



The 185-yard 15th. The clubhouse is being built to the left of the green

Something special

How does an architect go about creating a course, especially in an environmentally sensitive area? Chris Boiling talked to leading golf course designer Donald Steel about the Carnegie course on Peter de Savary's Skibo Castle estate, near Dornoch, Scotland.

"Heaven on earth," was how Andrew Carnegie described Skibo, his Highland castle which is now being turned into a golf and sporting club by Peter de Savary. "Heaven", "Mecca", "paradise" are over-used terms in golf magazines, but the Carnegie course, which is due to open in July, is certainly special.

It's the first links course built in Britain in the last 40 years; ➤ 33

31 → it's bounded on three sides by the estuarial waters of the Firth and has spectacular views of Struie Hill; eight of the holes lie within the Dornoch Firth Site of Scientific Interest; it's the first course owned by wealthy entrepreneur Peter de Savary; and it's a project that Carnegie himself would have been proud of.

Carnegie was a Scot who emigrated to America with his family when he was 13. There he rose from a bobbin boy in a cotton factory to become a steel magnate, and returned to his homeland as one of the richest and most successful men of his generation. He bought Skibo (a shortened version of its Celtic name, Schytherbolle, which means 'fairlyland of peace') in 1898 and spent a fortune rebuilding it to entertain the likes of King Edward VII, Rudyard Kipling and Lloyd George.

It is believed that the local golf club, Royal Dornoch, invited him to become a member but because he couldn't play he built himself a nine-hole golf course where he could learn the game. He invited five-times Open champion JH Taylor to stay at the castle – and coach him. Carnegie later became vice-president of Royal Dornoch and, today, the impressive-looking Carnegie Shield is one of the big competitions on the club's calendar.

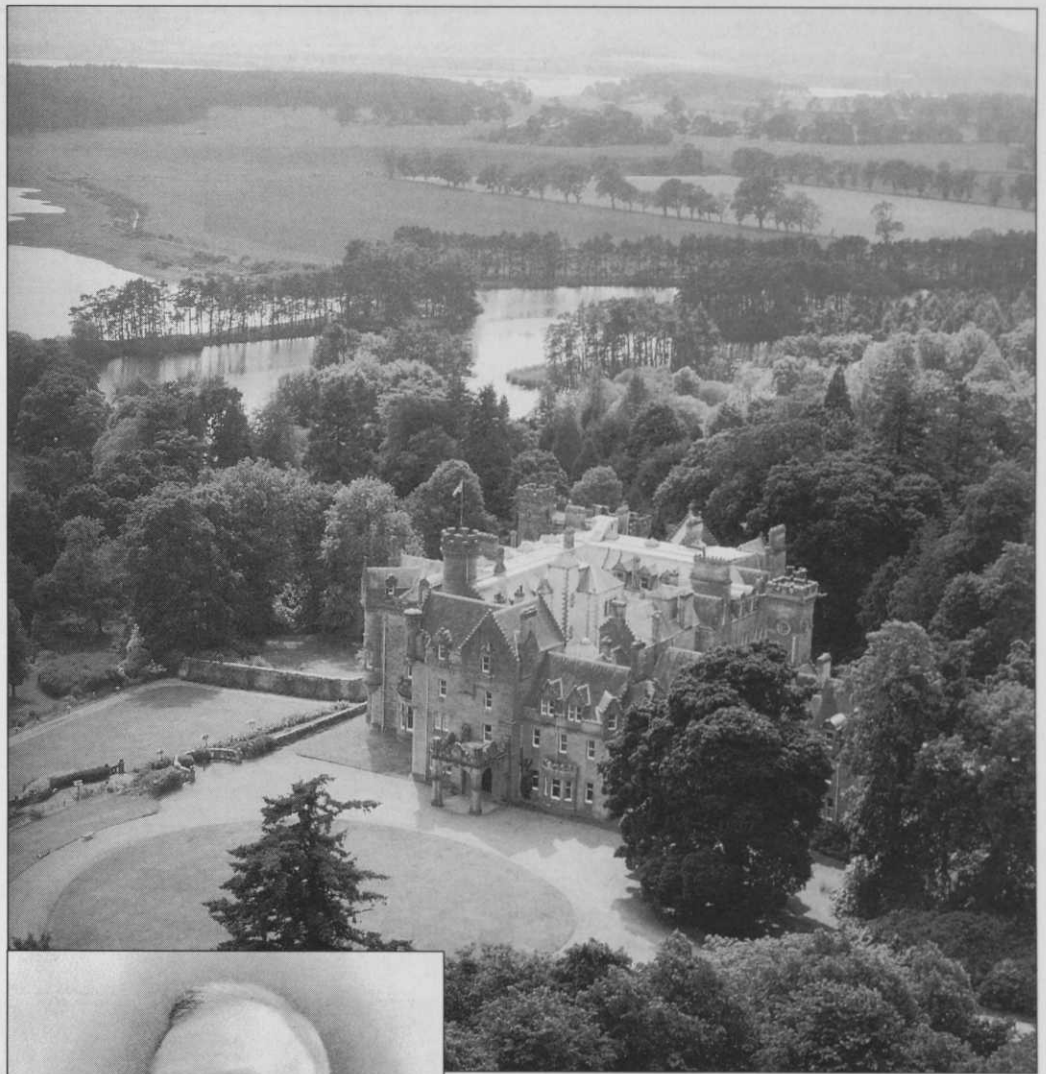
Peter de Savary is a non-golfer too, but he's not building the new 18-hole course for himself. He is turning the 7,000 acre estate into a private residential golf and sporting club with an invited international membership of about 500.

