



## Development of Football in Leicestershire

Leicester was in a period of prosperity, expansion, and improvement throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century. The town's population rapidly increased from 68,000 in 1861 to just over 142,000 in 1891 and by 1901 the population had risen to 211,600. The town's chief industries were dominated by hosiery and footwear manufacture which had largely shifted from domestic to factory production. As prosperity increased the town's infrastructure developed. New gas works were constructed on Aylestone Road and continually expanded throughout the 1880s to cope with the increase in demand. Electricity was not supplied to the town until the mid-1890s and even then, only to the commercial and business quarter in the centre of the town. The electricity works were situated by the gas works on the Aylestone Road site. Public transport was provided by Leicester Tramways Company. The company's first tram service, opened in 1875 was between Leicester and Belgrave, and in the following year two further services, along London Road and Humberstone Road, began operating. Several years later, in 1878, the Victoria Park line was extended along London Road to Knighton Road, and further routes along Aylestone Road in the south, and to Woodgate in the north were added. Further expansion of the tram system did not take place until 1901 and motorised omnibuses did not appear until the 1920s. Many of Leicester's landmarks were constructed during the second half of the nineteenth century, as wealthy Victorians made their mark on the town – London Road railway station (1840), the clock tower (1868), King Street (1850), Corah & Sons – St Margaret's Works (1866), Town Hall (1876), 8), Grand Hotel (1897) and Western Park (1899).

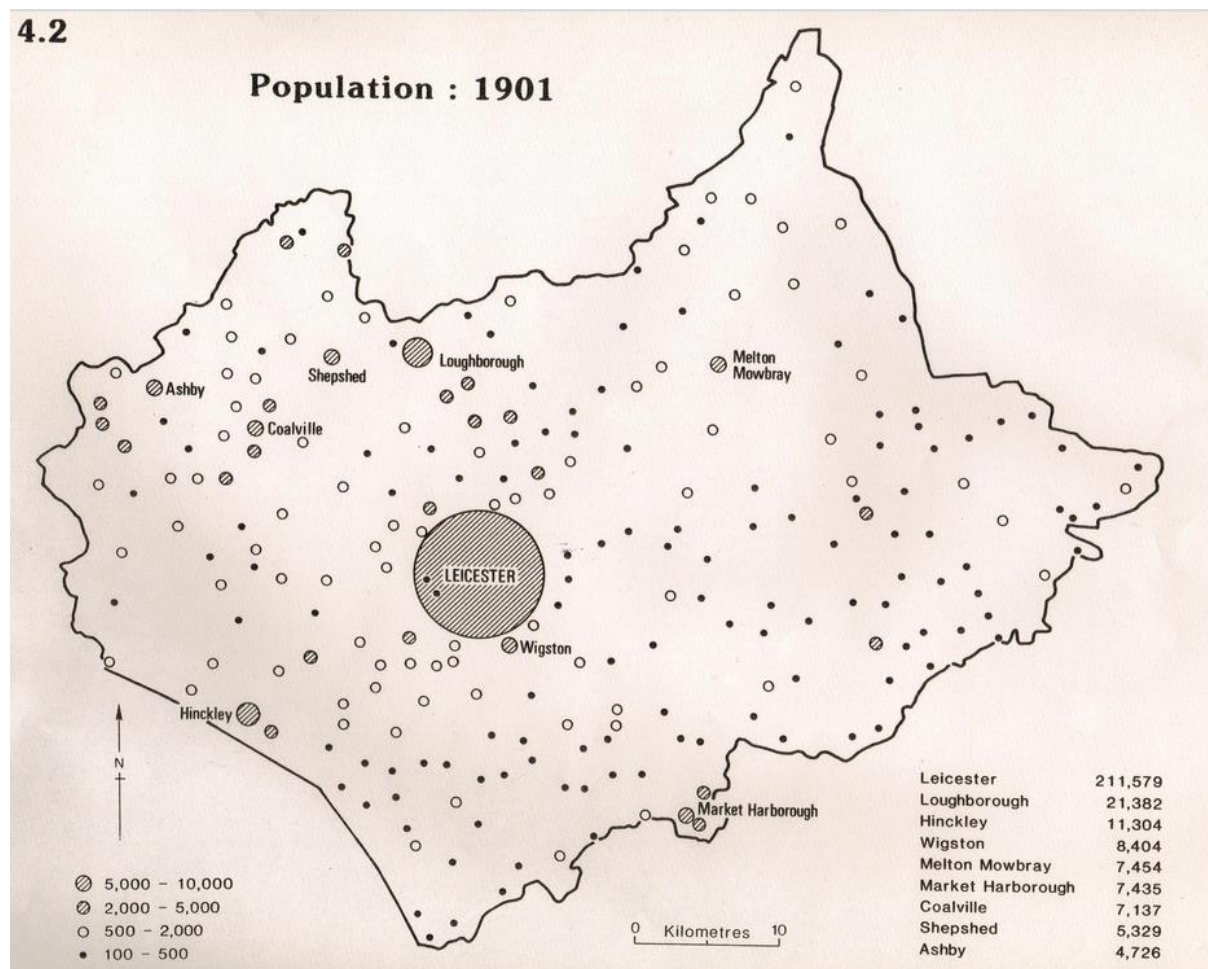
Life on the streets and in public houses of Victorian Leicester was violent. Newspapers of the time contain innumerable cases of assault. Men who could fight were highly respected within their community. Hundreds of men would gather on open land or abandoned buildings to watch prize fighters as well as informally organised contests to settle disputes. In 1887, a 34 year old plasterer, Arthur Taylor (34), a plasterer of Sanvey Gate, died from injuries received in a fight with Samuel Fowkes (27), of Barston Street. The incident was the outcome of a long-standing dispute between the two after Taylor had cut open Fowkes's head with a pewter pot the previous year. A meeting in the Star Inn led to agreement to fight the matter out on the Pasture, where they met after closing time. A witness reported that a crowd gathered to watch a fight of many rounds which lasted 30 - 40 minutes. Two to three minutes before the end, Taylor exclaimed 'You. You have given me one; you have kicked me'. Fowkes was quick to deny the accusation. Afterwards, Taylor 'gave over', proposing a wager for a further fight, which Fowkes refused. At the assizes, Fowkes was found guilty of manslaughter but received only the seemingly lenient sentence of two weeks hard labour as the judge found it 'a fair stand-up fight'. Leisure activities, for those that could afford it centred around the church, music halls, public houses and 'pre-modern' sporting activities.

