



One Hundred Years of Tennis



Introduction

It is a privilege to be members of Aylsham Tennis Club during such an important time in its history. How much better to be able to remember 2021 for something more joyful than Covid-19!

This centenary year provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the importance of the Club to our lives and to appreciate the joy that tennis gives us. Nothing beats the pleasure of hitting an (almost) perfect shot. Even better, we can feel good about keeping fit whilst doing something that is such fun. But, more than anything, the Club is a wonderful way to make new friends and develop those social networks that enrich our lives.

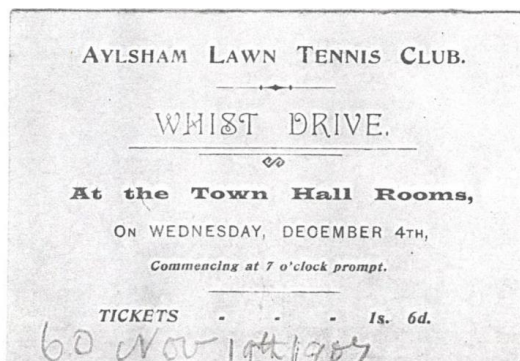
But, where did it all begin? Who are the people who gave us the opportunity to play and enjoy tennis in Aylsham?

The purpose of this document, therefore, is to give you the background to the Recreation Ground and creation of Aylsham's tennis courts in 1921. The growing popularity of tennis will be explored. In addition, there will be a brief description of tennis fashion, culture and the historical context in which the Club started its history.

Next time you are on the court pause for a moment and perhaps you will catch a faint echo of the past. Maybe you will sense the vibration of a tennis ball hitting the ground or sense the faint footsteps of someone running for a wide ball. You may even be lucky enough to hear a distant voice of praise for a high smash executed to perfection.

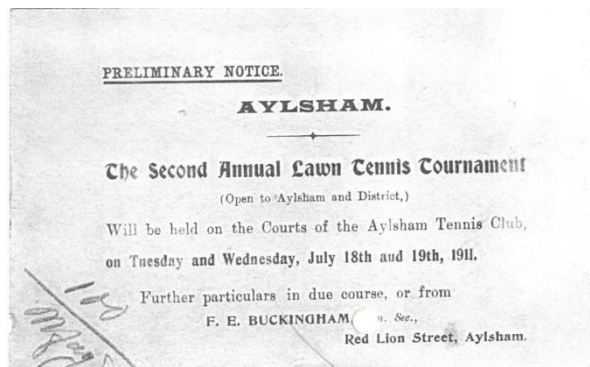
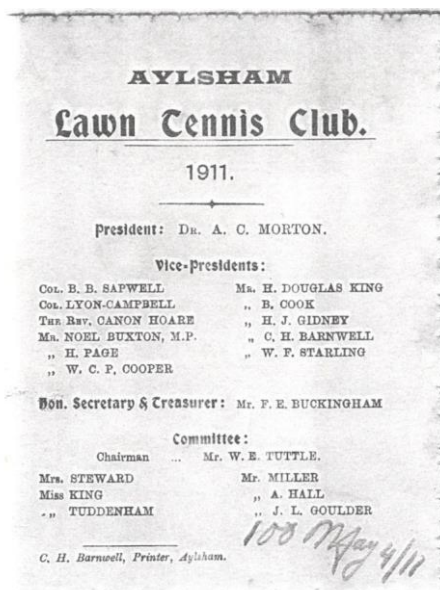
How did it all Begin?

Interestingly, whilst tennis at the Recreation Ground began in the 1920s, residents were enjoying the game several years beforehand. The author, Col Sapwell, writes in his 'History of Aylsham' that tennis was 'in existence by 1889' and this took place on private courts. This changed in 1894 when the Club obtained its own courts which were situated on a meadow in Oakfield Road belonging to Mr Starling.



This notice of a Whist Drive held at the Town Hall was found in the Club hut and, as you can see, a handwritten note at the bottom suggests that this event took place in 1907.

The 'Preliminary Notice' demonstrates that competitive tennis took place at the Club and had done so since 1910.



