



Askernish Adventurers

# A HEBRIDEAN TASK

*Scott MacCallum visits South Uist to see the work being carried out on Askernish and talks with Gordon Irvine about progress*

**Gordon Irvine MG is many things. He's a Master Greenkeeper; he's a Course Manager; an ex General Manager, and currently he's a Consultant to some of the finest courses in the country. But he is also something else. He's the Tony Robinson of Greenkeeping. Gordon might not be starring in Time Team but the work he and his team of volunteers are undertaking on the island of South Uist is just as exciting as any project Baldrick and his archeological colleagues have been up to.**

Gordon is currently fitting in regular visits to the Outer Hebrides where he is carrying out greenkeeping's answer to archeology – uncovering Askernish Golf course which was one of the last courses ever designed by Old Tom Morris back in 1892 and which fell into obscurity in the early part of the last century.

Askernish is not your conventional golf club. There is no sumptuous clubhouse complete with spike bar and locker rooms. In fact outside of a few tin sheds there is nothing to signify a golf club at all, but for a few flagsticks. It is very much golf as it used to be played – golf in the raw.

But once you tee off you are met by a host of excellent golfing challenges, albeit some of which in a stiff wind are a little too tough for all but the better quality players and some of the holes run alongside the beach and are as beautiful as any you would find anywhere in Scotland.

Gordon became caught up in the project a couple of years ago when on a fishing trip to the island and since then it has become something of an obsession seeing him using up much of his free time jumping on planes and heading to the little island off the north west coast of Scotland surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean.

"I'm pleased with the progress we've made so far. It has been slow but this project deserves to have time spent on it because it's so unique and special we wouldn't want to make any mistakes on it," explained Gordon.

Some of the delay has revolved around local politics with crofters suspicious about the consequences and implications of a rediscovered golf course in their back yard.

"We had a seven month delay because of the need to make sure all the paper work was in order. We want to make sure that we are working with the local community so we have been spending a lot of time talking with different local bodies and making sure they were happy with the golf course being here and see the benefits it can bring."

In the early stages Gordon spent a lot of time with architect Martin Ebert walking the site, studying it and attempting to uncover the 18 original holes.

"We'll never be totally sure but we are as confident as we can be that we have picked up the bulk of the old course."

One area with which Gordon and Martin had to work around was the RAF airfield which was cut out of the course in the 1930s, flattening part of the existing course.

"We actually decided to stick to the policy of working only on the land Old Tom had used so we have actually incorporated the runway into the 6th fairway – we've made a feature of it. We thought that would be the fairest way to combine everything," explained Gordon.

Bunkering was another issue which had to be resolved.

"We've identified five areas which we considered to be bunkers, but they may have been places which sheep scraped out for shelter and which subsequently became bunkers. They might not be in the ideal area for the modern game but it fits into the ethos and we will maintain them as bunkers."

During last winter with the help of some greenkeeping friends including,

Euan Grant and Chris Haspell, Gordon spent three weeks on construction work – repairing rabbit damage on greens, building tees and attempting to reinstate a lot of the playing surfaces.

“Chris helped me in the early stages to stake out holes and Euan dropped in for a couple of days and built us two tees. But we’ve also had great help from many others including Alistair Beggs, of the STRI, on agronomic issues; Steve Isaac, of the R&A and Keith Duff, formerly the Chief Scientist of English Nature.

“Keith’s advice on the paper work side and making sure we had a sustainable policy was invaluable. He also advising that having an animal grazing on the course was to be encouraged and this also helped with the concerns of the crofters.”

The man charged with raising both funds and profile for Askernish is well known Temple Golf Club man, Malcolm Peake, whom Gordon knew well from their joint involvement with Royal Cinque Ports, in Deal.

Malcolm’s passion for traditional golf and general enthusiasm and drive made him the ideal man to take on the mammoth challenge of making Askernish a must visit golfing destination.

Thanks to Malcolm Ransomes Jacobsen got to hear of the project and so well did he sell the project that Managing Director, David Withers, offered some kit to assist with the maintenance of the course.

“We were absolutely overwhelmed by the help we got from Ransomes Jacobsen. We never expected them to do as much as they did for us,” said Gordon.

