

◆ Resident golfers group questions the sustainability of rising number of visitor rounds at revered St Andrews courses



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Investigations Correspondent

It is the guardian of golf's birthplace, tasked with protecting a history that dates back more than six centuries while also ensuring the sport's most hallowed site moves with the times.

For more than half a century, the St Andrews Links Trust (SALT) has strived to safeguard the Fife town's famous public courses while capitalising on growing global demand to drive forward investment. It is a delicate balancing act, and one that may be approaching a tipping point.

The trust, established by legislation in 1974 to manage, maintain and preserve the golf courses and facilities on behalf of the people of St Andrews and the golfers who visit, has enjoyed considerable financial success of late.

In 2013, its total incoming resources amounted to £19.2 million, allowing it to post a modest net income of over £900,000. Fast forward ten years to 2023, and SALT brought in an all-time high of £43.8m, with net income of £11.4m.

There are several factors behind the upturn, such as rising merchandise sales. But above all, it is the sheer number of rounds being played on SALT's seven courses that has allowed it to break records and grow its surplus to £11.5m.

Its income from golf alone across its seven courses exceeded £24.4m in 2023, up from £11.1m a decade previously. Whereas there were 213,086 rounds of golf played in 2013, the number reached a record high 283,032 in 2023, with an unprecedented 78 per cent course occupancy the same year – ironically, the wettest in the trust's history.

Such numbers provide an invaluable revenue stream, and the trust's strategic investment portfolio includes an overhaul of the 30-year-old links clubhouse, an upgraded irrigation system, and a way of ensuring the Castle Course can open for play 12 months a year. SALT has also spent £3.5m to acquire 70 acres of agricultural land as part of coastal protection works.

Those ambitions could go even further, with talks under way with the Kohler family to take over a long-term lease of The Duke's course. If successful, SALT says it would provide thousands of additional tee times every year for ticket holders.

But Scorecard: The Business of Golf, the Scotsman's series scrutinising the finances underpinning the game, can reveal many who hold the town's golfing heritage dear are questioning the trust's direction of travel. A newly formed group, known as the St Andrews Resident Golfers Association (STARGA), and which boasts nearly 220 members, has expressed concern that an emphasis on increasing revenues may be subverting the original intention of the 1974 act.

STARGA points out that of the 283,032 rounds played in 2023,

visitors accounted for 151,822 of them – a 49 per cent increase in visitor numbers compared to 2009. Such an upturn, according to John Winter, the association's secretary, has had a deleterious impact.

"The world of golf has seen increased demand post-Covid, but in St Andrews, the level of demand has been disproportionate, in part as a result of promotion by SALT," he said. "Most of this demand is in the summer, which has resulted in problems with access, pace of play, and the deteriorating condition of the courses."

"The courses are overplayed and do not get any time to recover, and the quality of the visitor experience as well as the local experience has been reduced. There has been no increase in capacity, and this is the root cause of the issues that the resident golfer is facing."

A recent STARGA survey of its members found 92 per cent of respondents said the availability of tee times had got worse. More than three quarters were of the view the interests of

resident golfers were being represented not so well, or not well at all, by the links' board of trustees.

Over 91 per cent agreed the increasing number of visitors had negatively impacted the experience of links ticket holders, while more than 70 per cent said visitor numbers – and the trust's surplus – should be reduced. In Mr Winter's view, curbing visitor rounds to around 210,000 to 220,000 a year would be a workable compromise.

A spokesman for SALT said: "As the home of golf, St Andrews Links is a worldwide golf tourism destination and significant economic driver for the town and Scotland as well as providing publicly accessible facilities open to all. "In the last six years, before and after the pandemic, we have seen unprecedented demand from both ticket holders and visitors, in line with

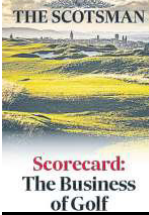
global trends. Importantly, the number of rounds played has risen at a similar rate for both ticket holders and visitors and there has been no decrease in the number of times available to ticket holders."

The trust pointed to an independent ticket holder survey carried out last year that drew more than 1,200 responses. Nearly nine in ten people said their links ticket represented good value for money, with the majority of its seven courses receiving positive feedback for availability.

The spokesman added: "The charitable objective of the links trust is to increase public participation in sport and therefore it is encouraging to see increased demand for golf and to recognise the important role St Andrews Links plays in providing a publicly accessible facility to all.

"We do recognise the challenge that increased demand has on tee time availability and we have created a golf access group to review availability and forecast future demand at the links. As part of this, we announced additional tee times for ticket holders, which includes more than 10,000 additional exclusive ticket holder tee times for 2025.

"As a charity, all revenue is reinvested into course maintenance, tackling threats such as coastal erosion, improving facilities for all and supporting charitable giving. Ensuring fair access to the golf courses is part of this and a top priority for the trust."



PICTURE: JAVAL SEVERNAL/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



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Home of golf warned historic courses are being 'overplayed'

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Clockwise from main: The famous Swilcan Bridge on the 18th hole of the Old Course at St Andrews; Golfers 'Old' Tom Morris, left, Captain Hay Wemyss, right, and Allan Robertson, centre, at St Andrews in 1854; More than 283,000 rounds are played a year on the seven courses managed by the St Andrews Links Trust; Tiger Woods holds the Claret Jug aloft after winning The Open at St Andrews in 2005

