

FRANK DONLON, GROUNDSMAN, MALAHIDE CRICKET CLUB SINCE 1961

“Guess where I was last night?”

“Where?”

“At Frank’s 80th birthday party. In Gibneys Back Lounge. It was a surprise party from his family” says Phil Frost, Head Groundsman in Malahide CC

“Is Frank still helping you out on the ground?” I ask.

“A few times a week. He cuts the grass banks on the main pitch, marks the second ground and various other bits and bobs around the place.”

BG Frank, when did you start as groundsman in Malahide Cricket Club?

FD Around 1961. The Cricket Club approached Joe Craddock in Malahide Golf Club and asked would I be interested in giving John Neville a dig out. John was doing the ground, the wickets and the bar in the Cricket Club. AB Robertson and Lewie Hughes from the Cricket were probably involved as they were also members of the Golf Club. I was working as a greenkeeper in the Golf Club at the time.

BG And have you been groundsman in the Cricket since 1961 to this day?

FD Yes, no interruptions. The thing is I loved what I was doing. I got great enjoyment out of it.

BG What was your routine like?

FD In the early days I would work a full day in the old Malahide Golf Club from 8am to 5pm and then maybe three evenings a week would go to the Cricket and do a couple of hours on the wickets and the ground. When John Neville packed it in a couple of years later I took over as groundsman. Later on I started at 7am and then 6am in the Golf Club and then would head down to the Cricket in the early afternoon.

BG What did a groundsman do in the 1960’s?

FD Brushing, scarifying and cutting the wickets. There were only two or maybe three men’s teams, a schoolboy side and no ladies. And back then they only played on Saturdays with little or no games on Sundays. Overall there was less cricket than there is nowadays. And the ground was smaller but it used to take me about three hours to cut with a Ransome mower which was only three foot wide. I didn’t roll the wickets then. The players and anyone else who was around would do the rolling after practice on a Tuesday and Thursday evening with the big concrete roller. It’s still over by the Gate Lodge in the corner of the ground. You would need at least a dozen lads to push it. Everyone gave a dig out!

BG Did you have any experience of preparing wickets when you started?

FD No but John Neville guided me in the beginning and then I learnt as I went along.

BG Obviously, greens and wickets are the opposites. On one you want the ball to roll smoothly along the ground and on the other you need bounce. How did you deal with that?

FD Yeah it was no problem really, the golfers want greens to be a little soft to hold the ball up whereas wickets need bounce and carry. The amount of rolling was a major difference.

BG Malahide Ladies Hockey Club played on the far side of the ground until the early 1980’s. Was the ground cut up in any way, say after their season finished?

FD No not really. They marked out their own pitch. And to be honest they left very little trace on the ground. Tennis was also played on grass courts on the Castle Drive side of the ground during the summers up to the mid 1960’s. Mrs Hodges used to run the club. The tennis was played on

Sundays and midweek when there was little or no cricket. As the cricket expanded the tennis was phased out.

BG There have always been strong connections between Malahide Golf and Cricket Clubs.

FD Yes. So for example, in March every year I would bring the tractor and gang mowers down from the Golf Club and give the cricket ground a first cut. The Golf and Cricket were very close with many members common to both clubs.



BG What about climate change? Have you noticed any differences over the years?

FD Helluva change. You wouldn't have watered the wickets as much as you do now. It has totally changed. Big time. The winters were harsher. Whenever there was rain you would have icicles hanging down from branches, gutters. Wherever there was a drip of water. It was that cold at night in winter. And you could get two foot icicles hanging down from the trees. You don't get that now. Also now you could be cutting the ground up until December whereas years ago I would stop cutting the outfield in September or maybe early October.

BG Water and water pressure was always an issue. How did you get around this?

FD At the beginning of a week we used to fill two drum barrels full with water at either end of the wicket and slowly tip them on to the playing area. This would allow time for drying and rolling. Today, in the new ground we have a water tank down by the practice wickets with a pipe connection close to the square which gives a good consistent watering system. However, the dry spells can still cause problems.

BG Down through the years did you get help on the ground as the amount of cricket expanded.

FD Yes at different times Dougie Goodwin, Joe Caprani, Gerry O'Brien and Alan Hughes all would have been involved and assisted in wicket preparation.

BG What about wicket covers?

FD The first cover was in the 1970's when a single green tarpaulin was used to cover one wicket. Then we got the big, heavy corrugated covers. There were four separate covers, with solid wheels! I couldn't push them myself from the boundary to the square so I developed a system where I joined the four covers together. Then I connected a metal bar onto the back of the ride on mower which hooked onto the train of covers and drove them out to the square. Then I was able to manoeuvre them onto the wicket myself.

