



The Origins of the Golf Course

'Let us but ask ourselves why golf originated on links land and immediately it becomes clear. Here was terrain to be battled with- terrain which called forth skill, adroitness, finesse, power, daring and other fine qualities possesses by the athlete and the sportsman. Here were the great dunes to be carried, problems to be met and solved, masterly strokes to be made, dangers to be faced.'

Robert Hunter 1926.

Historians tell us that golf began on the sandy wastelands along the Scottish Coasts. When this information is conveyed to us, it often comes with photos of the Old Course in St Andrews on the east coast or Prestwick on the west. But in these photos the turf on the fairways is always short and manicured, greens are pure and smooth and bunkers are defined. While golf may have been played for hundreds of years at these long established locations and others, how the first courses may have appeared to the early pilgrims is now hidden from us. It intrigues me to visualise from where the first fairways and greens may have come, how the first courses looked and how the modern course has developed since.

It takes a sojourn into the sandy dunes along an undeveloped coastline to find the origins of the first courses. In these natural, windswept places where the hand of man has had little time to toil, one can find, if fortunate, islands of finer turf growing in the basins between the sandy ridges. Kept there by the sandy walls around them, these grasses have evolved from salt tolerant tussock grasses into quite distinctive habitats of fine leafed grasses – many with their own micro-climates.

Of course, nothing happens quickly. It has taken a long period of time and many seasons for the soils in these low areas to naturally modify. The first stages would have almost certainly have been the initial establishment of the hardy dune-grasses. From here, due to the growth and decomposition of that flora, the nutrient content and structure of the sand would have improved and the pure sand 'soil' slowly developed into a sandy loam. Soon some wind-distributed seeds of the finer grasses such as Bent grass and fescue would find their way to this receptive seedbed. At the right temperature these seeds would germinate and take hold, and after a few seasons their organic matter mixes with the sand further slowing the speed that rain water percolates though the sandy soil profile. With water now available, the new finer turf species grow stronger and soon spread eventually filling the entire dune basin forming perfect early green or fairway.

I took this photo on a remote beach on Great Barrier Island. I believe this is how the links at St Andrews would have looked when golf (or 'Goff') was first played there 600 years ago. Indeed it still may have had an appearance more closely resembling this than the current look up until as recently as 1850. Golfers played from one area of fine turf to the next – island hopping over large areas of sandy dune. Of course there



would be a hole dug here or there, but there was always a great degree of elasticity as to where it might be located. It's location depending upon where the next suitable patch of grass lay, not par and preconceived notions of hole yardage.

Given that these fine-turf islands were treasured golfing pastures, it is somewhat surprising to learn that the first golfers deliberately caused further damage to these limited areas of play by taking sand from the hole and teeing up the ball within one club length of the hole. Neither act helped improve the growth or maintain the condition of these finer areas of grass.

The playing of golf from tee to green did little to help stabilize the dunes either. While the existing areas of fine turf were being hacked up, any grasses trying to take hold elsewhere were in great danger of being downtrodden, buried or hacked to death in the general playing of the game. As a result, exposed dunes generally would stay exposed. This could mean that after large storms some sand may have blown across the desirable playing areas, but that was all part of the game.

With golf becoming more popular due to improved access via the railways from 1850–1880, and cheaper golf balls, things had to change to prevent the courses returning to sand dunes. Maintenance regimes and rule changes were required. In 1875 the rules provided for the first use of separate teeing grounds. This helped save the turf around the hole, and allowed the course to use areas of the dunes that may have been out of range previously. Next came the souls who took upon the role of caring for the Links. Perhaps the most famous of these early green keepers was Thomas Morris of St Andrews. During his tenure at St Andrews from 1865 to 1903 he revolutionised the role. While books have been written about his achievements, he invented the first

'hole cup' to stop the newly cut holes from filling in with sand. He also started top-dressing greens and tending to the excessive growth of grasses.

A look at the first golfing areas also reminds of the enormous change in bunker formations. Sand and grass have inversed their relationships in the modern game to what they had initially. Originally there were islands of grass amidst oceans of sand. Now it is the bunkers that are pinholes holes in the fabric of turf that covers the modern day course. Neither is necessarily better, but it does highlight the change, the difficulty of golf in the early days and how hazards are an indispensable part of golf challenge.

Early golf was an extreme adventure. Modern golf is quite sterile comparatively. And while I am not advocating a return to the difficulty of fairways not mown etc, I look at the dunes and find it hard to imagine not having as much fun playing three holes here with a few friends as I could on a recognised course. I know why golf started in the dunes- it was fun. With rising costs, complex rules, and increasingly slower rounds and a perception that golf courses should be designed to be fair and with perfect lies, I wonder if the original spirit of golf is being sapped from a modern golfing experience. Maybe not, but to find a better way forward, sometimes it's best to look back first.
