It is over 30 years since Short Mat Bowling arrived in North Yorkshire. Recollections from this time are understandably hazy and often very subjective. It is unfortunate that there seems to be little written documentation that would help write an accurate, objective history.

This article was put together from information I obtained from John Ward (Ampleforth SMBC) who was also able to provide the photos and various press cuttings, Janet Clark (North Duffield SMBA) and others. I have also referred to the brief ‘thumbnails’ supplied by most of our clubs and published in previous County Handbooks as well as information gleaned from various bowls websites.

I would be interested to hear from anyone who has any recollections of these early days especially from those with access to club minutes or other historical information. If anyone feels this article gives an inaccurate picture please let me know.

(Roger Green NYSMBA Secretary)

IRELAND - There is some evidence that Short Mat Bowls originated in Ireland as long ago as the 1920’s. However it was in 1952 that the first Irish league was formed and the game then expanded rapidly during that decade. Because there were many variations in the “rules” at that time, the Irish Association (IIBA) was formed in 1961 to standardise these. At that time there were 5 leagues and 58 clubs in existence but this has now grown to over 40 leagues, 1000 clubs and around 30,000 bowlers. Irish bowling was (and is) organised into geographically based Zones – currently 24.

ENGLAND - According to the ESMB website, the game found its way over from Ireland in the late 60s thanks to George Dix from Staffordshire. George, having worked in Ireland “saw the potential of the game as an activity to be offered to members of sports and social clubs in England” and he began to promote the game in the North West leading to an early league being established in Staffordshire & Cheshire as long ago as 1969. The contact for mat sales was Jim Rose (see photo) of Bury Cooper & Whitehead (BCW) who manufactured Regalgrene mats – a key figure in the early development of the game. Eventually in early 1984 a meeting was convened at the Wool Secretariat in London (at the instigation of Jim??) which resulted in the formation of the English Association (ESMBA) with George as the first President.

NORTH YORKSHIRE - It is ironic that the game seems to have first appeared in our county in Pickering, a town which no longer has as a Short Mat venue. According to the Slingsby BC minutes, in October 1984, Pickering sent an invite to various outside clubs in the area to attend a demo of the game. This was attended by four bowlers from their club which then purchased 2 mats in November 1984. Shortly after this, John Ward and Alec Young, lawn green bowlers from Hovingham attended another demo, this time at Slingsby. Here they met Jim Rose (see above), who was to be instrumental in advancing and supporting the game across the county over the next few years. (It is not known exactly why the game should have come to Pickering initially and unfortunately the clubs minutes for this time have all been lost so we may never know).
However, Noel and Janet Clark recollected that it was also in 1984 that the Sports Council (now Sport England) was giving grants of 50% towards the cost of setting up the game and that Noel (who was Chairman of the Selby & District Sports Council) together with the Assistant Secretary of the Parish Councils Association and the aforementioned Jim Rose visited numerous village halls across Yorkshire demonstrating the game to various communities. Although they cannot pin point exactly which communities and villages were visited it does not seem unreasonable to surmise that perhaps it was one of these visits that resulted in the game arriving at Pickering. Noel remembers that although there was a lot of interest wherever they went, it was a sport people had not seen before and even with a 50% grant, finding the other half seemed a lot of money to some, especially as there was no guarantee the game would be a success. However, anyone who did not make a success of the venture within 12 months could return their equipment for a refund. To Noel’s knowledge only one mat was ever returned. His involvement was certainly instrumental in introducing the game in the Selby area and directly resulted in the early formation of North Duffield, Escrick and BOCM (now Selby WMC) in 1985.

Anyway, John and Alec returned from the Slingsby demo fired with enthusiasm for the “new” game and initiated a door to door canvass in their village to gauge the level of possible support. This looked positive so with the grant money and generous help from a local benefactor, (Tony Fawcett of Studford Venison), they obtained 2 mats from Jim. Thus Ampleforth Bowls Club came into being and John recollects that they had about 25 members including several juniors.

(1985 saw clubs being formed in Welburn and Thornton-le-Dale, maybe as a result of further demos or having seen what was happening at Ampleforth and Slingsby. In November 1985 Ampleforth held the first of their many Pairs competitions in the St. Albans Centre attended by 32 invited pairs from Rillington, Welburn, Pickering, Slingsby and Ampleforth. The competition was sponsored by Regalgrene who supplied all the equipment and also donated the Cup, known as the Relgalgrene Trophy. This was presented by Betty Stubbings (an England lawn green international) to the winners Jim Campbell and Derek Wishaw from the Pickering club. The President, Treasurer and NW Zone representative on the fledgling ESMBA committee (George Dix, Harry Lockett, and Norman Dickenson) were also in attendance as referees (although it is not known exactly how this came about). This competition was a great success and certainly further raised the profile of the game in the area. It continued to be held annually until 2006 when it was discontinued and replaced by the “High Fives” (now run by the BSA club). (THE EARLY YEARS continued)
In 1986 John and Alec were invited by the ESMBA to play in the very first international match between Ireland, Wales and Scotland where they represented England in the Pairs. This competition was titled the “British Isles Short Green International” and was held at Pontins in Lytham St. Annes. The following year 1987, the ESMBA used the St. Albans Centre to stage the Finals of their 3rd National Singles competition in which it is recorded that Jim Campbell, Ian McEvoy, Christine Peel and Stephen Demaine took part. (It is interesting to note this was won by Malcolm Follis who is still active in the West Midlands county team which recently played against our own Premier team in 2018).

So the seed was sown and over the next couple of years several clubs in areas to the North and South of York can trace their origin including Riccall, Carlton, Melbourne, Eggborough, Gristhorpe and Flixton. With an increasing number of clubs, there was a growing demand for competitive bowling and in 1987 the Selby league was formed and some time later the Ryedale league followed. (The first name on the Cup for the latter was Slingsby in 1991, but it is John Ward’s recollection that the competition started somewhat earlier than this).

In the early ‘90s there was an explosion of activity. John was instrumental in launching our own Association, the NYSMBA, in 1991 and in making contact with the Northern England Association (known then as the Northern Zone). The County team was launched in 1992 and the county badge and tie were designed. In the East of the county in the same year Trevor Collier introduced the game at Kirbymisperton and introduced their Open Triples competition that continues to this day. Around the same time, Edwin Smith formed the St. Saviours club (now Scarborough) and the Scarborough league was set up in 1993 with just 4 clubs. In the West in the same year, Fred Wood had initiated the Kyle Valley league with 7 clubs.

John’s job took him far and wide and he became aware of the progress the game was making in the Leeds and Dales area where there were clubs at Pateley Bridge, Dacre Banks and Darley. He made contact with the Les Hardcastle in Darley and Tom Moss in Bramley and several friendly games were arranged with clubs in that area. The idea of a Yorkshire wide league also began to take root at that time. Looking back he now feels that the creation of what is now the Yorkshire (North) league was the culmination of his efforts in promoting and developing the game over the previous 10 years and he recalls vividly the day when Edith Collier sent the first wood down the mat in the very first game. It was at 10.26am on Sunday 26th October 1995!!

John’s contribution to the early development of Short Mat Bowling in the county speaks for itself. After a spell living in Easingwold and playing occasionally for St. Cuthberts (the new name for the Ampleforth Club) he has now retired to Alnmouth in Northumberland. A man who likes innovation and new projects, his last achievement was to replace the “Ampleforth Pairs” with the “High Fives” competition in 2006.

How many of our current members are aware of all the groundwork over the last 30 years that have made their enjoyment possible.

John Ward - 2010