

111 YEARS OF ANTWERP CRICKET CLUB



by Jeremy McKenna



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The origins of our illustrious cricket club have for long been shrouded in mystery, apparently lost to the annals of history. Up until now, the limit of our knowledge of the earliest days of the “Antwerp Cricket Club” has been marked by a few obscure anecdotes concerning the common history of A.C.C. and the (now “Royal) Antwerp Football Club.” This common history, we know, can be traced back at least as far as the year 1880, in which certain cycling enthusiasts recorded their testimony of the strange activities of several Englishmen on the *Wilryksche Plein*, the site of the present-day *Bouwcentrum* in Wilrijk. However, recently rediscovered sources from the late nineteenth century reveal a much more complex and fascinating story of the genesis of A.C.C. and the enthusiasm of its first members in bringing that genesis about. It is hoped that the light shed by these accounts, meagre as it is, is sufficient to furnish this humble reconstruction of a genealogy of “Antwerp Cricket Club.”¹

Of course, those few Englishmen witnessed at play in Wilrijk were engaged in a game of *cricket* and were in all likelihood amongst the founding members of the “Antwerp Athletic Club,” whose collapse a decade later sparked the instantiation of our club. In fact, within forty-eight hours of the folding of the A.A.C. – and with it the last opportunity for the cricket loving members of the English colony to play their beloved sport – the decision was made to establish a new club, the “Antwerp Cricket Club,” on the 11th May 1892. This decision is revealed in an excellent article from the English newspaper, published in Brussels around the turn of the century, *The Belgian News and Continental Advertiser* which I have chosen to cite in full:

To meet a want expressed by the Cricket-loving portion of the English colony, a few enthusiasts undertook the by no means light

¹ Many thanks to Dirk Willocx of the Royal Antwerp Football Club for passing on the “discovery” of these sources and for many helpful insights concerning the mutual history of our two clubs.

task of awakening the dormant patriotism and sporting instincts of the Britishers in Antwerp, in order to unearth and set up again on a sound working basis the "Antwerp Cricket Club."

A meeting was called on Saturday 11th inst. at the English Club, and considering that but very short notice could be given, the attendance was very encouraging to the promoters. It was unanimously admitted that, as Football, Golf, Lawn-Tennis, Rowing etc., has found a footing in Antwerp, it could only be ascribed to a want of energy and perseverance that Cricket had for some years entirely disappeared from our list of sports. The necessary "few but touching words" having been eloquently delivered by Mr. Little from the Chair, the meeting agreed nem. con. that the national game of England should once more be established in Antwerp. This principal item being disposed of, the meeting at once proceeded to business and details:- The old Club was re-formed under the title of the "Antwerp Cricket Club;" a committee was elected, consisting of a President, four Vice-Presidents, four Members, a Captain, a Vice-Captain, a Secretary and a Treasurer. A moderate subscription was fixed provisionally, as it was impossible at the moment to determine exactly what outlays would be necessary. It was reported that investigation showed the old match ground on the Plaine des Manœuvres to be in very fair condition, and also that strenuous efforts were being made, with every hope of success to secure the use of a ground in town, within easy reach of the members, where regular net-practice could be held every evening during the summer; once this ground obtained, the supporters of the Antwerp Cricket Club will have no reason to fear that the Club will ever again drop out of the running. To strike while the iron was hot, a preliminary practice was held on Sunday 22nd inst. at the Plaine des Manœuvres, and, as in the case of the meeting on the previous evening, the attendance was encouraging. The ground not having been rolled or cut, the wicket [sic.] was a trifle dangerous, the bowling being at times erratic, with occasional "head balls," but we were pleased to see that through the rust that has been accumulating for many years some very good form in batting as in bowling had tried to make itself apparent and, above all, the right spirit showed itself everywhere, there being no exception to the rule of implicit obedience to the Captain's orders, everyone doing his utmost for his side. The regular evening net practice, which the members are all confidently looking forward to, will in a very short time wear off the rust and expose to the naked eye genuine batting and bowling worthy to uphold the colours of the Antwerp C.C. against the

attacks (which the A.C.C. takes the opportunity of inviting) of any and all continental teams. The fielding, as to be expected, was of rather feeble description, apart from a few instances which, by comparison, looked so brilliant as almost to justify the epithet "flukey." However, as every one knows, good fielding cannot be looked for from men who, having omitted to play cricket for some years, suddenly find themselves on rather a rough ground playing with men they have never played with before.

