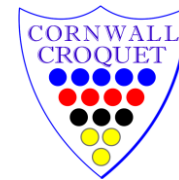


CORNWALL CROQUET CLUB



A Personal History by Tony Backhouse

I called the first General Meeting, having been given a list of contacts by Don Waterhouse (a noted CA member previously living in Cornwall) and obtained others from the Croquet Association and Margaret MacFarlane (one-time County Sports Officer), for 9 August 1995. It was held in the basement of the Bustopher Jones winebar in Truro and attended by 7 people. The obvious main point of discussion concerned possible sites for a club, considering Boscawen Park in Truro, Lanhydrock or any convenient golf or tennis club with space available.

The next meeting was held on 6 September, This was the first appearance of Malcolm and Moira Hooper, who had their own attractive lawn at Budock Vean, and of Jenny Burrows, member of a group headed by Margaret MacFarlane who played on a small private lawn at Penelewey. Discussion centred on the possibility of coaching at Truro School, encouraged by Nigel Baker of that institution, and of the question of establishment at the Veryan Sports Club. The latter includes cricket, football, tennis and bowls, both indoor and out and was enthusiastic about adding croquet. As a result the next meeting was held at their clubhouse on 21 February 1996. 14 people plus two officers from the Veryan club attended, with apologies from 11 others. Claud Lanyon was elected as Chairman, Tim Grainger-Allen as Treasurer and I as Secretary. A draft Constitution was adopted and it was determined to construct suitable courts at Veryan as soon as possible. However two months later, Claud and I reported to members that one full-size court and two short courts would not be fitted in the club's available space unless the cricket section were prepared to move over. This proved to be unacceptable.

Our first Open Day was held at Truro School on 6 May, 1996. This was a fair success thanks to help from the Plymouth Croquet Club in the shape of Sean and Jo Carter. In spite of this, negotiations with the School to use their lawns stuck on difficulties over holiday arrangements and our attentions moved elsewhere.

So later that summer we moved on to negotiations with the owners of Bethesda Farm and Caravan Park. This was sited on an old playing field next to the private road between Carlyon Bay and the Par road from St Austell. Ambitious plans, to include tennis, badminton, rounders, an ornamental lake and three croquet courts, were drawn up by Leslie Buxton. After a number of meetings it gradually became clear that the owners were not prepared to give sufficient security of tenure to make any significant capital expenditure worthwhile.

Following this, we were introduced to Howard Rosevear, the owner of Porthpean and Castle Gotha Farms on the coast south of St Austell. He had constructed a nine-hole golf course on Porthpean Farm but had been obstructed from extending on to Castle Gotha Farm by the National Trust. When the latter property was sold to Howard by Mrs Cobbold Sawle, a covenant was included in the conditions which gave the NT the right to veto any change of use. We were then dismayed but not surprised when approval for two croquet courts was turned down for no apparent reason except, we thought, the reluctance to create a precedent.



Our eventual first lawn on Porthpean Farm

I subsequently obtained planning permission on a marginally less attractive and more exposed site on the other side of the road. However at further meetings, concern was expressed that this site was too far from the main population centres, including Truro, and therefore that recruitment might be difficult. So the plan was put on hold for the time being though I made a personal appeal for support to go ahead.

The AGM on 8 April, 1997, decided that we should continue site investigations at Roserrow Country Club, the Roseland House Hotel and a small site behind Gyllingvase Beach at Falmouth as well as at Porthpean. It also decided that the name of the Club should be changed from the Veryan Croquet Club to the Cornwall Croquet Club.

On 27 June, after considerable encouragement, I decided to go ahead with arrangements for the site at Porthpean. I therefore started negotiations with Howard Rosevear and his agent and sought estimates for the cost of levelling two courts and providing and erecting a suitable hut. I also investigated the possibilities of grants from Restormel, the North Cornwall Sport and Recreation Council and the Croquet Association. A costing was given later at about £23,000 including a hut with water, electricity and WCs, but by then our eyes had moved elsewhere.

A second Open Day was held on Boscawen Park on 12 July, 1997, using equipment borrowed from Plymouth and the WI. This was a qualified success giving us a few more names to add to our database. We also investigated Killiow (up for sale) and the Lakeview Country Club.

At the AGM on 30 April, 1998, Claud Lanyon resigned as Chairman and I took on both offices of Chairman and Secretary. Arrangements were also made to use lawns at An Gwel (Malcolm Hooper), Bareppa (David Laity), Tremethick (Peter Dexter), Pencarrow and the Plymouth Croquet Club for both coaching and general use.

In May, Ian Wilson joined the club. He came from the Nailsea club with a handicap of 10 and with a history of involvement in club affairs. He was to prove an invaluable co-worker. He was a computer buff, designed a selection of club logos, researched grant-making authorities with their various regulations and procedures, drafted applications and was a reliable consultant, confessor and source of advice and encouragement.

