



Alresford Golf Club A Short History Part One 1890 to 1939

By

Robert Hedqes (Hon. Secretary, 1953 - 1973)

Alresford Golf Club is well established and well known, popular and prosperous. In recent years especially it has been fortunate in having dedicated trustees, captains, committees and staff who have responded admirably to the tremendous challenge of mounting pressure from a new and enthusiastic golfing public. With a playing membership of over 400 and increasing numbers of visitors, the club can look back with interest and gratitude to those who founded and fostered it many years ago. But when was this, and who were they?

At a time when most of its columns were devoted to matters of Church, State and the Administration of Justice rather than to parochial affairs, the Hampshire Chronicle of 22nd November, 1890 reported that the Alresford Golf Club Cup had been won by Dr. D.W. Moore and that there had been a very close contest for second place between the Rev. C.H. Conybeare (Rural Dean and Vicar of Itchen Stoke) and Mr. J. Ridley Shield (solicitor, of Alresford). This seems to be the earliest reference to the club and 1890 may well have been the year of its foundation.

The late Mr. G.E.R. Shield used to say that his father and Dr. Moore were founder members and that the best golf in those days was played between early autumn and mid-spring when the Down had been well grazed and the grass was becoming or was still semi-dormant. He had a very old scrap of paper on which were listed the assets of the club at an early date: a mower with box, a roller, a hole cutter, 7 rings, 8 iron numbers, 4 leather horse-shoes and £16/12/2.

For some reason not divulged by Mr. Shield the club suffered a temporary closure at the end of the century. Patriotic though they always were in these parts, it is unlikely that enthusiastic enlistment for the Boer War could have left this fatal vacuum, for as early as both March, 1900 a small group of interested and influential people met and resolved that the Alresford Golf Club be re-started". They amended the old local rules, honoured old debts and charged old and new members alike an entrance fee of 5/- and subscription of £1/1/- Visitors might play at the rate of 9 holes for 6d but only if resident more than 6 miles from Tichborne Down and if playing with a member so for non-members there was no easy access to the course.

Neither the dissolution nor the resolution was reported in the local press, but the club was small and select and under no moral obligation to publish anything. In fact it could have presented few attractions. The unguarded greens were but small, featureless oases in a wilderness of hazards; for the 30 or so members, representing rank, the professions and high respectability, were forced to make their toilsome way along narrow, ill-cut "lines" close to tangles of old grass, bushes, hurdles, troughs, horse-jumps and other appurtenances of rural sport and animal husbandry; and never were they far from the sight, sound and smell of sheep.

The 100-acre expanse of Tichborne Down had by long tradition shared with The Nythe on the Bighton Road the distinction of being a venue for occasions minor and major, when the sheep would be folded away and the good townsfolk of Alresford would foregather either to celebrate an event in the local calendar or to discharge their quota of national rejoicing. The Cricketers' Arms, just across the road at the bottom of Sun Hill, had for over a century witnessed scenes of congratulation and commiseration after cricket matches on the Down and the Hambledon Hunt had held annual race meetings there. But golf was soon to become established to the gradual exclusion of other activities.

Despite these depredations and intrusions the Down was thronged with bird life, wild flowers grew in random profusion and a wide variety of chalk-land trees and shrubs completed a perfect setting. Today the course is immaculate and practice areas have been provided, but there is no semblance of formality or artificiality and members can still enjoy the beauty of their surroundings; indeed, during the past two decades the club has carefully preserved the seedling oaks that are now flourishing and forming a new fringe of woodland from the 9th fairway to the Cheriton Road. It may be true that most golfers have no eye for natural splendour (unless of course they happen to be playing particularly well) and that their faculties are totally directed to the task of thrashing, urging and coaxing the ball economically to its final hole; and while there are everywhere some light-hearted golfers there is no doubt that many regard the aggregate of their bad shots as an important part of life's adversity.

The gentlemen of the newly-constituted club took a room at the Cricketers' Arms for which they paid the landlord, Mr. Charles Young (the father of any other Youngs mentioned hereafter), £3/3/- a year including cleaning and firing; and the charge remained the same when the new tenant, Mr. Fred Freemantle (a former opening batsman for Tichborne Park who had long threatened to extinguish the art of bowling in mid-Hampshire), offered them an upstairs room with a view over the first and last holes. For the ladies, however, there was still no room at the inn.

Until this time work on the course had been carried out by a succession of local men working part-time with a hired horse though Sir Henry Tichborne (1866-1910), the president and landowner, had sent over his gardeners and machinery whenever a special onslaught was necessary.

