

Pastimes, Holy Days and Holidays; Part 3

I was fortunate about 2 years ago when researching for the William Williams Centenary Exhibition to discover in "The Glamorgan Gazette" a description of a rough and tumble football match played at Aberthin in 1868. This game took place in an era just before mass spectator sports like rugby, football and cricket with formalised rules, permanent pitches and regular fixtures became popular.

The football match at Aberthin took place in a field near the "Hare and Hounds" Inn, kindly loaned for the occasion by Mr. M Davies of St. Hilary. It was a match between Town and Country, with players coming from Cowbridge and the surrounding villages. Both teams were picked on the day by the two captains, from a larger pool of potential players that turned out for selection. The Cowbridge captain was John Williams and his Country counterpart was called Rees Thomas. Each team comprised twelve players and it is not clear from the article whether this game was the forerunner of football or rugby and perhaps it was a mixture of both games. What is most surprising is that in a cold January afternoon over 200 people came to cheer on their respective teams. The Cowbridge Town team were as follows:

W G Thorpe	F Stibbs
L Llewellyn	F Miles
W Lawrence	D H Harman
E Evans	J Williams
T Jones	D Thomas
W Knapton	John Williams (Capt.)

The Country team consisted of:

W M Thomas	M Davies (St. Hilary)
John Thomas	E Cox (St. Hilary)
D Jenkins (Flemingstone)	T Spencer (Flemingstone)
Thomas John	David John (Sheepplays)
W Davies (Ysradowen)	D Rees (Penlline)
E Williams (Penlline)	R Thomas (Capt.)

The country team as you would expect was far beefier and stronger than their town counterparts and when they ran on to the pitch to show their colours the Cowbridge team appeared somewhat overawed. Kick off was at 2:30pm and the Country side having won the toss were allowed to start the game. The match was a very one-sided affair and the poor Town team only once got the ball into their opponents' half of the field.

Although the spirit of the game was amiable the Town Team were penned in to their own half and were often severely tackled to the ground. Inevitably, after an hours play William Thomas of the Country team drove the ball home and won the first match. Thereafter another game began and was more evenly contested but by 4pm Mr. D. Jenkins of the Country team carried the ball through the mouth of the goal making his side once more the winners. The victorious captain was then handed the ball as a memento of a great double win.

What is significant about this article is that there is no mention of a referee and rules and times seemed to have been agreed by the teams. The players then adjourned to the "Hare and Hounds" where an hour or two was spent "in harmony and conviviality".

By the early 1870s Cowbridge Grammar School could boast of its own rugby team, which Mr. Iolo Davies in his "A Certain Schoole" claimed was one of the first homes of rugby in the whole of Wales and by 1874 was participating in the Cardiff Rugby Football Club's first away match. Mr. Davies goes on to say it was ironic that the game of rugby which in England was developed at public schools had become the national game of Wales, a country with very few public schools. What we do not know is the result of this match but like some matches today, this early game against Cardiff was something of a riotous affair. Mr. Davies, quoting from "The Cardiff R.F.C. History and Statistics" and a later "Bovian" conjures up an amusing picture of the event. He says that the return journey by members of the Cardiff team in a coach and four was hilarious to say the least:

"...everyone appeared to have enjoyed the outing, especially the coachman, as on the return journey he was unable to keep his seat on the box, and one of the players, C W Watson took the reins and brought the party safely home, although they smashed the turnpike gate which then stood at Ely, in consequence of the gatekeeper's endeavouring to stop them as they were driving through, in the belief that they were going to evade payment".

The 1944 "Bovian" states that the size of teams was very different in the 1887s than today and could vary from between 10 to 20 members per side and the game was played with a round ball. There were other differences in the rules of the game in the 1887s such as, a goal being more important than a try, the ball when caught was carried by the player but passing were unknown as were "line-outs". If a ball went into touch the forwards formed a line with their heads down and a spectator threw the ball into a tunnel, punting was frowned upon and tripping was not considered good form but "hacking" was allowed. One similarity with today's game was the use of the drop kick and the place kick and with a round ball some huge distances could be covered by the kicker; players like Neil Jenkins would have enjoyed themselves I think! Rules were still vague and often based on those of Cheltenham College and there were still no referees, but each side brought along an umpire who were rather biased, causing constant interruptions and arguments with the spectators joining in. There were still no team colours or proper kit and players simply wore whatever they happened to be dressed in that day. It was no unknown for players to wear bowler hats or play in evening dress!

