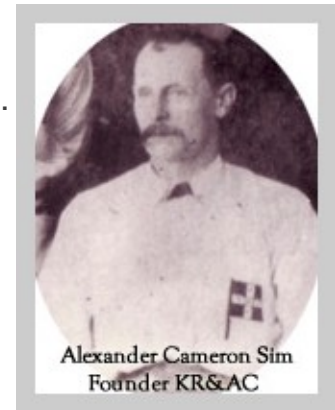


A Distinguished History

The Kobe Regatta & Athletic Club has a long and fascinating history spanning three centuries. The club's fortunes have been closely tied to the oft turbulent emergence of modern Japan. The club has survived extremes of fortune which would have felled any lesser an organisation, yet through the persistence and dedication of its members, the club can look back on a record of significant contribution to the lives of both foreigners and Japanese in the Kobe region and beyond for over 135 years. As such, it is important to understand the history of the development of the port of Kobe.



Japan Opens to the World

Nearly three centuries of isolation from the outside world came to an end when in 1853 Commodore Matthew Perry led an armed expedition on a mission to 'open' Japan. Under pressure from European warships in Japanese ports, eventually the government opened the country and concluded treaties with foreign powers. The treaties included extra-territoriality by which foreign residents in Japan came under the legal jurisdiction of their own countries' consuls. The abolishment of the policy of seclusion threw Japan into turmoil. The Ansei Five-Power Treaties, which came into effect in July 1859, ended Japan's long disengagement from international, commercial and diplomatic networks.

The treaties also provided for the establishment of designated settlements for foreigners in the five Japanese ports of Nagasaki, Kanagawa (Yokohama), Niigata, Hakodate and Kobe. The political fallout brought about the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate, which was to be Japan's last. Power was transferred to the young emperor Meiji and Japan began a rapid process of industrialisation and modernisation, the so called Meiji Restoration. At this time the capital moved from Kyoto to Tokyo. In stark contrast to China, Japan accepted she could not match the military might of the European powers and employed a stance of tolerating the unequal treaties with the European powers whilst seeking to learn as much as possible from them.

The foreign settlements subsequently served as springboards for the modernisation of Japan (see left for Kobe Foreign Settlement circa 1870). In the process, the Kobe Foreign Settlement developed its own unique style of administration, architecture and economic activity and provided a venue for international exchanges on various levels.

The Foundation of the Club

It was in the Oriental Hotel within the Foreign Settlement that the clubs' founder met with 31 other enthusiasts, gathered by a notice in the Hyogo News. At this meeting, on the 23rd of September 1870, the KR&AC was founded by Alexander Cameron Sim (pictured at the top of this page).

This was less than three years after the Port of Kobe had been opened when the foreign population, excluding Chinese, stood at only 300. Mr A. C. Sim, a Scotsman, a pharmacist by profession and an all round athlete, would become a part of the fabric of Kobe over the next 30 years. In 1870, within six months of its foundation, the club moved into a newly fabricated boathouse and gymnasium in an area known as the Eastern Chamber on the southern shore of the Kobe Foreign Settlement - the current site of Kobe Customs House at the end of the Flower Road. This was the stage for Kansai's first ever regatta, held on December 24th, 1870 with Cameron Sim acting as umpire and starter.

To the right you will find a map showing the location of the Foreign Settlement, the bordered area adjacent to the river on the right hand portion of the map. The original site of the KR&AC is to the very bottom right of the settlement. This river was diverted in 1871 and is now the site of the Flower Road in Kobe.

Interport: A Tradition is Born

In 1871 the first interport sporting event between the 'Southern port', Kobe and 'Northern port', Yokohama was held. As the railway did not extend as far as Kobe at that time the Kobe rowing team traveled to Yokohama by steamer to compete with the Yokohama Rowing club and the Nippon Rowing Club. Here began the long tradition of annual interport sporting fixtures between Kobe and Yokohama which are still keenly competed today. (To the right you can see an athletics competition in 1905 and a picture of the recreation ground in 1920.)

In 1872, with the assistance of Mr Hirobumi Ito (Later Prince Ito, one of the founders of modern Japan), moves were made to secure athletic facilities for the clubs. In 1875 an area within the Foreign Settlement was designated "as a perpetual trust for the common recreation of Foreigners and Japanese" and was named the 'Recreation Ground'. In May 1877 the first athletic sports were held on the Recreation Ground. A year later a new club gymnasium was constructed on the site. In 1880 a typhoon destroyed the boathouse on the Eastern Chamber site and the gymnasium on the Recreation Ground site. This would be the first of many challenges, both natural and man-made, that would test the resilience of the club to the core.

Contribution to Sport in Japan

Over the years, many persons and organisations have laid spurious claim to have introduced certain sports to Japan. The fact is that clubs such as the KR&AC and its counterpart in Yokohama, the YC&AC, served as incubators for non-Japanese sports such as football, rugby, baseball, rowing and tennis. The clubs would often organise games against crew members from visiting warships and other vessels. The Japanese, students in particular, observed with considerable interest. In this informal manner western sports were first introduced to Japan.

The KR&AC can look back on a proud contribution to the introduction of western sports to Japan. The first rowing regatta in Kobe and the Kansai region was held by the KR&AC on December 24th 1870. The first official football match in Japan was held between the KR&AC and YC&AC on February 18th 1888 with Kobe the eventual winners (See below left). This fact was acknowledged by the world footballing authorities as the same two clubs were invited to play their annual interport fixture, fully 113 years later, at the 70,366 capacity Yokohama stadium ahead of the 2002 Korea Japan World Cup Finals (See below right).

