



## **Mackenzie & Ebert Limited**

INTERNATIONAL GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTS  
Metro House, Northgate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 1BE  
Telephone: +44 (0)1243 531901  
Fax: +44 (0)1243 532582  
E-mail: [pitchandrun18@aol.com](mailto:pitchandrun18@aol.com)  
Web site: [mackenzieandebert.co.uk](http://mackenzieandebert.co.uk)

### **Report of Visit to Askernish Golf Club, South Uist, Outer Hebrides 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> March 2006**

#### **Present**

Mr. Ralph Thompson – Askernish GC	Mr. Colin MacGregor – Course Manager
Mr. Gordon Irvine – Project Consultant	Mr. Chris Haspell – Danish Consultant
Mr. Adam Lawrence – Editor of GCA	Mr. Martin Ebert – Mackenzie & Ebert

#### **Terms of Reference**

1. To look at the possibility of restoring the original 18 hole course routing.
2. To extend the club facilities from 9 to 18 holes.
3. To assess the methods of implementing the extension to 18 holes.

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#### **The Original Course**

The original design of the 18 hole course at Askernish was carried out by Old Tom Morris in 1891. There is an article in a golfer's almanac of 1891 which documents this.

However, there are no records of the course layout and, in 1936, 9 holes were closed to allow for the construction of a runway. Since that date, it is not known how the other 9 holes were changed to provide the current layout. It is not known whether any of the original holes form part of the existing course. It is suspected that there are few holes, if any, remaining as originally designed although the current 4<sup>th</sup> could be one.

#### **The Existing Course**

The existing course at Askernish offers old style, traditional golf in a links environment although it does not occupy the more dramatic sand dune areas surrounding it. The valiant efforts of the limited greenkeeping resources (Colin!) and the sandiness of the soil have resulted in traditional links conditions for fairways with native grasses throughout. Cattle and sheep graze the land and cause some damage in low lying areas of the course where the water table is very close to the surface. Greens are fenced off to keep the animals from causing damage. Some of the greens have been shaped to some degree to form flat enough surfaces to putt on but they contain very natural and quite random undulations. The tees are very rudimentary and there are two sets for each hole to provide variation for the second nine. There are only two bunkers on the course. The rough is reported to get very thick once the growing season kicks in but, at the time of the visit, it was very thin making it easy to find balls.



*The 9<sup>th</sup> green and its rugged surrounds*

All in all the course is a breath of fresh air in terms of its naturalness and basic maintenance. Colin must be congratulated on maintaining the course on his own. However, the course does not take the opportunity of playing over the more dramatic and interesting golfing terrain to its north and south and so any addition of holes should focus on these areas.

### **Restoration of the Old Tom Morris Layout**

With no documentation available for the Old Tom Morris layout, it is impossible to guess the form of the old holes. In the dune land to the south of the existing course there are areas which look as though they could have been shaped greens at one time but there is no certainty.

Hence any addition of holes to the course should instead be inspired by the methods available to Old Tom Morris for the construction of holes and his design principles. He would have had the very basic resources available to him for construction so any holes would have required very little earth movement and the native grasses would have been mown down to provide the fairways, tees and greens. Bunkers would have looked like natural sandy scrapes and the golfers would have had to contend with the natural undulations of the land which would have produced difficult and varied lies.

As Dr. Alister Mackenzie, the great golf course architect of the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who admired Old Tom Morris's St. Andrews so much, said:-

*The chief object of every golf architect or greenkeeper worth his salt is to imitate the beauties of nature so closely as to make his work indistinguishable from Nature itself.*

This worthy objective must define the creation of any course at Askernish.

It is very likely that Old Tom Morris would have introduced some blind shots in the course of the round as they would have been very much in vogue during the period in which he designed golf courses. He was involved with the evolution of the course at Prestwick, which still features a number of blind holes and he was, of course, associated with St. Andrews and its blind drives and approaches for so long as keeper of the green and professional. In his role as keeper of the green he is credited for widening the Old Course at St. Andrews to create the double fairways and greens and the numerous options for playing the holes. He is likely to have followed that principle of offering the golfers different routes and challenges to play holes at Askernish which would have resulted in the golfers playing over a natural landscape rather than along defined fairways.

