

PRINCIPLES, PRAGMATISM, AND PRESSURE: THE RUGBY UNION CLUBS OF NORTH-EAST ENGLAND 1895-1914

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Abstract

By the early twentieth century north-east England had become one of the heartlands of soccer, and its regional rugby union clubs were losing support. But from 1895 to 1914, following the emergence of a new rugby organisation, 'Northern Union' (later known as 'rugby league') in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Cheshire and Cumbria, rugby union clubs in Durham and Northumberland faced further difficulties. This paper explores the range of challenges they faced: isolated, separated by distance and geography from other rugby union regions, and heavily constrained by the national rugby-union regulations, suffering regular poaching, soccer's popularity, and the constant possibility of sides joining the new code. Crowds and revenue were declining, player numbers growing fewer, and club survival was often constantly under threat. Indeed, some clubs folded. In response clubs debated over principle, pragmatism and practice, especially over whether to adopt a league structure, like that for soccer, in the face of strong opposition from ultra-amateur officials nationally and regionally. Some clung to life financially only via members' subscriptions as attendance dropped, or by raising revenue through sports, all much easier for more middle-class clubs. Some achieved temporary success, perhaps by veiled forms of incentive for players. Most simply struggled to survive.

Keywords

Rugby union clubs, Northern Union, soccer, amateurism, league competition, social class

Sport has always played a key role in northern cultural identity, most especially in its soccer and rugby traditions. In 1895 it was in northern England that English rugby football finally

split into two variations, when the Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire-based Northern Union breakaway organisation split from fully-amateur rugby union, paying for work-time lost by players, and later known as 'rugby league'.¹ Within two years many Cumberland and Westmorland clubs also joined the new movement. Rugby union clubs in southern and many midland English counties were initially largely unaffected. However, Durham and Northumberland's senior local rugby union clubs were now isolated from mainstream rugby union further south. Facing a major dilemma about how to proceed, they experienced serious challenges to their survival. This paper provides a more detailed case study of the problems and pressures that these sides faced over the next decades, a critical period for their existence, and their successes and failures in attempting to deal with them. In so doing it adds richness and texture to general overviews of a key phase of northern England's rugby history and development.²

The rugby background in North-East England 1870-1895.

In the 1870s, rugby union was still more popular and better organised than soccer in the region. Club sides spread across the north-east. In October 1876 the Durham County Rugby Football Union (henceforth RFU) was formed, initially with six of the leading sides, including Darlington, Stockton and Sunderland. Northumberland County RFU's first 1880 clubs included Northern, Gosforth and Percy Park. Initially all games were friendlies, played just for the enjoyment of participants, often more middle-class members, and sides were exclusively amateur. As the county unions expanded, new clubs appeared such as Hartlepool Rovers (1879) and West Hartlepool (1881), making the two Hartlepoons *the* key regional rugby centre. County Challenge Cup competitions were introduced in both

¹ Mike Huggins, *The Victorians and Sport* (London, 2004), pp. 51-84 explains the broader amateur debates of the time.

² Kenneth Sheard and Eric Dunning, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players : A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (London, 1979); Tony Collins, *Rugby's Great Split: Class, Culture and the Origins of Rugby League Football* (Abingdon, 2006); Tony Collins, *How Football Began: A Global History of How the World's Football Codes Were Born* (Abingdon, 2018); Tony Collins, *Rugby League: A People's History* (Leeds, 2020); Rev. F. Marshall and L. R. Tosswill, eds, *The Rugby Union Game* (London, 1925). Tony Collins, *A Social History of English Rugby Union* (Abingdon, 2009), p. 44, briefly looks at struggles of N.E. rugby clubs 1896-1908 but with little detail.

counties in the 1880-1 season.³ This increased spectator numbers. Rugby and soccer initially competed for crowds and public interest. But from the mid-1880s onwards north-east soccer spread rapidly, given further stimulus by the English Football Association's recognition of professionalism, and soon outstripped rugby's regional support.⁴ Even so, the two great rugby rivals Hartlepool Rovers and West Hartlepool, could attract an estimated 10,000 spectators for their first-round County Cup match in 1892.

Further south, in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire, as rugby became more popular, more working-class players joined clubs. Urban spectators increasingly demanded competition, excitement and partisan forms of team success. Better rugby clubs travelled further to meet other top teams. While the majority of middle-class players were happy to meet much of their own expenses, working-class players playing away games were much less able to afford to break time from Saturday work, buy railway tickets or dine after the match. Wealthier clubs soon sought 'clever' players from elsewhere who had adopted more effective competitive playing methods, providing incentives, perhaps jobs, money, or even legs of mutton.⁵

In 1886 the English RFU introduced legislation to halt the growing professionalisation and monetization of the game in northern England, in part as a way of controlling who could play, and avoiding potential loss of control. There was concern that more working-class clubs might take the game over from those clubs and players, mainly in the south, but sometimes too in the north, who were in terms of occupation, school and background more middle-class, drawn from private school and college, business and university backgrounds. Increased pressure by many northern clubs, often reluctantly, to try to keep amateurism but introduce legislation allowing payment for 'broken time' in the early 1890s was initially defeated. The English RFU was strongly supported by those ultra-amateurs who stressed that rugby should be played for the love of the game, the pleasure of those playing it, for moral reasons, without undue training and specialization, and by men who could well afford to play it, and not to meet the commercial instincts of clubs, pecuniary results, and the

³ *Newcastle Courant*, 5 Nov. 1880.

⁴ For details see M. Huggins, 'The Spread of Association Football in North East England; the Pattern of Diffusion', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 6, (1989), pp. 299-318.

⁵ Tony Collins, "'Noa Mutton, Noa Laaking". The Origins of Payment for Play in Rugby Football 1877-86', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 12, 1 (1995), pp. 33-50.

gratification of spectators. Rugby's national leadership was largely older, looking back to the past, unprepared to compromise. It rebuffed all suggestion of change. One uncompromising proponent of pure amateurism, the Rev. Frank Marshall, later conceded in 1897 that the national organisation had 'never been celebrated for business methods', but rather for 'indecision ... a reluctance to allow publicity', and the keeping of 'old stagers', eight past presidents, on the twenty-eight-man committee, until they retired. But this, he claimed, had led to 'continuity of policy and steadiness of purpose'.⁶

Lack of compromise led to the 'great split', the schism, when in August 1895 twenty northern rugby clubs announced their intention to form a separate Northern RFU to allow 'broken-time' payments. By the next season fifty-nine clubs were members.⁷ In Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire, rugby union club membership slumped as 'Northern Union' support grew, reducing Lancashire to 13 union clubs in 1897. Because the English RFU leadership wanted to maintain rugby as a sport for the elite, its varied feelings of paranoia, zealotry, and principled concern led to the passing what has been called a 'scorched earth policy', a series of anti-professional rules, seeking to ban permanently any player who had contact with the Northern Union.⁸

This powerful new Northern Union now separated the far-northern counties' rugby clubs from the amateur sides further south. In Cumberland rugby clubs were initially loyal to rugby union, albeit quickly losing players.⁹ They had looked to Lancashire for their best fixtures, but their more working-class teams faced difficulties in obtaining matches with the surviving, largely elite, Lancashire clubs, while soccer was taking away crowds too. Barrow, founded in 1875, had strong links with the seceding Lancashire sides, and in April 1897 it voted unanimously to join them. In Westmorland the famous Kendal Hornets and Kendal sides were quickly decimated, and by the season's end seventeen Cumbrian clubs had

⁶ Rev. F. Marshall, 'The Rugby Union Game', *South Wales Daily News*, 4 September 1897.

