

Edmund Harris, Twickenham Rugby Ground 1906-1910: A Grand Gesture (September, 2002)

Introduction

In his book, *The Football Grounds of Great Britain*, Simon Inglis makes a telling observation in that although “the architecture books are full of studies of the dullest church, even Pevsner’s *Guide To The Buildings of England*, mentions only two football grounds; Wembley and Hillsborough, and even then only in passing.”¹ Within this scenario, the Rugby Football Union ground at Twickenham rests comfortably. As the single most dominant architectural feature on the Twickenham landscape it has largely escaped serious historical attention.

What has become accepted as the definitive history of Twickenham Rugby ground has mostly been passed down from O.L.Owen who wrote the *History of the Rugby Football Union* in the 1950s.² Nothing since has been produced which has tested or rigorously questioned Owen’s legacy. Wallace Reyburn did write *Twickenham – The Story of a Rugby Ground* in the 1970s, but mostly what historical information it contains echoes Owen’s earlier account.³ The legend has it that it was fine, all-round sportsman and rugby referee Billy Williams who found the Twickenham site after a year of scouting around for a suitable home and headquarters for the England rugby game and the Rugby Football Union. Because of the inferior nature of the site, it was almost immediately dubbed ‘Billy Williams’ Cabbage Patch’. Whereas the overall scheme was later praised as an example of “hard bargaining and honest accounting at their best,”⁴ there is evidence to suggest otherwise.

Starting with *The Roots of Twickenham Rugby Ground*, this paper sets out to firstly examine Owen’s partial perspective within the context of the Rugby Football Union and the England game before 1907. Next, the conundrum of *William Cail: The Consummate Professional* is explored to determine his actions as a member of the Rugby Football Union hierarchy having to choose between popularism over elitism in order to secure *A Home for England Rugby*. How Cail went about this business and how he came to select the unlikeliest location in the form of *Billy Williams’s Cabbage Patch* is assessed, as well as his pragmatism in *Laying the Foundations* which ensured his scheme became a reality, even though it was met with a mixture of *Antipathy, Acrimony and Indifference*. The *Conclusion* will demonstrate how Twickenham Rugby Ground came about, why it was built where it was; and who and what were the motivating forces from concept to construction.

The Roots of Twickenham Rugby Ground.

It is important to begin at the end of the process, with Owen’s account, for two reasons. Firstly, Owen was an aspiring sports journalist when Twickenham Rugby Ground was opened in 1909. Apart from active service in both world wars, Owen worked for *The Times* newspaper for most of his long career. He would have known personally the founding fathers of the Rugby Football Union as well as those responsible for the acquisition and the building of the ground at Twickenham. He would also have had direct

access to primary source material that has subsequently been lost. And by the time Owen came to write the history of the union, he had won both its confidence and its trust. This is demonstrated in the attitudes expressed in his book, which was commissioned by and published for the Rugby Football Union.

As one who passionately defended the union and what it stood for, Owen was the ideal choice to chronicle the fortunes of what he himself describes as “an understandably shy” organization. Throughout its 130 years, the RFU has given the impression of a body under siege; often secretive and defensive and at times, manipulative. In effect, Owen became something of the RFU’s public relations man - and in this he did an excellent job. But it is what lies hidden between the lines of his text, in concert with what fragmentary evidence survives, which produces a different reality outside of Owen’s partial reporting more than half a century ago. For example, his open support of the amateur principle, which determined the governance of rugby union football until it was declared an ‘open’ game on 26th August 1995.⁵

Owen also offers a direct throw back to the late nineteenth century when the order of things and ‘one’s place’ were sharply defined. “The well-paid artisan”, according to Owen, was better able to accommodate the pursuit of the sport than those struggling “in the early stages of a learned profession.” This was the very antithesis of those who believed that it was unreasonable to expect the same ‘amateurism’ from the wage-earning classes as from the upper classes, and that it was unfair to expect working men to sacrifice too much of their low wages in order to play and to travel without appropriate remuneration. The whole question of ‘Broken Time’ as it became known, effectively split the game of rugby in two, and after 1895 had served to divide North and South. Strict new rules and lines of procedure had come about to “crush any attempt to establish professional cells within the government [the RFU] machine.”⁶

Owen even goes so far as to support the fears of a League system having a tendency to become more powerful than the parent body - almost an authority within an authority. It was fortunate, therefore, from his own perspective that, despite the successes of the Association game and of Rugby League, there were still those “men of strength” who believed profoundly in the Union’s core principle of amateurism. Such a man was William Cail who had been the RFU President at the time of the Great Split of 1895 and who was able “to meet any kind of challenge”. William Cail has latterly been described as “the type of economist that are careless of popularity”. Indeed, “there would have been no Twickenham had it not been for William Cail.”⁷ With the benefit of hindsight, the latter observation can be viewed as either a brickbat or a bouquet. For despite his proven business acumen elsewhere, the founding of Twickenham rugby ground did not necessarily represent Cail’s finest hour.

