

Chudleigh Lawn Tennis Club

During the summer of 2018 I was contacted by a gentleman clearing his mother's house following her passing away. Apparently his mother, Mrs A Brown, and formerly of Waddon House, had been the secretary of the Chudleigh Lawn Tennis Club and amongst her effects were the minute books and account statements, etc. from the club's existence. He asked if the History Group would be interested in having them. They were the contents of a small metal chest which I took to History Group member Des Shears whom I knew would be interested in them as in his active days was an enthusiastic tennis player. The following is a history of the tennis club written up by Des after his perusal of the chest's content. – Alan Brunton

A Sign of the Times by Des Shears

I was given the opportunity of looking through a chest of documents relating the history of the Chudleigh Lawn Tennis Club. Founded in 1897 they read as a record of the town's elite during the club's existence. In that year the club started with forty-two playing members and secured permission from the Chudleigh Cricket Club to play on two courts which were prepared and marked out in front of their pavilion.

The club's first meeting held in the town hall on June 3rd, 1897 was 'largely attended' and 'proceedings were opened by Lady Clifford'. It was proposed by Lord Clifford and seconded by Reverend G Ford that a lawn tennis club be formed. This was seconded and the following formed a committee: President, Lady Clifford; Vice President, Lady Katherine Parker of Whiteway (to become Mrs. Farquhar); Secretary, Reverend G Ford of Ideford Rectory; Committee members: General Lock, Rev. T Yarde, D Ellis, R Long, HG Michelmore, R Moyle.

The minute books list the membership for the subsequent years and they read like Chudleigh's who's who.

Twelve months after the club's formation they asked the Cricket Club if they could add another court to the existing pair and also an area where croquet may be played. The added suggestion for an area for archery practice was not pursued. Their request was approved. It was also agreed that a members' ball be staged at the close of the 1899 season. The Brookfield Club, more of which later, carried on this tradition as from 1947.

Records show that in 1921 the ground rental was increased from £16 shillings per year to £5.00, with a further charge of £2.00 for the use of the pavilion and cycle shed. Mr Kelly, the proprietor of the Big Jug china shop in Fore Street, provided crockery for the teas at 2 shillings and 6 pence per week and a local resident was employed to undertake the catering on club afternoons.

Incidentally, one of my family worked as an assistant to Reverend Ford's cook and my mother, maiden name Yeoman, worked for the Reverend Yarde of Culver House upon leaving school.

The members played their tennis on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons between May and September.

In addition to the members' list upon the club's formation the following names appear on the list the following year: Mr and Mrs Wright of Coburg House, Mrs Scott of the Laurels, Mr and Mrs Oldham, Mrs Sheepshanks of Stokelake, Captain Templer of Stover and Sir Channing Wills of Harcombe, although Harcombe House was not yet built at this time. And the committee of 1920 included Mrs McMurdo, Miss Forbes, Dr H Walters and Admiral Leah, so many names which contributed to the town's early history of the 20th century. Mr and Mrs Oldham, Mrs McMurdo and the Sheepshanks family all lost sons during the First World War.

As a boy I recall sitting in the balcony seating of the pavilion with the permission of Mr Potter, the groundsman, to watch the cricket, but the tennis I had to watch from the roadside.

Founder member HG Michelmore was a Devon tennis champion for three consecutive years and his son became a regular county player.

In 1947 several of the town's tradespeople formed the Brookfield Tennis Club, separate from the lawn tennis club, and asked the cricket club if they could mark out three courts above the cricket square below the Baptist Chapel. A rental was agreed allowing the new club to play on those evenings that would not infringe on cricket matches or the playing area. Twelve months later the Brookfield Club, wishing to be free of limitations to the aforementioned courts, laid out two new courts on previously derelict land adjacent to the Kate Brook. Several members were from the farming community and their expertise and machinery prepared a playing surface of the required standard to allow the club to enter two teams in the Exeter league.

From a personal view the availability of these new courts and very amiable club members encouraged me to pursue the game and reach a playing standard I had previously thought unattainable. However, the enthusiasm of Brookfield members dwindled and I then joined the Torquay Club for whom I played for fifty years, filling every role on the committee bar president at various times.

The Chudleigh Lawn Tennis Club prospered for the first half of the 20th century playing both tennis and croquet at the cricket ground, but as members got older the club's membership also dwindled and at an extraordinary general meeting at Mr. Michelmore's house in Saffron Close it was recorded the club only had ten members and it was no longer viable to continue paying rental to the Cricket Club. A donation of £15.00 was made as a severance gift and from 1956 the few remaining members played their tennis on private rented courts at Newinnton Lodge, Waddon and Saffron Close. Their annual tournament was played at Stover School.

The club finally closed in 1993 having played their last matches at the home of Teddy and Lettice Hadow at Newinnton Lodge.

A note of interest

Mr Collings, the builder of the first cricket pavilion with its tiered roof seating, resided at Culver Cottage. He was a non-playing member of the tennis club and in 1898 built the bicycle and equipment store adjacent to the pavilion. The tiered seating was removed in 1946. He was employed by the Ugbrooke Estate to build numbers one and two Parade in the 1880s and also built Collingwood, now the Vicarage.

Resources

Minutes and Accounts books of the Chudleigh Lawn Tennis Club (1897–1993) kept by Mrs A Brown, former club Secretary, and donated to CHG archives in 2018.