

# **Chester Croquet Club**

**The First Twenty-five Years**

**1977 - 2002**

**Hastíng Wang**



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## **The First Twenty-five Years**

As the club is approaching its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary I realised that Margaret Povey and I are the only founder members who have been continuously active in the club over this period. Consequently I thought it might be useful to set down, with Margaret's help, an account of the founding of the club and its early years while we are still around. I hope some members might find this interesting.

### **Founding**

After attending a croquet course at Lilleshall, Bert Mason and his wife Nora became enthusiasts and, as there was no club at or near Chester, they decided to form one. Bert contacted Margaret Povey (who had attended an earlier course at Lilleshall), various friends and neighbours, and placed an announcement in the local paper about an inaugural open-air meeting at the old crown green bowling lawn at the Groves, adjacent to the Hermitage in Chester. As my wife and I with one of our sons, Andrew, along with our friends Tony and Mary Page and one of their sons, Julian, had played sequence croquet (an earlier form of the game) for many years at Cober Hill, a large guest house near Scarborough, we all jumped at the chance of furthering our interest. Most of those who attended this meeting had little or no experience of Association Croquet.

At this meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1977 the basic structure of the club was formed. Bert Mason lent the club his equipment and play started. Other equipment was purchased or borrowed. The number of founder members in this first season was 25 including two students.

The successful launching and development of the club over the first few years was largely due to the enthusiasm of Bert and Nora. The club was also indebted to Rupert Thorp, an excellent and experienced player who carried out valuable coaching. This resulted in a rapid improvement in standards of play. Rupert also lent the club a set of hoops and donated two copies of his book on croquet for sale to club members, the proceeds going to club funds.

Unfortunately, due to business commitments abroad, Rupert ceased to be an active member after 3 years, but accepted an invitation in 1980 to become president, and continued to keep his interest in the club. We were all pleased to see his return to an active role in the club in 2001.

In 1981 the club moved to its present location in Westminster Park. This move was necessitated by the need to have two full size lawns to cater for increased membership and for matches.

## **The Development**

In the 1980's the club prospered mainly due to the efforts of Bert Mason as secretary, and the chairman, Don Duffy, who concentrated more on the administration and social side of the club. Following Bert Mason's untimely death in 1987 following an emergency operation, Andrew Collin carried on the good work as secretary. In the early part of the nineties Roger Croston did sterling work as secretary, keeping the club going through difficult times. He liaised with Carden Park in the development of 7 excellent croquet lawns there, resulting in the staging of the 5<sup>th</sup> World Championship in 1994. At this event many members of the club acted as stewards. During 1993 and 1994 the club played many of their matches and some club competitions at Carden Park.

Almost from the start, the club has taken part in regional and national competitions. Initially we entered the Northern Federation Handicap League, and won it in 1979, 1982, 1983 and 1984. Later, the league became the North-West League, but we did not manage to win again until 1999. In each case we automatically qualified for the next year's Secretary's Shield competition, open to the winners of the various leagues. However, the only time we won the Shield was in 1980 when we played the final at Edgbaston and beat Wallingford 5 – 1. The team on this occasion was Bert Mason, Andrew Collin, George Collin and myself.

At various times the club has entered teams for the Longman Cup and the Short Croquet League. We managed to win some matches, but no overall success.

Over the years, many members have competed in numerous competitions throughout the country with many successes. The most notable of these were:

- 1978: Andrew and George Collin won the first indoor doubles championship.
- 1982: Mary Collin won the C.A. Steel Bowl for the most improved lady player in the country.
- 1983: Keith Aiton (a Scottish international player who joined Chester for three years) won the C.A. Chairman's Salver.
- 1985: Mary Collin won the National Ladies Championship after a final lasting nearly 9 hours. Immediately after this, Mary was on the lawn again with Keith Aiton to win the final of the National mixed Doubles Championship.
- 1987: Mary Collin won the National Ladies Championship again.
- 2001: Derek Bell-Jones won the North-West Millennium Trophy at Pendle, with Alastair Woolley runner-up.

## **Social Activities**

Over the years, many social events have been held to enable members, their spouses and friends to get to know each other away from the lawns. Some of these also had the secondary object of raising funds for the club. These events have taken the form of cheese and wine parties and coarse croquet events. For these events the club has to thank many members including Don and Mary Duffy, Bert and Nora Mason, Margaret Povey, Mrs. Richards, Andrew and Mary Collin, Mike Wilkins, Soili Barker, Malcolm and Anne Fletton.

