

THE POLO CLUB

Talking to older inhabitants of East Farndon over the years, I have heard many accounts of 'the polo ground'. Some of the details about Market Harborough Polo Club and its ground on the Marston Trussell Road in Farndon can be gleaned from the local newspapers of the period.

The 'Harborough Advertiser' of 17th May, 1902, records the opening of the ground. A match was played between two teams from local hunts, Mr. Fernie's and The Pytchley. Tea was supplied by the Angel Hotel of Market Harborough. There was a shower of rain, which made everyone pleased that there was a tent to shelter in. Whether the Polo Club had existed prior to this, with a ground elsewhere, I cannot be sure. The ground was in a field known as Oak Tree Close, roughly opposite 'The Grange' farm.

Thereafter, fixtures continued on a regular basis. On 26th May, 1903, we read that the season had started and that the ground was 'in capital order'. On 3rd October, 1905, the Harborough Polo Tournament at East Farndon had to be abandoned 'because of the accident to Mr. Bellville'. He lived at Papillon Hall in Lubenham, a house now demolished. A gymkhana was then held instead.

The number of people going to watch the matches must have been considerable. There is a bridleway from Harborough, which crosses the Farndon-Lubenham road, passes near the 'Judith Stone' and then meets the Marston Road, next to where the polo field was situated. The condition of this bridleway caused much discussion at the meetings of Oxendon Rural District Council. On 31st March, 1903, it was reported that 'this road is very much used by people going to the polo ground'. At that time, there was even a house on the bridleway, known as 'The Lodge'. The Council was also concerned about bends in the road to the ground from Farndon, though it is not clear that the road is any straighter now than it was before the reported discussions of 1907 and 1908.

It seems likely that polo matches were suspended during the first world war, but reports start to appear again in the 1920s. It seems, in fact, that the mid-twenties were the hey-day of the ground and the club. By this time, the owners of Thorpe Lubenham Hall were the Wernhers, who took great interest in the club. They were also extremely well-connected and brought a number of eminent visitors to the Farndon ground. The accompanying photographs date from this period and were kindly loaned by David West, whose father, William E. West, lived in Farndon and was the Secretary of the Polo Club (as reported on 30th July, 1926).

In the first photograph below, William West is second from right. In the second one, he is standing in the centre. He and his family lived at Greywalls on Main Street and his wife was a member of the Cox family (see the article about F.G. Cox elsewhere on this website).



The Wernhers later left the area, when Sir Harold inherited his father's house, Luton Hoo in Bedfordshire. Lady Zia Wernher, his wife, was a member of the Russian royal family. 'Zia' was short for Anastasia. She was the daughter of Grand Duke Mikhail and Sophia, Countess de Torby (Luxembourg). The Grand Duke was the nephew of Czar Alexander II and grandson of Nikolai I, czar from 1825-1855. He became a naturalised British citizen. The photograph shows him sitting in the back of a Rolls-Royce at the polo ground in the mid-twenties, with Sir Harold and Lady Zia.



A photograph in the 'Harborough Advertiser' of 5th September, 1924, which is of poor quality as it was taken from microfilm, shows a scene (below), perhaps from the same occasion at the ground, with Countess Torby (left), Lady Zia and 'ex-King George II of Greece'. In fact George later returned to resume his reign as King of Greece. It seems incredible that such a gathering of Europe's aristocrats could ever have occurred in a field in East Farndon. The main reasons for this were the fabulous wealth of the Wernhers and the fact that Lady Zia was related to many of the royal (or former royal) families of Europe. Sir Harold's father, Julius, was a German who went to South Africa and acquired vast wealth in the diamond business. He then settled in England. When he died in 1912, he left £11 million.



The polo teams at this period were no longer formed by the local hunts. A tournament reported on 8th August, 1924, had three teams, the Whites, the Yellows and the Reds. The Whites were Commander Alexander, G. Marks, W.E. Stokes and G. Sumner. The

Yellows consisted of F. Stops, J. Sumner, J. Toller Eady and Lord Stalbridge. The winning Red team was H. Sutton, C.E. Barwell Ewins, W.E. West and L. Burgess.

Then, oddly, when the club appears to be flourishing, comes what is clearly the end. On 20th April, 1928, a sale notice appeared in the paper. 'Sale at the Polo Ground' to include grass mower, fence, shed and 'the Club Pavilion, 10' by 8' with open shelter 15' by 10''.

The Pavilion is stated to be the property of Mr. C.E. Barwell Ewins, who lived at Marston Trussell Hall. The sale was to take place at the ground, on 1st May, 1928, the agents being J. Toller Eady and Burman. I have found no further mention of the Club after this, so probably it ceased to exist. It would be interesting to know why it folded so suddenly.

Looking back at what evidence remains of the twenty-six years of the polo ground, you can see a vivid picture of a colourful era which now seems far removed.

Apart from conversations with local residents, the information in this article comes from back issues of the 'Harborough Advertiser', available on microfilm in Harborough library. Information about the Wernhers can be found in the book 'Grand Dukes and Diamonds' by Raleigh Trevelyan.

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