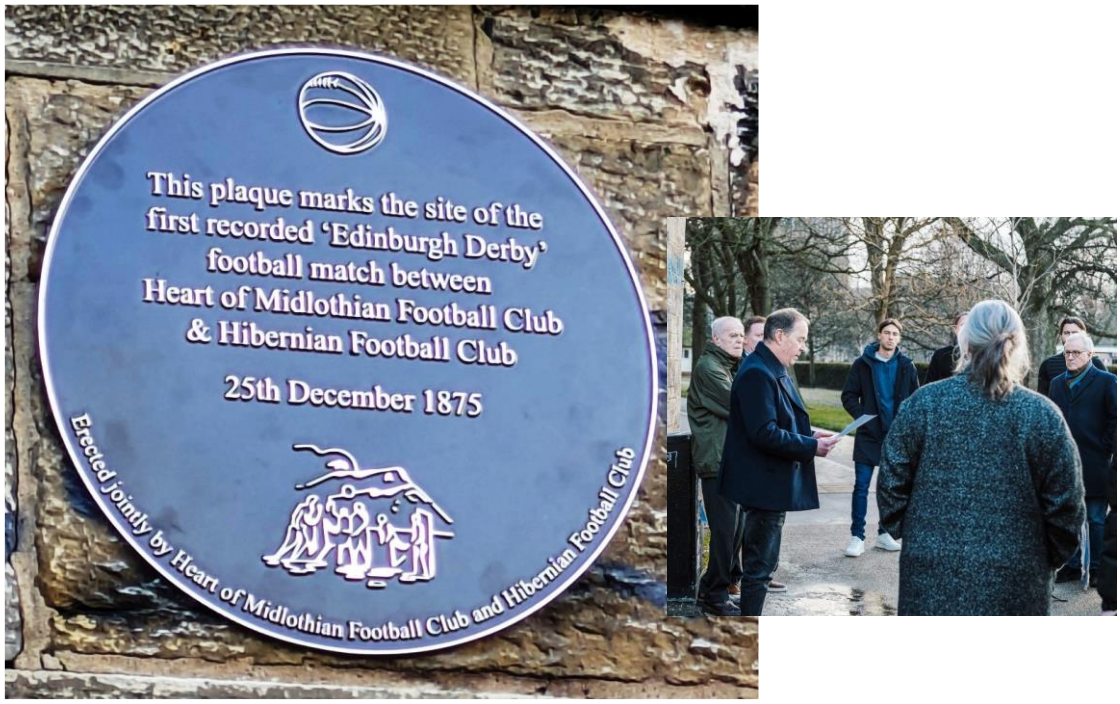
EDINBURGH'S MEADOWS: A CRUCIBLE FOR FOOTBALL IN SCOTLAND'S CAPITAL

A presentation by Andy Mitchell to the International Football History Conference, held in London, on 13 June 2026

Plaque at the Meadows, erected jointly by Hearts and Hibs, to mark 150 years since the first Edinburgh derby



I recently spoke at the unveiling of a plaque in Edinburgh to mark the site of the first ever derby between Hibs and Hearts in 1875 – one of the world's oldest city rivalries. That historic first match was played on the Meadows because at the time, not only Hibs and Hearts but *all* of Edinburgh's association football clubs were based there.

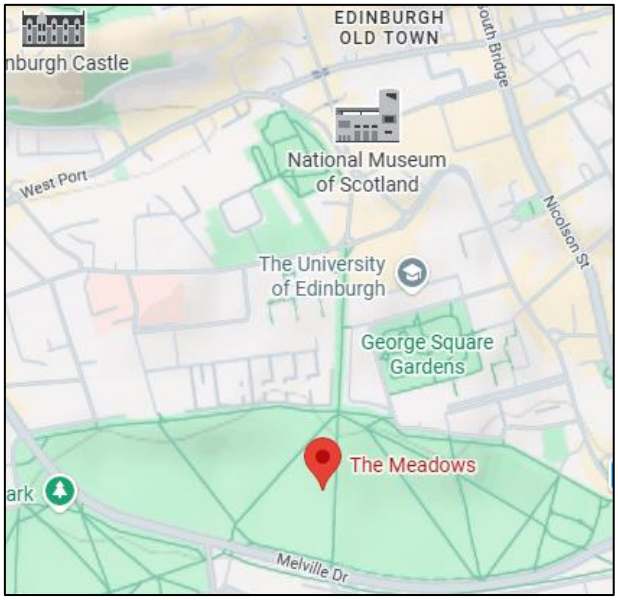
Amidst the plaque ceremony, the question arose: in such a large city, which had plenty of other parks and open spaces, why was this particular place the ground of choice for so many teams?

In this paper, I will explain how and why the Meadows was so important for the early development of football in Edinburgh from the 1850s onwards. And I'll outline the social and economic changes that enabled young working class men to take up the sport, long before association rules came along. It's a pattern of change that could equally be applied to other major cities in the UK.

The Meadows: 60 acres of flat green space



You may not be familiar with Edinburgh, so what and where is The Meadows? It is a 60 acre green space – that's the equivalent of about 35 football pitches – which effectively acts as a buffer between the historic heart of the city and the urban sprawl to the south. It's a popular recreational area to this day and is a vibrant hub for all sorts of activities and sport.



The history of the Meadows is long and interesting: until medieval times it was a water-filled loch, then it was drained and the reclaimed land became a grassy meadow – hence the name. It was mostly fenced off by the City Council so it could be rented out for grazing sheep and cows, apart from a small area where the Royal Archers – a kind of ceremonial bodyguard for the monarch - had a traditional right of access to practise archery.