⁷ K.G. Sheard, "'Breakers Ahead'". Professionalisation and Rugby Union Football: Lessons from Rugby League', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 14, 1 (1997), pp. 116-137

⁸ Collins, *A Social History of English Rugby Union*, p. 38.

⁹ *Carlisle Patriot*, 6 Sep. 1895; *Carlisle Journal*, 1 Jan. 1897.

joined the Northern Union. By the 1898/9 season there were few rugby union teams left, and none at all in West Cumberland, a former union stronghold.¹⁰

This left Northumberland and Durham clubs in a very difficult position. Northern Union now dominated Cumbria, Lancashire and Yorkshire. Rugby was still strong in Scotland and the borders, but Edinburgh was about 115 miles away, and most border clubs were expensive and time-consuming to access by rail. The border clubs, composed largely of working men, were reportedly looked down on by the Scottish RFU through attitudes of 'caste and class distinction', 'public school connection', and 'Scottish snobbery', so some north-east clubs might have likewise felt unwelcome.¹¹

Just two years after the split a London *Standard* reporter took the view that although both Cumberland and Northumberland were still represented on the national RFU Committee

it is felt by many supporters of the Union that the survival of the rugby clubs in those counties will not outlast the success of the Northern Union in its new departure, isolated as they are and divided in opinion as to which union offers them the more advantages.¹²

The north-eastern senior clubs were indeed divided, both in opinion, as we shall see, and in the social backgrounds of players and officials. The relatively few Northumberland teams were all situated close to the Tyne. A highly influential figure in keeping them with rugby union was William Cail (1849-1925), an all-round sportsman, rugby player, coach and referee. Cail was heavily involved in business and local politics. He had helped establish the middle-class Northern rugby club in Newcastle. He played a leading role in Northumberland RFU in the 1880s, and became Northern's president.¹³ He was also a key national figure in the English RFU: its national president from 1892 to 1894, its treasurer from 1894 onwards,

¹⁰ J. Wilson (ed.), *Victoria County History of Cumberland Vol. 2.* (1905), pp. 493-4; Collins, *A Social History of English Rugby Union*, pp. 24-5, 45; Collins, *Rugby's Great Split*, p. 127; Trevor Delaney, *The Roots of Rugby League* (Keighley, 1984), pp. 82-3.

¹¹ 'Football on the Borders: Will Rugby Survive?' *Edinburgh Evening News*, 5 May 1906.

¹² *The Standard*, 2 Sep. 1898.

¹³ See William Cail, 'County Football: Recollections of Northumberland Football', in Francis Marshall, *Football: The Rugby Union Game* (London, 1892), pp. 447-463.

and closely involved in drafting anti-professional laws.¹⁴ Later he played a key role in the purchase of Twickenham for the English RFU.

Always treated with respect, he made regular appearances at dinners and annual general meetings of north-eastern clubs. His speeches emphasised his strong 'amateur' principles: playing for the love of the game, winning in fair and legitimate and sportsmanlike manner, rugby for sporting pleasure and not as a business with inducements for players.¹⁵ His obituary said 'as a pillar of amateurism in the far North his position...was not always either easy or enviable. But nothing could shake his determination or his fidelity to the cause'.¹⁶ This however, overstated his principled position, since he was to prove more pragmatic at times, as we shall see.

The background of players in the various north-eastern clubs has proved difficult to establish through lack of surviving data. Press team lists lack detail, often only giving surnames, but very occasionally further material has allowed nominal record linkage. Northumberland-based Rockliffe, in Whitley Bay, appeared resolutely middle-class. Founded in 1887, the club had already provided England with a half back in the 1890s. A side selected to play against North Durham in November 1907, for example, included medical student and vicar's son Ernest Averell, prosperous coal merchant James Millons, coal exporter Axel Brunstrom, marine engineer Martin Sheedy and Hugh Viall, son of a sugar agent.¹⁷

Durham clubs were more heterogeneous. Hartlepool Rovers were a high-status, very dominant club, only missing one County Cup final appearance between 1887-8 and 1897-8. Its leadership, including Arthur Hill the Durham RFU president and leading England players such as Fred Alderson and Bob Oakes, were all supportive of a strongly amateur approach. They were one of the most respected clubs in the North of England, strong yet socially mixed. By the early 20th century, the rugby team reflected the rather paternalistic Anglo/Irish community which had developed in Hartlepool during the mid to late Victorian period.¹⁸ A

¹⁴ Paul Blackledge, 'Rationalist Capitalist Concerns: William Cail and the Great Rugby Split of 1895', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 18, 2 (2001), pp. 35-53.

¹⁵ *Shields Daily Gazette* (hereafter SDG), 24 April 1897.

¹⁶ *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 5 Dec. 1925.

¹⁷ *Newcastle Daily Gazette*, 1 Nov. 1907; *The Genealogist Search Engine; Births Deaths and Marriages and Census* (hereinafter Gen/BDM or Gen/Cen).

¹⁸ Keith Gregson, 'Poor Law and Organised Charity: The Relief of Exceptional Distress in North-east England, 1870 -1910' in M. E. Rose ed. *The Poor and the City: The English Poor Law in its Urban Context 1834 – 1914*, (Leicester, 1985), pp. 93 -131.

photograph of the side that won the Durham County Cup in 1907 includes Daniel Edmundson Ellwood, timber merchant clerk and son of a grocer, James Philip Sivewright, marine engineer and son of a ship builder, ship plater William Edwin Heal and brass finisher John James Broadhead.¹⁹ Francis/Frank/Patsy Boylen was a classic example of the club's working-class players. At thirteen he was in the local workhouse but he later rose to play for Durham County and England. In both the 1901 and 1911 censuses he was described as a shipyard worker, although by 1911 he had moved to Hull and the Northern Union.²⁰ The Carter family is also indicative of this social mix. The father was a tax collector while one rugby son (George Edward) became a teacher and another (Ernest Crowe) a plumber.²¹

The elite Sunderland club remained resolutely anti-professional and generally unwilling to change codes. A recent detailed study of the club show that of regular players identified during the 1907/8 season, all were middle/upper-middle class through their or their father's occupation. Erik Mail, for example was the son of a dry dock owner, C. Raymond Common was a marine engineer and iron merchant, Charles Pickersgill was from the internationally- known Pickersgill ship building dynasty and the Legat brothers (Charles and Andrew) were the sons of a surgeon/medical practitioner. Many of them had picked up the sport at schools such as Durham or Dean Close in Cheltenham. The 1913-4 team background was similar, with almost all players educated privately.²²

Other clubs in the region varied in their make-up. Alongside Sunderland or Rovers there were a small number of strongly working-class sides. One example is Durham County's Hamsteels, based round the mining village of Quebec. The *Durham County Advertiser* for 11 September 1908 provides one of the rare occasions on which a Hamsteel's side featured in the press complete with surname and initials. In contrast to the middle- class sides, most players had a single forename initial, making them difficult to identify. Regular players included F. G. Ainsley, a coal miner from the nearby village of Esh, T. R. Fordham a coal-miner wayman, J. Rutter and E. Maxwell, also miners, from Quebec, while George Dodds and his

¹⁹ Picture from 1907, <http://rugbyfootballhistory.com/timeline1900s.htm>

²⁰ C.B. Cowell and E. Watts Moses, *Durham County Rugby Union 1876-1936* (Newcastle, 1936), has much on him and other Hartlepool Rovers players.

