# Shrove Tuesday football in Surrey

by MATTHEW ALEXANDER

The history of mass football is essentially the history of attempts by the authorities to suppress it. These attempts, it may be noted, were largely ineffective until the last century. Wild and disorderly games of football involving large numbers of players are known all over Europe – *soule* in northern France and *calcio* in northern Italy, for example. The first record of it in England is Fitzstephen's account of apprentices' and students' football in London in 1174. From 1314 onwards successive English kings issued edicts against the game, seeking to channel violent energies into military training. Archery, in particular, required regular practice and the authorities were worried that it might be neglected.

The first specific link of mass football with Shrove Tuesday occurs at Chester by the 1530s. It was a generally urban game, rough and violent but self-regulating within rules that varied widely from place to place. The gentry patronised and supported the games but conflicts with the borough authorities were frequent: at the end of Elizabeth's reign there were arrests of Shrove Tuesday footballers at Shrewsbury, and rioting in Bristol in 1660 followed an attempt to suppress the game. The Scots seem to have been more tolerant: Glasgow Corporation was providing the balls by 1600, and the game became widespread throughout Scotland and the Borders. The successive attempts to suppress Shrove Tuesday football at Derby from 1731 are well documented, culminating in 1847 when special constables and dragoons were required finally to stamp it out. The sport survives in a number of places today, notably at Kirkwall in Orkney.

In the middle of the 18th century football was adopted by the public schools. Between 1840 and 1860 the rough-and-tumble game was formalised with a code of rules – part of the great Victorian remodelling of public school life, in which sport received a great deal of prominence. Team spirit and co-operation were emphasised rather than the individual heroism of mass football. The formation of the Football Association in 1863 signalled the rapid establishment of public school football as the British national sport.[1]

In Surrey, Shrove Tuesday football was widespread in the north of the county, centred on Kingston upon Thames where the game attracted visitors from the London suburbs. Throughout Surrey the game usually began with a procession on the morning of Shrove Tuesday collecting money, ostensibly to defray any damage done to buildings during the game but in practice for refreshments for the players. Shops in the main streets were then shuttered and barricaded and a ball thrown in or kicked off at a central point. Usually half the town played the other half, the player's allegiance being determined by which side of the central point he lived. Two or three balls might be thrown in during the afternoon: it became the practice for the first to be the boys' ball, and the last to be the most important. The ball had to be carried either to a set goal on either side or simply retained in the team's own half of the town at the hour fixed to finish the game. Afterwards the players would disperse to celebrate in the local pubs.

The fact that the game was played on Shrove Tuesday might be seen as legitimising the custom by reference to a church festival. Carnivals before the self-denial of Lent are well known on the Continent, but there is no evidence of involvement by the church in Shrove Tuesday football. It has been suggested that such rough and disorderly customs were opportunities for the mob to protest against the authorities,[2] but there is little evidence for this in Surrey save the burning of the effigy of a tradesman at Thames Ditton in 1862,[3] and the snowballing of respectably dressed passers-by in Dorking in 1873.[4] (Incidentally, the excuse offered for the effigy burning that it formed part of the Shrove Tuesday football was accepted by the magistrates.) There is more evidence, in fact, of deference rather than defiance shown towards the social superiors of the players. Gentlemen were offered free kicks of the ball in Kingston and loyal toasts and patriotic sentiments were common at the feasts afterwards.[5] While the open opposition of two halves of

the town may seem to be divisive rather than encouraging communal solidarity, the rivalry seems in most cases to have been purely temporary. The violent disagreements inevitable in such a game were either restrained by nearby players or – as at Kingston – settled by an organised boxing fight afterwards.[6] Both sides ate and drank together afterwards, and there seems usually to have been one pub as a headquarters rather than two. The game was mainly played by youths but their elders treated the game as a time of reunion and reminiscing. The presence of respectable tradesmen is emphasised in early reports but later their absence is increasingly mentioned: in this lay the decline and fall of Shrove Tuesday football in Surrey.

The sources are mostly newspaper reports, or undatable memories. They are rarely written by a player, and clearly many details of the game are imperfectly understood. For example, the most important aspect of a modern football report is the result, but this was only ever noted in Dorking. Significant variations in the kick-off times, the names of the two sides, and the methods of winning the game may simply be uninformed reporting – or may be evidence of quite radical changes in the 'tradition' as time went by, as is known to be the case at Kirkwall.[7] Obviously the reports cannot be considered entirely reliable, and they often manifest conflicting attitudes between antiquarian sentimentality and disgust at lower-class disorder.

