



## **HASLINGFIELD LAWN TENNIS CLUB – A BRIEF HISTORY**

The origins of Haslingfield Lawn Tennis Club (HLTC) date back before the Second World War when a number of teenagers, mainly from local farming families joined together to play tennis on a court in the garden opposite Trinity College farmhouse (now Watsons Yard) which was owned by the Watson family. Following the War, Haslingfield resident Mr Eric Cole, who had played with competing Wimbledon players in his youth, effectively established the Tennis Club together with other villagers who included Lily-May Watson, Betty Bowering, Mac Noble, Clifford Barnard, The Rook Family and June Huddleston. They were founder members of HLTC which has been based on the village recreation ground since 1948.

The Recreation Ground itself was given as a legacy by local farmer Mr Henry Badcock, who died in 1921. He wanted an area in the village where children and young people could play on. The field he provided was separated from another field by a hedge running from River Lane to the Harston Road. This was owned by Messrs. Chivers, who gave it to the village on the condition that the two fields were made one and used as a recreation ground in perpetuity.

The field was subsequently given to local trustees for the use of the people of Haslingfield. After World War II the ground was levelled and two tennis courts (one hard and one grass) were constructed. A cricket pitch was also laid. E. DOE & Sons' 1948 quoted cost for the construction of one "Grey Stone" hard court was £325. The cost for the construction of the grass tennis court was quoted as - £51-17-Od (Fifty one pounds seventeen shillings). The overall cost for the two courts, including the erection of chain link fencing was £530. The courts, funded mainly by voluntary contributions, originally belonged to the recreation ground until 1964 when they were then transferred and overseen by Haslingfield Parish Council (HPC).

The first documented Club committee meeting minutes were recorded on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1964. Subjects discussed at this meeting include group coaching led by local resident Mrs Pearce, ladder and doubles knock-out competitions (the first knock-out singles tournament was played at the Club nine years later in 1973), a barbeque social event, and the Club's involvement in the annual village fete. These minutes reflect a progressive Club closely connected to village life; it's noteworthy that founder member Mr Eric Cole, then headmaster of Haslingfield Primary School was the Club Officer during this time.

The 1960's saw the Club continue to be run efficiently and membership steadily increased. The hard court was regularly used by Club members and non-members but the grass court much less so. Even when it was properly cut, rolled and treated it was only really suitable for "knocking-up" due to the deteriorating condition of the surface. This effectively meant that one fully playable hard court was available which severely limited the Club's ability to cater for the demands of its growing membership.

By the mid-1970's, the difficulty of running a progressive Club with over 100 members (no other organisation in the Village had such a large active membership) on just one operational hard court was clear to all involved. The updated 1976 Club Constitution outlined that Full membership could only be available to people from the villages of Haslingfield and Harlton. Associate membership was open to people from other local villages but significantly they weren't able to book courts in advance.



### *1. The sole tennis court in the 1970s*

In August 1976 an urgent letter from the Club committee to the Chairman of the Haslingfield Pavilion Committee was sent outlining the main challenges that the Club faced; namely that the hard court was fully booked most weekends, and from 5.00pm onwards in the evening during the Summer months which meant that many members couldn't play when they wanted to. The letter also outlined the fact that the hard court surface was 13 years old and in urgent need of re-surfacing.

The proposed solution put forward by the Club was that the existing hard court should be re-surfaced and a second hard court be constructed. The quoted cost of this proposed work was around £4000 – a figure that dwarfed the £273 membership fees that the Club collected in 1976 and well beyond their means without significant financial support from HPC.

After careful consideration and much debate, Haslingfield Pavilion Committee agreed to initially loan the Club £200 in April 1977 to enable the Club to resurface the hard court. HPC agreed to give a grant of £250 a month later. Resurfacing work was carried out by DOE Contracts in September 1977 at a cost of £1204.

In January 1978, HPC finally approved the plan to provide a second tennis court in the village. It was now very clear to all parties that the Club needed a second court to meet the increased playing demands. HPC provided an interest free loan of £3,362 for the construction of a second court. The main condition of the loan was that the Club had to pay a minimum of £250 or 50% of the Club's income from subscriptions and visitors fees to the Parish Council each year until the cost of the construction was repaid. Although all aspects of the administration of the new (No. 2) court were then left to the Club, no formal lease agreement between the Club and HPC was established.

