

Blackheath – The Epicentre of English sport

On the 26th October 1963 in the Freemasons Tavern on Great Queen Street in Holborn, London, the first meeting of the Football Association took place. The main item for discussion was to create a codified set of rules, that would "embrace the best and most acceptable points of all the various methods of play under one heading of Football". Eleven clubs, all based in London, attended the meeting after Ebenezer Cobb Morley, the captain and founder of Barnes, had written to Bell's Life newspaper, suggesting that football needed set rules and a governing body similar in structure to how the Marylebone Cricket Club ruled cricket.

Apart from Morley's Barnes Football Club, the other ten representatives in the put that night were Civil Service, the Crusaders, Forest of Leytonstone, No Names Club of Kilburn, Crystal Palace, Blackheath, Kensington School, Perceval House of Blackheath, Surbiton and Blackheath Proprietary School. One small area of London, Blackheath, with a population of a few thousand that provided three of the clubs who were willing to codify the game of football for the first time in the world.

Up until this point, the way the game had been played had varied based on geography in the UK. The rules created by the world's oldest club, Sheffield FC, for example, differed from those used at Rugby School, whilst in London a number of private schools had their own versions. With the game becoming more popular, Morley's idea was to "form an Association with the object of establishing a definite code of rules for the regulation of the game".

The captains, secretaries and other representatives of a dozen London and suburban clubs who saw Morley's letter and responded playing their own versions of football headed to Holborn to agree on a new approach for football in England.

At that historic meeting, Mr Francis Maule Campbell, from Blackheath FC, was elected treasurer. However, by the sixth meeting of the ground, less than two months later, Campbell withdrew Blackheath FC from the new structure, created under the name of the Football Association, after hearing that some of the more "robust" rules that his side played to in South East London would be outlawed.

Campbell wasn't alone in challenging the rest of the newly found association on the rules to play under. G.W Shillingford, representing Perceval House, another Blackheath-based school which was originally chosen as a founding member of the Football Association, also disagreed with the majority. 'Football', they thought, would be a blend of handling and dribbling. Players would be able to handle the ball: a fair catch accompanied by 'a mark with the heel' would win a free kick. The sticking point was 'hacking', or kicking an opponent on the leg, which Blackheath wanted to keep.

Eliminating hacking would "do away with all the courage and pluck from the game, and I will be bound over to bring over a lot of Frenchmen who would beat you with a week's practice." Campbell was reported to have said after leaving the group, further explaining that the rules that the FA intended to adopt would destroy the game and all interest in it.

Other clubs took the decision to follow Blackheath's lead and in December 1870 Edwin Ash, secretary of Richmond Football Club published a letter which said, "Those who play the rugby-type game should meet to form a code of practice as various clubs play to rules which differ from others, which makes the game difficult to play." On 26 January 1871 a meeting attended by 22 clubs was held at the Pall Mall Restaurant, in London, the result of which was the formation of the Rugby Football Union (RFU).

The third club who attended the meeting in Holborn from Blackheath was the Proprietary School, which in effect was a feeder club for Blackheath, who also went by the name of Old Blackheathens Club where old boys of the school continued to play football together.

Blackheath in the twenty first century may be better known for its trendy cafes and bars, the wide open heath and the traffic jams on one of the major routes in and out of the capital but it can claim to be a major part of the history of three sports in the UK.

Today, seven of the original twenty two founder members of the RFU still exist with Blackheath playing their rugby in the third tier of English rugby just down the road from Blackheath in Eltham, a stone's throw from Step 4 football club Cray Valley PM. However, from the founding members of the Football Association only Civil Service FC, who now play in the Southern Amateur League's Senior Division One, are the only surviving club (the Crystal Palace club is not the same as the Premier League club of the same name today).

However, with three of the FA's original eleven member clubs and one of the founders of the RFU, it is fair to say that the epicentre of the footballing world was for a short period of time was in SE3, London.

Pre-dating Football and Rugby though is Golf which was introduced to England via Blackheath as well, with the first English course to be open, in 1608, being the Royal Blackheath Course. The Royal Blackheath Golf Club claims to be the oldest such club in the world, although today is based just down the road in Eltham on land once owned by Henry VIII.

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