Lawn Tennis in Devon during the 1920s

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In the early 1920s, the London-based national governing body of tennis, the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA), sought a venue for a new high-profile event in response to the growing popularity of the hard-court version of the sport. The hallowed green turf of Wimbledon, in London SW19, was already firmly established as the centrepiece of the domestic – indeed, global – grass-court scene, its annual summer tournament growing ever more renowned with each passing year. But to act as a counterpoint, the LTA wanted to create a springtime showcase, one capable of attracting top players from home and overseas. Hence it came about that in April 1924 the inaugural British Hard Court Championship (BHCC) took place in Devon, close to the seafront in one of the county's top coastal resorts, Torquay. The location was chosen partly on the basis of Torquay's long association with elite-level tournament tennis: a popular grass-court meeting had taken place for several decades past at Belgrave Road in the town. In addition, the resort also had a strong reputation for attracting scores of holiday visitors every year. These factors helped to ensure healthy attendances in the impressive grandstand set-up behind the municipal courts used for the BHCC. In reasonably mild spring weather, albeit with a stiff sea breeze frequently blowing onshore, players from six different nationalities paraded their skills in 1924. The experienced Anglo-Australian Randolph Lycett comfortably beat his Dutch opponent to secure the men's title, while the women's singles event was won by Californian Elizabeth Ryan, a serial trophy collector who also triumphed in the women's doubles and mixed doubles.[1]

Over the next couple of years, the new Torquay tournament continued to feature high-quality tennis. The men's singles final in 1926 was a knife-edge encounter won by Jacques Brugnon, one of the famed French 'Musketeers' who claimed honours everywhere across the tennis world during the 1920s. After five close and pulsating sets, Brugnon defeated the dashing young English hopeful, 'Bunny' Austin, who later became a two-time Wimbledon finalist.[2] However, the difficulty of maintaining international-standard quantity as well as quality – of attracting overseas stars in sufficiently large numbers – meant that in 1927 the LTA decided to shift the BHCC closer to London. The event was moved along the south coast to Bournemouth, where the West Hants Tennis Club offered a greater number and better maintained hard courts, and where for the following few decades the meeting consolidated its position as the most prestigious tournament in the British calendar outside of Wimbledon. But

[1] F. R. Burrow, *The Centre Court and Others* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937), pp. 226–7.
[2] *Torbay Express and South Devon Echo*, 19 April 1926.

the importance of Torquay being chosen to host the BHCC in its formative years should not be downplayed. Lawn tennis relied heavily for its development across England on county-level administrative structures, and there was no question that Devon tennis – both before and after the First World War – was something of a 'brand leader'.

As this essay sets out to demonstrate, the thriving tennis scene in 1920s Devon was built on twin foundations. Firstly, Torquay was only one of numerous resorts on the south coast of the county that for many years – stretching back to the game's foundation in the late-Victorian era – featured the best amateurs, the so-called 'cracks' of the day, in acclaimed summer tournaments. These tournaments, we shall see, continued to be highly regarded once tennis resumed following the hiatus of the war years. Secondly, Devon was fully engaged in a striking new evolution of the sport in the 1920s: the rapid expansion of recreational tennis. The growth of membership-based clubs, particularly in city suburbs and small towns, signalled that the playing base of tennis was changing, and was coming to encompass much wider sections of British society than had hitherto been the case. Devon frequently struggled to be at the forefront in the development of some of the nation's favourite sports. In cricket, for example, the county has never secured first-class status (though it has achieved success at 'Minor County' level), and it's well-known that none of Devon's leading football teams have ever played in the nation's top-tier leagues. But in lawn tennis, despite being a long way from the London/Home Counties heartland of the game, Devon has often – to borrow a metaphor from another, more pugilistic sport, boxing – 'punched above its weight'.

