

THE CALCUTTA CUP: the legacy of a club that died



The birth of a famous club

On Christmas Day 1872, a game of rugby football, between a XX representing England on the one side and a XX representing Scotland, Ireland and Wales on the other, was played in Calcutta. The match was the outcome of some agitated letter writing to the editors of the Englishman and the Indian Daily News by Old Rugbeians and other emigres ensconced in Calcutta. The match was such a success that it was repeated a week later: the game of rugby had reached India! These lovers of rugby football wanted to form a club in the area and the

forementioned matches were the agents which led to the formation of the Calcutta Football Club in January 1873.

The first year of the Club's existence proved to be a healthy one: 137 members, a free bar (described in the Centenary History of the Rugby Football Union as being '...a slight sop to Cerberus...') and an interesting fixture list. Some of the fixtures make fascinating reading: Calcutta F.C. v. The Calcutta Volunteers (the second club to be founded in the area); Calcutta F.C. v. The Military; Public Schools v. The Rest; Scottish and Irish v. English and Welsh; Merchants and Brokers v. The Rest; Griffs v. The Rest.

The Calcutta Club joined the Rugby Football Union in 1874. Despite the Indian climate not being entirely suitable for playing rugby, the club prospered during that first year. However, when the free bar had to be discontinued, the membership took an appreciable drop. Lack of opponents proved to be a major stumbling block. Officers of The Buffs and of the 62nd Regiment gave a lot of their spare time to the coaching and training of 'other ranks' (as well as commissioned officers) in the playing of the game. It is worthy of note that this was in direct contrast to the actions of the then Inter-Services Tournament in the U.K. : it was over thirty years later before that tournament was opened up to 'other ranks.'

Players of distinction

The Calcutta Football Club boasted several players of distinction in their membership. They had two England international players in B. H. Burns and S. Finney, and one Irishman who was later to be capped for his country - G. St Leger Fagan. They also had two Scots: D. McKinnon from London Scottish and G. C. Maclagan, the elder brother of W. E. (Bill) Maclagan, of Edinburgh Academicals and London Scottish, who represented Scotland in twenty-six internationalists.

Benjamin Henry Burns is of particular interest to Scots, having been educated at Smeston's Private School in St Andrews and at Edinburgh Academy. He qualified as a banker and moved to London where he played for the Blackheath Club before sailing for India. Whilst a member of Blackheath he was the club secretary and he it was who accepted, on behalf of the English clubs, the challenge issued by the leading clubs in Scotland, to a Scotland v. England match. That the English accepted the challenge is history: the match was played at Raeburn Place, Edinburgh, on Monday, 27 March 1871 and was the very first rugby international. An irony arising from all of this is that B. H. Burns was selected and played for the England XX. He could well have worn the dark blue jersey of Scotland.

Stephen Finney was a railway manager by profession. He had played in two early matches against Scotland - in 1872 and 1873 - scoring a try in the first. A whole-hearted half-back, he is described in the Rev. F. Marshall's Football: The Rugby Union Game (1892) as being '...a crack half-back of this era...towards the end of a hard match he generally wore the appearance of having been in a prize fight...' Finney was knighted in 1913.

The demise of the Club

Funds were not lacking for the Calcutta Club but fixtures were. Other sports, such as tennis and polo, which were considered to be more suited to the local climate, were making inroads into the numbers of gentlemen available and this, in the end, forced the Club to close down after only four years in existence.

A variety of proposals for the disbursement of funds

In these circumstances, the membership had to decide what to do with the Club's funds. Suggestions were several and varied: a 'beano' in the form of a gymkhana, a ball, and a dinner were but some of the ideas put forward. It was observed by one of the more influential members, G. A. James Rothney (who was the Club Captain, Honorary Secretary and Treasurer) that celebrations such as those suggested would be but transient and quickly forgotten. With a great sense of history (whether intentional or not) he made a suggestion which was carried and was to be instrumental in keeping alive forever the memory of the Calcutta Football Club.



