

Aston Case Study

Q1. Tell us about your club

Aston Bowling Club is a privately run crown green bowling club based in Aston Park, near Queensferry, Flintshire. The club was established in 1994 with the first bowling happening in 1997 following laying down of the green the previous year. Next year (2022) Aston will celebrate its 25th Anniversary since the green was officially opened. It had its inaugural season in the Flintshire Midweek League in 1997. The club is ran by its 16 member strong committee and the green, surrounds, club house and out-buildings are all maintained by a group of club members who volunteer their time working down at the green multiple times per week unpaid.

Outside of league bowling, the club tries to maintain an active social and competitive internal club bowling schedule, and social programme. We run a number of internal club competitions, external club open competitions, monthly coffee mornings, Bowling BBQs, inter-club friendlies with the Albany Bowling Club on the Wirral, weekly Saturday morning training sessions for new bowlers, internal club mini-leagues for new bowlers, social nights, Annual Community Bonfire Night, and this year we are running our first Community Christmas Market & Grotto.

Q2. What was the project/initiative your club run and why?

The general project the club initiated around two years ago was a drive to turn the club around and buck the trend of most bowling clubs whose membership is ageing and dwindling.

When the club was founded the majority of its membership were younger, residents of Aston Park, with some juniors and a lot of recent retirees and people still in work. The ages were mainly 40-60 years old. Overtime the clubs age profile slowly crept up with these same people now in their 70s and 80s and a small number of juniors and younger members. A number of members since passed away or have become too old to play the same number of games they used to or help out and work at the club. As such, the membership had slowly fallen and certain league teams were beginning to struggle three years ago to field teams. There were talks at one point of maybe having to fold one of our Flintshire Midweek Teams as it is the evening teams that began to struggle first as older members prioritise playing in the daytime veteran's leagues over the evening leagues. This would've resulted in less opportunity for younger members to play at the club as it is only evening leagues, they can play in due to work commitments and age restrictions on other leagues. In addition internal club competitions and social events were struggling to attract the same numbers of people that they used to as members chose not to attend and instead prioritised their league bowling. The committee hadn't seen much fresh blood in years and as such new ideas for improvements were drying up and the enthusiasm was slowly falling as organised events were poorly supported by membership.

A number of members estimated that the club only had a couple of seasons left if the trends were continued to be followed just like many other clubs nationally.



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This stark prediction sparked a fresh impetus to start a new drive to help renew the club. Fresh faces were drafted onto the committee including local residents who didn't even bowl. The first thing we knew we had to do was to get ourselves out there and make our club known to local residents and the people of Flintshire and try and debunk the myths of sleepy old bowling clubs. This sparked us to organise our usual Bonfire Night for club members and to open it up to our local community. To advertise it we recognised that flyers were a thing of the past and the internet and social media is now the way forward. We set up a brand new Facebook page on 1st October 2019 for the Club – our first presence on the internet. We drafted up a digital poster and shared it all over local Flintshire Community Facebook Pages and shared the Club's Facebook page. The page grew fast and interest in the event was unprecedented. On the night we estimated over 300 people turned up to enjoy, we were handing out membership posters out on the gates in the hope that even if 1 or 2 of these people would come back next year to give bowling a go it would be a huge success. The event also generated income for the club.

Over that winter we continued our push on Facebook to build our presence and get our name out there to the community. We got a banner made up and hung it on our local roundabout to attract the attention of commuters and advertise us wanting new members. We were so excited to get to the next season to begin our programme of improvement and attract new bowlers at the club. We advertised heavily on Facebook appealing for new members to come down and give it a go. Then March came and the virus struck. This forced bowling clubs across the whole of Wales to close with uncertainty if they would be allowed to bowl at all that season. Instead of bunkering down like a lot of other clubs we saw this as an opportunity. We continued our Facebook drive and prepared for reopening. With no league bowling we saw this as great opportunity for us to use the time we would usually dedicate to playing in leagues to train up new people at the club and give them taster and tuition sessions. On reopening we ran weekly Saturday morning training sessions for new people to come down and try out bowls and learn week on week. We also ran a comprehensive internal league programme complete with cup knockouts. This involved over 30 members of the club and we invited along our brand-new members as an opportunity to them to meet the members of the club (A, B & C) and learn how to play, learn the rules and play competitively in a supportive environment. It was a huge success. It was safely ran within COVID regulations and got lots of new members hooked as they saw that ABC was a busy club with lots going on while other clubs in the area didn't even open up. We shared all of our successes on Facebook to encourage other people to give it a go.

We caught the attention of a local reporter for Deeside.com, a local news website who are present on Facebook and Twitter. They saw the effort that the club was making on social media to encourage people to join us and saw all of the great events we were organising. We stood out by miles compared to all other bowling clubs and as such we got spotted by them. They asked us if they could write a piece on the club to help us attract new members which we accepted. They launched the article before the 2021 season
<https://www.deeside.com/aston-park-bowling-club-is-opening-its-doors-to-people-who-want-to-try-the-sport-for-the-first-time/>



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We put up our banner on the roundabout outside the club to attract the attention of commuters driving past the club and to let them know that we were looking for new members. This drawn in a number of our new members to the club.

