

The History of the Wimbledon Tennis Championships

by Ben Johnson

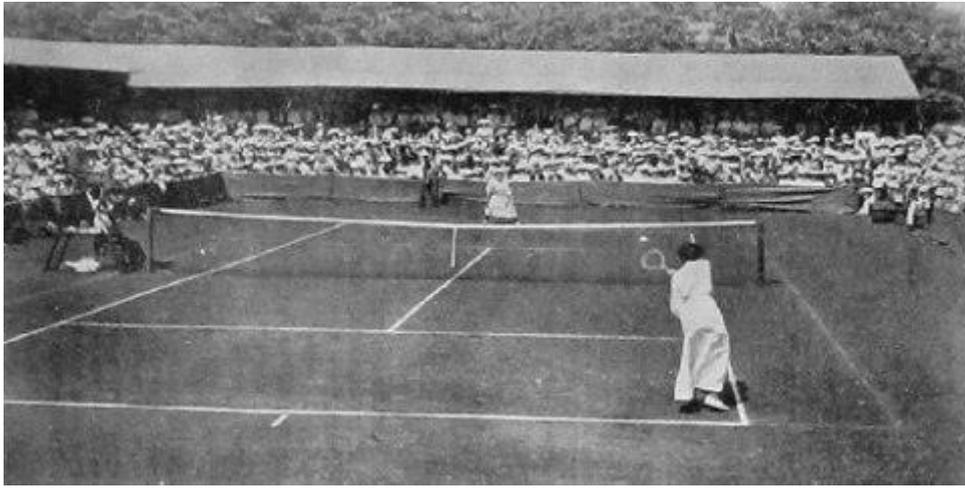
<https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/The-History-of-the-Wimbledon-Tennis-Championships/>

The Championships, Wimbledon, or just *Wimbledon* as it is more commonly referred to, is the oldest tennis tournament in the world and arguably the most famous. Since the first tournament 125 years ago in 1877, The Championships have been hosted by the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in Wimbledon, London and take place over two weeks in late June - early July.

Of the four major annual tennis tournaments known as the 'Grand Slams', Wimbledon is the only one to still be played on grass, which is where the name lawn tennis originated. Grass is also the surface which provides the fastest game of tennis. Of the other three, the Australian Open and the US Open are both played on hard courts and the French Open is played on clay.

In stark contrast to today's sporting extravaganza, the first year of the Championships took place with very little fanfare. The All England Club had originally been called the All England Croquet Club when it opened in 1869, but as the new game of lawn tennis - an offshoot of the original indoor racquet sport known by traditionalists as 'real tennis' - began to grow in popularity at the end of the nineteenth century, the club decided to provide tennis courts for their visitors. On 14 April 1877 the Club introduced the first of a number of name changes to become the All England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club.

Unlike today's tournament, which involves four junior and four invitation competitions alongside the five main contests - the men's single and double matches, the women's single and double matches and the mixed doubles - the first Wimbledon championships had one event, the Gentleman's Singles. As it was not permissible for women to enter the tournament in 1877, the first Wimbledon champion from a group of twenty-two male competitors was twenty seven year old Spencer William Gore. In front of a crowd of 200, who had paid a shilling apiece to attend, Gore beat his opponent William Marshall in a decisive 6-1, 6-2, 6-4 defeat lasting only forty-eight minutes. As would also be the tradition for many Wimbledon tournaments to follow until a retractable roof was installed over centre court in 2009, the final was postponed due to rain. When it was eventually played three days later the weather conditions had not greatly improved.



Ladies at Wimbledon

The game of lawn tennis was still in its infancy at this stage, with players using basic handmade equipment and imprecise strokes, unlike the slick powerful serves and top of the range rackets we see today. However, modern day Wimbledon spectators would be sure to recognise many of the rules of the game which were first introduced by the All England Club's Committee in 1877 as an adaptation of those put in place by the Marylebone Cricket Club, perversely the then controlling body of 'real' tennis.

Whilst no tournaments were held at Wimbledon during 1915-1918 and 1940-1945 because of the First and Second World Wars, the game continued to grow in popularity. In 1884 the men's doubles competition was introduced and the same year women were also invited to join the tournament. In the fifties the club moved from its original rented site on Worple Road to the larger, present day Church Road site and in 1967 the tournament made history when the event became the first broadcast to ever be televised in colour.



Trophies and prize money

Following the completion of the five major competitions the winners are presented with the traditional Wimbledon trophies. Having had to replace both the Field Cup in 1883 and the Challenge Cup in 1886, the All England Club decided that future trophies should no longer become property of the Championship winners, who would instead receive a replica of the trophy whilst the originals were housed in the Wimbledon museum.

For the men's singles winners the trophy was a silver gilt cup engraved with the words "The All England Lawn Tennis Club Single Handed Champion of the World" and inscribed with the name of winners dating back to 1877. In 2009, when there was no more room for the names of future Wimbledon Champions, the addition of a black plinth adorned with a silver band was incorporated so that more names could be commemorated.

For the ladies' singles winners the trophy is a sterling silver salver, known as the 'Rosewater Dish', which was first introduced in 1886, and for each of the doubles tournaments a silver challenge cup is presented to the winners.

Whilst the coveted trophies were highly prized it wasn't until 1968 that prize money was awarded at Wimbledon. This was also the first year that the Club allowed professional players to compete. However, surprisingly it was only as recently as 2007 that the prize money for men and women became equal! As you can see below, there is quite a difference between today's prize money and that received by the winners in 1968!

