

523/85

History of H. J. Gray & Sons 1855-1953

[Sports Shop & Equipment]

The firm was established by H.J. Gray at St. Johns College Racquet Courts in 1855 making Racquet racquets. At first it was mainly concerned in satisfying local requirements, but as the fame of Grays racquets spread the world became their market.

In the records of sport there is no instance of one family attaining greater pre-eminence in any particular branch of sport than that of the Gray family of Cambridge in racquets. From 1863-1878 there were four professional champions, and of the four, three of this family held the championship for 22 years, while the other two brothers were amongst the leading players in Great Britain.

There were five brothers of the Gray family:-

Henry John Gray - born in 1837, eldest of the remarkable quintette of brothers and the first, on the 15th of March 1863, to win the English Racquets Championship. H.J. Gray was first introduced to racquets in 1847. This was in the days of the open courts and he was engaged at the old court at the University Arms. Sixteen years passed before he was at the top of the tree, although long before 1863 his prowess had been shown in exhibition matches, and he was known far beyond the confines of Cambridge. Meanwhile the erection of the famous courts at Prince's had done much to popularise the game and it was here that one of the matches which Francis Erwood and Sir William Hart-Dyke played took place. Hart Dyke was successful in winning. By this time the skill of the Cambridge player was such that in his name a challenge was issued to the winner of the Erwood and Hart contest, but it was never taken up. The challenge remained open to all comers and was backed by a stake of £200. No one could be found to face Henry John Gray, who, as recorded in "Badminton" was consequently the first to take the championship out of London. With one brief interval of two years, the name of Gray, was pre-eminent in the world of racquets for close upon a quarter of a century. For three years H.J. Gray enjoyed the undisputed title of champion. Meanwhile his younger brothers were steadily climbing the ladder and finding no one ready to take up his challenge he yielded the title to his next brother William.

H.J. Gray was for many years master and instructor of racquets at St. Johns College, Cambridge. He instructed his four brothers in the game and arranged many of their matches. He was also interested in local affairs being a town councillor and a J.P. for many years. Henry John Gray died 8th of March 1915 aged 78 years.

William Gray. William was born in April 1846 and became the finest player the world had at that time ever seen. When he was 16 years of age he had gained laurels by beating Dalton, the marker at the Vice-Regal Lodge Court, Dublin, and became champion of Ireland at the time his elder brother was champion of England. His brother Henry yielded the championship title of England to him on March 24th 1866 and this he held for nine years. In June 1866 he defeated Joseph Foy at Aldershot and soon afterwards at the age of 21 won the the largest stake ever deposited for a racquets match.

Illustrative of the keen interest racquets excited in those days, both in England and America, it may be mentioned that the stake of the memorable match between William Gray of Cambridge and Frederick Foulkes of New York, the respective champions upon either side of the Atlantic, was no less than £1,000 (i.e 5,000 dollars) and wagering being very much in fashion among the patrons of sport, heavy sums were laid upon the result. The match carried with it the title of champion of the world and was partly played at the New York Club Racquet Court, 53 & 55 West Thirteenth St, New York on Monday and Tuesday the 22nd and 23rd of April 1867 and partly at the Ulster

Club Racquet Court, Belfast, Ireland on the 1st of July 1867.

Incidentally, it should be mentioned that the former champion H.J. Gray had devised a scheme of scoring which, to all intents and purposes, did away with the possibility of a draw. Two matches, one in America and one in Belfast were to be played and it was conceivable that each man might win one match and also win an equal number of games in each match. Consequently Henry Gray, who made the arrangements for the great match decided that the "aces" - a term well known to racquet players - should be scored and as it was scarcely possible for the competitors to score the same number of aces a definite conclusion as to whether Great Britain or America should be supreme at the game was arrived at.

Both in America and in the more familiar court at Belfast William Gray was successful, not however, without a terrific struggle, which tried the stamina of both men to the utmost. In the New York match Gray was one game and 25 aces ahead and he finished up at Belfast the winner by three games and 44 aces. While in America the champion had a "Benefit" at which he and his sixteen year old brother Joseph were matched against Foulkes and William Devoe.

The Hon. Alfred Lyellton and others writing of William, the most brilliant of the talented brothers, stated "He played racquets just as George Lambert plays tennis - like a gentleman and a sportsman. His object was, no doubt as that of all great players must be, to win, but he was not satisfied with victory unless it was achieved in faultless style. When the greatest masters of various games are passed in review none seem to have quite equalled Gray in combination of absolute success with absolute gracefulness.

William was a quiet and rather reserved young man except when in the company of his friends. He was instructor for sometime at old Princes' and then at Eton College. He died with rapid consumption in December 1875 at the early age of 29 and for a short period the championship passed out of the Gray familys' keeping.

