

Croquet

Extract from A History of Tasmanian Sport and Recreation –
working title for a work in progress
© 2003 David Young

Chapter 2: 1854-1879

Two other sports enjoyed by mixed male and female players were introduced to Tasmania at about this time: troco and croquet. Troco or lawn billiards failed to capture the imagination, but croquet enjoyed a vogue from 1861, when equipment and rulebooks were first advertised for sale.¹ There are no records of croquet clubs having been formed at this time, the game being played principally in private homes with large enough lawns. J H Walch, the main importer of croquet sets, and his family were themselves keen players.² The game was also popular at picnics, being among the sports played by the Wesleyan Christian Association on its annual picnic at Cornelian Bay on New Year's Day 1868,³ and at the Green Ponds Christmas picnic of 1870⁴

In the mid-1870s the recently-patented game of lawn tennis was introduced to Tasmania, where it was played at the Hobart hotel, Presstand House.⁵ Advertisements for equipment for 'the new game of tennis' first appeared in *Walch's Literary Intelligencer* in 1876.⁶ The popularity of the game grew with great speed, a side effect of this being the virtual displacement of croquet as the 'in' sport for mixed company. This was regretted by some, who felt that:

In social advantage ... croquet excelled its younger and more vigorous rival. It allowed the ladies to meet their masculine competitors on perfectly equal terms; while at tennis, first-rate – it may almost be said, second-rate – skill is out of their reach, not to mention that what they gain in agility they commonly lose in grace.⁷

Chapter 3: 1880-1893

As tennis became the sports of choice among women, so earlier women's sports such as croquet and archery fell from favour.

Chapter 4: 1894-1901

Women's sports still included the traditional croquet and archery. Croquet, which had fallen from favour 'as a game fit only for harmless curates and young ladies', experienced a revival when in 1896 the All England Croquet Association held championships at Wimbledon after a lapse of fifteen years. Changes to the rules also made for a livelier game. However, it was only played on private lawns, and no clubs were formed until

¹ *Walch's Literary Intelligencer*, 4 July 1861.

² AOT: NS 1214: Halliday, R, 1980; *The Origin and History of Croquet*; unpublished typescript, vol 3 p9.

³ *Mercury*, 2 January 1868.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2 January 1871.

⁵ Stoward, J, 1998; *1999 Tasmanian Sporting Almanac*; Hobart, p223.

⁶ *Walch's Literary Intelligencer*, October 1876, p216.

⁷ *Ibid.*, January 1881.

after the turn of the century.⁸ Archery, by contrast, had been organised in clubs for some years. A new one, Beaulieu Archery Club, was formed in 1897 with Miss Harbroe, the New Town champion, as secretary.⁹

Chapter 5: 1902-1914

After the turn of the century, croquet began to challenge lawn tennis as the sport of choice for middle-class Tasmanian women. This was partly because at croquet women stood a far better chance of holding their own against men than they did at tennis.¹⁰ Perhaps for this reason, there were few male croquet players!

Hobart Croquet Club (HCC), the first established in Tasmania, was formed in 1903. Its green was built on Sandy Bay Golf Course, and membership was restricted to croquet-playing members of the Hobart Golf Club. Both men and women played on the lawn, and HCC remained the only club in Hobart until 1908.¹¹ The next three Tasmanian clubs were formed in Launceston in 1905, with the Launceston Croquet Club (LCC) conducting open championships between 1905 and 1910.¹²

In February 1906 a group of women from the northern clubs invited a group of southern women to play a series of matches against them. These were played on the LCC's lawn, and caused a great deal of interest.¹³

Not until the northern tournament had southern players engaged in interclub competition. Back in Hobart they keenly felt the lack of another local club against which to compete. Steps were taken to form one, and within two years Mrs A Howell and a group of fellow enthusiasts succeeded in setting up the New Town Croquet Club. They organised fêtes and collected subscriptions until they had raised about £200. Then Mrs Howell persuaded her husband, who worked at the Lands Department, to lay out a lawn on the Suburban Sports Ground. The club was officially opened in November 1908 by the Attorney-General, A B Propsting, whose wife became the club's first president. Mrs Howell was elected the club's secretary, and held the post until her death in 1931.

Three months after New Town Croquet Club (NTCC) opened, it had about 60 members, and a second lawn was planned. Mr Howell's assistance was again sought, and for his work he was awarded life membership. He became the club's first male member, took up the game and became a fine player.

