

# GOLF SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA INC.

Patron: P.W. Thomson, AO, CBE.

## **Minutes of Historians Forum at Heidelberg Golf Club Monday March 21st 2016**

A good group of GSA members, and club locals, attended the year's first Historians forum at Heidelberg Golf Club.

GSA President Geoff Vincent welcomed all to Heidelberg, and gave a brief talk on the role of the Golf Society outlining its primary objectives such as – collate, and record, the history of golf in Australia, bring society members together to enjoy social golf days and dinners, conduct historian's forums and maintain a memorabilia display at the MCG.

The first three presenters were members of Heidelberg's Heritage Committee.

Neil Walker, GSA member, was the first to speak giving a brief outline of Heidelberg's origins. In 1926 when Yarra Yarra GC moved to the Sandbelt, a small group of members voted against this move deciding to remain north of the river and establish a new golf course, buying land at Lower Plenty.

The main part of his presentation was a short heritage film; it didn't have any audio, so Neil supplied some notes along with commentary; despite the age of the film it was in very good condition.

Neil acknowledged the work of members Max McEvoy and Bruce Harding in organising the transfer of this film to digital format. The film showed the chosen farm land owned by the late Mrs Thomas and covered four historical aspects.

Inspection of the farm land and surrounds to be purchased as the site of the new course was carried out by the founding members walking, and driving, around the farm. Points of interest are the original homestead Bryn Teg (future clubhouse), Plenty Bridge Hotel and Main Road.

This segment of the film gave us a real insight to the lifestyle of the original members; the stylish clothing worn by the men and women, and the substantial cars they drove seem to indicate they were a group with significant wealth and influence.

Arbor Day was held on 18th September 1927; with 400 Members attending and each member giving 2/- towards the cost of trees, £40 was raised.

The Club was officially opened on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1928 by the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Mr Stanley Bruce. This part of the film showed Mr Stanley Bruce arriving to open the first 12 holes of the course. The importance of the occasion was underlined by the number of people appearing in the film.

The final part of the film showed views of the course, clubhouse, surrounding buildings and golfers.

Throughout Neil gave very informative commentary highlighting numerous points of interest.

It was really quite special to see this truly wonderful footage, it was thoroughly enjoyed and recognised by all as a significant historical piece.

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The second speaker was long-time member, Norm Shearer.

In his "Welcome to the Hills of Heidelberg " Norm gave a personal account of the changes down the years, his affection was obvious but he was quick to point out that he appreciates the tricks and toughness that remain to this day.

The course opened in 1928 at Lower Plenty, half way between Heidelberg and Eltham, and was set out in a neighbourhood of rural properties with unmade roads, a majority of the site being unused bushland.

The 18 holes known as the Old Course came into play in 1931 with the first 9 holes a loose figure of eight formation running mainly up and down hill, and the second 9 running out to the highest point of the property and returning to the clubhouse. The course saw little change for 30 years up to 1966; it was scenic golf but also a feat of physical endurance.

The Board commissioned changes to reduce the number of direct uphill holes and allowed the conversion of the surrounding bush for golf.

The new layout required levelling of fairways to reduce uneven stances, and the result was basically the current course experiencing little change over 40 years; but there were still 4 or 5 holes with significant uphill aspects.

Other changes included the implementation of a water management plan; large dams were built and Santa Ana Couch grass was introduced. Some excess land was sold for residential use.

In 1957 the Board installed a bowling green next to the clubhouse, to retain the older members when golf became too strenuous. The spike bar was well placed to allow interaction between golfers and bowlers.

The Clubhouse was refurbished in 1997 with a plan to have the current 4th as the final hole but the long Par 5 uphill was deemed too severe as a final hole, although it would have been wonderful viewing from the clubhouse.

The current membership is quite stable and play has seen a predominance of battery operated buggies with the increased use of ride on carts.

Recent improvements have included the replacement of Pines and Cypresses with indigenous trees.

The presentation of the course has benefited from the excellent co-operation between the core ground staff and member volunteers known as the "Tree Huggers".

On display were three large aerial photographs of the course through the years. Norm made reference to the photo's to highlight aspects of his talk.

Jan Balgowan our third presenter spoke of Don Walker, a promising young professional golfer in Victoria in the 1930's and his connection to Heidelberg.

There is an honour board in the clubhouse for the Don Walker Memorial Purse presented to the Heidelberg Golf club Board by the PGA in 1949.

Don was born in Wonthaggi and moved to Cheltenham with his family in 1919.

His father died young and to earn money Don caddied at Kingston Heath. Leaving school at 14 Don started studying to become a draftsman.

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George Naismith was the Pro at Kingston Heath and when George accepted the position at Riversdale he persuaded Don to follow, as his trainee.

