

ALRESFORD GOLF CLUB Part Two - 1939-1983

By

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As with many clubs during the war years, Alresford Golf Club had a distinctly subdued air. In 1939 all competitions were suspended for the duration, and although a few members played occasionally, many had lost interest while others feared that playing golf might be seen as an exercise in ostentatious frivolity. Mr. William Boniface, the popular professional/greenkeeper and landlord of the Cricketers' Arms, died in 1943 and the licence was granted to his widow, who married Mr. W.G. Banks in 1945. Henceforth until 1953 the club's professional/ greenkeeper lived elsewhere in Alresford but continued to use the shed on the Cricketers' premises.

While experts may disagree as to who really won the war, even a casual observer might well have thought that Alresford Golf Club would win the peace. The committee was active again and by the end of 1946 a professional/greenkeeper had been appointed, machinery repaired, unwanted bunkers filled in and ancient ant-hills levelled in the rough. But expenditure of reserves was producing no new income, and early in 1947 the first of several financial crises was imminent.

The committee called an extraordinary general meeting to consider the ominous resolution "that the Alresford Golf Club be wound up unless an alternative resolution be forthcoming".

This strong challenge found the members unanimous in their opposition to closure. But the problem was how to raise or save sufficient money to keep the club solvent. Many members were hard up, petrol was still rationed, subscriptions had just been raised to 4 guineas for men and 3 guineas for ladies and there was always the danger that a further increase would deter those members for whom golf was merely a fringe activity.

Sir Anthony Tichborne, the president and landowner, offered to waive payment of the course rent for two years; Mr. and Mrs. Banks were prepared for the time being to pay the club house rent to the brewers and to make no charge for lighting and cleaning; Mr. W.M. (Bill) Young and other artisan members were willing to maintain the machinery and help at times on the course, all without payment. The assistant greenkeeper was dismissed.

But all these savings brought no real solution. The club would have liked its professional/greenkeeper installed once again as landlord of the Cricketers' Arms, but the brewers insisted very firmly that Mrs. Banks would herself decide when to give up the tenancy. They suggested that the club might have its own separate licence, but the committee flinched from such a responsibility, with its hidden problems, at a time of depression and uncertainty. In a desperate, expensive attempt to attract new members a large square, which includes the present 2nd tee, was

levelled in preparation for tennis courts. (But it seems that there was no-one for tennis and the scheme was eventually abandoned in 1950.)

For some time there had been increasing support for the idea of forming a company to take over the financial affairs of the club. Prominent members, former members and local residents were circularised in an effort to raise £500 capital in £5 shares. There was a ready response, and in 1948 the Alresford Golf and Tennis Club, Limited came into being, more in the hope of saving the club from extinction than of making any money for the shareholders.

The board of directors, often referred to as the House of Lords, exercised financial control from a solicitor's office in Alresford, where the company secretary informed them regularly of income from subscriptions and green fees and presented accounts for payment. At the club house and on the course life went on much as usual, with the committee (now without a treasurer) administering the day-to-day routine of the golfing year. Two directors, Dr.H.R.Leishman and the late Mr.G.W. Searles, attended committee meetings on behalf of the board, where they would approve some requests for expenditure at once and take notice of others for reference to their fellow directors. As playing members they were closely involved in all the club's activities. Mr. Searles was captain in 1947 and '48 and Dr. Leishman in 1949 and '50, a state of affairs which emphasised admirably the harmony that prevailed under the new regime.

The professional/greenkeeper left in 1948 and was succeeded by Mr. Albert Bolton (1948-1956) of the Worksop Golf Club, who was very tall, very lean and very hungry for success. He certainly found plenty to do, for there was a minimum of machinery and a maximum of grass. Indeed, for nearly 30 years the professional/greenkeeper was to have only a little part-time help from a boy or a patient from Tichborne Down Hospital or a pensioner, from whom he could expect an honest modicum of supervised achievement rather than independent deeds of spectacular initiative; and it was during the pleasant part of the year, when customers might arrive or beginners require tuition, that he would find himself almost fully committed to a one-man slog out on the course. But the indefatigable Mr. Bolton succeeded in all aspects of his work, and the committee praised his efforts and gladly followed his advice (except when he wanted to uproot bushes or lop trees). In 1949 green fees at 2/6 a round reached a record total to date of £101/12/6.

