

The Rock Tennis Club: A Brief History

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Lawn tennis was developed as an outdoor version of court or real tennis. Its inventor was Major Walter Clopton Wingfield who patented his version of the game in 1874 and sold equipment packages including nets, balls and rackets. The sets were sold initially to the aristocracy who possessed large gardens that could incorporate the courts. In 1875, Wingfield attended a meeting at the MCC, who had their own court, and a set of rules was confirmed. Two years later the All England Tennis and Croquet Club held the first Wimbledon Championship.

The game grew rapidly and, besides the private courts of wealthy families, clubs sprang up providing access for the middle classes to play. In this regard Stamford was behind the curve, as tennis clubs had been set up in towns and villages nearby (Bourne, Oakham, etc.) before the first, Stamford Tennis Club, was opened in the town. That club was formed in 1885 by Stamford School and was still operating in the 1960s, but then closed. It was re-formed in 1990 on hard courts leased from Stamford School with access from Conduit Road and is still in operation.

Stamford, like most market towns in England at this time, was rather class conscious. Families in business or the professional classes went to private or grammar schools and mixed with people of similar backgrounds. Some of the wealthy, in larger properties like Rock House and Barn Hill House, had their own private courts, but others were keen to share this growing sport with like-minded people. These middle-class business owners founded the second of Stamford's tennis clubs in 1887. It was named the Stamford Victoria Tennis Club, in honour of Queen Victoria's golden jubilee in that year, and its courts were located on Burghley land opposite the Bottle Lodge entrance to Burghley Park.

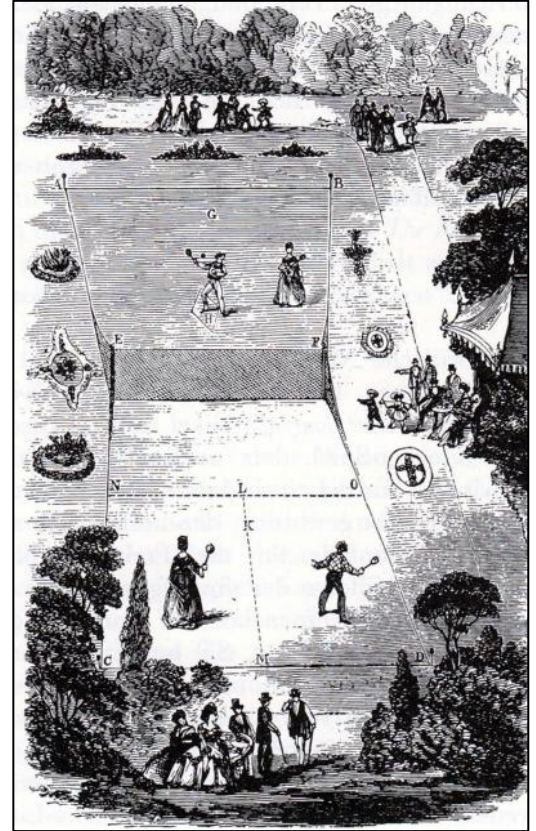


FIG. 1. Major Wingfield's original court design



FIG. 2. Albert Cliff in 1923

In 1909, Albert Cliff became the joint owner of Williamson, Cliff, Limited, a newly formed brickwork company; later one of Stamford's most successful businesses. Albert had moved to Stamford from Leeds and was renting 2 Ermine Villas on Empingham Road from Samuel Fancourt Halliday, whose family were major builders in the town. That house, and another called Rock Lodge at the bottom of the road, had been built in the 1870s by the Hallidays and Samuel was living there. In 1916, Halliday decided to sell both of those properties and move to Tinwell Road. Albert Cliff bought the larger Rock Lodge, which was adjacent to both Rock Terrace and Rock House, all named as such as the latter two were built on the site of an ancient quarry. Rock Lodge had extensive gardens to the rear, on land rising to the old windmill site, and needed several domestic staff, including gardeners, to keep it maintained.

