

Algarve's first golf course

WORDS Sue Spencer | PHOTOS Supplied

Golf in the Algarve wouldn't be what it is today without the legacy of golfing pioneer John Stilwell (pictured right), who in the early 1960s commissioned Sir Henry Cotton to design *Penina*, the Algarve's first golf course. In recognition of his services to golf in the region, the Portuguese Golf Federation has recently awarded John Stilwell its prestigious gold medal of honour and merit.

The pioneering spirit is in John Stilwell's blood. John's father left England for Lisbon in 1904 to begin a new life as a spice trader, with his uncle. After serving in the British Army during the First World War, he returned to Portugal and started his own business representing British companies such as *Rolls Royce Aero* and *GEC*. John joined his father in the business after serving in the Coldstream Guards during the Second World War.

John's family own a rice farm that is, to this day, among Portugal's biggest rice producers. This family connection with rice was instrumental in the path that John's life took when, at the age of 34, he decided to build a golf course near Portimão.

In the winter of 1961, Lisbon-

born John came to the Algarve to visit some cousins who had a rice farm at Penina. He was struck by two thoughts: how wonderful the weather was – and what a pity there was nothing much to do! In those days, tourism was in its infancy in the Algarve, but John could see the potential.

He then realised that the Penina paddy fields would make the perfect site for a hotel and golf course. Being low-lying, there was plenty of water to provide irrigation and, because of his background in rice farming, John had an experienced workforce to call upon when it came to digging ditches for drainage.

There was, however, a problem – John knew nothing about golf course design! Luckily a friend of his happened to know former Ryder Cup player and three times Open Champion, Henry Cotton.

The two formed a lasting working relationship and friendship. "Sir Henry was a charming man and great raconteur," says John. "He liked to have a good time, but Toots, his Argentinean wife, made sure he kept his nose to the grindstone!"

It wasn't all plain sailing, however. Back in the early 1960s, the Algarve's infrastructure was practically non-existent.



"The roads were just tracks. Services that we take for granted today just didn't exist. Despite promises made by the government to install mains water and sewerage, we ended up doing the work ourselves."

John did receive financial help from one quarter – the Portuguese Forestry Commission, which donated 350,000 trees to the project.

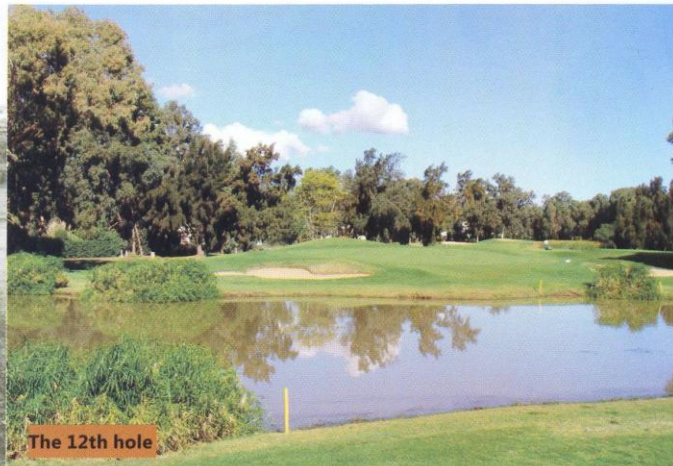
These trees, a mixture of eucalyptus, pine and other native species, are what give *Penina* its unique character today. These trees attract many different types of birds.

"The bird life in Penina is among the best in the Algarve," says John.

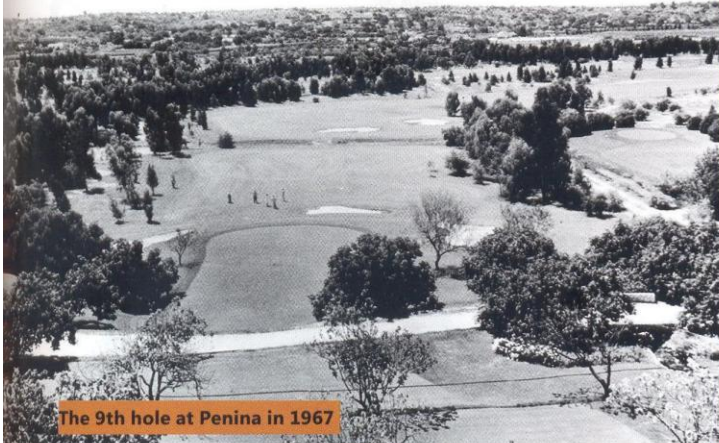
Not many people know this, but John Stilwell also built the Alvor aerodrome that backs onto



