

# COOMBE WOOD LAWN TENNIS CLUB

A Brief History

1919-2013



# Coombe Wood Lawn Tennis Club

## A Brief History

### **The Early Days**

The site that the Club now occupies was originally part of the 1,300 acre Coombe Estate, which was bought by the 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Cambridge – a son of George III – in 1837 from Earl Spencer. On the Duke's death in 1850, his son, Prince George, became the 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke and succeeded to the Estate. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke made a marriage that was invalid under the Royal Marriage Act of 1772, so his children by that marriage had no courtesy titles and could not succeed to the Dukedom when their father died in 1904. However, the Estate was left to the two sons and it was they who granted Coombe Wood Lawn Tennis Club (CWLTC) its first lease.

Kingston Hill Hockey Club was using part of the land attached to the Estate and, in 1895, the club extended its activities to include tennis. Two tennis courts were laid with a club house where the 14<sup>th</sup> hole of Coombe Wood Golf Course (then only a 9-hole course) is now situated, the tee of which adjoins the CWLTC car park. The actual area of the courts was subsequently incorporated into the golf course and the hole that was formed there then became known as 'The Tennis Courts' following the fashion of the day to name the holes.

Since tennis was becoming so popular, the site of the Club was transferred to that of our current Club in about 1905 and five grass courts were laid. These courts remained in operation until 1981 when two of them (Courts 4 & 5) were converted to hard courts. A small club hut was erected just beyond the current boundary ditch, on what is now the golf course, adjacent to Courts 3 and 4.

The Hockey Club ceased its activities during the 1914-18 war and when it tried to renew its lease with the Coombe Estate in 1919 permission was refused, since there were already plans to extend the existing 9-hole golf course. Consequently, the Hockey Club joined forces with the Richmond Hockey Club which had been long established on the Old Deer Park in Richmond. During the war tennis activities, on the other hand, had continued – although in a much reduced form – and in 1919 those who had continued to play applied to the Coombe Estate for a tenancy to set up a members' club.

### **The 1920s**

In May 1919 Coombe Wood Lawn Tennis Club was inaugurated with a membership of 24 and the Coombe Estate provided groundsmen to maintain the five grass courts. The members themselves provided furnishings for the pavilion. By 1921, the membership had increased to 103 and in 1924 the pavilion was moved on to the Club's own land to the site of the existing Clubhouse. It was a very modest building with no services of any kind. The ladies' cloakroom had an earth closet and the men had a separate corrugated iron hut to change in, but had to use a mound of earth behind the pavilion as a urinal. These primitive arrangements continued until 1936.

Although the Coombe Estate continued to renew the lease, in 1924 they insisted on the right to be able to reclaim the land at three months' notice if it was required for building purposes. This obviously did not bode well for the Club's future. With a fluctuating membership the Club struggled to keep going and at times was so short of funds that the committee had to pay their subscriptions well in advance in order for

the Club to finance its outgoings. In spite of this, the tennis was going from strength to strength with the Club playing matches against other clubs and competing in Surrey County events.

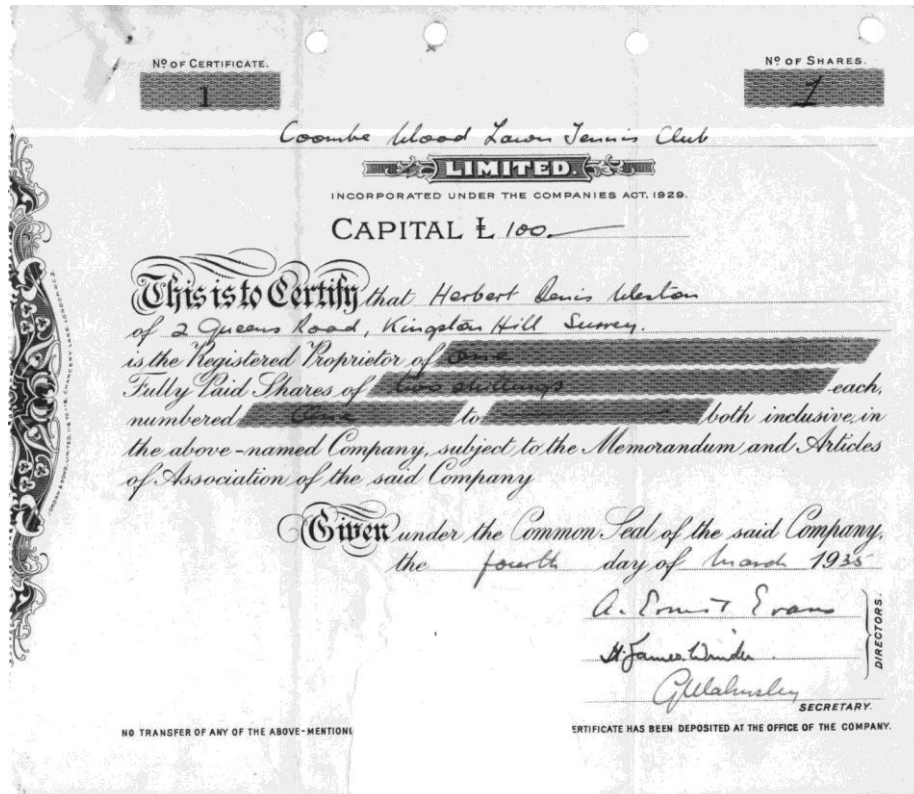
In order to raise some much needed funds, the Club held its first winter dance in 1928/29 at Bentall's Tudor Restaurant, which was to become an annual event, and in 1933/34 turned the Club to profit with an attendance of 300 people!

