



▲ Ninety two year old farmer, businessman and racehorse owner **Dennis Allington**, in action in 2014 at **Hadley Heath** in **Worcestershire**, itself one of the oldest greens still in use in British bowling.

One of the barbs often thrown at bowls is that it is a game for elderly 'trundlers'. 'Old men's marbles' is another typical jibe, as if sport were the sole province of the young.

But with average life expectancy across the nation reaching 79 for men and 83 for women in 2015, and with some 17 per cent of the total population now being 65 or over, bowling clubs would appear to have much to offer the Britain of tomorrow.

► Bowls 'is a very quiet game and calculated rather for the steady old gentleman than for his racketsy son.'

So said the *Manual of British Rural Sports* in 1861, a publication whose author, under the pen name of 'Stonehenge', had clearly never been to a pub green such as the **Gate Hangs High** in **Wrexham**.

For there are plenty of league teams in which the age gap between the oldest and youngest bowlers might be 50 years or more.

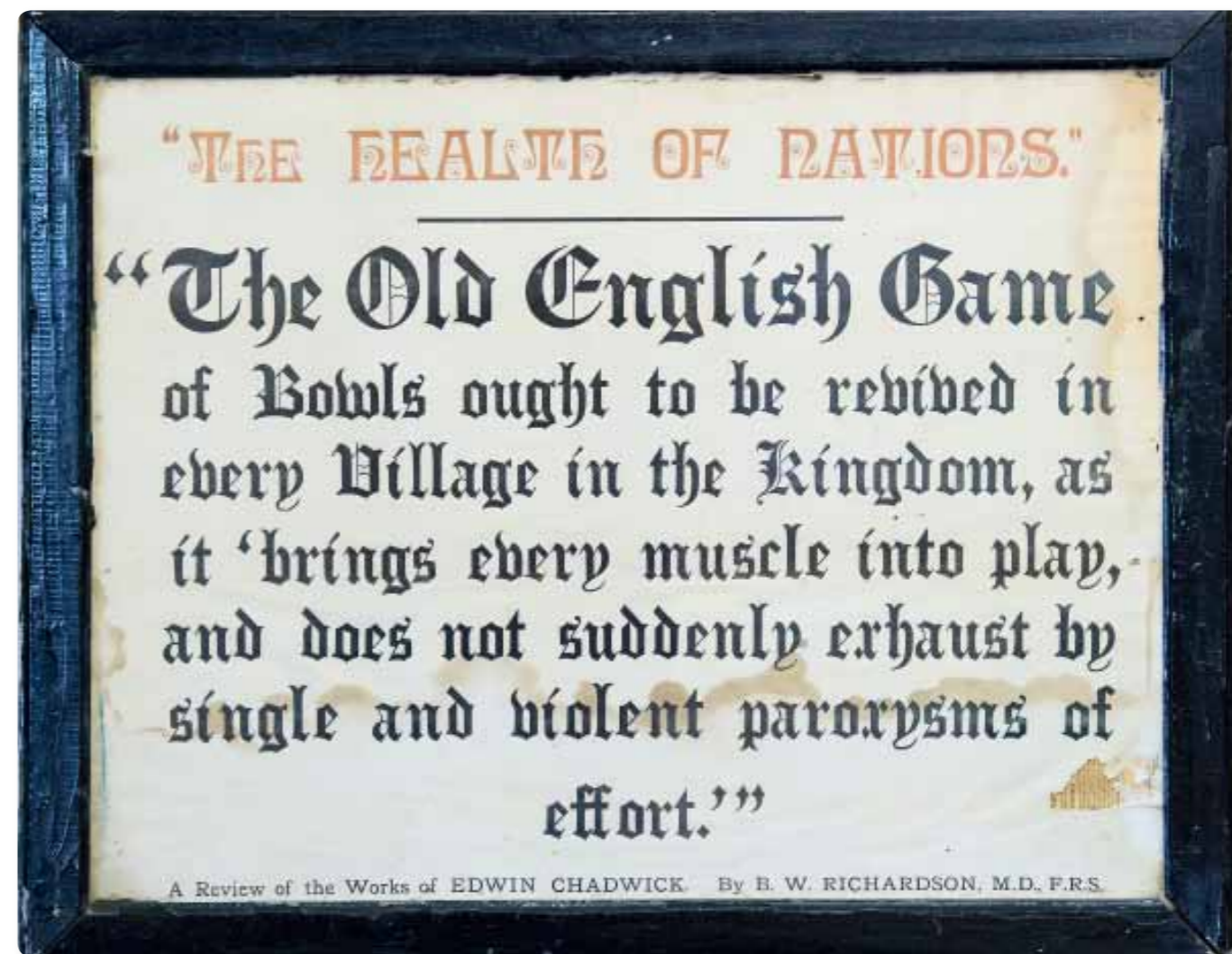
In addition to which, clubs hold special events where grandparents and grandchildren are paired in order to introduce the youngster to the basics.

Of course like any physical skill, bowls is best learnt young, when limbs are supple and the eye is keen. But it takes years to learn the tactical subtleties of line and length. As a result, except perhaps on a very slow green in poor weather, many a young whippersnapper has been taken down by a wily old hand who knows just how to spot a weakness in his opponent.

This aspect of bowls culture is unlikely to change. But another is dying out, and that is the 20th century phenomenon of standalone single-sex clubs.

Formed in Blackpool in 1928, **Highfield Ladies** is a now a relatively rare example of this kind, especially since most governing bodies have become mixed, and mixed leagues have become routine. Even on very large crown greens, women can now 'outreach' men by using small-sized bowls.

But while the older generation lives on, a certain conservatism is inevitable. At **Tamworth Castle** (right), and elsewhere, there are bowlers whose competitive careers began in the 1950s. Their knowledge, and not least their fund of tales, can never be discounted.



▲ Framed on the pavilion walls of one of Britain's oldest clubs, **Great Torrington** in **Devon**, this quote by **Benjamin Ward Richardson** is taken from *The Commonwealth*, a series of essays on health and wellbeing (see *Links*). Published in 1887, the essays were inspired by the works of Sir Edwin Chadwick, a staunch advocate of Poor Law reform and public sanitation.

Richardson was by no means the first to see bowls in the context of health. As early as 1572, John Jones, whilst extolling the virtues of Buxton Spa, recommended 'bowling in allayes' or, should the weather be 'convenient, and the bowles fitte to such a game, as eyther in playne or longe allayes, or in suche as have cranks with halfe bowles, whiche is the fyner and gentler exercise.'

Today, it is for that same reason that Sport England funds the game, via an organisation called the Bowls Development Alliance. For people of advanced years, bowls has numerous health benefits.

But to understand what Jones meant by 'allayes' and 'halfe bowles' our focus is now the past, and the very roots of bowling's place in the heritage of Britain.