

IN THE BEGINNING

It is a reasonable assumption that there were lively discussions in the howffs of Alyth over 100 years ago. A new golf club was being mooted, an undertaking of no small magnitude in these days.

Of course, it was still the Victorian era and membership to the club would be confined to those and such as those deemed suitable. An informal meeting of worthies from the business and professional ranks was held in the Airlie Arms Hotel on the 4th of August, 1894. A general discussion on the formation of a golf club took place, but it was 17 days later at a meeting in the Town Hall that the first real milestone was reached. At the instigation of the Rev. J. R. McLaren, The Alyth Golf Club was officially born. His proposal was seconded by Mr A. M. Ferguson and 51 gentlemen and 17 ladies intimated their willingness to join. The meeting resolved that gentlemen be charged 10/6d as original members of the club plus an annual subscription of 10/6d. The ladies paid the subscription only. Another man of the cloth, Rev. Dr. Gordon McPherson of Ruthven, was elected captain with the Rev. Mr McLaren as his second in command. Since then there have been 31 other captains of the club, but none aspiring to the title of Reverend!

At that first historic meeting on the 21st of August, Tom Morris of St. Andrews was engaged to sketch a plan of a 9-hole course. This he completed in two visits for which he received an honorary sum of £1.10/-. This original course was on the heathery muir, as the locals described the area, but today's golfers will pinpoint it better by visualising where a good-going slice out of bounds at the present 8th hole would finish.

The course was laid out by a Mr Hunter, a Meigle contractor, who must have bent to his task with a will. Whatever the state of readiness of the course, the official opening was on the 19th of September. Miss Isabella Ross, daughter of the Rev. John Ross of Balloch, did the needful by striking a ball from the first tee with a silver-mounted driver which had been presented to her earlier. The first match was a foursome consisting of the Rev. Dr. McPherson and the Rev. Mr McLaren against Provost Orchar and Mr Tom Morris. The latter recorded a one-hole victory.

FUND RAISING

Meantime, the lady members, no doubt chatting over tea and crumpets, got down to fund-raising with the formation of a clubhouse in mind. On the 29th of September they elected a committee - Miss C. Gordon McPherson of Ruthven Manse; Miss I. N. Ferguson, Heston; Miss G. Smith, Airlie Mount; Miss J. Pattullo, Airlie Arms and Miss I. N. Thorns, Airlie Street - to organise a bazaar. Not one of those 10am. to noon affairs either. They set their sights on a two-day event on the 16th and 17th of August 1895.

The local press had a preview of the various stalls and commented that: "preparations have been carried through with unwearying alacrity. The outcome is that the Town Hall presents stalls quite groaning with goods and articles, in which the useful, the beautiful and the artistic are lavishly represented."

One of the local dignitaries, Sir James Ramsay, made a speech well laced with witticisms at the opening ceremony. At one stage he quoted his nephew, a local poet, who summed up the game of golf thus:-

*Goufin' a the day
Daen' nae work ava;
Rinnin' about wi' a bag o' sticks
After a wee bit ba'.*

Which means...

*Golfing all the Day
Doing no work at all;
Running about with a bag of sticks
After a small bit ball.*

A raffle was held in conjunction with the bazaar with an array of prizes which make interesting reading today. Here's a selection: a fat pig, two rabbits, three ducks, a bride's cake, a "splendid" sewing machine, a pet lamb, two bags of oatmeal, a potato grubber, a Persian carpet, a mangle, etc., etc. The raffle made £16. 15/6d and the bazaar and donations, £443. 1/3d. Some pundits reckon that would be about £10,000 in today's money. So, ladies, a sterling effort in more ways than one!

TO THE TEE

The land for the original course came from one Captain Clayhills-Henderson of Invergowrie who also owned an estate at Hallyards, and another part was leased from the Rev. Mr Ross of Balloch.

