

Paradise regained

An Old Tom Morris classic lay hidden among the South Uist dunes at Askernish for decades until a chance meeting sparked a revival that will see it re-open for play this year. Jeremy Ellwood went to investigate

Old Tom's pulpit: the 16th at Askernish



A short twin-prop hop to the Isles



The 7th: golf as nature intended

Askernish: a brief history

1891 Old Tom Morris lays out 18-hole course at the request of Sir Reginald and Lady Catchart

Estates, Tim Atkinson, and course consultant, Gordon Irvine, sets wheels of rediscovery in motion

1936 Course falls into disuse; 12 new holes created on flatter land

DECEMBER 2005 Irvine and Ralph Thompson (Askernish chairman) set off in search of the lost holes

1960s Askernish at its busiest due to military bases on island

MARCH 2006 Work starts on reinstating Old Tom's course

1970 Nine new holes laid out to replace the 1930s 12-holer

MAY 2008 Course set to re-open

SEPTEMBER 2005 Conversation between Factor of South Uist

SUMMER 2008 Grand re-opening event planned (exact date TBA)

Remote windswept links or immaculately presented inland track? Both have much to commend them, but given the choice I'd always plump for the former, which is how I've come to find myself killing four hours at Glasgow airport one autumn afternoon. I'm en route from Gatwick to Benbecula, the Hebridean island wedged between the two Uists to the west of Skye. South Uist is my ultimate destination and more precisely, Askernish Golf Club... home to an Old Tom Morris course you've probably never heard of.

The trip is being hosted by Malcolm Peake, a staunch supporter of sustainable golf course management, and when the itinerary hit the office I made an instant pitch for it due to its unique nature. Old Tom courses on pure rugged linksland are nothing new, but what's so special about Askernish is that it had been a sleeping giant hidden among the dunes since being abandoned in the 1930s, until a chance meeting in 2005 proved the catalyst for it to be woken from its 70-year slumber.

Gordon Irvine, a golf course consultant and keen angler, was chatting about fishing one day to Tim Atkinson, the island's factor (or estate manager), when Atkinson mentioned the island was home to an 18-hole course designed by someone famous that had long since fallen into disrepair. Irvine is something of a links specialist with an impressive CV that defies his youthful appearance. He worked at Turnberry throughout the 1980s, and again in 1994 to help prepare the course for the Open. More recently he has acted in a consultancy capacity on the course refurbishment project at Royal Cinque Ports in Kent.

So, understandably fascinated and eager to find out more, Irvine made contact with Ralph Thompson, chairman of the now 9-hole club at Askernish, who confirmed that the name in question was Old Tom Morris, but that no-one knew much about it. Intrigued to learn about an Old Tom Morris course he'd never heard of, and initially sceptical such a course actually existed even if now hidden under a sea of sand,

Irvine ventured north to investigate, before embarking on some serious detective work in December 2005. The rest will soon be history once more.

As I wander through the airport ahead of my own journey of Askernish discovery, my eye is drawn to a blonde in uniform young enough to be my daughter striding purposefully towards the departure gates. An hour later I feel old when I spot her again at the controls of the modest 30-seater I board for my short flight to the Hebrides. The temperature on arrival is semi-Baltic, and as I'm reacquainted with my clubs I notice the terrorist threat hasn't gone unnoticed even in this remote outpost with granite boulders guarding the terminal building to prevent devious minds bringing havoc to the Western Isles.

Next day we head for the links from our Borrodale Hotel base in distinctly unpromising weather, and before I know it my first tee shot

is sailing right never to be seen again. First lesson – avoid the rough at all costs. Chairman Ralph explains that it isn't always like this, but the summer weather has left the rough a little rampant. If Sergio Garcia were here he'd no doubt be seeking a maternal shoulder to cry on.

After a slowish start things begin to build from the tough par-4 4th, and as we walk along the expansive 6th fairway, Ralph explains that when Old Tom's course was abandoned this formed a landing strip for small planes carrying the gentry to the island to plunder its rich hunting and fishing stock. We climb a crest to the 7th tee and for the first time I see exactly what all the Old Tom fuss is about. To the right, the Atlantic. Cascading away before me, a magnificent brutally hard links par-4, so natural-looking that one can only assume the Almighty had golf alone in mind when crafting this particular stretch of coast.

From here you play several holes among the most striking linksland before reaching the 11th tee – a mind-boggling 190-yard par-3 played >>





The dogleg 9th demands a very precise approach

“ This living golf museum’s broken history has afforded a small band of Hebrideans the rare chance to retrace an old master’s steps ”

across a valley from the peak of one towering dune to another just feet from the Atlantic shore. The green is one of the largest on the links but looks anything but as your hand reaches instinctively for the timber you know it will take to make the full carry into a freshening breeze.