Prize money won by Wimbledon Champions in respective events:

Year	Men's Singles	Men's Doubles	Ladies' Singles	Ladies' Doubles	Mixed Doubles	Total for Tournament
1968	2,000	800	750	500	450	26,150
2011	1,100,000	250,000	1,100,000	250,000	92,000	14,600,000

Wimbledon Fashion

The accepted outfit of choice for Wimbledon players in the nineteenth century was plain white long-sleeved shirts and trousers for men and full-length corseted white dresses and hats for women. It was not until the 1920s and 1930s that the players, and particularly the female players, began to experiment with their clothing. Shorter skirts, shorts and sleeveless tops were all introduced, some more daringly than others, to provide ease of movement and a sense of individual personality.

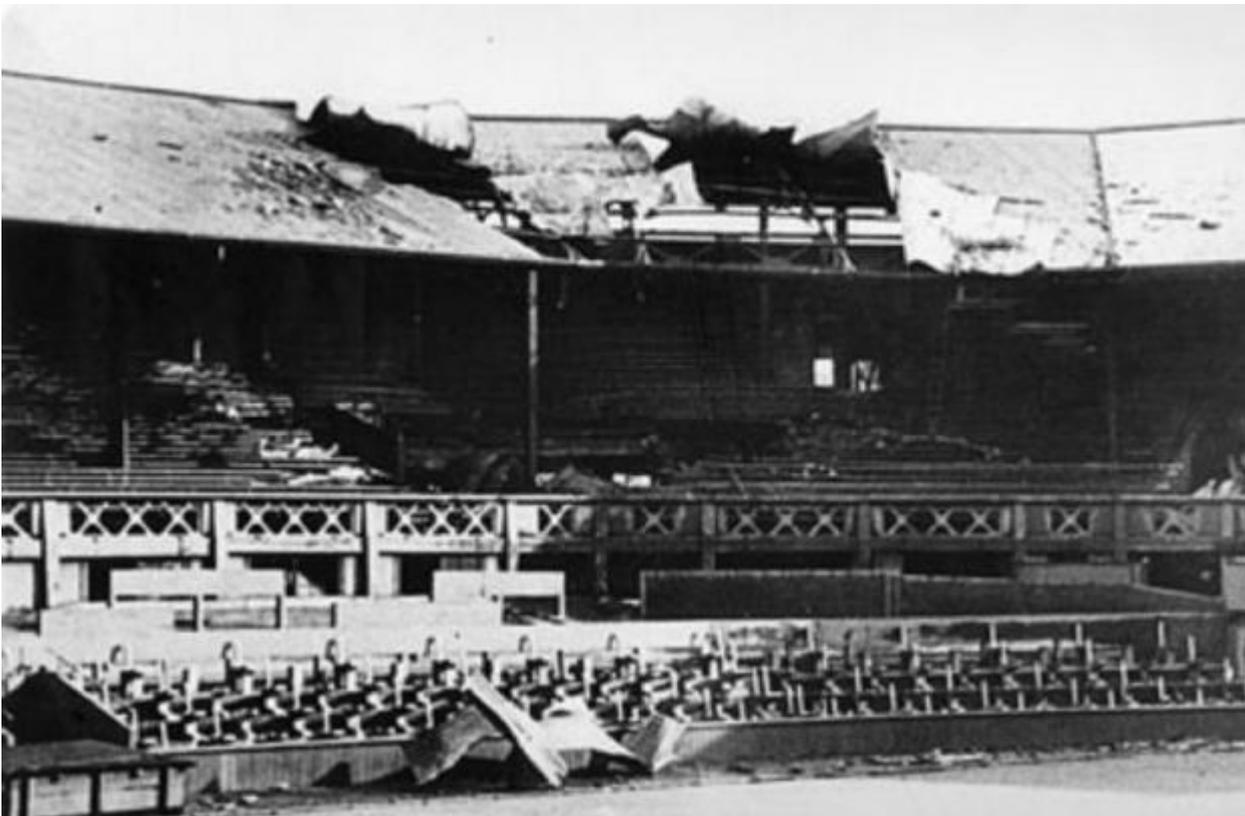
As far back as the nineteen thirties the French grand slam winner René Lacoste promoted his own eponymous label by wearing his crocodile emblazoned shirts whilst on court. However, today Wimbledon is besieged with the current sports logos of choice as tennis outfits seem to be less about comfort or individuality and more often than not, a result of the multi-million pound sponsorship deals with sportswear giants. Indeed even the ball boys and girls

have left behind the traditional Wimbledon colours of green and purple and have sported navy and cream uniforms created by the American fashion designer Ralph Lauren since 2006.

Wimbledon traditions

Although much has changed since the Wimbledon Championships were first introduced in 1887, today when we think of Wimbledon fortnight there are a number of traditional images that still spring to mind. The obligatory strawberries and cream (of which it is estimated that 28,000 kilos of English strawberries and 7000 litres of cream are consumed each year!), the white or almost all white dress code which is still a requirement, or the strong ties with the Royal family to name but a few. All of which combined continue to preserve Wimbledon's place both in British heritage and at the forefront of the tennis world.

Centre Court



During World War II, 5 bombs hit Centre Court, destroying 1,200 seats. It took 9 years to fully restore it, and it can now hold 15,000 fans. Centre Court now also has a retractable roof that prevents rain delays from causing loss of playing time.