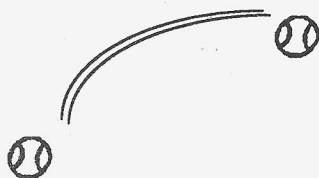




The history of
Mapledurham
Lawn Tennis Club
the first 25 years
1956 - 1981

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£2.99

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With assistance from Tricia Boucher, Brian Orpwood and many others

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Author's note:

Mapledurham Lawn Tennis Club lies in playing fields just off the Upper Woodcote Road in Caversham Heights, north Reading. It was originally in the parish of Mapledurham. The village of Mapledurham is in Oxfordshire and until the mid-1970s its parish spread to about 2 miles northwest of Reading. Boundary changes in 1974 meant that the area close to Reading - within proximity to the Upper Woodcote Road - became part of Reading District Council.

This booklet traces the history of the first 25 years of Mapledurham Lawn Tennis Club, from 1956 to 1981. The story is an interesting one, not least because the club almost closed down at one stage, but staged a remarkable recovery, to become, as it today, a very pleasant place to play tennis.

I joined Mapledurham Lawn Tennis Club in 1976, soon after coming to live in the area, and was encouraged to write this account because future generations will not thank us if we fail to record the history of the era in which we live. Most of the club's records, such as minutes of committee meetings, have survived and this is of course a considerable bonus for writing an account such as this.

There are many people I would like to thank for their help - starting with Mary Kift for her valuable recollections of Mapledurham before the club started. I owe an enormous debt to Tricia Boucher who very kindly offered to research the start of the club. Tricia trawled through parish records and old newspapers to find the - very scant - references to the club in the 1950s, and it was her diligent efforts that enabled me to piece together how the club actually started. I am also indebted to Rodney Pinchen who again helped with early research. Founder members, John Brettell and Max Dixon, were also most helpful, as were several of the earliest members, like Doris Hall, Joan Burton and Jacqueline Tomson (nee Habbitts). Ray Court was tremendously helpful with his recollection of the club's revival in the early 1970s. And I am most grateful to Brian Orpwood for writing of the club's match activities, and to Pat Morrison who helped with this. My thanks as well to many others, too numerous to mention, who I spoke with in the course of writing this, including officials of Goring Lawn Tennis Club, a club which shares part of Mapledurham's history. And I am indebted to Philip De Ville for his skillful editing of this account and to Julia and Nigel Stanbrook for their watchful proof-reading.

John Madeley

Background

On July 19th 1950 a meeting of Mapledurham Playing Fields Management Committee had before it an agenda item marked "Development of Playing Fields". A unanimous decision of the meeting was that provision should be made for tennis and netball "on that part of the ground on the southern field NE of the eastern end".

What happened to the provision of netball is not known. But the meeting was the beginning of tennis courts on Mapledurham Playing Fields, and the start, six years later, of Mapledurham Lawn Tennis Club.

The area which the playing fields now occupy was owned before World War Two by a Mr Charles Hewitt, who lived in a large house nearby called Ridge Hall. Before WW2, it seems that the land was farmed by a Mr Mander and was notable for its excellent mushrooms. It was then known as the Norman Rudge field - Norman Rudge being chairman of Mapledurham Parish Council from 1908 to 1910.

In 1938, the playing fields were given by Mr Hewitt to the National Playing Fields Association, and managed by Mapledurham Parish Council. But in WW2, they were taken over by the army. Searchlight equipment was installed and wooden huts were built as soldiers' billets. A larger wooden hut was built on the site of the present pavilion. The war was to bring a fundamental change of use in the Norman Rudge field. At the end of the war, with the army gone and the field in a neglected state, Mapledurham Parish Council decided to use it as playing fields.

By late 1940s, the soldiers' huts had also gone, and the playing fields were serving as a valuable recreational area. The main hut remained and became the War Memorial Hall. When Mapledurham Playing Fields Management Committee (MPFMC) was eventually set up, there were no organised games on the fields, there were no football or cricket pitches, nor was there a designated children's playing area. It was to stay that way until 1954.

The MPFMC was keen to establish organised facilities for cricket, tennis and football. A meeting of the committee on September 15th, 1954, agreed that a sub-committee should ask a company called Maxwell Hart to quote for building two hard tennis courts. The minutes of that meeting record that a Mr Johnson agreed to approach a local tennis club with a view to obtaining second-hand nets and posts for temporary use on the new courts. A meeting on May 9th, 1955, resolved to accept Maxwell Hart's quote for the courts. It seems that work on the new courts started a year later, in the

spring of 1956. The June 1956 meeting of Mapledurham Parish Council heard a report from the playing fields committee that the two new courts were nearing completion.

1956

This was the year of the Suez crisis, when petrol was rationed, when the European Community took its first steps, when Roger Bannister ran the first four-minute mile, Manchester City won the FA Cup, Lew Hoad beat fellow Aussie Ken Rosewall in the Men's Singles Final at Wimbledon, and America's Shirley Fry beat Britain's Angela Buxton in the Ladies' Final.

It was also the year when an advertisement appeared in the local post office asking people who were interested in forming a tennis club to get in touch with Mr Fordham, the chairman of Mapledurham Parish Council. People interested were invited to attend a meeting on June 25th when it was hoped that a nucleus of a sub-committee could be drawn up.

"The Mapledurham Parish Council had decided to lay down the new courts but without any idea of what to do with them", said John Brettell, a founder member and first chairman of the tennis club. "There was no groundsman or any way that council could run the courts. People had seen the courts being built, and a good number of people turned up, and they resolved to launch a club."

So the club was formed on the June 25th, 1956, and the inaugural meeting made four decisions:

1. That subscriptions should be £1.1.0 a year (£1.05) per individual; these were to be paid to the Mapledurham Playing Fields Management Committee.
2. That the new tennis club should draw up rules to be submitted to the playing fields committee for approval.
3. That a representative of the new club should be elected to serve on the playing fields committee.
4. That no resident of Mapledurham was to be refused membership of the club.

