THE BIRTH OF RUGBY IN EDINBURGH



how the handling code captivated the city

A talk by Andy Mitchell at the City Art Centre, Edinburgh, on 29 May 2025

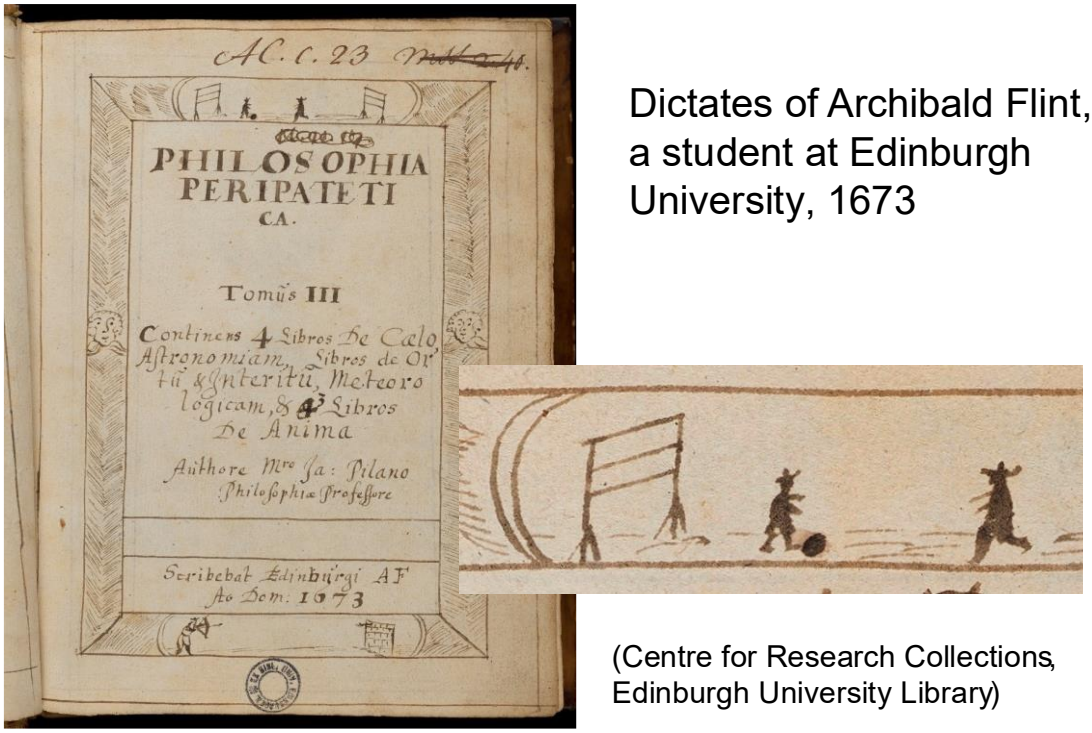
Edinburgh is right at the heart of rugby history for all sorts of reasons, of which the best known is the city playing host to the world's first rugby international.

As you will probably know, it was between Scotland and England at Raeburn Place in 1871, and to great acclaim, Scotland won. By then, the Scots had a wealth of experience as young men in the capital first played rugby football in the 1850s.

But to some extent that was an accident, as I will explain today. I'll start by talking about the pre-rugby days, and then take you through what happened over the course of the century and culminating in that famous victory over England. Those pioneers created a legacy that remains with us today as rugby continues to be a thriving sport at school, club and international levels.

If any of you came to my talk on football last week, the first few slides will look familiar, and that is because the pre-history of football is the same for all the modern codes of the game.

Earliest known illustration of football in Scotland



Dictates of Archibald Flint, a student at Edinburgh University, 1673

(Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University Library)

To demonstrate just how deep Edinburgh's football heritage runs, forms of football have been played in the city since medieval times, and it has been a popular game at school and university for hundreds of years.

Let's go back 350 years. A bored Edinburgh University student called Archibald Flint drew some doodles in the margins of his course notes, and that is how, in 1673, he made what is Scotland's earliest known illustration of football. There are just a couple of players, with oversized hats and rather quirky goalposts with three crossbars, but unmistakably playing football. What kind of football? It doesn't really matter, in those days it was a simple game whose rules depended on local custom and practice.

Archibald Flint also drew pictures of other sports: archery, billiards and tennis, so clearly he was an active type who got bored by his lectures and couldn't wait to get outside for a bit of sport.

Edinburgh's sporting 'world firsts'

Archery:
first club (1676, Royal Company of Archers)

Golf:
first club (1735, Burgess Golfing Society)
first rules (1744, Company of Gentlemen Golfers)
first trophy (1744, Edinburgh Silver Club)

Bowls:
first rules (1769, Edinburgh Society of Bowlers)
first trophy (1771, Edinburgh Silver Jack)

Gymnastics:
first multi-sport club and trophy (1786, Gymnastic Club)

Curling:
first rules (1811, Duddingston)
first national association of clubs (1838, Caledonian Curling Club)

It's fair to say that Edinburgh was something of a sporting hotbed in the age of enlightenment, and this is particularly noticeable in the 18th century. Some of the world's first sports clubs were formed here, and soon they organised some of the world's first competitions. For competitions you need a common understanding of how to determine the winner, so they wrote the earliest known rules.

There were thriving clubs for archery, golf, bowls, gymnastics and curling, as the city built up a wealth of experience and expertise in forming and running sports organisations and competitions. However these were largely recreations for older affluent men who had the time and the money. They didn't involve much exertion and football for adults was a latecomer to the party.

Early enthusiasm for football – school and university

- "We, the lads of the College, used to play at football on the grounds now covered by buildings." Henry Mackenzie, student at Edinburgh University in the 1760s

- "In due time I came to play ball in the College, instead of the High School Yards; yet I neglected not my studies." 'A Plain Man' writing about the late 18th century.

- "The games which had been handed down to us unchanged from one generation to another … football was then a first-rate game, though there was neither hacking, nor mauls, nor touching down to put life and limb in danger." Sir Robert Christison, reminiscing about the High School 1805-11

- "And life is itself but a game at football". Sir Walter Scott, writing in 1815.

Primarily, football was a game for schoolboys and students. It was played in the yards at the High School – at that time the only significant school in the city – which encouraged the boys to run around and be active. Some students at the university also found time to play the game. Here are a few quotes from men who enjoyed football:

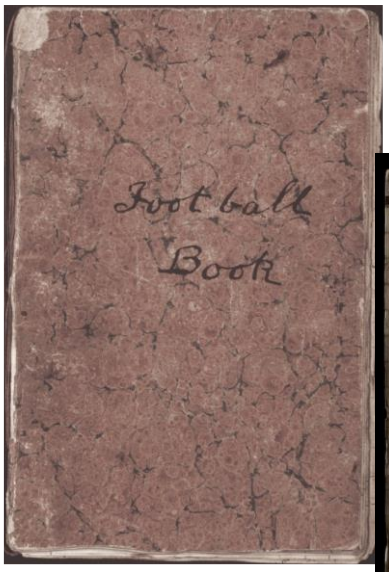
Henry Mackenzie, a student in the 1760s: "We, the lads of the College used to play at football on the grounds now covered by buildings." This refers to Lady Nicolson's Park, now Nicolson Square on the south side.

