

The 19th



The Oldest Golf Club IN THE WORLD

*Scotland is rich in history both on and off the golf course.
This is where you will find very the roots of the game of 'gowf'
but where you can also find the world's very first golf club.*

WORDS AND MOST PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID J WHYTE



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The Netherlands makes a strong claim to being golf's birthplace as does France, Belgium and China. But wherever and whatever the happy circumstances that led to the game we now know and love, Scotland, for at least the past 600 years, has held its position at the top of the leader board as the 'Home of Golf'.

The town of St Andrews is considered the game's crucible but all along Scotland's east coast are outposts of the game's earliest days and there is much written evidence of golf being played in several other towns and regions.

The City of Perth is a few miles inland, a defensive advantage but navigable by the River Tay. This was once the country's capital and it was here the game was adopted by royalty.

The Stewart Kings were particularly influential and the earliest written evidence of the sport in Scotland occurs in 1457 when an Act of Parliament under King James II banned the game along with football. One can only surmise that by that time the game was well established and popular.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Royal Burgess Golf Club clubhouse and 18th green

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The City of Edinburgh from Calton Hill; 12th green and Halfway House; Royal Burgess' Red Jackets served as a warning to other links users that golf was in play.

Both these parks still exist and Bruntsfield Links, located on the south side of the city, continues to offer a round on one of the game's oldest locales. There is a short 36-hole course open during the summer months along with a 9-hole winter course.

Back in the 1600s, the game's early enthusiasts no doubt cajoled and gambled their way around these tree-lined parks before retiring to a nearby pub to settle their wagers, much like Scottish golfers still do today to determine who buys the post-round pints.

FORMATION OF SOCIETIES

Informally at first, groups of friends or business acquaintances might gather to play or challenge each

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In 1641, Charles I (Mary's son) was recorded as playing at Leith Links in Edinburgh when he learned of the Irish uprising that led to the English Civil War. He, of course, finished his round.

BRUNTSFIELD LINKS

The City of Edinburgh was to succeed Perth as the nation's capital and its growing populace sought recreation on the city's dear, green spaces. Gentry and commoners alike took pleasure in the game and two parks, Leith Links and Bruntsfield Links, were largely given over to the sport.

other. A round on the links was considered a social occasion with enthusiastic betting taking place by participants and onlookers alike followed by wine and dining in the local hosteleries. 17th Century Bruntsfield Links was ideal for such activities with several pubs or 'houffs' within easy walking distance.

Regular venues appeared for such post-round revelries and early clubmakers, often bow-makers who found their skills no longer required as archery gave way to cannon, would set up trade there to service the 'gowfers' equipment requirements.

In this way golf's earliest clubs were formed. Evidence of the game's very first society appears in 1735 with the formation of The Burgess Society of Golfers. The Burgess was the first recognised group followed in 1744 by the The Honourable Company Of Gentlemen Golfers and in 1761 by the Bruntsfield Links Golfing Society.



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Meanwhile, in St Andrews, the first society didn't make an appearance until 1754 with the formation of the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews.

VICTIM OF ITS OWN SUCCESS

The game continued to grow in Edinburgh by 1755, now a city of some 60,000 souls mostly living around the Old Town and south towards Bruntsfield or in the busy Port of Leith. Increasingly, golf on the links of Leith and Bruntsfield would have been an attractive proposition.