In 1916, a few keen tennis players, including Albert Cliff and Percy Banks (Albert's wife's nephew), who attended the Congregational Church in Star Lane, were eager to start a tennis club and when Albert Cliff offered the church members some land behind Rock Lodge it was accepted and work began to prepare the ground. Percy Banks, who had worked on his father's farm at Cranwell, until invited by Albert Cliff to join the brickworks staff, levelled and seeded the courts, installing other facilities including water, a separate toilet, and a small pavilion with two changing rooms. The Church Tennis Club was formed, and the courts were ready for play in the summer of 1919, the first year in which Albert Cliff was appointed mayor of Stamford, and two years before the formation of the Lincolnshire Lawn Tennis Association.

Albert Cliff, who was re-appointed mayor in 1920 and 1921, had Cliff Road named in his honour, and by 1922 the Church Tennis Club had become known as the Rock Tennis Club (Club). At the time of the Club's name change a small folded card containing the rules, fees, and matches for the upcoming season was printed for all members and the front showed the officers of the Club. This included Albert Cliff as President and F W Williamson, the other co-founder of Williamson Cliff, as Vice-President. Albert and his wife Helen (Nell) had no children, but Nell's nephew, Percy, who later became managing director of Williamson Cliff, is named on the card as Captain. The Club membership from that time was extended to others, not connected with the church.

During the second world war, double summertime allowed members of all clubs to play late into the evenings, often until 10pm, and the Club was open throughout the war, but only after a rearguard action by its lady members. The minutes of the AGM held at the Crown Hotel on 23 March 1942 showed that the men's captain had suggested that it would be better to close the Club for the duration of the war. The ladies, who represented 70% of the membership for that year were not happy. A vote was taken of those present at the meeting and it was agreed to continue even though the minutes read that 'it would chiefly be a ladies club'. Later minutes recalled that in 1943 some cows had escaped an adjoining plot and damaged the court so severely that the club was closed for the remainder of the season. Then, in 1945, it was noted that eight American allies had used the courts as force's members, and it was hoped to welcome them again.

From its inception the names of Cliff, Williamson, and Banks, who were directors of Williamson Cliff, were always associated with officers of the Club. However, another name, Burgess, regularly appears in the minute books from 1933 to 1947. Humphrey George Burgess was the personal secretary and confidant of Albert Cliff, and after Albert's death became general manager of the brickworks. Burgess was a committee member from 1933 to 1939, but it was his wife who played a more prominent role: Hon Sec, 1933-38; Ladies Capt, 1939-40; Committee Member, 1941-47. The minutes in 1946 referred to her as Mrs H G Burgess but in 1947 she was called Mrs E Burgess, indicating that she had, by then, been informed that Humphrey had died of enteritis whilst a Japanese POW in Malaysia; his body was never recovered, or so she believed. [1] [2]

