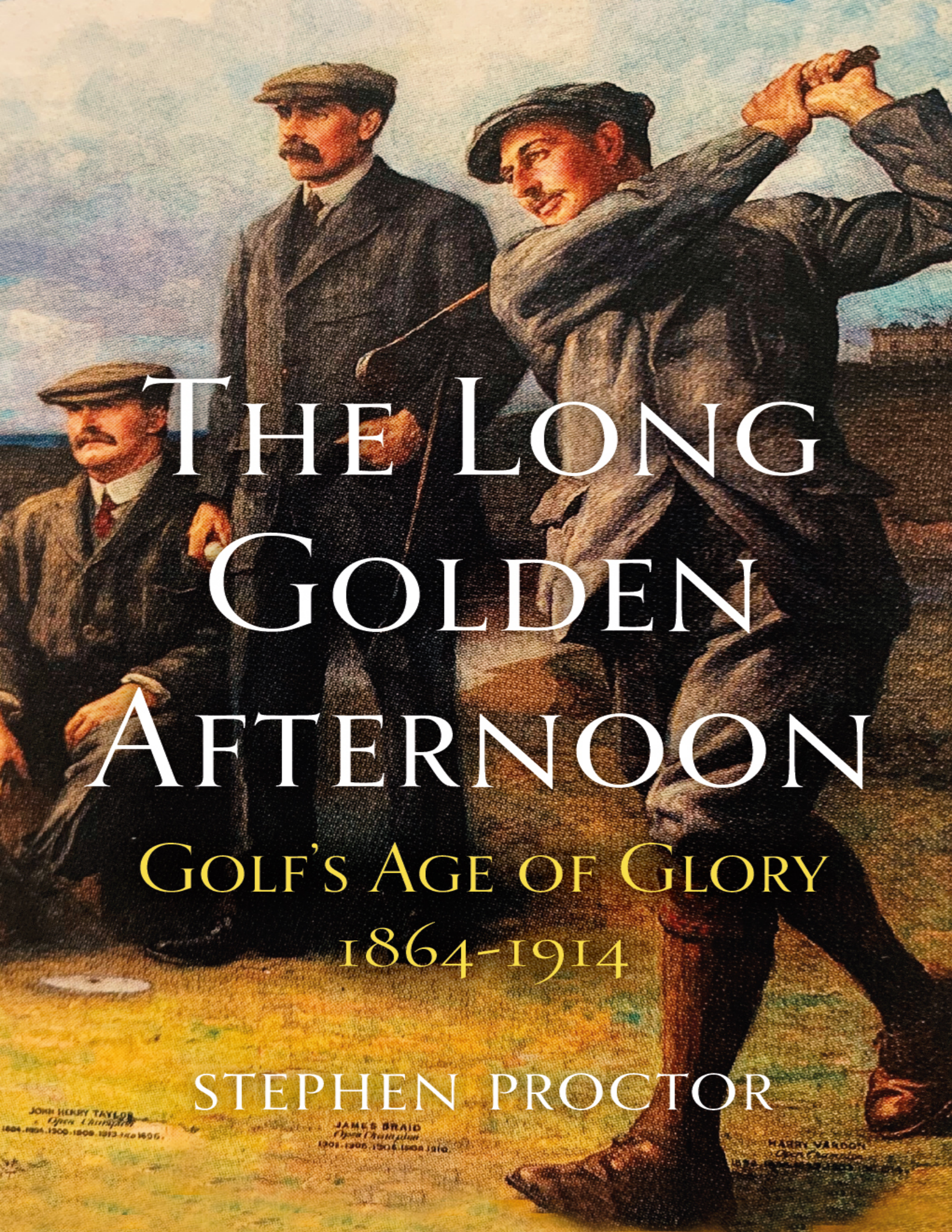

The Long Golden Afternoon

Golf's Age of Glory 1864-1914

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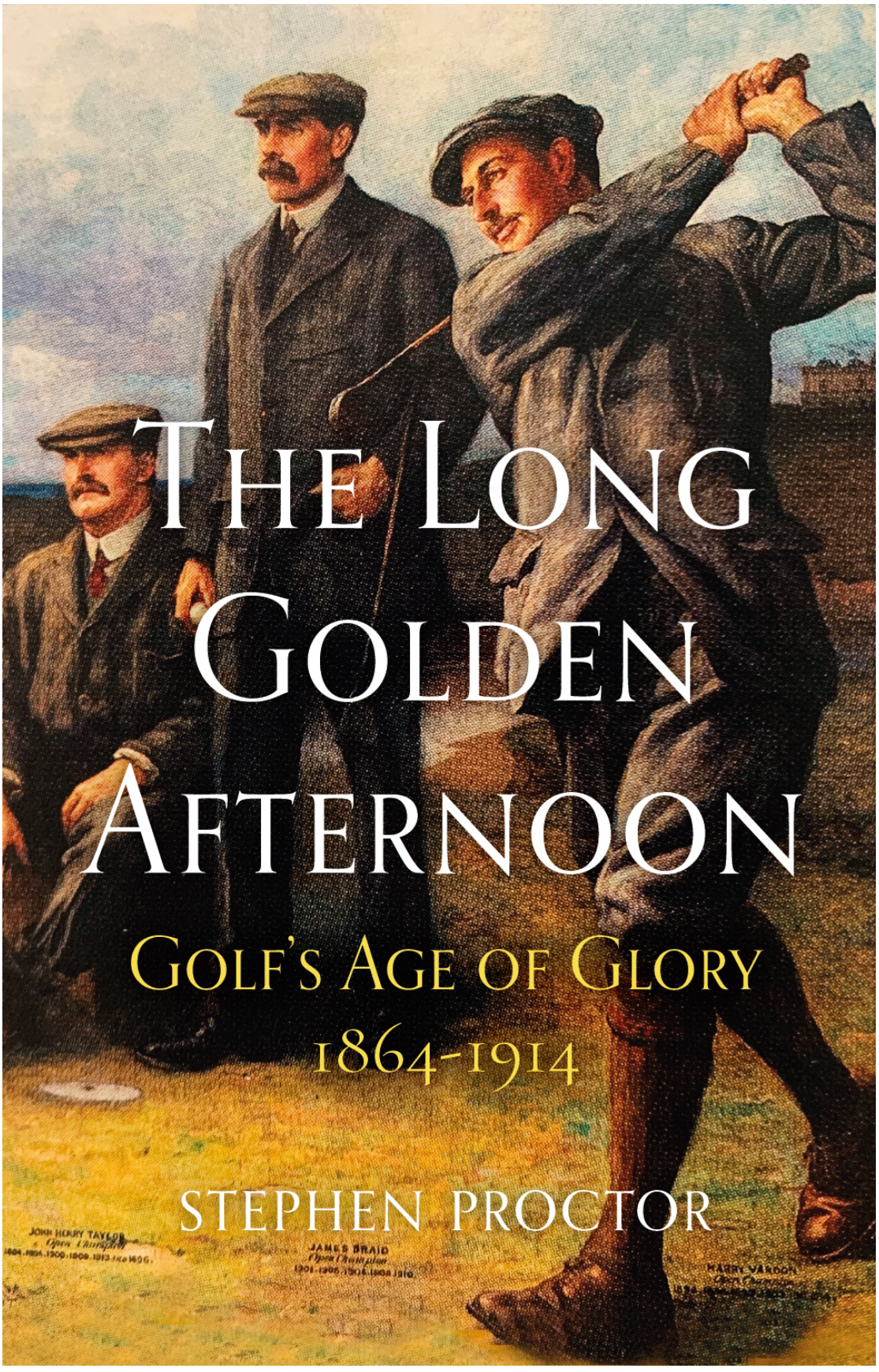

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One

‘TERRIBLE THINGS’

Horace Hutchinson, the famed English amateur, had just slogged in from his final round in the 1890 Open Championship when he heard the news that was spreading like wildfire around the links of Prestwick. The talk was about John Ball Jr, a gentleman golfer from Royal Liverpool. At that moment, Ball was playing his homeward nine and, as Hutchinson recalled, doing ‘terrible things’.

Hutchinson, of course, meant ‘terrible’ in that peculiarly British sense of the word that defines an accomplishment so unexpected as to be unthinkable. Ball was playing with such machine-like precision that the unimaginable might well happen. Hutchinson and his friend, Dr William Laidlaw Purves, both influential leaders in the rapidly growing world of English golf, hurried off to catch up with Ball and follow the nation’s rising star home.

By 1890 competitive golf had been played for a century and a half, and in nearly all that time the gentlemen who ran the game lagged far behind professional players, often

laughably so. The best of the amateurs had come closer in recent years, but those watching the Open still must have raised an eyebrow when Ball started the Championship with twin nines of 41. His tidy 82 left him a stroke off the pace set by St Andrews professional Andra Kirkaldy, the heavy favourite. Ball's admirers would not have been surprised. He entered the Open in magnificent form. Three months earlier he had won the Amateur Championship for the second time in its five-year existence.

In the afternoon round, as Kirkaldy struggled, Ball marched steadily along, making the proper figure on every hole. By the time he reached the 16th, it had become clear to Hutchinson, Purves and everyone else at Prestwick on that afternoon of 11 September 1890 that only an unforeseen calamity could prevent the Englishman from doing 'the most terrible thing that had ever yet been done in golf – he, as an amateur, was going to win the Open Championship.'

