



Women's Golf: Participation, Structure, and Social Context (c.1811–Present)

A Historical Context Paper

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Purpose of this document

This paper provides a detailed historical account of women's golf in England, tracing participation, organisational structure, and social context from the early nineteenth century to the present day. Its purpose is to establish **how women's golf arrived at its current position**, using documented evidence rather than retrospective interpretation.

The intention is to support informed strategic reflection. The document does not attribute fault, promote specific policy responses, or evaluate current governance decisions. It presents the historical record so that contemporary strategy can be considered with a clear understanding of what has existed before, what conditions enabled participation, and how those conditions have changed over time.

Where historical data sources differ from contemporary reporting frameworks, figures are presented as indicative of scale rather than as direct like-for-like comparisons.

1. Women's golf before national governance (c.1811–1893)

Women were playing golf in Britain well before the formation of any national governing body. Early references date from the early nineteenth century, and by the mid- to late-1800s women's golf had moved beyond informal recreation.

By the 1870s and 1880s:

- Women's golf clubs and women's sections within existing clubs were forming across England and Scotland
- Women organised regular play, internal competitions, and inter-club matches
- Committees of women managed fixtures, subscriptions, and social organisation

By the late nineteenth century, women's golf had reached a level of **local maturity**. Participation was not isolated or occasional; it was regular, structured, and sustained by women themselves.

What was missing was not interest or organisation, but **a shared national framework**. As inter-club competition increased, differences in rules, handicapping, and local interpretation created disputes and inconsistencies. Competitive fairness did not reliably extend beyond individual clubs.

From its earliest organised forms, women's golf developed within an implicitly amateur framework. Participation was understood as a leisure activity rather than paid work, shaped by prevailing social norms about respectability and women's public roles. This assumption did not limit competitive seriousness, but it did influence how women organised, governed, and justified their sporting activity.

2. The growth that necessitated organisation (1890–1893)

The early 1890s marked a period of rapid expansion.

By 1893, there were **63 recognised ladies' clubs or sections across Great Britain**, including **14 in Scotland**. England accounted for the majority of the remainder.

This scale is significant. It demonstrates that:

- Women's golf had reached a size where informal coordination was no longer sufficient
- Inter-club and inter-regional competition required common standards
- The absence of shared authority limited further development

The decision to form a national governing body emerged directly from this practical reality.

As competition increased, the absence of shared standards was particularly challenging within an amateur system, where authority depended on collective agreement rather than contractual or commercial enforcement.

3. The founding of the Ladies' Golf Union (1893)

In April 1893, representatives of women's golf clubs met in London and established the Ladies' Golf Union (LGU).

The LGU's purpose was explicitly functional:

- To establish consistent rules and handicapping
- To provide an authority recognised across clubs
- To enable fair competition between players of different standards
- To organise a national championship within an agreed framework

The LGU was founded within a firmly amateur tradition. All participants were amateurs, and competition was organised around principles of equity, conduct, and voluntary service. This framework aligned with wider British sporting culture and provided women with legitimacy at a time when paid sport for women was neither socially accepted nor structurally viable.

The LGU was not created to centralise control, but to **enable participation to travel** — from club to club, county to county, and eventually internationally.

It is important to note the social context:

- Women in 1893 did not have the vote
- Married women's legal and financial independence remained limited despite reforms
- Most women did not work outside the home

Within these constraints, women created and governed a national sporting body that functioned effectively for decades.

4. Expansion and consolidation (1893–1914)

Following the formation of the LGU, women's golf expanded rapidly.

Between **1890 and 1914**, the number of women's golf clubs grew from **approximately 30 to 479**, of which **297 were in England**.

During this period:

- Club membership increased steadily
- County-level organisation began to emerge
- Competitive standards rose
- Women travelled increasingly for matches and championships

Governance during this era was:

- Lean
- Volunteer-led
- Closely connected to the playing base

The system supported wide participation while allowing stronger players to progress through club and county competition.