1925: Scotland v England, the successful team Standing (l to r): D J MacMyn (Cambridge Uni.); J W Scott (Stewart's College FP); A C Gillies (Carlisle); J C H Ireland (Glasgow HSFP); R Howie (Kirkcaldy); I S Smith (Oxford Uni.) Seated: G G Aitken (Oxford Uni.); D S Davies (Hawick); J M Bannerman (Glasgow HSFP); G P S Macpherson (Oxford Uni., Captain); D Drysdale (Heriot's FP); A C Wallace (Oxford Uni.); H Waddell (Glasgow Acad.) In front: J B Nelson (Glasgow Acad.); J R Paterson (Birkenhead Park)

Rothney proposed that the funds be used to have a trophy made of ornate Indian workmanship and that the trophy be offered to the Rugby Football Union in London. This was agreed and a letter, dated December 20th, 1877, was sent to H. J. Graham the then Honorary Secretary and Treasurer of the R. F. U. Part of the letter reads as follows:

'...I proposed at a meeting of the few remaining members of the Club...as the best means of doing some lasting good for the cause of Rugby Football and as a slight memento of the Calcutta Club that the funds remaining to the credit of the Club should be devoted to the purpose of a Challenge Cup and presented to the Rugby Union to be competed for annually in the same way as the Association Cup or in any other way the Committee of the Rugby Union may consider best for the encouragement of Rugby Football. This proposition was carried unanimously and I now write to beg you to place the matter before the Committee of the Rugby Union and beg their kind acceptance of a Cup and also to enquire if the Committee would prefer one of Indian workmanship, or the money remitted for the purchase of a cup at home? The sum of money at my disposal at the present rate of exchange is about £60 sterling...'

Rothney's letter, charming yet to the point, gave the background to the birth, the life, and the death of the Calcutta Football Club. Enthusiastic when in existence and, at the end, determined to do good for the advancement of rugby football, the membership had made a decision which was to see keen competition on the field of international rugby, between England and Scotland, for well over 100 years.

A. G. Guillemard, President of the R. F. U. responded thus:

'The Committee accept with very great pleasure your generous offer of the cup as an international challenge cup to be played for annually by England and Scotland - the cup remaining the property of the Rugby Football Union.'

The Calcutta Cup

Thus came into being an original, elegant and distinguished trophy. The Calcutta Club officials closed their bank account, withdrawing the entire balance due in silver rupees and having these melted down and crafted by the finest Indian workmanship into what has become known world-wide as The Calcutta Cup. It is approximately 18 inches high, has three handles in the form of cobras and has a handsome lid surmounted by an elephant.

The inscription on the Cup's wooden base reads:

THE CALCUTTA CUP
PRESENTED TO THE RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

BY THE CALCUTTA FOOTBALL CLUB
AS AN INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGE CUP
TO BE PLAYED FOR ANNUALLY BY ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND
1878

The base has attached to it additional plates which record the date of each match played with the name of the winning country and the names of the two captains. The names of many fine and distinguished players appear on the base.

The first Calcutta Cup match was played at Raeburn Place, Edinburgh, on 10 March 1879 and ended in a draw - Scotland scored a drop goal and England a goal. Including that day in 1879, England and Scotland have contested the Calcutta Cup, excluding the years of two World Wars, regularly on an annual basis. Up to and including 2001, England had won the trophy 57 times, Scotland 37, with 14 matches having been drawn.

There is an anomaly in the recording of the winning country on the base of the Cup. It was first played for in 1879 - but an inspection of the plinth shows records extending back to the first international in 1871. The results from 1871 to 1878 are of matches which were played before the Calcutta Cup came into being!

The original Calcutta Cup is seldom seen by the public. Whether held in London or in Edinburgh, it is stored, for security reasons, in a safe vault. In Scotland, on occasion, it is withdrawn from safe storage and is exhibited in schools and rugby clubs in an effort to enthuse. Whilst the original is safely stored, the Rugby Museum at Twickenham boasts a full-size replica of the Cup - a generous gift from the Bovis Construction Group. Scotland, too, were recipients of a similar gift and it can normally be seen either in the S.R.U. Shop at Murrayfield or in the Library. Visitors to each stadium can admire the beautiful craftsmanship of the original Cup. Whilst the original was hand-made by native craftsmen, the replicas were provided by making use of modern technology to achieve the finished result.

