

Awa' Ye Go Ma Bonny Bird

Iain Crawford

*in Part IV of this President's Medal-winning series,
highlights the final years in the remarkable life of Douglas Rolland*

AFTER his success at St George's, the members at Rolland's home club of Limpsfield Chart GC were preparing a hero's welcome. Instead, Douglas informed them he had agreed to move to Rye GC. The Rye Committee, meeting on the 7th of July 1894 at the George Hotel minuted their view that:

The desirability of engaging a good professional was discussed. It was unanimously agreed that the Club must have a good professional. The committee then instructed (and gave power to) the greens' committee to do their best to engage a good professional.

Immediately below this minute, words which may be 'The name of Rolland was' crossed through, and this together with the speed of his appointment suggest that he was their preferred candidate, even at this early stage. This was likely to have been

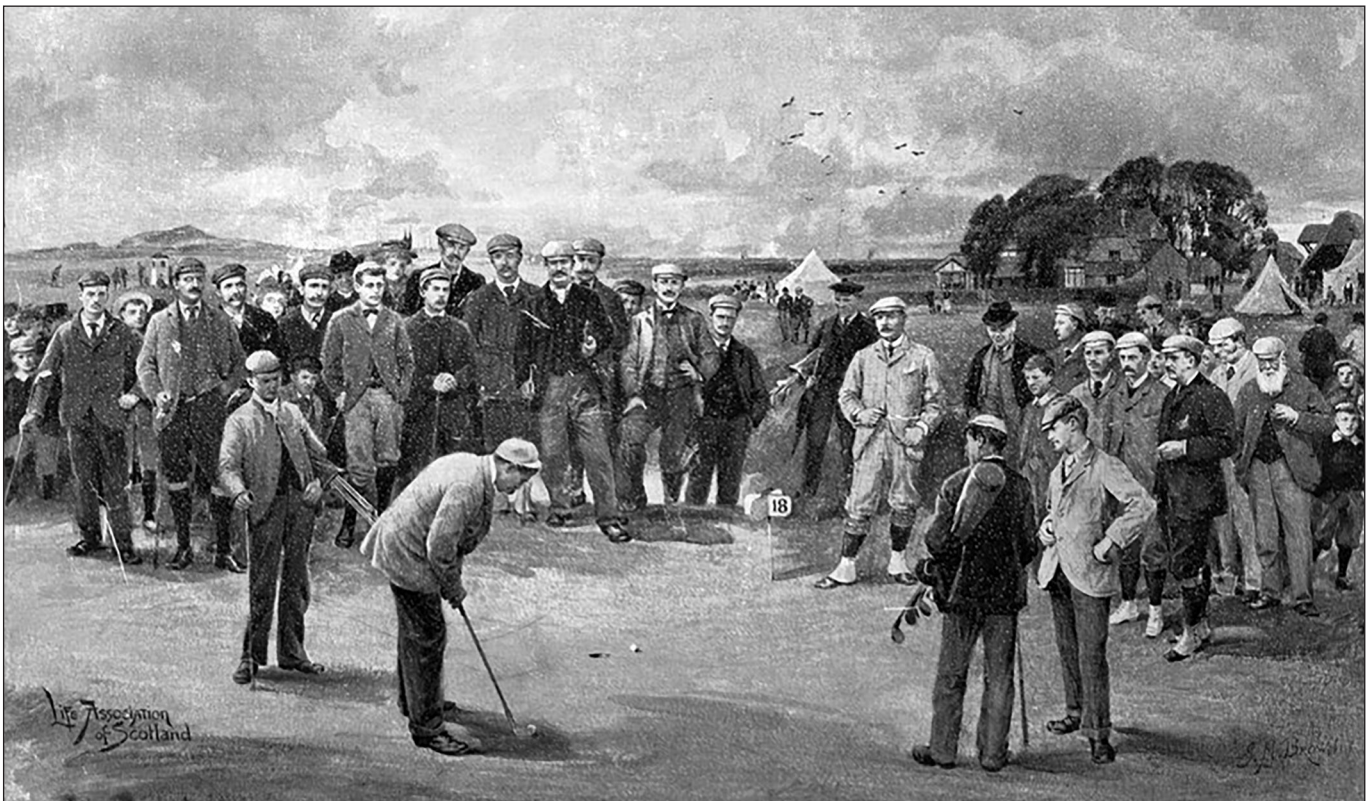
influenced by the Secretary, Harry Colt, who was well aware of Rolland, the two having met at Malvern some years before. Their relationship would develop during Rolland's time at Rye and continue thereafter.