The amateur basis of the game allowed governance to remain lean and participatory, with authority derived from service and experience rather than remuneration.

5. World War I and political change (1914–1919)

World War I disrupted sporting life across Britain. Many competitions were suspended or reduced, and travel was constrained.

However, the war also marked a shift in women's public role:

- Women entered paid work in unprecedented numbers
- Women took on visible civic responsibilities
- In 1918, some women gained the parliamentary vote

When golf resumed, women returned to the sport with increased confidence in public organisation and leadership.

The continuation of women's golf after the war reflected the resilience of an amateur system that relied on voluntary organisation rather than commercial infrastructure.

6. Interwar years: participation, competition, & structure (1919–1939)

The interwar period saw a resurgence of women's golf.

Key features included:

- Growth in county-level competition
- Expansion of national championships
- Increasing international fixtures
- Continued club-based participation across England

This period is notable for the **balance between breadth and aspiration**:

- Most women played locally at club level
- Progression to county or national competition was possible but not compulsory
- Costs increased with higher levels of play, but local participation remained accessible

Amateurism played an important role in maintaining this balance. Because competitive status was not tied to income, women could participate seriously without committing to a professional identity, allowing a wide range of players to remain engaged at club and county level.

The system allowed women to remain engaged regardless of competitive ambition.

Throughout the twentieth century, the governance of golf evolved through parallel but interconnected institutions. The R&A played a central role in the custodianship of the Rules of Golf and the amateur tradition, which shaped competitive norms internationally, including within women's golf. These frameworks provided stability and legitimacy across jurisdictions, even as participation patterns varied locally.

7. Leisure, work, and time (1920s–1930s)

Broader social changes affected sport participation:

- The adoption of a five-day working week for men (from the mid-1920s) reshaped leisure patterns
- Women's leisure time remained constrained by domestic expectations
- Sport participation increasingly depended on available time rather than interest alone

Women's golf continued to function because:

- Clubs provided regular, local opportunities
- Competition was structured but flexible
- Women exercised significant autonomy within their own organisations

Within an amateur framework, the primary constraint on participation was time rather than eligibility or cost, making local access and flexible competition formats particularly important.

8. World War II and post-war re-domestication (1939–1950s)

World War II again disrupted organised sport. After 1945, women's roles shifted sharply:

- Many women were encouraged to leave paid employment
- Domestic responsibility increased
- Leisure time for women contracted

Sport participation across many women's sports declined or stagnated during this period. Golf was not immune.

Despite this, women's golf structures survived:

- Clubs continued to operate
- County associations remained active
- National governance persisted

The system contracted but did not collapse.

The amateur structure enabled women's golf to survive this period of contraction, but it also limited the availability of financial support or alternative participation models at a time when women's leisure time was increasingly restricted.

8A. Amateurism: principle, protection, and long-term consequence

(Structural pivot with lasting participation impact)

From the late nineteenth century onward, amateurism was a defining principle of British sport. In women's golf, it was adopted early, embraced deeply, and maintained with particular rigour.

Amateurism as protection (late 19th – early 20th century)

In its original context, amateurism served several practical and cultural purposes for women's golf:

- It protected women's sport from commercial exploitation
- It reinforced respectability at a time when women's public activity was socially constrained
- It distinguished competitive sport from paid labour, aligning golf with leisure, education, and character rather than income

For early women golfers, amateurism was not imposed reluctantly; it was often **actively defended** as a safeguard that allowed women to organise, compete, and travel without social sanction.

Within this framework:

- All women golfers were amateurs by definition
- Governance, competition, and progression were structured accordingly
- Status and recognition were achieved through achievement and service, not payment

This model aligned well with the social realities of the period and supported broad participation at club and county level.

Institutionalisation of amateurism (interwar years)

During the interwar period, amateurism became increasingly **formalised and codified** within women's golf structures.

