



Elie and Earlsferry Clubmakers

Ronnie Sinclair

examines some of the finest late nineteenth century clubmakers

Before I begin, I think that it would be best to identify this particular area of the East Neuk of Fife. Earlsferry was a decaying coastal village possessing the status of a Royal Burgh in Kilconquhar Parish, Fife until 1891 when it was transferred to the parish of Elie. Today, most people think of Earlsferry as an extension of its larger neighbour Elie, but that has not always been the case. It was not until 1929 when the two villages united with one local council running both under the banner of 'The Royal Burgh of Elie and Earlsferry' that the two became one. The proper name however is 'Elie and the Royal Burgh of Earlsferry'.¹ For the purposes of this article, I will refer to the villages as 'the Burgh'.

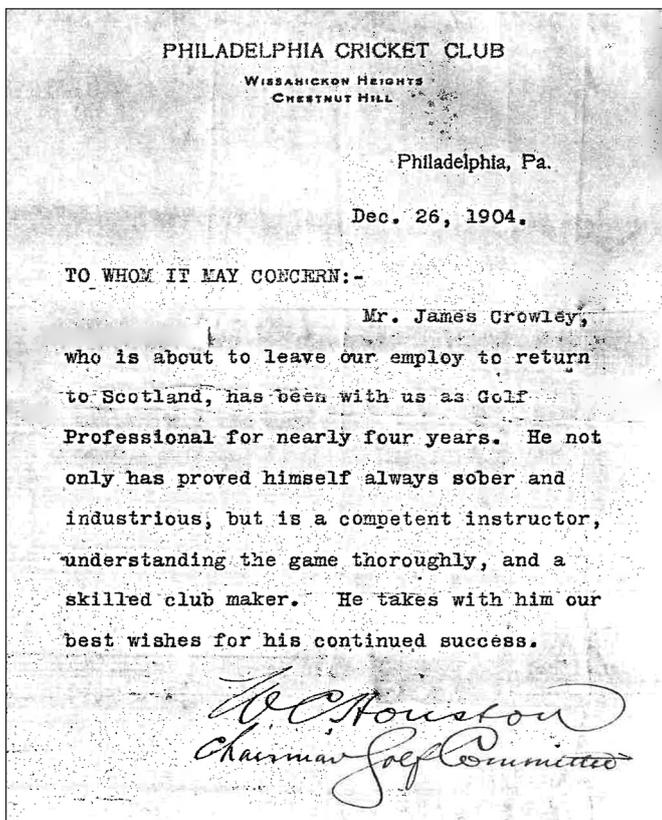
Elie Golf House Club

The golf course at Elie is probably best known for the submarine periscope at the first hole, which enables the starter to monitor the progress of those who have just commenced their

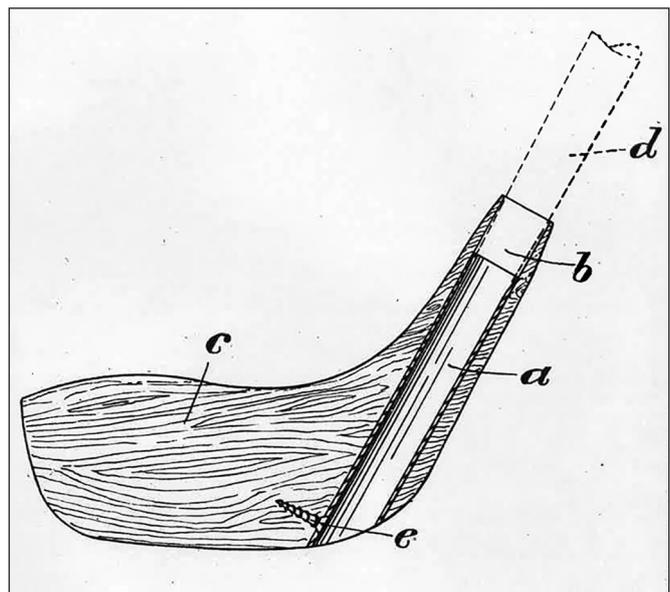
round. There is a marvellous tale of a golfer who had unfortunately found a dreadful lie off the tee in a bunker and without much ado, used the 'hand niblick' to extricate the ball out of this predicament. The perpetrator thought he was the only one to have knowledge of the 'shot', but unbeknownst to him the starter had witnessed the entire event through the lens of the periscope.

