

# Malone GC

It is not until you turn off Belfast's Malone Road and into the long drive which takes you up to the clubhouse that you appreciate just what a magnificent setting Malone Golf Club enjoys, and what a fine golf course the members have.

True, the club is regarded as one of the most prestigious in all Ireland while the course has been ranked as high as 14th in the list of top inland courses in the world but perhaps it is its location, just a few miles from industrial Belfast, which makes the sheer beauty of the place such a pleasant surprise.

Dominating the course is a 33 acre trout lake which, in addition to offering fine sport for the club's angling section, is a strategy-influencing potential hazard on a number of holes.

The man with the onerous responsibility of looking after a course that carries the unofficial title of "The Augusta of Northern Ireland" is Graeme Wylie, who also finds time to be Chairman of BIGGA's Northern Ireland Section.

This is a man for whom the need for attention to detail is second nature while customer care is of equal

priority - after our meeting he went off to find a lady member's Gucci handbag which she thought she'd lost out on the course.

"We have a reputation to keep up and I don't want anyone coming here and finding fault with any aspect of the course, or visitors feeling that they had not had their money's worth," said Graeme.

To highlight the point he explained some of his philosophy on presentation.

"It is extremely important that whenever anyone comes here they see high presentation. They come up our lime tree avenue and see nice striped fairways, they see lovely shrubs in flower around the clubhouse and no weeds. Everything must be tidy and brushed clean. It gives an overall impression whenever you arrive and this sets the standard for the whole course.

"You could have the back nine looking fantastic and maybe some of the first nine but, unless the 1st and the clubhouse are good, the first impressions would be of a scruffy golf course," said Graeme, who also has responsibility for the other nine holes and the club's bowling green.

While such a philosophy is one he would share with his opposite number at Augusta National the comparison between the two clubs has a lot to do with the overall look



of the course - number of rhododendrons and the similarity of some of the lakeside holes.

In fact, Graeme cleared many of the rhododendrons from the side of the 18th hole so that the lake was visible to the golfers when playing the hole.

Graeme also feels that the membership does seem to embrace the American influence.

"In the early 80s some of our members visited the States, some perhaps even visited Augusta, and they brought ideas back as to how to improve Malone. I noticed when I took over that a lot of things had an Americanised feel. For example the





use of a lot of American golf course accessories. The pins and cups are not of the traditional UK type. The pins are the big fat ones you get in the States. They are fibre glass and tend to chip easily and don't look good when painted so we have to replace them fairly often."

The element on which most golf clubs are judged is the greens and at Malone they get the highest priority of care in terms of maintenance and presentation.

"They go through a programme of their own and are always hand mown," he said.

The general maintenance of the

course goes through the Malone "housekeeping" practices and is subjected to the formidable "attention to detail" regime.

"The guys out on the course are the eyes and ears of management so if they see something is not right they report it to their supervisor who writes it down and ensures that something is done about it before a member reports it.

"For example, divots should be picked up and litter bins emptied while if there was a broken limb on a tree it would be reported back and a guy would go out with a chainsaw either later that day or first thing in

the morning. There is nothing worse than a member coming to tell me that a job is needing doing."

Graeme feels that the priority he places on presentation stems from his time working at Gleneagles.

"Around the clubhouse you'd see film stars and footballers and you knew that these people were paying to play the course and, in effect, were paying our wages. The worst thing that could happen was that these people would complain about something. It comes right down through your Head Greenkeeper back to yourself and you feel that you haven't done your job correctly," said

Graeme, who in his two and a half years at Malone has been able to instil that same sort of feeling with his staff.

"Gleneagles is a five star resort and I look upon this as a five star golf club. There is a lot of competition between golf clubs and between greenkeepers and I would not have applied for the job if it was not for the fact that Malone Golf Club has a reputation for being the number one parkland course in Northern Ireland.

He is also pleased that he is given the authority to do the job as he sees fit.

"You are put in here to manage and

as a manager you get the resources to do the job on a different level to most in Northern Ireland. I would say there are maybe only three or four clubs in the north which would be at a similar level. Working here is certainly the pinnacle of my career."

Graeme was particularly pleased when he took the job at Malone to find out just how pro-BIGGA the club was.

"One of the questions I was asked was what are my views on further education and training and how would I go about it. They were wanting someone who was going to be enthusiastic

and wanted to train staff," said Graeme, who added that since then two of his team, with over 40 years experience between them, had become involved in education for the first time since starting work at the club.

"The club contributed when I asked them for a donation towards the BIGGA HOUSE fund while they also pay the membership fees of every member of staff."

Graeme brought to Malone a practice that he had started at his previous golf club.

"Greenkeeping is an outdoor job and all greenkeepers tend to get

hungry so the best way to treat a greenkeeper is to fill his belly. I brought in the Captain's Breakfast for Captain's Day and organised club breakfasts for the other occasions when we've had big events and the men have been in from 4.30am. When I put the call out it is usually a full house and the men are sitting down to a fry around 9.30, when all the morning duties have been done."

It was also pleasing to read the fact that former Head Greenkeeper, Jim Bridges, played in the inaugural four-ball when the club relocated to its present venue in 1963. Jim was also



elected an Honorary Member of the Club and when, in 1972, he celebrated 25 years in greenkeeping, the course was closed until 12.30pm as a mark of respect.

He was succeeded by Jack McClinton, who took delivery of the club's first triplex greens mower in 1973 for a cost of £2,300 which enabled all the greens to be cut in a morning. Jack's successor was Frank Ainsworth who took over in February '83 becoming only the fifth Head Greenkeeper in the club's history.

Malone's approach to their greenkeeping staff is being followed by an increasing number of Northern Irish golf clubs with the new BIGGA Section growing in size.

"It speaks for itself. We've now got over 70 members and we had a successful seminar at Greenmount College in 1998 and now two years on we are going to have another on this October, all being well. The speakers are confirmed, most of the sponsorship is in place and it will complement the winter educational evenings and golf days we already hold," explained Graeme.

"The main thing for the members of BIGGA is the professionalism of our Association. It stands to benefit every single greenkeeper that they are in an Association which the golf clubs recognise.

"Since both Sections amalgamated we now have a good strong committee with five officers and five deputies. The main thing is not to become stale and we need to keep the young blood coming through in the Association so that when they come in at the bottom they know that they can work their way up and get there eventually."

Looking ahead at Malone, Graeme is already licking his lips at the prospect of working with the golf course architect on the redevelopment of the 14th and 15th holes while another project they will be tackling is the building of the new maintenance facilities.

"Our present site is a lovely location but I'm well aware of the fact, as is the club, that we are growing by the year with our fleet of machinery and storage is proving a problem and our workshop does need to be brought up to standard.

"It is hoped we will move down beside the bowling green with the present site perhaps being used for dormy or town houses. That would also be good in-built security for the club having people around at night."

Spending time with Graeme it is difficult not to find his enthusiasm rubbing off on you and can easily see why he has risen to one of the top jobs in Northern Ireland and within the Association.

Oh, and the Gucci handbag problem was resolved. It had fallen into her golf bag.