Rye GC minutes book for the 4th of August 1894 confirms the date of his appointment:

The green committee reported that they had engaged Douglas Rolland as professional at a salary of 25/- a week. Rolland to find his own lodgings.

Denis Vidler's book *Rye Golf Club* records that:

Douglas Rolland, a Scot renowned for his long driving who was runner up to JH Taylor in the first Open Championship to be held at St George's in 1894 was lured from Limpsfield and appointed Professional at a salary of 25/- per week in August 1894.



Rolland featured in the 1895 Life Association of Scotland calendar, in the previous year's amateurs v professionals match

Rolland's time at Rye was short but productive. He was heavily involved in laying out the extension to the course. A magazine with the wonderful Victorian name *The King – A Weekly Illustrated Journal for Society, The Salon and The Services* recorded in the edition published on the 14th of January 1905: 'The course was laid out in 1894 by Douglas Rolland under the supervision of Mr HS Colt.'

The diaries of Reverend JL Bates (a Trustee of the Club) include references to regular meetings with Rolland to discuss progress on the course. On top of this the committee meeting on the 6th of March 1895 agreed that 'Rolland should have £5-0-0 towards his expenses to Scotland for the Championship in June.'

This evidence builds a picture of a hard-working professional, who was more than proficient at designing, building and maintaining a golf course, an accomplished teacher and a player who his employers felt would represent them well at the 1895 Open Championship at St Andrews. He had worked with HS Colt to improve and extend the course at Rye and there are many references to the great progress in the condition of the course on both old and new holes. Rolland also seems to have remained able to maintain his high standard of golf.

Reverend Bates records 'Rolland round in 70 with a seven at the second' in October 1894, although it must be noted that this was the temporary course and his scores on the full course were not always as impressive. He did score 75 in May 1895, with a seven in both nines, so his play was of a high standard.

A hopeful New Year

Rolland remained at the forefront of many people's thoughts for the forthcoming year. The Calendar of the Life Association Insurance Co of Scotland for 1895 featured Rolland holing out with Taylor watching taken from the match between the professionals and amateurs at St George's on the 15th of June the previous year. Included in the painting by Mr J Michael Brown are, Old Tom Morris, Willie Auchterlonie, Harold Hilton, Horace Hutchinson, Willie Park Jr, Hugh Kirkaldy and others.

In January, an idea of a match between two champions, namely Mr John Ball and JH Taylor who were both Englishmen would play two Scots. This was strongly supported by Hilton who went as far as suggesting that a combination of John Laidlay or Freddie Tait could be partnered by either Douglas Rolland or Alex Herd. Unfortunately, nothing ever came of this enterprising scheme.

Rolland was also associating himself with clubs and other golfing aids. He was also making a name as a teacher. The Reverend Bates refers to regular lessons with Rolland at Rye and 'found he was a good teacher.'

All in all, things were going well.

It therefore came as a shock to the Club when Douglas resigned almost precisely a year after taking up this prime position. The minute recording this news, taken at a committee meeting on the 7th of October 1895, states:

The Secretary reported that Rolland the Club Professional had given notice to leave as he had received a very good offer to go abroad ...'

The US mystery

Although surprising, the idea of travelling abroad may well have been in Rolland's mind before he accepted the job at Rye. The *Toronto Daily Mail* carried an article on the 28th of February 1895 that stated:

A letter has been received the other day by Mr Harrison of the Winnipeg Golf Club from Willie Park Jnr, the famous club manufacturer and ex-Champion golfer. The news is conveyed that Park in company with Douglas Rolland, intends leaving Scotland for New York about the middle of March.

There was a delay in their departure, and something caused Rolland to default or be excluded from this trip, because in June 1895 Willie Park Jnr set off and joined Willie Campbell, Willie Dunn and Joe Lloyd in the United States, where they played a number of highly successful matches, either between themselves or with 'local' professionals.