Joseph Gray - Born in 1854, Joseph, the youngest of the five brothers, in his first attempt in 1875 to fill Williams place was defeated by Harry Faires, who was known to the sporting world of his time as "Punch". The return match was played at Rugby in January 1876 but Faires again prevailed. Faires enjoyed the title for less than three years, when he died, and Joseph succeeded the champion.

Joseph became champion of England on the 25th of May 1878 and held the championship for ten years but he, in his turn, had to give way to a younger man, Peter Latham, Queens Club in 1887. Joseph Gray won the odd game - four games to three with eight aces in hand - at Rugby but in Manchester Latham won the four games straight off.

Joseph, as well as William, made the acquaintance of America through racquets, having crossed the Atlantic with William in 1867. He was then only a lad but already such a fine player that during his stay several matches with men of mature years were arranged for him. About the time when he was at the top of his form the first champion of the family received a communication to send a player to America to match his skill with an American expert named Boakes for a prize of £100. Joseph made the journey and history repeated itself.

Joseph Gray was 5ft 7 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins in height and weighed 147 lbs at 29 years of age. He was a very bright, brisk you man in contrast to his brother William. A man of great intelligence, fine address and had an unblemished character. He was for some time Master of Racquets Courts and Instructor at Rugby School and was trained for all his matches by H.J. Gray his elder brother.

Walter Gray - Born in 1851 and like his brothers was taught racquets at St. Johns College by H.J. Gray. He was stated to be a fine player and excellent trainer. He helped to train Joseph for his matches and in 1888 he tried to avenge Joseph's defeat by Latham, but was unsuccessful. Walter was the same height and weight as his brother Joseph, and for 5 years was an instructor at Harrow and then Charterhouse Schools.

George Gray - Born in 1852 and like his brothers William, Walter and Joseph was taught the game of racquets by Henry at St. Johns College, Cambridge. He was stated to be one of the best players in England, although he never played in Public matches. He also was an instructor at East India College, Haileybury.

1883 Grays Lawn Tennis Racquets used by H.R.H Prince Edward of Wales.  
(Edward VII)

Horace George Gray - born in 1866 was the son of H.J. Gray and joined the firm in 1883. He started at the bench and went right through the workshops and thus had a real practical experience in every section of the racquet making business. He later became Managing Director of the Company.

H.G. Gray had a quiet but forceful personality. He was an excellent racquets and lawn tennis player whilst he also played golf, cricket and was a very good oarsman. He always took a great interest in public affairs and for over twenty years did good service as a County, Town and Urban District Councillor, an Income Tax Commissioner and a J.P. He was a Past Master of his Masonic Lodge, on the Executive of the Manufacturers Federation when it first started and also a keen member of the Sports Trade Golfing Society.

During H.G. Gray's time the firm made great progress, growing from a small business to a large limited company. H.G. Gray died on the 12th of November 1939 at the age of 73 years.

1885 Gold Medals awarded at London, Paris and Cork.

1888 Racquet balls were used by Peter Latham in his championship match at Manchester.

1890 Playfair Factory in Searle Street, Cambridge with 8 employees.  
Retail Shop and Racquets Courts at 8, Rose Crescent, Cambridge.  
London Office at 8, Goswell Road, London E.C.  
9 hole Golf Course at Grantchester.  
The Cambridge Lawn Tennis racquet was first introduced.

1891 Manufacturing Golf Clubs and Cricket Bats.  
The Dunelin Lawn Tennis racquet; Squash racquets, Racquet racquets;  
Fives Balls and Hockey sticks.

1893 Cricket Bats and Racquets used by Kuma Shri Ranjit-Sinhji.

1908 The Masterpiece Lawn Tennis racquet first introduced by J. Ferguson and patented. This was the first racquet to be made on the laminated principle.

1912 The factory moved from Searle Street to Playfair Works, Benson Street Cambridge (2 houses and stables).  
Max Woosnam - the "Worlds Doubles" Champion also Englands "Davis Cup" Captain used Grays racquets and a racquet was later named after this great player.  
C. Williams, the racquets champion used Grays racquets and it is said he lost all his racquets whilst on his way to America when the "Titanic" went down but these were quickly replaced.

- 1913 First Staff Dinner - 10 employees.
- 1914 Mr. Leslie Gray (youngest son of H.G. Gray) killed in a motor cycle accident May 7th aged 22 years.
- 1915 8th March, death of Mr. H.J. Gray at the age of 78 years.
- 1914/18 Factory on war work producing Tent Poles, Picketing Posts, Tent Pegs, Stretcher Poles, Telegraph Posts, Line Labels, Latrine Posts, Tables Forms and Kallets. 30-40 Employees.
- 1917 October 18th the firm was registered as a Private Limited Liability Company with Mr. H.G. Gray as Chairman and Mr. H.D. Gray and Mrs E.M. Gray as the other Directors.
- 1918 February 26th - fire in the old building causing considerable damage.