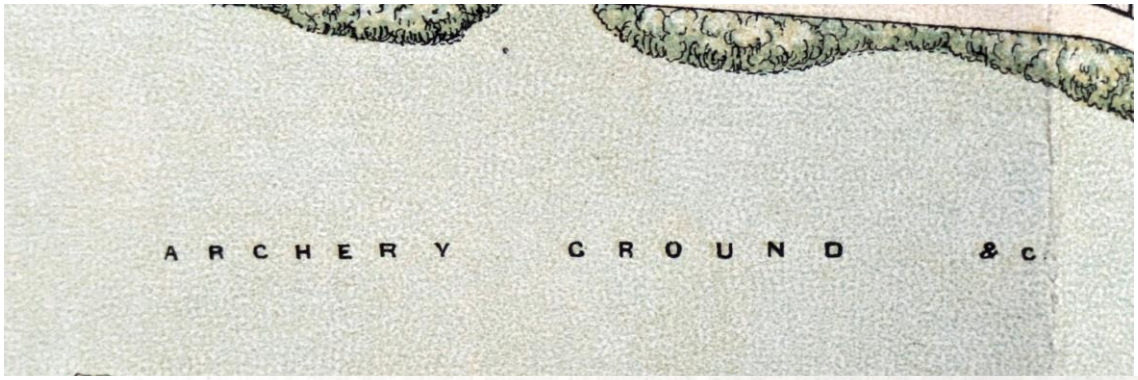
The Meadows, a new public park in 1855



It gets interesting, as far as football goes, in 1855. In a fine act of civic altruism, the City Council decided to give up their income from grazing livestock, take down the fences, and open up the Meadows for everyone. In doing so, they created the first public park in Edinburgh – and as an aside, the creation of city parks was very much a feature of the Victorian era, all around the UK.

The Council held a competition to design their new park and the winning entry was put forward by Thomas Davies, a promising Edinburgh architect. He published his plan in triumph, with a large fold-out map which is particularly interesting for what it reveals about his proposals for recreation. A large section is marked as ‘Archery Ground etcetera’, and to find out what the ‘*etcetera’* meant, let’s have a look at his detailed description in the text.

The East Meadows, laid out for sports in 1855



In laying out the Parks, or Meadows properly so called, this idea has been kept in view, that the Eastern Division should be devoted to amusements of a more active kind, while the Western Division should be reserved for the use of those who wish the quieter recreation of walking, and for the amusements of younger children. Thus, in the Eastern Division, besides the space reserved for Bleaching and Drying, there is a space proposed to be alloted on the north side of the Carriage Way for the use of the Archers of the Queen's Body Guard, for Football, and for games which do not cut up the grass; while on the south side there is a very large Bowling Green and a Pond, of an area about one and a half times that of Dunsapie Loch, which, besides being ornamental and affording a pleasant walk along its margin during summer, may be used for Curling in winter.

The winning design made specific provision for football

It reads: 'There is a space proposed to be allotted for the use of the Archers of the Queen's Body Guard, for Football, and for games which do not cut up the grass.' So, in 1855, the need was recognised to provide somewhere for people to play football – the only sport which was specifically mentioned.

The City Council then went as far as laying down regulations confirming that this is what the new space was intended for, and established the principle that the East Meadows was to be used for football and other sports such as cricket, shinty and quoits, while the West half of the Meadows was reserved for walks and gentle recreation.

So that brings us to the question, why did the Council appreciate the need for a public football ground? Surely, as some histories will tell you, football before codification was a mob game, blighted by violence and mayhem until the public schools came along and civilised it – not what you would want to encourage in the heart of the historic capital of Scotland. Not so. On the contrary, the inescapable conclusion is that football in Edinburgh was already a socially acceptable sport, which needed an outlet.

Early Edinburgh football – school and university



Student drawing of football in 1673

- *"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.

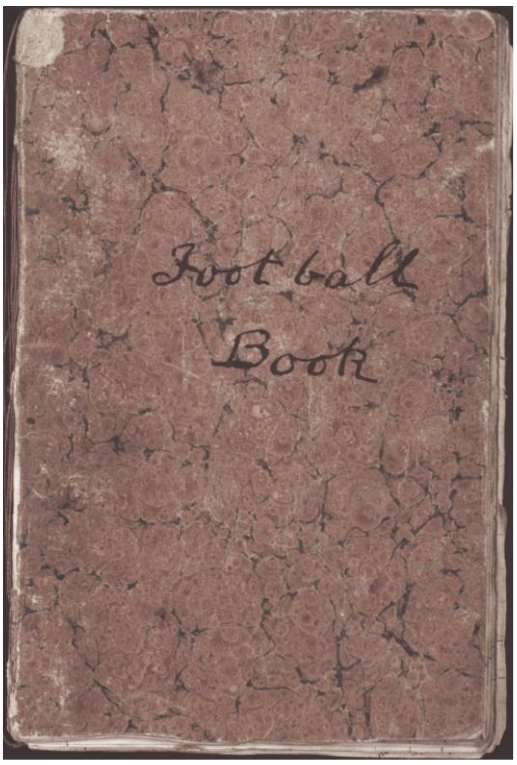
- *"The games which had been handed down to us unchanged from one generation to another … football was then a first-rate game, though there was neither hacking, nor mauls, nor touching down to put life and limb in danger."* Sir Robert Christison, reminiscing about his High School days, 1805-11.

