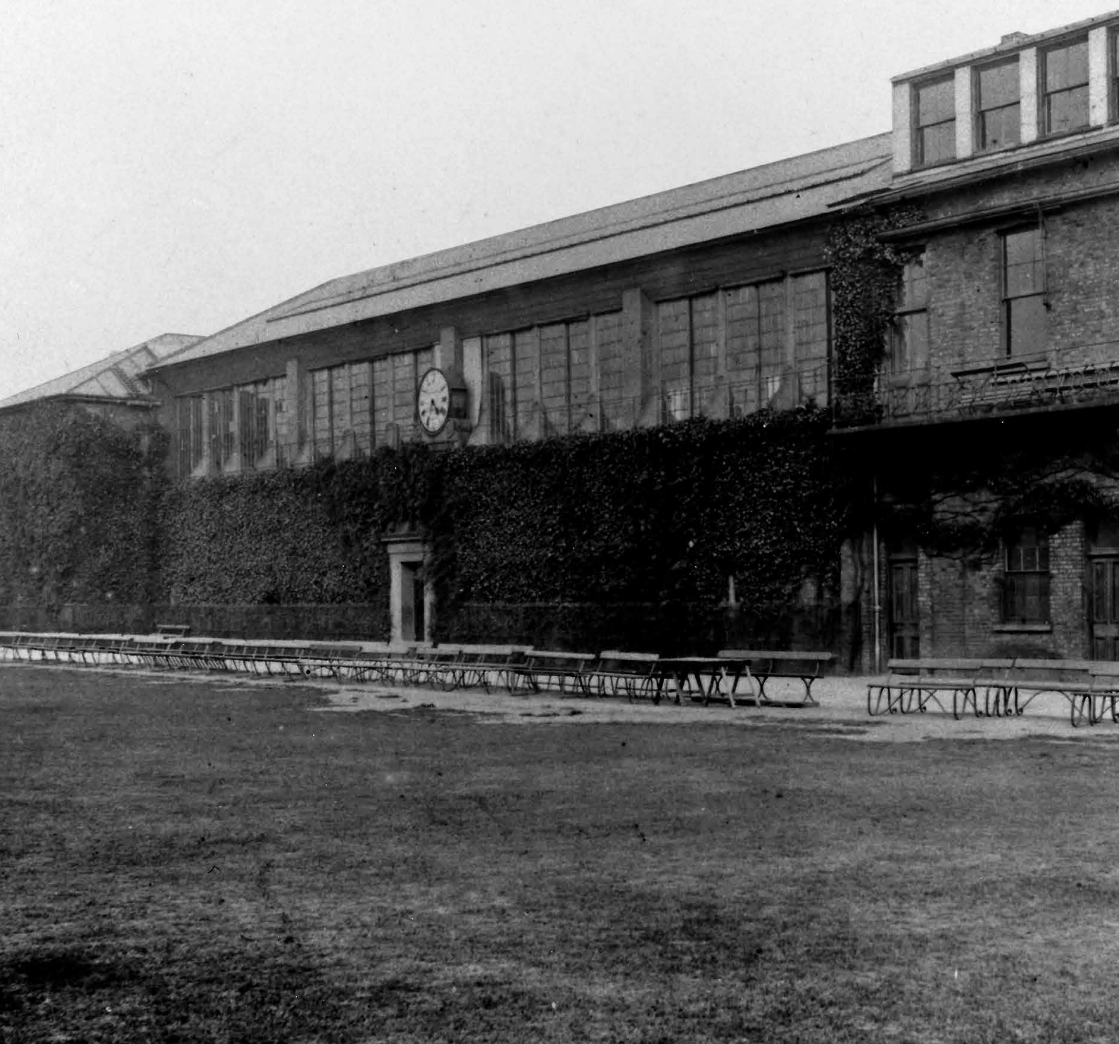




A SHORT HISTORY OF
TENNIS
AT LORD'S



The original court stood on the site of the current Mound Stand. The foundation stone was laid by the M.C.C. Secretary, Benjamin Aislabie, on 1st October 1838, and the building was completed the following spring. The Club gained 150 new Members after the court was built. The building itself cost £4,000. After its demolition in 1899, the floor of the tennis court was moved to the current location.