Loughborough, the second largest Leicestershire town are just 12 miles apart. Travelling between towns throughout the Victorian period was by horse drawn carriage, stagecoach, or train. Leicestershire's first turnpike road was a section of the main road between London and West Scotland, now the A6, built in 1726. This road ran south to north through the county passing through Market Harborough, Leicester, and Loughborough. Toll houses were located at the ends of each section. The section between Leicester and Loughborough had a toll houses at Belgrave, and Quorn. The Quorn toll house was later moved to the junction the turnpike with Woodthorpe Lane on the edge of Loughborough. Initially the road was surfaced with gravel and small stones, but by end of the 18th century granite chippings from Mountsorrel were utilised. The section between Mountsorrel and Quorn was paved with granite setts. A fast public stagecoach service was inaugurated from Leicester to London in 1766. Journey time for the 98 miles was typically 12

hours. Coaching inns were built along the route, and the old coach gateways can still be seen at the Three Swans (originally known as the Swan) and the Angel Hotel in Market Harborough. In 1822 the whole road was re-laid with Tarmac, and the volume of traffic began to increase, until the advent of the railway in the 1840s. The Turnpike Trust was wound up in 1878. Without the extensive rail network and regular trains professional football would not have been possible, as it allowed teams and their supporters travel by train across the country.

Loughborough by comparison with Leicester was a small town with a population in 1888 of 11,000, which increased to 25,000 over the following decade. Robert Taylor's bell foundry, John Taylor & Co and the Falcon works, which manufactured steam locomotives, and later automobiles motor cars, before being taken over by Brush Electrical Machines were all established in the town during the industrial revolution. In 1897, Herbert Morris set up a factory in the Empress Works in Moor Lane which become one of the foremost crane manufacturers by the mid-20th century. There was also significant municipal investment in the town's infrastructure, with the construction of a new sewage works in 1895, waterworks in Blackbrook and a power station in Bridge Street in 1899. The corporation took over the Loughborough Gas Company in 1900.

The only Leicestershire town with a population greater than 5,000 at the end of the nineteenth century were Hinckley (11,304), Wigston (8,404), Melton Mowbray (7,454), Market Harborough (7,435), Coalville (7,137), Shepshed and (5,329).



