

The History of Weoley Hill Tennis Club 1921-31

The story of the iconic Bournville village, the beautiful garden suburb that became the model for many urban developments across the country is well-known.

In 1897 two young enterprising Quakers, George and Richard Cadbury had moved their expanding chocolate business away from the centre of Birmingham to the nearby countryside. They wanted their employees to live in houses with gardens surrounded by pleasant, green spaces and sports facilities that would enrich their lives. Healthy fit people, it was hoped, would be happier at home and more productive at work.

Their idea was a success but at the beginning of the 20th century, as Birmingham grew, more housing was required in the area. To the north of Bournville village was Corporation land, the south was already built up and on the east there were restrictions due to the railway and canal. So in 1911, the Bournville trustees (later to become Bournville Village Trust) purchased some land across the Bristol Road to the north-west of the original village. This had originally been part of a deer park, within the Manor of Weoley but was, at the time of the purchase part of Park Cottage Farm

In 1912, plans were drawn up for the 80 acre site which even at that early stage included 'open spaces, recreation grounds and tennis courts' which can be clearly seen on the maps below. An early reference to the original Cadbury aims.

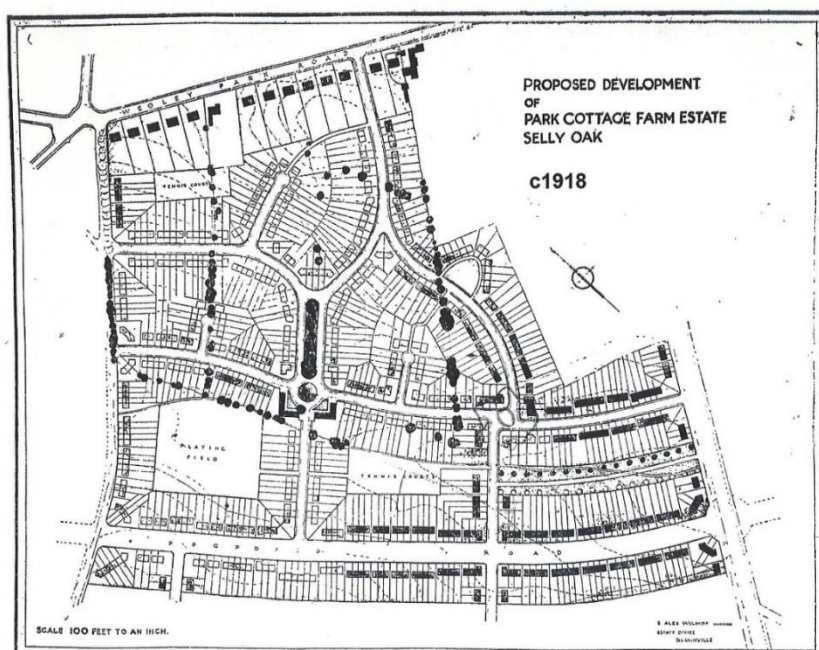


Fig. 1 Proposed development of Park Cottage Farm illustrating that tennis courts were included in the original plans for the village.

BVT decided to form a Public Utility Company in which the funds belonging to the Trust would be invested. This company, registered as Weoley Hill Ltd. (WH Ltd.) would carry out the development and from that point the new village was called Weoley Hill. BVT however, reserved the right to pass all the plans and to control tree work. It was originally planned to build a complete village of about 650 houses with schools, shops and a church with a 9 acre area allocated to the Central Council of Selly Oak Colleges.

The original village differed from nearby Bournville in that it had a much more informal layout with roads and cul-de-sacs following the natural contours and features of the land. The linear park that followed the course of Wood Brook and formed a continuous link between Bournville village and the Weoley Castle area was to become a defining feature as it provided, not only a green open space but room for the many sporting facilities that were to follow.

The building began in 1914 with the first houses fronting on to the Bristol Road either side of what was to become Witherford Way. By 1915, houses were completed up to the Fox Hill junction but further work was suspended due to the outbreak of war. The work resumed in 1919, and by 1927 another 217 houses had been completed. The houses were sold on a 99 year lease and were originally intended for first time buyers. They had gardens back and front with many mature trees left in situ that contributed to the picturesque outlook. The innovative addition of electricity for cooking and lighting must have been transformative. Yet another selling point was the easy access to the city centre by tram along the Bristol Road.

