

BY DAVID CORNWELL

Once Upon a Golf Course

Long lost in the annals of Vermont golf, for one brief moment the Kilkare Golf Club in Heartwellville played host to the world's best players.

Eighty-five years ago, Vermont had a briefly famous golf course that drew high marks for its great natural beauty and tough challenges.

In a time when virtually every club welcomed players, this layout was beyond "private," one of the first personal courses in this country and the second-longest nine-hole course in the state. None other than William Flynn is credited with its design as his first architectural effort. It was even host to a professional tournament featuring most of the greatest golfers of the era during World War I, but private ownership meant that public information about the course seldom appeared thereafter. This was the summer playground of the family and guests of millionaire William B. Plunkett. It was known as the Kilkare Golf Club, at the crossroads in Heartwellville, Vermont, a small hamlet in the northwest portion of Readsboro.

Plunkett lived in Adams, Massachusetts, and was very successful in the textile industry at the beginning of the last century. In 1911, he purchased land with an old turnpike inn in Heartwellville, Vermont, just a few miles up the Hoosic River valley from the North Adams Country Club where he was a member. Origins of the inn have been traced back to a



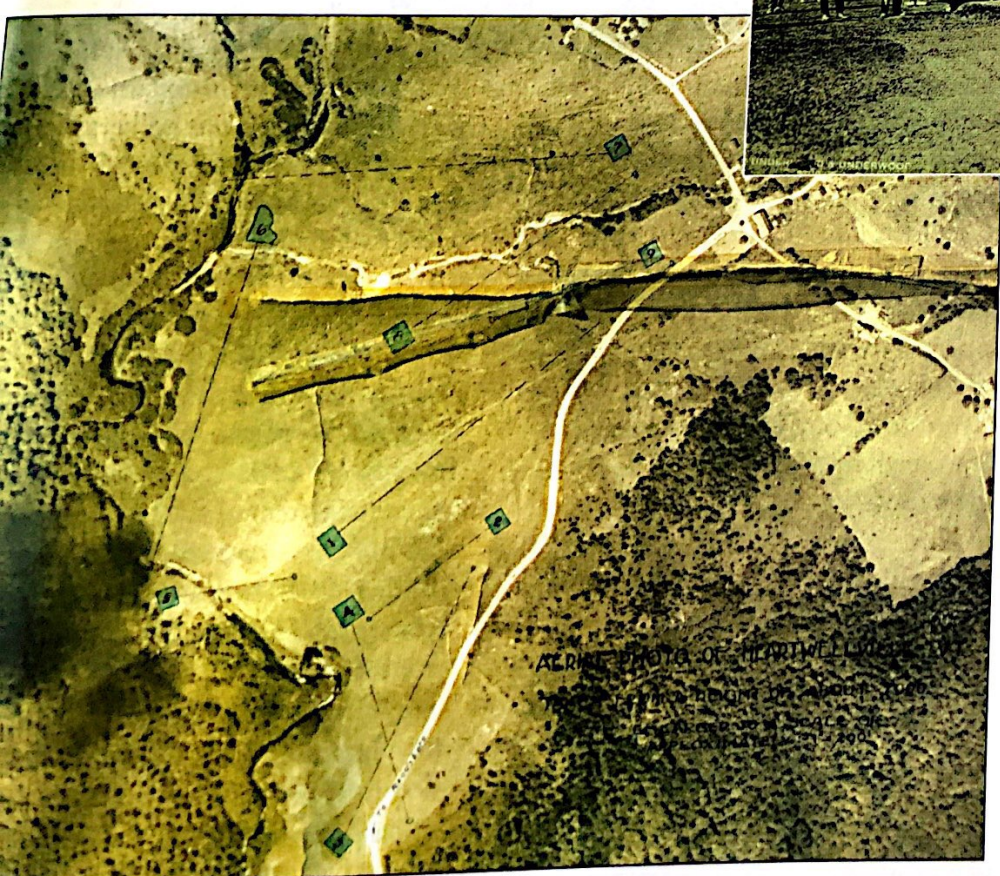
stage tavern built around 1783 by Revolutionary War soldier Lt. William Brace on the old Boston Albany Turnpike. Plunkett renovated and transformed the property into his country estate, a summer retreat he named Kilkare. He built a dam, creating a 10-acre pond to provide power to Kilkare; below the pond on the open meadows in front of the old inn, Plunkett commissioned a golf course that even decades later architect Geoffrey Cornish and historian Ron Whitten listed in their landmark reference work *The Architects of Golf*.

