

# THE 1997 BIGGA GOLF ENVIRONMENT COMPETITION

IN ASSOCIATION WITH



THE WINNER:

## HANKLEY COMMON

“ The amount of work undertaken over the last ten years in developing the ecological potential of the course has been considerable. This has involved an on-going commitment to woodland management – tree thinning and felling, natural regeneration control and programmes aimed at heather conservation and reinstatement.

Over the last few years a massive tree felling operation has been carried out and the club is now looking at ways of reinstating the heathland character.

The club also recognises the need to develop an ecosystem approach to retain sufficient scrub to assist the diversity of wildlife which is present. The RSPB has offered advice with regard to wood lark conservation and the course does support other notable rarities such as the sand lizard and silver-studded blue.

The heathland flora is allowed to develop in the semi rough areas which is also worthy of special note given the prestige of the golf club.

A small number of ponds have been created which support quite a diversity of insect life including dragonflies.

A company has been employed to look at energy use within the clubhouse and while at the moment no policies are in place, already all peripheral lighting is controlled by sensors which offers energy savings. The club is also looking to purchase a bottle crusher for recycling clubhouse waste.

Grass clippings are stored in holding pits around the site, collected and taken to a designated area for tipping.

The membership is informed of the reasoning behind the current management works by evening seminars, open forums and members' evenings while all reports are available to the members. There are also regular newsletters and periodic status reports.

The members have been extremely positive in taking to designated pathways and areas cordoned off – imposed to secure reinstatement of the heath. ”

STRI Ecologist Bob Taylor



This competition, in association with Rhône Poulenc Amenity and Amazone Ground Care, is designed to reward the golf course that is judged to have done most to encourage good ecological management and so improve the environment. The three way sponsorship, initiated this year, underlines the industry's commitment to the environment and the desire of the game to show the way towards good practice. Hankley Common, under the expert management of Course Manager Ian McMillan, is the 1997 BIGGA Golf Environment Competition Winner.

# The search for a winner

STRI Ecologist, Bob Taylor has spent the last few months judging the golf clubs which entered the 1997 BIGGA Golf Environment Competition. Here he talks about what he found during those visits and gives an insight into what he was looking for.

One of the most difficult tasks has been to obtain an objective balance between the larger prestigious sites set within areas of outstanding natural interest alongside those smaller clubs of limited budget found within a lower quality landscape.

A major change to this year's Environment competition, which has welcomed the involvement of BIGGA and Rhône Poulenc alongside Amazone, has been with regard to judging and the standardised way in which each course has been assessed. Both English Nature and STRI have become involved and produced a standardised and therefore much more qualitative format in which to assess individual golf clubs.

This has largely been overcome by asking a series of questions on up to three separate occasions. The first level of assessment was undertaken while assessing each application, which proved very successful in balancing the tremendous degree of variation found.

Questions focused on the level of enthusiasm, not just of the Head Greenkeeper, but of the entire team and the Club Committees, and indeed whether the level of enthusiasm had reached the membership. One would not expect that many of the larger, more prestigious sites could bask within the confines of the landscape in which they find themselves, but this was not generally the case. Take Loch Lomond for example, set within some of the finest countryside possible. Not content with this, the club has appointed a full-time Conservation Officer who has been actively encouraging woodland management, including the construction and erection of owl boxes and the recent excavation of a pond



Left and above: the splendour of Hankley Common. All photographs by Bob Taylor

purely for wildlife.

Additional work involves recording and pinpointing the rare Loch Lomond dock which apparently occurs nowhere else. To the untrained eye, the Loch Lomond dock looks just like the common broad-leaved dock typical of wastelands and disturbed ground.

A second series of questions was asked during the individual site inspections. These, taken from the "Committed to Green" initiative recently launched by the EGA during the Ryder Cup, included: 1. Nature conservation; 2. Landscape and cultural her-

itage; 3. Water resource management; 4. Turf and pest management; 5. Waste management; 6. Energy efficiency and purchasing policies; 7. Education and training; 8. Communications; 9. Public access.

