

# COMING OF AGE

## BEXHILL SOCIAL AND TENNIS CLUB 1969 -1978

## COODEN BEACH SPORTS AND SOCIAL CLUB 1978

Before the Second World War, Bexhill was well-known in the tennis world. The Bexhill Club had twenty grass and four hard courts in Dorset Road. There was also the Cooden Country Club in Clavering Walk, where Helen Wills Moody and other international stars gave exhibition matches. Four other private clubs were also well-supported.

The years 1958 – 1969, during which this Club emerged from nothing more than a gleam in the eye of its founders, still seem like yesterday to those original, later to become known as ‘Foundation Members’, who remain – many of whom are still fortunately actively associated with its affairs. But this period and subsequent years must seem very remote to an increasingly large section of our membership.

What you are reading is not intended as a form of historical research but rather an attempt to recall the triumphs, the heartbreak and the humour of all our efforts to realise a dream.

By the mid-fifties it was apparent that proposed housing development would mean the end of the Cooden Country Club despite the dogged efforts of Winifred Peile and others to save it for the town.

Encouraged by international sportswoman, the late Peggy Sulman of Sandown School, Eleanor Pym set about trying to fill the gap that was created. With the help of other parents, notably Molly Blair, herself and ex-Wightman Cup player and mother of gifted young players, she organised on local school courts – Ancaster House, the Grammar School and Winceby House – an Easter holiday tennis club for any juniors interested in the sport. With the numbers, enthusiasm and talent increasing rapidly, the problems became obvious and urgent.

Private schools, and of course their sports grounds, began to disappear under concrete and, as the only remaining tennis club in the town could offer only two rented courts in Egerton Park, a future had to be found for the new interest that had been created. When the battle to save the Winceby House School courts from the developers was lost, the time had come for drastic action.

From personal experience Eleanor was convinced of two things if her ambition was to be realised – the need to enlist the support of Doris Madeley and that of her husband, the late Geoffrey Madeley, with their known track record in local affairs and, if this could be secured, to obtain the direct help of professional men and women in the town with the expertise they could bring. With the active encouragement of the late Bob Adcock (manager of Martins Bank), Colin Shuttleworth (father of the club’s present Chairman) and Jethro Arscott – both senior solicitors in the area, an open meeting under the chairmanship of Geoffrey Madeley was called at St Andrew’s Hall one wintery night – 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1966 – at which the whole issue would be squarely faced. Eleanor’s husband, the late St. John Pym, himself an ex-Wimbledon player, extracted a reluctant promise from her that if this meeting proved indecisive she would accept failure.

Supported wholeheartedly by officials of the Sussex Lawn Tennis Association, Geoffrey called for a volunteer committee from the audience of one hundred and fifty people and, to the delight of the platform party, six public-spirited citizens (none of them incidentally active tennis players) undertook to examine the possibilities. This committee comprised Peter Fynmore (Solicitor – elected Hon Chairman), Brian Bird (Company Director – Hon Secretary), Lt, Colonel Reggie Wass ( Bank of England – Hon Treasurer), Major Walter Smith (County Councillor and former County Cricketer), the late Major Bill Hurley (ex-Wimbledon umpire) and Eleanor Pym. Several members of the Committee admitted later being stung into action that December by the passionate comments of one Cassandra in the audience. To this individual we should be eternally grateful.

At its opening meeting – the first to be held on Saturday mornings in Peter’s office over many years, TH Chairman put the issues plainly: no money, no site, no nothing save obvious enthusiasm. After Goeffrey Madeley had with typical humour wished the Committee good fortune and had departed to watch Rucker in Twickenham, the battle was joined. Geoffrey, as Chairman of the original Steering Committee, characteristically maintained a keen practical interest in all our affairs until his untimely death. Peter continued to steer the Club’s fortunes until 1984 when he succeeded the late Earl De La Warr as our President on the latter graciously accepted the post of Patron. So much is owed to Peter for the tenacity, dedication and professional skill he brought to the Club during those vital taxing years.

