

A HISTORY

# Au natural look lies at golf's roots: The period 1457-1832

*"Decreed and ordained that fute ball and golfe must be utterly crytdune."*  
— King James II, March 6, 1457

By JIM CONNOLLY

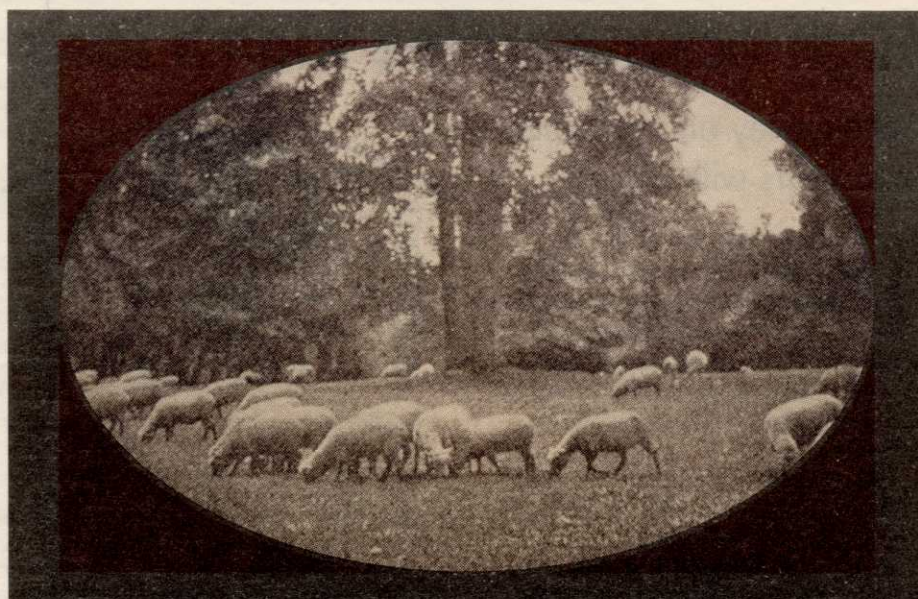
The King of England believed that playing golf and fute ball (soccer) interfered with practice of arch-ery, which was the common defense at that time. His decree went largely ignored and his loyal subjects continued to play golf in spite of possible punishment.

It is reported that Mary Queen of Scots, perhaps the Alice Dye of her day, was playing golf immediately after her husband's death. She claimed it eased her mourning. Sometime later, in 1603, King James I decreed that golf could be played but church must also be attended. Forbidding the game may have slowed its growth, but golfers' hearts and souls were branded with balls in flight and swishing clubs.

The game spawned some very serious followers as well. In 1637, a young boy was hung for stealing golf balls. The same year, a golfer bludgeoned his caddie with a nib lick club for giving bad advice.

The Royal and Ancient Golf Society of St. Andrews was formed in 1754, and in all its pomp and ceremony, formalized the game by creating a small number of basic rules. In its raw form, golf was and still is a game that consists of the golf course, implements (clubs) and a ball. Balls and implements used to strike the ball were similar for all golfers, but the differences between golf courses was

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great! This makes the game of golf unique in that the player is called upon to adapt to a number of situations. Conditions on golf courses varied greatly, depending upon rainfall, wind, the presence of grazing animals (the first lawn mowers), the type of grass — if any — and a number of vastly different land features.

Golf courses varied greatly because there were no uniform methods of maintenance. This all changed in 1832 with the invention of the mechanized lawn mower. The mowers equalized the playing fields somewhat, but big differences still existed due to differing geographic location. Ransomes, Simms and Jeffries began marketing the first reel mowers, introducing a dramatic change to the game of golf. The height of the grass was no longer dependent upon animals' appetite. Still, conditions varied greatly because this was the only form of maintenance available.

The golf clubs manufactured at this time are evidence of the conditions that prevailed on the courses. There were clubs for hitting out of wagon ruts, deep holes and all kinds of imperfect situations. Different clubs today are primarily manufactured with varied lofts for distance and height. When was the last time you selected a club for hitting out of a

## PART II OF A SERIES

wagon wheel rut or a horse's hoof print? The given environment and ball position forced the golfer to adapt in club selection and execution of the golf shot. It should be noted at this time that putting, and the putting green as we know it today, did not exist.

### THE PERIOD 1832 TO 1900

During this period, the putting green began to take on a more familiar shape and could be considered a "separate" part of the golf course. A brief account of how the game was played would help to clarify how this came about. In the early days, the golfer played to an area where a stick or pole, sometimes a hole in the ground, marked the finishing point of a single golf hole. The golfer finished the hole by either hitting the ball into a hole of nondescript size, or against a pole in the ground. The golfer could then start the next hole by teeing from an area only a few yards away from the previous finishing point.

The "putting green" and "tee" in those days were very close together, and difficult to distinguish one from the other. The lawn mower, and better maintenance techniques, eventually led to the distanc-

ing of tees and greens.

In 1836 a special club was designed for "putting" and aptly named the putter. It was desirable for the green to have closely cut grass, if grass was present, and golfers became experienced at putting with specially designed clubs suited for this purpose.

Tom Morris, famous greenkeeper of old, was born in 1821 and maintained golf courses from 1850 to the early 1900s. He was affectionately known as "Old Tom."

Old Tom believed the proper maintenance of the putting green involved frequent, light sand top dressing and no play on Sundays! Old Tom understood the benefits of regular mowing and top dressing to keep the surfaces true and predictable.

Ironically, Old Tom was known around the country as a terrible putter. One of his golfing competitors used to send him mail addressed "Misser of short putts."

Old Tom was normally mild-mannered, but was occasionally given to breaking golf clubs after he missed short putts. Fortunately, he preferred lemonade over Scotch!

Putters were becoming the acceptable club for use on greens, but conditions were still quite variable and players used a number of different clubs on the green. From the book *Golf-Badminton Library*, 1870, it is written: "He was unable to use a cleek for the bad lying putt, these he negotiated with his iron."

After finishing a hole, golfers reached into the hole on the putting green to gather a handful of soil to use as a "tee" on the next hole. This led to a wide range of hole sizes and must have been cause for many ruling problems.

In 1891, an ingenious greenkeeper found a piece of 4-1/4-inch clay drain tile that he pushed into the hole, thus setting the size of the hole.

This occurrence leads one to believe that today's golf course evolved often by happenstance. The hole remains the same diameter today.

Golf courses being built at the turn of the century were designed with separate tees and greens and this was the form of architecture brought to the United States in the late-1800s.

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