

"MEDAEVAL FOOTBALL"

The sturdy plowman, lustie, strong and bold

Overcometh the winter with driving the footeball.

Forgetting labour and many a grievous fall."

- "Shippe of Fooles," 1508 by Barclay.

We think it will be readily understood that it is not within the scope of this volume to trace the origin of Rugby Football as it has been evolved from the rough and ready forms of youthful exercise practised by the Greeks and Romans and so on down through the ages. Such a task, we frankly admit, is quite beyond us; but for those who have leanings in that direction, we recommend the works of Montague Shearman, James E. Vincent, and, of course, that classic by the Rev. F. Marshall aptly described as the Rugby followers' Bible.

In our own County, till quite recently, we had at Chester-le-Street each successive Shrove Tuesday a pretty fair example of what this ancient pastime was like. The "Up" and "Down" streeters are in direct succession to the "Ancients." A similar type of so-called football was also played, amongst other places, in the City of Chester, Ashbourne in Derbyshire, at Alnwick, and at Bromfield in Cumberland. The process was varied somewhat in Midlothian, where the married women played the single; we are assured the married women invariably won!

"Marshall's Bible" quotes Fitzstephen, a thirteenth-century writer, as being the first person to chronicle English football; the modern gentlemen faintly disguised as "Sharpspur," "Scrumhalf" and the like, at least have precedent on their side. Edward III, six hundred years ago, ordered his sheriffs to prohibit the playing of the game, not as a game, but rather that "it distracted the youth from cultivating skill in archery" !

Time has come full circle, for have not we to-day the InterServices matches, and at least three Durham County players have represented the Territorial Army against the Regular Army. About the same period (1314) there was issued a proclamation forbidding the people "to hustle over large balls" in the streets because of the riots which might follow. During the reigns of: Henry IV and Elizabeth other attempts were made to stop the game by the threat of penalties. It was condemned as too rough and so popular as to interfere with work. Doubtless the same arguments hold good to-day. Strictly speaking, "football" was illegal until the reign of Charles II. Furthermore, "respectable" folk disliked the game. Philip Stubbes in his "Anatomie of Abuses" denounces it as "a bloody and murthening practice, whereof groweth envie, malice, enmitie and what-not-else, and sometimes brawling, contention, quarrelling, homicide and great effusion of bloode." In the days of Good Queen Bess, the encounters took place in the old camping fields or camping closes. Holes in the ground did duty for the

modern goals, to be followed by stones and later by sticks. The process of evolution to the present-day goalposts and crossbar, this latter "to develop dexterity, accuracy and cunning in propelling the ball with the feet," is easily traceable.

Will those who so persistently call for a reduction in the value of a dropped or any other goal, and who equally persist in the glorification of the "try" with its consequent worship of the "sprinter" (pure, perhaps, but very simple) at the expense of the genuine, honest-to-goodness Rugby Football player, kindly note? Sight should never be lost of the fact that the "try" in itself, as its very name clearly indicates, is merely a means to an end. Having successfully touched the ball down behind your opponents' goal-line or, as it was more definitely termed sixty years ago, "having achieved a run in," you may now TRY to kick a goal.

The first recorded International match between England and Scotland, of course quite unofficial, was in the 17th Century. It was composed of twenty from Tynedale against an equal number from Liddesdale, the Southerners winning by 3 goals to 2. We are unable to record this as an annual fixture; however, in 1790 the youths of these same dales were playing a return on the "Haugh," close by Keilder Castle. Five games were played, no times stated; after four games the tally stood two all; the North Tyne lads won the fifth and were again declared the victors. No score is given, nor details of the duration of the battle, for battle it certainly was, several of the players being so exhausted by the intensity of the struggle that "a few who died soon afterwards dated the commencement of their illness from that date." Presumably there were spectators, yet we feel certain the accommodation provided did not necessitate the following, which we cull from the official programme of the match England v. Scotland at Twickenham, March, 1934: "The Rugby Football Union will be compelled to withdraw the privilege to spectators of obtaining cushions on hire if there is recurrence of the dangerous practice of throwing cushions about after the match."

Memories of Tudhoe and sturdy "pitmen" in many another team will be recalled by this, relating to both the 16th and 17th Centuries: "The North County Colliers received a new ball at every wedding, the gift of the bridegroom. They were reckoned amongst the best players in England." From all of which it is abundantly evident that the now rather hackneyed "Webb Ellis affair" at Rugby School in 1823 has received an undue amount of publicity and kudos in inverse ratio to its correct position of importance in relation to our game. There exists no possible shadow of doubt that Ellis-or maybe some other was, in

the full meaning of the word, a "pioneer," and to pioneers in general let us always remain respectfully deferential, but the pioneering in this case concerned the game as then played at Rugby School and not necessarily elsewhere. The introduction of " running whilst in possession of the ball " may have been, and doubtless was, an innovation at the great school, but to quote further extracts from Marshall: "The Romans who occupied this island during the first four centuries of the Christian era, played at a game of ball called ' harpastum,' which game presented the special features of carrying the ball and the scrummage, found in no other modern game of Football save in the Rugby game."

Again : " Indeed little or no trace of kicking the ball can be found, and in some cases there has been an actual prohibition of kicking altogether. Further, it was forbidden to pass the ball forward. Nowhere can there be found any trace whatever of a game assimilating, however remotely, to the kicking game of the Association code. It is the glory and privilege of Rugby Unionists to know that the game which they so dearly love and which they have spent so much time in developing and perfecting, is in its main features the *same game* that has been played in this island for centuries. The Rugby game is in fact "the most ancient of all popular sports of the present day." In quoting the foregoing we are far from unmindful that modern Rugby has been modelled upon the game as developed at Rugby School, that the schools taught the game, and their old boys materially assisted in creating Football Clubs.