

CHAPTER EIGHT

15

*Portmarnock
Golf Club*

CHAMPIONSHIP LINKS

PAR 3 · 190 YARDS



Three very *deep bunkers* greenside and short *swallow shots* all too greedily.

Golfers might heed the club's motto: *Be Up*

THE FIFTEENTH ON THE CHAMPIONSHIP LINKS at Portmarnock Golf Club is hard by Dublin Bay, hard by any standard. It is 190 yards from the back tees and not significantly less from medal and club tees. The hole plays straight north. The wind, typically, will be from the south west, helping in distance terms but pushing the ball towards the out of bounds, towards the Irish Sea. Ireland's Eye – an uninhabited rocky island – sits offshore. Its name has a Celtic and Norse etymological explanation, but its English-language name is perfect. It watches...

On a clear day, directly ahead, Northern Ireland's Mountains of Mourne are visible, behind which lies The Royal County Down Golf Club. City centre Dublin is just 10 miles from here. Yet the Portmarnock peninsula feels splendidly isolated.

The tees on the fifteenth hole are slightly raised. The green is a long narrow convex plateau with tight-mown fall-offs on all sides. But many will be happy to find their tee shot there, beneath the green, be it short, long, left or right. Any of these difficult spots, from where the player must scale a slope and hold the green, probably with a closed face iron or putter, is preferable to the buckthorn bushes or beyond them onto the beach. Many golfers, good golfers and great golfers even, find themselves there. Balls are compelled towards the sea. All Ireland might be on the left but all nature cries out to the player to hit it right.

This is Portmarnock's most exposed hole and the wind is almost always part of the riddle. The prevailing wind will lift the ball out to sea. The slightly less frequent wind from offshore begs bravery if the golfer is to play out right and allow the ball to fall back landwards. There, three very steep, deep bunkers swallow shots all too greedily. One is short left, one greenside and left and one short right. So golfers might heed the club's motto: Be Up. The hole is treacherous indeed, but also exquisite: the combination is thrilling.

Arriving at Portmarnock Golf Club is thrilling too. Turn down an unsigned road – the most traditional, prestigious clubs are never signed; think Royal Troon or The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers; if you do not know where to go you are almost certainly not welcome – and the Portmarnock peninsula is soon revealed. The red-roofed, white-walled clubhouse can be seen from far off as you drive down the small private road to the club's grand, but never garish, gateposts.

