A Royal course where nature is king

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Royal Birkdale’s special charm is that there are countless parts of the 95ha site close to the Lancashire coast where it doesn’t seem like a golf course at all, so natural are the surroundings. It is dune land par excellence.

Towards the sea are frontal dunes, constantly moved and reshaped by the weather. On the course itself are dunes and dunes of fixed – or grey – dunes covered by natural marram grasses that sway in the wind. This has to be an inspiring backdrop for any golfer.

Many in the world of golf regard it as the ultimate links course, challenging yet fair to all those who play it, and perfect for spectator vantage points. It is firmly one of the elite courses – to exchange information on conservation matters, including formal records of wildlife and plant life numbers and movements. This collaborative exercise helps to identify trends and make suggestions about any action that might be necessary.

The club also works closely with Natural England, the Environment Agency and the British Trust for Nature Conservation to see that nature rightly remains a priority across the site.

As a links we have all of nature’s surroundings, says Chris, who is by instinct a conservationist. "A lot of trust is required to keep Royal Birkdale close to the top of the Open course ‘leaderboard’, and that’s quite a challenge." He also trusts his greenkeepers because it should be there, and that’s how we see it," he says. "We might do an occasional bit of trimming or scribing if a particular area becomes too difficult, but otherwise we leave it well alone. We don’t cut the rough at all. We just move the semi-rough next to the fairways and we might widen this from five to 10 metres to suit a particular tournament need."

There’s no getting away from it, Royal Birkdale is quite an awkward site. It’s one of the few courses that are natural and perfect for spectator vantage points. It is firmly one of the elite courses – to exchange information on conservation matters, including formal records of wildlife and plant life numbers and movements. This collaborative exercise helps to identify trends and make suggestions about any action that might be necessary.

Conservation is most definitely a serious business at Royal Birkdale. Chris and other course managers meet at least a couple of times each year with other coastal landowners and tenants in the region – National Trust properties, council amenities and other golf courses – to exchange information on conservation matters, including formal records of wildlife and plant life numbers and movements. This collaborative exercise helps to identify trends and make suggestions about any action that might be necessary.

The club also works closely with Natural England, the Environment Agency and the British Trust for Nature Conservation to see that nature rightly remains a priority across the site. No two holes on the Royal Birkdale course are alike in terms of the surrounding landscape. Looking left and right you will see quite different flora, but what’s adjacent to the managed areas is there because it’s native to the land. As far as rare and treasured plants are concerned, Chris has a sensitivity map showing where these are to be found and creates ‘no go areas’ which are roped off in big tournaments to make sure they are fully protected.

There has been a big effort over the years to increase the emphasis on the managed areas of the course back to natural fine grasses – fescues, and bent in particular. There is still some meadow grass, but Chris says they are winning the battle. Reseeding and round the year management encouraging the wanted grasses is gradually tapering the scales in his favour.

"The way you cut, the way you irrigate, the way you feed and top-dress: they all contribute to this," says Chris.

"We are a natural golf course and we resist introducing anything that shouldn’t be there. Fescues should naturally be the dominant grass because of the dry sandy conditions, but your grass will always reflect what nature throws at it, so a wet summer may change things. Fescues and bent grasses are fully protected."

"There’s no getting away from it, Royal Birkdale is quite an awkward course to look after and machinery is all-important. Chris’s equipment policy is quite specific, and always has been. He buys each item of equipment on its merits to do a particular job for him – there’s no compromise. He trusts his judgement and he’s served him well, both here at Birkdale and before that at Muirfield for six years. I was also Course Manager, presiding over the 1992 Open. He also trusts his greenkeepers to give the right judgement on each individual piece of equipment. Out on the course and back at the maintenance department it is John Deere machines that dominate, supplied and supported by local dealer Turner Groundscare of Tarvin, near Chester, and that’s because Chris trusts them to do the right job on the course. All of the tripels mowers at Royal Birkdale are now John Deere 2500E electric hybrids and Chris is a big fan of them. These machines are central to the mowing programme at Birkdale and are used for all tees and aprons work, and alternately with John Deere 220 Series walk-behind mowers on the greens.

Chris believes that it is the quality of cut on the greens, tees and aprons that helps to define each hole so emphatically. "I want machines that don’t let me down. Mine don’t, and the peace of mind I get from this is priceless," he says.

"Using the 2500 E-Cut mowers means that all is in the past. It was one of the main reasons for buying them, and I liked the way John Deere responded to the perpetual concern we course managers had about leakages by coming up with the hybrid design. I think we actually bought one of the first ones in the UK, and there’s no chance we’ll ever go back now. "I’ve never worked on anything but links courses. I wouldn’t be happy at a parkland, however good it was, and I count myself very lucky to be in charge of Royal Birkdale.”
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“We are a natural golf course and we resist introducing anything that shouldn’t be there. Fescues should naturally be the dominant grass because of the dry sandy conditions, but your grass will always reflect what nature throws at it, so a wet summer may change things,” he says. Chris says it is essential to define the holes on a course like Birkdale and it is the roughs that do this magnificently here. Generally he leaves the rough to its own devices. “It’s a privilege to have such a wonderful golf course in such natural surroundings,” says Chris, who is by instinct a conservationist. “The management of the roughs should be left to its own devices and it is the roughs that do this magnificently here.”

Conservation is most definitely a serious business at Royal Birkdale. Chris and other course managers and volunteers meet at least a couple of times each year with other coastal landowners and tenants in the region – National Trust properties, council amenity and other golf courses – to exchange information on conservation matters, including formal records of wildlife and plant life numbers and movements.

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There are a lot of kites, storks, herons and sand lizards around the course. Chris and his team are as much custodians of plants on the course. Chris and his team are as much custodians of nature as they are professional greenskeepers.

“Nature put that grass there originally,” says Chris. “As a links we have all of nature’s advantages and disadvantages. It’s important to preserve the balance and that’s quite a challenge.”

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Chris says the holes on the course are alike in terms of the semi-rough next to the fairways and it is the roughs that do this magnificently here. Generally he leaves the rough to its own devices. “It’s a privilege to have such a wonderful golf course in such natural surroundings,” says Chris, who is by instinct a conservationist. “The management of the roughs should be left to its own devices and it is the roughs that do this magnificently here.”

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