

Course of beauty and challenge

Philip Reid takes a look at the new Blainroe layout that has transformed the Wicklow club.

The coast road southbound out of Wicklow town takes you on a short journey that has a most unexpected yet pleasant end for, just over three kilometres outside, there is a golf club - Blainroe - which has been transformed.

Different professions employ different means to achieve an end: for a plastic surgeon, the process of nipping and tucking is done by a scalpel; for a diamond cutter, the rough edges are taken off a gemstone by intricate machines. Yet, in his own way, a golf course architect - invariably using heavy machinery as his main tool of the trade - can attain equally remarkable results.

And, at Blainroe Golf Club, Martin Hawtree, part of a distinguished golfing family who left their imprint over most parts of continental Europe as well as Britain and Ireland in the 20th century, has fashioned something quite spectacular. The design philosophy of Hawtree, as he puts it himself, is "unashamedly rooted in the history and traditions of the game."

What the progressive folk at Blainroe have received for an overall investment of some €2.4 million (all achieved without the need to levy the members) is a facility that would grace anywhere.

First things first, though. The site of Blainroe Golf Club is given to us by Mother Nature, and it is a spectacular one with the course located atop 70 feet high cliffs that run for the length of the course that now measures 6,175 metres. However, the story of Blainroe - and its remodelled course, which officially opens next Saturday - is one that has seen the club overcome rocky times in the past to progress to become one that in many ways encapsulates the most successful attributes of the Celtic Tiger.

For their money, time and patience, Blainroe's members have got an updated and remodelled course that would bare comparison with any parkland layout, an impressive and thoroughly modern underpass that means there is no longer any need to take your life into your hands by crossing the road that intersects the land which houses the second to the eighth holes from the rest of the course and upgrading of the clubhouse, including kitchen, staff and locker-room facilities.

The earliest Blainroe layout was done by Fred Hawtree, the father of Martin, and the course was built in 1978 on what was originally farmland. The concept was that of Christy Cooney and, for its time, it was a rather grandiose one: that of the first "resort type" course to be built in Ireland. As club president Vincent Delahunt observes, "the idea (of a resort course) was far ahead of anyone's at that time . . . Celtic Tiger Ireland was a long way down the road."

Yet Cooney's innovative idea meant that the course - with a hotel (now a nursing home) and holiday homes built in tandem - gave Blainroe a wonderful, natural location. Apart from an incline to the sixth green, the course - for the most part - is

undulating without being physically difficult for players carrying their bags or pulling trolleys. However, the development had its financial difficulties over the early years before now evolving in to a state of rude health.

From the time in 1978 that those 28 founding members established Blainroe at a meeting in the La Touche hotel in Greystones, to the intervening years when it was owned by various international financial corporations, to the time in 1991 that a club members' buy-out was formulated, the club has matured and developed beyond all recognition. The buy-out in 1991 (for IR£ 1.6 million, which gave them the clubhouse, golf course and 47 acres on the opposite side of the road which is likely to be developed into a new practice area) was the catalyst for the club's evolution into what it is today.

While the members' buy-out occurred in 1991, the penchant for change came almost a decade later as the club evolved into a vibrant one while recognising the limitations of the old layout with its flat greens and bunkering that was being overcome by the advances in club and ball technology.

Initial moves for change were comparatively slow. Patrick Merrigan, a noted designer responsible for Slieve Russell among other projects, was commissioned to reconstruct the first green. While the second and fourth greens were redesigned by the members themselves. However, it was proposed at an annual general meeting that it would be worth seeing if the original designers - Hawtree - were interested in updating the course, which is how Martin Hawtree (who was responsible for the upgrading work carried out on the old course at Lahinch) came on board.

The result is quite outstanding, with Blainroe transformed from a rough jewel into a polished gem.

Although a new SS for the course has yet to be decided, club captain Michael Geraghty anticipates that the changes have made it "at least a stroke and a half harder" than it was before the changes were implemented, a process that first started in 2000 but which gathered pace over the past three years and which has now been completed.

Of the €2.4 million put into the club's redevelopment over the past four years, some €1.6 million was reinvested in the course with 18 new sand-based greens, new tees, fairway drainage (although its location alongside cliff tops has traditionally given it a natural drainage that's the envy of most), additional bunkering and hole redesign. Anyone who experiences the new course will readily acknowledge that any inconvenience suffered during the redesign has been worth it and the conditioning of the course is a tribute to its superintendent Pat Conway.

Nobody is more enthusiastic about the transformation that has occurred than the resident club professional John McDonald. A native of Delgany, McDonald learned his trade while serving his apprenticeship with the late Harry Bradshaw at Portmarnock but he arrived here at Blainroe as the Irish assistants champion in 1982 and has been an integral part of the club ever since.

Like many others at one time or another, McDonald recalls the sacrilege of using a putter off the tee at the downhill short par three eighth hole and allowing the ball to

tumble towards the green before its redesign transformed the hole into a much less benign beast.

"The course was still considered a good course, despite those failings," remarks Geraghty, but the changes that have been implemented have taken it onto a new level and a course that should prove especially appealing to societies and players who like to sample different courses with green fees of €50 midweek and €65 at weekends."

Many of the holes retain the almost-continental influences of Hawtree Snr with tree-lined aspects associated with courses in parts of Germany and France but Blainroe's overall appeal is that no two holes are alike and the contours of the greens, while not overly undulating, present a test for any calibre of player once the blade is put into your hands.

It doesn't take long for the course at Blainroe to offer a serious challenge, with the second hole (an uphill par four with out-of-bounds down the left) rated as index one (for the men) but it is fair to say that there are no weak holes on the layout and the new bunkering (large and aesthetic) particularly appealing.

The greens are excellent and are now all sand based. Rather than reseed them, however, the decision was taken to remove the old sods and replace them on to the new sand bases and this procedure has worked a treat.

When Christy O'Connor played the old course in a pro-am some years ago, he professed that the long par three 15th was one of the finest "short" holes to be found anywhere. Its redesign, if anything, makes it even better, a true championship hole of over 200 yards from an elevated green with a pond in play on the left and the green now located in an amphitheatre of hills and mounds.

But it is just one of many fine holes to be found on a layout that should no longer be considered a hidden jewel, but a shiny gem well worth discovering.

As club president Delahunt remarks, "this new course is testament to the dedication and determination of the committee who have worked tirelessly over the last three years to make this dream come true."

On that he is right, and what has been delivered to them is a course of which they have every reason to be immensely proud.