

# KING HENRY VIII's UNKNOWN 'BRITISH LION'



Herbert Laxon & the 1908 British Lions tour  
to New Zealand and Australia

*by*  
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Most Old Coventrians with an interest in rugby would quickly be able to name one of the school's two 'British Lions': David Duckham. This dashing, leonine winger was a key member of the legendary 1971 triumph in New Zealand. Few, if any, would be able to name the other. It is not Peter Preece or Peter Rossborough. Neither of these splendid backs, Duckham's contemporaries in England teams, went on a Lions tour; Preece, like Duckham, was unavailable for the South African tour in 1974. Nor was Andy Goode, England international in the professional era, selected in 2005 or 2009. Instead, we must go back well over a century, to 1908, for the involvement of Herbert Laxon, Old Coventrian, in a tour of New Zealand and Australia which, though the 'Lions' term was not formalised until 1950, was regarded as a Great Britain rugby union football team.

Herbert Laxon was born in Coventry on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1881, the third son of Arthur Samuel Laxon and Hannah, nee Barton. The family was well-established in Coventry as wholesale grocers, eventually trading under the name M.A. Laxon & Sons, the initials those of Arthur's mother, Mary Ann, who was widowed in 1866 <sup>1</sup>. By the 1880s Arthur Laxon was specialising as a cheese factor. The 1881 census records the family (at this point Arthur, Hannah, and three sons: Ernest, Rowland and three-week-old Herbert) living in Gloucester Street, near the Holyhead Road. Later in the decade the Laxons moved to 'Verecroft', an impressive eleven-roomed house which still stands on the corner of Spencer Road and Davenport Road, opposite King Henry VIII School. There were eventually seven children: a fourth son, Frank, and three daughters, Winifred, Elsie and Ruby, all growing up in spacious and privileged conditions.

Arthur Laxon had attended King Henry VIII School from 1856 to 1861, when it was the 'Grammar School' in Hales Street, so it is unsurprising that each of his sons studied at the newly-located King Henry VIII School in Warwick Road <sup>2</sup> – his daughters attended the High School for Girls at 8 and 9, The Quadrant. Herbert Laxon was at King Henry VIII between 1890 and 1899, overlapping with each of his three brothers, including the youngest, Frank (KHVIII 1894-1901), himself a fine sportsman and Coventry rugby captain. Sport played a significant part in the lives of the Laxon family, with participation in typical middle-class recreations of the era: rugby, cricket, croquet, tennis and hockey <sup>3</sup>. A short biography, provided for the New Zealand press by Herbert Laxon's tour captain in 1908, reported that Herbert captained the King Henry VIII rugby team for three years, was a member of the school cricket team for two seasons, and first played for the senior Coventry rugby club aged sixteen. Research in school magazines and other archives helps flesh out this summary.

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<sup>1</sup> Laxon wholesalers ended up on Charter Avenue - one of the warehouses still has ghostly lettering visible.

<sup>2</sup> Fifteen Laxons are recorded as attending the school, with Arthur's older brother Bryan (1854-57) the first, Herbert the eleventh, and Leonard (1925-30) the last. All of the Laxons come from two branches of the family, descendants of Thomas Laxon (1775-1845). Herbert's generation were the great-grandsons of Thomas.

<sup>3</sup> The sons played regular club tennis in Warwickshire – Frank even participated in the 1919 Wimbledon Championships, losing in the first round. All three daughters were county hockey players; Elsie, a full back, was near international class, representing An England XI in 1912. The Quadrant School boasted of its hockey and cricket field, and the sisters would make an interesting historical study in themselves.



