



## Vale Royal Abbey Golf Club

### Annual General Meeting

### Minutes – Friday 4<sup>th</sup> April

<b>Date:</b>	Friday 4 <sup>th</sup> April 2025	<b>Venue:</b>	The Great Hall
<b>Chair:</b>	Ian Embury, General Manager	<b>Minutes:</b>	Stuart Wilson, Club Secretary

#### 1. Present

A total of 32 members were present – list available on request.

#### 2. Notice of Meeting

The General Manager requested the Notice of the Meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2025 to be taken as read, and this was duly accepted by those present.

#### 3. Apologies

Apologies were received in advance from the following:

Richard & Judy Moss, Franky MacIver, Andrew & Joan Threlkeld, Steve & Judi Hewitt, John D’Arcy, Trudy Roden, Peter Goddard, Stuart & Elspeth Forbes.

#### 4. Charitable Presentation to St Lukes Hospice

Outgoing Captains Mark and Jane Haynes presented the sum total of their charitable work as Captains in the form of a donation of £6,178 to St Lukes Hospice.



## 5. President's Financial Update

Our audit firm, Azets, signed-off their review of the 2024 accounts last week and I'm pleased to report that we made a surplus, for only the 6th time in the last 20 or so years, of approximately £90,000, which you may recall is very similar to the surplus in 2023. We still have a long way to recover significant losses overall, due to investment in earlier years of over £100,000 per year since we became owners in 2003. The losses still amount to well over £1M.

However, I'm pleased to say that VRA business has been at least break-even since 2020 and the Covid outbreak, which as I'm sure you realise is not a coincidence! While golf is still "booming", thank God, the function business is still tough, but necessary to balance the books.

Recent surpluses have facilitated further capital investment in the Clubhouse of circa £75,000 during 2024, including:

1. The long-awaited redevelopment of the Spike Bar, now renamed the Abbey Bar.
2. Re-development of the Armoury Bar area.
3. Further repair and painting of the windows to the front of the property.
4. Wi-Fi upgrade throughout the building.

We have also continued investment in the Course (our key asset) and the machinery required to maintain it. You might be interested to know that we have added approximately £100,000 worth of greens equipment to our fleet over the last twelve months.

Looking forward, the surplus generated in 2024 will go to help support ongoing capital investment during 2025. We still have a number of projects to progress in 2025, in particular:

1. Improved Halfway House vending.
2. Repair and painting of the windows to the rear of the building.
3. Lift refurbishment or replacement.
4. Replacement of all the tee-post, tee-markers and flags, in line with the new tee colour scheme.
5. Further Course and equipment improvements.

Over the last five years, since Covid, we have experienced very good Member retention and excellent recruitment, such that this year (earlier than ever) we have already closed the Full Membership for men, at the current maximum of 350 Members. As you will be aware, this is in an attempt to ease the pressure on Saturday tee-times.

In closing, I would like to thank you all for ongoing and loyal support and wish you all the very best for a good 2025 season of golf, on what we believe to be one of the best Courses in Cheshire.



## 6. Sub-Committee Annual Reports

### 6.1 Handicaps & Competitions – Tony Dullaghan

Competitive golf continues to thrive at Vale Royal with Sunday evenings at 7.00pm continuing to be a time of acute stress and frustration to members as they try to book into the forthcoming competitions on BRS. We are very aware of the initial excess demand for competition tees, and we do monitor tee availability weekly.

The BRS waiting list on the whole worked well in 2024, but the early signs for 2025 are that the demand for tees has grown once again. Over the coming weeks we will approach our peak tee availability and hopefully that will alleviate some of the issues.

During the past year there were 101 competitions finalised by the Gents Committee and due to some exceptional weather, and a course that drains well, we only lost 4 competitions throughout the year. As a consequence of that, the amount of golf played at the Club rose again. There were 5,800 gents handicap qualifying competition rounds played, up from 4,200 in 23/24. In addition, 2,400 general play scores were returned, up from 2,000 in 23/24. One member even managed to find the time to post a remarkable 108 general play scores.