But there had been no expert service or advice and the club now decided to remedy this. On 24th March, 1907 there appeared in the Hampshire Chronicle an announcement from the hon. secretary, Mr. Bryce McMaster, manager of the Union of London and Smith's (now National Westminster) Bank, Alresford informing readers that the club had secured the services of Mr. Charles Marks of the Woking Golf Club, who would as professional give lessons and sell and repair golfing equipment and as greenkeeper apply himself to the task of improving the course. Mr. McMaster would "be happy to give every information to ladies and gentlemen desirous of joining the club".

It is obvious that the appointment of Mr. Marks had committed the club to greater expenditure and that income from new members would be the only means of meeting this necessity. There was no question, however, of open flood-gates and a free-for-all. The club continued to be highly discriminating in its admittance of new members, and Mr. T.C. Hankin the young proprietor of the Swan Hotel (and prospective father of Mr. C.A. Hankin, J.P. was entreated not to mention the club in his hotel advertising. Furthermore, travel was slow in those days, for motorcars were still uncommon. and it may well have been that few eligible people were willing to undertake arduous journeys and then endure a form of martyrdom on a primitive course. So recruitment was perhaps restricted by a process of natural selection.

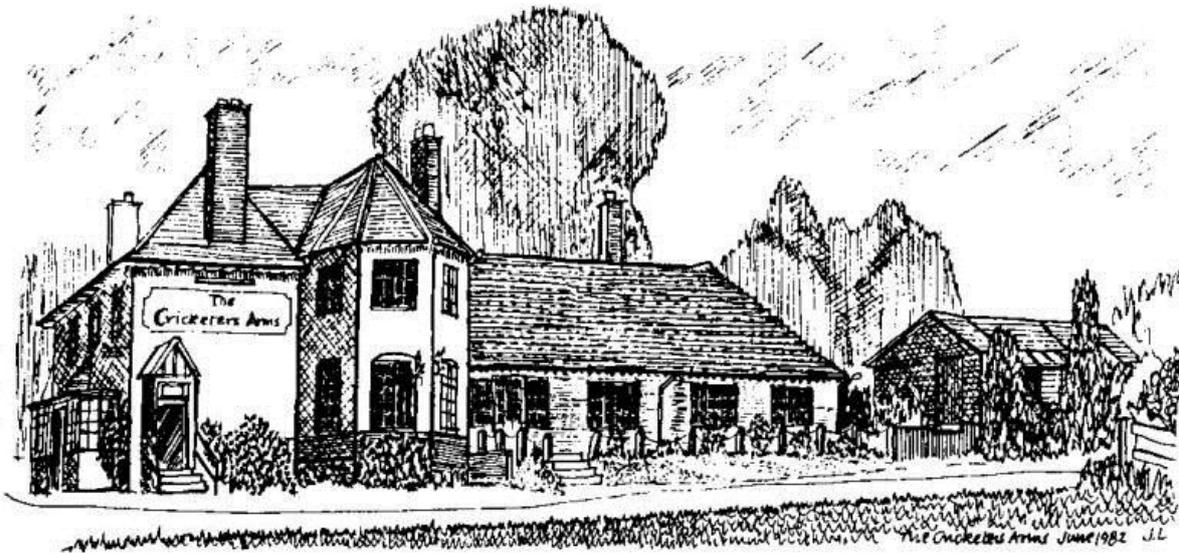
Realising this, the club decided to offer Mr. Stubbs the farmer tenant of Tichborne Down, a higher amount of rent in return for permission to cut wider areas of grass. At the same time Mr. Marks gave advice on the siting and making of bunkers, and it seemed that the course was at last about to take shape. Then came the news that frustrated the better part of their endeavours. Sir Henry informed the club through his agent Mr. Michie (whose little son Bryan was to become a well-known wireless comedian) that he did not like the idea of having bunkers. Golfers generally will not only feel a wild surge of sympathy with Sir Henry's attitude; they will also be envious of his power to carry it into effect.

For various reasons Mr. Marks found his position with the club increasingly uncongenial. There was insufficient scope for his ability as a professional and he had too much work and too little reward as a greenkeeper. Sir Henry's disapproval and Mr. Stubbs' increasing reluctance to permit the cutting of grass had thwarted the club in its efforts to make rapid progress, and Mr. Marks rightly estimated that his prospects as the employee of the sub-tenant of an uncooperative grazier were well on the dim side of average. His work began to reflect the lack of incentive and eventually he and the club parted company in circumstances of mutual dissatisfaction (after which he was employed by Charles Young, who had become a hire carter).

