

# Cecilia Betham, (1843-1913) Ireland's Champion Archer and Lillington Resident

Cecilia Maria Eleanor Betham was born in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, in January 1843, but from the age of ten, grew up in Ireland, where on the death of her grandfather Sir William Betham, her father, Molyneux Cecil John Betham took up the post of Cork Herald, which he held until his death thirty years later.



Once firearms were invented, archery was no longer a weapon of warfare. By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it had become recreational, a leisure pursuit of the upper classes, and one very much favoured by women. Archery allowed them to compete, decorously, in public, without censure. By the middle of the century however, as women took up other sports such as lawn tennis, croquet and golf, archery began to decline in popularity. In Ireland however, particularly in the 1860s, it was still a high-profile sport. Many of the Betham family were keen members of the County of Dublin Archers, one of the longest-established Irish clubs. Cecilia's father was captain of the club for most of the 1860s. He was also one of the founders of the Irish National Championships, and

a national champion in his own right.

Not surprisingly, then, Cecilia took up archery, and at the age of twenty, was runner-up in the Irish women's championship in August 1863. The winner was a Mrs Horniblow of Warwickshire, and this tournament marked the beginning of a long period of keen rivalry between the two.

In 1864, Cecilia emerged victorious from the Leamington and Midland Archery event held over two days in June in Jephson Gardens, and the Crystal Palace competition later that month. At the Grand National Archery Competition, held at Alexandra Park in early July, Miss Betham scored her greatest success, and with this came celebrity status. She was fêted everywhere, she endorsed products such as a newly patented arrow, and even had a waltz, "The Irish Archers," dedicated to her (and the Archery clubs of all Ireland.)

**Miss Betham opened the season at Leamington by the magnificent score of 743, with which three figures she subsequently won also the champion rank in Ireland.**

Following her successes at Leamington and Crystal Palace, the press reported with admiration Miss Betham's "singular firmness of nerve", - considered the secret of success in match-shooting. It was even suggested that Miss B could out-shoot many contemporary male competitors! She went on to complete a hat-trick of victories by winning her first Irish Women's Championship in Leinster at the end of July. She repeated her run of success the following year, at Leamington, Norwich, Brighton, Birmingham, Crystal Palace and Leinster, and continued to compete at the highest level until the early 1870s.

By 1874, Archery was losing some of its lustre, even in Ireland. That same year, Cecilia married an older first cousin, Captain William Sheffield Betham, also an archer of some standing. The following year, they had a daughter, Bethan Gertrude Cecilia, but before her first birthday, Capt. Betham died.

It is not known at what point Cecilia settled in England, but in March 1891 at Market Drayton, Shropshire, she married Councillor John Edmund Corbett, a widower from Leamington who also had one daughter at home. At the time of the marriage, John Corbett was living in Beauchamp Avenue, Leamington, in the home he had shared with his first wife who died in a tragic accident, but the 1891 Census return shows the Corbetts and their daughters living at "Everest", Lillington Road. Widowed a second time when John Corbett died in 1904, Cecilia moved back to Market Drayton where she lived with a servant/companion until her death in April 1913.

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*This article is based partly on a longer piece in "History Ireland" by Brian Griffin, Senior Lecturer in History at Bath Spa University, information from National Archives Census returns, and extracts from the Leamington Courier/ National Newspaper Archive online.*