

Part 1 – Chris Gavin

Chanonry and Sport

The Chanonry Grounds began sporting life as the playing field of the Chanonry House School – popularly known as the Gymnasium or Gym. The ground was known to the boys of the school as “The Back” and had enough space for two cricket pitches, one under grass and the other gravel¹. Winter games played there were Shinty and a form of Rugby akin to Australian Rules football. The school had been founded in 1847 but by the summer of 1887 it closed down and this gave the Aberdeen Football Club the opportunity it had been searching for.



Cricket at Chanonry School about 1882

After playing a few more games at Holburn Cricket Ground, the Aberdeen Club kicked off their residency in Old Aberdeen, as tenants of the “beautiful and classic grounds at Chanonry”², with a match against Our Boys of Aberdeen, part way through the 1887-88 season. That match, which was a very easy one for the home players, was a semi-final of the Aberdeenshire Cup with the result being 10 goals to 2 for the Chanonry side.

“This important match, which was postponed on account of the snowstorm, was played on the Chanonry grounds, under more favourable circumstances as regards weather. The ground, however, was still in a very heavy condition, the snow lying to a depth of between two and three inches. There was a fair attendance of spectators. Aberdeen, losing the toss, kicked off, but the Boys' forwards collared the ball and brought it to close quarters, when Key relieved by a long kick. Aberdeen now had a turn, and after hovering about the goal for some time, Clark drew first blood. Other two goals fell in quick succession to Aberdeen, The Boys getting nettled at these early reverses broke away, and by some splendid passing managed to score their first goal off the foot of McKay, amidst loud cheering. Give-and-take play followed, till Aberdeen again scored. After the kick-off a foul fell against the Boys, but was well cleared by Still. T. Wood, getting on the ball, had a nice dribbling run up the right, and sent in a sharp shot to his namesake,

¹ The Record of the Gym (Chanonry House School) Old Aberdeen by Alexander Shewan

² Aberdeen Football Club Souvenir, February 1898

which be managed to clear at the expense of a corner. Nothing was made of the corner however, it being headed over the bar. The goal kick was well followed up, and brought close to the Boys' quarters. Here the goalkeeper managed to clear his lines, and the forwards, collaring the ball, had a splendid passing run the whole length of the field which ended in Mitchell putting on the second goal for the Boys. From this period until half-time the Boys pressed very hard, but failed to score. At the start of the second period Aberdeen, having now the wind in their favour, began to press very hard, but Still and Wood at the back managed to keep the goal clear for a short time. Out of a scrimmage the Aberdeen scored their fifth point. After this, except an occasional run by the Boys, the Aberdeen had it all their own way, another five goals being put on before time was called. The contest ended: Aberdeen, 10 goals; Our Boys, 2 goals. The Aberdeen all through played a splendid game. They were, however, by far too heavy a team for the Boys, who played pluckily.³

The crowning glory of that opening season was when the Chanonry Grounds hosted the inaugural final of the Aberdeenshire Cup and the new tenants won the trophy in some style by inflicting a 7-1 defeat on the City Rangers on the 24th of March 1888.

The First Aberdeenshire Cup Final

At Chanonry Grounds, Old Aberdeen, on Saturday, the final round of the Aberdeenshire Cup ties took place. The opposing teams were the Aberdeen and Rangers. Much interest has of late been centred in the match from the fact that although the Aberdeen has always been considered the premier club in the Association, the Rangers team, good as it was at the commencement of the season, has by steady, consistent play, and strict attention to training, improved so much as to become a dangerous eleven to tackle. Both clubs have good records for the season, the Aberdeen having a clear card, while the Rangers have only been beaten three times (twice by their present opponents and once by the Orion). In the former rounds for the Cup the teams have been very successful. In the first round the Aberdeen beat the Albert by 11 to 0, the Rangers defeating the Granite City by 3 to 2. The second round resulted in the premier team lowering the Orion's colours by 6 to 1, the Rangers getting the better of the Britannia by 3 to 0. In the semi-finals the Aberdeen and Our Boys played a game of 10 to 2 in favour of the former; while the Rangers successfully engaged the Rovers, whom they beat by 4 to 1. These figures as showing the superiority of the two teams engaged on Saturday, gave every indication of a stiff tussle, though the weight of opinion was in favour of Aberdeen gaining the cup, which, as will be remembered, is presented by Dr Maitland Moir. There was considerable doubt expressed during the week as to whether the clubs' regular teams would play as illness and other reasons had prevented several members of both elevens from appearing in recent matches. On Friday, however it was definitely settled that the usual teams should play.

