

“SERVICE!”

LAWN TENNIS.*

BY H. W. W. WILBERFORCE.



IT is now just twenty-one years since the first Lawn Tennis Championship was held at the All England Club, and although the game, for obvious reasons, never had and never can have any hold upon public schools, still it may fairly by this time be said to have become the recognised pastime of a large number of the game-playing classes. There are many amusements of a similar nature which have passed or are passing through the period of craze ; some survive—not quite in their pristine vigour, but still with a permanent though more limited *clientèle* ; some die out altogether, and some drag out a lingering existence barely maintained by the support of a faithful few. Archery, croquet, rinking, golf, bicycling, and, the latest comer, indoor skating, are instances of this proposition ; and all of these have found or will find their level sooner or later. Lawn tennis is to be placed, I think, in the first of these classes ; from the palmy days when cricket trembled for its very life, to the time when golf threatened its almost entire extinction, its career has been a chequered and an exciting one. Now it may well

consider itself comfortably established in a comparatively humble but useful sphere. And its possessions are by no means despicable : there are championships in nearly all the countries of the New World, as well as the Old ; there are treatises on the theory and practice of the game in English, French, German, Danish and American ; there is a lawn tennis parliament in the shape of an Association—an indispensable adjunct nowadays to every pastime—which has a jurisdiction ranging from the laws of the game to the morals of the players ; and last, but not least, it has an organ in the press—*Lawn Tennis*—exclusively devoted to chronicling its doings. The game is, no doubt, one mainly for young men ; but to say that it is merely an exercise, as Mr. Arthur Balfour in his enthusiasm for golf has said, is to overshoot the mark. There is just this amount of truth in the statement, that activity and staying power are essential to a first class player. Such qualities are not, of course, as a rule found in mankind much after thirty-five ; yet, so long as anybody retains his eyesight and a sufficient amount of strength to toddle about on the grass, so long can he enjoy, not perhaps a punishing single, but a not unexciting double in which craft and delicacy of touch may prove a match for agility and endurance. Indeed, I have seen a man of seventy playing away vigorously, doing his share of the work, though not jealously, and have myself found

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him a very decent and useful partner. I daresay he was something rather exceptional in the way of a veteran, but there is many a man of not quite such advanced years who, though not so slim as he used to be, and perhaps a little short in the wind, comes back from his business to play with great keenness for his hour or so before dinner, and who will be as pleased as Punch if he and his old friend Jones manage to take the shine out of those two youngsters who fancy themselves so tremendously. The social

criminally together, and you will get into sad disgrace if you pair off last year's local champion with the young lady who "never can take those horrid twists."

Such matters as these, however, are mere trifling to the ardent and serious lover of the game; what he cares for, whether as a player or spectator, are tournaments; and I must confess for myself that at times I have found a match almost too exciting to look on at with unmixed pleasure. Two instances in particular I recall, one in 1883



G. W. Hillyard. Pim. Stokes.
Miss C. Cooper. Miss Dod. Mrs. Hillyard. Miss Cooper.
H. Baddeley. W. Baddeley.

Reynolds.
Allen. Ball-Greene. Allen.

A GROUP OF FAMOUS PLAYERS.

aspects of the game, too, are a strong point in its favour in the country; the ordinary young man—the hostess's desideratum—does not fight so shy of a garden party if he thinks he will have a chance of scoring off that conceited fellow Brown, who is really not half so good as he imagines, or, as the case may be, of being the partner of the fascinating Miss Snooks, even if it is only for one set. Such a party, nevertheless, requires some management; the cracks and the crocks must not be huddled indis-

and the other in 1889, both at the championship meeting. In the first match Mr. Ernest Renshaw beat Mr. Lawford after the games had been called five-love against him in the fifth set. Everybody thought it was all over, and Mr. Renshaw won several games before anyone realised at all that perhaps it was not such an entire certainty. Then with each stroke the interest became more intense, and when the end came the scene was quite indescribable; the gravest and most respectable people leaped from their seats and shouted

themselves hoarse, to such a pitch had their nerves become strung. The other match was, if possible, more exciting still; it was between Mr. W. Renshaw and Mr. Barlow, and was one of the longest matches I ever was at. I will not dwell on more than this one incident of the fight out of many: Mr. Barlow had won the first two sets and was within one stroke of the match; he returned a ball high over his opponent's head; the latter, in turning sharply to run back, slipped and fell, and a groan went round the ground; he recovered himself in an instant, however, just managed to reach the ball, got it over, won the stroke and ultimately the match.