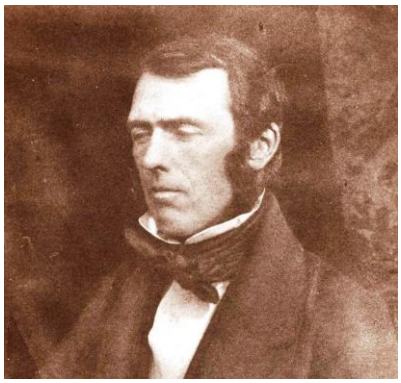
- *"And life is itself but a game at football."* Sir Walter Scott, 1815.

In fact, there is plenty of evidence to show that football has a long and respectable history in Edinburgh, popular since medieval times. A charming illustration from 1673 shows men playing football, using some kind of goalposts with multiple crossbars . It was drawn by an Edinburgh University student in the margins of his notebook where he also sketched archery, tennis and billiards.

Subsequently, football was played by generations of young men, either at the University or the High School, where the boys were encouraged to run around and be active. There are numerous reminiscences of the 18th and 19th century to back that up, and most famously it was Sir Walter Scott, a former High School boy, who wrote: "And life is itself but a game at football" – perhaps the inspiration for Bill Shankly's 'life and death' quote.

The Foot-Ball Club, founded in Edinburgh, 1824





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

The Foot-Ball Club papers include detailed accounts, membership lists, and outline rules of the game.

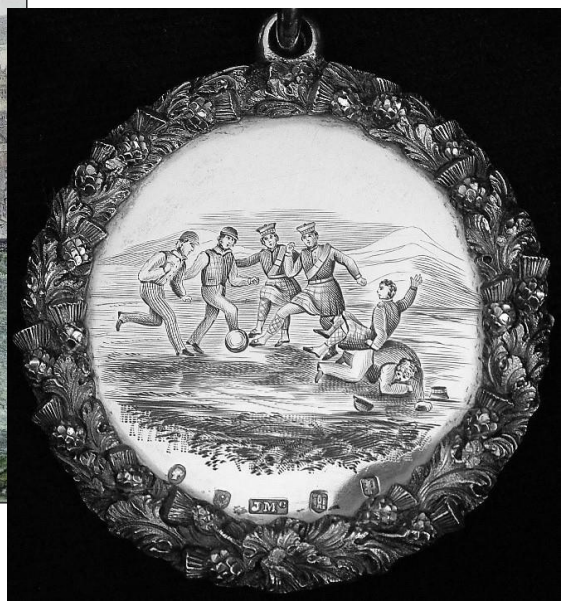
That enthusiasm took a significant step forward in 1824, when the world's first dedicated football club was founded in Edinburgh, with John Hope creating a vibrant organisation that attracted hundreds of young men to play once or twice a week over the next two decades. Hope kept detailed records of the club's activities, including membership lists, accounts and outline rules of the game. He is a key figure in the story of Edinburgh football, and I will return to him.

However, while the Foot-Ball Club met a need it was also exclusive, open only to those of a certain social standing, affluent middle class men who had the time for recreation and could afford to pay for it.

Football in Edinburgh was part of everyday life



Football on Calton Hill
Panorama of Edinburgh (1841)



Silver football medal, Edinburgh University v 93rd Highlanders (1851)

Then, after the Foot-Ball Club wound up, there is evidence that football remained a part of everyday life for some. A scene from 1841 shows boys enjoying casual football on Calton Hill, overlooking the city. And there was a match in 1851 between the Edinburgh University football club and a team of soldiers garrisoned at the castle, with the action captured on a silver medal. That was one of a series of matches that year which were reported in *Bell's Life*, clearly showing organisation, training and tactical awareness. In 1854, John Hope created a sports ground for youths which included a football pitch, for which he had rules of play printed.

And although football at that time had no common code, either locally or nationally, it is clear from occasional news reports and from Hope's printed rules that the games in Edinburgh put the emphasis on kicking the ball, goals were scored between the posts, handling was either forbidden or heavily restricted, and violent play such as hacking was taboo. All of which indicates that the game in Edinburgh wasn't so far removed from what later became association football.

However, when the city's exclusive fee-paying schools started to adopt football as their winter sport in the 1850s, they changed the direction of travel by choosing the rugby code, having bought into Muscular Christianity and Tom Brown's Schooldays. That set them apart from the rest of the populace.

Barriers to working class football in the mid 19th century

Time – the six-day working week.

Space – lack of suitable public open spaces.

Money – cost of equipment, especially balls.

These applied to all major cities, not just Edinburgh.

Meanwhile for the masses, the working classes, who wanted to play football in the traditional fashion there were still three significant barriers: time, space and money.

