



FEATURE
MARTIN DAVIDSON
NZPA Golf Writer

Scott Macpherson and the latest project for the company he shares with Greg Turner is the remake of Royal Wellington Golf Club.

ALL PHOTOS DAVID LEGGOTT



Royal Wellington Golf Club
Master Plan
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ROYAL FACELIFT IN SAFE HANDS

So, here we are in the salubrious surrounds of the tastefully refined, rimu panelled clubhouse bar at Royal Wellington Golf Club, Heretaunga, Upper Hutt. As scene setters go, this ain't half bad.

Simply gaining entry is a journey in itself because an exhaustively researched survey of nomadic drinkers has revealed it to be among the top three clubhouse bars in the country that any golfer has had the pleasure to stumble out of.

So it comes as no surprise when the club's dress code requires your slovenly travelling correspondent to dispense with his denims at, it must be said, the behest of Lisa Scott - wife, confidante and allround superior of Shane, the club's director of golf - who shows she is much, much more than a very pretty face.

She is behind the counter in the pro shop and it is Mrs Scott's idea for the Levis to be temporarily replaced with a smart pair of Oakley trousers plucked straight off the sales rack.

Only then can New Zealand Golf Magazine's casual representative - with his Masters green visor removed out of respect for the stately venue - even think about entering the clubhouse.

It is crucial that he does so, to fulfill a demanding editor's latest assignment brief: to meet and ever so gently interrogate Scott Macpherson, an extraordinary man with an extraordinary tale to share.

It is entirely appropriate that the two strangers enjoy a light lunch and coke at Royal Wellington because the storied club will be Macpherson's home away from home for much of the next three years.

It is into his hands, and those of his course design business partner Greg Turner, that Royal Wellington members have entrusted a \$7 million redevelopment project to drag the grand old dame of New Zealand golf into the new millennium.

It is a bold move in these recessionary times but club members can rest assured that they have chosen wisely in throwing their lot in with Turner and Macpherson.

While the former is well known due to his past career as a successful and talkative touring professional, Macpherson's background is not so well appreciated among a wider audience.

Well, it damned well should be, so here goes. And following one rule of common sense which says the quickest way to the finish is to start at the start, then that is where we will begin.

Born in Lower Hutt close to 40 years ago a young Macpherson played his golf at Waikanae then Paraparaumu Beach, the latter this country's premier links course and one which ultimately left an indelible imprint on the mind of an impressionable teenager.

It was the mid-1980s when an annual junior sub at Paraparaumu cost all of \$60 and by the early 1990s he had not had to part with a fortune as he developed sufficiently as a player to represent his club at Duncan Cup level.

During this period, when he was all of 15 or 16, Macpherson chanced upon a revelation which was to consume his life.

"I was quite interested in art and I was quite interested in horticulture and golf, and I thought someone must be designing golf courses."

Macpherson naturally raised his career choice with a careers advisor at his secondary school. ▶



“He said that ‘nobody does that, don’t do that’. It was a bit like waving a red rag to a bull.”

A horticultural degree followed at Massey University, during which time Macpherson went out of his way to introduce himself to the good folk at the New Zealand Turf Institute, even attending conferences and writing articles for the organisation’s magazine.

His passion for his chosen craft was already evident and in 1991 Macpherson won an academic scholarship to study landscape architecture at UC Davis in Sacramento, California.

A four or five handicapper at the time, he played second division college golf, enabling him to travel and play a variety of courses, all the while storing away for future reference anything out of the ordinary that caught his eye.

He then completed the latter stages of his degree back at Massey and graduated at the age of 22 as a Bachelor of Horticultural Technology with Honours in Landscape Architecture.

As graduates find to this day, work in his specialist field did not present itself to Macpherson, who instead idled away a couple of years working as a DJ for a commercial radio station.

But after two years of this he grew impatient and took himself off to Melbourne to watch the Australian Open where, as chance would have it, a friend introduced him to the legendary Peter Thomson.

Next thing you know and Thomson took Macpherson on as an architect in his own golf course design business and some time later the New Zealander found himself working out of the company’s satellite office in Kuala Lumpur.

“We had seven or eight courses on the go in Malaysia but in 1997-98 there was a coup and because I was one of the last on they sat me

down and asked whether I had any plans?”

Of course he did. He had Scottish grandparents, had visited St Andrews in 1988, and knew if he wanted to continue his education he had to return to the famous seaside course and visit other links layouts on that rich strip of land on the east coast of Scotland.

Thomson kindly wrote him a letter of introduction which in time was duly handed over to Michael Bonallack (now Sir Michael), then secretary of the R & A.

Before setting foot back in Britain, Macpherson took a detour through the US on a personal fact finding mission.

He flew to California, bought a 1967 VW Combi Van and spent 10 weeks driving around America and visiting some of the most influential golf courses, including PGA West, TPC Scotsdale, Pinehurst, Riviera, Kiawah Island, Colliers Reserve and Pine Valley. He had a scare at Pinehurst when he was held up at gun point while asleep in the van outside the resort.

