

Tree Expert, John Nicholson, and Golf Course Architect, Ken Moodie, work closely with Course Managers to encourage positive tree management. Scott MacCallum spent a day watching them in action.

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Trees have become an integral part of the armoury of many inland golf courses and on several occasions have played a major role in some of the games more historic moments.

Who will forget a young Bernhard Langer clambering up one of Fulford's trees during the Benson & Hedges International or, during the Volvo Masters, Seve frantically trying to persuade the referee that his ball, wedged between the roots at the foot of one of Valderrama's famous cork trees, was actually in a rabbit scrape and that he deserved a free drop.

On another occasion, during the '79 US Open at the Inverness Club, a short cut down another fairway which was being exploited by Lon Hinkle was plugged when a full size tree appeared overnight courtesy of the USGA.

The value of trees on certain types of golf courses has not always been taken as read. In the early days of golf trees were considered unfair and not worthy of a place on a golf course at all.

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Above: John Nicholson admires the clearance work carried out at Coombe Hill

Overleaf: David Stanton examines some of the planting work at Hartsbourne

Below: Murray Long and Ken Moodie walk the Coombe Hill course



They are three dimensional hazards and with the equipment around when the game was born a skilful player, one who could hit the ball in the air, was penalised more by a tree and its ability to snare airborne shots than a poor player who could much more easily avoid the narrower trunks.

Since then equipment has improved and most players are now skilful enough to hit their ball into the air and the better players are rewarded for their ability to shape a ball.

But, unlike other hazards, like bunkers, trees don't stay the same. They are living beings which change shape and grow. As a result they must be managed.

Golf courses change gradually over the years and it can be almost imperceptible to those who play regularly. It is only those who visit occasionally who can see a difference. It's a little like when you're growing up and your great aunt says "My how you've grown" because she hasn't seen you since last Christmas.

"I believe too many clubs forget how a course changes over the years so they should really have a photographic record of the course so it can compare situations and see how it changes," said Golf Course Architect Ken Moodie.



"We should be encouraging proactive green management rather than reactive," he added.

"I try to look at old plans when I visit a club and you can see where courses do change through bad management or just lack of management and you can see trees or bushes pushing onto tees."

John Nicholson, of Eamonn Wall & Co, works with Ken on several projects, and has also seen many examples of poor tree planting on golf courses.

"People often see golf courses as an extension of their garden. But they aren't. It is a big landscape and big landscapes need big trees. People don't pay enough attention to scale and you often see a hawthorn or a rowan which would look fine in a garden but which just becomes lost and is out of scale with the rest of the landscape."

The style of the terrain should also have a bearing on what type of tree is planted.

Talking during a course visit to Hartsbourne GC, managed by David Stanton, John explained some of the tree planting dos and don'ts.

"Hartsbourne is set in rolling English landscape so you wouldn't plant angular dark trees like pine or spruce but in Switzerland or Austria the land forms are very angular, the mountains have sharp edges and that type of tree looks natural," he said.

David explained the background to the club calling in an arborist to give specialist advice.

"We called John in, not because we felt we had any inherent problems

but because we have some big mature trees which we were thinking about replacing and also because we wanted to fill up some empty areas as well as create more definition on some holes," he said.

The tree planting programme has not been in place long but already David can see benefits.

"Areas we've filled in are now in leaf and you can imagine what they are going to be like in 10 year's time. They are already having an effect so it's fair to say it's working well."

To give the trees a chance of establishing it is important that a maintenance programme is followed through as it can increase the trees survival and growth rate by times five.

"You must remember that a tree is just a cylinder with pipes on the outside. The middle of tree is dead so if you strim or damage the outside bark of the tree you are reducing the tree's potential to produce sugars etc and it is immediately under stress," said John.

Occasionally a Course Manager will decide to carry out the weeding in-house but often the man hours it involves makes for a minimal saving at best," said John, and this point was reinforced by David

"The two man team came in with knapsacks and sprayed around 5,000 trees and it only took them a morning. It was quite unbelievable," he said.

