

# **The Development of Baltinglass Golf Course (A Brief History)**



**Founded 1928**



**Baltinglass Hill overlooking Baltinglass Golf Course**

On visiting Baltinglass Golf Club, one will be impressed by the striking beauty of the countryside. Looking down towards the town, St. Joseph's RC Parish Church stands visibly tall. A hill, the 'Pinnacle' or 'Baltinglass Hill' overlooks the town. On this Pinnacle are rings of stones - burial chambers – Passage Graves dating back to around 3000 B.C. Artefacts, excavated in the 1930s from the graves, are stored in the National History Museum, Dublin. Down at the foot of the hill, nestling in the Slaney Valley, stands the ruins of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cistercian Abbey established in Ireland, founded by a group of monks from Mellifont, Co. Louth. Dermot McMurrugh, King of South Leinster (1140 – 1170), granted the lands to the monks in 1148. For the next centuries, the Abbey was the focal point of learning and business activities in the area until its suppression in 1537. These lands, comprising 59,000 acres, included several castles and water mills.

The golf course stands on part of the lands formerly owned by the monks and the Club emblem features the Abbey ruins, the River Slaney and the Pinnacle.

The dissolution of the Abbey in the 1500s, and the Anglicisation of these extensive lands allowed the Eustace family to gain control of the area in 1541. A succession of landlords followed during the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. These included Sir Henry Harrington, Sir Charles Wilmot, Sir James Carroll, Sir Thomas Roper and the Stratford family, who represented this area in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. It was Benjamin O'Neill-Stratford II, the 6<sup>th</sup> Earl, born in 1808, who lived at Stratford Lodge. He was unmarried and lived as a semi-recluse. The site of the present Clubhouse is where his mansion stood. The Earl had a balloon house built, apparently on the western side of his residence with a doorway 50 feet wide and 60 feet high. Stratford Lodge was destroyed by fire in 1858, but the balloon house survived the fire. The mansion was never rebuilt and the Earl lived in the balloon house for a time after the fire. He left Ireland and died at Alicante in Spain in 1875. This was the end of the Stratford Dynasty, 1660 – 1775. The present main entrance to the Club is locally known as 'The Lord's

Piers' and was the entrance to the Earl's house. The balloon house was dismantled and the granite was used to build the bell/clock tower at St. Joseph's Church, Baltinglass in 1887. The Stratford family pyramid shaped granite mausoleum is located near the ruins of the former Cistercian Abbey.



Following the end of the Stratford earldom, the lands passed onto a number of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl's descendants, who living in England, let their land through agents, to local farmers. In the late 1920s, the Irish Land Commission acquired some of the estate, known as the Lord's Wood, from the descendants of Catherine Dora St. John.

In 1927, a proposal for a golf club was put forward. Approximately 168 acres were acquired from the Land Commission on a "Trust Estate" lease under 'The Irish Land Act, 1903' (record No. S3804). The original Trustees were: Miss Violet Tynte, Rev. Albert Byrne CC (First Captain) Dr. W.G. Lyons, Colonel Meade J. Dennis, Patrick J. Ronan, Hugh C. Doyle and Major C. Mitchell. Both Ms. Tynte and Colonel Dennis were descendants of the Stratford line.

Development of a golf course was confined to nine holes, and was designed by Lionel Hewson and named originally as St. John's Golf Club. While this registered name continued up to the AGM 1972, it was generally known locally as 'Baltinglass Golf Club' and occasionally referred to as 'The Links'. The Club was officially opened in May 1928 and the first members' competition was held on the following month, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, an event noted in the Nationalist at that time.

The first clubhouse, a shed, part of the Earl's ruins, was replaced in 1930 when a new golf pavilion with a large ballroom was constructed on the site of the historic ruins of Stratford Lodge. Sand was obtained from the quarry, positioned below the current ladies' 15<sup>th</sup> tee box.



