

CLUB SCENE

Carlisle weathers storm



Carlisle Squash Club stalwarts Ronnie and Paul Bell tell Rod Gilmour about the havoc wreaked by Storm Desmond on the Cumbrian venue, and how it is recovering

When Ronnie Bell first heard that looters were venturing across Carlisle in canoes and on jet skis with a view to robbing businesses, his gut reaction was to find a boat and protect the squash and fitness club that has been a part of his life for 40 years.

"It was my first instinct," the 63-year-old says in the aftermath of the "devastating" Saturday night in December which saw Carlisle Squash Club flooded for the second time this millennium thanks to the destruction left behind by Storm Desmond.

"Just under 11 years later here we are again. It was two foot higher than in 2005 as well."

The first signs of danger had come from a club member who happened to be working as part of Cumbria's flood alert team. "Ronnie, this is going to be bad", the member had told the club stalwart-turned-gatekeeper in an early-evening telephone conversation.

It was to be a "real shock" for Bell. A decade previously the club experienced their first significant setback caused by

flooding. With the club holding insufficient insurance cover, it was on the brink of folding, but battled back to reopen its doors.

Then, in 2009, another tense period of high water levels put the club under further threat, though this time the flood defences held the water back.

"Perhaps we were a bit blasé, but we were all thinking we would be safe this time around because of that," admits Bell.

Meanwhile, some 120 miles away in Manchester, Ronnie's son, Paul, was attending an England Squash North-West training weekend. As soon as he heard the news, he drove back to Carlisle to look after his girlfriend, with the couple's house located across the road from the club.

In the early hours water started to flow into the streets. By 2am the club had flooded. "I didn't think it would actually happen, but in the space of an hour that all changed," recalls Paul, England Squash's Young Coach of the Year in 2011.

The Bells, especially Ronnie, were on edge throughout the night. As dawn broke the following day, Ronnie went in via boat to secure the club.

On the Monday, in the early aftermath, the Bells entered the club together. The ground floor had been completely ruined. In all, it was seven foot under water and the courts were half full of water. One of the court's glass-back walls had been smashed by the force of the water cascading into the club. It was a surreal sight.

In all, it took two days for the water to clear, though the car park was still submerged a week later. Some members' houses had been completely destroyed. As for Paul, his house looked like a "derelict building", a shattering admission given that he had just finished redecorating the last bedroom before Christmas.

Ronnie and Paul have received hundreds of texts of support as the club found itself bound together by the community's 'Spirit of Cumbria'. The deluge has included offers to help set up

donation initiatives, but Ronnie admitted that, despite this generosity, the club would have been “embarrassed” to take any money, as they were fully insured.

The foundations will by and large take three to six months to dry, while the club has taken the decision to freeze membership fees until the courts are back up and running. All six court floors will have to be ripped up and replaced.

The Bells hope to be back in business by the autumn, but it is now in the hands of the loss adjusters to decide just how quickly.

After the 2005 flooding, the non-profit club, which opened in 1972, reduced the courts to six from the original eight. “We

INSURANCE LESSON LEARNED

The one lesson Ronnie Bell took away from Carlisle Squash Club’s first flood disaster in 2005 was to learn the ins and outs of insurance policies.

It is a crucial aspect of running any club and Bell believes that clubs in threatened regions of flooding and other risk-affected areas “should make sure they are protected 100 per cent on disaster policy”.

In 2005 Carlisle were heavily under-insured and had to take out a series of loans to pay for repairs and other costs. A decade on and the club is now fully insured, which means that they will be able to install new courts, floors, showers and changing rooms following December’s flooding.

Bell envisages that the insurance premiums on the club will increase, while the total claim is likely to be around £500,000.

The Cumbrian floods in December also saw the Sands Centre in Carlisle and Appleby Squash Club affected.

They have all received Sport England’s flooding document through England Squash, the national governing body, and Active Cumbria.

Sport England has pledged £400,000 to its emergency relief fund to help facilities, while England Squash has waived affiliation fees to affected clubs for the year.

managed to get the club back better than the way it was and we have managed to be very successful because of it,” says Paul. “Now we are back to square one.

“There was still uncertainty back then, but the loans we had to take out to repair the damage had been repaid and the club was flourishing.”

Success with masters and junior players on the national scene has helped Carlisle to prosper. At its peak, 400 members were playing the box leagues. The courts were filled from 5pm to 10pm every night.

The upshot now is that there is no alternative. There are a couple of courts “dotted around here and there”, but the worry is that some members will get their squash fix elsewhere.

However, as Carlisle, the most northerly club in England, holds the monopoly on squash in the area and with the nearest club of the same size an hour’s drive away, their only major concern lies in the gym-only members, who account for 20 per cent of the business.

Even then, members are likely to return thanks to the “non-commercial, family-friendly atmosphere”.

Step forward the Professional Squash Association. Based in Leeds, their headquarters were briefly threatened by the rapidly-rising River Aire, so the World Tour body has taken a vested interest in Carlisle’s travails.

They have generously loaned their TV glass show court (which will next be used for this year’s World Championships) on the premise that the PSA can find the right insurance quotes and the committee could find a location to house it for a few months. It did not take long for a member who owns a warehouse in Carlisle to offer the space needed.

“This is something we are looking into and are hoping to pull off,” said Lee Beachill, the PSA’s chief operating officer.

The flooding may have stopped the children’s routine of finishing school and walking to the club, but the PSA initiative means that the club’s burgeoning junior scene (which includes Matthew Harrison, England’s no.1 at under-11 level) might be able to continue playing, albeit in wholly unique surroundings. One to tell the grandchildren.

“The flooding is something I never thought we would have to go through again,” states Ronnie, who has run the club on behalf of the committee for 33 years and may well now be asked to stay on beyond retirement. “But we will come back stronger.”

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The top four pictures show the damage inflicted by Storm Desmond, while in the bottom photo Ronnie Bell points to where the flood water reached

