CHAPTER I.

THE ORIGIN OF THE GAME.

It is not within the purpose of the present work to give a detailed and exhaustive record of the ancient games of football or to compile a history of the game as played in this country for so many centuries. The ancient records have been so exhaustively searched into by Mr. Montague Shearman, and embodied by him in the Badminton Series, in addition to a work by the same author in conjunction with Mr. James E. Vincent—"Football: its History for Two Centuries"—that to attempt to go over the same ground again would be a work of supererogation. The present work is intended to treat of Rugby Football only, and the present chapter will be devoted to an endeavour to trace the origin of that game, and that game alone.

Rugby football is the modern scientific development
of an ancient game at ball. It can therefore lay claim to be the most ancient of British sports, and in its present form is the legitimate refinement of the rough and crude games which in their main features are undoubtedly the source from which the Rugby game and the Rugby game alone is the true issue. It is often urged as a charge against the Rugby game that the title "football" is singularly inappropriate, inasmuch as the distinctive features of the game are the handling and carrying of the ball. And this charge has some foundation as regards the nomenclature of the game, which has certainly, as will shortly be shown, been known under other titles than that of football. In the Western Counties it has been designated as "hurling," whilst in Norfolk and the Eastern Counties it has been styled "camp-ball." But under whatever name the game may have been known, it is possible to trace back for many centuries the existence of a game at ball which in its general features has been unmistakably the precursor of the modern Rugby Union game.

Without going so far back as the days of ancient Greece, there was a game of ball amongst the Romans called harpastum, which both from its name and the description given of it was clearly a somewhat similar sport to the Rugby football of the present day. Very probably this same Roman game harpastum was introduced from Greece, and, if so, the antiquity of the game can be traced back still further than Roman times. The name harpastum is derived from the Greek ἁρπάζω, signifying "to seize," and the game was so called from the efforts of the players to seize or carry the ball from their opponents. The game was therefore a "carrying" rather than a "kicking" game, and in this respect is exactly in accord with the Rugby game. But the similarity is not confined to the act of carrying the ball. The description of the game, as given by an ancient writer, affords reasonable ground for assuming that the harpastum may have been the parent source from which sprang those games which afterwards became developed into the Rugby game. From this description it may be gathered that in the harpastum the players were divided into two bands; that the game was started by the ball being thrown up on a line in the middle
between the two sets of players, whilst behind the players at the two ends there were marked two other lines (corresponding to our goal lines), and that the players tried to carry the ball beyond these lines, which they were unable to accomplish without pushing one another backwards and forwards. Here are distinctly described the two acts which are most strongly characteristic of the Rugby game, viz., the scrummage, and the carrying of the ball.

The Romans may, or may not, have introduced the *harpastum* into Britain. There is no historical evidence to show that they actually did so; but only one conclusion can be arrived at from the above description of the *harpastum*, viz., that amongst the Romans there was a game of ball strangely similar in its chief characteristics to the game now played under Rugby Union rules.

But though there is no record of the introduction of the *harpastum* into Britain, yet it is possible to infer that the game may have been known in this island during the Roman occupation, for there is evidence that at this period there was some such game in vogue. Needless to remark that we allude to the traditions of the games played at Chester and at Derby. A Chester antiquary mentions a practice which prevailed in that city “time out of mind, for the shoemakers yearly, on Shrove Tuesday, to deliver to the drapers, in the presence of the Mayor of Chester, at the ball of Rodehee, one ball of leather, called a football, of the value of three shillings and fourpence or above, to play at from thence to the common hall of the same city”; and it is likewise chronicled that the first ball used was the head of a Dane, who had been captured and slain, and whose head was kicked about for sport. Here, then, at a period little later than the Roman occupation, we have an indication that some game at football was played at Chester, a city which owes its origin and name to the Romans themselves. With respect to the character of the game we can glean nothing further than that it must have been of a somewhat rough nature, for it was “productive of so much inconvenience that the ball was afterwards changed into six glayves of silver of the like value as a reward for the best runner.
of the day upon the Rodehee.” Glover, in his “History of Derby,” in referring to the celebrated match played annually in that town on Shrove Tuesday, mentions a legend that points unmistakably to the connection of the game with Roman times. He says, “The origin of this violent game is lost in antiquity, but there exists a tradition that a cohort of Roman soldiers, marching through the town to Derwentio, or Little Chester, were thrust out by the armed populace, and this mode of celebrating the occurrence has been continued to the present day.” It is even added that this conflict occurred in the year 217, and that the Roman troops at Little Chester were slain by the Britons. Whatever the character of the game played at Derby in ancient times may have been, the game as played at that town in more modern times was certainly more of a “carrying” than a “kicking” game, as will be gathered from an account which is given later.

