

# Course Feature



▲ Phil Chiverton

## A Masterpiece

**Scott MacCallum visits The Grove and meets the man charged with looking after a masterpiece.**

At a time when a Picasso painting has sold for over \$100 million it is perhaps fitting to recognise an artist in another field, sharing a talent to take a blank canvas and create something unique. Renowned golf course architect, Kyle Phillips, is one such person and his latest British masterpiece, The Grove, confirms his status as one of the best around.

The man who designed Kingsbarns, near St Andrews, and Dundonald, the course recently purchased by Loch Lomond Golf Club on the west of Scotland, is justifiably proud of what he has created on the edge of Watford just inside the M25 loop, and he has received outstanding reviews since it opened late last year.

The responsibility for ensuring that the quality of the layout is matched by the course conditioning falls to Course Manager, Phil Chiverton, who joined The Grove in 2001 during the construction phase.

"I would say that it is an inland links," said Phil, when asked to describe The Grove, and you can readily see what he means.

Transport yourself away from Watford and you can easily see some of The Grove holes being included in the Kingsbarns or Dundonald layouts and vice versa.

The bunkers are small and deep and the greens have swales and fall away to devilish hollows like so many fine links courses. With a putter in your hand the greens leave little doubt as to which way the ball will break but plenty of doubt when it comes to determining speed and line.

Indeed it is around the green where Kyle's talent can be seen and those who play any Phillips' course know that they need their short game to be at its best if birdie, or indeed par, is to be threatened.

However, Kyle has not ignored influences which are more familiar to the south of England.

He wanted to go back to the roots of traditional parkland courses which featured some of the classic characteristics synonymous with the great designers such as Harry Colt and J H Taylor. To this end he spent many months with his shaper, Jason Dott, visiting some of the finest courses in the south of England including Sunningdale, Swinley Forest and Walton Heath before he even contemplated putting pen to paper.

The Grove, a top-of-the-range pay and play course, is privately owned and the search for a suitable site began back in the mid 90s with the

proviso that ease of access was all important. It took some time to identify the farmland site, purchase it and begin the arduous task of seeking planning approval.



▲ The Grove Hotel and 1st green

Once achieved MJ Abbott began the construction work and, as with Kyle's other courses which look so natural once completed, it masks the mammoth effort that went into reaching that stage.

In all 300,000 cubic metres of earth were moved during the construction phase and at one time more than 60 people were working on the project under the guidance of Abbott's.

Some fascinating discoveries were uncovered during this period including the outline of two old lakes which were subsequently dug out and re-lined with a pvc liner. A series of pumping chambers were then installed so that water taken from the discharge of the land drainage system could be pumped away if the level of the lakes becomes too critical. The end result is two distinctive water features situated on the front nine which look as though they have been there for many years.

Much of the work was carried out during one of the wettest winters we've experienced in recent years. The Law of Sod then kicked in and last year's cold drought slowed the establishment of the grasses just months before the official opening and during the important preview time.





▲ The 18th

However every cloud has a silver lining and the weather which caused the problems also created opportunities for Phil and his team.

"The wet time allowed me to identify potential problem areas on the course and bring in additional drainage and on the flip side the drought meant we could really test the Rainbird irrigation system in extreme conditions," said Phil.

"It is a high maintenance course and the level to which we maintain it is labour intensive with 20 greenkeepers and five gardeners working round the clock on the course, hotel and spa surrounds as well as the walled garden, which is the second biggest in England," he explained.

"All the greens are hand mown and many of Kyle's design features including the little swales in bunker surrounds and steep banks around the greens look dramatic but take time to maintain."



▲ The 17th



▲ The 8th

The Grove also benefits from the input of Troon Golf the world's leader in golf resort and club management. With more than 140 clients worldwide in 11 different countries Troon Golf provides a comprehensive service which not only involves using the latest agronomic methods and expertise on the course but also maximises the wider aspects of developing and marketing the facility.

The annual maintenance programme has to be signed off by Troon Golf each year and Chief Agronomist Jeff Spangler visits The Grove three times a year to ensure everything is on track.

It is testament to the quality of Phil's team, that The Grove has been ranked third for course maintenance and fifth for the overall golf experience throughout the 140 resorts at Troon's Annual Meeting of Club Managers in Arizona recently.

"Prior to Troon Golf being appointed as our management consultants, I would like to personally thank Steve Jones, from Golf Course Solutions, and Mark Hunt, from Headland Amenity who have both made a huge contribution helping us

with our agronomic plan and management of our facility," said Phil.

"Steve's experience with the maintenance of the A4 grass on the greens and Marks help with our fertiliser programs, both working alongside ourselves and Jeff Spangler, from Troon Golf, have made a huge team effort in making the course a success and setting standards in the industry for others to hopefully follow.

Initially play will be limited to 20,000 rounds per annum and will gradually increase as the course develops. The Grove is certainly more than capable of staging a big tournament in the future and as Phil has supervised preparations for more than six tournaments at The Buckinghamshire, from where he moved to The Grove, and Wentworth he is well equipped to take the course to the next level.

What Kyle Phillips can be sure is that his English masterpiece will be looked after as well as Picasso's \$100 million painting.