One area in which there was a little bit of debate was John's advice that the grass should be left to grow around the trees. However, the membership felt that they would rather



have this grass cut short to assist in the recovery of balls.

"We took on board the golfers and their particular abilities and felt that we should agree to their wishes," said David.

At Coombe Hill, West Kingston, Head Greenkeeper, Murray Long, has worked with John on the thinning out of the rhododendron bushes which lined much of the course.

"Because they were so dense I knew we weren't getting any regeneration so I explained the situation to the committee. I showed the Chairman of Green exactly what I was talking about, and we agreed to bring in John. That was about about two years ago,"

said Murray, who added that as the club emblem is a rhododendron bush care had to be taken to preserve the distinctive character of the course.

"What came across when I met the committee was the fact that it was a very mature, progressive golf club who had grasped the need to carry out the work," said John.

"There is a big difference between preservation and conservation and many golf clubs have a vocal minority who want to preserve everything... pickle it. They don't realise that they are not preserving what was there before because it's ever changing - it is a living entity," said John.

At Coombe Hill a strategy plan was

Above: Well defined fairways following the line of the trees make for an attractive finish.

Below: Magnificent Redwoods now visible from the 12th tee



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Key points to remember

Mowers and strimmers are the biggest killer of trees on golf courses

Trees should reflect the scale and style of the landscape.

It is often better to remove inappropriate trees when they are small to avoid club politics and reduce cost.

It is better to buy and plant small trees and watch them grow than buy 15 footers.

When clearing areas be aware that it takes twice as long to clear up as it does to cut down as the debris created is much more than you would think.

If you must plant larger trees for impact it is also better to plant a few small ones alongside as an insurance.

One year guarantees on larger trees can be worthless as trees can live off their own sap for up to five years

Tree planting should be accompanied by a maintenance programme as having a good weeding programme can increase both growth and survival rates by up to five times.

Fast growing trees do not live as long as those which are slower growing.

When planting avoid straight edges wherever possible.

Take shapes from what is growing outwith the confines of the golf course itself.

Avoid species such as poplar and willow as they are surface rooting and will invade drainage systems causing unnecessary blockages.



Above: An impressive view of Barnard Castle in Northumberland

Inset right: The exact same view some 12 years later, blocked by the growth of trees



instigated which look at the management of the trees as well as the way they affected the aesthetics of the holes.

"We looked to see if all the canopies were at the same height because that indicates whether the trees would be dying around the same time," explained John.

One of the major plus points a golf club should take on board when considering tree work is the fact that there are valuable grants available for woodland improvement.

"You can get 50% of the agreed cost for woodland improvement to a maximum of £10,000 in grant," said John, who investigates these on behalf of the club.

Often potential grant aid is lost because work is started before applying for the money. Extra grants may be applicable when the land is still in agriculture but not when work has started on a new course. It is the same when a golf course is being extended. You can get 30% more grant if the

land is still agriculture when the grant is applied for," warned John, who added that you have five years to plant once approval is given.

At Coombe Hill the work has been divided into three phases with each stage being priced accordingly.

"Before we started I put up pictures in the clubhouse from other clubs up to show what was going to happen and informed them when the work was going to start. I expected some reaction from the membership but after a few weeks it died down and when we cleared an area around the 12th tee which revealed some Redwoods that the club didn't even know we had the feedback was very positive.

"They were the biggest trees the club owned but they couldn't be seen until we cleared the path in front of them," said Murray.

Fortunately the clearing work, which also took in some birch and sycamore, didn't interfere with play because the majority of it was well

into the woods and the rhododendrons closest to the fairways were left.

The stump produced by a cut down rhododendron are huge and such is the extensive roots which feed the remainder of the bush it regenerates extremely quickly so return visits to spray any regeneration are necessary in order to maintain the desired environment.

Despite the fact that trees perform a major role at many golf clubs they do tend to be taken for granted. To ensure the best results clubs should have a management programme which takes account of the trees in and around the course and plans for their future. That way we ensure that they will continue to be involved in many of the more memorable moments the game has to offer.

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