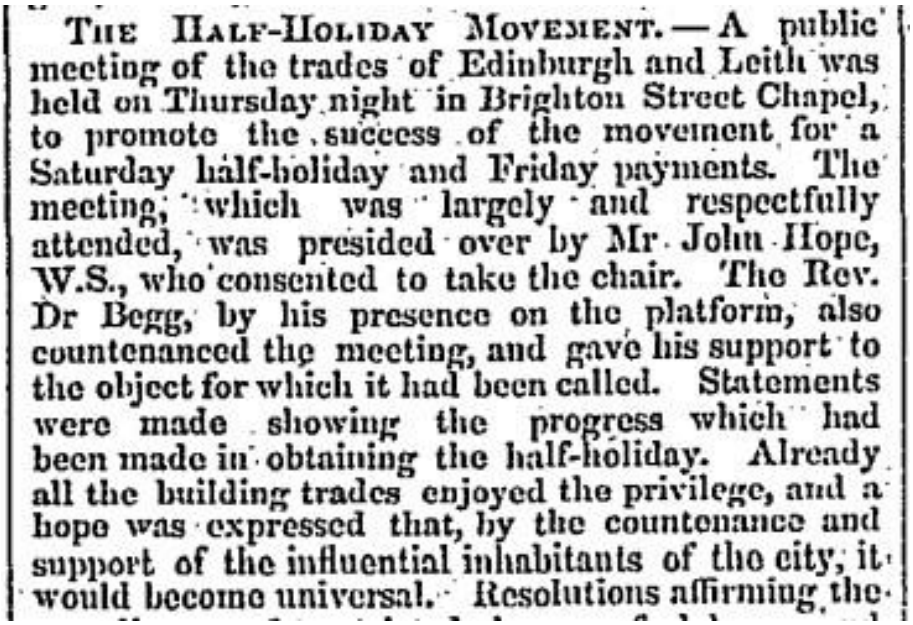
For starters, where would they find the time? The working classes generally worked ten hours a day for six days a week and in presbyterian Scotland there was little prospect of playing sport on Sunday. They might manage summer evenings, but that was the only viable option.

Next, where could they play? Edinburgh city centre was built up with virtually no space for public recreation. Gardens were mostly private, reserved for local residents, with access strictly controlled. Any existing open ground was unsuitable for football of any scale, for example at Bruntsfield and Leith Links which were considerably rougher than they are today, and were primarily dedicated to golf. Suburban fields were generally used for grazing cattle or sheep, and Police regulations forbid playing football in the street.

And finally, how could they afford to play? John Hope's club members had the means to pay subscriptions which allowed them to rent a private field, and pay for expensive equipment like handmade leather balls and bladders, while the fee-paying schools built private sports grounds, and could afford the oval rugby balls and fixed goalposts. The well-off could also afford to dirty or damage their clothing in the course of playing because they had servants to clean and repair.

The working classes had virtually no free time, nowhere to play, and were priced out. There's a wider lesson here which applies throughout the UK: up to the middle of the 19th century football – indeed most sport except in rudimentary forms – was simply beyond the reach of the mass of population.

The Saturday half holiday, introduced 1850s



THE HALF-HOLIDAY MOVEMENT.—A public meeting of the trades of Edinburgh and Leith was held on Thursday night in Brighton Street Chapel, to promote the success of the movement for a Saturday half-holiday and Friday payments. The meeting, which was largely and respectfully attended, was presided over by Mr. John Hope, W.S., who consented to take the chair. The Rev. Dr Begg, by his presence on the platform, also countenanced the meeting, and gave his support to the object for which it had been called. Statements were made showing the progress which had been made in obtaining the half-holiday. Already all the building trades enjoyed the privilege, and a hope was expressed that, by the countenance and support of the influential inhabitants of the city, it would become universal. Resolutions affirming the

The Scotsman, 22 October 1853

That all started to change in the 1850s with a number of developments, on and off the field, that would have a significant impact on football's future.

The first major change was the idea of the Saturday half-holiday, brought about by a national movement led by those who campaigned for better conditions for working men and women. It started in Manchester and Liverpool in 1844, and spread gradually across the country until it came to Edinburgh in 1853, and a prominent leader of the campaign there was none other than that man John Hope, again – reported here chairing a meeting for the trades of Edinburgh and Leith.

The half-holiday movement was slow to progress as some employers resisted, and initially it was only skilled tradesmen who were able to negotiate better working hours. Then the Factory Act of 1867 brought it in for many industrial workers, although some people had to wait until the turn of the century.

The Saturday half-holiday created – for the very first time – regular, dependable leisure time for the working classes. Those few hours on a Saturday afternoon revolutionised life choices for many and created the first generation with a significant amount of free time.

India rubber footballs, introduced 1850s



48 NICOLSON ST. — By Her Majesty's

78 PRINCE'S ST. — Royal Letters Patent.

RENOWNED ESTABLISHMENTS FOR ALL SCOTLAND.

THE Notice of the NOBILITY, GENTRY, SPORTSMEN, EMIGRANTS, and TRAVELLERS, is especially directed to a Large Assortment, just received, of the following :—

VULCANISED RUBBER MANUFACTURES in Chest Expanders. Elastic Door Springs.
Teats for Nursing Bottles, and with Breast Shield.
Finger Stalls. Corn and Bunion Protectors.
Infants' Corals and Gum Rings. Breast Bottles.
Urinals for both Sexes. Baby Jumping Straps.
Sponge Bags, Purses, and Tobacco Pouches.
Trouser and Gaiter Straps. Cricket and Foot Balls.
Enemas and Injection Bottles, for the Ear, Clyster, &c.

GEORGE THORNTON & CO.,
PROPRIETORS AND SOLE AGENTS,
48 NICOLSON STREET & 78 PRINCE'S STREET, EDINBURGH.

