

Rothley Park Official Opening

May 1912



The official opening took place on May 1912. In an article in the Dundee Evening Telegraph on the 21st of May 1912, James Sorley wrote:

“Rothley Park Golf Club is a new one, and the course has not yet been properly opened. At present we are playing over 12 holes , but we will have at our disposal in a few days 16 holes. When completed the Rothley Course will be 6000 yards, the longest hole measures about 500 yards”.

The fact that the golf course consisted of only 12 holes at the time of the official opening probably explains why there was no record of an exhibition match being played at that time. It is interesting to note that in the above photograph, Braid and Vardon are both wearing golf shoes. It would be reasonable to assume that they perhaps had a drive in of some sort, with an exhibition match arranged when the 18 holes were completed.

The Great Triumvirate

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a trio of players dominated professional golf to such an extent that they earned a collective nickname. “The Great Triumvirate” of Harry Vardon, J.H. Taylor and James Braid won 16 of the 21 Open Championships held between 1894 and 1914. The members of the Great Triumvirate made a very good living out of Golf Club openings and exhibition matches. The usual fee was £8 plus expenses, at a time when winning the Open Championship was worth £50. In the month of May 1913, Vardon played no less than five exhibition matches at golf clubs all around the country.

Exhibition Match at Rothley Park Golf Club – 8th May 1913

James Braid



Harry Vardon



James Sorley published an account of the day in the St. Andrews Citizen:

“We had James Braid and Harry Vardon at Rothley the other day playing exhibition games. We also had wind and the rain (other newspaper accounts mention heavy rain and gale force winds all day) but notwithstanding the elements both gave an excellent exposition of golf. In the morning Vardon returned a 78 to Braid’s 79 in a medal round but in the afternoon Braid rather easily conquered his great rival in an 18 hole match by 3 and 2. Braid was round in an approximate 74 to Vardon’s 76. Braid played well nigh perfect golf all day and his form is as good as ever. Quite good enough to win yet another Open Championship”.

Sorley then had the temerity to finish the article by remarking (no doubt for the benefit of readers in St. Andrews) “Rothley is in Leicestershire where the rain is always there or thereabouts”.

One month after the exhibition match, James Sorley played in Open Qualifying at Hoylake but failed to qualify for the championship proper.

Historical Context

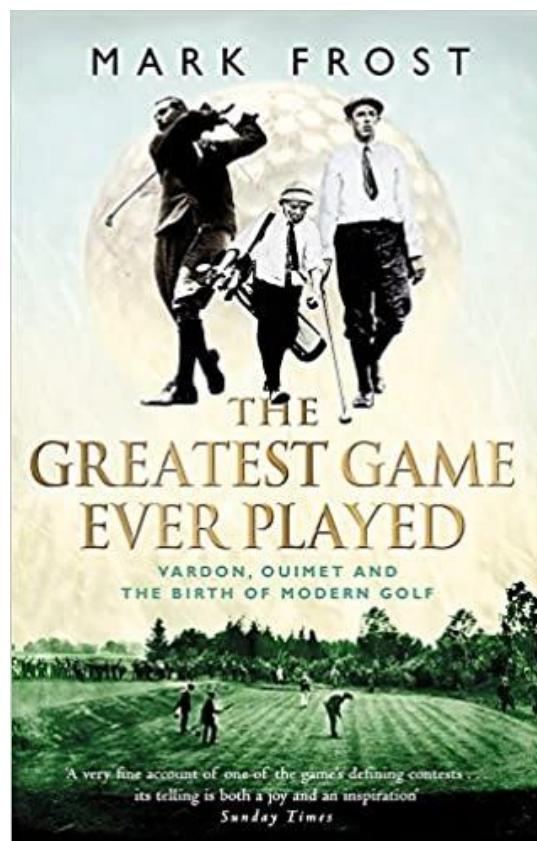
- In 1913 there was a workhouse in Rothley. During the week of the exhibition match there were 90 inmates in the workhouse as well as 17 tramps. In the children’s home there were 13 inmates.
- This was the height of the suffragette movement, over two nights in February 1913, fifteen golf courses around the country suffered damage to their greens.
- Earlier in the year, suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst was sentenced to 3 years penal servitude and Emily Davison ran out in front of the King’s horse in the Derby and died of her injuries several days later.

The Greatest Game Ever Played

Little more than 4 months after appearing in the Rothley Park exhibition match , the great Harry Vardon and his British compatriot Ted Ray were in America for the U.S. Open, played at The Country Club in Brookline, Massachusetts. Ouimet, a 20-year-old amateur and former caddie, unknown on the national scene , forced the formidable duo into a playoff.

When Ouimet won that playoff, he became an instant folk hero in the United States, and well known to golfers around the world.

At the time there were very few players in America, no public courses, and the game was confined mostly to the wealthy. Ouimet's victory changed all of that, his victory sparked a tremendous golfing boom in the USA. There were roughly 350,000 golfers in America in 1913, by 1923 there were 2 million.



This was one of the greatest upsets in golfing history and inspired a book by Mark Frost and a feature film of the same name in 2004.