## **Victorian Sport**

One of the distinguishing features of 'pre-modern' sport was the central place of cruelty to animals, and/or of contests involving animals. There was a great affection for dog sports in 19th century Leicester. As late as 1886, the Pall Mall Gazette reported that 'The Leicester rough is ... greatly addicted to small white dogs and small brown rats'. A newspaper noted in 1881 that there was a rat pit in Soar Lane, owned by a Mr. Terry, which was 'patronised by dog fanciers from the nobleman down to the nailer'. Other sporting activities popular in Leicester included dog fighting, pigeon flying, 'running naked', prize fighting and pitch n toss. The rules of many pastimes and games, some of which had previously been played with a variety of unofficial rules for several centuries, were officially codified in the early and middle years of the nineteenth century. As a result, local clubs and societies were formed across a broad range of sports including cricket, boxing, tennis, and golf and horticultural societies. Attempts to formally organise and regulate dog racing, another popular pastime, such as series of dog handicaps staged at Belgrave Road Ground in 1881, were unsuccessful.

With the rise of commercial attractions, notably cycling in the late 1870s and cricket and football in the 1880s and '90s, these sports become less prominent, or acquired 'legitimate' forms – long distance pigeon racing, boxing etc. Leicester acquired several of its major sports clubs and sporting institutions during this period - Leicester Fosse (f. 1884), Leicester Football Club (f.1880), Leicester Athletic Society (f.1868), the Belgrave Athletic Sports and Races (f.1870) and the Stoneygate School Athletic Sports (f.1867). The rapid growth of sport was reflected by the local press. Local weekly newspapers gave only occasional coverage to sport in 1873, usually items on specific events in the 'Local Notes' column. By 1883, the Leicester Daily Post carried half a column of sporting news every day, which had increased by 1893 to up to two pages, with fixture lists, previews, and results of local and national events. The Leicester Mercury had a Saturday evening football edition. Such extensive coverage continued to be the norm until 1914, although by 1903, local clubs joined the Football League (1895) and County Championship (1896), and the Tigers (Leicester Football Club, the leading rugby club) acquired a national reputation. Several attempts were made to establish a Leicester sporting paper, but as elsewhere, the effectiveness of the local daily and weekly press reduced the potential audience, and none lasted for very long. The prominence of sport in the press, and complaints by churchmen and others that sport took up too much of people's attention, indicate that by 1900, sport had acquired a far more salient place in the consciousness of large sections of the population.

However, it was cycling, rather than football or cricket that attracted the biggest crowds in Leicester throughout most of the 1870 and 1880s. The only exception being the cricket match against Australia in 1878. Even then, the first day crowd of 12,000 at Aylestone Road was no bigger than that which gathered for the 25-mile bicycle championship of the world in 1884. The Cyclist observed in July of that year that the visit gave the ground a 'more animated appearance than is usual for cricket matches'. In 1886, the county cricket club brought in only 2.3% of total revenue against 32.4% from admissions and season tickets and 49.1% from the sale of refreshments.

## **Development of Football in Leicestershire**

Leicestershire has a long and extensive football tradition, which goes back as far as the mid-fourteenth century, when John O'Gaunt stopped at Ratby on his way to Leicester to watch a football match. The development of modern football in Leicestershire as elsewhere can be divided into three distinct stages, each characterised by more orderly and elaborate behaviour and by more complex and formal organisation than its predecessors. Changes in the social context of the

game that accompanied the transition between each stage, proved significant for its further development. During the first of these stages, from Medieval times until well into the nineteenth century, so-called folk football was a simple, wild and unruly folk game played according to unwritten rules. Considerable local variation existed.