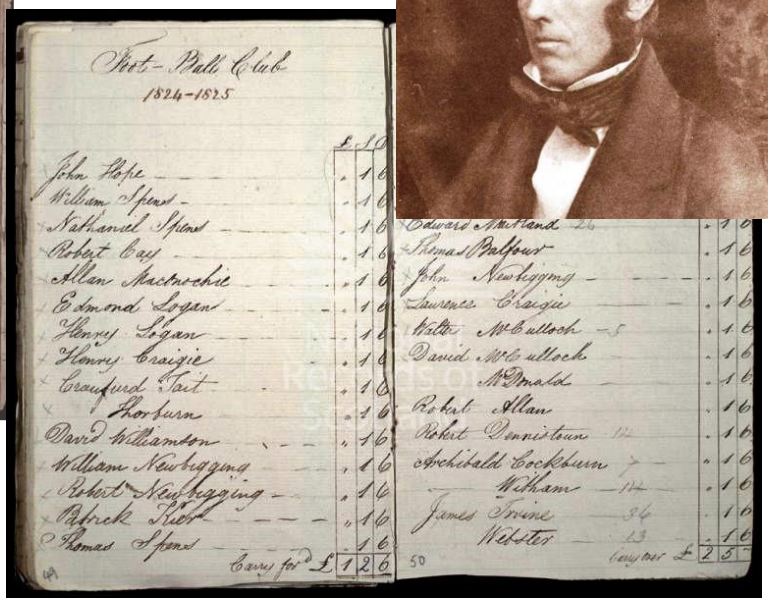
An anonymous correspondent to the *Scots Magazine* in 1824 wrote about his childhood in the late 18th century: "In due time I came to play ball in the College, instead of the High School Yards; yet I neglected not my studies."

The surgeon Sir Robert Christison, who was at the High School, wrote of "The games which had been handed down to us unchanged from one generation to another of High School boys … football was then a first-rate game, though there was neither hacking, nor mauls, nor touching down to put life and limb in danger."

And most famously, Sir Walter Scott, another High School boy, wrote "And life is itself but a game at football".

The Foot-Ball Club, first season 1824-25





Founded by John Hope, the world's first club dedicated to playing football.

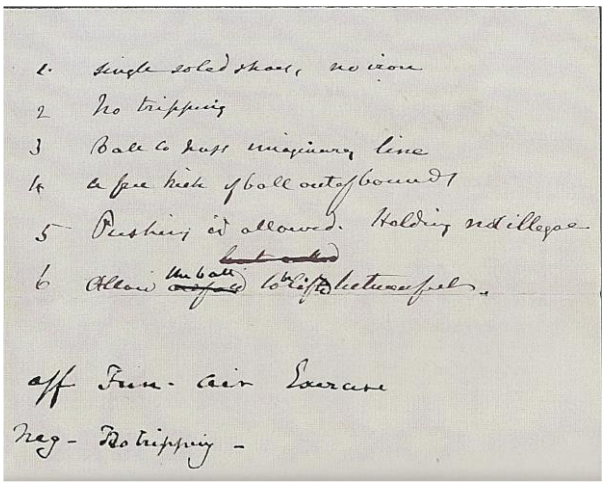
So, football was a popular game for the young and energetic, but it was not until the 1820s that adult men took the game out of the playground. The world's first club devoted to the sport of football was founded here in December 1824, the brainchild of John Hope, a 17 year old Law student who wanted to carry on the game he had played at the High School.

He called his new club simply The Foot-Ball Club because it was the only one, and we know plenty about it because John Hope was not just an obsessive organiser who wrote everything down, he was an obsessive hoarder who kept everything. All his papers are now held in the National Records of Scotland.

Hope found plenty of like-minded individuals and their names are all written neatly in his notebooks against their subscriptions. They paid a shilling and sixpence each to join, and the club met once or twice a week all year round to play football in a field at Dalry, which was then on the western edge of the city.

The world's first football rules, written by John Hope in 1833

1 Single soled shoes, no iron
2 No tripping
3 Ball to pass imaginary line
4 A free kick if ball out of bounds
5 Pushing is allowed. Holding not illegal
6 Allow the ball to be lifted between fields



How did they play? What they considered as 'football' is perhaps not a game we would immediately recognise today as either association or rugby football, because games of football were played to local custom and practice, not to a common code.

However, these handwritten rules from 1833 are the best indication we have that John Hope's club played a kicking game, which was vigorous and robust, but where handling the ball and violent play were forbidden. The same general principles applied pretty much everywhere in Britain: even at Rugby School there wasn't a general acceptance of handling the ball at that time. If you believe the Webb Ellis story it was not until he 'picked up the ball and ran with it' that the game started to develop in its modern form where the ball could be carried.

The formation of the Foot-Ball Club and the writing of those rules join the series of world firsts for Edinburgh in those other sports I mentioned earlier.

However, while the Foot-Ball Club met a need it was only open to those of a certain social standing and wealth who had the time for recreation and could afford to pay for it. The members were professional men – lawyers, accountants, doctors and so on – who had been educated at schools like the Royal High and Edinburgh Academy. The only reason the club was able to play was because John Hope took on the rental of a farmer's field, commissioned expensive handmade leather balls and bladders, and employed a man to blow up those balls and prepare the equipment like goalposts. He then recouped the expense through subscriptions.

John Hope ran the club for seventeen years, by which time he was in his 30s and couldn't find anyone else willing to take on the responsibility. So in 1841, it folded, which left a bit of a football vacuum.

Football in Edinburgh – part of everyday city life



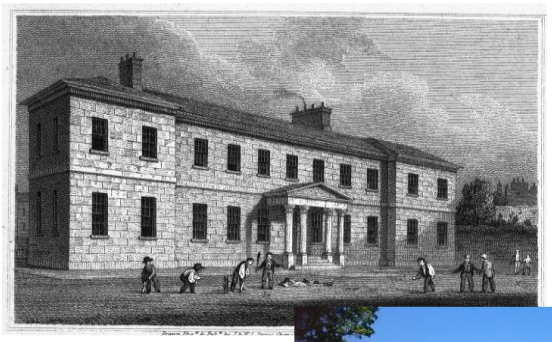
View from Calton Hill (Macgill & Schenck's Panorama of Edinburgh, 1841)

In the 1840s, therefore, we have something of a paradox. Football was popular in Edinburgh, part of everyday life as this engraving on Calton Hill shows, but largely limited to kickabouts rather than organised sport.

For the bulk of the population, there were three significant barriers: time, space and money. For starters, where would they find the time? John Hope and the lawyers could take afternoons off to play, but the working classes worked long hours for six days a week and in presbyterian Scotland there was little prospect of playing any sport on the seventh day, so the only realistic possibility was summer evenings.

Also, there were very few open public spaces in Edinburgh, and none of them really suitable for football – this was before the Meadows was open to the public, while spaces such as Bruntsfield Links and Leith Links were hotly contested by golfers, cricketers and others.

And finally, money. Football was not a cheap sport because of the cost of the leather balls and pig bladders, not to mention the hire of pitches.



The High School and its yards in 1819

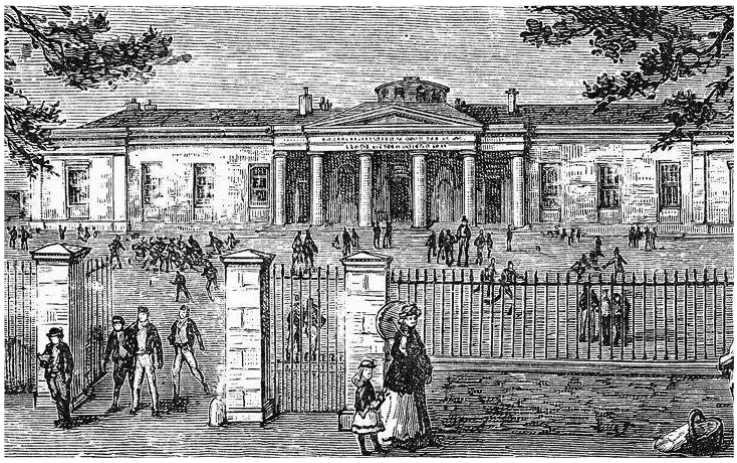


the same building today, in Infirmary Street

That wasn't such a problem within the city's schools, which had playgrounds (or yards) and football was widely played there but not on an organised basis.

