

## THE COURSE

Although it is believed that golf in Drouin was played at the turn of the last century on Mr Hendry's property on Lardners Rd, it wasn't until 1902 that an official club was established. The President was Dr Alfred Cowan with H.T. Robertson as Secretary and Col. G.V. Stephen as Captain.

The first official "course" - if you could call it that - was played on land owned by Mr McLachlan near the township on the Main South Rd. An eighteen-hole course was laid out and a club house of sorts constructed. Ingeniously this club house had a wall that was hinged and when lowered, formed a trestle table from which afternoon tea could be served.

Thereafter the Club led a nomadic existence. It was played mainly on farming properties around the town, the use of which was constantly changing. The Club became used to staying for a short while before moving on.

In 1908 the land was subdivided into five acre blocks forcing the Club to move to Mr C Smiley's paddock in Lardner's Rd, the site of the old Butter Factory where a nine-hole course was constructed. Eventually the Club was allowed to return to the original site this time owned by Mr Hoopell. The clubhouse with the hinged wall survived these relocations. The land was sold yet again this time to a Mr Stewart who was a public minded citizen. Not only did he allow the Club to continue but he constructed a fresh water swimming pool fed by the King Parrot Creek.

In 1910 the land was sold to the Woeff Brothers. When they constructed a flax mill, the Club was on the move again. This time they ended up at Mr Henry Higg's property on the corner of McNeilly Rd and Higgs Rd.

A new course was established on Mr G. Powers' property before the Club went into recess for WW1. This wasn't uncommon, with the AFL (then VFL) suffering the same fate. It wasn't so much out of a sense of patriotism as an acknowledgement of the lack of man power.

Things got back on track in the 1920's, this time at Mr Mick Butler's place on the Old Sale Rd at Brandy Creek. Mick was the father of one of the Club's stalwarts, Gerry Butler. Although the topography of the land made it ideal for a golf course it was thought that with the increased enthusiasm for the game a site closer to Drouin would be better.

Eventually, land owned by Mr Jenkin Hopkin in Hopetoun Rd was chosen. Prior to this a short seven-hole course was laid out on the Gleeson Hotel paddocks between Young Street and the Sports ground. Hopetoun Rd seemed to be the final resting place for the Club before it went into recess for the war.

Through all of these moves what seems remarkable was the apparent ease with which changes were made. The construction of new holes would have been largely done by hand and voluntary labour. The result would have been interesting to say the least. The fairways would have been little more than paddocks and it is unlikely that mechanical mowers would have been used. A Mr Lechtie was much admired for his, "expertness with the scythe....and his work with this difficult instrument was almost unbelievable" Given it was dairy country, cow pats would have been a hazard The greens at Hopetoun Rd were enclosed by post and wire fencing to make putting easier assuming of course that they were greens.

After the war Drouin players joined the Warragul Club until a move was made in 1955 to re-establish the club. At a meeting on the 7<sup>th</sup> July, chaired by Mr Jack Sharkey, President of the Race Club - yes, you read that correctly - a motion was passed declaring that a Golf Club be formed at Drouin. These people meant business because an earlier motion calling for investigations into the

possibility of forming a golf club was rejected. The site selected was Matthew Bennett Park, the home of the Race Club and used periodically by the Harley Motor Cycle Club for their rallies.

The Park was named after State politician, Matthew Bennett, who had done much to promote the local area. A member of the Country Party, he served as a member of the Legislative Assembly from 1929 to 1940. The land had been gazetted in 1881 as a Temporary Reserve for Racecourse, Recreation and Agricultural Show Grounds Purposes. It had multi uses because Mick and Peter De Vries can remember their football club using it as a training ground in the early fifties.

The Drouin and District Carnival Organising Committee was formed to oversee the management of the Park and seek grants. It didn't take long before this Committee ran into trouble. It struggled from the start to reconcile the competing interest of the two principal users - the Golf and Race Clubs. An agreement had been signed with the Race Club that among other things stipulated a height limitation on trees – an issue that has been a constant source of irritation between the two Clubs ever since.

Following a full scale Buln Buln Shire Council debate in 1966, a new Committee involving the Race and Golf Clubs chaired by the Shire was formed but did little to ease the constant bickering between the two clubs. When the Kennett Government began its process of Council amalgamation in 1993 this body was rescinded and has yet to be re-appointed. Nominally, it is the Department of Sustainability and Environment that is in charge of the Park. Effectively they handballed responsibility back to the Shire of Baw Baw but in practical terms this has meant little: the two Clubs are at loggerheads still with the absence of war rather than peace the best that has occurred.

