

**THE FOUNDING OF THE NORTHERN UNION:
A SHORT PLAY FOR SCHOOLS.**

THE GEORGE HOTEL, HUDDERSFIELD, 29 AUGUST 1895.

Introduction

This is a reconstruction of the historic 1895 meeting that founded the Northern Rugby Football Union (which became the Rugby Football League in 1922). Sadly, the minutes of the meeting no longer exist but I have attempted to reconstruct the opinions and attitudes of the clubs at the meeting based on contemporary statements that appeared in the press or by creating composite statements based on the historical research that enabled me to write *Rugby's Great Split*.

The name of each club is followed by the name of their representative at the meeting. The source of their statement is indicated in the square brackets at the end of each statement. Where possible each delegate speaks their own words or the words of someone close to the club.

The script was written as part of the heritage programme of the Rugby League World Cup 2103 and is primarily intended as an educational tool to be performed by schoolchildren at Keystage 2/3 level.

The Meeting

Harry Waller (Brighouse Rangers) [chairman] "Colleagues, it is now 6.30pm and I would like to call this meeting to order. We are gathered here as some of the most successful rugby clubs in England. I think all of us are agreed that the amateur rules of the Rugby Football Union, which forbid any type of payment to players, are a disaster for the game of rugby and unfair on our players, the majority of whom are working-class men.

"Rugby football in the North - for every part of the Kingdom in fact where there was a preponderance of working class players - cannot be honestly carried out under the existing by-laws of the English Union. A new rugby union, the Northern Union, must be formed. [Harry Waller]

"But before we move to a vote, I would like to go around the room and ask each club to state their opinion."

Batley (Jack Goodall): "Although rugby was started in the public schools, now in the north it is the game for everyone, especially miners, dockers and textile factory workers. No-one should lose wages for playing rugby, so it is only right that the Northern Union allows its

clubs to make what have become known as 'broken-time' payments to make up the wages of players who have to take time off work to play rugby." [composite]

Bradford (Fred Lister): "This movement has my heartiest support and I consider that the only fault all working-class players have with it is that it was not launched years ago. The formation of the Northern Union sounds the death-knell of the supercilious gentlemen possessing the present power in the English Rugby Union." [Jack Toothill]

Broughton Rangers (Ernest Gresty): "We realise that we have cut ourselves off from the Rugby Union; we realise too, that it is an important step; but it was inevitable, and we have no thought whatever of going back on our actions. There is not the slightest need to fear any consequences. What we must do is to work unselfishly together and if we do this the result must be most satisfactory." [Ernest Gresty]

Dewsbury (Charles Holdsworth): "Although our supporters and players seem to be in favour of the Northern Union, my committee would suggest that we do not resign from the Rugby Union. We may still be able to persuade them to change their minds and allow us to make broken-time payments to our players. We will therefore not resign from the Rugby Union and will not join the Northern Union." [composite]

Halifax (Joe Nicholl): "I would hope that the Northern Union can quickly move from 15-a-side teams to 13-a-side. This will give the backs greater scope for showing their skill and scrummaging would be less frequent than is the case at present." [Halifax committee resolution]

Huddersfield (John Clifford): "I believe that the payment of working-men players for loss of wages due to playing in a rugby match is not professionalism. If broken-time payments were not allowed, rugby would become a game for the upper classes but not the masses." [William Hirst]

Hull (Charles Brewer): "The clubs here have struck a blow for freedom and are to be commended for throwing off the cloak of hypocrisy, conceit and subterfuge, and standing out for those essentially English characteristics - honesty and straight forwardness." [Hull Daily Mail]

Hunslet (J.L. Whittaker): "Among our supporters, there is no division of opinion on the severance from the Rugby Union and my committee has unanimously backed the Northern Union." [anon quoted in Yorkshire Post]

Leeds (Harry Sewell): "I agree with the delegate from Halifax. Let us have teams of thirteen players instead of fifteen, do away with the line-out and use a round ball - that will make the game as attractive as possible." [Harry Sewell]

Leigh (J. Quirk): "In Leigh we have reached the end of our tether with the Rugby Union. Last year we were banned from playing for ten weeks and forbidden from charging spectators, just because we were accused of helping players in financial trouble and paying the hotel bills of two of our Welsh players." [composite]

Liversedge (John Hampshaw): "I think the Northern Union is a champion move and I think the committee would have been justified in making the move a year ago." [Harry Barker, captain]

Manningham (Tony Fattorini): "It is my opinion that if this new Union were properly conducted, the Rugby Union would have to recognise professionalism in some form or another in the future or they would find ere long the only support they received would be from the Universities and Public Schools." [Tony Fattorini]

Oldham (Joseph Platt): "We have concluded that it would be impossible to carry out the rules of the rugby union, and decided to form a new union more in touch with present-day football, and with a special view to meeting the requirements of the working man player." [Joseph Platt]

Rochdale Hornets (William Brierley): "We are joining the Northern Union because we will get to play 42 matches with the very best clubs in Lancashire and Yorkshire, instead of just fourteen at the moment. But we are determined to stick to broken time payments to our players and not have full professionalism." [club statement]

St Helens (F. Dennett): "Less than ten years ago not a single association club could be found either in Manchester or district. Now both Newton Heath and Ardwick are high up and making big names for themselves at the dribbling code, and have innumerable imitators in their districts. The conservatism evinced by the Lancashire Rugby Union is astounding - they are content to sit still whilst the tide of association football makes great inroads into the stronghold of the rugby game. The Northern Union will help to turn that tide." [A.A. Sutherland, *Clarion* rugby reporter]

Tyldesley (George Taylor): "Last season was ruined because of the Rugby Union's amateur regulations. Leigh, Salford and Wigan were banned and Broughton, Rochdale, Swinton and ourselves were investigated because we were accused of giving money to our players. Is there any wonder that rugby is losing popularity to soccer?" [composite]

Wakefield Trinity (John Fallas): "People in the North could not help wondering how it was that no southern rugby club would go north unless they got a financial guarantee - and they won't play if they don't get it? I am prepared to bow down at the shrine of the southern amateur, but I represent a working-class district where very different conditions prevailed. I quite agree that a man should not make money out of playing rugby, but equally, he should not lose money by it." [Herbert Fallas]

Warrington (James Warren): "Under the Northern Union, rugby players will endeavour to get themselves into better form, they will train more regularly, and they will playing a better and more combined game." [James Warren]

Widnes (Fred Wright): "Merseyside used to be a rugby stronghold, but soccer is taking over. It has a national league and a national cup, the the Rugby Union won't allow either. The Northern Union will have a league and a national cup competition, which will allow to fight back against soccer." [composite]

Wigan: (Ernest Wardle) "All along the feeling has been expressed that freedom from the thralldom of the Southern gentry was the best thing that could happen, and the attitude which has been taken up by the leading clubs of the North has met with general approbation in town." [Wigan Observer]

Harry Waller: Thank you everyone. I would now like to put the following motion to the vote: "That the clubs here represented decide to form a Northern Rugby Football Union, and pledge themselves to push forward, without delay, its establishment on the principle of payment for bona-fide broken-time only." [All vote for, except Dewsbury.]

"I declare the motion carried. We will now resign from the Rugby Football Union and proceed to build the Northern Union!" [composite]

ENDS ENDS ENDS

Tony Collins

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