

Factsheet

Real Tennis and The Royal Tennis Court at Hampton Court Palace

- Originally known simply as 'tennis' (probably deriving from the French habit of calling out 'tenez' before service), 'Real' or 'Royal' tennis originated from France in the 12th century. The terms 'Real' and 'Royal' were only added in the mid-twentieth century to distinguish the game from the more widely known, although different game of, lawn tennis which developed around 1874,
- As a young man, King Henry VIII was renowned for being extremely athletic and passionate about sport. He built a tennis court at Hampton Court around 1532-3.
- Anne Boleyn was watching a game of tennis in Whitehall Palace at the time of her arrest. She is reported to have complained to her guards that if they had waited until the end of the game then she would have won her bet! Legend also has it that Henry was playing tennis at Hampton Court when news was brought of Anne's execution.
- The current Royal Tennis Court building dates back to 1626, probably built on the site of an earlier court for King Charles I, another keen tennis-playing monarch. His son, Charles II made a number of improvements to the building after his restoration in 1660. These included a new tile floor, remodelled galleries, repairs to the roof, new nets and curtains, and velvet cushions for the spectator's seats. Charles II would come to Hampton Court to play tennis even when he was staying in London.
- During the reign of William and Mary, the court at Hampton Court Palace was used by Christopher Wren to store horse manure.
- Prince Albert only played once at the Palace but his name plate can still be seen on a drawer in the changing room - probably put there in the expectation that he would play more.
- The court has undergone little alteration since the end of the seventeenth century, although new windows were added in the nineteenth century to prevent the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) catching a cold.

Historic Royal Palaces HAMPTON COURT PALACE

- The tennis court at Hampton Court Palace today is the oldest of its kind in use in the world. It is also one of only two courts in the UK which the public are admitted to see and play in (the other being in Falkland Palace, Fife).
- Founded in 1818, the club at Hampton Court now has 550 members. Around 250 of these, including Prince Edward, are regular players.
- No two tennis courts have the same dimensions. This dates back to the time when the game was played in courtyards immediately adjacent to a castle or in cloistered monastery quadrangles. The court at Hampton Court measures 96'3" x 32'3" on the floor and 110'11" x 39'7" on the upper walls.
- Real Tennis is called 'Court Tennis' in the USA, 'Jeu de Paume' in France and 'Royal Tennis' in Australia. There are twenty two courts in the UK.
- The current resident Head Professional is Chris Ronaldson who was World Champion from 1981-1987. Britain is one of the leading nations in the game and the top five women players in the world are English.
- The oldest tennis racket at Hampton Court dates from 1853 and is decorated with silver and velvet. Today the rackets are only made of wood and are usually strung with synthetic string.
- Tennis balls were originally made from animal leather stuffed with human or dogs' hair. The balls are still hand made by the professionals and are supplied in sets of 72 - however they are now made from cloth.