Charles Burton Barrington (1848-1943) has proved to be the most fertile source of information on the earliest manifestations of rugby in Trinity, and in Ireland.

Barrington came from a distinguished Anglo-Irish family with a seat at Glenstal in Co. Limerick. He succeeded to the family baronetcy in 1890, and became High Sheriff of Limerick.

His family had founded Barrington's Hospital in Limerick in 1829; and Barrington's Pier and Barrington's Bridge are other reminders of his family's long connection with the city. He entered Trinity in January 1867, having been educated at St. Columba's College in Rathfarnham near Dublin, and at Rugby School; captained the football club in 1867-68, 1868-69 and 1869-70 and was to a large extent responsible for the modernisation of the game in Ireland.

Barrington remained fit and vigorous in his later years, driving an ambulance in France during the First World War at the age of sixty-seven. He retained his interest in Trinity football to the end of his life, regularly sending a congratulatory telegram on the occasion of a notable victory referring to club members in 1930 as "my Rugger great-grandchildren". His only daughter was tragically killed in a republican attack on her car, which was carrying a district inspector of the Auxiliaries when returning from a day's fishing near Newport in Co. Tipperary during the Anglo-Irish conflict in 1921. The Barrington family then moved to England, and Sir Charles offered the family seat to the Free State government as a presidential residence; this offer was not taken up. The house is now a Benedictine priory attached to a school where, as its former owner would have wished, a strong rugby tradition is maintained.

Barrington was eighty-one when he corresponded with Edward J. McCartney Watson, the first historian of the rugby club, describing incidents that had occurred on and off the field of play some sixty years before. His letters, which are quoted in the text, show that he had lost none of his passion for the game, his exuberant humour, or his joie de vivre. They constitute a remarkable record by an equally remarkable man of the early days of football in Trinity.

The 1854 foundation date gives Trinity a substantial claim to be the oldest rugby club in continuous existence. Guy's Hospital FC, which was founded in London in 1843 and played its football initially on Kennington Oval, is certainly older, but went into abeyance for some years in the nineteenth century.

William Trail was an early stalwart of the football club, as were Arthur Palmer, a fellow and distinguished Latinist; the mathematician and Celtic scholar Charles Graves, a fellow until consecrated Bishop of Limerick in 1866, and Graves's three sons, Alfred, Arnold, and Charles. Alfred was a collector of Irish music and the composer of "Father O'Flynn", while Arnold was an international cricketer, a champion hurdler, and a leading proponent of technical education in Ireland. But the most remarkable of the pioneers, and the one who deserves to be known as the father of Irish rugby, was Charles Burton Barrington, who captained the club for three years from 1867 to 1870.

Barrington's uncle, Charles West, was a footballer, and it is possible that he influenced the game in the university. "Charley West", wrote Barrington, "was at Rugby and is the "East" in Tom Brown's Schooldays. He might have had a hand in it, but he would have been before 1850".

Giving his own early reactions to football in Trinity, Barrington remarked: "When this Rugbean went out to play in the [College] Park for the first time the game may have seemed to him peculiar but it never occurred to him that it was anything else than Rugby of sorts". He retained this impression although "the whole thing was very loose, two fellows were made heads. Tossed for first choice and then picked their team from the bystanders who happened to turn up".

Barrington had been introduced to
football at St. Columba’s College, where we played a sort of soccer game. On one afternoon a man called Strickland appeared and played in our game. He belonged to the T.C.D. football club, we heard, but who brought him the boys did not know. He played as we did. On making a catch, though, he ran with the ball, but when collared and downed would not let the ball go. Our big boys had difficulty in getting from him. This incident would show that T.C.D. did run to play against. The match of the year was against the Medical School. Sometimes too the Dublin Garrison boiled up a team to play us ... We played matches among ourselves, ‘pick up’ twice or three times a week ... The Club was really a great success and did introduce the Rugby game into Ireland. Barrington goes on to describe how he and the secretary, R.M. Wall (whose father, Rev. F.H. Wall, was headmaster of another early rugby nursery, Arlington School, Portarlington), tackled the problems of dress and rules: 

The club had no rules, written or unwritten. Thȝy just played and ran with the ball, no touch line, no goal lines, our only paraphernalia [sic] being the Rugby goal posts. These were all sufficient for the simple tastes of those days in Dublin Football. A rugbean brought in the new idea of Rules. Rugby School itself though had no written rules! ... They were traditional, like the British Constitution or the Secrets of Free Masonry. In fact Rugby School had produced written rules in 1846, and a further set had been drawn up by Blackheath FC, one of the earliest of English clubs, founded in 1862. But when Barrington and Wall met to draw up rules in the secretary’s rooms in Botany Bay early in 1868, the Rugby School tradition was paramount: “Wall sat gravely at his little table. A small dark wiry hardy chap with a short black beard and kindly dark eyes. He wrote and I dictated. Gradually and gradually as one could remember them the unwritten laws that govern the immortal Rugby game were put on paper”. It is interesting to observe how the pattern of the modern game was already established by 1868:

D.I. LAWS OF FOOTBALL

(1) The kick-off from the middle must be a place-kick.
(2) Kick-out must be from 25 yards out of goal, not a place-kick.
(3) Charging is fair in case of a place-kick, as soon as the ball has touched the ground; in case of a kick from a catch as soon as the player offers to kick, but he may always draw back, unless he has touched the ball with his foot.
(4) If a player makes a Fair Catch, he shall be entitled to a free kick, provided he claims it, by making a mark with his heel at once; and in order to take such kick he may go back as far as he pleases, and no player on the opposite side shall advance beyond his mark until he has kicked.
(5) A Fair Catch cannot be made from Touch.
(6) A Player is off side when the ball has been kicked, or thrown or knocked on, or is being run with by one of his own side behind him.
(7) A Player off side may impede the game.
Rule 15, prohibiting hacking, represented in important difference between the football played in Rugby School and at Trinity College. Barrington described the hacking practised in the school:

In those days no-one was allowed to put his head down in the scrum, if he did it was immediately pulled up again by the others. The forwards all stood straight up hacking away for all they were worth at the opposite side. All standing straight up, packed close together and wearing very heavy boots. The only swing in their kicks being made with their jerking heads.

This may seem a bit of an Irish way of putting it. Before my time they had what was called a Hallelujah at the end of a House Match ... The ball was then taken away, put into the scrum and hacked each other away dutifully for five minutes. That was the finish and all went to their houses to hot water, footpans, tea and baked potatoes. The latter being a treat in a House Match always.29

Writing to Watson in 1930, Barrington remarked that the front of hisibia even then had a "saw-like edge" from this practice.

Dress, too, was selected by captain and secretary, as Barrington later explained:

Little Wall and myself sat in the air in our rooms in Botany Bay and on the lines of Rugby custom drew up the schemes. We introduced, however, knickerbockers in lieu of flannels - this was done out of respect for the black earth of our College Park. We decided on the colour being Red and Black for the very same reason.30

The committee accepted these proposals without demur, and the arrival of the new kit, which had been ordered from Rugby, caused quite a stir in the college, as formal uniforms for football were a novel idea in Ireland. Highly delighted with his new outfit, Barrington dressed and proceeded to Fitzwilliam Square, to let my dear mother see her son in this resplendent appurtenance. She was at luncheon and Aunt Josephine was with her - a very pretty lady, daughter of Sir Matthew Barrington. Her back was towards me as she sat at table. I stooped down and kissed her. "Look at this, Aunt Jo,". She turned round and seeing the red and black and huge rough-looking person gave a terrified scream and then began to sob and cry. "Oh, that I should have lived to be kissed by an acrobat!" ... This was the dress of all playing members, and the fifteen wore "caps" as a mark of distinction.31

In reply to a query from Watson, Barrington explained that the start of the game was more or less as it is today:

The ball was nicely placed on the ground and a scrum formed round it and all went to their houses to hot water, foothpans, tea and baked potatoes. The latter being a treat in a House Match always.29

Barrington recalled that when he played his first match in Trinity in 1867 there was no distinction between forwards or backs, the players all running after the ball. He introduced a full-back and two half-backs, one on either side of the scrum, as at Rugby School.

Further light was thrown on the early manifestations of rugby in Trinity by Barrington's contemporary Arnold Graves: Some of the rules I remember, hacking was barred but tripping was allowed. Passing was against the rules - it was called hand ball. We played without a referee. There was offside of course. The scrum was the invariable and lasted until it was holding the ball expressed his willingness to put it down, and that was only when his side was losing ground. I have seen a scrummage travel half way down the ground ... and as there was no passing one often saw very fine long runs - sometimes even three-quarters of the length of the ground, with wonderful sprints and dashes ... in every way the game was more individual and scientific than it is today.32

Football was such a novelty that on match days Nassau Street railings were lined with spectators, and the bow windows of the Kildare Street Club, known to rumbustious undergraduates as "cod bank", or, the "seat of the scornful", were filled with admirers.

The invention of the pneumatic bladder greatly assisted the handling game, and in November 1872 the club adopted an "essential change" whereby the ball might be picked up if it were in motion, whether hopping or not; up to this point, as in Gaelic football, the ball could not be picked up off the ground.33 This furthered the distinction between forwards and backs which were now divided into quarter-backs, half-backs, threequarter-backs, and a full-back.

In 1870, the Boat Club became the first Irish club to compete in the Henley Regatta. A four including the Barrington brothers won the Visitors' Cup in 1870 and 1873, and further boat club victories came in the Ladies' Plate in 1875 and the Wylie in 1881, which were again won by the Boat Club. In 1883, the Boat Club went to a boat club eight. The rowing club became the first Trinity club to compete in America when a crew was dispatched to take part in the Philadelphia Centennial Regatta in 1876. The four, with the Barrington brothers (who, on graduation, had transferred their allegiance), found the centennial temperatures bearable, but were successful in a competition restricted to graduates in which they emerged as the only eligible crew!

(Reprinted from The Bold Collegians: The Development of Sport in Trinity College, Dublin by Trevor West, the Lilliput Press, 1991).