

FROM THE ARCHIVES

How the rules of snooker arrived in England from India via Roehampton Club

Steve Riedlinger, Club Archivist

The Maharaja of Cooch Behar joined Roehampton Club in March 1902. He used his magnificent Palace in West Bengal to entertain British Army Officers and world leading sportsmen to indulge his interest in polo, cricket, football and the game of billiards. It was here in 1885 following a hunt that the rules of snooker were discussed and subsequently brought back to England.



Cooch Behar Palace

The game of snooker had been introduced by British Officers stationed in India as a combination of two betting games played as an alternative to billiards. One was called 'Pyramids' involving just 15 red balls and a white ball with the winning player taking the money by potting eight reds. The other betting game was known as 'Black Pool' for multiple players with each having their own coloured ball and the winner potting most of the coloured balls of his opponents. Stationed at Jubbulpore which is now known as Jabalpur, Colonel Sir Neville Chamberlain is now acknowledged as the person responsible for combining these games into the version of snooker we know today.

The actual name of 'snooker' also derives from the military as term to describe first year cadets at the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. Chamberlain was transferred from Jubbulpore to the Central India Horse based at the Tamil

Nadu hill station at Ootacamund where he was assigned to the personal staff of Field Marshall Sir Frederick Roberts – Commander-in-Chief of the combined British forces in Afghanistan.



It was here in the famous Ootacamund Club that the rules of snooker were first recorded with the Club cementing its place in the history of the sport.

It was recently featured in the TV programme the *Real Marigold Hotel* when Dennis Taylor paid homage to the origins of the game by playing a frame on one of the original snooker tables dating back to the late 19th century. The Club was affectionately known as 'Snooty Ooty' or 'the Morgue' because of its many hunting trophies which adorned the walls. Membership at the time of its inauguration in 1841 was open to 'HM and the Honourable Company's Civil and Military Service gentlemen of the mercantile or other professions, moving in the ordinary circle of Indian society'. Such was Chamberlain's enthusiasm for his new game, he even named his horse Snooker!

In a book published by the Maharaja of Cooch Behar in 1908, there is a record of a meeting in Calcutta between himself, Lord Frederick Roberts, Neville Chamberlain, and others, prior to them all setting out on a big-game hunt which commenced on 28th February 1885.

The meeting also refers to the attendance of a Billiards Player. The identity of the player has been the subject of some conjecture but was thought to be the extravagantly named Sackville West Stanley who had been appointed as personal billiards tutor to the Maharaja on a generous salary in return for giving the Maharaja lessons in billiards and the occasional exhibition for the entertainment of his guests. Stanley stayed in India until 1887 when it is thought that he returned to England accompanied with the rules of snooker. Another example of the influence of the Roehampton Club in the history of sport.

More snippets from Club history to follow in future issues!



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