



Giles Wilcock

# Forgotten Pioneers

The Story of the Original  
English Lady Cricketers

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## The Ambitions of Mr Michell

BY THE time the Original English Lady Cricketers played at Burnley in July 1890, the concept of women who played cricket by day and performed in theatres by night had become firmly established. It was radical and scandalous – but undoubtedly successful. How did the idea emerge? Where should we begin our story?

Perhaps the best starting point is one London street. Most of the early advertising for the concept that evolved into the OELC named the organisation's manager as Mr E. Michel of 13 Chesterfield Grove in East Dulwich. That particular house had been vacant at the time of the 1881 census and was empty again in 1891. But in the meantime, Chesterfield Grove was the location of some unusual business enterprises. Advertising sections of newspapers allow us to build up an interesting picture. For example, the unnamed occupant of 17 Chesterfield Grove offered the rental of an unspecified house for £24 per annum during September 1887. In June 1888, a man calling himself Edward Ludwig at the same address claimed to be the manager of 'Snell's Australian Giants', an Australian family which toured England several times to 'exhibit' their oversized children. This latter case is curious, because a few weeks earlier other advertising had listed number 17 as the address of an auctioneer called Edward P. Michel (or Michell).

A few doors along, another resident of Chesterfield Grove also placed regular adverts in newspapers across the country. 'Mr Sanders' at number 23 ran a 'matrimonial introduction agency' which invited respectable men and women to apply for a list of suitable people for 'introduction'. This agency operated from around 1884 until at least 1891, but the adverts peaked between 1888 and 1890.

The common denominator of these two addresses was a pair of siblings. 'Mr Sanders' at number 23 was in reality Joseph Sanders Michell, a 'Confidential Enquiry Investigator' who lived with his wife and children at that address at the time of the 1891 census, when he was 39. His younger brother – who lived at number 17 before moving to number 13, and who probably used the pseudonym Edward Ludwig – was called Edward Parsons Michell.

The two men were the only children of Henry Michell and Mary Parsons. Their parents originated from Cornwall; when Joseph was born in 1852, the family lived in Wapping but had moved to St George-in-the-East, part of Tower Hamlets, by the time of Edward's birth in 1859. The 1861 census records Henry as a licensed victualler who ran the Royal Crown public house on St George Street; several live-in servants helped him run the establishment.

Edward's early life was unremarkable; when the 1871 census was taken, he was listed, under the name Parsons Michell, as a boarder at High Field Lodge School in Winchmore Hill, Enfield. Our next glimpse comes in 1881, four years after the death of his father, when he was lodging with a family in St George Hanover Square, working as a 'General Architect and Surveyor'. Later that year, he married Clara Caroline Fowler – giving his occupation on their marriage certificate as an auctioneer – and 12

months later they had their only child, Henry. Given that Edward Michell gave two different occupations on official documents in 1881, it is hard to be certain how he earned a living, but those newspaper adverts in the 1880s support the idea that auctions were his main livelihood.

There is, however, one other possible appearance of our man in newspapers. In 1885, an actor was charged at Marlborough Street Police Court with ‘feloniously obtaining seventeen dresses, valued at £14, belonging to Mr Nathan, costumier, of Castle Street’. His name was given as Edward Michel. He persuaded the magistrates that he had not intended to steal and arranged to pay back the amount. Could this be our Michell? Possibly, but we can’t be sure.

Although we might be light on detail about Edward Michell – aside from an impression that both he and his brother might generously be described as entrepreneurs – he was happy to fill in some of the gaps while promoting the OELC. As interest in the team grew, many newspapers printed an interview with its manager. The origin of this piece need not concern us yet, but in giving the interview, Michell invented a whole fictional background and lost a letter from his surname.

The feature described ‘Mr Michel’ – ‘the man whose fertile brain first evolved this quite new departure in the natural game’ – as a ‘dark-complexioned, good-looking, knowing sort of gentleman of about forty years of age’. He claimed to have French parents, to have been raised in America, and never to have played cricket: ‘If I had been a cricketer, I never should have thought of such a thing as a lady team like the one now on tour. A cricketer would have had no confidence in the idea of girls coming to any degree of proficiency in the game.’

