

RACQUET COURT BEGINNINGS

Racquet Court

In the 1920s the club moved to its current location. But its first club house was located at Racquet Court. Hence, it is appropriate at this juncture to describe Racquet court, the clubhouse, and the ground, and then go on to delineate the evolution of the Havelock Park premises.

Shared by three clubs

In the 1890s the Racquet Court was shared by the Colts, Bloomfield and Melridge C.C. (Foenander 1924: 42). As there was only room for two clubs on the small ground, Bloomfield and Melridge agreed to play a match in which the losing club would be merged with the winning club. Bloomfield won and remained at Racquet Court until Chalmers Granaries came into being when the club moved to Campbell Park.

VETERAN COLTS AT THE RACQUET COURT, CIRCA 1900



Seated left to right – C.J. Mathew, O. C. Raffel, W. de Kretser, Dr. A. Raffel, A. Van Geyzel, C. Foenander and C. Kelaart
Picture courtesy Foenander 1941

Dr. A Raffel also features in the 1940 club photo. C. Kelaart is probably Colvin Kelaart who captained the Colts and kept wickets. In addition to bowling fast he was also a hurricane hitter. The Kretser is probably Wally de Kretser.

Cricket pavilions were in the early days possessed only by the CCC and the Sports Club, and the Colts pitched a tent on big occasions on the northern side of the ground, until the Khan pavilion was erected with funds provided by the family of Framjee Bkiahjee Khan, a Parsi businessman. The family is also responsible for the Fort icon, the Khan clock tower.

**COLTS "OLD CROCKS", OPENING OF THE KHAN PAVILION, RACQUET COURT,
1905**



Dr. A. Raffel in the middle with J.C. Ebert on his right and O.C. Raffel, W. de Kretser and M. Thomasz on his left.

Courtesy of S.P. Foenander, 1941

Note the ladies in the pavilion wearing bonnets and long dresses. And the scorer with scorebook in hand.

The prime mover was Mr. F. Dadabhoy, a senior vice president. Foenander (1941: 23) states –

“The prime mover in the efforts made to obtain a pavilion for the Colts C.C. was Mr. F. Dadabhoy, one of the most enthusiastic members of the Club and a senior Vice-President. In December 1904, Mr. Dadabhoy informed the Colt’s Committee that he had approached the members of the Framjee Bhikajee family with a request that they should donate the cost of a pavilion to be erected for the Colts C. C. at the Racquet Court.”

“The pavilion, a two-storeyed building, was duly erected at the northern end of the old Racquet Court, and formally opened in the presence of a very large gathering of members and well-wishers of the club before the end of the year 1905, by Mr. E. M. de Courcy Short, Mayor of Colombo. At that function both the Mayor and Dr. C.T. van Geyzel paid a well-deserved tribute to Mr. Khan for having sportingly come forward to the assistance of the Colts C.C.

Among the first photos hung up in this pavilion was one of the Ceylonese team that had recently visited Bombay, besides separate photos of Dr. A. Raffel (the Captain), Mr. J.C. McHeyzer and the late Mr. C.E. Perera. A photograph of Tommy Kelaart also occupied a prominent place in that Pavilion.”

There is a photograph of Tommy Kelaart presently hanging in the boardroom. It is probably the same photo which once hung at the Racquet Court pavilion.

Chalmers Granaries

The Racquet Court subsequently became the Chalmers Granaries which had been earmarked for a shopping centre in 2015. Refer pictures below.



Courtesy of ?



Courtesy of ishakaperera.wordpress.com



Courtesy of Wikimapia

Chalmers Granaries was named after the governor of Ceylon from 1913 to 1915. Robert Chalmers was a Pali and Sanskrit and spent a lot of his retirement translating Pali texts. He also put down the anti-Muslim riots by force and alienated many Sinhalese. (There is a statue in honour of Captain D.E. Henry Pedris, executed on a false charge of mutiny, following the riots, at the northern end of Havelock Park.) It is not known when the Racquet Court was converted into a granary.

But the Racquet Court was the social and sporting center of the youth of the area. To quote Foenander (1941: 7) –

“It was mentioned early in this chapter that the Racquet Court in the Pettah was the cradle of the Colts CC. C. and of Ceylonese cricket. Where once was the famous Racquet Court (the playground of the youth of Pettah, San Sebastian and Wolvendaal) now stand the Chalmers’ Granaries. Many of the older generation of Ceylon cricket lovers can still visualise the Racquet Court of the eighties and nineties, when the Lotus Pond was a boundary on the western side, along with the railway lines that so many big hitters loved to clear with their strokes for six.

The wicket itself was a natural turf one of a kind that would not be appreciated by the present generation of batsmen, who are so used to perfect pitches. A score of twenty-five was more worth more than some of the best half centuries scored in the past quarter century, while a half century was a very unusual achievement, and a century almost a phenomenal feat. Batsmen had to fight really hard to get their runs against bowlers who reveled on those wickets.”

These wickets seem like the wickets I played soft ball cricket on at Brownrigg Park, Gregory’s Avenue and Edinburgh Crescent (the grass next to the tennis courts). Getting into double figures was a major achievement.

