

The only way *is up*

Scott MacCallum visits a golf club which so nearly went out of existence but which is now well on the road to recovery



One of this country's most profound philosophers, I believe her name to be Yazz, once said, "The Only Way is Up!" It is a positive message, to be sure, and one which Darren Child, Course Manager of Hawkhurst Golf Club in Kent, has been using as a mantra since he took over at the nine hole village course last February.

And it would be hard to argue as, when Darren took over, the course was certainly in the gutter, but not necessarily looking at the stars - to paraphrase another acclaimed philosopher and wit, Oscar Wilde.

The course had just gone into administration. The Head Greenkeeper and his part time assistant had to go as part of the old regime. The Administrator had taken what worthwhile machinery was to be had in the ramshackled building which masqueraded as the maintenance facility.

The club had struggled for a number of years, being propped up by the club's owner, who was spending anything up to £50,000 each year, to bail the club out on salaries, overheads etc. The membership had also dwindled from a relatively robust 400 to just over a 100. It was then that the owner understandably felt

that the situation was not sustainable and that, while he would be happy for the club to continue, he would no longer bank roll it, and so things came to a head.

Looking into a genuine abyss, the Club Professional, Peter Chandler, and one of the club's squash members, James O'Reilly, decided, despite the less than rosy outlook, to try and make a go of the club.

It was to this situation that Darren arrived. A man who had earned his greenkeeping stripes at Walton Heath, under Clive Osgood and latterly, Ian McMillan, and a former junior member of Hawkhurst, Darren



was living with friends on the edge of the golf course when a member got wind of the fact that he was between jobs and offered to pay for him personally to rebuild the bunkers.

"It took a lot of graft as the bunkers hadn't been touched since the previous October and it took me three weeks to get them into some sort of order," explained Darren.

The bunkers had previously been the responsibility of a volunteer who had to catch a bus to get to the club, usually arriving around 10 in the morning and working on them a couple of times a week.

"This arrangement wasn't sustainable or fair on the person tasked with the job," said Darren.

Obviously impressed by the work he had done and knowing that a full time greenkeeper for Hawkhurst had become a necessity, Darren was asked if he would be interested in taking over full time. He said "Yes".

"I do recall my first day. It was raining, and had been for about four months on the spin.



ABOVE: Darren Child, Course Manager of Hawkhurst Golf Club in Kent

"When I was at Walton Heath, we had all the best kit for whatever we needed to do. Now all I had was a bucket, a shovel and a borrowed half moon.

Once all the leaves had been raked out of the bunkers and the water bailed out, I then started doing the edges and digging the sand around to make it more level," he recalled.

"When you don't have someone to talk to when you are working and you are 'on your tod,' it is pretty hard graft," he added, with an understandable degree of understatement.

With the receivers having taken a tractor and trailer and a fairway machine and with only a John Deere 2500 greens machine available, which has to be re-set each time to cut tees and surrounds. For fairways they have a John Deere 2653, which allows them to cut fairways in four and a half hours and an old Saxon to cut rough.

The club currently operates with Darren and a number of volunteers who turn up to provide support when they can.

"Some bring domestic ride-on's which they use in their gardens, while others would do divoting or bunker raking. I'm really grateful for all the help but you never know if anyone is going to arrive that morning until they turn up."

With such uncertainty, planning,

even for the day ahead is nigh on impossible and Darren regularly works 55 hours a week, considerably more than the 40 for which he is paid.

"I usually go in on the Monday morning and think about the main tasks that I want to complete. Obviously there are the essentials and cutting greens and raking bunkers are done daily but much of the rest is often spur of the moment thinking – what needs doing now or can I do it first thing tomorrow depending upon which volunteers come in," said Darren, who is given some respite by Pro, Peter Chandler, who is useful on a greens machine and who normally cuts the greens at the weekend.

"If there is a big competition on, nine times out of ten I'll be playing in it so I go in early and do them."

But before you feel too sorry for Darren, he does have a Guardian Angel in the shape of Mike Mosse, Course Manager at the nearby large and prestigious, Dale Hill Hotel and Golf Club.