INTRODUCTION

The year 1839, the year in which the first real tennis court was constructed at Lord's, was also the year of publication of Charles Darwin's *Journal of Researches into the Geology and Natural History of the Various Countries Visited by H.M.S. Beagle under the Command of Captain FitzRoy, R.N., from 1832 to 1839* better known as *The Voyage of the Beagle*, the observations he made being important in helping him to develop his groundbreaking theory of evolution by natural selection. It was also the year in which Charles Goodyear developed vulcanized rubber.

What is the significance of these two events for real tennis at Lord's? Well, Goodyear's invention by permitting the manufacture of rubber tennis balls allowed lawn tennis – a game having its antecedents in real tennis – to develop and grow, eclipsing its parent. Today, through the operation of “natural” selection, there are approximately 23,000 lawn tennis courts in Great Britain (The Health of Tennis in GB, 2010) but just 26 real tennis courts. However, real tennis has continued to flourish at Lord's and this is the story of the first 175 years.



The First

TENNIS COURT



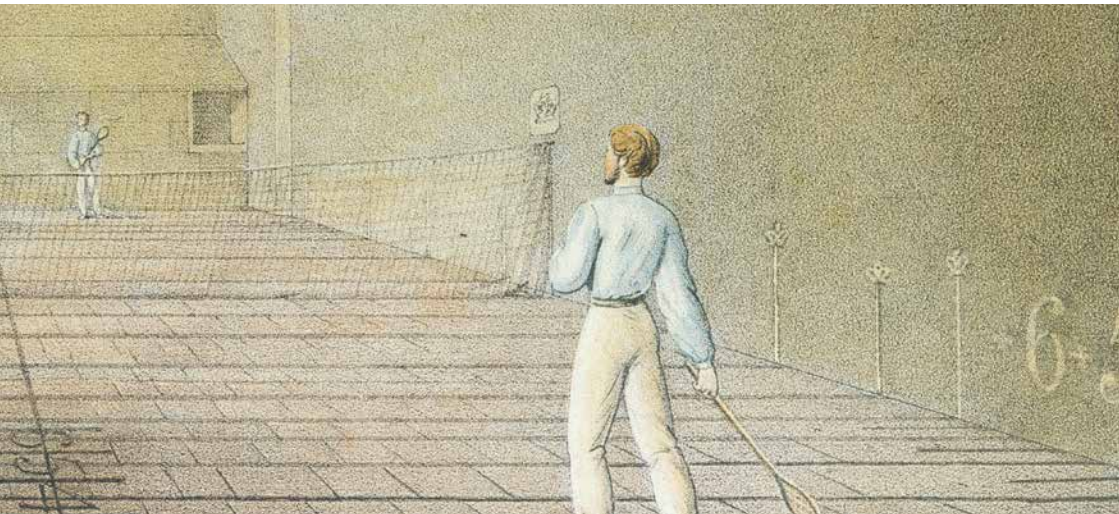
▲ The original court at Lord's

▼ The running track at Lord's with the original court pictured in the background.



FOOT RACE AT LORD'S CRICKET-GROUND.

In 1839, lawn tennis was still to be invented. Yet, for the M.C.C. Committee at Lord's Ground, real tennis was just one of several activities that it was hoped would attract new Members to the Ground and to join the Club. Of course, there had been cricket played on the Ground for 25 years before the tennis court was constructed. (In 2014, the Club is also celebrating 200 years of cricket on this site.) However, there were other sports on offer: at around the same time a bowling green was laid out, an archery ground constructed and followed, a few years later, by a running track (Green B. , 1987, p. 36). There was a new spirit of enterprise in the air. The accession of a young Queen Victoria to the throne in 1837 may have been a factor. In the same year, M.C.C. celebrated its first fifty years. Both events could have been calls to action.



However, an even more likely impetus for change was a new man in charge, James Henry Dark, one of the mid-nineteenth-century's genuine entrepreneurs.

