



Greenkeeper Exhibitors

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Clive Osgood looks after the two magnificent Walton Heath courses and, as he explained to Scott MacCallum, you've got to work extremely hard to retain their heathland characteristics.



BACK TO THE FUTURE

Walk out into the middle of Walton Heath and immediately you can smell golfing history. Half close your eyes, and you can almost picture James Braid's giant frame striding down the fairway. Listen carefully and you'll swear you can catch the swish of hickory as another ball flies off towards its intended target.

Walton Heath Golf Club doesn't celebrate its centenary until next year but in the 99 years golf has been played on the famous piece of common land it has witnessed more significant moments in the game's development than the combined histories of a dozen clubs each with 200 years on the clock.

Just as a taster. In addition to the '81 Ryder Cup, which featured what is widely regarded to be the finest team ever to represent the United States, and numerous top professional and amateur Championships, Walton Heath is the home of the Parliamentary Golf Society.

Pleasingly the test of golf set by architect, Herbert Fowler, and over which the aforementioned Scottish representative of the Great Triumvirate played as long time Club Professional, has changed only minimally, and efforts to regain the 1903 look involves a great deal of on-going effort now and in the future.

Continuity is a quality

Walton Heath has in spades and something many other clubs would do well to emulate. James Braid was the forerunner of a very small band of Club Professionals, while BIGGA National Chairman Clive Osgood, is one of only six Head Greenkeepers in the club's entire history. In fact one of the old photographs on display in the clubhouse is of Thomas McNiece, the club's first Head Greenkeeper.

That's not to say that Clive is the greenkeeping equivalent of a museum custodian, as keeping things the way they are intended is a full time and demanding job.

"Heathland is a semi permanent state and it is true to say that it is always trying to revert back to woodland," explained Clive, as we sat in his 4x4 in the middle of the course.

"Heathland originally came from tree felling and sheep grazing and there certainly hasn't been any sheep here for a few years," said Clive, whose office wall carries a poster which declares, "Heathland: Surrey's Last Wilderness".

It prompted the question of how long would it take for the course to recolonise.

"If we sat back for 10 years and did no clearance work at all you probably wouldn't be able to see from one fairway to another for trees. In fact within a year the growth would be noticeable," said Clive, who has enjoyed a considerable number of years at the Club.

It was, he contends, the war years

contributed to the decline in Surrey heathland.

"The men were not around and the commons and heaths were neglected and became woodland. When that happens it takes a lot to get them back."

While Walton Heath Golf Club is well aware of the quality of the golfing heathland it has in its care and has policy documents ensuring the two wonderful courses retain their character, Clive has had to face criticism when trees have been felled and removed, not necessarily from members of the golf club.

"If we stand in the middle of Walton Heath we are surrounded by trees on all sides and a lot of the people who would criticise us for taking trees down are the same people who would, in 15 years time, say we'd been remiss and lost the heathland. It's a point about which I feel quite strongly," he said.

Clive has some old postcards of the course which show James Braid playing shots on some of the holes and one thing that does strike you is that, although anything but heavily wooded, the modern day Walton Heath does have a few more trees than when Herbert Fowler designed it.

"We don't rely on trees on the course. It was designed by Herbert Fowler to be an inland links course, not with trees in mind. In our circumstances there are still too many trees on the course," he said, adding that another feature noticeable from the postcards is that Walton





Heath's greens which are considered large were even larger in Braid's day.

Walton Heath is found in an area covered by several blanket Tree Preservation Orders but by making a case through English Nature, the Surrey Heathland Project, other relevant bodies and local councillors that they would be replacing the trees with a much richer habitat they were able to remove the Order.

As you look around you'll see examples of some large scale tree clearance which has subsequently been carried out and Clive sees this as an on-going project.

To highlight the point of how this will return the course to its original look

Clive drove out to the 12th tee on the Old Course and told a story about a Henry Cotton feat in 1938.

"Henry Cotton was involved in a Grand Match involving, among others, Bobby Locke and he performed the previously unheard of feat of taking out the dogleg and driving the green," explained Clive, as I attempted to peer through the trees even to see the green.