William Cail: The Consummate Professional

The son of a Tyneside businessman, William Cail was educated in Newcastle and Stuttgart where he studied chemical engineering before going on to the Sorbonne. Cail’s was a typical middle-class background of the ‘new gentry’; one of the industrial bourgeoisie later to follow in the footsteps of four previous generations of councillors,

three of them Aldermen and one a mayor⁸. Outside of business, second only to Cail's passion for politics and business was his enthusiasm for sport, and in particular rugby football. His first recollection of football was at his grandfather's house in Yorkshire where he spent the summer months. It was here that Cail's father would host an afternoon of entertainments, chief of which was a game of football between the two neighbouring villages played in the old traditional style, but with a degree of respectability that reflected Cail's social origins.⁹ But it was perhaps as an acclaimed rower and yachtsman that Cail fully acknowledged the amateur principle in sport.

He held the Tyne amateur championship and won over 50 prizes, but this was against the backdrop of an uncomfortable reality wherein working-class scullers and rowers dominated both the local and national rowing scene. Amateurs such as Cail simply could not compete with those who rowed for a living, so in turn this became a root cause for segregation, essentially wherein their inferiors would not beat the upper classes. When the Rugby Football Union was formed in 1871, no mention was made in the formulation of its rules of the amateur status of the game. The terms amateur and professional signified the type of man who played the sport. The amateur was a gentleman who played fair and regarded his opponents with respect. The professional, again characterised by Owen, played the game hard and organized it well, "and were imbued with a doctrine of complete physical fitness and the will to win – sometimes at all costs".

Cail was instrumental in the formation of the Northumberland Rugby Football Union in 1880 and it was from there that he became a national union committee member two years later, just as the whole question of professionalism became a national talking point. So much so, that in 1886, the RFU began the process of formal legislation, with William Cail as the Chairman of the standing committee on professionalism. It was this committee that drafted the new laws that made monetary gain from whatever source or form, illegal. However, despite even the most draconian of measures imposed by the union, the call from working men in the North to be paid expenses for travel and loss of earnings continued to gain momentum.

As President of the Rugby Football Union in 1893, Cail violently opposed any erosion of the amateur status of the game. So great was the RFU's intransigence and the subsequent depth of feeling in the north, that in 1895, 22 Lancashire and Yorkshire clubs resigned from the Rugby Football Union to form the Northern League. "We glory in the outlawry pronounced on us in freeing us from the tyrannical bondage of the English union", wrote one correspondent to the *Yorkshire Post*, "and we breathe pure air in being freed from the stifling atmosphere of deceit in which we previously existed."¹⁰ Such was the depth of resentment.

Although William Cail saw the union through this, the most traumatic period in its history, the impact on it was profound, resulting in the near-death experience of the English national side. By 1903, the number of clubs belonging to the RFU was halved. Lacking its talented Northern input, England did not once win the international championship, and in five seasons was beaten by every one of the home countries. There was a real danger in the south that the game was wasting away. Either some form of

drastic action had to be taken - and soon - or the RFU and the England game would face a humiliating future. In order to prove to the Northern Union that it meant business, some grand, expansive gesture on the part of the Rugby Football Union had to be found. The solution, however, presented something of a conundrum amongst the deeply principled RFU hierarchy.

A Home for England Rugby

By the turn of the 20th century, the expansion of the game had resulted in increased profitability of many clubs. Cup-ties with crowds of 20,000 in the north were not uncommon, and the England v. Scotland internationals ensured large crowds. Yet, the “atmosphere was anathema to those who ran the union”, who saw in these crowds nothing but “a nuisance.”¹¹ The Welsh had built their first stand at Cardiff Arms Park as far back as 1881. The Scottish Rugby Union had secured their home ground at Inverleith in Edinburgh in 1897 and the Irish were settled at Lansdowne Road. But the RFU was still continuing to expend its resources travelling to and from rented grounds up and down the country.

Whilst his contemporaries within the RFU hierarchy wanted to maintain rugby as the sport of the elite, William Cail was beginning to see in the huge crowds a lucrative, money-spinning potential. On the one hand, however, he was steeped in the belief that popularisation of the game would prevent keeping the working class where they belonged, in the factories, and on the other, the big gates signalling the possibility of profiting from the growing interest in the sport. Owen credits Cail as a prime mover in the transformation of the RFU from “an old-fashioned, almost archaic body” into a “great modern concern.” In this however, he “did not leap out of history, rather he got to his position through his business acumen and retained it because of that acumen.”¹²

His inspiration came with the All Blacks tour of 1905. With their new formation and style of play, the New Zealand side renewed English interest in the game. In order to maximize the number of spectators wanting to see them in action, the RFU had to lease the Crystal Palace arena in Sydenham where some 45,000 spectators turned out to see the visitors thrash England by five tries to nil. Ever the businessman, Cail put this dismal result to one side and looked instead to the record number of spectators and the union’s profit on the fixture of £1,300. The climate was ripe for the securing of a home ground for the England game. His reasoning was as undemanding as it was harmonious with his inherent parsimony.

