G is for GOLF by Kyle Granite A—Z of Scottish History

We all know that Scotland is affectionately referred to as 'The Home of Golf', the game is seen as a national cultural icon that many Scot's are particularly proud of. With Scotland having 587 golf courses spread across her dramatic landscape (that's more courses per head of population than anywhere else in the world!), it is little surprise that the golfing industry plays a significant role in Scotland's economy, with ancient courses such as St Andrews, Musselburgh and Carnoustie attracting pilgrims from all across the world. This post will explore the history of golf and why a sport that involves hitting a ball across large open plains became so popular in a country known for unpredictable and almost always wet and windy weather!

The Old Course at St Andrews and the iconic Swilken Burn Bridge

It is a common misconception that the word 'Golf' is an acronym of 'Gentleman Only, Ladies Forbidden', but the word actually derives from the words 'goff' or 'gouff', simply meaning 'club', which eventually evolved to 'golf' (and while we are at it, it wasn't until the Victorian era when women were discouraged from playing the sport). In fact, records show a variety of spellings used to describe the popular sport, such as; goff, gowf, goif, gouff, goife, golve and gowfe. This was because there was no standardised spelling with the absence of dictionaries, and therefore people would write phonetically.

The origins of the game, like many other things, is unknown (on a complete side note, this simply highlights the value of records and record keeping). It is generally accepted that the game originated in Scotland in the High Middle Ages, however many variations of the game appear in countries all over the world. The first courses (including the establishment of the 18 hole course), clubs, rules and tournaments are all credited to Scotland.

The game was so popular in Scotland that in 1457, during the reign of King James II, it appeared in two Acts of Parliament stating that "the fut bal ande the golf" (football and golf) were to be "vtterly criyt done" (cried down) and "nocht vsyt" (not used) or offenders will be "tane be the kingis officiaris" (arrested by the king's officers). Essentially, the concern was that golf and football were distracting Scots from practicing archery and other military training. Thankfully, this irrational law was repealed in 1502 and the game was embraced by many, including Scotland's monarchs - James IV and Mary Queen of Scots were known to have been avid golfers. Nonetheless, the game, like many other leisurely activities, were to be avoided on the Sabbath. In the parish register for South Leith four parishioners appeared before the kirk session on 7th December 1610 confessing that they had "prophaned the Sabbath be playing at the gowffe in tyme off preaching and thairfore was ordained to mak thair publict repentance the nixt Sabbath".

The MacDonald boys playing golf by Jeremiah Davison (1741)

Following the Union of the Crowns in 1603, with James IV and many of his courtiers passionate about the sport, it wasn't long before it became a popular pastime in England and Ireland. With the King residing primarily at Greenwich Palace, Scottish nobles began to play golf on Blackheath, the hill behind the palace, with The Royal Blackheath Golf Club claiming the title of England's oldest course. Of course with the spread of the British Empire the sport quickly gained ground across the globe, the first record of golf appearing in North America was a consignment of 96 golf clubs and 432 golf balls which were shipped from Leith to Charleston, South Caroline in 1743.

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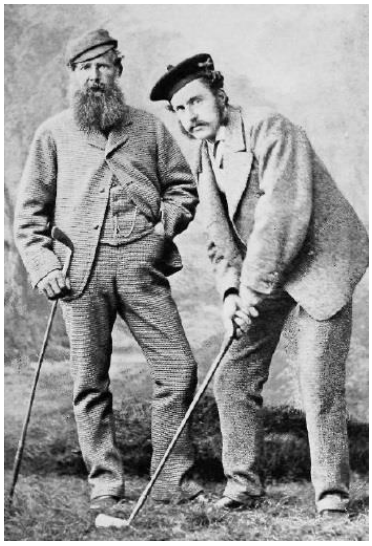
By 1786, Scottish merchants had established the first golf club in the United States; The South Carolina Golf Club in Charleston. The popularity of the sport grew exponentially in the States, and by 1894 the United States Golf Association (USGA) was established and by 1900 more than 1000 golf clubs had been formed.

Back home, the Industrial Revolution brought with it the expansion of railways, allowing ordinary Scots to explore outside of their locality for the first time and golf clubs sprang up all across the country. With the improvement of mass production, golf clubs and balls became more affordable to the average person making the game much more accessible to all, regardless of social class.



Old Tom Morris with Young Tom c. 1870-75

The desire to add a competitive element to the game led to the forerunner to the British Open taking place at the Prestwick Golf Club in 1860, with Willie Park taking the title. Other legendary names include Tom Morris Snr (who holds the record for oldest champion and greatest margin of victory) and his son Young Tom Morris, who has gone down in history as the first great champion after winning four consecutive times from 1869. The senior Morris is also heralded for his pioneering work on course architecture.

To this day golf remains one of the most treasured sports in Scotland. Many golf enthusiasts simply love the idea of playing their favourite sport in the open air, whatever the weather, with Scotland's breathtaking landscapes as the backdrop. In fact, many see the weather, which can often feature all four seasons in the one day, as adding an extra challenge - golf in Scotland can accurately be described as a form of meditation as well as an extreme sport! But for some, the love for golf stems from the bond with the courses themselves, steeped in history and tradition, and the idea that you can retrace the steps of Mary, Queen of Scots herself at the oldest golf course in the world at Musselburgh Links.