

West Heath Lawn Tennis Club



Part I ***The First Half-Century History***

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Part II ***Some Reflections from 1950 or So***

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Postscript ***Early Memories of West Heath***

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***The First Half-Century of the
West Heath Lawn Tennis Club 1902 – 1952***

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Introduction

The minute book of the West Heath Lawn Tennis Club starts in 1912 and records that the 11th AGM took place on 7 November 1912, at St. Luke's Church, Kidderpore Avenue, Hampstead, to receive the treasurer's statement of account for 1 October 1911 to 30 September 1912.

Working back, one arrives at 1902 as the first playing summer of the club. The names engraved on the club champions' cups go back as far as 1905, when the Rev. W L Benthall won the men's and Mrs. J Salwey the ladies' singles.

The club's existence took some years to be officially acknowledged by the LTA, whose 1906 handbook contains a list of the addresses of Lawn Tennis club secretaries, including the following entry:-

WEST HEATH - G W Hart, Platt's End, Finchley Road.

This is the earliest official mention of the West Heath tennis club. If the club had been acknowledged when it was founded in 1902, it would have been one of 17 clubs then affiliated to the Middlesex County Lawn Tennis Association which today (April 2002) has 137 member clubs.

The club reaches its centenary this year, 2002. The following pages are based on the contents of the minute book of Committee, Annual General and Extraordinary General Meetings during the first half-century of its existence, up to 1952.

Ludwig Berlin

May 2002



1. Number of Club Members

The early club rules had imposed a ceiling on the number of playing members. In 1914 it was 90, later raised to 100. This maximum was presumably dictated by the need to conserve the surface of the then five grass courts. It must also be recalled that the intensity of court usage was much higher than it is now when many other interests compete for members' leisure time, not to speak of the simultaneous membership of several tennis clubs.

The earliest record is for 1912 when the club had 85 playing members. Membership seems to have stayed around this level until a decline set in after the Second World War. In 1946 it was as low as 60 and by 1951 it had only recovered to 68, causing the club treasurer to ascribe the £40 deficit to a lack of members. The ceiling on the number of members had, therefore, become absurd and was dropped in 1951.

It is satisfying to record that fifty years after its post-war low, the club's accounts for the eight months ended 31 December 2001 show 144 member subscriptions (excluding 30 juniors and 23 non-playing members).

2. Subscription Rates

Historical comparisons of subscription rates are bedevilled by the profusion of membership categories in the club's early years:

Annual 7-day
Summer 7-day, winter 5-day
Summer 7-day
Winter 7-day
Annual 5-day
Summer 5-day
Married (full)
Married (21-25)
Under 21
Under 17 5-day
Junior
School holiday
Non-playing
Honorary

It is a relief that this cumbersome structure has been simplified.

The earliest records of subscription rates go back to the years just after the First World War. The rates aroused great interest and detailed discussions among members. At the 1920 AGM four

narrowly different rates were each proposed, seconded and voted on. The rate finally adopted was £4 14s 6d (£4.72) which seems low until adjusted by the Retail Price Index into today's equivalent of about £127, and this for the summer season on grass courts only. This puts the 2002 membership fee of £160 into perspective.

3. Finances

The club's early finances were often described in gloomy terms by the treasurer. The records show, however, that they were always in reasonable order, showing mostly modest surpluses and the occasional small deficit. The largest deficit recorded in the period under review was in 1934 (expenditure £445, income £382, deficit £63).

The first annual income recorded is for 1912 when it was £312, which comes to £18,900 when converted into 2001 value. 83% came from subscriptions.

By comparison, the club's income for the year to 30 April 2001, which is the latest twelve-month period for which figures are available, was £24,330 of which 84% came from subscriptions.

At an extraordinary General Meeting in July 1937 it was resolved to construct two hard courts at a cost of £250, which equals about £9,875 today (2002) when inflated by the Retail Price Index. An anonymous benefactor provided the finance at 3% p.a., to be repaid over seven years. Repayment was completed in 1948 instead of 1944 as originally envisaged, but it is reasonably assumed that the closure of the club during much of the Second World War was taken into account. It was not until the year 2000 that the benefactor was openly identified as Mr C A E Percival who, over many years, was successively treasurer, chairman and president of the club. The identification was made by his son, Mr Ken Percival, in his delightful

Some Personal Jottings and Memories on Tennis and the WHLTC.

