



CHARMING CARNE

Home to Belmullet Golf Club, the Carne golf links in County Mayo is opening a new nine holes this month. GDI went west to have a look and to see how they have managed to swim against the tide of the current downturn. Words by Dan Walton, photographs by Larry Lambrecht

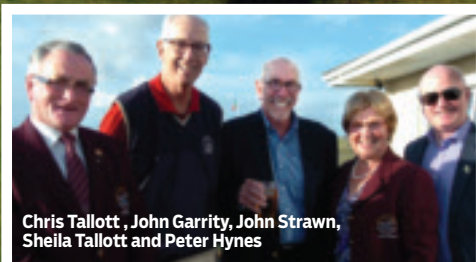
In the little over 20 years since it opened for play, the Carne Golf Links on the Mullet peninsula in County Mayo has gained an aura of golfing mythology that would make its predecessors proud. Arriving on the scene in the early 90's to no discernible fanfare, its rapid growth in stature has resulted from a litany of compliments poured upon it from one golfing VIP after another. Put simply, Carne is the real deal: it has earned plaudits the old fashioned way; through word of mouth and sheer quality of product. The rugged and raw beauty has played a large part, as has the sense of adventure visitors feel on discovering what writer Jim Finegan called "the single

greatest remote course in Britain or Ireland". Golfers just seem to fall in love with the place. And this month, against all odds, Carne are opening a new nine holes that are sure to increase the course's stock even further.

The original 18 holes have a worthy backstory. In the mid-eighties, a number of local businessmen got together to form Erris Tourism with the sole aim of attracting more visitors to their under-appreciated corner of the country. At the time, the common land that was to become the golf links was being divided between the nearby farmers. Seeing the potential immediately, the company set about securing the purchase



Minister of State for Sport and Tourism Michael Ring welcomed some of America's top golf journalists to Mayo accompanied by Faite Ireland Client Services Manager Eva Dearie, Cathaoirleach Collr Johnny O'Malley, Chairman of Erris Tourism Gerry Maguire, and Carne Golf Club's Eamonn Mangan and Club Captain Chris Tallott. The group consisted of Sports Illustrated's John Garry, Golf Magazine and golf.com's Michael Walker, South Carolina's Bob Gillespie, Stephanie Wei - "Wei Over Par" golf blog, US Golf destination promoter Dove Jones, Callaway Golf David McCormack, Yahoo Sport's Bruce Selcraig, sports-talk host Ann Liguoiri, author John Strawn, Links magazine contributor Tom Dunne, Adam Lawrence and golf book author Kevin Mac Klom



Chris Tallott, John Garry, John Strawn, Sheila Tallott and Peter Hynes



Chris Tallott, Mary Walsh, Gerry Maguire, Minister Michael Ring, John Garry, Eva Dearie and Eamonn Mangan



from the 17 new owners. Perhaps inevitably, not all were easily persuaded of the benefits but Belmullet being the small town that it is, the stragglers were eventually convinced that a greater good was at play. The next job was to raise the funds and then to find themselves an architect. Taking their lead from the links at Ballyconneely in Connemara, Eddie Hackett was appointed to oversee the design and at the sprightly age of 77 he set about the dunes with the enthusiasm of a teenager, spotting immediately that there was a great course waiting to be discovered under the long marram grass. That was in 1987

and it was to be a further eight years before the course was fully open for play, having been built in entirety by a local workforce on a shoestring budget. At the time, and in a rare show of pride, Hackett stated his belief that "ultimately there will be no better links in the country, or, I doubt, anywhere". Hackett routed the front nine on an undulating parcel of land to the north-east of the clubhouse. It has a number of excellent holes; the third, sixth and ninth – all par 4's – being particular highlights. But it is the back nine, weaving its way through lunar like sand hills, that stimulates the jaw dropping