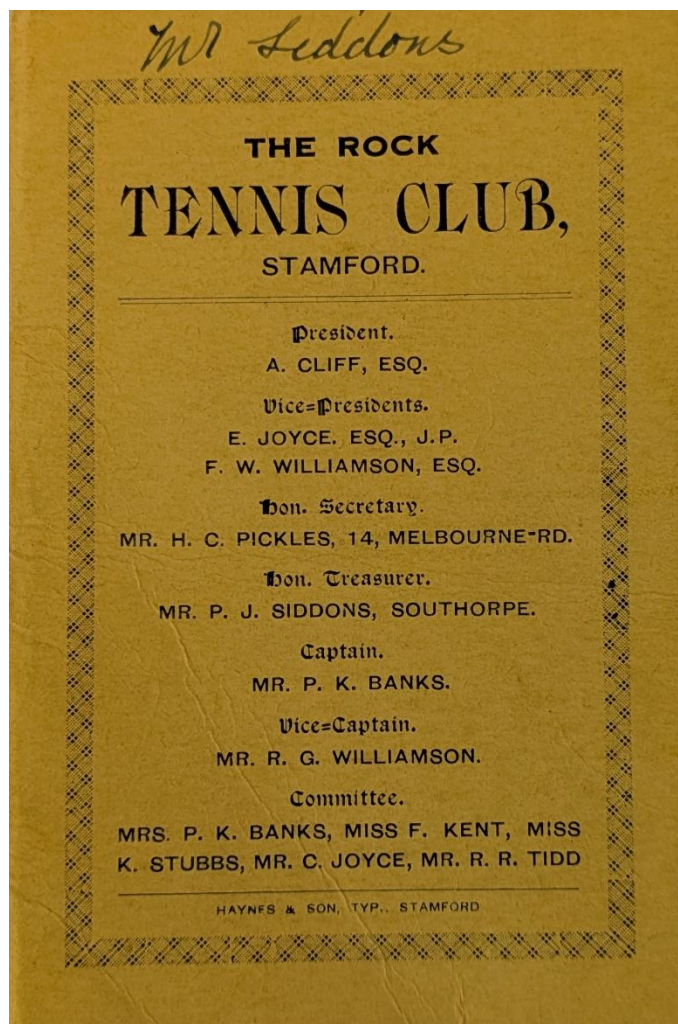


FIG. 3. Rules card c1923

Later, a chairman of the Club, Trevor Kirk, described playing on the courts with his grandmother in the early 1940s. The booking sheet, to reserve the courts, was displayed in a small hut by the courts where one could pencil in a name. This was at a time when vandalism and defacement were unheard of. Membership of this private club was by invitation or application only and the members attending the Annual General Meeting voted on any new applications to join. To be accepted, applicants had to be competent players able to maintain a high standard of play and, to some extent in those early years, of an acceptable social standing. Some members still remember the ordeal of playing in front of committee members to prove their worth. However, the Club was also social, and members met for tea on Saturdays, made easier by the installation of a calor gas stove in 1949.

Other tennis clubs appeared in the town in the 1930s but they were short lived; Stamford St John's Tennis Club, and the Stamford Infirmary Tennis Club. Another club, Blackstone's Tennis Club, was part of the well-known engineering works' leisure facilities. Blackstones was originally for employees only, but accepted others later when numbers fell, until closing in the 1950s. Another, the West End Tennis Club, originally played at Foundry Road, but in the 1950s took over the courts which had previously been the home of the then defunct Stamford Victoria Tennis Club opposite Burghley Park. The West End Tennis Club was wound up in 1964.

Percy Banks was followed as managing director of Williamson Cliff by his son A. J. F. Banks (Alec), who became a member of the Club in 1950, and during his fifty years of membership was both its chairman and benefactor. By the late 1950s the membership of the Rock Tennis Club was eighty strong, some of whom were regarded as social members. Any more would have made it difficult to provide play on the two courts. When friendly matches with neighbouring clubs were organised, they were played on the three grass courts at the Recreation Ground (Rec), as the extra court enabled matches to cater for teams of six. They were booked and paid for via the duty groundsman. These were public courts available to all and, in those days, were often fully booked by townsfolk.

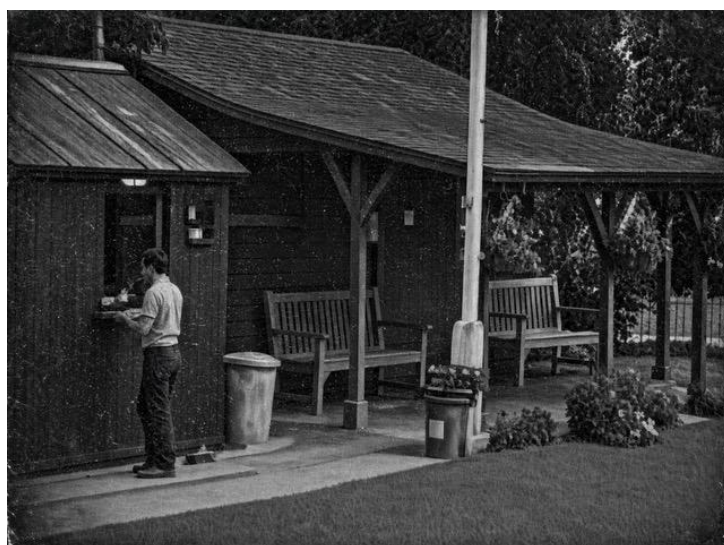


FIG. 4. The booking office (left) for the bowls, putting green and tennis courts at the Rec c1960