*M.A. Laxon & Sons, Market Street, Coventry*

'H Laxon' is first noted on the rugby field as a thirteen-year-old, in November 1894, when the school's Junior XV played two matches against Bilton Grange. His work at half-back was applauded: he "played a smart and brilliant game" in the second match. For 1895-96 he took his place in the First Fifteen, and was part of a highly-successful season. Nine of thirteen matches were won, and one drawn. He proved to be "a very smart half back. Picks up well and dodges well. Is perhaps most useful in spoiling his opponents' game. Does not always pass when he should, but is improving in this matter. Should be very useful for several seasons to come". There were, indeed, a further four seasons. Reports later in his career suggest that he maintained his dodging and spoiling abilities, and was able to develop a more effective pass. In the 1896-97 season he and ED Cadell, who had played together as halves in the junior team in 1894, and occasionally for the Firsts in 1895-96, were central to an outstanding record of

nine wins and just one defeat, away to Tettenhall College. “Though both small, Caddell and Laxon proved themselves very smart and possessed of considerable dodging power”. They combined well, though at times crowded each other out. As a half-back Herbert Laxon played in a period when differentiation between the two halves was becoming more consistent. He was a specialist scrum-half (or ‘inside-half’): later newspaper accounts frequently commend his speed in getting the ball away from the scrum into the hands of a distinct ‘stand-off’ (outside) half. In 1896-97, though, it appears that both he and ED Caddell preferred to be the inside-half.



*The 1898 Second XI, with Herbert Laxon on the far right*

This is no surprise, as Ernest Duncan Caddell was to have a highly distinguished rugby career, playing thirteen international matches for Ireland between 1904 and 1908 as a scrum half. Caddell was eight months younger than Laxon, but left Coventry in 1897, so the two international players did not appear together as Sixth Formers <sup>4</sup>. Laxon’s first season as captain, in 1897-98, without Caddell, produced only a fifty-fifty record, though the captain “played a splendid game at half-back, and did the work of two. Plucky, energetic, and most dangerous at close quarters. Set a splendid example to the team”. Matters improved vastly in 1898-99, with thirteen wins, two draws and just one defeat, again at Tettenhall. The school magazine could not be more effusive: “to his determined play at half-back the success of the

<sup>4</sup> ED Caddell came from an Irish military family. He completed his education at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, and at Trinity College, Dublin, and served with distinction as a doctor in World War I, winning the Military Cross.

team last season was mainly due. Passes, tackles, and saves rushes extremely well; has great scoring ability, and always turns out in the pink of condition". He was assisted by a member of staff in what would now be called a leadership team: "much of this [success] is due to the untiring coaching of Mr. H. M. Wilkinson, and to the brilliant captaincy of Laxon, and the school feels and appreciates the debt it owes to both".



*This scratched but splendid rugby team photograph, taken outside those very familiar school doors, is most likely that of the 1898-99 side. Herbert Laxon is seated at the front, carrying the ball, and is one of four who are wearing colours shirts with the familiar badge – the other three are also wearing colours caps.*

It is probable that the great-coated man in the centre of the above photo is Harold Mayfield Wilkinson (1875-1957). He joined the school as Science Master in January 1898, after attending Durham School and then reading Natural Science at St. John's, Cambridge. He worked at KHVIII until 1900, and then moved to Giggleswick School, before returning to Durham School, where he was eventually Second Master from 1923 to his retirement in 1933. At KHVIII Mr Wilkinson not only helped coach the team, but – as did other masters at times – played for the First XV in matches against clubs as opposed to schools. He was a regular forward in the Coventry Club second fifteen, sometimes with Herbert Laxon as one of the half-backs.

Herbert Laxon remained at school for the autumn term of 1899-1900, and led the rugby team for a third season. Again the results were excellent, this time with his younger brother Frank as his fellow half. The older Laxon's greatest individual contribution came when his two tries were the only scores in the school's first ever win at Tettenhall College. It appears that he left school at the end of 1899, though unfortunately a gap in the school magazines means this cannot be confirmed.

