



History of the Old Buckwellians Association - Part 4 - The 1970s

The actions taken in the late 1960s provided only a stay of execution. The problem of the unaffordable clubhouse and unplayable playing fields had not been resolved. As a result, the third crisis in less than twenty years occurred in the mid 1970s.

The Association has faced many difficulties over the past year and I cannot paint a very bright picture. There will certainly be some radical changes made this year and it is certain that the Association will not be able to continue in its present form. ... It has been said that Old Boys' Associations such as ours are now out of date and not what young people want.

So wrote Secretary Graham Eales (1955) in *Roding* 1970.

There may be some truth in that latter statement. For example, the description of some of the social events as 'beat dances', suggests that in that era of discothèques and rock festivals, the organisers were perhaps not fully in touch with the popular culture of the day.

By 1971 the playing pitches had deteriorated further, football had returned to its old ground in Loughton, hockey had been hived off, and there were talks of reorganization involving merger with another sports club. Inconclusive discussions were also held with Redbridge Council as to whether the lease should be wound up or whether the very poor condition of the pitches could be improved.

Use of the Roding Lane North site was limited to social activity. Years later, in December 1983 newsletter editor, John Berrett (1955) reminisced:

The most memorable thing about the long-lamented clubhouse—apart from the sub-zero temperatures (I remember a cricket (sic) tea being ruined by frozen pipes) - was the fact that, for three or four evenings a week, an Old Buck knew that there was somewhere he could share a drink with a fellow member and put the world to rights. Or chat up somebody else's girlfriend without fear of leaving with a beer-mug wrapped round his head. Or hear fascinating accounts of life in Throgmorton Street, or on a North Sea oil rig, or in Wormwood Scrubs.

Nevertheless it must have been a bitter blow for the sporting sections in particular, that the new facility that they had looked forward to for so long had ended up a failure.

In the last ever edition of *Roding* in 1973, OBA's contribution comprised no more than a plug for the football club and a page of news of old boys. No newsletters were published between 1971 and October 1975. OBA has been described as having been during the early 1970s 'moribund' and 'pretty inactive'.

In a letter written in May 1975 to former pupil Brian Tarlton (1939), Fred Scott wrote :

Since the demise of the OB's association ... OB news tends to be somewhat fragmentary – which makes it all that much more welcome when it comes.

'Demise' was perhaps a bit of an overstatement, but it must have seemed that way to those who were not close to the (in)action.



Jack Sutton

During the mid-1970s, Jack Sutton, who had been Chairman of the OBA for eight difficult years, disappeared entirely from the OBA scene. Despite an uninspiring academic career, Sutton had become a very successful businessman, no doubt due in no small measure to his impressive interpersonal skills. He became a high-flyer in the City and senior partner in a stock broking firm, eventually forming his own company. His personal wealth was apparently substantial, reflected in a lifestyle that included a superlative house, luxury cars, and a string of racehorses. He had done a lot for OBA, including personally financing several projects at the clubhouse.

Sutton's disappearance appears to have followed the seizure of his personal assets in order to pay off creditors. He apparently got involved in a deal involving a Russian bank that went sour. The big mistake was providing a personal guarantee, resulting in his bankruptcy.

According to Malcolm Beard (1941):

I believe the early years were very successful, but I always felt he found it difficult to say "no", even when he should have done.

A message published in the March 1979 OBA News said that Sutton was living in Thorpe Bay. He sent regards to all his friends, and hoped to see them again soon.

Brian Hand (1940) writes:

The last time I met Jack was in the late 1970s in the Foresters pub in Loughton, where I used to lunch. But I had little time to talk to him as he was in a rush clearing out his house in Albion Hill from which he was moving. He then seemed to disappear completely. It was only some years later I heard he had gone to Hong Kong after successes and failures in London.



Malcolm Beard

OBA's official papers, including financial records, had surprisingly all been kept at Sutton's home, where committee meetings were held. Unfortunately these all disappeared too, and despite considerable efforts by Trevor Lebentz they have never been recovered. This has of course hampered the ability to record the early days of OBA with accuracy and completeness.