4. Formal Management Style

The minute books show that the early affairs of the club were conducted with a degree of formality. The committee insisted on receiving seven days notice of motions, as required under the club rules. New members had to be nominated and then formally elected by the committee which also had to approve the transfer from honorary to playing membership.

In 1937 it was decided that all those members who in future might be admitted to the club before they were personally known to three present members should be required to apply for re-election in the following year.

4.1 From Formality to Arrogance

Several entries convey an attitude of arrogance

A committee meeting was held on 5 July 1912 to discuss the honorary membership of Mrs S who had been proposed by three other ladies. The honorary secretary was instructed to write and say that the committee were not considering any further nominations as the club was very full. The very next entry in the minute book, however, reads as follows:

Mr & Mrs R..., Mr J... and Mrs C... were elected honorary members

In 1916, in the middle of the First World War, a request was received from the Lymington Lawn Tennis Club (a few hundred yards down the Finchley Road) requesting West Heath to admit six or more Lymington members for the season at a reduced fee, as their ground had been taken over by the War Office. West Heath

regretted that we were unable to accede to same.

On 11 February 1921

Miss T.'s application for temporary membership was blackballed and therefore not accepted.

A particularly pretentious entry on 5 September 1946 (when membership had fallen to its all-time low) reads as follows:

The committee resolved that in future applicants for the WHLTC should be interviewed by two members of the committee, one of whom should be the Hon Treasurer or Hon Secretary. The applicants should be informed that their case would be considered and in the event of the applicants being desirable, forms should be sent to their proposers without further reference to the committee. In the event of there being any doubt the committee should be consulted before any further steps be taken.

5. Women Members

In 1938, the first year for which such a breakdown is available, ladies (as they were then called) constituted 62% of West Heath

membership. By contrast, in the latest club membership list, which shows the situation as at 13 September 2001, the proportion of women is only 35%.

In spite of their early numerical predominance, women played only a subordinate role in the running of the club. The men's captain had been a committee member as far back as 1912. It was not until 1927 that the ladies' captain became ex officio a committee member.

In 1923 the AGM elected a dance committee consisting of three men

with the power to select any further lady members to the committee

The high proportion of women among the membership caused concern to the committee. An entry in 1916 says that there were no more vacancies for lady members and as late as 1948 the committee agreed

when the total membership reaches 90, to possibly consider limiting [presumably new] membership to men only.

The committee need not have worried. Social developments, such as the growing proportion of modern women with paid jobs, solved the problem for them.

6. The Courts

The West Heath Lawn Tennis Club, Hampstead originally had, as the name implies, only grass courts. The topic of hard courts (then called rubble courts) is first mentioned in 1912, when the AGM

instructed the committee to make enquiries if it be possible to get any further ground for additional rubble courts.

Nothing came of this matter, which was raised again in 1928, but this time in the form of a suggested conversion of the existing grass courts into hard courts.

The proposal was then postponed owing to the decreasing period of the lease. In March 1937 this was renewed and at an EGM in July 1937 it was resolved to convert courts 4 and 5 from grass to red hard courts. Permission was obtained from the landlords (the Metropolitan Water Board) and the contract awarded to the en tout cas company. At the AGM in November 1937 it was reported that the courts were nearing completion so that 1938 would be their first year in operation.

The total number of courts has remained constant at five.

Present members who find it difficult to cope with the lack of space behind the base lines of court 1 might be interested in the following July 1937 entry:

Miss M R... suggested that court No 1 should be lengthened and it was reported that the committee already had this under consideration.

6.1 Sharing the Courts

The West Heath Lawn Tennis Club has, since 1946, allowed various nearby colleges to hire its hard courts for use by their students.

The first to do so was Westfield College whose own courts were unusable after the war. The arrangement lasted only a year. By then Westfield had put its own courts in order and West Heath lost the income.

