



FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURS

Scott MacCallum speaks with Archie Dunn who has the task of maintaining a golf course next door to some very illustrious neighbours

When I mentioned that I was going up to Auchterarder it was immediately assumed that I'd be visiting Gleneagles and not the excellent members' club which is the wonderful resort's direct neighbour.

"That's the 15th hole of the PGA Course," said Auchterarder's Course Manager, Archie Dunn, as we stood on the corner of his course looking over a very small fence at a greenkeeper cutting the green just a few yards away.

With the PGA Course the venue for the 2014 Ryder Cup Archie is looking forward to having a much sought after view of proceedings without having to leave his own workplace.

"The Ryder Cup is a major opportunity for the area, not just for Gleneagles, and if Auchterarder Golf Club can't make progress that year there would be something far wrong," said that man who started his greenkeeping career as a 16 year-old at Gleneagles and rose to be the Head man on the wonderful King's Course.

Archie has a close relationship with Scott Fenwick, Gleneagles' Courses Manager, having worked alongside him for many years, but that relationship is sometimes stretched when staff move from Auchterarder to its illustrious neighbour.

"He's taken a lot of my staff in recent years. He does apologise occasionally..."



but not very often," laughed Archie. "There is not a lot we can do about it as it's progress for the young guys and everyone who has gone to Gleneagles from here has done very well so I feel that it's a credit to the way I've trained them. They get the opportunity to learn the basics here, so they have an all round knowledge when they leave here. But it does mean that we have quite a turn over of staff," explained Archie, who pointed out pictures of Sean Connery, Lee Trevino and Peter Alliss from a visit they made during the old Pro Celebrity Golf series in the '70s and '80s.

The conventional neighbouring club mutual back scratching does go on between Auchterarder and Gleneagles with machinery swapping on a regular basis.

"They borrow as much from me as I do from them, particularly if they have the same job being carried out on all three golf course at similar times."

Despite have the shadow of one of the world's most attractive golfing destinations hanging over it Auchterarder Golf Club shines extremely brightly



A Gleneagles greenkeeper cuts the 15th green on the PGA course, just a few yards away

in its own right. Last year the club came third in a Scotsman newspaper poll for Best Value Golf behind Lanark GC and Boat of Garten GC for the quality and affordability of what is on offer.

“We didn’t enter a visitor must have put us forward but we got some superb publicity in the Scotsman just the week before The Open at Carnoustie.”

And it would be hard to argue with the poll. Auchterarder, at one end of a town known as the Lang Toon as it’s the longest town in Scotland, has 850 members with all gents and ladies paying £340 a year subs while visitors pay £27.50 a round during the week £33 at weekends - £39 and £50 respectively for day tickets.

“We brought in well over £100,000 in visitors fees last year and with medals on Sunday’s and Wednesdays, ladies’ medals on Tuesdays, and juniors playing two evenings a week, it does get busy,” said Archie, who still finds time to act as Scotland’s BIGGA Board of Management representative.

With that sort of drive the club has moved forward on all fronts with improvements to the clubhouse – a first floor function room complete with balcony looking out at some of the finest scenery money can’t buy – recently opened while on the course major changes have and are continuing to be made.

The original nine holes were built in 1892 with a second nine being added around 30 years ago after the club leased land from the council.

“The second nine was designed by the then Gleneagles pro, Ian Marchbank, and built for around £50,000. The layout works pretty well but we’ve spent a lot of money over the last 10 years improving areas, as you only get so much for your money and the £50,000 didn’t stretch to quality construction. However, it was all that could be afforded at the time and it moved the club forward.”

The improvements have included 12 major tee reconstructions – doubling them in size and including two double tees for the 3rd and 9th (completed but not yet in play) and the 12th and 13th.

They have also reconstructed three new greens in the last six years with pride of place going to the 12th.

