

The Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum

By *Scott A. G. M. Crawford*

DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION
EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum, Church Road, Wimbledon, London SW19SAE. Telephone: 0181-946-6131. Fax: 0181-944-6497. Open throughout the year Tuesday to Saturday: 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sunday afternoon: 2 p.m.-5 p.m. Adult admission two pounds and fifty pence. Alan Little, Librarian, Kenneth Ritchie Wimbledon Library. J.G. Clark, University Archivist, Pilkington Library, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, England. Telephone: 44(0)1509-222-357.

One of the most fascinating books on sport published in the 1990s is Karl B. Raitis *The Theater of Sport*. This collection of essays examines sport and place, sport and its distinctive use of space, and sports landscapes as ensembles. A chapter written by Bruce Ryan explores tennis and spotlights Wimbledon as “a name that inspires greater reverence among the sporting public at large than even St. Andrews, Churchill Downs, Lord’s, Le Mans, or Yankee Stadium.” Ryan maintains that the Wimbledon complex is unprepossessing and architecturally more ordinary than extraordinary. Nevertheless, the place has an ambiance that is singular. This modest suburban home of the original All England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club, Ryan writes,

“lacks many of the features that dignify the other famous tennis stadiums . . . it is merely a drab green wooden tinderbox . . . Wimbledon’s hedges, ivy, hydrangeas, roses, and doll’s house kiosks resemble those of an overgrown country estate. It is . . . the village garden or church fete where the local parson appears to be masquerading as the presiding referee.”

The museum is actually a series of 12 adjacent exhibition areas. The Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum is located in a wing of Wimbledon’s Center Court and a viewing area allows visitors to look down on the famous playing area. Over the entrance to the Center Court, through which the players pass, is the following inscription from Rudyard Kipling’s poem “If:”

If you can meet with triumph and disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same.

Bruce Ryan concludes his tennis essay with a poem that excapsulates the theatricality of the Wimbledon experience.

Brookes beat Wilding, who cares where?
 Rapt spectators stand and stare.
 Love the game but not the place
 Chaste our Gorgeous Gussy's lace,
 Must we quibble over space?

The displays follow a chronological pattern and focus on particular themes: the origins of tennis; the birth of the new game (the role of Major Walter Clopton Wingfield); the popularization of tennis (the first star and celebrity players); the Victorians (a representation of a tea and tennis garden party of the 1890s); the Edwardians; the development of the tennis racket; the move to Church Road (it is not generally known that today's Wimbledon complex has a relatively short history and was opened in 1922 by King George V); the significant tennis happenings between World War I and World War II; the stellar players of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s; the creation of open tennis and the game's professionalization; the evolution of modern "power" tennis; and a databank so that visitors can find answers to their questions about Wimbledon and tennis.

The visually stunning displays make excellent use of the tennis artifacts. There are literally hundreds of items in the collection including a 1855 lawn mower, a 1885 ladies tennis broach, and the once popular Demon (all wood) racket. Extensive use is made of magazine art covers (see *Collier's*, *New Yorker*, *Saturday Evening Post*), and they give a remarkable sense of costume, etiquette, competition, charismatic players, and national success. In a similar fashion, photographic illustrations from *Life*, *Look*, and *Sports Illustrated*, provide a telling commentary on the social history of tennis. As with many sport museums, there is so much to see and savor that one of the problems is an over-abundance of athletic paraphernalia. One quite exquisite collection of materials is a series of colored cigarette cards brought out by the W.D. and H.O. Wills and Ardrath companies in the 1930s. The action sketches of players such as Godfrey Phillips, Dorothy Round, and H.W. (Bunny) Austin are superb. They are elegantly crafted and the detailed precision of the art work is a joy to behold.

The museum effectively highlights the major changes that have transformed a minor social recreation into a global enterprise. When prize money was first offered at Wimbledon in 1968, the men's prize was 2,000 pounds and the ladies prize was 750 pounds. In 1996 the Gentlemen's Singles Champion received 392,500 pounds and the Ladies Singles Champion, 353,000 pounds. Matches were first televised by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1937. By 1995 the BBC coverage of Wimbledon was the basis for television programs seen in 145 countries, 27 more than in 1994. In 1995 there were nine Chinese commentators compared to one during the 1994 championships.

While much of the sociocultural fabric of tennis and Wimbledon is intelligently presented and creatively packaged, do not expect the museum to address controversial topics such as drug use, "burn out," racism, homosexuality,

the explosive court manner of Nastase and McEnroe, the Seles attack, and the like. Nevertheless, there are some promising forays into examining tennis as a complex cultural mosaic. Billie Jean King, for example, is accurately analyzed as a pioneering athlete who deserves recognition for her role as an agent provocateur (e.g., “she fights for a fairer system”). There is also a commentary on the 1977 Wimbledon Champion England’s Virginia Wade, who in 1982 became the first woman elected to the All England Club Committee.

Of special note for sports historians is the Kenneth Ritchie Wimbledon Library. The honorary librarian Alan Little describes the collection as “the foremost tennis archive in the world.” There are more than 5,000 bound volumes and while the video library is disappointing, primarily Wimbledon championships since 1970, the photograph and picture postcard archives are spectacular. The *Library Catalogue* is available free of charge from the librarian. While a useful resource tool, the catalogue entries are classified according to country, and there is no index, so the researcher will have to sift through the 148 pages to locate specific nuggets of information. Admission to the library is by appointment, and Journal readers should apply by post or telephone the librarian assistant.

One of the museum’s signal attractions is its multiple video units. There is also a video viewing room designed like a miniature movie theater. Much of the film material shown in the Museum is the BBC footage of Wimbledon. For many years the BBC color commentator at Wimbledon was a former English tennis coach, Dan Maskell. Now deceased, Maskell was the doyen of tennis broadcasters, his insight, encyclopedic knowledge, good manners, and affection for tennis made his every utterance an ode to the sport. His archive (known as the Dan Maskell Collection) is located at Loughborough University, England. It is noteworthy that some of Maskell’s trophies and photographs are on display at the International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, R.I. Maskell’s pithy comments about a game shrouded in class consciousness helped to demystify tennis and made it intelligible to literally millions of viewers.

The Wimbledon Museum plays a key role in retelling the storied encounters that animate the historical heritage of tennis. Tennis as much, if not more, than any other individual competitive activity has center staged a succession of titanic encounters. For this correspondent the apotheosis of tennis was the Jaroslav Drobný/Ken Rosewall clash of 1954. The museum brings to life the fairy tale legend of the 32-year-old naturalized Egyptian (as early as 1938 Drobný, a 16-year ball boy from Prague, Czechoslovakia, appeared at Wimbledon) playing the game of his life against 19-year-old Australian Rosewall. After Drobný won, 13-11, 4-6, 6-2, 9-7, the *New York Times* of July 3, 1954 reported: “For fully five minutes the 15,000 spectators cheered and waved.”

Two final points. If a visit is planned to Wimbledon, call or write ahead to request access to the various courts. Research at the Wimbledon Museum is incomplete without such a conducted walking tour. Also, take care not to exit at the two Wimbledon stops on the London underground network. The closest station, a 15-minute walk to the museum, is Southfields on the District Line.