

by IAN WOOD in conjunction with Kathleen Cashmore (nee Redhead)

Title:-

Memories of Wenning Badminton Club at the Town Hall, High Bentham

Article:-

My most vivid memories are from learning to play Badminton within the Junior section of Wenning Badminton Club in the 1960'/70s.

Together with my siblings and my mother and father, Wenning Badminton Club gave all my family, a lifelong love of the game and provided friendships for me that have lasted for over 60 years.

Frannie Forster, who had a newsagents and toyshop in Station Road, had founded and been involved with Wenning BC & Evening Institute for the benefit of the local community after World War II.

After approximately 20 years, he wished to retire and approached Badminton players and coaches Desmond and Irene Redhead from Ingleton, to ask if they would support local youngsters to play and enjoy the sport of Badminton.

By the late 1960s, there were already some older teenagers playing competitively for Wenning Badminton Club in the Lancaster and Morecambe and also the Craven Badminton Leagues and the family members of Howson, Metcalfe, Newhouse, Hogg, Williams, Carr, Taylor, Huck, Capstick and Marshall helped Desmond and Irene promote Badminton to other locals in the area.

However, Junior club nights began to take place every Saturday evening from 7pm on the first floor of the Town Hall, High Bentham.

The expensive Badminton Court had to be rolled out from a wide box in front of the stage where it was housed and the net posts and nets erected before play could begin - the room was only big enough for this one court and the players also had to contend with the low roof beams.

When I began attending on Saturday nights, the Junior club had become so popular, there could be anywhere between 30 to 45 juniors turn up each week.

With this many youngsters in the room it was, as you can imagine, very noisy but great fun.

Desmond maintained order with his booming voice and was noted in an article that was published in the national magazine "The Badminton Gazette" as being referred to as "Des – The Dictator".

It was only right that to maintain order with so many young people in the room, he had to be strict.

Games were fast and furious with 4 players on court playing for a timed 6 minutes only, so that all the juniors were kept busy and also learned how to score correctly.

There was just enough room for 2 more to practice at the entrance door end and 2 more practising at the stage end playing all sorts of made-up games involving hitting the plastic shuttlecocks, in some way or another !

The local community was also helped when any down time the juniors had, allowed frequent visits to the local sweet shop which stayed open late or the local chip shop for refuelling.

Occasionally, Desmond would split everyone into 2 teams on either side of the net - you had to play a shot and then run clockwise round to the back of the team on the other side.

Anyone making a mistake had to sit down and the game would continue until there was a 'last man standing' .

At the end of the evening there was a competitive Singles ladder played in 3 divisions with games to 5 points and the winner stayed on to challenge the next higher opponent on that division's ladder.

Once you lost, it was time to go home to bed.

The higher you were in the Singles ladder meant that it was sometimes nearly midnight before that weeks Champion emerged.

The competition was fierce !

The expensive Badminton Court then had to be rolled back up into the wide box in front of the stage where it was housed and the net posts and nets put away until the next Saturday night.

It was not long before this blossoming Junior club started to spread its wings as the most able players were entered into English Schools competitions in Yorkshire , Lancashire, Cumbria and then further south.

Christine Ralston and Anne Staveley were the first two who not only entered but started to win those competitions.

They were then selected to represent Lancashire Schools and on one occasion travelled with other team members to the Isle of Man and won 12 games to 0 They flew out to Douglas at an air fare cost of £4 and 5 shillings each !!

On one occasion in April 1967, Desmond had arranged for Christine and Anne together with other members of the Wenning Junior Club to enter the Lancashire County Junior U/18 Championships and they all travelled to Lytham.

They all played well and won lots of their matches in the Singles and Doubles but in the Mixed Doubles, the girl partner of the top boy player, Alan Harkness from Southport, did not turn up to play.

Desmond suggested the only spare girl in the hall was his 10 year old daughter Kathleen, who had just started to learn Badminton at the Wenning Club.

Alan was eventually persuaded, reluctantly, to play in the Mixed Doubles with this 10 year old beginner.

Alan won the Boys Singles, then won the Boys Doubles and then remarkably won the Mixed Doubles with 10 year old Kathleen Redhead.

This result catapulted Wenning Junior Badminton Club into instant stardom.

The Junior Club went from strength to strength during the 1960/70's as more and more local families sent their children to learn to play Badminton on a Saturday night, including mine:-

Wood, Armstrong, Skeats, Clapham, Cowgill, Russell, Rosier, Chappell, Redhead, Scott, Parker, Harrison, Leak, Wilcock, Pedder, Jackson, and many more

As well as singles successes, many doubles and mixed doubles partnerships emerged from these families to play in Junior County teams and competitions.

My partnership, in particular, was successful with Hugh Redhead,

Paul Wood was successful with Gary Scott,

Kathleen Redhead was successful with Hazel Scott, Susan Parker, Hugh Redhead and Paul Wood,

Catherine Wood was successful with Lynva Russell.

The National Junior Badminton Championships were known as the Junior All-England and were held in Wimbledon, Surrey over the Christmas period each year for both U/15 and U/18 age groups

Members of Wenning Badminton Junior Club were successful at this National Level in both age categories

Paul Wood, Carl Wood and Gary Scott for Boys Singles
Kathleen Redhead for Girls Singles
Paul Wood and Gary Scott for Boys Doubles
Kathleen Redhead and Susan Parker for Girls Doubles

This then led to them being selected for Junior England in International Matches against Denmark, Scotland and Ireland and travelling to Europe for competitions.

Some Juniors, as I did, moved away from the area for either further education or work reasons but those who remained eventually became good enough to play in the Senior Teams of Wenning Badminton Club in the Lancaster and Morecambe and also the Craven Badminton Leagues.
Many of them also went on to be selected for their chosen Regions and Counties in Lancashire, Yorkshire or Cumbria.

Wenning Senior Badminton Club gradually became strong enough to have 4 full teams in the Lancaster and Morecambe District League which had been dominated by teams from Lancaster for decades.
Wenning started challenging the Lancaster and surrounding teams in all divisions and went on to become Division 1 Champions.
For almost a decade, they remained unbeaten.

Desmond's achievements were recognised when the Lancashire Evening Post coupled with Rothmans presented him with their "Services To Local Sport Award" for which he had been nominated by Wenning Badminton Club President/Chairman Bateman Marshall.

Success had been based on the hard work, coaching, love of the game and dedication to Wenning Badminton Club put in by Desmond and Irene Redhead but this remarkable achievement was also due to the unwavering support and time given by all the local families and their willing children.

It was a magical moment in time and had done Bentham proud with its sporting achievements at both junior and senior levels having gained national recognition and admiration in the world of Badminton.

But as in life, things change and over time Desmond and Irene's health deteriorated.

The sport of Badminton was slowly moving from its amateur status into the harsh reality of professionalism.

Many other life opportunities became available in the locality and of course, technology was beginning to take over in everyone's lives.

Although many former players tried to keep both the Junior and Senior Clubs going for many years after those halcyon days unfortunately the Town Hall had to finally bring down its curtain on Wenning Badminton Club in 2004, but the memories of those good times remain.



