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The Longest Winter

A Season with England's
Worst Ever Football Team



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A Beautiful Quiet

BEFORE THE winter comes the summer. And, in and around a football club, even a lower-league one such as Rochdale, it is a place to be when the sun shines and the days are long and languid. Ask the groundsman about the pitch and he'll tell you it is *immaculate* or *perfect*. He'll crouch on his knees to show you. Look, he says, pulling at a handful of deep-green strands and then forming an arc with his pointing arm: not a single divot in sight. The sit-on lawnmower is still, parked at the side of the pitch, but the smell of petrol is in the air, mixed with the tang of cut grass. Towards the stands, there is another smell: fresh paint, blue and white, has been daubed across wooden panels. It is the last week of June.

Last season, 1972/73, Rochdale finished mid-table. They won 14 times and lost 15, a typical and acceptable mix of a season that brought forth cheers and moans, chants and groans in equal measure as players battled through the mud and cold, driving rain and occasional sunshine. It has all gone now – over there, blown up and over the moors and far away; out of sight, out of memory. The ground, forlorn in November fog, feels today to be a snapshot of heaven fallen to earth. Terraces are brushed clean. Stands are neat and symmetrical, framed by foliage, the sycamores strong and verdant behind the Sandy Lane End.

'The Hill' is at the corner of the Pearl Street End and the Main Stand. Here, in November 1948, soil and debris heaved from the pitch in an attempt to reduce the five-foot slope from one end to the other was piled high. A handful of crush barriers are driven down hard into the mound but it is too steep and uneven to terrace. Buddleia, dandelions and, at the highest point, rosebay willow herb flourish, almost as if placed there to garland a Pennine hill caught and set among the people at play.

From the halfway line on the pitch, it is possible to see the steeple of St Clement's Church peeking above the top of the stand at the Pearl Street End. Curiously, as if prearranged by a higher force, the spire pierces the sky at the exact centre of the crossbar down below. Rays of sunlight criss-cross the four metal structures that hold aloft the floodlights at each corner of the pitch. What are those for? Surely the light never fades around these parts. All around, there is newness and hope and promise and giddiness for a season soon to begin.

A football ground is a village, an encampment of disparate souls. The villagers here at Rochdale, those who work on the grass and others who set down in the dugout, offices or boardroom, are few in number, at least until the players return in a week or so. This morning, today, Fred Ratcliffe, club chairman, has invited a few pressmen and radio lads to meet the new manager. In years to come, such events will be branded 'press days' and the terminology – lads? *pressmen?* – recast to fit a wider social agenda.

For now, this small band is doing what they did last season and many more before that. Ratcliffe leads the way on to the pitch. He is chatting to Walter Joyce, the man he appointed as manager a few weeks earlier – Tuesday, 5 June 1973, to be precise. They are a mismatch of men. Ratcliffe is small, slightly bowed and walks in short steps. Joyce is 35 years old, sure-footed and lithe, still with the resplendent aura of a sportsman, as if living within a halo. The *Rochdale Observer* will later describe him as

a 'fitness fanatic'. He is wearing a short-sleeved polyester shirt and check trousers. Before leaving the family home in Sutton, St Helens, he'd asked his wife, Doreen, whether the shirt was 'a bit feminine'; it was bright and seemed to wear him as much as he wore *it*. She'd reassured him that it was fine and he looked smart, very smart. 'Lemon is all the rage this summer,' she said, smiling. 'It's not lemon, it's yellow,' he protested.

Looking on at pitchside, respectful of the pre-eminence of the chairman and manager, is the back-up team: Peter Madden, assistant manager; Angus McLean, secretary/assistant manager (a position that would clearly need reviewing: no club had *two* assistant managers); Fred O'Donoghue, chief scout; Beryl Earnshaw, office assistant; Albert Sanderson, groundsman; and Tom Nichol, a man without a formal position but the avuncular figure found at most football clubs, with too many roles to audit.

The press corps that had made its way to Spotland to meet Walter Joyce was only three-strong – Mike Smith of BBC Radio Manchester, Stan Townsend of the *Rochdale Observer* and local freelance journalist, Jack Hammill. Was Joyce surprised to get the job? 'I suppose I was, really. Most football directors prefer someone with managerial experience but I'm pleased they chose me.' Would he be bringing in the players early for pre-season training? 'Footballers, like everyone else, need a break and most of them will have already made plans for their holidays. So I think I'll let them have their rest, but once they come in for training, I expect 100 per cent effort.'

