

SWANNING AROUND AT DUCK RIVER

By Al Howard June 1988

In this year of 1988 I find myself once again on the banks of Duck River taking a step back into the history of the Auburn Municipal Golf Course and the Rosnay Golf Club.

1958 was my year of introduction to the area – an overgrown tangle of stunted scrub with weeds as high as the proverbial elephant's eye and smelly drains that oozed in erratic patterns across an environmental wasteland.

Admittedly, as a former garbage dump and sanitary depot the site was not exactly salubrious, but it did attract some insidious insects who meandered in their millions through the mulga. It was infested with those terrifying termites of that time, the invidious and almost invisible Argentine ants and in an orgy of generous funding the Government of the day granted Auburn Council 100 pounds to kick the critters off the common.

Happily today and for many years past the area has been infested with golfers and some 30 after it all began in 1958 Auburn Council is now embarking upon a further expansion of the original golf course.

No story about this part of Auburn would be complete without mention of Alice and Thelma, two wonderful old world characters who lived out their lives on the banks of Duck River. They created their own unique and independent life style in and around the old house that nestled in the south west corner of the golf course, which until recently was the oldest house in Auburn.

Though minus all the modern day conveniences, it was Home Sweet Home to Alice and Thelma, those grand old girls from a by-gone era.

The proposed new golf course expansion will cover the land area beyond the present 2nd and 16th holes where a large sweep of Duck River to the west created a flood free section. Upon this land Alice and Thelma cultivated flowers and vegetables and perhaps unknowingly, Argentine ants. Once a week they pushed an old pram laden with produce to sell at Regents Park and through the week hauled water and took turns at pulling the small cultivator to fill their garden plots.

Within that back paddock snakes and weeds were plentiful, but the "girls" pulled up the paspalum and repulsed the reptiles with equal disdain.

Though it was Council land at the time when the golf course was being planned it was thought that the present short 16th would serve as a stop-gap hole pending Alice and Thelma's departure to higher realms.

As Council Engineer Eric Black explained it was back in 1858 "in tribute to them Council feels that should remain undisturbed – after all it will only be temporary".

That's what they said about income tax – Remember?

Anyway, here we are 30 years down the track and back where it all started.

Duck River (not Duck Creek if you please) was, in the distant past, a pleasant reach of billabongs and none more so than Dead Horse Pond at the junction near the present third tee.

One time Rosnay golfer Dave McBay said he and many other Auburn kids saved themselves from drowning by learning to swim in that less than Olympic water hole.

Aided and abetted by the flood swirl Dead Horse Pond by the middle 50's made a wide sweep to the east and bordered the scrub line left of the present second fairway. Believe it or not, all of the present third hold was reclaimed from the ravages of erosion in flood time. Apart from stabilizing the bank of the stream in its present location, that reclamation added a vital land mass to the 67 acres upon which the original course was designed.

The thought was always in my mind that one fine day the western (Parramatta) bank of the river would be available to expand the very restricted front nine, but thus far only the thought exists.

Meanwhile the area serves the devious exploits of car wreckers and arsonists, winos, odd bods and occasional glimpses of that queer bird, the Duck River Flasher.

Some years back one such exhibitionist was frequently on display near the 7th green. To ensure a captive, if unimpressed audience, he performed generally on Ladies Day, but he big noted himself once too often and the "no-knickers knave" was eventually hauled off to the cooler.

The case was dismissed – there were witnesses aplenty, but none could remember his face. Ah well – beauty as they say, is in the eye of the beholder.

But now back to the more mundane aspects of the former garbage dump and sanitary depot upon which the new golf course was to be build.

The whole area was a minefield of broken concrete slabs, dups of road base, asphalt, barbed wire, corrugated iron sheets and lumps of any old iron in an old quantities.

Perhaps the worst obstacle to clearing the site were the dozens of partially hidden or buried 44 gallon drums containing who knows what dross. Even to-day, those we failed to unearth render the surface G.U.R. (Ground un-repairable).

In late September, 1958 the first blows in golf course construction were struck in more ways than one.

Several firms marketing the new large industrial scrub slashers put on a machinery exhibition day and what is not the 4th fairway was selected as a test site.

