

Newsletter

Oxford University Tennis Club



Winter 2025

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Our Chair, Neil Mortensen, serving during Open Doors

As you may have heard at the AGM, things at OUTC are really looking up. We now have the two key ingredients for a successful club, namely increasing membership numbers and court usage, and a stable financial outlook. I was concerned that as we had to increase the fees two years running this might have a detrimental effect, but not so. Thank you all for agreeing to continue with your higher costs of playing.

This means that we will now be able to continue to employ Nick Jamieson for another year and have a small surplus to improve the Club estate. A big

thank you to our special donors, who responding to the initiative led by Daniel Baltzer, have made donations and pledges worth around £40k over the next 3-4 years. There was a further piece of good financial news this year with HMRC agreeing to the Club subscription being eligible for gift aid relief. Both of these measures will give us some headroom should there be any unexpected financial shocks over the coming years.

It was Ashley Deakin's idea to introduce our new undergraduate real tennis star Bertie Vallat in an exhibition match before our Annual General Meeting. My goodness, what a success. I have never seen the galleries so packed to watch a game, and the whole event was inspiring. This was followed once again with wine, cheese, and charcuterie on court and then a very well attended business meeting. I was able to thank on your behalf our professionals, our committee and those committee members leaving the team.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

This edition of the Newsletter not only looks back over the last six months of the Club year and forward into 2026 but also takes us into the more distant past. Who was the mid-19th century 'Professor of Tennis' and what were his links to the Club? There's a follow-up to the summer edition's story about our Bickley floor. Just who was Joseph Bickley and why is he so important to the history of the game? And what links him to the Ernest Shepherd's 'Toad of Toad Hall'?

And, in case you're fed up with history, we have news of more recent changes and successes. There's the back story of our new Pro, Nick, and a report on his recent tournament success. Craig, too, enjoyed

CLUB MATTERS

AGM 2025 – 3rd December 2025

This year's Club AGM took place in the Clubhouse on 3 December, preceded by an Exhibition Match between Bertie Vallat, newly come to Oxford as a student at St Hugh's College, and Nino Merola, the Radley pro. For a report on the game see below – but first the AGM.

As in 2025, the AGM was held after a lavish on-court spread with wine, bread, cheese and cured

meats. The awesome exhibition match between Bertie Vallat and Nino Merola (see below) guaranteed a large crowd to squeeze into the Clubhouse for the AGM.

There is still much to be done. We are redrafting the constitution for our changing times, and a major revision of the website is in hand. We need help on the committee overseeing the estate, and with health and safety so please be in touch if you can help. There might otherwise have to be an old-fashioned tap on the shoulder.

If you have recently joined the Club, I do hope you feel welcome and that you are beginning to get to grips with real tennis and its wonderful foibles.

Finally, I have had to change the date for our real tennis dinner at Merton College. The final date is now Saturday September 5th, and there are some early details below of what we hope will be a wonderful occasion.

Neil Mortensen

tournament success at the recent British Open – along with a number of other players with Oxford links including Henry Henman and Bertie Vallat, recently come to Oxford as a freshman. And don't miss Craig's 'Ode to Tennis' on page 19.

Christmas time means AGM time. We enjoyed the now customary spread of good things on court, but this year's AGM came with an added bonus – a fantastic Exhibition match between Bertie and Nino Merola of Radley. A great finish to a good year.

Graham Harding

meats. The awesome exhibition match between Bertie Vallat and Nino Merola (see below) guaranteed a large crowd to squeeze into the Clubhouse for the AGM.

Before the AGM proper got underway, there was a presentation by Alastair Robinson and Norman Hyde of the Leamington Club of a facsimile of a very rare booklet written in 1846 by General Sir George Cathcart and Edmund Tompkins, then at Leamington but later lessee and marker of the



Oxford court. In Norman’s words, the booklet links our two clubs. For more on the Cathcart booklet on the game, see page 11.

Neil opened the AGM by thanking retiring Committee members, noting also Martin Mercer’s retirement as Chair of our Charitable Foundation – to be replaced by Chris Lintott. Particular notice – and a bottle of champagne – was given to Harriet Blandford-White for her work in recruiting new members. Before handing over to Ashley for the Treasurer’s report, Neil also paid warm tribute to the fund-raising efforts led by Daniel Baltzer – £40,000 and rising!

Graham Harding



Harriet gets hold of her champagne

Treasurer’s Report

“We’ve made significant progress on the finances of the Club in the last year. We’ve brought in a new, modern, accounting package to replace the old Sage system. It’s much more user-friendly and will enable us to give the details behind the monthly bills to our members. Payment will be easier through a direct debit system – and we’d urge you

all to sign up for this. What’s more significant chunks of our income can now be gift-aided, and this should bring us in some £10,000 extra revenue per year.

What’s more, we can get a rebate for over £40,000 from HMRC for past payments – provided that individual members give us retrospective agreement

to Gift Aid such monies as we legally can.
At a broader level – thanks to high court utilisation levels and our increased charges – we are now running with a monthly surplus and we're on track for £28k yearly surplus and that's before the HMRC rebate.

Further good news is that we can fully fund Nick's contract next year and it's clear that having a third pro has done great things both for the general buzz around the Club and for the under-rated but vital issue of ball quality."

Ashley Deakin

Pros report

From the pros perspective too it's been a good year. The membership drive has been very successful and, halfway through the year, we have almost hit our target of 150 Club members. The Club tournaments and fixtures are also doing very well with Craig getting now record numbers of entries for all events.

As Ashley said, ball quality has gone up significantly ("better than Queen's", say some top top players now), giving better bounce and, hence, longer rallies. It's a team effort but Andrew paid particular credit to Nick not just for his enthusiasm for tennis but also for the quality of his ball-stitching.

Andrew Davis

Club officers

Neil paid tribute to the work of the Committee – and called for further volunteers to ensure we have good succession plans in place. In particular, Howard needs support for his invaluable work on our facilities.

we'll have a new chair to take the Club further into its goal of being the best club in the UK. Work to be done for sure but we're making progress.

