



## 12. AVE ATQUE VALE

1943-1968

It was seriously mooted that the Wanderers controversy cost the United Party the 1948 election. Public opinion, earlier antagonistic to the Clubs resisting Railway intrusion in 1927, rallied almost unanimously on the side of the City Council and its protégé. It was not only the people who protested but the lessors who purveyed public amusement—the African Greyhound Racing Association, the cricket and soccer unions and athletics (tennis and rugby had gone to Ellis Park) and the incidental impresarios of all kinds. Public petitions were signed and in July 1943, the Johannesburg Publicity Association on the instruction of its Executive Committee issued a bilingual brochure SAVE THE WANDERERS. "It is the cradle of traditions which cannot be transplanted", purple prose pronounced, "The front ground is hallowed by a thousand memories of great incidents and occasions. It has witnessed scenes from the days of President Kruger onwards which are the warp and woof of Rand history. Let us save this enviable civic possession."

Sturrock halted in his stride and appointed an overseas railway expert, Major-General Szlumper to survey the situation. Optimistically the Club anticipated a favourable report and proposed substantial alterations including the demolition of the old Club House and the erection of modern premises. The development of Kent Park continued, hampered by wartime restrictions, but a growing number of members made use of its tennis courts, golf course and playing fields. In the press of the moment, no one noticed that the Club's founding chairman and original debenture holder, W. P. Taylor, had died. In 1945, Szlumper found in favour of Railway expansion.

At a meeting of the Union Cabinet, the decision was taken to expropriate the entire Wanderers ground and on the 1<sup>st</sup> June 1945, notice was served giving the Club six months to remove. There was an immediate and violent outburst of public indignation. The action seemed as peremptory and autocratic as the regime which the recent War had been fought to destroy. Letters poured in to the newspapers which themselves supported the Council and the Club in their joint opposition. Slogans were painted on walls. In a much-publicised letter, Sir Pelham Warner, writing officially for the M.C.C., in July offered sympathy to the Wanderers Club in its predicament and recalled the historic match on its grounds in 1906.



Like the Coliseum in Rome, the old Wanderers Ground was in the centre of Johannesburg. The cricket match in progress was between Transvaal and the M.C.C in 1938

Public feeling ran hotly and strongly in favour of the Club until August when an unfortunate *contretemps* turned the tide. The maximum capacity of the main ground was 30,000 but when a wildly popular soccer final was played, the gatemen continued to admit spectators after capacity had been reached for fear, they said, of riots if they had closed the entrances. Men stood in rows along the touchlines blocking the view of thousands of spectators and two visiting Cabinet Ministers watched the match standing on the chairs with which they had been ceremoniously provided. It was abundantly clear that the Wanderers was inadequate for the huge Stadium which the Rand now required.

Kent and his Committee were in almost ceaseless negotiation with the Council and the Railway Administration. Voluminous files testify to the immense amount of consultation and discussion that took place between the parties and their lawyers. It had become a question of compensation. The City owned the land but the Club's property in buildings, amenities, sporting facilities and other assets seemed incalculable. The figure of £692,000 was finally reached and was duly contested.

Then the Club decided to take its case to the Supreme Court to claim an order against the Railways declaring expropriation invalid. Represented by E. R. Roper, K.C., and Abram Fischer, its deposition was made before Judge Phillip Millin who found against it. The members agreed to take it to appeal and in March 1946, five judges in Bloemfontein divided three to two against the Club. The narrow majority deepened the disappointment. The cost had been high— in the region of £6,000. There was one final Court of Appeal—the Privy Council, but the members decided to bow to the inevitable. In the end, the Railways paid the Club a total of £499,000, largely through the patient and persistent representations of the secretary, A. S. Frames. (£179,000 was paid in 1946 to enable the Club to weather the storm of removal.) The Wanderers paid the Railways £10,000 for material and equipment (otherwise almost unobtainable during post-war shortages) removed from the Grounds.



The last days of the Old Wanderers Ground as demolishers did their work in 1946

For Victor Kent, who had fought long and stubbornly to preserve an historic international institution, the turn of events was saddening. It means, he said, that the Wanderers Club will have to revert to the private Sporting Club of its inception and withdraw from the responsibility it had assumed in catering for the general public. He was then 67 and in his 27th year as chairman. Before he died, Kent Park had swung back to the policy which he had so ardently advocated.

