

The Making of Machrihanish

Course's architect,
head greenkeeper
jump environmental
hurdles to help
create a natural gem

Just inside the seaside dunes in this speck of a town on the Mull of Kintyre in southwestern Scotland, a golf course is coming to life. To say it is being “built” is somewhat misleading. It’s more as if Machrihanish Dunes Golf Club is being unfurled or, perhaps, revealed.

In all likelihood, never has the creation of a golf course ever been attempted on land that came with so many environmental restrictions, and quite possibly no other architect or grow-in superintendent has had to work under such taut constraints as David McLay Kidd and Euan Grant.

Machrihanish Dunes, which has a soft opening in September and then opens to the public next spring, is the only course ever built inside a Site of Special Scientific Interest — commonly known as “Triple-SI” — the most restrictive classification of Scottish National Heritage. It’s the organization that protects the flora, fauna and geology of the country, ensuring it can be enjoyed by the inhabitants and tourists. Of the roughly 275 acres on the site, construction of the course will disturb a miniscule seven, not 70, *seven*. Earth was only

BY ANTHONY PIOPPI | EDITOR AT LARGE

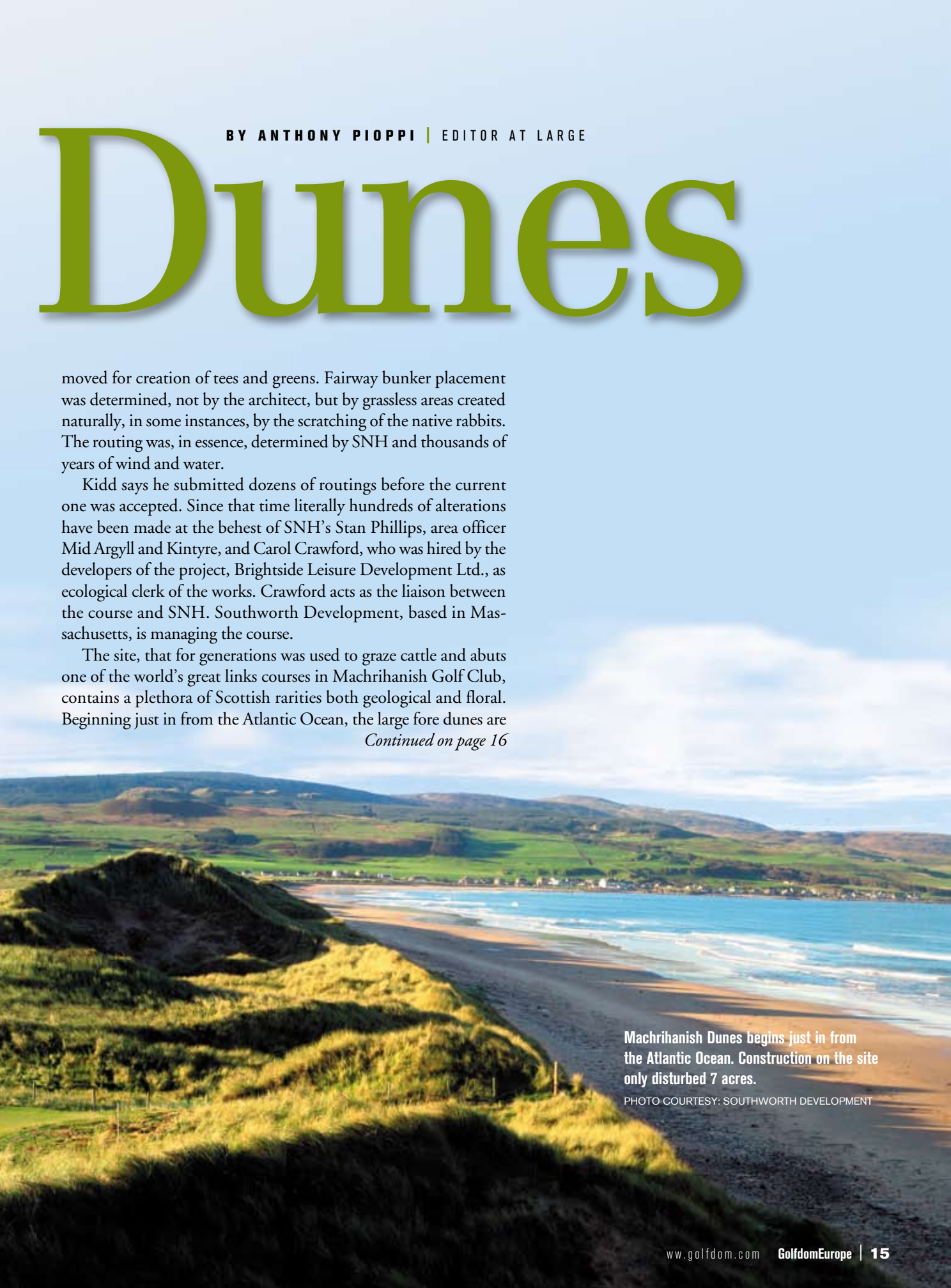
Dunes

moved for creation of tees and greens. Fairway bunker placement was determined, not by the architect, but by grassless areas created naturally, in some instances, by the scratching of the native rabbits. The routing was, in essence, determined by SNH and thousands of years of wind and water.

