

THE FIRST MATCH

Gloucester Rugby occupies a special place in the history of rugby union. It remains (in 2019) one of only four Clubs to have been established

- during the era when 'gentlemen' played rugby union as amateurs, and
- survived the transition to the professional era, and
- be still a member of the top division of rugby union's formal league competitions during the 32 seasons since they were introduced - without having been relegated.

[see footnote 7 below]

The Club has been based at Kingsholm, a famous rugby ground with a proud tradition, since 1891.

The Club's origins are set out in detail in the seminal work of Malc King and his colleagues at The Gloucester Rugby Heritage Project (1) [referred to hereafter as 'The Official History'] but evidence is now available which sheds further light on the first competitive match in 1873 and the background to it.

During the 19th century, independent schools developed a version of 'football' which became described as a "*rugby-type game*" - the example set by Rugby School. The game of 'football' was regulated, following a meeting held on 26th October 1863, by the establishment of The Football Association (the FA) which laid down the rules for that game but they prohibited running with the ball in hand and [what was referred to as] 'hacking'.

The Blackheath Club, one of the founder members of the FA, ceased its membership of the FA on 8th December 1863 because of that prohibition.

21 Clubs, including Blackheath and one named 'Flamingoes', decide to establish rules for the separate game of rugby. They met together on 26th January 1871 when The Rugby Football Union (the RFU) was established. The Flamingoes Club, based in Battersea, had been formed in 1865

"... to play without hacking or tripping".

FRANK HARTLEY

Their captain was Frank Hartley, who represented the Club at the inaugural meeting of the RFU. He was duly elected onto the committee tasked with drawing up "The Laws of the Game of Football as played by The Rugby Football Union". He attended 13 meetings of the RFU Committee, and also became a member of the selection committee for international games. England played their first international against Scotland on 27th March 1871.

Frank Hartley is believed to have been one of the committee which approved the final draft of The Laws. He was certainly an influential figure in the early organisation

of rugby at international level. His experience in the game at the highest level was directly responsible for the establishment of The Gloucester Club.

He was a solicitor. In 1873, he moved to Gloucester where he joined the law firm of Haines and Riddiford. He met other rugby enthusiasts including J. P. Riddiford who was the son of one of the partners.

Other identified enthusiasts included E. T. Gardom and two brothers, William and John Boughton.

Hartley was described in due course as

“... a useful half-back and a good runner”.

Following the establishment of the Gloucester club, he is credited with influencing its early development as a side skilled in “the short passing game”.

THE FIRST MEETING

Hartley and Riddiford decided to try to establish a rugby club in Gloucester. Together with other enthusiasts, they held an initial meeting at the home of E. T. Gardom in London Road, Gloucester. A subsequent meeting was held at the home of Mrs. Boughton in Brunswick Square.

They decided to go ahead and, in September 1873, a notice was placed in The Gloucester Journal newspaper inviting anyone interested to come to a public meeting.

On Monday 15th September 1873, as the Gloucestershire Chronicle dated 20th September records,

“A meeting was held on Monday night in the Spread Eagle Hotel, Gloucester for the purposes of enrolling members in a football (sic) club. About 45 gentlemen joined, and Mr J. P. Riddiford was elected captain. It was arranged to play on two afternoons a week, in the Spa Cricket Field. A match is already made with the Hereford club. The annual subscription is 5s, with an entrance fee of 5s”

This record identifies J. P. Riddiford as being elected captain but subsequent evidence indicates that Frank Hartley was the first captain. Certainly he was the captain of the team which first took the field and then in early games which followed - whereas (see below the report of the first match) Riddiford became

“... the hon. sec., Northgate House”.

The Gloucester Club was ‘up and running’.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR GAMES

The intention had been to play on two afternoons a week in The Spa Cricket Field in the Park, Gloucester but arrangements were made to play the first competitive match on the playing field of The College School (now The King's School).

The nucleus of the new club was probably provided by players associated with The College School which had built up a strong reputation for its rugby in Victorian times. As appears below, the College School team was then "... *in a very flourishing condition...*".

The school provided the pitch and offered to put out a team to play against the new Club for the first recorded competitive match. Several of the founding members of the Club were old boys of the school.

The Gloucester Club came to be revered as being a club 'of the people' but it started as a more exclusive club. The founding members included 3 solicitors, 2 corn merchants, a magistrates' clerk, a banker's clerk and the first clerk of the Gloucestershire County Council. These high status individuals were socially exclusive and had strong associations with Gloucester Cricket Club and various churches.

THE FIRST MATCH

The Gloucester Journal (3) recorded, on Saturday 11th October 1873, that the first competitive match took place on Saturday 11th October 1873

"... *on the ground of the latter...*" (The College School).

