

**The Ancestor of All Baseliners
Herbert Lawford and the Evolution of Lawn Tennis**

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**The Ancestor of All Baseliners
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Introduction

Herbert Fortescue Lawford took up lawn tennis in the year after the All England club laid down the rules of the modern game¹ and he competed at Wimbledon in every year from 1878 to 1889. The Irish Championships then ranked second in the tournament firmament and in 1880 he joined the English expedition to Dublin and was to play in the national Irish singles event with similar consistency every year until 1889, prompting Dublin's *Freeman's Journal* of May that year to bestow the accolade *ipsis hibernis hiberniores* – more Irish than the Irish themselves². By 1880 he was ranked amongst the top four players in the British game and he competed at the top for the whole of the first decade during which the tournament game was established. He was one of the game's principal pioneer players and second in influence only to William Renshaw, albeit a distant second.

The All England Club held its first tournament in 1877 when lawn tennis was in its infancy. The first Wimbledon champion, Spencer Gore, describes the 1877 event as the introduction of lawn tennis as a recognisable game: "From the date of the first championship the history of lawn tennis begins, for before that time the state of the game might be described as a state of chaos", with players "grovelling in an hour-glass court, with balls of all sorts and sizes, and governed by laws varying according to the size of the lawn and the surrounding accidents of nature"³. Herbert was therefore in at the start and he played through what could be described as the three initial phases in the development of the singles game: the first was what Gore called the "pat ball" phase, when players tried to win through consistency alone, aiming just to keep the ball in play until their adversary made an error; the second phase – initiated by the Renshaw twins - was dominance by volley, when players sought to move into a position just behind the service line at the earliest opportunity to kill their opponent's ground strokes; and the third was the all-court phase, when baseline play improved and players were forced back from the service line and had to establish control in a rally before advancing to volley from close to the net. Herbert collaborated in the first phase and was as attritional in his play as anyone, famously playing an eighty-one stroke rally in 1880 (- Herbert lost the rally but won the match⁴ and years later explained that he was off his game and was forced to play defensively⁵). In the second phase he resisted almost alone the cult of the volley and in so doing instigated the third "all-court" phase in which after a rule change reducing the height of the net at the posts, both baseliner and volleyer adopted aspects of each other's game and a balanced approach emerged. Herbert's principal successes on court came in the first and third phases.

Tournaments in the nineteenth century tended to utilise a Challenge Round system and results have to be seen in its context. Typically an open All Comers knockout competition was held first of all with the reigning champion standing aside while a challenger was selected by a process of elimination. The winner of the All Comers then played the champion in a Challenge Round and either the old reign was extended or a new reign begun. The system

¹ Badminton Library, Lawn Tennis, "Match-Playing", H.F. Lawford, p.277. HFL took up the game at 26.

² Freeman's Journal 21/5/1889 p.6

³ Badminton, "A Reminiscence Of Fifteen Years of Lawn Tennis", SW Gore, top p.282 & base p.281

⁴ Field 3/7/1880. HFL v. E. Lubbock.

⁵ "The House on Sport", Ed WA Morgan, Gale & Polden 1898, p.427 & 428. "...in three hours and seven minutes, [I] won by playing the worst Tennis I was ever guilty of in public."

was followed at both Wimbledon and the Irish Championships but not at Prince's, which ranked third in the tournament hierarchy until it ceased in 1883. It followed that a defeated champion could not be classified as "runner-up" and indeed had nothing to show for his participation; someone who failed to win a single match in a competition could not reasonably be described as coming second⁶ and a vanquished challenger had achieved more than the runner-up in an open competition; the former had defeated all entrants other than the old champion, the latter had defeated just half the field.