A tennis club committee was elected and met for the first time on July 2nd, 1956. The meeting noted that work on the new courts was progressing, and it discussed the use of the hall for having tea and for changing. The July 1956 meeting of the parish council heard a report that the new tennis courts had been completed, and that arrangements had been made for the formal

opening of the courts "in the near future". The date of the opening seems to have been July 28th, 1956.

Mapledurham Lawn Tennis Club was the second club in the area. Caversham Lawn Tennis Club (off Conisboro Avenue), one of the largest tennis clubs in Berkshire, had started many years before. It had about a dozen courts and at least some members with a high standard of playing ability, many from outside the area. The Mapledurham club, by contrast, was much smaller, mainly for local people, and for players of whatever tennis ability. And although it was within a half a mile of Caversham LTC, the Mapledurham club was then in a different county, Oxfordshire.

The precise number of founder members is not known, but the first entry in the tennis club cash book reads: July 16/27 Sundry Subscriptions, £28.1.0. There appears to have been a junior rate of 7/6 (37p) so it is possible there were 26 adult and two junior members. On August 4th, subscriptions of £4. 3. 6 were entered and, on August 6, £3.15.0. On August, 5s. is entered as being received from visitors. About £43 was received in subscriptions in 1956 which suggests the new club had over 40 members. Also in July, the club purchased two dozen tennis balls for the princely sum of £4. 2. 0 (£4-10p). There was also an expenditure of £7.14.6 for deckchairs, which suggests that members wanted to relax in comfort when they watched others playing.

Minutes of a meeting of the club committee on August 13th, 1956, read, "Shelter to be erected at the east end of the hall facing the tennis courts, to take the form of a lean-to". This suggests that the new club wanted its own room or rooms, although the minutes also say that the hire of the hall "was to be shared between tennis and football clubs".

It was also decided to approach the Lawn Tennis Association for membership. It seems that a decision was made quite early in the club's life to lay down a third court, and the Ministry of Education was approached for a grant. This suggests that two courts were not proving adequate for the people who wanted to play at peak times. The residents of Mapledurham especially were clearly enjoying having their own courts.

Joan Burton, who joined the club in 1958 (and who was still a member in 1998) remembers that membership was very small, that all play had to be arranged beforehand and that the club was "mainly run by two sisters, Mary Ford and Nan Fordred". Joan recalls that she used to play in the afternoons in the late 1950s with three other lady members, one of whom, Bea Rogers, went on to become a coach.

Another of the earliest members recalls that a lot of people who lived in the then RAF houses in Hewitt Avenue became members and that "it was a very jolly club". Mrs Doris Hall, who lived next door to John Brettell, was another of the first members; she recalls that members could collect tennis balls from Mary Ford, who also lived on the Woodcote Road. Members had no need, it seems, to buy their own balls.

The regular tennis apart, the main events of 1957 were a social evening in May and a junior tournament in September - the club's first ever tournament. The winner is not known. And it seems to have been a one-off. According to Jacqueline Tomson (nee Habbitts), who was a junior member at the time, there were no regular club competitions, and no matches with other clubs in the late 1950s. Nor were there club nights, it seems, when members could turn up and play with anyone who happened to be there, so getting to know each other better. Rather the format seemed to have been that people had regular playing partners and fixed games in advance.

In June 1958, the club paid £13.0 to apply to join the Oxfordshire Lawn Tennis Association, and planted the roots of contact with other clubs in the county. The club's application to join the Lawn Tennis Association was also successful, it appears; Wimbledon ticket sales were recorded in the cash book for the first time in 1958. Also that year, the courts were hired to St Peters School for £10. In September 1958, junior coaching began, under the watchful eye of Robin Sharp. Robin was to continue as a coach at the club for the next three decades. Jacqueline Tomson remembers that early coaching as being very beneficial to the junior members. And in October that year the club speculated - buying £5 worth of premium bonds in the chairman's name.

Into the sixties

In 1959, a junior dance was held and coaching continued, but it seems that the club's application for a grant for a third court was not successful. The court was built however, in 1960, chiefly thanks to a generous donation of £400 from a Mr Stutfield. This benefactor was not a member of the club, but lived in a house in Upper Woodcote Road overlooking the playing fields, and wanted to help. In August 1960 a payment of £250 was made to En Tout Cas Co. Ltd, followed by a second payment of £324 in September. The third hard court was in use by September that year.

On March 10, 1960, a lease had been signed between Mapledurham Parish Council and Mapledurham Lawn Tennis Club leasing the original two courts to the tennis club for seven years at an annual payment of £50. The lease

was technically made between club members John Brettell, Mary Bradley, Nancy Fordred and Godfrey Surman. On June 29, 1960, a lease was signed for the third court but on very different terms - £1 a year rent for a period of 14 years. The rent was nominal. The third court had been paid for by the club and was considered to be theirs, whereas the two original courts were the parish council's.

Although there were now three courts, the hoped-for shelter had not been erected. Instead the tennis club rented a small area called the lobby at the end of the old wooden pavilion (this was demolished in 1974, and replaced by a new pavilion). Subscriptions in 1960 totalled nearly £150; family membership cost £4.14.6, and individual membership had risen to £2.12.6. This suggests that members numbered close to 100, so clearly the club had grown considerably. And it was a club for all levels of ability. The rule of the club stated, in 1961, "Members shall not be required to provide proof of playing ability". Social events appear to have been few, although the books record that a dance was held in January 1961, with the band costing £6.10.0 and a conjurer £5.5.0.