Hence we have a basis for approaching the design of any additional holes at Askernish.

### **The Character of the Land to the South and North of the Existing Course**

It is not an exaggeration to say that the duneland to the south of the existing course is the perfect terrain over which to route holes and it is hard to imagine that there has ever been better raw material for the laying out of a course anywhere in the world. The combination of the dunes, the local undulations, the vegetation, the wet dune slacks, the seaside views, the views of Barra and the inland views to the heather clad hills make it the perfect land for a golf course.



*The land to the south – Ideal!*

The land to the north of the existing course suffers by comparison with the land to the south but it, too, offers some superb naturally undulating terrain and distinctive features such as sandy scars and dune slacks.



*The land to the north – Natural obstacles abound*

The land upon which the existing course is laid out is less interesting in terms of its natural feature although it is still classic links territory.



*The plainer landscape of the existing course*

The conclusion is that the most should be made of the terrain to the south and north and that the design exercise should not focus on addition of 9 holes to the existing course. Instead, the whole stretch of land should be viewed as a blank canvas for the creation of 18 new holes. Wherever there appears to have been an old, shaped green amongst the dunes, use should be made of it with the possibility that it could have been an original.

### **New Holes at Askernish**

By careful assessment of the site, an 18 hole course and practice ground was staked out during the visit. The plan showing this layout is shown overleaf. Great care was taken during the design process to ensure that there was no interference with the cropping areas of the local crofting community as the area for the course is common grazing land. This was achieved with no problems as the best areas for the crops are the least interesting for the golf course. Hence the two will sit side to side very well indeed.

The resultant course has unlimited potential. It could be the equal of any links in the world. If its potential is realised, it will take golfers upon a return to many of the qualities of the great courses of the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Below is a description of the characteristics of the course:-

The layout consists of two well balanced loops of nine holes. The entire back nine occupies the incredible dunescape to the south of the existing course.

The course has a modest (for this day and age) length of just under 6,400 yards but the ever present wind will ensure that the holes playing into it will be a very stern test of ball striking. Downwind, the challenge will be to control the ball on fairways and greens which will be maintained to be firm rather than soft. In this day of 7,000 yard courses, it is refreshing to return to a more sensible overall length. This allows the layout to have a marvellous mix of holes including a very short par 3, two driveable par 4s and a classic short par 5. These will be a test of accuracy and strength of mind rather than brute force.

An excellent practice ground is available which will help to bring on new and junior golfers. There is also room for a triangle of three short practice holes for them to cut their teeth on. This will be a great facility to encourage the local children to play the game.

The course will be a challenge for the best golfers but will be a very enjoyable test for the higher handicap players.

The stretch of holes from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> will represent a peerless coastal stretch of golf holes.

So many of the holes will be remarkable in character but, if it is possible to single out individual holes, as being exceptional, the 5<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> would fit that bill. The natural character of their terrain is outstanding.



**5<sup>th</sup> Hole – 385 yards – par 4**

A blind but attractive drive will need to be played across a line of dunes. On the other side is a large dune slack running diagonally across the hole. The further left the golfer drives, the greater the reward with a shorter shot to the green. That will be a great advantage as the green will be elusive, perched on a bank, shallow in depth and protected by a natural bunker and dune slack to the right as shown by the photo below and a deep hollow on the left.

*The green site protected by the natural sand scar to its right*



**9<sup>th</sup> Hole – 446 yards – par 4**

The 10<sup>th</sup> will provide the most exhilarating drive on the course with the tee perched next to the beach and the fairway far below in the deep valley between the dunes. The view of the fairway, beach, ocean and the island of Barra is breathtaking. Played into the prevailing wind, two perfectly struck shots will be required to reach the green perched on a ledge of higher ground at the end of the valley.



