

Memories of Sports and Leisure Activities in Kibworth, 1920s to 1950s

By Joan Spain (nee Allen)

My childhood memories of outdoor sports facilities in Kibworth cover tennis, golf, hockey, football and rugby. Indoor leisure in my experience focused on the Village Hall with its whist drives, dances, cinema and occasional concert. Also there were the occasional outside events such as fairs and circuses.

I joined the Tennis Club on Smeeton Road recreation ground which had only two courts at that time. Although not a particularly good player, I enjoyed the sport and usually played singles with another girl. However on Sundays two fellows from Fleckney came and then we played doubles. This was in the late 1930s. The courts were open all the year round and I can remember having to clear snow from the courts in winter before we could have a game.

In my young days the golf course was situated alongside Wistow Road, but then the club moved to its new site at the bottom of Weir Road. There was a hockey club in Kibworth, run by Sid Coleman, and they played matches in surrounding villages. I never played golf or hockey myself but I knew several people who did and they were good activities for them.

The rugby team used a field off New Road, where the Brookfield Way houses were later built. The gate entrance to the field was just after the railway bridge (east side) and I remember the field was always boggy! I often went to watch matches there. Kibworth also had a football team and for a while their home matches were played in a field by the A6 main road, just south east of the cemetery.

There was a Young Men's Institute in Kibworth, centred at St Wilfrid's Hall in the High Street, and they had two good standard billiard tables. The aim was to keep young fellows 'off the street'. The Working Men's Club (now the Kibworth Club) in Fleckney Road also had billiard and snooker tables and a Mr Durham used to teach boys, and me as well, how to improve their technique. The game of darts was also available at this Club.

My main memories in regard to leisure in the late 1920s and 1930s are linked with the Village Hall. On most Saturday nights there would be a dance, usually preceded by a whist drive. It was the grown-up men and women, including my mum, who played whist in the main hall while the children had to sit and play their games in the back room. Whist began at half-past six. [Whist is a card game with four players at each table usually playing in pairs. Each pair would have a score card. But in progressive whist the winning pair after each game would move to the next tables - gents one way and ladies the other - so that new pairs were formed. For progressive whist each player had their own card.] Winners received a prize at the end of the evening. A few whist drives were run for charity: some beds at Leicester Royal Infirmary were bought with the proceeds and each had a plaque mentioning Kibworth above the bed.

Admission to the whist drive was one shilling (5p in today's money) or one shilling and sixpence (7½p) for both whist and the dance. It was one shilling for the dance only and this started at 8.45pm after the whist tables had been cleared and chairs put around the sides of the main hall. Typically there would be 25 or so people but numbers grew later in the evening, especially after ten o'clock when the pubs closed. Sometimes there would be more girls than boys so two girls would dance together. At 9.45pm some fellows left the dance to go across to the public house for a drink before closing time. However at the dance interval refreshments could be purchased, such as tea (tuppence a cup), coffee, sandwiches or fancy cakes. Two ladies did the refreshments and they must have had some special licence or other to buy food in during the early part of World War 2 (WW2).

I was allowed to stay on to the dances when I was 12 but in my early teens had to leave for home at 10 o'clock. There was always a live band and this came from Fleckney with 5 or 6 instrumentalists. The band leader announced each dance and chose the music. During the evening there would be a mix of modern (waltz, foxtrot, quickstep tango, veleta) and old time dances. The last dance was always a waltz with the song often being 'Who's taking you home tonight?' The floor was a good wooden sprung floor, excellent for dancing. No special decorations were provided except at Christmas time.

Friday nights was cinema night in the Village Hall. These were very professionally done and the films were often quite up-to-date, not necessarily old ones. The right hand side of the Hall's entrance lobby, as you entered, had a small sturdy lockable room that housed the two large film projectors. These worked in tandem so that a film showing was apparently continuous (when one reel was near its end the other projector started rolling). The man who ran all this came from Leicester. There were small openings high in the wall between this projection room and the hall for the projected light to come through to the screen. Chairs were arranged in rows (same chairs as used for whist drives and dances).

The Village Hall was heated by hot water radiators fed from a coke boiler. The boiler was in a tin shed at the back of the hall and it needed to be lit in good time otherwise the hall would be too cold. In winter especially, girls, still wearing their summer dresses, would gather near the radiators between dances. There was a door (now blocked up) on the right hand side of the hall, looking forward, used as an emergency exit and one could also get out at the back through the kitchen.

I can also remember social evenings being arranged on Wednesdays. There was always food there and I often wondered how the organisers managed to provide food, but they did.

The Kibworth Gilbert & Sullivan Operatic Society gave performances occasionally in the Village Hall. These would be on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings so that there would not be any cinema or dances in those weeks. Briggs, the shoe people, organised the Society and Eddie Welton was one of the lead singers. It started in the 1930s and at that time had a good number of men and women members. The Society had to disband in wartime because of the call-up of some men and blackout restrictions.

A fair came to Kibworth every October and this was a popular attraction to villagers. In the years before WW2 this fair was held in a field opposite the Rose & Crown Hotel (now Raitha's restaurant) where the houses on The Leys were later built. The wide gate to this field was by the A6 roadside path, roughly where the macadam path is now that leads from the A6 to The Leys. Traction engines and the fairground caravans, rides and stalls would arrive on the Monday before the special weekend. Then the fair would be open to the public from Thursday to Saturday. The engines would provide power to the rides (such as waltzer, carousel etc: some cost sixpence a ride), sideshows (coconut shies and so on) and stalls (selling candy floss, brandy snap). One had to go in boots as, being October, the ground was always very muddy; some gravel was put down at the entrance area but not all over.

I remember that once the fair opened on the Sunday, but not for rides and selling. Music was played and villagers went to listen, then collections were taken for a charity. Another one-off was when the fair stayed in Kibworth for two weeks, but one of the men told me afterwards that the fair didn't do well in the second, presumably because most folk had spent-up in the first week! The fair always seemed to move on to its next destination on a Monday.

Early in the 1940s the annual fair had to change its venue to the Smeeton Road recreation ground. The entrance at Smeeton Road was in the same place as it is today. The fair manager had mains water piped in so that he no longer had to ask for water from neighbouring houses. On one occasion the fair was held in Sturgess' field (opposite side of New Road from Council Street, now Stuart Street): houses in Greenway and The Paddock were later built in this area on what was part of Mason's Farm.

A circus came to Kibworth on at least one occasion, and this was also held on the Smeeton Road recreation ground. However I didn't go myself so I can't give any details.

Recorded in November 2008