Pre- and post-1918 tournaments at coastal Devon resorts

For a sport that started as a garden-party pursuit for the English upper middle classes – and long maintained a reputation for being associated with genteel court manners – lawn tennis has a surprisingly long history of keen competition. The knock-out tournament, pitting talented men and (more unusually, at the time) women competitors one against another, quickly became a staple of the game as it spread across the country after the 1870s. Tennis was governed from the outset by strict amateur rules, with payment for performance – as was permitted in some working-class sports such as football – being seen as vulgar by those who administered the sport and played it competitively. These were overwhelmingly wealthy folk, those with independent means or higher-grade professionals who had the time and means to travel and maintain themselves at the network of prestigious tournaments that developed during the English summer. It also mattered to participants in such events that they usually took place in congenial surroundings, ensuring that tennis was mixed with holiday-time relaxation and fraternisation with like-minded social equals. Against this background, Devon became a magnet for the burgeoning grass-court tournament scene. F. R. (Frank) Burrow, the chain-smoking referee/overseer at scores

of meetings of variable size and quality (including Wimbledon) before and after the Great War, noted that of the forty or so elite tournaments taking place across the United Kingdom in the 1890s, three of them took place on the south coast of Devon, at Torquay, Exmouth and Teignmouth. They formed part of a summertime 'Western Tour'. In particular, according to Burrow, the tournament at Exmouth for a while in the years before 1914 attracted 'an entry second to none in the provinces'.[3]

Devon therefore had a strong pedigree when lawn tennis revived and experienced an impressive boom after the First World War. The sport's popularity at elite level (recreational tennis is discussed separately, below) was bolstered in the 1920s by the emergence of globally renowned superstars for the first time: in particular, the charismatic American, 'Big Bill' Tilden, and the flamboyant French 'Empress of the Court', Suzanne Lenglen. International-standard tennis attracted a major spectator following, prompting the All-England Club in London SW19 to move from its original site to a more spacious venue in nearby Church Road. Thereafter, swelling crowds were more comfortably accommodated, and Wimbledon's profits soared from hundreds into thousands of pounds annually. Across England, a longer playing season – stretching over six months from spring to late autumn – started to develop, facilitating the re-emergence of high-quality grass tournaments as well as the growth of hard-court meetings such as that beginning in Torquay in 1924. In Devon, the county's pre-war reputation held it in good stead in attracting a decent number of the sport's top amateurs. The region's mild (if not always sunny) climate, established tourism industry and excellent railway links came together to ensure it drew in large numbers of players and spectators alike to a range of events held all along the south coast in the 1920s, everywhere from Torbay on the English Riviera through to Seaton on the eastern border with Dorset.

Of the six most prestigious tournaments in the Devon summer calendar, three stood out for most consistently featuring top-draw entrants, both domestic and overseas. The Torquay Open Tennis Tournament (and its antecedents), as noted earlier, had a long pedigree, first taking place in the early 1880s. By the 1920s the club in Belgrave Road boasted eleven well-maintained grass courts, ten being the unofficial minimum required for hosting a sizeable meeting. The setting, close to the centre of town and the seafront, was described by one contemporary publication as 'a pretty one', with ample seating for eager spectators.[4] Although cheap railway fares and improved holiday provision for industrial workers meant Torquay was no longer – as it was at the turn of the century – an exclusive haven for the upper classes (including royalty), large numbers of well-to-do visitors still enjoyed tennis of the highest quality after the First World War, especially as the open tournament often coincided with the late August bank holiday. The international flavour of the meeting was illustrated when

[3] F. R. Burrow, *My Tournaments* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1922), p. 207.
[4] *Pastime*, 17 August 1887; The Lawn Tennis Association (LTA), *The Lawn Tennis Association Annual Handbook* (1931), p. 49.

the Indian baseline specialist Mohammed Sleem, Punjabi amateur champion on several occasions, beat New Zealander J. F. Parke in the final of the 1924 men's singles. Sleem, a practising criminal lawyer, won trophies at numerous English and Welsh tournaments in this period, including nine in 1924 alone. The Torbay Open, as it was later called, proved to be the most enduring of Devon's top summer tournaments, its roll of honour after the Second World War including Wimbledon champions such as Jaroslav Drobny and Plymouth-born Angela Mortimer.