### The 1930s

In 1930 the Coombe Estate increased the length of the lease, without the right to reclaim the land for building and they also added an extra piece of land that was to be used for two additional hard courts adjoining the five grass courts when circumstances allowed.

In 1931 a committee was set up to negotiate the purchase of the Club's land and an approach was made to the Coombe Estate in May 1932, but to no avail. The entire estate had been sold to a developer who was prepared to sell the Club its land, but at a highly inflated price. Eventually, after much negotiation, in February 1935 the Club's offer of £1000 was accepted. The committee's justification for this outlay, as well as the addition of the two hard courts, was the development of expensive new houses in the Coombe Lane and Kingston Hill area which, it was hoped, would produce the increased membership that was required to meet the costs.

In order to finance the purchase, the Lawn Tennis Association made a loan of £666 and the rest had to come from the members themselves. A Limited Company (Coombe Wood Lawn Tennis Club Limited) was formed, as the Club – which is technically an unincorporated association – is not legally entitled to own land. The Limited Company has a nominal capital of £100, made up of 1000 shares which were purchased by the three directors and three shareholders, who at the time were elected by the members at the AGM. The Club Secretary was appointed by the directors. This was changed when the rules were re-written in 2008 and the shareholders are now appointed by the committee.



One of the original share certificates from 1935 (unfortunately damaged)

In order to keep down the cost of laying the new hard courts (Courts 6 & 7), the members themselves removed the turf and cleaned the surface ready for En-Tout-Cas to proceed. However, a problem arose in that the plan shown on the Deeds was wrongly drawn meaning that the piece of land that had been allocated for the hard courts was not quite large enough. Consequently, a small piece of land on one side had to be traded with the Golf Club for an equal piece of land on another side so that the courts would fit.

The Club continued to go from strength to strength, thus justifying the purchase of the land and the laying of Courts 6 and 7. In 1936 the pavilion was doubled in size to include a proper ladies' changing room with an Elsan toilet. The following year another extension was built for the men, who also got an Elsan toilet, and finally the terrace (much as it is today) was completed in 1938. Most of this work was done by the members themselves.

In 1939 a water pipe was laid from Gloucester Road (now Galsworthy Road) to a standpipe near the pavilion. Previously water had been collected from a standpipe on the golf course across the ditch from Courts 3 and 4.

