

In 1899 the Hoffman Manufacturing Company opened a factory in New Street, Chelmsford to manufacture Ball and Roller Bearings and during 1907 the Hoffman Athletic Club was formed. Headquarters were at the works and football was played at Coval Lane. The Works Directors purchased an 8 acre field in Rainsford Road in 1919 which was to be made suitable for all outdoor sports, and on July 18th of that year the first Athletic Sports Meeting was held. The sports were followed by a Fete at which the music was provided by the Band of the 2nd Essex Regiment. This in turn was followed by dancing on the lawn to the "Hoffman Orchestra".

During the period 1920 to 1936, indoor activities such as Billiards & Darts were established at the Works club headquarters. Dances and Concerts were held by clearing the Mess Hall / Canteen. These concerts were all given by employees.

In 1937 the Works football team had a successful run in both the Amateur and FA Cups. Crowds in excess of 3,000 turned up at the Rainsford Road ground and saw games against Ipswich Town (Champions of the Southern League) and many other top teams.

By 1938 the Company had built the three floor Social Hall that was to play a major part in the Club history for the next 50 years. It was used as a canteen for employees and provided more facilities for club rooms. Included was a Girls club room used for Music, Table Tennis, and Dancing. At this time the Club was flourishing with a total of 17 different sections. Bathrooms were provided for lady members and were available for use at a charge of 2d (just under 5p in today's money).

The sprung dance floor that had been laid in the Social Hall was considered the best in East Anglia. To mark the opening of the Social Hall in December 1938 the Club, now known as "Hoffman Athletic & Social Club", staged a Variety Concert. This ran for 5 nights to full houses of 450. All artistes were Hoffman employees including the Hoffman Orchestra of 24 musicians, the Hoffman Male Voice Choir, the eight dancers of the Hoffman Follies, and the Hoffman Hillbillies.

During the war years 1939 – 1945 the factory had a major role to fulfil and employees worked many hours of overtime. In consequence, the indoor and outdoor activities were considerably reduced, but those that continued aided morale during this difficult time for factory, club, town and country.

The Bowls Section was formed in 1944, playing on a public green (now Central Park, Chelmsford). In May 1950 a new Six-rink bowling green was opened by Mr J. W. Garton, the Managing Director of the Hoffman Manufacturing Company. The green had been laid in the North-west corner of the Rainsford Road Sports field, taking the place of the Tennis Section's six grass courts which, in turn, were moved to a strip of land behind the football stand.

1951 to 1958 were extremely active years. The Club membership was in excess of 4,000, each member paying 2d per week (deducted from their wages) plus a small fee per section. A Club Secretary and a Bar / Club Room Steward were employed, with their wages being paid by the Company.

During this period, well known sports personalities both visited and played at the Club. Among these were Joe Davis (Billiards & Snooker), Johnny Leach (World Champion, Table Tennis) and the Rowe twins (Table Tennis). In addition to the regular football, hockey, cricket, tennis and bowls, full use was made of the Sports field with regular Inter-Works athletic meetings, Gala Days, and Flower shows. The 1914 – 1918 'war huts' at the southern end of the field were used to capacity.

In 1952 the Company purchased a 4½ acre field situated in St Fabians Drive (now Acres End) which had previously been used by the YMCA. This was then used by the Football Section.

On 29th August 1959, Essex started a 3-day County Cricket Championship match against Lancashire on the Rainsford Road ground. Paid attendance on days 1 & 2 exceeded 2,500. The Essex team included Trevor Bailey, Doug Insole and Barry Knight. Lancashire included Cyril

Washbrook and Brian Statham. This one match was so successful that Essex asked the Club to stage two further games in 1961, one against Derbyshire and the other against a South African team that included three youthful international stars of the future in Colin Bland, Eddie Barlow, and Peter Pollock.

During the summer of 1964, the International Cavaliers visited the Club ground to play Essex in a one-day cricket match. This aroused much interest as the visitor's team included Dennis Compton in addition to 4 New Zealand Test players. There was now a very urgent need for a new pavilion on the ground and, with financial help from the Company, a new pre-fabricated building was erected. This was officially opened on 18th July 1964 and proved to be a great asset to the Club. Many of the activities taking place at the Works were transferred to the new pavilion.

On 23rd October 1965 an International Hockey match, England v Holland, was played at the Rainsford Road ground. The game was televised in England (by ATV) and in Holland. Well over 3,000 spectators attended the match and the splendid condition of the ground was highly praised, particularly by the Dutch players and officials.

