



Dick and Brian's Real Tennis Tour of the UK. 4-18 July 2012

The sad story of two forlorn, hopelessly unpracticed real tennis players who without a home court suffer the ignominy of defeat far from home.

The moral of this story is Sydney needs a real tennis court now.

Well, it started as a theme holiday. The idea was to tour beautiful southern England in the summer playing real tennis at a recreational pace and visiting historic sites and enjoying the delights of the countryside. We thought nothing would be more pleasant than having demonstrated our superior skill on the Real Tennis court then to have a pint on a sunny afternoon in the garden of a quaint old English pub. So the planning began. Inspired by the incessant motivation of Dr Dick Crane (right) we chose 11 courts at which we planned to play over a 14 day period. Our plan involved staying in B&Bs, catching up with friends and family, and finishing in London with a victory tour of Lords, Queens and Hampton Court. All this in the lead up to the Olympics.....we were going to show the pomes !



Petworth 4th July 2012, a marvellous game for all ages. From left Dick Crane, Brian Robertson Josh Medley and Penny Briant.

The first problem with our grand plan was we couldn't find the first court. Coming from different corners of the globe we decided to meet at Petworth Real Tennis Court. 'I'll meet you at the court' said Dick, 'its in the middle of the town you can't miss it', said Dick. Those who have played at Petworth will know how easy it is to miss this wonderful old court. Well when Dick finally turned up, looking a tad sheepish (with his fuming wife and driver.. 'we've been around this ***** town twenty *****times') we began our first match with Josh Medley and Penny Briant. This match confirmed what a wonderful game Real Tennis is – we had a challenging competition against a budding young player and his lady partner probably at least twice his age, with Dick and Brian almost 3 times his age, well Dick was close to 4 times !! Definitely

a game for the young and old, fit and not so fit, and all levels of skill in between.

Dick really hit his forte in this opening joust. Handicap haggling. The difference between winning and coming second can be minimised by negotiation. Yes, we had a handicap worked out by that computer thingo but it didn't allow for jet lag, latitude, coriolis force, home court advantage or Dick's incessant pleading. Wonderful to watch. Dick was superb at eking out an extra 15 here and there and probably the reason why we weren't thrashed but came a close second. Our less than glorious start to the tour didn't detract from a visit to Petworth Castle in the afternoon which is a very interesting and informative glimpse into the lives of the rich and privileged.

It's probably worth a short word about court protocol. We thought the English clubs would be steeped in tradition and protocol so we took the advantage of some private tutoring from Sidney Yankson, a member of Queens, when he visited Melbourne during our training visits. From the outset we were told that 'one' not only lets the receivers pass the net first (we knew that) but each player should be given a ball, and celebratory 'chest-bumps' would definitely be frowned upon. During the tour none of our opponents was a stickler for protocol and we found the approach to the game very refreshing and modern. Sorry Sidney your efforts were in vein, but we did spread the word, and in so doing probably raised standards throughout the UK.



The Real Tennis court at Seacourt has been entertaining enthusiasts since 1911.

Our second court was Seacourt on Hayling Island. Brian, a retired naval officer, had visited a naval base on Hayling Island in the early 70s where well-meaning Royal Navy matelots had attempted to instill in their colonial charges a sense of decorum and etiquette – commonly referred to as the ‘knife and fork’ course. Clearly they failed, however never did we realise that just around the corner were such majestic buildings steeped in history and tucked in one of them was the beautiful Seacourt. We had a wonderful game with 2 pairs of players which revealed the problem with taking on fresh players after an hour of tennis, but never fear Dick and his negotiation skills were up to it. Another close second – we were beginning to amass a pile of silver medals.



Phil Rogers and Rick Rauman at Canford School – we were beaten, bowed but not broken.....yet

Anyway, onwards and upwards. The next morning we arrived at Canford School in Dorset. Well sort of.....not only did we get lost on the way there we turned up at the sports complex to be told the court is at the other end of the establishment. The tour of the school was very worthwhile as it is full of old and beautiful buildings – which we saw 3 times. We weren’t too late as by now we had adopted the habit of



Canford School, Dorset

leaving very early – good planning !! We were met by Steve Ronaldson, the professional and head coach at Canford School. Now look carefully at the man on the left of the photo above. Yes, wily springs to mind. He looks like nothing escapes him. He is the most cunning fox of a tennis player we encountered – Phil professes to be a little slower now than in his prime but what he couldn’t do with the ball hasn’t been invented yet and no matter where we hit the ball Phil was there – unbelievable exponent of the art of real tennis. We accepted humbly our lessons and another silver medal and headed out with our opponents for a great pub lunch at the Vine, a great watering hole.