The referee appointed by the Association was Fettes of the Orion, Messrs Melville and Collie acting as umpires. The colours were white for the Aberdeen and black and gold for the Rangers.

THE GAME

The weather unfortunately was very unfavourable to good football, a soft drizzling rain, which at times fell heavily, making matters very uncomfortable for the players. The ground, too, was extremely spongy. The attendance of spectators fully testified to the interest which has been taken in the fixture, as sometime before the start the enclosure was circled by a large crowd, and at 3:30 o'clock there could not

³ Aberdeen Journal, 28th February 1888

have been much less than 1000 present. Punctually at the advertised hour the teams entered the field, the Rangers gracing the occasion by a fine display of new jerseys. The Rangers winning the toss, Ketchen kicked off from the east end. After slight give-and-take play at the centre Ferry passed to Clark, and almost cleared the backs, Downie and Anderson subsequently bringing the ball down to the Aberdeen end. After some struggling here by the forwards of both sides the leather went behind. A foul was granted to the strangers in the centre of the field, which Aitchison kicked and Thomson saved. A beautiful dribble down the field by Haselwood ended in the ball going behind. A foul to the Aberdeen at the Rangers' "25" was taken by Key, and the leather, rebounding on the head of Ketchen, went between, Aberdeen thus securing the first goal amid cheers after five minutes' play. Immediately after the kick-off Macpherson had to fist out. Another foul to the Aberdeen at midfield was taken by Lothian, but came to nothing. A very good dribble by the Aberdeen forwards, in which Glennie backed up well, was spoilt by Lumsden sending the ball over the posts. Afterwards Downie tried a long shot, the leather, however, going over the top bar. Through a miss of Aitchison's, Ketchen got the ball, and McPherson going out to meet him, enabled the former to score the second point for Aberdeen. Play for the next ten minutes was confined exclusively to the Aberdeen end. Key at one period made a bad miss, but Wood saved capitally. The ball went behind the Aberdeen posts twice, and shortly afterwards Clark had a splendid dribble right up to the goal mouth. The goalkeeper, however, was alive to business, and kept the ball clear. It may be said here that the contest was carried on amidst the alternate shouts, hootings, and jeerings of the crowd, the Rangers evidently having a large number of sympathisers among the more youthful of the spectators. After half-an-hour's play Clark, getting a chance, centred, but Ketchen's shot rebounded off the cross bar. Another good shot by Ketchen was fisted out and a splendid run down the field by the Rangers was spoilt by McKay. From a throw in Macpherson had to save a shot by one of his own team. Ketchen placed to "Dodger," who, by a beautiful display of dribbling, landed a splendid goal, his achievement being received with hearty cheering. Aberdeen soon thereafter got a couple of corners. In the course of the subsequent play Key made another miss, which gave Irvine an opportunity, but his long shot at goal just grazed the post. A minute later Wood in saving had to concede a corner. When the whistle blew the score, which had been increased with the assistance of Thomson and Ketchen stood: Aberdeen, 4 goals; Rangers, 0 goals.