Within Pettah and within walking distance of Chalmers Granaries, lies the historic Dutch Reform Church at Wolvendaal (1642), where many Colts cricketers of the late nineteenth century got married in. Colvin Kelaart and S.P. Joseph were married there. Tommy Kelaart got married at the Dutch Reform Church in Bambalapitiya. But the Kelaart family became Catholics and the next generation attended St. Joseph’s, which was not around when Tommy, Colvin etc. were attending school. In fact, Tommy Kelaart’s son was a teenager when the Kelaart family converted to Catholicism and attended St. Joseph’s.

From Pettah to Havelock town

In the late nineteenth century, the hub of social activity of Colombo’s middle class would have been the Pettah area. Hence, the meeting to set up the club and the playing area itself was in Pettah, then a residential area.

When the Colts Cricket Club took up their new residence, Havelock Park and adjacent areas such as Bambalapitiya were taken up by large tracts of coconut and cinnamon plantations. By the fifties it would have been hard to imagine what the area around the Colts looked like in the twenties, and even less imaginable now.

The Parsi legacy

The Parsis are the descendants of the Zoroastrians who fled Persia to avoid persecution by the forces of Islam. Not unlike the Jews they have assimilated their host societies and embraced western traditions.

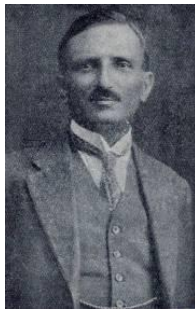
World renown conductor Zubin Mehta is a Parsi and so was rock legend Freddy Mercury. Many Indian test cricketers have been Parsi, notably Polly Umrigar, Nari Contractor and Farouk Engineer.

The Bhikhajee family, brothers Framjee Bhikhajee Khan and Dinshawjee, came to Ceylon from Bombay and owned the famous Colombo Oil Mills. Framjee Bhikhajee died in 1878. On the 45th anniversary of his death the clock tower and fountain was erected to his memory by his sons Bhikhajee and Munchershaw Framjee Khan as a token of affectionate gratitude and dedicated through the Municipal Council to the citizens of Colombo.

In addition, the family of Framjee h provided the funds with which to build a pavilion at Racquet Court (Foenander 1941: 23-24). The prime mover was F. Dadabhoy¹, a senior vice president of the club.

Apparently, the Parsee community have always been strong supporters of the club. F. Dadabhoy's elder brother Dr. D. Dadabhoy was an honorary secretary of the Colts. Dr. D. Dadabhoy represented Royal against the Thomians in 1900 and was one of the best schoolboy wicket keepers of his time.

F. DADABHOY



Courtesy of
S.P. Foenander,
1941

F. Dadabhoy was largely instrumental in raising the funds to needed to send a Ceylonese team to Bombay in 1905, and he also played a leading role in inducing the Elphinstone College Past and Present team to tour in 1904, during which it beat the Colts by three runs on the C.C.C. ground.

F. Dadabhoy was persistent in getting S.P. Foenander to write his book on the history of the Colts and he is in the club photograph of 1940. He was club president from 1942 to 1945.

¹ There is F Dadabhoy Memorial Prize instituted in 1922 at Royal College and this Dadabhoy is probably the father of the Dadabhoy brothers?

In 1905 the building was erected at Racquet Court on various conditions one of which was “That the pavilion be called the ‘Framjee Bhikhajee Khan Pavilion’, and should always be styled as such.”

When the Colts moved to Havelock Park their old pavilion was demolished and the Khan pavilion was re-erected at where the pavilion stands today (Foenander 1941). Foenander added “The old inscription marble plate now finds a place on one of the inner walls of the present pavilion and will always bear evidence to the generosity of the Framjee Bhikhajee family”. That marble plate was visible in 2016.

THE MARBLE PLATE, 2016



Courtesy of Eardley Lieversz

It needs to be noted that while the Racquet Court pavilion was opened in 1905, the plaque is dated 1907. Clearly, the plaque came later.

The move to Havelock Park

In 1921 the club took lease of their present home in Havelock Park. It is possible that the move was triggered by the conversion of Racquet Court to Chalmers Granaries.

In 1926 a tennis section was started by A.T. Pollocks. The tennis court was located at the intersection of Park Road and Park Lane. It was terminated in the fifties. The tennis court were abandoned and about the eighties the land that it stood on was taken over by the Colombo Municipality to create living quarters for doctors. This is a pity because the redevelopment of the club that commenced with Mathivanan at the turn of the new millennium could have put that space to good use. For instance, the space would have been ideal for a swimming pool.

At the time the Colts moved to Havelock Park it had begun to experience occasional lean times. In its wake new clubs had been established, many organised on ethnic lines, which drew away many good players who would otherwise have played for the Colts.

