

Warwickshire LTA – the next 125 years begins!



The WLTA insignia in use in inter-war, post-war and recent years

The end of 2021 marked the completion of WLTA's 125th anniversary – an opportunity to look back on the Association's contribution to organisation, participation and elite standards in tennis in the county and far beyond since 1896.

The WLTA was not there at the start of tennis, but it brought together the country's first clubs at local and national level to promote the sport in its earliest days. The national LTA had been founded in 1888 - its first president, William Renshaw, came from Leamington, where Britain's first lawn tennis club had been established in 1872. The Midland counties and Leamington tournaments were held annually from 1881 onwards, and informal county competitions were being played before the LTA was founded.

1896-1918

The WLTA had modest and spontaneous beginnings, but quickly spread and strengthened tennis across the county in its first two decades. Arthur Short, then secretary of The Priory Club, remembered 50 years later how the association came into being:

"We had a county match against Cheshire. When the match was over, we found we were about thirty shillings out in expenses, and there was no-one particularly liable to meet the deficiency. We thought we had better have a little association and get the funds together, get the various clubs who were in existence then to contribute so that we should have something to pay for the balls when we had matches."

At first, there were only six clubs involved - five from Birmingham - but within the first decade, clubs affiliated from Coventry, Rugby, Warwick, and the new University of Birmingham. By 1914, there were twenty three WLTA clubs, a Ladies'



These sketches of the Midland Counties tournament from the *Birmingham Pictorial and Dart* of 22 July 1898 show two founders of the WLTA, Arthur Short and G.F. Goodman, at the bottom left and right, officiating. Goodman was the first Captain of Warwickshire, served four decades on the LTA national Council, ultimately becoming its Chairman and in 1935 a Life Vice-President. Short won national honours with the Birmingham Athletic Club as a young man, won the Inter-County trophy for Warwickshire in 1909, and remained a supporter of the WLTA until his death in 1946.

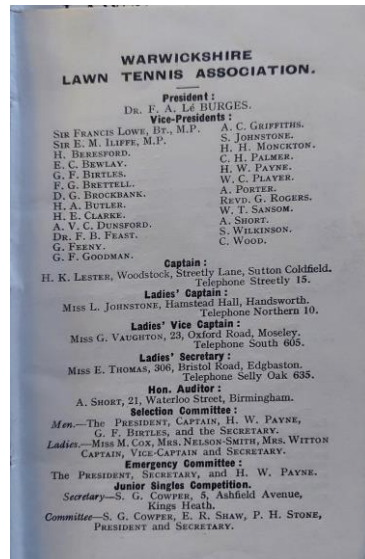
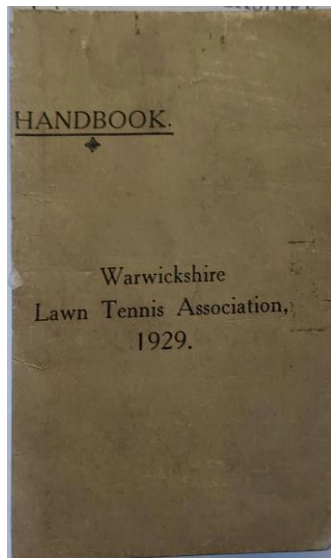
committee had been founded, and in 1909 Warwickshire won the National Inter-County Championship. Amongst the players in the winning WLTA team were founding officials of the association, including Short and F.A.L. Burges, both of whom continued to serve the Association well into the twentieth century. At the point where war interrupted sporting activity for four years, Warwickshire was building on twenty years pioneering lawn tennis of the highest standard to an ever-growing community.

The Warwickshire Inter-County champions of 1909



The Inter-War years

When play resumed following the First World War, Warwickshire had twenty-eight clubs. The next two decades saw this number more than quadruple whilst the county's players won national glory again and laid the seed-bed for post-war individual triumphs.



The 1929 WLTA handbook shows that the Association had support from two prominent local MPs, Rev Rogers from St Martin-in-the-Bull Ring, and Davis Cup player H.K. Lester.

