

Too Posh for Lotto Dosh

It is rare for Deeside Golf Club to merit the attention of the national press but just under 25 years ago, in February 1996, the Club was the subject of an article in the Sun with the above strapline - what you may ask, brought about this state of affairs?

This story had an unlikely genesis, namely a decade long debate about the 9-hole course - the Lang Nine - which, as I mentioned in a previous article, was aptly named as it measured 3,345 yards with a par of 36. In June 1995 Council notified the membership of a SGM to be held on 4 July and accompanied the notice with a document entitled 'Visions of the Future' which set out a plan to redevelop the existing 27 holes layout at a cost of £600,000 (which incidentally equates to £1Million in today's money).

Visions of the Future narrated the Lang Nine was unpopular with the membership for the following reasons:

- its distance from the clubhouse (in those days the clubhouse was located in the area where the ride-on buggy shed now stands - the Lang Nine 1st tee was near where the Haughton 3rd green now sits);
- its poor access (originally there was vehicular access to the Lang Nine via West Cults Road but in recent years its use had been discouraged and was eventually banned all together);
- its layout lacked character;
- its greens were of inferior quality to those on the 18 hole course; and
- its length and degree of difficulty.

The document went on to say that as a result the Lang Nine was greatly under-utilised, putting additional pressure on the 18-hole course, that Council had commissioned proposals from two reputable golf course architects and that Hawtree Ltd had been preferred.

At its core the redevelopment plan had three drivers:

1. an improved and longer 18-hole course (under Hawtree's proposal the championship course increased to 6,460 yards from 5,971 yards);
2. a shorter and more 'playable' 9-hole circuit; and
3. both courses starting and finishing at the clubhouse.

The chosen scheme was bold and imaginative and involved radical surgery. The Lang Nine was to be reconfigured into 11 holes (the construction programme envisaged that the whole area would be closed for 18 months) and the last holes 5 holes of the main course were to go all together. The project was to be phased and scheduled for completion in time for the Club's centenary in 2003. Importantly the entire capital expenditure was to be met from the Club's existing funds and in that respect the Council underpinned the proposal with a promise that a levy would not be imposed. At the SGM in July 1995 the members voted 5 - 1 (187 for and 37 against) in favour of the project pursuant to which Council confirmed work would commence in the Spring of 1996.

The historians among us will know that the National Lottery was established in 1994 by John Major's government. The first draw was held in November 1994 and shortly thereafter the Scottish Sports Council, the agency responsible for distributing Lottery funds in Scotland, began making awards. Following the SGM vote the Club's Council made enquiries of the Scottish Sports Council and, having established that the redevelopment expenditure met the relevant criteria, decided to apply for Lottery funding - indeed it felt obliged to do so on behalf of the membership. The upshot was that in November 1995 the Club applied for funding of £300,000.

News of the application caused something of a furore and drew criticism from various quarters both near and far. In its edition on 21 November 1995, the P&J editorial commented that *'the news of Deeside Golf Club begging for a £300,000 lottery handout will set golfing circles abuzz this morning'* and that the *'club can expect even greater ripples outside the game'*. In the same edition an apparently outraged Alex Salmond, then leader of the Scottish National Party, was quoted as saying there were *'more deserving causes than an opulent golf club'*. The Club Captain, when asked for his take on the opprobrium being heaped on the Club, confined himself to *'people will say what they will say and have their own views ...we understand that lottery funding is available for developments such as this so we have applied for it'*.

In February 1996 the Scottish Sports Council awarded the Club a grant of £185,200 - albeit with strings attached - this amount being 50% of the budgeted expenditure in the first 12 months of the project. Criticism of the Club's application for funding was nothing compared to the widespread condemnation from politicians and commentators which then ensued. The award was *'scandalous'* (a spokesman for the City Council) and *'taking money from the poor and giving it to the rich'* (Labour MP, John McAllion). In addition to the Sun headline and article mentioned at the beginning of this piece, the Scottish Daily Express carried a feature in which it asserted that the Club, described as set in an area of *'oil-rich Aberdeen where news of a £1 Million house sale scarcely raises a well-bred eyebrow over the (large) gin and tonics'* was awash with cash. A correspondent to the letters page of the P&J commented he *'was utterly appalled that money be awarded to snotty-nosed Deeside Golf Club'*. Closer to home, a member of the Club wrote to the P&J stating that the award had caused a furore of *'justifiable public concern'* and accused the Scottish Sports Council of *'abusing public trust'*. The Club's response to all of this was stoically matter of fact. The P&J reported the Club Secretary, Alistair MacDonald, as saying that Council had considered the application criteria, had come to the view it met them, had determined it would be failing its duty to members if it passed up the opportunity to obtain funding and so had applied - the fact that the award was made had vindicated that stance.

The strings attached to the award mentioned in the preceding paragraph was a requirement to amend the Club's constitution so there was gender equality - in short membership of the Club was to be equally available to men and women, there was to be equal opportunity irrespective of gender to participate in the Club's affairs and subscription levels (ladies at that time paid a lower fee than men) were to be harmonised. At a SGM in April 1996 a motion to do precisely that was carried unanimously on a show of hands - there was no need for a formal vote. A short time later the lottery funding was paid to the Club. By then the redevelopment works were already underway.

And so ended a remarkable chapter, in terms of exposure to the public gaze at least, of the Club's history. A quarter of a century ago, you knew you'd made it when mentioned in the Evening Express Dod'n'Bunty column. In one such column, on learning of the Club's lottery award, Dod expressed the hope that it *'disna include the twa quid he and Bunty had been spendin' on lottery tickets every wik since it started as he widna wint a' the millionaires of Deeside Golf Club gettin' the benefit o' oor hard-earned money'*.

Fitting, I think, to give the late, much lamented Buff Hardie the final word and allow him to put things firmly into perspective.

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