*** Illustrated and Descriptive Catalogues to be had on application.

Edinburgh News, 18 February 1854

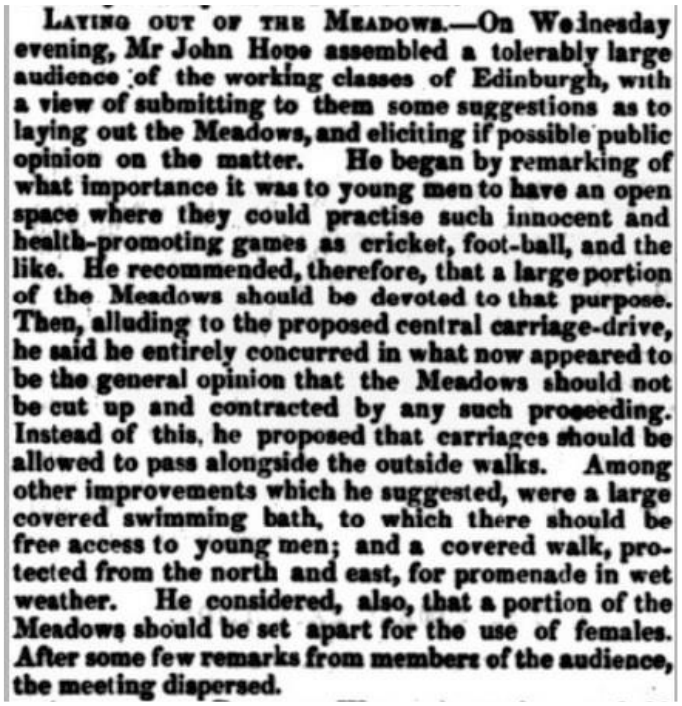
The next barrier had been money, and wages for working people started to rise in the 1850s after decades of stagnation, and that, allied to the falling cost of food, created a modest level of disposable income.

At the same time, football was becoming more affordable thanks to the march of technology. The footballers of old had to buy handmade leather casings and inflate them with pig bladders, which were not only expensive but tended to burst with regularity. Now, balls could be made from and inflated with india rubber, which was much cheaper and considerably more robust than the old pig bladders. The first adverts for vulcanised rubber footballs in Edinburgh appeared in 1854, and you can see that rubber revolutionised everything from chest expanders to bunion protectors. It's fair to say that it also transformed other sports, notably cricket and golf.

That still left the significant issue of somewhere to play, and in Edinburgh the breakthrough came in 1855, when the open expanses of the Meadows were made available to the citizens for football and other recreation.

So within the space of just two years, 1853-55, those issues of time, money and place were breached: we had the introduction of the Saturday half-holiday, the launch of manufactured footballs and the opening of the first free public space.

Football promoted on the Meadows in 1855



LAYING OUT OF THE MEADOWS.—On Wednesday evening, Mr John Hope assembled a tolerably large audience of the working classes of Edinburgh, with a view of submitting to them some suggestions as to laying out the Meadows, and eliciting if possible public opinion on the matter. He began by remarking of what importance it was to young men to have an open space where they could practise such innocent and health-promoting games as cricket, foot-ball, and the like. He recommended, therefore, that a large portion of the Meadows should be devoted to that purpose. Then, alluding to the proposed central carriage-drive, he said he entirely concurred in what now appeared to be the general opinion that the Meadows should not be cut up and contracted by any such proceeding. Instead of this, he proposed that carriages should be allowed to pass alongside the outside walks. Among other improvements which he suggested, were a large covered swimming bath, to which there should be free access to young men; and a covered walk, protected from the north and east, for promenade in wet weather. He considered, also, that a portion of the Meadows should be set apart for the use of females. After some few remarks from members of the audience, the meeting dispersed.

Edinburgh News, 7 July 1855

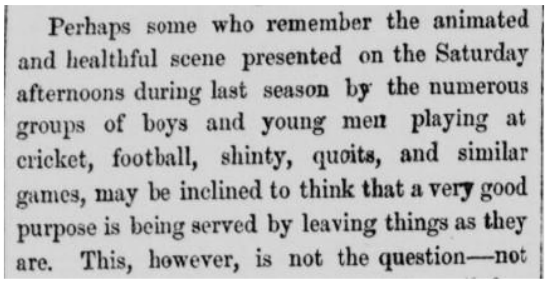
John Hope assembled ‘a tolerably large audience of the working classes’ at the Meadows, promoting ‘open space where they could practise such innocent and health-promoting games as cricket, foot-ball and the like’.

To push things in the right direction, that man John Hope, ever the football enthusiast, called a meeting for the working classes at the Meadows in July 1855, before the park was even laid out.

There he promoted the idea of using the space to play ‘such innocent and health-promoting games as cricket, football and the like’.

While he was a lifelong advocate of football as a sport, it’s also true to say that he had a vested interest in keeping young men out of the pub, as a leading temperance campaigner.

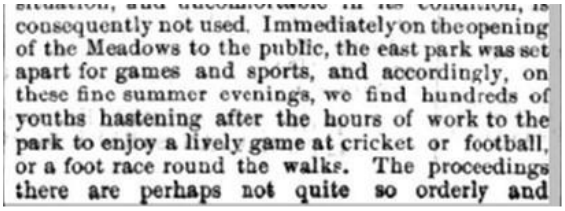
Football on the Meadows in the 1860s



Perhaps some who remember the animated and healthful scene presented on the Saturday afternoons during last season by the numerous groups of boys and young men playing at cricket, football, shinty, quoits, and similar games, may be inclined to think that a very good purpose is being served by leaving things as they are. This, however, is not the question—not

March 1861: 'the animated and healthful scene presented on Saturday afternoons last season by numerous groups of boys and young men playing at cricket, football, shinty, quoits and similar games …'

May 1862: 'these fine summer evenings, we find hundreds of youths hastening after the hours of work to the park to enjoy a lively game at cricket or football'.



consequently not used. Immediately on the opening of the Meadows to the public, the east park was set apart for games and sports, and accordingly, on these fine summer evenings, we find hundreds of youths hastening after the hours of work to the park to enjoy a lively game at cricket or football, or a foot race round the walks. The proceedings there are perhaps not quite so orderly and

The impact of these changes creating free time, space and affordability was such that football was soon being played widely and regularly by the working classes in Edinburgh.

