

Scottish Golf and the World at War by Bob Jones

Golf in Scotland and war are not inextricably linked, but their paths have crossed several times. One of the very earliest records of “gowf” was King James II’s decree in 1457 to ban the game, so that soldiers and noblemen would spend more time practicing archery to better defend the homeland against English invasion. James III and IV convinced their parliaments to affirm that ban.

Though that ban was unenforceable, the most important connections were forged during the two World Wars, 1914 to 1919 and 1939 to 1945. These were times of extreme crisis, in which the game of golf was but one of the victims. Golf courses suffered the ravages of war through damages to courses and club finances. At the same time, golfers incurred losses to their own games.

My wife and I became aware of the golf-war relationship as we played courses with town or parish monuments to those lost in the War-to-End-All-War (though the names of locals who gave their lives in other wars have been added to many of the monuments). Maybole Golf Club in Ayrshire has such a monument beside the sixth green. Also in Ayrshire, Turnberry displays a monument just to the right of the twelfth hole. While other courses, such as Anstruther on the Fife and Bucky Strathlene on the Moray coast, have monuments near greens or tees, Abernethy GC in Nethy Bridge has a monument in-play on the eighth hole. Knowledgeable golfers aim to the left of the monument to find the fairway on this blind par-four. Whereas monuments,



Maybole's War Monument

whether in-play or not, are reminders of the casualties of war, golf courses were themselves casualties.

During both world wars, the Ministry of Defense needed golf course land for its own purposes. The west end of North Berwick West Links was used for RAF (Royal Air Force) target practice, and weapons pits and defensive bunkers were built along the sea edge of the course. Aberdour GC became home to Heavy “A” Batteries, while Balbirnie Park GC was heavily damaged by placement of Ack-ack guns and search lights. Trenches, barbed-wire, and mines were placed on many seaside links courses such as Crail Balcombie, Elie, Dunbar, and Peterhead. It was the RAF which exacted the biggest toll when it dug up historic Turnberry and the Ladies’ Course at Dornoch to build areodromes or landing fields.

Golf courses were also ploughed up for food production. Victory or Friendship Gardens were integral to the domestic war effort. Duff House Royal on the Morayshire coast was ploughed up twice, once for each war, and rebuilt twice. Powfoot Golf Club on the Solway Firth lost five holes to the plough. Today, those holes are still the flattest on the course. Many courses, such as Shiskine, Kinghorn, Muirfield, and Aboyne, avoided the plough, but were used to graze sheep and cattle.

Clubhouses and other golf course buildings found uses in the war effort, as well. Troops were billeted at Boat of Garten, Royal Troon, and Lundin Ladies' Links (the only time men have been allowed in that clubhouse). When the Ministry of Defense took over the Crieff Clubhouse, the club moved its historical records to an equipment shed. Those records were lost when the shed was destroyed in an accidental fire caused by troops staying there. Part of the opulent Gleneagles Resort Hotel became the headquarters for Tom Johnston, Scotland's Secretary of State, and the rest served as a convalescent hospital.

Scotland's golf courses and clubs suffered tremendous financial losses during the war years. With so many golfers enlisted in the military, club membership took a big hit. North Berwick West's membership was reduced from 87 members in 1940 to 35 in 1945. On Isle Arran, Shiskine's membership dropped from 112 to 48. Memberships were so depleted that at Kinghorn GC on the Fife, the club couldn't muster a quorum for a club meeting. Along with a reduction of membership, of course, came a reduction in financial resources which threatened the continued existence of clubs like Kingussie GC in the Highlands. Further financial damage was done when courses, like Anstruther and Abernethy, completely shut down for the duration of the war. Nine-hole St. Boswell GC in the Borders was closed from 1944 to 1947. Within a year of reopening, the River Tweed flooded the course. It was not rebuilt until 1957. Although, the St. Boswell course did survive, the ultimate sacrifice was made by many courses whose names are just memories now. Corriecravie on Isle Arran, Acherfield and Fidra in the East Lothians, and Falkland in the Fife were all closed and never reopened. Sauchhope Links, once a fine Fife golf course, is now a caravan park. Markinch Golf Club reopened for one year after the war before succumbing to financial pressures.

