

AN OLD INSTONIAN LOOKS BACK HALF A CENTURY

Mr. T. K. Ward of 8 Osborne Road, Birkenhead writes:-

I became a member of Old Instonians R.F.C. sometime before the commencement of the 1935 Rugby season, and, as there are very few of us left, I feel I should give an authoritative account of the conception and birth of the club as I witnessed it. The founding fathers were a small group of Old Boys namely Don Rigby, Eric Todd, Peter Burrell, Ken Coughtrie and Alan Bracknell, with the assistance of Mr. A. O. Jones, then Chemistry Master at the Birkenhead Institute. The idea was kicked around during the early months of 1935, well nourished by draughts of Birkenhead Brewery No. 1 Strong Ale, and translated into action in the spring. This working committee reconnoitred the rural areas for a piece of land to the required dimensions before concluding an arrangement to rent the cow-pasture at Bidston, as related by Dick Bell in his excellent article in the News, 17th October. Don Rigby can relate a harrowing account of the effort expended by the working party who set up the goal posts.

A number of matches were played against the school team at Ingleborough Road to enable the increasing number of members to achieve some sort of cohesion, before commencing their fixture list at Bidston. The first team on that list was Oldershaw and the Old Boys were comprehensively defeated.

An old war horse, named Gordon Wilson, had been elected Captain. He had already been campaigning for some dozen or more seasons with the now defunct Bidston R.F.C. and was a hardened warrior. Under the fierce lash of his tongue the Old Boys sharpened their game and began to win a few. Old Parkonians refused to give a first team fixture and the Old Boys had to be content to sharpen their teeth on Old Parkonians Second Team until that club eventually sent along their first team to seek revenge. Rivalry between the two clubs intensified and the clashes became more and more physical until, at the end of the 1938 season, Old Parkonians broke off fixtures alleging "ungentlemanly conduct". When their letter was read out at the General Meeting, Old Instonians felt that they had gained a victory. That was to be the last season until after the war. So many Old Instonians were members of the Territorial Army, R.N.V.R., or R.A.F.V.R. that it was not possible to raise a team.

My fellow playing members, from these pre-war years, perhaps now to be called Ancient Instonians rather than Old Instonians, included - J. Abbott, L. Black, A. Brecknell, P. Burrell, R. Bell, K. Carr, K. Coughtrie, R. Colenso, F. Francis, E. Hosker, R. Hardie, R. Lawson, R. Lockety, A. McFarlane, A. Moss, G. Nixon, K. Page, N. Rees, K. Rice, D. Rigby, T. Smart, A. Theobald, E. Todd, G. Todd, A. Tweedy, R. Weir, G. Wilson, and E. G. Williams.

One of the most unforgettable characters at this time was not an Old Boy at all. He was an indefatigable sparrow of a man, named Cole (we never learned his first name), who was engaged, on a casual basis, as a groundsman. He marked out the ground, heated the water for after-match ablutions, and prepared refreshments. He stood on the touchline for the first half, a self-appointed critic, making pithy comments on our efforts with that dry wit characteristic of Merseysiders, driving us on to greater and better efforts. At half-time he departed to the temporary changing-rooms at Bidston School to see to the rest of his duties.

Had we been able to field a team for the 1939 season, it would have been without Cole, for he too was a Territorial Soldier, and had more pressing engagements.

Phase Two of the Old Instonians story commenced in 1945. On their return from military service Don Rigby and Ken Coughtrie contacted as many pre-war members as they could- After a few special meetings, and much behind-the-scenes activity, two teams were in action for the 1946-47 season. The school headmaster, Mr. Wynne Hughes, was elected President, and home games were played on the School ground. at Ingleborough Road.