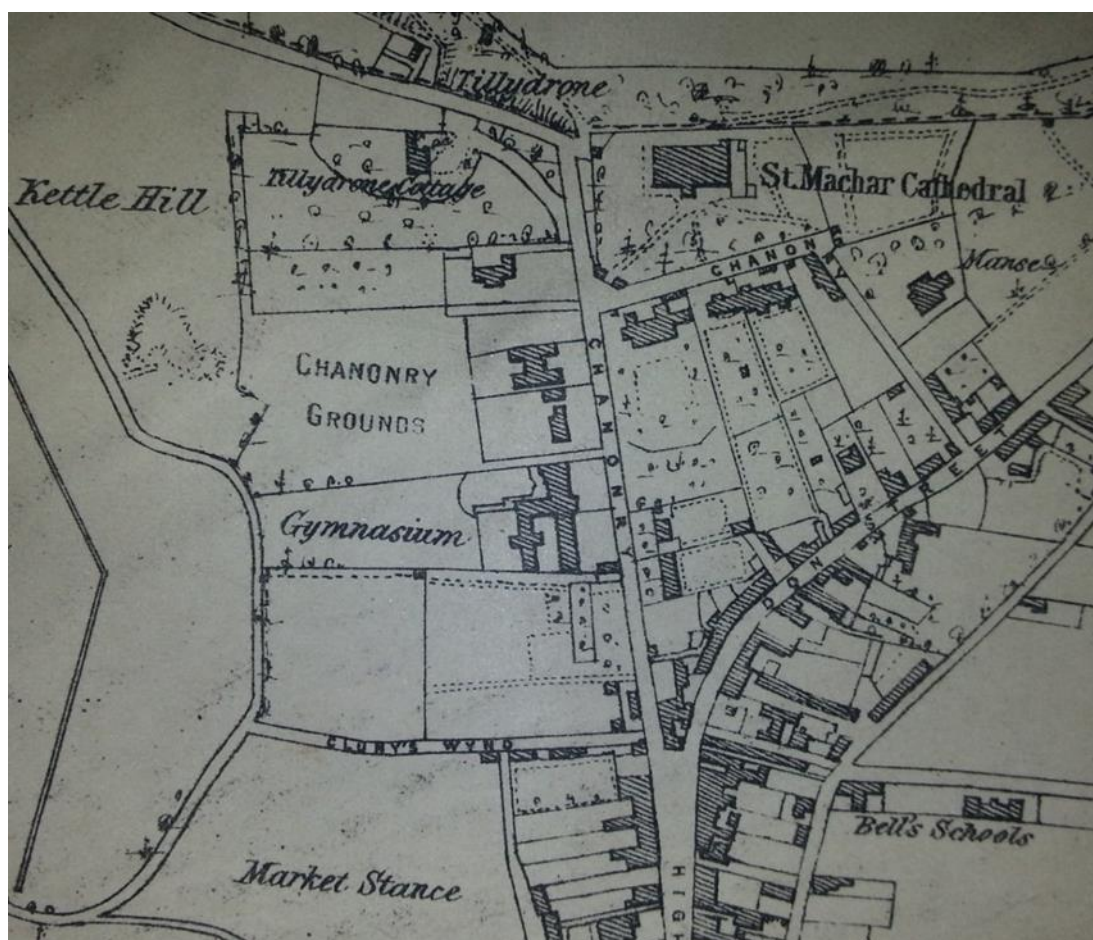
ON the Resumption of play McKay made a good attempt to score, and after some very exciting work at the Rangers' goal, a fruitless corner was secured by Aberdeen. Ketchen, a short time afterwards, scored a beautiful goal and a few minutes thereafter a sixth was just missed, the ball running along the top bar and falling outside. A capital dribble to the Rangers' goal was "mulled" by a misdirected kick by Ferry, and a shot by Downie, on operations being taken up the field, struck the top bar. Twenty minutes to time Aberdeen registered their sixth goal, "Dodger" doing the needful; and almost immediately thereafter Sutherland scored the first, and as it turned out the only, point for the Rangers, a result which was greeted with quite an excess of enthusiasm. Five minutes more play culminated in a seventh goal, kicked by Lumsden. The rest of the play was unimportant, and the game ended: Aberdeen, 7 goals; Rangers, 1 goal.