Exactly the sort of catastrophe that might yet derail Ball had befallen his playing partner, Willie Campbell, three years ago on this very hole. The ill-fated professional from Musselburgh had a two-stroke lead in the 1887 Open when he stepped up to the tee of the 16th. Playing boldly, Campbell tried to carry his shot over a fairway bunker. It fell short, ending up mired in gnarly grass that rimmed the hazard. He needed five shots to get out and tossed away his best chance to become Champion Golfer. Not long afterwards, Hutchinson had seen poor Campbell and his caddie sitting atop upturned buckets in the professional's shop, weeping uncontrollably. Ever after that sinister pot bunker would be known as Willie Campbell's grave.

No such disaster would befall John Ball. In the end, he would win the Open by three strokes with matching scores

of 82, for a total of 164. As the inevitability of his victory dawned on the two pillars of English golf, Hutchinson remembered, Purves turned to speak to him. ‘“Horace,” he said to me in a voice of much solemnity. “This is a great day for golf.”’

Even those forward-thinking men had no idea just how great a day it was. Golf had been growing slowly but steadily in England since the institution of the Open Championship and the rise of the game’s first superstar, Young Tom Morris of St Andrews. Ball’s historic victory at Prestwick turned that smouldering fire into a conflagration.

The quarter century that followed would witness the game’s coming of age. It would see golf’s popularity explode – in England and Ireland, in the Americas and Europe, in Africa and India, and in Australia and New Zealand.

It would see the emergence of professional golf tours, and the anointing of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews as the game’s governing authority and guiding light.

It would see the beginning of a relentless quest to make golf easier that has shaped the game from that day to this, as well as the blossoming of a literature that remains the envy of other sports.

And it would see, against all odds, the first period in history in which the gentlemen golfers who had ruled the game since time immemorial could actually compete against the professionals whose prowess had always humbled them, even as they sneered at the men as ruffians.

These revolutionary changes unfolded against the backdrop of something else Hutchinson sensed on the 18th green at Prestwick as he, Purves and the crowd lustily

cheered John Ball as the first amateur to be hailed Champion Golfer of the Year.

‘What interested me much at the moment,’ Hutchinson wrote, ‘was the attitude of the professionals towards the result. I had expected that they would feel rather injured by seeing the championship which they had regarded as their own going to an amateur. To my surprise that did not appear to disconcert them in the least. What they did resent, however, so far as resentment may be carried within the limits of perfectly good sportsmanship, was that it should be won by an Englishman.’

That autumn afternoon at Prestwick stoked a rivalry as passionate as any in sport. Scotland now had a genuine competitor at its national pastime. In the years leading up to the First World War, the battle between Scotland and England for supremacy on the links provided the dramatic backdrop for this transformative generation.

As one century ended and another began, Scottish stalwarts like John Laidlay, Freddie Tait, Willie Park Jr and James Braid fought bravely to turn back the rising English tide represented by John Ball, Harold Hilton, John Henry Taylor and Harry Vardon.

These golfers became childhood heroes of the writers who chronicled that glorious era, especially *The Times* correspondent Bernard Darwin. Their fierce skirmishes would produce an astonishing number of performances that will stand for the ages. By the time war was declared on 28 July 1914, the outlines of golf’s future were well established. The struggle for superiority between England and Scotland had also been settled – and the most important result was that the game itself had won.

The heart-stopping drama of the championships and celebrated matches of that era – coupled with dramatic

advances in balls, clubs and science – positioned a game that for centuries had been played only by Scots to become a worldwide obsession. In the aftermath of the Great War, that truth would be almost immediately revealed.

Two

GOLF MOVES SOUTH

Golf arrived in England the same way it would nearly everywhere else – through connections with a Scotsman.

In 1853 a British Army engineer named William Driscoll Gosset was stationed in Ayr, on Scotland's west coast, to work on drafting topographical maps of the nation. He arrived two years after the famous St Andrews golfer Tom Morris Sr had moved to neighbouring Prestwick to lay out a golf course and become keeper of the green. Captain Gosset came to know Morris, learning the game from him and drawing the first map of the dastardly links he had crafted along the shores of the Firth of Clyde.

Later that year the captain paid a visit to his cousin, Isaac Gosset, the Vicar of Northam, a small village in an area of southwest England known as North Devon. Isaac had also been bitten by the golf bug, having been introduced to the game while visiting his sister in St Andrews. She was married to General George Moncrieff, a

prominent member of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club. While the captain was visiting the vicar in Devon, the two of them took a stroll along Northam Burrows, a vast sprawl of links land on the picturesque shores of Bideford Bay. Captain Gosset couldn't help but note what General Moncrieff would later observe on one of his visits to Northam: 'Providence obviously designed this for a golf links.'

