

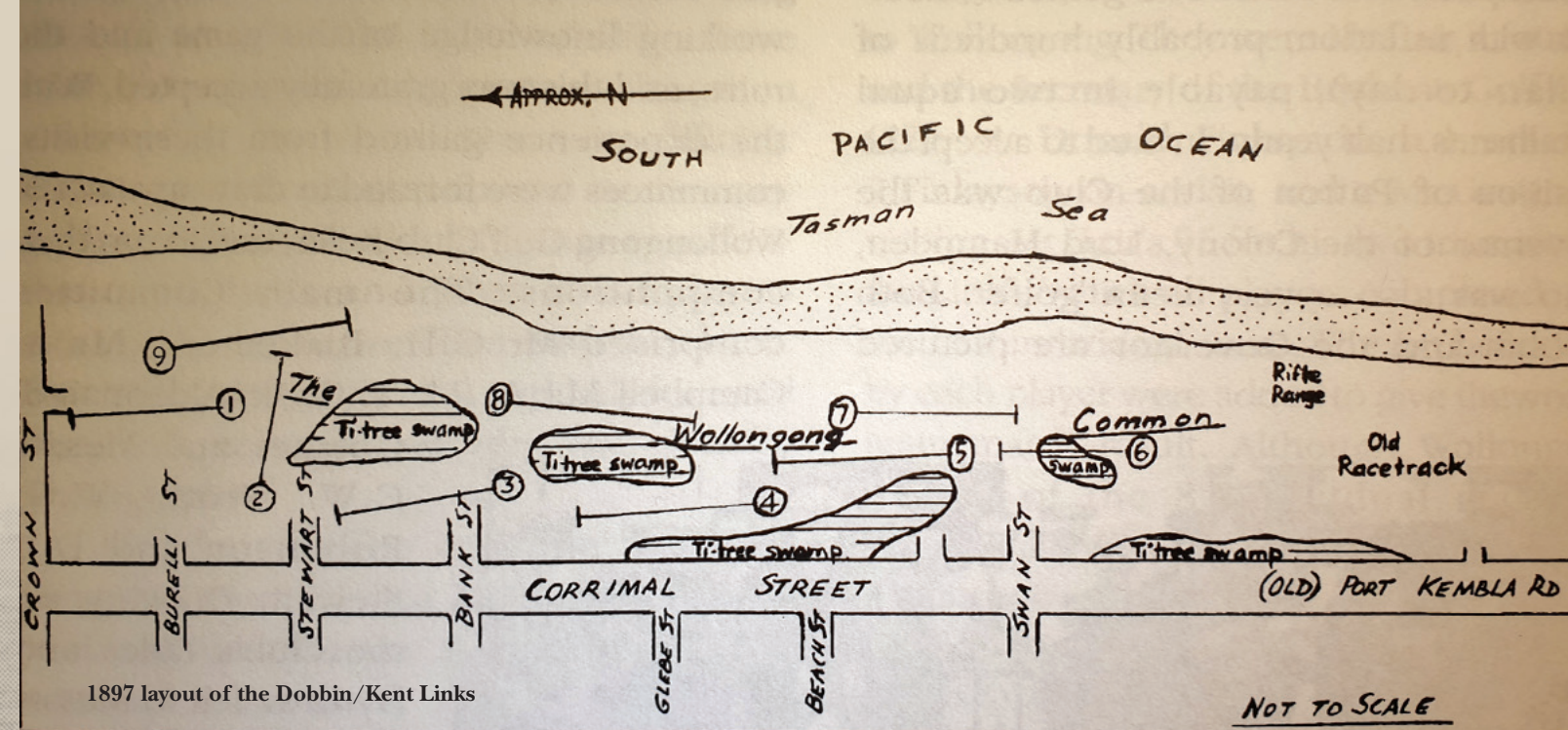


Wollongong Golf Club

1897

It is not absolutely certain when golf was first played in Wollongong, but it was most likely in or before 1897 on the present Wollongong site. Only a few clubs are known to have existed on the continent at this time. Sydney Mail writer and Royal Sydney Golf Club member E.D. Hoben wrote in November 1897 that he had “noticed the most admirable site for links, a place nature had evidently constructed with an eye to golf. There is such a place in Wollongong, a stretch of turf extending along parallel with the beach for miles south of the town, and beginning at the town itself.” Part of this undeveloped area was called ‘The Common’ by some and ‘The Green’ by others. Ex-captain of Royal Sydney Golf Club Irving Kent had earlier “examined this and considered that one of the best links in New South Wales might be made there”