The Wanderers Club now hung like Mahomet's coffin between Heaven and Earth with Frames driving back and forth every day from town to Kent Park. By the end of 1946, many playing fields were available at Kent Park and two bowling greens. A house for Frames was also completed and he was in occupation. Building Control blocked the completion of the magnificent new Club House which the architect V. Whyte had designed and the shortage of cement precluded the undertaking of small works, including the Swimming Bath. But the members had already transferred their activities from the old grounds where bull-dozers and steam shovels were demolishing hallowed fields and premises.

People wept when the Wanderers closed and every newspaper published nostalgic notices, pictures and cartoons. On Sunday the 27<sup>th</sup> October 1946, the leave-taking ceremonies took place accompanied by laments from the pipe band of the Transvaal Scottish. Matches with teams of "old-timers" had been organised on every remaining field and the occasion was intended to be gay. A huge and tattered old flag in the Wanderers colours hung listlessly from a masthead on the main field.

At noon, Victor Kent and his committee accompanied by the Club's oldest founder-member, the white-bearded Sir Llewellyn Andersson, now 85, approached the flagstaff and the thousands on the grounds stood still. Kent apostrophised the ground as if it were animate. "It is my melancholy duty to bid farewell to you, Old Ground and Clubhouse", he said, "You have played a worthy part in the growth of Johannesburg from mining camp to great city", and he went on to refer to the Club's holding it in trust at the hands of the

State President Paul Kruger. People in every walk of life, high and low, had made use of it. The Ground had seen the noblest galaxy of sporting talent and no other club could claim a similar record for catering for so many sports. It had been the meeting place of Johannesburg's citizens. On its playing fields, they had developed their sporting prowess. In the Club House, the spirit of good fellowship had been engendered. "You will never pass from our memories, Old Ground. The Wanderers Club at Kruger's Park is dead. Long live the Wanderers Club at Kent Park!" and to the lament of the pipes and the roar of the steam shovels, he pulled down the Club's old colours while at Kent Park, a proud new flag was hauled to the masthead.

The old Club House remained open for a year while part of its new counterpart at Kent Park was being built. The Bar closed at the end of 1947 and opened in the new Club House on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1948 closely followed by the offices which had been operating inconveniently in Allsop's old house. Legend has it that in its closing paroxysms, the old Bar was opened to lady members who danced on the Counter and purposefully celebrated their liberty at great length, keeping their spouses waiting outside in unfamiliar reversed roles.

Slowly and piece by piece as Import Control allowed, the new Club House was built and furnished. In 1948, a revolutionary decision was made to "socialise" the Club by opening the membership to non-playing individuals. Kent Park soon became so popular that the membership roll had temporarily to be closed. The sporting facilities were in good running order but, for some time, administration without adequate premises was difficult. The year 1948 marked the Diamond Jubilee of the Club but it passed unnoticed. Llewellyn Andersson who would have insisted, had grown vague and frail and died at the age of 87 in the midst of the construction activities that should have included celebration of his 60-year old creation. In his will, he left £1,000 to the Club for sporting trophies and cups.

Some attention was paid to preserving the traditions of the Club and honouring its founders. The "Jeppe Hall" was one of the first to be named in the new Club House. The memorial stone of the old cricket scoring board was carefully incorporated in the new Board commemorating George Allsop. Members themselves made costly gifts—the clock and the weather-vane in the tower above the *porte cochère*, beautiful wood carvings of the Club's device and the Union coat-of-arms, books, pictures and sporting relics. Most of the Wanderers' archive material portraits, photographs, trophies and documents—had to be stored wherever space could be found.

In 1950, when the huge new complex of halls and dining rooms, lounges and committee rooms, bars and dressing rooms, Gymnasium and Billiard Rooms constituting the Club House was virtually complete, it behoved the Club to celebrate its history and in a special Souvenir Number of its Magazine, such as was known was told. Written without reference to source material and largely by amateur sportsmen who lovingly recorded the historic course of their various games, the Magazine provided an admirable record of sporting activity. It unfortunately recorded Charlie Pietersen's historic letter of 1908 as 1909 and, failing to refer to the preceding articles on which he commented, based its narrative erroneously on the 1889 Minutes of the Athletic Club instead of the records of the Parent Club. Andersson was no longer there to correct it and no one consulted the Club's own Minutes. The lapse became historic and the Club erroneously celebrated its "70th Anniversary" in 1959 with another publication, a banquet and a drum-head service and its "75th Anniversary" in 1964 with another special publication, a ball, cocktail party and hockey matches. In fact, its 80th Anniversary fell due in August 1968.

