Alister MacKenzie and Limerick Golf Club

Alister MacKenzie wrote that he "*first commenced to play golf in Scotland when I was about eighteen years of age. At that time, I described it as a rotten game, that you simply smote a ball as hard as you could and then spent half an hour looking for it. I did not take it up again seriously until nearly ten years later, and I then developed the disease badly.*" In 1896, after taking a position as an anaesthetist at the General Infirmary in Leeds, he joined Leeds Golf Club. The outbreak of the Second Boer War in South Africa in 1899 required a significant expeditionary force, and MacKenzie was appointed as a civilian medical officer to the 4th Somerset Light Infantry before returning to his father's GP practice in Leeds in 1901. Shortly after, his first thoughts on course architecture appeared in writing in the Leeds Golf Club suggestion book, pointing out "*how the course could be changed by utilizing the natural features, and making others indistinguishable from them and thus creating a greater resemblance to the golf on seaside courses, which in those days everyone admitted to be vastly superior to inland courses, though few, if any, knew why they were better.*" MacKenzie was a founding member of Alwoodley Golf Club near Leeds in 1907 and served as the first Secretary, and was also a member of the Greens Committee. The club engaged Harry Colt, then in the early years of his prolific golf architecture career, to design the new course. Colt is recognised as one of the true geniuses of course design, and many of the world's leading courses are attributed to him. MacKenzie worked with Colt on the Alwoodley design and took on his first solo layout at the nearby Moortown Golf Club the following year.

Over the next few years, MacKenzie made recommendations for improvements to existing courses in the region and gradually began to increase his design work. At a 1912 visit to Hallamshire Golf Club, a Colt design, it was reported that "*he was very much struck with the series of mounds which have been built to form the first hazard at the opening hole, and declared that they are the finest samples of grassy mounds that he has yet seen, and it is to be remembered that Dr. Mackenzie is regarded as parent of this type*

of hazard. At all events, he was very anxious to obtain photographs of this one, and certainly it is admirably planned." He paid his first visit to Ireland in 1914 to design the new course at Malone Golf Club in Belfast. The construction of the course was interrupted by the Great War, and when it finally opened in 1919, Mackenzie returned £200 of the £300 that he had been paid, as the members were so unhappy with the state of the new course.

A commission in the Royal Engineers (Second Lieutenant) interrupted golf course design activity, and MacKenzie saw action in the Somme for most of 1916. He specialised in trench design and concealment, rising to the rank of Major before returning from the front after the end of the war in November 1918. He formed a partnership with Harry Colt in 1919 and shortly after visited Ireland again to oversee a scheme of extensive improvements at Royal Portrush Golf Club. He also advised Royal County Down Golf Club and designed a new course for Balmoral Golf Club later that year. In 1920, MacKenzie published a book called "*Golf Architecture: Economy in Course Construction and Green-Keeping*", which is now recognised as a classic of golf literature. He continued his work in Ireland with a new course for Knock Golf Club in Belfast, which was constructed by his brother Charles, who had also done the work at Balmoral. The Colt partnership only lasted until 1923, but MacKenzie had established a significant reputation by this time and was engaged on several projects across Great Britain.

Muskerry Golf Club in Co Cork engaged the services of Dr MacKenzie in 1924, and when Cork Golf Club heard he was coming, they also engaged his services to examine bunkering and other aspects of the course. The suggested modifications for Cork cost £600 and were carried out in early 1925 by the British Golf Course Construction Company (BGCCC), which had been established by the MacKenzie brothers to construct Alister's designs. He designed a new nine holes for Muskerry and modified two existing holes. He visited Douglas Golf Club in October 1924 and planned some alterations to their course, with the work carried out by the BGCCC in the summer of 1925. Further modifications to Cork were proposed to Cork in 1925, coinciding with a visit to Monkstown Golf Club to plan a remodelling of the course.