1967 – 1968 was probably one of the most successful periods for the Club, as expansion was taking place in every direction. 3 new sections were formed – Motor Car; Photography and Needlecraft, making 20 sections in all. Both bars – one at the Works and the other in the Sports field pavilion, were very popular and social activities at both the Works and Sports field were well attended. The majority of the 4,500 employees were members of the Club – for one “Gala Night”, no fewer than 3,000 tickets were applied for!

On 6th July 1969, Essex played Northants in the John Player Sunday League on the Club ground but, unfortunately for the 5,000 spectators, rain permitted only 5 overs to be bowled.

In 1969 the weekly subscription for Club membership was raised to 6d (2½ p). To avoid the possibility of losing members, this subscription entitled members to enter a quarterly draw for a prize of £750.00 or a new motor car. The first winner chose the car, a Vauxhall Astra. Within 3 years, the draw had to be modified to a prize of £1,000.00 as this sum would no longer buy any make of car.

After some Government intervention during 1969 – 1970, a merger of Hoffman with Ransome & Marles, and Pollard took place. This resulted in nine principal factories in the UK, Chelmsford works being the largest. In total the merged group employed 15,000 people. As from 1st January 1970, the new company was called RANSOME HOFFMAN POLLARD LTD but, after a few years, this was changed to RHP. The new management fully supported the Club and initially made no major changes, although the name had to be changed to RHP (Chelmsford) Sports & Social Club. The famous “Ransome & Marles Brass Band”, who made over 400 broadcasts and were the first brass band to appear on television, also had to change its name to “RHP Brass Band”. They made several appearances at Chelmsford but, due to high costs, had to disband after a few years.

Between 1971 and 1973 the Club started to have financial problems, not helped by the introduction of VAT (at that time 10%) having to be paid on subscriptions and bar turnover. By 1973 the total membership had dropped to 2,366. In an attempt to revive interest, an annual ‘Miss RHP’ competition was introduced and proved popular for several years. During 1973, a Retired Members section was formed. With a large number of members being made redundant or taking early retirement, this quickly became popular.

The Company made big changes to the Social Hall building in 1974. The canteen was moved from the ground floor to the dance floor above. This floor was covered with a drugget which had to be removed before any badminton or dancing could take place. In addition, the main bar and Billiard Hall were turned into offices. To partly compensate, a new Games Room was built on to the Sports field pavilion.

Between 1975 and 1978, the number of Sections in the Club reduced to 10 and most of these were struggling. The exceptions were Carpet Bowls, Freshwater Angling and Outdoor Bowls which, in 1978, reported their most successful season to date, with a membership of 65 winning two County titles (County Fours and Doubles) and the Chelmsford & District Pairs.

In October 1978, the Duke of Gloucester landed on the Sports field in a helicopter prior to visiting the Works.

In 1980 the Company instructed the Club to reduce the number of Groundsmen from 2 to 1. This forced the Club to leave the old YMCA field and football returned to play on the Rainsford Road ground. The Club was now struggling financially and, in 1980, made a loss of £3,805. Many operating costs previously paid by the Company had to be taken over by the Club. By now, the numbers employed by the RHP group had fallen from 15,000 to 8,000. Several substantial redundancies had occurred at the Chelmsford Works.

During 1981 an application was made for planning permission to build houses on both Sports fields. This met with much local opposition and was refused by Chelmsford Borough Council. On appeal to the Department of the Environment, a 3-day public enquiry took place in December 1982. The decision of this enquiry was to give permission to build 33 houses on the old YMCA ground (which had not been used since 1980) but to refuse permission to build on the Rainsford Road ground. The Inspector said "I consider it would be a significant loss to the Club and the facilities of Chelmsford if this high quality sports ground were to be lost to houses". The Club's pleasure at saving their field was short-lived as, within a few months, the Company gave instruction to cease using the ground for football and cricket from 1984. This meant that the only active Sections remaining in the Club were Angling, Badminton, Bowls (Carpet and Outdoor), and Retired Members. Entertainments and Dances were still being held in the Social Hall.

In June 1984 the Company instructed the Club to get the turf uplifted from the Rainsford Road ground and sell it immediately. Very sadly, despite resistance, the Club had to comply. Once the turf had been removed the state of the ground deteriorated rapidly and it quickly resembled a 'tip'. As had been anticipated, the Company soon applied for permission to build 58 houses (an increase from the previous application in 1981). On this occasion the application included the demolition of the existing Sports pavilion and a new pavilion alongside the bowling green which would remain. Once again, Chelmsford Borough Council refused the application and it went to appeal.

