William Bragg in Adelaide:
and finally golf

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William Henry Bragg arrived at Adelaide from Cambridge early in 1886 to take up his appointment as the University’s second professor of mathematics and first professor of experimental physics. In earlier articles in this journal I have discussed Bragg’s love of sporting recreation, particularly lacrosse [Jenkin, 1980] and tennis [Jenkin, 1981], and his important role in the development of the game of lacrosse in South Australia.

When Bragg ceased to play lacrosse and tennis, he devoted what time he had for sport to golf, and this article therefore completes my account of his active Australian sporting interests. The Adelaide Golf Club was founded in June 1870, but by 1876 it had lapsed because of lack of support. The club was reformed on the initiative of Col. J.M. Gordon in August 1892, and obtained permission from the Adelaide City Council to play on the north-east parklands, in the area bounded by Kingston, Robe and Lefevre Terraces, directly opposite the house where the Bragg family lived [Adelaide City Council, 1892]. W.H. Bragg (WHB) watched with increasing interest as the members struggled to lay out a nine-hole course on the hard and waterless ground. W.L. Bragg (WLB) and his friend Eric Gill sometimes played there. (Photo 1).

WHB joined the club on Friday, 28 April 1893 [Royal Adelaide Golf Club], and began at once to demonstrate that characteristic that was a feature of every activity he undertook, whether teaching, research or recreation: ‘Professor Bragg’s golf is the result of an infinite capacity for taking pains, as during all his golfing career he has set himself to master individual shots by constant daily practice’ [The Critic, 1907]. With the course so close to his home, it was possible for WHB to spend an hour or two in the evenings improving his game. He quickly reduced his handicap from 13 to 10. A ladies’ club was also formed in 1893, and given permission to play on the course.

In January 1894, WHB was elected Secretary/Treasurer for the ensuing year, the neat and economical style of his hand-written minutes stands out in stark contrast to the heavy and flamboyant hands of his predecessor and successors. In the same year he and Mr Ayers were appointed a sub-committee to superintend all details in connection with the preparation of the greens on the links. Bragg’s year as Secretary/Treasurer was not an easy one. There was much dissatisfaction with the way the greensman was attending to his duties, and WHB’s arrangements with Constable Beckman for the use of part of his house as clubrooms had to be abandoned because of lack of use by the members. J.R. Baker, the gifted but erratic tennis player that WHB had partnered in doubles to good effect [Jenkin, 1981], now frequently complained about the golf course and the committee. Some members were unhappy about the presence of lady players, and the committee decided, on the motion of the Secretary, ‘that in consequence of the danger resulting from members of the club going the reverse way round on days on which ladies were allowed to play, members should go the ordinary way on Mondays and Tuesdays’. Nevertheless, the weekly handicap match always offered WHB the satisfying relaxation he sought; the official course consisted of two rounds of the parkland links, and in 1894 only Dr Swift (scratch) had a lower handicap than Bragg (one) for the Browne Trophy competition. Winning net scores were usually close to 100.

Early in 1895 the club negotiated with the Corporation of the City of Adelaide to have water laid onto the greens and stinkwort weed removed from the fairways. Under Bragg’s influence an increasing number of University staff and Charles (Jnr), and Hedley Todd joined the club. But despite these improvements, the condition and long-term prospects of the course remained problematic. A special general meeting on the question of amalgamation with the Glenelg Golf Club, while retaining the North Adelaide links for practice, was held on 3 December 1895. The resolution was opposed by Messrs Strahan, Pope and Bragg, but after some discussion in which it was agreed that the Adelaide Golf Club should retain its identity and membership. The motion was carried unanimously. The Glenelg course was not the present one, but on land leased from the Sandison family, who owned a large property in the area then called Helsmdale. Sandison Reserve and Golf Links Terrace are present-day reminders of these earlier times [Jeans, 1979]. Even on the new course, however, conditions were far from ideal; the ‘Local Rules’ required a ball lying on a putting green on the way to another hole to be lifted and dropped beyond the green, and allowed a ‘prickly jack’ stuck fast in a ball to be removed, under the supervision of an adversary, without penalty. A convenient train service ran from the city to the sea-side suburb.
BRAGG CENTENARY