Fortunately for the enthusiasts in 1955 these troubles were all in the unknown future; in the meantime there was a golf course to be built.

It was built in stages. It began with a nine-hole lay-out basically enclosed by the Race Track with sand scrape greens. In 1958 three holes were added using the Northern part of the Park; by 1960 this had risen to 14. The Club was ambitious and decided that to be a proper course it needed grass greens. In 1962 this was accomplished and by 1963 the dream came true when a full eighteen-hole course complete with grass greens was constructed.

How was this done in such a short space of time and with minimal financial backing? Hard work basically. A Mr Campbell, a retired Public Works engineer, had designed an eighteen-hole lay out for the course. The first and second seemed the logical place to start. At that stage the first began where our present (2012) 18<sup>th</sup> green is situated and finished to the left of the 17<sup>th</sup>. The second ran to a position near the current 17<sup>th</sup> tee. It was basically a swamp. This was Don Roberts' description of the "Saga of the First Fairway."

"The great day came when Jack (Cuthbertson's) bulldozer moved in, pushed down and heaped the trees and scrub on the pegged alignment. These were later burned, and we gazed with pride at our handiwork and what a stark, unfriendly sight it must have been – thin cleared strips with heavy bush on either side. Payment was a subject we approached with some embarrassment and it was with some relief we heard Jack's drawl, "Well, Don, you'll have to give me time to work it out. The 'dozer had nothing else to do, and the driver was just learning to use it." However, Jack eventually rendered a bill and eventually, I recall, got paid.

With Jack "Cuthie's" borrowed disc harrows, Keith Grant - and doubtless other farming enthusiasts - with his tractor, the area was disced up, harrowed and sown using Jack Wharton's borrowed "spinner." This was after conferring with our farming friends and also Jack Hoskins, the agronomist with the Department of Agriculture. Doubtless the minimal amount of seed and top dressing was used but to our great joy, a thin spindly green growth showed up through the millions of little roots and sticks still littering the area in spite of us harrowing the bulk of them off before sowing. We

were still picking up these roots and sticks for two years after we opened the two holes for play. After we had coped with - I won't say solved - the problem of borrowing the equipment to try and "stool out" a bit, we eventually constructed a couple of sand scrapes, marked the tees with old SEC insulators and incorporated the two holes in our lay out.

However, the first still remained a very poorly grassed fairway, hard as concrete in fine weather and slippery when wet in other conditions. Our hard working Bill Young came up with the news that he had organised some very suitable top dressing - from the Drouin Settling Ponds most likely - and a weekend working bee was organised with trucks - largely from the Shire - to cart it, and of course, manpower to spread it."

The construction of the grass greens reflected the same can-do attitude. Here is Hugh Mapleson in his memoir, "The Dust Never Settles."

"The Committee really got going on the grass green project, and Bill Young was called in to assist with this venture. Bill advised the Committee that soil was available from the construction of the new drive-in theatre at Warragul and the decision was made to get stuck into the job.

Council trucks roared up and down the highway, ferrying the soil, council equipment and members with shovels and rakes spread most of it as it arrived. Thirteen greens were set out and constructed during one hot weekend. The final work down and sowing took place the following weekend and everybody had visions of soon being able to sink twenty foot putts on these new, true surfaces. But what a disappointment was to follow, for, instead of the expected fine grass sward, all that grew was a beautiful crop of cape weed and thistles.

Retired Drouin West farmer and sawmiller, George Taylor, who had been employed by the Golf Club at five pounds a week to look after the sand scrapes, started to wage war on these offenders with his pocket knife. Hughie Mapleson arrived on the scene with a spray outfit and after killing all of the weeds, found all that was left were a few patches of water grass. Alan Wilson and Barry Smith lent their cylinder cut lawnmowers and George and Hughie set about the task of trying to make something with the remains.

Eleven of these small greens were in operation for the opening of the season in April (1961) and the whole 14 were somehow made playable for May for the annual tournament. Using car lights, all these greens were mown by members on the Saturday night of the tournament. Although these greens were composed of poa-annua and Cranbourne loam, they were the pride and joy of all members."

Both Bill Young and Jack Cuthbertson mentioned in these accounts went on to become life members.