Chris Conlon, Hon Secretary. spoke briefly about the development of a new constitution for the Club – more news next year.

Graham Harding

Neil's successful and productive term as Club chair comes to an end next year and by the next AGM,

The Oxford Real Tennis Dinner – Saturday September 5th 2026

So, the final agreed date for our Real Tennis Dinner is Saturday September 5th, and I am sorry for the change from the previously announced save the date. The Club has not had a formal dinner since well before Covid and we need to celebrate our game and court. Way back, there were dinners on the court itself, with drunken Club members running along the penthouse, but we are thinking of something a little more refined. After discussions with Merton College we have been allowed to have the formal dining hall for a black-tie dinner, and this is a rare privilege. The hall seats around 150 and you will all be invited to bring friends and partners to what should be a very special event. If the weather is fair, we may be able to have drinks in the college garden beforehand. I hope that by the end of January we will have a booking system all arranged with prices and specimen menus to check out.

Neil Mortensen



Merton College dining hall

Fundraising

Over the last few months, a fundraising project has been initiated by one of our long-standing and loyal members Sir Martin Smith who has very kindly agreed to donate £5,000 per year over three years. So far, we have received most generous commitments totalling just under £40,000. We would like to ask all members to consider following Sir Martin's example by committing to an annual donation of any amount over ideally five years to help us reach the goals outlined below. All donations can be classified as charitable and are therefore tax deductible and eligible for Gift Aid for UK taxpayers.

As you'll know from Neil's piece above, the Club is in good shape, but we are aiming to build a prudent buffer mainly for three purposes / fundraising goals:

1. A third Pro: last year we had Jim Ludekens as our third Pro. His presence made all the difference to providing the best possible service to all playing and non-playing members of the OUTC community. When Jim left, this led to the decision to appoint Nick Jamieson from 1st May 2025 as Jim's successor. Funding for this position has very kindly been secured for now from the Trustees of the

Tambour Fund which was de facto established for matched refurbishment projects. We are aiming to raise £25,000 per year over five years for a third Pro so as not to delve further into the Tambour Fund.

2. Maintenance/Refurbishments: Every year we have repairs / maintenance and specific refurbishments costs. For example, the changing rooms, the kitchen areas and the social areas are in need of refurbishment. We have the Tambour Fund which provides some matched funding for these kinds of expenses. To regularly trigger this matched funding, we seek £20,000 per year over five years to enable us to keep up with all necessary repairs and refurbishments.

3. Crucial Reserves Fund: Since Covid we have had to reach into our £204,000 reserves which have gone down to £149,000. Any additional funds we may raise over and above the total of £45,000 per year over five years above will go straight into our crucial Reserves Fund.

For further information or making a donation please contact our treasurer Ashley Deakin at ashleydeakin1@gmail.com.

Daniel Baltzer

The Congestion Charge – legal challenge update

Neil had noted in his AGM report an unsatisfactory letter from the Council's Andrew Gant on the Congestion Charge – summarised (politely) as “you're doing a great job but now shut up and go away”. Club member Emily Scaysbrook is leading the city-wide opposition to the congestion charge and the traffic filters and her personal summary of the current position follows.

“Many members will be aware that Oxfordshire County Council has introduced a £5-a-day ‘congestion charge’ – more accurately described as a set of road tolls – on six key routes into and across Oxford. The scheme is already having wide-ranging negative effects across the city.

Last summer, I formed the limited company Open Roads for Oxford (ORFO) with two co-directors and launched a fundraising campaign to pursue legal action against the Council in relation to this scheme. That challenge is now underway, and in December we formally submitted our permission bundle to the High Court. This is a key procedural

milestone in the judicial review process and included detailed witness statements and supporting evidence prepared by our legal team. We are delighted to have recently appointed Charles Streetham of Francis Taylor Building as counsel, particularly given his recent success in a similar challenge against another local authority.

The Court is now considering whether the case should proceed to a full hearing. We have asked for this process to be expedited, given the real-world impacts already being felt, and – if permission is granted – we hope the hearing will take place no later than March.

I want to stress that this challenge is not part of any sort of ‘pro-car, anti-bike’ campaign, as some supporters of the scheme suggest. Nor do I question the importance of clean air or the need to address congestion on key routes into and across the city, where and when it genuinely exists. My concern lies instead with the premise on which this particular scheme rests – namely the assertion that Oxford faces a “traffic emergency” requiring a



blanket charging scheme operating from 7am to 7pm, seven days a week.

That premise is difficult to sustain when the Council's own data show that Oxford has already met the air quality and congestion targets it set for itself, prior to the scheme's introduction. The Council has also acknowledged, within its Equalities Impact Assessment, that the charge will have disproportionate, negative impacts on elderly and vulnerable residents, yet has proposed no meaningful mitigation. In addition, it has declined to offer any support to businesses during the three-to-six-month "adjustment period" it predicts will follow implementation. I do not believe that approach is fair or proportionate.

From a legal perspective, our challenge focuses on whether the consultation process run by the Council before introducing the scheme complied with basic legal requirements, known as the Gunning Principles. For those interested in further detail, updates are available at www.openroadsforoxford.org, where you can

A superb exhibition match

'An electric atmosphere!' That was Bertie Vallat's summary of the exhibition match before the Club AGM. The dedans was full; the side galleries were full. A bigger audience than anyone could recall! And watching a fantastic display from Bertie, now world No. 17 with a handicap of 0 and Nino Merola, the Radley pro and world no 20, the Club was buzzing.

also sign up to receive future developments as the case progresses. I am, of course, also very happy to discuss the matter more informally at the Club.

Like many local organisations, OUTC relies on accessibility. Members travel in from across Oxfordshire and beyond, and measures that increase the cost, complexity or time required to reach the Club risk affecting court occupancy and membership – particularly for older members, those with mobility constraints, and visiting teams unfamiliar with Oxford's road network. These concerns are likely to be exacerbated further if the Council proceeds with its original 'traffic filter' scheme, under which the same ANPR cameras would issue £70 penalties rather than a £5 daily charge, once the Botley Road reopens in the summer. That is precisely why we believe it is important to challenge the current scheme now. Although it is presented as temporary, it forms the legal and practical foundation for the more punitive traffic filter scheme the Council intends to introduce next. If this stage is left unchallenged, it effectively clears the path for what comes next, making later intervention significantly more difficult.