In 1861 the *Caledonian Mercury* described 'the animated and healthful scene presented on Saturday afternoons by numerous groups of boys and young men playing at cricket, football, shinty, quoits and similar games'.

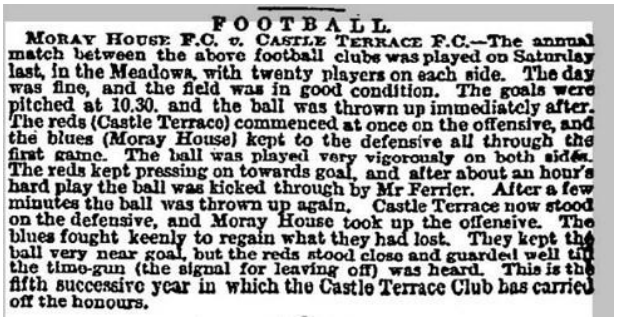
In 1862 the *Evening Courant* reported that hundreds of youths hastened to the Meadows each evening to enjoy cricket and football.

Did they have clubs and matches? It's frustrating that little detail was reported in the newspapers, but having seen how the Foot-Ball Club thrived over two decades without a single match report in the Edinburgh press, that doesn't necessarily prove anything. The answer probably lies in the fact that football was now increasingly a working class sport, and newspapers catered for a literate middle class audience.

From what we do know, there was some level of organisation and mutually accepted rules, and it is clear that the football they played on the Meadows, unlike the city's private schools which played rugby, was the round ball game, the kicking game, where the aim was to score a goal between the sticks.

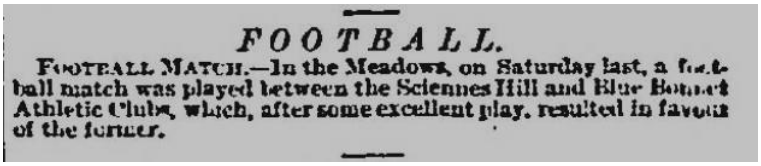
Football teams and matches on the Meadows

March 1869: Moray House FC v. Castle Terrace FC for ‘the fifth successive year’.



FOOTBALL.

MORAY HOUSE F.C. v. CASTLE TERRACE F.C.—The annual match between the above football clubs was played on Saturday last, in the Meadows, with twenty players on each side. The day was fine, and the field was in good condition. The goals were pitched at 10.30, and the ball was thrown up immediately after. The reds (Castle Terrace) commenced at once on the offensive, and the blues (Moray House) kept to the defensive all through the first game. The ball was played very vigorously on both sides. The reds kept pressing on towards goal, and after about an hour's hard play the ball was kicked through by Mr Ferrier. After a few minutes the ball was thrown up again. Castle Terrace now stood on the defensive, and Moray House took up the offensive. The blues fought keenly to regain what they had lost. They kept the ball very near goal, but the reds stood close and guarded well till the time-gun (the signal for leaving off) was heard. This is the fifth successive year in which the Castle Terrace Club has carried off the honours.



FOOTBALL.

FOOTBALL MATCH.—In the Meadows, on Saturday last, a football match was played between the Sciennes Hill and Blue Bonnet Athletic Clubs, which, after some excellent play, resulted in favour of the former.

June 1870: Sciennes Hill v. Blue Bonnet

There are a few straggling match reports: such as one in 1869 for Moray House v Castle Terrace, described as an annual match, won by the latter for the fifth successive year, which indicates they started playing each other at least as early as 1865. Reports show they continued to meet on the Meadows for years after, eventually adapting to association rules.

And another brief example comes in 1870, a match between Sciennes Hill and Blue Bonnet on the Meadows. Currently, nothing else is known about either club.

By then, the East Meadows had become so popular with footballers that the ground was in a sorry state. It could be a marsh in winter and a dustbowl in summer, so it was a poor substitute for proper playing fields. This prompted the City Council to start making improvements in 1871, to level the ground and improve the drainage, but it was a slow process and much criticised at the time. In the long run, though, it did the job and was completed in time for the arrival of the association rules.

In that respect, the capital lagged behind Glasgow where Queen’s Park had been the first club in Scotland to adopt association football. Their influence led to the first international in November 1872, which in turn prompted the formation of the Scottish FA in March 1873. But in Edinburgh, seen as a rugby stronghold, there was still no sign of the association game making inroads. The men in the west weighed up the situation and decided something needed to be done if association football was to become a truly national sport.

Association football comes to Edinburgh, 1873



FOOTBALL MATCH—SCOTTISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION.

A GAME (Association Rules) between two teams picked from the leading Western Clubs, will be played TO-DAY, on the GROUND of the ROYAL HIGH SCHOOL, at PORTOBELLO. Kick off at 3 P.M. Admission 6d.

MR GARDNER'S ELEVEN.

Goalkeeper—Dickson, Queen's Park.