The desire to commemorate its history and its founders, however dimly appreciated, remained constantly with the Club. Victor Kent had known almost all its great personalities and Frames was not far behind him. In 1951, the decision was taken to commemorate Llewellyn Andersson and Jacob Swart in a stained glass window of sporting design with a Johannesburg connotation on the grand staircase leading from the main hall. Constituting

a unique feature in the Club House and a touching tribute to its true founders, it was completed in 1954.



The front of the partially-completed Wanderers Club House, Kent Park

As a private club for social and sporting activities, the Wanderers at Kent Park met a manifest community need. Once all its facilities became available, the membership steadily climbed. By 1953, it had reached 7,173 and the trend continued until a peak of 10,380 in 1957 when domestic crisis supervened. The Club House had been conceived in the grand manner and stood, like a bastion of private enterprise, in open country as blocks of flats and houses steadily crept around it. The playing fields, Courts and greens swept down the slope across Corlett Drive to the golf course. It was a sportsman's paradise but, by comparison with the multiple sources of income of the Old Wanderers, its production of revenue was disappointing.

A general lassitude began to afflict the members. The stimulus of the bright new world that was to be built after the War had slowly faded and of the fine dreams of reconstruction and rehabilitation, only the drudgery of endless work and effort remained. The Club's finances began to give grounds for disquiet. Of the massive compensation paid by the Railways, almost all had gone in providing amenities at Kent Park, including at last the magnificent swimming bath envisaged nearly 70 years before. In the huge complex that had been created, something was lacking. Some of the spring of the early hazardous days had gone Out of the corporate body.

Members held balls and parties and wedding receptions in the Club House but gone were the great public occasions when the City itself entertained its guests at the historic Club and overseas teams, watched by vast crowds, played on its fields. For the men who gave up their time to govern its future, it was a period of adjustment and accommodation and the framing of new policy.

By 1952, Victor Kent had directed affairs from the chair for 33 years, latterly assisted by Basil Melle as vice-chairman (who, a member of the Committee for 42 years and a participant in historic happenings, died in 1966). Kent had been a Committee member for 44 years and a Club member for 52. Increasingly frail, he had resigned the chairmanship in 1951 but submitted to persuasion and served another year. He was 73 and bowed by the cares of an office that would have broken most men. The Club commissioned Edward Roworth to paint his portrait and presented it to him at a ceremonial farewell. He had been, it was officially stated in an Appreciation circulated with the Annual Report, "the greatest single influence in the progress and development of the Club". Few of the members were old enough to gauge the full extent of his contribution or the prescience with which he had guaranteed the future by purchasing the Illovo property. He accepted the portrait and in his turn, presented it to the Club which hung it in a place of honour. Three years later, he died. By then, the organisation which he had so long directed and shaped, had taken a hazardous leap into the future arid had set its course towards new horizons.

The historic figures of the Wanderers Club who had seen it through *sturm und drang* and themselves contributed to that state, one by one left the scene to younger successors. Houlston, the pioneering protagonist of turf and longstanding groundsman, retired in 1952. Miss Cathleen Smith, secretarial righthand and rivaled only by Kent himself in knowledge of the Club, retired in 1953 after 31 years of service. A. S. Frames, who had followed Allsop's traditions for twenty-two years, even unto managing South African cricket teams on tour overseas, retired in 1955, later becoming a Life Member, but retained the secretaryship of the South African Cricket Association whose offices were accommodated in the Club House. He was succeeded by T. S. Cawse as Secretary/Manager at a time when the Wanderers had embarked on its most ambitious enterprise.

Although the membership was steadily rising, post-war lethargy continued to characterise a Club that seemed to be running only under the impetus of its own great size and traditions. To infuse a new spiritedness into its affairs, a scheme was set in train to realise one of its earlier dreams—the Construction of a gigantic all-weather Stadium that would restore it to its historic position as the premier sporting venue in South Africa. The outlay was enormous and far beyond the Club's existing resources but the idea was allowed to snowball and before long every member became involved, not so much in attaining a fantastic amenity, but in saving the Club from financial ruin. Dispute and argument failed to halt the onrush of an enterprise which suddenly assumed historic urgency. In 1956, it became known that the M.C.C. would send a team to South Africa under the captaincy of Peter May. The Stadium had to be built. As in 1888, the work was on - all hands hastened and, as in 1888, costs rocketed and ruin faced the Club.