But all roads were leading to St Andrews and when Macpherson eventually arrived he bunked down on the floor of a house of a New Zealand friend for a week before phoning Bonallack to set a time for them to meet so he could pass on Thomson’s letter.

“I borrowed a jacket and tie, and walk in and he takes me into the bar where we are looking at the Open Championship Trophy and these cabinets full of ammazzing history ... Tom Morris’ hickory shaft, Allan Robertson’s ball that he made in 1850 ... my eyes were glazing over.”

While Macpherson was trying to take everything in, Bonallack politely inquired about his plans. “I told him I wanted to get back into golf course design and that I would spend that summer in the UK and travel.”

As chance would have it, Bonallack was aware



of a new 36-hole development planned at St Andrews Bay, 2km southeast from the Old Course itself. There just so happened to be a meeting in the town hall to discuss the project that very same night.

“But he told me I couldn’t go because it was a closed meeting. Gene Sarazen was going to be there. Then he said, ‘I think I can get you an invite’.

“So there was the course owner Don Panoz, Gene Sarazen, architect Denis Griffiths and half a dozen others, the planners and me. I became friendly with the architect and I told him I’d be more than willing to help. He took my email address and it took a year to get all the planning through. But I’d decided to stay anyway because it was too big an opportunity.”

To pass the time, Macpherson kept himself busy ▶

TURNER ON MACPHERSON

"He brings an artistic flair to the business, a "three dimensional sculptural flair".

"It is a sculptor's skills rather than an academic skill. A golf course is never going to be any good if it doesn't meet the strategic requirements for golf to be interesting but it's never going to be great unless it sits seamlessly in the landscape as well. To do that you need that third dimensional skill.

"That is something that is a real strength of Scott's. Most of us can imagine a green or a fairway sitting in an existing landscape. It's a large step forward to be able to imagine that when it doesn't exist. To imagine how that form will work, to understand the scale of the form, the way the land pitches, the way the forms run together which will create a seamless environment.

"That is the skill of the sculptor. They take a block of stone and in their mind's eye they can see something completely different."



caddying on the Old Course, earning some loose change and working a bar job at night to pay the bills.

"The caddying turned out to be a real boon in the long run because I ended up doing 365 rounds in the year. I'd do two a day and sometimes three, and there was always a day off to play golf.

"I was just immersed in golf and got to know the Old Course, which is the centre point for what has happened in the golf design industry. It was the pebble dropped in the lake and we feed off the ripples."

Macpherson grew to love the course and this led him to write a book. Now, take a deep breath, because its title is *St Andrews: The Evolution of the Old Course. The Impact on Golf of Time, Tradition and Technology*.

It took four years of painstaking research as he uncovered the data proving how the length of the course had changed down the years, when the changes were made and why they were made.

It was mildly controversial because the Scots had always bragged about the Old Course being very much as it was in the mid to late 1800s when Old Tom Morris became the first greenkeeper in the world to design reverse saucer-shaped greens, which he even watered!

It was the late 1990s when Macpherson was still buried in the past that he first crossed paths with Greg Turner, in town because the Dunhill Cup teams events was then still an annual staple at St Andrews.

The New Zealand line-up in those days was fairly predictable. There'd be Frank Nobilo, Simon Owen and Greg Turner, and if there were changes then Grant Waite or Michael Campbell would be those to appear.

"Greg even then was quite interested in design

work but at that stage he was at a very early part of his learning curve. But we had a great time and he was a great conversationalist."

By now Macpherson was an on-site architect for the Fairmont St Andrews development at St Andrews Bay, which incorporated two courses, a clubhouse overlooking the sea and a 217-room hotel.

He stayed there for four years then relocated to the Atlanta, Georgia, offices of Griffiths where another three years passed before he became engaged to a Scottish lass. At this juncture Macpherson flagged his return to Britain to his then employer, and although he parted ways with Griffiths in a business sense the two remain close friends to this day.

Now, fast forward to the present and Macpherson is trying to explain to an imbecile what his vision is for Royal Wellington.

For he is certainly a man of vision, one whose imagination is encouraged to wander as he takes in all the conceptual possibilities a piece of land offers.

He describes himself as a naturally curious person, one forever seeking answers to the myriad questions which pop into his head.

Often, there is so much going on up top that he is known to forget the little things, like where he put his car keys, or where he left the clipboard with precise details of the first new hole being developed at Royal Wellington, a 190m crosswind par-three.

"If we have been hired here as architects then we have a responsibility to know what we do. We are not learning on their dollar. I have to do that in my own time, or it's been done previously as a junior at other companies.

"That doesn't mean you stop learning, it just means there is a lot of background work done



prior to us coming here.

"We walk a very fine line. On one hand we are sculpturing and there is a very strong art component. Every single hole that we build has to be aesthetically pleasing, it has to be beautiful. Regardless of their playing merits ... every hole has to look great."

The other, more functional aspects of his craft concern engineering, hydrology, agronomics and planning.

"You are constantly wearing these different hats, and it is challenging."

The next three years are full of possibilities for the fine members of Royal Wellington. They, and others, can hardly wait to see what Macpherson and Turner come up with. ✕