Membership in the 1930s/1940s was very small, varying between 20 and 30 mainly business and professional people. Revenue from the sale of timber and the grazing of cattle and sheep helped to sustain the Club's existence. In 1947, with very few golf playing members, the Club was in danger of closing as it was unable to meet its financial commitments. With very little revenue being generated from the Club, the annuity on the Club's land, which the Trustees were obliged to pay, could not be sustained. During an EGM in 1947, it was proposed and seconded, by two prominent members, to 'wind up' the Club but this was defeated. It was decided to find a last chance solution to save the Club. Following a public meeting in the Town Hall in January 1948, a concerted effort to revitalise the Club was undertaken. Memberships were actively canvassed, tennis courts and pavilion were improved thus allowing club dances, badminton and tennis to flourish. Individual members took care of course maintenance. Some of these improvements were undertaken by non-golfers though some took up the game of golf later. Memberships increased and a GUI return in March 1948, recorded that the total of male members was 12 and a similar number of female associate members. These, and other improvements, allowed the Club to consider the

employment of a groundsman. In 1948, Christy Foley became the first permanent employee. One of his many functions was 'running' the bar, a task previously undertaken by committee members. Christy remained the sole employee until 1967 when the Club employed a second groundsman.

In 1954, a decision was taken to return almost 100 acres to the Land Commission, thus reducing the Trustees' annuity. The Land Commission, in turn, transferred the returned land to the Forestry. However, in 1956, the Trustees had to purchase back a small portion of what was then marshy land on the right of the present 16<sup>th</sup> hole, as sheep needed access to water.

Access to the Club, during all these years, was by a right of way from the County Road, (which is off Belan Street), passing by the Railway Station House, (presently a Quinn's Superstore office), and up along to the right of the present 15<sup>th</sup> fairway and on in front of the 15<sup>th</sup> green and 17<sup>th</sup> men's tee box. The present main entrance from the Dublin Road to Stratford Lodge, through 'The Lord's Piers,' had not been used by the Club. Permission to use the Earl's entrance was sought from and granted by The Land Commission. The road was paved at a cost of £1,160 and opened as the Club's entrance in 1963. That was also the year that sheep no longer grazed the course.

The growth in the use of private cars allowed the popularity of golf to improve in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many new members came from such places as Dunlavin, Hacketstown, Tullow, Moone and nearby areas. From the mid-1960s onwards, many travelled from Dublin to join, particularly frequenting the Club on Saturdays. By the early 1980s, membership of the Club was full and new entrants were mainly accepted from the local area. With the extra members, improvements to the pavilion were necessary and a 1966 extension of a new and more spacious bar was added to the 1950s kitchen and supper room. By 1972, a watering system for the greens was in place at a cost of £2,000. In 1974, a new kitchen and function room were constructed and the club house central heating was installed.

Sheds, adjacent to the present ladies' 12<sup>th</sup> tee box, part of the original Stratford Lodge buildings, were used for Club machinery storage up to 1980 and were replaced by the present machinery sheds. The final remains of the Earl's residence, the archway/bell tower and the old sheds were demolished in 1980.



The demolition of these, as well as the removal of the old dance hall and supper room allowed for a clubhouse extension. This extension is where the present locker rooms, toilets and showers areas are situated.

An extension to the Club's bar was opened in 1991. An adjoining conservatory and a veranda overlooking the 18<sup>th</sup> hole, was later added and opened in 1996. This was also the year that the concept of ladies as full members, rather than associate members, was passed at an EGM. While this 1996 amendment to the Constitution did not yet grant ladies complete equality, it was a stepping stone to equality that was achieved in 2002.

During the late 1970s through to the 1990s, many other course & house improvements occurred. Extra alternate tee boxes were constructed so golfers, playing the second nine, teed off from a different position. Some existing tee boxes were greatly modified including the present 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>. A ditch was removed at the right of the present 17<sup>th</sup> green and trees planted. The green was also modified. Changes along the 6<sup>th</sup> (15<sup>th</sup>), fairway all brought about course improvements. In 1993 the greens were pole-forked for the first time. Granite

bridges were constructed across the 1<sup>st</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> hole dykes in 1994. The 1<sup>st</sup> green was completely reconstructed and bunkers revamped. Due to an increase in traffic, a large section of our entrance roadway was refurbished. Though many of these, and previous improvements, were a cost to the Club, subsidised through members' levies and the advance sale of 5 year memberships, a great portion of work was also done free of charge. In January 2005, following an EGM in Inis Fáil, Baltinglass, (Germaines), the Club catering and bar facilities were franchised.

