Askernish

Lost and found

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very good golf course."

Old Tom described the land as “second to none in the various
elements which go to make a
"second to none in the various
Club on the west coast of
The story of Askernish Golf
for Golf” and writes articles for
students from Elmwood and
the world and also worked
many golf courses around
Consultant at Temple GC
Malcolm Peake was Chairman
The Outer Hebrides suffers from
in Berkshire. He has visited
in the UK, with severe gales
and storms regularly battering the
Western Isles. He began the
restoration of the help of Allan
MacDonald, now Head Greenkeeper
at Askernish, and Ruan Grant,
then Head Greenkeeper of the
Old Course, which was a nice link
with Old Tom.

During the restoration, construc-
tion materials were frequently
blown away and at other times
sand from the beach was blown
onto the previous days’ work.

The 11th green sitting just
above the beach was a particular
challenge, and a temporary four
foot turf wall was eventually built
around the green to protect the
area whilst work was underway.
Seaweed was sourced locally
which stabilised the sand, adding
organic material which also helped
moisture retention.

Rabbit damage was another huge
problem. When repairing a rabbit
hole a whole warren would often
be reseeded, and the area then
had to be totally restored and turfed.
In the early days some of the local
crofters did not support the re-
servation of the course, and when
work started in a new area, the
next day they discovered cattle had
been moved to graze on the new
turf.

Now these issues have been
resolved and crofter and golfers
work in harmony in this wonderful
environment.

All MacDonald said: “I cannot
stress enough how grateful we are
to Rannomess Jacobsen for their
help, we would not have been able
to produce the course we have with-
out the use of their machinery.”
The course has been developed in the
most sustainable way using the
native fescue grasses.

All greenkeeping activities are
aimed at promoting these species,
which are slow growing, disease
and drought resistant, which is
vital with no irrigation system.

Askernish is situated in one of
the wettest parts of Europe with
1800mm annual rainfall, but there
have been two six-week periods
without rain, yet the deep rooted
native species have survived.

The original contouring of the
green surfaces requires a height
of cut that would not be playable
on greens not dominated by native
fescue.

The course not only gives
immense pleasure to golfers,
but has been used as a fine educational
tool funded by The RSA with
students from all over the world having
the opportunity to see how golf
evolved. The Student Sustainability
Project is hosted by Askernish,
and welcome six greenkeeping

about the author

Malcolm Peake
Malcolm Peake was Chairman
of Elmwood from 2006 to 2010.
Consultant for golf course
management in Scotland, his
work has also included the
restoration of the golf course
at Askernish. Malcolm has
published "Golf Greenkeeping:
A Sustainable Approach. A
multi-skilled community with
the help of an industry renowned for its
generosity of spirit, and intrigued
by the romance of this exceptional
opportunity to restore an Old Tom
Morris masterpiece.

This move has received great
plaudits from environmental bodies
who have branded Askernish “the
most natural course in the world.”
But best of all the islanders have
a superb links, with the restoration
completed in eight years.

Askernish is a golf course for
aficionados of real golf, who like to
use their imagination and skill on
a course which suits naturally in its
environment.

This project is a wonderful
example of the spirit of enterprise
by multi-skilled community with the
help of an industry renowned for its
generosity of spirit, and intrigued
by the romance of this exceptional
opportunity to restore an Old Tom
Morris masterpiece.
The story of Askernish Golf Club on the west coast of South Uist in the Outer Hebrides began in 1891 when Lady Cathcart invited Old Tom Morris, keeper of the green at St Andrews and the first known course architect, to lay out a golf course. Old Tom described the land as “second to none in the various elements which go to make a very good golf course.”

In the spring of 2006 I took a call from Gordon Irvine MG. Gordon told me what seemed an unlikely story of finding a lost Old Tom Morris golf course that had fallen into disrepair while on a fishing trip. He convinced golf course architect Martin Ebert, Adam Lawrence, editor of Golf Course Architect, and Chris Haspell, Head Greenkeeper at Castle Stuart, to go to this isolated island, where they found the course.