*The dramatic view down into the fairway of the 9<sup>th</sup>*



*A similar view as dusk falls – Sunrise and sunset are special times at Askernish*

### 10<sup>th</sup> Hole – 286 yards – par 4

This is possibly the most natural hole which I have ever seen. It could have been one of the original holes. Another hole where the view from the tee is dominated by the backdrop of the sea and Barra. It is a classic short par 4 where the best golfers will be tempted to drive the green but so much danger will lurk with steep banks to the right of the approach and behind the green, ideal craters which can easily be converted to bunkers at the green site and a tiny green surface to reach. There will be numerous options available on the tee, a principle Old Tom Morris would have approved of heartily. The most minor adjustment of levels of the green surface, excavation of the bunkers and mowing of the fairway is all that is required to produce one of the best and most photogenic holes in golf.

#### *The greensite – An unparalleled setting*



*The view from the tee - The crater cutting across the hole requires a carry of around 180 yards from the back tee but there will be fairway around to the left of it*

### 11<sup>th</sup> Hole – 345 yards – par 4

A strong drive from either of two marvellous tee locations will give a short approach and a view of a green which is set on a shallow plateau. The green runs diagonally from right to left on the plateau, rewarding a drive played as close as possible to the cliff edge. The contours of the plateau run gently away from the golfer requiring a softly landing approach or a running shot using the contours from the left of the green. Another situation where the green could have been one of the originals. All that is required is to mow down the existing grasses.