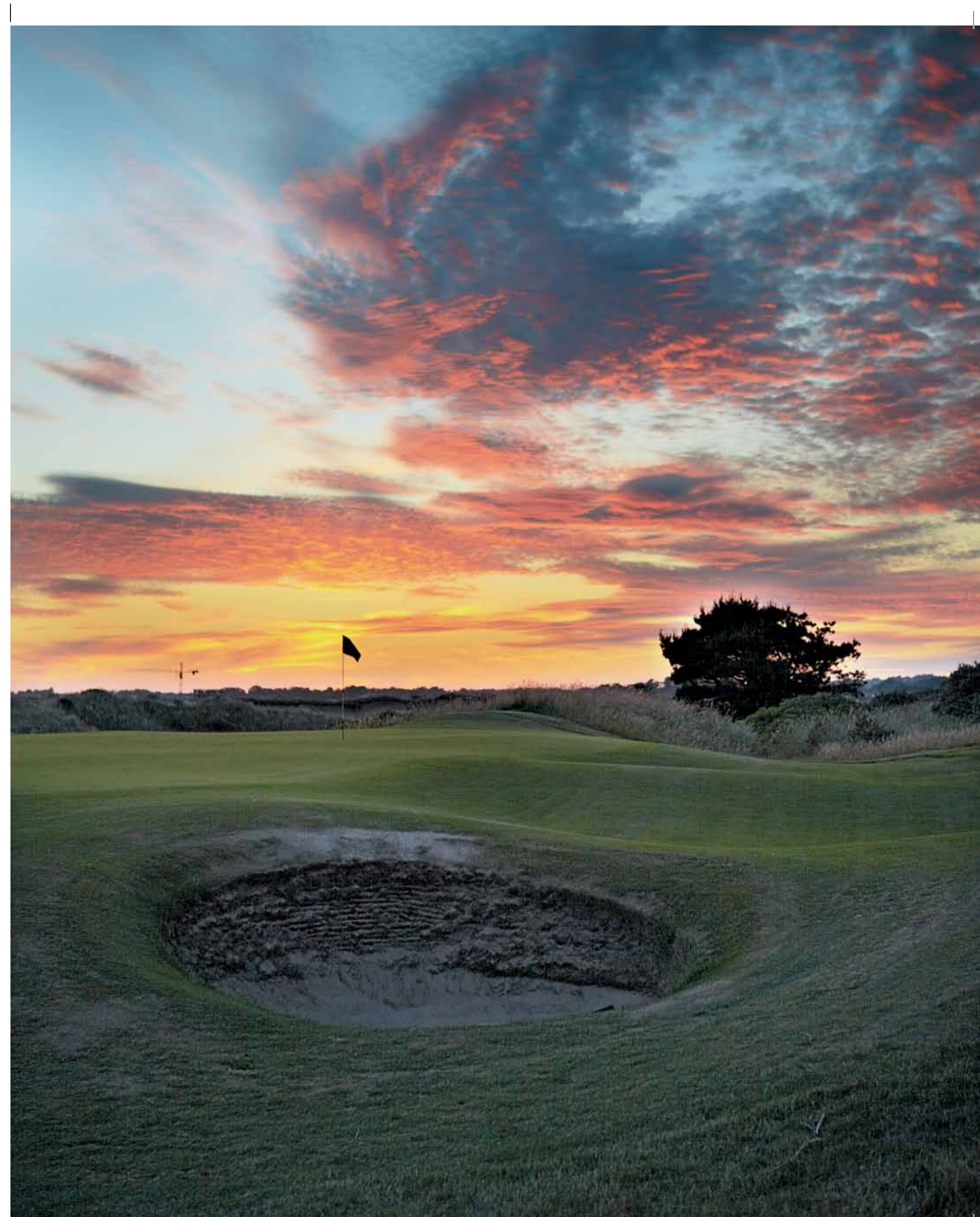
Once upon a time players arrived by sea. Even when a road was introduced members still had to cross the estuary in horse and cart, water halfway up the wheels. It was Christmas Eve 1893 when a Scotsman and an Irishman in a rowing boat (no joke) first arrived looking for golfing ground. They found 500 acres of it, some of which, it turned out, had been used for the great game for some time, a very private golf course for the family of John Jameson, a Scotsman who moved to Dublin to establish the eponymous whisky distillery. The Jamesons agreed to lease the land to the newly formed Portmarnock Golf Club. John Jameson became the first President. The Scotsman in the boat, William Pickeman, became the first Secretary, not to mention course Architect alongside Open Championship winner Mungo Park.

