

The Life and Times of a Bowling Club 1883-2022

As a sequel to our recent article which traced the early history of Cheltenham Bowling Club from 1883 to 1956 we provide an insight into the running of a club and make some comparisons with current times.

Running the Club

In the early years, executive meetings and social events had to be held at various hotels in the town. The annual dinner was the main social function and there were whist drives, smoking concerts and dances, mostly run at a small profit to help club funds. It was not until the Unwin Pavilion was extended and provided with heat and light that a winter club was possible. This had facilities for cards and chess, with billiards and snooker to follow. When the final extension was opened after the fire more elaborate social events were possible.

The Bar

As the club developed, sub-committees were appointed to deal with special aspects of the administration, e.g. Finance, House & Social, Grounds & Greens, Matches and Competitions. Not least in importance was the bar committee.

It is on record that eighteen shillings had to be paid to the Excise on the profit of the 1920 season. In 1923 the bar steward's wages were raised from 5 shillings to 10 shillings a week during the playing season. Since then the bar profits have figured prominently in the club's finances and the minutes contain frequent references to management problems, including the summary dismissal of a steward whose accounts were unsatisfactory.

A reliable, efficient steward is a necessity for any social club and an outstanding example was that of Mr A Webb who was appointed as steward in April 1935 at a commencing wage of 27s 6d a week. Initially, in addition to looking after the bar, he was also expected to cater for teas. On his retirement at the end of the 1960 season he was presented with a cheque for £210 subscribed by members. By then the weekly wage had risen to £10.

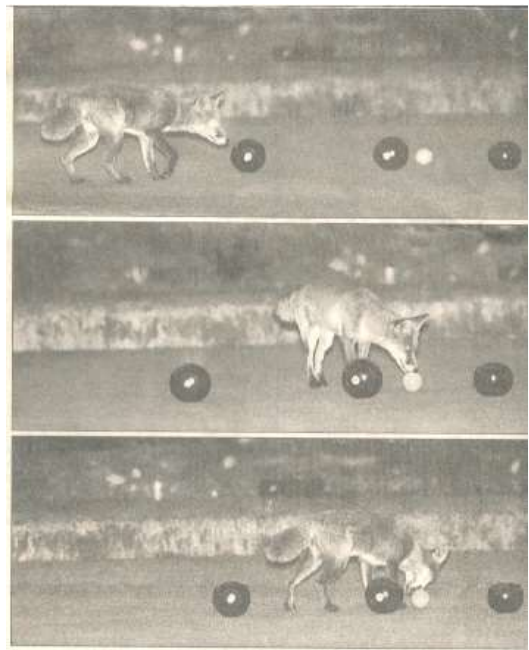


The Greens

The laying, maintenance and cost of the greens was covered in the previous article, but the pictures below show how equipment has made the job easier but not necessarily less expensive with current annual maintenance costs being in the region of £25000.



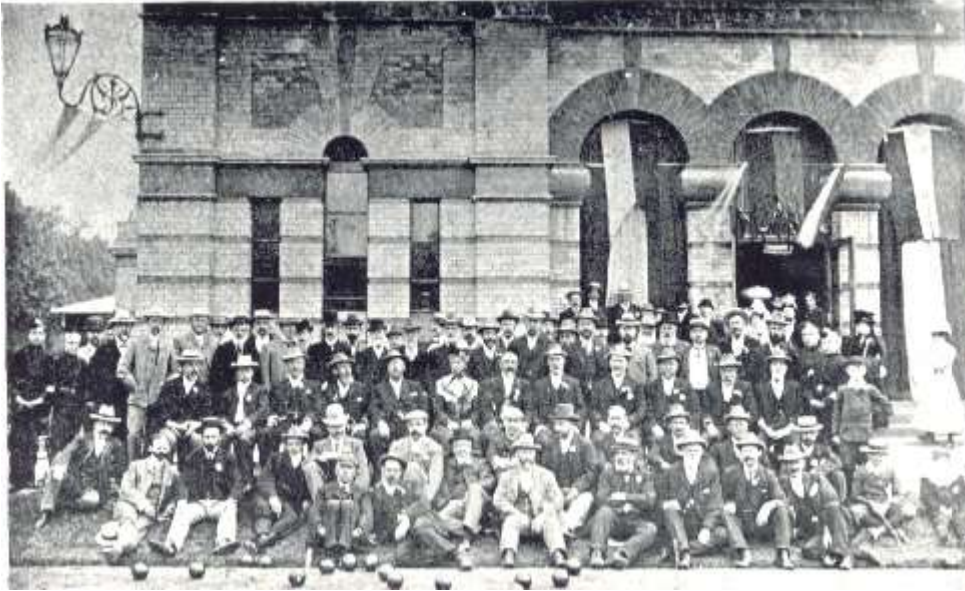
Just as important as good equipment is a good green keeper. Cheltenham BC was lucky to employ Mr Cyril Peacey from 1972 and he was widely recognised as a first class green keeper. In 2008 President Geoff Hamson presented Cyril with a farewell gift and awarded him Honorary Membership of the Club on the occasion of his retirement after 36 years service at Suffolk Square.



In 1996 foxes invaded Suffolk Square and were often seen lying on the bank next to the green. Matters came to a head when they interrupted a County Triples Final! Apparently the jack (or kitty) was the object of their affection. The story not only attracted the local Echo but also the Western Daily Press and The Times who we have to thank for the pictures above.

Commonwealth Connections

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. After the visitors had returned home, the Mayor and Club officials received "Commonwealth Medals" as a memento of the event.



