

Moorpool Skittle Alley - 100 not out

One of Britain's most curious and unusual sporting venues - and undoubtedly one of Birmingham's best-kept architectural secrets - **Moorpool Skittle Alley**, in the well-heeled suburb of Harborne, has reached its centenary. One of only two surviving dual skittle alleys in Britain and the only surviving example of a round - or cambered - and flat - or level - alley combination, its exact opening date is uncertain, but is believed to have been in late January or early February 1911. Situated on the Moor Pool Estate, an utterly charming and essentially intact example of 20th century social housing and the brainchild of John Sutton Nettlefold, a Quaker, industrialist and first chair of Birmingham Housing Committee, the alley is part of the community buildings erected by the esteemed Birmingham architects Martin and Martin in 1910, the estate then being known as Harborne Tenants, with each household allowed a say in how it was managed.

Yet despite being located at The Circle, the epicentre of this still thriving community, the alley's presence is about as unobtrusive and obscure as is possible. Not visible from the public highway and with no signage to proclaim its existence, Moorpool Skittle Alley is unknown even to some of Harborne's residents and unvisited by many on the estate itself.

Birmingham's last surviving purpose built skittle alley, it has been home to the **Moorpool Skittle Club** since its formation in September 1913. Back then regional skittles games were enjoying a revival and the club joined the Birmingham and District Skittling League, whose members included the Chad Valley Skittle Club, thought to have been based at the nearby Duck Inn (now called the White Swan) on Harborne Road, and home to another dual alley. It's unclear whether one of these tracks was also round, locals who remember it are - perhaps surprisingly - divided (and the only available photographic evidence is inconclusive), but if one of the Duck's alleys was round that may help to explain why Moorpool's was constructed in such fashion. Or it may simply have been a cruel trick played on the skittlers of Moorpool by whoever designed their alley, installing an obstacle that continues to thwart players a century on.

Because bowling a ball (or wood, as it is known) down the round alley and toppling a goodly proportion of the ten skittles positioned in a triangular formation at the end of its 49ft length can be devilishly difficult. Achieving the Round 30 - that is, knocking over all ten skittles three times in succession - is exceptionally hard, so much so that this feat has only been achieved by 11 people - and not at all for 16 years! Those who do so are honoured with their name on a plaque in the alley and two players at least appear to have had the knack - B.A. Fuggle (18 times club champion) chalked up 9 Round 30s between 1946 and 1965 with J. Stone (club champion 17 times) doing so on a staggering 19 occasions between 1961 and 1983! There's some achievement; as both novices and seasoned skittlers alike have discovered, the woods' have a nasty tendency to slide into the side gutter before reaching their target.

Despite their different characteristics, both of Moorpool's alleys share the same dimensions - 49ft long and 42" wide, made from a combination of maple and oak. The woods (made of *Lignum vitae*) come in three different sizes (5", 7" and 8.5" diameter, weighing 3lb, 8lbs and 14lbs respectively) with many thought to be original, though the skittles (which are nowadays manufactured in Asia) need replacing approximately every ten years. A larger ball scatters the skittles more effectively but even on the flat surface is prone to veer sideways as it traverses the alley, while the smallest ball runs faster, holds its line better but causes less damage. Until the 1960s, boys sitting at the end of the alleys would be paid to return the bowling balls and replace the skittles, a common practice, and from which it is believed derives the term 'earning pin money'.

Each player is allowed three woods (of any size) per end, on both flat and round alley (both of which are played several times during the course of a match) and the player with the highest cumulative score at the end of the contest wins. The season runs from October to April, though there's also a spring/summer competition, and the club's membership currently stands at around

25 (a Ladies section was formed only as recently as 2005). The club's oldest member, Ernest Connington, died recently aged 98, a sad loss for a club that is as much social as it is competitive (though this being a Quaker estate, there is no alcohol license and no bar).

Birmingham no longer has a skittles league and there are no opponents left for the Moorpool Skittles Cub to play. Later this year the alley, which has barely changed since it opened (Mr Fuggle would recognise it in a thrice), is scheduled to undergo essential repair work. Meanwhile, discussions are ongoing which could see the Grade II listed building in which the alley stands handed over to a Trust Board, to be operated much as it was a century ago.

Like the woods on Moorpool's dual skittle alley, what goes around comes around.

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February 2nd 2011