After cycling to Wollongong on Friday, messrs Leonard Dobbin and Irving Kent laid out the first 9 holes without charge on Saturday 18 December, 1897. After which they played an exhibition round with many in attendance. The Sydney Morning Herald reported “The lies are so good that the driver could be used throughout...the turf... is like a pile carpet, thick, short and springy... The turf simply set the Sydney visitors longing to be able to bring a mile or so of it back with them”



1897 layout of the Dobbin/Kent Links



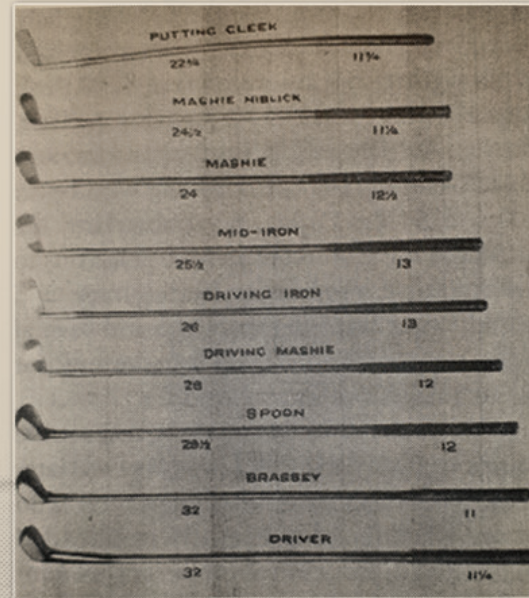
Course designer Dobbins (far right) and the club's first patron Lord Hampden (second from left).

Photograph: Sydney Mail, 11 June, 1898.

In Wollongong's early years, the gutta percha golf ball was still in use, which was spherical in shape without dimples and which weighed about 2 ounces. However, the rubber cored Haskell ball was just coming onto the market and allegedly travelled a further 25 yards.

