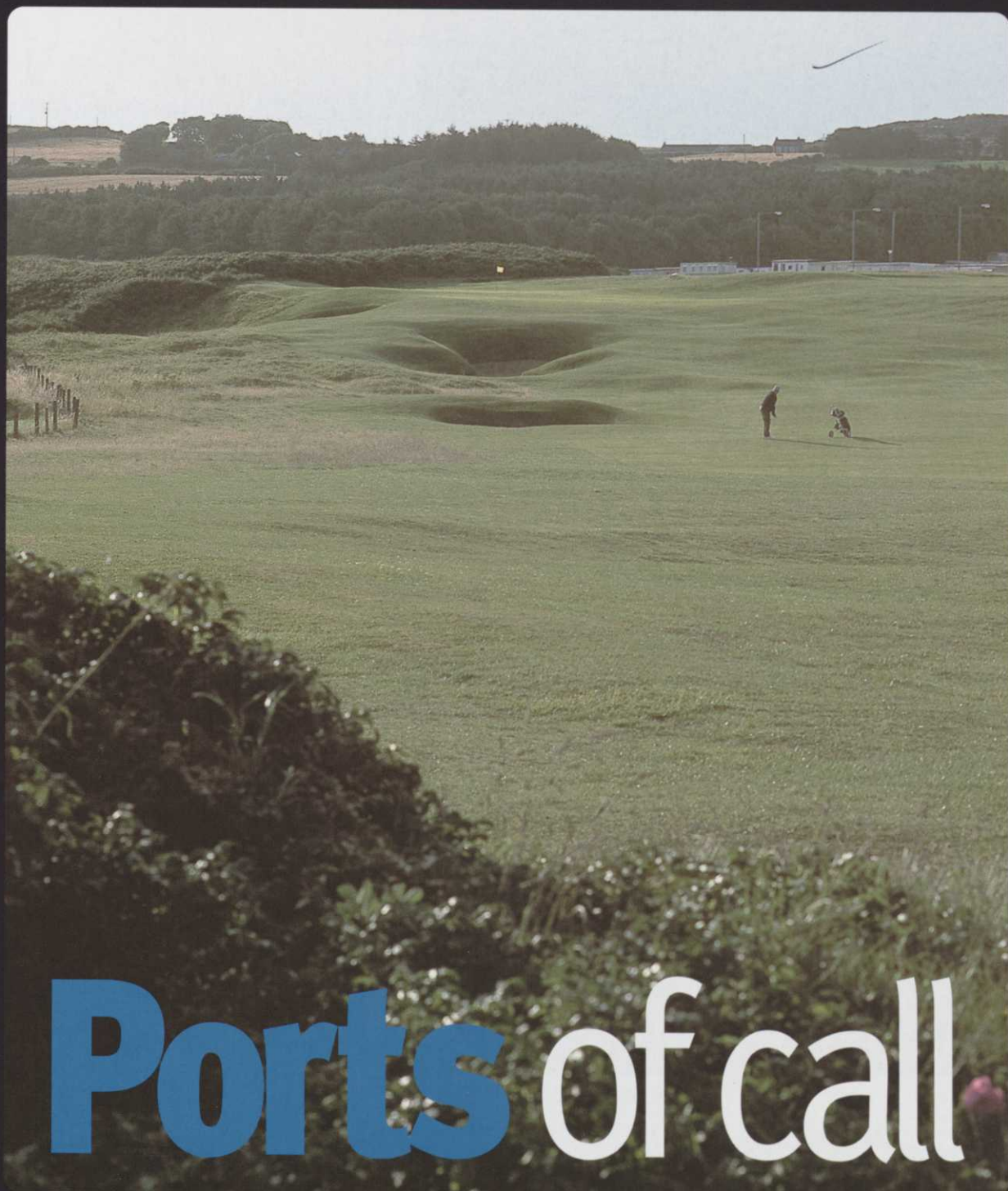


Scott MacCallum travelled to Northern Ireland to meet two brothers managing two of the finest courses the country has to offer



Photography: Brian Morgan 0141 221 6236

Ports of call

Northern Ireland is true golf country and one of the areas rightly regarded as a jewel in the crown is the northern most coast which boasts some of the finest golfing land to be found anywhere.