We understand that a protest is to be lodged against the result on the ground that the goal posts were six inches too high, and a special meeting of the association committee will be called to consider the point. Dr Maitland Moir, it may be mentioned, visited the ground in the course of the game, and remained till the finish.

Umpires: Melville & Collie. Colours: Aberdeen – White. Rangers - Black and Gold.⁴”

That final combined with the fact of Aberdeen Football Club being the most senior Association club in the city saw the Chanonry Ground quickly established as the top football venue in Aberdeen. This was further reinforced when a Scottish International XI came to the Granite City to take on an Aberdeen select in April that year. The crowd that was attracted was regarded as the largest yet for any “similar sporting event in the City” the estimated attendance being anything up to 4000. The outcome of the match was a 6-1 victory for the Scotland XI, but that hardly mattered alongside the significance of the game having taken place so far away from the central belt which, even then, was dominating the Scottish game.

Despite facing competition from the Victoria Bridge Grounds and to a lesser extent Central Park, Chanonry also provided a home venue for many representative inter-county matches as well as hosting Aberdeenshire and Charity Cup finals. The ground was located on what is currently the area occupied by the Cruickshank Botanic Gardens. Buildings to the eastern end of the ground can still be seen and easily recognised from the few surviving photographs from that period. There was a “reserved entrance” off Cluny’s Lane which no longer appears on modern maps of the area, although it can still be found running from Chanonry along the side of the garden of Number 8. As well as having a grand stand, the Chanonry Grounds also sported a pavilion which was used for social as well as sporting purposes.



⁴ Aberdeen Journal, 27th March 1888

When the football ground was laid out, there were a couple of omnibus routes that travelled there from the centre of the city, but no tramway. The nearest a tram could get was to the top end of Bedford Road in Kittybrewster, but football enthusiasts of those times would hardly have been put off a bit of a walk. However, there was some campaigning for the tram routes to be extended along King Street as far as Old Aberdeen. A letter in the Aberdeen Journal in November 1888 argued: "The proposal [for an extension of tramway to Merkland Road] is good so far as it goes; but were the company to extend the line as far as University Road it would greatly benefit the inhabitants in the vicinity... The opening of the new grounds at Chanonry has given an impetus to traffic the present mode of journeying to town can hardly cope with."⁵ Meanwhile, for the better off supporters, fields nearby Chanonry were offered for the parking of horsedrawn carriages and carts.



Aberdeen v Dumbarton in January 1898 – The building with the tower was the Chanonry House School and still stands today as part of the Botanical Gardens complex.

Over the ten years at Chanonry, the grounds were also used for the club's Annual Sports, an event which proved a popular summertime diversion spread over a couple of weeks and which included a five-a-side football tournament as well as more traditional sporting and athletic contests. In the 1898 Souvenir booklet, "An Old Official" wrote that "In all, during the last ten years something like £5000 has passed through the hands of successive Treasurers of the Club and during that time fully 200,000 persons have visited Chanonry Grounds." However, ground attendances were rarely published, or else the takings were given rather than the size of the crowd. From the sparse figures available, the biggest attendance at Chanonry was probably at the Aberdeenshire Cup final in February 1892 when the estimate was 7000.

In the winter of 1897, the ground suffered structural damage in a gale. The Bon-Accord columnist wrote: "Aberdeen's grand stand roof has taken its departure and now occupies a lowly position on the Aulton

⁵ Aberdeen Journal, 27th November 1888

market stance. We felt decidedly cold without a roof over our heads and the seat of our quarters as wet as could be. Erect a brow new press box when you are making alterations, gentlemen, and let's have it heated by steam, if possible. We are nothing if not modest in our requests.”⁶ It appears that the journalist's appeal fell on deaf ears, for when the club moved up the road to Central Park the following season, they took the stand with them, still sans roof.

