

A HISTORY OF FOOTBALL IN 100 OBJECTS

Gavin Mortimer



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Introduction

How do you narrate the history of football in 100 objects? A bit like supporting England these past forty years – it hasn't been easy; fewer missed penalties but just as many selection dilemmas.

The toughest challenge lay not in compiling the list but in cutting it. Ideally the book would have been titled *The History of Football in 117 Objects*, but as my editor pointed out, that lacked a certain *je ne sais quoi*, as Arsène Wenger might say.

The selection criteria were simple: we wanted objects that represented the convoluted, colourful and controversial history of football over the past 150 years, but we also wished to provoke and stimulate. A book full of shirts, badges and silverware wouldn't have been much fun. Oh, and all objects had to be inanimate. The thought of Maradona jostling for space with Alex Ferguson didn't bear thinking about.

We accept our history is a little Anglo centric but then the English invented football, formulated the rules, fine-tuned the style, and then graciously consented to be beaten by the rest of the world on a regular basis.

We accept, too, that not everyone will be satisfied with our 100 objects – why have you included this and omitted that? – but then isn't that the essence of football? It satisfies and frustrates, it excites and it exasperates, but above all it endures.

Next year is 2013, 150 years since the birth of the Football Association and the start of modern football as we know it. Of course the game today is virtually unrecognisable from the one first played on the green and pleasant fields of England in 1863. But there does remain one crucial constant: the team that wins is still the one that scores the most goals.

Happy reading and happy 150th, football!



School bench

We begin with a bench. Not a pitch-side bench on which to park a substitute's bottom, but a school bench, hard and unforgiving, as football was in its formative years when it was played with unbridled ferocity by the English elite.

Forget all that baloney about football being the invention of the Chinese. It wasn't, and nor was the game – as we know it today – played in the Middle Ages, whether in Florence or London.

All our forebears did was use a ball for amusements. Modern football began in England in the early nineteenth century, though not on the streets of Derby in one of the city's annual Shrove Tuesday thrashes. The Derby game was really a riot with a ball and no wonder the army was called out in 1846 to restore order.

No, football has its origins not on the backstreets of Derby or the lanes of Lancashire but in altogether more salubrious surrounds – the hallowed walls of the English public school.

At the turn of the nineteenth century the English public school was not a place for the faint-hearted. Rosy-faced cherubs saying their prayers and singing their hymns were thin on the ground; instead the sort of pupil causing mayhem at Harrow, Eton or Winchester was the arrogant offspring of an aristocrat with an innate sense of superiority and a wilful

disdain for anyone not of blue blood. As Richard Sanders writes in *Beastly Fury: The Strange Birth of British Football*: “The boys had very little interest in learning. The bald fact was this: if you were born an aristocrat in the eighteenth century you were going to run the country no matter how useless and incompetent you were.”

Riots were not uncommon in English public schools at this time with the militia frequently called in to quell the adolescent rebels. When the occasion arose, soldiers arrived, as they did in the Cheapside district of London in 1811, when school-boys from Merchant Taylors and St Paul’s fought running battles in the capital. When they weren’t fighting the boys liked to hunt, using stones, catapults and bows and arrows to kill birds, rabbits, squirrels and dogs.

A form of football was played, one which initially bore a passing resemblance to the Derby Game, but which evolved in the first decades of the nineteenth century as the strong asserted their dominance over the weak in bringing some vague form of rules to proceedings. *The History of Marlborough College*, published in 1923, recalled the football boys played in the 1840s:

Piles of coats supplied the first goalposts, between which was stationed some shivering small boy who suffered dire physical woe for any unhappy dereliction of duty. The ball – for the school boasted but a solitary specimen – was a small round one. The rules, such as they were – and there were none in particular – were somewhat similar to those of the present Association game; for no handling of the ball was permitted, except in the case of a fair catch, which gave the right to a free kick off the ground. ‘Off side’ was unknown. Indeed the whole game was played in a senseless, unscientific manner, and attracted but few supporters.

There were more supporters watching Eton’s Field Game, and at Winchester where the football was based around “charging”. At Charterhouse they preferred to dribble with the ball

while at Rugby and Shrewsbury there was no rule against handling.

