



## William Webb Ellis information



William Webb Ellis was born on 24th November 1806 in Salford, near Manchester in Lancashire, although some sources say he was born in Manchester itself. He was baptised at Holy Trinity Church in Salford on 2 Jan 1807.

His parents were James Ellis and Ann Webb and the couple had married in Exeter in 1804. William's father was an ensign in the 1<sup>st</sup> Dragoon Guards cavalry regiment. In September 1809 he bought a commission in 3<sup>rd</sup> Dragoon Guards for £735 and went to fight in the Peninsular War but was killed at the Battle of Albuera in 1811.

This left Ann Ellis and her two sons alone without any income until she applied for and received an army pension of £10 a year for each child. Ann decided to move to Rugby in Warwickshire so that William and his older brother Thomas could become 'foundationers' and receive a free education at Rugby School ('foundationers' were pupils that lived within a 10 mile radius of the Rugby Clock Tower). William Webb Ellis enrolled at Rugby School under the headmastership of Dr Wooll.

William attended the school from 1816 to 1825 and he earned a reputation as a good scholar and a good cricketer. In football however, it was noted that he was '*rather inclined to take unfair advantage*'. The incident where Webb Ellis picked up and ran with the ball in his arms during a football match is supposed to have happened in the second half of 1823.

The only source of the story of Webb Ellis picking up the ball and running with it comes from one man, called Matthew Bloxam. He was a local antiquarian and former pupil of the school and in October 1876, he wrote to *The Meteor*, the Rugby School magazine, saying that he had learnt from an unnamed source that the change from a kicking game to a handling game had "*...originated with a town boy or foundationer of the name of Ellis, Webb Ellis.*"

In December 1880, in another letter to *The Meteor*, Bloxam elaborated on the story: "*A boy of the name Ellis - William Webb Ellis - a town boy and a foundationer, whilst playing Bigside at football in that half-year [1823], caught the ball in his arms. This being so, according to the then rules, he ought to have retired back as far as he pleased, without parting with the ball, for the combatants on the opposite side could only advance to the spot where he had caught the ball, and were unable to rush forward till he had either punted it or had placed it for some one else to kick, for it was by means of these placed kicks that most of the goals were in those days kicked, but the moment the ball touched the ground the opposite side might rush on. Ellis, for the first time, disregarded this rule, and on catching the ball, instead of retiring backwards, rushed forwards with the ball in his hands towards the opposite goal, with what result as to the game I know not, neither do I know how this infringement of a well-known rule was followed up, or when it became, as it is now, a standing rule.*"

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Whether or not this happened is now open to doubt and there is almost as much evidence that it didn't happen. The reality is that at the time Bloxam was writing, the game of rugby was in crisis as a result of a dispute regarding whether the governing body should allow the game to become professional. This eventually led to a split and the creation of rugby union and rugby league. Whatever, Webb Ellis' involvement, the incident has gone down in legend as the origin of the game of rugby and Webb Ellis has forever become associated with the game.



After leaving Rugby School in 1826, Webb Ellis went to Brasenose College, Oxford aged 18. He played cricket for the college and also played for Oxford University against Cambridge University in 1827. He graduated with a BA in 1829 and received his MA in 1831. He entered the Church and became chaplain of St George's Church in Albemarle Street, London and then rector of St. Clement Danes in The Strand. He became well known as a 'low-church' evangelical clergyman. The only known portrait of William Webb Ellis is a drawing published in the *Illustrated London News* (24, 1854, 400) following a notable sermon he preached during the Crimean War. In 1855, he was appointed became rector of Magdalen Laver in Essex and remained in charge of this parish until his death in 24 January 1872.

William Webb Ellis never married and died in the south of France in 1872, leaving an estate of £9,000, mostly to various charities. He never claimed to have invented rugby and was never interviewed about it. His grave in "le cimetière du vieux château" at Menton in Alpes Maritimes was re-discovered by Ross McWhirter of the Guinness Book of World Records in 1958 and has since been renovated by the French Rugby Federation.