²¹ Gen/Cen and Gen/BDM.

²² Keith Gregson, *Can You do Nothing to Mend my Broken Heart? The Ashbrooke Boys – A Sports Club at War* (Self-published 2018).

brother, who also played, were butchers. Most of the other players have names which appear as miners in the census.²³

Facing Growing Challenges.

From 1896 onwards, north-eastern clubs faced a series of challenges and dilemmas. They might wish to maintain the dominant principles laid down by the national RFU, but to survive they also needed to be pragmatic. In the north-east soccer was rapidly growing in popularity, taking potential players, club members and paying crowds away. Many Lancashire, Yorkshire and Cumberland rugby clubs had turned to Northern Union, abandoning amateur principles, paying 'broken time' and adopting league structures. Such clubs tempted good north-east players away, and meant loss of some fixtures. There was real worry too that Northern Union would take hold in the region. Rugby Union clubs traditionally only played friendly games, except for county cups later in the season, and friendly games, for many north-eastern clubs, did not attract crowds. This could mean gradual drops in membership and gate money as crowds moved to soccer.

The challenge of soccer

Soccer had far more appeal in the north-east than rugby. Up to the mid-1880s, rugby had held its own. But soccer was often perceived as easier to play, with simpler laws, needing fewer players to make a team, and playing on any sort of ground, including the harder grounds that rugby avoided. It was more spectator-friendly, with less stopping and starting. The region lacked the middle-class numbers to sustain the respectably amateur, gentlemanly game of rugby more broadly. The north-east's major industries were heavy industries, attracting a predominantly working-class population to work in coal and ironstone mining, iron and steel, shipbuilding, or railway work, jobs often demanding skill, toughness, physicality and stamina. In soccer, from 1885, good players could be rewarded for playing, while cup competitions fostered local rivalries and stronger urban identities, splitting larger towns in two: Middlesbrough and Ironopolis, Sunderland and Sunderland

²³ *Durham County Advertiser* (hereafter *DCA*), 11 Oct. 1907, 29 Nov. 1907, 21 Feb. 1908 and *Newcastle Daily Gazette*, 23 Sep. 1908. The full side is given in *DCA*, 11 Sep. 1908 and a photograph of the side with most of those referred to in the text can be viewed at Durham County Record Office, D/MRP 61/9.

Albion, Newcastle East End and Newcastle West End, Darlington and St Augustine. Hartlepool Rovers and West Hartlepool rugby clubs were the only exception. Rugby was opposed to leagues, but from 1890 onwards soccer leagues spread widely and rapidly across the north-east, strengthening the sport's popularity as clubs found a league level where they could achieve success and local support.

By the 1890s soccer had become engineered into north-eastern culture, and the area had become what has been described as a 'hotbed of soccer', with crowds dwarfing those of rugby.²⁴ The extremely popular professional soccer clubs in Sunderland, Newcastle and Middlesbrough were all in the Football League by 1899. Sunderland A.F.C. had won the league title three times and stood alongside Aston Villa as a dominant force in English football. Newcastle United won Division One titles in 1904-5, 1907-8, and 1908-9.

Soccer teams from Teesside and South Durham dominated the English FA Amateur Cup, winning it eleven times in the seasons from 1894-5 to 1913-14. Stockton appeared in the final seven times, Bishop Auckland six, South Bank twice, Middlesbrough twice, Eston United twice, and Crook Town and West Hartlepool each once. By 1900 the Northumberland coalfield had semi-permanent teams in nearly all coalfield villages.²⁵

The Tees area was quickly lost to senior rugby. Middlesbrough Rovers struggled with poor crowds. Faced with two popular local soccer clubs, the club folded c. 1897, with only a brief abortive flourish in 1912-3.²⁶ By contrast Middlesbrough's Football League side had gate receipts of £8,347 by the season 1900-1901. Darlington Rugby Club struggled before collapsing in 1898, reportedly 'eclipsed by the association', in debt, with poor prospects and an 'absence of sufficient interest by players'.²⁷ At regional rugby clubs' annual general meetings, concern over the progress of soccer and the deteriorating support for rugby featured regularly. Sunderland Rugby Club minutes contain suggestions that the club should move to soccer, but a majority of its administrators were opposed. At West Hartlepool, as the local amateur association football side became more popular, West Hartlepool rugby officials bemoaned declining local interest in the rugby code, and a corresponding increase

²⁴ Arthur Appleton, *Hotbed of Soccer: The Story of Football in the North-East* (London, 1961).

²⁵ Alan Metcalfe, *Leisure and Recreation in A Victorian Mining Community: The Social Economy of Leisure in North-East England 1820-1914* (Abingdon, 2006) p. 140.

²⁶ Catherine Budd, *Sport in Urban England Middlesbrough 1870-1914* (London, 2017), pp. 86-88.

²⁷ *Yorkshire Evening Press*, 31 Aug. 1898.

in interest in the dribbling game. 'For the first time in the history of West Hartlepool football. Rugbeans are now faced with new conditions in the shape of a powerful rival for local patronage', claimed one.²⁸ By 1908, one former Hartlepool and England forward, Harry Havelock, already believed that amateur rugby was dying and receiving scant support at matches, while 'the rival game, association' was 'now dominant', and 'coming on in leaps and bounds'.²⁹

The pressure from Northern Union rugby

Initially through 1895 and early 1896 the Northern Union had 'not interfered to any important effect in Durham'.³⁰ But relatively quickly the agents of the Northern Union began searching the region's clubs for capable players, making substantial offers to the best. The most vulnerable club was Tudhoe, with its many skilful, tough, working-class players. In 1897 it lost players to Hull and Salford. A Percy Park player refused £2 a week at his work, a further £2 a week in the football season, and a bonus of £30 to go to Lancashire.³¹ The same year a former West Hartlepool international was active as an agent in Hartlepool, approaching county players, and there were rumours, quickly denied, that Rockcliffe was considering moving to Northern Union.³² From early 1898 onwards, as the Northern Union adopted full professionalism, there were regular further poaching attempts, most commonly to leading Tudhoe, West Hartlepool and Hartlepool Old Boys players. More players went south in 1899, when the reported generous signing on fees and weekly payments quoted were well in advance of official Northern Union rules. In May 1899 there were rumours that West Hartlepool might join the Northern Union, though its chairman said he was thoroughly opposed to doing so.³³

Poaching continued in 1900, with press headlines such as 'Local Players and the Northern Union' signalling approaches and defections.³⁴ Early that year there were rumours that that a first Durham club, South Shields, was considering applying to join the Northern

²⁸ *Hartlepool Daily Mail* (hereafter *HDM*), 8 Aug. 1905.