### **The 40s and 50s**

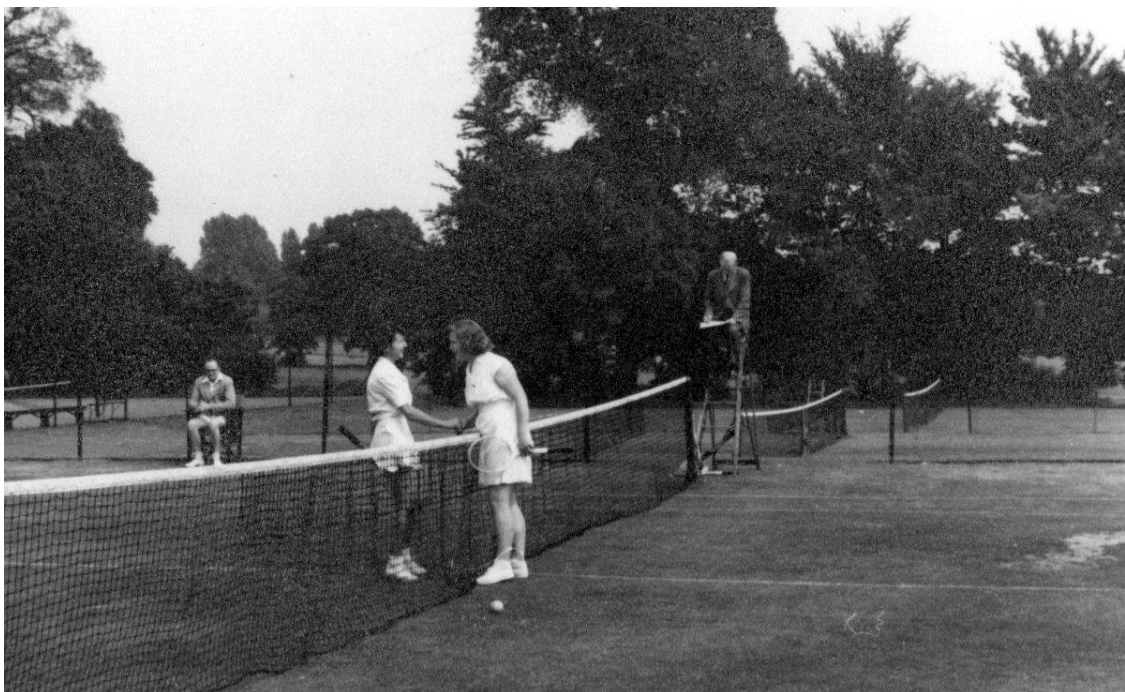
On the day before Finals Day in 1947 a disastrous fire broke out in the pavilion and by the time the Fire Brigade had arrived and got its hoses working from Gloucester (Galsworthy) Road, most of the building had been raised to the ground and the entire contents destroyed. However, as usual, the members rallied round and produced furniture, crockery and tents to make Finals Day – and tea – the success it always was, with over 100 people attending.



*Finals Day 1951 showing the old clubhouse before it was rebuilt later that year*



*John Weston, winner of the Gentlemen's Singles, 1951*



*Ladies' Finalists, 1951*

The remaining third of the Clubhouse which had survived the fire was gradually restored by the members and in 1951 the whole thing was rebuilt – the shell of which houses the current Clubhouse today. A group of members laid the cement floor, did the decorating, put in place the fittings and provided furnishings to replace equipment lost in the fire. As always, the spirit and commitment of the members showed

through. For the first time the Club had running water in the kitchen and electricity to replace the oil lamps. A Dr Barnardo's Home, in what is now Blenheim Gardens, allowed the Electricity Board to run the necessary cable down its boundary from Gloucester (Galsworthy) Road to the back of the clubhouse – about one third of the distance of bringing it down the lane – which greatly reduced the cost. The following year a small wooden hut, which had served as a kitchen, was transformed into a bar and the Club's first licence to sell alcohol was acquired. During the winter of 1955/56 the Clubhouse was further improved by incorporating the bar into the main building and updating the changing rooms.



*The clubhouse after the 1956 alterations*

### **The 60s and 70s**

In 1962 the Club acquired main drainage which again was paid for largely by loans from members. And again, Dr Barnardo's allowed the sewer pipe to be laid along their boundary, thus reducing both the length of the pipe and the cost.

The Club continued to flourish and grow, but the upkeep of the five grass courts was becoming an increasing burden as good groundsmen became difficult to find at reasonable costs. Whereas, before the war, one summer subscription would pay for a groundsman for a week, by 1980 a summer subscription of £25 only covered one-third of the groundsman's £75 weekly wage. Thus, in 1980, a decision was taken to turn Courts 4 and 5 into hard courts, so increasing the all-weather facilities. This meant that the Club was no longer primarily a grass court club, having four hard courts and three grass, so it was decided to do away with summer and winter membership and have just full or mid-week membership lasting throughout the year, which meant an increase in subscriptions. This alone, though, was not enough to cover the cost of relaying the two courts and so loans were sought from the LTA, the Greater London Playing Fields Association and – of course – from the members. However, the laying of the two new hard courts paid off and by 1982 the membership had increased to 150.

### **The 80s and 90s**

The Clubhouse underwent significant updating and repairs in 1988, following the October gales of 1987 which damaged the roof of the building to such an extent that it had to be overhauled and made

watertight. At this time, an entrance lobby and committee room were constructed and the kitchen completely refitted. The whole building was also rewired, the ceiling insulated and off-peak electric heaters installed.

The Club has always enjoyed a right of access over the lane approach from Galsworthy Road. In 1989 the purchase of the Freehold was negotiated in order to control development of the land and for the Club's possible future use.