I tell you flying concrete and junk took to the air upon that occasion and scattered itself and the watching assemblage to all four points of the compass.

Bigger, if not better machinery was needed for the task of untangling the undergrowth and Bede Hodges from Princes Rd load Council an old cable blade D7 dozer. There was on major catch. Yours truly had to

drive it. It was a cranky cuss of a thing, a Caterpillar by name and pace, but what we couldn't shift we mounded over with clay and thus covered a multitude of sins (44 gallon bins).

In the years that have passed since those long gone and dusty days of the dozer, the thought has often crossed my mind what I would have sad had some Government official turned up to observe what was happening to that hundred quid donated for termite eradication.

I daresay "chasing Argentine ants with a dozer" would not have been an acceptable answer.

When construction commenced in late 1958 there were only two stands of timber on the area. One small grove was at the rear of the present 10th and 13th greens and the other group formed the avenue on which stands the present 16th.

Quite rightly Council ordered that no trees were to be felled – none – not even on – not now – not ever! The green wooded landscape that is not Auburn golf course stemmed from that reservation action. Mind you, there were times I was sorely tempted to have the old Cat lean heavily on some spindly scrub, but I stayed my hand. In return for my forbearance some of that lousy lumber, nurtured by fertilizer and water filched from nearby greens and tees has spread branches far and wide and now casts unwanted winter shade o'er all. Oh how I longed for a chainsaw, a cherry picker and a dark night.

And while on the subject of trees and winter shade problems, many Sydney golf courses are now repenting in displeasure the haste exhibited in planning an overabundance of trees on the northern side of tees, greens and fairways.

In this fair city the sun on its winter circuit swings in a low northern arc leaving much of the playing area devoid of dappled sunlight, even to the extent of permanent shadow.

Beware the shades of March – also April, May June and July.

Mind you the trees were not the only things going up.

One day, to my amazed gaze up went a large notice board informing all and sundry that the new municipal golf course would open in September, 1959.

Likewise other burghers of the bailiwick were notified that come September the new swimming pool would be christened.

What a month September, 1959 promised to be for Auburn – two major sporting amenities, and oh I almost forgot – an election in October.

More surprises were in store for me.

If I thought having the golf course ready for play by September, 1959 was a load of old garbage imagine the consternation when trucks started arriving on site loaded with piles of new garbage.

In a break with conventional methods and due to the time and money factor involved, the new greens were to be built on a garbage base covered by layers of ash, then clay and finally the top soil.

The Auburn golf course, similar to many others, serves a multitude of people and purposes. In addition to the open spaces, flora and fauna reserves and recreational area they provide stormwater outlets and flood retention basins.

Three major drainage outlets flow onto and through the golf course into Duck River.

The smallest of these channels is in front of the 18th green and the largest runs through the middle of the golf course. That drain in full flood enticed the local “surfies” to ride their boards and rubber floats down the brown surge towards the 2nd tee, while Duck River at the peak would provide passage for a Manly Ferry. This until it met up with the Wellington Road bridge, which has been under water for short periods in major floods.

The Wellington Road bridge was not built until the golf course had been opened a few years and crossing Duck River to the Granville side, even in the sober light of day was not a feat to be attempted unless far removed from a state of temperance.

Col Borthwick, hero of hundreds of night river crossings reckoned you needed more than a Toohey's or two at Rosnay for some Dutch courage to undertake the perilous hops, steps and jumps to gain the Granville bank. According to Col, such was the shock upon reaching safety that one reverted immediately to sobriety. From stoned to unstoned in three uneasy steps.

But now away from Duck River and back to building the golf course and forming up the fairways.

As explained earlier the ground was a mass of weeds, but the best method of eradication was to distribute kikuyu grass far and wide across the area. Many grass experts today classify kikuyu as a noxious weed, but on hard clay country it provided grass as opposed to gravel. The fairways at Auburn today all came from a small patch that is now the fairway of the short 14th and through drought and flood kikuyu has survived and served well the cause of Golf since its introduction from Africa over 50 years ago.

The worst fairways for drainage and grassing were the 1st, 13th and 17th, with little or no fall and pockets of subsidence that held water after rain.

