

# Unrivalled Expanses



## The history of golf on Tiree

Tiree & Coll Gaelic Partnership, 2011

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## **- the history of golf on Tiree**



**Unknown couple playing golf in the 1920s or early 1930s (B137)**

## Introduction

The origins of golf are disputed and lost in the mists of time. The Royal and Ancient Golf Club in St Andrews was established in 1754, but the game's popularity mushroomed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century after the development of the gutta percha ball in 1848. These new, cheaper balls allowed the use of iron club heads. 'Old' Tom Morris built the first purpose built course at Prestwick in 1851, and his son, 'Young' Tom Morris, became one of the game's first stars. The development of the railways also brought large numbers of city players out to the new links courses around the coasts of Scotland.

Links courses were built near the sea, where the grass was short. Tiree, with its huge expanses of machair, must have seemed like an ideal place for the game. Indeed, the Duke of Argyll, writing in 1883, made this prediction:

*I fully expect that "far on in summers which I shall not see" the Island of Tyree will be a great resort for health. Its strong yet soft sea air – its comparative dryness – its fragrant turf, full of wild thyme and white clover – its miles of pure white sandy bays, equally pleasant for riding, driving or walking or for sea bathing – **and last and not least, its unrivalled expanses for the game of golf** – all combine to render it most attractive and wholesome in the summer months. Crofts and Farms in the Hebrides by the Duke of Argyll, 1883. AI 1997.49.1.*

## Tiree's first golfers

The first recorded golfers on Tiree were the marines who came to 'pacify' the crofters of the island who were agitating for land rights in August 1886. Lady Balfour, part of the Argyll family, paints a bucolic picture, although, as we shall see, the island was, at first, in an ugly mood:

*The [marines'] chief occupation was assisting the islanders with their harvest, while the officers were the pioneers who laid out the first of the golf courses, destined to be famous in the annals of first-class golf. Lady Victoria Campbell by Lady Frances Balfour, Hodder and Stoughton , p161.*

We even know the names of the ten men:

*The number of marines put ashore from the Ajax and Assistance was 250. The officer in charge of the force was Colonel MacKay Heriot, and under him were Captains Eagles, Wylde and Lang; Lieutenants Clavell, Anderson, Curtoys, Connolly and Pulter; and Dr Todd, RN. The Times, 3 August 1886, p5.*

These officers must have travelled into active service with at least a handful of clubs and some balls, which tells us something about the life style of officers at that time and the popularity of the new game.

There is no record of where this new course was laid out. But we know that the marines were camping in Scarinish and that they preferred to play on the short, grazed machair grass. This may rule out The Reef, as it is grazed only in winter, and the grass would have been long in August.

But there were also political considerations. The dispute between crofters and the landlord had arisen in May 1886 over Greenhill farm. The crofters of that district wanted the land broken up into crofts. Instead the estate gave the whole farm to Lachlan MacNeill, Vault. The local people took the law into their own hands and turned out their own animals onto the land. The Duke served warrants on 51 men, but the police, who were sent to enforce the law, were turned back by an angry crowd.

When the marines waded ashore in August the atmosphere was initially hostile. Local tradition has it that the force mounted a 24 hour guard on the well they commandeered in Scarinish in case it was poisoned. All of this makes it less likely that the officers would have felt comfortable playing golf on the machair in the west of the island, and that Vault would have seemed 'safer' territory.

## **The Tiree Golf Club**

The marines left, but the idea of playing golf on Tiree stayed behind. In 1899 the Duke, who was kindly disposed towards the new game, donated funds to the Tiree Golf Club:

*1899 Rev TS MacPherson, secretary and Treasurer of Tiree Golf Club, donation to funds £3 (Factory Act Books, Inveraray Castle Archives, AI 1998.151.1).*

Again, there is no indication where the Tiree Golf Club was, but by 1910 or 1911, the Vault machair was transformed into a modern 18 hole links course. One of the holes was in Calum MacLean's croft in Kirkapol and the club was called the Kirkapol and Vault Golf Club:

*The monthly medal competition was held on the Kirkapol and Vault golf course. The day was wet and unpromising in the morning but at 10am it cleared up. There was a good turnout of members...the course was in good order and some fine golf was witnessed...Mr Burton, HM Inspector of Schools played over the course [and] stated that people have only to know the testing qualities of the new links when they will come in large numbers to the island. Oban Times, 4 February 1911.*

As this was in February, it is likely that the course had been laid out at least the year before.