Along the coast in Exmouth, the annual tournament on the seafront also showcased a sprinkling of overseas stars as well as top domestic players. Tennis, as noted earlier, was well-established in Exmouth long before the Great War, fuelled by developments such as the arrival of the railway in the 1860s and the construction of grand buildings such as The Imperial, an elegant Victorian hotel with its own grass courts set in four acres of grounds on the Esplanade. When the Exmouth Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club revived its widely acclaimed summer tournament after a six-year absence in 1920, the local newspaper noted that it boasted a 'capital entry', with strong attendances watching on throughout the week.[5] The standard of competition in the early 1920s remained consistently high, with winners including Elizabeth Ryan in 1921 and in 1924 Betrand Clark, seven-time Jamaican national champion. Clark appeared at numerous top tournaments in the 1920s, locking horns with many elite champions of the era; his obituary described him as 'a wonderful opponent, a gracious winner and an unruffled loser'.[6] In the middle of the decade, unable to secure an extension of its council lease on the promenade, the Club decided to relocate to more spacious grounds a little way inland, at Cranford. An end of era came with the final running of the tournament at its superb seafront setting in 1927. Many faces familiar from competing at Wimbledon that year took part, including the holder of the Exmouth title from the previous year, Agnes Tuckey, a 'great favourite' – it was reported – having been raised locally and learning to play in the vicinity.[7]

In August 1928 the *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette* gave an upbeat assessment of the inaugural Exmouth tournament held at the new Cranford venue: 'The move from the prettily-situated grounds on the sea front, which had been associated with so many giants of the past, is amply compensated for by the vastly greater convenience of the new establishment.' There were now sixteen courts available for use (including three hard courts); players and spectators alike benefited from much improved amenities, including 'refreshment rooms and baths'; and the vista from the balcony outside the

[5] *Exmouth Chronicle*, 7 August 1920. For information on tennis in Exmouth from the 1880s to the 1920s I am grateful to Carole Evershed, chair of the Exmouth Museum Management Committee, and to Yannick Munro, researcher for Exmouth Museum.
[6] *Jamaican Gleaner*, 6 April 1958, cited on www.tennisarchives.com (accessed 7 October 2025). The men's singles in 1921 was claimed by Herbert Davis, a first-round loser at Wimbledon on several occasions and subsequently three-time winner of the Devon county closed championships (restricted to members of Devon clubs) after that event was introduced in 1925.
[7] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 20 August 1927.

fine clubhouse as play got underway was 'exceedingly pleasant and animated'.[8] The star attraction in a quality field was two-time Wimbledon champion Kitty McKane, playing in the doubles only that year owing to a recent illness. The move to Cranford was thus a considerable success, although without fulfilling the hopes of those who felt it could return the status of the tournament to 'second only to Wimbledon' in the domestic calendar.[9] The Exmouth event did continue to attract a sprinkling of international stars, but in most years the stand-out performers were top-notch home contenders. In 1930, for example, the women's singles was dominated by London-born Ermyntrude Harvey, winner of forty-five top-level singles titles between the wars, as well as doubles champion at the United States national championships in 1927.

The third of Devon's top-tier events in the 1920s took place in the smallest of the six locations, at Budleigh Salterton. The small settlement of Salterton, as it was called for many years, fifteen miles south-east of Exeter, had long been known as a place where 'gentlefolk of means and leisure came to live by the sea'.[10] By the 1870s the village had a fashionable archery, croquet, cricket and tennis club. Set back on a hillside in Westfield Close/Cricket Field Lane, entrants to the first tennis tournaments in the 1880s enjoyed fine views over Lyme Bay. Upgrades to facilities and the opening of a local railway station at the turn of the century facilitated the arrival of players from far and wide, enabling the Budleigh Salterton tournament to grow in prestige during the Edwardian period. The event was revived in 1919 and the strong entry for the 1920 meeting, held in early September, showed the tournament was still capable of drawing in leading 'cracks'. American Elizabeth Ryan beat one of England's best players, Phyllis Satterthwaite, in the women's final; the same outcome as when the two met in the latter stages of Wimbledon that year. On the men's side, the 1920 trophy was claimed by South Africa's George Dodd, who also teamed up with Leslie Godfree to win the men's doubles. Godfree was a leading tennis administrator and a multiple doubles champion at Wimbledon, including in the mixed doubles with his wife, Kitty McKane. Budleigh Salterton was something of a happy hunting ground for South Africans in the 1920s. The men's singles there was won in 1924 by six-time national champion of that country, Louis Raymond, who also reached the Wimbledon semi-finals that summer.[11]

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[8] *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 21 August 1928.

[9] This phrase was cited in an article about the move to Cranford in the *Portsmouth Evening News*, 8 March 1927. For more on the social and sporting history of Exmouth, see Mike Menhenitt's series 'Walking Through Exmouth' at www.exmouth.nub.news, (accessed 7 October 2025).