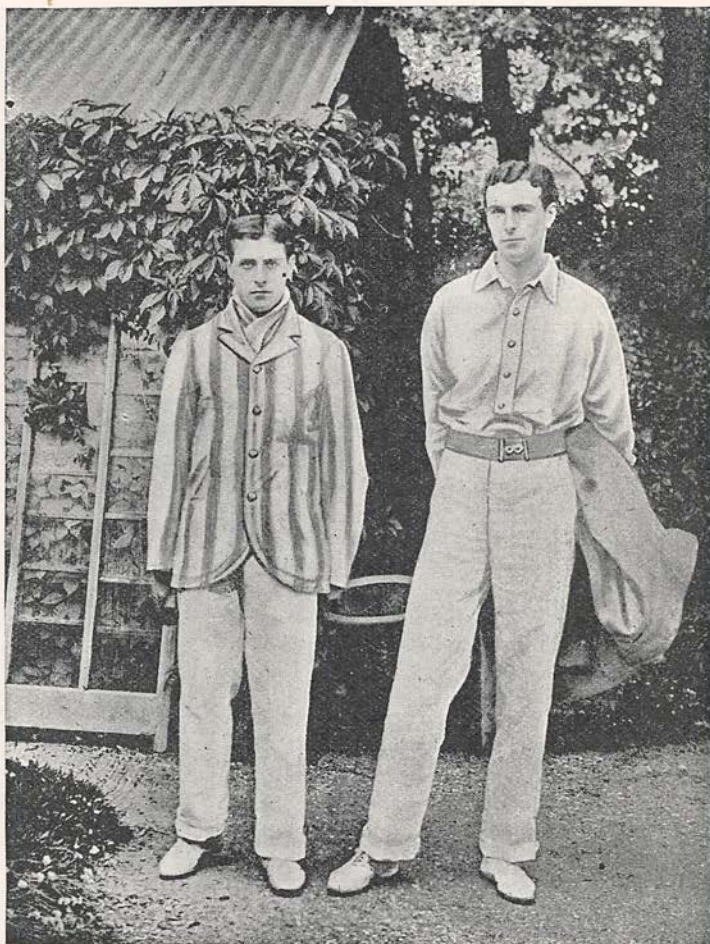
It may seem childish to some people to remember, and much more to prose about, ancient performances like these; but to me, and I believe to many others, the memory of them is as fresh as if they had only happened a few weeks ago. And if one were in a moralising mood, doubtless many instructive lessons might be derived thereout.

Since the game was first introduced there have been changes, as might have been expected, of some importance in the laws of the game and the computation of handicap odds, in the *personnel* of the players, and in the standard and style of play, many of them of more interest to the expert than to the general public, but some deserving of a little notice.

At first the laws were to a great extent tentative; drawn as they were from various sources—from rackets, from real tennis, and elsewhere—it had to be left to experience to determine whether they were adapted to the requirements of the conditions under which play would take place. In the result the

shape of the court was materially altered almost at once, and its new dimensions have stood the test of criticism and trial sufficiently long to justify a belief in their finality.

The scoring was originally the same as that at rackets; the real tennis method seemed likely to give more satisfaction, and was accordingly adopted, and the various experiments of playing a large number of



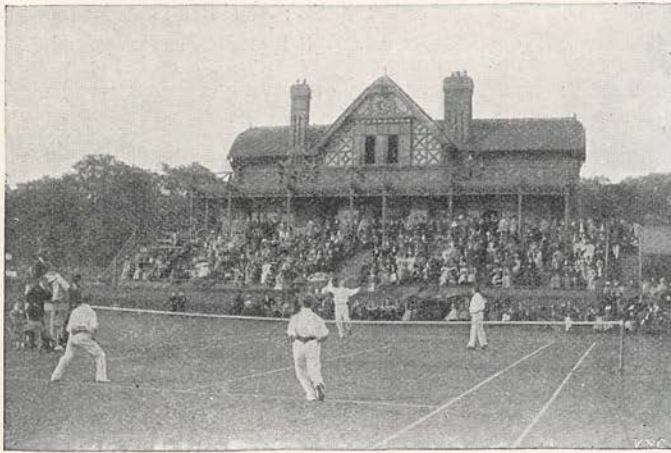
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[R. W. Thomas, Cheapside.

