

COLCHESTER RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB

THE EARLY 1950s

BRIAN HULSE O.B.E.— CRFC 1948-1960

I moved to Colchester in 1948 and joined the Club in October of that year. At that time we ran two sides, the First XV and the Ravens. We played in a field off Gosbecks Road and it was a feature of Saturdays that the team playing at home was expected to turn up early and clear the pitch of cow pats, the farmer having removed the beasts in the morning. This wasn't as vital a chore as happened weekly at Norwich, for when they moved from the ground beside the gasworks, where the soil was so black and foul that an abrasion sometimes took weeks to heal, the Norwich team and the visitors lined up across the field with buckets and advanced in echelon picking up stones. I recall doing this when we played there for at least the first two years. Our headquarters was the Red Lion where we repaired after the game for baths and tea with the visitors. The management put about four bathrooms at our disposal, which was barely adequate, and of course the cunning home players frequently spilled over to other bathrooms in the hotel. This was certainly not welcomed by the manager not least when on one occasion a bath was allowed to overflow and the Manager's wife was heard to berate the home team captain with a tale of water 'cascading' down the stairs. She was still less pleased on another occasion when she could not get into her own bathroom which it turned out was occupied by the captain of the Ravens, one Mick Rouse, alas no longer with us.

Of course we provided all our own kit and it is extraordinary how many different shades of black there are, from near white through the greys to in the case of our jerseys the all too rare pristine black. And we were responsible for laundering as well, that is if the garments saw the light of day from one week to another. When I came to Oxford in 1960 I was for some years Treasurer of the Oxford R.F.C. and was aghast when I was presented with a bill for such things as strapping and vaseline, and that was forty years ago; I wonder what such things cost clubs today. In the fifties if a forward produced a tiny pot of vaseline before the match to smear round his ears in the naïve hope that it would last him a few weeks he was quickly disillusioned when it was pounced upon by the rest of the pack.

As far as I can remember I only played on the Gosbecks Road ground for the 1948/49 season and I think it was in the summer of 1950 that we moved to Mile End, no doubt much to the relief of the manager of the Red Lion, and his wife!. This pitch was a vast improvement, even if the approach down a muddy farm track left much to be desired. A goodly number of us spent a part of that summer preparing the concrete base for a large hut that was to be a tearoom and bar. The changing accommodation came much later and at first we used that provided by the Town Council who owned the ground. We also decorated the interior of our new clubhouse and I think that some of us were pleased to find that emulsion paint, which was quite new to the DIY market, was a vast improvement on the distemper that we had previously been accustomed to daubing on walls with less than pretty results.

The hut had cross ties across the various rooms, including the bar, and I mention this because of the night that D.L.(Sandy) Sanders of Ipswich Y.M.C.A., displayed his extraordinary strength in hanging *by his toes* from one of the beams and drinking a pint of bitter whilst upside down! The Ravens had played the Garrison that afternoon and one of their team, a P.T instructor, thought he could do it, but he couldn't even get to the point of hanging by his toes let alone drinking the beer. The first time Sandy played for England he insisted on appearing in the programme as "D.L.Sanders Ipswich YMCA & Harlequins"; I still have the programme! He was described by a touring All Black at that time as the best front row forward in the four home countries and, as most will know went on to become President of the R.F.U.

During my time with Colchester our notable fixtures were, to the north, Ipswich, Ipswich Y.M.C.A. and Norwich; to the west Cambridge, Bishops Stortford, Old Cantabrigians and Shelford; to the south, Chelmsford, Southend, O.Westcliffians and Met. Police 3 District; and to London, Wasps Vandals and Saracens 'A'. Not many of us had cars and we went to all away matches by coach piloted, for many years, by a long suffering driver by the name of Alf who did us so well that we made him an honorary member; from then on he wore the club tie with some pride. Some of the clubs that I see featured in league tables nowadays weren't even in existence then and I well remember playing in an exhibition match on a soccer ground in Braintree where an enterprising enthusiast had set up a PA system on the touchline so that he could explain the game to the spectators; both of them.

We played the Garrison from time to time but it was not easy to give them a permanent fixture because their ability to raise a side was dependent on the incumbent Army units and the keenness of one of their soldiers to do the admin. If we had been able to play them on Wednesdays it might have been easier because they were all keen on getting weekend leave as often as they could. When there was a unit like the Welsh Regiment in situ it was all we could do to beat them but this was rare. At one time there was a keen young subaltern frequently to be seen in the vicinity of the barracks dashing around on a motor-bike trying to raise a side on a Saturday morning.

We had a number of Eastern Counties players, like Johnny (a.k.a. Jerry) Bland, who captained the Wasps, Eastern Counties and the London Counties, Donald Bland, who also played for the Wasps, Eastern Counties and for the London Counties team that were the only side to beat the Springboks on a muddy day at Twickenham on their 1952 tour (sadly both these brothers are now long gone). Like, also, Gordon Goodwin, Gordon Hockley who came to us from Wasps and ultimately returned to play for his native Norwich, Brian Borges, Michael Lusty (and me!). Other names that come to mind are, Tom Hollingdale (Vicar of St. Peters) who was our President and a Welsh international of the twenties and H.B.T.(Teddy) Wakelam who was a pre-world war two sports correspondent for the Daily Telegraph and who commentated at Twickenham and at Wimbledon (even before Dan Maskell!). He it was to whom we owed our press coverage because even in his advancing years he was frequently seen on the touchline with our tiny handful of supporters. There was not a lot of joy for those long suffering rugby aficionados any more than there was for the stalwart band of ladies who provided tea on Saturday afternoons.

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