Clubs and balls were promptly ordered from Tom Morris and the Gossets began playing on the Burrows in the same way golfers in Scotland had done for centuries – by cutting holes in the ground with a knife every few hundred yards and hitting shots to them. Gosset's neighbours gradually began to take an interest in this curious new Scottish game. By 1860 – the same year the Open Championship made its debut at Prestwick – Tom was asked to pay a visit to North Devon. He stayed a month, teaching the locals how to play golf and helping Reverend Gosset improve his rudimentary course.

Four years later, on 18 May 1864, came a momentous occasion for the game – the formation of the first golf club that could fairly be described as English: the North Devon and West of England Golf Club. It was not, of course, the nation's oldest club. Golf had been played on English soil, although almost exclusively by Scotsmen, since King James I brought his royal court from Edinburgh to London in 1603. Golfers played at Blackheath, where the nation's first golf club was established in 1766. Expatriate Scots also played at Kersal Moor in Manchester as early as 1818.

North Devon was something different. It came to be acknowledged as the 'cradle of English golf' for the simple reason that fully three quarters of its original 51 members were Englishmen new to the game. In time the club would

come to be better known as Westward Ho! That nickname was adopted from the title of an adventure novel Charles Kingsley had written in a hamlet next door to the Burrows not long before the captain and the vicar discovered its possibilities for golf.

His club now established, Reverend Gosset knew what to do next – invite Tom Morris for another visit. Tom arrived that August as a celebrity, having twice won the new Open Championship at Prestwick. He spent eight days at Northam, during which he designed a formal 18-hole golf course on the Burrows, the first seaside links outside Scotland. Tom also played a daily foursome, introducing southerners to the most popular form of the game in those days. It consisted of a match between two-man teams, with players on both sides alternating shots until the ball was holed, a sublime and volatile format.

When Tom returned home, he would begin an important new chapter in his own life. That year, he was persuaded to return to his birthplace in St Andrews and tend its famed links. He would stay in that ancient seaside town all his days, gradually emerging as the Grand Old Man of Golf.

Gosset's next step was to do what every club founder would do for decades to come, recruit a Scotsman to be North Devon's golf professional. The club hired Johnny Allan, who had grown up in Prestwick as a childhood friend of Tom's precocious son, Young Tommy. It is a testament to how quickly golf took root in England that only three years passed before Gosset's venture received recognition deeply valued in a nobility-conscious nation. The Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, became the club's patron and gave it a new name – The Royal North Devon Golf Club.

Among the club's founding members was Colonel William Nelson Hutchinson. He had a precocious son of his

own named Horatio Gordon, after the famous British admiral. A tall, striking figure who preferred to be known as Horace, Hutchinson quickly emerged as one of the best golfers at Westward Ho! In 1875, aged 16, he was admitted as a club member. That autumn, Hutchinson recalled, he 'committed the blazing indiscretion' of winning the club medal, which made him captain of Royal North Devon. That meant he, a mere teenager, had to take the chair at the club's general meeting. 'I do not know that I made a much bigger hash of it than any other boy forced into the same unnatural position would have done,' he wrote.

Hutchinson wasn't one to make a hash of many things, despite a lifelong struggle with frail health. He would go on to study Classics at Oxford, flirt with taking up sculpture, see his hair turn prematurely white, become a leading amateur golfer, and emerge as an important voice on golf. Hutchinson's work inspired a generation of writers who grew up reading his books and magazine articles, chief among them future *Times* correspondent, Bernard Darwin.

On the links, Hutchinson was a flamboyant player, taking a long, loose swing with what he described as 'bombastic freedom' – a move that saw both his knees bending, his right elbow flying, and his body never quite catching up to his arms on the follow-through. With that swing and his fearless approach to the game, Hutchinson was inclined to find more than his share of trouble. Thankfully, as Darwin put it, 'Nobody was ever better at improvising a stroke for some difficult or, as it looked to the too confident adversary, impossible occasion.'

Important a figure as he was, Hutchinson would not turn out to be the most famous golfer in his household. That distinction would fall to a lad then working as a boot boy for the Hutchinsons – a small, thin, tow-headed young man

named John Henry Taylor. Before the Great War drew the curtain on that formative era of golf, Taylor would emerge as a player for all time and an enormously influential figure in shaping the game's future.

Royal North Devon may have been the birthplace of English golf, but it was hardly the only place where the game was taking root south of the border. In 1865, a year after the founding of Westward Ho!, the London Scottish Volunteers formed a club on Wimbledon Common. It, too, attracted English neighbours eager to take up the game.

