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 conviced golf course architect Martin Ebert, Adam Lawrence, editor of Golf Course Architect, and Chris Haagell, Head Greenkeeper at Castle Stuart, to go to this isolated island, where they found the course.

They identified the probable routing through the dunes, and the sites of tee 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 and 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 buttercups, daisies, gentians, harebells, numerous orchids, ragged robin, and red clover amongst the profusion of herbage, and on the beach there were gulls, lapwings, oystercatchers, and ringed plover.

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

The R&A provided initial financial support, and Rannomes 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 Mac-Donald, now Head Greenkeeper at Askernish, and Rana 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 crofters and golfers work in harmony in this wonderful environment.

All Mac-Donald said: “I cannot stress enough how grateful we are to Rannomes Jacobsen for their help, we would not have been able to produce the course we have without 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 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 page).

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

Although they may not have been aware that electricity to the clubhouse is supplied from its own wind turbine, with excess going into the national grid, reducing its carbon footprint, the practice range with nearby putting and chipping green gives plenty of scope for the PGA 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 sand beach revealed, there is no better place to play golf.

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

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 sits 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.
My R&A Scholarship at Askernish

R&A Scholar Geoff Fenn, Course Manager at Bedford & County Golf Club, recently visited Askernish through the scholarship scheme. It turned out to be the highlight of his greenkeeping career...

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Richard Cutler
Course Manager
La Moye Golf Club

"Even with snow cover we achieved five weeks disease prevention."
Marcus Oakey
Head Greenkeeper
Moor Allerton Golf Club

"The greens treated with Medallion TL came through the harsh winter period with no signs of disease."
Stan Power
Head Greenkeeper
Hanbury Manor Golf Club

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Eight lucky R&A Scholars recently had the opportunity to study and play at Askernish. I was one of them, and we were immediately awed by our surroundings.

We were accompanied by Paul Miller from Elmwood College, Andy Owen of Myerscough College and Steve Isaac from the R&A. Head Greenkeeper Allan MacDonald introduced us to the course with an overview of its fascinating history - from its design by Old Tom Morris in 1891 to the decline of the original layout in the 1920’s and its eventual restoration in the most traditional fashion.

Our appetites whetted, we headed out onto the links for a round. It is only once out on the course you begin to realise just how special this place is. There is a stretch from the 7th tee where you encounter some of the greatest holes you could ever play. Dramatic views, brilliant design and most of all, great fun!

The greens are not visually as well manicured as golfers are used to, but this should come as no surprise as they are managed in the most natural way and the budget does not allow for any other type of approach.

Askernish is on a small island with a low population and requires a long journey to reach it. There is no passing trade!

The greens have literally just been mown down from the natural vegetation when course construction began in 2006. Maintenance is restricted to top dressing using the local dune sand mixed with a little local seaweed meal, a little iron and mowing (6mm in summer, 7mm in winter). This was my first visit to the club, but those who have visited over a number of years are full of praise for the annual improvement of the playing surfaces under this minimal maintenance approach.

The club has tried to keep the course in a traditional style - this means encountering some rabbit scrapes and broad-leaved weeds on the fairways and some coarse grasses, weeds and moss on the greens, but it all adds to the feeling that you are playing golf as it really should be.

We took a series of performance measurements of the greens, the most interesting being the Greens-tester (the holing-out test). The ball was rolled into the hole from 3ft, 6ft and 9ft and the ball was rolling straight and true.

R&A Scholarship

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To the Manor born

In his latest article on greenkeepers taking on increasingly diverse roles, Laurence Pithie met Paul Bishop, who combines the roles of Course Manager and Estate Manager at the Manor House Hotel Golf Club in Wiltshire.
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Paul began his career as an apprentice greenkeeper at Haywards Heath Golf Club in 1980. Having gained valuable knowledge and experience, he became Head Greenkeeper at Tunbridge Wells, and after spells at East Sussex National and Hever Castle he accepted the role of Course Manager at the then Castle Combe Golf course in 1994.

Apart from the club changing its name to that of the Manor House Hotel and Golf Club (part of Exclusive Golf and Hotels), Paul rebuilt bunkers.

At that time, eight full time staff were employed to maintain the entire estate was being maintained to the required standard. But I knew that if this was to be possible, it was essential for the business for greater efficiency.

(management changes)

In 2004 the head gardener resigned. This presented an opportunity to evaluate the way in which the entire estate was being managed, and whether it was possible to streamline the business for greater efficiency.

Prior to that, the only input from maintenance was the mowing of the Manor Hotel lawns. Having given the proposed Estate Manager role due consideration, Paul accepted the wider responsibilities it would entail and set about implementing the various changes that were necessary. Paul takes up the story.

“There was inevitably some reluctance to change from both staff and golf club members and it was essential to achieve the right balance of staff between the hotel grounds and golf course.

“Having added responsibility for the gardens meant that I needed to hire the right people with at least a basic qualification, and once again highlighted the need to hire the right people with the right skills and above all, the right attitude to work with.

“Although I was on familiar ground at the Manor House Hotel, I was satisfied that my two roles were part of a dedicated team.

“Fast forward to 2013 and we had need to hire the right people with the right skills and above all, the right attitude to work with.

“John Rowlands, an ex-livestock farmer with a horticulture background, was appointed in the new role.

“With a good support team on the morning and pigs and chickens in the poly tunnel to the hotel guests something extra.

“Paul continued: “With separate gardens meant that I needed a much better understanding of horticulture since the kitchen garden, orchard and flower beds were now part of my remit.

“Foliar feeding the greens in the poly tunnel to do it properly.

“Home produced pork is available with fresh salad and vegetables are market several times each year; not a licence from DEFRA as well as supplied to the hotel daily, along with 40 to 50 eggs, this benefits the hotel guests locally produced food.

