

Edinburgh Sports Club Ltd and Murrayfield Lawn Tennis club merger proposals

By Colin Robertson, October 2020

In the early days of Edinburgh sports club (ESC) many members were also members of Murrayfield Lawn Tennis Club (Murrayfield), and even to this day many members of the club are or have been prominent tennis players at Murrayfield. Mrs T. J. C. Gifford, Paul Harding Edgar, and David Hollingdale to name a few.

During the fifties and sixties, the effects of emerging from the Second World War helped to create a difficult period for both clubs. This state of affairs was probably familiar to many clubs at the time and was partly caused by the lack of a playing structure below the top level with little attention being given to the needs of social squash and tennis members

The 1955-1956 proposals

During this demanding period in the history of both clubs Murrayfield was approached by Edinburgh sports club in November 1955 proposing the amalgamation of the two clubs. Edinburgh sports club claimed the amalgamation would offer Murrayfield members better changing and coaching facilities, cheaper subscriptions for combined squash and tennis and professional help in the day to day running and administration of the club. The basis of the proposal was that Murrayfield would sell the site at 57 Corstorphine road and from the proceeds lay four tennis courts in the grounds of ESC at Belford Place.

The proposal was to lay the courts at the east and west extremities of the site. Murrayfield indicated that sitting accommodation would be required for people waiting to play and the siting of the courts would make it impossible for the waiting players to command a view of all courts.

The matter was discussed at length by the Murrayfield committee and although a number of the advantages of a move were acknowledged a view was expressed that the site at 57, Corstorphine Road was superior to the proposed site at Belford Place. There was also some doubt expressed as to whether the funds likely to be available from the projected sale of the Murrayfield site would be adequate to enable courts of a sufficient standard to be laid.

Murrayfield would be represented on the board of management of the sports club but doubts were expressed as to how long this would benefit the Murrayfield tennis members. It was considered that before very long Murrayfield would lose its identity and become an offshoot of Edinburgh sports club.

The Murrayfield committee had at first thought that some financial benefit might accrue from the merger but after a detailed study of the accounts of the sports club it was clear little or no advantage would be gained.

The Murrayfield committee decided that their recommendation must be against the amalgamation provided the club could continue to be run on a financially sound basis and this was confirmed by the members at the annual general meeting on Friday 23rd march 1956

The 2001-2003 Proposals

During the latter part of the 20th century membership at both ESC and Murrayfield was reducing, and areas of both clubs required attention with the need to be upgraded. At the time people's expectations were very much higher and competition from the David Lloyd and Next Generation clubs was very real not only in terms of facilities but also in many other aspects.

Over a year or two the committee of Murrayfield considered various options concerning the future of the club and after a lot of thought ESC was approached to see if they were interested in discussing a merger.

ESC had no real tennis structure with no teams except juniors in the east of Scotland leagues. Squash and racketball were the only sports played and they would benefit from a major summer sport. Any merger would maximise the catering and bar facilities although a certain amount refurbishment was obviously necessary

After initial discussions it was agreed by both clubs to take the matter to their memberships. At meetings in late 2001 both ESC and Murrayfield were given authority to proceed further with negotiations.

The proposal was to sell the Murrayfield site at 57 Corstorphine road and invest the proceeds in ESC at Belford Place. The opening offer from the developers was £1.2 m although Murrayfield was confident of a higher offer. In fact, when a survey report was received from Rydens the valuation was put at £1.5m to £2.0m depending on planning. In addition, Murrayfield involved the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) in the project and after meeting their facilities team they confirmed there was a good chance of LTA funding for indoor courts unique to the East of Scotland. The LTA predicted a cost of £250,000 per court and the project would be considered a priority. As far as planning was concerned the Murrayfield site was already zoned for housing in the local plan. ESC, for this development, only needed an amendment to an existing approval

Both memberships would benefit from the merger and it was made very clear at early meetings that the merged club should not commence its life in debt.

