



THE ROYAL LEICESTERSHIRE REGIMENT RUGBY HISTORY



Historical origins and changes in title:

- 1688: Colonel Richards's Regiment of Foot
- 1751: 17th Regiment of Foot
- 1782: 17th (or The Leicestershire) Regiment of Foot
- 1881: The Leicestershire Regiment
- 1946: The Royal Leicestershire Regiment
- 1964: Amalgamated with 1st, 2nd and 3rd East Anglian Regiments to form The Royal Anglian Regiment.)

There were two periods covering about ten years in Regimental rugby history when the Tigers were a power in the Army Cup; the first and greatest was just before the First World War (1914-18), from 1908 to 1912 inclusive, and the second was in the early 1930s, from 1932 to 1936.

Lieut Clive Liddell, later to become Gen Sir Clive and Colonel of the Regiment, became a founder member of the Army Rugby Union in 1906.

Before the First World War (1914-18) the eight winners of the Army Cup were all Infantry battalions of Line Regiments and the 1st Battalion the Leicestershire Regiment (as it then was) was the most successful, winning the Cup in 1908, 1911 and 1912; they were beaten in the final after extra time in 1910, and beaten by the Welch in the 1909 semifinal.

They did not enter a team in 1907, the inaugural year, as both battalions were in India. That year Liddell joined the 2nd Battalion there, and he trained and led them to two wins in the Madras Cup, in 1908 and 1909.

The 1st Battalion returned to England in the summer of 1907 and were stationed at Shorncliffe where 2nd Lieut Walter Wilson (who had already played for the Army and England that year) joined them. He was a very good centre threequarter who, although he played for the Army against the Navy in 1908, 1909, 1910 and 1911, did not play for England again after 1907.

Also serving with the 1st Battalion was Capt Brock, a very good centre, and Lieut 'Tough' Yalland, who besides being a good forward himself was a good leader and trainer for forwards. These three formed a very good nucleus for a Regimental team and started hard training and match practice forthwith. Although these three practiced and played a great deal with the Regimental side, they also managed to find time to play first-class rucker. All three played for Richmond and the Army, though Brock was only capped once and that was against the Navy in 1909 - playing in the centre with Wilson. Yalland also played for the Army but did not get a cap against the Navy; he did however play for Hampshire.

The battalion entered for the Army Cup for the first time in the 1907/08 season, won 33-0 in the first round, 26-0 in the second and 16-0 in the semi-final. In the final, a very hard game at Aldershot, they beat the 1st Battalion the Welch Regiment by one goal to a dropped goal. It is interesting to note that their line was not crossed once in an Army match that year.



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The 1908/09 season saw the start of a most successful half-back combination between Ptes Smitten and Fisher, which lasted for at least another three years and helped the battalion to win two more Army Cups.

They won the first round 12-5 and the second 36-5. The semi-final was played at Cardiff. Perhaps this helped the Welch but they deserved to win a hard fought battle 9-0 and they went on to win the Cup. There was no score at half-time but the inability of the Leicesters' forwards to win the ball in the tight scrums gave few chances to their brilliant outsides and resulted in their first defeat in the Army Cup.

In 1910 the Leicesters and the Gloucesters had the great honour of being the first two Army sides to play at Twickenham before the then Prince of Wales, later King George V. Again the Leicesters had reached the final without a point being scored against them. It was a tremendous defensive battle with everybody playing as hard as he possibly could. All their forwards played well and so did the backs, with Wilson and Brock outstanding. After forty minutes each way there was no score and fifteen minutes each way was then ordered. Eventually in the second half of extra time Cpl James of the Gloucesters, the tallest man on the field, hurled himself at the line. He was tackled by a Tiger, landed on his head over the line, but managed to ground the ball, which acrobatic feat won the Cup! This, therefore, must have been the first score by anyone playing in an Army Cup or Army match at Twickenham.

