

# Custodians *of the* COUNTRYSIDE

by DAVID HEMSTOCK

If you didn't already know it, golf is under attack; from a written and verbal assault which will increase rather than diminish whether there is a further 'boom' in new courses or not.

It is of course over the desirability of an increased number of golf courses in the countryside, and to what extent a course benefits or detracts from rural Britain. And it falls upon those existing courses which can be set up as fine, environmentally sound, non-intrusive examples to defend against some of the perceptions that others hold on golf and its venues.

It is an unfortunate fact that the recent activity on construction of new courses does not appear to have particularly helped the cause because of the inadequate quality control that has applied during the boom.

Any consultant such as myself who visits a wide range of golf courses, and particularly the recent spate of projects which can be said to range from the 'insensitive' to the downright disastrous, cannot help but worry about the defence of such schemes in future as prospective new projects are compared to them.

The battering that golf development is taking from the financial world, for whom the Midas touch has been replaced by the lepers', is linked to the struggle to show environmental compatibility to those concerned.

A long-term viewpoint has not featured in many new courses. The massive earthworks that have helped snuff out financial viability of some, are in a way the impatient developers' device allowing the claim of 'a major championship course', the instant and impressive formation of a spectacular piece of saleable real-estate. The scale of some of the work is awe-inspiring, or frightening if you are viewing the butchering of a childhood held scene of the local countryside. But the fact is that some of our true, actual championship courses are what they are through age and maturity, through woodland, water and ice-age sculpting of the land rather than as a result of major civil engineering work. Apart from breaking the bank on capital



No bunkers allowed - or needed - on this proposed Midlands course. The greenkeeper will follow an established ecological management strategy

costs, the ground conditions are likely to be badly effected for an awfully long time (there is a more concise, less polite way of describing it) which may put your debenture holders in the Clubhouse rather than on the course. And to top it all, the environmentalists, which are actually becoming 'the public', are able to compare golf course construction to opencast mining or quarrying; with the same rape-of-the-countryside tags.

The big schemes have had all the publicity; bad publicity recently. They have set the tone in the general public's mind of what golf courses are about; development, 'bull in a china shop' approach, private clubs behind whose gates untold crimes against nature are committed.

This sort of misconception or lack of understanding fuels the type of situation which appears to be at its worst at present in parts of Germany. To give one example, a greenkeeper friend of mine who operates there in a very 'green' way; integrated pest control, replacement of ornamental trees with indigenous, revitalising choked-up ponds and woodland, has a running battle going on with local environmentalists who would rather he cut fairways above daisy flowering height (I don't think they have extended this to putting greens, yet).

Some of the German planning policies applying to golf course development such as the setting aside of areas purely as nature reserves in addition to that required for the course are inter-

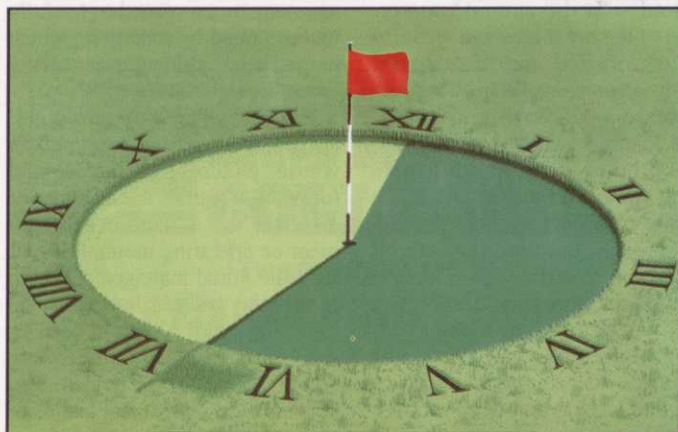
esting, but the inference is that these are needed to counteract the damage done by the course to the environment; a pay-off.

The planning authorities are important in controlling what happens in the countryside but

have in the recent past been fairly slack in their control over golf developments. Now they require landscaping details, and some sort of information on earthworks, but further constraints and controls are to be expected.

However, what happens over a long period to the development of a course is pretty well out of their hands. It takes more than a small amount of consistent self-control by a club to avoid the over-ornamentation of their course and even over-manicuring, which takes a golf course away from countryside on which golf is played, to an extension of the formal garden type of landscape.

With time, the evergreen hedging trees, other ornamentals, fountains, paths, walls and sanitised water features do tend to give courses a rather artificial, urbanised feel. Plenty of ammunition for those who say golf → 34



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## 'The truly 'green' golf course will now have a water storage or perhaps a re-circulation system, preferably with a means of aeration to keep the water clean'

33 ➤ detracts from traditional landscapes.

