

# A Short History of Mid-Herts Golf Club

The first recorded action in the creation of a golf course on Gustard Wood Common is a letter which was sent to various gentlemen by Mr John Lloyd in the summer of 1892. It read:- 'I have been requested to inform you and to ask your attendance at a meeting to be held at the County Club, St.Albans, on Saturday 23rd July to elect a committee to carry out the formation of a Golf Club for Mid Herts'. The meeting was attended by Messrs G.U.Robins, H.S.Rice, G.Green, the Rev W.A.Pope and John Lloyd.

The resolution to create the Club was formally agreed by these gentlemen at that meeting, although one can assume there had been some investigation into the possibilities beforehand. The owners of Gustard Wood Common, the Lords of the Manor, were the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and Mr G.Robins had already received their permission to use the land for the increasingly popular game of golf. It would appear that no application was sought, or needed, from the local authorities.

Further letters were then circulated amongst all persons in the neighbourhood likely to be interested in joining the Club, inviting them to do so and to pay a subscription to the Treasurer. Towards the end of 1892, the professional from West Herts Club, Charles Thom, had been asked to 'lay out the links' and Mr George Wren of Wheathampstead 'to make the greens'. As the prevalent grass on the common was sheep's fescue, it was presumably only necessary to cut the grass a little shorter to form the putting surfaces.

Within seven months from that first meeting, the nine hole course was ready for play. The



*The Ladies section, circa 1905, with Professional 3rd from left back row.*

official Opening Day and first Annual General Meeting was held on the 20th February 1893, when it was reported that the expenses of 'making the links' amounted to eight pounds and one shilling, with a further eight pounds twelve shillings and fivepence for 'implements and tools etc'.

Viscount Hampden was elected as the first President of the Club and was succeeded over the years by the Earl of Limerick, the 9th Earl of Cavan, the 2nd Viscount Hampden and the 10th Earl of Cavan. Membership of Mid-Herts for its first fifty or so years was quite exclusive, being limited to those of noble or 'high county family' birth, together with many representatives of the clergy. Two ladies were elected in April 1893 and their numbers grew steadily, leading to the formation of the Ladies Section in 1911 which existed until the outbreak of the Second World War, being re-formed in 1951.

An early membership list gives addresses a considerable distance from Wheathampstead including several residing in London. In some cases the time taken to travel by horse and carriage or railway train must have been longer than the round of golf - motor cars were still a distinct rarity in this early part of the twentieth century. Wheathampstead was linked by rail to Royston, Luton and Kings Cross from the station which was situated near the northern end of the village. For many years the Club contracted the licensee of the Railway Hotel to provide horse carriages to transport golfers between the station and the course.



*On the green outside the Cross Keys, circa 1900*

The early professionals combined their teaching responsibilities with the more mundane duties of groundsmen or greenkeepers and the first such employee at Mid-Herts was Horace Rawlins. On leaving the Club, he went as an assistant to Newport Rhode Island where he won the inaugural United States Open Championship in 1895 and was runner up in 1896. Our new greenkeepers' building is dedicated to his memory and Mid-Herts were pleased to invite his grandson, Michael, to officially open the facility in December last year.

Despite endeavours by the Club to achieve an harmonious relationship with local residents, there were many who objected to the playing of golf on Gustard Wood Common in the early days, especially on Sundays. One 'commoner' would regularly sit in a deckchair in the middle of the greens to disrupt play and drove sheep across the course 'to protect his rights as a copyholder'. On one occasion he deliberately 'dug up the greens in front of the players' and was taken to Court by the Club for his misdemeanours.

In the early 1920s, it was decided to enlarge the course to a full 18 holes and James Braid was invited to inspect and advise upon the layout, which was opened for play in 1923. The new design covered the same area of the Common as the original 9 hole course which extended beyond the present boundaries. To the north, the old 11th fairway was played over The Slype past the "Tin Pot" and "The Cricketers" public houses, followed by a par 3 hole to the east, the green being situated in front of the "Cross Keys" inn. With the "Old Plough" public house at the entrance to the Club, one can readily understand why our predecessors recall the days when Mid-Herts provided frequent opportunities of taking liquid refreshment during a round of golf!

After representation to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, due to fears expressed by the Committee regarding the insecurity of the short term lease of the Common, a Deed of Dedication was executed in 1928 granting the exclusive right for Mid-Herts Golf Club to play the game of golf on the Common. In 1935 the Ecclesiastical Commissioners went even further by offering to sell the Manorial Rights of Gustard Wood Common to the Club for the sum of £500 - an offer which was accepted with alacrity! The Club thus became the owners of the land, although the public still had the right to 'fresh air and exercise' but not to play any ball games or drive wheeled vehicles on the Common.