In 1917, while the major golf tournaments were suspended for World War I, Kilkare Golf Club hosted an event attended by most of the country's professional golfing elite.

Their design attribution to 19-year-old Flynn seems at first quite remarkable: The design date is listed as 1909 and by 1911 the course lists as NLE (no longer exists). How did a teenager come to be called upon by Plunkett and gain his first course credit? Chances are it had



Other than the aerial photograph below, the images of the tournament provide the only evidence of Kilkare's brief existence. Within several years, the course had disappeared and the land reverted to its rural nature. The former clubhouse (top) still stands at the junction of routes 8 and 100 in Readsboro.



much to do with Plunkett's son, Theodore, and the small world of competitive golf in Massachusetts almost a century ago.

References to the golfing Plunketts can be found over a 20-year span in the North Adams (MA) Transcript. In August 1909, Theodore R. Plunkett became the Berkshire County Golf Champion. Father William was an avid golfer, as well, who frequently played at North Adams Country Club and won many of the local tournaments. Another family member, W. C. Plunkett, traveled to Atlantic City in early May, 1911, to

Called "the most obscure genius of American golf course architecture" by *Golf Digest* architecture editor Ron Whitten, William Flynn has only recently taken his place in the pantheon of the top American course designers, but his work has always been well known. Shinnecock Hills, Merion, The Country Club, Pine Valley, James River, Cascades and Cherry Hills are some of the more famous courses that Flynn designed or reworked. He wrote a series of articles for the USGA Green Section Bulletin in 1927 describing the elements of good design:

- "Each layout should be designed to fit the particular ground on which it lies..."
- "Natural topographic features should always be developed in presenting problems in the play. As a matter of fact such features are much more to be desired than man-made tests for they are generally much more attractive."
- "The most important point in designing golf holes is to select proper green sites.... A tremendous amount of study must be given each site...so as to get distinctive types, thus avoiding sameness."
- "A concealed bunker has no place on a golf course because when it is concealed it does not register on the player's mind as he is about to play the shot and thus loses its value. The best looking bunkers are those that are gouged out of faces or slopes, particularly when the slope faces the player. They are very much more effective in that they stand out like sentinels beckoning the player to come on or to keep to the right or left."

compete in a big tournament where he set a long drive record of 334 yards!

Flynn was born on December 25th, 1890, in Milton, Mass., just south of Boston. In 1909, he had just graduated from high school in Milton where he played interscholastic golf with and against Francis Ouimet. Flynn was a scratch player, and it seems quite likely that Flynn made the acquaintance of the Plunketts through golf or one summer spent as a tennis instructor at Lake Placid.

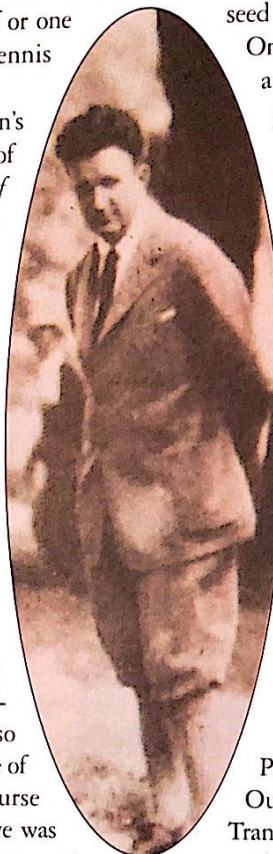
Cornish contacted Flynn's daughter in the course of research for *The Architects of Golf*, and received the following information in 1979, as part of a letter from Constance Lagerman (nee Flynn). She wrote: "...Williams College offered him a scholarship which he declined in the last moments in order to build his first golf course at age nineteen. He built a course in Hartwellville (sic), Vermont for Mr. William Plunkett..."