The club committee meeting minutes for March 6, 1961, suggest that there were problems with the third court. "It was agreed that the new court should be allowed to be played on", they read, "provided that the players were given fair warning that they should first roll out any bumps and take reasonable care". Playing on the new court seemed quite an adventure! The minutes also record that an American tournament was being held in April.

The minutes of a committee meeting on June 13, 1961, are significant, as they record that letters were being circulated to members announcing knock-out tournaments for "Gentlemen's Singles, Ladies Doubles and Mixed Doubles". The American tournament apart, this is the first reference to organised competitive tennis at the club. There was no ladies singles tournament but the ladies rose up. The minutes of the next meeting, on June 26, record "there had been a request for a ladies singles tournament". The club then had a captain, although it is not clear what he captained as there is no record of the club playing other clubs.

It seems that four couples entered for the mixed doubles that year, four couples for the ladies doubles, and eight players for the gentlemen's singles. When the committee discussed buying trophies for the tournaments they agreed "in view of our financial position....and the not too generous support of these events, it might be money wasted". Tough luck for the winners! A committee meeting in September, 1961, compromised however, by agreeing that miniature trophies would be provided for winners only, "but not more

than £6 would be spent". The runners-up were also in luck. When the trophies cost less than expected, spoons were bought for the runners-up! There is no record of the first winners or runners-up.

In October, 1961, subscriptions were raised to £3 for individual members, junior to 12s.6d. and family to £5.10.0. Included in the minutes for 1961 is a reference to one lady not being accepted for membership "through lack of residential qualifications". It does not record where she lived. While Mapledurham residents had preference, it is not clear that membership was automatic. The minutes for that year also record that another application was refused; the grounds were not given. The rules of the club then stated that 75 per cent of all members "shall be residents of Mapledurham".

It seems that in the early years, the others all came from Caversham Heights, as the minutes for March 26, 1962, record that the Parish Council "had given its consent to the tennis club accepting members from outside the Mapledurham and Caversham area.....but not to the exclusion of applicants from the Parish and Caversham Heights". The fact that the club was seeking members from outside the area suggests that it was not full, and needed more people to help its viability. It seemed to have been choosy, however, about who it accepted. Minutes from this time refer to one application by saying obliquely "in view of past experience it was decided that this could not be granted".

In 1962, John Brettell stood down as chairman of the club, after six years in the post. His successor was Max Dixon.

A social and dance was held in early 1962, the minutes recording that "the entertainer was not up to last year's standard". Table tennis was also played once a week by members in the winter, by renting the memorial hall; the minutes mention that the tennis table activity "had lost a little money".

Club tournaments were on the increase, with Miss Habbitts being asked to organise junior American tournaments in the holidays. "Mass coaching" for younger members in the Easter holidays was requested. Later that year the minutes record that the club tournaments "could not possibly be finished for final's day of September 8". This proved to be just the first year of problems with completing the club tournaments on time! The winners are not recorded. The committee clearly thought that dances were popular among members and their friends, as they agreed that 150 tickets should be printed for a dance in March, 1963. The cost was 12s.6d, a sizable sum in the

early 1960s, a buffet supper was included and the dress was "dinner jackets". The dance made a profit of £5.13.10, and the secretary was given "carte blanche" to organise a summer dance.

By May 1963, it seems that matches with other clubs had started; the May 20, 1963, minutes say, "Captain stated that he would endeavour to arrange teams one week in advance, but reserves were almost an impossibility, and notices of the teams would be displayed". But there is no mention who the teams were playing, although later that summer the minutes record: "The secretary said he will also be able to arrange home and away matches with RAF Shinfield".

Club nights could have also started by now, as minutes of June 10, 1963 record that the secretary asked that members "should sweep one court each evening when they were on club duty". (Other members considered that this was unnecessary!) A letter from the secretary, dated May, 1964, contains a duty roster for each weekday evening, with two members on duty each evening. It is not clear if the duty people were supervising club nights, or just ad hoc play. American tournaments were clearly popular, three of them being held in 1963.

Frustrated by lack of space in the old memorial hall, the club committee decided in November, 1963, to submit a proposal for a new pavilion to the annual general meeting. It was clear that the lack of a pavilion was hindering the club's development. The lobby at the end of the memorial hall was tiny and it was not possible for the club to provide changing facilities or even teas for visiting clubs. The lobby was not even suitable for members to shelter in during showery weather. But minutes of a meeting held on December 30, 1963, note that Mrs Fordred would shortly be attending a sub-committee meeting of the playing fields management committee to discuss the possibility of a new joint pavilion. It was agreed that Mrs Fordred should tell the meeting the facilities the tennis club wanted - a verandah, changing rooms, cloak rooms and toilets and access to a kitchen.

Minutes of "an extraordinary committee" on January 7, 1964, record an extraordinary offer. Mr Stutfield, who had donated £400 in 1960, had offered to provide "a sum of £1000 for a further two tennis courts to be built, or alternately for the provision of a pavilion for the tennis club only". Within the club, treasurer Mr Penney, had written to En Tout Cas, who laid the third court in 1960, asking for a quote for "one further court or possibly two". Maybe the cost was more than the committee had hoped for, or maybe there was a change of mind.

Almost 18 months later, in June 1965, the club chairman wrote to Mr Stutfield to say that the committee was "unanimously of the opinion that the greatest single benefit that could be conferred on the club would be the provision of a small pavilion for the exclusive use of the tennis club". Mr Stutfield's £1000 donation was received five days later. But the separate pavilion was never built. Mr Stutfield died a short time after making the donation, and the club had to pay 45 per cent estate duty on the £1000. Estimates for a new pavilion were far in excess of the net £550 the club had for the purpose.

In the years that followed there were discussions on both a separate pavilion for the tennis club, and a joint pavilion to replace the memorial hall. While there was the possibility of raising money from members, and of obtaining grants, the cost and the need for a separate pavilion seemed to be acting against it. It seems that discussions on a new joint pavilion were going smoothly, and that the tennis club was likely to get most of the facilities it wanted.

