



Shankly's Village

The Extraordinary Life and Times of Glenbuck
and Its Famous Footballing Sons



Adam Powley & Robert Gillan

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Chapter 1

Memory

THIS is a kind of ghost story. It begins under an icy-blue winter's sky, in a valley of silence, where there is an eerie, haunting presence.

Visit the place and you never feel quite alone. In the imagination there are ghosts passing by on the cold breeze, others standing stock-still along the sides of the glen and open fields, and some lingering deep underground. These ghosts lurk over your shoulder as you climb the sloping track. They cannot be seen, nor heard, but it feels like they are here all the same. They make you stop and think, "What on earth happened here?"

It is a ghost story of memory and lives retold. It is of people conjured up in fading photographs, the written word, and impassioned conversation. They are still talked about now, decades or more after they were flesh and blood. Walking this same path, treading those fields; working their lives to a stub in the dark holes underground.

They made an impact, these determined men and women, and their families. Their home has gone, erased without care or compassion from the landscape. It is as if a giant hand has simply smothered and smoothed away any remnant of habitation. Virtually nothing is left – just a few stones and the lumps and bumps that give the barest indication where buildings, a school

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and dozens of homes once stood. Where people once lived. All that life has gone now. But the memory lives on. Those ghosts have not gone. This village is not quite dead.

This is Glenbuck. It is a name largely forgotten, now. A woeful neglect considering what took place within its unique, isolated world. Narrow your eyes, now, and try to imagine those past people calling and shouting in the middle distance, on a soggy bog of tufted grass flattening out from the road and the sides of the low glen.

It is an unkempt field left to nature's devices. But here, not that long ago – a few generations at most, and still within living memory – men and lads played the game. They ran, chased, tackled, dribbled, and scored. They would battle, fight, strain every muscle and wring out their last grain of energy in the fiercest of contests, cheered on by their family, loved ones, and pals who made up the most partisan of home crowds.

On this now sorry, forlorn field, players were sown, nurtured and grew out of the land, blossoming into champions. Fifty of them, out of a seed bank of talent barely ten times that number. Such a rich concentration of quality has never been equalled. Some among their number would scale the heights of football. One of them even came to almost define it.

They made Glenbuck the most remarkable place in the history of the greatest game. It is the village of football. If a sport is supposed to have a home, it might as well be here. Not the grand arenas of Wembley or Hampden, and definitely not some glass-fronted office in Switzerland, moneymen manoeuvring and manipulating behind its darkened windows and in cavernous underground lairs floored with lapis lazuli. If football does have a heartland and yearns for a true spiritual home, Glenbuck, with its memories and sombre, forgotten pitch, is as good a place as any.

'Hotbed' is a chronically overused term to describe heartlands of sporting prowess and popularity, but Glenbuck unquestionably met the criteria. Football for many in the village was a way of

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life: not just a means of leisure and escape from the grim graft of physical labour, but vital for a sense of physical and emotional wellbeing, and identity.

The story of how Glenbuck became so committed to the game and such a vibrant footballing community is as remarkable as the people behind it. Out of the barest of resources they put their own clubs together, seizing upon football's opportunities with a zealous commitment to the sport. Football rescued men from the drudgery and physical hardship of tough manual work in many places across Britain, but few devoured the chance with such alacrity as Glenbuck men. They learned the game, honed their skills, and found a ticket out of the village and away for better prospects.

This is not to say that the village did not imbue pride in its inhabitants. It was their home, and its isolated position and situation generated a strong local loyalty. Tucked off what is now the A70, it was not a place passing travellers would have much reason to detour to. Remote and exposed, it was crushingly cold in the winter; many of those famous footballers would recall with a shiver how dreadful the cold season could be in Glenbuck. But the shared experience of eking out a living made Glenbuck what it was. Thus developed the tightest of close-knit communities.

Collective survival had been stitched into its fabric from the foundation of the village. It was built on coal, literally and metaphorically. The black seams that ran through the surrounding Ayrshire hills were too tempting to leave in peace beneath the shallow soils, and so people endeavoured to quarry the riches by the Stottencleugh Burn. First, sometime in the mid-1600s, by gaining meagre spoils from the deposits close to the surface, supplementing their bare subsistence as they and their families strove to make a scant living off the land. Later, as technology improved and the twin demands of the Industrial Revolution and capitalist profit provided a hunger for coal that never seemed to be sated, mining made its unmistakeable impact.

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Pits were opened, shafts were sunk, and the village grew until it was a busy, industrious community of 1,700 people. People no longer sifted the surface for coal but were taken down – way down, into the earth to bodily hew the coal from the rock in deep, cramped passageways and rudimentary openings. It was pitiless work that took men's lives with almost casual indifference. Some of them are still lying there, buried deep underground after roof falls killed and then entombed them.

Those living on the surface resided in an unprepossessing environment. Even Glenbuck's proudest sons and daughters would not claim it was ever anything spectacular or charming to look at. The main street, a couple of terraced rows, low cottages, the church and schoolhouse threaded around its industry, some shops and a pub were all it amounted to.

