The people traditionally credited as doing the most to establish Australian football are Thomas Wentworth Wills and his cousin Henry C. A. Harrison. Appreciating the need for uniformity, in 1858 Wills and Harrison formally codified ten rules from the various styles of football that were being played in the colony of Victoria. This first incarnation of what would one day be our great game they called Melbourne Rules.

It is noted that Tom Wills was of convict descent. Wills' father Horatio was the first European to settle at Ararat in western Victoria and also the only settler who refused to evict the local Djabwurrung people from his family's property at Lexington, Victoria. Young Tom absorbed these aborigines' culture alongside that of his fellow immigrants. One of the things they taught him was a game they called Marngrook, a sort of keep-away game played with a stuffed or inflated opossum skin which featured the leaping overhead catch used today in taking high marks.

Horatio wanted his son to have the best education available, so he sent Tom away at 14 to boarding schools in Melbourne and then to Rugby School in Warwickshire, England – where he proved himself as a scholar and athlete, captaining the cricket and football teams. He returned to Melbourne in 1856 with an outstanding sporting background on two continents, taught his state cricket side everything he learned in England, and the next summer led them to their first ever win over New South Wales.

There is little doubt that his childhood experience with Marngrook, the stigma of his convict breeding as well as a desire to show a "fine disregard for the rules" of the Rugby forerunner, influenced his desire to create 'a game of our own'. He wrote to the new sporting weekly, *Bells Life in Victoria* on 10 July 1858. Part of the letter reads:
"Now that cricket has been put aside for some months to come, …why can they (cricketers) not, I say, form a foot-ball club, and form a committee of three or more to draw up a code of laws?"
Wills was convinced that cricketers would improve further if they had something to do during the winter months and this first 'Melbourne Rules' football was just the thing to maintain their fitness. Likewise, Henry Harrison was directly descended from a network of emancipist families that were regarded as,
"some of the most enterprising and intellectually productive achievers in the colony". He too grew up in an area of western Victoria – near present day Moyston, where it is proposed he also played Marngrook with kangaroo-skins with the local indigenous people.

During 1858, local groups in the Geelong area played scratch matches of Melbourne Rules. Arranged by Wills and Harrison, the Melbourne Cricket Club cricketers challenged a Barwon outfit to a game, but it was too late in the year for Wills to organise the fixture – with the cricket season so near.

So Wills founded the Melbourne Football Club on August 7, 1858, as an adjunct of the Melbourne Cricket Club – to meet a combined side from Bellarine, Barwon, Kardinia, Flinders, Corio Bay, and Moorabol clubs in the next year – 1859. The Melbourne Football Club was born, the first football club in Australia, and perhaps the first anywhere in the world. Just two months later, in his hometown Harrison then also united their combined opponents to found the Geelong Football Club proper.

The first game was played as a demonstration that very day in 1858, as two private schools, Melbourne Grammar and Scotch College, spent the day on the Richmond Paddock (at Punt Road just outside the present Melbourne Cricket Ground) with forty players on each side and goalposts a half a mile apart. Each team scored a goal that first day, and the game was resumed every other Saturday for the next four weekends until it was called a draw on September 4th, after no further goals were scored.

However, it is problematic to comprehensively say that Harrison and Wills invented the sport, as their initial rules did not remain unaltered. From the moment they proposed their rules, players soon began corrupting them. As Henry Harrison wrote with some frustration:
"As Captain, I once protested that such tactics were against the rules, but the only satisfaction I got was the forceful reply, 'to Hell with your rules! We're playing the Irish rules.' "

It is not clear what 'Irish rules' meant. It may have been slang for 'our own rules' or it may have been referring to the rules of Gaelic Football. The later would support the initial widely held view that Australian Football evolved from Irish convicts and diggers playing the sport of their homeland.

The new game spread fairly quickly, with help from the founders. A few games of football had been played in 1858 but it was not until 17 May 1859 that Tom Wills chaired the meeting of seven men who framed the first rules of Australian football. Wills, Harrison, and associates including a W. J. Hammersley and J. B. Thompson revised the rules of Wills' original game at the Freemason's Hotel in Swanston Street, Melbourne. It is probably appropriate that our formal game's birthplace was a pub! Four of the seven men at the meeting had experience of football at Britain's schools and Universities. They were divided on what the rules should be, and consulted copies of the rules of the English schools – Rugby, Eton, Winchester and Harrow.

