

FAIRBAIRN

GOLF CLUB



Club History

1953 – 2025



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Foreword

Fairbairn Golf Club (FGC) is an 18-hole, Par 70, not-for-profit, public golf course located on the north-east corner of the Canberra International Airport precinct ... but its inception and development are intimately linked to the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).

Enclosed within is an attempt to try and capture the history of FGC before its origins fade from memory (even more than they already have). It is also a tribute to the many people, past and present, who have dedicated their time and commitment to building and growing this Club over the years.

The Club continues to flourish thanks to the dedication and hard work of its staff, Committee members, and numerous volunteers. This document provides history of the club over the last 70 years and is an interesting read.

Brian Depree
FGC President
July 2025



IMAGE H1 – 4th hole (photo December 2010)

Acknowledgements

A brief history of the Club was first compiled by the FGC Committee in March 2013 by canvassing contributions from those who remembered (or at least thought they did) the early days.

The course evolution material was originally compiled by Wally Warrington (an ex-President of FGC). He picked the brains of a couple of long-term Club members, and dug out some old photographs and plans, to try to get a better understanding of how the course layout has developed and evolved over the years.

Following the discovery of additional material surrounding the formation of the Club, this history was subsequently updated and expanded in November 2022.

New material and photos were mostly sourced from online archives of “Air Force News” (a newspaper published by the Department of Defence since 1960). In particular, two Letters-to-the-Editor by former Club members who were instrumental in the establishment of FGC (Ken Caffery and Don Lynch) were a great source of information on the earliest days of the Club.

This document integrates and expands the brief history and the details on the course evolution into a single work to better present and preserve the information. This latest update (July 2025) details work from the 5-10 year Course Masterplan adopted in 2023.

Anyone who can provide any further information, stories, or old photos that can be incorporated into this document is welcomed to provide their comments and evidence to the FGC Committee.

FGC Committee
July 2025

Timeline

Timeline		
	1953	First 6-hole course established.
	1959	Work commences on new 9-hole course.
	1960	New 9-hole course officially opened.
	1963	“RAAF Fairbairn Golf Club” (RFGC) formed.
	1964	RFGC takes over responsibility for the maintenance and development of the golf course.
	1965	First clubhouse opened.
	1967	Forced redesigned of 9-hole layout due to new RAAF Fuel Farm.
	1973	Upgraded fairway watering system installed.
	1988	Work commences on new 18-hole course.
	1990	New 18-hole, Par 71 course officially opened.
	1998	Club name officially changed to the “ADF Golf Club Fairbairn”.
	2004	Club name officially changed to the “Fairbairn Golf Club incorporated”.
	2010	Lease for use of grounds signed with the Department of Defence.
	2014	17th hole shortened to a Par 4 (making the course Par 70).
	2015	Commenced upgrades to the course irrigation system.
	2017	Defence lease renewed and new clubhouse opened.
	2021	Finished upgrades to the course irrigation system.
	2023	5-10 year course upgrade Masterplan initiated.
	2024	Original clubhouse demolished and driving range improvements finalised.
	2025	Defence lease renewed.

A Brief History

1950s

To the rear of the Officers Mess at “Headquarters RAAF Canberra” (later to be renamed “RAAF Base Fairbairn”) was a vacant paddock with a lot of potential. The year was 1953 and Flight Lieutenant Greville Conroy (Monty) Montgomery, the then Barracks Officer, conceived the idea of constructing some golf holes on this unused piece of land for the recreational enjoyment of Base staff. The work, which was done by Base volunteers, resulted in a rough 6-hole course with sand greens.^[5] Although no Club officially existed at this time, Monty is recognised as our first Honorary Board member.

In 1959, two Base Officers (and keen golfers), Flight Lieutenant Ken Caffery and Squadron Leader (Raj) Bendixon, became interested in further developing these golfing facilities. In what, at the time, must have seemed an insane folly for two complete novices they set about redesigning and building a new 9-hole golf course on the location ... in their spare time ... as an unofficial welfare project.

Realising they would need a lot of support and material assistance to complete this project, the pair gathered friends and colleagues from the RAAF Base and RMC Duntroon to help with the construction. They managed to obtain a few welfare grants and additional financial assistance from the Officers Mess and, with the blessing of the Commanding Officers, were able to organise working bees to set about the task of creating tees, fairways, greens, and bunkers (which were all laboriously dug by hand). A basic watering system was also installed by Corporal Pat McGuinness since a guaranteed water supply was essential to the survival of the newly constructed tees and greens. On occasions, the limited use of Base equipment and vehicles (mostly in conjunction with other RAAF duties and as training exercises) helped ease the pain.

Two thousand 25cm high Radiata Pines were obtained and planted along the fringes of the planned fairways ^[1] ... some 60 years on these trees now present a magnificent backdrop to the course, some soaring to 40 metres or more in height. They provide year-round shade, shelter for the abundant birdlife in the area, and frustrating hazards for golf balls to nestle behind.

1960s

The original 9-hole course was officially opened in November 1960 by the Acting Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice-Marshal Ian McLachlan.^[7] It soon became a popular venue for RAAF personnel and Staff College students.