They identified the probable route through the dunes, and the sites of tees and greens. The club was still in existence, and played golf on nine simplistic holes on the edge of the dunes, but they had little money, facilities or machinery. Gordon asked me to help raise funds to promote the restoration of the golf course, but I needed to see this site for myself. On arrival I saw the towering dunes above the white sand beach.

I walked the incredibly fertile Machair, which is naturally reclaimed land from the beach. It was early summer and the floor was a carpet of rich and diverse colour containing, over 200 species of wildflowers.

I could identify buttercup, daisies, gentians, harebells, numerous orchids, ragged robin, and red clover amongst the profusion of heritage, and on the beach there were gulls, lapwings, oystercatchers, and ringed plover.

I approached friends for practical help. Amongst others, SHS carpets donated spare proof carpet for the proposed clubhouse, and the Berkshire GC donated redundant furniture.

The R&A provided initial financial support, and Ransomes Jacobsen supplied machinery for maintaining the golf course, seven years later RJ are still generously supporting the project.

When Gordon started the restoration of the golf course in 2006 the biggest challenge was the weather. The Outer Hebrides suffers from some of the most extreme weather in the UK, with severe gales and storms regularly battering the Western Isles. He began the restoration with the help of Allan MacDonald, now Head Greenkeeper at Askernish, and Ruan Grant, then Head Greenkeeper of the Old Course, which was a nice link with Old Tom.

During the restoration, construction materials were frequently blown away and at other times sand from the beach was blown onto the previous days’ work.

The 11th green sitting just above the beach was a particular challenge, and a temporary four foot turf wall was eventually built around the green to protect the area whilst work was underway. Seaweed was sourced locally which stabilised the sand, adding organic material which also helped moisture retention.

Rabbit damage was another huge problem. When repairing a rabbit hole a whole warren would often be revealed, and the area then had to be totally restored and turfed. In the early days some of the local crofters did not support the restoration of the course, and when work started in a new area, the next day they discovered cattle had been moved to graze on the new turf.

Now these issues have been resolved and crofter and golfers work in harmony in this wonderful environment.

All greenkeeping activities are aimed at promoting these species, which are slow growing, disease and drought resistant, which is vital with no irrigation system.

Askernish is situated in one of the wettest parts of Europe with 1800mm annual rainfall, but there have been two six-week periods without rain, yet the deep rooted native species have survived.

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The course not only gives immense pleasure to golfers, but has been used as a fine educational tool funded by The R&A with students from Elmwood and Myerscough Colleges. The students receive tutorials, workshop and practical activities on how to build and maintain a golf course in a sustainable way (read Geoff Fenn’s story from his visit on the following pages).

Well over a hundred golfers from across the world enjoyed putting their wits against the course at the recent Askernish Open.

Artificial fertilisers and herbicides are prohibited from use on greens not dominated by native species.

This move has received great plaudits from environmental bodies who have branded Askernish “the most natural course in the world.” But best of all the islanders have a superb links, with the restoration completed in eight years. Askernish is a golf course for the love of the game. The practice range with nearby putting and chipping green gives plenty of scope for the PIA qualified teachers.

The new machinery compound/ indoor golf centre has nets and artificial putting green to hone technique or warm up.

Golfers can even have their swings filmed and analysed on a large screen, which was recently donated by Panasonic.

In winter cattle and sheep graze the fairways and in summer with the machair a profusion of flora, the sea a shade of azure and with the tide out and the white shell beach revealed, there is no better place to play golf.

Artificial fertilisers and herbicides are prohibited from use on the course.

This project is a wonderful example of the spirit of enterprise by multi-skilled community with the help of an industry renowned for its generosity of spirit, and intrigued by the romance of this exceptional opportunity to restore an Old Tom Morris masterpiece.