

NEW TENNIS AIRDOME AT HALTON

by Wing Commander M. C. D. Felton (Chairman) and
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The Airdome is a novel answer to a seemingly insoluble problem based largely on finance – or more accurately, a lack of it in sufficient quantity. A covered tennis venue incorporating three courts was becoming an essential requirement if tennis in the RAF was to continue on its remarkably successful course: Inter Service champions on 29 occasions since 1946 – including the last 16 years. Preliminary soundings yielded fearsome figures – in the order of £300,000 for a brick-build. Out of the question for a sports association. However, a concrete base covered by an air-filled balloon was a much more economical prospect. More importantly the projected time-scale from site-clearance to first serve was almost breath-taking: a mere four months. (In the event it took seven because of a local objection which slowed progress). There are interesting lessons here concerning other potential applications, both public and non public, and it cost a mere £80,000 because a fixed price contract was agreed in June 1978. It should be noted however that the cost of this venture at today's prices has soared to nearly double.

Coming back to the timescale, how many RAF projects of this size do you know of as having been completed in so short a space of time from conception to operation? How was this achieved? Well, the answer in this instance was simple. Not too many people were involved, certainly no filtering bureaucracy. The support for the project was unequivocal (after initial committee doubts were dispelled). Your authors then went ahead with the essential functions of finding

a contractor, arranging the price, fixing a start date and going ahead.

So what have we got for our money so generously donated by a far-sighted Central Fund Administration? For a start an insurance against bad weather for all the major tennis events in the RAFLTA's crowded calendar. Three magnificent courts to international standard – by common consent the most modern in the UK. A new playing surface called Tenelux (pioneered by Entout-cas) that looks and feels a lot like 'Iron Duke' carpet, and which plays like fast grass except that the bounce is invariably true. A still environment that makes playing a joy – and simple. And – most importantly – the facilities to play tennis all the year round either by natural light through the translucent dome during the daytime or assisted by the bright, reflected, sodium lighting at night.

The benefits to RAF tennis are incalculable. There are some 400 practising devotees of the sport dotted around the Air Force, all of whom, come rain or shine, turn out each wet week of the summer to represent their stations. About 100 players compete in the annual championships. The encouragement, the boost to morale, of firstly having this amount of money spent on them and, secondly, having so magnificent a facility to play in, is immeasurable. Already there are many who are reassured by this demonstration (not untimely) of the RAF's willingness to carry on doing the unusual, zestfully supporting the imaginative, and improving the quality of life in the Service.

The translucent Airdome lit from inside.



Four international tennis stars played an exhibition match in the RAF Lawn Tennis Association's new Tennis Airdome at RAF Halton on 1 December 1979, shortly after it was officially declared open by Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Beetham, Chief of the Air Staff, who was accompanied by Lady Beetham.

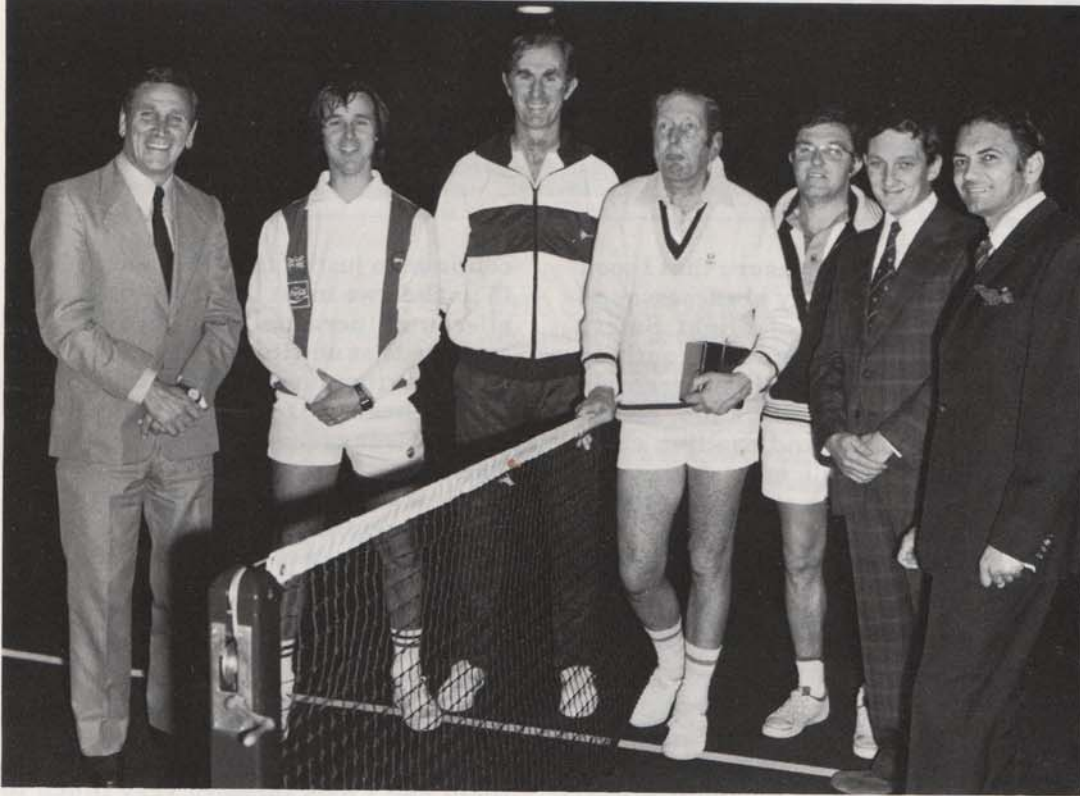
The exhibition match was played by Bob Howe, David Lloyd and Roger Becker, and Michael Hann who retired from the RAF recently after winning 24

RAF individual titles. David Lloyd is currently a member of the British Davis Cup Squad, and Roger Becker was the RAF Champion in 1952 during his National Service. He now coaches the Davis Cup Squad. Bob Howe has won many doubles championships but now promotes veterans' tennis events in Britain.

Lady Beetham presented each of the players with an RAF Silver Jubilee tankard as a memento of the occasion.

(Pictures by RAF Halton Photographic section).

Left to right: Wing Commander Ray Greenhall, umpire for the evening, David Lloyd, Michael Hann, Bob Howe, Roger Becker, Brian Locke (Steward of the RAF Lawn Tennis Club) and Squadron Leader Ivor Geddes (Hon Secretary RAFLTA).



Lady Beetham shares a joke with Bob Howe, before presenting him with his RAF Silver Jubilee tankard.



The Chief of the Air Staff has a word with Halton trainees who volunteered to act as ball boys for the evening. Flight Lieutenant Peter Harding, O i/c Tennis Airdome is seen left.