Despite the lack of any formal lease agreement between the Club and HPC (significantly there was no lease agreement in place for the next 36 years) the second court was constructed by DOE Contracts in July 1978. Membership of the Club quickly rose from 102 that year to 148 in 1980. The Club were also elected to play in the Cambridgeshire LTA doubles leagues for the first time in the Summer of 1979, making full use of their two courts for these matches.

The early 1980's saw the Club thrive with membership peaking at 193 (112 adults and 81 juniors) in 1982. During this period, the Club also had a strong committee, a varied playing and social calendar, a resident coach Barbara Robinson and stable finances. The Club's finances were bolstered by a steady stream of fundraising activities involving numerous Jumble and Nearly New Sales + Jubilee Draws.

At this time, extremely high playing demands on the courts meant that individuals would occasionally have to resort to going to the courts at midnight just to make a court booking for play the following day. HPC had stipulated that the second court should be available for non-members to play on 24 hours in advance whilst the first court could be booked by members 2 weeks in advance. The assumption was that keen players would know 2 weeks in advance when they wanted to play. Conversely, it was assumed that non-member, casual players would be agreeable to only being able to book a court 24 hours in advance.

Unfortunately, by 1985 membership levels had dropped by 40% of the 1982 figure. This was attributed mainly to the lack of marketing of the Club within the village to recruit new members and to replace those that had left the village. Both court surfaces had also deteriorated and in January 1986, HPC agreed a grant of £500 and a loan of £3000 (with interest) towards the re-surfacing of the courts. An LTA Loan of £3500 was also secured together with a grant of £800 from South Cambridgeshire District Council and a donation of £50 received from Rugby Cement Ltd, Barrington. The re-surfacing of both courts was completed by Match-Maker in the winter of 1986 at a cost of £6000 and the courts were officially opened for play in May 1987.

The newly re-surfaced courts gave the Club renewed focus and pride. Membership numbers steadily improved and group coaching was prominent. Local resident Matt Willcocks led the coaching at the Club from 1990 to 1992 before going off to University later that year. Matt

had himself been coached by Barbara Robinson from the age of 9 before assisting Barbara with group coaching sessions from the age of 14. He went on to become Gosling Tennis Academy director in 2005 and currently still holds this prestigious role.

With the Club looking positively to the future, it was unanimously agreed at the 1995 AGM that the new committee should seriously consider the floodlighting of the courts in order to extend the playing season and allow the Club to play in the Cambs LTA Winter leagues. In November 1996 an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Club was held on the desirability of floodlighting and the building of a multi-purpose third court – “exceptionally high attendance at Club sessions” in 1996 had prompted the committee to explore the possibilities of a third tennis court.



## *2. Coaching in 1996*

The intention was that the project (quoted cost £43,000) would benefit the village community and could attract lottery funding. It was envisaged that the third multi-purpose court could also be used for 5-a-side Football, 5-a-side Hockey, Basketball or Netball, “achieving a positive commitment to the village into the next century”. Approval in principle from HPC was given but no further progress was made due to the disappointing general lack of support evident at the EGM. The significant question of how a multi-purpose area could be administered also proved to be a contentious one.



### *3. Coaching in 1996*

Some 10 years later in 2006, floodlighting of the two courts was researched and debated further by the Club committee. The significant cost of the project (quoted cost £22,000), the ongoing maintenance expense (at least £1000 a year) and the increased administrative burden were major concerns. However, it was acknowledged by the Club committee that the general feeling of club members was that floodlights would be desirable and it was agreed, subject to formal approval at the 2007 Club AGM, to apply for planning permission. Unfortunately, formal approval at the 2007 AGM was not granted; it was agreed that in view of the expense of installing floodlights, the ongoing running costs and the ongoing issue of the cracks in the courts, the floodlighting proposal should not be pursued.

