

From the Archives – 2nd November Remembrance Day at Roehampton Club

Saturday 11th November marks the day of remembrance for those who sacrificed their lives defending our freedom during the First World War. It is a time to reflect on the contributions made by many of our former Members of the Club and the local families affected by the hardships and loss of life as a result of the conflict.

Only the dwindling number of family members born in the early 1930's will have the opportunity of recalling stories from their parents at the time of the Great War. The Club has a proud heritage of a membership founded by senior military figures who served the country in many different ways. Our founders, the Miller brothers were personally responsible for approximately three hundred Members recruited from the military in the first year of its existence.



The Miller Brothers



Grove House

During the war, the Club was used to support the training of Balloon Observation Officers who were stationed at Grove House, now used by the University of Roehampton, and Lower Grove House, now the site of the Fairacres development.

The administration of the Royal Naval Air Service was based in the Polo Pavilion while the officers were billeted at Grove House.

The polo fields and the golf course were used to erect tents for the many visitors who were here to learn the techniques of navigating a balloon tethered to the ground to spot enemy positions close to a battlefield. This involved two people in a basket – one to guide the balloon and the other to send messages to the command positions on the ground. The balloons were also attached to warships to assist in the spotting of enemy submarines.



The Polo Pavilion



Needless to say, this was a hazardous existence in the face of enemy fire with those on board representing a large slow-moving target full of inflammable gas. Unsurprisingly, the average life expectancy of a balloon was a fortnight with only a parachute to help your escape. Despite the possible dangers, there was no shortage of willing volunteers who achieved the nickname 'The Balloonatics'.

Within the Club archives, there were a number of our Members associated with this activity and later regarded as pioneers in military aviation. Notable Members included Viscount Combermere (also

known as Francis Lynch Wellington) who joined the Club in 1916 showing his rank as Second Lieutenant in the Kite Balloon Section of the Royal Flying Corps.

Several other individuals who joined Roehampton Club at this time were also members of the Royal Aero Club. The formation of the Royal Air Force which we know today took place on 1st April 1918 representing the merger of the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corp.



The first Roehampton Club Member from the RAF was Major GL Lloyd who joined the Club in 1919. Another significant contribution to the war effort was one of the Club's founders, Charles Miller, who took on the role of Captain of the Remount Department with responsibility for the supply of horses to the Cavalry regiments on the Front Line.

It was quickly apparent that the numbers of suitable horses in the UK were insufficient. The small number of horses deemed fit for use by the military was highlighted in a report published at the beginning of the war in 1914 when 25,000 horses were requisitioned. The logistics requiring their transfer to the battlefields involved 121 officers and 230 staff. With monumental efforts by all concerned, the requisitioning of the horses was expanded to become a global exercise in transportation involving the USA, South America, Spain, and Portugal.

The sheer scale of this operation required the establishment of four major depots in the UK close to our sea ports at Liverpool, Bristol, and Southampton. By 1917, the number of horses requisitioned had grown to 600,000 managed by 423 officers and 20,560 staff. At its peak in the same year, the number had reached nearly 870,000.

The use of effective horsepower during the conflict was a critical contributor to the outcome of the war. Charles Miller was a key figure in this operation using his connections to recruit other officers to join the Remount Service. He also used his background knowledge of his time in the Cavalry, the challenges of moving livestock and the need for effective animal welfare.

Steve Riedlinger, Club Archivist