

The Bicheno Bowls Club was established in 1961 and was opened officially, by the Deputy Premier, Roy Fagan, at a ceremony on Saturday 21 October. The first Club President was H.W. Bennett and the first Secretary was C.N. McQueen.

This was the second Lawn Bowls Club on Tasmania's East Coast, following on from the St Helens Bowls Club, which had been founded in 1954. Because of the Tasmanian climate the Bowls season normally ran from early October till the end of April, after which the Greens needed rejuvenation for the next season.

Games at Bicheno were held on a Green which was constructed behind the *Silver Sands Motel*. A clubroom room, measuring about 18m x 10.6m, was built near the green for meetings and social get-togethers. It included Ladies and Men's change rooms, a bar and sinks, as well as a stove. A smaller shed adjacent to the Green was used for the storage of equipment. Players dressed in a traditional all white uniform as decreed by the National Bowls authorities.





In 1968 a new club was formed at St Marys and in 1970 Swansea followed suit. For the next four years the four East Coast clubs played regular social or friendly matches, as their main form of inter-club competition. Often these took the form of two clubs playing for a donated shield on a two-match (home and away) basis. Bicheno played St Helens for the Claxton Shield which had been donated by Bill and Mabel Claxton; and against Swansea for the Madsen Shield, donated by the Madsen family of the Douglas River. These Shield matches continued, with some interruptions and changes for more than fifty years.



Bicheno won its share. Records of the results are sketchy but in the 21 years from 1965, Bicheno won the Claxton Shield ten times and St Helens eleven times. For the Madsen shield only more recent results are available. Bicheno and Swansea played for the shield eleven times between 2000 and 2015 with Bicheno winning on six of those occasions. Since 2019 the Shield has been contested between Bicheno and St Marys with Bicheno winning five of the seven matches.

In the 1974/75 bowls season an East Coast Bowls Pennant was instituted, to be contested between St Marys, St Helens, Swansea and Bicheno. In the initial years Bicheno was the dominant team, winning the Pennant for five of the first seven seasons, and the club continued to grow, with membership reaching a total 55 resulting in the need to extend the clubrooms. A fifth club was added to the East Coast competition in 1984 with the building of the Scamander Sports Complex and Lawn Bowls continued to boom on the East Coast. However, since the 1979/80 season, despite the extra space, Bicheno's prize cupboard has remained bare, at least as far as the men's East Coast Pennant competition was concerned.



In early 1986, after 25 years on the Silver Sands site, the Bicheno Club decided to move to its own premises, but the reasons for this decision are debated. The 'official' reason, as reported to the state politicians, was that the Club had been informed by the owners of the *Silver Sands* that they wished to expand the motel and required the Club to vacate by May 1989. However, one of the owners at that time, Geoff Robertson, disputes this explanation. He claims that he and his partner had no intention of expanding the hotel. Another myth which surrounds the decision to move is based on a suggestion that the initial Bowling Green encroached on Crown Land and possibly an 'aboriginal' reserve, but there is no existing evidence to support this.

In any case a search for a new suitable site began in early 1986. In February advice was received from the Lands Department that representatives from that Department and the Bowls Club had identified a potential site of about one hectare at the top of Sinclair St., Bicheno, comprising the northern half of a block leased to Brian Winspear for a proposed development of "*Sunny Banks Retirement Units*".



However it would be another five years before the land purchase was completed. The process was complicated by conflicting views of different public service departments, by an approaching election and by the delaying tactics of the Premier, Robin Gray.

The initial approach by the club, based on advice from the Department of Sport and Recreation, was to seek Government funding under the Public Bodies Assistance Act, whereby Government would pay two thirds of the purchase cost with the remainder also provided by the government in the form of a 25-year loan. Under this scheme the expectation was that after a few years of repayments the remainder would be waived. The only proviso was that the Bowls Club should ensure that the land 'purchased' under this scheme would also be sufficient to cater for the projected needs of the Bicheno Community Development Association.

The first hurdle to be negotiated was the fact that the Planning Department was about to release a new Zoning Plan for Bicheno, which would place the development in a residential zone, which would conflict with the Club's desire for a liquor licence. A second problem was

that the BCDA had not yet completed the process of Incorporation, necessary for them to be included as an owner under the Grant deed. The Lands Department intervened on both issues, instructing Planning to ensure that the site was 'appropriately zoned' and determining that the Bowls Club and the BCDA requests proceed separately.

However, separating the BCDA from the Bowls Club request had the effect of weakening the Club's application under the terms of the Public Bodies Assistance Act Grants so a decision was made to join forces with the Returned Services League. That body had no permanent home in Bicheno and monthly meetings were normally held in the homes of members or in the annex to the Memorial Hall. Few Bowls Club members foresaw any problems with this arrangement as most of the male members of the Bowls Club were also members of the local RSL Sub-Branch. However, the arrangement would necessitate forming a new joint body and seeking Incorporation. That process was completed quickly and the new body, the Bicheno Bowls and RSL Club Inc., came into effect on 15 October 1986.