The club also made considerable contributions to other sports. Japan's first olympic medallist was taught the crawl method in the professional swimming pool at the club's Mirume site. This same pool also fostered the beginnings of water polo in Japan. Rugby, tennis and hockey in Japan were all aided in their development in no small part by the KR&AC and the YC&AC in their respective areas. Over the years the club also staged baseball, lawn bowls, cricket, ice hockey and basketball. Below you will find a selection of the teams which represented the KR&AC in the late 1800's and early 1900's.

In 1894 Japan finally succeeded in negotiating the abolition of the former treaties and replacing them with trade pacts similar to those concluded among European countries. The new pacts became effective five years later in July 1899, placing Japan on an equal international footing with the Western powers. As a result, the foreign settlements, including that in Kobe, ceased to exist as official entities. With the end of extra-territoriality the club was now subject to the will of the Japanese authorities. This saw the beginning of significant changes for the KR&AC.



In 1880, as a result of the expansion of the port area, the site of the old boathouse was becoming increasingly untenable and the land was sold to the Kobe Pier Co. New grounds were leased at Ono-hama. But in 1900, with the Port of Kobe ever expanding, the club again sold its seafront holdings and moved out 4 miles East to Mirume. Over the next 40 years the club enjoyed a golden period at its Recreation Ground and Mirume properties with varied social and sporting activities - athletics, rowing, swimming, water polo, sailing, yachting, lawn bowls and tennis. At that time the Mirume grounds were a 30 minute rickshaw ride from Kobe or alternatively, a short ride by steam launch to the private Mirume pier (See left).

The KR&AC grounds and facilities were always a focus for gatherings of the foreign community and for international societies. On March 3rd 1905 the registration of the KR&AC as a Shadan Hojin (a corporate juridical institution for non-profit making purposes) was accepted by the Japanese authorities. Later, in 1923, in the aftermath of the great earthquake, the club opened its facilities to shelter refugees from Yokohama.

The Pacific War: Clouds Gather

By the 1930's the Mirume boathouse effectively was situated inland, a result of progressive land reclamation schemes. The club then constructed a sea-water swimming pool the size of two tennis courts, extending the purpose of the property until 1939. However, in 1939, with the Japanese war machine gearing up, the KR&AC was forced to sell its Mirume holdings, lock stock and barrel, to Kobe Steel Works which at the time was manufacturing war materials. After great difficulty new grounds were purchased at Fukae and new club premises were completed in the summer of 1940. But in 1941, before they could even be used, the club was again forced to sell up as it was near the site of a contemplated aircraft factory. When war broke out in 1941 the club was in the position of having no fixed assets other than the Recreation Ground gymnasium and clubhouse in Kano-cho. When inflation hit the economy, the club was much more a victim than most other clubs of its type. At the end of 1941 the club was closed by the police, only to be opened again under strict monitoring two weeks later.

Then in January 1944 the Japanese army commandeered the Recreation ground clubhouse and gymnasium. The club moved to premises at Suwayama but was ejected by the Japanese military police who were unhappy with the clear view of the city it provided. The wartime committee then purchased a property in Kitano-cho only to lose its only home and investment when it was destroyed by allied air raids shortly thereafter. In March 1945 the club moved into a temporary home at the Shoiya Club, which in July was occupied by the Japanese Naval Authorities. Bereft of home, the wartime committee suspended all club activities until the end of the war.

A New Beginning

In October 1945, two months after the surrender of Japan, the KR&AC was permitted to move into its Shoiya premises again. At the end of the war the Recreation Ground, which had been sequestered by the Japanese Military, was subsequently sequestered by the Occupation Forces. Four years later the club was permitted to use the tennis court on these grounds. Eventually in June 1952 the club's town premises were returned by the US Military and the club was officially re-opened on February 14th 1953.

The club had overcome its darkest years when at times there seemed little hope of survival. It naturally took time to revive the friendly competitive games with Japanese teams and to rebuild the club's sporting facilities. However, through the determination, sacrifice and collective effort of its mixed international membership the club pulled itself to its feet again. This was not the last challenge to face the club. In December 1955 the club received notice from the city of Kobe that they would have to vacate the Tennis Courts. Shortly thereafter the City followed up with a demand for a significant sum of money to aid the rehabilitation of the Recreation Ground.

Then an additional scale of charges were proposed for the use of the Recreation Ground, designated in 1875 "as a perpetual trust for the common recreation of Foreigners and Japanese". The signals were clear that the city wanted the land. In 1957 the club was notified that the city, wishing to expand Kano-cho, intended to relocate the KR&AC entirely to nearby Isogami Park. On December 27th 1961 at an Extra-ordinary General Meeting of members the club accepted the city's terms of surrender of the club's premises. The Recreation Ground premises were formally signed over on February 6th 1962. Six months later, an opening ceremony was held at the club's new Isogami Park premises. And over 40 years later this is still the home of the Kobe Regatta & Athletic Club.

On September 23rd 1970 the club celebrated its 100th anniversary. The club received recognition for its significant contribution to the lives of its many members and the surrounding community as well as sport in Japan. In January 1995 after the Great Hanshin Earthquake the club once again made its facilities available to earthquake victims. Its sports ground was shut for over a year to provide vital storage space for cleared debris. The KR&AC later received official recognition of its contribution in a city ceremony.

