

From the Archives – 4th July 2024

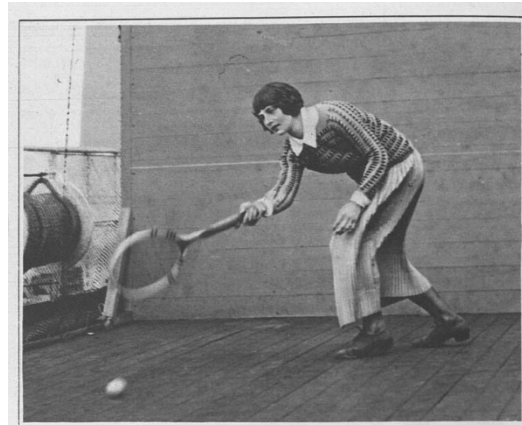
Helen Wills, Olympic and US Open Tennis Champion at Roehampton Club 100 years ago



Helen Newington Wills was in the early stages of her outstanding tennis career at the tender age of eighteen, when she chose Roehampton Club to make her tournament debut appearance in this country ahead of the Wimbledon Championships in 1924.

Her arrival in the UK and her practice games were widely reported in the British Newspaper Archives. Two of the newspapers showed her practicing en board the cruise ship SS on her way to England from the US.

Prior to her arrival in 1921, the Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News publication showed a photograph in 1921 of Ms Wills receiving an automobile as a gift from friends and admirers.



TO APPEAR FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ENGLAND ON JUNE 18: MISS HELEN WILLS, THE YOUNG AMERICAN CHAMPION.



PRACTISING ON HER SPECIAL "COURT" ON THE DECK OF THE "BERENGARIA": MISS HELEN WILLS—WHO HAS JUST REACHED ENGLAND.

Much interest has been roused by the arrival of Miss Helen Wills, the United States lawn-tennis champion, who is to compete at Wimbledon, and who hopes to meet Mlle. Suzanne Lenglen, the invincible French girl. Miss Wills, who was born on Oct. 6, 1905, is a tall, graceful girl, with a beautiful complexion. She is not going to play in any tournament before appearing in the international match of Great Britain v. the United States on June 18, at Wimbledon. This is to be her first public



SNAPSHOTTED ON ARRIVAL: MISS HELEN WILLS, THE AMERICAN LAWN-TENNIS CHAMPION, WHO IS TO COMPETE AT WIMBLEDON.

Referring to her as the 'Californian Girl', The Scotsman newspaper described her as hitting the ball harder than any of our ladies making her so difficult an opponent to play with her extra speed of stroke. The report goes on to talk about her practice game at Surbiton in which she repeatedly demonstrated her ability to play an attacking lob as one of her most useful strokes.

It was the Daily Mirror, Daily Herald and the Westminster Gazette that announced the decision by Helen Wills to play in the tennis tournament at Roehampton Club in the Ladies Singles and Ladies Doubles competitions.

Less than two weeks before the All England Championships at

Wimbledon, the Belfast Telegraph and several other leading newspapers were building the prospect of a final involving five-time Ladies Wimbledon Champion Suzanne Lenglen and the young Olympic and US Open tennis champion, Helen Wills.



WILL THE LENGLEN BANDEAU, as a feminine fashion, be supplanted this year by the HELEN WILLS EYE-SHADE?

appearance in this country, and she will subsequently play in the Championships at Wimbledon, and then go to France for the Olympic Games. Miss Wills, who arrived in England last week on board the "Berengaria," practised her game on the way over, as a special net was erected for her on the deck. At the age of seventeen she captured the National Women's Lawn-Tennis Championship in the States. She does not wear a "Suzanne" head-band, but a very practical eye-shade when in play.

Her form in the tournament at Roehampton Club was now under scrutiny to assess her form and the likelihood of a famous win against the favourite at Wimbledon.

As it turned out, the newspapers were unable to take a view on the form of the young pretender as she scratched from the Ladies individual competition at Roehampton Club leaving her to concentrate on the Ladies Doubles with Hazel Hotchkiss Wightman – Captain of the US Ladies Tennis Team.

Her name lives on today as the result of her donation of a trophy for the annual team tennis competition between teams from the United States and Great Britain known as the Wightman Cup.

Despite the build-up to the possible Wimbledon Ladies Singles Final between Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills, this eagerly awaited outcome was ruined by an injury to Ms Lenglen after her win in the fourth round forcing her to withdraw from the competition.

Meanwhile, Helen Wills also faced disappointment having made the final where she met Miss Kathleen McKane.



Singles Champions and their Runners-Up



Photograph
Sport & General
MISS
K. MCKANE

MISS HELEN WILLS

[L. B.]

In an exciting match reported by the Daily News, she lost 6-4, 4-6, 4-6. There was consolation however for Helen in winning the Wimbledon Ladies Doubles competition with her partner Ms Hazel Wightman mentioned previously.

We can only speculate on the contribution by Roehampton Club in providing a suitable practice facility for these players.

Steve Riedlinger, Club Archivist