

Dunblane – Victorian hotbed of sport

I was moved to put this talk together as there is a wealth of sporting history in Dunblane, which can be traced back for hundreds of years, and much of it is relatively unknown.

Today, of course, Dunblane has a great sporting hall of fame. One immediately thinks of Andy and Jamie Murray, who have brought considerable prestige to the town, but there are many other sporting giants among us. To name just a few: Fiona Brown and Frankie Brown should be part of the Scotland women's football squad at the World Cup this summer; Louise Martin (made a Dame in the recent honours list) is president of the Commonwealth Games Federation; Elaine Hopley rowed across the Atlantic in record time; and Callum Davidson, now coaching, played for Scotland at football, having also represented Scotland at golf and tennis as a boy. I could easily add to that list.

For those ordinary mortals living here, we are well provided for, with tennis and squad at the sports club, a golf course, bowling green, an all-weather pitch at the High School, not to mention all sorts of recreational facilities, from the skateboard park in the Laigh Hills to the leisure spa in the Hydro. It sounds good, but I'm going to talk about a time when sport was even more of an integral part of life here.

Dunblane offered an extraordinary range of sporting opportunities by the end of the 19th century. Despite the town population being less than a third of what it is now, there were several curling clubs, and clubs for bowling, football, golf, cricket, quoiting, cycling and angling. There were annual sports meetings each summer, shooting competitions for the Volunteers, and Dunblane Hydro boasted a tennis court and a croquet lawn.

I'm going to give a quick tour around those sporting activities, attempt to explain why Dunblane had such a vibrant athletic culture, and I'll reveal that some of our Victorian sporting heritage is still with us, even though you may not have noticed it.

The nineteenth century saw an explosion in sporting activity all across the country, for a variety of reasons. The obvious one was the introduction of leisure time, as the working classes moved from a six day working week with leisure activity banned on Sundays, to shorter hours and the half day Saturday.

There were other factors, too, where Dunblane managed to tick all the right boxes:

The railways arrived in the 1840s, which meant people could easily travel outside their own communities.

The landscape is benign, with a mix of gentle slopes, flat ground and running water.

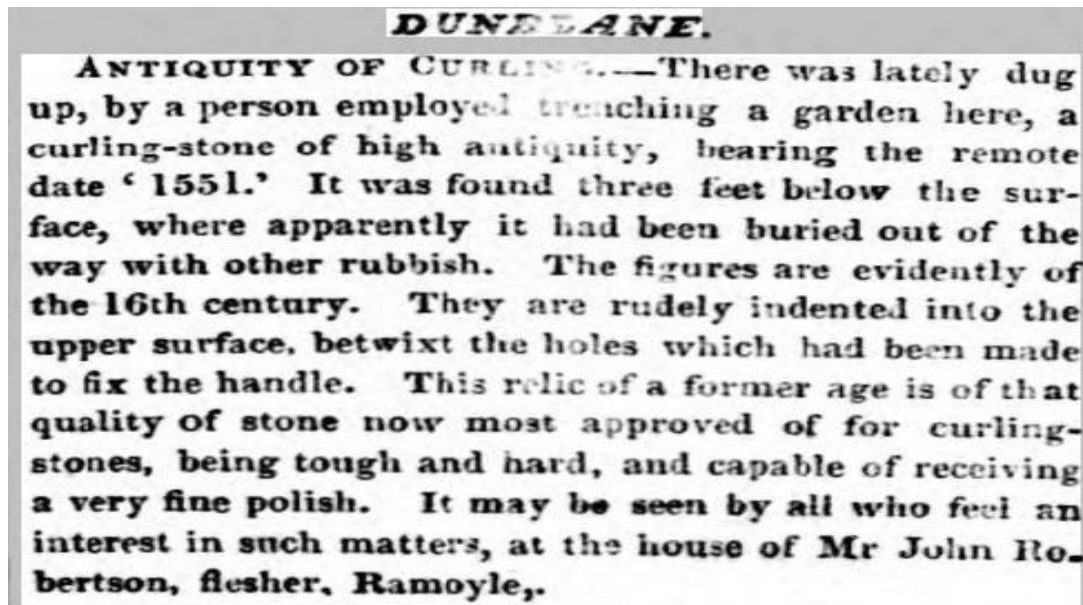
The population was big enough to provide teams, but small enough to retain a strong community feel. Growing prosperity meant people had the wherewithal to pay club subscriptions, buy equipment, and socialise after the game. Although it was male-dominated for much of the century, by the 1890s sport started to open up to women, as they were first accepted as golfers and curlers.

And perhaps most importantly for Dunblane, sport attracted patronage from the landed classes. This is a theme which crops up time and time again: the owners of Kippenross, Kippendavie and Cromlix estates provided land for games to take place, donated prizes, medals and trophies, they even wiped out debts. Patronage is a subject all in itself so I won't go into too much detail today, but today's golf course, tennis club and bowling club all owe their land to benevolent landowners,

and recreational space such as the Laigh Hills, Ochloch Park and very recently Holmehill have all been donated to this community by philanthropic benefactors. It is a fine local tradition.

Dunblane's sporting story actually goes back to medieval times. Mass games of football were played on the Laigh Hills on public holidays such as Hansel Monday, but it was chaotic and somewhat brutal. The football game had one rule: that there were no rules.

Medieval sport has few meaningful records but one that does have a long documented history, the first organised sport I'm going to talk about, is curling.



(Perthshire Advertiser, 20 November 1834)

In fact, one of the world's oldest curling stones was found here in 1834 in Ramoyle, while digging a ditch in the garden of Thomas Henderson's house, called New Orleans Cottage. It was inscribed with a date, 1551, and went on display in the local butcher's. Unfortunately it seems to have disappeared since then. Where is it now?

It is not quite the world's oldest stone, as another one dated forty years earlier, 1511, is in the Stirling Smith Museum. Curling at that time was played using rounded stones from the riverbed, called loofies, with no handles but grooves for fingers and thumbs to grip.

That early game was played on frozen water wherever it could be found. But the landscape changed as agricultural land was drained, meaning that by the start of the 19th century there were far fewer areas of standing water which would freeze in winter.

The solution was to create artificial curling rinks: flood a flat piece of ground with water and let it freeze. The earliest rinks were just compressed earth, later on they were lined with clay or tarmac. A good artificial rink needed to be north facing and shaded so as to avoid direct sunlight which might melt the ice. Then in cold weather it could be flooded with water, and just a thin coating would suffice, perhaps half an inch, which would quickly freeze.

Preparing, levelling and maintaining the ground to create a rink cost money, so curlers clubbed together to raise the necessary funds, and that was how the earliest clubs were formed, on the subscription model.

Dunblane Curling Club was founded by 24 members in 1816, and although not the oldest club in Perthshire – that was probably Doune, founded in 1732 – it is certainly the oldest sporting

organisation in Dunblane today. It was a founding member of the Royal Caledonian Curling Club in 1838 and recently celebrated its bicentenary.

Curling became so popular that other clubs were formed in the town. Dunblane Thistle (founded 1858) were great rivals to Dunblane and only merged quite recently, while the Keir club was founded in 1895 and is still going strong. There was also Sheriffmuir (1850s), absorbed into Dunblane in 1869, and Kinbuck (1879), disbanded about 1910.

In 1820 the Dunblane men wrote down a set of seven rules, more concerned with behaviour than sport. The admission fee was set at 2s 6d, of which a shilling went 'to the drinking bowl' as the curlers of that era insisted on drinking a new member's health at his own expense - but woe betide any member who appeared on the rink intoxicated as that meant instant expulsion. When a member came to the ice he must have his 'besom neatly tied' – that's his broom. And the last rule called for a fine of one penny for each oath pronounced by a member while engaged in curling – with the fine doubled for each new offence.

