

TREES AND FUN GOLF

By John Nicholson

SUPPLEMENT



Trees now form an integral part of many British golf courses, though this was certainly not the case 100 years ago when trees were not considered to be relevant to golf whatsoever, as all of the better courses were links. However with the evolution of golf architects such as Colt had identified that the heathland ecosystem represented similar qualities to that of the links, low fertility, sandy free draining soil and fine grass.

Colt had an intense dislike to playing golf in the winter on muddy clay based courses with broadleaf grass and soon realised that the heathland of Surrey and Berkshire offered the opportunity for all year round golf and classic playing conditions similar to the links. Further the heathland was poor

agriculturally therefore cheap to buy.

However heathland is a transitory ecosystem which will revert to woodland if left unmanaged, trees therefore became an issue and many people do not realise that heather is a woodland shrub which appears in gaps in the canopy. Therefore woodland management is needed if a heathland golf course is to remain intact.

The strategy of many of the traditional courses was to carry over a diagonal feature such as heather or a bund, however, a lot of older courses have been adversely affected by the encroachment of trees often forcing doglegs and removing the risk and reward from the shot. We should never forget that golf is played for fun and if this crucial element is lost then the popularity of the game will suffer and as finances get tighter this becomes even more pertinent.

The removal of trees in this situation is always politically sensitive as members think that it will make the hole easier, however, the carry often remains the same but becomes more appealing and tempts an adventurous shot; the one thing golfers have in common is that they think they are capable of shots that in truth they are not.

Trees bring out strong emotions in virtually everyone, many feel the removal of any tree should be punished by hanging however, there is a raised awareness that trees are only good if in the right place. My philosophy has always been that trees should form the framework in which the course is set but should have little relevance within the strategy of the course.

The doyen of strategic design Harry Colt stated:

'Trees are a fluky and obnoxious form of hazard, but they afford rather good protection, and if a clump of these exists at such a spot it might well be considered justifiable to leave it standing.'

H.S.Colts, Some essays on golf course architecture, 1920.

His comments are due to the strong three dimensional hazard trees form, this negates the skill of the talented player as whatever handicap a player is to play a chip from behind a tree is the same for all.

Woodland naturally regenerates around the perimeters or within gaps in the canopy therefore any areas of rough will eventually turn to woodland, this succession can often be rapid and goes undetected by those who view it on a daily basis. This has resulted in many courses losing land to woodland. Oak is regarded by many as a slow growing tree however it can put on up to 4 feet of growth in one season (not only upwards but also sideways) therefore significant amount of space can be lost each year.



Most woodland on a golf course is restricted by mowing regimes thus removing a woodlands natural ability to regenerate, therefore if sustainable woodland is to be achieved then a management policy is required to ensure a mixed age structure is created. A mixed age structure guarantees that as one generation of trees reaches senescence another is ready to take its place thus providing continuity of the landscape and its wildlife habitat.

Man has managed the woodlands of Britain since 1100bc, in one form or another, depending on his needs and it is often not realised that the face of what is thought to be natural Britain is manmade. The original woodland of southern Britain was predominantly Lime woods but Rule Britannia would never have ruled the waves if her ships had been made from Lime!

The misguided belief that woodland will manage itself is a dangerous philosophy, as man always intervenes by mowing or building on the edges of woodlands in exactly the spot where the woodland needs to regenerate. Woodlands are mobile and will therefore steal every piece of land available to them a policy is therefore required in order to ensure the woodland remains where the landowner requires.

If an edge is managed through mowing then the trees on the edges will become heliotropic (one sided looking for the light) this means that the tree puts all its energy into growing on only one side. Growth is therefore rapid and encroachment can occur in a relatively short period. If this adjoins a tee or green then it can have a detrimental effect on the agronomics and strategy of a hole. Tees can effectively be reduced in size creating excessive wear as players naturally favour the unimpeded line of play, both tees and greens can suffer from heavy shade and competition from roots which stress the sward and predispose the playing surface to disease. Further in winter areas can remain frozen and out of play for longer than necessary periods.

Therefore on urban courses, where space is at a premium, it is essential to ensure that the woodland edge is managed to safeguard the golf course. On more established courses encroachment may occur to such a degree that all of the strategy is lost and only one option from the tee is possible, hit it down the middle or into the trees. To give an example at Coombe Hill; this made for difficult but dull golf however once the edges were relocated (10-15 metres being gained either side) the course was able to embark on a more strategic bunkering programme which resulted in the club receiving the Golf World Award for best Renovation of the year in 2004 something which would not have been possible if the woodland had remained unmanaged. Further the course probably gained 2-3ha of land which was previously unusable how much would it cost to buy that amount of land in Kingston!

Finchley undertook a similar programme of woodland management finishing in 2005 and causing much debate amongst members and a lot of political pressure was placed on the course manager Craig Newton and committee to stop the programme in the first year. However both stood firm and the doubters are now quiet as the



benefits of the woodland programme are there to see, and the quality of the course and its set up for enjoyable golf has improved to such a degree that on a recent visit Ken Brown was even tempted to dust off his clubs.

Finchley is an example which many golf clubs could follow the course is set up so that it promotes fun golf with wide fairways, scenic woodland and great playing surfaces. The club now have the space necessary to review the bunkering in order to improve the challenge of the course without the need for penal golf with long rounds and lost balls.

Craig Newton, Course Manager said: "Before we managed the woodland many greens were closed in the winter for long periods, however, since the work was completed we have played continually on the greens 12 months of the year. Disease is far less frequent than in the past when we would have had to spray for Fusarium 5/6 times a year, however with improved light and air we have reduced this to 1 or 2 applications per annum. The grass sward is now much stronger I now have the

opportunity to keep the course in good condition for a much longer period.

"The woodlands were previously full of bramble and scrub which led to slow play and lost balls but now they feature bluebells, foxgloves and wild garlic and the majority of the members now really appreciate the attractive woodland that has resulted from the work."

Trees and woodlands offer many benefits they create important wildlife habitats for wonderful creatures such as woodpeckers and bats, they provide seclusion and protection and can act as attractive backdrops to golf holes. Sentinel oaks add majesty and in autumn trees can provide colours which brighten the day.

It is therefore essential to have sustainable woodland located in the correct position if a course is to reach its full potential, a net loss in numbers of trees but a positive gain in quality!

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