**‘An ambitious club on a small scale’:**

**The rise of the Royal Isle of Wight Golf Club 1882-1914**

**Abstract**

In this article, the notable, but forgotten, history of the Royal Isle of Wight Golf Club (RIWGC), founded in 1882, is used to examine the cultural and social shifts that enabled the development of the sport’s popularity across late Victorian and Edwardian society in Britain. The club can justifiably be described as notable because for a brief period this small Island club was at the centre of developments which helped shape golf during this era and framed its development in the twentieth century. Two archetypally entrepreneurial Victorian gentlemen, Captain Jack Eaton and Charles John Jacobs were central to the club’s success and their endeavours underpinned the club’s illustrious status. This paper examines newspaper records, periodicals and local archives to explain how the RIWGC originated and then prospered in tandem with the development of the Isle of Wight as an upmarket holiday destination. Moreover the article shows how the club provided access for both genders of the English upper-middle class to a sport and an environment that delivered the cultural benefits and the social kudos which could be derived from association with a golf club, and particularly one that was one of a select group of ‘Royal’ golf clubs. However, research also demonstrates that the club provided an environment where enterprising and talented men from less privileged backgrounds could seize the opportunity to become famous on the national and even the international stage. Finally it will demonstrate that the RIWGC played a major part in codifying the rules of golf in the 1880s when the R&A appeared hesitant to take the lead. The combination of these achievements even led some to suggest that the RIWGC threatened to rival ‘the cradle of golf’ at St. Andrews such was the impact of the Island club.

**Keyword:** Golf, Isle of Wight, Tourism, Rules, Royal, Class.

**Introduction**

While golf had been played in Scotland for centuries, it made little impact in England until the 1860s. Previously considered an idiosyncratic and mysterious Scottish pastime, golf was promoted so successfully that by the end of the 19th century it had become regarded as a fashionable sport for English gentlemen.[[1]](#endnote-1) One of the earliest clubs in this boom was the Isle of Wight Golf Club, located at Bembridge, and described ‘as an ambitious club on a small scale’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The history of golf has mainly been written from the perspective of the famous clubs and the role played by the R&A. There is an broad range of popular titles include Geddis and Hamilton who paid considerable attention to the formation of the early golf clubs and naturally focussed on the renowned Scottish clubs at St. Andrews, Prestwick, and the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers at Muirfield. Whereas, Henderson and Stirk feature England’s oldest golf club, Royal Blackheath and Behrend and Graham describe the history of another of England’s oldest and most prominent clubs, the Royal Liverpool at Hoylake.[[3]](#endnote-3) There is no doubt that these clubs all deserve literary attention but by only providing accounts that celebrate the well-known clubs they overlook the contributions made by smaller clubs and feature little analysis of wider British values or contemporary socio-cultural issues.

As a corrective to these popular histories there is a slowly emerging field of academic literature on golf history. These text encompass Holt and Lowerson who have written on class and society and the influence of the R&A on the administration of the game but this article will provide further depth to these themes including the cultural development of early golf clubs and will also show that the R&A’s influence over the rules of golf was not absolute and was publically challenged. George has considered the well establish topic of gender in sport through recording the growth of ladies golf and in terms of the history of golf tourism, Durie broadens our knowledge by looking north and west but fails to consider a southern gaze. Organisational matters have been aptly featured by Vamplew and Kay who lead this debate by contributing to the British obsession with ‘clubs’ and their importance in class conscious Victorian England. In contrast, Holt et al depict the role of the golf professional and the founding of the PGA to represent the interests of those working and making their living in the golfing industry.[[4]](#endnote-4) However, despite this body of work Huggins suggests that there is still little breadth of a scholarly nature, and the role played by the RIWGC in these themes is ignored by all authors, except for the acknowledgement by Lowerson concerning the commencement of inter-county golf played at Bembridge in 1895. This article will examine how a relatively remote ‘Island’ course with just nine holes quickly became the ‘Royal’ Isle of Wight Golf Club (RIWGC) and suggest that it was one of the pre-eminent golf clubs in England during this foundation early period in of English golfing history.

This article has three aims. First, it will survey the origins of the club, highlighting the challenges and the opportunities presented by its location on the Isle of Wight both for its establishment and then as an early destination for golfing tourism. Second it will analyse the social make-up of the club, in terms of a socially exclusive membership, the employment opportunities it presented for the working classes as well as highlighting the barriers and the opportunities encountered by female golfers at the RIWGC. Third, if the playing of golf or even simply being associated with a golf club was considered to be a way to improve one’s cultural capital then being a member of the RIWGC would certainly have magnify this status symbol. Membership of one of the first ‘Royal’ clubs and the reflective prestige of connection with a club that played a key role in the development of golf as a sport and as a pastime through the codification of the Rules of Golf would have been highly rewarding. Inextricably linked to these developments, were the roles played by two key people in the club’s early importance, Captain Jack Eaton (1840-1888) and Charles John Jacobs (1867-1942).[[5]](#endnote-5)