The man credited with bringing order to the “senseless, unscientific” games played in public schools was Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby from 1828 to 1842. No great lover of sport himself, Arnold nonetheless saw how it could help boys channel their energies and shape their character. More importantly, organised games would distract a boy’s mind from the Unholy Trinity of Victorian vices: drinking, gambling and masturbation. As Percy Young wrote in *A History of British Football*, none of these habits were “conducive to corporate character at which the nineteenth century ‘public’ school aimed, nor convenient to accommodate. Sport, therefore, became and remained at once a means of sublimation and correction. It also afforded pious headmasters suitable analogies wherewith to imbue their less intelligent charges with a basic philosophy.”

By the middle of the nineteenth century hundreds of young men were taking this philosophy up to Oxford and Cambridge Universities – and there a problem arose. There were no common rules. The football played at Eton was different to that played at Harrow or Shrewsbury or Marlborough. “The result was dire confusion,” reflected Henry Malden, studying classics at Cambridge in 1848. “Every man played the rules he had been accustomed to at his public school. I remember how the Eton men howled at the Rugby men for handling the ball.”

In exasperation Malden and a group of former public schoolboys called a meeting to agree upon a set of uniform rules. The meeting began at 4 p.m. and ended five minutes before midnight, by which time the weary men had drawn up the “Laws of the University Foot Ball Club”. Although the original document has been lost, an 1856 revision of the laws is held in the library of Shrewsbury School:

1. The Club shall be called the University Foot Ball Club.

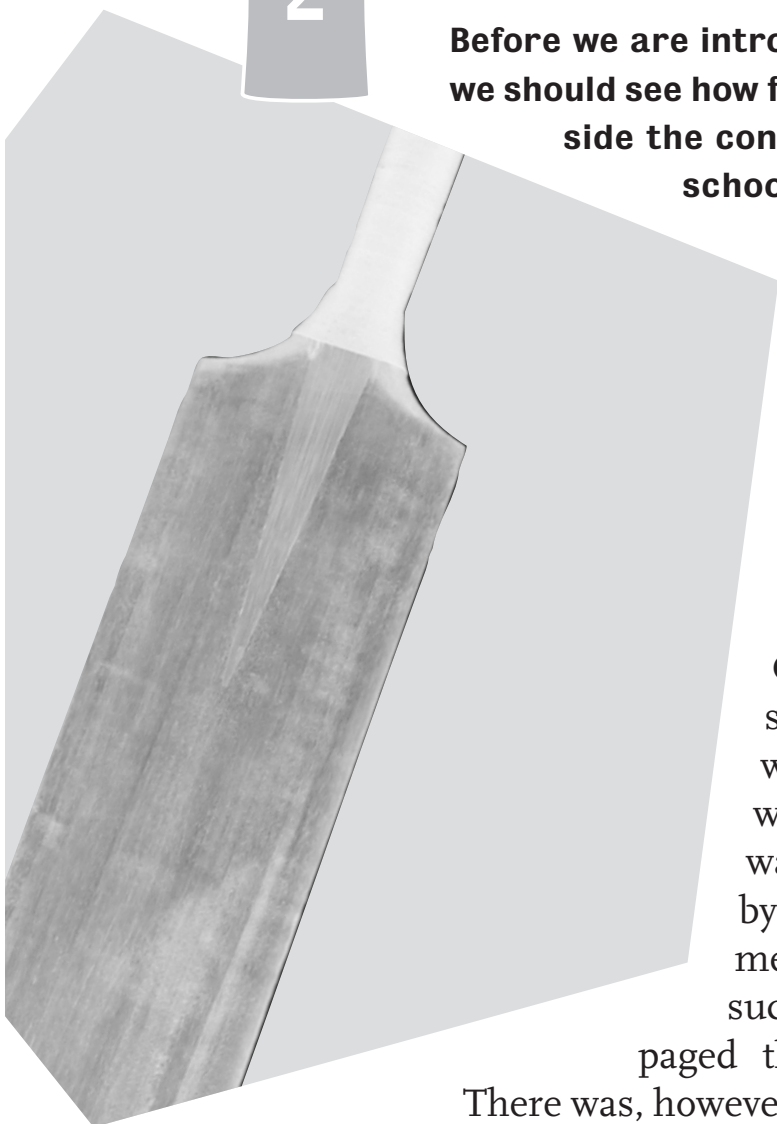
2. At the commencement of play, the ball shall be kicked off from the middle of the ground; after every goal there shall be a kick off in the same way or manner.
3. After a goal, the losing side shall kick off; the sides changing goals unless a previous arrangement be made to the contrary.
4. The ball is out when it has passed the line of the flag-posts on either side of the ground in which case it shall be thrown in straight.
5. The ball is "behind" when it has passed the goal on either side of it.
6. When the ball is behind, it shall be brought forward at the place where it left the ground no more than ten paces and kicked off.
7. Goal is when the ball is kicked through the flag posts and under the string.
8. When a player catches the ball directly from the foot, he may kick it as he can without running with it. In no other case may the ball be touched with the hands except to stop it.
9. If the ball has passed a player and has come from the direction of his own goal, he may not touch it till the other side has kicked it, unless there are more than three of the other side before him. No player is allowed to loiter between the ball and the adversaries' goal.
10. In no case is holding a player, pushing with the hands or tripping up allowed. Any player may prevent another from getting to the ball by any means consistent with this rule.
11. Every match shall be decided by a majority of goals.

