

Hitting the sweet spot

Tennis is about so much more than the score, suggests Deborah Nicholls-Lee, as she revels in the ‘pop-pop’ of a rally and the zesty scent of freshly mown courts

AT the bottom of my childhood garden, backing onto woods and bordered by rabbit holes, stood a scruffy grass tennis court overlooked by a dusty pavilion. We would drag a rusty lawn roller behind the tractor to try to squeeze out the lumps and bumps, the zesty whiff of freshly mown grass rising in the air. The court was barely playable, but the sensory pleasures of the sport have stayed with me. I now play on clay, which has its own appeal: the satisfying crunchy sound it makes under the feet as you chase a ball and the vermilion sand that clings to my tennis shoes, leaving a granular trail as if I’ve spent a day at the beach.

The beautiful international courts featured in a new photographic ode to the sport, *Courtship: For the Love of Tennis*, by model, photographer and writer Laura Bailey and filmmaker, photo-

grapher and author Mark Arrigo, may outshine the one with which I grew up, but they all have an individual charm. ‘Wherever I go, I take my racket and always find a game,’ reveals Ms Bailey. Jamaica is her next stop and, closer to home, Cliveden, Buckinghamshire, is somewhere she is ‘longing to play’.

Creating the images for the book became a quest. ‘We travelled in search of the rare and the beautiful,’ she writes. ‘We climbed trees and scrambled across rooftops and clifftops and waded into the sea.’ The author, who says her working week ‘now revolves around tennis’, has played on some of Britain’s most beautiful courts. Her favourites include the Gleneagles Hotel, in the green rolling hills of the Perthshire Highlands; Oakley Court near Windsor, Berkshire, where the courts adjoin a pretty kitchen garden on the banks of the Thames, and the grass court at Babington House in Somerset, surrounded by trees and fields. For ‘one of the most romantic courts’, with ‘tangles of rose and ivy marking the

boundaries’, she recommends a trip across the Celtic Sea to Ballymaloe House in Co Cork.

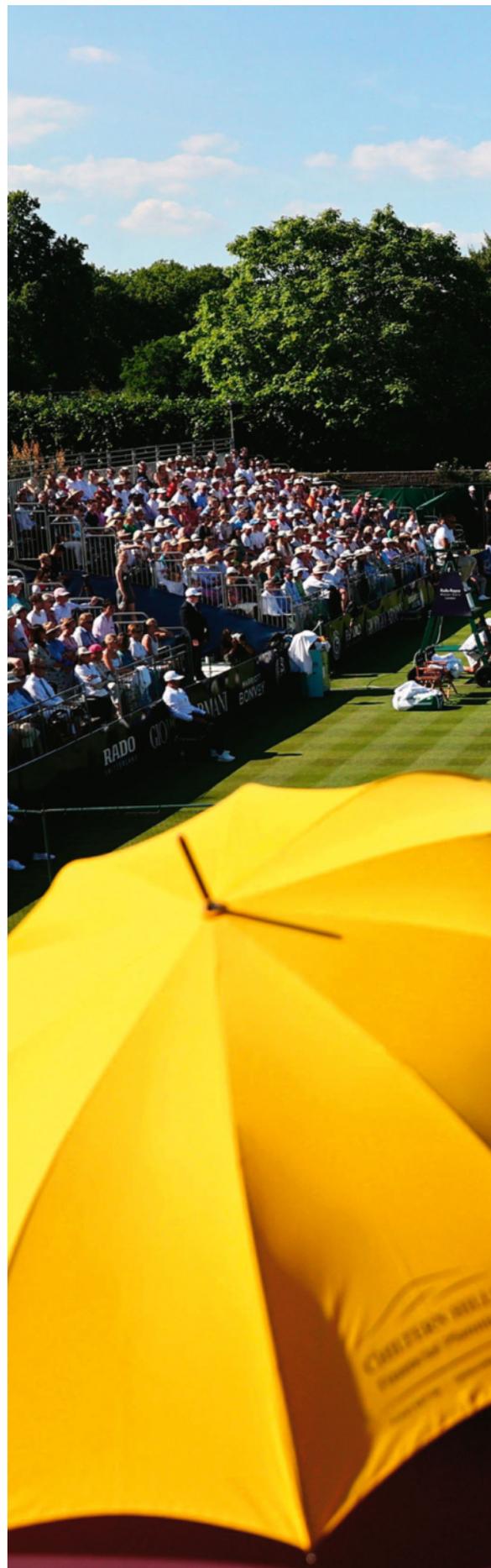
Whether you’re serving aces on the pristine lawns of a private London club, such as Hurlingham or Queen’s, or devouring strawberries and cream at the Wimbledon final, tennis is about so much more than the score. It’s the warmth of the sun on your shoulders, the fuzzy feel of a tennis ball in your fingers and the satisfying pop-pop of the rally. Quoted in the book, actor Eddie Redmayne adds another sound to tennis’s ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) delights—‘the unmistakable “cluck” followed by the persuasive, elongated hiss’—when you tear the lid off a new tube of balls.