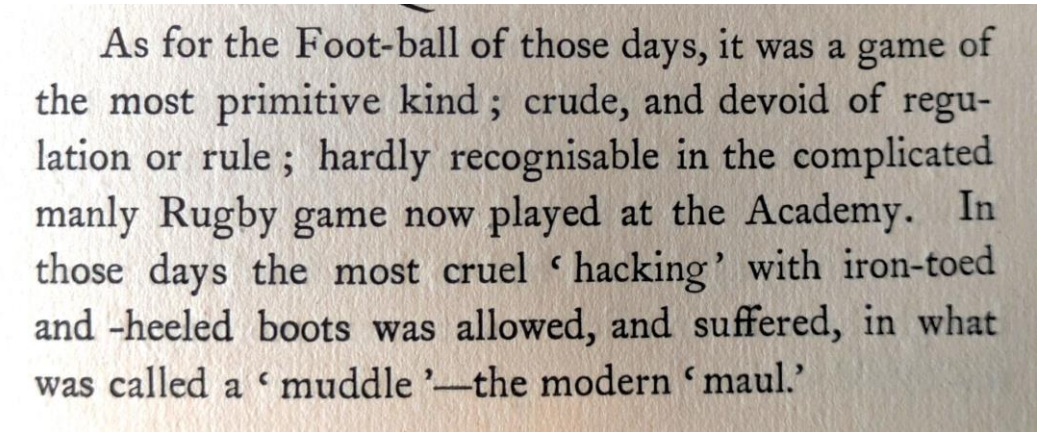
The prime example of this is the High School, where boys had played football since at least the 18th century. If you want to take a step back in time, and imagine how it was then, the High School Yards are still there in almost exactly the same layout, in Infirmary Street, just a ten minute walk from here. Of course, the School moved to Calton Hill in 1829, but the traditions remained.

The Edinburgh Academy yards (opened 1824)



It is clear that football of a kind was also played by boys at new schools such as Edinburgh Academy, founded in 1824, but they made no particular provision for organised sport, far less any matches, and the boys simply played amongst themselves in the school yards to the front. As with the High School, the Academy layout is virtually unchanged in 200 years.

Football at Edinburgh Academy in the 1840s



As for the Foot-ball of those days, it was a game of the most primitive kind; crude, and devoid of regulation or rule; hardly recognisable in the complicated manly Rugby game now played at the Academy. In those days the most cruel 'hacking' with iron-toed and -heeled boots was allowed, and suffered, in what was called a 'muddle'—the modern 'maul.'

"A game of the most primitive kind … crude and devoid of regulation … the most cruel hacking was allowed"
[*Chronicles of the Cumming Club*]

This is how an Edinburgh Academy boy reminisced about football in the 1840s: 'it was a game of the most primitive kind; crude and devoid of regulation or rule; hardly recognisable in the complicated manly Rugby game now played at the Academy. In those days the most cruel hacking with iron-toed and heeled boots was allowed, and suffered, in what was called a muddle – the modern maul'.

Quite what the attraction was for playing this kind of football is beyond me, but it does seem to have been popular, and somewhat perversely there were those who argued that hacking was a virtue, as it was thought to help boys learn how to bear pain. On the other hand, you can see why a set of rules would have been welcomed, to give some structure to the game.

Merchiston Castle School (1833) in its original setting, with playing fields in front



There is a similar story at Merchiston Castle, opened in 1833, and which unlike the High School and Academy did have its own grounds for outdoor games, albeit again just open space without any particular direction from the school. Of course the school is now in the suburbs but the old castle is still there, part of the Napier University campus, while the surrounds have all been built on.

Football at Merchiston Castle School before 1857

Our football was not the English game now in vogue—the Rugby rules had not then been heard of in the north, and Association did not come into existence before 1863—but the good old Scottish game, as it had been played for centuries, notwithstanding the Act of 1424 that "na man play at the fut ball." "There's no' the like o' me at the fit-ba," said Cuddie Headrigg. The whole school, masters and boys, young and old, big and little, played together and at once, divided into two sides, kicking the ball from one end of the field to the other.

There were no goals except the end of the field: there were no rules except that the ball must be kicked, not carried, but it might be caught, and if it was, the captor was entitled to a free and clear kick; there were no limits as to numbers or as to time; there were no points. All played in their ordinary clothes, masters wearing their tall silk hats, as was then common in the

'The good old Scottish game, as it had been played for centuries.'

'No rules except that the ball must be kicked, not carried, but it might be caught.'

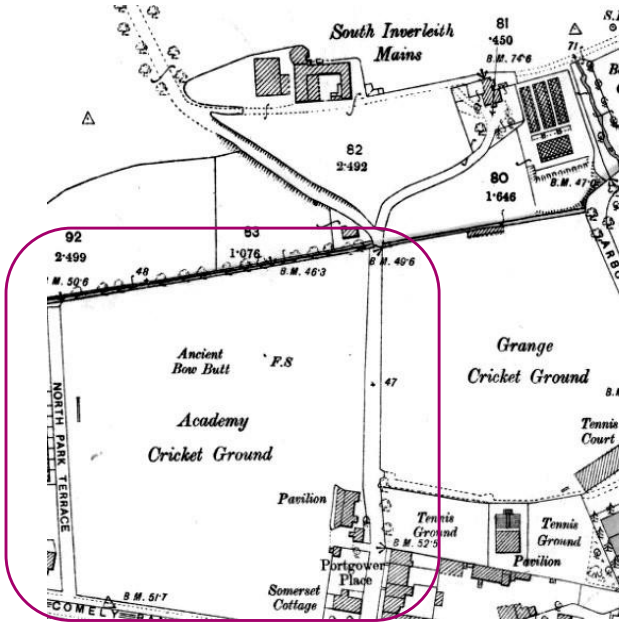
[Merchiston Castle School 1855-58]

Again, football was a primitive game at Merchiston. There were no rules except that the ball must be kicked, not carried, although it might be caught. There were no limits to numbers or to match duration, and the goal was simply the end of the field. All

very basic. It was described as ‘the good old Scottish game, as it had been played for centuries,’ and Merchiston football was based on understanding rather than written rules.

Not surprisingly, with no common code, each school kept to itself and there was no prospect of inter-school matches in Scotland. That was about to change, and the revolution started in the 1850s. That was when Rugby football captured the imagination and the first step towards its introduction here can be traced very precisely to 17 May 1854.

Edinburgh Academy Sports Field at Raeburn Place, opened 17 May 1854



Scotland’s first school sports ground

That day saw the opening – to great fanfare – of Scotland’s first private school sports ground, for the Edinburgh Academy, at Raeburn Place. It was primarily intended for cricket, which was already the established game in summer, but there was no real plan for the winter months, at least in an organised sense. But of course the boys wanted to play sport in winter and football was their game of choice.

And to take football in a specific direction, something happened in the autumn of 1854 which would prove to be monumental, the arrival at Edinburgh Academy of a 16-year-old boy called Francis Crombie. Together with his elder brother Alexander, he had spent the previous two years at Durham Grammar School, which was already playing rugby football, and in his back pocket he happened to have a little booklet of rules. That coincidence was essentially the spark which gave a new impetus to the traditional game of football which Edinburgh schoolboys had played for generations.

Francis and Alexander Crombie brought rugby to Edinburgh Academy from Durham in 1854

ENTERED MARCH, 1852.

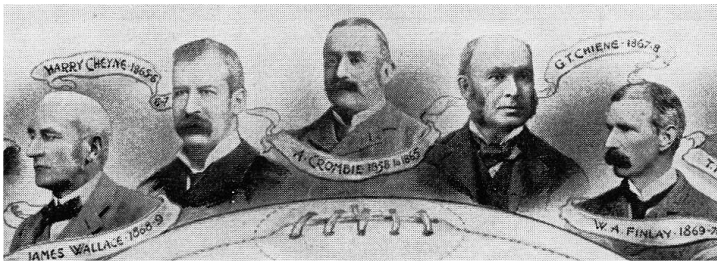
Crombie, Alexander.—B. 1836, son of A. Crombie, J.P., D.L., Thornton Castle, co. Kincardine. 2nd M.H. XI. 1853. Left Dec. 1853 (v). W.S. in Edinburgh. Major (Deeside Highland) 5th Vol. Batt. Gordon Highlanders. Retired 1887. Late Memb. of the Royal Archers (King's Body Guard for Scotland). J.P. and D.L. co. Kincardine and J.P. co. Aberdeen.
Address—Thornton Castle, Laurence Kirk, Kincardine-shire.

