

RUGGER

A History of Rugby Union in the Peterborough Area

**with special reference to the history of
Peterborough Rugby Union Football Club**

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It is widely believed that the sport of rugby has its origins with the initiative of William Webb-Ellis who in 1823 "with a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time, first took the ball in his arms and ran with it, thus originating the distinctive feature of the Rugby game". Thus reads the plaque erected in 1895 at Rugby School. His reputation as the originator of the sport finds expression in the naming of the Rugby Union World Cup trophy - the Webb Ellis Cup.

But is his reputation fully deserved? There is evidence that many versions of the sport of football (with many spelling variations) including handling the ball were being played well before Webb - Ellis came on the scene and there is equally evidence that his action had very little influence at the time. I shall return to Webb Ellis a little later on, but first, in tracing the history of the sport we need to go back over 2000 years.

The origins of the sport go back at least to Roman Times with a game called Harpastum. Harpastum was very much like rugby involving two teams whose sole objective was to carry a leather ball stuffed with feathers or cloth over the opponent's goal line.

Variations of this game carried on through the centuries. In the twelfth century a popular game of football between two villages ranged over many miles and could go on for days. They were brutal, savage affairs including the use of blunt instruments. Authorities generally did not approve, believing that men's time should be spent more profitably in military training. England, Scotland and France all had laws banning football in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. However different versions, all incredibly violent, continued to be played throughout Europe, and in England it was not until the nineteenth century, with a more effective control by Sir Robert Peel's police force, that the game went into decline.

Not so in the public schools however where the boys were in control of the continuation of the game through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Winchester, Eton (50 years before the famous Eton Wall game), Harrow, Charterhouse, Shrewsbury and Westminster led the way.

There is little mention of football at Rugby school until 1800. By the 1820s however the game was well established. Sides were picked from the Upper school with younger boys - the fags, sent to keep goal at each end. No one was allowed to run with the ball in his grasp towards the opposite goal. Boys could catch the ball but they then had to retire back, the opposition only being allowed to advance to the point where the ball was caught. It was this rule that was broken by Webb Ellis in 1823. What weight do we place on his action?

The official archivist at Rugby School who might be thought to have some sympathy with the Webb Ellis role said that fellow players probably thought that the move was unfair. A Committee of Old Rugbeians in 1880 said "the innovation was of doubtful legality for some time, and only gradually became accepted as part of the game, but obtained customary status between 1830 and 1840 and was only legalised first in 1841-1842.

By 1845 Rugby School had a written set of laws which were updated annually.

We would recognise many of these laws today. "Knock-on" and "off side", were much the same then as now. Some we would not recognise, such as the law which provided for a drop kick after the ball had hit a tree.

Another feature we wouldn't recognise today was "hacking". Hacking might be scientific, consisting of a gentle kick to the runner's back leg when in the air bringing the runner to the ground or it could simply be a violent kick to either leg. It is perhaps not all that reassuring to know that hacking was not allowed above the knee nor were projecting nails or iron plates on the heels or soles of the boots.

At this time the footballs were made of pigs bladders encased in leather, a major supplier being Gilberts the shoemakers. However after the wife of Richard Linden, a rival to Gilberts,

died of a lung disease after years of blowing up the bladders, a safer way was sought. Rubber for the inner bladder was first used in 1862

Different schools played to their own laws and it was not until 1848 that a number of schools got together to try to produce common laws. In the meantime as public school boys moved on and wanted to continue to play the sport, clubs were being formed - first at Universities and Colleges such as Guys Hospital and Trinity College, Dublin and then in towns and cities. Blackheath was the first town club, being established in 1857. In 1861 Blackheath and Richmond played their first game under Harrow Rules, changing later to Rugby Rules under the influence of old Rugbeians. Perhaps they were anxious to take advantage of the 1862 Rugby Rule that 'Although it is lawful to hold any player in a maul, this holding does not include attempts to throttle, or strangle, which are totally opposed to all principles of the game'.

Attempts to codify a set of laws continued but there was emerging a clear split between the supporters of a kicking code and a handling code. In 1863 a Committee of Cambridge men in which many public schools were represented drew up a set of laws which made no mention of running with the ball. A rival group in London proposed a different set of laws that encouraged holding the ball and hacking. The two groups met at the Freemason's Tavern at Lincoln Inns Field to see if the differences could be resolved. They couldn't and the two codes split irreversibly, one evolving into soccer and the other into rigger.