Weoley Hill Village Council

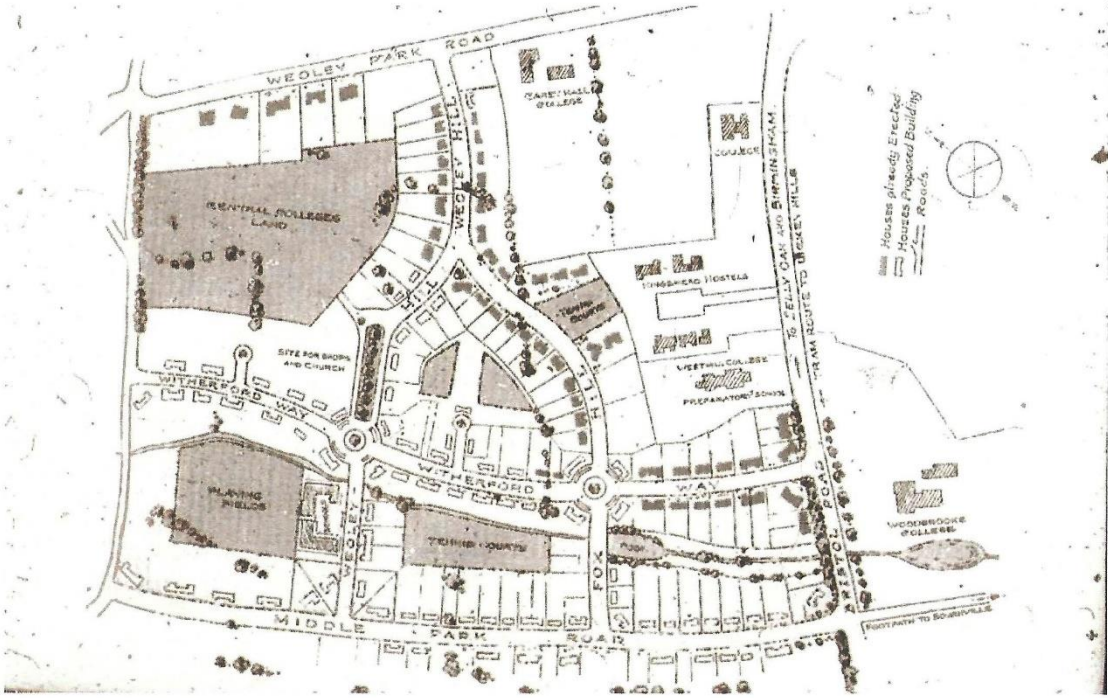
On February 18th 1921 the Weoley Hill Village Council (WHVC) held its first meeting in The Common Room, Holland House at Woodbrook(e). This would seem to be the first officially recorded meeting of a 'Village Council' which was made up of local residents, both male and female, who had undertaken to administer all aspects of village life, with the proviso that important issues had to be referred to WH Ltd.

So gradually, every aspect of village life began to be considered by the Council, the social life, the hospitality to new residents, the scope of the gardeners, the censorship of the noticeboards, a pillar box, even the cat nuisance and many other issues followed as the village developed. These very often resulted in a sub-committee being formed to address each issue!

On 22nd April 1921, the WHVC minutes stated that 'every section (of village life) should be self-supporting, and a start could be made with the tennis club'. It was proposed that two members of the WHVC 'approach all those interested in tennis and bowls with authority to set up a sub-committee of which they will form a nucleus. This sub-committee was to draft rules for the use of the tennis courts and bowling greens'. The Bowling Club evolved separately several years later, but the first tennis courts had already been laid by WH Ltd. on grass between the bungalows in Fox Hill Close (Fig. 2). The Tennis Club committee was formally accepted by the WHVC at the next meeting on 27th May 1921 which formalised the beginning of the Weoley Hill Tennis Club.

The first problem that the Tennis Club committee had to deal with was a request from bungalow tenants who overlooked the tennis club and who wanted to play!

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Fig. 2 c.1914 Tennis Courts shown on Fox Hill.

