

Course Feature



Golf Environment
Competition

From Spiders to Wild Boar

Scott MacCallum visits a golf club which has embraced the concept of ecological friendliness since becoming involved with the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition.

The story of Robert the Bruce and the spider is entrenched in Scottish folklore but it is also a tale which has resonance today and in particular, a certain Suffolk golf club.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Scottish warrior King and the arachnid, Robert, was holed up in a cave after a heavy defeat and was contemplating his future. On the verge of giving up he watched a spider attempting to create a web. It failed time and time again before one last attempt brought success. Robert took this as a sign, brushed himself down and went on to win the Battle of Bannockburn, having told his men: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again."

Ian Willett, Course Manager at Thorpeness Golf Club, in Suffolk, hasn't spent time in a cave, at least as far as I know, nor does he spend time studying spiders, but there are still similarities between him and Robert the Bruce.

Ian first entered the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition, now sponsored by Scotts, Syngenta, Ransomes Jacobsen and Course Care, eight years ago and quickly began picking up Commended and Highly Commended awards. In 2003 they made progress by winning the Regional Award, but the National prize still eluded the club. Then, last year, they cracked it and Thorpeness Hotel & GC was announced as BIGGA's environmental champion for 2005.

"It's been a long road and we did get despondent on occasions when we thought we were there, only to find that the bar had been raised again, but we are absolutely delighted to have finally made it," said Ian, who credits much of the success to Managing Director, Tim Rowan-Robinson, the man who ensured budget was set aside to implement the changes and who was very much at the forefront of the Club's environmental push.

Indeed, while there were knock backs and near misses on the golf course something wonderful was happening at Thorpeness Hotel & Golf Club as a whole, for which the BIGGA Environment Competition could claim to be the catalyst and which, in turn, helped the club over that final hurdle and through the winning line.

The competition pricked Thorpeness's green conscious and the hotel has since introduced a plethora of environmentally inspired initiatives while the individuals involved have taken ideas back to their homes and become far more ecologically active.

"We set up a Green Committee within the Thorpeness staff and we look at all aspects of our work from an environmentally-friendly perspective," said Operations Manager, David James.

"For example we recycle our corks, which now go to a charity which turns them into shoes for African children; in the restaurant we don't use any fish which is on the endangered list, including locally caught cod; we use returnable crates for deliveries so we don't use cardboard; there are recycled pens beside the beds in the rooms; we're in the process of changing to environment friendly light bulbs throughout the hotel and also installing bubble showers which don't use as much water while the staff have helped tidy up the beach at Aldeburgh," explained David, who has stopped using plastic bags for his own supermarket shopping preferring



Ian Willett, (blue jacket), with his team

instead to load everything directly from his trolley into a box which he keeps in the back of his car.

Ian actually has a small windmill attached to his home which supplements the electricity drawn from the national grid.

"It would be fair to say that all this work started as a consequence of Ian becoming involved in the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition and making us conscious of what we could do as a business," explained David.

Thorpeness is a village which takes you back in time. A haven for well heeled London residents the wonderful old cottages, traditional pubs and a boating pond, paint a picture of idyllic English life, while the quirky



The Sizewell A and B Power Stations are nearby neighbours

House in the Clouds and the magnificent old windmill add a little something not found in many other locations.

Ian, who was brought up at Wentworth where he was son of the Club chef and later a greenkeeper, has been at Thorpeness for 10 years and it seems the perfect club for a man who enjoys nature as much as he does.

"If I go out at night the number of hedgehogs you see is amazing while, when I walked my dog, Buddy, recently I ended up rescuing toads which sit in the middle of the road. I picked up about two dozen and carried them to the pond or the grass at the side so they can get on with mating. They are the same colour as the road and would be run over. You see the local children doing the same all the time.

"Then there's the nightjars and the woodlarks, for which we have SSSI status. It really has a vibrant wildlife community."

When he first entered the competition Ian genuinely believed that they had a good chance of winning.

"I didn't really know the criteria at that point and it was only through going through the process of the competition and speaking with STRI judges, Bob (Taylor) and Lee (Penrose), that you learn what is looked for. Then you try to integrate their thinking into the work that you are doing. At that point for us it became a journey.



The unique House in the Clouds overlooks the course



"As standards increased, the bar was being raised and there were occasions when we knew we were getting close but just as we were about to jump we discovered the bar had gone up by about three feet and we missed it totally!"