In the 1860s there were around 20 clubs playing rugby football in the London area all employing variations of the Rugby School laws. In 1870 it was recognised that authoritative control was necessary and in the following year the Rugby Football Union was established. Common laws were drawn up and hacking and tripping were expressly forbidden. Once the sport was launched with its own code it rapidly spread throughout Britain and the World. The first International was played in 1871 between England and Scotland. As the popularity of the sport spread, particularly in the North of England, demands arose for "broken time payments" for money lost while playing rugby. Divisions arose between those in favour of payment and those against it leading to the split between the then amateur code and the professional Northern Union, later to become the Rugby League.

It is at this point we can turn to Peterborough to see when rugby was first played. The earliest reference I have found is in the diaries of Reverend Walter Debenham Sweeting, second master at Kings School who, in his diaries, records a game of football at Tout Hill in 1862, another against the "Training College" in 1863 and one against the boys of Oakham School in 1867. Sweeting states that the boys at Oakham "win every game, partly in consequence of the Kings School not quite realising the rules". This comment alone points up the problems that arose from the failure at that time to have a common set of laws accepted across the Country.

Amongst the Kings School archives is another most revealing and fascinating document - The Football Rules of the Kings School, Peterborough, dated October 20th 1868. That is three years before the laws drawn up by the Rugby Football Union. We can assume that they closely follow the laws that emerged after the 1863 split with the kicking code. Running with the ball was now allowed to any player, "provided he makes a fair catch, or catches off the first bounce". There was no deliberate "tripping, shinning or hacking" and, in addition to nails and iron plates being forbidden on a player's boots, so also was gutta percha. Pitches were up to 150 yards by 100 yards, i.e. half as big again as a modern pitch.

We also at this time pick up our first references to a town rugby club. In 1870, two years after Kings printed its laws, the Peterborough Football Club was formed with printed laws which were very close indeed to the Kings laws. The new Club had a formal constitution with elected officers. The Captain in that first year was H. Roper, the Secretary was J. W. Buckle and the Committee Messrs Brand, Giles and Brown. Buckle was the son of Samuel Buckle who founded the solicitor's practice in 1844. An original set of the laws and the first fixture card is retained by the Peterborough Museum.

In the year the Club was founded two games were played against Kings School. Sweeting tells us that "on the first day neither win, on the second, after a hard fought game, the Town Club wins".

Throughout the 1870s the school and the club were quite active. On 27 February 1874 Kings and the Town Club played each other once again. The account of the match tells us of the key difference between the game at that time and the modern game. Sweeting records that the school win one game and two touchdowns. The Town were much amazed by the result and not a little chagrined. In the return match a week later, the boys won 4 touchdowns but there was no game decided. In the Peterborough and Huntingdonshire Standard this was called "little more than a drawn game", which elicited a letter from the secretary of the school club protesting that in this "drawn game" the school scored four touchdowns and the "Town did not score anything at all". . But technically a draw it was. At that time a touchdown (or try in modern parlance) scored no points at all. It simply conveyed the right to take a kick at goal.

It was not until 1886 that England attempted to introduce a points system to determine the outcome of games when they designated a try worth 1 point and a goal (conversion) 3 points. The value of a try was increased to 2 points in 1892, 3 points in 1905, 4 in 1973 and 5 in 1992.

Other significant changes included the number of players in a team which was reduced from 20 in 1863 to 15 in 1876.

It was in 1876 that Oundle School started to play rugby instead of "Association" rules. Their second game was against Peterborough. The school lost five goals to nil, but the school magazine notes that the defeat was not thought to be a disgrace "as there were in the Peterborough team two men who have played for England and it is hardly to be expected that we should prove victorious against Clubs composed entirely of men as their weight tells so very much against us". Means were obviously found to overcome this unfair advantage as the next six games resulted in four wins for the school and two draws. They went on to play teams from Oundle Town, Stamford, Kettering Cambridge and Rushden. In 1889 they played Peterborough Football Club in a match that the School magazine, The Laxtonian, declared was only settled after "a little polite argument and a large quantity of parliamentary language".

In the 1880/81 season the Peterborough Football Club fixture card records 12 games, of which only one was due to be played on a Saturday. All other games were played on weekdays, with Thursday being the favourite. The card records that "Practise" was on Thursdays and Saturdays at 3.30pm. There are a number of recorded instances of the Peterborough team turning up late, leading to foreshortened games or games ending in darkness.