The aforementioned problem was referred to WH Ltd. who ruled that 'the bungalow tenants had no legal liability to play on the courts, but as the courts were situated in front of their windows, it was thought desirable to give them an opportunity of using one of the Courts at any time'.

WH Ltd. had recommended that a fee of £75 be charged for their annual upkeep and a groundsman was to be appointed.

These Fox Hill courts must have been on two levels which can still be clearly seen today. Correspondence suggested that rates had to be paid for these courts but in April 1922, the Club no longer used the top level and the rates demand for that area was returned to the Rates office unpaid.

Since November 1921, WH Ltd. stated that 'the question of playing space was still being considered by the planning committee' and eventually this may have led to courts being laid in the Parkway, as in March 1923, the Tennis Club were asked 'to take over the management of 6 courts for the next 12 months. The courts were maintained by a greenkeeper known only as 'Curly' to local people.

All adult residents on the Estate were eligible for membership with a limited number of vacancies for non-residents and friends of members. However, residents always had priority, so it was important that at the beginning of each season residents who wanted to play

applied promptly. Non-residents had to apply annually There were 4 grass courts and 2 hard courts. There was a small practice court. The courts were well used and all players wore white.

The President of the club in the 1920s was Laurence J Cadbury. The club thrived with numbers increasing most years. Matches were arranged against other clubs which proved very popular and were played on weekday afternoons and evenings.

In 1923 there were 85 members, 50 resident, 30 non-resident, 5 Honorary with the hope that there would be 100 members the following year.

In 1926 the subscriptions were:

| | Summer | Full Year |
|--------------------------|--------|-----------|
| Lady (Resident) | 30/- | 40/- |
| Lady (Non-resident) | 45/- | 55/- |
| Gentlemen (Resident) | 35/- | 45/- |
| Gentlemen (Non-resident) | 50/- | 60/- |

Non players could become honorary members for 5/- per year and could then visit the courts and take part in club social activities.

The subscription covered the cost of the balls.

WHVC were obviously mindful that some residents could not afford a full subscription to the club and requested that the TC Committee consider the possibility of allowing people to pay £10 for one game a month. WHVC were also anxious to make tennis more accessible for all children in the village and floated the possibility of re-opening the tennis courts on Fox Hill. There was no record of a reply from the Tennis Club!

However, by 1927, residents' children (12-16) were allowed to play during the summer holidays between 11am and 4 pm, although not on Saturdays and Bank Holidays. This cost 6d per day or 5/- for 4 weeks.

In 1927 there were 4 grass courts and 2 hard courts, but a year later there were 4 grass and 3 hard, which were almost continuously in use every Saturday. The balance sheet that year recorded expenditure of £23 11s 6d on tennis balls and £20 for 'wire netting fencing' for the grass courts. (In 1932, there were 2 grass, 4 hard and one small practice court, but by 1936 the grass had gone and there were just 7 hard courts).

Sunday play on the Tennis Courts

In **November 1923**, following a request to allow play on Sundays, the WHVC asked the Tennis Club Committee to conduct a poll amongst members on the desirability Sunday play. The resident members were balloted and the results were as follows:-

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| Voting papers issued | 49 |
| Voting papers returned | 46 |
| In favour of Sunday play | 26 |
| Not in favour of Sunday play | 20 |

WHVC discussed the results and

- (a) decided that it did not warrant a referendum of the residents of the Village
- (b) in the opinion of the Council Sunday play was not desirable.

It was not until **25th August 1925** that this was raised again with the figures that 33 members voted for and 21 against. This was again discussed at great length before deciding that the issue was most relevant to those people living close to the courts, so 'this Council is not prepared to consider the question of Sunday Tennis until the estate is more fully developed'. Presumably houses along Middle Park Road had not yet been built.

At the WHVC meeting on **May 10th 1929**, the club again asked for permission to play between 2pm and 6.30pm on a Sunday. This time the WHVC agreed to write to Alderman George Cadbury and WH Ltd to ask for their opinion. They also requested the numbers for and against amongst the resident members and asked them to ascertain the view of the residents of Witherford Way, Fox Hill and Middle Park Road whose gardens backed on to the recreation area. Armed with all this information they would then call a special meeting.

