

From the Archives – 4th May

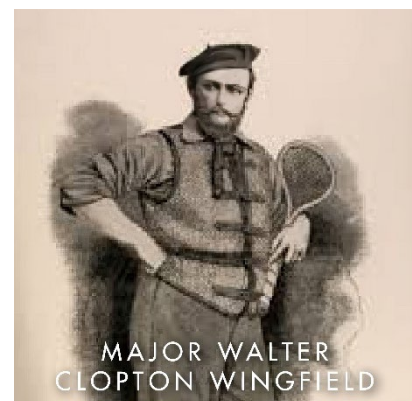
Lawn tennis revolution at Roehampton Club 100 years ago

In April 1923, an event took place at Roehampton Club which transformed the game of tennis that we know today. Tennis has a long history dating back as far back as the twelfth century but the surface which made the game so popular in the UK was grass and the game was specifically named Lawn Tennis.

According to certain tennis historians, the first use of grass tennis courts was recorded in the memoirs of William Hickey in 1767 when he wrote 'in the summer, we had another club which met at the Red House in Battersea Fields, nearly opposite Ranelagh... The game we played was an invention of our own called field tennis, which afforded noble exercise... The field, which was of sixteen acres in extent, was kept in as high an order, and smooth as a bowling green'.

The evolution of lawn tennis continued in the period between 1859 and 1865, in Birmingham, when Major Harry Gem, a solicitor, and his friend Augurio Perera, a Spanish merchant, combined elements of the game of racquets and Basque pelota and played it on a croquet lawn in Edgbaston.

By 1870 the rectangular court to play the game had been established. The history of the rules of the game however has been the subject of differing accounts. The centennial commemoration of the game in 1973, recognised the contribution of Walter Clopton Wingfield when he published the first book of rules that year and took out a patent on his version of the game in 1874, although historians have concluded that similar games were played earlier.



An important milestone in the history of tennis was the decision of the All-England Croquet Club to set aside one of its lawns at Wimbledon for tennis, which soon proved so popular that the club changed its name to the All England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club. In 1877 the club decided to hold a tennis championship, and a championship committee of three individuals was appointed. It decided on a rectangular court 78 feet long by 27 feet wide. They adapted the real tennis method of scoring - 15, 30, 40, game – and allowed the server one fault (ie two chances to deliver a proper service on each point). These major decisions remain part of the modern rules.

Wingfield is however, credited for popularising the game of lawn tennis with the marketing of a boxed set of all the equipment needed to play the game irrespective of the different versions that existed. His efforts led to the widespread interest in the game across the country and by 1875 Lawn Tennis had virtually supplanted croquet and badminton as outdoor games for both men and women.

The number of tennis courts at Roehampton Club was initially restricted to the amount of space available. The extension of the lease with additional land in 1912 allowed the Club to

add ten extra tennis courts and by 1922, the Club had twelve grass and twelve hard courts and by the end of the 1920's, the club had a total of 37 courts in almost continuous play at weekends.

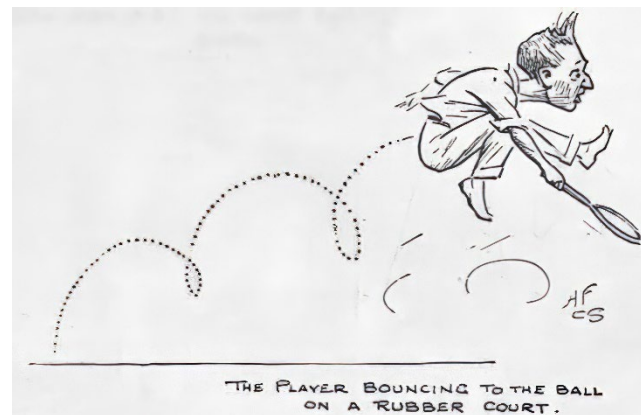
On 11th April 1923, the *Daily Sketch* featured an article written by HF Crowther-Smith writing up notable events in the world of lawn tennis. He mentions the latest fashions in women's tennis and the men in their 'white flannels and socks and shoes and shirts'. He goes on to point out that the start of the 1923 Lawn Tennis season will not be using a 'lawn' as defined at the time by one of the leading players as 'a space of ground covered in grass'. He refers to tennis as a 'universal game' played by everyone, everywhere, all the year round – and on all sorts of surfaces; red rubble, wood, asphalt, cement – and even grass.



He then announces the news that Roehampton Club have recently laid a tennis court made up of wool and rubber and goes on to suggest that the name of the

'universal game' should be simply amended to leave out the 'lawn' and call it just 'tennis'. He is also critical of grass courts in the event of bad weather referring to interruptions during play at Wimbledon. He even goes as far as suggesting that Wimbledon should invest in a glass roof and that the new court at Roehampton Club opens up all sorts of possibilities to revolutionise the game.

He lets his imagination run riot with the development of a new ball to test the ground shots of expert players on this new surface, and the idea that a player, with a good take off could easily spring easily across the whole of the court in a single bound. He finishes his article looking forward with great interest to this innovation at Roehampton Club suggesting an entirely reversed state of the game with the player bouncing to the ball instead of the ball bouncing to the player.



Steve Riedlinger, Club Archivist