The story that Douglas had travelled to US around this time has been repeated so often it is regularly taken as fact. The story was carried by the *East of Fife Record* in September 1914. It states:

In his first championship, 1884 at Prestwick, he tied for second place ... four strokes behind his fellow villager Jack Simpson and in his second championship, fourteen years later, at Sandwich, he finished second to JH Taylor. Following the latter championship, Rolland went to America, and he came back a changed man; a giant of a figure when he left, he returned from the States but a shadow of his former self, and some three months ago when I last met him in the beautiful Hampshire village of Farnborough he looked very much more than his 54 years.

Prestwick (1884) was actually Rolland's third Championship after 1882 and 1883. He next played ten years later at St George's and furthermore he died at the age of 53, not 54. With these obvious errors it is hard to rely on the statement that he travelled to the US.

A statement made by Andrew Kirkaldy and carried by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1918 is occasionally cited to support a claim that Rolland was in the US. It reads:

Asked who had played in a foursome with him, in which his side had been defeated he blurted, 'Me and masel, ma brither Hugh, and I, Jake, Duggie Rolland and me.'

This clearly cannot be a contemporary report as Rolland had died four years previously and is probably an indication of Kirkaldy's speech pattern rather than anything else.

However, the story of Rolland travelling to the United States continued to circulate, and Alan F Jackson's *The British Professional Golfers 1887-1930 A Register* contains the following entry:

ROLLAND Douglas S
Born Earlsferry 1860. Open Runner up 1884, 1894. PGA 1902. WORCESTERSHIRE 1888-1891, LIMPSFIELD CHART 1891-1894, RYE 1894-1895, BEXHILL 1897-1908, Merchant Navy, USA, ARMY 1911-1914. Died 1914. 'The greatest driver of a gutta ball.'

This places a possible trip to the USA later, after he left Bexhill. Given he was 47 in 1908 and had been ill for many years, and was long since passed his best, it is unlikely that he travelled for

any reason connected with golf. It is also difficult to see him being employed as a stoker for the same reason.

Park's trip to the US was very successful and validated his decision to miss The Open Championship at St Andrews that year.

The only other notable professional to miss the 1895 Championship was Rolland himself. He entered and was one of the favourites. Rye GC had assisted with the cost of travelling. The *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* predicted that the winner of the Championship would be either Douglas Rolland or Alex (Sandy) Herd and The *Edinburgh Evening News* reported that Rolland entered 'both by telegram and letter'.

Rolland's withdrawal was so late that his name appeared on the drawsheet for the first two rounds and was the first of a string of last-minute withdrawals from matches.

He cited an injury sustained while practising earlier in that week. Whatever the cause, he had not participated in the last Championship that he would have had a realistic chance of winning. It is possible that he had forgone the chance of a trip to America with Park in order to contest the Championship at St Andrews but now both had passed him by.

Resignation

If Rolland missed the opportunity to explore golf in North America in June, why did he take the extraordinary step of resigning from his prime position at Rye four months after the US tour, in October? *Golf* of October 25th carried the intriguing report that:

It is stated that Douglas Rolland is at present in negotiation with an Indian Prince to go out to one of the Indian provinces and teach him how to play the game ... It is whispered the retaining fee for the professional's services will be £350 per annum.

A few weeks later on the 15th of November, the same publication reported:

The Royal and Ancient game has invaded Travancore and has secured a patron and devotee in the Maharajah. There appears, under the head of expenditure by the public works department a sum for the improvement of His Highnesses golf course.

The course in Travancore is known as Trivandrum Golf Club, and I am grateful to their Secretary, Mr SN Raghuchandran, for confirming that that His Highness Maharaja of Travancore Sree Moolam Thirunal was born in 1857, and therefore was 38 years old in 1895. The coincidence of the improvement of the course and the age of His Highness makes it very likely that the approach to Rolland came from Travancore.

The Secretary also states that this course was established in the 1850s by the Travancore Royal family and that it has a strong claim to be oldest golf course outside Great Britain, still playing on its original course. It was with disappointment that I learned from Mr SN Raghuchandran that Rolland was never at the Trivandrum Club. Somewhere along the line things unravelled and Rolland didn't go to India.

