

## A People's History of Tennis

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– David Cohen, Investigations Editor at the  
*London Evening Standard*

# A People's History of Tennis

David Berry

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# 1

## Mavericks

The first game of lawn tennis, at least in public, was played on Wednesday 6 May 1874, not in Wimbledon but in Knightsbridge in the land between Lennox Gardens Mews, Hans Place and Cadogan Square. Today it is one of the most expensive slabs of real estate in the world, but then it was a cricket ground surrounded by tall trees and owned by the Prince's Club, one of Victorian London's most popular sporting clubs. To mark the start of the cricket season a demonstration of the new game of 'lawn tennis' was arranged. It was organised by its inventor, Walter Wingfield, a country gentleman originally from North Wales who had recently retired from the army with the rank of major.

There had been much interest in Major Wingfield's game since he had begun promoting it two months earlier. On the Monday before its Prince's Club debut, the *Morning Post* urged readers to go along and catch this 'clever adaptation of tennis to the exigencies of an ordinary lawn' which would 'undoubtedly become a national pastime'.<sup>1</sup> The paper's enthusiasm may well have been influenced by the adverts Wingfield placed in their columns, but it was shared by other publications of the time as their editors looked for something that might replace croquet and rinking, two popular pastimes of the previous decade which had unaccountably fallen out of fashion.

On the morning of the demonstration, Wingfield ensured that a court 60 feet long and 30 feet wide was marked out in the shape of an hourglass on one corner of the cricket ground. A net was erected five feet high in the middle of the court and everything was ready for a game of doubles.<sup>2</sup> Wingfield was joined on court by his close friend Clement Scott, theatre critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, Captain Alfred Thompson and a cricket player

called Lubbock. What they wore is not recorded but it is likely to have been the clothes of the Victorian sportsman: plus-fours, long-sleeved T-shirt and cricketing cap. In front of an audience of *Morning Post* subscribers, amused bystanders and sceptical cricketers, the match began.

Wingfield's 'lawn tennis' turned out to be a deceptively simple game. All the players were required to do was to hit a soft rubber ball with a wooden racket backwards and forwards over the net making sure the ball stayed in court. As anyone who has ever played tennis can testify, however, this is by no means as easy as it sounds. One can imagine the frustration of the four players that morning as they slowly realised this new pastime was a little more difficult than they had thought. Many of their balls would have hit the net or sailed out to the jeers of the watching cricketers who were convinced the game would never catch on.

The cricketers were wrong. Within a year, lawn tennis had spread all over Britain and within a couple of years across the world as it evolved into the sport we know today as simply 'tennis'. It is an extraordinary story and it is worth getting to know more about its inventor, Walter Wingfield. But first it is useful to note that lawn tennis is a relatively recent addition to the racket sports family. There are other games that are much older.

Tennis historians have traced similar ball games back to medieval tournaments and one or two have speculated (with no evidence) that tennis in some form or another could have been played in ancient Rome or Egypt. But lawn tennis's most recognisable antecedent is the game we now call *real* or *royal* or *court* tennis which originated in French monasteries in the thirteenth century. This was played indoors on a stone floor and quickly became a favoured pastime of the European aristocracy. At the peak of its popularity in the sixteenth century, Paris alone had 250 courts, including one at the Louvre and another at Versailles, the latter of which was occupied in the revolution of 1879 by the Third Estate as a symbolic protest at the elitist nature of this sport. The most famous real tennis court in Britain was built in 1519 in Hampton Court Palace for Henry VIII, a keen player, at least in his younger

days. It is still in use today by some of the few thousand enthusiasts in Britain, France and the United States who keep this version of tennis alive.