**Playing golf at Kirkapol in the 1920s (U65)**

*Tiree: On Thursday afternoon last week Mr Riddley, a professional golfer, showed some wonderfully fine play over the links. Oban Times, 25 March 1911.*

Lachie MacLean, Vault (*Lachainn Sheumais*), remembers that his father, who was born in 1850, was a keen golfer and won at least one medal. He would have been 61 in 1911, not too late to start golf, but it is more likely that he had been playing as a younger man (Lachie MacLean, personal communication, 6/1995). This is further evidence that the original course had also been in Vault.

## **Charles McNeil**

The man behind the transformation of golf on Tiree was Charles McNeil from Prestwick. His father John owned the Colonial Iron Works in Helen Street, Govan. This factory made machinery for sugar cane and rice milling in the British colonies and employed 500 men (1914 Whitakers Red Book). In the 1911 Census, Charles is living in the family house in St Nicholas parish, Prestwick. He was 35 and his profession is noted as Mechanical Engineer, like his father. The McNeil home had 13 rooms and the household included three servants and two nurses. Despite our best efforts to establish a Tiree connection that might have brought Charles to Tiree, we have been unable to find one, at least as far back as two generations.

He was on Tiree a few months later but had to rush home to be with his dying mother:

*Heartfelt sympathy is felt with Mr Charles McNeil of Messrs John McNeil and Co, Colonial Works, Govan, on the death of his mother at the family residence, Glenamod, Prestwick, on Wednesday, after a trying illness [this may explain the two nurses in the home]. Mr McNeil heard on Saturday night of her critical condition, and at once left Vault and was in time to be*

*with his mother, to whom he was much devoted, when she peacefully departed. Mr McNeill's untiring enthusiasm in promoting golf on Tiree has done a great deal for the island, and will continue to bear fruit. Oban Times, 20 May 1911.*

The new course seems to have had an immediate impact:

*Tiree: Golf – devotees of the game continue to reach the island with each fresh arrival of the regular steamers. In the immediate neighbourhood of the course, housing accommodation is severely taxed, but both at Heanish and Scarinish the usual boarding charges are available at the moderate charges. It has been finally arranged that in the early spring an inter-Universities match, open to students of the four Scottish Universities, will take place on the course. The coveted trophy is a valuable gold cup, the generous donors being Messrs McNeil, Colonial Iron Works, Govan. Oban Times, 2 September 1911.*

McNeil also gave the new course a clubhouse:

*A commodious club house, the gift of Mr Charles McNeil, Colonial Iron Works, Govan, has recently been erected on the golf course at Vault. The erection, which is the work of Messrs J & L MacKinnon, Vault, supplies a much-felt want, proving an inestimable boon to all who make use of the course, and especially to such enthusiast as resort hither, welcoming the shine and not the shower. The course is now as perfect as can possibly be, Mr McNeil having spared neither time nor money in making it second to none on the western seaboard of Scotland. Oban Times, 16 September 1911.*

The first hole of the new course was named after him. In the Tiree & Coll Gaelic Partnership's place-name index for Vault there is a *Pomp* or *Tobar Mhic Nèill* (MacNeill's pump or well) near the old fang, and a *Croit* or *Pàirc Mhic Nèill* (MacNeill's croft or field) just south of the fank by the present third green. This area was fenced off and the whole township is said to have had a share. Whether these names relate to Charles MacNeil or Lachlan MacNeill, the crofter in the 1886 dispute that brought the marines to Tiree, is not clear.

While he was on Tiree, McNeil rented Silversands and Margaret MacFarlane, Vault, worked for him as housekeeper (Lachie MacKinnon, Balephetrish, her son, personal communication).

He is likely to have been conscious of the potential conflict between the increasing popularity of the game and the importance of the grazing to the Vault crofters. He gave every crofter in Vault a set of clubs (Lachlan MacLean, personal communication, 6/1995). The prize for the season's best golfer was a bag of meal (Donald MacIntyre, Gott, 9/2005).

While the inhabitants of Scarinish in the 1930s would say:

*Of course, we didn't golf. It was only the toffs who came in that did the golfing. We were second class citizens, as it were! Annie Kennedy, Scarinish, AC66.*

In Vault it seems that McNeil had won over the crofters. In one of the first competitions in 1911, the best scores came from John MacPhail, Neil MacDougall, John MacArthur, Lachlan

MacDougall, H. MacIntyre, P. Anderson (the gamekeeper) and M. MacLean (*Oban Times*, 4 February 1911). These sound like local names!