“It was the third green we rebuilt after the 7th and 8th and it was probably the most problematic on the golf course. It was in a wet heavily wooded

clay area, was disease prone and always the first to close the course when it rained,” explained Archie, who explained that everything except draining work, which is contracted out because they don’t have the equipment, is done in-house by the five man team including himself.

“We increased the size of the 12th threefold, added some undulations, put in three new bunkers and a 500 square metre pond, which has totally rejuvenated the whole area. It is now the feature hole of the course and the feedback we’ve had from members is very positive.”

The difficulty of attacking a major project like a new green is that all the other day-to-day work must continue and it can stretch the length of time taken to complete the work.

“It took us three months to complete but it all depends on the weather and how quickly we can start. Nowadays you can still be cutting well into November. With construction work you have to make sacrifices and sometimes we don’t rake the bunkers every day during the week to allow us to get on.”

Weekend bunker raking is carried out by members of the Junior Section and Archie has already employed... and subsequently lost to Gleneagles, three members who discovered a love of greenkeeping through this route.

The green was out of play from the first week in November until the first week in May but the speed of re-introduction owes much to another hands across the fence alliance between Auchterarder and Gleneagles.

“We were very fortunate that Gleneagles were lifting the 14th green on the PGA course and that’s where our turf came from. We paid the going rate for it but it meant we had turf that was green height and it probably saved us six to eight weeks because our putting surface was established a lot quicker,” said Archie, who is hoping the arrangement might be repeated when they tackle the two remaining greens on the list to be rebuilt.

With the construction side moving forward on an on-going basis the environmental work on the course is also making real progress.

“We have a five year plan, in conjunction with Elspeth Coutts, of Green Progress, for our environmental management work and at the moment we are doing heather regeneration and scrub clearance.

“Some of the heather had been 25-30 years old and had become very leggy

and totally unplayable – it was 18 inches to two feet high on some of the playing areas with gorse around eight feet,” explained Archie.

“We had hoped to get started a lot earlier but the weather was against us over the winter so it was only recently that we were able to bring in a two metre flail mower. We are still to rake off the debris to see what is left and whether we will have to scarify and vertidrain to reproduce the heather bed.

“The whole course features a lot of heather and I do expect to get a bit of criticism from members for stripping it out but as Jimmy Kidd once said to me, ‘You’ve got to crack an egg to make an omlette’.”

When Archie arrived at the club he began a policy of adding definition to the fairways and leaving out-of-play areas to develop naturally.

“It has softened the whole landscape down and is much more pleasing to the eye. It’s given us less grass to cut, we’ve been able to transplant saplings to other areas of the course and the wildlife we see out of the course has increased in number.”

The club has red squirrel postcards in the clubhouse which are sent to the Perthshire Red Squirrel Group when one is spotted, while there are also buzzards, herons and deer on regular display. The club has also applied permission for a rope to be extended across the busy road outside the course which will give safe passage from one side to the other and let them display their daredevil high wire skills.

Archie is always very keen to try new ideas when it comes to course management and is currently investigating the purchase of a set of rollers which he would use to reduce the number of occasions the greens are cut.

“Over the last few years some guys have saved up to 30% of cutting and still produced a surface. I know of guys who are rolling three times a week instead of cutting and it enables them to raise the height of cut by a mil.

Instead of cutting seven times a week you are cutting four and rolling in between. It doesn’t compact the surface too much and reduces the stress on the grass plant. It’s an idea I started to hear about 18 months ago and I like to try new things and perhaps take a chance occasionally.”

Another example of this is his use of Primo Maxx on his greens.

“I used it on the tees last year and got some good results and decided to use it on the greens. It is an expensive tool but you have got to weigh up what you are saving on cutting as a small labour force. I think you need to practise with it, particularly on timings of applications and the grass plant must be strong before you apply it because you get no regrowth after you’ve sprayed it. What you’ve got is what you’ve got.”

Archie is a progressive greenkeeper at a progressive golf club and the results achieved have been impressive in keeping up with the Jones’ next door.



The results of scrub clearance on the 1st



The view of the 12th green and pond