



Modern golf owes much of its status to the Gentlemen Golfers of Leith who formulated the game's first rules in 1744

THE HOME OF GOWF

Golf was invented by a group of Scottish fishermen. *Colin Callander* traces the growth of the game

There is much debate in some circles about the origins of golf. But, as a Scot by birth – not to mention inclination – I have no hesitation in confirming that it was the brainchild of an anonymous band of 13th-century Scottish fishermen, who dreamed it up in order to pass the time as they walked from their boats to their cottages, at the end of a hard day's work.

What's more, we Scots can also take the lion's share of the credit when it comes to the development of the game since then, although sadly, we no longer play the same central role we once did.

Back in the 13th century, golf was a very different proposition. The "gowf", as it came to be called, was a rudimentary exercise performed not on a course, but between two points agreed beforehand. The rules, for what they were worth, dictated that the player had to get his pebble from point A to point B in fewer shots than his competitors but did not allow for lost balls, unplayable lies or other acts of God.

Slowly but surely, however, the game began to develop and one of the first changes to occur was for it to be contested, not as a cross-country pursuit, but,

instead, on rudimentary courses expressly set out for the purpose. These first courses, hewn from land reclaimed from the sea, were laid down in an age long before mechanised mowers were invented and it was left to the rabbits, and other animals, to feed on the grass and ensure it was short enough for "the gowf".

It is sometimes supposed that all Scots must love the game of golf, but one who definitely did not was King James II of Scotland who became so concerned that it was interfering with archery practice – and thereby threatening the defence of the realm – that he chose to ban it by an Act of Parliament in 1457.

James II was used to getting his own way but in this instance, I like to think he did not. Instead, his subjects cleverly got round his edict by taking their bows and arrows with them on to the golf course, shooting at the rabbits between shots, thereby enjoying their sport, appearing to adhere to their master's wishes and, at the same time, providing meals for all their families.

Unfortunately, not all golfers were able to bend the laws and one who failed was Mary Queen of Scots, arguably the world's first woman golfer, who incurred the wrath of the Church by playing a round (not around, we hasten to add) with the Earl of Bothwell, a mere day or two after her husband, Lord Darnley, was murdered. Sadly, a short while later, Mary herself was executed although it's unclear whether this was because of her opposition to the powers that were, or as a result of an early, but far from isolated, case of discrimination against women golfers.

The game of golf was to remain a male enclave for centuries and it was also to continue to be a rather haphazard affair until 1744 when a group of Scottish dignitaries, who called themselves the Gentlemen Golfers of Leith, but whose unruly behaviour suggested otherwise, formulated the first official rules of the game. Soon, the best legal minds in Edinburgh, the Lothians, Fife and beyond had taken the original 13 Articles & Laws in Playing at Golf and transformed them into pages of impenetrable text. It is debatable whether this process can be labelled as progress, but at least it ensured their own future as the administrators of the game.

As the upper-class Scots pontificated over the development of the rules, so the craftsmen and labourers in their midst continued to refine the equipment that was used, culminating in the invention of the "gutta percha" ball in 1848.

Today, with the benefit of hindsight, the invention of the gutty can be seen to have revolutionised the game. The gutty was much cheaper, not to mention more effective, than its predecessor, the "featherie" and, as a result, it led to the participation of the masses, many of whom had previously been unable to afford to take it up.

Sadly, it also bankrupted the traditional "featherie" makers. So, when faced with destitution, they decided to switch to playing golf for a living. Nowadays, of course, the Scots no longer dominate golf as they once did. But back then it was different. Back then it is no exaggeration to state that we were the kings of the royal and ancient game.