We applied for the Sport Wales COVID grant to help us prepare for the new season by purchasing things such as sanitiser and dispensers and were awarded part of our grant application. We set the club up to operate securely for the 2021 season under the virus.

In 2021, we continued how we left off. Again, with a slight delay at the start of the season thanks to the second Coronavirus lockdown. The committee were positive about the members who joined in 2020 and who looked forward to joining in 2021 and saw the success. As a result, the Committee decided to offer free membership to all new bowlers for the entire 2021 season in a drive to encourage even more new members. We carried on our Saturday morning sessions and advertised all over Facebook the free membership offers and our sessions.

We had even more new members join us throughout the year. Some of them came once, some came a few times and a lot came week in week out to our Saturday Morning Sessions. They also came to watch and support in league matches, attended club competitions, helped volunteer for club events, came to club socials and some even decided to throw themselves into league bowling straight away. We ran another internal mini league for new bowlers to play competitively amongst themselves with the guidance of experienced bowlers.

We started a partnership with local Primary School St. Ethelwolds to give bowling PE lessons at the green to 23 Year 5/6 children weekly for the summer term. We had no junior bowls and limited adult bowls. As such we approached local businesses and charities to help us fund 12 sets of junior bowls and other training aids. Our calls were answered by Deeside Round Table and Synthite Ltd. It was a massive success, the kids loved it. We tailor made the sessions to try and keep them fun. We ran the lessons with the help of our club members who volunteered their time to help teach the kids under the supervision of the primary school teacher. We ran a big finals day and gave the children medals, cups, and invited their parents to come down and watch them. Again, this boosted the profile of the club in the local community and helped to dispel the myths of it being a game purely for older people.

We ran two open competitions at the club in August / September. The first competitions in a number of years after low entries they were fully filled and big successes. (advertised through Facebook entries from all across north Wales, and the North West and Leeds. Secured sponsorship from long term sponsor Cobblestone Driveways. This helped to boost our profile and was good kudos for the club to hopefully host big matches in the future.

We're now preparing to host our first Christmas Market and Grotto on Saturday 4th December and have got nearly 20 stall holders from local people, a silver band and a Santa's grotto. We are expecting large number of people to come along – again boosting our club's profile in the local area.



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Q3. What was the impact?

Big community presence, regular events which are well supported by the community (300+ bonfire night).

Well known in the local area. Our Facebook page now has 327 likes and 348 followers. Our posts on Facebook are seen regularly by over 5,000 people and shared by many of our followers.

Club open competitions back up and running and well supported.

Club internal competitions back up and running and well supported.

Over 75 people came down and gave it a go or enquired (including 23 school children) and over 20 new, regular members of the club. Plenty more enquiries already by new people wanting to give it a go in 2022.

Big impact for our old members, making new friends.

Big impact for our new members, making new friends, belonging to a new club. Have been told it has had a massive impact on some of their lives, especially those who have recently lost their partner or those who live alone.

Word of mouth from new members to their friends and family to join and have a go – a domino effect.

Younger membership attracts younger members still, more ladies members and dispels myths and stereotypes of old men's sport.

New members trained up and confident to join our club league teams. League teams are struggling much less to field a team now as a result.

Possible interest to enter new teams into new leagues as a result of influx of members.

A real fresh and vibrant buzz about the whole club and all its members a massive change.

Lots of new ideas at the club. The club is always busy and well used. We are running regular social events which are always brilliantly supported by our members.

Fresh new ideas coming into the club. Sub-committees set up to organise social events and competitions and other aspects of the club.

Club sponsorship boards fully filled by 20 local businesses, generating income for the club.



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Our 2021 Presentation Night has got nearly 90 attendees! The most it has ever had.
New investment into the club's facilities.

Q4. Was there any learning you took from the project?

A club is only as good as its members. The real reason why the club succeeded in this project was because it was a team effort from lots of members all bringing their own skill sets. Also thanks to our members being friendly and welcoming to our newer members.

Q5. Any advice for other clubs?

Never give up!

Embrace social media – it's the key to success in the 21st Century.

Q6. Did you work with any partners/organisations on this project?

St. Ethelwold's Primary School, Aston set up a programme to learn bowls in their Year 5/6 P.E. lessons over the summer term at the club every Friday.

Deeside Round Table and Synthite Ltd. Provided funding for Junior's bowls and training aids for school children.

Asda Queensferry and the Co-Op provided groceries, and COVID supplies for coffee mornings, bonfire night, Christmas Market.

Cobblestone Driveways sponsored our club competitions.

Q7. Any other information you would like to share around this project?

Covered above.



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