

The Golden Age of Golf Course Design.



Tom Williamson – course architect of Rothley Park Golf Club

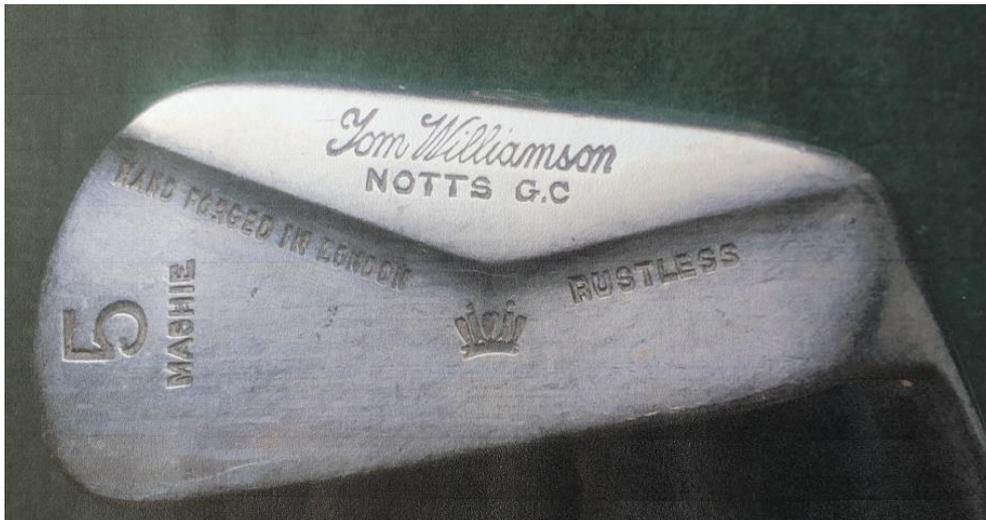
The period from the last decade of the 19th century up to the late 1920s was the turning point in the development of the golf course. As the game of golf became more popular and the demand for courses grew, those tasked with developing new courses recognised that it required the input of a competent designer to create a course from seemingly unfavourable sites. A further opportunity for those skilled in course design came with the introduction of the rubber cored Haskell ball in 1902, which meant that existing golf courses also had to be lengthened, and bunkers relocated, in order to maintain their challenge. Capitalising on the economic prosperity and advantages of the period, golf courses began to be designed following a coherent process that involved a pre-build study of the existing site terrain, design of the course on the drawing board, and onsite inspection by the architect during construction. This period is considered the 'golden age' of golf course design, witnessing the development of strategic golf course architecture – the strategic principles of hazard positioning relative to each individual hole.

Tom Williamson was born in Grantham in 1880. At the age of 15 he was sent to North Berwick under the direction of J.H.Hutchison to learn the trade of a club maker. Whilst there, he also received broad training in many aspects of greenkeeping and golf tuition. In 1896, following a glowing reference from Hutchison he was appointed, for a probationary period, professional, head greenkeeper, and caddymaster at Notts Golf Club, at that time situated at Bulwell Common. In 1897 he played in his first Open Championship at Hoylake.

In 1901 Notts Golf Club moved to its present location at Hollinwell where Tom Williamson was to remain as Professional and Head Greenkeeper, for 54 years until his death in 1950.

Tom Williamson was known as the father of Midlands Golf and has a remarkable list of achievements which are well worth recording below:

- By 1919 he had designed or made recommendations to every course within a 50 mile radius of Notts Golf Club.
- He designed over 60 courses, mainly in the midlands but also in Cornwall, Norfolk, Wiltshire, Surrey and Zurich in Switzerland.
- He qualified for his first Open Championship in 1897 at Hoylake and qualified for his last Open Championship at the same course 40 years later at the age of 56
- He qualified for a total of 32 Opens between 1897 and 1936, finishing in the top ten 6 times, his best finish was 4th in 1914 at Prestwick. It is noteworthy that during that time there were no exemptions into the Open, even the immediate past champion had to play in a 36 hole qualifying competition.
- Won the Midland Professional Championship seven times between 1897 and 1922
- In 1905 he was the first club maker to inscribe numbers on irons as well as names. See below. He then produced irons with only the number.



The Birth of a Golf Course in Rothley Village



1910

In order for the Rothley Garden Suburb to live up to being a suitable place for the homes of gentlemen, the amenity of a Golf Course was a prime necessity. The slopes on either side of the Rothley Brook and the natural western boundary of the railway embankment provided a perfect site for this facility. A clubhouse was built and Tom Williamson was commissioned to design the course.

1911

- **Roald Amundsen reaches the South Pole**
- **Rothley Park Golf Club is formed.**

The first recorded meeting of Rothley Park Golf Club was in August 1911 when the newly formed club took the lease on the course and buildings, still owned at the time by the Temple Estates and the Merttens family. Construction work continued in earnest on the first 11 holes.

1912

- **The Titanic sinks**
- **Rothley Park Golf Club appoints its first professional. James Sorley from St.Andrews**



More next week on James Sorley and the grand opening of Rothley Park Golf Club