His club rugby began, aged 16, in the Coventry 2<sup>nd</sup> XV, but in 1899-1900, at eighteen, his Saturday rugby was in the Firsts; he would retain this position, when available, for the next decade. The Daily Mail (18/9/1899) noted that "Coventry opened their season with a match against a team of players drawn from the district. The vacant positions at half-back were filled by H. Wharton, of Warwick School, and H. Laxon, of Coventry Grammar School". He settled well to senior rugby, but in early 1900, Herbert Laxon was convinced of the need to fight for king and country. In February 1900 he volunteered for the Imperial Yeomanry, and served in the South African (Boer) War as Private 10248 H. Laxon, in the 56<sup>th</sup> Company, Buckinghamshire Yeomanry. The Coventry YMCA presented him with a knap-sack bible bound in khaki before his departure, and the Coventry Herald noted in August 1900 that he was one of six key Coventry rugby players who were in South Africa. Herbert Laxon served in South Africa from March 1900 to June 1901, seeing action in the Johannesburg-Pretoria region at Rhenosterkop, Potchefstroom and Frederickstad to earn the South African campaign medal. He was, though, discharged at his own request in July 1901, and was back in Coventry to keep wicket for the Old Boys against the School team in that month <sup>5</sup>.

He resumed rugby with Coventry in September 1901, but in October Herbert Laxon began study at Pembroke College, Cambridge <sup>6</sup>. There he played for the University XV against a couple of club teams in his first term, while appearing for Coventry during the vacations, sometimes paired at half-back with his brother Frank, and sometimes playing on the wing. Herbert had ample pace for the latter position – he had come second in the school's athletic sports at both 100 and 440 yards.

At Cambridge Herbert Laxon did not play for the University between November 1901 and 1903, but his Coventry appearances in that time showed distinct developments in his play. The Midland Daily Telegraph of March 10<sup>th</sup> 1903 commented that "H. Laxon is a greatly improved player; he has gained strength and resourcefulness, which helped him to get away nicely on several occasions". At 5 feet 7½ inches he was sturdy enough, probably heavier than the 10 stones that he weighed on joining the Yeomanry in 1900, to take the buffeting inevitable at scrum-half. In 1903-04 his rugby reached a new level. He represented Midland Counties (initially as a wing) and earned his 'blue' by playing at half back for Cambridge vs. Oxford University at Queen's Club <sup>7</sup>. Although Cambridge lost, Laxon scored a try, following up a cross-kick, and in reports of the game he was generally commended for smartness in getting the ball away from the scrum. The Times remarked, "Dealing with an inferior pack, the Cambridge halves did as well as might have been expected". A year later Laxon was one of ten 'old Blues' who helped Cambridge to its first victory over Oxford of the new century. In the 15-10 win he was complimented for "doing many clever things"; he and his captain, Humphrey Mainprice, "formed a capital pair of halves" <sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> His only season in the school First XI was 1899, after summers in the Second Eleven. In 1899 he "kept wicket in good style", and showed improvements as a batsman.

<sup>6</sup> In the summer of 1903 he passed Cambridge University Historical Tripos Part I, albeit in the Third Class, and he graduated with a BA in December 1904.

<sup>7</sup> In November 1903 he and ED Caddell were opposing half-backs in the Cambridge vs Dublin University match.

<sup>8</sup> Manchester Courier 14th December 1904. Mainprice was also a Cambridge University cricketer.



*This is actually the victorious Cambridge University XV of 1904-5*

Herbert Laxon had now also established himself as a leading player in the Coventry XV. His 1905-6 season was disrupted by a series of shoulder injuries, but in October 1906 he was restored to the Midland Counties XV at half back. In March 1907 he was considered the best player on the field in a Coventry victory over Leicester Belgrave in the Midland Counties Union Cup. A month later "Laxon was the hero of the match" when Coventry beat Stratford 19-3 in the final: "a more hard-working player never assisted Coventry"<sup>9</sup>. This was the club's first victory in the MCU Cup Final since 1896<sup>10</sup>. The Coventry Herald continued to laud his "scrum working half" play through the 1907-8 season. In October it enthused: "Not many footballers have made the progress of Laxon ... in a sense Laxon is Coventry. He sets the machine in motion ... he has a wonderfully resourceful way of making use of [the ball] ... he is about the most difficult man to tackle in the whole fifteen ... He is determination and doggedness themselves". The Times (18/10/1907) noted that he "was able to open up the game continuously" when the Midland Counties beat East Midlands 26-0.

<sup>9</sup> Coventry Herald 5th April 1907 and 12th April 1907

<sup>10</sup> Leicester had won eight of the ten finals in the interim.