²⁹ *Hull Daily Mail*, 11 Sep. 1908.

³⁰ *Northern Echo* (hereafter *NE*), 27 Aug. 1896.

³¹ *NE*, 29 Oct. 1897.

³² *HDM*, 22 Oct. 1897; 19 Feb. 1897; 28 Jan. 1898.

³³ *HDM*, 15 April 1898; 20 May 1898.

³⁴ *HDM*, 14 Jan. 1901.

Union.³⁵ After winning the Durham Senior Cup, South Shields decided to join and participate in its Yorkshire 2nd Division competition. This was a coup for the Northern Union, keen to expand into the north-east. The secretary of Durham County RFU, at its annual general meeting, bitterly blamed the national RFU for going on 'in the same antiquated and fossilised lines' but hopefully claimed that 'although the South Shields Club are too bolstered up financially by the Northern Union, yet their experience after a season or two will not be likely to induce other clubs to go over'.³⁶ In November 1901, a Northumberland club, Wallsend, also joined the Northern Union, although for very different reasons. They were in debt, with poor attendances, had been refused financial assistance from the Northumberland RFU, and offered support from South Shields.³⁷ In February 1902 a newly-formed Northumberland and Durham Northern Union side played Lancashire at South Shields with players from Shields, Wallsend and a junior club, St Pauls. It attracted a 'considerable crowd' estimated at 1,200, along with many leading officials of the Northern Union, keen to spread their game.³⁸ However the Northern Union move was a false dawn. Crowds proved poor. By November 1903 South Shields funds were in a precarious state. They were paying players 2/6 for home games and 7/6 for away games, gate money was only about £12 a match and away games into Yorkshire cost about £15 in expenses.³⁹ At the end of the 1903-4 season Shields finished at the bottom of Division 2 and were voted out. No Yorkshire club wanted the expense of travelling so far north, due to the finance involved. The club folded, no further club joined, and the Northern Union inroads thereafter were confined to poaching of players, although as the game became faster and more interesting, and more clubs paid their way, they turned more to Wales and colonial recruits.

Attendances, recruitment and financial troubles

Faced with strong soccer competition and poaching of players by the Northern Union, attendances and player recruitment both suffered. Some sides struggled financially, according to the balance sheets occasionally reported in the press at annual meetings,

³⁵ *HDM*, 20 Apr. 1900.

³⁶ *Sunderland Daily Echo* (hereafter *SDE*), 28 Aug. 1901.

³⁷ *SDE*, 5 Nov. 1901, *HDM*, 8 Nov. 1901.

³⁸ *SDG*, 6 Feb. 1902.

³⁹ *SDG*, 10 Nov. 1903.

though these are not necessarily reliable. Such figures as are available indicate a slow but fairly steady falling off in numbers of clubs, attendance at matches and interest in the game across the period up to circa 1909 and only a limited and very inconsistent recovery thereafter. As early as the Durham RFU's annual meeting in 1903, it was claimed that most of its clubs were 'only kept moving by the hard and persevering work of those connected with them', and that the organisation seemed to be 'heading towards bankruptcy'.⁴⁰

Those clubs with more elite subscription membership, such as Northern or Sunderland, were often relatively unsuccessful in playing terms, but their players, espousing a more privileged rugby amateurism, were more able to cover travel and entertainment costs. Financial figures provided in reports often made it difficult to separate out gate money and the members' subscriptions which showed more commitment and allowed attendance through the season. Crowd estimates were often very unspecific. At Sunderland, well supported by annual members, other spectators were often much fewer when fixtures clashed with Sunderland AFC's soccer games. At one September 1907 game only sixteen spectators paid.⁴¹ The following year a change of code to soccer was briefly considered. The team paid their own travelling expenses, and there had recently been an adverse balance year on year.⁴²

Cail's club, Northern, had annual gate receipts of only £34 in 1903 and was kept going by its members' subscriptions of £55. Rockcliffe, drawing on the seaside holiday, fishing and commuter suburbs of Cullercoats and Whitley Bay, and founded circa 1887, managed a profit of £53 in the 1897-8 season, and generally either balanced its books or had a small deficit, although this reached £91 in 1905-6 thanks to being without a ground part of the season.⁴³

Hartlepool Rovers, the leading County Durham side in the 1890s, had attracted a strong side to compete with its West Hartlepool rival, on a ground which had good facilities. Following the 1895 split, the 1897-8 gate receipts, boys gate receipts, grandstand and uncovered stand receipts reached £616. But in the following season the gates and stand

⁴⁰ *HDM*, 27 Jun. 1903.

⁴¹ *SDG*, 29 Sep. 1907.

⁴² Keith Gregson, *One Among Many: The Story of Sunderland Rugby Football Club RFC (1873) in its Historical Context* (London, 2011), pp. 62, 161-2.

⁴³ *HDM*, 1 May 1908; *Newcastle Journal*, 14 June 1898. *Shields Daily News*, 11 Jun. 1901; *HDM*, 24 May 1906.

receipts were only £484. By 1903-4 these were only £384, although this in part was blamed on depression of trade. Even in the very successful 1904-5 season they only reached £441, funds were in deficit, and at the A.G.M. the decline of rugby and great strides of soccer in Hartlepool were becoming a concern. By 1906 players were being reminded that with less income 'the days of big gates, big dinners, and big expenditure are gone, and that those who wish to play football must be prepared to make some sacrifice for it'.⁴⁴ Even so, for some matches the club could still attract crowds. A match against Sunderland, during a heavy frost when other games were cancelled, attracted an estimated 3,000 spectators in 1908, and a match against Hull had about 1,000 spectators in 1909.⁴⁵

Smaller clubs with more working-class players often struggled more. Tyne Dock Rugby Club disbanded in 1899.⁴⁶ In 1903 Hamsteels Rugby Club, the senior side centred round Hamsteels Colliery, had an annual income of only £65. Hamsteels always lacked support, and though it continued to raise sides it finally disbanded at the end of the 1913-4 season.⁴⁷ Westoe played some games 'before a handful of spectators' by 1909.⁴⁸ Tudhoe had been a formidable, largely working-class Durham side, first formed circa 1884 and centred round the ironworks and collieries near the village. It was a regular winner of the Durham County Cup in the 1890s. But in 1903 West Hartlepool businessman Christopher Furness bought the Weardale Steel, Coal and Coke Company which owned the ironworks, and opened a new Iron Works at Cargo Fleet as part of the South Durham Iron & Steel Co.'s plans. The Tudhoe ironworks closed. That and the loss of many of its best players to Northern Union meant they struggled to raise a team and had a financially disastrous season in 1903-4. At the A.G.M. the committee recommended the winding up of the club while still solvent as there appeared no possibility of the funds being increased by gates or subscriptions. Spennymoor AFC soccer club took over its ground, a demonstration of the power of soccer in mid-Durham.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *HDM*, 13 Jun. 1899; 30 Aug. 1904; 4 Aug. 1905; 3 Aug. 1906.

⁴⁵ *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* (hereafter *NEC*), 8 Jan. 1908; *Yorkshire Post*, 20 Sep. 1909.

