

EARLY METHODS OF GOLF COURSE MAINTENANCE

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ST ANDREWS connections with the game of golf go back a long way. It has been played there since 1553, and possibly earlier. There is a record of the Marquis of Montrose playing golf at St Andrews in 1628, buying two golf balls for tenpence on the day before his wedding, and returning a few days later for further supplies.

An interesting contribution made by St Andrews to sporting history is the official acknowledgment that rabbits are useful to golf. Around 1650 the city authorities permitted the archbishop to "plant and plenish rabbits" in certain parts of the links. The idea, apparently, was that the archbishop could have the meat in return for his rabbits grazing the course. Mowing machines were not yet invented, and any burrows or holes that were made merely provided further natural hazards. History draws a discreet veil over the performances and records of those original golfing rabbits, but seventy years later there is another reference to someone else being given the privilege of "planting black and white rabbits". The city authorities were, however, learning their lesson. This time there was a proviso that "the links were not to be spoiled where golf is used". The assumption is that these later rabbits were expected to keep off the fairways and spend their time grazing in the rough.

Later this concession passed to another farmer. It seems he had no

interest in golf, for he took no steps to keep his rabbits within the area allotted to him. As the result, the links became little more than a rabbit warren. By this time the city of St Andrews was in debt and the links — which had been public property — were sold, with the proviso that the public could still play there.

House of Lords banish rabbits

It was now around the beginning of the nineteenth century, and two clubs had come into existence. Their players complained that the rabbits were spoiling the course. It needed long and expensive legal action, which went as far as the House of Lords, to end the nuisance. Even today sheep and cattle grazing is quite common on a few courses in Britain where ancient laws are still in force which give certain farmers free grazing rights. Most of these courses are laid out on common land which belongs to the local community and where golf is permitted at a very cheap rate as a form of recreation.

The difficulties of turf upkeep under these circumstances can be appreciated — and the task of course maintenance must be pretty tough. It is the writer's experience that most of these particular courses are well kept in spite of ravages of the animals. This is surely a great tribute to the greenkeeper and his staff.

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