On Tuesdays and Saturdays, NTCC held club days at which A grade players were encouraged to compete against B grade players, thus giving novices a chance to improve. The club held a number of tournaments during 1909, and thanks largely to its efforts croquet was soon flourishing in southern Tasmania.¹⁴ In 1908 Sandy Bay Bowls Club built a lawn next to its rinks, essentially for the benefit of members' wives and daughters.¹⁵ Croquet was introduced as a girls' school sport, and in 1910 a third Hobart

⁸ Halliday, *op. cit.*, vol. 3 p23.

⁹ *Tasmanian Mail*, 13 November 1897 p23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15 November 1902 p8.

¹¹ Goc., *op. cit.*, p175; *Tasmanian Mail*, 2 June 1906 p29.

¹² Halliday, *op. cit.*, vol. 3 p34.

¹³ *Tasmanian Mail*, 24 February 1906 p29.

¹⁴ Halliday, *op. cit.*, vol. 3.

¹⁵ *Tasmanian Mail*, 3 October 1908 p30.

club was formed on a lawn at the 1833 New Town mansion Beaulieu. By the end of the year, the three Hobart clubs were playing tournaments against one another.¹⁶

Country clubs at Burnie, Oatlands, Parattah and Campbell Town as well as additional clubs in Launceston were soon formed.¹⁷ Northern and Southern Tasmanian Croquet Associations were established in 1912,¹⁸ two years before the first mainland association. In 1913 the Northern Tasmanian Croquet Association hosted the state's first open championships. These were subsequently held annually, the venue alternating between Hobart and Launceston. Almost from their inception, these events featured North v South matches.¹⁹

Chapter 6: 1915-1939

Croquet, unlike golf, declined in the years after WWI. This was particularly the case in Britain, where the game was regarded as smacking of privilege and wealth. In Australia croquet almost disappeared, and was only kept alive by the efforts of a few dedicated women.

New Town Croquet Club remained the major club in the South of Tasmania, while the private Beaulieu club folded in 1916. The third southern club, Hobart Croquet Club, underwent a change. Until 1915 it had enjoyed the use of a lawn laid out on the Hobart Golf Club's Sandy Bay links. When the golf club lost the use of this course and moved to its new links at Rosny, the ladies who formed the bulk of the croquet players did not join the menfolk. Their reluctance to do so has been attributed to their disinclination to put up with the rowdy behaviour that was common on the ferry trips across the Derwent.

The croquet players remained active, however, and established a new lawn at the Beach House private hotel in Sandy Bay. This served until 1918, when the club – by now renamed the Sandy Bay Croquet Club – prevailed upon Hobart City Council to form a croquet lawn on the public recreation ground. T M Lipscombe, the council's Superintendent of Reserves, put in the lawn and it was played on from 1921. Sandy Bay and New Town remained the only two croquet clubs in the South until 1965.²⁰

The situation was somewhat healthier in Launceston, where – after the formation of East Launceston Croquet Club in 1916 – four clubs were affiliated to the Northern Tasmanian Croquet Association.²¹

In 1922, after long discussions, the Northern and Southern Tasmanian Croquet Associations formed a statewide body, the Tasmanian Croquet Council. This lasted until 1928, when at the initiative of the Southern Tasmanian Croquet Association it was replaced with a new body called the Tasmanian Croquet Association with an executive made up of three delegates from the North and three from the South. This body met annually in either Hobart or Launceston at the time of the Open Championships. By 1930 two new clubs that had formed at Devonport and Ulverstone established the North-West Tasmanian Croquet Association, which affiliated to the statewide body.

¹⁶ *Tasmanian Mail*, 8 December 1910 p30 & 15 December 1910 p54.

¹⁷ Pink, *op. cit.*, p316; Halliday, *op. cit.*, vol. 3 p35.

¹⁸ *Walch's Tasmanian Almanac*, 1913, p346.

¹⁹ *Tasmanian Mail*, 23 April 1914 p32.

²⁰ Halliday, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, unnumbered pages.

²¹ *Walch's Tasmanian Almanac*, 1917, p349.

