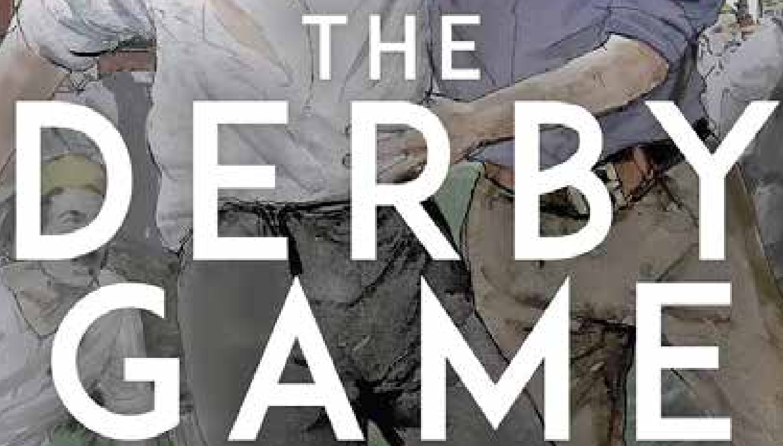
IAN COLLIS

THE DERBY GAME



A History of Local Rivalries

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1
The Game

FOR CENTURIES, Shrove Tuesday was the most exciting and eagerly awaited day of the year for many Derby folk. Young men, and others not so young, must have spent the night before dreaming of the lifelong honour and glory they could gain, if they could score a goal in the Shrovetide football. For the silk worker released from a 12-hour working day, for the grimy chimney sweep, for bricklayers, tanners and china painters alike, here was a day of revelry when the cares of the winter could be forgot. Publicans checked their cellars and rubbed their hands in glee at the thought of the thousands of carefree players and supporters about to engulf the town. Owners of property in the town centre fretted about whether their windows, walls and gardens would survive the following day unscathed. Pedlars checked their stocks of pies, gingerbread, fruit and nuts. For weeks before Shrove Tuesday, the annual game had been the focus of endless local debate and argument, a welcome distraction in the final weeks of a dark and dreary winter. It was the big day, something the 19th-century writer and clergyman, Rev. Thomas Mozley, recalled in his memoirs as 'THE great event of the Derby Year.'[1]

On the day itself, the atmosphere swelled before the start of the game and rippled through the town. The public houses were crammed with noisy drinkers, the pedlars were shouting their wares. Every vantage point was crowded: young boys

climbed posts to sit or stand on walls and roofs, the better-off had paid householders for prime viewing spots and leaned out of upper-storey windows. In Georgian times the aristocracy – or if absent their servants – could observe discreetly from their ducal townhouses in the Market Place and Cornmarket, while the gentry could commandeer positions in the Town Hall and the Assembly Rooms. The scene before the start of the game was described by *Penny Magazine:*

> At two o'clock on Shrove Tuesday starts the sport; and as the hour approaches, the whole town seems alive with expectation. It is a universal holiday, and all ranks and ages are seen streaming towards the market-place. Here the shops are found to be shut, and the houses all around filled with spectators, men, women, and children, crowding the windows and perched upon the house-tops. The players arrive by degrees from opposite sides of the market-place, coming generally in parties of a dozen or more, each greeted as it appears by the cheers of its respective side.[2]

The throng in the centre of the Market Place would build and build. All eyes would turn to the town hall clock and as two o'clock approached the 'war cries' of the different sides started to ring out across the square; 'All Saints' for ever' would be met with a reply of 'St Peter's for ever'. From the rooftops and walls little gangs of children chanted disparaging ditties about the opposing side. The men and lads in the very centre were prepared for action; no coats or jackets, their trousers bound with strapping round their legs, coloured handkerchiefs or cloths round their heads, their arms bare:

> At the appointed hour arrives the ball, carried by the hero of last year who was lucky enough to goal it then.

