

## **Presentation by Dermot Gilleece, Life Honorary Member, to Members and guests on the occasion of the Pro-Am to celebrate the Centenary of the official opening of the 12 holes in Clontarf Golf Club on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 1923.**

A visit from the renowned British golf-course architect, Harry S Colt to these lands at the end of World War I, proved to be a particularly productive development for this club.

This was the accomplished golfer who studied law at Cambridge University and reached the semi-finals of the British Amateur in 1906 before turning to golf-course design.

He was practising as a solicitor in Hastings at the time. Having first decided to quit the law and become the first secretary of Sunningdale Golf Club, he would go on to exert a profound impact on the development of golf facilities in these islands and further afield.

During 12 years at Sunningdale, he designed the club's New Course, the original 18 having been crafted by the celebrated Scottish professional, Willie Park.

Colt's legal background brought him into contact with Sir Anthony Babington, who would become Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland. Babington was largely responsible for an influx of Trinity law graduates into Royal Dublin and was also a prominent member of Royal Portrush.

Colt, meanwhile, soon became a golf-course architect of international repute, leaving his stamp at such a revered establishment as Pine Valley.

Regarding his craft, he famously observed: "An architect's earnest hope is, without doubt, that his courses will have the necessary vitality to resist possibly adverse criticism and will endure as a lasting record of his craft and of his love for his work."

The great scribe, Bernard Darwin, described Colt's work as "more enduring than brass." And I suspect that even 100 years on, those of you who enjoyed his handiwork today would endorse those words.

He was responsible for the famous West Course at Wentworth and for re-designing Royal Dublin after the departure of the British military from Dollymount in 1919. He later designed the Dunluce links at Royal Portrush, Royal Birkdale, Castle, the old Dun Laoghaire at Tivoli Road, the County Sligo links at Rosses Point and Rosapenna in Co Donegal.

In the event, Colt was a house-guest of Babington's on frequent visits to this country and became a close friend of the Rev John Love Morrow, the hugely influential honorary secretary of the GUI from 1906.

Given their shared legal background, Colt and Cecil Barcroft, a scratch golfer who became secretary of Royal Dublin, would also have been friends.

In such circumstances, it is easy to see how, after his work at Royal Dublin, Colt became involved at Clontarf which was founded by Morrow in 1912.

Morrow's native place lay between Ballymena and Ballymoney on the great trunk road of that time, which cut through the heart of the Ulster countryside. It was a district of substantial farmers, Scottish in origin and Presbyterian in religion. It was a background which Morrow cherished throughout his life.

He once recalled: "I early learned that to be a true Christian, it is no handicap to be a good sportsman and learn to play the game in religion as well as in the field."

This was the balance that was to characterise a distinguished career. Given his upbringing, it was hardly surprising that he should have been drawn towards the Presbyterian ministry. In the event, he gained an MA degree at Dublin University; took the degree of Doctor of Divinity at Edinburgh University and was ordained in Gloucester Street, Dublin in 1884, having been a Licentiate of the Presbytery of Ballymena.

He spent six years in charge of the old Presbyterian Church in Gloucester Street which had fallen on hard times. Morrow's remarkable energy, however, was soon evident in a determination to find better quarters.

So it was that he moved in 1890 to Clontarf where his enthusiasm brought the desired reward. Apart from erecting the church which still stands at the city end of Howth Road, he undertook the building of a school. All the while, his remarkable charisma ensured the love and support of his congregation, particularly as a counsellor and a friend who was widely respected and liked elsewhere in the community.

Clontarf Golf Club is unique, certainly in an Irish context, in that it has had three distinctly different courses. Firstly there was the nine-hole layout at Mount Temple which served the members from 1912 to 1922. Then came a 12-hole course, constructed in two loops of six and bordered by the ditch to the right of the present 18th fairway, the railway line, Mount Temple, and the Malahide Road.

Finally, on the acquisition of McCullagh's and Corbett's land including the quarry holes, the present course was officially opened in 1928. With the exception of the 12th, 13th and 15th holes, very little change has taken place since then, other than the modification of certain greens and the addition or removal of hazards.

Dr Morrow's strong ties with Royal Dublin where he was captain in 1910, became extremely useful in the laying out of the original, Mount Temple course. During construction, he obtained free of charge, 50 loads of sand from the Dollymount club. Further sand for the construction of bunkers was later acquired from Royal Dublin in exchange for loam, of which Clontarf had an abundant supply.

The layout, which incorporated part of the present first green along with the land that now stretches across the second, eighth, seventh and fifth fairways, conformed largely to Dr Morrow's ideas on design. Drawing on information from various sources, we believe the par of the nine-holes was: 435 534 434 = 35.

General improvements were made over the years, including a change in the seventh from a par five to a par four. This hole, which was close to the railway-station end of the course, was later restored to its original par-five configuration, however, through the addition of strategically-placed bunkers.