Of course, there is much speculation as to how golfers made their way to the course from the town. Doubtless some arrived by pony and trap along the Ruthven road, but another popular theory is that there were "foot soldiers" shouldering their clubs and taking the Ruthven Walk. This trail, now largely overgrown, ran up the left of the present first and second holes. However, it is conceivable that remnants of that track remain on the approaches to the top of the hill at the first and as you descend between the bushes to the second green. Present-day golfers who are inclined to hook will know the areas well!

FIRST MEETING

Some snippets from the minutes of the first meeting:-

First men's committee

The Rev. Dr. McPherson (captain); The Rev. J.R. McLaren (vice-captain); Mr D.S. Kidd, solicitor, (secretary & treasurer); management - Messrs John Reid (town clerk), Mr A.M. Ferguson (solicitor); Mr. W.A. Thoms (baker); Mr F.T. Garden (accountant); Mr. D.B. Lawson and Mr. James F. Ross.

First golf club dance

Scheduled for the 18th of January 1895, with gents tickets at 12/6 and the ladies 7/6.

It was postponed due to lack of support. However, it did materialise in the August, - when the gents ticket was reduced to 10/- and the ladies were admitted free of charge.

First greenkeeper

Mr John Rae of Loyal Road, Alyth was appointed in November, 1894.

First costume and colours

The club adopted green and gold (as in the present-day gents tie) and members were advised to give their custom for jackets, caps, etc., to the Alyth clothiers, Fleming, Silver & Clark.

First flags on the greens

Replacements needed, as the originals had whetted the appetites of cattle grazing on the course!

Play on the original nine-holer was to last little more than 18 months as one of the proprietors was unable to grant a long lease. The next instalment deals with the club switching to land now part of the present course.

NEW LAYOUT

The 6th of June, 1896, saw the opening of Alyth Golf Club's new 9-hole layout, mainly on the land used for the present course. The mind boggles at the number of people who must have tramped this ground over the years with the light of golf-battle in their eyes. The new course was formally opened by the Coxes of Cardean with Mrs Cox driving the first ball with a club suitably inscribed. Plans were prepared for a clubhouse and the contract given to Alex Oastler, joiner, the same firm which has done recent work around the clubhouse, including the trophy cabinet in the bar area.

Speaking of that trophy cabinet. Pride of place therein is taken by the clubs used to open the two nine-holers. It is a matter of some conjecture just how many members are aware of this, but scarcely deign to give those clubs a second glance. Breathes there a man or woman with soul so dead, who chooses to ignore such integral parts of the club's heritage!

The new 9-hole layout:

The first hole was played to a green at the top of the hill.

The 2nd went to the present first green which was a double green.

The 3rd was the present second.

The 4th, the present eighth.

The 5th followed the line of the present seventeenth up to the other hole on the first green.

The 6th went at right angles in the direction of the present fourteenth green.

The 7th to the present fifteenth green.

The 8th to the top of the hill at the sixteenth.

The 9th back to what's now the eighteenth.

Two relics are still visible of this nine-holer. At the top of the hill to the right of the present first is the tee for the old second hole. Far to the right of the fifteenth, where a

monumental slice off the present tee would land, is the outline of a bunker for drives off the old seventh tee.

The land for the course was leased by the club for £30 per annum from the tenant farmer, a Mr Black. Apparently the club at the time deemed the charge exorbitant, but after some to-ing and fro-ing they swallowed their pride and agreed to pay.

In October, 1897, came a decision almost in the momentous category. Remember, it was still the staid Victorian era. However, after some deliberation the committee agreed to admit "working men and others" to the privileges of the course. But, and a big BUT, such members would not be allowed in the clubhouse for any purpose whatsoever. So there!

NEW CENTURY

The next few years were not the happiest in the club's history. Whether the novelty of local golf had worn off or the standard of course maintenance had declined is tactfully not recorded. However, there appears to have been a period of unrest with the state of the greens coming in for particular criticism. (Times don't change!) The upshot was that in April, 1903, the committee agreed that in the club's best interest it would hand over to a new management. Resignation documents were duly signed. The first captain, The Rev. Dr. JG. McPherson, returned to do a four-year stint in the chair.