Crombie, Francis.—B. 1838, son of A. Crombie, J.P., D.L., Thornton Castle, co. Kincardine. 2nd M.H. XI. 1854. Left Sept. 1854 (v). Trin. Coll. Camb. B.A. (Sen. Opt.) 1860, M.A. 1863. D. 1861, P. 1862. Curacies 1861–66 and 1874–78. Minister at Ghazeepore, N.W.P., 1866–68; Chap. (Eccles. Est.) at Mhow 1868–71; V. of Bradborne with Ballidon, Derbys., 1878–91; V. of Long Grove, Herefs., since 1893.
Address—Long Grove V., Ross.

CROMBIE, Francis, 1854-6. Cl. 6, 7. b. 25 Jan. 1838; s. of Alexander Crombie, 11 Moray Place; XI. and XX. (Capt.).

Trin. Coll. Cantab; B.A. (Sen. Op.), 1860; M.A. 1863; C. of Bramshall, Uttoxeter, Staffs, and Norbury and Snelston, Derbyshire; Min. Calcutta Diocesan Additional Clergy Soc. at Ghazipur, N.W.P.; Chap. Bengal Establishment at Mhow; C. Haughton, Staffs; V. Bradborne, with Ballidon annexed, Derbyshire, and Longgrove, Herefordshire; m. Isabella Anne Williams. *Address*: Longgrove, Ross, Herefordshire.

Crombie brothers in Durham School Register (left) and Academy Register



There is a curious story about how the Crombie brothers came to be in Durham in the first place. In 1847, when they were aged 10 and 9, both boys went to Merchiston Castle School and they probably played a kind of football there, but more importantly they were taught by a charismatic teacher called Edward Humphreys.

In 1850, Humphreys set up his own private school, Salisbury House in Newington, and the Crombie boys followed him there. Then early in 1852, out of the blue, Humphreys was appointed headmaster of Cheltenham Grammar School and immediately closed his debt-ridden school in Edinburgh. This left the pupils in the lurch, and the Crombies' father had to find a new school for his two sons in a hurry. There was space at Durham, so off they went to boarding school and there they were introduced to rugby, taking it up with gusto.

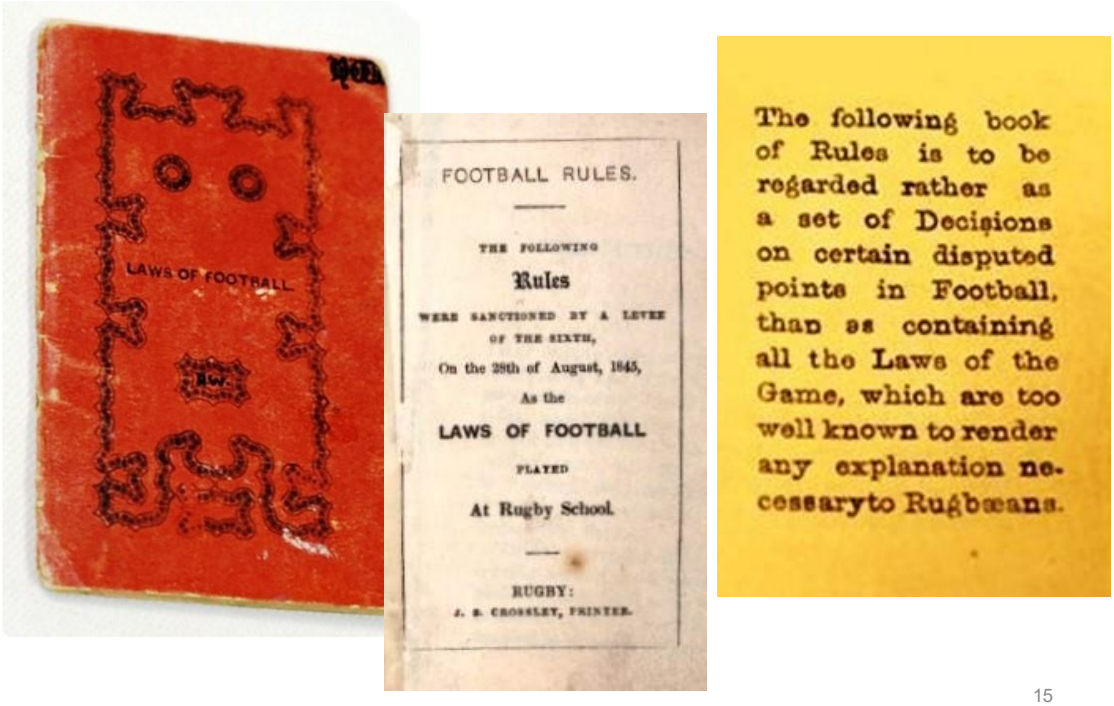
Then in 1854, when elder brother Alexander went to Edinburgh University, Francis was enrolled at the Academy for the last two years of his education.

There seems little doubt that his influence led to the Academy adopting the rugby code, and it does appear to have been a rapid transformation as by the time Francis Crombie left the Academy two years later, he had been elected as the school's first ever Captain of Football for 1855-56. That recognised not just his sporting prowess, but his understanding of the game and its rather complicated rules.

Meanwhile his elder brother Alexander, despite never having been at Edinburgh Academy, also kept on playing rugby and went on to found the Academical Football Club in 1857. The picture below comes from the Academical Club golden jubilee in 1907 when he was celebrated as its first captain.

It is no exaggeration that the Crombies changed the course of sporting history, and it interesting to speculate how different Scottish football might have been if the brothers had gone to any school other than Durham, perhaps one that played football as a kicking rather than a carrying game.

Rugby School rules, first published in 1846

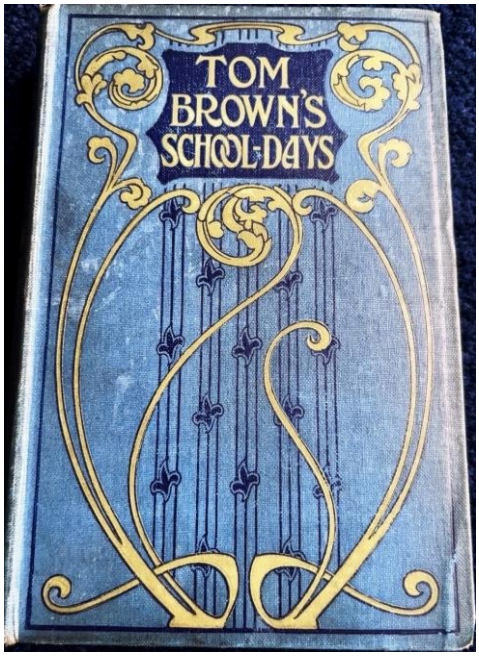


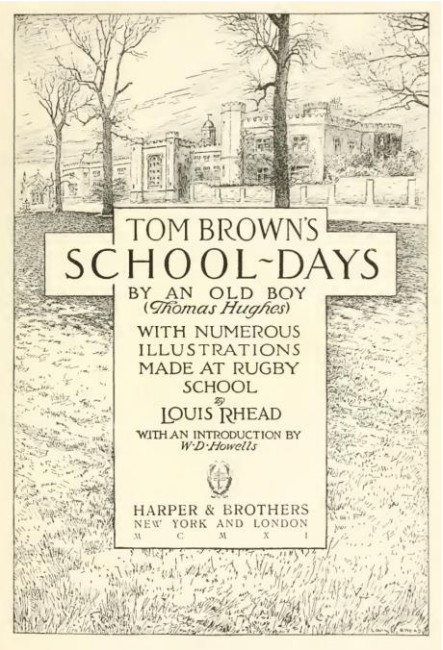
But was the game they played really the true Rugby football? You might think that's a daft question but rugby football meant different things in different places. What was played in Edinburgh was certainly close to the spirit of rugby, but there was plenty of scope for interpretations and variations.