**Golf in Victorian Britain**

In 1889 there were 230 golf clubs in the whole of Great Britain and Ireland with the vast majority being located in Scotland.[[6]](#endnote-6) From the foundation dates listed for the clubs, the RIWGC (1882) was approximately the twentieth club in England and was in the vanguard of the evolution of golf in England. Clubs provided a lens into civil society through which one’s social life was arranged and the ‘games revolution’ of Victorian Britain further stimulated club development.[[7]](#endnote-7) Indeed, Clark has observed that voluntary associations were a classic British cultural form for centuries before golf clubs became popular entities.[[8]](#endnote-8) Little surprise then, when writing in the late nineteenth century, that the French Goncourt brothers observed that ‘the first thing two Englishmen would do if cast away on a desert Island would be to form a club’.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Golf clubs though had their own peculiarities. Vamplew argues that their development was usually based on one of three principal models.[[10]](#endnote-10) The first was agency in the form of the efforts and endeavours of one key individual who was the driving force mobilising a small number of the local population into forming a club and overseeing the laying out of a course on a piece of suitable land. The second model was based on a group of influential locals who sought to establish a community type of facility. These clubs often aped exclusive country clubs and offered a range of sporting, recreational and social facilities in addition to golf. Finally there were those clubs that were established as a business proposition and formed as limited liability companies, notably those clubs situated along the stretch of the Lancashire coast from Liverpool to Southport and also in the suburbs around London.[[11]](#endnote-11)

**Golf, tourism and the Isle of Wight**

The Isle of Wight, a small island of 150 sq. miles situated 3 to 5 miles off the Hampshire coast and separated from mainland England by the Solent waterway, was on the face of it not the ideal location for a pioneering golf club. It can be no coincidence that the extension of the railway to St. Helens and on to Bembridge was completed in 1882, the same year as the RIWGC was founded.[[12]](#endnote-12) Walton points out that with the coming of the railway age in the nineteenth century, new and more distant resorts became accessible to wealthy inhabitants from London and many other cities, expanding the leisure and tourism industries.[[13]](#endnote-13) For the Isle of Wight though this transportation included the need to cross the Solent by paddle steamer and then on to Bembridge by way of the Island railway network. At the time of its formation the RIWGC was one of only two clubs not located on the mainland, the other one being the Royal Jersey Golf Club. This relative isolation made it less accessible and required a more protracted and expensive mode of access for even the wealthier golfer visiting from the mainland. As a consequence, the Isle of Wight had a relatively limited ‘catchment’ area from which to develop a thriving golf club membership, with a total population across the entire Island of 73,633 in 1891.[[14]](#endnote-14) For the two villages that bordered the RIWGC, *Hill’s 1879 Directory* stated that the village of St. Helens had a population of 879 and Bembridge’s population was only slightly larger at 945.[[15]](#endnote-15) This compares with most of the other contemporary English golf clubs that were established close to the major urban centres. Only the Royal Jersey Golf club and arguably the Royal North Devon, located in the rural West Country at Westward Ho, had similar catchment areas.[[16]](#endnote-16)

What the Isle of Wight did enjoy at the end of the nineteenth century though was a growing reputation for being a holiday destination for the wealthy tourist. As Anderson and Swinglehurst have argued,

The Victorians who went to the seaside were very class conscious, for some, the big resorts became too noisy and vulgar and they moved across to the Isle of Wight where even the popular resorts never became big and brash like some on the mainland.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The Island’s status as an upmarket resort had been cemented by Queen Victoria and her extended sport loving family who frequently spent holidays at Osborne House.[[18]](#endnote-18) Furthermore, *Kelly’s* *Directory* identified the Island’s chief source of prosperity as the numerous visitors who enjoyed its romantic scenery coupled with its sheltered position and the mildness of its climate.[[19]](#endnote-19) As Lowerson established, it was wealthy individuals with ‘new’ money who enjoyed an ambivalent place in the popularisation of newer pursuits.[[20]](#endnote-20) Equally significant was an increase in competitive participation sport and the pursuit of associated social goals as sport took the boredom out of the conventional seaside holidays for the nouveau riche.[[21]](#endnote-21) Guide books regularly promoted leisure opportunities at UK holiday resorts for sports-loving holidaymakers and from the late 1880s, resorts increasingly referred to the excellent facilities for golf.[[22]](#endnote-22) One of the places where visitors could choose to ‘recreate themselves’, was the RIWGC.[[23]](#endnote-23) Visitors needed a place to stay and amongst many local hotels the Spithead Hotel quickly became a successful and popular establishment with Queen Victoria bestowing royal patronage on the hotel in 1883.[[24]](#endnote-24) A general increase in visitors to Bembridge along with the popularity of the RIWGC resulted in the raising of the roof of the now ‘Royal’ Spithead Hotel and another story added, together with a new room built alongside the hotel as a private room for RIWGC members in 1884.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Sport not only became a popular pastime on the Isle of Wight during the nineteenth century, but it also carried considerable social cachet. The most renowned sporting activity based on the Island was Cowes Week, which, according to the Royal Yacht Squadron’s records, began in 1826. The yacht club had the title ‘Royal’ added to its name in 1820 when the Prince Regent, who had been a member since 1817, became George IV. Thus the RIWGC was not the first ‘Royal’ sporting club to be located on the Isle of Wight.[[26]](#endnote-26) Both clubs would have undoubtedly benefited from what Bourdieu described as ‘distinction’ or a case of social snobbery, where taste become the basis for social judgement and thus where the royal title enhanced the status of the club.[[27]](#endnote-27)