Overall, it appears to have been a delightful challenge, judging by the reaction of visiting golfers. One such player, writing in the magazine "Sport", observed after a visit in 1917: "A player coming from Portmarnock may be permitted to remark on some things which seem strange to him, such as the variety and beauty of the trees which the golf committee have deftly turned into hazards; the flocks of sheep and lambs that browse the rapidly-growing grass and the multitude of fair ladies that adorned the course.

"Were a Dublin citizen to be dropped from an aeroplane in that very attractive little links at Clontarf, shut in by high hedges and interspersed by tall trees and little copse woods, varied here and there by lovely lakelets, he would have no idea he was treading terra firma which lay within a stone's throw of the city."

Cecil Barcroft wrote of Mount Temple: "The ground leased to the club is about 45 acres – of these, some five cannot be used owing to lakes and woods. The remaining 40 have been used to the best possible advantage. Seventy acres is regarded as a minimum for a good nine-hole course.

"The 40 acres at Clontarf's disposal were laid out in accordance with the theories applied to the products of the best golfing architects and has not suffered as so many courses do, from the conglomerate tinkering of incompetent green committees."

We're told that the club flourished for eight years at Mount Temple until 1920 when several problems arose over the leasing of the land. Finally in August 1921, a lease was secured from Dublin Corporation on the land attached to Donnycarney House and under the guidance of Dr Morrow, work was started immediately on laying out a new golf course there.

The choice of Colt as architect was a measure of how highly Dr Morrow regarded his work. The members, however, were confronted with the problem of whether they should content themselves with another nine-hole course, which would leave them with considerable land to spare, or utilise the land to its full capacity by going for a larger layout.

It was finally decided that they should opt for 12 holes, comprising outer and inner loops of six. With the loops being played in opposite directions, the result was an ingenious method of completing 18 holes.

Based on the present course, the holes were played in this sequence: Outer six (anti-clockwise) – first, second, third, fourth, 11th, 18th; Inner six (clockwise) – 10th, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth. So, to complete 18 holes, the outer six were played a second time. This gave the course an ideal balance of five par threes – the present sixth was played once and the fourth and 11th were each played twice. There were also five par fives – the present second and 18th played twice and the 10th played once. Overall par was 72.

Though there was predictable sadness among the members at the move from Mount Temple which was praised universally as a very pleasant course, there was general agreement that the new layout represented a major step forward in the development of the Club. Indeed some fine golfing terrain incorporated part of the old course.

Of the new holes, the second was considered to have been the best. It was, in fact, the old third played in the opposite direction and measured 454 yards, making it the longest on the course. The fifth, sixth and ninth were also reported to have been splendid holes, the short ninth (now the sixth) being one of the trickiest of the round with "a deal of trouble for those who did not get the green from the tee."

The Irish Field reported: "Though visitors will find it rather novel playing 12 holes, they will soon become accustomed to it. In fact, after a few rounds, one does not mind it, and the impression which the place gives is that there are few courses in the vicinity of Dublin where one can enjoy a round of golf with the same comfort that is to be had at Clontarf."

Still, it was entirely understandable that the club should have aspired to acquiring a full, 18-hole layout, almost from the time they moved into Donnycarney House. And as things worked out, this ambition was to be realised, five years later.

Established examples of Colt's work are clearly in evidence on the present course. The difference in character between the old 12 and the six holes (12th, 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th), which were to be added at a later stage, is also clearly defined, even allowing for the unique nature of the quarry land.

In designing par-four holes, Morrow and Colt believed in offering the player options off the tee, an approach which became strongly favoured by Robert Trent Jones, the world's leading golf course architect during the later-half of the 20th century.

He believed, as Morrow did, that par fives should be gamble holes, reachable with two woods bravely struck and executed with pin-point accuracy. The present 18th is such a hole, where the long hitter is faced with the risk of a cut second-shot ending out of bounds.

Ideal examples of "option" par fours are the fifth, where a brave drive right of centre is rewarded with a clear shot to the target, and the eighth, where a sliced tee shot towards the seventh fairway is followed by a difficult approach over a bunker.

Though Colt found he could use only one of the old greens in his splendid, new design, the cost of constructing the 12-hole layout was kept to a minimum through the careful supervision of Dr Morrow who directed the work during 1922.

The course was completed early the following year and was officially opened on June 6th, 1923 by the Governor General, Tim Healy, who was presented with an inscribed putter which is on display in the club lounge.

Meanwhile, a crucial move towards achieving an 18-hole layout was the purchase, in January 1927, of land for the princely sum of £20. In informing the members of the deal, Dr Morrow emphasised that Clontarf would be the only Club in the country to boast an 18-hole course within a city boundary.

But that's a story for another day.

Dermot Gilleece.