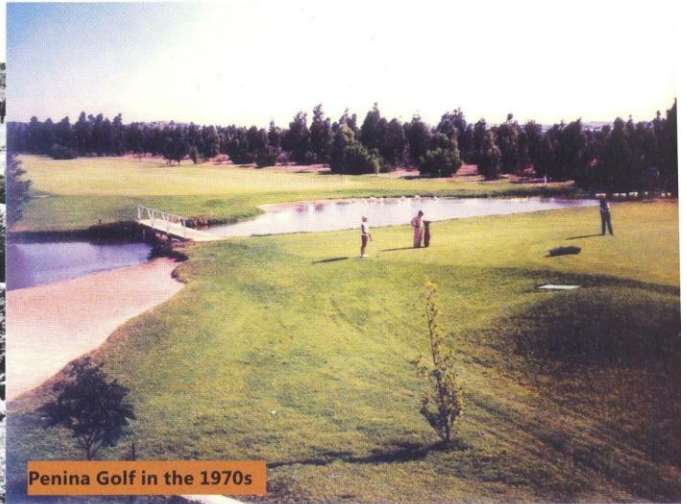
The golf course in 1965



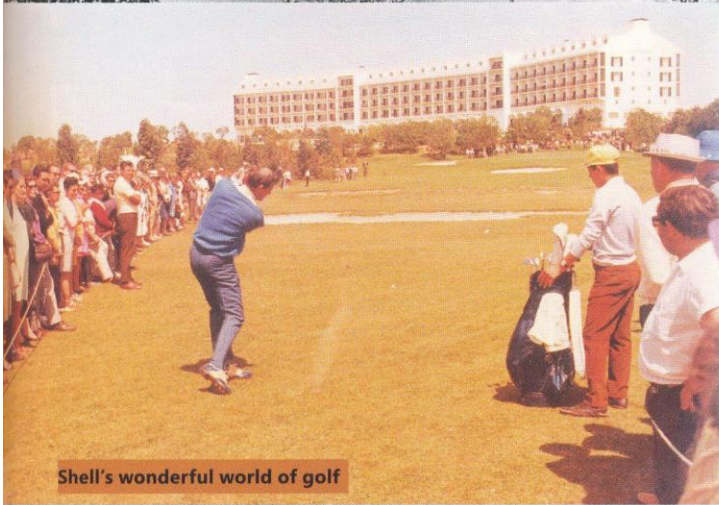
The 12th hole



The 9th hole at Penina in 1967



Penina Golf in the 1970s



Shell's wonderful world of golf



Penina Hotel in the 1970s



The Penina Hotel under construction in 1965



The Penina Hotel now

Penina and which, besides Faro, is the only airport in the Algarve that can take small jets.

"In the early days, most of our visitors to *Penina* were Americans," says John, "although they all stopped coming when we had the 1974 Revolution." The revolution made

things very difficult for a time.

Over the years, John Stilwell has met many famous golfers and remembers once playing with Henry Cotton and Tony Jacklin, who Cotton was coaching at the time.

"Jacklin kept hitting his ball into the woods," John recalls. "Even professionals find *Penina* a

test of golf – and that's the mark of a true championship course." *Penina* has played host to the Portugal Open no less than ten times.

John is now retired, but one of his sons, Christopher, is Managing Director for *Oceânico Golf* and another son, Mark, is Managing Director of *Gericonstroi*,

owners of *Vale do Milho* Course near Carvoeiro. Mark, together with Malcolm Kenyon, designed Montebelo Golf Course near Viseu, between the Serra da Estrela and Caramulo mountain ranges in the north of Portugal.

The Stilwell dynasty lives on in the Algarve world of golf. &