By 1873 the Englishmen had split off to form a club of their own, playing from the other end of the common. Eleven years later the Prince of Wales became patron of that club, too. It would be known ever after as the Royal Wimbledon Golf Club. Wimbledon had the disadvantage of not being a seaside course, but that was offset by proximity to London. It became an important power centre of the English game, home to such influential figures as Henry Lamb and Dr William Laidlaw Purves.

Turning point

The pivotal moment for English golf, however, came in 1869. That was the year a golf club was established in a small fishing village along the Dee Estuary known as Hoylake. The village is 12 miles west of Liverpool, a bustling trade centre and England's gateway to the world.

Being next door to Liverpool meant Hoylake was home to ambitious businessmen inclined to be bold in any endeavour they undertook. Its location by the seaside also meant that a club led by such forward-thinking men was far better positioned to be a dynamic force in the growth of

English golf than one situated inland, as Royal Wimbledon was, or in a remote place like Westward Ho!

The centrepiece of Hoylake was the Royal Hotel, a resort founded in 1792 by Sir John Stanley as a way of capitalising on a fashion then sweeping the nation, bathing in the sea. The Royal stood on the edge of a vast rabbit warren that was also home to a racecourse. Since the mid-19th century the Liverpool Hunt Club had conducted race meetings there. By 1869 the hotel's lustre had faded, but its fortunes were soon to be revived because the rabbit warren also happened to be ideal for golf, a game whose popularity had been surging in Scotland and England for the past two decades.

Golf was spreading 'like Noah's flood', as golfer Andra Kirkaldy put it, because a genius known as Young Tom Morris had come along to take advantage of new technology – the arrival of the first hard-rubber golf ball in 1848. The ball was made of gutta-percha, a sticky substance drawn from trees in Malaysia. The 'gutty' replaced a ball made of leather stuffed with feathers. Those balls were extremely fragile and vastly more expensive than gutties, meaning that for centuries only wealthy men could afford to play proper golf. The arrival of the cheap, durable gutty opened golf to the masses and drew thousands of new players to the game.

A dozen years later, all those new players got a national championship to root for when the Open debuted at Prestwick. With the stars aligned for a golf revolution, along came Young Tom Morris to ignite the spark. The year before Hoylake was founded, aged 17, Tommy began his inexorable march to claim the Open's first trophy, The Challenge Belt, by winning three Championships in succession. Young Tom's prowess and star power attracted

lavish attention from the London press. Not surprisingly, gentlemen reading about Tommy's exploits in English newspapers began to take an interest in this newfangled game emerging from Scotland.

Those newly curious Englishmen often had Scottish acquaintances more than happy to introduce them to the glories of golf, in the same way that Old Tom Morris helped his friend, Captain Gosset, bring the game to North Devon. That was especially true at Hoylake, which was teeming with Scottish merchants – men like John Muir Dowie of West Kirby. He was married to the daughter of Robert Chambers Jr, an Edinburgh publisher and skilled golfer. Chambers was famous for having won the second of the three Grand National Tournaments for amateur golfers conducted in St Andrews beginning in 1857. On Thursday 13 May 1869, at the urging of his father-in-law, Dowie sent a letter to 20 prominent Hoylake residents. It began: 'It has been suggested that Hoylake offers a suitable and convenient ground for playing Golf, and some friends have asked me to endeavour to organise a Golf Club.

'Your name has been mentioned as a probable member, and I take this liberty of asking you to join.'

Twenty-one men attended a meeting held two days later at the Royal Hotel. Together they resolved to form Liverpool Golf Club, with Dowie as its first captain and a room in the hotel serving as its clubhouse. Later that night, in the sky above Hoylake, villagers witnessed a sparkling celestial display we now know to be the Northern Lights. Back then people thought the sky had been set alight by the tail of a comet streaking overhead. They considered that a portent of good things to come. For golf, at least, it certainly was.

Chambers was in town for the occasion and had brought along his personal golf professional, Old Tom Morris's brother, George. The two of them laid out a crude nine-hole course in front of the Royal, and newly christened members celebrated the club's birth by playing a few matches even as horses raced around the oval next to their links. By 1876 the racecourse would be gone and the rabbit warren left to the golfers.

In August 1869, Hoylake's connections to the founding family of golf would deepen when George Morris returned with his son, Jack, to explore the possibility of his becoming Liverpool's golf professional. Hoylake still seemed a bit sleepy to George. He worried that his son might not thrive there and suggested they return home to St Andrews. Jack ignored his father's advice and decided to give it a go. He set up shop in a stable behind the hotel and stayed until his death 60 years later, becoming as much a fixture at Hoylake as the mighty winds that sweep over the links from the Dee Estuary.

From the start, the men of Liverpool Golf Club – which would receive its royal patronage from Queen Victoria in 1871 – proved themselves to be a forward-thinking lot determined to make a mark in the game. In the decades that followed, Royal Liverpool would become the English equivalent of St Andrews as an epicentre of the game. Unlike the Royal and Ancient, however, Hoylake would prove to be a dynamic agent of change, the club responsible for nearly every significant innovation in championship golf.

