



// HISTORY OF THE FUTURE

MACH DUNES

Minimalist Machrihanish Dunes makes full use of its prized historic linksland setting to deliver a stirring throwback test. By Duncan Lennard.

Professional golf, it must be conceded, has a lot to answer for. Charges of slowing the game to a standstill, establishing 'grouchy' as the game's default facial expression and promoting naff, gimmicky footwear can all be laid at its grand and presumably CCTV-monitored front door. But perhaps worst of all, tour golf has encouraged strokeplay – that relentlessly oppressive form of the game – as the dominant form of examination.

Golf, you see, was never meant to be about playing against the course. Recognising the futility in such an attritional endeavour, our earliest ancestors took on each other in head-to-head combat. Here you could take risks, ride momentum or reverse it, take the hits then deliver your own. You even had the pleasure of taking on an opponent you could actually beat. Strokeplay? Well, that's where we spend half the time wondering how we can shoot no worse than a five. As Alister MacKenzie once wrote: "There are many of us who firmly believe that a contest between flesh and blood is the only true form of golf, and that too much score play is detrimental to the real interest of the game. Surely there is far more fun in a contest against flesh and blood than against a card and pencil?"

A game of control and fairness, strokeplay has even taken its toll on modern golf course architecture. A century's removal of awkward bits and rough edges may have left us with more equitable playing arenas, but it has certainly left us with blander ones.

Which brings us at last to Machrihanish Dunes, which is that rarest of creations – a modern matchplay course. ▣



Dropped transparently on to the pure golfland of the Kintyre peninsula, the course is a refreshing and much-needed celebration of weather and history, of semi-blind shots and crazy fairway gradients that scarcely soften at the green. They'll give you a scorecard at the minimalist, cosy clubhouse hut, but you'd do better to file it in your golf bag, engage with the course and your playing partners, and simply enjoy the game you fell in love with in the first place.

It must be said, though, that this welcome state of affairs has come about through enforcement as well as choice. The first west coast links course in a century when it opened in 2009, Machrihanish Dunes is built on heavily protected duneland, awarded Site of Special Scientific Interest status. Parts of the course – between the 4th and 5th, left of 11, right of 16 – are so low that they're actually below tide level, creating the rare occurrence of moisture-loving, duneland flora. As such, the Scottish government was never going to let this stunning duneland, next door to Old Tom Morris's venerable 1879 creation, out of its control.

Machrihanish Dunes' architect is David McLay Kidd, the creator of the Oregon masterpiece Bandon Dunes. If his reputation took a slight knock with the 2008 opening of

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St Andrews' Castle – a course fellow architect Tom Doak famously marked zero out of 10, and one McLay Kidd admits he 'overcooked' – there can seldom have been a more fitting choice. Born in Renfrewshire, his family have owned a holiday home here for three generations and he grew up playing hide-and-seek among the dunescape. "My dad would point at those dunes and say 'There's room for another two or three courses out there,'" McLay Kidd recalls. "It always stuck with me as my career developed."

But moreover, McLay Kidd was brought up by a father passionate about the traditional game and the designs of Morris, Colt and Braid. He nurtured in his son a passion for natural settings and a yearning to develop what he describes as "a simplistic view of golf on a beautiful landscape". It was McLay Kidd himself who did much of the work to convince the protecting body, Scottish Natural Heritage, that golf was feasible on SSSI land.

"This land is internationally protected," he says. "There are some plants there that live nowhere else on planet Earth, rare pyramidal orchid bulbs that exist in the hollows between the dunes. It's an incredibly fragile landscape. When I first approached SNH I was effectively told 'Don't even think about it'; but I argued that SSSI is a designation that allows agriculture, which is often not the best protection. Conservation and protection are not its foremost objectives. I tried to persuade them that if we could find a way to allow the golf course to coexist with the most fragile and important parts of the land, the course would provide the armour for the land, and protect it forever."

With an eventual and cautious green light given in 2006, McLay Kidd got to work. He was given licence to create only greens and tees, land that takes up just seven acres of a 260-acre site. There has been almost no earth movement, and the course's fairways are simply the natural terrain mowed – and the natural terrain is pretty bumpy.

