

# Rugby Football in Bangor

The game of Rugby Football was brought to Wales during the Industrial Revolution by the sons of colliery owners and iron masters. Also, many of the middle class professional men and clergymen went to English public schools and colleges, and there they were introduced to the game, which had been developed by the middle years of the nineteenth century. No doubt that if they returned to the Principality, many would try to introduce the game to the people in the localities where they worked. Yet a form of the game had been played in Roman times by the soldiers', and this was called Harpastum, and it has been recorded that it was played inside the Roman fort at Caerleon, in Gwent. There is also evidence that a type of rugby football was played in - Wales between groups of villagers, where they started from two ends of the village and tried to carry a ball, of sorts, to the other end. This proved to be an exceedingly rough game.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the game had made great progress in Wales, particularly in the south, but it had no organisation, and it was only a question of time before something would have to be done.

Saturday, March 12, 1881, is a significant date in the history of Rugby football in Wales, for it was on that date that the delegates representing eleven clubs gathered at the Castle Hotel, Neath. According to the *Western Mail* this group of officials met "to consider the question of forming a Welsh Rugby Union". It is reported that the clubs represented were Bangor, Brecon, Cardiff, Lampeter; Llandeilo, Llandovery, Llanelli, Merthyr, Newport, Pontypool and Swansea. It was unanimously decided to form a Welsh Rugby Union, with Richard Mullock as the first honorary secretary.

The report that Bangor was represented seems to suggest that in the Northern part of the Principality, Rugby football was, in a thriving condition. This was far from the truth, for in fact, Bangor as a Rugby football club, had ceased to exist. Indeed, precious little Rugby was played in the North. Bangor's history, it seems, lays a bit further back in time. The year 1876 found North Wales football, of either code, in its infancy. There were no leagues, no cups and very little organisation. On 18 December, 1876, a few enthusiasts banded together at the Magistrates' Room in Bangor, determined to establish a club in the city. Mr. George Tolson presided at this meeting and a motion was proposed by Mr. Fred Docker, seconded by Mr. Winter, "that a football club be formed to be called the Bangor Football Club". The first President of the club was the Hon. G. S. Douglas Pennant, M.P. Mr. R. Ll. Jones, was elected Vice-President; Mr. R. H. Pritchard, who later became Bangor's first Town Clerk, was appointed secretary and Mr. John Jones, Manager of the National Provincial Bank at Llangefni was voted into the Treasurer's post. The first committee consisted of eleven members (with power to add to their number), and was as follows: "Messrs. Green; J. Haywood; J. R. Brown; F. C. Docker; R. C. Rathbone; I. Shrubsole; S. R. Drew; G. Tolson; J. Purvis, Rathbone, Sr. and Dr. Ellis".

The annual subscription for playing members was five shillings (25p) and a sum not less than ten shillings and sixpence (52 ½ p) entitled a person to become an honorary member. It was decided that a committee of seven playing members be elected annually for the purpose of directing and arranging the business of the club, and it was further agreed "that the game be played according to the rules of the Rugby Union".

One interesting rule drawn up by the new committee was that, "If any 'member renders himself generally obnoxious, the committee shall, on representation being made to them by five members of the club, call a general meeting which shall have power to call on the member to resign".



**FIRST WELSH TEAM – WALES v ENGLAND 1881**

Back Row

W. D. Phillips (Cardiff); G. F. Harding (Newport); R. Mullock, Hon. Sec. (Newport); F. S. Purdon (Newport); G. Darbishire (Bangor); E. Treharne (Pontypridd); R. G. D. Williams (Abercamlais).

Centre Row

T. A. Rees (Llandovery); E. Peak (Chepstow); A. J. Bevan (Capt.) (Grosmont); B. E. Girling (Cardiff); B. B. Mann (Cardiff).

Front Row

L. Watkins (Llandaff); C. H. Newman (Newport); E. J. Lewis (Llandovery); R. H.B. Summers (Havorforwest).



The first Bangor ground at Maes-y-Dref can be seen next to St. Mary's Church, on the right. When this picture was taken it had become a soccer ground, although the University College and the Normal College used it on occasions to play rugby. The Friars School field at this time was to the right of the ground - the boundary wall can just be seen at the edge of the picture.