Herbert's first singles successes came in 1880 when he won Prince's (after defeating William Renshaw) and then went on to win the All Comers at Wimbledon, losing to John Hartley in the challenge round. His successes in the three majors can be summarised as follows⁷:

- 1880: Wimbledon, All Comers winner; Prince's Club, champion
- 1881: Irish Championships, All Comers winner
- 1883: Prince's Club, champion
- 1884: Wimbledon, All Comers winner; Irish, All Comers winner & champion
- 1885: Wimbledon, All Comers winner; Irish, champion
- 1886: Wimbledon, All Comers winner; Irish, champion
- 1887: Wimbledon, All Comers winner & champion

Informally, on these results he could probably be given national rankings of second to Hartley in 1880 and second to William Renshaw in 1881 and 1884 to 1886; victory at Wimbledon in 1887 suggests a ranking of first but Ernest Renshaw claimed the Irish crown in Dublin that year and really he was the player on form in his brother's absence through injury, so perhaps a joint first. At men's doubles Herbert won the first All England competition in Oxford in 1879 and he enjoyed some success in Ireland, becoming Irish champion in 1880 in partnership with A.J. Mulholland and winning the Irish All Comers in 1884 with Ernest Browne. He won the Wimbledon singles All Comers five times in all, which was as many as the two Renshaws put together (William twice, Ernest three times)⁸. His feat in winning four years running between 1884 and 1887 was a landmark in consistent match winning.

Herbert was a member of the All England Club by May 1880⁹ and he took up residence in Wimbledon in 1884, making his home on the Common just west of the Royal Wimbledon golf clubhouse and living there in sylvan comfort until 1909. Apart from making a direct contribution to the development of the tactics and strokeplay of the game, he played his part in its administration, joining the All England club management committee in 1882¹⁰ and assisting in the launch of the Lawn Tennis Association in 1888¹¹. His rivalry with the Renshaws, and his jousts with William in the challenge rounds of 1884 to 1886, did much to build the popularity of the All England championships.

To make sense of Herbert's tennis career it is necessary to take account of the evolution of the tournament game because it changed as he played and in many ways his decade was the key formative period. In the beginning there were real tennis and rackets players applying their familiar strokes to unfamiliar rubber balls bouncing on unfamiliar surfaces; by the end there were lawn tennis players with their own strokes - overarm serves,

⁶ In the AELTC Official Jubilee Souvenir Publication of 1926 the Championship Roll on p.79 omitted the names of champions losing in the challenge round but included the names of "second" in the All Comers.

⁷ See Appendix 1 to Chapter 4 below

⁸ "Fifty Years of Wimbledon", AWM, The Field 1926, p.79

⁹ Field 29/5/1880 p.584 (Irish) & 3/7/1880 p.15 (Prince's)

¹⁰ See Chapter 1, p.9, footnote 45 below ("Among the new...").

¹¹ Field 28/4/1888 p.589. HFL attended the LTA meeting & was appointed a Vice President for the coming year.

attacking volleys, the topspin forehand – and their own separate identity. Writing in 1903 on the methods of playing lawn tennis, Harold Mahony referred to “the Renshaw and Lawford era, when lawn tennis proper may be said to have begun”¹². Herbert and the Renshaws began playing at about the same time – Herbert possibly six months or so earlier – and from 1880 they were constantly in contention at the major tournaments. Between 1880 and 1889 the Wimbledon All Comers title was won only by Herbert or one of the twins and one of the three was champion for every year from 1881 to 1889; likewise one of the three was champion of Ireland for every year from 1880 to 1888, and during a life span from 1880 to 1883, the Prince’s club title was passed from Herbert to William to Ernest then back to Herbert. Herbert’s career was entwined with the Renshaws’ and it is impossible to consider it in isolation. Bearing in mind that the history of the All England club is a well trodden path, it therefore seemed fitting to begin an account of the evolution of lawn tennis by charting the development of the game in the Renshaw home town of Cheltenham.

