

STOCKPORT GOLF CLUB – A BRIEF HISTORY



Stockport Golf Club is home to one of the premier courses in Cheshire, with excellent clubhouse catering that is the envy of golfers throughout the region. The membership from all walks of life includes serious golfers, people who have taken up golf in middle age after playing other sports and some who just want to enjoy meeting new friends.

The Club's history stretching back to 1905 provides a glimpse of a bygone age, before modern technology and the extensive use of cars, a time of the 'Gentleman's Club' when segregation between the men and women was commonplace and golf was a sport for the gentry and professional classes. The Nominations Book from the early years refers to: Battersby Hat Manufacturers, Robinsons Brewery, various denominations of vicar, solicitors, doctors, engineers, merchants, as well as the senior officers from Stockport Council.

The Club was initially named Davenport Golf Club, not to be confused with the Club of the same name today. The original nine-hole course was located at Woodsmoor on the other side of the railway line from Stepping Hill Hospital, off Barlow Moor Lane, between the railway line and Barlows Lane South. A significant number of the first members had learnt the game at Disley Golf Club.

The land for the original course was leased from Sir John Barlow of Torkington Lodge. He was a British businessman and Liberal Party MP. His wife, Lady Barlow was also a politician and welfare reformer committed to 'the principles of sobriety and teetotalism'. She became a member of the Club in 1909, although from the records it doesn't appear that she converted many of the other members to teetotalism! In religion, Sir John and Lady Barlow were Quakers and as part of the lease they 'specifically forbade the playing of golf on Sundays'.

With its location in the Bramhall area and the original name of Davenport GC, the Club adopted the crest and motto of the Davenport family who had lived at Bramhall Hall and were major landholders in the area. Their Latin motto of 'mens aequa in arduis' which was adopted by the Club translates as a 'stable mind in adversity', which is particularly adapt for the game of golf!

In 1906 the Ladies held their first meeting. Nine ladies attended and decided to form a committee, to which eight ladies were appointed. Only eight ladies were appointed, so I'd like to think the ninth lady indicated she didn't wish to stand!

In 1907, the diesel engine manufacturer, Mirrlees, Bickerton and Day re-located from Glasgow to an adjacent site to the course and the land transaction included the golf club. The co-founder of the company, Charles Day, had been educated at Stockport Grammar School and Manchester Technical School, before moving to Glasgow. He was instrumental in moving the company south. He was an enthusiastic golfer, as were a number of his colleagues and no doubt the re-location might have been eased by there being a Golf Club on the doorstep.

When looking through the early Nominations Book it's interesting to note that Charles on 2nd August 1909 nominated his brother Colin and Henry and Richard Bickerton for membership and throughout the early year's he continued to nominate various engineers



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who appeared to have moved to Stockport (and presumably Mirrlees) from other Clubs around the country.

After a short time at Woodsmoor, the members wanted to secure the Club's long-term future and to have a course of 18 holes, the traditional length of championship courses. Sunday play was also an issue.

A few snippets from the suggestion book of the time include:

- Fred Lowe: 'I suggest that Mr Higson's handicap be reduced'; a week later JB Higson replied 'I suggest Mr Lowe minds his own business'. I don't think this was the purpose of the book!
- Miss H Bancroft complained about the very bad appearance of the sheep on the course!
- Several members suggested a Club telephone that they would be willing to pay for. The Committee did not think this 'advisable'!
- That a bicycle pump be kept at the Club for members.

The second Club Captain, Robert Hyde, was the Town Clerk of Stockport and he was well placed to locate an alternative more suitable site and in 1908 one hundred and twenty-two acres at Torkington were secured from the Shepley Estate. Originally the land would have been within the borders of the original Torkington Hall. There is a record of a manor house at Torkington referred to in the Chester Forestry Proceedings of 1363. It says: "That in 1354 John de Legh, who would have been related to the Leghs of Lyme Hall, cleared sixty acres of woodland known as 'the Graverslend' and built a manor house there. The Hall is reported to have consisted of two chambers and a kitchen, surrounded by a moat, outside of which was built a barn, stables, and wards. It was possibly abandoned around the beginning of the 16th century." The moat is still there today alongside Broadoak Farm which borders the fourth fairway.

Alex (Sandy) Herd, the Club Professional at Huddersfield and the 1902 Open Champion, was engaged to advise on the design of the new course with Peter Barrie the revered Club Professional and Greenkeeper, carrying out most of the heavy work with a team of twenty men. The course was opened in 1909 and the following year there was a celebration Exhibition Match between four international golfers: John Henry Taylor & Harry Vardon, representing England and James Braid & Alex Herd, representing Scotland. Between them they won 18 Open Championships.