Harold Douglas Gray - eldest son of H.G. Gray born in 1893 and educated at Framlingham College. After leaving college about 1911 he entered the firm and started at the bench, he went right through the workshops as his father had done before him. He later became joint managing Director with his father.

During the 1914-18 war H.D. Gray served in France and was awarded the Croix de Guerre. He was a keen sportsman and was a member of the Council of the Federation of Sports Goods Manufacturers.

He was married to Alison Rhone Cecil-Wright on October 2nd 1931 and died on the 16th of March 1938 at the age of 45 years.

- 1919 Purchase of the Tennis Courts at Milton Road, Cambridge.
- 1923 The Company purchased its first motor car.
- 1924 Purchase of Playfair Works from H.G. Gray. Additional workshops built at Playfair Works (finishing shop and Stores.)
- 1925 Labour strike at Playfair Works. Squash racquets used by Chas. Read the Squash racquets Champion of England. Mr. A. Coppen appointed a Director of the Company 2nd July.
- 1926 The Self Help Club formed at Playfair works.
- 1927 The following lines were first introduced:- Light Blue, Double Blue and Varsity Blue Tennis racquets, Light Blue and Goshawk Badminton racquets.
- 1928 The Badminton and Racquets Courts at Milton Road purchased and opened by Sir George Thomas.
- 1931 The Super Blue and Treble Blue Lawn tennis racquets also the Super Blue Hockey stick first introduced.
- 1932 Purchase of J. Nash & Co, Thornton Works, Lee, manufacturers of metal Sports equipment. The introduction of the Light Blue and Cambridge Hockey sticks.
- 1933 Purchase of cottages 9, 11 and 13, Benson St, Cambridge, their demolition and the building of new offices.

Purchase of 2-4 Priory Street and the extension of the factory by the building of the tennis saw mill and the makers shop.  
A London Office established at 94, Hatton Gardens, London.  
Sudley Pope and Peter Smith of Essex used Grays cricket bats.  
C.W. Riggs appointed a Director of the Company 31st March.

1935 15th July, inauguration of the Employees Life Assurance scheme at Playfair Works.  
Formation of Gray-Russell & Co. Ltd as an associated company in I.F.S.  
Jim Dear; Squash Racquets Champion of the British Isles, Open and Professional, and Royal Tennis Professional Champion of British Isles used Grays racquets.  
A.S. Cooper and D.S. Nilford used Grays racquets for their Worlds Open Championship match.

1936 badminton racquets, Racquets used by Ken Davidson U.S.A and International Badminton Coach and winner of many Professional Championships.  
16th March - death of H.D. Gray joint managing director.  
17th June - Mrs Alison Rhone Gray appointed a Director of the Company.  
13th July - H.G. Gray and Mrs E.M. Gray resigned their Directorships.  
Mr. B.S. Few appointed a Director of the Company 13th July.

1939 The Silver Gray Steel Shafted Badminton racquet was first introduced.  
Formation of Grays of Cambridge Court Construction Co. Ltd.  
12th November - death of Mr. H.G. Gray former Managing Director.

1939/45 The company engaged on war contracts making stabiliser fins for balloon barrage; panels for aircraft; tent pegs; water troughs; tent mallets and picketing posts also electrical components for aircraft.  
The Badminton and Racquets Courts at Milton Road were turned into a factory and produced electrical parts for aircraft.

1940 27th May - purchase of shares of Shaw & Shrewsbury Sports Co. Ltd of Nottingham and amalgamation of this company with I.J. Nicolls of Roversbridge - Gray-Nicolls Ltd.  
Mr. R.W. Buck appointed a Director 30th June.

1941 The company was appointed a nucleus firm under the Concentration of Industry Act.  
The factory was extended by the building of a new hockey saw mill and making shop.  
Purchase of shares and business of Hazells Ltd of London and the formation of Fulcrum (Sports Products) Ltd in co-operation with Fulcrum Works Ltd.  
Purchase of shares and interest in Nicoltoys Ltd.

1942 Purchase of the shares and business of Frank Austin (1939) Ltd of London.

1944 Formation of Walter Briggs (1944) Ltd and taking over of the business of Walter Briggs Ltd.  
J.F. Devlin, the International Badminton player, used Briggs racquets.

