

Golf's Origins and its Beginnings in Australia

by Robert Grant

Ancient Rome, Chile, Italy, Holland, Scotland. Such diverse countries all have some historical claim on the development of the modern game of golf. Golf, it would seem, does not have one direct lineage but is rather a development and refinement of variously connected games using a ball and a stick.

The Romans used a stuffed leather ball called paganica while *Golf in the Making* (1979) by Henderson and Stirk notes that part of a stained glass window in Gloucester Cathedral, circa 1350, depicts a man about to strike a ball with a hockey-style stick. A Chilean Indian boy is doing the same in a sketch from Charles Darwin's exploration of South America in 1835.

Pele mele, jeu de mail or pall mall originated in Italy, skipped north to France and crossed the Channel to England at the start of the 17th century. An action similar to the golf swing was used to hit the ball with a mallet-headed club, there were rules and boundaries for the game to be played within a court.

Pall Mall in London was the site for the original course, which developed into the road running from St James' Palace to Trafalgar Square. In France, jeu de mail began being played in open countryside and along byways - ditches were original 'hazards' and hedges the 'rough'.

Henderson and Stirk point out that the Dutch historian van Hengel has traced the origins of golf in Holland as far back as 1296 to the village of Loenen which had four holes for the game which continued to be played there for more than 500 years. Seventeenth century Dutch landscapes commonly show golf being played on ice.

Early trading links between Holland and Scotland probably can explain the Scots' passion for golf. *Golf in the Making* shows a watercolour of Bruntsfield Links dated 1746, possibly the first picture of golfers in Scotland. From 1501 there are records of golf being played in the country with James IV beginning the long association of the Stuart kings with the game.

Golf flourished and was played by all classes mainly in the east of Scotland on public wasteland and while there were no rules, gradually the game began to include a set number of holes. Challenge matches began and in 1753 at Bruntsfield a society was formed for players to meet and arrange matches. The societies were the forerunners of golf clubs - the St Andrews Society, later to become the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews, was formed in 1754.

In Australia a century-old feud has raged between The Australian Golf Club in Sydney and Royal Melbourne Golf Club as to which is the oldest.

The Australian was formed in 1882 but six



years later lost its course until 1895. Royal Melbourne was founded in 1891 and technically may be the second oldest club in the land but certainly is the oldest continuous club.

But while this argument still surfaces from time to time, it should not be forgotten that the oldest course in Australia, beyond doubt, is that at Bothwell in the Tasmanian midlands, about an hour's drive from Hobart. In fact Bothwell Golf Club officials go further, claiming the course was the first in the Southern Hemisphere.

The course was established in 1839 and golf was first played there on the Ratho Links by Alexander Reid who came out from Scotland in the late 1820s. He returned to Scotland in 1837 and in 1839 journeyed again to Tasmania bringing with him clubs and "featheries", pieces of bullhide stuffed tightly with feathers and sewn together. Reid played social golf with friends and relatives from nearby farms and the club itself was officially formed in 1902.

According to the Bothwell club secretary Max Stuart, the same turf is still used for the course today. The greens are fenced to protect them from the sheep that graze on the fairways. The farm is now owned by the Ratho Trust and the club leases the course for a peppercorn rent of \$25 a year.

At the time of writing the club had 40 members, 14 junior members and five associate members. Competitions are held on Sundays and the local rules include: if your ball hits a sheep or a green fence it may be replayed.

Capitalising on its unique place in Australia's golf history, Bothwell planned in 1996 to open the grandly-named Australasian Golf Museum in association with the Tasmanian Department of Tourism. It is to be housed in the original Bothwell School built in 1887.

The museum will be based on an extensive collection of memorabilia donated to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery by Tasmanian amateur legend Peter Toogood and by the state's most successful female amateur star, Lindy Goggin.

Eight years after the first divots were taken at Bothwell, golf was being played in the heart of downtown Melbourne, according to Muir McLaren, author of the 1957 *Australian Golfer's Handbook*.

"Right in the heart of busy Melbourne there is a tiny area of parkland crowded on all sides by buildings, and disturbed by the noise of trams, buses and other traffic that speeds around it," McLaren writes.

"The name of the park is Flagstaff Gardens and as parks go, there is not much to recommend it, but to Australian golfers it should be hallowed ground, for it was in this place that golf was first played on the continent of Australia." Presumably McLaren was referring to the mainland of Australia.

