

For whom the balls roll

FOR the keen bowls player, the green and pleasant lawn of the bowling club is a second home. Leaving the club after an evening or afternoon bowling a ball with a bias towards another ball called a "jack" is a wrench. The bowler feels like a child being taken home from a party.

Bowling is the oldest outdoor sport of British origin after archery. Seven hundred years ago it was being played in a form which would be recognisable to today's bowler.

Bowls was so popular in Merrie England that, in one of those great clashes of interest between rival sports, it threatened the livelihood of the archery promoters. Their lobbyists must have been better organised, since they managed to have laws passed banning bowls.

The game survived somehow and was soon out in the open again. Sir Francis Drake, a keen bowls player if ever there was one,

insisted on completing his match before sailing out to defeat the Spanish Armada.

By the 17th century bowls had become super-chic — the sport to be seen at, like skiing at Gstaad or Aspen is today. Kings played it and — though it's hard to picture bookies on the rails at the bowling green — the well-to-do gambled high sums on major games.

The fever spread, and soon high-minded citizens were deploring the amount of betting on bowls that went on illicitly in pubs. Whether a "Clean Up Bowling" campaign followed is not recorded.

The popularity of bowls in Australia is

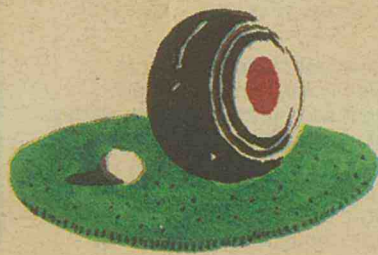
directly due to the Scots, who rediscovered an addiction to the game last century. Being pious folk, Scottish bowling fans avoided the temptation to bring bowls into disrepute by gambling, and the national bowling association they formed was a pillar of respectability. Scots emigrating abroad took their bowls with them and, wherever they settled, bowling flourished. Of nowhere is this more

true than of Australia, where the Bowling Association of Victoria and New South Wales (now, in Victoria, the Royal Victorian Bowls Association) was established in 1880, the second such association, after Scotland's, in the world.

Bowling is an old sport

— but why does it seem only to attract old (or older) players? Lack of strenuousness is part of the answer, but more than that, the "elderly" image of bowls derives from World War I. Many returned servicemen who found the tranquil rhythm of bowling helped them unwind from battle stress filled the clubs. Club life became an extension of the comradeship of war.

The same influx was noted after World War II, with the result, say today's bowlers, that as the ex-service players grew older, the clubs gave the impression of being exclusively for the elderly. Membership of many clubs is now declining; there are few where the club-house flag doesn't fly at half-mast at least once a month. Perhaps if the RVBA's present efforts to recruit younger, school-age players are successful, bowling will again be the all-age sport it once was.



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