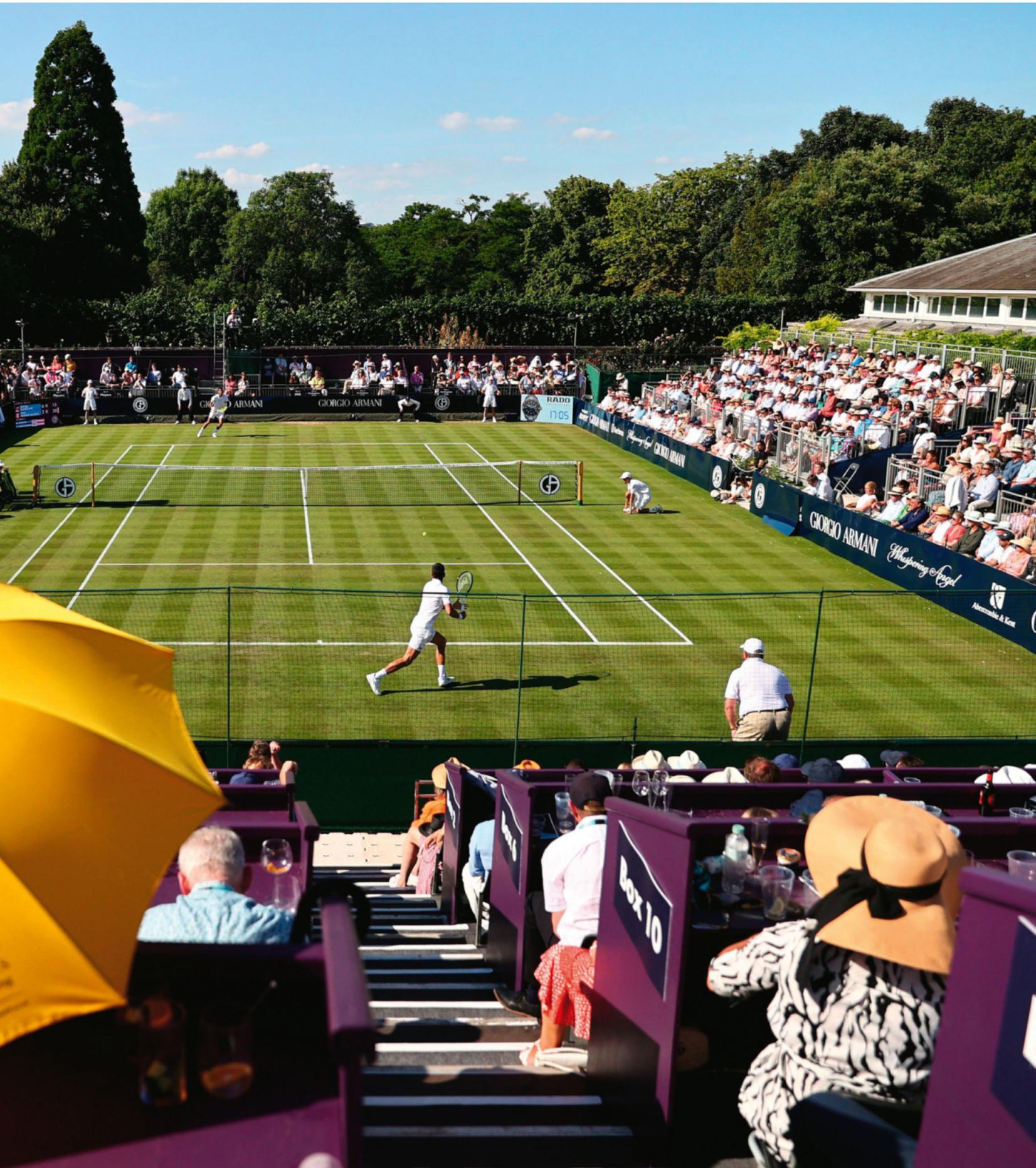
For Mr Redmayne, the reward for negotiating its ‘razor-sharp edges’ is the smell. ‘I swear I could drink it in,’ he says. He’s not alone. The rubbery aroma of new balls is so popular that, last year,

