

The Origin of Golf

David Hamilton

Beginnings

The game of golf was not a sudden invention; it evolved and matured out of many other stick-and-ball games played in medieval Europe. France had its game of *chole* and England had a stick-and-ball game called '*cambuca*'. Only two games, however, are serious contenders as the forerunner of the modern game of golf. The first was *colf* (or *koffe*), popular in the Low Countries, and the second was the game already known as '*golf*' (or '*gouff*' or '*gollfe*' in the random, phonetic spelling of the day), which is persistently mentioned in Scottish records from medieval times onwards.

Dutch colf

The Dutch *colf* was popular and appears frequently in early Dutch records—of which many more have survived than the few scrappy Scottish documents of the same period—from 1300 onwards. A major study by Steven van Hengel, *Early Golf* (privately published in 1982), has at last described the game from original documents. A single iron-headed club, which had considerable loft, was used. It seems to have been mostly a town game, played towards a target such as a door, and may have been popular with children. The game became a nuisance in the towns, but only occasionally did regulations successfully move it out into the open fields nearby, where it may have been played into a hole in the ground. The Dutch towns where *colf* was popular were inland and, without adjacent coastal links, it could not be played very successfully outside the towns. When the canals were frozen, a form might be played using a post, or even a hole, in the ice as the target.

In Scotland, early records are less well preserved, and portrait and landscape painting did not exist. Nevertheless, sufficient is known about the early game of '*golf*' to suggest that until about 1650 it may have resembled *colf*, as many records show that it was played in the churchyard or street. Scotland and the Low Countries were closely linked by trade, and hence there are good reasons why the games should have been similar.

Move to links

But by 1650 another version of the Scottish golf can be seen emerging as the dominant form, changing it to resemble the modern game. At this time it moved out of the towns on to the hard links — land beside the east-coast towns and ports, where in winter (and early golf was a winter game) a game of skill developed, combining lengthy shots with accuracy as the hole was neared. Wooden-headed clubs, which could be expensive, were now the kind most in use and even in the Low Countries were known as 'Scotch cleeks'. In Scotland an iron club was reserved for bunkers or ruts. The target in this long game was a hole in the ground.

REGULUS,

Baculus, Pila calvaria, a golf ball. Fovea, a gear. Percute pilam baculo. Nimis curasti hunc missum, this is too short a stroke. Pila tua devia est, procul aucussisti pilam, that is a good stroke. acutissima pilam arena, Teag your ball on the sand. Statumen, the teaz. Frustra es, that is a miss. Vel irritus hic conatus est, percutit pilam scissim, give the ball but a little chap. Appropinquè that is very well. Immissa est pila in foveam, the ball is geared. Quomodo canis hinc elidam? Cedo baculum ferreum, dei jee the bunk and club. In iterum frustra es, this is the second miss. Tertia quarta, &c. Bene tibi cessit hic clu, that is well. A-taken, Male tibi cessit: huius. Huc rectè pilam dirige. Dirige rectè reglus foramen, strike directly upon the hole. Percute pilam furium verius. A-take up the ball. Percute deorsum verius, strike down the hill. An prateriaspe est foramen. Factum quod volui, I want not wish a better stroke. Immissa est in pulidum, it is in the mire. Rectè evolavi, it hath flown directly on. Baculi caput, the head of the club. Baculi caulis, the shaft of the club. Baculi manubrium, the handle where the wippen is. Baculi filum, the wippen.

The earliest description of the Scottish game of golf, taken from a Latin grammar for schools, Aberdeen 1632. It mentions bunkers, iron clubs, holes and sand used for teeing up. (Courtesy of Aberdeen University Library.)

Why should the game have been different in Scotland from that played elsewhere in Europe and why should it have changed in this way? Perhaps the interest of the aristocracy and the Stuart monarchs was important, since they took up golf seriously; they could afford to buy the expensive equipment. For this reason golf appeared in London after the Union of the Crowns, when James VI of Scotland ascended the

throne of Great Britain as James I. In Scotland too, the east-coast ports, notably Leith near Edinburgh, had links, whereas the Low Countries' *colf*-playing towns were inland, with wet, heavy land in winter.

There is no evidence that the Dutch game evolved along the same lines as its Scottish counterpart, and indeed *colf* disappeared about 1700, probably eliminated by the growth of the towns and the congestion of their streets. Ball-and-stick games in Holland developed in a different way to give *kolf*, an indoor game played over a short, formal court. It seems reasonable to conclude that, in the absence of other evidence, golf as we now know it evolved in Scotland, but perhaps later than was once supposed.

