

March 2021

Radley College Tennis Court

Better Than The Last Club Newsletter

Spring is Sprung!

Welcome to the third RCTC newsletter of 2021, appropriately entitled, 'Better Than The Last'.

March marks the beginning of the end of this Lockdown, as well as the beginning of the end of Winter. The Radley College grounds are full of crocuses and daffodils and there is promise of Spring everywhere. Greater optimism is palpable, as the rollout of the vaccine continues and the numbers of Covid cases and related deaths declines.

We offer our sympathy and support to everyone who has been negatively affected by the pandemic over what has been, by any measure, an extraordinarily difficult twelve months. Although something like normality will return, life will never be quite the same again after what we have all been through.

The Boys are Back in Town

The Radley tennis court will be back in business from the return of the College boys on Monday 8 March. They will be able to use the court in the afternoons and evenings until the end of their extended Lent Term on 26 March. We anticipate the same high level of usage by the boys as when they were able to play at these times in the Michaelmas Term.

The Roadmap: Re-opening the Tennis Club

On 12 April the Radley Sports Centre will be permitted to re-open its doors to members and **we hope** that some (perhaps all) of the full range of indoor sports facilities can be used once more.

We are fairly confident that solo practice and individual lessons will be allowed from this date but

cannot be absolutely sure about anything yet. We will let you know as soon as we have been given the green light.

If arguments with Government are won about social-distancing being an intrinsic part of our game, every club should be able to welcome back its members for normal singles and doubles play from 17 May. However, this must remain a hope rather than an expectation until we have confirmation from the T&RA about when regular play can resume.

Balls!

In anticipation of the court's re-opening, CJR has been making a ball a day during lockdown. This industry has produced an impressively large, but not terribly photogenic, pile of old ball covers. Instead, there is below is a production-line view; from old at the bottom to re-covered balls at the top.



You may not know that each of the sets of balls at Radley is a 'Royal Set', comprising 72 balls.

Balls are still generally counted in 'old-school' dozens, as befits the traditional nature of the game. Apparently, an English Royal Set is made up of six dozen balls but in France, nine dozen are required. Though how many courts have balls holes and baskets large enough to accommodate 108 balls is unknown, but we would guess none.

Given the amount of play, in happier times, on the Radley court, balls must be changed regularly. We expect that a set will last just over two weeks, during which every ball will have experienced about three hours of considerable assault and battery.

Each ball will be examined regularly and when its optic-yellow cover starts to loosen, it will be stripped-off, the core of the ball will be checked to make sure it is well-tied and remains in good shape (literally and metaphorically), and the whole will be re-covered in new strips of yellow cloth. It takes about 15 minutes per ball to complete the process or half an hour to make a ball from scratch.

Tournament News

In the absence of play in the UK and France, the most notable announcements in the tennis calendars in either country have been the further postponements of both World Championships for men and women.

The Men's World Championship Challenge had been due to take place at Prested Hall last year, was re-arranged for this year and now has been moved again, this time to September 2022. The exact dates of the three days' play are yet to be confirmed but the venue and players will remain as they have been since the Challenger rounds were completed in 2020, when Camden Riviere earned to right to challenge the holder, Rob Fahey, for the Championship.

Camden remains the only man to have beaten Rob in a World Championship Challenge match since 1994, as the American won in Newport in 2016 and then lost to the Australian at Queen's in 2018.

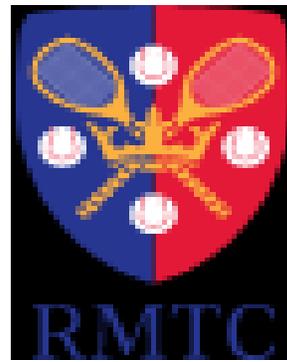
The Ladies' World Championship is always played in a knock-out tournament format. It was last held in Australia in 2019 when Claire Fahey defended her

title once more, beating fellow Briton, Isabel Candy, in the Final 6-0, 6-0.

