

Hurling at St.Columb Major by Philip Tremain

A Cornish tradition fiercely maintained

Hurling, not to be confused with the Irish sport of the same name, was once played right across Cornwall and records exist of matches between parishes up until the latter part of the nineteenth century. At St.Columb, where the earliest recorded reference is from 16thC, the playing area consists of the whole parish, some 20 square miles, and it has an entry in the Guinness Book of Records as the game with the largest pitch. The goals are two miles apart, equidistant from the Market Square where after reciting "Town and Country do your best, for in this parish I must rest" the ball is thrown up to start the game at 4:30pm on Shrove Tuesday.

The teams consist of the townsmen, those who live in the town itself, and the countrymen who reside in the rest of the parish. There is no matching of numbers and in recent times the townsmen have considerably outnumbered the countrymen who nevertheless fight their corner as underdogs. Play continues up and down the streets for up to an hour, shop windows barricaded as protection against the ball, a silver shell on an applewood core about the size of a cricket ball and weighing just over a pound/half a kilo. It is *dealt* (passed) between the hurlers and large scrummages take place but all usually in good humour with respect shown to older and very young participants.

In order to win the game a hurler has to place the ball in the appropriate goal (stone troughs, probably old cross bases) or carry it over the parish boundary, involving a run of what could be several miles. Once the play leaves the town everything gets more serious as the hurlers work with their team mates to deny the opposition. When a winner emerges he is carried victorious by his friends back to the town to declare "Town ball" or "Country ball" as appropriate.

At 8pm the winner again returns to Market Square to declare his victory, before the hurlers, both town & country, tour the pubs drinking silver beer poured from large jugs in which the ball has been dipped. After ten days to recover, on the following Saturday week it happens all over again; it's far too much fun to only take place once a year!

We will leave the final word to C.E.Vulliamy who, writing in his book *Unknown Cornwall* in 1925, enthused "Across the slopes of the moors, and through the fields beneath them, the men of Cornwall played their game of Hurling, the manliest, most glorious and exciting game that was ever played in Britain. It was a Homeric game, a game fit for heroes." We will foregive CEV his use of the past tense, if he had visited St Columb Major he would have known that the words still apply.

Phil Tremain was born and has lived his whole life in St Columb. He won the ball for the townsmen in 1977.