

Introduction

Welcome to the Edinburgh Sports Club. The Club exists on a piece of land which was prominent for over two centuries as a centre of flour and wood milling. The Club's position on the West end of what is an island enclosed by the Water of Leith and the mill lade was more recently allotments dating from the Great War, but was acquired by a group of Edinburgh businessmen and converted to allow the construction of a squash club in 1936. The East end of the 'island' is now occupied by a hotel (currently a Travelodge) and a recently constructed block of flats, but until the early 1970's was a hive of activity principally as an active flour mill, and latterly as a motor car garage. Bell's Mills had formerly been part of the Dean estate, sold by the Nisbets in 1799, and purchased just prior to Gideon's tenancy by James Steel, later Lord Provost of Edinburgh. The Edinburgh Squash Club was opened in 1936 with three courts, and was extended during the following 60 by the addition of a further five, (including what is now the UK's only doubles court), snooker, gym, dining and lounge facilities. It has remained a private Club.

Prior to being a squash Club, the area was used as allotments.



Aerial view of ESC site in 1930 showing the extensive nature of the allotments (on the right of the photo). The large building at the foot of the photo was John Watson's

College - now the Gallery of Modern Art

In the 1880's, our neighbours across the mill lade, who were the owners of Bells Mill, had a tennis court in their garden. A photograph from this era shows a group of players and onlookers.



Tennis being played in 1888 on the court across the lade

The Club was opened in 1936, and the photo shown below shows the principal sponsors. It must have been quite a risk to undertake such a venture, especially so soon after the depression that had affected the world in the early 1930's. Other photos show later stages in its development



Opening day 1936



The 1937 extension



1953 trip to England



The Duke visits 1960

The building was reputedly designed by Basil Spence, better known for Coventry cathedral. It shows extensive art deco features, mainly in brickwork, floor separation and windows. When the gym facility was constructed at the West end of the building, the planners insisted that we continue the brickwork features in the new building. The photos below show examples of the art deco features.



Finely detailed brickwork in art-deco style



A grand frontage with 'unnecessary' windows



Elegant perpendicular style



Artificial 'column' style

The Club has the only doubles court in existence in UK. This court, constructed in 1937, is now used for a variety of

racket games including hardball doubles squash, racketball and badminton.

The Club also has a venerable exhibition court, also dating to 1937, featuring raked seating above the court, rather than the now fashionable glass-back configuration where spectator seating starts at the same level as the court. The next photographs show how the 'show' court.

The doubles show court



The 1985 Scottish Final – over 100 spectators



The court as it is now

The Dean Valley has an extensive and well documented history. We are at the extreme Westmost end. The following is a short extract from the Dean Village Association's website.

(The opening paragraphs describe Dean Path, Belgrave and the Dean Cemetery). If you follow the riverside path upstream from the footbridge and passing the weir from which a lade used to run through the Village, you come to a beautiful stretch of the river beneath a steep wooded bank. The tall brick building on the other side of the river was built as cabinet works for Whytock & Reid. There used to be several industries in this Sunbury area, a distillery, a wrought-iron works, a garage, but now there are offices and houses. A footbridge leads to them. Further upstream is Belford Bridge built in 1887. Just before the Belford Bridge, steps lead up to the street level and a pedestrian access to the Dean Gallery, which was built as an orphanage in 1831-33, to a design by Thomas Hamilton. Beyond it is

the National Gallery of Modern Art, which can also be reached from the valley. If you follow the path under the road bridge, you will come to a hotel on the site of Bell's Mills, which were destroyed by an explosion in 1971 (QV), but the granary, dated 1807, and the eighteenth-century miller's house survive. Further upstream, where the valley opens out, there is a timber footbridge from which a path leads up to the Gallery of Modern Art (formerly John Watson's School, built in 1825 to a design by William Burn). Other local buildings include Belford Church, by Sidney Mitchell 1889, now the backpackers' hostel; Lynedoch House (sheltered housing for the old) by Roland Wedgwood Associates 1977; Drumsheugh Baths (a private club) by Sir John J Burnet 1888; Drumsheugh Toll by Sir George Washington Browne 1891. Across the valley is Holy Trinity Church built in 1838

Bells Mill occupied roughly half the island site on which Edinburgh Sports Club stands. The photographs show following illustrate the nature of the business practices there between the 1800's and 1973.



Bells Mill pictured around 1900. with the lade outlet



Sunbury motors around 1973

The following is an extract from a document created when the on-time mill owner, then Chair of the Dean Village Association, died in 2007.

Lawrence Walker (known as the last miller of Edinburgh) and his brother Allan were the 8th known generation of families of millers, with a long history of milling stretching back over at least 200 years.

The extract includes the family history, from Kincardineshire via Spylaw to Bells Mill..when the family business moved there in the late 1880s. By this

time, the mill was grinding less corn and other foodstuffs and concentrating on wood-flour. This, in various grades, was used for a surprising range of purposes: for the first coloured linoleum, as a stabiliser in Nobel's explosives, for bus tickets, for coating in the forging of automotive parts - and for "dry shampoo" for Highland cattle before a show! (It has to be oak for this - it fluffs up the coats beautifully.)

Lawrence has described Bell's Mills almost as a self-sufficient hamlet, where there was no necessity to go farther than, oh, the former sub post office and its neighbouring shops, for their daily needs. There were a few other small businesses at Bell's Mills to add to the community. He used to describe the Water of Leith as the "general store", since so many odd items (and occasionally a body) used to come floating downstream and become caught in the haik, the metal grating which kept the mill-lade as free as possible. The family designed its own "Walker Haik", and Lawrence thought it ought to have been patented to earn some money!

Their idyllic life came to an abrupt end at 11.43am on 12th March 1971, when the mill exploded. Lawrence often said afterwards that the age of miracles wasn't over. Just at the moment of the explosion, a police car was on Belford Bridge. The officers radioed for fire engines and ambulances before anyone at Bell's Mills could reach a telephone. Lawrence was very seriously burned and had to spend several weeks at Bangour Hospital, whose services he extolled forever after. Two of his employees were also injured, one so badly that he could never work again.

Edinburgh Sports Club



*"A haven of peace and
tranquillity"*

*Welcome to the Edinburgh Sports Club
for Edinburgh Open Doors Day*

*Sunday 27th September
10am - 7pm*

*Edinburgh Sports Club, Belford Place, Edinburgh EH4
3DH*

0131 539 7071 www.edinburgh-sports-club.co.uk