**The origins of the Royal Isle of Wight Golf Club**

The RIWGC was formed in the spring of 1882. At a luncheon held in the Spithead Hotel, it was claimed that Commander Jack Eaton RN, of the Isle of Wight Coastguard, rhetorically asked the assembled company ‘What was the Duver meant for?’ (The Duver was the local name given to the spit of land that was to become the RIWGC). Eaton replied ‘It was made for the purpose of golf.’ Highlighting the importance of agency in the formation of clubs, Commander, later Captain, Eaton, according to his obituary in *The Times,* was a man with boundless energy and great vision and without this drive and enthusiasm for golf there might not have been a RIWGC.[[28]](#endnote-28) An agreement was quickly established to lease the land from its owners, the Brading Harbour Company, for a peppercorn lease of ten shillings a year. The Brading Harbour Company was supportive because a successful and thriving golf club would bring visitors and money to the village. The natural terrain and landscaping of the Duver meant that from the club’s initial conception it only took a few months before the course was ready to play. There was an official opening on 11 September 1882 with fifty members already signed up.

Jack Sumner Eaton was born in 1840 in Chester, the only son of the Rev. Thomas Eaton. He entered the Royal Navy as a boy cadet at the age of 13 and served and was decorated in the Crimean War before serving in several other overseas locations.[[29]](#endnote-29) Eaton combined his service in the Royal Navy with a developing enthusiasm and aptitude for golf. He joined the Liverpool club at Hoylake in 1870 (Royal Liverpool from 1871) and in 1875 he won the club’s prestigious Kennard Golf Medal. Eaton was transferred to the Coastguard in 1882 and given command of the Eastern Division of the Isle of Wight.[[30]](#endnote-30) Eaton became the first Hon. Secretary of the RIWGC, a post he held for two years until 1884 when he became the Club Captain. In 1886 he was placed on the retired list with permission to assume the rank of Captain, a promotion from his serving rank of Commander.[[31]](#endnote-31)

In order to play golf there has been one essential requirement – land.[[32]](#endnote-32) The earliest golf courses evolved on the sparsely covered land found along the coastline. As Graves and Cornish have noted, these strips provided a natural golfing landscape with ideal vegetation, in particular the blades of grass standing stiff and erect as a result of the salt air, which supported the ball. The landscape was devoid of trees and the sandy soil was well drained. The coastal winds forced the livestock to hide behind hillocks where they trampled the grass into sandy scars, which became natural bunkers. Birley explains that the first courses were located on the poor soil between the richer farming land and the sea and were known as ‘Links’ courses with the land being ready made for golf.[[33]](#endnote-33) The land chosen for the RIWGC followed this pattern, as it was located on a narrow spit of land at the mouth of Bembridge harbour using the existing sand dunes and gorse bushes for the hazards.[[34]](#endnote-34) Robert Browning, who served as the editor of *Golfing* magazine for 45 years, commented that ‘its only fault is that there is not more of it as it lies on a spit of sand between Spithead and Bembridge harbour that allows no room for expansion’.[[35]](#endnote-35) Once established the club was able to consolidate and, as Browning observed, it was considered to be a glorious, if challenging course.[[36]](#endnote-36) However, it was far from perfect. Bernard Darwin, grandson of Charles Darwin, and famous golf writer in his own right, described it in 1910 as ‘a cat’s cradle and possibly one of the most dangerous courses in Britain’ on account of the number of fairways that crossed each other.[[37]](#endnote-37) *The Islander Magazine* in 1913 tells of how a two week trial was undertaken to remove one of the dangerous crossing points, but despite these problems, it still claimed that the course was one of the nine premier courses in the south of England.[[38]](#endnote-38) The club handbook published in 1929 states that the 8th and 9th holes were the only two original holes still in play after changes were made numerous times between 1884, and 1926.[[39]](#endnote-39) Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate the original and final course layout. Despite the potential dangers the club was visited and commended by several of the leading players of the period, including all three of the ‘Great Triumvirate’ - Harry Vardon, James Braid and John ‘JH’ Taylor. They described the course as ‘beautiful, but very difficult, it is like driving down a gas pipe on some fairways’.[[40]](#endnote-40) This suggests a very tight layout but one good enough to challenge the very top players of the day and also to be enjoyed by local golfers and visitors alike.