[10] J. Dennys and B. Daniel, *Budleigh Salterton Past and Present* (1961), p. 3.

[11] See www.budleighcroquet.org (accessed 7 October 2025), which notes that the front-line tennis event continued for several decades, with post-1945 winners including big names such as Angela Mortimer, Ann Jones, Mike Sangster and Jaroslav Drobny.

Three further tournaments on the south coast – none of them by the 1920s as illustrious as those already discussed, but still well-regarded – completed the set of Devon's elite grass-court summer schedule. The first of these three – attracting many national-level British stars throughout the decade – was held at Sidmouth, a few miles to the east of Budleigh Salterton. The Sidmouth event, usually held over three or four days in early September, had many of the same hallmarks as other successful meetings in the county. The local club, based in Fortfield Terrace, a short way from the town centre, could call upon ten well-maintained grass courts, and its thatched pavilion afforded attendees superb views overlooking the sea. Railway links brought large numbers of visitors to the well-heeled resort throughout the summer, and players and spectators alike could avail themselves of high-end hotels in the town, including The Victoria, Royal Glen and the Belmont, all within easy walking distance of the tennis action. When that action resumed after the Great War, Phyllis Satterthwaite – who competed twenty times at Wimbledon in her long career – was to the fore in the women's singles, taking the title in both 1920 and 1921. She also enjoyed success in the mixed doubles at Sidmouth, winning in tandem with Jack Hillyard. He was the Harrow-educated son of George Hillyard (referee at Wimbledon from 1907 to 1925) and Blanche Bingley Hillyard, six-time champion in London SW19. The elite-level standard at Sidmouth was maintained through to the Second World War, with winners from Japan and South Africa in the 1930s. But during the 1920s the honours mostly went to strong home contenders such as Hatfield-born Teddy Higgs, the 1924 men's winner, who like Hillyard tended to go out in the early rounds of Wimbledon while winning scores of titles elsewhere on the amateur circuit.[12]

A few miles north of Torquay, the Teignmouth and Shaldon Open Tournament was also in keeping with the pattern seen elsewhere. This gathering had begun as early as 1880, and was regarded as one of the elite events that comprised the 'Western Tour' before 1914; the honours board in that era contained the names of Wimbledon champions such as William Renshaw. The Teignmouth Lawn Tennis Club, which hosted the tournament, was able to attract some of the best-of-the-best for a variety of reasons. The Club had ten good-quality grass courts and was scenically set overlooking the Teign estuary, adjacent to the Bowls Club in the Bitton Park area. This meant it was close to the town centre and the main seafront where there was plentiful accommodation for competitors and visitors to utilise. Although the mid-August meeting was successfully brought back after 1918, by then its entry list consisted mostly of good-standard home amateurs, rather than nationally renowned or international competitors. In 1923, for example, the men's singles title went to Henry Carless, a former Cambridge University graduate, who like his opponent in the final, Charles Luck, was on summer leave from his employment in British-run India.

[12] *Ayres* magazine, 1921; www.tennisforum.com (accessed 7 October 2025); *Lawn Tennis Association Annual Handbook* (1931), p. 49.

Teignmouth's meeting continued in this vein through to the Second World War, but it was never again to recapture the glories of its late-Victorian heyday.[13]

The Teignmouth experience was mirrored, finally, at the most easterly of the county's main tennis meetings, held in Seaton. The local club in Court Lane, 500 yards or so back from the seafront in the town, boasted a set of well-maintained grass courts – once more, ten in number – which regularly featured a competitive though not top-notch entry list each summer. What the Sidmouth, Teignmouth and Seaton tournaments illustrated, more so than the three Devon events discussed earlier (although all six were affected to a degree), was the difficulty as the years went by of continuing to attract the *crème de la crème* in the face of an ever more crowded 'market'. The number of LTA-sanctioned adult tournaments in England and Wales rose from about 140 in 1914 to an all-time peak of 155 in 1934.[14] Devon tournaments therefore had to vie not only with each to appeal to top players, but also with the rising number of elite meetings taking place elsewhere in the UK and, increasingly, on continental Europe. With 'payment to play' still strictly forbidden under amateur rules, tournament organisers intensified efforts to entice the star turns to their own events. It was an open secret in the tennis world that tournament committees were stepping up behind-the-scenes offers to go above and beyond in covering players' expenses, travel and hotel costs. The less scrupulous were also – in a problem that beset the sport until it went professional after 1968 – not averse to providing 'under the counter' cash inducements. Against this backdrop, the South Devon post-Wimbledon tournament schedule remained commendably resilient in the 1920s. Some meetings flourished more than others; some found themselves squeezed to the edges of the competitive market; but all continued to provide a platform for good-quality tennis. And within a few years, as will be noted later, Devon became the home to a novel type of elite tournament that further burnished its reputation for hosting some of the best practitioners of the sport.

