



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."

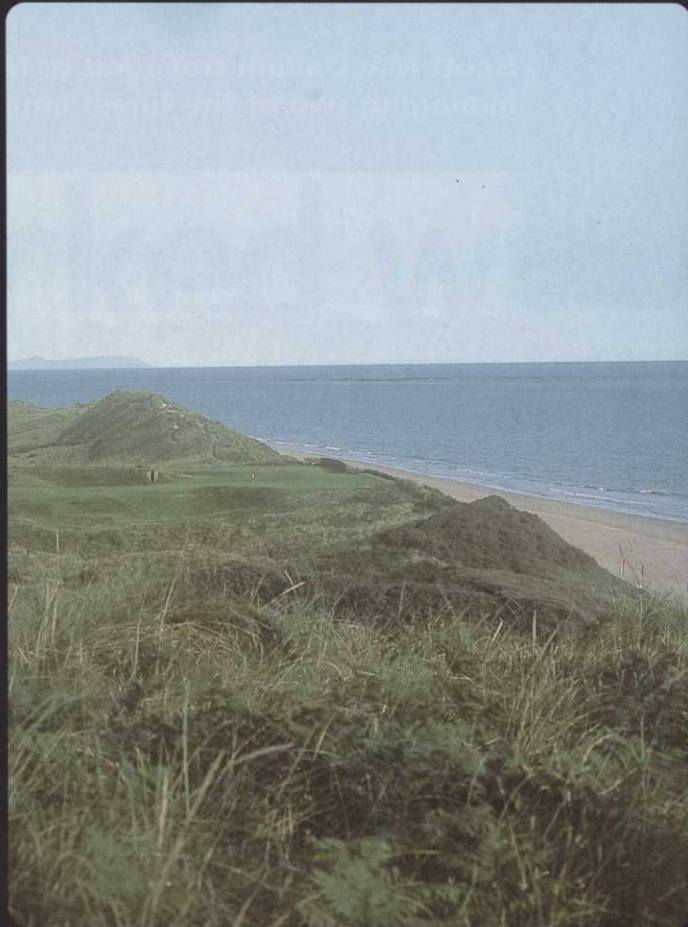
Royal Portrush boasts two fine courses, the Dunluce, which is the senior Open course, and the Valley which is very similar but tighter with narrower fairways and smaller greens.

"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.

"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."