

The Devil may care

Visit The Dyke Golf Club, on the Devil's Dyke, high above Brighton on the Sussex coast, and you get the feeling that you are entering a place that is cared for. The modern clubhouse is well appointed, the course in tip top condition and the staff eager to please. And that's all before you take into account that you are in the presence of the 2000 BIGGA Golf Course Environment Award winner.

The Dyke is a perfect example of what can be achieved in both course conditioning and environmental management, and listening to Course Manager, David Ansell, you can't help but feel that here is a man who laps up every single aspect of his job.

"We have a holistic approach at The Dyke where we look not just at the normal work that needs to be done but at all aspects of the land we have in our care," explained David, whose infectious approach to his job seems to have rubbed off on his team.

"If I, or any member of staff, is out on the course and comes across something we haven't seen before we go and find out exactly what it is. It's a job, but it's almost a hobby within a job," explained David, who is also aware of the dangers of becoming too wrapped up in it all.

"You should always keep one foot on the ground in this business and remember that we are a golf club. Golf comes first but fortunately I haven't found any problem with that."

The "We are a Golf Club not a Nature Reserve" faction which operates in many environmentally aware

golf clubs doesn't get the chance to build up much steam at The Dyke.

"In all cases the golf course wins any arguments when there is a conflict," he said firmly.

In any event David ensures that, wherever possible, work dovetails so that conservation work is often done on the back of course construction work.

"For example recently we were building some bunkers and we took the soil and chalk for these from a very stale, poor piece of woodland which contained mainly hawthorn. We cleared that area, took the soil out, and now that area is a nice coppiced woodland. There will also be some replanting of other species to mix it up a bit and more importantly the grassland will be allowed to come through.

"While doing one job to improve the golf course we did another to improve a key part of the woodland."

David is well aware of the unique nature of the land of which he is custodian.

"The Devil's Dyke is a formation from the last ice age and was grassland from early in its existence.

Much of it was turned over to the plough to produce cereal during the war efforts in both the first and second world wars and the grassland lost but the area on which the course now

stands was spared as it became a training area for the Canadian Army.

"As a result the Dyke area is famed for its ancient grassland. We've got species in abundance which you don't find anywhere else," explained David, as we sat in a committee room within the club house which was festoon with photographs, books, magazine articles and plaques all evidence of the importance the club places on its environmental action.

David is convinced that even without the importance he places on conservation matters golf has a real positive impact on it.

"The beauty of golf is that just by working on grass cutting you create a protection to the wild flowers because there is some management input whereas in other areas there might be none.

"The rough is cut on a regular basis, which almost mimics what the sheep were doing. Maintained areas stop the scrub, hawthorn and brambles coming in because they are cut in a





cycle whether it be once a year or once a month," he explained.

David and his team have gone one step further.

"It's now gone from just cutting, collecting and scarifying to looking at timings and heights of cut and monitoring how it may affect the butterflies, invertebrates and wild flowers. There are now areas which we don't cut on a regular basis and leave more tussocky for three to four years. It is trial and error and we have one or two trial plots so we can assess progress.

"This has only just started but I'm certain within five or ten years the results will be very evident.

"Where we have a good crop of orchids we're keeping those areas and trying to time our work to coincide with their growing habits," he added, by way of an example.

Looking back the 10 years to when he first joined The Dyke from Shirley Park Golf Club, in Surrey, David believes that the most sensible thing

they did was to bring in outside bodies to look at the course.

"At the beginning we had to explain to members what was needed to be done and while many people were sympathetic and others had been on the committee for a number of years and were aware of what was required it was good if they could hear it from respected outside bodies like the STRI, the South Downs Conservation Board.

"As much as it seems like common sense to everyone it is only when you've got an outside body who come in, like the STRI, and gives advice that things get done," he said, adding, "Once you've been through that period often there is a bit more trust in your own way of doing things."

He does admit that initially when it came to communicating with members they made many mistakes.

"I think we communicated extremely well with the committee but didn't do quite so well with the rest of the membership.



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"We probably didn't let them know what the work would involve and what the main outcome would be. We'd perhaps explain that an area was to be coppiced but didn't explained that there would be an unsightly area on the golf course until the plants came back."

The club's conservation programme was launched with some fairly small scale scrub clearance.

However, they did learned some tricks of the trade in terms of doing

some of the clearing work in areas where perhaps the golfer doesn't view very often.

"We'd take some before and after photos so that when we ask to do other more major areas, in higher profile areas of the course, we had some examples of the work that we'd done."

He also used some coppicing techniques to minimise any adverse reactions.

"Instead of going straight into a

poor piece of hawthorn woodland we'd perhaps come in from behind or from an acute angle that the golfer wouldn't notice when he was playing his round. We'd do the clearance work inside, wait for the process to grow in and then take out the front trees at the end.

"I wouldn't say it was sneaky but you needn't draw attention to yourself or the work, as it is being done. We did a number of things in that sort of vein to enable us to get the





job done without causing much of an issue within the golf club," said David, who produced a wonderful view over Brighton by clearing an area of trees at the bottom of the course.

David stressed the point that it is not just a case of returning the golf course back to grass at the expense of the other woodland.

"That has never been our aim although that was the fear among some of members when we started out ... that we were going to end up with an open field."

David has aerial photographs of the site going back to 1937 and can chart the change from small open coppiced areas to really thick woodland.

"In some areas this woodland is nice and mixed up with ash, oak and willow coming in but in other areas it is just pure hawthorn which is stale with no undergrowth plants or herbs," he explained.

He added that aerial photographs are taken of the entire country every ten years and are available at minimal cost or from the local library.

"The intention was to look after the woodland so that we get the best out of it over a long period and also get the best out of other surfaces. Most of the rarity is in the transition areas between woodland and grassland."

Since those early days many of those who originally had doubts have been converted.

"A number of people have noticed that the rough areas of the course are becoming full of wild flower and flying activity and that it looks so much more attractive now. That is one of the regular comments we hear with feedback from the members. It would be fair to say that we have increased the wild flowers by three, four even five fold in the last 10 years."

Winning the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition meant a

great deal to David and to The Dyke Golf Club as a whole.

"I was a bit worried when we first entered because I didn't think we'd done enough work to merit an award but it was silly really because, looking back on it, if we'd gone into the competition earlier we'd have got free feedback, in the shape of a report, from Bob Taylor much earlier."

The Dyke won a special commendation in its first year and the next two years was the South East regional winner before winning the whole competition last November.

"We were absolutely thrilled to win it and wanted to mark the year, which coincided with the club's centenary, by doing something special," explained David.

"So we decided to host a workshop for local clubs on the environment hoping to get them involved a little bit more. It went off very well and we are still getting feedback from it and have even heard from clubs who didn't make it on the day. Hopefully it might become an annual event."

The other main project which the club undertook on the strength of winning the competition was to produce a document on the conservation of the course which is colour coded and showing every single feature on the course.

While it may appear the majority of effort The Dyke's greenkeeping staff does goes into conservation work it should also be stated that the team has built 50 new tees, 30-40 bunkers and rebuilt five or six greens.

"There has been a massive amount of work done here regardless of the conservation work. We're lucky that we're on a site on which we can work most winters, but even then, I can't believe any golf club which says it hasn't got the time to go into its woodland and do some conservation work," said David.

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