The growth of Devon tennis clubs in the 1920s

The second pillar of Devon's tennis scene in the 1920s – which, like the resumption of high-quality tournament play after 1918 reflected burgeoning interest in the sport – was the mushrooming growth of membership clubs. This was a nationwide phenomenon, enabling much larger numbers of men and women than hitherto to enjoy tennis recreationally. Tennis after the Great War was no longer confined primarily to the very wealthy; instead, it also became fashionable for many sections of the broader middle classes. The established middle class of businessmen, lawyers,

[13] An overview of the tournament can be found at www.tennisarchives.com (accessed 7 October 2025).

[14] K. Jefferys, *Beyond SW19, World Class Tennis in England since the 1880s* (Pitch Publishing Ltd., 2021), p. 14.

doctors, clergymen, military officers – often stalwarts of Victorian and Edwardian tennis clubs – were increasingly being joined on court by those regarded as lower middle class: clerical and shop workers, civil servants, teachers and engineers. This pronounced change in the playing base of the sport reflected the wider fortunes of middle-class families in the 1920s. While many accounts of interwar Britain highlight the ongoing reality of grinding poverty and hardship for large sections of the working class, Oxford historian Ross McKibbin notes that the experience of the middle classes (making up about a quarter of the population, defined by occupational type) was rather different. In the immediate post-1918 era many middle-class families suffered appreciable losses in terms of real earnings, but from about 1923 onwards falling prices and greater job security – in stark contrast to high levels of working-class unemployment – contributed to what became, through to the Second World War, 'a kind of golden age'.[15]

In an age of highly stratified class divisions, middle-class patterns of sociability often revolved around joining clubs where like-minded people felt comfortable mixing together. Tennis clubs, as a result, were frequently associated with characteristics such as a high regard for correct behaviour. One instruction booklet in 1924 insisted that questioning an umpire or an opponent's decision in a match was 'an unforgiveable sin'.[16] Whereas the middle classes made up the majority of club officials and players, the sport was not entirely off limits for blue-collar workers, owing to a pronounced rise during the 1920s of (more casual) public parks and works' tennis. But the costs of membership, not to mention the prevailing culture, usually made joining a tennis club forbidding for the working classes. The exclusive tone of many clubs was not always appealing even to the lower middle classes, but for them playing the game more regularly was at least an option, especially in city suburbs where new clubs (sometimes with more relaxed rules) appeared in tandem with the huge numbers of owner-occupier houses being built across the nation. The relevance of these various social distinctions was amply illustrated in the case of Fred Perry, who made his Wimbledon debut in 1929 and rose to become world number one and three-time Wimbledon champion in the mid-1930s. Perry came from a working-class background in the north of England, but a family move to Ealing in West London after the Great War was crucial in enabling him to develop as a young tennis hopeful at newer suburban clubs (and led him to later refer to his 'lower middle class background'). Perry's blunt persona meant his ascent through the ranks was marked by frequent clashes with traditionalists – for him, one writer has said, the sport was 'never about pit-pat exchanges after a cream tea or chit-chat over cocktails' – but it

[15] R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures. England 1918–1951* (Oxford University Press, 2000 edn.), pp. 45–59.
[16] Cited in M. Huggins and J. Williams, *Sport and the English, 1918–1939* (Routledge, 2006), p. 99.

would have been almost inconceivable without the post-1918 expansion and widening of the social base of tennis.[17]

