

ROYAL CENTURY

With little fanfare but a lot of pride, Melbourne's Royal Park Golf Club marked its centenary this year with a tournament in March and the publication in November of its history written by member Denise Hilton.

The book, like the course, is short, quaint and charming and will sit on my bookshelf surrounded by grander tomes, always a pleasure to revisit.

Those who have not played the nine-hole layout are missing both a golfing treat and a lesson in history. Situated four kilometres north of the CBD in the same parkland from whence the Bourke and Wills Expedition set out in 1860, it offers inner-city dwellers and visitors space to play between the city skyline and the zoo next door where lions roar.

Bourke and Wills did not make it but another who started out at Royal Park became Australia's most famous golfer, although his life and career could have gone in a number of directions. In his foreword to the book, the 1945 club champion, Peter Thomson, revealed that his first foray onto the course was as an assistant greyhound trainer.

In the late 1930s the lad who lived two minutes' walk away in Brunswick Street "took my first step onto its hallowed fairways. I held my uncle's greyhound while he ran up the 4th fairway with a furry shape in a hessian bag. I was ordered

to slip the lead when he reached the far green. The dog took off like a shot out of a gun, leaving me to examine my surroundings."

Who knows what might have been if the uncle had a better dog or Thomson, who also made 150 not out for the West Brunswick Presbyterians and was invited to train with the Carlton Cricket Club, had not stuck with golf. Royal Park was also the golfing nursery of 1932 Australian Open champion Mick Ryan, his cousin Gus Jackson, whose many accomplishments included playing five seasons of pennant for Victoria GC without loss, and Afton and Vern Morcom who were fine golfers and even better golf course designers and superintendents.

With both trains and trams running through the 2299-metre course, Thomson says it is "no great shakes but the club thrives as a socially cohesive group of enthusiasts who make up a small stitch in the vast tapestry which is the global game of golf". How cohesive is shown by a delightful story Hilton tells about a member who is a tram driver contemplating a difficult shot. A tram pulled up beside him and the driver, another member, gave advice. The passengers crowded to one side and applauded the successful outcome.

—Brendan Moloney