



A gamble pays off

Scott MacCallum visits Donaghadee
Golf Club which has turned around its
fortunes thanks to some brave decisions



Three years ago Donaghadee Golf Club, near Bangor, in Northern Ireland, took a gamble.

Losing members, with the course not maximising its potential, the club recognised that a change was needed and advertised for a top Course Manager to turn around its fortunes as well as setting aside a significant amount of money to invest in the course.

Local man, Aaron Small, who had been number two at Clondeboye Golf Club for the previous 10 years, was attracted by the prospect of making his mark on the course and took on the challenge. If it was indeed a gamble for both sides, fortune has certainly favoured the brave.

The course is now in superb condition with an extensive bunker programme nearing completion which has transformed the golfing challenge and a new practice facility which will surely become the envy of many others. All in three short years.

“The course was lacking definition to be honest while the bunkers were in serious need of attention – they were old, in the wrong places with inconsistent sand,” said Aaron, who had played the course a number of times both as a junior and a senior team player.

“Basically the course was behind

the times but credit to the club, they appreciated that something needed to be done – the nettle was grasped and money spent.

“I knew, coming here, that it was going to be a challenge but I certainly wasn’t daunted by it.”

Aaron had been honest at his interview, highlighting where he thought the problems were, and that was music to the ears of the interview panel, who knew then that they’d got their man.

“I personally believe that the Head Greenkeeper needs to play golf otherwise it’s like a chef who doesn’t taste his own food. If I’d been a member of Donaghadee I wouldn’t have been happy and I could understand why people were leaving,” said Aaron, a 4 handicapper who hits the ball a country mile.

The first thing he did when he started was, as with most new men, turn the greens around, and the club was quick to honour its commitment with around £80,000 worth of new machinery, which has since been added to by another £70,000 worth of kit.

“Before I started they had one guy stuck on a three unit rough mower and it took him a full week to cut the rough. We now have a seven unit Toro and we get the work done in a day and a half. We were immediately saving three and a half days’ worth

of wages each week which meant that the machine basically paid itself and we got a better quality finish,” said Aaron, who couldn’t believe how busy the course was when he arrived.

“I thought it must have been Open week as we regularly have 600 people out between Friday and Sunday and I’d been used to Clondeboye, which had two courses to swallow up the golfers.”

“The greens are our bread and butter. I took out about 210 boxes of thatch and sanded them straight away to get them running true. It was the best thing for them.”

Having made an impact on the greens and added definition to the fairways Aaron then turned his attention to the bunkers.

“I was grubbing a greenside bunker on the 4th when the Captain came over. I pulled the hand grubber through the first time and it was HS Masters sand. I pulled it through again and it was Wexford White. The third time it was Silica. So basically there had been a problem with the Silica sand so instead of digging it out the Wexford had been put on top and when there was a problem with that the HS was put on top of that. It was good for the Captain to see what we were up against.”

Aaron had worked with architect, Howard Swan, at Clondeboye on



ABOVE: Aaron Small

70 bunkers which had been well received by the members and felt that Howard could make an impact at Donaghadee.

"I'd been in the club around six months before I approached them and suggested that we bring Howard in to take a look and they agreed."

