OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

THE GHOST COURSE

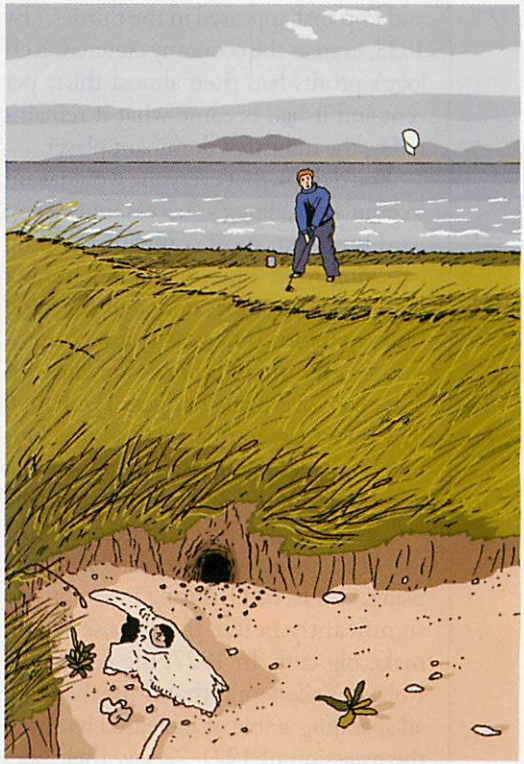
Links to the past on a Scottish island.

BY DAVID OWEN

In 2005, a Scottish golf-course consultant named Gordon Irvine took a fishing trip to South Uist, a sparsely populated island in the Outer Hebrides, fifty miles off Scotland's west coast. South Uist (pronounced YEW-ist) is about the size of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket combined. It is virtually treeless, and much of its eastern third is mountainous and uninhabited. Gales from the Atlantic strike it with such force that schoolchildren hope for "wind days." Irvine had approached the island's golf club, called Askernish, and offered to barter greenkeeping advice for the right to fish for trout and salmon in the lochs nearby, and the club had welcomed the free consultation. It had just nine holes and a few dozen members, and the golfers themselves mowed the greens, with a rusting gang mower pulled by a tractor. Irvine walked the course, in driving rain, with the club's chairman, Ralph Thompson, and several regulars, and then the group went to lunch at the Borrodale Hotel, a mile and a half down the road.

At lunch, one of the members surprised Irvine by saying that Askernish was more than a century old and had been designed by Old Tom Morris, a towering figure in the history and folklore of the game. Morris, who was born in 1821 and looked a little like Charles Darwin in an ivy cap, was the founding father of modern golf. In the eighteen-sixties, he won four of the first eight British Opens and became the head professional of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, serving there for four decades as the chief greenkeeper of the Old Course, golf's holiest ground. He also designed or redesigned several of the world's greatest courses, among them Muirfield, Prestwick, and Carnoustie, in Scotland, and Royal County Down, in Northern Ireland.

Irvine was polite but dismissive: the course he'd walked that morning was a cow pasture with flagsticks stuck in the ground, and he doubted that Morris, whose courses he knew well, had ever come near it. But another club member said that this was not the original Askernish, and that Old Tom's layout had had eighteen holes and was situated closer to the sea. Most of the original holes, apparently, had been



A golf course's main design elements—fairways,

PETER ARKLE

abandoned, probably beginning around the time of the Second World War. Ralph Thompson said that the club possessed a news clipping from 1891 which described Morris's creation of the course that year, and which quoted Morris calling the layout "second to none." Irvine was curious enough to take another look, and after lunch Thompson drove him back.

This time, Thompson led him to a grassy dune at the western end of the seventh hole, and when Irvine climbed

to the top and looked toward the Atlantic he saw a stretch of undulating linksland running along the ocean, between the beach and the existing holes. For Irvine, the experience was like lifting the corner of a yard-sale velvet painting and discovering a Rembrandt. There were no surviving signs of golf holes in the waving marram grass, but the terrain, which had been shaped by the wind into valleys, hollows, and meandering ridges, looked so spectacularly suited to the game that he no longer doubted the Morris connection. Despite the rain, Irvine could easily imagine greens and fairways among the dunes, and he told Thompson that, if the club's members would agree to work with him, he would donate his time and expertise, and help them restore their lost masterpiece. A resurrected Askernish, he said, would provide a unique window on the birth of the modern game.