THE BROTHERS DOHERTY.

points, say 100 up, have not met with any very extensive approval—in fact, they have pretty well been abandoned. The height of the net was a matter upon which there was some diversity of opinion for a time; I imagine, however, that the rule now in force will never be substantially departed from unless some unforeseen development takes place which would give undue prominence to some particular stroke or style of play.

From time to time suggestions have been made that only one service should be allowed, and the preliminary fault abolished, on account of the supposed advantage accruing



THE BADDELEYS v. THE ALLENS.

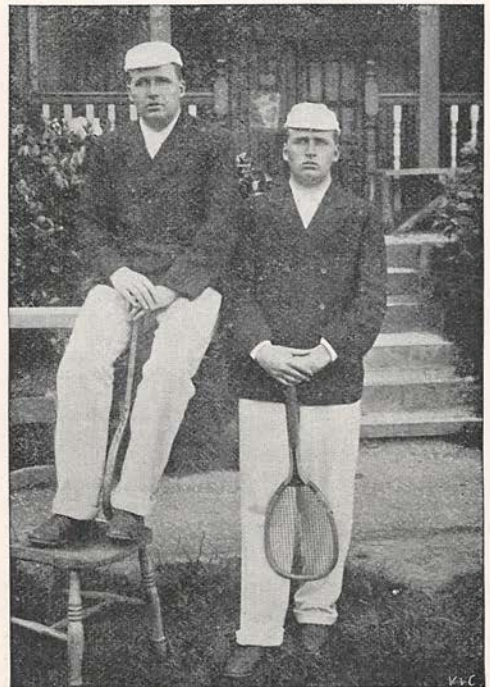
to the server under the present plan. It is very doubtful whether such advantage exists to any large extent, and it is pretty well recognised that the proposed change would put the server in a far worse position than anybody could say his opponent now occupies. Handicap odds admit of endless argument and adjustment; he would be a bold man who would deny the possibility of any further improvement; but the present tables are not, I think, in any immediate danger. For my own part I must say I am inclined to be rather conservative in these matters; to use a political simile, it seems to me that constant changes, except in the case of admitted grievances, tend to drive capital out of the country—that is, to disgust people with the game; and I am glad therefore to think that no cloud of legislation is to be discerned upon the lawn tennis horizon.

Since I first entered the lawn tennis arena, which I am sorry to say is as long ago as fifteen years, the cast of leading players has been entirely altered at least twice; not a single name remains now on the list of the mighty men of my early days. The Renshaws, H. F. Lawford, R. T. Richardson, J. T. Hartley, E. Browne, E. Chatterton, D. Stewart, E. Williams, C. W. Grinstead, and I daresay many more, are never seen among the aspirants to championship honours, and hardly one of them plays in public at all. Others there are who took their places, to be in turn elbowed out by the inevitable march

of time—W. J. Hamilton, H. Grove, E. Lewis, J. Pim, E. G. Meers, H. S. Barlow, and P. B. Lyon. Now at the top of the tree we have H. S. Mahony, the Baddeley brothers, the Riseley brothers, the Doherty brothers (it is curious how many good pairs of brothers there are and have been), H. A. Nisbet, W. J. Eaves, C. H. Cazalet, and perhaps one or two more whose names escape me for the moment.

Whether with the constant influx of new blood into the game has come an improvement in the quality of the play, or not, is a moot point amongst those best qualified to judge, and I give my own view simply for what it is worth. The high-water mark, I believe, was reached in 1886; it

may be that the tide returned in 1893 and 1894, when Mr. Pim was champion, but I am pretty confident it has never been quite so high at any other time. I mean by this that,



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[Brigham, Scarborough.]

THE ALLEN BROTHERS.