Maybe, like his brother's adoption of the pseudonym 'Mr Sanders' for his dubious matrimonial agency – and perhaps his own use of the name Edward Ludwig if he was the manager of the 'Australian Giants' – a new role required a new identity. But something very peculiar indeed was going on here, far more than the slight alteration to how he spelled his name. Why would he claim to be French? It seems an oddly specific deception, but there is a remarkable parallel at the heart of it; perhaps too remarkable to be accidental.

Living in London at this time was a railway manager called Louis Edouard Michel (usually known as Edouard/Edward Michel), born in France around 1839, who had moved to England in the 1880s. The 1891 census records him living with his wife Grace, whom he had married in 1886, his six-year-old son George Edward and two servants at 4 St John's Wood Park, his residence from around 1885 until his death in 1896. Despite the similarities with the story given by 'Mr E. Michel', Louis Edouard had no apparent connection with the OELC, and his job would have left little time to run a cricket team. Furthermore, a photograph printed in the *Railway News* at the time of his death shows a man bearing no resemblance to the OELC manager, who was pictured in several publicity photographs in 1890 and 1891. And the only legal document to survive concerning the OELC is signed by Edward Parsons Michell of 13 Chesterfield Grove, making it certain that he was the manager, not Louis Edouard.

But if this was not a coincidence, what possible reason could Edward Parsons have for stealing the identity of Louis Edouard? He would clearly not have sounded French, something which he presumably explained away through

being ‘raised in America’. Nothing obviously linked the railway manager with Michell, nor anyone else associated with the OELC. The only gossamer-thin connection is that William Dennison, who lived at 15 Chesterfield Grove in 1891, was a railway porter. Perhaps the background of the Frenchman just seemed suitably exotic to Edward Parsons Michell.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Louis Edouard’s name brought some kind of cachet as he was several rungs up the social ladder. But we simply do not know.

\* \* \*

Our second major character is a solicitor called Walter Henry Bosanquet. He was born in Bloomsbury, Middlesex in 1839 and came from a distinguished family. His uncle, James Whatman Bosanquet, was a renowned biblical scholar (and more prosaically, a banker); his distant cousin was the philosopher Bernard Bosanquet; and over ten years after the heyday of the OELC, his first-cousin-once-removed Bernard James Tindall Bosanquet invented the googly and played Test cricket for England. Walter Bosanquet had been married since 1866 and by the time he enters our story, he had four children. The family lived a comfortable life in Bromley, Kent, alongside several servants.

Bosanquet had built up a reputation – doubtless through his family connections – as an expert on banking. His wealth and expertise had enabled him to invest money in several projects, charitable and otherwise. And he was also a cricket lover: as an amateur club cricketer, he had

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1 There may even have been an earlier attempt by Edward Parsons Michell to link with Louis Edouard Michel. If Edward Parsons was indeed the Edward Ludwig who was the manager of ‘Snell’s Australian Giants’, it might not be coincidental that Ludwig is the German form of the French name Louis.



played for Richmond in the 1860s and was still playing for Bromley in the 1890s. By the time that the OELC came into existence, he had offices at 11 Queen Victoria Street in central London, a prestigious address. He was hardly the type of man to frequent Chesterfield Grove or avail himself of Mr Sanders' matrimonial introduction agency.

Yet somehow, in the autumn of 1889, Bosanquet and Michell between them created the idea that evolved over the following months into the first professional women's cricket team in the world. By late 1889, advertising had begun to appear in newspapers and early in 1890 the organisation that came to be called the Original English Lady Cricketers was attracting a lot of attention. How did the rich solicitor and the ambitious surveyor/auctioneer come together in such an unusual venture?