Largely at the instigation of Dr. Leishman, the artisans' section was wound up in 1950 and they were offered full membership. These 18 members presented their handsome Linnets Memorial Challenge Cup to the club for an annual 36-holes medal competition, open to ladies and men, to be held over the extended Easter weekend. Their former headquarters at the end of the professional's shed could now be used for housing some new-fangled trundle carts, later called caddy carts and now in common use as trolleys, which the ladies in particular handle with immaculate poise and elegant precision. (A male member was once heard to remark that the ladies

had taken to trolleys as coolies take to rickshaws - a most indecorous simile, of course.)

Despite the benefits of this transfusion, however, the club had not solved its perennial problem - how to attract new members; and when in 1952 the directors offered Mr. Bolton 20% of each first subscription if he could persuade visitors or local people to become members, the response was negligible. A very serious financial crisis was looming up, and the captain, Mr. H. ("Curly") Young, was destined to preside over remarkable changes in 1953, his second year of office.

During the early months of that year the directors had decided that the club would have to leave the Cricketers' Arms, move across the road into the parish of Tichborne and set up a new headquarters on the course. The income from subscriptions in 1952 was £344 from nearly 100 playing members, but all of this had gone on wages and casual expenditure. Green fees had produced £123, but routine expenses - mainly those of machinery, fertilisers, rent of the course and club room, lighting and laundry - had totalled £298. So there had been a loss of £175. The inevitable extraordinary general meeting was held in May, 1953, when Mr. Searles, in an address of great force and clarity, explained the company's position and plans. The directors had set aside £100 for a building and provision of services, but they would welcome donations for this most urgent undertaking. £64 was promised there and then, and preparations were made for the arrival of the new club house.

According to the most flattering opinions that can be gleaned from the rumour and ribaldry of the time, the deserted railway coach had by 1953 long outlived its usefulness, outstayed its welcome and outraged the sensitivities of its neighbourhood; in other words, it was just what Alresford Golf Club needed. Be that as it may, £10 changed hands and after a £40 journey to Alresford it was quickly set up (on sleepers, naturally) at the edge of a wood and in full view of its superior predecessor. Eager volunteers, among whom the ladies were indispensable, had soon partitioned and painted the inside, clapped elm boards on the outside, laid on services and set up a bar. A false roof was expertly thatched by the late Mr. A.V. ("Pongo") Holder, a popular and cheerful local well known for his general interest in country pursuits and his particular interest in rabbits and pheasants of low I.Q. With all this attention the coach soon lost its alien air and assumed a happier though somewhat specious guise of rustic innocence. Some passers-by thought it looked like Uncle Tom's cabin; but for all the members it represented survival. During the work the volunteers had expended great hilarity and exercised much wit, but such was their pride in the new home when all was completed that they tended to resent similar displays of mirth and humour by visitors. These were remarkably consistent in their reactions, among which were "Call me off the course if the signal goes up!", "Can I hire a porter?" and (a more subtle query) "Where do I change?".

It was perhaps natural that its isolated position should attract petty burglars, but as nothing of special value was accessible overnight the committee came reluctantly to the unethical conclusion that burglary was cheaper than security.

It may be wondered why even a small increase in subscription rates could not have been imposed during these difficult years, but the directors well knew that they could not take chances with a small membership. Nor have members ever taken kindly to demands for more. But such is human nature that many who would cavil at the compulsion of higher subscriptions and dearer drinks will cheerfully exercise free will and pay for a session of pleasant anxiety at the fruit machine.

In 1952/53 Mr. Young and his sub-committee sited 9 new teeing areas. Until then a player simply went round the same course twice for his 18 holes, but now there would be a different line and/or length for the second visit to each hole, thus providing variety and helping to preserve the course. The ladies had their extra tees in the mid-60's. Today, with over 400 playing members and many visitors, certain problems have become more acute. There is plenty of teeing space, but since approach shots are played from common ground, twice the usual number of divots are taken there; and over-consolidation of the 9 greens has meant slower seepage of surface water after rain. But grass is highly resilient and so are the green committee and staff. Anyway, greenkeepers can always find sanctuary in dreams of paradise: a golf course of artificial turf at a club with no playing members.