Not everyone on South Uist was pleased with this idea. The land in question had long been used as a common grazing area by local tenant farmers, called crofters, and a group of them protested that the construction of golf holes would violate their legal rights. One of the crofters described the golf project as a "land grab," and said that old property documents relating to the area made no mention of Old Tom Morris. For the aggrieved crofters, the plans brought to mind one of the most notorious periods of Scottish history, the Highland Clearances. Beginning in the eighteenth century, wealthy landlords gained possession of large sections of northern Scotland, which until then had been controlled by Gaelic-speaking clans. The new landlords attempted to impose what they viewed as economic rationality on their holdings, most of which were still farmed and grazed as they had been during the Dark Ages, by subsistence farmers working tiny plots. This transformation, which has been described as the wholesale substitution of sheep for people, involved waves of eviction, consolidation, and forced expatriation. By the late nineteenth century, the chieftains of the northern clans had either sold out to others or become landlords themselves, and the old Gaelic culture had been weakened or obliterated in many places, and sentimentalized elsewhere. A fad for kilts, tartans, and bagpipes took hold in the rest of the country, even as genuine Highlanders were being shipped off to Canada or put to work in the factories of Birmingham.

The Askernish project seemed, to the protesting crofters, like the clearances all over again. Ralph Thompson soon began to speak of making the restored Askernish—which the sportswriter John Garrity has described as a "ghost course"—the anchor of a much larger development, including additional golf courses and a hotel. He created a Web site and solicited nonresident life memberships, at twenty-five hundred pounds apiece, in the hope that fees from abroad would help to finance the construction. The crofters complained that the club's members were courting golf-playing "dandies" from the mainland and the United States, and were doing so at their expense. "What a cheek," one crofter said this past December. "They have gone on top of our grazing land and done with it what they want." The crofters began legal action to stop them.

bunkers, and greens—are synthetic analogues of features of the Scottish coastal linksland where the game was first played.

Getting to South Uist today isn't as hard as it was in 1891, when the sole option was a slow, unreliable steamer, but it still requires determination. When I visited the first time, in 2007, I flew from Inverness to Benbecula, one island to the north; South Uist doesn't have its own airport but is con-

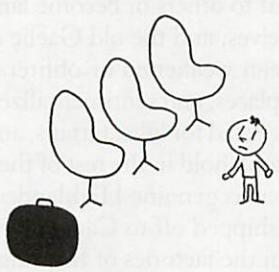
nected to Benbecula by a half-mile-long causeway. In the air, I looked down, through breaks in the clouds, on the fjord-like creases that rumple Scotland's west coast and on the waters of the Minch, the stormy channel that separates the Outer Hebrides from mainland Scotland. This past December, I visited again, taking a ferry from Oban, which is a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Glasgow, by way of Loch Lomond. The ferry sails three or four times a week and sometimes makes a brief stop at Barra, which has a tiny airport whose schedule depends on the tides, since the runway is a beach. The South Uist ferry passes Mull, Coll, Muck, Eigg, Rum, Sanday, Sandray, Vatersay, Hellisay, Gighay, and other small islands, and in good weather the trip takes about six and a half hours. Until 1974, cars had to be loaded and unloaded with a crane, like freight; nowadays, you drive on and drive off.

The first time I visited South Uist, Ralph Thompson, the Askernish chairman, came to meet me. He manages the island's main agricultural-supply store, which stocks sheep feed, onion sets, shotguns, and other local necessities. He was born on the mainland in 1955, but, as a child, he spent summers on South Uist, where his grandparents lived. One reason he liked those visits, he told me, was that he was allowed to go for weeks without bathing, because his grandparents' house, like almost all houses on the island at that time, had no running water.