It's not that a golf course can ever look anything but a golf course; greens, tees, markers and flags make sure of that, but some do appear to be at odds with their surroundings, and are probably less useful to their environment than they could be. Useful in terms of the habitats and diversity that could exist, in an area by its nature protected from the annual upheavals found on most farmland, for instance.

Although most golfers may not be capable of or interested in identifying plants and birds, I believe that they appreciate the more natural surroundings, perhaps even subconsciously, and 'feel' that they are on a course with an active environment.

### Back to nature

So, if a course provides a better golfing experience and makes non-golfing friends if it is integrated with the natural countryside of the area, how can a course be constructed and/or managed with as an aim? In the first instance, on a new development, the Planners should ensure that the project is set up with more than hollow promises about the future treatment of the landscaping aspects. But once they are off the scene, it is the Club or course managers who should set up a few golden rules, or a policy setting out long-term what the nature of the course is meant to be, and what is and what is not to be allowed. The less Draconian it is the more likely it is to be adhered to over a long period, human nature being what it is.

The Club's management and development policy might contain clauses such as:

- A list of natural tree species for the area to be used on the course.
- A programme for woodland management with certain aims on species and spacings.
- Preservation of areas for wildlife only.
- Limits on the amount of hard edging to ponds and watercourses, preservation of varied conditions within watercourses and around ponds.
- A description of what the natural conditions of the course and surroundings consists.



This new course near Stratford suffers more from previous agricultural practice than any design or construction effect. The foreground shows an important 'wildlife corridor' - a hedge; one of the few features on the original land, but a key to rejuvenation of the new course environment

- Specifications for various features on the course.
- Restrictions on environmental pollutants of all kinds; including garish course accessories, loud clothing, loud Americans!

But seriously, the basically transient nature of the course management team can be usefully under-pinned by something which helps keep things progressing along the right lines.

This sort of information ought to be presented by the person whose philosophy shaped and formed the course, the designer or architect, as a hand-over document or operating manual. If not, then the initial management team could take pride in having set up the course with a written basis or reference. Some of the more eccentric additions which can appear during particular trends or phases of management might then be avoided, preserving both the original intended nature of the course and the ecology around it.

### Construction

Apart from the earthworks and landforming considerations already covered, there are other green aspects which might be important at the development stage.

Preserving any old ponds, hedges left over from the ravages of grant aided agricultural defoliation, etc. will give the course a head start with re-establishment of wildlife. Having come across even Planners with reservations on the desirability of water features and tree numbers on golf

courses it is worth remembering that prior to agricultural hyper-efficiency the land was littered with ponds and ditches for stock watering and the like, and the more open water we restore the better. And of course almost any land below 3,000 feet would have once been thickly wooded in the UK.

Bunkers are perhaps the most visible labels announcing the presence of a golf course, but there are courses which manage without, using their own indigenous natural hazards, notably rocks, water and trees instead. Sharp-edged, bleach-sand filled and sore-thumb like, bunkers can be very intrusive, to golfer and non-golfer alike.

The truly 'green' golf course will now have a water storage or perhaps a re-circulation system, preferably with a means of aeration to keep the water clean. Apart from using water efficiently the alternative cost of irrigating with mains water is becoming, and must continue to be frighteningly expensive.

Although theoretically water re-circulation and aeration helps to prevent nitrate pesticide runoff pollution, it is fair to say that on the golf course any such pollutant is far more likely to originate from adjacent farmland, inputs of such chemicals being enormous and more powerful compared to the course.

### Maintenance

The final point following on from the latter is that relatively little chemical input does go into

a typical golf course, but there are still possibilities for reductions. I have mentioned previously integrated pest control management, but there is another key factor in keeping chemical inputs to a minimum. Keeping the turf and sub-surface conditions in a healthy state ie. by combating those weakening factors that appear on any course; compaction, water-logging, avoidable drought stresses, will make turf more resilient to attack and therefore reduce the need for pesticides.

Compaction and water-logging also inhibit the usefulness of any fertiliser added. An application may even be washed away with the first rain if the surface does not allow absorption. Fertiliser wasted in these conditions affects the greenkeepers turf management programme but also, of course, has to end up in a place where it was not intended to. Soil analysis helps to trim fertiliser amounts to the minimum required, soil management helps to use the amount applied to the full.

I have left out a lot of features which could be identified as being part of the 'green' golf course in this article, but in a way I am preaching to the already converted and so that does not matter. Greenkeepers are, like any other landowner or manager, custodians of the countryside generally in addition to managing land for a purpose. And we all have a responsibility to defend golf by our actions.

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