

*THE
SUNNINGDALE
STORY*

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**A SHORT HISTORY OF SUNNINGDALE
GOLF CLUB FROM ITS FIRST
BEGINNINGS**

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Sunningdale secretary 1934-39**

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SUNNINGDALE

In a very short time it will be sixty years since, so to speak, the first sod was cut in the making of Sunningdale Golf Course. What is its history and what the evolution which has made it probably the best known inland course in the world?

In writing this story I have had the advantage of the knowledge of two people who were in at its birth, the late George Roberts one of its founders, and Hugh MacLean, foreman of works during its making, and for forty years its Head Greenkeeper now, in this year of grace 1957, well over 80 years of age.

The land on which the Old Course is constructed belongs to St.John's College, Cambridge. The Sunningdale estate formed part of the possessions of the Benedictine Nunnery of Broomhall. Suppressed by Henry VIII, its possession was obtained for the College in 1524 by John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester and one of the executors of the Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby, mother of Henry VII, the Foundress. The Sunningdale property, until its modern development by the Ridgemount Estate Company began, consisted of three farms, Broomhall Farm, Titlarks Farm and Stavehall or Broomhall Waste. The rest was heather and gorse and pine trees.

In 1897/98 the brothers T.A. and G.A.Roberts built a house to live in. It faced in one direction what is now the 18th green of the Ladies' Course, and in the other direction what is now the "exit" from Sunningdale Golf Club. A photograph shows this house and Gordon House very bare and treeless. There were a few golf holes on

part of what is now the Ladies' Course.

There were then no shops near the station and no Ridgemount Road, merely a bridle path over the property, continuing as it still does, past the 13th green, the cottages, the 9th green of the New Course to Valley End. Sunningdale village with an accent on the "dale", lies, with its Church, below the main road and is in Berkshire. Sunningdale Railway Station with its level crossing and shops, and the whole of the golf course is in Surrey, though the postal address is Berkshire.

The house, "Ridgemount" which the brothers Roberts built, was some years later enlarged out of all recognition and became the Dormy House Club and is now the property of B.O.A.C.) Soon after taking up residence Tom Roberts, affectionately known for many years "T A" approached the College with a view to making a golf course and the creation of leaseholds on the land round about for the building of a good class house. Mr Kirle was agent for the college at the time and when he retired in 1914, "T.A." was appointed their agent, a position which he held till his death in 1944 when he was succeeded by his brother, George.

Almost immediately a Founders Committee, with the brothers Roberts as promoters, was formed of some keen golfers who were interested in the proposition. Willie Park was approached with a view to laying out the golf course, and in the same year an agreement was signed with him for the making of the course for the price of £3800. As mentioned previously, Hugh MacLean, "Mac", became foreman and remained in the service of the club until he went into honourable pensioned retirement in 1939.

There is moreover another servant of the Club, Bert Chapman, still in service after more than 57 years. His story told to me some years ago when I met him going down to the village is as follows:-

"I used to work for a greengrocer in the village and one Saturday I wanted to go to the Cup Final with a pal. I asked me boss and he said "Yer can't go". But I went. I turned up as usual on the Monday, but he packed me off, said he didn't want me any more. One day I met a pal and he says to me "Hallo, Bert, out of a job?" "Yes" says I, "I got the sack." "Look 'ere" says 'e, "they're makin' a golf course or something up on the Common. There's the man who's making it." And he pointed to a man smoking a big cigar. It was Mr Willie Park. I went up to him and said "Excuse me Sir, I 'ear they're making a golf course or something up on the Common; Any chance of a job for me?" He say "Go on up there and you'll see me foreman, Mr MacLean, and ask him." I went along and I sees old Mac. "Are you Mr MacLean" says I. "Yes" he says. "'ave yer got a job for me on this golf course yer makin'?. "Can yer dig" says Mac." I can do anything" says I. "Then carry on" says he. And next Tuesday I shall have been 'ere fifty years".

