

REVIEW OF THE HISTORY
OF THE
FOREST HILL BOWLING CLUB
1894 - 1994

Our Early Years 1894-1905

The story of the Forest Hill Bowling Club begins on Friday 13th April 1894 with a small advertisement in the Anerley and Norwood Times stating that "A Forest Hill Bowling Club is in the course of formation". Further information followed inside the same newspaper under the heading "PROPOSED BOWLING CLUB AT FOREST HILL - It is proposed to establish at Forest Hill a club in which the old fashioned game of bowls may be indulged in. A private ground, 240 feet by 60 feet, at the foot of Perry Rise, has been levelled and prepared during the winter, where two or more games may be played at the same time. It is estimated that a subscription of 10s 6d (without entrance fee for the first fifty members) will be sufficient to provide material and maintain the ground in first class condition during the season. Mr C Spencer-West of Glenthorne, Perry Rise who is acting as Hon. Secretary, pro tem, will be glad to receive names for membership. As soon as a sufficient number of names shall have been received, a meeting will be called with a view to framing rules, and appointing officers of the club".

To put the subscription charge of 10s 6d into perspective, this is just over 50p in today's money. An advert in the same local newspaper indicates that you could purchase four dozen pint bottles of beer for this sum ie. approximately 1p per pint in new money.

The Club was situated between the Baptist Church and the Forest Hill Lawn Tennis Club on the west side of Perry Rise, less than a quarter of a mile from the present location, and it remained there until 1905 when it moved to the Forest Hill Cricket Club in Perry Hill. No reason can be found for the move but it may have been due to the re-development of the area. We do know that a Croquet and Lawn Bowls Club opened nearby whose Hon. Secretary was the same Mr C Spencer-West.

The Period 1905-1910

On Saturday 27th April 1905 an opening ceremony was held at the Forest Hill Cricket Club and was duly reported in the Sydenham Forest Hill and Penge Gazette. The Club President, Major Coates MP. was expected to open the new green but was prevented by absence abroad. In his absence, Mr H J Hancock, one of the Vice Presidents discharged this pleasant duty. The Club was now under dual management in conjunction with the Forest Hill Cricket Club, and the green, which had three rinks, was situated in the south east corner of the grounds. Before the end of 1905 Mr Hancock became President and the first Annual Dinner took place at the Rutland Hotel which still stands today.

The next report we have is dated 19th December 1908, describing the Annual Dinner, held at Frascati's in Oxford Street, with the Mayor of Lewisham as guest of honour. It is interesting to note that at the Dinner the Treasurer was pleased to report that after the year's working the Club had a balance on the right side of £5, making a total in hand of £22 13s 0d. He also reported that membership was low and new members urgently needed. Thanks were tendered to members' wives (not present at the Dinner) for dealing with refreshments. These dinners were entirely male functions and included a programme of music provided by Club members, after lengthy speeches, progress reports and prize-giving. Probably "Carriages at 10.30pm" was on the programmes.

In 1910 the Club moved once more to the present ground in Wynell Road and. to make this move possible, a Company was formed with a Capital of £600 in £1 shares. The prime mover of this project was Mr W P Ginner, the one-time (and only) Patron of the Club. who was the main person responsible for financing the laying down of the green and building the pavilion.

1910 to the present day

The first turf of the new green was laid by Mrs W P Ginner in March 1910 and the pavilion was opened by the President, Mr H J Hancock on the 4th June 1910. The opening ceremony is described at some length in the "Sydenham. Forest Hill and Penge Gazette" of 11th June 1910. It reports the the green was opened by Mr Robert Mowat. President of the London & Southern Counties Bowling Association and representatives of the following Clubs were present:

Bannister Park	Finchley
Brockley	Mansfield
Catford	Muswell Hill
Chiswick & West London	Redhill
Crouch Hill	South London
Croydon	Springfield Park
Edmonton	Sydenham Wells
Essex County	

It was reported that the Club had every right to be proud of its new green at Wynell Road as it was declared to be one of the finest in the County (which is still true today). It has been a fine achievement to turn something like a ploughed field into a bowling green in just three months. The new green, which had a run of 42 yards was square so that members could play either way. In a long speech which traced the history of bowls back to the 12th and 13th century, Mr Hancock said that the ground had been leased for 21 years. At the time, to those old boys, 21 years must have seemed an eternity but, if it had not been for the foresight of some of their successors, who turned the original lease into a longer one and subsequently purchased the

freehold. we should not now be celebrating our Centenary Year. In replying to the toast to the visitors, Mr McBride of the Chiswick and West London Club closed his speech with the following:

