

THE HISTORY OF MILTON KEYNES TENNIS CLUB

It was on Monday 15th April 1957 that a group of tennis enthusiasts met at the Park Hotel Bletchley, now “The Park”, next to the main railway bridge and near to what was the Bletchley “Working Men’s Club.” Those present were Michael Ramsbotham, Charles Neale, Les Clare, Malcolm Rayner, Dr. Frank Carter, Dan Collier, Tim McCoy, Alwyn Harris, David Higgs, Bill Betts & Wal Pacey. Dr. Carter was elected to the chair and the objective of the meeting was to consider a proposition by M. Rayner to form a men’s tennis club, for he had approached approximately sixteen players who played tennis regularly and they had all seemed keen on the idea. The meeting received apologies from Luing Cowley, Jimmy Fraser and Steven Haydock who had expressed their interest.

As a result, what is now known as the *Milton Keynes Tennis Club* was formed, and was known initially as the “**Bletchley Hard Courts Tennis Club**”. Unfortunately, having to block book public courts at Central Gardens in Bletchley (subsequently the road level parking on the west side of the Bletchley Leisure Centre and Princes Way, and now [Jan 2012] there are apartments on this site), it had to limit membership, rightly or wrongly, to men only and only admitted players of a reasonable standard. This made the club rather select but it did attain a very good level of play; this was proven by the fact that it joined the Bucks County Shield competition in 1958, having to join the lowest division (Division 8), and in 1966 was promoted to Division One, now called the Premier Division. The mainstay of the team during those years was the infamous pair of Pacey and Woolhead; they had won the Bucks Doubles on two occasions and Wal Pacey won the Bucks singles back in 1953. They were probably the most unorthodox pair ever to compete in County tennis but very effective in those days.

The following is an extract from the *Bucks County* magazine, November 2000:

“Don’t give them a point!”

There will, no doubt, be many older club members who played in the County Shield matches in the 1950’s and 1960’s, who will remember the infamous pair from the old Bletchley Hard Courts Tennis Club (now the Milton Keynes Tennis Club), namely Messrs Pacey and Woolhead. If ever there was an unorthodox pair, this was it! Even so, they won the Bucks closed championship on two occasions, and Wal Pacey won the Bucks Men’s Singles in 1953.

Both players could lob with monotonous consistency to within three feet of the base line; both their first and second services were of the same speed, but rarely did they require a second. The ball was delivered from a relatively low height, it was of good length and well directed, but compared to standards these days rather slow. As a result of this lack of pace, most players found it difficult to gain much advantage with the return of service. The pair had an uncanny knack of always being in the right place at the right time, mainly due to experience and agile footwork. Many teams, after seeing them “knocking up” before the beginning of any match, assumed they were the third pair, but after a match opposing pairs walked off in utter frustration, not knowing how they lost so heavily.

Their philosophy, as you will have gathered, was that they would never give a point away. They did, of course, lose on the odd occasion but only when the opposition produced very consistent power tennis and weren't tired out by having to play games where many high quality overhead smashes were necessary to win one point. The duo frustrated the opposition into defeat. Neither player had received any significant coaching, being basically self-taught, but both had excellent hand to eye co-ordination.

Brian Woolhead had a very unusual grip and racket position when at the net; the racket was held vertically with the head down, the back of his hand facing his body, his elbow pointing to the right and slightly above the wrist. Brian loved to play the powerful hitters. He invariably manoeuvred his body to be in line with the ball, held the racket firmly, twisted the angle of the face, and the opposition had no idea where the ball was going. He could, of course, change his grip to a more orthodox position when needs required.

Apart from his overall consistency, Wal Pacey (who was a left hander) had a very powerful and orthodox forehand drive. It was, however, only brought into operation when he was virtually certain of winning the point; otherwise it was back to the lob or rather gentle but well directed returns.

One obviously wonders how they would have coped with the much improved modern day rackets, but when the wooden framed Dunlop Maxply was **the** racket to buy (for approximately £7.00 in the early 60's) there wasn't such a vast difference in racket performance. I am sure that if their opponents had benefited from the modern coaching techniques and modern equipment the intrepid duo would have struggled, but we all know how being consistent and not **giving** points away is so important if one is going to win matches.

I hope this little trip back over 40 years has reminded some of you of this very awkward doubles pair, who were quite formidable in Shield and County matches.

BACK TO CENTRAL GARDENS

In those early days the club booked two courts on Wednesday and Friday evenings and two courts on Sunday mornings and of course three courts when we had home matches usually held on Saturday or Sunday afternoons. The entry fee to join the club was seven shillings and six pence ~ in today's money 37p, with an annual subscription of one pound fifteen shillings (£1.75p); it was also agreed to pay a ball fee of six pence (2.5p) when members played on the days we had block booked courts. This enabled the club to play with good quality balls which were purchased from Pollard's the ironmongers in Queensway, who have since moved to Aylesbury St. and are the oldest surviving independent retailers in Bletchley.

During those early years Dr Frank Carter continued as Chairman, the Treasurer was Mr Bill Betts, and the Secretary was Mr David Higgs. In those days, the club was often embarrassed due to the very poor facilities existing at Central Gardens, when compared with those clubs in the southern half of the county. All we had was a summerhouse-type pavilion with two changing rooms (no showers) which could also be used by the general public and as a result we frequently asked clubs due to visit us if we could play our home matches away.