Gents' competition entry fees totalled £25,000 in 24/25 - a 15% increase on 23/24. To put that number in context, and to show the growth in competitive golf at VRA post-Covid, entry fees in the 19/20 season totalled just £14,000. The 25/26 season once again sees over 100 Gents competitions scheduled in the diary with a mix of Saturday Competitions, Sunday Medals and midweek fixtures seeing us through the main body of the season.

In addition, we are running three Board Major knockout competitions, we have entered four teams in the Manchester and District Knock Outs of which unfortunately only one team has made it through to the second round. We did enter a pair in the Daily Mail foursomes knock out who lost their first-round tie. Finally, we have entered our qualifiers into the England Golf Race to Woodhall Spa qualifiers at Stockport in June.

England Golf have been remarkably quiet with updates to WHS this year, but I think most of the changes they made last year have worked well with the inclusion of exceptional 4BBB scores being particularly welcome. Looking to the future, Ireland Golf is currently trialling adjusting percentage calculations in competitions to calculate playing handicaps and this may be rolled out by EG next year. In general terms the belief is that lower percentages will be used than the current 95% in singles and 85% in 4 ball better ball, in order to make playing handicaps more equitable.

As part of our responsibilities under the Rules of Handicapping, we undertook the annual handicap review process in March. In total three players were considered by the Committee. After reviewing their scoring patterns and taking into account their observed play, all three players received a handicap reduction ranging from 2 to 3 shots.

Unfortunately, we saw a marked increase in General Play score discrepancies last year. Rounds were commenced after sunset, they were apparently completed in a remarkable 2 hours on a Sunday, members played without a marker and then had their score attested and



one member submitted scores at courses that were closed during the extended period of snow in November.

We have taken decisive action following these issues and have suspended the handicaps of three members for terms of up to 6 months. Other Clubs are also reporting a similar pattern, and we currently have two issues being reviewed involving Vale Royal members that have been highlighted by the Handicap Secretaries at local Clubs.

I would like to thank all the members of the H&C Committee who give up their time freely to attend meetings and close the numerous competitions we run on behalf of the members. The current members are: Mr Captain, John Bebbington, Phil Bettley, Paul Tooze, Will Igoe and Wayne Pearce. In addition, I would like to thank Andrew Threlkeld for his continued support.

I would also like to thank the Club for the recent email confirming that our Honours Boards will return to the walls of the Club so that members may look back in pride, and occasionally bore their playing partners, as they recall their past achievements.

Finally, I would like to personally thank Mark and Jane for all their words of wisdom, their constant support and encouragement over the last two years. Enjoy the break!

## **6.2 Ladies Section – Jane Haynes on behalf of Franky MacIver**

It has been a pleasure to chair the Ladies Section during 2024, and I would like to thank the Committee Members who have managed handicap, competition, finance, social and secretarial duties and organised inter-club matches. Our current section is made of 63 ladies holding a playing handicap (around a 12% increase), showing a yearly growth since pre-lockdown. New members always compliment us about how easy it is for them to settle in, as they feel so welcome.

### **Finance:**

Despite the continuing rising costs, our funds are healthy. As always, the various away days and Invitation days were subsidised by our section. Although the cost for individual memento Annual trophies has increased this year, as well as new banking charges, all were counterbalanced by an increase in competition fees due to having more members. Our competition fees also fund entries for various inter-club matches, flowers and sundries in the locker room, and the weekly competition winners. Thank you Treasurer, Maddie Kubiak for a great job.

### **Competitions:**

May I thank Tony Dullaghan, who has made easy and straightforward the interlock with the Gents Competitions on Saturdays. It can sometimes be “challenging” but there is always a solution. As our Section is expanding, putting more demands on our Committee members, Debra Locke has been recruited onto the Committee and is now assisting Wendy Dullaghan and Sue Wiseman with closing our competitions. This has been necessary to help Wendy with a job that has been too time consuming for just one person. As always Wendy did an



excellent job in providing a selection of competitions during the year, her task not helped by poor weather. Thank you Wendy, for your hard work and dedication.

Amanda Roberts is our current Club Champion; Sharon Wilson won the Handicap Trophy and Gill McKenzie was the winner of the Masters.