The early 1960s saw the Royal Canberra Golf Club relocate from Acton to Yarralumla and they accepted an offer from Fairbairn to 'liberate' some of their turf greens that were due to be covered by the rising waters of the newly formed Lake Burley Griffin ... some older parts of the FGC course retain these greens to this day.^[1]

In 1963, Squadron Leader Keith Maunder called a meeting of interested golfers in the Sergeants' Mess of the newly named RAAF Base Fairbairn and together they decided to start an official club and form a committee ... thus the RAAF Fairbairn Golf Club (RFGC) came into being. Squadron Leader Keith Maunder was elected the first President and Warrant Officer Don Lynch the first Club Captain.^[2] At this time, the golf course was being maintained as a Base recreational facility. In 1964 the RFGC undertook responsibility for maintenance and development of the site. Subscriptions were set at £10 (approximately \$20 for those of the decimal generation).

In late 1965, and typical of the improvisation shown in these early years, the Club took possession of an old condemned married quarters and repurposed it as a golf clubhouse. The transport of this building to the golf course coincided with the delivery of crated Bell UH-1B Iroquois helicopters from the USA. This gave the Club access to Oregon Pine timber salvaged from the crates that were used in the repair and renovation of the new clubhouse ... which quickly became a popular 19th hole.^[4]



IMAGE H2 – *the original clubhouse*

The RFGC was still located wholly on an active military base and was considered a RAAF Welfare Facility. As such, it depended heavily on Base/Club volunteer labour (and a few RAAF members on Reserve Service). During the late 1960s, it was decided that the bunkers should be filled in as they were expensive and labour intensive to maintain. Mounds, some of which are still evident today, replaced them but over time, and with careful planning, many of the bunkers have now been reinstated.

1970s

An upgraded fairway watering system was installed in 1973. The cost of \$16,000 was provided from the RAAF Welfare fund, into which all the Club's revenue was paid in those days. For more than 35 years the fairways and rough were cut by the Base lawn mowing contractor under the guise of "... maintaining a fire-break".

The challenges of maintaining a golf course on an active military base were never more evident than when, in 1978, two diligent members of the Club's Greens Committee decided to repaint the OOB markers to reflect the recent change in colour. One evening, paint in hand and dressed in jungle greens, the pair were detained by Base security (with a huge guard dog in tow). Neither had their Base ID cards on them and their explanations regarding painting were not accepted, so they spent some time in custody until their identities could be confirmed.^[8]

1980s

In 1988 Squadron Leader Glen Toscan, CO of 28 Squadron and also an avid golfer, instigated a major upgrade of the course, incorporating the existing 9-holes with the addition of 9 new holes to take it to a full 18 holes. He arranged for the Australian Army Engineering Construction Squadron to come to RAAF Base Fairbairn with their heavy earth moving equipment to construct the fairways and the fundamentals of the tees and greens ... as a training exercise. This included making the 'Australia' bunker on the 5th hole – see IMAGE E13)

The completion of the work in laying tees, greens, irrigation, etc was completed mainly by volunteer labour, with the advice of greenkeepers from other clubs and under the overall supervision of then Head Greenkeeper, Jim Sherd, whose memorial plaque can be seen today mounted on a post between the Club House and the 13th Green.

The construction of the additional 9-holes was done in two stages. Six new holes were originally added (taking the course to 15-holes – see IMAGE E9) followed shortly after by the last three holes (to take the course to a full 18-holes – see IMAGE E11).^[6]

1990s

Followed two years of progressive development, the new 18-hole course was officially opened by Air Vice-Marshal Richard Bomball on 11 August 1990. Flight Lieutenant Greville Montgomery (retired) was also in attendance to witness the growth of the course from its humble beginnings.^[3]

On 21 September 1998 the Club became part of the broader Australian Defence Force (ADF) network and the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) accepted the role of Club patron. As a consequence, the Club's name was officially changed to the "ADF Golf Club Fairbairn" and Commander Warwick Conlin became the first non-RAAF President.^[5]

The Club embarked on a process of self-sufficiency, directly employing ground-keeping and clubhouse staff and paying for all the machinery, course maintenance, and clubhouse equipment. A Course Development Plan was developed and is maintained to guide yet further improvements as time, resources, and opportunity permit.

In 1999 the clubhouse was extended to include a sheltered BBQ area for Club events and for use by members.



IMAGE H3 – *the extended clubhouse (photo July 1999)*

2000s

The drive to independence culminated with the registration of “Fairbairn Golf Club incorporated” on 4 November 2004. RAAF Base Fairbairn was closed in 2007 and the Club subsequently signed a seven-year lease with the Department of Defence on 18 August 2010 for continued use of the land. This included the former Base guard dog compound which became the new greenkeeper’s area.

For much of the 2000s the ACT region was in the grip of an extended drought that made course maintenance challenging and, as a result, the fairways suffered.



IMAGE H4 – *the 9th fairway (photo January 2003)*

In 2008 the Club received some money from the ACT Government’s “Sustaining Sport in a Drought Environment Grant Program”. This was used to resow the fairways with drought resistant couch and replace inefficient sprinklers. Unfortunately, it saw limited success as the drought was more persistent and severe than anticipated.

2010s

At this time in history, the golf course was a Par 71 (5,726m) course. In 2011 the ACT Emergency Services Agency (ESA) headquarters controversially relocated from Curtin to the former RAAF Base Fairbairn ^[9] ... a new glass-fronted office block was built directly adjacent to the Par 5 17th hole on the outside corner of the dog-leg to the left. The golf course soon became a target for disgruntled employees who (unhappy with the move from Curtin) complained about the dangers to life-and-limb from the occasional errant golf ball.