For those courses which did survive, some physical scars do remain. The flat holes at Powfoot are one reminder of what war did to golf courses. More dramatic, and of more concern to today's players, are the remnants of German bombings. Stonehaven GC, south of Aberdeen, has a grass bunker in-play off the left side of the first fairway. The bunker is the result of a bomb dropped in August of 1940, by a German plane heading home from a mission. The hazard is now named, "Hitler's

Bunker.” Powfoot, also, left bomb damage in-play. The ninth hole is called “Crater” after the huge German bomb crater short of the green. Today, that bunker is a reminder of how hard it is to hit that particular green.



Hitler's Bunker at Stonehaven at the left of the fairway.

Besides playing around the bomb craters, avoiding the mines, and, at Aboyne GC, staying out the rough, which was planted with potatoes, golfers had to contend with other special war situations. Conditioning of the courses was much affected by the war. Many courses had to reduce their number of holes.

Royal Dornoch and Boat of Garten both stopped maintenance on their farthest four holes because of a lack of grounds crew. The most interesting example of course-shortening was at Shiskine Golf and Tennis Club on Isle Arran. Six of the holes created by Willie Park & Sons, extending the course from nine to 18-holes, were permanently lost during World War I. Because of the lack of maintenance staff, the six Willie Park hill holes built on the side of Drumadoon Point were left to revert to their primitive state of gorse, heather, and bracken. After the war, the club chose not to reclaim the holes. Thus was born the world's first permanent 12-hole course, a number which many visitors find to be just right. Lack of staff and money created other maintenance headaches. For instance, because golf courses were only allotted ten gallon of petrol per month, fairways were seldom cut and rough became very deep.

Golf equipment wasn't left unaffected, either. In the First World War, importing hickory shafts for golf clubs was banned and club heads were often melted down for their metal. Golf balls became as valuable as gold to golfers. Since all rubber was needed for war related uses, new balls had almost disappeared by 1940. Players used balls until they were beaten, battered, and broken; then they were repainted and used some more. To lose a golf ball, even in thick gorse, was a crime. Searching for an hour or more was not unheard of in pursuit of a lost, playable ball. In one case early in the war years, a competition was held with a fresh turkey as first prize and six new Dunlop 65 balls as second prize. Everyone played for second!

During the war years, competitions became rarer or nonexistent. The Ryder Cup became the first victim of the Second World War when the 1939 matches in the US were canceled. The competitive spirit wasn't dimmed, however, as shown by the Secretary of the British PGA's cable to America: "When we have settled our differences and peace reigns, we will see that our team comes across to remove the Ryder Cup from your safekeeping." The venerated Open Championship was suspended from 1940 to 1945, as it had been during the war years of 1915 to 1919. Those local competitions

which were held, were often changed. The women's competitions at Grantown-on-Spey, for instance, donated all entry fees to the local Red Cross. During competitions, or casual rounds, special war rules were in effect. One such rule said: "A player whose stroke is effected by the simultaneous explosion of a bomb or shell, or by machine-gun fire, may play another ball from the same place. Penalty, one stroke."

Not everything that happened as a result of the wars had a negative impact on the game. The war years brought more women to golf. They played more and their club status often changed from associate members to full members. One of the most dramatic changes to the game, which most would call positive, started at Powfoot GC in southern Scotland. The Sabbatarian tradition of no golf on Sunday was well entrenched in Scotland prior to 1914. Because of the war, Powfoot granted workers at the munition factory in nearby Gretna the right to play for free on their only day off--Sunday.



Powfoot GC was one of the first to end Scotland's Sabbatarian tradition.

Other clubs in the area followed suit and the Sunday ban slowly lifted.

It is said that in war there are no winners, only survivors. Golf in Scotland, for the most part, proved itself a survivor. As my wife and I play one of our favorite courses in the world, Shiskine Golf and Tennis Club, we marvel that its unique twelve hole layout is the result of a War-to-End-All-War.

Sources: Golf: History and Tradition , Sturk (Excellent Press, 1998), Golf: Scotland's Game, Hamilton (Patrick Press, 1998), Scotland's Hidden Gems: Golf Courses and Pubs, Jones (Pen and Print, 2005), and various club Centenary books.

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