While at first glance there was little to connect them, the most likely explanation is that Michell either worked for or was closely connected to Bosanquet's firm of solicitors. Maybe he surveyed or auctioned buildings with which they were involved in some legal capacity. And between them, these two men developed the idea that became the OELC, probably around autumn 1889.

\* \* \*

We can just about trace the genesis of their scheme. The most crucial piece of evidence is the surviving paperwork that brought into existence the company that ran the whole operation.

On 26 October 1889, a Memorandum of Association was filed at Companies House under the Companies Act of 1862 to incorporate a new company which was to be limited by shares – the English Cricket and Athletic Association

Limited (ECAA). In simple terms, this created a company which had a separate legal identity to the shareholders who owned it; a loophole through which the creators of any company had to jump.

More importantly for our purposes, it listed the shareholders – how much money they had put into the newly formed company, their occupation and their address. The capital of the new company was stated to be £1,000, divided into 1,000 shares of £1. The original plan, 20 shares of £50, has been crossed out on the document. The majority shareholder and managing director was Walter H. Bosanquet, who had 843 shares; all the paperwork had been drawn up by his company, Mullens and Bosanquet of 11 Queen Victoria Street. The other major shareholders were a merchant called Alfred L. Shaw, who held 100 shares, and Henry Frith – listed on the documents as a ‘gentleman’ but better known as a writer of boys’ stories and the translator of the works of Jules Verne into English – who had fifty shares. Clearly, under the initial plan Bosanquet would have held seventeen of the £50 shares, Shaw two and Frith one. But for whatever reason, Bosanquet wished – presumably after the initial Memorandum of Association had been drawn up – to involve more people and therefore opted to split the shares up to be worth £1 each.

The other seven shareholders were men with far more humble backgrounds, each possessing one single – and probably merely symbolic – £1 share. Their identities do not tell us much. There were four clerks, a solicitor’s clerk and an accountant; it is not unreasonable to guess that all were employed by Bosanquet and received their share for working in some capacity with the ECAA. But the

most notable shareholder was Edward Michell, listed as a surveyor. Nothing distinguishes him on the paperwork; he is not even listed first after the majority shareholders. When he signed the Memorandum of Association in October 1889, his address was 13 Chesterfield Grove, but on a list of shareholders dated November 1890, he was living at 28 Shirlock Road. It is only the existence of these lists which enables us to identify 'Mr E. Michel' as Edward Parsons Michell.

What we don't know is the story behind these documents. Whose idea was it? The interviews given in 1890 by 'Mr Michel' plainly set out that he was the initiator of the scheme, and later advertising described him as the 'sole originator and business manager'. Bosanquet's only public comments on the issue appeared in a letter to the *Bromley and District Times* in May 1890, in which he claimed that his involvement was for 'the promotion of cricket and other athletic exercises among women'; while he admitted being the director of the company behind the OELC, he stated that 'Mr E. Michel' was the source of the 'whole scheme'. Yet if the idea was Michell's, surely he would have been marked as more important than the lowly clerks on the Memorandum of Association. If he was to be manager, why was this not listed as his occupation? If he was so central, why did he not hold more than one share?

But there is a linked, and perhaps more important, question. When Bosanquet and Michel conceived of the scheme in the autumn of 1889, what was their initial plan? What was their vision of what the ECAA would do? The Memorandum of Association does not help, even though it set out the aims of the ECAA. The most important was

the first: 'To advance and promote the exercise, pursuit and development in the United Kingdom or elsewhere of all or any of the following games, sports and pastimes.' There followed an exhaustive list of sports, headed by cricket, football and lawn tennis but also including bicycling, musical drill and dancing. For anything left out, there was a catch-all 'or any other game, sport or pastime of an athletic nature or similar in kind or character or analogous to any of those above mentioned.' The other aims in the memorandum were mainly practical ones: purchasing property or equipment; lending, borrowing or investing money; the awarding of prizes or payments to 'promote the objects of the company'; and various other legal necessities which need not concern us here.

Nowhere in more than two pages of aims, provisions and legal language was any mention of women or women's sport. Just the promotion of games, sports and pastimes.

