

A Royal course where nature is king

A scenic view of a golf course with rolling green hills, a winding path, and a large bush in the foreground under a blue sky.

Neville Johnson travels to Lancashire to discover how Chris Whittle, Course Manager at Royal Birkdale, deals with the unique conservation challenges posed by the area





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Royal Birkdale’s special charm is that there are countless parts of the 95ha site close to the Lancashire coast where it doesn’t seem like a golf course at all, so natural are the surroundings. It is dune land par excellence.

Towards the sea are frontal dunes, constantly moved and reshaped by the weather. On the course itself are dozens and dozens of fixed – or grey – dunes covered by natural marram grasses that sway in the wind. This has to be an inspiring backdrop for any golfer.

Many in the world of golf regard it as the ultimate links course, challenging yet fair to all those who play it, and perfect for spectator vantage points. It is firmly one of the elite UK courses chosen regularly to host the Open Championship. Nine have been held here since it first staged the event in 1954.

A lot of trust is required to keep Royal Birkdale close to the top of the Open course ‘leaderboard’, and Chris Whittle, Birkdale’s Course Manager for 19 years, is understandably proud that that the eyes of the world are so often on his course.

What pleases him so much, as well as looking after such a challenging test of golfing skill, is the

trust placed in him to conserve its wonderful natural heritage. He gets enormous job satisfaction – as do the nine full-time staff in the club’s maintenance department – in two quite contrasting ways.

Royal Birkdale is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Less than 25 per cent of the course area is what Chris describes as managed grass. Much of the rest is precious environmentally, both in terms of wildlife and plant life, and looking after it comes within the course care remit every bit as much as the greens, tees and fairways.

The site is renowned for sand lizards, great crested newts and natterjack toads and it’s important to maintain an environment that allows them to thrive. Southern and northern marsh orchids, petalwort, Baltic Rush and varieties of Helleborine are among the rare plants on the course. Chris and his team are as much custodians of nature as they are professional greenkeepers.

“It’s a privilege to have such a wonderful golf course in such natural surroundings,” says Chris, who is by instinct a conservationist. “As a links we have all of nature’s advantages and disadvantages. It’s important to preserve the balance and that’s quite a challenge.”

Conservation is most definitely a serious business at Royal Birkdale. Chris and other club representatives meet at least a couple of times each year with other coastal landowners and tenants in the region – National Trust properties, council amenities and other golf courses – to exchange information on conservation matters, including formal records of wildlife and plant life numbers and movements.

This collaborative exercise helps to identify trends and make decisions about any action that might be necessary.

The club also works closely with Natural England, the Environment Agency and the British Trust for Nature Conservation Volunteers to see that nature rightly remains a priority across the site.

No two holes on the Royal Birkdale course are alike in terms of the surrounding landscape. Looking left and right you will see quite different flora, but what’s adjacent to the managed areas is there because it is native to the land.

As far as rare and treasured plants are concerned, Chris has a sensitivity map showing where these are to be found and creates ‘no go areas’ which are roped off in big tournaments to make sure they are fully protected.



INSET TOP: Dog Rose
INSET ABOVE: Marsh Orchid



There has been a big effort over the years to increase the emphasis on the managed areas of the course back to natural fine grasses – fescues, and bents in particular. There is still some meadow grass, but Chris says they are winning the battle. Reseeding and round the year management encouraging the wanted grasses is gradually tipping the scales in his favour.

“The way you cut, the way you irrigate, the way you feed and top-dress: they all contribute to this,” says Chris.

“We are a natural golf course and we resist introducing anything that shouldn’t be there. Fescues should naturally be the dominant grass because of the dry sandy conditions, but your grass will always reflect what nature throws at it, so a wet summer may change things and bring in coarser grasses quite naturally. You have to go with that to a certain extent.”

Chris says it is essential to define the holes on a course like Birkdale and it is the roughs that do this magnificently here. Generally he leaves the rough to its own devices.

“Nature put that grass there because it should be there, and that’s how we see it,” he says. “We might do an occasional bit of trimming or scarifying if a particular

area becomes too difficult, but otherwise we leave well alone. We don’t cut the rough at all. We just mow the semi-rough next to the fairways and we might widen this from five to 10 metres to suit a particular tournament need.”

There’s no getting away from it, Royal Birkdale is quite an awkward course to look after and machinery is all-important. Chris’s equipment policy is quite specific, and always has been.

He buys each item of equipment on its merits to do a particular job for him – there’s no compromise.

He trusts his judgement and it’s served him well, both here at Birkdale and before that at Muirfield where for six years he was also Course Manager, presiding over the 1992 Open.

He also trusts his greenkeepers to give the right judgement on each individual piece of equipment. Out on the course and back at the maintenance department it is John Deere machines that dominate, supplied and supported by local dealer Turner Groundscare of Tarvin, near Chester, and that’s because Chris trusts them to do the right job on the course.

All of the triplex mowers at Royal Birkdale are now John Deere 2500E electric hybrids and Chris is a big

fan of them. These machines are central to the mowing programme at Birkdale and are used for all tees and aprons work, and alternately with John Deere 220 Series walk-behind mowers on the greens.

Chris believes that it is the quality of cut on the greens, tees and aprons that helps to define each hole so emphatically.

“I want machines that don’t let me down. Mine don’t, and the peace of mind I get from this is priceless,” says Chris.

“The worry in the back of your mind that you always had using a triplex on greens and tees was that the hydraulics might leak,” he says.

“Using the 2500 E-Cut mowers means that’s all in the past. It was one of the main reasons for buying them, and I liked the way John Deere responded to the perpetual concern we course managers had about leakages by coming up with the hybrid design.

“I think we actually bought one of the first ones in the UK, and there’s no chance we’d ever go back now.

“I’ve never worked on anything but links courses. I wouldn’t be happy at a parkland, however good it was, and I count myself very lucky to be in charge of Royal Birkdale.”