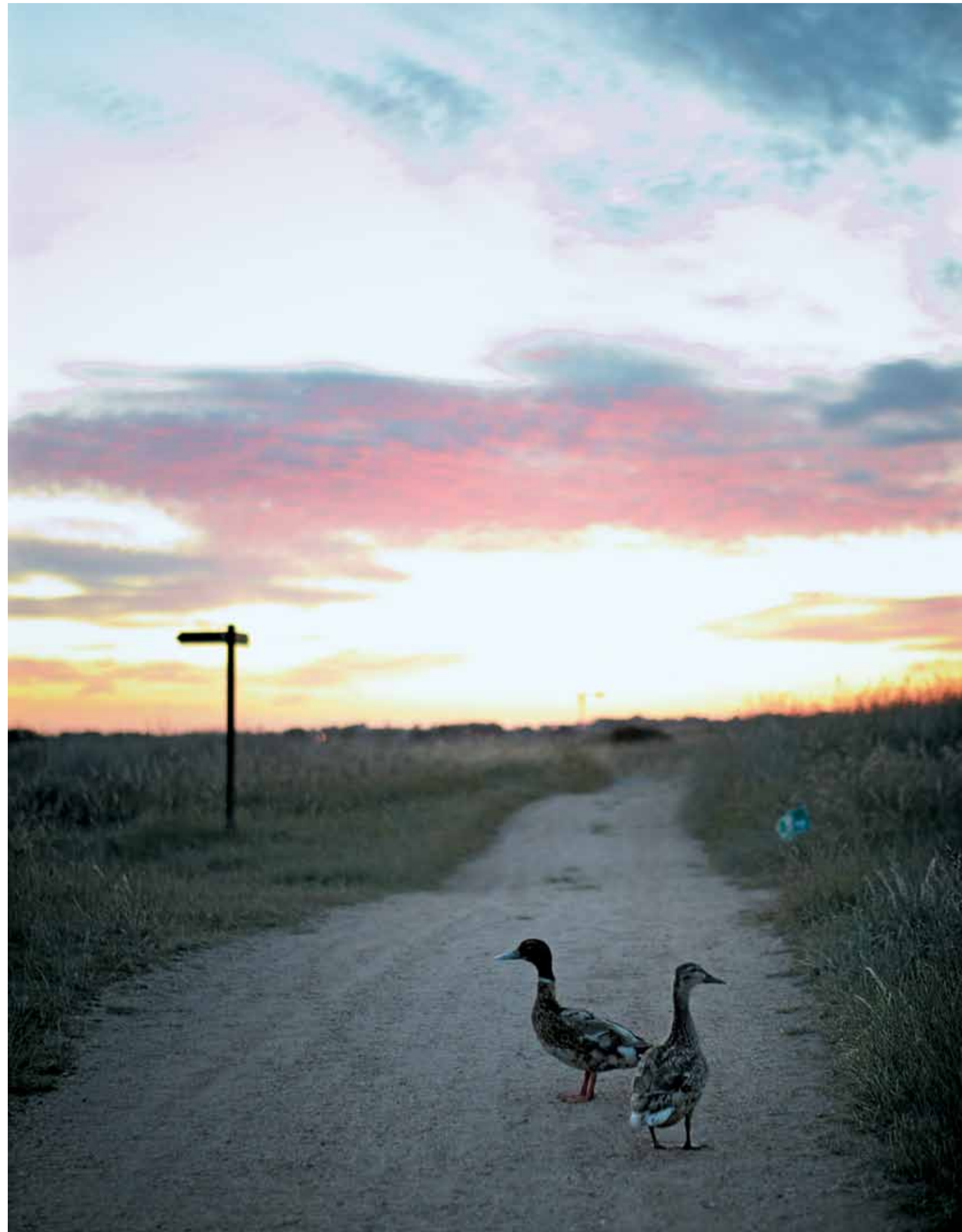
The course opened for play almost exactly a year later and two years later still boasted a full 18 holes. It has gone on to stage many great events, not least the Irish Open, for which Portmarnock is the spiritual home. The Irish Open was inaugurated here in 1927 and hosted many times since, producing winners including Severiano Ballesteros, Jose Maria Olazabal, Bernhard Langer and Ben Crenshaw (who failed, one year, to hold the fifteenth green in any of the four rounds).

In the late 1920s some changes were made to the course. HM Cairnes – Guppy Cairnes to his friends – a stockbroker, National Hunt jockey, Irish tennis doubles champion, scratch golfer, course record holder, Irish Close champion, one-time Club Captain and latterly Club President, decided to turn his hand to course architecture. He retired the old seventeenth hole, a par 3, and created a superior single-shotter, the fifteenth.

In 1971 an additional nine holes were added by Fred Hawtree, every bit as good as the original 18. More recently Martin Hawtree, Fred's son and a third generation course Architect, has made some subtle changes. Portmarnock did not need much refining. It is already, one might say, highly refined.

OPPOSITE: one of Portmarnock's fearsome green-side bunkers
PREVIOUS PAGE: fifteenth green and Dublin Bay, viewed from the tee





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Spotted Orchid, one of four varieties of the plant found on the course

Portmarnock Golf Club
CHAMPIONSHIP LINKS

Looking from the green back to the tee on the testing shore-side par 3, fifteenth hole

THE LOCAL KNOWLEDGE **NIALL GOULDING**

“The prevailing wind is from the west, the left. Typically it means a mid-iron from the tee played landward in anticipation of some drift back towards the target. Let it go too much on the wind and you are beached and must begin all over again.”

PORTMARNOCK, MORE SO THAN MANY COURSES, MIGHT BEST BE CONSIDERED IN ITS ENTIRETY rather than as a sum of its parts. It succeeds not because of a memorable run of holes in high dunes or a devastating selection of cliff and cape challenges but because of its considered progression across the low-lying Portmarnock peninsula, its distinct difficulty balanced with much fairness, its perfect sense of rhythm, its joyful but challenging harmonies.

Despite this clear unity of purpose there is still room for individual high notes. Bernard Darwin wrote about the course building to a crescendo, its great finish. He referred to holes 14 through 18 of which 15 is certainly the most celebrated.

