

Trees

Trees on the Golf Course - Friend or Foe?

Simon Marrington, woodland consultant with John Nicholson Associates Ltd examines the role of trees on a golf course.

Landscapes are constantly evolving. It is nature's law that everything on a golf course grows and where it is not kept in check by nature itself, then managerial control becomes essential. It is all too rarely accepted by 'preservationists' (as opposed to conservationists) that change is inevitable and that positive management is required simply to maintain the status quo.

A good example is Flackwell Heath Golf Club in Buckinghamshire where work has recently been completed in the form of a three year programme of scrub clearance and woodland management operations. As with many of the more established clubs, the age of the course was beginning to tell. Recent decades had seen a natural increase in tree cover as regeneration occurred away from the manicured playing surfaces. Ingress had affected the strategy of several golf holes, as the woodland and scrub expanded and trees had grown up in places which were not appropriate. Tees and greens had begun to suffer due to the heavy shade cast, with dense crowns restricting both light and air circulation.

Furthermore, large areas of valuable chalk downland habitat were being eroded due to the succession of hawthorn dominated scrub and other associated vegetation. Most members' clubs are fortunate to enjoy well documented histories and a wealth of historical pictures. Having studied photographs of Flackwell Heath across the decades it became clear to Course Manager Dean Jones that the course had previously benefited from an open aspect and that management intervention was imperative. He recalls 'heathland communities (as suggested by the golf clubs name) from the upper reaches of the course had already disappeared and we were faced with losing another part of the club's heritage'.

A management plan was commissioned with John Nicholson Associates. The existing tree and vegetation cover was surveyed and management prescriptions which would ensure their sustainability were identified. A holistic approach was adopted, with the overall aim being to create, or to maintain a mosaic of grassland, woodland and scrub habitat within the framework of the golf course.

Numerous benefits are achieved by adopting conservation management on the golf course. By producing a management plan for instance, a better understanding of habitats, soils and ecology is likely to come hand in hand with improved relations with statutory bodies, such as the Environment Agency, English Nature and local authorities. Most golf clubs share common interests, with management objectives being landscape and conservation based. Clubs which demonstrate a firm



Marbled white butterfly



Orchid

commitment to nature conservation are far more likely to secure funding through the range of grants that are now available. The work at Flackwell Heath was part funded by the Forestry Commission under the Woodland Grant Scheme.

Large areas of scrub were removed completely, using a tracked excavator based mulching unit. Such machines have incredible work rates and are capable of clearing up to a hectare per day. The woody material is shredded and stumps reduced in one pass, yet the machine is manoeuvrable enough to ensure desirable stems may be marked and retained.

Existing woodland was selectively thinned by 30% ie. nearly one third of the total number of trees was removed. This may sound drastic, but it must be remembered that there are literally thousands of trees on most inland golf courses and once thinning is complete club members are amazed how little the woodland has changed to the layman's eye. The woodland edge was cut back completely where encroachment had occurred. Poorly formed, suppressed or defective stems were targeted for removal. The opportunity was also taken to reduce the proportion of exotic or non native tree species within the woodlands.

The result? Reclaimed chalk grassland has been colonised by spotted, pyramidal and bee orchids, a variety of wildlife (including marbled white and chalk blue butterfly species), flowers and grasses during the first growing season after scrub clearance. These areas are complemented by patches of scrub retained for habitat and landscape diversity and large areas of managed, predominantly native high forest, where future growth will now be concentrated on the better, more attractive trees that remain. These stems will now be able to develop unhindered and reach their true potential. Adjacent playing surfaces will benefit from improved light penetration and air circulation. Course agronomist Andy Cole (PSD) agrees, 'fine leaved grasses such as bents and fescues are simply not shade tolerant and the grass sward had deteriorated as broader leaved grasses started to prevail around the woodland edge.'

From the player's perspective, Associate Consultant at John Nicholson's, Ken Brown, concludes.



Mix of wild flowers



Original scrub understorey

"It is important to remember that good golf is easier to play off finer turf. Consequently there is a natural conflict between trees casting shade and the development of quality playing surfaces."

Having read the above and given further knowledge that the author trained in forestry, is a mediocre golfer at best and is frequently frustrated by an awkward lie beneath or behind an offending branch or trunk, it would be easy to assume it is written by someone (if you'll forgive the pun) with an axe to grind. In order to redress the balance I should point out some of the benefits that trees may bring to the golf course.

Trees can be used to define and orientate a golf hole. They can be used to frame a fairway which cannot be seen due to the topography. They can emphasise a dogleg by exaggerating the orientation of the fairway, or strategically to add interest as a heroic carry. Trees can be used to screen unsightly views or neighbouring roads or properties in the interests of safety. They may also contribute significantly to the character of a course, either by creating a feeling of seclusion, stability or simply by forming an attractive backcloth to the game of golf. Aside from the shelter they afford us in the winter winds and rain, only woodland will provide unique habitats for native wildlife such as badgers, deer and bluebells.

Put simply; trees have incredible potential to make either a positive or negative impact on the golf course. What is undeniable is that they grow and then they die. They must be viewed as dynamic, living entities with a limited lifespan. They require long term management and planning with an objective or balanced approach. To conclude, while there will always be debate it should be the aim of course managers, greens committees and consultants alike to adopt the maxim 'the right tree in the right place.'

John Nicholson Associates are an environmental consultancy firm who specialise in golf courses. Management proposals are based on sound ecological principles, but trees are an emotive subject and a broad spectrum of opinion should always be anticipated!



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Poor understorey



Wildflowers and fairway