

## Nigel Playfair – star of stage and screen at Roehampton Club

Sir Nigel Ross Playfair was elected to the Club in December 1919 at the same time he had taken over as Manager of the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith. He was educated at Winchester, Harrow and University College, Oxford, destined for a career as a lawyer. Having achieved a third-class honours degree in Modern History, he was called to the bar by the Inner Temple in 1900.

During his time at university, he was a member of the Oxford University Dramatic Society performing in his spare time. He must have enjoyed his time as a performer as he decided to give up law for a new career as an actor. In 1903 he played his first professional Shakespearean role, Dr Caius in Herbert Beerbohm Tree's production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at Her Majesty's Theatre in London. Members may recall the name of Beerbohm from a previous article in which he features as one of the earliest Members of the Club and his successful career as an actor before taking over the role of Proprietor and Manager for Her Majesty's Theatre in London.

This may have influenced the young Nigel Playfair to follow the same path and may even have made him aware of the attractions of the Roehampton Club. In his application form to join the Club, Sir Nigel Playfair confirms his membership of other clubs including the Garrick Club and Royal St Georges. He was also a member of the Stage Golfing Society.

The British Newspaper Archives are full of complimentary reviews of his acting career on stage and at Ealing Film Studios, but the early days were difficult in making money. One pleasant story which made the newspapers at the time was about his first engagement for a stage job with Arthur Bouchier. In answer to the question of what salary he would require, Sir Nigel responded by suggesting five pounds a week. Bouchier responded by saying 'It's curious that you have said that, because it's exactly what I think you are worth to me ... But I shan't give it to you as I feel that you are the sort of man who will soon be driving the coach yourself and the sooner you learn the value of economy, the better. You shall have four!'



Bouchier proved correct in his estimation when Sir Nigel took over the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith at the end of the First World War. Having opened in 1895 as the Lyric Opera House, it initially achieved popularity for its pantomime productions until the early 1900's when the theatre industry suffered a general decline in audience numbers. Part of the regression was the beginning of the motion picture industry and the attraction it created at the expense of the theatres.

It must have been a leap of faith for Nigel Playfair to make his move taking over the Lyric in Hammersmith especially as it was only by chance that he became aware of its availability. According to the *Daily Mirror*, he was about to produce a one-act play for a charity matinee, for which he needed certain scenery. He was told that he might be able to hire the 'props' at 'an old blood-and-thunder theatre at Hammersmith'. When he got there, he was told by the manageress that the theatre was to be sold the next day to a cinema company for a little over £2,000. So, he offered her £50 more, which she accepted and gave him a fortnight to find the money. This marked the beginning of the revival for the theatre with a

long series of brilliant productions raising Sir Nigel to the forefront of theatrical figures and the theatre itself to international fame.

To many in the theatre world, he will be remembered for his revival in co-operation with the late Mr Lovat Fraser and with Mr Frederick Austin of *The Beggar's Opera* which ran for 1,463 performances. Sir Nigel's fourteen-year career at the Lyric was unfortunately cut short with his sudden death in 1934 at the age of only 60. He was taken ill while performing *As You Like It* at the open-air theatre in Regent's Park. He was admitted to King's College Hospital where his condition deteriorated. Despite the best efforts of the hospital, he passed away peacefully with his wife and three sons at his bedside. The reading of his will which took place in the same year included a request for the family to support the continuing employment of their faithful servant, Helen Schulpher. He also asked that any memorial to him should be a tablet in Holy Trinity Church, St Andrews, Scotland designed by George Sheringham. In a final quote by Lady Playfair to the newspapers regarding their loyal servant she says 'We value Helen Schulpher like a friend. She has been with us 23 years. She came as cook, but she has been cook, nurse and everything to us'.

Steve Riedlinger, Club Archivist



ALFRESCO SHAKESPEARE : Sir Nigel Playfair as Malvolio and Miss Phyllis Neilson-Terry as Olivia in the open-air presentation of *Twelfth Night* which was given before an audience of over 2,000 in Regent's Park on Whit-Monday. With a grassy platform for stage and a gentle slope as auditorium the play was shown under ideal weather conditions and in the most delightful surroundings