A ladies committee formed to work in conjunction with the men consisted of Miss C. McPherson, Miss Watson, Miss Saddler (aunt of Joe Saddler), Mrs Kidd, Miss Jack and Mrs Lawson. They were to hold afternoon teas every Wednesday during July and, if successful, to continue during August. Such were the delicacies provided, the teas did indeed make a profit.

In 1904 the tenant farmer at Pitcrocknie, now a Mr F. Mitchell, ruled that there would be no play on the course during December, January and February. He was asked if he would deign to allow play for at least two days of the week. Answer - NO. If the same set-up applied today, one wonders how Mr Mitchell would have reacted to 40 irate Winter League members on his doorstep! He did relent six years later, but only on payment of £15 per annum.

Now here's an item well worth recording. In 1906 a Mr Gordon had the first hole-in-one in the club's history at the 170-yard sixth, long before the days of the club being licensed, so he possibly escaped with dishing out no more than handshakes.

Most present-day members will be aware of a framed photograph in the bar area of a rustic gentleman with a smiling face full of character. The caption underneath is "Willie." This, indeed, is one William Coventry who became greenkeeper in 1909 and held the post for over 20 years.

THE GREAT WAR

Along came the 1914-1918 war and, naturally enough, the male membership went into sharp decline. Nevertheless there must have been reasonable golf activity for, in 1915, no fewer than 12 caddies were appointed each wearing a distinctive badge. In

these days, of course, one could reach the course by rail and golfers from as far afield as Dundee could arrive by train, albeit by a round-about route. Trains left the old Dundee West station, headed out towards Invergowrie, then cut back to Lochee past the present B&Q and wound their way to another station at Downfield. Thence to Dronley, Auchterhouse, Newtyle, Meigle and, at long last, Pitcrocknie Halt. The outline of part of this platform still exists over from the present first tee. Fact or fiction, no one knows for sure, but keen golfers who missed the train at Dundee are said to have taken a taxi to either Lochee or Downfield and caught up with the train! In the late 1950's goods trains still chugged by the fifth hole before vanishing underneath the bridge at the green side, then, alas, vanishing for good and all along with the railway lines.

Two items of interest from the 1923 minutes - lady members were admitted to the management of the club and Mr J. Craik, the new owner of Pitcrocknie, upped the ground rental to £40, which taxed the club's financial resources.

However, AGC continued to expand. In 1924 Sir John Ogilvy-Wedderburn offered the use of ground, now the 3rd to the 7th, at the nominal fee of 1/- per year. This was gratefully accepted and Sir John was promptly made an honorary president.

By combining the first two holes on the 9-holer and taking in the new land, Alyth thus attained its 13-hole status. The year - 1928.

Incidentally, green fees at that time were 1/6d a round, 2/- a day and 12/- a fortnight.

18 HOLES - AT LAST!

Alyth became an 18-hole course at last on 20th June, 1934, but not before many months of back-breaking toil. The elder statesmen in today's club say the new fairways were carved from a wilderness of heather, gorse and whins. Extensive drainage work was done. Seven tons of stones were removed. In the end six new holes, the brainchild of one, James Braid, were completed.

At this stage someone with a mathematical bent may interject, "Hold on, six holes added to the original 13. Was there a permanent happy hour playing the 19th?" Ardent readers (hopefully there are some) will recall a short hole on the nine-holer on a line from the present 17th green to the 14th. That, of course, vanished in the new set-up, which still prevails today.

When all the burning of heather and up-rooting of this and that had ceased, Mrs A. Cochrane of Craigisla, performed the opening ceremony and donated £50 to club funds. Around this time, too, Sunday golf was introduced. The first Sabbath ball struck in anger was by Alyth man David Whyte, better known as Davie, and at the time of writing (1994) our oldest honorary member.

