Club History

The history of Tavistock really began in 1896 when some residents of the Haddonfield area became interested in a new game called golf, which had recently attracted the attention of the socialites at Philadelphia Country Club. The Haddonfield group decided to lease some land and founded the first golf course in South Jersey. This course, ultimately located in Haddonfield, began by taking over the Haddonfield Cricket Club, which at that time, was located at the corner of Euclid Avenue and the Camden and Atlantic Railroad. The new club, which assumed all the Cricket Club's debts, was renamed Haddon Country Club.

Early in the 1900's, the new country club leased a plot of land known as the Hinchman Farm that was located in West Haddonfield, north of Kings Highway West, in the vicinity of North Hinchman, Homestead and Mt. Vernon Avenues. The land was transformed from a farm into an eighteen hole golf course with a clubhouse that occupied the 18th century Hinchman Homestead. Haddon Country Club provided its members with such activities as tennis, billiards, cards, dining, dancing, and of course, golf. A golf professional was hired and course construction was started. Haddon Country Club remained in existence until April 1, 1922 when with the opening of Tavistock Country Club, Haddon Country Club ceased operations.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Sunday Blue Laws prevented the playing of sports anywhere in New Jersey, except where local laws prevailed. Although the Blue Laws remained on the books, they had become very unpopular in many areas and were often disregarded or ignored by local residents and law enforcement agencies. In Merchantville, New Jersey, for instance, golfers were permitted to play, but were prohibited to hire a caddy. In Haddonfield, however, the Blue Laws were strictly enforced.

By 1920, a number of members of Haddon Country Club decided to do something about this situation. The ten year lease, under which Haddon Country Club used the Hinchman property, had two more years to run with a very modest rent of $700 per year. During the eight years since the signing of the lease, the country had fought a war, adopted the automobile as its favorite mode of transportation and taken the bootlegger into its family circle. It had also experienced a financial revolution which saw property values increase considerably. The lessor of the Club let it be known that he was not inclined to renew the lease and suggested a fair purchase price of $75,000 for the property on which the golf course had been constructed. At that time, Haddon Country Club had 140 members who were each paying dues of $25 per year. The situation was further complicated by the fact that there were no bar revenues since the Volstead Act was very much in force.

By present day standards, this club would not have had much chance of survival, but golf, like history, seems to have the right man in the right place when he is needed. In this case, the man was an avid golfer, Frank B. Middleton, Jr., who was professionally employed as Assistant Treasurer of the Victor Talking Machine Company.

In 1917, Frank Middleton made a fortuitous land purchase, probably with some thought towards its future use as a site for a golf course. He purchased the property then known as Tavistock Farm through an intermediary of Mary Gill Hopkins, the sixth and last generation of the Gill family who owned the property.

In 1747 during the reign of King George II of England, John Gill, I, first cousin of Elizabeth Haddon Estaugh, bought a 300 acre tract from John Cox of London, England. This farm became known as the "Home Farm" which was part of the Gill family estate. The farm remained in the family until the mid 1880's when John Gill, V gave the farm to his son, William Hopkins Gill. William H. Gill had a daughter, Mary Gill. When William Gill died, his daughter, Mary Gill, inherited the farm.

In 1885 Mary Gill married Johns Hopkins, cousin of the famous Baltimore physician and founder of the famous Baltimore Hospital and Medical School. Mary and Johns Hopkins spent summers on the Home Farm which they renamed Tavistock Farm in honor of Tavistock, Devon, England, the area from which Johns Hopkins' ancestors had come. Through this fortuitous naming of Tavistock Farm has come an ongoing relationship between the present day Tavistock Country Club and the "Tavistock Golf Club" in Devon, England. Tavistock, Devon, England, was also the home of Sir Francis Drake of English history.

By 1917, Mary Gill Hopkins was in failing health and the care and management of Tavistock Farm had become too much for her, so she sold the 299 acre property out of the family estate. The date of the sale was May 25, 1917 and
the buyer was Horace Roberts. Then, six-months later on November 19, 1917, Roberts sold the land to Frank Middleton, Jr. for $500.

Frank Middleton, Jr. having title to the property, continued to employ James Walker, who was a tenant of fifty years, as well as Martin Murphy. Both tenant farmers continued to work the land. Middleton was, apparently, waiting and probably working towards the eventual move of Haddon Country Club to this property. This goal was achieved on December 21, 1921 when Middleton sold 174 acres of the original 299 to twenty-eight members of the newly formed Tavistock Country Club and the defunct Haddon Country Club for $21,875. Records indicate that Middleton took the entire purchase amount in promissory notes. It is believed that Middleton kept the remaining 125 acres, which today is the Lane of Acres tract, for his own future use.