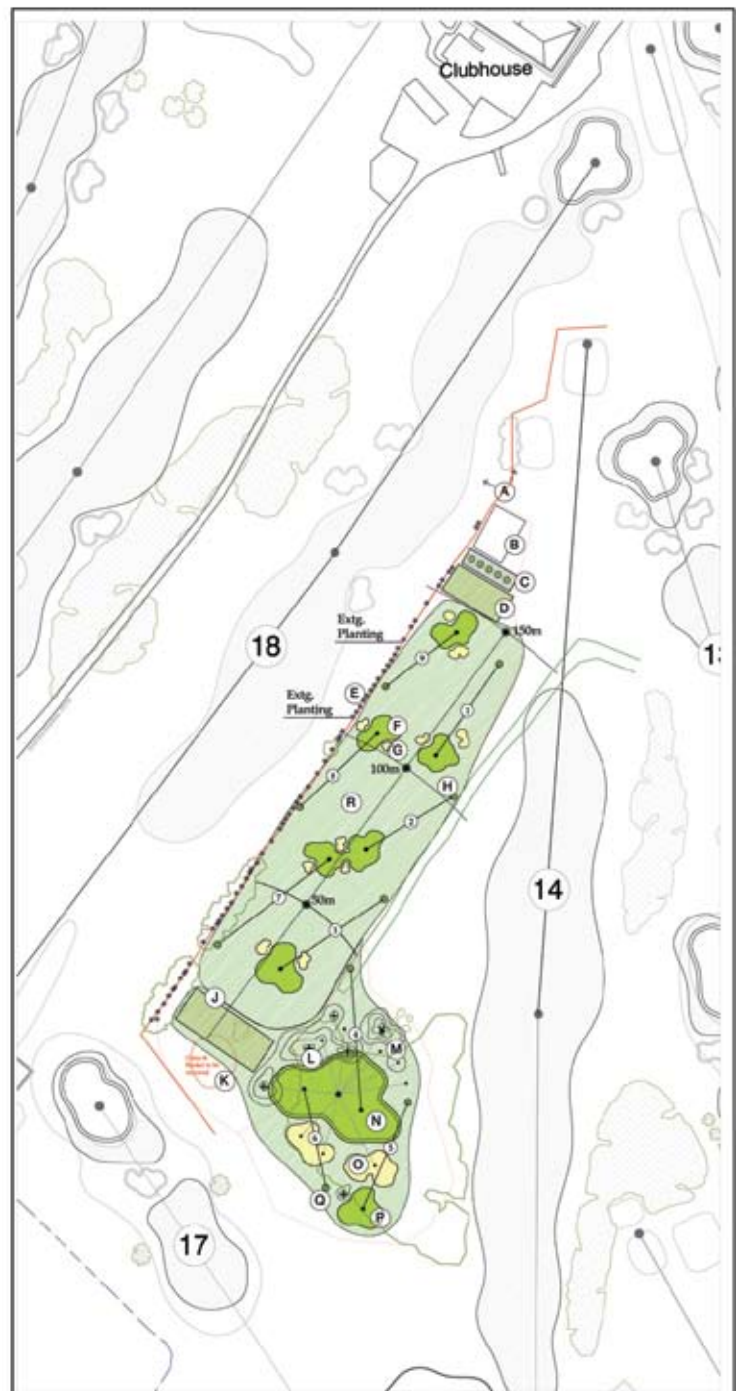
Howard visited and the club agreed that he would look at two holes, the visually appealing par-3 13th and the 18th, the two holes that would make the biggest impact.

"The downhill 13th was a bit unbalanced with one bunker on the front, one on the right and another at the back. Now it looks like a real signature hole with bunkers surrounding the green. With the 18th it meant people left the course thinking what a good golf course it was. The club was over the moon

Howard Swan's Short-course Plan

KEY

- A Access to/from Clubhouse to Practice Ground
- B Existing Practice Tee
- C Artificial Teeing Area
- D Grass Tee Area - North
- E Tree Planting/Screening
- F x5 Target Greens, Main Outfield, as part of x6 Hole Course
- G x11 Bunker Hazards to 6 Hole Course
- H Artificial Teeing Mats x9
- J Grass Tee Area - South
- K Existing Chipping Green & Bunker to be removed
- L Practice Mounds Area
- M Practice Hollows Area
- N x1 Main Academy Green doubling up as 3 additional holes
- O Bunker Academy
- P x1 Target Green
- Q Area of Woodland to be removed
- R Range Outfield



“The club knew that the course was behind the times so the nettle was grasped and money was spent.”

Aaron Small

and the decision to extend it to the rest of the bunkering was easy,” said Aaron, or “Bunker Boy” as some of the members call him.

After that a programme which involved Howard visiting twice in the year, in February and October for three days with two holes being done each time.

“The course is a little below average length wise and there is no way we can make it longer so really the only way we can improve the challenge is to tighten the course up with the bunkering and make sure they are in the correct places.

“We put £20,000 in the budget each year which worked out at £5,000 per hole covering all architect fees; digger man fees, drainage, sand etc. I really enjoy working with Howard because he is on site the whole time and can make amends as we go rather than him leaving plans for us to interpret.”

Asked to describe a Swan bunker Aaron explains that they fit in well to the landscape and that they are built in proportion to the scale of the golf course.

