



A family affair

A farming family has turned its land into a golf course. Charlesland Golf and Country Club Hotel opened two years ago. How are they adjusting to the change and coping with greenkeeping? And what does their spring maintenance programme entail? Chris Boiling went to the Republic of Ireland to find out.

When you look at a map of Ireland and see where Greystones is – on the coast 18 miles south east of Dublin – you expect the town's newest course to be a links. Indeed it's on the same coast as Portmarnock –

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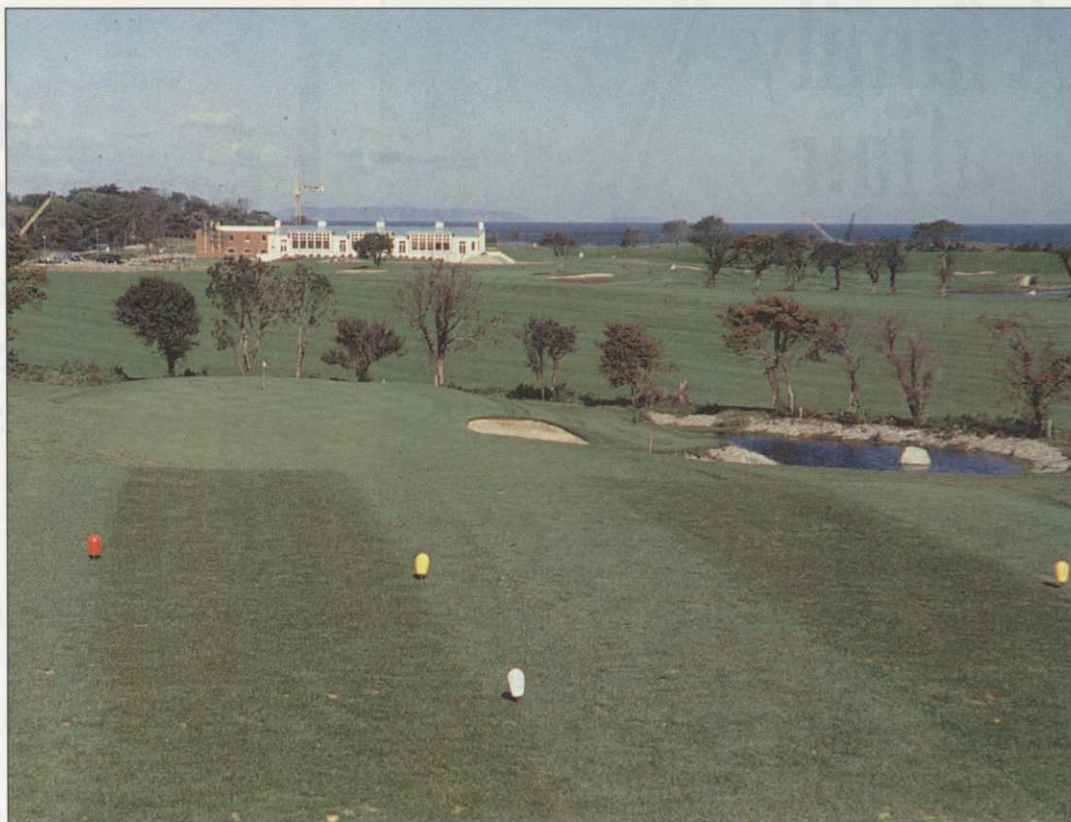
but further south. The 3rd, 4th and 6th tees at Charlesland Golf and Country Club Hotel are only 20 yards from the beach, but it's not a links course. The former arable farm has been turned into a parkland course.

However it doesn't look like a parkland course. The cold wind from the Irish Sea discourages tree growth. There are some oaks, some as old as 300 years, but they're not as big as you'd expect them to be. 4,000 trees were planted when the course was built a few years ago, but they're little more than knee-high and hard to spot.

The fact that it is neither a links nor what you'd expect a parkland course to be takes nothing from this 6739-yard (6159m) par 72 challenge. It is a charming course with several great holes.

