

# **Bowls Lancashire**

## **Lancashire Men's History**

### **Fifty (plus !) Years of Progress**

I first wrote most of the following for the 2001 Golden Jubilee Year Book.

Whilst the Men's Association's was formed in 1951, Flat Green Bowls has been established in Lancashire for much longer.

The first club to be established was Heaton Hall in June 1926. The inaugural meeting was attended by seven gentlemen who agreed to play on the 'International Flat Green' in Heaton Park. For those newer members to the County this green, together with two crown greens was situated towards the front of the Hall. Manchester City Council obtained Heritage Lottery funding to re-landscape the Park as originally designed by William Eames in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (and re-worked in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by John Webb. Thus, there is no evidence left of their original site. The existing greens were laid for the 2002 Commonwealth Games on what had been a football pitch. The club moved after the Commonwealth Games. Incidentally, the first mention of women playing in Lancashire was in 1930 when Heaton Hall had 8 Lady members.

Stanley Park in Blackpool was opened in 1926 and the bowling club was founded 3 years later in 1929. The third club formed was Southport in 1937 but, again, not at their present site in King's Gardens but at Chapel Street. They moved to the Victorian King's Gardens in 1949. The first game to be played under English Bowling Association (E.B.A.) rules is believed to be in 1938 when Heaton Hall sent a team to Southport to celebrate the new club.

In 1942 Heaton Park was closed for the duration of the Second World War, 133,000 aircrew cadets were stationed in the Park en route overseas for flying training. The club played for one year at a Bolton green but then the Club became dormant until being re-formed in 1947. Incidentally the Park was also used in World War 1 for the training of local volunteers who subsequently formed 4 of the Manchester Pals battalions. They left in April 1915 for the Battle of the Somme. Almost 10,000 men enlisted in the 8 Manchester Pals Battalions, of whom 4,776 were killed.

I presume the E.B.A rules pre-WW2 were similar to those post-war. Namely, 'Membership of the Association shall be open to ... County Associations ... each having at least six Affiliated Clubs'. Thus, with only 3 clubs in the County no County Association was formed.

To get around this Heaton Hall affiliated to Leicestershire (1927-39) and Cumberland (1949-50), Blackpool was affiliated to Cumberland (1933-39 and 1946-50) and Southport, also to Cumberland (1946-50).

The English Bowling Association were anxious to encourage growth of the game and the 1950 President, Alec Page of Norfolk, outlined at the EBA Council Meeting held on 28 January 1950, a programme of matches for the forthcoming season including visits to Lancashire and Derbyshire. The Secretary's foreword to the EBA Year Book that year included *'and will include a visit to Lancashire with the hope that this County will become affiliated to our Association as a result'*.

The EBA team travelled to Blackpool on Sunday 10 September and between Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> and Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> played *'Matches with Lancashire clubs at Blackpool, Southport and Manchester'*.

The visit was obviously a huge success; at the EBA's Forty-first Annual General Meeting, held at the Connaught Rooms, London on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1950 Lancashire were accepted. The minutes state : *The E.B.A. having been informed that seven clubs were now members of the newly formed Lancashire Bowling Association, the President, Alec Page, proposed, and A.H.Hardy (Kent) seconded a proposition that the said County Association be affiliated to the English Bowling Association. The proposal was supported by representatives from Cumberland, Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland and also by T. Campbell Dykes (Berkshire). The proposition was carried with much enthusiasm.*

Presumably to enable Lancashire to affiliate the E.B.A. had suggested the formation of the 2 'paper' clubs (Birkdale & Marton) to ensure the requirement of... 'at least 6 clubs' could be met.

J.E.Spedding (Southport) the founder President and Messrs Clarke of Blackpool and Young of Manchester made responses. Interestingly, personal pleasure was also expressed by W.T. Elliott (Civil Service Association) who had been responsible for much pioneer work during the war period.

Of the 7 Founder clubs 3 remain to this day - Blackpool, Heaton Hall and Southport. The other 4 were Birkdale (1951-2007), Marton (1951-90), Manchester Deaf Club (later renamed Institute) (1951-73) and Civil Service Club Manchester (1951 only). There is evidence that the CSA were also involved at Southport at some stage.

