

# CHAPTER 4

## 1878 The first rugby inter- national

Ireland v  
England, 11  
March 1878

International rugby took its first steps in 1871, when Scotland beat England in front of four thousand spectators at Raeburn Place in Edinburgh. Just seven weeks earlier the English clubs had founded the Rugby Football Union (RFU) and Trinity College Dublin joined up soon after.

The student club was founded in 1854, laying claim to being the oldest club in continuous existence anywhere in the world. Charles Barrington, club captain, recalled how he and secretary R.M. Wall had written down the first modern laws of the game in their student rooms in 1868:

*'Wall sat gravely at his little table. A small dark wiry hardy chap with a short black beard and kindly dark eyes. He wrote and I dictated. Gradually and gradually as one could remember them the unwritten laws governing the immortal Rugby game were put on paper.'*

The formation of the RFU was noted in Dublin, and attempts were put in train to set up a similar body. Again the Trinity captain was to the fore, and George Hall Stack's rooms saw several meetings of the clubs. In December 1874, the Irish Football Union (IFU) was founded at the premises of sports equipment seller John Lawrence at 38–39 Grafton Street (now occupied by the Monsoon Accessorize clothes store, and a Burger King restaurant). Things did not run smoothly for the new body, as the northern clubs were irked at not being involved and formed their own Northern Football Union (NFU) in January 1875.

The relations between the two unions were civil, however, and each provided ten men to the first Ireland team, which played England at the Kennington Oval the following month. That the game was twenty-a-side was at the insistence of the Irish, who clearly felt that their best hope of overcoming the more experienced English side was by crowding the field. Ireland's players, it was reported by *Sport*, were 'immaculately innocent of training'. Wearing stout woollen sweaters, the Irish side went down by two goals and a try to nil. (Until 1875 internationals were decided by the number of goals – conversions and dropped goals – but from that year the number of tries was used as a 'tiebreak' if teams were level on goals. A formal point scoring system was not introduced until the late 1880s, when a try scored one point, a conversion two and a drop goal three.)

Ireland was captained by Donegal man Stack, who had hosted the

nascent IFU, and that day took the first step in the long history of Irish rugby when he kicked-off the game. Stack was fated not to play a large role thereafter, however, as he died nineteen months later in November 1876. At that time, Stack was a twenty-six-year-old barrister with rooms

in Trinity. He had recently undergone a painful and unsuccessful operation and was staying at the Royal Albert Hotel in Dominick Street, close to the courts. On Sunday lunchtime he sent a waiter on an errand to Hamilton's Chemist for a bottle of hydrate of chloral, a popular sedative. Stack suffered from painful indigestion – for which he took opium – and may have needed help in sleeping.

The following morning he was found unconscious in bed, with the bottle empty beside him. He died before a doctor could be summoned. 'Chloral', as the substance was known, was widely used in Victorian times, but overdosing was fatal; the celebrated Irish scientist, John Tyndall, died in such a manner. Stack's inquest found that his death was caused by misadventure.

England were the first visitors to Dublin, but not to Dunlop's stadium, which would have to wait a little longer. The RFU offered 19

December 1875 for the fixture, which the Irish Football Union originally wanted to play in Trinity College. That ground was considered unsuitable, as was the Nine Acres in the Phoenix Park. Dunlop offered the Champion ground, but that was rejected out of hand, despite the founder making repeated efforts to persuade the committee. Lansdowne Road, it was



Handbill for the first international at Lansdowne, with the late change on the Irish team noted

reported, was 'quite inadequate for an international rugby match'. Eventually the Leinster Cricket Club arena in Rathmines was hired – at a cost of £10 – with goalposts, ropes and a flagpole provided by Trinity. The IFU must have been concerned that this novelty might inspire public misbehaviour, with Honorary Secretary H.D. Walsh warning spectators that 'Stewards and representatives of the Press alone are allowed within the ropes'.

England again were too strong – by a goal and a try to nil – and the press blamed the result partly on the 'wretched thin cotton vests' Ireland wore. These were coloured white (as were England's) and the only distinguishing part of the kit was the blue knickerbockers and green velvet cap. Ireland also wore a gold badge and lace. The shamrock crest was the property of the Trinity club, but when Trinity switched to the college coat of arms in 1880 the Irish union requested they be allowed take over the emblem.

The gate takings were just £22 and nine shillings – which at one shilling admission meant fewer than 450 paid in, although women were admitted free. The IFU managed to negotiate the rent down from £10 to £7 ten shillings.