⁴⁶ *NEC*, 26 May 1899.

⁴⁷ *NEC*, 13 Aug. 1903; *DCA*, 14 Aug. 1903.

⁴⁸ *Shields Daily News*, 2 Jan. 1909.

⁴⁹ *Athletic News* (hereafter *AN*), 31 Aug. 1903; *SDG*, 18 Sep. 1903; *Sunderland Echo*, 30 Jun. 1904; *DCA*, 1 Jul. 1904; *AN*, 4 Jul. 1904; *HDM*, 15 Jul. 1914.

Blaydon Wanderers R.F.U. collapsed in April 1906 due to lack of support and scarcity of players. In October 1906 Hartlepool Old Boys, founded circa 1890, and associated with the Hartlepool Old Boys Institute, also collapsed, after several years of financial 'struggle against overpowering odds', unable to maintain their ground, and losing players to other clubs which were 'able to provide better attractions.'⁵⁰

West Hartlepool had been a large, very successful and more commercially-driven Durham side than Rovers, respected beyond the region, with an ambitious programme, and even in 1902 it was attracting large crowds. Its middle-class committee was keen to keep working-class spectators in West Hartlepool on Saturdays, rather than have them travel to leading soccer games, and recruited teams who could make the game interesting.⁵¹ But financial troubles increased and by 1903 it was running a financial deficit of c. £200. Thereafter its struggles worsened. In 1905 it had gate receipts of £437 and was finding 'declining interest in the game'. The team was no longer as powerful, even though opposition was comparatively still weaker, and that year it experienced local bad trade, worse weather and an awkward fixture list. In 1905-6 it had a poor season, losing players and with gate receipts of only £409. It had a deficit, was having to exercise more economy, and felt that the public of West Hartlepool did not support the club to the extent that the committee would like. The 1906-7 season was marred by very bad weather again which reduced fixtures and attendances, despite games against the Springboks, Stade Francais and Devon. It had gate receipts of only £309, and there was a general concern about lack of support from the townspeople and tradesmen. The 1907-8 season was even worse, despite cutting back on expenses, with gates dwindling further, a serious deficit, and little interest in the games, as soccer attracted increased interest.⁵² Locally there was much economic distress, and by May 1908 the club had decided that

in view of the declining interest in Rugby football, and consequent lack of support accorded the club during the past few seasons, the club be disbanded, and that steps be taken to form a club under Association rules.

⁵⁰ AN, 2 Apr. 1906; HDM, 13 Oct. 1906.

⁵¹ It was in part a form of social control, just as was Northern Union. See K.G. Sheard, "'Breakers Ahead"; Professionalization and Rugby Union Football: Lessons from Rugby League', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 14, 1 (1997), pp. 116-137.

⁵² HDM, 27 Jun. 1903; 8 Jul. 1905; 24 Jul. 1906; 24 Jul. 1907; AN, 4 May 1908.

The club moved over to soccer, helping form Hartlepool United, which took over their Victoria ground and its debts, and as a professional side joined the North Eastern League.⁵³ The amateur remnants joined local junior side Greatham. West Hartlepool reformed in 1911, attracting a crowd of about a thousand to a match against leading side Winlaton Vulcans.

Winlaton Vulcans had been founded as a junior side in 1896, and soon joined senior ranks. They were a hard-playing side from a small but flourishing village mining community, and attracted a local following. Before the start of the 1907-8 season they erected a large stand and improved the ground. According to the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* the team occupied 'an enviable position in respect of the number and enthusiasm of its supporters. about 300 of whom made the journey from Blaydon on Saturday to witness the match with West Hartlepool'.⁵⁴ They attracted players from other clubs, but despite their successes they were still sometimes unable to raise a team and had to cancel away matches. Their failure to raise an away team to visit Percy Park was seen by the *Athletic News* as 'an eloquent commentary on the position of the game now and its effect on the clubs which are endeavouring to keep the code to the fore.'⁵⁵

After 1910 few Durham clubs were as strong overall as they had been. Many more experienced players had been lost to the Northern Union, and soccer attracted more youngsters. Surviving Northumberland clubs were older, well established ones, which had weathered the difficulties of the period, although in 1912 they were joined by Monkseaton, a team from another residential resort near Whitley Bay. By 1914 A.E.T. Watson, writing in the *Badminton Magazine of Sports and Pastimes*, could claim that 'there is now no rugby football worthy of the name in Northumberland', though it 'was at one time a great rugby centre'.⁵⁶ In 1912 and 1913 there was more optimism about the future amongst most Durham clubs, but standards remained fairly low. Hartlepool Rovers dominated still, with income in 1911-12 of £607. Revived West Hartlepool had receipts of £101, of which gate receipts were £68.⁵⁷

⁵³ *HDM*, 28 Apr. 1908

⁵⁴ *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 14 Oct. 1907.

⁵⁵ *AN*, 14 Feb. 1910.

⁵⁶ A. E. T. Watson, *Badminton Magazine of Sports and Pastimes*, Vol. 43, (1915), p.387.

⁵⁷ *Nottingham Evening Post*, 12 Jul. 1912; *HDM*, 16 Jul. 1912.

Responses

Generating income beyond friendly fixtures.

As gate money dropped nearly all the clubs cut back hard on spending, sometimes asking players to pay their own travelling expenses. They introduced activities such as bazaars, public subscriptions or whist drives. Some ran athletic sports, though these could be at the mercy of the weather and show little profit.⁵⁸ At Sunderland, for example, the overall Ashbrooke club ran a week-long bazaar in 1895, opened by Lord Londonderry, which reportedly raised £2,587. Its annual Whit Sports, run up to 1904 and again from 1910 onwards, were held not merely for fun or 'healthy exercise'. They were another crucial element in funding the running of the organisation. If the sports were paraded as amateur, money was still crucial, and all evidence points to the event being a significant part of club funding.⁵⁹

Another source of funding was cup matches. Nationally rugby union had only friendly matches, with a principled opposition to leagues, but rugby union counties had brought some structure to local rivalry by organising knock-out competitions, to create county champions, and encourage local interest. However even this had brought increasing concerns about amateurism.⁶⁰ Both Durham and Northumberland introduced Challenge Cups for in the 1881-2 season, and used them after the split to encourage interest. But over time both found interest in the Cups waning. To take Northumberland as an example, in the first years after the split crowds were still quite substantial. Over 7,000 watched the Rockcliffe v Percy Park final in 1897.⁶¹ But by 1900 although there was a 'good gate' the attendance was affected by Newcastle United's soccer attractions. The *Shields Daily News* journalist pointed out that

⁵⁸ *HDM*, 28 Apr. 1908.

⁵⁹ Keith Gregson and Mike Huggins, 'Ashbrooke Whit Sports, Sunderland and Its Records: A Case Study of Amateurism in Late Victorian and Edwardian Athletic and Cycling Competition', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 34, 9 (2014), pp. 994-2011

⁶⁰ Collins, *English Rugby Unionism*, pp. 25-7.

⁶¹ *DCA*, 9 Apr. 1897.