Backs.	Forwards.
J. Michie, Vale of Leven.	W. Gibb, Clydesdale.
—M'Arly, Clydesdale.	F. Anderson, do.
Half Backs.	J. Wilson, Clydesdale.
R. Gardner, Clydesdale.	A. Mackinnon, Queen's Park.
C. Campbell, Queen's Park.	W. Mackinnon, do.
	M'Gregor, Vale of Leven.

MR THOMSON'S ELEVEN.

Goalkeeper—R. Parlane, Vale of Leven.

Backs.	*Forwards.*
J. Taylor, Queen's Park.	A. Taylor, Clydesdale.
J. M'Cort, Eastern.	A. Rae, Queen's Park.
Half Backs.	James R. Weir, Queen's Park.
J. J. Thomson, Queen's Park.	H. M'Neill, do.
R. Kinloch, Granville.	T. Lawrie, do.
	A. P. Broadfoot, do.

27 December 1873 at Raimes Park (now Victoria Park)

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So they went into missionary mode and two days after Christmas in 1873, a group of Scotland's top footballers took a train from Glasgow to Edinburgh, bringing everything needed to stage a game, including – would you believe – two sets of goalposts. About 500 people braved the winter weather to come along and watch this innovation, and reports of the match varied in their enthusiasm.

The *Glasgow Herald* wrote: 'the match excited much interest … the play was equal and smart. Cheers for the players were given at parting.'

The *North British Daily Mail* also praised it: 'magnificent efforts in the art of dribbling … several fine runs on both sides were much appreciated.'

On the other hand, the *Scotsman*, representing the Edinburgh establishment, was less impressed: 'The game seemed to be characterised by great sameness. Lacking nearly all the excitement of the Rugby game … there was little to maintain the interest.'

But the *Scotsman* did recognise something familiar and commented 'The game is substantially the old Scotch style of football'. So perhaps this football was not so alien after all, and some Edinburgh people had been playing a similar code all along.

Edinburgh's first association football club, 1874

RIFLE VOLUNTEER FOOTBALL CLUB.—A football club in connection with the 3d E.R.V. Corps, under the "Association Rules," having been newly formed, the first game was played in the East Meadows on Saturday afternoon. Sides were picked, and Major Hope began the game by giving the ball the first kick off. After a keen contest for one hour and a half, the game ended in a draw. The day was very favourable, considering the bad state of the weather previous to Saturday. It is arranged that the next game shall be played next Saturday at three o'clock, on or near the same ground.



Third Edinburgh Rifle Volunteers: first match on 17 January 1874 on the Meadows, kicked off by Major John Hope

Certainly, that demonstration was the spark that lit the fire for the association game. Among the spectators were members of the 3rd Edinburgh Rifle Volunteers and they were so taken by what they saw that within a couple of weeks they had founded the city's first association football club.

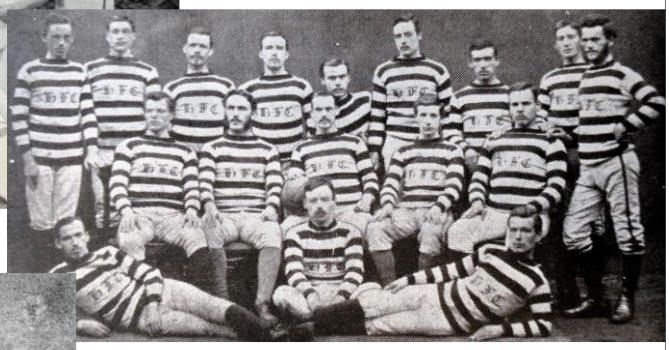
They chose to play their games on the Meadows and what is more, they were actively encouraged by their company commander, none other than that man John Hope. Now in his late 60s, he kicked off their first match in January 1874, just as he had done for the Foot-Ball Club in 1824, fully fifty years earlier, providing a direct link between the traditional Scottish game and the modern game of association football.

For the players of the 1870s, although the laws of the association game were new, they appear to have had little difficulty in picking them up, which indicates it was a change of direction for the game they loved, rather than an entirely new pastime.

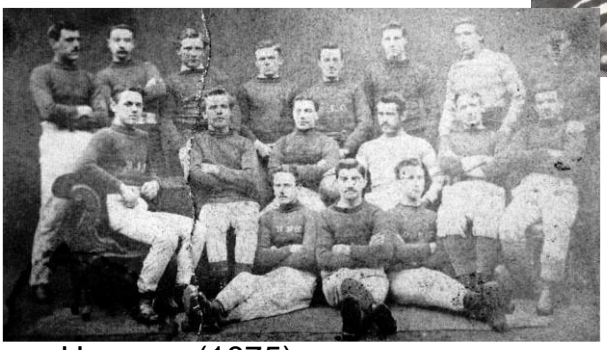
Other early association football clubs



Heart of Midlothian (1874)



Hibernian (1875)



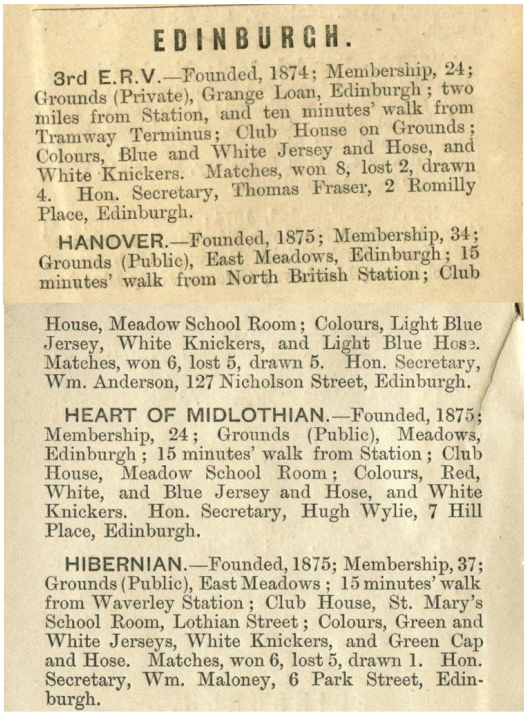
Hanover (1875)

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Not surprisingly, other city clubs soon followed. Along came Heart of Midlothian, Thistle and Hanover, all from working class roots, and together these four clubs founded the Edinburgh FA in 1875.