The Fairbairn Golf Club Board met with the Airport Operations Manager to attempt to find amelioration solutions, resulting in the fence between the course and the ESA building being significantly heightened (at a cost to the Club of around \$80,000).

However, complaints from ESA staff (still unhappy about the move) continued, and eventually ESA management called in the ACT Government Office of Regulatory Services (ORS) on Occupational Health & Safety grounds. It soon became clear that the golf course was a casualty of the politics surrounding the unpopular relocation and after several meetings with the ORS the Club Board, regrettably, agreed to shorten the 17th hole by nearly 150m – making it a Par 4 hole and the course Par 70 (5,569m). This work was completed in May 2014.

Taken from approximately the same spot, IMAGES H5 & H6 show the dramatic change to the 17th hole from its original Par 5 configuration to the new shorter Par 4 layout. IMAGE H6 shows the new 17th green located on what used to be the fairway just before it dog-legged to the left (IMAGE H5).



IMAGE H5 – 17th fairway (November 2009)



IMAGE H6 – new 17th green (November 2014)

Sometime around 1994 the RAAF constructed a building for use by the Air Power Studies Centre ... this was located opposite to (what used to be) the exit from the Club carpark. It was subsequently expanded to include conference facilities and a bigger carpark to service the Centre. Over the next decade or so, this new addition (nicknamed the 'Blue Elephant' – see IMAGE H7) saw a steady decline in its use as a conference facility and was, at various stages, employed as a music practice area and a storeroom. After the closure of the RAAF Base the facilities remained effectively vacant for many years.

Prior to the construction of the Blue Elephant the site encompassed a gun club and 25m firing range. FGC members remember the sound of intermittent gun fire directly behind the 18th green making putting more challenging. This was especially the case when the gun club refused to postpone a Sunday afternoon shooting session despite it coinciding with the final round of the golf Club Championship.

In February 2017 the golf Club renewed the Defence lease (for an additional 7 years) and the Blue Elephant was included in this agreement to be used by the Club as its new clubhouse ... proximity to the 1st tee and 18th green making it and ideal for this purpose.



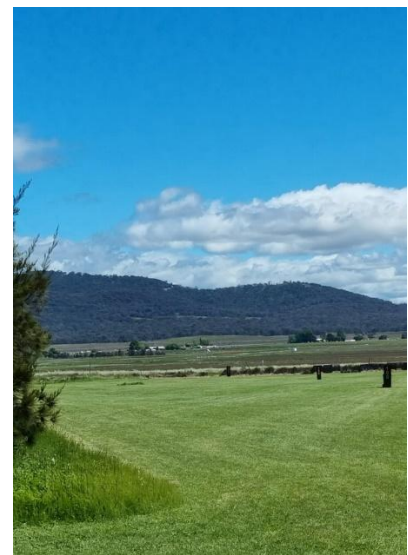
IMAGE H7 – *the new clubhouse (photo March 2018)*

2017 to 2019 saw the ACT region again in the grip of drought and, once again, the fairways suffered. The Club resorted to the use of 'town water' to keep the tees and greens in a playable condition. In 2015 the golf Club (in an attempt to mitigate the effects of future droughts) embarked on a major upgrade to the course irrigation system ... this was completed in 2021.



IMAGE H8 – *the 6th green and 7th tee (photo January 2020)*

In 2019 the Club also started development on a driving range and practice facilities located to the rear of the greenkeepers compound. This 200m range has both artificial and natural grass as well as a chipping green and bunker.



IMAGES H9, H10 & H11 – *driving range and practice facilities (photos October 2022)*

2020s

2020 saw the breaking of the drought and what followed was several years of significantly above average rainfall across the region. This, combined with the finalisation of the upgraded course irrigation system, saw the condition of the golf course flourish. The Club found itself with sufficient funds to invest in a full suite of John Deere course maintenance equipment to enhance the ongoing upkeep of the course and a new fleet of petrol carts was acquired for players.

Minor adjustments and improvements to the course have continued at a steady pace (see the Course Evolution section for further details). The old 'ladies' toilet block by the clubhouse was moved out by the 9th green and plumbed in to remove the portable toilet from the course.

The Club has grown and matured over the years and now participates at all levels within the district as a fully-fledged and officially recognised golf club with affiliation to Golf Australia and the local district golf associations. We have successfully hosted significant tournaments, including the very popular PGA of Australia Legends Pro-Am series.

The course offers a very pleasant walk without the overcrowding often hampering players at other courses in the area. The Club still retains a strong association with Australian and overseas Defence staff and retired service members, but Club membership is now fully open to the general public and the access restrictions that once applied (when the course was situated on an active RAAF Base) are now completely removed.



IMAGE H12 – 4th hole (photo April 2022)

2024 finally saw the removal of the old Clubhouse and an upgrade to the driving range facilities supported by a grant from the ACT Government. 2024 also saw the implementation of a 5-10 year Course Masterplan to gradually upgrade course features including greens, bunkers, and tees and to improve the environmental sustainability of the course so that in time it becomes a haven for flora, fauna, and golfers alike. This plan included the creation of a 19th hole to allow some flexibility during the upgrade activities.

In July 2025 the lease with Defence was extended out to 2030, with a 5 year option to allow completion of the course masterplan. At the same time a Clubhouse environment masterplan was being commissioned to complement the work previously done updating the entrance to the club and the course masterplan activities.