The Flagstaff Hill site extended to the Flemington Bridge area and one of the founders of the club was the Honourable James Graham who emigrated to Australia from Fife in Scotland in the early 1840s and, like Reid a few years earlier, brought with him clubs and a supply of featheries.

McLaren also says that at about the same time golf was being played at Bell Park, Geelong, where a number of Scots had emigrated, although there are no records to confirm this. The growth of the city gradually squeezed the Flagstaff Hill course out and it transferred to Elwood, but just a few years later, a victim of the sudden gold rush exodus, it met its end.

"In 1855, the year that Royal Assent was given to an act granting New South Wales self-government, the game of golf was first played there on links between Homebush and Concord, somewhere near the present Concord site," McLaren writes.

John Dunsmore, a solicitor who had emigrated from Edinburgh, was the first man to play the game in New South Wales but he had trouble finding fellow enthusiasts and his attempts to have the game established at that time flickered out. A similar attempt to set up a course in Adelaide in 1869 met the same fate.

But 20 years later, after Australia had settled somewhat, following a rapid period of population expansion and prosperity based on gold mining, interstate railways and telegraph communications, the golf boom in America and Britain finally took hold for good in Australia.

Clubs were rapidly established Australia-wide, including The Australian 1882, Royal Melbourne 1891, Geelong Golf Club 1892, Adelaide Golf Club 1892, Royal Sydney 1893, North Queensland (later Townsville) 1893 and Newlands (later Hobart) 1896.

The beginnings of The Australian Golf Club can be traced back to 1882 by a group of wealthy manufacturers and, according to McLaren, there were no rules or constitution

for the first two years until a meeting at The Exchange Hotel.

Permission was sought from Sydney Council to play golf on Moore Park where a handicap competition was arranged "in order to afford persons not acquainted with the game an opportunity of seeing it."

The roughly laid out course was near the western side of Centennial Park and the Royal Agricultural Showgrounds but circumstances contrived to end the experiment. Players had to contend with the popularity of bicycling, the latest craze, while the road leading to Centennial Park interfered constantly with play.

And so golfers there gave up and the club lay dormant, with no club meetings until 1895 when J W Fletcher, a foundation member who had been at The Exchange Hotel meeting, revived interest and The Australian was revived.

The first course was east of Centennial Park, at Queen's Park where 11 holes were originally carved out, later extended to 13. McLaren notes: "It should be remembered that in those days, the number of holes in a golf course was not necessarily 18, and usually as many holes as the land would carry or the club could afford were laid down. St Andrews originally had nine holes out, and the same greens were used to come home. In this way 18 holes finally became accepted as the standard number for a round of golf.

The Australian was stretched to 18 holes two years later but the land's owner sold some of his property off for market gardening so once again new links had to be established. In 1899, the club moved to Botany on a site where part of Sydney airport now stands and this is where the first Australian Open was played from September 2-3 1904. The tournament was won by the Honourable Michael Scott who shot a total of 315 over four rounds.

McLaren says that the first mention of lady golfers is included in the club's minutes of September 1896, when approval was given to ladies playing over the Queen's Park course on Mondays and Thursdays. But it was not until the club moved to its present site at Kensington that the first 31 associate members were elected in January 1905.

That final shift to Kensington was forced due to difficulties over the leasing of the

land. The area where the present Lakes Golf Club now is was considered but ultimately 70 hectares was purchased after a public company was formed with all the members buying up the shares and the land leased to The Australian Golf Club.

Construction of the original layout designed by Hutchinson, Martin and Carnegie Clark began in 1903 but was delayed because of floods and drought and not completed until April, 1905. The course was then altered when the committee took advantage of a trip to Australia by the legendary Scottish golf course architect, Dr Alistair Mackenzie, in 1926.

Royal Melbourne will always claim, because of the lapse of The Australian, that it is the oldest club in the country. The first idea that laid the foundation for Melbourne's sandbelt jewel, came from Melbourne businessman J M Bruce, the father of Stanley Bruce who was to become Prime Minister of Australia and the first Australian to be made captain of the Royal and Ancient Club of St Andrews.

