

Coast to Coast

Scott MacCallum headed to the west of Scotland to visit a new course designed by the same man who gave us Kingsbarns on the east.

There is a degree of rivalry in the MacCallum household based on the fact that I come from the east coast of Scotland while my wife is a west coaster. I have to put up with little homilies like "East is east, but West is best" and complaints about how cold she finds the east. But I counter with official Met Office statistics which confirm that it rains 365 days of the year in the west, while the east coast has sunshine records which better even the Bahamas. Usually we agree to differ.

Recently I was able to blow the east's trumpet about the wonderful new Kingsbarns Golf Club which just happens to be on the east coast, just a couple of miles from St Andrews, the Home of Golf ... which is also to be found on the east.

However the west is fighting back with a new course designed by the same man who gave us Kingsbarns.

Kyle Phillips is casting his spell over Southern Gailes which is currently

under construction in Irvine, in an area which already, even to this East Coaster, must rank as one of the richest golfing seams to be found anywhere in the country.

It borders two fine courses, Western Gailes and Glasgow Gailes with Barassie not too far away and Royal Troon and Prestwick within shouting distance. The ambition is that the new course will more than earn its place among such exalted company.

Ironically the man charged with ensuring the project comes in on schedule and on budget is from the east. Alistair Connell, was brought in as Golf Course Director and is relishing the opportunity of being involved in such a wonderful project.

"There would be no point in building a new course which was inferior to the great courses it has around it. Southern Gailes is going to be a traditional Ayrshire golf course with a traditional Ayrshire clubhouse while we also have 40 executive style villas and a hotel with leisure facilities," said Alistair, who explained that it would be a pay and play course aimed at the American market as well as local golfers.

"The land is probably one of the last traditional links sites in Scotland and

is certainly one of the last traditional links sites in the west of Scotland.

"It is not on the actual coast but is within 400-500 yards of the sea and the aim is to create a links golf course," he explained, as we drove around the course.

Southern Gailes was conceived when Irvine Development Council decided that it wanted to develop an area of wasteland and put the project out to tender.

"It could have become industrial units or anything really but our company, the only one which was proposing a golf course, was the successful bidder.

The next step was to appoint an architect and such was Kyle Phillips' reputation, having made such a magnificent job with Kingsbarns, he was asked to look at the site.

"Everyone knows he designed Kingsbarns on the east coast which is a pedigree golf course and the Directors of the company felt he was the man for this one. He looked at it and was very upbeat about what he found," he recalled.

The original routing plan was completed in June 2000 and the sod cutting ceremony performed in August of last year.

Kyle has visited the site every four or five weeks since and there have been considerable changes to his original thoughts and designs.

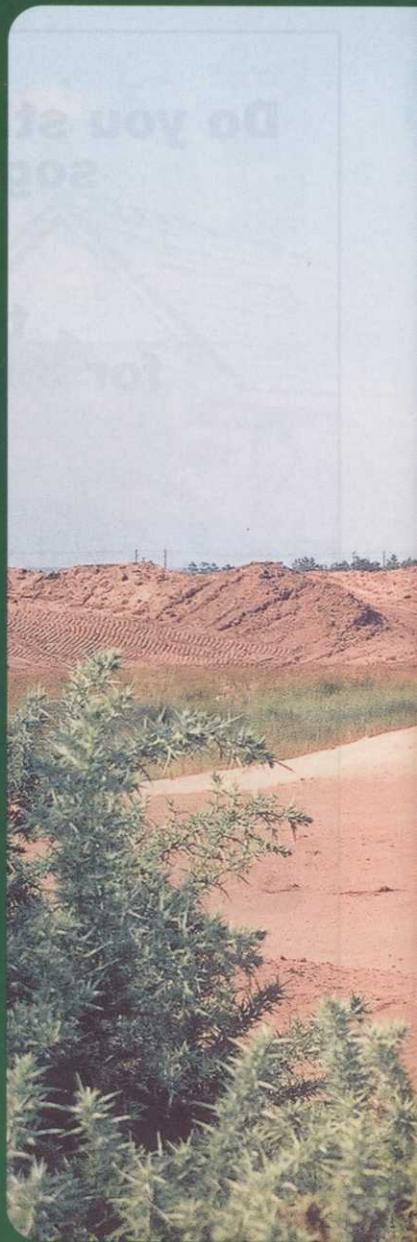
"You can easily do contour drawings but when you see the earth moving you can tweak the design then," explained Alistair.

Kyle Phillips has used the four corners of the compass on the design and has cleverly shielded the golfer from the massive paper mill building which is a few hundred yards from the site on the vast majority of the holes.

"It is a bit of an eyesore and if people are here to play golf they'd rather be looking out to sea than at a paper mill," he said.

The course also boasts the distinctive Phillips' greens.

"He has his own thoughts about greens. You could say that some of





One of the distinctive Kyle Phillips greens under construction.

into," said Alistair, who currently works four days a week at Southern Gailes.

"My role now is Golf Course Director and I'm part of a team of directors and it is my role to oversee the construction of the course, act as the middle man between Kyle Phillips and the Directors and grow in the course to a playable standard."

