

3. The Aristocratic Myth Early Scottish Golf - an elite game only?

David Hamilton

It is asserted occasionally that only a small number of gentlemen golfers played the game of golf in early Scotland and that they, and their tiny number of clubs formed in the 1700s, alone kept the game alive until the boom in golf in the mid 1800s.⁽¹⁾ If this assertion is true, important consequences flow from it, not least that historians of democratic outlook can ignore golf history on the grounds that it was not a politically correct game in this early Scottish phase.

I believe that the historical record is to the contrary: all the documents suggest that golf was popular with Scottish citizens in the 1700s and earlier. The reasons why this dimension has been missed by historians are also of interest to contemporary sports history, and can be looked at too.

The evidence suggesting a broad interest in golf by all classes is firstly that many ordinary golfers were brought before the church courts in the 1700s, for playing on Sundays. The offenders singled out by the Kirk Sessions were not men of substance, but ordinary citizens - tailors, masons, apprentices and others. Young men and boys also feature in the church's actions. The frequent mention of golf in these Sunday limitations reveals the popularity of the game. It was not a minority sport of the privileged.⁽²⁾ Even in St Andrews, the Kirk Session took action against the Sunday golfers.

St Andrews Kirk Session, Dec 18th 1583 reports:

"This quilk [same] day, it was delaited [judged] that Alexander Miller's two sonis [sons] ar inobedient to him, and that thei, with Nichol{ Mane, William Bruse and otheris, their complices, playit in the golf fields Sunday last wes, Lyme of fast and preching, agains the ordinances of the kirk. The sessioun ordanis shame to be warnit and accusit theairof."⁽³⁾

The prosecution tells us much. It shows that golf at St Andrews in 1583 was popular and was sufficiently established for there to be an area known as the golf fields, probably the links we know today, and mentioned in earlier statutes. The accused were young boys, the sons of a local citizen and they had a group of golfing friends. Their play was in winter, in December, a season which, we will see later, was important for the sport. Other "Sunday golf" prosecutions confirm these findings, namely that the ordinary citizens of the Scottish towns played golf at this time. In Stirling an apprentice was accused of playing golf in the park on Sunday.⁽⁴⁾ Apprentices were the poorest of all those at work, and were paid little or nothing. Yet they, like the St Andrews boys, played golf. There is no chance that they played golf with the expensive feathery balls and equipment of the nobility.

Secondly, at this time the early statutes of some towns like Elie and St Andrews had ancient charters which protected the play at golf by the "inhabitants", "citizens", or "neighbours". Such regulation was unnecessary if only the local lairds were at play, and the use of these words suggests mass play by the humble.

Thirdly, in the 1700s evidence of golf as a widely popular game appeared in literary accounts by travellers. Pennant's Tour of Scotland of 1769 says that the sports of Moray, on the north-east coast, were "hunting, firing at marks. football and club- ball."⁽⁵⁾ Smollet in his Expedition of Humphrey Clinker makes the same point in his description of golf at Leith in 1766. Of golf he says:

"Of this diversion the Scots 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 mingling together in their shirts, and following the balls with the utmost eagerness."⁽⁶⁾

Topham's account of his visit to Scotland in 1774 gives much the same picture, adding that "they [the Scots] instruct their children in it, as soon as they can run alone". Even at the end of the century a local description of the of the game at Leith describes the same situation. The Statistical Account of 1793 says grandly that:

"the greatest and wisest of the land were to be seen on the links of Leith, mingling freely with the humblest mechanics in pursuit of their common and beloved amusement. All distinctions of rank were levelled by the joyous spirit of the game. Lords of Session and cobblers, knights, baronets and tailors might be seen earnestly contesting for the palms of superior dexterity, and vehemently but good humouredly discussing moot points of the game, as they arose in the course of play."⁽⁷⁾

This vision of a vibrant classless game of the links is perhaps overstated. But it gives no support to those who consider that early Scottish golf was an aristocratic preserve, an elite game of the few. Instead it does seem to have been a widely popular game, though perhaps one lacking sophistication at the lower levels. But the most important observation relating to the controversy is from John Chamberlayne's *Magna Britanniae* a survey of British life in 1708, and he says of Scottish sport that he found:

"not to mention Hunting, Setting, Horse-Racing, Fishing, Fowling, Coursing, Bowling and such manly Sports, proper only to the nobility, gentry and their attendants; the sports called Football playing, and Golf were the usual recreations of the Common People."⁽⁸⁾

Chamberlayne's conclusion is clear: the game of golf was a mass game, a game more popular with the ordinary people than with the gentry.