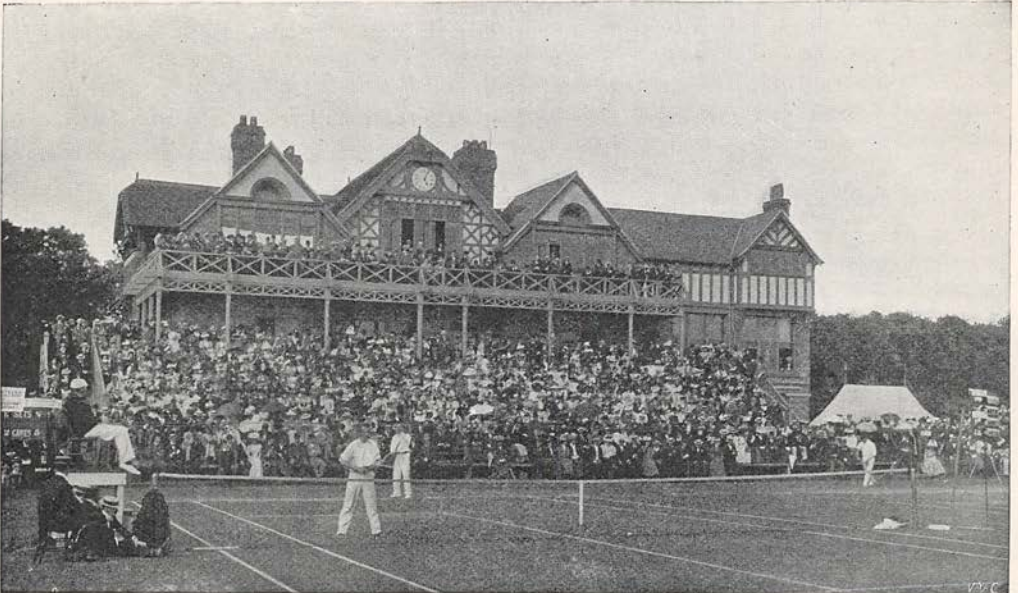


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[Gibson, Seacombe.

Miss Picstal. F. O. Stoker. T. G. Hill. W. Baddeley. H. O. Jones. Pim. H. Baddeley. A. Dod.
 Miss Martin. Miss Dod.
 Miss Jackson. Stoker. H. S. Barlow. W. Renshaw.

COMPETITORS IN THE NORTHERN TOURNAMENT, JUNE, 1892, LIVERPOOL CRICKET GROUND, AIGBURTH.



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[Gibson, Seacombe.

THE WIND-UP OF THE NORTHERN LAWN TENNIS TOURNAMENT, 1896.



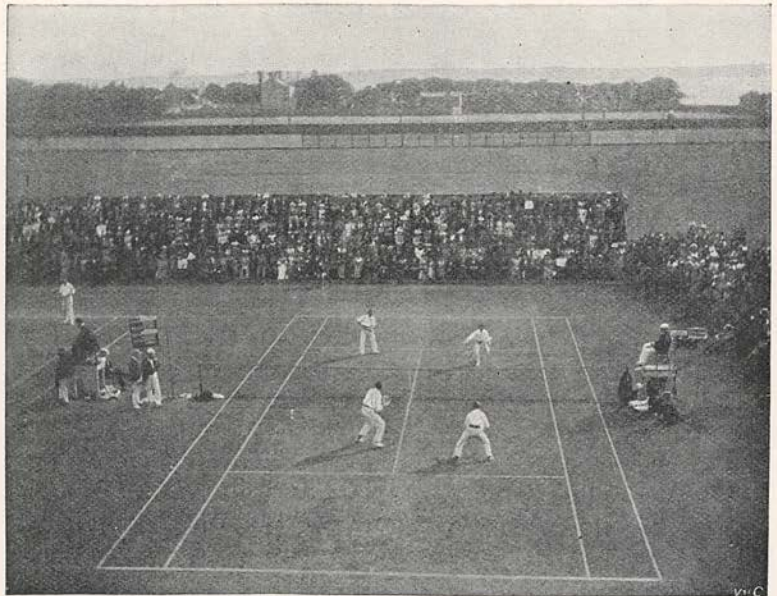
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MR. W. J. EAVES.