In 1992, floodlights were introduced on Courts 6 and 7 and it was proposed to change the three grass courts to artificial grass. This naturally caused a stir amongst some of the members who felt it would totally change the nature of the Club. However, a vote was taken at the AGM and the change was agreed. It was necessary to raise money in order to make these major changes so the Club successfully applied for a Lottery grant and also took out a loan from the LTA of £25,000. Work started in 1997 to lay the artificial grass and put floodlighting on Courts 2 and 3. In the summer of 1998, the courts were formally opened and an exhibition tournament was arranged which included Pat Cash, John Inverdale, David Hamilton and Tony Hawks. The artificial grass proved to be both popular and practical as it meant that more members could play all year round and maintenance costs were greatly reduced.



*The inauguration of the artificial grass courts, 1998*

### **The Year 2000 Onwards**

In 2001 Courts 6 and 7 were converted to artificial grass and floodlighting was also installed on Court 1. A couple of years later Courts 4 and 5 were also floodlit. So the Club currently has five artificial grass courts and two hard courts, all of which are floodlit. As a result of all this activity, the condition of the lane deteriorated to such a state that it was necessary to resurface it in 2003/4.

Apart from the aforementioned alterations in 1988, the Clubhouse had remained much as it was since it was rebuilt in the 1950s so, in 2004, a decision was taken to completely gut and rebuild the inside and to extend the terrace. This entire operation took the best part of two years to complete and meanwhile a couple of port-a-cabins and toilets, situated on the rough grass beyond Courts 4 and 5 (which is now part

of the car park), served as a Clubhouse. On a beautiful day in October 2006, Sue Barker opened the new Clubhouse and presented the prizes for that year's Finals Day which had been put back to September.



*Opening of the new clubhouse, October 2006  
From left: Sue Barker, Mike Bourne (Hon Sec), Audrey Marsh (President), Eric Smith (Chairman)*



*Sue Barker cutting the tape, October 2006.*





*The new Clubhouse*



*A social afternoon at the Club*

In 2002 Sport England introduced Clubmark to provide a focus around which all organisations involved in sport for children and young people can come together in support of good practice. In 2008 it was felt that Coombe Wood should work towards achieving Clubmark. The Club was accredited in 2010. One of the requirements was that the Club should have a five-year plan for future development and, initially, this included:

1. Resurfacing of Courts 1, 2 and 3 – completed in 2009.
2. Resurfacing and renewing floodlights to Courts 6 and 7 – completed in 2011.
3. Extending, resurfacing and landscaping the car park – this was started at the beginning of 2011 and finished during the summer of the same year. It was noted that many non-members were using the car park as a convenient (free) alternative to the hospital car park and so it was agreed that an automatic barrier should be installed in the lane to deter non-members from parking there. This work was completed in 2012.
4. Resurfacing Courts 4 and 5 with artificial clay to make them more popular with adult members, but still suitable for junior play – completed 2013.
5. Building an extension to the back of the Clubhouse.
6. Building a semi-permanent awning at the front of the Clubhouse.

It was recognised that the nature of the Club had changed over the years since the Rules had first been written and, although several attempts had been made to update them, this had never been finalised. Certain aspects of achieving Clubmark also made it necessary to make some changes. So a sub-committee was set up to review and amend them as necessary. This work was completed during 2007/8.

In 2008, an opportunity arose for Club Members to learn to play bridge. Classes were organised and proved so popular that it was decided to hold regular duplicate sessions at the Club on a Tuesday evening during the winter. In the summer months, when the Club is busier, the bridge moves to the Minima Yacht Club. In order to make the regular duplicate sessions viable, a few non-members were invited to join in. As the bridge became increasingly popular, those non-members who wished to play on a regular basis were offered the opportunity to become 'Bridge Members' of Coombe Wood and this additional category was added to the membership in 2011.



*Some Coombe Wood members after the first Winter Tournament final in 2010*



*A Breast Cancer Campaign charity day at Coombe Wood 2012*

Throughout the years, it has been the dedication and commitment of the members – particularly the committee – that has driven the club forward to the success it now enjoys. Unlike some clubs in the area, Coombe Wood continues to thrive with 300 senior playing members and nearly 400 juniors, so it has been necessary to instigate a waiting list for the first time. The members are now looking forward to the Club's centenary in seven years' time.

Jan Holman, 2013

*An abridged version of John Weston's 1983 account with more recent additions from David Gibbons & Jan Holman  
Thanks to Tony Hutchinson for some of the old photos*