The site of the Old Course was mostly gorse and heather, but the 7th to the 10th holes were cut through the trees. The "Haskell" and other rubber cored balls had not come into use, so naturally the course was laid out for the gutty, and in the progress of time a good many alterations have taken place, though the original layout remains substantially the same, and it must be remembered that the New Course did not take shape till 1922. I have often wondered whether, in laying out the Old Course, Willie Park had in mind the position of the low winter sun. But the fact remains that only at the 7th

hole in the morning, and the 3rd hole and to a slight

degree the 1st in the afternoon, does the sun affect the playing of these holes in the winter months.

Now I will try to describe the Old Course as it was originally laid out. I was always interested in this and must have played it in the early days, and have often discussed it with "Mac", who was "in" at the making. The teeing ground for the first hole was more or less under the big oak tree, and only moved to its present position when the New Course was commenced. Then more land was taken in nearer the road, part of the gardens of Derry House and Sunnyside.

Part of this can easily be recognised from the different, rather lush texture of the grass near the hedge. The flowering cherry tree, halfway down the right hand side of the fairway was well inside the garden. The angular piece of bank and heather, which has considerable nuisance value to the not so long player marked the corner of a field, and if the sides of the angle are followed across the 17th, the boundaries of the field can be made out. The first green was more or less as it is now. Willie Park had the reputation of being a very good putter, and practically all his greens were large, much more so than they are at present. Their size was considerably curtailed, chiefly for economical purposes during the war, which one thinks, makes for improvement.

The second and third holes were substantially the same as they are now, but the fourth green was on the lower ground to the left of where the present green is built, and this hole was played from the extreme right of the teeing ground. The fifth hole was driven from the very top of the hill, but otherwise this hole and the sixth were as at present. There is a story connected with the small bunker in between the two cross bunkers near the green at the

latter hole, some time known as "Monty's" bunker. R.H.

Montmorency could not always carry these bunkers with his second shot, but he was so accurate that he could play between them. This bunker was made to foil him! (Recently some alterations to the approach to this green have been made and "Monty's bunker no longer exists)

The original seventh green was away down to the left of the present green, a bit of ground now completely overgrown with trees and scrub. The disused long bunker in the side of the hill which was carried by the second shot can easily be seen. Over it the ground sloped down to the invisible green. The teeing ground to the eighth was near to it and the green was very different in shape. Whilst the present green was being made, a temporary green was cut out of the side of the hill on the left and its site can easily be seen by the discerning eye.

Except for bunkering, the ninth remains practically the same and at one time was a great cause of congestion in a tournament. The writer remembers on one occasion during play for the Golf Illustrated Gold Vase, there were no less than nine couples waiting on the tee. On this occasion Cyril Tolley was so disgusted at the long wait that he gave up and walked back to the Club House.

The tenth remains the same, except that the bunker in the middle was originally much nearer to the tee. The eleventh green was a double one. The left half can still be seen, with the valley between the two halves. There was of course no bunker in the valley.

There was an awkward diagonal ditch across the middle of the 12th fairway and the green was on the low ground in front of the stables. The present green was designed and built by H.S. Colt as was the present seventh green. The thirteenth hole was quite different. It was a blind

one-shotter from a tee near the approach to the present

12th green, over the hill to the site of the present green. The tee was later changed to the top of the hill, a tee now being brought into use again. When the tee was moved to the top, the bunker in the centre, originally half its present size, was surrounded by putting surface. It was much criticised and known as "Colt's Po!"

Except for bunkering, the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth are very little changed, but it may be remarked that the bank and the ditch run along the right side of the fourteenth and fifteenth marked the boundary of the land leased from the College. Over the other side was the "Common". There was a small teeing ground to the 15th, now disused, over the bank to the right of the present medal tee. I believe it was "Monty's" idea to have one there, and "Mac" always called it the "Tee on the Common".

It may be noticed, especially in winter, that the left half of the fourteenth fairway, and also part of the left of the twelfth fairway, and the second up to the road, are inclined to be soft and "worm-casty". This was caused in the early days by a dressing of lime, which has altered the whole character of the turf. This lushness may be noticed at many of the near approaches to some greens, more especially the third, sixth, fourteenth and fifteenth. The reason for this is that they were originally part of the very large putting greens.

