

The Relationship between Craigend and Troon Golf Club

By Douglas McCreath, Club Historian



Craigend Farm, 1880s

Whilst many golf clubs established earlier in the 19th century originated on 'Common Land', Troon Golf Club's genesis was on a working farm. There had been no significant settlement locally - records from 1800 show that fewer than 200 people were scattered around scrubby land north of the rocky peninsular jutting out to sea. The concept of Common Land as known in places like St Andrews, Prestwick, Bruntsfield, and Glasgow didn't exist here in 1800, but by 1878 (population now c2,500) rudimentary golf was being played over Troon's bents and beaches. The question was, in the absence of common ground, where could a site for a golf course be found?

Though it was probably established some years earlier, the first appearance of Craigend Farm on a map seems to be in 1804, just before Colonel Fullarton sold his lands - including the farm - to the Marquis of Titchfield (who became 4th Duke of Portland). The 1837 edition of 'Statistical Account of Scotland' mentions that the Duke spent a considerable amount of money improving the lands he had purchased from Fullarton, citing in particular the introduction of drainage in 1826, which may well explain the origin of the Gyaws Burn. This familiar feature appears on today's scorecards - the 3rd hole on the Old Course ('Gyaws'), and the 12th on Portland ('Goat') both of which cross the burn. In Old Scots language these two names 'Gaws' and 'Gote' meant the same thing, "a drainage furrow, ditch or channel".

The Briggs family were the last tenants to occupy Craigend Farm. William and Jane Briggs, both from the Dumfries area, arrived with their four children in 1867. They were well experienced in agriculture coming from farming stock and having also spent several years farming in Cork in Ireland. Three more children were born at Craigend Farm before Janet (eldest daughter) died aged 18 in 1884, tragically followed by the death of William (Jane's husband) the next year at the age of 58. The lands of Craigend were divided into two distinct parts, separated by a turf dyke to keep out cattle. The well drained fields between the dyke and the railway were used for crop production and the seaward rough grazings (or 'waste areas' as they were known in the 19th century) were used for sheep, cattle and horses. Mr Briggs was a respected livestock farmer and won prizes for his bullocks at the Ayr Show.

It was on this rough grazing land that Troon Golf Club planted its roots in 1878. Agreement had been reached between Mr James Dickie and Mr Frederick Turner, land agent for the 5th Duke of Portland, that golf would be permitted on these acres in return for a rent to be paid to Mr Briggs. The arrangement was on an annual basis only and the Club had to wait 17 years until 1895 before obtaining its first lease. The Briggs retained grazing rights for their livestock during this whole period meaning golfers had to share their course with cattle, sheep

and horses - and contend with damage to greens caused by the wandering animals. Despite regular appeals from the Club for a change in this situation, the Duke's Factor stood firm - the agreement with the Briggs would be honoured. During lengthy negotiations with the Duke of Portland in 1885/6 when the Golf Club was seeking his permission to build a new stone Clubhouse the Duke firmly resisted calls for a lease - letting arrangements between the Club and the Briggs would remain in place.

Overall however good co-operation was maintained between the Club and the Briggs, the latter occasionally lending sheep, fed by turnips purchased by the Club, to graze and fertilise areas of the course. One section in particular required much attention - the bleak wilderness area at the southern end where, threading between large sand dunes, six new holes had been laid out in 1883. In 1889 Jane Briggs' son, Thomas, married Robina Morrison, sister-in-law of William Fleming, Club Master of Troon Golf Club. The marriage was conducted in the Clubhouse, though no Members were present and the occasion is not Minuted! In 1895 Jane Briggs' two sons, James and George, were granted the privilege of playing the courses 'at the pleasure of the Committee' and in 1901 James was elected a Resident Privileged Member of Troon Golf Club. Her grandson, William, was also a keen golfer and later joined Portland Golf Club.

Although we have no record of the Briggs' tenancy agreements with two successive Dukes of Portland, it is clear that some form of contract was still in place in 1895 when Troon Golf Club secured the lease on a tract of land near the railway from the 6th Duke, this forming the first 18 hole New Relief Course - later to become the Portland Course. Twelve years earlier the Duke had published a Feuing Plan for Troon setting out his intentions to expand housing out to Craigend Farm. These plans were altered over time and the farm buildings were eventually demolished in 1900. The agreements reached in 1895 (revised in 1887) between the Duke, Troon Golf Club and Mrs Briggs included the removal of cattle and horses from the old and new golf courses thus bringing to an end the practice of mixed farming at Craigend. A generous compensatory cash settlement for Mrs Briggs was agreed (additionally she would for a short period retain occupancy of two small fields for keeping sheep) and a new era of golf at the Club began. Portland Golf Club, founded in 1894, consisted of mostly local gentlemen who would play over the New Relief Course. In 1897 a new 9 hole Ladies Course was constructed beside it which was then extended to 18 holes by 1901 when more land was made available.

The last entry in the Minutes relating to Jane Briggs is on 9th October 1897 when she requested that water be laid on for sheep in the 'field in the centre of the Relief and Ladies Courses'. Her daughter, Henrietta, married a Dumfriesshire farmer at Craigend Farm in December 1897 and moved to Dumfries. Jane also appears to have moved to Dumfries with her son George, spending the rest of her life not far from where she and William had grown up. Three of her surviving sons lived in Troon and another posted at Dunbar in the Army.

In 1921 Troon Golf Club purchased for £5,000 all the fields once comprising the Craigend Farm estate from the 6th Duke of Portland. It is fitting that today we celebrate the memory of Craigend's heritage in names found on our golf courses and upstairs in Royal Troon's Clubhouse.