It was another 5 years (16 years after the original proposal) before the subject of floodlighting was back on the Club's agenda. In the intervening period from 2007 to 2012, resident Club coach Paul Bonnington developed an extensive junior and adult coaching programme involving over 75 participants most years in weekly sessions during the Summer and Autumn terms. Coaching weeks during the Easter and Summer holidays, junior tournaments, and friendly junior matches against other local Clubs were also organised by him. Significant success was also enjoyed by the Ladies 1<sup>st</sup> Team who were promoted to Division 1 of the Cambs LTA Summer league in 2010. A year later, the Ladies 1<sup>st</sup> Team were promoted to Division 1 of the Cambs LTA Winter league - both were notable achievements which saw the ladies team playing in the highest county division for the first time in the Club's history.

By 2012, with membership numbers of 167, 76 participants involved in weekly coaching, and 10 teams involved in the Cambs LTA Summer & Winter leagues, playing activity at the Club was at a level higher than that of the vast majority of small clubs in Cambridgeshire. With

strong momentum at the Club, Treasurer Lawrence Hopkins presented an excellent case for the installation of floodlights at the final committee meeting of 2012.

This was forwarded to the AGM for agreement in January 2013 and permission was given for the committee to ascertain costs and other issues relating to the installation of floodlights. A floodlighting sub-committee was formed immediately and Tennis 4 Cambridgeshire's Project Manager Steve Goswell produced a funding feasibility report for the project shortly after this. The consensus was that floodlighting on the two existing courts and the construction of a third court was realistically achievable. A highly successful "Tea at the Ritz" fundraiser in September 2013 was the first social event in aid of the new floodlights fund – it brought together members and committee members of the Club spanning 40 years. The event was also a springboard to the success of the Club over the next two years.

2014 and 2015 were both momentous years for the Club which saw the 70<sup>th</sup> Year Anniversary of the Club in 2014 being covered by a feature story in the Cambridge News. HPC gave their support in principle for the floodlighting of the two existing courts and the proposed development was deemed acceptable at the pre-planning stage by a South Cambs planning officer. A formal 20 year lease, the first in the Club's history, between HPC and the Club was eventually signed in November 2014. A full planning application for the installation of floodlighting on the two existing courts and the construction of an extra court (a longer term aspiration which could be achieved by rotating the existing courts 90 degrees) was submitted a month later.

Planning permission was granted in February 2015 and the Club were named "Club of the Year" by Cambs LTA two months later. Membership was at record high of 203. In July 2015, the Club ran an ambitious Village Summer Fun day with Haslingfield Little Owls Preschool which involved tennis with local ATP professional David Rice, live music, football, street dance and other fun activities. By September 2015, £84,000 in grant funding from Sport England, The Amey Community Fund, The Rugby Benevolent Fund and LTA had been raised in a period of just 7 months.

These grants combined with significant Club funding enabled the construction of the new third court, resurfacing of the existing two courts and the installation of floodlighting columns to be completed in October 2015. Interestingly, DOE Sport Limited who laid the original courts in 1948 did all of the new court work some 67 years later.

At the end of October 2015 a separate planning application was submitted for a new 5 x 3 metre equipment Shed which could also house the power distribution board for the floodlights. It was proposed that the new Shed could be located just beyond the North West corner of the new third court. A supplementary 20 year lease between the Club and HPC, for the land adjacent to the new court, was also signed. Planning permission for the new timber Shed was received in January 2016 and it was erected a month later. All of the outstanding floodlight, ducting and electrical work was completed at the beginning of March 2016. The final 3 phase power connection work is due to be completed in May and, following full testing, the lights will then be fully operational.



#### *4. The courts in 2016*

Over the last year there have been tremendous improvements in the playing facilities at HLTC which now rival those of any Club in South Cambridgeshire. A Grand Opening Event on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2016 celebrated these significant developments; it involved two former Great Britain Davis Cup players, Danny Sapsford and James Auckland providing enjoyable coaching to over 75 people and playing exhibition matches throughout the day. The day encapsulated all that's good about the Club and will be fondly remembered by many for years to come.



#### *5. James Auckland, Danny Sapsford and Paul Bonnington at the Grand Opening Event 2016*

Paul Bonnington

May 2016