The surfaces of the two original courts were also beginning to cause problems in 1964. "A fairly large hole" had appeared on the playing surface of No 2 court. The secretary was asked to inform the playing fields management committee of the problem, and "to raise the question of the complete re-surfacing of the No 1 and 2 courts". Temporary repairs were carried out later that year.

A difficult period

1964 seems to have been a difficult year for the club. An end-of-summer letter from the club chairman, Mr Dixon, to members said: "The past season has again been disappointing in the extent to which the club has been made use of by members". There were two main reasons for this, he believed - the "continuing inconvenience of having only a small lobby in the memorial hall for the use of members, and the poor condition of the two courts rented by the club from the Mapledurham Parish Council". Minutes record that a match against Woodley LTC had to be cancelled that year because Mapledurham could not raise a team.

With nowhere to meet and courts that seemed barely worth playing on, it is hardly surprising that the tennis club was struggling. For the committee especially, it sounds like a frustrating time. Thanks to Mr Stutfield's donation, the bank balance was healthy, but the money was earmarked for a new pavilion - or at least, as a gift that would meet part of the cost.

Minutes of a November 1964 committee meeting put the cost of re-surfacing the two courts at around £650. The parish council said, however, that this was a sum it could not afford. But minutes of a February 1965 meeting say that the council "had subsequently authorised the re-surfacing of the courts at a cost of about £684". This was done before the summer of that year.

Club nights are mentioned for the first time in the club's minutes, in April, 1965. "It was agreed that a club night should be held on Wednesday night and Saturday afternoon, and that Monday evening should be allocated as a juniors' evening," they read. It was also agreed in 1965 "that a ladies sub-committee be formed....to organise the catering arrangements and the prizes" for a social evening.

The re-surfacing does not seem to have persuaded members to use the courts more. Minutes of a meeting held on January 3, 1966, contain an entry, "it was agreed that the club tournaments should not be cancelled for the time being". This suggests that the 1965 tournaments were poorly supported. The minutes of a meeting a month later confirm this - "it was decided that the 1965 club tournaments should be declared cancelled". No reason was given, and it is not clear whether the cause was lack of interest or the problems of fixing up matches.

The committee decided to arrange matches in 1966 against "Woodley, Bulmershe, RAF, NIRD", and also to hold progressive American tournaments (every four weeks), club tournaments and club nights. Also in 1966 three tenders for a separate pavilion were received - "the most expensive was £2,195 and the cheapest nearly £1,700". Grants, it seems, were proving difficult to obtain. A dinner dance planned for October that year had to be cancelled for lack of support.

The club's lease on the two original courts was due for renewal in 1967 and a crisis of confidence was looming. The committee had become concerned at the very limited use being made of the courts by members. The rental under a new 14-year lease offered by the parish council would be £75 a year for the first seven years, as against £50 in 1960, and then £100 a year for the next seven years. A year's extension was also offered at £75. The committee appeared to take the view that it was no longer economically viable to rent courts that were little used, even though there was a healthy bank balance, and maintaining the courts could be done at minimal cost.

The minutes of a committee meeting held on September 21, 1967, refer to a "unanimous decision of the committee not to apply for an extension or renewal of the lease". In a letter to members, dated March, 1968, the club

chairman, Mr Dixon, said that "having regard to the very limited use still being made by members of the courts, the committee came to the conclusion that it would not be in the best interests of members to agree either to an extension or to a renewal of the lease on the terms offered. The lease of the two rented courts therefore terminated on September 30, 1967, and the club has since had the use of the single court only".

The committee are "unanimously of the opinion", the letter went on, "that on the experience of the last three or four years, little if any inconvenience will be caused to playing members of the club by the reduction in the number of courts from three to one". From having aspired to a fourth and possibly a fifth court only two years earlier, the club now only had one court. It was in the ironic position of having a healthy bank balance of almost £900 but very few people who wanted to play. Subscriptions for adult members were reduced to £1.14.0, and committee meetings declined in frequency. Mapledurham Lawn Tennis Club appeared to be hanging on by its fingertips. The two courts were unused for a while, but then leased by the parish council to Goring Tennis Club in 1968.

The Goring club had started in 1966, but without courts of its own. For a while its members played on courts at Woodcote but this proved unsatisfactory. A Goring club member, Daphne Ayling, who had done some coaching at Mapledurham, suggested that an approach be made to the MPFMC about leasing two of Mapledurham courts. A leasing agreement with Goring was duly signed and was to continue for four years.

Despite having to travel 15 or 20 minutes by car, it seems that Goring members took full advantage of the newly available courts. On fine evenings in 1968, its members were often waiting to get on to their two courts while Mapledurham's court stood empty.

"This seemed an absurd situation," noted the chairman, M.E Dixon. At a meeting in July 1968, the committee discussed "the possibility of a joint scheme for using all three courts in conjunction with the Goring Club". No action was then taken, but at a meeting on April 28, 1969, the chairman was authorised to approach the Goring club with this suggestion. It seems that the committee also discussed the club's possible demise - "it was agreed that in the event of the club being dissolved, the sum of £500 should be set aside and established if possible in some form of trust fund to be utilised for purposes such as envisaged by the late Mr Stutfield". This begs the question of what use a pavilion would be without a club.

Goring agreed to a trial period during which it would use all three courts, and members of Mapledurham could become temporary members of the Goring club. This joint arrangement operated for the rest of 1969, and both clubs wanted it to continue into 1970. But for reasons that are not clear, the parish council would not agree and Goring was restricted to using the two original courts.