Despite his play for Coventry and the Midland Counties, and even in an era when Varsity rugby was highly valued, Herbert Laxon was not generally considered a player of more than above average county rugby standard, and was never in contention for full England international recognition. How, then, did he come to be selected for a 'British Lions' tour? There are three elements to his elevation.

First, the 1908 tour was a purely Anglo-Welsh team. Scotland and Ireland refused to participate, concerned that Rugby Union in Australia and New Zealand had become infected by the new professional Rugby League (or 'Northern Union' in contemporary parlance), and critical even of the daily three shillings allowance paid to the Anglo-Welsh tourists. Indeed, concerns intensified during the 1907-8 season when a professional New Zealand rugby team toured England, a direct challenge to the amateur game. The New Zealanders included four members of the 1905 'Original' All Blacks, who had converted to professionalism.

Thus, second, the Anglo-Welsh tour of 1908 was intended as an amateur crusade. Scotland and Ireland preferred a policy of "passive resistance"<sup>11</sup>, but to the English Rugby Union the best response to the professional threat was to encourage mutual tours to demonstrate the union game. As the 1908 tour manager George Harnett explained: "The Rugby Union in sending out the team [is] merely carrying out its mission for the preservation of amateurism. In the present condition of the game in the colonies the visit of a British Rugby team was quite imperative"<sup>12</sup>. G.T. Vincent, the modern historian of the 1908 tour, attributes the intent as "Practical Imperialism ... being entrusted with preserving the 'cultural' unity of the British Empire by 'saving' New Zealand rugby for 'amateurism' ... [its] primary objective was to provide an example which would 'guide' New Zealand rugby back to the 'true path'"<sup>13</sup> "by practically showing the splendour of the Mother Country's Rugby"<sup>14</sup>. Prospective members were carefully scrutinised for their gentlemanly credentials – the Welsh contingent was largely privately-educated, with six players from Christ College, Brecon, alone. What could be better than to include Laxon, a Cambridge University man of impeccable middle-class background?<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, the very best Anglo-Welsh half-backs were not available. Wales had won all four of its internationals in 1908, but none of those Welsh inside or outside halves was available. Thus, uncapped players, like Laxon, came into consideration. As halves, J. Davey was a logical choice, with one England cap in 1908; moreover, though a Cornwall player, he had partnered Laxon in several games for Coventry. G.L. Williams was the Lancashire county captain, and W. Morgan the London Welsh and Kent scrum-half. As for Laxon, the Sporting Chronicle rated him as "a moderate half-back", but he had played regularly for the Midland

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<sup>11</sup> The Times 21st December 1907

<sup>12</sup> His statement of 19th March 1908, quoted in Clem Thomas '125 Years of the British and Irish Lions' (2013)

<sup>13</sup> G.T. Vincent "Practical imperialism: the Anglo-Welsh rugby tour of New Zealand, 1908", International Journal for the History of Sport, volume 15, issue 1, 1998

<sup>14</sup> The Morning Post (London), quoted in the Evening Post (Wellington) 21st February 1908.

<sup>15</sup> Though the other Coventry stalwart included in the tour party was W.L. Oldham, whose education had been at St. Peter's Church of England School, Hillfields, but who was a strong and athletic forward.

Counties, and had impressed as a late call-up for 'Midlands and East Midlands' versus a combined Oxford and Cambridge team. A report of that match states that he secured the ball from the scrum in great style, and sent the passes out to his fellow-backs in streams, encouraging hopes that he would do the same for the Anglo-Welsh backs on tour <sup>16</sup>.

The tour was, in truth, a disappointment, both on and off the field. New Zealand overwhelmed the visitors in the first and third tests; a 3-3 draw in the second was largely because the hosts chose a highly experimental fifteen and were handicapped by a slushy ground when trying to play their open passing game. Herbert Laxon's international career consisted of just the first test, in Dunedin, in which he partnered Davey in a 32-5 defeat: the visitors were simply outclassed.

