

Course Feature

A Dozen Reasons to Visit Arran

Scott MacCallum jumps on the car ferry to Arran to visit a unique golf course.



Stewart Fotheringham

In my time with Greenkeeper International I have visited over 150 golf clubs spread over the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. I've been to some of the most famous courses in the world, some of the most exclusive clubs in the world and some of the most beautiful courses in the world. I've also visited clubs where the staff have achieved the greenkeeping equivalent of the miracle of the loaves and fishes in making the most, and beyond, of the resources available.

Indeed I believed that I'd encountered every conceivable style and type of golf course, and greenkeeping, experience that there was to be had. That was until I visited Shiskine Golf and Tennis Club on the island of Arran, off the west coast of Scotland. I've seen nine holers, 18 holers, 36 and even 54 holers but never before had I visited a 12 hole golf course!

But don't go away with the idea that Shiskine offers some sort of "Golf Lite" experience offering two thirds of the regular golfing fare. Shiskine is a proper, fun, golf course requiring every club in the bag. It has a range of seven par-3s from 120 yards up to 212 off the yellow tees, four challenging par-4s and a par-5, which comes in at 477 yards, and 506 off the medal tee.



The elevated 5th Medal tee

Indeed it regularly features in the Golf World Top 100 and has been described as "the cult 12-holer at Blackwaterfoot" in reference to the village that is home to the club.

And it is all beautifully maintained by Head Greenkeeper, Stewart Fotheringham, and his team of Assistant, Kenny Gilroy, a recent finalist in the Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year Competition, and summer worker, Lois Hodgart. That's it, and between them they achieve standards and an attention to detail that would do many more heavily staffed clubs proud.

"The plusses of a 12 hole course from a golfer's point of view is that you can be round in an hour and a half. For a lot of people 18 holes are just too many and it's too much time out of a day," explained Stewart, as we walked around the course on a mid-October day with the sun splitting the sky.

"The minuses from our perspective is that the course fills up very quickly and it is difficult after 8am to get anything done out on the main playing areas."

It means early starts for Stewart and Kenny, 5.30am and earlier on occasions, with the main priority cutting. Even then, though, no compromise is sought with hand cutting of the greens the order of the day.



Stewart with Kenny Gilroy and Lois Hodgart

"It looks so much nicer but it takes two of us two hours to cut them rather than one of us an hour and a half on the Toro greens machine, which we sometimes do on Sundays."

Other greenkeeping complications result from the fact that the big event of the year, the Arran Challenge, a 36 hole event, is played for women in October and men in November delays the start of the winter programme. Also being a holiday island there are a lot of country members who tend to use the course in July and August, a time when it would traditionally be busy with visitors so the revenue boost that some clubs get in the summer months is more limited.

A local lad brought up not far from the golf course, Stewart started out as part of a youth opportunity programme and immediately found his vocation.

"I loved being outdoors and even more than that I loved cutting grass. I knew straight away that it was the job for me," he said, with an enthusiasm just as strong as it was 24 years ago when he started.

"I always loved cutting grass, even when I was at home. I also love the smell of grass and I just love keeping things tidy," he said, well aware of the fact that the popular stereotype is of a profession where all people do is cut grass.

"I wouldn't want people thinking that's all we do. It's a small part of what we do but it's what got me hooked initially."

Stewart became full time assistant and then took over as head man in 1989 when he started to put his mark on the course.

"I wanted to introduce more definition to the fairways and create some semi rough so golfers could identify the hole they were playing more easily."

Backed by investment in new kit, including a deep spiker, Stewart also made inroads into the longstanding thatch problem and an intensive aeration programme began to reap its rewards.

"A lot of it was down to having the machinery to do the job but when we started our aeration programme, the surface of the green was lifting because the rooting was so shallow now the rooting is below the hole cutter," he said.

He is also delighted to have been able to build some excellent revetted bunkers for the course.

"We have 10 bunkers in all and I really enjoy working on the bunkers and making them look the part. I've put a few more in and taken some out during the years but there is nothing better than revetting a bunker, standing back and admiring a job well done," said Stewart, who taught himself the art with the aid of books.

With a stream cutting through the course, Stewart has built some fine bridges, complete with non-slip treads to ensure traffic is spread with another of the downsides of a 12 holer being wear area and he is very careful to ensure that he reseeds areas which are suffering from the footfall whenever he can.



The course was originally designed by former Open Champion, Willie Fernie, in 1896 as a nine hole and extended to 18 holes by another Open Champion, Willie Park, in 1912, which included six holes on a hill inland from the rest of the course. When the 1st World War came these six holes fell into disuse and Willie Park was brought back in the '20s to create a stand along 12 holer from what was already there which involved turning Willie Fernie's nine holes inside out retaining only two of the holes in their original form.

In 1936 James Braid was actually commissioned to create a six hole extension to bring the course up to the more conventional number. The

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Course Feature



Distances	Yards	Meters	Par	Yards	Meters	Par	Yards	Meters	Par
1	368	338	4	5	377	4	5	377	4
2	357	328	4	5	368	4	5	368	4
3	323	293	3	9	323	3	9	323	3
4	337	307	3	11	337	3	11	337	3
5	212	192	3	7	212	4	7	212	4
6	296	276	4	3	296	4	3	296	4
OUT		1463	1363	21	1472	22			
7 Hinnaben 162 172 3 10 164 3 10 8 Haden 220 249 4 6 221 4 6 9 Chumabon 477 506 5 2 480 5 2 10 Peadar 150 163 3 12 154 3 12 11 The Millon 186 200 3 4 201 4 4 12 Eilmyry 120 128 3 8 124 3 8 IN 1325 1427 21 1444 22 OUT 1463 1569 21 1472 22 TOTAL 2788 2996 42 2916 44 HANDBAP NET SCORE									

great man produced drawings but the plan was abandoned when the club couldn't secure the ground needed to implement the plan.

