

A breath of fresh air

Scott MacCallum visits Worplesdon, a club which can now breathe thanks to an extensive tree removal programme



It's amazing how things creep up on you. One minute you're the young whippersnapper with your whole life ahead of you, the next you're one of Terry Wogan's TOGs, and nodding earnestly during Grumpy Old Men. It's the same at Worplesdon Golf Club, in Surrey. One minute it's regarded as one of the finest heathland course in the country - the next thing it's tight and tree lined, albeit still an excellent test of golf.

Of course, the truth is that neither of these things happened overnight. They crept up little by little, bit by bit, and before you know it the grey hairs outnumber all others and the previous wonderful views across the golf course are blocked by unruly timber.

There are adverts on TV which point to a product that can help with the former but the latter has required a real commitment to change from the Worplesdon members and a professional plan, professionally executed.

The catalyst for a return to how the course used to be came from the older members who could recall the wonderful heather and genuine heathland on which they had once played their golf.

"The members who have only joined in the last 15 years only know the course as woodland and it was those members in the main who had objections and asked why we were going to change what they felt was a lovely golf course – a lovely woodland golf course," said Jeremy Caplan, who was the Centenary Captain in 2008 and current Chairman of Green.

"When I joined in 1965 the heather was in abundance, but the trees have grown up, almost imperceptibly, year on year and it is only when you look at photographs do you appreciate how much the course had changed," said Jeremy, who said the club's prestigious Worplesdon Foursomes had generated a great many photographs to use as evidence of how much it has altered.

Impetus for change also came from Course Manager, Brian Turner, who had identified the problem when he took over five years ago.

"There was no light or air movement on the course and this was particularly poor on the 16th and 17th tees. The back of the 12th green where I had no sunlight at all and the quality of the sward was suffering. Now it's one of the first greens to get the sun," explained



Brian, who is in his second stint at the club, having spent a number of years at Sunningdale.

Brian had worked with woodland specialist John Nicholson, of John Nicholson Associates, at Sunningdale, and it was to John who he turned after he had got the go-ahead to look into the problem.

"Bringing John in was a carry on from my Sunningdale days where he helped me and did a very good job and I saw the need here to return

the course to a more heathland look. I felt that the course could be revitalised if we undertook a professional woodland management programme."

John Nicholson has carried out work at a number of Home Counties courses.

"What you have to remember is that heathland is an ecosystem in transition and is always wanting to revert to woodland. Harry Colt identified heathland and linksland,



INSET TOP: Jeremy Caplan
INSET BELOW: John Nicholson

PAGES 18-19: The 5th after the tree removal (MAIN) and before (INSET)

The 9th after the tree removal (MAIN ABOVE) and before (INSET ABOVE)



which have the same ecosystems, as ideal for golf as they attract fine grasses and are free draining,” explained John, who made a presentation to around 80 Worpleston members explaining the need for an extensive woodland management programme to return to the course to where it once was.

“Those who attended John’s presentation understood what was going on and appreciated that it wasn’t just a butchery exercise but that it would be done very carefully, ensuring that the correct trees were removed and that younger ones were left to take their place,” said Jeremy.

“I think that some members had the wind taken out of their sails when they posed their questions and got scientific agronomic replies. I think they were slightly taken aback and had their initial perceptions changed.”

One of the concerns that is often expressed when tree removal, heather regeneration, schemes are muted is that the course will become a lot easier as a result.

“In many cases we make it more difficult because you are creating more temptation – a desire to cut a

corner that was previously wooded – and as amateur golfers we all, to a man or woman, think we are better than we are and attempt shots that we shouldn’t. In reality scores tend to go up not down when we carry out such work,” said John, who recalled a comment from his business associate BBC commentator and ex Ryder Cupper, Ken Brown – “Why would an 18 handicapper want the course hard anyway?”

It was agreed that the work would be carried out in three phases and Brian felt that the most dramatic and politically-sensitive phase – work within sight of the clubhouse – be carried out first.