Laxon, who was allocated the number 12 jersey for the tour, was selected in the tour's first two matches, at Wairarapa and Wellington, but defeat in the second game, where Laxon had the worst of it against the Wellington half-back, led to him being supplanted by Willie Morgan. For the first test, though, Herbert Laxon was recalled, preferred to Morgan in order to exploit his familiarity with Davey. Laxon's test experience was disappointing, despite a couple of good runs. He suffered behind a beaten pack and "was hustled into uncertainty and inaccuracy by the New Zealand wing forward", the experienced George Gillett <sup>17</sup>. Injury and illness then made Laxon unavailable for the next five matches. He suffered from quinsy, losing a stone in weight in four days, and reappeared in matches only after the second test.



*Front cover of the match programme for Herbert Laxon's only test match appearance, Dunedin, 1908*

<sup>16</sup> The fourteen backs eventually selected had just 27 'caps' between them, and Laxon was one of eighteen in the 28-strong tour party who had not yet played for their country – nine, including Laxon, never would do so.

<sup>17</sup> Evening Post, New Zealand, 8th June 1908; later in the tour, Gillett, this time for Auckland, repeated his harassment of Laxon, when the home team won 11-0.



### THE 1908 ANGLO-WELSH TEAM

Back Row: WL Oldham, RB Griffiths, F Jackson, T Smith, H Archer, JF Williams (standing)

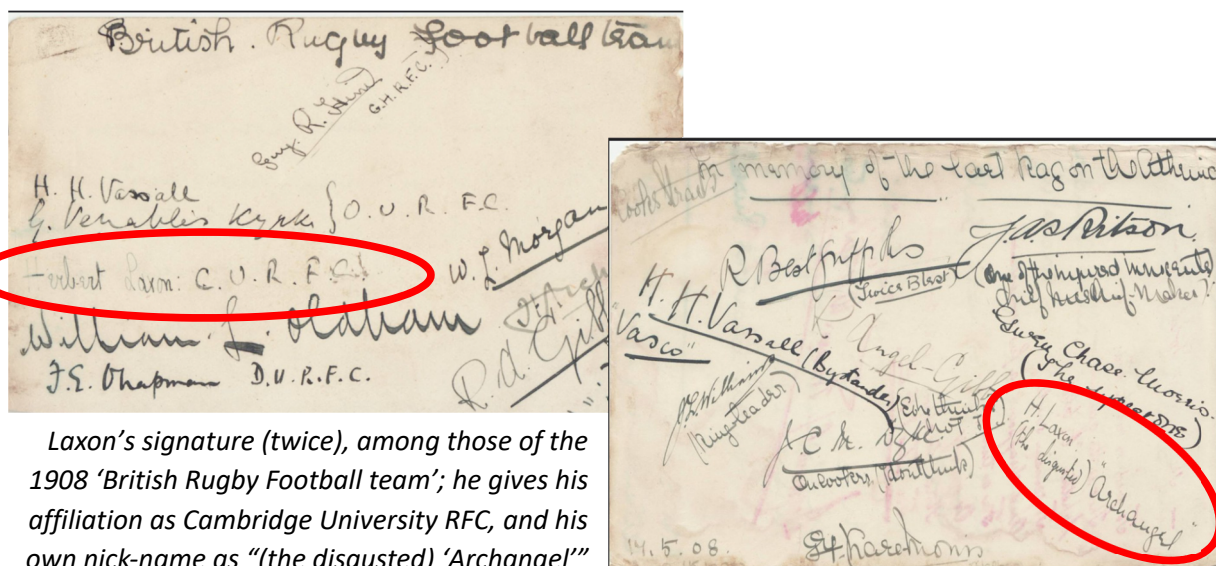
Third Row: JP Jones (Pontypool), GF Kyrke, PJ Down, JAS Ritson, E Morgan, RK Green, GR Hind, LS Thomas

Second Row: HH Vassall, RH Gibbs, AF Harding (capt), GH Harnett (manager), PF McEvedy, R Dibble, FE Chapman

Front Row: W Morgan, JCM Dyke, GL Williams, J Williams, J Davey, **H Laxon**, EJ Jackett, JP Jones (Guy's)