By the end of the 1905-06 season, the RFU had paid £1,100 to the Crystal Palace Club alone for the use of their ground. Over the previous ten years, many Internationals had been played in London that had cost the union on average £3,000 a year. Because there was always a far greater demand for seats in covered stands than could be met, a ground complete with an “ample supply” of permanent stands would generate much larger receipts from International matches. With a proper fixture list, turnstiles regulating ticketed entrance and the incorporation of the RFU’s offices into the stands saving on London rents, it made sound, economic sense for the Rugby

Football Union to purchase land in or near to London to build a permanent football ground.¹³

If the union's investments were sold, Cail calculated, they would realize £7,500, or just over two years expenditure on renting grounds in London. Besides the savings and other benefits to be had if the union used this money to purchase a ground of its own, there was the investment in the land itself. Land purchased near any large and growing town, and especially London, represented a far superior financial return over time than interest received from the bank. So powerful and popular had Association Football become, that in many towns and cities it was able to monopolize some of the prime open land which would otherwise have remained as such or become public property. Often breweries or businesses put up the finance in return for control of the clubs. Association Football clubs had changed from being committee-run to limited liability companies, issuing shares and being run by a board of directors. This was the result of the rise of professionalism and the desire to purchase or rent and develop better football grounds.

The Rugby Union however remained solidly committee-run and committed to the amateur principle. It controlled its own destiny and in turn that of others, which was how it was to remain. Cail's peer group comprised City bankers, financiers and businessmen, and given its recent popularity, the England rugby game had showed itself to be a worthwhile investment. But Cail's plan was not to look to outsiders, but for the Rugby Union to self-fund a ground of its own. Of the "small band of men"¹⁴ who supported him in this aim, we can positively identify one whose name has become synonymous with the Twickenham Ground.

William (Billy) Williams had come to wider public attention during the same All Black's Tour of 1905 that had motivated Cail's ambition. During a game against Surrey, it was Billy Williams who bravely awarded 14 penalty kicks against the outraged New Zealanders and saved the home side from a total basting. Although he was an honorary member of Harlequins and 21 years a rugby referee, Williams was much better known as a cricketer. He appeared as wicket keeper for Middlesex in 1885, toured the West Indies during the winter of 1896/7, became a member of the MCC in 1900 and served on the RFU Committee from 1904.¹⁵

Apart from his reputation as a well-known and highly respected all-round sportsman, Billy Williams was also a Commission man for an estate agent¹⁶ and "certainly a man of affairs."¹⁷ Therefore, as a property professional with an excellent personal knowledge and wide experience of sporting grounds, Williams was uniquely equipped to procure for the Rugby Football Union that which he secured for other "grateful clients."¹⁸ So it was at the end of the 1905/6 season that William Cail would have charged Billy Williams with the task of setting out to find a site for England rugby's national stadium. Although London at this time was rapidly expanding, there remained vast tracts of land available and suitable for the home and headquarters of the RFU. During the period of Williams's search, three potential locations other than the one eventually chosen can be identified.

The Stamford Bridge Athletics Ground had been available for some time¹⁹, but was secured by Chelsea Football Club in 1905. Then there was the Richmond Athletic Ground at Old Deer Park. Apart from Blackheath (the third potential site), if there was considered to be a spiritual home for English rugby then it was at Richmond. Both Richmond and Blackheath were deemed to be the only grounds in or near London physically fit to play and, more importantly, appreciate the game of rugby football. Cail later revealed that the leases on both grounds were secure, besides which, he believed (without foundation) both sites “would soon be lost to the game of rugby.”²⁰

Of the two, Richmond enjoyed superior rail links in the form of the London & South West Railway from Waterloo, the newly electrified District Line system and the Richmond-Broad Street Line. Therefore, the possibility of acquiring a plot of land reasonably close to Richmond would have received serious consideration. Twickenham, on the Middlesex side of the River Thames and less than two miles from Richmond, already had a reputation as essentially a rugby area, and the building of the RFU ground there would only enhance that reputation. In this, attention turned to a ten-acre portion of The Erncroft Estate situated north of Twickenham town. This was ideally aligned north-south with potential entrances obtainable from both the London Road to the east, with its all-important tram link to London, and the Whitton Road to the south west. It was close to Twickenham railway station and there was scope for expansion.

In addition, Harlequins FC was looking for a home ground and was invited to become tenants at the new RFU headquarters. As the Rugby Union’s elite, their presence would not just be accidental. With the game played by them in such an entertaining way, they would also be able to “do splendid missionary work in keeping the game alive and adding to its popularity.”²¹ They would also provide useful additional income to help fund the development of the New Ground. The Erncroft Estate was decided upon and in his formal proposal to the RFU Committee on 15th March 1907, William Cail concluded that there was sufficient evidence to justify the union’s purchase. If doubts were raised or questions were asked as to the likely location, then these were not recorded. The motion was carried without further discussion and Cail was given full powers to purchase a ground with immediate effect.