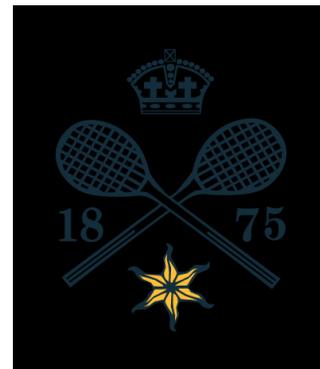
The Tournament was due to have been held in Bordeaux in May 2021, was moved to Fontainebleau, and has now been postponed until 2022. Exactly when the next Ladies' World Championship will be held has not yet been announced, but April or May next year is likely.

Tennis Down Under and Tennis Over There

The tennis courts in Australia and in the USA remain open and busy.



The Royal Melbourne Tennis Club has two major events during the first weekend in March. It is hosting the Australian Amateur Doubles and, secondly, the 'Percy Finch Racket' match, in which RMTTC plays the Hobart club. The latter is the premier inter-club event between the long-standing rivals, and is always hotly contested.



It is named in memory of Percy Finch, who was the longest-serving Professional of the twentieth century at the Hobart club (logo above).

Contests between Percy and the Melbourne Professional, Woolner Stone (who worked for that club for an incredible 69 years in different roles, succeeding his father who was tennis Professional from the court's opening in 1882), were a much-enjoyed annual tradition until the 1960s.

These inter-club matches continued when CJR was Head Professional in Melbourne in the 1970s and Barry Toates (the second-longest serving Professional at Hobart), held the equivalent position at the Tasmanian court.

The Sydney Real Tennis Club (the club is still without a court, until the one planned to be built at the Cheltenham Recreation Club in a Sydney suburb is constructed), maintains a fixture list of Away matches.



James Willis of the SRTC reports about the recent visit to Hobart at the end of January that they: 'had a fantastic weekend in beautiful Hobart' in which the result of the match came down to the final rubber.

It is not easy to assign handicaps to the Sydney players who go for many months between court appearances, but Brett McFarlane, the Hobart Pro clearly did a good job to ensure such a close contest. The eventual result may not just have been the result of judicious handicapping but may have had something to do with the clever gamesmanship of the hosts.

Apparently, James relates, Hobart have a well tried and tested tactic of putting out a side for the first day's play that takes out the visitors and ensure they have a thoroughly over-indulgent and long, long evening once the first day's play has ended.

The following morning, a brand-new Hobart team arrives to do battle with a bedraggled group of Sydney survivors of the night before, with fairly inevitable consequences.

Notwithstanding the final result of a win for Hobart by 9 rubbers to 8, the Sydney-siders had 'an absolute ball'. Rather tenuously, Radley can claim an interest in this match, as one of the players and Sydney resident, David Pinsent, is an Old Radleian. We understand that his was the stand-out match of the weekend, as David clawed his way back from being 0-6 down to claim a win by 9 games to 8. Talk about doing it the hard way!

Over in the USA, there was an exhibition match played at the Boston Tennis and Racket Club a month ago. We reported in a previous newsletter about this event, in which World Number One, Camden Riviere, played against Tony Hollins, his friend and team-mate in the US National League.

This match was notable for being the first one for which Camden has worn glasses. He has recently been diagnosed with an astigmatism and is now adjusting to playing in corrective eye-wear.

Tony plays off H7 and so Camden gave him a handicap of receive 15, owe 30, but Tony emerged the winner; 6-5, 5-6, 6-3.

The match can be watched, along with other past US tournament, on the YouTube website of the American Court Tennis Association, the USCTA: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxktSihWEYw>. Via this link, you should also be able to watch the 2021 National League in the US, which is being played in Boston from 10-14 March.



Meet the teams.



Racquet Club of
Chicago

Players:
1 - Steve Virgona
2 - Conor Medlow
3 -



New England
(Boston & Newport)

Players:
1 - Camden Riviere
2 - Tony Hollins
3 - Mike Gooding



Racquet &
Tennis Club

Players:
1 - James Stout
2 - Barney Tanfield
3 - Adrian Kemp



Racquet Club of
Philadelphia

Players:
1 - John Lumley
2 - Rob Whitehouse
3 - James Asher



The Tuxedo Club

Players:
1 - Tim Chisholm
2 - Leon Smart
3 - Josh Dodgson

Tennis Closer to Home

Holland –

The design and planning process is in motion for the court in The Hague, as previously reported, and will take many months, as these things always do.

