



Notts (Hollinwell) Golf Club, winners of the 2008 BIGGA Golf Environment Competition

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SUCCESS

By Kelly Watson and Richard Stuttard



It doesn't seem like 12 months ago that we were last excited by the high quality of entries to the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition, but results time is upon us again and the bar has been raised even further by this year's entrants and particularly by this year's winner, Notts (Hollinwell) Golf Club. The day of our visit to Notts (Hollinwell) was one of the wettest of a very wet summer but despite this, the clubs ecological and environmental commitment shone through.

Hollinwell has been the Midlands regional winner in the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition for the last three years and this year, through the club's continued efforts with existing initiatives and the implementation of many new ones, Hollinwell is the worthy winner of the overall prize. It is a heathland course that not only impresses through large-scale environmental and ecological projects, but also with their superb attention to detail and their huge list of smaller initiatives. The course is managed by a team of nine greenstaff, under the guidance of Philip Stain, Course Manager, and the commitment and enthusiasm of all involved at Hollinwell towards promoting aesthetically and ecologically interesting holes, while maintaining fine playing surfaces, is clear both when visiting the course and also when talking to Philip and his team. It is the enthusiasm and the backing from all levels at the club that have enabled Hollinwell to claim this year's top prize.

During 2007, scrub clearance has been carried out on the course to continue the club's heathland restoration programme and this has been hugely successful. Heather regeneration is widespread, thanks to the innovative techniques employed by the greenstaff, and heather is now becoming an integral part of the golf course. Hollinwell is unusual in having a 50-acre out of play area in the centre of their course. To keep this free of developing scrub vegetation, the club have introduced a team of grazing sheep which are successfully keeping the area free from scrub trees and bracken.

Water features are also strongly represented at Hollinwell. There are a number of well-managed ponds, including an irrigation reservoir, while the comprehensive network of dykes and ditches, which have been further extended this year, look stunning. The club recognises the need not to over manage, and have encouraged appropriate marginal plants. There are almost countless other small touches everywhere you look around the course, such as the provision of hibernacula for reptiles and snakes, the creation of nesting holes for kingfisher and sand martin, and the provision of wood piles in woodland areas to provide habitat for stag beetle and other invertebrates that feed on dead wood.

The good work at Hollinwell is not exclusive to the course. At the maintenance facility the greenstaff have put in place a fully sustainable water management system, using reedbeds to cleanse the washdown water and in the clubhouse the club have installed a wood burning boiler to meet the club's entire heating and hot water needs. This boiler will be fed from waste wood from the ongoing woodland management programme on the course, supplemented by deliveries from an outside contractor who delivers 'waste' wood to the club at no cost, rather than paying for its disposal in landfill. This is a superb "win-win" partnership that, although it has an initial start up cost, will ultimately reap both financial and environmental rewards.

Communication with members on ecological matters is of an extremely high standard and this has served the club well in enabling the progression of projects that change the look of the golf course. The club commissioned a bird survey of the course to provide members with information on what can be spotted as they play the course and this highlighted the success of the 50 nesting boxes that have been erected. A moth survey has also been carried out through a local University. The results of these surveys are posted on the club notice board, along with details of the environmental projects being undertaken at the club. This

information promotes healthy debate in the Clubhouse and maintains strong links between greenstaff, club officials and members. It is this holistic approach to environmental and ecological matters that has kept Hollinwell a contender for the title for many years and has led to it being this year's winner.

Given the high standard of entries to this year's competition, choosing regional winners was no easy task. The high number of entries and the diversity of each club's individual projects, coupled with often unique and innovative ideas, continue to make our competition visits more and more interesting and our selection process more and more difficult!



