

Wall Heath Tennis Club 50 + 1

Wall Heath Tennis Club is a small community-based club lying behind the Community Centre, Enville Road, Wall Heath, South Staffordshire, which currently boasts 80 adult members and over a 100 juniors being coached weekly.

The Club started life in the 1930s under the chairmanship of Joe Massey, father of John Massey of Ashwood Nurseries. Following the outbreak of the 2nd World War in 1939, two courts fell into disrepair and suffered great decay until, in early 1972, local villagers Doug Hyde and John Clarke had a long chat and decided to reform the tennis club. A meeting was held in the community centre in May 1971 of all people interested in reforming a tennis club.

Doug Hyde chaired this meeting and a steering committee was formed to negotiate with the local council. Twelve people attended, including John Corns, Molly Powell (elected secretary), Arthur Weaver, a local bank employee (elected Treasurer), David Powell, Val Clarke and Val Hyde.

For the first steering committee meeting John Corns provided an excellent set of rules which would hopefully provide the basis of how the club was run in the future.

Following the next committee meeting, letters were sent out to three councillors asking for their help in approaching the council about forming a club. It was fortunate that the committee received invaluable help from Councillor Watkins, whose influence was paramount, as he arranged a meeting with the chairman of the Parks and Recreation Committee, Councillor Goode and Mr. Deans, Parks and Recreation Director. As a result of that meeting it was passed in council that a sum of £2,000 be spent on resurfacing, replacing chain link fencing and posts to provide two new tennis courts with nets. The rent for the courts was to be £100 for the first twelve months rising to £175 for the next ten years. All maintenance, bar the marking of the courts, was to be done by the members.

The club re-opened its doors for membership in 1972 and according to the club accounts for the year ending 31st December, there were 24 seniors who paid £3 and 38 juniors who paid £1.50. Changing rooms were not available so the Community Association agreed to the tennis club using a back stage room.

As numbers grew from the original twelve members, an 'American' tournament was arranged to be the first competitive tournament as a reformed club in May 1973. Rob Bishop, Sports Editor for the Dudley Herald, was so interested in the topic of reforming the tennis club that he went along to cover the tournament. They were a player short, so he dashed home, changed into tennis gear, and turned up to complete the numbers. He so liked it that he joined the club and in September 1973 he won the first men's and mixed doubles championships.

In the men's singles final he beat favourite Steve Ellis 6-1, 6-3 and completed a double success partnering Brenda Hall to victory over Steve Ellis and Janet Owens in the mixed doubles final 6-1, 7-5.

The ladies singles championship was won in great style by Val Hyde who overpowered Anne Mole 6-0, 6-3. The quality of her strike play made it a rather one-sided final, much to the delight of her husband Doug whose vision had reformed the club.

It was also at this time that a small port-a-cabin building was acquired for the club by Alec Allen who arranged a crane to take the hut and drop it on the park behind the netting. This allowed them to entertain after matches, give shelter from the rain and allow one person to change at a time, making them independent of the Community Centre- except for toilets, when open!

The tennis club held its first presentation dance in Autumn 1973 at Wall Heath Community Centre, Joe Massey, Chairman of the old tennis club, being guest of honour. He presented trophies to Val Hyde and Rob Bishop, ladies and men's singles champions respectively and mixed doubles champions Rob Bishop and Brenda Hall. Rob though was curiously missing from the Dudley Herald's championship press pictures due to sickness through being nervous at having to dance with the lady champion, disappearing outside for a breath of fresh air.

The next stage of the club's progress was to play against other clubs. Two mixed friendly matches were arranged against Tenbury Wells away and Hanbury home.

It was then decided to form competitive teams, so a men's and a ladies team were entered into the Hereford and Worcester Lawn Tennis League in 1975. Rob Bishop was appointed captain, the first match played at home was lost 5-1 to Droitwich, but two matches had to be played at Wordsley Park because three courts were needed for the three pairs! This was quite inconvenient because players had to drive there in the middle of the match! In the second match at Bewdley, Rob Bishop recalled "Our opponents seemed ancient compared with myself and Rob Johnson but they were good enough to thrash us 6-0. The highlight was a beautiful sit down tea prepared for us in their club house. We didn't have the facilities to put on anything at our place other than sandwiches!"

From those small acorns, having lost their first two matches, they remained unbeaten for the rest of the season and were promoted from division 7 and division 6, helped by beating Bewdley in the return fixture which of course featured only sandwiches and a drink in the Wall Heath Inn.

In 1976 they were promoted for the second time and went on to be promoted to the top division in 1983.

The next project was to acquire funds to build two new courts. The £5,560 cost was raised by loans of £10 from members plus grants from both the Sports Council and

Lawn Tennis Association in the Summer of 1977. The opening ceremony took place in early 1978, performed by Dudley's Dorothy Little (nee Round), former Wimbledon ladies singles champion in 1934 and 1937 and mixed doubles champion in 1934, 1935 and 1936. After the opening ceremony the club staged men's and ladies' tournaments to 'christen' the new courts. Club Chairman Alan Taylor presented trophies to winners, New Zealander Katherine Broadbent and Eric Grove.

