

Golfers make bee-line

SOMEWHERE in the sand dunes of Portstewart, a hundred little orchids are whispering a sigh of relief.

Yesterday, the tiny flowers faced imminent squashing — to make room for Hole Five at the golf course.

Today, they are on new ground — thanks to the Department of the Environment, the National Trust, a few volunteer students from Coleraine University and some of the golf course men.

The planned expansion by the club into the dune system at the strand put the rare plant at risk.

But a unique digging operation

By NUALA MCCANN

took place — more than a hundred holes in one day.

Then the tiny flowers were moved to a safer situation nearby — owned by the National Trust.

It was not a good day for it — high waves slapping down, fierce chilly winds that had your knees knocking, and enough sand to build a castle in every breath.

But there was no slacking by the volunteers.

"We'll just go along the beach and it is a five minute walk over the dunes," said Ms Jo

Whatmough, trust adviser on nature conservation.

It was a hike — clambering up mountainous dunes, sliding down sandhills to the nook where the crew was marking the miniscule plants to cut them out of the turf.

You would have needed a magnifying glass to pick out the bunch of leaves among the grass.

The bee orchid gets its name from its pink and brown petals which resemble a bee's abdomen.

"There is no guarantee that the move will be successful," said Jo.

"But at least the bee orchids will have more of a chance than if we leave them to be bulldozed into the

ground.

"The problem with this orchid is that it might appear in hundreds one year and not appear at all the next year.

"And the problem is that the orchids we are finding are the older plants and we just hope they will spread their seed."

Out digging was golf course manager Bernard Findlay. "Golf started in areas like this, so it is not in our interests to change the ecology and we would want to maintain it."

Alongside were the DoE's wardens in North Antrim, John Greer and Ian Irvine. It was the first time Ian had seen such an operation in ten years as assistant warden.

Two of the post-graduate students begged to differ with the decision to transplant. They felt the golf club should not have been allowed to expand.

"I think it is a backward step and displays a kind of zoo mentality — that the plants, like animals, can only be preserved if they are taken away from their natural habitat," said population ecologist Stephen Crute. Swiss ecologist Pierre Binggeli agreed.