Where were Kings and the Peterborough Football Club playing their games 125 years ago? E. B. Whyley, headmaster in 1867 records that he had secured some ground near the school at an annual rent to the Hon. George Fitzwilliam of 5 guineas. Sweeting refers to matches in the 1870s at Boroughbury Field owned by a Henry Little. The precise location is uncertain but it is likely to have been in the Park Road/Broadway area before those roads were developed as we know them today. So appreciative were the boys that in 1972 they presented to Mr Little an ornamental dish for his dining table. His letter of thanks to the Boys of The King's School is signed "Your Sincere and Faithful Friend".

Matches were also recorded at the Town Cricket Ground which was also the ground of Peterborough Football Club, which appears to have been shared at that time with the Peterborough and Northamptonshire Joint Agricultural Show. Admission to the Club matches was 2d. In 1879 the School was still playing at Tout Hill. This last venue was withdrawn in August of that year and for a while the school played on "a lumpy field at the end of Gravel Walk" Presumably this was in the area of the Werrina or Bishop Creighton School. However the field proved unsuitable and was soon given up.

Rugby and Soccer were still intertwined in the 1880s. In 1885 the Peterborough and Spalding clubs played both codes against each other with some players appearing in both games.

I have found very little on the fortunes of Peterborough Football Club through the 1880s and 1890s although matches continued to 1893 when Old Scarlet's Almanac records the club ground to be at the Town Cricket Ground. At this time the Club President was A. Percival, the Captain G. W. Phillips, the Treasurer J. B. Craig and the Secretary M. Bruster. It appears that subsequently, in the mid 1890s, the Club went into decline and newspapers carry reports of Peterborough players turning out for other clubs. This was part of what appears to be a general decline in club rugby at this time. The Laxtonian in 1891 records that "There are now-a-days so few Rugby Union Clubs in this County that we depend for most of our matches upon teams from Cambridge". Late cancellations were also common as the Oundle School were "time after time disappointed at the eleventh hour" It declared "hope deferred maketh the heart sick ", and "very sick and sore did our team feel when frequently balked of a match through no fault of their own".

By 23 November 1898 the Peterborough Advertiser carries a piece that "it was not possible to arrange a fixture list for Peterborough Town Football Club so the hope that even the shade of its former self would have continued this season is doomed". An attempt to revive interest was made in the following February when a Peterborough and District XV played an East Midlands XV at the Midland Railway Club which was probably at the railway company's site at Midland Road. Two England internationals played including W. Yiend, a former Peterborough Player, and players from as far afield as Kent, Coventry and Gloucester.

Unfortunately the desired effect was not achieved and the following report appeared in the Peterborough Advertiser the following week:

'Several Peterborough gentlemen are anxious to see a Rugby football club established in the city. The match last week proved interesting certainly to those spectators who understood the laws of the game. The majority present enjoyed the fun but left the field ignorant of the result of the game. Many were attracted out of pure curiosity for a Rugger match is but seldom witnessed, association football is more appreciated by the public of the city.'

Enthusiasm for the sport also declined at King's School which in 1886 switched to Association Football. The school magazine reports that "Only a few years ago Football was Rugby Football and Eton Football and Harrow Football, each different, and when the boys from these schools came to University they carried on their own particular game. Then some genius invented Association Football which combined the best points of all the others."

At nearby Stamford School there were many switches in the code of football played. Like Kings they moved to Association Football in the mid 1880s. By 1907 they were playing rugby, but in 1912 they reverted to soccer and then went back to rugby again in 1917. In Spring 1918 the school magazine records "The school seems to have got thoroughly into the swing of Rugger, but were unable to secure any outside matches". However within two years the school had a fixture list of ten games, including a match against Stamford Town.

The revival of the game in Peterborough did not occur until the 1920s. In September 1921 there was a match against Wellingborough at Midland Road. The Club has a letter from Claude Knight who in 1998 at the age of 97 wrote to say that he, with another Old Stamfordian, Abe Barlow played in this "pioneer game".

The official formation of a new club was however delayed until 1924 when rules were approved and officers were elected. Former Burgh Society members Arthur. Mellows was elected captain and E. W. Jeffreys vice captain. So the two law practices which eventually came together as Buckle Mellows had common ground in rugby many years earlier with Buckle being Club secretary in 1870 and Mellows Club captain in 1924.