In early nineteenth-century Britain, a variant of real tennis migrated outdoors and became known as *field* or *long* or *open* tennis depending on which part of the country it was being played. One version in the 1830s had six people on each side and a court 160 yards long, six times longer than today's tennis court. These games never amounted to anything more than passing fads despite initial concerns that they threatened 'to bowl out cricket' (at that time the most popular sport in the world).<sup>3</sup> So in 1874 nobody expected Wingfield's new invention to be anything more than a craze which would last a season or two. There were, after all, several other racket games also vying for attention around this time such as *five-ten*, which combined real tennis with fives, and *Hildegarde*, which combined real tennis with rounders and cricket. These games flared brightly for a while and then quickly faded. Lawn tennis survived to become one of the three most watched sports in the world today and one of the six most played. The interesting question is why.

One simple answer is that it was a more satisfying game than any of its rivals. It would have done well wherever and whenever it was introduced. All it was waiting for were a couple of technical innovations. In 1827 in the village of Thrupp, Gloucestershire, Edwin Budding developed the world's first lawn mower. In 1844, in the city of Philadelphia, Charles Goodyear discovered the process of vulcanisation which allowed a ball to be made out of waterproof rubber and filled with air, although rubber balls did not become commercially available for another couple of decades. When a cut lawn and a soft rubber ball were eventually put together, lawn tennis became inevitable and, because it was such a satisfying game to play, inevitably popular. But popularity can wane as fashions change and popular satisfaction is no guarantee something will survive.

We need a little context, so it is useful to remember that tennis was not the only major sport to emerge during this time.

The modern forms of football, golf, hockey and cricket were all developed too. Games became popular in late nineteenth-century Britain because the country had been the first to industrialise and so develop a working day that was organised and regulated with time off for leisure, at least for some. New jobs towards the end of the century like clerical and shop work were less tiring, and better transport enabled people to travel more easily to a game. Most importantly, there was money around, again at least for some. By 1870, the *average* standard of living in England was the highest in the world. Even though Britain remained, in Disraeli's phrase, a 'country of two nations', the distance between rich and poor was narrowing as the wages of skilled workers began to rise. For those who did have money, there were ample opportunities for leisure.

Old recreations were plundered and new ones discovered as Britain experienced a 'great sports craze'.<sup>4</sup> The country's wealth, empire and dominant position in trade ensured that any game popular in Britain would spread quickly to Europe, North America and the colonies. Team sports like cricket and football became public events which appealed to everyone as participants or spectators, but individual games like tennis and golf found a niche too because they provided a private space for an insurgent middle class of bankers, merchants, clerics, factory owners and professionals to socialise with an aristocracy intent on holding on to at least some of their political power. Lawn tennis, according to the sociologist Robert Lake, enabled 'middle-class aspiration' to meet 'upper-class status insecurity' within a framework of 'appropriate gentlemanly conduct and budding female emancipation'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, it came at exactly the right time. All it needed was a Major Wingfield.

Walter Wingfield was born into a comfortable family in rural North Wales in 1833, although this congenial upbringing was soon shattered by the death of his mother when he was two years old and then his father, a British army major, when he was 13. Family connections allowed Walter to sign up with the Dragoon Guards at 17 and he eventually rose to the rank of captain. Wingfield served in India and was present in 1860 at the capture



of Peking, returning home with a Pekinese dog called Joss. A year later, he retired from the army to become a country gentleman on land inherited from his father. The fields and mountains of North Wales proved no match for the attractions of the Orient, and Wingfield soon quit the countryside to rejoin the army before retiring again a few years later, this time with the title of major. He remained a ceremonial Royal Body Guard for most of his life.

In the late spring of 1873, we find him living in a Georgian terraced house in Belgrave Road in Pimlico, not yet 40 years old, with a wife, Alice, four children and a household of servants to support. Pimlico at the time was 'genteel, sacred to professional men ... a cut above Chelsea which is only commercial'.<sup>6</sup> It was the place to be for someone who needed to make money while not appearing to be trade. Wingfield had excellent contacts and decided to reinvent himself as an entrepreneur.