However, some unexpected and good news has reached us from our friends at the Dutch Real Tennis Association.

It now appears that the inclusion of a real tennis court will be encouraged in all similar sports centre developments across the country. It is early days, but the upswell of interest from those currently outside the real tennis playing community in Holland but in a position to influence such things, is extremely encouraging.



We will 'cross our thumbs', in true Dutch fashion, and stand ready to help as needed.

Who knows? The future, may indeed, be Orange.

From the Archives

The First World Champion

There has been some exciting news for those interested in the history of tennis and for all sports trivia buffs. We have been proudly saying for ages that real tennis has the oldest world championship of any sport. That statement remains correct, but it may be that the contest is even older than we thought.

An RTC member and avid historian of the game, David Best, has recently discovered important documents. They show that in 1733 a match took place at Whitehall that could well claim to be the inaugural world championship. In it, the Frenchman, Clergé the Elder, who was the incumbent marker/professional at Whitehall and thus playing on his home court, was beaten by Thomas Clarke, who was the marker/professional at the James Street court, just off the Haymarket.

The challenge match between them, it is reported, was a fierce encounter over five sets and, although the result was close, it was won by Clarke, who took the then-huge sum of £500 in prize money that had been put up by the backers of the match.

Clergé is acknowledged as the greatest player of of the mid-18th century, the height of whose career was attained about 1753 in France. Back in 1733, he may have been relatively young and inexperienced, but not so much so that he could not be appointed at a royal court in London in succession to his father, which suggests that he must have been already regarded as a player of some consequence.

The great significance of this research is that it strongly suggests that Clergé, long credited with being the first world champion of any sport, by dint of holding the real tennis title from 1740 until 1765, was actually the second champion and that the first world champion was, in fact, an Englishman.

Well, well, well, that is enough to set a cat amongst the Gallic pigeons....

Staying on the subject of tennis in France, the second item of interest is the result of a suggestion by Nick Stogdon. Our thanks to him. In looking at *César (calendrier électronique des spectacles sous l'ancien régime et sous la révolution)*, which is 'a dynamic online resource' for all those interested in scholarly study of French theatre in the *ancien régime*. As so many *jeu de paume* were converted into theatres, there is a tab under the 'Places' section that allows you to select 'the palm game' in order to produce a list of converted sites.

While aware of the fact that this transformation happened a number of times in France (as well as in England, Italy and elsewhere) in which courts became theatres, it was a surprise to see as many as the huge total of 86 different locations listed. Investigate further by following this link: <https://cesar.huma-num.fr/cesar2/>.

Other News

Elvaston Castle, just outside Derby, is to be the subject of a wholesale renovation programme, in which as many of the buildings on the estate as possible will be returned to their original purpose, including the real tennis court, or so reported the BBC: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-56112864>.

This news was enough to set our pulses racing, but, alas, the report turned out to be based on inaccurate information from the Castle Trust's Chairman. Although a Rackets court was built at Elvaston in the 1870s, no tennis court has ever been recorded there:

The T&RA has made contact with the Castle's Trust to offer whatever help and advice might be needed with regard to the partial or full restoration of the Rackets court.

Keeping Entertained

We continue the series of items about tennis-related ideas for entertainment during the Lockdown,

and beyond, by mentioning a few items to read, to watch or to exercise the grey cells.

1. Reading about Tennis

As we have mentioned in previous issues, the real tennis specialist press, Ronaldson Publications (a.k.a. 'RonPubs'), was set up by CJR and his father, Bruce, to publish *A Cut Above the Rest* in 1985, when it proved difficult to find a publishing house prepared to take on a title on such an arcane subject of such minority interest. Rather like *Harry Potter*, in that regard...

To help Radley members start or augment a real tennis library, we offered a book bundle of seven RonPubs titles at a bargain price throughout January.

A special feature of this time-limited offer was that it included a personal delivery service, at least as long as the buyer lived within 25 miles of the court. CJR and MH-T committed to delivering the orders by bike or on foot (weather and injuries permitting), to give their daily exercise regime greater purpose.

