

The need for tree and woodland maintenance on your golf course, by Hens Hinloopen

TREES are jolly good fellows

It has always been my belief that trees and woodlands on golf courses add greatly to their value and character. Equally, they now require more care and attention than may have been given in the past and it seems that many people who work in the maintenance and construction of golf courses agree. Trees and woodland, quite apart from having an intrinsic beauty, also have an important golfing function. However, due to a lack of time and resources, they have often been neglected.

Golf has seen many changes since its invention. In the last few decades, with its massive increase in popularity and the desire for ever higher standards, the challenges for the greenkeeper have come thick and fast. Consequently, greenkeepers have been able only to tend to their trees spasmodically and then only in areas where the work is considered crucial. This often means that work is only carried out in areas where the trees interfere, or threaten to interfere, with the playing of golf. The opportunities to do even this sort of limited work are then further constrained by time and weather conditions. It is in this way that neglect builds up over many years.

THE EFFECTS OF TREE AND WOODLAND NEGLECT ON THE GOLF COURSE

When golf courses are built and trees are planted, they are often planted relatively close together. There are two reasons for this. Initially trees growing close together will grow taller as they compete for light. The top crown canopy then closes up, which denies the base weeds light and discourages them from growing.



Whilst at first this may appear to be a good thing, without thinning between the trees the lack of space soon becomes a problem. It is the situation I come across most frequently on golf courses.

Ideally fully mature trees, oaks for example, should grow at a spacing of 15 metres in order for them to flourish. This would mean 150 fully mature oaks on a one hectare site. In order to produce these 150 mature oaks, 1500 would need to be planted. However, when the trees are neglected, as so often happens, they continue to compete for light, water and nutrients. The surrounding grass areas then begin to suffer, making them susceptible to disease and fungi. This is caused by trees leaning over the

play areas and creating harmful micro climates that stifle growth. I have also come across many heathland courses where the trees have slowly encroached upon the course, leading to the disappearance of heather.

Whilst more fertiliser may be called for on grass areas, simply to encourage the grass to grow, thatch forming also needs to be treated. Chemicals and fertilisers only treat the symptoms, they do not cure the fundamental problem. To do this, a more remedial approach is needed. Thus it would be far better for you to ask yourself: does my green get enough light and air?

WORRIED MEMBERS

The carrying out of tree work

on golf courses is often a sensitive issue, no matter how vital it may be. Members may demonstrate complete confidence in their greenkeepers as far as preparing the playing surface is concerned, whilst tree work may get an altogether different reaction. If trees and woodland have been neglected, any work carried out can at first sight look quite radical.

For example, neglected strips of woodland dividing fairways often need attention, especially when they begin to encroach on to the playing area. When these areas are opened up to provide better growing conditions for grass and trees, members can often see from one fairway to the other, where in the past this view was denied them. This often leads them to complain, without realising that it is years of neglect that are to blame and not the corrective and constructive measures being used to solve the problem. Past neglect can be corrected, but it can take time, 10-20 years is a long time in human terms but a far shorter time as far as trees are concerned.

PLANTING

Another large problem facing many golf courses is the uniformity in age of the trees on the course. This means that the majority of the trees will reach maturity at the same time. It is therefore important for a golf club to have a wide age span of trees on the course. Planting and transplanting are two ways of ensuring that a course has a wide age range, and this will guarantee and protect the courses character for future years.

Many clubs appreciate the need for planting, however it is seldom carried out as part of a planned

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planting programme. Over the years courses become littered with different varieties of tree, often planted in areas and soil types for which they are not suited, and the overall quality of planting is poor. More importantly, after planting, scant attention is paid to the trees. Stakes are often left to rot away, tree ties are allowed to grow into the trees, whilst watering, pruning, weed control and fertiliser are so often forgotten.

LONG TERM TREE AND WOODLAND MANAGEMENT

To maintain the character of a golf course over a long period of time it is essential that a long term management plan be implemented. This should be backed up by a short term maintenance plan to rectify the immediate problems. Such a management plan should set objectives to be achieved and lay down a framework through which the work may be implemented. The overriding concern of the plan,

always, should be the provision of the 'best possible playing surface' for the golfer.

An important aspect of any plan is the education of club members, so that they understand why work needs to be carried out and when. I have used seminars for this purpose in the past and they have proved very useful. In this way difficult and controversial decisions do not have to be taken by greenkeepers or green committees alone, the club can move forward on the basis of a strong consensus among its members. The management plan must be designed to serve the club for many years and act as the continual point of reference when tree and woodland work is being discussed.

Such a maintenance plan might cover a period of five years and be used to rectify the immediate problems facing the trees and woodlands on the course. The plan should enable the club to assess the volume of work that needs to be carried out, how much of this can be done by the



green staff, and how much might need to be sub-contracted. Work involved in this plan normally consists of thinning, felling, tree surgery, planting and transplanting. New health and safety regulations demand that this work be done only by properly qualified and equipped staff.

Greenkeepers should not treat the playing surface and woodlands in isolation, for they are both inextricably linked, one affecting the other. Caring and planning for the trees on your

course now will provide fundamental benefits in future years. Regular thinning, felling and tree surgery will not only benefit the trees but will also have a fundamental impact on the greens, fairways and tees.

■ The author, Hens Hinloopen, is the founder and owner of Woodcare, a specialist forestry and arboricultural company specifically involved in golf course activities. Hens' track record includes major work on such courses as Sunningdale, Hankley Common, Coombe Hill, Effingham and Moatland.



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