

# PLACES WE PLAY

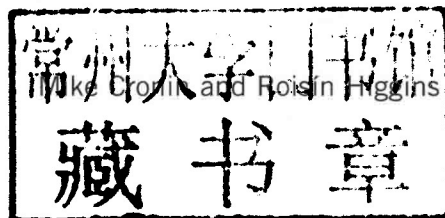
IRELAND'S SPORTING HERITAGE



Mike Cronin and Roisín Higgins

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Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht*

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Laytown Races, County Meath

This book has grown out of the Irish Sporting Heritage Project, which is available to visit online at [www.irishsportingheritage.com](http://www.irishsportingheritage.com). The project is funded by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department of Arts, Heritage and Community and was created in order to build a record of Ireland's built sporting heritage from the 1850s onwards. We have to offer thanks to Niall Ó Donnchú and Donagh Morgan for their invaluable support throughout the lifetime of this project and their enthusiasm every time we spoke with them. Michael Kennedy co-ordinated a national audit of existing sports facilities for the Department of Arts Sport and Tourism in 2009, and we were able to build upon this valuable work. One of the great pleasures of working on this project has been the opportunity to meet people who are involved in sport in a voluntary or professional capacity. We hope this book, in some way, does justice to the commitment and energy it takes to maintain sporting clubs across the country. The big idea behind the project was in many ways borrowed from the amazing work of Simon Inglis, in his ongoing series, *Played In Britain*. Simon has always been tremendously supportive of all that we have done, and has been a mine of information. Equally important for guidance, as always, have been the faculty at the International Centre for Sports History and Culture at De Montfort University, notably Dick Holt and Dil Porter. The guidance offered by Doug Booth, and his conceptualisation of his own project on Bondi Beach, was invaluable and much appreciated. Also invaluable was the help of Kevin Baird from the Irish Heritage Trust, Peter Smyth of the Irish Sports Council and Sarah O'Connor of the Federation of Irish Sports.

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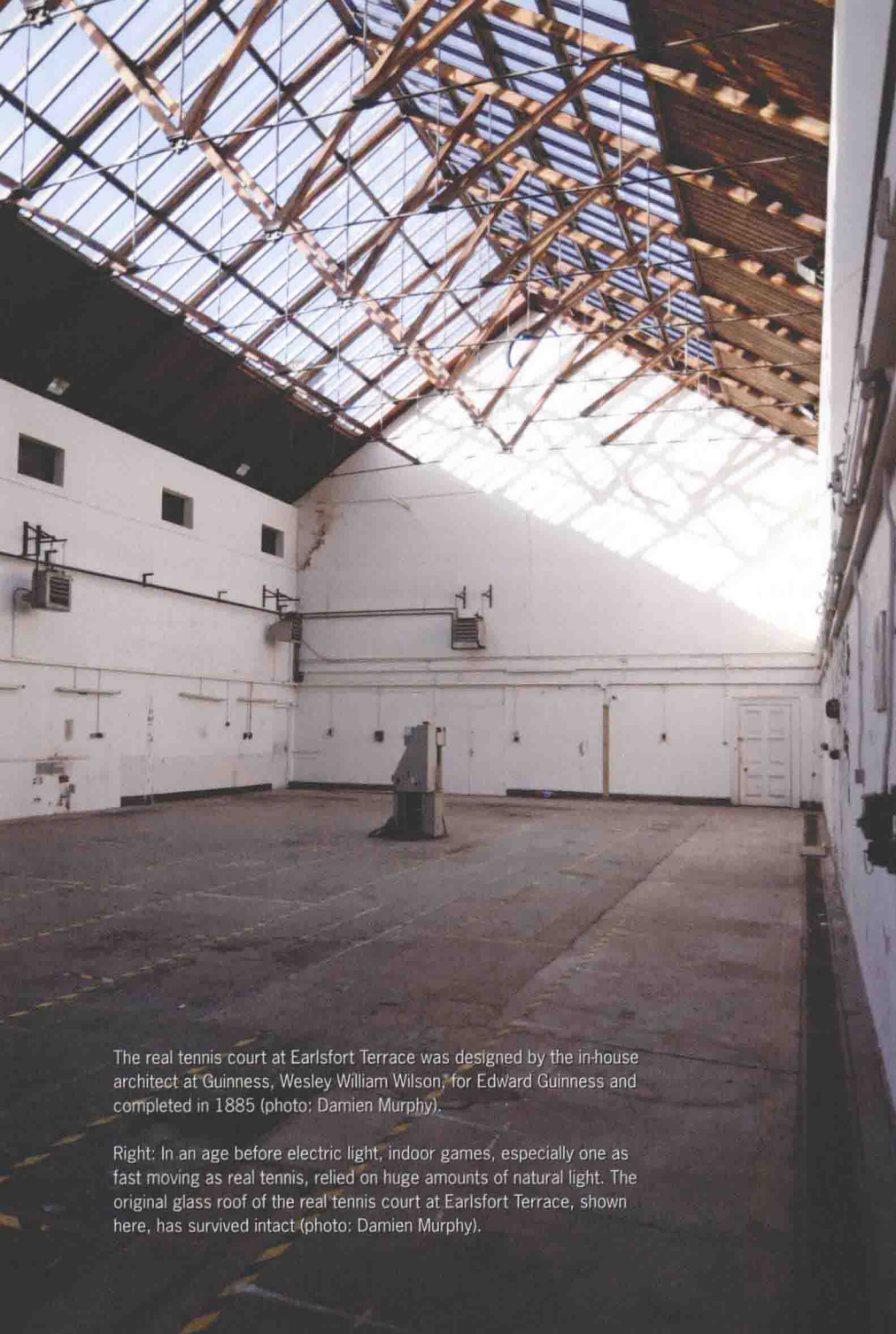