Next steps

There is still a long way to go. Around £50,000 remains to be raised to fund counsel through the next stage and any court hearing, so fundraising remains critical. If you are able to contribute, please visit our GoFundMe page via www.openroadsforoxford.org, or feel free to contact me directly at info@openroadsforoxford.org or via my contact details in the members' area of the OUTC website. If you are able to help with fundraising efforts more broadly, I would also be very grateful for that support." "

Emily Scaysbrook

The physical contrast between the two was compelling: Nino tall and muscular; Bertie, shorter and slimmer, yet still capable of generating great power to complement the speed and grace of his movement about the court. The match was to 8 games and Bertie took first blood to go 3-1 up before Nino's constant attacking tennis pulled him back to 3-3. Nino was all aggression, hammering forces at Bertie but often getting in return sharp

volleys precisely aimed at the tambour or the hazard end nicks. Bertie relied on a vicious railroad serve for most of the match, while Nino consistently mixed it up with boomerangs, side walls and drags. The service end corners were targeted (and found) consistently whilst both players made extraordinary gets, remarkably often turning almost unbelievably pressured retrievals into winners.

From 3 all and then 4 all, Nino began to get the better of Bertie's railroad and despite consecutive winning grille and gallery shots, Nino took the critical 10th and 11th games to go 7-4 up before closing out the match at 8-6. A shame it didn't get to 7 all; a deciding 15th game would have been a spectacular (and fair) end to a brilliant game that left Club members awestruck. Thanks both!

Graham Harding



Nino Merola (left) and Bertie Vallat

Introducing Nick (and his tournament success)

By now, Nick doesn't really need an intro... but here's his account of how Tennis hooked him. "I first found real tennis rather randomly – I stumbled across the image of a real tennis ball on google images and dived straight down the rabbit hole to find a sport I didn't know existed. I brought my family an hour and a half from central Somerset up to the Bristol court to learn about the game with Kevin King.

I played for 3 or 4 months there occasionally before stopping when I went to University at Bath to study Chemical Engineering. Having got my masters, I realised I could indulge my taste for tennis again, and started playing as a member at Leamington near the start of 2022, where I quickly became obsessed with the sport, and found out about the Investing in Professionals scheme to get started on becoming a pro.

It was another year later that I finally got accepted onto the scheme in October 2023 at Leamington, doing my first year there learning under Lewis Williams and Chris Aley, before moving down to Radley, where I filled in the third pro space left by Chris Ronaldson going off to open up the Sydney court, and finally found myself at Oxford – a fantastic club to work in – which coincided perfectly with when I needed to finish at Radley."



Nick Jamieson (left) on court at Radley

PS. He's a great coach!

And tournament success:

At the Hyde a few weeks before Christmas, Nick played and won the Category 'B' group – that's 10-19 handicaps – marking a significant improvement in his handicap and promise of future success. Well done!

Graham Harding

RIP Keith Tombs

We regret to pass on the news of the sad death of Keith Tombs (1938-2025).

Keith was a member for 15 years from the late 1990s and an active player until the 2010s.

Our condolences to his family.

Andrew Davis



Railroad Club update

Two successful events this year – and more to come in 2026. We reported on the Hatfield event in the last newsletter and there was a re-run of our successful event at Queen's (see below).

The Club is doing well – steadily growing its membership base and finances. This year our income has gone on our half-price racquet scheme for students, on funding the Rob and Claire Fahey masterclasses for the Blues Squads early in the year and on supporting the Varsity Match itself. A new Railroad Club committee is now taking on the development of the Club.

New Railroad Club committee

In November a new Railroad Committee came together at Queen's to talk next steps and next events.

Spike Wilcocks remains the President – with Andrew Davis as Chief Exec! Ashley Deakin is Treasurer and events will now be run by Eve Shenkman, Georgie Willis and Laura Neill. Do give them suggestions please.

Benedict Yorston will manage alumni engagement; Richard Vallat the comms and Matthew Dick will take on fundraising.

Do get in touch with ideas/suggestions/offers to help on admin or with financial support.

Andrew Davis

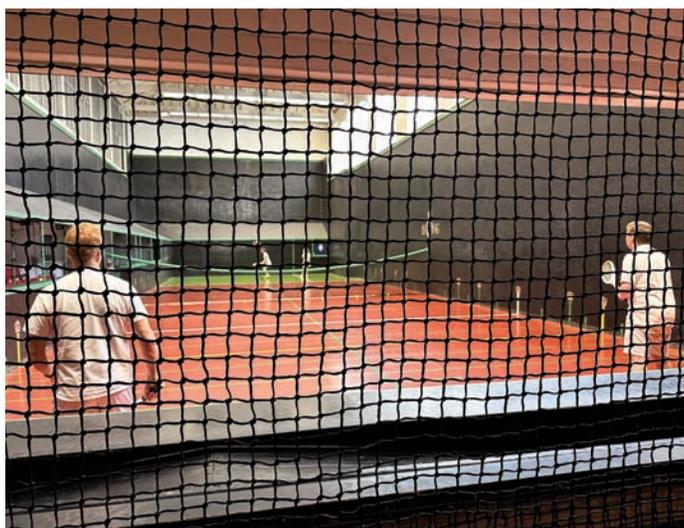
Queen's Event

The Railroad Club met up on Saturday 26th October at The Queen's Club for a hugely enjoyable day of tennis and catching up with old friends. Having two courts meant that there was a lot of tennis played, and everyone had a few matches each.

Handicaps ranged from 12 to 80, with stars like Charlie Defries on 12, and ages that weren't far off that range either, with current students, and even former Blues from the 1970s like Fred Satow.

It was a wonderful opportunity to see fellow players from the past, meet new people, and share stories from Oxford days. It was noted that Horatio Cary will be giving the Blues match speech at Lord's this

year and was looking for any embarrassing tales about the pros, which had Andrew Davis looking nervous. I am sure he would be grateful for any suitable contributions.



