



A HEATHLAND CRUSADE

Scott MacCallum visits BIGGA's Environment Competition winner and finds a club that has been transformed over the last 10 years

A meeting 10 years ago between Notts (Hollinwell) Golf Club Course Manager and a member of the Sherwood Forest Trust may not have been up there with Stanley catching up with Dr Livingstone or Harry meeting Sally, but the consequences of that encounter have had a hugely beneficial impact on the golf course. So much so that Notts (Hollinwell) are the current holders of the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition, sponsored by Ransomes Jacobsen, Scotts and Syngenta.



Phil Stain had been Course Manager for a couple of years and very keen to ensure that the jewel in Nottinghamshire's golfing crown was maintained to the highest possible standard when he met Adam Goodall, of the Sherwood Forest Trust,

"I was approached by Adam, who asked me if I realised what we had at Notts - before adding that we were going to lose it. I was shocked, as I was proud to be working on a heathland golf course and, with a strong environmental and wildlife interest, keen to maintain the course as sympathetically as possible," recalled Phil.

Adam was referring to the fact that the course was being taken over by birch woodland and the distinctive heather and gorse was disappearing. In short, Notts Golf Club was on its way to losing its identity and becoming a woodland golf course.

Phil was genuinely disturbed. He and his team had been doing all they could to maintain the heathland characteristics but resources meant that this work was restricted to the playing areas, while the extensive

land the club owned bordering the playing areas had to be left and was becoming overgrown.

"These areas were closing in and the two main grazing areas – one 27 acres and the other four – were on the verge of becoming birch woodland and closing in on the course itself."

Originally these areas had been grazed by sheep and cattle, which keep the growth down, but when this practice stopped the land, left to its own devices, got out of control.

"Adam offered us a solution and the resources to restore and manage more of the heathland. I was very much in favour and spoke to my Chairman of Green at the time, Ian McLachlan, and encouraged him to come along to a seminar outlining how important it was to retain the remaining heathland in Nottinghamshire," said Phil, adding that Sherwood Forest Trust research highlighted that 95% of heathland had disappeared in the previous 10-15 years.

"Ian was taken aback, just as I had been, and together we felt we had to do all we could to restore and retain heathland at Notts. What has subsequently been achieved couldn't have happened without Ian. I've got huge respect for him because I was getting paid to do a job but he was doing it in his own time because of his love of the golf course," said Phil, who revealed that Ian still provides practical support by personally potting heather seed to produce small plants for replanting on the course.

Signing up to a 10 year contract with Sherwood Forest Trust provided the funding to enable Phil to put added resources to heathland management but it also meant that certain targets had to be met.

To that the club land was split into compartments and a prescription

given for each area. For example, the first 20 yards into woodland could be cleared for golfing purpose but beyond that nature had been allowed to take its course and fallen or wind blown wood left to become potential habitat for the insects. Anything cleared from the outer area also had to be taken into the inner part so it wasn't wasted.

"It might be that Compartment A has a target of 40% of gorse removed by a certain time and a heather bed developed, while in Compartment B they might want to see 20% more heather. It's not so strict that we have to comply down to the exact percentage point, and through time we developed a very close relationship with Sherwood Forest Trust and they know and we've often exceed the targets. So it's a system which works well.

"A lot of it is matched funding but our input comes in the shape of man hours and machinery."

The benefit of the agreement, and they are set to sign up for a second 10 year period with increased funding, is that what the Sherwood Forest Trust and the golf club desire naturally tie in very nicely.

They have taken thousands of trees out during the last 10 years – one small area just in front of the 13th tee involved removing 650 – but the timber is all put to good use in a Biomass boiler and two log burning stoves in the clubhouse which has helped reduce heating bills.

The tree removal has helped the airflow to greens so Phil has found that his putting surfaces are much healthier.

However, with birch clearing, one problem is solved but another three created as the issue of gorse and bracken invasion and self set trees doesn't go away and places constant demands on the team.

"If we hadn't got involved with Sherwood Forest Trust and the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust when we did we would have been predominately a woodland golf course by now. Had we left it much longer to do the work it would have been too expensive and we would have lost the little pockets of flora and fauna which were clinging on including the common lizards and the grass snakes. Fortunately we caught it in time and where bird species were here in small numbers we have much more and brought in new and different species as well."

