

What is Ashbourne Football?

By Simon Sanada

It's dark, it's snowing, and it's very cold. In the corner of a muddy field a group of men in dirty clothes stand holding onto each other tightly. There must be about twenty of them, and they are hardly moving. There is an occasional shout, and some pushing and shoving. Then it becomes quiet again. Around the group of men are scattered another thirty or forty people who stand there watching. Some of them are carrying torches. More than a mile away across the snowy fields can be seen the lights of a town, but the men continue playing their game in the dark.



[1] Street Football

They are playing a traditional kind of football that is now very rare in Britain. Three or four hundred years ago, mass football was a common and popular sport. As towns and cities developed, and as the countryside was enclosed for agriculture, people lost the places where they had played their games. For this game is not played on a pitch or in a sports ground.

It was played through the streets of a town or across the fields around a village. [1] There were no fixed rules, and every game had its own different traditions and customs. Few of them survive today.

One of the places where a game has continued for hundreds of years is Ashbourne, [2] a small market town in the middle of England. In 2003 I spent a year living near Ashbourne, and I was able to watch the game in 2004. [3] Everyone in the town takes



[2] View over Ashbourne



[3] Ashbourne Market Place

part. On the day of the game, all the shops, restaurants and banks in the town close [4]. The local schools give the children a holiday. Traffic in the town is stopped or diverted as the game starts. And the many pubs in the town remain open all day, full of people.



[4] Shop protected from

Games of mass football were usually played on religious holidays when people had free time. The festival of Shrovetide, which usually falls in February, was popular. There are two games played in Ashbourne; the first is on Shrove Tuesday, and the second on the next day, Ash Wednesday. In 2004 Ash Wednesday was 25th February, and

that was the day I went to watch Ashbourne Royal Shrovetide Football.

The game starts at two o'clock in the afternoon. A large crowd gathers in the centre of the town, and after they sing the national anthem, the brightly painted ball is thrown to them. The ball is a little bigger than a soccer ball, but it is filled with cork, so it is not easy to kick. The start of the game is called "turning up" the ball. It is an honour to be asked to turn up the ball for Shrovetide Football. Twice in the past a Prince of Wales has turned up the ball, which is why the game is called "Royal". [5] The first time was in 1928, and more recently in 2003. [6]



[5] The Prince of Wales shows the ball to the crowd...



[6] ...and then throws it to them

As soon as the ball has been thrown into the crowd, the men try to grab it and hold on to it.[7] Although many women and children follow the game, it is too dangerous for them to play. A “hug” quickly develops around the ball, as men fight to break into the group and pull the ball out. At the same time, each team tries to push the hug towards their goal. Slowly the hug moves away into the streets of the town, carrying the hidden ball with it. The streets become packed with people, and traffic has to stop. [8] Sometimes shop-windows and doors are broken, and cars and streetlights damaged. As the hug is pushed and pulled, it is almost impossible to control its direction.



[7] The hug grab for the ball



[8] Ashbourne High Street blocked by the hug

A small river, the Henmore Brook, runs through Ashbourne. People living north of the river, near the centre of town, are called Up'ards. Those who live on the south side of the river are called Down'ards. The Up'ards try to carry the ball up the river to their goal at Sturston, about a mile and a half east of the town, while the Down'ards fight to take the ball in the opposite direction towards their goal at Clifton. The players on both teams wear the same dirty old clothes, but since they all live in the same small town, they know which team each person always plays for. [9]



[9] Players outside a pub before the game

The ball can be kicked, carried or thrown along the streets, over the fields and even in the river. However, one of the few rules of the game is that it may not be carried by car or motorbike. Progress is usually slow, although occasionally the ball pops out of the hug and there is a break as players run with the ball, or throw it ahead to other members of their team. The game often continues until dark, and sometimes the ball is not goaled at all. If there has been no goal after eight hours of play, then the game stops. If a goal is scored before five o'clock, while it is still light, then a new ball will be turned up and a second game begun. The ball is goaled by being touched three times against a millstone on the riverbank either at Sturston or Clifton. [10] In order to reach the goal, the scorer has to be standing in the river. It is a wet, cold and dirty game! The player who will goal the ball is chosen by his team-mates, and he has the honour of keeping the ball after the game.



[10] The goal at Sturston

could go back to the warm and noisy pubs in town. I'm sure that as soon as the game was over, though, they were already looking forward to next year's game.

On Ash Wednesday 2004 when I watched the game, no goal was scored.



The play stopped in the snowy and muddy fields near Sturston. The Up'ards tried to carry the ball a few more metres to their goal, but the Down'ards prevented them. The snow fell and it became colder and colder, so the players must have been happy when ten o'clock came and they