In fairness, Laxon had some success in the later non-test matches. He passed and broke well in the victory over Hawke's Bay, while he and Davey were described as the stars of the 26-0 win over Poverty Bay; but ultimately Laxon played in only seven of the seventeen official tour matches in New Zealand. He scored a try from a cross-kick in an unofficial match against the Maoris just before the third test, but, being seen as rather predictable, was never likely to regain his place from Morgan, whose swift, 'flick', pass got the three-quarters running. A New Zealand newspaper, the Grey River Argus (17/6/1908), aptly summed up Laxon's strengths and weaknesses: "a solid and defensive half-back who will furnish football without trimmings, playing the game for his side all the time. He has studied for the ministry, and, good footballer though he is, Laxon is probably a better philosopher". He continued to be little-used in the subsequent nine-match Australian segment of the tour. Although he was in a 19-man squad initially named for the second New South Wales contest, he played in only the two 'country' matches, against Western Districts (at Orange) and against Newcastle.

Herbert Laxon's social value to the tour was arguably as important as his on-field ability. One of three University rugby 'blues' in the party (alongside Oxonians G.V. Kyrke and H.H. Vassall), he spoke at a number of post-match functions, including proposing the health of the referee after the third test. Here he was diplomacy personified in his comments. He was speaking just three years after a controversially disallowed try had allowed Wales to beat New Zealand (the only New Zealand defeat in a test match to that point), and in the light of considerable disquiet among the Anglo-Welsh tourists at the over-interference of New Zealand referees. "Mr. Laxon, proposing the referee's health, said the refereeing was excellent, 'We lost,' he said, 'became the 'All Blacks' were too good for us. They beat us at all points of the game. They are the best players in the world. The Welshmen can think what they like; but in my opinion New Zealand would beat Wales three times out of five'" <sup>18</sup>. He was similarly visible at important social events: at Palmerston he was a guest of the New Zealand Governor, Lord Plunket, and in Sydney he was one of a small group invited to dine with the New South Wales Governor Sir Harry Rawson after the second NSW match. Laxon and Gerald Kyrke were staying by invitation at Government House, 'Cranbrook', while the rest of the tourists made do with the luxurious Hotel Mansions in Darlinghurst!



Laxon's signature (twice), among those of the 1908 'British Rugby Football team'; he gives his affiliation as Cambridge University RFC, and his own nick-name as "(the disgusted) 'Archangel'"

The 1908 tour cannot be said to have succeeded in its wider sporting and imperial context. For many of the 1908 tourists, their southern hemisphere opponents were too violent in play, and too fond of outwitting referees, to be true gentlemen; while for the New Zealanders, the tourists were too weak, and often too physically unfit, to be true rivals for rugby's crown. Nor did the tour stem the migration to professionalism. The 'Northern' game did become established in New Zealand and Australia; George Gillett, the roving wing forward, transferred his allegiance, and one of the Anglo-Welsh tourists, Leicester forward F.S. Jackson, had to be removed from the party during the tour when doubts arose over his pre-tour amateur status. George Harnett's recommendation to the English authorities on his return to England was to "keep in very close touch with the South African players, who, besides being

<sup>18</sup> Wanganui Herald 7th August 1908

amateur to the core, are genuine sportsmen, who play clean and honest Rugby”<sup>19</sup>. It is no coincidence that the next British Isles tour was to South Africa in 1910, and contained players from all four home nations, nor that South Africa toured Britain again in 1912-13. The next New Zealand rugby union team did not visit Britain until 1924; it was not until 1930 that another British Isles tour was made to the Antipodes.

Professionalism was not an issue only in New Zealand. The amateur status of rugby in Coventry itself came under suspicion. The Rugby Football Union suspended the Coventry Club in September 1909 over questions of payments to players, including two of the 1908 Anglo-Welshmen, Davey and J.C.M. Dyke. Although the club itself was reinstated by the end of 1909, a Northern Union team had meanwhile taken over the club ground, and for three seasons from 1910 took part in the professional league. The blurred line between amateur and professional is illustrated by the fact that the Coventry Northern Union Rugby Club was captained in 1911-12 by Percy Oldham, brother of William Leonard Oldham, the 1908 amateur rugby union tourist.