There have been, through the course of the years, three different greens for the seventeenth hole. The first of these was driven from a high built up teeing ground straight down the hill. The first and seventeenth formed a large double green. And near the site, in the direction of the Clubhouse, there can still be seen the shape of the

tee to the eighteenth. It was easy to slice out of bounds,

which was marked by the bank running down the right hand side. The site of the second green to be made at this hole was immediately below the present green, making the hole almost a complete right-angled dog-Legged hole. Driven from the same tee, it was still easier to go out of bounds if the player tried to cut too close a corner. The present green was designed at the time of the making of the New Course in order to make room for two first holes and two last holes to run side by side.

The original eighteenth hole was much longer than at present, driving from the teeing ground I have mentioned above, near the clump of trees, to a green not far from the hedge bounding Holiday House and in a line more or less half way between the present two eighteenth greens. Like the seventeenth, the eighteenth green was re-sited nearer the big oak tree in order to make room for the New Course. It was larger than at present with a very wide entrance so that any sort of second shot, given the length, could find it. In the autumn of 1940, a squadron of German planes dropped upwards of ninety high explosive and incendiary bombs in and around Sunningdale.

One of the former made a large crater at the right hand near side of the green. In the clearing up of the mess that was made, someone had the bright idea of making these two insidious bunkers on the site of the bomb hole, thus making the second shot from a very ordinary one into a first class one. It is amazing how many balls they catch. The writer on one occasion counted nine consecutive professionals putting their seconds into or outside these bunkers. The large bunker to the left of the drive, once called "John's" bunker, after its designer John Morrison, was so placed to check those who essayed to drive too

much on to the first fairway.

So much for the almost too popular Old Course! During the years many amateur and professional tournaments have been played there and records broken. Though individual rounds of 65, 64 and 63, the latter the present record held by Norman von Nida, have been made, probably the most famous in the minds of many were the two rounds by Bobby Jones in the qualifying round for the Open Championship in 1926 of 66 and 68, largely in view of the fact that the two rounds contained only one 5 and one 2.

What of the putting greens? In these days of scientific green-keeping, most courses have their excellent putting surfaces at certain times of the year, but year in and year out, and day in and day out, the Old Course greens can bear comparison with any. In the past they have had their diseases, such as fusarium patch and leather jackets. Now, thanks to the various research stations, these diseases can be scotched before they appear. "Mac" always said that the original greens were laid with turf cut from the road side! I have little doubt that the turf on some of the originally sited greens, such as the 10th, 14th and 16th is descended from the first "road side" turf.

Before the New Course came into existence, there was a 9-hole course, starting and finishing where the practice ground is and played round Titlarks Hill. It was known as the Sunningdale Heath golf Club, and later on as the "chauffeur's" course, or the "nine 'ole". The green fees it brought in were practically sufficient to pay the wages of one man to look after it.

The original New Course was laid out by H.S. Colt, and came into being in 1922. Lord Dunedin, three years Captain of the Club, was principally responsible for the

legal side of the new land tenure. For the construction

of the course, laid out largely on Chobham Common, the Club obtained the freehold of the land, subject to commoners' rights. There is a right angled corner stone near the 14th teeing ground. Lines drawn east-wards from this to a stone on the boundary of Park Hill, a house built by H.O. Sillem and now occupied by J.R.A. Strovan, and north westwards to Upper Ribsdon, built by Gordon Anketell, mark the boundaries of the freehold property. In addition the Club has a lease and yearly tenancy at a peppercorn rent from the Lord of the Manor of the part of the Common up to the cross roads. Part of the present 6th, 7th and 8th holes come on to this portion.

A number of the holes of this New Course remain substantially the same as laid out by Harry Colt. The second, third, fourth, fifth, eleventh to seventeenth come into this category, though of these the fourth and twelfth have had, for a short time, alternative greens. The latter were not popular and the original greens were taken into play again.

The first hole was at first played from about the site of the present 18th green to a green in a small sort of amphitheatre below the 17th green. The eighteenth was played across the approach to the first to a green where the now first tee is situated. Thus the two holes were played in more or less reverse directions to what they now are.

