

A real members' club

Rod Gilmour visits the Derbyshire home of Premier Squash League champions Duffield

The story goes that to book a court at Duffield, you once had to pop over the road to the White Hart pub to pay your court fee.

It is an enduring image of this much-loved Derbyshire club, but it was a policy that ended in the 70s, a period which turned out to be a pivotal era in its history.

In 1972 members collaborated to obtain the freehold on the property and Duffield's clubhouse was duly opened. Drinks and Dunlop were finally entwined.

There are now around 1,000 members of both the squash and tennis clubs in Duffield, which has a population of just 6,000. Around 550 of those are squash members.

Today the bar and squash courts also maintain a unique atmosphere at Duffield, which can surely lay claim to being the best village squash club in the United Kingdom.

Just to emphasise the point, Brian Hargrave looks out of the window of the family-run racket sports shop across the road from the club and spots a gaggle of school children walking on their own to the reception door. It is an image that is all too rare in the modern world, where many clubs are housed outside of towns and villages.

"We're right in the centre of the village. Youngsters can walk in safety, without being transported," says Hargrave, who led Duffield to two Premier Squash League titles in the noughties and managed the team for 15 years before leaving at the age of 66.

Moreover, the club has survived thanks to the longevity of its committee members, some of whom have served for 30 years.

"It is amazing that there are people who can give that length of service," Hargrave continues. "Duffield has benefited from this loyalty, but it gets more and more difficult to get people to volunteer these days."

Such is the dedication of John and Pauline White that their names are adorning a plaque on the club's show court.

John, who received an MBE for services to squash, led Duffield's development – as well as keeping the minutes for every committee meeting for 33 years – while a coaching scheme inaugurated by Pauline set the club apart.

While the tennis club was formed in 1882 (making it the 12th oldest in the world), squash was a relative sporting latecomer to the village when the first court was opened in 1937. "Squash is undoubtedly the coming game," wrote a club member at the time.

There are seven outdoor tennis courts, with six being all-weather, while the squash club has five courts, including the glass-back where Benz-Bavarian Duffield hold court during the PSL season.

Both squash and tennis clubs share the facility's gym, changing rooms and bar, all of which have been recently refurbished, while shared membership is on a pro-rata basis and as far as the coffers go, squash members hold sway for seven months of the year.

"It has a unique character," Hargrave says. "Some clubs don't have the bar close by and you have to pass down long corridors."

“It has a unique character”

Furthermore, Duffield is regarded as having one of the best coaching set-ups in the country.

"We have a good coaching structure in place and we are very conscious of this," says Russell Moore, the club's president.

One thing is for sure: Duffield may lie in Derbyshire's Amber Valley, but the squash club is red hot right now. The PSL side started the new season as defending champions and the clamour for a vantage

point on match nights continues apace, with capacity limited to a cramped 120.

What sets the team – led by former world champions Nick Matthew and Laura Massaro – apart is the fact that most of the current crop live within a 30-mile radius.

"They play for the club and it drives you on," says Felix Frixou, Duffield's current team manager. "The whole of the town understand this."

"We have CEOs and mayors attending. It's almost the best-kept sporting secret. We have to turn people away and the whole club comes alive, which all adds to the ambiance."

Matthew's love for the club as a whole is put down to the faith shown in him as a young player who was asked to play no.1 string when he wasn't a top 20 player.

"My relationship with Felix has grown from there and he is now one of my closest friends," he says. "The club is just a pleasure to play for. It feels like the whole village chips in to get things organised, not just on match nights, and the atmosphere on home match nights is electric."

As such, parking is a recurring problem and a factor in committee members raising the prospect of moving the club to better premises on the outskirts of town (a not-altogether popular motion).

While adult membership continues to "hold up well", Moore admits there has been a reduction in the number of



There are no seating spaces left for a PSL night at Duffield

student and junior members.

He says: "We are looking at new incentives to try and arrest this trend, although student membership numbers declined partly due to Derby University building their own squash courts recently."

Students could be forgiven for not straying off campus, but then again,

Duffield is more than likely to outlast any competitors.

As squash club membership secretary Sheila Alcock told *Derbyshire Life* earlier this year: "The beauty of the club is that it belongs to us – the members – and is run by volunteers. That also means our future is in our hands."

HOW TO RUN A SUCCESSFUL CLUB

Five key points from Duffield president Russell Moore:

1. Get a good coaching structure in place. We are very conscious of this as a club. We also have a performance coach for the more advanced players.
2. We have taken on a marketing/social media manager. Ranking yourself higher in Google for search words is key, as is being navigational for smart phones so that members can book.
3. We are a members' club and rely on voluntary work to help the club tick over. We are able to have a low cost base, which helps to attract new members.

4. If teams are successful, then it helps to attract new members. I ensure that we maintain the performance record of our various teams.
5. We make a point of going to other clubs to see if we are missing any tricks. In recent years we have noticed clubs with LED lighting (Pontefract) and how Oxford have built a second glass-back court.

FACTFILE

Annual club membership fee: £165
Courts: £3 peak, £1.50 off peak
Website: www.duffieldsquashclub.co.uk
Twitter: @duffield_squash
Facebook: Duffield Squash & Racketball Club



Sarah and Graham Tomlinson head to the club

Gawad strengthens Surrey

Showing remarkable consistency, the dozen clubs in the world's top squash league, the PSL, all retained their no.1 players for the 2015/16 season, which started on October 6, writes Ian McKenzie.

Star players are not all that is required for success, though. The keys are competitive players at every level, availability, commitment and a cohesive squad.

A team's first aim is to top their six-club division or at least fill the first two places and so make the semi-finals. The next target is to have your leading players available for the knockout stage. Surrey have been the masters at this in recent years, with title holders Duffield not far behind.

Duffield – runners-up in the 2013/14 season, when Surrey's Peter Barker famously beat Nick Matthew in the final – were runaway winners of Division A in 2014/15. They then sneaked past their old adversaries in the semi-finals, when Barker retired injured against Chris Simpson at no.1, before pipping St George's 3-2 in the final.

This season Duffield again sport both their former world champions – Matthew

and Laura Massaro – in a largely unchanged squad, but Surrey have strengthened their line-up, bringing in the firepower of Karim Abdel Gawad, the world no.12 from Egypt, at second string.

With all the teams' top orders settled, most of the important transfer action has been at numbers two and five.

At no.2, Chichester have brought in fast-improving New Zealander Paul Coll (Squash Player's Player of the Month in May); Exeter have imported Mazen Hesham, this year's British Open quarter-finalist, who will play behind fellow Egyptian Mohamed Elshorbagy; Switzerland's Nicolas Muller transfers from Coolhurst to Winchester; American Todd Harritty comes into the Birmingham side; and Malaysian Nafizwan Adnan has been signed by Leicester.

A win at no.5 is also crucial, though, so British Open champion Camille Serme strengthens the Exeter team by switching from Bristol, Georgina Kennedy steps up at Winchester as Emily Whitlock moves to Leicester and Fiona Moverley, a surprise British National Championship quarter-finalist, joins Pontefract from Duffield.

After all these signings this season looks likely to be as tight as last term in

Division A, when Coolhurst, Birmingham and Nottingham were closely grouped in the battle for a play-off place behind Duffield.

As for Division B, St George's and Surrey again are favourites to qualify, with Bristol, who challenged them strongly last season, having lost Serme.



Karim Abdel Gawad

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My Game: Profile on Karim Abdel Gawad, squashplayer.co.uk/workshop

