

## Tournament to celebrate Birmingham's game

Business professionals are to launch a special tennis tournament to celebrate Birmingham's claim to have invented the game. It is part of a major push to promote the city as the birthplace of the sport. The event, to take place on May 15 at Edgbaston Priory Club, is the brainchild of networking group Birmingham Business Focus and being hosted by Else Commercial Solicitors.

It will be a mixed tournament, probably in pools and then knockout form, and played for the Harry Gem Cup – Gem is the Birmingham solicitor and journalist who, claim his supporters, founded lawn tennis in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Firms already signed up are lawyers Else Commercial Solicitors, Benussi & Co, Hammonds and Martineau's along with recruitment consultants Robert Walters.

BBF chairman Neil Maybury said interested parties also continued to work on the possibility of establishing a tennis museum based at the Priory which would honour Gem and his creation. And, he has revealed, there are hopes that the Barber Institute of Fine Arts will be in position to open a major exhibition of lawn tennis art in 2012 to coincide with the London Olympics.

Mr Maybury, a consultant with Else, said: "This will be the first time we have put together an inter-professional tennis tournament in Birmingham." "We want to salute Gem who was a charismatic man of many talents. And we also want to tell the world how lawn tennis was invented in the city – too few people are aware of that."

Like many sports, tennis's roots are murky in the extreme.

The Egyptians have a good shout for being the original inventors and certainly a form of the game was widespread in France as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, tennis had found its way to England where both Henry VII and Henry VIII apparently became keen players. By 1800 tennis had more or less died out in France. In England, what became known as real tennis, set in an indoor quadrangle, continued but more as a fashionable pastime for the rich.

Then in 1858-9, Major Gem and his friend Augurio Perera, a Spanish merchant based in Birmingham, came up with an outdoor version of tennis adapted for play on grass. Among Gem's sporting interests was the game of rackets, which he played at

the Bath Row Racquets Club in Lee Bank with Perera. Frustrated at the complex and expensive facilities required for rackets, however, the two developed a simpler game that could be played on Perera's croquet lawn at 8 Ampton Road in Edgbaston, incorporating elements of rackets alongside features of the Basque game of pelota.

Gem and Perera, along with two local doctors, then formed a club in Leamington Spa in 1872 specifically to play the new game. The Leamington club thus became the world's first tennis club, playing on the lawns of the Manor House Hotel opposite Perera's new home in Avenue Road. A first set of rules still exists in Birmingham Public Library. And, it is maintained, the sport was only at that stage picked up by the then All-England Croquet Club in Wimbledon.

Birmingham's detractors point out that tennis's anniversary was celebrated in 1973 on the basis that it was invented by a Major Walter Clopton Wingfield, although played on an hour glass shaped court. Others would date it to 1877 when the All-England Croquet Club decided to hold the first Wimbledon lawn tennis championships. For this tournament, three members of the club drew up a new version of the rules, the composition of which marked the first accepted standard.

But Mr Maybury, who is organising the inter-professional event along with Else colleague Claire Magill, is not buying that one. "The game originated in Birmingham," he insisted. "And this tournament will be a celebration of that achievement."



**For more information, please contact:**

**Neil Maybury**

**Tel: 0121 222 2602**

**Email: [neil.maybury@elselaw.co.uk](mailto:neil.maybury@elselaw.co.uk)**



**Claire Magill**

**Tel: 0121 222 2602**

**Email: [claire.magill@elselaw.co.uk](mailto:claire.magill@elselaw.co.uk)**