

The History of
The Meridian Sports and Social Club, Charlton
1977 – 2007

Originally Siemens Sports Club
1921 – 1967

Or

NOW and THEN

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Who belonged to both of the above Clubs.

THE HISTORY OF THE MERIDIAN SPORTS AND SOCIAL CLUB

OR NOW AND THEN

Believe it or not The Club was founded in 1921, in a large house in Charlton Village until 1933, it's name then was Siemens Bros. Employees Club. Siemens Bros. was a large Cable and Communications factory situated alongside the River Thames. The factory was founded in 1863; the site was where the Thames Barrier is today. It employed roughly 5,000 workers, even more during the Second World War then 9,000. Originally the employees paid one penny a week towards the cost of the Club, this was optional and eventually rose to sixpence a week right up to the time the firm closed, in 1968.

In 1954 the first merger took place and this was eventually going to lead to the closure of the factory, although bombed, workshops were repaired or replaced Siemens had plans by the late 1940's to move some work to West Hartlepool. Then early in 1950's Siemens amalgamated with Edison Swan and a new Siemens Edison Swan laboratory was opened in Harlow New Town, Essex, although when Siemens became part of the A.E.I. group (Associated Electrical Industries) in 1954 Woolwich works seemed secure. It was still in the forefront of the communications industry.

Then in 1967 A.E.I. was taken over by G.E.C. (General Electric Co.) and almost immediately a decision to close the whole of the Woolwich factory was taken. Walkouts, demonstration and deputations were to no avail, and 1968 Siemens, as it was always called, closed.

A factory had died. Through this closure, the first of it's kind after World War 2, thousands of jobs were lost, it was soon apparent it was the first of an avalanche of closures along the banks of the River Thames. The Westminster Industrial estate occupies the Siemens site now and for those interested in industrial archaeology or wanting a sentimental journey there are still a few buildings dated from 1871 – 1899 in Harrington Road and Bowater Road, Woolwich.

You know how ex A.E.I. Club belonging to The Meridian Club got it's name, it was our original Club practically 40 years ago.

The Sports Ground in Charlton Park Lane was purchased in 1933, the first Club was single storey and made of wood. Eventually (in) 1936 / 7 the Club as you know it today was built.

From 1967-1977 The Sports Club and Ground laid derelict – much sadness to all those who remembered it's former days, many friends of years were separated, our lives left in ribbons, the Club was our whole life, no televisions then, we did not need them, all out entertainment and sport took place at Siemens Sports Club.

Then came 1977, a notice in the local Kentish Independent paper, Greenwich Council had been offered the Club's lease at a peppercorn rent of £1 per year. There was to be a meeting of Sports teams, Social Clubs and anyone else interested in getting the Sports Club open again, Wonderful!!

The venue – Greenwich Town Hall – I of course went along, in the hope of getting my old Siemens Ladies Hockey Club back there (the past 9 years we had called ourselves Charlton Ladies and played in Charlton Park). On arrival at the meeting I was told it had been transferred to Charlton House. This meant me flying out of the Town Hall hoping to catch a bus, to no avail, I ran and walked alternately all the way, arriving very puffed and out of breath, only to be faced with a large meeting, consisting of all men, very daunting!!

This meeting finally led us all to visiting the Sports Club – what a terrible disappointing moment – when we say the state the Club was in. Guard dogs had been patrolling it the last 9 years, can you imagine the smell, it was horrendous, doors, skirting boards gnawed, the hall upstairs – puddles from a very leaky roof all over our once lovely sprung dance floor, dirty dog mattresses everywhere, more windows out than in.

The field was over waist high in grass and weeds, hay was literally baled, huge mounds and clumps of earth, which took almost a year to be dug, raked until it was flattened, every sports club working systematically coming from the top of the field down towards the Club House. This happened every night and every weekend. Jack who lived in the house next door to the Club, had through all those years it was closed, kept the ground free from rubbish and kept any vandals at bay. Jack and his wife came up trumps when we had no water, they would bring over tea and sandwiches, which was very much appreciated.

A steering committee was formed from member clubs. John Ayling from the Council took charge, begging everyone to bring along anything that would help us start work, spare spades, forks, rakes, wheelbarrows, paint and brushes, cleaning equipment etc. What a task we all had!

Alan Mayes, the Greenwich Borough Treasurer looked after all our accounts in those early days.

We scrubbed the whole of the downstairs area at least 5 times, no way could we bring our once shiny green tiles, which had to be taken up. Eventually when we could afford it, it was carpeted. Originally a plain burgundy carpet was laid, current carpet about 1985.

