

## Whitchurch Tennis Club – the story so far... (but, when did it start?)

The Whitchurch Tennis Club's story probably begins in the early twentieth century, although the game itself is centuries old with the modern version starting around the 1870s. Tennis clubs were popular. As there were no municipal courts in Whitchurch private tennis courts were used, such as at The Gables where in 1950 and 1951 the finals of the Whitchurch and District Tennis League were held by permission of Mr. and Mrs. Lane. Two other clubs appear to have existed in the town; the Whitchurch Young Conservatives' club, which was invited to enter the League in 1950 and 1952, and the Evingar Tennis Club.

The Whitchurch Tennis Club was based off Bell Street, in the area around the present Surgery and Seeviours Court, close to the old gasworks and on land owned by the Seeviour family. The story goes that visiting teams would complain that the home team played to its advantage by hitting balls close to a line with a wall on one side of the court, making the shot difficult to return.

Photograph taken from *Whitchurch A Hampshire Town from Past to Present* Geoff Hide and Geoff Kelland

Was this the Overton Shield winning team of 1948?



### Gasworks

With the opening of the L&SW railway in Whitchurch in 1854 coal was brought to the town and a gasworks for the Gas Light & Coke Co Ltd was built in 1856. By the following year there were 20 gas lights in the town. The business closed on 31 March 1958. Shown here are members of the Evingar Tennis Club which had two courts close to the gasworks and National School and where Seeviours Court is now.

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NB Probably WTC not Evingar??

### Sources:

The earliest extant records for Whitchurch Tennis Club are for the accounts, which run from 1<sup>st</sup> May 1928 to 15<sup>th</sup> October 1951 and the club minutes which run from 12<sup>th</sup> April 1940 to 1951. Mention is also made of the Club in the minutes of the Whitchurch and District Tennis League from 25<sup>th</sup> March 1938 to 16<sup>th</sup> November 1973. (donated by Ellen Dennett after John Dennett's death)

### 1930s

In 1928 membership was 10s 6d with 35 paid-up members although the club must have been in existence before this date. This level of subscription appears quite substantial for the time; however, repairs to the mower, costs of netting, whitening for lines, 6d for grass cutting and £5 rent to Miss Seeviour show that the private grass courts were being maintained by the Club. Refreshments were purchased such as ginger beer at 3s 4d for 2 × 1 gallon. In 1929 a

dance raised funds for the mower and the rent which had doubled to £10. Other costs included 2s 6d entrance to the Kingsclere Tennis League, which also included the Laverstoke, Overton and St Mary Bourne clubs. Membership at Whitchurch increased in 1932 to 37 and the mention of match refreshments at Evingar Tennis Club shows they played friendly matches in the town. Rent, rates, repairs, balls and a grounds-man continued to be the main expenditure, whilst dances and whist drives (card game first mentioned in 1930) provided extra income on top of membership fees, which from 1938 included Juniors. In 1936 a shelter costing £8 0s 0d was erected and the grounds-man received £3 10s 0d. However, Miss Seeviour only had £8 rent on account. The team travelled quite widely, the bus fee to Oakley for example, presumably for a match, cost 1s 6d.

### 1940s

Unsurprisingly there was a dip in membership in 1939 but it recovered in 1940. Shortages of supplies and problems with the mower and netting are a constant theme throughout the 1940s. However, membership numbers increased through the early 1940s and the Club was able to donate two guineas to Whitchurch Housing Association.

The earliest extant minuted records for Whitchurch Tennis Club start with the AGM on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1940. Miss Seeviour was approached about Sunday play and the state of the courts, which were badly in need of repair. It was decided to treat the Bank of England as locals for the dance in 1940, at which Smithers Dance Band from Winchester was to play. Wire netting, obviously a rare commodity at the time, had been stored at the late Mr Hamilton's Manor Farm and there was much consternation as the wire seemed to have disappeared. It was eventually found and stored in Mrs Billimore's shed. In 1941 there was a complaint about noisy play on Sundays and concern about boys who were not members playing on the court. An application to join from one of them was refused. As there was no chance of new balls, members were to be asked to take greater care of the balls. Lyricats of Newbury were engaged for £3.15s for the season's dance at which Mr J. Ashfield was to be M.C. and the prize for the draw was cigarettes.