However, no sooner was the scheme underway than it suffered a serious setback. Cail later revealed that when the union’s £6000 investments (‘some bought at £110’) were sold, they produced only £4,919.²² This not only left a considerable shortfall in Cail’s projected budget, but something of a hole in the subsequent history of events. Cail was by this time into his fourteenth year as Honorary Treasurer and would have known intimately the exact state of the union’s finances. As there was no sudden downturn in the economy, it is therefore a mystery as to how and why he managed so comprehensively to miscalculate both the union’s investments and their true worth. The union’s profit on games for the 1906-7 season was around £1,905. But this did not include the RFU’s financial responsibilities to member clubs. Whatever was the

balance added to the £4,919 realized from the sale of the union's investments, it would have produced no more than £6,000, or £1,500 short of target. This otherwise previously undisclosed lack of financial acumen on the part of William Cail notwithstanding, it is at this same point in time that the legend attaching 'Billy Williams' Cabbage Patch' becomes likewise anomalous.

That there were insufficient funds to proceed with the purchase of the Erncroft Estate would have meant one of two things; either the abandonment of the scheme or the purchase of an alternative and much cheaper site. Cail was by nature a pragmatist, who presented with a practical problem sought to solve it – as long as the investment promised reward. He was committed to the scheme and would not have wished to abandon it unless there was absolutely no alternative. Into this came the Fairfield Estate. This was a ten acre site in the same neighbourhood as the Erncroft Estate, but far less well appointed. According to the memoirs of former RFU archivist and one-time Assistant Secretary, Alf Wright, it was Billy Williams who “suggested that the union might like to buy it.”²³ That a later “vocal minority thought he was mad to make the suggestion...did not stop Billy.”²⁴ Neither did it inhibit William Cail. For on June 1st 1907, eight weeks after Cail had proposed the scheme, *The Richmond and Twickenham Times* reported the Rugby Football Union's purchase of the site and that “a ten per cent deposit had been placed.”²⁵

In the opinion of *The Thames Valley Times* the selected site did not represent the best choice and failed to understand how the RFU refused the other, especially as the terms were “almost identical.”²⁶ The preferred site was confirmed as being towards Whitton and in the neighbourhood of Kneller Hall. It was further from the railway station than the Erncroft Estate and with no access to the trams along the London Road. Reaching it was by foot or private transport. It did not even adjoin the Whitton Road and entry to it was via a service road between a row of newly built houses. Despite much investigation by the *Thames Valley Times* representative, what few facts could be established had to be “gleaned from other sources.” Negotiations had been partly carried out by the local firm of Messrs. Hoskins and Booth of Twickenham, but “upon this point” the Rugby Union Committee had “preserved a stoney silence.”²⁷ In this we can turn to the oral testimony of a great nephew of Billy Williams (also called Billy Williams) who recorded his memories of life as a young boy in Whitton during the early years of the twentieth century.²⁸

Oral testimony has since the 1970s grown in importance in the provision of access to areas of the past that may never otherwise have been documented. In this instance, there is sufficient information arising from the overall testimony to match other contemporaneous accounts of names, dates and places to suggest, for the most part, a robust clarity of mind and memory. Within the context of this phase in the Twickenham story, the following extract represents a pivotal, if tantalizing, body of evidence with specific reference to the Fairfield Estate:

“So you got George Williams who was my grandfather's eldest son, my uncle. They farmed the land...they leased all that land... that was Billy Williams' only ground...he

leased the ground to my grandfather... he negotiated and then eventually it was all passed over to Billy Williams – the owner – to do the completion of the business.”²⁹

In creating evidence from oral testimony that may be relied upon however, the spoken word must be tied to documentary evidence. Apart from the oral testimony of Billy Williams’s great nephew it cannot (at the time of writing) be established absolutely who owned the Fairfield Estate at the point of sale to the Rugby Football Union in 1907. Although given the fairly irregular nature of the scheme’s transition thus far and in particular the brief timescale from Cail’s proposal through to purchase, it would be tempting to look to this evidence as addressing the various anomalies arising. Instead, what other evidence survives must be interrogated in order to arrive at as reasonable as possible an assessment of reality over report with regard to the ownership of what has become known as ‘Billy Williams’ Cabbage Patch’.

Billy Williams’ Cabbage Patch

Of course, the very suggestion that the Rugby Football Union purchased land directly or indirectly from the Chairman of its New Ground Committee is the stuff of scandal. Even if Billy Williams was the owner and the land was transferred in some form of non-profit bequest, questions would have been asked. Quite possibly they were which might explain the local press having been met with a ‘stoney silence’ from the union. Possibly one newspaper had a sneaking suspicion when it recounted Billy Williams personally picking all of the apples from the orchard “to sell to help raise the purchase money for the ground.”³⁰ Documentary evidence exists to show that Billy Williams did own property in the form of two houses in Whitton,³¹ but nothing exists to prove his great nephew’s claim that the Fairfield Estate was Billy Williams’s “only ground.”³² In his memoirs, former RFU archivist, Alf Wright, stated that the ground “never belonged to Billy Williams.”³³ This is significant if only to suggest the presence of a once uncomfortable rumour, but what of the facts?

