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PROFILE

Name: Allan Donlevy

Role: Acting Head
Greenkeeper

Born: Liverpool, 22
August 1970

**Favourite sports
team:** Everton

Hobbies: Rugby
player and coach

In it together

Steve Castle heads to the north west and discovers a busy, traditional club where everyone is prepared to muck in – including the members



Ashton-in-Makerfield Golf Club is an undulating parkland course situated in Garswood Park between Wigan and St Helens, close to the M6. On a glorious sunny day, Acting Head Greenkeeper Allan Donlevy was soon into his stride as he explained how his interesting greenkeeping career led him to Ashton, which has been on its current site since 1965.

"I started at West Derby Golf Club in 1986 as one of Maggie Thatcher's apprentices! I then moved to Gerrards Cross, then I was at Walton Heath for 11 years working under Clive Osgood.

"We held a couple of European Opens there, County events plus some Amateur Championships. It was a fantastic time, great fun as well as a great place to work, and the pinnacle was the European Open in 1991.

"Then I came back up north to take the Deputy Course Man-

ager's role at Stockport, but I got made redundant so came here in 2001."

Ashton recently acquired the services of Gordon Irvine MG as a consultant, and last year they invested in a Toro ProCore 648 which the entire team have been very pleased with.

"It's easy to use, excellent maneuverability, it's brilliant. It does use a lot of petrol – but ultimately I can start tining the greens at 6am and do all the greens in six hours.

"Even the members noticed a difference as we were using smaller tines. It gives flexibility and access to greens all the time as opposed to the tractor mounted alternative which could leave tyre marks.

"We do weekly sarel rolling in conjunction with the 8mm tines with the ProCore, which is every two weeks from March until the end of May. Regarding cutting we work between 5mm and 6mm until more growth is achieved."

In 2009, it was announced that

The team of Phil Roberts, Mike McGrail, Carl Roscoe, Allan Donlevy, Richard Orrick

a £120m water pipeline linking Liverpool and Bury was to be routed straight through Ashton-in-Makerfield and five other golf courses. At Ashton, the pipe's route took it through the 17th hole and 18th tee.

So, United Utilities agreed to fund the purchase and construction of 14 spare acres of land adjacent to the course for two new holes, then reinstated the original 17th.

Allan added: "The greens are meadowgrass bent, we've recently started an overseeding programme to get more bent in. It's great to have Gordon Irvine on board, we get on well and he's always at the end of a phone if I need him. The course is really coming on, we've had good feedback this year.

"Thanks to Gordon's advice we are now majoring on aeration, it's all about getting the right playing surface for the members.

"We don't have a full irrigation system – albeit we have irrigation points to all our greens and some tees.



“The course has a clay base. Nine holes are reclaimed land and you wouldn’t describe it as good growing soil, but we’ve made a good golf course out of it and our members are really proud of what they’ve got.”

This is clearly illustrated by the so-called ‘Wednesday working party’ at the club. It began around a decade ago when a couple of helpful members offered to tidy some borders surrounding the clubhouse, and has grown to a larger group who now perform some key tasks.

They work generally from 8am – 12 on Wednesdays. The club held a training day to show them various tasks, so they’re all fully up to speed with health and safety issues. Two of them wanted to get even more involved so they are fully trained to use the five ton dumper. This was all paid for by the club who recognise how important their input is.

Allan added: “I’m very appreciative of that group, they take on all sorts of tasks from small things like pruning copses to full-scale projects like building pathways. They save the greenkeeping team a lot of time and ensure we can concentrate on the course.

“My ultimate aim here is that as soon as every golfer leaves, they’re on the phone wanting to come back and play again.”

Ashton-in-Makerfield is a very

busy golf course. As I’ve travelled the country speaking to BIGGA members, one of the constant themes raised is the fact that golf courses are much more heavily used than 20 or even ten years ago – and Ashton is no exception.

Allan confirmed: “We start at 7am in the winter and there are always golfers here ready to go out at 7.30. This is also something we have to really think about in the summer when we have people finishing their night shift wanting to have nine holes at 5am. We have 500 members, and Saturdays here are absolutely manic.

“In the summer we can have more than 180 golfers here on Saturdays playing all the way through from 7am, and in the winter a similar number on a two tee start on a shortened course.

“Of course we need the money from people playing here, but naturally, and I’m sure many greenkeepers would agree with this, the sheer volume of golf played causes us problems. When I started greenkeeping in 1986 it would literally be one man and his dog playing on a winter morning. But as time’s gone on, people are retiring younger, they’re watching more golf on TV and they want to play all year round.

“You can set your watch by some of our members. In fact it gets to

the point if they don’t turn up on a morning, you start to worry about what’s happened to them!

“In the winter we put a lot of ropes up to keep golfers away from the finer stuff. Parts of the course do end up looking like a maze but it protects key areas of the course.

“One of my favourite sayings is ‘many hands make light work’. This is certainly true here. We’ve got the members helping out, and the greenkeeping team working together (we have five in total) is the most important thing.”

As I left, the team were summoned to an apparent emergency. What could have happened? Allan’s colleague Mike McGrail explained: “One of our members has got a bit of a temper, and he’s just duffed a shot and hurled his fairway wood into a tree. It’s stuck in a branch 15 feet up and he wants us to get it down.”

All in a day’s work for the team at Ashton-in-Makerfield.



MACHINERY LIST

- 1 John Deere 4520 tractor
- 1 John Deere 3720 tractor
- Lewis drainage trencher
- Wiedenmann XP 160 Terra Spike
- 1 3 ton gravel bander
- 1 5 ton dumper
- 1 Toro 648 ProCore
- 2 John Deere 2500 greens mowers
- 1 John Deere 3245C rough mower
- 1 John Deere 3235C fairway mower
- 2 Toro 3250s
- Various hand machines
- 1 Greentek thatchaway system
- 1 Pro Pass topdresser
- 2 John Deere 2653 Semi Rough Mowers
- 1 John Deere 2500 Hybrid Greens Machine (due in April)
- 1 Industrial Wood chipper