

GLENEAGLES

Gleneagles is cutting down nearly 200 trees – on advice from environmentalists. It's part of a plan to return the landscape to how it was when designer James Braid created the King's Course 80 years ago. Jimmy Kidd of Gleneagles Golf Developments explains what they've done and why.

At the same time as Gleneagles Golf Developments were putting together an environmental management plan for the estate and three golf courses, they were carrying out an 'historical audit' of the courses.

The objectives of the audit were:

- Identify alterations over the past 70 years, reasoning and timescale;
- Investigate possible weaknesses in the golf strategy and natural experience;
- Define current problems with regard to safety and maintenance;
- Examine the championship status and requirement;
- Propose possible improvements and alterations;
- Estimate costs;
- Indicate possible timescale for realisation of proposals.

The study of all available historical information indicated some fairly major changes in the length, par and golf strategy over the years.

It also became evident during the historical audit that vegetation had forced golf strategy



alterations. Encroaching and invasive species, such as broom, whin and gorse, which is exceptionally good to look at when it's in flower, was having a serious impact upon the golf experience.

A detailed examination of each hole then took place, taking into consideration the environmental management plan for the entire

830-acre estate. As part of this plan we:

- Identified all sites of special and scientific interest – (20 sites exist);
- Set up 'control' and 'experimental' botanical monitoring quadrants to assess changes in vegetation. (There are 13 selected sites with 2 sq m control plots and 2 sq m experimental plots alongside. A botanist analyses the

When James Braid designed the King's and Queen's courses at Gleneagles, the land was covered in grass and heather. It remained that way until about 25 years ago. Then the courses were opened all year.

So what? you're probably thinking. Opening all year meant not using it for sheep and deer grazing in the winter. The sheep and deer used to nip the heads off the alien broom, whin, bracken, rowan trees and silver birches, whose seeds were probably introduced by birds.

"I look back at aerial photos from ten years ago and there's nothing there, and I look at it now and it's just an absolute mass," according to Gleneagles' Jimmy Kidd.

Research shows that as close as 1958-1968 there were no rowan trees on the golf course, very little bracken and only a little gorse and whin. But in recent years it has gone out of control, altering the strategy of many holes. The 1st hole is a prime example

In 1921 it was a 355-yard par 5, dog-leg right to left with two bunkers on the right side of the fairway and two guarding the green on the left. It was a relatively simple opening hole with a very wide fairway. Sketches of the hole at the time show there was little or no scrub on the right

side. The strategic drive, therefore, was played to the right to open up the green for the approach shot.

By 1974 there was no longer a dog-leg, the bunker count had increased from four to nine, the length had increased by just seven yards and the par had decreased from 5 to 4.

Closer examination reveals much of the reasoning behind the major strategic alterations was due to the severe encroachment of invasive

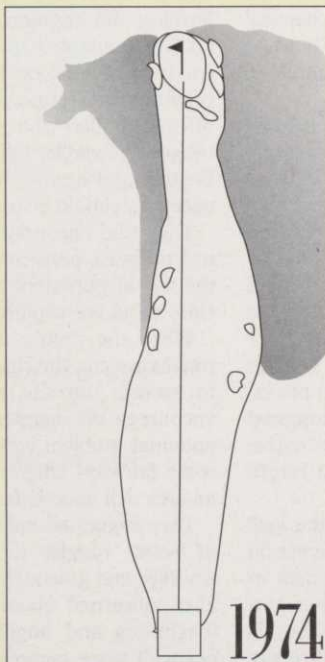
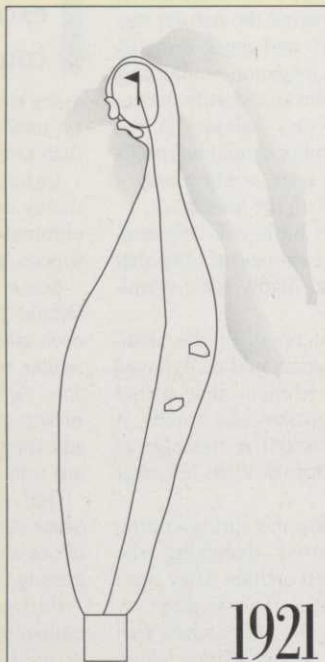
broom/whin, gorse, rowan and bracken on both sides of the fairway. As a direct result of the loss of the dog-leg strategy on the right side of the hole, it was deemed prudent to incorporate THREE new bunkers on the left side as most golfers now preferred that route. This in turn forced strategic changes to the right side of the green and two extra bunkers were incorporated to catch the typical shot – slightly pushed out to the right.

A comprehensive environ-

mental plan and historical audit many years ago would have identified the problem and subsequent investment in construction and development of a new strategy would have been avoided, along with the extra daily maintenance burden of five new bunkers.

The removal of the invasive scrub, which is now being done, would have restored the original architectural concept. At Gleneagles, they now make it policy for everyone to understand James Braid's original concept. Not all of it is valid with the modern game, but only when you understand what the architect was trying to achieve on each hole can you say what is relevant today and what is outdated.

Says Mr Kidd: "You can only properly maintain a golf course if you have a perfect understanding of the architectural concept. I see too many green-keeping errors created because the superintendent doesn't have a good understanding of a) who the architect was and b) what his concept was. Once you understand that you can make up your own mind whether you want to retain it because it's useful or discard it because it's outdated. And at least when someone asks you why you're doing something you can explain it."



Left, the 1st and right, the 15th at Gleneagles' King's Course



WORKING WITH NATURE

variety, type, size, and quantity of plants inside the squares and compares the results with previous years. He then produces a conclusion which may indicate a slight modification of maintenance practices);

- Established future management prescriptions;

- Produced a vegetation map, identifying scrub invasion to the detriment of golf strategy and the aesthetic appeal of the courses;

- Conducted ornithological and entomological surveys to find out what we've got, what we want and what it takes to keep those species.

An essential element of our plan was the establishment of a monitoring group, comprising professionals in ecology, botany, geology, Scottish Natural Heritage, a member of the hotel staff and, most importantly, a respected member of the local community.

The monitoring group meets twice a year to

assess the impact of our golf courses and estates management practices and consider future management plans and prescriptions.

When these plans are formulated, it is important to communicate these to all staff, members, guests and visitors.

Awareness is probably the most important thing when it comes to golf and the environment. Firstly you have to make the greenstaff aware of what you're trying to do. In our case it was mainly why we're controlling scrub invasion (see panel). Communicating the

problem to the greenstaff means they can go out and eloquently explain why we're getting rid of "those beautiful shrubs and trees" when asked by guests, members or hotel staff.

Conclusion

Awareness is the key. Awareness of what you've got on your course and how to keep it there (or not). Awareness among the greenkeeping staff of what

you are trying to achieve, so they can make members and others aware of what is being done and why.

Golf courses, old and new, are becoming increasingly important as models and reminders of how beautiful and wild our countryside can be, whilst still performing a very necessary commercial leisure role.

Long established courses must make special efforts to retain their habitats and new courses have the potential to develop into beautiful and valuable wildlife areas.

Brian D. Pierson

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