The great difficulty that cricket has to contend with in Antwerp, beyond those experienced by other games, is that no one has yet been able to obtain a ground, or even a practice ground, within the town. Antwerp being a business town where office hours are long, much time being wasted in the middle of the day, it is quite impossible for most of the members who are business men, to reach the Plaine des Manœuvres after office hours in the evening, at least, in time to get enough practice to make it worth while going to such great inconvenience. However, by means of the excellent tramway service, almost any part of the town is easily attainable in a very short time, and it is now the earnest endeavour of the promoters of the Club to lay before the committee, at the meeting to be held very shortly, several offers of suitable sites for practice grounds within the fortification. We dare not hope for such good fortune as that a match ground may be found in the town, and only trust that the well-known good feeling and tolerance of the Belgians towards their "mad English" guests may facilitate the endeavours of the Antwerp C.C. to ground the great game in Antwerp, and that later on the contagion may take hold on them too in their turn, as it has already done with the Dutch and other nations, and that at no very distant date we may find the Belgians challenging us, if not beating us, at our own national game.

Clubs are invited to correspond with A.W. Moody,² Hon. Secretary, Antwerp C.C., 17, Rue Van Brée, Antwerp (The Belgian News and Continental Advertiser, May 28 – June 3, 1892, p. 6).

Of course, as has been mentioned, cricket was played in Antwerp long before this date, at least as early as 1880, around which time the informal "Antwerp Athletic Club" was established by several British

² The same A.W. Moody is highly spoken of in a notice from *The Belgian News and Continental Advertiser* of November 5 – 11 1892: *Cricket and football players will be sorry to hear of the departure of Mr. A.A.W. Moody for Hamburg. Doubtless many of the Brussels men can call to mind his doughty deeds on the football field, and I think I can safely say he was the best all-round cricketer we had in Antwerp.*

expatriate workers – mainly apprentices from the shipping and trade industry. Little is known about the formal organisation of the “Antwerp Athletic Club” during its maiden years. The informal training sessions and ‘scratch matches’ that largely constituted the club’s activities did, however, occasionally give way to real competitions against the crew of British ships in port at Antwerp. There were also several matches organised against the various English colleges based in Belgium at the time. Depending on the season, popular sports of the athletic club were cricket, lawn tennis, rugby football and association football. As is well known, it was the football contingent of this very club that went on to form its own governing committee, eventually becoming the “Royal Antwerp Football Club.”

The first playing field was located, under rather primitive circumstances, on the *Wilrycksche Plein*, a wide expanse of field often used as a military training ground – hence its alternative name, the *Plaine des Manœuvres*. Play was allowed on the condition that the ground was prepared no earlier than one hour before the scheduled start of play, and all equipment dismantled again no later than one hour after. Preparation of the ground often included the removal of rocks, dead branches, pieces of glass and so on that repeatedly accumulated on the playing area. It was not until the end of 1893 that alternative facilities could be acquired for the club at a ground in Zurenborg, right in the middle of where the now famous Cogels Osylei was later constructed.

In the meantime, the “Antwerp Cricket Club” continued to co-exist alongside the by now separate governing body of the “Antwerp Football Club.” Indeed, contact between the two sporting contingents was maintained through the sporadic organisation of cricket matches between the two clubs; ones which – it pains me to announce – were often won by

the footballers. The following account, again from *The Belgian News*, details such an encounter:

The opening match of the season took place on 23rd inst. when a pleasing and interesting game was witnessed. The two teams being composed respectively of the Football members of the Cricket Club versus the rest of the club. The game resulted in an easy win for the former; though it must be admitted that their opponents had the hardest of hard luck. For the football members, Rivaz played a first-class game in both batting and bowling, although he ought to have been caught when he had made four runs only; his mistake cost the side dear, as it enabled him to make the largest score for his side.

Playing for the Cricket Messrs. Little and Brotherthon bowled in fine style whilst batting Ryan and Piggott took a lot of separating, the former especially playing well for his twenty-six.

The smartest bit of fielding in the match was a catch made by Little from a hard drive by Dooley, and it well merited the applause given. The fielding of the winning team was of a first-class order, no bye being scored against them.

...

My congratulations to the football members of the Cricket Club for the smart game they played against the remaining members of the club. It says volumes for the fielding of the F.C., when not a bye or over-throw was scored against them.

*Pleased to see the first appearance of Rivaz. Cannot Little persuade him to join the club, or are tennis and its feminine attractions too great for him? His services would be invaluable. Price, as wicket-keeper, has found his true position. He gave the best exhibition of wicket-keeping since the club was formed. Captain please note (*The Belgian News and Continental Advertiser*, April 29 – May 5, 1893).*

Despite the disbanding of the various sporting factions of the old “Antwerp Athletic Club” in 1892, less than a year later, the by now divergent clubs based in Antwerp were forced by financial concerns to consider amalgamation. After the primitive conditions at the *Wilryksche Plein*, newly acquired head-quarters in Zurenborg within the walls of the

city provided an excellent opportunity for a suitable playing field. This well positioned, well maintained ground was part of the *Société Anonyme pour la Construction de Maisons Bourgeoises* and was leased by Herbert Debenham and Martin Price for the sum of 1000 francs per year for a period of two years. To help raise the exorbitant rent, the establishment of a new “Antwerp Cricket, Football and Tennis Club” was suggested as a means of sharing the financial burden. The report of a meeting held on 12 March 1894 appears in *The Belgian News and Continental Advertiser* a week later under the title, “Antwerp Cricket, Football and Tennis Club”:

