

CONSERVATION OR PRESERVATION?

VIRTUALLY all the most admired natural scenery in all its wide variety in Britain is the result of man's activities, directly or indirectly." Another "dogmatic Arthurian statement?" No, the view of one of the leading authorities in this country on conservation and national parks!

It seems a bold statement. What about the thousands of acres of northern heather moors? Not much would survive without regular muir burning or swaling (depending on which side of the border you come from), either for grouse moors or hill sheep farming.

Certainly, the primrose woods of my youth seem almost a thing of the past. This, despite the opinions of well-meaning, but misguided, conservation activists, is not due to picking the flowers (though perhaps mass digging up of roots is another matter), rather the end of coppicing, which left open, cleared woodland, coppiced stumps and spaced standards that rapidly colonised with primroses and bluebells in response to light and air — only for them to be suppressed when the coppices regrew on a seven to 14-year cycle.

Coppicing ceased when the market for poles, hurdles and other rural products ended. It is far too expensive a management system to maintain unless financed by a demand for the end product.

The problem with conservation is that it has become highly emotive and its chief protagonists seem to be urban country lovers who want to stop the clock! You cannot preserve any status quo in a living and developing ecology without intensive and positive management.

So, many conservationists are preservationists, but don't know it! What is it that they want to preserve anyway? Why should the present state of a developing ecology be regarded as so much more worth preserving than past or future stages?

Golfers are as bad as any. The sound of a chain-saw summons the battling conservationist lobby to the attack! We even had a case recently when 20-year old rubbishy, birch scrub was being cleared, leaving spaced, individual mature oaks, in the process of course extension and alterations, of the local con-

servationists seeking a tree protection order for the stumps! And this despite the fact that full planning permission and felling certificates had been obtained, with the full approval of the official conservation body which, like me, regard birches as a self-seeding weed!

Heathland courses are almost unrecognisable by comparison...

If you look at the photographs of many of our famous heathland courses taken at the turn of the century, they are almost unrecognisable by comparison with their present state. Most of our heathland 50 or more years ago was kept free from colonisation by trees due to a massive rabbit population — even if it was not grazed — but rabbits have been decimated by myxomatosis and intensively controlled.

Birch especially has alarming invasive powers and will soon convert open heather into uninteresting birch scrub, with self-competing and smothering 'weeds' struggling to survive, none being able to come to full maturity. Unless the problem of invasion is tackled at an early stage, it becomes prohibitively expensive and, of course, attracts the attention of those who cannot understand that true conservation demands positive management.

Hence, my frequently repeated requests to members to pull out a seedling birch on every round and to 'fell a tree in '83 and fell four more in '84.' This does not mean indiscriminate clearance. It does mean selective thinning to leave the best selected maturing trees room to develop to their full potential.

Golf course planting has been appallingly unimaginative and often has had disastrous and unexpected results. The more obvious examples — for example, avenues of Lombardy poplars planted in straight lines between fairways, blocking every drain with their roots — are so bad that you would not expect them to be defended. But they are! This, with planting of unrelieved dark conifers and especially *Leylandii* — the 'privet' of the 1970s — are examples of planting anything if only to get a quick effect.

Capability Brown could never expect to see much of his planting come to maturity, yet his belief in natural landscaping altered the whole concept of landscape architecture in England for centuries.

In passing, I do find it slightly alarming to see numerous trees that I planted 30 years or more ago! But this emphasises the speed at which trees grow and if you plant forest trees, you must try to envisage how big they will be in, say, 50 years time and give them room.

The best parkland courses are not noted for masses of individually spaced, majestic, mature specimens, which replace bunkers as natural hazards — with the course designed around the mature trees and not the other way round!

Perhaps as bad in my book is the unaesthetic planting of trees totally out of place — flowering cherries, etc, on open heathland courses. I once mentioned that a flowering cherry, planted by the 18th fairway in memory of a departed captain, was as much in place as his tombstone would have been. The next year, I saw, with some incredulity, a concrete plinth with bronze 'in memoriam' inscription near one green, behind which a liquidamber had been planted!

It has always been my main theme, both as a landscaper and conservationist (and in both schools, incidentally, I am professionally qualified) to work with nature, to produce a natural environment and to control that environment by positive management. Just as in large industrial landscaping schemes, my aim was to plant too closely to start with, thus having surplus maturing stock from subsequent thinning out operations to form the basis for the next stage of development. Planted or natural woodland is always in need of thinning out.

Quite apart from the need to aid turf management by increasing light and air, we must give a few individuals the chance to mature fully, rather than refuse to cull surplus trees and so end up with a mass of choked, distorted and self-smothered specimens.