An example of this came a couple of years ago when composting and controlling waste water became more of an issue. I went on a seminar to learn about it then persuaded our MD that we needed to install a waste water system but it was still in the process of being installed when judging time came and I think that counted against us."

That highlights another of the issues Ian had to deal with. Having a small team - there are five in total - and doing most jobs in house meant completing jobs would take more time than might be the case at other clubs with larger staffs or who contracted more jobs out.

"We installed the concrete wash down area for the Waste2Water system ourselves and also put in the concrete composting area, completed with a bunding.

"We do have a budget, which isn't huge, to work within but we are particularly lucky to have Ray Hardinge, an ecologist who is also a member of the club, who gives us a lot of his time and expertise."

Ray built a set of bird and bat boxes for the course and together with the team spent a great deal of time up ladders studying compasses to make sure they were facing in the right direction.





"In the first year we had a 60% success rate with these and credit for that must go to Ray and his knowledge. He has always been keen to know who had won the competition and always made a point of visiting the winning club to see first hand the work that they had done"

Ray is also on hand to assist Ian and his team when they do any major work on the course.

"Every job we do has an environmental impact. If we are refacing bunkers, Ray will speak to me about which of them we are intending to do. Then we'll go out and take an environmental record of what flora we have within a metre and a half of the bunker. Then we'll tackle the job using locally grown fine turf and once finished compare what we had to what we've got. We leave gaps to allow the original seed beds to come through and recent work has shown us that we can get 55% of the original plants and wild flowers back within two to three years and we reckon it will take about nine years to get it back fully."

Ian is well aware of his responsibility to provide year round golf to members and hotel guests and the course copes with well over 30,000 rounds per year.

"We do practice sustainable golf at Thorpeness but not what the R&A are taking about, as we do take preventative measures to control disease because guests wouldn't want to pay on diseased covered greens.

"I don't have the luxury of closing the course for a couple of weeks to give it a rest. It just doesn't work like that."

So what turned the perennial bridesmaid into the 2005 bride?

"I'd say it was the whole club's involvement. I'm lucky that around 30% of the members are interested in the fact that we won the award and are champing at the bit waiting to see the Scott's Weather Station (part of the prize) in action," said Ian, who also has an ongoing programme of heather regeneration.

There is very much a collective feel to the management style of the Hotel, club and the course.

Thorpeness is lucky to have a small but dedicated and committed greenkeeping team comprising Deputy, Mark Henderson, Chris Guy, Paul Barber and Toby Alexander, and Ian is quick to involve all of them in decision making and often finds some of the best ideas come from the least experienced team member. More widespread consultation takes place



The club is heavily involved with heather regeneration



The team do all construction work in-house

throughout the club with everything being discussed at the Golf Committee so the members, the golf course, hotel guests and environmental issues are all considered from everyone else's perspective.

Ian's advice to other Course Managers thinking about entering the competition is short and to the point.

"Give it a go. That's what I did. I got so fed up with people turning round and telling me that golf courses were detrimental to the environment I wanted to show them that they are anything but and this competition showcases the great work that goes on up and down the country.

"You may not get a certificate in the first years, you may not get a visit, but you will improve your golf course through the information which is available from the judges," he advised.

Ironically, for a golf club with such green credentials it is a close neighbour to an establishment whose very name stirs the passions of environmentalists. Nuclear power stations Sizewell A and Sizewell B can be seen from the 10th tee and although A is currently being decommissioned there are still groups protesting that they should never have been built in the first place.

"We don't glow green at night, nor do we have two headed swans but the local waters are good for fishing as the water around Sizewell is a little bit warmer than further out," said Ian.

Although banned from entering the competition for three years, Thorpeness will continue with their environmental work and Ian is hoping to sign up to the EGU/STRI certificated programme.

"I'd also like to experiment with using sheep to manage areas the way Hollinwell has done, while I do believe you can do things with iron age pigs or wild boar which I'd like to look into."

As I said at the beginning you won't ever find Ian Willett in a kilt but he does have some similarities to Robert the Bruce, who as well as studying spiders, no doubt knew a bit about wild boar as well.

There is still a little time for anyone interested in entering the 2006 BIGGA Golf Environment Competition, sponsored by Scotts, Syngenta, Ransomes Jacobsen and Course Care. Details and entry form can be downloaded from the BIGGA Website www.bigga.org.uk. But be quick entries must be submitted by June 23.



Heather regeneration areas are protected by blue rope



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