Newcastle is now a “Socker” centre, and the attraction at James’s Park, where Newcastle United met Notts Forest, proved to too great for many who would have otherwise patronised the Jesmond ground.⁶²

Northumberland rugby was struggling. only Rockcliffe, Percy Park and Northern entered in 1901-2. Between 1895 and 1914 the competition was dominated by Rockcliffe and Percy Park, although Northern and Tynedale (founded 1876, based at Corbridge) also each won three times. Very few reports gave any indication of attendance. Tynedale’s win in 1911 merely attracted ‘a large gate’, and the Percy Park v Old Novocastrians match in 1913 a ‘fairly large gate’.⁶³

In Durham its county cup competition was dominated by Hartlepool Rovers, who won it nine times in the period from 1896 to 1914, although Tudhoe, West Hartlepool and Durham City were often finalists. But at the county’s annual general meeting in 1910 it was noted that while there were now more junior clubs in the north of the county, in the period between 1900 and 1907 the average gate for the County Cup final had exceeded £140, but in the next three seasons the average had only been £77, and there had been a severe falling off in public support.⁶⁴

County matches on their grounds also bought some extra funding to those clubs involved. For the region’s players, representing the county remained an attraction, and getting to the final of the RFU County Championship a major achievement, not least because of the celebrations and dinners afterwards. Following the 1895 split the former dominance of Yorkshire and Lancashire in the Rugby Union County championship ceased, and the English RFU restructured the County Championship by having separate competitions in the North and South regions, with the winners of these regional competitions playing a final for the County Championship. The ‘northern’ counties included Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland, Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire, and with the initial loss of clubs to Northern Union in Lancashire and Yorkshire, the two northern-eastern counties had national success for some years. Northumberland reached the national final in 1898 and 1899, with 6,000 watching

⁶² *Shields Daily News*, 7 Apr. 1900.

⁶³ *Yorkshire Post*, 27 Mar. 1911; *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 31 Mar. 1913.

⁶⁴ *Newcastle Journal*, 13 Jul. 1910.

them defeated by Devon at Jesmond in 1899. Durham then reached the championship final each year from 1900 to 1909, although never again before 1914.

Hints of secret payments and veiled professionalism.

In the first decade of the twentieth century there were regular allegations of payments, gifts and inducements of jobs to players in those clubs in the rugby union world such as the midlands and the west country which had large working-class followings. As early as 1899 *The Sporting Chronicle* suggested that there was 'no doubt that professionalism in a veiled form exists amongst English amateur clubs.'⁶⁵ One would have expected these to surface in the north-east, especially in those Co. Durham clubs with more working-class support, and with working-class players needing time off work, despite the opportunities for them to join Northern Union teams or become involved in semi-professional soccer sides. However local journalists and reports of club meetings and player interviews were scrupulous in making no suggestion of it, either because it did not exist, or because to attract any investigation of leading clubs might mean the end of rugby in the region. Frank Boylen, an international forward, for example, on signing for Hull from Hartlepool Rovers, said that he believed rugby in co Durham was 'amateur in every respect' and that he did not know a player who had received any remuneration.

The occasional allegations came from outside the region. The *Hull Daily Mail* suggested in 1903 that 'almost every enthusiast in Durham knows on what lines the leading clubs are conducted. The whole district is a hotbed of professionalism', and in 1906 suggested that 'there would be no difficulty in showing that professionalism is rampant in the North, the Midlands, South Wales, and the South-West.'⁶⁶ Treasurers' accounts at annual general meetings usually lacked detail, perhaps deliberately, although at West Hartlepool in 1905 suspicious figures quoted included £297 in 'team expenses' when all other clubs were paying much less.⁶⁷ By 1907 the English RFU had responded to increased national concern and established a 'Commission on Veiled Professionalism' to investigate nationally as to the status of certain (un-named) clubs. The Commission held inquiries in camera in Manchester, Bristol, Plymouth, York, Hull, Leicester, and also in West Hartlepool.

⁶⁵ *Sporting Chronicle*, 11 Feb. 1899.

⁶⁶ *Hull Daily Mail*, 24 Aug. 1903; 10 Dec. 1906.

⁶⁷ *HDM*, 23 Jul. 1905.

To almost everyone's surprise they concluded that 'so far they could ascertain, veiled professionalism did not now exist in the Rugby Union game'.⁶⁸ The Chairman of the enquiry was Northumberland's William Cail.

Back in 1895, Cail himself had drafted the English RFU manifesto that made any club or player accused of professionalism assumed to be guilty unless they could prove their innocence. Now, in a new context, English RFU officials were turning from principle to pragmatism, and often demanding overwhelming evidence, similar to that in a court. Documents could then be unforthcoming or compiled especially for the investigation. Witnesses could not be required to attend or answer questions. This allowed Cail and the English RFU officials to avoid the potential dangers of breakup, although it not suit the ultra-amateurs, who quickly challenged the eventual report.

Almost all rugby union journalists stressed that the most serious matter the Committee had discovered was that in some cases too lavish expenditure had taken place. They under-emphasised other issues raised, including, *inter alia*, not keeping separate insurance funds, not showing sufficient details in balance-sheets; paying players' expenses without having details, and providing unnecessary refreshment for players, such as providing or paying for teas after home matches. More importantly for the clubs examined, the Commission decided not to made the report's details public. Instead relevant sections of twelve separate sections addressing the issues were to be sent to clubs concerned via their County RFU. Clearly the English RFU were pragmatically prepared to suppress details that might break up the Union. As *The Sportsman* pointed out, the report was in several ways an unsatisfactory document, which admitted 'irregularities' but 'did not altogether assure one that there were not greater ones existent'.⁶⁹

However, it may have had some impact on West Hartlepool. Shortly after receiving the report came the news that the club had decided to move to soccer at the end of the 1907-8 season. There was no mention in the local press of any links to veiled professionalism but one former Hartlepool Rovers and England forward who had moved to play for Hull said in August 1908 that West Hartlepool had become defunct because of two principal causes, the 'alleged breach of the amateur rules regarding the payment of

⁶⁸ *The Sportsman*, 3 Mar. 1908.

⁶⁹ *The Sportsman*, 8 Apr. 1908.

players... and also the advance of soccer in the district'.⁷⁰ At the English RFU's May meeting, one speaker who led a discussion on veiled professionalism dwelt heavily upon the fact that West Hartlepool had given up rugby and taken up association stating that if the latter did not pay them they could return to the former game.⁷¹ Equally suggestive is the fact that when West Hartlepool folded, several leading players left to play for Winlaton Vulcans, and by 1911 the Vulcans squad contained two England internationals, five Durham County players, all recruited from other clubs, and a former Percy Park and Northumberland forward.

The need for leagues: principle or pragmatism?