So in the two most ancient games to which we have any allusions we are met with two indisputable facts, viz., that at or about the period of the Roman occupation, there are traditions that some game at football was played at the two centres of Derby and Chester, and that such games were of a character to warrant the not unreasonable inference that the harpastum had been played by the Romans in Britain, and had suggested the method of play, if it had not actually been the model itself upon which the game was formed. Shrove Tuesday, in each instance, is the day appointed for the game, and it is not a little singular that this day was also the one set apart for many games at football, which, it is well known, have been in vogue at different times in this island. Thus the great game at the Cross of Scone, in Scotland, was played upon Shrove Tuesday. On Shrove Tuesday there is still played the Corfe Castle game, which can be traced as far back as the year 1553. This game is a curious custom of the Company of Marblers at Purbeck, who, to preserve an ancient right-of-way which they claim, kick the ball from Corfe to Ower-quay on Shrove Tuesday. This company is a most ancient body, and in its articles, the earliest extant copy of which bears the date 1553, provision is made for the game as follows:—“That any man in our companie the Shrovtesdaie after his marriage shall piae
unto the Wardings, for the use of and benefit of the companie, twelve pence, and the last married man to brynge a football according to the custom of our companie." In the counties of Northumberland and Cumberland the inhabitants have from time immemorial been accustomed to celebrate the sport annually. Special mention may be made of a game at Alnwick Castle, where, on Shrove Tuesday, the porter of the castle threw out a football to the young men assembled at the castle gate. This was not so much a game at football as a struggle to obtain and keep possession of the ball itself, which became the prize of the person who could carry it off. At Brounfield, in Cumberland, the scholars of the Free School obtained the privilege of a football match in a very peculiar manner, by barring out the master. If the boys succeeded in keeping the master out for three days, they claimed the right of honourable capitulation on certain conditions, which were duly written out, and subscribed to by both parties. Amongst these conditions was the privilege of immediately celebrating a football match, and a cock fight. The cock fight was indulged in first, and then the football was thrown down, and each side strove to carry the ball to the house of their respective captains, generally some two or three miles distant. In the “Statistical Account of Scotland” it is mentioned “that in a certain parish in Midlothian it was the custom for the married women to play the single yearly, on Shrove Tuesday”; and it is added that the married women always won.

So far we have dealt with traditions only, and, as far as can be gathered from those traditions, it is certain that whatever football was played in ancient time, it was more of the carrying and running game than any other, and was very nearly allied to the Rugby game of the present day. We shall now make some reference to written evidence concerning the game, still, as before, with no intention of writing a history of the game and its antiquities, but rather with the view of further strengthening the grounds for the assumption that the Rugby game is the legitimate descendant of the football of former times. The first mention of football in English history is made by FitzStephen, who wrote in the thirteenth century. Speaking of the various games
played by London schoolboys, he says:—"Annually, upon Shrove Tuesday, they go into the fields immediately after dinner and play the celebrated game of ball." The allusion is somewhat vague, and from the passage itself it cannot be absolutely deduced that the game mentioned was football. Indeed, Stowe and other writers explain the game as having been tennis, and Strutt is also of the opinion that it is very doubtful if the reference was to football. But inasmuch as Shrove Tuesday, as we have already shown, was the day specially set aside for games of football, it may reasonably be inferred that the game played by these London boys was football.