Meanwhile, just across the road at the old Cricketers' Arms, Civilisation had been advancing with the stealthy inevitability of gradualness. For brewers can not only anticipate and satisfy sudden and serious outbreaks of thirst; they can also draw

subtle conclusions from vague trends. Realising that the ancient, well-used horse-and-cart road from Alresford down Sun Hill and on over woody undulations to Bramdean was destined to be superseded by a motor road to Bramdean via Cheriton, they purchased a large plot at the next cross-roads and built the present Cricketers' Arms, attaching a club house with facilities for both ladies and gentlemen; and in 1911 Fred Freemantle made the short journey from the old public house, bringing with him his wife, his stock and chattels and an excellent reputation.

This was a time of tremendous activity. While representatives of the Lion Brewery were successfully resisting attempts by the club to amend the Lease of Club House Agreement with concessionary clauses: a sub-committee was providing lockers, linoleum, lamps, candles, clothes-brushes, the Daily Graphic and other accessories conducive to an atmosphere of cosy domesticity; and on the course itself there was joy unbounded, for the club had acquired the lease, and the new president, Sir Joseph Tichborne (1890-1930), not only approved of bunkers but went so far as to offer the use of additional land to the south of the course for an extension. Soon a "ground" committee had planned the lines of 9 extra holes, and work started with the laying of the greens, supervised by none other than Fred Freemantle.



The 18-holes course was opened in January, 1912: but when war broke out in 1914 the additional land reverted to agricultural use and so it remains today. According to contemporary opinion, quoted by the late Mr. H.C. ("Maurice") Young, the new part had no special character and any challenge it presented was not so much to golfing skills as to the stamina of reluctant pedestrians. Nevertheless: it had been a remarkable achievement by a few generous and devoted members, but any shadow of regret at the loss became insignificant under the dark cloud of national danger.

This had been a period of patient consolidation. Led during Edwardian times by Col. H. Stratton Bates, Mr. W.H. Hunt:, Mr. J. Ridley Shield and Mr. E.E. Snow, the club completed the peaceful penetration of Tichborne Down and by 1911, after 20 years, it had acquired the tenancy of an extended area of over 150 acres. Perhaps the townsfolk of Alresford resented the curtailment and eventually the loss of their "right" (countenanced by kindly Tichbornes and their earlier tenants except in the shooting season) to encroach upon the Down; perhaps they felt that a golfing area of that size

was disproportionately large for the sole use of 60-odd members playing occasionally. It is difficult to say. Of course the Down (in the parish of Tichborne) is nearly a mile from the centre of Alresford; but in those more leisurely days before Time and Motion became associated objects of close scrutiny a walk of less than 20 minutes was probably as lightly regarded as is a drive of less than 2 minutes today. Could there have been an element of compensation in Col. Stratton Bates magnificent gift of a recreation ground to Alresford in 1910?

Having been recommended to Alresford by James Braid and to the Army by Lord Kitchener Mr. William Boniface returned from military service and resumed his duties as professional/greenkeeper; and when in 1920, "after much suffering" poor old Fred Freemantle gladly relinquished all his earthly tenures, he married Miss Charlotte Cooke (now Mrs. George Banks and still at the Cricketers') and succeeded him as landlord. Despite St. Matthews warning about the danger of wearing two hats, Mr. Boniface was able to give loyal and single-minded service to both masters - no easy matter at a time when in golfing circles generally the right of the professional to enter the club house almost at will would have aroused feelings ranging from mild dismay to acute jaundice. (But the brewers, infallible as ever, had ensured from the start that the club house was part of the licensed premises and had rightly judged Mr. Boniface to be a man of honour and discretion.)

In the period between the wars membership remained fairly constant at 120 - 140 and the club concentrated on improving the 9-holes course with better fairways, more bunkers (formerly of grass, but now filled with sand as finances permitted), additional teeing ground and a replacement 5th (now the 6th green. The greens were hand-weeded in the winter by the staff with occasional help from members' gardeners, while such large but vulnerable weeds as plantains that appeared during the growing season were burned to the heart with pinches of sulphate of ammonia.

From 1923 the fairways were cut with a Corinth Dennis motor mower: and a second (36-inch) Dennis was purchased in 1930; but the greens were cut with hand mowers until 1934, when Mr. E.E. Snow, the hon. treasurer, reluctantly agreed that a 14-inch Enfield motor mower was essential. Mr. Boniface used his own one-horse-power tractor, fuelled with oats and chaff, for transporting materials about the course. Peggy and her traces have long since disappeared: but the pony's chaff-cutter was still in the stable loft at the Cricketers' in January, 1982. It was not until 1937 that the club acquired a mechanical tractor and gang mowers. The staff trimmed bunker surrounds with reap-hooks and used scythes under trees and bushes, and whenever the semi-rough became too rank Mr. T.E. Bennett went in with the side-cutter from his adjoining farm.

