*This article is reproduced by kind permission of Keith Duff, retired Chief Scientist with English Nature and now Environment Consultant. It was first published in the Golf Club Secretary newsletter (*keithduff21@hotmail.co.uk*).*

Heather flourishes at Walton Heath

A study in heathland restoration

I first visited Walton Heath nearly 20 years ago to provide some geological advice to the club at the request of my then boss, who was a friend of the Club Captain. I was impressed by the Club's awareness of the value and significance of the extensive tracts of heathland which they managed, and by their determination to restore it to the open condition which had characterized it when Herbert Fowler created the courses in the early years of the 20th Century. I was even more impressed when I returned a few months ago to play in one of the GCS Qualifiers, and saw how much has been done since my last visit, and is still going on. It seemed an opportune time to reflect on how well the natural environment and golf course management fit together on lowland heathlands.

The English landscape has changed hugely over the past couple of hundred years, especially in the densely populated south. Most of our characteristic habitats and species have declined massively as the need for housing, food production and economic development has grown as the population expanded rapidly. This is particularly true of lowland heathland, which is a rare habitat in the UK (and indeed globally), and which has seen over 85% of the area that existed in 1800 disappear. As a result, it is one of the most highly protected habitat types in the UK, and one which is almost a conservation touchstone.

Environmentalists do not always see golf as a sustainable or desirable land use, so it is always good when this often poorly-founded perception can be shown to be wrong. Lowland heathland golf courses are some of the best examples of situations where the interests of "both sides" come together, and the golf industry should make sure that this message is promoted widely. Walton Heath is a great example of why this is, and also of how to do it. There are, of course, many other heathland courses in the south of England which are also doing good things to restore and maintain heathland, across Surrey, Sussex, Berkshire, Hampshire, Dorset and Suffolk, as well as in Staffordshire and the West Midlands, and their contributions are equally valuable and important.

For me, heathland golf courses have delivered conservation benefits in two ways. Firstly, they have ensured that the areas they occupy have been safeguarded against loss to housing or commercial development in parts of the country which sees very high development pressure, because they are a land use that the owners value and wish to retain. And secondly, they are managed in ways that aim to maintain the open

heathland nature of the landscape, providing the unique character and context in which the golf course sits. In my experience, this management (which is done for golfing rather than for habitat or species reasons) generally delivers the kind of outcomes which nature conservationists want to see, and often creates opportunities to build and strengthen relationships with interest groups who can sometimes be disproportionately influential with planners and decision makers.

Walton Heath, like most lowland heathland areas, was historically kept essentially open and almost treeless by extensive livestock grazing on what were often common lands, by animals such as sheep, cattle, goats and horses. This continued until World War Two, when military recruitment resulted in stock management declining rapidly, never to return. Consequently, most heathlands were invaded by trees and scrub such as gorse, broom and bracken, as the grazing which prevented their establishment ceased, so that by the 1980s the open nature of heathlands had been lost. Gradually, golf clubs began to realise that the character of their original course design had been lost, with some courses effectively becoming woodland rather than heathland courses. It was at this stage that Walton Heath, and others such as Hankley Common, decided that they wanted to restore their courses to the style intended by their designers, and were determined enough to do something about it.

We should not under-estimate the challenges they faced at this stage. There was then (and still is to a considerable extent) a strong view held by planners and local residents that trees should be sacrosanct, and not cut down. Many bureaucratic hurdles had to be overcome before Walton Heath succeeded in convincing the local council that Tree Preservation Orders should be removed from several hectares of land in the centre of the site, but once that was achieved in 2000 steady and impressive progress towards opening up the whole site again has been made. A major programme of engagement with both members and local people was undertaken, before the "Walton Heath Initiative" came into being, and all of us who played there in March in the GCS Open can't have missed seeing the extensive restoration work which is still on-going.

So, what sorts of things are entailed in this restoration programme? Initially, extensive selective felling of trees, especially the highly invasive silver birch, needed to be done, to start opening up the landscape. Key trees, especially oak, yew and Scots pine, were retained in places to reflect the natural character of the area, but generally as specimen trees rather than larger patches of woodland. Tree cover was, however, retained around the edges of the heathland area, to screen out noise and visual intrusion. Scrub such as gorse, broom and bracken was also in need of reduction, as these species are very invasive and suppress heather growth as a result of the shading they create. Again, it was a matter of reducing the areas covered by these species, rather than removing them altogether, as they are characteristic species of heathlands.

Heather seeds are very long-lived (50 years plus), so once trees and scrub are removed it is a relatively simple matter to encourage them to germinate. The speed of this process can be accelerated by scarifying the ground below the cut trees or scrub, and will be even quicker if brashings from existing areas of heather elsewhere on the course are dragged across the area after they have set seed. Areas which have become dominated by coarse grasses such as meadow grass or Yorkshire fog can also be restored to heathland vegetation by scarifying and/or turf-stripping to expose heather seed and encourage its germination. At Walton Heath this process was expedited further by the establishment of a heather nursery, to provide plants to help with restocking.

But it's not just a matter of getting the heather back and then leaving nature to take its course. That would merely result in a slow return to the situation which pertained before the restoration work was started. A programme of management to, in effect, replicate the past effects of the grazing, harvesting and cutting which would have taken place whilst the heathland was supporting an ancient subsistence regime is needed and, recognizing this, the club has acquired a fleet of modern equipment to do this, including a customized tractor and mounted rotary mower that both cuts and gathers material from the heathland.

The impacts of Walton Heath's heathland restoration programme have already been significant in respect of its impact on bird populations. In the years since the programme began, numbers of important species such as stonechat, meadow pipit, skylark, linnet and yellowhammer have increased significantly, and woodlark have recolonized the area. The scrub and woodland areas which remain are now much better managed, and support populations of green woodpecker, great spotted woodpecker, sparrowhawk and hobby. Crossbills are now regular winter visitors, and there are signs that Dartford warbler is returning.

Walton Heath is an excellent example of how heathland regeneration work has benefitted both the golfing environment and the wildlife environment, and deserves much credit for playing such an important role in the early stages of this whole concept. It has been followed by many other courses, including Hankley Common, Broadstone, Ipswich, Sunningdale and Enville (plus many more), all of whom have helped to convince sceptical environmentalists that golf courses are often good places for wildlife, and should acknowledged as such. I think it's important for the golf industry to become more aware of the positive contribution it makes to wildlife protection in the UK, and to get better at telling people about the good things which are being done. There are lots of good stories to tell, but what sometimes worries me is that we're not even very good at making our own members aware of this, let alone anyone else! Food for thought perhaps?

1000306: Specimen Scots pine retained adjacent to managed heather area

1000308: Heather restoration area where ground has been scarified to open the seed bed containing heather

100314: Managed heather area, and view showing how small groups of managed trees have been retained