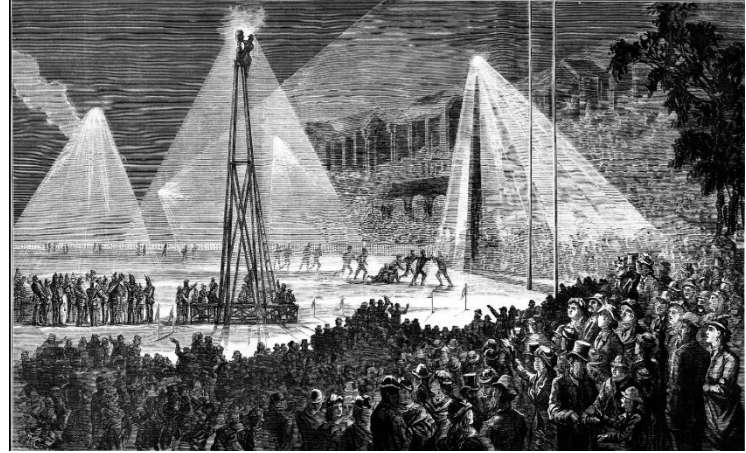


From the Archives

Exhibition tennis match under floodlights at Roehampton Club 100 years ago

According to available archive sources, the use of floodlights in sport at the turn of the 20th Century was still in its infancy. It seems however, that the first sport ever to use floodlights was polo on the 18th July 1878 in a match played at Fulham between Ranelagh Polo Club and the Hurlingham Club. There are also references later in the same year involving the use of experimental floodlights in football at Bramall Lane – the home of Sheffield United FC.

On the other side of the world in Australia in August 1878, two matches of Australian rules football (image right) were staged at the Melbourne Cricket Ground under electric lights. The second of these matches took place between two of the city's leading football clubs Carlton and Melbourne. When both matches took place on separate occasions, the lights failed to illuminate the whole of the ground, and the spectators struggled to make sense of the action in the murky conditions. The development of football stadia in the UK was to prove the testing ground for better lighting to allow the game to be played throughout the winter despite the fading light after sunset.



Other sports became interested in the technology especially if it meant better use of the facilities and the opportunity for spectators to attend. Even the enthusiasts in the so-called summer sports could see the opportunity of expanding the game across the calendar year. Against this background, Roehampton Club played its part as the venue for one of the first exhibition tennis matches in the world played under floodlights.

Outdoor tennis at night is now a practical proposition as a result of a well-known pre-war lawn tennis player from nearby Richmond-on-Thames who has patented a device allowing the sport to be played for the first time after sunset. The invention was claimed at the time to revolutionise the lives of tens of thousands of town dwellers who work during the day and are now able to enjoy their sport taking fresh air exercise to keep themselves fit and healthy.

The illumination of two tennis courts is made possible through the use of four electric gas-filled lamps laid side by side. A demonstration of the invention was made at Roehampton Club one evening in January 1922. The energy needed to light up the tennis courts was equivalent to two thousand candlepower. The lamps were placed on the four corners of the adjacent courts and the light was thrown backwards – away from the courts – on to white reflectors enabling a clear and consistent light.

The newspaper report in the *Westminster Gazette* confirms that one of the exhibition matches played under these conditions involved a Mixed Pairs contest between Mr AE Beamish playing with Mrs Larcombe against Mr GR Sherwell and Miss Holman. These competitors were described in the report as 'first class players of international standing'. For those watching the encounter, the standard of play was



regarded as 'remarkably high' and all the players involved expressed themselves afterwards as being 'delighted with the lighting'.

The names of the first of these mixed pairings have been featured in previous editions of the newsletter and were regular visitors to the Club. Alfred Ernest Beamish (image right) lived locally in Richmond and had excelled in the game reaching the Final of the Australasian Championships at this event which became the Australian Open due to start shortly in its 110th year.



Beamish had also played in other significant tennis events including the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, the World Covered Court Championships in Denmark in 1921, and was a two-time semi-finalist at the Wimbledon Championships in 1912 and 1914. His playing partner was Mrs Ethel Larcombe (left) – wife of the Roehampton Club Games Manager Major Larcomb (bottom right).

She also had a distinguished playing record at tennis and badminton winning the Ladies' Open Tennis Title at Wimbledon in 1912 and the Ladies' Badminton Championships on no less than eleven occasions. Tennis players at Roehampton Club have a good reason to look

up at the lighting on the courts knowing that the Club was instrumental in pioneering the use of floodlights.

Steve Riedlinger, Club Archivist