A farmhouse on the site became the clubhouse and the former clubhouse, which was in the style of a traditional cricket pavilion, was sold to Alderley Edge Golf Club and it was still in use up to 1971. The former course continued as Mirrlees Golf Club until 1988, presumably with a new clubhouse.

During the First World War there were major financial difficulties with a significant proportion of membership being 'away at war' and there being little time for leisure pursuits. On 19th November 1915, a letter was read from Mrs Todd declining to give to the Christmas Fund "on the grounds that at the present time all money should go to the soldiers". In 1916 the course was used for 'cadet training' and there was an agreement with a local farmer to allow him to use it for sheep grazing. The following year further land was put aside to grow oats, wheat and potatoes. Unfortunately, at this time, the old nine-

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hole course at Mirrlees, was turned into a tank testing area. It must have taken some time to get the putting greens back into reasonable condition!

At the end of the war Harry Colt, a well known Course Architect, advised on the restoration and improvement of the course. To celebrate the outcome of the war the Arundel Cup, a major club competition, was renamed the Victory Trophy. This is still contested today. There's a photograph in the clubhouse of members at the Peace Day Celebrations on 18th July 1919. The clubhouse is decorated with flags and there is a huge union jack hanging from the balcony. Over one hundred members are gathered in front of the clubhouse in their edwardian dress - the men in their plus fours, high collars & ties, jackets, trilbies - the ladies in long skirts and wide brimmed hats decorated with flowers

In March 1920, Sir Henry Fildes, a member of the Club, was elected as Liberal Member of Parliament for Stockport at a by-election. Apart from his being Club President in 1921, within the Club he was known as a champion of the skylark. At the time it was common for these birds to be sold in markets as caged pets. Each Saturday morning, he would visit Stockport Market, buy all the skylarks and then set them free on the golf course in the afternoon. The future of the poor birds for sale while he was at Westminster, might have been less agreeable! Sir Henry features in 1935 Committee Minutes when writing 'tongue in cheek' to the Hon. Sec. He was protesting that his handicap had been reduced from 17 to 16. He offered a Tripe Supper to the Committee to 'secure justice'. Surprisingly this was accepted!

In 1929, the American Ryder Cup team, including global golf legends Gene Sarazen and Walter Hagan visited Stockport. They played against a team of local amateurs in front of a crowd of seven thousand people. (Ted Jarman, a Stockport Professional, was to later represent Britain in the 1935 match). Each American played against two golfers from the area who of course had the advantage of local knowledge. The match was close with the Americans coming out winners by 5.5 to 4.5. The Club presented the Americans with a clock together with a set of cufflinks for each player to commemorate the occasion. In recent times the clock and a set of cufflinks have been brought back to the Club and these are now on display in the clubhouse. A small footnote to the occasion was a committee minute stating 'Ladies should not be admitted to the balcony of the clubhouse'!

During the 1930's leading up to the Second World War, the following snippets stand out from the club records:

- Dec. 1931 – Two boys were prosecuted for stealing holly.
- Aug. 1932– The Suggestion Book had an entry "In the old days bulrushes were provided to hide babies. Is there any necessity that they should hide golf balls and damp the ardour of elderly golfers? I am alluding to those in the hollow on the 17th. May they be removed? This was turned down.
- Nov. 1934 - "Reference was made to an incident which occurred recently when a lady member was served with lunch on Saturday after 1pm when the course is closed to ladies. It was decided to suggest to the General Committee that ladies might be served with meals in their own room when, under the bye-laws, the course is closed to them."
- Dec. 1935 - The ladies invited the Officers and Members of the Committee to be their guests at their Annual Dinner. This was declined by the Committee "on the grounds that the ladies would enjoy themselves better without the gentlemen."
- The 1936 Open Champion, Alf Padgham, created an unofficial course record in 1937 in an exhibition match with Henry Cotton (who won the Open that year),

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against Tommy Renouf, the Stockport Professional and Gordon Good, the Romiley Professional.

