

# CHELTENHAM BOWLING CLUB 1898 - 1917



Opening of the 1909 season at the final Winter Garden green. Nine-up match with the Mayor (Mr. J.T. Agg-Gardner MP) and Ald G. Norman versus the Captain (Cllr J. Stewart) and the Secretary (Mr. F.W. Strange).

Photograph by G.H. Martyn and Sons.  
Reproduced from the Cheltenham Looker-On of 15 May 1909.

## Introduction

Smith's centenary history, published in 1983, concentrates on the period after 1917, for which Club records are available. The present study takes the story back two decades and is based on some 80 reports in the Cheltenham Examiner, Free Press and Looker-On and the Gloucestershire Echo.

The main feature of this period was the complex and rather uncomfortable relationship that developed between the Club and the Town Council. Some association was inevitable because the Council was the Club's landlord. But the complication arose because many prominent members of the Club were also councillors or Council officials. (Most of the rest seem to have belonged to the Chamber of Commerce.) Identity between Club and Council became even more complete from 1903, when it became automatic for whoever was elected Mayor to be Club President also. By 1911 the Club had gained the reputation of being virtually "a municipal institution". One innocuous though irritating manifestation of this was that Club functions came to be treated as an extension of Council debates, and civic matters predominated in the speeches. Even the Captain's report was not exempt, and at the 1913 annual dinner, for example, Mr. Ivens inveighed against the town's slums, the inadequacy of its hotels, its poor train service and the sorry state of Lansdown Station before reporting on the season's results. The uncomf-ortableness of the relationship resulted from the actions of those Club officials who were also councillors. If they appeared to be over-helpful to the Club, they were liable to provoke complaints of favoritism in the press, and Club members were embarrassed. If, on the other hand, they acted against the wishes of the Club in what they perceived to be the best interest of the town, Club members felt hurt and resentful. A degree of separation between Club and Council was clearly desirable, and the acquisition of the Suffolk Square site ultimately provided the means of achieving it.

## From Pillar to Post

The Club had rented a green at the Winter Garden ever since its founding in 1883. It had become a tenant of the Town Council, when the latter bought out the private Winter Garden Company in 1895 and acquired both the grounds and the brick and glass building. For an unknown period up to 1897 the Club had used a green, described vaguely as "facing the Promenade" But in May 1897 a new lawn, approximately 60 by 40 yards, was laid on the north side of the Garden, facing Imperial Square and "partly on the site of the custodian's lodge". The Club transferred there for the 1898 season. Within two years, however, there was talk of this new green having to be given up, because the site was needed for the planned Town Hall. But building work did not begin until after the close of the 1901 bowling season, so that the Club had use of this green for four years.

At the Annual Meeting in December 1901 it was announced that the Corporation was "doing its best to provide the Club with another green". This prompted the Looker-On (a society paper, which did not recognize bowls as a respectable sport) to complain that it would be iniquitous if the "expensive draining, turfing and weeding", which had been taking place in the southwest corner of the Winter Garden, facing the Queen's Hotel, were to be for the exclusive benefit of "a small club of no particular public importance". But this was indeed the plan, and the Club moved to this green for the 1902 season. The opening ceremony was performed on 14 May by the Earl of Jersey, President of the Imperial Bowling Association. (The Jerseys spent a busy few days in Cheltenham; on the 13th the Countess addressed the inaugural meeting of the local branch of the Victoria League; and on the 15<sup>th</sup> the Earl, in his capacity of Light Railway Commissioner, attended a hearing on the plan to extend the local tramway system.) The Club retained this third green until it moved to Suffolk Square in 1918, but it was never allowed to feel very secure.

The first scare came in 1911, when it was proposed to build Municipal Offices in the Winter Garden, partly on the bowling green. The Club was provisionally put under a month's notice to quit and,

although the Mayor (Ald C.H. Margrett) was fairly confident by the end of the year that nothing would come of the scheme, the Borough Surveyor took the precaution of reserving "two first-class greens in College Road" for the Club as a possible replacement. By the time of the next annual dinner in December 1912 Ald Margrett was able to be even more reassuring, reporting that all the designs for the new Municipal Offices had been costed at more than the approved ceiling price of £11,000. By mid-1913 the Corporation had become committed to the purchase of 22-26 Promenade for conversion into Municipal Offices, and this particular threat to the Winter Garden green was lifted.