How, then, did the process of 1920s club expansion operate in Devon? LTA records show that the number of affiliated tennis clubs in the county more than doubled, from nineteen in 1922 to forty-five in 1931. In looking at where clubs were concentrated within Devon, the pattern changed significantly during the course of the decade. In 1922, about half of LTA-affiliated clubs were found on the coast. In addition to those south coast venues that hosted renowned annual tournaments (as described above), the Torbay area was the home to three further clubs: at Dawlish, Paignton and St Mary Church, Torquay. There was also a single listed establishment close to the north coast, the Torridge Vale Club in Chanters Lane, Bideford. Away from the coastlines, Exeter was the home to two affiliated clubs, one in Mount Pleasant Road and one in Victoria Park, underlining how club strength in the early 1920s was heavily concentrated in the triangle between Torbay, Exeter and Sidmouth/Seaton. At this point in time, any remaining clubs were scattered across other larger urban areas in the county, with one each in Newton Abbot, Tavistock and Tiverton and just two in Plymouth – the Mannamead Club in Eggbuckland Road and the Stoke Club in Molesworth Road, Devonport.[18]

As for the picture by 1931, the number of clubs on the South Devon coast remained largely static. The leading tournament venues were still going strong (albeit that the Exmouth club, as noted earlier, had relocated away from the seafront promenade). Elsewhere, the situation on the coast was mostly unchanged, although Paignton now hosted two clubs, rather than one. There had also been modest growth in north Devon, with two affiliated clubs in Barnstaple and one in Ilfracombe, as well as Torridge Vale in Bideford. And the same applied in some small towns, Totnes now being listed alongside the likes of Queen Street, Newton Abbot, and Tavistock. But by far the largest expansion in the 1920s came in the county's two largest cities. In Exeter, the number of clubs rose over the decade from two to seven. The newly formed clubs were generally located in the more affluent parts of the city and its surroundings, thereby highlighting the manner in which middle-class involvement and interest was a crucial driver of the sport's development at local level. Hence, for example, the roster of Exeter clubs now included the likes of St. Thomas, St Leonard's and the University College of the South West (as it was then called).[19]

Plymouth, however, stands out for the speed and scale of its expansion, witnessing growth from two tennis clubs previously to fourteen by the early 1930s. As in Exeter,

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[17] The material here and quotations by Perry and writer David Allaby ('pit-pat exchanges') are cited in K. Jefferys, *Fred Perry: British tennis legend* (Pitch Publishing Ltd., 2017), Chapter 2.

[18] LTA, *The Lawn Tennis Association Annual Handbook* (1922), pp. 12–13.

[19] LTA, *Lawn Tennis Association Annual Handbook* (1931), pp. 47–9.

many of the newly-created clubs were found in areas where recreational tennis provided a congenial leisure pursuit for the middle-class families associated with the spread of private home ownership. The long-established Mannamead Club, to the north of the city centre, was now joined in surrounding residential areas by clubs at Ford Park, Carhullen, Manadon and Home Park (as well as at Whiteford Road, although the club there only later affiliated to the LTA).[20] Two other features of the Plymouth scene further indicated how it had rapidly become central to Devon's tennis growth. One was the notable increase in clubs exclusive to members belonging to public sector middle-class professions and higher ranks of the military services. In 1931 the register of affiliated clubs in Plymouth included those operated by the Civil Service Sports Association, the Inland Revenue, the Garrison Warrant Officers and Sergeants, and the United States Officers' Recreation Division (at Mount Wise). A second way in which Plymouth stood in the vanguard in the 1920s was in the priority its newer establishments gave to laying down hard courts, giving members the opportunity to play for longer throughout the year than the summer grass-court season permitted. Grass courts still predominated numerically across the county, but several clubs were adding one or two hard courts in addition, and in Plymouth, unlike elsewhere – for example at Carhullen and St. Jude's – clubs offering hard-court play only were appearing for the first time.[21]

It should also be remembered that not all 1920s tennis clubs chose to affiliate to the national governing body, indicating that LTA figures underestimated the total number of clubs – and thereby the amount of recreational tennis being played – across the country.[22] Neither was the thriving of the sport after the war associated only with city and urban areas. Lawn tennis also re-emerged in fine fettle in some rural settings where it had long been established, as was the case at the Avon Vale Tennis and Croquet Club, near the village of South Brent. There is, unfortunately, a dearth of detailed, published histories of individual Devon clubs. These club histories, abundant for some parts of the country, often give valuable insights into club personnel, membership numbers and the ups and downs of club life over time.[23] In the case of Devon, Avon Vale stands out as a valuable exception, the club having produced a lengthy booklet in 2009 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of its foundation. This

[20] The Whiteford Road website, www.whitefordtennis.co.uk (accessed 7 October 2025), notes that the Club was founded initially for badminton in 1910. Tennis began in the 1920s, although the club was not LTA-affiliated in 1931.