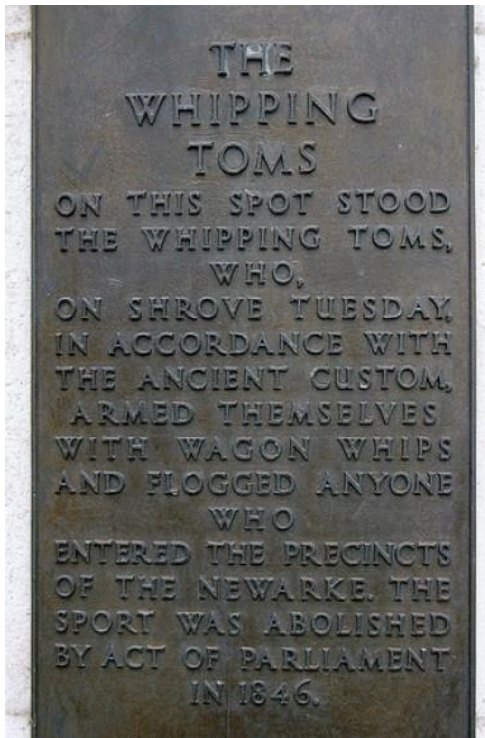
The second stage took place from about 1840 to 1860 when the game was taken up by public schools as it was well suited to the ideals of "Muscular Christianity". Like cricket, football was perceived to be a "character-building" sport. Rules were written down for the first time and players were required to exercise a greater degree of self-control in their play than had been previously demanded of them. Each public school developed its own set of rules, which were written down for the first time. However, when students from the various public schools played the game in university, the need for more a more universal set of rules was required. This led to the third and final stage, codification. An early set of rules were developed at Cambridge University in 1848. Many young men continued to want to play football even after leaving school or university, which led to the formation of football clubs. The oldest documented non-university football club still in existence today is Sheffield FC formed in 1857. Sheffield FC devised its own set of rules, which became widely used in northern England. A major milestone in the ongoing efforts to codify the game was the formation of the Football Association in 1863. The first set of rules was similar to the Cambridge Rules and the Sheffield Rules, overturned the two rules in the Cambridge Rules that allowed a player to run with the ball after making a fair catch, and to trip, hack, hold or push an opponent, resulted in several clubs leaving the Football Association, and subsequently forming the Rugby Football Union in 1871. Codification of the game along with social and economic changes that swept across Great Britain saw both Association and Rugby become mass spectators and participation sports during the 1870s. League and cup competitions both at a local and national further enhanced the popularity of both games.

### **Early Leicestershire Football**

There was significant overlap between the stages of football development. Folk football continued to be played throughout Leicestershire as the public schools and other middle-class organisations adopted a more organised game. It was not until the establishment of local and regional cup and league competitions from the late 1880s that there was a clear distinction between rugby and association football.

Shrove Tuesday was the great football day in England. In some places the people who would not turn out to play were roughly treated, either in person or property. In others, before the game began the ball was carried from house to house, and money was demanded. There is no doubt that in many cases it was given because it was found to be cheaper and more convenient to give it to the football players than to pay to the glaziers. In travelling through rural districts on Shrove Tuesday, as late as the early part of the present century, it was quite a common thing to find doors and windows barricaded up. Women had to stay at home, and travellers to avoid any place where the ball was. The sides were generally parish against parish, or, in cities, the men engaged in rival trades would contend against each other. The goals were frequently the parish churches or alehouses. The scenes in these contests led, in many cases, to the interference of law, which ultimately stopped them. In others, the players seem to have wearied of the disputes and fights.

Although folk football does not appear to have been played in Leicester on a large scale, there are records of games being played in county towns and villages. Instead, Leicester folk participated in Whipping Toms – a rather bizarre game even by Medieval standards. Every year, on Shrove Tuesday, a fair was held in The Newarke. Large numbers of people gathered to buy and sell goods. Crowds of mainly young men drank alcohol and sang traditional songs and hymns. Various games



Plaque on the Hawthorn Building DMU.

were played. The last of these games started at midday and was always a game similar to hockey. Played between two crowds of men and boys, both teams were armed with sticks that had a knob or a hook at the end and a wooden ball. The ends of the Newarke courtyard formed the goals. As with bottle kicking the game had little rules or stipulations and quickly became violent and injury was almost certain. At about 1 o'clock the game ended, and the "Whipping Toms" made an appearance; two or more men in blue smocked frocks, a handkerchief tied over one eye and carrying a long cart-whip. They were led out into the crowds by three men who each signalled their arrival by ringing a small, brass bell. At once the whipping started. They were not by custom allowed to whip above the knee, and anyone kneeling down was spared. You could also be spared of the whipping if you made a small donation of Two Pence to the "Whipping Toms", which many gladly did. The Whipping Toms also liked to line people up and whip up and down the line. Often people attempted to avoid the whipping by wrapping material around their legs. However, the 'victims' would attempt to protect themselves with their hockey sticks and fought back.

Unsurprisingly it often got a little out of hand. On the 16<sup>th</sup> February 1847 an Act of Parliament officially ended it and the last Whipping Toms put up a valiant fight – quite literally – but it was gone.

