

Askernish

Lost and found

Malcolm Peake tells the fascinating tale of how an enterprising group of greenkeepers helped regenerate a 'lost' golf course in the Outer Hebrides



The story of Askernish Golf Club on the west coast of South Uist in the Outer Hebrides began in 1891 when Lady Cathcart invited Old Tom Morris, keeper of the green at St Andrews and the first known course architect, to lay out a golf course. Old Tom described the land as “second to none in the various elements which go to make a very good golf course.”

In the spring of 2006 I took a call from Gordon Irvine MG. Gordon told me what seemed an unlikely story of finding a lost Old Tom Morris golf course that had fallen into disrepair while on a fishing trip. He convinced golf course architect Martin Ebert, Adam Lawrence, editor of *Golf Course Architect*, and Chris Haspell, Head Greenkeeper at Castle Stuart, to go to this isolated island, where they found the course.

They identified the probable routing through the dunes, and the sites of tees and greens. The club was still in existence, and played golf on nine simplistic holes on the edge of the dunes, but they had little money, facilities or machinery.

Gordon asked me to help raise funds and to promote the restoration of the golf course, but I needed to see this site for myself. On arrival I saw the towering dunes above the white sand beach.

I walked the incredibly fertile Machair, which is naturally reclaimed land from the beach. It was early summer and the floor was a carpet of rich and diverse colour containing, over 200 species of wildflowers.

I could identify buttercup, daisies, gentians, harebells, numerous orchids, ragged robin, and red clover amongst the profusion of herbage, and on the beach there were gulls, lapwings, oystercatchers, and ringed plover.

I approached friends for practical help. Amongst others, JHS carpets donated spike proof carpet for the proposed clubhouse, and the Berkshire GC donated redundant furniture.

The R&A provided initial financial support, and Ransomes Jacobsen supplied machinery for maintaining the golf course, seven years later RJ are still generously supporting the project.

When Gordon started the restoration of the golf course in 2006 the biggest challenge was the weather. The Outer Hebrides suffers from some of the most extreme weather in the UK, with severe gales and storms regularly battering the

Western Isles. He began the restoration with the help of Allan MacDonald, now Head Greenkeeper at Askernish, and Euan Grant, then Head Greenkeeper of the Old Course, which was a nice link with Old Tom.

During the restoration, construction materials were frequently blown away and at other times sand from the beach was blown onto the previous days' work.

The 11th green sitting just above the beach was a particular challenge, and a temporary four foot turf wall was eventually built around the green to protect the area whilst work was underway. Seaweed was sourced locally which stabilised the sand, adding organic material which also helped moisture retention.

Rabbit damage was another huge problem. When repairing a rabbit hole a whole warren would often be revealed, and the area then had to be totally restored and turfed. In the early days some of the local crofters did not support the restoration of the course, and when work started in a new area, the next day they discovered cattle had been moved to graze on the new turf.

Now these issues have been resolved and crofter and golfers work in harmony in this wonderful environment.

Allan MacDonald said: “I cannot stress enough how grateful we are to Ransomes Jacobsen for their help, we would not have been able to produce the course we have without the use of their machinery.” The course has been developed in the most sustainable way using the native fescue grasses.

All greenkeeping activities are aimed at promoting these species, which are slow growing, disease and drought resistant, which is vital with no irrigation system.

Askernish is situated in one of the wettest parts of Europe with 1800mm annual rainfall, but there have been two six-week periods without rain, yet the deep rooted native species have survived.

The original contouring of the green surfaces requires a height of cut that would not be playable on greens not dominated by native fescue.

The course not only gives immense pleasure to golfers, but has been used as a fine educational tool funded by The R&A with students from all over the world having the opportunity to see how golf evolved. The Student Sustainability Project is hosted by Askernish, and welcomes six greenkeeping



RIGHT: Head greenkeeper Allan MacDonald with Gordon Irvine





about the author



Malcolm Peake

Malcolm Peake was Chairman of Green then Course Consultant at Temple GC in Berkshire. He has visited many golf courses around the world and also worked on the R&A Golf Course Advisory Panel. He is author of "Confessions of a Chairman of Green" and "A Natural Course for Golf" and writes articles for a variety of golf magazines.

students from Elmwood and Myerscough Colleges. The students receive tutorials, workshop and practical activities on how to build and maintain a golf course in a sustainable way (read Geoff Fenn's story from his visit on the following pages).

Well over a hundred golfers from across the world enjoyed pitting their wits against the course at the recent Askernish Open.

Although they may not have been aware that electricity to the clubhouse is supplied from its own wind turbine, with excess going into the national grid, reducing its carbon footprint.

The practice range with nearby putting and chipping green gives

plenty of scope for the PGA qualified teachers.

The new machinery compound/indoor golf centre has nets and artificial putting green to hone technique or warm up.

Golfers can even have their swings filmed and analysed on a large screen, which was recently donated by Panasonic.

In winter cattle and sheep graze the fairways and in summer with the machair a profusion of flora, the sea a shade of azure and with the tide out and the white shell beach revealed, there is no better place to play golf.

Artificial fertilisers and herbicides are prohibited from use on the course.

This move has received great plaudits from environmental bodies who have branded Askernish "the most natural course in the world." But best of all the islanders have a superb links, with the restoration completed in eight years.

Askernish is a golf course for aficionados of real golf, who like to use their imagination and skill on a course which sits naturally in its environment.

This project is a wonderful example of the spirit of enterprise by multi-skilled community with the help of an industry renowned for its generosity of spirit, and intrigued by the romance of this exceptional opportunity to restore an Old Tom Morris masterpiece.

