

Wild about heather

Mike Beardall visits an East Sussex golf club where bio-diversity is taken seriously on the heathland course



Heather regeneration and bio-diversity have been passions for Head Greenkeeper John Shepherd since he first encountered Piltdown GC's heathland golf course in 1981.

That was his first job and, after several years at the RAC Golf Club, Epsom (becoming Head Greenkeeper on one of the two courses), and a brief spell at the Sussex National while it was under construction in 1988, he returned to Piltdown, in East Sussex.

He began serious heather regeneration about 12 years ago, and it has been a long hard struggle for his team and the supportive club officials. "Biodiversity was hardly talked about in the early days," says John, 45.

"But I knew that we had to reintroduce heather if we were to attract

birds, butterflies and insects.

"The heather had been wiped out, but the seed lies just under the soil waiting to flourish, which it cannot do without help.

"We had to remove a good number of silver birches, which we regard as the enemy, before taking off the topsoil and laying down heather bracken, obtained from Ashdown Forest, with their permission.

"This encourages the seed to germinate and gives the young plants protection. It takes from four to five years for heather to get established so this is not a short-term project."

This magnificent course has brought back vast swathes of heather, through much effort from his team of five and, in recent years, the work of Speedcut Contractors, who have also been carrying out work on new tees and greens.

There are no bunkers at the 18-hole Piltdown club, but the tree layouts and newly-established wild areas of heather, gorse and flowers make this a challenging course for players.

Being on silty clay the course suffers from extremes, either very wet or very dry – as it has been during the summer months.

A Watermation TW2 system of pop-ups keeps greens in pristine condition.

"It's hard work finding the balance between managing heathland and traditional greenkeeping practices," says John. "We don't aim for the sharp, neat and tidy look and the dramatic green stripes – we are used to areas looking dry, and the members appreciate what we are trying to achieve.

"It's very much a team effort



ABOVE: John Shepherd, Course Manager





“When heather reaches about 150mm we tend to cut it back to encourage fresh growth. The results are well worth it and bio-diversity is no longer just a phrase, but a reality” John Scott

all round because the director of greens, Philip Russell-Vick, is very supportive being a landscape architect himself. He, myself, a former greens chairman and the club secretary all meet regularly and agree tactics as a team, so we all know what we want to achieve.”

The golf course was the subject of a thorough survey by European Golf Design about six years ago and their final report included the comments: “Piltdown is not a modern corporate golf machine. There are no plans to host major regional, national or international tournaments. It’s members’ golf, it’s companionship, it’s comfortable, it’s familiar and it’s really rather good.”

The greenkeeping team, BIGGA members, agree completely. John heads a very loyal group – youngest being Josh Bevan, 19, who is

working on his level 2 sports turf management qualification at Plumpton College.

Tony Woolley, who has been at the club since the late 90s and is first assistant, and went to America with the Bernhard-sponsored BIGGA delegation to the States about six years ago.

Assistant Head Greenkeeper David Welfare and greenkeeper Peter Millin have been at the club since the early 2000s and longest-serving member is greenkeeper and mechanic John Scott who has been at Piltdown since 1970.

“We have a very happy team,” says John. “We all work hard to maintain standards and the development of the course is constantly under review, with plans for several new tees and greens in the future.”

Speedcut Contractors, under contracts manager Barry Pace, have carried out a lot of work in the last two years, including building a new ladies tee at the 18th and a new green, plus recontouring around the men’s tee and a new winter tee at the 9th, plus building five other new tees.

Mowing at Piltdown is carried out by Toro ride-ons and other equipment includes Cushman utility vehicles, a Hardi 400-litre sprayer for the Cushmans, a Greensward Multi-slitler, a Cushman top-

dresser and two compact tractors – a Kubota and Kioti.

Spraying is kept to a minimum, to fit in with John’s naturalistic plan and to reduce any threat to wildlife.

The number of trees on the course mean that John and his team are constantly keeping growth monitored and during the long winter snow they carried out a good deal of thinning with chainsaws.

Trees are not just a feature, but also seen as a threat if they get out of control.

“Management of a heathland course is rewarding, even though the results are sometimes only seen long-term,” says John. “We have signs on patches that look dead but they are actually young heather plants developing.

“When heather reaches about 150mm we tend to cut it back to encourage fresh growth. The results are well worth it and bio-diversity is no longer just a phrase, but a reality.”

Nearby courses using similar practices include the Royal Ashdown, Surrey Heath and the West Sussex Golf Club at Pulborough.

“We get a lot of positive feedback from club members and the committee and the greenkeeping staff are really encouraged by the praise we get,” said John.