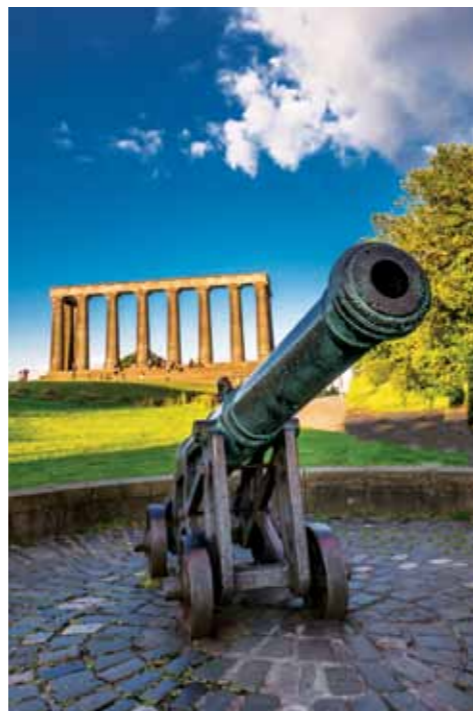
Of course, you needed money to pay for golf clubs and expensive feathery balls but commoners would have joined in as caddies or onlookers. Bruntsfield Links would have had the largest number of golfers living within walking distance of the course.

The Burgess Society of Golfers continued to use Bruntsfield Links along with other societies and individuals. The open, green space was also used by many of the townsfolk.

The custom of Burgess members wearing a scarlet jacket is said to have started as a warning signal to other users of the links that might find themselves unknowingly

Today, The Royal Burgess coat of arms proudly endorses the long history and reputation of The Royal Burgess Golfing Society of Edinburgh – the heraldic badge being the singular symbol of the Society since 1930. Informal origins of the design can be traced back to 1875 when a stained glass panel was commissioned to adorn their Musselburgh clubhouse.

This historic pane is carefully framed within a window in the Dining Room of the present clubhouse. The Burgess motto, "Far and Sure", first appeared in 1802 on gold or silver dress buttons and badges inscribed above crossed clubs along with three balls and a thistle.



in the line of fire.

Military training and livestock trading also took place on the greens giving golfers some interesting, additional hazards. While these disparate groups shared an uneasy relationship, the presence of golf probably helped preserve this open space for the townspeople as members of The Burgess were typically men of influence, lawyers and merchants who would have held some sway in civic matters.

TIME TO MOVE ON

After more than a century, congestion on the course at Bruntsfield reached intolerable levels and The Burgess sought alternative facilities. The Links at Leith offered short respite but they too soon became overcrowded. The Honourable Company Of Gentlemen Golfers had already moved from Leith to Musselburgh Links along the coast and in 1874, The Burgess joined them.

This was ground that had hosted 'gowf' as far back as 1672 and Musselburgh Links proved superior in many ways being closer to the sea and more 'linksy' in nature than the city parks of Edinburgh. They were also generally playable throughout the year whilst the parks became difficult in wintertime.

The links at Musselburgh were also used for horse racing as they still are today. The present 9-hole golf course, the oldest continuously played golf course in the world, is surrounded by one of Scotland's premier race tracks. Musselburgh's Old Course played host to six Open Championships from (1874 - 1889) and gave rise to five Open Champions.

You can still play the Old Links with hickory clubs which you can hire from the starter's pavilion. Some of the original features of the course have disappeared such as Mrs Foreman's Pub at the 4th where Old Tom and his contemporaries would stop and order a pint of beer through a roughly-hewn hole-in-the-wall.

TOP, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The opening hole at Musselburgh Old Links, the world's oldest playing golf course and once the home of The Royal Burgess Golfing Society; The main dining room at Royal Burgess; Some of the many mementos on display within the clubhouse

BELOW, FROM LEFT: Calton Hill cannon, captured by the British during the invasion of Burma in 1885; Edinburgh Castle from Princess Street Gardens.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The casual Spike Bar displays the Society's long & proud history; Royal Burgess plays over one of the finest parkland courses in Scotland; Golfers tee off at Musselburgh Old Links using hickories and in period costume.

Edinburgh Council run the Old Links at Musselburgh and make a good effort at presenting the history of the links. Be sure to ask the starter for more information as they are remarkably well informed.