As in the first war, there were financial problems and food production challenges during the Second World War. Frank Dennis, the Professional and Eric Burd, the Steward/Secretary, were two key figures who managed the land on behalf of the Club and also arranged a number of exhibition matches to help fund the war effort. Miscellaneous items, worthy of mention include:

- During the Battle of Britain, the Club was told that obstructions would have to be placed on the fairways to prevent the landing of hostile aircraft.
- In Feb 1941 a circular was received from the Cheshire War Agricultural Committee requesting that 29 acres (later increased to 39) be put aside for food production.
- The ladies held knitting parties to help the war effort and a golf competition took place to raise money to buy the wool.
- In June 1940 the Local Defense Volunteers (later the Home Guard) were provided with accommodation that gave access to 'an extensive view of the country from the balcony of the clubhouse'. They erected a notice on the door of their room 'Guard Room, Private' and there was long running dispute between them and the Club over the use of the snooker table!
- On 8 May 1941 a Heinkel 111 Bomber crashed next to the sixth hole after being hit by artillery fire when attacking Fairy Aviation at Levenshulme. The four crew members baled out and were quickly captured. This was not before one of them, who had been a student at Manchester University before the war, landed near his former digs - "Stumbling to his former boarding house in full parachute and flying gear, he knocked on the door and was greeted with the immortal albeit obvious question – what are you doing here?"
- On Sunday 12 Oct 1941 a Red Cross match took place between Henry Cotton (1934 & 37 Open Champion) & Harry Bentley (European Champion) against Dennis & Burd. In a newspaper report of the match Cotton referred to "Frank Dennis has been one of the leading Northern professionals for a long time, erratic but brilliant, and is a most painstaking but efficient putter, and despite his police duties and his spare time activities as a farmer – he farms some 29 acres of the course – he manages to keep his golf game more than alive and supervise the upkeep of the course as well." All in a day's work!
- At the conclusion of the war, the clubhouse was in a poor state and there were major concerns about the drainage. The insurance arrangements were reviewed to "cover for food poisoning risks"!
- On 1 June 1951 Henry Cotton gave a talk and film show sharing his golfing experiences on the international golf circuit. This was followed a few weeks later by an exhibition match between Bobby Locke (South African winner of four Open Championships) & Norman von Nida (Australia) v Bill Shankland (Australian professional golfer and rugby league international) & Bill Hancock, the Stockport Professional.

In October 1966, Bill Hancock, the popular Professional who had been with the Club for twenty years, died on the course. The following May, the Bill Hancock Testimonial took place at the Club and many of the country's top professional and amateurs took part reflecting the respect and affection for him from the world of golf.

One of the Club's major social events is the Annual Dinner, sometimes attended by approaching two hundred members and guests. The quality of the food and its exceptional

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service to so many people by the Club Stewards (just two in over forty years) and the staff, is a marvel to behold. Many golfing and sporting characters have spoken at the event, including Henry Longhurst the BBC long serving correspondent. Of note was the entertainment in 1948 which included:

Song, Tricks & Laughter by Gilbert Stewart;

Singing by Baritone Peter Crick; and

Robbie & Platt, Humorous Characters

- sounds hilarious!

One of the traditions of the Club is to follow each Saturday's men's competition with a formal presentation where members are expected to wear a jacket and tie. Recently a member played in the morning and finished his round about 1.00 o'clock. His plan was then to immediately travel to Abersoch to meet his partner for a weekend break (she had left earlier with the house keys!). His problems began when he tried to explain to her that he'd had a good score and that he wouldn't be able to leave until 7.30pm, after the presentation. Because he couldn't access his house, his next challenge was to acquire a suit from the local charity shop!

His winner's speech proved to be very entertaining!

When trawling through the archives there has been a strong and consistent theme of charitable initiatives for deserving causes. Each year there is a Captain's Charity and thousands of £'s has been raised over the years. It would be impractical to list all the charities, but recent beneficiaries have included: The On-Course Foundation for injured soldiers, The English & Welsh Blind Golfers Association, Mencap, Rainbow Trust Children's Society, Francis House Children's Hospice, Beechwood Cancer Care Centre and The Offside Trust safeguarding children in sport.

In more recent years, the Club has played host to the Regional Qualifier for the Open Championship and many major County competitions. It was during the 2002 Open Qualifier that Charl Schwartzel, the 2011 Masters Champion, shot a 64 to set a new course record. The Club is currently home to the 'Stockport Salver', one of a series of world ranking events for amateur golfers.

To conclude, for over one hundred years the Club has reflected a small part of Stockport history, it's been the home to many notable golfing events, happy social occasions and lasting friendships, long may this continue.

Peter Roche, February 2019

Further Reading: Stockport Golf Club, One Hundred Years