

## **Learn About the Game's History**

As Harry Truman used to say, "The only thing new under the sun is the history we don't know." There are a lot of great stories to be told about golf over the past 500 years, for instance the history of the golf ball, the golf club, or the birth of the golf tee. Here are a few bits and pieces for you to consider, and below them some useful links to other sites dealing with the history of the game:

### ***A description of the game from Chambers' Edinburgh Journal, October 8, 1842:***

*"But what sort of game is this said golf? Why, to speak to it with a regard merely to its materialities, it is a game played with clubs of a peculiar forms, and balls. Holes of a size to admit an ordinary sized tumbler are made in the ground in a series, at the distance of from three to four hundred yards from each other. The player is furnished with a ball about an inch and a half in diameter, formed of leather stuffed as hard as possible with feathers; and this he plays from hole to hole with his club, he and his opponent contending which shall get it holed by the smallest number of strokes. This is all that a man of no soul and not a golfer would see in the game, and all that he would say in description of it....To appreciate golf fully, it must be studied in some such school as that of St. Andrews, where its whole character is fully developed, in consequence at once of the admirably adapted ground, and the enthusiasm of the votaries."*

### ***Where did golf begin?***

Numerous theories exist as to how golf evolved. As to the ultimate origins of the game, Henry B. Farnie put it aptly in his 1857 book *The Golfer's Manual*, when he said they are "hidden in the mists of antiquity." The Romans played a game called *paganica* in which players used a bent stick to hit a large leather

ball stuffed with feathers. Some contend that the game may have traveled with the legionnaires to various lands in the empire and influenced the development of like games, many of which could have had elements adapted to golf.

*Chole*, a game which still survives in parts of Belgium and Northern France, resembles something between hockey and golf, and was first referenced in 1353. It was a cross-country game played with an iron club and beachwood ball. The "goal" would be a cemetery gate, church door, large rock, or like object, often located as far away as five to ten miles. Opponents would bid on how many number of "turns" (of three strokes each) it would take to reach the goal, and if they didn't reach the target in the agreed upon number of turns, the opponent was entitled to give the ball a whack backwards or into some bad patch of rough ground.

Around 1400, another stick-and-ball game was played in Holland, called *kolven*. It was not a field game but was played in a walled space or court. Players used a straight faced club (called a "kolf"), usually made of brass, and a two-pound leather ball. Two posts were set up on a court anywhere from 40 to 130 feet apart. The object was to hit the post at the far side and then return to do the same to the one on the near side. The team to accomplish the feat in the least number of attempts was the winner. It would also be played on ice, like hockey.

The French played a couple of games they reputed to have inspired golf; *soule* and *jeu de mail*. Soule appears to have been something like the local French version of chole. Jeu de mail was another cross-country stick and ball game, but played by a single player retaining his own ball throughout the contest.

In England, the game of *pall mall*, a cousin of croquet, was played as early as 1625 and mentioned by Samuel Pepys in his famous diary. It involved players hitting wooden balls with mallets through suspended hoops at either end of the long alley near St.

James Park in London (which eventually became known as Pall-Mall). The best players could drive the ball over two hundred yards.

So we have various theories, but in the end, the origins of the game of golf are hidden in the mists of antiquity. As far back as 872, at the coronation of King Alfred, there were accounts of sports taking place and players "driving balls wide over the fields."

From this sampling of theories we can see that golf may have had elements of many games. The earliest traces of golf being played is said to date back to 1340, where in a sketch from a stained glass window in the east window of the Gloucester Cathedral, England. There scenes of the French Battle of Crécy showed a man swinging some kind of club in a golf-like manner. It was probably not actually golf, but the old English game of cambuca, which involved a club and a wooden ball.

The game did come to Scotland, somehow, someway. Many Scots believe that the Dutch game of kolven was adopted by their forefathers, a residual of commerce with Holland, as traders played the game to give them something to do before returning home. It could be, especially in St. Andrews. The land there had the good fortune to be located in a city that was the ecclesiastical capital of medieval Scotland, with a port connecting it to European traders. Men would entertain themselves by hitting a ball along the ocean shores to some far off target, the theory goes, and actually dug holes in the ground for the ball to come to rest in. Back and forth they'd go, playing this silly game, until the locals poked their noses in and asked what all the fuss was about. And so was born competition. As far as the name of the game is concerned, the old Scottish verb "to gowf," means "to strike hard." The game we call "golf" probably came from that word.

