



Hyde Park Croquet Club England Tour ~ May & June 2018.

It is amazing where socialising after a club Croquet day can take you. In Hyde Park's case a few drinks on a Saturday afternoon about 3 years ago led to discussions about a possible Golf Croquet trip – New Zealand and the UK were both mooted. Fast forward 2 years and planning was firmly in place for what is believed to be the very first Australian Club Croquet tour of the UK with former members Anne & Andrew Larpent taking a key role. (They had returned to the native homeland and did all the reconnoitring of which clubs should be visited.)

It was decided early in the planning that everyone would be responsible for their own travel to and from England and that the tour should be approximately a fortnight with a mixture of croquet matches, sightseeing and free time and that is exactly what happened.

The touring party assembled at the Cheltenham Queens Hotel on 28 May in readiness for a tour of the Cotswolds on the 29th and our first match against Cheltenham on the 30th.

Most Club members were without their trusty Mallet, we were in a foreign country with unfamiliar surroundings and of course the English weather to deal with. Despite these challenges, we weren't deterred and we all went into the heat of battle full of excitement and confidence.

At our first dinner there was some discussion of the correct protocols, dress code (simply white) and general behaviour while in England. We were also reminded there may be some friendly comments made to us by our hosts about the behaviour of fellow Australians, while touring overseas, playing cricket. Sandpaper was mentioned more than once!!



As it turned out we learnt a lot from the first match at Cheltenham and found that we were of a roughly similar standard. Key lessons were that: while the mallets provided for us to borrow would not be brilliant they would certainly be of an acceptable standard but we should insist on a short warm up before starting the matches (a request that was met favourably at other Clubs); and we should maintain flexibility as to how games would be played (and how many people would be playing them) for as long as possible. On the morning of the first day we found out that of our top 6 ranked players only 3 were available to play – one had worsened a sore back over night and was struggling to walk, one had a severe case of food poisoning that was so bad he required a permanent carer. Given the opposition had come with a full complement of players keen to take the field we had to convince some of our supporting tourists – those who were happy to play socially once the competition was out of the way,

that they had in fact been promoted to the big league a fact that was much appreciated by all, but very tough on those who had never played a competition game previously. We lost 9 games to 15.



Moving on to Budleigh Salterton situated on the Devon coast which has 11 courts to play on!! Here we were better prepared and began the morning playing in a sea mist that persisted for the first couple of hours. The members served us a terrific lunch on the verandah of their clubrooms before play resumed in the afternoon.

This time Hyde Park was able to turn the tables despite still being 3 players down winning 14 to 10 games.



It's worth noting that the wonderful condition of their lawns was down to a fulltime green keeper paid for by their £300+ annual membership fee.

Then we up mallets and moved to London. There to first play at Surbiton, a club that boasts many of England's top players and only 7 courts at this club. So, with our members large range of handicaps we put up a good fight to only lose by five games 28 to 33 playing a mixture of singles in the morning and doubles in the afternoon. Again, another club that provide a wonderful lunch this time in a marquee hosted by a club member who amazed many of our members by cooking elaborate dishes from scratch during the morning on humble cooking facilities. Here, by contrast to Budleigh, all the greens maintenance was done by club members in their spare time.



Our last match was in the grounds of Hurlingham with their Georgian style Clubhouse sited in a park like setting on the banks of the Thames and hosting a cricket oval, tennis, bowls as well as croquet. Black Cab taxis took us past the entry gates along the drive to the main entrance and we were asked to assemble in the Rose Garden to meet the Hurlingham players. Here on immaculate lawns and against strong opposition we won a very tight contest 12¹/₂ to 11¹/₂ and then enjoyed a splendid



silver service lunch in the grand surroundings of one of their Terrace Rooms.



Hyde Park and Hurlingham members photographed before retiring for lunch.

Overall, we played 4 test matches – winning 2 and losing 2. All were sufficiently close and while the games were the key, playing with the generous hospitality of our hosts on a range of quality lawns made the tour one that all involved do cherish.

Apart from playing croquet, our tour was well organised with plenty of sightseeing to local villages, gardens, museums and historical sights, this was greatly appreciated by all participants. One gets the feeling we were very lucky with the weather – there was some rain but never when we were due to play. They had exquisite individual shelter sheds accompanying most lawns used if it had rained.

Hyde Park players exchanged ball markers with our rivals and after each game the opposing captain was given a plaque from our club, with a list of participants on it, plus a boomerang to encourage a return visit. The Croquet tour was a wonderful experience for all of us, with a great group of people. It is hoped that either a return trip to the UK or that we host a reciprocal visit will eventuate.

Our tour's finale was a dinner in the Fusiliers Mess in The Tower of London and afterwards to witness the "Ceremony of the Keys", a traditional event that has been performed daily over the last 700 years. What a special occasion for all of us.

