

A photograph of Arthur Gore, an elderly man with a mustache, dressed in white tennis attire. He is captured in a dynamic pose on a green tennis court, holding a tennis racket. The background is a blurred crowd of spectators in a stadium.

# NEVER SAY DIE

**ARTHUR  
'BABY' GORE**

The Oldest  
Wimbledon  
Champion

Derek  
Sculthorpe

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## Chapter One

# 'Baby' Gore at Dinard

*'Of slight physique, he is extremely quick in action, and has a wonderful wrist play which enables him to command his flight of the ball from the racquet with amazing skill.'*<sup>1</sup>

ARTHUR WILLIAM Charles Wentworth Gore was born on 2 January 1868 at The Orchard, in Lyndhurst, Hampshire into a distinguished family that had served for at least two generations in the military. He was the third son of Augustus Wentworth Gore, late of the 7th Hussars, and his wife Emily Ann (née Curzon). Augustus Gore was the son of Lieutenant, later Captain, Charles Arthur Gore of the 1st Life Guards, and the nephew of the Duchess of Argyle. Augustus had been born in France, and in 1855 when he was a Cornet (the modern-day equivalent of a Second Lieutenant) he was appointed Aide de Camp to the Earl of Carlisle. As a full Lieutenant, Augustus Gore served with the regiment in India in 1858 during the siege of Lucknow, and afterwards in the Rohilcunda campaign for which he was awarded a medal and was frequently mentioned in dispatches.<sup>2</sup>

Arthur's paternal grandmother was the novelist Mrs Catherine Grace Gore (née Moody). In her works, Mrs Gore (1798–1861) depicted the fashionable social life and character of the Regency and Georgian eras from intimate knowledge of many of its leading players. She was prolific; she wrote over 70 works consisting of more

than 200 volumes, including 11 plays. Among her novels were *Theresa Marchmont or the Maid of Honour*, *Mothers and Daughters* and *Cecil, The Story of a Coxcomb*. She wrote under several noms de plume and was the leading light of what became known as the 'silver fork' literary school. Much lauded in her day, her novel *Women as They Are* was a great favourite of George IV. *The Times* once said of her, 'Some future Macauley will turn to her pages for a perfect picture of life as we find it in the upper classes of society.' Her father Charles Moody was a wine merchant at East Retford in Nottinghamshire, although she never knew him because he died when she was young, after which her mother married a wealthy physician and moved to London. Unusually for those days, Catherine had been well and expensively educated by governesses and private tutors.<sup>3</sup> In February 1823 she married Captain Charles Arthur Gore (c.1795–1846) of the 1st Life Guards, at St George, Hanover Square. On his marriage, Charles sold his commission and left the service. The couple had ten children, of whom eight died in infancy. They lived for some years on the continent, where Catherine looked after her then ailing husband. It was largely her prodigious literary efforts that supported the family.<sup>4</sup> This despite the fact that she was swindled out of her rightful inheritance of £20,000 by her former guardian Sir John Dean Paul, who was later convicted and imprisoned. It was a case of life imitating art because her novel *The Banker's Wife* was all about a fraudulent banker.

Charles died in 1846 and Mrs Gore was blind in her later years after which she became far more reclusive. At the time her loss of sight was partly attributed to extreme anxiety over her only son Augustus serving in India during the Mutiny. On her death in January 1861, she left a considerable fortune, having inherited a property from a relative on her mother's side. As well as personal property valued at £14,000, she owned an estate called The Lodge in Halifax, Nova Scotia of some 12,000 acres, along with 400 shares in the Dublin & Belfast Railway worth £17,000 (a combined value today approaching £3.8m). She was concerned about her posthumous literary reputation,

and left instructions to her son Augustus in her will that 'he is to prevent, as much as in his power lies, any posthumous notice, or biography, or re-publication of my works, and I wish him to look over and burn any of my papers, giving to his sister any object as a memorial of her mother'.<sup>5</sup>

Arthur's mother Emily was a younger daughter of Hon. Edward Curzon, of Scarsdale House, Kensington, a qualified barrister who was at that time the Registrar of Designs. Edward could trace his ancestry in the male line back to Geraline de Curzon, feudal Lord of Locking, Berkshire, at the time of the Domesday Book, who was reputedly a Breton. Indeed, the Curzons played a central role in the life of the nation over many generations as public figures and administrators.

