



# WALSALL TENNIS CLUB

Founded 1912 - President: Nick Clarke

Club grounds at the rear of the Metro Inn, Birmingham Road, Walsall

[www.walsalltennis.co.uk](http://www.walsalltennis.co.uk)

Sponsored by: whg, Decathlon, and Sweepfast



Secretary: Mr Rick Magnante, 12 Scott Road, Walsall, WS5 3PU.

Telephone: 01922 645130

## OUR CLUB'S HISTORY

*The following short history of the Club was compiled by a former President, Winnie Beebee, who was a member from the very earliest days of tennis at Birmingham Road. A strong player herself, with an overarm serve, Winnie played at the club for well over forty years and then went on to serve as President. Written in 1983, this is her story:*

"It is said that everything has a beginning and that mighty oaks often grow from small acorns. Birmingham Road L.T.C. was no exception when a group of friends combined in 1912 and rented a single court located in the garden of Mr. and Mrs. Austin of Charlemont Road. Founder members included our former President Mr. R.T. Palmer and his wife. They were among the mainstays of the Club and lived in Park Hall Road.

This small Club prospered and there were soon too many members so that around 1918 new premises were found at the present Birmingham Road site just behind what was then the Malt Shovel Inn. The land was rented from a Mr. John Lord who later became the Club President. There were four grass courts, two being where our courts numbers four and five are, and two adjoining the former bowling green, now a car park. The courts were quite exposed except for the outer netting as, at that time, there was no hedge or pavilion.

I joined the Club in 1919 when many young people became members following the end of the First World War. The membership at that time was about fifty.

Because the grounds were so exposed frequent rain showers presented problems and so in 1920 it was decided to purchase an army hut from Cannock Chase. This was a round contraption with steel girders, wooden sides and mica windows and was quite a problem to erect. However, this enabled us to begin providing teas on Saturday afternoons, with gallant ladies heating water on a primus stove. The gentlemen assisted with the primus and we never knew whether it would behave or blow up.

Fortunately in these early days we had some quite good players and many enjoyable friendly mixed matches were arranged, in addition to ladies matches. Play usually commenced in the afternoon at about 3 p.m. and tea concluded the proceedings.

The original minute book covering the period from 1918 to 1924 unfortunately became lost and so the earliest official record available dates from February 1924. I recollect however, that around 1921 John Lord, our landlord, laid down two hard courts (now our numbers one and two) for which we were required to pay extra rent. These were among the first in Walsall and, as a result, we were often able to play right up to Christmas.

During 1924 a suitable pavilion was purchased from F.H. Sutcliffe of Surrey at a cost of seventy pounds fifteen shillings. This had ladies' and gentlemen's changing rooms and a central area for meetings and refreshments. The cost was met by the issue to members of 360 shares of five shillings each, redeemable when funds permitted. Also in 1924 the Club first became affiliated to the L.T.A. and has remained so ever since.

By 1929 a ladder competition was going strong and in the ensuing years each September our energetic team captain, Colonel Muller, organised interesting and exciting Treasure Hunts to the great enjoyment of many members. Also in 1929 the records show that the ladies team was successful in winning the Joseph Bowl for the County.

Gas was laid on in the pavilion in 1933 and this proved to be a great help with meetings and match suppers. The gas stove



together with tools and equipment were housed in a wooden shed built onto the existing structure. Apart from the re-siting of the pavilion in 1927, it was 1934 before the next improvement which consisted of the addition of a third hard court in line with numbers one and two. Again John Lord provided this

extra facility, but as a result of the need for a car park for the Malt Shovel we had to give up the two grass courts adjoining the bowling green. We were not the only ones to suffer because the newly constructed Broadway ring road succeeded in bisecting the adjacent golf course.

By now the need for improved privacy had been recognised, and near the two remaining grass courts a fence was erected and climbing roses planted.