Although a triangular competition between England, Australia and New Zealand was established in 1930, Tasmanian croquet remained apart. Local players and clubs did not even participate in interstate competitions. In 1931 the sport was hit hard by the death of Mrs A B Howell, who had served as the secretary of the Southern Tasmanian Croquet Association since its founding. During the 1930s croquet limped on in Tasmania until the impact of the Second World War almost wiped it out for a second time.²²

Chapter 7: 1940-1974

Croquet, almost obliterated by WWII, revived but for a long time remained very much a minority sport for women. The Tasmanian Croquet Association believed that in the North-West in particular the arrival of lawn bowls as a women's sport robbed croquet of potential players. In 1955 the state of affairs was thought to be 'serious'.²³

The situation was healthier in Launceston, which was the dominant force in croquet in the early 1950s. And it was in the northern city that the first Australian Croquet Association (ACC) Carnival was held in 1952. The only man in the Tasmanian team was Hedley Gunton, a tough ex-champion cyclist.²⁴

In Hobart there were only two croquet clubs, Sandy Bay and New Town, but the latter had three lawns and space to create more. These facilities were superior to those in Launceston, and for this reason the next ACC carnivals to be held in Tasmania took place in the South. The first of these was staged over three weeks in late 1958.²⁵

Gradually, croquet attracted more players, and in 1964 Glenorchy Croquet Club was formed, taking the number of southern clubs to three. Glenorchy City Council (for Glenorchy became a city in 1964) provided the lawn and built a clubhouse. The club initially had nineteen female members; then the first man, Jack Read, joined followed shortly by his wife Elsie. Jack Read was a national champion, and the couple were regularly state doubles champions. Their enthusiasm and skill helped the club to grow. In 1969 Glenorchy Council provided a second lawn, and the club's membership expanded to a peak of about seventy.²⁶

Jack Read developed into such a fine player that he was included in the Australian team that played in the UK in 1973. He also won an Australian silver medal in the play-off between state gold medal winners. Other Tasmanians to achieve national prominence before 1974 were Hedley Gunton, who was co-winner of the 1953 Australian Doubles Championship, and Harold Clemons, who won the Australian Men's Singles Championship in 1970 and again in 1971.²⁷

Chapter 8: 1975-2003

The number of croquet clubs in the South rose to four in 1975 when the Eastern Shore Croquet Club (ESCC) was opened. It was built thanks largely to the efforts of Fay Herington, who persuaded Clarence City Council to approve a site for a lawn and to set

²² Halliday, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, unnumbered pages.

²³ Tasmanian Croquet Association, *Annual Report 1955*, quoted in Halliday, *op. cit.*, vol. 3 unnumbered pages.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; Pink, 1986, *op. cit.*, p35.

²⁵ *Mercury*, 3 April 1958 p21.

²⁶ Alexander & Young, *op. cit.*, p253.

²⁷ Stoward, *op. cit.*, p88.

aside \$6,000 to construct it. Unfortunately, Fay Herington died shortly before the council announced its decision. Soon after the lawn was opened the state government provided \$7,000 towards the cost of a clubhouse, which Clarence Council supplemented with a loan of \$8,000.

In the year after ESCC opened, there were lengthy and occasionally bitter negotiations between the governing bodies in the North and South. Eventually, both agreed to dissolve and form a single state governing body, the Tasmanian Croquet Council (TCC). Individual clubs affiliated to this body, the number of their delegates being determined by club size. Of the TCC's four annual meetings only one was required to be in the North. This resulted in the three Launceston clubs feeling isolated. These clubs had wound up the former Northern Tasmanian Croquet Association as part of the deal with the South. However, they now formed a new northern body in conjunction with the Devonport Croquet Association. This was the Northern Regional Croquet Committee of Tasmania.

But the change in structure could do nothing to make the sport more popular, and the fact was that in the North it was losing favour fast. The Ulverstone Croquet Club had closed in 1965, and this was followed by the Devonport Club in the early 1980s. Besides, the three Launceston clubs only had 61 members between them in 1984. In the South, by contrast, membership had been slowly climbing since 1960. In 1980 a fifth southern club was formed at Kingston Beach, and the five southern clubs had a combined membership of 252.²⁸

Over the next two decades the decline in membership continued, and the total number of registered players in the state's nine croquet clubs shrank from 313 in the early 1980s to 260 in 1999. Despite this, Tasmania has produced one notable Australian player since 1975. This was Leigh Herington of ESCC, the son of the club's founder. He was the runner-up in the Australian Men's Singles Championship in 1981 and 1982 and the winner in 1987. The following year he won the Australian Open Doubles Championship in partnership with a South Australian woman. The following year he was selected as vice-captain of the Australian team that toured to Great Britain and New Zealand.²⁹

The affiliated membership of the TCC hovered around the 260 mark during the final year of the 1990s, then in 2002 and 2003 two new clubs were formed at St Helens and New Norfolk. The number of registered croquet players immediately increased to once more top the 300 mark.³⁰

²⁸ Halliday, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, unnumbered pages.

²⁹ Stoward, *op. cit.*, p88.

³⁰ Pers. com., Robert McAdam, 30 July 2003.