
The true home of tennis

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'Sphairistrike' (or 'arena for ball games' when translated from Greek), a game designed by Major Walter Clopton Wingfield is wrongly believed by many to be the original lawn tennis. In fact it is 'Pelota', played as early as 1869, that is the game we now know as tennis. 'Pelota' was the brainchild by Major T H Gem, Clerk to the Birmingham Magistrates and Mr. Perera, a Spanish merchant and they developed it in the garden at Fairlawn, Perera's home in Edgbaston, Warwickshire. The dimensions of the court were identical to those used today although the height of the net was different. Sadly there is no longer a lawn tennis court at Fairlawn, only a plaque on the gates commemorating the birthplace of tennis, now one of the most popular games in the world.

In 1872, having moved to Leamington, Gem and Perera along with two others formed the world's first lawn tennis club in the grounds of the Manor House Hotel. Unfortunately the Leamington club did not survive long but another tennis club, set up only months afterwards, is still thriving today. The Edgbaston Archery Society, now known as the Edgbaston Archery and Lawn Tennis Society, is the oldest surviving lawn tennis club in the world. A fixture card dated 1875 shows that Lawn Tennis Meetings were fixed for Saturday throughout the summer. Although Major Gem was certainly a member of the club from 1864-9 there is no evidence to prove lawn tennis was introduced by him directly. Lawn tennis clubs were springing up all over Warwickshire: Edgbaston Lawn Tennis Club, founded in 1878 and Priory Lawn Tennis Club, founded in 1875 are today a partnership known as Edgbaston Priory Club. The Solihull Lawn Tennis Club completed the list of the country's first five tennis clubs and ensured Warwickshire remained a tennis stronghold.

Lawn tennis was immediately popular in late Victorian Britain as it brought the fashionable game 'Real Tennis' outdoors. With the production of Charles Goodyear's vulcanized rubber it became possible to develop balls soft enough not to damage the grass but which still retained the elasticity and bounce of rubber. A second boost for tennis came in 1875 when the All England Croquet Club decided to offer lawn tennis as a means of remedying their dwindling

funds. In order to earn enough to pay the costs of rising rents and purchase a new roller, a lawn tennis tournament was held in the summer of 1877, four weeks after the Edgbaston Archery Society officially added the words 'lawn tennis' into its title.

A committee was established to codify the rules and with just 22 players and 200 spectators the Wimbledon Championships were born. The origins of the 15, 30, 40 scoring system are thought to have roots in medieval France and the term 'deuce' is said to have derived from the French 'l'oeuf', the egg, symbolising nothing. Fittingly the first ever champion was from Warwickshire; 27-year-old W Spencer Gore won 12 guineas prize money. In 1881 Maud Watson, also from Warwickshire, won the first ladies' singles.

Tennis tournaments began to take place all over the country and many of them have become hugely prestigious. Angela Mortimer, who won the Ladies' title at Wimbledon in 1961 has fond memories of playing on the grass courts at Eastbourne, home of the most significant ladies' tennis tournament in the world. The centre court at Queens Club, London is said by many players to be the best grass court in the world but Mortimer is adamant that centre court at the All England Club is the finest.

Tennis quickly developed abroad, with grass courts being prepared in Australia and the world's first womens' tennis society set up in America. Mortimer is sad that The All England Championships at Wimbledon is now the only grand slam to be played on grass; the courts at the Australian and American Opens have been covered over with hard surfaces. She is keen to defend grass courts: 'You have to learn to play on all surfaces,' says the veteran champion whose tennis career began on the wooden courts at the Palace Hotel, Torquay: 'on hard surfaces you can only have one set of tactics' she adds.

It is not only the demise of grass courts that has changed traditional lawn tennis over the years. Although Mortimer admits that the move from white tennis balls to yellow in the seventies and eighties did not affect the game in any way, she is convinced that tennis has changed unrecognisably since manufacturers began marketing rackets with larger heads: 'It has made the game much more one-dimensional,' she says, 'a different kind of talent is now required'. Tennis historian Robert Holland, Honourary Secretary of the Edgbaston Archery and Lawn Tennis Society agrees: 'larger rackets have taken the subtlety out of the game' he explains. Mortimer has a personal preference for the tactical strokes played by Roger Federer: 'he is still capable of making the game interesting' she says.

With so many changes in tennis courts, rackets and clothing, Holland is determined to not let the Warwickshire origins of lawn tennis get forgotten. He is presently in discussions with the family of Major T H Gem in the hope of acquiring a commemorative headstone for Gem's unmarked grave.

Read more at <http://www.countrylife.co.uk/country-pursuits/the-true-home-of-tennis-41091#hUj8JuvA2W8lJd34.99>