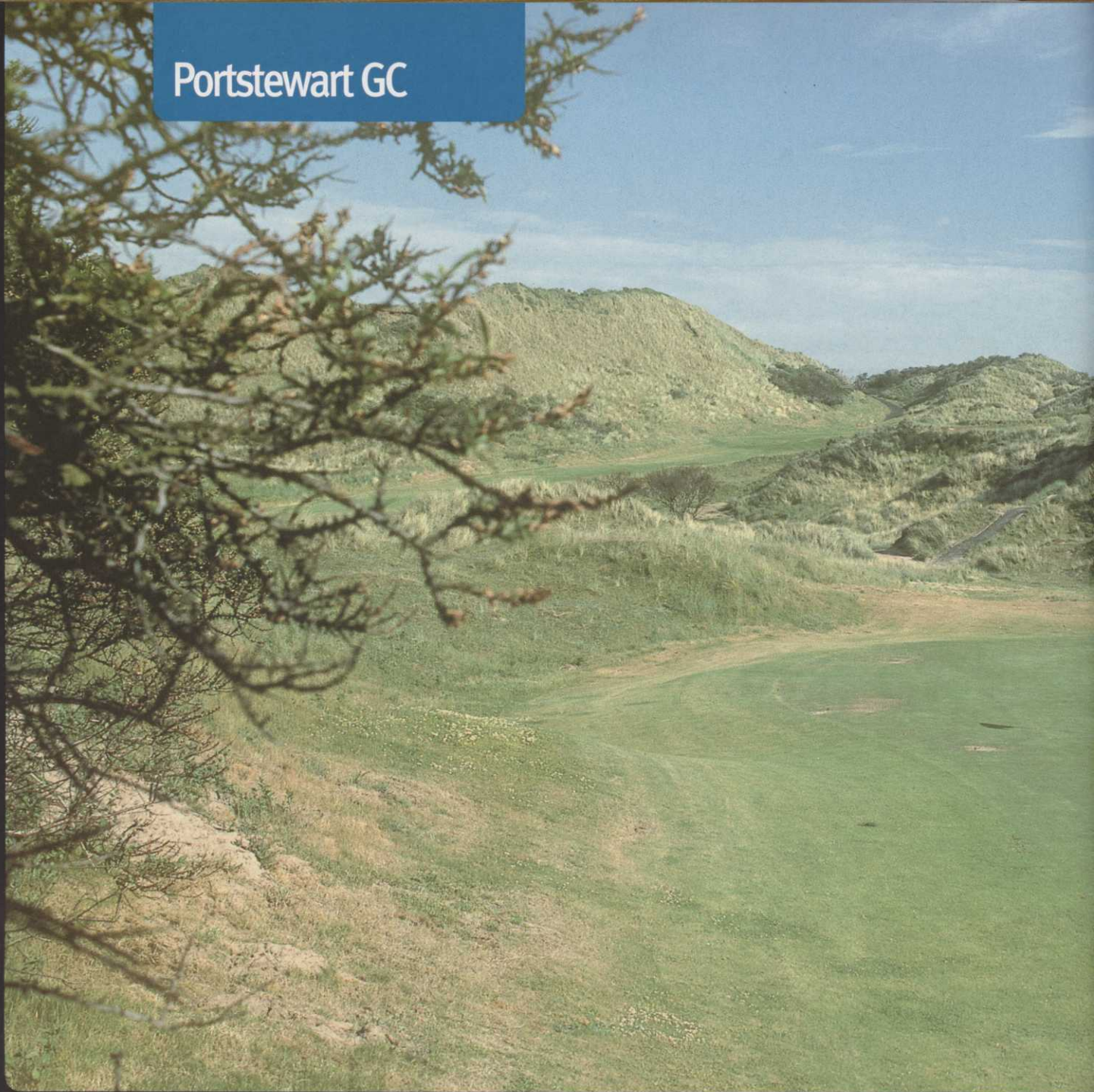


Portstewart GC



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."