An annual subscription was agreed at 10s 6d. Fixtures were arranged against neighbouring towns but appropriately the first game was against Kings School who switched back from soccer to being a rugby playing school in 1923. The school magazine records that the sport

soon showed its "beneficial influence as a moulder of character". The Peterborough Citizen recorded that 200 spectators watched a scrappy game that the Club won 39-3. This was a creditable result for the school as at the start of the previous season none of the players tried for the team had either played or witnessed a game of rugby in their life.

Matches were now being played at the Showground on Eastfield Road. The newspaper's cartoonist attended and produced a number of cartoons to mark the event including one illustrating cows among the spectators, marking once again the sharing of the ground with the Agricultural Society.

This appears to have been a recurring problem. Past Burgh Society member Ken Wheeler, Deputy Headmaster at Kings, records in the 1950s that the school rented three pitches from the Peterborough Agricultural Showground, which was also rented to a local butcher for cattle grazing. He states "Before a game the boys drove the cattle off and then hoped to avoid being brought down in the evidence of their presence. It was as unpleasant and unhealthy then as it would be now but, so many things were put up with because there was no alternative. We either played on those pitches or we didn't play at all, for cattle grazing for meat rations was obviously much more important than boys playing rugby".

Meanwhile Stamford School went from strength to strength. In 1923 they beat the newly formed King's School team, 91-0, a result that was nearly matched the following year with an 83-3 victory. The Stamfordian magazine recorded that "A game with such prolific scoring is bad: while unduly flattering the ability of the victors, it unnecessarily emphasises the shortcomings of the vanquished". They also played Peterborough Town in the Club's first year and on a quagmire of a pitch in the pouring rain the school won 6-0.

Peterborough Club continued playing through the 1920s and 30s with long serving officers Arthur Mellows and Roy Westcombe early Club Captains, and Dr Burrell, the resident doctor at Wansford who became the Club's first President. Mellows, in 1935 to 1936 combined his services to local rugby with the city mayoralty. The Club secretaries in 1927 were H. J and C. W Sturton. The headquarters at this time was the Grand Hotel. One notable game in April 1925 was against Park House, a South London club which ran five XVs every Saturday. The visitors stayed for three days in the City and on the Saturday evening they went to the Theatre Royal to see the production "Sally". An early Club Tour!

The Club was prepared to travel considerable distances. On 16 February 1926 they played at Sidcup in Kent, losing 51-3 having one short, a player having missed the train at Charing Cross.

Peterborough Rugby Club was not alone in the City, playing rugby at this time. Kings School had regular fixtures during the 1930s against a Westwood Works XV as did Stamford School. Deacons School started playing rugby in 1925

Play was suspended during the War although a few diehards from the Peterborough Club and the Old Deaconians calling themselves the Peterborough Nondescripts managed games in 1939 including one against the Peterborough RAF on Westwood Airfield. The match was won by the RAF who fielded several county players.

Westwood managed to keep going through the war as many of the players were not able to join HM Forces having reserved occupations. Jim Deboo records that they persuaded John Horrell, to let them put up some posts in his field behind the farmhouse next to the airfield. Jim was vice captain and Jeff Odham the captain. At the end of the War they played a challenge match against the Free French Air Force. Around 600 spectators watched a hard fought game end in an honourable draw. After the War Roy Westcombe was instrumental in restarting the Peterborough Football Club and Westwood players moved across to the larger club. In the 1950s when Baker Perkins were recruiting well qualified apprentices they were able to form a new club. A sports ground and pavilion were created at the rear of the works and remained in use until the company moved to Paston, when the rugby club played at the Phorpres Club on London Road. The club continues to this day, playing at Deacons school but it no longer has any connection to the company.

Kings School also managed to keep playing through the War although fixtures proved hard to get and labour became scarce for such jobs as taking down the goal posts and transporting them back to school. The boys engaged in their own war effort by digging trenches around the playing field - just in case. Trench evacuation was practised daily. One match against Deacons proved impossible to finish as air raid sirens sounded mid-game; in another which was completed, a Kings School broadsheet records that the school kept up its winning sequence by "wiping up Deacons". 1940 was recorded as "a good season with plenty to remember - trains that refused to start and long hours in darkened stations".

Peterborough Rugby Club resumed playing in 1946 with initial trials at Kings School Field at Bishop's Road. The first match resulted in a win against Newark-on-Trent 22-3. The 1950s also saw the introduction of a new club on the Peterborough scene. Perkins formed a club which by the 1970s had three teams. Unfortunately the fortunes of the club declined as the number of employees fell and by 1985 the club had folded despite trying to attract players who were not company employees.

