

A History of Eynsham Croquet Club 1996 – 2003

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In 1994 I retire to my childhood village of Eynsham. Having played Association croquet for five years at a small Kentish Club on a garden lawn with sundry bunkers, I intend to continue. The only possible way is to become a WI member and join the Thames Valley Club which plays Golf Croquet in the gardens of Denman College. They play all the year round and I join in January of 1995 and slowly become accepted and am able to provide advice on lawn maintenance to the gardener at the College.

After a year I begin to think about starting a club in Eynsham and, in February 1996, the Parish Council agrees to lease space on the village Playing Field. We have an inaugural meeting on 20th May 1996 with about 25 members. Applications for funds to buy equipment to the New Horizons Trust and the Parish Council are successful and we purchase 2 sets of hoops and balls and some mallets. A local player loans a set of Jaques hoops which, after a few years, develops into a gift. We are able to keep our equipment in the Disabled Toilet on the Playing Field.

During 1996 and 1997 we play Golf Croquet regularly twice a week all the year round. In 1998 some members of Witney U3A join and increase to a regular 16 members playing on Thursday mornings. We apply for funding from WODC and purchase more balls and a set of hoops so that we now play on four half-size courts. Mowing is done by the Parish Council staff somewhat erratically, but we manage to play regularly.

By 2000 we are a very active club and compete in the CA Handicap competition with two members playing in the final. We also play in the Southern Federation Golf Croquet League. In 2003 we enter the Grass Roots competition and in 2004 we also enter the Centre Stage competition. In all cases we have some success without anyone actually being a winner!

The Club grows in size but it becomes more difficult to play on the Playing Field as teenage youths kick their footballs amongst us whilst we play and then rush in to retrieve them. It is very unpleasant for us all, but we hear rumours that the Eynsham Cricket Club might be interested in sharing a field on Cassington Road which they lease from the Bartholomew Trustees. During 2003 this becomes more possible and we take steps to make it happen. It looks as though my dream of having a club with its own courts is going to be realized.



Jennet Blake January 2006

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A History of Eynsham Croquet Club 2003 – 2006

Autumn 2003

The Cricket Club members indicate that they would like us to play on part of their field. There would be enough room for several courts, but the actual area is not decided. We realize we must apply for grants and consult the WODC Sports Officer. We decide that a full lottery application would not be suitable as lottery funds are now more difficult to obtain and the Cricket Club also have realized that it would be better to rely on small grants and local help to achieve their new facilities. So we apply for an 'Awards for All' sports grant and ask for £5000 which we believe will be enough to lay two full courts, but without incorporating any drainage. We believe that our soil is reasonably free-draining and, as we are in the flood plain of the Thames, a drainage scheme might not be entirely successful. We spend a lot of time making sure we have a good case on the application form, which is supported by the WODC Sports Officer. Our application is submitted in December. We start to obtain estimates for laying the courts.

Spring 2004

We obtain estimates from three firms: one is a local firm which has recently laid courts for another club, but we are not convinced that they have much experience of croquet requirements. Another firm is involved with maintenance of a large club and the third, which comes with a personal recommendation, carries out work for a large club near London. All the estimates appear to be quoting for the much the same activities, and we begin to favour the last of the three which comes in at just below £5000. However we can make no commitment until we have the grant and have made progress with a lease.

In February we hear that we have been given £5000 for our project which must be spent within twelve months on the work specified. The Cricket Club asks their solicitor to prepare a lease. Everything seems set fair and we start making plans to have the lawns laid as soon as possible, perhaps even in May.

We have been given the £5000 (the cash is now in our account) so we can use this as matching finance for applying to the WODC for a further £5000 which we will need to purchase equipment. At first we are told the WODC has run out of money but we make our application in April.

Summer 2004

We are awarded £5000 by WODC to purchase equipment, most of which is expected to be spent on two mowers and a hut.

We are still optimistic that we are making progress, but we can see that the lawns cannot be laid before the autumn. However, August/September is a good time for sowing grass seed, so we are philosophical.

Regular contact with the Chairman of the Cricket Club does not encourage us to think that the lease has been receiving any priority from those involved. We dare not proceed until we have signed the lease.

Autumn 2004

We are desperate. September is slipping away. Our contractor is holding himself in readiness for when we sign the lease. The lease arrives and we sign it on September 30th. We mow the proposed area and members and friends rake up the grass. The sub-contractor arrives within a week to start work but announces that rotavating the turf will not give a satisfactory level to the courts and the turf must be stripped. All efforts are directed to getting a turf stripper on site. Meanwhile the weather is deteriorating. Finally, in the middle of October, we decide everything must be postponed until the spring.

Winter 2004 – 5

Our lease of ground on the village Playing Field runs out on 31st December, so we start to mow down an area on the Cricket field where we can play golf croquet over the winter. We start to play on 1st January. We are thrilled to have made the move and have many good playing sessions on two half-size field courts during the winter months.

We gather information about mowers, both from suppliers and from people who are involved in maintaining courts. We decide to buy a new mower because we must have a reliable machine and none of our members are qualified to maintain a secondhand mower. Finally we decide to go for one expensive mower which will have two cutting cylinders (5 blades and 11 blades) and will also take a verticut cylinder for autumn work. We place the order in mid-winter to obtain 10% discount. Almost all our WODC grant is spent on this machine.

From the time of getting our initial grant, we have been investigating what kind of hut we need to store our equipment. We have visited scrap yards, garden centres and checked the internet. Now we have ordered the mower we must have secure storage for it. This represents a problem in our village where vandalism is common. We decide that only one expensive hut fills the bill, so we apply to the Croquet Association for a grant. In March they give us £1674 so we order the hut and consider options for the base.

