

CLUB HOUSE

After your latest debacle on the course, you might like to remind yourself that no matter how bad your game is at least you can drown your sorrows in comfort. The million dollars plus refurbishment finished in 2010 has guaranteed that. Of course it wasn't always like this.

From 1902 until 1955 the Club had no fixed home. It simply moved around the district as various farming lots became available or more importantly not available. It made for what we would consider primitive golf. To even have a club house under these circumstances was remarkable. It is not recorded what were the materials but presumably it was iron because it was transportable. It had one remarkable feature. A wall was hinged in the middle which dropped down to provide a table from which afternoon tea could be served. Given West Gippsland weather the players must have been a hardy lot or maybe golf was essentially a summer sport.

When the Club reformed in 1955 at Matthew Bennett Park relations with the Race Club were initially amicable and so their club house became our club house. Improvements were made by the Golf Club. In 1958 the building was completely re-lined and enclosed so that in Hugh Mapleson's words, "it was possible to sit in it without freezing to death." Portable gas provided the lighting, a wood burning heating stove was acquired and insurance was provided for both.

The good times with the Race Club was not to last and in 1961 Hugh is complaining that despite completely renovating the building the Race Club was, "still pinpricking the Golf Club's efforts" to improve the facilities. When the rental value was increased to 50 pounds and the Club was told to pay or get out the moves to get our own home increased in urgency.

Acquiring land became the first priority. The Club approached the Council to buy part of their land on the eastern boundary. This was refused but we were offered instead a 75 year lease on half an acre. After negotiation the Council eventually agreed to the sale of the land where the Club House now is including a carriageway to Princes Highway.

In 1962 plans were drawn up for a temporary building which later could become a machinery shed once the permanent building was established. In 1964 members agreed to pay an extra shilling per round into the building fund. Real progress came though with the development of a Co-operative Society in 1966. With a capital of \$1000, a loan from the State Savings Bank of \$9000 was obtained. Shares with a face value of \$2 were sold at a call of 20 cents per share. The maximum number to be allocated was 50 per member. This was enough for plans, designed and costed by Bill Young, to be adopted, tenders to be called, the site cleared and filling brought to build up the area. Things were on the move.

Would you be surprised to know that there were cost overruns and the Co-operative ran out of money? A motion was passed requiring all present and intending members to purchase 50 shares. At this time the subscription for members was \$20 and \$13 for Associates. The scheme worked because in July 1967 the Club House became a reality.

The building was basically half the size of the present Clubhouse. Square in shape it had a small dance floor, kitchen and toilet facilities. Initially it didn't have a bar although that didn't mean the area was dry. The Committee was concerned about this and in 1968 a liquor licence was obtained. A built in bar was soon established. The club house was furnished by the Associates whose fundraising activities since the Club's inception had been a feature.

With the building came a sense that the Club was now properly established. For those who had the vision in 1955 it was a satisfying moment.

Hugh Mapleson didn't call his memoir, "The Dust Never Settles" for nothing. By 1978 the Building Committee was considering plans for an extension. A plan was drawn up, quotes obtained and an offer of a \$50000 loan from the ANZ Bank obtained. At the end of the year a tender from Yarragon Holmes of \$39356 for the renovations was accepted. Members will be familiar with what happened Basically the idea was to double the size of the Club House by adding another square to the existing Club House with the bar forming the dividing line between the two sections. The new work was completed and in 1979 the extensions were officially opened.

It is interesting to speculate as to why just eleven years after our first building was complete it was felt necessary to take the financial risk of the extension. It could be that with a growing membership that the original building was inadequate to cater for our needs. This was especially so in an era when the social life of the Club was vibrant with an Annual Ball, regular Dinner Dances and Formal Dinners part of the calendar. This meant having an adequate space and suitable catering facilities.

It might also have been the beginning of a trend to improve the Club's finances by hiring the space for outside use. Membership fees were kept low - in fact annual reports record complaints by other clubs about this - to maintain the Club's reputation as a good value place for members. Costs inexorably rise especially as more paid staff are employed. Its location a few kilometres out of town made it an ideal spot for things like birthday parties with the money earned an important addition to the Club's income.

Certainly in 2006 when plans to renovate were explored this was a very important consideration. At this stage there was no cash flow problem but there was a concern that in three years this could be an issue. While the new nine generated new income from green fee players it also generated new costs. Simply, maintaining 27 holes is a vastly different proposition to looking after 18 even if you don't increase the staff numbers. At the same time membership numbers, while healthy, were only holding their own rather than increasing as was imagined would be the case just ten years earlier. Drouin could not escape the Australia wide trend for golf to be popular but golf membership to be less so. Players now days cannot always be sure about a regular commitment to say a Saturday game and in any case are keen to sample different course. All of this was placing pressure on the Club's finances. A renovated Club House was seen as a key way to make the facility even more attractive to outside hirers while of course making for a more pleasant amenity for members and creating a decent commercial space for Anthony.

