England's Rugby Museums

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RUGBY SCHOOL MUSEUM, 10 Little Church Street, Rugby CV213 AW, England. Open Monday to Saturday: 10:30 AM to 12:30 PM and 1:30 PM to 4:30 PM. Closed for two weeks at Christmas. Guided tours of Rugby School leave from the museum each day at 2:30 PM.

THE JAMES GILBERT RUGBY FOOTBALL MUSEUM, 5, St. Matthews Street, Rugby CV213BY, England. Open Monday to Friday 9:00 AM to 5:15 PM and Saturday 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM.

MUSEUM OF RUGBY, Twickenham Stadium, Rugby Road, Twickenham TW11DZ, England. Open Tuesday to Saturday: 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM Open Sunday: 2:00 PM to 5:00 PM. Closed: Mondays and national holidays. On match days and post match days access is limited to match ticket holders. Guided stadium tours (from the Museum of Rugby) take place daily at 10:30 AM, 12:00 PM, 1:30 PM and 3:00 PM. http://www.rfu.com

The Rugby School Museum understandably trumpets the achievements and accomplishments of its most distinguished alumni, including Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known by his *nom-de-plume* of "Lewis Carroll" (*Alice in Wonderland*), the novelist Thomas Hughes, and the noted poet Rupert Brooke. The latter is mostly remembered for a fragment of his poem "The Soldier":

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is for ever England.

A less well-known piece by Brooke, called "A New Boy," written in 1904, described one of his earliest experiences of playing rugby football at Rugby:

When first I played, I nearly died.
The bitter memory still rankles—
They formed a strum with me inside,
Some kicked the ball and some my ankles.
I did not like the game at all,
Yet, after all the harm they'd done me,
Whenever I came near the ball,
They knocked me down and stood upon me.

The Rugby School Museum is squeezed into a small building on the campus of the school; its very cramped and constricted nature helps to evoke the closed-in nature of the Victorian classroom, dormitory, and study space at Rugby School. All of this is in stark contrast to the adjoining fields, on which swarms of students, neither disciplined nor supervised by masters, took part in a physical activity more akin to a mob fracas than a regulated game.

The museum does an excellent job of playing down the notion of William Webb Ellis singlehandedly inventing the game in 1823. It emphasizes that he was an individual "generally regarded as inclined to take unfair advantages," and that his penchant for running forward with the ball rather than kicking following a fair catch was not generally accepted as a legitimate scoring tactic until 1840. The museum matter of factly notes that, "Webb Ellis became a clergyman and never knew that he was to be hailed as the founding father of the game."

The museum, and indeed the Rugby campus itself, is a shrine to Thomas Arnold, the Rugby head master who died one day short of his 47th birthday in 1842. As is well known, Arnold was not interested in sport or athletics. However, his reforming zeal saw to it that the boys themselves were empowered to organize their own extracurricular activities. One of these was rugby football, and the museum devotes one whole room to the documentation supporting this view. This includes the original manuscript of materials collected by Rugby pupils in August 1845 as they drew up the original rules of the game. After three days of discussion, three senior students compiled what they felt were the 31 rules of rugby football. Thereafter the document was printed and published.

If Arnold was the educational reformer who stamped Rugby school with his notions of what character was all about-"My object will be to form Christian men, for Christian boys I can scarcely make"-it was Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* which sold the world an idyllic and fanciful view of life at Rugby, where the good were virtuous and the bad thorough cads. The museum has Hughes's actual description of how rugby football was played when Hughes "was captain of the Big Side in 1842" (correspondence of 14 March 1895). To support the view of Hughes as a bestselling global novelist, there is an exhibition of Hughes's first editions and subsequent editions with publishers such as Cassell, Collins, Harrap, Warlock, Dent Dutton—even a *Classics Illustrated.* I took a graduate class at the University of Pennsylvania in 1969 entitled "The Literature of Schooling;" one of the four required texts was *Tom Brown's Schooldays.*

The museum is a joy to visit, and my only reservation is that there is too much material in too little space. The exhibits include the "death cart," a perambulator for injured players of the late nineteenth century; Rupert Brooke's rugby football cap; and two

fine watercolors completed in 1852 by George Barnard, drawing master at Rugby from 1843-80. The watercolors in particular serve as a useful primary source clue on the evolution of rugby football: a ball more round than oval, posts that look a fusion of association football and modern rugby goals, and a playing surface more rough pasture than manicured meadow.

Nowhere is there any mention of muscular Christians or able warriors "produced" by the stern realities of boarding school life. And yet the museum's concluding exhibit is a roll of honor in which it is noted that 3,159 Rugby alumni served during World War I. Of that number, 83% were volunteers, 682 lost their lives, four won Victoria Crosses, and 720 won the Distinguished Service Order, the Distinguished Service Cross or the Military Cross.

