

# CHAPTER 1 – 1926 to 1930

## Early History

From the early 1800s, various forms of football were played in the major public schools. Each school developed its own set of rules to try and manage and refine a sport that had essentially developed from medieval mass street games. At Rugby School, William Webb Ellis is famously said to have picked up the ball and run it over the goal line during a match in 1823 and the technique of “running in” to score a “try at goal” was subsequently included in the school’s rules in 1845. As the game spread into the universities and the first clubs were formed, disputes over the different rules led to the formation of the Football Association in 1863, with the intention of establishing a single set of rules. However, as things turned out, the FA rules favoured the Eton and Cambridge game, which was based on dribbling with the ball and banned handling and some of the more violent features of the Rugby game, such as charging, tripping and shin hacking. So those clubs and schools which preferred a handling game declined to join the FA and instead formed the Rugby Football Union in 1871. Separate codes for Association and Rugby Football therefore came into being: the RFU “laws” being based on a cleaned-up version the Rugby School rules.

The establishment of the RFU in 1871 was quickly followed by the formation of a number of clubs in Warwickshire: Rugby (1873), Moseley (1873), Coventry (1874), Stratford (circa 1877) and Nuneaton (1879). This was probably influenced by the proximity of Rugby School and the likelihood that some of its former pupils and masters lived in the county and promoted the game here. The early history of Rugby Football in the Leamington area is somewhat vague and has not been researched, but it has been established that a club known as Leamington Rovers was formed in the first tranche of clubs, in 1875. The Rovers played with a skull and crossbones on their shirts and they competed against the top clubs in the Midlands and beyond, including: Moseley, Coventry, Leicester, Stratford, Harlequins, Richmond and Oxford University. By 1879 they had 100 members. The leading figure in the club was H.C. King, who was an all-round sportsman and is said to have been the founder of the Madras Cricket Club.

Within the next decade the game seems to have flourished and references to teams such as Leamington Albion, South Warwickshire Rovers, the Ancient Foresters, the Volunteers, the Normans and the Crusaders. It is not clear whether all of these were separate clubs or whether they were team names within a club or clubs. It is fairly certain that Leamington St Mary’s and Leamington St John’s were separate clubs and there were village clubs in Southam, Stockton, Napton, Long Itchington, and Kineton.



**Leamington Rovers 1882-83** S. Ruddock, Randall, C. Standbridge, R. Bullock, Wayte (jnr), H.H.Bellot – W.J. Pratt (umpire) E. Ivens, Wayte (sen), G. Hill (captain), F. Harding, F. Proctor, F. Glover - W. Gascoyne, J. Hatwood, J. Mitchell

We don't know what happened to the Rovers, but in the RFU Centenary History, there is reference to a Leamington club having been established in 1894. However, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it appears to have gone out of existence. In a reference to rugby football in the Warwick Advertiser in 1897, it was reported that "the game is as dead as a doornail in Warwick and Leamington District and nothing is yet heard of the resumption of operations of the Leamington club", which had been playing on a ground on the Old Warwick Road. The specific reasons for the decline of the game in the area are not known, but it may have been to do with the outbreak of the Boer War and subsequently World War One.

## Formation of the Club

It was not until the 1920's, when life was starting to get back to normality following the War, that interest in rugby football began to grow again in the area. At this time, Coventry and Rugby still boasted first class clubs and junior rugby was thriving in Coventry, where there were several sides. Stratford was the only original club to have kept going in south Warwickshire. A new club was formed in Warwick in 1924 but this struggled to survive and folded in 1928. Kenilworth was also formed in 1924 and because it was recruiting in the Leamington area and it was known that fifteen to twenty players were travelling from Leamington to play for them or for other clubs, the idea formed that it would be viable to re-establish a local club. A public meeting was therefore held at the Town Hall in Leamington on 14 April 1926, under the chairmanship of G.W. Hawkins, the Deputy Mayor. Some seventy people attended and the new Leamington RUFC came into being, with Councillor Hawkins elected as its first President and a Committee was formed under the chairmanship of Fred Barr, who can reasonably be described as the father of the club.

After the meeting, arrangements were put in hand to enable the club to begin playing at the start of the forthcoming season. A tentative fixture list was compiled, a pitch was made available on the Campion Hills and the Bath Hotel was offered as a headquarters. The annual subscription was set at half a guinea, which was to remain unchanged for 20 years. About thirty to forty potential players came forward, including some ex-Northern Union (Rugby League) men and either in ignorance of their background or defiance of the Rugby Football Union's strictures on associating with these outlaws, the club turned a blind eye and they were welcomed into the fold. There is no suggestion that they tried to introduce the sins of professionalism into the club: then as now we could not have afforded it, but their influence was felt in the design of the club jerseys which used the town colours of blue with a single red and gold hoop, which was the pattern favoured by many rugby league clubs. The cost of jerseys was £5.50 for a set of 15 and shorts (or knickers as they were then called) were just over 20p a pair. So, with these arrangements in place, we were ready to go.



