

# Course Feature

## In Safe Hands

Scott MacCallum travelled to Suffolk to visit Purdis Heath, a club which does more than most to look after the land in its care.



▲ The bunkers are a fine example of the combined work of the greenkeeping and conservation teams

Ipswich Golf Club, also known as Purdis Heath, is one of those excellent golf clubs which, once seen, you think, "If I lived around here, I'd love to be a member of that place". A James Braid designed heathland course with all the attributes you associate with that genre – attractive, natural surroundings, a well appointed clubhouse and everything run with friendly efficiency.

But the thing about Purdis which marks it out from every other golf club in the country, and demonstrates an approach to the custodianship of the land in their care which is exceptional, is the fact that Neil Sherman and Mike Dickens, two of Course Manager Norman Fenwick's highly motivated team of eight, are qualified conservation officers. There are some who feel that this is an extravagance and sheer indulgence on the part of the golf club, but Norman Fenwick uses the resources which Neil and Mike bring to great effect. After all, many clubs employ mechanics for their specialist knowledge!

Purdis Heath carries out a total area programme which embraces all aspects of the club's land. Norman, who has been at the club for just over four years, feels that programmes for turf quality and conservation overlap so much that there is not a dividing line between them.

As part of the successful team, General Manager, Neill Ellice and Chairman of Green, Brian Laws, both have significant input into the club's land management policy. As an indication of success, Purdis Heath is the only club to have won the BIGGA golf environment award twice – becoming the first ever winners in its guise as the Amazone Golf Environment Award in 1995, and then again in 2002.

The benefits are there to be seen with a huge variety of flora and fauna, including rare butterflies, birds, lizards, deer, foxes and a white squirrel who has made one area of the course home. The impetus for a more environmentally aware golf club came in the 1980's with a group of Committee members who fostered a real interest in the subject. One of them, Ron Squirrel, a Past Captain and President of the club, has a nature trail named after him.



▲ Back row: Brian Laws (Chairman Green), Graham Brumpton, David Barton (Deputy Course Manager), Neil Worger, Neill Ellice (General Manager). Front row: Neil Sherman, Scott Thompson, Norman Fenwick (Course Manager), Adrian Goode, Mike Dickens

At that time, Neil Sherman became the first Conservation Officer, arriving initially as part of his Otley College work placement, and working one-day a week, then two. He became full time when Norman arrived as Course Manager and then, three years ago, Mike Dickens, who was a mature student also at Otley College, joined the staff, bringing the complement up to eight.

"Bringing in Mike as a second Conservation Officer was a bigger step than taking on Neil full time, but the work that we have done has proved the benefits of doing it," said Norman, who introduces a northerner's common sense approach to all that he does.

The key question, though, must be, "What does a Conservation Officer bring to the table that a greenkeeper with an interest in the environment doesn't?" It is one which Norman is well qualified to answer.

"The biggest benefit you get is the specialist knowledge. As greenkeepers, we would know what to do when it comes to woodland management, but Neil and Mike have the knowledge to do that and how to take it forward to the next stage. It is not just woodland management but looking after the whole site so that it enhances the golf course," said Norman.

The point is reinforced by Neil Sherman.

"You need to have the vision of what you want in an area and decide what will work and look appropriate. You have to plan ahead and, with heathland, that means looking at the soil and checking if it will be adequate for Heather or Gorse to grow," he said.

On Norman's arrival at Purdis Heath, he and Neil, with support from Neill Ellice and Brian Laws, produced a five year plan to cover all aspects of maintenance from greens to ponds. The plan was important as a means of identifying the full diversity of habitat within the boundaries of Purdis, which supports acid grassland, heath, dry woodland, wet woodland, fens, woodland trails, rides (vistas) reed beds and ponds. This plan is updated on an annual basis.

Another project undertaken on the site is an extensive nest box programme for both birds and bats. Over 120 bird boxes have been erected around the course with most occupied every year. The bat population around the club's lakes is very good, with the County's largest known colony of Noctule bats (Britain's biggest species) located at Purdis Heath.

One of the main thrusts when Norman arrived was to improve airflow and reduce shade problems by canopy raising and scrub clearance.

"This has had a massive impact on all playing surfaces."

An example of this was the work which was done on the beautiful par

3 15th in removing the rhododendrons which had encroached to within three feet of the putting surface. Removing them vastly improved the quality of the green which had previously been extremely damp. It has also exposed James Braid's original landscaped contours around this green and restored its original character.

Having spent 10 years at the club, Neil Sherman has seen some of the projects come to maturity and around the course there can now be seen stands of Heather and Gorse at differing heights and stages of growth.

"I know in my mind that it takes time but always with these projects you want them to happen quicker. It's a case of having the vision in my head as to what will happen, and then waiting."

The work has been aided by success in the Environment Competitions with two polytunnels purchased after the first win which are used to grow Gorse and Broom in one and Heather stocks in the other.

