

A journey back in time

On a recent trip back home to his native Scotland, Sanctuary Cove superintendent Robin Doodson took the opportunity to take in a few of his favourite courses including Royal Troon and Turnberry. However, it was a visit to the recently opened Machrihanish Dunes on the Mull of Kintyre which proved the most intriguing given its unique minimalist approach to golf course maintenance.

You know you're in for something a little different when you step on to Machrihanish Dunes in Scotland. It is the first golf course in the country to be built on an existing 'Site of Special Scientific Interest' which brought about unprecedented environmental and planning scrutiny

Esteemed Scottish golf course architect David Mclay Kidd was entrusted with gently routing the golf course through the wild dunes. His other recent works include the highly acclaimed Bandon Dunes in Oregon, USA and The Castle Course at St. Andrews. In shaping the golf course only seven of the 93 hectares of the site were disturbed. Only the tees and greens were shaped. The fairways were simply mown out of the dunes with no overseeding allowed to take place.

MAINTENANCE CHALLENGES

The real challenge at Machrihanish Dunes is maintaining the golf course under very strict environmental constraints. This task has been given to "keeper of the green" Keith Martin. Keith has a long and illustrious career on the links courses of Scotland having started his career working under George Brown at Turnberry.

From Turnberry Keith went on to spend 10 years working at the Old Course at St. Andrews, including two Open Championships. After a short spell in Holland, Keith spent some time working under our very own David Warwick at Avondale Golf Club in Sydney.

On returning to Scotland Keith took a position working on the construction of Machrihanish Dunes working under Euan Grant. When Euan left to take on the course manager's position at Turnberry, Keith stepped into the top job. Keith oversees a crew of 12 staff which looks after 18 holes, practice facilities and resort maintenance. The temporary maintenance facility is a series of buildings which interestingly used to be a US Airforce base.

Machrihanish Dunes was opened in July 2009 to coincide with The Open Championship being held across the Firth of Clyde at Turnberry. The course is situated next to the Old Course at Machrihanish on the Mull of Kintyre which was designed by Old Tom Morris and opened in 1876. Machrihanish Dunes is owned and operated by Southworth Developments, a US company whose stable of golf courses includes The Renaissance Club in Boston and Creighton Farms in Virginia. Machrihanish Dunes has been several years in the making due to the sensitive nature of the land that it lies on. It is the first golf course in Scotland to be built on an existing 'Site of Special Scientific Interest' (SSSI) which brought about unprecedented scrutiny from both planning departments and environmental agencies.



To keep the roughs under control, the club has brought in around 80 sheep

Maintenance of the course is constrained by the rules set out by the regulatory authority Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). A few examples of the restraints are:

- No fertilisers or pesticides other than on greens and tees;
- Fairways not to be mown below 20mm;
- No mowing of roughs. The club has brought in around 80 sheep to keep the roughs under control;
- No importing of turf or seed from outside the site. Certified native seed is allowed to be used but at over \$2000 for a 25kg bag it is hard to justify;
- Maintenance paths and walking tracks have to be strictly monitored through the dunes. There are very few maintenance paths so the staff have to travel by foot to carry out the majority of their work.

The course receives quarterly visits from SNH to ensure that no indigenous vegetation has been lost and no pesticides have been used in restricted areas. The height of cut on the fairways is even measured to ensure that it is above 20mm.

Another challenge faced by Keith over the development of the course was controlling the 350,000 rabbits which inhabited the site. With regular trapping the population is now dwindling and damage is limited only to the outer rough areas.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

With these and other restrictions in place, Keith is expected to produce a course worthy of attracting visitors from all over the world who demand a course in keeping with its near neighbours such as Troon, Turnberry and Prestwick.

