

On Court: – Bath and Tennis from Indoor to Outdoor!

Museum of Bath at Work

June 12 – October 31, 2025

New Exhibition sheds light on the enthusiasm for tennis in Bath from Georgian times to the present day to open in June at popular museum.

An exciting exhibition revealing new research about the importance and popularity of tennis in Bath from Georgian times to the present day opens this June in a building which is itself a Georgian Real Tennis court. A wide range of displays will illustrate the development of the game from Real to Lawn tennis, including unique tennis trophies, early rackets, original costumes, tennis balls and manufacturing equipment, games and toys inspired by the sport, historic photographs and much more.

The Museum of Bath at Work displays a series of authentically reconstructed workplaces, workshops and galleries illuminating the working life and communities of the City. Less well known is the fact that it is housed in a Georgian Real Tennis court, built in 1777 by Richard Scrace. It was run successfully as a Real Tennis court, alongside a riding school – the equivalent of an early sports centre - until 1809.

This summer we will be highlighting its original use, and the exhibition will include a newly developed trail to help visitors to understand how the building was used for Real Tennis and the historical clues which remain. The exhibition will explore the history of Real Tennis in Bath, look at how Lawn Tennis developed in the 1870s and quickly became hugely popular (especially among women) resulting in clubs springing up across the city. Bath is the only UK City to have two early foundation Lawn Tennis clubs still surviving and flourishing today – the Bath Tennis Club (founded 1880) and the Lansdown Lawn Tennis and Squash Club (founded 1882).

In the mid-1880s Bath became famous for the **West of England Tournament** which was staged at the Lansdown Cricket Club from 1881 – 1895, part of the hugely popular **Bath Tennis Week**. This tournament was a pre-Wimbledon competition attracting some of the most famous Lawn Tennis players from home and abroad. Large crowds attended and there was a tournament for local players too. It was one of the earliest competitions to allow women to participate. The young Lottie Dod, who went on to win Wimbledon 5 times played and won in Bath in a memorable ladies' final in 1886, beating Maud Watson the reigning Wimbledon champion. We will have the iconic men's singles West of England trophy dating from 1882 on display for the first time in many years. In 1883 this was won by James Dwight, the founder of modern American lawn tennis.



By the beginning of the 20th Century people from all walks of life were playing in dozens of clubs across Bath from Combe Down to Southdown, Oldfield to Weston and public courts were available in places such as Sydney Gardens, as well as at the Recreation Ground for practice and tournaments. It was a far more progressive sport than we might imagine. Clubs were organised by local employers such as the department store Jollys and the engineering company Stothert and Pitt, churches, schools and political parties.

The changing fashions worn by women tennis players will be a particular focus of the exhibition, with displays of original costumes. These illustrate how in the 1880s women played in tight corsets, long skirts and tennis aprons, wearing hats and high heels. Skirts were shortened after World War I, with more loose-fitting outfits in the 1930s, flatter more comfortable footwear and a growing enthusiasm for tennis jewellery.

Until the 1920s women were expected to wear corsets under their long and cumbersome clothing, these restricted movement and sometimes even caused injury; we will have an example on display. Charles Bayer & Co. Ltd. Corset manufacturer was established in the late 19th century in Bath by a German immigrant, the 1892 red brick building still stands and claims to be England's first corset factory. Bayer made various sports corsets for riding, cycling and tennis, which were slightly shorter and gave a little more freedom of movement than everyday corsets.

There is a long tradition of the manufacture of tennis balls in the area. Both Spencer Moulton and Rex Rubber made tennis balls in nearby Bradford on Avon but neither company has survived. This tradition will be celebrated with loans especially from Price of Bath established in 1936, now the UK's only surviving tennis ball makers. Displays will consider how tennis ball manufacture has developed over the years, their production today and innovations developed at Price of Bath such as the Mini Red Tennis Ball 75 for junior players. High quality tennis rackets were produced by Murray and Baldwin (Bath) from the mid 1930s to early 1950s, who supplied Fortnum and Mason in Picadilly.

The exhibition will be brought up to the present day with information about Team Bath Tennis at Bath University, its contributions during the 1990s, the opening of the LTA Tennis Academy by Tim Henman in 2003 and the hosting of the Fed Cup in 2019. It will conclude by looking at the rising popularity of Padel and Pickleball.

A programme of events will include lectures, in conversations, film screenings, a historic tennis match re-enactment, Heritage Day events with the tennis clubs, family activities including a children's tennis trail and a section of the exhibition dedicated to games inspired by tennis.

This exhibition has been supported by the Sporting Heritage Network, Price of Bath, and Wesport and is part of the Museum of Bath at Work Museum Making Project supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Loans have been secured from Bristol Real Tennis Club, Bath Tennis Club, Lansdown Tennis Squash and Croquet Club, Bloomfield Tennis Club, Price of Bath and generous private collectors to whom we are most grateful.

For more information contact:

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Ann Sumner is available for further interviews should this be helpful and can be contacted via the museum.

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Opening hours 10.30 a.m. – 5.00 p.m. (last admission at 4.30 p.m.)