CHAPTER NINE

‘The very essence of first-class golf’

The players who joined James Sherlock

The Great Day

Plenty to do besides golf

‘His Majesty and no other!’
known as ‘the great triumvirate’. His swing was punchy with a short follow-through. No doubt because of his learning the game in the windy conditions of Westward Ho! and Burnham, he tended to hit the ball with a low trajectory.

That master of the game, Henry Cotton, would write of Taylor in his book, *This Game of Golf*:

J.H., as I was allowed to call him, … was a sturdy person and his type of muscle, short and strong, lost its flexibility possibly sooner than his contemporaries, but right up to 59 years of age he was still the same, neat, thrustful player.

James Braid (1870–1950)

Braid was a Scot, from Elie in Fife, not far from St Andrews – though Elie itself has a splendid golf course. As with Taylor, Braid’s father was not a golfer. But Braid’s father was opposed to his son playing the game, thinking it had little future. Braid therefore began his working life apprenticed to a joiner. Nevertheless, he played golf on every occasion he could. He broke the Elie course record when he was still only sixteen. In 1893 he moved to London to work as a clubmaker at the Army and Navy Stores. He played at the West Drayton Golf Club, where the members, impressed by his game, arranged a match with Taylor. The match, over 36 holes, finished all square. In 1894 he played in the Open Championship and, in the year that Taylor first won, came tenth. In 1895 he did not play, in 1896 he came sixth, in 1897 runner-up, in 1898 eleventh, in 1899 fifth, and in 1900 third. He was apparently held back by his poor putting. An experienced amateur who followed him in his rounds in

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John Henry Taylor (1871–1963) was perhaps the first of a new breed of professional golfers who came to the fore in the last years of the 19th century. Born at Northam in north Devon, he was apprenticed to the master clubmaker from North Berwick, Charles Gibson, who had come to the local course, Westward Ho! In 1891, when he was only twenty, Taylor was appointed professional at the new golf club at Burnham-on-Sea in Somerset. He was transferred to Winchester and, after competing in the Open Championship in 1893 and coming third, in 1894 he won the Championship at Sandwich. He won it again in 1895, and in 1896, though he tied for first place with the great Harry Vardon, he lost the play-off. He then came eleventh in 1897 and fourth in 1898 and 1899, before winning again in 1900. He won again in 1909 and 1910. He also won the French Open in 1908 and 1909 and the German Open in 1910.

Taylor, like Old Tom Morris in the late 19th century, eventually became the ‘Grand Old Man of Golf’. He was non-playing captain of the British Ryder Cup team in 1933 when it achieved one of its rare (before the Europeans joined) victories over the United States at Southport and Ainsdale. He was made an honorary member of the R&A in 1945. The year he retired as professional at the Royal Mid-Surrey.

Pupils came from all over the country to try to unlock the secret of his accurate mashie play, where he hit the ball high or low according to the demands of the course and the weather. Taylor was also tireless in seeking to improve the status of professionals and becoming a leading light in their trade association.

Taylor was only 5’8” tall, shorter than his great contemporaries, Vardon and Braid, with whom he formed what became known as ‘the great triumvirate’. His swing was punchy with a short follow-through. No doubt because of his learning the game in the windy conditions of Westward Ho! and Burnham, he tended to hit the ball with a low trajectory.

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1900 said that his putting would have made the angels weep and if he could have holed from two feet he would have won. However, the following year, at Muirfield, he finally won the Open Championship, largely thanks to his long hitting and in spite of his still indifferent putting and the over-exuberance of the Scottish crowds who kept slapping him on the back to encourage him. In 1901 he came second, tied with Vardon. They were still using the gutty ball and were beaten by Sandy Herd who used the new rubbercore. In 1903 he was fifth, two shots behind Vardon. In 1904 he was second, tied with Taylor. In this Championship he became the first person to break 70 in the Open. The following year, at St Andrews, he was first with two shots to spare and in 1906, at Muirfield, he won again, coming from behind to win. (Clearly he had sorted out his putting problems.) After coming fifth in 1907, he won again at Prestwick in 1908.

Here is Henry Cotton again, writing of Braid: ‘This tall, stooping, ruddy-complexioned old Scot is one of the wonders of the golfing world.’

Harry Vardon. One of the famous triumvirate with J.H. Taylor and James Braid, Vardon became golfing’s first international superstar after he toured the USA in 1900. He played in more than 80 matches and won the US Open. He also won the Open Championship a record six times. His motto: ‘Don’t play too much golf. Have a day a century.’

The Great Day

In his usual masterly way, Jackson organised plenty of publicity for the ceremonial inaugural match. In terms of spectators it was a sell-out, as is made clear in Golf Illustrated of 8 July 1909:

‘It is definitely arranged that J.H. Taylor (Champion), J. Braid and A. Massy (ex-Champions), and J. Sherlock, the club’s professional, will start...’