As befitted their status, Augustus Gore and Emily Curzon married in a big society wedding at St Mary Abbots, Kensington, on 19 September 1861, which attracted much of the landed gentry. This was in the 17th-century church before it was rebuilt a few years later. It was a jolly occasion that drew an appreciative gathering outside as the cadets of the South Middlesex Volunteer Rifle Corps, all wearing their colourful rosettes, sang 'Haste to the Wedding' while the Queen Elizabeth's Band from Southwark played. The service was conducted by the bride's uncle, Hon. and Rev. Frederick Curzon. After the service the happy couple were heartily cheered as they made their way to Castle Goring near Worthing before leaving for their honeymoon on the continent.<sup>6</sup> They settled in the pleasant town of Lyndhurst, the administrative capital of the New Forest and the meeting place of the ancient forest courts held at the Verderers' Hall. The Gores were active locally in Hampshire and intimately involved in the social life of the area. They were particularly associated with the New Forest Hunt. An army friend recalled that Augustus once hunted the fallow deer with the deer hounds for a brief period.<sup>7</sup> The month following Arthur's birth, they attended a lavish ball and supper at the Crown Hotel in Lyndhurst, given by the New Forest Hunt. Augustus decorated the room appropriately for the occasion,

and all the prominent families were present. The local society correspondent noted, ‘Targett’s band played in the usual brilliant manner, and dancing was kept up with great spirit until five o’clock in the morning.’<sup>8</sup> Arthur had two elder brothers, Charles (b.1862) and Frederick (b.1865), and a younger brother Francis, 11 years his junior. There was one sister, Catherine, who died of scarlet fever at the age of six in Winchester just before Christmas 1870.<sup>9</sup>

By around 1875 the family moved to France, at which time Arthur was seven, and the move proved serendipitous for his future path. It was there that he was chiefly educated and spent his formative years.<sup>10</sup> Naturally he was fluent in French, but did not appear to have much interest in academic pursuits. The family were resident in Brittany in the Ille-et-Villaine Department of the coastal resort of Dinard, home to several English families. Before it became too fashionable, it was remembered by one of its votaries as a place of easy charms, with its horseshoe bay for ‘bathing parties, shrimping ones, excursions to the oyster beds at Cancal, and nightly dances at the quiet little casino’. The same writer recalled how ‘in the early days there was no dressing up, no show, no unnecessary expense. Everyone knew everyone. The young people could run loose from infancy to twenty.’<sup>11</sup> ‘Baby’ Gore had an idyllic childhood during which the boys were left to their own devices. All kinds of games were encouraged among his siblings, including cricket and, happily for him, the new invention of lawn tennis, which was then the latest thing and all the rage. He took up the game with gusto when he was around nine. As he recalled, ‘This was on the magnificent sands at Dinard, which a receding tide left sufficiently hard to enable us – I am speaking of the years 1877-8 – to mark out a court with a stick. Then I and my brothers began smacking the ball about with one or two other small boys the year the first Wimbledon Single Championship was won by my namesake Spencer Gore.’<sup>12</sup> Being the younger brother, he tried that much harder to compete and his lack of height made him even more determined to prove himself. The game soon became popular among the children of the resort, especially so with the brothers Gore. Despite the seeming

unsuitability of the sand for the game, the surface proved good, and the bounce was surprisingly true. The success of tennis in season led to the construction of two permanent courts which later became six, and the establishment of several competitions, including some for children. He admitted that he received no formal tennis instruction worth the mention, there being few if any coaches at a time when the game had not been going long, and so he learned by playing.

The Dinard Tennis Club was first established in 1879 and is still extant, the oldest club in the country. The permanent courts were composed of talc sand, a fine gravel, and were known as being fast and true. At the time he was first playing, the exact rules of the game were still in flux to an extent, and were not formalised officially until the third year of the Wimbledon Championship, when the court dimensions and height of the net were agreed upon. Originally, the court was an hourglass shape, tapering at the net, and the net itself stood at five feet high. The All England Club decided instead on the rectangular shape known today, and after a few years the net was reduced first to 4ft 9in at the posts, then 4ft and finally by 1883 to 3ft 6in and 3ft in the centre, and these measurements have been in operation ever since.

