

John Nicholson, of Eamonn Wall & Co, looks at some of the unique problems that are encountered when golf; trees and the English Parkland landscape are combined, with Brancepeth Castle Co. Durham highlighting many of the difficulties.

In 1923 Lord Boyne decided to lay out a golf links in the deer park of Brancepeth Castle. To design the layout, he employed the premier golf course architect of the period H S Colt.

Colt with the assistance of his partner Major J S F Morrison, did a truly remarkable job, using the natural rolling land form to great effect. It is perhaps testament to the fine quality of turf that from conception to the course opening was only 14 months. In fact no turf or seed was imported to the site, so good was the native sward. This was possibly due to the fact that the park had for some 300 years benefited from the grazing and natural fertilisation provided by the deer.

The course is unusual in that it has three distinct characters – parkland, heath and the once ornate old castle garden. Therefore to retain the unique “Genius loci” of the site, three separate management prescriptions are necessary

It is also unusual in that it is registered by English Heritage as “A Park and Garden of Special Historic Interest”.

The course enjoys a wonderful backdrop; rolling countryside to the south and the magnificent castle and medieval church to the north.

There are few courses which can boast such a classic layout and picturesque setting. The castle which was described by Bernard Darwin as “a splendid pile which makes a backdrop to several holes”, combines with the golf course to form that special ambience which is only found in settings steeped in history.

The name Brancepeth itself evokes mystical thoughts being a derivative of Braun’s path (Boar’s path). It is said that the last wild boar in England roamed what is now the golf course and that the castle was often frequented by Richard III for the pursuit of such beasts.



Even slow growing species such as oak can have an impact in a relatively short period. The top picture was taken just five years before the picture above. The visibility of the left hand side of the green and bunker is reduced by some 30 per cent – resulting in uneven wear to the tee and a par 3 which will to some extent become blind

THE PARKLAND LANDSCAPE

The landscape remained much the same until the time of the English Landscape Movement when in 1783 Adam Mickel drew up plans for the landscaping of the park;. However these seem to have been largely ignored and the parkland is much today as it was

in the 16th century. Even when the golf course was constructed the parkland remained virtually unchanged. Colt, using all his undoubted skills, integrated the layout in an almost anonymous manner.

The first real changes to the

traditional parkland have accrued in the last 30 years The breaking up of many of the larger estates and with them their traditional management prescriptions, combined with changes in legislation, have led to the evolution of new landscapes. The once routine

'Woodland design should also consider aesthetics'

practice of burning off areas in the autumn to control the spread of unwanted vegetation is no longer allowed. As a result the open park lands which are no longer grazed are falling prey to regeneration of both trees and assertive weeds. Rose bay willow herb being the most common. The once open views and designed vistas are now no longer and the character of many of the classic parkland courses is being lost to regeneration. It is therefore important that courses such as Brancepeth realise the need for management and take advantage of the grants available to manage their existing woodlands and ensure their sustainability.

The importance of woodland management

In 1920 the well known course architect Dr Alistair Mackenzie stated in his book "Golf Course Architecture" that:

"Perhaps the most serious mistake made by a golf committee is the fallacy that they will save money by neglecting to get expert advice ..."

He goes on to say: "There can be little doubt that the poorer the club, the more important it is not to waste its small funds in doing the wrong kind of work, but to get the best possible advice from its inception."

The use of an independent specialist allows a club to adopt an unbiased long term plan and strategy for improving the quality of the trees and woodlands as and when resources allow.

The arborist should be used to assess the existing tree cover on the course and to draw up a woodland management plan to ensure that the appropriate long term results are achieved. If, as is quite common, the club also desires the strategy of the course to be altered, then a golf course architect should be used in conjunction with the arboriculturalist.

Within all golf clubs there are a range of opinions as to the main issues and problems and just as many divergent views on how to put these right. This is understandable as there are few absolutes or prescribed standards in either woodland management or golf course design. Further, as the composition of a club committee changes, so do the policies for woodland management and course improvement. These

become at best inconsistent and at worst, may swing from one extreme to another. In addition, securing a consensus within a committee may lead to ineffective compromise when an imaginative decisive approach is required.

There are rarely any easy short-term quick fixes when tackling flaws in existing tree cover. Similarly, fundamental design faults usually require comprehensive solutions rather than merely tinkering with the problem.

A management plan needs to command the support of the majority of the membership and should include a review of existing tree cover on the course and its effectiveness in fulfilling the required long-term objectives along with proposals to ensure these long term objectives are secured. These objectives should be achieved by a gradual evolution of tree planting and management rather than drastic short term changes.

When a management plan involves additional tree planting indigenous species should be used, particularly around the perimeter to create a strong structural framework that will look natural in the wider landscape.

Species selected for planting should take account of the following:

- soil type
- drainage
- aspect
- climatic factors
- resilience to golf ball damage
- form and shape

● compatibility with the wider landscape character

● compatibility with the landscape character of the golf course

● compatibility with the character of the individual hole

● compatibility with existing tree planting

● light management

● provenance

● stock type and quality.