Photo: Glanville Jones Collection



Another view of the ground taken 80 years ago. It seems that a fancy dress show is being judged. The houses in the background have now nearly all gone.

Photo: Glanville Jones Collection



Lewis Lloyd, Headmaster of Friars School 1872 – 79 and Headmaster of Christ College, Brecon. Later Bishop of Bangor. He attended the historic meeting at Neath in 1881.

Photo Gwynedd Archives

The footballers were to train on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. !These were called "practice days", when residents of Bangor were allowed to play, on being introduced by a member, "who was responsible for his good conduct, and who in case of the said person misconducting himself, renders himself liable for any damage done to the property of the club". There were, apparently, plenty of exuberant players over a century ago!

On the selection of the team, the rules stated that on a "match being arranged with any neighbouring club, the team be chosen by the captain, subject to **the approval** of the committee". If a player failed to turn up, the culprit was fined two shillings (10p) and he was ineligible to play in any subsequent match until such a fine was paid. Every member, on payment of his subscription was furnished with a copy of the rules of the game as played by the Rugby Union and the Football Association. The club evidently was not too sure about the decision it had taken to play the Union code, and all too soon, a change did come.

The colours the club decided to wear was royal blue and scarlet, and these were arranged in vertical stripes. The field the club was to play on was at Maes y Dref, adjoining the site of the old Friars School. It was owned by a Mr. Thomas Williams, and the club rented it from him for £1 a month. There is no trace of this field today as it has been occupied by a number of houses and the Drill Hall.

For a few months, therefore, Rugby football was played, and from all accounts, rather too enthusiastically; several players were badly injured, there were other difficulties, particularly in arranging sufficient fixtures locally. The following season, at a general meeting on 10 September, 1877, it was decided "to consider whether Rugby Union or Association Rules be played by the Club". The decision of that meeting was to drop Rugby in favour of Association Rules.

Bangor, then, were reluctant to carry on with the rugby code. Apart from lack of opponents, the game itself must have appeared unnecessarily rough to the locals. The rules in those days were certainly different. For, example, passing in the 1870's was mainly confined to the forwards, since the half back went either for a try or a run-in, or, when within range, attempted to drop a goal. It was the duty of the threequarters to drop at goal or tackle the opposing halves. Punting was unknown, but dribbling was a great art among the forwards, and combined rushes were employed to sweep past the opposing half backs. The off-side and on-side laws were the same, as was the knock-on and the forward pass. It was only in 1876, the year of Bangor's formation, that there came a major departure in that the number of players was reduced from 20 to 15. International teams followed suit in 1877, and in 1878 it was ruled that the ball be released in a tackle, as previously it could be held until all the forwards had gathered round to form a scrummage. In 1879 no player without the ball was to be obstructed, and probably in the early Bangor games, much obstruction and body checking went on, resulting in some bad-tempered play, and this could cause many injuries. Another feature of play at this time was uncontrolled hacking, and the boot was used as a lethal weapon, quite legally, to intimidate opponents.

It was also difficult to play matches on a regular basis, because, in the 1870's and the 1880's, workers did not enjoy a half day on a Saturday, since it was the general custom to work until 4.00 p.m. in offices, and shops shut a lot later in the evening. Thus the concept of the Saturday afternoon match being played on a regular basis was virtually unknown, and in both codes, games were arranged on a mutual basis and played when it suited the respective clubs.

