

The origins of golf and how it conquered the world

By Patrick Fossett

You think you know where the game of golf originated? Well so did I, but now I am not so sure. The idea was clear in my head that the Scots were hitting “balls” into “holes” (originally rabbit scrapes) across the sandy grasslands near the sea in the middle of the 15th century. They put a gull’s feather to indicate the hole and the depressions that had been made by the sheep sheltering from the stormy winds, and which had exposed the sand underneath the grass, were the first “bunkers”.

Of course I thought I knew that the Dutch used to play a well documented game called “kolf”. This involved propelling stones with sticks across the ice until they hit a series of stakes placed in the ice. This started in about 1300 and so probably in advance of the Scots. It may well be that the trade between Flanders and Scotland helped transfer this concept (you know, businessmen chatting about their hobbies over a glass of whisky at the end of a busy day of commerce) and that the Scots transferred the game from the ice to the links.

The linksland is, of course, the land that separates, or in fact joins or “links”, the agricultural land close to the seaside and the beach or sea itself. Useless as arable land and therefore mostly common ground where rabbits were bred. The rather sparse, fine bladed grasses that were able to survive there in a hostile environment are the forerunners of the expensively bred bents and fescues of today’s modern golf course.

In 1457 there was sufficient enthusiasm for golf that the Scottish parliament had to issue a decree to stop people playing golf since it was interfering with their archery practice. The first surviving written reference to golf in St Andrews is contained in Archbishop Hamilton’s Charter of 1552.

This reserves the right of the people of the Fife town to use the links land “for golf, football, schuteing and all gamis”. In 1567 Mary, Queen of Scots, is rumoured to have practiced her chipping and putting only days after the murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley, to show her loyal subjects just how much she cared about his death. Later, a golfaholic King James the First talked down the church’s opposition to playing the sport on Sundays. The Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews was founded in 1754 and has been the ruling body for the game ever since.

So it seems obvious doesn’t it? The Dutch gave the Scots a bit of an idea and the Scots turned it into a fantastic game which has been evolving systematically and continuously over the years. Well this is where we should bend the knee and maybe take a less Eurocentric attitude. A Chinese professor, Ling Hongling, has written a paper which explains that golf was a sport in China long before the emergence of the game in Holland or Scotland. According to him the game was developed around 945 and was later exported to the West, possibly by a Mogul eunuch, Admiral Zheng He, in the 13th century.

The Chinese gave the name “chuiwan” to the game they played. This name comes from the two words “chui” meaning hitting and “wan” meaning ball. The game (as you have probably already guessed) consisted of hitting a ball with a stick into a series of holes in the ground. Sound familiar? Well it appears that the game was played by noblemen and commoners alike and that early in the 12th century it featured in the Imperial courts as a pastime for the rulers. Here, as you can imagine, the clubs were made from precious metals and decorated with jewels. When you come to think of it these are probably the equivalent of today’s titanium-headed, tungsten-insert, adjustable-weighting-screw drivers with carbon-boron shafts!

Several paintings, murals and scrolls dating from well before the earliest records of golf in Europe exist and have been commonly accepted as showing a game substantially the same as golf. A monograph entitled *Wan Jing* and published in 1282 can be compared to the early books describing the rules of golf and there can be little doubt that they describe the same activity.



This picture shows a bunch of ladies playing with clubs which look suspiciously like golf clubs and batting a little ball around in the direction of what looks like a hole. These figures were created by Du Jin, active during the 15th century in the Ming dynasty.

However, and this is where the Scots can perhaps take the moral high ground, the game of chiuwan probably did not survive much later than the 14th century. No references to the game can be found in documents after the 15th century and when golf came to China in the 20th century it was regarded as a foreign import because chiuwan had disappeared from the collective memory. The Chinese went on their own way inventing much more useful things such as gunpowder, umbrellas, phosphorescent paint, the fork, and probably pasta (sorry to the Italians amongst you!) and in general developing their unique civilisation. Half a world away, and with only the briefest of inputs from Mongol warriors (?), the Dutch and Scots contrived to develop what is surely the world's finest sport.

What is abundantly clear is that the Royal & Ancient game of golf has come back to China with a vengeance. The number

of golf courses being built each year would make your eyes water, and the number of Chinese golfers is now growing exponentially. As with all the people who actually succeed in hitting a golf ball properly at least once during their initial lessons, they get addicted to the game. It is not for nothing that the game is now known in China (in some circles) as “green opium”.