In 1908, Herbert Laxon lingered in Canada en route to England from Australia, going shooting with Gerald Kyrke, evidently a firm friend. On his arrival in the Midlands, he was elected Coventry club captain for 1908-9. He played for an Anglo-Welsh XV – essentially the 1908 tourists – against the Australian touring team at Richmond in December (losing 0-24), but not for the Midland Counties, though his play for Coventry in early 1909 was well-received. The Coventry Herald of January 15<sup>th</sup> 1909 commented: “Laxon ... is no mechanical handler of the ball ... has an open eye for possibilities ... he strikes out many different lines”. When Coventry was suspended in the autumn of 1909 Laxon, a club committee member, made public comments favouring amateurism, but at the same time acknowledging the need to keep rugby union football open to working men. This could be achieved through compensation for work-time lost: “However excellent as business concerns clubs connected with professional Association and Northern Union football may be, they are derogatory to English sport. I hope this inquiry into the Coventry club’s affairs will have a good effect, and the healthy form of Rugby football will exist in Coventry under the control of the English Rugby Union”; “Mr. Herbert Laxon, the Coventry and Midland Counties half-back, and a former Cambridge Blue, speaking of the desirability of working men playing Rugby football, says that if it is the desire of the Rugby Union to keep the game for London and the universities they are making a huge mistake. They are trying the absolutely impossible. They are cutting out the very best sportsmen from the game”. In this he was in agreement with S.R. Masser, the Coventry Club President, whose view was “that the best way of keeping Rugby football a distinctly amateur game was to admit to their fellowship everyone who cared to join, just as the Coventry Club had done, and try to keep Rugby football an amateur game, free and open to every one.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> G.T. Vincent, *op cit*; Harnett was interviewed by the ‘Daily Express’ in October 1908; his words were reported in New Zealand newspapers in late November, eg the Press (Canterbury), November 25<sup>th</sup> 1908.

<sup>20</sup> London Standard 25<sup>th</sup> September 1909 and 20<sup>th</sup> October 1909

Laxon continued in the Coventry XV in December 1909, once the club's suspension had been lifted <sup>21</sup>. He was now selected more often at 'stand-off half', but continued to impress with some "clever moves" with his inside half, Thomas, and showing "plenty of his best form" against Leicester <sup>22</sup>. He had remained involved with his old school, coaching the Fifteen to a good season in 1906-7, playing in Old Boys vs School cricket matches, donating geographical works to the school Library, subscribing to the school magazine and being associated with the school's mission in Red Lane. This sense of social duty may have contributed to thoughts on a career in the church <sup>23</sup>. In February 1909 Laxon began study at Wells Theological College, but he remained available for Coventry's major matches, and appears to have been at Wells for only a few months. In April 1910 he and his brother Frank left for Canada on the 'Virginian', with the intention of pursuing fruit farming in British Columbia. The attraction of the Dominions was a strong one to active young Britons in the early twentieth century, and the Laxons were far from the only Old Coventrians to seek new challenges and opportunities there. The Midlands Daily Telegraph (14<sup>th</sup> June 1910) recorded that "The brothers Laxon are engaged in building stores for the supply of the neighbouring districts. They have also acquired some land in Alberta" and played Association Football. In the summer of 1911, the brothers were briefly visited by their father Arthur and sister Elsie, but Arthur, Elsie and Frank were back in England by September 1911, for the marriage of the family's eldest daughter, Winifred. The grand reception, held at 'Verecroft' might be taken, in retrospect, as the family's high point. From 1912, misfortune, even tragedy, took centre stage.

Herbert himself was not present at Winifred's wedding, but returned to England in January 1912 on the 'Empress of Britain', describing himself as a merchant on the ship's manifest <sup>24</sup>. In September of the same year the family was afflicted by adversity. First, on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, Arthur Samuel Laxon died, aged 64. He had been in failing health for some time <sup>25</sup>, and died, not in Coventry, but as a resident of Brislington House, near Bristol. This was a mental asylum, albeit a Quaker-run one of high repute. In the very same month Herbert himself was admitted to a similar institution, at Coton Hill, Stafford. This forward-looking asylum had its own chapel, dance hall, sports facilities, gardens, fruit orchards and farm, suggesting that Herbert might have found something of comfort there. He remained in institutions for the rest of his life.