One of the many superb water features at Hollinwell



Ecology rough at Eaton Golf Club

Scottish winner, West Linton Golf Club, is located in stunning countryside in Peeblesshire in the Scottish Borders. The golf course circles a substantial area of blanket bog, which is protected from development and from agricultural improvement by the surrounding golf course. The bog area was initially retained as it was simply too wet for golfing play but is now appreciated as the outstanding visual feature of the course. The club are conscious of the need to manage and to protect the bog and have commissioned botanical surveys of the bog to help guide management. West Linton has worked closely with conservation organisations such as The Wildlife Partnership, Scottish Borders Biological Records Centre, the Scottish Golf Environment Group and their local Biodiversity Action Plan officer. The club is also very inclusive of the local community and host a glass recycling site for West Linton village and reach out to schools to encourage research projects and work experience. Internally, the club have a dedicated Environment and Energy Committee.



West Linton Golf Club

This year's Northern area winner, Eaton Golf Club, stood out for its incredible interest in the subject of ecology and environment and their desire to take the club forward. The club has an Environmental Working Group which meets regularly to discuss how the club can improve. It's not all talk though. The club has only been at its present location for 14 years and yet the ecological work carried out on the course creates an air of maturity. Deep ecology rough has been introduced in many areas of the course by the Head Greenkeeper, Gavin Clark, and his team,

aimed at providing definition to the holes and increasing the aesthetic and ecological value of out of play areas. There is also an impressive series of ditch networks which, where out of play, have been left to nature, and provide superb habitat for a wide variety of insects and small mammals.

Hedgerows also feature strongly around the course and provide an effective natural barrier and are effective wildlife corridors which facilitate the safe movement of birds and small mammals. Hedgerows are declining in the UK, with over 150,000 miles lost in the last 60 years, and Eaton, recognising the ecological value of the hedgerows, has undertaken a hedge laying programme to preserve and enhance hedges on the course. These are just a few of the measures that, coupled with best practice techniques regarding turfgrass and water management, have led to Eaton being top of the Northern region this year.

Fulford Heath Golf Club, near Birmingham, has surprised the judges by securing the Midlands region title in its first year of entry. However, this result is down to dedicated and continual work over many years by the Course Manager, Kim Blake, and his greenstaff, and significant investment by the club in 2007. The rough grasslands are the highlight of the course at Fulford Heath, where the sowing of annual seed into



Wildflowers in rough grassland at Fulford Heath



Royal Porthcawl Golf Club

rough areas has produced impressive wildflower meadows, which change colour throughout the year and provide important food for pollinators. The club is also taking part in a study, in conjunction with STRI and Syngenta, which trials several different management techniques aimed at encouraging wildflowers in golfing rough, to provide food plants for bumblebees. The results from the study will be communicated to other golf clubs to encourage the establishment of wildflowers on courses across the country. In 2007 the greenstaff put in place a comprehensive composting system that utilises organic waste from the course and from the Clubhouse, including waste cardboard and paper. The club has shown faith and foresight in purchasing a wood chipper to speed up the composting process.

The Wales and South West regional prize has been an incredibly close fought battle with the standard in this area being truly impressive. Coming out on top this year was Royal Porthcawl Golf Club. Head Greenkeeper, David Ward, and his team, have utilised and promoted the coastal species they have on the course to maximise the habitat available for wildlife and, in turn, create a superbly challenging round of golf. There is not a square metre of managed turf that is not realistically required and the golf course sits harmoniously within the surrounding coastal landscape.

Gorse and heather feature strongly on the course and are managed to maintain them at the healthy stage of their lifecycles. The gorse provides superb definition and strategy to every hole and, where gorse or heather are not present, deep but fine ecology rough grassland has been allowed to develop. There are significant 'out of play' areas on the course that have been left with minimal management to promote wildlife and these areas are akin to nature reserves. This, coupled with an excellent attitude to communication, recycling, and water management (including a water harvesting scheme from maintenance buildings), made Royal Porthcawl the judges favourite in this region.

