

FORERUNNERS OF DORSET FOOTBALL

Dorset, through the known Roman occupation of parts of the County, may well have been among the forerunners of football played in Britain. A version of football is on record as having been played at time of the Han Dynasty (206B.C. to A.D. 220) in China. Whether or not European awareness of the game came from China is not known, although there is acknowledgement that features of Chinese culture came into Europe from East China via the Silk Road, an ancient trading route.

In the Rome of that time, apart from any acquaintance with "Tsu chu", by which name a Chinese form of the activity was known, the Romans used their own style of football, known as "harpastum", as part of military training. There is some assumption that from their occupation of Britain from 43 A.D., the occupying forces, as well as the training uses of football, might well have explored recreational opportunities of such a practice.

Regardless of any Roman claim to the pursuit of football in occupied Britain, in due course parts of the country developed varieties of the game existing under the later heading of either "mob" or "folk" football. Here, historically, Dorset comes very much into the picture, knowledge of which owes much to the research of authors such as John Symonds Udal, as in his 1972 publication "Dorsetshire Folk-Lore." Here is told of an ancient custom of "kicking the ball" as part of Shrove Tuesday activities at Dorset places, such as at Corfe Castle by the quarrymen of Purbeck.

Of other historically known forms of football within the County, Benjamin G. Cox in "The Book of Blandford Forum" (1987) refers to a version of the game at Blandford dating from Medieval times, Nationally, from the reign of Edward II (1307-1327), the growth of football's popularity, including in the streets, regarded by some as a vulgar and uncivilised pursuit, was subject to some measures aimed at suppression. Various acts of legislation included, in the reign of Henry VIII, rendering it a penal offence to devote ground for the playing of football. Despite attempts to eliminate the sport, or even to a certain extent because of them, football continued to exist, if at times with little or no recorded history.

In Dorset, as elsewhere, in that relatively few football clubs outside of the major sources possess Minutes Books or other records of any age, much that is known of local clubs and organisations is gained from County or other local newspapers. Dorset is fortunate in its availability of such sources, especially so in later decades of the 19th century.

Nationally, as well as locally in places such as Dorset, there had for some years been need for a voice of authority to which organisations might refer. As Percy M. Young stated in his "Football in Sheffield" (1962), "by 1863 the time was ripe to attempt some uniformity in legislation." On the 26th of October that year, a Meeting was held at the Freemason's Tavern, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, for the purpose of modifying rules for regulation of the game. Thus the Football Association was born.

Among measures introduced by the F.A., to be recognised in Dorset and other Counties, 1871 inauguration of the F.A. Cup competition, with size of the ball defined the following year, and in 1885 introduction of rigid crossbars instead of tapes.

Of the 1870s, Geoff Theobald has told of Wimborne Town F.C. dating from 1878, while of a year later, Fred Brown, President of Gillingham Town was able to write of that club having been formed on November 14th 1879 at the Phoenix Hotel, playing initially at Chantry Fields. Characteristic of those who devote themselves to football clubs in a variety of capacities, Fred Brown had been Gillingham's Secretary from 1961/72, Chairman 1975/80, and President from 1981. Of similar long service was Vic Riglar in the post of Treasurer.

Other places in Dorset at which football was played during the 1870s include Sturminster Newton, Blandford and Portland. Into the 1880s were Bridport, Lyme Regis, Dorchester, Melcombe Regis, Wareham and Shaftesbury. Other clubs might well be added to the list, but for an apparent absence of match reports.

Playing conditions and pitch measurements varied considerably from club to club as did spectator, match officials and player accommodation. Interpretation of the rules governing play was frequently a cause of dispute, with spectators joining in, sometimes to the point of near violence. Match control, often entrusted to those either willing or coerced but without adequate qualification, was an issue that would emphasise the need for some kind of wider authority.

While eleven-a-side was generally by this time accepted by competing teams, appointment of those in charge of play was not always agreed. Match officials, known as umpires, were appointed by the opposing clubs, their responsibility in the main confined to the "sidelines." Umpires feature in the F.A. 1874 rules. A third official was added late in the 1870s becoming known as the referee, with 1880 F.A. acknowledgement that by mutual consent of the teams concerned, a referee could be appointed to decide in cases where there was dispute between the umpires.

