

THE INTRODUCTION OF LACROSSE FOR GIRLS AT ST LEONARDS IN 1890

Written by Jane Claydon

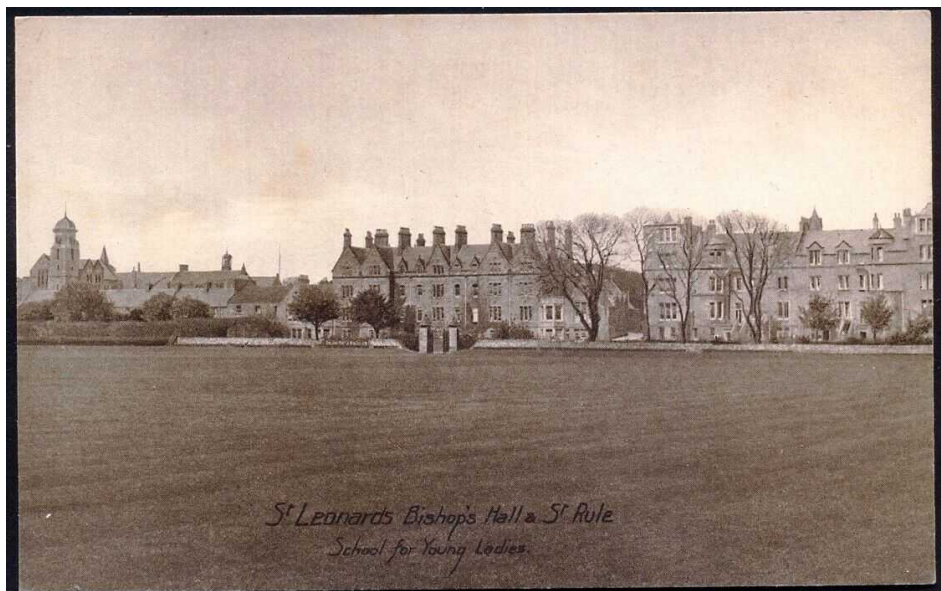
Jane Claydon was a member of staff at St Leonards for 32 years. She was appointed as head of the physical education department in 1975 and then became a housemistress, and finally deputy head. She learned to play lacrosse while a student at Dartford College of Physical Education, in Kent.

Her involvement in lacrosse was as an administrator and organiser. She was the manager of the 1981 Celtic Tour (Combined Welsh and Scottish internationalists) to the USA and Canada and, a year later, the director of the first World Lacrosse Tournament for women in 1982. She was President of Lacrosse Scotland for about ten years and retired in 2018. She is still Chair of the Lacrosse Scotland Hall of Fame Committee and looks after their archive. At the moment she is a member of the World Lacrosse Hall of Fame working group.

ST LEONARDS – THE BIRTHPLACE OF WOMEN’S LACROSSE

St Leonards is a private girls school located in Fife, Scotland, on the east coast, 37kms from Edinburgh and 22 kms from Dundee. Fife is Scotland's third largest local authority area by population. The historic town of St Andrews is located on the northeast coast of Fife and St Leonards is 3km from the famous golf course, known as the Old Course, believed to be the oldest golf course in the world.

Louisa Lumsden was the first headmistress of St Leonards and in the post for only five years, from 1877-1882. In 1877 she wrote “You must not forget that the model of the school is, as you say, Eton”. The aim was to develop a school which would be very similar to the schools the brothers of the girls attended: Eton, Harrow, Winchester etc. The boarding house system was key to this as it encouraged competition, opportunities for leadership and service.



In 1884 Miss Louisa Lumsden, the first headmistress of St Leonards (1877-1882), and her former deputy, Miss Frances Dove, who became headmistress in 1882, attended a conference, run by the British Association of Scientific Achievement, in Montreal. It must have been an extraordinary adventure to board SS Circassian in Liverpool, 137 years ago and set sail for Quebec to attend meetings, together with other pioneering people interested in the emerging sciences. Both ladies were from upper middle class families and made good use of their connections and would have paid for the trip themselves, which may have been during summer holidays. Both Louisa and Frances were deemed educationalists and liked to be in the swing of new ideas.

One of the party attending the conference was a Clara, Lady Rayleigh, who wrote the following in her diary on 2 September 1884:-

“In the afternoon we all went to see the Indian game of La Crosse played between twelve Montrealists and twelve Indians. It is pretty and exciting, something between lawn tennis and football — I could have watched it for hours! We were all comfortably seated in places of honour on a covered stand, which partly accounts for my enjoyment.”