The Williams family moved from Essex to the Twickenham area in about 1875.³⁴ In 1881, George Williams was living in Orleans Road with his wife, Ellen, and their four children. George’s younger brother, William (Billy) Williams was living in St Margarets, north east of Twickenham Town. By 1891,³⁵ George and Ellen, plus three additions to their family, had moved to the Richmond Road and in 1900, Billy had moved to 27 Walpole Road, Twickenham.³⁶ On 29th September 1903, George Williams took up a 21-year lease on Orchard Cottage and its 1.094-acre orchard on the Whitton Road.³⁷ Orchard Cottage was one of only six cottages on the south west side of Whitton Road towards Chase Bridge. On the north east side, towards the junction of Whitton Road and Oak Lane (now Rugby Road) were eight detached late Victorian villas, which mostly survive, adjacent to the South Stand of the rugby ground.

In 1904, seven Lots of Freehold Estate in this neighbourhood were for put up for sale.³⁸ Included were the Erncroft Estate, which was owned by market gardeners Messrs. W & T Mann, and the Fairfield Estate, which was owned by market gardener, Frank Peacock. In 1907, the Erncroft Estate either remained unsold or was put up for sale again as it was

still “owned and in the occupation of Mann & Sons”³⁹ when it was considered for purchase by the RFU. Whether or not Frank Peacock sold the Fairfield Estate in 1904 cannot be categorically established. But given the oral evidence of Billy Williams’s great nephew, it seems reasonable to assume that if George Williams was leasing the land in 1907, he would have been doing so sometime after 1904 when either Frank Peacock had no further direct use for it, or Billy Williams had become the owner and had leased the land to his brother.

In the absence of an actual lease there is only the oral testimony to go on, apart from one piece of circumstantial evidence to link George Williams and Orchard Cottage with the Fairfield Estate, and that is the access road into the site. On the Estates sale plan of 1904, the Fairfield Estate is shown quite isolated with no access from the Whitton Road. Oak Lane (now Rugby Road) formed the estate’s eastern boundary and natural access points. On the Rugby Football Union sketch plan of the Fairfield Estate for 1907⁴⁰ however, there had by this time been cut an access point into the site directly opposite Orchard Cottage. This would strongly suggest that the road was cut after 1904 and before 1907 for the convenience of the occupier of Orchard Cottage. And then there is the motivation of the owner of the Fairfield Estate to consider.

The vendor was either desperate to be rid of the land on any terms or was a good friend of the RFU, sympathetic to both its aims and its tenuous financial situation. If the Fairfield Estate represented a dubious proposition from a locational perspective, then its attractiveness to the union from a financial standpoint is clear in so far as payment was by installments over some considerable time. The October 1907 minutes of the Ground Committee record that a payment of £3,500 was made on the ground, “which completed the purchase.”⁴¹ However, according to Cail’s later autobiographical notes this was only a first payment.⁴² Two years later, the extent of the RFU’s holding was only eight point nine acres.⁴³ It was not until 1911 that the union’s liabilities were *being* paid off, and not until 1913 that they finally were.⁴⁴ Therefore, given that at least three years of occupancy were to pass before the union completed the ten and a half acre acquisition, other than the intervention of an anonymous benefactor, and within the context of what documentary and circumstantial evidence there is to hand, Billy Williams would appear most likely to have been the vendor.

Had Williams purchased the land in 1904 it would have been long before Cail decided on his grand gesture. This leaves no suggestion that Billy Williams bought the Fairfield Estate with a view to selling it on to the Rugby Football Union. Besides, three years later as Cail’s plan neared fruition, the Erncroft Estate was by far the better located and preferred choice of site. It would have been when Cail’s venture was on the brink of failure that Billy Williams would have suggested the Fairfield Estate as an expedient to save the project. Cail the pragmatist would have agreed to the suggestion in order to keep the scheme on track, but subject to absolute confidentiality. What exactly constituted the part-negotiations for the sale carried out by Messrs. Hoskins and Booth of Twickenham, perhaps we shall never know. This scenario at least addresses the need for the union to maintain a ‘stoney silence’ when questioned about the transaction. What is absolutely clear however is that the poor quality of the site and its dubious location was not

uppermost in Cail's mind, which is evidenced in the months and years following the purchase.

Laying The Foundations

Immediately following the acquisition of the ground (4th June 1907), the RFU Secretary, P.Coles, resigned and was replaced by C.J.B. Marriott. Although no reason is given, the timing of Coles' sudden departure might reasonably be taken as further circumstantial evidence that the deal struck with the RFU and the owner of its newly acquired site did not meet with universal approval. Cail meanwhile needed around him tough, like-minded individuals to help ensure the venture's ultimate success, and in this the prompt replacement of disaffected committee members such as Coles with more forceful and dynamic personalities such as Charles Marriott would have been fundamental.

