

# Pioneers of a Profession

At the 20th Australian Turfgrass Conference, the AGCSA Board bestowed the prestigious Distinguished Service Award posthumously to five turf industry legends – Claude Crockford, Mick and Vernon Morcom, Rupert ‘Rube’ Walkerden and George Rüb. ATM, through the words of Graeme Grant and Doug Robinson, pays tribute to these pioneers of a profession.



Claude Crockford: "An uncommon genius." Peter Thomson

## CLAUDE CROCKFORD

Course Manager, Royal Melbourne Golf Club  
1937-1975. (By Graeme Grant)

Claude Crockford was the undisputed doyen in his chosen field, and I was privileged enough to work under him and retain his friendship from 1967 until he died in 1995.

Crockford was trained as an architect but found the outdoor life on a golf course more to his liking. He was quoted as saying, "All I wanted to do when I started was architecture. But things were a bit tough at the time in our family so I got this job at Yarra Bend. I rather liked the idea after that. It was a good life – being outdoors and developing things."

Upon his retirement he wrote, "It's incredible, it's all gone so quickly. I have countless wonderful memories to take with me.", such was the satisfaction and affection he had for his work.

An indication of his impact on the profession can be gauged by various pieces appearing in the press both during and after his time as course manager at Royal Melbourne Golf Club.

Upon his death in 1995, five-times British Open champion Peter Thomson wrote, "The Royal Melbourne turf is his Shrine of Remembrance – a tribute to an uncommon genius."

Such tributes to Crockford are commonplace. In the opening pages of Claude Crockford's book 'The Complete Golf Course – Turf and Design' published in 1993, the likes of Thomson, former Royal Melbourne captain and president George Burgess and Don Lawrence wax lyrical about the genius that was Crockford.

Burgess wrote that during his time at the club he was "able to properly appreciate (Crockford's) unrivalled skill in maintaining the character and condition of the two courses...and it would be true to say that his reputation extended far beyond Australia."

Thomson is quoted as saying that the famous Royal Melbourne greens, their texture, speed and true nature, were so "because of the skill and art of one man - Claude Crockford". Thomson goes on to say: "(During his 40 years at Royal Melbourne) through flood, frosts and devastating droughts, those greens were never less than perfect. The fairways may have suffered stresses and strains. His greens never."

Lawrence refers to Crockford as "a gold nugget – rare and precious", a man who developed the "reputation of Australia's foremost golf course superintendent – the doyen of them all" and who "effectively rewrote the manual on golf course care and maintenance".

Crockford commanded the respect of both golfers and his peers because of the immaculate pure bentgrass greens he nurtured. Golf Digest referred to them around the time of the 1972 World Cup as the best putting surfaces in the world.

When talking about the greens, Crockford said, "I always thought the speed of the greens was essential for an international tournament. Players had to have that finesse of touch to handle them."

At Royal Melbourne the greens appeared brown not green. They were firm, fast, true and received only a bare minimum of fertiliser. Just as importantly this hungry turf was *Poa* free.

The drought in Melbourne during 1967/68, more than at any other time, brought Crockford's skill to the fore. Royal Melbourne had only town water in those days and irrigation was restricted to the greens using hand held hoses for half an hour per day during the worst of the drought.

Apart from some of the better couch varieties in the fairways, the only turf to survive this harsh period was that on the greens. But this was unrecognisable as it was allowed to grow to a height that resembled green surrounds. If the greens were not pure bentgrass it is doubtful they would have survived.

Some seven months after the drought broke, Royal Melbourne hosted the Eisenhower Trophy. It was testimony to Crockford's turf nurturing skills that he was able to literally bring the course back from the dead to host the event.

Apart from the drought, Crockford was to endure further trauma later in 1968. Some three to four weeks prior to the tournament a freak accident occurred. OH&S would have had a field day, but in that era if a recoil starter on a machine broke you simply substituted it with a piece of rope.

In this case a piece of electric flex was used to try and start the mower. As Crockford pulled,

the knot slipped and flicked up into his right eye. He was admitted to hospital and spent the next month there but was never to regain the sight in this eye.

The dedication of his staff and their respect for him meant the course preparation went ahead as he would have expected, with the tournament a success.

