

Football in and around Winchester 1880-1900

Ian Denness

In January 2016 Ian Denness came to talk to the group about the history of football in the Winchester area. Ian's research began in 2005 when, as programme editor for the Winchester City Football Club, he started researching the history of the club with a view of serialising it in the programmes. After considerable research in the Record Office, Ian found the subject was worth exploring in far greater depth and therefore began a PhD entitled, 'The popularisation of football games in Winchester, 1850 – 1914' at the University of Winchester.

Considering football is England's most popular sport today it is interesting to note that mid-19th century it was a minority sport mainly played by the middle classes. There were no universal rules until the Football Association was formed by a group of London clubs in 1863.

So what was happening in Hampshire? Ian researched reports of matches in the Hampshire Advertiser. Between 1850 and 1870 there were occasional mentions of games, the following ten years rugby football was more popular and then 1880 – 1900 soccer/football became increasingly popular. In the final seven years there was a massive increase in reports of football games. Ian explained that soccer/football became more popular than rugby football because it had competitive matches, there was a sense of local pride, it was a safer, free flowing game with less rules and it can be played on tarmac. In the 1890s Southampton and Portsmouth football clubs emerged as strong clubs and in 1896 the Hampshire League was formed.

As for Winchester, football was being played in the 1850s and 60s. In 1852 an advert appeared as follows: "Football – 11 of Winchester will play any 11 within 50 miles for dinner at any time within a month." There was also a niche style of football called "Winchester Football" played by the Winchester Colleges boys in Kingsgate Street. This idiosyncratic game is still played today though presumably not in Kingsgate Street!

Winchester Football Club was founded by Charles Sylvester Wooldridge and Arnold Tebbutt in 1884. They initially wanted to found a rugby football club but there was not enough interest so launched soccer/football instead. To begin with the team included a solicitor, coal merchant, future solicitor and other middle class players plus one working class team member, who was a carpenter. Ian plotted the class of players and found that from 1890 there were more players from the lower classes. The popularity of the game increased with successful local sides and increased media coverage. Between 1895 and 1906 the Hampshire Advertiser showed that several Winchester teams played on Thursday or Saturday afternoons and in 1904 North Walls park was opened to meet the demand for space to play.



In the final part of the talk Ian spoke about football in the Worthys. There was no evidence of a Worthys team taking part in local matches. The photo above shows “Kingsworthy Football Team” in 1906/7 however it the players are dressed in normal clothes rather than kit. Perhaps they were not an organised and committed enough team to compete in official leagues and this photo may have been taken at a one off event. Using census returns and other records Ian was able to discover more information about the players. They were employed as a railway porter, farm labourer, insurance agent, gardener (the only servant), baker and postman. Many of them fought in the First World War and all survived.

The group thanked Ian for delivering an informative and engaging talk. It was particularly interesting to view the development of football from a national, local and village perspective.