The Rock Tennis Club continued to thrive in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, but by the 1990s membership began to fall. The remaining members continued to maintain the courts, employing a groundsman to cut and mark them, but with members re-seeding and doing some of the extra work on a voluntary basis, as required. Money raising activities such as jumble sales and raffles helped to raise funds towards the growing costs of maintenance, but inevitably the quality of the courts started to suffer

Rock Lodge changed hands several times over the years. While the Cliff family lived at the property they took in Gladys Archer, the daughter of one of Nell's sisters who had been orphaned. Gladys later married T. D. Ross, a director of Williamson Cliff who became the next owner of Rock Lodge. After Ross others followed, most with an interest in the Club, allowing it to continue in return for a small donation and the promise to maintain the area to a reasonable standard as it was a part of their garden. However, as more of the land was sold for development, several houses were built nearby, and the owner eventually informed the Club that he wished to develop all the land on which the courts stood. This was now a prime area for building properties close to town and notice to quit was received by the Club in 1999, after eighty years of occupancy.

The members discussed their dilemma at an Extraordinary General Meeting to see if it would be possible to continue providing a grass courts club for the town. There were insufficient funds available to consider purchasing land and it was agreed to approach South Kesteven District Council (SKDC), with a view to

transferring the Club to the Rec and to use the three courts there, which were now used less frequently by the general public. The courts were still in excellent condition and the Club was welcomed, with an offer to rent them in their entirety. This was too much for the Club, but an alternative to hire the courts for fixed periods during the summer months was agreed at an appropriate hourly charge. Maintenance remained with the SKDC and in 2019 the Club celebrated its centenary, with its members photographed in 1919 tennis attire.

The arrangement, which started with the SKDC, continues although the ownership of the Rec and courts passed to the Stamford Town Council some years ago. The Club maintains a happy relationship with the Council, through the Town Clerk, despite the increasing pressure on funding for recreational activities and its inevitable impact on services and their maintenance. There is no longer a duty groundsman, employed by the council, at the Rec so casual bookings are now rare, but the Club has maintained a steady level of enthusiastic members at the only remaining grass court club in the town. Play is offered on four afternoons from May to September (Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday), and the members maintain the friendly atmosphere for which the Club has become known. This includes the long-standing tradition of “Tea at 4pm” on a Saturday, although the brew is no longer made using the calor gas stove, which was replaced by electricity in 2025.

NOTES

[1] Daffurn, John, *Stamford Tenants*, (Stamford, 2020)

[2] It is probably a blessing that Mrs Burgess never knew the truth. Her husband had been captured in 1942 after the battle of Java and a year later was transferred to Sandakan in Malaysia. In 1945, 2,400 prisoners were held at Sandakan and as Allied Forces started to bomb the area it was decided to march the prisoners for 155 miles, through the jungle, to Ranau. During this death march most died and only six escaped. Burgess was one of less than 200 who made it to Ranau, where illness took most until only fifteen were left. To cover their atrocities the Japanese recorded most of the men as having died from enteritis, dysentery or beri beri.

The Japanese government surrendered on 15 August and on 22 August leaflets were dropped over Ranau informing everyone that the war was over. On 27 August, Burgess along with his fourteen remaining comrades were marched out of the camp expecting to be taken to a release point, instead they were all executed by gunfire at close quarters. It was not until many years later that an Australian military historian Lynette Silver started to investigate this death march. The project would become all-consuming and remarkably, through her tenacious investigation, interviews with Malaysians, and research in Japanese archives, she was able to catalogue the outcome of all 2,400 soldiers {Silver, Lynette Ramsay, *Sandakan: A conspiracy of silence*, 4th rev. ed. (Binda, NSW, 2011)}

Silver, with the help of Malaysian officials and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) continued to investigate those buried as ‘unknown’ and since 1996 has identified thirty-five more soldiers who are now buried in named CWGC graves. One of those is Flight Lieutenant H G Burgess (promoted whilst in captivity) who was identified by his RAF cap and badge which had been found at the site of the final massacre.