

# Course Feature

## Short Move Long on Benefits

Scott MacCallum travelled to Dundee to meet Paul Murphy whose short journey eight years ago has been long on benefits.



▲ The 7th green



▲ Snow is a big problem at Downfield, but they have come up with solutions

When Paul Murphy was Head Greenkeeper at the Dundee District Council run, Camperdown and Caird Park golf courses his near neighbour was the highly regarded Downfield Golf Club, one of the finest inland courses in the country.

Eight years ago when the Course Manager's job came up at Downfield it coincided with Paul's completion of an HNC and a feeling that it was time to look to progress his career. One letter of application and an interview later and he had moved a short distance geographically but a long way in career terms. Since then both Downfield Golf Club and Paul himself have achieved a great deal.

"I had quite a bit of security with the District Council but I felt very restricted in what I was able to achieve there but within a week of coming here I knew that I'd made the right move. It was just a feeling that I had and I've never regretted moving to Downfield," he said.

Among the highlights was the 1999 Open Championship at Carnoustie when Downfield was a final qualifying course and will be remembered as the course over which Paul Lawrie became the first qualifier in the modern era to go on to lift the Claret Jug.

"Paul Lawrie loves Downfield. He'd already won a Scottish event over the course and really liked the tight fairways and firm greens," said Paul, who also mentioned that Peter Alliss is also a fan having recorded an 'A Round with Alliss' series with Greg Norman at the club in the 1970s.

"Some of the members thought the pros would shoot really low in the Open Qualifier but I told them just to wait and see and in the end the lowest score over the two days was 67, the same as it was at Carnoustie, regarded as the toughest of all Open venues, during The Open itself.

"We actually played a competition over the course a few days later as it was set up for the Qualifier and most members found it too difficult," said Paul of the par-73 parkland course.

On a tour of the course early last month the colour in the trees was still evident and the golfers were still enjoying a stiff test of golf and fine putting surfaces and fairway shots from their own plastic mats. Mats were introduced for the winter months prior to The Open qualifier as we felt there was not sufficient time for the course to recover from divot damage

before the spring. "It was one of the more unpopular decisions that had to be taken to achieve our goals. It is now accepted that during the winter months mats are required on most courses in our area.

"The first thing an older member said to me when I arrived was that I'd do fine if I didn't cut down any trees or make them play from mats," smiled Paul.

That they both happened early in his Downfield career says much for his abilities both as a greenkeeper and as a diplomat.

"When I arrived, with the support and help of my Chairman of Greens, Doug Smith, and experts like Steve Isaacs, then of the STRI, we looked at the course and identified areas where our attention had to be turned."

Among these were areas where trees had grown too close to greens causing problems with shade.

"Taking down mature trees is never going to make you Mr Popular so the answer is always to call in the professionals. In the case of trees it was the Council, who have their own Arbor Squads, who I'd worked with while I was with the Council, and I contracted them to take the major trees which were shading the greens".

"I reported to members, kept them informed and told them the reasons why it was happening but a couple of members still called the Council to let them know the trees were being taken down and asking if it was the right thing to do. The Council was able to say that yes it was the right thing and that they would be doing the work," said Paul, proving the benefit of going through the proper channels.

His knowledge of tree management and previous Council experience has brought about a system at Downfield which must rank with any in the country.

"I realised with trees that you must have a structure in place so in conjunction with the Council (Doug Shearer and Eric Hamilton) we undertook a survey which has resulted in a map upon which every



▲ Paul Murphy



▲ Path to the 11th

plantation is featured to scale. Each plantation is numbered and we know exactly how many trees are in each one. Jonathan Smith, of the Scottish Wildlife Group, has asked if he can use this as a working document to take to other clubs," explained Paul, who has a eight man team to look after the grass, and in autumn, leaf factory.

"We also have some major trees out on the course and each one has a tag on it with a number. Then, on another file, the tree is listed together with its height in metres, and an 'A', 'B' or 'C' score for general condition; the leaves, the branches, the bulbs and the trunk. Those trees which are receiving straight 'Cs' will be removed."

The survey took around four years to complete but now it is working and Paul doesn't get asked why work is being done on trees anymore and the plantations contain much healthier, stronger trees, growing in more

spacious surroundings giving more room for the flora and the fauna to flourish underneath. A five year grant was also obtained from the Woodland Grant Scheme to help finance these projects.

An added benefit to all the tree work was that one of the first purchases Paul made when he arrived was a chipper and now all the paths are covered in environmentally friendly and free wood chip which doesn't damage machines and which is so much more attractive to the eye than the quarry dust which had been used before as well as mulching in the shrub beds which reduces the need for weeding.

Paul worked closely with Doug Smith in designing and rebuilding three of the course's greens, the 5th, 8th and 13th. Doug has also built his own golf course in the shape of Drumoig on the other side of the River Tay, near St Andrews.

# GROUND GUARDS

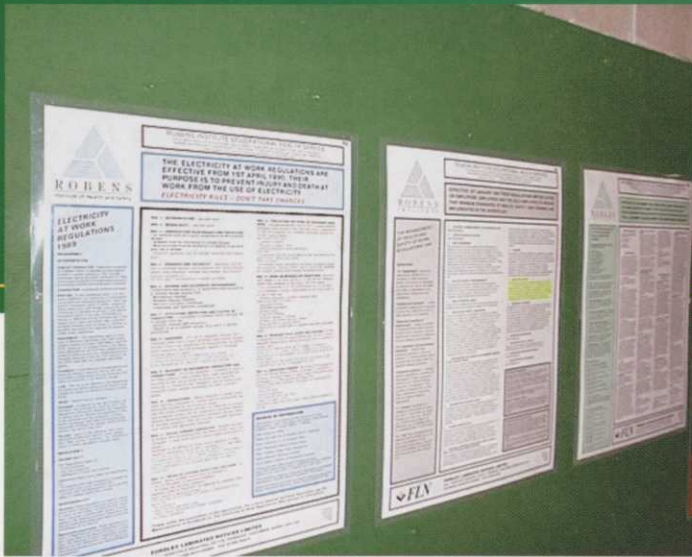
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▲ The club has a superb policy on tree management

"A lot of architects may feel that we should have got the professionals in but as a private members club we have a limited budget to work with. As well as feeling confident enough to produce a green which, when finished, you have improved on what was there, and it looks natural in its surroundings it means we have completed a successful project."

