

# *The Bowdon Sheaf*

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## **Bowdon History Society - 25 Years**

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of Bowdon History Society. In 1979 the vicar, Canon Maurice Ridgway, called a public meeting at which, following consultation with interested parishioners, he recommended the formation of a history society to study and record the rich heritage of Bowdon. The resolution was accepted unanimously and the vicar then resigned, as self-appointed temporary chairman, in favour of Mrs Cox who as a professional historian, he considered to be better qualified to hold the office.

Following this adoption a committee was formed and the work began of organising the society. The word local was omitted from the title as, by doing so, the opportunity was provided to expand interest beyond the immediate confines of the parish, but focusing on the main interest in Bowdon.

Canon Ridgway, as a committee member, was very keen that the approach of the Society should be broad based to cover as wide an aspect of the very long history as possible, and not to confine it to narrow aspects of the subject, in order to encourage every section of the community to participate. Similarly it was recommended that, whilst trivia should be avoided, an over academic approach would be inappropriate and that interest should be maintained at a popular level. In view of the strength of membership, compared with other Cheshire Societies, of the length of its existence, it would appear that Bowdon History Society has so far achieved its aims.

During the twenty five year period over 200 talks have been given, 43 issues of the Bowdon Sheaf have been published as well as several larger publications, notably 'Bowdon Hall & Its People' and the Millennium Book 'Bowdon & Dunham Massey', now in second edition. Visits have also been made to places that have historic connections with Bowdon.

In the contemporary global attitude of rejection of smaller local community interests by larger dominating authorities, it is essential that those at the lower level should maintain their independent heritage & subculture for the benefit and enrichment of future generations.

These factors should also be very seriously considered at national level in view of the increasingly dominating influences of Washington and Brussels.

## **Bowdon Lawn Tennis Club**

In 1877 J. R. Bradbury negotiated to rent a plot of land measuring 2060 sq yds from the Earl of Stamford. The land lay at the end of Elcho Road on the north side of the Devisdale, a huge open meadowland ringed by ancient trees. Four grass courts were laid and this small ground was named the Bowdon Lawn Tennis Club. With a membership of approximately seventy two gentlemen with a committee headed by a Treasurer, a Secretary and a Ground Manager, to oversee the club. By 1893, a Mixed Doubles Tournament was played. A photograph of that year shows ladies and gentlemen both participating, with spectators seated at tables around the courts. In the distance, across the open fields can be seen the old spire of St Margaret's Church on the Dunham Road.

The ladies who are playing in these early photographs came from the Ladies Lawn Tennis Club to the east of Bowdon Lawn Tennis Club over the land owned by the North Cheshire Water Company and beyond the big tree. For the sum of £1 a year Miss Rachel Heald, as ground manager, had rented a plot of land from the Earl of Stamford. It must have been a fairly rough piece of grass separated from the Devisdale meadowland by only a stretch of iron railing. Doubtless Clibrans, the nurserymen who were to level the courts and Mr Garner, the Groundsman (paid 12 shillings a week in summer and 5 shillings in winter) waged continual battle against the buttercup and clover seeds which would have wafted in on the summer breezes. The Ladies Lawn Tennis Club comprised fifty-six members headed by Miss Heald, Miss Gaddum, Mrs Nield, Mrs Haworth and Mrs Golland - names well known in Bowdon.

The minutes of the Club give a glimpse of old Victorian Bowdon, into a way of life which was to disappear forever with the events of 1914. The ladies, meeting annually at 'the hut on Devisdale' discussed the subscription, set at one guinea for full members and 10s 6d for country members, the cost of relaying the four courts and the decision to hold an 'entertainment' to be entitled 'The Cafe Chantant' to defray some of the expense. Lively debate ensued every year as to the best dates for the 'At Home' events, how the needs of the croquet players on their undersized lawn could be reconciled with the requirements of the lawn tennis players. The club's domestic arrangements were also important: Mrs Alice Walton looked after the Hut and the teas, the cakes for those long, lazy summer afternoons were to be brought from Mrs Scott's on Station Road. In 1902, the ladies had a new pavilion built, again paid for by a dramatic and musical entertainment and this time held at Bowdon College on South Downs Road. The pavilion, which was constructed by Pennington the joinery company on Stamford Road, had a verandah, two dressing rooms, a kitchen with a china cupboard and it measured approximately 15' x 12', at a cost of £75. Despite the passing of nearly a century, the excitement accompanying the plans for the opening of the new pavilion is conveyed to the reader of the minutes; members of the Gentlemen's Club were to be invited, so the courts must be in good condition; will Mr Garner, no longer in the first flush of youth be able to cope? A primus stove will be required for tea and extra tablecloths and tea cloths must be clean and ready for the day.

