

Part I - In the Beginning

Many tennis players and their fans around the world regard England and Wimbledon as the true home of tennis. But where and when the game of tennis was first played no one really knows. Yet what we do know is that for the Italians, tennis goes back a long, long way. Two thousand years ago the Ancient Romans played several ball games, some very similar to tennis. It's been recorded that Julius Caesar enjoyed watching and playing some of these tennis-like games. Later in the sixteenth century, *rachetta*, a form of what we now know as Real Tennis was a very popular game in Italy and in 1555 Antonio Scaino wrote the very first book on tennis.

However, it can be said that the Scottish have a great pedigree in playing the game. The game of Royal Tennis, ancestor of the Lawn Tennis we know and love today, was first played during the reign of Alexander III in the thirteenth century, well before the game was ever documented in England.

Five hundred years ago Court Tennis had become a 'Sport of Kings' and was being played by all the royals of Europe. Tennis technology at this time was also on the march and thereby lay a problem. Tudor England at that time played Court Tennis as the French and other Europeans had taught them, with the palm of the hand. But towards the end of the fifteenth century, the devious continentals had invented the tennis racket and unforgivably, by the start of the sixteenth century, no one seemed to have told the English.

I wonder how many players must have turned up to play a match against another club in the 1970's clutching their trusty wooden-framed Dunlop Maxply Fort only for their hearts to sink as the opponents arrived wielding a metal-framed Prince Classic Jumbo, resembling something like a snow shoe?

Yet surely no player in history has suffered such indignity as the Lord Marquis of Dorset who, at Windsor castle on 31st January 1506, was duped in the most outrageous way possible. Whilst Philip, Archduke of Austria and King of Castille, was being entertained by King Henry VII at his place in Windsor, Dorset challenged Phillip to a game of tennis. Conveniently, it seems Philip had omitted to pack a spare one of these new-fangled implements, thus depriving Dorset the chance of borrowing a racket. Even after giving Dorset a 15 – love start, Philip gave him a jolly good thrashing.



'Real Tennis' Court

After this thrashing, the English kitted themselves out with a vengeance, never to be caught out again. Three years later when a slim, youthful and athletic Henry VIII succeeded his father as King of England the tennis-mad monarch wielded the racket with great skill and the royal inventory showed that he had at least seven of them.

By the 1800's tennis had become much more than just a 'Sport for Kings.' The Frenchman J. Edmund Barre, became the greatest 'Real Tennis' star of the nineteenth century at a time when the game had become sufficiently popular for paid professionals to earn a living from it. Playing for the World Championships and in challenge and

exhibition games, player's names become known to a wide public following. Barre was so talented, that he was the World Champion from 1829 to 1862 when he finally succumbed, at the age of 60, to the 36 year old Englishman Edmund Tomkins. Yet this was just the beginning of the great impact the English were about to make to the game of tennis.

Next Month: Part II - Tennis is Coming Home.