

THE
WIMBLEDON
ANTHOLOGY



Tales, Trivia, Facts and Figures from the
World's Oldest Tennis Tournament

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THE ANTHOLOGY

WHY WIMBLEDON?

The history books tell us that the game of lawn tennis was invented by Major Walter Clopton Wingfield in the grounds of his stately home in mid-Wales, while the first tennis club sprang up in the Warwickshire town of Leamington Spa. With that in mind, why isn't the world's oldest tennis tournament held in Welshpool or Warwick? The answer lies in a crossfire of geography and initiative. By the mid-1870s, the game Wingfield had initially launched (under the less-than-catchy title of 'Sphairistike') was beginning to replace croquet as the choice sport of the middle classes. Spotting this growing trend, The All England Croquet Club, founded in July 1868 and based in Wimbledon, started admitting tennis players in 1875, opening up a number of courts (which in those days were shaped like an hourglass) prior to changing its name two years later to The All England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club. Putting it simply, they had the land, the chutzpah and enough interested people to make a go of it within a short train ride of London, one of the world's major global cities. Which, with due respect, Welshpool isn't.

ROLL WITH IT

Legend has it that the inaugural Championships of The All England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club were held in order to raise money to repair the club's pony roller, the one used to maintain its croquet and tennis lawns. Then again, comedian Billy Connolly once said legend is nothing more than rumour plus time, so make of that what you will. What is for sure is that the very first Championships got underway around 3.30pm on

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Monday, 9 July 1877, with play taking place at the club's then home beside the London and South Western Railway in Worple Road, Wimbledon. Twenty-two men each paid a guinea to take part, with one, an old Etonian by the name of C. F. Buller, dropping out before a ball had even been hit. The final saw local land surveyor Spencer Gore comfortably defeat William Marshall 6-1, 6-2, 6-4 in just 48 minutes, the match having been postponed several times over a number of days due to a combination of bad weather plus the annual Eton versus Harrow cricket match (a highlight of the social season) taking place at Lord's. As for the ladies' singles final? Well, there wasn't one. Not until 1884 did the ladies finally get a competition all to themselves, with 19-year-old Maud Watson beating her elder sister Lilian 6-8, 6-3, 6-3 in the final.

THE SAINT

The third man ever to win the Wimbledon men's singles title was a Yorkshireman by the name of John Hartley, otherwise known to his parishioners in rural Burneston as the Reverend John Thorneycroft Hartley. This man of the cloth hadn't expected to reach the latter stages of the draw, which explains his return home on the middle Saturday of the 1879 tournament to fulfil religious duties the following day. Come Monday afternoon, Hartley was back at Worple Road ready for his semi-final, having caught a train from Thirsk to King's Cross station that morning before hotfooting it across London to The All England Club, to use its abbreviated title. He duly won, despite the haphazard pre-match preparation, going on to defeat the Irishman Vere Thomas St Leger Goold in the final. Hartley retained his trophy in 1880 and reached the final again in 1881, only to be crucified – not literally, of course – by William Renshaw in a match lasting just 37

THE SINNER

minutes, the shortest recorded time for a men's singles final at Wimbledon.

THE SINNER

Several years after losing to John Hartley in the 1879 final, Vere Thomas St Leger Gould and his wife Marie Giraudin were found guilty of killing a wealthy Danish widow by the name of Emma Levin in Monte Carlo. He was sentenced to penal servitude for life on Devil's Island, French Guiana, where he died in 1909 aged 54, by which time Hartley had become an Honorary Canon of Ripon Cathedral. Now there's a salutary lesson in right and wrong for you.

CULTURE CLUB

In 1882, with lawn tennis continuing to grow in popularity, Wimbledon decided to drop the word 'croquet' from its title, becoming The All England Lawn Tennis Club. Not only that, but croquet also ceased being played on the grounds at Worple Road. Seventeen years later, the word was restored again, apparently for sentimental reasons. It has continued to be known as The All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club ever since, although more often than not that tends to be abbreviated to The All England Club.

FOREIGN LEGION

The first overseas players ever to compete at Wimbledon were James Dwight, Arthur Rives and Richard Sears, all from the USA, who took part in the 1884 Championships at Worple Road.