MacKenzie spent the early months of 1926 in the United States of America to work on some of his more well-known designs on the West Coast, including Pebble Beach and

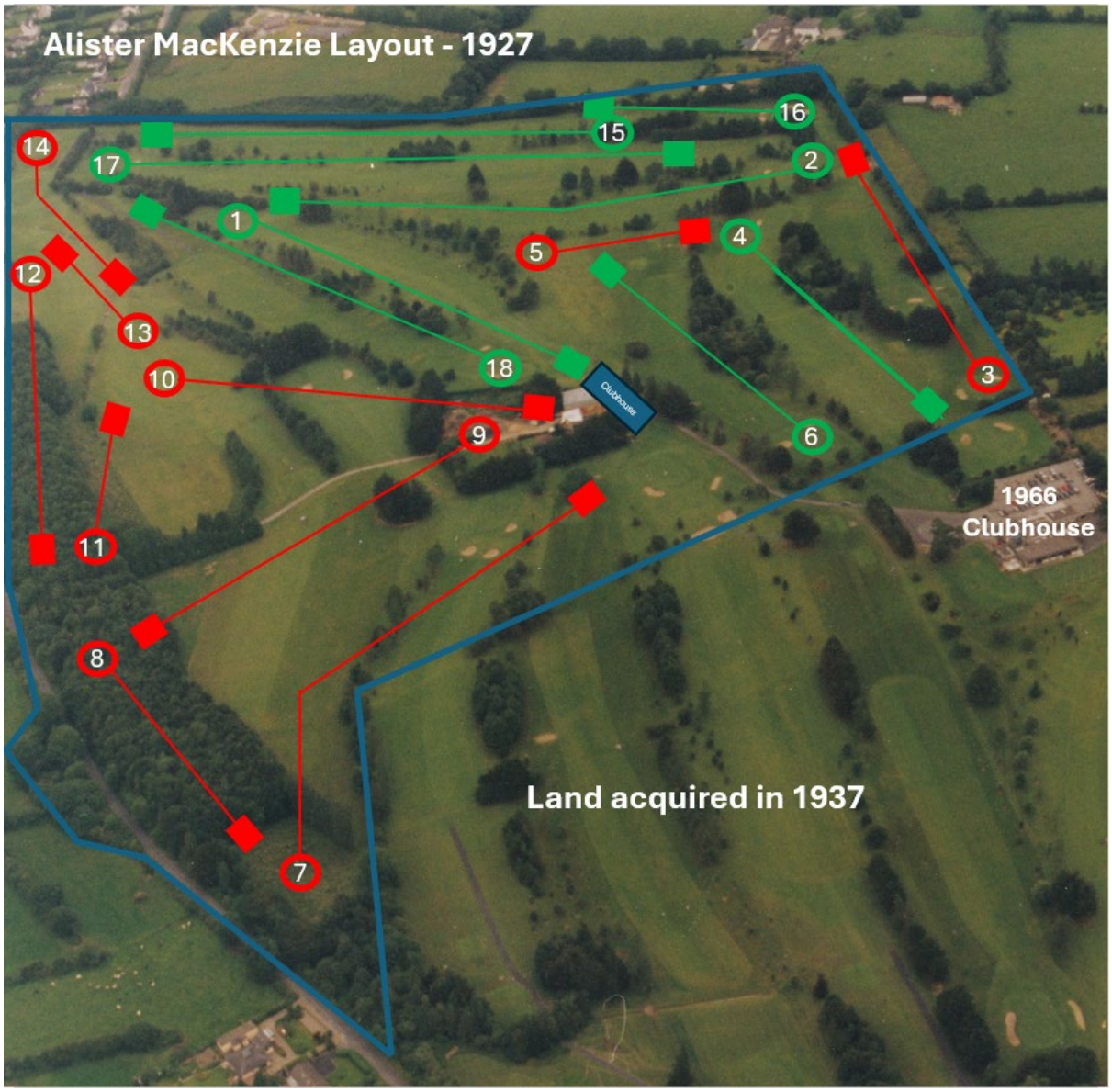
Cypress Point. On his return, he visited all of his Cork projects in the summer of 1926, before spending some time inspecting the course at Lahinch Golf Club with a view to developing 18 holes on the sandhills side of the links. Late 1926 saw MacKenzie in Australia, designing courses for several clubs, including Royal Adelaide, Royal Melbourne, and Royal Sydney, during his four-month visit. A return to the United States followed, via New Zealand, returning home to Leeds in April 1927 on the RMS Olympic, sister ship of the RMS Titanic.