In 1934 very large reconstruction of the remaining holes took place at considerable expense. The old seventh, eighth and ninth holes were abandoned. These were picturesque holes which entailed an amount of descent and climbing up again. The sites of two of these, now much over-grown, may be seen through the trees to the

right of the tenth hole of the Old Course. The New Course

10th hole was played to the present green from the top of the hill, a complete right angle to its present line.

The 6th hole [now the 9th] has had at different times four separate greens. The first was along the top of the hill to the left, and then across the bridle path well to the left of the present line. The writer never actually saw this green in play, but from an examination imagines that there was too much trouble involved for the ordinary golfer, which was the reason for the construction of the second of the greens. The site of this may still easily be made out short of the bridle path on the line of the present green.

The third of these four greens-was built over the spur of the hill, making a completely blind third shot to all but the biggest hitters who attempted to find it in two. This did not remain in play for long, when the present green was constructed. It always has been and will remain a difficult piece of ground for construction purposes and still may be considered rather a freak hole, even though in 1956 in the fourth round of the Dunlop Tournament. Arthur Lees and Gary Player, playing together, each scored threes at the hole.

To replace the abandoned old seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth holes, Tom Simpson who was employed on the reconstruction, made four new holes on the so far unused part of the Common. The first of these became the sixth and was played from a tee below the fifth, a drive and a pitch on to a small green on the side of the hill.

The seventh was a one-shotter of about 170 yards to the present seventh, but at right angles to its present line. A few steps brought one to the tee for the eighth hole. This was designed as a long two-shotter, played up the valley

and then a left handed dog leg to the present green. A

heath fire had left the common bare and black, so that some of the longer hitters were able to aim across the corner, and if unable to reach the fairway, were sure of not too bad a lie on the bare hill top. The ninth hole was also a long two shotter from a tee below the then eighth green, the second shot across the hand made ditch to the present eighth green. [A new green for this hole has now been built].

The tenth hole, now the ninth, was driven as at present, designed as a three-shotter, the third shot played over the present ninth green to a now disused site over the brow. The eleventh green was re-designed as it is at present and driven from a tee nearby, the hole being much shorter than at present. This tee can still easily be seen, now overgrown.

Mention has previously been made of the alternative green built for the 12th hole and now abandoned, and at the same time the present thirteenth green was designed. Harry Colt's original hole was over six hundred yards long and driven from a tee above the present 5th tee to a green to the right of the newly constructed one: And so to the eighteenth where Simpson designed a small two terraced green a little way beyond the belt of trees.

In 1935, R.H.Anketell, the then Captain, drove the first ball to open the newly constructed course, retrieved by one of the caddies who was given the customary sovereign; a real one! For the new holes on the Common, a very elaborate system of draining was accomplished which has certainly remained effective. A photo taken from the air shows this drainage work while being done. The heath fire previously mentioned had been a particularly extensive one, reaching right across the

Common from the railway line, a tongue of it having very

nearly got as far as the 9th green of the Old Course. Consequently the whole Common was bare and black except where the new fairways and greens had been made.

Partly on this account and partly owing to the Italian-Ethiopian war, the New Course was christened "Abyssinia". This appellation, whoever first invented it, I am sure helped to damn the course, and it was never popular. Thus shortly before the World War, Harry Colt and John Morrison were asked to see what could be done about it. Hence the Course as it is at present. One of the reasons of its unpopularity was alleged to be the long walks between green and teeing ground. For this reason, the writer measured the aggregate yardage from centre of greens to medal teeing grounds of the Old Course, the original New Course and "Abyssinia" and found barely one hundred yards difference in all three!

Somehow the Old Course has a personality of its own which is not shared by the New Course. Perhaps one of the reasons was expressed recently by a Professional golfer. He remarked that in his opinion the New Course was easier to the handicap golfer. As one of the latter class, the writer agrees, but if he were allowed an opinion, he would strongly assert that if the New Course was situated twenty or more miles away and be as easily accessible, it would rank as one of the best tests of golf in the Country.

From its beginning till his death, H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught was President of the Club. He was followed by the Earl of Derby, since whose death no one has held that office, though Their Majesties King Edward VIII and King George VI both graciously consented to be Patrons.