Louisa Lumsden and, almost certainly, Frances Dove also watched this same game of lacrosse. Later, Louisa Lumsden wrote a letter to her family which was reproduced in *Yellow Leaves*, her autobiography:

“On Tuesday we went to see a great Lacrosse match between the Caughnawaga Indians and the Montreal Club. These Indians live not far from Montreal, above the Lachine Rapids (On the St Lawrence River) and are, of course, very civilised and many of them very wealthy. They were in ordinary costume – dark blue jerseys, velvet breeches, hats, all dark blue and their dark faces and legs below the knee gave them a picturesque appearance. Their chief was called White Eagle. But the whites were the stronger team and won the game. It is a wonderful game, beautiful and graceful. (I was so charmed I introduced it at St Leonards).”

Traditionally, Louisa Lumsden has been credited with introducing lacrosse at St Leonards because she claimed to have done so. However, this may not have been the case. The autobiography was written fifty years after her visit to Canada and she may have used a little artistic license.

Frances Dove also attended this conference in Montreal and, by 1890 she had been the Headmistress of St Leonards for eight years. It is possible that Louisa Lumsden had a discussion with Frances Dove about the introduction of the game of lacrosse but, the latter must have made the final decision to establish the game at the school and source the sticks, probably from Canada. Jane Claydon also points out that at that time there were no rule books for women's lacrosse:

“I expect the girls made it up as they went along. I believe they used a book by Sachs but we do not have a copy. The girls would not have seen it played and they may have been influenced by the game of goals they created. Lacrosse was played on the same area. They played this in the autumn term and probably got bored playing it for two terms. It was linked to the need to find a new game for the spring term.”

St Leonards very much waited for the girls to say they wanted to try something – ie cricket, then this game called goals, plus a bit of tennis and fives as the school inherited a fives court. It was the girls idea to introduce a new game for the spring term which ended up being lacrosse, possibly suggested by Frances Dove. Then in 1892 an “Old Girl” suggested a golf course on part of the school field, which Tom Morris laid out a year later. The games were not driven by members of staff. The girls ran them and it is only perhaps in the last 50 years that this had changed.



Above is a photo of St Leonards lacrosse players in 1890 with the inter-house shield
With permission from St Leonards School

In 1890 teams consisted of eight players. No other girls' schools played the game and so the matches were played between the school houses. Later, in 1895 the teams were increased to ten players and eventually in 1913 to twelve.

The first international matches between England, Scotland and Wales, took place in 1913, in Richmond, Kew, London. Seven members of the Scottish team, including the

captain, were all educated at St Leonards. The outbreak of war in autumn 1914 meant that these matches could not continue but they resumed in 1921.

According to Jane Claydon "The Scottish national lacrosse teams work very hard to maintain their places in the world rankings. Lacrosse is played mainly in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dumfries but very few schools play. Grass roots lacrosse and inter school lacrosse has not been possible for almost two years as, during the Covid pandemic, most team games were not allowed to be played in Scotland.

The original trophy in the photo above was first presented in 1888, for the inter-house competitions in hockey and cricket. As only 3 of the original 10 boarding houses exist now, it is not played for in the same way.

An alumni of the school, Rosabelle Sinclair, who played in the first international matches, immigrated to the USA and established lacrosse for girls at the prestigious Bryn Mawr School, in Baltimore, in 1926. As a result, lacrosse for girls and women took off in the Baltimore area and spread up the East Coast of America. Rosabelle was the first woman to be inducted into the US Lacrosse Hall of Fame.

"Lacrosse, as women play it, is an orderly pastime that has little in common with the men's tribal warfare version except the long-handled racket or crosse that gives the sport its name, It's true that the object in both the men's and women's lacrosse is to send a ball through a goal by means of the racket, but whereas men resort to brute strength the women depend solely on skill." – Rosabelle Sinclair

The history of men's lacrosse in Scotland is significantly different. In 1876, followed by a second visit in 1883, two men's touring teams visited Scotland from Canada. One team was made up of Native American Indians and the other of amateur players. In 1883, the teams played exhibition games in Glasgow, Aberdeen, Inverness, Dundee and Edinburgh and distributed immigration literature at each venue. One source suggests 18 teams existed in Scotland in 1876, but the sport lapsed.

The Pan Am Flight 103 disaster in December 1988 proved to be a turning point for men's lacrosse in Scotland. Thirty five Syracuse students were killed when the plane came down over a small town of Lockerbie in Scotland. Later, the Syracuse lacrosse squad planned a memorial visit to the area and suggested they should play a match against the men's national team. They were unaware that a team did not exist. Players with Scottish eligibility were found and a team selected for a game in 1990. Memorial games have been played since.