Fund raising was important in those early years and many whist drives and dances were held, all of them very profitable. The pavilion often housed the smaller whist drives and a few beetle drives as well, usually accommodating six tables or so.

In 1935 Mr. H.H. Tucker, who was a friend of my father, donated a silver cup to be competed for annually by mixed pairs and a Club photograph taken in June of that year shows the presentation cup with the donor.

The following year marked the introduction of an entrance fee.

Two years later Mr. Lord agreed to convert the two remaining grass courts, and this work was carried out by Messrs. H.W. Gough and Sons Limited of Wolverhampton, the Club undertaking to pay off the debt at twenty pounds per annum.

In 1938 a great effort was mounted to try and purchase a larger pavilion owned by Mr. A. Cartwright of Jesson Road but eventually the scheme foundered due to lack of support from the general members. However, the effort was not in vain since it led to the launching of a pavilion fund. This was also the year in which we left the South Staffordshire league and arranged friendly matches instead.

Our full complement of one hundred members was reached in 1939 just before the outbreak of the Second World War. 1940 was remembered for the efforts made in collecting for war charities. A Town Hall dance raised twenty pounds and a further fifteen pounds resulted from tournaments - mostly for ladies.

As you can imagine, as the war progressed, it became increasingly difficult to obtain tennis balls, although to some extent this situation was anticipated and a good supply was purchased in the autumn of 1941, sufficient to see us through the following season. During this period very few clubs were able to play at all, particularly as the allocation for new balls from 1942 onwards was very small. All old balls in decent condition were returned to Dunlop for reconditioning, some being scrapped in the process, but one way or another the Club managed to keep going.

By 1950 it was decided that a Junior section should be formed with a maximum membership of twenty-five.

The Club achieved major recognition in 1952 when it supplied its first lady member of the Staffordshire County Team. She was Miss B. Atkins. During the same year her sister, Mrs. B. Stokes became first reserve and afterwards was a regular member of the Staffordshire Ladies' Team playing in County Week each year.



In 1956 the ladies won the Joseph Bowl for the second time, defeating Basford in the final, but by now the membership had expanded so much that the purchase of a new pavilion became essential. As a result of seeing an advertisement offering a building of a suitable size, a party of Committee members visited A.J. Maxfield of Waltham Cross and approved the purchase. It was delivered to our ground, and working parties chiefly under the direction of Mr. Adey and Mr. Jarrett expended great efforts in the erection of a brick foundation on which the new pavilion was superimposed. All this was financed by a loan from the L.T.A. with Club members acting as guarantors. The building was completed in the autumn and then, during the following spring, it was

the turn of the ladies as well as the men to undertake the necessary painting and decorating all of which was accomplished most professionally, so that it was ready for the 1957 season.

The pavilion fund was still in need of support and various efforts were made to provide it. Profitable dances were organised and a jumble sale realised sixty-one pounds.

The period up to 1970 was uneventful but a cloud was on the horizon. Road improvements and the building of the Crest Motel were proposed and would, it was thought, encroach on the courts, causing us to need to seek pastures new. We investigated the possibilities of combining with our nearby neighbours, Handsworth Rugby Club, but despite much hard work by our Secretary and other Committee members no way could be found to bring about a union entirely satisfactory to both Clubs.

Fortunately the road development scheme was abandoned, and although the Malt Shovel was demolished, and replaced by the Crest, we were temporarily saved. The single remaining threat to our future lay in our inability to obtain the long lease needed to provide security of tenure.

The next few years passed uneasily with our Secretary making repeated efforts to negotiate a long lease. Now in 1983 we are holding our breath because we believe that the coveted lease may be within our grasp. If so this will enable a further programme of improvements to be effected. The plans envisage six all-weather courts, floodlighting and, yes you've guessed it, another pavilion.



It is hoped that Club members will rally round the Committee and work hard together to bring about the changes which will be necessary to achieve this new development, just as their predecessors did in the past, as a result of which the Club has flourished for seventy one years. It is impossible to mention all those energetic officials and members by name who have contributed so much time and effort during that period and who have established the traditions of a Club of which so many of us are proud to have been members.