*Of sports we know there's a charming variety;
Pastimes to suit every grade of society;
Sports of the vulgar and sports of propriety;
But bowling's the sport that is king of them all.*

*Bowling has charms you can never resist;
Once you have played it you'll always persist.
Game full of jollity.
No silly frivolity
Stands first for quality and ever shall.*

*Here's to Forest Hill bowlers, stout hearted and true,
They're the best of good sports, the whole world through;
Steadfast and zealous.
Never spiteful or jealous:
Prince of good fellows, is only their due.*

The original pavilion and green-keeper's cottage were blasted by a flying bomb in 1943 and the present pavilion was built on the same site at a cost of around £5,000. Due to post-war controls and restrictions this could not be done before 1951 and it was chiefly due to the energy and persistence of the then Club and Company Secretary, Mr Jack Wade, and his Board of Directors that the job was done even then. The new pavilion was opened by Mr Henry Price, MP for Lewisham West on 8th September 1951.

The Club prospered over the years and many improvements were made to pavilion and green surrounds. The green was true and fast and, up to the early 1960s the groundsman, after mowing the green, used to shave it with a scythe.

The year 1964 marked the formation of a Ladies Section which has continued to flourish over the years. It is pleasing to note that our centenary year coincides with the ladies' 30th anniversary.

In July 1969 discussions were initiated by our Board of Directors with the Leathersellers Company with a view of acquiring the freehold of the Bowling Club land held on a lease expiring 1994. These discussions reached a successful conclusion in April 1976 after nearly seven years of negotiations. We are much indebted to Mr Keith Martin, Chartered Surveyor, for his valuable advice and good services in this connection. The knowledge that the Company/Club owns its own Freehold is of great comfort and will be of lasting benefit to future generations of Club members.

The Club also had its share of misfortune during the 1970s. On the night of Thursday 28th September 1972 a serious fire almost completely gutted the Club pavilion. The cause was never fully established but, at that time, the Club was suffering from vandalism and regular break-ins. The blaze appeared to have been started by an intruder setting fire to the curtains which then formed a screen from the bar area. To the great relief of the Company Secretary, who answered the call-out, the fire brigade had not damaged the green. From the insurance proceeds, the Club pavilion was restored to its former glory before the commencement of the 1973 season and, indeed, the opportunity was taken to extend and improve the original building. All members played their part in the restoration through gifts, contributions and hard work and their enthusiasm was well rewarded by the final result of their endeavours. The only sadness was the loss in the fire of many photographs, bannerettes and mementos from earlier years. However, the old honours boards, although badly blistered, were miraculously restored.

Also in the early 1970s, the Club was shocked to receive a claim for tree-root damage caused to a neighbouring property. The claim was eventually dealt with by our Insurers but the outcome was that many of the large trees on the Club perimeter had to be chopped down and the roots poisoned. As this coincided with the incidence of "Elm Disease" we unfortunately lost most of the last remaining part of the "Forest on the Hill".

During much of the 1970s and 1980s, the green was maintained on a voluntary basis by our own members with varying results. However, we should remember the considerable good work carried out by David Topping and Joffre Harmsworth until their untimely deaths. Over the past years we have employed the professional services of a green contractor, Phil Clarke, and thanks to his excellent work we again have one of the best greens in the County. We have long been troubled by urban foxes who have in the past caused a considerable amount of damage to the green. After trying many preventative measures, without success, we were forced into having a low-current electrified fence around the green. This fence, although not harmful to the foxes, has succeeded in keeping them off the sacred green.

Our last commemorative brochure was to celebrate our 70th anniversary in 1964. Our match fixtures in that year numbered 35 and we subsequently added to that list our first ever Sunday match which was against the London Paper Mills, Dartford. In our Centenary Year 1994 we have more than twice that number of fixtures including prestige anniversary matches against the English Bowling Association, the Kent President and Council, the London & Southern Counties, the Kent County Past Presidents, the Kent County Patrons, the Combined Lewisham Parks and the Bromley, Beckenham & District Bowling Association. We are also looking forward to special matches against the Royal Household (Windsor) and the Portarddulais (Wales) Touring side. We also have two special Anniversary Days. One of these is against invited fours from Clubs who were present at the opening of our green in 1910 and the other

an internal Club fixture where we hope all members present will dress up in Victorian costume.