During the year, Rolland played in a few matches and managed a few wins, but he was no longer playing the cream of the

games, with one exception. At the end of October he met his old friend, JH Taylor at Romford GC. *Golf* reported:

Rolland has not come prominently before the golfing world since the Open Championship at Sandwich in June of last year ... [however] The Champion (JH Taylor) is at present in his best golfing form and would be very hard to beat.

And so it proved. On a wonderful day for golf Taylor was faultless, scoring 75 in both rounds giving 'one of the finest exhibitions of his skill that it has ever been the privilege of golfers in this part of the world to witness'.

Rolland was well off form, looking unwell and certainly playing badly, with his usual weakness, poor putting, being evident to all. He scored 85 for the first eighteen holes and was 9 down at lunch. Taylor won four of the first five holes in the afternoon and was 13 up with thirteen left to play. A half in 4 at the sixth hole finished the match. Rolland had been mauled. The fact that he then played the back nine in 37 shots and won the bye did not salve the wound Taylor had inflicted.

Taylor later recalled that he had thought Rolland to be 'quite off colour' and that his victory was due to the decline in Rolland's game rather than any improvement in his. Taylor had, to this point, regarded Rolland as his most dangerous opponent, but no more.

Dwindling opportunities

Douglas's work re-designing and improving the course at Rye, ran in parallel with a commission from the New Zealand Club at Byfleet and in May 1895 his role in the layout of that course was acknowledged in *Golf*.

Later that year he was credited with laying out the nine-hole extension to The Hastings and St Leonard's GC, which was opened on time and to much acclaim, adding to his reputation in this growing field.

Despite this, 1895 had not worked out as Douglas had hoped. The Rye Minute book records a meeting on the 7th of December 1895:

Rolland the club professional being still in attendance it was resolved to write to him that as his notice to leave expired sometime back no wages would be paid him after Saturday the 14th inst.

So, he had gone nowhere and now had nowhere to go. Rolland had allowed four significant opportunities to slip through his fingers namely, the position at Rye, a Club whose prestige was growing. Second, the hugely successful tour with Willie Park to the US. Third, an opportunity to win The Open Championship, where he was tipped to be the favourite and finally a wonderfully well-paid role in India teaching a Maharajah. All these chances were his for the asking, but they had all been squandered. Was it simply bad luck or a pattern that highlighted all too human mistakes?

Instead, Rolland ended the year having been evicted from the property in Rye, without a job and with little immediate prospect of one. He returned to the Limpsfield area as his advertisement in the 'Situations Wanted' column and the supporting note from the editor of *Golf* show.

Failing Health

The *East of Fife Record* reports in late May 1896 that 'Douglas Rolland who has figured so prominently in the golfing world for some years, is presently far from well, being confined to hospital'. There is no additional detail as to the nature or the duration of his illness.

It is known that Douglas suffered from some form of rheumatism. Rheumatoid arthritis is a long-term condition that causes pain, swelling and stiffness in the joints. The condition can affect the hands, feet and wrists and this is consistent with the reports of Rolland's health. This would not normally require hospitalisation, even in the nineteenth century; however rheumatic fever is a rare complication that can cause painful joints and heart problems and it may be that this was Rolland's problem.

By September of 1896 there are newspaper reports of Rolland, 'stalking the Hastings links with his clubs once again. It is reported that the champion long driver is in good form and may soon be on the warpath again. May it be so'.

The professional tournament to be played at Romford GC in late October 1896 offered the prospect of Rolland's return. Not only that, the field included Harry Vardon (by then The Open Champion), JH Taylor, the local professional James Braid, Sandy Herd and Ben Sayers.

The London Evening Standard reported: 'It had been hoped that Douglas Rolland would make his reappearance at the competition, under notice: but having had the misfortune to sprain his wrist, he did not enter.'

There was still the opportunity of Rolland playing again that year. The Hastings and St Leonards GC held a professional competition on the 25th of November and JH Taylor was to join the Earlsferry trio of Rolland, CR Smith and James Braid. The *Dundee Courier* reported that 'Rolland has been indisposed for some time by a rheumatic attack in his wrist, but is all right again'. The morning was medal play and was won by Taylor with a 76; Braid and Smith tied second with 79 with Rolland on 81.