There are scattered references to Shrove Tuesday football being played in a number of Surrey towns in Victorian times: Cheam,[8] Epsom,[9] Ewell,[10] Molesey,[11] Mortlake[12] Richmond,[13] Ripley,[14] Thames Ditton,[15] Walton-on-Thames,[16] and Weybridge.[17] There are only two towns, however, where newspaper reports are consistent enough to chart the development of the game – Kingston and Dorking.

Kingston upon Thames was the scene of the most popular Shrove Tuesday football game in the county. It was well established by 1797 when the local magistrates posted bills declaring that the game was to be discontinued.[18] These were ignored and a number of players were arrested and convicted at the Assizes at Croydon. However, they were discharged by the judge with a warning not to offend again. This was interpreted by the players as a vindication of their right to play the game and it was afterwards claimed that the judge had acknowledged 'an old charter' which confirmed the privilege. It was asserted that football had been played for over 1000 years, and had its origins in the kicking around of the severed head of a Danish chieftain defeated in battle.[19] (This explanation of the origins of Shrove Tuesday football was, however, advanced in several other towns in Britain. It is unlikely to be true of any of them.) Antiquity alone was considered a sufficient justification, and the game continued. It was played the following year and three ringleaders were arrested. The magistrates read the Riot Act but the prisoners were rescued by the mob. Cavalry from the barracks at Hampton Court nearby refused the magistrates' request for help. Without an armed force under their control, the magistrates were helpless and the game flourished. In 1815 it was noted that 'several persons of respectability' participated.[20] This is a common feature of early reports of the game in which the presence of gentlemen and leading tradesmen was seen as making Shrove Tuesday football socially acceptable. The 1830s saw the repression of Shrove Tuesday football at Barnes, Mortlake[21] and Richmond,[22] as being a manifestation of 'mob law', but it may have been at this time that it was first played at Dorking.

The new Police Act which came into effect in 1840 gave the magistrates of Kingston the means to extinguish the game; indeed, a senior police officer came to the mayor asking for his authority to suppress it, as several gentlemen had jointly complained. At a meeting of the Borough Council on 6 May 1840 a motion had been passed which condemned the football as an 'obstruction to the Passengers, a great annoyance to the peaceable Inhabitants, subversive of good order and prejudicial to the Morality of the Town'. The mayor refused to act, however, and the game continued.[23] In 1846 (fig 1) it was reported that 'the annual game is supported by some of the wealthiest inhabitants in and around Kingston: the majority of the Corporation are understood to be favourable to the maintenance of this old English custom'.[24] This appeal to antiquity and tradition is characteristic of the more conservative and paternal amongst the gentry. The game drew larger and larger crowds – spectators from the suburbs of London, and players from nearby towns where the game had been banned – the police merely looking on and


Fig 1. Football on Shrove Tuesday at Kingston upon Thames. *The Illustrated London News*, 28 February 1846

keeping order. As the crowds grew, actually kicking the ball became rarer and 'hugging' it in a huge scrum became the rule. The loss of the afternoon's business, however, was increasingly resented but many of those who would like to have seen an end of the game feared rioting and resulting ill-feeling if an attempt was made to suppress it. In 1857 the mayor denounced the game as a drunken riot and suggested its removal to a park away from the main streets of the town.[25] However, the influential John Williams, a member of the council and landlord of the Griffin Inn where the annual Shrove Tuesday supper was held, opposed the move and reminded the council that this was 'free England'. In East Molesey, however, arrests and fines saw the removal of that town's game to a field on the outskirts.[26] In Kingston the following year the controversy continued. The abolitionists were described as 'revolutionaries' and the point was made by one councillor that it was inequitable that 'the rich can have their sports while they would curtail the enjoyment of the poor – did not hunting injure very frequently the farmer's crops?' However, it was noted that fewer tradesmen were playing the game and so it had become vulgar and coarse. The council voted for the game to continue and even paid for the footballs for that year, which were paraded in triumph in the procession before the game.[27]