Some people say that the MacNeill who set up the course was a Peter MacNeill, a travelling salesman from Colonsay, who is also credited with starting the Tiree Regatta (Donald MacIntyre, 10/2002).

## **Gordon Lockhart**

A 1965 article quotes Roddy Morrison, the bank manager of the time:

*Mr Morrison says, "The course was designed by Gordon Lockhart, a professional golfer, and was once one of the best on the west coast of Scotland." Daily Express, 8 April 1965.*

Gordon Lockhart was born in 1887 and came from the same parish as McNeil in Prestwick. A fine golfer, he had become the secretary of the Prestwick St Nicholas Club in Ayrshire (*Golf Illustrated*, November 1920, p11) and it seems highly likely that the young man knew McNeil through a shared love of the game. He would have been 24 in 1911 when the Vault course is thought to have been laid out, and, while one of the top golfers of his day in Scotland, he was still very much an amateur. His style of playing is vividly described:

*One very well known amateur has joined the colours since I last wrote, in the shape of Mr Gordon Lockhart, who has enlisted in the Glasgow Highlanders. Mr Lockhart, who belongs to the Prestwick St Nicholas Club, is, next to Mr Jenkins, unquestionably the best amateur golfer in the west of Scotland. He is, as may be seen from the picture, a very big and powerful man and his power of hitting the ball is in proportion to his size. He has a powerful, short up-swing but a tremendously free and powerful finish. There is something a little clumsy in his methods of which the rather curious grip right in the fist of his right hand gives a hint, but there can be no two questions about the result (*Golf Illustrated*, unknown year, p27).*

He won the Irish Open Amateur Championship in 1912, and at the British Amateur Golf Championship at Muirfield in 1920, Lockhart was only beaten in the semi final, generating this headline in the *New York Times*:

*Brilliant Scotsman Carries Chicagoan to Home Hole After Having Squared Match on the Fifteenth.*

He turned professional the next year:

*Two British professionals will sail for America on May 8<sup>th</sup> to play a series of eight exhibition games – Gordon Lockhart and Tom Fernie. Lockhart, 39, is the professional at the famous Gleagles course. He was a well-known amateur before he turned professional in 1921. He has represented Scotland against England, has won the Irish Open amateur championship, and has reached the semi-final of the British Championship (*Golf Illustrated*, May 1926, p33).*

## James Hobbens

Another man who is remembered on the island as having been involved in the layout of the course was James Hobbens, who came to Tiree and married a local girl. In the 1911 Census James Hobens (as it was spelled), 33 from North Berwick, was described as a green keeper. For some reason, on the day of the census, he was on board a passenger vessel *The Numibian*.

He next appears (as Hobbens) in the Blythswood records in Glasgow. In 1913, he married 35 year old Catherine MacArthur, daughter of John and Margaret MacArthur from the Neuk, Vault. He gives his occupation on the certificate as Golf Green Keeper.

Oral tradition in Vault was that he was a professional golfer. There is no mention of this in these two records, and the likelihood is that he was brought to Tiree by McNeil to work on the greens between 1911 and 1913, and met his future wife there.

There were no fences around the greens originally. There were less sheep on the Vault machair in the 1930s, and cows were kept off the machair in summer (Lachie MacKinnon, Dunfoot, 12/2008, personal communication – he left school in 1939). Donald MacKinnon was the treasurer of the club even though he did not play himself.

Morag MacIntyre ran the small shop at Silversands. She also acted as secretary of the Vault Golf Club, and players had to pay their green fees to her. A map of the course (now in An Iodhlann) was on her shop wall.



**Five children playing golf in 1925 (W97)**

Duncan Grant remembers Mr Swinton, a frequent holidaymaker in Ruaig, walking down the road to play golf just before the Second World War. But the club seems to have run out steam in the 1930s. It is likely that Charles McNeil was no longer bankrolling the course. His father had died in 1927 and he may have had to take charge of the family firm which began to struggle anyway in the 1930s economic depression.



There was no play during the war. RAF Tiree's base newspaper, *The Cyclone*, lists badminton, cricket, football and table tennis – but no golf. And when a few people started to play again in 1945, maintaining the 18 hole course was too much and play once again came to halt (Mairi MacKinnon, Parkhouse, 6/1995).