In the 1910/11 season the Leicesters won 74-6 in the first round, 49-0 in the second and 7-0 in the semi-final against the Welch. In the final against the Life Guards their forwards were the same as those who had played in the previous final. Of the backs, Kitchen regained his place as full-back and Lieut Ralph replaced Brock, on whom age was perhaps beginning to tell. The game was played mostly in a blizzard and saw the last appearance of Lieut Wilson, the captain, and also of Lieut Yalland, the leader of the forwards. The Leicesters won 14-0.

At the start of the 1911/12 season the prospects looked black; six replacements, including those for Wilson and Yalland had to be found. However, Liddell had returned home from India to captain and train the side and Nott and Pte Walker, who both also played soccer and hockey for the battalion, now started to play more rugger, and proved such an excellent pair of threequarters that they played for the Army.

Twenty-two played that year and they scored 60 points without a beating. Everybody felt it would be Liddell's year - and they were right. Their line was only crossed once and the two other scores against them were penalties. They beat the 1st Battalion the Gloucestershire Regiment 13-3 in the semi-final and 2nd Battalion Welch 6-3 in the final, after extra time.

In October 1912 the battalion moved from Aldershot to Fermoy in Southern Ireland. In the second round they beat the 2nd Battalion the Duke of Wellington's Regiment 16-0. Their backs Osborne, Rolph, Nott and Walker all played very well; Osborne, running very fast, scored two excellent tries and Walker one. In the third round the Life Guards



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got their revenge and deservedly won 10-0.

Looking back, the Leicesters were lucky to start with such outstanding players as Wilson, Brock and Yalland, two good halves in Smitten and Fisher and later outstanding replacements in Liddell, Nott and Walker, none of whom ever seemed to be injured for vital games. Furthermore, they were lucky in having ideal stations for winning the Army Cup in Shorncliffe and Aldershot. Also, from the Regimental point of view they were perhaps fortunate that Wilson was never again selected to play for England after 1907.

Between the Wars 1920-39

The Tigers' success in the Army Cup was, in a way, surprising because unlike two of the other most successful sides prior to the Second World War (1939-45) - the Welch and the Dukes - their other ranks preferred to play soccer rather than rugger. In India the Regiment won the Madras Association Football Cup as many as five times.

For over ten years after the First World War (1914-18) the Regiment had little success in the Army Rugby Cup because the Home battalion, the 2nd, was concentrating on soccer very successfully. The Regiment is one of the few to win both the Army Rugby and Association Football Cups.

was fit again and they were strengthened in the pack by the play of Lieut Drummond, who had recently returned from the 1st Battalion in India and had already played for the Army, Leicestershire and Leicester. After a close game they lost 11-14.

The battalion entered the Army Cup in the third round of the 1935/ 36 and 1937 competitions. Both matches were played in 1936 against the Welch, winners of the Cup in 1935, 1937 and 1939. Both matches were lost; in the first at Londonderry by two dropped goals and a penalty goal to nil; and in the second at Belfast by 6-0, a try and a penalty. Both games were hard fought and after the first match the Leicesters were the first team for three years whose line the Welch had failed to cross. In the second match the recently joined Sandhurst Blues, Lieuts Marriott, a threequarter and Army player, Marshall, a forward, and Daniells, a scrum-half, all played well.

This period between the two great wars finally ended successfully when in 1939 the 1st Battalion in India beat 2nd Welch 6-3 in the final of the Calcutta Rugby Cup.

Post-1945

After the Second World War (1939-45) the Leicesters never established themselves again as a top-class rugby regiment. H O Godwin played for England in 1959 and it was the fourth International cap to be awarded to a member of the Regiment whilst serving. Only two other Infantry regiments, the Duke of Wellington's Regiment and the Welch Regiment have had more Internationals.

Extract from: McLaren Lt Col J: *The History of Army Rugby* (Aldershot, The Army RFU, 1986)