Course Evolution

This Course Evolution attempts to explore how the golf course configuration changed from the 9-holes of the late 1960s into the 18-hole course we enjoy today.

A redesign to the original 9-hole layout was required in 1967 after the RAAF erected a Fuel Farm, causing the loss of the 5th green. The new design (see IMAGE E1) saw the crossover of the 5th and 8th holes eliminated, and new greens build on the 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th holes. Four to five hundred more pine trees were also planted lining the fairways ... long-time Club member Derek Gough recalls using Duntroon Cadets to plant row after row of these trees (flown down by C130 from Queensland).

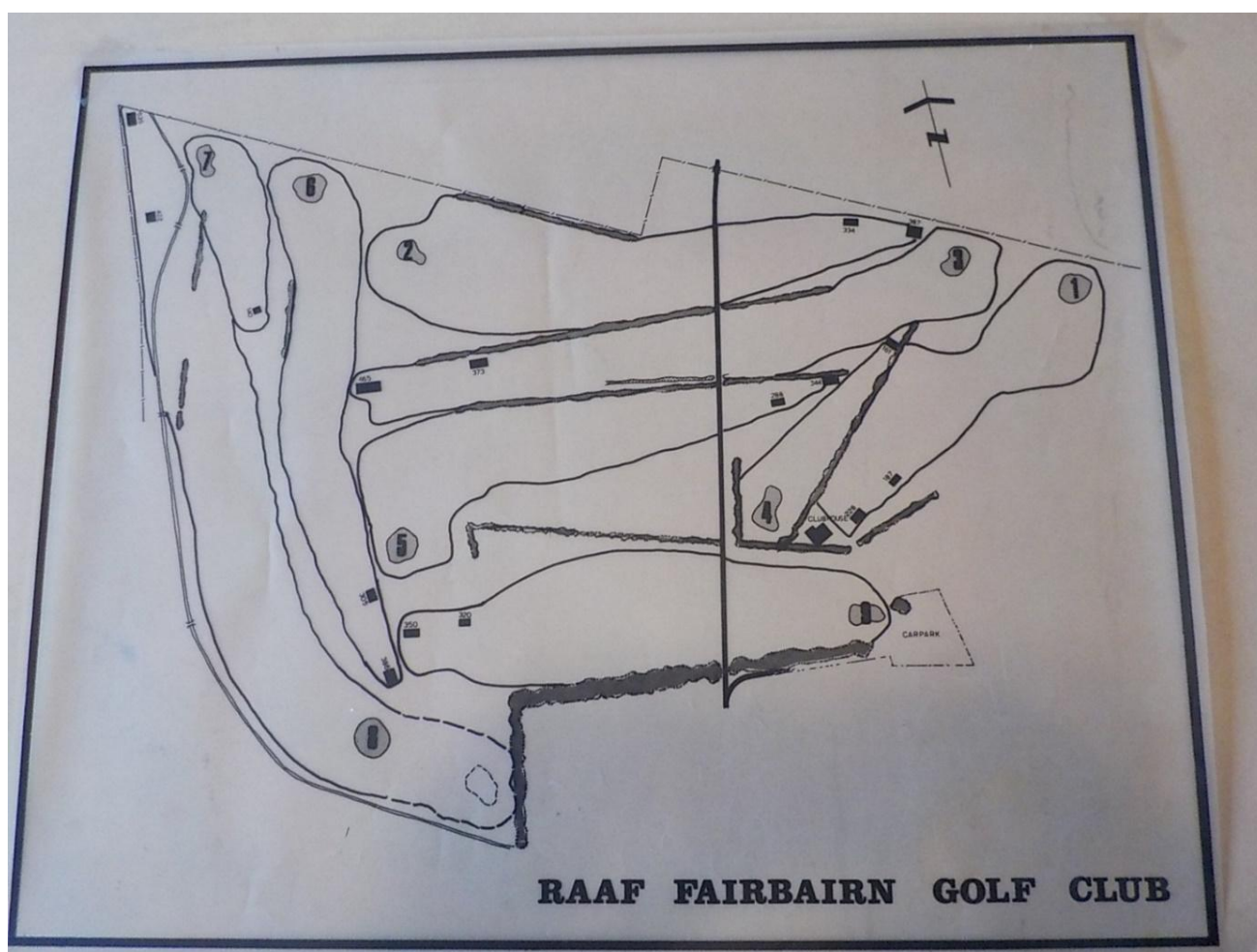


IMAGE E1 - *course plan (late 1960s)*

In IMAGE E2 we can see how the new 9-hole plan aligns with the current course configuration by superimposing this layout onto a contemporary aerial map of the course (Google Earth 2020).

