

FLIGHT TO LAHINCH

by Francis Roberts



It was a Spring evening 50 years ago and Lahinch hotelier, the late Joe Linnane, and his local customers were in contemplative mood.

The month of May had just a couple of weeks to run and the finishing touches were being put to the preparations for the coming holiday season. The talk was about bookings, weather prospects, golf and visitors.

People with young children would be arriving shortly, and the sand dunes would echo the shrill whoops of childish delight as the bucket and shovel brigade scampered along the strand; the trickle of golfers would swell to a steady flow.

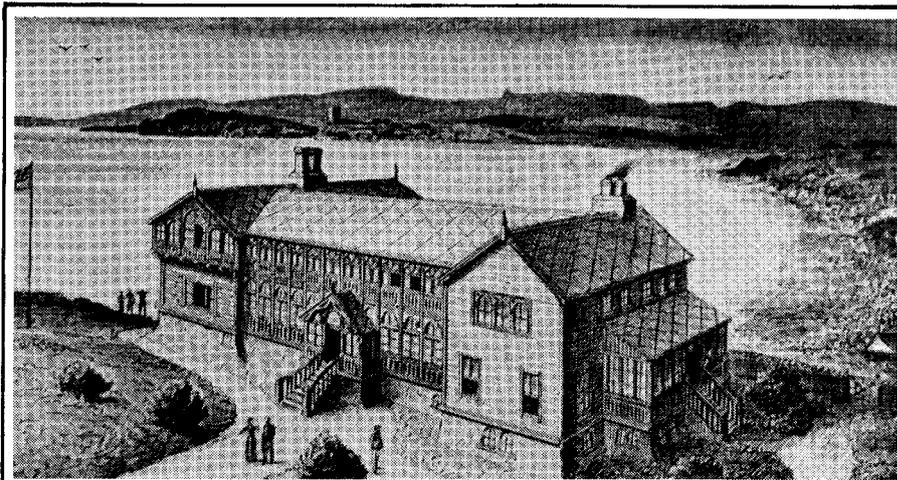
But the ruminations of those in the Claremont Hotel on May 15, 1934, would soon be ended abruptly, and Lahinch, the tiny hamlet of Moy and the Claremont would be engulfed in world-wide publicity of a most favourable kind.

Over in Limerick our ancient city's very enterprising Mayor, Cllr. P.F. Quinlan, was preoccupied with his business affairs and civic duties. However, his diary for May 17 would have to be hastily altered to lay on a special reception which would attract the spotlight of international publicity and draw many visitors as did Lahinch.

Over the North Atlantic and in dire straits were two airmen of those pioneering days of trans-ocean flying. Capt. George Pond an American, and Lieut. Sabelli, an Italian, had left New York on May 14 in an attempt to fly non-stop to Rome. Their aircraft proudly bore the name "Leonardo da Vinci".

No doubt that great artist of the Renaissance period, whose paintings, the "Mona Lisa" and "The Last Supper", became treasures of the art world, would have approved.

He was a man of many other talents, and it was said that in dynamics, in anatomy, engineering, and aeronautics he was centuries ahead of his time. He even turned out a flying machine which



The hotel at Lahinch golf links.

it was believed could actually have taken to the skies had he a source of power such as a petrol engine!

Pond and Sabelli had a plane with the necessary power, but flying the Atlantic in those adventurous days was still a hazardous pursuit. Some attempts were successful, others unfortunately disastrous. The capricious weather of the North Atlantic had closed in on the fliers, and what had begun as a promising well-planned attempt had become a horrible nightmare. By the evening of May 15 they had been "flying blind" in fog for many hours, and as they looked anxiously at the fuel indicator, Signor Sabelli prayed fervently for deliverance from their awful plight.

Time passed, and after what seemed an eternity to the hapless aviators, their hopes rose. As if in answer to Sabelli's prayers, the fog began to slip away, and it seemed that the Hand of a Wise Providence was guiding them towards safety. Suddenly there was a panoramic view of coastline, roads and fields, and a church steeple above a cluster of houses, with people moving about.

Landfall was near for the weary airmen. At 20.30 hours, European mean time, on May 15, 1934, Pond and Sabelli landed in a field at Moy after an epic crossing of the Atlantic against all

the odds. As they made their way to nearby Lahinch Sabelli prayed once more, this time in thanksgiving.

As the leather-jacketed airmen entered the bar at the Claremont, understandably they were presumed to be a couple of motor-cyclists. But when one of them announced, "We're Pond and Sabelli", a customer who had read the pre-flight publicity gasped almost in disbelief, "They must be the Atlantic fliers going to Rome".

After that corks popped, glasses clinked and a cead mile failte greeted these most unexpected visitors. Joe alerted the press, and soon newsmen and photographers from many parts were hot-footing it to the West Clare resort. Before leaving Lahinch they presented him with their American flag, which for many years afterwards he would produce from under the counter to show to visitors.

On May 17 the intrepid airmen were given a rousing welcome to Limerick. They were entertained by the Mayor, and in lighter vein we toasted the health of the "motor-cyclists" who dropped in from the Banner County skies.

They finally made it to Rome, arriving there on June 11, and bearing with them a petition from the Mayor to Pope Pius XI.