By early 1985, large parts of the Club had ceased to operate and the Groundsman and Bar staff had been made redundant. On 17th January 1985 a "Closing Night Party" was held in the Sports field pavilion. This was the last night that the bar was open, although the building continued to be used by the Bowls and the Retired Members sections.

In October 1986 the Department of the Environment held another public enquiry to discuss the Council's rejection of the Company's proposal to build houses. This time there was no opposition as the Bowls Section in particular stood to benefit and residents in St Fabians Drive did not object this time as they preferred new houses at the bottoms of their gardens rather than a 'tip'.

As expected, in January 1987, the Department of the Environment gave permission for houses to be built, adding a condition that a new Sports pavilion was to be built before any houses were occupied.

Due to redundancies there were now less than 1,000 employees at the Works and Club membership totalled around 700. Dances and Badminton were still taking place in the Social Hall.

The Bowls section became involved with the developers (Countryside) in discussing details of the new pavilion to be built for the Club. In September 1987 the old Sports field pavilion was demolished and work commenced on building the new houses and the new pavilion.

By February 1988 the new pavilion was complete and the Bowls Section had the task of getting it furnished for the opening of the summer season. Most of the chairs, tables etc. came from the Social Hall at the Works as it had now been officially announced that the Works were to close.

On 29th April 1988 the new pavilion was officially opened with a Bowls match against Chelmsford Bowls Club. By November 1988 all 58 new houses on the Club's old sports field had been built.

The management of RHP Group moved to Newark and, whilst the majority of employees had left during 1988 – 1989, it wasn't until December 1989 that the gates of the New Street works were finally closed after 90 years.

Although the Club was pleased to have the new pavilion, a sizeable car park and a six rink bowling green, the long term outlook was uncertain. Initially, the Club was told by the Company that no decision would be made for 6 months (December 1989). They were then given another six months and then, in September 1990 another twelve months but, at this time, the Club was informed that the property would be put on the open market in October 1991.

During this twelve months grace the Club tried to persuade the Company not to put it up for sale but to give it to them in return for a lifetime of service or to lease it to the Club. The Company refused both options but said it would be sold as it stood and not for development.

In May 1991 Chelmsford Bowls Club expressed an interest in buying the site in partnership with the Club. Very many meetings were held but eventually the Chelmsford Bowls Club pulled out. The Club was not too disappointed as it had been foreseen that many problems could well arise.

The Company were asking for a price of £300,000, discounted by 50% to the Club. Further negotiations got the price down to £110,000. The sole aim of the Club, somehow or other, was to retain the use of the bowling green and pavilion for its members. In an attempt to raise money to purchase the site, help was sought from organisations including the Sports Council, the Playing Fields Association, the Foundation for Sport and The Arts and Essex County Bowling Association. All these attempts proved negative.

Many discussions were held with Chelmsford Borough Council who were prepared to buy the site, then lease it back to the Club but their terms proved unattractive.

In November 1991, it was suggested that the Club members try to raise the money themselves in the form of interest free loans. In promises a total of £24,000 was pledged. Many fund raising events were organised and these were well supported, not only by Club members but also by other local Bowls Clubs, who were equally anxious that RHP did not lose their green. The Club's bank and the brewery promised loans which the Club felt could be afforded. After more negotiations with the Company, the asking price had been reduced to £85,000. In July 1992, the Company were told that the Club could only afford to pay £65,000 (£13,000 from Club funds; £24,000 from members, £20,000 loan from the bank and £8,000 loan from the brewery). To the great joy of the Club, the Company said they would accept £65,000 subject to a speedy completion. After many discussions and much correspondence with the Club's solicitors (Hill & Abbott) the contract was exchanged on 12th November 1992 and, on 1st December 1992 the deal was completed. The Company gave permission in writing for the Club to continue using the name of RHP and their logo.

The member's loans which had been pledged were paid in full. The 1½ acre site now belonged to the 250 members of the Club. Trustees had to be elected and several changes made to the Club Rules.

Now with an assured future, the Club took on a new lease of life and during the next 2 years continuing efforts were made to obtain some money from the Foundation for Sport and the Arts. The initial application had been made in 1991 and the Club had always been hopeful of some financial assistance from the Foundation. Persistence and patience finally paid off for,

after a period during which 20 letters were exchanged and a personal inspection of the Club accounts, a gift of £20,000 was made to the Club in June 1994. This was given specifically to enable the Club to repay the member's loans. During the two years between making the loans and receiving the gift, several members had generously changed their loans to donations. Today the Club is a happy marriage of ex Hoffman / RHP employees and new members that have joined since the closure of the factory. The special comradeship built during the factory days continues unchanged across all members old and new.