Elie and Earlsferry have a rich golfing history, partly through the achievements of the many outstanding golfers from the Burgh, most notably James Braid, but also through the hands of some of the innovative clubmakers based there in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In 1986, I set out to research the clubmakers of Elie and Earlsferry and put together a collection of their clubs for display at Elie Golf House Club (EGHC). To date, EGHC, without whose sponsorship this project would probably never have happened, has built up a collection of some 115 local clubs. As this collection began to evolve, my thoughts turned to learning more about some of their origins. Rather than putting them on display just as they were, it seemed to be a lot more informative to add historical background, using information from national archives, local census reports, and family interviews.

In this article, I would like to concentrate on the impact



Testimonial from The Philadelphia Cricket Club



The patented Crowley method of socket reinforcement

of early golf clubmakers during the critical time of golf club development in the late nineteenth century. Three local clubmakers fitted this category: James Crowley, George Forrester, and Andrew H Scott.

Patents and registered designs

In those frantic times of fast-moving developments many clubmakers felt it was essential to seek out legal cover to protect innovations and assist with marketing. Registered design protected the look of an object, whereas a patent protected the way it works. The early clubmakers in Elie and Earlsferry chose different paths of protection: James Crowley always used a patent; George Forrester, on the other hand, always used registered designs, while Andrew Scott used a mixture of both. For the purposes of this article, I shall refer to both as patents.

James Crowley

James Crowley produced many fine clubs in the Burgh. He was born on the 22nd of January 1861 in Earlsferry and learned his trade as a joiner. He began working in clubmaking in 1876 but it is not known where he served his apprenticeship; we are fortunate however to have several of his early clubs in the EGHC collection.

A professional as well as clubmaker, Crowley spent several summers serving the golfing members of the Philadelphia Cricket Club. Before his move to Glasgow in 1912, Crowley decided to tackle the problem of the day, which was to strengthen the neck of wooden clubs sufficient for them to be virtually unbreakable. His Patent No. 26072 involved fitting a short length of reinforcing metal tubing into the socket.

Although the EGHC collection contains some of Crowley's earlier clubs, there is one that has so far eluded my attentions.

In a guide of Elie Golf Course from 1904, Crowley was credited as the inventor and patentee of the *Eureka* golf club. Visitors to Elie were strongly advised to add this patent to their stock of golf clubs. However, I have yet to trace an example of this club and would welcome any correspondence from anyone who can remedy this situation.

After his move to Glasgow, Crowley became a major retailer of golf clubs and equipment with premises on Union Street, the business continuing with the same name after his retirement, under his son, John Christopher Crowley.

George Forrester

George Forrester has been described as one of the most active and enterprising developers of this period, and one of Scotland's most innovative club makers. He was born on the 6th of April 1848 in Kilconquhar, Fife. In his early twenties, Forrester spent time working as a stonemason in Baltimore, USA. He returned to the East Neuk in 1872 and was married the same year. It has been widely recognised that Forrester's comparatively late arrival into the art of clubmaking would have been extremely difficult for him and few gave him any chance of success. His lack of reputation did not help, and it took him until the early 1890s to become established as one of the masters.

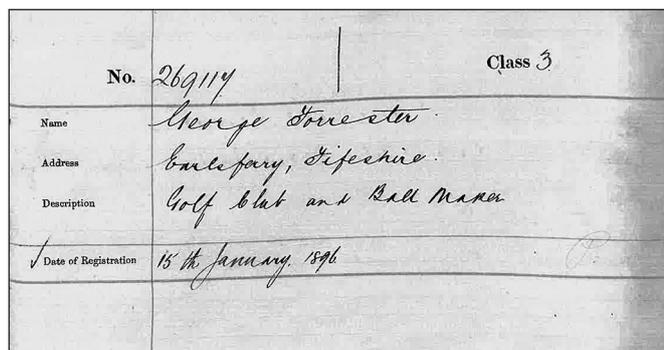
One of the oldest and most treasured items in the EGHC collection is a Forrester play club circa 1875. His early patents include the smooth face cleek (registered design 153408) in 1890, the ball back cleek in 1892, and the first real socket head wood advertised as the 'unbreakable drilled neck driver' in 1896 (registered design no. 269117). This development revolutionised wooden club design at that time.