What, then, was the ECAA planning? One answer appeared even before the paperwork had been filed. In early October 1889, an advertisement appeared in theatrical publications such as *The Stage* and *The Era* for 'The Original English Female Athletic Troupe', offering 'complete entertainment for parks, cricket grounds, fetes, or large halls.' This advert was opaque – probably deliberately so – in giving little indication what might be involved except that it would be provided by 30 women and would be 'highly attractive, and refined picturesque entertainment'. It also mentioned 'Roman sports and old English games' – which probably left the reader baffled – and promised that the troupe would be 'splendidly equipped'. They were available for booking from Easter 1890, and enquiries were directed to their manager: E. Michel of 13 Chesterfield Grove.

It is almost as if the aims of the ECAA and the aims of this Original English Female Athletic Troupe were completely different; all that apparently linked them was the occupant of 13 Chesterfield Grove. Only with his interview from May 1890 did Bosanquet suggest that the aim all along had been to promote women's cricket; neither his company's Memorandum of Association nor the early advertising made any such claim.

We do not know how successful this initial advertising campaign was, although it made no impression on the press, nor do we know if the Athletic Troupe even existed beyond the 'fertile brain' of Mr Michel. But the next time the concept was tentatively aired in public, it had been refined. And this time, there was a considerable reaction.

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In January 1890, an advertisement appeared in the *Daily Telegraph*: 'Lawn Tennis: Lady Players Wanted for select exhibition matches. Training and costumes free. Small salary and all expenses. No premium. Applicants must be of good address and appearance, respectable, strong, active, not under 5ft 6in in height, over 22 years old. Long series – Address fully (letter only), etc. Parents and guardians invited to communicate.'

Initially, such a novel request was taken to be a joke, so a follow-up letter appeared underneath later versions of the advertisement, stating:

The vacancies occur in the above troupe (the Original English *Lady* Cricketers), the members of which will also study lawn-tennis, Swedish drill, etc, for the purposes of playing public

matches from Easter to October. Tennis tuition and match costumes free. Members find hose, gloves, etc. Salary 10s [shillings] per week during training or practice, and from £1 to 30s during the time of public matches. Travelling expenses paid the whole time.

There was to be six-and-a-half hours of practice each day, anyone under the age of 21 needed the 'consent of their parents or guardians', and 'references as to character, etc, are also required'.

It was this advertisement which lit the spark of publicity that burned throughout 1890. It came to the attention of a journalist, who penned a rather dismissive article which concluded: 'The managers of this extraordinary venture may possibly intend to add another to the many novelty shows on view in this country, but it is to be hoped that they will not succeed. It is not altogether pleasant to see feminine acrobats, but exhibitions by professional female cricketers and lawn-tennis players will be positively painful.' And, as was common in the Victorian press, local newspapers took the article and reprinted it; the result was that the story rattled around the country for a couple of weeks.

Although that advertisement received a lot of attention, smaller ones passed unnoticed, such as those in *The Era* during January which wanted 'managers of recreation grounds, winter gardens, cricket grounds, and other large places of amusement to know that the Original English Lady Athletes' still had 'seven weeks vacant during the ensuing summer seasons'. They offered: 'Cycling, Sports, Athletics, Drill, Fencing, Assault-at-Arms, &c' and were 'trained by leading professors [professionals]'. 'Dressed, and

provided with Pictorial and other, Billing equalled only by Barnum and Bailey.' The terms offered either a fixed fee or a share of the profits. There was no mention of any cricket. Enquiries were directed, inevitably, to E. Michel at 13 Chesterfield Grove, or in some adverts at St George's Hall, a theatre in Wandsworth. In February a feature published in the *South Wales Echo*, which aimed to secure bookings for the 'English Cricket and Athletic Association', said that they were 'open to accept engagements for cricket, flat racing, Roman sports, &c'. Another advertisement in *The Era* in March listed a range of attractions provided by the group now known as the Original English Lady Cricketers: a 'complete day show', an 'assault-at-arms' by night, cricket, 'crooketta', cycling, fencing, boxing and Swedish drill.