The Carnegie course at Skibo Castle will be de Savary's first golfing venture. And what a venture. The first links course built in Britain since Southerness and the restoration of Turnberry after World War II. It's not long – just 6,650 off the championship tees and 6,400 off the white tees – but there are many tough and memorable holes.

Despite some of the publicity for the club and boards outside proclaiming its "reopening", the new course, designed by Donald Steel, is nothing like the original. The only visible evidence of the original course is a grassy hollow near the 12th which was probably a bunker near the original 9th green.

When the castle was put on the market in 1989, Steel was commissioned to provide a golf course as a selling feature. When de Savary bought Skibo in 1990 he saw Steel's name on the plans and asked him to design a course for him.

When Steel and his assistants,



Andrew Carnegie, left, called Skibo 'heaven on earth'. His highland castle is now owned by the de Savary family

Martin Ebert and Tom MacKenzie, are designing a new course they walk the new site as many times as possible. For Tom, who comes from Dornoch, this meant driving 11 hours home a few weeks after starting work at Steel's offices near Chichester, West Sussex.

The first two things they have to find out before they start creating a course are the boundaries and the site of the clubhouse. With the Carnegie course they also had to plot the areas of scientific interest.

The site of an old steading was to be used to build the new clubhouse. Standing there, Steel envisaged a spectacular final hole, a par 5 dogleg with a drive across a bay. So, to some extent,

they worked backwards on the design of this course. Once they realised they could get three holes to the west of the clubhouse, the first hole became obvious.

They also knew they wanted to use some land on the other side of Ferry

Road because it gave a third view of the Firth and linked the course with the beach. Another hole, the 8th, alongside River Evelix, was also obvious, according to Steel.

Before they went too far down the design road, they employed an ecologist to plot the areas of importance and grade them: prime importance, importance, and potential importance, so they knew where they could go and where they most certainly couldn't go. They also started consultations with Scottish Natural Heritage and began communicating with planners, ecologists, environmentalists etc.

They told them they wouldn't go into any areas of importance or prime importance and they would do their best to avoid areas

of potential importance. They also struck a deal allowing the conservationists to come in and manage the heathland areas, which they hadn't been allowed to do for the previous 30 years and as a consequence some of the areas of good heathland had started to disappear. The conservationists jumped at the chance to stop the decline of valuable sites.

The most sensitive area was the land south of Ferry Road. Steel wanted to take the course there to add to the scenic variety, but also because he needed the space. Although the estate is on more than 7,000 acres, the golf course is on a plot of about 120 acres (200 if you include the areas of scientific interest).

Once they had received approval in principle from Scottish Natural Heritage, Steel's ecologist had to do a detailed environmental appraisal showing why the site was valuable, what plants were there, what effect the work would have on them and how the course would be built – hole by hole with particular attention to holes in SI territory. He also had to say how → 35

33 → these holes would be managed – what fertiliser would be used, how it would be applied, and what the irrigation regime would be. This is important because the lichens in these areas are very sensitive: “One application of fertiliser and they’re gone, and they’ve been there since the Ice Age,” said Tom.

Fortunately, Steel had been involved in the rebuilding of some new greens at Royal Dornoch, so they were able to take SNH there to show them how it’s possible to work in very tight areas, without damaging heather and gorse bushes around the backs of greens.

The new plan for the Carnegie course showed it would only go into SI areas with the first green, second tee, fourth and fifth holes, and sixth tee.

So with the 18th, 17th, 16th, 1st, two holes near the beach and a hole near the river in mind, the rest fell into place.