Bragg's handicap was reduced to scratch early in 1896, but thereafter he played less often, although he won the August monthly medal with a net 99 (104.5). Mrs Bragg was President of the Ladies & Gentlemen's Doubles in October 1897; they were overseas on study leave in 1898. On his return, WHB played regularly, with a consistent handicap of 5, and Mrs & Professor Bragg played together in occasional mixed-pairs handicap stroke competitions. Newspaper reporters did not always share the seriousness of the competitors; an unattributed newspaper cutting in the club's 1896-1902 Minute Book describes a mixed foursomes day on the Glenelg links as follows:

'Had a cynic stood by the last flag he would have found ample material for his cynicism — a well-known city merchant toiling over the hill, whose eye would not quiver at the sight of six figures, but yet, whose courage failed him when he found his ball half-buried in the sand; doctors hacking their balls with the powerful club with as much complicity as if the innocent rotundities were so many patients; lawyers fairly thick, able as a rule to control their tongues, but who found a topped ball or a broken club was apt to make them forget their surroundings — but why prolong the list? Golf makes different creatures of us all — some worse, some better, but all enthusiastic!'

During the period 1902-4 WHB played regularly in the weekly competitions, with a handicap between 5 and 10, and was often in the top 10 finishers.

The combined clubs did not have control of the land on which the 18-hole course was laid, however, and the rising rent, inadequate clubhouse and inadministrability of investing too greatly in the links caused increasing dissatisfaction, despite regular seeding, top-dressing and enlarging of the course. Matters came to a head in September 1904, when the committee called a special general meeting to consider the fact that it had 'endeavoured fruitlessly to come to terms with Mr Sandison, the present landlord, for an extension of the lease.' The meeting authorised the committee to pursue the matter of buying land for a new course in the Grange/Seaton seaside area, and the committee began negotiations with the directors of the proposed Seaton Estates Ltd for the lease of a large piece of open land, with a stated intention to purchase on specified terms at a later date. Mr Sandison made the club an improved offer to stay at Glenelg, and further special general meetings had to be called on 19 September and 10 October 1904. Bragg wrote a letter to the committee and sent a proxy to one of these special meetings, but his letter has not survived and individual votes are not recorded. After a motion to stay at Glenelg was lost 17/40, the proposal to move to Seaton was carried unanimously. In view of WHB's subsequent enthusiasm for the new course, we may assume that he strongly supported the proposition to move. Not only was the sandy location ideally suited to the construction of a permanent course, but there was a good train service from the city; the line through the centre of the course remains a famous feature to the present day. The Adelaide Golf Club had finally reached its permanent home.

Early in 1905, WHB wrote to the committee, and although none of the club's early correspondence remains, we may infer its contents with a good deal of certainty. The minutes of the committee meeting at which the letter was read record that Bragg's offer be accepted with thanks and Professor Bragg be informed that the details of carrying out his scheme be left to the incoming Committee. ... 'Alterations to the course as shown on the plan were approved. Similarly, WLB later recorded in his autobiographical notes [Bragg, W.L.]: 'I used to caddy for [my father] as a boy, and I remember going around with him when he was planning a new course at Seaton. WLB clearly took a leading role in laying out the new course. Nor was it the first time he had done so. WLB also recorded that, during one of the family's summer holidays at Port Elliott in the 1890s, 'my father joined in making some sort of golf course in the rough ground in front of the hotel. He had a great interest in games of all sorts.'

After some negotiations, it was resolved to accept the £200 offer of the Glenelg Golf Club for the whole of the Adelaide club's property there, including the Ladies' House, and the bicycle shed, but excluding the pictures, tee tins and hole cutter. It was further agreed to borrow up to £500 for the erection of a new clubhouse in the centre of the course alongside the railway line. Photo 2. Motions to exclude the lady associates from the building were carried, although the members later allowed their admission. J.R. Baker resigned in protest. Stiles were built over the railway-line fences, and a tassel platform was erected after the Railway Commissioner had given approval for trains to stop at the new clubhouse. The 'dairy cottage' was refurbished for a resident greenkeeper and a caddies' shed built. The first competition was held in August 1905; for a trophy donated by Professor Bragg, and Professor G.C. Henderson also donated a trophy for 1906. WHB continued to nominate his friends and acquaintances for membership: Rev. Hopcroft, Harold Fisher and Professors Ennis, Jethro Brown and later William Mitchel were among them.

