

History & Formation of South Benfleet Bowls Club (1946 to 1959)

Towards the end of 1939-1945 war, a group of shopkeepers around Benfleet got permission from the council to excavate and refill a piece of land in South Benfleet in order to create a lawn bowls green. There was no financial cost to the local council other than helping with the cartage of clinker (burnt coal residue used for drainage), cinder ash, gravel, top soil and the sowing of grass.

The digging was accomplished by several unemployed who were paid by the shopkeepers and other helpers. Empty bottles were collected and sold to help with the wages. Eventually, the green was completed by 1945 and opened in 1946.

I arrived in Benfleet in January 1946 and during the summer, my wife and I used to roam around the recreation ground picking mushrooms. Cattle used to roam the fields freely and it was on one particular day during this period that we happened to stop at the bowling green where a few people were playing. There was no proper hedge in those days, only a small privet hedge that had been planted around the green. Along one side, there were three giant Yucca plants with long prickly spikes whilst on the south east side was a three-sided hut which had been used by the wardens for fire-fighting. The council had enclosed a small part off with a padlock and key into which members could leave a few personal belongings.

Whilst watching the efforts of a few bowlers, one of them (a **Mr Orchard**) suddenly looked up and recognised us. He happened to be an old neighbour from East Ham who after a short talk asked my wife if she would make the tea for the bowlers and showed us the small part of the hut where the tea was made and where a primus stove, kettle, tea cups and saucers, and a pail of water were kept during for the tea interval. They talked me into joining and my wife became the first tea lady until 1958 when her health failed. A brother in law of Mr Orchard came to Benfleet and joined the club. Later, Mr **Bert Squires** who is now 93 or 94 and is a life member had a leg amputated. There was no water or toilets at the green, members had to fetch water from the tap located behind the chemists shop near to the dressing rooms used by the footballers and cricketers.

The formation of the club officers was

President	Reverend Dean
Captain	Mr S Ward
Treasurer	Mr Hilton
Secretary	Mr Pratt
Other Members	Charlie Mundy
	Mr H Orchard
	Mr CJ Fielder
	Mr W Bridge
	Mr Brown
	Mr GH Foster
	Mr Murray
	Mr HA Cave

And one or two more but I can't remember their names anymore.

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The first AGM of the bowling club took place at the South Benfleet School in November 1946. The club didn't process any cups but had a silver medallion for the championship winner which was won by **Mr Orchard** and is now in the possession of Mr Squires who informed me he is willing to give it to the club as a memento.

The next year (1947) the club started to have a few fixtures, mostly away as there were no facilities at Benfleet. I remember going to matches at Brighton, Lowestoft and Greenwich. We used to travel in a twenty "seater" coach.

Around 1950, **Mr Powell** joined the club. He was better known as C.I.C and kept the café at the station. He used to supply the club with cutlery, plates, forms and tables when we had visitors. Members used to borrow a two wheeled hand truck and fetch them and take them back. We would also attach a large canvas to make room for twenty-four people to sit down and to give cover should it rain. Every member used to work and do some job to keep the club going. **Mr Ward** used to do the refreshments until the tea lady and assistants took over and were able to do it at the club.

In 1958, **Mr Lazell** joined the club. He was a master builder and he got permission from the council to build a larger tea-room outside of the existing hut. The council also connected water to the green and a temporary men's toilet. This improved the club's matches and we were gaining in membership and getting quite strong. His wife took over the kitchen as my wife was ailing in health. Mr Lazell that year won three cups – Championship, Pairs and Two Woods.

In 1959, the club entered for the South Essex Fours and the team was:

1. **Mr Lazell**
2. **Mr Buckland**
3. **Mr Ayling**
4. **Mr Birks**

We went through to the final against Orsett which was played at Ilford and drew 21-21. An extra end was played resulting in a final score of 21-22 in favour of Orsett. This was the first final the bowls club had reached since the club's inception. We all received a small plaque each. Unfortunately, three of the players passed on and I don't know what happened to their plaques. I gave mine back to the Secretary of the club to keep which I hope is still there.

Benfleet has really been a training ground for bowlers and several good players had their early years with us including **Mr Pratt, Mr RH Stevens, B Bridge and G Foster**. The first three went to Essex County and later won the All England Fours. **Harry Cave** never left Benfleet although he became a very good bowler. He was president for several years. He was picked to play for Southend and District, for the County of Essex and was selected for the Middleton Cup. He won the Benfleet Championship several times and won the Singles Championship at the Southend Tournament. Wish him well from me in his later years.

Johnny Birks was another good bowler. He worked hard to get Benfleet recognised in the Southend area who had a league running, but clubs outside the area were excluded. Eventually, by determination and hard work he succeeded. They reframed the league including all outside clubs that fell within the newly defined boundaries. Since then, Benfleet has topped the league on several occasions. His father in law was **Mr Groves a former M.P** for Maryland, West Ham. He was Secretary of Benfleet in the early days.

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I will leave the following years of the Club's progress to succeeding members who have enjoyed them. I would like to mention however that during my 34 years with the Club, I have fulfilled all positions on the Committee – Captain, Vice-Captain, Secretary and President but not Chairman or Treasurer.

Before closing, if any member's remember Mr Perry who was the Treasurer for several years and lived in Thundersley Park Road before moving to Cornwall (I still hear from him each Christmas), he tells me that he and his wife have had hospital treatment and now has trouble with his eyes. He always sends a greeting to the Bowls Club members. I still follow the Club's activities through serving members and wish the Club every success.

Good luck and good health to you all,

Yours faithfully,

W.F.F. Buckland