



# BY THE WAY

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## *Spoons, Niblicks and Cleeks*

Member Simon Gordon Clark, a regular visitor to the Society's London meetings, was heard to bemoan the confusion caused by the modern habit of referring to golf clubs by numbers rather than by their traditional – and colourful – names and went on propose that some clarification could perhaps be offered in *By The Way*. The following, prepared by Tony Ring, seeks to fulfil that request.

But before members take time to read what follows, they are asked to appreciate that in trying to translate the names into numbers and *vice-versa* there are as many expert opinions as on questions of even greater moment, such as Jeeves's age or Bertie's subject of study at Oxford.

The evolution of the sport was uneven in many ways – the rules; the balls; the clubs; they all developed in stages. The materials out of which the clubs and balls are made have responded over the years both to technological development and experiment. Gradual changes led to a name being attributed to clubs with different characteristics, and thus there is considerable overlap in the lists of equivalents provided by different authorities.

In Wodehouse's Golf stories – collected in *The Golf Omnibus* – the Oldest Member makes frequent mention of the clubs used by his fellow-members, but I am aware of only one occasion on which he refers to a numbered club. In *Rodney Has a Relapse*, the final story of the four describing the trials and tribulations of the artistic reformed-poet-now-golf-enthusiast Rodney Spelvin, his wife Anastatia again caught him composing such verses as:

Timothy Bobbin has a canary.  
As regards its sex opinions vary.  
If it just goes tweet-tweet,  
We shall call it Pete,  
But if it lays an egg, we shall switch to Mary.

Anastatia's brother William Bates was then described as scratching the top of his sister's head with a number three iron, in 'a well-meant effort to comfort and console'. This iron's traditional name is a 'mid-mashie', a term which does not appear in the canon, though in *A Damsel in Distress* Reggie Byng complained that being in love had caused him to develop a bad slice with his mid-iron.

With the proviso already given, then, the following may be a reasonable summary of the names of clubs and their modern equivalents.

### Wooden Clubs

- 1 Driver
- 2 Brassie
- 3 Spoon
- 4 Baffy
- 5 Cleek

### Irons

- 1 Driving iron or Driving cleek
- 2 Mid-iron
- 3 Mid-mashie
- 4 Mashie iron
- 5 Mashie
- 6 Spade mashie
- 7 Mashie niblick
- 8 Pitching niblick
- 9 Niblick
- 10 Sand wedge or Pitching wedge

Numbered clubs began to be offered between the wars when significant improvements were made to the shafts – high-carbon steel that could be heat-treated and tempered replaced hickory, and shafts of fibre-glass and aluminium were introduced. These numbered clubs were more finely graduated than the names which were traditionally used, and the shafts themselves could be tailored to different specifications for flexibility and the point of flex.

Wodehouse, of course, would put his own gloss on these names, inventing a number of new ones, such as the patent Sturgis aluminium self-compensating putting cleek (see *A Mixed Threesome*) and identifying the Baffy used by Bobby Jones, an early golf Champion, in the Infants' All-in Championship of Atlanta, Georgia, open to those of both sexes not yet having finished teething (see *High Stakes*).

As a player himself, Wodehouse was *au fait* with the rules of golf, so when Mortimer Sturgis confided to the Oldest Member that he had solved the problem of putting ('He intended in future, he said, to use a croquet mallet, and he wondered that no one had ever thought of it before.'). the OM was able to tell him that 'croquet mallets were against the rules'.

In fact, even that concept seems to have been capable of more than one interpretation! In 1910, the Royal and Ancient Golf Club responded to a suggestion made the previous year by the Pickeridge Golf Club that the R&A should decide at a general meeting whether to putt with a putter made in the form of a small croquet mallet was permissible. It decided that it was illegal to use such clubs (or 'such clubs as have the neck so bent as to produce a similar effect'). Nevertheless it was not until 1968 that the separate idea of standing astride the line of the shot to make the putt was actually made illegal.

In *The Salvation of George Mackintosh*, Wodehouse demonstrated his expertise in how the various clubs could be used successfully for unorthodox purposes:

"I want your advice," said Celia.

"Certainly. What is the trouble? By the way," I said, looking round, "where is your fiancé?"

"I have no fiancé," she said, in a dull, hard voice.

"You have broken the engagement?"

"Not exactly. And yet – well, I suppose it amounts to that."

"I don't quite understand."

"Well, the fact is, said Celia, in a burst of girlish frankness, "I rather think I've killed George."

"Killed him, eh?"

...

"I killed him with my niblick," said Celia.

I nodded. If the thing was to be done at all, it was undoubtedly a niblick shot.

It is noticeable that when the beefy Sidney McMurdo advised his ex-fiancée Agnes Flack that her opponent, his new love Cora Bellinger, expected to win the Women's Singles (to which title Agnes herself aspired), and Agnes opined that she would only do so over her, Agnes's, dead body, Sidney thought it would be a mashie-niblick shot, a difference of two full clubs.

And then, while writing *Sundered Hearts*, he allowed his imagination full rein. The same Mortimer Sturgis who was mentioned earlier, having found the girl of his dreams, had the idea of escorting his bride out of church under an arch of crossed cleeks. Giving in to his new wife's whims, however, this idea was dropped, and he yielded to her idea of honeymooning in Italy. But the great monuments of the past left him cold. 'Of the Temple of Vespasian, all he thought was that it would be a devil of a place to be bunkered behind.' He was more interested in the Colosseum, 'as he speculated whether Abe Mitchell would use a full brassy to carry it'. (Something similar had occurred to Lord Dawlish in *Uneasy Money*, for it was normal for him, while waiting for his fiancée Claire Fenwick, to speculate on such problems as how to carry the length of Shaftesbury Avenue with a single brassy shot.)

Reading the Wodehouse golf stories and the evocative names of the clubs he mentions makes one regret – not for the first time – the loss of historical names in the interest of simplification. If a final demonstration is required, let it come from that renowned Russian golfer, Vladimir Brusiloff, in *The Clicking of Cuthbert*:

"My friend Cootaboot and me will go now to shoot a few holes. You will lend me clobs, friend Cootaboot."

"Any you want."

"The niblicksky is what I use most."

Not even Tolstoy could have made 'number nine iron' as interesting.