



Heritage

COMMONWEALTH GOLF CLUB Inc.

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History of the Clubhouse at Commonwealth

On entering the main gates at Commonwealth, members and visitors alike are immediately impressed by the setting as they walk towards its imposing clubhouse. Positioned on the top of an east-facing slope, with commanding views over the course, the building is so placed that the main entrance on ground level is single storey while the eastern elevation becomes two storeys in height. The design is also very functional, with access to the golf shop and locker rooms from the southern side on the lower level adjacent to the first tee, as well as from inside the clubhouse. On the upper level, an open balcony leads into the spacious bar on the south eastern corner and a magnificent east-facing verandah extension of the main dining room, which have panoramic views of the first and eighteenth holes - a truly magnificent setting.

The history of the clubhouse is very interesting. It mirrors the evolution of the Club itself. This article draws information from various sources, including historic reports in the *Herald* newspaper, *Golf* and *The Australian Home Beautiful* magazines, summaries of the minutes of the committee by former Life Member Bill Campbell and discussions with 50-year Commonwealth member, the late Dr J.B. "Mick" Flanagan.

It was in December 1919 when the Lands Sub-committee of the Waverley Golf Club reported that it had inspected suitable land for a new course at Centre Road, Oakleigh. The Waverley Golf Club acquired an option over the land in 1920; all members willing to take up two £10 six per cent debentures were offered membership of the Commonwealth Golf Club. This first £3,000 debenture issue provided finance to pay a deposit on the land and start construction of the course.

In July 1920, the old weatherboard buildings of the Waverley Golf Club were moved to the new site but as these proved totally inadequate, the committee resolved to accept an offer by one of its members, Arthur Purnell, an architect, to design a new clubhouse free of charge. One year later, in August 1921, committee approved his plan for a two-storey brick construction at a site on Centre Road (to the east of today's third green), and awarded him life membership for his services. The clubhouse was completed in May 1922 at a cost of approximately £1,850.

It was not long, however, before the Club began to outgrow its new clubhouse. It is interesting to note that at its third AGM in August 1923, W. H. (Bill) Cuming was elected President and Charles Lane, Captain, and these two served in those positions for six years or more when the ambitious plans for a new clubhouse unfolded. In June 1926, just four years after the completion of the Centre Road clubhouse, Committee appointed a Sub-committee to advise on a proposal to enlarge it. By August 1926, the Sub-committee submitted its report proposing instead that an entirely new clubhouse be built.

In April 1927, this proposition was put to members at an Extraordinary General Meeting.



The Original Clubhouse on Centre Road (1924).

After much discussion (some reportedly quite heated), it was resolved to take a decision after hearing members' views. Four months later, at the 1927 AGM, the response was still judged to be inadequate and members were given one further opportunity to respond. The final decision to proceed was taken at yet another EGM in November 1927.

The sense of occasion was captured in an article in the December 1927 edition of *Golf* magazine: "We are pleased to note that the progressive Commonwealth Club, at a meeting held recently, decided to scrap their old clubhouse... and erect a new one on a site near their present 5th green [now the 9th]... at a cost of about £12,500".

The architects, Sale and Keage, were selected on the basis of their winning design from sixteen schemes submitted in competition. By May 1928, the Club had secured finance through mortgages of £13,000 allowing construction to start. The winning tender for the building contract was that of H.P. Brady for £11,999 for the main building, and £335 for the terrace, although records indicate that £18,000 was set aside for the full project including the road, parking area and lighting. The finance was raised by the £13,000 mortgages over the building, and a £10,000

voluntary debenture issue from the membership, to be repaid by an increase in annual subscriptions to £12/12/-. As this was a significant increase, no doubt some members found themselves in difficult financial circumstances. An article in the December 19th 1928 edition of the *Herald* captures the grandeur and visionary nature of the project, supported by an illustration taken from the architects' drawing, the original copy of which hangs in the dining room. Six months later the building was essentially complete and plans were taking shape for the grand opening. These were settled at an EGM in November, 1929. The official opening was marked by a luncheon at the clubhouse, attended by Lord and Lady Somers (the then Governor of Victoria and his wife), who then presided over the opening ceremony on 7 December 1929 and joined a 9-hole mixed foursome event, with Lord Somers driving the first ball.

Not long after, in February 1930, R.H. Morton, who was elected President in September 1929, reported that the Club had commissioned a portrait of Charles Lane. This portrait, which hangs in the main entrance over the stairs, is a fitting tribute to the man who played such an instrumental role in bringing the new clubhouse from concept to fruition.

In *The Australian Home Beautiful* article, dated 1 January 1930, Charles Lane is described as "the moving spirit in this progressive venture... to whom great credit is due". Sadly, Bill Cuming, who as Club President laid the foundation stone in October 1928, did not live to see the completion of the project.