Beyond here one or two holes are not yet ready, so we play in from the 14th, taking in the signature 16th, known as “Old Tom’s Pulpit” due to its raised green – a tiny shelf as tricky to hit downwind with a wedge as into the wind with a 4-iron. Originally, it may have been a landing area for shots to run down to a green in the rear right hollow, and there is talk of shaving the bank a little to create a two-tier green.

This highlights one of the problems facing the restoration team – with no firm evidence of Old Tom’s routing ever coming to light, how can they be sure they’re faithfully recreating exactly what was there? The answer is they can’t, but Irvine believes the vast majority of holes will be very much as Old Tom’s eye originally saw them. What is known for sure is that the demanding 7th was the 1st in Old Tom’s day, and we should be thankful that Irvine’s team have granted us a six-hole warm-up before facing this fearsome hole at Askernish reincarnate.

Even if no-one can say for sure that the restored layout precisely mirrors the original it doesn’t really matter, for either way this is a living golf museum like no other with its broken history affording a small band of Hebrideans the rare chance to retrace an old master’s steps. Rather than rearranging the landscape to suit, it’s about fitting a golf course into the existing terrain – the very same brief Old Tom would have worked to in 1891 – resulting in the pure unspoilt feel you get at courses like James Braid’s Brora or Old Tom’s raw Royal North Devon jewel. It will be a work in progress for years, but then isn’t every golf course really? It’s just that this one is seeking to restore in two years what had been lost over the previous 70.

Those keen to come and see for themselves may need to set aside their usual expectations over golf course conditioning as the course beds back in. The greens are essentially being mown out of the wild grasses that have recolonised them since the 1930s, so may never be the billiard-table green swards to which many have become accustomed. Given time, Irvine assures me they’ll be perfectly puttable and there are signs of this already in places, despite the first mower blades only taking to the grass weeks earlier. But the dedicated team aren’t aspiring to Hampton Court perfection so much as restoring Askernish to its former raw glory. So maintenance will focus on sustainability and simplicity, relying on sand from the dunes to top-dress and even out the humps and hollows, and mother nature to supply the water.

THE LURE OF THE LINKS

Day two of my trip dawns and with it the enticing prospect of a Stableford over the 15 prepared holes, with everyone sensing level twos will comfortably secure victory. I get my head round the greens a little better and my 26 points proves good enough for the green jacket. Given the island’s climate it’s no surprise it’s a more padded garment than the one Zach Johnson eased himself into at Augusta last April.

The urge to linger over the lunchtime soup and sandwiches before taking a well-earned siesta is strong. But though the body is unwilling, the mind won’t let things rest and as the sun breaks through I’m amazed to hear my own voice utter, “anyone up for a few more holes?” I get one taker – Phil Sparks, a pro and qualified golf course architect from Kent – and minutes later we’re on the spectacular 7th tee once more.

These extra holes in the golden twilight prove a kind of spiritual adventure for us both. “That looks like it could have been a green over there,” we muse in our new roles as amateur golf course detectives



Topping up at the 4x4 halfway hut



seeking to uncover what others may somehow have missed. As we shake hands on the 18th green we reflect on two days that have provided a golfing experience like none before.

If you come expecting to find a pristine layout among these imposing dunes you may walk away a tad non-plussed; if you come eager to see how a few passionate souls have set about recreating a long-abandoned classic as authentically as possible, with only limited funds and resources, you will surely walk away marvelling at their endeavours. I’m firmly in the latter camp.

A number of golfers will be waiting anxiously for precious invites to drop through their letterboxes any day now from a majestic golf club beginning with the letter “A”. Count me among them, though I’d like mine to be from a club at the opposite end of the manicure spectrum to Augusta. So chairman Ralph, if you’re reading, please take note – there is one humble golf journalist who’d like nothing more than for an envelope to fall on his doormat in early 2008 requesting the pleasure of his company at Askernish Golf Club’s grand re-opening. Sorry, but I’ve never really been one for subtle hints...



The 11th green sits right on the shore



South Uist’s beautiful ocean scenery

Top Trump



Soon to be Trump’s latest golf course?

In an age of conservation, links projects in the UK are few and far between, so Donald Trump’s plans for a magnificent new course in the Balmedie dunes on the Menie Estate near Aberdeen have provoked their fair share of controversy. Proposals for Trump International Golf Links include two golf courses, a five-star luxury hotel, 1500 houses and other top class facilities. Opponents say the development on a site of special scientific interest will be bad news for the environment; Trump and his supporters say it will generate 5000 jobs and

bring more than £60million a year into the local economy. Outline consent for the project was approved by Aberdeen City Council in late November, but the final say rests with the Scottish Executive. If, as now seems likely, it does proceed, rest assured Trump’s budget will contain several more zeros than the Askernish Team’s! For more information, and amazing pictures of the breathtaking dunes, log on to trumpgolfscotland.com and imagine just how spectacular the course will be if it does get the Scottish Executive’s green light.