Although Royal Melbourne was his first love and turf management his forte, Crockford was sought after for his design expertise and was a contemporary of Vernon Morcom.

Crockford used his design skills to great effect at Royal Melbourne and although the credit for changes to the 7th, 11th and 12th West are accorded to Ivo Whitton and Alex Russell, Crockford was the one to implement, as he put it, "their sketchy ideas".

Few would be aware that the contours of the MacKenzie greens were altered substantially by Crockford to effect proper surface drainage.

I well remember the pride he took in the greens' ability to shed excess water quickly after storms and become playable almost immediately the rain had stopped.

He showed great annoyance that the organising committee of the 1972 World Cup did not recognise this fact, choosing to cancel the second day's play before observing the drainage qualities of the greens.

Royal Melbourne was famed for the greens but there was much more to Crockford's course maintenance. He understood golf, its traditions and spirit. He was a naturalist with a unique appreciation of the heathland flora once so abundant around Port Phillip Bay.

At a time when others were despoiling the indigenous scrub on their courses, turning even remote areas of the golf course into grasslands that required constant mowing, he was acting to preserve the dwarf indigenous plants in the carry hazards between the tees and fairways.



Graeme Grant recalls memories of Claude Crockford and the Morcoms

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The Morcom family with Mick, second from left, and Vernon, right

The fact that substantial areas of the heathland survive today providing a wonderful contrast to the manicured grasses, as well as a link with the way the landscape was before urbanisation, is a legacy recognised in the AGCSA's Claude Crockford Environmental Award.

Crockford always wore a collar and tie to work, which was both a sign of his desire to raise the perception of the golf course 'curator' and of the era he came through in golf.

I believe he felt more comfortable when dealing with members and administrators when dressed as they were.

The term used to describe his position - course manager - was the impetus for the title of the turf manager of today and a means of gaining respect for the profession.

Curator was the accepted title then and before that head greenkeeper. It was obvious he felt more a manager than a keeper of the green.

The legacy left by Crockford has been profound and has benefited many more golfers than he could ever have imagined.

Course management has progressed in many areas during the past 30 years, but there have never been purer putting surfaces than those prepared by Claude Crockford at Royal Melbourne.

## THE MORCOM FAMILY

*(By Graeme Grant)*

While Melbourne was home to one of the turf industry's great individuals, it was also home to "one of the country's most remarkable golfing families, the Morcoms." (Mike Clayton, *A Round Forever*, 2001). Mick and Vernon Morcom had a huge impact on not only the profession, but golf throughout Australia.

## MICK MORCOM

**Head Greenkeeper, Royal Melbourne Golf Club 1905-1937**

The words used by Alister MacKenzie are probably better than any to give an insight into the skills of Mick Morcom.

In relation to Royal Melbourne, MacKenzie wrote: "I have suggested to the Council of the Club that the work of construction be left entirely in the hands of the Greenkeeper, M. A. Morcom. Morcom is, I think, the most intelligent Greenkeeper I have come in contact with in this or any other country and understands my plans thoroughly."

On Kingston Heath, MacKenzie had this to say about Morcom: "The construction work which has been carried out by Morcom is in many respects better than I have seen on any other golf course in Britain or Australia."

And this upon MacKenzie's return to Britain, penned in *Golf Illustrated*: "The Royal Melbourne Golf Club has the good fortune to have the best Greenkeeper I have come across in Britain, America or Australia - a man named Morcom - and I managed to persuade most of the golf clubs in Australia to secure his services for the purpose of helping them in their construction work.

"Morcom has not only read, but has studied every book he could possibly get hold of on the subject of golf course construction and greenkeeping, and has been in constant touch with the Green Section of the USGA, who have done so much good in greenkeeping."

A paragraph from 'A Centenary History - Royal Melbourne Golf Club' reads: "It is pertinent that MacKenzie mentions construction as well as greenkeeping when referring to Morcom. After 60 years it is not easy to assess the relative contributions of MacKenzie, Russell and Morcom in the design and construction of the West Course or Russell and Morcom with the East Course, but it should be borne in mind that a world famous golf course architect and an Australian (golf) champion would find it much easier to be acknowledged than a club employee."