Our ever popular Invitation Tournament will take place in August under the valued sponsorship of the City & Metropolitan Building Society who also sponsor the Kent (North West) League in which eighteen private Clubs participate. The formation of this League took place at a meeting held at the Forest Hill Bowling Club on 18 January 1973 under the chairmanship of John Canham, who became the first Secretary and subsequently President of the League, an office which he continues to hold today.

There is an interesting photograph taken around 1912 where one can see the President and Captain of that period, on the side of the green on a Sunday morning, both of them in top hats and frock coats. Doubtless they were on their way home from Church and not contemplating a "roll-up", although it would not be surprising if their attire was also worn on the green! It was certainly the requisite 'status symbol' to obtain membership of the Club in those days. Nowadays bowls is a more democratic affair and bowlers come from all walks of life and are of all ages. As in all Clubs we have some bowlers as temperamental as prima donnas, some as placid as a mill pond and some between the two, but all with the same aim in life, to get the best out of the most exasperating game in the world. There is no doubt that the Club members have a famous heritage handed down to them from the past and the present generation will need to try hard to merit the traditions of which they are now custodians and strive to see that the Club goes forward to greater fame.

We are looking forward to a very successful season and to greeting our fellow bowlers from near and far. May they all have a most enjoyable game on our green.

KENT COUNTY BOWLING ASSOCIATION

Congratulations to the Forest Hill Bowling Club on 100 years of bowling.

Founded in 1894, the Club was also a founder member of the Kent County Bowling Association in 1911 and indeed provided its first President. W. H. Sims. Of the recorded affiliated Kent clubs today only three are older than Forest Hill - Milton Regis (1540) Bromley (1888) and Hythe (1652).

Of the past players for Forest Hill, the name A. E. (Jimmy) Godsall stands out for his bowling achievements which I am sure will be recorded elsewhere in your Centenary brochure. Many years later, another fine bowler who subsequently made a national name for himself, began his bowling career at Forest Hill - Gary Smith.

It is fitting that John Canham (a Past President of Kent and County Treasurer) should have been recalled to lead the Club in this great event in their history. I feel sure the County will join with me in wishing Forest Hill continued success in this great game.

Bernard Burt
President

KENT COUNTY WOMEN'S BOWLING ASSOCIATION

On behalf of the Kent County Women's Bowling Association I would like to offer heartiest congratulations to the Forest Hill Bowling Club on reaching their centenary. It is particularly exciting for me, as a member of Forest Hill, to be President of the County in the same year. At the same time the Ladies Section of the Bowls Club will be celebrating its thirtieth anniversary.

The undoubted highlight of my Presidential Year will be the visit of the County Executive side to Forest Hill on Friday 23rd September and I hope that this will be an enjoyable and memorable game for members and visitors alike.

My best wishes to all at Forest Hill for a very happy and successful season

Eleanor Canham
President

FOREST HILL BOWLS CLUB - LADIES

As mentioned earlier, the Ladies Section of the Club was formed in 1964 so that they are celebrating their 30th Anniversary this year. Initially they were granted a Licence which restricted their membership to 24 and set limits on their use of the green. Happily these restrictions no longer apply and the men and ladies co-exist side by side in perfect harmony. Care is taken with fixtures so that when the men are at home the ladies play away and vice versa.

The Club is much indebted to the ladies for their assistance over the past years with fund-raising and catering. For all intents and purposes we are one Club and we hope the ladies will equally enjoy our Centenary celebrations this year.

We must congratulate Eleanor Canham, the Ladies Secretary, on her election as President of the Kent County Women's Bowling Association for 1994 and we wish her a very happy and successful year.

We would also wish to mention Mary Green who is the Club's oldest member. Mary, a past President of the Ladies Club, is a sprightly 96 year old who still attends meetings and social functions at the Club. We all send her fond wishes and hope that she will be able to attend many of our events during this Centenary Year.