Even before the Incorporation was finalised the Minister (on 19 May) approved a lease of land to the Bicheno Bowls & RSL Club Inc. for a term of 5 years, with an option to purchase on satisfactory development of facilities. The 'new' Club was required to pay for a survey, which was completed by August.

Despite the apparent speed of the Incorporation, the proposed amalgamation of the Bowls Club and the RSL Sub-Branch was far from automatic. In May 1986 early drafts of a new constitution were confused by attempts to have the rules of the two bodies referred to in the joint constitution, and a series of contentious points had to be worked through: Including whether the bar profits should go solely to the RSL, whether RSL members should be required to pay the annual membership fee, and whether women should be permitted on the Executive committee. Nevertheless, an agreed constitution came into effect from 15 October 1986.

Not surprisingly, money had been a major sticking point. The new club's Steering Committee suggested that the Bowls Club should wind up its financial affairs and deposit \$3,000 into the account of the new Club. A Special Meeting of the Bowls Club agreed to this suggestion only on condition that the RSL contributed a matching amount and committed to negotiating any remaining assets. Although the RSL eventually agreed to match the Bowls Club commitment it was not prepared to discuss its remaining assets, which amounted to more than \$16,000. Further, the RSL insisted that the Bicheno Sub-Branch continued to exist and that it retained full autonomy in all matters related to the goals of the RSL. The eventual solution was for the two bodies to continue to exist separately, with their own goals and missions but to also become equal partners in the new joint club which would own and operate the new premises.

Despite some teething problems the new body managed to function as a separate club, with T.E. Lawson as President, and focussed its energies on achieving the loan of \$167,250 under the Public Bodies Assistance Act. This amount would cover the cost of architect's fees, engineer's reports and basic building costs including sewage and drainage for the Green etc., but the promised loan was elusive. In July 1987, Robin Gray, as Treasurer, finally responded to the Club's application with the advice that all applications under the Public

Bodies Assistance Act were to be deferred till after the 1987 Budget. In November Treasury officials advised that they were still waiting on Gray to give the matter further consideration. In December Premier Gray announced a grant of \$10,000, but the Club was unimpressed as it had already spent \$7,000 on preparatory works and a further \$2,000 on solicitors' and incorporation fees. The Club continued to be frustrated throughout 1988 by Gray's reluctance to make a real decision. It was not until August 1989 that the Club was advised that the application had failed.

By that time the Commissioner for Corporate Affairs had approved the Rules, and the application for Incorporation was finalised. The Steering Committee proceeded with the application for a Liquor licence and continued to seek alternative sources of financial assistance. It also considered a proposal that, instead of a new, expensive, clubhouse it might be more economical for the Bowls Club to move its existing rooms to the new site. The Club also petitioned the Department of Lands for a special rental concession, requesting a nominal rental of \$50 p.a. for the first three years while it continued to find ways to purchase the Land.

Whilst still awaiting the final ruling from Premier Gray, the Club sought approval for a mortgage loan. They argued that the land value was \$30,000 and the Bowls Club, by June 1988, had spent more than \$25,000 on the site (clearing, levelling, drainage etc.), but again their requests were denied. Nevertheless, the Club continued to assume that they would eventually find a way to purchase the land so the decision was made to move the existing clubrooms from the *Silver Sands Hotel*, to the new site and for Club members to build on an extension, more than doubling the original building. The work was completed with voluntary labour.



Eventually, in February 1991 the Minister for Lands approved the purchase of the Land by the Bowls & RSL Club for \$20,000, on the basis of a \$2000 deposit and 10 half yearly payments of \$1800 (plus interest). The payments were completed by December 1994 and the certificate of title was finally issued on 27 January 1995.



Over the next three decades the joint club continued to hold an important place in the Bicheno physical and community landscape but often there were tensions between the two partners or ‘owners’ of the facility. In an attempt to minimise any conflict the Bowls Club and the RSL agreed to ensure equal representation on the incorporated body’s Management Committee, which would be Chaired by an ‘independent’ chairperson and these measures have been largely successful.

Tension did approach breaking point in 2009, when the Management Committee recommended a restructure, which would dissolve both the joint body and the Bowls Club, with the latter becoming a sub-committee of the RSL. Although this proposal had the support of the then Bowls Club President, when it was put to a Special Meeting of the Bowls Club, the President found himself in a minority of one. Gradually co-operative relationships have been restored with the joint ‘owners’ working together to expand their Clubrooms. A Community Fund Grant to build a commercial standard kitchen and to expand the bar area by enclosing part of the deck was made possible by a \$25, 000 donation from Bowls Club members Alan and Betty Brown and subsequent matching contributions from the RSL and the Bowls Club. The Bowls and RSL Club has continued to develop in more recent times with the opening of a Bistro in the new kitchen, from 2022.