The 1860s saw a definite change in mood by the gentry who had previously supported Shrove Tuesday football in Kingston. Comparisons with states of siege, revolution, and civil disturbances were more frequent in newspaper accounts, together with observations that respectable inhabitants were no longer prominent in the game.[28] By this date it had become the practice for the mayor to kick the first ball, although this may only have been initiated by John Williams himself in 1858. Previously the landlord of the Castle public house in the Market Square had kicked off – the Castle being the point which divided the two halves of the town. In 1866, the

mayor refused to take the kick and a council meeting afterwards decided to abolish the game.[29] Many outsiders had joined in, it was claimed, and many of these were merely young boys or unemployed labourers. In the same year the game was suppressed at Walton-on-Thames.[30] Shrove Tuesday 1867 saw large numbers of police drafted into Kingston to stop the game.[31] The crowd were described as the 'great unwashed' with only twenty 'respectable artisans' amongst them. Arrests were followed by riotous scenes where councillors who had opposed the game were roughly handled and their houses stoned: a hay rick belonging to one of them was burned. An old inhabitant, Frederick Pyle, who had played since boyhood was carried shoulder high in a disorderly procession singing 'Work, boys, work, and be contented'.

The following years saw attempts to 'keep up the old charter' by playing in the Fairfield, a park outside the town centre. After a while the ball was kicked into the streets, however, and Pyle was again carried in procession.[32] Nevertheless, arrests and fines discouraged subsequent attempts. Played on the Fairfield, the game had little appeal and it petered out. The more liberal of the councillors had seen this removal to a 'Peoples' Park' as an acceptable remodelling of the custom. In the event, the game did not survive transplantation.[33]

In Dorking, however, Shrove Tuesday football was still going strong. Lying in the very centre of Surrey, Dorking preserved the custom longest, perhaps because it retained the conservatism of an old country town long after the suburbs had been 'colonised' by incomers (figs 2, 3). The day's festivities were heralded by a bizarre group that paraded the town in the morning, led by a man carrying a pole with a cross-bar from the ends of which hung two – and later three – painted footballs (fig 4).[34] On the cross-bar was painted the slogan 'wind and water's Dorking's glory' – supposedly a reference to the bad weather that often accompanied the game (fig 5). Later this was prefixed with 'Kick away both Whig and Tory' though the political significance of this is lost. The half dozen or so characters in the procession were in fancy dress, with their faces daubed with soot and red ochre. A drummer accompanied whistle players, and sometimes a fiddler,