In part, this can be explained by a close reading of the booklet which Rugby School published: 'The following book of Rules is to be regarded rather as a set of decisions on certain disputed points in Football, than as containing all the Laws of the Game, which are too well known to render any explanation necessary to Rugbaeans.' In other words, it was an outline guide rather than a complete rulebook. If you know, you know; if you don't, you can make it up, and that caused many a debate down the line.

To some extent that didn't matter as, at that point, any rugby played at the Academy was purely an internal affair and there are no records of any external matches.

Tom Brown's Schooldays, published in 1857





The next significant catalyst for change came with a book: in April 1857 the publication of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* caused a sensation. Although it focussed on school life at Rugby, and football was only a part of the story, the book had a meteoric impact on school sport and went a long way to making Rugby football the winter game of choice for so many.

To understand why it had such an impact, it came at a time when the British Empire was approaching its peak and needed a constant supply of young empire builders and military leaders, men who were expected to manage and to spread so-called British values. At home, rapid economic growth meant the country needed people to manage banks and factories, to safeguard the law, to nurture the masses while keeping them in their place.

Regardless of the flaws of that process, the model Victorian gentleman was expected to be disciplined, self-assured, fair-minded and untainted from scandal. For the schools which were tasked with providing these young men, the easy part was the educational part, in the classroom, which was rigidly controlled and where attainment could be measured.

But what about those mystical elements of 'manliness', 'character' and 'self-control'? Thomas Arnold, legendary headmaster of Rugby, summed it up as 'What we must look for is, first, religious and moral principle; second, gentlemanly conduct; third, intellectual ability'.

The answer lay in sport, and schools all over the country embraced Arnold's philosophy of a healthy mind in a healthy body (in Latin, *mens sana in corpore sano)*. This became known as Muscular Christianity, a catch-all for the cult of athleticism.

The publication of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* was the catalyst for the big step forward, and the values of the book provided the moral foundations for what would become rugby union football.

It was the ideal trade-off. It suited the schools as it meant they could meet their promise to parents to turn their sons into model gentlemen. And it gave the boys an outlet that encouraged a measured amount of aggression, and gave them the opportunity to prove themselves, to taste victory, to defend the honour of their school. While some people, even then, thought this was promoting sport over intellect, boys were more than willing to buy into the Rugby code as within a year of the book's publication there were school teams at Merchiston, Edinburgh Academy and Royal High.

Merchiston adopted rugby specifically so that they could play against the Academy. A match was mooted in the autumn of 1857 but had to be cancelled due to illness, so Merchiston's first inter-school match was on 13 February 1858 against the Royal High, which is thought to have started playing rugby in 1856. Merchiston eventually met the Academy on 11 December 1858, and have continued to meet them every year ever since, the world's oldest continual rugby fixture.

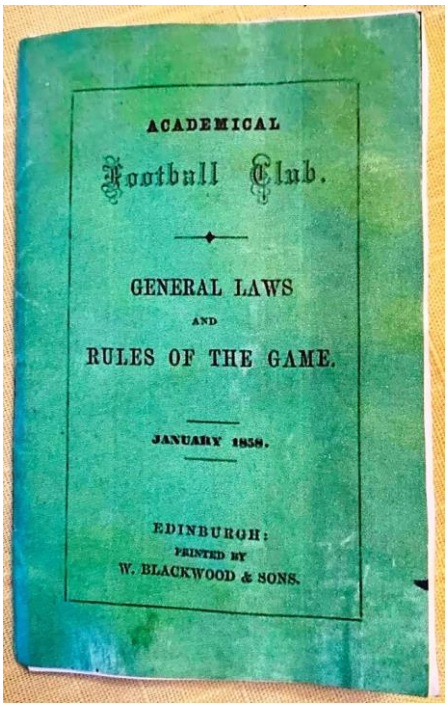
The Merchiston school magazine was effusive with praise about these developments: 'Football at Merchiston this year is, we are happy to say, very different and superior to the game as played last year. For the improvement we have to thank the Rugby rules and those who introduced them.'

Academical Football Club

General Laws and Rules of the Game

January 1858

Edinburgh
Printed by
W Blackwood & Sons

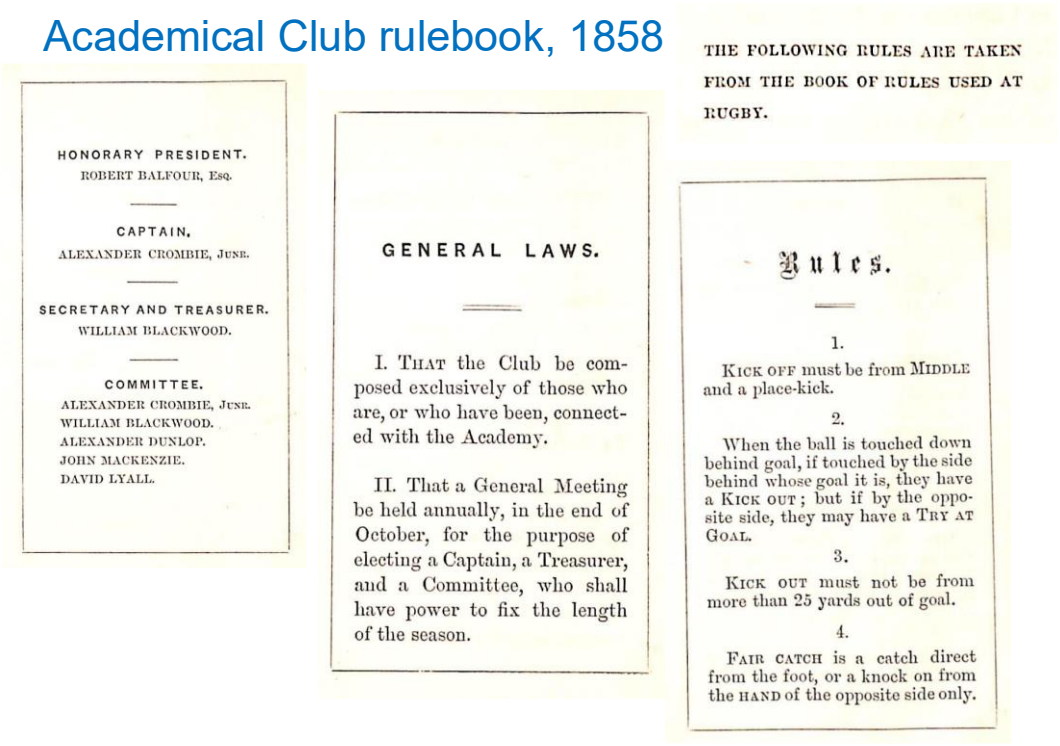


As boys grew up and left school, the first adult rugby clubs soon followed, starting with the Academical Club for old boys of the Edinburgh Academy, although they also included those with a close connection, which explains why Alexander Crombie was its first captain despite never having attended the school.

They were founded late in 1857 and published their rule book in January 1858. You may note that it was published by William Blackwood and Sons, and the connection is that one of those sons was a committee member. This surviving copy is held in the Academy archive, having been thought lost for many years.

The Academical Club lost no time in getting started and their first match was against Edinburgh University on 27 December 1857, with 25 players on each side, for the best of seven goals. Essentially that meant the first team to score four goals, and somewhat remarkably it took four matches over four weeks before the Academicals came out on top. Apparently their success was due to some players who had played in England and learned the 'drop kick'. Dark arts!

Academical Club rulebook, 1858



HONORARY PRESIDENT.
ROBERT BALFOUR, Esq.

CAPTAIN.
ALEXANDER CROMBIE, JUNR.