Key characteristics included:

- Clear separation between amateur and professional status
- Strong cultural resistance to payment, sponsorship, or material reward
- An expectation that serious competition existed outside commercial incentives

At the same time, women's golf expanded competitively:

- County championships flourished

- National competitions grew in prestige
- International fixtures increased

Amateurism functioned effectively in this context because:

- Most women players were not seeking income from sport
- Participation costs remained manageable at local levels
- Time, rather than money, was the primary constraint

The system supported both elite amateur competition and mass participation without internal contradiction.

Divergence from the men's game (mid-20th century)

By the mid-twentieth century, a divergence between men's and women's golf became more pronounced.

In men's golf:

- Professionalism expanded gradually and then decisively
- Clear pathways developed between amateur and professional status
- Commercial sponsorship and prize money increased visibility and aspiration

In women's golf, particularly in England:

- Amateurism remained the dominant organising principle for far longer
- Professional opportunities were limited, fragmented, or geographically distant
- Elite women often remained amateurs by necessity rather than choice

This divergence had structural consequences:

- Women's golf governance remained oriented toward amateur competition
- Pathways prioritised championships over careers
- Financial support for progression was minimal or absent

While this preserved the integrity of amateur competition, it also constrained adaptation as wider social conditions changed.

Amateurism and women's changing lives (post-1945)

After World War II, women's lives altered significantly:

- Paid employment increased

- Dual responsibilities (work and home) became more common
- Time for leisure became more limited and fragmented

Under these conditions, the amateur model began to show strain.

Key tensions emerged:

- Competitive participation required increasing time and travel
- Financial support remained limited by amateur rules and culture
- Those with greater personal resources were better able to continue

Amateurism, once a leveller, began inadvertently to act as a **filter** — not by intention, but by structure.

Professional opportunities and delayed integration (1950s–1980s)

The establishment of the LPGA in 1950 and the Ladies European Tour in 1978 introduced professional opportunities for women, but these developed largely **outside the traditional English amateur pathway**.

As a result:

- Club and county systems remained amateur-focused
- Professional golf did not meaningfully relieve participation pressure at grassroots level
- Most women golfers continued to engage entirely within amateur structures

This separation meant that:

- Amateur governance continued to carry the full weight of participation provision
- Structural adaptation to women's changing time and economic realities was slow

Long-term participation implications

By the late twentieth century — even at the point of peak participation in England — the amateur system carried implicit assumptions:

- Regular availability for weekday and weekend play
- Capacity to self-fund progression

- Continuity of club-based identity over flexible engagement

As women's lives diversified further, these assumptions became increasingly misaligned with lived reality.

Importantly:

- Amateurism itself did not cause participation decline
- Nor did professionalism offer a direct solution

However, the relative rigidity of the amateur framework, combined with changing social conditions, reduced the system's ability to adapt at scale.

Why amateurism matters in strategic context

The historical record shows that amateurism in women's golf has been:

- A source of protection and legitimacy
- A foundation for mass participation
- A stabilising governance principle

It has also, at different moments, limited flexibility in response to:

- Time pressure
- Economic change
- Shifting patterns of engagement

Understanding amateurism as a **structural design choice**, rather than a moral stance, is essential when considering participation history and future strategy.

9. Professional golf and visibility (1950s–1970s)

The mid-twentieth century introduced new dimensions:

- The LPGA was founded in 1950 in the United States
- Professional women's golf became more visible internationally
- In Europe, the Ladies European Tour was established in 1978

These developments increased aspiration and visibility but operated largely outside the long-established amateur club-based system that continued to underpin most women's participation in England.

10. The late-20th-century participation peak (c.1980s)

Primary evidence from *Golfing Ladies* documents the scale of women's golf in England at its peak:

- **1,128 affiliated women's clubs**
- **93,550 women members** (England)
- **47 LGU officials**, equating to approximately **one official per 230 players**

This scale was achieved within a predominantly amateur structure, indicating that amateur governance remained capable of supporting mass participation when aligned with social conditions.