Lawn tennis was a derivation of 'real tennis', as it later became known, which had a long history and traced its origins in the higher echelons of society across Europe in the 15th century, hence its original moniker of Royal Tennis. It was famously encouraged by Henry VII who had a court especially constructed at Hampton Court. The scoring system was similar to that adopted by the later game; only the first player to six won the set without the need for a two-game advantage. Another branch of origin was from the game fives, in which a ball was propelled against a wall in a three- or four-sided court by the gloved hand. Rackets developed from that, which, as the name suggests, used a racket instead of the hand. Curiously, for a game said to have first developed at the Fleet debtors' prison, it was readily taken up by public schools and universities. Rackets was essentially a forerunner of squash. The new variation of lawn tennis



had originated in England, the brainchild of Major Walter Clopton Wingfield and was based on a game he played in Leamington Spa with Augurio Perera, a Spanish-born merchant and sportsman. The game was boxed up and marketed as Sphairistikos. The novelty was that it could be set up on any lawn of a suitable size, in what was the heyday of the English lawn and all it stood for. The Englishman's obsession with, if not veneration for, his lawn has long been remarked upon, and it was surely fitting that the country nurtured the game and moreover the inventor of the lawn mower. Tennis soon took off among the upper classes across the British Isles, and in a short time clubs and tournaments began to be established which codified the rules. British and Irish players dominated the scene in the first 30 years or so. The Renshaw brothers, William and Ernest, were the most proficient and consistent players of the time, and were instrumental in establishing permanent courts in France, in order to practise in the off-season, which in itself was a considerable advancement in a short time, and showed just how much serious interest the new game engendered. Consequently, the game found instant popularity in France, and its progression was so rapid that by the 1880s it was played by many nations across the globe.

Young Arthur soon advanced and his early exposure to the conditions at Dinard made him adept on the courts there; it was essentially his home patch. He soon mastered what became known as his trademark stroke, the swinging forehand drive on which his game was based – so much so that he won his first tournament in a mixed doubles handicap in 1880 at the age of 12. It was that win which earned him the nickname 'Baby', a name that stuck. There was always something of the eager boy about him. He retained that same boyish enthusiasm of the barefoot child lost in his love of the game when he first discovered it on the beach. His initial childhood enthusiasm never wavered and he retained his love of tennis to the end; that diminutive figure dancing about at the back of the court became a familiar sight to many an exasperated opponent over the years to come.

Arthur left school at 15, and was compelled to enter the real world of work. In 1884, soon after he turned 16, he returned to London and became an apprentice clerk for a wine merchant in the city, following in the footsteps of his elder brother Charles, and his great-grandfather Charles Moody. Neither he nor any of his brothers went to university. Arthur hardly abandoned his real love, however, and in his spare time he continued to play tennis whenever he could. He frequently entered tournaments in and around the capital. He also maintained his links to France and at 17 he won the silver cup in the main competition back on the familiar courts of Dinard. In a cup tie against a visiting team from Jersey in 1886, the Dinard team lost 3-6. Nevertheless, of the three matches in which Gore took part he won two: the men's doubles and the mixed doubles.<sup>13</sup>

Even at such a young age, Gore showed a surprising interest in the administration side of the game, and at 19 he joined the committee of the London Athletic Club (LAC) at Stamford Bridge, where his brother Frederick was already a member. As well as taking part in numerous matches at the club, Arthur also donated the cup awarded to the winner of the Ladies Singles. It was the first of many such trophies that he donated to various clubs during his playing career. Although he lost to William Gladstone Eames in the LAC final in 1887, he did not go down without a fight. As a reporter noted, 'Mr Gore played a remarkably resolute game, his returns especially being much admired.'<sup>14</sup> Arthur and Frederick took part in competitions there, both in singles and doubles. They were always competitive and in 1888 they played each other in the final of the handicap singles, at which time Fred ran out the winner.<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, all the brothers played the game. Fred continued to play up until the advent of the Great War. He regularly entered the annual tournament at Southend, and one year won alongside his brother Francis in doubles. Both shared Arthur's determined spirit, clearly a family trait.

Arthur's record on the grass and rubble courts at Stamford Bridge was a fair one. He faced many leading lights of the 80s, including Herbert Chipp and others, all of whom had great talent but who

never won Wimbledon. Chipp, with his black beard, looked every inch the Victorian gentleman; he was the player who once famously complained of finding clover growing on the Centre Court. He had a similar approach to Gore in that he too favoured baseline play. Of all these personalities, Gore recalled that '[E. W.] Lewis was probably one of the finest players ever seen – a keen, hard hitter, whether volleying or otherwise, with a perfect back-hand'.<sup>16</sup> Gore often reached the semi-finals, where he lost on several occasions to H. S. Barlow, a good player, and a one-time Wimbledon winner. Leading commentators of the day noticed his advance, and the American Valentine Hall remarked that Gore and other young players, including George Hillyard, had 'shown steady improvement' during the year.<sup>17</sup> As yet Gore was only one of many promising upcoming men, but to gauge how good he was he needed to play the best players in the sport, and rising 20, his success induced him to try his luck in the most prestigious tournament going, at Wimbledon.