The letter sheds light not only on the true architect of Kilcare, but also charts the early career of one of America's great golf course designers. Flynn's next move was a brief stint on the grounds crew at the old Merion Cricket Club, near Philadelphia and by 1912 his career hit the fast track when he was invited to supervise completion of architect Hugh Wilson's new East course at Merion. Flynn stayed on as head greenkeeper and continued to work with Wilson for a short time.

The *North Adams Transcript* announced on May 15, 1913:

**WORK IS PUSHED
ON GOLF COURSE**

W. B. Plunkett's
Private Links at Heartwellville
Will Be Ready Soon



The article went on: "... (this) promises to be one of the best in this part of New England. No efforts have been spared in the work, which commenced last year, and six of the nine holes are already in shape for play... There will be a water hazard on Mr. Plunkett's links." A Philadelphia professional, Mr. Pickering, is listed as laying out the course, and it is reported that the grass seed was imported from Scotland. On August 4, 1913, the *Transcript* announced that Plunkett was planning a major "Fete" for all the members of the North Adams Country Club and that the golf links would be open to the guests followed by supper, a concert and a dance. The *Transcript* of August 20, 1914 shows just how popular the new links were: "A large field of entries is expected in the open golf tournament to be decided on W. B. Plunkett's private links at Heartwellville Saturday.... Mr. Plunkett has offered two handsome prizes... All golfers in this section are eligible to compete..."

In 1915 and again in 1916, Plunkett tried to entice Francis Ouimet to Kilcare. The *Transcript* reported the invitations several times but no notice of the actual visit ever came. There was considerable interest focused on whether Ouimet could break Kilcare's amateur record of 39 held by son Theodore. Ouimet had stunned the golf world when he won the National Open at Brookline in 1913 and was considered the best amateur of the day.

The first American Annual Golf Guide (1916) included a mention of the Kilcare Golf Club in Heartwellville, saying the course was founded in 1912. It was further described as 3,000 yards, having grass greens and located 12 miles from North Adams, Massachusetts. Perhaps the most intriguing note in the



Caddies (above) were hard to come by during the 1917 tournament due to school schedules. Following his work at Kilcare, William Flynn (opposite page) went on to plan such noteworthy layouts as Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, Pennsylvania, and Cherry Hills in Denver, Colorado.

entry was the final sentence: "This is a private course but visitors are permitted to play; no charge."

Notices began appearing in late August, 1917, that a professional tournament was in the works at Kilcare for sometime in September: "Invitations have been extended to the leading professionals at all the eastern clubs and some of the best players in the country are expected to compete. The fact that \$750 is to be offered in cash prizes will undoubtedly attract many of the top notchers." The tournament was to be over 72 holes, Friday and Saturday, September 21st and 22nd.

The *Transcript* noted that caddies were scarce on Friday because the boys were back in school. The field was strong; there were three U.S. Open Champions and several Open runners up. Top names like Alex Smith, Horace

Rawlins, Fred McLeod, Mike Brady, Louis Tellier and Tom McNamara were there. Long Jim Barnes, the first PGA Champion the year before and winner of the Western Open the prior week in Chicago, was the favorite. What made this year's tournaments different and probably helped Plunkett secure the event was America's recent entry into the World War: among other cancellations, there was no PGA or Open Championship in 1917.

The *Boston Evening Transcript* reported on the tournament and gave these insights into the conditions and layout: "In the way of natural hazards... the rough and the series of brooks crossing and recrossing the fairway were the distinctive features. The rough was about as difficult to play from as anything the professionals have encountered this year."

Twelve pairs of pros played the nine-hole course eight times around. Mike Brady of the Oakley Golf Club of Boston took honors with a total of 295, a six-shot margin over runner up Jim Barnes. Gil Nicholls of Long Island was tied with Brady after 54 holes, having set a

- "Sharp knobs and little bumps and pots are wholly out of place: they do not belong in the picture."

- "Water hazards absolutely prohibit the recovery shot, perhaps the best shot in the game."