> The crowd of players opens to receive him; and going into the middle of the market, he throws up the ball; all cluster round it, and the game begins.[3]

So, what was this game that drew such crowds and created local heroes? And where exactly is Derby? The city – it achieved city status in 1977 as part of The Queen's Silver Jubilee – sits slap bang in the middle of England. It is part of the East Midlands, but only a few miles from the edge of the West Midlands. Mozley considered it the most southerly town of northern England. Immediately to the north of Derby, the land starts to rise, and old houses are built of the underlying gritstone before the limestone of the white peak landscape takes over. A little further north and a latticework of drystone walls leads into the Peak District National Park. Nowadays, the Peak District, with its scenic moors and dales, is a magnet for tourists and day-trippers but centuries ago, it must have seemed a wild and remote place, prompting Daniel Defoe to denounce it as a 'howling wilderness'.[4] Most of the Peak District drains into the River Derwent and Derby was built originally at the lowest crossing point of that river.

Today, Derby is well linked by railways and strategic roads. It can be promoted in brochures and websites as a central business hub. But for most of its history, Derby's 'furthest from the sea' location meant that it was a lot more difficult to reach than England's coastal towns, or those occupying the banks of great rivers. Although the River Derwent runs into the River Trent a few miles to the south, navigation upriver from the Trent to Derby was often difficult, and certainly did not provide a water route to anywhere further north. While it would be wrong to think of pre-industrial Derby as a backwater, the town was mostly left to look after its own concerns. Perhaps this is one reason why it managed to sustain an ancient tradition that had been extinguished many

years before in other large towns – Shrovetide football. But while Derby's relative remoteness might partly explain how this riotous game made it into the 19th century, it was a set of other extraordinary factors that gave what became known as the Derby Foot-Ball another half-century of life. We will explore these factors – events, personalities, movements – in later chapters. But for now, let's look at how the Derby Game was played.

Despite its name, Shrovetide football was very different from the game of football that is now played across the globe. There was a ball, and you could kick it if you wanted to. There were also two goals. A few of the players on each side might wear a particular colour. Everything else was different. Indeed, an article in the *Derby Mercury* in 1840 distinguishes between the manly and healthful game of football, as played in a meadow between neighbouring villages in Derbyshire, and the 'filthy and disgusting' sport played in Derby at Shrovetide.[5] The bucolic version used kicking as the main method of forcing a ball with an inflated bladder towards a goal. The Derby Game, at least by the late Georgian and early Victorian eras, was more like hug ball, with deliberate holding and shielding of the ball, while opponents sought to tear it away by any means possible.

The Derby Game had no defined pitch or playing area. Although the opposing goals were roughly a mile apart, the two 'teams' could use any route they liked to get to them. The modern city of Derby straddles the River Derwent, but its early growth was largely confined to the west bank of the river. Here, the higher ground offered greater protection from the floods that affected the lower-lying land to the east. But the watercourse that was central to historic Derby was not the Derwent; it was the Markeaton Brook. This brook provided a more manageable location for water powered mills and ran west to east through the centre of town, on its way into the Derwent. Historically, the brook seems to have been used to

help define the boundaries of parishes to the north like All Saints' and St Alkmund's and those to the south like St Peter's and most of St Werburgh's. In summer the brook might wane to a few inches of water, but in winter it often had real power and frequently flooded the town.

Derby Shrovetide Football nominally pitted the parish of St Peter's, centred around St Peter's Street, against the parish of All Saints' centred around Irongate. In 1841 the population of St Peter's exceeded 10,000 people, while All Saints' had fewer than 4,500 residents. Unsurprisingly, the All Saints' side called upon support from the small neighbouring parishes of St Alkmund's and St Michael's. Residents from the parish of St Werburgh's appear to have supported either side. The key parishes were all included in the following rhyme:

Pancakes and fritters,
Say All Saints' and St Peter's
When will the ball come,
Say the bells of St Alkmun;
At two they will throw,
Says Saint Werabo';
O! very well,
Says little Michael.[6]

Markeaton Brook seems to have been the dividing line, with those to the north supporting All Saints' and those to the south connected to St Peter's. The core of each 'team' – in reality a mob of at least several hundred people – was formed by the men of these parishes. But it was also boosted by 'foot-ballers' from neighbouring parishes and villages outside Derby. Different parts of the town and outlying villages appeared to favour either one side or the other. Unusually, compared with festival football played elsewhere in the country, different colours were associated with each side: blue for St Peter's; yellow for All Saints'.

