

A Short History of . . .



Back in the 1920's there were two tennis clubs in Welwyn. One existed above New Place off School Lane, and was supported by local trades-people. The other was at the Rectory at the top of Hobbs Hill. The Rector, Canon Bate, invited young people who were confirmed, to play on the Rectory lawn after services. The original name was The Companies of St. George (for the boys) and of St. Joan (for the girls).

The numbers grew steadily and then, in 1928, this little club moved to the New Place courts when the other club folded. There the Company of St. George and St. Joan played tennis on two courts until 1939. The charges were thruppence per set or one shilling per day. Almost at the same time the Playing Fields (which were opened in 1934) provided rival facilities with two courts.

It was in 1949, after the war, that the name of Welwyn Tennis Club was formally adopted. The pavilion was moved from New Place to the playing fields - at a cost of £52! Membership was 14 seniors and 5 juniors at an annual subscription of ten shillings and five shillings respectively.

In 1951 the club was using the two courts on the playing fields (one of which could be hired for public use). A fifty year lease was agreed with the Parish Council. In 1952 there were 33 members. The Club Dinner was held at The Wellington. Teas for matches were taken at the Cinema Cafe next to the Pavilion Cinema (now the Ford Garage - you will see the old 500 seater cinema profile if you look carefully).

In 1955 the club converted the two grass courts to hard courts. That marked the end of an era, when 3 committee members resigned and the club

declined to the point where it ceased to exist for the 1957 and 1958 seasons.

In 1959 the club emerged again with subscriptions at twenty five shillings for seniors and fifteen shillings for juniors.

In the 1960's Jack Howard encouraged school children to play. Coverage of Wimbledon on television provided the stimulus so that 50% of the membership were juniors. In 1962 WTC joined the Herts LTA and WGC LTA, the club having grown to 54 members.

By the 1970's the standard of the facilities was falling behind people's expectations, and the membership numbers declined again. The Parish Council initiated a scheme for three new courts off White Hill (at the bottom of the field in which the club is currently situated), but the club foolishly gave this initiative a cool response.

Under the chairmanship of Peter Setchell, new interest was kindled in this scheme but by this time there had been a change of heart; the option was no longer open.

There followed two or three years of intense activity and intense frustration, with the then Project Officer, Mike Buckley, designing schemes for the playing fields, Danesbury Hospital walled garden, Lockleys Farm, Singlers Marsh, and Woolmer Green playing fields.

The Woolmer Green scheme gained the wholehearted backing of the Parish Council who agreed to a 50 year lease and to providing funds for the carpark and the services to the clubhouse. However, they had reckoned without the objections of the Woolmer Green residents and at a stormy

public meeting the Parish Council agreed to rethink its approval of the scheme. After more negotiations the club won an agreement to build the new facilities in Welwyn where we now are.

Work on levelling the hillside started on St. David's day in 1982 and was completed exactly 6 months later in time to open the courts with the inaugural Love Spoons Tournament - no small achievement for a workforce of entirely voluntary labour. The male membership was divided into project groups to carry out the work and the ladies were similarly divided to organise fund-raising events. The scheme comprised five new all-weather courts, a wooden pavilion donated by Roche Products (see first picture), with the original wooden pavilion bolted on the back to house the changing rooms and showers etc

The new courts and location were an immediate success. The membership rose steadily, and the playing standard of the club continually improved - each year we increased our complement of Herts League and Winter League Teams. At the same time we actively encouraged the 'beginners' end of the scale with such policies as no playing-in standard and having plate events in all our tournaments.

In 1986 we added floodlighting to the main three court block. Once again this was done by voluntary efforts of our members, supplemented by the Herculean strength of a lamp-post erector called Mick. The whole electrical design and installation was done by another of our members - Peter Howard - who many will remember as 'the man in the cupboard' as he spent evening after evening buried in the switchgear cupboard making up Pyro connections. (Tragically Peter died in 1990 at a young age and in honour of his contribution to our enjoyment of the club via his outstanding

floodlighting efforts we named our family tournament after him).

This, however, was not the end of our development ambitions - far from it! In 1988 we invited officers of Welwyn Hatfield District Council up to the club to discuss the possibility of a joint venture to provide indoor playing facilities. They caught us off guard by picking up this ball and running with it in a completely different direction - the result is Gosling ITI.

Recognising the danger and the challenge that Gosling would pose for our club, we immediately developed plans for two covered courts of our own and entered into negotiations with the Parish Council for the joint development of a block of three new all-weather hard courts for mixed club and public use.

By the time Gosling was up and running, we were also up and running, but the high standards of the social areas built within the Gosling scheme were such as to force us to substantially upgrade our own clubhouse. Within the scheme we also upgraded our five courts to artificial grass. Our efforts earned us the accolade of No.2 Best Tennis Club in Great Britain in the 1990 competition sponsored by the LTA and National Girobank.

Since then, many more improvements have been made including a carpet surface on our two-court block, artificial grass on the lower three-court block, all now with floodlights and of course the Kid's Zone and court 9 with a clubhouse extension.

With the dramatic improvements in all its facilities and potential developments for the future we can now all enjoy matchplay and social tennis plus coaching at every level right up to county and even national standard.