J M Bruce, who learned to play at St Andrews where he had grown up, had returned from a trip to Britain, according to McLaren, with a supply of golf clubs and balls and was practising in a paddock at Mt Martha, a seaside resort, when he had vague notions of establishing a golf club. Out for his morning stroll was another Scotsman, Thomas Brentnall, who had played at Edinburgh's Royal Musselburgh Golf Club. Brentnall was attracted by the familiar whack of balls and when Bruce allowed him with some hesitation to hit a few shots, he realised here was a fellow enthusiast.

The pair, along with another prime mover, William Knox, enlisted 80 members to help establish the first Royal Melbourne Golf Club at Caulfield "five minutes" walk from Caulfield Railway Station. The course was ready for play in two months.

McLaren quotes a description of the layout in the Melbourne Argus of 6 July 1891, as: "A wide tract of sandy country, a couple of miles or so of gorse-clad common stretching away in gentle undulations towards Heidelberg and the blue line of the Dandenongs in the distance..."

The longest hole was 370 yards and the shortest 160 with the total length 4,750 yards. Par was 87 - a six was par for the

340-yard ninth. Until 1895 the course record was 80.

While Bruce had recruited 80 of the 100 original members, he admitted at his speech during the official opening of the course: "A number of members don't know yet what golf really is, but after they have played it half a dozen times they will find it impossible to give the game up."

A talented and somewhat confident 20-year-old, Richard Taylor of Hoylake, was appointed the club professional and in 1897 played the first professional golf match in Australia against James Scott of Royal Sydney, over 72 holes - 36 at Caulfield and 36 at Geelong - and won 4/2.

Women, according to McLaren, first played the course in 1892 but were allowed "no voice in the management of the club."

The Royal prefix was approved by Queen Victoria in 1895, whilst in the previous year the club donated a trophy, called the Victoria Golf Cup, to be contested at an open event for amateurs throughout Australia and New Zealand. This became the first Australian Amateur Championship. In 1898 the club acquired the Sandringham bayside area and the course there was



opened in 1901.

During the late-1920s and early-1930s the club migrated to its present site next door in Black Rock. This migration involved the incorporation (and re-design) of four of the old Sandringham holes into the new West Course lay-out (designed by Alister Mackenzie) and the development of an

entirely new 18 holes - the East Course (designed by Alex Russell). The Black Rock clubhouse (situated on the present clubhouse site) opened for operations in July 1931.

The founder of Royal Sydney, Irish solicitor Leonard Dobbin, had to be taught how to play golf before he could form the club. In May, 1893, Dobbin sought out someone to teach him the basics of the game and was introduced to Irving Kent, a Queensland-born and Oxford-educated barrister who won the captaincy of the Sydney Golf Club through his play at the Sydney Lawn Tennis Club.

Lessons began, McLaren says in the Golfer's Handbook, on temporary links set out at Yaralla, the home of Miss Eadith (later Dame Eadith) Walker at Concord. Two months later she gave permission for her land to be used as the site for the club proposed by Dobbin. Twenty members began playing there and were able to use Miss Walker's lodge as a clubhouse.

As with Bruce in Melbourne, Dobbin quickly became smitten with this most infectious of games and later wrote: "What good days they were, when after playing the whole Saturday afternoon some of us enjoyed Miss Walker's hospitality at her home, and others dined in town together to talk and think nothing but golf and looked with mighty scorn on those Philistines who pleaded their youth as an obstacle to playing golf."

However Kent in particular, had his heart set on a seaside links in the Scottish tradition and looked at an area at Bondi, which was virgin sandhills and bush. He and fellow enthusiasts began to lay out nine holes there and play started towards the end of 1893.

The Popplewell family had moved into a stone cottage on the site which had become the clubhouse and one of the boys, Fred, was to become Australian Open champion twice and served as the professional at Royal Sydney for many years.

Hazards on this layout were both natural and daunting, as one of the members later said: "We played over fearsome sandhills

and climbing up and down these in summer was probably conducive of a good thirst rather than good golf.”

The club was granted its Royal prefix in 1897, the same year in which associates, who had been admitted two years earlier, held their first general meeting. But keeping up two courses, one at Concord and one at Bondi, was financially taxing and it was decided in 1899 that no more money be spent on the Concord links. But western suburbs members, concerned at this decision, met and decided to form a new club, retaining the original course.