The Club, as an active Rugby union body, then seemed to disappear from view, but in the Welsh Rugby Union records, the names of G. Darbishire (Bangor) and H. C. Vincent (Bangor) appear in the Welsh International team lists of 1881 and 1882 respectively. G. Darbishire came from the well established Penmaenmawr family of that name, and he played as a forward in the back row against England on "Mr. Richardson's Field, Blackheath", on 19 February, 1881; Wales were heavily defeated that day and they were not offered a match with England the following season. H. C. Vincent, who came from Bangor itself, was another forward playing in the back row, and on January 28, 1882, he was fortunate enough to be on the winning side when Wales beat Ireland at Lansdowne Road. The game itself proved to be a turbulent one, and there were a great many arguments between the Irish team and the Welsh "umpire". Ireland finished with 11 men and it was such an unsatisfactory game that the fixture was discontinued until 1884. Neither of the two men played for Wales again, nor did they play for Bangor, because the club, as a Rugby playing organisation, did not exist. They may have played for the club in 1876-77, but there is no evidence of this. The name of C. P. Allen, of Beaumaris, appears on the Welsh team list, in their match against England at Leeds, on January 5, 1884. He was a wing threequarter, and he scored a try, the only one for Wales that day. England scored three tries, one of which was converted. There was certainly no club in Beaumaris at that time, but he did play for Oxford University. One explanation is that this was his residential qualification, and the background to this is given in the profile of famous personalities at the end of this account.

How Bangor, then, as a club came to be represented at the historic meeting at Neath in 1881 is therefore a mystery, as no rugby team was recorded as playing in the city at that time. It seems that Godfrey Darbishire was at this meeting, but we do not know if he was invited, nor do we know whether the Bangor Football club had decided to send a representative down. We must remember that in those days the distinction between the football of the two codes was not very clear, especially from the administrative point of view, and one must suppose that many other clubs, apart from Bangor, had provided their players with rules of both games. We do know, for example, that Harry Vincent played soccer in Bangor, after he had played Rugby for Wales.

The Welsh side that Godfrey Darbishire had played for was massacred by England to the tune of 56 points to nil, by modern scoring values. Indeed, this Welsh side was not really an official one, and the *Western Mail* of the time printed letters in which Richard Mullock of Newport was attacked for picking a "private team . . . to do battle for Wales". Such was the uproar about this defeat, that those interested in the development of the game in the Principality decided to put its administration on an organised footing and the meeting at Neath was the result. The selfsame Richard Mullock who had been instrumental in engendering the furore was elected the first honorary Secretary of the W.R.U. Godfrey Darbishire was made a Vice-President, and then he disappeared from the rugby scene, for within a few months he had gone to work in West Virginia in the United States. However, there is another version of the meeting at Neath which Gareth Williams, the Aberystwyth historian, maintains is authentic. He states that Lewis Lloyd, the Headmaster of Brecon College, represented the Bangor interest. This is a feasible point of view, Lewis Lloyd, a native of Llanarth, Cardiganshire, was appointed Headmaster of Friars School, Bangor, in 1872, when he was 29 years of age. He had been educated at Lampeter and Jesus College, Oxford. He was a remarkable scholar, and keen on all aspects of sport, particularly rugby. No doubt his stay in Oxford influenced him in this respect. In 1867 he was appointed as Headmaster at Dolgellau, and revived the school's waning fortunes, and by 1872 the establishment was flourishing. He then came to Friars School, and such was his reputation as a fine teacher, that many of his pupils followed him. He had a fiery temper, and was a strict disciplinarian, but he had a tremendous personality which fired the enthusiasm of his pupils and he won their devotion.

He is remembered now by many as the first Welsh-speaking Welshman to become Bishop of Bangor for two centuries, and as the author of "*Emyniadur yr Eglwys*". Yet his true greatness was revealed in the classroom, and upon the playing fields, where he played-vigorously alongside his pupils. It was no accident that, in addition to their academic distinction, the Friars boys of those years produced such good football teams, including several future international players. As the Friars School field was near to the football field at Maes y Dref, it is more than likely that Lewis Lloyd's interest extended in that direction. When he went to Brecon College, as Headmaster, in 1879, he took his enthusiasm with him, and once again, many of his pupils followed him. He was immensely keen on rugby football, although strangely enough it was not introduced in Friars School during his stay there. In Brecon College, however, under his influence, the game flourished. At the meeting at Neath, Lewis Lloyd's presence has been noted, and it is reported that he supported Bangor. It would be more logical for him to support Brecon, but men's motives are often complex. There is reason to believe that he wished to return to Bangor, and in fact he did so in 1890, when he was appointed Bishop. Was there a secret hope, perhaps, in his mind, that rugby might flourish in the North? At any rate, when he did return, there is no evidence that he took an active interest in the development of the game in the city. Had he done so, the story of the Bangor R.F.C. might have been very different. He was an extremely active supporter of the Friars School cricket team, and in the Old Boys matches, Bishop Lewis Lloyd wielded a useful bat, by all accounts!

