

100 Years of

Golf in

North Devon

by

R. A. Pooley

WITH most of their special centenary celebration events now behind them the Royal North Devon Golf Club can look back on the past season with a tremendous amount of satisfaction.

All the competitions were well supported and a crowd of 600 turned up to watch the exhibition match between four famous tournament professionals—Peter Alliss, Brian Huggett, Max Faulkner, and Christy O'Connor.

This large gathering was in sharp contrast to 1853, when the first game of golf was played on Northam Burrows. In the early days just a few hardy individuals tried their hand at a game, which was mainly played north of the border.

But as the number of players increased it was decided to hold a meeting and on 4th April, 1864, in Bideford, these enthusiasts met to "arrange the preliminaries for playing the fine Scotch game of golf on the Burrows of Northam".

Club formed

The proposal was adopted and the club was named the North Devon and West of England Golf Club, with the Hon. Mark Rolle as president.

One of the principal problems facing these pioneers was finding a place to change. This was overcome by renting a room at Beer's Farm, Pimpley, Northam.

This led to another snag—transport. But these staunch sportsmen were not to be denied their game and a horse cart was hired to take them to the course, about two miles away.

A well-known print shows one of the early members, Capt. Molesworth, and several of his associates driving along in what appears to be a reckless manner in a two-wheeled trap.

Capt. Molesworth was truly a great character. All his life he played with only three clubs. With these implements he used to lay big wagers and despite the handicap of inferior equipment, often came out on top. He was just as well-known for his skill at bargaining. Golden sovereigns, suits of clothes and mining shares all came alike to the Captain as stakes for golfing encounters.

Became 'Royal'

When he was 82, Capt. Molesworth took part in a particularly notable match, for the ages of the four contestants totalled 335 years. Dr. W. L. Reid, 87, and Capt. T. L. Gordon, 81, beat Mr. R. B. James, 85, and Capt. Molesworth, by 3 and 1.

When in 1867 the Prince of Wales gave his patronage, and the club became "Royal", the seal was set on its fame. Golfers descended like vultures to play on the course which was then, as now, an adventurous, but fair one. One person ventured to say that it had the "tallest, spikiest rushes in the world and the biggest bunkers to carry".

Another milestone was laid in 1868, when the Westward Ho! and North Devon Ladies' Golf Club was formed. Their course was on the ground now occupied by Sandymere and for some obscure reason they were allowed to use only one club—a wooden putter.

Originally the course—which started from just below the Pebbleridge—had only 14 holes, and three were played twice to complete the round of 17 holes.

Famous golfers

At that time holes were cut out by penknives and marked with gull feathers. There were no greens in those days and the grass was uncut, although the sheep of the potwallopers or villagers in the district kept the grass in check.

Many famous golfers learnt the game on these links, including the immortal J. H. Taylor—the greatest of them all—who won the Open Championship five times.

During the war the course, like numbers of others, was requisitioned and used as a bombing range. But the ravages caused by its war service have now been removed leaving few traces of those troublesome days.

One unfortunate aspect of this fine course is that it is no longer the venue of any major championships. Everyone accepts that as a course it is the equal of any in Great Britain, but there are two vital factors missing.

Thousands come

The first is that because it is on what is practically public ground it is virtually impossible to collect any gate money—a necessity if one is going to run a major championship with prizes running into thousands of pounds.

The other is that competitions nowadays attract so many entries that two courses are needed. Saunton—seven miles away as the crow flies—immediately springs to mind, but by road it is a difficult journey, especially in the summer when mile-long traffic jams are the rule rather than the exception.

So it appears that the Royal North Devon Golf Club will never again attain the great heights it once knew as the Mecca of British golf, but one can rest assured that no one is shedding any tears, for it still attracts thousands of golfers each year.

Not perhaps the man who plays off scratch, but the one who plays for the fun of it and for the happy family atmosphere which is always predominant in this club, the oldest in England still playing on its original area.

With grateful acknowledgments to the "Western Morning News", Plymouth.

S.G.G.A. NEWS

Senior Greenkeepers' Golfing Society

A DEPARTURE FROM THE USUAL outing took place on the 10th November, when fifteen greenkeepers with an aggregate of 615 years' service, met together as the Senior Greenkeepers' Golfing Society

This new found Society, whose hope it is to have one meeting in the Autumn of each year, has only one purpose—this is that the "elder brethren" can meet socially and if they wish, enjoy a little, not too serious, golf!

There can be few societies who have had such an auspicious start. Lanark Golf Club were the kindest of hosts and the arrangements by Mr. and Mrs. Gibson of that club were the major part in what proved to be a memorable day.

The weather too was at its most genial behaviour, for although Glasgow was in the grip of one of the worst fogs for years, at Lanark the sun was blazing down from a cloudless sky. After lunch the challenge of this really testing course could not be resisted and seven of the company went out, with the others as spectators. There was a good deal of gamesmanship of the best natured kind and afterwards to tea and a final dram for the road home. We hope to meet again next year, but it will be difficult to match our wonderful day at Lanark.

WM. BRADFORD.

The 19th

A new £40,000 club house is to be built on the Mid-Kent Golf Course, at Singlewell, near Gravesend.

100-Room Hotel on Golf Course

A proposal to build a 100-bedroom hotel on Morecambe golf course has been approved in principle by Morecambe Corporation Parks and Publicity Committee. Designed mainly for the accommodation of conferences, it would include a lecture hall, cinema, banqueting hall, tennis court and swimming pool.

It would first require the consent of the golf club whose lease with the Corporation has still four years to go.

"Caterer & Hotel Keeper".

CORRECTION

We apologise to Mr. Rees, Sales Director of Messrs. Atco, whose name was inadvertently spelt Reece in the Midland Notes in our November issue.