



Mitchell & Kenyon *Edwardian Britain on film*

Gallery Oldham 16 November 2006

EARLY RUGBY LEAGUE FILMS FROM THE MITCHELL & KENYON COLLECTION

The Mitchell and Kenyon films of Northern Union (NU) rugby matches are the earliest known moving images of any form of rugby. The first film in the collection dates back to January 1901, barely five years since the momentous split of 29 August 1895 that gave birth to the Northern Union.

They give us the opportunity to see Hunslet in the glory days of Albert Goldthorpe; great players such as Salford's Jim Lomas, the first-ever captain of a Lions touring side; the 1903 Halifax v Salford Challenge Cup Final; a Hull derby from 1902; and matches featuring Batley, Dewsbury, Leeds, Oldham, St Helens, Swinton, Warrington and Wigan. Not to mention lost teams such as Manningham and Runcorn.

By the time that these films were made, rugby in the North of England was long established as a major working-class spectator sport. From its origins as a game for the privately-educated sons of the industrial middle-classes of the north, by the 1880s it had become the dominant winter sport in Yorkshire and large sections of Lancashire, concentrated especially in the textile and mining towns that dominated the region.

When these films were made, there were no professional soccer sides in West Yorkshire. Although just two years after the film of Manningham was made, seen here playing at Dewsbury's Crown Flatt ground, the club switched to soccer and became Bradford City.

The NU itself was in transition at this time. Unlike Mitchell and Kenyon's soccer and cricket films, captured at a point where, apart from minor changes, the playing rules would be recognisable today, the Northern Union matches were filmed at the mid-point in its evolution from rugby union rules to what we now know as rugby league rules. Although the NU had abolished the line-out in 1898 it wouldn't be until 1906 that it would move to thirteen-a-side teams and introduce the play the ball. So these matches were filmed when the game was still played with fifteen players per side. The NU was also grappling with ways to make the game more attractive and move away from the endless stoppages of the union game. Perhaps bizarrely to modern eyes, these films were made when the game was played under the rule that a scrum was formed after every tackle. It is only through these films that we can appreciate why this rule was introduced; the scrums are formed and completed with a surprising rapidity.

The importance of scrummaging can be seen in the fact almost all forwards wore belts, which were worn to help them with the arduous task of pushing in what could often be over a hundred scrums per match. And at this time there were no set positions in the scrum such as prop or hooker. Scrums were formed on a first up, first down principle.

Perhaps what makes these films more interesting than many others of the time is the variety of angles from which play is filmed. As well as the commonly used pitch-side view from the touch line there is also footage shot from behind the goal posts at Oldham's Watersheddings, and most modern to present day viewers, from the top of Headingley's West Terrace for the 1903 Cup Final. The Oldham footage also contains what may well be the first try ever to be filmed.

These films are a vital window on a world that survives today only in sporting folklore and newspaper archives. Most importantly, they gave us a rare and valuable insight into the people who played and watched the game, and perhaps give us a clue as to why it meant as much to them as it does to us today.

Curated and presented by Vanessa Toulmin and Tony Collins.

PROGRAMME

Introduction

M&K 373: Warrington v St Helens (1901)
M&K 653: Hull Kingston Rovers v Wigan (25 Oct 1902)

1901

M&K 116: Oldham v Swinton (12 Jan 1901)
M&K 161: St Helens v Swinton (19 Jan 1901)
M&K 160: Runcorn v St Helens (16 Feb 1901)
M&K 151: Hunslet v Leeds (16 Feb 1901)
M&K 114: Halifax v Salford (23 Mar 1901)
M&K 157, 156, 155:
Dewsbury v Manningham (19 Oct 1901)
M&K 159, 158 141, 162:
Salford v Batley (2 Nov 1901)

1902

M&K 150, 131, 660:
Hull F. C v Hull Kingston Rovers (26 Apr 1902)
M&K 149: Hull F.C. v Wigan (4 Oct 1902)
M&K 148: Hull Kingston Rovers v Wigan (25 Oct 1902)

1903

M&K 152: Northern Union Challenge Cup Final – Halifax v Salford (25 Apr 1903)

A special thanks to Professor Tony Collins (Leeds Metropolitan University) and Dr Vanessa Toulmin (University of Sheffield) for supplying the expert information.

NEW BOOK FROM BFI

Electric Edwardians: The Story of the Mitchell & Kenyon Collection (Vanessa Toulmin)

Electric Edwardians presents a stunning visual record of the films of Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon, combined with an illuminating discussion of the films and the social context of their production by Vanessa Toulmin, a leading authority on the collection.

For news and information on Mitchell & Kenyon books and DVDs visit: www.bfi.org.uk