

Golf

Management Europe

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photo finish at close house

World number one, Lee Westwood, officially opens the new Colt Course and clubhouse at Close House



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Wylie's investment pays off at Close House

When Sage co-founder and entrepreneur Graham Wylie purchased the Close House estate from Newcastle University, he had ambitious plans to transform the estate into a golfing mecca. As **Lee Todd** reports, it appears as if Wylie's £25 million investment has paid off.

■ Upon announcing a £7.5m development at his Close House estate, Graham Wylie said he hoped to turn the north-east into a region that could host top tournaments and attract players from across the world.

Little more than two years later he looked on as world-number-one Lee Westwood teed off on his new Colt course.

Wylie purchased the land originally from Newcastle University in what he refers to as a "thank you" for his education. Since then the man who co-founded the successful Sage accounting software company has spent an amount reported to be around £25m developing an elite venue.

This transformed the estate, creating a 19-bedroom hotel, with 12 luxury rooms soon to be added; state-of-the-art meetings facilities; and the 6,000 yard Filly course. That is not including the latest £7.5m golf development which brought about an impressive clubhouse; a new golf academy and fitting centre; and, of course, the Colt course.

General manager John Glendinning was the second person employed by Wylie when he acquired the property, and has helped oversee the seven-year transformation from day one.

He said: "The transformation has been absolutely fantastic. We started with a golf course that had just been run by Newcastle University.

"They used to close the course on Wednesday and Saturday when the university had rugby and football, because the pitches were right in the middle of the fairways.

"Graham gave me the brief and said 'I want to have a course that is going to be renowned as being one of the top courses in the north-east if not the north of England', so those were our parameters to work towards."

But, as is so often the case, things weren't as simple as initially thought and it would take a lot more than anticipated to get Close House to the desired standard.

"Our initial thoughts have changed over the years," said Glendinning.





“But looking back we’ve probably come up with something better than what we’d imagined.

“Originally we only planned to have one golf course. We were going to redevelop what we had and bought some extra land to extend it.

“After about a year we decided why not get some more land and let’s have two golf courses.

“We thought within the area there was the demand for two golf courses, but two different courses.

“So we’ve now got the original one that’s shorter and good fun and then the new one we’ve just opened is the more ‘championship’ one with bigger fairways, bigger features.

“Building the second course was a big decision and I think our inspiration was really the fact that when we looked at the top 100 golf courses in the UK on a map there’s not one course within the north-east of England.

“We thought ‘wouldn’t it be great if you could create a course that would possibly get into the top 100?’

“I’m not saying ours will, but that was one of our inspirations for the project – to make the course as good as we possibly could and hopefully in the future get some great recognition.”

While Wylie (pictured left) is well known as a racehorse lover and owner, that was not the only inspiration for the new layout’s name.

Glendinning explained: “That came about from Scott Macpherson who was the golf course architect.

“Because we’ve got a grade-two listed building here and a lot of very mature woodland, he thought wouldn’t it be wonderful to build a golf course that would suit the features of an old-fashioned site.

“He looked at golf courses in the past that have fitted in with this kind of property and what sprang to mind was Harry Colt who in the 30s had quite often built courses at old properties like this.

“Scott suggested we use some of the features Colt incorporated into courses. One of the big things was obviously that back then they didn’t have the machinery to move a lot of land so they used natural features to build the courses. We’ve got quite undulating land here so Scott designed the course around incorporating all of those features into it.

“He spent 18 months researching Harry Colt courses and that can be seen in a lot of the bunker and green designs and the strategy of the holes.”

And the culmination of all that work was when Westwood arrived by helicopter to play in the official opening of the new course in May.

While he undoubtedly stole the show, the world number one was not the only famous face on show with Alan Shearer, Ant and Dec and Tony McCoy among the star-studded line up.

The high-profile event raised £135,000 for the Children’s Heart Unit Fund (CHUF), at Newcastle’s Freeman Hospital, which benefits youngsters from across the region and is a cause very close to Wylie after the unit treated one of his daughters when she was just two days old.

Westwood – who played alongside Shearer, club captain and non-executive director of Close House David Fulton and a golfer who donated £10,000 to charity to complete the fourball – was suitably impressed with the new course.