Having acquired the land necessary to establish a golf course, the next requirement was the need for a clubhouse.[[41]](#endnote-41) Browning suggested that the sociability off the course was of equal importance as play on it and what a clubhouse offered to the Victorian and Edwardian gentleman golfer was a place to reiterate class distinction.[[42]](#endnote-42) Lowerson notes that the clubhouse became the centre for social activities for golf club members, especially when they began to offer a pseudo-gentry life style with their bars, restaurants and vistas.[[43]](#endnote-43) The RIWGC was fortunate in that it was able to use the Spithead Hotel as their first official headquarters, and the club continued to use the hotel as their headquarters for their ‘wining and dining’ events. However, the members soon required a more convenient clubhouse facility in closer proximity to the course to complement the facilities at the Royal Spithead Hotel and a pavilion containing ‘every convenience’ was erected within twelve months of it first being proposed.[[44]](#endnote-44)

However, once established the RIWGC, in common with a number of other golf clubs and reflecting wider social tensions, attracted some opposition when local people were denied access to land on which that they had previously enjoyed unrestricted access. In 1908, for example, the club appealed to the Isle of Wight County Council for an injunction to stop the public from taking their leisure on the Duver.[[45]](#endnote-45) After a two-day hearing, the jury at the County Court in Ryde could not agree on the outcome and so the judge agreed to hear further legal arguments at a later date.[[46]](#endnote-46) When the hearing was reconvened in Winchester a month later the jury came down on the side of the golfers rather than the local protestors.[[47]](#endnote-47) The jury also awarded the club costs. The case was reported in *The Times*, and thus the RIWGC set a national precedent serving as a high profile deterrent to other groups undertaking or considering undertaking similar protests across the country.[[48]](#endnote-48)

**The RIWGC Community**

*Membership and Social Exclusivity*

Golf clubs have never existed in a social vacuum and the RIWGC was no different. During this period the relationships between those who ran the club, those who played there and worked there were shaped by prevailing social tensions, such as class relations. Cannadine has offered three different views on the English class system: a seamless and interconnected web; three distinct levels; or simply a case of ‘them’ and ‘us’.[[49]](#endnote-49) Victorian and Edwardian golf clubs were replete with ‘Upstairs, Downstairs’ tensions, reflecting contemporary strict social hierarchies; it was the workers who tended to the course and provided services for the socially exclusive members populated by the upper and middle classes.

Clubs generally during this period were a central part of a bourgeois culture that comprised a wide-ranging network of voluntary societies, which importantly provided an opportunity to reaffirm middle-class identity.[[50]](#endnote-50) According to Holt, Stanmore Golf Club, a typical private sports club populated by the middle classes, was a place for developing networks where business and pleasure were easily mixed with ‘deals done’ on the course and sealed in the 19th hole.[[51]](#endnote-51)

Moreover, as McKibbin states, golf was a game that was steeped in ‘relentless amateurism’, which provided an ideological underpinning for its social hierarchies and particular codes of behaviour, including the banning of the club professional from the bar.[[52]](#endnote-52) Amateur clubs were the cornerstone of sporting activities with volunteerism and membership central to the Victorian values of cultural capital.[[53]](#endnote-53) The gentleman amateur played a significant role in the organisation and governance of sport at a national and local level.[[54]](#endnote-54) Many of the members of the RIWGC were also associated with the Bembridge Sailing Club and other community events.[[55]](#endnote-55) In general, golf was principally seen as a vehicle for social prestige rather than one for rampant competitiveness, where play for play’s sake was important. However Holt counters, that one was still expected to try hard and is clearly evidenced by the numerous reports of competitions recorded in the local press.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Golf was also a reflection with the Victorian obsession with health and used by members as a retreat from the pressures of work and escape to the fresh air of the countryside or the seaside from the dark and poorly ventilated sedentary office and the polluted city air.[[57]](#endnote-57) It helped support the Victorian mantra of ‘mens sana in corpore sano’ and the amateur obsession with active participation and their indifference or hostility to spectator sport.[[58]](#endnote-58) How one dressed was also highly important for the amateur sportsman with clothing modelled on the casual style favoured by the upper classes and this included the attire worn when socialising after the round.[[59]](#endnote-59) The surviving drawings of the various captains of the RIWGC depict them dressed resplendently in their red jackets and plus fours and so it is clear that this symbolic protocol was keenly followed.

What was the social composition of the RIWGCs’ early members?[[60]](#endnote-60) The membership unsurprisingly was mainly made up of men from middle to upper middle class backgrounds with a liberal number of military men.[[61]](#endnote-61) There were also a number of Reverends and other men who had taken up Holy Orders listed in the names of the competitors. Further examples included a clerk in the Parliamentary Office of the House of Lords, a retired High Sheriff of Louth, an Author, a Master Merchant Marine and a Bank Agent.[[62]](#endnote-62) The census returns on several occasions also showed ‘Living on Own Means’ as the member’s occupation, reflecting their affluence. A list of members that has survived and is dated October 1912 is equally revealing in terms of the ‘home’ addresses given. Out of the 164 members listed, all appear to be men and 74 gave their address as locations on the mainland. Interrogating the membership list further, it shows that 37 of the members lived in London, sixteen gave their address as a club or a hotel and six were shown as currently living abroad. One member, who was living at the Oriental Club, Hanover Square, London, was joined on the membership list by his son, one of two members who were at Eton College. There were also members who lived close to a number of other major golfing venues including, Westward Ho, (Royal North Devon) Sunningdale, Sandwich (St. Georges) and Wimbledon (London Scottish).[[63]](#endnote-63) See figure three. These two sources of the traceable members confirm Tranter’s view that club membership was not open to everyone.[[64]](#endnote-64) While membership was all about inclusion for the privileged few it was also about exclusion for the majority.[[65]](#endnote-65)

