



Left: Glyn School pupils enjoy their PE lesson at Ewell Bowls Club and above, England's Sophie Tolchard, Sian Gordon and Ellen Falkner show off their Commonwealth Games gold medals

Bowled OVER

The game of bowls has long been the domain of elderly gents in pristine slacks, but in a corner of Surrey it is finding a host of new, much more sprightly fans. Caitríona Marron reports

If you asked the average teenage boy which kind of sport they liked playing, you would no doubt hear a diverse range of answers, from the classic contact sports of rugby, football and hockey to rowing, cricket and tennis. A few would obviously tell you they'd rather stick pins in their eyes than do anything physical and fewer still would say 'bowling'.

However, in a corner of Surrey, at Ewell Bowling Club, that is exactly what has happened following an initiative with Glyn School for boys. Bowling coach Roy Hibbin was approached by the school's PE department, which was looking for a summer sporting activity that would appeal to students who did not want to play a contact sport.

"It was agreed to introduce a less volatile sport than rugby or football, so I plotted a six-week course," Roy tells me

"It's a sport that you can never be as good as you want to be"

when I visit the club, a calm oasis populated by figures in pristine whites.

"And as the days passed by, the boys were turning up earlier and earlier. We'd shown them how to set up the rinks, and when it was their turn to do it they had less time to play in the allotted time. But they were eager to spend as much time as they could bowling!"

In fact, the course proved so popular that the school and students wanted to continue it in the winter terms, but with no indoor facilities the budding players will have to wait until the summer. The club's coaches were as equally enamoured as their young protégés.

"Our assistants have already signed up for next summer!," says Roy.

As I watch a game in progress, I am joined by another club member, who graciously hands me a cup of tea and a running commentary: "The lead throws the jack, that tiny white ball, down the centre and the players must get their bowls closest to it."

That much I remember from holiday games as a child, but I could never quite get my bowl to land correctly.

"Well, that's because the shape of the bowl causes it to bend," my personal pundit explains, "you have to cast it almost at an angle," thus revealing the strategy and focus required to be successful.

While there is evidence that the sport dates back to the 13th century and has come to represent summer entertainment for genteel gents and ladies in their twilight years, it transpires that the today's game has a different story to tell. It is enticing a much younger demographic and not just with the boys of Glyn School.

In recent months, Surrey's junior under-25s men's team has been crowned county champions while the Surrey ladies team secured second place. You could say the

Young England bowler Natalie Melmore

game is enjoying its 15 minutes of fame, especially in light of the recent medal successes by the – young – men and women competing at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.

Natalie Melmore, 25, who won two silver medals in team and individual events tells me why the sport is gaining in popularity.

"It's such an inclusive sport and one of the only sports that a grandmother can take her kids and grandkids to and all be involved together," she says. "It's totally addictive, too! I've been playing for 16 years now and it's a sport that you can never be as good as you want to be, there's always another goal."

Natalie's fiancé, Jamie Chestney, was part of the Commonwealth men's team that won silver and bronze medals, and three other players, Sian Honnor, Ellen Falkner and Sophie Tolcard, all won gold.

With such fantastic results and the obvious enthusiasm expressed by the boys at Glyn and their coaches at Ewell, I can't help wondering why there aren't more similar initiatives aimed at getting young people involved.

"A lot more can be done by all our national governing bodies to promote the sport," concedes Natalie. "Change is coming but it's slower than I hoped."

Nevertheless, as the leaves turn brown and traditional bowling clubs up and down the county close their doors for the season, the long-term future of the game remains a bright prospect. After all, a sport that has survived for more than 700 years surely has plenty of staying power.