In 1999 Geoff Reynolds arranged a club dinner, and this has become an annual event.

## **Furthering the Game of Croquet**

Besides running croquet courses at Chester as part of our own recruitment drives, many members have helped to spread awareness of the game of croquet.

We have run courses for the W.I., and Andrew Collin, Bert Mason, Roger Croston and Margaret Povey have run courses for the pupils of King's School and Queen's School.

In 1981 the BBC television cameras came to Chester and Bert Mason described the game of croquet while some members, including his wife Nora, Margaret Povey, and my wife Jean, played in the background.

Mike Wilkins and I were requested on two or three occasions to demonstrate croquet on the lawn in the walled garden at Norton Priory. Roger Croston and Chris Boon have organised croquet at corporate functions at Peckforton Castle and several at Carden Park, raising some funds for the club in the process. One of these at Carden Park was played under floodlights.

When Liverpool held their Garden Festival the Cheshire stand had a small kidney-shaped lawn and croquet clubs in the area were asked to put on demonstrations at the weekends. A number of our members helped out on various occasions during that summer.

In 1984, Granada TV set up a croquet lawn adjacent to their set for Coronation Street in Manchester. The croquet took the form of UK International players playing a series of short croquet matches against each other. At this time short croquet was in its infancy. For a week, Granada televised croquet for 5 – 6 hours each day, with "Match of the Day" at 11pm. By invitation, many members of our club went along as spectators to help set the scene.

Earlier, I mentioned that my wife and I got hooked on croquet at Cober Hill. Over the years, more than a score of guests there have become interested and joined their local clubs. Two guests, Clive and Georgina Llewellyn, finding there was no club in North Wales, founded one at Llanfairfechan. Jean and I spent several days there

giving them preliminary coaching. Another Cober guest, David Barrett of Bury and Pendle clubs later gave them more advanced courses.

For several years, I, along with a member from Ellesmere club, ran courses for Vale Royal Council at Castle Park in Frodsham. Initially Chester club did not benefit from this, but eventually gained a few new members.

As will be seen later, Chester club did get unexpected benefits from these associations with Vale Royal and Llanfairfechan.

## **Courting Trouble**

Relationship with the public has not always been as friendly. One year, our hermitage event coincided with Chester Races. The owners of the Hermitage, along with other lady friends were selling refreshments to the public to raise money for charity. Three drunks from the race meeting were causing trouble along the Dee. They started shouting abuse and obscenities to the players, causing distress to everyone, especially the ladies. They started climbing the fence and approached the lawn. I was nearest to them and moved to intercept them. I was immediately aware of Roger Croston and Chris Boon behind me. We did not threaten them, but, as we later told the police, "as we were in the middle of a game, we just happened to have our mallets in our hands!" They were not so drunk that they could not see the error of their ways and beat a hasty retreat. Roger later reported this to the police who had been aware of the trouble the drunks had been causing but needed some member of the public to give evidence. Roger told the police we were willing to do this so, several weeks later, we attended a magistrates court. They changed their plea to guilty at the last moment so we did not have to give evidence, but we did see each of them fined £100 with costs of £25. An expensive day out for them at the races!

## Lowest Ebb

During the early part of the nineties, the club was in difficulties. Despite all our efforts the membership was falling. We had great difficulty raising teams for the league. In 1996 we invited Clive and Gina Llewellyn from Llanfairfechan to join the club as country members. With their help we managed to honour all our commitments in the league. We were so worried that we revised the constitution to bring up to date the provisions for winding up the club.

I think we reached rock bottom when in 1996 the pavilion, which we shared with the bowls club, was destroyed early one morning by fire – probably by an arsonist. We lost all our equipment. We first learnt of this when Cheryl Hindle went along on the same afternoon hoping for a game. Cheryl reported this to Janet Davies (in her first year as treasurer — truly a baptism of fire!) in the early evening. We were due to play a league match against Southport at home the following day! After a series of frantic telephone calls, the match went ahead as planned. Southport supplied the croquet equipment, all our team brought along an assortment of chairs and tables, Geoff Reynolds borrowed a tent from the Guides and adjustments were made to our catering arrangements.

