



## MEDWAY RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB – A SHORT HISTORY

The club began life in 1929 as the Rolenian Sports Club when pupils at the Kings School started playing hockey and cricket to occupy themselves during the long school holidays. They rented a pitch at Priestfields from the headmaster of Allendale Prep School at a nominal rental of £4 per annum. There they built a small pavilion which was officially opened in March 1928. It was extended in 1931 when "fixed concrete plunge baths and showers were added for the rugger."

Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> October 1931 saw the club play its first match when they played and beat the King's School 10-5 at the Paddock in Rochester. Interestingly Ronald Buxton, the club captain was also the school captain at the time but there is no record of which team he played for on the day.

*(Right) The Paddock in Rochester*



At the end of that season the Chatham Observer reported "the Easter Saturday fixture between the Old Williamsons and the Rolenians, the newly formed Rochester rugby football club, on the former's ground, aroused much local interest, a large crowd watching a thrilling game". The visitors won by 9 points to nil with the captain scoring twice.

Over the next few years the club grew at pace and by the outbreak of the WW2 were running three sides and a Wednesday XV and were the only open club in the



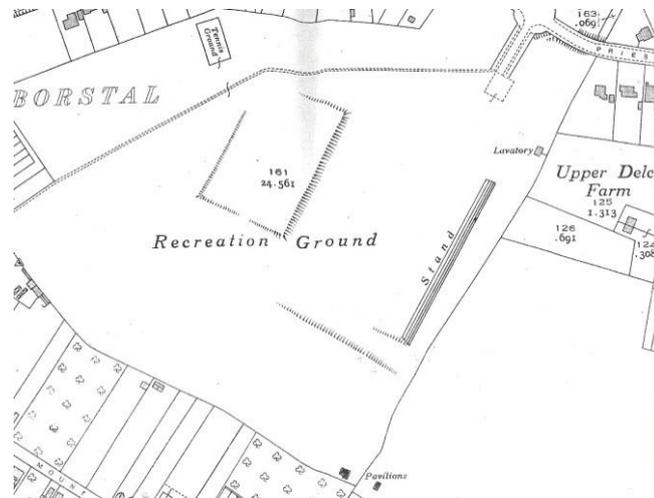
Medway towns. United Services (Chatham), Shorts Brothers (the aeroplane manufacturers), the Old Williamsons and the Old Anchorians being the others at the time.

Ronald Buxton dominated the club being both secretary and captain for the first eight seasons with his father being at first the president and later the chairman.

*(Left) Ronald Buxton – the Club founder*

In 1935, Priestfields which was owned by the Watts Trust became the property of the Rochester Corporation. Slightly earlier in AD 880 it had been given by King Ethelbert to the Dean and Chapter of Rochester and later given in 1077 to the monks (priests and so Priestfields) by Bishop Gundolf.

Major work then took place over the next two years to level the ground for pitches. The original pavilion can be seen at the bottom of the map. Although the pavilion was occasionally used during the WW2 by the Home Guard and the Red Cross, it was eventually destroyed by vandals.



(Right) OS map showing Priestfields in 1938 after levelling had taken place.