Dunlop must have been feverishly keen to host these popular fixtures. His persistence with the IFU paid off, and the first interprovincial in Dublin was staged in Lansdowne on 16 December 1876. Dunlop offered the options of the ground for £5 rent, or to share the expenses and receipts; the IFU opted for the latter. There was torrential rain in the morning which reduced the crowd, and Leinster beat Ulster by a goal and a try to two tries.

After the game, representatives of the provinces met in the Arcade Hotel in Suffolk Street – now the Ulster Bank – to pick the team to play at the Oval the following February. That was the first of Ireland's fifteen-a-side internationals, and another defeat to nil resulted. Ireland played the inaugural fixture against Scotland in Belfast two weeks later, which the visitors won by six goals and two tries to nil. There were two Leinster men on the side, of whom the acerbic reporter Jacques McCarthy said they 'might have been much better at home in bed.'

It was more than a year before the next international – Ireland's fifth

– came around, and this time the IFU offered it to the Irish Champion club, commencing a run of 244 games as the sole venue in the capital, which only ended in 2006 when the old ground was closed for demolition.

The press was confident that the attendance would be good for the visit of England on 13 December 1875. ‘The ground is in capital order, and a reserved portion has been set aside where ladies can obtain a most commanding view of the contest’. Stewards were enlisted from the captains and secretaries of the city’s clubs, plus past members of the Irish team. The slightly haphazard organisation can be seen in the newspaper notice that read ‘both teams are requested to be at the ground at 2 o’clock, and the public may count on the kick off at 3 o’clock.’

*The Irish Times* editorial hailed the new organisation, saying it ‘may take credit for having done much to foster and encourage the manly game throughout the country’.

Ireland made nine changes from the previous game, picking six new caps, but the selection did not go down well in some quarters. It was the first Irish team that was open to Munster players, and three Limerick men were called up. However the honorary secretary of the Cork club wrote a letter to the editor of *The Irish Times*, complaining that his men had been totally ignored.

Robert Walkington and James Macdonald were the only survivors of the Oval game in 1875, with Walkington the only man to play in all four games to date. He was an important figure in those early days, playing ten games up to 1882, in which year he was also president of the IRFU.

In a late change, Kingstown schoolboy George Fagan – who had just turned eighteen – was called in a few minutes before kick off to replace Gus Whitestone of Trinity at half back. Fagan was ‘well worthy of his place’, but it proved to be his only cap, and he died in Calcutta seven years later. His younger brother, Arthur, played for England against Ireland in 1887.

Concerns about the arrangements proved well-founded:

*‘The rush at the gates was somewhat unexpected, and much pushing and shoving was indulged in. The entrance to the turnstile was too wide, creating a block and preventing the machine from turning.’*

The teams were photographed before the game, the England team haphazardly arranged under a tree inside the grounds. A strong, bitter north-westerly wind blew over the ground, which was rather exposed. It was reported that two thousand people turned up, and a rope was needed to keep them back from the pitch: 'the public kept fairly within the touch line and the utmost good order prevailed, which the players of either team received commensurate amounts of applause according to their desserts,' wrote *The Irish Times*.

Shortly after 3pm England won the toss and asked Ireland to kick off into the wind towards the river end. Walkington started the game, his kick resulting in a scrum, from which a Kelly break saw the ball dribbled close to the English line. Enthoven rescued the situation for the visitors and started another attack.

Matier made a relieving kick for Ireland but England came back again and again. A penalty for 'hand-ball play' led to a Hunt break. He passed to Bell who ran it close to the Irish line, where England forward Herbert Gardner touched down for the first of the 864 international tries at the stadium. Pearson kicked the goal 'in splendid style'. Herbert Prescott Gardner, aged twenty-one, was playing his only game for England. He later emigrated to Australia where he was a local representative in Queensland in 1915 and is believed to have died there in 1938.

Walkington kicked off again from half way, when as the pressman put it 'Hornby returned the Gilbert' – an early plug for the ball's manufacturer – but Walkington 'replied with interest' and a promising situation was set up close to the England 25 yard line, eventually ruined when 'the wind proved Kidd's worst enemy'.

An England attack ended with Bell failing to ground the ball and Walkington touched down to save a try. There was much comment on the quality of play in the game, and the end-to-end attacking made it entertaining for the spectators.