In a letter dated 1897, Malden recalled that the students, after a good night's sleep, pasted the laws the following day on a noticeboard on Parker's Piece. "And very satisfactorily they worked," added Malden. Alas, the passing of time had clearly dimmed Malden's memory, for the Laws of the University Foot Ball Club worked to virtually no one's satisfaction. So by the early 1860s football was still as disorganised as ever and in desperate need of an authority figure. As we shall see from our next object, that man was Charles Alcock.



Cricket bat

Before we are introduced to Charles Alcock we should see how football was evolving outside the confines of England's public schools and leading universities. The short answer is that it wasn't, which is why our next object is a cricket bat.



Organised football was still an alien concept to the English working class, as was rugby. Cricket was the only team sport with which they were familiar. If a football was seen on the streets it was normally being chased by scores of excited young men, bloodied and bruised, such as those who rampaged through Derby in 1846.

There was, however, an exception – in South Yorkshire. It was in the hill country to the north of Sheffield that football began to evolve, with matches organised between villages that were more than just shambolic kickabouts. There were rules.

As early as 1843 a report in the journal *Bell's Life* described how “an excellent match of football took place at Thurlstone [north of Sheffield] lately, between six of the celebrated players of that place and six from Totties, which ended with neither party getting a goal.”

In Sheffield itself cricket was still God. But that began

to change in 1855, the year that the Sheffield Cricket Club moved into its new premises in Bramall Lane. One of the members brought along a football so they could have kickabouts before the cricket began. Two of the team, William Prest and Nathaniel Creswick, agreed that forming a football team might be a good way for the boys to stay in shape over the winter.

On 24 October 1857, the world's first club, Sheffield FC, came into existence with, according to FIFA, "its headquarters located in a potting shed and green house. Creswick was appointed captain and secretary and he and Prest went about establishing a set of rules that would allow for the activity's progression."

Creswick was still alive when Sheffield celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1907. In a speech to mark the occasion he recalled that he'd drawn up the rules by studying the football laws used by the various schools. What he regarded as good laws he incorporated into the Sheffield rules and what he viewed as absurd he discarded. These rules (which were sold at auction in July 2011 for £881,250) were published at the club's first annual general meeting in October 1858, and were as follows:

The kick off from the middle must be a place kick.

Kick out must not be more than 25 yards out of goal.

A fair catch is a catch from any player provided the ball has not touched the ground or has not been thrown from touch and is entitled to a free kick.

Charging is fair in case of a place kick (with the exception of a kick off) as soon as a player offers to kick, but he may always draw back unless he has actually touched the ball with his foot.

Pushing with the hands is allowed but no hacking or tripping up is fair under any circumstances whatever.

No player may be held or pulled over.

It is not lawful to take the ball off the ground (except in touch) for any purpose whatever.

The ball may be pushed or hit with the hand, but holding the ball except in the case of a free kick is altogether disallowed.

A goal must be kicked but not from touch nor by a free kick from a catch.

A ball in touch is dead, consequently the side that touches it down must bring it to the edge of the touch and throw it straight out from touch.

Each player must provide himself with a red and dark blue flannel cap, one colour to be worn by each side.

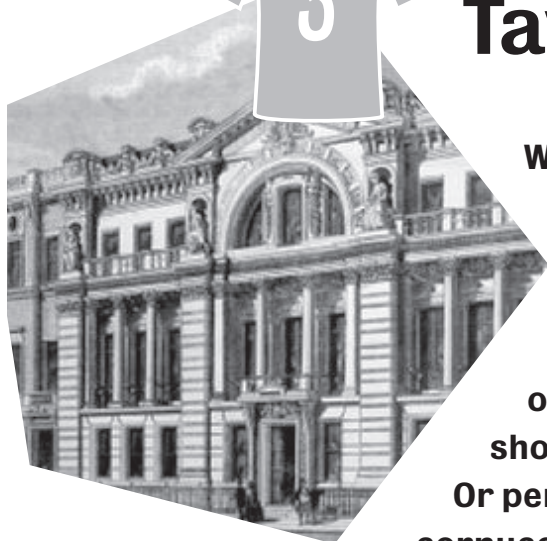
With the laws in place, football in Sheffield underwent a surge in popularity. Montague Shearman, writing in 1887, described how “after 1860 there was a great football ‘boom’ at Sheffield, and several fresh clubs sprang up, and indeed from that time for the next fifteen years the Sheffielders could put an eleven into the field able to meet any other eleven in the kingdom.”