Fred Ratcliffe was listening in, taking it in; ever thus. He knew the buggers (Rochdale supporters) would accuse him of going for the cheapest option; an established manager would invariably have commanded a higher wage. He knew also that if Joyce succeeded, the thinking would be reversed and he'd receive acclaim for having the vision to detect and foster untried talent. Ratcliffe had been on the board for more than 25 years, 20 as chairman. He knew more than enough about football

fans, how they were both loyal and fickle, that they complained and congratulated, and, of course, they each felt they could run a football club better than him. On this particular deal, what they didn't know was that Joyce had been enticed from his job in the youth set-up at Oldham Athletic on the promise that he could bring a couple of coaches with him – and they wouldn't be paid in brass washers.

The microphone was also placed in front of Ratcliffe; he was known to be good for a quote. He said a principal reason behind Joyce's appointment was his promise to assemble a squad of young players. As Ratcliffe said this, he imagined the mutterings, Brimrod to Castleton, Norden to Littleborough: Fred's cutting the wage bill again. Salaries were seldom revealed in football but everyone knew that a kid drawn from amateur football, brought to Spotland after running his guts out for Torchbearers (a local amateur club) on Lenny Barn (a nearby playing field), would earn about a fifth as much as a well-fed, well-trained stopper or striker who had played 200 matches for Scunthorpe United or similar.

The board at Rochdale AFC was typical of most lower-league football clubs. Fred Ratcliffe, the wealthiest and most charismatic, aged 59 in 1973, was essentially the club's owner, courtesy of holding the most shares. He had 12,263 of a total of almost 50,000 issued, while no other individual had more than 500. If the other directors combined all their shares, they would still have less than half the number of Ratcliffe. Many described him as a 'natural chairman' – an autocrat who, true to the cliché, didn't suffer fools but was prudent enough to listen to those whom he respected. Under his stewardship, the board had fallen together naturally, each of them local, middle-aged and moderately wealthy. Much the same as Ratcliffe, they viewed running the club largely as a call of duty – propping it up or bailing it out was how they most often described it. The drip-drip of money from their own accounts into the club's and out

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again was constant but, by way of recompense, they enjoyed their soirées and Saturday match routines; all pals together.

Football was easy in June, when even the most experienced pros succumbed to hope and optimism. They looked at the pitch and it was, as Albert the groundsman had said, ‘immaculate’. They imagined dancing across it, this way, that way, pass, move, dribble, another pass, shoot – goal. All that space to run into and time enough to chip the ball from one wing to the other, to even pose for the photographer, snap, while the ball was in arc-flight. There was no mud slowing them down, no opponents shifting their weight to block a run or raking studs against their shins, ankles or calves. Quiet was on all sides, a beautiful quiet, no grumbles or groans from the crowd, no fat bloke leaning on the perimeter fence imploring you to lump it forward or screaming that you were a mardarse or shithouse for not making a tackle that was always two yards out of reach.

Players were sparkly-healthy in June and relaxed after a summer break, even if it had only been a week or two. That dip in the sea at Scarborough or Majorca had ‘worked wonders’ on their old war wounds – the achy knee, tight hamstring or an ankle injury that sent a sharp stabbing pain into their shin when they pushed off in a particular direction. For now, today, mid-summer, they were without pain or fear of pain. In their imagination, they were running as if they were children again or in a dream, floating across the grass, quick as sprites. They tried, but couldn’t fathom, what had made it all seem so difficult last season and all the seasons before that. Football really was a beautiful game.

The cheer was shared by everyone gathered upon the Spotland turf. Stan Townsend joked with Ratcliffe about the press box chiselled into the Main Stand, so small that journalists were squashed up against a narrow ledge barely wide enough to take a notebook. The light bulb hanging above the box was invariably missing and reporters often worked in the dark,

especially at evening matches. 'Are you going to sort it, Fred?' asked Townsend. 'If it's toss-up between signing a decent full-back from Rotherham and having a joiner in for a couple of weeks building you lot a new press box, I think you know what I'm going to do, don't you? And, come on, you're not having to climb up a 14ft ladder to get to the press box like you do at Port Vale. And none of that's for printing,' said Ratcliffe.

