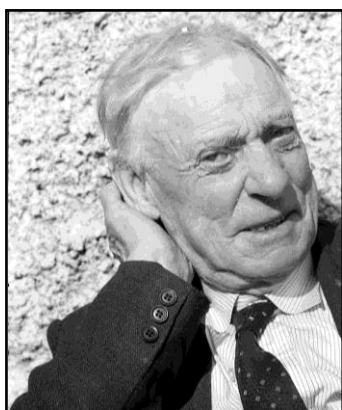


## BILL TINSLEY OF THE CURRAGH GOLF CLUB

GREENKEEPER 1894 – 1950

Colonel William H. Gibson (retd.)

William (Bill) Tinsley began work as an assistant greenkeeper at the Curragh Golf Club in May 1894 and three years later he was appointed Head Keeper; he was to become a key figure in establishing the top class course as we know it today. During his fifty six years of service, until his retirement in August 1950, he would witness the transition of the Curragh Camp from an essentially British military establishment to becoming the great Defence Forces Training Centre of the modern Irish Republic.



Bill Tinsley's father Joseph was from Fethard in Co. Tipperary and it appears that he had a falling out with his father in the 1870s when he remarried. Bill's grandfather had a mill and may also been a surveyor in Tipperary South Riding County Council. Joseph moved to the Curragh area and married Francis Bryan (Bryant) of Ballysax – she died in 1915. Bill Tinsley was born in 1879 and first went to serve his time in Martinstown House, Curragh. He commenced work on the Curragh Golf Club in 1894, when he was 14 years of age.<sup>i</sup>

Because of the failure to handover records by the outgoing British golfers in 1922, it is difficult to put together an account of Tinsley's work on the course. One early story that Phil Lawlor<sup>ii</sup> heard from him was the occasion circa 1894/5 when Lieutenant Penny (in charge of the course) told Bill to go to the first green and dig a rectangular hole beside the green approximately 16 feet long and 10 feet wide and to keep digging down at least three feet deep. He was told by Penny that he would see him at lunch time. Bill didn't know why he was digging this feature and wondered was it a grave of some sort. In due course Lieutenant Penny came down and asked "Tinsley, do you know what you are digging?" Bill declared that he didn't and was then told "Tinsley, you are digging a bunker" This was the first bunker on the Curragh golf course.<sup>iii</sup>

Phil Lawlor recalled that on another occasion Bill Tinsley was working on the course and had to pause his work. A Highland Regiment crossed the low lying area within the centre of the Royal Curragh Golf Club's course, wearing their distinctive kilts and bonnets. With their rifles held in the high port position they were an impressive sight and everything appeared to be in perfect order. At a bugle sound they all adopted the prone firing position and aimed their rifles towards the front – a long line of kilted figures across the golf course. Unfortunately, the scene suddenly changed when a very strong gust of wind blew over 500 hundred kilts over the heads of the prone figures and there wasn't a single underpants to be seen anywhere!



Sir Henry Greer was a member of the Club from 1883, when he arrived with the Highland Light Infantry; he remained a key figure in the Club until his death in October 1934. During the Boer War and World War 1 he paid the ground staff, including Bill Tinsley, out of his own pocket. Greer retired from the army in 1893 and was the first Director of the National Stud in Kildare. The two of them were key figures in the preservation and continuity of the Club in 1922. The Irish Golf Guide of 1911 states "The condition of the green reflects the highest credit upon the Greenkeeper William Tinsley, and his assistants, who have to overcome difficulties undreamed of on an enclosed links. For instance, it is hard in the excitement of a field day for dashing cavalrymen to subordinate their military to their golfing instincts.... In this connection Colonel Thompson used to tell a good story. A gallant officer once said to him – 'Oh yes, I know your course well; I've often ridden my charger over it!'"

In addition to his green-keeping duties, Bill Tinsley repaired and also made golf clubs. He bought Persimmon blocks to make the club heads & also purchased rough shafts. When the club was finished he stamped them with his name and then he applied waxed grips to the shaft. Every autumn he would send men to Kilcullen woods to gather Birch brooms to use as brushes to sweep greens of worm casts; these had to be done every day.<sup>iv</sup> A left handed driver, with the stamp of “W. Tinsley,” is on display in the Royal Curragh Golf Club.

When the Club celebrated the Centenary of recorded existence in 1983<sup>v</sup> the present writer was contacted by Lt. Col. James Buchan who was Camp Engineer Officer in the early 1940s. He was able to state that Tinsley came to him and reported that he had identified areas of narrow bladed grass which was perfect for putting greens. Having been given permission, he treated and prepared the area and lifted the turf at the appropriate time. Thus he ensured that the greens on the course were laid with the perfect type of surface for putting.



*It's farewell to the greens for Bill Tinsley, whose life has been spent in the service of the Curragh Club.*

The Tinsleys occupied a former British hut close by the location of the Royal Curragh Golf Club's clubhouse and Bill worked on the course until his retirement in August 1950. Eventually, the day came when he was seventy years old and he was notified that, in his own best interest, he should retire from the arduous service that he had faithfully given to the Club. In a letter dated 17th February 1950, the Honorary Secretary, Comdt. P.J. Hayes stated:-

*“The Curragh Golf Club will not be the same because of your absence from the course. Your faithful service is appreciated by all members and through the long years of the club's vicissitudes you became an institution on the course, having been employed here long before some of the present members were born.”*

Bill Tinsley continued to live in his former British hut near the Clubhouse until he died in 1961. The 17th hole on the course bears his name to this day, in honour of his many years of dedicated work on the Curragh golf course,

**The People 24th September 1951**

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## END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Information from Rosaleen McCarney, daughter of Bill Tinsley, in an interview 24th January 1983.

<sup>ii</sup> Phil Lawlor was professional at the Curragh Golf club from 1945 to 1996.

<sup>iii</sup> Lieutenant A.T. Penny was an officer of the 2nd Battalion Hampshire Regiment on the Curragh from October 1893 to 1895, when they moved to Birr. The Irish Field 26th October 1895 shows Penny as a monthly medal winner at Birr Golf Club

<sup>iv</sup> Information from Rosaleen McCarney, daughter of Bill Tinsley, in an interview 24th January 1983.

<sup>v</sup> The Curragh Golf Club received the title ‘Royal’ in September 1910 and the title was not withdrawn after the departure of the British Army in May 1922. The Royal title was reinstated at the Club's A.G.M. in December 2013. The evidence of the institution the Curragh Golf Club in 1858 was found in the Belfast Newsletter of 1st July 1858 and reported in an article by this writer in the British Golf Collector's Journal in June 2011.