Even today, South Uist is short on modern conveniences. The lights went out one afternoon as Thompson and I were having a beer in the bar at the Borrodale, and he began counting. When he got to "five," the lights came back on, and he said, "If you count to five and the power comes back, it means a swan hit the line." Later, we drove south on the island's main road—a single lane for most of its length, with frequent bump-outs for yielding to oncoming traffic and for overtaking sheep—and crossed a causeway to Eriskay, a smaller island. Thompson spotted, in the distance, a ferryboat approaching from Barra, and he pulled over to watch it. He wasn't expecting anyone, but there are so few activities on South Uist that residents have evolved an unusually low threshold of amusement. We watched the ferry for fifteen or twenty minutes, and didn't pull away until the last of a handful of departing passengers had boarded.

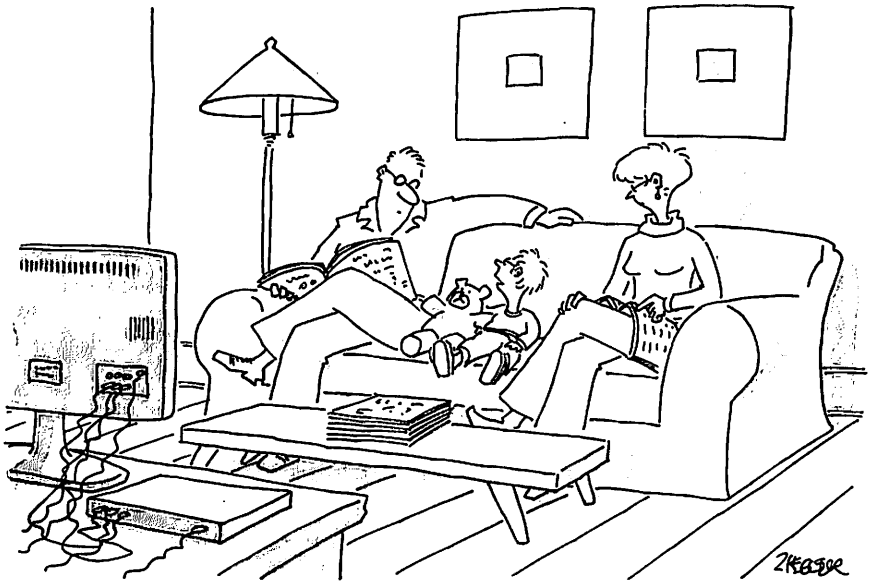
Sometimes, entertainment arrives on the island unexpectedly. Early in 1941, a freighter, the S.S. Politician, ran aground in the sandy shallows between South Uist and Eriskay. Its cargo included more than twenty thousand cases of whiskey, and, over several weeks, groups of islanders rowed to the wreck and made off with thousands of bottles. They hid the whiskey in cowsheds, rabbit holes, and lobster traps—and significant portions of the adult population of several Hebridean islands stayed drunk for weeks. In 1947, the Scottish novelist Compton Mackenzie wrote a fictionalized account of the wreck and its aftermath, called "Whisky Galore." Two years later, the book was made into a movie, filmed mostly on Barra. For its release in the United States, it was retitled "Tight Little Island"; too late, James Thurber suggested "Scotch on the Rocks."

Most people think of the word "links" as a synonym for golf course, but it's actually a geological term. Linksland is a specific type of sandy, wind-sculpted coastal terrain—the word comes from the Old English *hlinc*, "rising ground"—and in its authentic form it exists in only a few places on earth, the most famous of which are in Great Britain and Ireland. Linksland arose at the end of the most recent ice age, when the retreat of the northern glacial sheet, accompanied by changes in sea level, exposed sandy deposits and what had once been coastal shelves. Wind pushed the sand into dunes and rippling plains; ocean storms added more sand; and coarse grasses covered everything. Early Britons used linksland mainly for livestock grazing, since the ground closest to the sea was usually too starved and too exposed for growing crops. When significant numbers of Scotsmen became interested in smacking small balls with curved wooden sticks, as they first did in 1400 or so, the links was where they went (or were sent), perhaps because there they were in no one's way. On South Uist, linksland is called *machair*, a Gaelic word. It's pronounced "mocker," more or less, but with the two central consonants represented by what sounds like a clearing of the throat.