By early 1970, the Mapledurham club committee appeared to be losing heart, and the club was on the brink of closing. Annual subscriptions had been put in abeyance, and minutes of a meeting in February 1970 state: "The possibility of the dissolution of the club later in the year was discussed. It was agreed that if the club did dissolve, the club funds might be paid over to the parish council on condition they were utilised for the promotion of tennis playing facilities for the Mapledurham parish residents." The committee was therefore looking ahead, beyond its quite severe immediate problems. But "the consensus of opinion" at that meeting "was that the club should be wound up".

The single court was now rarely used. Ray Court came to live in Caversham in September 1969 and almost immediately joined Mapledurham cricket club. He writes: "The first interest in the tennis club, particularly the idle looking single court, came from a neighbour of ours, Mrs Jill Baker, and my wife, Tricia, when they attended a playgroup Jill used to run. The two ladies started talking about the possibility of using this court which no one else seemed to want and one or two others began to take an interest, particularly Noel and Pat Postles, friends of ours at the local Methodist church. Jill made enquiries and established that while for practical purposes MLTC had ceased to play, the committee was identifiable and still holding office largely because of a substantial bank balance they were holding for the club."

MLTC was still playing, however, if not very much, and the impression of "an idle looking single court" is understandable. But the committee clearly wanted to keep the club alive and put the sole remaining court in good order. In May, 1970, it resolved to ask En Tout Cas "to inspect and quote for putting the court in good repair". It was also decided that a club night would be held each Wednesday and that a new padlock would be obtained. Applications from two new junior members were approved in June, 1970. En-Tout-Cas quoted a "figure of over £215" but the chairman was asked to seek a revised quotation "limiting the work to be done".

A list of members for the "1970 season", presumably drawn up at the start of the summer, shows that 10 couples and two other individuals were members

- 22 in all. A letter to members, dated May 12, 1970, says that Mapledurham Parish Council had refused the club's request to continue with the arrangement of using the three courts jointly with Goring. No reason was given; the letter adds that "annual subscriptions are temporarily in abeyance".

There are virtually no club records of any kind for 1971 other than a letter from the club's bank manger to the treasurer. There is no reference to an annual general meeting being held that year. It seems that the surface of the single court was in poor condition, and hardly suitable for tennis. There also seems to have been some sizable holes in the fences around the court, which meant that anyone could effectively play for nothing. One resident recalls crawling through the fence to have a game. Goring tennis club was still using the two original courts, but Mapledurham Club was effectively in suspense.

Revival

But, in 1972, the club sprang back to life. A letter from M.E. Dixon to members, dated June 20, 1972, speaks of new members who had recently joined and invited members to come to an annual general meeting on July 5 to elect a new committee. The letter mentions that the club's bank balance stood at more than £900.

Noel Postles had moved to the area at about the same time as Ray Court, and was already a keen tennis player. He recalls that when they were house-hunting, he and his family looked for a house near some tennis courts. They found the Mapledurham playing fields, and bought a house nearby, without bothering with the minor details of whether the club was active! Rushing up to the courts one evening soon after moving in, Noel was rather dismayed to find that the club was in virtual limbo. He was only too delighted to help get it going again.

"When the Committee saw that there was some interest in the club", says Ray Court, "they convened a meeting which Jill and Brian Baker, myself and Tricia and Noel attended. The upshot was that, apart from two of their members, the old committee members all resigned that evening and 'temporarily' I took over the offices of chairman and treasurer and Noel became the secretary and the club's representative to the Mapledurham Parish Council, perhaps in the event the most important role of all. The two 'old' members who continued with us were young people, Mike Jennings (son of the butcher in Caversham) and his fiancée, Sue Smith, and they were soon very prominent."

July 1972 was therefore a seminal time in the history of the club. Max Dixon stood down after 10 years as chairman. He and John Brettell were the only chairmen the club had had in its first 16 years. With members being so few, neither had the committee changed very much since 1968. While the club seems to have become moribund, and the committee lacked fresh blood and ideas for reviving its fortunes, at least it had hung on through lean and difficult times to the idea of a tennis club at Mapledurham. A new generation was about to pick up the baton. At the July 1972 AGM, the new chairman, Ray Court, expressed his warm thanks to the retiring officers and committee members "for their efforts on the club's behalf in the past".

The new committee met within a week of the AGM. One of the first acts of the new committee was to slash the membership fee to £1.1.0 and to throw in a carton of six tennis balls to each new member - "an undoubted attraction!", says Ray Court. It also decided that club sessions should be held on Monday and Wednesday evenings and Saturday afternoon - a bold move as there were so few members and the court was in such poor shape. Quotations were sought for resurfacing the court, ranging from £395 to £780.

"We soon had the court resurfaced, but it was not a complete success as although we left it for six weeks before playing on it as advised by the contractors, the very hot summer played havoc with it", says Ray Court. "When it was seen that the club was reviving others joined as members, such as our next door neighbours, the Ross's, the Pages, and the Adamsons. "I seem to recall that in the first year the subs amounted to about £20".

Later in 1972, the chairman of Mapledurham Parish Council advised the club that Goring Tennis Club did not require the two courts any longer as it now had its own. Meeting in November that year, the new committee felt that the club should take back the two courts "as we were not in a position to expand the club with a single court". It discussed ways of attracting new members, such as advertising in the Caversham Bridge newspaper and inviting Goring and Caversham Park tennis club members to join.

In February 1973, the committee discussed conditions that had been offered by the parish council for them to take over the lease of the two original courts. "These conditions were acceptable to the committee," say the minutes of that meeting. The club's five-year "exile" from its original and natural home was coming to an end. But a cautionary approach was adopted, and the club accepted the offer for two courts from April 1, 1973, "initially for a period of one year".

The club expanded steadily, says Ray Court. "To my mind one of the significant factors in its rebirth were that Noel Postles (the new club secretary) was able to strike up a very co-operative relationship with the Parish Council, particularly with the leader of the council, Col. Elliott, who became very favourably disposed to us. This led to our taking over the two double courts from Goring at a reasonable rent when Goring moved back to their courts. It must have been galling to Col. Elliott to see another village club using the Mapledurham facilities, so we were welcomed by him."