When in 1935 Ted Naismith resigned as Heidelberg professional, George Naismith had no hesitation in recommending Don Walker for that position; Don had been a trainee for 3 years by this time.

Don Walker remained a Heidelberg for 6 years competing in many major competitions such as the Victorian and the Australian Opens. Some of his major victories were in The Finlay Cup and the Dunlop Cup; he also played numerous exhibition matches against well-known players such as Norman Von Nida, Joe Kirkwood and Will Hagen.

Don enlisted in the RAAF on July the 20<sup>th</sup> 1941, undergoing training in Victoria, NSW, and South Australia, becoming a flight sergeant.

Don married Gladys Coppack in March 1941 and held his baby son Lance, but was never to see him grow up.

Don was seconded to 235 squadron and while flying a Beaufighter on a reconnaissance mission over Norway coast contact with his plane was lost after it left Scottish air space.

Many Australian pro golfers enlisted in WW2 but Don Walker was the only one to lose his life. There is a memorial plot for Don in Surrey England.

A Pro purse at HGC was played for during the 1930's but suspended due to the war. In June 1949 a new event, the first Heidelberg Open, was played; President Dr Melville announced the Open to be known as the Don Walker Memorial Purse and it has become an annual event.

In the clubhouse, the Don Walker Memorial Purse honour board has a plaque on it, presented to the Heidelberg Golf club Board by the PGA in 1949.

Gary Player visited Australia in 1971 and was a target of vigorous anti-apartheid protests. To avoid publicity he came to Heidelberg to practice with Von Nida.

Gary having previously played there in March 1939 with partner Eric Cremin they won an exhibition match against Naismith and Walker. Later that year Gary finished equal second in the HGC Pro Purse.

**Note** in Jan's notes for her speech there were many newspaper extracts from the Sporting Globe, the Australasian and the Argus. All giving high praise about this fine young man. The extracts cover all aspects of his golf life from his early trainee days though to his professional playing days and on to his successful teaching career. On display were some of Dons clubs, a part of Heidelberg's collection.

Murray Cropley from Latrobe GC was the meetings final speaker.

Murray's talk was an insight into Latrobe's newly formed Heritage Committee. Latrobe will celebrate its 75<sup>TH</sup> anniversary in 2023 and one of the projects will be to update the clubs history "The Dream Comes True", written by Gary Mansfield for the clubs 50th anniversary.

Murray approached two other likeminded members, Brendan Mathews and June Senyard, who agreed it was a worthwhile project and committed to be involved.

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They prepared a paper with three major recommendation seeking approval from the Board.

1. Approve the establishment of a Committee to undertake all associated activities and tasks gathering, preserving, maintaining and displaying club historical artefacts.
  2. Approval to proceed with planning for the update of the club history.
  3. Approval to set up a room/space for the proposed committee conduct their work
- The paper was accepted and the Heritage Sub Committee was instigated officially in November 2015, pleasingly the group has been strongly supported.

Murray went on to outline what they want to achieve and the many tasks ahead of them such as obtaining physical storage and working facilities, classification of all material, what will the Subcommittee consider, determine a budget with the possible use of professional services, physically storing documents and objects etc., acquire good computer facilities The mostly likely database application will be Mosaic.

Murray acknowledged the significant assistance they have received from GSA members Moira Drew (RM) and Ian Rennick (Kew).

Club members have been kept well informed with e-newsletter articles.

Murray's enthusiasm was obvious and it was clear to date the Heritage group has clearly planned and thought this very important project through; however he stressed the main task is now to get on with the work itself. Murray invited attendees to contribute any thoughts, or suggestions; this stimulated a number of questions and comments.

GSA Curator Cliff George presented two hickory clubs. The first club had a stainless steel head hand forged in Australia by the Stirling Golf Co. Little is known about the maker. Cliff has fitted this club with a bamboo shaft, a very strong, light and flexible material and so far providing pleasing results.

The second club was A.G Spalding "Crescent" series smooth faced Niblick made in Great Britain c 1900-1905. An interesting feature of this club was the weight of its head at 335gms.

Paul Burgess GSA member produced a lovely book about golf memorabilia.

Titled *Millers Golf Memorabilia* by Sarah Fabian Baddiel. As it is quite comprehensive he suggested to those interested it is worth having a look at, or sourcing.

Paul also gave us an update on his further research into club makers Himmerman and Kirk partnership and their subsequent separation.

Ian Rennick promoted the recent reproduction, and publication, of *The Australian Golfer* by Dan Soutar, advising of its' importance as an historical reference, and how to purchase it.

Convenor Kim Hastie thanked the speakers for their time and interesting presentations.

Closed the meeting and thank all attendees and Heidelberg GC for hosting an enjoyable day and advised the next forum will be at Bendigo Monday June 27<sup>th</sup> 2016