As historians have emphasised, the league question had 'become one of the battlefields in rugby's decade-long war over professionalism', seen by the English RFU as helping to precipitate the move towards the Northern Union, and so post-1895 they were resolutely opposed to leagues.⁷² Prior to the 1895 split, Yorkshire's senior rugby sides had introduced a Yorkshire Senior league competition, followed closely by Lancashire. Only a few leading high-socially elite clubs demurred, and by 1893 both counties had been highly organised on a league basis, and this had encouraged commercialism and broken-time payments

Durham and Northumberland clubs initially also reflected the principled anti-league attitude, but over the next decade the debates between principle and a more flexible pragmatism can be seen clearly in a slow shift of attitude within the two counties. For some north-eastern clubs, faced with major competition from soccer, competitive leagues seemed a way of fostering greater public interest. Durham was the stronger of the two counties, with perhaps a dozen senior sides. A league was first tentatively suggested to the Durham RFU in early 1896, but leading clubs such as Sunderland rejected the proposal.⁷³ Discussions continued and by November 1897 a new proposal for a joint Durham and Northumberland Rugby League circulated, led by N.L. Dees, of the Wallsend club. He argued that it was due to the encroachments of the Northern Union and the enormous and growing

⁷⁰ *Hull Daily Mail*, 17 Aug. 1908

⁷¹ *The Sportsman*, 29 May 1908.

⁷² Tony Collins, *How Football Began: A Global History of How the World's Football Codes Were Born* (Abingdon, 2018); Collins, *Rugby's Great Split*, p. 62.

⁷³ *SDG*, 12 Mar. 1896.

popularity of the Association game. Initially Sunderland members still opposed it as not ‘in the best interests of the game’, which would ‘likely form the first step to professionalism’, though the club maintained a watching brief, alarmed at the possibility of losing fixtures.⁷⁴

By late November 1897 some leading clubs, including West Hartlepool, Tudhoe, and South Shields, and Northumberland’s Percy Park and Rockcliffe, had come to feel the league might be desirable. Sunderland, Hartlepool Rovers and Old Dunelmians were opposed.⁷⁵ So were Northern, under Cail, still a powerful figure. There was no clear consensus. Both County RFUs, holding the national line, rejected the proposals in December. Continued anti-league opposition from Northumberland clubs resulted in a new proposal to form a solely Durham-based league. This was initially rejected by the Durham County RFU executive in February 1898.⁷⁶

Durham officials personally opposed to the league proposals quickly came under increased pressure. In September 1898, they agreed to a Durham-only league, and gained provisional sanction from a sub-committee of the England RFU, provided the rules were such that they could approve. By early in November, discussions over rules were in a ‘advanced stage’ under the ‘management of Durham Rugby Union’. Sunderland and Old Dunelmians were now involved but still not Hartlepool Rovers.⁷⁷ The Sunderland club committee had accepted the proposal by six votes to one. In November, the Northumberland RFU capitulated, and sent a letter asking to be allowed to join. It was rejected.⁷⁸ In response Northumberland RFU appealed to the national RFU Committee, arguing against the league proposal. They claimed that leagues were a stepping stone to the Northern Union, and that the Durham league would mean a loss of their clubs’ Durham fixtures, forcing distant travel to any replacements. Northumberland trying to join the league, and then denouncing the concept when the county was refused entry, sounded hypocritical, the more so when they admitted that they would have liked to take part.⁷⁹ Even so, at the English RFU meeting the Durham proposal was squashed, almost

⁷⁴ *SDG*, 16 Nov. 1897; 30 Nov. 1897.

⁷⁵ *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 18 Nov. 1897; *SDG*, 30 Nov. 1897.

⁷⁶ *SDE*, 16 Feb. 1898

⁷⁷ *The North-Eastern Daily Gazette*, 7 Nov. 1898.

⁷⁸ The relevant correspondence was later printed in *SDE*, 11 Jan. 1899

⁷⁹ ‘The Rugby game in the North’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 17 Sep. 1898; *Shields Daily News*, 12 Jan. 1899 gives details

unanimously, with Lancashire and Yorkshire representatives strongly supporting the Northumberland objections.⁸⁰

The two counties were now at loggerheads. In early January 1899 some Durham County RFU members, angered at 'unwarranted' Northumberland interference, proposed that all Northumberland fixtures next season should be cancelled.⁸¹ Press headlines described the move as a 'rugby crisis', a 'remarkable motion' or a 'sensational proposal'. On 10th January 1899 the motion, carried by a tiny majority, was met with surprise and disgust by Northumberland clubs. It was 'unsportsmanlike conduct' according to the *Scottish Referee*.⁸²

Pressure weakened Durham attitudes. Five clubs more ambiguous about the league moves, Sunderland, Hartlepool Rovers, Old Dunelmians, Durham City, and Westoe, each decided to keep fixtures with Northumberland clubs as usual.⁸³ Others soon followed, and by June 1899 friendly fixtures between clubs in both counties were arranged as usual, leading the *Sunderland Echo* to suggest that 'the friction caused by the proposed League' had passed away.⁸⁴

This was naïve. By November a joint county league proposal had resurfaced, circulated by the South Shields president John Morales.⁸⁵ In January 1890 eleven north-eastern clubs agreed to petition the English RFU for leave to form it. Two leading Northumberland clubs, Rockcliffe and Northern, were opposed. Sunderland and Westoe were still unsure.⁸⁶ Another Northumbrian club, Percy Park, likewise saw the league as 'death to the amateur game', a step 'in the direction of the paid player'.⁸⁷

At national level, too, the *Athletic News* rugby correspondent commented that he gathered that

⁸⁰ *SDE*, 19 Dec. 1898, 20 Dec. 1898.

⁸¹ *Shields Daily News*, 12 Jan. 1899

⁸² *Pall Mall Gazette*, 5 Jan. 1899; *HDM*, 11 Jan. 1899; *Scottish Referee*, 13 Jan. 1899.

⁸³ *SDE*, 18 Jan. 1899; *AN*, 23 Jan. 1899.

⁸⁴ *SDE*, 15 Jun, 1899.

⁸⁵ *Middlesbrough Daily Gazette*, 13 Nov. 1899; *Leeds Mercury*, 22 Nov. 1899.

⁸⁶ *SDE*, 16 Jan. 1900.

⁸⁷ *AN*, 20 Aug. 1900.

the English Union are dead against assisting in any way to extend the league system, the reasons being that wherever it has been introduced the control of the game has moved out of their hands.⁸⁸

In April 1900 the Durham RFU committee, concerned at continued Northumberland opposition, again refused to approve the formation of a joint county league. Although the issue had not disappeared, at a Durham RFU meeting celebrating the county side's win of the 1899-1900 county championship an appeal to attenders to urge the members to stick loyally to the union, and not to go for Leagues, but play the game for the sport's sake, was still greeted with applause.⁸⁹ In September 1900, the South Shields club raised the league proposal again with the English RFU. At the Northumberland Annual General Meeting some attenders pointed out that most Durham clubs were favour of forming a league, and that they were dependent on Durham clubs for fixtures. Tynedale, which had lost its Cumberland fixtures, felt it would then become extinct. Cail restressed the firm opposition of the English RFU Committee, and proposed that Northumberland RFU express their disapproval of all league combinations, believing they greatly conduced to professionalism, and fearing that many clubs, now composed largely of working men, would be induced to join Northern Union. He was supported by most attenders.⁹⁰

At the 1900 English RFU annual general meeting an attempt to introduce a league system in the Bristol area was defeated, seen by Rev. F. Marshall and others as 'the thin edge of the wedge of professionalism' which had 'ruined the game in Yorkshire and Lancashire', a 'spectre' which created the Northern Union, something which they could not control and would eventually kill them.⁹¹ Surprisingly, however, Durham's representative W. H. Bell, the Sunderland president, was now one of the few to pragmatically support leagues. Though he had not been in favour initially, he felt they might help overcome the difficulties rugby was facing.⁹² Press columns were also giving increased support to their introduction, one Shields

⁸⁸ *AN*, 22 Jan. 1900.