Our next destination was The Hyde Court at Bridport. Originally built in 1885, the real tennis court at The Hyde has had a colourful history, and has undergone numerous changes in its time. During WW2 it was used as a motor vehicle maintenance depot and more recently it has been renovated to its former glory, and is once again one of the finest examples of a Real Tennis court anywhere in the world. Unfortunately on our drive to Bridport Court the second problem with our grand plan was revealed in all its meteorological might. July was part of the wettest summer in many decades and that morning was surely the wettest day of all. We all know England gets very wet and one would expect that over the centuries the water would find an expedient exit to the Ocean. No, not so in Dorset as our route to the court was beset by flooded roads. Lucky we were now leaving before sunrise to ensure we found on time the elusive real tennis clubs of England (well it felt like it !) As the deluge continued we found ourselves negotiating axle deep flood waters across ‘A’ roads that were rising fast. We made it to the court but obviously our concentration was impaired by the impending natural disaster evolving outside and we again flashed into silver medal contention. A wonderful game with very helpful hosts, not only did Piers Rodgers and Ian Potter come out on a lousey day but Piers volunteered to guide us back to our accommodation via the high ground along the Roman Road – those Romans knew a thing or two – it wouldn’t be a surprise to discover that they are the true inventors of Real Tennis – ‘imagine Romus Tenuus’.



Bridport Court – this well posed calm belies the havoc outside.



We are now 4 courts into our 11 court adventure and we were beginning to feel the lack of a local court and the inherent level of skill and fitness regular games would have provided. Aching bones, tired muscles, pub lunches and big dinners were beginning to take their toll and we were becoming patently aware of the folly of travelling without a physiotherapist and sport psychologist. Our wives, Yvonne



Merton College, Oxford, with Lesley Smith and Craig Greenhalgh

and Helen, were very supportive and sympathetic but were in many ways the cause of our social diversions. But we were not to be thwarted. Our next destinations were the intellectual spawning grounds of Oxford and Cambridge. We chose to stay in B&Bs in the country and we relied heavily on the recommendations of 'Tripadvisor' which is a very useful online accommodation tool. Our first selection was Willow Cottage near Denton –



Willow Cottage, Denton, Oxford

a gorgeous 17th century, cute, thatched cottage in a picturesque garden settingwith a tortuous, steep, narrow, low stairway up which one must haul luggage. Seriously though it was wonderful and was a well situated base for our first game at Merton College. By this stage we were beginning to notice the difference in the courts: the spring of the floor, the height of the roof, the lighting, the resiliency of the lower back walls, all of which had a very marked effect on our game and assisted Dick who by now had the handicap haggling down to a fine art. Merton was a wonderful court with wonderful light and easy walls which greatly assisted our game and this time we earned a resounding silver medal – wonderful stuff.

The next day we were on our way to the most important encounter of the tour. Dick was quivering with anticipation. Once again we were up early and heading out, just as well because the GPS and the verbal instructions on how to get to Radley College were no challenge for our driver (no names, no courtmartial) who ignored these and wound up in some distant village, but no worries, we arrived with plenty of time to spare.



Pick the world champion - Chris Ronaldson



Radley College with Roger Henderson and Doris Siedentoph.

The goal was a meeting with a world champion, Chris Ronaldson. Chris will be no stranger to members of Real Tennis Clubs around the world. He is an inspiration to the game, an organiser extraordinaire of club activities and a real tennis legend. His energy, vision and leadership, ably demonstrated in the commissioning and running of Radley College Real Tennis, would be a welcome catalyst during the embryonic days of the new Sydney Real Tennis Club. Obviously star-struck we pulled ourselves together to clinch a very respectable silver medal.

