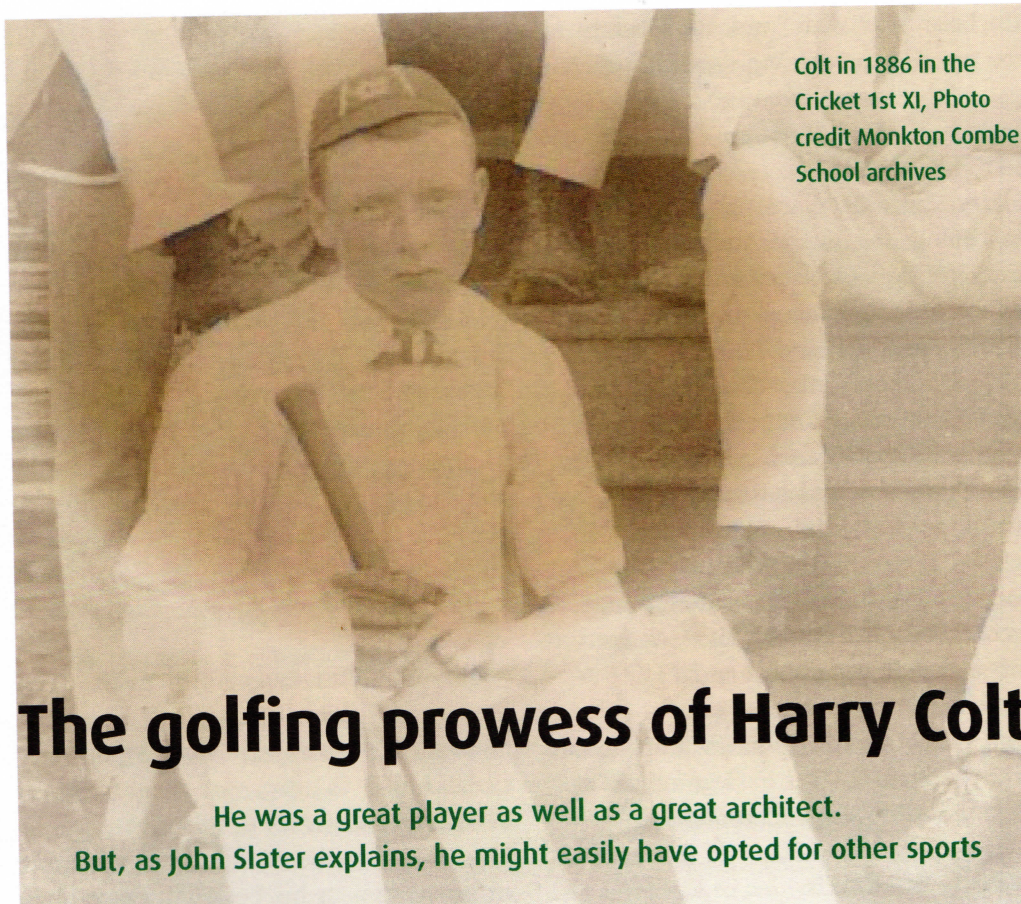


ALL-ROUNDERS



Colt in 1886 in the Cricket 1st XI, Photo credit Monkton Combe School archives

The golfing prowess of Harry Colt

He was a great player as well as a great architect.

But, as John Slater explains, he might easily have opted for other sports

Many believe that Harry Shapland Colt was the finest golf architect the world has ever seen. Certainly his list of credits – among them Pine Valley, Sunningdale, Swinley Forest, Rye, Royal Portrush, Royal County Down and Muirfield – is unsurpassed.

Many also know that he was a top golfer, captaining Cambridge University, winning the R&A Jubilee Vase in 1891 and 1893, reaching the semi-final of the 1906 Amateur Championship (where he lost to the eventual Champion) and representing England against Scotland in 1908.

What is perhaps less well known is how he became so good at golf.

Colt was born in August 1869 in Hornsey,

London. Two years later his barrister father died and his mother moved her family (two sons and four daughters) to Malvern in Worcestershire, probably to be near her wealthy aunt, Kate Brace, in Worcester.

Although he started golf at the Worcestershire Golf Club on Malvern Wells Common at the age of 10, in January 1881 the young Harry was packed off to board at Monkton Combe, a small Evangelical private school with 65 pupils in a beautiful valley south of Bath. He stayed there until the summer of 1887.

Founded in 1868, Monkton Combe had recently been taken over by the Revd. R G Bryan, formerly a pupil at Rugby under Thomas Arnold. Bryan reorganised it on

Rugbeian lines with "muscular Christianity" the order of the day, and sport an important part of the curriculum.

OTHER GAMES

Harry had a glittering school career, captaining the rugby and cricket teams, participating in athletics and doubles tennis tournaments, rowing, and gaining entry to Cambridge University.