On court, there were some superb volleys from Izzy Marshall, some sublime off-the-tambour forehands from leftie Rob Walker, and it was heartening to see that Ollie Hawkins' self-invented method of hitting it high onto the back walls for a combo of chase the line followed by hazard chase the line is still going strong. Thanks to some clever pairings, everyone was able to play off level, and half an hour matches meant a full set could be played.

A big thank you to Andrew for organising such a wonderful day, and to The Queen's Club for generously allowing this event to take place there. Everyone left with big smiles on their faces, even if lack of regular play meant some of us were also aware of creaking joints as we hobbled happily home. Roll on the next Railroad event!

Alastair Mackeown

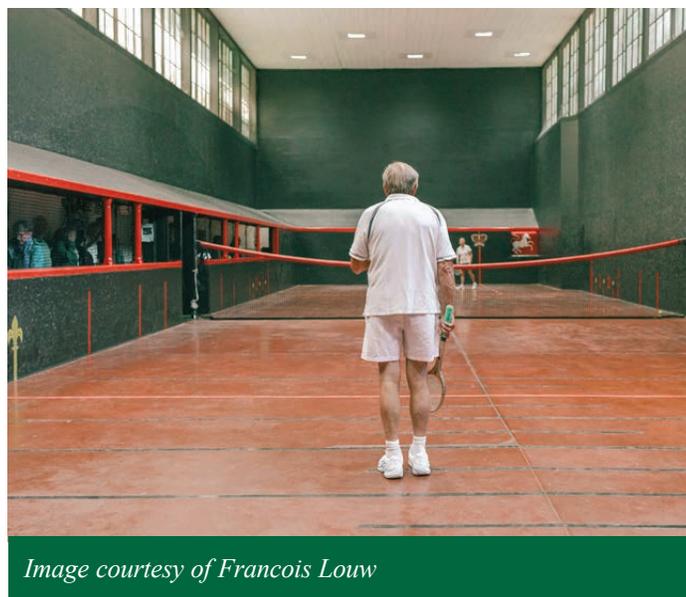


English Heritage Open Doors – September 13th

OUTC have taken part in this event since 2010, and once again we were able to showcase our sport to around 4-500 visitors through the day. 16 people took part in four matches and it was a real pleasure to play in front of a packed dedans and galleries.

The players also moved amongst the constantly changing crowd explaining the rules to them and answering a myriad questions on aspects of the game and the history of it as well as the court and our Club. We also handed out many flyers for taster sessions, and for the forthcoming National Real Tennis Open Day. Thanks to all those that took part.

Derek Williams



Real Tennis National Open Day – October 4th

The Tennis and Rackets Association launched the inaugural Real Tennis National Open Event, which aimed to introduce new players to the sport by bringing every club across the country together to showcase our great game.

On Saturday 4th October we held a Real Tennis Open Day at OUTC for friends, relatives, colleagues or anyone else who might be curious about our game. Those who came got an on-court explanation of the game, a chance to watch an exhibition game plus the opportunity to get on court and hit some balls!

Andrew Davis



Facilities update – good news!

A logjam to programming future maintenance and improvement works at has been cleared. We've reached agreement in principle (and virtually all details) over billing issues with our electricity provider. After almost a year's dispute about historic estimated billing costs with our provider, we submitted a dispute case to the Energy Ombudsman in the summer of 2025. After further months of investigations and debates the Ombudsman found in our favour and recommended that the service provider make various credit payments to the Club's account to tune of over £5,700. For the first time in a couple of years, we can now plan and deliver various improvements without the cloud of a potential fluctuating electricity debt over our heads. While we still await from our service provider certain details about timing and amounts of future bills, we can at last start 2026 with a new broom!

Consequently, we now hope to see the much-awaited improvements to the gents' shower room delivered early in the year and the replacement of

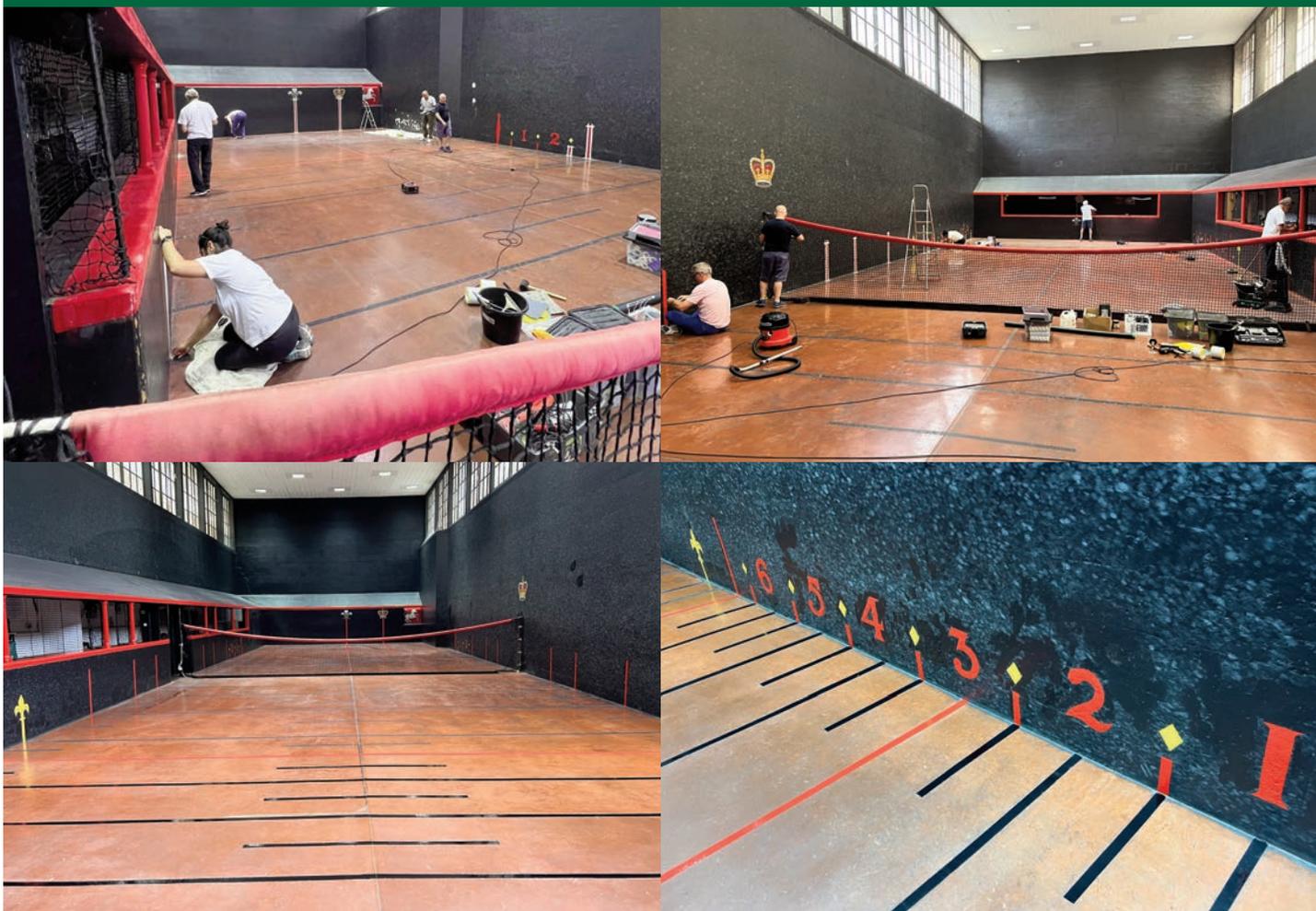
our grumbling boiler (serving the whole Club) soon. We are also moving forward with the upgrading the on-court lighting by replacing the various units which have failed before the end of the current guarantee period in summer 2026.