By October 1907, the RFU Ground Committee was considering the council's reaction to their plans. Although discussions were taking place with Architect, J.C.A.Greatorex, no formal plans were as yet drawn up. There was only a sketch plan, loosely describing The Fairfield Estate as an area of 'about ten acres'. No reference is made on this plan as to the 1.8 acres awaiting purchase. Oak Lane (now Rugby Road), forming the eastern boundary, is depicted as leading to a New Road to London where no such intention on the part of the local authorities existed. A spurious reference to the "projected electric car route" along the Whitton Road was another embellishment entirely without foundation.⁴⁵ Indeed two decades were to pass before the first omnibus was introduced along this route.⁴⁶

Clearly this sketch plan was designed to present the most optimistic portrayal of a less than perfect location. What the RFU Committee made of Cail's purchase is not recorded. The first visit paid to the site by the RFU President, C.A.Crane, was in October 1907, accompanied by the Ground Committee and William Cail. The main business of the day was to go over the ground and "inspect chairs and levels etc".⁴⁷ Presumably the committee had set out a series of chairs around the pitch area to offer an idea of the layout and elevation of the ground. This was important, as there were grounds deemed unfit for appreciating the finer points of the rugby game. At the Crystal Palace Arena especially, even though it boasted three stands, the vast majority of spectators were crammed onto sloping grassy banks without any terracing or crush barriers, so viewing was less than adequate if the crowd was large. When it was wet the slopes turned into slippery banks of mud and the pitch had considerable drainage problems.

Of the £3,500 payment that the delegation took with them, erroneously minuted as completing the purchase,⁴⁸ £1,250 was already allocated for clearing, fencing, legal charges and architects fees which, when added to the £3,500 payment, left little change from Cail's £4,919 budget. The recipient of this considerable sum is not recorded. Possibly it was made through Messrs. Hoskins and Booth when the meeting adjourned to the Railway Hotel (now The Cabbage Patch) in Twickenham to discuss amongst other matters dates to meet with the Architect "for the completion of the stands". The date for the first match was given as February 8 1908 which, at less than four months away, was even by Cail's standards highly over-optimistic. Clearing and peripheral work presented

few difficulties, unlike the business of laying out the pitch where the true magnitude of the undertaking was to become all-too apparent.

While the overall design of a stadium is important, so too is what lies underground, in the sub-structure and drainage. Many football clubs took on sites that were originally rubbish dumps, disused quarries or pits where, despite the initial effort required in filling and levelling the ground, a sub layer of ash and clinker created an economical and effective form of drainage. But difficult conditions such as that found at Twickenham, required ‘proper’ drainage systems. These, however, cost money, and money that Cail did not have. Indeed, no sooner had the first spade become bonded to the glutinous blue-clay subsoil than Cail found himself faced with a stark choice. He had either to find extra funding, or his grand gesture was in danger of faltering at the first failed shovel-full.

In February 1908, together with the President of the RFU, Cail wrote a letter to member counties and clubs in the form of a progress report on “the formation of a first-class football ground.”⁴⁹ He skillfully avoided going into any great detail, except to think it “of interest to state” that in spite of recent heavy rainfall the ground was in excellent condition with “no signs of water accumulation or flooding.” Clearly, word had spread about the watery nature of the site. As ever, looking beyond such mundane considerations, Cail focused instead on his vision of providing a ground with a “better class of stand.”

What he proposed was two covered stands, each 330 feet long and each seating about 4,000 spectators, with double that number standing. In all there would be accommodation for roughly 20,000 spectators. One stand would be complete with players’ dressing and bathrooms; there would be offices, committee and luncheon rooms, and a kitchen. Press seats would be included and a telegraph office. The overall site would be complete with proper entrance gates and turnstiles, and all utilities, and prizes were to be advertised for the most suitable design. In order to accomplish this, Cail required a further £10,000, which he looked to realize by First Mortgage Debentures of £50 each bearing interest of 5%. Cail expressed the hope that many counties and clubs would help to raise at least £8,000, which would be added to the acquisition and start up costs. This would complete the costs of the preliminary work as well as several other, undisclosed, “costly improvements”; doubtless including the drainage system.

In the event, only £5,700 was raised.⁵⁰ Undaunted by this disappointing response, Cail then secured a £6,000 bank loan.⁵¹ This meant that by March 1908 – just one year after he had proposed the scheme, well over double the suggested budget had dribbled into the RFU’s funds, and was pouring out of it at a rate of knots. Thus far, the ground was fenced off with gates and access roads, some legal and architects fees had been paid and only a single payment had been made on the ground. That same month, plans for the ‘New Football Stands at Twickenham’ were submitted to Twickenham Urban District Council.⁵² The firm of Architects and Surveyors was now J.E.Profit, Henderson and Brown.⁵³ Mr. Greatorex had shifted his responsibilities to the drawing up of what has been described as the “elaborate drainage system”.⁵⁴ Both plans were approved on 23rd July 1908.