*The green is perched precariously on the natural ledge*



*The view from behind the green*



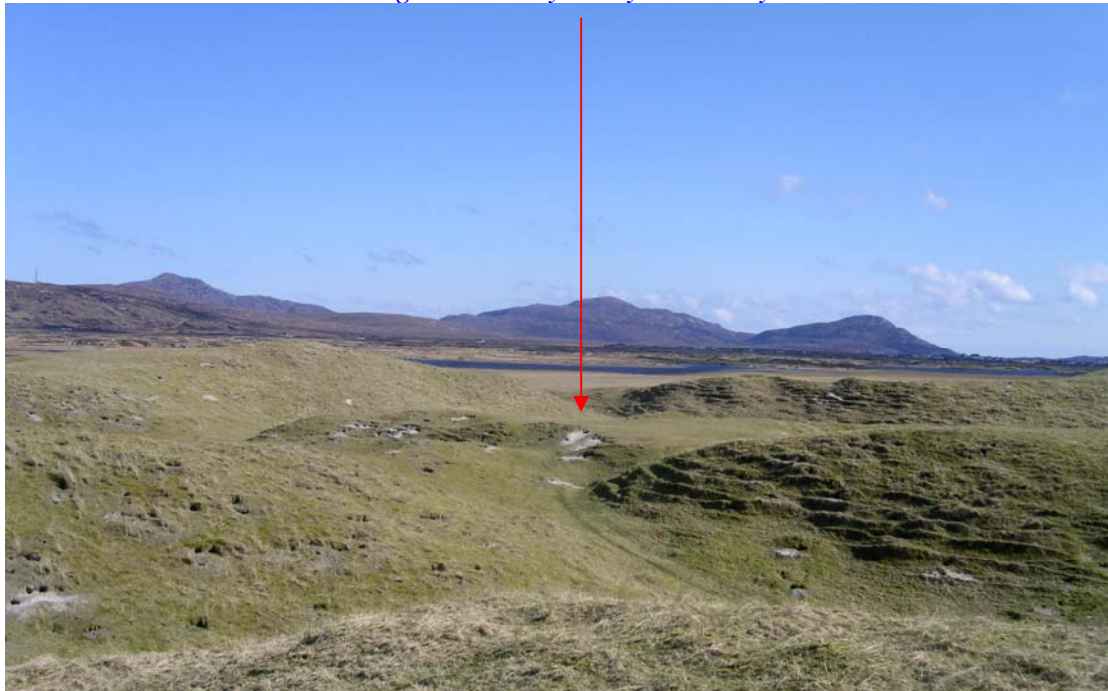
*The centre stake for the green*

### 13<sup>th</sup> Hole – 132 yards – par 3

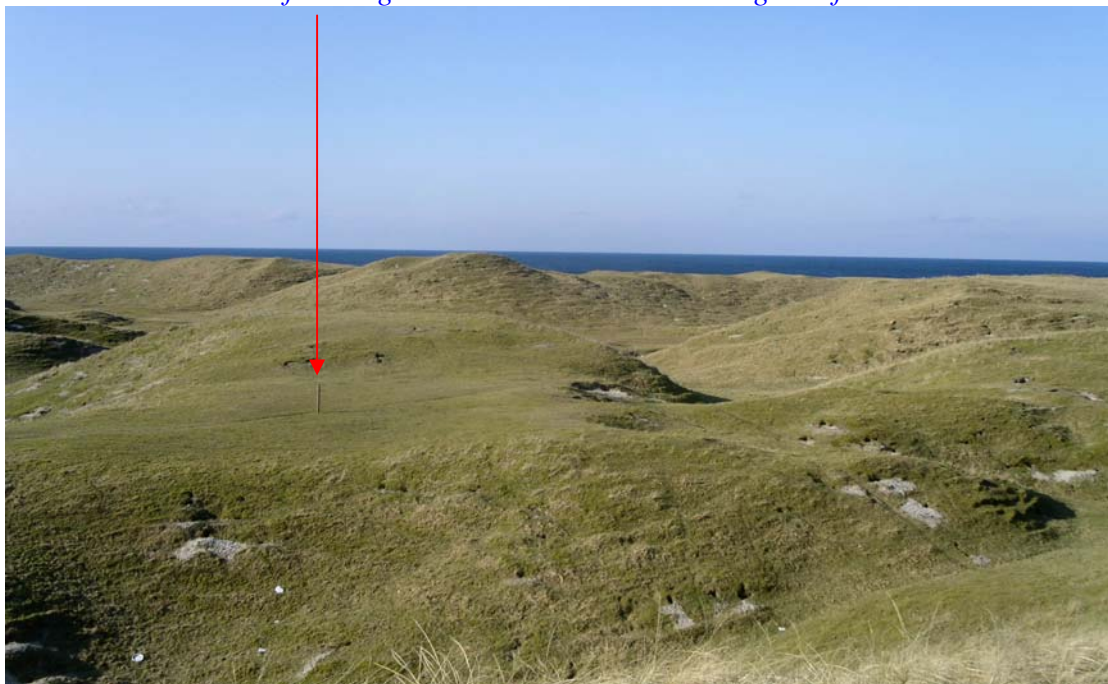
In the same way that the 11<sup>th</sup> is one of the most natural short par 4s in golf, the 14<sup>th</sup> will be one of the most natural short par 3s. Short 3s which send a shiver down the spine must be preserved in modern golf course architecture and this one will be as good as any. Danger abounds around the entire green. Once again, the surface could have been one of the originals appearing to have been set on top of a shaped dune. Another case of mowing out the grasses. A couple of natural craters to the left of the green can be turned into bunkers with great ease.

The backdrop of the water and the hills adds to the beauty of the hole.

*The green – Only 132 yards away!*



*The centre stake for the green – The view back to the green from the next tee*



### 14<sup>th</sup> Hole – 490 yards – par 5

A real risk and reward par 5. The elevated tee will invite a long drive but the fairway narrows considerably at 240 yards which will make the driver a very brave choice. If a good drive has been hit, the green, set in a valley between dunes, can be taken on but only with a well struck shot across a significant width of marshland. If not, the golfer can play safely to the left of the marsh but even that needs careful positioning as playing too far up the hole will lead to the green being obscured by the dune to the left of the green. A genuine hole of options.

