



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
1988**

© County Tipperary Historical Society

**www.tipperarylibraries.ie/thc
society@tipperarylibraries.ie**

ISSN 0791-0665

LENA RICE OF NEW INN — THE ONLY IRISH LADIES WIMBLEDON CHAMPION

By Eileen Bell

In the tiny protestant cemetery in Downey's Field in the village of New Inn, the only Irishwoman to have won the All England Tennis Championship at Wimbledon lies buried. Lena Rice, who took the coveted title in 1890 at the age of 24, played tennis for only two seasons, and during her brief career on the court took part in only a handful of tournaments.

Born on 21st June, 1866, at Marlhill, a two-storied Georgian mansion half a mile from New Inn, Lena (who was christened Helena Bertha Grace) was the second youngest of eight children of Spring Rice and Anna Gorde. Her father was a distant cousin of Lord Mounteagle of Brandon, as was Mary Spring Rice, a friend of Erskine Childers, who took part with him in the Howth gun-running in 1914.

Lena, who regularly partnered her own sister Annie at tennis, learnt the game at home, where her parents entertained lavishly in the 1880s. The two girls also frequently played at Cahir Lawn Tennis club, which then had four courts as well as two croquet lawns. With a cavalry regiment of the British Army stationed nearby, mixed tennis was fashionable in Cahir even a century ago.

Lena Rice's first sporting appearance outside county Tipperary was at the Irish championships at Fitzwilliam, Dublin in May 1889. Here she lost narrowly (7-5, 7-5) to Blanche Hillyard in the semi-final. However, in the doubles Lena reached the final with Mrs. Hillyard, and with Willoughby Hamilton she won the mixed doubles title from H. Stone and Hillyard — 6-4, 5-7, 6-4, 6-4.

After competing in the Lansdowne meeting in Dublin in June, Lena crossed to England to compete at Wimbledon. Reaching the final, she found that Mrs. Hillyard, who had beaten Annie Rice in an earlier round, was her opponent. Although at one stage Lena stood at 4-3, 40-30 in the final, her opponent recovered to take the title 4-6, 8-6, 6-4. At the same meeting Lena became the first woman to officiate at Wimbledon.

At the 1890 Irish championships Lena lost the singles final (9-7, 6-4) to Louise Martin, and was also successful in both doubles events. At Lansdowne, however, she won the singles 6-3, 6-1.

At the Wimbledon championship of 1890 Lena had little difficulty in reaching the final, where her opponent was a Miss Jacks. Mrs. Hillyard did not enter that year, as she was then pregnant. The final took place on the famous Centre Court on Friday, 4th July in fine weather. According to contemporary accounts, Lena Rice wore a two piece costume, comprising an ankle-length floral-patterned skirt and a blouse tightly clinched at the waist.

After a promising start Lena faltered somewhat, but gradually she gained confidence and ended up on a high note taking the last two games without losing a point. By the end of the match she had scored 58 points to her opponent's 42. She was presented with the 50-guineas challenge trophy, together with a cash prize of 20 guineas.

There is, curiously, no record of Lena Rice ever again playing tennis competitively. It is surmised that family ill-health may have prevented her from continuing her career. Lena's mother died in 1891, after struggling to manage the household since the death of her husband 23 years before.



On 21st June, 1907, just 17 years after her Wimbledon triumph, Lena (who never married), died of a tubercular condition on her 41st birthday. She was buried close to her parents in the local cemetery. There too lie her brother, Samuel, and a sister of her father, Agnes.

By a series of strange coincidences, Marlhill has to this day continued to have sporting associations. In 1938 it was purchased by one of the well-known Leahy family of Boherlahan of hurling fame. Since 1983 the land, with a new house erected in 1962, has been the property of Mr. David O'Brien, the noted horse trainer.



Lena Rice from a faded photograph in the possession of the All England Lawn Tennis Club, Wimbledon, London.

The author acknowledges the assistance she received from Mr. Alan Little, Hon. Librarian of the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum, Church Road, Wimbledon, London SW 19 5AE.