### **FINDING THE MONEY AND THE SITE**

Peter Fynmore was adamant from the outset that there should be some definite indication of the number of people who would actively support the Committee and not merely wait until reasonable progress had been made before “jumping on the band-wagon”. A circular letter was therefore sent to anyone known to the members of the Committee who would be likely to see the need for a Club, particularly for the benefit of their children. A non-returnable deposit of £1 was asked for to help finance initial expenses. The Chairman told the Committee that if there was insufficient response to this approach, he for one would withdraw from the project. In fact the response exceeded all expectations and the Committee knew that there was a need in the town that had to be met.

In July 1967 the Chairman explained to a meeting of the subscribers to the Club’s Foundation Trust that, before applications could be made for loans and/or grants to Governmental and other public bodies, it was necessary to form a Club and appoint Trustees to hold shares in a Company to be owned by the Club. Elected as Trustees were Geoffrey Madeley and Bob St.John Adcock.

The main sources of financial support were:

1. Interest free loans from the Lawn Tennis Association and the National Playing Fields Association.
2. The annual “Nearly New Bargain Shop” which became the chief local money raiser. Over some eight years this venture occupied roughly eighty members for a fortnight annually working in various loaned and rented premises in the town. This raised a thousand pounds plus each year. One welcome side-effect of this effort was the personal friendship and team-spirit it engendered, which remains a feature of the Club to this day. An important secret of its success was the complete change of stock each day which ensured continuing interest and support from the public. Peter Fynmore displayed a hitherto hidden talent as skilled window-dresser. It certainly was a “Bargain Shop” in every sense. Customers must have been bewildered by the fluctuations in process that took place according to the whims of individual helpers! One

pensioner from London, who paid annual visits to Bexhill so that she and her friends could patronise the shop, still regards members as part of her extended family and continues to holiday in the town so as to maintain contact.

3. Regular sums were raised from coffee mornings, bridge drives, jumble sales, dances, quiz competitions, lectures, Christmas Fairs and, on a more unusual note, concerts staged for us by the Eastbourne and District Gilbert and Sullivan Society at the De La Warr Pavilion. These latter were arranged for us through the good offices of Walter Smith. The juniors were active in organising their own fundraising entertainments. As in these early years there was no spare cash available for postage stamps, all circulars had to be delivered by hand. Here again, the juniors were most helpful volunteers for the mammoth task.
4. Three-year advance subscriptions and interest free loans from individuals.

Up to twenty potential sites were explored. Walter Smith's membership of East Sussex County Council proved of great assistance in this connection. The Council offered a number of possible sites – some of which might have been satisfactory but the objection to them all lay in the shortness of the term of the lease that the Council was prepared to grant. It was hardly likely that anyone would lend money if there was a possibility that the site would be reclaimed from the Club. It was also held by some members of the Committee that to hold land on lease from the County Council or from Bexhill Council would expose the Club to bureaucratic interference – a prospect that was not relished. One possibility was a site of land on the Cooden Beach Golf Club, but negotiations to this end failed to produce a satisfactory conclusion.

Eventually the 1½ acre site in Withyham Road was found. This originally formed part of the Convalescent Home and had been sold off some years previously, subject to a Restrictive Covenant precluding its use for housing. Presumably the original purchaser hoped that, given time, the Covenant would be removed. He had, in fact, sold half the frontage land to another purchaser, resident in Hong Kong, who was prepared to await events.

On 12<sup>th</sup> January 1968 the Committee was able to report that its offer of £2500 had been accepted subject to contract and planning permission. An additional sum of £800 was required to cover outstanding road charges. When the request for outline planning permission was submitted, however, the unexpected happened. Objections were raised from all sides.

After six months the press reported that "The Club sponsors have become sandwiches in a mass of planning rigmarole". The town's Development Committee urged rejection on the grounds that "the proposed club would generate a very considerable amount of increased activity and noise in this quiet and pleasant residential area and would detract materially from the amenities of residential properties in the area". Councillor Foster elicited the fact that the land could be sued as poultry or pig farm since agriculture would not constitute development! Some residents in Withyham Road feared the 1960's equivalent of an "Acid House Party" on their doorsteps and this problem called for all the Chairman's personal prestige and diplomacy to resolve.

