

DROMOLAND CASTLE

A GOLFERS PARADISE



Golf course architect Ron Kirby and Irish legend Joe Carr knew they had a task on their hands when they arrived at Dromoland Castle in 2002. Their brief was to design a golf course that would test the low handicap amateur while providing a pleasant round off the less stringent tees for those of lesser ability. Charlie Mulqueen of the Irish Examiner describes how well they have succeeded in both briefs. And now Dromoland is set to open a state of the art academy as well!

Ron and Joe feasted their eyes on this magnificent estate, all 410 acres of it, and realised that here was the opportunity to provide something very special for their clients. The existing lay-out had served its purpose but had seriously passed its sell by date and so they decided on something new and something very, very different. They set about their task with undisguised enthusiasm and the final product is now there for all to see and admire.

Even then, though, Dromoland weren't finished. The one glaring shortcoming was the absence of a practice ground and so they decided to put that right, but only after they had acquired suitable, neighbouring land on which they could build a state of the art range and academy. It is due to open on August 1st with a stone clad, slate roofed structure housing nine driving range bays and an additional

fully enclosed teaching bay. All are fitted with fully automated "Power Tees" which alleviate the need for bending down for your next ball.

Four bunkered target greens ranging between 100 and 250 metres allow for a wide variety of shot selection and another exciting feature will be the use of non-intensive floodlights. Dromoland resident PGA Professional David Foley will provide tuition to all levels of golfer aided by personalised programmes and highly sophisticated teaching aids.

So the point has been reached when Dromoland Castle can provide every conceivable facility that even the most discerning golfer could require. And the man to convince them that it's the place to go and to greet them on arrival is Sam Smith, a genial Englishman who worked for twelve years at the Wentworth club and so knows a thing or two about all of this.



“Everybody seems to be amazed that there’s such a good golf course attached to the hotel”, says Sam a little ruefully “There seems to be the view that it’s the same golf course as it was five or ten years ago. Maybe what was done by Ron Kirby and J.B. Carr three years ago wasn’t got across well enough.

“It really is a total different course. It measures 6,824 yards on the score card but it plays a lot longer than that. Americans always want to know the slope rating. It’s 126 but they invariably say it’s harder than that. Maybe the course is overshadowed by the castle. If it was a completely separate entity, people would probably perceive it as a fine golf course in its own right. I would like to see Dromoland regarded as a golf course with a castle rather than a castle with a golf course and which is our ultimate aim.”

Smith says that everybody who comes to play there is “blown away by the experience” and it’s perfectly understandable that such should be the case. First and foremost, there’s the location. It could hardly be more spectacular or more beautiful, circling as it does

Between them, they used the natural attributes of the Dromoland site along with the River Rine and Lough Dromoland to create an 18 hole course that will test the best while accommodating those of lesser ability. The sand based greens are as good as any in the country and that’s saying something!

Sam Smith again: “Take the 18th. The decent golfer faces a 200 yard carry to the fairway. He then has to place his second to avoid a tree strategically placed eighty yards or so from the green so it’s a proper three shot par five. Indeed, all our par fives are decent three shot holes and you have to think about all three shots. The 7th is one of the great par threes, probably our signature hole because it’s so scenic with the view of the lake and castle in the background. Even when it’s pouring rain, the views are spectacular.

“You have the 10th just outside the clubhouse. It measures about 300 yards and is quite similar to the 10th at The Belfry ... water all the way down the right. The long hitter can take the green on and it’s a proper risk and reward hole. The 11th is one of the

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Lough Dromoland and the glorious surrounding neighbourhood with its undulating, rolling countryside, ancient forests and mature trees.

Dromoland, the ancestral home of the O’Briens, barons of Inchiquin and direct descendants of Brian Boru, High King of Ireland, dates back to 1543. It is set in 410 acres with the golf course complemented by fishing on the River Rine while deer, pheasant and other wildlife roam the grounds. And for the really sports minded, there’s also archery, boating, clay pigeon shooting, tennis and mountain biking!

Time was when guests stayed at Dromoland before making their way to the great links courses of the south and mid-west such as Lahinch, Doonbeg, Ballyunion, Waterville and so on. Very welcome they are to do so, but many nowadays are happy to stay on site, so to speak, and tackle the challenging par 72 lay-out right on their doorstep. Ron Kirby worked on golf course projects all over the world with the likes of Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player and Robert Trent Jones while the late Joe Carr was a three times British amateur champion with countless other achievements gracing his golfing c.v.

par fives and it’s a terrific hole... over the water off the tee, short of the water with your second, over the water again for the third. Great. The 13th is a little 130 yarder with bunkers front and back and the green slightly raised, so you have to hit the perfect shot in there.”

Barton Shield golfers had to play drivers from the tee at the 230 yards 17th so there’s also a nice contrast in the par threes before the 18th with its towering tree strategically if slightly controversially located in mid-fairway bringing the golfer right up to the majestic castle.

The green fee at Dromoland is €110 but there are early bird rates for €60 and other reductions depending on numbers and time of year. Sam Smith believes it’s good value for money and it doesn’t harm his cause that the clubhouse and especially the Fig Tree restaurant and the locker rooms are particularly impressive. As Sam says: “We run the golf club along the same lines as the hotel. If someone asks the question, we’ll do our very best to facilitate their needs.” Five star treatment at a five star resort!