The Scots must have kept striking it hard, because we know for a fact that by 1457 golf had become such a popular sport that Scotland's King James II banned the playing of the game. "The

fute-ball and Golf be utterly cryit doune, and nocht usit," he proclaimed, because it was taking young men from practicing their archery skills, and this was a threat to the national defense.

But golfers were as persistent then as now, and continued to play, even if the law prohibited it. In 1471 and again in 1491, acts of Parliament declared it expedient to ban the game "for common gude and defence of the Realme." The 1491 ban declared "That in na place of the realme there be usit futte-ballis, golfe, or uther sik unprofitabill sportis."

In 1502 something occurred that might have shaped the history of the game as we know it. King James IV became a golfer and overturned the 1457 decree. If he had not, perhaps today there would be nothing to write about. He bought his own set of clubs that year in Perth, and is also recorded as buying clubs from St. Andrews in 1506. We know this because the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland noted and compared the prices of "Clubbis and Ballis" at each place. A bureaucrat's adherence to paperwork was a blessing in this case, since we have proof of these events.

### ***What about golf at St. Andrews, Scotland?***

The area of the links, bordered by the River Eden and St. Andrews Bay, was granted to the city by a Charter issued by King David of Scotland in 1123. At the time there was no mention of golf, and the land was used as a source of peat for fuel, turf for roofs, and rabbits for food, and it is probable that in the 11th and 12th centuries high tides overflowed the grounds. The course itself was bequeathed to the golfers by the recession of the sea. Nobody can say for certain when the first golf was played there, but on January 25, 1552 Archbishop John Hamilton was given a charter to establish a rabbit warren on the links. The Charter confirmed rights "in playing at golff, futbal, schuteing at all gamis with all manner of pastime as ever thai pleis." This was not an original

grant, but merely a confirmation of rights already established by long usage.

The word "links" is derived from the Old English "hlinc," which means a strip of unploughed land. It was left unploughed is because it was poor in plant nutrients, unfit for cultivation, and of commercial use only as pasture for sheep. The links was probably regarded by some as wasteland, but for those eager to play the game, it suited their purposes nicely. By 1583, as elsewhere in Scotland, the Church in St Andrews was taking people to task for using the Sabbath to play on the "golf feildis." But they couldn't stamp out a game dear to Scottish hearts.

We know that golfing clubs and balls were mentioned in connection with St. Andrews for the first time in 1574, found in the diaries of James Melville, who was a student in St. Andrews from 1569 to 1574. No balls or clubs of that era survive, but whatever instruments were employed, the game took hold amongst the upper classes.

It was a game the royals played. With them setting an example, how could the common folk be denied? Mary Queen of Scots sought solace in golf after the murder of her second husband Henry Stuart (Lord Darnley) in 1567, and was "seen playing Golf and Pallmall in the fields of Seton." Charles I played golf on the links of Leith (near Edinburgh on the Firth of Forth) and it was while thus engaged that he received news of the Irish Rebellion in 1642. England's James II was likewise a golfer, and in 1682, while he was still the Duke of York, took a shoemaker named John Patersone as a partner in a challenge against two English noblemen. So delighted was James when they won the match, he gave Patersone half the winnings, who in turn used them to build a house. The golfer's motto "Far and Sure" was displayed prominently over his door.

In 1691, there is an important reference to the pre-eminence of St. Andrews in the world of golf by Alexander Munro, Regent at St. Andrews University. In a letter of April 27, 1691 to his friend, John Mackenzie in Perthshire, he referred to St. Andrews as the "metropolis of Golfing." With the letter, Munro sent his friend "ane sett of Golfe-Clubs consisting of three, viz. an play club, ane Scrapper, and ane tin fac'd club" (in today's language a driver, utility wood, and an iron). He also sent him "ane Dozen of Golfe balls."