It was played as

"... *a scratch match between ten members and fifteen of The College School...*"

The Journal described the game as follows –

"*The College fellows played well in the scrimmages (sic - see below), in which they generally had the best of it; but it is hardly expected they could prove a match for their older and more weighty opponents. Eight tries at goal were obtained for the Club, 3 by Hartley, 3 by J. P. Riddiford, 1 by W. A. Lucy and 1 by W. A. Boughton. The Club was therefore victorious by 2 goals and 6 tries to nil...*"

The team members were –

F. Hartley (captain). J. P. Riddiford, W. A. Lucy, E. L. Blossie, A. King, John Boughton, W. A. Boughton, J. A. Balfour, R. Ping and McKenzie (sic)

Thus the side included the founder movers of the new club - Hartley and Riddiford and the two Boughton brothers.

THE BOUGHTON CONNECTION

As noted above, the two Boughton brothers (John and William) were involved in the initial discussions to set up the new rugby club and meetings were held at their mother's house.

There is no record of the boys who played for the College School but The King's School records show that a player named Hubert James Boughton, commonly known as 'Jimmy', had been at the School in the 1870s. It is believed that he was aged 14 at the date of the first match. It is possible that he played bearing in mind that John and William Boughton were his older brothers.

He became a prominent sportsman in the City and captained Gloucester for two seasons in 1883 -1885. He is also significant as having, with A. W. Vears, been responsible for orchestrating the acquisition of Kingsholm in 1891.

On leaving the School he was articled to the law firm of Messrs Bretherton and Sons who became the solicitors engaged in the process of acquisition of Kingsholm.

Further details of his involvement with the development of the new Club are set out in The Official History (1).

THE SCORING SYSTEM

The Journal Report dated 11th October 1873 refers to a scoring system unfamiliar to modern players and spectators. The rules at that time followed the Laws promulgated by the RFU in 1871. Relevant examples are set out below.

The only extant version of those 1871 laws is recorded in the original manuscript of one of the members of the sub-committee which drew them up. As noted above, one of the committee members of the first RFU committee which approved the final draft was Frank Hartley.

Law 7: A match shall be decided only by a majority of goals.

Law 5: A goal can only be obtained by kicking the ball from the Field of Play direct (ie without touching the dress or person of any player of either side) over the Cross bar of the goal whether it touch such Crossbar or posts or not: but if the ball goes directly over either of the goal posts it is called a poster and is not a goal.

Law 6: A goal may be obtained from any kind of kick except a punt.

In March 1875, a proposal for a points scoring system - and another that three tries should equal a goal - were rejected. The scoring system has subsequently changed significantly.

The Report of the First Match includes reference to "... the scrimmages ..." but what, in 1873 was 'a scrimmage (or scrummage)'?

Law 11: A scrummage (sic) takes place when the holder of the ball being in the field of play puts it down on the ground in front of himself and all who have closed round on their sides endeavour to push their opponents back and by kicking the ball to drive it in the direction of the opposite goal line.

THE VENUE FOR THE FIRST MATCH

A history of the Club written in 1891, just as the Club was about to move to Kingsholm, includes an entry pasted into the GFAG minute book which states that the College School team against which the First Match was played

“... was then in a very flourishing condition. Curiously enough that match was played on the very ground in Deans Walk to which the club has now moved”.

So where exactly in Deans Walk was the College School ground?

(a) *THE RECORDS OF THE KING’S SCHOOL* (formerly The College School)

There are a number of ‘histories’ of The King’s School which refer to the school’s playing field being used in the late C19. The best, most contemporaneous, account was written by Frederick Hannam-Clark (4) who had been a student at the school between 1859 and 1867. He described the location as follows –

“... What “old boy” is there living to whom the mere mention of Dean’s Walk does not bring powerful (to the nose) recollection of “Dockham’s Ditch”? At the time of which I speak there was no public sewer along the walk itself, with Ventilators for concentrating and distributing the foul air at fixed points... The playing field of the school was in... this said Dean’s Walk. It was bounded on the west by the Walk, on the north by the backs of houses in St. Mark’s Street, on the east by a large house in Worcester Street... and on the south by the memorable “Dockham”. Part of the field was levelled for a cricket “pitch” but the rest was rather irregular, and there was a general slope southwards...”

‘Dockham’s Ditch’ was part of The River Twyver. The relevant page of the modern Gloucester A to Z uncannily marks all the names mentioned in the Hannam-Clark narrative.

Subsequent school ‘histories’ follow the description by Hannam-Clark but it is interesting that the book by a member of the History Department staff writing in 1990, Roger Whiting, (5) develops the description as follows –

“...The two-acre ‘playground’ (now the Gloucester Rugby Ground) was bounded... on the south by an unsavoury open sewer of black water fed by two tanneries called the Dockham Ditch (in fact the River Twyver). In the middle was a farm called Castle Grim...”.