So if we can credit the Scots with developing and refining, rather than inventing, the game, how did it get where it is today and how was it exported in the more modern world? The spread of golf from Scotland to the rest of the world owes itself to the spread of British imperialism. In 1860 the golfing world had only about 38 golf clubs – 34 in Scotland, 1 in England, 2 in India and 1 in France. But as the British Empire grew, so the game of golf grew with it. Intrepid, entrepreneurial, military and games-loving Scotsmen (with a few Englishmen from time to time) took the game out into a world where they built courses with only the scarcest of resources and spread the gospel to a largely indifferent native population. Any Scotsman with half an ounce of initiative would, on hearing that he was being posted to one of the colonies, include in his packing cases the essentials to create a (minimalist) course wherever he arrived. Lack of grass was not generally a problem as those who have played on the superb oil stabilised “browns” of the Gulf countries or Nigeria will attest. Other developments too helped to make the game more enjoyable to play and thus accelerated its spread. The most significant was probably the invention of the lawn mower, so necessary for making the grass surfaces more playable.



The lawn mower was invented in 1830 by Edwin Beard Budding, an English engineer. His idea came after seeing a machine in a local cloth mill which used a cutting cylinder mounted on a bench to trim cloth to make a smooth finish after weaving. Budding thought that he could cut grass using a similar concept by mounting it in a frame with wheel so that the blades rotated close to the lawn's surface.

Thus the international spread of golf largely followed the expansion of the British Empire, which took golf to North America, South Africa, India, Australia and New Zealand and the Far East. Where the map was, or became, pink, so golf spread its virus. The first golf club on the European Continent was formed in the foothills of the French Pyrenees at Pau in 1856 by former officers of the Duke of Wellington. The Royal Calcutta is the oldest club outside Britain and was founded in 1829. Another Indian club, the Bombay Club is only a little younger dating from 1842. Nearby Ceylon (as it was then called) had its first club founded in 1879. The first Adelaide Golf Club was founded in Australia in 1870 and clubs appeared in New Zealand soon thereafter. In 1885 the Cape Golf Club was formed in South Africa.

The earliest record of golf clubs in North America can be traced to the year 1786 with the founding of a club in Charleston, South Carolina. However the first real charter was that of the Royal Montreal Golf Club in 1873. By 1876 there were five courses in Canada: at Montreal, Quebec, Toronto, Brentford and Niagara-on-the-Lake. Golf was played at Oakhurst, West Virginia, in 1884, the Dorset Field Club, Vermont, in 1886, and in Foxburg, Pennsylvania, in 1887. In

1888 a rough three-hole golf course was built by John Reid, a Scot, near his home in Yonkers, New York. Later that year Reid and some friends built a six-hole course nearby and formed a golfing organisation that they named St. Andrew's Golf Club. (This showed that their grammar needed a little polishing since there is no apostrophe in the Scottish town of, approximately, the same name!) This club, in Hastings-on-the-Hudson, N.Y., has been documented as the longest continually running club in North America since its founding in 1888.

Once golf was introduced to America, its spread was swift and sure. Among the most significant early courses were Shinnecock Hills at Southampton, Long Island, and the Chicago Golf Club. The latter established in 1893 was the inspiration of Charles Blair MacDonal, who learnt the game as a student whilst at St. Andrews University. It was the first 18-hole course in the U.S.A. Later on he designed and built the National Links course on Long Island incorporating the best features he had been able to glean by playing the great Scottish courses. The growth in the number of golf clubs was spectacular. By 1896 there were over 80 courses in the United States; by 1900 there were 982, with at least one in each of the 45 States. In fact, by the turn of the century courses in the United States outnumbered those in Britain.

Nowadays golf is played by over 55 million people on more than 30,000 courses in the world. There are at least 130 countries affiliated to the world's governing bodies. It is growing in popularity all the time, and has already spread its tentacles to the newly emerging countries of Eastern Europe. The Czech Republic already has 60 courses; even in Estonia there are 6 with 8 under construction. It will be fascinating to see when golf finally gets a proper launch in Romania with the opening of the first 18-hole international standard course. Rest assured, dear reader, Vertaria is doing its best to spread the gospel of golf in Romania, for truly, "Golf is our Religion".