Sheer determination paid off and, with conditional planning permission finally obtained, the Club was formally launched on the 20<sup>th</sup> July 1969. The inaugural meeting was held in Harewood School kindly lent, as on other occasions by Michael and Jill Phillips. Looking back, it was surely a good omen that N.A.S.A.'s Neil Armstrong and our Club took their first tentative steps into the unknown on the same evening! It was remarkable too that the hall was crowded on that occasion despite the

spectacular counter-attraction on T.V. Our membership at this time comprised 360 of which 152 were under 21 years.

Readers must not assume that the meeting of 1969 marked even the end of the beginning. Our first 'pavilion' was a hut (18' x 20') bought for £900, dismantled and carted from East Bexhill. It was reconstructed, painted and furnished by members under the skilled direction of Geoffrey Madeley, Freddie Mann and Tim Hodson who prove hard taskmasters to the uninitiated.

Two cloakrooms were added and a small bar erected. The latter was supervised by Red Penman who until very recently continued to lend his professional skills in this field. It's a sad reflection that in those days it was possible for drinks and cigarettes to be openly accessible during licensing hours! Furniture, largely acquired at private school sales and as gifts from members was temporarily stored in Effingham School pavilion. A humorous incident occurred when local dignitaries among our membership, while busy sorting this out, were confronted by the police alerted by local residents alarmed by the flashing of torches late in the evening in the apparently deserted building!

In any account of this kind its authors are only too conscious that to mention individual names is highly invidious and tribute is sincerely paid to all those unsung heroes and heroines of all ages who have made such magnificent contributions to the Club's success. Each has brought his or her own particular brand of knowledge and enthusiasm to our affairs. Who can forget the contributions made by Doris Madeley, Brian Bird (Company Director), Alan Storkey (Merchant Banker), Richard Rumary, David Lamdin and Anthony Shuttleworth (Solicitors), Arthur Rogers M.B.E. (Hon Tournament Referee and Sussex L.T.A.), Stan Freestone (B.O.A.C), Graham Hooker (H.M. Customs and Excise), Mary Sidebottom, Norman Blair (Investment Secretary), Olive Lyth, Molly Blair, Dorothy Griffiths, Jo Freestone, Ian Curtis (Unilever Manager), the late Tim Hodson (Forestry Consultant), the late Pat Redman M.B.E. (East Sussex Highways), Joan Craig, Truddie Prosser and John Dobson (Manager of Lloyds Bank) among so many others over the years. John's financial statements were eagerly awaited at Annual General Meetings for the mastery and humour with which they were presented.

The basic aim of the Club was summed up in one of the first Draft Rules. i.e. to "create a friendly atmosphere where young and old can enjoy the pleasures of social exchanges without necessarily being competent tennis players". In fact, one remarkable feature of the development must be that, with the notable exceptions of Norman and Molly Blair and Arthur Rogers, only a minority would claim more than a basic knowledge of the game of tennis and, in particular, the technical problems involved in its administration. This situation, oddly enough, created one of our early strengths – adult and junior members were equally starting from scratch and were willing to learn together to tackle difficulties.

On 20<sup>th</sup> September 1969 – almost three years after that first meeting in St Andrew's Hall, play started on four all-weather courts supplied by Messrs. Rutherford Battle for £3517, after exhaustive enquiries on our behalf by John Haines.

There continued to be pressing ground development work to be tackled. Junior working parties, under the guidance of Stan Freestone, the late Patrick Redman and the late Tim Hodson, dealt with formidable drainage and ground-levelling problems. Tim brought regular parties from Claverham School, Battle who constructed the north retaining wall as part of their practical school course. The practice wall, such an asset to the Club, was erected during 1972.

It was soon obvious that a larger well-equipped pavilion was required to house the rapidly increasing membership and to cater for the developing social sections of the Club. The spread of activities other than tennis which had always been envisaged by the Club's founders could not be accommodated on the site eventually acquired. When planning the new pavilion the Committee wanted to provide a badminton hall, but such a project could only be achieved through the help of a grant from the Sports Council and the ruling at that time was that badminton "was not a sport" so far as the Council were concerned. In any event the Planning Authorities would not permit a building of sufficient height. The possibility of a croquet section was actively explored, but the scheme did not attract sufficient support.

