

Ramsbury & Aldbourne Bowls Club

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CLUB

Many club records have been lost, mislaid and even destroyed over the years and this Club History, by necessity, is based on my own recollections. Keith Evill – President January 2022



The **Ramsbury Bowling Club** was established by a group of Ramsbury enthusiasts in 1952. The President of the Ramsbury Building Society, Mr Sidney Chamberlain made land available at the rear of the Building Society Offices at The Square in Ramsbury at a peppercorn rent. The construction cost of the half-size bowling green (three-rinks) was mainly financed by Mr Chamberlain with contributions from members. The green was constructed by Tout-en-Cas a tennis court specialist company. Although named ‘The Ramsbury Bowling Club’ it was basically run as a syndicate. However, some members expressed a wish to play more competitive bowls and the membership was extended. In 1953 the club was registered with both the Wiltshire Bowling Association (now Bowls Wiltshire) and the English Bowling Association (now Bowls England).

The Club initially played friendly matches with other similar clubs within a 10 mile radius but in 1955 a Mr Ashley Baker established a three-rink league, specifically intended for village clubs with three-rink greens, of which the Ramsbury Club was a founder member. It was a mixed league; unusual at that time but by necessity as most of the clubs would not otherwise have raised a twelve-player team. It was also unusual in that there was no dress code and matches were always played in casual dress. Club membership averaged between 15 and 17. Afternoon home matches usually ended with sandwiches at either the Crown and Anchor Pub or the Bell Hotel. There was no shelter and matches were often abandoned due to inclement weather. About this time the club decided to send a representative to serve on the County Executive Committee and Fred Hicklin was duly

appointed to that office. This was the first time I recall any member wearing Greys with a Blazer and Tie.

In 1964 the Captain, Bert West, successfully obtained a grant for a timber pavilion from the Wiltshire Playing Fields Association. Keith Evill prepared a plan and obtained planning permission, Fred Hicklin arranged materials and labour from Bradleys of Swindon and it was constructed in a few days. Members painted the building after the colour green was eventually agreed and players finally had a shelter from rain, somewhere to store their bowls and equipment and could now entertain visiting teams with sit-down teas. Toilets in the Building Society offices were used for some years but a key was often unavailable for evening play and Michel Franklin supervised the formation of a “multi-sex’ toilet in a partitioned end of a storage shed.

Little changed over the next 15 years but membership increased during the 1970s, mainly due to two new housing estates in the village; Ashley Piece (started in 1972) and The Paddocks (started in 1975). By the 1980s membership had increased, the Ashley Baker League games had been adjusted to three mixed triples and a dress code was well established. The club had not been closely involved with the Men’s and Ladies’ County Organisations, not least because the men lacked both facilities and sufficient players to enter a county league and the ladies could not register with less than 12 members. However, a number of men frequently entered County Competitions and were selected to play in County matches. In 1985 the club had four badged county players; Cyril Palmer, Michael Franklin, Jim Sinnott and Keith Evill.

In 1982, the Ramsbury Building Society manager, warned the club of an imminent amalgamation with the West of England Building Society and that the lease would not be renewed albeit bowling could continue on a yearly basis. The Manager Mr Roy Broderick later informed the club that due to possible further amalgamations he could not guarantee the club’s future use of the green. The Society was prepared to pay £44,000 for the construction cost of a new green and to move the timber pavilion to the recreation Centre. Cyril Palmer and Keith Evill urged the club to accept this offer but at a special meeting, a majority of members voted to decline the offer after founder member, Bert Giddings, urged them not to move as it would result in the subscription being raised above £2.50 per annum! A later offer to relocate at the Recreation Centre was again agreed by a very narrow majority but a year later was unfortunately reversed. In retrospect, this should not have been allowed. It appeared that a majority of members felt that the Society would have no alternative use for the land within their lifetimes, a frustrating and unfortunate decision for those younger members who hoped to live and continue bowling for rather longer.

Following further Building Society amalgamations, the property was sold to a speculator who in 2002 warned the club that it should seek alternative premises. The club continued using the green for another five years, sheltering behind the Wiltshire Structure Plan in which the Green was zoned as Recreational Land. It had become increasingly obvious that the club’s future was at risk and the members agreed that they should investigate the possibilities of financing the construction of a

new green in a different location. As the only three-rink green remaining in Wiltshire and surrounding counties, it was accepted that a full size six-rink green was necessary for the future. The Recreation Centre was keen to accommodate the club but there was unfortunately insufficient land on which to construct a full size green then available. Richard Badger advised members that the club's only chance to survive was to seek and obtain the necessary finance for a new facility.

In 2002 the club was renamed the “**Ramsbury and Aldbourne Bowls Club**”; aimed to attract more members from the adjoining parish and to help increase fundraising. In 2003, eleven members of the Club qualified as coaches to ensure the coaching capacity needed to support a Lottery Grant application for a new and larger facility that was then being discussed. Land off Loves Lane was offered for which planning permission was granted but the Lottery Fund refused a grant application due to the club lacking sufficient members to justify one. The Parish Council made clear its preference for all village sports to be located at the Recreation Centre and members finally accepted that any public fund- raising endeavours could not successfully compete with a similar but well established fund for the Recreation Centre's development 2005 project.