Play continued on the northern and eastern extremes of the area until the mid-1960s, despite the increase in traffic using the Kimpton to Wheathampstead road and The Slype. To avoid danger to vehicles on these roads, a local rule was introduced making a penalty of one shot for any drive from the then 16th tee which reached or passed the ditch in front of the road. Gustard Wood had become a popular area for picnics from nearby towns and new local housing developments led to more residents taking 'fresh air and exercise' on the Common. Children of customers from the adjacent public houses played on the grass and added to the difficulties, especially when ice-cream vans set up in the area.

A solution was found in 1965 when Delaport Home Farm and its land was offered for sale. Mid-Herts Golf Club negotiated the purchase of twenty one acres which enabled three new holes and a practice area to be laid out to the south of the course, on the ground now known as 'the field'. Fifteen tees, green and fairways on the Common were redesigned to eliminate the problem areas to the north and east boundaries, the new layout coming into play in August 1968. Apart from various modifications and alterations over the years since, this is basically the same course as is played today.

The first 'clubrooms' were in parts of two cottages rented at different times alongside the



*The original clubhouse.*



*An aerial view of the course, early 1980's, 7th green in the foreground.*

Common, but the need for larger and more suitable premises led to the building of the first proper Clubhouse, on land donated by the Robins family. The mainly wooden construction was completed in 1897 at a cost of £107, with funds raised by Debenture Loans from the membership. The Clubhouse had frequent enlargements and modifications over the years, until the need to provide accommodation for greenkeeping staff entailed the construction of a major brick extension with a first floor flat in the early 1960s. Further building was undertaken between 1974 and 1975 which provided new changing rooms for both ladies and gentlemen, increased dining and kitchen areas, a new entrance hall and secretary's office, with a further staff flat on the first storey. This was the basis of our current clubhouse, although it has been further extended and improved at various times during the past decade.

Mid-Herts has faced many crises over the one hundred years of its existence, mostly linked to financial problems. After the First World War and up until 1920, the Club was desperately short of members and funds. It was only due to the generosity of the Earl of Cavan and members such as Sir Otto Beit and Colonel Ackland that sufficient money was donated to allow the Club to survive.

Similarly the neglect of the course during the Second World War and the associated lack of subscriptions from a reduced membership, left the Club on the brink of closure after peace was declared. The staff of the I.C.I. Company at Welwyn Garden City became keen supporters of Mid-Herts and their Divisional Chairman, Peter Allen, requested his colleague and playing partner Alan Gawler, to 'ensure Mid-Herts was properly restored' and persuaded other employees to play at the Club.

An Artisan Section was formed in 1921 and existed for over sixty four years. At the peak of their membership, they had sixteen single-figure handicap players out of a total of twenty five members and several represented Hertfordshire in the Inter-County Artisan matches.

Although the course at Mid-Herts has never been long in yardage, it has always provided an interesting test of golfing skills. The dense heather and long rough of the early years have largely disappeared, only to be replaced by the growth of planted trees and indigenous scrubwoods which still demand accurate play. The greens and tees have been enlarged over recent years to accommodate a vast increase in players using the course, especially on weekdays.

Some of the holes, notably the 10th and 14th, have not basically changed since the first nine-hole course was laid out in 1892 and many of James Braid's famous bumps and hollows can still be seen around various greens. The great Harry Vardon, J.H. Taylor and Jack White are known to have played matches at Mid-Herts against our early professionals, Tom Yeoman and Arthur Catlin. Neil Coles had his first major win at Gustard Wood when the Club hosted the P.G.A. County Championship in 1955, narrowly beating Dai Rees with a score of 138 over the 36 hole competition. Pro-Am Tournaments have only been held over the last few years and it is some reflection of the difficulty the course presents that many visiting professionals are pleased to approach par scores at the end of the day. Chris Platt has made a speciality of taming the challenge of Mid-Herts in these events, although Hugh Baiocchi set the course record of 66 on his first visit in 1987, together with Geoff Pinsett and Ralph Morris.

The current amateur course record is held by Chris Tingey with a gross score of 67 achieved in the Club Championship in 1990, whilst Miss Francis Davis holds the honour for the ladies Section with her gross 71 which was accomplished in the same year.

Will the Centenary Year of Mid-Herts Golf Club see these Professional and Amateur records broken?



*This precis is extracted from 'The History of Mid-Herts Golf Club', a 200 page book to be published in Autumn 1992 to celebrate 100 years of golf at Gustard Wood.*

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# Map of 1892