Long and Short

The many ordinary golfers out at play lacked the elegant equipment of the gentleman's game - the feathery balls and the brittle hybrid clubs. It is likely that the humble players were using simpler equipment, hitting the ball less far, and a full round of the links might have been an ordeal.

This suggestion is strengthened by finding "short" golf holes and "short" golf courses, suited to the simpler equipment, at a number of places, plus a number of references to short holes or short play. In the Seafield correspondence of 1690 in the north-east of Scotland, there is a hint of this, "ife you have a mind for the long goff, let me know."⁽⁹⁾

Similar language is found in 1786 when a correspondent in Edinburgh wrote to a friend in the island of Mull:

"I meant to send you a Doz golfe clubs and a half a Doz balls to play round the Green at short or long holes as you chose - if I thought it would be agreeable to you to have such - as it would be a new exercise in Mull."⁽¹⁰⁾

Short courses for short golf with inexpensive equipment are hinted at surprisingly often

in early documents. At Leith near the start of a circuit of the links, there was a short course called the "Braehead Holes," and to the left of the first hole there were also the "Scholars' Holes." At St Andrews there were also the "Scholars' Holes" near the 17th green with the Scholars' and Progressing Bunker persisting nearby as a reminder, perhaps, of these short holes. At Musselburgh there were "caddies holes" near the 5th hole. Carnoustie later had a "Duffers Course," and North Berwick had its "Tree Holes" - a name which raises the possibility that these holes were played by those with tree clubs, ie home-made shinty sticks. In the 1770s both a long and a short course were found at Elie.⁽¹¹⁾ These were not putting greens but a set of holes of modest length.

These all testify to a simple form of golf played with simpler equipment by the humbler players on shorter courses. It was the churchyard game, evolving onto the links, where the gentlemen golfers were a familiar sight, and it may have had connections with shinty.

The Sunday games played could be of many kinds, and took place on the flat grassland round the church. Football was popular, and in 1595 Glasgow Town Council had to ban "golf and shinty" from the "High and Blackfriars Yards." The High and Blackfriars were the two churches in Glasgow, and the yards were their churchyards. Since golf and shinty were banned together, this increases the likelihood that these were two forms of one game played with the same club and ball. Perhaps many of the Sunday sportsmen brought along a club. Perhaps if enough players appeared, team games like shinty were played. If few appeared or few wished to play, or late in the day after an exhausting game of shinty, they perhaps reverted to the simpler, personal, stick-and-ball game of golf.

Links with Shinty

Though shinty is now regarded as a Highland game, it is easily forgotten that in mediaeval times the game was also played widely in the Borders and Lowlands of Scotland. This observation increases our interest in shinty as a possible relative or precursor of the early game of golf.

Two scraps of information from Glasgow show this link. In 1595 the Town Council of Glasgow acted to ban "golf, carrick, and shinty" as nuisances in the town, revealing that shinty was as popular as golf with the ordinary citizens.⁽¹²⁾ As late as the 1700s, shinty was a favourite with the lowland university students. Murray's lively social history, *The Old College of Glasgow* says shinty was so popular in Glasgow that "every boy had to find his own shinty stick".⁽¹³⁾ Murray says that there was, in consequence, steady damage to the local hawthorn hedges in Glasgow, as the boys made up their own sticks from the bent hedge saplings, the traditional way of making a sporting club. These young College players, mostly from well-off lowland families, probably also used these clubs for golf as well as shinty. The curved sticks shown in the early illustrations of shinty are not unlike early golf clubs, and the construction of the hair-filled shinty ball is obviously similar to the later descriptions of the feathery golf ball. Shinty even appears in 1671 in the town records of North Berwick, "Reported some of the East and West Gait [Gate] to have played at schinne on Sabbath last in the afternoon."⁽¹⁴⁾

