

A HUNDRED YEARS OF BRITISH OPENS

By

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One hundred years ago a character named Willie Park went round three loops of the Prestwick links in Scotland, a dozen holes each, in 174, winning thereby the Champion's Belt. One wonders what scores the great players of today would have returned with the implements Willie used—the woods more like hockey sticks, the irons akin to a set of plumber's tools, the fickle light ball. Conversely, what would Willie have shot with a modern, graded set of woods and irons and a precision-made ball? Doubtless he would have lopped many a stroke off his aggregate, despite the rough putting surfaces and bestial lies prevalent in those days.

What is certain is that Park was the first "Champion Golfer," that Tom Morris, Sr., was the greatest golfer of that era, and that in 1872 the Champion's Belt was replaced by the Cup—the same trophy to be offered to the world's golfers for competition at St. Andrews July 3-8. The winner will not only be able to take it home with him for a year, but an exact replica, specially moulded for the great occasion, will be his proud possession for ever.

The Open was played at Prestwick in Ayrshire until 1873 and then it began alternating between Prestwick, St. Andrews and the Edinburgh links of Musselburgh. The route was still over 36 holes. The victors, rightly, were the Scottish professionals, inheritors of their own invention. Tom Morris, Jr., emulated his father by winning four times. Jamie Anderson and John Ferguson both completed the hat-trick that was not equalled again until modern times—by Australia's Peter Thomson.

In 1890 John Ball became the first amateur to win. He was followed two years afterward by Harold Hilton, who won at Muirfield over 72 holes. Then there was the long stretch to 1926 before the third amateur, America's Bobby Jones, graced the cup with his name.

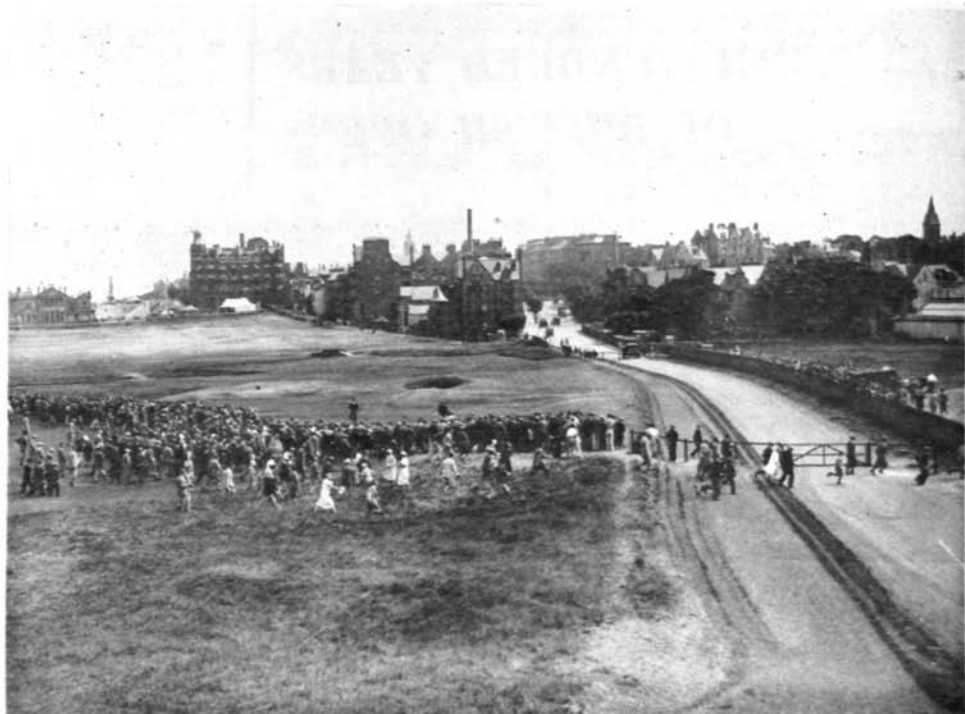


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Pennink has been a player of note for 30 years. He was a member of the British Walker Cup team which won over The Old Course, St. Andrews, Scotland, in 1938. He has served golf, not only as a competitor, but as judge of talent for international teams and as a writer for magazines and newspapers.

One of the most memorable finishes of any Open was in 1878, when Anderson completed the last four holes at Prestwick in 3, 4, 1, 5, knowing that he needed 17 for victory. In sharp contrast was the "blow-up" of another Morris—old Tom's youngest son. He came to the 17th (Road Hole) on the Old Course, St. Andrews, with twelve strokes to win. Somehow he contrived to take nine and followed it



THE OLD GRAY CITY

The 17th "Road Hole" on The Old Course at St. Andrews is one of the most decisive in golf. Many championship hopes have been wrecked on the par 4 which has as a background the Scottish city of St. Andrews. A paved road runs just behind the narrow green, waiting to catch the overhit shot. If the 17th, with the clubhouse of the Royal and Ancient Club to the left, plays its usual role in the Centenary British Open, July 6-8, it again will be a decisive factor on the Championship.

with a six. The terrors of the Road Hole were certainly greater then than now—more bare road, no grass and no exploder or wedge.