The club has a fine collection of trophies and medals: in 1840, Dr Robert Douglas, who was long President and father of the club, presented a silver medal to be played for annually, and many other medals were presented over the years, for example in the 1850s Mrs Stirling of Kippenross gave a medal for the annual match between bachelors and married, and laid on refreshments afterwards – a popular patroness, as you can imagine.

So, who were the curlers?

178—DUNBLANE (PERTHSHIRE).

Colonel STIRLING, Patron.
Mrs STIRLING, Patroness.

ARCHIBALD STIRLING, President.

MONTGOMERY PATERSON, R. CAMERON, R. H. CHRISTIE, and
Rev. J. E. C. COLQUHOUN, Vice-Presidents.

J. W. BARTY and JAS. WATT, Representative Members.

Rev. Canon HENRY MALCOLM, Chaplain.

ROBERT WADDELL, Treasurer and Secretary.

Committee or Council of Management.

John Sinclair	James Watt	A. H. Anderson
Robert Finlayson	James Gray	James Lennox
J. B. Robertson	Peter Williamson	

Honorary Members.

John Stirling, Holmhill	John Wallace, Glassingall
Sir J. Campbell, Kilbryde	J. C. Stirling, America
Archd. Russell, Kilbryde	W. R. Stirling, America
Sir J. Stirling Maxwell, Pollok	J. L. S. Gavin, S. Africa

Ordinary Members.

Regular.

R. H. Christie	A. H. Anderson	James Lennox	Thos. Saddler
R. Cameron	R. Finlayson	Wm. Ross	R. M. Christie
J. W. Barty	Hugh Marshall	J. B. Robertson	William Jack
Col. Stirling	Charles Angus	James Gray	Rev. J. Far-
James M'Laren	Robert Waddell	James Watt	quhar
John Stirling	P. Williamson	Dan. Colquhoun	James Cramb
Wal. Buchanan	John Sinclair	A. Buchanan	Charles Willox
L. Ritchie	J. M'Ewen	Wm. M'Ewen	Jas. Stirling

Occasional.

Rev. Canon	W. B. Bruce	Jas. Guthrie	J. Anderson
Malcolm	Rev. J. E. C.	Jas. Keenan	Arch. Stirling
James Dall	Colquhoun	D. T. Reid	G. Willison
Andw. Gray	Rev. David	Wm. Thomson	R. Lennox
B. M'Lauchlan	Morrison	T. D. W.	Peter M'Laren
W. Alexander	Rev. A. Ritchie	Thomson	P. MacGregor
M. Finlayson	J. Cunningham	M. Paterson	C. M. Stewart
John Lang	R. Henderson	Major M'Nee	Arch. Don

179—DUNBLANE THISTLE (PERTHSHIRE).

The Hon. Captain DRUMMOND, Patron.

The Hon. Mrs DRUMMOND, Patroness.

JOHN CRAMB, sen., President.

DAVID BAYNE, Vice-President.

JAMES M'FARLANE, Representative Member.

PETER BRUCE, Treasurer.

JOHN CRAMB, jun., Secretary.

Committee or Council of Management.

William Angus David Cameron Peter Bruce A. Hepburn
William White James M'Farlane W. M'Guire J. Keenan

Honorary Members.

Robert M'Lellan Alexander Gordon

Ordinary Members.

Regular.

Jas. M'Farlane David Cameron P. Carnichael Wm. M'Dougal
William Angus Alex. White James Keenan Peter M'Laren
William White Wm. MacGuire Alex. Hunter Henry Stirling
Peter Bruce James M'Caull Alex. M'Caull David Bayne, j.
John Cramb David Bayne And. Hepburn Arch. White
John Cramb, j. Alex. Cameron John Hughes Alex. Reid

Occasional.

James Watt Jas. Gray William Bruce John Graham
Dun. M'Kenzie Thos. Taylor Michael Bruce Allan Stewart
Edward Boyle Jas. Wilson Wm. Peattie George Maule
John Wilson David Hally Jas. Jardin Geo. Wilson
W. Manuel A. Robertson Robt. Eadie R. Cameron
M. M'Donald John Robertson

These membership lists are from the RCCC Annual in 1892, showing about 150 active curlers in just these two clubs. The population of Dunblane then was just over 2000, so perhaps one in five adult males were active curlers. And if you add to that all the footballers, bowlers, golfers and cyclists, it is perfectly reasonable to infer that over half of the male population of Dunblane belonged to a sports club of some kind.

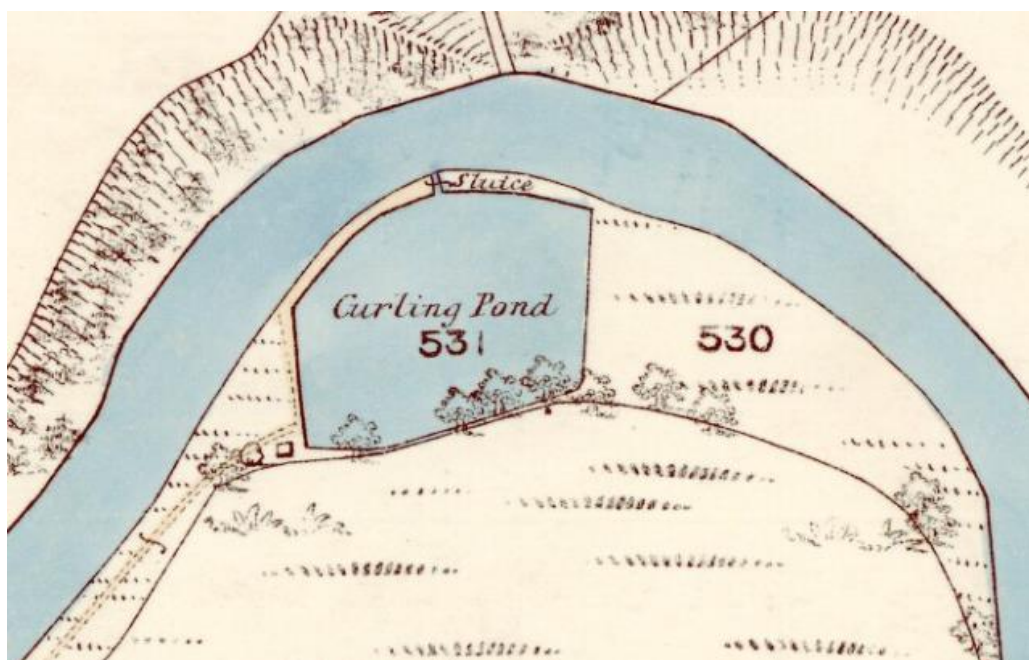
And the curlers were good. Dunblane regularly took part with distinction in the Grand Match – that's the national mass contest held at places like Carsebreck, Lake of Menteith or Loch Leven.



Dunblane's Bob Christie (pictured), a character who you will be hearing more about later on, represented Scotland at curling, having already made his mark in football and golf.

Where did they curl? The first pond was at Barbush Farm, but it soon turned out to be unsuitable and there were eventually five curling ponds in Dunblane. Only one of them is still there, the pond at Ochloch Park. The one up the hill at Pischah is now covered in housing and the one at Auchinlay Farm has reverted to grass.