A total of 18 clubs have been affiliated to the LCBA over the 50 years, although at no stage has there been more than 9. The others being - Manchester and Prestwich (1974-7), Fairhaven Lakeside (1975-7), Enterprise - the first synthetic surface (1978-9), Bolton (1980-), Greater Manchester (1981-2007), Leverhulme Park (1984-2007), Newton Hall (1988-94), Stanley Park Juniors (1992-9), Acton Bridge

(1997-), LMS Loco (1999-2007) and, finally, Manchester Commonwealth (2002-12). 7 venues in Lancashire, plus one in Cheshire.

Thanks must be recorded to Ernest Spedding (Founder President) who encouraged, by personal action and financial aid, the efforts of the initial committee. Bill Smith, first Hon. Secretary who co-ordinated the clubs to ensure a sound foundation from the start. We will never forget his first assistant secretary - Cyril Martin who gave over 30 years of commitment (25 as Hon. Secretary).

In 1951 there were 31 entries in the County singles, 15 Pairs, 9 Triples and 5 Fours. We were restricted to only one entry in the National finals. Similarly the County was reliant on established bowlers moving/retiring to the area.

In its early years the County was probably unique in having a club composed entirely of deaf players and the Manchester Deaf Club (subsequently amended to Institute) provided the County with 2 of its early Presidents - John Roberts in 1955 and F.J.Yates in 1960. Even now Heaton Hall has several members who are deaf.

The County's first success came in 1958 with victory in the National Triples by C.H.Garside, W.Malin and J.Cragg of Blackpool. Then in 1968 John N Bell (now of Cumbria) was awarded an England trial as a member of Heaton Hall. We had to wait a few more years for our first full International – David Holt (of Bolton, but now Australia) in 1989.

In 1975/6 the County's very existence was under threat. The E.B.A. had established a sub-committee to review the County structure in the light of Local Government boundary changes. One of the criteria being that no 'County' should have less than 25 clubs. New counties such as 'Tyne & Wear', Teesside and Humberside would be formed and poor little Lancashire would be merged with Cumbria (again !). Yorkshire appeared ambivalent to these changes but the other Northern Counties, including Cumbria, were not happy. Fortunately neither was the rest of the country and in June 1977 the issue was shelved by the E.B.A. (to be re-examined in 3 years !) and there it appears to have lain.

The formation of the 'Funding and Projects' sub committee in 1981 (Alistair Lindsay, Gordon Niven, Trevor Rimmer and John James) saw many radical changes - coloured clothing, Southport Open Pairs, sponsorship being amongst many. The financial future of the County with the sale of bowls products - many hundred pairs of shoes especially !

There have been many recent highlights on the green ; in 1987 David Holt followed up winning the National Pairs with Tommy Armstrong by drubbing Tony Allcock 21-5 to win the National Singles.

Unfortunately the County could not follow up these successes the following day when we lost our first Middleton Cup semi-final to Essex. This was rectified in 1998 when we beat Warwickshire to win the trophy for the first time. Based on the number of playing members Lancashire must be the most successful county in the country in recent years.

Off the green Lancashire had for many years been represented at the 'Top Table' by Bob Jack who for THIRTY years was EBA Treasurer. His service to the sport of Bowls was recognised by Honorary Life Membership of the EBA. This was followed by recognition from H.M. The Queen (also Duke of Lancaster, of course) with the award of an M.B.E.

All this had been capped in 1992 when Bob was elected EBA President.

A further two Lancashire members were recognised with Honorary Life Membership of the EBA. In 1989 the late Ken Drury of Blackpool (previously Guisborough KGV (Yorkshire) was granted Life Membership in recognition of his assistance in the running of The Kodak Masters Bowls Tournaments. These celebrated the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the EBA. Then in 2005 Allan Higgins of Bolton (also formerly Yorkshire) was recognised for his work in the preparation and running of the Lawn Bowls at the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games in Heaton Park.

In 2008 Lancashire followed the EBA & EWBA who amalgamated to form Bowls England and our Men's & Women's Associations merged to become Bowls Lancashire.

The new combined Association has continued to 'Punch above its weight' with success in National Championships and Competitions. Perhaps best illustrated in 2018 with yet another win in the Men's National Triples together with the Balcomb Trophy. Plus 'almosts' in the Men's National Fours, Men's Under 25 Singles and Men's Over 55 Singles.

The previous year Bolton's Viv Tomlinson was Bowls England President. Viv was County Administrator of the combined County from its inception for 11 years.

I wonder what Ernest Spedding, his colleagues and Cyril Martin would think if they came back now. Hopefully we have met most, if not all, of their aspirations for Flat Green bowls in Lancashire. Let it continue.

*Compiled by Alec Atkinson*