'The Englishman who golfs today,' Hutchinson wrote years later, 'may do well to think that, had it not been for the zeal and energy of the early members of the Royal

Liverpool Golf Club, we, in the South, might never have come into our golfing heritage.'

The first sign of that zeal wasn't long in coming. In the spring of 1872, Royal Liverpool staged the Grand Tournament for Professionals, the first major golf competition held on English soil. Club members subscribed more than £100, an enormous sum, to finance lavish prizes. These included a payout of £15 to the winner, the largest prize ever offered. By comparison, the Open paid the winner £8 that year.

Just as remarkable, however, was that Royal Liverpool agreed to cover the railway expenses of every golfer who competed in the tournament and to provide them with dinner in the evening. That was an enormous gesture of respect, perhaps even a turning point for professional golfers, at a time when they were viewed by gentlemen like Hutchinson as 'feckless, reckless creatures'. The idea, of course, was to make certain Hoylake attracted the biggest stars in the golfing firmament – Young Tom and his St Andrews sidekick, Davie Strath.

The timing could not have been more perfect. Eighteen months earlier, Tommy had set the golf world aflame by winning his third consecutive Open at the age of 19. That victory ended a decade-long quest to claim The Challenge Belt by making it Tommy's personal property. It also left the Open in limbo for a year, as its founding club, Prestwick, reached out to St Andrews and Musselburgh to subscribe for a new trophy and create a bigger, brighter future for the game's premier championship.

That made the Grand Tournament a marquee event, and it came off precisely as planned. Tommy, Davie and every other leading golfer turned up to compete at Royal Liverpool on Tuesday 25 April 1872. The only glitch was

that it rained so torrentially that play occasionally had to be suspended. The nasty weather didn't stop a hardy crowd from following the action, among them a ten-year-old from Hoylake who was soon to make his own mark in golf – young Johnny Ball. True to form, Tommy and Davie staged a fierce battle for the largest purse ever offered in golf, with Davie taking the lead in round one and Tommy rallying on the second 18 to win by a single shot.

Bold stroke

If the Grand Tournament put English golf on the map, it was two amateur events launched over the next dozen years that secured the future of the game south of the River Tweed.

The first was the annual University Match between Oxford and Cambridge. That competition debuted on 6 March 1878 at the London Scottish Volunteers' course on Wimbledon Common. Both teams fielded four players, who faced off man to man. Oxford's team, led by the ever-present Hutchinson, won every match, a lopsided victory to begin a contest in which honours have been fairly even over the decades.

The University Match immediately became the only first-class amateur event in an age when the golf calendar contained just a single certain fixture, the Open. More important, however, was that it signalled the acceptance of the game by Oxford and Cambridge. Generations of students destined to become Britain's leaders and brightest minds would grow up steeped in golf. That was no small thing in the 1870s – a time when, 'you could not travel about with golf clubs . . . without exciting the wonder and,

almost, the suspicions of all those who saw such strange things,' Hutchinson wrote.

Significant as the University Match was, however, the most transformative development in English golf unfolded half a dozen years later at Royal Liverpool. On 13 December 1884, during a meeting of the club's committee, Honourable Secretary Thomas Owen Potter proposed that Hoylake host a tournament open to all amateur golfers during its spring meeting the following year. His idea received near unanimous approval at an extraordinary general meeting of the club on 28 January 1885.

The notion of a national amateur championship was not a new one. At the instigation of Prestwick's James Ogilvie Fairlie, patron of Old Tom Morris, St Andrews had hosted three such championships beginning in 1857. That was the event in which Robert Chambers made his name a decade before he helped found Hoylake. The competition lapsed after its third year because it interfered with the Royal and Ancient's Autumn Meeting. In the years since, the idea had resurfaced. In 1884, an R&A member urged the club to host a championship open to all amateur golfers, but his suggestion was not taken up. Still, there continued to be agitation in the press, much of it coming from newly minted English players, for an amateur championship to rival the Open.

Those dreams were realised the following spring. Beginning on 20 April 1885, 44 players from 11 clubs in Scotland and England competed in the first Amateur Championship. The format was different from the one used in the Open, where the trophy went to the golfer with the lowest score over 36 holes. The Amateur featured a series of one-on-one battles in which the player who won the most holes prevailed. The last man standing won the title. With

its thrust-and-parry drama, match play was everybody's favourite form of golf in that era. Scots considered it the only true test of a champion.