# INTRODUCTION

Just off St Stephen's Green in Dublin, on Earlsfort Terrace, is the National Concert Hall. This building, and those surrounding it, were the original home of University College, Dublin. The university as a whole moved to its current site at Belfield from 1964, and closed its few remaining offices at Earlsfort Terrace in 2007. Despite this, the site has not been fully redeveloped, and many buildings retain the look and feel of a university campus. One building in particular seems more overtly abandoned since its former university use. This large brick building, with a pitched glass roof, and standing directly opposite the Conrad Hotel. It is not a particularly pleasing building, and it does not seem to have, at first glance, any aesthetic or architectural value. Inside it lies largely empty, having been used by the University, at various times, as a gymnasium and a chemistry laboratory. There are various lines and markings on the floor and walls of the building, and these, along with the excellent light that pours through the glass roof, give a few clues as to why the building was constructed, and why it remains, to this day, significant to Irish heritage. This building, constructed in 1885 by Edward Guinness, was, and remains, Ireland's only covered Real Tennis court. Guinness lived at 80 St Stephen's Green, and built the court in his back garden (the remainder of which, Iveagh Gardens, was given to University College, Dublin, in 1908). The solid-looking building was constructed with a brick facade, a marble-lined interior and vaulted skylight roof in glass. The court was held in

such high regard that the 1890 Real Tennis world championship was played there, and won by British-born American Tom Pettit. In 1939, Rupert Edward Cecil Lee Guinness donated the court to the nation in the expectation that the court would remain in use. Unfortunately, University College, Dublin moved in and the court was used for other purposes. After the University's departure to Belfield, the Office of Public Works eventually indicated that they would assist the Irish Real Tennis Association in restoring the building and its court to a playable state. However, at the time of writing, the renovations have still not begun.

While the setting for one of the more esoteric sports of Ireland, the fate of the Real Tennis court demonstrates the peculiar problems associated with sporting sites. While the Irish, in common with many other nationalities, have a great love of sport, the places in which games are played are infrequently viewed as being important in terms of national heritage. It is true that supporters and followers of teams often speak of 'loving' their home ground, but they also expect that the fabric of their stadium will move forward in line with contemporary trends in facility provision, comfort, and health and safety regulations. After all, no one wants to sit in a draughty stadium in a seat that is uncomfortable and where the view is restricted. For all the nostalgia and memories that circulated when the demolition of Lansdowne Road began in 2007, the high-tech Aviva Stadium has been roundly applauded for its



The real tennis court at Earlsfort Terrace was designed by the in-house architect at Guinness, Wesley William Wilson, for Edward Guinness and completed in 1885 (photo: Damien Murphy).

Right: In an age before electric light, indoor games, especially one as fast moving as real tennis, relied on huge amounts of natural light. The original glass roof of the real tennis court at Earlsfort Terrace, shown here, has survived intact (photo: Damien Murphy).







