DYVOURS LAWN TENNIS CLUB

1883 — 1983

by Phil Sked

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Dyvours Lawn Tennis Club was founded in 1883 and is thus one of the oldest in Scotland. The connection between the Club, Grange cricket ground, and tennis, however, goes back even further, to the very origins of the game.

On an October afternoon in 1874, a young Edinburgh advocate and a few friends carried out on to the Grange cricket field a large flat box. From it they unpacked rackets, balls, netting, and a book of instructions.

The box and its contents cost five guineas, and was, in fact, the immediate ancestor of lawn tennis. This may well have been the first time it was played in Scotland, for only that year had it been patented as a "new and improved portable court for playing the ancient game of tennis".

The inventor was Major Walter Wingfield who he burdened his creation with the jaw-cracking name "Sphairistike" from the Greek for "ball" and "play".

The Edinburgh pioneers were not notably enthusiastic. The young advocate who initiated that early trial, James Patten, (in later life Sir James Patten MacDougall) recalled "It was felt that the game was one suitable for indoor exercise when outdoor sports were impossible". They continued to play it as an indoor game at the Grindlay Street Drill Hall in winter, and outdoors at the Grange in summer.

There were at this time almost as many codes of rules as there were players. Wingfield's invention was not the only one, nor was it the first. Another military man, Major T. H. Gem, assisted by a Mr J. B. Perara, had laid out a court at Edgbaston near Birmingham in 1858.

Oldest Ball Game

What they were all trying to do was to take out-of-doors one of the oldest ball games in the world, the game we now call "royal", "real" or (in U.S.A.) "court" tennis, but which for centuries required no adjective. Tennis was so popular that at one time Paris alone boasted over two hundred of the specially built courts which it requires.

It is still played today. There are about a dozen courts in England, and many overseas. Scotland has two, and there is an active playing group at each. One, built early this century, is at the Sun Court Hotel, Troon; the other, at Falkland Palace, Fife, was built by James V and is the oldest court in Britain. Many Queen of Scots must have watched the game there many times, from the same spectators' gallery as, in 1959, did the present Queen.

A major problem for those trying to produce an outdoor version of the game was the ball itself. The real tennis ball, made traditionally from rags with a cover of wool, does not bounce on grass. It was the development of the rubber ball which made lawn tennis possible.

In the 1870's, the new game, despite its off-putting name—which in any case had been shortened to "sticky"—was becoming popular.

In Edinburgh, the Grange cricket ground became the focus of the new sport. It was played in a building known affectionately as the "Tin Temple". This stood on the west side of the present Grange pavilion, in the area now occupied by three grass courts. It contained two tennis courts placed end to end; between them was a spectators' gallery reached by an outside stair. There were dressing rooms, and the lighting was from side windows.

The Tin Temple was the creation of the Edinburgh Lawn Tennis Company Limited. It is strange that the word "lawn" was used in the title: the company had nothing whatever to do with lawns, but the cumbersome Greek name was vanishing and the game whether indoors or out was becoming known as "lawn tennis".

The Company was not a club. It was a commercial venture, and for about twenty years a very successful one, paying usually a dividend of five per cent. The charge for a court was a shilling an hour, and many of the regular players were shareholders.

First Scottish Championship

Soon after the courts were opened in 1878 the first Scottish Championship was held there, and the first singles champion was none other than the young advocate who had begun it all—James Patten, later Sir James Patten MacDougall.

Although the basic rules for outdoor tennis had been laid down a year earlier for the first Wimbledon, the Tin Temple had its own indoor rules. There was little room at the back of the two courts, and the ball was played off the walls as in "real" tennis or squash.

Sir James recalled, in later life, "The main characteristic which marked the early history of the game in Scotland was that it was regarded as an indoor game to be played as a popularised and simplified form of the *jeu de paume*". This is the old French name for real tennis, and relates to the days before the invention of rackets when the ball was hit with the palm of the hand.

The Scottish championships continued to be played in the Tin Temple until 1883, but a combination of factors was conspiring to move the game outdoors. The rubber ball has already been mentioned. There were also coming to the game young players who were not inhibited by practices learned in the real tennis or racquets courts, and who introduced such innovations as the overhead service, the smash, and playing at the net.

Origin of "Dyvours"

It is at this point that the Dyvours Lawn Tennis Club enters history. One of the founder members, Sheriff Charles R.A. Howden wrote in 1933, on the 50th anniversary:

> "In or about 1883/84, a number of us, chiefly advocates or aspirants to the Bar, used to play in the tin house on Monday mornings. It seemed to me that we could raise a team strong enough to tackle any of the other Clubs in Scotland and I suggested we should form ourselves into a Club. We had a meeting at which Graham Murray (Lord Dunedin) presided.
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> "I was at that time a law student and I suppose I had recently heard of the dyvours and their brown and yellow garments. This made me suggest the name and the colours. I remember Lord Dunedin saying it was an appropriate name as we had no grounds of our own and intended to play on other people's grounds and eat other people's lunches".