Prestwick was the prime-mover in golf during the last century. On Prestwick's initiative the event was played over 72 holes in 1892 and has continued so since. Three new links were added to the roster in 1892—Muirfield (vice Musselburgh), Hoylake and Royal St. George's, Sandwick. Each of the clubs contributed £15 (then worth \$75) annually towards the prize list, the entrance fee of ten shillings supplying the balance.

An exciting period of Open history followed. It embraced the change from the gutty ball to the American-invented Haskell, rubber-cored ball with which Sandy Herd won his Championship in 1902. The

period also included the halcyon days of the great Triumvirate—John Henry Taylor, Harry Vardon and James Braid. They dominated British golf, counting sixteen Opens between them. Each made his record more pleasurable remembered by his modesty, charm and dignity. We are indeed happy to have Taylor with us still, a hearty octogenarian at his native Westward Ho!, in Devon.

Vardon was famous for his brassie play, Taylor for his accurate mashie, and it was the cleek, and the power unleashed with it, for which Braid was best known.

The last Open to be played before World War Two was Vardon's sixth and last victory. The Championship, won in 1914 at Prestwick proved one of the most remarkable in the annals of the event.

Vardon's score was 73-77-78-78—306 to Taylor's 74-78-74-83—309. Braid began well but faded right out of the reckoning. Several factors made this Open outstanding. Firstly, Taylor and Vardon were by chance paired together on the last day—a forerunner of modern pairing—and everyone wished to see their duel. Secondly, each was striving to win his sixth Open.

Taylor not only caught his opponent but led him by three strokes with sixteen holes to play. Vardon retrieved one at the third hole, "The Cardinal," but it was really the next hole that decided the issue. Vardon obtained another perfect four, but Taylor found the sinuous burn on the right and took seven. Thereafter some 10,000 people saw Vardon gradually add to his one-stroke lead and it was his superb wooden club play that laid the basis of his triumph. The first-recorded incident with a cameraman, which made Taylor "start all over again" at the 3rd, adds to the historical interest of this last, pre-war championship.

More courses were added to the Open roster when the next, American-dominated chapter began. Walter Hagen and Bob Jones won seven titles, while Jim Barnes, Jock Hutchison, Tommy Armour, Gene Sarazen and Denny Shute also took the Cup across the Atlantic. The pre-Hitler period ended with six straight British victories, including two by Henry Cotton, possibly the best British golfer since the Triumvirate.

The history of the Open's prize-money makes interesting reading. Before 1893 the prizes varied in number and amount, but subsequently the pool was fixed at £100, the winner receiving £30 and a gold medal. In 1910 it increased to £125, advanced to £275 in 1927, as a result of the first "gate" the year before. The Open of 1931 saw £500 divided into 23 prizes; five years later £1000 was reached and £1500 in 1939. In those days the Pound Sterling was worth from \$4.25 to \$5.00. In 1953 the fund was raised another £1000, while the last two years have yielded £4,850 and £5,000, the winner receiving £1000. To celebrate Centenary year, the Committee has hoisted the graph sharply to £7,000—an undeniable risk, for it costs around £8,000 to stage the Championship. The pound is now worth \$2.81.

Two great American golfers, Sam Snead and Ben Hogan, have won post war Opens. But the era has been dominated by two players from the Commonwealth—Bobby Locke of South Africa and Peter Thomson of Australia, each of whom has won four times—while it is possible that a third, Gary Player, the holder, also of South Africa, may prolong this Commonwealth dominance. We have regretted the lack of substantial invaders from the United States, though the reasons for their absence are known and understood, as well as the lack of success of the home brigade.

Some may wonder why the Old Course of St. Andrews, rather than Prestwick, where the event began, has been chosen for the Centenary Open. It is a question of crowd control in the main, while a secondary consideration has been the lack of length, by modern standards, of Prestwick. One has the last five holes particularly in mind.

As I write, the Old Course is resting for five months, without a ball being struck on those much-used, much-loved fairways and double greens, in preparation for its greatest days in July. The players will assemble soon after the Canada Cup is played at Portmarnock in the last week of June, and they will be assured of an especially warm welcome. We hope that the American Open Champion, accompanied by a string of Ryder Cup calibre players, will be present also, for here is a chance of an unique double—Champion of America in its Diamond Jubilee Open and Centenary Champion Golfer.

AMERICAN ENTRIES IN BRITISH OPEN

American professionals entering the British Open included Masters Champion Arnold Palmer, PGA Champion Bob Rosburg, former American and British Open Champion Gene Sarazen, Stan Dudas and Neil McGeehan.

American amateurs entering included Tim Holland and former British Amateur Champion Robert Sweeney.