



LIVING ON THE EDGE

Scott MacCallum travelled all the way to the eastern edge of England to a golf club which has a history of producing fine greenkeepers.

North Foreland Golf Club couldn't be much closer to continental Europe if it tried. Just outside Broadstairs, in Kent, and set on a cliff top, the club boasts some of the finest views to be found anywhere – "A view of the sea from every tee" is the club slogan. North Foreland had a Lookout Post during the First World War which was permanently manned for four years.

And just to reinforce the fact that the course is perched on the edge of England and closer to mainland Europe than most of Britain's populations centres, Course Manager, Dan McGrath, finds that when he ventures onto the 13th green he gets a text message welcoming him to Belgian Telecom! When he heads a little inland again he's

welcomed back by his home provider.

Dan has been Course Manager at North Foreland since 2005 and has not regretted the decision he made in taking the job for one minute.

"When I looked at the club I could see the huge potential. For one thing it's built on chalk which is the best thing to sand – some would say it's better than sand," said Dan, in his soft Irish accent.

"We are on greens all year round and we haven't got a single drainage pipe on the whole course. When we stripped the first bunker for renovation I asked where the drainage trench was, and was expecting to find shingle, but the guys said they'd never seen drainage here and had no experienced in how to install one. When I'm showing them how a herringbone system

works I've got to take them to another course to see one in action."

North Foreland has an enviable record of producing high quality Head Greenkeepers, among them Peter Wisbey. Peter spent 22 years at the club, then spent a number of years in Portugal, before returning to the post of Courses Manager at Woodhall Spa with the EGU. Duncan Kelso, Course Manager at Kings Hill and Steve Byrne, at The Wisley, both worked under Peter before becoming successful Course Managers in their own right.

Dan worked under both Duncan and Steve and it was they who pointed their young protégé in the direction of their former proving ground.

"I worked at Fota Island, under Steve Byrne straight from college and gained experienced of



North Foreland's reservoir

working at an Irish Amateur before going to the Old Head for the grow-in," recalled Dan.

At the age of 19, and hearing of another grow-in project, this time with Duncan Kelso at Kings Hill, in Kent, Dan took the brave step for a young lad and crossed the Irish Sea for a new life.

"Modern grow-ins are brilliant and are the best thing to learn how a golf course works," he explained.

He left Kings Hill in 2003 and joined Crown Golf, for a short spell before the job at North Foreland was advertised. Both Steve and Duncan encouraged him to put in for it.

Not having been with Crown Golf for long, Dan was a little apprehensive about applying for another job but he did so and was invited for interview.

"I basically went for the interview for the experience and felt that I had nothing to lose. That's when you are most relaxed. It all went well and a day later they called me and offered me the job," said Dan, recalling some good news which caused a few logistical problems at home.

"We were in the process of moving from

Maidstone to Surrey to be nearer my Crown Golf job and it was as we were filling boxes that the call came through. My in-laws were packing a van, expecting to drive up the M25, and I had to tell them that we'd be going in the opposite direction."

Since arriving at North Foreland Dan has become more admiring of the club.

"You couldn't buy this site," he explained.

"It has a good name, is known within the history of the game and was an Open Qualifier and really only needed tweaking around the edges."

He identified that the turf was good – indeed Alistair Beggs, of the STRI, recently said that North Foreland had the best fairways he'd seen in quite some time. The one problem was the greens which were a combination of rye, meadowgrass and bent.

"It's a combination that is notoriously difficult to manage," said Dan, whose first purchase on arriving was a Wiedenmann.

"We can pencil tine, top dress and roll and the golfers don't even realise we've been in. We're blessed with the machinery we have nowadays,

but saying that the volume of golf has increased. We have 1100 members and over 40,000 rounds a year," he said.

"The fescue doesn't like verticutting but at certain times of the year the rye was getting very woody so we needed something to lift it up so we went for verticutting which was good in one way but which was having a negative effect on the fescue. It was a Catch 22 situation. It was good for rye but not much good for the fescue which we'd overseeded.