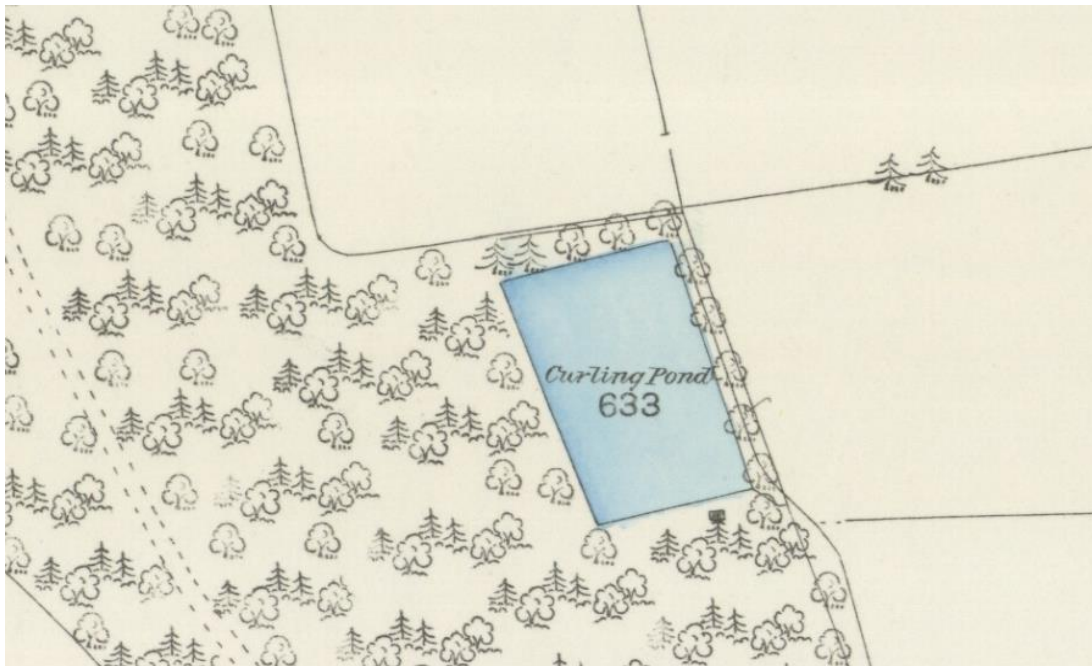
I think you will find the other two interesting as they are still visible if you know where to look.



A pond at the Laigh Hills was laid out in the 1830s on a bend of the river, and is clearly marked on maps of the era. In a close-up of the pond, you can see it had a sluice gate to let out the water when it melted, and a small building which served as a clubhouse and store room for the heavy curling stones. The pond was finally abandoned after the First World War.



What may surprise you is that the pond is still there, if you know where to look. The club house is completely overgrown, but the four stone walls are clearly visible, while the pond itself retains its raised banks and is now a marshy reed bed. It would be a great project for an archaeological dig! Who knows what you might find.



As for the pond at Dykedale, again it shows up on maps. This is a close-up, showing that it was enclosed by trees to provide shade, and a little mark appears to indicate another clubhouse or store room. What is not clear is where they got their water from – there is no stream marked nearby.



Dykedale pond was abandoned long ago but this aerial photo shows that now, although the landscape has changed considerably, the site of the pond is still discernible as the trees have not grown back. Perhaps another archaeological project!

These outdoor ponds proved sufficient for most curlers in Scotland until the gradual rise in temperatures in the 20th century restricted the number of occasions when outdoor curling could be enjoyed in winter. The opening of the Stirling Ice Rink in 1980 virtually ended outdoor curling, and its successor at the Peak is now the home of the Dunblane and Keir clubs.



And a final reminder of our curling past is embedded in the walls of the Tappit Hen pub, these two ancient curling stones, one of them with the original owner's initials carved on the top.



Moving on, a close cousin of curling is bowling, and Dunblane Bowling Club claims a date of formation of 1822. This date is actually quite hard to substantiate, and there is little firm evidence to support it. Having said that, it is not impossible as bowling was played throughout Scotland at the time, and there is a cryptic reference in the Stirling Observer to a bowling green here in 1850.

DUNBLANE.—PROPOSED NEW BOWLING GREEN AND CLUB.—There is some prospect of a new bowling green and bowling club being formed here. A meeting of subscribers was held on Monday night in the Stirling Arms Hotel, when it was found that a sum of upwards of £50 had been obtained. Several eligible sites for a green were mentioned,

DUNBLANE.—A number of subscribers to a proposed bowling green met in the Stirling Arms Hotel, on the evening of Friday last, and resolved to take steps for making it at once. We understand that the piece of ground behind the Parish School has been secured.

(Perthshire Advertiser, 29 February 1872 & 16 May 1872)

However, there were newspaper reports in the 1860s bemoaning the lack of a bowling green in Dunblane, and the first concrete evidence of a club dates from 1872 when there was a founding meeting in the Stirling Arms Hotel, where subscribers put in £50 to pay for a new green.

Then the present bowling club was created in 1886, largely thanks to Colonel Stirling of Kippendavie who donated the land and paid for the green to be laid out. Its first president was Robert H Christie, the head teacher at the parish school in the Braeport, whose sons Bob and Alex were leading Dunblane sportsmen.



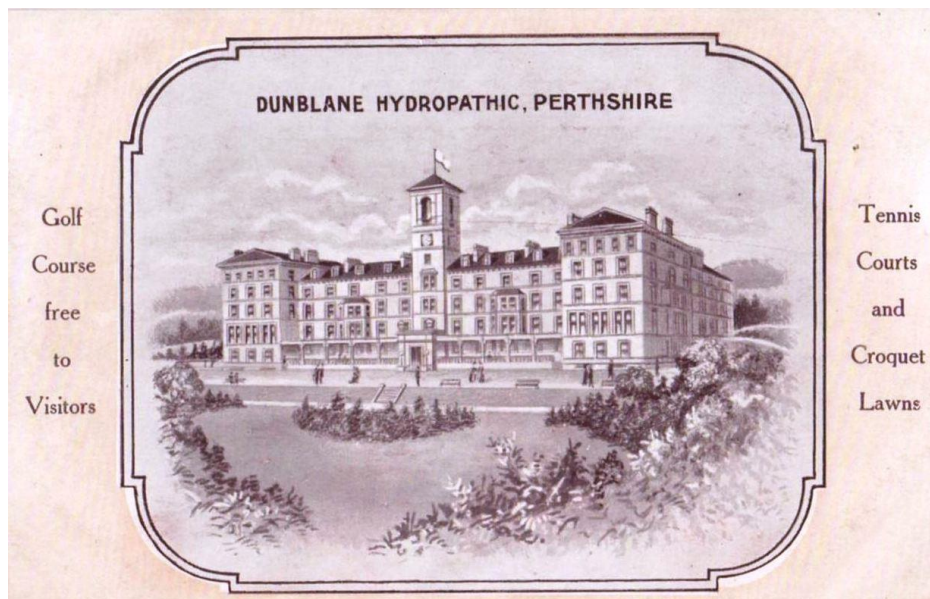
The original green was half the size, and what you see now at Dunblane Bowling Club is the result of a major expansion in 1921.



MR PETER M'LAREN, CHAMPION
BOWLER

BOWLER.
There has just died in the Victoria Infirmary, Glasgow, from appendicitis, Mr Peter M'Laren, cattle dealer, Dunblane, a very well-known bowler. Since the local bowling green was opened in 1886, "Peter" carried off the championship of the Dunblane Club no fewer than 19 times—a record for Scotland. The performance is all the more remarkable when it is considered that the green has only been open for 29 years, and that he was in his 56th year when he won the championship for the 19th time this year in September last. In his younger days he took part in many open competitions, winning numerous prizes, and on at least two occasions he carried off the premier prize in competitions open to Scotland. Three years ago he assisted the club to win the Perthshire and West Perthshire Bowling Trophies, and in the Scottish rink ties he on more than one occasion helped to carry the club rink to the final stage. His skill was not solely confined to bowling, as he was a fine all-round sportsman. He was in his younger days a fine footballer, and played in many a stirring game for the local club, "The Heather"—the Perthshire champions. He was also a first class gun and rifle shot, a good billiard player, and a crack curler, being a skip in the Thistle Club, and his prowess on the ice was a reflex of his skill on the bowling green. "Peter" was gifted with a fine sense of humour, and his presence at local outdoor sports, and particularly on the local bowling green, will be sadly missed. He was a bachelor, 56 years of age, and a son of the late John M'Laren, butcher and farmer, The Haining and Craigton Farms, Dunblane.