BG Apart from the incredible service you have given Malahide Cricket Club I reckon that you have saved the cricket thousands of money with your ability to repair machines and improvise when the easy solution would have been to discard the old and simply buy a new, very expensive piece of ground machinery. I remember there was an old wreck of a mower down by the Gate Lodge which you used to plunder for parts from time to time to magically revive an ailing mower.

FD Well you had no choice but to patch things up when you only had one mower or roller and a green or a wicket to prepare for the following day. I remember one time when the steering broke on the old yellow two-ton diesel roller in the cricket. I bolted a steel bar onto the back and steered while walking behind the roller. And then walked backwards to the other end of the wicket. I think some were amused by this but it was the only way to roll the wicket!

BG You have the unique distinction of being groundsman on the three different grounds of Malahide Cricket Club as it evolved from the original small ground bordered by the ditch on the Castle side, to the extended ground in 1981 with a new square bordered by a stone wall again on the Castle side to the completely re-laid international ground developed in 2011/12. How has that been for you?

FD Well I suppose the main difference from my point of view is that the ground has got bigger each time and there is more grass to cut. But machinery has improved which makes all the difference.

BG The first wave of internationals in the ground began in 1984 with Ireland versus Wales. How did that go for you?

FD Yeah it went well. Everyone seemed happy with the ground and the wickets. Then the English counties played Ireland. Yorkshire including Geoff Boycott (1986) followed by Sussex, Worcestershire and Middlesex.

BG Head groundsman Phil Frost came on board in 2012 having been in charge of the county ground in Taunton, Somerset for many years. You seem to be a good team.

FD Ah yeah, the best thing, absolutely brilliant, absolutely. Frosty, you couldn't find fault with the man. Brilliant to work with.

BG I am reliably informed that you keep Phil in spuds and vegetables and home made jams!

BG And then the second wave of internationals on the new International ground. The first match against England in 2013 with 10,000 spectators. And then the first Test Match v Pakistan in 2018. And then India, South Africa, Sri Lanka and New Zealand. How has all that been for you?

FD All brilliant.

BG Do you enjoy the big games?

FD Absolutely. Definitely.

BG On the Golf front, when did you start as greenkeeper in Malahide Golf Club and when did you retire.

FD I began about 1958 and retired in 2008. So 50 years in total. The old Malahide Golf Club was a 9 hole course. It produced a lot of great golfers, the Craddocks, Paddy Caul, Philip Walton.

When the new Golf Club moved to Beechwood, Malahide in 1990 which is a 27 hole course, I stayed as greenkeeper with the old course which remained as a public course until 1998. When the builders moved in onto the old course, I moved up to Beechwood until I retired in 2008. So I was 10 years in the new course.

BG You were a good golfer yourself. There are plenty of Frank Donlon press cuttings winning trophies for the Island Golf Club. You won the Leinster Alliance Pro Am in 1976 and again in 1983 with team members Shay Rogers and Brendan Mooney. What was your handicap?

FD My lowest was 3 handicap. I play off 17 now! I still play every Sunday morning in the Island.

BG How did you get into the golf?

FD A group of us young lads used to play the top holes in the old Malahide Golf Club when nobody was about. You couldn't play the 8th, 9th and 1st holes because they were too near the clubhouse and you'd be caught! After that I played as an Artisan Golfer on Sunday mornings on the old course. I played with the likes of Tom, Joe, Mick and Paddy Craddock, Paddy Caul and then later Philip Walton. You couldn't but learn when you played with those guys. Eventually, I moved over to the Island around 1970 where I play to this day.

BG Your brothers also were greenkeepers and cricket groundsmen.

FD Yes, Eddie was groundsman and greenkeeper in Rush and Jimmy was groundsman in Trinity College.

BG Did you ever have any dealings with Lord Talbot of Malahide Castle?

FD Well my father worked in the Castle. My main memory was that in the first week in January every year Lord Talbot would give a party for all the staff and their families in the Castle itself. There was even a late Santy. I was a child then and remember they were great fun.

BG Any thoughts about taking a back seat on the ground?

FD I will go when Frosty goes and providing my health is ok.

BG Thanks Frank

FD Thanks Gilly

Brian Gilmore

Based on conversation with Frank on 13th August 2022 in front of the Clubhouse on a beautiful Saturday morning. Phil Frost was putting the final touches to the wicket before the firsts played YMCA in the afternoon.