

Antiquity and Football in Exeter

Archaeological excavations in Cathedral Close during the years 1971 and 1972 revealed the remains of a large Roman bath house that had been built during the 2nd Augustan Legion's occupation of the south-west in the period approximately lasting from AD 55 to AD 75. It has been estimated that possibly 5,000 Roman legionaries were based in and around the locality of what was to become the city of Exeter. If the Roman occupation of Isca Dumnoniorum was one of the empire's less demanding postings then the occupying forces surely had time to indulge in the luxury afforded by a large bath house complex. If they did then it is not beyond the realms of possibility that they could also have indulged in a favourite pastime – a game called *harpastum*. The exact rules of the game are not known but in certainty it did involve a ball which could be handled and physical contact between opponents. Were the first football seeds sown in Exeter by the Romans?

Fast forward a thousand years or so to the mediaeval city. In 1287 the Synod of Exeter banned “wrestling, dancing and other unseemly sports” in the churchyard. Some one hundred and fifty years later the Dean and Chapter of Exeter complained to the Mayor that ungodly people played games in the cloisters during divine service. The Mayor responded in uncompromising fashion. He asserted that this was a common practice everywhere. What form these games took is not clear but by this time the playing of a form of football often took place in or near churchyards and it appears that Exeter Cathedral may have been no exception.

What is now termed “folk football” could be found throughout England. The common man was usually too busy trying to survive than play football but on holy days he was free to indulge in mass games that involved a ball being carried between two specific points by opposing groups. The ball was usually carried and games could be very physical and often violent. The most popular time for these games was Shrovetide which is when the famous game at Ashbourne in Derbyshire takes place.

Devon was no exception and there is mention of such traditional games taking place at a number of locations in the county during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There are reports of similar games taking place at Easter and Christmas as well as Shrovetide. Here then were more seeds to be added to the football mixture.

From the sphere of what is mostly conjecture concerning the origins of football in the city it is no great leap to enter realms of both fact and fantasy with the Cathedral again playing its part. Consider this fact. A simple announcement appeared in Trewman's Exeter Flying Post on Thursday 22 March 1804. *Thursday last was married at St. Peter's Cathedral in this city, - Ellis, Esq. of the First Somerset Militia, to Miss Webb of Bristol Hotwells.*

Soon afterwards the aforementioned James Ellis was to join the Dragoon Guards. When serving in Ireland he established his family in the Manchester area and it was here that the couple's second son, William, was born in 1806. James Ellis later purchased a commission in the Third Dragoon Guards and was sent to fight with the Duke of Wellington against Napoleon's forces in Spain. He was killed in a skirmish during the bloody battle of Albuera in 1812.

In order to secure a decent education for her sons Ann Webb moved to Rugby so they could attend Dr. Arnold's establishment with the help of her husband's pension. On entering Rugby School William was known by a combination of both his mother's maiden name plus that of his late father and so was referred to as William Webb Ellis. Whatever the truth of the matter he will be forever associated with the act during a game of football of running with the ball at Rugby School and thereby introducing the unique feature of the Rugby game.

Now comes further fantasy. Had the family remained in Exeter one could be left wondering if the game might have developed differently and even be called by a different name – Exeter Football instead of Rugby Football!

The legend of W.W. Ellis and the “invention” of the distinct feature of the Rugby game however cannot be proved but the myth lives on as witnessed during the opening ceremony of the 2015 Rugby World Cup at Twickenham.

In the first half of the nineteenth century various features of football were slowly being formulated at many public schools and universities throughout the country. The development of football, whichever code it became, was one of evolution rather than revolution.

But football was not the exclusive domain of the privileged few. It remained also a game of the people and a game of the streets albeit illegally. In February 1854 Thomas Collins was fined 5 shillings and costs or three days imprisonment for playing football with others in King Street, Exeter. Three years later an ostler at the Dolphin Inn was fined for striking the owner of a football which had been kicked over a wall of the inn yard. There were further instances as late as 1873 and 1885, when football was a well established sport in the city, of local lads being fined for playing in St. Sidwells, Exe Street and the highway at St. Thomas.

From a mixture of many seeds rugby football in Exeter was to flourish.