The last two decades of the 19th century was the period when most rugby, cricket and soccer clubs came into being in Diary Country Villages. Rugby had been played at Cowbridge Grammar School regularly since the 1870s and Cowbridge had also been involved in cricket matches as early as 1840 as the Cambrian newspaper of the time recalls a match against Bridgend. Pontyclun, Llanharry, Llanharan and Pencoed on the other hand had to wait a few more years until they were to play competitive matches of football, rugby and cricket. Eventually like their counterparts in Cowbridge, they too would have access to proper pitches to play on and to develop into fully-fledged clubs with officials and regular fixtures. What were the factors that contributed towards (and sometimes against) the development of these village teams? They can be listed as follows:

- * The growth of mining and associated industries
- * The influx of immigrant workers into the South crop of South Wales Coalfield
- * The dependence in the early days of local patronage
- * The role of the chapel and public house (often, but not always in conflict)
- * Support from schools and schoolmasters and local entrepreneurs who were to become the officials and administrators of most of the village teams

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(Continued)

Of all the factors that influenced local sport in our area it was the growth of collieries along the southern rim of the coalfield that was the most important. Firstly, it caused the population of each village to rise dramatically after 1880, as pits like the Meiros and South Rhondda, the Pencoed Collieries, the Trecastle Iron mines and the Coedcae and Lanelay mines came into production. Thus hamlets were turned into villages over night, greater prosperity came into the area and associated industries sprang up along the South Wales Railway such as the Tin works and Pipe and Sanitary works at Pontyclun and the Brickworks at Pencoed, all of which brought into the area an immigrant, often English workforce, who made up the ranks of the manual workers. These were the people who would soon be looking for recreational activities close to their workplace. It is no coincidence that The Pontyclun Tinworks provided as John David has described "...a conveyor belt of players for the Pontyclun Rugby Club that was founded in 1887. These English immigrants, crammed up in terraced houses such as Tinworks Row in Pontyclun or Bridgend Road, Llanharan felt that playing for their local team not only enabled them "to let off steam" but gave them a sense of belonging and identity in their new surroundings. The star players of this early era include such immigrant families as the Speeds, Quicks and Amburys of Llanharan, the Shillibeers, Worgans, Pascoes, Cogbills, Coles, Russells and Barkles of Llanharan and the Waters, Graces, Carters and Warehams of Pontyclun.

The unskilled workers in the mines and factories worked in teams and this would mirror their role on the pitch because, as they were used to working together well, it enhanced the quality of their play.

However great an abundance of strong and fit young men was available it was necessary to find fields and proper pitches to play regular matches on. This was not as easy as it seems. In Pencoed for instance it is said that the Pencoed Rugby team used over 25 fields between the club's formation in 1888 and 1924. Due to the patronage of Edward Christie, the local Squire, Pencoed team were privileged to use the ground at Tregoes when the club was founded.

Cricket in our area had a more charmed existence. In Llanharan for instance the patronage of the local Squire, John Blandy Jenkins provided the teams with a playing field, cricket equipment and financial help with the running of the club. In about 1910 the Squire encouraged the Club Committee to lay a proper pitch and using suitable soil from Meiros Mountain, one of the best playing surfaces in the Vale of Glamorgan was laid on the Welfare ground. The Squire's son John was also deeply involved in the Cricket Club in its early days and became Joint President with the Manager of the Meiros Colliery, Mr. T. Hopkins. Cowbridge was even more fortunate in its patronage than Llanharan, for not only did it have a ground bought specifically for cricket by E.H. Ebsworth of Llandough Castle, but it had a near perfect pitch laid out by the famous Kent County cricketer, Alex Hearne. In addition it had a professional player called William Russell as a player/groundsman before 1911.

What then was the attitude of the local chapels to the growing popularity of team games? At Pencoed it seems, some Non-Conformists saw the Devil in rugby in particular. Walter King tells us in his book that players had to hide their boots and jerseys in hayricks days before the match in case they were discovered by chapel folk. One player, it seems, forgot his "hiding place" and when he had eventually found it he had missed the horse drawn brake and had to run all the way to Cefn Cribbwr to play his match. Not all Non-conformists were against football and cricket because they saw it as a better alternative to the "demon" drink. Interestingly, many of the immigrant families we have earlier mentioned like the Austins of Llanharan were Anglicans, anyway and so they had no fear of what the minister would approve of.

To date, local historians have not emphasised strongly enough the important role of the public house in the development of team games at the end of the 19th century. Llanharan's earliest soccer team, the Pops and Flagns, who played before the First World War were utterly dependant on the Bear Inn's facilities for changing into and out of kit, refreshments after the game (when the youngest drank the pop and the older players the beer) and transport to matches by horse-drawn brakes. In Llanharan too the early rugby team's headquarters were the High Corner and Turberville and it was in the former public house that the cricket club held its first dinner in about 1892. In Pontyclun, it comes as no surprise that the early teams played on a field near the Ivor Arms and in Pencoed too, the team's headquarters ranged from the King's Head and The Railway Hotel to the Britannia, whose adjacent slaughter house provided dressing room accommodation!

Teams cannot be run effectively without administrators and officials to control financial business. Often those administrators came from the emerging business community that grew up in places like Pontyclun, Pencoed and Llanharan in the Age when "Coal was King". In addition local schoolmasters like John Meggins of Talbot Green, Lovatt of Maindy, D Emlyn Davies of Brynna and David Rees of Llanharan played pivotal roles in providing fields, encouraging the youth in their charge and helping out with the onerous task of administration.

I hope you have enjoyed the recent features on pastimes and leisure activities and I will continue this series with a short account of the growth of the early holiday industry.

By Caroline Francis

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