The game continued to be nurtured, and on May 14, 1754 the Society of St. Andrews Golfers was formed. The minutes show that twenty-two "Noblemen and Gentlemen, being admirers of the ancient and healthful exercise of the Golf." They met and drafted articles and laws in playing the game. In May 1766 it was agreed that they would meet twice a month for golf and dinner, which was served in Glass's Inn at the corner of South Castle and South Street. Under the reign of King William IV, who also held the title Duke of St. Andrews, the society invited him to become their patron and asked for permission to change the society's title. The club thus received its "Royal and Ancient" designation in 1834, and has become golf's Mecca.

### ***What was it like?***

Golf has been played in Scotland for over five-hundred years, first on the links land that separated the ocean from arable terrain. The word "links" is derived from the Old English "hlinc," meaning a strip of unploughed land. These areas were poor in plant nutrients, unfit for cultivation, and their main commercial value was as pastures for sheep. Links land was probably regarded by some as wasteland, but for people eager to play the game, it suited their needs nicely. By 1583, as elsewhere in Scotland, the Church in St. Andrews was taking people to task for playing on the "golf fields" on Sundays. But it couldn't stamp out a game dear to the

Scottish heart. In 1771, Tobias Smollet wrote about people he encountered in Edinburgh, just north of St. Andrews, who:

....divert themselves at a game of called Golf, in which they use a curious kind of bats tipt [sic] with horn, and small elastic balls of leather stuffed with feathers, rather less than tennis-balls, but of much harder consistence. This that they will fly an incredible distance. Of this diversion the Scotch are so fond, that, when the weather will permit, you may see a multitude of all ranks, from the senator of justice to the lowest tradesman, mingled together in their shirts, and following the balls with the utmost eagerness.

Players (or caddies) carried clubs in their hands and under their armpits, golf bags didn't come into use until the late nineteenth century. The ball was teed up on a small mound of sand (usually taken from the bottom of the hole). They played against each other in matches (this is where the term match play comes from), and did not keep score like we do now until the late 1700's, when competitions began to be decided by the total number of shots a player took, rather than how many holes he won against his opponent. Match play is still played today, as in the Ryder Cup, but it is a form of play most people are not very familiar with. Even though the game was a little different in the old days, there have always been golf enthusiasts. As George Carnegie wrote in a poem almost two-hundred years ago, it is for many a "never failing fountain of delight."

### ***How has the game changed over the years?***

Golf is still essentially the game it has always been – you hit a ball from the tee and keep hitting it until you can put it into a hole many yards away. Golfers are always comparing one era against another. Old-timers who have played the game for years

complain that the golf ball goes too far now and that technology is getting out of hand - that basically the game is easier than before. It may be, but this is not a new argument. Take the following newspaper story from the 1880's, comparing the playing conditions on the Old Course at St. Andrews from what they had been thirty years before:

The niceties of the game are minimized, and force is taking the place of skill. The time was when a mistake at any place was severely punished; now the course can be 'skuttered' without much loss....Where now is the nervous danger of crossing 'Hell' [bunker] on to the Elysian fields? Where is the punishment of the 'Beardies' [bunkers] for a missed stroke? Both are left as historical terrors; no one now requires to risk them. The putting greens too, are quite changed. Then, there was a variety of surface which brought out the greater skill; now all are nicely turfed over and artificially dressed like billiard tables.

With technological changes in the clubs and balls, we hear the same kind of arguments today - courses are not as hard as they used to be since Tiger Woods and others can hit it past all the trouble. As the old saying goes, the more things change the more they stay the same. This certainly holds true for golf.