When we played at home the six players from the home team were responsible for supplying the teas; four brought sandwiches, one brought a cake or cakes and the other was responsible for cold drinks and tea. This took the form of a picnic in the open veranda of the summerhouse and we had to eat with paper plates on our knees.

In later years, the Bletchley Urban District Council did help by installing a shower in one of the changing rooms, but in 1969 the club suffered a serious set back resulting in the demise of Central Gardens when the Council decided to build the Bletchley Leisure Centre. This resulted in the demolition of the eight tennis courts, the Queens swimming pool an excellent nine hole putting course, a well constructed bandstand and well manicured rose gardens, all for the building of a multi story car park for the Centre (which has since been demolished), and for the construction of Princes Way, which was against the wishes of most of the residents of Bletchley.

It took two years to build the Leisure Centre and this eventually opened in 1971

We had no alternative but to use the three remaining courts in Bletchley, those at Rickley Park, where the facilities were no better, in fact more inconvenient! The changing rooms had to be shared with the cricket and football clubs along with the casual users of the tennis courts, and still no showers.

The then Borough of Milton Keynes did build three courts intended for the exclusive use of the Tennis Club at Tattenhoe Lane but these were continually vandalized and eventually became a play area for local children.

We had no alternative but to go back to Rickley Park or use the courts constructed at the Bletchley Leisure Centre; although good to start with, they gradually deteriorated due to the Leisure Centre allowing all sports, football, hockey, netball and basketball to be played on a supposedly multi use surface which was poorly maintained. There was one occasion where the headlines on the sports page of the Bletchley Gazette read “TENNIS CLUB HUMILIATED BY POOR CONDITION OF LEISURE CENTRE COURTS.” It was a day when we were due to play High Wycombe in an important county shield match and the courts were so bad we had to cancel and therefore forfeit the match.

Facilities were again far from satisfactory as the changing rooms were a long way from the courts and were used by all those involved in Leisure Centre activities, but we did have showers! The club membership, due to lack of facilities had fallen to a low level and Bletchley Hard Courts T.C. was hanging on by its fingertips. It was when we held an AGM in **1974** at the Leisure Centre with only about nine members present that we decided to change the name to the **Milton Keynes Tennis Club**.

THE NEW OPPORTUNITY

One can understand how enthusiastic the club was to hear of the proposed sports complex development at Woughton by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation who instigated the setting up of a steering committee consisting of all sporting bodies interested. The first steering committee meeting was held at Wavendon Towers on the 28th September 1976; knowing that we had difficulties with facilities in Bletchley, and the fact that we were called the Milton Keynes Tennis Club, we were asked to serve on this committee. Other sports represented were cricket, hockey, football and rugby league.

Unfortunately those meetings were at times extremely contentious but unfortunately the Development Corporation ploughed on regardless of many of the recommendations made by the representatives. One example of this is the very expensive “pagoda” type building, involving relatively high building costs, maintenance costs and expensive running costs. The tennis section also asked for courts to be built adjacent to the pavilion (the then position of a bowling green - which no longer exists and the area is now used by MK Dons) and that all courts run from north to south. What happened? The courts were built some 100 yards away and ran east to west.

No real thought was given to the efficient operation of the individual sporting sections within the buildings. I have a considerable amount of correspondence relating to the difficulties we could foresee and the problems the tennis section experienced. However, we were now fortunate to have six tennis courts we could call our own. We also had showers and changing facilities, although these were somewhat inconvenient, again shared with other sports sections, and more than 100yds. from the courtside, not usual with tennis clubs!

Our first new season at Woughton started on Monday 26th April 1982 and since that time the club progressed from strength to strength. In 1985 we entered four teams in the Open Divisions of the Milton Keynes League, two teams in the Ladies Division, one in the mixed and one junior team. In addition to the local league, two men’s teams and one ladies’ team participated in the Bucks County Shield competitions. The men’s first team won Division Two and competed in Division One in 1986. The men’s second team was promoted from Division Seven to Division Six.

Apart from all of the above, the Club provided many other competitions for members, which culminated in a successful Dinner/Presentation evening in 1986, where five trophies were presented.

Since 1985 further progress was achieved in that three astro courts were laid, floodlights were installed, and a small clubhouse was built at the north end of the courts.

This helped enormously in improving the administrative and social aspects of the Club. As the Club developed it was hoped it would be able to increase the size of this clubhouse

Chairmen who have been involved with the club since the first meeting regarding the development of Woughton were David Higgs, Terry Sumpter, Peter Wolfendale, Nick Freer, Rob Cooper, Linda Beesley, Richard Ward, Tony Carr, Tony Mellody, Vanda Joss and the present chairman Mihai Cenusă.

Without doubt Milton Keynes Tennis Club has the potential of becoming one of the leading clubs in North Bucks and, in the long term, will hopefully help redress the present imbalance where all the top clubs have been in the south of the county.

In 2010, following the restructuring of the relationship between MK Council and the Sport's Club, Milton Keynes Tennis Club (MKTC) together with the other two sections, hockey and cricket, entered a lease agreement directly with MK Council. MKTC, MK Council and LTA are all committed to MKTC maintaining the current Clubmark status (indicative of the MKTC's quality of its coaching programmes, facilities and environment) and supporting MKTC further.

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENT

For the first time ever, in 2011, the Club's Men's first team were winners of the Premier Division of the Bucks County Shield.

D.J. Higgs,
February 2012