“Although I was on familiar ground with golf course management, I had the support of a dedicated team.

“I was satisfied that my two roles were part of a dedicated team.

“Recognising the various changes in the industry and the need to be more business orientated, Paul gained qualifications in Enterprise and Business Management, as well as an Intermediate Diploma in Sports Turf Management and a Management Course at Cranfield University: these would prove extremely beneficial in the future.

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Paul continued: “With separate budgets for the golf course and the hotel grounds to produce, implement and control, it became obvious that I needed to ensure that I had the support of a dedicated team that I could rely upon.

“Although I was on familiar ground with golf course management, I would be relying heavily on the skills of others within the hotel grounds which were several hundred metres away from the golf course.

“I was satisfied that my two key positions of Deputy Course Manager and Mechanic were undertaken by Gian Povey and Charlie Gaisford respectively, both of whom were suitably qualified and experienced.

“With a good support team on the course and a sound management structure already in place, I could at least focus more attention on the aspect of the business that I was less familiar with.

“For me this was a steep learning curve as I gradually got to grips with the seasonal requirements of vegetable production and plant breeding, while still maintaining the golf course to the required standard. But I knew that if this aspect of the business was to fulfill its potential then further changes would be required.”

**MOVING FORWARD**

With the downturn in the economy being fully felt by 2008, Paul knew there was a need to further enhance what they were capable of producing on site, and one of the key objectives was to offer hotel guests locally produced food as much as possible.

This was seen as a drive towards greater sustainability and offering hotel guests something extra.

Paul added: “For this to be achieved there would be a planned expansion of the vegetable garden, the creation of a poly tunnel to supply micro veg and herbs to the Hotel’s Executive Chef and the introduction of livestock.

“At first this was a daunting task and once again highlighted the need to hire the right people with the appropriate knowledge, skill set and above all, the right attitude to be part of a dedicated team.

“John Rowlands, an ex-livestock farmer with a horticulture back-ground, was appointed in the new role as Garden Supervisor and is assisted by one full time and one part-time gardener.

“Fast forward to 2013 and we now have 65 chickens, several Gloucester Old Spot pigs, a large lag store, a continually expanding vegetable garden and enhanced shrub and flower borders.

“Fresh salad and vegetables are supplied to the hotel daily, along with 40 to 50 eggs, this benefits every hotel guest as they tuck into fresh eggs for breakfast.

“Having livestock on site requires a licence from DEFRA as well as one for the movement of animals to market several times each year; not always an easy task when the pigs escaped on one occasion and had to be rounded up.

“Had this been on camera, it would have been a YouTube sensation!

“Home produced pork is available all year round and other produce which is required by the hotel is sourced from surrounding farms wherever possible.

“Foliar feeding the greens in the morning and pigs and chickens in the afternoon with pellets is all in a day’s work at the Manor.”

**WORK ROUTINES AND CHALLENGES**

With such a diverse role and high expectations from golfers and hotel guests, having a well-planned work program is essential for the business to thrive in both areas.

Paul’s typical day during the summer starts at 5.45am at the golf course with a brief meeting with his deputy, who then assigns work
tasks which are listed on the staff bulletin board.

Greens staff commence work at 6am and then it’s all hands on deck for everyone including Paul. He is very much a working manager and is encouraged to put his own stamp on the Estate, working with the General Manager Stephen Browning and the Exclusive Golf Manager Steve Slinger.

With regards to the challenges being faced on and off the golf course, Paul explained:

“The Manor House course is very diverse with an abundance of flora and fauna and therefore needs to be sensitively managed within its unique environment of woodland, valleys, stream, ponds and grassland.

“This is a very undulating course with some steep sided valleys so safety is a primary consideration.

“One of our biggest challenges is managing the 85 bunkers, also dealing with shade and sometimes limited air circulation around a few of the greens keeps us on our toes. Our fertiliser input for sand based greens is low at around 90kgs N/ha per annum. This limits our OM level which means our need for coring or deep scarifying is minimal. Regular light topdressings are carried out with a Dakota top dresser and monthly aeration is achieved with a lightweight Redexim Vertidrain 7117.

“Without major disruption to the playing surfaces in season, we can virtually guarantee good playing surfaces at all times. There are many challenges on the Estate, and our biggest on the course is achieving consistently smooth fast greens. This has been greatly enhanced by our recent purchase of a Tru-Turf roller – one of the best pieces of equipment I have purchased. Our greatest challenge on the hotel grounds is to meet our requirement to produce sufficient fresh produce. We are reliant on reasonable weather although we do have the benefit of the poly tunnel.”

“Fresh salad and vegetables are supplied to the hotel daily, along with 40 to 50 eggs, this benefits every hotel guest as they tuck into fresh eggs for breakfast”

**SUMMARY**

Paul’s role at The Manor House certainly requires a diverse range of agronomic, management and horticulture skills as well as a working knowledge of dealing with livestock. He also plays a leading role in implementing best practices and health and safety measures at the company’s other course in Sussex as well as five other hotel grounds.

Paul concludes: “This is a rewarding position and I’m sure there are other hotel operated courses where similar opportunities could arise. My advice would be; don’t be afraid to have a go. Learning new skills is essential for understanding any business but perhaps the key is to ensure that you hire the right staff with passion and aptitude for the job required.”

about the author

Laurence Pithie MG

Laurence Pithie MG runs his own training and consultancy company, Turf Master One Ltd. Previously he spent 17 years managing multi-site golf operations in the UK. With 42 years in the golf industry, Laurence has used his experience and knowledge to produce a number of recent ‘case study’ articles.
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Rhys Butler, Links Manager, Royal St David's Golf Club