Next milestone. On 17th June, 1938, a meeting was held in the local YMCA to discuss a proposal to purchase the golf course from Mr J.A. Craik. The chairman, Provost Morrison, stated that a price of £2300 would be acceptable to the proprietor. A club member was prepared to grant a loan of £2000 at 3¼ per cent interest on the security of ground and buildings. The loan would not be called up for 10 years and

repayment of capital would not be below £150 per annum. This was agreed and a motion to purchase was carried.

WAR LOOMS

Alas, war clouds were already gathering and by 1940 one member of that era says, "There were mair four-legged beasts than twa-legged golfers on the course." So who bore the brunt of keeping the club afloat? Why, the ladies of course - dances, whist drives, jumble sales and the like were organised. Sheep were allowed on the course which, apart from the income, allowed it to be classed as a grazing subject and tax de-rated. By 1942 even the greenkeeper had vanished from the scene and members were left to keep the course in trim as best they could.

However, Alyth survived. There is no record of the ladies who did the fund-raising, but it's a safe bet that some at least came from officer-bearers elected in April 1945. They were: Mrs Cant (Captain), Mrs Lowson (Vice), Mrs Ritchie-Smith (Secretary & Treasurer) and committee members, Ms Douglas, Mrs Morrison, Mrs McIntosh, Mrs Bell, Mrs Feggetter, and Mrs Neil Smith. Heroines all. Incidentally, this was the first full meeting of the Ladies Section since 1938.

By 1946-47 men were returning to the civilian ranks - and the golf course. But a new "foreign" element was becoming more pronounced. Dundee courses were crowded. One present-day member recalls taking two trams and a 10-minute walk to one club only to face a first tee queue then a four-hour round. So Alyth became attractive to Dundonians in as much as there was no entry fee, the sub was two guineas, there was rarely a wait to tee off and even though cars were a rarity, buses were reasonably frequent. Members permanently residing outwith a radius of six miles from the clubhouse were prohibited from voting at meetings. However, times were changing and this rule was deleted on 15th December, 1949.

BABY BOOMER YEARS

The 1950's saw the club increasing numerically, especially as cars ceased to be a rarity and petrol ceased to be rationed. It became obvious that the old clubhouse was beginning to strain at the seams. Members were issued with yale keys. Last person to leave of an evening snibbed the door. Various ladies (Mrs McLeod and Mrs Taylor for two) took over catering, but golfers lunched with the hazard of others delving into adjacent lockers for their clubs, or even changing socks and shoes nearby. What today's Environmental Health people would say, one shudders to think!

Golfers partial to a beer had to smuggle in their own. Many kept a stock of screw-top bottles in their lockers. Alyth residents became used to the strange sight of car-less Dundee golfers huffing and puffing along the old railway line of an evening to quaff a pint of beer at a local hostelry before the last bus left Alyth. Two pints and the journey might end in some discomfort! Yet those whose memories stretch back to these days recall the convivial atmosphere of the old clubhouse with its rutted wooden floor, wooden seats, paraffin lamps, etc. and how they relaxed, chatting around a log fire in winter, or lazed on the veranda in summer. There's nothing to beat nostalgia, is there!

In 1954 an architect submitted plans to provide a bar at a cost of £410 and application for a licence was duly made. The bar opened in 1955 with Mr Taylor, husband of the then caterer, acting as barman. The club supplied him with two white jackets, but ruled that when these wore out, he would have to supply his own. Trading profit in that first year was £244 with a net profit of £88. Later the bar was run by a kenspeckle couple, Mr & Mrs Frank Shaw. On the wall outside the present caddy car shed is a roller grille through which they purveyed the drink. The shed and secretary's office are the last remnants of the old clubhouse.

Two more items from the 1950's. . In 1956 it was decided to alter the order of holes. The 16th became the first, the 17th the second, the 18th the third and so on, finishing at the 15th. This lasted a few years, but, largely because the first hole was the longest on the course, it was decided to revert back to the original format. And lastly, and perhaps more contentious, the AGM in 1957 was the last time lady committee members were present.