The new affiliated clubs included ones representing a new clientele of municipal parks players, YMCA teams and works ranging from the civil service to Mitchell and Butler's, Kynoch's, Dunlop, G.E.C., and Exhall Colliery. Clubs also emerged from new housing estates such as The Circle in Harborne. In 1926 it was necessary to reorganise the Association to give clubs outside Birmingham proper representation, and divisions were formed for Coventry, Rugby, Nuneaton, Warwick, Stratford and Leamington. Junior tournaments and the Warwickshire League were established, and in 1933 and 1939 the county again won the national cup.



Coventry Herald, 15th July 1939

The 1936 annual report of the WLTA showed a new record of 123 affiliated clubs, and stated that the coaching scheme begun the previous year had helped 933 players – twice as many as in any other county – two-thirds of whom were under 25. In 1937 a reporter visiting the county for *The Times* acknowledged that “the game is as strong in the Midlands as anywhere”, and on the eve of war the *Coventry Herald* (above) felt entitled to declare “Warwickshire lawn tennis in a very healthy state” such that “Warwickshire Lawn Tennis Association has been trying to cope with a glut of honours” won by county stars including Tony Mottram, Roland Morton and Betty Clements playing in the national teams of England or Great Britain.

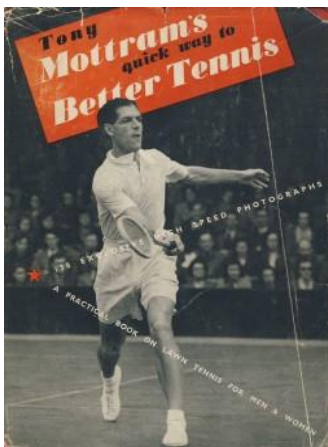
1945-1996

As peace returned, WLTA President Percy Stone understandably felt optimistic that:

“It has always been the aim of Warwickshire to cultivate the sport for the love of the game, and councillors and officials have contributed of their best to the national councils, and have left their mark over many years, while clubs, teams and players have been constantly encouraged and developed.”

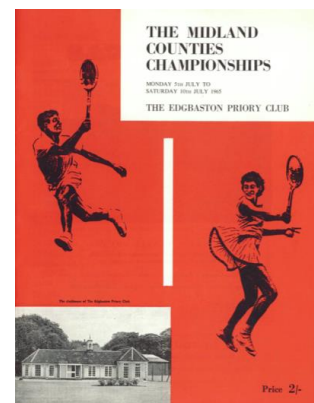
“I am sure” Stone anticipated, “that the same spirit will animate the county on the threshold of its second half century”.

The Association had maintained coaching through the War, and in 1946 had 132 affiliated clubs. The county’s contribution to elite tennis at international level came to a peak in the post-war period. Alongside this, however, came challenges which called upon the Association’s resilience and versatility.



Coventry’s British No 1 Tony Mottram published his guide to tennis in 1952, and the Warwickshire Ladies were County Week Champions at Eastbourne in 1955

For the next quarter-century, the pre-war investment of the WLTA in the next generation paid handsome dividends at national level. County players competed at Wimbledon – sometimes over a dozen at a time – from 1945 to 1972. Whilst pre-war players at Warwickshire clubs such as the Lowe brothers and Dorothy Round had won major tournaments before, they had little association with the County. Now WLTA protégés such as Rosemary Deloford and Tony Mottram reached the last eight and the Final in their respective Wimbledon competitions, and Ann Jones won singles titles at Wimbledon and Roland Garros. Jones continued to play in County competitions, inspiring younger recruits as she conquered the world. This was a golden era of achievement for Warwickshire.



The Warwickshire Ladies' team (left) made 1967 “one of the outstanding years in the County’s history” according to the *Birmingham Daily Post* when they captured the Inter-County title . The team celebrating here with outgoing WLTA President Dr Don Seaman included past, present and future Wimbledon competitors Alex Soady, Hazel Cheadle, Margaret Knott, Ann Jones, Rosemary Deloford and Janice Townsend. The Midland Counties programme of 1965 (right) featured a young Virginia Wade, but was the last of this Warwickshire event.