### ***How has equipment changed?***

In the beginnings of the game, players used mostly wooden clubs, hand-made by skilled craftsmen, many of whom made bows for archers. Before the 17th century, balls were made of wood, boxwood was common. Around 1618 the ball began to be fashioned from leather and stuffed with chicken feathers. Iron clubs used only for extricating one's ball from a horrible lie, since



they had a tendency to rip the ball to pieces. Hickory was usually used for the shafts of clubs (Britain began importing it from the United States in the 1820s), and the heads were generally made of apple, blackthorn, or beech. The clubs were very long and slender in shape, with shallow, convex faces. This technology remained basically the same until the middle of the 19th century. The ball was made from leather that was cut into three pieces, softened with alum and water, and sewed together with waxed thread. A small hole was left for putting in the feathers, which was done with a strong stuffing-iron. The hole in the leather, which did not affect the flight of the ball, but slightly interfered with its putting quality, was then sewed up, and the ball received three coats of paint. An experienced ball maker could make four balls a day. With this equipment a player could hit the ball 160-170 with his "Play Club" (equivalent to today's driver).

Around 1848 a new ball began to be made out of gutta percha, a gum tapped from trees indigenous to Malaya. Using a mold to shape warm chunks of this material into a ball, a man could now make a dozen "gutties," as they were called, to every feather ball, and the price was a quarter of the old ball. This made the game more affordable for the masses, and brought on a greater demand for golf courses – and new equipment. The new ball was harder and much more resilient than the "featherie," and to play it effectively, the club head became shorter and the neck of the club thicker and stronger. With this new, harder ball, golfers were able to use irons more often in playing shots, and they replaced the woods for shorter shots requiring great accuracy.

By 1890 the driver took on a look that has remained pretty much the same ever since, and the ball could travel 190-210 yards with a good hit. Then, in 1898, another new ball was invented by Coburn Haskell, the "Haskell" ball, made of thin rubber strips wound around a solid core. It added another twenty yards to drives. By 1920, the ball could be hit 250 yards,

and even further when steel shafts finally replaced hickory in 1929.

From the 1950's on, with the exception of golf balls getting better, equipment design stayed pretty much the same until about twenty years ago, when metal heads for woods and graphite shafts came into general use. Today, with these new clubs and shafts, along with super hard golf balls, a pro can drive the ball 350 yards. Golf courses in 1900 were around 6,000 yards long, now to have a comparable distance challenge they would have to be about 8,000 yards. Today there is a debate that the ball travels too far, but this is not a new concern. As John Low claimed in his 1906 book *Concerning Golf*, "the worst feature of the new balls is the distance they travel from a mis-hit. Not only had the old ball to be hit hard, but it had to be hit accurately, or it would not go at all." The same might be said today for modern golf balls and clubs being too forgiving. Yet the fact remains, no matter what the technology, golfers still have to get the ball into the hole in the fewest number of shots to win.

### ***How have the rules changed?***

The oldest known rules of golf were written in 1744, and there were only thirteen of them. Today, there are thirty-four, and they can appear complicated to even the most experienced golfer. Some of these early rules wouldn't go over very well today. For example, then you were required to tee your ball within a club's length of the hole. Could you imagine doing that today, resulting in divots everywhere around the green. Back then they didn't really have greens, someone just cut a hole in the ground, but still, it seems kind of rude, don't you think? If you were to lose a ball, you had to go back to the spot you last hit, drop another, and "allow your adversary a stroke for the misfortune." One rule that remains today is the twelfth, which required the player farthest from the hole to play their ball first.

The rules have evolved with the game, taking into account developments in equipment as well as course conditions. It was not until about 1910 that regulations were put into place regarding equipment, so before that some players would use a pool cue or some other strange instrument to putt with. In the 1920's size and weight limits were established for the ball in the United States, but it wasn't until 1990 that there was a standard for balls world-wide. Up until 1938 a player could carry as many clubs as he wanted in his bag, now the limit is fourteen.

The rules have become unified in the last fifty years, as the United States Golf Association (founded in 1894) and Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews (founded in 1754) make the rules that are now accepted as the standard for the entire golfing world. Before that, different rules applied depending on where one played, and in the early years of the game, each club established its own rules. A player should know the rules, and carry a rule book with him or her. Of all the rules, the two most important rules to remember are: 1) to play the ball as it lies from the tee to the green (no "mulligans," "do-overs," or "gimmes"), and; 2) when confronted with a situation that isn't covered in the rule book, to do what is fair – present day Rule 1-4, the equity rule. This way the spirit of the game is upheld while allowing people to still have fun playing it.