As reported last month, an improvement in the winter weather in January allowed a dash to Aston Rowant to deliver a package to James Williams. Since then, the fact that the remaining orders were 27 and 29 miles away respectively, and in opposite directions, making the round trips challenging at this time of year, has daunted the delivery team.

A warmer (10C) and sunnier day last week presented the opportunity to make the final hand delivery of the 7kg bundle of books to Christopher Prentice, in the lee of the Ridgeway, at Ashbury.



2. Watching Tennis

Below are a few links to tennis video clips, starting with one from the archives. Radley member Roman Krznaric talks about real tennis in this two-minute excerpt from one of a series of short programmes made in 2013 for the PBS channel in the USA about 'The Secrets of Hampton Court Palace':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Od9s1u3LJI4>.

The second link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MxP6CGc9Cc&t=12432s>

takes you to the Australian Open in Hobart, 2018, and features 4 hours and 20 mins of coverage of some of the play from Day 5, with commentary. The recording starts with the Ladies semi-final, in which World Champion Claire Fahey (H8) beat Jess Garside (H36) 6-0, 6-1.

The speed of that encounter means that there is an hour's gap in the broadcast, so we suggest that you pick up again on the two-hour mark on the broadcast counter for the start of the Men's semi, in which you can watch the World Champion, Rob Fahey, play the world top amateur and fellow Australian, Kieran Booth. The film coverage is excellent and the commentary is good.

This match provides an opportunity to watch a masterclass from Rob, who shows controlled brilliance against high class work from Kieran, with some examples of a perfect boomerang serve. Can you tell how hard Rob is trying as he wins 6-4, 6-4, 6-4?

The last clip is of the US Open 2020 Doubles Final on 13 Feb last year, in which three Americans and one Brit played. Camden Riviere & Tim Chisholm beat Steve Virgona & Ben Taylor-Matthews after four hours of play.

There is no commentary with this recording:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SI7HyUKFXA&t=12660s>.

3. Quizzes about tennis

Tim Harper's limerick competition for the T&RA, requiring entries to be themed on Real Tennis clubs, terms or pros and personalities, proved wildly popular, and not just with our members, as a total of over 300 entries were received.

To avoid all accusations of voter fraud, stolen wins and the risk of rioting crowds storming its Queen's Club citadel, the T&RA decided to ask members to vote for their top three. How admirably democratic!

The top three winning entries have been announced and are reproduced below.

We congratulate Radley member Valerie O'Donnell, who picked up third prize for the following ditty:

*Some say real tennis is folly
And, to play, you are right off your trolley,
But, oh, what a thrill
When you aim at the grille
And strike a magnificent volley!*

Valerie has been asked by Tim Harper where she would like her prize, a game of tennis at one of Tim's many clubs. She has selected Hatfield House and will meet him there for a game as soon as a guest visit and game is possible there.

In second place, was Martin Shaw, a member of Manchester and Jesmond, who wrote this self-deprecating piece:

*With my serves being deemed rather comical
And my returns being judged diabolical
My aim for this year
Is to step up a gear
Using something pharmacological*

And the winner, taking the case of vintage Pol Roger, the expenses-paid fortnight for a family of four to the Maldives and the commissioning of a volume of his poems by Faber & Faber, was...

...oops, sorry, my apologies. Those, I am told, will be the prizes in NEXT year's competition.

The winning entry this year was from Bridport member, John Elford, who was awarded the garland of laurels for the following verse:

*The first chase was Better than Four
The second one – was it the Door?
The score's fifteen-love
But – heavens above –
To you, or to me? I'm not sure!*

Last, But Not Least

In conclusion, we turn from the literary to graphic arts, for this issue's inevitable photo competition.

The photo below shows a famous tennis player from an unusual angle and playing an unorthodox shot.

Q: Who is he?



The Radley court is ready and waiting for your service...



...and we are ready and waiting for your return.



Until we see you back at Radley, stay safe, stay fit and stay well.

*This Newsletter, the third of 2021,
was compiled by Maggie Henderson-Tew.*

P.S. A word of warning. When you next arrive at the court, you will find that the road layout is slightly different. Take care!

It looks as if we might be able to turn the pebbled area into a Japanese-style garden. Do we have any volunteers?