The greatest challenge at Machrihanish is changing the perception of the golfers who visit and making them realise that this is "the way golf began", as David Mclay Kidd likes to describe it. On the walk to the first tee a small sign sets the tone for the golfers' experience with a quote from David Mclay Kidd reading:

"We will do some mowing at Machrihanish Dunes, but mostly rely on the wandering sheep to keep the fescue in check – just as the old courses used to do. We are returning golf to how it should be played, no longer is it a gentle stroll in a garden. Machrihanish Dunes is links golf in its purest form, untamed and raw, much the way golf began." – David Mclay Kidd

The fairways have been a point of discussion with many who have played the course due to the existence of so-called weeds in the turf. The dictionary description of a weed is "a valueless plant growing wild, especially one that grows on cultivated ground to the exclusion or injury of the desired crop." As no cultivation has occurred on the fairways and scarification and topdressing are not



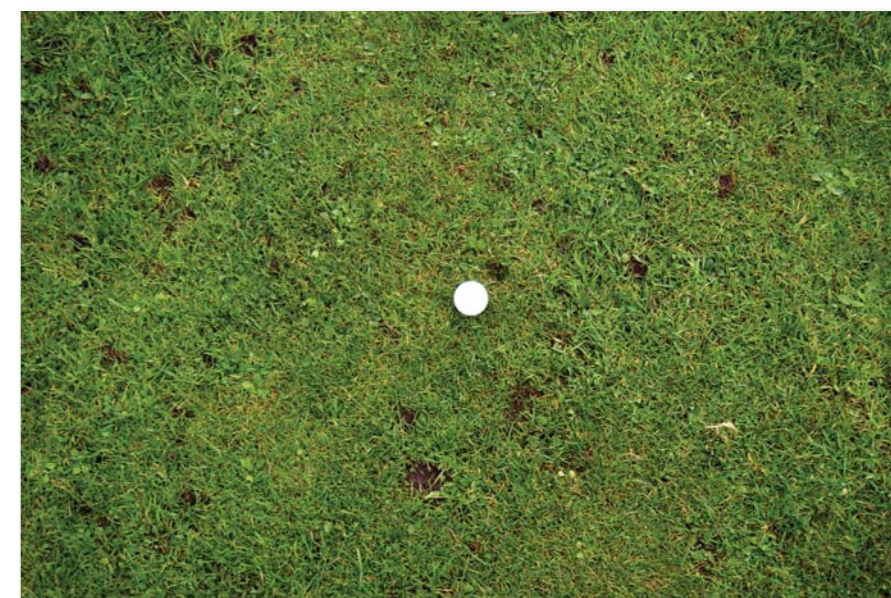
allowed due to the environmental restrictions, this definition does not apply at Machrihanish Dunes.

All plants on the fairways, whether they are daisies, chickweed or dandelions, have value as they provide ground cover which stops erosion on this wind-blown site. My conclusion was that these fairways were actually the world's first weed-free fairways. The fairways certainly look different to the eye but play hard and fast with the ball lying perfectly every time you step up to it.

The greens have been planted with fescue and are reminiscent of those found at Barnbogle Dunes in Tasmania with their slope and undulation. Sustaining fescue on the west coast of Scotland is certainly a challenge especially with the salt spray coming off the Atlantic Ocean onto the golf course.

The greens were in excellent condition with remarkably little *Poa* invasion. One of the most impressive aspects of the golf course is the bunkers which have simply been manipulated out of blowouts in the dunes. Marram grasses have been used to stabilise the bunker edges and give them a truly rustic look.

Machrihanish Dunes is a journey back in time and I truly believe that any course manager could learn something from the minimalist approach to maintenance that, although forced upon the club, is what really makes the course great. I came away thinking that this is surely the future of sustainable golf and we should all be trying to self-impose some of these restrictions upon ourselves. 🌱



The contouring of the fescue greens is simply stunning



Mown out of the dunes, fairways can be no less than 20mm



Bunkers have been manipulated out of blowouts in the dunes

Machrihanish's fairways have been a point of discussion due to the existence of so-called weeds in the turf. All plants have value as they provide cover and prevent erosion