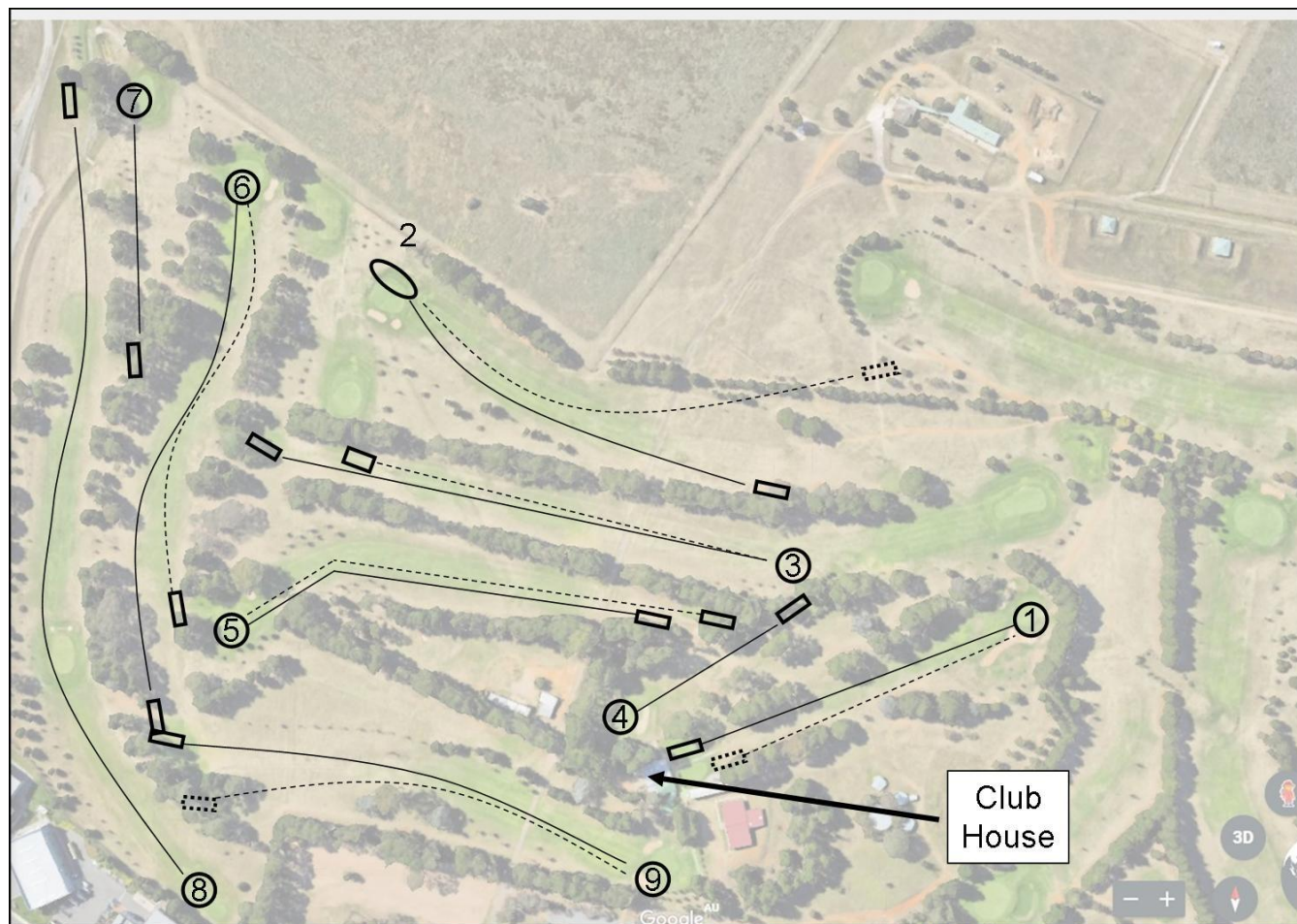


IMAGE E2 – early 9 hole layout superimposed on current map (2020)

Note that some greens could be played from alternative tees (shown by dotted lines) to provide something like a full 18-hole experience.

IMAGE E3 is an aerial photo taken in 1968, showing the early development of the tree plantings that still define the basics of today's layout.



IMAGE E3 — *aerial photo of FGC (1968)*

IMAGE E4 is a plan for the original irrigation system that was installed around 1973.

