

Ballarat Club

A Short History

The Ballarat Club was founded in 1872 by a group of Ballarat Graziers and Professional men, and was descended from earlier dining clubs such as the Hothamian and the Scotia, which were popular at the time. The founding President was Judge R L P Trench, whose portrait hangs in the club, and the secretary was Mr H.A. Nevett. In the tradition of the earlier dining clubs, the Ballarat Club originally rented rooms at Craigs Royal Hotel. The first accounts cover the period 29th December, 1872 to 30th December 1873 and referred to the seasonal celebrations of the time. Early in 1873 the club moved out of Craigs to premises on the site of the Wattle Tea Rooms, however this proved unsatisfactory and "the committee found the affairs of the club in a poor condition with very few members having paid their subscription". On March 1st, 1873 the club leased, for three years, the Club Hotel, (now demolished) at a rent of 300 pounds per annum and a new billiard table was purchased for the price of 100 pounds. With the opening of the new premises the clubs prospects improved considerably, there was an influx of 25 new members and a call of 10 pounds per head was made for the purchase of club furniture. At the end of 1873, the first rule book was printed and many of the rules still stand. In particular there were to be no games of cards or chance, no games of dice and backgammon would only be allowed in the billiard room. Members should be gentlemen and elected by a general ballot, proposed by one member, seconded by another, and the candidate would not be elected if there was a single black ball. Rule 16 stated that: " Any member proved guilty of wilfully infringing the rules or by laws, or of conducting himself in or out of the Club House in an ungentlemanly manner, shall be liable to expulsion."

In 1876, Mr Nevett resigned as secretary ("regrets he can no longer devote sufficient time to the club") his place was taken by Mr John Wilson Noble. And in that year we have our first recorded Committee and Membership. President, Mr M.R. Macleod, Committee Messrs T.D. Wanliss, R. Rede, A. Shepherd, J. Williamson, C.B. Finlayson and J.N. Wilson. The committee is recorded voting that a portrait of the first President; Judge R P L Trench be painted and that it should be hung prominently in the club. In that year the membership stood at 131 gentlemen with 11 awaiting election.

In 1886, it was decided at the Annual General Meeting to build a new club house "more convenient to members". A number of different sites were considered including land opposite Craigs Hotel, quarter acre block in Lyons Street and a site in Sturt Street. The present site was chosen by unanimous vote in 1887 and purchased at a cost of 1,500 pounds the club house costing 4,500 pounds, and to be paid for with 100 pound debentures with 6% interest. At the time of the opening of the new club house in 1890, the membership stood at 157 with 12 gentlemen waiting for election. That time the president was Mr C. Greenfield and the following year in 1891, the first club ball was held making a profit of 58 pounds, 5 shillings and 8 pence.

In 1898, a new secretary was elected Mr W.J. Pullum, and further developments were undertaken at the club house including a hot water service, a members bathroom with bath and sewered lavatories. Extensions to the club house also included accommodation and living quarters for the steward, his family and other club servants. During this year the club entertained the Geelong Club to a dinner and cricket match, which was a great success. The club also undertook the purchase of wine and cigars for sale to members. A 16 gallon cask of red hermitage burgundy was purchased for 6 pounds and the secretary purchased 10,000 cigars in boxes of 100 for sale to members at 6 shillings a box . It is also recorded that in this year the staffs total wages came to 237 pounds which was, in the opinion of the committee, "far too high".

In 1914, club membership was temporarily affected by the first World War, Mr Jasper Coglan being the first member to volunteer, a further 28 members were to volunteer including doctors, Hardy and Dane, who were given a farewell dinner in March 1915. A motion was passed at the Annual General Meeting 1915, not to serve any German beer or wine in the club for the duration of the war. At the end of the war, in 1919, the then president unveiled an Honour Board which he presented to the club to perpetuate the memory of those who served in the first World War. We understand that it was also during the first World War that the tower on the left side of the club collapsed due to faulty foundations.

In 1922, the club held a dinner to celebrate the jubilee of the club (1872-1922). Mr A.J. Fiskien was president and Mr J.J. Griffiths was honorary secretary. Smoking nights were introduced on a monthly basis by Mr Fiskien and they were a great success (no food provided, only cigarettes, cigars, pipe tobacco and drinks from the bar) unfortunately Mr A.J. Fiskien died the following year and was replaced by Dr A.G. McGowan who maintained the tradition of smoke nights. Smoking nights were also used to entertain visiting English cricket teams, naval officers from visiting royal navy ships and on other similar occasions.

In 1926, the tradition of a club ball was reintroduced and was a great success, in that year, the president, Mr Rowe, recommended that the best band in Melbourne be secured, Smiths Dance Band recently arrived from America. (Cost 40 pounds plus travel and accommodation.) Membership continued to increase during this period and activities of the time included dinners with the Geelong, Horsham and other provincial clubs, shooting days, golf tournaments and cricket and billiard matches with Melbourne and provincial clubs.

During the 1930's membership declined reflecting the difficult times of the depression and the club was required to raise a further mortgage (2,000 pounds). However in every other way the club continued to function well with membership remaining above 200 gentlemen. By the mid 1930's the financial situation had improved considerably. Under the presidency of Dr G. R. Davidson, the mortgage was reduced by 500 pounds and the club was repainted. In 1938 the laws of the club were revised and reprinted and appear to be the current rules under which the club functions.

In 1941, under the presidency of Dr W A Spring, 16 members were on active service and a further 10 were to volunteer during the war period . A special membership category was created for members on active service and a motion was passed that persons holding His Majesty's Commission residing in the Ballarat area could obtain honorary membership. It is understood that this was extended to American Officers in 1944. During this period the numbers who were members and honorary members was considerable and the club was particularly busy.

At the end of the second World War the club reverted to its original function of providing for the needs of graziers and professional and business gentlemen in the Ballarat area. A function that continued until 1997, when the rules were altered and for the first time women were admitted as members.

Dr A.C. Cree
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