The major design elements of a modern golf course are the synthetic analogues of various existing features of those early Scottish playing fields, and the fact that golf arose so directly from a particular landscape helps explain why, more than any other mainstream sport, it remains a game with a Jerusalem: it was permanently shaped by the ground on which it was invented. Groomed fairways are the descendants of the well-grazed valleys between the old linksland dunes; bunkers began as sandy depressions worn through thin turf by livestock huddling against coastal gales; the first greens and teeing grounds were flattish, elevated areas whose relatively short grass—closely grazed by rabbits and other animals and stunted by the brutal weather—made them the logical places to begin and end holes. ("A rabbit's jawbone allows it to graze grass lower than a sheep," Gordon Irvine told me recently, "and both those animals can graze grass lower than a cow.")

On the great old courses in the British Isles, the most celebrated holes often owe more to serendipity and to the vicissitudes of animal husbandry than they do to picks and shovels, since in the early years course design was more nearly an act of imagination and discovery than of physical construction. One of Old Tom Morris's best-known holes, the fifth at Lahinch, in southwestern Ireland, is a short par 3 whose green is concealed behind a tall dune, so that the golfer's target is invisible from the tee—a feature that almost any contemporary architect would have eliminated with a bulldozer. The greatest hole on the Old Course at St. Andrews is often said to be the seventeenth, a long par 4 called the Road Hole, which violates a list of modern



"Once this commercial is over, I'll have a number of questions on erectile dysfunction."

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design rules: the tee shot not only is blind but must be hit over the top of a tall wooden structure that reproduces the silhouette of a cluster of old railway sheds; the green repels approach shots from every direction and is fronted by a vortex-like circular bunker, from which the most prudent escape is often backward, away from the green; a paved public road runs directly alongside the green and is treated as a part of the course, meaning that golfers who play their way onto it must also play their way off. Over the centuries, every idiosyncratic inch of the Old Course has acquired, for the faithful, an almost numinous aura.

For Gordon Irvine, Askernish was in some ways an even more compelling historical artifact than the Old Course—so much so that shortly after his first visit to the course he called it "the holy grail." Unlike most other early links courses, Askernish had never been stretched to accommodate high-tech clubs and balls, and its original quirks had not been worn smooth, over the years, by motorized maintenance equipment. "Askernish was as Old Tom left it," Irvine told me. "Because the old holes were abandoned so early, there had been no real proactive maintenance done with machinery or chemicals, and it had never been revisited by other architects. The last time the old holes were played, the greens were probably cut with scythes."

In 2006, he enlisted the help of Martin Ebert, a golf architect whose specialty is links courses. No plan of Morris's Askernish layout was known to exist, so the men's first task was to identify eighteen likely green locations among the dunes. A round of golf consists of eighteen holes primarily because the Old Course ended up with that many in 1764, when four very short holes were combined to make two longer ones—although the number took a while to catch on. Prestwick, where the first dozen Opens were played, had twelve holes until 1883. Leith, where golf's first rule book was written, in 1744, had five. Montrose had twenty-five.

Finding a lost golf course isn't as simple as you might think: the creators of early layouts did so little in the way of earthmoving that unambiguous evidence of their work can be difficult to detect, even for someone who knows where to look. My home town, in northwestern Connecticut, had a small golf course in the eighteen-nineties, contemporary with Askernish. I know exactly where it was and have seen old photographs of it, but during a long afternoon spent tramping over the area I was unable to find a single undeniable surviving feature. In the earliest days of the game, golfers created courses the way children do when they knock balls around a vacant lot, by devising interesting ways to go from Point A to Point B.