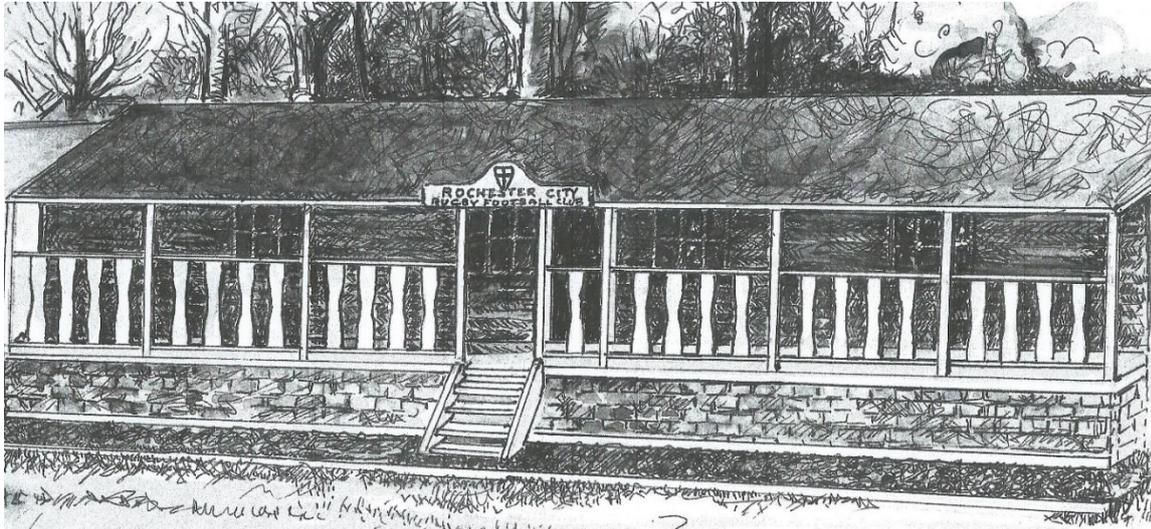
In August 1936 the club were granted permission to change their name to that of the Rochester Rugby Football Club with the Mayor of Rochester consenting to become their Patron. The club also took on the city colours of scarlet and gold to replace their original blue and white. In August 1939, the club held their AGM with optimism for the new season but a month later WW2 broke out and the club disbanded.

At the conclusion of the War, the club reformed as Rochester City RFC and played alongside the Shorts RFC at their Riverside Ground. Two of the stalwarts involved in the club were Joe Hilderbrands and Dave Gautrey. The 'City' was recognised officially for a couple of seasons but was used unofficially for many seasons after.

The 1947-48 season saw the firm of Shorts Brothers move to Northern Ireland and the club stood on its own again. Although the club were granted the use of a pitch at Priestfields they turned this down as there were "no bathing facilities." Games that season were played in Gillingham at what is now Medway Park and where the players changed beside the pitch. A young player by the name of Fred Dellow, from the Parachute Regiment, joined the club as a speedy winger.

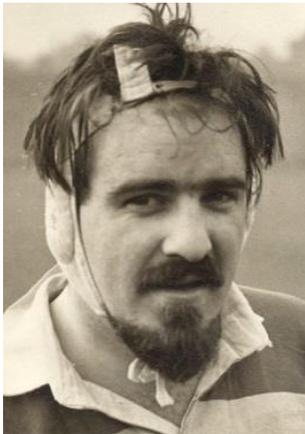
A season later saw the club on the move again, this time to a pitch at Knight's Road in Strood. Coach transport had to be used for both home and away fixtures. However, in August 1950 the Rochester & Borstal FC, who had been using the main pitch at Priestfields made the move to the recently completed Rochester Greyhound Stadium. Rochester City RFC bought the pavilion from the football club and after a break of twelve seasons the club returned to its rightful home.

In October 1951 a letter was received from Rochester City RFC asking for *the opinion and guidance on a proposal to apply for a club licence to retail beer to its members at the pavilion*. Happily there was no objection offered to this proposal! George Nelson joined the club soon after and took on responsibility for the running of the bar. George had organised a summer outing to Folkestone when he was told by Bill 'Pop' Lintern, another club stalwart, that the licence had been granted and players on the outing were 'encouraged' to acquire beer glass for the new bar.



*The Rochester RFC Pavilion 1950-1969*

Norman Parkes played for the club on its return to Priestfields. He then took up refereeing, rising up the ranks, and in February 1958 took charge of the Wales and Scotland international at the Cardiff Arms Park.



A recruit from the Maths School was Jim Fray who was renowned for, amongst other attributes, his rendition of 'The Tattooed Lady'. Jim, chairman and secretary for many seasons also 'toasted the guests' at the club's annual dinner completing his forty sixth before retiring in 2010.