The official tour of Rugby School is especially valuable as various Arnoldian relics reaffirm the man's spiritual and historical legacy and, of course, being able to walk on the school's rugby fields eloquently evokes the rugby passages from *Tom Brown's Schooldays.* The tour stops almost reverentially to acknowledge the statue of Thomas Hughes outside the main library and the famous plaque on the garden wall of School House, overlooking the close:

> This stone commemorates the exploit of William Webb Ellis, who with a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time first took the ball in his arms and ran with it thus originating the distinctive feature of the rugby game A.D. 1823.

The origins of rugby football have been discussed in several books. Jennifer Macrory's *Running With the Ball: The Birth of Rugby Football* reads easily, while Eddy Rawlins's *How the Game Began* is shorter, with a distinctly regional feel to it.[1]

The James Gilbert Museum, on the site where Gilbert footballs have been made since 1842, is very similar to the original New Zealand Rugby Football Museum in Palmerston North. It is essentially a former cobbler's shop that has been added to over the years and is packed, floor to ceiling, with a plethora of rugby memorabilia, dominated by hundreds of framed photographs. Team photographs may strike visitors as so much stilted black-and-white flotsam. But are they? A team photograph of the All Blacks doing a "haka" in 1924 shows a smiling group of New Zealanders gently moving their arms. A 1999 "haka" performed by New Zealand at the Rugby World Cup was a form of macho posturing evoking intimidation, arousal, mental focus, and commitment to victory.

The Dickensian ambiance of Gilbert's—its small leaded windows, creaking wooden floor, strong smell of leather, saddler making his last stitches, then turning and molding a rugby ball as if a fine potter working with clay—makes for a magical moment in which a bruising, contact-collision game seems more a modern day reenactment of rugby as a time of running grace and elegant ballhandling.

The Museum spotlights the life and times of William Gilbert, who, trading in the High Street as a boot- and shoemaker, increasingly dealt with the students of Rugby School and made them the first rugby footballs out of pig bladders. By 1851, the Gilbert Company had a rugby football stand at the Crystal Palace, London, Great Exhibition of 1851. Gilbert's was responsible for the first export of rugby balls, shipping twenty to Australia in 1871, the same year as the formation of the Rugby Football Union.

When I visited Gilbert's, John Batchelor, a 35-year employee of the firm, was stitching up a rugby ball and clearly relished the opportunity to talk to every museum visitor. He spoke of the history and tradition of ball making, and the fact that Gilbert was the official manufacturer of "the" ball for the 1995 and 1999 Rugby World Cup. While Batchelor acknowledged the professionalism of the Museum of Rugby at Twickenham, he saw the Gilbert museum as being special. "It has a personal side to it. The atmosphere of going back while being in the present is unbeatable. Our museum makes you nod, and recognize and feel a part of this game called rugby. The air of connection never stops." I might have been an unbeliever until, as I exited the museum, I saw, lost in a grimy corner, a weathered photograph of the 1947-48 Australian Wallabies on their tour of Great Britain and France, including a youthful M.L. Howell with collar pressed and hair neatly parted. This is the same Max Howell who went on to contribute much to the field of sport history. A history of the company is available from the museum.[2]

The Museum of Rugby at Twickenham is situated at first floor level in the East Stand. Jed Smith, the museum's curator, writes that the various exhibits create "a wonderful celebration of oval ball culture." In many respects he is correct. The museum includes fourteen separate exhibition areas. The entrance to the museum is through an actual Twickenham turnstile. The third exhibit focuses on the atmosphere and ambiance of a Twickenham match day. Another exhibit presents the history of Twickenham broadcasting—the first British Broadcasting Corporation live commentary took place on January 15, 1927. Yet another exhibit shows replica dressing rooms, replete with individual bath tubs, and part of the original Twickenham Medical Room.

Subsequent exhibition themes concern such topics as the birth of rugby; the development of rugby kit (uniforms and equipment); the history of rugby football; the split from association football; the formation of the Rugby Football Union; amateurism; the international game; worldwide rugby and overseas rugby football unions, competitions and trophies; highlights of the rugby year, such as the historical significance of the Oxford/Cambridge Varsity Match, which originated in 1872; women's rugby football union; youth rugby; the ground itself; and the changing role of Twickenham spectators. The Museum of Rugby concludes its celebration of the game with a picture gallery of paintings, cartoons (including some delightful work by Kenneth Bird ["Fougasse," 1887-1965]) ephemera, a massive wall-high chronology of rugby, and finally an intimate, yet comfortable, movie theatre. When I visited, the fifteen-minute documentary film was on the events leading up to the climax of the 1995 Rugby World Cup: the South Africa v. New Zealand match presided over by Nelson Mandela. The sights, sounds, and colors of the occasion continue to make for gripping drama.