Two of the golf clubs which occupy this land are Royal Portrush and Portstewart. Only seven miles apart the clubs are a dream double act for golfing visitors from all over the world who make the golfing pilgrimage to Ireland.

Surprisingly the clubs are independently managed by two South London-born brothers, Joe and

Bernard Findlay. Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that although the clubs have so much in common they are also so very different.

Joe, who is in his second stint as Head Greenkeeper at Royal Portrush, sees himself as custodian of a historic links which hosted The Open Championship exactly 50 years ago, while Bernard, Course Manager at Portstewart has piloted many fundamental changes at the Club including the building of a fine new nine holes for the Strand course and as well as a new parkland layout.

"I am very conscious of my responsibility as Head Greenkeeper looking after a course like Royal Portrush. I take that responsibility very seriously and feel almost like a custodian," says Joe.

By contrast Bernard's job is completely different.

"Portstewart has not stood still since I arrived. The club is never frightened to change, and I sometimes joke that it's been like a building site since I got here," explained Bernard, who at 44 is the younger Findlay by six years... although Joe is quick to point out that he is the one with more hair and teeth.

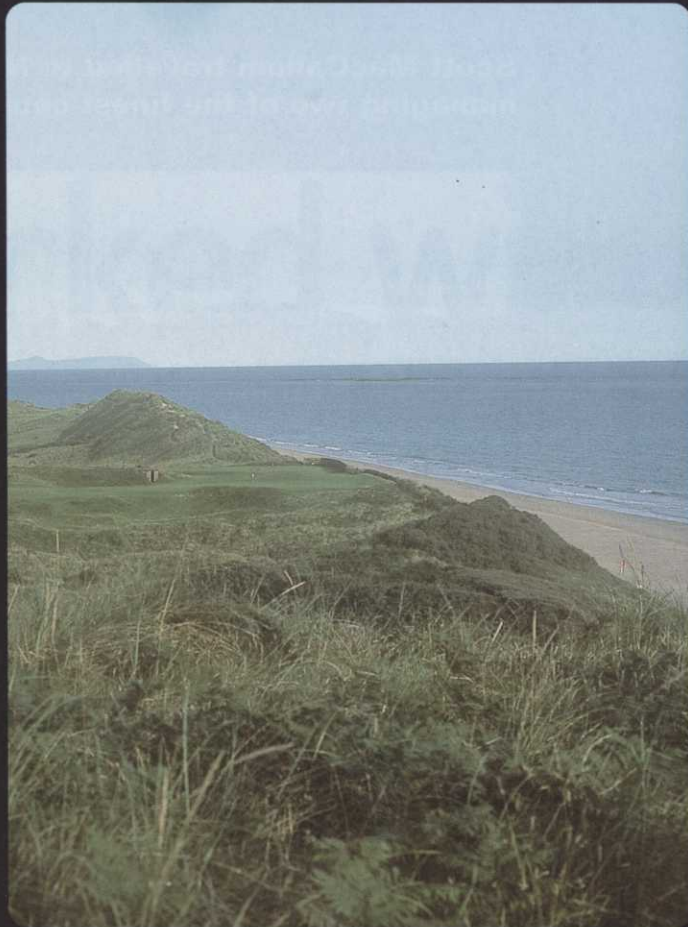


As the only course to have hosted an Open Championship outside of the British mainland - Max Faulkner lifted the Claret Jug in 1951 - Royal Portrush has a pedigree unmatched by any course in the Province and anyone visiting the Club now will find a challenge very similar to that faced by the extrovert Champion it crowned.

Any change that has been carried out on the course in the intervening 50 years has been done merely to preserve the challenge that is Royal Portrush.

"The club employed Donald Steel a few years ago to do a hole by hole report on the course just to assess what changes were needed and all it amounted to was the repositioning of a few bunkers and the odd case of lengthening holes," explained Joe Findlay who began his second stint as Head Greenkeeper when he took over from Philip Baldock, some three years ago.