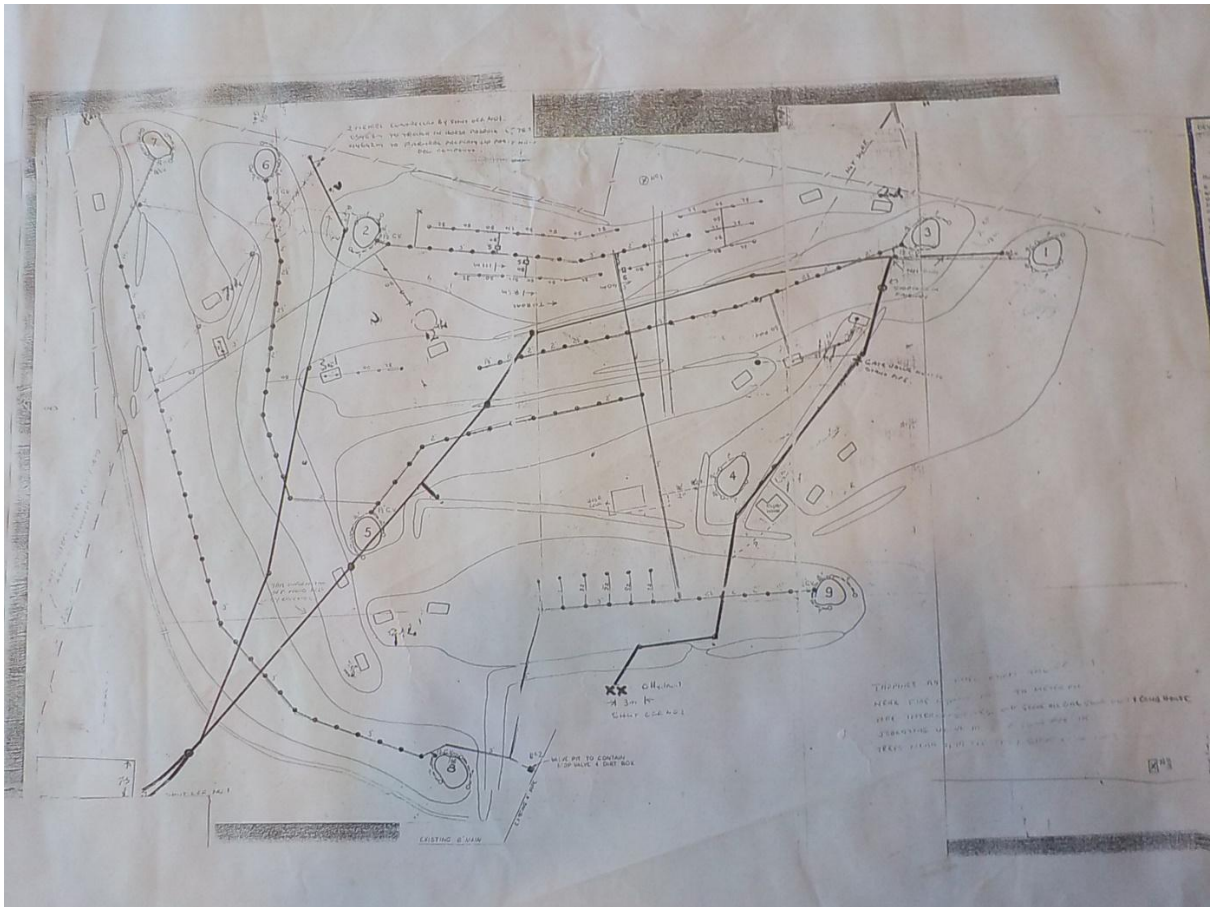


IMAGE E4 – *original irrigation system (1973)*

The aerial photo (IMAGE E3) is not sharp enough to clearly identify the precise positions of tees and greens, but the irrigation diagram (IMAGE E4) provides useful information as to positioning.

There's some indication in the aerial photo (IMAGE E3) of a green with a bunker in front of it, around where the current 16th tee is located - which would suggest that the direction of old 7th hole (the current 16th hole) was reversed - but this is probably an illusion.

Anecdotally, the original 2nd green (today's 10th) was in the middle of where today's 11th fairway would be and the nearby white patch in the aerial photo ties in with other anecdotal evidence that there was a "...pit full of building rubble..." in that area.

Over the next twenty years plans were gradually developed for an expansion to a full 18-hole course. Various plans and photographs from the early 1980s (IMAGES E5-E8) show proposed course layouts and reveal that at least one alternative layout was considered before the eventual configuration was agreed.

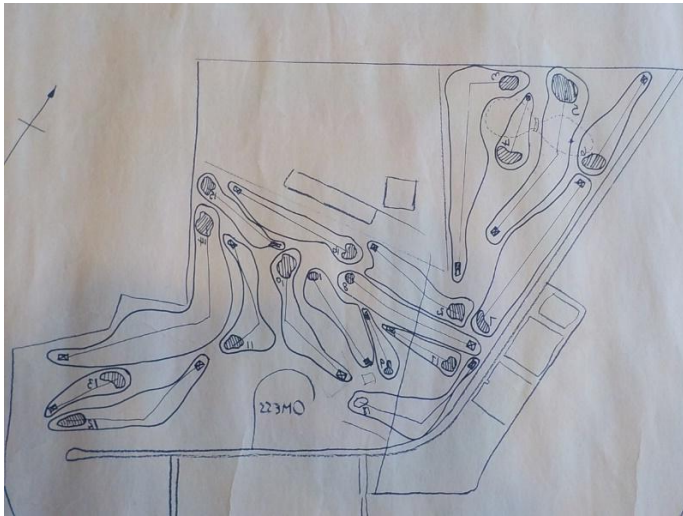


IMAGE E5 – *proposed 18-hole layout*

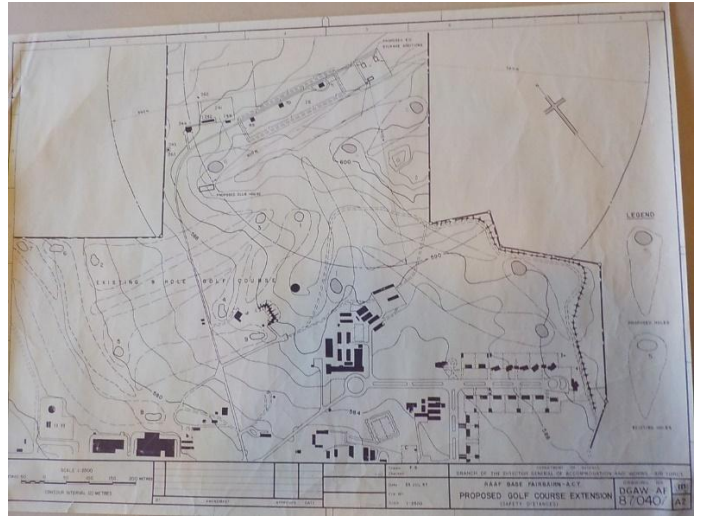


IMAGE E6 – *18-hole plan*



IMAGE E7 – *18-hole layout on aerial photo*



IMAGE E8 – *18-hole layout on aerial photo*

Basic earthworks for the remaining nine holes were undertaken in 1988, but it took another two years of largely volunteer effort before the official opening (in August 1990) of what is essentially today's course.