The Ayrshire hills provided a ruggedly impressive backdrop, looking down on the nearby Glenbuck Loch. 'Loch' is a fanciful descriptive for what was a man-made body of water, formed by a dam to serve the mills at nearby Catrine, but it has become a wooded, sylvan calm that betrays its dangerously ice-cold depths. Yet if the immediate area wasn't pretty, and existence was almost unremittingly hard, it was certainly a living, lively place, full of people making the best of challenging circumstances.

From it sprang that half-century of professional footballers. Not all were great; many were, in the more literal sense, journeymen who ventured far away to maintain their modest careers. But they all made their mark and some carved it deep. There were those who made the relatively short trip to play for the clubs of Glasgow and Scotland's central belt; the players who gave fine service to clubs in England's industrial heartlands; the two Sandys who found glory down south among Londoners and triumphed in the greatest competition of the age.

And, most famously, there was the diminutive right-half who drew on the experiences of his club and international career to forge an even more successful life in management. In the process

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Bill Shankly would utterly transform one of England's great clubs, turning it into a globally renowned institution, while providing the broader game with so much of its spirit, purpose and character. He set the highest of standards that few of his successors anywhere have even hoped to equal, but they all work now in the shadow of his deeds and words.

Bill Shankly's famous – almost infamous – misquote has been tiresomely overused and abused, but it is an inescapable facet of the man. He was said to have said, of course, in response to a discussion about the wider significance of the game that, “some people believe football is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.”

It was originally uttered with tongue firmly in cheek. People close to him who heard it first hand knew that for a fact. A man who had seen first hand how hard, brutal and cruel real life could be would not actually have thought a mere game was of greater significance. But there was also in the renditions of the quote an acknowledgement of the all-consuming passions football generated, and the seriousness that could overwhelm its adherents. Fan, player or manager, Shankly recognised and articulated how central football was to working-class people.

That was in turn a reflection of his own political outlook. Shankly, like the village that made him, believed in socialism. Not the esoteric theorising of Marxist philosophy, or grand command of the progress of civilisation, but the practical, ground level application of collective endeavour for collective reward. It was a utilitarianism that governed his outlook on that most team-focused of sports, and a direct product of the environment in which he was raised.

Glenbuck was a place resolutely left of centre. It couldn't be anything much else given the nature of its existence and the economic relations to which its people were bonded. It was not a communist enclave, nor a place of revolutionary ferment, but the

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people of Glenbuck certainly knew whose side they were on. The mines made this an unsigned but binding contract. People could die from their work and needed to depend on their neighbours and workmates to mitigate the risk of danger, or at least attempt to ensure their loved ones were looked after if they were severely injured or lost their lives. It is no surprise that the village that was nourished on the shared experience and the essential collectivism of mining for coal should provide so many men committed to a sport that depended on those same principles of working and functioning together.

Now those mines have gone. The people who worked them have departed, the surviving relatives and descendants resettled in the nearby towns of Muirkirk, Douglas, Cumnock and beyond. Those local places used to treat Glenbuckians with mutual suspicion and not infrequent enmity, but now they are part of the modern locale of quiet small towns with neat municipal housing and well-kept private homes. Those who were born in Glenbuck, or can remember it from family connections, are inevitably dwindling in number but still speak with a fierce pride for their lost home.

One is Sam Purdie. A barrel-chested, brawny man with a voice to match, he is now 79 but fit, energetic and full of enthusiasm. A former miner and oil man, an activist, campaigner and general go-to man for all manner of things, he writes of and recalls Glenbuck like no one else does. He can talk for Scotland and anywhere else besides. He waxes lyrical and forceful on any number of topics, reflecting his broad interests and areas of knowledge, and holding a listener in a kind of willingly captive grip.

One cold wintry day in the now deserted Glenbuck, Sam Purdie is back. From the car parked just off the modern A70 highway, Sam walks accompanied by two fellow travellers, past the black-stoned memorial close to the trees bordering Glenbuck Loch. The stone is inscribed with gold letters, paying tribute to Bill Shankly. This is the great man's memorial, placed fittingly near the site of his former home village.

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People come from all over the world to see it – football pilgrims of many denominations, paying homage to one of the game’s legendary figures. A few scarves in Liverpool red are spread around; some flowers hang wearily by the granite sides.

Sam and his companions stop to look and pause before continuing up the sloping track, the sides of the low valley surrounding them, the fresh but faint icy breeze making a barely heard whisper. The footsteps end. There is silence and stillness as the group look up the road to the gently winding lane, the bumps and lumps and that boggy, forlorn field. Sam has stopped talking now.

The moment is broken with the most stupid of stupid questions. “Ask a stupid question, Sam. But how do you feel coming back here now?”

There is a lament of sorts, some hesitant voice-cracking words about the sadness of it all and then silence again. It’s no real answer but it speaks volumes. There are ghosts here, listening in. Theirs is a story to be told.