## Revival in 1968

*Golf was revived [on Tiree] in 1966 or 67, courtesy of three stalwarts - Harry Rutter, manager of the shop in Balemartine; Kenny MacKinnon, the local policeman at the time; and Roddy Morrison, who was the local banker. It started off as 18 holes and we all mucked in and built tees and cut greens, sometimes before we went out to work in the morning. But the upkeep of it was so great we had to cut it down to nine. Gordon Connell, AC299.*

A newspaper cutting from 1965 reports on the efforts to bring the Vault course back to life:

*Plans are being made by a group of islanders on Tiree to retrace and develop a golf course which was in existence more than 30 years ago. Since the course fell into disuse the land has been given over to sheep grazing.*

*The old course, which was laid out by a professional, had 18 holes and was known as Kirkapol and Vault Golf Club. Sheep have been grazing the land since the course went out of existence before the last war...Mr Donald MacLean, Vault, is the only islander who can remember the location of the former tees and greens and his memory will be used for restoring the course.*

*At least 14 of the original holes will be redeveloped. A road now runs across the grazing ground and rather than make players cross it, the remaining holes will be built on the same side of the road as the others...The sheep have kept the grass short, and Mr Morrison, a local bank manager, who is one of the leading figures in the scheme, will play over the ground tomorrow. But it is expected to be a year or two before the course is fully restored...*

*The existence of the course, and the inauguration of the island's first public water supply, which should be in operation by the end of the summer, will it is hoped, make it worthwhile providing more accommodation on the island for tourists. Newspaper cutting 7 April 1965.*

Another report backs this up:

*I see that after more than 30 years there is a ploy on to resurrect Kirkapol and Vault Golf Course from under the very hooves of the Tiree sheep. The islanders have had a meeting. And today Scarinish bank manager Mr Roderick Morrison, is going out on safari with the policeman...*

*Some two years will go by before Tiree Golf Club (as they're going to re-christen it) is restored to its former glory. But already there are 30 members out of a population of 1,000.*

*“Three holes have been cut off by a roadway. But there is new ground available to make a full 18-hole golf course.” As yet there are no amenities like shelters, tee boxes or a club house. “But,” says Mr Morrison, “there are still some fine bunkers left.” Daily Express, 8 April 1965.*

The Vault golf course was re-opened formally in 1968:

*Vaul Golf Club Tiree began their season with the official opening of their new club hut in the presence of a large gathering of the players and their supporters. On the call of the club captain, Mr H Rutter, the key was inserted in the door by Mr Hugh Cameron, Hon. President of the Tiree Association, the donors of the hut...Mrs Cameron was presented with a bouquet of flowers by young Mairi Morrison, daughter of the club treasurer. Unknown publication, unknown date.*



**Opening of Vaul Golf Club House in 1968 (T78)**

L-R: Henry Rutter; unknown boy; Hugh Cameron, 'Lochiel', Cornaigbeg; Margaret Cameron; unknown man.

In 1969 a trophy was donated by John and Gilbert Cadden, two brothers who had provided a visiting dental service to Mull and Tiree, some of it in a boat. The cup is still keenly fought for every year between Vaul and Tobermory Golf Clubs.



**The Tیره golf team, which played Tobermory for the Cadden cup, outside Vault Golf Club in 1981 (F97)**  
 L-R: Joyce Gillespie, Balinoe; Gordon Connell, Crossapol; Donald Berry, Vault; Stewart Langley, Kirkapol;  
 Donald Farquhar, Balemartine; Eachann Donald, Vault; Kevin Boyd, Ruaig; Iain MacLeod, Kilmoluaig; Danny  
 Gillespie, Balinoe; David Weatherston, Scarinish; Neil Munn, Crossapol; Leslie MacKenzie, Heylipol.

## Scarinish golf course

While putting the finishing touches to the new course in Vault, Charles McNeil was eyeing up other promising sites on the island:

*A new golf course is to be opened at Machair Heanish, which should attract visitors to the Scarinish, Heanish and Baugh districts of the island. Mr McNeil, Glasgow, has done yeoman service in this direction for the island. Oban Times, 17 June 1911.*

Nothing came of this, but a golf course in Scarinish was set up in 1920 or 21 by the Heanish policeman, John Glenday and a visiting telegraph operator, David Murdoch. Johnny Brown from the Scarinish Hotel and Jack McEwan, who lived in Heanish, were also involved. The course had 7 holes.