The expansion of the course to 18 holes was done in two stages. Six new holes were initially created:

- the current 2nd
- the 3rd (probably positioned between the 2nd green and the 4th tee)
- the 4th (a big Par 3 across the water hazard)
- the current 5th
- the 7th (a Par 3 played from the current Ladies 6th Tee)
- the 9th (played as a Par 5 from the current 8th tee)

IMAGE E9 is an attempt to represent the new six holes superimposed on a current aerial map. It also includes the introduction of the 11th hole which, although not previously mentioned until it was re-shaped in 1997, was probably created at around the same time as the others.

All that then remained to achieve (more or less) the current course layout was the introduction of the current 6th and 8th greens, construction of a new green for the 12th hole, and realignment of the 6th, 7th, and 9th tees.

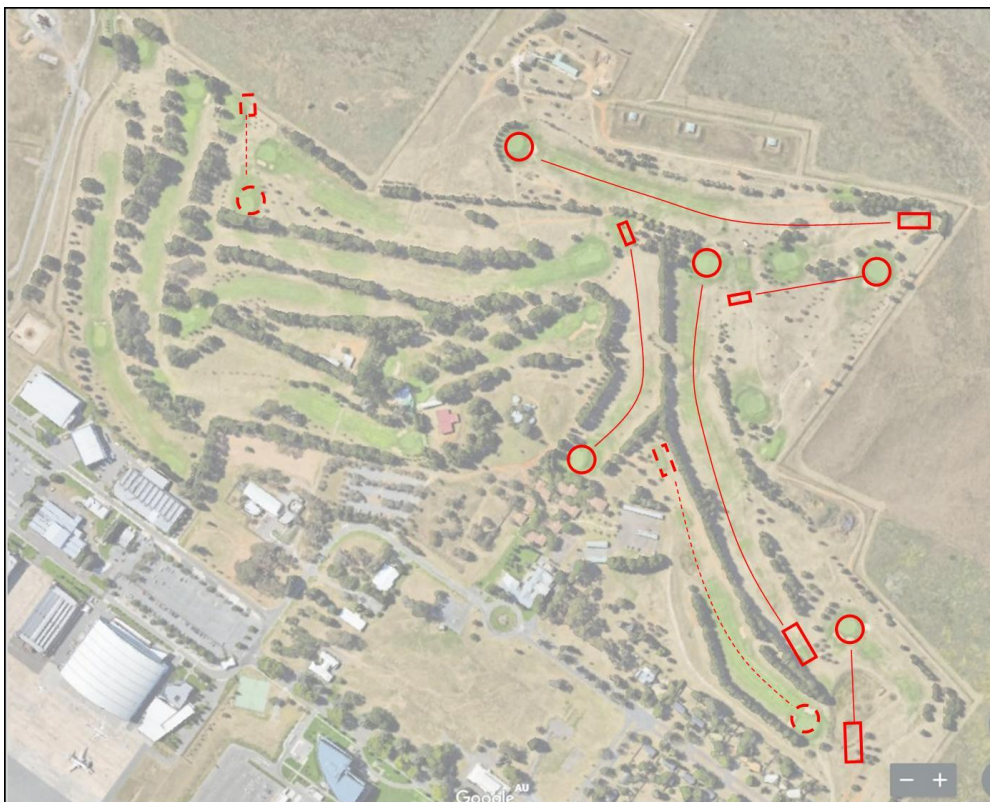


IMAGE E9 – *new six holes (late 1980s)*

IMAGE E10 is a degraded, but interesting, photo taken in the late 1980s that seems to confirm the temporary alignment of the 4th hole as a Par 3.



IMAGE E10 – *aerial photo (late 1980s)*

IMAGE E11 shows where these new additions fitted into the current course configuration. Many of the Club's senior members will well remember the dastardly alignment of that original 8th green.

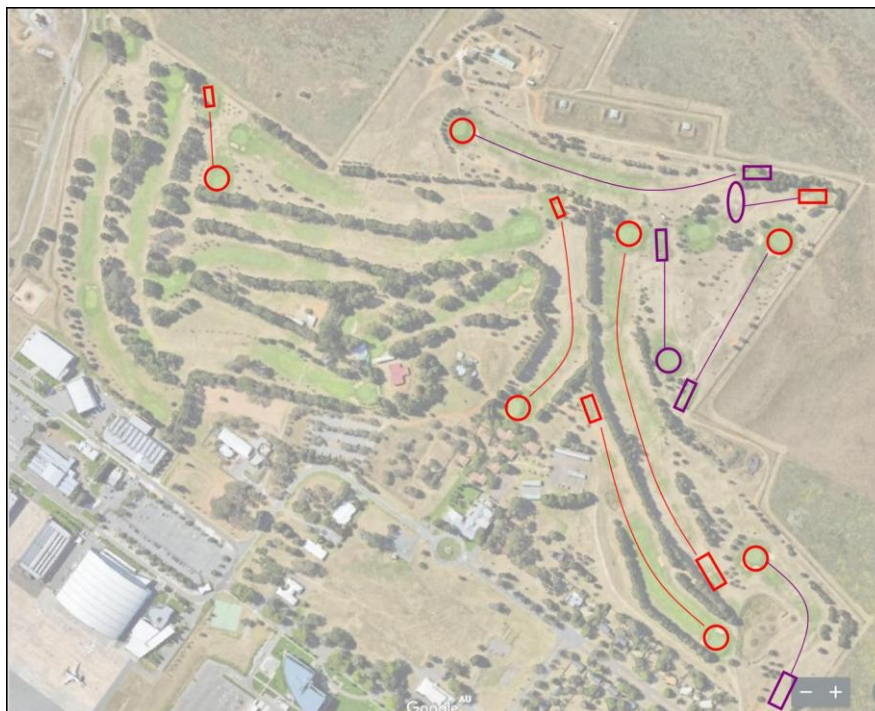


IMAGE E11 – *last 3 holes (late 1980s)*

IMAGE E12 is a picture dating (presumably) from the early 1990s showing the newly developed Eastern part of the course. The difference in the maturity of tree plantings is very evident.