"We use our home grown Heather stocks in small areas, like mounds in the centre of bunkers, otherwise we'd use our plants up too quickly on large areas. On those bigger sites we use the natural seed bank and also brushing material – the clippings from heather which we've already got around the course. We mow areas of heather as part of our annual maintenance and the material collected is then reused on the golf course so there is no wastage at all," explained Neil Sherman.

They also employ trial plots out on the course to identify which techniques are best for each area.

"We have tried using grasses, plain brushings and sieved material to get purer seed to use. The technique that might work best is dependent upon the soil in a particular area and the climate as well, which means we don't always get much re-growth of heather straight away. You know the seed is in there and it will come when conditions are right," said Neil.

Purdis Heath is more than just a heathland golf course with areas of woodland and wetland as well, but each area is treated with the same amount of care by the team. The club owns a 250 acre site and, away from the playing surfaces, they use the additional land constructively.

"We've created a new path through the woodlands and around our lakes and wetlands and worked on a new section of woodland to create features for people to look at as they walk. Among these is an area of hazel coppice which is part of the historic management of the site. Traditionally, the hazel was used to create hurdles for purposes of screening around the old duck decoy pond in the centre of the woods," explained Neil.

Neill Ellice is a man who gives 100% support to the work of Norman, Neil Sherman and the team.



▲ The new nature trail gives ramblers a very pleasant new route

"The members are starting to see the benefits and have done so over the last year. These projects are not short term and the danger is that most golfers want a quick fix and instant results, and certainly it took some brave Committee decisions to go down the route we chose," said Neill.

"The important thing was that Norman was able to put his vision across to the Club Committee. Having been on The Committee myself eight years before becoming General Manager, I can remember years of arguments about an odd tree here and a bough there. Norman convinced the Committee that the long term vision was certainly worth trying to attain, and he was able to explain quite lucidly how to go about that."



▲ One of two polytunnels paid for out of the winnings of the first Environment competition

But as everyone knows, convincing the Committee doesn't mean the job is done.

"Once the Committee was on board, half the battle was won, the second half was taking the membership forward and this is where the education process has had to come in," added Neill.

With that in mind, the club has produced a range of different methods of getting information to the membership.

"We have course walks with Neil and Norman, open events at which members can, for example, come down and see the equipment they've seen out on the course, how it works and what it is used for. We keep them up-dated with a quarterly Newsletter which includes a question and answer session between Brian Laws, and Norman, in which they explain some of the complicated techniques which are used out on the course," said Neill.

Brian also reinforced the point.

"Getting the message across is still a bit of a slog and it is often only read by the people who know anyway, but we're no longer getting the comment 'What's it got to do with golf?' that we got on the early days," said Brian, who has been Chairman of Green for three years.

Norman also has strong views about the matter of getting the message across. "We're not confrontational when it comes to communication. We just talk about the issues, but one of the problems is that people get emotional about it instead of just looking at the facts. My biggest benefit is that I've actually done it, so I can say, if you do it this way, that will happen in two or three years time or, if you do it another way, this will happen. My main objective when I first moved here was to ensure that everything we did was sustainable," said Norman, who is delighted that he enjoys an excellent relationship with Neill and Brian.



▲ This vista, overlooking the lake, has been opened up by the team

"The General Manager is pivotal because he has to field the awkward questions from members. If he doesn't like fielding such questions, perhaps because the answer isn't what the questioner want to hear, it can become difficult. Neill can answer those questions but another Secretary/General Manager might not be quite so strong and pressure can then be exerted on the Course Manager. That is when things can start to crumble a bit."

Norman has nothing but praise for the work of his team and feels that they are in a win win situation, as are the club members. "In the event that any of the conservation work did not produce 100% of the desired results, then the worst case scenario would be production of increased areas of acid grassland, while the shade, airflow and root invasion problems would also be improved," said Norman, with Neill and Brian nodding in agreement.

#### MACHINERY INVENTORY

- Toro GM 3200
- Toro GM 3250
- Jacobsen Greens King 1V
- 4 Ransomes Greens Pro
- Accessories Verti-cut, Brush, Rollers
- 3 Jacobsen Tri-King JACOBSEN TRI-KING
- John Deere Fairway Cutter
- John Deere F1145 with Lastec Articulator Deck
- Iseki Front Rotary with Collector
- Amazone GH160 Flail with Collector
- Jacobsen Scorpion Bunker Rake
- Renault Ceres Tractor + Weidenmann XP 210

- Iseki TK538 Tractor + Wiedenmann G6 160
- Toro Hydrojet
- Kubota 3250L Tractor
- Ryan Turfcutter
- Sisis Variseeder
- Sisis HDS32 Slitter
- 3 Cushman Truck
- Cushman attachments sprayer, top-dresser, brush, slitter
- John Deere 55 with Front Bucket & rear Digger



▲ The Squirrel Trail named after Past Captain and President Ron Squirrel