The competition could not begin, however, until the committee in charge of the event, Hutchinson among them, dealt with a ticklish situation – defining what constituted an amateur golfer. The issue arose because an entry was received from a Scotsman named Douglas Rolland. He had finished second in the 1884 Open, earning a modest prize. It would have been easy to bar Rolland as a professional, but for an awkward truth. Hoylake's favourite son, young Johnny Ball, had also pocketed a £1 prize when he competed in the 1878 Open, finishing fourth as a boy of 16.

In the end, the committee did what committees often do. It split hairs, deciding that any player who hadn't accepted a prize in five years remained an amateur. Hutchinson considered that grossly unfair. Ball's case and Rolland's were 'fundamentally on all fours', he wrote. Hutchinson resigned in protest before the vote was taken. The committee also barred any player who made clubs or balls for a living, worked as a caddie or gave lessons for money – the rough outlines of what would become the rules for amateur status.

Once that messy business was concluded, players set out for three days of match play in an event that quickly emerged as one of the major championships that golfers and fans looked forward to each season, a worthy companion to the Open. Every leading club in the kingdom was represented – from the Royal and Ancient and the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers to Royal Blackheath, Royal North Devon, Royal Wimbledon and more. The gentlemen who had presided over golf since its earliest days now had a championship of their own,

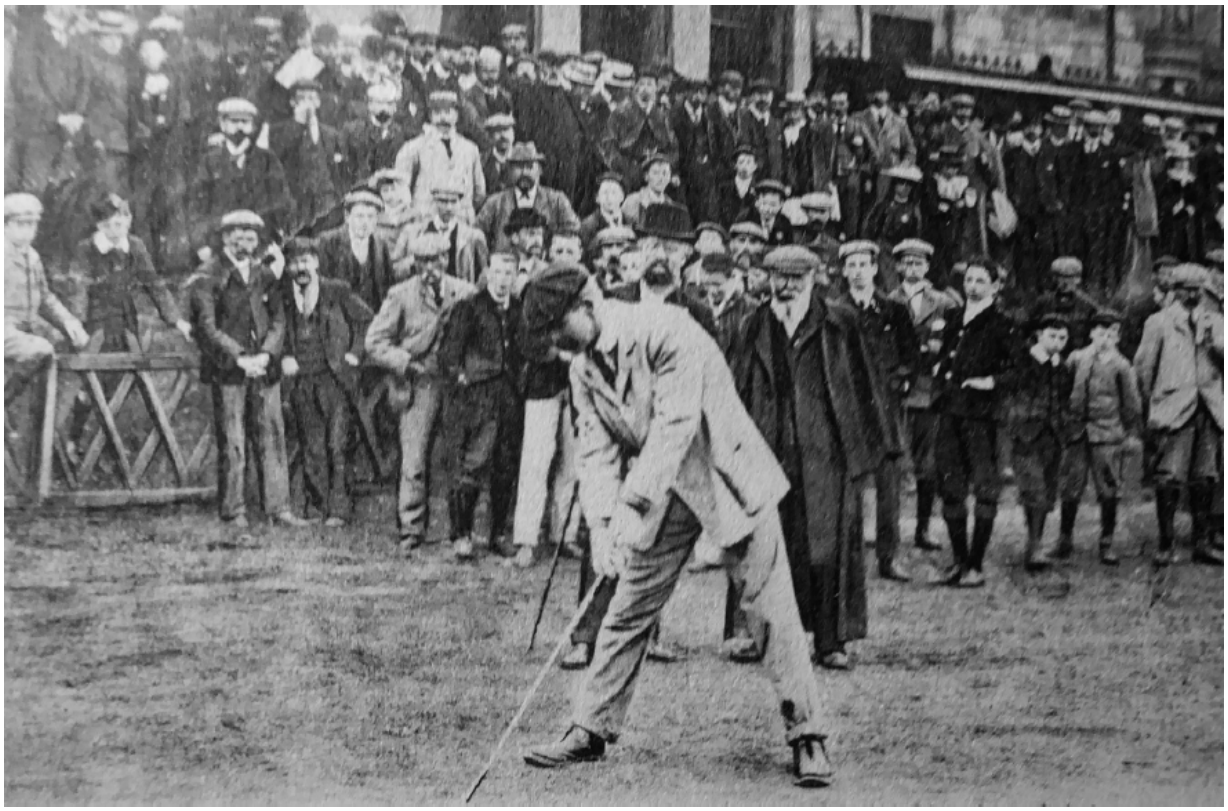
guaranteeing that English interest in the Scottish game would only redouble.

The first Amateur Championship did not come off perfectly – mostly because the committee running the competition decided that both players would advance to the next round if a match was halved, rather than having them play off until a winner was determined. The unfortunate result was that three players, not four, made it into the semi-finals. One of them, Allan Macfie, received a bye into the final, an absurd situation. Not surprisingly, that led to play-offs being adopted in future Amateurs.