We are also looking to improve our effectiveness and efficiency in delivering various improvements at the Club. To that end if you are interested in helping to manage some of the proposed improvements, please contact me (Howard) or speak to Pros.

Finally, a big thanks to the Club members who helped in freshening up the court last September. A jolly and productive work party, organised by Derek Williams, took the opportunity to spruce up the court with much needed surfaces and net repairs together with some glorious painting. Hopefully we can do the same this year, so don't miss out this time. We'll circulate more information in the summer.

Howard Cox

Volunteer team hard at work filling holes, refreshing chase lines and markings and repainting posts, ledges and the bandeau



Book review – An Unlikely Partnership

We owe him our court – the story of Joseph Bickley
In this Newsletter, we pick up the story of Joseph Bickley from the Summer edition with a review of a new book on him and Charles Rose – the probable model for Toad of Toad Hall.

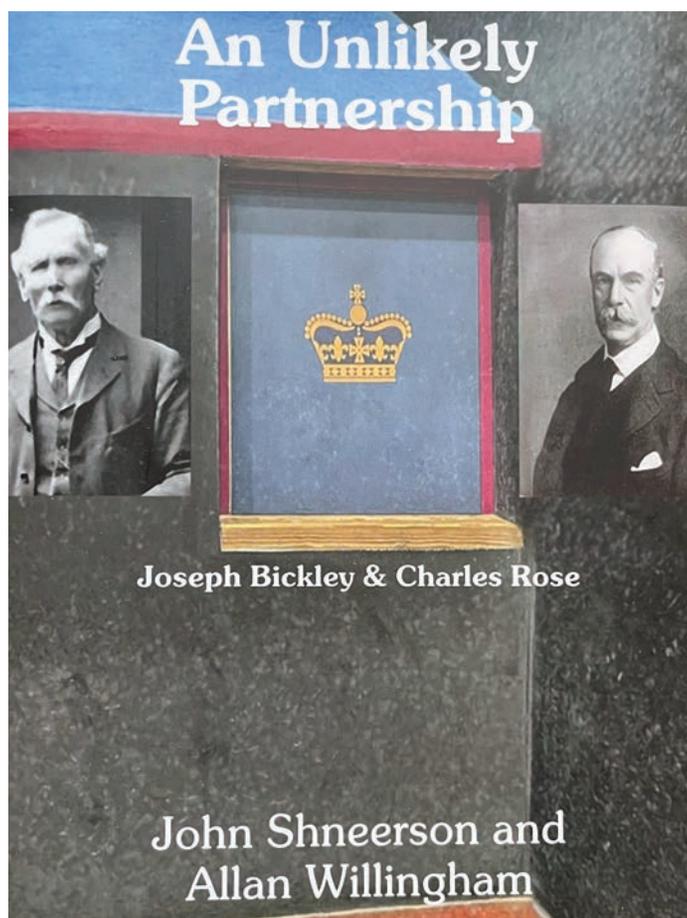
In 1887, Joseph Bickley, a plasterer who had been a trade union leader and political reformer, built the first tennis court that could be called ‘modern’ at the Queen’s Club. He’d never built a tennis court before but for the next 60 years he and the firm he established built almost all the new courts in the UK and United States. In so doing, they created the template for today’s courts and set standards that have rarely been surpassed. Using a technically complex, highly labour-intensive process he and his team created perfectly smooth, highly durable walls and floors, which have stood the test of time. The Oxford court – refurbished by Bickley in 1912 (see last Newsletter) – is just one example.

Three of these courts – two at Hardwick and one at Newmarket – were built for Sir Charles Day Rose, a wealthy, well-connected society figure (a friend of King Edward, who as Prince of Wales may have introduced him to tennis at Oxford). Through his work as a banker, Rose was also a friend of Kenneth Grahame and was almost certainly the inspiration for Toad of Toad Hall in *The Wind in the Willows* (published 1908). As we all know, Toad loved his motors (‘poop, poop’) but Rose’s violent enthusiasms included not just motoring but also yachting, horse racing – and tennis. Whatever the pursuit he was intensively competitive – and extremely successful.