That summer Hibernian came on the scene, although at first nobody would play them because of their Irish Catholic origins. Their saviours were Hearts, who agreed to play Hibs on Christmas Day 1875 and out of that friendly gesture the great derby rivalry began.

Edinburgh's football clubs in 1877 – five out of six based at the Meadows



EDINBURGH.

3rd E.R.V.—Founded, 1874; Membership, 24; Grounds (Private), Grange Loan, Edinburgh; two miles from Station, and ten minutes' walk from Tramway Terminus; Club House on Grounds; Colours, Blue and White Jersey and Hose, and White Knickers. Matches, won 8, lost 2, drawn 4. Hon. Secretary, Thomas Fraser, 2 Romilly Place, Edinburgh.

HANOVER.—Founded, 1875; Membership, 34; Grounds (Public), East Meadows, Edinburgh; 15 minutes' walk from North British Station; Club House, Meadow School Room; Colours, Light Blue Jersey, White Knickers, and Light Blue Hose. Matches, won 6, lost 5, drawn 5. Hon. Secretary, Wm. Anderson, 127 Nicholson Street, Edinburgh.

HEART OF MIDLOTHIAN.—Founded, 1875; Membership, 24; Grounds (Public), Meadows, Edinburgh; 15 minutes' walk from Station; Club House, Meadow School Room; Colours, Red, White, and Blue Jersey and Hose, and White Knickers. Hon. Secretary, Hugh Wylie, 7 Hill Place, Edinburgh.

HIBERNIAN.—Founded, 1875; Membership, 37; Grounds (Public), East Meadows; 15 minutes' walk from Waverley Station; Club House, St. Mary's School Room, Lothian Street; Colours, Green and White Jerseys, White Knickers, and Green Cap and Hose. Matches, won 6, lost 5, drawn 1. Hon. Secretary, Wm. Maloney, 6 Park Street, Edinburgh.

SWIFTS.—Founded, 1876; Membership, 33; Grounds (Public), Meadows, Edinburgh; 15 minutes walk from Waverley Station; Club House, Meadow School Room; Colours, Blue Jersey, White Knickers, and Red Stockings. Matches, won 12, lost 4, drawn 4. Hon. Secretary, Francis G. Watt, 59 Bristo Street, Edinburgh.

THISTLE.—Founded, 1874; Membership, 25; Grounds (Public), Meadows, Edinburgh; 15 minutes' walk from North British Railway; Club House, School House, Meadows; Colours, Navy Blue Jersey, with White Band across Breast and Shoulders, White Knickers, and Blue Hose. Matches, won 8, lost 4, drawn 3. Hon. Secretary, John Henderson, 21 Carnegie Street, Edinburgh.

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And where did they play? In those formative years, there was only one viable option. Take a look at the Scottish FA handbook for 1877-78 which lists six member clubs in Edinburgh. Five of them named their home ground as the Meadows; only the Rifle Volunteers had moved on to a private ground at this point.

It was certainly a hot spot, but it couldn't last. In September 1877, Hibs met Hearts in the first round of the Scottish Cup, winning after a replay, but those were the last city derbies played on the Meadows because the crowds were now simply too big and boisterous for a public park.

When they met again a few months later, in the final of the Edinburgh Cup, it was played on a private ground where crowds could be managed and admission could be charged. That proved the financial viability of football in the city and is why Hearts and Hibs both waved farewell to the Meadows and secured their own grounds. Hearts went west to Gorgie, Hibs went north-east towards Leith, where the clubs remain to this day, although their roots are in exactly the same place.

Their success inspired many more to take up the game and the growth of association football in Edinburgh was exponential. Dozens of new clubs sprung up, many starting out in the Meadows, and thousands flocked to watch them.

From those small beginnings, the city's footballers soon made a national impact. Edinburgh hosted the first ever women's football match in 1881 and by the end of the century, three Edinburgh clubs had won the Scottish Cup. The peak was perhaps 1895 when the city swept the board: Hearts won the first division, Hibs won the second, and St Bernard's won the Scottish Cup.

But had it not been for the springboard provided by the Meadows, the story might have been very different.

So to conclude, I think the evidence shows that the style of football which was played in Edinburgh always had the same principles as the association game and was enjoyed by working class men on the Meadows from 1855 onwards. This public park is as important to football's origins in Edinburgh as Glasgow Green is to Glasgow, or Battersea Park to London. You may have somewhere similar in your own town.

And while some of that story is not well recorded, there is no doubt in my mind that this created two decades of football experience in the city by the 1870s, which laid the ground for association rules to take off rapidly when the new code finally arrived.

Although the Meadows is not often recognised for its historical sporting importance, it was the crucible for football in Edinburgh. And if you take a walk there now, you'll see it is still a popular football field to this day.



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