Similarly, a brief visit to the Musselburgh Old Course Golf Club opposite the first tee sheds light on the early days of Scotland's first golfing societies. Originally built in 1873 for The Royal Burgess Golfing Society, the clubhouse remains an authentic and original period building and welcomes visitors to appreciate its history.

The Burgess' time at Musselburgh Links was once again short-lived due to the same reason as before, ie, overcrowding. And once again, Edinburgh's golfing societies found themselves pressed to move to pastures new.

The Honourable Company went west to the coastal town of Gullane to a site they called Muirfield while The Burgess, in 1893, set its sights on a private estate at Barnton Park to the northwest of the city.

Robert Clark, an Edinburgh publisher, golf author and R&A gold medalist had developed a nine-hole course for his own use at Barnton and it is likely that he invited Burgess members on occasion to play his private course. This may have facilitated an approach by the society.

Whatever the background, by 1895 'Old' Tom Morris, then 73, was commissioned to survey the ground. He pronounced it "all he could have wished" in terms of a suitable land and "the turf was so good there would be no need to lay the greens." The actual design of the course was given to an 'up-and-coming' young golfer, Willie Park Jnr and the new course formally opened in 1895. Work on the clubhouse started a year later.

The Burgess finally settled into a permanent home and its fortunes rose. The newly-completed Barnton Railway Station led to an increase in the course and club's popularity and membership had to be capped at 720, so keen were the people of Edinburgh to join.

THE WORLD'S TEN OLDEST CLUBS

- 1735 Royal Burgess Golf Society
- 1744 Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers
- 1754 Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews
- 1761 Bruntsfield Links Golfing Society
- 1766 Royal Blackheath Golf Club
- 1774 Royal Musselburgh Golf Club
- 1777 Fraserburgh Golf Club (1881)
- 1780 Royal Aberdeen Golf Club
- 1786 Crail Golfing Society
- 1787 Glasgow Golf Club



In 1925, five times Open Champion James Braid was asked to make some further alterations to the course, making it all the more challenging.

Royal denomination came in 1929, when His Majesty King George V, commanded by Royal Edict that the Society's name be changed to The Royal Burgess Golfing Society of Edinburgh.

The connection continued with HRH The Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII, accepting Captaincy of the Society in its bicentennial year of 1935. More recently, in 1991 HRH The Duke of York accepted honorary membership.

A MODERN HISTORIC EXPERIENCE

Today, visitors are afforded a very warm welcome to enjoy both this excellent championship parkland course and the Society's historic clubhouse. Displayed within is some of the Society's most valuable and historic golfing memorabilia.

Out on the course, there is a steady barrage of excellent holes, the first of note coming at the 4th, a long, well-bunkered Par 4 with out-of-bounds down the right and the green rising and sloping back towards the fairway, making it a tough putting proposition.

The 10th is another strong Par 4, not overly long but a good dogleg left to right where you play for position to attack an uphill green. The two closing holes are unusual; the 17th with its sloping fairway causing untold trouble and the 18th hole, which is a short 247-yard, Par 4 that finishes in front of the clubhouse.

Royal Burgess is only five miles from Edinburgh's centre so if you are visiting the Scottish capital, it is worth considering a day to visit the world's oldest golfing society. Tee times are available to visitors every day unless there is a club competition. The latest sets of clubs are also available for hire and buggies are also available.




To view more of David's stories, photography and video visit www.linksland.com

Like most of Scotland's most notable golf clubs, dining is as much part of the day as golf and it is

highly recommended to make time for a meal here. The Society has developed excellent fine-dining facilities, making the most of seasonal variations and offering the best of service and atmosphere.

Afternoon tea is a speciality with smoked salmon savouries, exquisite cupcakes, and the finest teas are served in the upstairs lounge. Certain areas within the clubhouse such as the main dining room require a jacket and tie so enquire when you make your reservation.

A round at Royal Burgess is definitely one to include on your bucket list so make arrangements to enjoy a day the oldest golfing society in the world. 

www.royalburgess.co.uk