UNDER A NEW ROOF

The new clubhouse was the main topic of conversation in the early 1960's. Progress was impeded by a change of architects and also sundry small delays, which all add up. However, the present dining room began to take shape attached to the end of the old clubhouse. Ancient and modern side by side. The old wooden structure looked somewhat frail and forlorn as if it knew its days were numbered. In the spring of 1964 a social event was held in the completed dining room. That year, too, the foundations for the lounge, locker rooms etc., were in place. The following year the members were in their new abode and the axe fell on the old clubhouse. Mr & Mrs Bob Crighton became the first resident steward and stewardess.

Of course, there had to be snags. For example, the bar area was built on open plan design. In other words, there was no glass partition at the top of the stairs. A gaping hole existed under the present trophy cabinet and so on. If the wind was in the wrong direction in winter, someone opening the main door would send an icy blast upstairs. Everyone in the bar or lounge shivered over their beers. Oh, the pitfalls of progress!

The first professional recorded in the annals is Ian Connelly, who, of course, was handicapped with no area for tuition or practice. The latter he sometimes solved by hitting iron shots up the 18th fairway from the side of the green. Alas and alack one member was not amused when he drove off the 18th, strode over the brow of the hill musing what club he'd play to the green, only to be confronted by 20 or so golf balls. When at last he'd discovered his own, he duffed his shot to the green!

1965 saw the start of what is now an annual event, the Open Mixed Foursomes. The driving force behind this was the late Dr. Bill Wallace of Muirhead who did months of immaculate pre-match planning. In recent years this event, still run on the same lines, has been so popular that it is over-subscribed months in advance.

The first Ladies Open was in May, 1968, the first Men's Open in May, 1971 and in 1974 the Strathmore League began with Alyth, Blairgowrie, Kirriemuir and Edzell as founder members.

Around this time came the demise of a shot perfected by many Alyth golfers. The railway side of the 5th green was fenced off with wire netting between the posts. If you missed the green to the left, the shot was to give your ball an almighty bang with your putter - up the bank, over the green and hope for a friendly rebound from the netting. The railway land was bought for £150, the fence and netting removed and a more delicate shot became the order of the day.

CATASTROPHE OF '72

Due to some administration slip-up or other the bar licence was not renewed and the 19th hole went dry as far as excisable liquor was concerned. There followed a thirsty wait until the next Licensing Court. However, it's an ill wind etc. etc. The Blackbird Inn and Belmont Arms saw a marked upturn in turnover.

Still focusing on the bar side of things, a new era of petticoat rule was about to dawn, a situation if not unique amongst golf clubs is certainly unusual. Anna Robertson and Madge Burnett started as bar assistants in the mid - 1970's. Then, in 1978, Anna became stewardess with Madge as her number one. Their assistants were Finella Smith (wife of Doug Smith, Centenary Convener) and Nancy Dellaquaglia. For seven years it was a female hand dispensing the drinks and washing the pint pots summer, winter or whatever. Anna is now Mrs Sullivan, wife of former secretary Harry, while Madge emigrated to Australia in 1988. Anna did have one hectic winter before she retired when the bar area was extended towards the patio. A larger bar and cellar were created on the present west side and the bar area refurbished. The whole place was in turmoil. A cold and draughty one at that. Who would be captain and house convener at a chaotic time like this? Hamish Grant and Ian Wheatley respectively were the two who no doubt sprouted a few grey hairs.

MODERN TIMES

And so, dear reader, we approach the 1980's. Is it worthwhile recording events which are fresh in many members' memories? Well, let's look at it this way. Hopefully, Alyth Golf Club will flourish for another 100 years and, if nothing else, this literary outpouring may be useful to some scribe tackling the bi-centenary write-up. So let's chronicle some events at least.