One of the great bowling characters was Peter McLaren, who won Dunblane's inaugural club championship in 1886 and went on to lift the title no less than 19 times in 29 years before his early death from appendicitis – which prompted this obituary in the Stirling Observer. It reveals he also skipped for Dunblane Thistle curling club, and played football for Dunblane FC.



A considerable boost to Dunblane sport came through the efforts of the Hydropathic, in the years after it opened in 1878. The hotel was keen to provide a range of activities for its guests and on site there were tennis courts and a croquet green. But its biggest contribution was to oversee the creation of Dunblane's first golf course in 1892.

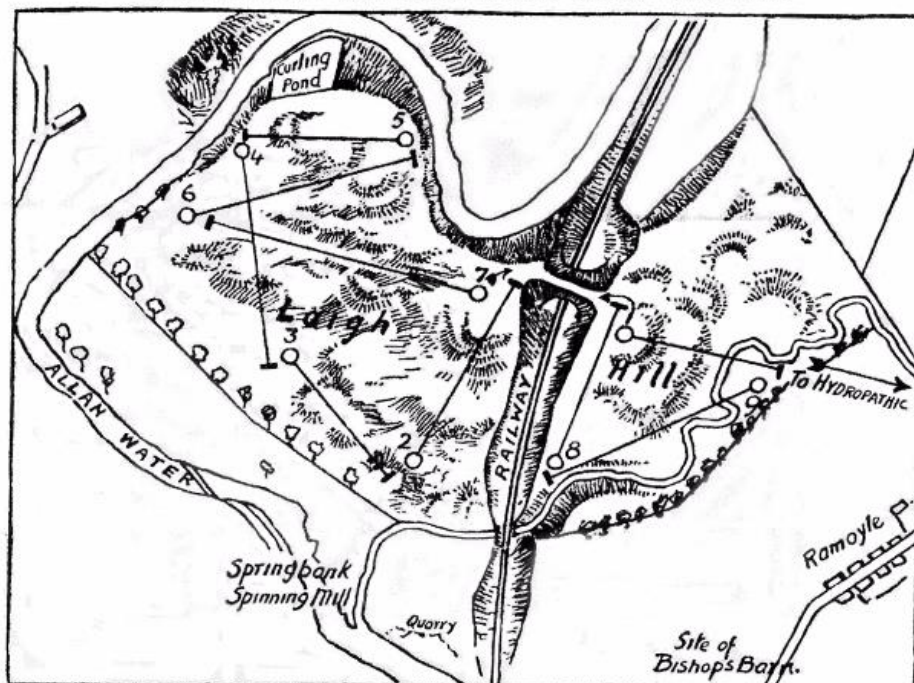
OPENING OF A COURSE AT DUNBLANE.

In splendid weather, and in presence of a large gathering of local ladies and gentlemen and of visitors, the golf course on the Laighills at Dunblane, in connection with Mr Philp's Hydropathic, was opened on Saturday forenoon by Mr Leslie M. Balfour, W.S., Edinburgh, who hit off the first ball in a single against Mr Alexander Stuart, the Unionist candidate for one of the Glasgow divisions. The course is delightfully situated on the site of what is believed to have been an old British camp, which may have done much to hinder the famous march of Agricola upon the Highlands. It lies within ten minutes' walk of Dunblane, and commands a fine prospect. The ground has been leased from the Hon. Captain Drummond of Cromlix. There are nine holes in it, laid down by Mr Henderson, manager of the Hydropathic, on sites afterwards approved of by the veteran Tom Morris, who, it may be mentioned, along with Ben Sayers, of North Berwick, played a foursome with the amateurs on Saturday. The greens nearly all lie in hollows, and have been turfed. There are plenty of hazards. The course is intersected by the railway, and, after holing out on one side, the golfers walk across the metals by a bridge, and come to the second tee. In connection with the course a Club, known as the Dunblane Golf Club, and having on its roll of membership most of the gentlemen resident in the locality, has been started. In the foursome on Saturday Messrs Balfour and Stuart played a magnificent game, and registered a score which local players will find it difficult to beat. Their figures were :—

(Dundee Advertiser, 4 April 1892)

The golf course was laid out by the legendary Old Tom Morris, with nine holes over the Laigh Hills, on both sides of the railway line.

DUNBLANE HYDROPATHIC GOLF COURSE.



The ground was initially leased from Captain Drummond of Cromlix, but as you may know the Laigh Hills were purchased in their entirety in 1909 for the town by a former resident, Robert Martin of New York.



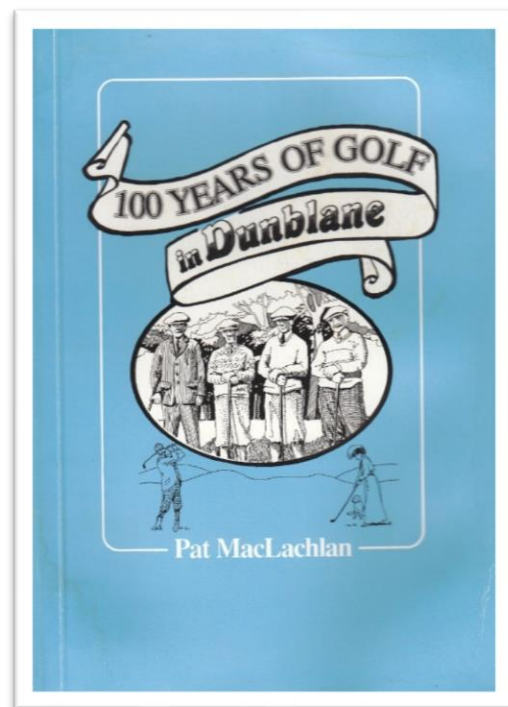
The course was a huge success. Here you can see a picture of the old clubhouse, and significantly this picture includes a couple of women, as golf was the first sport locally to allow women to take part.



This picture gives a better impression of the layout of the clubhouse and the first tee, with the little footbridge over the Scouring Burn.



In some respects, the landscape has changed little since, although it is now very overgrown. The footbridge over the burn is still there (just!), albeit concrete rather than wood.



The golf club thrived at this site for over 30 years, and an example of that prosperity is this gold medal from 1906. Then after the First World War the growing popularity of golf meant there was a need for a full size 18 hole course. The present day Dunblane New Golf Club opened in 1923 – so they have a centenary fast approaching – on Kippenross Estate, after agreeing terms with Colonel Stirling. You can read the story of Dunblane golf in Pat MacLachlan's excellent history. It's now out of print but it is in the Library.

I'm now going to move quickly through some of the other sports which featured in Victorian Dunblane, starting with cricket.

CRICKET.—BRIDGE OF ALLAN v. DUNBLANE.—A match between the clubs of the above places came off at Westerton, on Saturday last, and ended in the defeat of the Dunblane players. The score was—Dunblane, 74; Bridge of Allan, 79, with four wickets to go down.

Stirling Observer, 20 Sept 1855

DUNBLANE.

CRICKET.—The lovers of this manly game have been bestirring themselves here. A meeting of cricketers was held a few days ago, at which an election of office-bearers for the season took place. The unsuitability of the ground on which cricket was last year played gave rise to some discussion, and a committee was appointed to look after more suitable ground, and it is gratifying to learn that they have been successful in obtaining a park from Mr Stirling, of Kippendavie. From the success which attended this young club last year, notwithstanding the disadvantages under which it laboured, now that they have obtained better ground, and the club generally better organized, a brilliant cricketing season may be expected.