In the next three decades he would devise a range of upmarket products and services with varying degrees of ingenuity. There would be a butterfly bicycle, a smoking mixture and a French cookery school, all a little ahead of their time. Wingfield's relatively brief venture into lawn tennis was his most successful enterprise by far, although how he stumbled across the game is by no means clear. He does not appear to have witnessed any of the other half-dozen attempts around this time to find a new outdoor pastime with bat and ball. He seems to have discovered tennis entirely on his own.

Sometime in late 1873, Wingfield assembled a portable set to play a game he called 'lawn tennis'. In a chocolate-coloured box, he arranged a net, four wooden bats made by the sports equipment manufacturer Jefferies & Mallings, a bag of India rubber balls imported from Germany and assorted poles, pegs and netting to mark out a court which could be done, according to Wingfield, 'in five minutes'. Then almost as an afterthought he threw in a book about how to play this new game which contained six simple rules. Wingfield's nets, rackets, balls and poles have all long gone and his hourglass court would soon be replaced by the rectangle we know

today. But you can still read his rules and marvel at how close it is to how tennis has been played ever since.<sup>7</sup>

In his book, Major Wingfield claimed that lawn tennis had been tested at several country houses across Britain and been found to be so 'full of interest and so great a success that it has been decided to bring it before the Public'.<sup>8</sup> There is little independent evidence, however, that any such testing took place apart, perhaps, from one visit to his cousin on the Earnshill estate in Somerset in the summer of 1873 where he seems to have come up with the idea. Later that year, Wingfield did attend a spectacular pre-Christmas gathering in Nantclywd, Denbighshire given by his friend, Major Thomas Naylor-Leyland, for 200 guests, but these few days away in North Wales were dominated by amateur dramatics not by trying out lawn tennis, even if this had been possible in deep midwinter. Naylor-Leyland's event was useful though because it gave Wingfield a story. Like marketing people ever since, the major recognised the power of narrative. He realised he would be able to charge a premium if he associated his 'lawn tennis' with the leisure activities of the English country house. He dedicated his new tennis sets to 'The Party Assembled at Nantclywd in December 1873'. It worked even better than he imagined.

After advertising in *Army and Navy Gazette* on 7 March 1874 and, over the next few weeks, in *London Court Journal*, *Morning Post* and *Land and Water*, the first 1,000 tennis sets sold at the not inconsiderable price of five guineas, the equivalent today of £350. A third of them were bought by the aristocracy and, in subsequent editions, Wingfield listed the eleven princes and 54 earls who had purchased a set and were satisfied with the result.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, he left out any reference to customers who were less pleased, like the correspondent to *The Field* who protested about the 'absurdly high price for this tennis set, all very roughly made'.<sup>10</sup> Wingfield took little notice. He preferred to quote his friends at the *Morning Post* ('a source of amusement to a large and fashionable concourse of ladies and gentlemen') and the *Sporting Gazette* ('I hear from Paris that people are all raving about it')

which testified to his tennis sets' appeal here and overseas, at least to the well-heeled.<sup>11</sup>

The sets were indeed a triumph. The only mistake Wingfield made was in the name. In a futile attempt to try and stop others stealing his idea, he started calling his new game *sphairistikè*. Unfortunately few customers knew how to pronounce this word or indeed what it meant (it was garbled Ancient Greek for 'belonging to the ball').<sup>12</sup> The game soon became known by Wingfield's original choice, 'lawn tennis', although it owed as much to rackets as it did to real tennis. But then rackets, a sport originally developed in debtors' prisons in the eighteenth century, did not have the same cachet as real tennis, the sport of kings.