In contrast to the first clubhouse, which lasted less than seven years, the new one has stood the test of time. It was not until 1959 that substantial renovations were deemed necessary, and these were planned so as not to alter the original character of the building. The main requirements were to build a new pro shop, to create additional locker space, to expand the bar, to improve the manager's office and committee room, and to enclose the balcony with access to the bar and dining room. The initial cost estimate was £38,000, and it was proposed that this be partially offset by imposing a one-off special levy of an amount equal to the annual subscription, at that time £32/11/-. The final proposal, put to the 205 members attending the June 1960 EGM, was passed by show of hands. The levy raised £19,800. By November 1960, the committee approved the revised plans of the architects, Hassall & McConnell, for a contract price of £33,875,



Clubhouse from the 18th Green (1930).



Entrance to the clubhouse (1934). Note entry to John Young's shop at the end of the hedge.

with discretion of 5% in view of the uncertainties of some aspects of the renovation. The renovations progressed well, and a ceremony marking the opening of the clubhouse was held on the 1 September 1962. At the AGM that year, the Captain reported that the actual cost amounted to £35,841/17/11 as an extra amount of approximately £1,100 had been approved for panelling the bar.

These renovations made significant improvements to the clubhouse. The old bar became the new Associates' Lounge (now named the W.A. Edgar Room) and the area of the old golf shop was incorporated into the men's locker room. The opening of the new golf shop, to the west of the lower entrance, coincided with the appointment of a new Club professional, Bob Jennings, earlier in 1962. He replaced John "Jock" Young, who had served as Club professional since 1924.

The new bar, and enclosed verandah adjoining the dining room, are regarded as prime features of the clubhouse by members to this day.

Since the major renovations of 1960 to 1962, there have been several incremental improvements. The men's southern shower block was added in 1963, and the ladies' toilet blocks in 1975.

The outdoor balcony beside the bar, and the open area below it on the eastern side of the entrance, were constructed in 1977, at a cost of \$56,560. The period 1982 to 1985 saw several modifications, such as the replacement of the original bar in the W.A. Edgar room; air-conditioning of the dining room, balcony and bar; the erection of the tee house by the 1st tee; and extensive renovations to the office and foyer areas. These improvements culminated with the upgrading of the main gates in 1991. In 1996, the Club moved the golf shop to the current position overlooking the eighteenth green,

with the club storage and repair area moved to the west of the lower entrance. The most recent renovations to the Clubhouse were in 2001, when the kitchen areas were completely refurbished both to provide greater capacity to handle large functions and to bring them into line with modern standards of occupational health and safety.

The quality of the clubhouse is enhanced by its interior fixtures, fittings and furnishings. Many remark on the pair of stained glass windows in the northern wall of the dining room. These were designed by and were the gift of Bill Whieldon, a member of the Club, and made by Brooks Robinson, a leading Melbourne stained glass firm. As if to reinforce the character of the clubhouse, the same design is incorporated in the Club's house-wine label, a tasteful touch appreciated by many. The rooms in the clubhouse are richly adorned with furniture, embossed honour boards and paintings.

The Longcase clock and Breakfront bookcase in the lounge are gifts from the Wren family. Amongst its art works, the Club has two oil paintings of the Australian artist, Robert Johnson. Both are traditional Australian landscapes, donated by former Life Member, Alec Brahe. Perhaps the most striking painting is the Sir Erik Langker landscape in oil that hangs above the fire place. The Rubery Bennett landscape, hanging in the dining room, marks the contribution of E.E. Vines. Such a coalescence of quality furnishings and artistic contributions to the Club serve to symbolize Commonwealth's rich history.

As to how long it will continue to do so, Club Captain Chris Davie remarks, "Our stately clubhouse is the envy of many other clubs, and it is likely that further changes will be in sympathy with the character of the existing structure.

It would be, in Sir Humphrey's terms, a 'brave' committee which resolved to demolish the present Commonwealth clubhouse and

rebuild as Royal Melbourne have done! But, of course, as both our membership and general community attitudes change, we must evaluate whether, in its current configuration, it provides adequately for the needs of current and future members and their guests."

Chris Davie expands, "In the late 1990s, a Master Plan for the further development of the clubhouse was drawn up and exhibited to members. The committee has recently reconfirmed this plan, with some minor changes, as a broad strategy for the future. In line with this strategy, members can expect to see plans brought forward in the near future for larger outdoor terrace areas to provide more extensive (and sunnier) outdoor bar and dining areas, and for a somewhat overdue refurbishment of the main bar. These changes will be handled sensitively. There is no reason why the grand yet clubby and comfortable atmosphere of the 1929 clubhouse should not be enjoyed by many future generations of Commonwealth members."

From its inception in the 1920s to the present, the clubhouse has evolved to meet the requirements of members and staff. The construction of the grand new clubhouse in 1929 was a truly visionary act for the then fledgling Club. Since then, the improvements to the clubhouse have made it a fine "home away from home" for the enjoyment of all and we may be assured that future improvements will follow this theme. Its evolution not only reflects the history but also serves to mark many of the great traditions of the Commonwealth Golf Club.

Chris Blain

Heritage Sub-committee