The Library of the Scottish Rugby Union, and that of the R.F.U. at Twickenham, hold copies of the original correspondence between the Calcutta Football Club and the Rugby Football Union. This is available for examination by researchers and other bona fide interested parties, by prior arrangement with the Librarian.

That, then, is the story of the Calcutta Cup - the catalyst that spawned the still-growing world-wide brotherhood of rugby football which, today, spans the five continents and allows opportunity for all, who may so wish, to enjoy the camaraderie that comes from the playing of the game in spirited but friendly competition.

In his letter to the R.F.U. in December 1877, the secretary of the Calcutta Football Club wrote that the members desire to do '...some lasting good for the cause of Rugby Football...' We can but wonder if the members then realised just how prophetic these words were to be.

TRANSCRIPTION OF THE LETTER FROM THE CALCUTTA FOOTBALL CLUB TO THE RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION, 1877

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5 Bankshall Street
Calcutta
Dec. 20th 1877

H. I. Graham, Esq.
Hony. Secy. & Treasurer
Rugby Football Union (Wimbledon)

Dear Sir,

I regret to say the Calcutta Football Club has ceased to exist, it being now found quite impossible to get sufficient men together to play even a scratch game, this is the result of a variety of causes, but chiefly from the fact that many of the old members who started the club in 1872, and kept it going, have become dispersed over India or gone home, etc., & there has never been enough new blood to supply the loss; then the great & rapid development of Polo has proved a fatal blow to Football here; it being considered (as it requires no training or condition) so much more suitable for the climate, lastly the loss of the "Buffs" who were undoubtedly a mainstay of football in Calcutta. This being the case I proposed at a Meeting of the few remaining Members of the Club held on Tuesday last the 18th inst. as the best means of doing some lasting good for the cause of Rugby Football & as a slight memento of the Calcutta Club, that the Funds remaining to the credit of the Club should be devoted to the purchase of a Challenge Cup & presented to the Rugby Union to be competed for annually in the same way as the Association Cup or in any other way the Committee of the R. Union may consider best for the encouragement of Rugby Football.

This proposition was carried unanimously & I now write to beg you to place the matter before the Committee of the Rugby Union & beg their kind acceptance of a Cup & also to enquire if the Committee would prefer one of Indian

workmanship, or the money remitted for the purchase of a Cup at home?

The sum of money at my disposal at the present rate of Exchange is about £60 sterling.

Hoping to be favoured with an early reply & with every good wish for the success of Rugby Football.

I remain, dear Sir,

Yours ffy,

*G. A. James Rothney
Capt., Hony. Secy. & Treasurer of the late "C.F.C."*

EXPLANATORY NOTE

In his letter to the R.F.U., dated December 20th 1877, Mr James Rothney, in making the offer of a Challenge Cup, suggested that it be

'...competed for annually in the same way as the Association Cup or in any other way the Committee of the R. Union may consider best for the encouragement of Rugby Football.'

The Committee of the R.F.U., having considered the offer, replied to the effect that their member clubs would find it difficult to take part in a competition similar to the F.A. Cup. Their alternative suggestion was to make history: the Calcutta Cup match, between England and Scotland was to become, and still is today, a highlight in the rugby calender of those two countries.

Extract from Committee Meeting of the Rugby Football Union, held in Charing Cross Hotel on Januaray 22nd 1878:

'The secretary then read a letter from Mr Rothney the Secretary of the Calcutta Football Club, lately dissolved, offering a Challenge Cup to be annually competed for by All Rugby Union Clubs. The hon. sec. was instructed to write to Mr Rothney about the difficulties of all clubs playing together and it was proposed by Mr Guillemard and seconded and carried by Mr Adams, that Mr Rothney be informed that the Committee of the Rugby Union would accept the Cup as a gift to be played for annually by the representative teams of England & Scotland & held by the winning team. That a cup of Indian workmanship would be preferred.'



SCOTLAND v ENGLAND, 1990 John Jeffrey and Gavin Hastings race up the field with new-found energy following a hard eighty minutes of play