Fig 2. Dorking High Street, Shrove Tuesday 1897

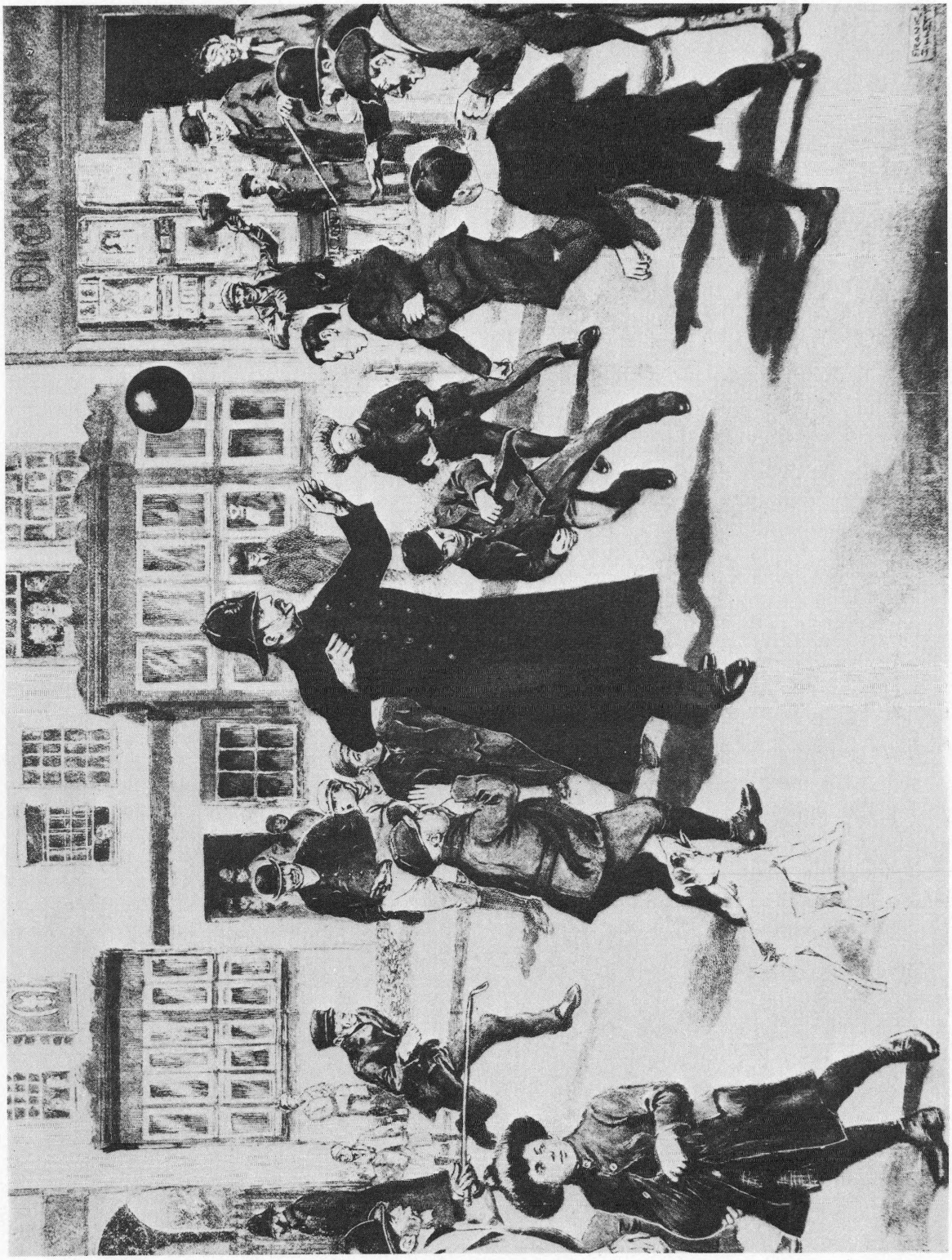


Fig 3. 'Old Customs Die Hard': how Shrove Tuesday is kept at Dorking. *The Graphic*, 20 February 1904

who attempted to render the traditional 'football tune'. All witnesses agree, however, that the noise they made could scarcely be called music. There was always a man dressed as a woman, who exchanged banter with the onlookers. Most important of all, though, at least one of the group carried a collecting box for contributions. In theory the money went to pay for any damage to the windows and paintwork of the town centre shops that might result from the game: in practice, though, most was spent on drink in the pubs afterwards.

Soon after midday the shops were closed and shuttered, and the fragile street lamps covered with sacking. After barricading their premises, the shop assistants had the rest of the day as a holiday, and many would join the crowd that began to assemble to see the fun. As the clock struck two, the first ball was kicked off from the top of the church passage: a privilege claimed by the Town Crier, John Sandford, from the 1860s until his death in 1895. The first ball was the Boys' Ball, and comparatively few youngsters joined in at first. They observed the tradition that the Eastenders played the Westenders, the church passage marking the boundary, and each side tried to keep the ball in their own territory. After an hour, a second ball was sent off, but the really important one was the large, gilded ball that started at 5 o'clock. By this time the crowd of players had usually grown to several hundred men, young and not so young. The play was very rough but generally good humoured. If the ball was carried into a pub, it was the tradition to take a break for a quick drink before the ball was thrown back into play from an upper window. An early feature of the game used to be splashing through the blood and other filth that had flowed out from the slaughterhouse in West Street, and also violent duckings in the Brook: these, wisely, had been given up by the 1870s.[35] The play grew more and more aggressive and tense as 6 o'clock approached, for whichever side held the ball in their territory when the church clock struck was the winner for the year. The West usually triumphed, simply because there were more people living in the western part of the town. The Eastenders are only recorded as having won seven times, and in 1866 this was only because they were reinforced by navvies building the London & Brighton Railway nearby. After 6 o'clock the town rapidly returned to normal. Many of the footballers held a dinner at the Sun, their headquarters, and that part of the

Fig 4. 'Taffer Boult's Band': the morning procession at Dorking, Shrove Tuesday 1895