The site of the Grand Stadium in Illovo

The effects were remarkable. Esprit de corps, long absent from the now massive membership, returned to carry the labouring corporate body across the chasm that could have meant its end. Economies of every kind were imposed and the Wanderers Voluntary Services did duty for paid staff. Among the disputants, the sheep were sorted from the goats and all those who valued their Club and its amenities stood by to see it through one of the most critical phases of its existence. At colossal cost, the Stadium and its arena were completed (including special provision for non-white spectators who were subsequently excluded by the Group Areas Act). In November/December 1956, Peter May and his team took the field against Transvaal and South Africa as Major Wharton and his men had done sixty-eight years before. The Club, like its historic I Zingari forbear, had come through darkness into light.

Over many difficult years during which the membership declined and doubts were continuously expressed, the policy of exploiting all the Club's amenities to restore its economy finally prevailed. The huge Stadium remained a problem but ultimately found its function as the venue not only of all major sporting events, local and national, but of special spectacles such as Military Tattoos and pyrotechnical and other displays. To the routine sporting activities of rugby, soccer, cricket, athletics, tennis, gymnastics, bowls, hockey, baseball and swimming and the more-recently acquired Billiards, Badminton, Squash and Table Tennis, were added many new outlets for recreational diversion in the shape of Fencing, Water Polo, Bridge, a Toastmasters Club and in fact, any activity on which a member's fancy might alight. At one time or another, Boxing, Cycling, Judo and Karate, Trampolining, Netball, Basketball, Jukskei, Softball and other organised exertions were accommodated and appropriate facilities always held available. Much of the proliferation of sporting facilities was enabled by the development of the Club's other assets, particularly the Club House itself which, as in the past, was made available for entertaining by non-members.

The management was divided into Administration and Catering under D. C. Bursnall and F. R. Reid and the Club House became the venue of banquets and conferences, receptions and ceremonies, commanded by every kind of body including the City Council of Johannesburg whose Mayor, reverting to tradition, frequently entertained there. By that time, the Wanderers Club (Kent Park) had become as completely surrounded by suburban

development as the Wanderers Club (Johannesburg) had been by urban. Again an oasis in the middle of buildings, it had acquired a new mystique.



The completed Wanderers Stadium in Illovo

Where in past years, the older members had been outraged by the intrusion of professional sport, now they cavilled at a new "commercialism" in the use of the premises, the magazine and other features for advertising. The answer was the same as Victor Kent had given a generation before. Revenue was essential to preserve the identity of the Club as an association of like minded private persons, free to determine their own affairs in a world where management and State interference were becoming increasingly conspicuous features.

Many attitudes had changed. The definitions of "amateur" and "professional" had become almost too blurred to have significance. Among the members, the deferential camaraderie between the young and the older members had become a boisterous bonhomie verging on the schoolboyish with everyone feeling entitled to call another member by forename. Old standards were discarded and new ones installed but the identity of the Club as a framework in which unregimented individuals could find their ease, remained the same. Some of its fortuitous aspects even became traditional. When, at the age of 75, A. S. Frames retired after 39 years from the secretaryship of the South African Cricket Association in 1966, it was assumed by the Club secretary/manager D. C. Bursnall, who continued the tradition George Allsop had established. Direct lineal descent could be traced even further back. In 1887, Charlie Pietersen had been the secretary of the Wanderers Cricket Club before the parent Club existed, and in 1888 had become first secretary of the historic Wanderers Club. Other traditions lay deep in Wanderers history. Much of the wheel would continue to come round full circle.



Hugh Lobban (right), Wanderers bowling star, winning the National Singles Championship in 1963



“Okey” Geffin, Wanderers Rugby Springbok



Wally Hayward, Wanderers Athletic Springbok

Neville Price, Wanderers Athletic Springbok



Sir Stanley Mathews – guest soccer star at the Wanderers in 1958 and 1966



Mrs. Anne Mackenzie, Wanderers Athletic Springbok



Norman Farquharson, Wanderers Tennis Springbok

The completed Wanderers Club House from the rear