The final level of scoring was qualified by a further series of questions which centred on the scale of works undertaken, whether it is sustainable, the nature of the challenge, how much flak or criticism has there been and how effectively this has been overcome. A very interesting point raised by Dr Keith Duff, Chief Scientist of English Nature,

was, "Would the work impress a non-golfing nature conservation sceptic?"

Most of the clubs impressed Keith Duff but then he may be biased because he is one of the seemingly few golfing conservationists!

Having completed the above quite rigorous programme, it became apparent that several entrants were worthy of winning, making selection that much more difficult. All of the applicants this year were worthy of due recognition but in the end certain decisions had to be made and I am indebted to Keith Duff for sharing



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this burden with me.

The Dyke Golf Club is worthy of special mention with regard to Communication. Course Manager, David Ansell, has produced a noticeboard of photographs of the wildlife to be found and description of the work being undertaken, all of which is on regular view to the membership. Committee meetings are held monthly and reports are standardised so as to include regular topics on conservation management.

A similar scenario was apparent at Temple Golf Club whereupon a very strong and positive management structure is in place. Here, the green staff meet monthly with the Green Committee and weekly with the Secretary. The greenstaff together discuss policy on a weekly basis, so maintaining and ensuring the continuing enthusiasm for the work being recommended. Members are kept informed via notice boards, a quarterly bulletin and through on-course walks run by the greenstaff.

At Beau Desert and Berkhamstead Golf Clubs, notices relate the importance of each site to the players.

At most clubs visited, education and training does appear to be available to the greenstaff. At Loch Lomond this extends to seminars and specific aspects of natural history such as the identification and ecology of lichens, their conservation being particularly important on this site. At the Manor House each member of the greenstaff has received a copy of the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust's report to the Club. At Lyme Regis, individual members are being encouraged to develop their own special interests such as Lepidoptery (the study of butterflies and moths). Almost all those clubs assessed do allow the greenstaff time to visit shows, attend local seminars and training days as appropriate for their developing interests.

Special mention should go to Royal Birkdale who, over the past few years, have undertaken a substantial amount of work in order to control the buckthorn and other scrub encroaching over the course. The level of work becomes even more impressive

when one considers the relatively short period of time remaining to get the course back in condition before the Open to be held in 1998. Burnham & Berrow, although not hosting an Open Championship, have over the past two years or so totally reinstated the dune character, this formerly had succumbed to the mass encroachment of sea-buckthorn. The topography of the dunes following removal of the buckthorn is now clearly evident.

A number of heathland courses entered the competition this year, including Berkhamstead, Beau Desert, Enville, Hankley Common and Liphook. All have made tremendous strides in educating the membership of the need to reinstate the heathland character and in undertaking work appropriate to reclaiming areas of heather. This, at Berkhamstead, has changed the frequency of cutting to encourage heather back naturally, while at the other clubs scarification, turf laying and the use of chemical herbicides have all been tried. All of the above have had to give consideration to tree and scrub removal – always a contentious issue with the membership.

It has been interesting this year to note just how enthusiastic many of the regional conservationists have been to the work being undertaken. Charnwood have the full support of their local English Nature consultant, Royal Birkdale has developed a very close working relationship with the Sefton Life Project based at Formby, Temple Golf Club make good use of the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Naturalist Group while Beau Desert Golf Club is benefiting from the expertise of the heathland project run by Sue Sheppard.

Even without such relationships, all of the clubs would, to a greater and lesser extent, satisfy the most sceptic of non-golfing nature conservationists and I would like to thank all of the clubs that participated this year and trust the advice given was appropriate and of benefit to each club.

I will look forward to reassessing these courses in the next year or so.