Around the same time, another series of advertisements quietly appeared in *The Era*. No connection was made to the ECAA, nor any variant of the 'Original English Lady Cricketers', nor to cricket, nor even sport. The only link was a very familiar address. For example, a January advertisement requested second-hand 'stage dresses, hose &c, suitable for principal boy or girl's parts, complete; also lady gymnast's dress and girl's leotard'. Details and the 'lowest cash price' were to be sent to 'F. H.' at 13 Chesterfield Grove. Also that month, a request appeared for a 'lady, used to bicycle troupe; also girl knowing something of trapeze work and flying rings. State experience and lowest terms for two months engagement.' Again, details were to be sent to 'F. H.' at 13 Chesterfield Grove. In February, another advertisement appeared: 'Wanted, lady bicyclist, good for trick work. Six months' tour. No turn shows. State lowest terms, age, and photos.' Details were to be sent to 13 Chesterfield Grove, but this time to 'Wheeler' (presumably a pun).

The dizzying shifts of emphasis displayed in the advertising might betray confusion or disagreement behind the scenes. Two possible scenarios could have led to this point in early 1890. Maybe Bosanquet (and the other two major shareholders) conceived of the idea of an organisation to promote cricket (which was central to the name of the ECAA and was first in the list of sports outlined in the Memorandum of Association), and appointed Edward Michell as manager because they had previously worked together. In this scenario Michell decided to make it an organisation to promote *women's* sport and drove the subsequent direction into the confusingly wide range of activities promoted between October 1889 and February 1890. Another possibility is that Michell was the driving force all along: he thought of the idea and approached Bosanquet to bankroll it; Bosanquet and the others saw potential in the idea and became involved hoping to make some money.

In either case the advertising in late 1889 and 1890 reflected Michell's original conception before his troupe transmuted into a cricket team. The spectacle being promoted was only loosely tied to the world of late-Victorian sport. The adverts were suggesting a different world, an implication that would have been grasped by anyone who read them: the world of athletic and cycling displays; the world of 'Barnum and Bailey'; the world of gymnasts wearing leotards. In other words, the world inhabited by readers of *The Era*: the stage, theatre and music hall.

Music hall was at this time approaching the height of its popularity in Victorian Britain; for example, the number of music halls in London had trebled since the 1860s, and the venues had made considerable efforts to become more



‘respectable’. Audiences flocked to see performers in halls around the country; acts included song, dance, acrobatics, magicians and comedy. Also popular was burlesque, in which the stars – wearing revealing outfits by the standards of the times – parodied highbrow entertainment or mocked the upper classes. Many of the biggest stars were women. Even if male audiences may have been lured in by skimpy costumes, and the beauty of performers was probably of more interest than their talents, music hall was an opportunity for women to succeed on their own terms.

Just a hint of this world can be seen in the advertisements section of *The Era*. There were requests from all over Britain – not just London but places such as Bolton or Morley – for pianists, violinists and other musicians; vocalists; dancers; acrobats; clowns; horse riders; actors; illusionists; trapeze artists; puppeteers. And these come from just one page of one issue. Another impressive demonstration of the variety of acts available was seen in late 1889 at a tribute to the trick cyclist George Gorin, who had been killed earlier that year. An extremely well-attended tribute at the Canterbury Music Hall in London involved over a hundred acts including Gorin’s own cycling troupe, a ventriloquist and ‘Captain Pike and his performing fish’. Women played a sizeable role in proceedings; Miss Vesta Victoria and the ‘Sisters Bushling’ appeared, Miss Nelly Moore performed a sketch from *The Burglar* and Miss Jenny Hill gave a recital ‘with considerable feeling’ of a tribute written by Fred Bowyer.