a soap company pretended to bottle it. No wonder players are forever being caught on camera pressing these neon-yellow orbs of joy to their noses.

The allure of tennis radiates from some of our most-thumbed novels. In E. M. Forster’s *A Room With a View* (1908), for example, ‘the innumerable folds of the South Downs’ are the backdrop to a charmingly disorderly game of garden tennis featuring an assortment of well-loved balls, including one nicknamed ‘Saturn’ due to the ring encircling its middle. Hunting for tennis balls that have been flung around the garden and now nestle like Easter eggs among the laurels is part of the pastime, even if not everyone understands the appeal. When Lucy Honeychurch’s pedantic fiancé refuses to make up a men’s four, she does the only sensible thing: she calls off the engagement. ‘She liked music, but how much better →

Not a blade of grass out of place: the pristine Hurlingham Club, London SW6





The Season



'What strenuous singles we played after tea': nothing brings more happiness on a sunny English summer afternoon than a spot of tennis

tennis seemed,' writes Forster. 'How much better to run about in comfortable clothes than to sit at the piano and feel girl under the arms.'

Comfortable clothes were too much for Jilly Cooper's memorable evocation of the delights of lawn tennis in her 1988 bestseller *Rivals*. In the grounds of Penscombe Court, Rupert Campbell-Black's fictional country pile, a gravel path teeming with 'red admirals gorging themselves on the white buddleia' leads to the court. Concealed behind an 8ft beech hedge, the former showjumper partakes in a flirty game of nude tennis with giggling love interest Sarah Stratton. For Mr Campbell-Black, these are simply 'innocent afternoon pleasures'. For readers, the cheeky scene denotes a frivolity that captures the fun and freedom of summer encounters on court.

Preferring to keep their clothing on, Ms Bailey and friends cite tennis apparel as a pleasurable part of the ritual. 'It's as much about the look as the game,' asserts film director, artist and photographer Sam Taylor-Johnson. 'In every other arena of my life, my socks don't go on first. For tennis, they do... They've got to be just right—the right length, the right thickness, the right colour...'

'I like the rules—and breaking them,' declares Ms Bailey, expressing a fondness for 'classic whites', such as a L'Etoile Sport dress and—more unconventionally—'a vintage stripey knit with Nike shorts'. Soothing routines play a role: a Chanel Comète necklace is worn for luck and her locker is 'stocked up' with 'beauty treats' and new balls. 'I'm not very good [at tennis],' asserts artist Robert Montgomery, 'but I always turn up in all whites, with perhaps a paisley silk cravat.'

