

125 years old and still going strong



By **ARTHUR HASKELL**

ACCORDING to legend, on the afternoon of Friday, July 29, 1588, famous English seaman and adventurer, Sir Francis Drake, was playing bowls with Sir John Hawkins, at Plymouth Hoe.

Suddenly, Captain Fleming, from one of his scouting vessels, came running up breathless and agitated. He informed Sir Francis that the Spanish Armada had been sighted off Lizard Point to the southwest.

Drake calmed the messenger with a raised hand, saying: "First things first. We have time enough to finish the game and beat the Spanish too." He then turned his attention back to the green.

A touch of traditional romance perhaps – well, maybe so. The story does serve, however, to illustrate the important position the game of bowls has enjoyed in the history of sport. This worthy contest of skill and finesse has gathered a massive number of devoted club members over the years until now the game can boast many thousands of representative clubs throughout the world.

Here in Australia, the first reported game of bowls was played between T. Burgess and F. Lipscombe for a small wager at the Lipscombe Beach Tavern, Sandy Bay, near Hobart. The game took place on January 1, 1844. Burgess won by 13 games to 12.

Eventually, the first bowling green was laid out at the Tavern and was in use by November 26, 1844.

The first bowls club was established by John Robinson at the Boundary Stone Inn, Surry Hills, Sydney, on November 10, 1845.

Members played only on Saturday afternoons. The first interstate match was held at Annandale, New South Wales, on April 14, 1880. Victoria defeated New South Wales 112-91. Bowls was first played by women of Australia, at Stawell, Victoria, in October, 1881. The first women's club, "The Rainsford Bowling Club" was founded on December 16, 1898, at the residence of J. Rainsford Needham, which had a private green at Glenferrie, Melbourne.

The first bowls made in Australia were turned by Thomas Eades, of Parramatta, in 1867. They were made to order for a local tailor, Alexander Johnstone, who practised with them at Elizabeth Farm without hardly a let up, until neighbours feared for his sanity.

The first plastic bowls in the world were produced in April, 1931, by Henselite, of Melbourne. They were made from phenolformaldehyde.

On January 17, 2009, an official function will take place to celebrate the 125th anniversary of

Hamilton Bowling Club. No doubt it will be a gala event organised under the direction of the board of management, chaired by Neil Robinson.

The club has a proud history reaching back to 1883, when George Reynolds Rippon was its founder. G. R. Rippon was born at Mortimer, Berkshire, England, on September 17, 1838.

Following an extensive education in England and Europe, he came to Australia in the late 1850s, settling in Geelong. After several years with the literary staff of the Geelong Advertiser, he moved to Hamilton in July, 1876. Here, he purchased a share in the partnership of the Hamilton Spectator, later becoming its sole proprietor. Mr Rippon displayed the same spirited approach to local sport as he did to his literary profession.

An advertisement placed in the Hamilton Spectator on June 21, 1883, invited gentlemen interested in forming a bowling club in Hamilton, to meet at the Victoria Hotel on June 21, at 8pm. Further information in the same edition mentioned that the meeting convened for the following evening held great promise of success, as the Hamilton Cricket Committee had offered to provide a substantial area of ground for a bowling green and some of the town's more influential burgesses (citizens) had promised to attend.

Unfortunately, bad weather spoiled the arrangements and this advertisement appeared in the Spectator of June 23, 1883: "The meeting for the formation of a bowling club was postponed owing to the inclemency of the weather." Then, on June 26, 1883: "The adjourned meeting is to be held tomorrow evening, when a very successful outcome is expected". Then once again, in the Spectator on June 28, 1883: "A meeting was advertised for the formation of a bowling club, but the effort again resulted in a failure. No doubt the weather prevented many from putting in an appearance, but really, this second failure shows a lamentable want of enthusiasm and may lead to the abandonment of the scheme altogether".

This, however, was not the end of the matter. On July 5, 1883, in answer to a call by Mr G. R. Rippon, owner of the Hamilton Spectator, 24 gentlemen interested in forming a bowling club, attended a meeting at Mrs Murphy's rooms. His Worship the Mayor, Cr Louis Horwitz, presided and the following gentlemen were present: Rev J. Zillman and Messrs P. Bromfield, Mr Wilson, P. Learmonth, C. Wiggins, A. Lockie, W. Thomson, G. Mott, G. Rippon, I. Routledge, J. Begg, S. Stretch, W. Smith, R. Murphy, Mr Macaulay, D. McLellan, Mr Rancaud, J. Dunnon, Mr Bloomfield and Mr Ladbury.