As you are all aware, the club did a great job in refurbishing the Spike bar. I remembered when I first stepped in, it was just wow, until I realised that something was missing - no competition boards on the wall. I remember my first win; I couldn't wait to see my name (hopefully correctly spelled). A mixture of pride and joy. I know VRA is a private club and members have little say in any decisions but I don't know what is worse - a digital board (I'll probably feel asleep by the time I catch my name) or not see my name if none of the boards competitions I won are deemed, I quote, less prestigious.

### **Handicap:**

The annual handicap was carried out in December 2024. As in previous years, there were no manual adjustments to be made. At Vale Royal there are at least 30 individual ladies' qualifying competitions on offer during the March to October qualifying season. It is pleasing to note that many of our ladies have a healthy number of competition rounds in their scoring history, and are taking advantage of the many opportunities on offer to play competitive golf. When representing the club at Shield matches, or other inter-club events, it is important that the veracity of our handicaps is not in question. The post came up for re-election: Sue Wiseman to continue (unopposed).

### **Social:**

An Exchange Day took place at Curzon Park and Lady Captain took us to Bromborough for her away day. Our yearly invitation to the Seniors was well attended despite having a few gents trying to turn left after playing the 8th hole! Ladies invitations to outside VRA members were a huge success. As always Dave, bar manager, his staff and Vicky looked after us. Our thanks to Sue Goddard and Jackie Quinn for the organisation.

### **Interclub matches:**

We now have two Ladies Shield teams. We might be a small section compared to more established clubs, but we do have a strong core of good players. We are very grateful to Mr President and the Club who subsidised our new kit, a vibrant blue. It was very noticeable when we were hosting the Shield Finals at our Club, unfortunately without any of our teams playing in it. Amanda Roberts will now look after the A team as Sue Wiseman stepped down. Sue Helm will continue to run the B team and Maddie Kubiak the Business Shield.

Finally, on behalf of the Ladies Section I would like to thank Jane Haynes, the retiring Lady Captain. You did it! 24 months of hard work and dedication. You can now enjoy stress free golf, with a new driver... maybe! Lady Captain: what can I say? When first asked, you were more a 'no' than a 'yes' but we made you an offer you could not refuse, playing away ... with your husband. We are so glad you accepted the position. You certainly did a great job. Challenges never fazed you, and you had quite a few. You were thoughtful and always present when needed.

I lost a Captain but gained two friends, you and Mark. Thank you.



### 6.3 Greens Committee – Chris Wells

I hope you will all agree that communication from the Course Manager and the Greens Committee this past year, has been regular and informative, so this report highlights the main focus items and achievements.

Firstly, I would like to thank Justin Lee, our Course Manager, and his team. We have a full complement of six members, including Justin, and they have again maintained our course to a very high standard all year. Achieving this, and the many pieces of additional work they have completed, was no mean feat with the weather playing a significant role in determining work priorities. Very often this past year, work planned had to be postponed due to heavy rainfall and high winds, and this wasn't just during the winter months. We had turbulent, wet weather in the summer too - it was a difficult year.

As well as the day-to-day work, which I could talk about at length and add at least an extra 10 minutes to this report, we have achieved the following additional projects:

- We have made changes to 6 bunkers, making them smaller and more manageable without taking away the challenge of the course. We intend to continue reviewing possible changes to bunkers, therefore a second phase plan is currently being developed. This will cover changes to a further 8 or so bunkers and we will share this plan with the membership in the near future.
- A comprehensive winter course protection plan was created; the main success of which was the introduction of mat zones in vulnerable areas. The use of winter mats in these zones proved to be very effective, reducing the number of divots significantly and this has allowed the course to recover more easily and quickly.
- Drainage work - particularly the 13th and 14th fairways has taken place, however, this and other drainage work is always ongoing as, when one problem is solved, others surface due to root growth, soil invasion etc., unblocking the drains.
- Many paths, which were improved previously, have been maintained. The path from the 7th, by Rookery Pond, has been resurfaced. A safer surface to the path at the back of the 11th greenside bunker has been constructed and is bedding down well.
- The large beech tree on the right-hand side of the path, by Rookery Pond, has been made safe.
- A new fence has been built and creosoted around the 12th ravine – looking very smart.