Many would say that Mick had the primary influence on the Royal Melbourne courses. A study of MacKenzie's work throughout the world shows his bunkers have a slightly different style dependent upon who constructed the course. Alex Russell did work in other places such as Lake Karrynup but none of this has the style of Royal Melbourne.

Greenkeeping references to Mick are not as common as those on construction but suffice to say Claude Crockford learnt his craft from him.

## **VERNON MORCOM**

**Head Greenkeeper, Kingston Heath Golf Club 1928-1967**

Son of Mick, Vernon Morcom was head greenkeeper at Kingston Heath between 1928 and 1967.

In 1982, I was appointed as superintendent at Kingston Heath and almost immediately I found an urge to find out as much as I could about the history of the course. One of the first things I did was to read the published history of the club, 'The Test of Time', where references to MacKenzie and Dan Souter were common but scarce where the Morcoms were concerned.

As well as reading the history I sought out aerial photos going back to 1931. They revealed only 53 bunkers which would have been essentially as MacKenzie's plans dictated.

What the later aerials portrayed was the vast difference between the original bunkering and that of 15 years later - 53 bunkers had become more than 130. The position of a few had changed dramatically, but most remained in the original locations.

This was where Vernon's work is most obvious. I am convinced that his eye for harmonious balance within the landscape caused a rethink of the style of the bold expansive original bunkering.

At Royal Melbourne the large expanses of sand blended well into the wide fairways and

rather bold contours. Kingston Heath was another story where the flatter ground and narrower fairways called for less obtrusive bunkers. So he set about turning one bunker into as many as five or six and developing what has made Kingston Heath so famous.

These old aerial photographs changed my preconceived views on who was really responsible for the design and construction of Kingston Heath, but up until the early 1990's my protestations of missing credits fell on deaf ears. Photos of Dan Souter and Alistair MacKenzie took pride of place in the clubhouse but nothing was to be seen of Vernon or his father.

People seemed more receptive to what I was saying, following my discovery in 1995 of a report to the club by MacKenzie, his account dated November 1926, and an original letter from Mick Morcom to the club.

That letter confirmed Vernon would undertake the work of bunkering the course and making the new 15th hole, while Mick would "direct the scheme of bunkering and give general supervision for a fee of one hundred and fifty pounds". The dates confirmed that MacKenzie took no part in the construction of the bunkers or the reconstruction of the 15th.

Vernon's devotion to his beloved Kingston Heath is graphically indicated in this extract from John Scarth's biography on the Morcoms, 'A Round Forever'.

"On January 14, 1944 Kingston Heath Golf Club faced what appeared to be a major disaster. A large bushfire spread throughout most of the course, almost reaching the clubhouse when a wind change saved the building. Vern spent two days fighting the fires and because he did not contact anyone - family, friends, staff or management - it was feared he had lost his life endeavouring to save his beloved golf course. Reports appeared in the local newspaper of his death. On the third day Vern appeared from his workshed, where he

had stayed during this time, dirty, slightly burnt, hungry and thirsty but alive.

Mike Clayton, in his foreword in the same book sums up: "Vern Morcom was clearly one of the most highly regarded men in Australia's golfing community.

"Doug Courtney, a life member at Spring Valley Golf Club wrote, 'The picture of Vern Morcom that emerges is that of a man of great talent who, in the limited time available to him, and despite recurring bouts of illness, gave everything he could to the work that he loved - the design, construction and maintenance of golf courses'."

Clayton finishes by saying: "Melbourne, Victoria and Australia were indeed fortunate to have a family of such talent and influence, and while the legend of MacKenzie will live on, the Morcoms stand there beside him as true unsung heroes."

## **GEORGE RÜB**

**Superintendent, McLeod Country Golf Club 1974-1990**

*(By Doug Robinson)*

The name George Rüb is not one that will generate itself readily in the minds of many of today's superintendents, but George Rüb was an enthusiastic administrator within the Queensland and national superintendent association movements during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Rüb served on the committee of the Queensland Greenkeepers Association for 16 years and held the office of president from 1973 to 1986. During his term as president, Rüb participated in many interstate negotiations, such as organising national turfgrass conferences, and throughout 1983 and 1984 he represented Queensland in the discussions about forming a national association.