Under the auspices of Kenneth Higgs A.R.I.B.A. the present pavilion, constructed by E. Godwin & Sons Ltd. was dropped from cranes onto its existing site in 1971. Thus building called for all the skills of Dorothy Griffiths, Doris Madeley, Jo Freestone and countless others who had the practical knowledge to equip the pavilion of which (although we must admit its lifespan is limited) we are so justly proud to this day. Members with the required professional skill were actively involved in a major internal reconstruction when the existing kitchen became a modern bar with good storage facilities and the then Committee Room was sacrificed to provide the present kitchen and pantry.

The official opening of the pavilion on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1972 was timed to coincide with the town's Charter celebrations and the occasion graced by the presence of our then President, Lord Buckhurst, the Deputy Mayor, the late Alderman John Baker, representatives of the Lawn Tennis and Sussex Tennis Associations and other distinguished guests. To quote Alderman Baker, who had never concealed his original opposition to the project: "this small enterprise does prove the value of democracy – the value of standing up for what you think is right. If you know you have something you want and you think it is right for you to have it, you should stand up against the bureaucrats, whoever they may be and wherever they may be and try to get what you want by democratic and legal means – and this is what you have done. I congratulate you for doing it". These were encouraging and, in the circumstances, particularly generous words much appreciated by those present who recalled the early struggles.

There were notable advances on the tennis courts. Teams were entered in the County League competitions. In addition there were several inter-club friendly fixtures and a full junior programme by an enthusiastic junior committee. Ancaster House School presented the Club with a trophy to be competed for annually by the East Sussex schools with the final round staged on our courts.

By the mid-seventies the Club had acquired a distinctive badge and tie incorporating the 'Ibex' logo. The design for these originated with one of our youngest members, Jeremy Danks, son of Olive Lyth, through his professional contacts. The art section produced the blueprint for the attractive junior T-shirts. A smart flag in the Club's colours fluttered proudly on the south patio.

As our contribution to the Queen's Silver Jubilee celebrations we were able to build Court No.5 (principally reserved for juniors) on land in the south-east corner acquired from the prospective land developer mentioned earlier. The benefit of advice and practical help from Graham Hooker and Councillor Eric Johnson proved of great value. The prize money won by the Club in the I.B.M. National Competition helped considerably to finance the development.

## **I.B.M. NATIONAL TROPHY**

A highlight in our then short history occurred with our entry into the I.B.M. sponsored national competition held in 1972 to find the club adjudged to have “contributed the most towards fostering its junior membership”. We had unique advantages in this field in possessing such a cooperative junior section and the professional and personal dedication of Molly and Norman Blair to the progress of the Club and, particularly, to the interests of its junior members. Molly has always been ready to pass on her skills to the gifted but has derived equal pleasure in encouraging the young to enjoy the game. In the early 1970’s she conducted coaching sessions for nominated pupils from local primary schools; some of their number have stayed with us and become leading members of our first team and supporting committees.

After a preliminary study of our record and facilities, a panel of judges came to Bexhill to meet both senior and junior committees. Members of the Executive held their breath when the chairman of the panel asked one of our young representatives, Colin Mann, what happened to funds raised by junior activities. Colin replied that any profits would be handed to the Hon. Treasurer as “we’re all in this together”. This spontaneous, and to the panel, unexpected comment had, in the view of many present, a telling effect on our chances of success, however remote that might have seemed in view of the strength of the competition.

Final judgement on a total entry of four hundred clubs was pronounced at Queen’s Club in London. The Chairman, Alan Storkey, Molly, Eleanor and Susan Pym attended this nail-biting adjudication when leading clubs were rated on an elimination basis – first place, a trophy and cheque for £1000 to the Bexhill Social and Tennis Club! News of our success preceded our representatives’ return from London and members, rounded up by bush telegraph, held an impromptu celebration in the New Pavilion. This was an occasion that will live long in the memory. Let us hope that we can continue to merit the works of Clay Iles, South-East Regional Coach and professional coach to our Club when in 1972 he wrote in a national tennis publication “At the Bexhill club no one receives more attention than the child who finds the game difficult and who watches with envy as his friends clout the ball about with comfortable ease”. At this period he organised national junior training squads (including seven of our most promising juniors) on our courts and, as a further contribution to the town’s Charter year, staged exhibition matches with members of the junior Davis Cup Squad.

