

STEPPING STRAIGHT IN

A Novice's First Year of Croquet

After reluctantly giving up my favourite sports of badminton and years before that, squash, I found that walking, swimming and using the gym simply weren't challenging enough. But it was with some surprise after being invited to a neighbour's garden for a game of croquet, that I suddenly knew I had found an answer. Croquet was more than putting with hoops.

In late July we joined the Kenilworth U3A Croquet group which plays fortnightly at the Croquet Club in Crackley Lane. With an introduction to the game from Mervyn and lots of help from other players we soon picked it up and were able to join in games almost from the start with little skill but lots of enthusiasm. The group was friendly and relaxed but when it stopped for winter at the end of November, I was hooked, and plucked up courage to join the main Croquet Club, part of KTSCC.



It took some courage to walk across the lawns on my own on the first visit, to where three men and one woman were clustered together in deep conversation and looked up in astonishment as I approached. Lynne [Club Chair] hastily introduced herself and told me I was most welcome. The three men stood in a line and introduced themselves simply as Jim, Bob and Nick. Fortunately after this inauspicious start, things improved: others arrived, mallets were chosen, balls rolled out, cards selected and I had my first daunting experience of playing on a full lawn, after the half lawns used by the U3A group.

With two afternoon social sessions each week, I quickly settled in to the wider group. They were fun, friendly, incredibly welcoming, and I don't think I have ever felt so accepted so quickly into such a new group. I began to feel more confident on the larger lawns and was hugely excited when others started asking me to join them in friendly games outside the social sessions.



The winter passed quickly and the new summer season opened and with it a few anxieties arose. Being asked to take a test for a first handicap score turned out to be not as terrifying as expected, with lots of advice and reassurance from Lynne, Phil and Nick, and I mastered the complexities of filling in a handicap card. Entering major competitions proved too big a step for me, but the introduction to Leagues gave me the competitive challenge I'd always loved, but with players at my own level, and no handicaps used. In regular group coaching sessions I learned useful tactics and new skills, including the elusive jump shot, and the thrill of leaping over an opponent's ball to score a hoop.

I loved the idea of a hands-on club and threw myself into everything, from painting the cabins, to aerating, scarifying and watering lawns, topping up biscuit supplies and helping at hospitality events, and I enjoyed every minute of it. I made mistakes and experienced a few brushes with authority: for over-booking lawns on the excellent new online booking system; talking a player through a magnificent jump shot at the U3A group (not allowed in U3A sessions, to avoid possible damage to the lawns); and, more seriously, scarifying a lawn during the summer drought and damaging the turf. A learning curve, but nothing dampened my enthusiasm for the game and past errors faded into history, although I still get ribbed endlessly about jump shots at U3A sessions.



As the summer progressed I became aware of other players playing a different form of the game. I learned this was called Association Croquet and for a long time I watched from a distance, fascinated by the strategies involved. In the final few weeks of the season I plucked up courage again to go along to the roll-up weekly session of AC, and am only starting to feel my way around this more complex version of the game with the patience and good humour of Adrian, Mervyn and the other players.

The summer season finally drew to a close in mid-October, with a wonderful Doubles Fun Day of non-stop croquet from 10.00am till after 6:00pm, with light-hearted games between couples of mixed abilities. Prizes were presented, photographs taken by floodlight in the dusk, and we parted for home, tired but elated. And now I am looking forward to a winter of friendly games without handicap cards or deadlines, as well as the regular roll-up sessions. And when the new season opens again in Spring, to another lovely summer of companionship, laughter and new challenges.



To anyone looking for a new venture or some added excitement in their lives, I would say wholeheartedly, "Give croquet a chance!" You'll find a fascinating activity combined with a new social circle of like-minded individuals who are friendly, fun and welcoming. Don't watch from a distance, just step straight in, either through the U3A group if you're eligible and prefer to start on smaller lawns, or by joining the croquet section of the KTSCC. You won't regret taking that step.