Consideration should be given to both the visual impact and contribution the trees make to creating the golfing strategy of each hole. A management plan should ensure that these roles are protected, reinforced and enhanced where necessary. In addition the plan should protect and enhance the wildlife value of existing and proposed tree planting on the course while also protecting and enhancing the contribution trees make to promoting safety both around the edge of the course and between the holes.

Sustainability and aesthetics

In forestry terms sustainability is the production of a normal forest, ie a forest with an even distribution of age classes, from newly planted stock to mature trees. Although golf courses do not exist for the production of commercial timber (although this should not be ruled out) the principle of sustainability can still be applied. Sustainability should be one of the major objectives of any management plan, as the loss of a tree or woodland can affect the aesthetics of a course, influence its

strategic qualities and, on a broader scale, can affect the wider landscape.

In order to achieve sustainability, a management plan should aim to create an uneven canopy with a diverse species mix. An uneven canopy would allow the loss or removal of over mature trees without a drastic change to the landscape and would safeguard the woodland against such dramatic losses as occurred in the storm of 1987 where in southern Britain some courses lost virtually their entire tree stock. Similarly, courses which lacked diversity suffered devastation with the emergence of Dutch Elm Disease in the 1970s.

In addition to aiming for sustainability, woodland design should also consider aesthetics. The surrounding landscape has to be complemented by any planting and extremes should be avoided. Too diverse a mix can be as unsightly as a monotonous plantation. Colours should be harmonised rather than contrasting and changes of mix should be blended together avoiding harsh lines.

Sustainability cannot, unfortunately, be gained overnight. It requires long term management in order to gain the necessary uneven canopy. Species mix can however help to reduce the time scale as different species have different growth rates and varying life spans. A continuous programme of under planting is required on older established courses in order to

The increased growth rate which occurs when trees are 'topped'



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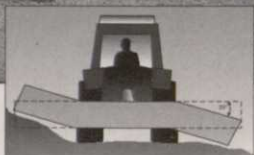
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ensure the longevity of tree cover. The programme does not have to be intensive as long as it is continuous.

"The need for effective woodland management has never been greater and clubs whose courses were damaged by the storms of recent years should rethink their management to assist the trees and the wildlife they support."

On Course Conservation, Managing golf's natural heritage. The Nature Conservancy Council 1991.

Problems specific to parkland courses

One of the major problems encountered on a mature parkland course is that within the English Parkland Movement trees were commonly used, either individually or in small groups, to frame attractive views or as part of a much larger composition. Care must therefore be taken when undertaking new planting. It has become in vogue to plant as many trees as possible, however in the designed landscape large areas of planting may be detrimental to the overall landscape character of the course.

The replacement of small groups or single trees which are often strategically and aesthetically very important to a course should be undertaken well in advance of their demise. This is a course of action which is often neglected unknowingly and results in either a dramatic change to the landscape or a hole completely losing its strategy. Forward planning is crucial to the long term well being of a course.

This, as previously mentioned, was proven by the storm of 1987 when many courses were decimated by the loss of tree cover. As a result of the lack of earlier underplanting, the results of the storm will be evident for many years to come. When such catastrophes occur, further problems may arise due to the panic which ensues. What will grow quickly is often the question. Poplar, willow, spruce and cupressus is the answer that comes from the gardening fraternity and so unsuitable species are planted as replacements for grand oaks or majestic beech. These quick; fix answers result in a landscape which loses its identity with the form, shape and colour of trees breaking the unity of the composition.

The presence of the designed landscape often goes unnoticed as the quality of the naturalistic designs of Brown, Repton and Kent were so effective that the layman does not realise that they were contrived. It is interesting to note that a comparison can be drawn between the development of parkland design and that of golf course architecture. The gradual departure from the formal symmetrical patterns of the Tudor and Baroque styles parallel in some ways the evolution of the golf course from the early days of square bunkers and rectangular greens to the natural rolling contours which typified the designs of Colt, Mackenzie and Ross.

Trees are a welcome component of any landscape and an important feature of most golf courses. However where there are many thousands of trees and only one castle, every effort should be made to return the vistas that were such a prominent part of the original concept, even if at the expense of some trees. The complexities of managing and sustaining woodlands within such environments are such that professional advice is essential. A balance must be reached between safeguarding the strategy of the course and maintaining the landscape. Below are listed a few guidelines to maintaining unity with the classic English parkland.

- Species selection should be in keeping with the original design.
- If there is a dominance of any particular species, ensure that mixed stands do not break the unity of the composition.
- Do not block scenic views or vistas.
- Avoid symmetry.
- Maintain the original positions of clumps or stands of trees when replanting as these will be an integral part of the design.
- Take care to retain the shape of stands when underplanting.
- Control unwanted regeneration which may alter the balance of the composition or block views.
- Be brave and remove regeneration or poor planting which has a detrimental effect on the landscape.
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