1979 Brian Young appointed professional. The little pro shop where the visitors' changing room is now located.

1981 New putting green in front of clubhouse completed.

1984 Start of Senior Men's Open.

1985 Alyth won Strathmore League (Blairgowrie had withdrawn by this time. Forfar and Arbroath had joined the other originals).

1987 Tom Melville became pro.

1988 New pro shop opened at first tee. John and May Williams took over stewarding. New practice ground of ten and a half acres bought for £20,000. Mrs Marjory

Anderson, wife of former secretary, celebrated with champagne at a function to mark her 50 years as a member. (Sadly she died in 1992.)

1991 Lindsay Brough became our first scratch golfer. Alyth hosted its first national tournament, the Scottish Girls. Young Mhairi MacKay credited with course record of 69.

1993 A further three acres of land purchased at west end of practice area.

A final thought. What if one of those be-whiskered, bowler-hatted 1894 Alyth golfers could be re-incarnated for an hour's visit to the present club? How would he react when he saw the extent of the course, electric caddy cars, newfangled clubs and all the colourful sportswear? Not to mention wall-to-wall carpeting, an enormous array of drinks, the TV, the meals and so on. And what of those two strange machines with whirling drums where people lose in minutes what would have taken him days to earn? Back to heaven in amazement!

And so the written history ends!! The history of the club will be extended to include the last six years - once it's been written down!! We'll try our best to drag ourself away from the fairways and continue the article.

ALYTH GOLF CLUB 1994 - 2000

There I was on my way to the first tee, when I was waylaid by current Secretary, Jim Docherty. Would I, he asked, fill in the six years since the club's 100 year booklet was issued in 1994 to the millennium? Well here goes:-

THE CENTENARY YEAR

The obvious place to start is centenary year. Much midnight oil had been burned in preparation which proved its worth when all the planned events came to fruition. For a start every member received a crystal glass tumbler engraved with the club motif and, moreover, the appropriate accompaniment of a miniature of whisky.

The tournaments throughout the year were many and varied. A pro-am, a cel-am, a day when the guests were the captains of Perth & Kinross golf clubs and a day when Alyth members entertained representatives from the other clubs in the Strathmore league. We had also contacted another club, Drumpellier, who were also celebrating their centenary and arranged a challenge match. This proved so popular that it has become an annual event.

We had also approached the Scottish Golf Union and asked for a prestigious tournament to be held at Alyth. In the event we were accorded the Boys under 16 tourney which was another feather in the cap for the club.

Then there was the week in August leading up to the exact anniversary of A.G.C. A marquee was hired for the week and pitched on hard-standing on the practice area, adjacent to the first tee. The seniors were allotted a day. The ladies had their day which included a strawberry tea where many were resplendent in 1894 costumes. On the Friday evening the marquee and clubhouse were packed for entertainment and a free meal for all. The kitchen staff worked wonders.

The climax on the Saturday was a members and guests dinner in the marquee with a host of local golf dignitaries and special guest speakers. Two former captains, Mike O'Malley and John Salvesen, were present and a memorable evening was presided over by the then captain, Lindsay Brough.

So much for centenary year. The club has progressed steadily since with various course improvements, notably a new watering system and extensions to the greenkeepers sheds. The clubhouse was extended to include more spacious quarters for the Secretary and an upstairs conference/committee room.

One important milestone was the decision to return the ladies to full membership which subsequently resulted in Mrs Margaret Kerr being voted on to the full committee in 1998.

I think it worth noting a tragic event in 2000 - the sudden death on the club premises of our Steward, John Williams. It was testimony to his diligence and popularity that club members turned out in full force at his funeral.

To end on a happy note. 2000 saw the men's club membership of to one of our younger members, Mark Cameron. He also celebrated the millennium by establishing a new course record of 64.

Well, for future years another scribe will have to take up the pen, but I have enjoyed documenting the first 106 years of the club's existence.

Hugh Fraser
July 2000