Lastly, even the most remote part of Scotland - the island of St Kilda - had its stick and ball game. Martin Martin, who toured and published an account of his tour in Scotland in 1697, recorded of the islanders:

"They use for their Diversion short clubs and balls of wood ; the sand is a fair field for this Sport and Exercise, in which they take great pleasure, and are very nimble at it; they play for Eggs, Fowl, Hooks, or Tobacco; and so eager are they for Victory that they strip themselves to their Shirts to obtain it." (15)

The St Kilda game may have been shinty or it may not: the play for a prize suggests an individual rather than a team game.

Later Links with Shinty

These close and unexpected links between golf and shinty can even be traced into the nineteenth century. Bob Ferguson, Open Champion 1880-82, describes starting golf as a boy in Musselburgh using a shinty stick, as had 'Old' Willie Park. Even in his prime, Park could take out a shinty stick to play and beat lesser golfers and demonstrate his mastery of golf. His biographer describes his early play:

"In the summer evenings the caddies began to play on their own account. It was difficult at first for Willie to procure clubs and balls. When he could not get a club he found a substitute in the shape of a large thick stick, hooked at one end - in other words a shinty. With this, Willie made such progress that in a very short time his opponents with the aid of more orthodox weapons were no match for Willie with his shinty." ⁽¹⁶⁾

Alex Herd, Open Champion in 1902, is known to have started playing golf as a boy in St Andrews using shinties cut from trees in the woods near St Andrews, and played with cork balls made from champagne corks rescued from the bins behind the R & A clubhouse. Balls were weighted with screws driven into the cork. ⁽¹⁷⁾

Even Vardon in Jersey later started his play with a tree stick ⁽¹⁸⁾ and James Barrie's Historical Sketch of the Hawick Golf Club of 1898 starts:

"Don't bounce about your dogs of war,
Nor at our 'shinties' scoff, boys;
But learn our motto - 'sure and far,'
Then come and play at Golf, boys."

The Myth

What is the origin of this aristocratic myth? The evidence suggests that a game or games of golf were popular in Scotland in the 1700s. My explanation of this loss of historical memory is that there was a crisis in the sport in the serious and troubled times of the early 1800s. The authorities feared a French-style Revolution in Britain, and with troops on the streets, public sport was discouraged. In addition, industrialisation meant long factory hours summer and winter, with the loss of traditional winter leisure. All forms of sport in Britain declined, including shinty and curling, and in particular most of the gentlemen's golf clubs in Scotland had some form of internal crisis. Many folded up, as at Glasgow, Leith, Aberdeen and elsewhere, but revived later.

The revival of sport came about 1850 but the golf boom was not until later, about 1880. By then two generations of neglect of sport had occurred and when the new wave of sport appeared, it was based in England on private property-owning golf clubs, with the customary prejudices, and the new amateur historians of the game were English. Most of these historians have equated golf activity with the membership of a club, an understandable assumption from their English viewpoint. In studying Scotland they have contented themselves with noting the numbers and activities of golfers who were members of the early golfing societies, and the expense of the sophisticated equipment discouraged any further hunt for golfers beyond the land-owning classes. Instead, the majority of players were not involved in any club, society or golfing cliques: many golfers, rich and poor, simply went out and played on the links. The formalities of a club were not desired, nor necessary, for large numbers of players. This then is the

origin of the myth that persists, that there were only gentlemen golfers out at play. Instead, there were others, playing in their own way a game which might not be quite the game we call golf today. They should not be forgotten. ⁽¹⁹⁾