Strong evidence as to the universality and popularity of the game can be drawn from the various edicts of several monarchs prohibiting it. The earliest prohibition dates as far back as the reign of Edward III., in the year 1349. That monarch did not object to the game of football in itself, but because the playing of the game tended to distract the youth from cultivating skill in archery. At that period of our country's history the military strength of England depended upon the skill of its archers, who pre-eminently were the cause of England's great military achievements in that age. The edict of Edward III. conclusively proves that in his time football was sufficiently popular, and so widely indulged in, as to be a serious hindrance to the practice of archery. In modern times the rulers of both the Rugby and Association games have found it necessary to forbid the playing of football during the summer months, because it encroached upon the game of cricket, and caused less interest to be taken in that game. The prohibition of Edward III. was followed by similar interdicts in the reigns of Richard II. and Henry IV. In the Tudor period Henry VIII. and Elizabeth also issued prohibitions, but there is no absolute proof that the statutes suppressing the game were ever put in force or recognised, except where fatal results had occurred, or where a riot had arisen from the game.

And so, without quoting the many allusions to the game of football by Shakespeare and other writers, we have clear evidence of the continuance of the game till Elizabethan times. Then we get a description of an actual game played under distinct rules, and those rules
bearing a curious resemblance to the Rugby Union laws of the present day. The game mentioned is not called football, but “hurling,” and the chronicler is Carew, in his “Survey of Cornwall,” published in 1602. Though the game is styled “hurling,” the description is clearly that of a game at football with very little kicking, and very much carrying of the ball and running with it.

Carew describes two games, one of which he calls “hurling to goales,” i.e. playing the game within prescribed limits of space, and the other, “hurling over country.” We will quote his description of the latter first. In this game the goals were three or four miles apart, and were houses or trees or some other conspicuous landmark. Carew’s description of the game is as follows:—“Two or three parishes agreed to hurl against two or three other parishes,” and so the number of players was practically unlimited, and in this respect the game would correspond to Bigside at Rugby School. It was essentially a “carrying” game, for “that company which could catch or carry it (the ball) by force or slight (i.e. stratagem) to the place assigned gaineth the victory. Such as see where the ball is played give notice by crying ‘Ware East,’ ‘Ware West,’ as the same is carried. The hurlers take their way over hilles, dales, hedges, ditches, yeas, and thowre bushes, briars, mires, plashes, and rivers whatsoever, so as you shall sometimes see twenty or thirty lie tugging together in the water, scrambling and scratching for the ball.” We can also gather that the players were assigned particular positions in the game, for there were “companies laid out before, on the one side, to encounter them that come with the ball, and of the other party to succour them in the manner of a foreward.” Is this the origin of the term “forward” in modern football. If so, the main idea conveyed in the term is that of being in the van to bear the brunt of the first attack.

Passing over for a moment the game of “hurling to goales,” we find that a game very similar to hurling was played in the Eastern Counties. There it was styled as camp-ball. This was also a game at football, and evidently took the name by which it was known from being played in the open country (Latin campus, a plain or open country). To this camp-ball there are many references in documents of the fifteenth century,
and in an old comedy of 1649 one of the characters describes himself as “Tom Stroud of Hurling, and I’ll play a gole at camp-ball”; but we get no actual description of the game till a much later date. In the Badminton Series there is quoted a description of this game as given by a writer named Moor in the year 1823: “Each party has two goals, ten or fifteen yards apart. The parties stand in a line, facing each other, about ten yards distance midway between their goals and that of their adversaries. An indifferent (i.e. neutral or impartial) spectator throws up a ball about the size of a cricket ball midway between the confronted players, and makes his escape. The rush is to catch the falling ball. He who can first catch or seize it speedes home, making his way through his opponents and aided by his own sidesmen. If caught and held, or rather in danger of being held—for if caught with the ball in his possession he loses a snotch—he throws the ball (he must in no case give it) to some less beleaguered friend more free and more in breath than himself, who, if it be not arrested in its course or be jostled away by the eager and watchful adversaries, catches it; and he in like manner hastens homeward, in like manner pursued, annoyed, and aided, winning the notch or snotch if he contrive to carry or throw it within the goals. At a loss or a gain of a snotch a recommencement takes place. When the game is decided by snotches, seven or nine are the game; and these, if the parties be well matched, take two or three hours to win. Sometimes a large football was used; the game was then called ‘kicking camp’; and if played with shoes on, ‘savage camp.’”