A meeting of the Antwerp Football, Cricket and Tennis clubs, for the purpose of amalgamation, was held on Monday last at the café, “Shakespeare.”³ Mr. Lewis Potter, Secretary and Treasurer of the Tennis Club being voted to the chair at once called upon Mr. Debenham, as representing the Football Club, which club was mainly responsible for the proposed amalgamation, for an explanatory statement as to what course it was suggested should be followed for the natural benefit of the three sections. Mr. Debenham, who was well received, opened his remarks by referring to the great loss suffered by the Cricket and Football members by the death of Mr. Alex Little. He then proceeded to put before the meeting a brief summary of the steps taken by the Football Club for the laying out of the ground they had already secured at Zurenborg, and of which, he mentioned, they had a two years lease with every prospect of a further contract, upon similar terms being entered into the expiration of the present one. He was happy to say the work of enclosing the ground would be entirely completed in the course of the next few days, and the Club would then own one of the first recreation grounds on the continent. The only thing still left to be done was the laying out, and for this some very reasonable tenders had already been received. In conclusion he begged to move that the three clubs be amalgamated and called the “Antwerp Cricket, Football and Tennis Club.” The motion being unanimously carried, the election of a General Secretary was then proceeded with Mr. Gordon W. Allan accepting the post.

³ Where the apartment residence is now located on the river side of the Groenplaats, Antwerp.

Upon the motion of Mr. Price, it was resolved that a management committee of nine members, three from each section should be formed, and the following representatives were then elected:-

Cricket: Messrs. Crighton, Rivaz, H. Jacobs

Football: Messrs. Debenham, Price, Borthwick

Tennis: Messrs. Graham, P. Jones, Walrond

*Debenham kindly consented to undertake the post of Treasurer, the operation of subscription was then dealt with, this finally being fixed at 25 francs, but only after it had been proposed that playing members of the Tennis section should pay an extra ten francs had been defeated. This amendment though was productive of some useful discussion and had the effect of eliciting some interesting remarks from Mr. Flint as to the general working of the Club, the operation of the subscription for lady members being touched upon, and attention called to the expense of the Tennis as compared to that of the other sections. The meeting was most unanimous in passing a hearty vote of thanks to Messrs. Debenham and Price for the way in which they had carried out their respective duties as Treasurer and Secretary during the last season that the Football Club was responsible for the interest excited in sport in Antwerp during the last few months was not to be denied, still more so was it certain that without the aid of Messrs. Debenham and Price the Club would never have reached its present and popular position. Mr. Debenham replied and the meeting concluded by a vote of thanks proposed by Mr. Flint to Mr. Potter for the impartial manner in which he had conducted his duties as Chairman (*The Belgian News and Continental Advertiser*, March 17 – 24, 1894).*

However, the new co-operation was yet to solve the club's financial difficulties, a fact well illustrated by an anecdote involving a touring side from England. A football match between Antwerp and Ealing Football Club was proposed for the spring of 1894, for which the English requested a fee of £50. The Antwerp club, unable to afford this hefty fee, proposed instead to divide the proceeds from the event. It was thus that Ealing Football Club played a match against Antwerp on 8 April 1894, the 'gentleman's agreement' between them earning Ealing a grand

total of 11 francs and 50 centimes. The tourists' financial deficit was at least compensated by the match result: 0-5 in favour of the English.

In 1897, the Transvaalstraat ground was transformed into a velodrome, space being allowed for a football ground and several tennis courts. Being the more space dependent sport of the three, however, cricket was forced to find alternative arrangements. Though sadly very little is known of the club's activities after 1897,⁴ we do know that cricket continued to be played in Antwerp – and that under the title of the “Antwerp Cricket Club” – thanks to the preservation of a handful of records of matches played up until the years immediately preceding the first World War. Most likely this latter date marks the end of the club as it was known, as it did the vast majority of the English presence in Belgium in general. The aspirations of those first Antwerp cricketers, “to ground the great game in Antwerp,” and have “the contagion... take hold on them too in their turn,” thus had to wait more than half a century to see fulfilment, a project we are proud to continue in their name.

Jeremy McKenna

⁴ A fact due to the limited holding in the National Library in Brussels of *The Belgian News*, practically the only source on sport in Antwerp at the time, and relevant copies of the same, formerly held by the British Library, having been auctioned off to private collections.

Cover photo: “Antwerp Cricket, Football and Tennis Club” at the Zurenborg velodrome ca. 1897.
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