[21] LTA, *Lawn Tennis Association Annual Handbook* (1931), pp. 47–9. In addition to those Plymouth clubs named above, there were three others in the Devonport area and also at Saltram, St Jude's and Tor View.

[22] R. J. Lake, *A Social History of Tennis in Britain* (Routledge, 2015), p. 125, notes there was a gradual increase in affiliations to the LTA between the wars as clubs realised there were associated benefits such as low-interest loans to upgrade facilities and access to tickets for Wimbledon.

[23] Of the over fifty club histories identified by the author for counties across southern England alone (outside of Devon), these works typically range from short pamphlets through to lavishly illustrated, detailed studies of more famous establishments, e.g. R. McKelvie, *The Queen's Club Story 1886–1986* (Hutchinson, 1986), 306 pages.

traces the origins of the enterprise back to 1859, when a meeting of seventeen 'local gentlemen', including several clergymen, took up the then-fashionable pastime of archery. In 1870, surviving minute books show that a change of venue was decided upon, from Wrangaton to nearby Avonwick, onto land owned and set aside for recreation by the Cornish-Bowden family (who remained strong backers of the club thereafter). A few years later, following the construction of a sturdy pavilion, tennis was introduced, giving Avon Vale a strong claim to being one of the oldest clubs in the world where lawn tennis is still played on the site of the original courts.[24]

For many years in the late-Victorian period the Avon Vale Club hosted an annual summer tournament, popular among players from surrounding villages and hamlets, and it continued to thrive in the Edwardian era. During the First World War all the land in the locality, including at the club, was given over to sheep grazing. In 1919, however, two courts were in sufficiently good condition to allow play to resume. 'By 1923', the committee records note, 'The Club was flourishing and had a healthy balance of £105'. Under the chairmanship of Rev. A. T. Allin, Avon Vale continued to be 'successful in every way' for the remainder of the decade. Through to the Second World War and beyond – probably in common with many clubs, urban and rural – Avon Vale continued to reflect many of the more genteel values and characteristics of lawn tennis. The emphasis for members was on social rather than competitive play (inter-club league play only came later); a dress code of all-white was insisted upon, as this was in keeping with club tradition; using the courts was not permitted on Sundays and was confined to the grass-court season (a hard court was not added until the 1980s); and the widely practised process of vetting potential new members for their social fit as well as their tennis-playing ability remained firmly in place. Only in 1951, the minutes show, was it agreed that 'all the old restrictions as to the suitability of perspective [sic] members should not now be enforced'.[25]

Conclusion: Into the 1930s and beyond

LTA-compiled figures for the first half century of the history of the game, from the late-Victorian era through to the Second World War, confirm that in the evolution of recreational tennis Devon was 'ahead of the curve', both within the south-west region and across the nation as a whole. In 1891, the county stood well ahead of its neighbours Cornwall, Somerset and Dorset, and only seven other counties across England contained more affiliated clubs than Devon. This 'lead' over adjacent counties was still evident in 1922, although by 1931 Somerset (which included Bristol

[24] www.clubspark.lta.org.uk/AvonValeTennisCroquetClub (accessed 7 October 2025) 'The 150th Anniversary Booklet', pp. 5–6. See also: 'Timeless Tennis', *South Devon & Plymouth Times*, 8 August 2007.

