



Royal County Down

Royal County Down is widely regarded as one of the top golf courses to be found anywhere. In fact there are many sane judges who would place it top of a pile containing every course which had ever been built, while many of the top golfers in the world make a pilgrimage to the little town of Newcastle, 30 miles south of Belfast, just to play the course.

It is easy to see why. It provides links golf at its absolute best and when your golf is not up to the task you can wallow in some of the finest scenery in the shape of the Mountains of Mourne. They cause many otherwise focussed players to walk down fairways backwards rather than miss any opportunity to enjoy the views.

The man in charge of maintaining the course and making himself immune from the distractions of one of the most beautiful locations in the world is Alan Strachan, a Scot whose CV contains other such illustrious links courses as Montrose, Royal Dornoch and Carnoustie.

"There are so many reasons why you can see that it is placed so high in these rankings. Obviously you've got the scenery; you've got the length - it is 7100 off the backs with a par of 71, while the greens are small and shed off which, in a sense, is quite similar to Dornoch which also has plateau greens," explained Alan.

Alan has been at the club for five years now and in that time has maintained and, when needed, enhanced the traditional approach to the game that links golf courses represent.

"We like to keep the place as linky as possible. Like golf in the old days when the grass was cut with gang mowers and they couldn't have undertaken all this fancy mowing practices that can be done now. They just went round the green with the

gangs and this encouraged the ball to run off the green and go into areas where the golfers didn't want to be. Having said that, if they missed the green they should have the opportunity to use the putter to get back on. To me that is links golf," said Alan.

His course management practices are out of the same mould.

"My philosophy is to keep it simple.

Very, very infrequent fertilising, a lot of top dressing and very little water. Simple things, but an awful lot of people can make mistakes and change what I think are some of the most valuable golfing assets we have in Britain. We have so few links courses and we really want to look after them and not see them change," said Alan, 33.

RCD is tough. The course record is 66 which, bearing in mind the quality of the players who have tackled it, says much for the quality of its defences.

"When we had the Amateur Championship here last year we had very calm conditions on the first day and the best score was 68 then, on quite calm conditions the next day, it went up to 73. It was tough," he revealed.

Outside of the surrounding scenery the one thing that would really identify Royal County Down is the bunkers.

"The bunkers here are unique," explained Alan.

"Having come from the east coast

of Scotland where it was all revetting it was quite something to be faced with marram, heather, gorse and so much lovely colourful vegetation coming out of the tops of these bunkers.

"I can picture the sheep and the rabbits cowering down into the dunes and creating these bunkers," said Alan, who revealed that it is written



into the RCD policy that the style of the bunkers will never be changed.

They do, however, cause Alan and his staff headaches.

"Because they are not built and designed like a revetted bunker, which are built to retain the sand, the sand blows everywhere, particularly as our sand particles are very fine. Any wind blow at all creates overhangs so an awful lot of sand shaping is required. It is a weekly thing and we have guys out with shovels all the time. What you gain in time not doing the revetment you lose through having to do so much sand shaping.





With such natural bunkers it does beg the questions how do they go about building new bunkers or rebuilding existing ones?

"Since I've been here it has been a bit of trial and error. They hadn't built any bunkers here for a long time before I arrived so we played around really. We dug up cubes or material from heather and marram areas, like bricks really and built up a wall with these. I suppose you could call it revetting after a fashion," he explained.

"The trick is to make it look natural when it isn't. Donald Steel, who does work for the club, was delighted with the results we got. He drew them on paper for us and then left it to us and he was very happy with the bunkers and the shaping."

Two other issues which occupy much of Alan and his 16 man team in their efforts to maintain not just the world famous course but also the little sister Annesley course as well is the gorse and the courses' very shallow root zone.

"The gorse is definitely the main problem at Royal County Down. Sixty years ago we had no gorse and now we are overrun," Alan revealed.

"We would never want to eradicate it all but what happens is that the gorse kills the heather. What we are trying to do is create a gorse line so we'll manage these areas and not let them go out of control. The other areas we will try to wipe out.

"We are currently in the process of looking at the best eradication. We've tried chemical but generally it comes back again so I think we're going to have to take the bull by the horns and do what Ian McMillan did at Hankley Common and just root the whole place out."

Alan sees this as one of the main priorities the golf club has to deal with in the next few years.

"The club is so traditional that they want to get back to what it was like but it will be a long process turning what is gorse land back into heather land."

To alleviate the problem of the shallow root depth the club undertakes an extensive overseeding programme every autumn.

"If any drought comes along it just wipes out the plant so we have our overseeding programme which will be helped by the club's decision to install a new watering system to help bring on the young seedlings. It is just a maintenance tool for us. I'm looking forward to it going in as it will transform some parts of the course in the right way and not transform anything else. At some of the far holes the water pressure of the current system is very poor and we don't get sufficient coverage on the middle of the green. You can see a general thinning out of the sward which in turn allows the meadow grass to establish."

As an additional aid to improving the turf quality Alan has brought in a turf nursery.

"We introduced it for patching purposes and we have different types of seed - fairway, tees with a smooth stalked mix through it which takes the wear very well and some rough mixtures."

As well as course maintenance practices Alan also made changes to some of the other working practices at the club.

"When I arrived the boys were starting work at 8am when there were golfers out on the course before them. I wasn't used to this so I changed it so that we started at 6am and got the club to move tee times back to 8am from 7am so we had a two hour window to do our early morning work.

"The last thing you want is to have machines buzzing around golfers when they've paid £80 a round. We want them to go away having really enjoyed the product because it is a business now isn't it?"

Having tackled the Amateur Championship last year, by the time you read this, Royal County Down will have hosted the British Seniors Championship - the club's first professional event for 50 years.

"I did feel pressure on the run up to the Amateur but we had a great spring and I was very happy with the

course and I'm lucky that I have a really good staff to rely on."

The quality of the course was highlighted last April during the Masters when Steve Rider, interviewing Graeme Storm, the Amateur Champion asked him if he'd been frightened by the speed of the greens. Graeme said not really because he'd played on faster at Royal County Down.

"The greens were very fast then - 11.5 in the early morning and through the day they got faster than that. We are fortunate that the greens are sheltered and as long as the pin placements are sensible we can make them fast," said Alan.

With the best amateurs enjoying the RCD hospitality last year Alan is looking forward to the visit of the best seniors.

"It is a much bigger event than the Amateur. They are talking about 5,000 spectators per day and there will be a large tented village and cameras on every hole. I went to Portrush to get a feel for the size of it last year," said Alan, who added that the club had the Championship for two years.

It can only be good news that a course such as Royal County Down is being utilised as a venue for some of the major events on the calendar and in Alan Strachan and his team looking after it the course will always be at its natural best.