Kidd says he submitted dozens of routings before the current one was accepted. Since that time literally hundreds of alterations have been made at the behest of SNH's Stan Phillips, area officer Mid Argyll and Kintyre, and Carol Crawford, who was hired by the developers of the project, Brightside Leisure Development Ltd., as ecological clerk of the works. Crawford acts as the liaison between the course and SNH. Southworth Development, based in Massachusetts, is managing the course.

The site, that for generations was used to graze cattle and abuts one of the world's great links courses in Machrihanish Golf Club, contains a plethora of Scottish rarities both geological and floral. Beginning just in from the Atlantic Ocean, the large fore dunes are

Continued on page 16



Machrihanish Dunes begins just in from the Atlantic Ocean. Construction on the site only disturbed 7 acres.

PHOTO COURTESY: SOUTHWORTH DEVELOPMENT

The Making of Machrihanish

Continued from page 15

rich in lime, which is unusual for the west of Scotland. The fore dunes meld into a plain that Phillips says once ran eight or so miles across Kintyre to Campbeltown on the east coast of the peninsula. Back then, peat bogs would have been found on the site as well. Of what is left of the plain, there are five varieties of orchids and one gentian worthy of protection. The most rare are the Early Marsh orchid and Pyramid orchid found in the low, damp areas of the dunes known as dune slacks. The course was routed away from large patches of the plants so that even wayward shots will not end there.

Wartime remnants

While the layout sits on special land, it is bordered by an unpleasant relic of the recent past. The RAF Machrihanish airbase was built during the Cold War to be used primarily by the large bombers of the U.S. Air Force, many of which carried nuclear weapons. Although no fighter jets remain, the base is still used as a training site by the British military. The 1.8-mile runway, purported to be one of the longest in the UK, was constructed to accommodate fully loaded B-52s. The airstrip remains, and a smaller landing strip on the site is used for commercial purposes. The majority of the heavily fortified bunkers where nuclear weapons were stored are either vacant or used to house golf maintenance equipment.

While the base land might not be worth preserving, the idea of a golf course on the neighbouring idyllic property was something Phillips at first did not want to see happen.

“My thinking was ‘Oh no, no, no, no,’” he says, but that changed when he realized, “We have to listen to what they’re saying and give them a fair hearing.”

Once SNH did that and the project was presented, Phillips was agreeable to the idea.

“We were thinking, ‘What you are suggesting is probably doable, but there are parameters,’” Phillips says.

Indeed, there are parameters.

“I was expecting restraints,” says Head

Greenkeeper Euan Grant, who came to the project from the Old Course where he held the same position. “But no way could I envision to what extent they would be.”

There is no artificial drainage anywhere on the course. Irrigation is only for greens and tees. Grant, who has done two grow-ins, can use no fertilisers, pesticides or plant growth regulators on areas other than greens and tees. No topdressing of fairways is allowed. Overseeding of fairways can only be done with grass varieties that fit the exact natural turf types on the property; so far Grant has found 21 kilos of acceptable seed, all produced in the surrounding area. Other than for the greens, no seed from outside sources will find its way onto the property.

As an example of how truly difficult the project is, Grant explains the construction of the greens. The first step was for the natural turf from each site to be removed with a sod cutter at a thickness that would allow it to be replanted. The thin slivers of grass invariably left by the process had to be saved and reused. The turf was then replanted on site carefully, but not just anywhere.

The turf taken from nearest the dunes had to be put back near the dunes in areas determined by NHS. Turf removed near the mid-point of the course had to go back down in that section, as well. Turf was used to cover rabbit holes or other exposed areas. If the removed turf was found to match with areas inside the airbase, then it was used there as well. It is up to Crawford to find suitable areas for the sod to be put down.

Another of Grant’s chores, this one he will share with Crawford, will be to monitor metre-square areas in out-of-play sections for the next five years to determine what impact golf has on the native vegetation.

“At least once a day I stop and ask myself, ‘What the hell am I doing here?’” Grant says with a laugh.

Even travel routes for maintenance vehicles were determined by SNH. Grant says one minor slipup by his crew, such as driving a golf car in a forbidden area, could bring the project to an immediate halt.

He says he tells all new employees, “You will stick to the hole routes. You will do things

“I was expecting restraints. But no way could I envision to what extent they would be.”

— EUAN GRANT,
HEAD GREENKEEPER

PHOTO BY: ANTHONY PLOPPI

PHOTO COURTESY: SOUTHWORTH DEVELOPMENT



A herd of about 80 sheep is on site until the opening of the course. PHOTO BY: ANTHONY PIOPI

right. Although it's a pain, you'll do it."