At this point:

- Women's club golf in England was larger than it is today
- Governance was dense and closely aligned with participants
- Participation spanned all ages and competitive levels

Internationally, women's golf comprised:

- **17 overseas women's golf unions**
- **3,809 affiliated clubs worldwide**

This was a mature, scalable system supporting mass participation.

11. Changing lives, changing participation (1980s–2000s)

From the 1980s onwards:

- Women's participation in paid employment increased significantly
- Dual responsibilities (work and home) became common
- Time for regular sport became more constrained

At the same time:

- Club structures remained largely unchanged
- Participation models continued to assume availability aligned with earlier social patterns

While many women continued to play golf, formal club membership began to decline relative to earlier levels.

As women's lives diversified, the assumptions embedded in an amateur, club-centred model — regular availability, self-funded progression, and long-term membership continuity — became more difficult to sustain for many, even as interest in the game remained.

12. The contemporary landscape

Today:

- Golf participation includes a broader range of formats
- Engagement is more flexible and less club-centred
- Women form a smaller proportion of formal club membership than at the historical peak

Governance is unified under a single national body, with strategy focused on inclusion, sustainability, and growth.

The historical record shows that women's golf participation has previously thrived when:

- Structures aligned with women's lives
- Access was local and repeatable
- Governance supported breadth as well as excellence

The challenge for modern participation lies not in the amateur principle itself, but in how inherited structures interact with contemporary patterns of work, time, and engagement.

13. Why this history matters

This history demonstrates that:

- Decline is not inevitable
- High participation has existed before
- Structural alignment matters as much as cultural aspiration

Understanding the full arc of women's golf — from local clubs, through national organisation, to modern participation challenges — provides valuable context for future strategic decisions.

...understanding how amateurism has both supported and constrained participation at different moments may be particularly valuable when considering future pathway design.

Closing note

This document offers history, not prescription. Its value lies in showing **what has worked before, under what conditions**, and **how change has shaped participation outcomes**.

It is offered in the spirit of shared institutional memory and informed reflection.

Appendix A

Amateurism in Women's Golf: Timeline & Structural Effects

Purpose of this appendix

This appendix summarises how amateurism has functioned as a *structural design principle* in women's golf over time, and how its effects on participation have shifted as social conditions changed. It is not an evaluation of amateurism as a value, but a record of its operational impact.

Timeline: Amateurism and Participation Alignment

Pre-1893 — Implicit Amateurism

Context

- Women's golf organised locally through clubs and committees
- Sport framed as leisure, education, and social activity

Structural effect

- Participation open to women without professional identity
- Governance voluntary, local, and socially legitimate

Participation outcome

- Steady growth at club level
 - Competitive seriousness without commercial pressure
-

1893–1914 — Formalisation within Growth

Context

- Founding of the Ladies' Golf Union
- National competition and handicapping standardised
- Amateurism explicit and uncontested

Structural effect

- Lean governance
- Authority derived from service and consensus
- Costs contained at local level

Participation outcome

- Rapid expansion of clubs and members
 - Broad base with optional progression to county/national levels
-

1919–1939 — Amateurism at Scale

Context

- Interwar resurgence
- County and national competitions flourish
- Women's public roles expand modestly

Structural effect

- Amateurism supports balance between inclusion and excellence
- Serious competition without income dependence

Participation outcome

- High engagement across competitive and recreational players
 - Stable retention at club level
-

1945–1960s — Social Shift, Structural Strain

Context

- Post-war re-domestication
- Reduced leisure time for women
- Continued reliance on voluntary structures

Structural effect

- Amateur model ensures survival
- Limited capacity for financial support or adaptation

Participation outcome

- Contraction and stagnation
 - Retention increasingly favours those with time and resources
-

1970s–1980s — Peak Participation within Amateur Framework

Context

- Women's employment increases
- Professional tours emerge externally (LPGA, LET)
- Club golf remains predominantly amateur

Structural effect

- Amateur governance still supports mass participation
- Increasing mismatch between time demands and women's lives