The most compelling match of that inaugural Championship turned out to be the hotly contested 18-hole semi-final between Hutchinson and Ball, the up-and-coming 23-year-old from Hoylake. Hundreds of the faithful turned out to root for their young champion as he and Hutchinson waged a desperate battle on a lovely afternoon marred only by a boisterous south-west wind. The partisan crowd's hopes were raised as Ball played the outward nine flawlessly, displaying the exquisite long game that would be his hallmark.

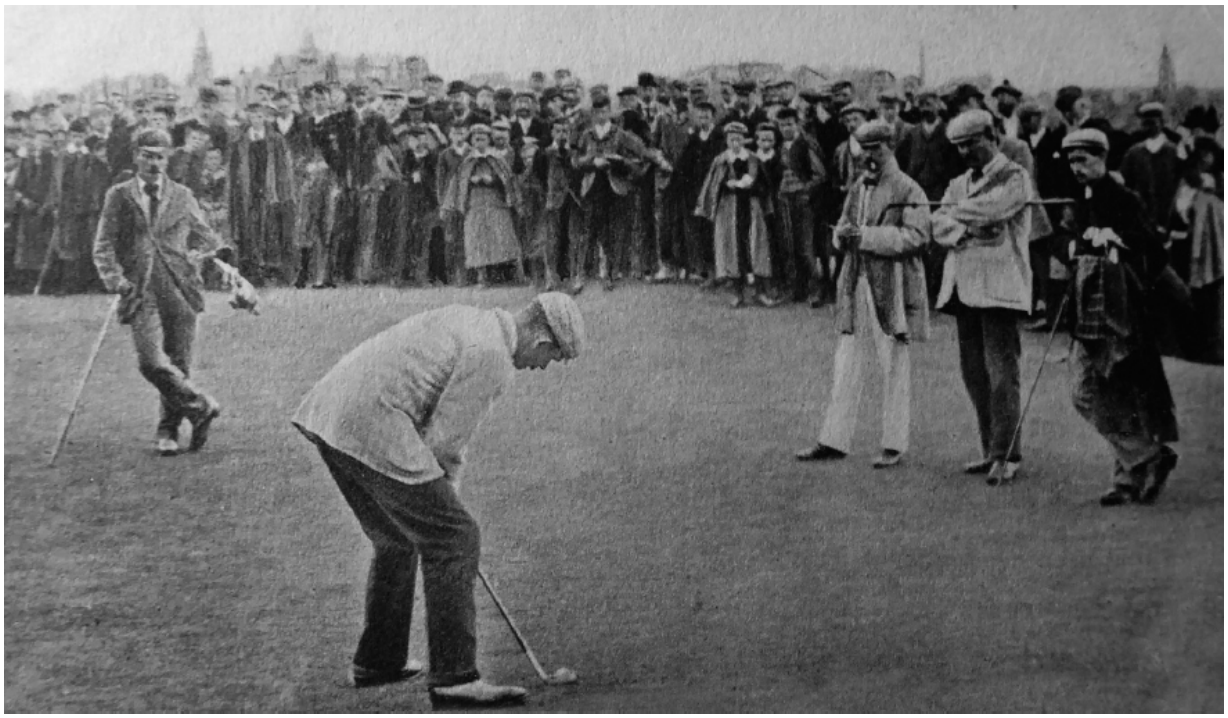
By the time the players turned for home, Ball was leading by a hole. The tension reached boiling point when he pocketed the tenth to go 2 up. Hutchinson, however, was not one to wilt in a crisis. He won the next four holes, taking his own 2-up lead with four left to play. The young son of Hoylake fought valiantly through the finishing stretch at Liverpool, one of the toughest in golf. Ball won the 17th to give his fans a glimmer of hope as the tandem approached the final hole, with Hutchinson leading 1 up.

Alas, the home crowd's hopes were dashed when Hutchinson laid his approach to the 18th stone dead, winning the hole and the match 2 up. That battle with Ball



John Henry Taylor, golf’s indispensable man, was the first English professional to win an Open, breaking through at Sandwich in 1894 and repeating the following year at St Andrews. He was also instrumental in founding the Professional Golfers Association, assuring a brighter future for his brethren.

No Scotsman fought more valiantly than James Braid to stem the rising English tide. He won five Open Championships – all on home soil – including this one in 1905 at St Andrews, not far from his birthplace in Earlsferry.



Scotland’s other stalwarts included Willie Park, Jr., a descendant of one of the game’s legendary families, and that old warhorse, Andra Kirkaldy. A beloved figure in St Andrews, Kirkaldy (looking on) became the professional to the Royal and Ancient Golf Club.

Nothing stirred the soul of Scots like a Great Match, especially the International Foursome of 1905, pitting James Braid and Sandy