- "Placing a premium on accuracy with due consideration for length should be the aim of all men who design golf courses, for accuracy in the play signifies skill and skill is generally the master of brute force."

- "In applying these problems or tests to the layout through the medium of bunkers, the architect has a great opportunity to display versatility. On one hole he may have a big diagonal bunker off the tee where the player takes as much risk as he feels capable of carrying and he is rewarded in his shot to the green commensurably with his first effort."

- "A great many players are averse to using forward tees, perhaps because they were originally christened "ladies tees," but regardless of that fact it seems that a great deal more enjoyment could be had if golfers used the tee on the various holes that really suited their game."

- "All architects will be a lot more comfortable when the powers that be in golf finally solve the ball problem. A great deal of experimentation is now going on and it is to be hoped that before long a solution will be found to control the distance of the elusive pill. If, as in the past, the distance to be gotten with the ball continues to increase, it will be necessary to go to 7,500 and even 8,000 yard courses, and more yards means more money for the golfer to fork out."

tournament low record of 70 in the Saturday morning round, but he finished in fourth position behind Patrick Doyle with a hazard-plagued final round 85.

Aerial photos from the time show the course drawn in as a series of straight-away holes, but the newspaper account indicates the seventh was a dogleg (hinted at by the angles of the tee and green). With a photo showing the first hole marker at 535 yards, the rest of the yardage can be closely approximated: there were three long (par-5), three medium and three short (par-3) holes. The little brooks that bordered and crossed the course were the upper reaches of the west branch of the Deerfield River; the main flow was controlled by Plunkett's dam.

Following the Heartwellville Open in 1917, mentions of golf at Kilkare vanished from the Transcript. The American Annual Golf Guide does list Kilkare in the 1920 edition but the effects of the war surely made golf take a back seat. Later editions of the same Guide from the mid-1920s on did not list Kilkare. W. B. Plunkett clearly kept playing golf because he defended his Berkshire County Champion title in August 1927, but what happened to his personal course?

Heartwellville sits at the headwaters of two significant rivers. The north branch of the Hoosic River runs southwesterly with Routes 8 and 100 to North Adams. The west branch of the Deerfield River also begins near Heartwellville with feeder streams coming in from three adjacent towns, and runs southeasterly with Route 100 toward Readsboro. This elevated spot is surrounded by higher hills, some over 3,000 feet high. The lazy little brook visible in early aerial photos handled a drainage area of over 10 square miles, a very significant fact in the flood of November 3, 1927.

The Readsboro town history *Down Through the Years* reports on that date: "considerable damage was done on the west branch, the iron bridge at Heartwellville was taken downstream a considerable distance, and much highway was washed out." The Kilkare

course sat below the level of the road, directly in the path of the floodwaters. If the iron bridge on the road washed downstream, most if not all of whatever remained of the course would have been under water. Eleven years later, another weather event was to have an even greater impact. In 1938, a hurricane brushed southern Vermont and took out Plunkett's dam and, with it, the 10-acre pond. Again the golf course was flooded with water, suffering great damage.

After the Plunkett family sold the property about 1950, Kilkare and the golf course passed through three owners in short order. Geoffrey Cornish visited in 1957, called in by then owner Mark Hill who was considering reviving the old layout. Cornish recounts: "The course was abandoned but we could still easily recognize the features: a tee here, a green there. At first I was brought in to look at rebuilding the course and later found that the property was for sale. We actually contemplated purchasing it, and what I saw there was consistent with William Flynn's work."

Two years later, in 1959, the property did sell to Barbara and Melvin Coe. They managed to revive three greens, developing a plan to restore and extend the course to 18 holes. The State of Vermont had other ideas and in the early 1960s, when Route 100 was relocated away from the old inn and rebuilt over part of the course. Extensive excavation of gravel beds along the river for highway construction resulted in the area that exists today, which bears no hint of golf among the sturdy thickets of heavy brush, a small pond and swimming hole. There is only a hint of the layout that attracted the country's best golfers for one magical weekend in 1917. ♦

David Cornwell is contributing editor to New Hampshire Golf magazine. He conducted a great deal of original research in writing this piece.