In their well-researched, highly readable and brilliantly illustrated book, John Shneerson and Alan Willingham not only tell the story of ‘unlikely partnership’ between Bickley and Rose but provide a fascinating picture of real tennis around the turn

General Sir George Cathcart and the ‘Professor of Tennis’

The 1867 Explanation of the Game of Tennis presented to the Club at the AGM by Norman Hyde and Alastair Robinson of the Leamington Tennis Court Club is very rare. Discovered in the Beineke Library at Yale by American tennis historian Adam



of the 20th century. Pen portraits (and rare photographs) of great players – both amateur and professional – abound.

Both Shneerson and Willingham are prize-winning tennis historians – and it shows. Shneerson has also been deeply involved in the rescue and re-establishment of the Newmarket court after it had spent over 70 years as a garage and storage depot, for which we owe him thanks.

If you’ve any interest in the last 150 years of real tennis – its early 20th century heyday and its 21st century recovery – this is the book for you! John Shneerson and Alan Willingham, *An Unlikely Partnership: Joseph Bickley and Charles Rose* (Ronaldson Publications, 2025). Available from the Club shop.

Graham Harding

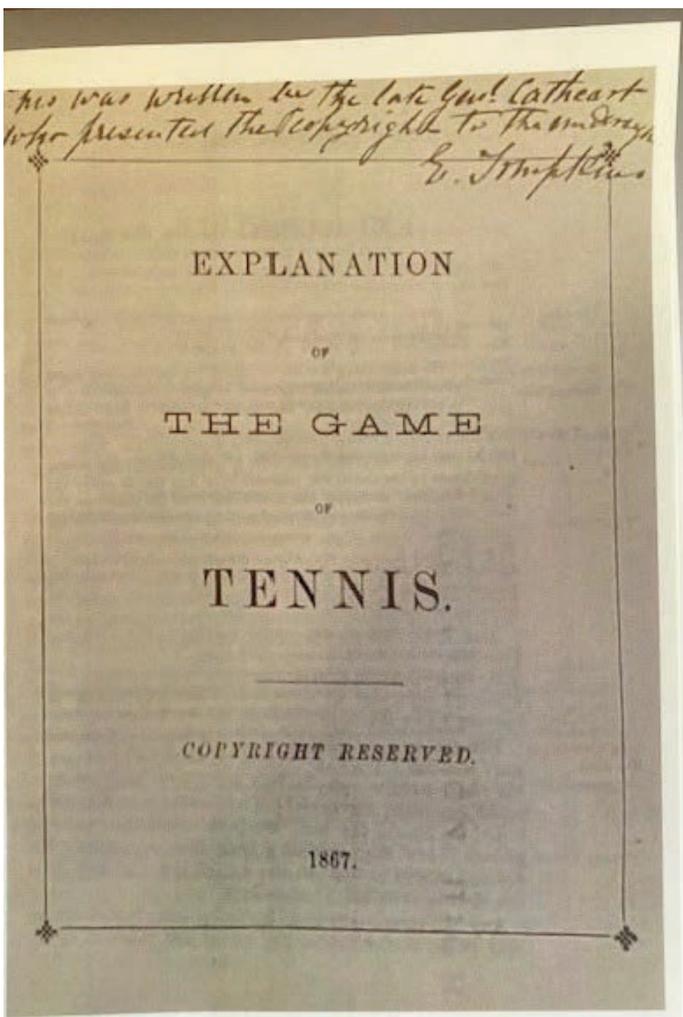
Inselbuch, it’s probably the only example in the world. Certainly, none of the world’s great tennis libraries had ever heard of it.

The facsimile copy we now have is inscribed with the words ‘This was written by Gen’l Cathcart who presented the copy to the undersigned’.

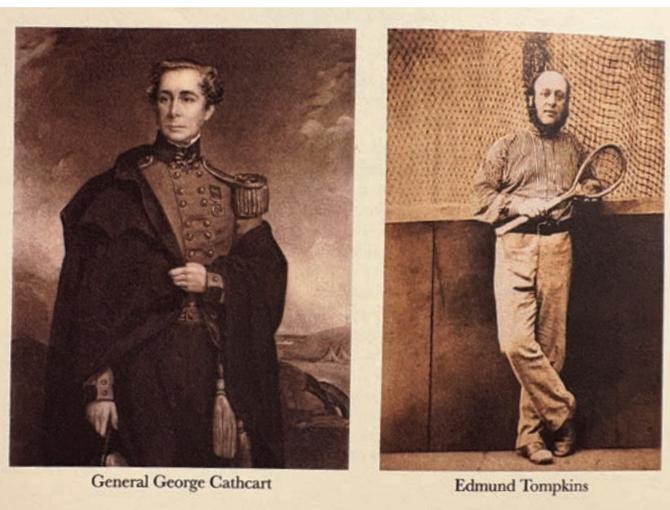


Neil receiving a facsimile copy of the "Explanation of the game of Tennis" from Norman Hyde

The 'undersigned' was Edmund Tompkins who published the booklet in 1867 in Oxford. Tompkins and Cathcart had met at Leamington soon after the foundation of the Club in 1846.



The 'Explanation'

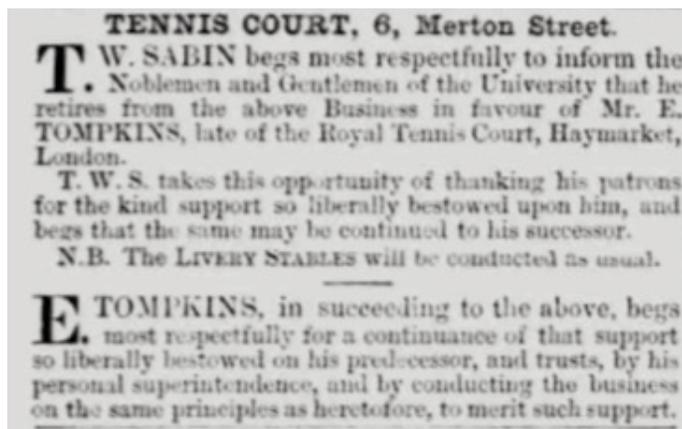


General George Cathcart

Edmund Tompkins

General Sir George and the 'Professor of Tennis'

But Cathcart himself was killed at the Battle of Inkerman in 1854 during the Crimean War. So a posthumous publication. And why Oxford? In fact, it's likely that the booklet was written around 1846 with Tompkins, who was then the marker at the Leamington Club and thus knowledgeable about the game and its rules. So knowledgeable and so expert indeed that in 1862 at the age of 36 he became world champion, beating the ageing Edmond Barre 6-4.



