

History of Croquet in Sidmouth

This history of Sidmouth croquet, below, was drawn-up by Mrs Dart shortly after 2000. The Club is grateful to the overall Club President, and long term, stalwart member of the Croquet Section, David Temple, for recovering this history from his archives so that it could be scanned in and made available to all members. Historic values are followed by updated 2020 values.

Without access to the archives old photographs and pictures are very limited. However, Croquet was a popular subject for Punch and the accompanying picture could almost be a Sidmouth scene!? Like all sports the decorative / memorabilia/ trophy firms soon took to producing croquet figurines which are now quite collectable. These range from bronze figures costing thousands to Parian ware to modern composite materials costing considerably less. A 'local' collection is pictured.

Mrs Darts History of Croquet in Sidmouth

Croquet at Sidmouth is first recorded in the Club minutes of 20th November 1900 when the question of meeting the wishes of several residents and visitors by the making of a Croquet Ground was discussed. It was unanimously agreed that 'the Committee approve of a Croquet Ground (or Grounds) on the field at a cost not exceeding £25 [c£3,093], towards which the Club has been promised £16 and 10 shillings [c£2,041], and that a sub-committee be hereby appointed to carry out the work to the best of their judgement and ability'.

By July 1902 a Croquet Ground must have been in being as a special, committee meeting had to be called on July 19 'to consider the advisability of making a boundary on the east side of the Cricket ground to exclude the new Croquet Lawn'. This was considered 'inadvisable', and a resolution was passed 'that in view of the possible danger to both Croquet players and cricketers alike, it is desirable that croquet play should be suspended during Cricket match hours, and the Committee order the hoops to be removed accordingly'.

By the start of the 1903 season croquet players must have become both keener and braver, because at the AGM, 4th May 1903, the motion was carried that 'the Croquet ground shall be protected by netting during cricket matches and shall be available to croquet players at their own risk, the Committee retaining the right to withdraw the privilege if it be found inconvenient or dangerous'. [Interestingly still a risk to be addressed in 2020 but, play continues more or less shielded by a permanent, high 'chicken-wire fence in the process of being renewed and heightened].

At the end of the 1903 season croquet's popularity must have grown, to the extent that a special Committee meeting was convened to consider the advisability of making a Croquet Lawn on the site of the old Asphalt Tennis Court at the North East Corner of the Cricket Ground'. It was agreed to carry out the work at a cost of not more than £25 [c£3,060]; and at the 1904 AGM on 6th May, it was reported that 'a sum of nearly £20 [c£2,448] had been expended in making the new croquet ground'.

The 19 May 1904 saw a special Committee meeting held to promulgate new Club rules which include for croquet: 'Members may reserve a Croquet Lawn at 10 o'clock each morning and at 2 o'clock each afternoon, by writing their names in a book kept in the Pavilion, but if all the players are not there within ten minutes of the time secured, the right will be forfeited. Not more than four players may play at a time. [The '10 minute' rule still applies in 2020].

Nothing to do with croquet, but Rev. Brutton commented at the 1904 AGM on 'the great increase in the consumption of the teas mainly due to frequency of visits to the tea tent of youths and children, possessed of abnormal appetites' and went on to say 'the tea tent was not meant for children to feast themselves in; they should be sent home to their nurseries'.

The 6th May 1905 AGM recorded the report that 'the Croquet engagement book shows that both croquet lawns were much in demand during the greater part of the season'. So, Croquet was obviously well under way and the possibility of tournaments was in the air but, at yet another 'special' Committee meeting on 22nd February 1907, 'it was decided not to hold a

Croquet Tournament in the ensuing season'. Croquet, and tennis, was ever more popular as shown by the 19th April 1907 AGM which decided that accommodation was to be provided for 'the large number of ladies who use the ground for lawn tennis and croquet'.

It was finally agreed that an Open Croquet Tournament be held at Sidmouth at the 16th January 1908 committee meeting. The date was set for the week commencing 27th April 1908.

The 1908 tournament was, thankfully, a success with the Club Secretary pleased to announce that from the profit he had been able to make good to the Club the £2 lost by not renting the field for sheep feed for as long as usual'. [I wonder what the local rules were for a shot hampered / obstructed / diverted by sheep droppings?]

