

Part III - Lawn Tennis Catches on

By the later part of the 1800's the game of Lawn Tennis was becoming popular with people from all walks of life in the British Isles, even the clergy. In this respect, it wasn't unusual at this time to find a tennis court on the local vicarage lawn.

What was later referred to as the 'Good v Evil' Wimbledon final on July 1879, J.T.Hartly played Thomas Goold in front of 1,100 spectators at the old Warple Road Ground. John Hartly was a decent chap. A Harrow boy, an Oxford graduate and now an Anglican vicar from Yorkshire. His opponent Thomas Goold, was born in County Cork and was the youngest son of an Irish baronet. Hartly beat Goold in straight sets, 6-2, 6-4, 6-2, and after that thrashing, Goold never played at Wimbledon again. In 1907 Hartly went on to attain the celestial heights of Honorary Canon of Ripon, whilst Goold was sentenced for murder in Monte Carlo and served life at the notorious penal colony on Devil's Island in French Guiana. Goold remains the only convicted murderer ever to have contested a Wimbledon final.

During the late 1800's Lawn Tennis was very much catching on with the ladies and in 1884 Maud Watson beat her older sister Lillian, in the very first Wimbledon ladies singles tournament. In those days what better way was there for a demure young lady to meet a handsome athletic young man, than on a tennis court. A bit like some of our tennis clubs of today. Thus bringing a new meaning to the term 'courtship.' However it must be remembered that this was Victorian times where men and women were not only different sexes but perceived by some sections of polite society as entirely different species. As the ladies game was becoming well established, a leading writer of the time pontificated, "Most ladies believe that a ball struck horizontally over the net will bound off the court vertically as if dropped straight from the skies" and "The ladies will surely have some difficulty in understanding the scoring." Yet there was a flaw in this sexism. The ladies that played tennis treated this male chauvinism in a quiet contempt because beneath their long skirts were athletic bodies and healthy hearts and many of them played exceptionally well.

Soon a young lady would burst onto the scene and change for ever this sexist concept of women in sport and become the world's first woman sports superstar.

Enter Miss Lottie Dod. Cheshire born Lottie, known as the 'Little Wonder,' won the 1887 ladies single title at her first attempt at the age of 15 years. This remains a singles record to this day. She also successfully defended her title the following year. Lottie won a further three titles and was never beaten at Wimbledon, some years electing not to enter due to, "lack of serious opposition."

Dateline Monday 13th August 1888. This year's men's Wimbledon singles champion, Mr Ernest Renshaw takes on this year's ladies champion Miss Lottie Dod in a singles challenge match in Exmouth, Devon. Lottie took the first set 6-2 but went down 5-7, 5-7, to lose the match in three closely fought sets.



Miss Lottie Dod

However, this was a moral victory for the ladies and gave woman's tennis the boost it needed. Lottie went on to be captain of England's ladies hockey team, Woman's Open Golf Champion in 1904, England's best lady archer, an accomplished figure skater, fine choral singer, expert bridge player, keen cricketer and the first lady to go down the Cresta Run. She died 27th June 1960 during Wimbledon Fortnight, aged 88. No male journalist ever dared to ask Lottie, "do you have difficulty understanding the scoring."

A few years later in 1909, the now titled “All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club” adopted the purple and green colours still used today.

Next Month : Part IV - Wimbledon becomes a moving place.