"Our overriding principle here is that if the golf course closed tomorrow it could revert to where it was before," adds head greenkeeper Simon Freeman. "Those seven acres of greens and tees are lost as far as Scottish Natural Heritage is concerned; we can do pretty much anything to those, feeds and fungicides, as long as they are kept within those boundaries. Otherwise there are no outside influences. But this is fine. We are chasing the same dream as SNH... to have a low-impact, top-class natural golf course, and that's why we use compost top-dressings and humus-rich fertilisers. After all, this site was chosen because it was ideal for golf, not because you have to change things to make it for golf."

Indeed. This was the piece of land that persuaded Old Tom Morris, a reluctant traveller, to make the 400-mile round trip from St Andrews to the Mull of Kintyre to lay out the famous links at Machrihanish. Its history and remote location ensure golfing in this part of the world is imbued with a feeling of pilgrimage, even when you take the fastest and least romantic route of plane from Glasgow to nearby Campbeltown. Far better, though, is to drive north up past Loch Lomond then south-west down the Kintyre peninsula, a magnificent lowland drive with amethyst rhododendrons one side and sparking loch waters on the other. This four-hour drive was Paul McCartney's inspiration for The Long and Winding Road, and it's one that tells you that sometimes it can be about the journey and the destination.

Underrated, clifftop Dunaverty sits a few miles to the south, but as a second championship-calibre course, Machrihanish Dunes definitely answers the question of whether such a long trek is worth it. Immediately to the

You can expect a warm welcome after your long journey at the small but delightful clubhouse.



The walk up to the 14th green provides stunning views out across the water to the small but welcoming village of Machrihanish.



'You'll see things at Mach Dunes you never thought possible on a course. But it's nature, just the way I found it'

north of Old Tom's layout, it occupies the same stretch of duneland that frames the stunning, five-mile stretch of golden sands along Kintyre's southern west coast. The dunes here are not massive, but this is to their advantage; they allow consistent sight of the magnificent smoky outlines of Jura, Islay and the Ulster coast while forming a dynamic landscape full of energy and movement, just perfect for a fun, versatile and challenging game of golf.

Close to the wind

Taking you from the tiny, minimalist clubhouse hut out towards the sea, the first hole epitomises the course in many ways. A par 4 of under 300 yards, it is driveable in the right conditions, but your cause is hampered by a blind fairway that adds to the sense of disorientation already created by the expansive, rippling marram sea. Right off the bat, the hole issues one of the course's key demands – a committed leap of faith over a black-and-white marker post – but as the round develops, the wide open if crumpled spaces that emerge increase your confidence.

But the course takes a step up as early as the 2nd. Here, the full gold and cobalt glory of Machrihanish Bay starts to reveal itself – as does the course, with distant flags flashing yellow and red against the silver green of the dune grass. A typical small island in the marram, the tee shot sets up the course's first real test, a long two-shotter jaggling right to an awkwardly angled and hard-to-hold green.

Angling west, the 4th is another short par 4 that brings the front nine towards the coast and a crescendo. Its fantastic, funnel green appears to be set into an ancient and natural dune dell, but look closer and you can see subtle evidence of a green shaped and expanded for flag locations. It's to McLay Kidd's credit that it is rarely clear to what extent a green occupies a natural or created site.

With the sea to your left, the remodelled short 6th is a similar length to the 5th but because it runs in the opposite direction, can easily play four or five clubs differently. The first hole to run along the coast, it is also the last for a while as the front nine weaves back towards the clubhouse to a lulling reverberation of coastal roar and larksong. The greens here are big, their raised sides and swales setting up gorgeous sweeps and gathering areas. They effectively show the golfer, back down the fairway or on the tee, the shot needed to feed the ball in to the flag. Whether you can pull it off is another matter, but in pulling your mind off your technique and on to the task ahead of you, these slopes deliver a game that is much more creative, and all the more enjoyable for it.

Hitting the 17th green in regulation is an achievement in itself... but your work is far from done.

The back nine begins in robust and spectacular fashion, as the strong par-4 10th takes you back out to the coast. Its typically tempestuous fairway gives way to a punchbowl green, a running approach that exemplifies the old-fashioned ground-game this course demands. "The biggest mistake golfers make here is trying to loft it off tight lies," says caddie Willie MacMillan. "Even on a still day, the fairways are too firm to try to throw the ball up with a lob wedge – mostly you'll thin it through the back. You just have to hit wee punch shots."