One of the main decisions taken was to put together an in-house team to do the construction.

"To construct a golf course you can have an open cheque book but we had a budget to build a course and felt that it could be done in-house at a cost that wouldn't frighten anyone off. We've proved it can be done. We've used a subcontractor to do some of the muck shifting and hauling of materials and we're still on target to come in on budget.

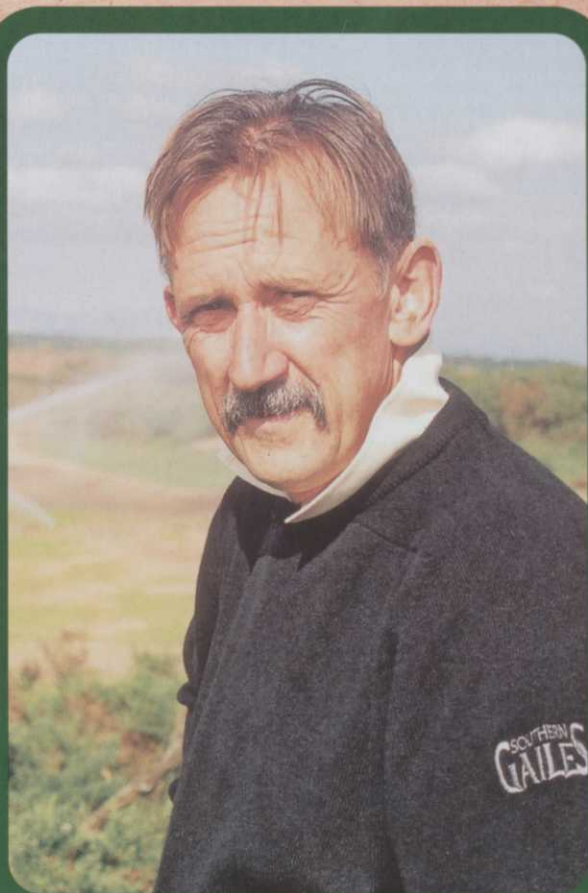
"We also employed one shaper, Jeff Ppaff, an American based in Wales

who was brought in on the recommendation of Kyle Phillips and he does all the shaping to the architectural drawings and works closely with Kyle."

Alistair put together a crew comprising greenkeepers from neighbouring clubs who can do the finishing work and the growing in of the course and they have all had to get used to the problems of working on pure sand.

"Wind is the problem. The name Gailes says it all and for a large percentage of the year there is a wind blowing from one corner of the site and it sometimes proves difficult to stabilise the sand. At the early stage we had a state-of-the-art irrigation system from RainBird installed with which we've managed to minimise the blow-out.

"We have 85% take at the moment and the other 15% can be done during the work carried out over the winter."



Alistair Connell



The rolling dunes are all man-made

The team stripped a 15 acre site on the edge of the course of rootzone and used some of this to build the two and a half metre high dunes which define much of the course's perimeter. Such is the quality of natural rootzone Southern Gailes has been able to sell some of it to off-set cost.

"It's been used to construct football pitches in Glasgow including Murray Park the new state-of-the-art Glasgow Rangers training facility while we've also offered it to other local golf clubs."

Part of the site includes EEC grassland areas and the planning restrictions meant that no dune structure could be higher than two and a half metres above ground.

"We are now on those critical grassland areas which were part of the old overgrown Dundonald golf course over which Southern Gailes is laid out and the grasses have lovely fescues in them and we want to retain those indigenous grasses to retain the links feel."

Another element which had to be taken into consideration was the trees with 32 acres of fir trees on the site.

"The site is about 320 acres but about 33 acres were fir trees planted when the Government were giving tree planting grants in the 70s.

"We had no problem with the planners who said the trees were a blot on the landscape and a contractor came in and gave us a price for removing them and the money we made from the job gave the construction crew and the rest of the staff a nice Christmas party last year."

The areas around the proposed villas are Scottish Natural Heritage and SSSI sites boasting some fine flora and

fauna and Alistair is working closely with Jonathan Smith, of the Scottish Wildlife Group, to ensure everything is done to maintain these areas while there are also trying to establish wetland areas on the course as well.

"Areas of the course are rife with heather and gorse and we are taking plugs of these to transplant in other parts of the course to create an older look," he explained.

At the moment the winter work will be continuing, weather permitting with turf from their 60 area turf nursery being used to for the bunker revetment.

"Hopefully we will have some play in July of next year and if not we'll wait until the August but as we speak we are quietly confident that a given a good break with the weather in the winter and spring we will remain on course."

One of the aspects which pleases Alistair the most is the employment the new project is bringing to the area.

"We feel we are putting something back into Ayrshire by way of jobs. We've got a clubhouse, a golf course and will have a hotel and it will

bring tourists to the area and that brings jobs."

On a personal note Alistair hasn't yet made up his mind about the future.

"I would like to stay for three years and by then this course will be complimenting the other very good courses it has around it, but beyond that I don't know what will happen."

Once matured the new Southern Gailes course will, undoubtedly and some might say unfortunately, become another valuable addition to the west coast's case when it comes to the great east-west debate.