I can't possibly remember all the names of people that helped, so I better not mention anyone in case I leave anyone out. It was amazing how many tradesmen we had in different sports teams and Social Clubs etc. The Rugby team had roofers. A football team helped re-wire the Club. Drainage trouble at the top of the field was sorted by another footballer. Our Ladies Hockey team painted a dressing room and most of the window frames. Bear in mind most of the windows at that time were missing and the wind whistled through them, and a lot of girls went down with influenza, the club had no heating at that time either.

Our children had a whale of a time whilst all this work was going on. They brought along their tents, dolls and prams, bikes and picnics etc. Great fun! With lots of fund raising events, raffles, booked entertainers, downstairs in a very sparse club, trestle tables and a make-do bar situated where the canteen is now, we did everything we could to make the Club look more presentable.

We had roughly 28 Clubs here running under the umbrella name 'The Meridian', all very friendly especially after we had all worked together for so long, it almost felt like the old Siemens Club days.

In Siemen's days the Club House downstairs was completely open – not portioned off as it is today, apart from the bar area. This was enclosed with double doors either side of the Club, mainly to stop children venturing in. The outside walls either side house two very large glass cases holding cups and trophies. Incidentally, in those days our Rugby teams were not allowed in this bar, they had a special wooden hut at the top of the field, so their antics would not upset anyone in the Club House (it worked well). The lobby had a doorman who made everyone sign in on entry, this would enable us to know who was in the Club each night, this was also, I believe the law, in case of fire or accidents.

Where the Gent's are today was exactly the same then, except there were sliding doors between each room, which were opened for table tennis and darts competitions etc. They had a giant sunken bath, which would take the whole football team; my husband recalls rushing in after a football match to be first in the clean water, which was very hot usually. He use to wait for the rest of the team to arrive they jumped in and out again very quickly due to it being so hot, I won't tell you what they called him!! The left-hand side of the Club was used by the Ladies where the Gents toilets are today. We also had a large sunken bath plus showers and toilets. The upstairs large hall had a wonderful stage, which stretched right across the width of the hall, it has 2/3 steps going up each side. To give you some idea of how large it was in 1966 I have a photograph of 4 hockey teams sitting down to a Dinner on it. We did not have a Bar area in the Main Hall in those days. When needed trestle tables were put at the back of the Hall, plus barrels of beer and other drinks, glasses etc., and it was amazing how ell it worked

The Hall was always occupied with different events such as; a drama class, keep-fit and dancing lessons, weight lifting and badminton which needed a very high ceiling (which has since been lowered with air conditioning and heating). Saturday evenings there was always good entertainment, either a Dinner and Dance or a really good play and on special occasions a really good Concert Party, all contributed by our very talented employees, musicians, singers, dancers, comedians or really good funny skit.

Our main event every year in June was our Gala Day, consisting of Best Baby shows, horticultural tent, best cake, jams, flowers or vegetables etc., and our marvellous Novelty Races, which always included either our bosses or Committee members. What a laugh this was especially in the obstacle races when you had your chance to soak your boss or anyone, by throwing wet sponges or push them into low tanks of water, maybe drown them with the Tilting Bucket game where 2 people took part, one sitting in a wheelbarrow with a pole which had to be pushed through a hole where the bucket of water hung. If you missed you drowned. The Clothes Race was the funniest. Men would have to race, say 50 yards putting on a garment every 10 yards or so, what made it hilarious they were ladies clothes, which included underwear (corsets, bras and directoire knickers) right down to hats and handbags and shoes.

Gala Days. We also had the Kent A.A.A. Championship races, which included High Jump, Long Jump, Relay races (which included other local firms taking part), 100 yards etc and cycle races such as 'Devil take the hindmost', all very competitive. 6pm: Prize-giving time, always a celebrity to present prizes. I particularly remember Hattie Jaques and the film star Hazel Court. The Beer tent at the top of the field then closed after making a good profit. Everyone would, either stop for teas at the Club then change for the evening's entertainment upstairs, a really good Concert party, or just go home after a very good day.

Incidentally, my whole family were involved in sport there. Trevor and his father played both cricket and football (Trevor's father was the last Chairman of the Sports Club before its closure). I played hockey for the same team for 40 years and my children and my sister played in the same team, my son played football and cricket there. So you see why we are so interested in the Meridian.

Coming back to The Meridian Club, 1982 Falklands Night, an unforgettable night. The Meridian held a large fund raising evening in aid of the wounded Service Men from the Falklands War. Most of them were next door in The Military Hospital (now the Queen Elizabeth Hospital). Alison Bennett, daughter of sadly missed Vera and Jim Bennett, and myself contacted the Hospital Army Doctors asking if those soldiers would be allowed to come over to our Club for this evening, so we could entertain them and show our appreciation to them personally and hopefully

give them a night to remember. We were very please that they gave their permission. They supplied ambulances and Nurse to accompany them. Naturally quite a few of them were missing, too injured to come, including Simon Weston who was in intensive care. Quite a few had missing limbs. One in particular was in a wheelchair. The only way we could get into the upstairs hall, quite a few rugby players chair-lifted him up the very steep outside steps, which was quite dangerous. He must have been very brave to let them do it.