During this period, however, members’ rising expectations of club facilities, and competing recreations at home, posed significant challenges for some clubs. At its centenary, the WLTA regretfully listed 82 of its clubs which had folded since the war – some smaller local ones, but others from large employers no longer in existence, or not offering their workers courts. Even some well established clubs, including Edgbaston, Priory and Tally Ho! had merged, so that by the 1990s, the number of affiliated clubs in the county had fallen to 80.

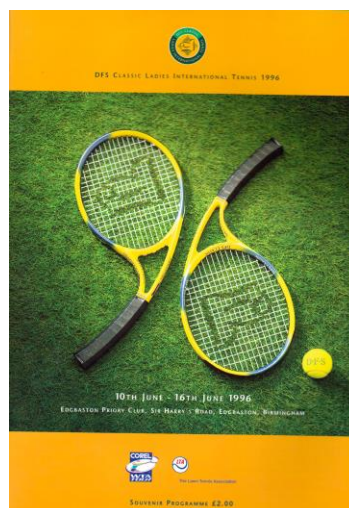
Predictably this affected WLTA structure and finances: as early as 1951, Warwickshire LTA’s budget was in deficit - and although President Harry Payne saw it recover the next year, he appealed for new affiliations and feared that without a “great effort” the WLTA might lose its place in the top level of inter-county tennis for the first time. The

Birmingham and Coventry Leagues went their separate ways, and the Association was restructured later in the decade, and again in the 1980s when arguments also emerged about the rating of the county championships. Warwickshire's main open tournament, The Midland Counties, suffered financial difficulties, an LTA ban for 'shamateurism', and ran fully for the last time in 1965.

Such changes in the Association's circumstances, together with the intensified international competition brought by the Open era, inevitably undermined the County's profile in national tennis. No Warwickshire player appeared in the senior singles competition at Wimbledon for 37 years after 1972. These trends affected tennis nationally, and prompted a government inquiry in 1978. In the centenary history of the Association in 1996, Ann Jones looked forward anxiously fearing that "despite all the hard work to improve the standard of play at grass roots and intermediate level, the future does not look good."

Beyond the Centenary

By the time of its centenary, the WLTA's response to its challenges was in fact already underway. A new tournament supported by the association - the Birmingham Classic - had started in 1982 at Edgbaston Priory, and went on to become a major pre-Wimbledon women's event, seven of whose winners were world number one players. Some of the business support lost through the decline of works teams was recovered through corporate sponsorship



The Billesley Indoor Tennis Centre and the Birmingham Classic (here represented by the programme of the WLTA's centenary year) were two of the WLTA's projects to revive tennis in the county for the twenty-first century

Emphasis was placed on making new facilities available through new arrangements with local councils and schools. 1994 saw the opening by Sir Cliff Richard of the Billesley Indoor Tennis Centre, a million-pound facility the WLTA's investment in which gave it office space and 70,000 hours of court time over the coming 21 years. By the 2010s the WLTA had links with 35 schools, and today it runs twenty-nine teams and has over eighty affiliate clubs.

Finally, Warwickshire players returned to Wimbledon Girls' and Boys' tournaments in the late 1980s, and of these Katie Rickett played at the Australian Open, whilst after 1995 Jamie Delgado and Dan Evans competed in senior grand slams.

A frustrated Honorary Secretary of WLTA wrote in its 1935 handbook that "it is obvious that many tennis players have no idea of the advantages to be obtained from the County Association." As an enabling organisation, WLTA has often done more work than it received credit for: but it is through the many decades of commitment and activity by officials of the WLTA that the play, performance and profile of the County's game has been made possible. WLTA's 125th anniversary should be marked mostly by tribute to the County's servants for their work during the dramatic changes since the game's Victorian origins – and a welcome to the next generation in that great tradition.