Needing the money, the club secretary canvassed nearby girls' schools and in May 1947 agreed to lease the hard courts to St Margarets on Monday and Wednesday afternoons during the summer season.

7. The Pavilion

In October 1914 it was decided that nothing should be done with regard to the new pavilion owing to the war. Evidently the pavilion had been unsatisfactory. It was to remain so for many years. In 1937 it was described as unsuitable for winter play and its periods of sitting out. The committee then decided that the west end of the pavilion might be glazed or boarded up, adding that this was not to be a permanent fixture.

However, at the 1948 AGM the chairman said that the club proposed to extend the premises by building an addition to the clubroom. The structure of the pavilion has been unchanged ever since.

The interior has, however, been improved, partly through members' efforts. At the 1952 AGM Miss Daphne Money and Miss Anne Caldwell were thanked for having made the curtains for the clubhouse.

8. The Bar

At the 1932 AGM a member pointed out that whereas the sale of drinks should show a profit, this item actually figured as a loss. The Hon. Treasurer replied that the deficit was due to the fact that members had, at times, and chiefly on Sundays, fallen into the regrettable habit of helping themselves and not marking up their purchases. The meeting then asked the committee to use their best endeavours to see that this was put to an end. Plus ça change!

There is a puzzling entry in 1938 when it was decided

that measures be obtained of the type that fix into the neck of the bottles and give a visible indication of the quantity.

Does this mean that the bar at the West Heath Club used to sell spirits?

9. The Telephone

In 1912 the club secretary wrote to the telephone company to enquire the cost of installing a telephone on the basis of half a year's subscription. The telephone company, hardly unreasonably, refused to entertain the matter. The committee then decided to let the matter drop.

The minutes do not make it clear when a telephone was installed but it first appears as an item of expenditure in the club's accounts for 1925.

In 1951 the club treasurer asked members not to forget to pay for the telephone. Again plus ça change.

10. Security

An astonishing entry in the minute book records a committee decision in 1948:

Agree to put broken glass on the wall at the Croftway end of the club and to lock the club at night, putting the keys in a hiding place.

Surely this can be interpreted in no other way than that up to 1948 the club was left unlocked day and night and that West Heath members felt the club was safe?

11. Club Nights

It was only in 1934 - more than 30 years after the club's foundation – that a weekly club night was first proposed. It started in 1935, on Wednesdays. This was shortly afterwards increased to two nights, viz. Tuesdays and Thursdays.

12. The Club Tournament

The annual club tournament goes back at least as far as 1905, the year when the men's and ladies' champions cups were introduced.

The date of the tournament was frequently changed. In different years, it started in May, June, July, late August or September.

The length of the tournament was equally variable. It was, at different times, one week with two weekends, two weeks, three weeks and even four weeks.

13. Matches Against Other Clubs

The playing of matches was first proposed at the 1921 AGM. Nothing seems to have come of this because at the 1925 AGM it was proposed to play 'A' men's matches. This was left in the hands of the captain. This is a puzzling entry. Does it mean that the men's first team had not, up to then, been playing matches against other clubs? In that case what was the role of the captain?

14. Saturday Afternoon Teas

These teas were important occasions for West Heath members. In the early days of the club, lady members vied with each other to provide good teas. They continued to do so well into the First World War until in 1916 they had to be reprimanded by the chairman

that the tea committee should endeavour to persuade the hostesses to provide plain teas only and not to deviate from the unanimous wishes of the committee.

The problem became academic in 1917 when all teas were cancelled owing to rationing.

In the inter-war years differences arose between those who wanted to continue to have their free Saturday afternoon teas and those, headed by the treasurer, who insisted on a charge of sixpence. The matter was discussed and voted on at the 1934 and 1935 AGMs. The outcome of this confrontation cannot now be established, but

the severe tone of the treasurer's report to the 1936 AGM leaves little doubt that his insistence on economies prevailed.

15. The Club Dance

In 1913 the club held a dinner on the last night of the season. The first time a dance is mentioned is in the minutes of 8 July 1914 when a sub-committee was appointed "to take what steps they consider desirable" and put a notice on the board to see what support a dance would attract.

