

East Lothian – a golfing story
By Sarah Powell of Burke's Peerage & Gentry



Illustration By Courtesy of East Lothian Council”

If St. Andrew's was the birthplace of golf, then East Lothian was its nursery. By the mid-fifteenth century the game was played widely on the east coast of Scotland – to the consternation of the then monarch, James II. The problem was that his nobles were enjoying this game, and football, to such an extent that they were neglecting to practise their archery, a skill at that time essential to the defence of the realm. By 1457, the king deemed it necessary to take firm action. A parliamentary decree specified that “fute-ball and golfe be utterly cryed downe, and not to be used...” This decree constituted the first documentary evidence of the existence of golf. However it proved singularly ineffectual in quenching enthusiasm for the game.

Two further decrees, issued under James III and IV respectively, were similarly ineffective. Fortunately, not long afterwards, the advent of gunpowder diminished the role of archery, enabling the rehabilitation of golf. James IV subsequently developed a passion for the game which became a firm favourite of kings – and queens – in succeeding generations in both Scotland and England. Its popularity since then has spread world-wide, and among people far removed from royalty. In Scotland golf is played by people from all walks of life, while the country's premier golf courses attract players from around the world.

So, where *did* the game start? There have been claims that golf was “invented” in Holland or Belgium, although the game there resembled hockey rather than golf as we know it and supporters of a Scottish heritage point out that there were numerous ball and stick games in Britain and continental Europe at the time. They suggest traders visiting Scotland from the Netherlands saw golf being played in St. Andrews and subsequently introduced it back home.

Encyclopaedia Britannica agrees that golf as it is played today originated in the Middle Ages in Scotland, being first played on the east coast. But it concedes that other, similar, games were played as early as Roman times. It suggests that the Roman game *paganica*, which used a club and feather-stuffed ball, may have inspired games that appeared in countries settled by the Romans such as France, Holland and Britain. Golf balls were stuffed with feathers until the mid-nineteenth century. Intriguingly, a club and wooden ball game called *cambuca*, played in England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was banned as early as 1363 for the same defensive reasons that prompted the ban on *golfe* in Scotland a century later.

Encyclopaedia Britannica also points out that several golf-related words, including golf itself, and also put, tee and stymie, appear to derive from their Dutch counterparts. Meanwhile fifteenth-century illustrations show golf being played in Holland and a famous seventeenth-century painting by A. van de Velde entitled *Frost Scene* depicts a game between two Dutchmen in knickerbockers and two Scots in kilts.

Whatever its origins, early golf in Scotland had markedly royal connections. Despite introducing the third anti-golf decree, James IV became a keen golfer, playing at St. Andrews where he is said once to have lost a bet of 42 shillings playing against the Earl of Bothwell. James’s granddaughter, Mary Queen of Scots was also an enthusiastic player and, indeed, was censured for enjoying a game just days after the murder of her husband, Lord Darnley, in 1567. Some reports say she played at St. Andrew’s, others East Lothian, where her father, James V, played. James VI, also a fan, may well have introduced the game to England when he became the country’s King James I in 1603 for it is thought that he and his court played on Blackheath Common. While in Scotland he reportedly played at Musselburgh and, hearing complaints that the game was prohibited on Sundays, rectified the situation with a decree that those who had “first done their duties to God” should be allowed to play.

Golf was originally played informally in the countryside or on common land. By the eighteenth century, however, golfing societies or clubs were being created. Musselburgh Links – The Old Golf Course claims to be the oldest surviving course in the world, the game having been played there since at least the sixteenth century, while there is documentary evidence of regular play since 1672. Between 1774 and 1895 Musselburgh Links was home to four of

Scotland's earliest and most prestigious clubs: The Royal Musselburgh, formed there in 1774, The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, The Royal Burgess Golfing Society and The Bruntsfield Links Golfing Society.

A further sixty smaller clubs and societies also held their spring and summer meetings at the links while the Open Championship was played there six times between 1874 and 1891, in rotation with St. Andrews and Prestwick. The first ever competition for lady golfers was held at The Old Golf Course on New Year's Day, 1811 and in 1898 the course also hosted one of the first Scottish Amateur Championships.

There are, of course, competing claims to "oldest"... The Royal Blackheath Golf Club in London, which may or may not be located on the land where James VI first played, also claims to be the oldest existing golf club. This contention is based on the belief that a society of golfers formed at Blackheath in 1608. However there is no surviving record of this. Records do, however, exist showing that The Honourable Company of Goffers (sic) was established in Blackheath by 1766.

What we can be sure of is that in the eighteenth century the concept of golf clubs really caught on. The Royal Burgess Golfing Society of Edinburgh was founded in 1735. Nine years later The Gentlemen Golfers of Leith, the precursor of The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, was created. This Honourable Company recorded what are believed to be the earliest-known rules of golf. In 1754 The Royal and Ancient Golf Club – The Society of St. Andrew's was founded.

The Royal Musselburgh Golf Club was also one of the earliest golf clubs, being founded in 1774. Its Old Club Cup, dated 1774, can be seen at the St. Andrew's Golf Museum. The Royal Musselburgh also set a world standard for hole size with its 108 mm diameter cutter, the oldest hole cutter in the world. In 1926 the club relocated to Prestongrange House in Prestonpans.



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Today Muirfield at Gullane is perhaps the most celebrated of East Lothian courses, having become the venue for the Open Championships when The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers relocated there in 1891. The course is consistently rated amongst the top five courses in the world while a survey in

2000 by *Golf World* ranked Muirfield Links first among the top 100 courses in the British Isles.

A racecourse now surrounds Musselburgh Links – perhaps appropriately for this other “sport of kings”. But the original golf course remains and visitors may even try their hand at golf using original hickory clubs. The Old Golf Course also hosts another historic sporting fixture, the Musselburgh Arrow Competition of The Royal Company of Archers – the oldest such sporting event in the world and a fitting tribute to the early history of these two, once competing, sports. The Royal Company of Archers will be celebrating the 400th anniversary of the competition at Musselburgh Links on 22nd May, 2003. With such a rich and celebrated history, little wonder East Lothian remains a centre of attraction in the golfing and wider sporting world.

Golf in East Lothian

Musselburgh Links – The Old Golf Course

Tel: 0131 665 5438

<http://www.musselburgholdlinks.co.uk>

Royal Musselburgh Golf Club

Tel: 01875 810276

<http://www.royalmusselburgh.co.uk>

Muirfield Links

Tel: 01620 842255

<http://www.gullanegolfclub.com>

East Lothian boasts no fewer than 16 further golf clubs. Several of these have long histories. Many have wonderful views. For more information visit

<http://www.golfeastlothian.com>

Other useful sources:

* “Golf” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1969 edition.

** *A Round of History at the British Golf Museum* by Peter N. Lewis, Elinor R. Clark, Fiona C. Grieve, The Royal & Ancient Golf Club Trust, 1998.

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