Stan Townsend had reported faithfully and often bluntly on the club's many disappointments but he was upbeat in his preview of the forthcoming season: 'With eight goals coming in the final three games of last season, it only proved that if The Dale can relax in all the games, then they could well be challenging for promotion this season.' Walter Joyce was new to the balancing act between anticipation and realism, but volunteered: 'I can't promise promotion this season, but if the players give me their all in the games and we get off to a good start, who knows, we may well get there.'

* * *

On the other side of the stands and walls, the offices and car parks that form Spotland the football ground, is Spotland, the district of Rochdale. The name sounds comical when mispronounced as *Spot-land* rather than with the soft hybrid of 'u' and 'e' in place of 'a' in the second syllable. Rochdale people do this often with place names, as if to purposely catch out incomers and outsiders. In the local tongue, for example, Kirkholt becomes Ki'Kolt, Turf Hill is T'Fill, Whitworth is Whit'th and Milnrow is Milnrer.

'Spotland' means 'area around the Spodden', which refers to the River Spodden, a tributary of the River Roch that emanates high on the Pennine moors encircling most of the town. At different times, the water tumbles or surges down from these hillsides, through the peat and millstone grit and is responsible for all that is Rochdale. At first, it was used to power mills where

wool was woven and, later, during the Industrial Revolution, it was converted to steam as Rochdale became one of the world's most productive cotton-spinning towns of the 19th century. The incessant rainfall – it rains on average 161 days per year – provided both the energy and an attendant damp climate, so that cotton fibres, when spun, were less likely to snap.

By 1900, the population of Rochdale had increased from a few thousand before industrialisation to 120,000. The town had more than 125 mills, Acre Works to Yew Vale, with tall, belching chimneys jabbing the skyline. Dunlop Mill was believed to be the biggest in the world, built over six years using 14 million Accrington bricks. Inside this cavernous structure, the Dunlop Rubber Co. spun cord on a round-the-clock basis for use in car tyres. More than 3,000 people worked there and, over a year, it was said to consume the equivalent of one-third of Egypt's cotton crop.

Almost 90 per cent of workers in the town were employed in the manufacture or trading of textiles. They moved into cheap terraced houses, many of them back to back, hewed into narrow streets abutting the mills, several storeys high. Demand for living accommodation was so high that 'cellar communities' were established beneath houses, mainly close to St Chad's Church above the town centre; in 1870 almost 600 people lived in these dark, dank hovels.

Mills were infernal places. They were cramped. The air was clogged with cotton dust that snagged in lungs, making breathing difficult and often leading to a condition called byssinosis or brown lung disease. Machines were thunderously noisy. The temperature, which had to be maintained at between 65 and 80°C to save thread from breaking, was stifling. Operatives, a good number of them children, spent between 12 and 16 hours a day, Monday to Saturday, at their machines. They were fined for misdemeanours such as staring out of a window. Accidents were rife, many occurring in the last few hours of a shift when workers

were exhausted; it wasn't uncommon for people to lose fingers and limbs or suffer gruesome deaths trapped in machinery.

Debris from mills, along with oils and toxins from the associated dyeing industry, was pumped into streams and rivers; in 1915 Rochdale was the most polluted area in England. Life expectancy in the town during the Industrial Revolution was 21 – it was 38 in rural Westmorland. One in every three babies born in England didn't reach the age of five and the ratio was often one in two in industrial areas such as Rochdale. In growth terms, Rochdale boys, at the age of 13, were a full year behind those from elsewhere. This was the town and these were the people from which Rochdale AFC was formed.

* * *

It was his first day. Moral dilemmas and potential life-changing episodes shouldn't occur on your first day in a new job. He was still telling Beryl, the secretary, how he preferred his tea, when the phone rang. 'Is that Walter?' It took a few seconds before Walter Joyce could determine the words through the syrupy Glaswegian accent. 'Speaking,' he replied. 'Tommy Docherty, Manchester United.' As if Tommy Docherty needed to identify himself. Most days, he was on the sports pages of the national newspapers or on television, answering questions about the release of Denis Law and retirement of Bobby Charlton, or pondering on the whereabouts of George Best. 'Walter, I've heard good things about you. I'd like you to come and sort out the youth set-up here at Old Trafford,' he said.