The AGM in 1999 was not encouraging on progress at Roserrow, disappointed with numbers using the offers of private lawns and coaching and quiet on the question of Porthpean. But, by September, negotiations had opened at Killiow. This estate, two miles south west of Truro, had been bought by one Mike Sagin who was keen to add a croquet club to his existing golf club, particularly if it could be called "The Cornwall Croquet Club at Killiow".

By January, 2000, there was hope again of a single lawn at Roserrow as well as promises from Killiow. A tinge of optimism can be perceived in the Newsletter (no. 14). But by the AGM at Roserrow in March, the lawn there was being constructed with step edges, the turf was poor and there was no movement on equipment. There was also no movement at Killiow.

In September, we entered a Cornwall team, consisting of Ian Wilson, Peter Dexter, Tony Treglown and me, for the CA-sponsored Millennium Competition at Cheltenham. We had a lot of fun and came =4th out of 20 teams taking part. At the same time, the Newsletter reports no progress at either Roserrow or Killiow. However there is a mention of the playing field off Tregye Road at Carnon Downs. We registered our interest with the local Parish Clerk in joining in any efforts to form a combined Sports Club to share facilities, work, etc.

In June, 2001, there had been no progress at Tregye Road, Roserrow or Killiow. There was a possibility at the Roche Sports and Social Club but this fizzled out when they denied having any available space. By October, Ian Wilson had organised sessions at Trevarno Gardens, established a club website and energised a tiring management team. Killiow remained a prospect full of good intentions but no sign of action.

By May, 2002, we had submitted to Killiow what they called "a detailed and business-like proposal" which included our offer of £2,000 as a contribution to the costs of building two courts (they already had appropriate equipment on site) and an annual payment of £70 per member. In return they would maintain the lawns and cover essential costs. We would also provide a hut and all the croquet equipment necessary to operate three courts, i.e. two courts, one capable of division into two short lawns.

By this time, anticipating future requirements, Ian had qualified as a Club Coach and I as a Referee.

By January 2003, we were explaining the requirements for an application for a Lottery grant, including the need for a statement giving us security of tenure for a minimum of 12 years. However by April, we had been informed of two critical decisions. Firstly, despite all negotiations and previous agreements, Killiow had reneged to the extent of requiring the club to pay in full for the entire costs of maintaining the lawns. After a full discussion, we agreed that we could not afford this and we therefore broke off negotiations unless or until they could return to their previous bargaining position. It was typical of the progress over the previous three years that they took three months to answer with a schedule of costs totalling an annual payment of nearly £6,000, far more than we could afford without raising subscriptions to an impossible level. Secondly, the Feock Parish Clerk informed us that Truro College, the owners of the Tregye playing fields, had decided that they could not afford to develop as they had hoped and that matters were now at a standstill. In addition we would not be permitted to make temporary use of the field despite our undertaking to vacate whenever requested.

It is perhaps typical that, after a period of deepest gloom, the sun should suddenly burst through. In late July, out of the blue, Howard Rosevear announced that he would proceed immediately with the construction of the two lawns exactly in accordance with the planning permission I had obtained five years earlier. And this he duly did in the autumn. A subsequent deluge left Court 2 relatively undamaged but, as a result of soil compaction, caused serious flooding on Court 1, enough to necessitate the installation of drainage which in turn delayed final levelling and seeding.

In March, we submitted a detailed application for grant to the Croquet Association, this to cover the provision of equipment. Calamity then struck in the form of Ian Wilson's angina attack so his work then fell to the Chairman until a new recruit, Nigel Grant, took over as Secretary on 3 August. Meanwhile a further application had been made to the CA Development Committee together with a Business Plan and projected cash flow. Approval was finally received, a cheque for £1,000 arrived on 30 July followed almost immediately by a set of hoops and two sets of Barlow GT balls, theoretically on loan from the South West Federation.



Our new hut/pavilion, almost complete

Meanwhile we had received substantial donations, bought and erected a hut, converted it into our pavilion, purchased one set of hoops, etc. and finally started play and coaching on Court 2, using second-hand balls purchased earlier by Ian Wilson. Court 1 was still not fit for use. Our informal opening took place with a Club Day on 22 August, Court 2 being by then in surprisingly good condition, level and well mown though the grass was somewhat patchy and weedy. Plymouth Croquet Club sent a team of three to play a friendly on 19 September and the season was effectively finished with the final of the last of the club competitions and the prize-giving on 25 September, 2004.

So almost nine years after I called the first meeting of what was to be called the Cornwall Croquet Club, we celebrated our first, brief season of croquet on the county's first club court. I think it was just as well that I did not know at the start how long it would take, how much grief, disappointment and frustration I would experience and how much it would cost. But I was in no doubt as I played my first game, which I lost, against Nigel Grant on our new court, that it had all been most worthwhile.



(L to R) John Dowding, Malcolm Hooper, Rosemary Bradshaw, Stephen Read, Tony Backhouse, Tony Jennings, Nigel Grant, Margaret Read, Elizabeth Schofield, Paul Schofield.

Tony Backhouse

30 September, 2004.

(Revised 21 Jan. 2012)