Golf, given the expense of equipment and membership fees, was generally beyond the means of the masses. However, from the 1890s a lower middle class fringe became attracted to the game and artisan golf clubs emerged.[[66]](#endnote-66) There were often socio –economic agreements where artisans could play at a reduced fee, but at restricted times, and also if they also undertook maintenance tasks on the course and in the clubhouse.[[67]](#endnote-67) The RIWGC did introduce an Artisan’s section but this was not formed until 1927 and so it does suggest that until this date, the playing membership of the RIWGC was restricted to the middle and upper middle classes.[[68]](#endnote-68)

*Golf’s Workers*

In order for socially exclusive golf clubs to function they had to employ workers.[[69]](#endnote-69) This was a natural progression for middle-class golfers from employing servants in their homes to engaging them in their recreational activities. Of these the caddie was the lowest but also the most common type of golf worker.[[70]](#endnote-70) According to Browning the word ‘caddie’ was the Scottish derivation of the French word ‘cadet’ meaning a little chief.[[71]](#endnote-71) The lot of a caddie was not always glamorous or easy. Their work was often only casual, semi legal, and for most offered no prospects for future employment in life.[[72]](#endnote-72) By way of comparison, take the case of Horace Rawlins who was born in Shanklin in 1874 and who learnt to play the game while caddying on the RIWGC. Rawlins later immigrated to America and won the first ever US Open. Rawlins would have been carrying clubs for RIWGC members while, at the same time, learning his craft and playing a round of golf when he had the chance.[[73]](#endnote-73) Further opportunities for caddies presented themselves in terms of competitions organised by the clubs.[[74]](#endnote-74) The RIWGC was no exception and in 1886 held a caddies competition with the aptly named Alfred Toogood winning the boys’ competition.[[75]](#endnote-75) The RIWGC proved a successful breeding ground for aspiring golfers, as eight years later, Alfred finished fourth in the 1894 Open at Royal St George's Golf Club in Sandwich, seven shots behind JH Taylor and winning £7 in prize money. Bernard Darwin described Alfred Toogood as a golfer who had really great possibilities but that he never quite lived up to them.[[76]](#endnote-76)

The professional was a role that evolved throughout the nineteenth century. Lowerson claims that, similar to greenkeepers, most of the early professionals were of Scottish descent and indeed they frequently combined both roles working long hours especially on the smaller courses.[[77]](#endnote-77) Similarly, Holt et al noted that, rather than playing in tournaments, most professionals earned a living through running the club shop and making golf clubs.[[78]](#endnote-78) Many were highly skilled club makers and were much in demand as they were almost the sole supplier of clubs for the members. It was not until 1909 that the R&A applied limitations on the form and make of clubs.[[79]](#endnote-79) This meant that players were constantly seeking new styles of clubs and the professionals would patent and market their own brand of clubs to the members.[[80]](#endnote-80) Golf professionals were also subject to the strict rules of British class distinctions that impacted on all sports in the late nineteenth century. Professionals mainly came from working class backgrounds and were not allowed to use the clubhouse or mix socially with the middle and upper middle class ladies and gentleman who made up the membership of Britain’s golf clubs.[[81]](#endnote-81)

Initially there was a rapid turnover of professionals at the RIWGC. Between 1888 and 1906, it employed eight of them. However, a long period of stability commenced in 1906 when Charles John Jacobs was appointed and he went on to hold the position for nearly twenty years. Jacobs was the most interesting of the ‘employees’ associated with the RIWGC, even if he did not achieve the same level of tournament golfing excellence as Rawlins or Toogood. Jacobs was central to the success of the RIWGC with the title of Custodian of the Course interchangeable with Golf Professional. Yet to consider that this was the limit of his abilities and influence is to seriously underestimate his entrepreneurial talents.[[82]](#endnote-82) Known as ‘CJ’, Jacobs was born in 1867, but a certain degree of intrigue surrounds his ancestry. He was brought up by his aunt, and some reports claim that he was actually the illegitimate son of the Duke of Connaught. He joined the army as a boy and served in Malta and Egypt before returning to the Island to be taught the game of golf at the RIWGC. Although he was never an outstanding player he excelled as a coach.[[83]](#endnote-83) When he became the club professional he balanced making and selling clubs to the members with teaching them the finer skills of the game. It was not only the club members who Jacobs taught, but also King Alfonso of Spain for which he was awarded the Bronze Medal of Her Imperial Highness Isabella the Catholic. Jacob was credited with a diverse range of inventions, which included the (disputed) claim that Jacobs was the first professional to make a hollow steel shafted club.[[84]](#endnote-84) In addition, he was credited with designing a ball cleaner and he was also thought to have introduced crazy golf into this country from America.[[85]](#endnote-85) Away from golf, Jacobs owned an amusement arcade in Shanklin, a campsite in St. Helens and the *Isle of Wight County Press* reported that in 1901 he organised the illuminated St. Helens carnival.[[86]](#endnote-86) He was a born organiser and was instrumental in forming football, rugby and boxing clubs in the village. Jacobs was also a talented caricature artist producing many fine drawings of the RIWGC members, which were then displayed on the walls of the clubhouse. His speciality was the Big Head and Small Body, which became so popular that he became a freelance caricaturist for such papers as *Vanity Fair* and the leading Golf Monthlies.[[87]](#endnote-87) When he died in 1942 his passing was equally as significant as that of any of the club’s members and the *Isle of Wight Country Press* described him as ‘one of the greatest personalities in the last half century of our Island’s history’.[[88]](#endnote-88)

