



STORY BEHIND THE PIC

SIR THOMAS BOWATER • SHIRLEY PARK GOLF CLUB, CROYDON, SURREY • JULY 18TH, 1914

IT HAS BEEN COMMON PRACTICE since time immemorial for the opening tee shot at a brand new golf course to be played by a local dignitary. There are no records in the history books, but it's highly likely that Mary Queen of Scots herself probably hit a gentle fade off the first to kick things off at the Home of Golf back in the day, while it's also an odds-on bet that our modern day golfing royal, the Grand Middle-Aged Duke of York, has received more than his fair few invitations to do the honours at countless clubs across the Home Counties.

There's something about the occasion that demands more than the club captain, the architect, or even a well-known professional, to play the first official shot. Of course, the hole will have been played before as part of the design process, but it's the shot that is witnessed by the entire membership, and in front of all the cameras, that really counts.

And while it's important to invite a suitably high-ranking candidate to carry out the onerous duty, it's perhaps also wise to consider whether they can actually play the game. Having Megan Markle cut the ribbon at a new hospital might be a massive coup, but would she be the right person to have an air shot in front of the paps?

That was clearly uppermost in the minds of the committee at Shirley Park Golf Club when they came to its official opening in 1914. Coming as it did, just two weeks before outbreak of World War I, the club did well to open the course at all, but it was something of a coup to get the then Lord Mayor of London, Sir Thomas Vansittart Bowater, to strike the first blow over the course. As well as



being mayor, he was also an MP for the City of London – a dual role that is no longer permitted.

As you may be able to tell from the photograph, Sir Thomas was a fine figure of a gentleman, but he clearly hadn't been paying attention during his golf lessons on the finer points of weight transference during the phases of the downswing. Perhaps he was an early adopter of the 'stack and tilt' style of swing, but with more tilting than stacking. Still, as he holds the pose, he looks like he's admiring a fine strike down the middle.

A few minutes later, the real business of the day got under way with a match between former Open champions JH Taylor and Sandy Herd, accompanied by the club's first professional, Tom Trapp. Taylor scooted round the 18-hole course in just 73, beating Herd by four strokes. Not a bad effort on a new layout with hickory clubs.

The course was the handiwork of the go-to architects of the day, Tom Simpson and Herbert Fowler, who succeeded in transforming 130 acres of the Shirley Park Estate into a stunning parkland layout that is still enjoyed as it was by members today, barring three new holes on land behind the fifth green.

The club celebrated its centenary in 2014, and there was an attempt made to invite the then Lord Mayor, Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, to recreate Bowater's heroics on the first tee. Unfortunately – or perhaps thankfully – Lord Wiff Waff had other important matters to attend to that day, and the world was spared the sight of the scruffy-haired loon shanking one into the pro shop. **GN**

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