

## **CANBERRA BURNS CLUB – CELEBRATING 100 YEARS IN 2024**

The Club was formed on 13 October 1924

- Reflects the large number of Scots in Canberra at that time. Canberra's population in 1924 was approximately 3,000. Around 1,400 of those were involved in the numerous construction projects being undertaken to build the new city. Many of those 1,400 were Scots.
- The Scots decided to form a Club so they could socialise, maintain their Scottish cultural interests and ties, and generally provide each other with moral and other support in their newly adopted country.

Within a very short space of time, the newly formed Burns Club became active in the Canberra community.

- Within 2 weeks of forming, the Club held a Halloween concert on 31 October 1924.
- The first Robert Burns Night was held in January 1925.
- A Highland Gathering was held in February 1925 (the profits of which were donated to the P&C Association of the Telopea Park school).
- A soccer team was formed in February 1925 – making the Burns Football Club the oldest soccer Club in Canberra.
- In March 1925 a series of concerts were organised to help raise funds for the Queanbeyan Hospital.

In 1927 the Club initiated a project to build a Robert Burns statue in Canberra.

- For the ensuing eight years the Club lead an Australia wide fund-raising program with Scottish Societies in other States to raise the equivalent of \$300,000 and to oversee the design and construction phases.
- The Burns statue was unveiled at its current location of Forrest in January 1935 at a ceremony attended by many hundreds of visitors and officiated at by the then Prime Minister Joseph Lyons.
- The statue was the first public statue in Canberra, and the event was the largest public event held in Canberra to that point.

Other significant Club achievements in its early years included;

- Sponsoring, in 1945, the establishment of the Canberra Racing & Trotting Club. The Club took a lead role in organising the first race meeting which was held at Acton Racecourse on 20 April 1946. The main race of the day was the Canberra Highland Society Handicap.
- Key supporting roles in helping establish Royal Canberra Golf Club, Royal Canberra Yacht Club, Ainslie Football Club, Griffith Primary school and Telopea Park School.

The Club funded and built its own permanent Club facility which opened in Forrest on 1 January 1957. For the next three decades the Club funded 13 different intramural sporting groups. The sports were billiards, darts, indoor bowls, cricket, golf, 10 pin bowls, bridge, rowing, fishing, tennis, lawn bowls, chess, and soccer. In many cases these Club groups helped build the Canberra wide sporting calendars and fixtures for these sports.

The Club also established and supported the arts and music, particularly those with Scottish roots. It established a pipe band in 1937, a highland dancing group in 1952, and a Scottish country dance group in 1953.

The Club relocated to new premises in Kambah in 1991, with the official opening held on 31 August 1991 and officiated at by the then Chief Minister of the ACT, Rosemary Follett.

- Membership grew from under 300 at Forrest in 1989, to 14,000 in Kambah by mid-1995.
- The Club quickly become an important part of the Tuggeranong community, supporting multiple community and sporting groups as well as providing local employment opportunities.
- By 1995, the Club was supporting over 50 local community groups through donations of approximately \$90,000. These groups included sporting clubs, schools, nursing homes, childcare centres, Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul, Tuggeranong Community Festival, Community Work Program and Canberra Children's Choir.

The Burns Club also has a long history of engagement with the political class.

- In 1931, James Scullin, the Labour Prime Minister, was guest of honour at Burns Night.
- In 1932, the "Immortal Memory" at Burns Night was delivered by John Latham, Deputy Prime Minister in the United Australia Party Government.
- In 1933 the Club appointed George MacKay, the Speaker of the House of Reps, as its first Patron.
- Guests at the 1935 Burns Night included Sir Robert & Lady Garran.
- In 1937, the Club created a Patron-in-Chief role, and appointed the then Governor General, Alexander Ruthven, to the role.
- In 1939, then Prime Minister Robert Menzies accepted the honour of being Club Patron for a period of 2 years.

It is clear from this short outline that the Canberra Burns Club has been deeply imbedded in the Canberra community for 100 years. Perhaps the three most significant achievements throughout that time are as follows;

1. The Burns Club has actually survived and operated for 100 years and today remains financially strong. Very few organisations in Canberra can say they have been able to achieve that longevity. This Club has survived the Great Depression, the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, and a significant downturn in business during the 1980s brought about by a combination of intense new competition from other newer Clubs, and considerable demographic & social changes in Canberra's population.
2. Despite its 100 years of operation, the Club remains innovative, forward looking and vigilant in seeking to ensure its services and facilities continue to meet member expectations. The most recent example is the purchase in April 2023 of a Club house and golf course in Holt. For the first time in its 100-year history the Club now operates two venues, has record membership of 35,000, and sees significant prospects for growth particularly at the Holt venue.
3. Throughout its 100 years the Club has remained true to the Constitutional objective of its founding fathers which is to preserve and promote Scottish culture;
  - The Club pipe band remains strong.
  - The Club continues to support the ACT highland dancing community.
  - The Club is a major sponsor of an annual Highland Gathering.
  - The Club provides financial support for the Canberra College of Piping & Drumming.
  - The Club provides financial support for Scottish sporting activities including soccer, golf, darts, snooker and pool.
  - The Club each year holds functions to commemorate Burns Night and St Andrews Night and hosts an annual "Scots in the Glen" afternoon of Scottish entertainment.
  - The Club maintains an extensive library of works on Scottish history, Scottish culture, and Robert Burns.

In summary, for 100 years the Burns Club has been a significant contributor to the Canberra community and has also been steadfast in its commitment to maintaining, preserving and promoting Scottish culture and activities. That the Club celebrates its centenary in 2024 and remains healthy and growing is a testament to the skill, determination, resilience and vision of many Presidents, Boards, CEOs, staff and members over its 100 years.

**JANUARY 2024**