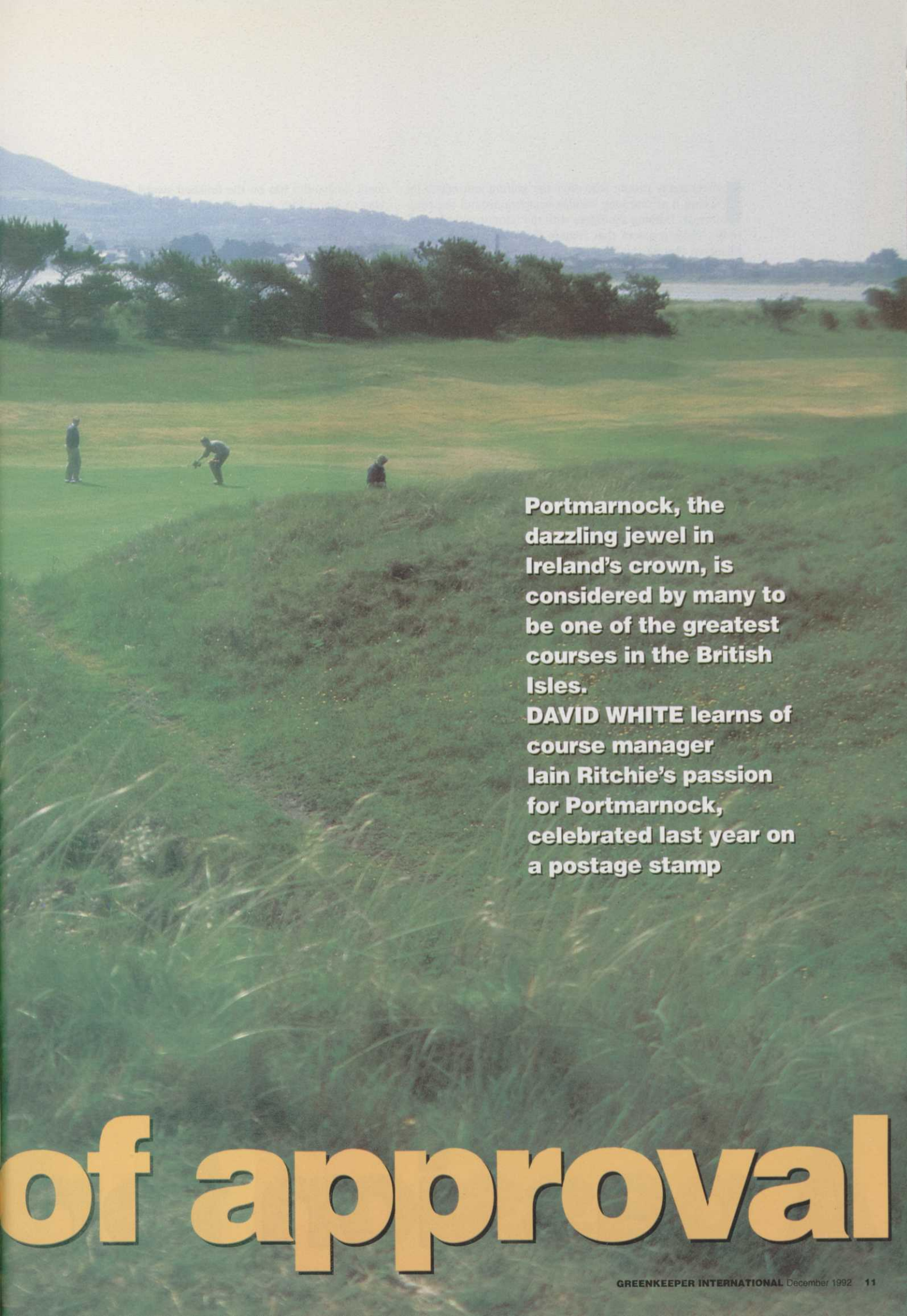


Stamp



Portmarnock, the dazzling jewel in Ireland's crown, is considered by many to be one of the greatest courses in the British Isles.

DAVID WHITE learns of course manager **Iain Ritchie's** passion for Portmarnock, celebrated last year on a postage stamp

of approval

meet many people who envy the golfing journalist's lot, seeing it as one long holiday roaming around the countryside, rubbing shoulders with the famous and the well-to-do, visiting places that remain for most a mere dream. Mistaken though this may be, I would be the first to admit, on occasions, that I would not change places with any man on earth.

