

The Wilderness Story : Part 71

by
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Wilderness Bowling Club

When Owen Grant bought the Wilderness Hotel from Mrs. Ferguson in 1928 he immediately embarked on alterations and it was reopened later in the same year “ glorified out of all recognition”, to quote a newspaper report of the time. The slightly faded photo, taken at about that time, shows the new hotel with the tennis courts just visible, but open ground where the bowling green now lies.

Grant was keen that his hotel should be more than a seaside boarding house and he laid out a nine hole golf course and the bowling green as soon as possible. The first official aerial survey photographs of the area go back to 1936. In this, the hotel’s two tennis courts and the bowling green are clearly shown, all where they still are today.

The Mists of Time

We know from the local press that Wilderness residents were playing bowls on the hotel’s new green in the thirties. There are also two or three of those little metal shields, which are usually fixed to larger trophies, which show that Wilderness Bowling Club won something in 1937 and won it again in the early forties. But that is all the evidence that we have at present concerning the years prior to 1948. Perhaps the club was wound up as World War II dragged on.

On 26th November, 1948 the first recorded committee meeting of the Wilderness Bowling Club was held in Owen Grant’s home, Greenways, now Palms. It appears that there had been a general meeting held two days earlier on the 24th. The chairman, W. Hoskin, and Desmond Leggatt were asked by the committee to draw up a constitution to be put before a general meeting as soon as possible. This was duly done and the constitution was passed at the next AGM in December, 1949. The constitution was updated in 1973, and remained unchanged until 2010 when it was amended to incorporate a Croquet Club.

Since 1948 the Club has been in continuous existence although there was a period of just under four years, from 1969 to 1973, when the running of the Club by a committee under a president was abandoned, apparently because of a lack of members prepared to take on the necessary tasks. Charles Lamming, a feisty Yorkshireman, transformed himself from President in 1969 to Liaison Officer between the Club and Hotel. In January 1973 he informed the Club that “due to advancing years and eyesight trouble” he was giving up all duties connected with the Club. A new committee was elected under H.N. Smith who was to preside for 8 years until shortly before his death in 1981, aged 86. Mr. Ray Rinaldi became green-keeper in 1973, and bought most of the machinery required. He remained in that position for 14 years.

The Minute Book

While the minute books contain all one should expect of such things – the likes of dues, membership, competitions, elections and state of the bowling green – it is also a fascinating glimpse of aspects of Wilderness village life over the years.

In January, 1949 “owing to prolonged drought and the absence of water ”, it was decided to close the Green until conditions improved. Later that year the Wilderness Estate informed the Club that they were not prepared to let them have water for the Green free of charge and that they should have a meter installed , and should provide their own hosepipe.

In the same year Miss Eve van der Byl offered to put on a play for club funds and the secretary was instructed to approach the hotel for permission to stage it there. It isn't clear whether the play was ever staged, but Eve van der Byl, now Mrs. Eve Dowling of Kalk Bay, doesn't think it was.

The provision of tea on Saturday afternoons appears to have exercised members' minds almost as much as the game of bowls. The cost of tea to visitors was 6d (5c) in 1948 but this was doubled two years later. It would appear that members supplied tea in rotation, but an early AGM decision allowed members who could not supply tea to make a donation of 10/- (R1) instead, later raised to 15/-. A committee member's suggestion that “unmarried people living in the same house” should only be responsible for one tea was deemed too weighty for the committee and was held over until the next AGM, when it was passed unanimously. At the same AGM a proposal that teas “ should consist of two things only ” was defeated after discussion, with the chairman, Desmond Leggatt, commenting that members would probably not make teas too elaborate. By the end of 1951 it was decided to discontinue the tea system and that the hostess of the day should supply only milk, the Club supplying sugar, tea and biscuits and everyone “who partook of tea “ should pay 6d, except the hostess who had supplied the milk! A year later this was changed again.

Perhaps inevitably, as most Wilderness inhabitants were retired people in those days, health often came up in discussion. Many are the Chair's reports which express “regret that we record the death during the year of...”. For a small club these losses were significant to the membership as well as marking the loss of old friends. More amusingly, perhaps, in 1984 there was a co-option to the committee as one member was “indisposed” while a second was “off-colour at the moment”. This is an interesting distinction to make but no further information is supplied.

From the Minute Book, we learn that “Jim” (who played with his grandfather's original wooden bowls) had his ashes scattered round the green. More recently in 2008, Frank Spooner's ashes were also scattered on the south side of the green.

Although The Herald referred in 1984 to the “Now Defunct Wilderness Club” this drew a hot denial from “Bull” Curtayne, the secretary, who quoted Mark Twain's “ All reports of our early demise are grossly exaggerated.” Perhaps it was the proposed introduction of the time-share section of the hotel which gave rise to the rumour. The Club was given notice to vacate, as the proposed building was to encroach on the bowling green. However, after much wailing and gnashing of teeth by Members, the top brass of the Karos Group relented and instructed their architects to alter the layout and by so doing, saved the green. The wall now between the green and the time- share section, and the ensuing small backspace, is the only disability suffered by the Club.

The Club continues to be very active to this day, as can be seen by anyone passing on a Tuesday or Thursday afternoon . New residents find it a great place to meet others in the community and, as with so many clubs, this in turn helps to identify other common interests as bowlers get together in the guise of birders, bridge players, walkers or whatever.