Ebert developed his restoration design by hiking over the *machair* and visualizing golf shots (Old Tom's method) and by studying satellite photographs, which helped him weigh various schemes for connecting the greens in a logical sequence. He also extrapolated from his knowledge of Morris's designs elsewhere, and from his own work in restoring old links courses. When I visited Askernish in 2007, he and Irvine had placed eighteen flags in the ground, denoting provisional green locations, and were taking readings with a laser range finder and a handheld G.P.S. device, so that Ebert could enter accurate coördinates into his laptop—enabling him, among other things, to leave a clearer record of his thinking than Old Tom Morris did. Ebert told me that he and Irvine were fairly certain they had identified a number of the original greens, in some cases because the ground appeared to have been slightly flattened, most likely by hand, at some point in the past, and in other cases because particular formations simply looked like golf greens to them and so presumably would have looked like golf greens to Old Tom Morris, too. One such site—the fourteenth green in Ebert's layout—occupied a plateau surrounded by dunes, which resembled ocean billows. "That green plays well from many different directions, but I think it plays best the way we've laid it out, as a par 3," Ebert told me. "It just seems like a par-3 green, set high on the dune with everything dropping away."

While Ebert and Irvine worked, Ralph Thompson, a couple of his friends, and I followed along, hitting golf balls into the marram grass, and losing many. At one point, we all hit shots toward the top of a distant dune directly above the beach, so that Ebert could get a sense of whether it was reasonable to expect golfers to hit such a long shot to such a small target and into the prevailing wind. Putting wasn't really possible yet, although a few of

the proposed greens had been encircled by single strands of barbed wire, to keep sheep and cattle from wandering onto them.

The most vocal opponents of the Askernish project have been Gilbert Walker and William Macdonald, both crofters. I went to see them this past December at Walker's house, down the street from the Borrodale Hotel. Walker, who is seventy, went upstairs to find his hearing aid, and Macdonald rolled a cigarette and took a seat near the hearth, so that he could blow his smoke toward the flue. Macdonald is fifty-four but looks and sounds at least ten years older. He apologized for his hair, which was pointing in several directions, and explained that he'd fallen asleep in his chair, at home, while waiting for Walker to pick him up. When Walker returned, I asked the men if they could explain crofting to me, and Macdonald smiled and said, "It is complicated."

Most of northern Scotland used to be occupied by clans, whose leaders had a conception of real estate which Macdonald likened to that of American Indians before the arrival of Europeans. "The clan chieftain did not regard himself as the owner," he said, relighting his cigarette, which had gone out. "He regarded himself as the chief of his people, and he considered his wealth in terms not of the number of acres he occupied but of the number of fighting men he had, or the number of cattle, or these things combined." Beginning around the time of Macbeth, the Scottish government (and, later, the British) increasingly viewed the northern clans as military, political, cultural, and religious threats, and took various steps against them. In the mid-eighteenth century, the rule of the clans began to be replaced by a modern system of land tenancy—the beginning of the clearances.

South Uist was bought in 1838 by Colonel John Gordon of Cluny, who lived in a castle on the other side of Scotland. Most of the island's residents spoke only Gaelic and subsisted by growing potatoes, raising cattle and sheep, fishing, and collecting seaweed for fertilizer. Their cottages, which they often shared with their animals, usually lacked chimneys; smoke from smoldering peat fires inside seeped out through thatched roofs. Colonel Gordon—whose name in historical accounts is often preceded by "heartless," "brutal," or some similarly grim epithet—eventually transported more than two thousand of these people, perhaps half of South Uist's population at the time, to Quebec, and consolidated their plots into large livestock farms, which were more profitable. His treatment of his tenants was among the reasons that the government acted, in the late nineteenth century, to bring the clearances to an end, by giving small tenant farmers protection from arbitrary removal. Crofters continued to pay rent to their landlords, but eventually gained many of the powers of ownership, including the ability to bequeath their crofting rights. The system, with various modifications, remains in place today.