SECRETARY AND TREASURER.
WILLIAM BLACKWOOD.

COMMITTEE.
ALEXANDER CROMBIE, JUNR.
WILLIAM BLACKWOOD.
ALEXANDER DUNLOP.
JOHN MACKENZIE.
DAVID LYALL.

GENERAL LAWS.

I. THAT the Club be composed exclusively of those who are, or who have been, connected with the Academy.

II. That a General Meeting be held annually, in the end of October, for the purpose of electing a Captain, a Treasurer, and a Committee, who shall have power to fix the length of the season.

THE FOLLOWING RULES ARE TAKEN FROM THE BOOK OF RULES USED AT RUGBY.

Rules.

1.

KICK OFF must be from MIDDLE and a place-kick.

2.

When the ball is touched down behind goal, if touched by the side behind whose goal it is, they have a KICK OUT; but if by the opposite side, they may have a TRY AT GOAL.

3.

KICK OUT must not be from more than 25 yards out of goal.

4.

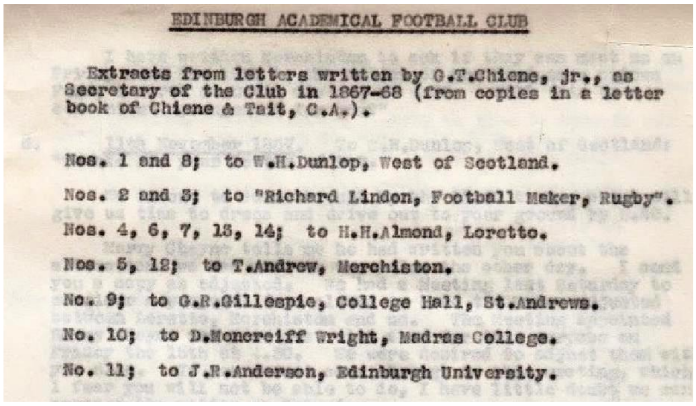
FAIR CATCH is a catch direct from the foot, or a knock on from the HAND of the opposite side only.

Here are a few extracts from the Academical Club rulebook, which contained General Laws for the running of the club, and playing rules which, as you can see, are taken from the book of rules used at Rugby School.

There were probably similar booklets for other schools and clubs, but there was no concerted attempt at uniformity. Indeed there was still a lot of confusion about the rules and their interpretation – for example the Merchiston boys were surprised that the Academy goalposts were lower and wider than their own.

However, the varied rules were close enough for the schools and clubs to muddle along, making agreements before each match for the finer points.

The ‘Green Book’ of 1868 - correspondence



EDINBURGH ACADEMICAL FOOTBALL CLUB

Extracts from letters written by G.T.Chiene, jr., as Secretary of the Club in 1867-68 (from copies in a letter book of Chiene & Tait, C.A.).

Nos. 1 and 8; to W.H.Dunlop, West of Scotland.

Nos. 2 and 3; to "Richard Lindon, Football Maker, Rugby".

Nos. 4, 6, 7, 13, 14; to H.H.Almond, Loretto.

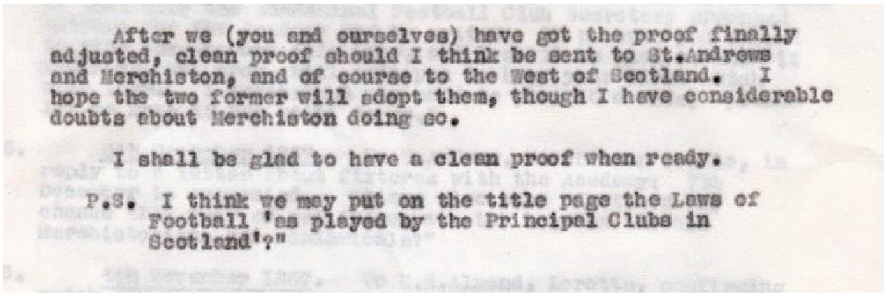
Nos. 5, 12; to T.Andrew, Merchiston.

No. 9; to G.R.Gillespie, College Hall, St.Andrews.

No. 10; to D.Monereiff Wright, Madras College.

No. 11; to J.R.Anderson, Edinburgh University.

No copies of the original book are known to exist. However, the correspondence survives.



After we (you and ourselves) have got the proof finally adjusted, clean proof should I think be sent to St.Andrews and Merchiston, and of course to the West of Scotland. I hope the two former will adopt them, though I have considerable doubts about Merchiston doing so.

I shall be glad to have a clean proof when ready.

P.S. I think we may put on the title page the Laws of Football 'as played by the Principal Clubs in Scotland'?"

Plainly this was not a satisfactory way to play sport and in Edinburgh, at least, an effort was made to streamline the rules in 1867 as by this time the network had extended to Loretto, to Madras College and the east coast universities.

The schools decided to revise the rules for their own purposes and this led to what is known as The Green Book. Some of the process of thought can be seen in over a dozen letters which passed between the lawmakers, not just in Edinburgh but in Glasgow at West of Scotland, and in St Andrews at the university and Madras College. The correspondence, which has been transcribed, has survived in the archive of the accountancy firm Chiene & Tait, because GT Chiene was secretary of the Academical Club at the time.

The outcome, published in 1868, was titled ‘The Laws of Football as played by the Principal Clubs in Scotland’ – note no mention of Rugby at this point, it was a Scottish interpretation of how football should be played.

I can’t illustrated it as no copies of the actual Green Book are known to have survived – if you ever find one, please let me know! However, the full text was published in *The Football Annual* for 1868, so it is not entirely lost.

The ‘Green Book’ of 1868: *The Laws of Football as played by the Principal Clubs in Scotland.*

In the event of no goal being obtained by either side, or an equal number of goals being obtained by both sides, ***it may be matter of arrangement*** *whether the match shall be decided by the number of tries obtained by either side.*

Before the Captains toss for choice of goals or kick-off, ***an agreement shall be made*** *when the match is to stop, and whether goals shall be changed at stated intervals, or after a goal is won.*

An ***agreement can be made*** *before a match that hacking and tripping shall be totally disallowed.*

The publication of the Green Book settled most of the arguments between the schools and clubs, and marked a big step forward in making it easier to arrange fixtures. On some points, however, there was still flexibility for captains to agree amongst themselves about interpretation, on a match by match basis:

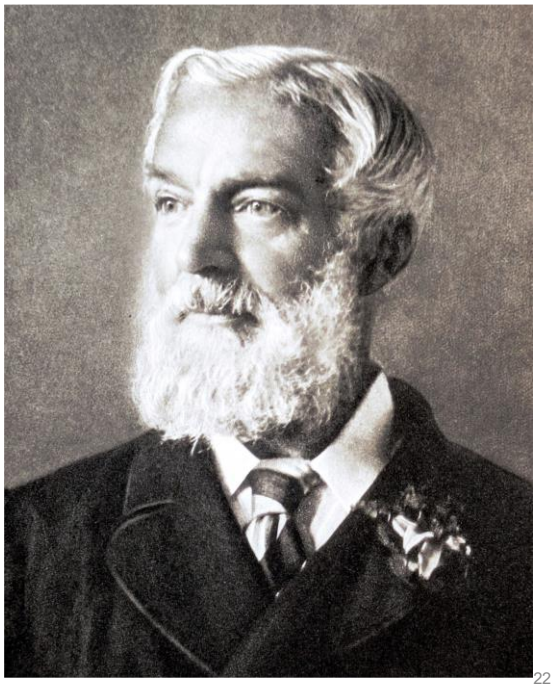
In the event of no goal being obtained, ie the ball kicked over the posts following a try, there was the option to decide victory on the basis of tries only.

Captains could decide the length of the match, and whether to change ends after every goal, or at half-time.

And in one of the biggest issues of the day, to hack or not to hack? Not surprisingly, hacking and tripping were usually banned, but – for those feeling brave – the option remained.

