

Pat Milliner: age has not wearied her

I caught up with Pat Milliner during the first week of this year's Wimbledon. She'd been looking forward to the coverage on the box and was annoyed with TV One and Duke for not repeating play during daytime as ESPN had with the French Open.

There are many reasons for talking to Pat. For starters she is a life member, was President when the current club was formed following the marriage of Herne Bay Tennis and Ponsonby Squash, and is the only tennis member from that bygone era. And, as anyone who has spoken to her on a Thursday club night knows is extremely socialable.

Although born in 1929 (I couldn't believe she's 88 either) she isn't an old woman, rather someone who's been around a hell of a long time. She was born in Derbyshire where her father was a tenant farm on land owned by the Duke of Devonshire. Tragically her mother died when Pat was two. Her mother was never spoken about and it was only in recent years that Pat learnt that she walked the mile and a half journey, from farm to village, to play bridge. Bridge happens to be another of Pat's passions and she still plays twice weekly. Understandably this crumb of information was utterly heartbreaking.

When Pat was around eight or nine she was sent to a boarding school just outside Guildford in Surrey. During the War there were occasions when Pat made the train journey unescorted in carriages full of servicemen and felt perfectly safe. The school was a bit like Dilworth's here in Auckland in that it was established by money left by a wealthy philanthropist called Lord Wandsworth, in this case to educate farmers' children. She attended the school set up for girls and continued to live there when she attended Guildford County after the dreaded eleven plus. "My school made me who I am." claims Pat. Indeed she returned for the school's centenary celebrations in 2012 where she also managed to get to the All England Club at London SW19 for only the second time.

From school Pat enrolled on a three year management course at Battersea Polytechnic, the third year spent cooking for at least a hundred at Birmingham University Hall of Residence. There followed stints in hotels supervising maids in London before she got another position in Hampshire where she met Douglas an officer in the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm and as a navy wife followed him to overseas postings in Singapore and Malta. They liked the sun so they moved to Auckland in 1963 to see if they liked it here and, except for visits, never returned.

For ten years Pat owned and ran a corner shop in Westmere that sold a variety of things like school stationary, wool, clothing and haberdashery. It's now a coffee bar.

Initially Pat and Douglas were members of our rivals down the hill: West End. At sixteen their son Howard started playing up here. Pat didn't follow him for three years as she didn't want to cramp his style but in the end numbers at West End were dwindling and nobody seemed to want to play at weekends so she brought her racket here and has been involved

on and off our courts ever since. Pat isn't the sort of person to spend too much time comparing the present with the past but she regrets the passing of the way things were then. People then had more time for tennis than she told me. There were interclub games on Saturdays as there are now but on Sundays people arrived, sat around when they weren't playing, and stayed for hours and at three everyone stopped for a cup of tea and a slice of cake or a biscuit. There was a small bar but not much drinking was done in those days. Before the new clubhouse was built there were nine tennis courts, grass and tarmac. Mostly people played mixed doubles. The social side was almost as important as playing and, needless to say, Pat had a big hand in the catering.

As stated Pat was tennis president when the clubs were merged. Initially there had to be a couple of meetings with the Council as complaints had been lodged by local residents who were fearful of the Ponsonby Squash Club's reputation. One complainant anticipated that drunken squash players would be running around naked in the grass. They were probably correct about the drinking but after a hit and a drink most of us have just about enough energy to hobble to our cars.

Pat has had both her knees and hips replaced the reason she tells me she is not playing tennis now. "I really miss it". She says. She last played in 2008. "I did try to go back when I'd had my knees done and went for a hit with a friend. I could still hit and could still put the ball where I wanted it to go but if she put it over there I was too frightened to go sideways in case I fell over. I thought 'don't be stupid you've got to be careful'. I go up at the weekend so that it means that whoever is in the office can have the weekend off and I go up on Thursday nights. When you're a woman who lives on her own you mainly talk to other women. It's nice to go up there and talk to the men. When you live on your own you have to make a life otherwise you have an awful time." But Pat's life is anything but awful. Apart from the club and bridge there also Probus, an offshoot of the Rotary Club, for active retired people which arranges trips to places of interest, talks and meals, then there's her garden and much else. While she regrets the passing of an era when social tennis was played over a longer period and gave members an opportunity to interact with a larger pool of players she likes the club house, enthuses about David and Jacqui and is really encouraged by the current committee. Our club has always been a friendly and welcoming one and for Pat Milliner that remains the best thing about it.