Fred O'Donoghue, Rochdale's chief scout, was sitting across from Joyce. 'It's Tommy Docherty,' mouthed Joyce, his hand held over the mouthpiece. O'Donoghue had already heard and recognised the voice. 'But I've just taken over at Rochdale,' said Joyce, returning to the telephone conversation. 'It's my first day.' Docherty was persistent. He asked if Joyce had signed a contract. 'Not yet,' he replied. 'Aye, that's what Frizz told me,'

said Docherty. Jimmy Frizzell was manager of Oldham Athletic, from where Joyce had joined Rochdale. Joyce immediately recognised the link. Frizzell had been born in Greenock, 25 miles west of Glasgow. Everyone knew that Scots looked out for one another. 'They're sorting out the contract for me to sign,' said Joyce. He promised Docherty that he'd 'think about it' and get back to him in a day or two. Turning to O'Donoghue, Joyce asked: 'Who have you got for me?' It was their first proper meeting. O'Donoghue began running through a list of players who were still not fixed up with clubs and might be interested in joining Rochdale. Joyce interrupted: 'I'm sorry, Fred, I can't concentrate. I've got the United offer on my mind. What do you think I should do?'

O'Donoghue had seen this conundrum played out before. The role of youth coach was without the do-or-die pressure to secure wins at all costs. The only measurement of efficacy was on how many young players were successfully readied for the first team. They tended to stay longer in their jobs, many even withstanding managerial changes. A manager, however, was much better paid and – board of directors willing – granted a fiefdom to govern as he saw fit: *his* players, *his* coaching, *his* tactics, *his* philosophy and, always, *his* responsibility. Within the game, those who embedded themselves at a club as youth coaches were sometimes viewed as patsies – lacking ambition, playing it safe – while, alternatively, those seeking manager status were heroes or egotists, savants or fools, setting themselves up for a fall, often so great that finding a job in football thereafter might be denied them. Two or three years on from their pay-off by a football club, many ex-managers, especially from the lower leagues, were spotted doing 'normal' jobs, maybe working in garden centres, pubs or driving a taxi to get by. Few returned to coaching or less prestigious roles at football clubs, either because their ego couldn't endure the diminution or, more likely, fans and directors alike considered them 'tainted' by failure.

‘Tell me, most of all – what do you want to be?’ asked O’Donoghue. ‘A manager,’ replied Joyce. ‘Well, you’ve answered your own question.’

Later, Joyce informed Fred Ratcliffe of the approach from Manchester United. ‘I know all about it,’ said Ratcliffe. ‘Docherty phoned me a couple of weeks ago and asked if he could speak to you. I told him I’d rather he didn’t, that we had an agreement you’d manage Rochdale.’ Joyce was impressed. Most lower-league chairmen would have kowtowed to Docherty, reduced in the shadow of Manchester United. To Ratcliffe, it clearly didn’t matter; hands had been shaken, a deal was a deal. Joyce was concerned that he’d offended Ratcliffe by broaching the subject. ‘It’s Oldham that have jiggered me off,’ said Ratcliffe. ‘The stirring buggers. They know full well that you’re our man and yet they’ve been on the phone to Docherty telling him we’ve not sorted out the contract.’ Joyce said he was ‘in shock’ and needed time to consider. ‘Fine,’ said Ratcliffe. ‘Take as much time as you want – let me know by the morning!’

* * *

Sport in a codified form was played initially by upper-class men who had more time available than manual workers and were healthier and generally less tired. They were also educated enough to set down rules and record results; 40 per cent of men and 60 per cent of women were illiterate in England in 1800. Earlier, ‘games’ such as mob football, involving an unlimited number on opposing teams, took place in the streets. The heaving mass would struggle to carry, kick or throw an inflated pig’s bladder to markers at each end of town.

The first team to formally represent the town was Rochdaliens, who travelled to Liverpool in 1812 to take part in a cricket match. Twelve years later, Rochdale Cricket Club was formed, thought to be the oldest organisation in the town aside from religious institutions. Rochdale Athletic Club was

inaugurated in 1866 and, in the same year, a magistrate and a handful of businessmen formed a rugby team, Rochdale Football Club. In Rochdale, the sport of choice for the working man was predominantly rugby. Alongside Rochdale Football Club (despite its name, a wholly rugby-playing entity), others formed to provide competition – St Clement’s, Rochdale Juniors, Rakebank, Rochdale United and Rochdale Wasps. At a meeting held in the Roebuck Hotel, Rochdale, in April 1871, three of these clubs merged (Wasps, United and Rochdale Football Club) to form a team strong enough to represent Rochdale against other town teams. Officials considered Grasshoppers and Butterflies before settling upon the suffix of Hornets.

