

# "Honourable Company" 200 Years Old

## EDINBURGH'S GOLFERS HAVE EARLIEST RULES OF GAME

★ TODAY (says an issue of the Scotsman, forwarded to GOLFDOM by a veteran pro-greenkeeper) marks a golf birthday which in peacetime would have been celebrated with all due honors. It is the 200th anniversary of the foundation of the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, and even among the news that comes from the world war front we may, without apology turn aside for a few minutes to take notice of the interesting occasion.

The men of Muirfield have every right to be proud of their "lang pedigree." They have a worthy past, in which they have given great names to the annals—L. M. Balfour-Melville, J. E. Laidlay, and Robert Maxwell among them—and have not only fostered the best traditions of golf, but have taken an influential hand in its progress and development. They were among the three subscribing clubs to the Open Championship Cup, they contributed to the Amateur Championship trophy, and they took the initiative after the last war in having Championship control vested in the Royal and Ancient Club of St. Andrews.

The first entry in the earliest minute book of the Honourable Company, or the "Gentleman Golfers" as they were then called, records the Act of Council and regulations of 7th March 1744 by the Town Council, with "Deacons of the Crafts Ordinary and Extraordinary of the city of Edinburgh," to be observed by those competing for the city's Silver Club. The "Good Town," as the Act calls it, had presented the Club to be played for annually, under rules which the Council desired the "Gentlemen Golfers" to draw up. The inference from that record is that the "Gentlemen Golfers" existed before 1744, when the Town Council approached them, and the documentary evidence begins the written records which, continuous from that date are the oldest among the world's golf clubs.

It was a condition that the Silver Club winner should attach a gold or silver coin or ball to the trophy, and that old custom survives, though, of course, the original club and one successor are crowded with these pendants of victory and, and the third is also heavily laden. It has, however, room for other ten balls, I am informed, an equivalent in time of 20 years, and there is a glimpse of golfing

days to come, and the era of peace that will follow the extirpation of the totalitarian menace in the Honourable Company's hope that in due course the "Good Town" will again renew its favour.

The rules under which the first competitions for the Silver Club took place are still in existence. They were a notable discovery made on an examination of the first minute-book in 1938, as reported in these columns at the time, and though undated they cannot be later than 1751 and are actually in the handwriting that recorded the Act of Council in 1744. If they were drawn up when the Silver Club was first played for, they pre-date the R. and A.'s original rules by ten years, and are evidently the oldest known written rules.

Space does not permit a detailed chronology or category of the Honourable Company's long life, but it began, as is the case of many golf clubs, in the association of kindred spirits in tavern or coffee-house. The Honourable Company's first "home" was Luckie Clephan's tavern in Leith. In the early years of the 19th century the club moved to Musselburgh, then the popular links, and there they remained till the congested state of the course dictated another "fittin'." The issue then became either Hedderwick or Muirfield, and the decision was for Muirfield.

The Muirfield green was opened in 1891, and with the Honourable Company went the Open Championship, to the extreme chagrin of Musselburgh's local patriots, who went the length of attempting to set up a counterblast Championship. To-day Muirfield is a world-noted test. It has spectacularly out-lived "Andra" Kirkaldy's famous jeer, "jist an auld watter meddie," though even in those days it staged one brilliant final in the Amateur Championship—that of 1909, in which Robert Maxwell beat Cecil Hutchison at the thirty-sixth hole. It gave us also that unforgettable moment in 1920, when Tolley beat Gardner (U.S.A.) for the first post-war Amateur title.

The later removal of the old boundary wall and the taking in of the terrain nearer the shore did, however, change the face and character of the course, and the international companies who competed there before the war found it quite insufficient as a test. Walter Hagen's three 75s in 1929 have, at any rate, been

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reckoned as giving the American the best of his four titles in this country.

In another column "the Scotsman" says:—The world wars have, of course, created gaps in golf records, but the Honourable Company, East Lothian's famous society, whose 200th birthday falls to-morrow (Tuesday) is old enough to boast a hiatus caused by "the Forty-Five." Their competition for the original Silver Club was in suspense for two years. Meanings change with time. "He went out in Forty-Five" would nowadays sound like a reporting phrase in an account of a handicap competition.

Those troubleous times have left other echoes in the Company's long history. The first winner of the Silver Club, John Rattray, an Edinburgh surgeon, was called out of bed in the early hours to

attend Prince Charlie's troops after Prestonpans, and he was afterwards taken prisoner at Culloden. His life was spared, and he was, owing to the good offices, so the story goes, of Duncan Forbes, Lord President of the Court of Session, released in 1747.

In the Honourable Company's annals are interesting glimpses of the convivial side of golf which was so assiduously cultivated in older and more spacious times. Smollet writes of "hearty old men, none of them under eighty, playing golf at Leith, and none of them retiring to bed without a gallon of claret in his belly." A dinner bill for twelve members of the Honourable Company (date 1802) includes £7 10s for claret in a total of £10 4s 2 d, and there is a striking contrast with 1s for beer and 2s for whisky.