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THE FIRST 1,000 YEARS

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for the stroke competition at 11.00 and 11.15 on the morning of July 12th, when this club will be opened. So many applications from members of other clubs making to attend have been already received, that it has been decided to send tickets of admission to members of other golf clubs who apply to the secretary, Stoke Poges Golf Club, Slough, on or before July 10th. Should these applications number more than the space in the club, they must send their applications not later than July 7th when a voucher enabling them to obtain a luncheon ticket will be sent to them. The Great Western Railway have arranged to run motor ‘buses in connection with all the principal trains from Slough Station to the entrance to the golf course, at a fare of 6d each way. It is decided to impose an entrance fee of 10 guineas for gentlemen and five guineas for ladies on and after July 12th. The last eleven million entrance for tea takes place on July 10th.

And Jackson was able to secure favourable comment in other magazines besides Golf Illustrated. This is what The Court Journal had to say, alongside a photograph of the Mansion:

Stoke Poges, which is within twenty-one miles of London and easy of access to that old-world and yet up-to-date town of Slough, has now its golf club. Those who have the opportunity and have never visited Stoke Poges, with its church and memorials which are exercises in the memory of the author of the famous elegy, must tell it to their shame, but it would be difficult to find an American ‘doing’ England who has not paid one or more visits to the Buckinghamshire hamlet. On Monday last there was an inaugural meeting, and the Stoke Poges Golf Club arranged some interesting exhibition matches, in which J. H. Taylor, the Open champion, James Braid and Arnaud Massy (ex-champions), and J. Sherlock, the local professional, took part. The magnificent and stately club-house,

A montage of the opening match.
which we fully described a little time back, needs no comment, as it is
essentially presented. The course, too, is in excellent condition, while
those of the other nine holes are not so well kept. Notwithstanding,
the green was an excellent one, and the putting stroke was
adequate. The putting stroke was adequate. The putting stroke was
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adequate.

The day itself was a huge success and the press was ecstatic
about it and the club itself. The public and formal opening of the Stoke
Poges Club. Preserving the amenity of being under fire until the ball
comes trickling along the green. Nature has never by so emphatically
declared against their rivalling of the men in feats of strength. In
accuracy and delicacy of touch there is no difference between the
sexes. Some indeed will have it that here the advantage is with the
ladies. The her former wife, the one who is about to become a sand
bunker guarding the green. Hundreds of years watched the playing of
this shot. So exactly was it played that Taylor holed his next stroke
and secured a 4. Then Braid demonstrated very nicely the art of getting out of a sand-bunker guarding the green and lay-
ing the ball dead. Braid is an adept at this stroke, as most others. In
the evolutions of it he takes a good deal of sand and a full swing almost,
lifting it two yards. The spectators of the remote side of the green
have a sense of being under fire until the ball comes trickling along the
green.

The play abounded in valuable lessons for the onlookers, and was
suaviter in modo and suave in sensu. Never, by word or look, did they
show annoyance at bad luck or resentment at the occasional encroachment
and restlessness of the spectators. Only once did Braid hold back his
shot. This was when a motor-car ran right across the line of his shot a
hundred yards ahead. And it was well that Braid did exercise this caution,
because his ensuing shot was a low one, never more than 15 ft. from
the ground.

And there was another instructive feature about this exhibition
of him, with the hole less than half a dozen yards further away. Here
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The course, like the club-house, is a wonderful example of modern
artistic and picturesque, if you like, but conveying no hint of its
golfing possibilities, excepting, perhaps, to the mind’s eye of that famous ama-
 teur golfer and accomplished course contriver, Mr H.S. Colt. His plan of procedure was original
and will spring into existence with disconcerting frequency within the
next few months.

The turf through the hazards is consistently good, as will be readily
appreciated, and the putting greens are surfaced with dwarf bent,
which, when properly managed, will ensure a dry surface, even in wet
weather – an important consideration this, and one which should
give a reliable start to the Stoke Poges Club, seeing that the majority of courses near London are often
marred by the presence of patches of bracken, running streams, paths, rough
bunkers etc. This, and the spirit of enterprise, have produced the most
astounding results, even in their day was a rough and ready game, played without any attempt at
courteousness or № 1,000 YEARS
after two or three years it was generally considered to be the best inland
course in the country. Doubtless the fine old turf, which had been over-
run by deer for centuries, considerably assisted us to provide such excel-
lent fairways and greens.

The interest shown by golfers generally in our new venture was so
great that on this opening day we had to provide luncheon for nearly 250
people. By using our smoke-room as an additional dining-room we were
able to seat about 250 persons, and my old steward at the Sports Club
afforded me much valuable assistance. I sat next to Prince Albert at the
luncheon, and he reminded me of a match played at Charterhouse
between the school and a team which I had taken down. As an illustration
of the extraordinarily good powers of memory possessed by the Royal
Family I may mention that he was able to recollect the names of the whole
of my eleven, and even mentioned that I myself had played half-back.