The club was again invited to relocate at the Ramsbury Recreation Centre on adjacent land if it could be made available. The owner was persuaded to sell the land for the bowling green relocation and the land was acquired by the Recreation Centre. In 2007 Keith Evill obtained planning permission for the new bowling green and a purpose-built Pavilion at the Centre.

Legal notice to vacate the old premises was served that same year and the club's last match at the Square was played on 22nd September 2007 (see picture) At this stage membership averaged around 20 to 24 Playing Members.

On a temporary basis, all club members became playing members of the Marlborough Bowling Club for the 2008 and 2009 seasons whilst retaining their own club identity and continuing to compete in the Ashley Baker



League. The Ramsbury Recreation Centre confirmed that sufficient money would be available and appointed Keith Evill Associates to supervise the contract on its behalf. Avonmore Associates of Stratford upon Avon successfully tendered and commenced the construction of a new full size county-standard bowling green in early May 2009. The new playing surface was turfed in late September that year.



The Centre's funds did not run to the cost of a proposed luxury pavilion but the club took up a £17,100 loan from Bowls England towards the cost of the present timber building and the Centre took on the annual repayments with Ian Smith kindly acting as guarantor (RRC repaid the loan in full by 2017). A new mower was purchased with a Marlborough Area Board grant and an attachment by Ramsbury Charities. The perimeter fence was erected and the club started its next season on the new green at the Centre in April 2010 (28 years after it was first offered) A well publicised "Introduction to Bowling" Day was held on 1st May 2010 with 82 enthusiastic members of the public attending to try the sport.

A formal opening of the new green on 31st July 2010 was attended by more than 200 people. The Club Chairman introduced; John Austin; Past President of both the English Bowling Association and the British Isles Bowls Council who represented Bowls England; Brian Butler; Managing Director of Avonmore Associates and an ex-Middleton Cup player and Ian Smith; Chairman of the Recreation Centre. Club Chairman Keith Evill briefly explained the sport and the important need for the new green, and thanked the Centre for providing the facility. He then introduced Sir Martyn Arbib who gave an interesting speech, officially opened the facility and unveiled a commemorative bronze plaque to mark the occasion. The club finally had the larger and higher standard green that some of us had wanted 28 years earlier, unfortunately at more than three times the cost that would previously have been paid by the Building Society.



In 2010, Membership increased to 78 (58 playing members), 2011 – 71 (58), 2012 – 65 (53), 2013 – 53 (42), 2014 – 50 (40), 2015 48 (40), 2016 – 45 (37), 2017 – 44 (36) and 2018 –37 (31). It was clear that apart from age-related losses, many village well wishers had initially joined the club to support the new project but then left over the following four years.

In 2010 the Secretary, Richard Badger, prepared a very detailed entry to the Bowls England National "Club of the Year" competition, the winner of which would receive prizes and a Bowls England Club of the Year Flag. Convinced that the club both should and would win, he purchased and donated a flagpole. Unfortunately Ramsbury & Aldbourne BC was runner-up and in 2011 Richard generously shared the cost of the present Club Flag. However, the club did receive a prize of two sets of bowls

Improved standards of bowling became evident in 2011, in part due to coaching and an exceptional green surface, regularly maintained by Avonmore Associates. That year a white, green and gold club shirt and blouse with embroidered club badges was introduced and registered with Bowls Wiltshire and Bowls England.

The club's first tour in its 60 years history was in May 2013 to Bournemouth. It was organised by Gail Keating who has each year since continued to organise tours to other locations until 2020. The Club led the Ashley Baker League table throughout 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018; winning in 2015, runner-up in 2016, winning in 2017 (with a record lead of 17 points and losing only two of 18 matches) and winning again in 2018. In 2014 a Ladies' Team was entered in the Swindon and District Two-Triples Afternoon League and a Men's Team (Team A) followed suit in 2016. Both teams progressed well but the Ladies were unfortunately forced to withdraw at the end of 2017 due to a shortage of available lady bowlers. A second Men's Team (Team B) was entered in 2021. As league winner in its first season Team B were promoted to a higher league for 2022. Three members continued to play for Bowls Wiltshire and were again selected in 2019, 2020 (all cancelled for Covid) and 2021; Gail Keating, Keith Evill and Bob Black

The club could not exist without holding fund-raising events which rely heavily on the efforts of its members and village support, not least the Parish Council and the Charity Shop. This becomes increasingly more difficult as the club is following a national trend of falling memberships. Special efforts have recently attracted more local people to join the club and play the game of bowls.

The Covid 19 Pandemic prevented bowls matches during the 2020 season but bowlers remained loyal and membership was not detrimentally affected. In 2021 the pandemic restrictions were eased allowing people more free time and opportunities to try the sport and membership increased by 20%.