

St Andrews Citizen, Friday 4th April 2008, Letters to the Editor

Dialogue Required

Sir

As a surviving member of that St Andrews Burgh Council which, in 1974, had the foresight successfully to argue for the creation of the Links Act, it is with some dismay that I have read the correspondence in the local press provoked by the recently announced season ticket tariffs for 2008. Without access to the actual sums involved, the merit or otherwise of the new rates cannot be judged.

On the other hand the trustees, among whom are local residents and local club members, have patently been persuaded by the Trust management that they are appropriate and warranted.

To an impartial non-resident, on a comparative basis the new scale of charges, for what they offer, will doubtless look like good value.

From what I see and hear the Links themselves are in good shape and the off course facilities are well run – so where lies the problem, because one can only conclude from the tone of much of the correspondence that a problem exists?

In trying to identify the problem let us not forget the 600-year-old relationship which the town's civic leaders, its residents and, in due course, all its golf clubs have shared with "their" Links, and I mean "their" Links. For those unfamiliar with the history I commend my old friend the late Tom Jarrett's account in 'St Andrews Golf Links – The First 600 Years' and refer specifically to his chapter on the 1974 Act, "... While the 'Fight For Fife' was going on the people of St Andrews – with the power and influence of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club behind them – had fought to hold on to the Links ..."

Hence came the 1974 Act and the birth of the trust as the management vehicle for the Links, thus ensuring, from the sponsors' perspective, that the Links would stay, albeit indirectly, under the control of the citizens of the town.

Over the years there has been an erosion of residents' rights, starting with the loss of free golf under the 1946 Act through to the progressive reduction in local access to the Old Course.

This may well be explained away as an inevitable consequence of the costs involved in maintaining golf courses to present day standards and the growing worldwide recognition of St Andrews and The Old as a golfing mecca.

For sure we are happy to share our Links with the world at large as prescribed in the 1974 Act "... the trustees shall hold and maintain the Links as a public park and place of public resort and recreation for the residents of the town of St Andrews and others resorting thereto ..."

The residents, however, now need some convincing that the trustees are not paying more heed to the "others" and the revenue they generate than to the "residents".

It seems to me that although the Trust management are running a multi-million pound sterling golf resort and, on the face of it, doing it well, they see themselves as, and conduct their affairs as if they are, a PLC and not a trust accountable first and foremost to the local community whom they were set up to serve.

I conclude, therefore, that although there are elements in the fee structure which merit reconsideration, the problem lies not in the 2008 season ticket price increase per se, but in the failure of the Trust and its management to recognise any obligation to communicate on their significant strategic objectives with the local golfing community.

The local golf clubs, some 25 years ago, responding to an initiative of the then captain of the R&A, set up the forerunner of today's Inter Club Liaison Committee (ICLC) for the purpose of exchanging views and collectively communicating with the Trust, so a ready made forum exists.

In conducting a constructive dialogue, the Trust would not be conceding any of their unquestioned right to manage their own affairs as they judge best, but they might just do it more harmoniously than has recently been evidenced in your columns. Ironically, as recently as 1998, it was the ICLC, in responding to the newly-created Fife Council consultation paper on the subject, that provided the defining support for the continuance of the Trust.

In conclusion, with this letter I am aiming to meet any lingering obligation I may have towards trying to ensure that the structure I helped to create all those years ago properly fulfils its purpose.

Yours, etc.,

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