

## History of the Rushbrooke Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club

Rushbrooke Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club was founded in 1870. Originally it was a croquet club where military officers and professionals from the locality could relax and enjoy the leafy surroundings. Communal croquet lawns were rare in Ireland at the time, as large residences had their own lawns. With the advent of the sport of tennis, many croquet lawns began doubling up as lawn courts as the new sport became more acceptable. The first record of tennis being played in Ireland was in 1875, when the All Ireland Lawn Tennis Club was founded as part of the rugby headquarters at Lansdowne Road. The first record of an official, competitive tennis match was played at Rushbrooke on July 21st, 1880.

The playing facilities in those early days consisted of two lawn courts, with an additional 2 courts added in 1884. This was very likely to appease the croquet players, as tennis lawns suffer significant wear and tear. By 1894, in response to a growing membership, the number of courts was increased to six. The first record of a club pavilion was in 1897, but is believed to have been constructed sometime between 1884 and 1887. Press reports from the summer open tournament in 1884, clearly describe the use of several tents for "the serving of refreshments and other necessary duties", as opposed to any pavilion structure.

The period 1870-1900 witnessed unprecedented growth in the number of tennis clubs emerging throughout the country, with croquet sharing a resurgence of interest. A prominent early player of Rushbrooke was Mr. G. Edwards, who dominated the sport at the club and was considered a "prized asset" on the tennis courts. The Championships of County Cork was first held in 1897 and the title remains at the club to this day. Historically, lawn tennis clubs have always operated where both men and women share equal rights. Women played a significant part in the lift of Rushbrooke from the very beginning, although the club still awaits its first lady chairperson.

A formal lease agreement was signed between the Rushbrooke Club and the Rushbrooke Estate on March 17th, 1893, although the Club had been using the grounds from much earlier. The Club was represented by Mr. James Deane, Mr. Anderson Cooper and Mr. William Henry Beamish. This guaranteed the club's existence for 99 years. Captain William Henry Rushbrooke signed on behalf of the Rushbrooke Estate.

Croquet has always been an integral part of the club. By 1904, the club used ten lawns to successfully run its annual croquet tournament, eight of which were normally dedicated to tennis. In 1907, the club agreed a new lease, which allowed the club's grounds to expand northwards. The Cork International Exhibition of 1902 was a landmark event which attracted many visitors. A showpiece tennis tournament was held where the aforesaid Mr. G. Edwards played the reigning Wimbledon tennis champion, Mr. A.W. Gore, losing 7-5, 7-5, 6-2 in the final.

The changing political climate in Ireland, and the withdrawal of British military forces from what had been Queenstown, and was now renamed Cobh, was widely felt in the town. Both Cobh and the Rushbrooke Club suffered financially. The club continued, and was held in high regard, so much so, that by 1924-5 the club hosted the Senior Irish Close Championship, along with the Munster vs Leinster inter-provincial match. This was the first time the club had hosted such a prestigious competition. The club had survived the political turmoil and upheaval of the early 1920's and was on a solid financial and sporting footing.

The 1920's and 1930's produced some memorable victories for Rushbrooke players with Binkie Harman claiming her first of three Irish Open U-18 titles in 1929, 1931 and 1932. She was the first Rushbrooke player to win this title and remained the club's only winner of the event until June-Ann

Fitzpatrick in 1951. The 1930's witnessed unprecedented growth in the popularity of lawn tennis, brought about by the broadcast on radio of the Wimbledon tournament. In 1931, the Rushbrooke Club had six lawn tennis courts, three croquet lawns, three hard tennis courts and a further lawn area which doubled as a croquet lawn or two tennis courts.

The club had a number of very good players, reflected in the fact that the club won the Munster Cup twice in the 1930s and 1940s, and once in the 1950s. The club was at the forefront in Irish tennis, hosting the Irish Close Championships in both 1935 and 1938, as well as senior inter-provincials. Reduced activity occurred during the 1939-45 war and continued thereafter with subsequent fuel-shortages making it difficult for players not living on the Great Island, to travel to the club. The club continued to have success in competitive tennis, with Gerard Fitzpatrick winning the Junior Irish Open Championships in 1948 and 1949. His sister June-Ann also achieved this honour with her back-to-back wins in 1950 and 1951. Frank Furney, the winner of eight Munster Cups with the club, won the senior boys events in 1946, 1947 and 1948.

During the 1950s, many of the club's players began to make their mark internationally. June-Ann Fitzpatrick, although based then in Dublin, played in the junior Wimbledon in 1951, and seniors in 1954. Her brother Gerard who also played in the junior and senior Wimbledon Championships received his first Irish cap against England in 1950 and his first Davis Cup appearance four years later against Austria.

The 1960s was a difficult time, as interest in tennis dipped in Ireland generally. In 1968 the landmark decision to abandon the distinction between professional and amateur players made tournaments truly "open". By 1972 the club was the venue for the Davis Cup tie against Turkey. This was only the second time an event of this magnitude had been played in Cork. The installation of floodlighting in the 1970's allowed for increased non-daylight activities and supported the club's bar facilities. In 1977, more lawn tennis courts were replaced with a hard court surface, showing the club's willingness to move with the times, and allow the club to cope with the growing membership.

The 1980's saw tennis on a high in Rushbrooke. The showcase event, the Championships of County Cork attracted the Irish no. 1 player, Matt Doyle in 1981, with him also returning with playmate Sean Sorenson for the 1982 event. Top quality tennis was regularly seen at the club and the membership grew accordingly. The club won its first Munster Junior Cup in 1986. The club purchased the freehold of the club's grounds in 1981, ensuring that the club continued to remain a venue where the sports of tennis and croquet would be actively promoted. The club prepared for its centenary in 1984.

In the 1990s the club had 5 hard courts and six lawn tennis courts. Significant investment was made in re-surfacing these courts with more modern surfacing technology. In 2006, the old club pavilion that had served the club since the 1880's was demolished and the new club pavilion built in its place. Although still perceived as a club with a Protestant and Anglo-Irish membership, over the years this has changed significantly, and the membership currently reflects fully the local population, and is "open to all". The members enjoy excellent playing facilities in terms of tennis, croquet and lawn bowling. The new pavilion with its improved viewing, extra space and bar facilities allows for the club to become an asset in the growing social life of the town of Cobh. The club members look forward to a bright future for the club and for sport in the locality of Cork.

From the original: "The Story of Rushbrooke Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club 1870-2007" by Frank McDonnell, available at the Club.