



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

11

*Waterville Golf Links*

PAR 5 · 506 YARDS



Fazio built *bravely* here yet Waterville's  
*soulful spirit* is unaffected, amazing considering only  
three holes have been *left unaltered*

THE VILLAGE OF WATERVILLE ON THE MOST SOUTH-WESTERN PENINSULA OF IRELAND is one of the country's most enchanting corners. Waterville Golf Links, laid out on sandhills between the River Inny and Ballinskelligs Bay is one of its – if not the globe's – most captivating courses. The eleventh hole here, Tranquillity, must be one of the most perfect on the planet.

Visitors here will most readily remember the final three holes that play along the bay. The sixteenth, a comely, curving, mid-length two-shotter sticks in the memory not least because this is where Waterville's most famous golfing son made an outrageous 360 yard hole in one: it is Liam's Ace.

The view from the single shot seventeenth hole never really leaves you: it is Mulcahy's Peak, the teeing ground towering above the course, first identified by the course founder. And the eighteenth, a three-shotter, perilously parallel to the seashore, demands a final burst of bravery and skill: it is O'Grady's Beach, the best-loved hole of a well-loved member.

Yet it is the eleventh hole that learned locals tell you is Waterville's greatest treasure. Played wisely, perhaps with the benefit of a calm day, Tranquillity will readily justify its name. Played incorrectly – and it does not take much to get this comparatively short par 5 wrong – it might seem less harmonious.

Its name comes about more because of its setting than the challenge it presents. That setting is an exquisite valley through dunes, entirely natural for all of its 500 yards, a remarkable find for principle course Architect Eddie Hackett. The challenge is quite different: a fairway in parts wide and in parts narrow, a natural break in the middle of it where the ground falls away steeply and then a green covered left by bunkers and protected right by a steep drop-off.

Golf came to this beautiful-beyond-belief linksland in 1889 with the arrival of the trans-Atlantic telegraph from the USA. Hundreds of men were stationed here to build that first cable. They formed the Waterville Athletic Club and golfed over a crude nine holes on the flattest land, where the current first, second, sixth and seventh holes can be found today.

Some eight decades later Eddie Hackett was invited by Jack Mulcahy, the Irish American businessman who owned the land, to create a more significant track. Hackett immediately knew that he had hit on something serious and the course spilled from the flat ground to the highest dunes under his watchful eye.

Waterville opened for play in 1973 amid a flurry of publicity and press interest whipped up by the enthusiastic Mulcahy. Like so many subsequent visitors, he had loved the linksland from the moment he had first set eyes upon it. You could say he lost his heart to the place. When he died in 1995 his ashes were buried next to the seventeenth tee.

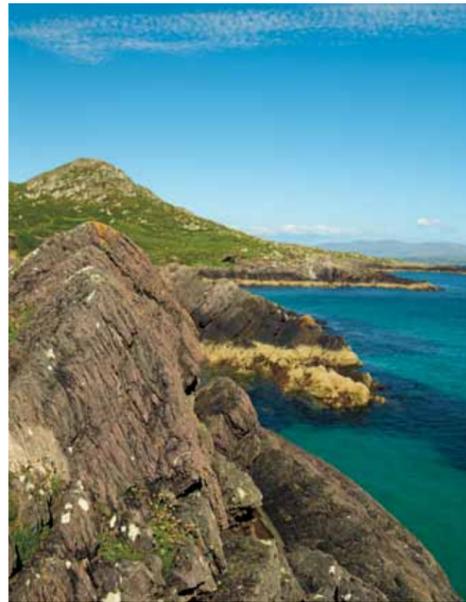
The American connection continues today. Waterville Golf Links is owned by a group of Irish Americans that also own Waterville House. The eighteenth century manor house-turned hotel is complete with an outstanding fishing beat and a practise range featuring a solitary par 3 designed by American course Architect Tom Fazio.

But Fazio did not come to Waterville to design a private par 3. He came to rework the great course. In 2002 work started improving those holes on the land where the original nine used to lie. On the first hole a new dune system was created on the left, giving the hole a sense of seclusion it had not previously enjoyed. Across the entire course flat areas were given interest, mounds created where there were none simply to focus the golfer's eye on the hole. Now the secret beauty of Waterville, its splendid isolation, something of the tranquillity of the eleventh hole, can be found throughout.

Fazio built bravely at Waterville where others might have tread carefully, fearful of interfering with something so universally admired. The results are spectacular. The holes seem to more naturally fit their dune settings while the special flow of the course remains. Its soulful spirit is unaffected, which is amazing when one considers that only three holes have been left entirely unaltered. The eleventh – a study in perfection – is one of them.

