

Roehampton Club connections with the Wimbledon Tennis Championships

As we enter the second week of the Wimbledon Tennis Championships, it seems appropriate to look back at the heritage of the Club and its close associations with the All-England Club which was originally founded as the All-England Croquet Club by six gentlemen at the offices of the *Field Magazine* in 1868 at the height of the popularity of the game of Croquet. Tennis was introduced in 1875 when one of the lawns was set aside for this purpose and the first Gentlemen's Singles Tournament was held in July 1877 when the Club changed its name to the All-England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club. It was a Welsh Inventor and British Army Officer, Walter Clopton Wingfield (right) who is regarded as the founder of modern Lawn Tennis and its introduction.



The first winner of the Men's Singles Tournament was Spencer Gore (below right) who was born and raised within a mile of the All-England Croquet Club at West Side House, Wimbledon Common, Surrey. Gore was among the twenty-two men who paid a guinea to enter the inaugural 1877 Championship – the women did not have their own competition until 1884. 21 matches were spread over five days and the Championship was suspended for the weekend to avoid a clash with the annual Eton v Harrow cricket match at Lord's Cricket Ground. The final was scheduled for the Monday but was postponed for a further four days because of rain. Dropping only two sets in four rounds, the 27-year-old Gore reached the final after beating CG Heathcote in the semi-final. In the Final against Marshall, he won in straight sets 6-1, 6-2, 6-4 in forty-eight minutes collecting the first prize of 12 Guineas (approximately £792 in today's money), and a Silver Cup presented by the *Field Magazine*.



Following the opening of Roehampton Club in 1902, it took a little time before tennis courts were established within the grounds marking a rapid increase in the recruitment of new Members eager to play the game. In the build-up to the first open tennis tournament at Roehampton Club which took place in 1914, the Club established its first connection with the All-England Club by recruiting its Tournament Director as Games Manager. This appointment represented a significant building block in the strong associations at the Club with the Wimbledon Championships which continue to this day.



Major Dudley Larcombe (left) was already a prominent figure in the administration of the game with his deft handling of the Wimbledon Championships, but it was his wife who took the limelight for her consummate tennis skills and her accomplishments in playing the game. Ethel Warneford Thomson (below right) married Major Larcombe in 1906. Three years previously in 1903, she had finished as Runner Up in the Ladies Singles Competition at Wimbledon losing 6-4, 4-6, 6-4 to Dorothea Douglass. This was only her second appearance in the Ladies Singles the previous year losing in the first round to Agnes Morton. Between 1903 and 1920, Ethel made no less than 9 appearances in Wimbledon finals winning the Ladies Singles in 1912 and the Mixed Doubles in 1914 with James Cecil Parke. She was also favourite to retain her



title in the following year until she was forced to retire because of being hit in the face by a tennis ball in the Mixed Doubles competition by her playing partner James Cecil Peake. She clearly recovered from this setback in the intervening years at the Wimbledon championships, finishing runner up on two other occasions in the Ladies Singles, runner up three times in the Ladies Doubles and runner up on one occasion in the Mixed Doubles.



The best player at Roehampton Club to make her name at Wimbledon was a local resident in East Sheen - Kathleen 'Kitty' McKane better known as Kitty Godfree (left). She was coached by the Roehampton Club Tennis Professional, Tom Fleming and went on to become a two-time winner of the Ladies Singles at Wimbledon in 1924 and 1926. She was also the first person to reach the Singles Final of the French Championship, 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.

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