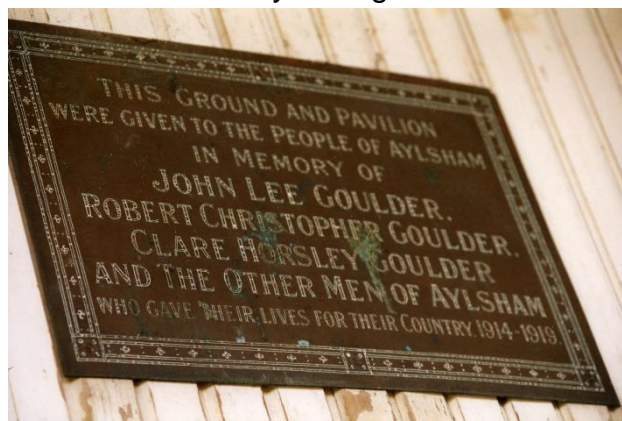
This next document lists the names of people involved in the running of the Club in 1911. Many of these names will be familiar as streets in Aylsham. What is striking is the number of people carrying out roles, especially the prevalence of Vice Presidents. Amongst them is Col Sapwell, the author of the 'History of Aylsham' who is listed as a Vice President, as is C H Barnwell, great grandfather of the current owners of Barnwell Printers and W F Starling, whose meadow was used to create grass courts for the Club.

Another important name on the list is Mr J L Goulder (committee member) and this provides the link to the Club's origins at the Recreation Ground.

Tennis was inevitably disrupted as a result of World War I. Historical records suggest that up to 400 men left Aylsham to fight in the Great War. Sixty-five did not return and their names are carved on the war memorial which is situated in the churchyard of St Michael's.

After the War it was decided that a recreation ground would be created as a facility for the people of Aylsham and, importantly, as a memorial to those residents who perished during combat. Specifically, it was 'to provide a healthy means of amusement and recreation for those who have not the opportunity of providing these things for themselves'.

The land and construction of a pavilion were kindly gifted to the town by the Goulder family who had tragically lost three members of their family during the War – these were brothers John, Robert and Clare. The recreation ground fund raised a total of just over £740, with the principal amount being raised by the Goulder family who donated £550. Aylsham History Society records state that there is evidence in Norwich Union archives of £300 taken out on Robert's life and which was paid out when he died of wounds he received in battle. This money was generously given towards



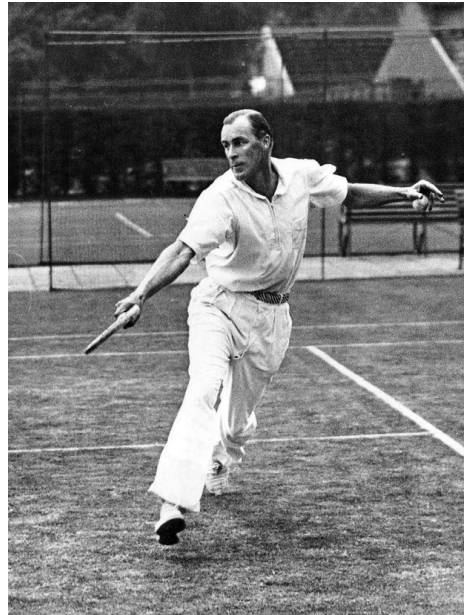
the cost of a sports pavilion on the recreation ground. The recreation ground land at that time comprised 11 acres, 1 rood (measure of land equal to $\frac{1}{4}$ acre), 14 perches (a square perch is $16\frac{1}{2}$ feet or $5\frac{1}{2}$ yards) and was purchased on 27 April 1920 from Col Bowman to be held by trustees of Aylsham Recreation Ground. However, the amount of land is significantly reduced later as a Charity Commission document dated 5 August 1991 describes the land as comprising 6.3 acres with 'a frontage of 1,200 feet or hereabouts on the north east to Sir Williams Lane'. The purpose of the recreation ground land is stated as being for 'the benefits of the inhabitants of the Parish of Aylsham without distinction of political, religious or other opinions, with the object of improving the conditions of life for the said inhabitants'. During discussions about the recreation ground it was expressed that the sports to be enjoyed there should include football and cricket. Mr Hodds, for example, stated that 'young men wanted a place to play football and cricket in the summer – he did not believe in stone memorials'. Mr Sapwell added that 'the men who played football and cricket won the war, not the men who played draughts'. Whilst these two sports were certainly played from the very beginning, ie in 1920, research to date has not been able to conclude with certainty whether tennis was first played on the recreation ground in 1920 or in 1921. Aylsham Town Council's Honorary Archivist provided information from Sapwell's 'History of Aylsham' which suggested that the Club reopened after the War in 1920 'as Aylsham Private Tennis Club with courts in Burgh Road'. However, the common view held by Aylsham Tennis Club is that tennis was first played on the recreation ground in 1921. Whichever is correct, the Club has been located on its current site for 100 years! What is not in dispute is that the courts were originally grass and remained so for many years.