IMAGE E12 – *aerial photo of FGC (early 1990s)*

Since the opening of the full 18-holes in 1990 work has, of course, continued to constantly improve the course. Minor works were conducted to the course in 1997 when the 11th green was levelled and reshaped (it had a steep slope and balls were wont to roll back off the green) and in 1999 when the 8th green and tee were moved and re-constructed. Other adjustments made to the layout include new “tiger tees” on the 5th and 11th, and the addition of more bunkers and trees.

As previously mentioned, the Par 5, 17th hole was shortened to a Par 4 in 2014.

2021 saw and a new dam (water hazard) set between the 2nd and 5th fairways. In 2022 a new “tiger tee” was added to the 18th and the unpopular 17th green was replaced with a new larger green and bunker.

Long-term members will remember (with varying degrees of fondness) not two but four bunkers guarding the 11th green and the iconic 'Australia Bunker' that guarded the front right of the 5th green (IMAGE E13) ... this bunker was removed in 2005 due to high maintenance overheads.



IMAGE E13 – *Australia bunker - 5th green (aerial photo 2004)*

IMAGES E14 and E15 show an aerial comparison of the golf course between 2006 and 2022. You can see various course configuration changes over the intervening years and the later image highlights the effect that the prolonged wet period in the early 2020s had on the amount of greenery both on and off the course.



IMAGE E14 – *aerial photo of FGC (2006)*

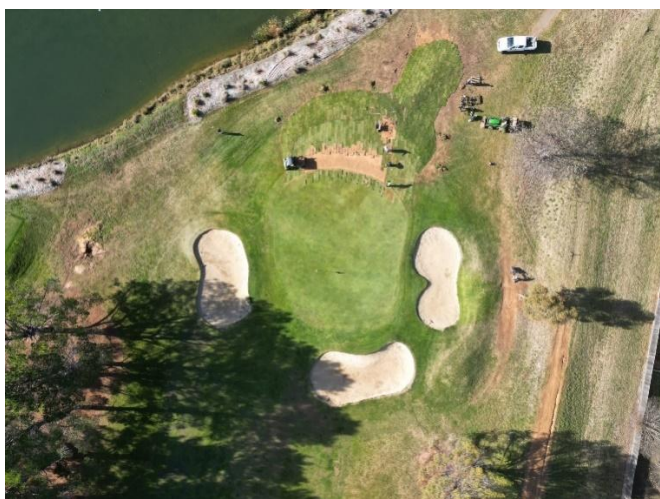


IMAGE E15 – *aerial photo of FGC (2022)*

Some work in progress on the course redevelopment are shown in the following images (June/July 2025).



6th fairway filled and levelled



3rd green being extended with grass from the old 9th green



New 10th hole (par 3) green (the extra hole)

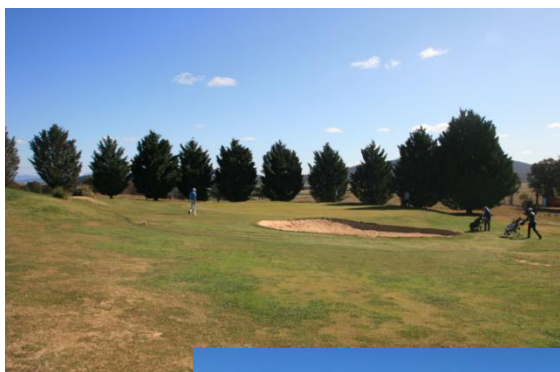


New 7th green built behind current green



New 9th green in the distance – works on old 9th green

The 9th green transition from par 4 to par 5 is shown in the following images.



References

- [1] Wing Commander Ken Caffery (Ret'd). (2000, February). "Letters-to-the-Editor: ADF Golf Club". *Air Force News*, 8.
- [2] WOFF Ron Lynch (Ret'd). (2000, April). "Letters-to-the-Editor: Fond Memories of RAAF Golf Club". *Air Force News*, 6.
- [3] John Watson (Vice Captain RFGC). (1990, September). "Fairbairn Golf Club – Gala Opening". *RAAF News*, 26.
- [4] (1966, January-February). "Handymen Golfers at Fairbairn". *RAAF News*, 10.
- [5] (1999, February). "End of an era for Golf Club". *Air Force News*, 30.
- [6] Geoff Thomson. (1988, 18 February). "Fairbairn gets a new look". *The Canberra Times*, 23.
- [7] (1960, 1 December). "Fairbairn Nine-Hole Golf Course Opened". *The Canberra Times*, 32.
- [8] (1978, September). "Red faces after painting exercise". *RAAF News*, 7.
- [9] (2011, 24 October). "Govt knew about ESA HQ problems". *The Canberra Times*.
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