



OPEN COURSE: Golfers were out in force for the opening day of the new Machrihanish Dunes course. The mist may not have been rolling in from the sea but the Mull of Kintyre still suffered wet and windy weather. Pictures: Colin Mearns

First links course to be opened in a century built with nature in mind

Machrihanish Dunes is strewn with wildflowers

JENNIFER CUNNINGHAM

THE mist was not rolling in from the sea, but the wind and the rain defeated some of the foreign visitors keen to stake their claim to a piece of golfing history by playing a round on the opening day of the first links course to be built on the west coast of Scotland for a century and the first on a site of special scientific interest.

After a token couple of holes, a number of Asians and Americans decided to abandon the challenge, leaving the course to the vast variety of wildlife it supports, from the six-spot burnet moth to the frog orchid, rabbits and oyster catchers.

Ecologist Carol Crawford proved more intrepid, leading The Herald's team across the flower-strewn turf to a site above the breaking waves where deep purple pyramid orchids were flourishing in the wet, but fast-draining turf.

The opening of the Machrihanish Dunes course on the Kintyre Peninsula is as much a triumph for the ecologists as the developer. The 200 acres are designated a Site of Scientific Special Interest (SSSI), mainly for the variety and abundance of

wild flowers which grow in the machair.

Irishman Brian Keating's original proposal in 2003 caused immediate concern to Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). Months of negotiation followed between SNH and the course designer, David McLay Kidd, resulting in a complete re-arrangement of his layout.

Apart from being one of the most sought-after designers of courses, Mr Kidd – and the environmentalists – had the great advantage of his complete empathy for the fragile nature of the dunes.

He said: "My grandparents had a caravan down here and I have fond memories of endless summer holidays, caddying for my grandfather and then playing the course."

"Unlike other courses, such as the Castle course at St Andrews, we did not have to come up with a storybook. It was more a case of how can we construct a way of walking round these

'Even the birds are happy. Staff will put fences round the nests'



BUNKERED: 'Old Tom Morris' made an appearance at the opening.

dunes with a set of golf clubs while respecting this hugely valuable SSSI?"

Southworth Developments, which moved from being a minor investor to the developer of the course and associated hotel and holiday village, which will open fully next year, retained Ms Crawford to ensure the safeguarding of the eco-system.

She said: "The rarest plant here is the sea bindweed, but there are also early marsh orchids and pyramid orchids, but the value is in the variety of flowers which in early summer provides a carpet of colour."

"That has been preserved by seeding the greens and tees with suitable grass and an agreement with the farmer allowing Hebridean sheep

to graze on the course during the winter."

Stan Phillips of SNH said: "It is the largest sand dune in mainland Argyll and it was vital to protect it. The dunes are most fragile closest to the sea, so we insisted that the course was set back a minimum of 10 metres from the top dune ridge."

"There were months of difficult negotiations, but the developers have been as good as their word and have shown that a golf course can be managed with the environment in mind."

Machrihanish Dunes, the first new links course to be built on the west coast of Scotland for a century, also meets the stiff test set by the Golf Environment Organisation.

By contrast, their chief executive, Jonathan Smith, has been critical of Donald Trump's plan to develop a golf resort in Aberdeenshire, saying the failure to match an appropriate development with an extremely sensitive site should have resulted in the proposal being sent back to the drawing board.

Mr Kidd concedes that golf courses have not always been so environmentally friendly: "We have to learn from the past. The ecologists helped us to lay this one down lightly on the land, just as Old Tom Morris did on the neighbouring Machrihanish course. That's the way golf should be."

There is another element to sustainability: the human one. As Andrew Campbell of SNH acknowledges, the Kintyre Peninsula needs economic regeneration and the new course and holiday accommodation, both in Machrihanish and Campbeltown, provides new jobs.

Southworth chief executive, David Southworth, expects around 20% of visitors will hail from the US, but the majority will be from the UK and Europe.

Even the birds are happy. At Machrihanish Golf Club, a ball which lands close to an oyster catcher's nest can be lifted and dropped.

At Machrihanish Dunes, they will put fences round the nests and have built artificial ones for the wheatears.

Floral attractions



EARLY MARSH ORCHID



SEA BINDWEED



BULBOUS BUTTERCUP



WILD PANSIES



FROG ORCHID



FIELD GENTIAN

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