After Colonel Gordon died, South Uist passed to his son and then to the son's widow, Lady Emily Gordon Cathcart. It was she who commissioned the first Askernish golf course, in 1891. A major golf boom was under way, and her decision to hire the most famous golfer of the day probably reflected a hope of attracting sportsmen from the mainland. When Old Tom Morris travelled to South Uist at her behest, he was accompanied by Horace Hutchinson, who was both a champion golfer and one of the first golf correspondents. An account of their trip, probably written by Hutchinson, appeared in *The Scotsman* and reported, "On a stretch of beautiful links ten miles in length it was difficult to select the best site for a course, as half-a-dozen courses, each having special points of interest, could have been marked off on the available ground. After a survey, a part of the farm of Askernish was selected, principally on account of its proximity to the excellent hotel at Lochboisdale, which at this season is usually crowded with anglers."

In 1922, most of Askernish Farm was divided among eleven tenants, one of whom was William Macdonald's grandfather. Each of the Askernish crofters received the permanent right to occupy a portion of the old farm and to graze animals on common land near the sea, while Lady Gordon Cathcart, who still owned the farm and the rest of the island, retained the manor house, a portion of the arable land, and the right to play golf on the *machair*.

The meaning of that last stipulation was central to the golf-course dispute. Macdonald told me that the golf provision, in his opinion, expired with Lady Gordon Cathcart's death, and that the crofters on her former property tolerated continued golf-playing only as a favor. He and Walker said that they had no issue with the old nine-hole course, which didn't extend into the dunes, but that the new course was an outrage. Walker, rising from his seat, said, "What they have now is four times the size of what was there. The whole *machair* is four hundred and thirty-seven acres. What they've taken over is three hundred and forty!"

In 2003, new legislation enabled communities in Scotland's crofting regions to collectively purchase the land they occupied. Three years later, the people of South Uist, Eriskay, and Benbecula paid £4.5 million for their islands, which are now owned and managed by a community-run nonprofit company called Stòras Uibhist—Gaelic for "the treasure of Uist." In 2006, Stòras Uibhist confirmed the decision of the previous owner to allow the golf club to restore the course—a decision that the Askernish crofters contested. The vice-chairman of Stòras Uibhist is Father Michael MacDonald, who is the priest of the Catholic parish at South Uist's northern end. When I asked him about the complaints, he shook his head. "I can't figure out what's behind it all," he said. "It's hugely expensive to go down this road. And for what benefit?"

Walker's and Macdonald's objections to the golf course are less straightforward than they may seem: although each man has a croft at Askernish, Macdonald doesn't graze animals there, and Walker owns only a few. In addition, the people who run the golf club, far from asking anyone to remove livestock, have said repeatedly that they wish the crofters would graze more animals on the course. Hungry sheep and cattle are good for a links course, Irvine and Ebert told me, because they fertilize the soil and help keep the rough under control.

