

Ashburton Bridge Club: the first forty years

By John Knight, Rakaia (written in 2002)

It is some 40 years now since the new Ashburton Bridge Club's clubrooms were opened by the mayor on March 17, 1962. The previous year a widely-supported public meeting had established there was sufficient local interest in starting a bridge club and planning went ahead.

Soon after the meeting, local businessman and bridge player, Ron Sutherland, heard about a partly-finished building in a back section on Alford Forest Road. It was to be an engineering workshop, but financial difficulties led to its being on the market. Ron had a look at it, realising its potential for a bridge club, put a shilling option to buy on it. (For years afterwards, he told anyone who would listen that he'd never got the shilling back).

In heavy rain he took a group of other players to inspect. There was general agreement about its suitability and the fledgling club bought the property (I believe for £800). Over the next few months a further \$3000 went on roofing, adding a kitchen and two toilet blocks as well as carpeting, furnishing and decorating. Finance was largely arranged by the issue of interest-bearing debentures, not only to potential members but also to a number of local businessmen and others who thought a bridge club would be an asset to the town (one wonders if today's business community would be so forthcoming).

Meanwhile, bridge was being played and experienced players were running classes for beginners and the new club rooms opened for play with 67 members. An article written at the time praised the site, décor, facilities and ventilation. Further, the club was reported to be the third bridge club in New Zealand with its own premises. Originally, play was held every Tuesday for contact and alternate Thursdays for duplicate. By 1966, when I joined, duplicate was the name of the game and grading of players into Senior and Junior had taken place. Seniors played Tuesday evenings, everyone Thursdays and a Monday afternoon game, open to all, had been established. Growth in club membership later led to the introduction of an Intermediate grade. A few years ago, with club membership over 200 (as it is today), a general re-grade was necessary as some grade nights were overcrowded. A Senior Reserve group was set up. (in spite of predictions, we lost no members after the general re-grade).

Today, play takes place on Monday (Senior Reserve and Intermediate), Tuesday (Senior), Wednesday (Intermediate and Junior), Thursday (Senior and Senior Reserve), while the open Monday afternoon game continues. Almost all players apart from the very junior have the opportunity to play organised duplicate on two evenings a week in a very wide range of competitions. Teams play, however, has never become popular. The club has run lessons annually for many, many years. These are usually well attended and, more significantly, most class members join the club. I believe this says much for the quality of the teaching. In the past few years, several day-long seminars (run by senior club members) have proved popular. Instruction and discussion are followed by the bidding and play of hands selected to cover and reinforce the theme for the day. More sessions of this nature are planned.

For many years the club had a reputation for providing strong support for tournaments. Rarely was one held in the region without a good Ashburton representation. Our record has slipped noticeably in this lately (we must be getting old) but signs of a resurgence among our newer players are appearing. We have had our fair share of tournament successes and count Mid-South Canterbury's only grand master, Bev Smith, among our members.



Cutting the anniversary cake are Pat Sutherland and Elsie Stroud.

When I joined the club, the first of many extensions, upgrades and renovations had taken place. Playing rooms adequate for 15 tables had been increased by the addition of an annex. This, in turn, was increased greatly and at present space for 27 tables (comfortably) is available. The roof, originally some nine-ten feet high, was later angled, greatly adding to the height and allowing windows to be incorporated along the front. As well, kitchen and toilet facilities have been upgraded several times and a scoring/committee room has been added.

The heating originally consisted of small bar heaters scattered around the room - the early birds got the warmth. It was not unknown for players to trip over cords or suffer scorched clothing. Installing of wall-mounted, fan-assisted electric heating, thermo-statically controlled, improved conditions in winter dramatically. Ventilation, highly praised in the article mentioned earlier marking the club's opening, would be regarded as totally inadequate today and even by the standards of the time was unimpressive. I can recall entering the playing area during a tournament and barely being able to see across the room for cigarette smoke. (Yes, the club went through the usual lively smoker v non-smoker debate even more intense than the 'sandwich and biscuit' v 'sandwich or biscuit' supper

discussions). A further heating-ventilation upgrade was done two years ago, but the clubrooms can still be very hot in summer; a subject for future committees to ponder.

I suspect we all recall our first duplicate club game. I certainly can. In a very nervous state (and in my sports coat amid the suits and long skirts) I was getting more and more anxious. Then I heard one player say loudly to his partner: "Woman, you're as silly as a two-bob watch". I relaxed, thinking that this might be my sort of club after all. The speaker was even bolder than I knew: he was playing with his mother-in-law. Some of the best stories come from tournaments and may even be true. One concerns the local who, just after the start of the Saturday evening tournament session, popped a peppermint into her mouth. On realising it didn't taste like a peppermint, she swallowed it discreetly. Unfortunately, it was a sleeping pill and partner had to watch her gradual but inexorable disintegration as the session progressed. Another story comes from an early away tournament for the locals. In one of those silences that occasionally occurs in even the largest gatherings, one Ashburtonian was widely heard to say to partner, "You silly bitch!" to which partner made the immortal reply, "I shouldn't have went, I shouldn't have went". Her bidding and play were significantly superior to her grammar and she usually 'went' with considerable success. Her play at no bumps was a legend in the club.

Early in my bridge career I had the privilege (and it was just that) of partnering her in a multi-round event (well, she was desperate) and it was an education to watch her deftly steer the contract into her own hand, usually in no trump, and to play the combined hands for more tricks than seemed possible, even double dummy. Her favourite response was 2NT (forcing; in her case to 3NT).

No bridge article is complete without a hand. This comes from the third session of the 1967 Mid-Canterbury Pairs. After the first two sessions it appears that John Wignall and his partner (was it Val Bell?) had the event sewn up but tournament was not yet over.

	<i>North</i>	
Dealer:	♠ AJ9	
Vul:	♥	
	♦ AKQ652	
	♣ AKJ4	
<i>West</i>		<i>East</i>
♠ K32		♠ Q10754
♥ A109		♥ J842
♦ 10973		♦ J8
♣ 872		♣ 53
	<i>South</i>	
	♠ 86	
	♥ KQ7653	
	♦ 4	
	♣ Q1096	

When local players Pat Sutherland and Hazel Robertson were N-S the auction was as follows:

North South

2♦ 2♥

3♣ 3♥

5♣ 6♣

2♦ was game-forcing, Goren-style. Against the club slam East led a small spade. North won, played ♦AK, discarding dummy's other spade and ruffed a spade. She returned to hand with the ♣J and ruffed her last spade. She drew trumps and conceded a diamond. 6♣ bid and made. North (Pat Sutherland, still very much a player to be reckoned with) admitted to shaking like a leaf as she played the hand. They were the only pair to bid slam. The usual contact was 5♦ and most lost a trump and two spades. 3NT was also down on a spade lead. This deal plus other great results gave the locals a 72% session, good enough to win the event. This was, I believe, the first major tournament success by an Ashburton pair.

Looking back, I see I have said nothing about the early scoring marathons and how our first (\$6,000?) TRS-80 computer, now a quaint relic of a bygone age, revolutionised scoring and gave many years of wonderful service. Nor have I mentioned the 'friendly' matches against other clubs which often provoked the most unfriendly behavior and the best fights behind the scenes. Nor have I ... but then, something has to be left for the report on the club's first 50 - or 75 - or 100 years.



Current members at the 40th anniversary celebrations.