In late 1908 permission had been granted for the playing of hockey on the ground during the Christmas vacation. Subsequently, the 1909 AGM concluded that this had not been a good idea, 'especially in view of the fact that play in the Croquet Tournament takes place over a portion of the ground which was used for this purpose (hockey), as the turf has been considerably damaged and it has been impossible to rectify the injury in time'. [Sheep droppings and hockey, damaged turf – challenging conditions for accurate play!!]

Croquet was still the flavour of the year at the start of 1909. It was reported at the 19th April 1909 AGM that 'the Croquet Courts have also been much appreciated and large numbers joined for this alone. [The first mention of 'croquet courts – the correct term, although nearly everybody in 2020 refers to croquet lawns]. It was further reported that, despite the hockey damage, 'the season opened with a highly successful tournament which is to be repeated during the first week of next month, when we trust that an even greater success may be recorded'.

Just as well that the first 1909 Tournament was so praised because, sad to say, there was bad news at the Committee meeting of 23 June. Members of the Croquet sub-committee 'stated that the recent Croquet Tournament, for which they had had such high hopes, had resulted in a loss of c£9 [c£1,078] and they enquired whether the Committee could render them any assistance towards defraying the deficit. The Hon. Sec. pointed out that in arriving at this sum of £9 no account had been taken of the expense of horse-hire on the ground prior to the Tournament, and that the share of this item which should, in his opinion, be allocated to the Croquet account was £31 [c£3,714].

The decision was made that 'the future conduct of the Croquet Tournament including the question of having it, should be vested in the Cricket Committee and be under their control'. *Mrs Dart opined*, I like to think that this harsh judgement was followed by conciliatory private discussion - interesting to me to note that one of the sub-committee members involved was Dr Colclough, who later presented 2 cups which are still in use.

By October 1909 croquet's misdemeanours must have been forgiven, because in October permission was given to hold a Tournament in the week commencing 2nd May 1910 run by a croquet sub-committee - and no charge was to be levied for horse hire for rolling the ground! It was at the same meeting agreed that 2 members should be nominated to serve on the General Committee in order to serve the interests of Croquet players.

No mention of Croquet thereafter in the minutes of the General Committee until after the years of the Great War. The sub-committee presumably kept their own records, but these have not survived. Perhaps, more importantly, Croquet did not inflame the passions of the General Committee for good or ill. It is suspected that no croquet was played during the war years.

[The current Chairman is aware that Budleigh Salterton Croquet Club held a tournament in 1914 but then the groundsman was called-up. Play did continue for Belgian refugees and officers, for half-rate fees but activity, although much reduced, did continue.]

Croquet resumed after the war and in April 1920 reference is made to the cost of a new Croquet Lawn at £72 10 shillings [c£3,262]. This probably refers to a decision taken way back in December 1908 when 'the matter of levelling the ground immediately south of the existing

croquet lawns near Station Road was deferred'. Tournaments did restart as minutes of a May 1920 meeting record the winning of a cup in competition. It was agreed to 'send a letter of thanks to Dr Colclough for his handsome offer to either give back the Cup he won at Croquet or present a new one for competition!' The Club presently holds 2 cups bearing the name of Colclough, one hallmarked 1914, the other hallmarked 1922 and presented 30th April 1923; the inference being that the good doctor was generous enough to return the one and also buy and present another.

His name first appeared in 1907 as present at a general meeting and by the 1920s he was an important member of the Club. He was listed as being on the Ground sub-committee in 1924, when he proposed that a notice be put up saying that 'perambulators and bath chairs come on to the cricket ground at their own risk'. He managed the end of April Annual Open Tournament and in 1924 & 1925 and, for the 1924 tournament, introduced the rulings that 4" hoops be used for doubles, and peeling be restricted to 4 hoops. He also ran a Knockout Competition in connection with the All England Handicap in June 1924 with an entrance fee of 3 shillings. [c£9].