The growth of sport, as either a participant or spectator, was stymied because most people worked on Saturdays. The Early Closing Association, formed in 1842, lobbied employers to allow workers to have Saturday afternoons off and ‘foster a sober and industrious workforce’. The burgeoning leisure industry backed the campaign. Train operators charged reduced Saturday fares for day-trippers to the countryside. Theatres and music halls put on star turns on Saturday afternoons. Ultimately, employers (mill owners especially) were most persuaded by the increased productivity and reduced absenteeism from workers refreshed by an extra day or half day away from their machines. Sport benefited greatly from this incremental shortening of the working week, which by the 1890s saw most mills fall quiet and still on Saturday afternoons, if not the whole day.

An ‘association football’ club bearing the town’s name had been established in 1896 but foundered after five years. Another, Rochdale Town, lasted two seasons, before a third attempt was undertaken. The *Rochdale Observer* of Wednesday, 15 May 1907 reported: ‘At a meeting convened by Mr Harvey Rigg in the Central Council School, Fleece Street, last evening, with Mr Herbert Hopkinson in the chair, it was decided to form a club to be called Rochdale Association Football Club.’

* * *

On the drive back home from Spotland, Walter Joyce pulled in to the car park at Birch Services on the M62; it had opened a few months earlier and workmen were still banging in fence posts and marking out parking spaces. He was anxious to return home and discuss the matter with Doreen and to have his usual back garden kick around with his son, Warren, aged nine. Before then, he needed some quiet time, alone time. He had a lot on his mind. The same as all ex-footballers, if asked about his playing career, he'd say how wonderful it had been to be paid for carrying out an activity he loved and to have the crowd cheering him on. He'd mention how much he'd enjoyed keeping fit and feeling fit and the kudos of being a *footballer*, a prince among the hoi polloi. In more wistful moments, in his car on an overcast afternoon parked up by a hawthorn hedge at a service station, for example, he'd think back, dissect his career and ponder on the incidents, episodes and decisions that comprised the whole.

Walter Joyce was born in Oldham in September 1937. At school, he excelled at sport – cricket, running, athletics, but most of all, football. Scouts from several Football League clubs had knocked at the family door and, at 16, he became a ground-staff boy – a precursor to the formal apprenticeship scheme – at Burnley, an established top-tier club with a progressive reputation. At the time Joyce signed, the club was investing in splendid training facilities. Bob Lord, their chairman, had bought 80 acres of land on the estate of the nearby Gawthorpe Hall, an Elizabethan country house, and was overseeing the installation of three full-size pitches, an all-weather pitch, a medical room and gymnasium. The club was going to 'rear' players and avoid spending excessively on transfer fees.

Joyce signed as a professional in November 1954 but waited six years before making his first-team debut, in a 2-1 away defeat at Manchester City. He was three weeks short of

his 23rd birthday but the period had embraced two years of National Service, when he trained at RAF Catterick and served in Cyprus. He acknowledged that he 'wasn't the quickest' but he was athletic, strong in the tackle and able to play in several defensive and midfield positions. He played 71 matches in ten seasons at Burnley, suggesting his versatility had marked him down as a 'covering' player rather than being fixed to a single position and a regular place in the team. He'd also been competing with some of the finest players in English football. Burnley had won the league championship in 1959/60 with a team comprising footballers of the calibre of Jimmy Adamson and Jimmy McIlroy.

In February 1964, Joyce moved to Blackburn Rovers and played much more often (120 times) before signing for Oldham Athletic in September 1967, where he was a regular first-team player (71 appearances). He ended his playing career after breaking his right foot, then left and right foot again in quick succession.

Jimmy Frizzell, Joyce's team-mate at Oldham, had been appointed manager at Boundary Park in March 1970. He recognised that Joyce's enthusiasm and experience made him an ideal choice as youth coach. One of Joyce's mantras to young players was: get over it. If your last shot on goal was wide, you forgot about it, pretended it hadn't happened and demanded the ball, to try again. Similarly, if you'd had a 'mare', you put it out of mind as soon as the final whistle was blown; you moved on. These fundamental elements of performance were easily resolved, assuaged with a little cod philosophy.

On the more substantial issues across a footballer's career, regrets (although they preferred the kinder phrasing of doubts, qualms or misgivings) were inevitable. So, Joyce pondered occasionally whether he'd chosen the right club when he'd signed for Burnley. Might he have had more opportunities with a less successful team? Had he waited too long for his professional

debut, been too patient? Should he have insisted on being played in his preferred position (wing-half) instead of filling in here and there? Had he overestimated his talent, thinking he could dislodge the finest players in the country from their place in the team?

