An Anglo-Catalan Victorian in the Midlands: Auguri Perera, co-founder of lawn tennis

Autor:
Data de publicació: 20-08-2016

Lawn Tennis and Major T. H. Gem
//www.histo.cat/premsa/preview/gem,-thomas-henry-perera-
//www.histo.cat/premsa/an-anglo-catalan-victorian-in-the-midlands-auguri-perera,-co-founder-of-lawn-tennis

August 12, 2013 · by Kirsty · in Anglo-Catalans, Ephemera, MIdlands · Leave a comment

Those of you who have been following our adventures on Twitter will know that this summer, the Booksonspain family moved from Merseyside to the Midlands. Being used to the multicultural port-city history of Hispanic Liverpool,* I wasn't sure how much Hispanic history I'd find in the landlocked Midlands, but thanks to last week's Kenilworth Weekly News and a nostalgia story about lawn tennis in Leamington, I've discovered one very prominent Anglo-Catalan connection, and so rather excitingly, this blog now has its very own 'Midlands' category.

– Fairlight, Ampton Rd, Edgbaston. Image source: JimmyGuano @ Wikimedia Commons

The line that caught my eye was the statement that 'Major Harry Gem, a solicitor, and his friend Batista Pereira, a Catalan merchant, invented lawn tennis in the 19th century, playing on a lawn in Edgbaston.' A bit of judicious googling, and I discovered that the Major and his Catalan friend, real name Juan Bautista Luis Augurio Perera,** are now widely credited with inventing lawn tennis in around 1859 on the lawn at Perera's villa Fairlight, on Ampton Rd in Edgbaston (left), which even has a blue plaque commemorating the event. In the last couple of years, a Birmingham-based charity called The Harry Gem Project has been set up, with objectives including: '(1) To celebrate and publicise the life of Thomas Henry Gem (1819 – 1881) through publications, exhibitions, community events and a dedicated web site, and (2) To publicise his role as the originator, with his friend JBA Perera, of lawn tennis here in Birmingham and the creator of the world's first lawn tennis club in Leamington Spa.'

The Gem-Perera origin story for lawn tennis is now widely known and Perera has his own Wikipedia page, but the man himself remains something of an enigma. His name is often incorrectly recorded (for example as Augusto, Jean Batista, or John Baptiste) and a book published in 2011, From Court to Canvas even doubts whether he was really Catalan. In response to that claim and to what he perceives as the 'gradual erasure' of Perera from the history of tennis, the Catalan Olympic historian Fernando Arrechea Rivas set out the available evidence for Perera's Catalan origin in a post on his Olimpismo blog, quoting two certificates of arrival at the Port of London, Perera's marriage certificate, and his appearance on the 1841 and 1871 UK censuses. His conclusion is that while 'Quedan dudas sobre Augurio Perera' [doubts remain about Augurio Perera], 'nadie podrá afirmar de nuevo que "no hay evidencias" sobre su origen' [nobody will ever again be able to state that "there is no evidence" of his origin]. In short, 'El padre (o uno de los padres) del tenis moderno era español' [The father (or one of the fathers) of modern tennis was a Catalan]

Intriguing! And so, it being summer and me being incorrigibly nosy, I decided to look into Perera's biography for myself. And a couple of days' research turned into a week, a page of notes turned into 8,000 words, and the elusive Augurio Perera turned out to be connected not only to Birmingham, but also to Hispanic Liverpool, Manchester, and even the powerful Catalan business community in London. And this is just from the digitised records available from my laptop – archival research in Leamington, Birmingham, London and Spain will inevitably flesh the story out further. You can download the full biography from my website, but in the meantime, here are the highlights:

Juan Bautista Luis Augurio Perera (c.1822 – aft. 1889)

Augurio Perera was born somewhere in Spain in around 1822. At the age of four, in 1826, he moved with his parents, Augurio senior and Francisca to London, where they stayed for ten years and where Augurio's two younger brothers, Pedro Ricardo and F[r]ederico were born. In 1836, the family moved to Birmingham and Augurio senior, a merchant, took over the Great Charles St warehouse that would be the centre of their Birmingham operations for more than fifty years. Three years later, when 'our' Augurio was almost eighteen, his parents and brothers relocated to Manchester to set up a new branch of the business, leaving Augurio junior in charge of the Birmingham warehouse. He would remain in the Midlands for at least fifty years. The map below shows the locations associated with the Perera family in Birmingham. Click on each pin, and it will tell you what happened there!

Augurio married Irish-born Charlotte Louisa O'Donnell (known as Louisa) in Liverpool in 1847 and the couple had four children, all born in Birmingham: Francisca Eliza (1848), José Cortes Augurio (1850), Adrienne Clara (1852) and Carmen Mariana (1856). The death of his father in 1855 seems to have been something of a watershed; within a year, Augurio and Louisa had moved to Ampton Road, and Augurio had applied for (and been granted) British citizenship. During the 1860s, when he and Harry were apparently playing regular games of pelota on the lawn at Fairlight, Augurio was also getting involved in Birmingham's civic life. But in late 1873, with their two elder children married and settled in Edgbaston, Augurio and Louisa, with 21-year-old Adrienne and 17-year-old Carmen moved to Leamington Spa, to a villa with the familiar name of 'Fairlight', located in Avenue Rd at the heart of the Old Town. This is the period when Augurio, Harry Gem and two other friends set up an early tennis club in the town. The family would remain at the new Fairlight for almost four years, moving across the road to the elegant Manor House Hotel in the autumn of 1877. They returned to Birmingham at the end of 1877, but summered at the Manor House Hotel until at least 1880.

As other historians have found, details of Augurio's later years are sparse. He appears on the 1881 census at 140 Hagley Rd, Edgbaston, listed as 'John Perera' and staying with eldest daughter Francisca and her husband John Palmer Phillips. Son Cortes and his family were living around the corner on Stanmore Avenue, but Louisa, Adrienne and Carmen are nowhere to be seen. The last documentary reference I've found to Augurio is when his youngest daughter Carmen's marriage was announced in the Leamington Spa Courier in September 1889 – she had married in Venice, to Le Chevalier Gustave Koppel, of Vienna. What happened to Augurio Perera after 1889? We know that in 1890, son Cortes and his family left Birmingham for London, severing the family's business connection with the city where they had been based for more than fifty years. But what about Augurio and Louisa? Did they settle in Venice, where Carmen was married, or in Vienna, close to Carmen's husband's family? Did they return to Spain, or as one theory has it, to Louisa's native Ireland? As yet, we simply don't know…

Augurio Perera's life and career reveal the existence of a Midlands Anglo-Catalan community connected by networks of kinship, patriotism and business to their fellow expats in London, Liverpool and Manchester. The creation of lawn tennis is just one, unexpected outcome of the largely forgotten history of Catalan expats in Great Britain. What others might be out there? I, for one, can't wait to find out!

Download the fully-sourced working paper Juan Bautista Luis Augurio PERERA, co-founder of Lawn Tennis (2013) to read more about Augurio and his family in Birmingham, Manchester, London and Leamington Spa.

* The Hispanic Liverpool Database is being web-readied as we speak and will be published within weeks. Watch this space!

** Yes, I got very excited when the 'Pereira' spelling suggested he might turn out to be Galician. Sadly not the case…

* You should say anglo-catalan community for Perera as Carreras are very common catalan names.

here you have two more catalans of the same period

//www.histo.cat/sabies/carreras-tobacco-company-
//www.histo.cat/sabies/carreras-enrique-james-hammer
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Carreras