

The Kirkwall Ba'

The Ba' has been played in Kirkwall annually on Christmas Day and New Year's Day for over two hundred years. There are two contests on each day, a Boys' game which begins at 10.30 am and a Men's game starting at 1 pm.

The ba', made from leather by skilled local craftsmen, is thrown from the Mercat Cross in front of the twelfth century St Magnus Cathedral. The sides are the Up-the-Gates (Uppies) and Down-the-Gates (Doonies), and the object is for each side to take the ba' to its own goal. In the case of the Uppies it is the site of an old castle where it must touch the wall; and for the Doonies it is the harbour, where it must be thrown into the water. A win for the Uppies is meant to signify

a successful harvest of potatoes and barley for farmers in the following year, and if the Doonies win there will be good fishing.

Upwards of 80 boys take part in their game, which usually lasts about two hours; boys as young as seven take part and continue to play until aged 15.

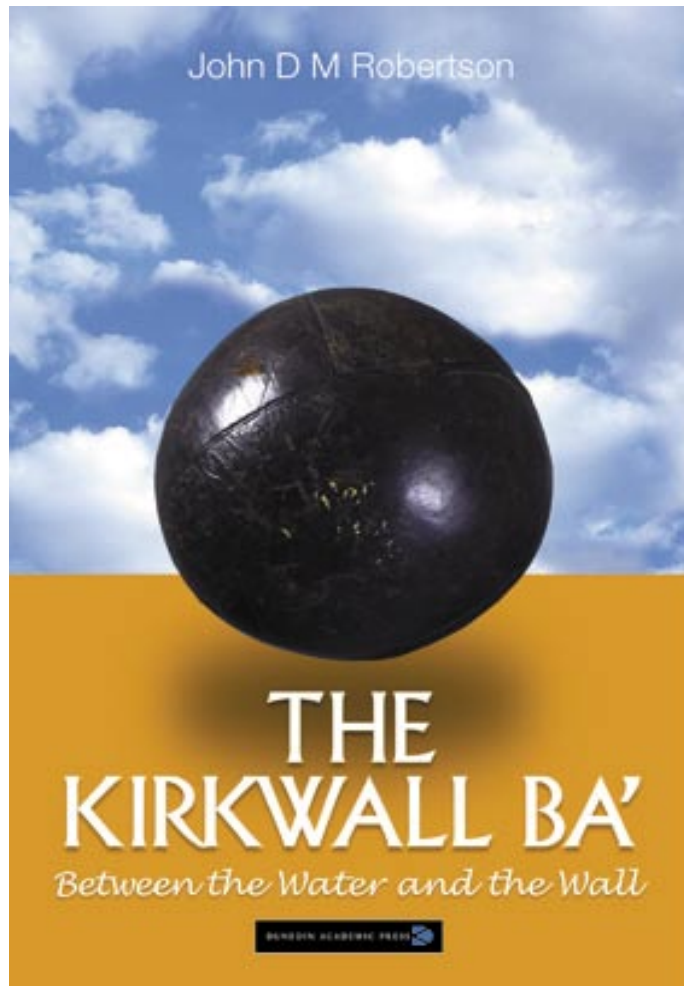
As far as the Men's game is concerned, upwards of 200 men form a massive scrum which pushes, grinds, swings and lurches over and through the narrow, flagstoned, streets.

Shop and house windows are stoutly barricaded to prevent broken windows and doors. There are no rules, and it is often the sheer weight of bodies

which determines how a game will go, although it has been known for the ba' to be smuggled out of the scrum and a player set off running to his goal.

For the most part the game is played in good spirits between the two sides and rarely is there any serious damage to property. Clothes can get torn and there is the occasional nosebleed or minor injury.

Games can and often do last, five six or seven hours. The winning side awards the ba' to a player who has been a stalwart over a number of years. Celebrations follow at the home of the winner, and Uppies and Doonies together enjoy the revelry.



THE DEFINITIVE BOOK ON THE BA':
'The Kirkwall Ba' – Between the Water and the Wall' by John Robertson.
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