Mr. Snow served as hon. treasurer from 1907 to 1943, and according to members of the ground staff at the time - Mr. A.E. Dedman Mr. H. "Curly") Young and Mr W.F. Sawyer - he watched every farthing. Nor . was he merely passive during his long vigil. When some subscriptions were overdue in 1921 he gained the support of the committee and sent letters to the defaulting members threatening to proceed against them in the County Court unless they paid up within a week. He insisted in 1930 that the new Dennis be delivered without an operator's seat, since its power was to be used for cutting grass "and not for giving an idle man a ride" He made an enormous contribution to the welfare of the club in this difficult period with but little increase in

basic income. Had successive premiers from Lloyd George to Neville Chamberlain looked to Alresford Golf Club for indicators of inflation they would have found collectively that a gentlemanly subscription remained at £3/3/- from 1920 to 1939, a green fee at 2/- a round from 1919 to 1939 and a caddies fee at 1/8 from 1925 to 1939.

Mr. Boniface was immensely popular with the boys who came to caddie, difficult though it sometimes was to regiment them and regulate their activities. If a member booked a caddie there was no problem, but the boys would often wait for any member who might chance to appear, and if no caddie master was present they would jostle and scuffle for possession of the bag if (like Sir Joseph) he was a good tipper, or bolt and hide in the nearest wood if they spotted an approaching member who was likely to pay no more than the standard fee. Times were hard: but not even poor boys were inclined to hang about quietly and unobtrusively; and quite frequently members who turned up expecting general decorum or even an atmosphere of tranquility would find excited boys booting a ball about on the road outside the club house. The committee received many complaints of such unseemly behaviour.

Some caddies developed a liking for golf and members would occasionally catch them having a few crafty shots on the course proper, so Mr. Boniface decided to absorb some of their effervescence by making pitch-and-putt holes for them on spare ground near the entrance. He also encouraged them to look for golf balls, for which he paid them. Now and then a hard-up caddie would be tempted to err in marking his employer's hall in the rough so that he could return later and correct his error in Private; and a small group of caddies once conspired to make easy money in the following way.

Mr. Boniface kept a succession of dogs, each called Bruce; and Bruce II a dog of many parts, was particularly good at retrieving golf balls and devouring chocolate. These caddies thought it a pity that he should pursue each activity as it were in isolation and soon found that for every fragment of chocolate fed to him he would fetch a ball from his master's open cupboard. So Mr. Boniface went on buying his own property until one day Bruce II strange excitement aroused suspicion and he was arrested, all shining eyes and saliva, at the cupboard door.

The General Strike of 1926, which brought conflict and chaos to many urban areas, impinged but little upon the affairs of the club. However, the committee postponed a special competition in support of the Royal County Hospital Extension Fund, arranged for Saturday, 8th May "in consequence of the strike and the unsettled state of the country". Soon afterwards the caddies, perhaps imbued with hazy notions of a New Democracy, intimated to the committee that they would welcome the lifting of a recent ban on football. Autocracy prevailed.

In 1927 Mr. Boniface persuaded the club to form an artisans' section with Mr. H. Clement as hon. secretary. Membership was limited to 25, many of them former caddies, and elections were controlled by the main committee of the club. The annual subscription was 15/-. They had to give way at all times but could play at will except on competition days. In 1929 a part of Mr. Boniface's shop (the wooden building still standing, though not without effort, near the Cricketers' club house) was

partitioned off for use of the artisans, some of whom were destined to become important figures in the club after the war.

There is only one recorded fatality on the course up to 1939. On 12th April, 1936 Major Eric Loder a guest at Tichborne House, killed a plover with his tee shot from the 8th and the ball found a bad lie, which, he asserted, cost him the hole and the match. His opponent took the view that nothing less than an albatross could have saved him.

Most prominent among committee members of the very difficult inter-war years were Mr. P. Laming, Capt. N. Zambra Miss M. Vowles (ladies' hon. secretary) Mr. F. Rowland, Mr. H.F. Ross, Mr. F. Martin, Major C. Newport (Hon. secretary) and of course Mr. E.E. Snow.

Finally, although it extends far beyond the period set for this article, it seems appropriate to outline Mr. W.M. (Bill) Young's long and distinguished connection with Alresford Golf Club. Having started as a caddie, he became an artisan member and then in turn a full member, match and competitions secretary, captain and then professional/greenkeeper. He is now - and none more deservedly so - an honorary member.

Can a parallel to his career be found in the annals of any other golf club? Perhaps. But for the time being the question is purely rhetorical.

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