### Tenancy Arrangements

Up to 1906 the Council was responsible for the upkeep of the green and charged the Club a rent that varied according to the size of the membership. Only three references to actual amounts have been found: in 1899 the Club paid £13 and in 1901 £16-5-0; while at the 1904 Annual Meeting, after the Captain had thanked the Mayor for the use of "the beautiful grounds adjoining the Promenade", he announced that the Club would "this year be paying more than ever for the privilege, namely £28 - 16 - 3."

At the commencement of the 1907 season the Council, apparently without prior consultation, imposed a new tenancy agreement, making the Club responsible for maintaining the green and charging a fixed annual rental (mentioned as £10 in 1917). In a "neat and tactful" speech at the 1907 green opening the Mayor (Ald W.N. Skillicorne) admitted that, because of its action, the Council was not in good odour with the Club, although "what they had done was to pay the Club the compliment of allowing it to manage its own affairs". The change put a considerable strain on the Club's finances, and it took several years and at least one subscription increase before the extra maintenance cost was absorbed. But the arrangement gave the Club more control over the quality of the playing surface, and this reportedly led to "a marked improvement" in the condition of the green in 1908.

The new tenancy arrangement proved a benefit to the Club in another respect. At this time some towns were building municipal greens, whose rinks they hired out to visitors by the hour. Some Cheltenham councillors came to regret that, through introducing the new tenancy terms, they had effectively given the Club exclusive use of a green which could have been developed as a tourist attraction. Realizing that they could not go back on their decision, they applied subtle pressure on the Club, up to at least 1913, to rent its rinks to visitors at times when they were least used by members. But the Club took the view that, if the Council wanted to be able to advertise bowling as one of the town's attractions, it should build a green expressly for the purpose. And it refused to budge from its policy, in force since at least 1904, of welcoming only individual visitors and then only if introduced by a member.

### Sports Ground or Pleasure Garden

Another threat to the Club's security of tenure came from a group of councillors led by Ald C.H. Margrett, who had a dream of how the upper part of the Promenade could be made more attractive. His plan involved removing the Winter Garden railings (described by a visitor in 1905 as "of a height and consistency associated with prisons and menageries"), expelling both bowlers and tennis players, and converting the whole area into an "ornamental space, with winding paths leading to gorgeous parterres". What he envisaged has since been largely achieved - although he did not go so far as to recommend the destruction of the Winter Garden building. There is no suggestion that Ald Margrett bore the Club any ill-will. On the contrary, he served his three years as President (1910-12) loyally and helpfully and was presented with a suitably inscribed pair of woods at the end of his term of office. But there is equally no doubt that he would not have hesitated to carry out his cherished Winter Garden scheme, if he had commanded sufficient support. Years of uncertainty for the Club ended in June 1915, when a motion to remove the Winter Garden railings was defeated in the Council Chamber by a single vote.

## Facilities

A press report of July 1898 states that a Club Room was provided in the Winter Garden building. No other direct reference to this room has been found, but the setting up in October 1908 of a small committee "to organize some indoor pastime for the winter" would seem to confirm its continued existence. The Club also had a bar, which was presumably in the Club Room. The only reference to it is in the report of the 1899 Annual Meeting, when there was a discussion on whether the custom should be continued of "keeping open house" (ie free drinks for all) whenever there was a match against a visiting team. The outgoing Captain (Mr. H. Wilkins) proposed that only the visitors should get free drinks but, when it was pointed out that the annual saving would be no more than 30/-, it was decided not to make any change.

It seems likely that the Club Room was small, because there is no record of it being used for functions. When visiting teams were entertained to "substantial meat teas", these were provided in "the cloak room of the Winter Garden building". Annual Meetings and (from 1903) annual dinners were held at a variety of local hotels, while the teas that the Mayor/ President traditionally gave to members and their wives after the ceremony of opening the green were held at either the Cozy Corner or, *after* 1905, in the Supper Room of the Town Hall.

The Club also had a pavilion, supplied by the Corporation, on at least its final Winter Garden site. It was reported as being under construction in December 1901 and as being in need of renewal 12 years later

## Membership and Finance

Although details are lacking, it is clear that, after the promising start with 100 members in 1883, the Club had gone through a bad patch. In 1899, when Mr. R.E. Steel retired after "some years" as President, a speaker at the Annual Meeting commented that the Club's fortunes had been "at a low ebb" at the commencement of Mr. Steel's Presidency but that he was now handing the Club over in a flourishing condition. And, speaking in 1904, Mr. J.W. Gunning (Secretary) said that, when he joined, there had been only 21 members; Unfortunately, he gave no date.

