

Labour of Love for Golf Lovers

It's a little like finding an old antique in the attic, but in this case this old masterpiece is in need of a little bit more than a little clean and a Sotheby's valuation.



It could also read like a script for an Indiana Jones film, or at least a golf version of an Indiana Jones film.

In a nutshell, Gordon Irvine MG visits his local estate agents in Ayrshire, to organise a fishing trip with the factor (land agent) of a Scottish estate when his profession - greenkeeper - crops up in the conversation. The next thing Gordon is offering to fly to the Outer Hebrides to look at a golf course. When he arrives he realises that he's fallen upon a rare treasure.

Let Gordon take up the story.

"The guy in the estate agent had lived and worked in South Uist, in the Outer Hebrides, and mentioned that his friends looked after a nine hole course on the island and could I perhaps give them some professional advice. I know how hard the job is, doing it full time without doing it voluntarily and I had a few air miles spare so I organised to go up one weekend," explained Gordon, who is currently involved in the revamping of Royal Cinque Ports and Rosslare in Ireland.

"When I got there I found Askernish, a nine hole course in poor condition but the volunteers told me that it had been laid out by Old Tom Morris. Looking at the course I was a little sceptical, as you hear these sorts of claims all the time, but then they showed me a newspaper cutting from The Times in 1898, which raved about the course."

Old Tom used to charge £1 a day plus expenses for design work, and played a part in the design of many famous courses, including Prestwick, Royal Dornoch, Muirfield, Carnoustie, Royal County Down, Nairn and Cruden Bay.

But Askernish must be the most remote of all the courses designed by the great man having apparently been persuaded to lay out the course while on a fishing trip to the island in 1891.

"I was told that some of the course had been turned over to the RAF to make a runway in the 1930s and that the original course had been on the links land nearby. We walked over and sure enough you could see this amazing links land and, because it was winter, you could just make out some of the original holes. It was absolutely incredible."

There and then Gordon offered that, rather than help them with their current nine holes, they work to restore the original course and that he would work on the project unpaid and bring in whatever help was required.

As he was working closely with Architect, Martin Ebert, at Cinque Ports, he sold the idea to him with a view to Martin providing half a day's consultancy but he persuaded him with such gusto that Martin became as excited about the project as Gordon himself to the extent that he, like everyone else involved, has gone way over any initial commitment made.

In the report Martin wrote on the course he states: "It is not an exaggeration to say that the duneland to the south of the existing course is the perfect terrain over which to route holes and it is hard to imagine that there has ever been better raw material for the laying out of a course anywhere in the world."

High praise indeed!

"When we went back in February the local volunteers had spoken with some of the older islanders who could recall watching golf being played and with their help we were able to identify some of the holes. As the course was paid for by Lady Cathcart we concluded that the course would have started and finished close to her house. We eventually became confident that we'd located 12 of the original holes and set about laying out the other six.

Gordon has roped in fellow greenkeepers including Alex McCombie, of Parkstone GC, Chris Haspell and a group of greenkeepers from Denmark, to give up time to work on restoring the course as close to its original condition as possible. Adam Lawrence, Editor of The Golf Course Architect magazine and Malcolm Peake, of Temple Golf Club, have also given support and shown great interest in the project.

As part of the promotion of the course, Malcolm Peake has organised for Terry Wogan to make mention of the project on his Radio 2 show, while a package to visit and play the course has been offered as a lot, in the Children in Need Auction. Life Memberships are also available.

"Alistair Beggs is another who has lent his support and he was instrumental in talking with the local crofters who were concerned about the grazing rights they currently enjoy on the land. Alistair was able to tell them that having sheep grazing the golf course was perfectly compatible with a working golf course," explained Gordon.

"We want to use traditional methods wherever possible, the only exception being the greens which will be maintained using more modern methods as we want and need quality putting surfaces. They are small and we will make them bigger unless it were to mean losing the original feel of the green.

"Martin wants to incorporate Royal County Down style bunkering with the marram grass faces and I haven't been involved in the construction of such bunkers so it will be interesting.

"It's a real step back in time. There will be no irrigation so we'll be looking at moisture retention techniques and ensuring that we don't disturb the growing medium once work has been carried out. What we do must be sustainable," said Gordon, who is also training the island volunteers, who are heavily involved in the project, in greenkeeping, as they will be maintaining the course in the long term. Colin MacGregor is the man who has been responsible for maintaining the existing course virtually single handed and he will carry on his good work once everything has been completed.

No drainage will be required as the course is so free draining, while tees will be turfed with local turf taken from the fairways of the existing course. Fairways will be mown down from existing grasses with imperfections of levels harrowed and rolled out. The existing soil at the greens is the perfect medium - natural sand enriched with organic matter in the first 150 to 200 mm.

The principle maintenance operations for greens will be top dressing with sand and aeration.

"Realistically I'll be spending a couple of days a month and perhaps the odd week up there and I'm grateful for the great support we have received for some many quarters," he said, adding that Rupert Price of Ransomes Jacobsen and IMG have offered their help.

Speaking with Gordon you can't help but pick up on the excitement and enthusiasm he has for a project which has captivated everyone who has become involved.

"The pace of the project will very much be determined by the amount of support we get and I'd like to thank everyone who has helped so far."