Stirling Observer, 19 April 1866

Cricket first made an appearance in the 1850s, and then a club was formed in 1866. With the use of a park granted by John Stirling of Kippendavie, they had every opportunity of thriving, but they seem to have petered out within a decade. There was a brief revival on the Cow Park at the turn of the century, but the construction of the New Road took away their ground and, as far as I know, there hasn't been a proper cricket club here for over 100 years.

FALKIRK.

Quoiting.—Such has now become the celebrity of the players of this town, that, after beating all the clubs within the immediate vicinity, it is a point of extreme anxiety with the different athletes at throwing the disc, all over the country, to have a shy with the men of Falkirk, and on Monday week the usual result proved their prowess. The Dunblane club had challenged them for a trial of skill, and the memorable field of Bannockburn being chosen as a halfway arena, a great many amateurs turned out to witness the friendly contest. Notwithstanding the rather unfavourable state of the weather, and badness of the ground, capital sport was exhibited, and at the close victory declared in favour of the "Bairns o' Falkirk," who carried the palm by 18 shots; there being nine players aside, and three rinks—123 shots in all. The members of the clubs and their friends, afterwards retired to the stack-yard of Munnoch's Inn, where a hearty glass, with toasts and songs, circulated for a few happy hours, to the mutual delight of all.

Scotsman, 17 August 1836

CRIEFF.—MATCH AT QUOITS.—A match at quoits, between the Crieff and Dunblane quoiting clubs, took place on a field belonging to Mr. J. Miller, Broadley, on Thursday, the 15th instant. The day was very unfavourable, as the rain was very heavy during the greater part of the game; nevertheless there were a goodly number of spectators on the ground. From the state of the game given below it will be seen that our Crieff players must exert themselves to regain their lost laurels:—Crieff, 1st rink, 28; 2d do. 33; 3d do. 51; 4th do. 31—total, 143. Dunblane, 1st rink, 51; 2d do. 51; 3d do. 49; 4th do. 51—total, 202. Majority for Dunblane, 54.

Perthshire Advertiser, 29 July 1852

Quoiting is a sport rarely heard of these days, but it was immensely popular in the 19th century, and there were matches over many years although few reports in the press. It was a hard game to play, throwing heavy metal quoits at a target.

QUOITING.

DUNBLANE 2D TEAM v. KINBUCK 2D TEAM.—These Clubs met on the ground of the Ashfield Club on Saturday to decide which Club was to have the honour of holding the Dunblane Quoiting Association second medal. The conditions were 8 men a-side, game 31 shots. The game, which was keenly contested, resulted in a win for Kinbuck by 26 shots. The Kinbuck Club now holds both 1st and 2d medals for one year. The following are the scores :—

DUNBLANE.		KINBUCK.	
J. Cassey, J. Bennet,	31	J. M'Gibbon, P. Irons,	21
J. Lawrie, R. Weir,	27	J. Jenkins, W. M'Nair,	31
J. Sharp, M. Bruce,	26	D. M'Gibbon, T. Sinclair,	31
J. Sharp, W. Sharp,	4—88	D. Campbell, R. Harris,	31—114

Evening Telegraph, 26 August 1886

By the 1880s there was even a Dunblane Quoiting Association, with clubs thriving here, in Ashfield and in Kinbuck.

DUNBLANE.—On Saturday at 2.30 P.M. eighteen members of the Dunblane Cycling Club started from the Cross here, and had a splendid run to Alloa. After partaking of refreshments in Alloa they began their homeward journey, and arrived between ten and eleven o'clock. The next run is to be to Callander.

Dundee Advertiser, 28 May 1889

DUNBLANE.—On Saturday the Dunblane Cycling Club had the first of a series of races for gold badges on the Perth Road. Distance, one mile. There was a good turn-out. The following is the result :—1 Charles Townsend, 2 Robert Marshall, 3 Alexander Guthrie.

Dundee Advertiser, 16 June 1890

Dunblane Cycling Club held a mix of outings and races, and the club minutes have survived – they are now held in the Museum. They had a bugler to lead the way, and they were clearly competitive and prosperous: like other clubs, they could afford gold medals as prizes.

DUNBLANE.—On Tuesday on the river Allan, near Ashfield, Mr Alexander Fraser caught a fine grilse of 4 lbs. Through the kindness of Mr Archibald Stirling of Keir, the Dunblane Angling Club had their fourth competition this season. The water was unsuitable for successful fishing, being very heavy from the recent rains. The following are the prize-winners :—1 D. Cameron, Ashfield ; 2 H. Manuel, Dunblane ; 3 A. Hunter, Dunblane.

Dundee Advertiser, 5 September 1895

DUNBLANE.—The prizes competed for during the season by the Dunblane Angling Club have been handed over to the winners, who were as follow :—A. Hunter, C. M'Lauchlan, J. Ritchie, W. Dougan, Daniel Cramb, J. Eddie, W. Weir, A. Fraser, D. Cameron, J. Roberts.

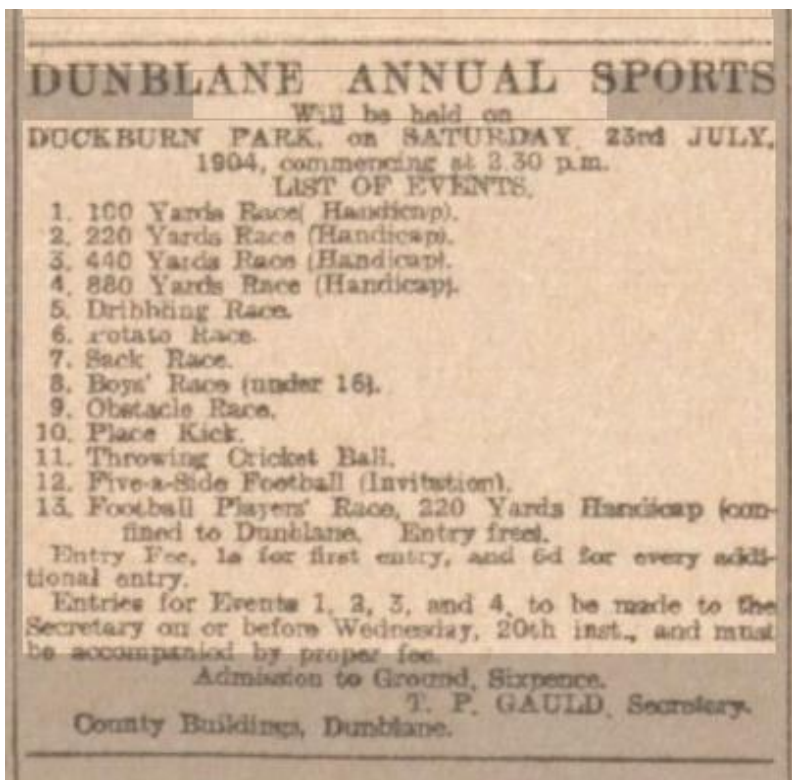
Dundee Advertiser, 22 November 1897

The Allan Angling Association was formed in 1850 to promote angling in the River Allan, covering the river from Dunblane to Bridge of Allan. Although much of its focus was on improving conditions for fishing in the river, it was perhaps inevitable that competitive angling clubs would spring up.

DUNBLANE.—HIGHLAND GAMES.—The Games Committee have just issued their circular announcing that the third annual celebration of these games will be made in a park near the city on Saturday the 25th inst. The names of Sir William Stirling-Maxwell, Bart., Sir James Campbell of Kilbride, Bart., Captain the Hon. Arthur Drummond, of Cromlix, and other gentlemen in the district, appear as patrons. There are twenty-nine competitions on the list, and for most three prizes are offered. Competitors for all competitions except dancing and bagpipe playing must reside within a radius of four miles of Dunblane.