Sydney Real Tennis Club (SRTC) needs a TOAD. The Newmarket Real Tennis Club exists thanks to Toad of Toad Hall. Or to be precise, because of the character the writer Kenneth Grahame based him on - Sir Charles Rose. Sir Charles was in many ways larger than life. He was born in 1847, married Elza (daughter of an MP) and they had 4 sons and a daughter. All four sons died prematurely, three in active service, one in a traffic accident. This may have been the catalyst that drove Sir Charles to involve himself in such a wide variety of activities. Professionally he was a very successful banker and subsequently an MP. He bought Suffolk House (which used to be on the High Street side of the existing club building) in 1890. He bought the land where the club now sits in 1899 and applied for planning permission to build a Tennis Court on this land in 1900.

We had the pleasure of playing two very hospitable members of Newmarket and a wonderful experience our visit turned out to be. Unfortunately Brian suffered an injury on court which was attended to by the team's sports physician but his demise affected morale and we had to settle for a silver medal.



Newmarket and Suffolk Club – shoeless Brian with Logan Crawford and Jeremy

So buoyed by the success of the Radley College and stories of the resurgence of real tennis in the UK we set out with a spring in our step to take on the best that Cambridge could offer. With images of gold in our eyes we weighed up our chances. Cambridge players would no doubt suffer the drawbacks of those who pursue intellectual activities. We figured that as academic pursuits would have priority Cambridge players would have little match experience, poor eye sight from reading late at night, weak wrists used to only wielding a pen and painful backs from carrying loads of books. This was our best chance of gold, howeverwe were mildly impressed with our opponents, Terry Gardiner and Donald Tipper (below), and after a very convivial game we pocketed our silver medals and went punting.



We were now entering the final phase of our tour. London beckoned and we were up to the challenge armed with the knowledge that any outcome would be an improvement on our performance to date. Although our skills had improved we were suffering from fatigue and loss of concentration on the court. Having mastered the London Tube we arrived at Lords. Here we were treated to a wonderful competition against the World Womens No 2, Karen Kirk. We had played Karen's mum, Doris, at Radley and we can confirm that both Mum and daughter are playing superbly and we will watch Karen's career with interest.

So it was off to Queens. It's worth recording at this stage that we were very impressed throughout the tour with the warmth of greeting and the players we were matched against. The clubs were welcoming, the professionals were helpful and without exception we thoroughly enjoyed every one. The uninitiated may think that the clubs of England can be a bit standoffish or tend to 'tolerate' us colonials but in our experience this is far removed from the truth.



Lord's with World No 2 Karen Kirk and Barry Nathan

The only time we received a very polite ‘chip’ was at Queens in the members café when Dick’s phone rang very loudly. We weren’t asked to leave but Dick was politely ushered out while he took the call. This happens in any good club and many of us think it should happen in restaurants as well. Sorry, didn’t I mention it – another silver medal to add to our haul. Just wait until we get our own court in Sydney and we return fit and feisty.



Hampton Court with John Clark and Gitte Dunkley – we received a superb lesson in strategy and control



Queens with Felix Pole and Lawrence Kingsley

The crowning glory was our experience at Hampton Court. Tennis has been played at Hampton Court for almost as long as the Palace has stood there. Present knowledge suggests the first tennis court, or *tenys playe* as they were called in Tudor times, was built by Cardinal Wolsey between 1526 and 1529. It was the first of three constructed at the Palace.

The Royal Tennis Court was last extensively refurbished in 1628 and is the oldest surviving real tennis court in England. It has been in more or less continuous use since it was built.

In the photo to our left can you see the casual way our opponents are standing – clearly relaxed and confident. Well the game got under way and John and Gitte were delightful to play, however I can’t say the same for the tour-fatigued Aussies. Try as we might we couldn’t find our form and it became clear that the superior strategy and skill of the home team would rule the day. Yes you guessed it – another silver medal. To celebrate our achievement we were very generously entertained in the most wonderful lounge which formed part of the club rooms, so well entertained that it wasn’t long before we were trotting off blindly to the local pub with a handful of members. Now that the stress of representing our club and country had been lifted we were finally able to relax. We should be honest here, in the last paragraph, especially to any reader who has got this far, we did win many games but there is no doubt that we felt keenly the absence of a home court. With a local court and all the fitness benefits that it will bring it’s assured future tours like ours will be showered with gold, but no one could have as much fun and we did, silver ‘n all.