

FOOTBALL IN THE MIDDLE AGES



The first documentary evidence of football being played is in 1170. It was a game that was played by working-class boys in the towns and peasants in the villages. Football was a constant concern of the authorities. It was first banned by Edward II in 1314. At the time he was trying to raise an army to fight the Scots and was worried about the impact that football was having on the skills of his archers. It seems that most young men took little notice of the order and his father, Edward III, reintroduced the ban in 1331 in preparation for an invasion of Scotland. Henry IV was the next monarch who tried to stop England's young men from playing football when he issued a new ban in 1388. This was ineffective and in 1410 his government imposed a fine of 20s and six days' imprisonment on those caught playing football. In 1414, his son, Henry V, introduced a further proclamation ordering men to practise archery rather than football. The following year Henry's archers played an important role in the defeat of the French at Agincourt.

Edward IV was another strong opponent of football. In 1477 he passed a law that stipulated that "no person shall practise any unlawful games such as dice, quoits, football and such games, but that every strong and able-bodied person shall practise with bow for the reason that the national defence depends upon such bowmen." Henry VII outlawed football in 1496 and his son, Henry VIII, introduced a series of laws against the playing of the game in public places.

Whereas the monarchy objected for military reasons, church leaders were more concerned about the game being played on a Sunday. In 1531 the Puritan preacher, Thomas Eliot, argued that football caused "beastly fury and extreme violence". In 1572 the Bishop of Rochester demanded a new campaign to suppress this "evil game".

After the execution of Charles I in 1649 the new ruler, Oliver Cromwell, instructed his Major-Generals to enforce laws against football, bear-baiting, cock-fighting, horse-racing and wrestling. Cromwell was more successful than previous rulers in stopping young men from playing football. However, after his death in 1660 the game gradually re-emerged in Britain.

However, football amongst the masses was unorganized and was barely tolerated by those in authority. Every so often men were fined in local courts for causing damage and social disorder while playing football.