

Historical snapshots from Durham County RFU Schools Union

Sadly it has become evident that the bulk of the records belonging to the Schools Union are no longer available.

That which follows provides snippets of information from its formation in 1896 some of which is in some detail i.e. the definitive list of Schools Internationals dating from 1908 to the present day, the Centenary Match programme for the game versus Captain Michael Peary RN, President of the Rugby Football Unions XV which contained amongst other Jonathon P Wilkinson, Ian R Balshaw, Lee A Mears and Patrick H Sanderson and John Pearson as the Referee who had recently achieved Tier 1 International status. Information about Committee members in the 1990's obtained from match programmes but there remains huge gaps which may be filled as time passes by checking the records of the County and information contained in the library at Twickenham. The items mentioned above are all attached to this all too brief a snapshot.

Of more recent times there would appear to have been a golden era of some 40 years in the history of the Schools Union when one person reigned supreme, Jasper Maskelyne (Lyne) Mock the Schools Union Secretary for over 30 years. During this era the Durham Schools membership of the Rugby Football Schools Union (now the ERFU and a more recent name change to England Rugby - Schools) reached 100 schools – the first County Schools Union to do so. From 1952 to 1955 J M Mock was a Maths teacher at Gateshead Grammar School and Master in Charge of Rugby who was also a stalwart of Gateshead Fell RFC and also a member of the Durham Referees Society. The rest, as they say, is history.

As the County Schools Union continued to develop he was more than ably supported by persons such as Ron Davidson, who became the Vice President of the Rugby Football Schools Union and both Lyne and Ron were to present trophies for annual competition – Lyne for U.19 Boys and Ron for U.15 Boys. Sadly both of these have disappeared and have now been replaced thanks to the support of the Johnson and McClurg Foundation. Brian Watt succeeded Lyne as the County Schools Secretary and was assisted by the presence of Bill Dale who had been capped at Under 15 level by the RFSU in 1965, by Nick Willings as Chair for 8 years and Under 18 Coach for 17 years and by others such as D.M Teasdale, D.C.S Everal, J Miller, S. Whitehead, K. Witherington.

Over the next twenty years a number of others were to place their stamp on the work of the Schools Union – D.A Thompson as Treasurer, P. Gerrard, S. Whitehead, P. Taylor. Following Brian Watts resignation as secretary in 2006 he was succeeded for a short time by Bill Parker with assistance from Martin Pepper and Stuart Hardy. On Bills resignation the role of keeping the Schools Unions head above water fell heavily on Stuart Hardy who undertook the role of both Chairman and Secretary with Martin Pepper acting as ERFU Representative and coordinating the Schools 7s. In 2015 two members of the County Committee, Robin Wannop and Charles Thoburn intervened to attempt to provide more support.

In 2016 Richard Wilkinson, a retired Head teacher and President of Durham City RFU and John Pearson a retired County General Adviser (PE), retired International Referee and a former Secretary of Kent Schools RFU offered their services as Chair and Secretary in order to re-establish an infrastructure for the Schools Union to move forward positively. Progress was excellent with support from the County RFU, a group of teachers forming the Committee with Stuart Hardy and Martin Pepper and an outstanding County Administrator (who Pearson would come to call 'The Guardian Angel') in the form of Clarissa Murphy. Sadly she was to leave in October 2018 to take up a more fulfilling role as a CRC in West Yorkshire. She was succeeded by Erin Knott who took up post in 2019.

In June 2018 John Pearson stepped down from the role of Secretary as there was by this time a strong working core of Committee members and an acknowledged infrastructure parts of which had received national recognition such as the Young Match Officials programme instigated by John Pearson and supported financially by Vic Young (South Shields) Ltd. Steve Smith took over the role of Secretary only to realise that the demands placed upon an active

teacher were too many. He stepped down in February 2019 with John Pearson stepping back into the breach and continuing to develop the role.

The programme of County Competitions was fully re-established with the addition of Girls Cup and 7's competitions and with the Boys competitions at its peak involved 36 schools. In addition District Competitions were begun in the South of the County under the leadership of Kevin Rudd and the North under the leadership of Bill Burdon-Taylor. Probably of greatest significance was the development of a Young Match Officials programme initiated and developed by Matt Bradford CRC and John Pearson with a significant level of support in the form of Sponsorship from Vic Young Motors (South Shields) Ltd. Durham are the first County Schools Union to have undertaken this programme and the constant supply of Young Match Officials (337 to date) has served the competitions well. Integral to the development of both the competitions and the YMO programme has been the inputs from Matt Bradford, Jon Benson, Phil Wallis and Damien Ameer-Beg in their CRC role. Sadly this support no longer exists.

As with 1919 Spanish Flu pandemic the Covid Pandemic of 2019 was also to have a significant effect on Rugby as a game as well as the work being undertaken by the Schools Union.

Pearson decided that the original 2 to 3 years which he had promised to set up the infrastructure was well and truly passed and retired once again in April 2022. With his best friend, the Chair, Richard Wilkinson struggling with both his health, and work as Chair of Durham City RFC Pearson once again did a Frank Sinatra and returned to the fold to undertake much of the Secretaries work with a new title of coordinator in June 2024.. Sadly Richard was to die in January 2025 and it was decided to restructure the Schools Union to accommodate the growing number of younger and keen people taking on roles. With Pearson retaining a coordinating role and a former Committee member from 2017 returning to be Chair – Chris Kirkland and the appointment, after a 3 year hiatus, of a new Secretary in Matt Tucker. In addition a new County Administrator, Suzanne Etchells, is providing sterling administrative support. Once again, supported by the evergreen stalwarts Pepper and Hardy. the future looks bright.

The work of the Schools Union is being significantly enhanced by the Johnson and McClurg Foundation who are now providing financial support..

John Pearson
October 2025