From these descriptions we can see that the “hurling over country” was of the same character as the celebrated games played at Seone and Derby, and that “camp-ball” was a game that differed very little from the “hurling” described by Carew. Indeed, “camp-ball” might very well be the same game as “hurling to goales,” the description of which game as given by Carew we will now quote. “For hurling to goales there are fifteen, twenty, or thirty players, more or less, chosen on each side, who strip themselves to their slightest apparel, and then join hands in ranks one against another; out of these ranks they match themselves by payres, one embracing another and so passe away, every of which couple are especially
to watch one another during the play. After this they
pitch two bushes in the ground some eight or ten feet
asunder, and directly against them, ten or twelve score
paces off, other twain in like distance, which they term
goales, where some indifferent (i.e. neutral or impartial)
person throweth up a ball, the which whomsoever can
catch or carry through the adversaries' goales hath won
the game."

"Camp-ball" and "hurling" were clearly games at
football, though not actually so called, and they contained
the germs and essential features of modern Rugby foot-
ball. For we can recognise the scrummage of the Rugby
game, notice that the goals are much the same distance
apart, and in the "matching of the players in payres"
are at once reminded of the present practice of every
player marking his man at the line out. But, from the
rest of the description of "hurling to goales," it is evident
that not only was the play under definite rules, and with
orderly and systematic tactics, but these rules and tactics
only emphasise the similarity of the game to modern
Rugby football; thus we find it forbidden to "but or
handfast under the girdle," i.e. in modern phraseology,
"to charge or collar below the waist." Now, though this
is not forbidden in the modern game, the feeling that to
"leg" a man is not exactly fair play is exemplified by
the chorus of dissent with which such proceeding is
greeted from the lungs of the observant spectators.
Tripping is absolutely forbidden, and tripping may well
be described as "charging below the waist." But, further,
there is strong presumption that the rules of onside
were already formulated, for it was distinctly prohibited
to "deal a foreballe," i.e. "to pass forward." So that
Vassall and his famous Oxford team, in perfecting
the system of judicious and scientific passing, were but
copying the example of the "hurlers" in Cornwall, who,
like the modern tacticians, were equally restricted as to
the direction in which the ball might be passed.

We cannot refrain from quoting the description of
the game as given by Joseph Strutt, the great historian
of English sports, who, writing in 1801, thus describes
the game:—

"When a match at football is made, an equal number
of competitors take the field and stand between two
goals placed at a distance of eighty or an hundred yards
the one from the other. The goal is usually made with two sticks driven into the ground about two or three feet apart. The ball, which is commonly made of a blown bladder and cased with leather, is delivered in the midst of the ground, and the object of each party is to drive it through the goal of their antagonists, which being achieved the game is won. The abilities of the performers are best displayed in attacking and defending the goals; and hence the pastime was more frequently called a ‘goal at football’ than a ‘game at football.’ When the exercise becomes exceedingly violent, the players kick each other’s shins without the least ceremony, and some of them are overthrown at the hazard of their limbs.”

With the same object still before us, viz., the tracing of resemblance between the ancient games at football and that of the modern Rugby game, we will now quote descriptions of some renewals of the ancient games. One of these took place at Scone, in Perthshire, and is minutely and graphically described by Sir Frederick Morton Eden, in his “Statistical Account of Scotland,” which description is as follows:—“At the parish of Scone, county of Perth, Scotland, every year, on Shrove Tuesday, the bachelors and married men drew themselves up at the Cross of Scone on opposite sides. A ball was then thrown up, and they played from two o’clock till sunset. The game was this: He who at any time got the ball in his hands, ran with it till he was overtaken by a player of the opposite party, and then, if he could shake himself loose from those who were holding him, he ran on; if not, he threw the ball from him, unless it was wrested from him by one of the other party, but no person was allowed to kick it. The object of the married men was to hang it; that is, to put it three times into a small hole on the moor, which was the ‘dool’ or limit of that side; that of the bachelors was to drown it, or dip it three times into a deep place in the river which was the limit of the other; the party who could effect either of these objects won the game: if neither won, the ball was cut into equal parts at sunset. In the course of the play there was some violence between the parties: but it is a proverb in this part of the country ‘All is fair at the ball of Scone.’”

The following is the account of the Derby game given