

The [Middle Ages](#) saw a huge rise in popularity of annual [Shrovetide football](#) matches throughout Europe, particularly in England. An early reference to a ball game played in Britain comes from the 9th-century [Historia Brittonum](#), attributed to [Nennius](#), which describes "a party of boys ... playing at ball".^[30] References to a ball game played in northern France known as [La Soule](#) or [Choule](#), in which the ball was propelled by hands, feet, and sticks,^[31] date from the 12th century.^[32]

An illustration of so-called "[mob football](#)"

The early forms of football played in England, sometimes referred to as "[mob football](#)", would be played in towns or between neighbouring villages, involving an unlimited number of players on opposing teams who would clash *en masse*,^[33] struggling to move an item, such as inflated animal's [bladder](#),^[34] to particular geographical points, such as their opponents' church, with play taking place in the open space between neighbouring parishes.^[35] The game was played primarily during significant religious festivals, such as Shrovetide, Christmas, or Easter,^[34] and Shrovetide games have survived into the modern era in a number of English towns (see below).

The first detailed description of what was almost certainly football in England was given by [William FitzStephen](#) in about 1174–1183. He described the activities of London youths during the annual festival of [Shrove Tuesday](#):

After lunch all the youth of the city go out into the fields to take part in a ball game. The students of each school have their own ball; the workers from each city craft are also carrying their balls. Older citizens, fathers, and wealthy citizens come on horseback to watch their juniors competing, and to relive their own youth vicariously: you can see their inner passions aroused as they watch the action and get caught up in the fun being had by the carefree adolescents.^[36]

Most of the very early references to the game speak simply of "ball play" or "playing at ball". This reinforces the idea that the games played at the time did not necessarily involve a ball being kicked.

An early reference to a ball game that was probably football comes from 1280 at [Ulgham](#), Northumberland, England: "Henry... while playing at ball.. ran against David".^[37] Football was played in Ireland in 1308, with a documented reference to John McCrocan, a spectator at a "football game" at [Newcastle, County Down](#) being charged with accidentally stabbing a player named William Bernard.^[38] Another reference to a football game comes in 1321 at [Shouldham](#), Norfolk, England: "[d]uring the game at ball as he kicked the ball, a lay friend of his... ran against him and wounded himself".^[37]

In 1314, [Nicholas de Farndone](#), [Lord Mayor of the City of London](#) issued a decree banning football in the French used by the English upper classes at the time. A translation reads: "[f]orasmuch as there is great noise in the city caused by hustling over large foot balls [*rageries de grosses pelotes de pee*]^[39] in the fields of the public from which many evils might arise which God forbid: we command and forbid on behalf of the king, on pain of imprisonment, such game to be used in the city in the future." This is the earliest reference to football.

In 1363, King [Edward III of England](#) issued a proclamation banning "...handball, football, or hockey; coursing and cock-fighting, or other such idle games",^[40] showing that "football" – whatever its exact form in this case – was being differentiated from games involving other parts of the body, such as handball.

"Football" in France, circa 1750

A game known as "football" was played in Scotland as early as the 15th century: it was prohibited by the Football Act 1424 and although the law fell into disuse it was not repealed until 1906. There is evidence for schoolboys playing a "football" ball game in Aberdeen in 1633 (some references cite 1636) which is notable as an early allusion to what some have considered to be passing the ball. The word "pass" in the most recent translation is derived from "huc percute" (strike it here) and later "repercute pilam" (strike the ball again) in the original Latin. It is not

