The only way is up

Scott MacCallum visits a golf club which so nearly went out of existence but which is now well on the road to recovery.

One of this country’s most profound philosophers, I believe her name to be Yazz, once said, “The Only Way is Up!” It is a positive message, to be sure, and one which Darren Child, Course Manager of Hawkhurst Golf Club in Kent, has been using as a mantra since he took over at the nine hole village course last February.

And it would be hard to argue, when Darren took over, the course was certainly in the gutter, but not necessarily looking at the stars – to paraphrase another acclaimed philosopher and wit, Oscar Wilde.

The course had just gone into administration. The Head Greenkeeper and his part time assistant had to go as part of the old regime. The Administrator had taken what worthwhile machinery was to be had in the ramshackle building which masqueraded as the maintenance facility.

The club had struggled for a number of years, being propped up by the club’s owner, who was spending anything up to £50,000 each year, to bail the club out on salaries, overheads etc. The membership had also dwindled from a relatively robust 400 to just over a 100. It was then that the owner understandably felt that the situation was not sustainable and that, while he would be happy for the club to continue, he would no longer bank roll it, and so things came to a head.

Looking into a genuine abyss, the Club Professional, Peter Chandler, and one of the club’s squash members, James O’Reilly, decided, despite the less than rosy outlook, to try and make a go of the club.

It was to this situation that Darren arrived. A man who had earned his greenkeeping stripes at Walton Heath, under Clive Osgood and latterly, Ian McMillan, Darren Scott MacCallum visits a golf club which so nearly went out of existence but which is now well on the road to recovery.

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I was keen as I knew they’d been going through a hard time and that Darren was on his own with virtually no kit and I just thought we might be able to offer some help. I had a chat with our General Manager and he in turn with Owners Paul and Jennifer Gibbons who agreed to us helping out, as long as there would be no direct cost to us,” explained Mike.

What happened next is a perfect example of what is great about golf and greenkeeping.

“Local John Deere dealer, Godfrey’s, brought their trailer and free of charge transported kit over for around 30 from the low point at the beginning of the year, the members were more than happy that their course was on the up. The course will go forward because we have the help and people genuinely want it to work. I believe the management are looking at getting someone in part-time to help me next year. Generally there is a good feeling about the place because they are seeing results – although there is some discomfort that the fairways are a bit tighter because I’ve added definition to them,” he smiled.

“When you don’t have someone to talk to when you are working and you are ‘on your tod,’ it is pretty hard graft” Darren Child

Having come from a top quality, highly respected club like Walton Heath to one from which survival is a huge achievement, Darren has got used to the difference in expectation.

“It is not easy but when you look at what you are working with there is satisfaction at achieving something with minimal help. You can’t just jump on a piece of kit and go, you have to physically check the machine you do have and adjust things so that you can do what you want to do,” explained Darren.

“I’ve still got good ties with Walton Heath and can phone Ian (McMillan) up at any time and he’s given me some excellent advice. Walton Heath Mechanic, Graham Goldup has helped me no end with the problems. I’ve had with machinery and Irrigation Engineer, Mark Bass, who is also a personal friend has helped with many irrigation issues. I’d hate to think where Hawkhurst would be without his help.

“We had a system which had fallen into disrepair but he was able to get it going again. It doesn’t run smoothly and it needs money spent on it but I can water all the greens now which is an absolute God send, particularly as we’ve only had five inches of rain since April.”

The help of all these people has been invaluable and done for the genuine desire to help a club down on its luck.

Darren has been able to thank Dale Hill in a small way by providing some plants for a new pond Dale Hill has created but in the main a warm thanks has been all that has been asked or given.

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When I arrived at Hawkhurst in a morning early in the school summer holidays the first 20 golfers I saw all appeared to be under the age of 14 and keen as mustard to play. If the club had gone to the wall those children would have missed out on the chance of developing a love of golf.

Now hopefully a proportion of those children will be golfers for the rest of their days and there is a fair chance that some of them will go on to become members of Dale Hill, showing that good deeds now might be rewarded further down the line. Yuan was correct in saying “The Only Way Is Up” but only through hard work and the determination of key people.
“When I was at Walton Heath, we had all the best kit for whatever we needed to do. Now all I had was a bucket, a shovel and a borrowed half moon...”

Darren Child, Course Manager at Hawkhurst Golf Club.

“When you don’t have someone to talk to when you are working and you are on your tod, it is pretty hard graft,” he recalled.

But before you feel too sorry for Darren, he does have a Guardian Angel in the shape of Mike Mosse, Course Manager at the nearby large and prestigious, Dale Hill Hotel and Golf Club.

“Some bring domestic ride-on’s, which they use in their gardens, while others would do divoting or bunker raking. I’m really grateful for all the help but you never know if anyone is going to arrive that morning until they turn up.”

With such uncertainty, planning even for the day ahead is nigh on impossible and Darren regularly works 55 hours a week, considerably more than the 40 for which he is paid.

“I usually go on in the morning and think about the main tasks that I want to complete. Obviously there are the essentials and cutting greens and raking bunkers are done daily but much of the rest is often spur of the moment thinking – what needs doing now or can I do first thing tomorrow depending upon which volunteers come in,” said Darren, who is given some people by Pro, Peter Chandler, who is useful on a greens machine and who normally cuts the greens at the weekend.

“If there is a big competition on, nine times out of ten I’ll be playing in it so I go in early and do them.”

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“The course will go forward and help was a big, big help and the greens benefitted greatly,” said a still grateful Darren, who was one of the Walton Heath staff who qualified as an HGV Driver so that he could drive a tanker to transport water on to the course during the last extended drought.

With membership already up by around 30 from the low point at the beginning of the year, the members were more than happy that their course was on the up.

“The course will go forward because we have the help and people genuinely want it to work. I believe the management are looking at getting someone in part-time to help me next year. Generally there is a good feeling about the place because they are seeing results – although there is some disgust that the fairways are a bit tighter because I’ve added definition to them,” he smiled.