The first Clubs

In the late 1600s, golf was popular in Scotland along the east coast and two centres in particular were of interest. St Andrews had keen aristocratic student golfers, whose fathers were among those who played at Leith. Numerous diaries and local records show the popularity of Leith, and it was not surprising that here the world's first Golf Club was founded – the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers. There were many golfing cliques in Leith and the club's foundation was probably a response to the fading fortunes of the town, in decline after the Union of the Parliaments. Already the Leith races were popular and a trophy had been given by the Town Council. The new Company of Golfers was also provided with a trophy – a silver club – and though this did not herald any sudden change in the game, it did mean that rules had to be drawn up for the new competition – the first rules of golf.

Other Clubs were founded in the seventeenth century, imitating the Leith golfers, and, as Scottish attitudes relaxed in an increasingly sociable century, these Clubs became known for their heavy drinking and hearty eating. They seem to have had little turnover of members, who were often bound together for reasons other than golf – often military or masonic. The Clubs played a valuable role in supporting the early club- and ballmakers, and were vigilant in protecting the rights of the townspeople to use the links for recreation. Many records show that golf was still popular with the tradespeople of the towns, who were not members of the Golf Clubs. Whether these poorer golfers played with the expensive equipment used by the rich or with a cheaper club and ball is not certain.

Temporary cessation

The early 1800s saw a crisis in the Scottish game. Industrialization brought rapid expansion to the towns without regard



The Trophy for the Gentlemen Golfers of Edinburgh (later the Honourable Company) on display.

for amenities, and public links such as those at Leith, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Leven were throttled. Some Clubs, like the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers and the Glasgow Club, ceased to exist for a spell and others dispersed to new, quieter areas, such as Musselburgh. The game itself appeared to be less popular.

The game takes off

But in the year 1848 a revolution in the game occurred. The appearance of the new gutty ball, made out of malleable gutta-percha, produced a cheap, durable alternative to the short-lived featherie or the wooden ball of the common game. Less dramatic but of similar significance was the change from the brittle woods to tough hickory for club shafts. To the older men who earned their living by club- and ball-making, like Allan Robertson, it seemed that their trade was in danger, but others, like 'old' Tom Morris, realized that the new equipment might help spread the game. In this belief they were correct beyond any reasonable expectation. The new well-off middle class produced by the growth of industry flocked to Scotland for their holidays using the expanding rail network. St Andrews and North Berwick were favourite places and there the visitors imitated the games of the old leisured class. Their wives and families also learned the game on these Scottish holidays, and women's golf was born at St Andrews.

Celebrities such as AJ Balfour, then Secretary of State for Ireland, were keen players and helped its popularity further.

Back home, in England and elsewhere, they drew up plans for courses, for which they hired Scottish help. From Scotland poured a stream of designers and professionals, like Willie Dunn and, later, Donald Ross. The Carnoustie Club (drawn from the artisans of the town) produced a remarkable number of emigrés who could be found playing golf and tending the courses all over North America.

English and US expansion

Blackheath claimed great antiquity, dating back to the Stuart kings. The first English Club of the modern era, however, was perhaps the Old Manchester Club (1818), though the first of the continuous modern era was the Royal North Devon (1884) at Westward Hol, a Club which had the distinction of raising JH Taylor who became the first professional to beat the Scots at their own game. In Ireland, Royal Belfast (1881) was the first golf club to be formed, and in Europe, Pau (1858) led the way. Britain's expanding Empire spread golf around the world. In Britain, a new burst of Club foundation occurred, reaching its peak in the 1890s. The number of Clubs rose from less than 100 in 1875 to 1300 in 1900. Golf had been played in a small way in America before the foundation of the St Andrews Golf Club of Yonkers in 1888, but

the Club's pioneers had met with ridicule. This Club's course was primitive, but by 1895 came America's first open championship links, at Newport, Rhode Island—although as late as 1899 leading British professionals like Harry Vardon met little opposition on tours in America.

Early competitive play

Competitive golf dates from the inter-Club matches of the early nineteenth century, the first of which was recorded in 1818 when two of the Edinburgh Clubs playing over Bruntisfield Links, the Burgess Golfing Society and the Bruntisfield Links Club, competed against each other. In 1857 the Prestwick Club organized a successful inter-Club tournament, and in 1860 they arranged an event for professional golfers, which later became known as the Open Championship. They may have wished to show the skills of the invited professionals, particularly their own man, Tom Morris, whom they had hired as a ball- and clubmaker, and who looked after the Prestwick links – the first such salaried post for a golfer. Sadly, Allan Robertson did not live to play in the competition, though the year previously he was the first to have broken 80 in a round over the Old Course. The Open was unusual in being a stroke-play competition, as the early inter-Club tournaments were match play.

