

# Between Two Wars

Cricket in Antwerp from 1924 – 1939



The Beerschot Olympic Stadium at 't Kiel in Antwerp, which staged the 1920 Olympic Games. It is on these grounds that the Antwerp Cricket Club resumed its activities just four years later, after the interruption of World War I.

One of the least charted periods of the Club's history is neatly, albeit tragically, bracketed by the two world wars of the last century. While Antwerp's English community (or colony as they affectionately denoted their collectivity) was flourishing in the Belle Epoque, and with it, the Antwerp Cricket Club, which was experiencing a Golden Age of its own since its formation in 1892, the swift advance of the enemy in 1914 forced the retreat of the "colony" and with it, the adornment of cricket in the port city. But it did not take long to return in the wake of albeit tentative peace on the continent. The Club was reformed under the title, "Antwerp British Cricket Club" around 1924 and played on the Beerschot Ground in Wilrijk. Thanks to a few scant records and the vivid testimony of some of Belgium's most distinguished cricketers, a somewhat scantily clad reconstruction of this period of the Club's history may be undertaken.

The Club provided several of the most prominent players of the era who made their mark both in the local fixtures against the handful of Belgian clubs active at the time and in regular international matches against Holland and France. Indeed, on more than one occasion does the name of Bridges (and the impressive totals he was like to amass) litter the entries of a rare scorebook recovered from 1928. According to W.A. (Bill) Skinner (d. 1988) of Brussels CC, Bridges used to play for Hampshire in the UK before setting up business in Antwerp. He was an outstanding player for Antwerp with both bat and ball and captained the Belgian international side right up until the outbreak of the war.

Under the auspices of La Fédération Belge de Cricket, international cricket was played on a regular home and away basis against France and Holland. John Kirsch (d. 1987) also of Brussels CC recalled playing for Belgium under Bridges in 1939 against Holland. The Dutch required just 3 runs for victory with as many wickets in hand. *"He [Bridges] was bowling at one end and I [Kirsch], at the other. Over after over was bowled, with no runs coming but with, occasionally, the odd wicket falling until, finally, we won with one run to spare."*

Together with players from both Brussels British CC and Lever Bros. CC, Bridges shared his place on the Belgian side with three other prominent Antwerp members in Dauncey and two Watsons (unrelated). Harry Watson, perhaps the more flamboyant of the latter two, was a sound batsman and a very useful medium pace bowler. He was by his own admission a 'self-taught' cricketer, who is reputed to have been accustomed to practicing his strokes in front of a mirror. During his time at Antwerp he amassed 1145 runs and 161 wickets. Some rare insights can be gleaned from a letter written to Jim Tarlton in 1976 (when Harry was 89). In this letter, Watson points out that his off spin tactics were always to attack the stumps, rather than to bowl for catches. This fact is made no clearer than by his figures in a match against a scratch side of a local tennis club in which he took 14 for 35 after Antwerp had enforced the follow-on. 13 of his wickets on that occasion were bowled. (The fixture also saw Watson score 103\* with the bat in Antwerp's first and only innings.)

Somewhat more telling is Watson's own description of the critical part he played in a match against Holland in July 1927:

*"In this match the Hollanders were 130 for 1 [in reply to Belgium's first innings total of 195 – ed.]. Jansen, their best bat, was on 99. Bridges threw me the ball and I decided to use the off break, for the first time. My first ball pitched outside the off stump, had too much spin, and missed the leg stump. Jansen, thinking that it was the pitch, went forward to pat down what he thought was a bump in it. My next ball was even wider on the off; he played forward and Bridges caught him, off a simple catch. I could see*

*that he was mystified, but he did not get his century."*

These two pre-eminent Antwerp players dominated both domestic and international cricket in Belgium throughout the pre-war period. But by far the most striking phenomenon of the intervening years, at least insofar as concerns cricket in Antwerp, were the activities of the Antwerp Amateur Cricket Club. Founded and run by a gentleman by the name of Anthoon (after the heroic giant-slayer of the ancient town), the Amateurs consisted entirely of Belgians who had been commissioned in the UK during World War I. There they presumably developed both a keen interest in cricket and a capable technique to boot as their enthusiasm and aptitude for the game was widely applauded back home in the early 1930's. Unfortunately, as Bill Skinner recalls, *"They were always fighting a losing battle for, as players packed up, there were no replacements. They were a sporty crowd and everyone was sorry when they finally disbanded about 1934."* It is somewhat heartening to note that the war's influence on Belgian cricket was, in producing this anomaly, not entirely negative. Though few at the time would have thought the same had they anticipated what lay just around the corner.

That cricket was played right up to the outbreak of World War II, however, is evidenced by John Kirsch's testimony, reminiscent of Drake and his famous game of bowls in 1588 and indeed a fitting conclusion to this historical collage: *"I remember well playing Antwerp, on the day that Neville Chamberlain declared war on Germany, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939. We all listened grimly to the broadcast and then played our match."* – J.D.M.

(Many thanks to Eric Robinson of Royal Brussels CC whose excellent publication, *178 Not Out. A history of cricket in Belgium and in Brussels in particular. 1815 – 1993*. Vol. I 1815-1965. Waterloo: Eric Robinson, 1994, has provided many of the facts, figures and anecdotes out of which the above has been constructed.)