reaction from so many first time visitors: The dunes are enormous and unique in their structure, having seemingly been formed by the elements in a random and chaotic fashion, very unlike the uniform ridges one often sees on links courses. The golf holes work within the natural ebb and flow of the landscape, resulting in one unpredictable moment after another. The finish is especially strong and the 17th is undoubtedly one of Ireland's great two shotters. So it is with no small sense of anticipation that GDI walks round the brand new nine holes which track their way over

and through exactly the same spectacular dune land that so characterises the existing back nine. Although Hackett had initially aired the possibility of another nine before he passed in 1996, it wasn't until 2004 that the club acted. Times were good for golf in Ireland and planning was sought and granted based on an initial routing devised by Jim Engh, the American designer and Carne member. Although some early construction was carried out during the winter months, the project slowed along with the economy. But well aware of the opportunity they had, the club reignited the flame in 2010 by

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engaging the Scottish architect Ally McIntosh to produce a final layout and design. The construction was supervised by Eamon Mangan, a director of Erris Tourism who oversaw the building of the original 18 and who has been the primary driver for all development at the course since.

“We were able to build the new holes at a very low cost” says Mangan. “All the machinery and staff were our own and we were greatly helped by various local community grants that aided the purchase of materials. Wherever possible, we used what we already had on site and we carried out the work most often during down periods on the original 18”. It was clearly a back to basics methodology and one that makes a refreshing change from the high budget and unsustainable developments that blighted Ireland during those heady days of the nineties and early noughties.

Ally McIntosh was also on site during much of the build, along with his partner James Coughlan who carried out the detailed shaping of features. “The land really spoke for itself” says McIntosh. “It’s every architect’s dream to work on a true links and I’ve grown up with such an appreciation of

this type of environment for golf that the objective was mainly about doing as little as possible to the natural humps and hollows; retaining the character. The budget necessitated this but it would have been criminal to do anything else”.

This reluctance to modify the landscape has engendered some singular and highly entertaining golf holes. The new first is a brute of a bunker-less par-5 which ends in a gloriously elevated green site that will cause even the biggest hitters to question the wisdom of attempting to get there in two. The par-3 second plays from the side of one hill in to an amphitheatre surrounded by cloaking dunes. Like the first, it also has no formal bunkers but there is more sand here than you will find on any other hole in Ireland. “Part of leaving the land as natural as possible meant that we also held on to these amazing open sand scars and blow-outs. They add a wonderful sense of scale and drama” says McIntosh.

Perhaps the most intriguing hole is the long fifth which has a split fairway round either side of a massive sand hill. The low road to the left is safer but will leave a mid-length third shot. For those who are a little more fearless, there is a direct option over a



blind saddle to the right. The choices are bound to cause a lot of debate in the bar afterwards.

After climbing up to the small and undulating green on the strategic sixth hole, the coastal panorama from the seventh tee has to be seen to be believed. But it is the hole itself that makes the heart miss a beat. A long par-3 with a gigantic chasm running across its left side, it is going to fill many golfers with knee-knocking terror. For sheer size, it puts Calamity Corner at Portrush firmly in to the shade.

The final two holes are strong par-4s with the gorgeous ninth playing from a towering tee between two sentinel dunes to a wildly rumped fairway beyond. It is a great finish to a new set of holes that should see Carne jump even higher in many course ranking lists.

For the time being however, the nine – christened Kilmore after the local parish – will primarily be treated as a stand alone loop. Links courses take a little longer to mature than their parkland cousins and it

will be a couple of years until the condition is up to the same standard as the existing 18. After that, there is the possibility that the new holes can be combined with the current back nine to produce what will surely become one of the most awe-inspiring courses anywhere in the world. To this end, McIntosh has provided a composite routing that will be used on opening day and allows the two nines to interconnect seamlessly.

As we walk back to the clubhouse in the evening sun, it becomes ever more apparent why grown men struggle to find superlatives when talking about Carne. There is indeed a magical and serene feeling about the links that belies its young age. These are tough times for any golf course at the moment but with the excitement generated by the new nine holes and the ever growing good will afforded the course by all who visit, it seems assured that Carne will continue to prosper. There is nowhere else more deserving.



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Belmullet, County Mayo



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