Sounds simple because everyone is a winner. Unfortunately money had to raise its ugly head. The initial proposal provoked a storm of protest. The idea was to sell 15 acres the Club owned on the east side of the course for housing development. This would have meant the loss of the practice area the first hole and most of the second hole but it was believed that with careful design these features could be located elsewhere. It was expected that this would raise about \$3 million dollars that would refurbish the Club House, seal the car park, pay for relocation of the practice area and golf holes and create an investment of up to a \$1 million. This investment was a way of guaranteeing the Club's financial future. In an increasingly bitter atmosphere the objections came thick and fast. There is no doubt that friendships were broken and that at least for some of the Committee a toll was taken on their health.

Some of those who had bought blocks on fairway Drive were aggrieved because one of the selling points had been that a new Club House would be built in that vicinity. Certainly in the nineties this was attractive to some Committee members. They had visions of a new Club House complete with bowling greens and tennis courts. However, it was never a realistic concept and the Committee never endorsed it as a marketing ploy. At a special meeting between the President and residents this was explained and eventually accepted.

Other objections focused on the sale of what was seen as a valuable asset. It was the golf course as people knew it that was being put up for sale. It was all very well to sell land that had been

earmarked for that very purpose i.e. the blocks on Fairway Drive but this was different. Some saw it as ripping the heart out of the course. In a farming community where land is gold this was going too far. It didn't matter that we would still have a full golf course and practice facilities: this was going beyond the pale.

People weren't happy either with a notion of urban development so closely abutting the golf course. Perhaps with the example of Warragul in mind where this is an ongoing problem, there was concern that we would be opening ourselves to legal proceedings if golf balls flew off course or if late night functions caused too much noise.

There was also a concern as to why the Club would want to go down this path when there were still blocks on Fairway Drive that could be sold. The sums involved wouldn't be as great but there would surely be enough to cover the cost of refurbishing the Club House. The difficulty for the Committee here was that the land would need to be rezoned and that their belief was that the Shire wouldn't agree to this.

At well attended extraordinary general meetings the proposal was eventually overwhelmingly defeated and a resolution passed requiring two thirds members' approval of any future land sales. The Committee accepted this and reopened negotiation with the Shire and were pleasantly surprised to discover that in fact the land could be rezoned. When this was done the blocks were put on the market, sold quickly and created a fund of \$1.2 million which would be sufficient to cover the building costs for the refurbished Club House. This was accepted by the members.

There was some surprise that the plans involved working with the current framework and only increasing the room by a small amount. Why not start afresh? This in fact would have added to the cost because it would need new foundations for which new planning permits would be needed. It was felt that the old club house was big enough but needed much better kitchen facilities, a better designed bar area and of course a proper pro shop. In other words a refurbishment would achieve all of our objectives.

At this stage the Committee made an inspired move. They gave the brief to Narelle Lockwood of Lockwood Design. Narelle had grown up in the area (her parents, Doug and Lorraine, had been prominent in local sporting circles), she was returning to the area and anxious to develop her business and she was multi skilled. The decision to make her site manager meant that she was on the spot to identify and solve problems before they became too great. She also fulfilled a role that would have provide a severe challenge for what was a voluntary group trying to do their best but hardly experts.

So, starting in about March of 2010 work commenced. We relocated our Club Rooms to a portable - small and noisy but adequate - and borrowed the Race Clubs toilet facilities. This is probably not the time for cheap shots but the comment was heard from several long-time members that nothing much had changed since the forty years they were last in the place. The rebuilding proceeded smoothly and was completed on time. There was a cost blow out of about \$100000 but this was seen as acceptable.

To celebrate the opening a diner dance was held. It wasn't hard to spot Committee members; they were the ones with the biggest smiles on their faces. And why not? The project had started from rocky beginnings, large sums were involved and there was the constant worry that their relative inexperience would land them in trouble. Occasionally today comments questioning whether we really should have spent so much money are heard but no one seems to object to the pleasant facilities we now enjoy. Everyone is pleased that Anthony finally has a proper work place. Finally under the shrewd management of Danny the function area is heavily booked and helping to underpin the Club's financial welfare. Not a bad improvement on the mobile shed that constituted the first Club House a century ago.

Written by George Shand