



▲ Although an earlier club bore the same name, today's **Rockcliff Rugby Football Club** was officially formed in 1887, the year that **John Baines** of **Bradford** also emerged as one of the earliest producers of sports-related collectables.

This Baines card, one of millions printed before the First World War depicting mostly rugby, football, cricket and golf clubs – and issued before Rockcliff dropped the final 'e' – carries the expression, 'O'ill show thee har ter tackle', which suggests that its creator hailed from Yorkshire rather than from the Northumbrian coast.

Rockcliff's first ground was a field on Grafton Road, Whitley Bay, above the Table Rocks swimming pool. Their nearest competitors were Percy Park RFC, founded 1872 and still going strong.



▲ In common with Northern RFC and many other rugby clubs now based in relatively anonymous modern surroundings, Rockcliff's heritage is mainly to be seen in the form of archive photographs and artefacts lining their clubhouse walls and filling glass cabinets.

This hand-tinted image from 1891 shows **Rockcliff** at their hilltop ground on **Grafton Road**, posing in front of an unusually ornate, oriental-style pavilion the club had bought on their formation in 1887. Prior to that it had served, most likely as a refreshment kiosk, at the first North East Coast Exhibition, held at the winter gardens in Tynemouth in 1882.

Rockcliff, their team including several Cullercoats fishermen, made an immediate impression.

Unbeaten in their first season they won the Northumberland Senior Cup in 1890. Two years later Ernest 'Little Billee' Taylor (second from right, standing) became the first of eight Rockcliff players to be capped, being appointed the England captain in 1894.

In 1901 housing developments forced Rockcliff to move to Whitley Park, a mile or so to the north, and in 1905 the club had to move again to make way for a funfair (later to become the Spanish City amusement park).

Two homeless and largely win-less seasons followed before Rockcliff made their final move to Hillheads in 1907, where within a year or two the final 'e' of their name was dropped (unlike at Rockcliffe Bowling Club, *page 139*).

Alas no photographs have been found of an impressive grandstand built at Hillheads in 1922. Costing £700 and holding 600 spectators, it was officially opened for a Northumberland County Rugby Union trial in October 1922.

After closing down during the Second World War Hillheads slipped into disrepair, leading to the stand and pavilion being demolished during the 1950s.

The current, rather utilitarian clubhouse then opened in 1964.

But if the building lacks character, Hillheads itself remains a vital social hub. Even better, during the 1984–85 season Rockcliff were able to buy the ground and its two pitches for a nominal fee, thereby offering a secure base for the future.



▲ Also on display in the **Rockcliff** clubhouse is this velvet and braid cap, supplied by athletic outfitters AF Donald of Newcastle and awarded in 1909 to **Joseph Brunton** (1888–1971).

The tradition of awarding caps began at Rugby School in 1839, originally as an aid to identifying fellow team members. But by

1909 they were purely decorative and were awarded on merit.

Brunton himself would win further caps for England, as a lock v. Scotland, Ireland and Wales in 1914 (although the official records erroneously named him as a player for North Durham RFC).

During the hostilities that followed he was honoured again,

with both an MC and DSO for gallantry, before becoming an international referee in the 1920s.

Made a life member of Rockcliff, Brunton went on to be elected president of the Rugby Football Union in 1953. One of his official duties was to formally open Gosforth's New Ground in September 1955 (*see page 61*).