Built for a man with the wealth of Edward Guinness, the fixtures and fittings in the real tennis court were of the highest order. While much was lost or damaged over the years, as the building's usage changed, some, such as the handcrafted stair banisters speak to the building's former glory (photo: Damien Murphy).











facilities, efficiency and excellent sight lines. So long as the Irish Rugby Football Union and the Football Association of Ireland remained on Lansdowne Road (no matter what name the new stadium would be given), most supporters accepted that the building of a new stadium was necessary. For them, the issue of a sporting 'home', had more to do with place (Dublin 4), as opposed to the building itself. The Aviva is, however, different from most sporting sites around the country. Its purpose is to serve the needs of up to 50,000 paying spectators watching major rugby and soccer matches. Most sporting sites around Ireland are there for those who play rather than those who watch. Many such sites are private clubs, such as golf and tennis clubs, while others cater for team sports like Gaelic games, soccer, rugby, hockey and so on where the primary concern is players rather than large numbers of spectators.

What all sporting sites have in common, whether for players or spectators, is that they are part of the fabric of Irish history and society. Most sporting sites emerged as part of the Victorian sporting revolution, in the later decades of the nineteenth century, and most have been in a state of transformation and adaptation ever since. This book will explore the development of modern sport in Ireland, and how a built heritage was constructed for those who wished to play. In doing so, it will highlight the central place of sport in Irish social and commercial life, and explore how agencies such as the railways, the army, Churches, schools and workplaces all assisted in the development of Ireland's sporting landscape. Ireland's built sporting heritage is not, when compared to Britain or

Finished in 2010, the Aviva Stadium is one of Ireland's most contemporary sporting sites, and sits on the site of the old Lansdowne Road Stadium, which began life as a sports venue in the 1870s. Initially leased from the Pembroke Estate for a ground rent of £60 per annum, it now houses one of the most expensive structures ever built in the Irish Republic (photo: Aviva Stadium).





The Listowel and Ballybunnion Lartigue Railway was completed in 1888, and ran until 1924. It was the world's first commercial monorail. In 1893, Ballybunnion Golf Club was opened, and the monorail began servicing the course and bringing eager players to tackle the challenge of one of Ireland's most famous links courses. Here, a carriage from the monorail has been preserved by Michael Barry (photo: Irish Sporting Heritage).

France for example, particularly rich in terms of architectural opulence or innovation. It is important, nevertheless, as each sporting site has a story to tell. They mirror political, economic and social trends in Ireland, they are the sites of sporting heroism, and they shift and change due to a host of external, non-sporting forces. They are all important and significant, although the scale will differ. The Real Tennis court in Dublin was built by a private individual, to cater for his needs and those limited numbers who followed such a minority sport. The Aviva Stadium is a national sporting site, catering for two of the biggest sports in Ireland and serving the needs of tens of thousands of supporters. Despite this difference in scale, both sites are over a century old, and tell stories of patronage, class, commercialism, politics, planning, design and ownership. They are architectural symbols of Ireland's sporting heritage, and while all such sites have and will continue to change and develop, this book encourages us to take a break in the play, and to open our eyes to the sporting sites that surround us.

The book is organised in three main sections. The first sets out a basic history of sport in Ireland, and seeks to contextualise the emergence of sporting sites as part of wider social, political and economic trends. The second focuses on a series of case studies of what might be termed major sites, that is, those that have regularly hosted international fixtures in their given sport, or else would be considered the national home or headquarters of the relevant association. The final two sections, and perhaps the most controversial, comprise a series of case studies of at least one important site connected with each of the major Irish sports, followed by a selection to illustrate a particular theme, such as workplace sports or temporary sporting facilities. These are controversial in that they are bound to spark debate. We have selected them on the basis of either their historical significance, architectural interest,

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Brures	- 10.10	-	-
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Tickets available for return on 9th or 10th May by Special Train leaving Cork at 8.0 p.m., stopping at all Stations.

Allowance will not be made for lost Tickets.

**ROBT. G. COLHOUN, Traffic Manager.**

Kingsbridge Station, Dublin, April 1898.

(14) Printed by ALLEN, VINCENT and CO., Cork, Dublin and other places.