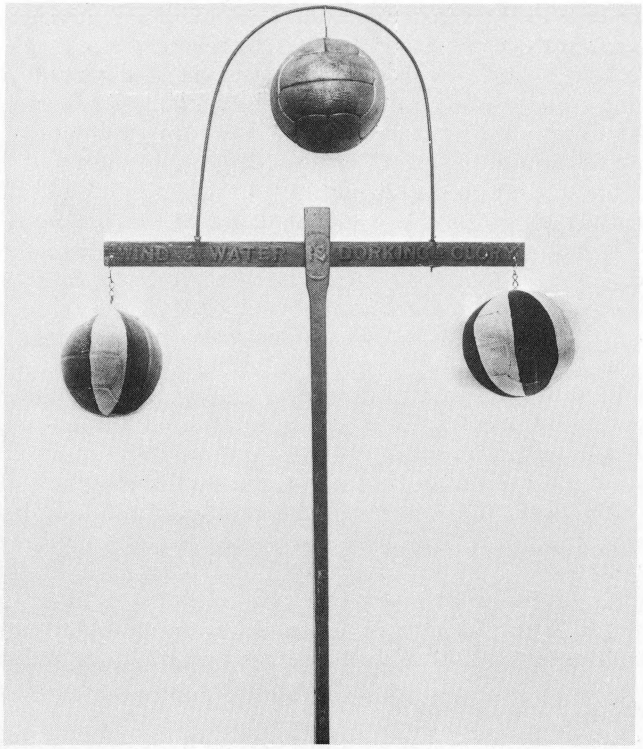

Fig 5. Cross-frame used in the morning procession at Dorking (photograph: Dorking Museum)

collection not claimed for damages was convivially spent. As a rival attraction to the demon drink, the Church of England Temperance Society gave a free tea party after the game in the years around 1890.[36]

A move to end the game in the 1850s was foiled when a local JP refused to read the Riot Act because the son of a principal tradesman was seen to be playing.[37] In 1873, however, there occurred an incident which marked a change of attitude, at least by the local newspaper. Snow lay on the ground and in the hour or two before the game started snowballs were thrown at respectably dressed passers-by, including a Roman Catholic priest.[38] Suggestions began to be made that the game should be moved to a field outside the town and the game was increasingly compared with Socialistic riots and trade union strikes as examples of civil disorder.[39] Increasingly it was noted that respectable tradesmen no longer played the game,[40] and in the mid-1890s a group of High Street shopkeepers made an official complaint about the obstruction of the highway and their loss of business.[41] The Dorking Urban District Council was, perhaps surprisingly, strongly in favour of the game continuing – and indeed one of the councillors, J T Maybank, was an active player. The Surrey County Council over-ruled them, however, and in 1897 large numbers of police broke up the game.[42] In the court proceedings that followed, both prosecution and defence accepted that the Shrove Tuesday game was hundreds of years old, despite the evidence of an old inhabitant who seemed to suggest that it began in Dorking only in the 1830s.[43] Attempts to find documentary proof of the legality of the game among old manorial records were unsuccessful. Furthermore, the objectors, who preferred to remain anonymous, were derided as newcomers bringing alien attitudes to Dorking's ancient traditions. Nevertheless, the prosecution maintained that no tradition, no matter how ancient, could override the provisions of the Highway Act of 1835, which specifically prohibited street football. Convictions

followed, with much heavier fines than expected. The old custom died hard, and attempts were made to keep it alive for nearly ten years after.[44] Arrests and fines, though, took their toll and it degenerated into a token scuffle with schoolboys kicking balls made of newspaper. Police confiscation made these paper balls necessary: leather footballs would have been too valuable to lose. Until 1899, it had been the practice to give schoolboys a half holiday on the afternoon of Shrove Tuesday in order to play the game. This holiday was then discontinued, but nevertheless there was considerable truancy on the day until 1904.[45] Extra police were drafted into the town on every Shrove Tuesday until 1909, by which date the custom had been thoroughly exterminated.[46] A dinner was held on Shrove Tuesday 1928 at the White Horse when H J Chaldecote, who had been chairman of the Dorking UDC at the time of the suppression, expressed his regret at the passing of the game and a token football was kicked in the streets.[47] All that remains of Shrove Tuesday football in Surrey is the cross-frame that carried the balls in procession, now on display in Dorking Museum.[48]

The suppression of Shrove Tuesday football in Kingston and Dorking affords some instructive insights into attitudes towards folk customs generally, both in the last century and to some extent in the present. Firstly, it is widely assumed that calendar customs of this kind are very ancient indeed, having their origins lost in the distant, and therefore romantic, past. No attempt was made to chart the introduction and development of such traditions, because it was assumed without question that they had been carried out in precisely the same way each year for centuries, perhaps millennia. Neither defence nor prosecution in the Dorking hearings doubted the custom was hundreds of years old, despite the sworn testimony of the man who remembered it first being introduced. This was a major failing of Victorian folklorists: having assumed folk customs to be the decayed survivals of some ancient 'original' practice, they did not apply the same critical analysis of the available evidence that they would have applied in any other field of historical investigation.