Dale Hill is part of the Leaderboard Group which also includes Chart Hills, The Oxfordshire, Sandford Springs and the Leaderboard Golf Centre in Reading.

"I was aware of the problems they were having at Hawkhurst as I knew the previous Head Greenkeeper. He came to see me to tell me that he was leaving and I knew the club was going into receivership," said Mike.

"One of Hawkhurst's members previously worked here as a greenkeeper and he approached me and said that they could do with a bit of help so he, Darren and I met for a chat.



"I was keen as I knew they'd been going through a hard time and that Darren was on his own with virtually no kit and I just thought we might be able to offer some help. I had a chat with our General Manager and he in turn with Owners Paul and Jennifer Gibbons who agreed to us helping out, as long as there would be no direct cost to us," explained Mike.

What happened next is a perfect example of what is great about golf and greenkeeping.

"Local John Deere dealer, Godfrey's, brought their trailer and free of charge transported kit over for

around 30 from the low point at the beginning of the year, the members were more than happy that their course was on the up.

"The course will go forward because we have the help and people genuinely want it to work. I believe the management are looking at getting someone in part time to help me next year. Generally there is a good feeling about the place because they are seeing results – although there is some disgust that the fairways are a bit tighter because I've added definition to them," he smiled.



ABOVE: The Club Professional, Peter Chandler

Heath Mechanic, Graham Goldup has helped me no end with the problems I've had with machinery and Irrigation Engineer, Mark Bass, who is also a personal friend has helped with many irrigation issues. I'd hate to think where Hawkhurst would be without his help.

"We had a system which had fallen into disrepair but he was able to get it going again. It doesn't run smoothly and it needs money spent on it but I can water all the greens now which is an absolute God send, particularly as we've only had five inches of rain since April."

The help of all these people has been invaluable and done for the genuine desire to help a club down on its luck.

Darren has been able to thank Dale Hill in a small way by providing some plants for a new pond Dale Hill has created but in the main a warm thanks has been all that has been asked or given.

When I arrived at Hawkhurst in a morning early in the school summer holidays the first 20 golfers I saw all appeared to be under the age of 14 and keen as mustard to play. If the club had gone to the wall those children would have missed out on the chance of developing a love of golf.

Now hopefully a proportion of those children will be golfers for the rest of their days and there is a fair chance that some of them will go on to become members of Dale Hill, showing that good deeds now might be rewarded further down the line.

Yazz was correct in saying "The Only Way is Up" but only through hard work and the determination of key people.

"When you don't have someone to talk to when you are working, and you are 'on your tod,' it is pretty hard graft" Darren Child

us, it's only a few miles but it really did help, and three of our guys tined and top dressed the greens for them," said Mike, of the good deed which took place last May.

It was the first time that the greens had been given such a good work out in about four years and there was plenty of thatch removed.

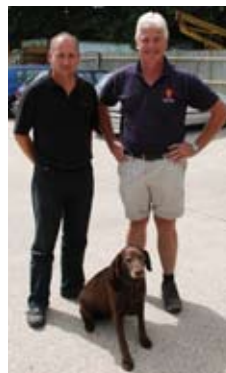
"Having Mike and his team come and help was a big, big help and the greens benefited greatly," said a still grateful Darren, who was one of the Walton Heath staff who qualified as an HGV Driver so that he could drive a tanker to transport water on to the course during the last extended drought.

With membership already up by

Having come from a top quality, highly respected club like Walton Heath to one from which survival is a huge achievement, Darren has got used to the difference in expectation.

"It is not easy but when you look at what you are working with there is satisfaction at achieving something with minimal help. You can't just jump on a piece of kit and go, you have to physically check the machine you do have and adjust things so that you can do what you want to do," explained Darren.

"I've still got good ties with Walton Heath and can phone Ian (McMillan) up at any time and he's given me some excellent advice. Walton



A friend and his dog: Darren stands by Mike Mosse, Course Manager at the nearby Dale Hill Hotel and Golf Club.