We had them coming along nicely when large amounts of grief in the form of the Metropolitan Water, Sewage and Drainage Board loomed up near the 1st tee one day. They had come, so I learned to bring the joys of flushing toilets to the residents of Regents Park and 12 feet under the first and second fairways was the way the pipes had to go. If I'd have my way six feet under was the way they would have gone.

And talking of six feet under conjures up visions of our puny attempts to dam up Duck River as a means of providing fairway irrigation for the golf course.

We had a report on the proposed site which stated that while the water was unfit for drinking it was suitable for irrigation and the washing of horses. Also, perhaps as a humorous afterthought, it was mentioned that the banks were quite stable.

Old time Auburn folk will recall with fond memories that name of Charlie Curran, as large in life as the bulldozers he leased and his latest machine had its christening by starting to build the dam in Duck River.

The site was just above where the creek flows in at the 7th and at the end of the day the dozer had the deed half done. It was a fine day's work, but the night that followed was anything but. In the overnight deluge that engulfed the dam site the only thing that emerged from the muddy surge to mark the spot was the exhaust pipe of Charlie's dozer.

In the passage of time at the fold course other disasters came to pass, unbidden or otherwise.

To assist grass cover and slow up the floor rains across the fairways, coffee bean husks were spread over the more arid areas. Granted there may be only 45 beans to the cu, but billions were broadcast over the barren patches of the layout.

Did they improve the golf course?

Well, let's say they improved the quality and maybe the quantity of Life to those prone to licking the golf ball.

Coffee beans were an improved taste on sulphate of ammonia and less fatal than weed killer.

Truly this Australia is a land of drought and flooding rains and in the early years of the golf course one such precipitation caused a high tide in the ground floor of a bulk seed store in Silverwater. The overflowing water brought forth sprouts from the seed bags that were busting out all over and the scent was not of the perfumed garden variety.

The dilemma where to dump this germinating glug was solved when someone of sound mind suggest the golf course.

Down it came – on it went – and up it came. You name it – we grew it. Couch grass, corn, cauliflower, coleslaw (new variety) and maybe our first crop of cannabis. Well at least it made a change from crab grass, our floral emblem of that period.

In contrast to that era a generous growth some may recall that wild hail and windstorm of the early 70's that literally shredded the trees back to bare trunks and branches. The golf course was a tangle of broken tree limbs and littered with twigs and leaves creating a giant cleanup operation. Until the next growing season the bar trees remained as a start reminder of the fury of that storm.

Upon that occasion the golf course was closed for a few days and there have been other periods since when the elements called a halt to play.

One other drama, fortunately with tones of comic relief happened between the dusk and dawn of Friday night and Saturday morning (doesn't it always). In the piccaninny dawn of one Saturday as I was unlocking the 17 locks to the Fort Knox Pro shop up came Alf the greenkeeper to give me the news that parked across the front of the 13th green was a locked semi-trailer.

Well though I, first off, under the Rules of Golf this calls for a decision...then secondly, wat general rule would apply to semi-trailers, parked in green, front of.

Do you know that nothing in the Good Book covered such an everyday occurrence. What a lack of jurisprudence! It was then by the dawn's early light I handed down a decision worthy of Solomon.

Delving deeply into my past ineptitude on the Rules I proclaimed to the waiting multitude on the 1st tee that the aforesaid articulated multi wheeled encumbrance was a stymie – and furthermore a dead set stymie! In those circumstances therefore the ball shall be played as it lies – over the top with a wedge or underneath with a pitch and run. Suit yourself.

And now for the \$64 question. How come the semi-trailer was on the fold course in the wee small hours of that Saturday morning? Seems as though the driver in a mood of intoxicated adoration for a damsel was teaching her how to change gear (mechanical I presume) when the midnight wallopers on patrol and alerted by such capers loomed up alongside. In the glare from the spotlight on their vehicle they later told of the most weird and wonderful human gyrations as the tangled twosome strove to regain their rightful positions in the cab.

During such process the truck stalled and everything came to a sudden stop – everything.

Perhaps now is an appropriate time for me to likewise conclude these chronicles from the past history of the Auburn Municipal Golf Course.