Quite a number of them came from Wales, and we managed to get quite a good night's entertainment for them, they were a talented Welsh family of entertainers. We had previously had lots of fund raising in the Club to pay for this evening plus added to this we held a really good raffle on the night. We gave the soldiers 10 raffle tickets each, hoping they would win most of the prizes. We had them all singing "We'll keep a welcome in the hillside" and many other Welsh songs, the Welsh family enjoyed entertaining them. The end of the evening we sent them back to hospital loaded with baskets of fruit, cigarettes and lots of goodies. This would enable them to share with the soldiers who were not allowed to come over. We hoped our evening brought a little sunshine into their lives and let them know how much we all appreciated their efforts.

Going back to the first days of the Meridian Club 1977. It was now beginning to get very friendly, we had lots of great evenings in a very sparse room downstairs area. Where the Poolroom is now you can still see a small corner of parquet flooring. This was our dance floor before we eventually got upstairs in the main Hall. Remember at that time there was still no heating in the Club, even our Committee meetings everyone was wrapped up, especially n the winter.

The original Committee consisted of 3 Councillors and 12/15 other people, usually one from each club belonging to Meridian. Then trouble started to raise its' ugly head, arguments with the London Borough of Greenwich. This would be in the mid 90's, mainly over our new Sports Turf. The cost of £312,000.00 came to us as a gift from the Greater London Council upon its closure. £249,000 plus interest it accrued in the bank by the time we used it also £30,000 which came from the Regional Sports Council. This consequently brought in a much-needed amount of cash by us hiring out the Sports Turf. The Car Park also went in at this time. Now the Greenwich Council wanted part of our income, arguments began to get very serious.

The next paragraph is taken from Mr. Peter Page's story, it is as follows:

" The Sports Turf was the subject of an operational agreement with LBG, to be managed by the Meridian, and for the use of Meridian member Clubs together with sports clubs and users at the community at large. Any surplus funds from the income to be used to maintain and improve the pitch and the general facilities at the Meridian. The overall control to be vested with a Management Committee comprising equal representatives of both the Meridian and the Council together

with a representative of the Regional Sports Council – meetings to be held when appropriate and necessary.”

The Meridian Club wanted the profits to go into a special fund, mainly so we could save up for when the Sports Turf would need renewing, which would cost well over £100,000, and it could wear out in 12 to 15 years according to wear and tear. We also took out of the profit the cost of electricity used each time it was in use, I believe something like £25 per hour then. All these arguments caused the 3 Councillors to leave our Committee and eventually many more problems which led to us seeing a top Barrister and our Solicitor's fees costing us well over £80,000. At one time they even tried to send the Bailiffs in. Even more all the Committee's houses were on line, which you can imagine was a very worrying time for us.

Going back to 1985/6, a rule our Committee decided, at each event in the Main Hall, 2 Committee members would have to be on duty at every event, mainly to keep an eye on each occasion. One particular evening members of the National front forced their way in via the balcony, causing a great deal of trouble and damage at a private football team's evening. Some of the sound of the discos in those days were mind blowing, so loud you could not possibly hear yourselves speak. Consequently I am pretty sure it was this made me deaf and possibly Arthur Hambrook too! Because he probably attended most of them.

Another rule then, due to not being able to afford Bar Staff, every Club took it in turns to run the Upstairs Bar at different events, we all got a small part of the profit for our individual clubs. One particular evening it was the Ladies Hockey Club's turn to do the bar. It turned out to be the biggest night we have ever had. The Radio presenters 'Capital Gold' brought roughly 300 teenagers, the place was heaving. We naturally had a very good bar take, which in turn gave our hockey club a fair amount of money, but it was absolute bedlam! We ran out of glasses, just trying to collect them was nightmare, amazingly we managed to cope.

A really big rule also, was every Sports team wanting to join the Meridian had to pay 5 years advance fee, I believe it was £2,000 and this was before we were allowed to play on the pitches. Can you imagine how each team (2 teams in the Ladies Hockey Club) approximately only 15 people in each team, managed to raise this kind of money. I can only speak for our 2 teams, we had bring-and-buy sales at each other's homes, always raffles, we hired 3-4 riverboats for evening discos, we supplied plated meals, quite an achievement especially preparing them from my home and then transporting it all to the Riverboat. But it did bring in a lot of profit and somehow we managed to raise £4,000, after lots of hard work and lots of our spare time.