Fred Barr, Founder Chairman of the Club

# 1926-27

In this first season, matches were played on a rented pitch at Black Lane on the [Campion Hills](#), not far from the present Eden Court flats. It was rented from Mr Butlin, a local farmer, at £8 for the season. The field had a slight cross-slope, but its most significant shortcoming was an immense and perpetual surface crop of flint stones, which were sharp and painful to fall on. Despite spending endless hours clearing the stones they

continued to come up throughout the season, particularly after a frost, so often before a game began a line of pickers would spread out across the pitch to clear it. The remoteness of the ground from the town made it inconvenient for players and spectators alike as few people and even fewer players had cars in those days. Most visiting teams arrived in town by train or bus, but local buses did not service the ground which was up a long cinder path about a mile from the then outskirts of the town, beyond Leicester Lane. Four taxis had to be hired to take visitors to and from the ground and back to our changing facilities, at the considerable cost of 60p per week. Our headquarters was the [Bath Hotel](#). It no longer exists, but it was at the junction of Bath Street and Smith Street, just across the road from what is now the Jug & Jester pub. The hotel was used for meetings, post-match drinks and for changing. There were two bedrooms and four bathrooms at our disposal, mainly for the opposition. The Leamington players had to change in their own homes, except for the few that lived out of town.

**RUGBY FOOTBALL.**  
**LEAMINGTON 3pts., ST. MARK'S 3pts.**

Leamington did well to share the spoils with Coventry St. Mark's, on Saturday, in the first match of the season. There was quite a good crowd when the game started, but play on the whole was disappointing, resolving itself into one of forward duels. The ball, for the main portion of the game, was kept close, and on the few occasions when the three-quarters got going, the tackling was so keen that players never got far. Good passing movements were conspicuous by their absence, and although a few attempts were made to open out the game, either the passing was not quick enough, or a three-quarter held on too long and was tackled. Then the game closed up again, the respective sides gaining their position mainly by touch-finding. The Leamington forwards got through a tremendous amount of work, although the visitors held a slight advantage in the scrums. Foss was Leamington's best three-quarter, but the wingmen were given few opportunities.

In the first half Leamington had the advantage of the slope, but St. Mark's had a strong wind behind them. The visitors had the major portion of the play in this half, and it appeared as if Leamington were in for a heavy defeat. Nevertheless, they defended well. Kench saved well on one occasion when a try appeared imminent, but it was obvious that Leamington could not withstand the pressure, and the visitors gained a just reward when Hands went over near the corner. The goal-kick failed. Leamington made a desperate effort to get on level terms just prior to the interval, and one of the best movements of this half was seen amongst the three-quarters. Foss was pulled down when only about four yards from the line, and in subsequent play, Barr was called back for a forward pass when he had an almost clear course. The interval arrived with the home team three points in arrears.

The second moiety proved the reverse of the initial half, Leamington having the major portion of the play, whilst St. Mark's had their work cut out to save their line. Constant pressure on the right was rewarded with a try, Russell going over almost at the same spot as Hands had done. The goal-kick failed, although the ball passed narrowly wide of the post. Thus the teams were on level terms, and both fought hard for the lead without success. A well-fought game ended with honours even.

At the start of the first season there were 40 players on the list of members. Jock Clow, L. Dickens, F. Oakley, E. Peers and D. Saint were among those who joined from Warwick; whilst Bernard Barr, Merrick Dyson, Cliff Harrison, B.O. Howard, Basil Jones, E. Millen, Bernard Price, A. Saltmarsh and John Walkey came from Kenilworth. The club also recruited several other useful players including; Arthur Dawkes who played regularly for Blackheath and Warwickshire; J.E. Knott of Moseley and Stratford; Frank Chapman, who was in contention for a Blue at Oxford University; and Bob Ellis who originated from Birmingham. Among the initial opponents were a number of familiar names including: Rugby, Nuneaton, Nuneaton Old Edwardians, Coventrians, Banbury, Kenilworth, Sutton Coldfield, Earlsdon and Camp Hill. The list included a number of Coventry sides, some of which no longer exist and the first game was played against Coventry St Marks, on the 25th September 1926. It ended in a 3-3 draw, with hooker Reg Russell having the distinction of scoring club's first points, with a try. The Courier's report of the game is reproduced opposite and the line up was - D.P. Kench, E. Peers, W.E. Foss, W.E. Hughes (captain) B. Price, D.W. Clow, F.B. Chapman, G. E. Lewis, R.W.J. Russell, E.R. Smith, J.R. Jacox, H.E. Millan, J. Walkley, R.J. Scovell, B.H. Barr.