The “... unsavoury open sewer...” (Whiting) and any stench caused by Dockham Ditch (Hannam-Clark) will have ceased after the Ditch was covered over in the 1930s.

These accounts suggest that Gloucester's first match was played on a pitch situated at the western end of the present Kingsholm stadium, Grandstand and car park.

There are no other accounts to help identify the precise location of the College School's ground. All the available evidence clearly points to Gloucester's first match being played on the school's (somewhat uninspiring) ground in Dean's Walk - which was part of the estate subsequently acquired by the Club.

Interestingly, the school has recently discovered in an edition of the King's School Magazine, published in the summer of 1928, (6) the reminiscences of an Old Boy (unidentified and who described himself only as "ANON") who recalled –

"Over 55 years ago [query about 1873] a little boy of 8 came to Gloucester and went to the Cathedral School... The big playing field was beyond where St. Catherine's Church used to be. A lovely field for footer [King's switched to football in the 1890s] and quite decent for cricket. There was a huge walnut tree not far from its little pavilion. Both have "gone west" and the field is now the Gloucester Rugby Club ground. ... In that field the Gloucester Club was born. Its cradle, however, was in the Park.

When one says it was born on the old College ground, what does one mean? Well this.

In those days games were in their infancy, and some of the then boys or just ex-boys joined some kindred spirits in the Town and started G.F.C. Here are some of their names. To us in those days they were big heroes.

W. A. Boughton and H. J. Boughton, fine $\frac{3}{4}$ backs; P. Cooke, a sturdy heavy forward; Snashall, a terrific and fast $\frac{1}{4}$ back (they called them $\frac{1}{4}$ backs in those days); Miller, as broad as he was long, and a splendid full-back. He bounced along as easily as the ball. Then last, but not least, the skipper, F. Brown and his brother W. Brown who led the scrum. ..."

Perhaps some, or all, of those players were on the pitch on 4th October 1873.

(b) THE RECORDS OF THE GLOUCESTER RUGBY HERITAGE PROJECT

The Gloucester Rugby Heritage Project believes that the College ground was –

"... right across the western end of the present ground - bounded by Dean's Walk on the west, Dockham Ditch on the south, the Castle Grim buildings on the east (in the middle of the present pitch) and St. Marks St. on the north."

This account accords almost precisely with, and amplifies, the College School records. It means that the ground was mainly under, what became, the area known as 'The Tump' and the western end of the present pitch, but also running across the western end of the present car park.

This extended area reflects the Project's access to a map of the Castle Grim estate when the Club acquired it in August 1891 and which includes the area where the pitch would have been located. That map, a copy of which appears on page 17 of The Official History, is reproduced below:



It shows the area where the pitch is likely to have been sited and which corresponds with the identified extended area.

It is also worth noting the probable circumstances which prevailed at the date of acquisition of the estate. There was insufficient time to change the layout between buying the Kingsholm ground and playing the first match on it in October 1891.

The Club demolished the Castle Grim buildings and relaid the pitch in roughly its present position in the summer of 1892.

CONCLUSION

The Gloucester Club began its competitive games on a pitch which formed part of the Castle Grim estate but was, in 1873, the playing field of The College School. At that time the intention was to play all home games on The Spa in the Park - the home of Gloucester Cricket Club. For reasons set out elsewhere (1) the decision was taken to look for another venue. In 1891, Kingsholm was acquired. The Club had 'gone full circle'.

As ANON recorded, in the King's School magazine published in 1928, the club was born on the old College ground but its cradle was in the Park. One might say that its adolescence and maturity has been developed at Kingsholm where its heart now lies.

FOOTNOTES:

- (1) Kingsholm: Castle Grim: Home of Gloucester Rugby: the Official History Malc King - Published by Gloucester Rugby Heritage (2016)
- (2) Gloucestershire Chronicle: 20th September 1873
- (3) The Gloucester Journal: Saturday 11th October 1873
- (4) Memories of the College School, Gloucester: Frederick Hannam –Clarke published by Mrs. Packer of 4 College Court, Gloucester (1890) pages 104-105
- (5) The King's School, Gloucester 1541-1991: Roger Whiting – published by King's School, Gloucester (1990) pages 70-71
- (6) Extract from the King's School Magazine No. 17 volume VI, summer 1928
- (7) Since leagues were started in the 1987-88 season only four clubs have been present in every season - Bath, Gloucester, Leicester and Wasps. The Premiership was established in the 1997-98 season. Only six clubs have been omnipresent - Bath, Gloucester, Leicester, Sale, Saracens and Wasps

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The investigation in to the history of Gloucester Rugby continues!

Clive Major: February 2019