Participation outcome

- Peak club membership achieved
- System functions, but under growing pressure

1990s–Present — Misalignment with Contemporary Lives

Context

- Dual work/care responsibilities common
- Fragmented leisure patterns
- Diverse participation preferences

Structural effect

- Amateur, club-centred assumptions persist:
 - regular availability
 - self-funded progression
 - long-term membership continuity

Participation outcome

- Reduced female representation in formal club membership
- Continued interest in golf through alternative formats

Structural Summary (Board-Level)

What amateurism enabled

- Legitimacy and respectability
- Wide participation without income barriers
- Lean, scalable governance

- Long-term institutional continuity

What amateurism limited (unintentionally)

- Financial flexibility
- Adaptation speed
- Inclusion of those with constrained time
- Structural response to changing women's lives

Key observation

Amateurism functioned effectively when *social conditions aligned with its assumptions*. As those conditions changed, participation outcomes changed — without any single decision or failure point.

Strategic Relevance

This history suggests that participation outcomes are shaped less by motivation or values, and more by **how inherited structures interact with contemporary realities**.

Understanding amateurism as a *historical system design* — rather than a principle to defend or reject — may be useful when considering future participation pathways, formats, and governance models.

End of Appendix

Appendix B

Women's Golf Participation Over Time aligned to England Golf 2025-2030 strategy

Amateur Structure × Social Change × Participation Outcome

Aligned to England Golf Strategy 2025–2030

Historical Period	Amateur / Structural Design	Participation Outcome (Evidence)	Relevant England Golf Strategy 2025–2030 Focus
c.1811–1890	Implicit amateurism Local club autonomy Volunteer governance	Steady club-level growth	<i>Golf as a community activity Clubs as the foundation of the game</i>
1890–1893	Expanding amateur competition No national coordination	Structural pressure for fairness & consistency	<i>Need for clear pathways and shared standards</i>
1893–1914	Formal amateur governance (LGU) Lean national structure	Rapid expansion of women's clubs & members	<i>Strong governance enabling participation</i>
1919–1939	Amateurism at scale County & national competitions	High retention across ability levels	<i>Sustainable participation models</i>
1945–1960s	Amateur system preserved Limited financial flexibility	Stagnation / uneven recovery	<i>Long-term sustainability challenges</i>
1970s	Club-centred amateur dominance Professional routes external	Participation pressure begins	<i>Changing lifestyles and time pressures</i>
Early 1980s (Peak)	Amateur governance at full scale	Highest recorded women's club participation	<i>Evidence that participation can scale</i>

Historical Period	Amateur / Structural Design	Participation Outcome (Evidence)	Relevant England Golf Strategy 2025–2030 Focus
	1,128 clubs / 93,550 women		
1990s–2000s	Amateur assumptions persist: regular availability self-funded progression	Decline in formal club membership	<i>Retention challenges Modern relevance of club offer</i>
2010s–Present	Unified national governance Legacy club models	Broader engagement, lower female share of club membership	<i>Inclusive growth Flexibility of formats Reaching under-represented groups</i>

How England Golf readers are intended to use this grid

This alignment is designed to allow strategy readers to:

- See **where current priorities sit on a long historical curve**
- Recognise that participation outcomes have previously shifted **without loss of interest**
- Reflect on which **structural assumptions** remain inherited from earlier eras
- Consider how today’s strategy objectives interact with those assumptions

The grid does **not** imply:

- That past structures should be reinstated
- That current strategy is insufficient
- That participation decline has a single cause

It simply shows that **participation outcomes have always been structurally contingent** — shaped by the interaction between governance design, social change, and lived reality.

Why this alignment matters strategically

England Golf Strategy 2025–2030 places emphasis on:

- Inclusion and accessibility
- Club sustainability

- Modern participation formats
- Long-term growth

This historical alignment demonstrates that:

- Women's participation has previously reached scale under different structural conditions
- Decline is not inevitable
- Structural alignment has been decisive in past success

That context may be useful when considering **how today's strategy is implemented**, rather than *whether its aims are valid*.

