

They Gave Us Rugby

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The beginning of New Zealand Rugby and New Zealand secondary school rugby from its origins at Nelson College

Chapter 9 - THE BIGG-WITHERS

Also unto Shemaiah... were sons born,
that ruled throughout the house of their father;
for they were mighty men of valour.
The Bible

No chronicle of Nelson College rugby would be complete without mention of a family that was virtually a rugby dynasty at Nelson College - the Bigg-Wither family. In the twenty years from 1870 to 1889 - inclusive, there were at least thirteen years when a Bigg-Wither was playing rugby for Nelson College. Each of the six Bigg-Wither brothers played for the college team and there were years when there were two brothers and, in 1882 and 1883, three brothers in the team at the same time.

Charles Bigg-Wither, a gentleman farmer of Richmond, was appointed to the first Board of Governors in 1858, under the Nelson College Act of 1858, and served two terms totalling eight years, until 1866. He was a Justice of the Peace and was appointed to the Legislative Council and elected to the Nelson Provincial Government, both in 1863. It is reputed that he kept all his sons at College until they were twenty one. Each of Charles Bigg-Wither's six sons made substantial contributions to the life of Nelson College in separate areas and in their own respective ways.

It appears that the double barrelled surname Bigg-Wither was a shortened in common usage to Wither, as each of the brothers is shown in this manner in the college records. The following are brief pen-portraits of the football / rugby involvement (which they held in common) of the Wither brothers:-

Frederick Bigg-Wither (Nelson College 1862-72).

The first and perhaps the most notable of the Wither brothers; he captained the College team in the first football match against the Nelson club played at Victory Square on 23 June 1869. In all probability, he also captained the college team in the first ever rugby match played at the Botanical Reserve on 17 May 1870 as well as in subsequent games against the Nelson club until 1872.

Richard Bigg-Wither (Nelson College 1870-78).

Member of the First XV 1876-78. Possibly played in the first game against Wellington College in 1876, and certainly played in the return match the same year.

John Bigg-Wither (Nelson College 1874-83).

Member of the First XV 1882-83.

Alfred Bigg-Wither (Nelson College 1876-86).

Member of the First XV 1881-86. Captain 1883-86.

James Bigg-Wither (Nelson College 1877-87).

Member of the First XV 1882-87. Captain 1887.

George Bigg-Wither (Nelson College 1883-92).

Member of the First XV 1889. George tayed at College until 1892 but does not appear to have played for the First XV in those remaining years.

Alfred and James both played for the First XV for six years, a jointly held record which has not been equalled since. Alfred Wither captained the First XV for four years, also a record which has not been equalled since.

In 1886 Alfred and James were selected for the Nelson representative team which played against New South Wales, the first overseas team to play in Nelson. After leaving college Alfred continued to live in Nelson and to play rugby while the other five brothers followed successful careers in other parts of New Zealand.

What happened to their male progeny, if any, is not known, for the name Wither never again appears on the roll of Nelson College. (John Wither was killed in a motor accident on Whangamoia Hill, Nelson on 2 April 1931 while travelling to the 75th Anniversary celebrations at Nelson College.)

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Certainly were some male progeny from these boys - just that they never stayed in the Nelson Area.