By 1862 Sheffield boasted fifteen clubs and though in time these gave football the crossbar, the free kick and the corner they persisted in using smaller goals (roughly the size of hockey goals) so that scores were never high. When Sheffield played Hallam at Bramall Lane in the world’s first derby match, neither side scored in nearly three hours of football. What there was, however, was a mass brawl involving players and public, sparked by a rash challenge from a Hallam player called Waterfall on Nathaniel Creswick. One local paper commented the next day that the game was the moment when “the waistcoats come off & the fighting began.”

Eleven months after the Sheffield Derby, in November 1863, representatives from eleven football clubs in the London area assembled at the Freemason’s Tavern in Great Queens Street. They were there to decide upon a universal set of football rules. None of the Sheffield clubs were invited, an oversight that would take years to remedy and would require the diplomacy of Charles Alcock.



Freemason's Tavern



Why the representatives of the eleven clubs decided to meet in the Freemason's Tavern on the evening of 26 October 1863 isn't known. Perhaps one or more of them were pigeon fanciers and knew of the tavern's large hall, where pigeon shows had been held throughout the 1850s. Or perhaps the tavern, the third object in our cornucopia of footballing history, simply served the best beer in town.

Not that they had much opportunity to sample the ale. From the outset the discussion was frank. Charles Alcock wasn't there but his brother John was in his capacity as secretary of the Forest Club in north-east London. Initially, wrote Charles Alcock later, relying on the testimony of his brother, "everything augured favourably for the formation of a body which would secure the adhesion of football players of every sect." By sect he meant those clubs who viewed the game as one of "dribbling" and those who favoured running with the ball in hand and "hacking" an opponent, or, to put it more bluntly, giving him a kick in the shins.

Francis Campbell of the Blackheath Club was all for hacking, warning that if it was outlawed "you will do away with all the courage and pluck of the game, and I will be bound to bring over a lot of Frenchmen who would beat you with a week's practice."

The meeting broke up with no firm agreement, so on 10 November they reconvened – again choosing the Freemason's Tavern. This time it was decided that Ebenezer Morley, the honorary secretary, would draft a set of twenty

three provisional rules for ratification at a later date.

Charles Alcock was cautiously optimistic that progress was being made, noting that “running with the ball in the case of a fair catch or on the first bound was allowed, and even the worst features of the Rugby game, hacking and tripping when running with the ball, were duly provided for.”

But this still didn't go far enough for the five clubs – led by Blackheath – that Alcock described as the “rugby clubs”. Finally, at the sixth meeting at the Freemason's Tavern on December 8, Francis Campbell withdrew the support of the Blackheath Club and the other four “rugby clubs” followed suit. It was all very cordial. Campbell agreed to remain as treasurer until the next general meeting, but within a few years Blackheath was one of the twenty one clubs to form the Rugby Football Union.

Undeterred, the remaining clubs formed the Football Association and published its first set of rules (see appendix). And barely anyone paid them a blind bit of notice.

It took the FA another three years after its formation to hold another general meeting, by which time only four new members had joined. By 1866 Charles Alcock had replaced his brother on the committee and he now set about implementing a clear set of rules. Richard Sanders in *Beastly Fury* describes how the FA, cajoled by Alcock at their 1866 general meeting at the Freemason's Tavern, agreed to introduce a tape “a height of eight feet between the posts and stipulated the ball must pass beneath this for a goal. They removed the right to a shot on goal, or conversion, following a touchdown (although they kept the touchdown). They removed the right to a free kick following a clean catch. And, most importantly, they introduced Westminster's three-man offside rule.”

In addition Alcock, a northerner by birth, reached out to the Sheffield clubs, still happily abiding by their own set of rules, and challenged them to a match in Battersea Park. Alcock, a bruising player in his own right, played in the match and remarked afterwards that the success of the occasion “had