After shocking the cricket world by announcing his intention to build houses on the Ground in 1823, Thomas Lord was prevailed upon to sell out to William Ward, a financier, M.P. and enthusiastic cricketer, who paid £5,400 to purchase the lease of the Ground (Galinou, M., 2010, p.131 & p. 467). Ten years later, Ward sold the remaining lease to Dark, who had a long connection with cricket at Lord's, beginning as a fielder at the age of ten, later representing the Players and then winning some respect as an umpire. Dark was described in a contemporary magazine as "short, broad shouldered and sturdy, of a somewhat pugnacious aspect

and apparently of a rather irascible temper, but a good fellow nevertheless" (Green B. , 1987, p. 34); so, a little bit like Mark Ryan! Such was Dark's influence that, for a while, Lord's became known to some as Dark's (Green B., 1987, p. 34).

It was Dark who invested some £4,000, equivalent to £300,000 today, to construct the real tennis court where the Mound Stand is currently situated. In order to attract a new clientele to Lord's it appears that no effort was spared: it was reported that the bathing facilities were able to accommodate 100 warm and cold baths each day; there were couches for those who had over-indulged in "heavy practice"; and, for those who found tennis too taxing, there were two of the best billiard-tables that could be manufactured (Green B. , 1987, p. 35). In

1859, utilisation of these facilities was further extended when gas lighting was installed in the court (Best & Rich, 2009, p. 144).

The Club's motivations in opening the court were made clear by the M.C.C. Secretary of the time, Benjamin Aislabie:

From the erection of this building I foretell the most beneficial results. I look forward to the formation of a society of the first noblemen and gentlemen in the land meeting on terms the most amicable, engaging in this elegant game, purely of the amusement it will afford, not impelled by unworthy desire of the gain. (Barker, 2014)

It is difficult to estimate what competition M.C.C. faced in the opening of this new court. According to David Best, the only rival Central London court at the time was in James Street, near Haymarket, a rather seedy street, where the court's neighbours were a commercial barn and a brothel! In some other ways, opening the court may have been a brave step. Just twenty years earlier in 1818, *The Morning Post* had contained the following advertisement for a new court, which had some obvious similarities with M.C.C.'s proposal:

A TENNIS-COURT and BILLIARD-ROOMS

P.W. FRAILING begs permission to inform the Noblemen and Gentlemen, that he has OPENED a NEW TENNIS-COURT and BILLIARD-ROOMS, at No. 12, St. Alban's-place, Charles-street, St. James's-square, where every exertion will be used, and accommodation provided for the gratification of those who will honour him with their patronage and support.

Sadly this court, and indeed, ones in Great Windmill Street and St Martin's Street had all closed in the early years of the nineteenth century, suggesting that the outlook for tennis in the capital might not be that good. However, perhaps the entrepreneur in James Dark sensed an opportunity. At a macroeconomic level, a more regular economic cycle in GDP emerged during the period after 1830. The average rate of growth rose to around 1%–2% — double that in the 1700–1830 period — reflecting the growing pace of industrialisation and technological progress (Hills, Thomas, & Dimsdale, 2010). At a more detailed level, Dark may have known that a new court had opened in Brighton in 1836. Certainly the second half of the century was to see something of a “golden age” for real tennis, with a boom in court building. Secretary Aislabie's hopes for the court were clearly substantially satisfied for, in the 1840s, William Denison, an early cricket journalist, was able to report that the court “has tended to increase the membership of the Mary-le-bone Club seeing that more than 150, amongst whom are the finest nobles in the land, have enrolled their names since the completion of the building” (Green S., 2003, p. 52).

So the venture paid off and Lord's became one of the UK's leading centres for real tennis, an important position that it still retains today, as demonstrated by the presence of crossed tennis racquets on the Club's new Royal Charter.

The introduction of the court at Lord's was not all good news. Sadly, one fatality occurred during construction work: Benjamin Donagan, a carpenter aged 43, was on a ladder repairing some supporting braces, which had been blown down by the storm the previous evening. A sudden and violent gust of wind shook the brace, before it was fastened, and threw both it and the deceased down at least thirty feet. Donagan died later in Marylebone Infirmary from “concussion of the brain”.



In the years after it opened, the M.C.C. Committee clearly remained concerned about other courts attracting Members, for *Bells Life* of 26th April 1857 reported that the Lord's Tennis and Rackets courts, having been put into "a perfect state of repair", and all the dressing-rooms "handsomely decorated", the charges for playing on the tennis court would be reduced to 1s a set, or 2s 6d an hour. David Best has suggested that both the refurbishment and the reduction in playing costs might have been connected with proposed opening of a new tennis court at the Prince's Club in Knightsbridge that summer.