Christy O'Connor Sr loves the 11th. It's a 338m par 4 that dog-legs left with a river running across the fairway at 220 yards. Anyone playing too safe or too left from the tee will be left with a difficult second shot over the largest trees on the course.

I liked the stroke index 1 16th. It's uphill all the way and it dog-legs to the right. With anything other than a straight-down-the-middle drive, you're left with a blind shot to the green. A good drive is rewarded with a lovely view of the pin through a valley which gives the hole its name – Torry's Canyon (named after the



digger operator who dug out approximately 32,000 tonnes of soil from this area. This was later used for the sub-bases of most of the tees and greens.)

Veteran Irish designer Eddie Hackett's signature hole is the unlucky-for-some 13th – the longest par 3 you can get. What makes the hole a little less daunting is the high tee – the highest point on the course – which offers splendid views from Howth to Wicklow Head and the little 13th green 250 yards away and 120ft below.

The other three par 3s are all relatively short – 130-140m from the back tees – but all face different directions. The 17th is course director Clive Evans' favourite hole "because the green cost the

most to build." In a dip that collects water, the green was built up using 5,000 tonnes of material in the base. Two 9in water pipes were put in below this in addition to the usual greens drainage. This drains into a man-made lake beside the green, which makes it a very pretty hole. The clubhouse can be seen in the distance behind it.

In the distance because the 18th at 615 yards (562m) is one of the longest holes in Ireland. A double dog-leg, the positioning of the second shot is crucial, otherwise you may find yourself having to carry one of the two small lakes that guard the green.

The greens were among the first true USGA-spec greens in Ireland. They are now four years old and starting to come good. They dry very quickly and are playable all year round. In fact the course only closed for one day last year. This is not just because of the sand greens but also because of the drainage put in during construction. 20,000 tonnes of drainage gravel and 6km of pipes are now paying for themselves.

Wet spots

When the Evans family decided to turn their farm into an 18-hole golf course with a 12-bedroom hotel, they had a great advantage. They had been working the land all their lives so they knew all the wet spots. Eddie Hackett was asked to design round these and turn the worst spots into four water hazards.

Where he couldn't design

around them, they put in extra drainage and dumped tonnes of sand. On the upper part of the 16th fairway there are drains approximately every 4m. On the 10th fairway they tipped 60 tonnes of sand. "Work on the 10th is on-going as what was a bog for thousands of years cannot be changed overnight," commented Clive. "But we are changing it from a wet meadow to a meadow beside a lake."

The land was passed on to 50-year-old Clive's father by an uncle. But while 350 acres was a fine provider for Lewis Evans, his wife Mai and three children – Clive, Lance and Wilson – it was more difficult for the sons and their eight children to eke a living from it.

"We needed to do something more so we looked at this idea of turning it into a golf course," said Clive. "We didn't set out to have a hotel but we think the area is right for this sort of thing."

Youngest brother Lance, the only member of the family who was interested in golf beforehand, is the managing director. Eldest brother Wilson, a qualified accountant, is a director, and Clive, now a 26-handicapper, is in charge of the course. Under him is a qualified head greenkeeper, Sean Conroy, and four assistants.

Clive was also in charge of building the course, using his knowledge of the land, farm machinery and what he learned at BIGGA seminars and conferences.

The advantages of doing it



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themselves go beyond the obvious economies and the fact that you know things are being done correctly. The biggest advantage of DIY course building, according to Clive, is that you can build it so it is easy to maintain afterwards. "When we were building the slopes we knew we'd be looking after them every day of the year. So maybe it took two or three days longer to make a green, but it was worth it."

It means they can cut all the banks with machines and never scalp the top of mounds.

As well as knowing the location of the wet spots, Clive also knew where the wildlife lived and was able to avoid disturbing badgers' burrows and foxes' converts.

