

CLUB FOCUS

Wrest Park – something of an Institute

by John Bevington

Players sometimes have trouble finding Wrest Park. The solution is to charter a helicopter and fly south from Bedford, following the A6 until you reach Silsoe. You can't miss it.



Looking south. The croquet lawns are between the path leading from the house and the formal canal known as the Long Water.

The earliest records of Wrest Park date from the 13th century when it was an estate held by Reginald De Grey. In the 15th century his descendant Edmund Grey was created Earl of Kent. Serious work on the gardens began after the eleventh Earl married an heiress in 1662, and the Long Water can be seen in engravings by Kip (c1705).

At that time the house in the photograph did not exist – the old house was more or less on the line of the furthest horizontal path, and the area now occupied by the croquet lawns was given over to formal gardens, fountains and mazes, outlines of which can still be seen through the turf in dry summers. The woodland gardens on either side of the canal are mainly the work of Henry, the twelfth Earl, who was created Duke of Kent by Queen Anne in 1710. His sons predeceased him and the estate passed to his granddaughter, for whom he secured the Marquisate of Grey before his death in 1740.

The present house was built in the 1830s by Thomas, Earl de Grey, the son of the marchioness's daughter and the first President of the Institute of British Architects. After the Earl's death in 1859 the estate passed through a number of relatives, was leased to the American Ambassador between 1906 and 1911, became a military hospital in the First World War and in the 1930s was sold to the Essex Timber Company. After the Second World War it was bought by the Ministry of Public Building and Works on behalf of the Government and leased to the National Institute of Agricultural Engineering.

The Institute began restoring the grounds, but also used them for experimental research. The acre and a half in front of the Long Water was at one time planted with potatoes and used for potato harvester trials. The soil is clay and, being at the bottom of a shallow slope leading down from the house, is quick to flood and slow to drain. If you dig down you will usually find a layer of pure sand, an outcrop from the quarries a few miles north. The area was returned to grass c1959. As it

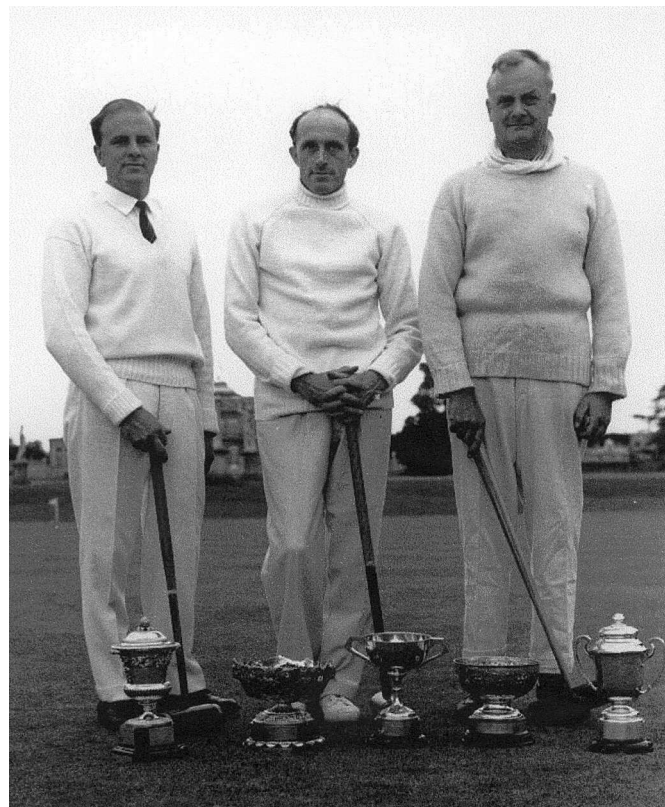
was to become the site of the croquet lawns these preliminary workings of the soil may have been to our benefit.



Looking north. An experimental reversible plough (exhibited at the Festival of Britain in 1951) at work on the area now occupied by the lawns.

The croquet club was formed by staff of the NIAE in 1961 using lawns near the house, and later that year club members welded and ground the first four sets of hoops for the material cost of £4/6/1d. In 1963 the legendary D.D. Steel, *châtelaine* of the old Bedford club, visited Wrest Park and donated one of her trophies, and a few months later permission was granted to create four lawns (now six) on the present site. Within a year Wrest Park had won the Longman Cup.

In 1966 club members began entering CA tournaments when John Wheeler and Anto Davies played in the Cheltenham October weekend. The same year saw the acquisition of a 1936 Dennis mower with a 36 inch cut, which gave 30 years service before being sold to some enthusiasts for a modest profit.