Railway companies were important sponsors in the development of Irish sport in the nineteenth century. Here, the Great Southern and Western Railway offers cheap tickets to allow racegoers to attend the Cork Races (photo: Irish Sporting Heritage).



or because the story of the site illustrates how historical change has impinged on a field of play. Many of the sites selected are Dublin centred: this is a product of the way Irish society and sport developed. The capital, with its abundant population, its growth of suburbs and its transport infrastructure, plus the fact that so many sporting bodies based themselves there, is simply home to many of the oldest and most significant sites. People will debate our choices and call to mind sites that they consider to have more significance: one they are a member of, have played at or been a spectator in. Part of the wider remit of this project was to create a database of sporting heritage sites across the island. It is available to view at [www.irishsportingheritage.com](http://www.irishsportingheritage.com), and for those who feel that our selections in the book can be added to, we encourage you to visit the website where details of your chosen site, photographs and other material you may have can be uploaded.

Overall we wish to emphasise how central sport, its sites and its heritage have been to the history of Ireland. Pick up most history books exploring the island's past, and sport barely rates a mention. The majority of scholars have always been more interested in the high culture of Ireland, produced predominantly by a literary metropolitan elite, than they have been in sporting life. Given that all social classes, in all parts of the island, have regularly played and watched sport since the later decades of the nineteenth century, and its central place in the contemporary daily narrative of the nation (there are not many subjects that warrant a supplement in the daily and weekend newspapers), the failure of sport to penetrate the consciousness of the majority of historians is surprising. And perhaps even sports followers are guilty of the same oversight. While most followers of sport will be up to date



**LMS**

**GOLF IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

**THE 8<sup>TH</sup> GREEN AT PORTRUSH**

by

**NORMAN WILKINSON, R.I.**



Not only were the sporting attractions of Ireland for those on the island, but also those from afar. The London Midland and Scottish Railway company was a keen advocate of Ireland's sporting venues, such as Portrush Golf Course (photo: Irish Sporting Heritage).

with the sporting news of the day, and will have their own memory bank of great players and matches, how many of them pause to reflect on the historical significance of the stadium, venue or club they walk into? Why is the stadium where it is? Has it always been there? Has it changed over time? What kind of men and women have been here before?

Sport has, for the last century and a half, given the people of Ireland a series of pastimes and leisure pursuits, and in the process of playing, a built environment and a heritage has emerged. This book, and the project that accompanies it, asks you to take a moment, and consider those places where we have played, and where we continue to play.

## 2

# HERITAGE IN IRELAND

WHEN A TOURIST CONSIDERS visiting Ireland, and contemplates what they may see, a host of images springs to mind. The landscape, especially that of the west, is evocative, as are ancient tales and legends, the great writers of the cultural revival, the GPO and other sites associated with political upheaval, pints of Guinness, traditional music and dancing, and the great buildings of Georgian Dublin. Indeed, for most Irish people, their list of important heritage and tourist sites would, but for some local variations, differ little. Certainly, with the exception of a visit to the GAA museum at Croke Park, there would be few, if any, sport-related sites on any inventory of Irish heritage or included in the plans of tourists. As this book makes clear, the sporting heritage of Ireland is significant, and it is one that tells a story of the Irish people and their past. Sport is not a minority pastime, but rather one that encompasses all regions, classes and religions. Why then, are sporting sites not often seen as important?

The 2002 *National Heritage Plan for Ireland* stated that, 'while our heritage is inextricably intertwined with our sense of identity, it also affirms the historic, cultural and natural inheritance which is shared on the island of Ireland'. The Plan goes on to argue that heritage should be preserved for present and future generations, as well as for

tourists. It concluded that, 'our heritage is a presence which physically expresses the essence and the heartbeat of our collective historical identity'. The linking of heritage, and its preservation, to ideas of national identity and history, is not, however, unique to Ireland. In Britain, the National Trust and English Heritage care for a range of buildings from stately homes to industrial sites, while in the United States, the National Park Service manages sites ranging from the Grand Canyon to battlefields associated with the Revolution and the Civil War. In comparison to Britain and the US, Ireland has been a relative latecomer to the world of heritage. The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government leads the government remit in caring for Ireland's heritage, and through Heritage Ireland manages a range of sites from Dublin Castle to Newgrange. The presentation of Irish heritage, and also to make use of it as an educational and tourist tool, is a comparatively recent phenomenon.

Although the need for a body overseeing Irish heritage was identified by a government committee in the early 1960s, it was not until 1988 that the National Heritage Council was established. The Council, funded by the National Lottery, is responsible for promoting heritage and carrying out research to support various organisations working on specific sites. As late as 2006, the Irish Heritage