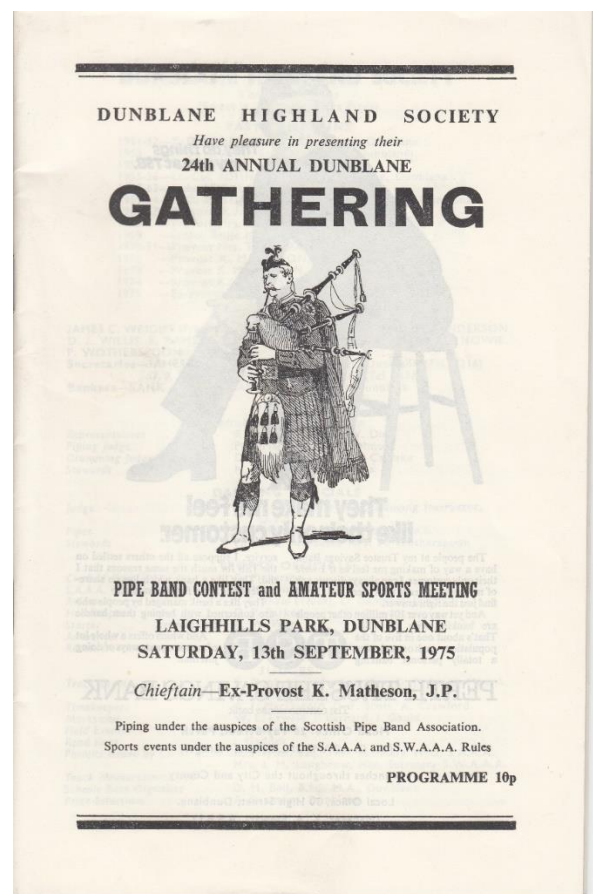
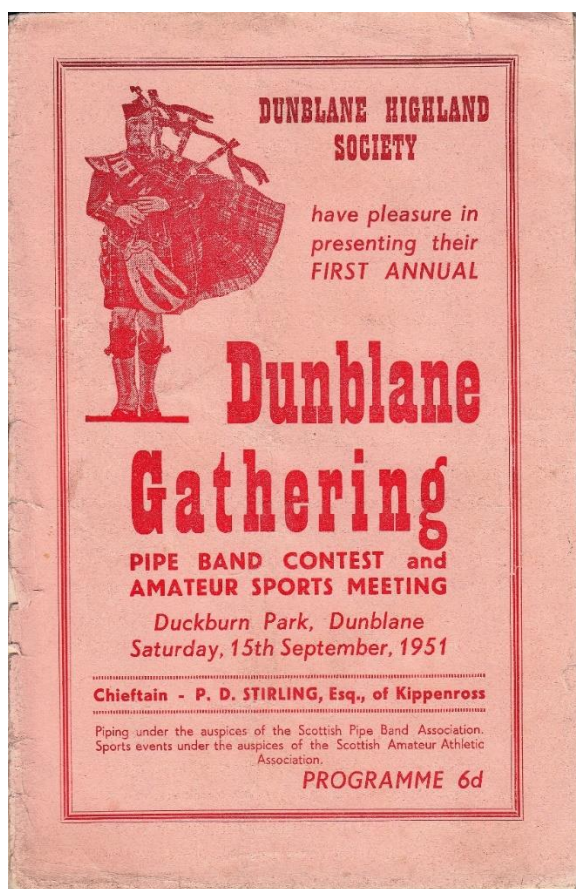
Perthshire Courier, 21 June 1870

A very popular annual event, the Highland Games were inaugurated in 1868 at Duckburn Park, with patronage from many of the gentlemen of the district. It ran for a few years, then developed into the Football Club sports, which always attracted a big crowd and became a major fundraiser.

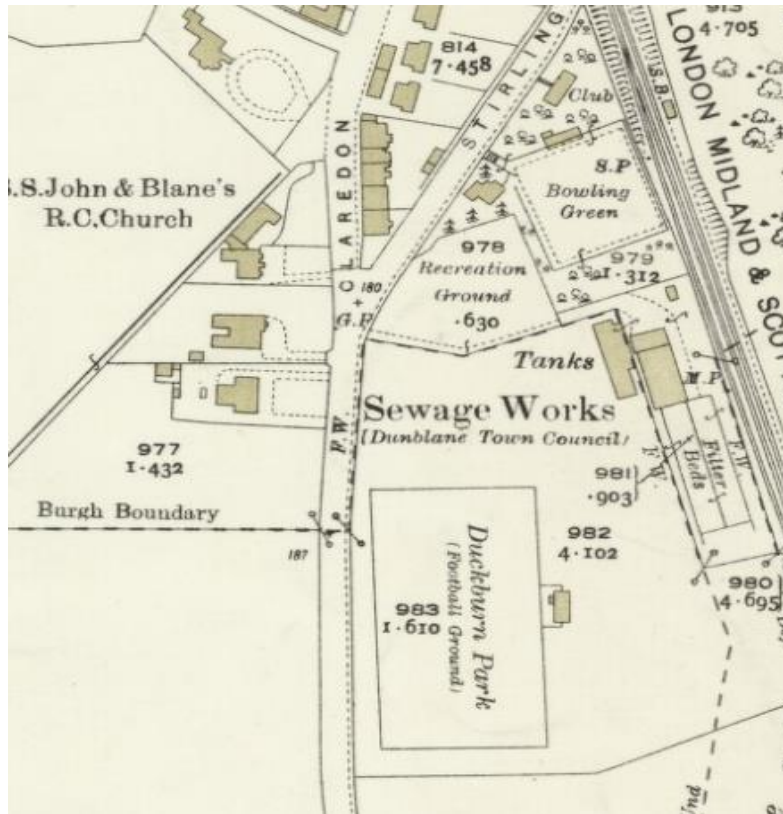


Scottish Referee, 15 July 1904

There were cash prizes on offer at the sports meetings here and around Scotland, which proved a money-spinning attraction for several Dunblane athletes.



The Dunblane sports fell into abeyance after World War 1 but were revived in 1951 at Duckburn Park as a Highland Gathering and kept going at least until the 1970s in the Laigh Hills.



I've mentioned Duckburn Park several times in relation to bowling, football and athletics, and it was perhaps the best known of Dunblane's sporting venues. The name survives in the industrial park on the southern edge of town, although the footprint of the park was actually where Marks and Spencer now stands, and previously the garage.

Duckburn was given to the town in 1867 by John Stirling of Kippendavie and used that year for a review of the 6th Perthshire Rifle Volunteers, Dunblane Company.

The bowling club came in 1886, then the football ground was laid out in 1888, with a small wooden pavilion – all paid for by the Stirling family. It contained two dressing rooms and a meeting room on the ground floor, with steps leading up to about ten rows of wooden bench seats.



The only picture I have seen of the grandstand is in the background of this photo of Dunblane Rovers juvenile team in 1911, but it gives a good impression of what it looked like.

The stand survived until the 1960s but in later years was almost derelict. I've spoken to a couple of older residents who remember going 'Doon the Duckie' as boys to play there, mindful of the fearsome tramp who lived in the old stand and would chase them away if they got too close.

And that takes me to football, the sport which had perhaps the biggest impact of all Dunblane's sporting activities, not least because it attracted thousands of spectators to the bigger games and put the town in the national spotlight at times.

I'm just going to skip through the highlights, but if you want to read the full story I have published the history of Dunblane FC.

Founded in 1879 and universally known as the Heather, for a while it was a genuine power and had many notable successes. However, it couldn't last, and after football became professional in Scotland in 1893, Dunblane was simply too small a town to sustain a top level club. It could not afford to pay players to attract them here, and those players who were good went elsewhere to earn wages.