*The first tee was straight across the road from where the bank is today, and then they went up to the lighthouse, and then along both beaches [one hole was on Eilean an Arbhair, the tiny mound at the shore that today carries an old telegraph pole, which would have made an interesting green!]. There were different holes and flags, and then they went over the back of what is now the Bank House and then right round till they stopped just below Slowther's house. It went over both beaches and over the road, I know that. I don't know if you remember the stream that used to run at the back of [The Willows]. They crossed there, and they always lost their golf balls there, and we went in with our bare feet and found them, after they were away of course. Not for them! Oh! No! We opened the balls, and some of them had*

*elastic in them and others were [made of] wood – they were no use. The ones with elastic were. You got a piece of elastic and two sticks and you had a catapult. We never gave them back, but sometimes we had to. AC66, Annie Kennedy, Scarinish.*

The first green keepers were Dugald and Neil MacKinnon (the uncles of Iain Johnstone in Heanish). Margaret MacKinnon's brother took over in 1925 aged 13. He was paid £1 a week to cut three greens and scrape the sheep droppings off the rest (Margaret MacKinnon, Braeside, 8/1995, personal communication).

One boy, who left Scarinish School in 1936, was disciplined for being late after playing golf one dinner time. The inhabitants of the time said that they sometimes had to duck as they went about their business, but there seems to have been remarkably little problem about playing golf around the village.

*I never heard of anybody being hit, no! AC66, Annie Kennedy, Scarinish.*

David Murdoch wrote a reminiscence of his time on Tiree in the 1920s:

*In the 1920s it was the responsibility of the Wireless Telegraphy Section of the British Post Office to provide a communication service when the islands of the Hebrides were cut off from the mainland arising from the failure of the normal telegraph system. These failures usually occurred during the early part of the winter and were attributed to the cutting of the submarine telegraph cable by trawlers fishing in this area...*

*At Scarinish the equipment was housed in a disused crofter's cottage with walls about six feet thick, earthen floor, two small windows, and close to the only hotel on the island. Two temporary aerial masts, about 60 feet in height, were erected. All communication was effected through Malin Head and the procedure adopted was a calling system every hour commencing at 9am each day and finally closing the station at 6pm. The telegraph traffic amounted to an average weekly number of 20 messages which were delivered to the local post office by a messenger boy.*

*One of my earliest visitors was the local island policeman, PC John Glenday and we soon discovered that we were both keen golfers. In consequence of this, and within a very short time, we had planned and laid down a 7 hole pitch and putt golf course with suitable greens and with three of the holes extending about 120 yards from tee to green. When the golf course was completed this was the procedure we carried out whenever suitable weather conditions permitted us to play. As soon as the 9am sked [scheduled report] was over we would set off to play round the course which, being planned in a semi-circular fashion, could be accomplished in about 50 minutes. Then, when the second call at 10am had been completed, a further round of golf would be possible if no other station duties were required...*

*Two interesting characters with whom I became acquainted shortly after my first spell of duty there were a Mr Jack McEwan (of Edinburgh) and Commander James Dewar, RN (of Perth), both members of large brewing family concerns on the mainland. They were known among the local inhabitants as remittance men, and had apparently been exiled to live on Tiree under strict family conditions. Both of them were very charming, well-educated companions,*

*and appeared to be quite reconciled to their exile style of life. The reason why Tiree had been selected for their stay was that the Duke of Argyll, owner of the island, would not allow any establishment to hold an excise licence. However, despite this prohibition, the inhabitants of the island were able to obtain wholesale supply of spirits from Oban by conveyance on the weekly Mail Steamer. This facility was taken advantage every few weeks by one or other of my new friends to obtain their supplies, and then they would disappear entirely from the social scene for a few days until the consignment was consumed.*

## **Cornaigmore**

Allan MacDougall came to Cornaigmore School in 1933 and became head teacher in 1938. Despite childhood polio he was a fit man and swam daily. He was a keen golfer and created his own private golf course on the machair between the school and the sea.

*When I came to Tiree [as a teacher in 1962] the only golfing activity was on the machair in Cornaig, and that was Mr MacDougall and myself. When he found out I played golf he told me he had a wee golf course out the back of the house. There were about four or five holes, and by approaching the holes from different angles you were able to manufacture a nine hole course. We went out a few times in the summer. Gordon Connell, AC299.*