

Footy 150

'The Leathern Sphere'

compiled by F. Bader

Main Sources:

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Grammar Rules

On June 5, 1858, a team of boys from St Kilda Grammar School played a game of 'footy' against Melbourne Grammar School (MGS). The principal of St Kilda Grammar, Mr William Northcott, (various spellings) was a graduate of Cambridge University as was Dr Bromby, principal of Melbourne Grammar.

Reportedly, there was prior agreement as to which 'rules' the teams would adopt for the game. Arguably, those rules were modelled on variations of rural and village football games previously adapted by elite (boys) public schools and (men's) universities in the offshore European kingdoms of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Dr Bromby
Melbourne Grammar
His sons played football
and it seems that Dr
Bromby may have initiated
the St Kilda v MGS
match which apparently
MGS won.

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'A wild free-flowing affair'

Just on two months after their match with St Kilda Grammar, Melbourne Grammar played Scotch College. 'A wild free-flowing affair' it continued over three weekends, 7 August, 21 August, 4 September 1858 and those games have gone into our folk-history as the first games of 'Aussie Rules'. (Bateman, P.)

T. W. Wills (MGS) and J. Macadam (SC) umpired the first game which started at 12noon and lasted over five hours. Both teams scored a goal each so a rematch was arranged for two weeks later. This too ended in a no-score. A rematch was played which again ended in a no-score and both sides retired to prepare for the upcoming cricket season.

St Kilda Grammar School

St Kilda Grammar School stood on Allotment No 34 on the corner of Fawkner and Acland Streets.

The building was previously called the Pembroke Hotel or Inn. When the licensee moved his business to High St*, probably late in 1856, William C. Northcott (various spellings) leased the ex-hotel for four years at a yearly rental of £350 with the option of buying it for £5,000.

Prior to that date, St Kilda Grammar was temporarily housed in Fitzroy Street.

*Historic High Street, now St Kilda Rd, was demolished in the early 1970s to facilitate the flow of vehicles through St Kilda to the southern suburbs.

Mr Northcott*, in a letter to parents and guardians, dated 16 January 1857, informed them of the move to the Pembroke site.

St Kilda Grammar, he added '... is in a retired position, commanding a full view of the bay, adjoining a Government Reserve, which stretches down to the sea.' His 'young gentlemen' would be prepared for the University, the Bar, the Army, The Navy and the Civil Service.

Mr Northcott also stated '... he could produce the highest references and testimonials'. (Cooper, p376)

*[Unable to locate an image of Mr W. Northcott.]

Scotch College

As well as Melbourne and St Kilda Grammar schools there was a third public school – Scotch College (SC) founded in 1851.

Alexander Morrison, a graduate of King's College, Aberdeen, Scotland, was engaged as principal in 1857. Apparently Mr Harvey, one of their teachers, came from or had attended Rugby College. When he had footballs sent out to him, he encouraged his Scotch College students to take up the sport.

Muscular Christians

Northcott*, Bromby and Morrison are noted for believing that team sports played a crucial role in creating 'Muscular' or 'Manly' Christians.

That many people were reading *Tom Brown's Schooldays* 'the Harry Potter of its day' written by Tom Hughes, is often suggested as having a big influence on schooling at the time. (Colonial Rugby Website)

Hughes' best-selling story was based on the author's own schooldays in Rugby Public School where physical sport was regarded as character-forming.

Ostensibly, group sports embodied Christian ethics by fostering team spirit and competitiveness.

*The proximity of Melbourne Grammar (Domain & St Kilda Rd probably led to the demise of St Kilda Grammar.

'The Leathern Sphere'

Meanwhile, champion Victorian cricketer Thomas Wentworth Wills writes an open letter to *Bell's Life in Victoria and Sporting Chronicle*, published 10 July 1858.

Wills is querying why cricketers should not form a football club to keep fit during the winter ... "rather than allow [a] state of torpor to creep over them ..." He goes on to ask if it were not possible to form a football club, why not form a rifle club: "... Surely our young cricketers are not afraid of the crack of the rifle, when they face so courageously the leathern sphere, and it would disgrace no one to learn in time how to defend his country and his hearth ..." (Quoted, Bateman, P.)

Thomas Wentworth Wills, (1835–1880), son of Horatio and Elizabeth Wills neé McGuire, moved with his parents c.1840 from NSW to settle near Ararat in the custodial lands of the Djadja Wurrung on the Western Victorian frontier. Young Thomas lived there for five years until enrolled in Brickwood Academy, Brighton and then as a boarder at Rugby Grammar School, England, c.1850-1854. During his terms at Rugby, Wills shone at cricket and football but didn't matriculate with the necessary marks to be accepted as a Cambridge University undergraduate. (cont. over)

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Nevertheless, Wills was invited to play cricket for Cambridge XI as well as Kent, the Marylebone Club and United Ireland.

On his return to Melbourne in December 1856 the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC) asked Wills to play for Victoria against arch-rival New South Wales and also made him their Honorary Secretary. 1857–1858.

Subsequently Wills helped coach local teams and played with various district cricket sides.

James (Jerry) Bryant

A few weeks after Wills letter, *Bell's Sporting Life*, July 31, 1858, printed a notice by James Bryant, professional MCC cricketer and proprietor of the Parade (MCG) Hotel in East Melbourne.

Bryant, who may have been responding to Wills' July 10 letter, offered to provide a foot-ball for anyone who wanted to play a game at one o'clock in Richmond (Yarra) Park.