That said the 12 holes give the course a unique feel and it's stunning with coastline on two sides complete with rocky cliffs and a view of what is reputed to be the very cave where Robert the Bruce took inspiration from a persistent spider. In the traditional style there are several holes with blind shots and some magnificently placed

high tees, which encourage you to open your shoulders and give it a belt.

Another interesting feature of the club is that the current Captain is Pat Adamson, who is not the Lady Captain but the overall Captain of the Club for this year.

Tennis is another feature of the club with two artificial surface courts, which Stewart is charged with maintaining.

The day before our visit there had been torrential rain that hadn't cleared from the courts and Stewart revealed his plans to drain alongside the courts to ensure dry surfaces more quickly in future.

Arran is Scotland's southerly most island and is 19 miles by 10 miles in size. Despite this it still has room for seven golf courses - Brodick, Corrie, Lamlash, Lochranza, Machrie Bay and Whiting Bay as well as Shiskine - and the greenkeepers form a close-knit community. Each course offers



One of the recently built bridges



One of the club's stunning views

something different and some possess some of the most spectacular scenery to be found anywhere.

"We play an annual Greenkeepers' match, playing the courses on rotation, while we all meet here for a Christmas lunch," said Stewart.

All cope with the difficulties and complication island life brings.

"The biggest thing is haulage and the cost of bringing over fertiliser, seed and the like. We're very lucky as we have our own sand quarry nearby and analysis from Rigby Taylor's Scottish-based lab has shown that it is very good quality with just the right particle size for top dressing," said Stewart, who added that the clubs had long considered the benefits of grouping together to purchase bulk orders but that such a plan hadn't yet got off the ground.

"I'm sure if it were left to the greenkeepers we would be able to make it work," he explained, adding that similar plans for purchasing equipment like a vertidrain, which clubs would only use perhaps a couple of times a year, also had the potential to work.

Machinery servicing and grinding used to be carried out by Shiskine's former assistant but since he retired Nairn Brown had taken the machinery away in the winter and returned it fully serviced and ready.

"If we ever have a break down we'd only have to wait a couple of days for Nairn Brown to come and fix it so it's not an issue at all. If we ever have a problem we do borrow or lend machinery to each other," said Stewart, who was demonstrating the spirit of friendly co-operation at the time by cutting the greens at nearby Machrie Bay Golf Club to allow Head man, David Jeffrey, a holiday.

Not that David would need to return the favour as Stewart can't recall the last time he had more than the odd day off in holiday.

"Holidays? A day off here and there but I've not been away for a full week for years. I don't need holidays," he said, spoken with the conviction of a man who knew that his wife and two children were not within earshot.

MACHINERY INVENTORY

Kubota 5030 with loader
 Ford 1520
 Wiedenmann Terra Spike
 Groundsman Tractor Aerator
 Charterhouse Greens Slitter
 Pro Pass 180 Top Dresser
 Charterhouse Pro Seed Top Dresser
 2 John Deere 220 Greens Machines
 John Deere 260B Tees Machine
 2 Allan Hover Mowers
 2 Echo Strimmers
 Two Tonne Trailer
 Royer Soil Shredder
 Powered Riddle
 2 Toro 3200D Greens and Tees Mowers
 John Deere 3235 Fairway Mower
 Thatchaway Verticut Units
 Wessex Rotary Mower
 2 Farmura F25 Sprayers
 Ryan Turfcutter
 Ransomes Gang Mowers
 Huxley Tv36 Scarifier
 Hunter Jupiter Grinder

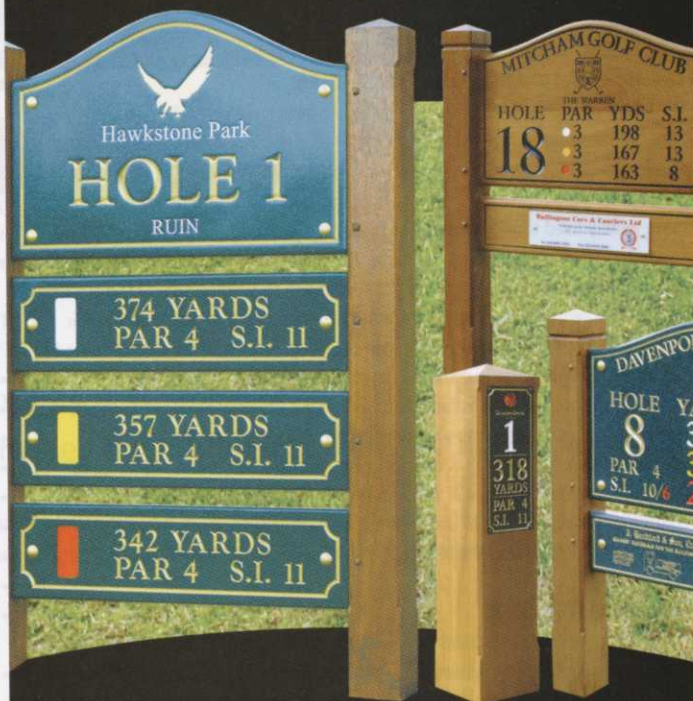


The team has worked hard to bring definition to the fairways

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