COLTS CLUB MEMBERS, OPENING OF THE NEW PAVILION, HAVELOCK PARK, CIRCA 1924



Seated left to right: W.E. LaBrooy, W.E. Jansz, H.O.W. Mayo, Dr. A. Raffel, J.C. Ebert, Mr. F. Dornhorst, K.C., President, C. J. A. Marshall, O.C. Raffel, O. de Kretser, C. Foenander, A.B. Claessen

Picture courtesy of Foenander 1941

Douglas Lieversz, in his 100th anniversary message mentions that the club moved its Havelock Park premises in 1921. He was fifteen years of age then. This move is confirmed by Foenander (1941:7). It would have been a few years later when the pavilion was built at Havelock Park. F. Dornhorst was president from 1896 to 1920. C.J.A. Marshall was president of the club from 1921 to 1927. Yet, Foenander's caption has Dornhorst as president. The following explanation can be offered.

In the photograph Marshall, the President, would have deferred to Dornhorst's seniority and status. When Foenander examined the photograph, he would have assumed that Dornhorst was still President without cross checking with the honour board.

Foenander does not date the photograph. He merely states that the photograph was taken in association with the opening of the pavilion. However, elsewhere (1941:7) he implies a date of 1924. To quote *"Among the visitors to the Colts' pavilion since 1924"*

W.E. Labrooy captained the Colts from 1925 to 1926. W.E. Jansz was an official of the club. H.O.W. Mayo served the club as an honorary secretary and his sons, C.D. and B. Mayo also represented the club. C.D. was the Lucky Mayo who played for St. Joseph's and later did umpiring while a member of the Colts.

The chronicler's cousin Trevor Ebert remarked that his father's family were staunch Colts. He was referring to Harry Ebert who was a contemporary of J.C. Jansz and C.T. Van Geyzel. But the J.C. Ebert in the picture is an unknown.

The literature refers to C. de Kretser, former secretary and opening batsman, and his younger brother Dr. Edgar de Kretser who captained the Colts. Oswald and Willie de Kretser were loyal Colts and it could be the former in the picture. Also from the same family were John, Julian, and Gerry. Finally, A.B. Claessen is very likely to be Aelian Bertram, the youngest child in a family of 11 daughters. Aelian passed away on 1st September 1924 aged 55 years, the same year as the group photo was taken.

Identifying the surroundings

The backdrop to the picture is a hedge over which is uncleared land. The road is either Park Road or Park Lane. A few coconut trees can be glimpsed through the thicket. It is possible that the photograph was taken facing Park Lane across which Issipatana College is currently located.

In his message which appeared in the centenary souvenir D.W.L. Lieversz stated that in 1921

"The land opposite the Colts cricket grounds across Park Road was a grass field with not a building in sight. We used to spend hours searching for our cricket balls which used to be smote very regularly over the road into the surrounding tall grass fields. The land where today Isipathana college stands was a coconut estate."

He adds that from 1921 to when the pavilion was built, the clubhouse was a hut situated across the grounds where the present pavilion is. The ground was sandy and in need of grass.

The land now occupied by the Colts, the Burgher Recreation Club, and the Havelock Sports Club, was a rubber plantation at the turn of the century (Rambler 1999). Park Road was then a gravel road that extended to Nawala.

The land between Park Road and the Wellawatte Canal was low lying and was planted with "keerai", the source of most of Colombo's green vegetables. It belonged to Ramasamy Reddiar who sold most of it for redevelopment (passim). Hence, those tall grass fields mentioned by Douglas Lieversz were probably "Keerai".

Matting wicket

Until 1957 a matting wicket stood at the Colts. It was due to A.V. Fernando's perseverance that a turf wicket came into being. In fact, the NCC and SSC also started off with matting wickets. According to A.W. Lorenz Andree –

“The early playgrounds of each of these clubs generally of rough turfed terrain; and mostly matting wickets were then in vogue. The first Club to introduce a turf wicket was the Colombo Cricket Club in Torrington Place, where all big matches, including those arranged against visiting English and Australian teams were played until recently, when the Tamil Union C & A C's 'Colombo Oval' at Wanathamulla, became a popular rival to it, with its sprawling grounds and spectator sheds.”

Turf wicket

Darrell Liewersz eloquently recalls the scene when the turf wicket was being laid.

“In my early teens I remember watching with fascination, the new turf wicket being laid which took more than a month to complete and the area resembled a building site for quite a while. The initial square was excavated several feet deep and then carefully filled with layers of rock stones of varied sizes. This was followed with gravel, sand and different types of soil brought in from various suppliers and sources and was closely watched and supervised by AV Fernando who was more-or -less in charge. My father appreciated positive advice from persons from other cricket clubs around Colombo and encouraged visits by curious persons and curators including FC de Saram of the SSC. If I remember correct, Iyapen was the name of the Colts ground-boy at that time, and he used to bowl to me in the nets when no one was around. Later Nonis² from the NCC was brought in maybe due to the vast experience he had in maintaining turf wickets.”

The matting wicket remained because it was a source of revenue. But the turf wicket was never up to standard and had a bad reputation into the seventies. The outfield was permanently affected by grazing cattle.

Twenty-first century developments

The infrastructure developments which have taken place in the past twenty years or so is the subject of a subsequent chapter. They require a chapter of their own.

² Before he moved to the NCC Nonis worked at St. Peter's as recalled by Clive Inman. Every time the ball was hit into the canal Nonis had to fetch it.