An example of this tweaking came at the feature 5th hole where a new Championship tee, adding about 27



yards to the hole, prevents players cutting the corner and forces them to play the hole as it was originally intended.

"Using Donald Steel was very good because he has a very objective and critical eye and is very much tuned into the traditions of the game," explained Joe.

Royal Portrush has long been regarded as one of the best courses in the world and certainly one of the finest links and Joe is in no doubt why this is the case.

"The site is on a particularly beautiful section of land between the main Bushmills road and the sea and it is absolutely fabulous, a very dramatic area of outstanding beauty."

Royal Portrush boasts two fine courses, the Dunluce, which is the senior Open course, and the Valley which is very similar but tighter with narrower fairways and smaller greens.

"If the Dunluce wasn't there the Valley course would be rated very highly in its own right as it's a stereotypically links course constructed with minimal earth movement, cut through the valley."

As well as a rich golfing history Portrush also contains artefacts from an age way before the time when the first golf balls were being knocked down fairways.

"We have one large open area known as the War Hollow where there was once a Viking battle and we regularly find ancient scrapers and knives. Archaeologists have also been involved in uncovering finds."

The Northern most tip of Ireland would have been one of the first land masses that Viking invaders would come across during voyages south.

Joe first moved to the course in 1977 to take up the position thanks to the persistence of his Northern Irish wife.

"I was working at Hindhead Golf Club in Surrey at the time and noticed the job advertised in Golf Illustrated magazine. The next thing I knew I received a letter inviting me for an interview. My wife had applied for the job on my behalf," recalled Joe with a smile.

Even then, brave man that he was, once he had been offered the job he didn't accept straight away reasoning that he was still very happy at Hindhead. However, he was forced to think again when the club came back to reinforce the job offer.

"I was working on a tee at the time and my wife walked out over the golf course carrying our newly born son and holding the letter from the club asking me to reconsider. I suppose I underestimated by wife's desire to return home," he said.

When he did arrive he discovered a course labouring under a feed and water policy which had been in place for some time.

"I still have reports recommending a pound of iron and three pounds of sulphate of ammonia per 100 square yards at six week intervals and advice to use preventative applications of fungicide," he revealed.

Prior to arriving at Portrush Joe had read much of Jim Arthur's work and he started to apply those methods to the course.

"The best piece of advice I was given by Jim Arthur was to buy a spiker and try to wear it out as quickly as I could."

"Very quickly we got rid of the inch and a half to two inches of thatch and





swung the botanical composition back towards the desirable grasses. Prior to that they were 90% poa and had all the associated problems with poa annua.

"Everything we do now is done to favour the fescues and the bents. We keep nutritional levels down and do a lot of aeration with various implements. We have a verti-drain, a Toro Pro Core, a Toro Hyrojet and a Ryan Greens Air and we use them," he explained.

Over the season Joe only applies five grams of nitrogen per square metre and they top dress five or six times per season.

"I haven't seen fusarium on the course since I've been here and in all confidence don't expect to see it.

"I don't believe in miracle cures in greenkeeping. I believe in good husbandry - try to look after the soil and if the soil is healthy the chances of growing anything become greater.

"I've got a great deal of respect for Jim Arthur's general philosophy because I've proved at Portrush that it works," said Joe.

The biggest greenkeeping problem Joe and his team of 14, plus summer casuals, encounter is ryegrass contamination and erosion.

"This is partly due to the fact that when I came in '77 they were using rye grass on the fairways. It had been introduced through misguided advice and because it was cheaper and we are working to eradicate it from Portrush."

The erosion could prove a more dif-

ficult and certainly more expensive hurdle to overcome.

"During the 80s we lost the back of the 5th green. I came in one morning and the irrigation ring main was hanging out into space where the sea had taken away a substantial area of sand dune. It was an interesting problem as we had to reconstruct the green which was right on the edge of the dune ridge," said Joe who is blessed with an extremely talented team of greenkeepers and a fine First Assistant in Alec McCooke.

They installed some stone armourment with financial help from the R&A and through an appeal made to the wider golfing world.

While that was emergency rebuilding the longer term prognosis has serious financial implications for the golf club but Portrush, like so many of Britain's finest links courses cannot and will not bury its head in the sand.

