

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2026

Life as an International Tennis Umpire - Julia Freeman

For the May meeting of Wargrave Local History Society, member Julia Freeman recalled her time as a tennis umpire, not only at Wimbledon, but internationally. Her presentation not only included pictures showing what they wore on court, but also brought some of her actual designer outfits for the meeting to see.

Julia began by outlining the history of the Wimbledon Championships, which had first taken place in 1877. At that time, the courts were in Worple Road, but it was not until 1913 that the ladies' game gained Championship status. The present site in Church Road came into use in 1922, and the anniversary of that marked 100 years later.

Julia's husband's work had meant the family had been living in Bangkok for several years, but on her return to England she decided to apply to the Lawn Tennis Association to work as a tennis umpire. She was accepted onto the training course, and having passed that in 1992, needed to obtain some experience before working at Wimbledon.

Her first time as an umpire at Wimbledon was in 1994. The uniform at that time was basically green, with the ladies having a skirt with an elasticated waist, a blouse and blazers made from a dull green fabric. They were easy to wear, as the skirt and top hung nicely, which was good in hot weather. The umpires also were provided with a green raincoat for use if it rained. A new style of uniform was provided every 5 years, but sometimes Julia was so busy at other tournaments that having provided her measurements, she had no time to collect the new ones, and had to send a friend to collect the garments from Reading!

The new design from about 1996 was provided by Wood Harris and was very easy to wear, with what Julia described as a lovely blouse and skirt. The latter again had an elasticated waist, whilst the blouse hung outside the skirt, which made it free-flowing and comfortable. The jackets now were collarless, but as they were worn over the blouse or shirt, the collar of that would be put outside the jacket. For use on cooler days (Julia said there were a surprising number of cold and wet days at Wimbledon) the ladies were also given a pair of trousers, although she never wore those. There were also fully lined jumpers, which kept umpires warm. New items were provided each year, meaning that there were cupboards full of uniform items that Julia had used - and it would not be permissible for them to be taken to a charity shop! At this time, however, the umpires provided their own brown shoes, which were not to have high heels. Julia wore this style of outfit for Tim Henman's match on Centre Court in about 1999.

In 2001 Julia was selected as an umpire for the Ladies Final, and so went onto Centre Court on the Saturday. However, the weather had been quite wet, so the Men's Semi-final between Tim Henman and Goran Ivanišević had not finished. The weather meant that play was on and off like a yo-yo. Eventually, Goran won - Julia adding that Tim Henman did not like her call against him.

In due course, the Ladies Final followed on the Sunday. Julia was again officiating - her team having a break after the semi-final to be the second on court, so she watched the start of match. After about an hour, Venus Williams had won the first set, and was 4-2 up in the next. She commented to a friend that if it got to 5-2, there might not be a change of umpires for just possibly one further game. However, she said that Justine Henin 'bucked her ideas up', and so Julia went to umpire with the score at 4-3, eventually reaching 7-5. In due course, Venus Williams won, and the team of umpires were lined up for the presentation of the trophies by the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester.

Justine Henin ‘bucked her ideas up’, and so Julia went to umpire with the score at 4-3, eventually reaching 7-5. In due course, Venus Williams won, and the team of umpires were lined up for the presentation of the trophies by the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester.

In 2005, Julia was asked to talk about her time as an international tennis umpire for the magazine *My Weekly*. The journalist described the teams as “the silent green army of Wimbledon each year, sitting inconspicuously around the edges of the courts, making split-second decisions affecting the finest tennis players in the world” - adding that “the Wimbledon umpires were a force to be reckoned with”. The uniform at that stage included long-sleeved shirts, on which initially they were allowed to roll up the sleeves, but it was soon decreed that they should remain at full length, as some of the wearers had tattoos, which was thought inappropriate for Wimbledon officials. The ‘grotty skirts’ were worn with t-shirts - which could show sweaty marks when the longer length jackets were removed. Julia was not keen on this outfit!

The article appeared in the magazine in July 2006 - but by that time the contract to supply the outfits had passed to Ralph Lauren. The jackets were dark blue edged in white - they were no longer the ‘silent green army’. Each year, the umpires were given an extra skirt or pair of trousers - adding to the cupboardful of clothes. Julia never wore the trousers for summer tournaments - meaning her grandchildren could identify her in the team of umpires - “Granny is the lady in the skirt”. Ralph Lauren also changed from the previous brown shoes to white canvas ones. Whilst visually they might seem more appropriate, they did not ‘give’ at all, which caused many blisters for the wearers. It was a couple of years later when Julia was first selected as an umpire for the Men’s Singles Final, when the American Andy Roddick (who had a very big serve) lost to Roger Federer - one of Julia’s favourite players.

In 2009, the retractable roof was added over Centre Court. Before the Championships that year there was a Songs of Praise performed there, to which Julia was invited to go, where the lower stands were filled with the audience, and this was followed by a show match featuring Kim Clijsters, Andre Agassi, Tim Henman and Steffi Graf.

At that time, there would be just 7 line judges on each court, with 2 at each end, 2 for the base line, and 1 who would be the service umpire, whereas on the show courts (ie Centre Court and numbers 1, 2 and 3,) there were 9 line judges, with 3 at each end, 2 on the base line and 1 for the service.

Two notable events took place during 2010. One is recorded by a plaque marking the longest ever match, taking over 11 hours over 3 days. To avoid it happening in future, a tie-break procedure was introduced for the final set of a match - something that Julia was not in favour of. The other happened when Queen Elizabeth made a visit. Julia was umpiring on an outside court, but during a break was able to capture a photograph of the occasion.

In 2011, Julia was again an umpire for the Men’s Singles Final. It was a good and very exciting match, in which Novak Djokovic beat Rafael Nadal 6-4, 6-1, 1-6, 6-3.

An unusual incident occurred in 2019. The Swiss player, Stan Wawrinka, liked to stand right back on the court, and had a huge back swing. His racket caught Julia on the back and he was concerned that she was alright. Julia said she remembers with fondness the sweaty hug they shared!

In 2016, Ralph Lauren decided to change the blazers to a striped version, which was much nicer to wear. In the same year it was necessary to have play on the middle Sunday, and each of the umpires concerned received a book commemorating this, with a personal letter inside, and a special cover depicting the new jackets. However, the use of umpires such as her ceased from the 2025 Championships, with an electronic system in use instead.

Julia’s informative and entertaining presentation also covered her work umpiring tennis abroad, including Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Spain, tournaments in New Zealand for 18 years (noting the difficulty of large amounts of uniform and a limited baggage allowance for the flight home!).

For more information about the society, visit our website at <https://www.wargravehistory.org.uk>