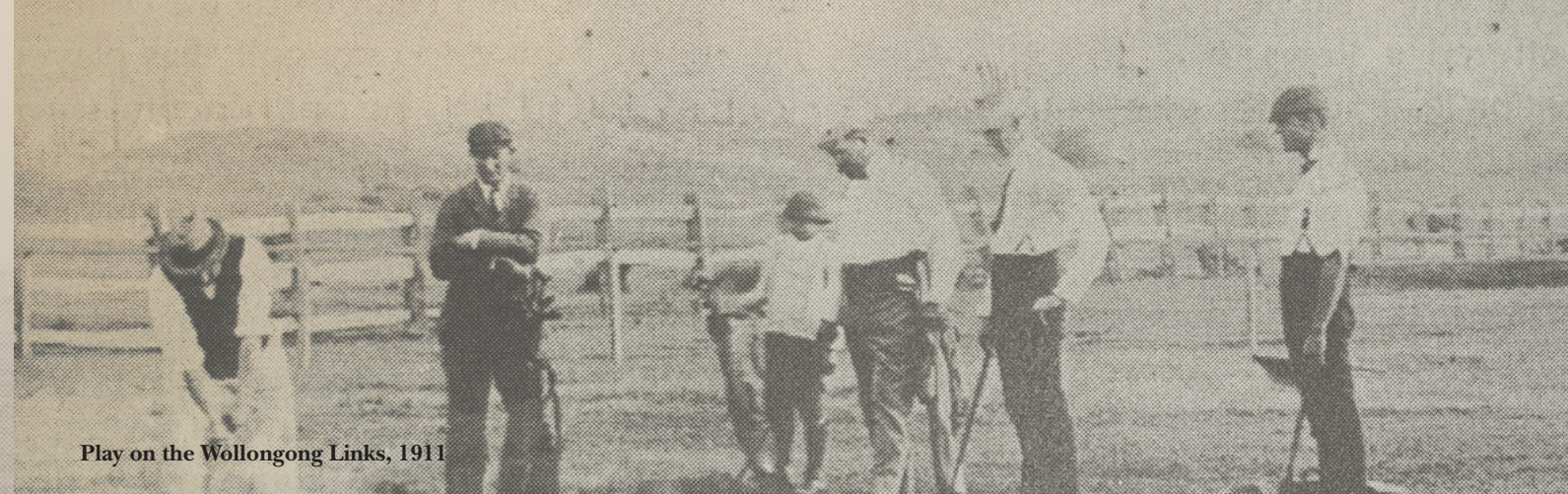
Clubs at the time were hickory shafted with quite bulky leather grips. The woods had either pear, apple, thorn, or beach tree heads. Lead was added to a slot in the base before the head was glued to the shaft, and tied with tarred twine. The usual canvas carry bag for top players might hold a driver, a long and middle spoon wood, and in descending order of length iron clubs, a selection from mid iron, lofting iron, mashie, mashie niblick and a straight faced putting cleek.

Conducted in 1903, the club's first major tournament was won by D.G. Soutar, a 21 year old Scot, shortly after he arrived in Australia. Later in 1903 Soutar would also win the Australian Amateur championship. He won the New South Wales Amateur in 1903 and 1904 and after turning professional he won the Australian Open in 1905. In Soutar's 1906 book on Australian golf, in which he made astute comparisons of most of the early courses, he said of the links: "Wollongong is slightly on the short side and the bunkering is somewhat primitive but the club plays for the most part on Government land and cannot do what it might otherwise be inclined to do in the way of improvements were the land privately owned. The turf through the green is the best type of seaside turf, and the greens are very well kept considering they are unfenced, and practically speaking in the public highway." Soutar would later go on to design courses the likes of Kingston Heath, Concord, Elanora and Royal Auckland amongst many others.



D.G. Soutars set of clubs

A major change to the course hazards follow Eric Apperly's 1935 visit, which lasted two days. He had been asked as a golf course architect to advise on improvements to the already testing links. Apperley's main suggestion was to add some greenside and fairway bunkers. The recommendation was quickly effected, with some 40 bunkers being dug on the original 9 holes that year. Apperly's other courses would include New South Wales, Avondale, Newcastle and Duntryleague.



