

# CLUB HISTORY

The first references to rugby being played in Colchester date back to 1875, but the current club was established in 1925. The founder was local businessman Norman Pertwee who created the club with some fellow enthusiasts, including local GP Dr Nolan-Fell a New Zealander who won 7 caps for Scotland between 1901 and 1903, perhaps making him the first "Kilted Kiwi". Fell persuaded his colleagues that the club should adopt the team colours of his native land, hence the All-Black strip club players still wear. The club took the Raven as its symbol, those being the birds depicted on top of the town hall in Colchester High Street.

## VENUES

Colchester have played at a number of grounds starting at the Horse Show ground which was at the top of Halstead Road in Lexden, on the site of the current Ambulance Station. The Club continued to play throughout the war using the pitches at Colchester Royal Grammar School, then in 1948 they moved to a field in Olivers Lane off Gosbecks Farm to the South of the town. The headquarters was originally in the historic Red Lion Hotel in Colchester High Street where players had the use of baths and had tea with the visitors, but they were eventually asked to move on by the landlords so they first went across the road to the George Hotel, and eventually to the Globe Hotel in North Station Road.

In 1950 the local council was persuaded to allow Rugby on one of its playing fields, and the club moved to Mile End where they had the use of a hut for changing but little else. Some members took it upon themselves to build a clubhouse, which was finished in 1953. In 1978 the council provided the Club with its current grounds at Mill Road and a new clubhouse was built, with the opening ceremony performed by England scrum-half Nigel Starmer-Smith.

## TEAMS

Colchester started off running a Saturday side and a Thursday side, both of which were frequently supplemented with players from the Colchester Garrison. After the war a second team was started and the third team came into being in the early 1950s. By the late 1980s the senior section was at its strongest in terms of playing numbers and regularly fielded seven sides; the First XV, Ravens, A's, Cavaliers, Roundheads, Rocs and Dodos, but the advent of league rugby took its toll and the mid 90s saw Colchester reduced to five sides. Although there was a period when it looked like these teams would be further reduced, Colchester still manages to field all five sides on a Saturday and is one of only two or three Eastern Counties clubs able to do so.

Colchester's Veterans team, the Roman Ruins, has been a longstanding feature of the club, having toured to New Zealand and other exotic places in the past. It is now established as a midweek side playing other local Veteran sides on a Wednesday evening.

## INTERNATIONALS

Colchester had a number of international players before the War; Joe Kendrew, who captained England when winning 10 caps between 1930 and 1936, Jimmy Unwin who played four times on the wing for England scoring 3 tries in 1937/38, and Hal "Boy" Withers who was the Irish No 8 in 1931. The last club player to represent his country at the top level was Dr John Steeds, a GP who played for Saracens before moving to Colchester in the late 1940's. In 1949 he was selected to play for England against France in the Five Nations Championship, and he went on to gain a further four caps. It was not unusual for him to play for Colchester one week and for England the next, but because he had been unavailable for training he was dropped to the Colchester second team!

The Reverend Tom Hollingdale was President of Colchester RFC in the 1950s having played six times at No 8 for Wales between 1927 and 1930, and more recently Colchester has been able to field a couple of minor internationals - Former Director of Rugby Chris Spowart played for Hong Kong and Roger Marshman represented Bermuda in the World Cup! Also Alex Mann (Germany) and Edward Osumu (Kenya) played for the club when

studying at Essex University, and Jeromey "Pot Plant" Vuletich represented Croatia at 7-a-side. The club has produced a number of England Students and Colts; Richard Acland in 1983 who still plays for Colchester now, Simon Wright in 1987 who went to Wasps and Matt Barham in 1993 who went on to play for Coventry.

In 1999/2000 three youth players were selected for London Divisional squads and three more were called for either Scottish or Irish Exiles Colts. In 2001/2 Pete Smith and Tyler Fitzpatrick played for London Division 16G and Bryn Lewis played for Welsh Exiles 18G and is a possible Welsh International of the future. In 2002/3 Ben Acton played for England Students U19 against Scotland, and the following season represented English Universities.

The Summer of 2004 saw three young players gain International Honours; Brendan Cook was selected for England Lionhearts Amateur Rugby League squad, Joel Barrett was selected for the Dutch National Rugby League side, and James Sarek played for Nigeria U18s.

### **CUP COMPETITIONS**

Colchester was part of the Essex County RFU at its inception, but in the 1980s, Colchester and other clubs in the Tendring peninsula became part of the Suffolk Rugby Union and in 1992 the club won the Suffolk Plate competition. In 1995 Colchester won the Chadacre Suffolk Cup defeating Stowmarket in the final, the first time that neither Sudbury nor Ipswich had won the County Title in over 20 years. Two seasons later Colchester were again in the final against favourites Sudbury. After a draw at Moorsfield, 2000 spectators packed Mill Road the following Wednesday for the replay under floodlights, only to see Colchester lose the game to an injury time try and conversion. Many Colchester supporters who were there still have nightmares about that evening!

Colchester has retained its links with the Essex County Rugby Union, and in 2002/3 Colchester Ravens beat Southend Priors in the final of the Essex 2nd XV Cup.

Colchester could not enter any National Cup competitions until the NPI Intermediate Cup was established in 1996. This tournament was set up to accommodate those clubs too low in the national leagues to enter the Senior Knockout Cup (currently the Tetley Bitter Cup) but too high to be eligible for the Junior Knockout Cup (currently the Tetley Bitter Vase). Colchester, having won the Suffolk Cup and promotion the season before were on the crest of a wave, and although their league results were poor they got through to the fifth round where they were drawn at home to Cinderford. Two coach loads of supporters came up from the Forest of Dean to watch their side beaten 29-16 with 24 points coming from Combined Services fly half Paul Knowles, putting Colchester into the quarter finals with an away tie at Thanet Wanderers. However, it turned out that Knowles' registration documents had not been filed in time, so Colchester were excluded from the competition and Cinderford went through instead. Thanet went on to win the competition in its inaugural year. Since then, Colchester have failed to get beyond the second round.

