

HISTORY OF SHORT MAT BOWLS

From ancient times some form of bowling has been in evidence. Egyptian inscriptions portray a type of bowls, in Roman times it is reputed to have its foundations in the soldiers of Rome its origins in the Italian Alps. In more modern times the oldest Bowling Green is to be found in Southampton and dates back to the thirteenth century. There are many forms of the game played in many parts of the world today, Long Green, Crown Green, Carpet etc.

The variation of bowls known as Short Mat, although relatively modern, its origins appear to be wrapped in a mystery of folk lore. One rather nice story relates that the game had its birth in the nineteen twenties, out of the travels of two itinerant South African workers who came to the UK. They found themselves far from their native homeland, weather, and bowling green. So it was that, in the dampness of the South Wales climate, they sought to alleviate their homesickness, by playing bowls on the carpet of a local church hall. They tried to replicate all the parameters of a full size rink, finding as they developed their game that they had discovered a new, enjoyable pastime.

However!

It must be stated that most Ulster players pour scorn on the Welsh connection and the story of the South Africans is dismissed out of hand. It is maintained that Short-mat Bowling came about almost by accident in 1926 when, on a rainy day, the members of the Victoria Bowling Club in Belfast found refuge in the nearby Strand Presbyterian Church Hall.

A couple of restless spirits began to roll their woods on the bare floor, soon others joined in and the suggestion was made that a piece of carpet would help to improve the play. From herein there is a period when reality is clouded by myth. However in 1929 the Presbyterian Minister at Ballymacarret was photographed bowling a wood along a piece of carpet, giving credence to their claim to be the very first Short Mat Bowling Club!

Again the mists descend and obscure dependable evidence of any development towards the game we know today. It is after the Second World War that tangible evidence is available, and records may be found relating to a growth of Short Mat Clubs throughout the province. Belfast was the stronghold but following establishment of the first Northern Ireland league in 1951 other leagues were formed from 1954 to 1961. From records available it appears that every league had its own set of rules (if any) including width of carpet, fenders and markings.

Dimensions of the playing mat were finally decided by the general width of carpet made and the size of Church and Village Halls in Northern Ireland. Thus carpet of six feet wide and forty five feet long became the norm, although some use of nine or even twelve foot wide carpets is known.

It was clearly apparent that there was an urgent need of standardisation if progress was to be made. By 1961 the growth and popularity of Short Mat Bowling in Ireland demanded its recognition as an established sport. This development is illustrated by the fact that a meeting called to inaugurate a governing body was attended by some three hundred representatives from the clubs of Ireland. Out of this gathering a committee was selected to formulate a set of rules for the conduct of the game. The value and quality of their work is shown in that today we play by rules which hardly vary from the original (but there are no extant copies).

Whatever the truth regarding the commencement of Short Mat Bowls in Northern Ireland, it is certain that they showed the way forward in promoting the game.

The Game Today

A special carpet, of green, measuring 40-45 feet x 6 feet, forms the playing area. Essentially it is a miniaturised version of a full-size rink. However the size is such as to allow, normal full sized bowls to be used in play. To prevent any heavy straight drive, and promote the use of bias, a wooden block, 15 inches long by 2 inches wide and 3 inches high, is situated across the middle of the rink mat. Any wood touching this block during delivery, is considered dead and removed from the rink. Replicating an outdoor ditch, a one foot deep area is marked at the ends of the Rink Mat, limited by wooden fenders, which mark the end of the rink. One restriction is that delivery mats are always placed in a specific section of the mat, which is clearly marked with white lines. Otherwise the rules are similar to outdoor bowls.

Short Mat Bowling is a demanding sport requiring as many, though different, skills and disciplines within play as other forms of bowls. Indeed, some players of the long mat variation find it almost impossible to cope with the demanding parameters of the sport which requires a delicate and skilful approach needing a very high quality of concentration. The 26,500 registered players (and many thousands of unregistered players) in England, would undoubtedly agree with this.

Although generally the game is played indoors using facilities of village halls etc, one new and exciting development in Short Mat Bowling is the establishment of outdoor rinks.

The ESMBA

In 1984 there were enough clubs in England playing this type of bowls to warrant forming an association to govern the sport. On Saturday 10th March of that year a meeting was held in Pall Mall, London and the ESMBA was born.

The English Short Mat Bowling Association held its first full meeting at Newcastle-under-Lyme Staffs, on Sunday 29th April 1984. It is required that all clubs and players wishing to play in county league, national and international competitions, must be affiliated to and play under ESMBA rules.

International

Short Mat Bowling is by no means restricted to the UK and Ireland and thriving national associations exist in, for example, Belgium, Sweden and Norway.