Logic suggested this would be a brief enough exercise, as earlier historians had chosen to ignore it, but it proved to be anything but. There are various reasons for this. Firstly, Cheltenham Lawn Tennis Club had its origins in Cheltenham Croquet Club, which was founded in 1869 and had close links to the All England Club, and its history was rather longer than might have been expected. Secondly, it had a close connection to Cheltenham College, and this yielded a selection of tennis-playing old boys above and beyond the Renshaw twins and gave rise to a close relationship with the Fitzwilliam Club in Dublin, home of the Irish championships. (It is no surprise that Irish champion Vere Goold participated in Cheltenham’s inaugural open tournament in 1879.) There were particular social links between Cheltenham and Dublin. Thirdly, at a time when a woman’s place was considered to be in the home, Cheltenham proved to be a founding force behind women’s tournament tennis and early in that first decade the club developed a core of players that was unrivalled; the first reported open women’s doubles competition was held as part of the Cheltenham tournament of 1879¹³ and the first ladies Wimbledon champion in 1884 was a member of Cheltenham LTC¹⁴. Beyond this, James Lillywhite of the famous cricketing family and retailer *Lillywhite Frowd* – renowned as the founder of the Cheltenham cricket festival - played an important part in the development of Cheltenham’s tennis facilities and was near neighbour to the Renshaw family; his story is of interest in itself.

These factors combined to make an account of Cheltenham’s early tennis history much longer than I anticipated and I therefore concluded that the evolution of the tournament game and the detail of Herbert’s tennis career would best be covered separately, later. This volume therefore comprises just Herbert Lawford’s biography and an account of the flowering of lawn tennis in Cheltenham.

On a personal note, I should explain that my blood link to Herbert is remote and there are a good many other Lawford descendants living who are closer family. My great-grandfather Philip Lawford was just a second cousin to Herbert. However, their fathers were both City professionals working within walking distance of each other in London and the senior Lawfords both maintained the family tradition of membership of the Drapers Livery Company. The families were close and Philip and his brother Godfrey attended the same small prep school as Herbert and two of his brothers, arriving after Herbert had left but overlapping with

¹² “Lawn Tennis at Home and Abroad”, AWM, G Newnes 1903, p.3

¹³ Field 11/10/1879 p.493 & 18/10/1879 p.536. 1st ladies doubles of other major venues: Fitzwilliam 1880 (only 1 match played & event abandoned for 1881); Brighton & Edgbaston 1881, Bath & Northern 1882, All England (Buxton) 1885.

¹⁴ Maud Watson. Cheltenham Looker-On 26/7/1884 p.473 & Field 26/7/1884 p.138 (Wimbledon); Field 9/6/1883 p.766 (Cheltenham), Exeter & Plymouth Gazette 17/8/1883 p.6 (Exmouth)

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his brother Ernest in a pupil body of just forty. Paths diverged for secondary school and Philip then placed half the world between himself and Herbert's family by seeking his fortune in Australia (and regrettably not finding it). His brother Godfrey, however, joined the family firm of solicitors in the City and was joint executor with Herbert to Herbert's father¹⁵. Although my own branch of the family held no personal information on Herbert and his family, I was able to make contact with a great niece of his whose mother lived with Herbert in his final years in Scotland. I was also able to trace the grandson of the great friend mentioned in Herbert's will; the grandson's mother was close to Herbert and was nominated in his will to receive the lion's share of the Lawford tennis trophies. Both mothers had fond memories of Herbert and passed on to their children the impression of a sociable, good and kindly man.