Such a world would have held little attraction for Bosanquet and was more likely to have appealed to Michell, a man who may have worked briefly as an actor and who probably managed the ‘Australian Giants’ as they toured venues in 1888. The only difference between the early vision

of those advertisements and the usual spectacle of music hall was the emphasis on athletic pursuits and the hint that events would take place outside. Perhaps the originator of the idea hoped that this would be sufficiently different to stand out in a crowded market. The unique twist: recruit women with the skills to put on a theatrical performance and train them in various disciplines such as cricket, tennis and athletics to provide a sporting exhibition as well. If this might seem unlikely to a modern audience, the 1890s were a different world. And this vision of breaking into music hall became a reality with the frequent evening appearances of the OELC in theatres, where the women not only performed, but were supported by other theatrical stars.

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If music hall had been the plan, something clearly changed in March 1890. The nebulous proposals were replaced in the advertising with something more concrete. Stories appeared in the press with an emphasis on cricket. Several reported pieces of information, such as the names of coaches and the location of practices, were accurate enough to detect the hand of a publicist pushing information at willing journalists. One of these, reprinted in several newspapers, revealed that the parent organisation of the women's team, the English Cricket and Athletic Association, had been registered the previous October for 'the purpose of instructing ladies in "cricket's manly toil"'. This can only have come from someone with knowledge of the ECAA.

In March 1890 more details emerged in a lengthy advertisement printed in *The Era* to publicise 'The Original English Lady Cricketers', which it assured readers was a registered trade mark. They would provide

‘sport, not clowning’ at venues throughout the summer. Various products would be on sale at these exhibitions, including photographs. and after a ‘complete day show’ there was to be an ‘assault-at-arms’ by nights. The sporting demonstrations were to include ‘cricket, crooketta, bicycling, fencing, boxing and drill’; readers were assured that the women were ‘Refined Lady Athletes, not Burlesque Masqueraders.’

In another vertiginous shift, the ECAA had gone from promoting a show ‘equalled only by Barnum and Bailey’ – in other words a circus – to promising ‘sport, not clowning’ and ‘athletes, not burlesque masqueraders’. From this point, cricket became the priority, possibly because the idea of women cricketers had received most attention in newspapers. But it may also be connected to the syndicate behind the ECAA. Perhaps the shareholders were uncomfortable with the drift towards music hall. Here, the words of Bosanquet to the *Bromley and District Times* in May might be important: ‘I insisted, at the outset, on two most important stipulations, as conditions of my co-operation, viz, that there should be, throughout, perfect respectability, and that the cricket should be as real and good as it could be made.’ It may also be relevant that around March, the correspondence address of the manager of the OELC listed in the advertising materials switched to Bosanquet’s offices at 11 Queen Victoria Street.

The likeliest explanation is that Bosanquet – the man holding the purse strings – had reined in some of the wilder elements and insisted on ‘perfect respectability’. The change around March might reflect Bosanquet taking more control. Even so, he was reluctant to claim any credit, as reflected in the interview he gave in May

and the frequent public assurances that the idea had come from Michell. But there is reason to suspect that Bosanquet was far more involved than he wanted to admit: he funded the operation, umpired several games, took a paternal interest in the women and – most importantly – his was the only name on a set of rules issued to the players. Was Michell merely his employee? A man to be the public face of an entertainment spectacle which was beneath Bosanquet's immense respectability? Probably not, but it is unfortunately not possible to pin down the precise nature of the relationship between Bosanquet and Michell, nor how much control each man had.

Whatever the balance of responsibility, what made Bosanquet and Michell decide that women's cricket would be the vehicle for their ambitions? What was their inspiration (apart from Bosanquet's love of the game)?

One possibility was an idea from half a century beforehand. In the 1840s and 1850s, teams of male professional cricketers toured England playing matches against local teams. This idea, begun by William Clarke with his 'All-England Eleven', has been credited with increasing the popularity of cricket in England and introducing it to areas where it had rarely been played. Maybe that is what Bosanquet envisaged: a pioneering tour which spread the gospel of women's cricket, just as Clarke had done for men. He certainly gave that impression in his letter to the *Bromley Times*, in which he suggested that the OELC were 'the first serious attempt to promote the game of cricket amongst the members of the weaker sex'. He observed that 'there is a great deal of ladies' cricket in this country', against which there were 'great prejudices' to be overcome, 'more especially in the southern counties'.