Throughout most of the 1950's the club ran three sides until introducing the Old Holcombeians in 1957.

*(Left) Jim Fray*

Many young players came to the club from the Chatham Technical School and this new side team contained a mixture of older, experienced players with younger, enthusiastic ones. One of their early captains was Jimmy Wilding who had received the DFC as a Pilot Officer with 138 squadron during WW2. Jimmy died of a heart-attack at Twickenham in 1980 while watching England beat Wales.

Mick Burford joined the club from Chatham Tech, always very involved both on and off the pitch, Mike began in the 1970's to research the club's history in the process making contact with the founder Ronald Buxton. These hand-written notes, now in the Archives, still provide a great insight into the early years of rugby at Priestfields.

By the mid 1960's the old wooden pavilion, now twenty years old, needed replacing. Much corresponding with the Rochester Council over several seasons followed but thanks to the involvement of Jim Fray and Hughie Smith and others, the necessary length of lease was granted, the money was raised and the new clubhouse was officially opened in 1968 with a match against Uxbridge Borderers.

In the early 1970's George Nelson introduced a Kent Schools' tournament with the final taking place at Priestfields. It ran with ever increasing success for several seasons until taken over by the Daily Mail who made it a country-wide competition with the finals taking place at Twickenham.

The club took on its present name in 1974 following the Rochester and Chatham Councils' amalgamation to create the Borough of Rochester upon Medway.

A notable player was Brian Waite who had joined the club as a young PE teacher and scored over 1,000 points in just five seasons. Other young players to arrive at Priestfields during the 1970's were Taff Gwilliam, Ginger Longstaff and Paul Essenhigh. All enjoyed success on the pitch and all three are all heavily involved with the club's present success.



*Medway 1<sup>st</sup> XV 1981-82*

In 1981-82 the club celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and the 1<sup>st</sup> XV retained the Kent Merit Table. League rugby came along in the late 1980s and Medway, despite enjoying several successful seasons, found themselves in Kent 1.

A very narrow 4-3 quarter-final defeat by Blackheath in 1988 saw Medway enter the Pilkington Trophy and the team, led by Ian Dance, beat Old Mid Whitgiftians in the first round before being knocked-out by Havant in the second.

Work began on levelling the main pitch which had an 11-foot drop from one end to the other and a match with the visiting Valenciennes RFC 'christened' the new playing surface in September 1988.

Dave Francis captained Medway in 1996-97 when promotion was secured to London 3 South east. With a great deal of financial assistance from the Council, the Mayor switched on the new flood-lights on the main-pitch at Priestfields in October 1998. New lights were later erected around the training pitch. The club has been pleased to welcome various Kent sides to use these improved facilities for training and playing.

The new millennium saw a downward swing in the club's fortunes. One Sunday evening in October 2001 a fire destroyed the roof and caused much internal damage to the clubhouse although by Christmas the necessary repairs had been made, and most importantly, the bar was functioning again.



*(Right) The fire-damaged clubhouse*

On the pitch Medway also found the going difficult eventually in 2006 being relegated to Kent Division 3. With encouragement from Mark Marriott, Taff Gwilliam, former player and captain returned to the Priestfields to reorganise the coaching. Success came quickly and that season achieved the double of league champions and cup winners. Two further promotions followed in quick succession and the club has maintained a steady climb since then.



In April 2015, Medway, as runners-up in London 2 South-East, hosted the play off against London Cornish which the home team won.

*(Left) Priestfields on play-off day 2015*

Much of this success has been due to the quality of the playing surface on the main pitch. By the mid 2000's it was in very poor condition but thanks due to the endeavours of Gerald Farrow and Mel Collins it has been turned it into the 'emerald gem' that we have today. This has been recognised by the Kent County RFU and Priestfields has hosted three of their county matches in recent seasons.

Brian Wolfe is the club historian and published in 2015 the '**MINIS AT MEDWAY**' to celebrate forty years of mini and youth rugby at Priestfields.