No description remains about the opening of the little pavilion on May 10th 1902. One is left to imagine long ago, a warm day in summer, with perhaps some sort of celebratory tournament being played beneath the spreading branches of the trees, and ladies and gentlemen gathering in the pavilion on the edge of the Devisdale for cups of tea and cakes from Mrs Scott's.

That day must have gone well. For with the close of 1903 came discussion about the possible amalgamation of the two clubs. Members of the Ladies Lawn Tennis Club, their sisters and daughters, and wives, sisters and daughters of Bowdon Lawn Tennis Club members, were all invited to play at Bowdon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays after 4pm. Similarly, the Ladies ground was to be open to members of the Gentlemen's Club on Tuesdays and Thursdays. One groundsman was in future, to manage both grounds. The co-operation between the two clubs was obviously successful. It relieved the men on the one hand, from the necessity of sorting out refreshments; tea was to be provided by the ladies every Wednesday and Saturday at a charge of only sixpence. The ladies on the other hand, no longer had to fret about the exorbitant cost of balls, netting and leaning tennis posts since this side of affairs was now managed by the gentlemen. With the greater availability of grass courts, two lawns at the Ladies Club were to be permanently given over to croquet.

This reciprocal arrangement continued to flourish and develop as the years passed. Still however, the two clubs paid their individual rents to the Earl of Stamford and maintained their separate locations. In 1906, both clubs contributed to the Welcome Fund for the Earl and Countess of Stamford on their arrival at Dunham Massey. Old committee members gave way to new ones, Miss Rachel Heald, the founder of the Ladies Lawn Tennis Club died in 1908. Younger sisters were now allowed to play at the club in the school holidays and boys under seventeen were permitted to play in the mornings provided that they brought their own tennis balls and were chaperoned by an existing member. Then on July 8th, 1914, shortly before the outbreak of war, an Extraordinary General Meeting was held at the Bowdon Lawn Tennis Club. It was resolved that the two clubs should join as one, but the outbreak of war, just four weeks later, caused the amalgamation to be deferred and consequently the seventeen members of the club, including those mentioned above, who were killed in action, were never to see it happen.

The years 1914-18 saw a suspension of the Annual Tournaments as many of the members were away at the Front, their subscriptions waived. Both clubs contributed funds to the Altrincham War Depot, Bowdon ladies made sandbags for the war effort in the pavilion, and it was suggested that officers at the John Leigh Hospital might use the grounds. The ladies were invited to use the lawns at BLTC at any time so their club was closed and sheep put to graze on the grass.

In the year following the Armistice, the Annual Tournament was once again held and plans for the amalgamation of the clubs were resumed, in 1920, the first joint meeting was held when it was proposed to lease an adjoining plot of land and to surrender the old plot on which the ladies club had stood. The membership now stood at eighty gentlemen and eighty ladies. Grass court numbers 5, 6, 7 and 8 were laid and estimates obtained for the laying down of two hard courts. The pavilion at the Gentlemen's Club was enlarged at each end to accommodate the increased membership and the trees adjacent to it, felled. The Ladies pavilion was taken down from its old spot by the railings on the Devisdale and reassembled at the left of the entrance on Elcho Road.

It became traditional that the Annual Bowdon Tennis Tournament should be held in the week after Wimbledon. The Coleman Cup for Ladies Singles was introduced in 1924, followed by the Leaf Cup for Men's Singles in 1930. In 1936, the Jubilee Cups were played for in a Mixed Doubles (Level) event. Membership expanded, including in the list such names as Miss Lamb of Denzell House, Herbert Lee of Hilston House and Lord Stamford of Dunham Massey. A Tournament Dance took place for the first time in 1923 and Juniors were now allowed to play on both grass and hard courts. Electric lights were installed in the pavilion in 1934 replacing the gas ones which the ladies had welcomed as a modern alternative to oil lamps just thirty two years before.