After only two games our excellent centre Billy Hughes, an ex-Northampton player, had to resign the captaincy as his job took him to Manchester, although he played occasionally afterwards. Doug Kench the vice-captain and recently of Birmingham University succeeded him and proved to be an excellent replacement. Eric Smith stepped in as vice-captain. Unfortunately he was killed in motor cycle accident just after the end of the season. Three defeats followed the opening game, but our first victory arrived on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October with a convincing 26-0 win against Coventrians. Warwick School were the only other side we defeated before Christmas, but after that we held our own and finished the season with 9 wins and 14 losses. Two games were drawn, including a Boxing Day fixture against Kenilworth, on one of the rare occasions we played them before World War Two.



Billy Hughes



Doug Kench

A 2<sup>nd</sup> XV was fielded within a few weeks of the start of the season. It played its first match on 23<sup>rd</sup> October against Coventry St Thomas's which was lost by 3-11. They got off the mark in their next game with a 24-0 win over Hearsall. A. Saltmarsh was elected captain, supported as vice-captain by 18 year old Cliff Harrison, but he was in the 1<sup>st</sup> XV by Christmas. It was hard to scrape together 15 players and the second side often had to play short-handed and fairly often games were cancelled. Quite a few of our players worked in banks and in that and other occupations Saturday morning working was common which made it difficult to get off in time for away games. However, they played 13 matches, of which they won 4 and drew 4. Kenilworth and Warwick both had to cancel their second team games towards the end of the season because they had lost so many players to us, and the Warwick club soon folded.

1926-27	P	W	D	L
1 <sup>st</sup> XV	26	9	3	14
2 <sup>nd</sup> XV	13	4	4	5

At the first AGM a profit of just under £7 was reported. This might have been greater had not R.J. Morrison, our Honorary Secretary proved to be less than honourable. He was dismissed from his office and was charged with fraudulent conversion of club funds amounting to over £12, although the true amount might have been closer to £60. In the end, the club asked for the prosecution to be withdrawn and the Court agreed to this but awarded costs against him and gave him a caution. Bill Foss took over as Honorary Secretary, a post he filled with distinction until the Second World War. Basil Jones became his Assistant Secretary.



**First XV - 1926-27** Freddie Mudd (Trainer) Alan Talbot, Doug Kench, John Walkley, George Lewis, Billie Hughes (captain) Bill Foss, Bernard Barr, Cyril Duddington, Eric Smith, J Matthews (groundsman) – Frank Howard, Bill Heynes, Bernard Price, Reg Russell, Frank Chapman, Jock Clow, Basil Jones

One of our founder members, who played regularly as a forward in the first season was Bill Heynes. He was a local man who became an outstanding automobile engineer and led the team which designed the renowned Jaguar XK engine after the Second World War. His obituary comments that in the late 1920's he submitted to the Institute of Mechanical Engineers, a design for a four cylinder motor cycle engine with twin overhead camshafts, but he was too far ahead of his time. His layout was eventually adopted with great success by the Japanese in the 1970s.



**Leamington RFC – 1926-27** F.J. Barr, J. Matthews, F. Heynes, D.W. Clow, D.G. Harrison, G. Wolston, Eric Smith, A. Talbot, L. Dickens, C.L. Duddington, M. Sephton, B. Howard, B.H. Barr, L. Vallenge, Basil Jones, Bob. Ellis, G.E. Lewis, Doug Kench (capt), Bill Foss, W. Taylor, J.Mitchell, E.J. Ball, C.M. Townend, Cliff Harrison, Reg Russell, E. Davis

## 1927-28

Our second season was mostly one of consolidation. The main event was a change of ground, from the Champion Hills to [Victoria Park](#), where we played as Council tenants until 1948. The Park was in walking distance of the Angel Hotel and the pitch was excellent, although it got very muddy at times. Financially it was a good deal; costing 25p per week to rent and it did away with the need to hire taxis. Being in the town it was also much easier for spectators to get there and we had good crowds, sufficient to justify a match programme (paid for by advertising) and a healthy touchline collection: up from £4 to £11 on the first season.

Doug Kench remained as captain with Bernard Barr as his vice-captain. After a poor start, with no wins in the first six games, the side settled down to win 8 and draw 4 of its 23 matches. The team was much changed from the first year and by spring, the usual line-up was - D.F. Kench (or W. Pratt), B. Price, J.C.B. Jones, W. Taylor, C. Townend, B.C. Harrison, G.A. Lewis, R.J. Russell, R. Sefton, E. Oakley, E. Matthews, R. Millen, B.H. Barr (or A. Bachelor)

At the annual dinner, one speaker commented that we had experienced “the rottenest weather for 30 years” and many games had to be played in poor conditions or cancelled. The December fixtures were almost wiped out. This had a particularly adverse affect on the 2<sup>nd</sup> XV who found it increasingly difficult to raise a side as the season progressed and they took some heavy defeats including a 46-0 hammering from the boys of Leamington College, when we could only field 12 players. Some results may be missing but we won 7 of the 18 games recorded.