Two of Grant's greenkeepers were with him at St. Andrews. Keith Martin, who left the Old Course to work on courses in Holland and Australia, returned to become the first assistant. The head mechanic is Haydn Chambers, who has taken on a variety of jobs besides turning wrenches during the grow-in, including building artificial nesting areas for the protected bird species, Wheat-ear, found on the property. There is also the rare skylark, which is globally threatened and nests in rabbit holes, including on the Machrihanish Dunes site.

Gaining approval

A large reason SNH approved the project was the willingness of developer Brian Keating to work with SNH rather than ram the project down the throat of local and national authorities in the style of Donald Trump and his proposed project near Aberdeen.

Keating, an Australian entrepreneur who now lives in Glasgow with his three children, says he fell in love with the site after playing nine holes at the Machrihanish Golf Club, one of the world's great links golf courses designed by Old Tom Morris. The fifth hole at Machrihanish Dunes touches the 16th at Machrihanish. Keating says it was pouring down

frigid rain when he walked off the course and immediately sought out the landowners of the adjacent property about selling. Since the land deal – a lease with option to buy — was signed with brothers Robin and James Barr, Keating keeps the Barrs updated on the progress and stops in to see them at least once a month.

In September, Keating invited a group of U.S. golf journalists to view Machrihanish Dunes and that night hosted a dinner, which was attended by Keating, Kidd, representatives from Southworth, along with the Barrs and their wives.

Soon after the deal was signed, Keating hired a geomorphologist consultant to help prepare the proposal that would be submitted to SNH. Here Keating, the man who brought Apple Computers to Russia, showed his savvy. The consultant was the highly respected Jim Hansom, Ph.D., professor at Glasgow University and a member of the SNH board of directors. At least one of SNH staff members studied under Hansom in grad school. Keating said his team worked quietly for six months before submitting its permit applications to SNH.

Continued on page 18



PHOTO COURTESY: SOUTHWORTH DEVELOPMENT

"I'd be happy to throw down the gauntlet to any of my peers and say, 'See if you'll got through this.' "

- DAVID MCLAY KIDD

The Making of Machrihanish

Continued from page 17

“He gave us a lot of grief,” Keating says of Hansom, “but he was on my payroll giving us grief.”

Keating’s strategy worked and SNH approved the plan after a series of revisions. Once the project was given a thumbs up, ecologist Carol Crawford was hired by Keating to oversee the project, coming on board in 2004. She was on site once a week while construction, which ran from June to December of 2007, took place. Crawford was responsible for making sure construction took place within parameters of the permits while making judgments on changes that come up during work, often times rejecting proposed alterations. The clubhouse, originally sited near the dunes, will be located outside the Triple-S I site and the small real-estate component will be located there as well.

Grant says some of Crawford’s changes were maddening, but he readily admits that “she was absolutely right” every time.

For her part, Crawford compliments Grant’s attitude. “He’s been learning all the important plants, and he’s really into that,” she says.

It was not just Grant that had to deal with the alterations made during the build.

“I’d be happy to throw down the gauntlet to any of my peers and say, ‘See if you’ll go through this,’” Kidd says of the trials and tribulations.

He credits his associate Paul Kimber, who

was the lead designer on the project, with making sure the changes went smoothly and adapting the design to work around the sensitive areas. “He’s usually not that patient but on this job he learned,” Kidd says from his home in Oregon.

Environmental concerns

There are also environmental concerns about the out-of-play areas. For decades, cattle grazed the land, allowing the rare species to thrive while keeping out the “rank grasses,” as Phillips calls them. Although cows have no place on a golf course, sheep are a different story. A herd of about 80 is on site until the opening of the course, and a few will be allowed to wander the grounds during the peak season. When play drops off in the fall, the entire herd will be brought back to graze until the spring when the majority of golfers return.

“That’s a massive benefit of the course and not at public expense,” Phillips says.

Crawford says it’s likely that large patches of the rare flowers that had been grazed by the cattle will now bloom for the first time in years.

SNH allowed the removal of tens of thousands of rabbits that were on site and responsible for much of the turf destruction, another benefit the course will bring.

Keating says he had no problem working within the environmental dictates and that it brings “a uniqueness” to the course. “The Way Golf Began,” the motto for Machrihanish Dunes, was devised for marketing purposes, but Keating said it is illustrative of the project.

“That really is the essence of what we’re doing,” he says. “There’s no other site available next to an Old Tom.”

This site, like all the Old Toms, came to life with nature as the principal architect, and it will be nature that continues to alter it.

Kidd says he is happy with the how the course has turned out and is looking forward to what the future — thanks to the wind, sheep and few remaining rabbits — will display to golfers.

“I hope they love it for what it is now,” Kidd says. “And the passage of time will improve it.” ■

Large patches of rare flowers, including the Pyramid Orchid, are blooming for the first time in years.