Australian Tourists and Cheltenham Bowling Club at the Winter Gardens Green in 1901

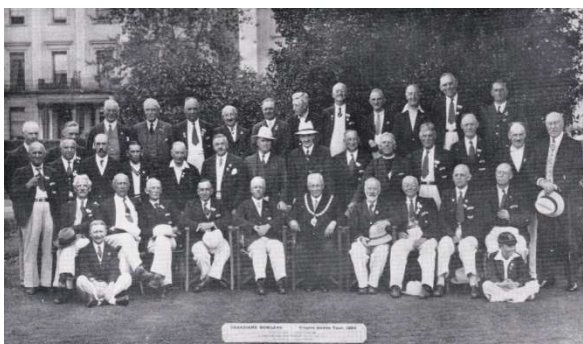
The Australians were to prove the most frequent overseas visitors to the Ashburne Bowling Green. On 3rd June 1922 on their first tour under the auspices of the newly formed Australian Bowling Association, they played a six rink match against Gloucestershire. Australian Touring teams played Gloucestershire at Suffolk Square on four further occasions, in 1930, 1950, 1959 and 1969.

During a fraternal visit to the club in 1948 by Mr F Felton a member of the Cheltenham Bowling Club of New South Wales, the club expressed their appreciation of the food parcels which had been received from the Australian club members.

In 2013 a small group of Cheltenham BC members visited their sister club in Sydney on the occasion of their centenary celebrations. The picture shows bowlers from both clubs and the centenary glass plate presented by Mike Longley and Campbell McColl of Cheltenham BC to the home club's Chairman and Captain.



Canadian touring sides made two visits to Suffolk Square in 1934 (see pic below left) and 1972. A New Zealand side visited in 1928.



The club welcomed a South African team in 1935 as part of the King George V Jubilee celebrations and they returned for a test match v England in 1995 (see pic above right). This visit saw the first wearing of shorts on the greens which has become an accepted feature in recent years.

The greens have been graced by many International players but the two most notable were world champions and bowls legends; David Bryant (left) seen here playing for the English Bowling Association in Cheltenham BCs Centenary match in 1983 and Tony Allcock who played for the club from 1980 to the mid 90s and was awarded an MBE for his service to bowls in 1989.



Lady Members

The introduction of Lady Bowlers at Suffolk Square was a long and tortuous affair beginning in 1902 when the Earl of Jersey's speech at the opening of the green 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. A second reference appeared 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 as follows; "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 1927 a special general meeting was called to debate a resolution "that ladies be admitted as playing members". Nobody — not even the mover of the resolution - voted for it. This resistance continued until the AGM in 1980 when a form of associate membership was created enabling the wives of members to be elected (subject to certain conditions). Such members may use the pavilion and its facilities but not the bowling greens or billiard tables, but it was a softening of the resistance. In March 2001 an EGM was called to dispute the 2000 AGM decision not to allow women in the club as full members. This decision was overturned and in April 2001 Penny Callaghan and Fay Hodges (pictured below) became the first ladies to play on Cheltenham BC greens – 74 years after it was first proposed! Today the Ladies form a welcome and crucial part of the club's administration and playing membership with Morag Notman becoming the first Lady President in the history of the Club in 2009.



Standards and Discipline

From the start of Ashburne Bowling Green the committee were insistent on strict adherence to the rules. Of these, great stress was laid on payment of subscriptions and, 60 years ago it was the practice to refer arrears to the Corporation's debt collector. The reason may have been twofold; it was the method used by the treasurer, Alfred Ricketts, in his professional job as a rating officer and it avoided mixing his personal bowling relationships with the unpleasantness of demanding money.

The 1922 annual subscription of £2 2s 0d was a quite significant amount when a wage-earner getting £3 a week was regarded as being in a good job which meant it was mostly the better-off business and professional men who joined the club; these included thirteen former Mayors of Cheltenham. Even so, it was a period of intense post-war depression with living standards that make conditions today look like booming prosperity. By comparison, full membership today costs £150 per annum with a concessionary first year fee of £75 for new bowlers.

All the early photographs show players wearing normal suits. Decorum on the green was rigorously enforced and, after a member removed his jacket leaving his braces on view he received a severe reprimand from the committee. Regulation blazers were first mooted in 1922 and, with the assent of the local Council, the Borough coat of arms was adopted as the club's badge. The following pictures show a comparison between the club's county cup winning side in 1925 and 2016. These reflect the more recreational attitude of the modern game and clear evidence that bowls is no longer just an 'old person's sport'.



Not many readers will know that Henry VIII tried to ban bowls being played by commoners because it encouraged gambling! The committee were always zealous to preserve the good reputation of the club and in 1944 agreed to a stern warning "that they were resolved to stamp out unreservedly any gambling within the club". However, in 1963 it was decided to give a trial installation of a "fruit machine", a second one being added shortly afterwards. At the subsequent annual general meeting there were several objectors on the grounds that the machines were unethical and noisy, and that the social side of the club had deteriorated. Consideration was deferred to the next bowlers' meeting in March 1964 when Mr. A. Knott, Chairman of the finance committee presented figures which showed that without the machines there would be a weekly deficit of £8, with them a surplus of £5. Opposition weakened and, on a show of hands, it was agreed to continue with the machines. Fruit machines were removed from the club in 2003 when the licence fee cost more than the income.

.....**and finally**

Bowls is a sport that is accessible to all, sociable and competitive, and provides opportunities not available in most other sports. In what other game during the course of a year, can you take part in a competition playing seven knockout rounds within the county, another seven at the national championships, win a national title and then represent England in the World Championships in Queensland.....and, if that is not enough, win the Echo Sports Personality of 2014 as well!!



If you would like to try your hand at bowls visit www.cheltenhambowlingclub.org.uk for contact detail.