Several examples of the clubs that I have yet to track down include his *Master Cleek* (registered design no. 257927), the ball back patent cleek from circa 1892, the *Concentrated Lofted* circa 1889 (registered design no. 125240) the *Acme Putter* (registered design no. 269477) and the *Ambidexter Cleek* from circa 1896.²

Marketing was of prime importance to clubmakers as there was a lot of competition in those days. Forrester's overseas travels had probably influenced the commercial side of his thought process, and as there was less cost and paperwork involved in a registered design, he may have opted for that as opposed to the paper-intensive application for a patent. This did not prevent the astute Forrester from advertising his clubs as patents, when they were clearly registered designs.

Through Forrester's business, established in 1871, came a host of apprentices, one of whom was Tom Reekie who later became one of the best-known clubmakers in the Burgh. In 1895, Reekie, aged fifteen, joined the firm as an apprentice because of Forrester's reputation as an innovator. Some of Forrester's relatives kindly gave me a fine picture of the man himself and also a picture of his premises in 1905.

Forrester had by that time constructed specialised labour-saving machines for making golf clubs and golf balls. He created brass moulds for gutty (gutta percha) golf balls and invented and constructed a machine to wind rubber elastic ribbon into



Forrester's design registration 269117 for a golf club



'Forrester's Patent' Regd No 269117

balls around which he moulded a cover. Other machines had a significant impact on clubmaking. Traditionally, shafts had been attached to the wooden head by means of a long tapered and glued scarf joint, reinforced by whipping with pitched string. Forrester developed a way of attaching the shaft to the wooden head by means of a tapered hole in the head. His bespoke machines formed tapers on the end of shafts, and matching sockets in the heads. This was not exactly rocket science, but clubs with a long scarf joint had been made that traditional way for over 200 years. Socket-headed woods quickly replaced the traditional scarf head.³

It was a chance event in Forrester's workshop that led Elie-based clubmaker Ralph Smith to contribute indirectly to his best friend James Braid's ability with a driver. One of Forrester's customers, John Berwick, a very tall man at six foot four, called into the shop saying that he had some clubs that he wanted to dispose of and asked if they could be collected. Smith immediately alerted Braid, also a tall man, who came round to the shop and found a number of drivers with very long shafts and flatter lies than his own. Trying one out, Braid found the ball flying into the distance and purchased it for one shilling and sixpence, giving Forrester a profit of sixpence on the transaction. Braid was in a state of bliss, outdriving all those who previously had the audacity to outdrive him.⁴ By the time he died in 1930, Forrester was reckoned to have had more patent applications than any other clubmaker.

The mashie

Forrester claimed, in a letter to *Golf Illustrated*, that he invented the mashie in 1884. This claim has always been hotly disputed



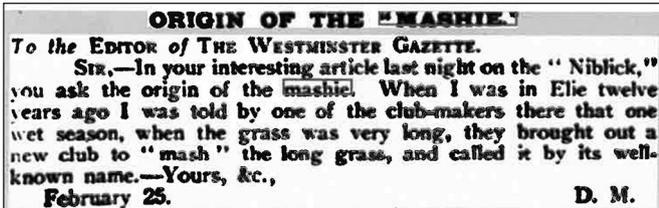
George Forrester, holding an unusual wry-necked iron



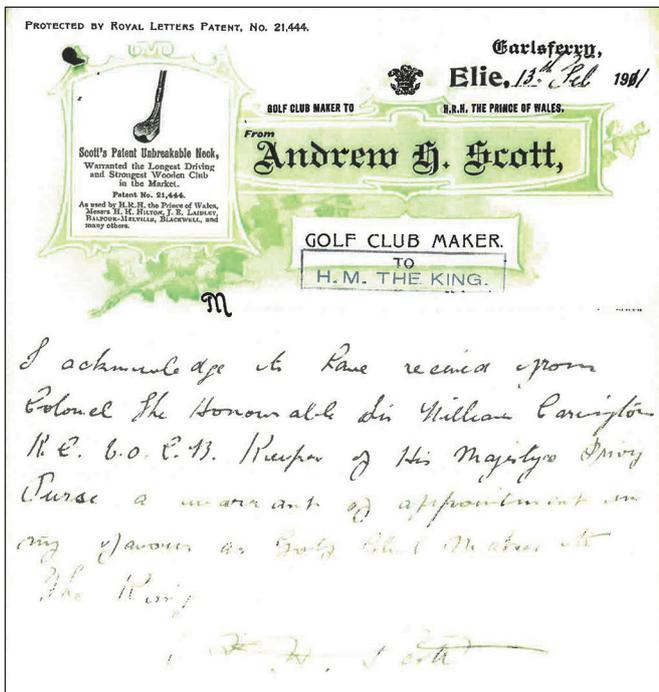
George, left, presides over the summer children's competition at Elie