Disappointingly, there seem to be few records about the Club's history but, of note, there is a letter from the National Provincial Bank Limited, Norwich, dated 11 February 1964 informing the then Secretary, R W Simpson, that Major Harold Herbert Johnson (who used to be the Club's President) had left £100 in his will to 'Aylsham Private Tennis Club'. Sadly, there is no information about how this bequest was used.

If any members have family records or photographs that they are willing to provide to the Club these would be greatly appreciated. It would be wonderful to be able to provide a richer account of the Club's history for future generations.

The Popularity of Tennis in the 1920s and Famous Tennis Players

There was a dramatic increase in the popularity of tennis in the 1920s and this period is often described as the golden age of tennis. One of the leading players of this era was Bill Tilden and he was Wimbledon champion in 1920 and 1921. He had the remarkable achievement of not losing a single match of singles in six Davis Cup challenge rounds and six US championship finals between 1920 and 1925. Two matches which he did not win in 1927 (finals of the US Championships to Rene Lacoste and semi-finals at Wimbledon to Henri Cochet) are nevertheless regarded as classic matches in tennis history. Bill Tilden is considered one of the greatest tennis players of all time. His serve proved highly effective against his opponents and service speeds of 151 and 163 miles per hour have been cited. However, these claims have subsequently been disputed as recording instruments from that era were suspect and, furthermore, it would not be possible to generate such speeds with the wooden rackets of that time. Even so, there is no doubt about the strength of his serve and it was often called a 'cannonball'. Tilden was tall, at over 6 foot, and played mainly from the back court with shots that were described as penetrating and delivered with pinpoint accuracy. His game also included chopped and sliced shots, lobs and drop shots and he employed an effective strategic approach against his opponents. He was such a dominant force in the game that, it has been said, he would 'throw' opening sets to make his matches more interesting and challenging. Most of all, he was a showman who loved performing in front of a crowd.



Bill Tilden



Fred Perry

American domination was superseded by brilliant French players and famous amongst these were the 'Four Musketeers' comprising Jean Borotra, Henri Cochet, Rene Lacoste and Toto Brugnon who reigned supreme between 1924 and 1929. However, the beginning of the next decade saw Bill Tilden break the French domination by winning Wimbledon. In 1930 he became the oldest person, at aged 37, to win the championship. One of Britain's greatest tennis players, Fred Perry, rose to prominence in the 1930s. This decade also saw another great achievement when, in 1938, Don Budge became the first tennis player to win the Grand Slam by winning the Australian, French, Wimbledon and US championships in the same year.

Famous female players of the time were Suzanne Lenglen of France and Helen Wills Moody of the United States. The latter was the first American born woman to achieve international celebrity as an athlete. Her incredible career included eight Wimbledon titles, four French championship wins and seven US Championship titles between 1923 and 1938. Other players worthy of note included Elizabeth Ryan, Kitty



Suzanne Lenglen



Helen Wills Moody

McKane-Godfree, Molla Mallory, Lili de Alvarez, Helen Jacobs, Dorothy Round and Alice Marble.