OPPOSITE: *looking back up the eleventh fairway*  
PREVIOUS PAGE: *fairway and elevated green beyond*





*The Hare is synonymous with this region and features on the club crest*

HOLE	11
PAR	5
STROKE INDEX	12
LADIES TEE	368
CLUB TEE	467
BACK TEE	506



## *Waterville Golf Links*



*The eleventh hole's teeing area and fairway, which doglegs from left to right*

THE LOCAL KNOWLEDGE LIAM HIGGINS

*“Into the wind hit a driver from the tee and then an iron to about 100 yards short. Then take a little 8 or 9 iron. You’ve got to keep the ball down – not much more than 10 feet off the ground – and pitch it short on these hard surfaces.”*

**WATERVILLE’S PAR 5, ELEVENTH HOLE MEANDERS THROUGH THE SANDY HILLS**, turning left to right to reveal its green, charmingly manageable if one has the good sense to play it safely. It is just over 500 yards from the back tees and only 477 or 467 yards from the medal and club tees. This must be where golfers come to make birdies?

“It all depends on the wind,” says Liam Higgins, Waterville’s long time Professional and distance driver extraordinaire. “If it is downwind hit a 3 or 4 iron from the tee to the end of the first part of fairway, the end of the top plateau.”

That shot is 290 yards from the tips, 260 from medal tees and 250 from club tees. Waterville does have fantastic running fairways, but it may not be a 3 or 4 iron for everyone...

“Do not take driver downwind,” says Higgins. “It is unsafe, too narrow when you get down to the lower fairway and the view of the green is not so good.

“From the end of the top plateau it is a rescue club or 5 wood into the green, but it is so tight you have to be very careful,” adds Higgins.

“Into the wind, which is more common than not, hit a driver from the tee and then an iron to about 100 yards short. Then take a little 8 or 9 iron. Do not take a wedge. So many visitors here are mad for lobs and keep trying them but when the wind gets a hold of them they are gone. You’ve got to keep the ball down and pitch it short on these hard surfaces. I would not have it much more than 10 feet off the ground on a 100 yard shot.”

Higgins recommends hitting just three quarters of the ball for the desired result: “Hit down too deep at the whole of the ball and into the wind it can come back over your head.”

The green here is raised into the dunes. Miss short or right and the ball can roll back 25 yards from its elevated position. Miss left and you might be in one of two bunkers or you could be into the sand dune where the rough is thick. It is the same off the back of the green.

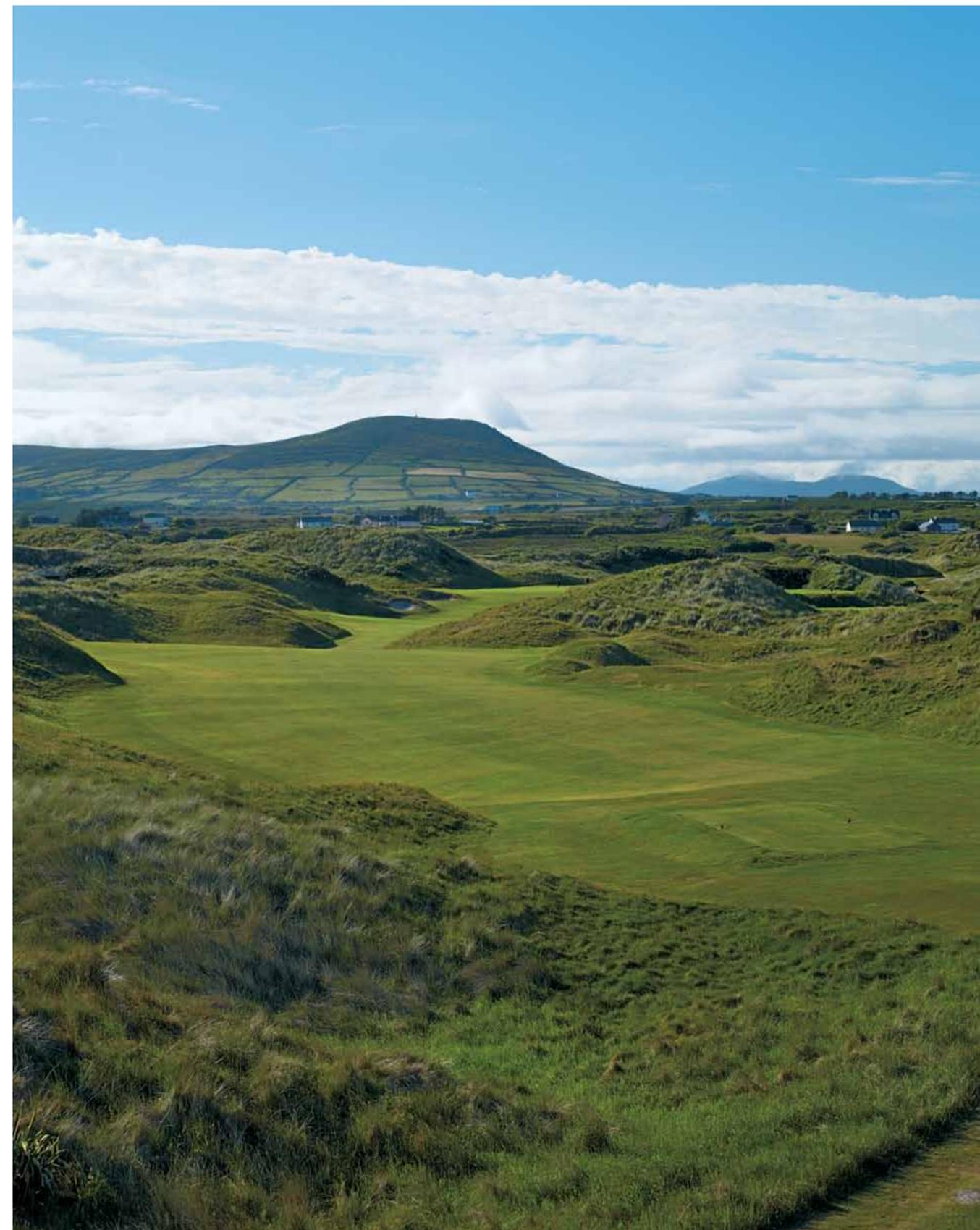
“From off-left or off-back, chopping the ball out, well, it is almost impossible to stop it before it gets away from you down the slope,” warns Higgins. “There is little hope of an up and down from there.”