*Female Golfers*

During this period golf was one of the few sports that could be enjoyed by both sexes.[[89]](#endnote-89) George has identified how golf was an agent for social change and that female involvement in golf was necessary for a club to succeed as a social institution.[[90]](#endnote-90) An Isle of Wight Ladies Golf Club (IWLGC) opened on 2 October 1893 with 26 members, a figure that was to increase to 90 by 1902.[[91]](#endnote-91)

Along with tennis, golf became one of the developing leisure pursuits for women in the 1880s and 1890s.[[92]](#endnote-92) The concept of ‘the modern woman’ was emerging but, as with men, the cost of playing golf meant that the female golfers came from the more affluent middle class who in addition to money had the necessary time to devote to the game.[[93]](#endnote-93) For the Edwardian woman there was a gradual liberation that allowed the pursuit of health and fitness through the participation in physical cultural activities but this was allied with a patriotic duty to be healthy mothers of the ‘imperial race’.[[94]](#endnote-94) There was, however, resistance to women joining the men on the course, some men thought that females were not competent enough to master the golf swing or strong enough to play on the same ‘long course’ as the men.[[95]](#endnote-95) Another apparent concern was that men did not want to be distracted by the women’s constant chattering which would prevent the men from being able to concentrate.[[96]](#endnote-96) Despite these forms of discrimination, females were not prevented from playing golf, with the first women’s clubs being formed at St. Andrews in 1867.[[97]](#endnote-97)

The female golfers on the Isle of Wight were not to be denied their chance to play golf but, in common with many other courses, it was considered that the RIWGC was too difficult for women and so, in 1893, a separate course of 9 holes, later increased to 18, was developed on reclaimed land, less than a mile away on the other side of Bembridge Harbour.[[98]](#endnote-98) The ‘Ladies’ quickly organised themselves and held their first competition on the ‘harbour links’ in early January 1894. The *Isle of Wight Observer* identifies that the weather for the event was very bad and prevented the women from doing justice to their game but despite this, nine braved the conditions and the winner was awarded a ‘beautiful ostrich feather fan’.[[99]](#endnote-99) It is interesting to note that although Queen Victoria’s youngest daughter Princess Beatrice was invited to become the club’s second captain, the Royal title was never bestowed on the Ladies Club.[[100]](#endnote-100) This separate course was crucial as there was a restriction on ladies playing on the RIWGC itself. Du Boulay confirms this when writing that ‘owing to the somewhat cramped nature of the Duver links and frequent crossings the RIWGC was never able to extend privileges to the ‘fair sex’ as it would have wished’.[[101]](#endnote-101) The First World War spelt the end of the separate IWLGC as the course closed at the outbreak of the war. The clubhouse was requisitioned and became the headquarters for the Royal Navy Air Service, which had a seaplane base on the point at Bembridge. However, the course never re-opened but it allowed the ladies to finally join and play on the RIWGC as a consequence.[[102]](#endnote-102)

**The RIWGC and cultural status**

Why did members join the RIWGC? In addition to its promise of mixing and networking with their peers, what other attractions did it hold? The foremost was that, within a year of foundation, it had the distinction of becoming the ‘Royal Isle of Wight Golf Club.’ Hill highlights that the social tone of a place might be enhanced by its golf course, and securing the cachet ‘Royal’ would have helped define the club in a very positive light and, by association, its members.[[103]](#endnote-103) Foster notes it was quite common that the leading clubs attracted influential players from other clubs and so, given the reputation and its cultural status, many locally prominent gentlemen would have become members at the RIWGC even if this had meant crossing the Solent.[[104]](#endnote-104) This may be understood as a form of ‘conspicuous consumption’ whereby it was highly respected and honourable for the gentleman of leisure to consume freely the best of all goods and services which naturally included membership of a ‘Royal’ golf club.[[105]](#endnote-105)