In the early 1990s, various options were considered to extend the course to eighteen holes, without fruition. The concept was kept alive and on the 28<sup>th</sup> February 1999, at a Special General Meeting in the Downshire Hotel, Blessington, attended by close on 300 members, virtually unanimous approval was given to a plan to extend the course to eighteen holes.

A development loan was secured for the purchase of the forested land and the development of nine extra holes. Almost 80 acres of the land, which had previously been returned to the Land Commission, was purchased on the 20<sup>th</sup> August 1999, from Coillte Teoranta for Ir£495,000. The sale of 3,000 trees, combined with a levy of Ir£1,000 from each male member and Ir£500 from each associate member, was to go towards the purchase of the forested land. The layout of the new nine holes was designed by Mr. Eddie Connaughton, Dublin, in association with Mr. James D'Arcy, Tuckmill, Baltinglass. A delay in the planning permission process and a reduction in the price of timber, decreased to Ir£140,000, added considerably to the project's cost of Ir£1.4 million. An EGM in 2000 agreed to the revised costs and the resultant increase in Club borrowing. In 2001, the Club acquired the freehold of its existing nine-hole property.

James D'Arcy constructed the new nine holes and on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2002, these new holes, (the present 2<sup>nd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> holes inclusive), were opened marking the fruition of the long sought aspiration of an eighteen-hole golf course. A new greens irrigation system was installed, replacing the existing one. A submersible pump

and a storage tank, with a capacity of 23,000 gallons approx. were necessary. During irrigation times, water is used from the well and water is piped to the storage tank from the pond springs which are situated above the 2<sup>nd</sup> hole.



‘In Going 18,’ refurbishments to locker rooms, toilets and showers were necessary and an area, (a former snooker room), was later converted into a Club office and reception area.

In 2007, a Club fund raising raffle assisted the committee in organising the drainage of a large section of the 8<sup>th</sup> fairway. The recession of 2008 to the middle of the next decade, witnessed a nationwide serious decline in golf club memberships. Baltinglass Golf Club was no different. However, the Club managed to continue to reduce its debts during these trying years. This occurred by reducing the number of Club employees, substituted by many members willingly volunteering their labour, combined with financial generosity of some of its members and the sale of some of our forestry trees as well as the sale of firewood hewn by volunteers. The sale of a number of life memberships in 2004 reduced our development loan by €100,000. Stringent Club management continues, making the Club a viable amenity for its members.

Recent course improvements include reshaping some bunkers, the revamping the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> tee boxes and the erection of sponsored tee information stones, which enhance all the tee boxes. Four sets of sponsored tee markers, presented to the

Club in 2020, add considerably to the course. The closing of three bunkers, with more to follow, will facilitate a less difficult course.

In 2017 & 2019, the Club secured grants totalling €94,769 from the Sports Capital Programme. These grants facilitated the purchase and leasing of mowers and allowed extensive drainage to be carried out on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> fairways. Drainage to sections the of 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> fairways was carried out in 2020, (to be completed in 2021). During the pandemic year of 2020, volunteers made great improvements to the course and clubhouse. In 2020, the committee, on realising that the Covid-19 pandemic would have a serious effect on the Club's finances, offered special membership deals which resulted in a substantial increase in Club membership, giving a much needed boost to the Club's income.

Though the Club still has part of the development loan to repay, it's projected that this loan will be fully paid by its centenary year, 2028.

*Tom Hannafin (2021)*

*Picture 1. The Abbey Ruins & Stratford Family Mausoleum.*

*Picture 2. Ruins of Stratford Lodge 1920s. Picture 3. The Archway circa 1900.*

*Picture 4. The Pond area (2<sup>nd</sup> hole). Picture 5. Developing the new 9.*

