

NORTHERN NEW BOYS

FEATURE

Machrihanish Dunes

Scotland is awash with exciting new golf developments. Mark Alexander speaks to the greenkeepers behind some of the most impressive new courses

The golfing landscape of Scotland is changing. The old guard of iconic courses is being joined by a new breed of designs etched out of the earth with more than a respectful nod towards the heritage of the past. With towering dunes, unforgiving gorse bushes and fast-running fairways, as well as a warming nip at the 19th hole, these new golf courses are designed to rub shoulders with the principalities of Troon and Dornoch and the legend of Machrihanish.

Despite the formidable legacy of Scotland's famous links, these young upstarts are far from shrinking violets, each being set in remarkable surroundings and featuring routings that emulate the styles of a bygone era. Rather than shirking away from their forbearers' achievements, this new lot are taking them head on.

Machrihanish Dunes

On a remote and wayward spindle of land that forms the Mull of Kintyre on Scotland's West coast, an audacious £30 million investment by an international business consortium is creating an oceanfront course that defies the modern principles of design and construction. Laid out by David McLay Kidd, the architect behind Brandon Dunes in Oregon, Queenwood and the new Castle Course in St Andrews, Machrihanish Dunes will follow the natural twists and turns of this prime

piece of links land for 7,300 yards. With six greens and five tees bordering the sea, it will be exposed to all that Scotland's magical west coast can throw at it.

The place is already home to the legendary Machrihanish course, made famous by its 428-yard, opening hole Battery which seems destined to be forever known as the greatest opening hole in golf. It's certainly the type of hole that every golfer would love to play with an opening drive that crosses the crashing waves that pummel Machrihanish Bay. Saying that, the rest of it isn't bad either. In fact parts of this ancient links look as if they have been touched by God, as Old Tom Morris implied when he came here to extend the original 10-hole course in 1879.

Today another keeper of the greens has arrived from St Andrews to make a bit of history. Euan Grant left his post as Head Greenkeeper of the Old Course in 2007. He was the eighth man to take up the post since Old Tom's retirement in 1903. He had been in St Andrews for just three years.

"After having done an Open in 2005, I'd pretty much realised my greenkeeping goals," he recalls.

"I was in a comfort zone and I felt I needed to push myself and the opportunities to do that weren't in St Andrews. At the end of my time there, I was responsible for a big team with a seemingly empty pot of money. We cut grass, raked bunkers and changed holes, but I wanted more. I wanted to make an impact."

He couldn't have chosen a better place. Machrihanish Dunes isn't merely a new links



Euan Grant, at his desk.

course cleverly positioned next to an old master. Brightside Leisure Development, the team behind the project, has already acquired two hotels in the area with the first reopening this summer sporting a new, boutique look. There are plans for luxury villas and a spectacular clubhouse as well as other projects in the offing.

And the course itself is certainly an eye-opener. Spread over 259 acres of prime links land, the course falls under a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Such a classification would make most developers wince, just ask Donald Trump, but Grant suggests the restrictions that surround the course and its construction have created a unique opportunity to shape golf holes as they were done in Old Tom's days.

"If you can imagine a modern architect sitting in his office designing a golf course to fit into a piece of land, they'd move hill and mountains to make it work," said Grant.

"We couldn't do that. The green sites were identified, rabbit damage became the bunkers



Rowallan Castle

and tee positions were shifted within reason to make the bunkers hazards. David routed the golf course through the natural landform, which is how it used to happen.”

In fact, the greens and tees were constructed by stripping turf off pre-determined areas and were then shaped and seeded. Beyond that, the team was severely restricted in what they could do but were required to tie in the green surrounds with the native fauna and landforms. More time-consuming was the redistribution of the stripped turf around the site, as Grant explains.

“Bare areas could only be filled with turf from the site, so when greens were stripped of turf, that turf was used to fill in damaged areas but the aspect, distance from the shoreline and elevation had to be similar. So a south-facing slope, three metres above sea level had to go to a south-facing slope, three metres above sea level. It was like a patchwork quilt and very labour intensive but we can genuinely say we did things correctly.”

Machrihanish Dunes is due to open next year.

Rowallan Castle

The Mull of Kintyre isn't the only place that presents a challenge for new golf developments. Just across the North Channel in Ayrshire, a prestigious golf, hotel and leisure complex is being developed on 600 acres of historic countryside. With an anticipated total spend of £70 million, Rowallan Castle Golf Club features two beautiful castles surrounded by rolling parklands. The oldest castle dates back to the 13th century and is the



Robert Johnson

birthplace of Elizabeth Muir; mother of Robert II the first Stewart king of Scotland. The second was added in the late 19th century and will provide the main accommodation for the new resort.

The estate was bought by Niall Campbell 19 years ago from Lord Rowallan's Trustees. It was a home-coming for Campbell, whose ancestors owned the estate between 1690 and the late 19th century, and became the setting for local-boy Colin Montgomerie's first design on home soil. Yet despite the neighbourhood ties, it took 12 years to get permission to develop the land and buildings, all of which are listed. The venture went to a full public enquiry in 1997 and eventually received full planning consent in 2001.