By the early seventies it had become apparent that the Squash Club already in existence at the other end of Bexhill had such a number of members and would-be members that the possibility of providing squash facilities at the Withyham Road should be seriously considered. It is an accepted fact that it is far easier to raise revenue from squash than from tennis and this was an added attraction to the Committee. This view was reinforced by the Lawn Tennis Association officials in conversation with our representatives at the I.B.M. award ceremony at the Queen’s Club.

Who better qualified than Stan Freestone, whose knowledge of the game and enthusiasm for its inclusion in the Club brought this scheme to such a successful conclusion, to tell us how this came about?

## **APPROXIMATE TIMETABLE OF EVENTS LEADING TO THE FORMATION OF THE SQUASH SECTION AT THE COODEN BEACH SPORTS AND SOCIAL CLUB**

It was after a fairly routine Executive Committee meeting in early 1975 that Peter Fynmore, the then Chairman, casually remarked to me "Had I any ideas for the expansion of the Club"? A point of discussion at that very meeting had been how to increase club revenues. In those days the bar was a very primitive hole in the wall facing into the present main hall of the club house. Many an evening I myself had done bar duty, and perhaps served two customers, sometimes none at all and all was closed up by 8.30 in the evening.

Direct tennis revenue through subs was not adequate to allow any reserve to be built up but the Club's overall policy of providing family sports at reasonable cost was not to be abandoned. My very casual and light hearted reply to the Chairman's question was all too ready. Having been a squash player since the 1940's, I said "we need a squash court". The thought obviously confirmed Peter's view of the future and before very long a sub-committee meeting was arranged to discuss and if possible take a squash court project further.

Early helpers were Alan Storkey, with banking/business connections, and Alan Maltby, who as a local estate agent knew many likely potential members in the area. Here also John Dobson became involved as our then most worthy Treasurer. Initial costs compared with our meagre resources indicated that only one squash court could be contemplated. It was hoped that with early costings we could afford one court at approximately £10,000 to include the concrete platform for a second court when funds became available. I think it was Alan Storkey who first mentioned the National Sports Council for a possible grant. However, to avoid delay a scheme was designed to raise the £10,000 from our own sources. This consisted of recruiting one hundred founder members who would pay £10 upon registration and a further £20 when building contracts were signed. This £2,000 plus the balance from Club funds and loans made up the required total. (John Dobson may well be able to correct me here regarding the make-up of the £7,000 balance)

The most cost effective structure proved to be a prefabricated unit made by Banbury courts, and approved by the Squash Rackets Association. As one can appreciate, the recruitment of one hundred people to launch the scheme was no mean task and I personally did much canvassing in the area with other social clubs, companies, the local authority and even the Police. Fortunately at the time it had been made known that the Lawn Tennis Association had recommended the addition of squash sections to existing tennis clubs for the same reason of increasing revenue. We fortunately had the space for two squash courts, as the site would not have been suitable for further tennis courts due to the proximity of very tall trees.

Building was due to commence in September 1976. Then we had the most wonderful piece of good fortune. Initially the National Sports Council had turned down our application due, I think, to lack of funds. Then they received a cancellation on another project and offered us £9,500 (I believe). Having already ordered the foundation base for the two courts there was little delay in ordering the second court from Banbury's. In retrospect I feel the £30 deal for members was wonderful value since this also included a substantial period of 'free' membership.

Now, with the second court under construction it was necessary to recruit a further one hundred members, aiming at a ratio of one hundred members per court. Completion of the two courts was achieved in January 1977. Immediately an 'Open Evening' was arranged at the clubhouse for

prospective members to come and meet us and view the new squash facilities. The squash committee had already been formed and they were on hand as hosts for the evening. As Chairman of the new section I arranged a small office, where the present clubhouse kitchen is, and commenced signing members up. The response and the attendance was overwhelming. I sat for four hours 5.45pm until 9.45pm and took over £1,000 in cash and cheques, remembering this was 1977 values. Within forty eight hours of the courts being declared open for play, on the 20th February 1977, a waiting list had to be started for new membership, such was the demand.

