



CLUB HISTORY

Considering that it must now be regarded as one of the top clubs in Dorset/Wiltshire, Swanage & Wareham RUFC have progressed from very humble beginning. Swanage Rugby Club was formed in 1953, following a meeting between Mike Codling, Rev Peter Chadwick, Rufus Simpson and Don Fugle. Hence the club was formed and they asked Lt Col Geoffrey (Tinny) Dean former Harlequins and England halfback to be its first President. Swanage team, with star players of County standard such as Malcolm Van der Pant, John Le Strange (Captain 1953-58), Ray Graves, Denny Hunt, Ken Saunders, Pat Gent, Alan Bishop and one outstanding player, Fred Hicks, who went out to play first class rugby for Bath. They played at King George's field and Days Park in Swanage, and used hostelrys such as the Owls Barn (now Tithe Barn), Black Swans and Royal Victoria as places to entertain their visitors. They played the likes of Bournemouth, Winchester, Salisbury, Dorchester and so on, and ran a second side and eventually fielded three.

Then, upstarts from Wareham Secondary School started an Old Boys team in 1961. Based on a school side that was undefeated for three years from 1956-59. This was under the tutelage of one Malcolm Van der Pant - PE Teacher, Swanage player and legend in his own time. He wanted to use the new club, who played in white with maroon hoops, as a feeder club for Swanage. The main founder members of the Old Boys being Don Fugle (he gets everywhere), Micky White and Jim Woolley. Jim and Micky are still very much involved with the running of the present club. Many of their players such as Les Miller, Don and Mike Fletcher, John and Tony Speer and Sammy Gover are still around the town and have vivid memories of those days. However this feeder scheme never came off as the Old Boys developed their own ethos and style. According to Swanage sources the Old Boys "played a different kind of rugby" and a kind rivalry sprang up between the two clubs. The Old Boys mainly played against the higher clubs second XV and enjoyed a successful five years. However, by 1966 times were changing and the Swanage club were having difficulty with finding facilities in the town, and following a meeting at the house of Tinny Dean the two clubs decided to amalgamate - hence Swanage & Wareham RUFC. The amalgamation took place while Ray Graves was club captain, and he continued to lead the combined club until 1970.

Another local rugby team sprang around this time, probably in 1964, started by John Proctor, and his team was called the Purbeck Colts. These were all under 19 years of age, and the first captain being Dave "John" Middletown. They played local teams of similar age, and when Swanage & Wareham was formed the Purbeck Colts also came on board in the new set-up.

After the amalgamation the new club played for one season on John Proctor's farm, down Bestwall and also on the secondary Modern School (now Wareham Middle School) field. Eventually they managed to rent some ground from the Town Council. Swans moved to their new and present ground at Bestwall in 1967. It took some time and effort to get the ground up to playing standard, and there are fond memories of stone picking parties at the new ground. However being fortunate to be based on sand and gravel the field has perfect drainage and have now developed into probably the best surface to play in the area.

For several years the club developed, now playing in their familiar maroon and white colours, with two and then three senior sides, together with Colts and U16 and U14 teams based on the local school teams. In 1972 an itinerant Welshman, Stan Jones convinced the committee that the only way forward was to have a full youth policy and start a junior section. With Stan's drive and enthusiasm this junior section then expanded into the "mini" - now running sides at all age ranges from under sevens, U9, U10, U12,

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01929 552224



U13, U14, U15, U16, and now, Sunday morning at Bestwall is alive with tots to teens being introduced to the finer arts of the game by top coaches, and with lots of help from senior, often first team players - most of whom have come through the system. Although Swans have always attracted some outsiders, originally from the local army camps and people moving to the area to work, the vast majority of Colts team and senior sides have always been and still are home grown talent. With interest increasing Swans now run four senior teams.

It is good to report that the founder members through the minis have produced some notable second-generation Swans players. In particular, Michael "Buster" White, who had a successful rugby career with Premiership club WASPS, and is now with London Welsh, John Strange the younger, like his father was a captain of the club (1988-90) and current first teamers Mark Woolley (Jim's boy) and Ray Graves' two sons Gary and Phil (the present club captain). One other player of the 80's who merits a mention is Dave "Yabble" Hill who played over 50 games for Dorset/Wilts as back row forward. What is more in such a close knit community it goes without saying that some third generation minis are making their mark.

The advent of the Rugby Union league system was a boon for Swans advancement, because although the club was growing it was difficult to get fixtures against the "better" sides. Starting in the Dorset/Wilts league, Swans soon gained promotion to the Southern Counties league where they started to meet teams from far away like Aylesbury and Oxford, and they encountered a different style of rugby. This higher class rubbed off and in 1988/89 Swans won the Dorset/Wilts Cup for the first time. Learning the system quickly, Swans won the Southern Counties title in 1992/93 and found themselves in Southwest 2. More learning to do as Swans began to meet the West Country boys from Gloucester, Devon and Cornwall. This experience did not last long as, unfortunately a re-organisation put the club into league Southwest 2 (East) and Swans lost the south west connection. Swans always seem to be the bridesmaid in this league, having been third and including this 1998/99 have been runners-up three times, never quite getting the title, and promotion to Southwest 1. Southwest 1, however, is mainly a semi-professional league, and would also involve much travelling, and although they would like to compete at that level, Swans are an amateur club and intend to always remain so.

In the meantime, Swans have gone on to win the Dorset/Wilts Cup a record equalling four times in a row in 1996-97-98 and the final this year (played on May 2nd) they beat Salisbury for the second year running, this time by 49-16 pts. This cup winning has now become an important part of Swans strategy, as it is the doorway into the RFU Tetley Bitter Cup. This gives a chance to meet some of the teams from higher leagues, and also helps to keep the club solvent. Twice Swans have reached round three, beating national league clubs as Askeans from London, Berry Hill, and this season would have been drawn against Leicester in the fourth round should they have beaten Barking.

Success has not been limited to our first team. The second team won the Dorset/Wilts Shield in 1991/92 and 1996/97, and has won the Southwest 2 Merit Table in 1996/97, 1997/98 and the Dorset/Wilts Merit Table this season. The Colts won the Dorset/Wilts Cup in 1994/95 and 1995/96.

Much of the Swans success is due to the camaraderie of the players who of course know each other for most of their lives, and their willingness to participate in the vigorous training the club's coaches have devised. The club has been very lucky over the years in the quality of the coaches they have attracted, and that is ever more true of those currently doing the training.

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Since moving into Bestwall Swans have built a fine clubhouse, which had several extensions added to accommodate the growing number of players, and a further addition is to be started this season, mainly to improve the toilet, bar, and kitchen facilities. The club has obtained a second field further down Bestwall and has now four fine pitches, the envy of many visiting clubs.

Over the last few years the club has built a relationship with a club called Balfour, based in the south of the South Island of New Zealand. There has been a two way exchange of players for a number of years, and Swans are sending a party out at their club in May 2000 to take part in their centenary celebrations. It is hoped they can reciprocate in 2003 when Swans celebrate their 50th Anniversary.

Many thanks are due to those people, especially the 110 or so vice-presidents, firms and organisations in the two towns, and surrounding area, who over the years have supported Swans in terms of advertising and sponsorship, for undoubtedly without that assistance Swans would not have been that successful and thriving club it is today. Anyone wanting to be part of the club in any of the above capacities, and to be part of its success is welcome to contact the club.

This gives a potted history of the club, and during the new season I hope to keep readers informed of the club's progress with a monthly update.

Ron Butler - Publicity Secretary