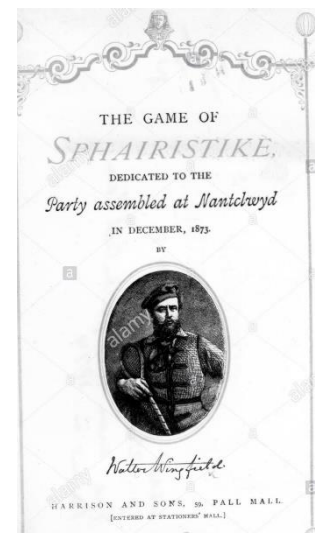
The 1920s was also important in terms of professionalism of the game. Despite opposition, the first professional tennis tournament was staged in 1926 at Madison Square Garden. Competitors included Suzanne Lenglen, Fred Perry and Don Budge. This set the trend away from an amateur sport to a professional one.

At Club level tennis was greatly enjoyed by ordinary people in the 1920s. It was especially popular during the inter-war years and reached into new communities and venues such as sports spaces, public parks and workplaces. Contrary to its elitist reputation, tennis was played by people from all walks of life and social backgrounds.

Tennis in England – A Short History

The modern game was officially called 'Lawn Tennis' and was played socially on grass courts in the gardens of Victorian ladies and gentlemen. The ladies would wear whalebone corsets and starched petticoats. Men would be dressed in long white flannels.

However, the origins of the game are thought to come from a French handball game played in the 12th - 13th century which was called 'jeu de paume' (game of the palm). From this it is believed that the game of 'real tennis' is derived (called 'court' tennis in the United States and 'royal' tennis in Australia). Marylebone Cricket Club became the governing body for real tennis and, subsequently for lawn tennis.



An important figure in the development of tennis was Major Wingfield who, in 1873, published the first book of rules. His tennis court was an hourglass shape and he called it 'Sphairistike'. This is based on a Greek word meaning 'playing with a ball'. Interestingly, there were similar games being played earlier and it is believed that the first tennis club was established in 1872 by Harry Gem and several associates in Leamington.

The manufacture of the tennis balls we use today was made possible as a result of the invention of vulcanised rubber by Charles Goodyear. German manufacturers were

the most successful in developing vulcanised, air filled rubber balls. These original rubber tennis balls had no covering and it was John Moyer Heathcote, a distinguished real tennis player, who experimented using a flannel covering. By 1882 Major Wingfield was advertising his tennis balls as being clad by a stout cloth made in Melton Mowbray. In 1923 Dunlop entered the tennis ball market using the new chemical-inflation and vulcanisation production process which resulted in greater product quality and consistency.



Dunlop Sports Co Ltd tennis ball assembling line in 1932

Major Wingfield also had a significant influence on tennis rackets, starting with his first racket in 1874. This was large, heavy and made of solid wood. Racket technology



1920s Racket by A G Spalding & Bros

remained relatively stagnant for about 100 years until the introduction of laminated wooden rackets, which started to gain popularity in 1947. Dominant manufacturers during this era were Dunlop, Slazenger, Wilson and Spalding. Dunlop launched its revolutionary and iconic Maxply tennis racket in 1932.



Rod Laver with his Dunlop Maxply Fort

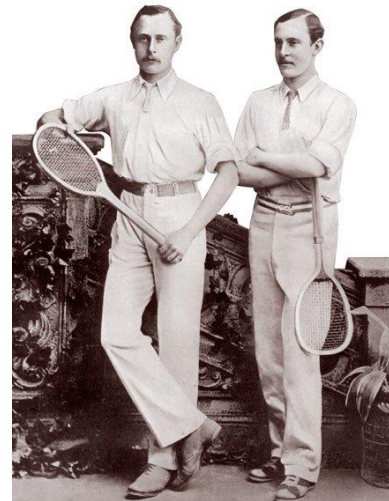
This model would become one of the most famous and recognisable rackets, dominating the marketplace for the next 50 years. It was used by some of the game's tennis legends, including Rod Laver, Virginia Wade and John McEnroe. Another popular racket was Wilson Jack Kramer.