The evidence already quoted of the amounts paid to the Council, when rent was related to membership, shows that in the period up to 1906 numbers were rising. The few references available to actual numbers confirm that the upward trend applies to the whole period: 58 in 1900, 67 in 1901, 80 in 1904 and 87 in 1913.

In the early part of the period small annual balances were recorded. In 1899, when the Club was described as flourishing, the balance was £12-11-2. The first "substantial" balance (nearly £25) was not achieved until 1912.

## Women's Role

There are two rather enigmatic references to women players. The first came at the end of the Earl of Jersey's speech at the opening of the green in 1902, when he expressed the hope that "the ladies present, if not already proficient in the game, would soon become so". But the ladies on these occasions - wives and friends of members - were invited spectators, and the Earl's remarks stemmed perhaps from ignorance of the true situation. The second reference, which is more substantial, appears in an editorial in the Cheltenham Free Press of 5 May 1906 and alludes to a speech by the Club Captain, Mr. W.H. Horsley, which has unfortunately not been traced:

"Bowls is not a vice - well, hardly so - but it is pleasant, and precisely because it is pleasant, the Feminist movement is rapidly nearing it. That Mr. Horsley, of all men - he who ought to be the bulwark and pillar of the sacred rights and interests of the Bowler - should positively invite and incite the Ladies of Cheltenham to take up their hitherto inviolate pastime, is to me, as it must be to many others, a source of profound *grief*. It is like dynamiting the breakwater of a harbour of refuge, and letting in the pitiless sea. A wanton, wicked thing."

Obviously nothing came of Mr. Horsley's invitation to the ladies. But nor, on the other hand, was his reputation damaged by his "wicked" suggestion, for he remained as Captain for two more years.

In 1910 the Club applied for permission to have a disused cabman's shelter in the Winter Garden converted into a ladies' pavilion, but this was refused by the Town Council on the grounds that it was "too exposed to the Promenade". It is assumed that the pavilion was envisaged as a viewing stand only.

Throughout the period the only role for members' wives and lady friends, apart from gracing the ceremonial opening of the green, was to provide refreshments at matches. In June 1901 Mrs. Gunning, the Secretary's wife, was presented with a purse in recognition of "the leading part she had taken in the catering".

#### Fixtures and Relations with Other Clubs

In the early part of the period each season's fixture list consisted of home and away matches against three clubs. In 1899, for example, the opponents were Tewkesbury, Hereford and Worcester. The Tewkesbury players, who used the ground familiar to readers of 'John Halifax, Gentleman' at the Bell Hotel", were described as "old and frequent antagonists".

From 1901 the number of opponents was increased to four and the number of matches to eight. Annual fixture lists are not available, but at various times the Club played against Bristol, Cardiff, Evesham, Gloucester City, King's Norton, Langley, Painswick, Rodburgh, Stonehouse, Stroud, Swindon (Wilts), Tuffley and West Bromwich.

From about 1906 a fifth club was added to the fixture list: the local Exmouth Arms Club in Bath Road. Its President was Ald Margrett who, during his term as Mayor, was President of Cheltenham Bowling Club also. At the annual dinner in December 1909 he expressed gratitude for the "double honour" and rejoiced that "the happiest relations existed between the two clubs".

There is no evidence that fixtures were arranged with any of the other local clubs:

- (a) the Emmanuel Institute Club, which opened in 1910 and whose green had been laid on the playground of the disused Naunton Infants' School;
- (b) the Liberal Bowling Club, which opened in 1911 on a green accommodating six regular-size rinks adjoining Albion House in North Street, and whose first Captain was Mr. J.W. Gunning, who had been Cheltenham Bowling Club's Secretary/Treasurer 1898 - 1904;
- (c) the Norwood Hotel Club, first mentioned in 1912, when it featured in an "Opening of the Bowling Season" match with the Exmouth Arms Club. Its President was Ald Skillicorne.

