



Conservation

Dan McGrath MG recently won Conservation Greenkeeper of the Year, a coveted STRI Environment Award. BIGGA are part of this and Greenkeeper International is a media partner, so Dan agreed to tell us about his prize – a trip to Portugal to explore how they're dealing with environmental challenges on the Iberian Peninsula



2012 Golf Environment Awards, supported by BIGGA



Following my appointment as Course Manager at North Foreland Golf Club on the Kent coastline seven years ago, many challenges confronted me. A truly spectacular chalkland cliff top course built on the ethos of traditional golf needed tweaking in several work programmes - one being the ecology and environmental work.

First thing was to draw up an environmental policy and plan, without which there is no direction. This was completed and the wheels were then well and truly in motion. I was introduced to the Kent Wildlife Trust by a previous employer, so the next logical step was to make North Foreland a corporate member. Having the expertise and local

knowledge of such an organisation is invaluable and one I would recommend to anyone wishing to pursue any environmental project.

The main concentration of the first phase of the work was the Chalkland Regeneration Programme. Large areas had previously been unmanaged and seen as out of play areas. Scrub had taken a foothold, completely smothering the native chalkland grasses and also allowing ground ivy to populate the site. A programme of scarification on a rotational basis commenced and is still carried out to this day. The results have been immense. Native grasses have returned, orchids have appeared with numbers growing every year, the rough is thin and wispy giving fantastic definition and improv-

goes European

ing overall playability. This work accompanied by the construction of a reservoir and bore hole plus over 70 bird boxes, two owl boxes, log piles, recycling units and more have led us to where we are today.

It was a great honour to accept Conservation Greenkeeper of the Year on behalf of all my team during BTME. The Award is a result of programmes put in place in 2005 and followed through by some fantastically motivated, skilled members of the team.

Once we felt that we were starting to win the battle on invasive vegetation and the site's natural characteristics were flourishing we felt it time to enter into The Golf Environmental Awards. I saw it as a great way to showcase the hard work the team had put in.

The first stage was completing the application form and then sending it to ecologists Richard Stuttard and Bob Taylor.

To everyone's delight within the club we were chosen for a site visit. Notice I say visit rather than 'inspection'. I feel that many may be put off by experts visiting and judging one's practices, however you couldn't be further from the truth. Richard and Bob are two of the most realistic and understanding ecologists out there and fully appreciate the obstacles that us turf managers have to confront every day. They not only have an unbelievable passion for flora and fauna, but they are also very sincere when they say that golf courses are one of the most valuable habitats left in society today for many endangered species.

I am no eco-warrior and anyone that knows me would say I'm just a normal everyday turf manager and the STRI appreciate this in every way.

The most important thing to recognise is that we are turf managers - but more so we are all land managers.

It really does not matter whether you have a championship course or a nine hole course, the decisions are made on the work done with the resources available. This is one of many refreshing aspects of the Award and believe me there are many highlights throughout the whole process. The phone call from Richard giving me the good news was one of the highlights of my career to date. On receiving the plaque during BTME, we were informed of the date for our prize Environmental trip to Portugal.

I was to be accompanied by Ian Willett from Thorpeness Golf Club who won the Overall Award.



The trip couldn't have been timed any better as I was looking forward to swapping the unforgiving easterly winds in Kent for a little Iberian heat. Bob, Ian and myself all met up in Faro in the Algarve and were later joined by Alexandra Almeida, Sustainability Advisor to the Portuguese Golf Federation.

Onyria Palmares Golf Resort

Onyria Palmares Golf Resort was the first stop where we were greeted by Course Superintendent Joel Nunes. This recently redesigned Robert Trent Jones Jnr 27 hole complex showed us the scale of the environmental challenges faced in such a location. Like all Portuguese clubs, struggles with the scarcity of water gave us a great example of how both drainage and





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lake design can be incorporated to serve multiple ends. Wetland areas were integrated with the drainage system and new lakes designed to increase holding capacity. Recycling of all hollow cores had also seen the recent construction of a chipping green which will be open in time for the main playing season. It was a pleasure to share ideas with Joel and his professionalism and hospitality was greatly appreciated by all.

Amendoeira Golf Resort

From there we moved onto the Faldo & O'Connor Courses in the Amendoeira Golf Resort. Located on the western Algarve, this 36 hole complex was largely built on a flood plain. Russ Wilson, Course Superintendent, explained the challenges and work carried out to reduce the frequency and severity of flooding.



San Lorenzo

Serious engineering solutions were required and employed with the stream bed being widened and redesigned with meanders added, to slow the water flow rate. The new stream accompanied by retention basins, lakes and integrated drainage has allowed them to produce two championship courses.

It has been widely recognised that the work carried out is not just from a golfing viewpoint but for the local area and residents. Villages have seen the flooding risk to their homes greatly reduced thanks to the work. It is very rare for a golf course today to actually reduce water usage and not impact more on the natural resources.

San Lorenzo

Day two saw us head to the exclusive resort of San Lorenzo – which has a joining fee of €60,000. Welcomed on site by a truly remarkable Director of Golf, Antonio Santos, nothing could have prepared us for the day that lay ahead. A stimulating tour around the course proved to us that this was justifiably awarded Golf Resort of the Year 2009 for Europe. One of the premier clubs from the 90 in the country, Antonio explained that a major issue environmentally is the residents living close to every hole. Large exclusive houses with gardens to match have seen many exotic plant species finding their way onto the course from the resident grounds.

These have increasingly become more invasive and the natural veg-

etation characteristic was starting to be lost.

San Lorenzo are now addressing these issues and have in their team a very knowledgeable greenkeeper/ environmentalist to make sure all codes of practice are followed. Large stretches of the course run along the protected area of the Ria Formosa, a wetland area of true beauty. The team are working hard to eradicate any foreign plants and produce a haven for all wildlife. To say that they are succeeding is an understatement. The bird life and plant species on show are unbelievable and the course is a shining example of how both nature and the game of golf can go hand in hand.

I could go on and on about our experiences from first entering this competition to the Portugal trip, but hopefully I have given you all a positive insight to a truly rewarding process. Please put yourselves forward for this award as all parties win, you the individual, your team, your membership, the golfing industry and the fragile flora and fauna we share this planet with.

I would like to sign off by thanking my travelling companions for making the trip one to remember and to all the sponsors without whom this would not be possible – STRI, BIGGA, County Turf, Golf Monthly, Ransomes Jacobsen, Syngenta, Greenkeeping magazine and this year's addition Farmura. Lastly, can I pay a special thanks to my team at North Foreland for their continued support and incredible work output.



ABOVE: San Lorenzo Director of Golf Antonio Santos
LEFT: Telephone masts disguised as trees at San Lorenzo

2012 Golf Environment Awards sponsors



Bob Taylor, Head of Ecology and Environment at the STRI, said: "It seems a bit of a cliché to say that the study trip provided through the Golf Environment Awards is a life changing experience but it is true. I am sure that Ian and Dan will never forget their experience to the Algarve and particularly the visit to San Lorenzo. The passion, knowledge and enthusiasm from the Director of Golf there was superb. Antonio Santos gave over five hours of his precious time; showing the group the World heritage site – The Ria Formosa - adjoining the course. His passion was infectious and perfectly aligned to the aspirations of our more informed greenkeepers. A wonderful trip."