"Dyvours" is Scots for bankrupts. Under the old Scots Bankruptcy Act, such unfortunates were condemned to advertise their plight by wearing "dyvours hose"—stockings of different colours. The brown and yellow adopted by the Club were the distinguishing colours of the dyvours who found sanctuary at Holyrood.

In its first years the Club had a dual identity: there was a winter club which played in the Tin Temple and a summer one which played on ground behind the Grange pavilion. Members of one club could join the other on payment of an additional subscription.

The birth of the Dyvours Club marked the beginning of the end for the Tin Temple. The popularity of indoor tennis decreased, the building was used for giving riding lessons, first on horses and later on that new-fangled contraption, the bicycle. Finally, it was demolished in 1902. It provided a service to tennis right up to the end; Dyvours members used its dressing rooms.

In 1884 the Scottish Championships were held out of doors for the first time. Play took place on the adjacent Edinburgh Academicals' cricket ground, except for a spell when high winds drove the players indoors to the shelter of the Tin Temple where by agreement they presumably played under indoor rules.

There are no records of the first four years of Dyvours existence, but the Club played host on its courts at Grange to the Scottish Championships from 1887 to 1893.

Male Chauvinism

The first minute which has survived, 19 March 1888, notes "The admission of ladies was discussed but the proposal was negatived". Dyvours seems to have been something of a bastion of male chauvinism. Ladies were certainly playing elsewhere. The Scottish Championships held two years earlier at Corstorphine on a University ground offered a ladies' cup, for which seven players competed. Dyvours members' wives and girl friends, however, had to content themselves with a poor compromise.

Garden parties were to be allowed, at which they could play, but there were not to be more than seven of these. It was very much a male "put down", but it was not followed by a sit-in on the courts or any other demonstration of feminine wrath.

The early minutes show how very little things have changed in the running of tennis clubs in a hundred years. In 1888 the treasurer reported a deficit of over £57. The Committee wanted to double both the entrance fee and the annual subscriptions, making them four guineas and two guineas respectively. The meeting wouldn't hear of it. The Committee resigned *en bloc*. There were rapid second thoughts. Someone moved a levy of a guinea on all members—and honour was satisfied.

One of the reasons for the Club's financial problems was the cost of playing host to the Scottish Championships. Another argument in favour of change was that the building of a new Grange pavilion had meant the loss of two of the Club's eight courts. The Championships were offered to St Andrews, and were held there in 1893: the new Grange pavilion was opened in 1895.

Meantime the ladies had been beavering away in the background. A minute of 1894 records the let of the courts to the Ladies' Club for four hours daily throughout the season. Three years later, the male and female clubs were joined. Possibly to seal the agreement, the ladies offered £20 towards the cost of a tea hut; the men contributed the balance of £5; and "a small corrugated iron Pavilion" was erected.

Ten Shillings a Week

From time to time the minutes provide little sidelights on life at the end of last century. In 1899 the greenkeeper had died. The Club agreed to pay his wages to the end of the year—ten shillings a week. They also undertook to pay his widow five shillings a week for the whole of the following year, and longer if possible. This was generous treatment by the standards of the day.

Further up the social scale, two members were placed on a special "supernumerary list" because they were serving with the Imperial Yeomanry in the South African war.

The Club entered the twentieth century with a playing membership of 45 gentlemen and 41 ladies. (The terms "men" and "women" are not used in the minutes until much later). There was a limit of 90 on playing membership, based on a ratio of 15 players per grass court.

A catering service was provided, and—surprisingly—Dyvours was licensed. The accounts, meticulously presented in beautiful clerical handwriting, reveal the somewhat extraordinary fact that the only form of alcohol sold was whisky. In a typical season the purchases were ten bottles of whisky at £1 11s 8d (about 16p a bottle); "aereated water" in unspecified quantity £1 17s 3d; and 10s 6d worth of lemons. The season's profit on these items was 17s 7d—a fraction over 75p. For those who thought that strong drink and ground strokes didn't mix, there was tea, with a penny profit to the club on each cup.

In 1901 there appears for the first time a proposal which was to recur in later years—that Dyvours and Grange should amalgamate. It was rejected unanimously but the tennis and cricket club continued to co-operate on plans for the new Grange pavilion, which was opened four years later.

Dyvours' accommodation needs were more modest: the tea hut was enlarged at a cost of £50, and its comfort was much appreciated "during the cold and wet summer of 1907". (So much for the myth of the glorious summers said to have preceded the first World War.)

Telephone Trouble

The Club was moving with the times—or trying to. In 1906 it was decided to instal a telephone, and it was calculated that a cost of 2d per call would give a hundred per cent profit, but three years later the Secretary was attempting to explain why the National Telephone Company had still not made the installation. Those on more recent waiting lists will sympathise.