ESC would benefit from

1. Additional tennis courts indoor and outdoor
2. An injection of cash to rebuild squash courts / racketball (doubles squash) court
3. Investment in other areas
4. Up to 100 new members from Murrayfield
5. Ability to attract new members
6. A tennis structure for the first time

Murrayfield would benefit from

1. A minimum of 2 additional outdoor and 2 indoor courts.
2. Reduced rates of subscription for existing members

3. A minimum of 2 board members to oversee merger
4. Tennis to be a major sport within the merged club
5. Development of tennis teams
6. Better facilities in general
7. Professional help with administration

Facilities plans were prepared but no discussions took place regarding the detail. No attempt was made to adjust the plans - the details are

1. 2 outdoor tennis courts to be built
2. Demolition of squash courts 5,6,7 and the doubles court
3. 2 indoor tennis courts to be built
4. 2 squash / racketball courts to be built, including the doubles court and the show court
5. Squash courts 1-4 altered and a central corridor to be introduced
6. Refurbish changing rooms, lounge, bar and dining areas

After many meetings and discussions with all interested parties the developer of the site at Murrayfield agreed to apply for planning permission. It was thought the 2 applications should be submitted together and would include the amendment to the sports clubs existing approval. In July 2002 a meeting was arranged to progress the planning application. At the meeting ESC intimated they were withdrawing from negotiations with Murrayfield and proceeding with another interested party.

The sports club indicated the discussions had "dragged on" but with three distinct parties involved and others with an interest e.g. the LTA, progress was bound to be slow. ESC also stated there was a "gulf in the finance required". Murrayfield disputed this statement, indicating the budget costs of £2.7m were particularly high in relation to the indoor courts and written confirmation was provided from 2 sources to back it up.

Coupled with the savings that could be made under the heading professional fees and the reclaiming of VAT, the cost of the project was very close to the potential sale price of the Murrayfield tennis club of £1.5m/£2m. These figures did not take into account any LTA grant towards the indoor facilities. The deal was potentially extremely beneficial to both clubs and Murrayfield wondered why a possible investment of £1.5m/2m had been refused and if there was a shortfall in funding why some reduction in facilities was not considered.

Murrayfield were convinced a merged club would make a lot of sense for the following reasons;

1. It would be a racquets club
2. The provision of summer and winter sports
3. Squash and tennis are compatible

4. Indoor tennis facilities
5. Introduction of a competitive/social tennis structure for the first time
6. Retain the existing club spirit
7. New squash / racketball courts built
8. Upgrading of other areas
9. Tennis development officer would be employed

In simplistic terms- an investment £1.5 m to £2.0m without selling any land and retention of the unique ambiance of the site at Belford Place.

Edinburgh Sports Club took the view that the proposals were potentially good for Murrayfield but it was not a good deal for members of Edinburgh sports club and the board were unanimous in the view that the proposed development with Duddingston House Property or another potential developer was the best option for ESC.

Murrayfield intimated they would now consider an alternative project, in the hope they could bring it to a successful conclusion

In order to obtain a mandate, ESC held a meeting on Wednesday 19th March 2003 to discuss the options including the Murrayfield option and asked members to submit their preference by 31st March. The meeting was purely to give the ESC board a clear mandate to pursue whatever option members chose. The most popular option would then be developed to allow members to vote on the implementation of that particular option at an EGM. The meeting was addressed by

- 1) Allan Munro – ESC
- 2) Colin Robertson – Murrayfield
- 3) David Hollingdale - former chairman ESC

A question and answer session took place.

In a discussion between Colin Robertson and Alastair Allanach in September 2020, Colin advised that the voting options were as follows:

- Option A – ESC develop their own plans, involving selling some land to build flats
- Option B – ESC and Murrayfield progress the Club merging option
- Option C – Club refurbishment only

The voting however was inconclusive and gave no mandate to pursue a particular option.

- Option a) 108 votes 48%
- Option b) 98 votes 44%
- Option c) 18 votes 8%

The meeting of ESC members clearly showed they felt some form of development was required and to try and bring matters to a conclusion the ESC board wrote to Murrayfield on 9th April 2003 to ask if they would like to re-enter discussions regarding a possible merger and develop plans as soon as possible. At the same time ESC would seek a preferred developer. A meeting would then be called with a view of putting the two proposals to ESC members for consideration.

However, Murrayfield were in talks with another party and did not want to prejudice these discussions. At a meeting on 30th August 2003 the members of Murrayfield gave the committee an overwhelming directive to withdraw from negotiations with ESC.