

RYE TENNIS CLUB DINNER – 18/06/2022

Mr President, Mr next President, Mr Past President, Mr Chairman, Mr past Chairman, all those who are never likely to be President or Chairman, fellow Rye Tennis Club members, non-members, honoured guests, ladies, gentlemen - and **fellow athletes**.

- How are we doing for time?
- Glad I was able to make it tonight as I haven't been well lately – having a lot of trouble sounding my “f’s”, “t’s” and “h’s”. The Dr has had a quick look and said - well you can't say fairer than that. I agreed that - indeed - I couldn't. He said I think you are either suffering from dyslexia or you've got arthritis. He said I want you to go home, find a dictionary and look up dyslexia and if you can find it then you've got arthritis.
- Anyway, it is very nice to be here but looking round I can't help wondering – why me?
- The Henmans are not here – but our President Chris Gorringe is here – former CEO of the All England Lawn Tennis Club – should be President of the United States – about the right age - and then there are the Club legends, many of them Board members - Jempo, Freddie, Frances, Zoe – the list goes on – Charles McDonald (Company Secretary), Michael Graden, Robert Dolman – could all have made a speech – but they choose me – pretty useless tennis player – no backhand – no second serve – two replacement hips thanks to the

dyslexic Dr – two fingers cut off the left hand, huge stomach – I mean – what a dreadful choice.

- Let's look at the legends as well.

Of course we are celebrating one hundred years of this Club – so the founders aren't here – they would be 130+ if they were – and then I realised why I had got the call – I am about the one bloke who looks about 130+ when I'm on a tennis court – so – I'm flattered.

- The Club was incorporated in February 1922 and purchased the land and buildings in April that year. Colonel Reid was the first Honorary Secretary – Zoe's predecessor give or take a generation or two - and by the way Zoe is a proper tennis player and has a beautiful backhand. Mr Ellis the Bank Manager was also a signatory to the deal and it wasn't hard to borrow money off him if you owned a pub. The Club's close relationship with bars and pubs continues to this day and I remember playing tennis at Rye 15 or 20 years ago and being forced at racket point by John Farmer to stop off at The Red Lion in Snargate where Doris was landlady with her daughter who looked like the Welsh bird in Darling Buds of May who later married Michael Douglas who looks like Chris Pack, or certainly does after five pints of Ruddles, when I was allowed to drive home.
- A key part of its success is that the Club has always understood which side its bread should be buttered in the context of the All England Club.

- Bimby Holt was a legend and known by several here tonight – Vice Chair of the All England Club Committee. On one occasion here at Rye, he had to ask four players to vacate a court because Jempo wanted it. One of them shouted insolently – “Anyone would think you run the bloody Wimbledon Championships” – and of course he did.
- There are some good stories of those who have passed on, and the one I knew best of all was John Farmer. He could yodel like the lonely goat herd in the Sound of Music and it would only take about one bottle of the finest burgundy to really get him going. As Jempo’s book will tell you, his tennis was unorthodox but John and Jempo played a lot together, dominating the net, and becoming known as “The Wall”. Farmer’s second serve was on the weak side and some of the foot faults were ginormous but he was so fast off the baseline that nobody had time to call those and Jempo used to reckon John was in danger of being hit on the back of the head by his own serve as he rushed to the net.
- But we do need to focus on current personalities.
- 40 years ago the Rye bounce was a feared natural phenomenon for players visiting these courts. When we talk about the Rye bounce, may I make it clear that we are not referring to the upper portion of a lady member’s anatomy, but to the gentle return that came to you and in relation to which you had plenty of time to line up a savage winner only

to find that the incoming ball shot along the ground at 45 degrees and nutmegged you between the legs. Enter Freddie Menzies – man of the turf, herbage expert, muscle man on the rollers, and of course member of the All England Club. Freddie sucked dry the knowledge of the All England groundsmen, brought it back to Rye along with quite a bit of their machinery and has turned these courts into the pride of South East England.

- That achievement didn't come cheap and nor has the Club's development programme over the last 50 years. This has included two new squash courts in 1974, improvement of the changing rooms and bar in 1977 augmented by Richard Foreman's kind donation of bar stools which are still there today. Flood lights on the hard courts and resurfacing of those courts with Astroturf and then clay, replacement of "the Tent" with a pavilion in Bimby's memory, but its still called "The Tent" and in case you don't know, the Tent is the Rye Tennis Club equivalent of the Kremlin – then a third hard tennis court, extension of the squash court building into the car park to provide new changing rooms on the ground floor and a rent earning flat on the top floor, and enlargement of the old bar area to make a splendid function room. Chris Pack took on the honorary role of project manager for this last scheme – a vital job in any building project. More recently outline planning has been obtained for three indoor courts and a second paddle court has

recently been built. So we are looking at remarkable success in driving development forward on a scale unprecedented in the planning history of the Rother District Council.