Niall Goulding, once a hungry Professional and twice winner of The West of Ireland is these days a contented Amateur and Chairman of the Greens Committee, still able to get his competitive fix taking on this unbending one-shotter:

“The prevailing wind is from the west, the left. Typically it means a mid-iron from the tee played landward in anticipation of some drift back towards the target. Let it go too much on the wind and you are beached and must begin all over again. But err too much on the left side, the side of safety, and you will be in the deep hollow or deep bunkers from where there are no easy recoveries.

“When the wind is from the sea things are no easier, maybe harder, because the winds are buffeted against the dunes and deflected upwards so that gauging their true effect is impossible. I’ve sometimes seen balls struck along the shoreline, from where the wind must surely bring them in, fly straight out of bounds.”

From the deep left-hand swale, indeed from the bottom of any of the short steep slopes which fall away on all sides of the green, the bump-and-run, or putt perhaps, up and onto the green is never simple. Portmarnock greens are firm and fast. This one has some wicked breaks and much skill is required.

There used to be palm trees down the right side of the hole, Seminole-style, but they have been removed and these days only the buckthorn grows, planted in the 1970s to help hold the dune firm and better bolster its defence against the sea. Along with much rock armour on the beach side, the buckthorn does its job dutifully, even producing attractive autumn berries, but the members get irritated when it obscures the views and the Greenkeepers get nervous lest its pervasive root system impacts the precious putting surface.

“The fifteenth will remain fundamentally unchanged for many years to come, I’m certain,” says Goulding. “It is historic and as much of a challenge to modern golfers as to those of the early twentieth century. Perhaps pathways will be altered for aesthetic reasons, maybe one day the buckthorn’s time will come. But no course Architect poses a threat to this hole. The only danger to it would come from extreme tidal surges. But all we can do is being done to ensure this masterpiece’s future.”

The Portmarnock routing sees every hole play in a different direction from the one before over a superb stretch of land, low-lying, subtly rolling. There are none of the huge dunes of, say, Tralee or Ballybunion. But the terrain’s restraint lets the composition reveal itself.

Dr Alister MacKenzie said that a good golf course, like much good music, might become more appealing, more understandable, the more one plays it. Many will recognise that to be their experience of Portmarnock.

It has a distinct and distinguished atmosphere, not unlike the Open Championship venues of the United Kingdom. In fact, national borders apart, Portmarnock Golf Club would be the perfect venue for that event. It is more than good enough.

*Niall Goulding is Chairman of the Greens Committee at Portmarnock Golf Club.
He is also a two-time winner of The West of Ireland Championship.*

OPPOSITE: Niall & Loyal D Goulding





The Portmarnock *routing* sees every hole play in a different direction from the one before over a *superb* stretch of land, low-lying, *subtly rolling*

SHORT AND STRONG

PORTMARNOCK'S FIFTEENTH HOLE MIGHT BE IRELAND'S GREATEST single-shotter but other nearby par 3s have claims to greatness. To the south is Royal Dublin, a links classic, much improved recently. The short ninth hole there has a much-admired undulating two-tier green with four large cavernous bunkers surrounding it. It is part of a fabulous stretch – six through 10 – on a course which, like Portmarnock, is harmonious and unified and laid out on some very special golfing ground.

This most historically distinguished of golf clubs plays on Bull Island, a sand bank created by Captain William Bligh, famous for sailing on Cook's last voyage and for losing a Royal Navy ship to Fletcher Christian and his mutineers but less famous for, by accident or design, conjuring up golfing linksland. Bligh's successful recommendation that a wall be built in Dublin Harbour to prevent silting in the shipping lanes saw the displaced soils become this remarkable island which continues to grow.

North of Portmarnock is The Island Golf Club which, confusingly, is no longer strictly on an island. The Island – in contrast to other seaside courses in this central eastern stretch – has heaving dunes. Hole 13 is its preeminent par 3, where, as at Portmarnock, there is a tremendous tension between right and left sides of the green – the beach right and the grass swales left – and where, inevitably, the wind will always play its part. The next hole, the fourteenth, was once the old first and is where early golfers would arrive by boat: more shades of Portmarnock.

Further north still is Baltray. We have left County Dublin now for this is County Louth Golf Club, a fabulous and friendly club with a top-flight course in a very special corner of the country where the River Boyne meets the sea. Baltray's collection of par 3s is perhaps unrivalled, their greens undulating magnificently, as imaginative as putting surfaces can reasonably be, with punchbowls and spines and little mercy.

OPPOSITE: sea buckthorn growing next to green
OVER PAGE: fifteenth green at sundown