“A field of play ready for action”, greeted the representative from *Athletic News* the following September, by which time the seven-acre pitch had been raised above the existing level and the foundations to the stands had also been laid. The pitch was described as dead level. The turf was of the best possible description and capable of standing any amount of wear and tear. Oblivious as to its true nature, the soil beneath it was described as a rich loam, which complemented an - as yet untested - “perfect” drainage system. On the surface at least, Twickenham presented “no more perfect field of play.”⁵⁵

Here was also a Rugby Football Union eager to see their enterprise up and running. C.J.B. Marriott had been confident that trial matches and the Australian fixtures would be played on the new ground, but due to delays on the part of the local authority he “could not even hazard a guess as to when a start could be made.” Marriott had wanted to arrange trial matches starting on 9th January 1909. “If we had a free hand”, he claimed, “we should be ready in about eight weeks,”⁵⁶ thus heralding a somewhat acrimonious relationship with the local authority on the one hand, and a bout of indifference from the press and public on the other.

Antipathy, Acrimony and Indifference.

The Council, through their surveyor, had declined to “express their satisfaction as to the safety of the stands for their use on the 9th day of January 1909.”⁵⁷ Since the stands themselves were not yet actually built, we must assume that the RFU was proposing to arrange matches using the stand foundations and mounds as temporary terracing, which carried statutory health as well as safety implications. With regard to delays to the opening of the ground, the borough surveyor was charged to lay before the Rugby Union clarification of any tests as advised were necessary, including the provision of “all appliances.”⁵⁸ This most probably referred to the toilet arrangements. An Act of 1907 already enforced the provision of toilets to new grounds, but not to improvements where they already existed.⁵⁹ On matters of safety, the actual stability of the ground was not within the local authority remit, but contained within Part 4 of The Public Health Act of 1890.⁶⁰

The borough surveyor could only report building work proceeding at the risk of the owner and items that infringed the council’s byelaws. Planning Permission as such didn’t exist at this time, although local regulations abounded. The local authority therefore had little option but to refuse to express its complete satisfaction. Irrespective of this, blame for the hold-ups to the union’s plans was squarely apportioned to Twickenham Council. In its solid support of the RFU, *Athletic News* attacked mercilessly the ‘circumlocution’ of urban councils, which in turn caused some council members to question whether or not the local authority was to blame.⁶¹

In the event, it was C.J.B.Marriott as the New Ground Manager who thought it wise not to take risks.⁶² However, all of this was somewhat academic in any case. At this time William Cail was busy berating the firm of architects responsible for ensuring that the builders carried out their contract.⁶³ Except, the builders in turn found themselves

somewhat stymied by events outside of their control as “the very ocean itself had conspired to thwart the expedition of the ground-making by swallowing the ship with the original girders from Glasgow.”⁶⁴

What this episode serves to demonstrate is the real sense of antipathy that existed between the RFU and the local authority. At the start of the scheme *The Thames Valley Times* had optimistically looked to the new “centre of England’s rugby games” to provide “the fillip that Twickenham required.”⁶⁵ Indeed, the building of a football stadium was normally viewed as a stimulant for employment in construction and maintenance; the supply of building materials and for the use of local firms and labour. But despite even the national unemployment crisis at the time,⁶⁶ work opportunities at The New Ground were never once mentioned, proposed or considered either jointly or separately by the council or the RFU.

Mostly too, the arrival of a football ground was as much bound up in civic pride as the public library or the town hall. *The Chatham and Rochester News* for example wrote of the development of “the colony” of New Brompton as “laudably ambitious and kingly desirous to at least keep abreast of its neighbours...but surely to crown it all a football ground has been purchased and laid out.”⁶⁷ Roker Park enjoyed a spectacular opening with pipe bands marching through the town, steamboats on the river and Lord Londonderry officially opening the ground with a golden key.⁶⁸ Marking the opening of Twickenham’s new football ground however was a column inch at the bottom of *The Richmond Herald* sports page.⁶⁹ Even this was a recycled extract of the *Daily Mirror*’s complaints about poor access to the ground and scorn of the union’s purchase.

Not all local sporting arenas were received with such indifference. In the same month that the Twickenham Rugby Ground opened, *The Richmond and Twickenham Times* carried a fulsome feature article, complete with photograph, celebrating the opening of the district’s “First Local Roller Skating Rink.”⁷⁰ A few weeks later there appeared a public announcement declaring a “Special and important notice to ice skaters regarding the opening ceremony of the Richmond Bridge Ice Skating Rink.”⁷¹ The “foolish actions” of some local residents unable to appreciate the financial benefits of having the stadium in the neighbourhood were identified by *Athletic News*.⁷² All in all, Twickenham Rugby Ground arrived not so much quietly onto the British sporting scene, but almost by way of an apology.

Saturday October 2nd 1909 should have celebrated the opening of the “the splendidly appointed new rugby ground at Twickenham”, wherein “undoubtedly the most important Rugby match in the district” between Harlequins and Richmond was to be played.⁷³ Instead, for the most part tortured tales of travelling to the ground dominated what sparse press reports there were. The journey from Waterloo was described as a very long, and, in the absence of concessions from the railway company, expensive journey.⁷⁴ Not that getting to the ground has ever focused entirely on Twickenham station. Besides those arriving from Richmond and The City, “those coming from the direction of Brentford”, for example, “found the Mogden Lane route the quickest.”⁷⁵ Fortunately, the motor age

was yet fully to arrive, as parking was limited to 200 motor vehicles at the rear of the South Terrace.