In a few short years in the mid-1870s, Wingfield's game became a desirable summer activity for the leisured upper middle class, not just in Britain but in France, Canada, China, America and Germany where the first tennis was played in the spa town of Bad Homburg as early as 1874. Lawn tennis reached Brazil and India the next year and had a strong appeal in the British colonies of the southern hemisphere where the climate favoured outdoor play. Tennis was being played regularly in Melbourne by 1878 and the first mention of the game in South Africa was in 1875 when Sir Garnet Wolseley, a colonial administrator in Natal, 'tried to play lawn tennis on very bad stony ground with wretched balls'.<sup>13</sup> As the sports writer and historian, Julian Marshall, noted at the time, 'never has a game sprung so rapidly into favour. It is now played in all quarters of the world and with steadily increasing zeal.'<sup>14</sup>

Wingfield's connections with the army undoubtedly helped these early foreign sales, but just as important were the testimonials the sets were receiving in London, the empire's hub. There, the game had been picked up by society magazines and played by celebrities including Oscar Wilde. Queen Victoria's second son, Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, purchased a set and laid down a court in the grounds of Buckingham Palace. Many of these fashionable folk would soon tire of lawn tennis and seek out new excitements. Wilde moved on to golf. But these initial endorsements by stars and royalty attracted the people who would sustain the game –

aspiring men from the new middle classes who would make lawn tennis their own.

In order for a sport to flourish, it needs not only an elite who compete at the highest level but also a solid base of players who turn out week after week and make it part of their lives. Without them, all you have is spectacle. One reason why tennis was able to prosper in the late nineteenth century was that it quickly discovered its first constituency, gentlemen from the professions. At the end of the century, there were some 20,000 lawyers and 19,000 doctors in England alone, not to mention thousands of architects, accountants, engineers and surveyors. Many had established practices and were able to take time off for recreation and pleasure. They had been forced to endure team sports at public school, and as they settled into partnerships and prosperous lives, they wanted a game that was more individual, a sport that was competitive but less physically demanding than rugby or cricket. Lawn tennis was ideal. It combined moderate exercise with the Victorian equivalent of networking. A correspondent to *The Field* in early 1875, who had played lawn tennis in Suffolk and North Wales the previous summer, thought the new game 'well-suited for middle aged gentlemen'.<sup>15</sup> One middle-aged gentleman who was one of the earliest lawn tennis players was Tom 'Harry' Gem, a lawyer from Birmingham.

Harry Gem was a short, eccentric man with an enthusiastic manner and piercing gaze. He was born in 1819, the son of a solicitor whose practice he inherited when he was 35 years old. Gem would go on to become clerk to the Birmingham Magistrates, but more important for him were his extra-curricular activities of which there were many. In his twenties he set up a cricket club. In his thirties, he founded the Birmingham Union Club where business and professional men could meet to discuss politics and culture. In the summer of 1859, he became secretary of a committee to set up a Birmingham branch of the Volunteer Rifles in which he would subsequently serve, reaching the rank of major. That summer too, 15 years before Wingfield's invention was introduced to the world, Harry Gem played lawn tennis.

That at least is the claim of a blue plaque sponsored by Birmingham Civic Society and unveiled in 1982 by the Lawn Tennis Association on the wall of a detached house in the affluent inner-city suburb of Edgbaston. On the back lawn of this house, the plaque proclaims, the game of lawn tennis was first played in 1865 by Juan Bautista 'Augurio' Perera, a Spanish merchant based in Birmingham who lived in the house at the time, and his friend Major Harry Gem, who lived in Moseley, just down the road.

It is a lovely story, and it is a pity it turns out not to be true. The tale can be traced back to a letter Gem sent to *The Field* in November 1874 in which he claimed that he and Perera first played Wingfield's new game 15 years before.<sup>16</sup> Harry Gem was trustworthy all his life and there is no reason to believe he wasn't telling the truth, at least as he perceived it. But meticulous research in the last few years by tennis historians Robert Everitt and Richard Hillway shows convincingly that Gem was mistaken. Gem and Perera, both keen indoor rackets players, were not experimenting with lawn tennis at all but with a version of outdoor rackets played with a solid and not a rubber ball.<sup>17</sup>

Whichever game it was, it cannot have made a strong impression. After this experiment, Gem and Perera seem to have lost interest and only came back to playing outdoors in the summer of 1874 a few months after Wingfield's tennis sets became widely available. By then they had both moved to Leamington Spa in Warwickshire, and sometime that summer they set up a 'lawn tennis club', the first one dedicated only to the game although the game they actually played seems to have been a mixture of Wingfield's lawn tennis and their own outdoor rackets. The club was situated at the back of the town's Manor House Hotel and its initial members were two young hospital doctors, Frederick Haynes and Arthur Tomkins, as Harry Gem recalled in verse:

Let all our deeds be written on the lasting roll of fame,  
 How Homer bet the shilling and Tomkins won the game,  
 How Haynes' youthful vigour placed him high upon the list,  
 And baffled all who hadn't got the great Perera twist.