The press was full of praise for the Englishmen: 'The style of play of our visitors was generally remarked, while the running and dropping was



**Above:**  
England's A.N.  
'Monkey' Hornby,  
who was also a top  
cricketer

greatly admired.' The unselfishness of the England players was also noted; 'No matter how close to the goal line they would prefer to pass back, and doing it so quick, one after another, they may be said to fairly bother the opposing team.' The reporter railed against the attitude of the Irishman: 'In Ireland men like to play the gallery game, and "Moriarty" thinks it a grand thing if the *Irish Times* next morning announces he "secured a try".'

Ireland's forwards continued to match their opponents – Kelly, Macdonald and Schutte were singled out for praise – but a great run by Jackson saw England twenty yards from the Irish line. 'The careless play of Matier now let Verelst gain a try, but the try at goal was a failure'.

England crossed again when a Hornby run ended with a scoring pass to Penny. This time Pearson goaled, 'notwithstanding the great angle to the posts'.

Albert 'Monkey' Hornby was a major figure in English sport: one of only two men to captain his country at both rugby and cricket, he also played football for Blackburn Rovers. Hornby was immortalised by the English poet Francis Thompson in one of the most celebrated of all sporting poems, 'At Lord's'.

*For the field is full of shades as I near a shadowy coast,  
And a ghostly batsman plays to the bowling of a ghost,*

*And I look through my tears on a soundless-clapping host*

*As the run stealers flicker to and fro, to and fro:*

*O my Hornby and my Barlow long ago!*

Ireland upped their game in the second half, when they 'several times seemed like wiping off the score against them'. England were playing into a stiff wind but 'closely penned their opponents'; with ten minutes to go Ireland were camped on the England line. The ball was fed back to Fagan but 'he was so quickly pounced on he could not drop a goal'.

But the Englishmen by slow degrees relieved the siege. Hornby and Enthoven made some excellent runs before a final relieving kick by Pearson spun into touch and 'no side' was called. The match was an England win 'by two goals to nil, with one try to spare'.

Much of the criticism went the way of three-quarter R.N. Matier, who 'did not come up to expectations, perhaps because of nervousness' –



**Above:** England forward Arthur Budd, who made his debut at Lansdowne Road

several times he ‘muffed’ the ball, and once he interfered with Walkington, and later with Kidd, while his picking up was rarely clean.

There was praise for the half-backs, notably Kidd, while Walkington ‘was equal to the occasion’, although the trenchant *Irish Times* reporter, Jacques McCarthy, criticised Ireland for playing one full back when the English had two. Ireland had lined out in a 1-2-2-10 formation, England 2-2-2-9.

The teams adjourned to the Shelbourne Hotel, where the IFU hosted the post-match dinner at 7 pm. The toasts, ‘which were given and responded to with much enthusiasm’, were made to the Queen, the English XV, the Irish XV, the Rugby Union, the Irish Union and ‘The Ladies’.

While the match was a success, it was clear Ireland’s rugby had a fair way to go before it would start winning games. It was not a glorious introduction to international rugby – Ireland lost their first ten games without scoring a point, while prior to the first victory over England in 1888, the record in all games read: won 1, drew 1, lost 23. In only six of those games did they even score.

IRELAND: R.B. Walkington (NIFC, captain), R.N. Matier (NIFC), F.W. Kidd (Lansdowne), G.L. Fagan (Kingstown School), T.G. Gordon (NIFC), E.W.D. Croker (Limerick), W.D. Moore (Queen’s, Belfast), F. Schute (Wanderers), H.W. Murray (DUFC), W. Finlay (NIFC), J.A. Macdonald (Methodist College & Windsor), H.G. Edwards (DUFC), H.C. Kelly (NIFC), R.W. Hughes (Queen’s, Belfast), W. Griffiths (Limerick)

England: H.W. Pearson (Blackheath), W.J. Penny (King’s College), A.M. Hornby (Preston), H.J. Enthoven (Richmond), A.H. Jackson (Blackheath), J.L. Bell (Durham), G.F. Vernon (Blackheath), H.S. Gardner (Richmond), F. Dawson (Cooper’s Hill), T. Blatherwick (Manchester), C.L. Verelst (Liverpool), A. Budd (Blackheath), E.B. Turner (St George’s), M.W. Marshall (Blackheath, captain)

Referee: E. Swainston (Manchester), Umpires: H.L. Robinson (Leinster), R. Bell jnr (Ulster)