“Visually they look excellent but they do require a bit of maintainance as they need to be hand raked.”

Aaron firmly believes that bunkers are the toughest element of a golf course to get right and that it is certainly harder to get bunker



ABOVE AND BELOW: The new practice grounds



consistency right than it is green consistency.

“Category One golfers like them to be firm but higher handicappers like a bit softer and fluffier. But we’ve also got to contend with wind blow as well as the fact that some bunkers drain better than others. Then you’ve got to look at the fact that sun facing bunker dry out more quickly, while those that are more in play will react differently to those that are not found so often. It is an impossible task to achieve total consistency.”

With the bunkers on track and due to be completed in another four visits, there is a steady improvement much to the delight of the members, despite the fact that it has made the course at least a shot tougher.

While this has been going on, other areas of the course haven’t been neglected and have seen an upgrade.

“We’ve improved the signage and made money,” explained Aaron.

“We bought some excellent signs from Eagle Promotions which have been cemented in. They are wooden and have a map of the hole painted on them and look great. We got them sponsored for an average of around £500 each for two years – more for par-3s as they are studied for yardages more than others and the 1st is more as well. For the sponsorship they also get 20 rounds at Donaghadee. This brings more people into the club to spend money at the club or in the shop so we benefit



there as well. Some people may also decide to become members having played the course. They were really easy to sell and it means when we come to renew the sponsorships it's all profit having paid for the signage out of the initial deal."

But the really exciting development at the club is the superb, unique, new short game facility, opened last month, which will be a great addition for the Donaghadee membership as well as being a new community facility for school children who will be given the chance to develop a taste for the game.

"It was a very poor area, about the size of a football pitch and you very rarely saw more than a couple of people on it at any one time."

Coupled with a 40 x 40 area of trees which was cleared, on which an Academy green complete with bunkering were built, it amounted to an area of around 1600 square metres.

"Howard designed it for us – to ensure we were eligible for the funding we needed to employ a professional architect – and we have two big natural turf tees at each end – the North and the South – which you can use to play to six of the holes, which have signs telling you the yardage to each hole, while there are also artificial tees for each of the holes. You can play it as a six hole or a nine

hole course," said Aaron, who added that the project was given funding by Sports Northern Ireland.

"There were strict tight deadlines for every stage of the project which, if missed, would have caused the funding to be withdrawn but we met every one."

The new area will be administered by the Pro Shop, with a booking system ensuring that there are not too many people on it at any one time, and schools will be invited to bringing enthusiastic children to the area to receive lessons from the professionals and hopefully ultimately become members.

"It will also be a great warm up for those with a later tee time and we will have matches for the various groups within the club – juniors, ladies, seniors etc. It will help to bring the club closer together while sharpening up our short games, said Aaron.

Howard is extremely impressed by the vision of Donaghadee Golf Club and the commitment that has been required to get it done.

"The achievement at Donaghadee is immense and has been fully supported by the public purse very gratefully and it is excellent news for the provinces golf and golf development that the Government feel it is important enough to support us in this way," said Howard.

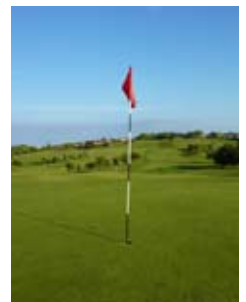
"It was a very poor area, the size of a football pitch, and on a slope - you rarely saw more than two people on it at any one time" Aaron Small

"It seems to me that many, many golf clubs do not make good use of their practice facilities, however comprehensive they might be, and much comes down to the fundamental philosophy of the club to see new blood coming into the game. Donaghadee has been very enterprising in looking at this innovative approach to swell their membership, both adult and junior, and they have been very successful indeed in doing this on both counts," he explained.

With the new short game facility to manage, which requires hand mowing of the greens, Aaron operates with a team of six including himself with summer help bringing that number to seven.

"I'm over the moon at the way things have worked out and delighted at the way the club has supported me. They gave me the job and let me get on with it which is exactly the way to a successful club. Pay the professionals to get on with the job," said Aaron.

Perhaps it wasn't such a gamble after all for Donaghadee Golf Club.



IMAGES ON THIS PAGE: Donaghadee Golf Club as photographed by Niall Kerr