A veritable mine of young talent was discovered among those who had left the Birkenhead Institute during the war years, including J. Bassett, L. Crossley, R. Lambert, J. Morris, F. Owers, M. Pollard, G. A. Smith and H. D. Thomas. Hallin Winter, who had been elected first-team captain immediately had at his disposal a very talented and impressive team, with ample supply of first-class reserves in the second team. Fixtures with Old Parkonians were resumed, all past differences forgotten, or submerged. Dick Bell gave an account of one of the matches played at Ingleborough Road against Old Parkonians. I think I can put a gloss on it. Dick, in his modest manner, omitted to say that he was a superb player with an unerring boot. It was largely due to his superlative play that kept Old Instonians on level terms, and, when in the dying minutes, Dick addressed himself to the penalty kick that would settle the issue one way or another, few Old Instonians doubted that, regardless of the poor light and the wind, the ball would go safely over the bar. And so, it did. Later, in the pavilion, during refreshments, Dick Bell's voice was heard asking for the jam. The Old Parkonian captain, Phil Pryce-Roberts, commented wryly "Dick, you have already had more than your share of jam today!" Dick's other memory was of the Park Sevens tournament won by Old Instonians. I am able to settle for all time the arguments over who were the players in that final. I have the actual programme for that day, April 19th, 1947, and I quote from the text. Old Instonians reached the final by victories over Old Rockferrians, Birkenhead Park, and Waterloo, and Old Parkonians got there by defeating Old Wirralians, St. Helens, and Old Caldeians. The teams were - Old Instonians - W. Garry, I. Podmore, H. Thomas, A. Theobald, H. Winter, A. Lambert, R. Bell, Reserve - G. A. Smith. Old Parkonians - C. Hargreaves, J. Jones, J. Dobie, G. Reed, P. Roberts, C. F. Jones, E. Johnson; Reserve - J. Hislop. Again, there was a closely contested match, being decided in Old Instonians favour by the last-minute conversion by Bill Garry. At this time Bill Garry was probably the best full-back in Junior Rugby and eventually he went to Birkenhead Park R.F.C. where he served with great distinction for several seasons until he made a career move to the United States. Ken Carr also went to Birkenhead Park R.F.C. and played in the second row for that team and for Cheshire for many years. His early death so soon after his retirement from the game was a great blow, particularly to St. Anselm's School where he was games master. Another Old Boy who scintillated on the County scene was Stuart Huntriss. In a County Match versus Lancashire, played at Birkenhead Park, Stuart, in defence, was eluded by his opposing wing three-quarter, who happened to be the speedy Dickie Guest, England's choice of wing three-quarter at that time. Stuart took up the pursuit, and, overhauling Guest, dumped him unceremoniously from behind. I doubt if there have been many players who had been able to do that to Guest.

At the end of the 1955 season after twenty years service to the club in various capacities, player, team captain, team secretary, club secretary, committee man and vice-president, I relinquished the post of club secretary. Norman Little was elected to the post and Paddy Ryan became treasurer. Both became prime movers in the club and guided it for many years, through Phase Three, when the club moved to a new location near Greasby, and into Phase Four when the new ground in Woodchurch Road was bought and developed. If There is any history of these Phases to be written, it would be best left to Norman Little and Paddy Ryan, for they will know more about it than anyone else.

I have no doubt that some several hundred players have appeared for one or other of the Old Instonian team. I myself have known well over a hundred. However, there is only one member who can claim the distinction of having been a member from Day One to the present time, and that is Don Rigby. It has been said of Don that if you cut him, he would bleed black and old gold. I know that is true because I was the one who said it. During his half-century of membership, it is doubtful that any other single person has devoted so much time and energy to club matters. Long after his playing days were finished, he would do things like standing on the touch line urging on the Old Instonians while the fainter-hearted of us were sitting in warmth and comfort at home watching the England v. Wales Rugby International on B.B.C's Grandstand. While not being privy to the thoughts of the present committee, I can make a fair guess at who will occupy the chair of honour at the forthcoming fiftieth anniversary celebrations.

The Birkenhead Institute Roll of Honour of Old Boys who fell during the 1939/45 war lists a total of 89 names. Of these 15 were the names of Old Boys who had played for one or other of the Old Instonians teams. They were D. K. Ashton, L. Black, L. Clarke, G. R. Edwards, J. Gullan, G. Hardie, R. Hardie, W. Jones, A. Moss, N. Rees, T. Smart, A.E. Smith, G. Todd, A. C. Williams, and J. A. Williams. Dennis Ashton sold his life dearly in a fighter plane defending Malta, Lionel Black died in service of the R.A.F. The Hardie brothers Ron and Graham, and Gordon Todd, died in the German offensive during the summer of 1940, Walter Jones died in a bomber shot down over Germany, Alan Moss was with a Commando Unit and was killed during the invasion of St. Nazaire, Tommy Smart, D.F.C. was a member of the Caterpillar Club, and let those who do not know what that means ask their fathers, or their grandfathers. Alex Smith was killed in the North African campaign, and J. A. Williams, M.M. died in France. I know nothing of the circumstances of the passing of others listed. Those of us who were fortunate enough to survive active service remember well these Old Instonians who made the ultimate sacrifice. We remember them as bright keen young men, filled with determination and enthusiasm. They will always be young, they were not given the opportunity to become old, as their contemporaries have. The torch has passed. May the present Old Instonians do as well!