

The Rother Valley Club Celebrates its 10th Birthday

The Rother Valley Club is tucked away in the rolling Sussex countryside on the road between Chichester and Petworth. It can be quite difficult to find as the entrance is via a small lane from the main road in the village of Duncton. It is not visible from the main road but once round the sharp bend one first gets sight of a modern village hall with the croquet club to the right and on a slightly lower level than the hall. It is not a large club but has two full size and one half size lawns, the latter being used for practice. The view from the club is simply amazing with the South Downs stretching off into the distance and only about four buildings visible. It is accompanied by a small but well equipped club house and equipment shed but quite surprisingly has a state of the art watering system. The membership register now shows over 70 players.

I suppose there are quite a number of similar sized clubs around the UK but I doubt whether there are many that can match the almost fairytale development of this club. The way in which it has grown from a green field site to a fully established club in the last ten years sets an ideal target for all new clubs to achieve.

It all started back in 1992 when retired and much travelled cleric, Canon Peter Cole and his wife Marion decided to settle in the small Sussex village of Fittleworth. Peter had been given a croquet set for use in his retirement. Being a very active type of person Peter advertised locally for others interested in playing croquet and by 1994 had set up an embryonic club with eight other members playing on a half sized lawn in a private garden. They very soon outgrew their lawn and looked for larger accommodation. They managed to obtain space for one full sized and one three quarter sized lawns on the local sports club cricket outfield. Whilst this gave them much needed facilities to increase their membership it was not ideal especially as the fast bowlers started their run from around hoop 3 every weekend. In 1998 two of their younger members were married at the local RC church in Duncton (just down the road from Fittleworth) and held their reception in the parish hall just behind the church. They noticed that just beside the hall was a flat area that had been used as a football pitch but was then falling into disuse. A few words to the imaginative committee at Fittleworth and this started a train of events that has led to the formation of the croquet club we now know as Rother Valley. Although the club is actually in Duncton, the committee felt that the name of Rother Valley was more indicative of the catchment area from which they hoped to draw members.

And so on 20 May 2000 John Solomon, the then President of the CA, was invited to cut the tape and open the new Rother Valley Croquet Club. Following the tape cutting ceremony, John then played an exhibition game of AC against myself to complete the opening.

We now jump exactly ten years to May 2010 and both John and myself were invited back to the tenth birthday celebration. Much has happened in the intervening years to change the original two croquet lawns into what can now be regarded as a very thriving croquet club with all the facilities that one comes to expect with an established club plus of course the club's involvement in all the local Federation activities. . This of course has come at a price and much hard work by the committee in raising all the necessary

funding. Of course Peter has been fully involved with all the developments but has managed to build up a team that I am sure will carry on the growth of Rother Valley during the next and subsequent decades. Technically Peter has partially retired and has been appointed life President of the club for all the work he has done to date. However as long as his health remains I cannot see him taking too much of a back seat. The records show that grants were obtained from many sources including the Croquet Association, the SE Croquet Federation, the Chichester District Council, the Sussex Community Foundation's Grassroots Fund, the Sussex Playing Fields Association and the National Lottery Sports. However the most recent acquisition overshadowed all previous grants and was from the Petworth Leisure Fund who gave £42,000 which allowed the establishment of the practice lawn, plumbing and electricity for the club house, a watering system and a modern mower.

The sporting side of the club was considerably enhanced in the early years by the recruitment of the Rev Nick Waters as a member. Nick was Chaplain at the local public school at Ardingly and took care of croquet for the school so he was a natural for the position of club coach and ran regular coaching sessions at the club when he was not flying around the Sussex countryside in his micro-light.



The Birthday Luncheon



The Gymkhana in Progress

The weather could not have been better for the birthday celebrations with brilliant blue skies all day and a slight wind to keep everyone cool. The festivities started with a review of the club by Peter Cole and then Ian Burn, ex club Captain, ex Chairman, for many years and fully involved in all the developments, presented club members and their guests with copies of a book he has written and had published on the first decade of the Rother Valley Croquet Club. This is an excellent publication with many colour illustrations and describes just how it is possible to develop in such a short time. Copies

can be obtained through the club Everyone then went into the village hall for the birthday luncheon. For once the club ladies were not called up to do the catering and an excellent cold lunch was provided by outside caterers. After lunch, a short talk was given by Jon Isaacs entitled 'Stuck in the Hoop' John retired last Oct as Chair of the CA but is still Chairman of the Southwick club and has recently joined Rother Valley (as its just down the road).Activities then transferred to the lawns with a demonstration Golf Croquet match between Jon Isaacs and myself . A croquet gymkhana was then run for all members to participate in and activities completed with John Solomon unveiling a new honours board naming all the club competition winners. Tea and a birthday cake were then served in the village hall. Nancy Allan who had made the cakes chose some rather fierce candles to decorate the cakes and managed to activate the smoke alarms. Luckily there was no connection to the local fire service but it did take a few minutes to discover how to silence the alarms.



The local countryside in the background



John Solomon unveils the new honours board

I cannot complete this article without once again returning to the club President Peter Cole. With doubt there have been many who have contributed to the development of the Rother Valley Club but it is under his leadership that the club has managed to progress so quickly. Having known Peter for over ten years, I for one am someone who has been hooked by his infectious enthusiasm for anything he becomes involved with. The club already have their eyes upon some land adjacent to the present lawns and although the local Council; are not willing to part with it at present, I would not be all surprised to see the club become a four lawn club in the next decade.