Hallaton, a village 16 miles southeast of Leicester still plays a '[Bottle-Kicking](#)' match, a remnant of traditional mass football games of the past. The contest between the villages of Hallaton and Medbourne still takes place on Easter Monday. There are no bottles but three small barrels that were carried, not kicked. The game has no rules, except that there is no eye-gouging, no strangling, and no use of weapons. Each bottle is tossed in the air, signalling the start of the competition. Each team tries to move the bottles, on a best-of-three basis, across two streams one mile apart, by any means possible. The contest is a rough one, with teams fighting to move the bottles over such obstacles as ditches, hedges, and barbed wire. Broken bones are commonplace. Participants and spectators return to Hallaton after the game, where players who put in an especially good effort (for example, carrying a barrel across the goal stream or holding on to a barrel for quite some time) are helped up onto the top of the ten-foot-tall Buttercross, and the opened 'bottle' is passed up for them to drink from before being passed around the crowd. The festive day normally draws to a close with participants and spectators retiring to the pub for drink and banter. Locals say a visiting grandson took the basics of bottle-kicking back to his school in Rugby, creating the modern game of rugby football. It is worth noting that the rugby ball also mimics the shape of the small beer keg (bottle) used in the pagan event.



*Bottle kicking 'dummy'  
used from 1850 to 1950  
Ref: Harborough  
museum*

In November 1822 a football match was played in the field at Snarestone, for 12 guineas aside between twelve persons of Appleby, and the same number of Ibstock, However, due to some unfair play on the part of Appleby team the game was not properly decided. Although the Ibstock

youths were deprived of their best player at the commencement of the game, owing to a sprain, "they got 105 byes, while their opponents only obtained two" Several thousand persons assembled to watch the encounter.

Fifteen of Great Wigston and the same number from Blaby played a football match on Monday 6 February 1829 for £6. The parties met in a field near Blaby. The Blaby men appeared the much stronger and tallest, but soon after the game began, it was clear that the Wigston players were clearly the "most active." An informant stated to the Leicester Chronicle that Blaby players were "thrown one after the other, and lay sprawling on the ground lie butts of trees, and that Wigston won cleverly in a short time." This version of events was according to one reader was 'not exactly the case, for it was allowed by a great number present, that it was quite the reverse. Two of Wigston men were down to one of Blaby'. The letter to the editor ended with the following challenge, "I have the authority to state, that the Blaby men are willing to play them again on Shrove Tuesday, for double the money played for before, or any sum they please to mention, providing they will act as men, and play honourably and fairly." This match did not taken place. The Blaby men were at their post at the time appointed, but the Wigston men did not attend,

Local printers played those from Derby on Good Friday 1838.

The Great Leicestershire Cricket and Football Club that existed in the early 1840s is thought to be one of the oldest football clubs in England. Little, however, is known about this club.

In a field near Countesthorpe on Shrove Tuesday 1852 several thousand spectators from the adjacent villages watched a fifteen-a-side game between Enderby and Wigston. Bell's Life, the leading sports weekly of the early Victorian period reported that: 'the play was excellent on both sides for half an hour. Then Wigston, finding they were losing, got out of temper and began to kick the Blaby youths, but they smartly returned it'.

A month or so later eleven youths from Enderby met the same number from Whetstone in a meadow near the river Soar, about half-way between the two villages. Whetstone won the first game in twenty minutes. 'Great was the joy of the Whetstonians at the easy of their victory. Hats were thrown up, handkerchiefs waved in the air and great was the shouting.' The second game however altered matters, Enderby winning after a very good game. According to a spectator's bets were freely offered on Enderby, but few appeared willing to take them The third game was easily won by Enderby in 21 minutes and thus "won the prize, winning two games out of three."

Rutlandshire 58<sup>th</sup> Regiment in December 1860 became the first 'foreign' opponents Sheffield FC, the world's oldest football club, at Hillsborough Barracks, Sheffield. The Regiment who had amongst its officers several gentlemen who were formerly noted players at the public school, lost the game one goal (5 rouges) to 1 goal (10 rouges).

Leicestershire newspapers throughout the 1870s regularly featured reports of football matches taking place involving numerous schools in both Leicester and Leicestershire, including Wyggestion, Stoneygate, Field House, Leicester Grammar Uppingham, Ashby Grammar, Loughborough Grammar and Uppingham. Football during this period was played using Sheffield Rules, the Cambridge Rules, the Football Association rules plus universities and schools had their own versions. The only Leicestershire local rules found to date are those of Uppingham School – the simplified rules of 1862 are remarkably similar to the Sheffield Rules. It is very difficult to pinpoint exactly what game was being played from newspaper reports. Only football had a player in goal. Also, scrimmage is a football term not rugby. The use of the word "touchdown" comes from the 1863 Football Association rules which gave a team a "try" at a goal if the attacking team touched the ball down behind their opponents' goal. Goals were the point scoring mechanism, but the number of touchdowns or rouges was used as a back-up in the case of no goals. However,

this was abandoned by the Football Association in 1867. On the other hand, a “touch in goal” is solely a rugby term as set out in the Rugby School rules of 1862.