When it became known in 1898 that the Aberdeen would have to move away from the Chanonry Grounds and take up temporary residence at Central Park, it was not all doom and gloom. The Bon-Accord argued that: “their new ground at Central Park will be much easier got at than Chanonry, and increased attendances at the various matches should in a way smooth over the regrets at leaving Chanonry, a place associated with the name of the club for so long.”⁷

The last ever football match on the much-loved old ground was a friendly, played against Peterhead on the 16th of April 1898. The attendance at the match was small and Peterhead put up a miserable resistance to Aberdeen who trounced them 9-2. In the coverage of the match, the press didn't even mention that it was the final game at Chanonry. Nor did they list all of the goalscorers. However, the final eleven to take the field at the venue for the whites was: Ritchie; John Davidson, McConnachie; James Mackie, Henderson, Thomson; Livingstone, Cameron, Clark, Gray and Shiach.

No sooner had Aberdeen moved away from Chanonry but the laying out of the University's Botanical Gardens began. These occupy not just the old playing fields but a sizeable chunk of land south to what is now St Machar Drive. The Gardens can tell their own story but are well worthy of a visit.

Part 2 – Stewart Eaton

Proposed Commemorative Plaque for Chanonry

Aberdeen FC Heritage Trust (AFCHT) has created the AFC Heritage Trail, which documents important locations in Aberdeen where Aberdeen FC played. The AFC Heritage Trail is available on the AFC Heritage Trust web site. Please see the following link: <http://www.afcheritage.org/heritagetrail/>

AFCHT has also worked with the Aberdeen City Council, Museums and Galleries Curator and the Aberdeen City Council Planning department regarding the installation of commemorative plaques in Aberdeen. Our first commemorative plaque was installed on what was the Albert Hotel in Correction Wynd, our second commemorative plaque was installed at Pittodrie, with a third commemorative plaque recently installed on King Street.

Due to the historic significance of the Chanonry Grounds to Aberdeen FC, further research was carried by AFCHT to gather as much information as possible on the 10 years residency of Aberdeen FC. It is hoped that the additional information would assist us with the application for the installation of a commemorative plaque.

⁶ Bon-Accord, 9th December 1897

⁷ Bon-Accord, 11th August 1898

Location of Football Pitches at Chanonry

With reference to The University of Aberdeen website section on the Cruickshank Botanic Gardens, (<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/botanic-garden/about/history/>) including the History sub section. The History sub section details the location of the “first Aberdeen Football Club pitch” as follows:

“The modern Garden dates from 1898, when Miss Anne Cruickshank bought the buildings and playing fields of The Old Aberdeen Gymnasium, a private school for boys, and presented them to the University to establish a Botanic Garden. The original imposing granite school building, now part of the School of Biological Sciences, is on the right as you enter the Garden from The Chanonry. Soon afterwards, the strip of land alongside what is now St Machar Drive was added, including land which had been the first Aberdeen Football Club pitch, and a market garden, whose owner became the first Head Gardener. A few years later the land immediately to the north, comprising No 8 The Chanonry and its large garden were added. The house at No 8 The Chanonry was thereafter home to successive Regius Professors of Botany until it was sold in the 1980s. Finally, in 1966 the land still further towards the River Don, in the angle between The Chanonry and Tillydrone Road became available, and this allowed the development of an arboretum.”

Based on research by AFCHT, it appears that two pitches existed at Chanonry, and it may have been the case that the first pitch was located closer to what is now St Machar Drive, with a second pitch located on what was the playing fields of The Old Aberdeen Gymnasium. Based on research by AFCHT, it is also clear that the Chanonry hosted football, rugby, cricket, sports days and picnics.

With reference to the map below, the northern boundary of the Gymnasium ran along what was Cluny's Lane and evidence of a lane can be found (fronted by a black gate) between numbers 7 & 8 Chanonry. It is the view of AFCHT that this would be Cluny's Lane, which is where people could access the reserved seating at the football ground. Again, with reference to the map below, it is the view of AFCHT that Cluny's Wynd is now part of St Machar Drive.