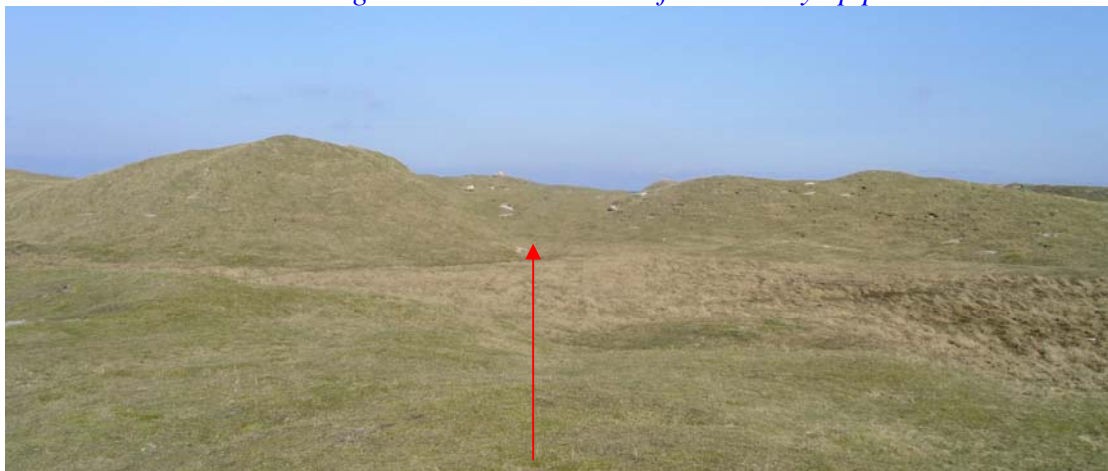
*The view from the tee*



*The 2<sup>nd</sup> shot – The green site*



*The view to the green across the marsh from the lay up position*



*The green*

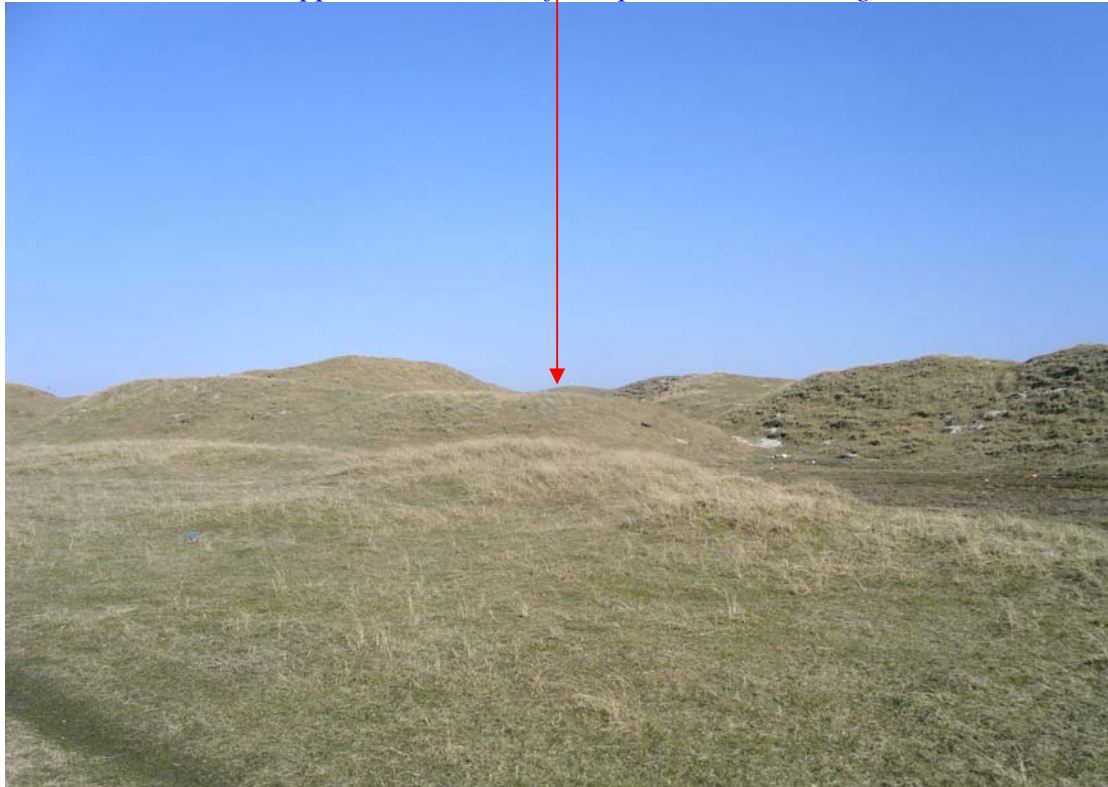
**15<sup>th</sup> Hole – 396 yards – par 4**

