

## *The Scottish hole*

At the beginning of golf, whenever that was, the game was played in the streets, churchyards and open spaces in and closely around the towns. Many golfers continued to do so until the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Olive Geddes ('A Swing Through Time – Golf in Scotland 1457-1743', 1992) mentioned the 'Aberdeen Burgh Records' in which references are made to playing golf in the town of Aberdeen in 1538 and 1613.

In 1552, the Bishop of St Andrews, John Hamilton, granted the right to the people of St Andrews, to use the links, among other things, for 'golfe'. Before that year they probably played in the streets of the Burgh. The document about 'street golf' in Aberdeen, 1613, tells us about a certain John Allan, a bookbinder who was convicted "for setting ane goiff ball in the kirk yeard, and striking the same against the kirk".

In 1632 ('Books of Adjournal, the record of the Justiciary Court'), golfers in Kelso used the churchyard of the town to play golf, for a certain Thomas Chatto was killed by a golf ball in the churchyard of that town. Geddes wondered if church (doors) were used here as targets.

*Bird's eye view of Aberdeen, showing how the town looked in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Golfers possibly used the church (door) as one of the targets in ancient Scottish golf as suggested by Olive Geddes. – From Geddes's 'A Swing Through Time'*



According to David Hamilton in ‘GOLF Scotland’s Game’ (1999), the earliest form of Scottish golf was played in the streets, squares, churchyards, garden allotments and open spaces of the Scottish towns, probably before 1457 (“[...] but the strange finding is that the game called ‘golf’ was the sport of the churchyard or street [...]”). Could church doors, walls, trees, porches, etc. have been the targets for the earliest golfers?

We can imagine that using a hole as a target in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance in muddy streets, churchyards and open spaces in the towns was not always easy. Doors and walls, trees and purposely erected posts were probably used.

The hole as sole target in golf emerged in Scotland when for different reasons golfers started to play their game on the ‘links’. Links have a very sandy surface with thin grasses that did not grow very fast nor very long. There were hardly any trees or shrubs available to be used as a target. A hole therefore was easily visible when a feather or a small flag was placed in the hole. The ‘fore caddy’ stood close to the hole when the players were approaching.

Neither in books of hours nor in breviaries, religious calendars, etc., created in Scotland, are illuminations included, in which golf or golf-like players are shown at all. The oldest painting of golf in Scotland is from around 1740. The painting does not show a hole or any other kind of target.



*Painted c.1740, the above is the oldest known painting of golf on the Old Course and possibly the earliest existing painting of the game of golf. It was presented to The Royal and Ancient Golf Club in 1847 and was described in the minutes as a very old oil painting, executed at a time when our ancestors took to the field in red coats and cocked hats. No targets are depicted in this painting. – Unknown painter; reproduced by kind permission of The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews*



*One of the first depictions of the hole as a target in golf, can be seen on this painting of 1847 after Charles Lees' 'The Golfers – A grand match played over the links of St Andrews'. – By courtesy of Mullock's*

That there were not any early depictions of golf players and so no pictures of golf holes, does not mean that there were not any holes used in the first few hundred years of the existence of golf. One could wonder if ever serious research has been undertaken in the archives of Scotland about 'golf' illuminations in Scottish books of hours, breviaries, etc.

When John Knox (1510-1572) became the leader of the Protestant Reformation in 1560 one could imagine that golf and other profane sports were not looked upon in a friendly way. Paintings, drawings, etc. of sports such as golf were 'not done' after 1560, until probably the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for the first depictions of Scottish golf players putting at holes are from that period.

The oldest written reference to holes as a target in golf dates from 1625 in the 'Aberdeen Burgh Accounts' in which soldiers are mentioned while exercising "in the principall pairt of the linkes betwixct the first hole and the Queen's hole" (Olive Geddes, 'A swing through Time', 1992).

In 1636, a Master of Aberdeen Grammar School, David Wedderburn, prepared a Latin Grammar book for his pupils. In this 'Vocabula', Wedderburn included words and phrases for various popular sports. The section on golf, called 'baculus', meaning ball, provided a more or less detailed description of the game.

One of the Latin sentences included in this chapter was 'Dirige recta versus foramen', meaning 'Strike directly upon the hole'. This sentence shows clearly that putting into a hole was common practice before 1636.

When leaving the towns and surrounding areas for the seaside links, there were no doors, walls, etc. to use as a target. We assume that from that moment on golf players started to use the hole on the Scottish links as the sole target.