



Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

Dear Member,

Most of this issue of Sìl Eòlais is about golf on Tìree. Many of you will appreciate the noble game, but there may be some who have other interests! Bear with me, because this has been a fascinating detective story and it shows, in a small way, how powerful a resource An Iodhlann has become.

We started collecting anything and everything about the island in 1997 and we now have some 12,000 items which are all catalogued and searchable with the computer. Our search for 'golf' came up with a mixture of photographs, newspaper cuttings, books, reminiscences, maps, place names, genealogy, recordings and oral tradition. This has allowed us to put together some of the jigsaw. We are still looking for some vital pieces, but if you stand back you can now see the shape. The picture is always incomplete – but then, that's the fascinating and frustrating thing about local history!

Our interest was sparked by a map, in this case one that we were given some years ago by Eddie Gillespie. It dates from 1911 and has been too fragile to examine regularly. However, Brian Findlater kindly took it to the National Map Reading Room in Edinburgh where they were able to copy it. It shows an 18 hole course extending into Kirkapol. Could this year be the club's centenary?

The Duke of Argyll, writing in 1883, made this prediction; *[Tìree's] unrivalled expanses for the game of golf...render[s] it most attractive and wholesome in the summer months.*

The first recorded golfers on Tìree were the marines who came to 'put down' the crofters of the island who were agitating for land rights in August 1886. However, Lady Frances Balfour wrote; *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.* This may be underestimating the very real political struggle that was going on between landlord and crofter!

The marines left, but the idea of playing golf on Tìree stayed on the island. In 1899 the Duke, as we have seen kindly disposed towards the new game, donated funds to the Tìree Golf Club; *1899: Rev TS MacPherson, secretary and Treasurer of Tìree Golf Club, donation to funds £3.* We don't know where this course was, but it was probably Vaul.



Playing golf at Kirkapol in the 1920s. The Free Church and Lodge can be seen in the background.

The next record we have of golf on Tiree comes from the Oban Times in February 1911; *The monthly medal competition was held on the Kirkapol and Vaul [as it was named] golf course. 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.*

The man behind this transformation was Charles McNeil from Prestwick. His father owned the Colonial Iron Works in Helen Street, Govan. This factory made machinery for sugar cane and rice mill works in the British colonies and employed 500 men. Despite our best efforts to establish a Tiree connection which might have brought Charles to Tiree, Duncan Grant has been unable to find one, at least going back two generations.

A commodious club house, the gift of Mr Charles McNeil, Colonial Iron Works, Govan, has recently been erected on the golf course at Vaul. 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.

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."*

Gordon Lockhart came from the same parish as McNeil in Prestwick. A fine golfer, 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 Vaul course is thought to have been laid out, and, while one the top golfers of his day in Scotland, he was then very much an amateur. He won the Irish Open Amateur Championship in 1912 and became a professional at Gleneagles in 1921.



An unknown couple playing golf titled 'Aig iomain' from a small album from Silversands, Vaul, titled 'Idle Days' probably dating from the 1920s or early 1930s.



Five children playing golf, from a small photograph album titled 'Tiree 1925' thought to come originally from Silversands, Vaul.

Another name remembered locally as being involved in the development of the course is that of James Hobbens. Local tradition has it that he was a professional golfer but, when we looked at the newly released 1911 Census we found him (as Hobens) on board a passenger ship and described as a green keeper and from North Berwick. We next found his marriage certificate in 1913 to Catherine MacArthur, 35, of Vaul, and again described as a green keeper. It seems most likely he was brought by McNeil to Tiree to work on the new course and he met his future wife there.

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 then began to struggle in the 1930s economic depression.

In 1965 the course was revived; *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...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.*

The Vaul golf course was re-opened formally in 1968; *Vaul Golf Club Tìree* 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 Tìree Association, the donors of the hut...Mrs Cameron was presented with a bouquet of flowers by young Mairi Morrison, daughter of the club treasurer.



Opening of Vaul Golf Club House, 1968. L-R: Henry Rutter; unknown boy; Hugh Cameron, 'Lochiel', Cornaigbeg; Margaret Cameron; unknown man.

Another golf course was set up in the middle of Scarinish 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, a 'remittance man' who lived in Heanish, were also involved. The course had 7 holes.

Annie Kennedy, Scarinish recalled: *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...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. 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.*

David Murdoch wrote a reminiscence of his time on Tìree 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.



The Tìree golf team which played Tobermory for the Cadden Cup. The Cadden brothers were dentists from Glasgow who carried out surgeries in Tobermory and Tìree, partly using a boat fitted out for operations. L-R: Joyce Gillespie, Balinoe; Gordon Connell, Crossapol; Donald Berry, Vaul; Stewart Langley, Kirkapol; Donald Farquhar, Balemartine; Eachann Donald, Vaul; Kevin Boyd, Ruaig; Iain MacLeod, Kilmoluaig; Danny Gillespie, Balinoe; David Weatherston, Scarinish; Neil Munn, Crossapol; Leslie MacKenzie, Heylipol.