Now I felt certain that I had never played at that position in my life, and
I told him so; he insisted, however, that I

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The Golf Courses of the
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And Jackson was keen to record other visits from the royal family:

An interesting experience I had at Stoke Poges in 1912 was the visit of the German Crown Prince and his Uncle, Prince Henry. Whether or not they really visited England merely to spy out the land, as was said afterwards to have been the case, I cannot say, but certainly we suspected nothing of the sort at the time. Prince Henry, who was an Admiral in the German Navy, spoke English perfectly and behaved just as an English sailor of the best sort would have done. The Crown Prince, too, was very pleasant and courteous, but one or two incidents occurred during the day which made me feel that he was not exactly what we in this country would call a gentleman.

After luncheon, as both our royal visitors wanted to play golf, I was instructed the driver which way to go. During the drive I said to His Majesty, 'It's really astonishing, sir, that you should remember me.' 'Oh, I don't know,' was the reply. 'I've never forgotten the story you told me in your room at the Sports Club that night. I've repeated it scores of times, and I only wonder it's never appeared in The Pink 'Un!''

Another royal personage who used to pay occasional visits to Stoke Poges was Princess Christian, and I still remember her surprise and pleasure when I first showed her the gardens and the wonderful view of Windsor Castle one gets through a tunnel of trees. Like all the royal family, she prompted occasioning poems of ceremony, and she obtained a more detailed knowledge of the history of Stoke Park and its owners than I could boast myself.

And it was not only British royalty that came to the club:

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either side, and to the best of my recollection whenever the Crown Prince putted he usually left the ball farther from the hole than it was when he started. However, on the last green he had a putt of about three yards for the hole, and he asked me, ‘How do we stand now?’ to which I replied, ‘Well, sir, if you put that in we shall win the match.’ ‘Oh,’ said he, ‘then it must go in,’ and go in it did! This was about the only good stroke on the whole way round.

By 1911 the Stoke Park Club was able to stage the Golf Illustrated Gold Vase tournament, and the magazine commented:

The Gold Vase Tournament has been played already over two of London’s most famous courses – Mid-Surrey and Sunningdale. In Stoke Poges we have a course which is almost equally famous, though much younger, and which differs in character as widely from Mid-Surrey and Sunningdale as those two differ from one another. Stoke Poges may be described as the ideal Park Links, in which the essential characteristics of a fine old English Links have been so skilfully employed as to produce a splendid test of golf – proof of which is found in the many important tournaments and matches which have recently been played there.

In 1911 a combined Oxford and Cambridge Universities team played a match against the Southern Professionals and by 1912, the Club was so well established that Golf Illustrated was full of praise not only for the golf courses but for the way the Club was run:

Some distance from the house – away beyond the golf-links – are large stabling and garage for the use of members, and just beyond these about 15 acres of kitchen gardens, one of which is the old walled garden of the mansion, containing very large fruit-houses, vineries, and greenhouses. These gardens supply fresh vegetables and fruit for the house, and for the members, who eagerly buy the fruit and flowers not required for the club. Close to these gardens is the principal farm and dairy. Here are about 10 or 12 milch cows, some thousand head of poultry, pigs, sometimes in the number of 200, and 10 or 12 head of cattle. Some idea of the extent of the catering for the club may be formed when one learns that two sheep were killed each week to provide luncheons, which average from 600 to 700 a week.

The management believe in avoiding the middle-man as far as possible, and accordingly have three own staff of artisans, including carpenters, bricklayers, blacksmiths, painters and engineers. They make their own electric light, pump their own supply of water, and even run a trolley for the convenience of their members.

In 1912 the final of the Ladies’ Pictorial Golfing Competition was played at the Club. By 1914 the Club had prospered so well that another nine holes had been added, and by July of that year the 900 limit for full membership had been reached, with 200 five-day members, most of whom were waiting to become full members. Jackson was rightly proud of what he had achieved but, as he admitted in his autobiogrophy, this pride cost him dear.
For in that month of July I received an offer for the shares of the club (all of which I then held) at a very handsome premium, but owing to my sentimental affection for the place I asked for a little time to consider the matter. Unfortunately the war began during this period of delay, and it need scarcely be added that the offer was immediately withdrawn. Even so, however, I was not so very perturbed. No, like many another, I believed the war would soon be over. I therefore decided it was clear that the moment of closing the short course and keeping the eighteen-hole course open. Had I been wise I should have closed the club altogether for the duration, and how nearly kept the greens in order, but as it was I tried to run it as well as circumstances would allow and what with labour-shortage and one thing and another I experienced the greatest difficulty in doing so.

On the day before Prince Albert left England for the last time he was talking with my daughter in the lounge of the club and told her that next morning he would be going to Germany for six months. 'Are you pleased at the prospect?' she asked, and the answer was that he disliked the idea intensely, but that he had to go, as otherwise he would lose his income. I believe I am right in saying that at the actual moment of the declaration of war between England and Germany the Prince was on board the Kaiser’s yacht, and that he begged so earnestly not to be put on active service against the British that he was appointed to some post or other in Berlin and remained in it throughout the war. I have been told, too, that whenever he heard of an Old Carthusian being taken prisoner he did everything in his power to assist him.

An advertisement for the Golf Illustrated Gold Vase at Stoke Park in 1911.