J. Bryant (left)
T.W. Wills (right)
1859

Image:
kindness
of
Melbourne
Cricket
Club
Library

Around forty men including some 'pedestrian* athletes' turned up to form a 'St Kilda Scratch Team' and a 'Melbourne Scratch Team'. Trees were used for goal posts. There were no boundaries and the game lasted from 1pm till dark. Englishers 'played something resembling Rugby', Scotlanders, 'a game that defied description', Irishers 'yelled and punted the ball in the air' while others 'played with no rules at all'. And, depending on which report one reads, the July 31 game was abandoned as confusion over the rules caused fights to break out. Or, 'the greatest good humor prevailed' until the ball could no longer be seen.

*on foot, not on horseback

Melbourne Rules

Soon after the 1858-59 cricket season ended another scratch match was held in Yarra Park on May 14, 1859. Afterwards, a group of 50 or so men, mainly cricketers, held a meeting at Bryant's Parade Hotel to formally 'get up' the Melbourne Football Club. A *Rules Committee* was selected and charged with drawing up a code of acceptable football rules, and a deputation appointed to request use of the Melbourne Cricket Ground from the Melbourne Cricket Club.

The following are variously reported as committee members:- Messrs. Wills, Bruce, Butterworth, Harrison, Hammersley (Cambridge University), Thompson (Cambridge) Smith (Trinity College, Dublin), Wray, and Sewell. *Bell's Life* noted that three days later, Tuesday May 17, some of the committee met to write up the set of ten rules that would form the basis of 'Melbourne Rules' – believed to give Australian football the distinction of being the first football rules ever put down on paper. On May 8, 1866 the rules were formally revised and codified at the Freemasons Hotel, Swanston St or arguably, on 11 May 1865 at Higgs' Royal Hotel.

St Kilda Footy Club (SKFC)

Other games were played in 1858 but apart from July 31, 1858 (above) and so far as can be ascertained, a 'St Kilda' team is not specified again that year. Author, Robin Grow (Presentation to SKHS 15.6.08) mentioned that there are reports of a loose-knit football club in St Kilda since April 1858 – which means it formed before the MFC (May 1859). He added that "it was most likely a group of friends who lived in or near St Kilda getting together to play for fun, as inner Melbourne players often turned up to play for whichever team they liked on the day."

A year later, on July 30, 1859 a twenty-five member Melbourne team played a St Kilda side. Robin Grow said that other St Kilda sides reported in 1859 were against Melbourne (twice) and Scotch College.

A formal SKFC was noted in 1862 and by 1864, St Kilda football ground was regarded the best in the colony. After South Yarra disbanded in 1873 many of their players joined St Kilda and went on to play in the now legendary Lake Premiership Series. SKFC was also among the teams making up the Victorian Football Association (VFA) in 1877.

Breakaways

Just on two decades later St Kilda was invited to join the powerful teams who broke away from the VFA in 1896 to create the Victorian Football League (VFL). A century later VFL encouraged various clubs to merge or move interstate and, in 1990 the Victorian Football League became the Australian Football League or AFL.

The Men's Sphere

Since 1858, (the oval ball introduced 1860s) footy has been praised and pilloried, revised and reviled, altered and argued over, misinterpreted and reinterpreted.

Just recently, a proposal surfaced that the AFL's 18th Club Licence (Western Sydney) should go to an Irish-dominated team.

The Age editorialised on July 14, 2008 (p12): '... The AFL needs to assess whether importing an international brand with a specific national identity ... hitherto unknown in the AFL ... would damage the competition as up till now ... the Australian Game transcends boundaries of class, religion and ethnicity in a way that Rugby and Soccer does not ...'

Footy DNA

Since time immemorial a sub-species of *Eva Sapiens*, anecdotally named Philo Ludenski, compulsively or obsessively threw or kicked stones and fruit. When balls were invented they formed ad hoc rural and later, village and district teams.

Australian Kulinian groups played a football game called *MarnGrook* in Western Victoria. Before and after Separation from NSW (1851) and the Gold Rush Era, Victorian blokes got together on Saturday arvos to form teams and play impromptu or scratch football games.

Such teams agreed on which rules they would obey. Mainly the rules were drawn from a variety of 'folk-rules' – not then codified in their diverse countries of origin – as well as various conventions developed by private schools such as 'Rugby' and 'Eton' as well as 'Cambridge', Sheffield 'Soccer', 'Gaelic*', and arguably, *MarnGrook*.

* Geoffrey Blainey writes that many Victorians emigrated to NZ during the 1860s recession and took the Melbourne game with them. (*A Game of our Own*, pp.80–82). Rev. Thomas William Croke, a later Gaelic Athletic Association foundation member (1884) and an Irish separatist, was transferred to Auckland New Zealand as Second-Bishop from 1870–1874. There is a remote possibility (not corroborated) that he may have been influenced by 'Melbourne Rules' and took them back to Ireland.

Economic Rationalists

On April 21, 1856 stone-mason sub-contractors persuaded reluctant Melbournian property developers to agree to an eight-hour working day and a half-day on Saturday.

Maybe the stone-masons had football in mind when making their point that less working hours would give them "more time to improve their social and moral condition". The ripple effect slowly flowed through to other workers and gave them the opportunity to play football on Saturday afternoons.

At the time, Melbourne Sundays were strictly reserved for religious observances or practices. And, the Sabbath remained unbroken until 1904 when the Museum and Art Gallery opened after a long campaign by the 'Sunday Liberation Society'.