How often do we see plantings — especially of conifers — which,

under the care of professional arboriculturalists, would have been thinned and brashed and managed, left to their own devices so that only the peripheral trees could develop to any satisfactory state, and one-sidedly at that, while the inner trees are mere etiolated beanpoles, with a tuft of foliage at the top, if not dead?

I am saddened by the opposition of a sizeable proportion of the conservation world to the establishment of new golf courses on the grounds of disturbing natural environments. By most people's management and standards, fairways today no longer receive granular, inorganic fertilisers; massive applications of lethal cocktails of insecticides, herbicides and fungicides are not applied on a routine basis and positive management ensures the survival far more efficiently of the very habitat conservationists fear will be destroyed by pollution or traffic.

Golf courses, in fact, make excellent conservation areas and, indeed, many of the hundreds that I have advised take positive action to look after special local fauna and flora under threat, whether this be natterjack toads or rare orchids. Badgers, incidentally, are safer on a golf course than anywhere in Britain, though, thankfully, mass gassing and eradication as part of a campaign against recurring bovine T.B. has hopefully stopped.

The rough of any golf course is probably only bettered by one other environment regarding the absence of disturbing humans and that is motorway verges.

What is more important is that golf courses both prevent agricultural exploitation of our heathlands and reduce trespass and disturbance. I often think the greatest enemies of birds are bird-watchers — especially the army of twitchers who descend on some previously unspoilt habitat, or even someone's garden, to merely say they have seen some rare vagrant!

Of course it is assumed that such golf course construction will not involve total destruction of a site to create an 'identikit course', with the 1st taken from some US course, the 2nd from a Spanish one, the 3rd from Scotland and so on.

In fact, the greatest architects always used the land they were given to its best potential, but with modern earth-moving on a massive scale making recontouring rather more feasible than in the days of horses and wagons, you wonder if, in the absence of this restraint, the same

principle would have been adhered to!

Conservation-minded head greenkeepers often work closely with officers of the nature conservancy, as well as the local county naturalist trusts. Rarely is it necessary to spray herbicides on even semi-rough and, in any case, the weeds in close-mown turf are usually common or unremarkable and not the rarities you find around the rest of the course.

Conservation programmes can be formulated to ensure survival of endangered flora, either by positive protection or indirect encouragement. A good example is the controlling of water tables. Many courses I advise have established small conservation areas, not left to their own devices, but managed properly, primarily to keep out people!



BY JIM ARTHUR

Positive management programmes in woodland clearance have created more attractive environments for flowers and birds. Thinning out — and, indeed, coppicing in some cases — has produced kaleidoscopic carpets of spring flowers in place of dense, shaded, bramble-infested, smothered woodland. You do not get too many birds in the dense pine wood, or even in smothered birch scrubs. They live and feed on the perimeters. Mown grass between controlled, open rough attracts a far wider range of wildlife than dense scrub.

Water features, if built naturally (please no lakes halfway up hills!) are a great attraction to all wildlife.

I do get a little aerated when

sensible management is stopped because of the ill-thought-out, if well-intentioned, objections of those who are, the worst enemies of their own wishes. Dead elms due to be felled on one course were (temporarily, I am glad to say), reprieved 'because they would attract woodpeckers.' Has anyone ever seen a woodpecker tackling iron-hard, dead elm, which would resist a pneumatic drill? Dead willows, perhaps. Elms, no!

Anguished screams greet the felling of any tree yet, within a few weeks, no one can remember what it was like. Sensible removal of shallow-rooting, totally unsuitable, quick-growing *Leylandii* is resisted to the last ditch, yet when they are cleared (assuming they have not blown down), the improvement is the subject of favourable comment.

All I ask any conservationist is a truthful answer to five questions.

● Why is the present condition more worthwhile preserving than, say, the open habitat of 30 to 50 years ago?

● Do you accept that all trees grow and have you thought whether the ones you want to preserve will have the room to grow to maturity unless you remove others nearby?

● Why do you want to preserve trees, misguidedly planted years ago, that are not natural to the environment of your course — for example, poplars, *Leylandii*, flowering cherries, etc?

● Would not a more open course of heather or gorse be more attractive than dark, unrelieved avenues of alien conifers, dank and dark in winter and fly-ridden in summer?

● Do you accept that golf is a game associated with open spaces and does not need to be screened from either public gaze or fellow golfers?

If the answers indicate that members prefer to play up dark avenues of ever-increasing swamping trees (the weak ones dying on their feet) and do not like open heathland or links, then I cannot help them, but I suppose everyone is entitled to their preferences. It would be a dull world otherwise.

My aim is, however, to make sure protestors know what are the inevitable results of their adopting an ostrich-like attitude to a constantly developing ecology and to understand both the benefits of timely action and costs of repairing the inevitable disasters caused by procrastination!

Next month the theme will be the link between sensible conservation and natural management.