

Golfer's Life/Brendan Moloney

Royal Park Golf Club on the edge of Melbourne's CBD is noted as the place where five-times British Open Peter Thomson learned to play and where he won the club championship in 1946 aged 16.

The club, formed in 1903, has a rich history and last month (March) put on a game and lunch for members from the Thomson era who also did something remarkable in golf.

In 1954 the pennant team of Wes Willoughby, Tony Thomson, Bruce Davis, John Munro, John Kellaway and Bob McKeown went through the season undefeated with all members winning all their matches. On top of this, Munro lost only one hole for the entire season, in the final against Patterson River at Victoria GC.

Munro modestly described the team performance as a record that can only be equalled and never beaten. It is a bit better than that says David Greenhill, the Victorian Golf Association's director of golf. "It is phenomenal," he said. "I've never heard of any other club having its entire team undefeated for the season. There are about 600 pennant players in Melbourne and in an average year, about a dozen go through without a loss. As for the man who dropped only one hole for the season, I'm astonished. It is an incredible achievement."

For some, the reunion was the first time they'd been back to the club in half a century and the group of five who played in glorious autumn sunshine had a combined age of 360 years. Missing and missed was Thomson's brother, Tony, who died in 2000, but another brother, Roger, was there by coincidence for his regular Monday game. It was fascinating to hear them reminisce as they played on what was, and still is, one of the world's weirdest courses.

McKeown, 68, grew up beside the ninth green. His father was Royal Park's station master who opened and shut the railway gates by hand and their home adjoined the clubhouse and the railway line that runs through the nine-hole layout. If he had been anywhere but Royal Park, people would not have believed the stories he told. "I remember as a kid hearing noises on the roof," he said. "Some monkeys had escaped from the zoo next door and the zoo keepers were chasing them. I got up there as well and helped round them up. Another time my father went to open the station early in the morning and there was a big chimpanzee sitting on his desk, shredding his papers. The animals were sometimes sent to the zoo by train and this one had got out of his cage."

It is normal to play to the sounds of elephants, lions and baboons at Royal Park and be surrounded by colorful parrots and other native birds attracted to suburbia by their city cousins in the zoo's aviary. Even Thomson added to the wildlife of the area when he was young. In his foreword to the club's centenary history written by Denise Hilton he recalled: "Forty years on from the club's opening I took my first steps onto its hallowed

fairways. I held my uncle's greyhound while he ran up the fourth fairway with a furry shape in a hessian bag. I was ordered to slip the lead when he reached the far green. The dog then took off like a shot out of a gun, leaving me to examine my surroundings." History might have been very different if the uncle had a better dog.

Like Thomson, who lived a short walk from the course, McKeown was smitten by the game and at the age of 14 was selling balls he found on the railway line or his dog brought into the house which was out of bounds. A typical Saturday for him was lighting the boiler in the clubhouse, raking the bunkers, riding his bike to the shops in Sydney Road to collect the shopping for the club caterer, foxing balls for pro Bert Ferguson as he practised, filling in divots and then caddying. In fact, Ferguson offered to take him on as a trainee professional but his parents steered him toward an apprenticeship as an electrician.

Munro, 71, has been returning regularly since the centenary in 2003 to present the trophies he donated for the club's foursomes competition. Before that there was a gap of 40 years. "It brought back a lot of memories," he said. "In the 1950s you could hit out of bounds on the right on just about every hole. All the Royal Park guys learnt very quickly not to hit it right. If we had a fault, it was a hook. The first hole was beside the railway line and if you were 10 metres off line, you were dead. It was great because when we went to other courses, the fairways seemed so wide. Even in those days the course was public but the members had preference. They had it all day Saturday and Sunday morning and there were nearly 400 members." Today membership is down to a quarter of that.

A couple of other things that set apart Munro, who played pennant for Kingswood for 30 years, are his course record and playing 17 rounds in 24 hours at Royal Park. A board in the old clubhouse showed that Thomson's record of 69 set some time in the 1940s was lowered to 68 by Munro in 1958. This was lost in 1970, along with the driver Thomson used to win a South African Open, when the clubhouse burned down. Willoughby, 72, who also played the 17 rounds (153 holes) as well in December 1954 said: "We were young and golf mad. We thought we would do something that nobody else had done. We carefully picked out a summer's night with a full moon but we did not see the moon because two inches of rain fell on us. Some of the members acted as markers and carried torches and we wrapped handkerchiefs around the wet grips. Bob McKeown's father, the station master, and his wife fed us. We started and finished at 4.00 p.m. and had a good time. Our best round was 68 and we averaged 82. We pulled up all right afterwards but it would kill me now."

He said the club encouraged juniors in the 1950s who started playing because of the publicity generated by Thomson's burgeoning career. "Everyone knew Peter. His father was a member and so were his three younger brothers who all played junior pennant. The club has produced some good players apart from Peter. Mick Ryan, who won an Australian Open (1932) started here and so did David Hill who won the club championship at Kingston Heath before turning pro.

Like all the "1954 Invincibles" Davis, 71, has led an interesting life. He made his living

as a bookmaker and was a victim of the Great Bookie Robbery at the Victoria Club in 1976 when six armed men got away with between \$3 and \$12 million in cash used to "settle up" after the weekend's racing. His abiding memory is being forced at gunpoint to lie on the floor and listening as the robbers opened the steel cash containers with bolt cutters. One of the bookies said: "If there is not enough cash for you, I'll happily write you a cheque." Not a cent was recovered and only one man, a dim sim manufacturer named Normie Lee, was charged. He was later acquitted.

The oldest member of the group, 78-year-old McNair, attended Brunswick West State School with Thomson, played with him and his family at Royal Park and was able to watch him play in Britain where he worked as an aeronautical engineer with Rolls-Royce's jet engine division. His last game at Royal Park was in 1953 while his last game of golf was with Tony Thomson at Victoria in 1990. Dusting off the sticks, he had a round of 55 for nine stableford points. "It brought back wonderful memories," he said. "I played at the same time as Peter and his younger brothers Tony, Roger and Michael, his father Arthur, who was left-handed, and his grandfather. The grandfather, Anthony Watson, used to collect the practice balls for Peter. Tony went one better than Peter and won the club championship when he was 15. The course has not changed greatly. Some holes are different and the greens are much faster than they used to be. My mother played here in the 1930s and she introduced me to the club. I played a couple of practice rounds with Peter but not in competition. I had dinner with him when he won the Welsh Open at Royal Cardiff and I took my sons to see him play his last British Open at Royal Lytham & St. Anne's in 1979."

Most Melburnians look down their noses at Royal Park but it is worth playing at least once for its heritage and quirkiness. As well as the wild animal calls, interest is added by hot air balloons taking off nearby, soccer and Australian rules football in progress hard against the third fairway in winter and cricket in summer and it is necessary to dodge the traffic on the bicycle, train and tram tracks that run through the course. Spasmodically over the years attempts have been made to improve the layout but because the Melbourne City Council controls the land, nothing is ever done. Thomson has even offered to fix it for free. It is a shocking design. Some years ago some holes were stolen to provide car parking for the zoo and now there is a walk of 600 metres from the first green to the second tee which is repeated from the eighth green to the ninth tee. In a round of 18 holes, this adds up to a walk of 2.4 kilometres without hitting a shot.

Lord Mayor John So presented a plaque to Thomson last year, recognising his connection with the course, so perhaps the time is right for another attempt at selling a great idea to city hall.