



Doffing of the cloth cap wasn't for Duncan McGilvray. When he joined Letchworth, he brought with him a 15-point management plan, as DAVID WHITE reports

The First Garden City – Letchworth – was and is the most successful township “planned to ensure the health and happiness, dignity and freedom of its inhabitants.” Unquestionably, it still remains the very best of such ‘dream’ concepts and a near perfect model to this day for civilised town dwellers the world over.

That the good burghers of Letchworth saw old Ebenezer Howard’s vision through to reality is clear at every turn – it really is a bonny place – as also are the results of some pretty clear thinking that began perhaps even before the first dream houses were built in 1904. In that year the professional from West Herts Golf Club, Alfred Tingey, was commissioned to design nine holes on what was then the Manor Park of Letchworth Hall, with a year or so later a somewhat rough and ready course opened for play. Like many such unsophisticated courses of that era, it served an initial purpose and was okay in its way, though according to their first professional, Bert Ashby, who seemingly doubled as a greenkeeper, “the greens were hardly bigger than the tees, the fairways were narrow tracks covered with weeds, and nettles abounded in the rough”.

At some point in 1909, ‘having regard for future development of the course’, £10 was set aside to look into the prospect of planning an extended course and the six times victor of The Open Championship, the near-invincible Harry Vardon, was invited to look the place over. His ‘thumbs-up’ opinion was followed by his own detailed architectural

Call it.

plans to re-design the existing nine and further extend the park to 18 holes – at a cost of £500 – and although the Club only had £64 in the bank, somehow the funds were found and the course laid out to Vardon’s specifications, remaining much the same as Harry saw it to this day.

Those who hold office at the Club seem to have been astute in many of their decisions, not least their choice of head greenkeepers, for in 86 years just six men have held the post, the last and present incumbent being Duncan McGilvray, a young Scot who joined them nearly four years ago.

To learn more of the course and the man, I took time out to play a round with Duncan, taking in the delights of real parkland golf whilst listening to him and absorbing many of his thoughts and ideas. “How was it”, I asked, “that a man celebrating his 38th birthday this very day, comes to be Course Manager of one of Hertfordshire’s most prestigious courses – what path did you take?”

Like many a young Scot before him, Duncan took to greenkeeping straight from school, guided by some of the very best head greenkeepers whilst gaining theoretic knowledge through college tuition. For ten years he remained in or around his birthplace of Edinburgh before moving south to England, where he took work as a head greenkeeper, first for three years on the seaside links of Great Yarmouth and Caister before moving inland to Bramall Park in Cheshire for six years and, just under four years ago, to Letchworth. He was hired as course manager from the start, inheriting a situation which the Club saw as being ‘an awful lot of problems on the course’ and which no one on committee had the skill or knowledge to effectively oversee. A man to manage totally was their brief. The idea of an old style doffing of the cloth cap and grubby overalls image was not part of Duncan’s make-up and he straightaway presented the Club with a 15 point management plan – culled over many years – which clearly impressed both the committee and John Campbell, who sat in at his initial interview.

Just as Duncan was impressed by the Club, who had made a radical decision about that time to dispense with a green committee, so were they impressed with him. They needed someone to take total control and they saw him as their man. There is just one committee member with whom Duncan negotiates, a green convener or course liaison officer, who having spent one year under the previous convener, learning the ropes so to speak, will hold office for five years. He reports to the management committee on course matters, but as Duncan was pleased to point out, no policy decision made previously can be changed. Committees come and go but policy once decided continues, and Duncan’s number one point of his 15 point plan was to take an active

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role in the formulation of such policy.

From the very onset the Club was behind him all the way, with a committee stalwart, Brian Hodder, arranging for the local 'Citizen' newspaper to print photos of Duncan and his course and introduce him to the golfing community. Soon a Club newsletter featured the new incumbent and within his first year he presented a detailed course discussion evening – now an annual feature – in which he presented to over 200 members his thinking behind course planning and maintenance. Duncan smiled as he recalled the title of that first talk, "The Way Forward", which can now rightfully be seen as the forerunner of the R&A document which was launched in 1989. Did they, one wonders, hear of the Letchworth initiative beforehand?

Talking of the course, his first and main aim was to reclaim indigenous grasses and eradicate thatch and *Poa annua*, whilst at the same time managing the course in such a way as to not alienate either his members or visitors while the change was taking place. Judging by the deliciously true hand-mown greens, he's winning that particular war and his members must be well pleased. His other primary aim, an admirable one, is to protect the environment and to that end he is a founder member of the School of Minimal Use of Pesticides and Herbicides. He's a confirmed admirer of Jim Arthur and believes in his doctrines.

"What are you most proud of?" I asked, and without hesitation he cited the achievements attained with his team. 'We've gone from their working in often confused and opposing directions into a tight and highly motivated group, spending over 70 per cent of our working time actually on the playing surfaces and with each man knowing full well the reasons behind every move we take. I've brought them forward to a point where if anything should happen to me my second in command could take over and each man could move up a place. The Club would not be in a panic situation, something that isn't always the case at some Clubs I could mention, and I claim training as the reason, the effective management of people'.

I was equally impressed to find work well under way on an independent water source – a borehole – which is part of the long-term management plan and nearing completion. The borehole is 185 feet deep and is being installed with an assured yield test of 5,000 gallons an hour, far more than the Club will ever need but nevertheless guaranteeing them a tested and no doubt comforting water source for the

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future. The contractors were doing a tidy job, with the accent yet again on minimal disturbance to players. Duncan's throwaway line – "all down to forward planning some three years ago" – appeared matter of fact, almost casual, – but I sensed nevertheless an unrestrained feeling of pride in his comment.

Duncan is a keen golfer and succeeded in taking me to the cleaners for a modest wager, his belief being that without access and knowledge of the game – especially on home territory – it was less than easy to discuss any finer points of the course. Having finished our round I warmed still further to this very likeable personality when he confided in me that he held his employers in high regard. 'The Club is not run as a business', he asserted, 'but it is run in a totally business-like manner, and I'm proud to play a part in that business team'. I formed the view that his Club might well share that same pride in him.



Above: The ninth fairway, with Letchworth Hall, now an hotel, in the background

Left: Attention to one of the 74 bunkers