Map of Derby (West) in 1817. The goal for All Saints' was to the north west of the town centre, off Nuns Street. (Credit: Derby Local Studies Library)

In the days when the game had official approval, the ball would be thrown up at two o'clock by a local dignitary, probably the mayor. In the last few decades of the game, when opposition to the event began to grow and mayors became less keen to be associated with it, the ball was brought into the square by the victors of the previous year. The arrival and deployment of the key players was carefully choreographed beforehand. For example, if St Peter's had won the contest in the previous year, then, shortly before two o'clock, a cohort of their best men would emerge, suitably fuelled, from a nearby hostelry and carry the ball down the Morledge towards the Market Place. They would be met by a gauntlet of All Saints' players, who would close in behind them. This compressed mass would then surge into the Market Place. The St Peter's men would gravitate towards the western end of the square, presumably to be better able to block the All Saints' getting to their goal via Sadler Gate or the Cornmarket. All Saints' concentrated their forces at the eastern end to try and stop St Peter's taking the ball down to the river. The two sides faced each other with hands raised and then closed together. An observer, Thomas Broughton, recalled:

> As soon as the men with the ball reached the centre each side would close in and the game would begin in earnest. In a few minutes a forest of hands would be seen, as it was dangerous to go in unless you held them up, or you would very likely have a broken arm. Soon the surging crowd swayed from one side to the other amid the deafening shouts of the players and the earnest pressing of the supporters.[7]

There were no rules to the game, and players were free to handle, hold, kick or punch the ball as the fancy took them. Some reports claim that players tried to hide the ball in their

clothing, but if this was the case the ball must have been much smaller than it was in the latter years of the game when it was around 14 inches in diameter, much larger than a modern-day football. Made of leather by local shoemakers, it was stuffed with cork shavings. The sole aim of the game was to get the ball from the Market Place to the home goal in the side's own parish – not the goal in the opposition's territory. All Saints' goal was the waterwheel on the side of Nun's Mill on the Markeaton Brook, about a kilometre west of the Market Place. By the mid-19th century, the St Peter's goal was a nursery gate on Grove Street to the north of the town, again about a kilometre away from the starting point. A goal was scored by knocking the ball three times on the 'winning post', or for All Saints' by striking the ball three times against the waterwheel, a task which could only be achieved by jumping in the mill pond. This ended the game and, according to some accounts, was celebrated by a long peal of bells from the victorious parish church.