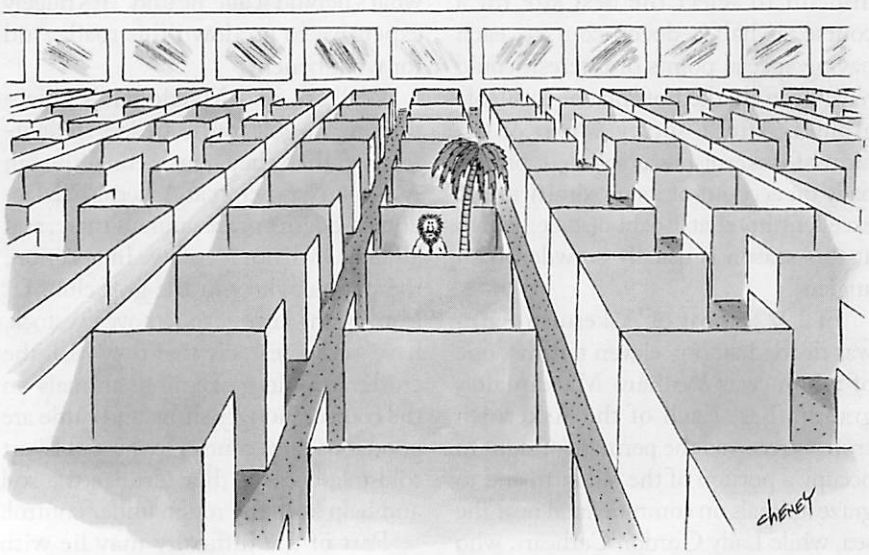
Part of the difficulty may lie with

crofting itself. Father MacDonald, when I asked, defined a croft as "a small piece of land surrounded by legislation." This is an old joke in Scotland, but it's apt. Crofting was devised to protect small tenant farmers from abusive landlords, but the system was already becoming an anachronism by the time it was put in place. The land on South Uist is so marginal and the plots are so small—an average of forty or fifty acres—that no one on the island today makes a living from crofting alone, despite substantial government grants and subsidies, and legally protected rents of less than a pound an acre. The system successfully preserves a sanitized form of medieval land tenancy, but it makes cost-effective agriculture impossible, since it divides the land among far too many tenants.

Perhaps for that reason, modern debates about crofting tend to focus more on symbols than on practicalities. The Askernish controversy has been portrayed as a class conflict, between struggling crofters and wealthy golfers, but the distinction makes no sense on South Uist, since virtually everyone on the island has at least one croft, including Ralph Thompson, the other local members of the golf club, and Father MacDonald. South Uist's economy—and therefore crofting itself—depends heavily on visitors from elsewhere, and has since at least the era of Lady Gordon Cathcart. Ralph Thompson has said that Askernish could eventually contribute as much as a million pounds a year to the local economy, a big deal on an island with a population of eighteen hundred and falling.

In early 2008, the protesting Askernish crofters asked the Lochmaddy Sheriff Court to halt the golf project. The court declined to intervene, and the crofters took their case to the Scottish Land Court, in Edinburgh. Meanwhile, construction of the golf course began. Actually, "construction" is the wrong word. At Askernish, Ebert and Irvine were determined to create golf holes the way Old Tom Morris and his contemporaries did, by doing virtually nothing beyond cutting the grass and filling in old rabbit burrows. (The 1891 article in *The Scotsman* about Askernish suggests that the first round of golf there was played within a few days of Morris's visit.) Modern golf-course designers usually work closely with contractors called shapers, who use heavy earthmoving equipment (and, often, explosives) to transform existing terrain to suit a designer's vision of what golf holes ought to be. For Askernish, Ebert didn't need a shaper, because he and Irvine intended to be no more aggressive than a nineteenth-century course builder would have been. Only a few small areas were subjected to more than trivial amounts of soil disturbance. One of those was the seventh green. Irvine and Ebert were both fairly certain that the seventh had been one of the original holes, because the valley in which it was situated looked so much like a fairway. But in what seemed to be the logical location for the green Irvine found virtually no organic matter beneath the grass. This led him to deduce that the old putting surface, if there was one, must be buried beneath six or seven decades' worth of windblown sand. He and a crew of local volunteers removed the beach grass from that spot and then raked away sand, looking for the original contours. A few feet down, they reached topsoil (or what passes for it on South Uist), confirming his hunch. Another green that required significant work was the eleventh—the target overlooking the sea which Ebert, in 2007, had asked several of us to hit shots to. Irvine and Ebert suspected that the original green (and most of the fairway leading up to it) had been lost to erosion, but they still wanted to use what remained of the dune, both because it formed an invitingly level plateau, and because the required shot, though challenging, had been so deeply appealing to all of us who had tried it. (Part of golf's addictiveness, for those who are hooked, arises from the thrill of effecting action at a distance—a form of satisfaction also known to anti-aircraft gunners.)