From now on the club (as opposed to the company) was responsible for all financial matters arising from its occupation of the club house. Mr. A. V. Stevens served as honorary treasurer for some years, dealing first of all with stocktaking and a straightforward bar account; but his duties soon expanded to the administration of investment and deposit accounts and various other funds including a loans fund when a 30' x 10' lean-to lounge was added for £164. Then there were bills for improvements and maintenance, depreciating assets such as furniture to be considered, and later bar wages, so that by the mid-50's a full-scale financial report had to be prepared for annual general meetings, when the company secretary would attend to outline briefly the company's financial position, which invariably showed members that there was "still no room for complacency". The provision of a lounge enabled the club to hold social functions (and even the A.G.M. until 1962), and the annual supper took place in a marquee on the "tennis court", at an average cost of 8/6 per head, until 1963. There was still no privacy for first-class passengers, however, so the committee often met at the Cricketers' Arms during the 50's and 60's.

The manning of the bar was a major problem for many years. Mr. Bolton had served there without payment for the first few weeks in June/July, 1953, and thereafter the club relied on the splendid services of 31 volunteers who each adopted a monthly date but exchanged duties ad lib, an arrangement that was often clouded with uncertainty. For a period the professional/greenkeeper was employed for this

additional service, but then the club had to fall back on voluntary help, relieved for brief spells by temporary employees until, amid general thanksgiving, a regular barman became available in 1964.

In the spring of 1959 the nation was in the grip of feverish excitement; the price of beer had gone down. But although this did not pass unnoticed at the club house (with mild beer reduced to 1/- a pint) the members were more concerned about a local matter - the presence of sheep on the course. These had long served a useful purpose in keeping down the grass; but instead of minding their own business in the rough, a new generation of sheep had been concentrating on the sweet young grass that followed the mowers and leaving insurmountable putting problems on the greens. So having rubbed shoulders with increasing friction over several years, mouton and mankind parted company and the sheep were fenced or folded away on peripheral pastures.

The history of the club throughout the 60's is one of unhindered progress, with many highlights, towards independence and prosperity.

During a very dry spell in 1960 two water-carts were borrowed, filled at the club house and towed out to each green in turn. The benefit of this so impressed Dr. Leishman that when he suddenly heard, during a further term as captain in 1961, that the services of a water contractor were available, he bypassed all formalities and, with a master-stroke of unofficialdom, sanctioned the piping of water to all greens. The members were surprised and delighted (with the possible exception of those who had become superlatively skilled in playing pitch-and-run shots to dry greens).

Early in the decade some new industries and other commercial enterprises came to Alresford with an influx of business and professional people, some of whom joined the golf club and helped to form the first social committee in 1963. Their noticeboard bore the powerfully pre-emptive heading 'Absens ne Queratur' -but few members were and no-one did. This very active and highly articulate group not only relieved the main committee of some routine responsibilities but also revitalised the club with its drive and enthusiasm. In those times of greater prosperity and increasing publicity for golf the membership grew steadily as the general public came to realise that a game worth playing is worth playing badly. The club began to thrive, and its corporate spirit warmed into a camaraderie that has continued to the present day.

In the past the club had often struggled on from day to day; by the mid 60's it could plan for the more distant future. It had become financially sound and felt that it no longer needed a benevolent foster-parent. The company, which for 18 years had kept a careful watch on the welfare of the club while staying remote and at times almost anonymous, readily agreed in 1966 to hand over its assets and responsibilities. The directors had received no fees and the shareholders no dividends. Their only gain had been in the moral satisfaction of looking after an

important local institution when it was in trouble. In a final gesture of goodwill the directors presented the club with the Company Cup to commemorate their long and successful association.

The committee now turned its attention to important matters of the future.

Since 1960 there had been fears at the club that the construction of an Alresford by-pass could affect the course. (Rumours of a coming by-pass had arisen from time to time over many years, and as early as 1930 some Alresford businessmen had been worried at the prospect.) It was anticipated that the line would run close to the Tichborne Down Road, and the question of re-aligning the course if some ground were lost was carefully considered in 1965. These preoccupations gave point and impetus to the work of a development sub-committee, which decided that the club must face the future from a position of greater strength; and it recommended in 1966 that the club should try to acquire the freehold of the course, build a substantial new club house with modern amenities and have the course re-aligned by an expert when the line of the proposed bypass had been established.

It had long been obvious that, despite its unique quaintness, the club house was becoming inadequate for a growing membership. It had to be abandoned or extended and the committee was convinced that the provision of a new club house was the only sensible choice. A by-pass that followed the anticipated line would prevent or restrict access from the Tichborne Down Road, so the new building would have to be sited off the Cheriton Road. The place selected was near the point where road and course were at the same level, the committee being confident that any future re-alignment could be based on a club house in that position.