Appendix C

What This History Shows: Institutional Perspectives

This appendix draws out, side-by-side, what the historical record **reveals differently** depending on institutional role. It does not propose responses or priorities. It identifies *what becomes visible* from each position.

Institutional Lens Comparison

What this history shows for National Governing Bodies

Participation outcomes have fluctuated significantly over time, even when interest in the game remained strong.

Periods of high participation were associated with close alignment between governance structures and women's lived realities.

Decline in formal participation did not occur suddenly, nor at a single decision point.

Club-centred, amateur models supported mass participation effectively under certain social conditions.

As women's time, work, and family roles diversified, inherited assumptions within participation structures became harder to sustain.

Participation scale proved sensitive to access, time availability, and local structural flexibility.

Governance density and proximity to participants supported scale during peak periods.

Modern participation challenges sit within a long historical arc rather than representing a recent failure.

What this history shows for Global Custodians

Participation outcomes vary internationally and across eras without undermining the continuity of the game itself.

Long-standing frameworks (rules, amateur status, competition norms) have provided stability across changing social contexts.

Structural endurance has allowed the game to remain coherent while participation patterns have shifted beneath it.

Amateurism functioned as a unifying global principle, enabling legitimacy, comparability, and integrity across jurisdictions.

As social conditions changed unevenly across regions, the effects of shared frameworks diverged in practice.

Custodial frameworks proved resilient, even when local participation models required adaptation.

Lean, principle-based governance supported long-term continuity rather than short-term participation optimisation.

The game's traditions have interacted with social change rather than determining participation outcomes directly.

**What this history shows for National
Governing Bodies**

Structural design choices made for one era
had different effects as social conditions
evolved.

**What this history shows for Global
Custodians**

Stability of principles does not guarantee
stability of participation patterns.

References

Women's Golf: Participation, Structure, and Social Context (c.1811–Present)

Primary historical sources (core evidence)

1. **Our Lady of the Green** (1899)
Contemporary account of early women's golf, clubs, competitions, and the founding context of the Ladies' Golf Union. Provides direct evidence of women-led organisation, governance, and participation at the end of the nineteenth century.
 2. **Golfing Ladies** – Rosalynde Cossey (1984)
Principal statistical and structural source for women's golf in England and internationally. Provides membership figures, club counts, governance density, and international comparisons, including peak participation data in the late twentieth century.
 3. **Golfing Reminiscences** – Mabel Stringer (1924)
First-hand retrospective account by a central figure in women's golf governance. Used for insight into early LGU administration, amateur culture, women's leadership roles, and institutional memory.
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Competition and championship context

4. **Matchless** – Stephen Proctor (2023)
Used for contextual grounding of elite women's competition, the 1929 Women's Amateur Championship, and international competitive standards. Supports understanding of aspiration, excellence, and visibility within an amateur framework.
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Institutional and structural context

5. **Ladies' Golf Union (LGU) records and published histories** (1893–present, various)
Used to establish governance purpose, structure, continuity, and women-led administration within amateur competition systems.
6. **English Ladies' Golf Association (ELGA) affiliation data** (20th century)
Used for participation scale, club affiliation, and membership context in England prior to unification under England Golf.

Contemporary governance context (framing only)

7. England Golf Strategy 2025–2030

Used solely as a *reference framework* for alignment in Appendix B. Not evaluated or critiqued.

Social and historical context (general)

8. UK social history relating to:

- women's legal status (property, banking, suffrage)
- women's work and leisure patterns
- wartime mobilisation and post-war re-domestication
- working-time reform (early 20th century)

These contexts are treated as **background conditions**, not as primary arguments, and are widely established in historical literature.

Method note (implicit but important)

- The document relies on **documented evidence**, not oral testimony or personal experience.
- Where figures are cited, they are used to demonstrate **scale and pattern**, not precise like-for-like comparison with contemporary reporting frameworks.
- Interpretation is deliberately restrained; conclusions are left open for readers to draw.