I must not allow it to pass in mentioning the source of the bulk of Club funds towards this project. The Ladies of the Club, at the time tennis and social members, had every year opened a style of 'good as new' shop in the town. Terrific efforts were made by the ladies and one name that springs to mind is that of Olive Lyth. The weight of correspondence throughout this project was considerable and here we must think of Anthony Shuttleworth, the then Secretary.

The passage of time has proved the squash project to be highly successful in every way. The young blood that was introduced brought new vigour and the nature of squash meant a bustling clubhouse throughout the winter evenings. Perhaps it should go on record that the financial benefit to the Club was also beyond expectations. Not meaning to assess the result purely in money terms, it is a very necessary feature of its continued success.

Such sustained success and a long waiting list with many prospective members wanting to know when they could join, brought forth the third court project. The third court was not straightforward from the constructional point of view. The Committee, quite rightly, wished the balcony of the two existing courts to be connected directly to the third court. Without this feature the third court would have been rather isolated and with match meetings would have restricted spectator facility. Thus with no prefabricated unit incorporating this balcony feature, we had to resort to a custom built court.

This meant extra expense and was the cause of much heart searching since we were now talking about some £30,000 for the third (1980) court. Here again our family club enjoyed good fortune. One of our squash players was a Hailsham builder, Chris Humphries. Being personally keen on the project he really offered us a cost plus basis on which to build. This finally worked out at £28,000 and we also got our connecting balcony.

In financing the third court similar fund raising activities were initiated. These took the form of three years subscription in advance, interest free loans, Privilege membership for existing members, sponsor schemes and the substantial starting deposit of £8,000 from Club funds. To fully appreciate the revenue produced one must mention that the initial court fee was 50p for two players to enjoy forty five minutes squash on brand new courts. Then free hot water and club bar prices to enjoy after the game.

The Club went on to produce County standard players within three years of its commencement and within a further five years our 'A' team was playing in the East Sussex County Premier League. By 1980 two local schools were regularly using the courts in off-peak times further enhancing the revenue situation.

The final outcome financially was as follows: The total squash booking revenue 1977 – 1987, the first ten years, was £45,220, excluding all the extra bar revenue that was generated. This was against a capital cost of £50,000 of which £40,500 was generated by the Club and £9,500 came from

the National Sports Council Grant. By any standards, this is a credit to the small group of determined and enthusiastic people and fully demonstrates what can be done by community effort.

### **IN CONCLUSION**

1990 marks the decision to combine tennis and squash membership and this is a most welcome and unifying development.

The inclusion of the term "Social" in the original title of the Club was always meant to be significant. The use of the word unexpectedly added to our initial difficulties with the Local Authority over planning permission leading the "Bexhill Observer" to comment "This is no fly-by-night outfit that wants to see Withyham Road a hippy-cum-beat-rave centre". As has been said before, the intention of our founders was that ours should be a centre for family activity where all generations could find some form of interest and recreation. It is to be hoped that we shall never lose sight of this ambition – our present age range of five to ninety plus is a source of much satisfaction. The continued incorporation of "Social" in our title was regarded as of paramount importance when, following the successful development of the Squash section, our name changed in 1978 to the "Cooden Beach Sports and Social Club". Despite some opposition, it was considered necessary to replace "Bexhill" by "Cooden Beach" in order to avoid confusion with the existing Bexhill Tennis and Squash Clubs and this change also assisted visitors by defining our geographical location.

Past social activities have comprised Keep-Fit, Dressmaking and Art Classes, Yoga, Aerobics, Table Tennis, Bridge, Antique Shows, Illustrated Lectures, Discos etc. There are signs that some of our present social sections are losing the support they once enjoyed, but others still flourish.

Twenty one years is a long time in the history of any organisation and we confidently expect that, as interests change, different activities will take their place. The Executive continues to welcome any suggestions of this nature – and it is understood that presently the formation of a "Scrabble" section is under discussion.

In conclusion we must hope that the tireless and selfless service given by the Club's founders and their successors will continue. With our affairs in the able and experienced hands of Anthony Shuttleworth (a junior from those early days at Ancaster House) and his present Executive, we remain full of confidence that this tradition of service will be maintained. Those who compile our jubilee history will hopefully attest to that.