The Edwardian era was uneventful. There was a crisis with the courts, which had to be returfed at a cost of £37. Mrs Henderson, the caretaker, completed 25 years' service, and received a gratuity of £1. (She continued to serve the Club until 1923, when, mysteriously, she was said to have completed 40 years' service, and was given £119.)

A reader ploughing through the minutes finds a bewildering amount of details about applications for membership, admissions, resignations and the like, and wonders—why the fuss? Then early in 1914 comes an explanation. Mr G. A. Hunter writes to ask when his application for membership might be considered. He had applied in 1908!

Obviously when one might wait for years for admission, membership was something greatly to be prized As for Mr Hunter—more later.

In July of that year the Chief Constable wrote to warn of possible Suffragette activity. Grange and Dyvours joined forces to employ night watchmen "on the same terms as last year", so the threat, presumably of damage to the turf, was not new.

The First World War found the Club offering its facilities to members of the Forces in or near Edinburgh and to "two Belgian ladies", probably refugees. The Food Controller allowed a pound of tea per week, but no sugar. War forced the price of tennis balls up to 15/6d per dozen, and as an austerity measure it was agreed that only eight be allowed per court. (Present day members would welcome a return to this ration.)

Eleven Year Wait

When the Armistice came, the Club was in trouble: there were only 25 men of the playing list. The Secretary wrote to everyone who had applied for membership since 1905. Six of those thus approached joined—among them Mr G. A. Hunter; he had waited eleven years.

In 1922 there was an administrative change. Dyvours obtained a new lease, this time from the Grange and Academicals Trustees, and not, as before, from the cricket club; and at the same time the tennis club had representation on the Trust.

The Golden Jubilee of 1933 was marked by the publication of a short history of Dyvours, one of a series of booklets on Edinburgh tennis clubs sponsored by R. and W. Forsyth of Princes Street. Their initial request stated that they "particularly wanted to publish one of the Dyvours as, through the Club's connection with the Edinburgh Tennis Company, it went back to the very beginning of tennis in Scotland in 1875".

The possibility of laying down hard courts was under discussion in the 1930's, because the curling club was about to give up its ground, which lay in the area now occupied by the bowling club. Red ash courts at that time would have cost around £100 each, and the proposal was dropped as being too expenisve.

The outbreak of the Second World War brought the Club's activities to a halt. The courts were closed from 1940 until 1946. They re-opened to a scarcity of balls and—more seriously—of members. And this time there was no list of waiting candidates to be approached.

It was at this stage, for the first time in the Club's history, that Sunday play was permitted.

By 1954 the continuing lack of members produced a state of crisis. A motion that the Club be wound up was made at the Annual General Meeting, but was defeated. The minute does not record the vote, but it seems to have been a close run thing.

Amalgamation with Grange

As if to demonstrate the impossibility of prediction, there was an almost immediate improvement in Dyvours' fortunes. By 1961 there were 136 members. But another decline set in and in 1969 there was yet another unsuccessful motion for amalgamation with the cricket club.

That controversial union was not to be postponed much longer. Dyvours, still a somewhat reluctant bride, was going through a bad patch: Grange, with a £5,000 grant from the Gannochy Trust, was rapidly expanding and a very attractive partner.

The marriage was arranged, and from 13 April 1974 the two became one. The bride, however, insisted on writing into the marriage contract that she retain her maiden name, for "Dyvours", puzzling though it is to the unitiated, is part of the history of Scottish tennis.

One of the grass courts was surrendered to allow new squash courts to be added to the Grange pavilion. In return, two new all weather tennis courts were built in the south east corner of the grounds, in the corner formed by Arboretum Avenue and the bowling green. These were opened in March 1975.

Meantime, Inverleith Tennis Club had lost their courts, and many of their members joined Dyvours. They brought not only an invaluable infusion of new blood, but introduced the Club to competitive tennis.

Not since its earliest years had Dyvours played in competition with other clubs, although in 1886 it "made history by beating the best of the Whitehouse Club". That Edinburgh club, long since vanished, was even older than Dyvours, having been formed in 1881, and in its hey-dey could beat the best not only in Scotland but in Britain.

There are occasional references in the minutes to friendly matches, but even the results of Club competitions are not always recorded. The fact that until relatively recently play took place exclusively on grass set the Dyvours apart from other clubs.

As part of the Grange sports complex, the popularity of the Club soared to unheard of heights. In 1978, with membership approaching the 280 mark, it was decided to limit numbers to 200.

Now, in the centenary year, the future of the Club seems assured. The pioneers of the Victorian era would find much to astonish them today, but they would also find that many things have not altered.

Members still complain about the availability of balls, about the condition of the courts, about the amount of the subscription—just as they were doing a century ago, and it is to be hoped, just as they will do a hundred years from now.

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