When he wrote this, Gem was in his fifties and Perera only a few years younger. The two medics, Haynes and Tomkins, were not yet 30. But as the millions of people who have played tennis since can testify, the cleverness of middle age can often prove quite capable of foiling the athleticism of youth. The 'Perera twist' – the spin Augurio put on the ball – was able to confound Haynes' 'youthful vigour' and give them all something to talk about over a glass or two of claret-cup at the end:

Farewell the turf, the bounding ball and nets are in the box,  
The rackets on the shelf are laid to wait next season's knocks;  
Then let us now pass round the wine, a brimming bumper fill,  
And drink the great Pelota game, Lawn Tennis if you will.<sup>18</sup>

The passion Harry Gem quickly developed for his new pastime, which he and Perera also called pelota after a Spanish ball game, was not unusual among tennis enthusiasts then or now. Tennis is a sport that inspires deep affection among its devotees if not thankfully a great deal of poetry. No profession in Victorian Britain was more appreciative of this than the clergy. There were 24,000 of them in late nineteenth-century Britain and many not only took up the game but introduced it to their local church. A tennis club in Ilkley, West Yorkshire, was formed in 1880 by the Reverend Ottley. The winner of their first tournament was a solicitor called Fletcher who Ottley described as the 'best type of English Christian gentleman'. In Kirktonhill in the West of Scotland in the late 1890s, the Reverend Stephen reported that his club 'was well supported by the congregation and as tennis is on the boom in the town, the new club has secured a firm footing'.<sup>19</sup> The first bishop of Birmingham, Charles Gore, was known for his Christian socialism and his love of tennis. His older brother, Spencer, was the first Wimbledon champion in 1877. It was hardly surprising that *The Field* proclaimed lawn tennis 'a game for vicars'.

The vicars who took up tennis in the last decades of the nineteenth century gave tennis a softer character than other sports. There was little of the *braggadocio* heard in the scrum or nineteenth

hole. Lawn tennis was an activity that seemed unembarrassed about its links with the Christian faith, as one early instructional manual proclaimed: 'Tennis should be played ... with a bright warm sun overhead. There should be a cool shadow of a tree, strawberries and cream, an iced claret mug and a few spectators who do not want to play but are lovers of the game. If these conditions are present, an afternoon spent at lawn tennis is a highly Christian and beneficent pastime.'<sup>20</sup>

The words are those of Robert Osborn, the first philosopher of the game. He was born in 1835 to a British military family in Agra in India. Like his father, he joined the Indian army and reached the rank of lieutenant-colonel. In his spare time, he studied Eastern religions and wrote two sympathetic books about Islam which were among the first books in English to try and understand the religion and its culture. In 1879 Osborn retired from the army and settled in Britain to devote himself to religion, tennis and the links between the two.

In *Lawn Tennis, Its Players and How to Play*, published in 1881, Osborn argued that tennis was a 'moral discipline much superior to a Sunday sermon' which produces a 'benevolence towards the human race' and encourages 'that great Christian virtue, hope'. In tennis, the lieutenant-colonel argues, success is still possible until the very last ball. He advised players 'not to try too much' and to cultivate good temper which is as 'indispensable for the enjoyment of lawn tennis as warm sunny weather and a smooth shaven lawn'.<sup>21</sup> These were all sentiments shared with Walter Wingfield who had urged his customers to 'hit the ball softly' a few years before. If the new players of the game had followed this advice lawn tennis would have died out long ago. Tennis became an international sport because it was taken up by rackets and real tennis players who were used to hitting a hard ball with pace and aggression and saw no reason why a game with a soft ball should be played any differently. All it needed was skill and technique. All it needed was a Herbert Lawford.

