

Barnes Bowling Club History

www.barnesbowling.org

Barnes Bowling Club is located in a walled enclosure at the rear of the Sun Inn at Barnes. The object of the Club is to play and preserve the ancient game of bowls in a historic environment on the very spot where bowls has been played for centuries. The game played by the Barnes Bowling Club dates back at least to the early 18th century, and may even reach back to medieval times. What is apparent, to even the most casual observer, is that the form of bowls played here is substantially different from the game seen elsewhere in Britain today. A comparison between the rules of this club and those of the English Bowling Association (which date from 1840 and govern most present day bowls clubs) reveals several marked differences.

At Barnes Bowling Club each player uses a pair of wooden bowls, not a set of four made of henselite that other clubs now use. Our woods have an unusually high bias (graded 12 or 13), unlike Bowling Association woods that have a much lower bias. We do not play on a completely flat green, or even a 'crown' green as in northern clubs - our game is played from corner to corner, the edges of the green being banked up to provide perimeter slopes to tempt and test the skill of the players.

All of this indicates that the unique game played at The Sun in Barnes is a survival from a time prior to the Association's national rules, drawn up in 1840 by William W Mitchell. Whereas most clubs throughout the country adopted the strict new Mitchell code, the club at Barnes, it seems, decided to continue on its own maverick way.

Other clubs with truly ancient origins - such as Chesterfield (c.1290), with its "oldest green in the country", and Southampton (c.1295) - play a game similar to our own, and this has led many to believe that the green at Barnes could also rank among the oldest in the country. Records suggest that our green pre-dates the coming of the Sun Inn, a pub being established on this spot by the early 1800s, when the property was bought by local brewer John E. Waring. Back in 1723, according to one record, there were on this site "two customary dwellings, two gardens, a barn, one stable and 3 orchards." One of these private gardens may have been the bowling green dated by The Shell Book of Gardens to the 15th century. During the 17th and 18th centuries, puritanical attitudes frowned on games such as Bowls being played in public places, but by 1805 a change of mood allowed the Sun Inn to incorporate the private green into its public premises.

Elsewhere in the country, there were a handful of other bowls clubs that continued to play by the old pre-1840 rules. The club possesses a pair of wooden bowls bearing a plaque commemorating a game played in 1892 between the Kings Arms at Dereham and the Victoria Arms at Norwich. It is known that the Dereham Club, established before 1858, played a game very similar to our own, using wooden bowls with a high bias.

Today the Club has some 80 members and our season runs from May to September each year. Competitions run throughout the season and have become increasingly popular with our members. The Club has a number of 'open days' when locals can test their skills against the members, details of which are posted on the Events page of our website.