But ironically there was another twist to the saga. In April 1973, Goring told the chairman of Mapledurham club that their new courts were unfit for play, and wondered if they could play on Mapledurham's courts for a limited period. It was agreed that Goring members could use one of the courts on Tuesday and Thursday evenings - without payment, it seems.

Membership was now booming. At a committee meeting on April 7 that year, a total of 17 new members were admitted into the club. At the 1973 AGM, the treasurer reported that the current membership figures were "39 family members, 96 adult members, 23 junior over 14, 29 junior between 10 and 14, and 13 junior between 8 and 10".

In less than a year, the club prospects had therefore undergone a transformation. Adult membership was increased to £3; the rate for family membership was set at £5, at £2 for juniors between 14-18 and £1-50 for under 14s. The meeting resolved that junior members would have preferential use of the courts on Friday evenings. It also decided to hold an American tournament that summer.

Minutes of a committee meeting held on June 25, 1973, record a new problem for the club - it was now almost full! "It was agreed that no further junior members should be accepted for the time being, and it was clear that some restriction on other applications would be necessary." While Mapledurham residents would have priority - it seems they were again automatically admitted - there would be a waiting list for others. After the possibility of being dissolved only two years before, this was an astonishing transformation! These minutes also record that a match was played against Caversham Park - and won by 12 sets to six. This was probably the first match the club had played for almost 10 years.

By the summer of 1973, coaching was under way again, under the watchful eye of Daphne Ayling, who had been instrumental in getting Goring tennis club to lease the two courts in 1968. Indeed another "significant factor" in

the club's rebirth, says Ray Court, "was that Daphne Ayling stayed with us. Her coaching abilities were a great encouragement to youngsters who in turn attracted their parents into membership. Her influence in this respect cannot be overstated". Both adults and juniors seemed delighted with Daphne's coaching and later that summer presented her with a picnic hamper as a token of thanks.

Daphne Ayling "also brought some semblance of authority to the club", says Ray. "She was steeped in tennis, her son was a county player and she was a member of the Oxfordshire LTA Committee. Being kept in order by Daphne had its downside too! I remember on one occasion when we had a social evening someone had the bright idea of having our allocation of a pair of Wimbledon Men's Finals tickets as the prize in the raffle. This engendered great excitement but at the 11th hour Daphne vetoed the scheme by indicating that we would be reported to the LTA and would never be allocated Wimbledon tickets again. She was right of course. Regulations re tickets are now not only tight but very well publicised, but 20 years ago the situation was not so clear and there was great disappointment on the night!"

Later in 1973 the MPFMC offered the club an arrangement under which it would pay £100 a year for renting the original two courts, an amount which was to be reviewed annually. This appears to have been accepted. By the start of 1974 the club had 120 members and was arranging five matches with other clubs, and an American tournament and a junior American tournament.

The long-awaited construction of a new pavilion to replace the old memorial hall was finally nearing a start in 1974, but it seemed without the facilities that the tennis club wanted. While the building was going ahead it seemed that it would initially lack any facilities for tennis, cricket and football clubs. Financial considerations, caused by inflation, were cited as the reason. Minutes of a September 1974 meeting refer to the possibility of the club "completing the changing rooms on a do-it-yourself basis". It was not clear how this was to be done. The club applied to the South Oxfordshire District Council for a grant "towards the completion of changing room facilities". But the application does not appear to have been successful.

The parish council appears to have had a change of heart, however, and found another £5000 to allow the pavilion to be completed. In early 1975 the pavilion was built and the club donated £40 to the playing fields committee for "fixtures and fittings". The tennis club was allocated, for its

sole use, the room close to the courts with kitchen and shower facilities nearby. "The comparison with the old lobby was chalk and cheese", says Ray Court.

March 1975 marked another milestone when the club's application for league status in the Oxfordshire Lawn Tennis Association was granted. This set the stage for the start of league tennis at Mapledurham. Brian Orpwood who had been "vital in getting the club to play matches against other clubs and in entering the South Oxfordshire league," says Ray Court, became team captain. "There were other good players, like Miller Ross and Brian Hazell," says Ray, "but it was Brian who was the backbone of any team and as he played regularly his presence meant that even if we lost, the other side were given a game".

"With inter-club matches the standard of play improved throughout the club and this was important to our enjoyment and the club's well being in attracting members. Also in the context of the club's playing ability I think it was valuable to have for a time the services of the Caversham club's coach, Robin Sharp, who used to coach the men on a Saturday morning. Robin's advice, particularly as regards tactics and the rudiments of doubles play, was a great help to those of us who did not have a tennis background and had had no formal training", recalls Ray Court.

The pointer to the interest of club members was seen at the 1975 annual general meeting when there was a rare occurrence for any voluntary organisation - an election for members to the committee! Nine members had stood for election, and six were successful. Members decided at the meeting to expand club nights, with Monday evening beginning with junior coaching, followed by the usual club evening, and to have a family evening on Tuesdays, club evenings again on Wednesdays, an open evening on Thursdays (to invite non-members presumably); match practice on the single court on Friday, and the double court reserved for the juniors, matches or club afternoons on Saturday, and club afternoons on Sunday. An ambitious programme!

During 1975, according to club records, Daphne Ayling coached younger members on Monday evenings, and Robin Sharp coached the men on alternate Saturdays. The minutes of a committee meeting held in April that year note that Mr Sharp would be asked "if he had any free time in which to coach the ladies". Were the ladies the club's poor relations, or so superior in tennis ability to men that they could be justifiably second in line to the men for coaching? Who knows! But the ladies had to wait until October that year before there was any coaching for them.