A yearly Open Tournament now seems to have been so much a normal event that it is rarely mentioned in Club minutes. The 1927 dates were listed, 14th -19th May and in 1930 at the May AGM 'the question of the Croquet Tournament being held after Budleigh Salterton' was raised. Friendly cooperation between the two clubs existed even then.

You will recall the horse that pulled the roller – well trouble for the Club's secretary in Spring 1931 as he reported that 'he was, as yet, unable to find a suitable horse for the roller'. The suggestion of a motor-car to haul it was discussed and found impracticable and the Secretary was instructed to make further enquiries and make every effort to find a horse. The Secretary's Richard III impersonations round the town bore fruit and he was able to report, at the June committee meeting, that he had 'obtained a horse from Small at 15 shillings [c£52] per week, and that Dagworthy would house and keep it for 7 shillings [c£24] per week'.

It was agreed that the Club would take the horse at that price until 12 September at the cost of £16 10 shillings [c£1,131]. [*Mrs Dart wrote*: A current member recalls that the field was rolled quite often during the summer months by a large roller drawn by a horse wearing special leather boots. The horse was kept in a stable which is now the machinery shed beside the pavilion. When not required the horse was put in a field in Bickwell Valley opposite Bickwell Cottage.]

At that time the tennis section was all-important with 8 courts. An interesting point raised at the April 1932 AGM was that a sub-committee should be formed 'to go into the whole question of the Club Subscriptions and more especially the Family subscription so that the Club need not depend on the profits of the Annual Tennis Tournament for its existence". This dependence may explain the Committee's refusal to accept Croquet members' request that their annual Open Tournament be held during the first week of June, starting that year, rather than in early May as heretofore. Permission was twice sought and twice refused. The reason, both times, was that 'the proposed date would interfere with tennis'. As the important annual Tennis Tournament seems to have been held, at that time, at the end of August the linkage seems unclear!

Undaunted, croquet members later proposed, with success, that No 1 Croquet Lawn should be kept open until the end of December. A sting in the tail was the proviso that Croquet members should each pay an additional 1 guinea [i. e. £1 1 shilling c£74] subscription fee for the period i. e. from the end of September, the normal closing date, until the end of December. Either the weather that winter was inclement or enthusiasm waned under financial pressure as, whatever the cause, it was accepted at the start of the 1933 season that 'the Croquet season be only up to the end of October - weather permitting - and the Courts then closed for necessary repairs and resting'. The Tournament that year continued the former pattern and was held from 9-14 May.

Subscription rates were altered at this time:		2020 Value	
Pre-1921	£1. 1. 0		c£47
1921 – 1933	£1. 11.	1921	c£77
		1933	c£113
Post 1933	Player	£2. 2. 0	c£151
	Family Rate	£3. 3. 0	c£227
	Non-playing	£2. 2. 0	c£151

[Members in 2020 may wonder at the stagnated rated between 1921 and 1933 / 34. The 1934 subscription must have come as a 'shock' and underlines the necessity of some increase every year].

Although the probability of war was very real, in May of 1939 an Open Tournament was held, and a report made that the condition of the Courts was very good. The Tournament scheduled for May 1940 however was cancelled due to shortage of entries, and there were complaints apparently throughout the season about the condition of the lawns. [Did they not know there was a war on?]

In October 1940 the Committee approved the introduction of sheep on the grounds throughout the winter. Complaints were still being registered at a Committee meeting in June 1944 but, as the war came to an end, there was little or no interest in Croquet. A brave attempt was made in late 1946 to start planning towards an Open Tournament for 1947. However, the 1947 April AGM was told that although 3 courts were to be available for part of the season and 2 for the whole season the section's hopes for an Open Tournament had been in vain; transport difficulties being a major stumbling block for possible contestants. Similar problems arose in 1948, but in 1950 it was announced that the Annual Open was to be resumed the following year.