At long last in 1983 a large wooden pavilion was purchased which had the luxury of running water, toilets and two changing rooms. This was to serve the club well for thirty three years while its membership and coaching of youngsters developed above all expectations. The men's A team won Division One of the Hereford/Worcester Tennis League in 1987 and 1989 (comprising of Adrian Hyde - Captain, Nick Knight and Rob Winter who were all playing for Staffordshire county team by then), the mixed A team won the Kidderminster Mixed League in 1993, whilst the Ladies A team reached Division One standard in 1995 after working their way up through eleven divisions!

The next milestone was the acquiring of floodlights in 1992. Much help was given by members, especially John Banner, who dug the footings out for the cable with a small shovel digger. This broke down so Paul Siviter managed to obtain a large crane to lift it out and over the fence. What fun was had just to play night time tennis!

A strand running through the tennis club from 1972 to the present day is Adrian Hyde, Wall Heath Club coach, Staffordshire tennis player, L.T.A. coach and international player, who, as the son of founder Doug and his wife Val, started playing on the courts aged eight in 1972 when they were first put down and won his first tournament in 1974 at the tender age of ten. Adrian quickly went on to win his first Staffs County title at under 12 level in 1975. A landmark title was achieved aged 15 in 1979 when he won the men's singles title at Wall Heath (the first year juniors were allowed to enter) beating Mick Johnson, his senior by ten years, 6-1, 6-4.

At 16 he won the Kidderminster men's singles title going on in 1982 to win the Staffs under 18 singles title. Adrian has played in the Staffs County team in one form or another since 1982, captaining every age group, open, over 35, 45 and 55.

His coaching career started aged 18 after gaining his first coaching award. He went on to gain the intermediate award (level 4) in 1994 and has been coaching at the club since 1982. He also coached Staffs County junior players and had the honour of playing at the All England Club, Wimbledon in the year 2000 where Staffordshire celebrated their centenary along with Lancashire and Kent.

Aged 38 he played for Loughborough in the National over 35 club championship, winning it at his 1st attempt. With either Bilston or Wolverhampton he won the Staffs Premier League title, eleven years in a row and also represented Florence Tennis Club, North Staffs in the Over 50s British Seniors Tennis Tournament, which they

won, so as British champions they represented Great Britain in the European Seniors Club Championships in La Manga Spain 2018.

At Wall Heath he coaches up to one hundred children weekly and runs lots of school holiday camps.

Over the years Adrian has coached thousands of children at schools, club and county level, giving back lots to the game he graces as a player.

Adrian is very proud of the fact that Wall Heath's Louise Scott became a Staffs Ladies County player along with Chloe Stephenson who played for Wall Heath Ladies A and Lisa Colling who ended up as Staffs Ladies Champion, following in the footsteps of her mother, Claire, who was champion in 2014. She later took up the offer of a Tennis Scholarship in the U.S.A. with the help of Ron Allan.

It is safe to say that the club has come a long way since 1972 to where it is today. It proudly boasts a new brick built pavilion costing £65,000, built in 2016, funded by Ibstock, Cory and Cory (Enovert) Environmental. The bid for this important funding was prepared by Wall Heath stalwarts, Paul Parry (Chairman), Claire Colling, Caroline Trinham and Maria Siviter with Carl Stephenson project managing the new building. Club members put in hours of work furnishing and decorating it so it was ready for the grand opening in September by the Deputy Mayor David Tyler.

This led to two Davis Cup Players, Danny Sapsford and Luke Milligan, whose company raises money for tennis clubs, providing a memorable day in May 2018. This well attended community event raised £2,500 for charities and the club.

Following this, in June 2019, Danny with Robyn Moore, who was helped with her Post Traumatic Stress Disorder through tennis, came again to help raise money for the Breakpoint Charity 2019 who help youngsters and adults with mental health issues access tennis coaching. This was part of a nationwide campaign throughout June with the club being chosen by Danny after impressing him the previous year. £1600 was raised by the club for the charity Wall Heath Tennis Club was featured on BBC Midlands news raising the profile of the club.

In 2019 the four courts were resurfaced with the aid of money from Sport England and Cory (Enovert) Environmental so giving the local community and beyond an excellent club to be proud of, due to the foresight of Doug Hyde and John Clarke, hard work by club members and grants from various organisations including local Wall Heath charity 'Helping Hands' and Hickory's Smokehouse.

Last year, in 2022, the club sadly lost founding member (Doug Hyde) but perhaps it was fitting in this year that the club celebrated 50 years since its resurrection. Who better to invite than Danny Sapsford and Luke Milligan to offer a day of tennis for the community, with over a 100 people having fun and raising money for Bright Ideas For Tennis.

Thanks to the vision of Doug and John, 1000s of people have enjoyed tennis at Wall Heath TC and there have been some notable successes and visitors. However, I know Doug would be most happy, like his son is now, that tennis is available to all in the local vicinity and beyond and Wall Heath Tennis Club is truly a jewel in the community.

Brian Lester and Adrian Hyde