The importance of Wimbledon in the history of tennis cannot be over emphasised. Interestingly, croquet and not tennis, was the original sport played at Wimbledon, which was then known as the All England Croquet Club. It was founded in 1868. At that time Wimbledon was a village west of London rather than the suburb it is today. A momentous decision, which shaped the history of tennis, was the conversion of one of its lawns for tennis. This became so popular that the Club changed its name to the All England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club. The Club decided to hold a tennis championship in 1877 and this was organised by a sub-committee formed of three people. The dimensions of the tennis court were set at 78 feet long (23.8 metres) by 27 feet (8.2 metres) wide and the real tennis method of scoring was adapted to allow a second service attempt. The first Wimbledon championship comprised 23 entrants and the winner was Spencer Gore. The first ladies' tournament was held in 1884 and there were 13 participants. The victor was a British player called Maud Watson. Female participants were required to wear high necked, long sleeved and full length dresses which must have made running and movement difficult, to say the least. The format was different from today, with the reigning champion in both the men's and

ladies' tournaments playing just the one match against the player who had triumphed through the elimination rounds.

In subsequent years there were only a few minor changes to the rules of tennis, for example regarding the height of the net but, in 1880, the All England Club and MCC published a set of revised rules which are very closely aligned to those in use today. Another important development was the creation of the British Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) which was formed in 1888.

Tennis in the 1880s was dominated by two people – twin brothers called William and Ernest Renshaw. William won the Wimbledon singles championships 7 times, beating his brother in 3 of these finals. Ernest eventually triumphed, winning on one occasion. They reinforced their dominance by winning the doubles championships 7 times. This period was popularly known as the 'Renshaw Rush'.



William & Ernest Renshaw

Sadly, in the 1890s there was a decline in interest in tennis and, worryingly, the Wimbledon championships incurred a financial loss in 1894 and 1895. This led to the re-emergence of croquet at the Club as an attempt to strengthen the financial position. Happily, tennis was revived, not least by the success of another two brothers – Reginald and Laurie Doherty. Reginald won Wimbledon from 1897 to 1900 and Laurie was champion from 1902 to 1907 in addition to winning the US championships in 1903 and doubles' titles at the Olympic Games in 1900 and 1908.

Another great stalwart of the game, The Davis Cup (or International Lawn Tennis Challenge Trophy, to give it the official title) was founded in the early 20th century. Although initially dominated by the United States, Great Britain had its first win in 1903 and retained the cup for the next 3 years.

As a final aside, it is worth mentioning here that Aylsham Tennis Club has been on its current site for longer than Wimbledon! The latter was originally situated off Worple Road in Wimbledon but moved to Church Road in 1922 when it had not proved possible to implement necessary expansion by purchasing adjacent land at Worple Road. The new facilities were opened by King George V and Queen Mary.



Construction of Centre Court in 1921

What Would Tennis Players Have Worn in the 1920s?

Competitive ladies' tennis in the 1920s was played wearing mainly white dresses but the casual player would wear whatever sporty type dress they had in their possession with the addition of a cardigan or jumper for cooler days. Legs would be covered by stockings and a headband would often be worn along with white shoes. During the 1920s ladies' dresses gradually become shorter, starting from ankle length with multiple



Suzanne Lenglen

petticoats to just below the knee and no petticoats. In the early 1920s ladies may have worn skirts rather than dresses with long sleeved blouses which were buttoned at the wrist. Sleeves were abandoned by

1930 to allow better movement of the arms. A key influencer of ladies' tennis fashion was the Frenchwoman, Suzanne Lenglen who was renowned for her 'shockingly skimpy ensemble' which was described as 'borderline indecent'. Amusingly, she overcame her detractors by becoming a star of the game as well as one of its fashion icons. She was renowned for embodying new fashion trends, including sporting a coloured bandeau and matching colourful jumper. Her dresses became lighter, more fluid and sleeveless. Her outfits were much admired by Wimbledon spectators, commentators and fellow tennis players. She later popularised ankle socks as a replacement for the more restrictive stockings and

encapsulated the need for clothing to be practical and comfortable as well as fashionable. It did take a while for stockings to be abandoned as demonstrated by the fact that, in 1927, Wimbledon officials were shocked when the South African player, Billy Tapscott practised on one of the outside courts wearing socks instead of stockings. In 1929 Helen Wills caused similar disconcertion when she competed at the French Championship with the calves of her legs on display. Soon all female competitors emulated her by playing without stockings. Similar discussions took place shortly afterwards about the wearing of 'shorts' and concerns around the effect on public morality. These debates about tennis fashion and suitability of competitors' attire have continued ever since. Gussie Moran's lace underwear is an example from the 1940s and a more recent example is the catsuit.