During 1967 the development sub-committee intensified its efforts to achieve the aims of the club and bring negotiations with the Tichborne Estate nearer to completion. At last, in 1968, it had reached its objective; the club had acquired the freehold and the club house could be built during 1969.

The club was greatly indebted to several members for this successful outcome and in particular to Mr. P.C. Gregory, who gave magnificent service as a counsellor and negotiator and was extremely skilful at critical times in dealing with the wilder speculations of members at large, who were impatient for results as the months went by and either wanted to know exactly what was going on or wanted whatever it was done quickly - or both; Mr. R.P. Kelt planned and administered the intricate financial transactions with enviable expertise; the late Lt.-Col. F.W. Schlesinger took on almost single-handed the work of designing the new building, supervising its construction and planning the interior decorations, furnishings and fittings; and for many years before and after the transition Mr. L.E. Spencer exercised firm control over the management of the bar and the bar accounts.

Those exciting days are over, but there has remained the unsettling matter of the by-pass. The club had anticipated the route correctly and expert advice on re-alignment,

incorporating land to the east of the present course, has been given and accepted. Work on the by-pass should start late next year, but the club is already (in May) preparing the lines of new fairways, while amid clusters of cowslips and solitary purple orchids a mechanical dinosaur is sniffing and clawing at parcels of virgin turf that will soon become new tees and greens. It is evident that golf will suffer as little disruption as possible when the highway authority takes over a strip by the Tichborne Down Road. Naturally, many people both inside and outside the club will regret the inevitable loss of some amenity, though the club may find that the by-pass will protect its privacy and form a useful barrier against casual infiltration.

Non-golfers may wonder why there has been so much fuss about the game over all these years and may find it even more strange that while some centres of industry are suffering losses, a centre of recreation is thriving as much as ever. Of course, golf is a primitive game, and if an ancient Briton could come back on a temporary resurrection permit for just one glimpse of 20th-century civilisation and catch sight of someone with a stick wandering about on the downs, apparently trying to knock a small stone into a hole in the ground, he would probably return to his resting-place with a conceited smirk. But of course there is more to it than that; and one cannot escape the feeling that if some of the golf addicts were suddenly faced with utter and permanent ruin, their last cash would go on a subscription and their final car journey would take them to the golf course.

Meanwhile the old railway coach is crouching sadly under the wood, doubtless dreaming of its romantic youth on the Eastleigh sidings. The former club room at the Cricketers' Arms has been transformed into an attractive bar, tastefully decorated with murals of master golfers (but the old professional's shed has disappeared; according to reliable witnesses it was last seen approaching a bonfire on November 5th, 1982).

Anyone who knows this year's captain, Mr. R.J.P. Good, whether privately or professionally, will not be in the least surprised to learn that he is dispensing wit and wisdom in generous measure at the golf club. The ladies' captain, Mrs. G.M. Williams, is using all her energy and charm to further the interests of her section, which has long been well known and respected in county circles. Mr. B. Broadbent, the new secretary, has taken over very smoothly from Mr. B.A. Ridley, who has retired after serving for a decade with splendid efficiency and infinite good-will. (Nowadays the secretary is an oracle/diplomat in charge of a complicated business that somehow never quite settles into a predictable routine.) Mr. N.F. Hudson, the complete steward, seems to deal with several orders, listen to several jokes, engage in several conversations, greet new arrivals and courteously refuse a drink - all at the same time - without missing anything else concerned with his domain that is worthy of a mental note (and his wife is an excellent caterer). Mrs. B.M. Powell, the longest-serving member of the staff, is responsible for the bright and cheerful appearance of the club house every morning.

In 1977 the unenviable dual role of professional/greenkeeper ended with the retirement of Mr.W.M. Young. Mr. B. Conway has since followed his high standards of greenkeeping and maintained the course in beautiful condition despite the problems already mentioned and the atrocious weather of this late winter and spring. Mr. Malcolm Scott, the talented young professional, has become a real asset to the club apart from giving lessons and selling equipment (which he is always willing to do, of course). He contributes wholeheartedly to the social life of the club by arranging indoor competitions and other entertainments in the winter and golfing excursions in the summer.

This is a strong team, and the future of the club is in very good hands.

Finally, since there has been so little mention of people actually playing golf over all these years - yes, they played a lot.

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