The 16<sup>th</sup> will harp back to the past with a completely blind approach shot up over a ridge to a green site set in a hollow in the dunes. First there is an exhilarating downhill drive to be played from the edge of a huge blown out dune. A marker post will give the line to the green from the fairway and a flat area of approach will allow the ball to be landed short and run down onto the green.

*The dramatic downhill tee shot*



*The approach must be lofted up and over this ridge*



### **Construction of the Course**

The construction will be a genuine return to the historical methods of creating golf courses. It is fortunate that Gordon Irvine and his team of volunteer, unpaid constructors (mainly made up of greenkeeping staff from the UK and also Denmark), will mastermind the creation of the course along with Colin. There is no one more traditional in outlook in terms of maintaining golf courses than Gordon and that is just what is required at Askernish.

Virtually no earth movement will be required – Just minor reshaping of some of the green areas, the flattening of areas for tees and the excavation of bunkers. No adjustment of levels in fairway areas will be necessary.

No drainage will be required as the site is so free draining apart from where the natural dune slacks or marshland exist and these wet areas will be kept exactly as they are at the moment.

The tees will be turfed with local turf taken from the fairways of the existing course.

The fairways will be mown down from the existing grasses. Minor imperfections of levels will be harrowed and rolled out. Some very minor adjustment of unmaintainable humps and hollows may be required after these processes have been carried out.

The existing soil at the greens is the perfect medium being natural sand enriched with organic matter in the first 150 to 200mm in general. The greens will either be mown out from the existing grasses where the levels are fine as they are or turf taken from the fairways of the existing course will be used to cover the reshaped green surfaces.

No irrigation installation is planned. The fact that the naturally occurring grasses will be used for all areas of the course will mean that none will be necessary for the fairways. It will remain to be seen whether the greens and tees can be maintained satisfactorily without irrigation when levels of play reach significant levels but a policy of minimal irrigation would apply if any proves to be required.

No fertiliser would be applied to fairway areas. The principle maintenance operations for greens will be topdressing with sand and aeration – both practices which Old Tom Morris pioneered as keeper of the green at St. Andrews. He noticed the benefits of applying sand to green surfaces and was an advocate of worms providing natural aeration.

Bunkers will be formed in the most natural way possible. They will simply be excavated, generally at the site of existing craters, and fringed with marram grasses, in a style similar to those of Royal County Down. This is no place for revetted, manicured bunkers.



*The marram grass fringed bunkers at Royal County Down Golf Club*





*The 10<sup>th</sup> hole green site as it is today (above) and a photovisualisation (below) of the green and marram grass fringed bunkers to be created*



### **Conclusion**

The project to extend the golf course at Askernish does not just offer up the opportunity for the creation of a world class, genuine links. In this modern world of sometimes unimaginable excess in golf course development, it provides a chance to take a journey back in time. To follow in the footsteps of Old Tom Morris. To try to think the way that he did. To really play the land as it lies. To build a course for a tiny investment. To just mow out the grass and play. In fact, the first round took place on the course the day after it was staked! May it be the first of many.