For some years after the court was constructed, Lord's remained an essentially rural location, as this description written in 1885 attests:

It was almost open country northwards and westwards. An old-fashioned tavern, with trees in front was the hostelry, and the Pavilion [reconstructed after the earlier one had burnt down in 1825] was of a somewhat rustic kind with shrubbery in front. The tennis court was the only building except the Tavern, and the Members numbered from 300 to 400.

Frederick Gale (Green B. , 1987, p. 35)

The rural aspect of the Ground was reinforced by the presence of sheep keeping the grass under control: a small flock was permanently on the Ground – except, of course, during play - augmented on Saturdays by four or five hundred fellows on their way to the Monday Smithfield Market. A Member, the Earl of Verulam, who is reported to have loathed Dark's "cursed tennis court", expressed the feeling that Lord's should be kept for cricket only. Fortunately the Earl's sentiments towards tennis did not take a more practical turn: when he found an early mechanical lawn mower challenging the role of his cherished sheep, it is said that he set about its immediate destruction (Green B. , 1987, p. 37).

Despite its country location, Lord's was within comfortable distance of the West End. Moreover, London was expanding northwards, rapidly providing new audiences for Lord's and its attractions. John Nash had laid out Regent's Park in 1812 and the southern part of the new Finchley Road was constructed by 1824. Residential buildings were constructed to the east of the new road and by 1842 there were several villas in the area. Between 1845 and 1852, 33 houses were built in Finchley Road, thirteen in St. John's Wood Park, close to the Lord's Ground. Most houses were detached, even imposing, and were occupied mainly by the professional and commercial classes: merchants, retired manufacturers, people of private means, and some tradesmen, almost all with several servants (British History Online). Perhaps the appearance of the middle classes in the area prompted the Club to take an interest in the new sport of lawn tennis for, in 1875, the Club's Tennis & Rackets Sub-Committee took responsibility for drawing up the rules of this game.

This is not to say that the Club's responsibilities towards real tennis were neglected. In May 1867, perhaps spurred by the appearance of three new real tennis courts in the UK, doubling the number of venues where the game could be played, the Secretary announced a new competition that it was hoped would make it the major centre for tennis, saying: "It has been decided that two challenge prizes for the best play at tennis shall be given by the Marylebone club to be played for annually". These Gold and Silver Racquet challenges remain among the most prestigious amateur competitions in the game. Despite being open to non-Members from 1870, in its first 29 years it was only won by two players, J.M. Heathcote (seventeen times) and the Hon. Alfred Lyttelton (twelve), and only in its thirtieth year did Sir Edward Grey, later Britain's Foreign Secretary, finally break their domination.

Background image: J.M. Heathcote who won the Gold Racquet 17 times

The Second

TENNIS COURT



- ▲ Henry Johns, right, demonstrates the grip of a racquet to David Cull
- ▼ Presented to Jack Groom on his retirement as Head Professional in 1955



Sixty years after the first tennis court was built, it was demolished to make way for the Mound Stand. The need for space for spectators within the Ground had become acute: in 1896, some 30,000 had somehow crammed into the Ground to watch the England v. Australia Test Match. However, tennis was not to be abandoned. Purchase of the freehold of an adjoining property in Grove End Road provided space for a new tennis court behind the Pavilion. The floor of the old tennis court was moved to this new site, the more worn flagstones being used near the net, where the old chase lines may still be seen today. Owing to a legal dispute with a neighbour, it was not until 1st January 1900 that this new court was opened. During this interregnum, both Prince's Club and Hampton Court offered hospitality to M.C.C. Members, and the 1899 Gold and Silver Racquet prizes were played at Prince's.