At times the club lived a precarious existence, and nearly folded on several occasions. For example in 1904 it only survived as John Stirling of Kippendavie cancelled a £40 debt from Dunblane FC. He also allowed the club to rent Duckburn Park thereafter at a nominal rent of a shilling a year, and agreed to be responsible for the upkeep of the grandstand. In return for his generous patronage he was made honorary president.



This is the only known photo of Dunblane Football Club. There must have been others, so if you think you know of one, please let me know! In 1888 they had already won the Perthshire Cup three times and the Stirling Charity Cup and the players here are proudly wearing those medals.

An early indication of the size of the club comes in the Scottish Football Association annual of 1887, by which time the club had 60 members. The move to Duckburn Park was still a year away, and they played home games at Kippenross Park, better known as the 'Coo Park' as it was also grazing land for cows, with obvious hazards. With a location roughly where Drummond Rise now stands, it was very basic, but the ground hosted a Scottish Cup tie against Rangers in 1883. We lost that one 6-1, but it was only 2-1 with half an hour to go. There was no dressing room on the ground, and the players changed in the Railway Hotel, now the Village Inn. Then, as now, convenient for a post-match pint.



The club was for many years the dominant force in Perthshire, and the name of Dunblane is engraved 12 times on the magnificent Perthshire Cup trophy, which was inaugurated in 1884. The trophy is still played for to this day by amateur clubs in North Perthshire.

After each victory the team was met at the station by a crowd of supporters and there are wonderful reports of them joining the players on a torchlight procession, led by the volunteer brass band, through the town to the Cross, and back down the High Street to the Railway Hotel for a dram.



Those triumphs earned gold medals for the winners, and here is a selection of those prizes from 1888, 1896, 1901 and 1906.



Many players from the Heather were selected for Perthshire, and presented with county caps like this one, won by Willie Robertson in 1897-98.

The greatest Dunblane footballer, and to my mind our greatest sportsman until Andy Murray came along, was Robert Main Christie.



The son of the parish schoolmaster, he was brought up in the Braeport. Tall, athletic and fast, as an 18 year old in 1884, would you believe, Christie played for Scotland against England, won the Scottish Cup, and played for Queen's Park in the English FA Cup final.

Dunblane's original sporting hero

Cathedral city spawned an 'Andy Murray' of the Victorian era, writes Andy Mitchell

HE was a young sportsman from Dunblane who represented Scotland as a teenager, made a big impact in London, and his brother was almost as famous in the same sport. Andy Murray? No, this was the cathedral city's Victorian equivalent.

In 1884, Robert Main Christie was not just one of Scotland's youngest-ever football caps, he achieved the unique distinction of being the only man ever to score a goal for a Scottish club in an FA Cup final. If you throw in other sporting achievements which include two Scottish Cup victories, representing Scotland at curling and being President of the Scottish FA, he is surely a candidate for another golden post box to sit alongside Murray's on Dunblane High Street. Sadly, however, the only memorials to Christie commemorate his premature death in the closing months of the First World War.

Born in 1865, the son of the parish schoolmaster, Christie founded Dunblane's first football team as a boy, and hit the ground running when he went to Edinburgh University where, as a 17-year-old, he won the East of Scotland Shield and played

opponents round by round. The scores would be unimaginable today: Crewe Alexandra 10-0, Manchester 15-0, Coventry 7-0, Aston Villa 6-1, Old Westminster by a single goal and in the semi-final, cup holders Blackburn Olympic were dumped 4-1.

Blackburn Rovers lay in wait for the showdown between the best of England and Scotland on 29 March 1884, and the Glasgow side travelled to London with confidence. They were widely considered favourites, but the best Scottish Scots among the 12,000 spectators at Kennington Oval were to leave the stadium bitterly disappointed. In an early period of intense pressure, Queen's Park hit the post twice and a Christie goal was disallowed for offside, but then Blackburn Rovers surged forward and scored twice in quick succession through Brown and Forrest. Christie knocked in a legitimate goal just before the break but there was no second-half fightback and the Scottish champions fell to a 2-1 defeat.

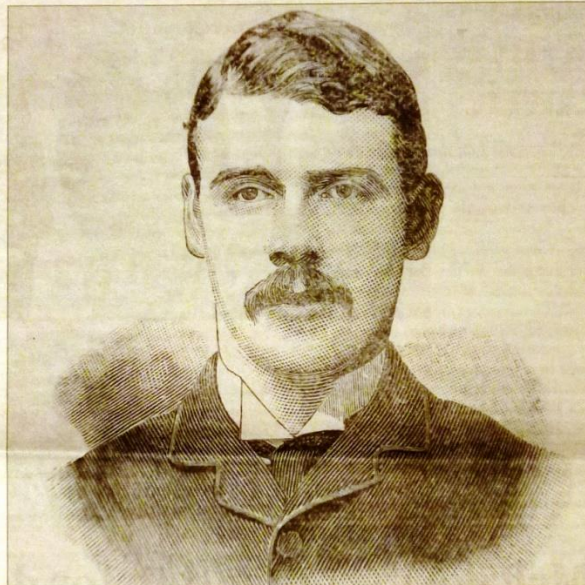
Although the Scots looked down their noses at the thinly-veiled professionalism of the Blackburn team, they were more aggrieved at being "refereed out of the game" by Major Francis Martin, whose decisions were, according to the official club history, "peculiar and vain". The referee rubbed salt into the wounds by visiting the team hotel the following day, to tell the players that they had the ball through the Rovers goal by a foot but did not claim, and that the first goal scored against them was distinctly offside but no appeal was made – this was at a time when, as in cricket, an appeal had to be made for every decision. In effect, he told them they should have won the cup but were not sufficiently sharp up.

Queen's Park made another assault on the FA Cup the following year, again reaching the final, but Christie only lasted till February when he twisted his knee at Norths County, which also ruled him out of two internationals for which he had already been selected.

Without him, the final had a similar outcome, 2-0 for Blackburn Rovers, and this was to prove Queen's Park's last serious attempt at English glory before the Scottish FA ruled that its members could not enter any national cup competition but its own.

Having returned to fitness, Christie scored one of the goals that won the 1886 Scottish Cup final against Renton, but he wrenched his knee again in the match and that was effectively the end of his top-level football career, aged only 20. He did return briefly for Dunblane three years later, winning the Perthshire Cup, before hanging up his boots for good. Christie was a sore loss. His runs on the left have electrified thousands, one journalist wrote, "like adler darting from the east".

Undaunted, he remained in



Robert Main Christie, above, dominated the Scotland sporting scene in the 1880s, representing the country in both football and curling. Dunblane's current hero, Andy Murray, left, returned to the city yesterday where he received the freedom of Stirling.

football as match secretary for Dunblane and was elected to represent Perthshire at the SFA as a 20-year-old – another youthful record – ultimately rising to be president of the SFA in 1903. He also had the satisfaction of seeing his younger brother, Alexander, playing three times for Scotland as well as scoring for Queen's Park in the 1900 Scottish Cup final, the last one ever reached by the club. Over a century later, his family's football connection continues with his great-grandson Russell Gilbert, who is general manager of Ross County.

Christie's energy took him in many other directions and he was active in a range of sports, taking up curling to such good effect that he played five times for Scotland, and he was also a founder and secretary of Dunblane's first golf club. Meanwhile, he set up in practice in Dunblane as a civil engineer and architect, constructing everything from the Burgh Chambers to the local water supply, not to mention his own house, Westlands, which is now a hotel.