Rüb was an active trade unionist and that had a strong influence on his support for the

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George Rüb: "A man of honour and integrity."  
Doug Robinson

failed move to have the national association registered under federal industrial law between 1978-1981. As an aside, it would be fair to say that the foundation of the Queensland Greenkeeping Award of today is there because of his efforts with the Queensland Miscellaneous Workers Union.

He was always forthright and steadfast in his convictions and became a prominent and respected member of the national forum and more than once brought about changes in policy because of his disciplined and calculated approach to matters.

Rüb worked on the groundstaff at the prestigious Indooroopilly Golf Club, which is now known as the St Lucia Golf Course. Indooroopilly Golf Club developed a public golf course known as Long Pocket Golf Club, just down the road from St Lucia, and Rüb served as head greenkeeper there for many years. Ultimately the club consolidated its golfing activities at the Long Pocket site and developed the 36-hole complex we know today.

In 1974 Rüb became superintendent at McLeod Country Club, probably the first and only all-women golf club in Queensland, if not Australia. He worked there until his retirement in 1990.

According to the book 'Women on Course: The McLeod Country Golf Club', Rüb became

the first person in Queensland to receive a certificate of recognition for his contribution to the greenkeeping industry from the Industry and Commerce Training Commission in 1985.

I am told that if any of his staff at McLeod arrived late for work they endured a fate worse than death. So much so that one of his apprentices admits that on more than one occasion he turned his car around and returned home when only two minutes from the gate, the early morning news on his car radio having signalled the fact that he would be late.

Reporting home and reporting in sick was a far better option than being late as Rüb was a compassionate man and insisted on staff taking their entitlements and properly recuperate if they were sick.

Rüb had the uncanny ability to defuse a situation either by his words of considered wisdom or by claiming malfunction of the hearing aid he depended upon and requesting time to make necessary adjustments so he could hear the full gist of the argument.

Rüb gave unselfishly of his time and effort to better the lot of those to follow in an industry he loved. As an employee and as an administrator at state and national level he was a man of honour and integrity.

## RUPERT 'RUBE' WALKERDEN

Curator, Royal Sydney Golf Club  
1921-1966

Long time Royal Sydney Golf Club superintendent Rupert 'Rube' Walkerden was one of the key players in the NSW industry and played a major role in the formation of the very first national superintendents association.

Walkerden began his career at Royal Sydney Golf Club back in 1921 and remained there until his retirement in 1966.

In the book 'The Royal Sydney Golf Club: The First One Hundred Years' there is this mention of Walkerden: "R.B Walkerden started as a greenkeeper and rose to be curator, retiring in 1966 after 45 years' service. He was a link between the former largely uneducated greenkeepers and the present highly qualified superintendents.

"In 1930, as part of a grooming process by which he rose to a position of authority, Walkerden was sent to Elanora Country Club where Major Tenbosch instructed him in the art of greenkeeping. Walkerden had strong connections with the golf club superintendents association and was held in very high regard by that body."

Walkerden was an active member of the NSW association and in 1973 replaced Cliff Meredith as NSW president, a post he held for a number of years.

A conference dubbed the First National Turf Conference was held in Sydney from 12-16

May 1969 and delegates visited 13 golf courses and the Ryde College of Horticulture. From 1969 to 1972, the tours became increasingly formalised, in no small part to the efforts of Walkerden.

Taken from a report of the Delegates of the Queensland Greenkeepers Association on a visit to NSW in 1969, it was written, "we can surmise that co-operation on a national level led to better, more uniform organisation, with one consistent element being the involvement of long-serving organising secretary Rupert 'Rube' Walkerden of the NSW association, who determined national conference venues and signified shared endeavour on national activities."

Three years later at the national curators conference in Adelaide, the Australian Golf Course Turf Management Association was formed with Walkerden named as national liaison officer alongside president Les Barlow and vice president Bill Powell.

Walkerden took immense pride in his work and took a very proactive stance in passing on his knowledge to the younger generation, conducting guest lectures and organising conferences.

The Walkerden name continues to this day and the NSWGCSA annually plays off for the Rube Walkerden Trophy in late summer.

Walkerden was another of the pioneers of the superintendent trade and through his abilities both on and off the course, set a benchmark for others to follow. 🏌️



Rupert 'Rube' Walkerden was part of the very first national association formed in 1972