

# 1

## **From Real Tennis to Lawn Tennis**

Did you know that we owe the pleasures of  
Wimbledon to medieval Moors and monks?

Read on . . .



*Well, I never knew that . . .  
 . . . tennis is scored 'love all, 15, 30, 40, game'  
 because of eggs, clocks and Noah's Ark!*

The medieval Arabs used to play a game in which they hit a ball to each other with their hands. It was initially spread to Spain by the invading Moors and then taken up by Christian knights and churchmen during the crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries. They in turn took it back with them to their homelands, where it became especially popular in the French monasteries. Before one player served, he would shout 'Take this!' – or, in French, 'Tenez!' Over time the word, and the activity, evolved into an early form of what in England we call TENNIS.

In the monasteries the game was played in the courtyards, hence the phrase TENNIS COURT.

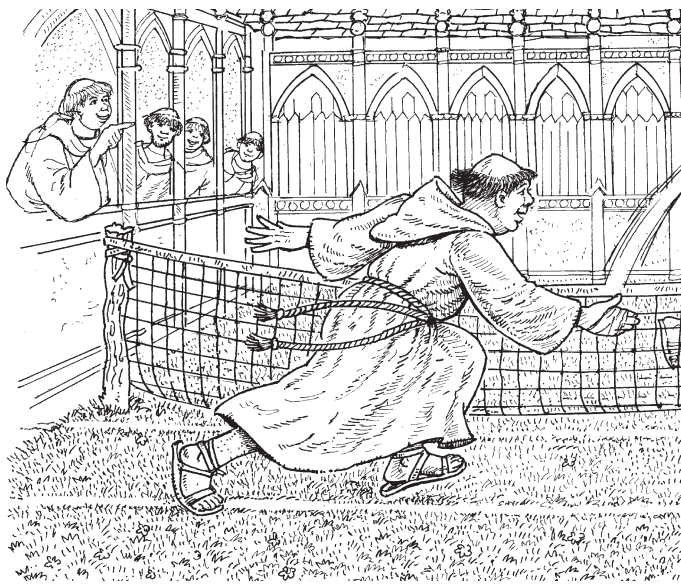
Henry VIII played a great deal of this game at his purpose-built tennis courtyard in HAMPTON COURT.

The Latin word *regalis* (meaning royal) evolved into a shorter word both in Spain, where it is still used today, and in England, where it is used only in conjunction with this form of tennis, giving us REAL TENNIS. Incidentally, in Spain the word is used, for example, to describe the 'royal' city of Madrid where the King lived: REAL MADRID.

The monastic courtyards would usually have sloping roofs over the surrounding passageways or cloisters, held up by pillars. This is still used as the basic design of real tennis courts. Initially a piece of rope was strung across the courtyard to divide it into two parts, with each player needing to play into his opponent's area. Hence the phrase THE BALL IS IN YOUR COURT – nowadays meaning 'it is now your turn or responsibility'.

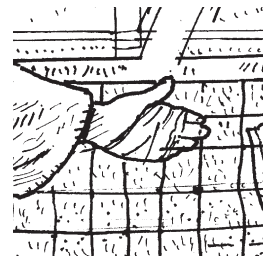


To make it easier to see who won the point, the rope evolved into a net. Where necessary, posts would be sunk into the ground from which the net was hung. One strategy in the game can be to play close to the net with one shot and then to the back of the court near the pillars of the old cloisters, and so on, to wear your opponent out. Hence the phrase FROM PILLAR TO POST, meaning running all over the place.



In real tennis it is important to make the ball bounce as close to certain lines as possible. This creates an advantage called a 'chase' that can, in fact, suddenly win a game. This can best be achieved by hitting the ball with the racquet at a sharp (cutting) angle, a tactic which gives us the phrase to CUT TO THE CHASE – to come to the point immediately.

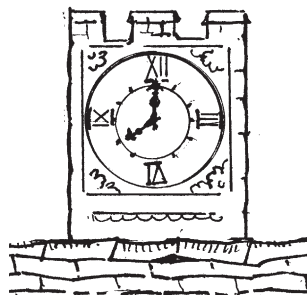
Monks would make balls out of cloth tied with string and initially used their hands to hit the ball. Hence the different terms for hitting a ball: BACKHAND and FOREHAND. In France a version of the game is still called *jeu de paume* – the game of the palm.



To avoid hurting their hands, players often copied the Arabic tradition of wrapping a length of cloth called *ruqatwas* around their hand. This gives us the word RACQUET. Incidentally, the

racquet used in real tennis is unique in that it is non-symmetrical and still made from wood rather than carbon fibre. It is shaped like a giant palm with one side flat, representing the part next to the little finger, and one side rounded, like the side where the thumb is.

Scoring was done using the quarter-hours on the monastery clock, which is how we have ended up with 15, 30, 45 AND GAME. The third number, however, was close to another



number that had strong biblical connections and so it was changed to that number: 40. It rained on the ark for 40 days and 40 nights; Moses went to Mount Sinai for 40 days; Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days; and so on. The shape of an

egg gives rise to the word describing a nil score: LOVE, from *l'oeuf*, French for egg, and the shape of zero. The shape of an egg has also given rise to different phrases for a score of zero in ball games: in the UK a DUCK, in the US a GOOSE. Also, when someone tries something that does not work it can be said that they have just LAID AN EGG, meaning they have produced zero benefit.

When two tennis players tied at a score of 40, it was agreed that instead of just one more point to win, either player would need two clear points to win. Thus we get the word DEUCE – from *deux*, French for two.

Given the nature of the original cloisters, with gaps between the pillars, a rule developed that is still key to real tennis that the ball must always be served so that it makes contact with a roof first and then drops down into the court. Because different monasteries had different shaped courtyards there was no standard court. However, the game always involved hitting balls onto various roofs and walls, and part of the skill was trying to anticipate the unpredictable angles

at which the ball would rebound off them. This gives us the phrase *OFF THE WALL*, meaning an unusual angle, or new idea.



In tennis, and some other sports, players can be ranked by their likelihood of winning, so that matches can be arranged to avoid leading players meeting one another in the early rounds of a competition, so saving the closest-fought matches for the later rounds. Using an analogy with the gardener's practice of carefully spacing plants to avoid unnecessary competition for good soil, or premature weeding out of

potentially good plants, we get the phrase *SEEDING* of competitors.

A variety of tennis played in France, called *bande*, ended up having more emphasis upon hitting the ball with the wooden part of the racquet. A similar game in Ireland, with some similarities to lacrosse, involved hitting a wooden object around between players on a flat piece of ground, sometimes played on ice. This game was also called *bande*. From this idea of hitting the ball around among several players we get the phrase *BANDIED ABOUT*. The stick used was a distinctive shape, having a long straight handle with a flat end bent at a sharp angle. This gave us the phrase for people with bent or bow legs: *BANDY-LEGGED*. And this game eventually evolved into what we know as hockey.