CHALLENGE CUP

The trophy presented to winners of the Wimbledon men's singles final is called the Challenge Cup. Standing

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18in high and made of silver gilt, it carries the following inscription:

*The All England
Lawn Tennis Club
Single Handed
Championship
of the World*

The Challenge Cup has been handed to winners of the men's final since 1887, The All England Club splashing out 100 guineas for it from the profits of the previous year's tournament. The trophy replaced another Challenge Cup that was purchased in 1883 but given permanently to William Renshaw after he won the competition three times in a row (1884, 1885 and 1886). Prior to that there was another trophy, The Field Cup, which did the honours from 1877 to 1883. This also ended up in William Renshaw's hands after he became men's singles champion in 1881, 1882 and 1883, so you can kind of understand why The All England Club now keeps hold of the present Challenge Cup no matter how many times a player is crowned Wimbledon champion.

ROSEWATER DISH

The trophy presented to winners of the ladies' singles final at Wimbledon is officially called the Ladies' Singles Plate, although it's more commonly known as the 'Rosewater Dish' or 'Venus Rosewater Dish'. The trophy carries no inscription other than the names of all previous champions, although the engraving on this silver salver would give the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel a run for its money, with numerous mythical gods and goddesses depicted. That old chestnut about the trophy being named after Venus Williams because

TWIN TOWN

she kept winning the thing is, of course, nothing but an urban myth.

TWIN TOWN

Despite their remarkable talents, the Williams sisters were never exactly firm favourites with the Wimbledon crowds. Dominance in sport can breed a strange kind of resentment – just ask Martina Navratilova, or Pete Sampras – so perhaps the achievements of Venus and her younger sibling Serena will only be fully appreciated in years to come. William and Ernest Renshaw, however, had no such problems regarding their public image. Born in Leamington, Warwickshire, on 3 January 1861, the Renshaw twins did more than anyone to transform a pastime into a sport during Wimbledon's infancy. So popular did the pair become that The All England Club installed a railway platform beside the Worple Road grounds to cope with the crowds flooding in every year to watch them in action. William was the outstanding player of his era, winning Wimbledon seven times (1881–86, 1889). Mind you, Ernest was no slouch, becoming men's singles champion himself in 1888 and finishing runner-up three times, losing to his brother on each occasion.

A LONG WAY FROM TIPPERARY

In 1889, Lena Rice came to Wimbledon from the village of New Inn, Tipperary, Ireland, and lost to Blanche Hillyard. Twelve months later, Rice returned and became the ladies' singles champion. Okay, so only four ladies entered that year, but she still went down in history as a Wimbledon winner alongside the likes of Martina Navratilova and the Williams sisters. Oh, and there's something else you should know about Lena Rice. She was born in New Inn

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on 21 June 1866 and died in New Inn on 21 June 1907. Not much of a 41st birthday, then, for Lena.

YOUNG GUN

A word or two about Charlotte 'Lottie' Dod, who remains Wimbledon's youngest ladies' singles champion (winning in 1887 at the age of 15 years and 285 days). An outstanding all-round athlete who also competed in archery, golf and hockey, Dod was held in immense affection by the crowds at Worple Road and generated huge interest in the women's game. All told, she won the ladies' singles on five occasions, sealing further titles in 1888, 1891, 1892 and 1893 (she didn't compete in 1889 or 1890). In fact, Dod – credited with bringing speed and net play into the women's game – never lost a match at Wimbledon and only ever dropped one set, blowing away anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves on the other side of the net. Small wonder her decision to give up tennis at the age of 21 to focus on improving her golf left a void in the sport.

DEVON KNOWS

The first overseas player to win a title at Wimbledon was May Sutton of the USA who defeated Dorothea Douglass 6-3, 6-4 in the 1905 ladies' singles final. Ah, but wait! Sutton's father was actually a captain in the Royal Navy and she herself was born in Plymouth, England, so you can't blame the good people of Devon for claiming her as one of their own.