but was supported in a letter to the *Westminster Gazette* in February 1911.⁵ The correspondent, who had visited Elie some twelve years previously, reported that a local clubmaker told him that he had brought out a new club to 'mash' the very long grass.⁶ The clubmaker called it by its now well-known name.

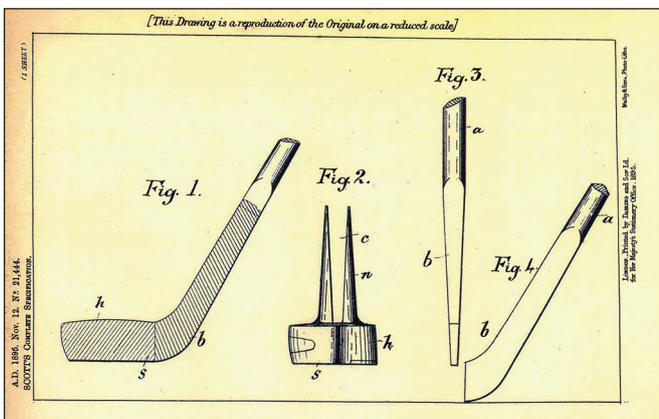
In addition, there was the ongoing dispute at that time, the background being as follows. The proprietor of Grange Estate Sir Michael Malcolm in the 1810s took exception to the playing of golf on what he considered was part of his estate farm and in order to prevent the good citizens of Earlsferry from playing golf, he instructed more land to be ploughed



DM on the origin of the mashie



Royal warrant holder as clubmaker to the new King Edward VI



Patent application for AH Scott's famous splice joint

up than before. Eventually in 1815, Malcolm raised an action in the local sheriff court seeking an interdict to prevent the playing of golf on his land. The Magistrates of Earlsferry, representing the citizens of Earlsferry, raised a counter action claiming a right of servitude, which rumbled on for the next 50 years or so until it was eventually resolved in the 1890s at great personal expense and angst to the people of Earlsferry, and at considerable financial benefit to the lawyers. In 1878, another action was raised against the management of the golf club and George Forrester, clubmaker and greenkeeper to the Club, declaring that golfers had no right to cut or carry away grass from any part of the golfing course of Earlsferry.

The ingredients are there. Long grass, local clubmaker and de facto greenkeeper – circumstantial evidence supporting Forrester's contention to be the inventor of the mashie – I rest my case m'lud!

Forrester also served on Earlsferry Town Council and became Provost of the Burgh in 1899.⁷

Andrew Scott

Andrew H Scott was born in Earlsferry on the 29th of September 1875 and was a nephew of George Forrester, with whom he served his apprenticeship before moving to Prestwick to work alongside Charles Hunter.⁸ Upon his return to Earlsferry, Scott – who by that time had acquired a reputation as a player – set up his own business. By the age of twenty, Scott had applied for and been granted his first patent, no. 21444.

The invention was an improved method of attaching the shaft to the head, making the connection extremely strong and almost unbreakable. In describing the invention, the patentee



Staff gather outside Scott's shop at Elie

explained that it also gave more spring to the head and as a consequence, greater power to the stroke. This enabled the ball to be driven further as it was a better-balanced club and much easier to play with.

Scott was one of the most progressive club makers of that time and by 1898 had commissioned a factory containing a wide selection of clubmaking machinery, all driven by a ten-horsepower gas engine. This included a head-turning machine or copying lathe, capable of turning out 40 heads per hour. Establishing the factory was critical in enabling Scott to mass-produce his fork splice (unbreakable neck) woods. A fine picture of his Earlsferry premises shows some of his apprentices standing outside.

Another important element of Scott's success was his connections to the Royal family. Scott succeeded Forgan of St Andrews as clubmaker to HRH the Prince of Wales, which earned him the right to use the Prince's heraldic badge in his advertising from 1902 to 1910. Upon his coronation as George V in 1911, Scott became clubmaker to the King and devised a 'crown' mark together with a lion to stamp on all of his clubs.