Because of our previous associations, Vale Royal were very happy to lend us two sets of hoops and sets of balls. Llanfairfechan Club lent us two sets of balls. Various members of the club lent or donated chairs and other equipment. Thanks to everyone concerned we were fully operational by the following weekend!

Fortunately, we were fully covered by insurance. Janet Davies undertook the lengthy and painstaking job of seeing the assessor, getting information and replacement costs for the equipment, making the claim and later, seeing to the purchase of new equipment. Without Janet's efforts the club may very well have folded.

## Revival

Having survived the effects of the fire, there was a new spirit to revive the club. Janet Davies undertook a new recruitment drive with beginners' courses. Janet was helped by other members of the club, particularly Margaret Povey who had been a constant and willing helper in the club since its inception. Subsequently the courses were run jointly by Janet and Malcolm Fletton, one of Janet's first pupils.

The club managed to retain a high proportion of participants from these courses. The standard of play rapidly improved, and we managed to win the North-West league for the first time in 1999. The backbone of the team in 1999 was Roger Croston, Janet Davies, Malcolm Fletton, Dennis Graham and Geoff Reynolds. Unfortunately we did not win the Secretary's Shield the following year, but we did lose to the eventual winners, St. Albans.

In 1993 Roger Croston started a campaign to get new lawns and we looked at several sites in and around Westminster Park. Chester City Council wanted to develop the facilities at Westminster Park, including relocating our lawns. With this in mind Chester City Council applied for a lottery grant in 1999, but failed in their bid.

However, in 2000 Chester Croquet Club applied to the Lottery Sport for All Millennium Fund for a grant for one half lawn and three full lawns to replace the existing two lawns at Westminster Park. Through the prodigious efforts of Janet and Malcolm, who had frequent meetings with relevant officials, getting quotations and other information, we received the grant without any problems.

Work started in the autumn of 2000 but because of the unprecedented bad weather throughout the country, it stopped almost immediately. It had been hoped that we would be playing on the new lawns in 2002, the club's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary but, because of problems with the contractor, it appears that 2003 is a more realistic date.



## **The Fletton Trophy**

The sudden death of our chairman, Malcolm Fletton, on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2001 from a heart attack saddened us all. When Anne, his widow, offered a new trophy for a competition under advanced rules, the committee was delighted to accept on behalf of the club, as a fitting memorial to a loyal member.

## **Outlook for the Future**

As the club celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the prospects look bright. The membership has risen and we are getting many younger members who can carry the club forward. Hopefully, the new improved lawns will be a success.

The committee is enthusiastic with many new ideas. It would complete the new lawns project if we could erect a new pavilion to replace the Portacabin that we have been using since the fire.

I can see a rosy future for the club with, I hope, great successes to be reported when the next account is written in 25 years time – but not by me!

## **Acknowledgements**

I am indebted to Margaret Povey and Roger Croston for checking the manuscript for accuracy and making several useful comments and additions.

I also wish to thank Geoff Reynolds for the preparation and reproduction of this booklet.

Hasting Wang  
March, 2002

# Appendices

## Founder Members

**Chairman**

Mr. D.S. Lester

**Treasurer**

Mr. C.J. Richards

**Secretary**

Mr. Bert Mason

**Committee Member**

Mrs. Margaret Povey

**Members**

Mrs. Lyn Atkinson

Mr. Andrew Collin

Mr. George Collin

Mrs. B. Dally

Mr. Don Duffy

Mrs. Mary Duffy

Miss H. Ellis

Miss J.J. Fice

Major J.T. James

Mrs. James

Mrs. Nora Mason

Mr. Tony Page

Mrs. Mary Page

Mr. Julian Page (student)

Mrs. Richards

Mr. D.H.M. Roberts

Revd. Norman Ryder

Mr. Rupert Thorp

Dr. Hasting Wang

Mrs. Jean Wang

Mr. Andrew Wang (student)

# **Club Competitions**

## **Mason Cup**

This is the main competition in the club and is rightly named after the founder of the club. It is a handicap competition played throughout the season.

## **Improvers Cup**

This trophy is awarded to the player deemed by the committee to have made most progress in the year. It is designed to encourage players, particularly beginners, to strive for improvement.