When Cotton did it he had a clear view of the green and had to clear an expanse of heather and gorse, no mean achievement in itself, but it was a possibility not open to anyone who walked off the 11th green with a point to prove nowadays.

"In the Ryder Cup in 1981 we played the tee off the front, a distance of 341 yards, to invite players to cut the corner but not too many tried. That was 20 years ago and trees will have come and gone in that time but I'd very much like to get the hole back to how it was when Cotton played it in 1938."

When tree clearing is undertaken Clive and the team often use a JCB to push the tree over and remove the roots as well.

Bracken is another unwanted visitor to Walton Heath and this year Clive and his team have sprayed it with an eco-friendly chemical, Asulox, in a bid to seize the initiative from the virulent plant.

Left: Thomas McNeice was the first Head Greenkeeper at the club and a man who served on the Board of Management of the greenkeeping Association of the time. He died in the Great War in 1916.

"We've invested a lot of money in bracken control but, being a systemic herbicide, we won't know until next spring how successful we've been. Hopefully it won't come up again and we can then budget to go round the bits we may have missed and it becomes just an occasional job thereafter."

While the bracken which is good to see the back of, heather is the opposite and there are on-going procedures in place to ensure the heather is positively encouraged.

"It is something which we've struggled to get on top of but in recent years the resources have been there and thankfully I think we've turned



the corner," said Clive, who has a dedicated team of three within the team devoted to the conservation work.

"Over the last few years we have carried out work on several fairways where we have stripped down to the seed bed on five metre wide strips down each side of the fairway.

"Some might consider it unsightly but after a year or 18 months the heather never lets us down and it comes through to the extent that the membership would like us to do a lot more. Heather needs to be kept young for best results.

"The important thing is not to carry away the heather seed when you lift the turf with a turf cutter. This can be used for returfing bunkers or restoring pathways or general repair work. The large scale areas are stripped with a JCB and we store it for composting," said Clive.

Labour intensive though the work is the rewards are there for everyone

to see with the ever changing colours which identify the seasons throughout the year.

"For a few weeks in March there is the beauty of the yellow gorse in flower, then there is the broom, which, if you're not careful, can get away from you, but it then comes into flower. Then we have summer before the end of August through to September when we have the beauty of the heather. There is also a certain bleakness in the winter which to me is another side of the character of the course," said Clive, spoken like a man who has never lost enthusiasm for his place of work.

It is a beauty which the Club shares with the many other people who enjoy the heathland.

"The course is on common land and I'm pleased to say that everyone who uses the heath complements each others' pursuits. We have dog walkers and horse riders and everyone enjoys and

respects the heathland. Long may it continue.

Another striking element of Walton Heath is the magnificent heather faced bunkers, many of which are fine examples of Fowler's, and subsequently Braid's, distinctive cross variety, which have helped to preserve the length of the course - although both courses can now be stretched to over 7000 yards.

"The best examples of the heather faces are on the obsolete bunkers because heather doesn't really cope well with sand blast but where we can encourage it we will. In fact you can see on some of the bunkers which side has most play because one side of the face can have better heather coverage than the other."

Clive also took the opportunity to correct the popular misconception that the courses' excellent drainage comes as a result of a sandy top soil.

"We have very heavy clay, 30 foot

of it above chalk. It is also extremely acidic which is where we get our heathland characteristics but there is not a hint of any good soil of any real consequence anywhere. Our quality drainage comes from surface run off. Any problems are always self inflicted," he revealed.

Talking with Clive you discover that he knows every nook and cranny of his golf courses. He even has an area named after him, Osgood's Corner, after he highlighted the location to a local archaeological group but those who know Clive will not be surprised that he is more embarrassed than proud of this accolade. When his year in office as BIGGA's National Chairman ends at BTME this year he will happily return to his full time role of ensuring that the Walton Heath members have a course to be proud of and that they stay ahead of the game in the battle to retain one of the finest true heathlands in the country.