

The Bowling Club: Early History

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Following the First World War the Merriott War Memorial Committee was formed and, in addition to looking after the war memorial, they decided to establish a recreation field as a lasting memorial to those who had died during the war. The committee was chaired by Reverend Percival who also chaired the Parish Council. In order to do this they bought a field for £400, which proved to be unsuitable. In 1924 Robert Blake of Marks Barn purchased part of a close of land, called Newchester Cross from Henry Parker, a butcher in Broadway, Merriott, for £700 and offered it for £400 to the Parish Council of Merriott for the purposes of a public pleasure and recreation ground. The offer was gratefully accepted and the money was raised by selling the unsatisfactory field for £400.

Between 1924 and 1939 the field was developed so far as the resources of the village allowed and by 1939 there was a children's playground with swings and a sand pit situated close to the road and occupying land now partly occupied by the bowling green, a football ground, possibly a cricket pitch and tennis courts (some doubt about these), a small bowling green (the bowling club was formed in 1934 with the Reverend Percival as President and A C Tett as captain) and a small sports pavilion (open fronted with seats at the rear and a fence at the front, painted green, positioned alongside hedge to the left of the entrance gate). In the County Mail of Wednesday July 29th 1936, there is a report on Merriott Carnival. The Vicar, Rev. S Percival declared the proceedings open and declared that the carnival and fete was in aid of the funds of the Bowling Club, The Hall funds and the Women's Institute. He stated that the Bowling Club had made a promising opening and he understood that the game was popular amongst the younger parishioner, and not entirely left to the "old fogies."

In 1939 the field was requisitioned by the military and during the course of the occupation fences were broken, gates destroyed, drainage impaired, the pavilion demolished and all facilities for recreation, including the bowling green, obliterated. Five Nissen huts plus a small cookhouse and stores were erected. The cookhouse and stores occupied an area just behind the Memorial hall, now the car park, and after the war were used as changing facilities by football teams. The Nissen huts were beyond the cookhouse/stores, backing onto the hedge and projecting out into the field. Each hut housed around 40 men in bunk beds. Tents were erected on the field and these they were later occupied by American troops and then by Italian prisoners of war. (The huts were first occupied by British troops (RAMC), then Americans prior to D-day who also erected a few rows of bell tents well down in the field, not near the roadway. The tents were removed when the Americans left. The Italian prisoners came next, with the freedom to walk around the village if they wanted to. Then came the German prisoners, fewer of them and conditions stricter.

In December 1946, the field was returned to the Parish Council and in January 1947 compensation of £957 was paid. During 1947, the bowling club reformed with Russell Webb as president and A C Tett as captain. The bowling green was re-laid with club members maintaining and developing the facility. Cyril Tett and Sam Burgess were the

main two people involved in re-establishing the bowls club and they built the bowls pavilion. The pavilion had very basic, bench seats around the sides and lockers in which were stored sets of woods and slip-on over shoes. No electricity or water. Visiting teams (very few) were entertained to tea in the committee room of the Memorial Hall.



Sam was the mainstay, not only being the grounds man but also running the club for most of the 1950s. He held the club together and was constantly trying to recruit new members. It was a very informal business back then, no whites, no blazers, no ties. Members played in their everyday clothes. Few people had their own woods (bowls) but the club had sets for anyone to use. The club were interested in attracting lady members as well as men. An advert in the County Mail of May 19th 1949 states "all ladies wishing to play on the green would have every consideration."

The compensation proved inadequate and by 1959 only the bowls club, the football pitch and the children's playground had been re-established. The maintenance of the field and the bowls club were dependent upon voluntary work by the bowls club and the Parish Council. According to a letter in 1964 from the Parish Council to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, the field was maintained as a semi-agricultural plot with the bulk of the grass cutting being achieved by a flock of sheep.

In 1964, due to public outcry over the unsatisfactory state of the field, the Parish Council took over the field in its entirety and appointed a full time grounds man who was paid from rates. Work on restoring the tennis courts also started. In 1973 the bowls club was granted a lease and have managed and developed the club premises ever since.



Novices Cup Presentation 1954

L to r: Russell Webb, David Gibbs, Clifford Foot, Vick Hooper, Florrie Gibbs, Chris Durant, Hilda Gibbs, the President, Leonard Staples and Sam Burgess