We've had machinery updates - a new top dresser; a new smaller fairway mower which is more efficient and is effective in tight areas. Also, this machine is able to mow tees and greens surrounds which the larger fairway mower is unable to do. We are trialling a robotic mower; and finally, a grinding machine for sharpening blades in-house has also been purchased this year.

Finally, I would like to thank the Greens Committee members for their ideas, solutions, and support throughout the year; and I would again convey our thanks to Justin and his team for their continued hard work, maintaining this course to its excellent condition. Thank you.



#### **6.4 Seniors Committee – Geoff Anderton**

The senior section of the club remains well supported and whilst fluctuating slightly over the year the membership averages around 120 over the winter and summer seasons. This probably represents over 20% of the Club membership of regular players.

Throughout the year, the section continued to run a weekly competition as well as a version of the Rider cup in spring and several other specific competitions. Eight interclub, home and away matches took place during the summer. Two exchange days were organised which were successful and extremely popular with over 50 members attending on each occasion. In fact, they were so successful that one member inadvertently signed up for the same exchange day three times and even paid twice - I think it demonstrated that it was a senior section outing!

Sometimes it becomes necessary to change the clubs we play in the interclub matches and exchange days, however there is no shortage of golf clubs that ask to be considered as replacements, if for whatever reason, we need a change. At the end of last summer Wallasey seniors after a number of years informed us that unfortunately they could no longer offer us their facilities. They have been replaced by Aldersey Green for the 2025 fixtures. All the other fixtures and three exchange days at Leigh, Bromborough and Hazel Grove have been agreed with Vale Royal and the relevant golf clubs.

As remarked to me by a new member of the senior section things run extremely smoothly in the section. This is as a direct result of a number of volunteers putting in a considerable effort throughout the year to ensure the efficient operation of the section. I would like to take this opportunity to recognise their efforts and give a vote of thanks to them.

### **7. Matters of Business & Resolutions Submitted by Members**

No matters of business or resolutions were submitted by Members.

### **8. Sub-Committee Chair Elections**

- Handicap & Competitions Committee Chair – Tony Dullaghan re-elected, unopposed
- Greens Committee Chair – Chris Wells, re-elected, unopposed

### **9. Lady Captain Outgoing Speech**

I'd like to firstly recognise the hard work done by everyone in the office, Pro shop, hospitality, kitchen, housekeeping and greenkeepers. They do so much to make VRA a club that members and visitors love. A particular mention this year to Lynne Embury for meticulously overseeing the refurbishment of the newly named Abbey Bar.

Over the past 3 years, I have served on the Greens, Ladies and Management Committees along with 25 other ladies and gents. No club can thrive without the commitment and dedication of these Committee Members who volunteer their time and expertise for the





good of its golfers. It's so easy to just turn up for a competition, sign in at the Pro shop, play a round of golf, put your score in, maybe visit the bar for a drink or a bite to eat, trundle off home, check later to see how you've done, check your handicap to see if you've gone up or down (or not moved at all!) and do it all again next competition day without acknowledging those who work tirelessly for our benefit.

Our fabulous and knowledgeable Ladies committee is always busy behind the scenes to run our competitions and away days flawlessly. This year we visited Curzon Park and Bromborough. Along with the Christmas 9 holes and mince pies, invitation day, LC's charity day, invitation to the Seniors and LC v Lady Chair match play these were all well-supported enjoyable days.

I'd also like to mention Chris Wells who runs a tight ship on the Greens Committee! Much discussion led to the winter protection plan and bunker plan which have both proved to be a huge success. The membership of our friendly, inclusive Ladies section continues to increase. It's unfortunate that there will not be a LC for 2025 but with the wealth of experience of those on the Committee and the support of our members, the Ladies section will flourish.

We are now fielding two established Ladies Shield teams. The finals were held here last September and in May we are hosting the prestigious Cheshire Ladies Championships. Our charity St Luke's, which offers a wide range of services to support people and their families living with life limiting illnesses, will benefit enormously from your support. I cannot thank you enough for your generous donations.