Biggest problem

Their biggest problem during the construction of the course was the amount of stones on the site. "There were so many that the

first agronomist said it wouldn't be possible to make a golf course where we wanted to. When I said that to Eddie Hackett he thought for a little while and then said, 'Why're you telling me that? God made this land to be a golf course, you've undertaken the job to build the course, you deal with the stones'."

Clive went to a show and bought a Kverneland stone picker. He reckons it picked up a 100 tonnes of stones per acre. The rest were buried with a Turfmech Rotadaron. The stones that were stockpiled were put to good use in drainage ditches and soakpits.

A sandpit on the course has also come in handy. After screening, the sand has been used on tees and to topdress several fairways, including the 10th. It's been used despite a pH of 9.4. "I know it breaks all the rules but the agronomist was prepared to

the risk it if we were. If it was a conventional club he couldn't tell the committee to use it because there'd be some genius who would read up on it and say it can't be done. But it wouldn't be the end of the world if we had to take up the tees, we could do them half at a time."

So far all is well. The tees are very dry and the sward looks healthy. Mats were never considered during the winter.

If you're starting to get the impression that everything at Charlesland was done on the cheap, you'd be very wrong. With seeds, for example, they've gone for the most expensive. The quotes they had varied by £26,000 and they took the dearest option, paying £110 for 30kg bags. That worked out at about £400 an acre. But they're pleased with the results. And the 650 members like the way the ball sits up on the fescues and bents in the winter. "I think it was the right thing to do," says Clive, although he is now overseeding the heavy wear areas with dwarf ryegrass.

The greens were also sown with fescues and bents, but are now 50/50 bents and *Poa*. The greenstaff are overseeding with bents.

The fine-tuning of the course continues. A bunker was put in on the 17th to stop mis-hit shots reaching the green and further bunkers are to be built on the easier first nine to tighten up the fairways. One big job on the cards is building a "landing area" on the 14th, which slopes severely from left to right. "It is the only hole on the course that may break Eddie Hackett's golden rule - 'The perfect shot should never be penalised'," said Clive.

In the future the former farmers may build another 18 Eddie Hackett holes on their land and a planning application has been put in.

With this in mind, we wondered if they were to do it all again from scratch is there anything they would do differently?

"We'd have built a much smaller clubhouse," said Clive. "Traditionally in golf, the course supports the clubhouse but from a purely business point of view it shouldn't have to be like that."

SPRING MAINTENANCE AT CHARLESLAND

Drainage and aeration

In March we will Verti-drain the greens for the first time. Prior to this hollow-tining has been sufficient. We will topdress with silica sand incorporating 25kgs of seaweed meal per green and overseed with bent.

Tees will be hollow-tined, topdressed and overseeded with dwarf perennial ryegrass. Sides of tees and heavy wear areas will be aerated and overseeded with dwarf ryegrass. Greens and tees will be slit weekly according to weather conditions. Verti-cutting will precede Verti-draining. Heights of cut will be at 5/16in prior to Verti-draining and greens will be mown two or three times a week. The height of the cut will gradually be reduced down to 3/16 and mown six times a week by the beginning of May. Once the mild weather and good growth have come in (say by the third week in March) grooming will be carried out every day.

Nutrition

Prior to Verti-draining, 165kgs/hect of sulphate of potash and 145 kgs/hect of super phosphate will be applied. There will also be an application of five star slow-release nitrogen at 130 kgs/hect prior to Verti-draining. Sulphate of iron will be applied at one litre per green at two to three week intervals and alternated with liquid seaweed at two litres per green. During the fourth week in March 450 kg/hect of Floranid slow release 20:5:8:2 will be applied. Six to eight weeks later this will be repeated. Five or six days before open week we will apply liquid fertiliser as a boost. The tees will be given Floranid at the same rate at six to eight week intervals.

Disease and pest control

To prevent fusarium, Turfclear will be applied prior to Verti-draining and overseeding. Leatherjackets and casting worms will be controlled by using the same product. We will alternate this application with the application of Rovral. All young trees will be sprayed around with round-up Simazine in early March.



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