Jack Mulcahy first met Liam Higgins on the driving range at nearby Killarney Golf & Fishing Club. The American, impressed by his length off the tee, invited him to Westchester Country Club in New York to demonstrate his distance driving in a competition with Jack Dipaolo, then presumed to be the longest hitter in the world. It was a walkover for the Irishman who drove some 400 yards. He was then taken west to Palm Springs where he golfed at Indian Wells with Ben Hogan and Claude Harmon. It was there that a deal was done and Higgins and Harmon were invited to help Eddie Hackett lay out the links at Waterville.

“It was simply an incredible discovery, this long hole through dunes,” says Higgins of Tranquillity. “No bulldozers were required and we did not have them anyway. The hole was there, almost waiting for us.”

These top-flight golfers – Harmon had won the 1948 Masters and Hackett and Higgins were no slouches – were not afraid to make Waterville very long and very difficult. These days it is 7,400 yards from the tips. When you consider the unrelenting Atlantic winds that it is subjected to, that length is a serious proposition. Even from the lesser tees where the course plays a little under 7,000 yards, Waterville is a true test.

*Liam Higgins is a co-designer of Waterville Golf Links. He has also been Club and Tour Professional at Waterville. He still plays on the European Seniors Tour.*





The *atmosphere* at Waterville and its surrounds in the Ring of Kerry is *truly singular*, difficult to put into words. Better to visit like so many of the *greats of the game*

#### ATLANTIC AFFAIR

**THE ATMOSPHERE AT WATERVILLE GOLF LINKS AND ITS SURROUNDS IN THE RING OF KERRY IS TRULY SINGULAR**, rarefied, difficult to put into words. Better to visit like so many of the greats of the game now do to acquaint themselves with the origins of the sport, playing on the sandy soils and in the sea breezes that define links golf.

Mark O'Meara credits his time here – and at Ballybunion – with his victory in the 1998 Open Championship at Royal Birkdale. It was O'Meara who first brought Tiger Woods here who likewise used it as a springboard to Open glory. Also travelling with O'Meara and Woods in 1998 was Payne Stewart. The flamboyant golfer endeared himself to residents in the small village by partying with them at the Butler Arms Hotel then praying with them at St Finian's Church.

On a return visit in 1999 Stewart greeted locals by name, asked after sick relatives, children at college: a mark of the gentleman that he was. In 2000 he accepted an invitation to become Waterville Captain, an honour he would sadly not live to experience. His memory lives long here, however.

Beyond Waterville is Skellig Bay Golf Course, opened in 2006. It is a seaside course, not a links course, built on old farmland above the Atlantic, playing through and across traditional dry stone walls and, in parts, ancient standing stones. Ballinskelligs Bay is on one side, Fionnglassa River on the other. The mighty peaks and stacks of McGillicuddy's Reeks watch over golfers as they have shepherds and their flocks for centuries.

Haulie O'Shea and Ron Kirby are the men responsible for this unique and brilliant course. They met during the build at Old Head Golf Links and O'Shea invited Architect Kirby, Jack Nicklaus's most loyal lieutenant, to design a course on this fabulous stretch of land he owns just a mile from Waterville Golf Links.

The course at Skellig Bay is long – some 7,200 yards – but it has wide fairways and large greens. The dry stone walls are not just there to frame the holes, though they do that. They line some fairways, narrowing landing areas, sometimes clustered together as obstacles to clear, putting one in mind of North Berwick, perhaps. Those visiting from nearby Waterville must not consider this as simple respite from its more celebrated neighbour. Skellig Bay offers a real reason, should one be required, to linger in the area...

OPPOSITE: Noel Cronin, Secretary and Manager, Waterville Golf Links

OVER PAGE: green-entry on the eleventh hole