The Club has featured highly in the BIGGA Environment Competition over the years, winning the Regional prize and the New Initiative prize on a couple of times. These prizes came for the introduction of specialist black Hebridean sheep, owned by the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust. The sheep, at one stage there were 70 of them, complete with shepherdess, in a throwback to the old days kept the vegetation down on the grazing areas.

"They had to be very hardy as the scrub is very poor quality and the discampsia grass doesn't provide much nutrient. We repeated the project last year with three short legged Dexter cattle, and we're investigating the use of ponies for future use."

The second new initiative prize came for a reed bed filtration project but it was another project, combined with the continuity of environmental endeavour which clinched the top prize this time around.

As Phil has discovered the chain reaction of benefits to wildlife which come about interlinking one project to another are amazing and gratifying.

"Because we had the sheep we have now got little owls, because little owls eat beetles which eat the dung left by sheep," said Phil, who is staggered by the amount of interest there has been in the club since it won the award with many calls from other golf clubs and coverage in local, environmental press, as well as national publications, including



Phil Stain, Course Manager



new media sponsor Golf Monthly, television and radio.

To enable the club to provide a nine hole loop two additional holes were added – 8a and 9a – which return golfers, who would otherwise be heading away from the clubhouse back to sanctuary. The attention to environmental detail on those two new holes is remarkable.

"Year and years ago we used to mow the margins of ponds and streams so balls would fall in but now, and with the new holes, we've ensured that we leave at least a metre around all ponds and water hazards to create little corridors for wildlife to move around.

"In fact, all the new ponds on the new holes are linked by corridors. With streams having two metre corridors, a metre each side, so wildlife can move from one pond to another without the risk of being seen by golfers or predators. We have gone from one pond inhabited by water voles to four – in ponds that didn't exist three years ago."

They also took the unusual step of leaving trees in the newly created ponds as the dead Alder trees provide nesting for the green woodpecker, the great spotted woodpecker, the tree creeper and the nuthatch.

“We’ve lost about 40% of timber through rotting and falling over but there are new trees growing up to replace them,” explained Phil, who also pointed out the sand bank at the edge of one pond in which they had created holes and which is now home to some kingfishers.

That wasn’t a first for the club. A few years ago they created something similar for sandmartins on a small quarry area in one of the non-play area grazing areas on the course.

“We excavated a small wall out of the sand in the quarry and made some holes and sandmartins used it for nesting. We actually featured on Springwatch with Bill Oddie and Simon King. Bill Oddie said it was great and that golf courses could do a lot more, but he’s probably oblivious to a lot of the other great work that does go on,” said Phil.

Despite all the excellent environmental work that has gone on at Notts, Phil is adamant that the priority is always the golf course.

“We’re something special. A heathland course verging on inland links and there are very few like that. People come here because they want to plan traditional golf – fast greens in summer; hard, fast fairways, a bit sparse and a bit wiry going back to the time before people came along with 100s of tonnes of fertiliser and 100s of gallons of water.

“Americans and Japanese come over and want to play this type of golf and the club does recognised that this is its selling point and from a golf course point of view it is a lot more valuable if it retain its heathland status rather than just becoming another parkland course.”

But with Phil and his team of eight working on it there is now no danger of that happening.

“If people come here from a parkland course they probably think we neglect it. Heathland management verges on neglect because we want those wiry tough grasses and we certainly don’t want high fertility fairways, or to be throwing nitrogen or water on it. That wouldn’t be natural and we try and keep everything to a minimum.



“I do get criticism for keeping the greens a bit stressed and hungry but I feel that is sustainable through winter and summer - there are no peaks and troughs. Everything I do is for the long term. I want to be sitting here when I’m due to retire thinking I’ve done my best and that the club has been happy with what I have done,” adding that he is delighted to have such a supportive golf club and hard working and talented staff.

“I can’t imagine a job that would be better than what I’m doing now. I’ve got a bit of office work, quite a bit of health and safety, but I’ve got the golf course and I’ve got the environment. What else is there from my point of view?”

All Course Managers/Head Greenkeeper members of BIGGA should find a copy of the BIGGA Golf Environment competition 2008 application form with this magazine. It can also be downloaded from www.bigga.org.uk/education