INSTANT REPLAY

The 1902 Wimbledon ladies' singles final brought together defending champion Charlotte Sterry of Middlesex and Northumberland's Muriel Robb, the latter of whom was

FLIPPING HECK!

making her one and only appearance in the last two. Robb began well in overcast conditions, taking the first set 6-4. The second went on seemingly forever until Sterry eventually levelled the scores by taking it 13-11, at which point the heavens opened and forced the pair off court for the rest of the day. When the players reconvened at Worple Road the next morning, some bright spark decided it would be a good idea if the match started all over again from scratch. And that's exactly what happened. The slate was wiped clean and Robb went on to claim the title with a 7-5, 6-1 win, making it the longest ladies' singles final ever at 53 games, providing you take into account the two abandoned sets.

FLIPPING HECK!

There was little to separate Frank Riseley and Sydney Smith as the two men went head-to-head in the semi-finals at Wimbledon in 1904. With the score delicately poised at two sets all, the pair decided on a novel way of determining their fate – they would flip a coin. Riseley won and progressed to the final, where he lost in straight sets to Laurence Doherty. This remains the only known occasion where a match at Wimbledon has been decided on the toss of a coin. Why did they do it? Well, because Riseley and Smith were also a pair in the men's doubles and wanted to preserve some energy for that competition.

HOME SWEET HOME

What's Laurence Doherty's claim to fame when it comes to Wimbledon? Well, he won the men's singles title five times in a row from 1902 to 1906. He also won the men's doubles title with his brother Reginald on eight occasions. But those aren't the answers I'm looking for. At the time of writing, Laurence Doherty was the last

player from Wimbledon to win Wimbledon, having been born in a house just across the road from the grounds at Worple Road.

FACE-OFF

So tennis is supposed to be a nice social game with little risk of serious injury, right? Tell that to poor Ethel Larcombe. In 1913, while competing in a mixed doubles tie, Larcombe was hit in the face with such force by a ball that she had to retire not just from the match but also the ladies' singles, which she'd won the previous year. The black-and-blue Larcombe was by all accounts inconsolable, having already reached the final of the singles, her withdrawal handing the title to Dorothea Lambert Chambers by way of a walkover. To make matters worse for the Wimbledon authorities, Charlotte Sterry then suffered a leg injury that left her unable to compete in the final of the ladies' doubles, resulting in yet another walkover. Not exactly a vintage Championships for the women, 1913.

LEST WE FORGET

A few lines about Anthony Wilding, or rather Tony Wilding as he was more commonly known, winner of four consecutive Wimbledon men's singles titles from 1910 to 1913. Wilding was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1883. He came to England aged 19 to study at Cambridge, where he played on the university's tennis team. By 1905, he was a member of the Australasian Davis Cup side, qualifying as a barrister four years later back in New Zealand. Wilding won Wimbledon in 1910 on his sixth attempt, defeating Arthur Gore in the final. He wouldn't lose another match at The All England Club until 1914, when he was unseated by Australia's Norman

MAX FACTOR

Brookes in straight sets in the final. On the outbreak of the First World War, Wilding joined the Royal Marines and served as a captain in France. Killed in action on 9 May 1915 at Neuve Chapelle aged 31, his body was buried at the Rue-des-Berceaux Military Cemetery in the village of Richebourg-L'Avoue, Pas de Calais. Wilding Park, the main tennis centre in Christchurch, is named in his memory. Fine scholar, great player, good sportsman, avid motorbike enthusiast – small wonder Wilding is still widely revered in tennis circles.

MAX FACTOR

In 1921, Liverpool-born Max Woosnam won the Wimbledon men's doubles competition along with Randolph Lycett. Not bad when you consider Woosnam was better known for his exploits with balls of a slightly larger nature, appearing at centre-half for Chelsea and Manchester City as well as earning a solitary England cap in 1922. The following year, Lycett made headlines of his own by bringing a bottle of champagne on court for his men's singles quarter-final against Zenzo Shimizu of Japan – not in anticipation of winning, but for refreshment purposes. Needless to say, he lost.

THE SWITCH

Well before the outbreak of the First World War, it became obvious that the 8,000 ground capacity at Worple Road was inadequate. And so The All England Club started looking around for a new site. It eventually chose an area of land off Church Road to the north of Wimbledon town centre, moving to its new home in 1922. At the time, the relocation was seen as something of a gamble because it cost approximately £140,000 (approximately £7m in today's money). The club has stayed put ever since.