100 years and still going strong

(5 minute read)

It’s not often you come across a sports club that’s been going for almost 100 years and is arguably stronger than ever.

Founded in 1920 and fast approaching its centenary surely that’s enough to tell you this club is doing something right?

211 members (including 62 social members) with and 50% of those recruited in the last five years, I talked to Chairman Frank Eveleigh on the success of Gildredge Park Bowls Club in Eastbourne.

Bowls sometimes gets a bad rep, particularly with the younger generation. It’s no secret it’s not very popular with youngsters. That’s not to say they don’t play the sport, but its popularity derives from people nearing or in retirement and that’s not an issue for Gildredge Park.

‘We concluded our niche market was the person coming up to retirement or has recently retired. That’s our market. We give people a purpose and role in life, and they can be incredibly active. You won’t necessarily get that same attitude with youngsters who often have other priorities in life.’

Frank makes a clever point and one, which a lot of clubs might disagree with. However the club’s identity is clear and they are not trying to be a club for every single person, they know their forte and they stick to it. So many clubs can get caught up in trying to attract new members from every corner of the community, which is fantastic if you can cater to that many people. However this club is thriving and has no plans to slow down.

Frank joined the club 9 years ago and has risen up the ranks to running the place.

‘If you open your mouth at the wrong time then you get asked to do things.’

That feels like the case with most sports volunteers. But modest as ever Frank doesn’t take the credit for the clubs recent success of achieving Clubmark accreditation and an influx of new members. He did however lead the club’s
recent success on a Sport England facilities grant for an extended pavilion. He has a strong team of volunteers behind him but he has also steered the ship to success – although he’d probably never admit this!

Tony Evans, Club Coach, has been one of Frank’s right hand men who boasts a team of 14 dedicated Coaching Assistants. One of Tony’s secrets to successfully recruiting new members is to organise the annual ‘have a go’ day. But the difference between their come and try sessions is they have coaches in the car park welcoming potential new members. Not one person has to walk into the club alone, they are very passionate about this and it could be one of the reasons why membership has soared.

Their friendly atmosphere is present, even in the car park, helpful signage adorns the front gate and members are very welcoming and genuinely nice.

‘We are widely known as the friendly club. There’s a lot of pride within the club. We’ve tried to develop a culture of doing things ourselves and being proud of it.

If you’ve got 100 people in the club 20% will do the work, we’re rather better than that.’

So I wondered what the appeal of bowls was to Chairman Frank, I can see it’s pretty good on a scorching hot sunny July day, being surrounded by luscious green grounds but what’s the general attraction?

‘I was a keen golfer and tennis player but my sight deteriorated and I want to do something else. Both my wife and I agreed we’d start a new sport together. We wanted to make new friends, and play in a proper rink and receive proper coaching. We also wanted to have a life outside of the wonderful village we currently live in.’

The club is about more than just bowls. It’s a lifeline to the local community; it’s where local people can find a purpose and a place in later life.

The extension has enabled the club to build a much better and larger bar and a kitchen, which allows for social and informal gatherings, it’s been so popular it’s helping to attract new members. With the new space the club organise various social evenings like cheese and wine nights and can have two short mat bowls carpets for their social members to play 4 days per week throughout the winter.

As I sit here watching the members play, drink tea together, chat and generally have a laugh, the appeal is obvious. Especially in later life people find themselves less mobile, Gildredge Park Bowls Club allows you to be fairly active and social at the same time; the sport is painfully addictive!

The club is ridiculously proud of their Clubmark status and the trust are just as pleased for them. They were the first club in Sussex to achieve Clubmark through Active Sussex as the licensing body. They are so honoured they’ve made their own Clubmark flag that majestically waves above their grounds.
You might think joining a club with fantastic facilities will cost you a fortune but it doesn’t, they keep costs as low as possible. They even have a deal for new members to receive four coaching lessons for £5 at a time that’s convenient to them. Then if they choose to join the club they get their £5 back!

The club really has made it as easy as possible to join, play and volunteer. Part of the club’s success is identifying the barriers and thinking outside the box to remove them.

‘The most arduous volunteer task is club captain, you have to arrange all the matches and we have around 80 per year. Its time consuming and old fashioned so we now have a captain of the day. We have a pool of 25 people who will be captain for that day.’

Frank credits good publicity to their increase in membership and they use advertising boards at the club to generate even more income.

Their links with local businesses have not only been lucrative but have actually secured employment for one member of the club!

Frank, Tony, Alan Hipkin and Jean Ritchie (Membership Secretary) and other club members and volunteers have made a real success of the club and they have a clear far reaching vision for it.

The club has been around for almost 100 years and there’s a pretty good feeling it will be here for another 100 years.

If you want to join or find out more about Gildredge Park Bowls Club you can visit their website: www.gildredgeparkbowling.club