

GOLF SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA

History at The Heath

More than 30 GSA members and guests enjoyed an enlightening historians' forum at Kingston Heath GC on May 1st.

Four prominent KHGC members, all involved in the club's active and well-organised Archives committee, spoke about different aspects of the club's storied history, from its humble beginnings at Elsternwick Park in 1909 to today's exquisite club at Cheltenham, which is home to a championship layout, plus the latest course to be added to the famed Melbourne Sandbelt.

Past president Geoffrey Knight outlined the club's history beginning as Elsternwick Golf Club in 1909. The club quickly decided the swampy land there was not suitable and decided in 1920 to relocate to the south-east. Four committee members began scouting for suitable land in the Cheltenham area, all acting as private individuals and in secrecy so as not to excite the market gardeners and farmers whose land values would have shot up had they known the club was on the hunt for 130 acres of sandy heathland.

Up to 6 separate parcels of land were purchased and in 1922 the club commissioned Sydney and ex-Carnoustie professional Dan Soutar to design the 18-hole course for a fee of 25 guineas. Construction began in 1923 by the famed course builders Mick and Vern Morcom.

Geoffrey described the club's careful policy of acquiring neighbouring land where possible, to allow for future-proofing and to prevent suburban encroachment to press in and overshadow the serene property.

He detailed the 1986 purchase of 20 acres of market garden land on the eastern boundary from the Madden family. The Maddens leased back the land and grew vegetables there for a further 33 years, until the club resumed its land and began planning for a 9-hole par 3 course. Design company OCM began work in December 2021, and the delightful short course opened for play on 22nd April this year. It is named 'The Furrows' in a nod to its past life as market garden beds, and the logo is a vintage Ferguson tractor.

Grant Nicholson outlined the club's careful strategy of water, drainage, and irrigation. From drilling test bores in 1939 into the Moorabbin Aquifer, the club has advanced to the point where it is self-sufficient in bore water, and able to survive any droughts without needing access to Melbourne's potable water supply.

Colin McKenzie described the fascinating history of the course development since 1922's blueprint by Dan Soutar. A key stroke of fortune was Royal Melbourne GC's decision to bring famed designer Dr Alister MacKenzie to Melbourne in 1926. The good doctor visited Kingston Heath that November, and designed a bunker plan

for the course -- which then had no bunkers at all -- and modified the 15th hole from a short par 4 to today's famed uphill par 3.

In April 1927, the Morcom father and son team was paid 150 pounds to build the bunkering to Dr MacKenzie's plan -- with some of their own modifications -- and by mid-1928 the course boasted 53 bunkers which still today are regarded with awe by course designers and players around the world. Vern Morcom was appointed KH greenkeeper in 1928 and remained in the post until 1967.

Robert Belleville was the final speaker and outlined the work of the club's library and its Archives committee. Beginning in 2002, work has been ongoing to digitise and safeguard all of the club's archives and history so as to be easily retrieved and permanently stored for posterity. Thirty per cent of the records are now digitised, and the work should be complete by 2024.

Three attendees showed items of interest at the end of the event. Member Brian Lowe showed a hickory-shafted driver he bought from its owner in Europe. It is mounted on a plaque including an autograph and photograph of Harry Vardon. The club, probably dating from the 1920s, was made by Maitland J Walker at Royal St David's Golf Club in Wales. Brian is very hopeful that the club is a genuine artefact owned, or at least used, by the great Harry Vardon. Provenance work goes on!

Grant McKay showed a set of Spalding Tour Edition irons that he bought from the half-brother of major winner David Graham. Some of the clubs have never been hit, but the set includes a sand iron with added lead tape, almost certainly used by the champion who won the US Open and US PGA championships.

Leongatha GC captain Andrew Bassett spoke about his club's design by Vern Morcom, and their desire to commemorate the often-unsung heroes of Australian golf: the greenkeepers such as Morcom. Andrew is trying to connect clubs and courses with Vern Morcom heritage, and Leongatha has instituted an annual 'Greenkeepers Cup' to pay tribute to these important people.

John Trevorrow 1 May 2023