They framed a set of ten rules from their knowledge of the English games, most likely the influence of Marngrook, and their experience of the scratch matches in the previous season. They wanted a game that was simpler than the complicated Rugby game, and a game that had less of the "vigour and roughness" of Rugby and the other school games. Three of the ten original Australian rules of 1859 that were taken from Rugby are remarkably still features of the modern version of the two codes, and clearly indicate the origin of Australian football.

Soon other clubs throughout Victoria such as Carlton and Collingwood were well established by the time the American Civil War was over. Each had its own book of laws, similar only in generalities: irregular paddocks incorporating trees and other obstacles such as spectators, no behind posts, no running with the ball, no handpass, no high marks (blokes could get hurt landing on surfaces like this), and more than a vague resemblance to the ancient mellays.

By the mid-1860s, large crowds were gathering on Melbourne's cricket ovals and scrubland to watch the game. A report in Bell's Life magazine from July 29, 1865, described the journey of the ball during the game:
"Backwards and forwards, on this side and that, now out of bounds; amongst the crowd and again into the ditch by the fence, now into old Dennis's cabbage patch, and again kicked into the branches of those horrible gums; now kept in exciting closeness to the Melbourne goal… and for over two hours, the closest observer could not tell which side had the best of it."

To facilitate competition between clubs, the fathers of the game and the clubs wrote a common set of rules in 1866, incorporating most of the features of the game we know today. This updated set of rules was put in place and a formal and organised competition started. The two champion teams of the decade, South Melbourne and Geelong, attracted 36,000 to a ground near Albert Park. The crowds flocked to the games because they wanted to see
"the long run with the ball, the high mark, the clever dodging and the sudden physical clash",
– so the law makers opened the game up, protected the player going for a mark, and allowed the umpire to quickly disperse scrimmages.

By the late 1860s, the game was entrenched in Melbourne and clubs formed in every new suburb of the rapidly expanding city. The crowds became greater and amateurism could not contain the vast interest of the sport. Soon enough fences, turnstiles, money and payment to players became part of the sport. By 1867 our game was played with a rugby-shaped ball predominantly fashioned from kangaroo leather and this new Football was spreading to South Australia and West Australia where it remains a religion today. The South Australian Football Association was formed in 1878. This was followed in the 1880s by the creation of a full professional league in most cities.
In 1880 when the FA Cup Final in England drew 6,000 spectators, an important match in Melbourne would draw 15,000.

The Victorian Football League was established in 1896 and the following year the League's first games were played among the foundation clubs – Carlton, Collingwood, Essendon, Fitzroy, Geelong, Melbourne, St Kilda and South Melbourne. In 1908, Richmond and University joined the competition. But after the 1914 season, University left the League. In 1925, Footscray (now the Western Bulldogs), Hawthorn and North Melbourne (now the Kangaroos) joined the VFL.

This line-up of 12 clubs would remain unchanged until 1982 when South Melbourne relocated to Sydney. Then, in 1987 the VFL expanded to include the West Coast Eagles and the Brisbane Bears.

By 1997, the competition comprised 16 clubs after Adelaide (in 1991), Fremantle (in 1995), and Port Adelaide (in 1997) joined the now Australian Football League and foundation club Fitzroy merged with the Brisbane Bears to form the Brisbane Lions (after the 1996 season).

Australian football was from the earliest years a spectator sport. The Australian rules allowed handling and catching of the ball and created a game of remarkable speed and fluidity. Perhaps the best way to look upon the inventors of these Australian rules are as links changing the direction of a chain. The first link is Wills and Harrison creating a hybrid game by codifying elements of Marngrook and the various folk games played by convicts and immigrants. These rules were later corrupted by players; particularly those of Irish extraction. Once the game became professional, the rules continued to evolve with input from conniving coaches, players and suggestions by the Australian people.

The rules have continued to be modified and the game we now know has evolved slowly, rather than being created at that first original one meeting.