In 1942 adult membership was 10/-, a reduction of 6d from 1928. There were 45 adults with 7 juniors of 14 years and under at 5/-. In 1942 hedge cutting, scything courts, re-conditioned balls, as new ones were too expensive, were part of the costs. There were also on-going problems with the second-hand posts purchased from Webbs of Andover. During the 1942 season two guineas were donated to Whitchurch Nursing Association and an American tennis tournament was held on June 21<sup>st</sup> at which Mr Dennett gave the prize. The old mower was advertised in the Hampshire Chronicle for 35/- but remained unsold and was sent for salvage.

In 1943 ball problems were again discussed, someone had offered half a dozen good second hand balls and 10/- was offered for them whilst 2 dozen were sent away for re-conditioning. The wire around the courts was still in need of repair, "but it was impossible to get anything done to this till after the war". A match with the Bank [of England] was held whilst the club looked unsuccessfully to buy shears for hedge trimming. In 1944 the netting was still an issue. It being impossible to get wire netting by the hedge fixed "the fruit netting given by Miss King could be put there". By 1945 new nets and a post provided by [Miss] McFaud were noted. The rent remained at £10. Miss Seeviour was unable to get wire, so Mr Gordon had ordered 3 rolls to repair the netting and was waiting for a permit. A wedding present was given to two of the members, Miss Gladys Gates and Mr Harold Dennett.

It appeared Sunday play was still causing problems and Miss Seeviour asked the club to find other courts. Enquiries were made about the ground opposite the 'Shrubbery' and a letter was sent to the Parish Council asking if courts could be put on the Recreation Ground. By 1946 the issue with Miss Seeviour's courts had been resolved with the club only using them on four Sundays. A hunt for new courts was started. Mr Wigmore was asked about courts on the cricket ground but had said there was no room and Mr Dennett said the ground by Great Western Railway was unsuitable. A public meeting was held in November 1947 about public tennis courts to which WTC was not invited. The club remained based at their original home, but with no municipal courts the dilemma of where to locate the club in Whitchurch remained an unresolved issue into the twenty-first century.

Another fund-raising dance was held in February 1947 with admission 3/- and an extension to midnight. Unlike today where membership is open to all, an application to join the club was refused in 1947. The court surroundings were still causing problems and Mr Wigmore was asked if he would sell some of his camouflage netting. The large number of younger members meant older ones were asked to coach on a Friday evening and Juniors were to play together to let adults have 'a good game'. A court net needed replacing so Mr Hide was to be asked about supplying a new one and also balls. Balls continued to be an issue and Mrs Billimore was put in charge in 1948. It was stated that "whoever collected balls was responsible for their safe return".

1948 appears to have been a very successful year for the Club. The AGM minutes in 1949 note a small memento was to be given to the League team to celebrate their winning of the Overton Shield in the 1948 season. All those who played were to receive a cup, although members were to pay for engraving their own names. The 1948 minutes of the Whitchurch and District Tennis League note Whitchurch won by collecting 18 out of a possible 20 points. In 1949 Whitchurch opened the new League season by playing a "pick of the league" team at Portals. In 1949 a whist drive was held with Mr King on the door and Mr Switzer as M.C. and this time two rabbits were the prize for the raffle.

### **1950s**

In 1950 a meeting was arranged by the football club with news of a sports ground, the tennis club were asked to send two representatives. League players were asked to turn up once a week for practice. The loan of a mower for the season was being negotiated whilst Miss Seeviour offered to cut the hedge and repair netting if members agreed to help. As many balls had been lost in the first month of the season, this was agreed. In September 1950 the weather made playing impossible and the financial situation was not good. It was proposed not to enter the Whitchurch and District League, with friendly matches to be played instead. For the whist drive a bird was to be top prize costing £3. 1950 showed a drop in membership and the rent was not paid for the season. On 26<sup>th</sup> November 1951 the AGM held at The Kings Arms Hotel showed a £13 profit but only 14 members. A letter was sent to members indicating the closing of the club. The profits from a New Year's Eve Ball were put into the Post Office and this account was passed on several years later by Michael Claxton to the revived Whitchurch Tennis Club.

photographs showing club members probably late 1940s



Some names: Miss Sampson, Jim Robb, Glad Dennett (nee Gates), Harold Dennett (with neckerchief), Madge Simpson (nee Dennett), Mabel Gordon, Will Gordon,

Kneeling: Jane Berry, Kath McFauld, Kath Robb (nee Dennett)

### **After the closure**

When Whitchurch Tennis Club folded in 1951 a few people played as a friendly club on the private court in the Hide family's garden, now Hide Close off Winchester Road. In fact, members of that informal club, Michael and Birdie Claxton, (2014) live in one of the houses and dug up a tennis post in their garden. Other members of the post-war club were John Wilson, Jimmy Dyack, from Scotland and Ken Rampton. Some players went to Portals courts, then situated by the railway station in Overton before they moved to Laverstoke.

