

## Tennis personalities at Roehampton Club in the early years

THE ILLUSTRATED SPORTING AND DRAMATIC NEWS

# Women in Sport

This second article regarding the tennis personalities at Roehampton Club in the early years features the Club's first tennis professional and his coaching skills in helping a local resident become one of Britain's best female tennis players of all time. Tom Fleming was appointed as Tennis Professional for the Club in 1912. There were very few Tennis Professionals around at this time with only a handful of Clubs in the whole of Europe who could even consider such an appointment and prize money from tennis tournaments was nowhere near enough to make a living.

For some players, money was not a problem as they had been taught and educated by wealthy parents and would achieve success as amateurs as was the case in other sports such as golf and football where attitudes towards 'professionals' were even hostile at times. For the so-called professional tennis players, only those with a reputation in the game could even consider such a career and even then, they needed to find additional income from private tuition, exhibition matches and exclusive relationships with rich benefactors.

Tom Fleming had already established his reputation and was previously employed as one of the first tennis professionals at Queens Club prior to his arrival at Roehampton Club. Fleming had played in professional tournaments in France as far back as 1898 when he took part in a round robin event in Paris. He was also well known as a regular visitor to the South of France where other tennis competitions for prize money would attract players from around the world at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fleming worked hard at Roehampton Club to coach players at all levels and wrote regular articles in the national newspapers sharing his knowledge of the game with his style of tuition. His opinions on the game and sometimes his pupils were always forthright as indicated by the following example.

During a tennis tournament held at Roehampton Club in 1919 and reported in the newspapers, one of the participating players from a neighbouring Tennis Club turned up with an oversized racquet – one of the very first examples of a new design by the player himself claiming that it had improved his game. Tom Fleming was quoted in the article as saying that 'These racquets will be a great help to duffers'. In amongst his many newspaper articles on *How to Improve Your Tennis*, he wrote a compelling piece on the advantage of a good coach. The introduction to the article reads as follows 'Tom Fleming, the well-known coach of the Roehampton Lawn Tennis Club has a larger clientele of notabilities than any other man in Great Britain. Royalty, great statesmen famous society beauties, foreign potentates, millionaires, and well known businessmen all seek the services of this famous

professional, who has been responsible for the training of many of the world's greatest lawn tennis players, and whose knowledge of the game is acknowledged to be unique'.

The reference to his training capabilities probably refers to his influence on a particular 'blue eyed and graceful' young girl called Kathleen 'Kitty' McKane better known as Kitty Godfree after her marriage to the Captain of the British Tennis Team, Mr LA Godfree in 1926 in South Africa. Fleming had spotted Kitty at an early age helping her to the pinnacle of the game with regular coaching at Roehampton Club. Two-time winner of the Ladies Singles at Wimbledon in 1924 and 1926. First person in 1925 to reach the Singles Final of the French Championships, Wimbledon, and the US Championships in the same year. Playing with her sister Margaret in 1922, they were the only sisters to have contested the Ladies Doubles at Wimbledon until the Williams sisters achieved the same feat in 2000.



THE RECENTLY MARRIED MIXED DOUBLES WINNERS AT ROEHAMPTON: MR. AND MRS. L. A. GODFREE (FORMERLY MISS KATHLEEN MCKANE).

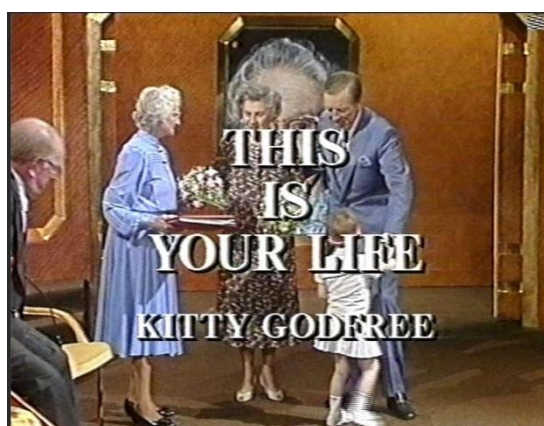
Playing with her husband Leslie in 1926, they remain the only married couple to have won the Mixed Doubles at Wimbledon. She was presented with a Centenary Medallion on Wimbledon's Centre Court in 1977 and presented the Winners Trophy to Martina Navratilova in 1986.



MISS KATHLEEN MCKANE, WHO WAS MARRIED IN KIMBERLEY TO MR. L. A. GODFREE, CAPTAIN OF THE TOURISTS.

MR. L. A. GODFREE, VICE CAPTAIN OF THE ENGLISH TEAM IN SOUTH AFRICA, WHO MARRIED MISS MCKANE.

Aside from tennis, Kitty also excelled in the game of badminton winning the All England Open Championships no less than eight times from 1920. Her achievements were recognised on TV when she was the subject of a programme called *This is Your Life* when only the best people in their field would be featured in such a way during peak time viewing.





Kitty enjoyed a long life before passing away in 1992 at the age of 96. Kitty was a long-term local resident in East Sheen where she is celebrated to this day with a Blue Plaque on the front of the house where she lived. RIP Kitty Godfree – a tennis superstar from the tennis courts of Roehampton Club.

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