⁸⁹ *HDM*, 20 Apr. 1900; *Durham Echo*, 7 May 1900.

⁹⁰ *SDG*, 11 Sep. 1900

⁹¹ *NE*, 22 Sep. 1900; *Gloucester Citizen*, 21 Sep. 1900; *AN*, 24 Sep. 1900.

⁹² *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 28 Aug, 1901.

journalist arguing that without a league rugby would 'remain in its present unsatisfactory state [and] spell decay and ultimate ruin'. Only cup ties generated any interest.⁹³

While the national body remained obdurate, in County Durham the loss of South Shields, the Durham Cup holders, to Northern Union at the end of 1901 panicked local rugby union sides. Crowds were in decline. Players were being lost. Even Hartlepool Rovers, during the 1901-2 season, had an adverse balance, poorer crowds, and lost two players to the Northern Union.⁹⁴ In March 1902 a deputation from Northumberland RFU travelled to meet with Durham officials to discuss yet again the advisability of arranging league fixtures. There was now a general feeling in favour, some of the officials, albeit still reluctant, looking upon it as the only way to preserve the carrying code.⁹⁵ Clubs were consulted, but crucially, this time no formal approval was sought from the English RFU. The belief amongst clubs, both County Committees and the regional press was that leagues would make rugby more popular with players and spectators, and lead to renewed enthusiasm and effort. Crowds preferred visible competition and success. It would focus players and give them a goal at which to aim.⁹⁶

Cail faced a dilemma. He was coming to see the league as necessary for north-east rugby's survival under the landslide of soccer's popularity which was focusing clubs' minds. But he was also a loyal supporter of pure amateurism. This forced him into a pragmatic approach. He demonstrated no public opposition to the move, nor raised it formally in committee. He likewise gave no support to a league. Instead he encouraged an Inter-county Championship Competition for Northumberland and Durham. This was a league in all but name, unauthorized by the London-based RFU, and so named, as the *Shields Daily Gazette* suggested, merely 'for purposes of convenience and bluff', a move for 'common sense and a consideration for the best interests of the game'.⁹⁷ The national body must clearly have been aware of this, but it was becoming more flexible about principle in this decade, and was more prepared to ignore evidence if rule implementation would threaten its numbers and authority.⁹⁸

⁹³ *SDG*, 17 May 1901.

⁹⁴ *HDM*, 28 Aug. 1902

⁹⁵ *DCA*, 28 Mar. 1902

⁹⁶ *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 30 Aug. 1902; *SDG*, 30 Aug. 1902; *DCA*, 5 Sep. 1902.

⁹⁷ *SDG*, 2 Sep. 1902

⁹⁸ *Collins, English Rugby Union*, p. 40.

All the senior clubs in the north-east joined this competition, including Cail's club, Northern. Alongside the senior club competition, there were competitions for the junior, less powerful clubs, one for Tyneside and other for Durham and Hartlepool, each with over a dozen sides. At the end of the 1902-3 season the competition had had some positive impact and clubs such as Percy Park generally felt it was a success. Matches started more promptly and were more keenly contested. Durham City's gates were up by £18 and the club felt that there was always now a determined struggle for points by players. Rockcliffe noted a 'considerable increase of interest in the game', with subscriptions and season ticket sales up and £36 increase in gate money. Sunderland likewise felt that finances and games had improved, and there were improvements in punctuality.⁹⁹

The regional press initially published league tables regularly, some newspapers carefully calling them an inter-county championship, while others such as the *Athletic News* used the term 'league'. League tables became orders of merit based mainly on the percentage of victories achieved, as north-eastern weather sometimes led to fixture cancellation, and home/away fixtures were arranged randomly. The regulations required at least eight home/away games to be played, with two points for a win, one for a draw, and position in the table on a win percentage basis.¹⁰⁰ The competition was initially dominated first by West Hartlepool and then Hartlepool Rovers. By 1907-8 sixteen senior club first teams took part, now also including Carlisle in Cumberland, plus two further 'competitions' involving lower-level clubs and second and third fifteens of top clubs. Even so the competitions were not having the hoped-for effects. More clubs were having to send incomplete teams to fulfil their engagements, while absences for county games affected leading sides. All in all, an amateur approach to league rugby appears to have held sway amongst players, local journalists and committees. Sides still struggled for fit players at the start of season. Training did not commence until the Tuesday before the first league match. As Touch Judge remarked in 1907;

⁹⁹ *DCA*, 7 Aug. 1903; *SDG*, 26 May 1903; *Shields Daily News*, 17 Jul. 1903.

¹⁰⁰ Copy of league rules and regulations 1904-5, Archives of Sunderland RFC, Ashbrooke.

Rugbeians do not rush into play on the first available day as do the devotees of the Association code, and so long as the game is played on the same amateur lines as at present they will never do so.¹⁰¹

One result was that support soon dropped once more for most clubs and the competition declined in popularity. Hartlepool Rovers left before the 1910/11 season, when the top division was extended to twenty-one clubs, to play fixtures against higher-status teams. Newspapers such as the *Newcastle Journal* continued to publish league tables, but there appears to have been limited public interest, and crowds were low. This was part of a wider trend, since many Northern Union sides in Yorkshire and Lancashire were also struggling for crowds with the growing popularity of soccer.

Conclusion

Although rugby union in the midlands and the west country also had their problems in the period from 1895 to 1914, following the emergence of the Northern Union, it was the rugby union clubs in Durham and Northumberland which faced the greatest difficulties. They were isolated, separated by distance and geography from other rugby union regions, and heavily constrained by the national RFU regulations. They were situated in a region where soccer attracted very large crowds, the majority of young players, and even larger cultural significance. Close to Northern Union's power base in Yorkshire and Lancashire they suffered regular poaching, and the constant possibility of sides like South Shields moving over to join them. Cumulatively these factors meant that crowds and revenue were

¹⁰¹ NEC, 7 Sep. 1907.

potentially in steep decline, players were hard to find and their survival was constantly under threat. Indeed, some clubs folded.

How might clubs survive? The big debate during the period, one which divided clubs internally, at county and at regional level, was whether to allow league competition in the face of strong opposition from the English RFU and from some county officials. A league structure was eventually introduced, but had only a brief positive effect on attendances. In order to survive some clubs managed to maintain fixtures supported by their largely-middle-class members' annual subscriptions, or raising money through other means such as Whit sports. Clubs more successful in county cup fixtures gained revenue from the larger crowds at finals. Some players stayed with rugby because they achieved success at county, regional or national level, especially up to c. 1910. For a few clubs such as West Hartlepool it seems likely, but unprovable, that success could be gained by offering players incentives but this was a risky move, and West Hartlepool abandoned rugby for soccer. Overall rugby union in the north-east between 1895 and 1914 was always the poor relation of soccer, most clubs surviving only with small crowds.