One such recent occasion provided me with the good fortune to visit Ireland, oft described as an Emerald Isle that might have been created just for golf. Forgetting for a moment the rift that separates Northern Ireland from Eire (and, incidentally, one that is traversed by the love for golf that epitomises both nations), I came eventually to a course which many consider one of the greatest in the British Isles, some would say the greatest, the glorious links of Portmarnock.

If you envy this writer, let me turn the tables by suggesting that you should reserve some envy for the keeper of the links at Portmarnock, the Scot, Iain Ritchie. Not that Iain has an easy job, far from it, but he does manage 27 holes of God's Kingdom which, in my opinion, represent the jewel in Eire's crown – a positive bonus. Portmarnock boasts a gorgeous location, with water on three sides, the Hill of Howth to the south, to the east a line of sandhills marking the strand and ocean, beyond the clubhouse westward a sheltered arm of the sea. It is blessed also with an abundance of fascinating bird life and rare flora of quite exquisite beauty. Proof that Portmarnock is a grand place to work may be gathered by the record of a previous incumbent, John Temple, who served the club from 1939 until his death in 1974, 35 years in total.

Born in Aberdeen in 1960, Iain Ritchie took to golf at an early age and was soon a very proficient player indeed. His love for the game took him straight into the business and he joined the golf course construction company, Souter's of Stirling, as an apprentice. Iain's wisdom in gaining expertise in construction cannot be overstated, for in seven years of building golf courses he met and befriended many different greenkeepers, exchanging ideas and ideologies, ever conscious of the huge importance to playing quality that proper drainage, green construction specifications and manage-

ment husbandry has on the finished sward. The experience was to stand him in good stead, whilst bringing about a close and understanding relationship with the consultant agronomist for Portmarnock, Eddie Connaughton of Sports Technology International, whose passion is equal to Iain's whenever Portmarnock is mentioned.

During these construction years Iain also attended Elmwood College, the seat of learning for so many fine course managers, sailing through Scotec Phases II and III with distinctions and credits before embarking on a fourth year in Turf Management. It is indicative of Iain's enthusiasm for education that one of his key apprentices at Portmarnock, Alan Walsh, is encouraged to follow the 'Elmwood Trail'.

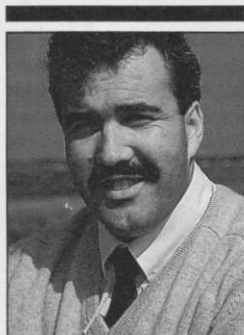
Backtracking somewhat, I learned that Iain took the advice of John Souter to enter the maintenance side of golf, 'a good business to be in', as John put it, and as Iain now acknowledges 'one hell of a good piece of advice'. Hearing that Elliott Small was looking for an assistant, Iain fired off a letter and though Elliott's job was taken, a discussion between Elliott and Bobby Fleming at Dullatur resulted in Iain becoming Bobby's assistant, a post he was to enjoy for some two years.

Time and opportunity marched on, and Iain moved to Ladybank, a delicious heathland course in Fife, first as assistant head greenkeeper and, within one year, promoted to head greenkeeper as reward for his skills and dedication. Listening to Iain speak of Ladybank, the

feeling he has for this course shines through: 'I loved that golf course', he told me, and one is left in no doubt that here is a man whose career is also his passion, for the same light shines in his eyes when talking of his latest love – Portmarnock.

Five years at Ladybank came to an end in 1990 when Iain was lured by the prospect of 'championship' golf management – the Carrolls Irish Open has been staged regularly at Portmarnock – and, for the first time ever on Irish soil, the Walker Cup was to be staged there in 1991, heady stuff indeed. The move to Dublin Bay was not taken lightly, however, for Iain and his wife Yvonne, together with their two young daughters, had never seen Ireland, let alone lived there, and they were to spend several days in Dublin weighing the pro's and con's – the pro's won and they now enjoy a pleasant lifestyle in nearby Malahide.

Iain was fortunate in knowing Eddie Connaughton through his Souter's connection; his opinion valued: 'It's right for you and you are right for them', Eddie declared, 'Ireland's not unlike Scotland but just a wee bit more laid-back, you'll love it'. The job secured, Iain was fortunate again in having the retiring head greenkeeper, Tommy Clark, remain with him through the first few months of his appointment as course manager.



Iain Ritchie:
a feeling for his course



A passion for

We talked about a typical annual programme, Iain of the opinion that Portmarnock's sandy soil suggested a regime not dissimilar to that carried out at Ladybank. 'Come the winds, the course can dry very rapidly and dry patch has been a problem over the last year', he told me, 'and though we apply wetting agents, I haven't yet found a magic cure-all'. Similarly, fairy rings have found their way onto the links, though these are responding to treatment, as is the fusarium that seemed to invade the whole of Ireland in '91, following the mild winter.