He told club officials he particularly liked the need to think your way round the course and how that keeps the experience interesting. He added: “It is very well set up indeed for a members’ club and

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with a lot of possibilities if they want to play big events. All the facilities were top-drawer."

Westwood also opened the new clubhouse, an attractive modern building which provides a new home for Close House's deliberately limited membership.

To keep an exclusive air there are only 300 memberships to the Colt course, 240 of which have already been sold, while the Filly's 400 slots are all allocated.

Despite the £1,000 joining fee on top of a £2,400 annual subscription Glendinning is confident finding the last 60 members will not be a problem.

He said: "We're getting more and more members in each day – especially with all the publicity we've had around the opening. I wouldn't be surprised if it was full in the next few weeks."

"We were up to 160 members for the new course in January or February, months before we'd even opened."

And he attributes those early sales to the presence of the exemplary academy facilities which opened last August.

"The academy has definitely helped to boost our membership," added Glendinning.

"It was the first thing we opened and it was our chance to show the standard of the facilities that were coming."

"I think that was such a high standard that people immediately thought this is so good that if the course and the clubhouse are a similar standard then it's going to be a place worth joining."

And in similar style to Macpherson's research into Colt, Glendinning and his colleagues visited top golf facilities around the UK in order to work out exactly what they wanted.

He said: "We saw a gap in the market in the north-east in that there wasn't anyone providing the first-class facilities that are elsewhere in the country. We wanted to build that."

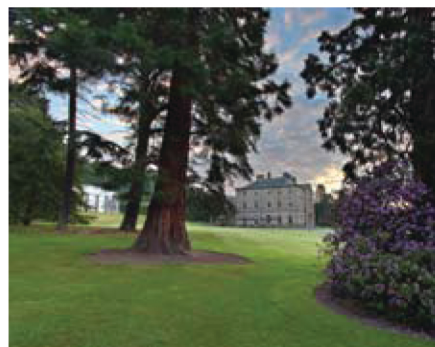
And that seems to have been achieved, with Glendinning reporting entirely positive feedback for a facility featuring a state-of-the-art custom-fitting centre for Taylormade, Titleist, Callaway and Ping alongside full facilities for tuition.

With the new course in place you might think those at Close House would pause for breath, but Glendinning refuses to rest on his laurels. He said: "We're definitely planning on further investment and obviously want to continue to improve the golf facilities. We're already looking at ways we can improve the original golf course going forward."

When asked about any major events that might lie in the venue's future he added coyly: "We haven't set our sights on anything in particular."

"The R&A have been down to look at hosting some amateur events in years to come which would be fantastic. But all we wanted to do was to make sure that if the right tournament came along we would be able to host it."

Maybe Westwood's next visit will be more business than pleasure. **GME**



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Lee Westwood opens new Colt Course at Close House

"To welcome world number one golfer Lee Westwood to the Colt Course at Close House Hotel is just about as good as it gets" said Graham Wylie, developer and owner of the Northumberland resort.

scape, 100 year old trees and vegetation giving the course a feeling that it has always been there.

The proximity to Newcastle International airport and the views across the Tyne Valley to the Angel of the North on



"What makes the new course so special is that it has been designed as an 'old English' course"

With over £12 million invested into the course, clubhouse and golf academy, along with a further 12 individually designed suites in the stable block; the facilities are widely believed to be on a par with Gleneagles and Wentworth.

The course is both challenging and beautiful with each hole carefully crafted and thought out by renowned International golf course designer Scott McPherson, who took great care to construct the course around the existing land-

a clear day make this a very special venue indeed.

General manager John Glendinning, who has worked with Graham Wylie since he purchased the venue from Newcastle University said: "What makes the new course so special is that it has been designed as an 'old English' course, which fits in with the style of the property."

"Rather than looking like a new course, it looks like it has always been here and it is only eight miles from the city centre."

Commenting before the opening, Westwood said: "There are some favourable comments floating around the European Tour about this new course at Close House."

"Some of the guys know those Senior Tour pros who were asked to look over it last year and I'm looking forward to playing it and seeing what it is like for myself."

Close House has also opened a new golf academy and driving range, and the 18th century hotel has been refurbished. **GME**

on the cover

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