

Part IV -Wimbledon Becomes a Moving Place

Prior to the First World War the facilities at Wimbledon's Worple Road were expanded to meet the ever growing demand of the public. Also in hand, were plans for a move to larger premises. Yet this was not achieved until 1922, when King George V opened the present ground in 'Church Road.' The foresight to build the Centre Court Stadium, designed to hold 14,000 people, did more to popularize the game at home than anything that had happened to date. The new ground, which many at the time thought would be a 'white elephant' was financed partly from the accumulated reserves of the club and partly by the issue of Debentures. Any misgivings about the future popularity of 'The Championships' were soon dispelled and applications for the tickets in the first year were so large that they had to be allocated by a ballot. This system has been adopted for every Championship since. Also, the move to 'Church Road' coincided with a break in tradition whereby the Challenge Round was abolished. This is where last years champion plays this year's winner for the Championship, in favor of the holder playing through each round.

So, in 1921, the last Championships at the old ground were held. Two legends of the game, America's Bill Tilden and France's Suzan Lenglen took the singles titles in front of capacity crowds. But many would recall these Championships for the men's singles quarter-final between the Birmingham-born, Randolph Lycett and the Japanese, Zenzo Shimidzu. This was an encounter on a very hot day that just fizzed with interest. Now it needs to be remembered that statutory rest periods between every other game had not yet been instituted at this time. Indeed, chairs for players to sit on were introduced at Wimbledon as late as 1974. Shimidzu took the first set 6-3, Lycett taking the next two 11-9, 6-3. During the fourth set the heat was beginning to tell on the 35-year-old Lycett and like all good sportsmen he knew what to do. Yes, take on board plenty of fluid. So 'Lycett' arranged for his trainer to come on to the Centre Court armed with champagne. Dehydration heightened Lycett's thirst, so more champagne was called for. Freed from all traces of Centre Court nerves, he won points with relaxed stokes but at other times, as a news paper at the time reported. "Mr Lycett was still capable of making powerful smashes but fell over several times when trying to turn sharply." The effects were not surprising, he lost the set 6-2. In the final set the champagne continued to flow yet remarkable 'Lycett' fought himself into the position of having two match points for the match. However, he made quite a hiccup and ended up loosing a closely fought final set, 10-8. A few days later stone sober, he stormed to victory in both the men's and mixed doubles finals. 'Lycett' died in Jersey in February 1935, aged only 48. There was fittingly, an 'unconscious' tribute to him at that year's Wimbledon Championships. For the very first time, Robinson's Lemon Barley Water was made available for the players.

Fashion trends were alive in these days as they are today. The ladies hem-line was becoming a little higher than the ankle, but a bombshell came on Tuesday 23rd June 1931. Officials spotting that the American, Joan Lycett was not wearing stockings and was about to parade her naked ankles on court, rushed up to her and told her to put some stockings on. Her reply was the start of emancipation for woman in the game of tennis when she replied, "sorry, but I haven't got any." Her brother, Bunny Austin shocked the crowds in 1933. For the first time, a male player not wearing long trousers, but *shorts* stepped out onto the Centre Court.



New ground in Church Road

The 1930's become Wimbledon's boom time and in 1937, the Championships were broadcast on the radio for the first time. This was truly a significant event as it introduced the game of tennis to the whole of the world. At this time a huge tennis star emerged - and he was British.

Next Month : Part V - A British Tennis Super Star is born.