

Duffield Squash Club – a history 75 years on

In this 75th anniversary year, it's time to reflect on how far we have come: it's certainly a long way from one single court to five; and from a kitchen, a boiler room and a single shower in a wooden 'pavilion' for changing, to facilities that include recently refurbished changing rooms with showers and sauna, a gymnasium, and 'Court 6', our licensed bar.

In playing and performance terms, Duffield's progress has been similarly stratospheric. 75 years ago, it was an adults only club, though only in the sense that all the swingers (of rackets, of course) just happened to be grown-ups, and mostly men. Membership initially was around 60. Today, it's over 600, including 100 juniors.

For the first 25 years, squash matches were friendlies – it wasn't until the mid-60s that a Midland League was formed – whereas today there are numerous Duffield teams in both senior and junior leagues. Leagues are both county-wide and in the last 20 years, country-wide, with Benz-Bavarian Duffield competing from the early 90s in the England National Squash League – now the Premier Squash League.

Club members dine out on the extraordinary fact that a village club has not only won the National League championship three times – in 1998, 2006 and 2007 – but also attracted some of the world's greatest players, including former World No.1 Cassie Jackman, MBE (1998 – 2005), and current World No. 2 Nick Matthew. At the time of going to press, Nick had just won his 25th PSA World Tour title and looks set to reclaim his World No 1 status.

Two club coaches have been champions many times: Paul Hargrave was a junior high achiever, winning the British Open Under 14 and Under 16 Championships and European Under 19 Championship; whilst Lesley Sturgess has been winning titles since entering Masters Tournaments, including the Women's Over 45s British Squash Championships in 2007 and in racketball, the Over 45s British Championships from 2007 to 2010 and the over 50s British Championships in 2009 and 2010. She is also a current member of the England Ladies' Over 50s team.

An honour Lesley treasures just as much, is last year's Thomson Salver for voluntary help at the Club. She is the latest in a long line of volunteers whose dedication, vision, and enthusiasm stretches all the way back to 1937, when a male Leslie (Woolley), along with Keith Thomson, brought squash to Duffield, thanks to an invitation from the tennis club (otherwise we might have ended up at the Friary Hotel).

"Squash is undoubtedly the coming game," wrote Keith in his typewritten appeal for members, a visionary statement considering Duffield's first court was only the fourth in the whole of Derbyshire. The first members who joined found rules and regulations to be, shall we say, relaxed: their annual two guinea membership was collected by hand and there was "an occasional booking system." To any current member crying out for online booking, be thankful for what you have: up until the early 60s, the booking sheets were kept over the road at The White Hart. And there was still only one men's shower.

However, the club was continually developing, thanks to stalwarts like Denys Hope, who was a member for an astonishing 60 years and held office for an unbroken 49 years. Court 1 is dedicated to his memory, while Court 2 bears the name of Clive Wildsmith, a President for 27 years. Another late member, Duncan Graham, has a plaque in the lounge for propping up the bar – in the official sense – for a tireless 30 years.

The honour of a plaque on Show Court 3 rightfully belongs to John and Pauline White, who served on the committee for three decades and inspired the playing activities of the club. Both were distinguished players, John being a county champion 13 times (and eventually earning an MBE for services to squash), while Pauline moved from British Universities Champion to Great Britain Captain and revolutionised the club with a coaching scheme that was taken up all over the country. No history of the club could be written without John in another sense: he kept the Minutes of every committee meeting for 33 years!

The club's Minutes will have recorded the names of numerous businesses, members and individuals who have sponsored or donated monies to the club. The £50,000 for the clubhouse extension and building of courts 3 and 4 in 1978 was mainly financed by club savings and members' loans. The glassback and lounge development, opened in 1991, cost £200,000, £70,000 of which came from members. One member at the time, architect Derek Latham, clearly played a crucial role: he was thanked in the souvenir brochure for conceiving the idea of the lay-out "when all else had failed". We can also thank Peter Ashworth: without his legal wizardry, we wouldn't have got our car park.

Derek is still a playing member and, like many others, has joined the growing legion of elders whose knees are better coping with the gentler art of racketball. However, it's still in squash that Duffield especially thrives in both competition success and coaching expertise, with close links to the three village schools ensuring that we bring on tomorrow's Nick Matthews and Cassie Jackmans.

Squash is now played by 20 million people in 185 countries and, according to Forbes magazine, is the healthiest sport in the world, a vital statistic as squash campaigns to become an Olympic sport in 2020. Squash continues to be healthy at Duffield. In the PSL, we continue to turn out one of the top teams in the country, thanks to indefatigable manager and long-time sponsor Felix Frixou of Benz-Bavarian, continuing the resolute work over 16 years of Brian Hargrave.

So many other names should be mentioned, including current committee members like Roy Squires who celebrates 20 years as Treasurer and has never once thought of running off to Buenos Aires. Indeed, it will take you as long to read the Appreciation in this brochure as it does this write-up, a rich testament to the committed, hard-working devotees who have produced a club of enormous pride and enviable distinction.

Ashley Franklin (2012)