The Museum of Rugby makes available a souvenir program, which is strongly recommended for those eager to delve into rugby's history. It is nicely written and an excellent visual overview of the museum's exhibits and assorted presentations. The program describes Twickenham's quirky beginning:

> Early international matches were played on various grounds, including Blackheath, Crystal Palace and the Oval. In 1907 Billy Williams persuaded the Rugby Football Union to buy a market garden in Twickenham for 5,572 pounds, 12 shillings and sixpence. It became affectionately known as Billy Williams's cabbage patch.

Another useful item also available from the museum is a manual for visiting teachers hosting school parties. The concept of the museum as an educational enterprise is, of course, nothing new. Nevertheless, I am struck by the fact that the vast majority of the sporting museums and halls of fame that I have visited do not capitalize on their educational uniqueness. The Museum of Rugby's teacher's guide/manual should be studied, as it offers a fascinating model that deserves imitation.

The various digital touch screens, video clips, and audiovisual presentations make the Museum of Rugby both entertaining and viewer friendly. However, the museum does have its shortcomings, as it ignores controversial yet critically important issues. These include the prevalence and severity of injuries in a bruising contact-collision sport; the rise of professionalism; the cultural origins and contemporary significance of rugby in countries like Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji; doping and drug use; players crossing traditional national borders to create new "identities" (for example, New Zealanders played for Japan and Scotland at the 1999 Rugby World Cup!); and, perhaps most important of all, the need for rugby to expand its playing and spectating support. The museum also leaves one with the niggling feeling that it is an English not a World Museum of Rugby.

The museum is also guilty of missed opportunities. Music, singing, and new songs of rugby praise make Twickenham, Millenium Stadium, Cardiff, and Murrayfield, Edinburgh special places in which people come together, shout and cheer and then, quite magically, launch into, "The Flowers of Scotland" (Murrayfield), "Land of My Fathers" (Cardiff), and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" (Twickenham). It would have been interesting to see the museum accounting for such phenomena. Another criticism would have to be the virtual absence of recent rugby history (1995-99). Despite Twickenham hosting many of the games in the 1999 Rugby World Cup, the museum's attempt at a special temporary exhibition to accompany the World Cup was not much more than a world map showing the 86 countries in which rugby is played.

The guided tour of Twickenham (seats 72,000) lasted about an hour and a half. Certainly the view, high up in the North Stand, is breathtaking. One of the meeting rooms is named after Prince Obelensky. Our tour guide's retelling of the Obelensky legend-Russian prince, charismatic Oxbridge player, sensational try scored in 1936 for England, killed as a pilot early in World War II—reaffirmed the many ways in which sports figures define and ennoble social history and become mythic heroes.

Of a number of rugby books that I looked at one of the most useful from the standpoint of sports history sources was *Rugby Compendium: An Authoritative Guide to Literature of Rugby Union* compiled by John M. Jenkins, and published by the British Library in 1998. In terms of recent events, the interweave of rugby and South African society, and the perspective of a current professional player, I found Francois Pienaar's *Rainbow Warrior* most helpful. The new Chandler and Nauright volume *Making the Rugby World* is a testament to the exciting rugby scholarship going on in contemporary sports history.[3] Leading up to the 1999 Rugby World Cup, the BBC showed a remarkable four-part series entitled *The Union Game: A Rugby History.* Sport historians Richard Holt and Tony Collins were major contributors to the venture; the series is a wonderful blend of great rugby film and insightful comment, creating an exemplary example of innovative sport history designed for a larger audience. One hopes that museum curators will seize on sources such as

Making the Rugby World and use it and chapter scenarios as models for creating exhibits that analyze and assess a global sport in transition, rather than provide one-dimensional descriptions of just a game called rugby.

1. Jennifer Macrory, *Running With the Ball: The Birth of Rugby Football* (London: Collins Willow, 1991); Eddy Rawlins, *How the Game Began* (Rugby: Steers, 1990).
2. James Gilbert, *Rugby Football: The Gilbert Story* (Rugby: n.p., 1957).
3. John M. Jenkins, *Rugby Compendium: An Authoritative Guide to Literature of Rugby Union* (London: British Library, 1998); Francois Pienaar, *Rainbow Warrior* (Harper Collins, 1999); Timothy J.L. Chandler and John Nauright, *Making the Rugby World: Race, Gender, Commerce* (London: Frank Cass, 1999).