New horizons

Golf prospered and by the time of Willie Park's success the small number of professional golfers could hope for larger stakes in challenge matches and the rewards of occasional tournaments. Park was perhaps the first to capitalize on his fame in the modern way as a golf consultant and by publicizing his own branded clubs, notably an infallible putter, and by using mass production, advertising and postal sales he was highly successful. At St Andrews the first golf club manufacturing firm that had not been set up by a professional golfer appeared—the Forgan's firm, which survived for almost a century.

Scottish professional dominance ended in 1894 when an English-born professional, JH Taylor, won the Open. The rise of American golf was signalled when WJ Travis won the British Amateur Championship in 1904.

Though a home-bred player, JJ McDermott, had won the US Open in 1911, it was Francis Ouimet's win in 1913 that caught the popular imagination. Another feature of the growing dominance of America was the appearance of the Haskell ball in 1902, quickly capturing the market. Club design changed to suit the new ball: heads became deeper and the scarehead design changed to the socket joint.



Old and young Tom Morris



From George M Colville *Five Open Champions and the Musselburgh Golf Story*, Musselburgh 1980.

Improved status

Professionals' status remained low until the end of the century and they were usually called by their second names only. Even Open Champions had to tee the ball up for their amateur partners in exhibition matches, and even James Braid never entered Walton Heath clubhouse by the front door. JH Taylor organized the professionals in Britain, promoting their image until they became national figures even outside the narrow world of sport. Their new-found popularity was marked by an increasing number of tournaments, notably the sponsorship by the *News of the World* of the first tournament of the modern era. The changing status of professionals in Britain was pioneered and continued by Henry Cotton, who, on being appointed to Ashridge GC in 1937, made the bold stipulation that he be made an honorary member of the Club. The modern professional had arrived.

Today golf is played world-wide, and is perhaps the most popular participant outdoor sport in the world. The government of the game still bears out its Scottish origins – the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews shares with the United States Golf Association the regulation of all golf. And only in Scotland is it still universally the game of the ordinary people.

Golf Terminology

Bogey—origin of the term

The term was first used in 1891. Hugh Rotherham, Coventry, suggested what was termed the ground score of the Coventry course. The scheme propounded by Rotherham was taken up by the Great Yarmouth Club hon secretary, Dr T Browne, who inaugurated matches for Great Yarmouth on the lines indicated. About this time the popular music hall ditty, *Hush, hush, here comes the Bogey man*, was on almost everyone's lips, and it must have been uppermost in the mind of Major C Wellman one day when he exclaimed to Dr Browne: *This ground score player of yours is a regular 'Bogey man'*. So the expression *bogey* was at once adopted at Great Yarmouth. Dr Browne introduced *Bogey* to the United Services Club as a *quiet, modest and retiring gentleman, uniformly steady, but never over brilliant*. He was heartily welcomed, and the hon secretary, Captain Vidal, was so impressed with the personality of the newest member that he suggested it was but fitting he should hold service rank, so he was given the position of *Colonel*, which he still retains. The Royal and Ancient did not recognize the term until 1910, when the Rules of Golf Committee framed special rules for bogey competitions. It is now almost in disuse in its original sense since the general adoption of the standard scratch score and the assignment of par to each hole. However in

the 1960s it came back into golfing parlance through its American use denoting one over par for any hole.

Golf terms

Birdie, Eagle and Albatross are words coined in America to represent, respectively, holes done in one below par, two below par and three below par. The word *birdie* is attributed to AH Smith, who, in 1903, when playing at Atlantic City, holed out for a 1-under par at one hole and exclaimed *that was a bird of a shot*.

Twosome is not a golf term. If one man plays against another, the match is a **Single**. In stroke play, two players competing together are a **Couple**.

Threesome designates a match in which one player plays against two playing alternate strokes with one ball, such a match being rare. The word does not mean three players each playing against the other; that is a **Three-ball Match**.

Foursome covers two players playing alternate strokes with one ball against two others playing one ball in match play or against the field in stroke play. There has been a tendency to use the word to cover a four-ball match, and so the term **Scotch Foursome** has been used in some cases to distinguish between the two.

Medal Play has crept into golf language as a synonym for **Stroke Play**. *Stroke play* is the correct term, according to the Rules and tradition.

Dormie is when a player, or his side, is as many holes up as there are holes remaining to play. A match consists of 18 holes or 36 holes. If extra holes are to be played to obtain a winning result, then the term *dormie* does not apply.