It has been an honour and a privilege to have been your Lady Captain. They say that the ingredients of a successful captaincy are to be yourself, do it your way and most of all enjoy it. I have! And would encourage others to seriously consider becoming Lady Captain. I am so grateful for the well wishes that you have given to Mark and me this last year. We walked more miles along hospital corridors than around golf courses.

So, what of the next 12 months?

I am looking forward to being simply a golfer, enjoying a round of golf with family and friends, preferably in fine weather! I wish you all a healthy and enjoyable golfing year too. Cheers!

## 10. Captain Outgoing Speech

When you approach the first tee, please take a moment and read the plaque on the new bench that the family of our former friend and Club Secretary has placed in his honour. It sums Martin up, and I'm sure it will put a smile on your face.

I said this last year and I'll say it again, but I cannot believe I stood here 12 months ago accepting a further 12 months as Captain. I also can't believe how quickly the time has passed. I hope I have done the position justice.





You have already heard from the various committees - I would like to say thank you to:

- Chris Wells and the Greens Committee, working with Justin and the Green Keepers for keeping our course in excellent condition and making ongoing improvements in all weather conditions.
- Tony and the Handicaps & Competition Committee, for providing us with a variety of weekly competitions and also for closing them, keeping our handicaps in line - I do not envy Tony's job one bit.
- Geoff and the Seniors. What can you say about them? It is run by a very knowledgeable committee, with a vast number of matches as well as the weekly competitions. Last night was the premier of internet competition booking instead of a paper tick form on the notice board. I bet there was lots of head scratching!!!
- Franky and the Ladies Section which runs like clockwork. As you heard earlier, they have weekly competitions and a number of match teams representing the club.
- Thank you to all the Committees for the hard work and time you put into the club. Don't forget these are all volunteers who put in many unpaid hours work. Because of all the committees, we can just turn up on the day and play without a second thought.

In addition, thank you to:

- Ben, Scott & Lucy for their friendly welcome in the shop and who are always willing to offer their golfing expertise.
- Dave, Chef and his food and drinks team for looking after us whilst providing us with refreshments and a smile.
- Ian, Lynn, Vicky, Sue and his staff for keeping the wheels in motion in the background.
- And lastly to all the volunteers who have helped Lady Captain and I throughout the year.

Thank you!

We were fortunately blessed with fine weather for both our Drive In and Captain's Day. It was a great pleasure meeting all the members on these days. I was reminded last week by a member that my drive for last year and this year only went 100yds in total, of which I corrected him to 150yds, which is 150 yds more as Captain than him!

Lady captain and I took great pleasure in presenting some of the trophies on the day immediately after the competition which we think was most appreciated. We hope this will continue in the future.

Talking of trophies during our Captaincy we have had two presentation evenings. The first one was delayed for two months. Unfortunately, on the rearranged evening I had literally just come out of surgery, but I managed to Facetime Lady Captain and Tony very woozily from my hospital bed, who reassured me the evening had gone well.

Both Lady Captain and I missed the most recent presentation evening due to a rather nasty bug! Don't ask!!



During my Captaincy I have had the chance to play many games, be it in competitions, matches or socially. I can honestly say I have always enjoyed the company if not all the games!!!

I do believe that over the years, the standard of dress, course etiquette and the knowledge of the rules of golf have dropped dramatically. It is up to us as Members of Vale Royal to bring this to the attention of other players. Please don't be afraid to make it known to them and hopefully every little bit makes improvement.

I think it's a real shame that the club has no Captains for next year. As Lady Captain has already said I would encourage anybody to take on the role and enjoy it. If anybody does fancy the role for the future, please do not hesitate in asking myself or any of the previous Captains for information or their experience.

Finally, Lady Captain thank you for the last two years. We enjoyed the highs together and got through the lows of the last 12 months together. For the past 24 months you have been telling everybody you're my PA and you have been my Lady Captain, well as of tomorrow you will be just Jane. So, for the last time thank you Lady Captain.

Thank you and I hope we all have a memorable year, good evening.

## **11. AOB**

No other business was raised.

## **12. Closing Remarks**

The General Manager thanked everyone for their attendance and invited those present to retire to the Lounge Bar for complimentary food and drink.

The meeting was concluded at 8:28pm