The school magazine, 'Monktonian', reported in January 1887 that Colt was a "very successful three-quarter-back (at rugby) – a thoroughly able and energetic captain" and that he was a good all-rounder at cricket. On sports day in 1885 he won the high jump and the 120-yard hurdles as well as coming second in the half mile. He also found time to row at bow in the school's coxed IV.

He was no academic slouch either – with two other Monktonians he passed the entrance exam to Clare College in April 1887, starting at Cambridge that autumn, aged 18.

SCHOOL HOLIDAYS

The mystery for us today is how the young Harry became so good at golf, a sport not offered at school, that within two years of going up to Cambridge he was captaining the University team.

Indeed, according to the 'Monktonian' in May 1889, he and his school friend C.M. Hutchinson were almost the only players to win any points in the match against Oxford that year. Colt was reported as being "dormy four on his opponent". The correspondent confessed he was "unversed in the language of golf" and so "was unable to render (this) in the vernacular."

Colt initially continued his rowing at Cambridge (in Clare's 2nd boat), and that might have become his main sport, but by

September 1889 he had switched to golf. He won the scratch Linskill Cup and was elected captain of Cambridge University Golf Club. John Low, the great amateur golfer of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, said the standard of golf at Cambridge was not high when he got there in 1890, but he makes an exception for HS Colt.

Throughout his schooldays we know that Harry returned home for Christmas, Easter and for at least four weeks in the summer, and presumably resumed play on Malvern Common. Perhaps back at school, bitten by the golf-bug, he spent any free hours clipping the heads off daisies with his favourite mashie-niblick on Longmead, the school's sports ground which was shared with a herd of cows.

But who first taught him golf? Peter Paxton, a Scot from Musselburgh who came 2nd in the 1880 Open Championship and tied for 10th in 1883, was the professional at Malvern from 1881 to 1887 when young Harry was at school. Although Colt never mentions him in his books, it seems likely that Paxton first showed the young Harry how to hit a golf ball.

THE INFLUENCE OF DOUGLAS ROLLAND

Colt, meanwhile, was a huge fan of Douglas Rolland who had arrived at Malvern as the professional in 1887 just as Harry was about to go up to Cambridge. "Everyone has a golfing hero, and mine was, and is, and always will be, Douglas Rolland" Colt wrote in 1933. "As a boy I worshipped him, and there is no doubt that his was a most delightful personality."

Rolland remained the professional at Malvern throughout Harry's Cambridge career, and must have polished the younger man's game when he was home in the long summer holidays, teaching him not just how



Douglas Rolland: hero of a young Colt

to play, but how to win.

According to golf historian Iain Crawford, Rolland was the best golfer of his generation, nine years older than his cousin James Braid, both from Elie, and was at his peak just before the rise of the Great Triumvirate. He tied for 10th with Paxton in the 1883 Open and came 2nd in the 1884 Open.

Writing about Rolland in 1912, Colt said "How when a boy, I envied his driving, and also his 44 inches of chest! And I well remember his favourite remark when he hit an extra good one; it was always the same: Awa' she sails with dashing spray! Many a round have I enjoyed in his company at Malvern, then Limpsfield and afterwards at Rye."

Colt and Rolland continued to work together after Colt's time at Cambridge. In 1891 Rolland moved from Malvern to Limpsfield Chart, a nine-hole course designed by Paxton. Over the next three years Rolland played innumerable money matches against

the greats of the game.

After graduating in 1890, Harry was working as a solicitor in London and living with his two unmarried sisters and three servants in Wimbledon Village, a mile from the clubhouse of Royal Wimbledon Golf Club, where he was a member. He was comfortably off after a double inheritance of about £5,000 from great aunt Kate Brace and his mother, who died within weeks of each other in late 1890.

During these years Colt would travel to play at Limpsfield, eventually becoming an honorary member there.

Elected a member of the R&A in 1891, he won the Jubilee Vase on the Old Course that autumn off a handicap of 1. He did it again two years later off scratch.

When Colt moved down to St Leonards in 1893 to be a partner in a Hastings law firm, he first joined Hastings & St Leonards Golf Club and then Rye Golf Club. At the Open Championship week at Sandwich in June 1894 he persuaded Rolland, who came 2nd again, not to return to Limpsfield but to become the Professional at Rye.

Together they re-designed the holes over the dunes at Camber Sands. The rest, as they say, is history.

My guess is that as a player Colt followed the standard pattern for budding amateurs; watching top professionals play and then getting lots of practice. Peter Paxton showed the young HS Colt the game, he developed his skills by practice during his schooldays and then Douglas Rolland taught him the finer points of how to win.

John Slater is a member of Tandridge.

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