6th March 1995 when trouble raised it's head once more, Greenwich Council gave us just one month to pay £5,000. I'm not one hundred per cent sure if it was for

rates or insurance we owed them, I am sure it was £5,000. I still have my record book with hoe we managed it. We decided to ask members for pledges. Yes, 30 members came up trumps. 2 of them actually pledged £1,000 each 4 pledges of £500, 5 pledged £250, the rest pledged £50 or £25 each and we made it on time! We could breathe again, in fact we collected even more than £5,000, which was even more astonishing. The whole amount sponsored was repaid to everyone by 11th May 1996, of course by fund raising ONCE MORE!!

In 1996 another problem which arose with the Greenwich Council, this was our Boot-sales. They tried their hardest to close us down by saying we never got permission to run them. Luckily I had kept all the minutes of our Committee meetings and found one dated 1983 in which Councillor Brooker (then our Chairman) suggested we run boot-sales to boost our funds, so we won that round. Another fund raised over £1,000 in a few months was a Bring-and-Buy sale I personally ran in Dressing Room 1 on most Saturdays, until the dressing room was required back for a changing room.

Year 2000 / 2001 we finally won our battle with the Council. They decided to sell the Club, of course now we were really worried, what was going to happen to us now! The new owners, Ashten & Co. luckily agreed we could stay, now our rent shot up to £56,000 a year, another bitter blow. About this time The Queen Elizabeth Hospital approached us for parking space for their staff, only during the weekdays up to approximately 6pm. This answered our prayers. The revenue from this practically pays our new rent.

All went well for a couple of years until Ashten & Co. decided they would auction the Club off, that was all except the Grounds man's old house. They wanted to keep this land to build luxury flats on it, which would bring them a fair amount of rent (you can see today this has actually happened).

2003 / 2004 Our Committee members went to a very large auction in London with little hope of bidding for their Club. Unfortunately the price rose way beyond our reach. It sold for £1.1 million to Calmet Syndicate, the new owners, complete with us as sitting tenants on a 35 year lease. We already had thoughts, such as making lists of what we could sell or auction off to help us clear outstanding bills. At the time it seemed whenever we took a step forward we would have to take 6/7 steps back. We were very despondent for a while, then the news arrived Calmet Syndicate would let us stay. Well, we could not believe our luck, we would have liked to have thrown a big party for everyone to celebrate our feelings, but unfortunately money was still very tight.

2007 Our Committee:

Paul Smith, our Chairman whose knowledge of air conditioning, heating and building has got us out of trouble on many occasions. He personally has a very responsible job but always manages to get to our meetings despite an exhausting journey.

Mr. John Ratcliffe, our Secretary, he puts in hours of work dealing with all our correspondence. He is a very knowledgeable head master, thanks doesn't seem enough for all the problems he sorts out.

Mr. Arthur Hambrook, our Treasurer has been with us since day one. He will be retiring this year. His voluntary sterling work had gone beyond the call of duty. We could not have functioned without him, a big thank you from us all.

Pr. Peter Page, now our assistant Finance Director. Most of you will know Peter, he was General Manager for something like 25 years since day one. His knowledge has helped us through many battles with the Council plus much hard work on the ground and running the Club. At one time he was in the Club so often we wondered if he ever went home! Not forgetting Christine, Peter's long-suffering wife, she also did many years of sterling work as our Assistant to the General Manager, organising the Sports Turf bookings and the catering for many years. A big thank you to both of you.

Mr. Jim Wadhams, Premises Director. Jim is a very useful person to have on board. His knowledge his past experience in the insurance world has helped us out on many occasions. Thanks Jim.

Myself, Doreen Gunning, Personnel Director and Membership Secretary. You will know from earlier reading I have been here since day one, fund rising being my main object. I also run ex A.E.I. Club and you will now realise was my main reason for joining in the first place. It still is my life and I, at last am glad to see all or voluntary work for the last 30 years has paid off. No we are not completely out of the woods, we do need all you support, bring your families and friends, watch out for all our new events coming in the future.

The rest of the Committee at the time of print are:

Mr. John Cody

Mr Brian White

Mr Mike King, all help out when needed, thanks for their help too.

Doreen Gunning 2007.



1950

Siemen's Gala Day - 1950



1950



18th September 1950
 THE ONLY PHOTOGRAPH
 I HAVE OF TREVOR
 AND HIS DAD
 WINNERS IN THE FINAL
 OF INTER-DEPARTMENTAL
 CUP.
 TREVOR CAME BACK FROM
 HONEYMOON TO PLAY IN
 IT, WE WERE MARRIED
 9th September 1950,

1976 Thanet Hockey Festival



Siemen's ground : about 1964