Between 1877 and 1930, therefore, there is no record of a Rugby club in the town, although the Bangor Normal College apparently started to play in 1898, when they took on a makeshift University side on the Bangor soccer ground at Maes y Dref, and beat the 'Varsity quite easily. This game, we gather, "was regarded as a novelty in the area" and the spectators "two thirds of whom had never seen a rugby ball before" were warm in their appreciation. The College did not have to wait long for its first success in the rugby world, for in 1900 one of the students, W. Williams, of Mountain Ash, represented Glamorgan in a county match against Yorkshire. The game grew and flourished in the College, and before the First World War the team was meeting sides from as far a field as Wigan, Birkenhead and Aberystwyth. Facilities for the playing of these games were very poor, the fields being situated to the northern side of the college buildings, and they were described as being "rough, sloping, uneven and dangerous". Thanks to the generosity of the Bangor City Football Club and the University authorities, some of the more important matches were played on the town ground and the Ffriddoedd playing fields.

In matches against the University College, Bangor, its chief rivals, the Normals were uniformly successful in the early years, and the "Varsity" did not gain its first victory in Rugby over its older neighbour until 1913.

The rugby code was very weak in the University at the end of the nineteenth century and very few matches were played. According to the University College magazine, apart from the game mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the next Rugby match for the 'Varsity was also against the Normal College, played on the Bangor soccer ground on March 20, 1900. "The match, owing to its comparative strangeness, afforded plenty of amusement", and it seems that the Normals were by far the superior team, winning by nine points to nil.

There is little record after this of Rugby football being played in the University until December, 1910, when it is recorded that "a new departure had been made in College Athletics this season-the formation of a Rugby team . . . the Captain is Mr. Emlyn Hopkins, and most of the players hail from South Wales. Two matches with the Normal have been played", and it was stated that considering the limited facilities for practice, the 'Varsity men did remarkably well. "Lack of cohesion lost us the first game, ill-luck the second". It was hoped that further matches would be arranged against Chester College and Liverpool, but there is no record of these games being played.

In 1911, however, the Rugby club was accorded the full status of a "College Institution", and the two matches they had with the Normal College before Christmas proved to be fierce encounters, with the latter emerging victors on both

occasions. The 'Varsity men, however, "rushed splendidly in the open". It was not until 1912-13 that the 'Varsity began playing on a regular basis, and they registered a win against Hamilton's XV, played at Birkenhead Park; it was their first ever victory, the score being 10 points to 3. In a subsequent game, 'Varsity beat Chester at Ffriddoedd by three points to nil, and to crown it all, they defeated their old rivals, the Normals, by 11 points to 3. It is interesting to note that matches were played against Rhyl, reportedly newly formed that season, and University College of Wales, Aberystwyth.

At senior level, therefore, Rugby football had come to stay in Bangor, but under the mantle of the Colleges. Few players were local born, as there was no tradition of the game in the district, and the evidence for this is in the fixture lists-there were virtually no clubs in North Wales, and the two colleges had to go far a field in search of opponents, which was a costly and tiring experience in those days.

With the outbreak of war in 1914, sport in the Colleges was badly affected, and relatively few fixtures were played.