Lawford, a stockbroker from London, was one of the first lawn tennis players to start stroking his racket over the ball to produce a

shot which became known as 'top spin'. The effect was miraculous. Top spin dipped the ball in mid-flight to ensure it did not go out. It then accelerated the ball so it zoomed past an opponent. With this powerful new weapon, lawn tennis shook off the derisory name of 'pat-ball' given to it by cricketers and become a contest that favoured the brave.

The aggressive play developed by Lawford and his friends was appreciated by spectators at the lawn tennis tournaments that started appearing across the British Isles towards the end of the 1870s. The most popular one was organised by the All England Club. The club had been set up in 1868 to play championship croquet in Wimbledon, a fast-expanding village only nine miles from London where the price of land was cheap. The fashion for croquet, however, soon peaked, and by the mid-1870s the club needed to attract new members and replenish funds. In 1875, it converted a couple of its croquet lawns into tennis courts and in 1877 decided to hold a national lawn tennis tournament.

Entries were invited for a 'Gentlemen's Singles' to be held at the club's grounds in Worple Road which were connected to Wimbledon station by a footpath. The tournament would run for ten days in July, although there would be a two-day break in the middle to allow club members to go to the annual Eton vs Harrow cricket match at Lords. Spectators would be charged sixpence a day plus an extra sixpence for a programme. The entry fee for competitors was one guinea with the winner receiving twelve guineas and a silver cup worth 25 guineas. The referee and organiser would be Henry Jones, the All England Club member who came up with the idea in the first place.

In later years, Jones cut an eccentric figure. Often regarded as arrogant and odd, he would parade around Wimbledon in white flannel trousers with a white helmet and a white umbrella. By then, he sported a long black beard, smoked Turkish cigarettes and had views on everything which he dispatched with brusqueness and, occasionally, malice. But for much of his life Henry Jones was an innovator. He had been born in London in 1831, the son of a surgeon when surgery was on the cusp of becoming a respectable



profession. He qualified in medicine and practised in Soho Square but what he really wanted to be was a sportswriter.

He started writing about the card games he had learned from his father, especially whist, the precursor of bridge. He then branched out to cover billiards and croquet and switched to lawn tennis as the game was spreading across Britain. Jones was an enthusiastic but critical fan and his acerbic comments in *The Field*, written under the pen name of 'Cavendish', made his reputation as the world's first tennis writer. What irritated him most was that there was no consistency across the country in the rules the new tennis players were following.

Some played according to the original rules of Major Wingfield, some to those suggested by competitors like 'garden tennis' or 'outdoor tennis' which had entered the market after Wingfield's early success. Some made up their own rules or followed those published in *The Field* by Harry Gem of Leamington. If lawn tennis was ever going to become a national sport, standardisation was required. In 1875, the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) devised a new set of rules based on those of Wingfield. Their adoption of his hourglass court, however, did not find favour with other clubs like Harry Gem's in Leamington and the Prince's Club in Knightsbridge which both favoured the rectangle. Henry Jones was determined that his Wimbledon tournament in July 1877 would attract the best players from the new clubs and he decided to adjust the rules once more.

A few weeks before the tournament at the All England Club was due to start, Jones met up with sport historian Julian Marshall and real tennis player John Heathcote and they devised a way of playing lawn tennis that has remained virtually unchanged ever since. They amended the MCC rules, replacing Wingfield's hourglass court with the rectangle, lowering the net and changing the scoring system from the one used in rackets to the one in real tennis. These amendments produced matches that were more exhilarating and dramatic than any lawn tennis games that had been seen before, even if some of the terms that were borrowed from real tennis like 'deuce' and 'love' were a trifle obscure.