Over the past two decades the Bowls Club has also made significant improvements to the Green, its surrounds and the equipment needed to maintain it. New mowers, a new roller and groomer, new scoreboards, seating, shade-cloths and fences have all been achieved with the assistance of matching grants from various funding bodies and much voluntary labour. Lighting around the green and the ultimate installation of a synthetic surface remain as achievable goals for the future.



2015



2025

Over this period the Bowls Club has also expanded its operations in various ways. In 2009 and 2010 the Club held a series of 'Learn to Bowl' sessions on Sunday mornings, to spread the word to more Bicheno residents. The 2012-2013 season witnessed the introduction of Barefoot Bowls each Thursday evening over the summer months. For a few years this became an important part of the village's social life with an average of about 60 non bowls-members competing in a fun program. In the following season up to 60 children from the Bicheno Primary School completed a season of Bowls tuition. A decade later, most of the regular Pennant -playing members had been introduced to Bowls through one or more of these programs.

Learning to Bowl 2010



Barefoot Bowls 2012



On the Green, the Club's successes have been more limited, with the highlights being runner up in the East Coast Pennant competition in 2020-21 and the beaten finalist in the 2nd Division Final, in 2012-13, on the one occasion the Pennant was run in two divisions. In the more social Shield contests Bicheno has been more successful winning more than an equal share of the Shield contests against St Marys, Swansea, St Helens and Orford.

The Club's women enjoyed more success than the men, with wins in the Women's Pennant in 1971 and 1978 and in the Women's section of the East Coast Championships



Until 2011 the social Shield events and some Club Carnival events were the only occasions when the 'gentlemen' and the 'ladies' competed together. Until then, in Pennant matches, the green was divided into separate rinks for each gender, But in 2011 the East Coast Bowls Association became perhaps the first such association in Australia to introduce a gender-free Bowls Pennant. This decision was based less on any philosophy of gender equality than on the basis of a decline in the number of women bowlers in the Association. Regardless of the motivation the decision proved to be a sensible one, with the rest of Tasmania

eventually following the East Coast lead. Although the Bicheno Bowls Club has maintained the tradition of having separate championships for men and women, in singles and pairs, all other events are gender neutral.

2011 also marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Bicheno Bowls Club, when President Alan Brown and Secretary John O'Hara welcomed a host of dignitaries including foundation members Ian Madsen and Brian Winspear along with the Club's foundation Patron Michael Polley.



Easter Carnival

Easter has become traditionally the weekend when the Bowls Club holds its annual carnival. Although it has always attracted visitors from around the state the carnival received a significant boost from 2011 with significantly increased sponsorship permitting a growth in prizemoney. For the past 15 years Bicheno has offered the highest carnival prize pool on the coast. Numbers attending have grown from about 30 in 2007 to 80 in 2026.



1981



2011



2018



2021



2025

East Coast Men's/ Combined Pennant

Season	Winner	Runner Up
1974/75	Bicheno	
1975/76	Bicheno	
1976/77	Bicheno	
1977/78	????	
1978/79	????	
1979/80	Bicheno	
1980/81	????	
1981/82	St Helens	
1982/83	St Marys	
1983/84	St Marys	
1984/85	????	
1985/86	????	
1986/87	St Helens	
1987/88	????	
1988/89	Swansea	
1989/90	????	

1990/91	????	
1991/92	St Helens	
1992/93	St Helens	
1993/94	St Helens	
1994/95	Swansea	
1995/96	St Helens	
1996/97	Scamander	
1997/98	Swansea	
1998/99	Swansea	
1999/2000	Swansea	
2000/2001	Scamander	
2001/02	St Helens	
2002/03	St Helens	
2003/04	St Helens	
2004/05	St Helens	
2005/06	St Helens	
2006/07	St Marys	St Helens
2007/08	St Marys	???
2008/09	St Marys	St Helens
2009/10	St Helens	St Marys
2010/11	St Helens	Swansea
2011/12 +	St Marys	St Helens
2012/13 *	St Marys	Swansea
2013/14	Swansea	Scamander
2014/15	Swansea	St Marys
2015/16	St Marys	Swansea
2016/17	Swansea	St Marys
2017/18	Swansea	Scamander
2018/19	St Marys	Scamander
2019/20	Swansea	**
2020/21	Swansea	Bicheno
2021/22	Scamander	Swansea
2022/23	Scamander	Swansea
2023/24	Scamander	Swansea
2024/25	Scamander	Swansea
2025/26	Scamander	Swansea

+ 2011/12 From the 2011/12 season Men and Women Pennants combined for gender-free Pennant

*2012/13 Played in 2 Divisions. 2nd Div Scamander defeated Bicheno

**2019/20 Finals not played due to the Covid lockdown