On December 14, 1920, the club known as Tavistock Country Club was formally incorporated for the purpose of providing "opportunity for playing the game of golf and other kinds of beneficial games and sports and to maintain a clubhouse to promote social fellowship and to perform any other acts as may be deemed necessary to ... carry out the purposes of the club". The first five Tavistock trustees were Frank B. Middleton, Jr., David Baird, Jr., William M. Nash, George H. Hall and J. Edward Fagan.

In the year prior to the sale of the land to Tavistock Country Club, an interesting bill was introduced and ultimately adopted by the New Jersey State Legislature. On February 8, 1921 both houses of the legislature adopted a bill that had been introduced by Senator James Wallworth of Haddonfield to create a borough from land previously part of Centre Township, and the Borough of Tavistock was incorporated.

After the introduction of the Wallworth Bill, strenuous objections to the plan to create the Borough of Tavistock were raised by Centre Township and other neighboring communities. Much appeared in the local press arguing this was merely an attempt to circumvent local ordinances against Sunday golfing. The residents of Centre Township met at the Mt. Ephraim Town Hall to adopt petitions to the State Legislature asking them to refuse the incorporation on the basis that the Club did not intend to enforce the state Blue Laws. Attorney J. E. Fagan represented the Club and stated that the Club's desire to be an autonomous community grew from the desire to be a unique group with a specific purpose.

All the protests proved to be for naught when on February 23, 1921 New Jersey Governor Edward I. Edwards signed the Wallworth Bill and Tavistock became a borough under the laws of Camden County and the State of New Jersey. Technically, the County could still have prevented the new borough from allowing Sunday golf, but in view of the way the whole project was organized, it did not seem likely to happen, and in fact it did not.

Once Tavistock Country Club was incorporated, the next important item of business was to design and build a golf course. Alexander Findlay, a Scot who came to America in 1887, was hired to design the golf course. Like many of his countrymen, Findlay was a golfer. Upon his arrival in America, he found that few people in the East had little knowledge or interest in the game of golf. Findlay moved west to Nebraska and opted for life as a cowboy. For the time being he had to be content with hitting a few shots on the prairie.

Shortly before the turn of the century, golf started to become popular in the East. Findlay returned and made his living giving golf exhibitions and designing courses. He went to work as a salesman for the John Wanamaker Company and continued to design golf courses. Although his place in golf in this country is well established, he never quite filled the bill as "The Father of American Golf", a reference he liked to hear used to describe his many talents and contributions.

Findlay, who designed and helped build such fine area courses as Huntingdon Valley and Atlantic City Country Clubs, undertook the contract to design and oversee the construction of the Tavistock golf course with the help of Francis James, who supervised the actual construction. From the inception, Tavistock was an eighteen hole course measuring 6,250 yards with par at 72. It was described in the press of the day as the most "ideally perfect" golf course in the country.

The course was ready for play on June 22, 1921. The cornerstone was laid for a clubhouse, which was designed by Charles Peddle and stood on a knoll overlooking a large part of the course and surrounding countryside. The anticipated cost to build the clubhouse was $60,000. It was designed to provide the membership with everything they could reasonably desire. The original clubhouse had a dormitory on the second floor with six beds for use by the
male members. This amenity was said to have been very popular. At this period the Club had a membership of two hundred which was divided into four regular classes: Active, Playing, Associate and Non-Resident.

During the depression, Club membership fell below the 225 mark and you could become a member for $100 a year which included dues, locker and club storage. Although there was little expansion to the club's facilities in this period, Tavistock was able to maintain its golfing heritage.

Five years after the Borough of Tavistock was incorporated, it changed its form of government to a commission form which remains today. Eventually the Borough of Tavistock contracted with the adjoining Borough of Haddonfield to provide police, fire, sewer and water services. Today, these services are still provided by Haddonfield.

Fire has played an interesting role in the history of Tavistock Country Club. On October 15, 1921, Tavistock experienced its first fire. On that date, a large barn that housed the machinery and equipment used to build the golf course, burned and was destroyed. Haddon Fire Company No. 1 responded to the alarm but was unable to save the barn due to a lack of water. The origin of the fire was never determined, but the barn adjacent to the Half-Way House was rebuilt and today, is used for storage.

A second and much more devastating fire hit Tavistock Country Club on December 29, 1945. A large portion of the clubhouse was destroyed by a fire which was discovered by the night watchman George Kaltenthalen while he was making rounds.

Following the 1945 fire, reconstruction of a colonial style clubhouse began. In the years following the construction of the new brick clubhouse, an expansion program costing over $460,000 provided an addition to the Clubhouse as well as expanded parking facilities. In 1963, a new Golf Shop was built, replacing a small wooden structure located in the middle of our parking lot near the first tee. The rebuilt clubhouse, completed in 1963, continued the colonial architecture of the original building and added two new wings to accommodate a new grille room, a kitchen and dining facilities as well as the rebuilding of the women's locker room and renovations to the lobby. Much of the success of this expansion program was due to the untiring efforts and administrative abilities of the late Mr. Samuel E. Fulton.