His next visit to Lahinch occurred shortly after, and a plan was submitted with work commencing in October. This produced the 18-hole championship course layout for £2,000 that remains largely extant to this day. Being aware of MacKenzie's work in the Cork clubs and his visits to Lahinch, he was engaged by the committee at Limerick Golf Club in the Autumn of 1927 to improve Lionel Hewson's 18-hole layout of 1925, which was largely considered to be too short. The committee contacted the Cork clubs to enquire about the quality of MacKenzie's work. Although he had a good reputation from his British work, his US and Australian designs were not complete and would have been unknown at the time. A two-stage plan was proposed, with the first stage of laying down six new greens considered essential. The second stage involved lengthening the course by some 800 yards to 5,500 yards and included new bunkers. At a Special General Meeting at the Royal George Hotel on 23rd November 1927, the committee recommended that "*Dr McKenzie's* (sic) *scheme for the reconstruction of the Course be carried out at a figure not exceeding £800 inclusive.*" Work commenced shortly after with the arrival of the BGCCC (probably from Lahinch). An overview of golf in Ireland in an Irish Independent article of 14th March 1928 describes "*the entire course at present undergoing reconstruction, the work being done by the British Golf Course Construction Co. The membership of the club has been doubled, and, generally, the future of golf is bright in the Treaty City.*" It seems that the BGCCC foreman undertook much more work than had been planned, evidenced in a letter from the Club to the BGCC in mid-December 1927, which reads:

> "*The Green Committee are afraid that your foreman does not quite understand the arrangement made with Maj. MacKenzie when he was in Limerick. Maj. MacKenzie made it quite clear to the Green Committee that a portion of his*

scheme was essential and the remainder desirable, and that he would carry out the essential work, consisting of the construction of six new greens first and then do as much of the desirable work as time and funds would allow. Up to the present, none of this essential work has been touched, and your foreman has done nothing but non-essential work; he is, in fact, occupied with improving a course that has not yet been constructed. We have explained our position and wishes to him, but would be much obliged if you would at once instruct him to carry on with the essential work. Our members are naturally getting a bit restive at seeing all their money being spent on non-essential work."

This difficulty was evidently resolved, and the first competition on the new course was played in April 1928. The O'Mahony Cup, presented by P. J. O'Mahony for stroke play, was confined to members with handicaps of 18 and over. This cup was replaced by The Lyric Cup in 1946. A report in the Limerick Leader of 15th April 1928 describes "*the first competition played over the Limerick Links since the reconstruction scheme carried out by Maj. MacKenzie, the British Golf Course Construction Co., and the course is now about 800 yards longer than previously and will shortly rank amongst the premier links in the South of Ireland.*" The Club were so impressed by MacKenzie's work that they resolved that any further work would only be done under his direction and supervision. Alas, MacKenzie's visit to Limerick was his last to Ireland and the BGCCC's last construction project in the country. He designed prolifically for the remainder of his life, including his best-known creation of Augusta National in Georgia, USA. He took up residence in Santa Cruz, California, for the last few years of his life, passing away at the relatively young age of 63 in December 1933 from a heart condition that had been diagnosed almost ten years earlier.



Unfortunately, the Club does not have any records of the construction or any drawings of MacKenzie's plans. A significant volume of club records and documents was lost during the clubhouse moves of 1966 and 2007. A history of the Club, written in 1943 by former secretary George H. Ryan, suggests that most of the greens were reconstructed at that time, rather than the planned six, and this is reinforced by the Irish Independent article. The holes that survive from the MacKenzie layout are the 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 17th, and 18th, with the 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, and 14th greens more or less in their original format. The small green that can still be seen adjacent to the 11th fairway was the Par 3, 5th hole of MacKenzie's layout. That green was used for temporary holes as recently as the early 2000s. When the Club acquired additional land in 1937, the course was extended, and six of MacKenzie's holes disappeared altogether. His 14th hole was a Par 4 running along

the present 8th hole, and the old tees and green are still visible. Mackenzie's 3rd hole was changed slightly in 1947 and is now the 15th. Three of his signature grass mounds were on the 11th (one) and 15th (two) fairways, and presented a significant challenge from the tee. The mound on the 11th was known as '*Beechers*' after the Beechers Brook fence at Aintree Racecourse that features prominently in the Grand National. These were removed in the late 1990s with reasons cited as problematic maintenance and difficulties for certain golfer groups.