

How the gallant Colonel was summoned by Fate from the banks of the Hooghly to save the Spirit of Golf in Scotland

Lt Col Sir Hugh Lyon Playfair 1786-1861, Provost of St Andrews 1842-1861, Captain of the R&A 1856, or 'How the gallant Colonel was summoned by Fate from the banks of the Hooghly to save the Spirit of Golf in Scotland'.

A biography written for The Calcutta Golf Society by Rollo Prendergast, Captain 2009.

"The patriarch of this talented family was the Reverend James Playfair DD (1738-1819) who became principal of the United College at St Andrews in 1800 thus establishing the link with the town and university which was to be so firmly maintained by his descendents. The youngest of his four sons, James (1791-1866) became a prominent merchant in Glasgow; William Davidson (1783-1852) and Hugh Lyon (1786-1861) both had distinguished careers in the Indian army, subsequently retiring to St Andrews where they played a full part in local affairs, Hugh, indeed, becoming provost and overseeing the paving of the streets of the town. The eldest son, George (1782-1846) became a surgeon and also went out to India where he rose to the rank of surgeon-general." (University of St Andrews: *The Playfair and Diaspora Project*)

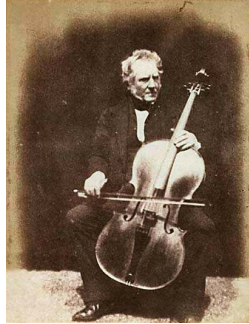
The first record we have of Hugh Lyon Playfair's connection with golf is his distinction of being the first winner of the Scotsraig Gold Medal in 1818 (Scotsraig Golf Club was founded in 1817 by some members of the St Andrews Society of Golfers, "who wished to play more golf than the Society's occasional meetings afforded them"). He also won the R&A gold medal the same year. HLP must have been on home leave from India, between postings, keen no doubt to show off the prowess gained in Calcutta.

Hugh Lyon Playfair (HLP) born in Meikle, Perthshire, was a student at St Andrews University and served in India 1805-1817 and 1820-1834. He served in the Honourable East India Company's Bengal Artillery Regiment, where he rose to the rank of Major. HLP later lost two of his three sons in action in the Anglo-Sikh Wars: Lt. William Dalglish Playfair, of the 33rd Bengal Native Infantry died in 1846 (aged 24) at Sobraon and Lt. Hugh Arthur Playfair of the 52nd Bengal Native Infantry, in 1848 (aged 23) after the siege of Multan). The author of this 2009 biography notes that his own great grandfather, Brig. James Henry Prendergast, was also in the service of 'John Company': he was commissioned in the 29th Madras Native Infantry, the year before events of 1857 caused the British Crown to assume direct administration of India.

The official history of the Royal Calcutta Golf Club (the oldest golf club outside the British Isles) records the founding of the Club in 1829 as the Dum Dum GC. "We have much pleasure in publishing the following list of subscribers to the Dum Dum Golfing Club and congratulate them on the prospect of seeing that noble and gentlemanlike games establishing in Bengal" – Major HL Playfair and Dr Playfair (his eldest brother George) are listed among 30 such subscribers – "...The Dum

Dum Links are said to be very inviting; they consist of fifteen holes, being a round of about two miles, and contain some very pretty and interesting hazards." *Oriental Sporting Magazine of December 23rd 1830.*

HLP seems to have been a polymath with interests in photography, gardening, music, golf, and civic affairs.



(Sir Hugh Lyon Playfair with cello. *Edinburgh Calotype Club*).

On his return to St Andrews in 1834, HLP "took up his residence in St Andrews, occupying his leisure with mechanical and mathematical pursuits, and furnishing his garden with those instructive curiosities, whims, and oddities, which have made it one of the 'Places of interest to visitors' and to which, with characteristic generosity, he welcomed all. His attachment to the City commenced when a student, and during his career in life that attachment never abated." A biographical Sketch (*D. Loudon 1874*) where this detail appears, goes on to paint a very different portrait of the thriving and select St Andrews we know today. "At the time of his return, St Andrews was fast dwindling into a state of ruinous decay. The streets were overgrown with grass, and it was no uncommon sight to see cows and pigs grazing upon them. Outside stairs, street projections, ruinous walls, dunghills, pigsties, and other abominations everywhere met the eyes, while noxious effluvia everywhere saluted the nasal organs."

HLP's impact on St Andrews was recorded elsewhere, as follows: "During the period these changes were in progress, repeated grants were obtained from the Legislature for the rebuilding and improvement of the Colleges; making St Andrews, so far as educational privileges are concerned, second to no town in the kingdom. These improvements were nearly all carried out and conducted by the late Lieutenant Colonel Sir Hugh Lyon Playfair, LL.D., who, as provost of the city for many years, devoted himself to the renovation of the town so successfully, that it may be said he found it in ruins, and left it a city of palaces." It is also recorded that he was instrumental in having the railway line extended to the town.

The Sketch continues: "Although 'The Major' had retired from active service as a soldier, it was only to enter on active service as a citizen. Himself a keen golfer, and knowing how popular the game had been in India, he first of all set about

improving the Links, which then lay almost an untrodden waste. A company of golfers had indeed existed since 1754 but little system was observed in promoting either the amusement of its members, or the facilities for playing the game. Up unto the year 1833 there was no Clubhouse for this association, till, through his exertions, rooms were rented for their occupation." In fact HLP formed the Union Club in 1835 with a membership which consisted almost exclusively of Royal and Ancient Golf Club members. The Union Club ran a small clubhouse facility called the Union Parlour and in 1853 built a new clubhouse behind the first tee of the Old Course. Completed in 1854, it continued to be known as the Union Clubhouse until both Clubs formally merged under the Royal and Ancient title in 1877.

HLP was the driving force behind the building of the R&A clubhouse. His golfing career was long and distinguished. Besides the honours noted above, he also won the R&A's gold medal again in 1842, as well as the Scotsraig gold medal twice more and the North Berwick Golf Club's Glensaddell gold medal in 1835 and 1841.

A vivid portrait of Playfair survives in Charles Lees' *The Golfers. A Grand Match of Golf St Andrews 1844*. Major Playfair is playing in a two ball foursome match and is about to sink a putt. The players are hemmed in by a crowd, many with betting books in hand:



Playfair's demeanour has been characterised: *That Major P _____ir, man of nerve unshaken
He knows a thing or two, or I'm mistaken;
And when he's press'd, can play a tearing game,
He works for certainty and not for fame!
There's none – I'll back the assertion with a wager,
Can play the heavy iron like the Major.*

It is this author's contention that, had it not been for this son of St Andrews, the game of golf might have gone into permanent decline in Scotland. Lt. Col. Sir Hugh Lyon Playfair honed his golfing skills in Bengal and brought his talents as administrator and man of action in the service of John Company to reverse the terminal decline of the game at St Andrews, the University and the town itself. The older Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers went into administration between 1831 and 1836, when it reformed at Musselburgh, before moving again, to Muirfield in 1891. It is possible that if the 'upstart' St Andrews Society of Golfers and its patron, the colonial Playfair had not kept the flame alive during the early part of the C19th, the game of golf would have continued its decline in popularity.