"Part of the problem is that Portrush is a holiday town and very popular with visitors in the summer who like to walk around the dunes and play in the sand. This breaks down the maram grass and leaves the dunes vulnerable to erosion," said Joe, who worked for the late and much respected architect, Fred Hawtree, at Addington Court.

The club has commissioned a report from a professor based at the University of Colrairie which recommends remedial work the cost of which will run to hundreds of thousands of pounds.

"We will probably take action in the

worst and more vulnerable areas first and then see where it goes," said Joe.

Joe's initial period at the club lasted 10 years before he left to manage a company for a Monastery which produced digested farmyard manure which the Club had been using as an ingredient in their top dressing.

"The monastery was interested in its application in amenity horticulture and they offered me the job, which after a lot of deliberation I accepted. I was particularly interested in working for a charity and the fact that it was an environmentally friendly project while I was keen to experience the opposite side of the business, that of supplier rather than consumer," he explained.

He worked there for four and a half years before the lure of practical greenkeeping pulled him back.

"I underestimated how much I missed preparing a golf course and seeing the long term benefits of management practices," he says.

So he left and took over at the parkland Roe Park Golf Club in County Londonderry before moving to Ballyliffin Golf Club in County Donegal where he oversaw the growing in of a brand new 18 holes before reapplying for Royal Portrush when Philip Baldock moved to Ganton.

"I'm delighted to be back and I think my experiences in working in the supply industry and on a brand new golf course has meant that I've brought a lot of additional experience to the job. Certainly the thought of reconstructing greens or tees doesn't

hold any horror for me."

It was Joe who was responsible for bringing his brother to Ireland.

"I knew there was a vacancy at Portstewart and suggested to Bernard that he apply. He was a Head Greenkeeper at a small course in Berkshire and I knew that his ability was being wasted.

"He's a younger brother but I've got more teeth and hair than he has. Our relationship works very well. We get together often and talk about work, sharing what is happening on each other's courses. We bounce ideas of each other and there is no real one-upmanship, certainly not on my behalf," said Joe who took Bernard on as an apprentice at Shirley Park.