HH Almond
(1832-1903)

Loretto head and rugby visionary, credited with introducing the passing game.



As the game spread, Loretto School in Musselburgh was a significant entry to the rivalry in the east, first facing Merchiston in 1867. This marked the introduction to the scene of Hely-Hutchinson Almond, who himself played in that game aged 35. He would be a transformational figure in Scottish rugby as he ramped up its importance at school, and introduced new ways of playing the game.

Born 1832, Almond went to Glasgow University and became a teacher, spending four years at Merchiston. But in 1862 he did something fairly dramatic, he bought Loretto School and set about implementing his ideals of Muscular Christianity, where sport was as much a part of the educational experience as the classroom.

When he arrived at Loretto one of the first things he did was to acquire a playing field, which allowed him to launch his game-playing ethos – football, athletics and cricket – and also embark on a crusade against laziness and indolence.

By football, he meant rugby, and he later wrote: ‘The defect of the Association game is that it gives no exercise for the upper limbs and thereby does not tend to the strengthening of the lungs, and the equal development of both sides of the person, as the Rugby game does.’

He was zealous enough to discourage spectators at matches. ‘The very sight of loungers takes the spirit out of players, and the loungers should be doing something else if they are too feeble for football.’ He added that spectating was the greatest of all football dangers and if boys were, on occasion, allowed to watch a big match they should then be sent on a two mile run to restore their circulation.

Perhaps his greatest contribution is being credited with introducing the passing game. In early rugby, as in soccer, many players ran with the ball until tackled as there was a feeling that it was ‘unmanly’ to get rid of the ball. Almond encouraged his boys to work as a team and to pass the ball before the tackle, to someone in a better position, and that simple idea transformed rugby. Incidentally, the same process happened in football.

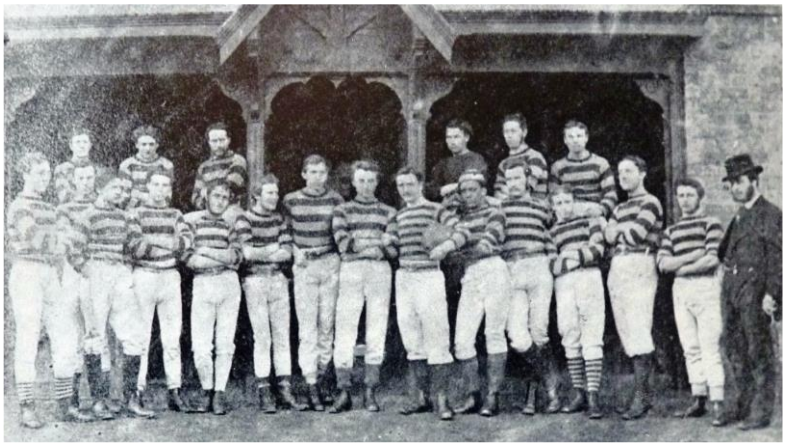
His innovation was so successful, that Lorettonians became the most accomplished rugby players. For example, from 1879 to 1907 there was not a single Varsity match without a Loretto old boy on the pitch, and in some matches there were up to seven of them in the Oxford University team.

Who played rugby in Scotland before 1870?

Schools
Edinburgh Academy
Royal High School
Merchiston Castle
Loretto
Craigmount
Glasgow Academy
Blair Lodge School
Abbey Park
Madras College

Universities
Edinburgh University
St Andrews University
Aberdeen University

Clubs
Academical FC
Royal High School FP
Merchistonians
Glasgow Academicals
West of Scotland
Edinburgh Wanderers
St Andrews Wanderers
Alloa
Dollar
Dumfries
Kilmarnock
and maybe others



Royal High School FP

By 1870, rugby was established in Scotland at the major schools and universities, notably on the east coast but extending much further afield, and there was considerable competition at club level as well.

Most rugby players in the capital, quite naturally, remained loyal to their old school and only a few needed another outlet. The first independent club here was Edinburgh Wanderers, founded in 1868, but the former pupil clubs have very much remained the model.

More broadly, it is clear that rugby had a wide-ranging appeal across the country despite there being no governing body.

Association football, by contrast, had yet to make any kind of impact by this time and apart from Queen's Park in Glasgow there were hardly any clubs in Scotland, and certainly none in Edinburgh.

However, association football did have an unexpected but profound influence on Scottish rugby which was prompted by a series of so-called football internationals in 1870. Described in the press as England v Scotland, they were organised by the Football Association, but were really small-time affairs between English and Scots who were resident in London.

However, the fact that they were described in the press as football internationals ruffled a few feathers in the Scottish rugby fraternity. They were not only piqued at being left out but were aghast that a different code had assumed the right to represent Scotland in an international game of football. On top of which, Scotland failed to win.

Letter to the press
6 December 1870

A challenge from Scotland to England, to play a football international under rugby rules.

Signed:
Alex H Robertson, West of Scotland
Francis Moncreiff, Edin Academicals
B Hall Blyth, Merchistonians
John W Arthur, Glasgow Academicals
J Henry Oatts, St Andrews University



FOOTBALL.

6th December 1870.

SIR,—There is a pretty general feeling among Scotch football players that the football power of the old country was not properly represented in the late so-called International Football Match. Not that we think the play of the gentlemen who represented Scotland, otherwise than very good—for that it was so is amply proved by the stout resistance they offered to their opponents, and by the fact that they were beaten by only one goal—but that we consider the Association rules, in accordance with which the late match was played, not such as to bring together the best team Scotland could turn out. Almost all the leading clubs play by the Rugby code, and have no opportunity of practising the Association game even if willing to do so. We therefore feel that a match played in accordance with any rules other than those in general use in Scotland, as was the case in the late match, is not one that would meet with support generally from her players. For our own satisfaction, therefore, and with a view of really testing what Scotland could do against an English team, we, as representing the football interests of Scotland, hereby challenge any team selected from the whole of England, to play us a match, twenty a-side—Rugby rules—either in Edinburgh or Glasgow on any day during the present season that might be found suitable to the English players. Let this count as the return to the match played in London on the 19th November, or, if preferred, let it be a separate match. If it be entered into we can promise England a hearty welcome and a first-rate match. Any communication addressed to any of us will be attended to.—We are, &c.

ALEX. H. ROBERTSON, West of Scotland F. C.
FRANCIS MONCREIFF, Edin. Academical F. C.
B. HALL BLYTH, Merchistonian F. C.
JOHN W. ARTHUR, Cpt., Glas. Academical F. C.
J. HENRY OATTS, St Salvator F. C., St Andrews.

So, in the autumn of 1870 the captains of the leading Scottish clubs, who knew each other well as they were now playing each other on a regular basis, discussed how to reassert rugby's dominance and decided they had to throw down the gauntlet.

In December, five of the captains signed a letter to the leading newspapers – Alex Robertson of West of Scotland, Francis Moncreiff of Edinburgh Academicals, Benjamin Hall Blyth of Merchistonians, John Arthur of Glasgow Academicals and Henry Oatts of St Andrew University.