Mr G. R. Rippon said he had convened the meeting to see if it were possible to follow the lead given by Portland, which had formed a bowling club on October 28, 1881. After more relevant discussion, a resolution was unanimously carried to the effect that it was desirable to form a bowling club in Hamilton. Mr Bree moved that a committee be formed consisting of Messrs Rippon, Routledge, Thomson and Mott. The rest



OPENING season 1892-93

is history.

The first settlement of Hamilton on Grange Burn occurred in 1837, three years after the Hentys settled Portland. Two years after the formation of the Portland Bowling Club, in 1883, the Hamilton Bowling Club was founded.

A piece from the Hamilton Spectator, of July 7, 1883, stated that the enthusiasm displayed at the forming of the bowling club guaranteed its success. "It will bring the people together and increase sociability." After considering a number of promising tracts of land for the green, one where the old land office had been, near the rear of the (then) Town Hall and the Mechanics Institute situated in Gray Street was chosen. A lease was arranged for two guineas per annum. A code of rules was adopted and printed. The entrance fee for town members was one guinea and a like amount for the annual subscription fee.

Country members living over five miles away from the town were not required to pay an entrance fee.

Members were elected by ballot and were required to pay their dues promptly. The Spectator donated the trophy for the first major tournament.

Lawn bowls is no longer a game for the retired and elderly; it is enjoyed by many of the younger folk. Indeed, the game attracts a great cross section of the community and can be described as a great 'leveller' in the field of sport.

Men and women enjoy the same amenities and play on equal terms within the bowling fraternity. A notice was placed in the Hamilton Spectator in November, 1925, informing the public that Hamilton Bowling Club president, Mr E. Friend and Mr H. Learmonth (hon secretary) would meet with a number of ladies with a view to forming a Ladies Bowling Club.

At the meeting, Mrs Wolff moved that a Ladies Club be formed. Mrs Valentine seconded the motion. A subscription fee of one guinea was set. Mrs Reid was elected president and Mrs Brown, honorary secretary. It is well worth mentioning, that during the 1939 drought, each lady member contributed one shilling a week towards the cost of providing water for the greens.

The constitution and by-laws for the ladies were not written up until the 1952-53 season. Up to that time, the ladies' club abided by the same rules that applied to the men's club. The Far

Western District Ladies' Bowling Association, was formed in 1964 with two Hamilton members holding leading positions in the first year; Nell Wright, President and Blanche Collins, honorary secretary.

The ladies continue to contribute to the updating of the furnishings, the improvement of the catering facilities and the raising of money for the club.

It is envisaged that in the near future, there will be a 'Unification' of the Royal Victorian Bowling Association and the Victorian Ladies' Bowling Association.

Membership numbers at present are 105 men and 60 women, with about 12 social members. The combined club did make use of three greens, however, now just two are in use, with the third converted to a carpark. Currently, the men's president is Jack Gilding, while the ladies' president is Ruth Hutchinson.

Though most of Europe was bowling at pins during the Middle Ages, residents in Britain continued with their preference for lawn bowling.

In the beginning, the game may well have been played using rounded stones or pebbles. There is evidence that a type of bowls was played in ancient Egypt. Later, it was developed by the Romans and Greeks.

Painted scenes of lawn bowls have been discovered on tapestries and pottery from ancient times. Thirteenth and 14th century manuscripts describe the game being played along lines similar to today.

The game was well preserved in Scotland in the 16th century, where for some time it was the national sport. Scottish emigrants were responsible for the spread of the game to the British Commonwealth, in particular to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. In 1892, the Scottish Bowling Association came into being.

In 1903, the English Bowling Association was established. In 1915, the American Lawn Bowls Association was formed. The first World Bowling Championships were held in Sydney, Australia, in 1966.

Yes, bowling is well established and is extremely popular, 'down under' and nowhere more so than here in Hamilton, where the fourth country bowling club came into existence all those years ago.



HAMILTON bowling season opening 1912-13



GROUP in front of first pavilion