One of the greens has been moved forward to reduce some of the shaping problem while another - the 8th - has been made into a double green with the 10th. It was just a coincidence that both greens add up to 18 like the double greens at St Andrews. It has made it easier to maintain this green now that all the golf traffic is directed to an astro turf path to the right of the green rather than wearing a track between the 8th and the

10th greens prior to joining them up," he explained, adding that all the work is carried out in-house.

"The club knows the standards the team can achieve and are happy that the team is the right size and come with the levels of quality wanted by the members."

Much of the work has been made easier because of Doug's other golfing interests.

"We mixed the rootzone to my spec. at a screening plant at Drumoig and we had a big 360 excavating machine doing the shaping work on the new greens. Because we had the machinery we were able to do both the 5th and 8th greens at the same time - the team was working on one green

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▲ Clearance work

while the machine was working on the other. We had the greens up and down and ready for play for the start of the new season. I don't know where the club would be without Doug. I also borrow other machinery from him including the Graden and all I have to do is pay for the blades."

Another area upon which Paul has produced improvements are the tees, around 10 of which have been rebuilt.

"These had always been a problem as, with the best of intentions, bits had been added to save money in the past. I decided that we should produce a specification for tees which would mean they would all be built to the same standard as well allowing us to give the club accurate costings for future work," said Paul, who brings in a laser level to ensure they are spot on and uses LevenSeat USGA rootzone as a growing medium on top of a stone carpet.

Being so high up, the course is 500 feet above sea level and north facing, and being on the east of Scotland where the east wind keeps temperatures low the course does suffer.

"I couldn't believe how long snow lay here when I started. It must be longer than anywhere else in Dundee as the trees hamper the snow from thawing.

"For that reason we took a conscious decision on certain greens, and only when conditions are right, do we clear the snow off, crack the ice which has formed and remove it the following day.

"It has been a bit of a godsend because we were finding that if we hadn't done this it would have caused ideal conditions for snow mould or as in the case of ice scorched turf from the glasshouse effect of the sun shinning down on the ice.

"As well as a green, tee and tree improvement programme I was also keen to set up a conservation policy which would create habitats for flora and fauna which would enhance the golf course rather than have a negative effect. One of the projects was to reintroduce a curling pond which was used when the land was part of the Camperdown estate before Downfield was built. The shape was still there but it had been overgrown by scrub and was a complete eyesore. By clearing the scrub to the shape of the original curling pond and felling some trees to let light into the area we created a pond which transformed the area as well as creating another habitat within the course. It is hoped that members can take advantage of the curling rink during the winter period, providing them with some alternative entertainment when winter strikes."

The geographic and climactic conditions always make Downfield a "late" course but the aeration work Paul and the team have carried out has produced a financial windfall each spring so far.

"Meadowgrass is never going to survive here and what I found when I arrived was that the edges of greens were quite good but the centres were thin and yellowing because there was so much meadowgrass in them.



▲ Removing ice from the 5th green

What we've managed to do through a more intense aeration policy, overseeding pure bent and plugging from the edges to the centres is turning them around from 70-30 in favour of meadowgrass to 60-40 in favour of bents. This work is ongoing and what we have now is more of a blend of grass which has a strong deep rooting system which we were able to achieve through creating air spaces within our soil to encourage the roots down. With the result we now have greens that you can play on through the winter months, which are firm and free draining only being rested for frost and snow".

"Not long after I arrived Doug told me that the greens were good at the start of the season but that they would go back which was due to the high poa content. I told them that they were stronger and they wouldn't go back. Each year I've won the pound bet that rides on the outcome," said Paul, as he looked at the seven Scottish pound notes which are displayed on the wall. He fully expects it to be eight early next year.

Around the maintenance facility things are currently hectic as lorries bring in landfill from a nearby housing development. Paul has negotiated with the builders to offer the facility which is being used to build up an area designated for a turf nursery at no cost to the club and a little profit.

Inside the modern facility all general health and safety and risk assessment information is displayed on the walls together with all the time sheets for each individual piece of machinery.

"I knew someone had to tackle health and safety and with a package put together by Elmwood College I made sure the club office and kitchen were up to speed and knew what was expected of them. We're all employed by the club and I felt it was only fair that as I had the knowledge I should put it to good use for the benefit of the club as a whole.

"Lots of places might be doing their risk assessments and health and safety work but where is the evidence? We have all our boards on display as the most effective way of ensuring the best practice is carried out is to have everything in full view. Everybody knows and there can be no excuses," said Paul, who is currently about to start a Level 4 course at Elmwood having just completed a fast track Level 3 to go with his HNC.

Education is also high on the agenda in the form of in house training using my assessors role and sending the staff to college. This has helped to raise and maintain standards to the benefit of Downfield as well as producing highly skilled staff who are a credit to the club.

Downfield is an extremely well run club and no more so than within the greenkeeping side where Paul has moulded the best of his Council experience to the attributes of a members' club to produce an excellent package.

Not bad for the man who made that short journey across the fence eight years ago.