

# ELMWOOD CREATES THE REAL THING

**Scott MacCallum travelled back to his home town in Scotland to see the new golf course which is going to give Elmwood College students the experience of training on a live course.**

**A**n oft heard criticism of greenkeeping colleges has been that it is all well and good training full time students in the ways of the job but they don't start learning properly until they're out there doing it on a live golf course when doing it right first time really matters.

In response, and to enhance their positions in what was become an increasingly competitive environment, several colleges have built their own golf courses. Among these has been Elmwood, in Cupar, Fife, which recently opened its new 18 hole course to the public.

"Any golfer coming to play Elmwood will see a lot more bodies working on the course than is normally the case. Hopefully, though, there won't be a whole class of them standing in the way," laughed Carol Borthwick, Head of the Greenkeeping Section.

"When they are working they should be spread out but there may be occasions when a lecturer is doing a theory subject and there may be 16 of them together.

"We will have an information board on the 1st tee so golfers will know what to expect and what the students might be doing. Our leaflet also says "Watch out for the green overall brigade!"

"It should be a learning experience for the golfers, too, because by telling them what we are doing, and why, they will pick up a bit about the greenkeeping side of the game."

The idea of Elmwood building its own golf course had been talked about for some time but it became more of a realistic proposition about four years ago.

"Basically greenkeeping has become very important to us and the previous Principal decided that it was going to be the showcase



**On course: Ian Hume, Michael Bonallack, Robert Burns and Stuart McDowall**

for the college. In order to fulfil that it was important that we had a working golf course," explained Carol.

Initially they looked at a nine holer but the Scottish Office is currently encouraging colleges to look at commercial activities and the viability of having 18 holes stood out as the better way of making money for the college as well as providing an excellent training resource for the students.

The land, to the west of Cupar, had previously been farmland owned by the college and the ultimate decision to go ahead was made easier by the college diversifying into game keeping and small animal training and as a result not needing so much room.

The new course was laid out by John

Salvesen of the R&A and John Quinn, previously of Alva Golf Club, was brought in as Course Manager from day one.

Work began in June '95 and the course was playable in August '97, with the official opening due to be held in May this year.

"John runs the golf course and is also heavily involved in training. He has five staff, three of whom are permanent and trained to supervisory level and the other three are on schemes of some description," said Carol.

"Those who are involved in training and assessing during the academic season revert to pure greenkeeping during the summer when the college is in recess. However, we do have the potential to take on students in the summer."

Asked the vexed question that, "as the



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course is a training facility, won't there be areas which are not quite up to scratch because they had been worked on by someone who is learning a particular task?" Carol is upbeat.

"We are hoping that the golfers really don't notice – that's our plan. The staff will be watching over what the students are doing and hopefully there won't be too many mistakes and problems," she said, while pointing out that most golf clubs employ younger greenkeepers who learn on the job.

She is also aware of the criticism levelled at full time college courses about students gaining qualifications but not knowing one end of a mower from the other.

"We've always had a training facility at Elmwood in the past but, now that we have a real live course with real live golfers and students who will be using state-of-the-art equipment, that criticism is completely invalid."

On the subject of equipment the college put the contract for that and the irrigation system out to tender and in both cases Toro came out on top.

"We have somewhere in the region of three times the amount of equipment the average 18 hole course would have – not right across the board but, for example, we have a lot more pedestrian mowers," explained Carol, who revealed that the total cost on machinery was around £300,000.

"In future, once we have settled in, we'd like to get a permanently manned workshop and give students hands-on experience but at the moment we are avoiding this because of the problem of warranties and the importance of having the machines running."

Elmwood's Greenkeeping Section moved out of the college buildings into its own self-contained unit on an old farm site in '95 and this, together with the new course, has totally changed the way Carol and her colleagues operate.

"It's like chalk and cheese and it really makes us wonder how we ever managed before.

"Last year we had 398 greenkeepers but trying to put that number through a three hole training facility wasn't easy. Now we have no problems at all. It also means that they are not doing jobs for the sake of doing them.

"The students are involved in a real project as opposed to something which might be ripped out when they go away or re-done with the next group. Everything is new and permanent and I think that gives the students a bit more satisfaction."

One complication which Elmwood has addressed is when John

Quinn wants to do something at a particular time because it is right for the golf course but the students are required to learn something else.

"We try to dovetail as best we can but if a job needs doing, like hollow coring or top dressing, it will be all hands to the pump and it doesn't matter what else is on the time table that week.

"The key time is when we have block release students who have to do scarifying in December because that's when they are in. It doesn't happen often but when it does we will use the practice area or go back to the three holes at the college."

The first rounds of the course were played on August 2 last year and there could scarcely have been a more distinguished group of guinea pigs. They included R&A Captain, Harvey Douglas; R&A Secretary, Michael Bonalack, the architect, John Salvesen, and the Chairman of the GTC, Bob McLaren.

They reported back that the greens, tees and fairways were of an extremely high quality but that the fairways were a bit tight and the semi rough not quite wide enough.

"Because the course is on good farmland the rough grows quickly so when we arrived for the first day the rough was a bit of a jungle. We are working on refining the landing areas over the winter.

"We have planted around 9000 trees and the course is more undulating than you think when you are playing around it. There are some excellent views as you play around the course."

The college, which is one of the biggest

employers in Cupar, hopes the course will bring a few more golfers into the town, which currently boasts a golf club claiming the oldest nine hole course in the world and, incidentally, the course on which your Editor learned, after a fashion, to play golf.

One of the other benefits of the golf course is that it will get students into the way of a greenkeeping life.

"With our agriculture courses students had to get up at six o'clock and do the milking because the cows couldn't wait. We'll be in a similar situation as the golf course will need to be presented for play each day in its life. We shall perhaps operate a rota system so students will have to come in early or work at the weekend. They will get a flavour of what they are going to get in real life," explained Carol.

The onus is on the golf course, which hopefully in time will form its own club to enable members to gain handicaps and break even financially.

"Money is going to be the crucial thing in the next few years. Other areas of the college don't make money so the plan is that the course will be profit making... but not huge," she said, admitting that she now had two focusses – to ensure that students pass with flying colours and also that the course makes money.

"The course is something which will enhance Elmwood's reputation as a college to which students want to come and we want to be able to say to those students come to Elmwood and you can train on a real live golf course. It will help us retain our position at the top of the market."