In the afternoon Braid and Taylor played Rolland and Smith and the former pairing won 2/1. The *Pall Mall Gazette* recorded:

Rolland's play attracted a deal of attention, it being his first appearance since his severe illness. Although playing pluckily in the foursome, Rolland showed little of his old form. He was, however, awarded a money testimonial in recognition of his efforts.

It is clear he was ill. The following month *The Daily Record* carried the paragraph:

Alluding to Douglas Rolland, the famous golfer, an English critic says: 'Rolland looks very worn, thin and shrunken: rheumatic fever has left its mark upon him, and it will be long before he gets back to his very best form of old.'

Rolland however was not finished with golf, and in February 1897 he was appointed greenkeeper to Bexhill Golf Club and reports of the improvement in their greens appeared quickly.

Neither was he finished with competitive golf. On the 1st of May 1897, Rolland faced his cousin Braid at the Wildernesse GC in Sevenoaks. Recent form was against Rolland, but in the first

2
3
0
6
g

Situations Wanted.

DOUGLAS ROLLAND is desirous of obtaining a re-engagement as Club Professional. — Apply, F. N. S., c/o Hon. Secretary, Limpsfield Chart Golf Club, Oxted, Surrey.

Douglas Rolland, as will be seen from an advertisement in another column, is anxious to secure a situation as a greenkeeper. We hope that any club in search of a good professional will give Rolland a chance. Not only is he a man of sterling qualities and charm of manner, but he is one of the best players who ever handled a club. At present he is staying at Limpsfield, and is playing a grand game.

* * *

Editorial support from Golf, following Rolland's advertisement

round he matched Braid's score of 73, although he was one down in their match. The report of the second round play sounded very familiar. *Golf* stated:

Though Rolland played a strong game, his driving being magnificent, luck seemed to desert him on the greens, his ball constantly lipping the hole.

Rolland won the ninth hole with a 3, holing a long putt, reducing Braid's lead to 6 up with nine to play. He had been outscored by Braid by 6 shots on the front nine and lost the match 6/5.

Rolland's golf could still contain flashes of brilliance, but his best golf could no longer be sustained. His ability to play well in short bursts is illustrated in the previous evening in preparation for his match, where he played the first nine holes in 34 shots, including a six at the first.

In July 1897, he played John Rowe at his old haunt of Limpsfield Chart. *Golf* recorded that 'Rolland's play certainly lacked some of the power and confidence which characterised it of yore'. Despite this Rolland was 1 up after eighteen holes. Rolland's play again deteriorated as the game progressed and Rowe was 4 up after the third circuit of nine holes, and he pressed home his advantage to win 7/5. Rowe had played well, registering scores of 78 and 77 for the day's play, but Rolland was just not the force he had once been.

The next record of Rolland playing competitively was his participation in a competition held in October 1897, at Norbury to celebrate the opening of the North Surrey Club. Twenty-nine players entered and it was won by JH Taylor (70/73 = 143), James Braid was second (72/73 = 145) and Rolland finished tied third (74/77 = 151). Eight shots adrift but a decent showing under the circumstances.

He continued his work at Bexhill-on-Sea GC, and the course was improving under his tenure. He found time to play his old friend CR Smith from Earlsferry in an exhibition match in November and won by 1 up.

In May 1898, Rolland had agreed to take part in a match played at Hastings and St Leonards GC where the other players would be Sandy Herd, JH Taylor, Harry Vardon, James Braid and CR Smith. From today's perspective the prospect of a fit Rolland playing against the Great Triumvirate and Sandy Herd is mouth-watering. However, Douglas attended but did not compete. Again, this was the consequence of rheumatism of

the wrist and his place was taken by the assistant at Hastings, Bill Sime (also from Earlsferry). Herd scored two 74s to win by five shots.

However, 1898 was an important year for Douglas Rolland, for reasons other than golf. On the 19th of June 1898, John Erskine Douglas Stewart Rolland married Anna Emily Edmunds at the Parish Church in Hollington, Sussex very close to Hastings. He gave his 'condition' as Bachelor.

Anna had a daughter born in August 1889, named Dorothy Phoebe Edmunds and the couple had two further children: Mary Isabella Anna Elizabeth Rolland, born in October 1899, and Douglas William Andrew Stewart Rolland, born in September 1901.

From 1898, references to Douglas and golf are rare and those that do appear reminisce on his previous achievements, for example, *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* of the 30th of January 1904, cites Harold Hilton stating that the two finest drivers against wind he had ever seen as Douglas Rolland and James Braid.