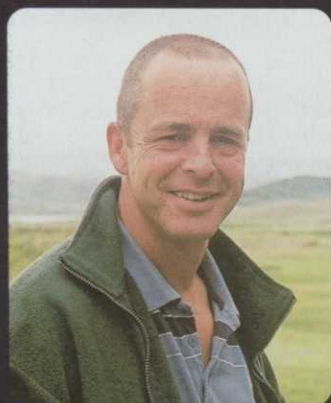
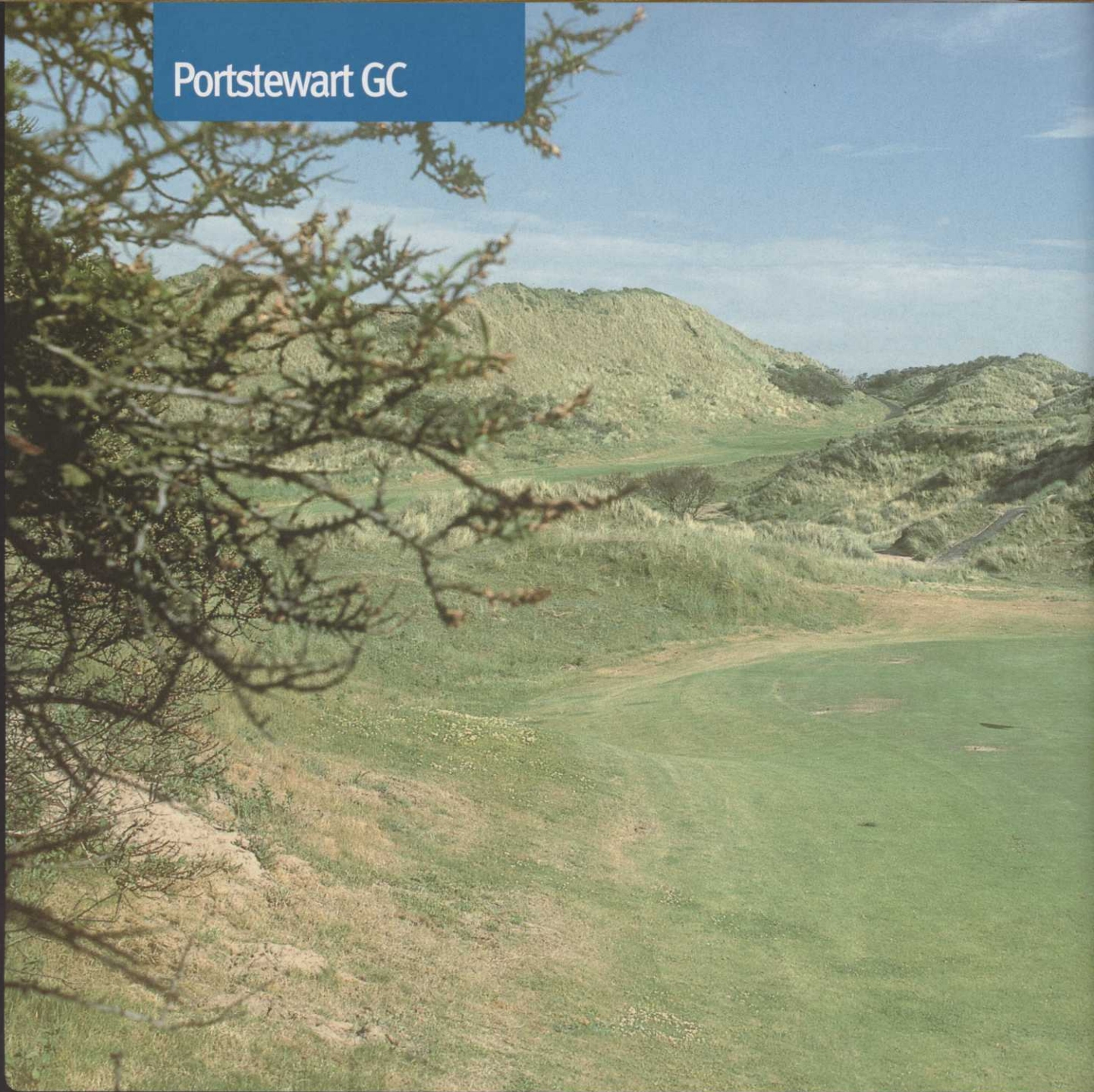
"I was Head Greenkeeper and he was a trainee and he hated me because I made him work. But he learned very quickly and soon became First Assistant.

"We agree on lots of things and disagree on others. Bernard is very organised as far as his office work is concerned whereas I prefer to be out on the course working, digging holes etc."

Talking to Joe you feel that here is a content man having returned, full circle to Royal Portrush, and enjoys his life outside the course through his sailing - he sails traditional working boats - kayaking and archery.

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Portstewart GC



While Royal Portrush has a reputation which draws people from all over the world those with more than one day to spare often take the opportunity also to play Portstewart. When they do it is a decision they invariably don't regret.

"Portstewart is happy to be associated with Royal Portrush and to receive some reflected glory. Almost without fail whenever golfers come to Portrush they play Portstewart as well and then they make the comparison between the two. Many people do say that Portstewart is as good an 18 holes as Portrush," said Bernard Findlay.

You can tell, talking to Bernard, that he feels his charge, which includes two 18 hole links courses - the Old and the Strand - and a currently under construction parkland layout, doesn't lose anything by comparison with anyone.

"It's difficult not to be biased but I do think Portstewart is far more dramatic than Portrush. The dune system is very dramatic and the golf

at Portstewart is generally played from a height where you can enjoy the views whereas Portrush is set down in hollows between the dunes," he said.

One of the other benefits of the Strand Course is that with the towering dunes the holes tend to be well separated.

"I call it the Yellow Brick Road syndrome. Golfers like not knowing what is round the next corner and that is part of the appeal of the Strand."

When he was interviewed for the job in 1986 Bernard was asked if he thought he could build holes in the Thistlely Hollow - an area of dune land owned by the club.