Ebert and Irvine used no pesticides or artificial fertilizers, and they didn't install an irrigation system. The entire cost of the golf-course construction was less than a hundred thousand pounds, a fraction of the usual bill for even a modest golf course nowadays. (Ebert helped to keep the price low by agreeing to work for Old Tom's fee, which was nine pounds.) Ebert told me, "Askernish goes back to the roots of the game, where you're just sort of playing across the landscape." Modern golf-course architects have individually recognizable styles, but most of them adhere to certain hole-design conventions: that golfers should be able to see their targets, that hazards and other obstacles should not be arbitrarily punitive, that fairways and greens should be shaped to reward good shots. In Old Tom Morris's era, a designer's main function was not to recontour the ground in order to conform to golfers' expectations but to direct play over existing terrain in thought-provoking ways, and to capitalize on lucky topographical accidents. Because Ebert and Irvine did their work at Askernish in that spirit, some of the holes pose challenges of a type that most modern players are unaccustomed to meeting. "Golfers



who have only experienced modern courses will find some of the Askernish greens very, very difficult to understand," Irvine told me. "Some of them look as if they were sloping the wrong way, but that's only because we've got so used to pandering to the golfer." The sixteenth hole, called Old Tom's Pulpit, has an elevated green whose rear half falls off severely, into a sort of bowl, where many players' approach shots are likely to come to rest. The green breaks any number of design rules, but the hole is both memorable and fun to play, as well as challenging—just like Old Tom's blind par 3 at Lahinch.

The restored Askernish course opened officially on August 22, 2008. The retired Scottish soccer legend Kenny Dalglish played in the first group and was named the club's honorary president. Five months later, the Land Court heard two days' worth of testimony from the attorneys representing the protesting crofters and Stòras Uibhist, and in late February it issued a ruling. It affirmed Stòras Uibhist's right to create golf holes anywhere on the *machair*, as well as to build a clubhouse and make other improvements, while stipulating that the golf club must not deprive the crofters of the right to graze their animals adequately. (If the crofters and Stòras Uibhist can't settle the grazing details on their own, the Land Court will hold a hearing in May.) Ralph Thompson had told me beforehand that Stòras Uibhist's attorneys were confident they would prevail, but, even so, the scope of the ruling surprised him. "It's miles above what we expected," he said.

Crofting remains an important part of life on South Uist, and many residents, Father MacDonald among them, believe that it serves a critical social function, by enabling the island to sustain a larger full-time population than would otherwise be possible. But crofting, because it spreads residents so thinly across the settled parts of the island, also undermines any deep sense of community: most of the houses on South Uist are widely scattered rather than clustered in true villages. The golf club, which is open to all and costs very little to join, has the potential to become a community anchor, and its junior golf program, which the club and Stòras Uibhist have both treated as a priority, may keep at least a few of the island's young people interested in hanging around instead of pursuing careers on the mainland. At any rate, it will give them something interesting to do on weekends while they wait for their chance to escape.

I got to play a couple of rounds at Askernish in December. Even though the course is farther north than Sitka, Alaska, the Gulf Stream keeps temperatures on South Uist mild through most of the winter and creates the possibility of a twelve-month golf season, at least for diehards. I played one day with Ralph Thompson and Donald MacInnes, who is the club's captain, as well as a builder and a crofter. There was a film of frost on some of the beach grass when we began, but the sky was virtually cloudless, and I never needed the stocking cap that I had tucked in my golf bag. On the fifth hole, we passed a spot where an Askernish crofter had plowed a small potato plot up to the very edge of the fairway, most likely as a provocation. I expected Thompson to be angry, but he laughed. "We never would have got the course finished so fast if it hadn't been for the crofters," he said. "They turned Askernish into international news."

MacInnes had brought along his dog, which ran ahead of us over the dunes, pausing occasionally to enlarge a rabbit hole. The fairways and the greens were ungroomed, in comparison with a typical course at home, and we sometimes had to play around a rut or a bare spot or a half-buried skeleton of a sheep. But roughness is part of the course's charm. The bunkers looked like real hazards, rather than like oversized hotel ashtrays, and the slanting winter light made the beach grass glow. We were a little worried, when we began, that we wouldn't have time for eighteen holes, because the winter solstice was approaching and the sun had seemed to begin setting almost as soon it came up. But we finished with visibility to spare, and had time for a beer in the tiny clubhouse, which MacInnes had built. We were able to play quickly because we had the golf course to ourselves, except for a few cows. ♦

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Slide show: David Owen at Askernish.