Early in 1906 the Sydney professional V.G. Souter was engaged to inspect the course and report on how it might be improved. Souter was scathing in his criticism of what we may assume was WHB's initial design. He felt the holes were too short and lacked variety and that the greens were inadequately guarded by bunkers. He proposed extensions to make use of all the available ground, which had some natural sand traps and was nicely undulating and naturally well grassed [Souter, 1906]. Against the wish of most of the members, Souter's suggestion that the course should be made more difficult and of championship standard was accepted by the committee, although the £700 that he had set aside for constructing the full course was used for a layout suggested by the Captain and Secretary and much closer to Bragg's original design than that which Souter had proposed. The result was a course of about 6000 yards, bogey 80, with the ninth 'crater' hole and the short fourth across a valley of drift sand and rushes to a small irregular plateau receiving special praise. During 1906 the number of full members passed the 100 mark, and a professional coach and club repairer, J.H. Scott of Carnoustie in Scotland, was engaged.

The new course was officially declared open by the State Governor on Saturday, 30 June 1906, a cold and bleak day. In describing the flight of the ball during the exhibition game that followed, a newspaper reporter spoke of 'the most elaborate conical sectional curves. As far as I can remember, the report continues, 'the name of the curve is a parabola, but it is much more graceful than its name.' Professor and Mrs Bragg were among the large crowd, Mrs Bragg and the other ladies of the club wearing their new but quite unsuitable navy blue uniforms of wide cloth cap, Norfolk coat with red collar and cuffs, long, cumbersome skirts and tan boots. A special train ran from the city to the course and return, an arrangement that one newspaper reported would soon become permanent: 'The Government have extended their patronage to golf, insomuch as trains which were refused the residents at the Grange are to be run on Sundays for the benefit and convenience of the golfers.'

From the opening of the new course until his departure from Australia for Leeds early in 1909, WHB continued to enjoy the game and play regularly. He won the club's Senior Medal for the 1906-7 season and participated in club and State championships when they were played at Seaton. In the 36-hole final of the club championship in 1907, G.C. Henderson defeated W.H. Bragg 'four up and two to play'; after the two professors had been all square after the morning round [Register. 1907]. Further land was purchased in 1907 to enable alterations and additions to be made, and the condition of the course was further improved by excluding grazing cattle. Late in the year WHB subscribed £1-10 to a fund to establish a memorial trophy to Mr Andrew Scott, for which a silver shield mounted on oak was purchased from England. The club minute book makes no reference to WHB's departure.

The Adelaide Golf Club became 'Royal' by the grace of King George V in 1923. For all its delightful and unusual features, it surely is unique in having been initially laid out by two future Nobel laureates, the elder carefully noting the terrain and stepping out distances as he played his round, the younger carrying the bag of clubs and making notes as his father called them out.

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The Bragg Family in Adelaide: A Pictorial Celebration

Author John Jenkins

Of all the scientists who have worked in Australia, William Henry Bragg (Professor of Mathematics and Physics at Adelaide, 1886-1909) is perhaps the most notable. His Adelaide research into central problems of radioactivity and radiation was not only of contemporary importance but also of lasting significance.

Apart from his teaching role at the University, Bragg became involved in almost every facet of university life and in a wide range of community activities. Equally, Adelaide was central to his development from a raw young graduate to a mature family man, public figure, teacher and research scientist. His elder son, William Lawrence Bragg, was born and educated in Adelaide.

The Bragg family sailed to England in 1909 to further their careers. In 1915, father and son were awarded jointly the Nobel Prize for Physics for work founded in Australia. Thereafter they became two of the major figures in 20th Century British science.

This extensively annotated collection of photographs, many previously unpublished, gives a delightful and fascinating insight into the Bragg story from 1862 to 1915. It also provides an innovative description of Australian science and of Australian life at the turn of the century. And, it details a very notable chapter in the history of the University of Adelaide.

Published by the University Foundation in conjunction with La Trobe University, this 92-page book is available from the University of Adelaide Foundation: GPO Box 498, Adelaide, South Australia, 5001, Australia A$15 (incl. surface mail postage). For airmail add: Australia A$2.30, United Kingdom A$7.60, United States A$6.60.