"I said 'Not on my own but that I could if I worked to a specification drawn up by a golf course architect'," he explained.

It was certainly a clue but perhaps it didn't quite prepare him for the extent of the work he would be doing over the next 15 years. The initial project, mentioned at the interview, involved replacing some of the course's perceived weaker holes with

new ones built on the spectacular Thistlely Hollow land.

"The club didn't use a golf course architect at that stage but a fellow called Des Giffin, a member of the club, who had ideas of what he'd like to see on the course. The club formed a committee and we walked the dunes and decided upon the routing of seven new holes. In the end we built nine new holes," said Bernard.

"We listen to the views of all concerned and certainly weren't closed to any opinion but the routing was done mainly by Des and myself."

They stripped out the buckthorn and removed the marram grass to produce the holes taking photographs all the time to display on a board.

"We started by building a pilot hole - the 8th which was to act as the link from the existing course to the Thistlely Hollow - and from the lessons we learnt we were able to go on and complete the rest of the holes and that worked very well."

The work was started in '86 and the



holes were fully constructed and opened by 1990. In fact the Irish Closed Championships were played over the course in '92.

When looking at the new holes Bernard does feel that they are his holes such was the level of work he put into the project but rather than feeling pride he says he merely sees everything he would have done slightly differently.

"I never get a feeling of satisfaction in fact I always get a feeling of dissatisfaction because I always see, probably like most greenkeepers, areas for improvement. A golfer can come up to me and tell me that the course looks fantastic but I don't think to myself 'Oh. Thank you very much.' I just think 'Well he obviously hasn't seen that over there.'"

The innate talent he obviously possesses for golf design and construction has been honed through the experience of working on such an extensive project for such a forward thinking club.

"One thing I did learn was to listen



to the practical people I found around me. I didn't have the experience on my own to do this and what I found was that the Greens Staff had lots of practical experience of different elements of greenkeeping and the different elements of this environment and I found that by listening to them it was a great help to me.

Since the new Strand holes have opened they have been able to go back and correct some of the mistakes that were made.

"We had made some fundamental mistakes with bottlenecks. With the best will in the world with areas of dunes 30 metres high you will not avoid them but we are improving the situation all the time," said Bernard, who admits that even after 15 years he has yet not quite slowed down to the Irish pace of life.

The comment Bernard made more than once that the club never stands still is borne out by the fact that the latest project, a nine hole parkland layout called the Riverside, is well underway which will give the club 54 holes of golf.

"The Club sees the Riverside as the next big project," explained Bernard.

Their latest acquisition was in 1999 when 47 acres of arable land came up for sale next to the Riverside course. The main reason for the purchase was to extend the Riverside Course from 9 to 18 holes and thereby further accommodate the demand for the Club's golfing facilities. The Council and Members of Portstewart Golf Club were also aware that the purchase of this land would prevent development by those wishing to build 'hard structures' in an aesthet-

ically pleasing and environmentally sensitive area at any time in the foreseeable future. The ecological value of the general area has been limited by its agricultural use. However, the opportunity to enhance the wildlife and habitat value as a result of golf course development is considerable.

"The greens will be built to USGA specification and they will need more in terms of nutrient and require us to keep the finger on the pulse. From a playing point of view it will suit golfers who want to play a round of golf over flattish ground," explained Bernard, who added that the Riverside was due for completion in 2003 with regular play a year later.

"A big part of my job will be to educate the golfer who is making comparisons between the links and parkland courses in terms of grass colour, presentation style and bunker sand," he added.

He jokes that he is happy to live in the shadow of his older brother because Joe is bigger than him and adds that they do exchange quite a bit of tongue in cheek banter.

On a more serious note the two brothers do look after each other's back and never do or say anything which could cause any conflict.

"The neighbouring golf club is the one your own club is held up against but I certainly can't recall any occasion when Joe has made me feel bad about what I'm doing here and I haven't done the same with him," said Bernard, who adds that they also share equipment when the need arises.

Like his brother, Bernard is extremely content with his lot and delighted to be working for a club like Portstewart.

"It is a tremendous club to work for as the members take a genuine interest in what is going on and react well to anything that you tell them."