However, he continued to work at Bexhill-on-Sea GC until his retirement from the post at the end of April 1907.

The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, dated the 15th of August 1908, carries the following: 'When I now see Douglas Rolland hobbling about the links at Bexhill the irony of fate is exemplified in no uncertain way.'

This and other references to his hospitalisation and general health cause me to doubt that he would be able to join the Merchant Navy or travel to the United States after he left Bexhill.

Turning for home

One final enigma was whether Douglas ever returned to Scotland. This is answered in *Tom Morris The Colossus of Golf* by David Malcolm and Peter Crabtree, which records that Rolland attended Old Tom's funeral in 1908, when describing the throngs of people in attendance noted: 'Among them Douglas Rolland, just another face in the crowd.' He joined the Aldershot Command Club in October 1911 and the Club history, *On Laffan's Plain* by NS Nash quotes Bernard Darwin's view of Rolland, that:

he was too fond of women and drink and was happy -go-lucky sometimes ... appearing at the last minute to play a match with no clubs of his own only to borrow a miscellaneous set and beat the record. He was by all accounts the most incorrigibly casual and delightful person.

Nash also notes that Rolland had previously made an *unsuccessful* attempt to make his way to the USA (my italics), which reinforces the view that he did not travel. Rolland was a new face at Aldershot, but was not the only one, nor the only Douglas. Lieutenant-General Sir Douglas Haig became both General

Officer Commanding and President of the Golf Club. One wonders what the two made of one another. If they ever talked, they would have discovered that that Rolland was five months the elder and that they had spent the first nine years of life living around ten miles apart on the south coast of Fife.

Rolland died on the 8th of August 1914, and his death certificate records the cause of death as:

1. Cirrhosis of the liver
2. Tubercle of Lungs and Larynx Haematemesis

Both are symptomatic of alcohol abuse.

Many complimentary obituaries appeared, all praising his long hitting and his easy-going attitude to life, but one, published in the *East of Fife Record* on the 11th of September, edged closer to the truth.

Rolland essentially belonged to the old school, the hard-living type which hung on the border line of the caddy. In dress and manner, he was of the type which had long been superseded by the more prosperous professional we know today.

More than one obituary was of the view that he was the best player never to have won The Open Championship. Bernard Darwin in *The Golfers Companion* noted that:

Douglas Rolland, who was, I take it, the greatest golfing genius of them all, casual and reckless to a degree, but universally adored and, as regards the long game at any rate, unrivalled.

He was, for the period of at least six years (1888-1894) the best in the game and was at the forefront of the growth of money matches in England which helped drive the popularity of the game. The distance he could hit a gutty ball attracted spectators as well as players.

John Erskine Douglas Stewart Rolland – a man few have heard of, was a man flawed in so many ways, but a man who deserves recognition for the golfing genius he undoubtable was.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to:

Tim Roberts (Archivist, Rye GC), Mungo Park, Richard Lloyd (Secretary, Army Golf Club), SN Raghuchandran Nair (Secretary, Trivandrum Golf Club), Michael Morrison and Graham Johnston (Chairman, Elie and Earlsferry History Society).

Sources

1. Nash NS. *On Laffan's Plain*. Sustainer Publications Ltd. 2000
2. Malcolm David and Crabtree Peter. *Tom Morris of St Andrews: The Colossus of Golf. 1821-1908*. Glengarden Press. 2008
3. Vidler Denis. *Rye Golf Club, The First 90 Years*. Rye GC. 1984
4. *Golf Magazine*
5. *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*
6. *East of Fife Record*
7. British Newspaper Archive

491	8 th August 1914 Golf Club House Framborough Road Framborough MS	John Erskine Douglas Stewart Rolland	male	53 years	Professional Golf Player	1 Cirrhosis of Liver 2 Tubercle of Lungs & Larynx Haematemesis Caused by Excessive meat	Anna E. Rolland Wife of Deceased Present at the Death Golf Club House Framborough Road Framborough	8 th August 1914	H. J. Joyce Registrar.
-----	---	---	------	-------------	-----------------------------	---	---	-----------------------------------	---------------------------

Copy of the entry on Rolland's death certificate