### **LEAGUES**

When leagues were introduced in the 1980s, Colchester were put in London Division 3 North East (level 7), and there they remained until 1994/5 when they won the league title and promotion to London 2 North (level 6). The league and cup double of that year has been the highlight of the club's achievements in recent years, and to some extent it precipitated a decline in fortunes. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and it is now clear that instead of resting on its laurels having gained promotion, the club should have looked to the future and started to build up its player base. As the first team players got older, there were not enough efforts made to help youth players make the transition to senior rugby, and to recruit new players from elsewhere. As a result, Colchester was relegated at the end of the 1998/99 season. The reorganisation of the leagues for 2000/01 and a string of poor results saw Colchester relegated two more times and drop to level 10, Eastern Counties Division Two North.

However, putting their faith in their young players has paid off with a remarkable reversal. Two unbeaten seasons on 2001/2 and 2002/3 has seen Colchester return to the London Divisions with a record of 40 league wins in a row.

## **YOUTH AND MINIS**

Colchester has run a Colts side since the 1960s, but it was not until 1975 that Youth and Mini Rugby were introduced by Frank Johnson. This was an immediate hit at the club, and it wasn't long before there were teams at every age group from 7 to 17. There is now an Under 6's group which is mainly for the younger brothers and sisters of players in older age groups. The first Colchester Mini Rugby Festival was held in 1982 and the club now hosts successful tournaments for every age group except Under 13.

The first major youth title for the Club was won in the 1980s. Colchester Colts, coached by John Fitzgibbon and Steve "Wally" Whiteman, successfully entered and won the Essex Colts Cup during the 1983/4 season. The team were boys from local schools and included players who have become club stalwarts such as Roy Abrehart, Steve Docherty and Mark "Morph" Scarth. The competition started with a close win against Canvey Island. Colchester then progressed through several rounds before meeting Thurrock in the final held at East London RFC before a large crowd. In a hard fought game Colchester triumphed 18-12.

The Youth section has grown in strength and in 1990 won its first Suffolk Title when the Colts lifted the St Edmunds Cup, and the club went on to claim the Colts Championship title four times in all during the 90s. When a Suffolk U17s competition was introduced in 1993, Colchester were the inaugural winners and in that year also became the Eastern Counties champion, repeating the feat in 2003 and 2004. The Youth sides have dominated Suffolk rugby from the early 90s, both at 15-a-side and 7-a-side. Being one of only a handful of clubs in Suffolk that runs a complete youth section, and the biggest one at that, has meant that Colchester players regularly make up a large proportion of Suffolk Youth Development squads and representative sides. It is also usual for Eastern Counties youth sides to have at least one Colchester player in their midst.

The Mini Rugby section also has had its share of success, winning the first Suffolk RU Mini Rugby Festival in 1999. Three of the six teams became County Champions, and in the same year Colchester's Mini section won the Hanbury Allen Award for Best Club at the Chelmsford Festival where the top teams in Essex compete. The Mini Section has been sponsored by McDonald's Restaurants since 1994, and this support has meant that Colchester has been able to provide some of the best minis training facilities and equipment in East Anglia.

## **SCHOOLS**

Colchester's success at attracting youth players is due to a large extent to their close working with local primary and secondary schools. Anton Vidler was the first Schools Youth Liaison Officer, and in the early 1990s he introduced New Image Rugby to Primary Schools across Colchester and Tendring. Annual competitions were staged and have proved to be a great hit with schoolchildren. Anton's work was continued by Tim Grimsey who, with support from Andrew Sarek, has extended the club's support to secondary schools, and has introduced Tag Rugby as the preferred version of non-contact rugby. The club is the venue for the finals of the North East Essex Schools Association Rugby competition, and the club's youth sides have annual fixtures against Colchester Royal Grammar School.

This commitment to spreading the game of rugby has resulted in Colchester Rugby Club three times being awarded the Wilkinson Sword Trophy for *"The development of sport for young people by a club or organisation"* by the Colchester & District Sports Council.

## **LADIES**

Ladies rugby was a feature at Colchester since the late 1980s. The Iceni team has had its share of success, and even produced an England International in the form of Assunta De Biase. But by the year 2000 the club was

struggling to field a team regularly, and a major recruitment drive was needed to inject new life into the ladies game. An award winning girls tag rugby programme run by the club has seen the emergence of an U16 girls team at Colchester, which will form the nucleus of a women's team of the future.

## **THE FUTURE**

So what of the future? Plans for a new clubhouse are well advanced, with much needed extra changing accommodation for the 20 teams the club runs. The grounds are amongst the best in the Eastern Counties, with four senior pitches, six minis pitches, floodlit training grids and two cricket pitches, all looked after by the long-serving Bill "Mac" McGenn. Sponsorship is vital to clubs nowadays, and although Colchester is fortunate to have many loyal sponsors, it is always looking for new opportunities.

The First XV's young side is rising up the leagues again. Fielding six senior sides is something to be proud of, and with over 800 members the omens are good for continuing to do so. Although youth rugby is one of the club's strengths, it needs to make sure that its younger players are nurtured and not overplayed, so that they will continue to enjoy playing rugby for as long as our veterans have, who still turn out well into their 50s!