Still world champion, Tompkins (also known as a 'Professor of Tennis') took on the lease of the Merton Street court in early 1867 – and its associated 'hunting stables' – and it was in Oxford in that year that he published Cathcart's booklet.

Though he lived until 1902, he was last recorded as 'of Oxford' in 1878. After that he probably returned to Brighton, where his family ran a famous court and billiard rooms in Little Preston Street.

Graham Harding

Oxford at the British Open

The 2025 Sir John Ritblat British Open was played at Queen's Club this last November. And, for the first time in a while, two current OUTC players were in the mix – plus several others with close Oxford links.



Craig in action at the British Open

First, the Oxford representatives. Craig won his opening match in the qualifying rounds, beating Zack Smart 6/5, 6/3, before coming up against the surprise package of the Open, Will Flynn. Flynn, who went on to reach the quarter finals, beating 5th seeded Leon Smart but then losing to world no 3, Nick Howell in the quarters. Flynn was just a bit too strong for Craig on this occasion, winning 6/2, 6/4 despite Craig's second set fightback – but thanks to these results, Craig has jumped 18 places in the world rankings.

The main draw featured Bertie Vallat, recently come up to Oxford as an undergrad. Bertie's handicap is now down to 0, putting him the world top tier. In the first round he was up against Robert Shenkman in a match between two of the country's very best amateurs. Vallat has been steadily improving in a series of matches with Shenkman, the Amateur Champion, but this time the latter's error-free consistency was too strong for Bertie to make further progress.

But that wasn't the end of Oxford success. Benedict Yorston, Blues captain in 2022 but now attached to Radley, has found a lot of success in the last months, including winning the recent MCC All-Comers Championship, and he wasted little time in seeing off Alex Machin, the Radley assistant pro, to reach the second round of the qualifiers.

Henry Henman is of course tightly linked to Oxford, through his father, Mike, though he is now assistant pro at the Oratory. He too won easily against Chris Aley in the first round before coming up against Benedict for a place in the main draw. After a tough and tight match, it was Henry who triumphed 6/4, 6/5.

Now in the main draw, Henry scored what Ben Geytenbeek's Real Tennis News described as the 'biggest win of his career', beating Nino Merola (Henry's former coach at Radley) in a five-set marathon which came down to the last game of the match. Victory to Henry 6/5, 6/5, 1/6, 3/6, 6/5. But he couldn't repeat in the next round. Up against Nick Howell, Henry held set points when 5/3 up in the third set but Howell's forcing game pulled him back to a three-set win 6/0, 6/1, 6/5.

Still in the main draw, Claire Fahey, linked to Oxford through her coaching sessions with the Blues Squad, had a good win against Zak Eadle before coming up against the power and precision of John Lumley, top seed and world no2 behind Camden Rivière. This was a tough assignment and no mistake – the match going to Lumley in straight sets 6/0, 6/1, 6/1.

In the Ladies Open, Claire – as expected – marched through to the final against Tara Lumley but not before Tara was given a real fight in the semis by recent Oxford Blue Georgie Willis, before winning 6/4, 6/4.

Graham Harding



Runners up in the Women's British Open, Jess Garside and on the right, Oxford's Georgie Willis

CLUB COMPETITONS

Howden Champagne League

The finals of the Howden Champagne League were played just before Christmas with Alex Thomson beating Theo Silkstone 8-6 in Group A and Jack Sunter beating David Hutcheson 8-1 in Group B. Michael Foord of Howden's presented the prizes, and we'd like to thank them (again) for their generous sponsorship of the League.

HOWDEN



Michael Foord with Group B winner, Jack Sunter



Group A winner Alex Thomson receiving his champagne from sponsor Michael Foord

Silver Racquet and Silver Goblet

The finals of the The annual Silver Racquet and Goblet were once again played for by our blues players in another exciting night of student real tennis. It was a night for the captains as Hannah

Wilson-Kemsley beat Francesca Dakin 8-2 in convincing fashion, winning the women's Silver Goblet. The men's Silver Racquet was tighter though. Men's captain Leon Kashdan-Brown edging Alex Williams 8/4.



Winner Leon Kashdan-Brown (right) with Alex Williams



Winner Hannah Wilson-Kemsley (centre) with Francesca Dakin (left) with photo-bombing by Craig!



Winners Sam Lowden and Alex Solovyev and their trophy with hosts Natalie Barber and Chris Lintott behind

Barber Lintott Trophy (Club mixed Doubles)

The 8th instalment of the Barber-Lintott proved to be just as strong and as popular as ever. The signature of the day being the superb lunch and dessert, hosted by Natalie Barber and Chris Lintott.

Thank you! Two new finalist pairs meant there would be a guaranteed new name on the trophy and this year, Sam Lowden and Alex Solovyev beat Anisha Charania and Jonathan Clark in the final 8/5.



Winners John Stevens (left) and Grace Beglan being presented with the silverware by Neil Mortensen

Stubbings Winter Doubles

Another great turnout for the 3rd instalment of the Stubbings doubles saw 20 players compete! The Doubles was played on a round robin format on

a 20-minute timer and this year's winners were John Stevens and Grace Beglan (pictured) who defeated Jonathan Clark and Chris Morton 6/4 in the final.



Winners Henry Philpott (left) and George Lu (right) with sponsor Ron Mutton

A1Ram

The A1 Ram handicap doubles tournament for the over 50's handicap proved to be as healthy as ever with 24 players entering. Such was the popularity this year we had to create an extra group on Friday afternoon, and the weekend was a harmonious blend of student and seniors.

The dedans was lively from the first ball to the last and it was great to see Ron Mutton with his

daughter Lucy and family all come to watch the final and present the prizes.