"So we decided on daily brushing to lift up the rye without removing it. That's what we've done for the last two years – using a drag mat every morning.

"I'd say we're winning the battle very slowly."

Among the other tweaks, since he took over, was to take a look at the staffing and the working practices of the greenkeeping team.

"I wanted to freshen things up a bit and change a few of the structures. For example, the guys had been going out cutting the greens, then coming in for a cup of tea, going out for their next

job and then coming back in for lunch. I wanted them starting at 6am, actually working on the course at 6, and I needed to know who could buy into the new practices – who was on side and who wasn't. Everyone had the same chance to impress and, interestingly, it was the younger guys who left the club and the older ones who are still here.

"I'm absolutely delighted with the motivated and loyal team I now have."

Dan has a policy of recruiting people from the local area and has employed many who have been made redundant from their previous jobs and are looking for a second chance.

Dan sees a huge advantage in taking people who have had no previous experience.

"They haven't been tainted by low quality training so if they carry out jobs to a poor standard, and continue to do so, it's my fault, not the fault of anyone who has trained them before.

"For the first six to 12 months we train them from scratch in-house to find out if they are

suited to the work, then send them to either Hadlow or Merrist Wood Colleges," said Dan, who revealed that he had 127 applicants for one trainee position.

"Nine times out of ten it has been successful and we get guys who are keen to take advantage of a second chance. You find they have worked in offices or factories and want a total change."

In addition to the fine 18 hole test of golf at North Foreland there is one of the finest short courses to be found anywhere, which enables many people to hone their short games or discover whether golf is going to be for them.

Out on the course the biggest project which has been undertaken in the last few years was a new irrigation system to replace the 34 year old version, which drew from the mains and which leaked constantly.

"We'd repair one leak and 20 metres down the line another leak would pop up and it was always on a Bank Holiday that it went wrong!"

An Irrigation Consultant was brought in

to design the system and put the work out to tender while the club chose to appoint Dan to project manage the work and appoint a series of contactors to undertake the various aspects of the project.

"We decided that we wanted a borehole and a reservoir to take away the reliance on mains water and earmarked an area of ground to the left of the 8th hole for the reservoir."

One company undertook the trenching and laid the pipe; one dug the reservoir; another put in the lining while another drilled the borehole. There was also an electrician contracted.

"We saved quite a bit of money overall and even more by installing the sprinkler heads ourselves in-house, which was brilliant for our guys who got a chance to do it. The pipework was all there and they had to put on the swing joints and then the heads themselves."

One problem emerged when an archaeological dig found some remains and a shelf had to be left in the reservoir floor so as not to disturb



anything but they ended up with 850,000 gallons of capacity.

“They found a spear head and a piece of pottery, which, between you and me, looked like something from IKEA!”

The irrigation project was started in November, 2007 and completed at the end of April, 2008.

Dan found it a tough but rewarding period – 14 hour days, and available and around whenever the contractors were on-site.

“But now I have an irrigation system that I know inside out because it was done from scratch. The best thing we did was to get the borehole to feed the reservoir and the reservoir to feed our storage tank so if the reservoir pump goes down we still have the borehole which can go straight to our tank. If the borehole goes down we still have the mains.”

Another on-going project is chalkland grassland regeneration.

“The site had been taken over by ivy, due to no management in the long chalkland rough and

smothering the native grasses.

“Working with Kent Wildlife and with the backing of the STRI we are now three years into the programme and the results have been amazing. It involves using a flail mower and scarified with all the cuttings being collected. This is done on a rotation cycle and the material is composted.”

Dan has immersed himself in the area and thoroughly enjoys the quality of life that working at North Foreland has afforded him.

“It’s great for my wife here, while our two kids absolutely love it. We just live 200 metres from the beach and when I get home from work I meet the kids and a few minutes later they’re swimming in the sea. I walk to work and I walk home. I don’t have a car. As of six months ago I now do have a truck for work but I keep it on site. There’s just no point in taking it home.”

Having joined the long line of talented greenkeepers at North Foreland Dan is lapping up the experience, even if he has to go through Belgian Telecom to tell everyone about it.



Dan McGrath