- I referred to the Henmans and of course Tim Henman's first outing at this Club was to play Nick Moy in the first round of the Men's Singles. In those days a nefarious system was in place to organise the draw and this was done on the Sunday before the tournament, rapidly becoming known as "Cheating Sunday". Moy had opted to play an unknown 12 year old in the first round – this Henman chap - anticipating an easy victory, but felt a bit guilty when the actual match came to be played. He felt that perhaps he should hold back a little on his first serve to be fair to the boy, and of course the rest is history. If only Tim had won his Wimbledon matches in the same way, we would all look much younger. My recollection is of Tim regularly getting through to the semi finals after gut wrenching five setters and then being robbed of a probable Wimbledon title win on that ghastly wet Friday afternoon when he was beating Ivanišević, as I remember, only to have to go off for 36 hours of rain and then lose on the Sunday morning. I'm afraid I've never got over it.
- Frances Candy has been coaching at the Club for many years and is always helping with Club events. I remember John Farmer and I developing a paralysing fear of her handbag. The reason for this arose

from a casual comment by me having played particularly badly one morning, that I thought sunglasses might be helpful. Quick as a flash Frances produced a pair from her handbag and £70 later I was fully equipped. We soon realised that mention of any equipment requirements ended up in the handbag with disastrous consequences for the Bank balance. Frances is a great trader!

- The new bar layout has of course been a great success and is a focus for the Club's social life. Only recently one of the local nuns visited the Club and asked to see the Manager urgently. The only person about at the time was Frances Candy and the nun blurted out – I've come to tell you something important – we have a number of cases of gonorrhoea in Rye.

“Thank God said Frances – I am sick and tired of the Chardonnay”.

- Jonny Dunn has been instrumental in all the recent successful planning applications. Jempo mentions in his book that Jonny's name crops up as frequently as his double faults.
- This list of names is endless and I have probably been foolish in referring to any, but people not mentioned should not take offence, because they know what they have done and that it is appreciated.
- But, one name requires special focus. Jempo has had great success in business, particularly as a trucker, but learnt his trade as a taxi driver in the early 60s, when he was lucky enough to have Harold Wilson as a

fare one night. He didn't know he had, because it was dark outside. Harold Wilson needed to go to the BBC and when they got there the PM said thank you very much and I wonder if you wouldn't mind waiting until I finish what I've got to do and then run me home again. Jempo replied – sorry governor I don't think I can do that – I want to go home as Harold Wilson is on the wireless tonight and I've never missed any of his speeches. The PM was of course very chuffed to hear this and passed a handsome tip of £5 through the window which was a lot of money in those days. Jempo immediately replied – alright guv, bollocks to Wilson – I'll wait.

- Jempo has never been very complementary about my taste in clothes. On the Club's tour to Slovenia about 12 years ago we took the opposition out to dinner and Jempo made an appropriate speech which started with an introduction of the various members of the Rye Team which included the UK Ambassador to Slovenia at that time, Freddie – the great All England Club grass husbandman, and all that sort of bullshit, finishing up by kindly introducing me as the man from Millets, simply because he didn't approve of my cool check cowboy shirt that I was wearing that evening in honour of the Slovenian horse fillet I had planned to choose from the restaurant menu.
- Thinking about my job this evening, I have realised how I've missed tennis at Rye in recent years. I intend to put that right now and I have

already bought a new pair of white K-Swiss tennis shoes which are still remarkably shiny and smart. I decided to wear my new tennis shoes home last week and walked into the house proudly saying to my wife Jan – “Notice something different about me?”

- Jan managed a brief glance and said - “No darling”.
- Very frustrating so I stormed off upstairs, undressed and walked back into the room completely naked, except for my new tennis shoes. Again I asked a little louder “Noticed anything different?”
- Jan looked up and said “quite frankly darling what’s different? – its hanging down today - it was hanging down yesterday – and it will be hanging down again tomorrow”.
- That really bugged me - so I retorted “And do you know why its hanging down Jan?”
- No darling – she replied – concentrating on her book.
- “Its hanging down because it’s looking at my new tennis shoes”.
- To which Jan replied.
- “Well you should have bought a cap Mike – should have bought a cap”!
- The ethos of the Club has always been to rely on the honorary work of so many diverse members – to hold it together and to keep standards high.

- As Jempo sums up in the book that will shortly be published, there can be no end to the history. The Rother Meads Tennis & Games Club is self-owned and provides a unique and very special facility for the local population. We have to hope that those who are taking over and will take over the reins will have a similar affection for the Club as Jempo and his gang, as it heads into its second one hundred years.