



Irish Examiner

Rebuilding on deeper foundations

Shades of Lazarus! That's the only way to describe what has been happening at the former Limerick County Golf Club, now re-christened Ballyneety Golf Club. A club that lasted less than 20 years before becoming one of the many victims of the Celtic Tiger crash is back on its feet with the facility set to reopen to its 500-strong membership and visitors in the coming weeks.

Designed by Ryder Cup star Des Smyth and opened for play in 1994, Limerick County flourished for many years before the wheels came off at much the same time as the country's finances hit rock bottom, before finally closing its doors in 2010.

Limerick already had Limerick Golf Club, Castletroy, two Adares and Shannon to look after its golfing requirements and despite widespread regret at its demise, few foresaw the revival of Limerick County. However, that wasn't the way several of the former leading members — led by Liam Lawlor, Minie O'Brien and professional Donal McSweeney — viewed the situation and their initiative and dedication to the cause led to a remarkable and healthy transformation over the past 12 months.

Four public meetings were held in 2012 to test public interest in reviving the club and, impressed by the numbers who turned up and their enthusiasm for the project, Cork-based **Quintas** Wealth Management came up with the necessary finance to re-acquire the site from the liquidator. The would-be members were asked to come up with €300 to cover their membership for 2013 in the knowledge that use of the course and clubhouse would be severely limited. Three hundred obliged and that number has now swelled by another 200.

The new club has been affiliated to the Golfing Union of Ireland and the only significant change from its former status is that it will now be known as Ballyneety Golf Club. Fourteen holes have been open for the past four months on a temporary basis and the full 18 will be up and running from September.

From what I witnessed on a recent visit, all the indications are positive. The original Des Smyth design has been faithfully retained, the fairways are already close to peak condition, the greens are also looking the part, a whole host of men were working on clubhouse refurbishment and the driving range under the watchful and caring eye of Donal McSweeney is again proving to have a magnetic influence on golfers in the area.

"Ballyneety Golf Club has risen like the phoenix thanks to the vision of a few and the support of many," is a point well made by the respective

captains, Tim Smyth, a lecturer at UL and a member of the original Limerick County club, and Bessie Lawlor, wife of Liam. "It is a work in progress. It will be as good as we make it."

It is as if all concerned have taken those words very much to their hearts. Those who walked the site at the beginning of this year cannot believe what has happened in the intervening months.

What looked like a wilderness has been developed into a very viable and excellent golf course. The dedication of the Lawlors, Minie O'Brien, Donal McSweeney and a host of members

prepared to voluntarily lend their labours has worked wonders.

"The GUI agronomist and our own agronomist, Ronan Branigan, have been here and described themselves delighted at what they saw," explains Liam Lawlor. "We have re-turfed four of the greens and with the weather proving helpful, the whole project is coming along very nicely. Financially, too, we are optimistic."

"There was a remarkable leap of faith from our members, most of whom were closely associated with Ballyneety in the past. They have demonstrated a great love for the

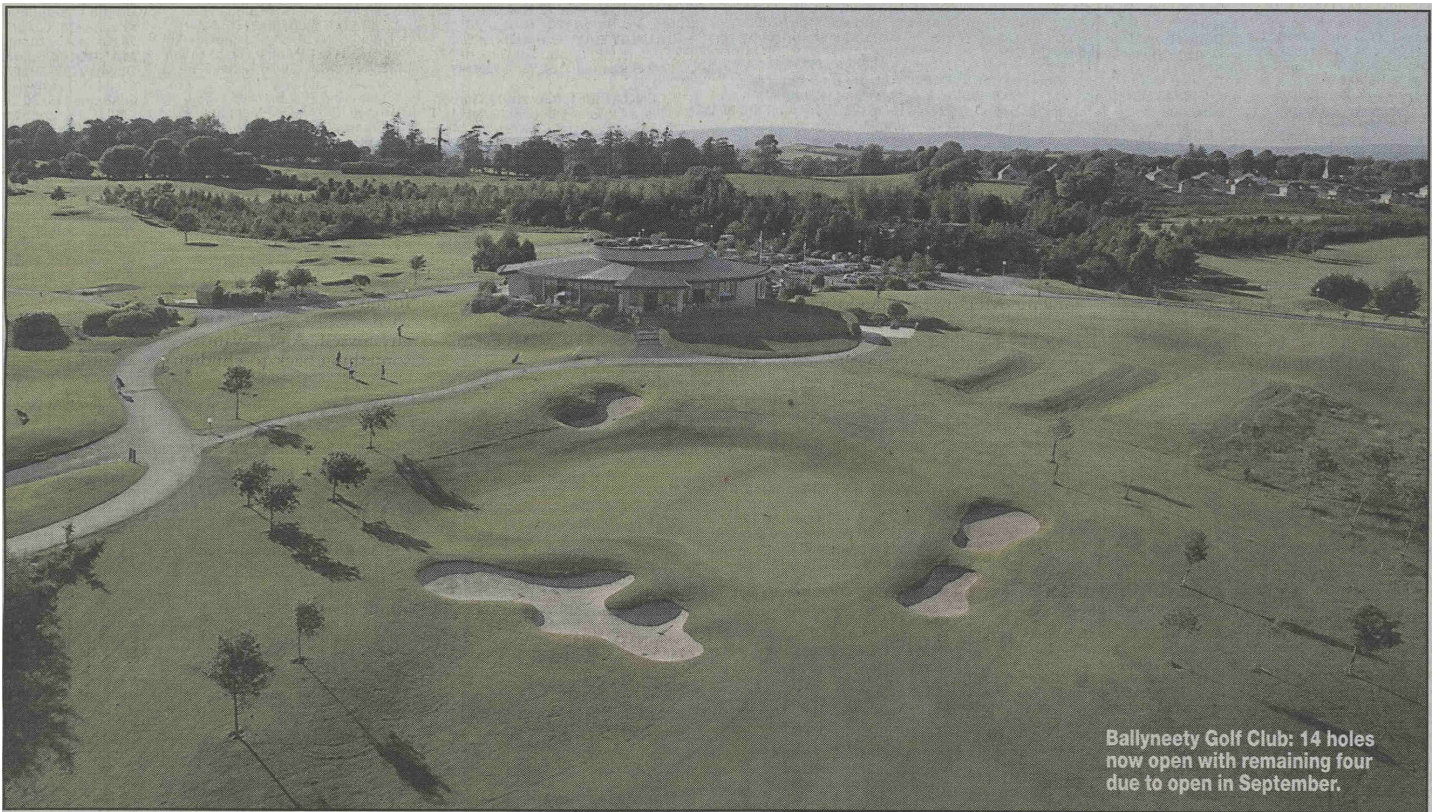
place and we are especially proud that the former head greenkeeper John McMahon and administrator Sinead O'Donnell are back on board."

As can be well imagined, deep scepticism greeted news of the resurrection of Ballyneety as a viable golfing concern and it took courage and belief to proceed when the inevitable obstacles arose.

"People said we were mad to take this on during a time of recession but we were all very confident we could pull it off until we can now claim that it really is a minor miracle," says Liam Lawlor.



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Ballyneety Golf Club: 14 holes now open with remaining four due to open in September.