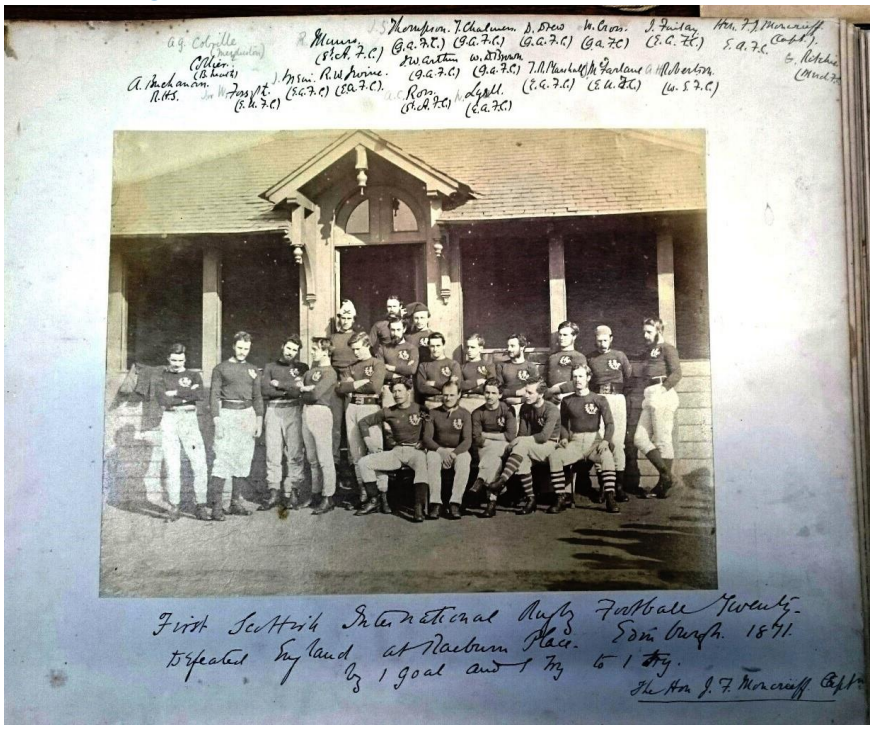
They wrote: ‘There is a pretty general feeling among Scotch football players that the football power of the old country was not properly represented in the late so-called International Football Match.’

‘We, as representing the football interests of Scotland, hereby challenge any team selected from the whole of England, to play us a match, twenty-a-side, Rugby rules, in Edinburgh or Glasgow. … We can promise England a hearty welcome and a first-rate match.’

At this time there was no ruling body for rugby football on either side of the border, and this challenge prompted the English to set one up, with the Rugby Football Union being founded in London on 9 January 1871. And just to show how unstable the laws of the game were, their primary aim was ‘framing a code of football rules to be based upon the Rugby system of play’.

One of their first acts was to set up a committee to select the England team but they failed to organise a trial and eventually met in the Princess of Wales pub, headquarters of Blackheath, to decide their line-up.

Edinburgh hosts the first international, 1871



Scotland team v England at Raeburn Place, 27 March 1871

On this side of the border, after weeks of preparation which included a couple of Scotland trial matches in Glasgow and Edinburgh, the first proper football international of any code in the world took place on 27 March 1871 at Raeburn Place. It was a momentous occasion, a model of co-operation between the Scottish

clubs, which did not yet have a national body as the Scottish Football Union – as it was initially called – was not founded until 1873.

A key part of the pre-match discussion was reaching agreement with the English on the finer points of the laws, and while these might seem like small differences, they again emphasise the fact that rugby was not yet a universal code. They included things like where a throw-in should take place, where a kick at goal should be taken after a try, and whether the ball could be picked up from the ground. They also agreed that hacking would not be permitted on this occasion.

Both teams posed for photographs, with the Scotland team pictured in front of the old Academy pavilion, in dark blue shirts with a thistle embroidered on the chest, and long white breeches or knickerbockers held up by a thick leather belt. A few wore caps, or cowls.

The visiting team for the first international



England team v Scotland at Raeburn Place, 27 March 1871

The English twenty also posed for photographs, not at the pavilion but in their hotel. They wore white shirts with a rose embroidered, white knickerbockers and brown socks, and many of them wore their club caps.

It is curious that both countries chose the colours – dark blue for Scotland, white for England – that they still use to this day, not just in rugby but also in other sports such as football, hockey and athletics.

They played two halves of 50 minutes each and to general surprise, Scotland won the match by a goal and a try to a single English try. There was no scoring in the first half, and the breakthrough came early in the second when Angus Buchanan of Royal High touched down and Merchistonian Willie Cross kicked the conversion for a goal.

Both teams scored one more try each before the end without converting, so the goal was the decisive factor in Scotland winning the game.

Mind you, both Scotland tries were loudly protested by the English, but home umpire HH Almond disagreed and in schoolmasterly fashion he later explained: ‘I must say that when an umpire is in doubt, I think he is justified in deciding against the side which makes most noise.’

The only drawing of the first international in 1871



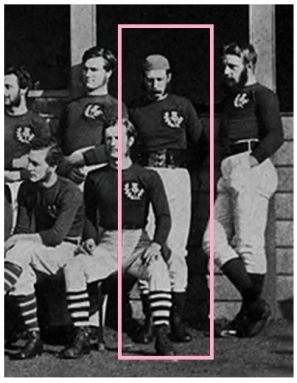
There is one known illustration of the match in play, and it has only come to light in the last few years when I bought it from a print dealer and established that it was indeed from 1871. It was drawn by a young Glasgow artist, Jack Ralston, who was given a commission by *The Illustrated Paper* to capture the scene.

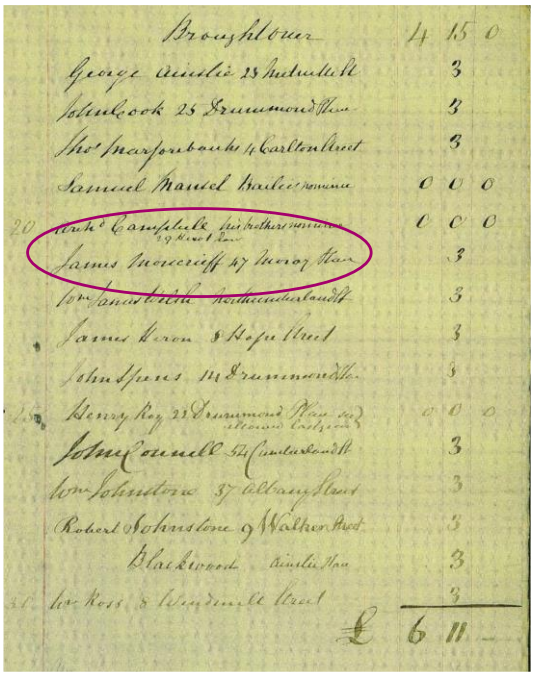
It’s a fascinating image which shows all sorts of details: the narrow pitch, just 55 yards wide, which the English complained about, and the thousands of spectators, who paid a shilling each, hemmed in along both touchlines but not behind the goal.

Some in the foreground are drawn in great detail and although they are not identified, clearly the artist thought they were worth including, and I wonder if the individuals recognised themselves. And finally, a bit of lost local history, that’s Inverleith Farm in the background.

Francis Moncreiff, Scotland's first rugby captain in 1871 (below)

Son of **James Moncreiff**, Foot-Ball Club member 1832-33 >>





I'll quickly mention a couple of aspects of the match which shed a bit more light on the people who played. Scotland's captain was Francis Moncreiff, an Edinburgh Academical, and just to show the sport of football was not new here, his father James was also a player, a member of the pioneering Foot-Ball Club in the 1830s. This father-to-son link goes to show there is a clear progression from the pre-history of football to the organised game.

Surviving Scotland and England caps from 1871





Scotland cap: John W Arthur England cap: Arthur Guillemard

And here are surviving mementoes of the match, in the form of the first international caps: one from Scotland, which belonged to John Arthur of Glasgow Academicals, and one from Arthur Guillemard of England, which is in the World Rugby Museum. They also have an England shirt worn by John Clayton, the only surviving jersey from the match

A closer look at the action, Scotland v England 1871



This is a close-up of the play, a massive maul involving all the forwards struggling for the ball, while a few backs stand behind, waiting for the play to break through.

Note the umpire in his top hat, standing in the background. The two umpires, one for each side, had to sort out the differences in interpretation between English and Scottish rules.

And the truncated goalposts are a far cry from the tall posts you find at matches nowadays, and what looks like a full back standing under them like a goalkeeper.

It may all seem very quaint, but that 1871 international proved that rugby football really had made its mark in Edinburgh, less than two decades after arriving in the city. It was the end of the beginning but also marked the starting point for the world game.

And that’s where my story ends. I hope you have enjoyed this talk and I would be happy to try and answer any questions you may have.