very marked difference between the style of the most modern play to that which preceded it. Everybody has heard of the great contest which raged so long between back play and volleying. The Messrs. Renshaw, who first reduced volleying to a science, prophesied its universal practice and the utter downfall of back play. Mr. Lawford, on the other hand, showed us to what a pitch of perfection back play could be brought, and was in his turn confident that it would be the most important factor in the play of the future. While he took part in tournaments the results certainly seemed in favour of his theory, and it was only because Mr. W. Renshaw had a great mastery of the stroke which he at one time seemed to disparage, that he retained his supremacy for such an extraordinary period of time. Some players belonged to one school and some to the other, but it was remarked that although when volleyers played against one another they could and did run up after the second service—which is the recognised test of the volleying game—they prudently abstained when encountering one of the rival camp. Without going too much into technical details, it became an axiom that anyone pretending to the first class must have a good stroke from the back of the court; and equally on the other hand that ability to volley decisively was indispensable. The effect on the play was to give it a charm and variety which it otherwise would have lacked. During the

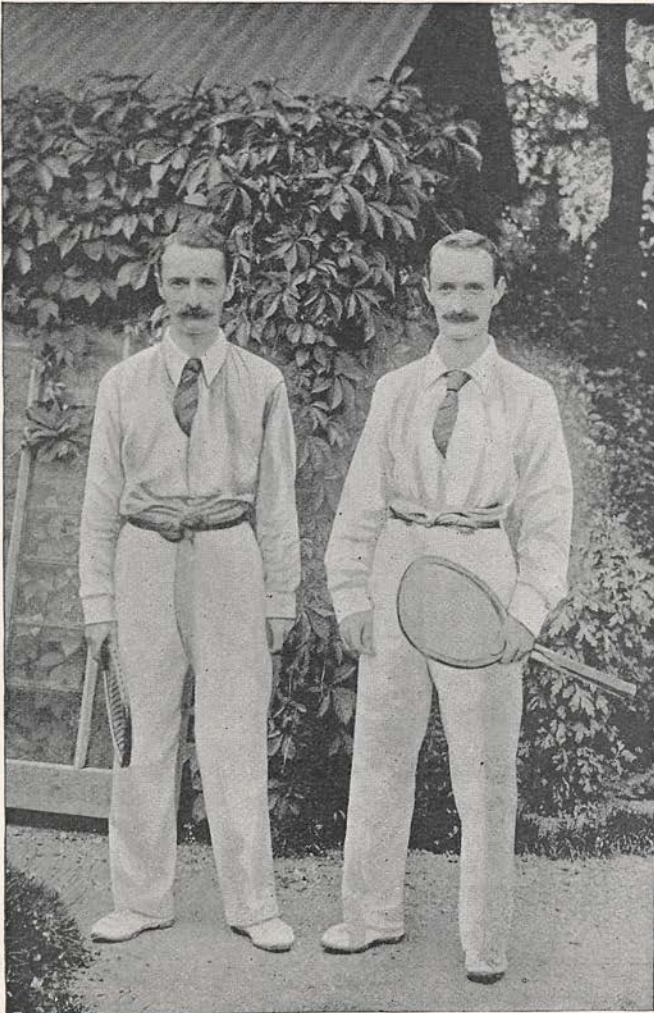
with the possible exception mentioned, I put Mr. W. Renshaw as the finest player I have ever seen, and I put Mr. Lawford second. It is only a guess, at the best, but there it is. Nevertheless, I have no doubt in my own mind that the general standard of play has distinctly risen; there are far more men who play a low first class game or a high second class one than there used to be. Moreover, double play is certainly better than it was. This latter fact is due to a great extent to the



MESSRS. HILLYARD AND CAZALET V. THE BADDELEYS.

past year or so, however, conditions have altered. For some cause or other—whether it is the undoubted difficulty of acquiring a hard off-the-ground stroke or for some more recondite reason—there seems to have grown up a kind of tacit agreement among the better players to give up back play almost entirely. It was the subject of general comment at Wimbledon in 1896 (when we had, I must say, the weakest championship play I have ever witnessed) that running up after the second service was practically universal. Most persons interested in the

welfare of the game regret this; and, as usual, there are those who cry out for an alteration in the laws to remedy the evil. Such a demand is certainly premature, and perhaps somewhat unreasonable. I have indicated what the experience of a past time has been when, as now, some people derided the threatened despotism of the volleyer, and it may well be that we are now passing through a similar phase, due to the superiority of particular individuals, which, with the advent of new players with different characteristics, will disappear.



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[R. W. Thomas, Cheapside.

THE BROTHERS BADDELEY