[25] 'The 150th Anniversary Booklet', pp. 13–23. Among the many more usual findings unearthed, it was discovered (p. 32) that the club employed a series of groundsmen to maintain the courts – one of whom, a Mr Trundle, was reputedly also employed as a hangman.

south of the Avon) had also experienced the tennis boom of the post-Great War period, boasting forty-eight clubs to Devon's forty-five. Looking further ahead, we can see that – with a peak of over seventy clubs in the 1960s – Devon continued to hold its own in terms of club numbers for the remainder of the twentieth century. Adding up totals of LTA-affiliated clubs in over thirty different counties in selected years through to 2001, Devon sits comfortably in the top half of such a listing. Although, as might be expected, the county was well behind the number of clubs found in counties containing major cities and urban conurbations (e.g. Middlesex, Warwickshire, Lancashire) and those in the home counties heartlands of tennis (such as Surrey, Essex and Kent), it compared favourably elsewhere: in relation to south-western neighbours and to several other English regions. Devon contained more clubs over the course of the twentieth century than, for example, Bedfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire in the south of the country; Northants, Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire in the Midlands; and Cumbria, Northumberland and Durham/Cleveland in the north.[26]

One of the factors behind Devon's sustained contribution to lawn tennis over many decades was, undoubtedly, the dedication and influence of key individuals. These might include the likes of far-sighted chairmen and stalwart members of individual clubs, volunteer officials of the county-level administration and talented, inspirational coaches. Unfortunately, owing to the scarcity of Devon-specific studies, it's not easy at present – pending the uncovering of fresh research materials – to do justice to many such individuals, whose vital role is often given prominence in published histories relating to other parts of the country. We can say with certainty, however, that one important figure in the interwar story of Devon tennis was solicitor Basil Hamilton Whiteford (1877–1957). As well as being benefactor to new clubs in the Mannamead area of Plymouth during the 1920s, he was instrumental in ensuring that in April 1931, ahead of the start of the grass-court season, the hard-court Carhullen Club in the city hosted a first-round tie in the Davis Cup. Originating as a contest between Britain and the USA at the turn of the century, by 1923 the Davis Cup was contested by over 150 nations. This meant that at the time (ahead of the later rise of football's World Cup), the Davis Cup ranked alongside the Olympic Games as the premier sporting event in the international calendar. The tie in Plymouth was notable for marking the Davis Cup debut of Fred Perry, who later helped Britain to four successive triumphs in that competition. The home team ran out easy winners in a rain-interrupted

[26] Figures extracted from LTA: *The Lawn Tennis Handbook* (1891 and 1902); *The Lawn Tennis Association Handbook* (1912 and 1981); *The Lawn Tennis Association Annual Handbook* (1922, 1931 and 1939); and *The LTA Official Handbook* (1951, 1961, 1971, 1991 and 2001). For many decades, these official publications collected club names only, not numbers of members, though it's safe to assume the doubling of clubs in the 1920s equated to greater numbers participating recreationally.

encounter against Monaco, whose players, Perry later recalled, 'were badly affected by the depressing weather'.[27]

Devon's tradition of showcasing elite-level tennis thus continued from the 1920s into the following decade, and was soon to be reinforced by one further novel innovation; one that also took out of the equation the vagaries of the south-west weather. The autumn of 1936 witnessed the inaugural edition of an indoor meeting at the luxurious Palace Hotel in the Babbacombe area of Torquay, which, for decades to come, occupied a cherished place in the English tournament calendar. The first women's final saw an engrossing encounter won by Chile's Anita Lizana, who beat the British Wimbledon champion of 1934, Dorothy Round. At the time, 'covered courts' (to use the parlance of the day) were a rarity across the country, and Torquay stood out for many years as being the only UK indoor location capable of attracting some of the game's best players to a top-level event outside of London. In due course, the Palace Hotel tournament was to be won by no less than five women who were Wimbledon champions. The availability of all-year-round indoor training facilities, combined with the influence of a stern but perceptive resident professional coach, Arthur Roberts, also helped to ensure that in the years after the Second World War Devon's reputation for 'punching above its weight' was bolstered by one final feature of the tennis scene that had hitherto been missing. This was the emergence of *home-grown* talent (as distinct from elite players travelling *into* the county to compete): a select few stars of the sport who rose to be among the very best in the world, including Wimbledon semi-finalist Mike Sangster and grand slam champions Angela Mortimer and Sue Barker – all born within a 40-mile radius of each other in South Devon.[28]

[27] F. J. Perry, *My Story* (Hutchinson & Co., 1934), p. 32.

[28] *Plymouth Herald*, 16 August 2018, for an overview of the history of the Palace Hotel and the tournament. Roberts also coached a host of other top-quality players such as Joan Curry, Corinne Molesworth and his own son Paddy, all of whom represented Britain in international competitions.