

Scott MacCallum travelled to Islay to talk with the Machrie Head Greenkeeper, Simon Freeman, about living and working on an island

Island life



Photography: Simon Freeman

Machrie was voted 56th in the most recent Golf World rankings. One visit proves why.

Below: Simon, seated centre, has been blessed with a talented hard working team



Think about life on an island and you might conjure up images of Robinson Crusoe; Sue Lawley; Father Ted or indeed the stars of *Castaway* or *Survivor*. But how would you fancy managing a golf course on a remote Scottish island?

Simon Freeman did just that. Two years ago he moved from his home town of Crieff to take over as Head Greenkeeper at the Machrie Golf Links, on the island of Islay off the West coast of Scotland, and he hasn't regretted his decision one bit.

Access to the island, which is on the same latitude as Glasgow is not always easy. The half hour twice daily flight from Glasgow can often be

delayed or even cancelled by fog or low cloud or the ferry which sails from Tarbert, itself a three hour drive from Glasgow. But once there you can appreciate why people make the effort. The beauty of Islay is stunningly natural with wonderful beaches and friendly islanders.

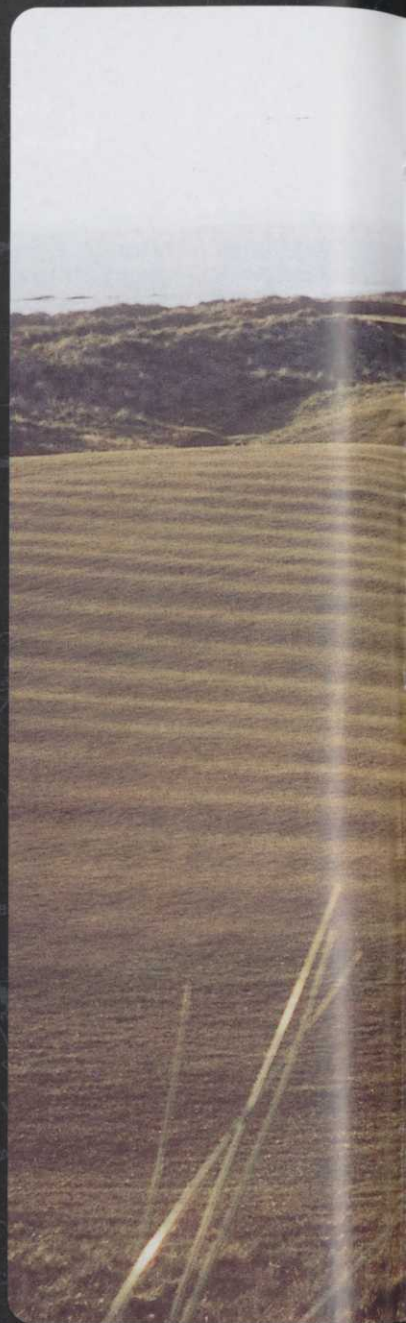
"This is as good as it gets as far as I'm concerned," said Simon, as we sat discussing his life and work shortly after returning from a strictly alcohol-free lunch in the restaurant of one of the island's six distilleries.

"I'd been over here once before I applied for the job. The son of the previous owner of the Machrie was an assistant pro at Crieff Golf Club

Far right: A rolling fairway

Right: Some standing stones laid out by the team near the nine hole par-3 course and with which the Machrie Captain engineered a very successful April Fool

Below: The Machrie greens are generally set in hollows rather than humps



Above: They attempted to alleviate the dry patch by hand forking the greens

Below: A core taken from turf close to the shore shows good root depth



and I came over with a group to play the course. That one visit was enough to convince me that if the job came up I should go for it," said Simon, who began his career as an apprentice under Jimmy Kidd at Gleneagles.

While the quality of the golf course quickly won over the four handicapper - it was ranked 56th in the UK in the most recent Golf World rankings - the complications of island life, and their impact on his course maintenance procedures gave him something into which he could really get his teeth.