Other private courts were at 'Jammy' Long's, the owner of Long's Jam factory, near the footpath between the new houses to the river in The Green. The young Conservatives played on a court where the Fire Station is now situated, and The Gables had tennis courts.

The earliest known records for the Whitchurch and District Tennis League are for the AGM held at the Church Hall in Whitchurch on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1938, although a league had been in

existence before this. Minutes for this organisation continue until 23 October 1974 when the last entry states ‘There being no further business the meeting closed, and the members adjourned to the Sherry Party...’

### **The 1980s onwards**

In the early 1980s Mike Harvey was running the club on Testbourne School Courts. Barry Elvin ran the club into the late 1980s. The courts were not in good condition and many players moved to Laverstoke. The club became formalised and affiliated to the LTA and a constitution was drawn up in the early 1990s with Bob Helsby as Chair. The club thrived and raised money to have the courts resurfaced and re-orientated for evening play.



September 1999, tournament on Testbourne Community School refurbished courts. Bob Helsby, then chair, in centre back row with cap, Wendy Helsby, Ellen and John Dennett, Sandra Smith, Sue Adams, Denis and Vivienne Hazell, Jackie and Simon Agate, Nigel Watts.



Nigel Russell, who took over from Bob Helsby as chair presenting James Billingham with shield as Men’s winner of club tournament at Testbourne Courts.

### **2000 onwards**

With limited playing time possible at the school, the hunt was on again for the club’s own courts. After years of searching and many false starts, reminiscent of the late 1940s and with



no success in finding a suitable site in Whitchurch, the club was eventually offered a lease on the old tennis courts once used by the Portals Club at Laverstoke.



Laverstoke courts before refurbishment in 2011. Julie Wild, Chair from 2013, middle back; Neil Marshall, then chair, in red/blue beside her; Deb Crook, Match Secretary, in pink on left next to Rosanna Marshall, Treasurer; Wendy Helsby in blue on right, Secretary.

Whitchurch Tennis Club used their funds, and with help from Laverstoke and Freefolk Parish Council they were able to refurbish two of the three courts, which is where (from 2011) they now play.



Arial view of the refurbished tennis courts at Laverstoke. The courts were officially opened by Jody Scheckter in May 2012.



Deb Crook (match secretary) in background, Julie Wild and Wendy Helsby at table on opening day. Jody Scheckter cutting the tape.

Currently (2019) the club runs teams in the Basingstoke and North Hampshire league and has a coach and a Junior section. Club sessions are for friendly play whilst members can use the courts anytime during the week. Like its predecessor Whitchurch Tennis Club runs an active social calendar. It is hoped with this development that the future of tennis in and around Whitchurch will be secure for many years.

Mayor of Basingstoke opening refurbished and Junior small court May 2019 with Julie Bourne (chair).



The web site is [www.whitchurchtennisclub.org.uk](http://www.whitchurchtennisclub.org.uk)

(collated by Wendy Helsby)



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The Whitchurch Tennis Club's story probably begins in the early twentieth century although the game itself is centuries old with the modern version starting around the 1870s. Tennis clubs flourished countrywide and several clubs played in and around Whitchurch. As there were no municipal courts private tennis courts were used, such as at The Gables, where in 1950 and 1951 the finals of the Whitchurch and District Tennis League were held. Two other clubs existed in the town, the Whitchurch Young Conservatives' club which played on courts where the fire station is presently located, and the Evingar Tennis Club.

The Whitchurch Tennis Club was based off Bell Street, in the area around the present Surgery and Seeviours Court close to the Gasworks. The story goes that visiting teams would complain that the home team played to their advantage by hitting balls close to a line with a wall on one side of the court, making the shot difficult to return.

The Second World War led to shortages of supplies and problems with sourcing balls, an unreliable mower and lack of netting for the court sides for which fruit netting and camouflage nets were used. However, 1948 appears to have been a very successful year for the Club. The 1948 minutes of the Whitchurch and District Tennis League state that Whitchurch won by collecting 18 out of a possible 20 points. As a result of this win, in 1949 Whitchurch opened the new League season by playing a 'pick of the league' team at Portals. The club's AGM minutes in 1949 note a small memento was given to the League team to celebrate their winning of the Overton Shield.

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Was this the Overton Shield winning team of 1948?



### Gasworks

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