

DUFFIELD TENNIS CLUB

AN OLD MEMBER LOOKS BACK

By J. G. Clayton

Seeing in last week's "Advertiser" the heading "Duffield Tennis Club Sold" sent quite a shock through my bones. Was it really true that this grand old club was to be no more?

Immediately I began thinking of the players of yesterday. I can lay claim to a longer membership by at least 17 years than any one else, so perhaps a few reminiscences are not out of place.

I joined the club in the early 1900's, and I well remember my first game was an American tournament. Owing to a shortage of ladies I had to play with one Arthur Pym, but we thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon, including tea with farmhouse cream galore given by our famous secretary, Mr. Charles Holloway. Those were the days!

Leonard West was our ace player and quite a legendary figure. His reputation was considerably enhanced by struggles with many famous players, including the Doherty Brothers and those famous "pot hunters" the Allens. In a mixed doubles once against Anthony Wilding, who used to partner Norman Brookes, the world-beating Australian, West's partner was Miss Mabel Smith. They held their own gallantly and only went down after a long fight. West had a beautiful easy and rhythmic stroke with perfect ball control and made his shots a joy to look at.

The handicap singles was a great event in the club, and West's mark was owe 50 and some players whom he met received 30 as well, and he usually won through. Jack Peacock beat him once, however (being owed points), and the reason he told me was that when making his strokes he looked at one part of the court and hit the ball into another! Quite a difficult feat.

The dour Peet and the mercurial Thirlby were a fine couple and pulled many a seemingly lost match out of the fire.

Nottingham and Leicester clubs and the Grange at Burton-on-Trent were often visited, and scalps usually adorned our belts when we returned. The matches against the Northern were great fun. Hulse and Walker were their top couple, but one memorable Saturday they put in A. E. Crawley, a headmaster of Derby School, and what a struggle! Their ace player could not connect with his partner, A. S. Gossett Tanner, and things were wrong and so another Goliath was laid low. West and our secretary, C. Holloway, played together. Holloway's top spin pull up drive was working admirably and West, well, was just West! So there was merriment in the camp that night.

Dr. Clements, a member of the Burton Grange Club, was a great thorn in our side in those far-off days, but he still plays a remarkably good game.

I vividly recall that Saturday in August, 1914, when tragedy seemed to lurk in the air and the long trains laden with heavy guns moved slowly past on the railway at the end of the courts. No wonder this eerie feeling for several of those on the courts that day gave their lives shortly afterwards.

When peace came, however, much more competitive tennis was played. A County Association was formed and we competed in the Inter-County Competitions. Some young players came along such as W. L. P. Woolley and H. L. Band, who were great supporters of the club, and a very strong recruit, G. F. Fletcher.

Our first County match was staged at Duffield and I well remember the enthusiasm of having to play such redoubtable opponents as Lancashire. X. Cazdagli, the Sherwells, Captain Miller were some of the visiting team. Singles were played in the morning and doubles in the afternoon. The programme, however, could not be completed through an unforeseen incident. I was put on to play my single about 12.45 p.m. when the lunch hour was beginning, so we were left almost in solitude to fight our battle. I lost the first set 6-0 as my opponent was a youngster and a very hard hitter. In the second set I soon found my feet. Long rallies from the base line were the tactics employed, but this was meat and drink for me, and I eventually won at 14-12. During this set the lunchers had returned, somewhat surprised at the duration of the match and the spectators, too, had collected, so the staging for the third set was quite colourful.

This was somewhat of a repetition of the second. Attacks on the net were infrequent as my opponent had learnt his lesson, so the game was mostly from the back of the court. Eventually I ran out the winner at 9-7. This was the only victory of the day, my match taking nearly three hours.

West and Fletcher led the County through many victories in the Inter-County Competitions and could hold their own with many of the best. They won many open events in tournaments in various parts of England and also competed at Wimbledon.

The three-day tournament at Ashby-de-la-Zouch was a most enjoyable event. There West and Fletcher beat the famous All-England player Godfree (he married Kitty McKane) and Ford, the Staffordshire County player, in the final of the open men's doubles and repeated it the following year. There was always a good entry, notable players from all parts of the country participating.

Norman Marshall was a great asset to the club and helped to make it the great success it undoubtedly was in those days. I could go on indefinitely, but space forbids. Before closing I must mention the matches with Repton School when Bunny Austin, Valentine and Sylvester were playing. West and Fletcher played and also H. L. Band. Horsley and I played third couple. And what a tea! The tables groaned with cakes, tarts and pastries, and all home-made—a real old-fashioned spread.

The matches at Normanton Barracks with Major Sherbrooke and Major Sullivan-Tailour, infusing such wonderful keenness around and the lavish hospitality of it all are also pleasant memories. Then finally the last match before this war on the hard courts at Repton with the same lurking tragedy in the air as in 1914. A portent of what was to come, but enough.