1927-28	P	W	D	L
1 <sup>st</sup> XV	23	8	4	11
2 <sup>nd</sup> XV	18	7	0	11

# 1928-29

Bernard Barr moved into the captaincy and Reg Matthews was his vice-captain. Having previously used our own committee, and other club members who claimed to know the laws, to referee our home games, this season we used Warwickshire Society of Referees for the first time. It appears to have had an adverse affect on our results.

After two early away wins in the first three games, against Birmingham City Officials and Saltley College, we failed to win another match all season. Nine games were lost before Christmas, when the weather then came to our rescue with games cancelled for four successive weeks due to frost. On the resumption of activity we managed a draw with Banbury but after a huge 34-0 loss to Aston Old Edwardians when we could only put out 11 players we cancelled the rest of the season. The 2<sup>nd</sup> XV only managed 6 games before they wound up their programme in early December.

The brothers, Pat and Doug Morris arrived but generally this was a lean time for recruiting new players and some of the initial members had retired or moved on and the club was clearly struggling. However, some players who had joined the previous season were beginning to make their mark, including: Bernard Batchelor, a good forward from Bedford; Frank Barnett who joined as a full-back but became one of the best forwards to wear the Leamington jersey; and Lewis Rowland who was a good centre or fly-half. Despite all our difficulties the club kept going and the profit on the season was £13

1928-29	P	W	D	L
1 <sup>st</sup> XV	14	2	1	11
2 <sup>nd</sup> XV	6	2	0	4



Bernard Barr



Bernard Price

# 1929-30

The collapse of the fixtures in early 1929 might well have been the end of the club, but we survived and an influx of new players began to restore our strength and results improved. Bernard Price was captain in 1929-30, with Pat Morris his vice-captain. C. Matthews and R.C. Smith, two good full-backs, joined us along with some useful forwards in Paul Ellingham, S.W. Exworthy, B. Tompkins and Ron Boroughs who was to become our captain and then Honorary Treasurer in later years. Another newcomer was H.J. Hooper, who came from the Principality. He joined us as a forward and was quite ordinary, but he was put on the wing when a player was injured and revealed hidden talents, converting permanently to the position and proving to be brilliant - one of our best ever. He left in 1934 to join Coventry where he held his place in the 1<sup>st</sup> XV for several years and played many times for Warwickshire.

With this influx of new talent we began to turn the corner, particularly after Christmas. Although some of the individual results are missing for this season, overall we won 10 games out of 25. Old Laurentians took on the Boxing Day fixture and beat us comfortably by 21-3. The second team's results are not known.

An incident recalled by Cliff Harrison relates to Basil Jones, who broke his thumb in the game against Old Edwardians on bitterly cold day when he received a kick on the hand. Due to the cold, at first he did not appreciate the severity of the injury which was so bad that the thumb was almost severed from the hand. When non-playing skipper Bernard Price came over from the touchline to see what was wrong he proved to be no help at all as he looked at the injury, fainted and fell flat on his face. The scene ended with our not so brave captain being stretchered off by the St John's Ambulance men with the wounded Basil bringing up the rear unaided.

An enthusiastic non-player Captain Elliott-Hayward was appointed as Chairman of the Committee which met weekly at the Bath Hotel with its main job being to select the sides - the minutes indicate that there was not much other business to do, with no ground or clubhouse to run. Cliff Harrison took over from Bernard Barr as Match Secretary this season and he commented on how some players would cry-off at the last moment without so much as an apology, whilst others would always be prepared to step in without complaint. Whilst some things move on it seems that other things don't. Also, if we think that communication is better now with emails, mobile phones and texting, back then in the late 1920's, after selection on a Monday night, notification cards were posted at about 10 pm and were delivered without fail soon after 7am the next day. Most players responded by posting their reply on their way to work, which was received in the afternoon delivery. This meant that team changes could be posted on Tuesday night and were received on Wednesday.

Developing the fixture list was the responsibility of the Honorary Secretary, Bill Foss, but undertaken with the help of match secretary Cliff Harrison and they did this between them until the War. Fixtures were usually arranged a season in advance in those days and although the aim was always to attract better, or more prestigious opponents, this was judged not only on their playing level and their facilities, but also on their accessibility as thought had to be given to local train and bus services, with coaches and cars still scarce. Having access to a car was sometimes seen as the best way to get selected! The profit on the year doubled to £26, which effectively was our credit balance at the end of the year as we had virtually nothing in the way of assets.

1929-30	P	W	D	L
1 <sup>st</sup> XV	25	10	1	14
2 <sup>nd</sup> XV				