Present-day managers cannot fully appreciate the earlier difficulties of shared playing areas and it is sad to read that an immense problem arose at the April AGM in 1951. The meeting agreed that the tennis courts should be opened on 28th April 'for tennis only', thus denying use of the courts for the intended Open Croquet Tournament starting on 7th May. The decision was challenged and after alternatives had been rejected:

- a) Fortfield Lawn quite unsuitable
- b) Cricket outfield too sloping
- c) Hire of grass court from the Council turned down.

a Special General meeting was called and the decision made that the Croquet Tournament must go ahead as 'any cancellation of the Tournament must call into question the good faith of the Club'. Whether the event was a success after this unhappy preliminary is not recorded.

The comment on the Fortfield Lawn is worth noting: 'This is found to be quite unsuitable for use as it is not level whilst the turf is full of moss and weeds making any accurate shot quite impossible'. Tournaments continued until 1956, but the 1957 tournament was not held because of petrol rationing, introduced at the time of the Suez crisis, and at this time there was only a small number of croquet members.

Already it had been reported that the courts were hardly being used and it had been agreed that after the Tournament the two courts adjoining Station Road should not be maintained for play and that one of them, in fact, should be used as a turf nursery. At the April 1958 AGM the ultimate indignity - that the Court opposite the Torbay Hotel should be used for a practice wicket was not taken up, but the phraseology was sadly interesting - the proposal 'was turned down though Croquet was in abeyance'.

One of the Club's older members, at the time this history was written [c2000] says 'the Croquet Section for many years after the war had only about 3 members'. It must have been the 10 years from 1956/7 which he particularly remembers, when only one lawn remained in use.

After years of silence, it was good to read in the report of the 30th April 1966 Club AGM that 'The Croquet Section of the Club is reviving, and to foster and improve on this Mrs R. C. Michelmores kindly offered to help by giving coaching lessons on Monday mornings'. Pleasingly, there was sufficient interest throughout the season for her to arrange a meeting in October 1966 to encourage members of the Club to join the Croquet section.

In the same month the Club committee minutes record that 'as a result of an increase in membership of the Section and continuing decline of Tennis membership the question of an extra Croquet Court was discussed! [At this time the Junior Tennis Club, which had been formed in 1960, with 6 grass courts, was disbanded.]

In February of 1967 the first meeting of the revived Croquet Section was convened and at the Club AGM in May members were told that 'one of the most pleasing features of the season was the splendid revival of the Croquet Section. Already in the new season, the Centenary Season of the Croquet Association, there has been a further considerable increase in the membership of this section, and three competitions have been arranged. As promised when the junior tennis courts took No 2 croquet lawn, the second croquet lawn has returned to its original site not that the disbanding of the Junior Tennis School has released that space'.

It was agreed also at this time that the croquet section could take over the small pavilion.

The Committee report for 1967, given as part of the 19th April AGM, reads well - 'This year marked a notable resurgence of interest in this Section and, with a remarkable increase to 26 playing members, competition play returned to the Club after a lapse of a number of years. A successful internal American Tournament was run and provided many close and hard-fought contests. Sidmouth also provided one unit of the Croquet Association's Centenary National Tournament. The Bronze Medal for winning the Sidmouth section was won by E. H. S. Shelton, who then proceeded to win the Silver Medal at Budleigh Salterton but was defeated in the National Semi-Finals in London.'

[Note: American Tournament means 'all play all'. These days so many compete that, often, all play all in a block and the block winners play off to decide the overall winner.]

The 1968 report to the AGM said that 'the Croquet Section maintained its high standard and we are pleased to say showed a slight increase in its playing membership.

1969's report is worth giving in full as it shows the increasing spread of interest: 'A happy season was enjoyed by all members and visitors and the lawn played well throughout. The American Handicap competitions proved highly successful and cups were presented to the winners by Dr R. G. Michelmores at the end of season Club meeting. The singles competition was won by Mrs Tunmer and the doubles by Mrs Waterfield & Mr Tunmer. The cup for the most improved high-bisquer was presented to Mr Duerden. It was good to welcome visitors from some six other recognised Croquet Clubs during the season, and two of our own members entered for competitions away from home. The Club enjoyed a happy visit to the Budleigh Salterton Club for a friendly game with a team of their players of a comparable bisquing. We do hope that we welcome many more playing members to the Croquet Section in the coming season. Equipment is available for members' use, and we are continuing with the availability of the second lawn in the express hope that more players will be forthcoming to justify the use of it. The Committee (Messrs Glover, Hodgson and Tunmer) will be very pleased to assist any interested potential player in an introduction to the game'.