Of course things didn't stand still and the course was "tweaked" over the next twenty years. For example, the 1<sup>st</sup> began near the Race Club House with the green about half way along the current 8<sup>th</sup> fairway. A long (200 yards) par three finished near the current 9<sup>th</sup> green. The third was a par 5 basically following our 10<sup>th</sup> but with a green another forty yards further on. In 1984 a small amount of land was acquired from the Shire to extend the 21<sup>st</sup>. The acquisition of land behind the Club House allowed a further reconfiguration of the course: the 1<sup>st</sup> became the dog- leg par five we know today and the 2<sup>nd</sup> became one of the feature holes - the current 9<sup>th</sup>. Other holes were shortened or added to until eventually we settled on the standard configuration for a par 72 course i.e. 4 par 3's, 4 par 5's and 10 par 4's

The biggest change of all occurred in 2002 when the new nine was opened. Kevin Hartley, a prominent Melbourne golf architect, had been employed to design the new holes and incorporate

them into the existing lay-out. Changes were made to his design by the Committee at that time which was not without controversy. Next time you play with Barry Cunningham he will happily (or not so happily) explain to you exactly what those changes were. Regardless of the merits or otherwise of this debate the end result was the opening of Gippsland's first 27 hole lay-out which gave us three separate options to play.

It wasn't just the addition or changes to holes that occurred: improvements were constantly made to the course. From the very beginning drainage had been a problem - not surprising given that the area was just about a swamp. With an almost impenetrable layer of mudstone the water just couldn't drain away. The back nine was a particular problem. In 1962 a dam was constructed near the 23<sup>rd</sup>; drainage channels were constructed; drainage pipes were laid; kikuyu grass was sown on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>. All helped but even today the problem remains. When the dam between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> was constructed in 1967 it wasn't just a reservoir: it was an attempt to lower the water table. Incidentally, the circumstances of this construction were mysterious. The Committee had shelved the idea for financial reasons. Imagine their surprise when next day they arrived to see construction started.

The construction of the dam on the 10<sup>th</sup> by Mick Devries and particularly the 30 mega litre dam built in 2006 were designed to drought proof the course and stop the reliance on town water. The financing and construction of this last mentioned dam was an issue. South East Water and Melbourne Water were the two authorities with responsibility and unfortunately they had conflicting views. Siting was controversial with many questioning the need for its elevated position and thus the need for a feeder dam. This came about because the Water Commission wouldn't allow us to build a dam on the creek line so we had to build it above and pump the water up to the higher level. After the dam was finished the Water Commission decided that the creek was not registered and we could have built the dam on the creek line anyway.

Finding the money was also difficult. With a State election looming and the seat of Narracan marginal, you might have expected that the Government would have been quick to act. Not so. The election came and went and still no action on the request for the grant. Eventually a \$50000 Federal grant was obtained for pumps, electric extensions and connections to the new dam. The seat of McMillan was also marginal but this time it seems to have had an effect. The new dam and feeder dam were funded internally at a cost of about \$250000. In the horrific 2009 bushfires which came very close to the Course, the dam was a valuable source of water for hard pressed CFA fire fighters.

Another improvement was the decision to re-sow the fairways with couch grass. The grass chosen was Santa Anna and the Club is well on its way to having all fairways covered with this grass. It has not been without controversy though. In a farming area where pasture management is crucial it is not surprising that the Club has so many "experts" and they don't hold back. Was the choice the best one for the soil? How low should it be cut? When should the winter grass be poisoned? While not denying the validity of these issues, the introduction of the couch came at the worst weather time. The extended drought in the 2000's made management a real difficulty; ironically the above average rain fall since has created its own problems. This is without the issue of pests (with the wonderfully named Cockchafer beetle prominent) and disease. In 2012 a problem of a different complexion emerged when six greens became unplayable. It was believed to be a deliberate act of vandalism. While this will probably be never definitively established the result was a massive blow to the Club's finances

Hughie Mapleson entitled his memoir, "The Dust Never Settles." Nowhere is this a more apt description than when you consider the way the course has changed over the 110 years of the Club's existence. The next 110 years should be a little quieter.

Anything to do with the water was rarely a happy event so this good news story needs to be told about the drains. Betty and Des Nottage were prominent players with Betty winning three successive Club Championships, 1988-90. They were greatly distressed when their Jack Russell pet went missing on one of Des' walks. For eleven days nothing was reported until John DeCoort, curator at the time, heard a yelping near the drain leading to the 21<sup>st</sup>. The dog was rescued from the drain to the great joy of all.

**Written by George Shand**