Within Dorset during 1883, an interesting example of a way in which the national Football Association's identified method of dealing with certain situations could be applied. In a fixture between Bournemouth Rovers and Blandford, a point of footballing Law was argued by the Blandford captain, he feeling at a disadvantage presumably that his team had not brought an umpire with them. As a future solution, the Rovers suggested securing the services of a referee, whose decisions could be regarded as binding.

A Bournemouth Rovers player of the time (season 1883/84), of later wide experience in dealing with points of legal issue, some considerably sports related, was Wareham born (1859) F.E. (later Sir Francis) Lacey. Apart from on-the-field achievements, including cricket for Dorsetshire (1878), an innings of 323 not out for Hampshire in an 1887 Minor Counties match against Norfolk, with Cambridge University blues at cricket and soccer, there was much else. Educated initially at Sherborne School, as Secretary to the M.C.C. at Lord's for 28 years, he played a key role in various Committees concerned with the development of cricket, also serving as President of Hampshire County Cricket Club, from 1927-28. A Dorset-born man who gave much to the County as to elsewhere.

The later expertise of Francis Lacey would have been invaluable in the steps that Dorset was taking towards forming a County Football Association. Aware of the benefits to be gained from collective and supported decisions, emphasised by William Pickford in his "Bournemouth Guardian" feature column "Under the Crossbar", from a suggestion of Bournemouth Rovers, a major local step forward was taken. On April 26th 1884 a Meeting was held at Laing's Hotel, Wimborne from which the South Hants and Dorset Football Association came into being.

The organisation's Handbook for 1884-85 showed a twenty-one man Committee having eight Dorset representatives, with Bournemouth providing eight of Hampshire's thirteen. Successful in a number of directions, the organisation became to some extent victim of that success. The territory covered stretched from Portland to Portsmouth, as well as reaching from North Hampshire to, and including, the Isle of Wight. To avoid the possibility of fragmenting into a number of smaller and splinter components, a decision was taken to explore the option of dividing into two sensibly workable units. A Meeting aimed at separating into a Dorset and a Hampshire Association was arranged to be held on the 13th of April 1887 at the Crown Hotel, Wimborne.

At the chosen Wimborne venue and on the agreed April 1887 date, the convened Special Meeting to determine future directions for football in

Dorset and Hampshire was held. Mr R. Hemingsley of Portsmouth Football Association Club having secured required signatures from ten clubs, the Meeting was empowered to consider a motion to dissolve the South Hants and Dorset F.A. Proposed by Bernard Pares of Portsmouth Sunflowers F.C. and seconded by Mr G.S. Wooldridge from Winchester (a solicitor, and later Chancellor to the Bishop) the 14 delegates from Hampshire clubs, with 8 from Dorset, considered the motion "That the Hants and Dorset Football Association be dissolved and that the 2 Counties be at liberty to form separate Associations."

Minutes of that April 1887 gathering tell that following discussion there came an amendment that the issue "be postponed to this day 12 months." The amendment defeated, the original motion was then carried by 25 votes to 5, bringing about division of the former authority into two separate County FAs. The South Hants and Dorset Minutes Book of that occasion records that after appropriate votes of thanks, the Meeting "concluded in a most amicable manner."

William Pickford, representing Bournemouth Rovers that day, and to become Hampshire F.A.'s first Honorary Secretary, decades later wrote of the event: **"The Dorset delegates, to their credit, took it very quietly and seemed quite ready to go on their own. In fact as soon as the meeting closed they hurried into another room and decided to start the Dorset F.A. and are thus the older of the two organisations by about ten minutes!"**

For their part, as Pickford also tells: "The Hampshire delegates agreed that Dorset being the weaker body, should have the Senior Cup and any balance of funds." Dorset, as with Hampshire, making good use of experience gained from the joint previous connection, addressed itself to the undertaken task. Important to the future was appointment of Mr D.C. Stewart a Wimborne F.C. forward of known ability, with eight Dorset County caps to his name, to be the organisation's Hon. Secretary.