Steel doesn’t believe a good course has to be over 7,000 yards. “You pick nice tee and green positions and whatever they measure, they measure and whatever they add up to, they add up to. The belief that unless it’s 7,000 yards it’s no good is a load of poppycock.

“Carnegie is not long, but it’s



Looking back from the 5th green. The SI area on the right is marked as GUR but requires a compulsory drop

long enough for the majority of golfers. And the penalties for missing the fairway on a number of holes are quite grave.”

With this par 71 (70 off the championship tees) course, Steel wants to make golfers think. Cut-

ting off the right amount of dog-leg is rewarded with a much easier line to the green.

Mainly turfed

Work started late August/September 1992, later than

desired because of all the planning involved. Most of the fairways, greens and tees were turfed because of the difficulties of getting seed established in light sandy soil on a windy site. Lindum supplied and laid → 37

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35 → the turf. David Stansfield was employed as the agronomist and Brian D Pierson Ltd as the constructors.

Alick Mackay and his team of six greenkeepers and a YTS lad built the bunkers, although by modern standards there are very few bunkers on this course – “it’s difficult enough without them,” says Steel, “and they require a lot of maintenance and upkeep.”

He added: “Setting up the impossible is the easiest thing in the world, but that’s not the right way of going about things, you want to present a challenge which is achievable if people play well enough.”

Holes which caught our eye include:

◆ The short 3rd, which is played from the top of one dune across a hollow to a green set on top of another dune. Anything to the right rolls down a steep drop, leaving the player with an awkward pitch back to the green. The left side is guarded by rough.

◆ The fourth and fifth holes with their panoramic views over the Firth to the bridge and the hill all around. The fifth fairway is flanked by the beach and sea one side and heathland the other.

◆ The 8th is a long dogleg to the right, lined along the right by Loch Evelix. The more of the dogleg you cut-off by driving across the loch, the more straightforward is the second shot.

◆ There are no bunkers on the par 3 15th, just a steep drop into the water.

◆ The 18th is one of the most dramatic finishing holes on any course. A long par 5, it sweeps left around the bay from tees set on a spit of land with water on three sides. From most tees, the player must choose how much of the bay to carry and the boldness of the drive will determine how to play the second shot. Big hitters may try to reach the green in two shots but most will play into the broad approach and pitch to the large green from there. Apart from the bay, the worst thing about this hole is the fact that you know everyone in the clubhouse bar will be watching your progress to the green as the bar overlooks the entire hole.

If the club is as successful as de Savary’s other clubs, like St James’s in London, when it opens a few months after the course, then a ‘parkland’ course may also be built.

CONSTRUCTION

The bases of the greens and tees were shaped from local material. The growing medium is a 70%-30% sand to fen soil mix. On the greens it is 250-300mm deep and on the tees it’s about 150mm deep. The greens, surrounds, approaches, tees and their surrounds are turfed with a *Festuca/Agrostis grass mix*.



Donald Steel was a golf writer before he became a designer. A scratch golfer, he joined the Sunday Telegraph after leaving Cambridge University. Five years into his 30-year stint there, Ken Cotton invited him down to see his new courses at St Pierre and Ross-on-Wye, among the first courses to be built in Britain after World War II. After that they kept in touch.

When a new wave of courses was built in the 60s, Donald was asked if wanted to help out. He did, and eventually he became a partner in the firm of Cotton, Pennick, Lawrie and Partners. In 1987 he started his own firm and in 1989 he left the Telegraph, although he still contributes articles (including a new series on his 18 favourite holes) and has written several books.

Over the last five years he has built about 60 courses in 15 countries. One of the courses he is most proud of is Redtail in Ontario, Canada. Built for just over £1million it has been voted the second best course in Canada one year after opening. And Canadian journalist Lorne Rubenstein has said: “Developers should ask English architect Donald Steel to work in Canada more often. This is the only course he’s designed in Canada. It’s a peach.” He believes it could become Canada’s Pine Valley.

In this country Steel, who now

plays off 6, is best known for his work at St Andrews, where he redesigned the Jubilee and Eden courses and designed the Strathtyrum course. Other courses of his which have received widespread acclaim are Mill Ride and Portal in the UK and Vila Sol in Portugal.

His assistants, Tom MacKenzie and Martin Ebert (pictured above with Donald – Tom is on the left), are also university graduates and low-handicap golfers. Tom has a degree in landscape architecture and plays off 5; Martin graduated in engineering and plays off 4.

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Course manager Alick Mackay, 39, reckons his greenkeeping staff form the best golfing team in the country. Five of the seven staff play off single figures!