N. Lawford, 2020

¹⁵ Probate for Thomas Acland Lawford 5/1/1885 ACU

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Biographical timeline for Herbert F. Lawford, 1851 to 1925

<u>Year</u>	<u>Day/month</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Chapter ref.</u>
1851	15-May	Born, family living at Gloucester Terrace, Hyde Park, London	Chapter 2
1858	By Feb	Resident with his family at Kenley, Calverley Park Gardens, Tunbridge Wells, Kent	Chapter 2
1863	By May	Became boarder at Windlesham House preparatory school in Brighton, Sussex	Chapter 2
1865	c. July Sept	Left Windlesham House School Became boarder at Repton School, Derbyshire	Chapter 3
1868	April c. May c. July November	Left Repton School Became resident in Edinburgh to attend Edinburgh Academy Left Edinburgh Academy Entered the Faculty of Arts of Edinburgh University to study Logic, Rhetoric & English Literature, and Natural Philosophy	Chapter 3
1870	c. August	Left Edinburgh University (did not graduate)	Chapter 3
1871	By 2 April	Began training as a stockbroker. Family resident in Tunbridge Wells	Chapter 4
1872	By March	Appointed one of three Clerks serving Steer, Lawford, Cuerton & Co, the family firm on the London Stock Exchange	Chapter 4
1873	By March	His family moved from Tunbridge Wells to Elmwood, Kenley, near Coulsdon, Surrey	Chapter 4
1874	27-Feb 23-Mar By March	Admitted as member of Drapers' Livery Company Admitted as member of London Stock Exchange Joined Barnes Association Football Club in London	Chapter 4
1875	By March	Became a partner of stockbrokers Steer, Lawford, Cuerton & Co	Chapter 4
1878	08-Jul Oct/Nov	Entered the All England Lawn Tennis Championships for the first time Played in early rounds of the FA cup for Barnes FC	Ch 4, App'x 1 Chapter 4
1879	By May	Joined The Carlton LTC, London (which became Maida Vale LTC in January 1880)	Chapter 4
1880	By May	Joined the All England Club, Wimbledon	Chapter 4
1882		Joined the management committee of the All England Club	Chapters 1 & 4
1884	By 31 Oct 04-Nov	His family moved from Kenley to Kinellan on Wimbledon Common Thomas Acland Lawford (Herbert's father) died	Chapter 4
1886	08-Sep	Married Edith Lawford, daughter of Herbert's cousin Alfred Lawford	Chapter 4
1887	07-Jul	Won All Comers at Wimbledon and became All England champion	Ch 4, App'x 1
1888	25-Apr	Appointed a Vice President of the Lawn Tennis Association	Introduction
1889	03-Jan	A son - Acland - born to Herbert & Edith at Kinellan, Wimbledon	Chapter 4
1894	January	Elected a member of Royal Wimbledon Golf Club	Chapter 4
1898		Joined Royal St George's Golf Club, Sandwich, Kent	Chapter 4
1903	By 25 Mar	Ceased to be a partner of Steer, Lawford & Co	Chapter 4
1909	July	Moved main residence to Drumnagesk, Aboyne, Scotland	Chapter 5
1910	By August	Joined Aboyne Golf Club	Chapter 4
1913	21-Oct	Edith Lawford, Herbert's wife, died	Chapter 5
1925	20-Apr	Died at Drumnagesk	Chapter 5

Note on main websites used and footnote abbreviations

Ancestry.co.uk (ACU)

Birth, marriage, death, census and electoral roll information was provided by this website. Also: information from general directories and detailed information in various instances on careers (most notably the London Stock Exchange), travel by sea and so on. For Scotland some information was also obtained from the ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk website – principally death and property information – and the abbreviation SCP refers to this website.

British Newspaper Archive (BNA)

All newspaper references other than those for the London Times should be assumed to derive from the British Newspaper Archive and where appropriate to incorporate the reference:

British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) & British Library Board

All *Field* references are sourced from the BNA but all *Pastime* references are derived from the inspection of records at the Kenneth Ritchie Wimbledon Library (at the AELTC)

Hard copy (HC)

The abbreviation HC indicates that a hard copy was seen or is held.

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, published online (ODNB)

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Scotland's People (SCP)

For Scotland some information was obtained from the ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk website, principally information on deaths and property.

Times Digital Archive (TDA)

References to *the Times* derive from the Times Digital Archive and where appropriate should be assumed to incorporate the reference:

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