

# The Gowffer's Tattle

L E I T H R U L E S G O L F S O C I E T Y N E W S L E T T E R

## NOT ONLY WERE THE 1ST RULES WRITTEN HERE, BUT

- Leith Links was the site where the first organised golf competition for a prize took place
- The first international challenge match was held on the same site
- And the first purpose-built club house for golf was arguably established on Leith Links

## AGM HIGHLIGHTS

Memberships renewed	X
Treasurer's report: surplus	X
2006 Activities covered	X
2007 Activities outlined	X
Special Projects status	X
Committee elected	X
Special Presentations	X

## IF THE LINKS COULD TALK

If Leith Links could tell its own story, it would be a tale traversing centuries; on this stretch of turf, possibly the oldest public green in Britain, walked eminent figures such as Mary Queen of Scots, and her mother, Mary of Guise, who ruled Scotland from Leith, Oliver Cromwell, who made Leith Links his headquarters and erected a citadel there, and King Charles I who was playing golf on Leith Links when he first heard of the Irish Rebellion.

When not in use as a military assembly point, animals grazed on the Links, women did washing there, children played, lovers strolled, horses were raced, and locals met for folk dance festivals on warm summer evenings. On a

more somber note, two-thirds of the population of Leith was buried under the Links during the black death of 1645.



Engraving of Leith Links From Old and New Edinburgh Vol III

If the Links could talk, we would love to hear the tale of happier times a century later, when gentlemen of distinction took up their clubs and played the "gowff" for wagers there. Perhaps it was foul

weather that first brought them into Luckie Clephan's tavern nearby, where a warm atmosphere and good food beckoned them to return. Return they did. Often their wagers were for dinner and claret, until Luckie's Tavern was the first makeshift clubhouse for the first formal golf society ever: The Gentlemen Golfers of Leith, later to become The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers.

Being men of substance, these honourable gentlemen put substance into the game of golf. They erected the first club house, established rules, organised competitions, and petitioned the city for a trophy to be played for yearly. And it all started here on the humble turf known as Leith Links.

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2007

The AGM took place on 17 Jan at the Cricket Club on Leith Links. 25 members were present. Two guests joined in (Bill Cairns of Cairns Intersphere Consulting and Mike Towers representing Teague Homes) to connect our interests with the interest

of the wider community. What these gentlemen had to say in regards to access and development was very interesting.

President Douglas Foulis applauded the work of the society thus far and sees an even more productive future.

After the general meeting the members enjoyed a slide presentation by David Anderson which showed National Trust excavation work being done to restore the Hill of Tarvit Golf Course to its former glory. All in all the AGM was a resounding success.

## HISTORIAN, ARCHIVIST, FRIEND



Philip Knowles (a bit camera shy)  
Trophy plaque (below)



There are so many accomplished, interesting, and worthy members of LRGS, that to select one person to feature in the newsletter is not an easy task. In this first issue the honour goes to Philip Knowles, historian and golf archivist at the Royal Burgess Golf Club. He is a great friend to LRGS, and donated the trophy club, a mashie (5-iron is modern equivalent) made in Leith in 1903 which Philip restored and mounted to be presented annually to the winner of our Hickory Open. Philip is currently authoring two books on golf, and is

the sole North American distributor for his book: *A History of the Bruntfield Allied Golf Club 1856-1996*. He is an avid collector and restorer of antique golf clubs and balls. The walls of his study at his home are filled with golf memorabilia, paintings and engravings to do with golf, and his shelves are lined with a veritable library of golfing history. He has uncovered some obscure and interesting facts to aid in the special project novel set in Leith circa 1744. Below is a sampling of what he found.

### A SAMPLING OF WHAT HE FOUND:

- Tobias Smollett (1721-1771) wrote of the Honourable Company in his novel, *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker*: "I was shown one particular set of golfers, the youngest of whom was turned of fourscore. They were all gentlemen of independent fortunes, who had amused themselves with this pastime for the best part of a

century, without having ever felt the least alarm from sickness or disgust; and they never went to bed without having each the best part of a gallon of claret in his belly."

- David Stirk

In his book, *Golf: The Great Clubmakers* presents a 1629 court case in which the Dickson family of Leith's monopoly on club-making was up-

held. A later Dickson of the same family is mentioned in Thomas Mathieson's poem 'The Goff':

"the work of Dickson, who in Letha dwells and in the art of making clubs excels."

- Bows to clubs

Philip also found evidence that the early clubmakers were generally bowmakers thus noblemen.

*"And they never  
went to bed  
without having  
each the best part  
of a gallon of  
claret in his  
belly."*

### LEITH RULES GOLF SOCIETY FOUR YEARS ON

Four years ago the vision of the 90 original founding members to raise the profile of the historic significance of Leith Links as the home of the first rules of golf sparked enthusiastic sponsorship, not the least of which **Georgian Antiques** generously continues to donate the use of their hickory clubs for all our events. From last summer we

have timed our June events to coincide with the Leith Festival and enjoy growing support from the Festival organisers. Our Hickory Open participants represent a wide range of age groups and have come from as far a field as Canada and China. As this newsletter goes to press we are looking forward to the anniversary of the signing of the original

rules on 7 March, which we will celebrate with our friends at **Georgian Antiques**. For more information about our society, visit [www.leith-rules-golf.co.uk](http://www.leith-rules-golf.co.uk) or write to us c/o 14 Pirniefield Terrace, Edinburgh EH6 7PW



John Taylor,  
three times  
captain of  
the Honourable  
Company of  
Edinburgh  
Golfers  
1807-1808  
1814-1815  
And 1823-  
1825