





Close to Perfection

Close House, near Newcastle, has turned into a superb golf club, but as Scott MacCallum discovered, it is about to get much better.



It would be fair to say that anyone looking at Close House Golf Club, five years ago would have agreed that it had potential.

An idyllic estate, in stunning countryside 10 miles west of Newcastle, the tree-lined parkland golf course was a great place to play the game but, frustratingly, shared its space with several University of Newcastle football and rugby pitches.

Not an ideal scenario for any golf club, but one enterprising businessman spotted the opportunity to create something quite special at Close House and with the original golf course enjoying a new lease of life having been divorced from the playing fields and boasting superb new USGA greens, with a magnificent new 18 hole course under construction and due to open by spring 2011, as well as a state-of-the-art academy and driving range and

new £2 million clubhouse members can't quite believe their luck.

When Graham Wylie, the founder of Sage Computers, bought the estate one of the first things he did was to bring down some greenkeeping expertise from Slaley Hall in the shape of Course Manager, Steve Cram, who brought some of his old crew with him, including the Slaley number three, Brian Clark, to be his number two at Close House.

Brian was to take over as Course Manager from Steve, when Steve returned to Slaley a couple of years later.

"When we arrived the 18 hole course had push up greens cut out of the existing land and there were eight football pitches and four rugby pitches which shared the golf course land.

"When the pitches were in use on Wednesdays and Saturdays the holes directly involved with the football and rugby pitches couldn't

be used," explained Brian, as we sat in the orangery of the luxurious hotel which is also part of the site.

"Even when the golfers could play those holes they were playing out of grass that was three inches long and mud created by the footballers and rugby players."

The pitches were moved to land that Graham Wylie bought to the east of the course freeing up the greenkeeping team to make their mark on the golf course.

"Graham was a graduate of Newcastle University and wanted to put something back for them hence the new pitches, while the students got special rates for the golf course.

"There are university buildings on the site as well – greenhouses and labs etc where grain testing is carried out," explained Brian, of a site which has been transformed over the last half decade.

"Initially the plans were to build a new Championship-standard



FAR LEFT: The new site offer spectacular views of the countryside

ABOVE TOP: The course is being built to a high specification

ABOVE LEFT AND ABOVE INSET: MJ Abbotts can have as many as 40 people on site and a great deal of plant

course on the land including that of the original course but we finally decided to keep and upgrade the old course and have the new one built on land that Graham bought from a neighbouring farmer," explained Brian, who took over as Course Manager three years ago.

The in-house team rebuilt all 18 greens and surrounds adding bunkers and designing the new USGA guideline style greens.

"We had a free hand to build and design the greens and we made them very undulating. The course is short – under 6000 yards – and we felt that we had to add interest to the golfing challenge by doing something with the greens and surrounds."

The course – now known as The Filly – offers a real feel-good golfing experience for the mid handicapper with the short but interesting holes presenting some solid birdie opportunities to average golfers enjoying a good day.

The current clubhouse is a traditional old cricket pavilion which really looks the part situated in the middle of the course but it will soon be replaced by the brand new version to serve both courses.

Having agreed that The Filly could never be stretched to present a genuine challenge to the top players the decision to build just such a course was taken and New Zealand-born architect, Scott McPherson, who worked on the St Andrews Bay (now Fairmont) courses, was offered the challenge of creating a course that hopefully in time will become one of the best in the North East and perhaps beyond.

"Scott is a real disciple of Harry Colt and he came up with some drawings which carried the Colt influence – open trenches and old stone walls etc."

Another Colt trait was minimal earth moving but given a site which had been farmland until Graham

Wylie's purchase of the land, a certain amount of shape shifting had to be carried out to create an interesting layout.

Indeed, judging by the amount of MJ Abbott plant and manpower on the site in early August Harry Colt would have been truly amazed, and comparisons with what he had required to create the likes of Sunningdale and Wentworth and at Close House would be staggering.

"Scott is on the site on a regular basis and the speed at which Abbotts work means that there is always something to see when I come up to the site, something I do most days. It makes coming to work very exciting.

"There is anything up to 40 guys working on site and they are all extremely professional and helpful, especially Mike Heath, the on-site Project Manager. I must admit we were all delighted when Abbotts won the contract," revealed Brian.



Monthly meetings are held to keep everyone up to speed and make any decisions that are required to be made as the work progresses.

"It is a very free draining site. Like many in the area we have had some torrential rain in the past few weeks and it has drained very quickly which I'm very pleased to see and Mike or Scott will come to me if they feel there is something I need to have input into including the steepness of bunker faces or a areas that make have draining issues – something I do have experience of from my time at Slaley."

The new course which will be known as The Colt – in tribute to the man who influenced it and also to reflect Graham Wylie's strong interest in horse racing, hence The Filly and The Colt – offers some spectacular views of the Geordie countryside and some of the holes will become stars in their own rights. The 14th is a feature hole. At around 160 yards the green is surrounded by trees and from a playing and architectural perspective looks magnificent. Brian thinks so too, but is sure the hole will give him headaches.

"The green will struggle for light and air and I'm sure I'm going to be pulling my hair out. I'm going to have my hands full," he smiled, while fully appreciating the qualities that the hole will bring to the course.

As part of the preparation for taking over the running of what will be a high quality golfing venue Brian and some of his colleagues have been visiting courses in other parts of the country to get a feel for how they do the job.

"We've visited the likes of Celtic Manor, and The Grove and learned a great deal from seeing how they operate. Graham wanted us to see how five star facilities and high quality golf courses run and see the standards they achieve.

"He really wants to create something special in this area and is the type of guy who will be looking for an event, whether it be main Tour, Seniors or Ladies, to establish the new course."

Having the resources to build a golf course during a recession makes it far easier to achieve a top quality job at a competitive price and it would be perfectly positioned if it were to open around the time the world, and the country, emerge from the financial doldrums.

Brian has really enjoyed his time since becoming Course Manager and is relishing the steep learning curve he is on.

"I did apply for some head man jobs while I was at Slaley but now know that I wasn't really ready. Coming here, taking on more responsibility, learning from Steve, and having him as a mentor,

meant that I was ready to take on the job when he left. I'm happy to take on responsibility. I do worry about things – I don't think you'd be normal if you didn't, but I enjoy the challenges of the job."

Some of that enjoyment may be derived for the fact that there is no committee structure at Close House.

"Graham definitely wants things to be right and he puts the right people in position to make it happen and then lets professional people get on with the job."

They are hoping to start seeding this autumn but the onus is getting the job right rather than finished and if it spills over to next spring no-one would be overly concerned. It will be sown out with traditional bent fescue mix – the same as The Filly – and the team which stands at seven at the moment but which will increase substantially, will maintain the two courses to a similar standard

"The plan is to have a light opening next autumn then, hopefully, the Grand Opening in the spring of 2011."

When that happens Brian's professional life will move on to the next chapter, but you can be sure that whatever challenges he faces he will treat in the same manner that he has with those he has tackled so far.

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Brian Clark,
Course Manager