A number of special fixtures were arranged during the period:

- (a) As mentioned in the Centenary History, a touring Australian team played against the Club on Friday 14 June 1901 and secured an easy victory. The public were admitted to the Winter Garden at 6d a head. The visitors and their wives were entertained to tea and dinner, and some stayed overnight for a drive to nearby places of interest on the Saturday, before moving on to their next fixture at Birmingham. After the visitors had returned home, the Mayor and Club officials received "Commonwealth Medals" as a memento of the event.
- (b) In July 1906 twelve members of Torquay Bowling Club spent a week in Cheltenham, based at the Queen's Hotel, playing matches against Gloucestershire clubs. They opened with a game against Cheltenham Bowling Club, which they narrowly won.
- (c) The most memorable match of the period was an away fixture at Plymouth. In May 1909 the Captain (Cllr J. Stewart) announced his intention of arranging a visit to Plymouth to coincide with the Corporation's annual staff outing there. This led a victory over the Francis Drake Club on the historic Hoe - a feat that was referred to with pride at many subsequent annual dinners.
- (d) In May 1910 a tour of the West of England was contemplated, but it is not known whether it materialized. Certainly a planned end-of-season tour in 1912, involving Dartmouth, Paignton and Plymouth, had to be abandoned for lack of support

### Affiliations

During 1899 the Club affiliated to the National Association - at the cost of a guinea.

In 1905 it was one of the founder members of the Gloucestershire County Association; its Captain, Mr. W.H. Horsley, became the Association's first President; its Winter Garden green was the venue for the first (friendly) match between a County team and a combined Worcestershire and Warwickshire team; and four of its members were selected for the County side. From the outset the Club entered the County Cup competition and reached the semi-finals in both 1905 and 1907. In 1909 it decided not to enter the Cup competition, although remaining a member of the Association. Later, for a short period, probably the 1911 and 1912 seasons, the Club left the Association. At the Club's annual dinner in 1912 Ald. Margrett said the Association still grieved at the Club's withdrawal and had asked him to do all he could to persuade it to rejoin. He felt that it was "a bit off" for "the premium Club of Cheltenham" to hold aloof from the Association. His appeal seems to have been heeded. Certainly by June 1914 the Club was again taking part in the County Cup competition - although going out to Gloucester in the second round.

### Playing Arrangements

Very little information is available on the arrangements for play. But 12 and 16-a-side matches are mentioned, and it seems to have been standard practice for the players to meet "in sets of pairs" and play 21 up. Pairs (one including the Mayor) were also the rule for the 9-up match which marked the ceremonial opening of the green. For the 1901 match against the Australians the Club sportingly agreed to accept the format preferred by the visitors, ie fours, and the press seized upon this gesture to excuse the trouncing the Club suffered.

Although the results of each season's matches are not always known, it seems to have been quite common for the Club to win all the home games and lose all the away ones. This suggests that results may have owed as much to the idiosyncrasies of the greens as to the competence of the players.

County Cup matches were always played on neutral grounds, but in the 1905 semi-final, when Cheltenham met Rodburgh at Painswick, it was ruefully noted in defeat that Rodburgh had played Painswick a few days earlier and therefore had recent experience of the green.

### Internal Competitions

No details are given in the press of the format of the Club's internal competitions, but these grew steadily in number during the period. In 1902 the Earl of Jersey presented two silver cups in memory of his visit to open the green, and these were competed for annually. For the 1907 season Mr. W.H. Horsley (then Captain) gave a silver challenge cup for a competition open to all who had paid their subscription for the year. Major Percy Shewell presented a cup, which was first competed for in 1910. In the same year Cllr J. Stewart (then Captain) gave a cup in commemoration of the victory over the Francis Drake Club the previous season, and there is the first reference also to Mr. J.K. Stephenson's cup. Starting in 1912 there was a competition for a cup given by the Mayor (Ald Margrett); 1/- entrance fee was charged to provide 2nd and 3rd prizes; and the first winner was the "popular treasurer", Mr. E.D. Ricketts.

It was also the custom for goods to be given as competition prizes: a chesterfield chair from Mr. Barnby Bendall (1900), a tea service from Mr. Stephenson (1912) and a silver inkstand from Mr. Scott (1915). In 1909 and 1912 there are also references to "Mr. Steel's consolation prizes", the nature of which is unspecified.

### Towards Independence

To all the uncertainties concerning security of tenure at the Winter Garden was finally added dissatisfaction with the quality of the green. In fact the final green opposite the Queen's Hotel seems never to have been as popular as the one buried under the Town Hall, even though the maintenance was in the Club's own hands. This perhaps indicates that the green had been poorly constructed in the first place and was beyond redemption. Criticism of the playing surface began to be voiced in 1910 and became increasingly harsh. At first, as a sort of reflex action, Club officials appealed to the Council to provide a new green. But at the Annual Meeting in November 1912 the Treasurer, Mr. E.D. Ricketts, recommended that the balance-in-hand of nearly £25 should be maintained or increased, in case the Club should "seek to realize its ambition of having a green of its own".