## Other major award winners

### Linlithgow GC – Regional Winner – Scotland

A number of conservation projects have been undertaken and include gorse management, grassland management and development and pond construction. Twenty bat boxes have been erected over the course and the Course Manager is keen to learn more about their placement and undertaking nest box surveys and a local bat group has been invited onto the course to record bats. The course is being used as a pilot project for both the Scottish Golf Wildlife Trust and the European Golf Association Ecology Unit.

### Royal Birkdale – Regional Winner – Northern

Birkdale is intrinsically a very important landscape covering a whole series of internationally important habitats and species and the enthusiasm of the club, from Head Greenkeeper through to the membership is excellent. Numerous projects are being implemented and are benefiting the wildlife on and around the course. The club is also looking towards the damage likely to be caused during next year's Open to provide further opportunity for habitat development and conservation management. For example the thinning and loss of cover to encourage greater botanical diversity.

### Temple – Regional Winner – Midlands

Temple was one of the first courses in the country to realise its environmental responsibility. This has grown to such an extent that it is now recognised as an ecologically friendly golf course to which people including conservationists can visit. The club has planted 2,500 trees in accordance with the Forestry Commission Grant Scheme and has also been engaged in hedge layering the work undertaken by the staff while the club intends to extend the amount of meadow-type grassland.

### Burnham and Berrow – Regional Winner – South West and South Wales

The club is built on a sand dune system which is of considerable ecological and conservation importance. The club recognises the ecological significance of these habitats and is keen to carry out management operations to reinstate or maintain their significance. Much of the work concentrates on the removal of sea-buckthorn and the reinstatement of sand dunes. In one or two areas ponds have been created, largely in an attempt to reform dunes and this has created areas of open water which is beneficial to wildlife.

### Berkhamsted – Specially Commended

There has been a drive towards reducing the dominance of trees and the expansion of acidic grassland. Heather is becoming quite strong which is leading to greater acceptance within the club therefore presenting other opportunities to develop the work. Indeed the club

boasts that due to the success of its management work it supports the largest parcel of heather within the surrounding area.

### Northamptonshire County – Specially Commended

Special recognition is given to the increasing interest that is now being devoted to rough management work. Gorse and broom feature heavily and the club is embarking on a programme of cutting and reinstatement. A number of trees have recently been planted to increase the amount of woodland in one section of the course. Ready mixed organic fertilisers are preferred and have resulted in well conditioned greens.

### Dyke – Specially Commended

The club is a very good example of a typical downland course with typical management problems but such as been the enthusiasm with which the challenges have been met the course is now worthy of higher ecological significance and it is perhaps more botanically rich in species numbers than adjacent downlands. Butterflies such as the adonis blue, silver-studded blue, brown argos, gatekeeper, small copper, small skipper and marbled white can all be seen on the course.

### Lindrick – Specially Commended

The club is very enthusiastic towards nature conservation management and is worthy of special consideration. The surrounding land is predominately arable or woodland so the course has preserved the outline heath supporting a wide and diverse ecological community. Extensive work has been carried out recently including the planting of 500 gorse plants, clearance and renovation as well as the development of a pond beside the clubhouse.

### Loch Lomond – Highly Commended

The course, by its presence, is now safeguarding the future of the historic parkland from further development – it lies within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and may in the near future become the first area of National Park in Scotland. It is almost unique in supporting the Loch Lomond dock, a very rare and localised plant species. The club employs a Course Conservationist and several ecologically based projects are currently being undertaken.

### Leominster – Highly Commended

Over the last seven years the club has done much in the way of tree planting in accordance with the Forestry Authorities woodland grant scheme and grassland retention. Some areas are being managed ecologically in that they were cut once a year while there is potential to develop the grassland rough. Policies are also in place with regard to storage and the disposal of grass clippings.





Amazone Groundkeeper in action at Leominster



Royal Birkdale: assessing site for Natterjack Toad pond



Dock at Loch Lomond



A male Common Blue at The Dyke



Wild pansies in the semi-rough at Linlithgow



Reinstating the dunes at Burnham and Berrow



Composting facilities at Temple GC