In 1930, a group of trustees for the club were able to purchase the land that had hitherto been held on lease from Lord Stamford. Additional land stretching to Green Walk was made available and the sum of £1298 7s 6d was paid. The Altrincham Agricultural Society removed the cattle and plans for a new clubhouse and two squash courts were drawn up by the committee. Disappointingly, the final estimate was too high, so instead, another hard court was added for £225, making a total of three. Thirty years later, plans to purchase the defunct reservoir on the Water Company's land to the east of the club proved unsuccessful when it was hoped to make the reservoir into a swimming pool which was opposed by the Earl of Stamford and so the land reverted to part of the Devisdale. With this final purchase of land in 1930, BLTC possessed eight grass courts, three hard courts and land for further expansion when required. When in 1939 the Second World War began and tennis activities ceased all energies were concentrated on the war effort, all tournaments were suspended. Subscriptions for those serving in His Majesty's Forces were again waived, and although the AGM's continued throughout the war, accounts, in the interests of economy were not sent out. After 1945, the return to normality was slow, for the club was desperately in need of tennis posts, nets and string netting, however, by July 1948, it was possible to hold a weekend tournament, the first since 1939. It was the start of a new era.

The Annual Tournament was restarted the following year and the number of events rose steadily to twelve. A Junior Tournament was played in September though the date was later moved to the third week in July. Coaching had been offered by Mr Nash in the 1930's at a cost of 2s 6d a lesson and after the war, Miss Shaw gave lessons to both adults and juniors for 6s a half hour. Every year promising juniors were recommended for County Coaching and participated in County Championships. The age of competitive tennis had arrived in Bowdon.

In the sixties and seventies, tennis at Bowdon was greatly strengthened by the presence of several county players. From 1961 Mrs R D Armstrong, an ex-Cheshire captain and Wimbledon player, dominated the Tournament scene, winning the Mixed Doubles (Level) with her husband, also a county player, no less than five times. The Ladies team included two other county players, Mrs Cathy Savage and Mrs Mary Penn, who also played at Wimbledon, and in the Cheshire County LTA Championships of 1972-74, Bowdon were twice winners. Ten years on, Bowdon won the Cheshire Ladies Veterans Championship. In 1986, the Men's First Team won the North East Cheshire League Division VII and in the following year won Division VI.

More recently Bowdon Men's Teams 1 and 2 have played in Division III and VIII respectively of the NECL and the Ladies Team in Division V. In addition, the junior teams have been successful; the U18 play in Division III and the U15 and U13 in Division I of the Junior NECL.

In 1991 another court was built and all four courts were astro-turfed for all round play, and membership and success went from strength to strength.

**Booth Mansion, Chester**  
**by Ronald Trenbath.**

When George Booth, 2nd Earl of Warrington, succeeded to his estates and titles in 1694, his first task was to re-establish his fortunes and properties, following their decline through neglect as a result of the political aspirations of his father and grandfather. During the remainder of his life he rebuilt his town house, Booth Mansion, in Chester, Bowdon Hall in Bowdon, and his main house, Dunham Massey Hall, and replanned and replanted the adjoining deer park.

In 1700 Booth rebuilt an imposing town house in the Rows on Watergate Street, Chester, to be known as Booth Mansion. In his petition to the City Assembly, for permission to undertake the work, Booth promised to rebuild his existing dwelling house, and the one adjoining it, and replace them with a new building which would be 'an ornament to the street'.

The two existing buildings were of stone construction and dated about 1260 and 1280 respectively, and sufficient of Booth's original house survives, within the later building, to allow a full reconstruction of it. A decorated timber arcade in the other house has been tree-ringed and dated to about 1260, making it the oldest piece of carpentry in the country.

These thirteenth century houses had at a slightly lower level than the street, stone undercrofts supporting strong wooden floors with massive timber joists and boarding, which were covered in hardcore and blinded with ashes to support thick stone paving slabs to ensure protection from fire. Stone cupboards were let into the walls and stone arches were built over the Row, much of which survives today. Each building would comprise a shop, sleeping chambers, a kitchen, stables and brew house for a merchant and his family.

The Row was at first floor level and constituted a right-of-way, which had to be maintained by the owner, an obligation still in force today.

Booth's new superstructure was built in brick with a grand staircase to an upper floor which contained large and spacious reception rooms. The front facade was of Dutch classical design, introduced into this country after the accession of William and Mary and adapted by Christopher Wren and Roger Pratt, and included facing brickwork with stone quoins, leaded cross windows, a large projecting cornice and classical columns along the Row and was built out of alignment with neighbouring property in order to distinguish it from them.

The family took up residence here during the Season' where they would entertain lavishly and enjoy the company of guests and neighbours and attend social functions.

Booth Mansion like most of the buildings constructed for the Earl have many common features with a distinct crudity of design, compared with other buildings of the period in Cheshire, such as Oulton Park (1716) and Aston Park (1715). A Huguenot, Boujet, appears to have been one of the earliest architects commissioned by Booth, followed by John Norris, but to date there is little information regarding who was responsible for other works undertaken on his behalf.



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