“They sent us a lightweight fairway mower so we now have fairways. If we’d stuck with the old trailed gangs it would taken us a long time to get to where we are now, and there would have been a lot more tractor damage. They also sent us a top dresser which has allowed us to get our top dressing down which otherwise would have been down by a barrow and shovel and they sent us a top of the range hand mower which has allowed us to tackle the delicate contours of the greens.”

Malcolm led a party of newly signed up Askernish Life Members, interested journalists, Keith Duff and David Withers to South Uist in September to play the course and experience island life.

Hosted by larger than life Club President, Ralph Thompson, the visitors were treated to some wonderful hospitality and an early chance to play the golf course – it won’t open officially until next August. They also met some of the volunteers who have taken the project to their hearts and worked with Gordon to improve the golf course.

“Two of them, Alan and Colin, are now working as full time greenkeepers which is fantastic because it shows that the golf course is contributing to the island.

“I visit the island every month and do a bit of on-site training before leaving the guys with a small programme to follow,” said Gordon, who delivered a passionate and informative presentation on the work at the course to the guests at the end of one of the dinners during their stay.

Leaving novice greenkeepers for a month is something which many Course Managers would have nightmares about but Gordon is delighted with the progress that has gone on during his times away from the project.

“They are all very mechanically minded, many of them having come from an agricultural background so they can turn their hands to what you ask them very quickly but the only thing I’ve really found is the need to explain to them how fragile a lot of the contours are and that those contours are what we are trying to keep.”



Keith Duff (right) with his wife and local volunteer, Colin McGregor





With that in mind Gordon is adamant that wherever possible he wants them working with hand tools even if it means the project working at a slower rate. It must be done this way to retain the character.”

Asked what has shocked or surprised him at Askernish Gordon comes up with two very interesting observations.

“It’s the strength of the Atlantic Ocean. It is absolutely unbelievable. I had two fairways coming along nicely and arrived back to discover them both under eight inches of sand, which had come in over the space of three days. It is staggering to consider the power needed to do that.” It also demonstrated just how hardy were the fescues which were swamped by the sand.

“Six weeks later without us moving the sand the fairways were playable again as the grass had absorbed the sand and worked its way through without any artificial aid. It was amazing to see.”

The other area that has surprised him was in the quality of some of the turf that he found.

“Some of the best quality grass was under some compaction from vehicles and tractors going up and down to the beach. It certainly opened my eyes and showed that by using moderate levels of compaction you can perhaps help prevent weed invasion. That’s been very interesting.”

Speaking with Gordon you sense that he has been well and truly won over by South Uist and Askernish and he admits that if he were to win the lottery he’d love to move over permanently and treat the course as a labour of love.

One of the biggest hurdles is the course’s inaccessibility given that there are only two flights from Glasgow each day and if the plane is full there is a possibility your clubs might have to join you on a later flight.



Two of the island volunteers



Gordon Irvine MG



The Ransomes Jacobsen Triple which has made such a difference

“At the end of the day if a course is worth playing people will make the effort. We’ve seen that at places like Machrihanish, Royal Dornoch and Skibo Castle. People will make an extra effort to experience something special and undoubtedly Askernish is special enough to attract people to come and play it. The big challenge is whether they have ever played anything as exposed, as it is as much a battle against the elements as it is against the course itself. It’s quite unique in that way,” said Gordon, whose dream for the island is ultimately to make it a dedicated links resort with perhaps a total of three or four links courses for people to experience.

The next stages are two fold. He is taking one of the full time greenkeepers under his wing who now sees greenkeeping as a career – having him shadow Gordon at some of his other courses in Ireland and at Cinque Ports to get a feel for greenkeeping as a whole while he has also signed up for Elmwood College – while his is putting together another team of volunteers for this winter’s work.

“We have more work to do on reinstating the greens and taking care of rabbit warrens and putting in some more forward tees – not the modern type but teeing platforms just to give golfers a level stance. We also have three of the holes at the end of the course which are further behind, because of the discussions with the crofters, which need to catch up. “The project will take time and deserves to. It has staggering potential but could be easily damaged and we are determined that we won’t make mistakes with it.”

If anyone wishes to volunteer to help at Askernish they should email Gordon at [ormegagi@hotmail.com](mailto:ormegagi@hotmail.com) Gordon has also promised keep anyone interested in the project up to date by sending out pictures.