



Stephen Woodley – Kent stalwart (via Oxfordshire)

Stephen Woodley, a Kent Tennis Life Vice-President, stood down as our Seniors Men's Teams Coordinator at the end of last year, handing the baton over to John Watton. We're very grateful to Stephen for marshalling our Men's Seniors teams for 12 years. Of course, Stephen has been much more than an efficient administrator, he has also been a very good player, who, aside from representing Great Britain in the World Team Championships (in the 55s, 70s and 75s), first represented Kent at Summer County Week 60 years ago. No player has had county representation for Kent spanning so many years, and only one player (Andy Burgoyne) has bettered Stephen's 195 appearances for Kent.



We asked Stephen, who originated from Oxfordshire, how he viewed his tennis and life in Kent compared to growing up and, initially representing Oxfordshire. Both are lovely parts of the world but clearly Kent is very close to Stephen's heart!

In Stephen's own words then, "I am grateful for all that county tennis has given me, over a long period of years. I grew up in the Oxon countryside, a culture away from any prosperous suburban tennis clubs, like Sundridge Park, where many Kent men played in the 1960s, or Parklangley. The Abingdon club was Council-owned grass courts, and it took a second bus journey to reach Norham Gardens, Oxford (now no more). But that was where I won my first junior tournament, age 13, in 1951. After that, it was a long odyssey that was to take me (via teaching in London day schools 1961-69) into Kent tennis and (initially as a Temporary Member, judged on results!) into AELTC membership.

My first county tennis match was at Northampton in September 1956. We (Oxon) lost 1-11, and I won 7 games across 4 sets, and 8 games a fortnight later against Warwicks. But it was real, keen, competitive hard court singles. I represented Oxon from then until 1962, playing about 40 times in all. My last such singles was at RAF Halton in Autumn 1962, when I couldn't make head or tail of Mike Francis's game, and don't know whether I even beat the Bucks no 2. As for Oxon County Weeks, I played them in Groups 5 or 6 from 1957 to 1962. For my last, I must have rushed out of the end of term, caught the train from Mottingham (Dartford Loop Line) to Minehead, and on arrival could (among other results) only win one rubber against Shropshire. Not a distinguished ending!

The following spring, I threw my hat into the ring to join Kent, and fortunately did well in the Kent Closed at Beckenham. Selected for County Cup at Southsea, I played for Kent (missing just one County Week) from 1963-74, including many, many hard court singles. I had chosen well: we were only once in Group One, and in those years when "everyone" played on County Week I would never have found a consistent place in Surrey, Middlesex or Essex teams. At the same time, had I remained with Group 5/6 Oxon I don't think I would ever have gained the recognition or quality of play that Group 2 Kent afforded me, and that led in 1967 to the offer of Temporary AELTC membership. Although, on marrying, we moved down to Canterbury (where tennis standards and facilities were not much better than Abingdon's), I hung on in the county side, belatedly captaining it in 1973-74, and Full AELTC membership ensued in 1975.

As I returned to the game in 1988, Seniors' tennis was beginning its boom, and I was able to take in 45s up to 75s, eventually reaching 128 Seniors' appearances for Kent, to add to 67 for the Men's team.

Has it all been worth it? Yes, I must say overall, but there were strains, and perhaps if I had been able to sing in tune I would have broken off at some stage and joined a choral society instead! But it has kept me fit, and it has broadened my acquaintanceship outside the academic world I would otherwise have lived within. I am proud to have been (with Phil Lynch, Denis Costelloe and Clare Lilley) one of the editors of what I suspect will be the last ever full KLTA Handbook (125 years), in 2015, and proud still more to have shared, with many others, the development of the Canterbury Indoor Tennis Centre. 30 shivering juniors we had each Friday night at Canterbury LTC twenty years ago: now there are 400, and with adult courses full all day long. Good luck and good wishes to everyone who is sustaining this.

And thank you, Kent. (But also: I was sorry to leave, you, Oxon)."

And thank you Stephen for your many years of service to Kent Tennis – the encouragement, kindly advice and good wishes regularly from Stephen to the Board, Captains and Staff are very much appreciated!