[Note 1: Bisques – the handicap system – difference in handicap equals number of bisques given / received. 1 bisque enables a player to play on in a new turn when otherwise the turn would have ended.]

[Note 2: The 'friendly' versus Budleigh Salterton is still played Home and Away in April and September. This became the 'Seagull Trophy' when Chris Donovan thought there should be some 'highly artistic' trophy to compete for. It was first presented to Graham Harford who captained the winning team when Sidmouth beat Budleigh in April 2013. Subsequently the

equally 'tasteful' 'Blue Parrot', based on Monty Python's Norwegian Blue parrot was created after a comment by a losing Sidmouth team member, Roger Hendy, when said he was 'as sick as a parrot'. This was first presented by Chris when Budleigh's Team, captained by Jack Thompson were again defeated in September 2015]

The 1969 Croquet subscription was £5. 5s [c£83. 67]

From 1967 the Section had its own Committee and maintained its own records of Committee meetings; the minutes thereof being held in the Section archives. They show a gradual increase in membership - for instance, in 1975 there were 50 members with 2 playing lawns and a practice lawn. The growth of the Section had already pointed the need for better playing surfaces and in 1978 releveling work was carried out on what is now Lawn 3 at a cost of a £1,000 [c£5,775], the entire cost being met from within the Section, 4 members being generous enough to provide interest-free loans of £100 each. In 1980; in spite of an alarming number of resignations at the start of the season because the subscription had risen from £13 [c£66] to £20 [c£86], the membership finished the season at 63.

[Again underlining the need to keep subscriptions increasing year on year to cover costs in year, planned costs later and unforeseen 'disasters'!]

The Section has been fortunate in having many dedicated workers, but special mention should be made of Pat Tunmer, a Sidmouth bank manager, who as Secretary and later Chairman worked tirelessly to rejuvenate the Section from 1967 onwards. It was Sidmouth's misfortune that on retirement he moved to Budleigh Salterton.

Another Secretary whose enthusiasm was boundless was Robert Case, a one-time railway engineer in India. His agendas for Committee meetings were so detailed and gave so many of the anticipated answers to problems to be discussed that subsequent minutes were hardly necessary. He designed and introduced a competition of stroke play which was featured in the Croquet Gazette and is now used by a number of clubs including our own.

The name, however, which must head our Roll of Honour is that of Iris Dwerryhouse. Her name is listed as among those who attended the first meeting of the revived Section in February 1967. Since that time she has worked tirelessly for the betterment of the Section, not only to improve individual standards of play but to get Sidmouth recognised as an important Club within the Croquet Association. Under her leadership Sidmouth was a founder-member of the South West Federation, and it was also in one of her periods as Chairman that Sidmouth was, in 1989, given the Croquet Association's Apps-Healey Award 'for excellence'. Exceptionally this Award was being given for the second time, the first having been in 1972. Her many years of service, ably supported at all times by her husband Philip, have been invaluable to the Club as well as the Section.

The Section is now into a new century, with a steady membership of over 100, playing on 4 lawns. May the success story of the 20th century be maintained.

Mrs G Dart
c2000

Update April 2020

Subscription for 2020 is £178 and the Club has a steady membership of c125. The members compete in 10 South West Federation leagues and regularly throughout the season in tournaments around the country and as far afield as New Zealand, South Africa and Corfu. In house there over 30 trophies to be won, see winners' picture. Handicaps range from the maximum 24 in Association down to -½ and Golf Croquet handicaps from 20 to -3! Whichever code you play, Association or Golf there is much serious or relaxed and social play to be had. Opportunities range from 2 or 3 informal roll-ups a week for AC and GC, Charity, 1 day / 2 day in-club tournaments, self-scheduled matches for season long club competitions, participation in Croquet Association listed tournaments and league matches galore for team players. And still

plenty of time for, self-booked play between friends old and new. Throw in the occasional social event and it is true to say we are a thriving Club.

Chris Donovan
Croquet Chair