So on the **7th June 1929**, the special meeting took place. By now the club members were 49 in favour and only 4 against and amongst local residents adjacent to the courts, 16 were in favour with 8 against. The 11 committee members discussed again and finally voted in favour (9 for, 2 against) of Sunday play being allowed between 2pm and 6pm. **BUT** only provisionally until the end of the seasonso in September WHVC asked the tennis club to report back on how much the courts had been used on Sundays and 'considerable discussion followed' that resulted in them being able to continue in the coming winter season.

In **May 1930**, the club asked for the same facility for Sunday play as last year and it was agreed. However the Secretary asked for an earlier application for next year!!

Finally in **April 1931**, Sunday play was unanimously approved, although I have not found out for how long this annual request had to be made!

Interestingly, no other sports facility in the village seemed to have to obtain permission to play on a Sunday, in the 1920s anyway.... Although perhaps no other sport had made a similar request.

Unfortunately, two of the hard courts suffered in the Great Storm of 1931 when their surfaces were badly damaged. However, WH Ltd. came to the rescue and 'cleared the courts of mud and dressed the courts' within a few days.

On the negative side, the tennis club had a Nissen hut, presumably for storage, which some considered an eyesore and was subsequently moved to another position. There was also a small practice court and board which proved popular but the surface was too soft (asphalt or concrete would have been better), and occasionally residents complained about noise around the practice courts on a Sunday. There was also a complaint that the grounds around the courts had to be tidied up which must have happened as in 1930 they were described as 'in first class order' and in addition, the recently completed car park was considered 'a wonderful asset to the Club'.

Interestingly, a recurring problem in 1930 and 1931 was the loss of tennis balls into the brook from Number 1 court. This constituted a considerable expense and a request was made for netting over the water.

Throughout the annual reports the work of the Ladies Committee, who provide match teas, and afternoon teas on Saturdays was frequently acknowledged. They apparently 'carried out their duties admirably'.

Village Hall

In September 1923 a suggestion was made that a village hall would be beneficial. Subsequently, on 2nd November 1923, the Tennis Club representative on the WHVC produced a plan of a proposed village hall, (that had been previously prepared by WH Ltd.) reinforcing the need for this facility so that the club could use it for their winter activities.

The Committee discussed this at length and 'endorsed the principle underlying the suggestion of the Tennis Committee that a hall was necessary to meet the needs of the Village community'. They also accepted the proposed cost of £975 which was to be raised through a variety of means, including a Subscription Fund which was opened by a £10 donation from the Tennis Club.

Almost immediately the original plan was amended after a suggestion from the Tennis Club that the Hall should be slightly wider than originally planned! Over the next few months more discussion followed and more sub committees formed to discuss the addition of toilets, a kitchen, a small committee room and finally when it was considered to be almost ready, it was suggested that the roof be raised to allow badminton to be played. This would increase income but of course would cost more and by May 1924 it was decided not to proceed until new quotes could be obtained.

The proposed height of the hall was discussed again with no apparent resolution, so the tennis club again appeared to be somewhat of a motivating force, suggesting that a resident's meeting could be called to discuss the possibility of forming a badminton club. A positive response would result in a badminton club that would contribute a regular income. This could

then provide the impetus for the higher roof. The main committee felt it was too early to call such a meeting and they should wait until the Hall Management Committee was elected!

Finally, in the summer of 1925, after more discussions and more donations, the tenancy of the Hall was agreed, with no more mention of the height of the roof and work began. The building with its club room and terrace overlooking the courts were designed as the Tennis Club Pavilion, while the main hall was to provide facilities for all the other village organisations.

The building work began at the rear of the building and during construction the tennis club were allowed to use the completed club room and kitchen when they were finished. Subsequently, it was decided that 'for one year the tennis club could have sole use in the summer of the Club room on Saturday afternoons, and on certain fixed dates, also on other evenings when the room has not been otherwise booked, the club to have the general use of the room: in the winter, the Tennis Club could have the sole use of the Club Room until sunset, except when it is wanted for use in connection with the letting of the Main Room'. The cost to be £25. As yet, I have not found an indication of this being changed.

The hall was officially opened on September 26th 1926 by George Cadbury Jnr.

At the end of 1931, the club was described as '*in a vigorous condition, the members are all enthusiastic and there is a very friendly feeling pervading the whole*'. *New local residents will be given a 'hearty welcome'*.