

## From the Archives

### Golf and Tennis Tournaments 100 years ago

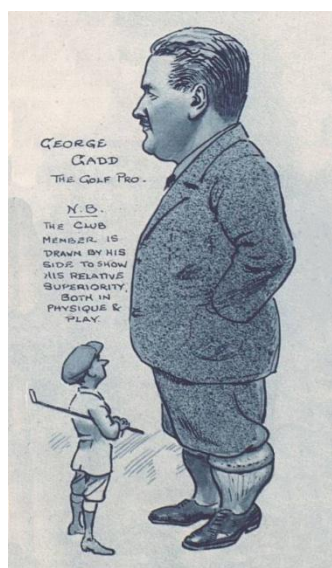
With each of the many sports at Roehampton Club beginning their events as part of our 125- anniversary celebrations, golf and tennis competitions at Roehampton Club 100 years ago are worthy of special mention with the newspapers at the time reporting the annual Professional Golf Tournament and the Surrey Hard Court Tennis Championships.



### Professional Golf Tournament at Roehampton Club

On a bright April morning in 1926, Roehampton Club presented a lively scene as Members and visitors gathered on the terraces and verandas to watch many of Britain's leading golf professionals open their season. The papers reported cars lining Roehampton Lane, caddies clustered around the first tee, and a sizeable gallery following the star matches. From the Clubhouse windows and the edge of the greens, spectators enjoyed unusually close views of Open Champions past and present, overseas title-holders, and the Club's own professional talent.

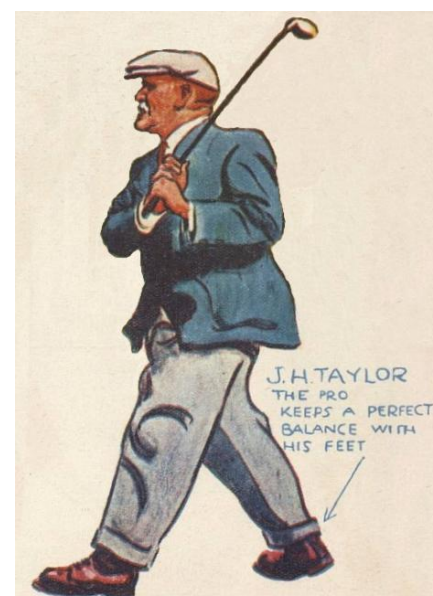
The 1926 Roehampton Club Professional Invitation Tournament marked the beginning of Abe Mitchell's three-year dominance at the Club and stood out as one of the most attractive early-season fixtures in British professional golf. Played from 14–16 April, it brought together many of the leading home professionals along with notable overseas champions, including Australian Open winner Tom Howard and five-time Open Champion J. H. Taylor.



By 1926 the Roehampton Invitation was a well-established three-day event: 36 holes of stroke play on the opening day, followed by match play for the leading sixteen professionals over the next two days. In the qualifying, Roehampton's own professional, George Gadd, produced a brilliant 66 in his morning round and, together with James Ockenden of Hanger Hill, led the field on 137, on a course described as around 1,000 yards shorter than full championship length but a demanding early-spring test. Abe Mitchell, viewed as Britain's great hope for regaining international supremacy, and Archie Compston followed closely on 139, while veteran stars Harry Vardon and J. H. Taylor both returned solid totals in the mid-140s to claim their places among the qualifiers.

International interest was enhanced by the presence of Australian Open champion Tom Howard, whose unorthodox putting—keeping his eye on the hole rather than the ball—was widely remarked upon in the press. Howard struggled to master the conditions, finishing with a 36-hole total of 159 and failing to reach the last sixteen. Taylor, by contrast, showed much of the steadiness that had brought him his five Open Championships before the war, qualifying comfortably, though he was eliminated in the early match-play rounds and did not progress to the semi-final stage. He did feature, however as a caricature figure in the *Bystander Magazine* in the same year.

Competition for the final qualifying places was fierce, with six players tied and forced into a six-hole play-off, from which Len Holland emerged to take the last spot in the knock-out draw. As the tournament moved



into match play, attention focused increasingly on Mitchell's length and control and on former Open Champion George Duncan, both of whom advanced smoothly to the semi-finals and then to a much-anticipated final. In the deciding match, Mitchell imposed his game on Duncan and secured victory by 3 and 2, his first Roehampton Invitation title. This win began a remarkable sequence, as he would also capture the tournament in 1927 and 1928, earning the challenge cup outright and confirming Roehampton Club as a personal stronghold. For the Club, the 1926 event underlined Roehampton's status as a key venue in the professional calendar, drawing Open Champions and international winners to a suburban London gallery eager for top-class pre-season golf.

### **Surrey Hard Court Tennis Championships**

The 1926 Surrey Hard Court Championships at Roehampton Club came at a defining moment in the Club's emergence as the home of top-class hard-court tennis in Britain. Established in 1919 and quickly recognised as one of the country's leading clay-court meetings, the Surrey Hard Courts drew strong domestic and overseas fields to Roehampton each spring, when the grass courts elsewhere still lay dormant. For members, the week brought a sense of occasion: galleries full, and the red-tinted courts providing an early-season stage on which future Wimbledon contenders could be quietly assessed.



In 1926 the men's title went to Nigel G. Sharpe, a rising British player whose victory at Roehampton Club signalled the start of a remarkably durable career. Born on 23 December 1904, Sharpe belonged to the new post-war generation taking their place on the national circuit, comfortable travelling between London clubs, provincial championships and, increasingly, international events. Between 1924 and 1939 he would collect 29 singles titles worldwide, and become particularly associated with the fast indoor wood at the London Covered Court Championships, where his compact, attacking style flourished. That he could also master the slower clay at Roehampton underlined both his adaptability and the quality of the Surrey Hard Courts as a test of all-round match play.

The women's singles that year was won by Miss Eileen Viviyen Bennett, whose success at Roehampton Club formed part of her rapid ascent from promising junior to one of the world's leading players. Born on 16 July 1907, Bennett was still in her teens when she lifted the Surrey Hard Court title, yet already displayed the crisp volleying and tactical acumen that would later make her a formidable doubles and mixed doubles partner. Competing under her maiden name before marriage made her better known as Eileen Bennett Whittingstall, she would go on to reach the singles finals of the French Championships in 1928 and the US Championships in 1931, and earn a world ranking as high as no. 3 in 1931. Her six Grand Slam doubles and mixed doubles titles between 1927 and 1931 confirm the calibre of player who honed her game on Roehampton Club's courts.



Seen a century later, the 1926 Championships illustrate how Roehampton Club quietly helped shape British tennis between the wars, offering Nigel Sharpe, Eileen Bennett and their contemporaries a serious competitive arena long before the first ball was served at Wimbledon.

**Steve Riedlinger – Club Archivist**