Tragedy continued to afflict the Laxon family. Although two of Herbert's brothers survived fighting in World War I (Frank in the Royal Scots and Rowland in the Suffolks), his sister Winifred's husband, Francis Moncreiff, died in December 1928 from wounds suffered at High Wood on the Somme over a decade earlier. In 1941 Herbert Laxon's oldest brother,

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<sup>21</sup> During the Rugby Club's suspension, Laxon played excellently for the Old Coventrians against Warwick School, one of the rare OC's matches recorded at this time, and appears to have played some Association Football for the 'Coventrians' – at the time apparently a town, not an Old Boys' club.

<sup>22</sup> Coventry Herald 7th January 1910 & 11th February 1910

<sup>23</sup> He had been awarded the Form IV Divinity Prize at school in 1895.

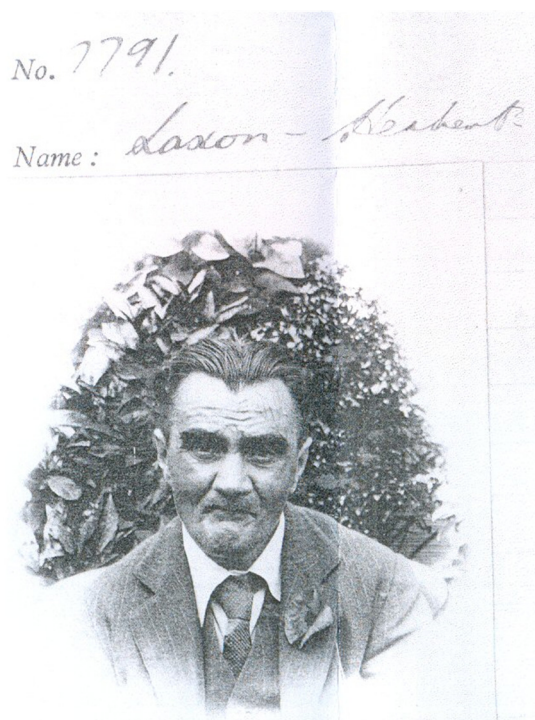
<sup>24</sup> A preview of Coventry's prospects in the London Standard (9th October 1912) noted that "Herbert Laxon, the old Light Blue half, may help again"; this proved sadly impossible.

<sup>25</sup> Coventry Standard 6th September 1912

auctioneer Ernest, was found drowned near Weston-Super-Mare; whilst the inquest recorded an open verdict, there were strong suspicions of suicide.

The family had, throughout, continued to devote much attention to Herbert. In August 1917 he was moved to St. Andrew's Hospital for mental illnesses, a Northampton institution with an equally good reputation to that of Coton Hill. Herbert Laxon suffered from paraphrenia, a gradual development of delusional ideas and hallucinations. Clinical records report that he was 'confused and incoherent in conversation and suffering from auditory hallucinations', but also that he remained physically fit and played a good game of tennis. Tennis was a sad echo of the shared family recreation of his youth; he also shared the long lives of his siblings, three of whom lived into their eighties – Ruby did not pass away until 1980. After the First World War Frank Laxon returned to Canada, and died in Kelowna, British Columbia, in 1956. Herbert Laxon survived nearly fifty years at St. Andrews (for thirty of which another resident was Violet Gibson, the failed assassin of Mussolini). Towards the end of 1964, Herbert's physical strength began to wane, and he died at the hospital on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1965, aged 83. Two days later England's rugby team opened its 'Five Nations' campaign with a defeat in Cardiff.

More than half a century on from his death, we salute Herbert Laxon, King Henry VIII School's 'unknown British Lion'.



*Herbert Laxon, photographed at St. Andrew's Hospital, Northampton, 1933, when in his early fifties*

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