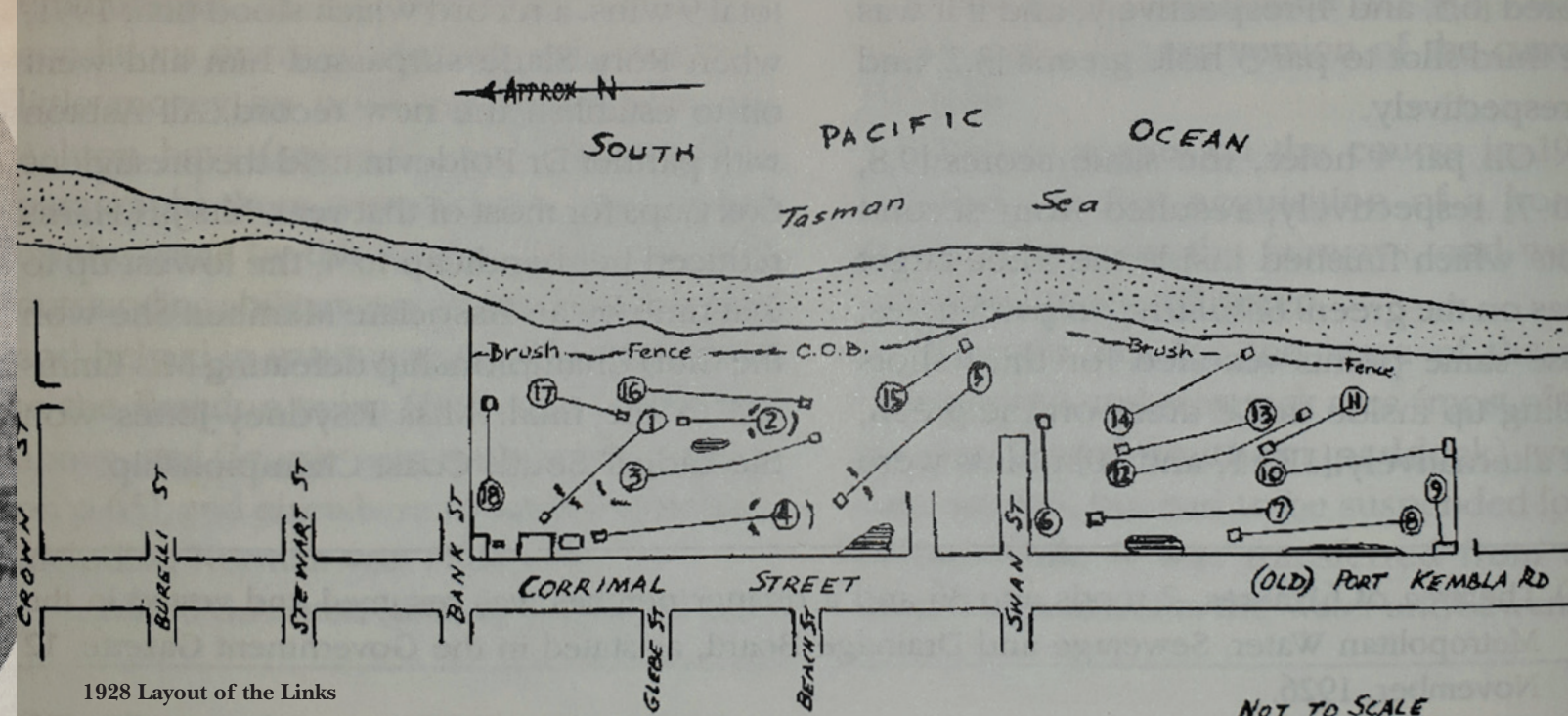
Play on the Wollongong Links, 1911

Alex Stuart Lowe became head professional at Wollongong in 1921 after previously being at the Australian Golf Club. His father, George Lowe was resident club professional at St Annes-on-Sea Golf club adjoining St Andrews. George was a course designer of note and is credited with over 120 courses in Great Britain. Alex's brother George junior was also an early professional at the links at Barwon Heads in Victoria.

Alex was an excellent strokemaker as his 4 holes in one at Wollongong would suggest. Among other successes, he won the coveted 'Golf In Australia' award in 1928. He was also an eagerly sought after club maker and repairer. Lowe would hire Hec McKay as an assistant in 1922 who would go on to serve Wollongong Golf Club for 64 years. Alex set the nine hole links course record in December, 1923 with a round of 31 strokes.



Alex Lowe - Professional at Wollongong 1921 to 1935



1928 Layout of the Links



1949 Exhibition Match - Left to right on green: F. Buckley, N. von Nida, G. Phillips and H. McKay



Gene Sarazen and Joe Kirkwood Exhibition on the Links 1935



The Wills Classic 1960 - G. Player (foreground) and N. von Nida (far right)