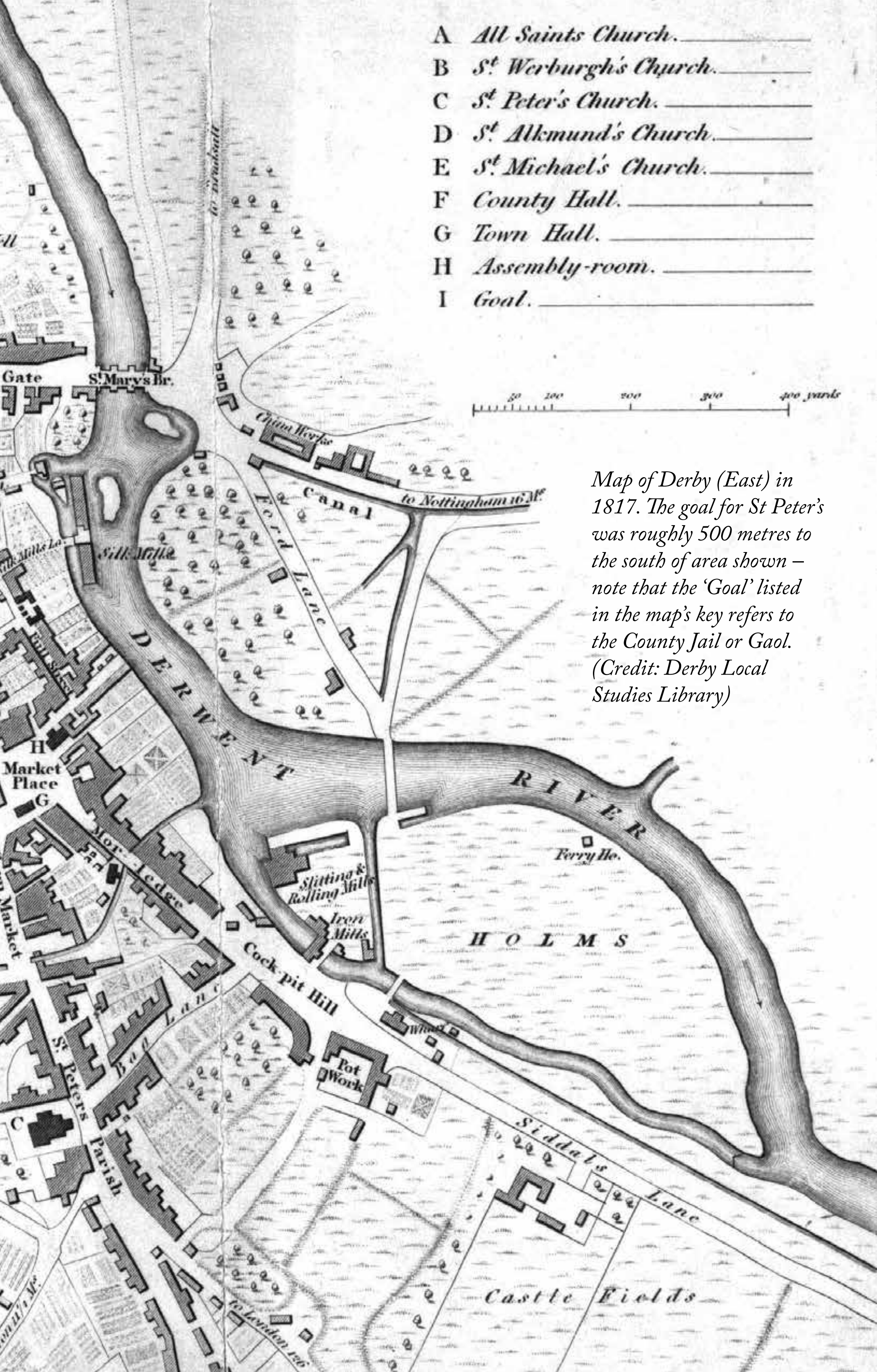
When the game started in the Market Place, there was basically a massive scrum. It might be thought that it would have been difficult for spectators in a large crowd to know where the ball was, but there was an invaluable clue, as Rev. Mozley remembered, 'In a quarter of an hour there rose a column of steam as from a funnel up to the sky on a still day, indicating the exact spot of the ball.'[8] The column of steam rose in the cold February air from where the players were straining every muscle in their efforts to get nearer the ball. The rest of the crowd would then try to push the players towards their goal. Unsurprisingly the set-to in the Market Place could result in a bruising stalemate which might take an hour or two to resolve. The ball was large and fairly heavy and could not be thrown or kicked for more than several yards. The play – pushing, shoving, grappling, wrestling – was distinctly up close and personal. If the players with the ball managed to break out

of the square and get into a narrow side street, like Sadler Gate or Irongate, then a blocking group would often be ready and waiting, and another lengthy eyeball to eyeball confrontation would be likely to ensue.