Short lived football clubs were also formed during this time, but it is unclear if these clubs played local, rugby or association rules. When teams played each other, they would often play by the home side’s rules or sometimes play one half to one set of rules and the second half by the other set of rules.

The first known recorded game of association football involving Leicestershire teams occurred on 10 March 1875, when Ashby-de-la-Zouch Football Club and Leicester Athletic FC drew 1-1. The 12-a-side game was staged on the Baths Grounds in Ashby. Other local football clubs which are known to have played association football during the 1870s include Thursday Half-Holiday, Coalville, St Margaret’s, Wigston, and Wyggestion School.

Coalville Football Club, founded in 1876 and adopted the Sheffield rules, published a fixture list for their inaugural season:

**COALVILLE FOOTBALL CLUB**  
*Matches for 1876-77*

|     |    |  |
|-----|----|--|
| Nov | 18 | Wigston - Wigston                              |
|     | 25 | St John’s – Burton                             |
|     | 30 | Thursday Half-Holiday                          |
| Dec | 9  | Wetmore Club – Burton                          |
|     | 16 | St Margaret’s                                  |
| Jan | 6  | St John’s                                      |
|     | 13 | St Margaret’s – Leicester                      |
|     | 17 | Ashby Town Club                                |
|     | 27 | Wetmore Club                                   |
| Feb | 1  | 1 <sup>st</sup> Derby Rifle Volunteers - Derby |

This is the first known fixture list for a Leicestershire team. It can be assumed that all the clubs listed also played Sheffield Rules football, prior to adopting association rules. By the late 1870s and early 1880s newspaper reports clearly distinguish between association and rugby football.

To gauge some idea of how association football was played during the mid-1870s , it is worth taking a look at the advice published about playing Association, as quoted in Victorian Goal Posts by

An old football annual by Alfred Davis, 1892. Alfred Davis was the long serving secretary of Marlow F.C. who now play at the Alfred Davis memorial ground. He coached the England national amateur football team that represented Great Britain and won gold at the 1908 Olympic Games. He looks back at a 1874 football annual when he says that dribbling was *“the distinguishing feature of the play, and hence the need for only one back, for a player, once in possession of the ball, generally kept it until deprived by one of the opposing side.”* *The Football Calendar of 1876-77 gives the following advice to teams which many would take with them into the 1880’s. “Best arrangement for a team is two backs, two half backs, six forwards (two left wing, two centre and two right wing).The goalkeeper shall be tall, active with a good eye and plenty of pluck. The backs should be fairly heavy and should never mince matters with opposing forwards. Half measures will not be successful. “either a charge, or a kick, or both”* should be the motto of the backs. Half backs should either get the ball themselves, or make it an absolute certainty for their backs to get it. The forwards should work in couples, and should

always worry, and stick to their opponents until they get the ball themselves or enable their half backs to play it". That sets out the basics of Association game at this time.

On 3 August 1880 at the George Hotel in the centre of Leicester, Leicester Societies FC, Leicester Amateur FC and Leicester Alert FC amalgamated together to form Leicester Football Club – the Tigers. As with many parts of the Midlands, rugby was the first football code to gain mass popularity. Leicester Fosse was formed 4 years after the Tigers. Coventry rugby club was formed in 1874 but Singers FC (Coventry City) was not established until 1883. Nuneaton Town were founded in 1889, 10 years after Nuneaton rugby, whilst Northampton Saints were formed in 1880 but Northampton Town not until 1897. However, this does not appear to be the case in the north Leicestershire towns and villages of Coalville, Sheepshed, Loughborough and Ashby-de-la-Zouch where football appears to have been the dominate code. This is presumably a result of the close proximity of Nottingham, which was a hotbed of initially Sheffield Rules and then Association football

Leicester had only a handful of football teams until the early 1880s. It was not until Frank Gardner, the founding father of Leicester Fosse in 1884, who aged just 19 helped form the Leicestershire Football Association in 1886 becoming its President, that football became popular in Leicester. The Association and Gardner's drive and enthusiasm transformed the game into a mass spectator sport across Leicestershire.

This website will take you on this footballing journey from obscurity to obsession.....