In June 1975 the club was offered a seven-year lease on the courts but the committee seemed to favour only a three-year lease. The rent increased, as expected, and the playing fields committee took over the third court, and agreed to meet two-thirds of court maintenance costs, with one-third to come from the tennis club. There was also a change in the air with the re-drawing of county boundaries which meant that the playing fields would be geographically part of Berkshire, instead of Oxfordshire. But as the land was still privately owned by a Management Trust, "it would never belong to Reading Council," the tennis club committee was informed by the playing fields committee. The playing fields continued to be organised by a management committee on which users of the facilities, and also local councillors, were represented.

Consolidation

The club was now entering a more settled period. Alarming for the historian, no minutes of committee meetings survive for the period 1976 to mid-1978! However at least 20 present-day members were members in the mid to late 1970s. League matches with other clubs were now underway in earnest, and for competitive and non-competitive spirits alike, Mapledurham was a pleasant place to play tennis. Family members made up a high proportion of the club and children of all ages graced the courts. Club nights were well-attended, but the courts were not too crowded, allowing everyone to play without too much waiting.

Club members and club nights were notable for a wide range of playing abilities. A hallmark of the club was the way that good players mixed with and encouraged people whose abilities were limited. When a committee member suggested that the club might like to introduce a playing-in rule "to raise the standard of play" - as exists at Caversham Tennis Club - the committee decided in favour "of leaving membership open irrespective of standard of play".

On the social side the formal dinner dances of the late 1950s and 1960s had given way to barn dances, which were great, chaotic fun as most people ignored the caller and created new "dances" of their own - it would be pushing it a bit far to call them "dancing". These were very distinctive Mapledurham barn dances!

Family membership in 1978 cost £10-50, adult membership £6-50, while juniors aged 15 to 17 paid £4-50 and those of 14 and under £3-50. There was an incentive discount of 50p on all subscriptions if they were paid on time!

In 1978 the club was full, and applicants for membership joined a waiting list and were accepted when an existing member resigned. While most tennis at the club was played at the weekends and on summer evenings, a number of lady members played regularly once or twice a week in the daytime during the week.

The singles court was re-surfaced in early 1978, with Reading Borough Council meeting two-thirds of the cost. The two original courts had a good, regular surface, but the singles court was shale and uneven in parts, and the least popular! This continued, even after the re-surfacing, probably because it was comparatively isolated compared with the other two.

The annual general meeting of the club, in October 1978, marked another milestone when Ray Court stood down as chairman. It had been the enthusiasm of Ray and a small band of others who revived a then dormant club in the early 1970s. Peter Adamson took over as only the club's fourth chairman in a period spanning 22 years.

A committee meeting the following month, November 1978, discussed the possibility of floodlighting the courts. Brian Orpwood and Rodney Pinchen agreed to prepare a feasibility study and minutes of the meeting note that "present estimates allowing for wiring to be done by members of the club is £250". Minutes of a meeting held in January 1979 indicate that the council "would in principle agree to a scheme being drawn up to install floodlights on the single court".

But the scheme was never likely to be plain sailing; the chairman of the users' committee was soon to express the view that difficulties may be encountered "in view of a Reading Borough Council by-law which requires that parks be closed half an hour before sunset". Mapledurham playing fields could not be "closed", in the sense of locking gates, but it seemed that the by-law could still apply. At the time of writing, however, (November 1998) the club was still hoping for floodlighting, its application having been turned down by Reading Borough Council. And the sum was, by then, greatly in excess of £250.

In March 1979 a new social event was held, a pub games evening, at a member's home, and turned out to be hugely successful, becoming an annual occasion for several years. Barn dances, skittles evenings and end-of-the-season dinner dances had also become regular features of the club's social life. On the playing side, club nights continued to be well-attended, club tournaments were well-supported, regular ladies' days and American tournaments were held, and junior coaching was in demand (although not in

the summer holidays it seems), under the skilled eye of Daphne Ayling. In 1979, around 30 juniors received coaching, and some of them were to go on to become outstanding players.

Also in 1979 the club decided to fence in the small area between the club house and the courts; this was to give members a kind of paddock to sit and watch the tennis, and it helped to deter people from walking in front of the court with their dogs. With children using the courts regularly, there was concern about dogs fouling the area. Members with dogs were asked to leave them at home when they came to play tennis.

Overall, with children, the club now had about 200 members, which the 1979 annual general meeting noted was about the right number. The meeting heard that Reading Borough Council had still not decided whether to grant new leases to the MPFMC, and that the council was looking for an increase in income of around 20 per cent. The accounts for the year show that subscriptions totalled £843, and that the rent from the courts and clubroom was £439. At the end of the year the club had funds of £753. Nonetheless, to cover the extra income required by the council, the AGM resolved to raise subscriptions by 20 per cent. Family membership went up to £13, the adult to £9.

The meeting also decided that winter tennis would become a feature of club life, with club sessions to be held on alternate Saturday mornings and Sunday afternoons. While the Saturday morning arrangement was not to last very long, Sunday afternoon sessions continued - if on and off - for many years.

Converting the single court into a double court was on the agenda at the committee meeting in February 1980, but members wanted clarification from Reading Borough Council about the renewal of the lease. This had to be settled first, believed the committee, before expenditure on a new court was considered. Nonetheless, they resolved to seek quotations from three contractors to build a new court. But minutes for September 1980 record that the council was still unable to agree any permanent arrangement with the club, because it was having difficulty "in agreeing suitable provisions with the Charity Commissioners"; (the playing fields were then under the commissioners' jurisdiction). Until that was sorted out, the club was expected to make do with a year-by-year arrangement.