Of the 130 clubs that were in existence when the Isle of Wight Golf Club was founded in 1882 there were only nine clubs that had been granted official permission to include the prefix ‘Royal’ in their title and only three, Royal North Devon, Royal Liverpool and Royal Wimbledon, were English clubs. To receive the honour, a club invited a member of the Royal family to be a patron and they then apply through the Home Office for the ‘Royal’ title. Ultimately, the approval must be granted from the reigning monarch.[[106]](#endnote-106) The timescale for the Isle of Wight Golf Club to become a Royal Club was, at the time, the quickest for any club to receive this title. Formed in spring 1882 and then open for play in September of that year, the club were able to announce in August of 1883 that HRH the Prince of Wales (later to become Edward VII) had graciously agreed to become patron of the club.[[107]](#endnote-107) The second step in becoming a Royal Club was made when Jack Eaton requested this honour be granted to the club by writing to the Hon. Secretary of State. On 18 September 1883 he received a reply saying, ‘Her Majesty Queen Victoria has been graciously pleased to command that the club henceforth to be styled the Royal Isle of Wight Golf Club.’ Thus the RIWGC became only the tenth club to be granted this honour and the first in the south of England outside of London.

Birley argues that it was a typical national trait to take great pride in the status and the social kudos that one received from being a member of a golf club during the period of this study.[[108]](#endnote-108) The national status of the RIWGC was further enhanced through its prominent role in both the development of the Rules of Golf and inter-county golf matches. During the Victorian period sport was modernised and codified and it was generally exclusive sports clubs or national associations that oversaw this process. Exclusive clubs, such as the Marylebone Cricket Club and the Jockey Club, and later governing bodies like, the Football Association and the Amateur Rowing Association, would eventually bring order through the standardisation of the rules and the organisation of competition through the governance of their respective sports.[[109]](#endnote-109) For golf this was the Royal & Ancient Golf Club (R&A) at St. Andrews.

However, the R&A were not the definitive rule makers for all of golf. As with many sports, golf was initially played under different rules at different clubs reflecting the local customs and characteristics of the course. Alternatively in golf, the clubs often applied a modified version of the R&A rules. Indeed there was no R&A Rules Committee to oversee how the game was played uniformly until 1897.[[110]](#endnote-110) By the end of the nineteenth century there were two key areas of contention. Firstly the R&A rules were primarily for match play competition and not stroke play which had become the more popular form of golf.[[111]](#endnote-111) The second was that the R&A rules were peculiar to the course at St. Andrews with reference to its unique features such as the Swilcan Burn, the Eden and the Stationmaster’s Garden. There was a widespread view, increasingly so by the 1880s and 1890s, that it would be desirable to have a universal code of the rules of golf regardless of location or the form of play. As Lowerson suggests, the increasing numbers of new English clubs demanded the same competitive superstructures as other sports. Many became exasperated with the conservatism of the R&A. In the letters pages of publications such as *The Field* and the *Golfing Annual* there was a vigorous debate[[112]](#endnote-112) with one letter posing the pertinent question ‘Why should it (the R&A) not be to golf what the Marylebone (club) is to cricket?’[[113]](#endnote-113)

One of the main advocates of a universal code was the RIWGC’s Captain, Jack Eaton. Eaton had made a study of all the leading clubs’ rules and proposed a version of rules for the game of golf that were ‘To suit all greens alike.’ These were the rules that were played at the RIWGC. Eaton writing in 1888 in *The Field* said ‘I am glad to see the question of uniformity of practice which I have advocated for years, again being discussed’.[[114]](#endnote-114) The debate in *The Field* broached the possibility of a split between the ‘new’ English clubs and the more established Scottish clubs who generally supported and had adopted the R&A’s rules. Indeed Eaton wrote to suggest that ‘The English Association Rules’ be adopted by all English clubs and be led by the (Royal) St. George Club.[[115]](#endnote-115) Eaton then added ‘The rules of the R&A…have not been found entirely satisfactory by the principal clubs in England’.[[116]](#endnote-116) One of the key objectives of Eaton was to simplify the rules for the golfing public, particularly in relation to penalties. The R&A rule for the player who had lost their ball was a simple loss of hole. This reflected the match play form of golf but was not suitable for medal play. Eaton’s alternative was for a ball to be dropped as near as possible to where it was lost but with the penalty of two shots. Another option, as played at Royal North Devon and (Royal) St. Georges was the ‘stroke and distance’ penalty where a player returned to where they hit the previous shot from and added one penalty shot. Eaton disliked this as it could disturb the players behind, leading to slow play. Another issue was the penalty incurred after hitting a ball into casual hazards such as water, animal holes or scrapes. Eaton obviously disapproved of the lenient penalty of only one shot for lifting out of these hazards and wanted to see the player lose two strokes thus encouraging golfers to actually learn how to play out of these hazards ‘to protect the game’. He also thought that it would prevent the irritating disputes as to whether the water is casual or how the holes and scrapes were made.[[117]](#endnote-117) These disputes were obviously in Eaton’s view, not very ‘gentlemanly’ and not in keeping with his ideas of how golf should be played by ‘proper players’ from respectable clubs.[[118]](#endnote-118)