The story of how this "ambition" of 1912 was turned into reality in 1917 by the munificence of Lt.Col. F.J. Ashburner is told in the centenary history. Col. Ashburner was already well known in the town as a maker and exhibitor of military models and as a philanthropist. (He donated a fully equipped carpentry workshop to the local Industrial School in 1892. for example.) But all that is known of his previous association with the Club is that he was made a vice-President in 1913 and was publicly thanked at the opening of the green in 1915 for some, unspecified, "kindness".

When the move to Suffolk Square took place, some of the explanations offered were extremely specious. It is highly unlikely that "many" would-be members had been deterred from joining because of the lack of privacy at the Winter Garden. The matter had certainly been raised from time to time at annual functions, although always in low key. At the December 1912 annual dinner Mr. Ivens (Captain) said he did not take much notice of the criticism that the green was too public. He thought members ought to be able to take it in their stride the light banter sometimes directed at them through the railings. And some members actually enjoyed being an attraction. As to citing the national policy of increasing "the number of bowling greens not associated with drinking houses", this was to introduce a complete red herring. The Club had a private bar at both the Winter Garden and Suffolk Square, so no change was involved.

These bogus explanations were presumably given because it would have been embarrassing to say that the Club wanted a decent green, security of tenure and, above all, an escape from being perpetually in the Councils pocket.

February 1989.

### LIST OF OFFICERS(i)

YEAR(II)	PRESIDENT	VICE-PRESIDENTS	CAPTAIN	VICE-CAPTAIN	SECRETARY	TREASURER	ASST. SEC.
1898	R.E. Steel (iii)	T. Mayos			J.W. Gunning		
1899	R.E. Steel		H. Wilkins		J.W. Gunning		
1900	G. Norman	R.E. Steel H.M. Kilgour(iv) W.H. Horsley J.C. Cooper T. Mayos			J.W. Gunning		
1901	G. Norman		H.M. Kilgour		J.W. Gunning		
1902	G. Norman	H. M. Kilgour H.A. Gwinnell R.E. Steel H.W. Elkins J. Stewart	W.H. Horsley		J.W. Gunning		H.G. Workman
1903		G. Norman(v)	W.H. Horsley		J.W. Gunning		H.G. Workman
1904	Col. Griffith		W.H. Horsley		J.W. Gunning		F.W. Strange
1905	G. Dimmer		W.H. Horsley		F.W. Strange	H.A. Gwinnell	F.S. Mallory
1906	W.N. Skillicorne		W.H. Horsley		F.W. Strange		
1907	W.N. Skillicorne		W.H. Horsley		F.W. Strange	H.A. Gwinnell	
1908			W.H. Horsley		F.W. Strange		
1909	J.T. Agg-Gardner		J. Stewart		F.W. Strange		
1910	C.H. Margrett		J. Stewart	T.J. Powell	F.W. Strange		
1911	C.H. Margrett		T.J. Powell(vi)	W. Jardine	F.W. Strange		
1912	C.H. Margrett		W. Jardine		W.H. Horsley	E.D. Ricketts	
1913	J.T. Agg-Gardner	C.H. Margret F.J. Ashburner J. Stewart R.E. Steel A.T. Atkins	A.T. Ivens	R.F. Beard	W.H. Horsley	E.D. Ricketts	
1914	W.N. Skillicorne		R.F. Beard	G. Straw	W.H. Horsley	E.D. Ricketts	
1915	W.N. Skillicorne	R.F. Beard A.T. Ivens R.E. Steel J. Stewart A.T. Atkins J.T. Agg-Gardiner		T.J. Powell	W.H. Horsley	E.D. Ricketts	

#### Notes:-

- (i) Gaps are mostly due to failure to find reports of Annual Meetings.
- (ii) The year quoted is that of the appropriate bowling season. Officers were mostly elected in the previous November or December.
- (iii) By 1898 Mr. R.E. Steel had been President "for some years".
- (iv) Mr. Hamilton M. Kilgour was Borough Electrical Engineer.
- (v) At the General Meeting in November 1902 it was decided to reduce the number of vice-Presidents from 5 to 1. There was a reversion to the previous practice by 1913.
- (vi) In 1911 it seems to have become the policy for the vice Captain of one year to be Captain the next. But the system broke down during the War.