New balls, please: the history of tennis

- 'Taking a beating' takes on a new layer of meaning in *jeu de paume* (palm game), a precursor to tennis played by striking the ball with the bare palm of the hand. Gloves came later, followed by bats and then racquets. The game is believed to date back to 11th-century France, where monks took it up to pass the time
- The tennis ball took numerous forms before rubber was introduced in the 1800s

and that familiar soft felt added a century later. In medieval times, the stomach of a goat or sheep wrapped in wool was bounced around the court or leather balls were stuffed with wool, cork, fur or human hair

- The earliest rackets were made of wood and strung with animal gut. Nowadays, polyester strings are widespread, although many of the biggest names in tennis still prefer natural gut due to its elasticity, vibration absorption and power



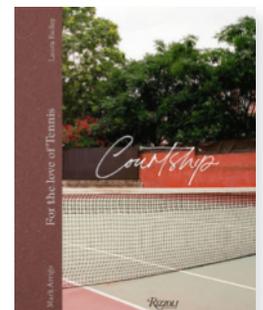
Some courts invite more relaxed attire—windswept Bunabhainneadar on the Isle of Harris, for example. Hugged by mountains sloping down to a loch once known for whaling, the community court is an extraordinary find in a remote setting. The only distraction is the wildlife. 'Sometimes, you throw the ball up to serve and an eagle goes overhead and it puts you off slightly,' co-founder Peggy Briggs told VisitScotland last year.

For those seeking crowds, tennis also works like magic. 'The tennis court is the heart of our summer,' Dame Anna Wintour states in the book. 'It's the place where everyone gathers.' For musician, singer and songwriter Peter Gabriel, conversely, tennis is all about family. He recalls 'wonderful summer afternoons' with loved ones on the imperfect court his father created by annexing part of their Surrey dairy farm to the garden. Now, with his children and grandchildren, it has become a tradition to play a set after

a meal. 'Who knew little yellow balls could bring so much happiness?' he muses.

Few games say summer like tennis does and few spots are more glorious than a leafy tennis court bathed in sunlight. 'We could/hear the ocean, not far off, and boats/firing up their engines,/and the shouts/of couples in white on the tennis courts,' wrote the poet Philip Levine. 'I thought, Yes, this is the beginning/of another summer, and it will go on/until the sun tires of us...'

→ *'Courtship: For the Love of Tennis' is out now (Rizzoli, £50). 10% of royalties go to the Lawn Tennis Association Foundation to help create access and opportunity through the game*



The Season



Ball girls and boys might benefit from climbing ropes and snorkels to find balls mishit from the courts at Hotel Il San Pietro, Italy

Smashing finds: the smartest international courts

• Hotel Il San Pietro, Positano, Italy

Carved into the cliffs and overlooking the vivid Tyrrhenian Sea, this tennis court is undoubtedly one of the world's most scenic places to play (00 39 089 812 080; www.ilsanpietro.com)

• The Enchantment Resort, Arizona, US

A spectacular canyon conceals three hard courts with terracotta walls that echo with the rich red of the sandstone rocks towering above them (00 1 888 250 1699; www.enchantmentresort.com)

• Le Cap Estel, Côte d'Azur, France

Assuming a dramatic position pressed against the rock face, this court serves up sea views so dazzling that players may struggle to keep their eyes on the ball (00 33 49 376 2929; www.capestel.com/en)

• Stanglwirt, Kitzbühel, Austria

Six indoor courts allow all-year-round play at this Alpine wellness retreat, but it's the eight open-air clay courts surrounded by snow-topped mountains that really make it worth the trip (00 43 5358 2000; www.stanglwirt.com/en)

• Monte-Carlo Country Club, Monaco

This prestigious club, with its attractive Art Deco styling, neatly trimmed hedges and expansive sea views, draws crowds each April for the Rolex Monte-Carlo Masters tournament (00 33 49 341 3015; www.mccc.mc/en)

• Soneva Fushi, Baa Atoll, The Maldives

The tennis courts on the private island of Kunfunadhoo are fringed by lush jungle and are a short stroll from crystalline waters—perfect for cooling off after a match (00 960 660 4300; www.soneva.com) 🦋