

Comment On 'Myth And Reality in the 1895 Rugby Split' by Tony Collins

Piers Morgan

In his article, 'Myth and Reality in the 1895 Rugby Split', Tony Collins has included an illustration of the Roses match of 1893. I would like to add some comments about the picture.

The picture was painted by W. B. Wollen (1857-1936), a sporting and military artist. It is signed by him and dated 1895. It was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1895. In 1957, Yorkshire played Northumberland at Gosforth. Members of the Yorkshire committee discovered the picture in a window of a second hand shop and purchased it. Having no official headquarters the Yorkshire R.U. decided to hang it in the club house of the Otley club. It remained there until the 1960's, when the Yorkshire R.U. requested the R.F.U. to take care of the picture. It has remained at Twickenham ever since. However it continues to be the property of the Yorkshire R.U.

At first sight it appears to be a straightforward picture of a Roses Rugby match. But on further consideration there are some peculiar features. Tim Auty and Robert Gate, who are very knowledgeable about Yorkshire Rugby in the 19th Century, have identified 11 of the players in the picture as well as 4 important spectators lining the railings at the right of the picture, the Referee and the Linesman. Peculiarly two of the players identified did not take part in the match. These are A. Barraclough (Manningham) making the overhead pass and T. H. Dobson (Bradford) the player on the extreme right. The referee is identified as Rowland Hill, at the time the Hon. Secretary of the R.F.U., but the newspaper reports give the referee as Mr. T. Potts of Durham. Yorkshire and Lancashire played alternate years home and away, Yorkshire playing at home in 1891, 1893 and 1895. In the autumn of 1895 most of the players portrayed had

departed with their clubs to the Northern R.F.U. The players identified fit the 1893 match better than the 1891 match. However, with the errors listed above and the weather conditions shown being good, when in fact the pitch was like a quagmire, it is probably best to describe the picture as being based on the 1893 match rather than of the 1893 match. Presumably after making sketches of the game, the artist completed the canvas in his studio using photographs to paint the faces of the players. Presumably he also painted in those who were not present at the request of the patron.

The other problem concerns the 'ghosts'. These are figures which were painted out by the artist but came through again over the years. When the picture was first displayed in the Otley club house a member suggested jocularly that the players painted out had gone over to the Northern R.F.U.

Unfortunately, over the years, this remark, made in jest, has come to be accepted as the truth. I think it most unlikely. An examination of the R.F.U. minutes shows that no player was declared a professional between 25th November, the date of the match, and August 1895 when the Northern R.F.U. was formed.

Before the picture was displayed at Twickenham, it was restored and cleaned. In its present condition it is hard to see any ghosts. Fortunately the picture was photographed before cleaning. On the photographic print the most prominent ghost appears behind the group of four players on the ground and partly coincides with the figure of the referee. The ghost looks suspiciously like Sir Francis Drake and, in the best tradition of ghosts, one can see through him to the referee behind. If one examines the original picture only 29 players can be counted. In my opinion the artist forgot to paint in the referee and so painted out one of the players to accommodate him. In the photographic print of the picture before cleaning, I can also make out a head underneath the arm of the player making the overhead pass. Tony Collins reports a ghost in the top left hand corner. I cannot see this but the odd figure on the extreme left of the picture is of a player bending down to tie up his boot laces.

As Tony Collins points out there is a deal of myth come down about the 1895 Split. I imagine it is true in all branches of history that myths repeated often enough become reality.