John Wheeler, Vic Rees and the late Harry Green with trophies won at the Nottingham Week and the Challenge & Gilbey in 1967.

Wrest Park started holding tournaments in 1972. At that time the only club building was a small wooden shed positioned near the lawns under a large copper beech, which served as equipment store, changing and tea room. As the number of tournament entries increased it was temporarily augmented by a Portakabin on wheels, borrowed from the Institute for the weekend. The Institute was always very supportive – the club does all its own lawn maintenance but the Institute ground staff up until recently used to dispose of all our cut grass, which for a big club is a favour beyond price.

As the members became more experienced they also became more ambitious. In 1973 Vic Rees and John Wheeler entered the Open Doubles and reached the final, only to lose to Humphrey Hicks and John Soutter. The following year Wrest Park won the Inter Club, and also entered a Bedfordshire team in the Inter Counties, finishing third equal out of six. At this time (and indeed for about ten years afterwards) membership of the club was only open to staff working at the Institute, and although this would inevitably have limited the number of players it made for a strong team spirit.

In 1976 the club broke new ground by staging the first ever advanced weekend tournament in the CA calendar, the winners being Eddie Bell and Harry Green. This year also saw Bedfordshire tie with Midland Counties for the Inter Counties, and the next year the team won the competition outright. The club briefly flirted with nine lawns for a tournament, and work began on the construction of the clubhouse.

1980 saw individual successes in CA events when Vic Rees won the Chairman's Salver and Mike Wilson won the All England Handicap, and the following year Harry Green won the Veterans'. In 1982 English Heritage took over the opening of the house and grounds to the public at weekends, but spectators were always outnumbered by players – the 1984 September handicap tournament attracted 41 entries, one of the block winners being David Goacher (5½). In those days you could find yourself, as a relative beginner, playing the likes of Colin Irwin or Phil Cordingley in a handicap tournament, which was invariably something of an education.



The Bedfordshire team at the 1983 Inter Counties. L-R: Vic Rees, Tony Dumont, Bryan Harral, Howard Bottomley, John Wheeler, Harry Green, Judy Anderson and Tom Anderson.

The 1980s also saw the club hosting CA events for the first time: the All England final in 1985 and the Peels in 1987, a year which also saw the construction of the changing room behind the clubhouse. Being situated in the middle of the park means there is neither electricity nor mains water, so lunch is an elaborate picnic taken in or out of doors. Courtside shelter is

provided by the nearest tree, and it was a sad day when the magnificent holm oak next to lawn 2, a veritable bell tent, was felled in 2003. One advantage of the setting is the opportunity to observe the local wildlife – players at last year's July tournament were able to watch four kestrel chicks whose parents had made a home in a tree near the clubhouse.

The last fifteen years have seen an expansion in the membership, aided by the opportunity to recruit outside the Institute (by now the Silsoe Research Institute) and the ending of the restriction on the hours of play which had previously been evenings and weekends only. Most of the new members are golf croquet players - finding and developing Association players is not so easy. Nevertheless the club continues to hold its own in competition, having reached the finals of the Inter Club and Secretary's Shield in 1995 and the final of the Longman Cup in 1997. Between 1995 and 2004 Wrest Park won the Mary Rose four times and was runner-up twice.

The club has also hosted more CA events. Wrest Park is now a regular venue for the Eastern Championship, in rotation with Hunstanton and Colchester, and in recent years has also staged the Selector's Weekend, the Home Internationals, possibly the wettest ever All England final in 1998 (won by John Gibbons, then playing off 9), the golf croquet Inter Counties and last year's England qualifier for the World Championship.



Roger White in play on lawn 6 during the August tournament in 2000.

This year sees the end of an era as the Silsoe Research Institute closed on 31st March, so it is an appropriate moment to look back at the club's history and remember the early pioneers. John Wheeler and Vic Rees still live in Silsoe, and John continues to mow the lawns and played in the winning Mary Rose team in 2004. The club is now looking forward to a future as tenants of English Heritage, which has taken over the house and grounds.

'If one seeks good croquet in peaceful and beautiful surroundings, Wrest Park is the place to find it.' This recommendation by ex-CA Chairman Lt Col D.M.C. Prichard in his book *The History of Croquet* (Cassell 1981) cannot be bettered by us, so if you've never been before why not enter one of our tournaments and see for yourself. English Heritage is unlikely to let your helicopter land in the garden so you will face the same problem as visitors before you: the final approach to the lawns from the car park. We will be happy to send you detailed instructions, including essential information that can't be found on Google Earth.

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