## **Hermitage Short Croquet Competition**

This is an enjoyable one-day event played at the Hermitage lawns, our original home. It takes the form of short croquet and usually forms part of Chester's Week of Sport, and is designed to publicise the game. Originally it was sponsored by the Lord Daresbury Hotel with small prizes, and later by Shell. It is no longer sponsored, but we still retain and award the two original trophies. The winner also retains for a year a copy of "The History of Croquet" which was donated by Bert Mason

## **High Bisquers' Tournament**

This is a one-day, end of season competition open to players with high handicaps. It is designed to give beginners a chance to play in a competition with players of a similar standard. It was started in 1992, but was held for only one year. It was revived in 1999 when Malcolm Fletton designed and made a unique trophy, which was named the Hibiscus Trophy – the pun was intended!

## **The Fletton Trophy**

This new trophy, presented to the club in 2002 in memory of Malcolm Fletton by his widow Anne, is to be awarded each year to the winner of a competition, played to advanced rules but not restricted to expert players and open to any member who feels ready to play this form of the game.

# Winners of Club Competitions

Year	Mason Cup	Hermitage	Improvers	Hibiscus
1978			Andrew Collin	
1979				
1980			George Collin	
1981	Andrew Collin		Mary Duffy (later Collin)	
1982	Hasting Wang		Mary Collin	
1983	Mike Elder		Mike Wilkins	
1984	Mary Collin		Mike Elder	
1985	Mike Elder	Bert Mason	Mike Elder Hasting Wang	
1986	Andrew Collin	Margaret Povey	Mike Wilkins	
1987	Chris Boon	Chris Boon		
1988	Chris Boon	Chris Boon	Mike Wilkins	
1989	Chris Boon	Chris Boon	Chris Boon	
1990	Tom Stothart	Chris Boon	Chris Boon	
1991	Chris Boon	Chris Boon	Geoff Reynolds	
1992	Keith Davis	Chris Boon	John Wilkinson	John Wilkinson
1993	Chris Boon	Hasting Wang		
1994	Geoff Reynolds	Roger Croston	John Wilkinson	
1995	Roger Croston	Chris Boon	Roger Croston	
1996	Hasting Wang	Chris Boon	Cheryl Hindle	
1997	Margaret Povey	Roger Croston	Dennis Graham Malcolm Fletton	
1998	Malcolm Fletton	Roger Croston	Donald Sharp	
1999	Dennis Graham	Roger Croston	Keith Long Mark Lloyd	Mark Lloyd
2000	Keith Long	Keith Long	Alastair Woolley	Donald Sharp
2001	Derek Bell-Jones	Keith Long	Richard Smith	Richard Smith



# Chronicle of Main Events

1977	Inaugural meeting on 18 <sup>th</sup> June at Hermitage lawn
1978	Constitution adopted Andrew and George Collin won first indoor doubles championship at Burscough. Started friendly matches and club competed in Northern Federation League
1979	The club was joint winner of the Northern Federation League with East Riding. BBC television cameras came to the Hermitage
1980	The Club won the C.A. Secretary's Shield by beating Wallingford 5-1 In the final at Edgbaston. Rupert Thorp appointed President
1981	Revd. Norman Ryder given honorary membership Mason Cup started
1982	The club won the Northern Federation League Mary Collin won the C.A. Steel Bowl for most improved lady player in the country
1983	The club won the Northern Federation League Keith Aiton won the C.A. Chairman's Salver
1984	The club won the Northern Federation League
1985	Mary Collin won the National Ladies Championship Mary Collin and Keith Aiton won the National Mixed Doubles Championship Annual short croquet tournament at the Hermitage started
1986	4-day short croquet tournament at Ellesmere won by Hasting Wang
1987	Mary Collin won the National Ladies Championship Bert Mason died after an emergency operation Mike Elder killed in a climbing accident in Scotland
1988	Trouble with drunks at the Hermitage short croquet event
1991	Don and Mary Duffy given Honorary Membership
1993	Roger Croston helped to establish the croquet lawns at Carden Park and arranged for some of our league matches and the Mason Cup to be played there.
1994	5 <sup>th</sup> World Championship matches played at Carden Park. Many of our members assisted with stewarding etc. Some of our league matches were played at Carden Park
1995	Don Duffy died after a short illness
1996	Club house and equipment destroyed by fire
1999	The club won the North-West Handicap League for the first time
2000	Obtained Millennium Lottery grant. Work started on new lawns Roger Croston appointed President
2001	Millennium Trophy at Pendle won by Derek Bell-Jones with Alastair Woolley runner-up Malcolm Fletton died suddenly following a heart attack



