

GLOUCESTER RUGBY  
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A cigarette card advertising women's rugby in 1895

**From the earliest days of the Gloucester Club, when matches were played at the Spa, ladies were encouraged to attend. Indeed seating in the pavilion at the Spa was reserved for ladies and members only.**

In 1876, the Flamingoes broke new ground by travelling from London to play in Gloucester, and admission charges were made for the first time. The Gloucester ladies were reported to have "mustered in full force in the pavilion" for this match.

This success was closely followed in March 1876 by a major setback, when the first serious injury occurred at a Gloucester match - Sydney Lane sustained

# LADIES AT KINGSHOLM

## THE VICTORIAN AGE

a fractured thigh playing against Ross-on-Wye. His misfortune was reported to have greatly upset the ladies present, and for some time their attendance at matches fell away as a result.

The first recorded instance of ladies playing football on the Kingsholm turf was on 11th November 1895, only four years after the ground was opened. An exhibition soccer match was played at Kingsholm by two teams of lady players who were touring the country.

It generated a lot of interest, and attracted a large crowd, despite appalling weather. However, the event also attracted a good deal of derision, as the Citizen reported the following day:

"When a lovely woman stoops to folly" there is no telling where she will end. They were announced as the "original" lady footballers. Their football is certainly "original" enough to warrant this title, and it is to be hoped that these aborigines may disappear before an enlightened and advancing civilisation.

If they could play football some sort of excuse for their appearance might be found, but they cannot, their notions of the game being elementary in the extreme and their attempts to play it fatuous. It must be remembered that the climatic conditions were all against a scientific exposition, pelting rain, muddy ground, and slippery, sodden ball being sufficient to test the stamina and skill of players made of much sterner stuff. Their movements

were for the most part leisurely, their pace slow, their ability a negligible quality. They betrayed a natural anxiety to avoid hurting one another by charging, and a disinclination to fall in the mud.

Let it be said that, so far as modesty is concerned, the most fastidious could hardly take exception to their attire. The blouses and "bloomers" left nothing to be desired as regards decency, and would even have been picturesque had it not been for their stained and weather-beaten condition, which accorded well with the dishevelled hair and general appearance of the wearers.

A noticeable exception was the lady rejoicing in the sobriquet of "Tommy". She was really clever with some of her dribbles, and was much more agile and fast – if we may use the term without reproach in this connection – than her comrades, who trotted about in a rather aimless fashion.

The game would, perhaps, have been more exciting if the goalkeepers had not been two mere men-things who most ungallantly kicked the ball away whenever the respective goals were in danger; and no goals were scored by either side. The first portion of the game lasted half an hour; and when the second had been in progress fifteen minutes the rain became so bad that even the lady footballers could not stand it.

It was getting dark too and the spectators dispersed. They had come to scoff, remained to do



so, and did. Football is all very well in its place. The two do not harmonise. They are hopelessly incongruous."

This experiment was not repeated, and the emphasis remained firmly on encouraging support rather than participation by the womenfolk of Gloucester.

Lady spectators were offered special membership rates by the Club, and even when there was a need to increase income substantially after the Great War, they were still charged less. The ladies continued to be accommodated with the members, away from the "popular" side, where behaviour and language were less genteel.



Lady cyclists at Kingsholm in 1918

### VIOLET PEGLER

Just as the Great War changed perceptions and attitudes forever as regards the roles of working men in society, so the parts which women played in the Second World War changed their expectations and ambitions.

This certainly applied to Violet Pegler. She had a good Gloucester Club pedigree, her father, Fred Pegler, having played 239 games for the Club, from 1902 to 1913. He took his daughter to her first match at Kingsholm when she was aged 5. She became a regular spectator along with a small group of women friends, and played touch rugby whilst in the Army during World War Two.

In 1948, she advertised for players to start a ladies' rugby team, sufficient numbers came forward and Sid Dangerfield, a

leading Gloucester player and local policeman, was recruited as trainer.

Violet requested assistance from the Club, and suggested that mixed matches be played at Kingsholm as curtain raisers before big matches. Her proposal came before the Club committee, but did not get far. The President, Dr Arnold Alcock, declared that he "considered it inadvisable from all points of view" – end of discussion.

### THE LADIES' COMMITTEE

Although the Club paid for professional catering after matches from early in its history

replacements were found, and the arrangement continued, but it became increasingly difficult to recruit ladies for these duties during the 1980s, and in the early 1990s the Ladies' Committee was disbanded, and the Club reverted to a commercial contract for all catering requirements.

### THE FIRST SEEDS OF CHANGE

By 1972, Tom Voyce was President of the Club, and he met with a group of ladies who requested permission to stage a match against the Club team at Kingsholm. Tom reported to the committee, and some members expressed disquiet, but the match was eventually agreed on the understanding that it would be touch rugby involving only light contact, and with the proviso that the Club "would not be responsible for injury or accident".

The match went ahead between the players and their wives and girlfriends, and "Ladies v Players" matches were held several times in subsequent years.

During the early 1990s, the number of women playing rugby in England grew very quickly, and many rugby clubs formed women's sections. Several women's teams were formed in the Gloucester area, but none directly associated with the Gloucester Club. Student teams made the breakthrough in terms of playing competitive games of women's rugby on the hallowed turf of Kingsholm.

And the Day Finally Dawns

The first women's team affiliated to the Gloucester Club only appeared on the scene with the formation of Gloucester-Hartpury Ladies this season. They have played most of their matches at Hartpury, but make history today by becoming the first ladies' team to play at Kingsholm as part of the Gloucester Club.

It's been a long time a-coming. Welcome ladies and congratulations - Violet Pegler would be especially proud of you.

until well after the Second World War, the attractions of cutting costs eventually resulted in the formation of a Ladies' Committee to provide meals after the match on a voluntary basis.



Girl Guides swamp Kingsholm in 1964

This arrangement did not always go smoothly – in 1961 the whole Ladies' Committee felt so put upon that they resigned en masse. However,