Real Tennis

Observations by a non player

Ian Newton describes the Real Tennis event.

My role in assisting Trevor Musk in getting the Reunion together meant that I was aware of the idea put forward by Derrick Pope to hold a tennis event at Hampton Court on the day before the reunion, just like Trevor had organised a golf day. Everything was arranged and announced by Derrick, and I asked at a fairly early stage if it would be possible to go along and observe. I had encouraged Derrick as best I could and his idea was no small part of persuading some long distance guys to attend the reunion.

My contact was welcomed and developed into having dinner in Wimbledon in the evening after the Tennis which eventually had seven of us enjoying a meal.

Why would Real Tennis be of interest? For me it was simple, in about 1976 to 1981 I had a chap working for me down in South Wales whilst I was with British Steel who was disabled through polio and was on two crutches. He could always beat me going down stairs but I could usually manage to beat him going up. He was a lovely character with a super wife and spend much of his spare time as an umpire at Real Tennis tournaments and often toured Europe and the UK in that capacity. I was therefore, not quite a virgin to the game. I knew he sat at a window and shouted the scores but sometimes had to duck if the shot came in the window.

You will already have seen that this game is not that much like the Wimbledon variety.

So the day arrived, I knew who was coming along and had the details of how to get into the private area at Hampton Court Palace. Being a Kingston boy, Hampton Court was a local attraction, visited many times each summer as a child. The chance to get behind the scenes could not be missed and the people coming to “have a go” were high on my “want to meet again” list.

The day was very pleasant weather wise and Christine and I could walk into the Palace in the sunshine. Find the Tennis Courts, no problem, ask the men at the main gate, ok go here, then left then right and then the security barrier. Managed that, report at security, on the list, yes I was, so got to go in behind the barrier to the public. Tennis Court Lane, go down to the bottom sir, see that door on the left, go in there , turn left, go through the barriers, go through the next barriers saying “keep out” and down the bottom to the changing rooms and club rooms.

This was beginning to feel as special as I had hoped.

Walked down Tennis Court Lane, passed the rooms where the embroidery repairs were being carried out, the various admin offices we saw on the TV programmes on the Palace and down to the door.

Nervously went in, through the barriers and at the very end met Derrick.

He was with a couple of strangers and a vaguely recognisable person.

Derrick Pope, no problem.

Bloss Cherry, got him in one,

John Fowler, grey but definitely him,

Doug Cole, no doubt at all,

Who was this other one, not the faintest idea,

Malcolm Baker, no way, he was never like that! Never in a million years could I have got that right, even with a limited list and a reducing one as I recognised this one and that one.

Introductions and hellos were made, every one nervous, our wives and partners and sisters keeping us company as we sized each other up. The players departed to change and I was left with several ladies in an area at the end of the court behind netting. Each part has a name and I cannot recall this area's and it is of no consequence to the readers anyway.

In my lifetime, I had been to Lord's a few times and more, and on about three of these had been fortunate to have been given the tour and as well as the cricket museum had seen and heard about the Real Tennis there. Sat and watched the local pros playing and heard an explanation of the game.

Now I was on my own, struggling to remember those past visits to Lord's and visualise what should happen.

Sue Pope had some handouts for us which covered the rules and the game, but the boys, now dressed in white, were eager to get on with it and get into action. The eight were split into four and onto court they went. This was through a door which was locked behind them. Were they locked in or were we locked out?

Well, Real Tennis is played across a net, with racquets and a ball.
Now then, the ball. It was the size of a tennis ball, it was yellow and furry like a tennis ball. But it is very hard and was a lethal flying object. You do not want to be hit by that. It was solid-ish. That is why the spectators were behind netting, it was to protect them from this flying bomb.

The racquet was smaller than a lawn tennis variety too. Now came the funny part, well funny to watch but not to the players. As you can expect, a smaller racquet head will make it a tad more difficult to hit the ball, same size as lawn tennis ball.

That was only a small part of the problem. Tennis balls bounce, don't they? Not if they are as hard as Real Tennis balls they don't. It took the guys about 15 minutes of knock up practice to adjust to minimum (if any) bounce. Every one was an air shot.

Learned later that there are nine dozen balls in a full set, just a few more than the usual six or dozen at Wimbledon! And they go into a basket in a hole in the floor at the side of the net, saves on ball boys! 500 years and I wonder who got it right?

Ok lads, let's start to play a game.

Service is off the roof, what, yes the roof. Make a return and hit the spectators viewing window, that wins the point? Don't get to a return and see how far it bounces back from the end wall. Now change ends and get the final non returned bounce inside that last bounce. Give up, that is why the wall has numbers on it, 1 through 6, and the court has lines across. How do you score, don't ask me. Portrait of King Henry VIII – hit that and you scored, or got your head chopped off!

Derrick took up the umpiring and explaining to the guys. Explaining did not mean much to them and Derrick always had to be very alert as the ball whistled round his ears many times as he stood in the doorway. OK everyone, what has a doorway got to do with Wimbledon's Centre Court, can Nick Tytherleigh help us out?

It really was great fun to watch the lads hit air shots and scream.
It was even greater fun to see them twenty minutes later have rallies of four, five and even six shots. The satisfaction was very evident and greeted with spectator applause.

Match over, you two won, who me, how did we do that, not the faintest idea. Next four, identical problems, pleasure and final result. Losers play losers, then winners play winners.

Lucky that Derrick's son Daniel came along to help out. He is a true (Real – pun) player (whilst at Cambridge University) and that helped.

A two hour session soon came to a close and the lads had to clear the court promptly. We managed to get a few photos in before that happened and these are available to view.

The professional at Hampton Court is the world champion and he kept popping out to see if we were ok. We learned from him that the courts were in daily use and fully booked at all times from 7am until 11pm.

The "club house" was just as remarkable. It was just like a normal house. Arm chairs, dining table, family cat, pictures on the wall, family wallpaper. When you first went in you thought you had entered someone's house by mistake.

Apres Tennis was as good as Apres Ski. We congregated in the dining room and were supplied with a drink by Derrick, cheers. No need to go to the local hostelry, it was more than civilized in the club room. We were able to renew our acquaintancies and I had taken along my "clippings" of the old school photos and teachers. This made every one very relaxed and the energetic part of the day was more than happily complete.

Leaving to make our ways to dinner in Wimbledon or elsewhere, we had to pinch ourselves to remember that this was Hampton Court Palace and we had been into the private bit all afternoon. Truly a very special day – A Grand Day Out.

Dinner in Wimbledon Village was also a most pleasant occasion and I am sure was enjoyed by us all. The pictures clearly show a happy bunch of well fed and adequately watered souls who were captured on camera in embarrassing poses, now displayed for all to see. Both Doug and Derrick stood on the chairs to take their photos, and were less than steady when doing so, but the restaurant management and other diners did not complain, so why should I?

This event was a true highlight for all of us who attended. As already said above, it was the carrot to lure some long distance donkeys to the reunion. A wonderful event, a wonderful day, and a wonderful result.

Thank you Derrick for arranging it all and getting those lads to the Reunion.