While the two goals were at a similar distance from the starting point in the Market Place, the most direct routes through the streets to these goals were rarely taken, as the narrow streets were too easily blocked by the opposing mob. Instead, as happens now at the Shrovetide game still played at nearby Ashbourne, the key players sought to get the ball into water – a tactic that soon sorts out the diehards from the blowhards. The cork shavings inside the ball helped with its buoyancy. William Hutton, who we will meet in a later chapter, tells us of his memories of the 1730s that:

> The professors of this athletic art think themselves bound to follow the ball wherever it flies; and, as Derby is fenced in with rivers, it seldom flies far without flying into the water; and I have seen these amphibious practitioners of foot-ball kicking jump into the river upon a Shrove-Tuesday when the ground was covered with snow.[9]

A common tactic used by All Saints' was to try and get the ball into Markeaton Brook and then force their way upstream, to their goal at Nun's Street Mill. Presumably, much depended on whether the brook was in full spate or had a more middling flow. St Peter's preferred the seemingly odd tactic of getting the ball into the River Derwent, which must have been bracingly cold at that time of year and to swim with the ball. This at least had the advantage of being in a downstream direction, but if pursued for too long took the ball further away from their home. No doubt this tactic helped to thin out the number of players and, if successful, resulted in a cross-country dash



Map of Derby (East) in 1817. The goal for St Peter's was roughly 500 metres to the south of area shown – note that the 'Goal' listed in the map's key refers to the County Jail or Gaol. (Credit: Derby Local Studies Library)

westward towards London Road and uphill to the St Peter's goal near Grove Street. After playing the game for several centuries, the sides knew all the key places where play could be blocked or ambushed. Groups of players were stationed at or near to these strategic spots and kept informed by breathless runners of the whereabouts of the ball. Indeed, Mozley wrote in *Reminiscences* that information on the state of play was passed through the town, as if it were news 'of a flood, or a stream of lava'.[10]

If St Peter's felt particularly strong they might try a direct route, out of the Market Place, down the Cornmarket and up St Peter's Street. But this was dangerous because they had to cross Markeaton Brook. They could throw or kick the ball across, or push in force over an arched bridge. Even if they succeeded in getting the ball to the other side of the brook, the route to Grove Street would be uphill. Markeaton Brook was culverted at this point in the 1840s (being buried underneath Victoria and Albert Streets), but previously had to be crossed by St Peter's Bridge, which could easily be blocked by All Saints'. Even worse, if All Saints' got hold of the ball at this point, they would then have a straight run up Markeaton Brook to the waterwheel in Nun's Street.

Nevertheless, if play got near St Peter's Bridge, the Peterites had a trick up their sleeve. Rather than try to cross the bridge they would throw the ball to some of their players on the opposite side of the brook. Here, ready and waiting, were specialist players who would disappear with the ball into a nearby sewer and re-emerge with it in the River Derwent. An All Saints' player writing in 1830 revealed that the sewers 'are not higher than just to allow the explorers to pass on all fours; and that, in addition to a plentiful supply of decomposed dogs, cats, & etc they abound with thousands of what your more humorous correspondents would designate black game (water-rats)'.[11]

Although the plunge into cold waters must have thinned out the numbers, an observer explained, 'It is curious to see one or two hundred men up to their chins in the Derwent or brook, continually ducking each other.'[12] Getting the ball into the river was a predictable tactic for St Peter's, and accordingly the best landing places downstream would be 'invested by skirmishing parties' from All Saints' ready to block the Peterites' progress and try and wrest control of the ball.[13] One of these places must have been a spot on an open area called The Holmes (now called Bass's Recreation Ground) where the ferry operated. The 'ferry' was simply a rope stretched across the river which enabled a small boat and its occupants to be pulled from one side to the other. On Shrove Tuesday, the rope could be used to get footballers from one side to the other. If All Saints' managed to get the ball on to the east bank, they could then run north for half a mile and cross St Mary's Bridge, taking them back into town. No doubt they would be met at the bridge by St Peter's men intent on blocking any progress and who would be happy to take play back into the river.