Two of the twentieth century's greatest professionals, Jack Groom and Henry



Johns, successively presided over the second court for more than fifty years. Groom trained at Prince's and Hatfield House, and took over at Lord's in 1924. He was one of nature's gentlemen, whose Cockney good humour helped him mix on easy terms with everyone. During an Eton v Harrow cricket match, a group of spectators wearing the traditional top hats customary in those days were watching tennis from the upstairs gallery. One of the spectators leaned over a little too far and his hat fell on to the court. Spotting the falling object, Groom, who was marking the match, instantly called it as chase two. He was also a fine player, running Edgar Baerlein close for the Open Championship in 1931 and winning it the next year, and a wonderful coach, taking as great an interest in less able players as he did in the best. He was also a very practical man. When a Second World War bomb fell immediately behind the tennis court removing the tennis court's roof, Groom organised a corrugated roof

to cover the tennis court saving it from serious deterioration.

Henry Johns took over in 1954 and remained in charge until 1975 (although he continued to work for the Club part-time thereafter). He had first come to Lord's in 1936 after training at Prince's and at the Cazalet family's court at Fairlawne. He was a masterly player on the Lord's court (champion of the world there, Jim Dear used to say), an excellent coach and a delightful personality. Henry was an outstanding marker, handling many of the most important matches of his time, and had a hand in training many young professionals – including his successor at Lord's, David Cull, and his two assistants, Mark Ryan and Chris Swallow, both of whom are still at Lord's. The outstanding M.C.C. amateur from the era of Henry Johns and David Cull was Howard Angus who won the Gold Racquet 16 times and was World Champion from 1976 to 1981. When David Cull retired in 2002, he was succeeded by Adam Phillips, who had been the Professional at Hatfield.

Tennis at

LORD'S TODAY



Although M.C.C. is, of course, primarily a cricket club, it has over two hundred tennis-playing Members and they keep the court and the Club busy over eighty hours a week throughout the year, both in the cricket season and out. Apart from its Gold and Silver Racquets and All-comers' tournaments for the elite amateurs, the Club holds a number of very popular tournaments in both doubles and singles in the R. Aird, H.D. Johns, D.P. Henry and W.H. Ollis Cups. The annual Tennis Weekend, a creation of David Cull, is also very popular and its format of exclusively doubles matches played in 25 minutes plays an important role in bringing Members together in a competitive yet social setting. The Club created the D.W. Cull Trophy, a singles competition for its best amateurs, in David's memory following his death in 2009.

- ▲ The court today
- ▶ Rob Fahey, World Champion, was elected as an Honorary Life Member of M.C.C. in 2011

Other new tournaments have been introduced in recent years and have proved very popular, including a series of Skills Nights and an annual Generations Cup, competed for by pairs comprising a parent and son or daughter. In 2015, the Club expects to inaugurate the R.G. Paterson Trophy to be competed for by the Club's younger Members.

M.C.C. has always been keen to support the wider game. It has always entered teams in T&RA's sponsored competitions and in 2011 was the last winner of the Field Trophy in its previous format and also won the Pol Roger Cup in 2013. An M.C.C. team has also won the Brodie Cup twice in the last seven years. A number of M.C.C. Members have served and continue to serve the sport at the highest level within the Tennis and Rackets Association. At the initiative of Adam Phillips, the Club has also created an internship to encourage a young amateur player to improve his or her game and gain experience of the sport. Three young amateurs have now held this position and one, Claire Vigrass, became Ladies' World Champion shortly after completing her term.

Lord's is frequently the setting for important events in the game. The annual University tennis match has been held at the Club since 2000, when it returned to Lord's at the initiative of the then Chairman, Brian Sharp. In 2008, the Club hosted the dinner to celebrate the centenary of the Tennis and Rackets Association attended by over 500 members of the Association, and the M.C.C. Locusts, captained by Roger Pilgrim, was the winner of the Tennis and Rackets Association's first Centenary Tournament. The professional game is not neglected: since 2005 the Club has organised and hosted the European Open Singles Championship. After the first year, the Club was fortunate to secure the support of Hiscox, thanks in major part to the then Chairman Andrew Beeson, and they continued as sponsor for four years. More recently, the competition has been privately sponsored and held to support the Afghan Connection and Voices Foundation charities. The tournament attracts many of the world's best singles players and has been won by the World Champion, Rob Fahey, five times and by Camden Riviere, four times. In 2011 with the support of the then Chairman, Ronald Paterson, the Club was able to secure the services of Fahey, now an Honorary Life Member of M.C.C., to play in the Premiership Division of the National League, which the Club won for the first time.



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