

Transcript

Folk Football

The legend, whether true or not, is still enacted year in, year out by the people of Kirkwall, Scotland, making it one of the last strongholds of the game, which for hundreds of years dominated Britain. The game itself is remarkably similar to other long-abandoned folk matches played on the island. The pitch is the entire town; the players number in their hundreds; the goals are local landmarks a mile apart.

One goal was generally all it took to win the game, although that could take a whole day. In Kirkwall, two sides compete: the 'up-the-gates' and the 'down-the-gates'. Their struggle for the ball, or 'baa', is deeply symbolic.

The tradition was for a long time that if the 'down-the-gates' managed to get the 'baa', which was a fertilising influence of the sun - it was the sun and its fertilising influence - and they threw it into the waters of the harbour then that would bring good fishing. And if the 'up-the-gates' got the 'baa' to their goal, and they were mostly farmers, that would bring good crops, particularly good potatoes.

And there was a small town in Norway that until recently phoned every New Year's Day to see which way the 'baa' had gone so that they could assess whether or not there was going to be good fishing in the months ahead.

In terms of roughness, there are no rules, it's hard, a hard physical contest. Perhaps sometimes old scores are settled but generally speaking there is little gratuitous violence.