Scott's acknowledgement letter to the Honourable Sir William Carrington (Keeper of His Majesty's Privy Purse) proudly displays his patented 'unbreakable neck' wood, warranted the longest driving and strongest wooden club on the market – very powerful advertising indeed.

On a much lighter note, Scott also gave lessons to royalty including the Duchess of Connaught and her playing partner 'Princess Pat' (Lady Patricia Ramsay). Alasdair M Drysdale in his centenary history of EGHC narrates the wonderful tale of a golf match involving the Princess and Scott against two of 'the gentry', where at the seventeenth hole with the state of the match very keen. Scott drove a good ball and the Princess topped the next shot into a bunker whereupon her caddie cried out, 'Aw, Great Christ yer Royal Highness, ye've bugged it noo.' Scott sent the caddy home for this remark.⁷

Included in the collection of Scott clubs there are several examples of the *Bulger Driver* (patent 21444), a *Monoplane* putter (registered design no. 744429) and his straight-line putter of 1899 (registered design no. 349407).

Scott was also a fine golfer, with finishes in The Open of seventh in 1896 and sixth in 1903. In an article on Elie golf course Scott is described as having a 'capital' style, and like many other natives of the 'Ferry', he had a rattling drive, was very sure through the green, and was an admirable putter.

Such was the success of Scott clubs and equipment that he opened a retail shop in Burntisland in 1905, capturing the lucrative passenger ferry trade from Edinburgh and Leith. He also maintained a retail outlet at Balcomie Links, Crail.⁸

Conclusion

It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that through this small burgh in the East Neuk of Fife came three extremely skilful and influential individuals who have left their own distinctive mark on the early development of golf clubs and through their doors came a host of eager apprentices who not only learnt the

art of clubmaking, but who then travelled widely throughout the United Kingdom and overseas, becoming responsible for even more development and knowledge of this wonderful game. After these three clubmakers came many others in the Burgh – James Forrester (son of George), Tom Reekie and later his son John Reekie and also James M Sunter. I did come across several other hickory-shafted clubs by an assortment of club makers bearing the stamp of Elie and Earlsferry but I have yet to establish conclusively that their clubs were indeed manufactured within the confines of the Burgh.

With this collection of clubs and the history they represent on display, it is my hope that visitors to Elie Golf House Club will be able to learn a great deal more about the clubmakers from Elie and Earlsferry, and be sure to take a peek through that periscope too!

References

1. albertoshutte.blogspot.com accessed December 2020
2. Ellis, Jeffrey B. *The Clubmakers Art*. Zephyr Productions. 1997. 136, 445, 450
3. Scott Reekie's article on 'The Gowff' on his website www.scottishheritage.net, accessed December 2020
4. Douglas MacKenzie's website www.antiquegolfscotland.com/antiquegolf/history.php3?itemid=30, accessed December 2020
5. *Westminster Gazette*. 28th of February 1911
6. Elie Historical Society records
7. Drysdale, AM. *The Golf House Club - A Centenary History*. Private. 1975
8. *The Scotsman*. April, 1905

Acknowledgements

I am pleased to acknowledge the advice and assistance from Peter Lewis and the late RAL Burnet (Past Captain of EGHC) in getting this project off the ground. My grateful thanks go also to Richard Craig (EGHC member and archivist) for all his diligent research through many archives.

Thanks are due to the late John Reekie (son of Tom Reekie) who was a fine club maker in his own right. His assistance in the early days of my research gave me valuable insight into the activities of the clubmaking profession throughout the Burgh.

To The Philadelphia Cricket Club (Linda Cozzi) for assistance with James Crowley references.

A great amount of input was also received from surviving family members of the three protagonists, the Crowley and Forrester families were extremely helpful. My particular thanks go to the Scott family, who contributed not only a significant number of early AH Scott clubs to our collection, but also a unique leather-bound album painstakingly put together by Andrew Scott covering a 'pot pourri' of golf from the late nineteenth century onwards – a treasure in itself, which will hopefully be put on display.

To Iain Forrester of Hickoryclubs.eu for his assistance in sourcing several clubs of interest for the collection.

Thanks are also due to Brian Siplo who has donated several outstanding clubs to our collection and finally to the staff of The World Golf Museum, St Andrews, for their kind assistance with my research.