By March we are preparing to have the courts laid, but the ground is still too wet. We have to write and beg an extension on the use of our 'Awards for All' grant which should have been spent by the middle of February. We gain an extension to the end of May.

Spring 2005

During April we mow down a further area of the field to give us four half-size courts which we can use for golf croquet during the summer. The Treasurer enjoys using a heavy self-propelled roller, borrowed from the Cricket Club, over all the field courts.

We enlist the Chairman's brother, who has access to a tractor and trailer, and a Parish Councillor, who can lay bricks, to start laying the foundations for the hut. These have to

be over a foot above ground level as the field may flood in the winter. The foundations are finished and the hut arrives in the middle of May. The Treasurer makes a ramp for access to the hut and we take delivery of the cylinder mower.

During March we anticipate starting to lay the courts. During April we continue to be hopeful but the weather ensures the ground is still too wet to cultivate. By May, the weather is improving and at last we envisage that work might start on the new courts.

Summer 2005

By May all our area is producing abundant grass so we decide we must purchase a secondhand ride-on rotary mower to cope with all the areas where we cannot use the cylinder mower, which will be used only on court areas.

So far we have managed without any toilet facilities. They now seem an imperative requirement so the Treasurer and Secretary erect a small DIY hut next to our larger hut. Despite its superficial simplicity, this proves to be one of the most complicated and time-consuming of all the jobs we undertake. A portable toilet is purchased so we can now invite visitors to play.

It is nearly the end of May. Work is planned to start on the courts on May 20th so the area is mown and raked again. The machine to strip the turf arrives and does an erratic job until the Chairman's brother arrives and points out the problem, which is then remedied. Turf removed is tipped in large heaps at the other end of our area. A week later all the machinery arrives to rotavate the area, plus a tractor to do the leveling with the aid of sophisticated laser equipment. Once this is done, the ground is fertilized and the seed is sown, drilling in several different directions to get good cover. The work is completed on May 29th, just in time for the end-of-May deadline to spend our grant!

We hastily erect wire netting around the area to keep out the rabbits. Then we attach plastic carrier bags to the top of the netting to blow in the wind to deter the deer! This all seems very effective as we have no trouble on the area.

We wait with anticipation for rain, which appears as if on request. It rains several times in the first fortnight, but where is the grass? The Chairman is getting impatient. We borrow irrigation equipment from the Cricket Club and we see some germination after 3 weeks but it is poor and particularly poor on one side of the area. Grass seed we have sown on a patch elsewhere in the field germinates well.

We continue to irrigate and eventually the contractor agrees to re-sow the grass in July. The Chairman's brother and his son-in-law lay nearly 200 metres of underground hose to our courts giving us three take-off points for the new courts, plus another for the area which could have two additional courts in the future. We purchase our own hose and sprinkler, the latter giving good coverage of the two courts by moving over three central circles. The corners are watered with two rectangular garden sprinklers at the same time. The sprinklers have to be moved every 6 hours so the Chairman visits the courts at 10 pm as dusk falls and again at 4 am as dawn is breaking. Irrigation at this intensity is only

needed for a few days before the new seed starts to germinate and further irrigation is done as necessary on an easier schedule.

In midsummer the Cricket club acquire another Container and we buy a half share in the first one so that we can store both our mowers in it and keep the hut for equipment.

Disaster strikes at the end of July when a mole tracks over 40 feet in 24 hours across one of the courts. At the cost of £50, a mole catcher puts down a dozen traps and catches the offender. By the middle of July the grass is well enough established for it to be cut with the new cylinder mower and the protecting fence is removed at the beginning of September.

The vast heaps of top soil and turf have to be spread and a local contractor comes in to do this. We hope the grass will grow through, but this does not happen everywhere and the bare areas become alive with plantains. The Chairman's brother sprays these off very successfully, but they take a long time to die. Grass seed is sown in October on some of the bare patches and germinates well.

Autumn 2005/Winter 2006

In September we have our first home match against Winslow club on our field courts. They enjoy this as it is a fine day and our half-size courts are bigger than their own!

The Treasurer has taken on the responsibility of the mowers and has done sterling work in keeping all areas mown. He has had occasional help from members but the weight of the (empty) grass box on the cylinder mower means that only those with strong arms are eligible to mow i.e. just 3 members. Other members can use the rotary mower as no strength is needed. The Treasurer is publicly thanked for his efforts and presented with 2 bottles of wine at the autumn Club lunch. Grass disposal is a huge and continuing problem. So far, it has been put into bags or a trailer and taken for dumping on an adjacent field (not belonging to either club!), but a better arrangement will have to be made. The amount of grass for disposal is phenomenal.

We have purchased our own back-pack sprayer and used it successfully on the new courts. We have also purchased a fertilizer spreader and spread autumn fertilizer on the new courts. The new spreader is a help as we have relied on a borrowed one during the summer for fertilizing the field courts.

At the end of September we arrange an evening where Association players can come and see our facilities and play on the field courts. About ten turn up and are very impressed and all intend to join. Two of them have wives who may like to play Golf croquet.

Also at the end of September, three Portakabins arrive to make a temporary pavilion for the Cricket Club and we shall have some use of it also. Cricket Club members rapidly add a verandah at the front, put on an over-arching roof and start altering the inside. By the middle of January the kitchen is installed and we may have use of the toilets by May 1st when we have arranged our Open Day to invite possible new members and all those who have helped us in any way.