Played south along the coast, the gorgeous par-4 11th takes you deeper into a back nine that delivers the authentic links experience. Fairway folds can ping your drive 50 yards forward or stop it dead; mad, muscular green complexes deliver valleys not just of sin but cos and tan too, such are the dramatic angles created by their steep sides. "You'll see things at Mach Dunes you never thought possible on a golf course," says McLay Kidd. "But it's nature, just the way I found it."

The hardest hole on the course is the 17th. A swingeing 400-yard par 4 arcing left, it asks you to overcome an intimidating, blind tee shot, an intimidating second-shot carry over wetland and a dastardly uphill approach that is, well, intimidating. Critics of Machrihanish Dunes will tell you the hole is symptomatic of a course that can beat you up – and yes, there are times when the questions it asks feel beyond you. But there are also eight par 4s under 380 yards off the whites and three shortish par 3s. One of



The signature hole

At the far southern end of the site sits a small plateau that was only ever meant to be a golf green. David McLay Kidd had originally intended it to be the finale to a dogleg-left par 4 that would have begun on today's 4th tee, but protected areas in between forced him to split that into two shorter holes. No matter. While the driveable par-4 4th is a treat in itself, the par-3 5th is an absolute gem. Sat on duneland slightly higher than the green, the small teeing ground commands an extraordinary view of its surroundings. Lower your sights and you see a classically simple green, with two deep bunkers protecting the lower left front side but an inviting slope giving you some latitude to the right. How you play this hole is at the mercy of the North Atlantic wind, though its south westerly direction means you're likely to need a purely-struck mid-iron punch into the prevailing wind.



Looking across the 9th green as the sun sets on the dunescape where architect David McLay Kidd played as a boy.



the true virtues of this course is the immense variety and versatility of the challenge, thrown up by landscape, weather and design. The polar opposite of bland, this is a course that will never play the same way twice... and like some of the greatest links, would take a lifetime to learn.

There is, apparently, no truth in the rumour that Donald Trump thought SSSI stood for 'Sod Scottish Sandhill Immunity'. It is one of golf's quirks, however, that even as McLay Kidd and Machrihanish Dunes' leaseholder, Southworth Development, were doing their utmost to work alongside Scottish National Heritage, Trump was reacting to requests to skirt the fragile duneland of Aberdeen by snorting that he "Didn't do things half-assed". Opened in May 2009, Machrihanish Dunes reputedly cost just £1.5m, compared to Trump International's £100m. As McLay Kidd observes: "Scottish Natural Heritage got a bloody nose at Aberdeen, but a kiss on the cheek at Mach Dunes."

But despite - and to an extent because of - the consideration given to ecological issues, opening reviews of Machrihanish Dunes were mixed. Mostly, they set the stunning location and natural, throwback feel against an unplayability created by its raw conditioning, encroaching marram grass and windswept setting. "Brutal" was an adjective commonly used. *Golf World* reacted by placing the course 99th in its 2010 ranking.

This was no more than McLay Kidd expected. As he explained, getting the course open at all was enough of a battle. He was also handicapped by mowing limitations enforced by a cautious SNH, which led to fairways too narrow to cope with the crazy kicks they seemed to enjoy administering.

Since then, however, the responsible nature of the course's upkeep and presentation has softened both the SNH's stance and, as a consequence, the playing experience. Fairways have become wider, more rough is mown, several greens have been repositioned or reshaped and routing has been improved to limit some of the lengthy green-to-tee hikes. Measuring just 6,317 yards off the white tees, the course has never been more playable or enjoyable... and this is reflected in its lowest-ever current ranking of 59. As the course continues this upward trajectory, that's a position that seems destined to fall.

"Golf course design is a game you play for the long haul," McLay Kidd asserts. "Europeans and especially Scots understand golf courses as evolving entities and think of them in terms of decades, generations, centuries."

"Machrihanish Dunes will only truly reach its best long after I am dead and gone - and at that point, the fact we worked so hard at the start to protect the flora and fauna will pay dividends." **GW**

A blind tee shot is followed by a long, uphill approach over wetland at the beautiful but brutal 17th.

HOW WE RANKED MACHRIHANISH DUNES