References

1. It is fashionable to view golf as a popular game only from 1850, and to state that prior to this, it was only played by a handful of aristocrats. Most historians obtained this view from Robert Browning's "History of Golf", London 1995 and share his view that the clubs were crucial: see similar conclusions in John Lowerson and Tony Mason "Sport in Britain: A Social History", Cambridge 1989 pp 187- 214 and Ian T Henderson and David I Stirk "Royal Blacheath" 1981

2. Interestingly the corresponding English regulations also ban a number of sports, but cambuca, golf and football are missing from the list: see Joacham K Ruhl (1984) "Religion and Amusements in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England" British Journal of Sports History, vol 1, 125-165. See also R D Breckenridge (1969) "The Enforcement of Sunday Observance in Post-Revolution Scotland 1689-1733" Records of Scottish History Society 17, xx-yy.

3. Scottish History Society St Andrews Kirk Session Records 1559-1600 Edinburgh 1890: see pages 515, 846 and 913.

4. Stirling Parish Records of 30th January 1621; quoted in W L Thomson "Old Stirling Sports and Pastimes" 1921. Another game mentioned in the church legal actions excites the golf historian briefly: namely the occasional mention of play at "nineholes." This was a form of bowls, not golf: see A I Ritchie "The Church of St Baldred" 1880, p164, J A Gillespie "Dundald: the Parish and its Setting", Glasgow 1939, p330, and R C Brownlee "Dunbar Golf Club 1794-1980", Dunbar 1980, p3. For the 1604 Aberdeen Ecclesiastical Records see "Selections from the Records of the Kirk Session, Presbytery and Synod of Aberdeen", Spalding Club vol 15, p38.

5. Thomas Pennant "Tour in Scotland", Warrington 1774

6. Tobias Smollet "The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker", London 1771, p524

7. Edward Topham "Letters from Edinburgh", London 1776 . "Statistical Account", Leith 1793: see also L N Tranter "Popular Sports and the Industrial Revolution in Scotland: the Evidence of the Statistical Accounts" "Journal of History of Sport 4", 21-38. One of the best known eighteenth century golfers, "The Cock o' the Green" in Kay's "Series of Original Portraits", Edinburgh 1837, was not a club member.

8. John Chamberlayne "Magnae Britanniae" 22nd English edition, 1st Scottish edition 1708, p524

9. Seafield Correspondence from 1685-1708 "Scottish History Society" vol 3 Edinburgh 1912

10. Scottish Records Office; Maclaine Papers GD174/1329

11. For short courses see Johnston "Clapcott"; Colville "Musselburgh", p23; Tulloch "Morris", p30 and Alasdair M Drysdale "The Golf House Club, Elie" 1975. I doubt if these were merely putting greens.

12. Ban on "carric" quoted in James Colville "The Glasgow Golf Club 1787-1907 Glasgow 1907", p1, based on the Glasgow Kirk Session Records of 1589.
13. David Murray "Memories of the Old College of Glasgow", Glasgow 1927, p425
14. John Kerr "The Golf-Book of East Lothian", Edinburgh 1898, appendix p1
15. Martin Martin "A Voyage to St Kilda", London 4th edition 1753, p62
16. For Park's early play with wooden clubs see George M Colville "Five Open Champions and the Musselburgh Story", Musselburgh 1980. A remarkable number of famous nineteenth century golfers started play with simple sticks, and for the childhood clubs used by Auchterlonie, Ferguson and Vardon see Henry Leach "Great Golfers in the Making", London 1907
17. Childhood use of shinty sticks in Bell Street, St Andrews is described in O K Andra Kircaldy "My Fifty Years of Golf: Memories", London 1921, p110 and confirmed in Sandy Herd "My Golfing Life London", 1923, p1
18. Harry Vardon gives more details of his home-made tee clubs in his "My Golfing Life", London 1933, p20
19. This view that clubs alone counted is an understandable mistake prevalent in anglo-centric golf histories. When golf spread to England, few players were outside the private club system. That golf was played in Scotland without being a member of a land and property-owning club escaped the notice of historians, and this continues to elude and baffle contemporary writers and visitors.