

St Andrews resident, Walter Woods, looks back at greenkeeping's daddy of them all,

Old Tom Morris



Photography: Brian Morgan

Every year thousands of golfers make the pilgrimage just to play golf. How many times have you heard the expression "It's a life long ambition" or "It's the golfing experience of a lifetime"? And what an experience the Old Course can provide. Ghosts can be sensed when walking the fairways, and the most powerful feeling is from Old Tom Morris who was the custodian for over 30 years. To commemorate this great man a bronze memorial was placed just below the clock on the R&A Clubhouse.

Tom Morris was born in St Andrews in 1821. Golf dominated his thoughts and daily, when school was finished, he would quickly make his way down to the Links where Tom and his friends would play some golf related game with hand-made clubs and anything which resembled a golf ball.

During his growing up Tom's reputation as a golfer was growing and it was a natural progression to receive employment in the golf shop owned by Allan Robertson who was recognised as the champion golfer. His duties were making golf clubs and

golf balls particularly the latter which was exhausting work as he was only able to make four balls per day.

Fortunately for Tom he was often given the opportunity to play matches against visiting gentlemen and this pleased Tom as he did not like the confinement of the shop. Challenge matches were the common form of competition and very little stroke play took place. Often these matches were played with large wagers riding on them. Allan Robertson and his assistant were now confirmed as the men to play which would influence large bets.

Tom was enjoying life. He was playing golf which was providing him with more than average earnings and, at the age of 29 he married Nancy Bayne and between them over the years they had four of a family, three boys and a daughter. The most famous of these was his first son, young Tom, who in future years became the most famous golfer in the land.

Around this time St Andrews was rundown and could only be described as decaying. Fortunately in 1842, Hugh Lyon Playfair was elected as Provost and because of his enthusi-

asm, wisdom and foresight, many improvements were implemented. His main hobby was golf and he instituted the Union Club which later became the Royal and Ancient Golf Club. Other notable improvements included the creation of the eastern part of the Links to extend the golfing ground. All these dramatic changes encouraged visitors from distant areas and it was a visitor which first introduced the gutta percha balls or solid rubber moulded golf ball. These percha balls were introduced soon after 1848 and they quickly became fashionable.

Old Tom Morris



Photography: Brian Morgan

This new ball had an undesirable effect on the relationship between Allan Robertson and Tom. This uneasiness continued for a number of months until one day Tom was invited to play with the rubber ball and found it to his liking for its quality. Unfortunately the news was taken to Allan who promptly fired him and afterwards they parted company.

The introduction of the cheaper golf ball made an enormous difference to the development of golf in Scotland. Many of the existing golfing societies had artisan membership with the result that the price to play golf was becoming within reach of many Scots.

In 1851 Colonel James Ogilvy Fairlie, who was to become Captain of the R&A arranged for Tom and his family to be moved to Prestwick. With the job description of Supervising the Links and Professional Golfer, Tom Morris was soon amazing the locals with his golfing ability and soon reigned supreme.

Prestwick, which consisted of 12 holes involving many crossing points, particularly around the Alps and Cardinal bunkers, could not be described as anything seen today. No greens or tees existed. The custom was to scratch away the longer grass immediately around the hole, the green only being a few feet in diameter. Teeing up was made only a couple of club lengths from the hole and sand on which to tee the ball up on was often taken from the bottom of the hole, making it sometimes difficult to retrieve the ball.

As the years moved on Tom's reputation gained momentum. Prestwick was also gaining in stature and soon was recognising the desirability of providing some annual test to gauge the comparative merits of professional golfers. To achieve this they organised the first stroke play event

over 36 holes which was three rounds of 12 holes at Prestwick. This tournament took place during October 1860 and eight entered to claim the honour. Tom Morris being the local was expected to win, but was beaten by two strokes by Willie Park, of Musselburgh. The next year Tom gained his revenge over Willie.

During this period St Andrews was having difficulties on the golf course and the Committee were authorised to appoint a custodian at a considerably larger salary than given before. It was decided in 1864 to approach Tom and offer him the job as Professional Golfer on the understanding that he would have the entire charge of the golf course and being responsible for it being kept in good order. The sum of £50 per annum was voted for payment of Tom's salary and £20 for his duty devoted to the upkeep of the Links. This was considerably more than the £6 paid to his predecessor, Alexander Herd.

A year later more progress was made when James Honeyman, a local St Andrean, was employed on a part time basis to help on the course. He was provided with a barrow and shovel and heard Tom's words ringing in his ears "more sand Honeyman, more sand" indicating that the main duty was to topdress greens and tees and fill in the many rabbit scrapes.

Tom's philosophy with regard to the application of sand went back to his time at Prestwick when he accidentally spilled sand onto the 10th green only to see beautiful green shoots come through a few weeks later.

Tom revelled in his return to St Andrews. He purchased a new shop where he manufactured golf clubs and balls.

The golf course, which was part of his duty, would be mainly supervised by his daily playing and only limited maintenance took place. Apart from

top-dressing, occasional hole changing and tee box moving, little or no other maintenance was thought necessary.

The Old Course which Tom had to supervise, bears no resemblance to the course which exists today. Even after a thorough search through records no one can tell how old the course actually is. We do know that the courses consisted of 22 holes, 11 out and 11 in. Having played out, the players played back using the same greens. Notices still exist today informing players that homeward players have right of way. In 1764 they reduced the course to 18 holes.

Grass growing would be slowed down by the concentrated traffic of many golfers taking the same constant routes, with the result that very little cutting would take place.

The first survey of the course had been made in 1836 and about the same period the greens were extended sideways and made much larger to contain two putting holes or two separate greens with their own identity. This course remains today except that they played it in reverse. Ten years later the committee changed the course as it is played today.

From a map dated 1821 it is known that the Old Course measured 6388 yards, but it was not until 1846 that teeing grounds containing tee boxes and tee markers were introduced.

The first Open Championship was organised at St Andrews during 1873. Young Tom was favourite having made the Championship belt his own property the previous year, but was well defeated by the winner, Tom Kidd.

Tom Morris senior was becoming older and his reputation and fame was becoming wider. To assist him a young man from Dornoch was employed, his name, Donald Ross, who eventually emigrated to Ameri-

ca where he built himself a reputation as a golf course designer.

By the late 1890's St Andrews had also made notable advances. The R&A was now in large part responsible for the running and organisation of the Open Championship and also, through general opinion, were given the authority in 1897 to improve and co-ordinate the rules associated with golf.

During 1895 horse driven and hand propelled cylinder mowers were purchased. Water wells were sunk adjacent to each green and by lowering buckets down by a rope, the water would be extracted physically and thrown across the green surfaces. The wells were about two feet square and about 15 feet deep with timber linings. The grasses throughout the St Andrews Links would have most likely been fescues and bents, no rye grasses or poa annua would be present.

In that same year life was not all smooth with Tom. AF MacFie, the first amateur champion, complained and resigned from the Green Committee as he thought that Tom Morris had too much power. And, after reading a notice which appeared, it looks as if Mr MacFie was right, for it said that the custodian had filled up the putting holes and stopped the public from playing without notice of his intention.

Just a few years later Old Tom retired at the age of 82 but his retirement was softened by the knowledge that it was not due to any decline in health, it was only the fact that the job was now increasing and Tom was finding it difficult to cope with all his responsibilities and felt that a younger man was now necessary. Tom Morris lived for another six years until 1908 and he was always a familiar figure on the golf course.