The First University College, Bangor Rugby XV. There had been other sides in the College, but they had not been allowed "official" status. The picture is of the 1911-12 1st. XV;

Standing: Back Row:

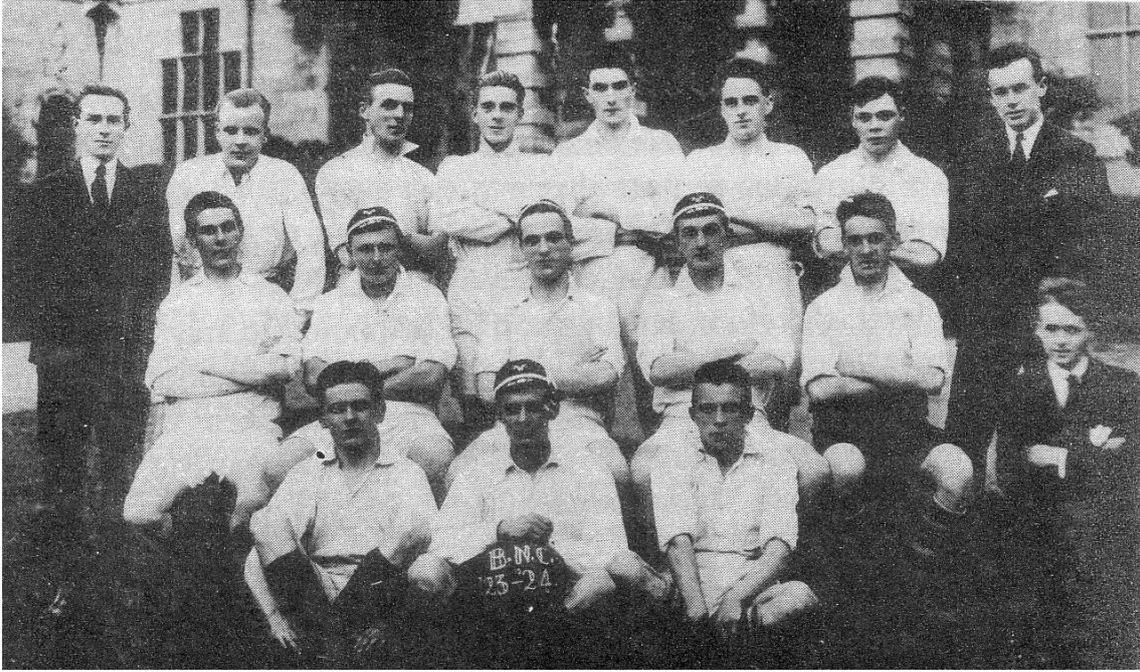
Emrys Evans (Ref.); G. D. Gwyn; John Elias; Richard Davies; Llew Davies; H. J. Thomas; J. E. Bayliss; O. Lloyd Williams; John Williams. Ben Walker (Hon. Sec.).

Middle Row (Seated):

T. Samuels; Brynley Thomas; Emlyn Hopkin (Capt.); Tim Williams; W. S. Thomas. Front Row: Frank Wright; Tom Cousins; George Vaughan.

Colours: Dark Green and Yellow.

Photo: U.C.N.W., Bangor



**NORMAL COLLEGE, BANGOR 1st. XV. 1923-24**

Back Row: Ivor Jarvis (Sports Editor); W. J. Evans; C. E. Jones; H. F. Jones; J. H. Clarke; Emrys Hughes; T. R. Jones; J. E. Jenkins (Linesman).

Middle Row: E. W. Jones; W. G. Rex (Sec.); Isaac Watts (Capt.); R. T. Williams; R. Pierce; Gwyn Williams.

Front Row: T. W. Thomas; R. Jones; G. A. Allen;

The picture was taken in the front of the old College building in Siliwen.



**A FRIARS SCHOOL XY 1925-26**

Great emphasis was placed on House Rugby in the school and the competition between the Houses was intense. This is School House. The team was:

Back Row: H. A. Jones; L. E. Ward; D. A. French; W. I. Thomas; R. I. Evans; A. LL Parry Middle Row: T. Harvey; M. D. French; G. H. D. Evans (Capt.); E. C. Allenby; R. N. Smith. Front Row: J. Hayley; J. E. E. Hughes; H. Sheffield; T. H. Jones.

Photo: Gwynedd Archives