Alone in his car a few miles from Spotland, he recognised that he was at a pivotal moment of his new career, the one that came after being a professional footballer. He didn't want to make a decision he'd regret or later have doubts, qualms or misgivings about – dress it up any way you wanted. Rain began to fall heavily and washed away the view through the windscreen and on all sides of the car. He liked this feeling of being cocooned; it concentrated the mind. What to do? Youth coach at Manchester United? Manager at Rochdale? What to do? What was best – working with some of the most talented young players in the country or being king of a small-town club? What to do? He'd given his word to Fred Ratcliffe but surely he'd forgive him an about-turn. It was Manchester United, after all. *Manchester United*. What to do?

In the meantime, the press had become aware of the contest for Joyce's services. Tommy Docherty was typically bullish, using the media to do his bidding. 'We feel Walter is the ideal man for United. He has done a good job with little resources at Oldham and we are trying to develop our youth side this year. It's now up to him to decide. I want him here, but so do Rochdale,' he told the press. Docherty was about to begin his first full season at Old Trafford and had been granted the support of the chairman, Louis Edwards, and board of directors, as he set about a restructure of the club that he insisted was necessary after the 18-month tenure of Frank O'Farrell.

Stan Townsend, with his excellent network of contacts – players, directors and other journalists – had heard that United were constantly improving their offers to Joyce. Townsend felt it was his duty to prepare Rochdale fans for the loss of a manager

who hadn't overseen a single match, not even a pre-season friendly. 'I feel the latest offer by Manchester United is too good for him to turn down,' he wrote in the *Rochdale Observer*.

* * *

At a meeting convened by Mr Harvey Rigg. Indeed, Harvey Rigg was a supreme convenor – 'a person whose job it is to call people together for meetings of a committee'. Unlike most people who were reluctant to take on titles and responsibility, Rigg relished both. Aside from his involvement with sport, he cheerfully amassed civic positions, among them honorary secretary of the Rochdale Agricultural Society and the presidency of both the Rochdale Head Teachers Association and the Rochdale branch of the National Union of Teachers.

Before he petitioned to set up a football club, Rigg had devoted much of his time to rugby. He was blessed with great eloquence and energy. He was the eldest of five sons born to Isaac and Elizabeth Rigg, long-time publicans at the Church Inn, Willbutts Lane, Spotland. The pub bordered a large field and in the 1870s the family marked it out as a rugby pitch; it had previously hosted cricket matches and a small pavilion was on the site. A rugby club was formed, St Clement's, named after the nearby church, where the nucleus of the team were members of the Young Men's Class. The Rigg brothers – Harvey, Wilford, Louis, Edgar and Arnold – all played for the club, for whom Harvey volunteered himself as treasurer and, later, secretary. By 1881, they had three teams and played matches as far away as the Midlands and South Wales.

Rugby grew in popularity but a schism formed. The rules stated that participants had to hold full-time jobs but players asked for 'broken time payment', effectively compensation for wages they had to forego to either train or play matches. In 1895, the Northern Rugby Football Union broke away from the Rugby Football Union to enable its clubs to pay players on a lawful

basis; it was previously done clandestinely or on a quid pro quo basis – players granted positions at club owners' businesses, for example. Clubs leaving the Rugby Football Union – all based in the north – reduced teams from 15 to 13 players, introduced the 'play-the-ball' and did away with rucks and mauls. Hence, two codes of the same sport were fashioned, rugby union and rugby league – although the latter version wasn't named as such until 1923.

Harvey Rigg backed the wrong code. He chose to maintain St Clement's on an amateur footing and follow the Rugby Football Union's diktat of 'if men can't afford to play, then they shouldn't play at all'. As their rivals joined the new code, St Clement's were left without key opponents. The next season, 1896/97, the club converted to the 13-a-side game but the better local players were settled at other clubs and, due to dwindling attendances, finance wasn't available to tempt them to St Clement's. The club went bankrupt in March 1897 while, on the other side of town, Rochdale Hornets prospered. Undeterred, Rigg was determined to make best use of the field next to his parents' pub for both the health and wellbeing of the townspeople and his family's finances. Soon afterwards, he convened that famous meeting.