Having made the journey by whatever means, what greeted the pioneer spectators to the New Ground was the absence of the big crowd and the “many notables” expected to be there.⁷⁶ Then there was the matter of the grass, likened to “the hair of some of our clever friends at the opening performance, a little too artistic in the matter of length.”⁷⁷ The rising mound of the North Terrace faced its counterpart to the South, with the ‘A’ and ‘B’ (later dubbed the West and East) stands either side of the pitch. Several newspapers praised the new stands as “excellent structures”⁷⁸, “extensive and very complete”⁷⁹ and “replete with all modern conveniences.”⁸⁰

However, other members of the Fourth Estate were not so magnanimous. Representatives from the *News of The World* and the *Daily Telegraph*⁸¹ especially felt that being set too far back from the field compromised their comfort and convenience. And due to its vast proportions, some believed that the only really big crowds to be seen at the ‘Rugby Union Arena’ would be at International matches. Otherwise, there appeared to be little reason for “this pretentious and costly arena.”⁸² The *Richmond Herald* reflected somewhat somberly: “Two teams just met and played, watched by around 2,000 spectators on the big day. There was no official opening; no history attached the place; it was once a cabbage patch.”⁸³ Turning to the inaugural game itself, “no Union official made a speech, no survivor of the original England-Scotland game in 1871 was invited to kick-off; there was nothing like that.”⁸⁴ In time, the stadium would become “a real rugby centre, and as long as Harlequins continued to play the most invigorating rugby in England, there was little danger of the public being put off by the coldness of the place.”⁸⁵

Overall, “nothing could rob the event of its symbolism. Here, for the first time - and high time too - English Rugby had a home it call is own.”⁸⁶ Whilst ‘the hypercritical’ would doubtless find fault, it could not be expected to please all.⁸⁷ It was not until the first International was played there the following January in which England beat Wales for the first time in twelve long years, that it was deemed “indeed the right way to open a new ground and to bring English Rugby Football and its new home straight away into the limelight.”⁸⁸

Conclusions

Whilst O.L.Owen’s perspective of the roots of Twickenham was partial, it was founded on his genuine love of the game and respect for the values imbued in the Rugby Football Union. Likewise, William Cail was an archetypal union man, born of an age where playing the game was all, and financial exploitation of it was anathema. He was, however, also a pragmatist and a businessman, which ensured that despite great odds, a home and headquarters for the England rugby game and the Rugby Football Union was established. What remains a profound conundrum is how he so comprehensively miscalculated the financial aspect of the venture. The general level of the consol yield before 1914 remained “remarkably constant” and the profit rate was higher,⁸⁹ so a sudden and dramatic downturn in the economy in 1907 can be discounted.

The scheme's serious financial shortfall was only resolved by taking the simple expedient of purchasing a less than favourable site on extended terms and conditions. This made it an affordable, if not a popular choice. In this, Billy Williams emerges as the most likely provider; a factor that for obvious reasons the union would have needed to - and succeeded in - keeping a close secret. The RFU's acrimonious relationship with the local authority was fuelled by the union's desire to see the scheme up and running in as short a time as possible, irrespective of the consequences. Similarly, the indifference afforded the scheme from both the press and the public was most probably rooted in much the same antipathy towards the union's anomalous decision to build the ground where it did.

Yet Twickenham brought success to English rugby. In terms of profit, the first International made over £2,000. Ireland drew with England at Twickenham that same season, attracting a crowd of fewer than 14,000, but still managing to make £1,700 through the turnstiles. A total of three victories and one draw were to bring England their first championship since 1891. Whilst it took 60 years to get the pitch right, and still the question of access haunts it, Twickenham stands as a testament to William Cail's grand gesture, which transcended his own prejudices to sow a new democracy for the England Rugby Union game on Billy Williams's unpromising cabbage patch.

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⁴ V.A.Tilley and Ross McWhirter, *Centenary History of the Rugby Football Union*, (London, 1970), p.146

⁵ *Beauty and Power: A Journey Through the History of World Rugby* (RFU Museum of Rugby, 2001).

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⁷ Tilley and McWhirter, *Centenary History*, p.219

⁸ P.Blackledge, "Rationalist Capitalist Concerns: William Cail and the Great Rugby Split of 1895", *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol 18 (June 2001), pp.35-53.

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- ³⁸ Plan of Freehold Estates situated in Twickenham & Isleworth. 1904, (LBRUT Local Studies).
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- ⁴³ PRO: O.S. IR 121/18/32 (Field Book IR 58/70092: 6996 including 6997) Finance (1909-10) Act.
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- ⁴⁸ RFU minutes, 18 October 1907
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- ⁵⁰ Marshal and Tosswill, *Football*, p. 76.
- ⁵¹ Marshal and Tosswill, *Football*, p.76.
- ⁵² Submitted by Mr. J C A Greatorex, Architect; approved on 23 July 1908. Detail taken from the original ground plan held by John Clark, Clerk of Works, RFU Twickenham.
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- ⁶⁰ Quoted by Inglis, *Football Grounds*, p.30.
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