The names of the Captains are inscribed on a board for all to see, and it seems fitting that the names of the Secretaries should now be recorded here. The Hon. Montague Erskine acted as Hon. Secretary in the foundation days, and when full swing, H.S. Colt was appointed and remained in office until his business as a golf course architect made it impossible for him to continue, a period of about seventeen years.

In 1919, F.P. Le Marchand became Secretary and continued till his death early in 1933. T.A. Roberts carried on for a few months until the writer was appointed and took up duties in November of that year. The war terminated his engagement, as it did many of the younger members of the green staff. James Moir became Hon. Secretary for the period of the war, putting in what time he could spare from his other duties.

During the war the Clubhouse was taken over by the War Office and a temporary Club House was made out of what had been the caddie enclosure. At the end of the war the normal building naturally required a great deal of re-conditioning as did the New Course which owing to shortness of staff and for economical reasons had been allowed to go into disuse, only such work being done there to prevent complete disintegration. G.G. Kirke was next appointed, and in five years time was succeeded by Bernard Drew, who after twenty years service in a similar capacity at the Royal Cinque Ports Golf Club, Deal, had resigned that position.

Very soon after the war, work was started to put the New Course back into condition. This was made possible by some hard work put into it by Jim MacLean who has now succeeded his father as Head Green Keeper, and the members of the Artisan Section of the Club, who in return

for their services were granted additional playing rights.

It would be invidious to mention the names of the many well known golfers who have been and are members of the Club, in case some may be inadvertently left out. Only once, however, has the Amateur Championship Cup reposed in the Club House, when in 1949 it was won by Max McCready. There was a year, 1906, when no less than three of the semi-finalists were members, H.S. Colt, E.A. Smirke and C.C. Lingen. However, James Robb, the other semi-finalist was the eventual winner from Lingen. The Club's Professional, Jack White, won the Open Championship at Sandwich in 1904.

The Club has been well and faithfully served by many of its staff. Mention has already been made of Hugh MacLean, head Green Keeper for forty years, and Bert Chapman still in service after over fifty years. Godfrey and Hampton were on the Green staff with nearly thirty years service. Miss Charman came originally as Harry Colt's personal Secretary in his outside work, and eventually at his special request took over the position of Manageress, and with her brother in the bar and later with Miss Paget, carried on for very many years. Miss Charman now lives in retirement in her cottage in Windlesham with Miss Paget. Arthur Wigmore has for 41 years reigned over the dressing and locker rooms. The holder of the rarely awarded Distinguished Conduct Medal, he remains the friend of countless members and visitors.

Last but far from being least comes that wonderful character James [Jimmie] Sheridan, Caddie Master for fifty years. His sense of humour, wit and powers of repartee are known to golfers from all parts of the world. No further evidence of the esteem in which he is held is required than the facts first, that his portrait painted by

Martin Ronaldson, once in the Royal Academy, now

hangs in the Clubhouse, and secondly that he has recently been elected an Honorary Member of the Club.

Of the Professionals attached to the Club, Jack White was the first. One time Open Champion, he employed six or seven club makers and had a large overseas market. Ernest Sales with his two sons came next, none of them great golfers, but who looked after their shop and their club making, now a fast dying art. After them, Michael Bingham was appointed from a large number of applications.

Owing to illness Bingham had to leave and Percy Boomer, having escaped from St. Cloud before the Germans overran France, took over temporarily and later permanently. Percy had his own methods of teaching and was the author of a book on the subject. He possessed an almost unique collection of golfing publications and books by every known author, mostly signed copies. On his death, in harness, Arthur Lees was appointed and carries on his golfing successes in spite of the onset of a younger generation.

Thus Sunningdale! The story has been written in the belief that may be of interest not only to those who can remember things as they were, but to those of a later generation who know nothing of them. It may also serve as a record of the evolution of the two courses from their first beginnings.

Extract from Bye-Laws 1902: -

“Caddies shall be paid at the following rates:-

**[i] 1st Class 1/- per round of 18 holes.
6d for 9 holes or less.**

**[ii] 2nd Class 9d per round for 18 holes
5d for 9 holes or less.**

[iii] Lunch money [6d.] if engaged for whole day

[iv] Booking fee 1d. per round.”

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