Through their cricket, he hoped that his OELC would 'convert' these opponents.

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Bosanquet's summary of the state of women's cricket in England in 1890 was fair but not quite the whole picture. Women's sport in general was emerging from a dark period during which it had been actively discouraged. In pre-Victorian times, it was quite common for women to play cricket, even with elements of pseudo-professionalism; several matches between 1790 and 1835 were played for prize money or involved collections for successful players. However, the lack of leisure time for most women following the Industrial Revolution meant that access to the game became restricted to the upper classes.

By the late 1830s women's cricket had effectively fizzled out, and Victorian moralists suppressed any possibility of a revival. A widely accepted argument was that strenuous physical activity such as that involved in cricket and other sports could harm women – a notion which found echoes in some press reactions to the OELC – or in some way 'defeminise' them. The stereotypical Victorian view of women as weak, vulnerable and overly emotional convinced those with the power to make decisions that female sport should not be allowed. In cricket, women were reduced to mythical supporting roles: the legend that overarm bowling was invented by Christine Willes, who found the prevailing underarm style impossible owing to the width of her skirt; or the idea that Martha Grace coached her son William Gilbert Grace into the great cricketer that he became.

For most of the Victorian period, cricket was something that women watched, not played. The first glimmer of

progress came in schools. Education available to girls was rooted in the notion that a woman's place was at home; therefore, it bore no relation to the equivalent experience for boys, which had a heavy emphasis on sport. For many years, physical education played little part in girls' curricula because the men who drew them up believed women were too weak and fragile for such activities.

During the 1880s such orthodoxy began to be challenged as physical education and fitness began to assume greater importance in the minds of educators. The growing obsession in public schools with the cult of games, comradeship, fair play and a healthy body began to seep into girls' education and was adopted by female educationists. Despite the reservations of male commentators, several influential women – such as the Swiss-born Martina Bergman-Österberg, the Lawrence sisters who founded Roedean School, or Frances Dove at Wycombe Abbey School – won a reluctant acceptance that girls could take part in sport at school without lasting moral or physical harm, and might in fact benefit from it.

From there, the introduction of team games into girls' schools was the logical step, and cricket, having a particular association with moral decency, was an obvious choice. In contrast to boys' schools, any competitive element was discouraged, and there was that ever-present concern that cricket could be 'de-feminising'. Even so, the sport proved popular and there were occasional matches between girls' schools, although there remained an expectation that girls would stop playing once they left formal education. For example, W. G. Grace's only daughter Bessie was a good cricketer but he would not let her continue playing once her schooldays were over. However, a growing number of

women's cricket clubs formed in the 1880s, the most famous (but not the first) being the White Heather Club, which had 50 members by 1891. However, these clubs were generally the preserve of the upper classes, not ordinary people.

Not only cricket but women's sport in general grew in popularity towards the end of the 19th century. Lawn tennis, for example, became popular not least for the social opportunities of mixed doubles. However, men constantly – often mockingly – dismissed the notion that women could ever be good at sport, and eyebrows would have been raised at any participant taking matters too seriously. There was also a hierarchy of respectability: cricket, tennis and hockey were reasonably acceptable, but athletics was questionable among the upper and middle classes. As Richard Holt wrote in *Sport and the British*, his historical survey of British sport: 'Appearing scantily-clad in public in a sport which was cheap and therefore open to lower class participation was regarded as unsuitable for girls from "good homes".' Such an attitude might explain why Bosanquet – the epitome of the 'good home' – would have had reservations about some of the plans advertised for 'Original English Lady Athletes' and why the focus switched to the far more acceptable sport of cricket.

