

Wooler has more than its share of keen golfers – so keen that they have constructed not one but two golf courses over the years. Jenny Pollock reports.



A tale of two golf clubs

Wooler's first golf course was set up by just 24 members on Wooler Common - 600ft above sea level - in 1893.

It's founders included the great and the good with "...the Right Hon. Earl Tankerville, Chillingham Castle; president, Mr Alderman George Rea, Middleton House; captain, A H Leather, Fowberry Tower; secretary, G G Rea, Doddington; treasurer, H G Stewart, British Linen Bank, Wooler; committee, R J Roddam, Roddam Hall; G Laing, Flodden; G E Carr,

Ewart; J Marshall, Chatton Park; Rev Canon Wilsden; Dr Dey, Wooler."

Having decided to build the course in April, they didn't hang around, reporting that it was hoped to have the course open that season.

Appeal to tradesmen

Originally a nine-hole course, it was designed by Mr George Rochester the professional at Alnmouth Golf Club.

In 1914 the land rented by the golf course was bought by Mr Bruce and following a rent increase the club sent out an appeal to tradesmen and others to become subscribers. The course became so popular with visitors that by 1922 it was extended to 18 holes.

A fascinating website called Golf's Missing Links (www.golfsmissinglinks.co.uk) includes information from Mr E Tate, a committee member in 1947, who says: "The original course occupied a large expanse of land and shared its occupation with Scottish Black-face sheep."



As well as being an extraordinarily picturesque setting for a golf course, it had one feature which was possibly unique in the world of golfing; the clubhouse occupied a delightful, partially preserved, ancient site presumed to be Roman and which is still marked on OS map as a CAMP.

"What was the actual golf course like? Firstly, nothing like the flat manicured parks now being built to cater for the modern pampered Tour Pros.

"Whoever built this course took their inspiration from the Scottish links courses; that is, to use land which was of little value to anything else - rough moor-land suitable for only rearing sheep, but nevertheless incredibly attractive to walk over.

"In this respect their choice was a happy one, while at the same time proving conclusively that sheep and golfers can exist harmoniously on the same piece of land.

"The natural hazards of the terrain meant that no sand bunkers were necessary. Originally the rough grass had been cut back to make

the fairways. The sheep - who naturally prefer short grass - showed their appreciation by keeping these areas closely cropped, so much so that the fairways only required one mechanical cutting each summer. It was my father's job to clean up the sheep deposits off the greens daily."

Having flourished during the 1920s and 1930s, the course seems to have fallen into disuse during World War 2. It was re-opened in 1947 but closed again some years later, leav-

ing Wooler without a course for a couple of decades.

In 1970 local golfers decided it was time Wooler had its own course again. The idea came from Donald Smart, who owned The Corner Shop in Wooler, and was enthusiastically backed by a large public meeting. Ronald Macdonald, who lived at Gallowlaw, was one of the steering group set up to run the project.

“The initial plan was to build a nine-hole course on land between Burnhouse Road caravan park and The Pop Inn, but the layout of the area was not ideal and it was decided that the hillside at Dod Law offered greater potential,” he says.



Ronald Macdonald

There followed seven years of hard

work by a team of 15-20 volunteers. Ron, who still enjoys a game of golf over the border where he now lives, says: “We spent most weekends cutting turf, transporting it to the course and then preparing the ground to produce a nine-hole course with eighteen tees.

Supportive

“Neil Harvey and family, the owners of Dod Law, were extremely supportive, regularly allowing us to use their tractors, trailers and grass cutting machinery. In fact, on more than one occasion Neil had to borrow back one of his tractors to feed his sheep! They also kindly forgot to collect any rent for the first few years.”

For keen golfer Margaret Cowens, helping build the course was a family affair; her late husband Ronnie put in the labouring, one of her sons was recruited to cut the grass and she was on the ladies committee which raised the necessary funds.

“We had some great nights - dances, fancy dress and race nights as well as sales, coffee mornings and road races - to raise money.” Ron adds that over the years they raised more than £10,000: “...a large sum in the '70s, considering that £1 then was equivalent in purchasing power to about £15,000 today.”

“Building the course was hard work in all weathers, and progress on some occasions could be very slow. For instance, removal of rocks from the 9th fairway was laborious and

time-consuming, involving the pro-

gressive use of sledgehammers, pneumatic drills and finally dynamite. Ironically when the course opened it was noticed that not many golfers used the ninth fairway, opting to land in the rough instead!"

Margaret also recalls dropping by in the midst of attempts to remove rocks: "I went up one day and I nearly died; they had this bulldozer taking the rocks out and I said 'My God, that's the cup and rings' - at the very top, you know. It was just another boulder to the lads. I said 'You can't move them, that's sacrilege'.

"So Wooler is the only golf course that has a rule that if your ball lands on the cup and rings you can lift it off."

"Apart from the normal course construction," says Ron who was deputy head at Earlston High School, "We needed to dig and connect a water supply from the quarry above the course to the clubhouse, the approach road had to be resurfaced with tarmac and a cattle grid installed, extensive fencing required to be erected and hundreds of trees were planted to give the course some character.

"There were legal, insurance and banking details to be dealt with, but the interesting thing about all of those tasks was that we always had someone with the necessary expertise to advise us. And all free of charge!"

The work was not without setbacks - such as the time a second-hand tractor they bought decided to just take off downhill towards the main



Margaret Cowan

road. Fortunately, it overturned before reaching the road.

"Despite all the hard work and difficulties, by 1976 the course was officially declared open to members and visitors," says Ronald.

"Situated on a hillside and involving a steady climb to the top of Dod Law we had to put up with a few wisecracks about altitude sickness and the non-availability of oxygen masks, but these were dismissed as the inevitable excuses of golfers who had returned a high score!"

Margaret remembers the early games before the clubhouse was built: "The first game they had was just like rough grass - what with sheep's dottle and that. We served sandwiches out of the backs of our

cars at first, then we progressed and used the scouts' tent before we got a clubhouse through the Lions."

"Today," says Ron, "I suspect not many people using the Clubhouse will realise they are sitting on comfortable seats that once adorned Ednam House Hotel in Kelso, as did the bar, or that they are standing on a beautiful wooden floor that was originally part of a school gymnasium in the North East of England, or that their water supply comes from a spring above the course.

"The clubhouse once served as a

large site hut for the upgrading of the A1 trunk road. It was then bought but never used by the Alnwick Lions charity and was subsequently offered to the Golf Club free of charge. Luckily, we received some grant aid to cover the building costs."

"For those involved in the construction of the course, it is gratifying to see that Wooler Golf Club is still going strong, and that all the hard work has delivered a successful long-term sports facility for the whole community."

This article first appeared in Glendale Live community magazine in 2020 (www.glendalelive.org)



The view from the 19th hole at Wooler Golf Club