At Aldeburgh, southeast regional winner, Mark Broughton MG is an extremely knowledgeable greenkeeper who has fostered an organised and sustainable approach to improving the course. The greenstaff at Aldeburgh have begun an extensive programme of gorse removal which, when complete, will transform and rejuvenate the course. The aim is to get a more even balance between grassland and gorse on the course, to open up vistas across the course and to provide more valuable gorse habitat – The interior of large blocks of gorse is largely inactive and is



Gorse removal at Aldeburgh



Carefully sited compost bays at Fairhaven Fairhaven

inaccessible to small birds, while breaking up the gorse blocks helps regenerate the gorse and increases accessibility.

This gorse management is a massive undertaking for the greenstaff and has taken up much of the time and resources available for ecological work but the club have undertaken successful woodland management by employing a contractor who works for the price of the wood he removes. The contractor has been selectively thinning the woodlands on the course – Removing non-native trees such as sycamore and retaining native species. The course at Aldeburgh is quite likely to have supported heather in the past as some very small remnants remain and the acidic soil conditions are suitable for heather growth. Mark has sourced heather seed from a local golf course and has successfully established heather within a trial area of the course. Given this success, more trials are planned, with the aim of gradually increasing heather on the course at a sustainable pace.

Fairhaven Golf Club, near Lytham, has been awarded the best newcomer award following its very recent pledge to introduce ecological change on the course and the rapid progress made since making this commitment. The club commissioned an ecological management plan in February 2007 and has made rapid progress since then with strong commitment shown

by both the greenstaff and the club. One particularly impressive element of Fairhaven's new management policy is the appointment of James Hutchinson, Assistant Greenkeeper, as Environmental Coordinator and the setting of a separate guaranteed budget for ecology work each year. On top of this annual budget the club has promised to double any prize money received by the club in this year's competition, which amounts to quite a windfall for ecology at Fairhaven this year!

Since February, the club have removed self-seeded silver birch from mounding on the first hole, which was threatening the survival of creeping willow (a European priority species) in the wet hollows. The club have also levelled and cleared an old dumping ground and have now concentrated all hollow cores and old turves into one screened area for reuse. Grass clippings are now collected and redirected off the course into a newly constructed central composting system. The club has a lot of Rhododendron on the course, which is non-native and supports only minimal wildlife interest, and the members have approved plans to significantly reduce the amount of rhododendron, an important and difficult step with such a controversial issue.

Dunstanburgh Castle Golf Course occupies a superb location on the Northumberland coast and is named after the nearby Dunstanburgh



Dunstanburgh Castle

Castle, which provides a dramatic backdrop to the course. The course is on National Trust land (the original golf course was constructed before the NT purchased the land) and is privately leased. The National Trust still have a vested interest in the management of the site and provide advice and volunteer labour to help manage the course. This is certainly appreciated by the club who rely on only two dedicated greenstaff to manage the 18-hole course.

The club has been awarded this year's special initiative prize for its efforts to encourage nesting birds on the course. This includes the restoration of grassland covered by bracken and by gorse and the reconstruction of a greenkeeper's shed from the 1900s in the same style and dimensions as the original, but with extended eaves to provide nesting space for birds and the windows have been left open to provide further nesting potential for swallows. The club plans to plant a small woodland adjacent to the reconstructed shed, at the periphery of the course, which should provide further shelter for the birds. This planting has been well thought out and will consist of deciduous trees planted in single species groupings, which mimics the dispersal pattern of trees in natural woodlands. The 2007 innovation title is well deserved by the club, who were also a very strong contender for the best newcomer prize.

Both STRI and BIGGA are grateful to the sponsors of the competition, Ransomes Jacobsen, Scotts and Syngenta, who make the competition possible. The sponsors demonstrate strong commitment to the environment through their own businesses and both they, BIGGA and STRI are keen to encourage best environmental practices on golf courses. The high standard of entries in 2007, from across England, Scotland and Wales, and from clubs of diverse budgets and resources, suggests that environmental stewardship in golf is certainly on the ball.

Kelly Watson and Richard Stuttard are Ecologists at the STRI Ecology and Environment Unit



Reconstructed greenkeeping shed



Woodchipper at Fulford Heath GC



Fox hole