Unlike other correspondents in the *Field*, who had written under a pseudonym, Eaton was one of the first to identify himself and by association, his club, through his advocacy of the rules played at the RIWGC.[[119]](#endnote-119) Unfortunately, Eaton died in 1888 at the height of this debate having caught a chill during the winter of 1887/88 that he compounded by playing golf at the RIWGC and died on the steps of the Royal Victoria Yacht Club in Sept 1888, aged 48.[[120]](#endnote-120) He was therefore not able to continue to lobby for the wholesale adoption of the RIWGC version. There is consequently no evidence to suggest that the RIWGC version of the rules had any specific influence on the eventual creation of a universal set of rules when issued by the newly created R&A Rules of Golf Committee in 1899.[[121]](#endnote-121) Neither of the penalty proposals highlighted were adopted, but the influence of Eaton and by association, the RIWGC, in the drive to produce a universal set of rules and challenge the R&A as the chief arbiter and authority on golfing rules is clear. For the members of the RIWGC at the time, it would have added some lustre being part of a club that had featured prominently in this national debate.

Another achievement of the RIWGC was the club hosting the first ever inter-county golf match when Yorkshire travelled to Bembridge (RIWGC) to play Hampshire in 1895. A brief report of the match played on 8 October 1895 is recorded in the minutes of the Hampshire Golf Union together with the result of the match, a three-hole win by Hampshire.[[122]](#endnote-122) A more detailed report of the match in the *Isle of Wight Observer* records that the result of the match was decided by the aggregate number of holes won by the players in all the matches played rather than today’s method where it is the number of matches won. Indeed if today’s method had been adopted in 1895 Yorkshire would have been the victors four to two, but due to a one sided victory by Duncan the champion of Hampshire over Woodhead, the Yorkshire champion, by 13 holes, it significantly skewed the result in Hampshire’s favour.[[123]](#endnote-123) This match was very farsighted, as most County Golf Unions were not formed until the 1920s with the first official County Golf championships being held in 1926 following the formation of the English Golf Union in 1924.[[124]](#endnote-124)

**Conclusion**

The RIWGC was certainly a classic model of the late Victorian boom in golf club development, but one that made the most of a number of its advantages in terms of its natural resources, impeccable timing, some very strong personalities and a series of fortunate co-incidences. The land on the Duver especially was a natural haven for golf. However, it might never had happened if Jack Eaton had not been posted to the Island and thus discovered the Duver. It was then Eaton’s drive and determination to ensure the foundation and development of the club which made subsequent achievements possible. Good timing was also on the side of the RIWGC with the improved transport connections combined with the building of the Spithead Hotel that provided the club with its first headquarters and was also a quality hotel for the numerous visiting golfers to stay.

Golf offered the expanding middle classes, who were able to benefit from rising incomes and greater amounts of leisure time, a moral and a physical attraction. The analysis of the RIWGC’s membership reveals that it mirrored similar socio-economic patterns associated with golf clubs of the period including a prominent ladies section but with all members portraying strong amateur values and an eagerness to see their social status enhanced through association with this fashionable sport. This association also helped mark the boundary between the board middle classes and their perceived inferiors. A greater preoccupation with health and physical endeavours also saw attitudes challenged and influenced by new theories of evaluation balancing the more tradition ideas of Christianity and imperial duty, such as the patriotic duty of the ‘race mother’, particularly in the aftermath of the Boer War. There was however, some evidence of wider community representation at the RIWGC with the acceptance of ‘outsiders’ to complement the club members and act as a buffer to the well-articulated class snobbery. This included the employment of skilled professionals and the involvement of young boys as caddies to enable the privileged golfers to participate more proficiently and more comfortably in the game. Additionally even elements from the lower middle classes through the creation of the artisan section were permitted to play on the course albeit at restricted times and under certain conditions.

Finally the RIWGC enjoyed a pre-eminence amongst the other English golf clubs, at a time when there was a great golfing boom. It was mainly through the endeavours of Eaton, that it played a significant and disproportionally large role in the development of the game. In particular, uniformity in the rules, which certainly made it a highly desirable club to be associated with in the late Victorian and Edwardian age. Despite this early prominence, the lack of available land for the club to expand and compete with its competitors together with a combination of social, economic, recreational and technological developments that altered the national sporting landscape of Britain after World War Two forced the RIWGC to close in 1961 when these challenges became insurmountable for the club.

**Notes.**

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21. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort*, 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
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113. *The Field*, 13 March 1886 in *The Golfing Annual 1887-88*, 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
114. *The Field,* 28 January 1888 in *The Golfing Annual 1887-88*, 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
115. *Ibid*, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
116. *The Field*, 4 February 1888, in *The Golfing Annual 1887-88*, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
117. The Rules of Golf define Casual Water as any temporary accumulation of water on the course

     that is not in a water hazard. Holes and scrapes are holes made by a burrowing animal that makes a hole for habitation or shelter, such as a rabbit. [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
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