The former player and policeman Benjamin Fearn recalled the tactics in the latter years of the game after the ball had got into the River Derwent:

> If Peter's got down towards the Siddals, they would attempt to land and work the ball up towards the goal, but it was now the policy of All Saints' to carry the ball further down and get it out on the other bank. Hundreds of people would line the river ready to oppose or assist any attempt at landing and the result was that the ball would sometimes go downstream as far as Chaddesden or almost to Alvaston. The osier beds at Chaddesden were the scene of several rare fights.[14]

If All Saints' succeeded in getting the ball out at Chaddesden, then according to Fearn, they would work the ball round getting as far north as the village of Allestree before getting back to their goal. This would have been a total round trip of at least five miles. The St Peter's 'countryside route' seems less onerous, Alvaston being a two-mile trip downstream of the Market Place and then a romp of another mile and a half by land back to the St Peter's goal. However, their exertions might well have been in vain, because as St Peter's approached their goal All Saints' could be ready and waiting:

> And even if they succeeded in reaching within a hundred yards or less of the gate the pressure of their opponents might be so great that the ball would be forced past, through the town – or better still, round the outskirts, through gardens and even houses, over walls and fences, anywhere, and at last into the mill-dam and up to the wheel.[15]

The game then could range over several miles, usually took several hours, and often lasted well into the evening. On one occasion a holder of the ball plunged into the river only to find himself surrounded by opponents. A mad chase in and out of the water then ensued, going upstream for five miles nearly to the village of Duffield after negotiating the weirs at Darley Abbey and Little Eaton. On another occasion, a player is claimed to have evaded capture by taking the ball into a sewer and making his way under a considerable part of the town. He emerged from his subterranean journey only to find a large party waiting for him.

The addition of support from outlying villages could be key to a successful outcome. In 1827, for example, play had been stuck for at least half an hour in a stalemate in a place called Old George Yard, when help arrived for St Peter's:

> This consisted of a body of strong and resolute men at least twenty in number, from Littleover, who had already been engaged in a successful contest at kickball with an equal party of Mickleover men. Flushed with victory, they entered the George Yard and succeeded in carrying the ball once more into the Morledge.[16]

Sometimes underhand tactics were employed, including taking the cork shavings out of the ball and smuggling the cover towards the goal underneath 'a countryman's frock or a woman's clothing'.[17] Carts were sometimes commandeered to help block narrow streets, false information spread about where the ball had gone, or cries would go up for help in saving a drowning man who turned out to be non-existent. The ball might disappear into a factory yard, like the Rolling Mill near the river, but if All Saints' shut the factory gates, St Peter's would simply lift the gates off their hinges. No hedge, fence, wall, brook or river was sufficient to stop the game.

Before each game, there must have been a lot of organisation and planning in the respective parishes about who was going to do what, where and when. The game at close quarters was incredibly energy-sapping, and no one could attempt to be continually involved throughout the several hours that the game normally took. Even leading players would be expected to take frequent rest breaks to regain some strength and energy. Luckily, crowds of supporters were on hand to provide refreshments and drag the exhausted out of harm's way, and there are many accounts of people who had gone to the game with the intention of just watching, ending up embroiled in the thick of the action.

So the game would ebb and flow, running pell-mell across fields, smashing through fences and hedgerows, pushing masses of people up streets, getting blocked in courts and alleyways, plunging into rivers and ponds. While players would know

that they should try and veer away from private gardens, this wasn't always possible, and many gardeners were left distraught at what a trampling horde could do.

Whoever managed, after all this herculean effort, tricks and turmoil, to goal the ball, became an instant hero. He was hoisted shoulder high through the winning parish and feted well into the night. The funds for this revelry were solicited by the winning players by knocking on houses and inviting contributions. The following day, Ash Wednesday, the whole performance would be repeated, but this time it would be a boys' only game, watched over by their bruised and battered elders.