For those not lucky enough to know Ron or have played with him, the event takes its name from Ron Mutton's initials (RAM) who has sponsored it for many years and A1 is his company's name.

This year, George Lu and Henry Philpott beat Anisha Charania and Dave Thomas 6/4 in the final.



Left to right: Derek Williams. Howard Cox (Committee Member presenting the trophy) Mike English, Ian Groom, Peter Norris

Over sixties (age) doubles

Six pairs once again competed for the over 60's silver platter. Luckily, unlike last year, the court wasn't sweating which meant we were able to finish the tournament on the same day this time! The formidable partnership of Ian Groom and Mike

English proved too strong for everyone off their relatively high handicap. Williams and Norris gave themselves hope by winning the first game of the final, but, as ever, it's hope that's the killer and Groom and English didn't drop a game thereafter, running out 8-1 winners.

Not the Varsity Match

Another successful Not the Varsity Match was held in September, with two competitive squads with handicaps ranging from 30 odd to 90-ish competing across two days of play at both Oxford and Radley.

In between we managed a decent dinner at the Magdalen Arms, though I should perhaps mention that some of the Cambridge contingent found the long walk to dinner rather arduous, having to stop for sustenance in both the Cape of Good Hope and the Fir Tree on the way.

This didn't stop Not the Light Blues securing a 21/19 victory, pulling away from a resurgent Not the Dark Blue squad just after lunch on Sunday. They take home the coveted trophy, a beautiful thing constructed from Pol Roger foil, but honestly the real prize for the weekend was to see so many people enjoying their tennis. This was true even for those facing steep handicap differences – one serve, banned tambour can be painful.

Especial congratulations to Jonathan Clark, who scored a perfect five from five for NtLB (lots of members end up switching clubs, given the transfer between the two cities over the course of a

Thames Valley League

Captain Chris Lintott reports:

Oxford's record in the Thames Valley League – doubles for handicaps from 30 to 70 – is second to none, with a combination of home court advantage, excellent support, steel-eyed determination and shots that have never been seen before working to our advantage over the last few seasons.

This year's competition got underway in November, with a home match against Holyport followed later in the month by our hosting neighbours and rivals Radley.

The Holyport match started with a reminder of how feared the Merton court's idiosyncrasies are by those not familiar with our perfectly formed, if small, home. Top pair George Fowler and Andrew Parkinson – both excellent players on form – celebrated winning a set against your captain and Roger Nathan like they'd won the match, tie, league and world cup. George explained neither had won a set in any previous visit – but then Roger turned on the afterburners to win the decider 6/4.

The rest of the match proceeded smoothly. Up and coming players Remy Lammertsma and Sam Lowden demolished their opposition 6/1 6/1, and Chris Peri and Daniel Talbot-Ponsonby (CP & DTP for short) got over an unnecessary wobble to win in three sets 4/6 6/3 6/4.

The only tie to go Holyport's way – an unfortunate loss for Philip Awadalla and Phil Biggin, who learnt much about doubles strategy along the way – was

lifetime), and particular thanks to Seth Whidden and Jenny Jones, who stepped up this year as Oxford captains after sterling service by Chris Peri. Thanks also to sponsors Pol Roger, who provided two magnums which must be drunk at the match.

The next edition is already set for September 19th and 20th at Cambridge – if you are an alumnus or have worked at either university, please put in your diary now and look out for an email to register for the match in early summer.

Chris Lintott – NtVM convenor

achieved by borrowing Ewan Smith, whose TVL debut surely made a good case for selection by Oxford in future rounds. The Radley match, played in good spirits with a bunch of players eligible for both teams (but all clearly desperate to sport the Unicorn), was closer. Your captain stood by as Roger demolished Peter Kidd and Rupert Henson 6/2 6/5, before Remy and Sam once more combined to win 6/1 6/5.

The hardest assignment of the day went to Grace Beglan and Anisha Charania, who faced Jenny Jones and Gerald Kinsbury. Despite some spectacular shots, great coverage of the court and strong comms, the Oxford pair fell 4/6 5/6 to keep Radley in the match.

In the TVL, it's the number of sets that counts, and so CP & DTP's capture of a crucial first set 6/5 – set up magnificently by some agile returns of serve from the experienced Oxford pair – gave us the match. We need not note what happened next.

Two victories down, we're looking ahead to tougher challenges to come in the form of four away matches in 2026. I'm confident our blend of young and old (experienced and less experienced? – Ed) will stand us in good stead and hope to report back soon on another league title for what one of our opposing captains described last year as 'Bloody Oxford Again'.

Up the Unicorn (again)!

Ode to Tennis

A Faheyn wall dedans, tapped racquet well played.
A Chisholm cut volley, chase easily laid.
T-Matthews backhander is oozing with grandeur.
B Sayers double-hander, superglued to the tambour.

The Ronaldson name as old as the game
Cutting ribbons on courts again and again.
J Lummers the hare with his beautiful hair
World champions Claire and the fox Rivière.

Virgona's turn on the serve hitting bombs.
A shout of COM'ON from a grinning D Long.
Nick Howell will drive it and putt it and cut it
And wedge it and ledge it and force it so duck it.

A game for the kings, new red and blue strings
And semi round balls doing all kinds of things.
A bobbly, bouncily, bumbily serve.
Or smashing a piqué if you've got the nerve.
High walls and side walls and framing a fluke
Or serving a boomerang to make the foe puke.

A legitimate up but calling it down
A quizzical look then drawing a frown.
A great game RT but a game just for me.
Much better than golfing, taking three off the tee

Craig Greenhalgh

Dates for your 2026 diary

Semi-final of the Brodie Cup (Interclub Category Tournament)
on 17th January v Holyport

Further inter-club Thames Valley League matches (doubles) - home and away
Seconds Varsity at home on 20th and 21st February

The Varsity match at Lord's on 27th and 28th February

The Broadbent Cup (Handicap Singles weekend) on 9th and 10th May

The Knight Cup (Club singles championship) on 16th and 17th May

The Wroth Cup (Club Doubles Championship) on 6th and 7th June



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