### **Post Script...**

Attire in the early twenties the older ladies wore very long skirts and white stockings and, if it was a warm day, white hats. Later in the decade scarves round the head became the fashion from Suzanne Lenglen's bandeau. Pink or flesh coloured stockings were next on the scene, and later young members began to do without stockings and wore ankle socks. Also dresses were getting shorter, about knee length.

The gentlemen always wore long flannels and sometimes straw boaters or a favourite blazer and cap to match. A few men before the end of the thirties began to wear shorts, and after the Second World War shorts for men became pretty general. Since then the men have not changed much, but as a result of Wimbledon ladies' fashions, anything goes!"

### **POSTSCRIPT:**

**Over twenty years have passed since Miss Beebee composed her epic history of Birmingham Road LTC. This is a brief attempt to bring the story up to date and highlight a few modern developments ...**

The sixties and seventies saw team tennis at a high level with both Men's and Ladies' squads holding their own in the Staffordshire Premier Divisions. The Men's Premier was a test of all round Club strength - and individual fitness - as three couples had to be fielded! The outstanding players of the era were ladies. Marjorie Stokes played at County Week for several seasons. Judith Heawood competed at Junior Wimbledon three times, represented the County and was also Singles Champion. Christine Peach also achieved similar honours at both Junior and Senior levels.

A key development since the seventies has seen the presence of a professional coach at the Club. Early concerns about the ability of the Club to support a coach soon faded as the benefits became apparent. The first full time coach was Bob Peach who performed the role more than 15 years until the late nineties. The Club was then fortunate to have the services of Lee Marks for over two years. Paolo Bagnato followed him for one season until his departure to better climes in 2002. Neville Goldsby took the position as Head Coach until 2005 when the present incumbent, Clayton Edge, replaced him.

The plan to lay six new courts mentioned by Miss Beebee never materialised but good courts are the backbone of any tennis club. Birmingham Road traditionally had the reputation for good quality red ash courts but by the seventies this reputation was fading. The foundation of the courts was fifty years old and the surface breaking up. In the modern age members were not willing to undertake manual work! On one famous occasion within the space of a few minutes a summer whirlwind removed most of the top dressing to the adjacent cricket field. Even with a groundsman it had become a case of throwing good money after bad and the decision was made to convert the courts to a *TennisQuick* synthetic surface. This was financed in two stages during the eighties by means of LTA loans. Members again guaranteed the loans - a heavy financial burden to the Club but one that was met over the ensuing years.

The Club suffered a serious blow in 1992 when about a third of the pavilion was ravaged by fire, including the kitchen and storage area. As a result that section of the building was never rebuilt and efforts made gradually to improve and renovate what remained. Within a few months of that disaster a large section of a tree fell in a gale and inflicted further damage on the long suffering structure!

By the late nineties it had become clear that tennis surfaces had moved on and expectations were for synthetic grass. Apart from a superior bounce all members wanted a surface less hard on the joints and in 1998 the decision was made to apply for a Lottery Grant through Sport England - a long drawn out process that involved substantial changes in the Club. In particular attention had to be paid to participation issues with regard to local schools and encouraging more adults to take up the game. Sport England insisted on strict conditions, especially with regard to accessibility for all standards of play and the provision of coaching capability. This included symbolic measures such as abandoning the 'all white rule' for tennis kit, which troubled traditionalists, but like the demise of wooden rackets, "all things pass" even in the sport of tennis! This was a process not without challenges but the outcome did result in a club better equipped to meet the new century.

By 1999 the Grant was secured and work began to lay three synthetic grass courts with floodlights.

### **The Twenty First Century opens...**

The increase in membership enabled an application for an LTA Loan to re-surface the top two courts with synthetic grass the work being completed by 2003. Again members were called on to act as guarantors and the Loan was paid off in 2010.

