

History
@Flemken



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Founded in 1892, the Flemington and Kensington Bowling Club is our oldest local sporting institution.

Its establishment was driven by John Munro, the manager of the Colonial Bank of Australia on Racecourse Road (now home to apartments and the St George's Op Shop) and resident of Brixton St. During the Christmas period of 1891, Munro set about ascertaining whether there was sufficient local interest, and found that there was.

This was during a period of intensive growth in Flemington and Kensington, which only 10 years earlier had broken away from the Borough of Essendon and Flemington to create its own council. The population of the local area was booming, with huge growth in the built environment and a high degree of optimism for the future of the area.

In May 1892 about 40 leading locals gathered at Barrett & Co's offices on Racecourse Rd, where there was almost unanimity over the proposal to establish the Club on the reserve on Racecourse Rd. It was considered that the Recreation Reserve (later called Newmarket Reserve) was too small for football or cricket but that there appeared sufficient space for bowling, tennis grounds and perhaps a bicycle track.

According to a description in the Port Phillip Times of 5 May 1892:

The chairman [Mr Munro] said he had no doubt that a bowling club would take root and prosper in the borough. A bowling green would form a rallying centre where the residents could meet each other, not only for amusement, but for the discussion of matters of public and local interest. Besides, if a bowler went to any other place where there was a bowling green he would find his membership as useful to him as if he were a brother of the mystic craft. It was an unfailing passport to hospitality when visiting other towns. Some social centre of the kind was badly wanted, for they had nothing at present. They couldn't get the numbers for the social institution ordinarily known as a club, and they had no reading rooms or libraries. An attempt had been made to form a library but there were insuperable difficulties in the way, and besides a library would hardly meet their case.

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Mr Raisbeck raised concerns that football and cricket might be shut out from the reserve, giving young people in the area some reason to complain if they were not allowed to use some portion of the ground. "It would not do for the old people to monopolise the ground." Mayor Cr Hardiman thought they were going too fast without expecting opposition from the football and cricket clubs.

It didn't stop them. Nor did it stop cricket and football (and soccer) from being played on Newmarket Reserve, which itself was set aside as a permanent reserve in 1886 and is still protected today by an Act of Parliament. Public subscriptions raised £457, with £365 spent on the Bowling Club and £85 on the tennis courts.

The first Open Day of the Flemington Kensington Bowling Club was on Wednesday 9 November 1892. The Essendon Gazette described it as follows:

The pretty bowling green, which occupies so commanding a position close to the Flemington Racecourse gates, was formally opened yesterday morning (Prince of Wales birthday).

Notwithstanding a dull morning, rain kept off and the event was more fortunate in weather conditions than equally important fixtures of late have been. The untiring hon. sec. had everything in apple pie order for the event, the green was a brilliant bit of verdure, and when it came under the test of experts was pronounced in tip-top playing order. The new and picturesque pavilion was also a theme of admiration. There was a very good attendance, including local members (which embraced the local council) visitors chiefly from Moonee Ponds and Essendon clubs, so far as regards playing strength, and, last but not least, a good sprinkling of the fair sex, whose tasteful costumes lent a charm to the gathering. Several young ladies and gentleman were already tasting the delight and excitement of play on the adjoining tennis court, and altogether the attendance was a representative one.

The club is a foundation club in the Royal Victorian Bowling Association pennant competition.

While the Club has won many pennants over the years, pride of place is reserved for the two Division 1 pennants the club won in the 1990s. At the time, Division 1 was the top division in Melbourne. Many of the players who were in those teams, and many others, have gone on to represent Victoria and Australia in major competitions, including the Commonwealth Games. Early presidents of the Club included active locals and politicians Thomas Millar (1892), William Pridham (1897 & 1906), George W Debney (1898) and James Raisbeck (1901). Later presidents included Arthur Calwell (1932-34), our local federal MP, and Jennifer Kanis (2008-2010), our local state MP.

In addition to bowling, the Flem Ken Bowls Club continues to host political and social gatherings, proving to be not only our most enduring sporting organisation, but also our longest-lasting cultural and social institution.