Another attitude which follows on from this is that such customs are justified simply because of their antiquity, irrespective of any intrinsic enjoyment they may have afforded the people who took part in them. Modern folklorists, on the other hand, have largely abandoned the futile quest for 'origins' but concentrate on the relevance these customs had for the participants. Thirdly, it can clearly be seen that the decline of Shrove Tuesday football – and many another communal custom – took place as the respectable classes withdrew their support and left them to the workers alone. The gulf between master and servant widened throughout the 19th century, and many established traditions became casualties. This, I say, is not a matter of opinion: it is specifically and unequivocably stated in contemporary accounts. Having become a purely lower-class activity, street football was increasingly feared by those who saw in it a threat of social disruption. Perhaps the Kingston footballers sang 'Work, boys, work and be contented' as an ironical jibe at those who wanted them to work but felt uneasy when they played. In any event, it was this combination of middle-class withdrawal and middle-class fear of the mob which led to the downfall of Shrove Tuesday football in Surrey.

## NOTES

1 See Marples, M, 1954 *A history of football*; Robertson, J, 1967 *Uppies and doonies*; Walvin, J, 1975 *The people's game*
2 See Malcomson, R W, 1973 *Popular recreations in English society 1700-1850;* Bushaway, B, 1982 *By rite*
3 *Surrey Comet*, 8 March 1862
4 *Dorking Journal* 4 March 1873, 5
5 *Surrey Comet*, 19 October 1878, 2
6 Ibid
7 Robertson, op cit in note 1, chapter 1
8 Marshall, C J, 1936, *A history of Cheam and Sutton*, 53
9 *Dorking Journal*, 3 March 1868, 2
10 Willis, C S, 1931, *A short history of Ewell and Nonsuch* 107
11 *Surrey Comet*, 28 February 1857, 17
12 Anderson, J E, 1886, *A history of the parish of Mortlake*, 75
13 Gascoyne, E T, 1898, *Recollections of Richmond*, 19

[14] Trinity College Cambridge; diaries of A J Munby, 4 March 1863
[15] *Surrey Comet*, 9 March 1867; 29 February 1868; 13 February 1869
[16] *Surrey Comet*, 3 March 1866, 4
[17] Weybridge Museum, TS recollections of Mr Ashtead, 1934
[18] PRO HO 42/46, f 128
[19] Biden, W D, 1852, *The history and antiquities of . . . Kingston upon Thames, 58-9*
[20] Quoted in Moyes W H, 1900, *The Surrey Magazine*, May, 67
[21] Mortlake Vestry Minute Book, 3 February 1837; quoted in Anderson, op cit in note 12, 75
[22] VCH, **2**, 1905, 549
[23] *Surrey Comet*, 7 February 1857, 17, and SRO KB1/6
[24] *The Illustrated London News*, 28 February 1846, 148
[25] *Surrey Comet*, 7 February 1857, 17
[26] Ibid
[27] *Surrey Comet*, 6 February 1858, 17-18; 13 February 1858, 17
[28] For example *Surrey Comet*, 8 March 1862; 13 February 1864; 4 March 1865
[29] *Surrey Comet*, 17 February 1866
[30] *Surrey Comet*, 3 March 1866, 4
[31] *Surrey Comet*, 9 March 1867, 3-4
[32] *Surrey Comet*, 29 February 1868
[33] *Surrey Comet*, 13 February 1869
[34] *Dorking Journal*, 24 February 1863, 2, 16 February 1864, 2
[35] Rose, C, 1878 *Recollections of old Dorking*, 84
[36] *Dorking Journal*, 1 March 1887
[37] *Dorking Advertiser*, 6 March 1897
[38] *Dorking Journal*, 4 March 1873, 5
[39] For example *Dorking Journal*, 16 March 1886, 3
[40] *Dorking Advertiser*, 14 February 1891, 4
[41] *Dorking Advertiser*, 20 February 1896
[42] *Dorking Advertiser*, 6 March 1897
[43] *Dorking Advertiser*, 17 April 1897
[44] For example *Dorking Journal*, 1 March 1898, 3; *Dorking Advertiser*, 25 March 1905, 4
[45] For example Dorking Boys National School Logbooks: SRO C/ES/121/2/6, 476, and /7, 110
[46] *Dorking Advertiser*, 27 February 1909, 5
[47] *Dorking Advertiser*, 25 February 1928
[48] See Sellick, E L, 1955, *SyAC*, **54**, 141