But Bosanquet had one major reservation – expressed in his letter to the *Bromley Times* – about contemporary women's cricket. The most common and popular games involved female cricketers playing against teams of men who batted, bowled and fielded left-handed to even up the contest. Bosanquet noted that this led to matches which were 'from a cricket point of view, very melancholy functions indeed'. Instead, Bosanquet seemed to want genuine competitive cricket for women; as such, he held a

view which most men of his class would have vehemently opposed.

Perhaps more importantly though, he wanted to create a good spectacle because the revolutionary part of the scheme was that spectators would pay to watch the games. For female players, this was unprecedented; there had never been genuine professional women cricketers, even in pre-Victorian times. Professionalism was anathema to the male cricketing and sporting establishment, and to amateur club cricketers like Bosanquet. For him to embrace it was remarkable, although his radicalism was quite likely motivated by the desire to make a profit from the spectacle.

Therefore, his wish expressed to the *Bromley Times* that the cricket played by the women should be ‘as real and good as it could be made’ was not as altruistic as it might first appear. His anticipation of criticism – which would not be disappointed – betrayed the simple fact that the largely male consumers of booming spectator sports such as football and cricket viewed the women’s version of these games as inauthentic. If the OELC were to be commercially viable and attract crowds, the cricket had to be of a standard good enough to persuade people it was worth seeing. Nothing like that had ever been attempted. Therefore, Bosanquet engaged professional coaching and Michell arranged for extended practices to produce the desired authenticity. In his own words, the entrepreneurial solicitor spared ‘no pains or expense’.

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Bosanquet’s use of the word ‘real’ is slightly double-edged because there had been attempts in this period to produce cricket as ‘entertainment’ rather than sport. Some theatres



had worked with cricket clubs in the 19th century to provide 'gala benefits' for professionals and in the late 1880s there was at least one team of 'lady cricketers', comprising theatrical stars such as Vane Featherstone and Maude Millett, which played against male artists and journalists.

But the most notorious example of cricketing entertainment was the bizarre and little-discussed late-19th-century phenomenon of 'clown cricket'. Although good cricketers played for the teams of clown cricketers – including the county players Tom Emmett, Edmund Peate and Walter Gilbert, who appeared under pseudonyms – the games were intended to provide farcical amusement. Batting and bowling were taken relatively seriously, although there were sometimes trick bats that allowed balls to pass through; it was only in fielding and during breaks in play that the 'clown' aspect predominated, for example through the performance of acrobatics and comedy routines. But in a foreshadowing of what would happen with the OELC, visits of touring clown cricket teams were highly anticipated in many places; and like the OELC, the players often featured in local theatres in the evenings.

Clown cricketers continued to operate into the 1890s, as did clown footballers; however, the number of teams declined over the years from their height in the 1870s. Such enterprises were unsuccessful and faded when it transpired that crowds wanted to see genuine cricket. The echoes with the OELC are numerous enough to suggest that someone was familiar with the old format but it clearly did not appeal to Bosanquet, whose commercial instincts might have warned him that the cricket of his OELC needed to be high quality to attract audiences and avoid the fate of clown cricket. And he was doubtless aware that many

people would have placed women's cricket on the same level as 'clown cricket'.

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Bosanquet's vision was some considerable way from the spectacle being offered in the early advertising for the OELC, making it likely that the final format was driven by his twin desires for 'perfect respectability, and that the cricket should be as real and good as it could be made'. Michell's music hall aspirations survived but were subordinate to the sport; a considerable reverse from what originally might have been planned.

So much for where – or from whom – the idea of the OELC might have arisen. There is much that we do not know. But the team quickly took on a life of its own because the plan required players.

These must have been recruited over the course of several months around January 1890. Presumably most responded to the adverts in the press, and by the time the cricket season started the OELC had enough recruits to fill the two teams of Reds and Blues, as well as some reserves. And it was these players who brought the OELC to life. We know little about many of them, and we can only guess why most applied to become part of the strange troupe.

But we should begin with the story of one woman whose motivation was clear: she joined as the consequence of a shocking murder.