In 1987, shortly after the passing of Sam Fulton, the Club purchased the Fulton residence, which is the most westerly situated property in the Borough. The house was renovated and is presently occupied by Club Manager, George Wolf and his family.

The latest renovation to the club's facilities was the construction of a new Golf Center which was opened in May, 1995. This new facility includes storage for sixty electric golf carts, a meeting area, rest rooms, a caddy room, and an indoor golf training area. The top of the golf center provides a new roof garden and deck for outdoor social events and dining. Like the original clubhouse, this area affords a spectacular view of the golf course. When the new Golf Center was finished, the grounds surrounding the first tee were reconstructed to enhance the beauty of the area. In addition to these changes, a major renovation to the Club's ballroom was completed.

Over the years when the changes were being made to the clubhouse, extensive renovations to the golf course were taking place. The extension of Interstate 295 in 1958, required that the Borough lines be adjusted and made it necessary for the Club to make changes to the design of the golf course. In the original course layout, the ninth hole and green would be in the middle of I-295 today, and the present 15th hole was hole number 10.

More course renovations were approved in 1987. Included in this program were projects for remodeling various parts of the course. Several tees were rebuilt and new sand bunkers were added to certain holes. In 1990, an additional green was built to the right of the seventh green because the original green was occasionally out of play because of poor drainage. In 1993, the present fourth green was redesigned and rebuilt. Remodeling of these two holes made play more consistent and enjoyable.

The aesthetics of the course are attributed to the many fine greenskeepers who have taken care of Tavistock. The first greenskeeper of record was John Reid, who is believed to have started after the course was originally constructed. Mr. Reid was succeeded by Angelo Commarota, who is also reported to have served as the Club's bartender! Following Commarota's tenure came Henry Wetzel for two years followed by Russ Kearns, who was
greenskeeper for five years. From 1951 to 1974, Mr. George Murphy was Golf Course Superintendent. Murphy was followed in 1974, by Greens Superintendent, Rich Hurley who planted more than 5,000 trees and shrubs around the course. Hurley was succeeded by Kevin Lyons who was Superintendent from 1977 to 1979. The present Greens Superintendent, Thomas Grimac, started as part of the greens crew in 1974 and was appointed Course Superintendent in 1980.

The needs of the golfer for both a great golf course and superior professional services have always been of paramount importance at Tavistock. The first Pro was a gentleman named Jimmy Leach. He was one of a family of three brothers all of whom were golf professionals. Jimmy and his brother Jack staffed the shop at the old Haddon Country Club until the new shop at Tavistock was opened in April, 1922. Upon the death of Jimmy Leach in 1931, his brother, Jack, took over the golf professional’s job until 1934 when he was replaced by Jack Hiner. Hiner was the only individual at Tavistock to hold the dual post of Golf Professional and Greenskeeper. About 1938, the late Dick Renaghan took over as Pro. Upon his death, the job went to Wally Govan.

Govan was followed by Charles LePre who came to Tavistock from Doylestown (Pennsylvania) Country Club in 1953. He was ably assisted by Nick Carbo who came with him from the Doylestown Club. Always one of the area’s better playing pros, LePre is a former two time winner of the South Jersey Open. Charles LePre and Nick Carbo left Tavistock in 1971 to take over the operation of Pitman Golf Club.


In addition to the many outstanding Greens Superintendents and Golf Professionals, Tavistock has been fortunate to have benefited from some outstanding club managers. In 1957, Sam Fulton engaged the services of E. George Wetmore to serve as Club Manager. At this point in time, the Club's dining room had been steadily losing money. Mr. Wetmore took the food concession as his own business and concurrently managed the remainder of the Club as an independent contractor. George managed to eliminate the Club's financial losses and improved the quality of food services the Club was able to offer its members. Wetmore put his expertise and experiences to good use during the Club's expansion program by designing two complete kitchens, which are located on separate floors so they can be used efficiently to serve two concurrent functions on both levels.

In 1990 when Wetmore retired from his position as Club Manager, Mr. George Wolf, an associate of Mr. Wetmore, came to Tavistock from Riverton Country Club. Mr. Wolf became the Club Manager and took up residence with his family in the former Fulton residence.

Seventy-five years after the founding of Tavistock Country Club, all its founding members have passed away. During the 75 year history, Tavistock has produced many individual and team champions in men’s and women’s golf. The honors and accomplishments won by our members are exhibited by the many trophies and plaques displayed in the Clubhouse. We recognize and honor all our Champions.

From the farm lands of the Gill-Hopkins family in the early days of the area, to what Frank Middleton, Jr. envisioned, Tavistock today is a dream that happened. Through the Club's governing bodies and members who have been willing to give their considerable talents and time from 1921 to today, each has put forth great effort to achieve what we now enjoy. Tavistock is simply "one of a kind".

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