Throughout this period the Club continued to play at the Showground at Eastfield Road with a clubhouse beneath the tiered seating of the Show grandstand. It seems that the rugby club followed the Showground around the City with a natural synergy between the winter use by the Club and the summer use by the Agricultural Society. The relationship was not always the most harmonious however. Roy Bird, Agricultural Society secretary records that he spent more time sorting out issues with the club than with the Show. The night after the end of season drinking party at the Club when the revellers left the gate open and Roy was telephoned at 1:00 am to be told that a shire horse was wandering around Dogsthorpe was probably not the finest moment in their relationship. The tie was finally severed in 1965 when the Agricultural Society moved to Alwalton and sold the Eastfield site to the Peterborough Joint Education Board.

In the following years part of the site was allocated to the Technical College and the land on which the Club was situated was sold for housing development. The Club was relocated by the Council to its present site at Second Drove, off Fengate on the east side of the City. A 28 year lease was signed in 1974. Pitches were formed on top of a former County Council refuse tip, and a prefabricated clubhouse was built again on made-up land. It was not long before differential settlement produced some very challenging undulating pitches and a clubhouse that was in danger of breaking its back. There followed eight years of dispute between the Club and the Council including a threatened lawsuit against the Council for alleged negligence. The dispute was finally resolved with a grant of £15,000 from the Council for repairs to the clubhouse.

Further negotiations with the Council in the late '90s led to the reconstruction of the undulating pitches and a new lease in which the club receives an annual grant from the City Council and is fully responsible for the maintenance of the pitches and clubhouse. A grant has also been received from the receipts of the Landfill Tax from which a new training area has been built. The Club now has among the best facilities in the East Midlands.

Since moving to Second Drove the Club has had a number of successes being East Midlands Champions three times and winning the Hunts and Peterborough Cup fourteen times. It is almost certainly the biggest sports club in the City with 650 members including 370 players in teams of senior men, senior women, colts, junior boys, junior girls and minis. In the '70s to '90s the club could not accommodate the growing demand for opportunities to play rugby and new clubs were formed at Oundle (1976), Deepings (1983) and Thorney (1992). Nationwide the picture is one now of falling interest. The number of players is declining and clubs are closing or amalgamating. At Peterborough the situation remains very healthy with increasing rather than reducing numbers.

To conclude, there are a number of notable local personalities who have played a significant role in the history of the Club. I have already spoken of Messrs Buckle and Mellows who were among the enthusiasts who founded the Club first in 1870 and then in 1924. An even greater role appears to have been taken by Dr Lionel Cottingham Burrell, Wansford's resident

doctor between 1922 and 1929 who was the Club's first President. He was an international rugby referee. His obituary in 1929 records that "it was largely due to his untiring efforts and unflinching zest that Peterborough Rugby Club has become such a flourishing body". The Club's appreciation published in the local paper spoke of their "sorrowful loss".

In the early years of the newly formed club, Roy Westcombe OBE, JP, played a prominent role, as Club captain from 1930 to 1936 and President from 1957 to 1976. In 1958 to 1959, like Arthur Mellows before him, he combined his presidency with the city mayoralty. However the longest serving officer of the Club was Wilf Saul, sports teacher at Deacons School who was on the Management Committee for 41 years including 28 as Chairman, then President. Both men served a year as President of the East Midlands Rugby Union.

Over the years the Club has generated a number of distinguished players, including it would seem five internationals, although I have not identified the two mentioned in the 1876 Oundle School report. The first of the other three was William Yiend (nicknamed Pusher), a railway traffic agent, who also played for Gloucester, Hartlepool, Keighley and Leicester. He was a Barbarian and had six full caps for England between 1889 and 1893 including one against the New Zealand Maoris played at Blackheath. In 1892 he played in the England side which won every game in the then Four Nations championship without conceding a point. The second was Michael Berridge, a Kings School pupil who went on to play for Peterborough, Northampton, and Leicester. He had representative games for the Barbarians, East Midlands and Combined Counties against Australia and South Africa and for England against Wales and Ireland in 1949.

The Clubs most notable international however is Ron Jacobs who in 1959/60 played in the England side that won the Triple Crown and the Calcutta Cup. He was captain of the England team in 1963/64, twice President of the East Midlands RFU and President of the Rugby Football Union in 1983.

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