

Dr Eve Soulsby introduces

The St Andrews Ladies Putting Club, alias 'The Himalayas' – a unique asset to the town

Where else would you expect to find the oldest ladies golf club in the world but in St Andrews, so often referred to as 'The Home of Golf'? However, being the oldest is only a small part of the uniqueness of the Club and its course.

At its inception in September 1867, The St Andrews Ladies Golf Club was created by David L Burn with some other members of the R&A, to provide entertainment for their daughters. The game they played was known as 'short golf', mainly because their swing was restricted by the dress code of the day. As raising their arms above their shoulders was difficult, and considered undignified, the only clubs that could be used were a putter and a cleek (type of wedge).

Mr Burn asked Old Tom Morris to lay out some holes on rough ground next to the men's golf course, now known as the Old Course. This land was rented from Mr Cheape of Straththyrum, consisting of grass, sandy patches, and bunkers. During his 28 years as its greenkeeper, Old Tom gradually grassed over virtually all of it. In the early 1890s he annexed some hilly land to the north, the area which gave rise to the title 'Himalayas'. Two unique features here: an excessively undulating putting green, and the fact that it was the brainchild of none other than Old Tom Morris.

The Club's gradual transformation is also unique. The first competition, held on 6 October 1867, was played by 22 ladies, mostly in their late teens/early twenties, only one of whom was married. By 1888, so many children played that a club was created and competitions organised for over a hundred 5 to 13 year-olds. By 1904 adult membership is recorded as 670, of whom 240 were unmarried ladies, 230 were married ladies, while 200 were classified as 'gentlemen associates'. Today, it is single gender – the men were reluctantly voted out, a result of the Equality Act 2010 – most members are in the 'retired' age bracket. The Children's Club evolved into the Children's Holiday Golf Club, still thriving today ... surely the oldest children's golf club in the world? It has certainly honed the skills over the years of several famous golfers, not least Freddie Tait in the 1880s, who twice became Open Amateur Champion before the end of that century.

The Ladies Golf Club changed its name to The St Andrews Ladies Putting Club in 1941 and since then has provided a unique form of outdoor exercise for those ladies of the town who can no longer play the long game. But it also attracts members who still play golf with single figure handicaps, including many from outwith St Andrews, not only throughout Scotland, but worldwide.

At the outset, competitions were organised by R&A members, who provided the prizes and medals; it became customary for the Captain of the R&A to gift a trophy. One of the earliest was given by the 1876 Captain, Prince Leopold, youngest son of Queen Victoria. Other trophies from royal benefactors include the 1922 trophies from the Prince of Wales, later Edward VIII, those in 1930 from the Duke of York, who became George VI, and two from the Duke of Kent in 1937. Is there any other ladies' club with so many trophies gifted by royalty?

This annual gift of trophies from the R&A Captains decreased in number after WW2. In 1971 the action was replaced by an annual match against the present and past R&A captains, which continues to this day. Tradition has it that the R&A team use long-nosed hickory putters and provide suitable liquid refreshment, while the Ladies Putting Club makes whisky cake! This tends to make for a very happy occasion!

Since the 1920s the Club has welcomed paying visitors to their putting green outside times reserved for members. Some 50,000 players a year avail themselves of this unique facility, many returning year upon year to enjoy the experience of putting on a course designed by Old Tom. Since the Club is a non-profit-making enterprise, only a relatively small fee is charged for adults, with reductions for children and the over-60s. In the light of this, it is quite remarkable that the Club has survived two World Wars plus various recessions, depressions, and most recently, the Covid lockdown. Nevertheless, the Club and its course has achieved a five-star rating from both Trip Advisor and Google, together with being rated by The Courier as one of the top three attractions in St Andrews.

After the first ten years, a marquee was acquired to provide some shelter for the Club members. This was raised and taken down daily – if it had not already been blown down! By 1898 a more permanent structure had been erected, built of wood and corrugated iron at a cost of £176 16s 2d. However, even this did not survive the St Andrews gales, for it blew down in 1968. The Club managed to raise £3,425 for a stronger building. By the 1990s this shelter was thought to have become somewhat inadequate. In 1996 the luxuries of electricity and running water were introduced as part of a total refurbishment costing over £63,000. What is unique about this, you may ask? Well, other clubs would refer to such a

building as their pavilion or clubhouse. But no, the Ladies Putting Club still call it, 'The Shelter'!

Over the years, income not required for the rental and upkeep of the course and its shelter has been donated to local charities. This first occurred in 1897 when 2 guineas were given to the Fund for the Queen Victoria Jubilee Fountain, now located next to the start of the Jubilee Course. Since the 1960s, charitable donations are recorded annually in the Club's Expenditure, increasing from £10 to RNLI in 1965; through £200 to the Step Rock Pool in 1983; £500 to Friends of the Memorial Hospital in 2001; £1,000 to TCCL, Horseleys Park in 2016; to £13,500 for Girls and Ladies Golf in NE Fife in 2022.

The Club and course are run by a small committee of retired ladies on a voluntary basis, another unique attribute. They organise tournaments for members and annual matches against local clubs, including the Children's Club, which they initiated over a century ago. Their enthusiasm has succeeded in maintaining the Club and its course in a viable condition throughout the recent Covid pandemic as well as closure during The Open, the annual Dunhill tournaments, and other Championships.

The Club is also unique in that it is the only one in St Andrews to have its own course, albeit rented – originally from Mr Cheape of Straththyrum, then from the Town Council, now from the Links Trust, which operates on behalf of the townsfolk. The town values its heritage so much that in 1988, when plans were drawn up to build the Links Clubhouse on top of Old Tom's 'Himalayas', it succeeded in having the building moved north beyond the confines of the course.

All these attributes have produced a unique asset for St Andrews, today providing an attraction for old and young worldwide, as well as a source of fun, fellowship, and outdoor exercise for the ladies of the town ... which is why you may well come across an elderly lady, possibly in her nineties, carrying a putter, on the streets of St Andrews. She will be heading for a competition on the Himalayas!



Ladies Putting Club 2010, by kind permission of Giles Le Maitre whose grandmother played at the Club in the 1920s.



Children's Golf Club, September 1892.



Old Tom Morris, Honorary Member, in front of the first Shelter, 1905.

(Photos courtesy The Putting Club)