"We have to source our top dressing from between the peat bogs and the sand dunes at the top end of the island, but while the chemical analysis of the material shows it is perfectly suitable the particle size is really too fine to be used as a top dressing.

"We've run into problems with it. When we get a period of dry weather after we've top dressed we find that the surface starts to seal," admitted Simon.

"If the course was on the mainland

we'd simply get the rootzone which was best suited to growing healthy bents and fescues. On the island however the cost is prohibitive to get lorry loads of top dressing coming over by boat, so we have to use what is available."

One option is sand from nearer the shore which is sharper, but they have found that the pH and the calcium content is too high. However it has created something of a puzzle.

"Strangely although the pH is technically too high to grow healthy grass it appears to be the tees and greens which have the sand off the shore blown over them which seem to be our healthiest," mused Simon.

The other main area of complication resulting from island living is machinery maintenance.

"I've got a basic grounding in mechanics and some of my guys are also quite good but once something technical goes wrong it becomes very difficult to get someone to fix it. When it comes to grass cutting machinery, the mechanics on the

island are no better than us so we have to get someone over for it, but you can't just phone up and expect someone to be there within two hours."

Such a scenario perhaps only happens two to three times a year but always at an important time.

"We can be looking at the machine being down for a week instead of a day as it would be on the mainland."

However, Simon does find that dealers are very good at talking them through problems over the telephone. "AM Russell's and Scottish Grass Machinery are good at this and it is a great saving. They are are now also excellent at getting parts to us."

Simon also tries to ensure that he has machinery which can do more than one job so he has cover if machines go down.

"I have tried to work out which machinery would cover my back - for example being able to use cutting heads on more than one machine so if one breaks down the heads can be transferred over and the job still completed."



The main disease problem the team has to contend with is dry patch.

"We have a build up of thatch on the greens and a build up of waxy material which caused a hydrophobic layer on the greens," he explained.

"It is a problem which isn't at the front of greenkeepers' thinking as much as it was in years gone by, but in our situation, where we haven't got the necessary aeration equipment or an irrigation system, it's the scariest thing that happens to us.

"When it strikes, as it did recently, we have to go out with hand and aeration forks and fork up all the patches and then water them. We borrow a bowser from a neighbouring farmer, strap a pump to it and spray with a fire hose which is very time consuming and when it's hot we can never really keep in top of it."

Simon is already looking at longer term solutions.

Getting access to aeration equipment is the key and the lure of the island has proved useful in ensuring one of Simon's contacts is a regular visitor.

"We have a very good relationship with Kevin Brunton, of Greentech Sports Turf, who has taken to the island to the extent that he is keen to come over with his aeration machinery and offer me any technical advice I might require," said Simon.

"But we are going to have to think about purchasing aeration equipment soon because the situation is going to have to be tackled otherwise it is just going to get worse."

They will also be installing a rudimentary irrigation system with a pump at each end so they can have a box at each green from which to hand hose.

Although only measuring 6,200 yards, the course, originally designed by Willie Campbell who also designed Brookline which hosted the 1999 Ryder Cup, doesn't play short. (Donald Steel also designed five holes in the 70s when land was lost to farmland). This is because it is laid out across the dunes rather than down valleys and long hitters often have to

lay up between blind hills to give themselves the best chance of hitting approach shots close.

It has a reputation of being one of the very finest links courses and as a result does attract some of the more intrepid golfing pilgrims.

Indeed before I returned to the mainland I listened to three Americans starting their day with a breakfast table reading of text from a golf book extolling the virtues of the Machrie.

They displayed the same passion that the club's own Head Greenkeeper has for the game.

"I was taught to play golf as soon as I could walk as it was an excuse for my father, who was a county player. In the winter he used to take me off to the seaside to get away from the drudgery of playing winter greens. That gave me a love of links golf and I always wanted to work and play on a links course," said Simon.

Indeed John Freeman did more than just introduce his son to the delights of playing the game, he bred

into him a love of golf course design.