Typical tennis apparel in the 1920s



Gussie Moran



Men's tennis apparel in the 1920s

Men's tennis fashion in the 1920s was relatively simple with white, belted cloth trousers, white dress shirt unbuttoned and rolled at the sleeves, a V neck jumper with contrasting trim and white shoes. Players started wearing shorts rather than flannel trousers and a trailblazer in the 1930s was Henry 'Bunny' Austin. He was an English tennis player who was notable for holding the record, for 74 years, of being the last Briton to reach the final of the gentlemen's singles at Wimbledon. This record was broken by Andy Murray in 2012.



Bunny Austin

Tennis in the 1920s and its Historical Context

As with all periods in history, the 1920s was a time of change, important advances and expanding opportunities. This decade also included its share of 'ups and downs'. Life started to return to normal at the beginning of the decade after the horrors of World War I. There were, however, issues to resolve following hostilities and, on 10 January 1920, there was the inauguration of the League of Nations, with the first assembly held in Paris on 16 January 1920. Another important event was acceptance of the Irish Home Law Rule on 31 March 1920 and, in 1922, the Irish Free State gained independence from the United Kingdom. However, there were further hostilities during the Irish Civil War in 1922-23. Better news was the end of military conscription by the British Government in April 1920. Also that year, the Cenotaph in Whitehall was unveiled on 11 November 1920 as Great Britain's monument of remembrance for those who died in the Great War. On the same day the burials of the unknown soldiers took place simultaneously in Westminster Abbey and at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

Glamour and enjoyment returned to the country and this was encapsulated by the 'Roaring Twenties'. This period was sometimes referred to as the 'Golden Age Twenties' because of the economic prosperity experienced by many countries and there was a vibrancy in major cities like New York, Chicago, Paris, Berlin and London. Jazz music was popular and Art Deco flourished. There were significant changes in women's fashion which highlighted the greater freedoms of the age. Hemlines for skirts and dresses were raised, cutting off at the knee. Women had shorter, bobbed hair and a 'marcel' wave was popular. The women who pioneered these trends were frequently referred to as 'flappers'. More people could afford modern luxuries such as cars, telephones, radios and household electricity. Motion pictures were popular and there was an acceleration in consumer demand and aspirations. This was the birth of

'celebrities', especially in the arenas of sports and the movies. The expansion in industrial growth contributed to this economic prosperity.

It was not, however, all positive and the 1920s saw the rise of radical political movements, especially in regions that were once part of empires. There was the spread of Communism following the October Revolution and the victory by the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War. Fear of Communism led to the emergence of far right political movements and fascism in Europe.

In addition, there was devastation caused by the General Strike in the United Kingdom in 1926 and the Wall Street Crash in 1929 which led to the end of prosperity for many people in North America and Europe.

On the positive side, the 1920s was a period of important inventions which still shape our lives today. In 1925 John Logie Baird invented the first working mechanical television and, in 1928, he invented and demonstrated the first colour television. In 1925 Clarence Birdseye invented a process for frozen food. Two notable aviation achievements were the first flight by Robert Goddard in a liquid filled rocket in 1926 and, in 1927, Charles Lindbergh's record as the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean non-stop from New York to Paris.

In 1922 there was the hugely significant archaeological find by Howard Carter of the shrine of King Tutankhamun near Luxor in Egypt. Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin in 1928 was a major medical achievement. Also in 1928 a cinematic achievement was the release of the first animated short film featuring Mickey Mouse.

These are just a few examples that hopefully provide a flavour of a dynamic period that coincides with the beginning of the story of Aylsham Tennis Club at its location in Sir Williams Lane. Our history shapes the society and people we are today and we are linked through our love of tennis to members past and present. Here's to the next 100 years!

Jane Attewell
Aylsham Tennis Club Member
May 2021