Three weeks later the First World War broke out and at the next committee meeting it was resolved to hold no dance, owing to the war.

Support for a dance took a long time to recover. In at least one year in the 1920's there was no dance

owing to insufficient numbers wishing for one.

Support grew in the 1930's and in 1938 at least 118 tickets were sold.

16. The Importance of the Club to its Members

There are indications that in its early years the club played a bigger part in the lives of its members than it does today.

Annual General Meetings were routinely attended by close to half the membership. This compares favourably with the turnout in recent years when barely one member in six would be present. At the 1926 AGM, after the ladies captaincy had fallen vacant,

Mrs Duncum, Mrs Arthur, Miss Flegg, Miss Moreland and Miss Bore were nominated as ladies captain. Mrs Arthur was duly elected.

It is difficult to imagine that nowadays, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, five women would engage in so intensive a competition for the honour.

17. Reception of New Members

The club could be self-critical. At a 1939 committee meeting it was said that members had possibly been lost by delayed replies to applications. The secretary apologised and offered his resignation (which does not seem to have been accepted).

At the same meeting the president suggested that there had been misgivings about the reception of new members and their obtaining games. He recommended that at least one member of the committee should be in attendance every club night.

18. Publicity

Members are frequently exhorted to persuade their friends to join the club.

As far back as the 1930's members suggest circularising the club's neighbourhood for new members.

The need for a board to show the whereabouts of the club is mentioned from time to time as shown by these extracts from two committee meetings:

17 February 1938

The secretary was instructed to approach the Council with regard to the possibility of placing notice-boards giving the position of the club at each end of Croftway.

29 March 1938

Permission had been obtained from the Council to erect suitable direction posts to the club at each end of Croftway.

The club did not, however, make use of this permission and no boards were put up. 64 years later, in the year 2002, when this earlier application had long been forgotten, the club again applied to the council and permission was granted once more. This time, however, the club did erect attractive boards.

19. The First World War

The first half-century of the West Heath Lawn Tennis Club, which is the subject of this report, coincided with a difficult period in the life of the country. It encompassed the two World Wars and the Great Depression of the interwar years.

Though the club did not close during the First World War, its activities were greatly restricted. Annual subscriptions for civilians were halved. Club members, serving with the colours had their subscriptions totally remitted while remaining playing members.

Incredibly, lady members who were away nursing had their subscriptions remitted provided they did not play and if they returned they would be admitted as temporary members at a fee of £1.1.0 per month.

No tournaments or dances were held during the war and no Annual General Meetings took place in the years 1916 - 1918.

20. The Great Depression

The difficult economic conditions between the wars are reflected in the minutes of the club. At the 1931 AGM the chairman proposed, and the meeting accepted, that in view of the stringency of the times and the falling off in membership, the paying of the entrance fee might be spread over three years. At the 1935 and 1936 AGMs the entrance fee was actually suspended.

21. The Second World War

The Second World War had a severe impact on the club. At the (barely attended) AGM in May 1941 the club was described as dormant, with members remaining members without subscription.

At a committee meeting in August 1945 it was resolved that all old members should be written to in order to find out if there were sufficient members to restart the club. In May 1946 the West Heath Lawn Tennis Club opened its doors again. They had been closed for five years.

Great credit for the re-opening of the club must go to Miss Gedge of nearby Westfield College (presumably the headmistress) who wanted the courts for her girl students to play on and pressed the West Heath functionaries to ask the Metropolitan Water Board for a renewal of the lease.

22. Post-war austerity

The end of the war did not mean the end of difficulties. Years of shortages lay ahead. Tennis balls were scarce and the groundsman did not have enough petrol for his motorbike. A lady member, Miss Henderson, volunteered to assume the duties of food officer for the club, including the buying of rationed goods for the club's teas and the tedious handling of Food Office returns.

It was not until the mid-fifties that austerity gradually gave way to the prosperity which has, with setbacks, lasted ever since.

This concludes the history of the first half-century of the club. It will be left to another historian to document the second half-century.

Ludwig Berlin
1 May 2002

End of Part 1