Quotations had been received for building a fourth court, all of which were in the region of £5,500, but the committee agreed they could not proceed with this until the lease had been finalised. But the meeting also noted

that the "use of courts this season has been disappointing", with club nights poorly supported. Poor summer weather seemed partly responsible. The demand for junior coaching also dropped off in 1980, with only six juniors requesting coaching, and a planned tournament for juniors was abandoned for lack of response. Subscription revenues were up, however, because of the increased rates.

At the October 1980 annual general meeting, Peter Adamson stood down as chairman and was replaced by Rodney Pinchen, the fifth man to take the role. Sexism dies hard in tennis clubs, and a woman was yet to be elected to the chair. After the long stints of the club's early chairmen, it now seemed likely that future chairmen would serve shorter terms.

There was concern among committee members about the general lack of interest in tournaments. Minutes of a December 1980 meeting refer to "a certain amount of apathy among members"; (about playing in tournaments). They went on to say: "the club is in danger of perhaps becoming merely public courts if club members do not show stronger support". A handicap tournament was suggested, and it agreed that the first American tournament of 1981, scheduled for April, should include a barbecue. The new chairman sent a rallying letter to members extolling the joys of winter tennis, and hinting that more might like to take part in the club tournaments.

The junior tournament was revived in 1981 and was well supported. And about 30 juniors registered for coaching, a marked increase on the previous year. It was suggested that a junior team should play against other clubs. In 1981, members made better use of the courts and for some club evenings, especially around the time of Wimbledon, some 30 members turned out. As only 12 could play at any one time, this meant some long waits for a game! But it was always a good opportunity to socialise. And a few more members had taken part in the club tournaments.

The club's 25th anniversary came and went in July 1981 with talk of the fourth court and floodlighting for the third court on a back-burner. Bureaucracy, or perhaps just the unique background of Mapledurham playing fields, has meant the club did not have enough certainty about the future to expand. But the anniversary was not marked. None of the club's members were founder members, so probably no one was aware of it. History, even recent history, has to be recorded or it is soon lost. The reason for this account is to record the first 25 years of Mapledurham Lawn Tennis Club at a time (in 1998) when some of the founder members were alive, and when the club's records were mostly still intact.

In 1981 the club was a pleasant place to play tennis on summer days and evenings - and also on cold, brisk winter days! If the number who played in tournaments was low, this was due to the fact that many members were not competitively minded and just wanted to belong to a club where they could go occasionally to enjoy a pleasant set of tennis with others who felt much the same. That was the uniqueness of the club throughout its first 25 years.

Postscript: The last paragraph holds true in November 1998, when this history was completed. A planning application for floodlights was turned down on appeal in 1996, but another application was being considered. The three courts were in excellent condition, membership was buoyant and made up, as it always had been, of people of a wide variety of playing abilities. Mapledurham was a friendly place for a game of tennis.

Club matches by Brian Orpwood

Once a hard core of members expressed an interest in playing matches against other clubs, in 1970, several mens friendly fixtures were organised with Caversham Park club and a few with Goring. When Goring left to return to their own new courts (in 1972), we continued friendly fixtures with them, where initially a trip to the loo necessitated a long trek to the railway station! In 1972 the club was still playing only mens friendly matches. All six members of the team, having recently played and won eight matches on the trot, decided it was time to venture into the Oxfordshire league and enter one mens team. Another factor which influenced this decision was the increasing club membership which meant there should be a larger pool of players on which to draw. Daphne Ayling was instrumental in this process and in the encouragement of the younger players, some of whom in later years reached county standard. Without her help, enthusiasm and expertise the club would not have flourished as it did.

In 1973 serious league tennis began. In our first season in the Oxfordshire league (division 7) the team usually comprised Brian Hazell, Ray Court, David Baker, Noel Postles, Brian Orpwood and Bill Pitkeathley. We lost only one match and finished second. Despite this, we were not promoted to the higher division where we felt we belonged, and which would stretch our games. The 1974 season followed the same pattern, including the lack of promotion. We informed the OLTC that we would be entering the Berkshire league the following season. The result was immediate promotion! So, in 1975, in division 6 the mens team enjoyed better playing conditions, encountered different clubs and at the end of the season were

promoted again, to division 5. One really useful and lasting contact made at this time was Paul Neighbour of Chinnor LTC, who later started and still organises the winter league in which the club now has two mens and two ladies teams.

In 1976 the increased membership and enthusiasm of the club encouraged us to enter a mixed team, which came first in division 6, thus gaining promotion. This success raised the question of whether the club could also manage to field a ladies team in the league. It was decided that we should, and Chris Ross became its captain. 1977 was a good year for the club as far as competitive tennis was concerned. The newly entered ladies won their division and were promoted to division 4 for the following season. The mens and mixed teams were both successful and promoted, which meant that after only five years in the Oxfordshire league we had three teams in division 4.

During these years friendly mixed fixtures were still being played, giving match experience to some non-team members. However there was an increasing tendency for these matches to be cancelled by the opposition, so in 1978 we took the plunge and entered another two mixed teams in the league for the following season. The ladies team was still going strong, finished second and was promoted again, to division 3, for the 1979 season. This season was again quite successful. The men continued their upward path and at the end of the summer were promoted yet again. The other teams all maintained their positions. It was at this stage the club decided to enter a second men's team which would enter the league in 1980 in division 7 (where it stayed for seven years). In that year all the teams remained static apart from the mixed B which was promoted from division 6 to 5. In 1981 the mixed A was promoted to division 3, due in no small part to the arrival of Cedric and Janet Field, whose names are prominent on our honours board.

These early years were on the whole the ones of greatest success and progress for the club, although there were some good years to come, (notably 1984 when the mixed A reached the giddy heights of division 2, 1986 when the same thing happened to the ladies, and 1987 when the mens A did so too. Perhaps the high point for the club was in 1988 when the men's A missed promotion to division 1 by one rubber in the last match of the season. However this may have been fortuitous as the following year the young and energetic stars of the team had spread their wings and flown off to pastures new.)