"My father is an architect but his hobby is designing golf courses. He helped design the new holes at Crieff Golf Club about 20 years ago and he and I both had input into designing the new nine hole extension at Crieff Hydro, where I worked before coming here. I did the original plans and he touched them up for the final design. Golf course design is a great interest for him and it has turned into a great interest of mine."

Those skills have been put to good use at the Machrie.

The team plan to build two new greens for the 12th and 14th holes as the existing greens are the least popular with the members and Malcolm King, the owner.

"The current greens, built when five new holes were required when the club lost land to farmland in the 70s, are on the tops of mounds while the original greens were in hollows. No-one thought about irrigation in those days and put the greens in the wettest areas so they wouldn't dry out in the summer."

Machinery Inventory

Toro 2300D Triple Fairway Mower
 Ransomes 160D with Greens units and verti-cut units
 Ransomes 160 Petrol (used for spare due to island petrol prices 98p per litre!)
 Set of Ransomes 160 tees units
 Kubota 3800 compact tractor
 International 484 tractor
 Ransomes 20" Super Certes
 Ransomes 20" G850
 Saxon Baroness 22" with groomer
 Set of five Ransomes Sportscurtter gangs
 2 Allent 218Si Flymos
 Komatsu Strimmer
 SISIS Auto-Rotorake
 SISIS Supaturfman
 Cushman Turf Truckster (Diesel)
 Cushman Top-dresser
 Richard Long Finishing Mower
 Alfa Laval Slurry Spreader complete with Honda WP20X Pump and Fire Hoses for Irrigation
 Honda 300 Quad Bike
 Allman Boom Sprayer
 CP20 Knapsack Sprayer
 Two and a half tonne trailer



"We want to see if we can restore the original philosophy of the course. We're not going to be bullish and say that we're going to make them better holes but it's worth a try and if it works it works and if it doesn't it doesn't," said Simon, who is delighted that Malcolm King, a golfing enthusiast who reads up on whatever subject he takes an interest, gives him 100% support.

The other major development is the new nine hole par-3 course which Simon and the team have built.

"We wanted to build a mini replica of the main course complete with blind shots and run and bumps so we found a bit of unused links land and Ewan Logan and Bobby Brown, of the greenkeeping team, and I designed the course into it.

"We are currently at the stage where we are ready to put the final cut on six of the holes with the other three still to be built. The holes will be between 120 and 180 yards with two or three holes together so we would have wide fairways, to enable the children to play, and narrow necks into the greens so good golfers could face a challenge hitting into the greens," explained Simon, who revealed that children get free membership of the golf club.

Before Simon, wife Catherine and young son Brandon - who has been joined by a brother, Bailey, since being on the island - arrived, Simon was told he might find it difficult to get people to work for him but he has found it to be the complete opposite.

"Ewan Logan, my assistant head was here under the previous regime, and has been very hard working and helpful; Bobby Brown was a farm worker most of his life and has been a God send; Chris Sather, the gardener, has produced miraculous

results around the front of the hotel while Stuart Pate has been working with us over the summer and has vast experience of the construction industry. I've been blessed with a good hard working team."

That team also turns its hand to whatever work is required and had decorated the bar in which we were sitting as well as doing similar work on the Hotel's chalets.

That demonstrates the close relationship Simon has with Hotel Manager, Ian Brown, with whom he conceived and organised the Machrie Team Challenge which filled all the Hotel's chalets and half the hotel itself last year and was won by Gleneagles greenkeeper, Simon Crawford and his team.

If Simon misses out on anything it is contact with other greenkeepers and he is keen to encourage greenkeeping colleagues to visit.

"It is prohibitively expensive for me to leave the island and keep up-to-date with current greenkeeping issues by visiting other golf courses so I do feel a little isolated but if any Section Secretary wants to organise a visit to the Machrie we'd certainly be able to sort out some sort of preferential rate for them."

I can guarantee anyone who takes up the offer would feel it a rewarding experience.