“There's quite a bit of legislation involved in this place, which I'm still coming to terms with,” said Robert Johnson, Rowallan's Superintendent.

“One of the reasons for the deep bunkering

is that the architect was restricted in how much earth he could move, so the bunkering, contouring of the greens and green complexes was how he made his mark on the golf course.”

After an 11-year stint at nearby Williamwood Golf Club and four years before that at Newport Golf Club, Johnston jumped at the chance of getting involved in a new-build project.

“Ross McMurray, the architect at European Golf Design, asked Jim Mackenzie, Celtic Manor's Director of Golf, if he knew anybody who would be interested in doing the grow-in and he suggested me,” said Johnston.

“I'd never been involved at such an early stage. I'd maintained golf courses, obviously, and I'd been involved in some reconstruction and design changes but to get in when the thing was just starting, well, not everybody gets that opportunity.”

Johnston arrived on site in June 2007, by which time the course was already taking shape.

“When I arrived, 50% of the construction work had been done and you could already see it was going to be a fantastic golf course,” he said.

He joined two of the estate's maintenance staff, who he's training up, and now hopes to amass a 10-man team with seasonals by the time the course is up and running.

Although the course is certainly taking shape, there's still plenty to do. “We're thinking along the lines of a full, perforated drainage system,” said Johnston.

“We've got a flash-flood system and existing field drainage at the moment, so it's not that we



don't have drainage; it's just that we don't have sufficient drainage to make this a top-class golf resort at the moment. Part of my brief is to look at the priority areas that are must-drain areas such as walk-ons, walk-offs, greens and tees. It's going to be an ongoing process."

The final spec looks impressive. As well as a 70-room hotel designed under the supervision of renowned hotelier Gordon Campbell Gray, there will also be a state-of-the-art spa, cinema and nine-hole par-three course as well as Europe's only playable 19th hole on the main course.

"The expectations are high," said Johnston. "It's a Colin Montgomerie course so it's got to be the top of the tree as far as presentation and

management is concerned. As a career move, it's a big step up the ladder."

Rowallan Castle Golf Club is expected to open officially next year.

Castle Stuart Golf Links

Located six miles east of Inverness and banking onto the Moray Firth, the site for Castle Stuart Golf Links provides fantastic views across the Kessock Bridge to the Black Isle and also to Castle Stuart itself. The stunning location of this new pay-and-play course is no accident however. The project's developer and co-designer has something of a reputation for hunting down

tracks with unbelievable potential and it looks like he's done it again.

Mark Parsinen made his name when he transformed a stretch of unremarkable Fife farmland into the striking contours of Kingsbarns. Here too, views played a major part in creating a course that regularly appears at the top of many golfers' wish lists.

His much-anticipated return to golf course development has utilised the same design principles that made Kingsbarns such an instant success but with the added interest of a 57-room boutique hotel with spa facilities, 148 resort-ownership lodges and apartments and a possible second links course. That said, much of the 7,000-yard course has



been routed along the coast in a similar fashion to Kingsbarns and all the holes have been orientated to take advantage of noted landmarks.

The layout, which was completed by Parsinen and Gil Hanse, was hugely dependant on the existing scenery and the landscape mosaic created by the onsite team, as Course Manager Chris Haspell explained. "The landscape has been really important to Mark and Gil, but we've also transported in heather and marim. When we've finished, we'll have planted around 5,000m² of sustainable heather and used about 200,000 plants to create that dune-edge look."

Haspell, who's been responsible for seeding and shaping at Castle Stuart and originally from Cheshire, ended a 12-year placement in Denmark to be a part of the project.

"The reputation of Kingsbarns was a big draw

as was working with Mark. The location was also important because it's nice to be in the Highlands. I mean, just look around you."

The setting is certainly stunning and the design is equally impressive which must have resonated with Haspell who was designing, building and remodelling golf courses in Denmark before his move to Scotland. But despite his construction credentials he believes his knowledge of fescue grasses secured him the job.

"I've done a lot of work with fescues and that's what they wanted to use here. Because of environmental restrictions in Denmark, we'd been dealing with it for a long time, indeed the six courses that I designed and built over there were done with pure fescue. So it just snowballed from there."

Apart from the location and specific challenges

associated with new builds, Haspell said working with Parsinen has been an extraordinary learning experience.

"In the 23 years I've worked in golf, working with Mark definitely was the best year for learning. Mark tends to have a view on things which is so detailed it's frightening. For example, the 13th green's level was set six inches higher so you couldn't see anyone on the fairway behind it but you still had the views to the Kessock Bridge. To almost get inside Mark's head and shape the things he wants has been fantastic."

Castle Stuart Golf Links is set to open in 2009.

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Castle Stuart Golf Links



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