OBA News reported in 1981:

How About That: Old Bucks can never be accused of doing things by halves. Members may have noticed in the papers a few months ago a photograph of former Association chairman Jack Sutton' alongside a story about his bankruptcy hearing, something about a little matter of five million quid. Apparently he even had to sell his racehorses!

In 1975 OBA had made a compassionate loan of £250 to the Sutton family who were literally destitute. This was considered appropriate in recognition of all that they had done for the Association. No thanks for this were ever forthcoming, and even when Sutton got back on his feet years later there was no repayment of the loan. This may partly explain why Sutton proved so elusive when efforts were made to trace him during the pupil search of the early 2000s. In 2005 OBA learned that Jack Sutton had died the previous year at Newmarket.



Following the end of the Sutton era, OBA finally managed to turn the corner and re-establish itself as a viable association with a long-term future.

The Roding Lane North clubhouse was sold to Wanstead Rugby Club in 1974/5. The lease was re-assigned to them by Redbridge Council, which funded bringing the pitches up to National Playing Fields Association standards. This was something that they had not done for OBA. WRFC are still based there, but the wooden clubhouse burned down in 1987 and was replaced by a brick-built structure.

It is not unusual for former pupils' Associations to get into difficulties through trying to maintain their own premises. This is believed to have happened in the case of at least two other local schools over the years.

By April 1975, OBA was dependent on loans from members. But in the spring of 1975 the sum of £6,623 was received – a considerable amount then – being the net proceeds from the sale of the clubhouse. The money was put into safe investments.

Trevor Lebentz recalls:

As we had not been able to use the playing surfaces since the early 1970s I was asked to take the matter up with Redbridge Council. I had several meetings, and on each occasion they would not accept any liability. During this period we were able to use the clubhouse for social functions, including very popular 'dine-ins'. From this income we were just able to pay our way.

Eventually having had little or no joy from Redbridge I decided to attack their conscience on a moral basis. Through a reporter friend at the Daily Express I had an article prepared exposing them. I told the council that the article was to appear in Friday's edition – at the time they were very wary of bad publicity. On the Thursday prior to publication I received a call asking me to attend a meeting that afternoon. It was at this meeting that they reluctantly agreed to pay compensation of, I think, £4,000.



Trevor Lebentz

Following these several years in the doldrums, a group of members, prominent in the football club, decided that this was an opportune time to get OBA back on its feet. An EGM was held in early 1975, followed by an AGM on April 16th. A new committee was elected, including Trevor Lebentz as Chairman, Grahame Eales (1955) as Secretary, and Roger Toms (1959) as Treasurer. This group re-established the OBA main Association virtually from scratch. According to Trevor Lebentz:

The Association had never folded and in fact right through the troubles it published newsletters and held an annual dinner. We did lose some members but only a small proportion. Following the demise of Jack Sutton I was asked to become Chairman. I said I would for a couple of years. 27 years on I found myself still Chairman but had the satisfaction of OBA surviving and going from strength to strength.

Dick Thomas was asked to resurrect OBA News, and wrote in the October 1975 edition:

The clubhouse and ground at Roding Lane that swallowed up members' money and energy like hungry beasts have been sold. After paying off loans there is enough in the kitty to get the Association on the road again. For the first time in its life the newsletter has the funds behind it to ensure a continued existence. It would have been so easy to have let the Old Bucks slide into oblivion.

The clubhouse saga has been described as 'a debacle', but Trevor Lebentz says:

I do not think the project was too optimistic. It certainly would have been a success had the playing surface been up to standard.

The one good thing that did come out of it was the money that was recovered. The clubhouse sale provided a sizeable nest-egg which has prevented the Association from having to worry unduly about money since.

A loan of £600 was made by OBA to the OB football club as compensation for it having to find new grounds and equipment. The OBA AGM authorized writing off that loan in 1982.