“I think after the first phase had been completed the members were appreciative of the trees that were cut down but had no real imagination of how bare it would look when the undergrowth had been removed,” said Club Captain, John Philips.

It was not long before the views across the course that had re-emerged, some after 30+ plus years were being enjoyed be all.

John (Nicholson) undertook all the preparatory work required ahead of the first chainsaw slicing

timber – acquiring felling licences from the Forestry Commission and appointed the contractor, Tony Craggs, who would undertake the felling work and another contractor would come on, remove the stumps and carry out the mulching and scraping. John supervised the job from start to finish so he was in hand to address any issues that arose.

“There were two men who lived on site in a caravan while they carried out the work. They were amazing workers and worked from first light until it was dark,” explained Jeremy, whose role during much of the work was to offer reassurances and answer questions from concerned members who were watching large swathes of their golf course being thinned out.

He also received a deputation from a group of local residents who explained to him that there was a longstanding protection order on trees bordering the course.

“The interesting thing was that the licence that John had acquired from the Forestry Commission over road everything already in existence. However we spoke with the residents and with everything being



INSET TOP: Brian Turner
INSET BOTTOM: Paul Robinson
(Deputy Course Manager)



done so sympathetically the work was agreed without any acrimony.”

The issue of change puts many people on edge and members are genuinely concerned if any dramatic changes to the golf course they love are to be made.

“Members here had got used to playing holes individually and not being seen by anyone on adjoining fairways. They liked the isolation, yet they would happily play other courses – links courses, where you could see everyone else.,” said Brian.

One major benefit has been that holes can be played in the manner they were intended.

For example the 14th has a bunker down the left hand edge which had been virtually hidden by trees before the work was carried out and golfers aimed much further right, often going into the garden of the house on the right hand side of the rough. Now players can aim much further left, aiming to drift the ball off the now visible left hand bunker into the middle of the fairway.

With the final phase completed during the last winter programme, in total around 35%-40% of trees were removed - approximately 800 tonnes of timber and, with the seed beds uncovered, once again heather has begun to return to the course.

In many ways the tree removal is the easy bit with the clear up and

on-going maintenance work creating many more man-hours.

“When clearing woodland people have this lovely idea that there will be a lawn underneath but when you go into unmanaged woodland it’s actually quite nasty – brambles, bracken etc because the ecosystem has been created due to the lack of light and air,” said John.

“There is more maintenance work now that the trees have been cleared but we have the manpower and machinery to carry out the work and it doesn’t take too long to maintain.

The benefits far outweigh the work that it has created,” said Brian, who leads a team of eight at Worplesdon.

With the work complete the verdict has been virtually unanimous in its praise.

“Our regular visitors have been very complimentary. We have an annual event, the Cyril Gray Public Schools Championship, which brings 32 teams of six to Worplesdon and to a man they have said the course is fantastic,” said Jeremy.

John, who regularly visits golf clubs up and down the country, has heard a number of people comment on the work at Worplesdon.

“It is nice to be able to sit in the background and smile knowing that I was involved in it,” he said, while he is full of praise for the decisions that the golf club took to get to

the end result.

“I think Worplesdon has achieved a lot more here because they didn’t compromise, something a lot of clubs tend to do in similar situations. I think, apart from one or two areas, the club did everything I would have wished for them to do. And it’s more difficult for them as I don’t have to live with it, and the concerns of the members, every day. I do think Worplesdon has been the bravest club I’ve been involved with,” said John, who has seen many individuals who have been the driving forces behind similar projects leave their clubs, and even give up golf, because of the pressures and strains of piloting such a project through a sceptical golf club.

“That very nearly happened here,” revealed Jeremy, who has been on the receiving end of many more positive comments from a membership, whose only real concern is the preservation of the one piece of untouched land on the right hand side of the 9th.

“People say to me that they are praying that we are not going to do anything to that area, which contains several rhododendrons.”

That aside Worplesdon is reaping the rewards for their decision and commitment to carry it through and the club once again boasts one of the foremost heathland courses in the country.

ABOVE: The 14th hole with the left hand fairway bunker now visible from the tee