The Club pavilion remained a constant concern for the Committee – the structure was already second hand when erected over 50 years ago and was again showing its age at the dawn of the new century. Initially the building was re-clad to ensure weather proofing and in 2005 a 'Community Chest' grant was awarded to modernise the kitchen area and carpet the floor. Lack of showers had long been a bone of contention due to various technical problems! In 2011 this facility was finally provided for the men – but for reasons unknown has yet to be extended to the ladies!

In line with LTA recommendations serious attempts were made to improve competitive opportunities and in particular the format of the Annual Club tournament was revised with the result being a well-supported Finals Day which served as both a competitive outlet and a social function. For many years the town of Walsall had also held an 'open' tournament, a tradition that had declined with the demise of many of the smaller clubs. This idea was revived in 2004 with a well-supported Men's Doubles and, in 2011, a Mixed Doubles run solely by Walsall Tennis Club. This served to raise the sporting profile of the Club in the area.

The Millennium also saw a revival of more team play which eventually grew to include nine teams - five men's, three ladies' and one mixed. The number of ladies in the Club had declined to a critical level in the nineties and had become insufficient to support even one team. Determined efforts were made to remedy this problem with a more supportive approach. A series of coaching sessions organised by head coach Clayton Edge played a significant part in reaching the point when team play could again be offered for ladies.

The year 2010 saw the passing of Arthur Mammatt who had been a member since the fifties and thus a witness of over half a century of Club history. Some of his recollections are summarised below.

Arthur was a keen player who in his heyday was an A Team player and in fact continued to be competitive well into his eighties – a true proud veteran! Among his many memories of personalities and developments was the erection of our current pavilion. This was already second hand when purchased in the 1950s and was assembled by members. Bill Adey - father of Bob a recent member - built the brick supports on which it stands and Arthur himself assembled the roof. Arthur recalled there was no toilet and members had to use the old "Malt Shovel" pub if they felt the need. Eventually planning permission was granted for sewer access to the Broadway, a facility which still functions in 2013. The pub was also a major social centre for the Club with the possibility of pints of beer carried to the Club on a hot day and it was a sad time when it closed in 1970. At the same time the Young Men's Fellowship ('YMF') cricket field was sold for housing which very much changed the environment for tennis. It was a shame to see the cricket disappear but a positive aspect was that the houses offered more shelter from wind.

Arthur served as Secretary from 1957 to 1987 and was amongst the sometimes forgotten stalwarts of our Club. He became President after Winnie Beebee until his death in 2010, and worked as a solicitor in Walsall well in to his nineties. He left a bequest to the Club which was used to provide access to tennis coaching for juniors, being a strong supporter of youngsters in the Club and often providing transport for matches. Together with Ted Clarke he also presented a cup, still in use, for the Boys' tournament. The job of Secretary is demanding and Arthur was followed by Elaine Peach, Wendy Slater, Kay Farrington, Daniel Crocker and Ricardo Magnante who have all strived to maintain the ever more complex administration of the Club.

Club Chairmen whose office coincided with Arthur's long membership of the Club included Bernard Howell, Stan Simms, Bob French and Margaret Cooper who all had to meet the various challenges of the day!

The year 2010 also saw the end of a 12 year co-chairmanship of the Club by Marlene Sanders and Nick Clarke, strongly assisted for most of that time by Kay Farrington as Secretary. Marlene subsequently became President until she sadly passed away in February 2013, after many years of service to the Club. The Sanders family perpetuated Marlene's memory by the donation of a Cup as a trophy for the winners of the Walsall Open Mixed Doubles tournament – an annual event which attracts top competitors from far and wide.

Brian McBride stepped in to the breach as Chairman and, together with his Committee, is making vigorous efforts to face the challenge of securing the future of the Club for the next half century – and hopefully longer...

*Revised Club history as at 11 June 2013*

(1.2 – August 2013)