In the spring, greens are hollow tined using 2" centres with half-inch tines, relieving compaction an essential task following heavy winter traffic. Many members at Portmarnock (1000 strong, all-male) are also members at other inland courses and they tend to gravitate toward the links in winter. Taking the winter of '91 as an example, Portmarnock experienced only three frosts, all superficial and dispersed by mid-morning. It's as busy as any course might be and this contributes in part to the compaction problem. The pattern of scarifying, hollow coring and top dressing (using local dune sand) is one of little but often.

Come March or April, the greens and tees receive a stimulant feed, a 12: 0: 6 organic seaweed based mix that works well in Eire's higher spring temperatures - often some three or four degrees warmer than in Scotland - and this gets them started sooner. They'll receive about three feeds a year, changing from 12: 0: 6 to 8: 0: 0, plus a monthly spray cover of Seamac or, occasionally, Seamac + N, seaweed applications that Iain find most effective. Back end of the season he also applies sulphate of iron, essentially to prevent disease outbreak.

The emphasis at Portmarnock is on producing first rate playing surfaces, Iain of the opinion that he can control the *Poa annua* content to around 40/50% without resorting to drastic starvation methods that would leave little putting surface at all. His greens are roughly 50/50, with bent grass predominant over fescue and competing vigorously against the *Poa annua*. To keep such surfaces in fine order, Iain's regime is to verticut each week, hand cutting on Monday and Tuesday, Triplex cutting mid-week with verticutters and groomers fitted to the Jacobsen, handcutting again until the week-end, when the same triplex regime is repeated (without verticutter) on Saturday and Sunday. Levels are set to 3/16" for regular play, 1/4" over winter, 1/8" for premier events such as the Walker Cup. In Iain's two years the greens have only been Vertidraind once, though tees and fairways have an annual 'going over', the effect well worthwhile.

For the Walker Cup there was no problem in producing great surfaces on the greens, but if the wind failed to materialise the course was wide open for attack. A player could, in Iain's words, 'hit the ball anywhere and have some sort of lie to strike the ball'. A dry summer had left the fairways sparse and at the end of 1990 an overseeding programme was deemed necessary. Three tons of fescue/bent mixture was drill applied quite late in October - sensibly waiting for rain. Fortunately a wet and mild winter gave a near 90% seed strike from the highly successful programme, which utilised a Unidrill, covered by the added insurance of a pre-seeding fertiliser - 'when you spend that sort of money you leave

nothing to chance'. During the run-up to the Walker Cup, an R&A event, the agronomist David Stansfield was another regular visitor and both he and Eddie Connaughton could be seen striding the fairways. 'The reports from both were without controversy and surprisingly similar, indicating that their ideas were never far apart'.

As the course manager, Iain liaises with the secretary, with reports produced regularly by Eddie Connaughton and Iain on management regimes. Iain's report to committee is essentially a mixture of what has been done by the nine strong staff (plus John Kane, a mechanic who 'does a fantastic job'), the problems that have been found, how they've been tackled, and any plans afoot for the next three months. It's a good, workable system that leaves Iain with a comparative free rein - the right to properly manage, so to speak.

There are few courses that dare boast better all round surfaces than Portmarnock, and fewer still that can lay claim to immortalisation on postage stamps. In 1975 the Killarney course appeared on 6p and 9p Eire stamps, and in 1991 Portmarnock was singled out for this great honour, an illustration of their 15th green struck on a 28p stamp to commemorate the Walker Cup. This was a proud time indeed for all Portmarnock members, with none prouder than their highly talented course manager, Iain Ritchie.

Major machinery in the Portmarnock stable

- 1 x Ransomes 3500
- 1 x Ransomes Motor 180
- 2 x Ransomes 171
- 4 x Ransomes Super Certes
- 4 x Ransomes Auto Certes
- 3 x Ransomes Marquis
- 1 x Jacobsen Greens King
- 1 x Steam Cleaner
- 1 x Supreme Auto Leader Grinder
- 3 x Ford Tractors (various)
- 1 x Kubota 1750 Tractor
- 1 x Iseki 530 Tractor
- 2 x Major Toppers
- 1 x Royer Power Screen
- 1 x Coremaster
- 1 x Three gang units
- 3 x Trailers (various)
- 1 x Vertidrain
- 1 x Shredder
- 1 x Unidrill seeder
- 1 x McConnell Back Actor

Portmarnock