

Steve Castle visits Easingwold Golf Club to see how an ambitious tree management project has transformed the course – at very little cost

Seeing the light



THIS IMAGE: 5th hole before the work
MAIN IMAGE: 5th hole after the work

Take a look at the photographs in this article. Can you believe they were taken just a few months apart? Easingwold Golf Club has transformed a stagnant, shrouded course into a healthier, brighter, blooming vista for play.

Course Manager Andre Erlah joined the six-strong greenkeeping team at the parkland course in 2001, and began by introducing a full aeration programme.

He explained that previously the club were stuck in a vicious circle.

“They knew they should aerate but the members didn’t want their rounds to be disrupted so they just put fungicides down”.

However, the looming long-term issue, which was literally preventing the club’s growth, was the sheer proliferation of trees on and around



PROFILE

Name: Andre Erlah
Born: Stoke-on-Trent, 2 March 1971

Marital status: Married with a five-year-old daughter

Hobbies: Thai boxing, travelling, reading

Favourite Sports Team: Stoke City



the course in this rural corner of North Yorkshire.

Andre admits it was impossible to accurately gauge how many there were - but there was no doubt there were far too many and they were largely in the wrong places, threatening the very future of the course.

"There had been no tree management at all since it first opened in 1930", he says.

"A lot of planting had been done in 1976 and over the years the course became very dense and dark, giving me problems keeping the tees, greens and fairways in good shape.

In fact it was so dense some areas of the course never received any natural light at all because of these big scrub oaks, birches and pines.

Even on the brightest summer



The team at Easingwold: George Edwards, Robin Cornforth, Andre Erlah, Guy Borthwick, Lee Frost, David Raper, Scott Needs.
Photograph by Rebecca Erlah



days the course was dark due to this immense foliage.

“The flags on some of the greens would flutter in the breeze, but when you squatted down to ground level there was no air movement whatsoever.

“This meant the greens became stagnant leading to disease and poor drainage - if you’ve got a mature tree in competition with grass for water and nutrients the tree is going to take everything.

“Also, the sheer number of trees meant we had very limited traffic routes around the course which were leading to problems with compaction.

“Yet another reason was from a golf strategy point of view - certain trees were continuing to grow and preventing our members from playing certain shots.

“I turned to the greens chairman and told him I’d gone as far as I could with the course until we solved the tree problem.”

The club met with renowned woodland consultant John Nicholson who produced a report which supported Andre’s beliefs, and outlined which trees required removal.

However, the club soon realised the cost for the work would be very

substantial which was out of the question - particularly with the recession biting.

But they came up with an ingenious solution with the help of a nearby timber merchant.

“In the autumn of 2011 we approached the merchant literally opposite the course, wondering if they would be interested in doing the job.

“We worked out that he could take the brush away and sell it to power stations, saving us thousands of pounds.

“Luckily as he was so close this removed the haulage costs which normally absorb all the profit from the timber.

“He would then make money on selling the felled timber as logs.

“This meant we could confidently go to our committee explaining how this was the ideal opportunity to go ahead with the plan and they were 100% behind us.

“We got permission from our landlord, and enlisted John to obtain the necessary felling license from the Forestry Commission.

“We placed a big sign at the first tee spelling out clearly to our members what we were doing and why we were doing it.

“The contractors came in and worked solidly for five months removing the trees we had highlighted as problems.

“Luckily we had a reasonably dry winter which helped.

“It was staggering to see how much timber was produced.

“There was an industrial chipper here filling up three lorries a day.”

Crucially, because Andre and his team had communicated the project to members, they were mostly on board - some even giving up their time to help out grinding the tree stumps left behind.

“Our main outlay was £9,000 for a stump grinding machine.

“We were quoted around £400 a

ABOVE: 6th tee before the work and RIGHT: afterwards

Woodland Management Workshop

A seminar to showcase the work at Easingwold Golf Club will be held on Thursday 21st March 2013 beginning at 9.45am. Speakers will include Andre and John.

Full details can be viewed at www.the-gtc.co.uk and www.greenkeepertraining.com. The cost is £65 per person with lunch included.



week to hire one so it was far better to buy, and we would be able to sell it later.

"I was trained up to use it, and when members came forward offering their help one day a week I trained them up.

"There must have been 2,000 stumps to grind but with everybody mucking in we kept to our schedule."

Andre and all at the club were well aware of the potential controversy associated with removing certain trees.

Some members complained that they had a particular affinity with certain trees which they had enjoyed watching flourish over decades.

"It's a strange issue - I heard an agronomist say removing a tree reminds people of their own mortality! We did check before removing certain trees that had been planted as a memorial.

"Of course some people were nervous about the project, but we were absolutely convinced it would be hugely beneficial for the club long-term."

After five months of perspiration - removing around 2,000 trees -

the changes were dramatic, and embraced by all but a tiny minority at the club.

Andre, who trained at Reaseheath College in Cheshire, says: "Admittedly, when the work was ongoing it looked terrible with all this heavy machinery and piles of timber, but when it was done almost everyone liked it.

"We were getting feedback from members who had been here for years amazed they were finally playing in daylight!

"There have also been other bonuses.

"Last year we saw new flora and fauna never seen before.

"There are foxgloves everywhere, bluebells are blooming that never had a chance before.

"One member was even encouraged to plant hundreds of bluebells, confident they will grow in this environment.

"Mature oak trees with real character have flourished.

"It's also helped us stay open for longer during the extremely wet year we've just had.

"Removing the problem trees has helped drainage across the course."

Ultimately the course is healthier, drier and more aesthetically pleasing

The pictures graphically show the difference.

Taken on similar bright afternoons, the previous jungle has been transformed.

When the sun does come out the course is bathed in dappled light instead of darkness.

"Ultimately the course is healthier, drier and more aesthetically pleasing when previously it was stagnant and you can actually appreciate individual trees.

"You look back at the photos of the course before this project and you can't believe how messy and dark it was.

"It's still ongoing - we've broken the back of it but still need to thin some trees out and make other amendments.

"But we're on top of it now.

"I've loved doing it, it's made a huge difference to the course and I feel I've made my mark.

"I've left a legacy here now which makes me feel extremely proud."