1945 Cricket Bats made by Gray-Nicolls Ltd were used by Cecil Pepper (Australia) W.N. Hammond (England) D.R. Cristofani (Australia) Capt Amarnath (India) and Keith Miller (Australia).

1946 Grays Squash Racquets used by Mahmoud Karim the British Open Squash Champion 1945-7-8-9; Scottish Open Squash Champion 1946-7-8-9.  
Cricket Bats of Gray-Nicolls Ltd used by Harold Gimblett (England)  
Grays and its associate and subsidiary companies now employed 250 people.

Alison Rhone Gray - Born 1901, Mrs Gray occupied a position in the sports trade far greater, perhaps, than had ever before been attained by a woman. Not only was she the principal of one of its most important firms, but she personally supervised all its various departments. As Chairman of the Racquets Group of the Federation of British Manufacturers of Sports and Games and a member of their council she played a part in the governance of the trade in which she was such a well known and respected personality.

It was on the death of her husband, Douglas Gray in 1938 that Mrs A.R. Gray took over the management of the firm. At that time some thought that she was shouldering too great a responsibility but little could they have foreseen the position to which she was destined to raise the old established firm in the course of 12 years.

It was during Mrs Gray's regime that the firm incorporated many important concerns engaged in the manufacture of sports equipment - Hazells Ltd, Fulcrum, Austin, Briggs, Nicolls, Shaw and Shrewsbury, Wainwrights of Leeds and the Gray-Arnold Court Construction Co.

In addition to her normal business activities, Mrs Gray had various outside interests such as running of a farm at her estate Coton Court and a hotel in Buckingham.

Mrs Gray died at the age of 49 years at University Hospital, London on the 13th of February 1950.

- 1947 Purchase of shares and business of Gray-Arnold Court Construction Co. Ltd.  
The building and extension of the offices.
- 1948 The extension of the factory by the building of two new workshops (Tennis Ball Dept and Engineering Shop).
- 1949 Sale of shares and interest in Nicoltoys Ltd and Gray-Russell & Co.Ltd.
- 1950 Sale of Milton Road Factory to Pye Ltd.  
13th February death of Mrs A.R. Gray Managing Director.  
9th January - appointment of A/Cdr J.A. Cecil-Wright; Mr. C.B. Lee and Miss E.M. Dixon as Directors of the company and the resignation of Mr. B.S. Few, Mr. Coppen and Mr. Buck.  
Grays Squash racquets used by Hashim Khan, the British Open Squash Champion 1950 & 1951, British Professional Squash Champion 1950 & 51 and the Pakistan Squash Champion.  
15th May - death of Mrs E.M. Gray aged 83.  
September Mr. H.W. Gray (Son of F.D. Gray) commenced at the factory as an apprentice, having been educated at Stowe.
- 1953 Introduction of the "White Toe" cricket bats and hockey sticks. This is a process which gives complete protection against damp.  
21st Birthday Party of Mr. H.W. Gray.

It was in 1876 that L.J. Nicolls, a village carpenter, in picturesque Robertsbridge began making his own cricket bats. The quickly began to attract attention and it was not long before he was making them for his friends. His fame grew and the making of cricket bats became a whole time occupation and so the business of Nicolls was founded.

Mr. Nicolls daughter married Percy C. Bridger who succeeded his father-in-law and managed the business until 1926 when ill-health caused him to retire. Mr. A.L. Newbery and Mr. D. Nicolls Bridger (son of P.C. Bridger) then took over the control of the business. Mr. Newbery was a good cricketer himself having played for Sussex, the Stoics, Blue Mantles, Wanders, Hastings and Eastbourne and, of course, Robertsbridge.

From 1926 until 1939 the firm of Nicolls flourished at Robertsbridge but the war caused a big upheaval and under the Concentration of Industries scheme an association was formed with H.J. Gray & Sons Ltd. Grays had taken over the business of Shaw & Shrewsbury Sports Co.Ltd of Nottingham and this company and L.J. Nicolls were amalgamated thus giving the present firm of Gray-Nicolls Ltd.

L.J. Nicolls originally made his bats in the centre of the village, but the present factory is a little way out and is one of the most beautifully situated in this country, being in the middle of a wood.

The immortal "W.G" was the first great cricketer to bring the Nicolls bat to the notice of the general public. Since those far off days a host of distinguished cricketers have used Nicolls bats.

The "White Toe" bat was introduced in 1953. This was an invention of Mr. A.L. Newbery in which the toe of the bat has been subject to a special toughening process which gives complete protection against damp.

Gray-Nicolls have taken over the prominent cricket bat making firms of Wainwright of Leeds, Cobbetts and C.A. Odd & Sons of Sutton also the cricket ball manufacturing business of H.H. Hitchcock of Hildenborough.