However, his devotion to a military career as a reservist would ultimately lead to his tragic, early death. As a member of the 4th Perthshire Volunteer Battalion, he saw active service



in the South African War, commanding a Relief Company of the Black Watch but, by the time the First World War broke out, he was too old to be considered for the front line. Still, he was determined to "do his bit" and went with the Royal Scots Fusiliers to France and Salonika before being seconded to the Labour Corps in the final year of the war.

It was a non-combat role engaged in essential work ranging from road repairs to burying the dead so Major Christie, as he was by then, had a good chance

of coming through the conflict unscathed to rejoin his wife and five children in Dunblane. Sadly, it was not to be.

On the night of 11 May 1918 he was commanding the 10th Labour Company, laying cables spiked with mustard gas.

There was nowhere to hide and, in the resulting carnage, three officers and 130 men were killed, with Christie enduring four agonising days before succumbing in a Red Cross hospital

in Rouen. He was 52. Like most casualties he is buried in France, but is commemorated in Dunblane on the war memorial and on a poignant brass plaque in the local masonic lodge, where he had been a member and his father had been master.

It was a horrible end for Dunblane's first great sporting talent, but Robert Christie's legacy lives on. He was a youthful record-breaker and there is no knowing where his precocious football ability could have taken him had it not been for that twisted knee.

I wrote an article about Bob Christie for the Scotsman a couple of years ago, which you can read online, but a summary of his achievements reads like a Boy's Own story. His top level football career was as meteoric as it was brief, as a serious knee injury forced him to retire at the age of just 20.

Undaunted, he threw himself into sports administration and he represented Dunblane on the Scottish Football Association council, becoming President in 1903.

He was a founder of the Dunblane golf club, acting as its secretary, and was also a devoted curler, representing Scotland several times.

He was a civil engineer and architect and left his mark on the town by building, among others, the Burgh Chambers and his own house Westlands, which is now the hotel.

A dedicated volunteer soldier, he served with the Black Watch in the South African War, and had four years active service in World War One, which ended in a desperately sad death from gas poisoning in 1918.

Bob Christie was far from the only notable footballer in Dunblane, and his younger brother Alex was also a Scotland international while playing with Queen's Park.

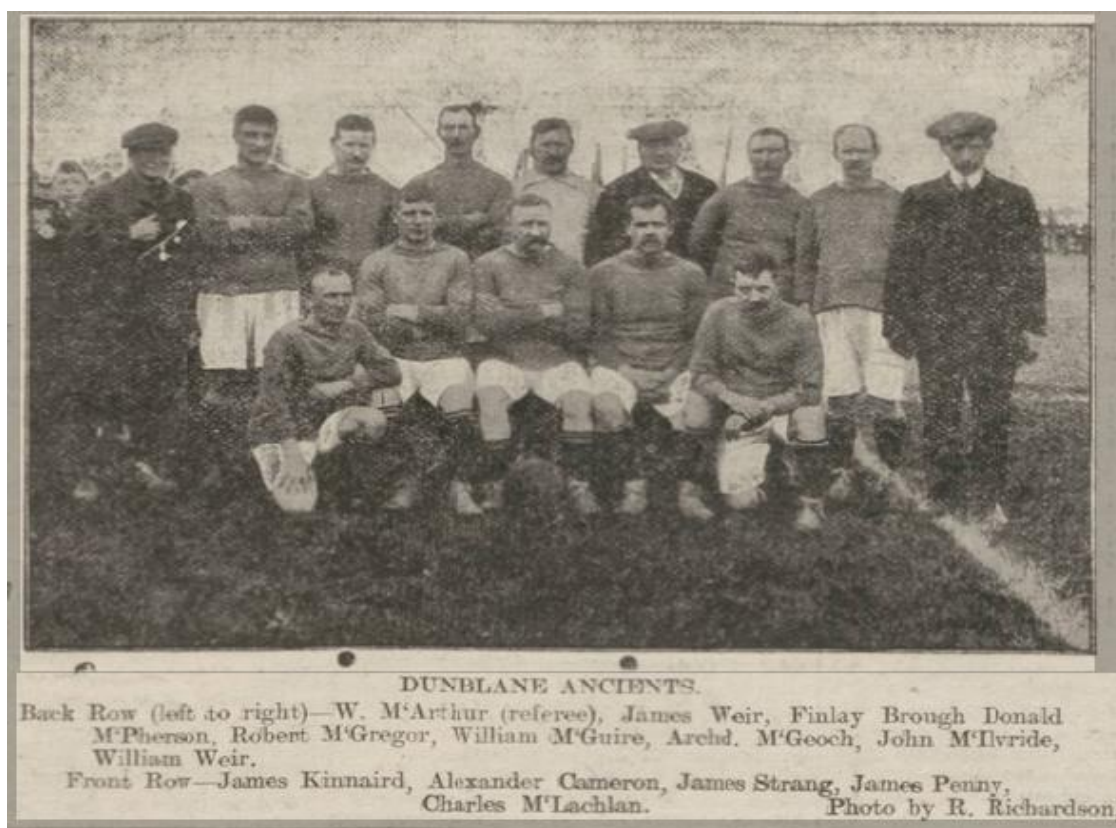
A number of other players from the town went on to play professionally, so we had players transferred from Dunblane to the likes of Arsenal and Liverpool. Some notable players include:

Archie McGeoch – Arsenal, Dundee, Portsmouth
Willie McFarlane – St Johnstone, Rangers & Canadian championship
John Bayne – Reading, Brentford, Hearts
David Henderson – Liverpool
George King – Sunderland, Burnley, Millwall
James Law – Motherwell, Blackburn Rovers
James Vallance – Airdrie, St Johnstone, Bradford City; father-in-law of Stanley Matthews

Some of the results Dunblane achieved are remarkable. In fact three prominent clubs today – Dunfermline, Cowdenbeath and St Johnstone – all owe their record competitive defeat to Dunblane. Here are some notable scores:

Dunblane 10 Dunfermline Athletic 0 – Scottish Cup 1885
Dunfermline Athletic 1 Dunblane 11 – Midland League 1891
Dunblane 13 Cowdenbeath 2 – Midland League 1891
Dunblane 5 Partick Thistle 2 – Scottish Cup 1892
Dunblane 9 Alloa Athletic 0 – Midland League 1894
Dunblane 10 St Johnstone 0 – Central Combination 1897
Dunblane 8 St Johnstone 1 – Perthshire Cup 1900
Dunblane 7 St Johnstone 2 – Perthshire Cup Final 1906

And while St Johnstone finally came good, for many years they definitely played second fiddle to Dunblane in Perthshire and it was only after the humiliation of losing 7-2 in a cup final in 1906 that they took the plunge and turned professional.



Before Dunblane's senior football story came to an end in 1914, there was one last nostalgic look back on the halcyon days of the club when these veterans played in a charity match in Stirling.

WE! L PLAYED DUNBLANE!

No football will be played at Duckburn Park, Dunblane, this season. The "heather" were due to have met Tulloch to-day in the first round of the Scottish Qualifying Cup, but, in consequence of being unable to raise a team, the men of the Cathedral city have been obliged to scratch.

The reason for doing so is a good one. Nearly all the players on the club's books, not forgetting the officials, have resolved to serve their King and country in the present emergency.

And the final curtain came down with the outbreak of the First World War. The club was on its last legs in any case by then, but it closed down definitively as almost all the remaining players signed up for war service in the first few weeks of the conflict. The newspapers praised them: 'Well played, Dunblane!' but many of those players lost their lives, and I have identified 19 Dunblane footballers who were killed in the conflict.

And on that sad note, I have to conclude this look at Dunblane's sporting heritage.

I hope you have found it interesting, and one thing I would like to say is that there are many gaps in our knowledge – so if you have any old photos, medals, ephemera or recollections which can add to this story, I would be delighted to hear from you.

Andy Mitchell, Dunblane Local History Society, 15 January 2019