



Marvin Close

1923

Life in Football
One Hundred Years Ago

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Legacy of War

'The old men were still running the country. The politicians who had caused millions of deaths, as if they had done something wonderful.'

Ken Follett, *Fall of Giants*

MONDAY, 5 July 1915. It was a grey, rainy morning on the Somme. The night before had been quiet, opposing sides cocooned within their redoubts. In the British lines there had been the chance to brew tea, eat some rations, smoke a few fags and then gain some hours of slumber. A rare peace would soon be ruptured. An hour before daybreak, 200 men from the 9th Green Howards regiment got the order to advance. They emerged in the drizzle from their trenches to attack a German position 300 metres away. The aim, to overrun an enemy machine gun emplacement as part of a wider attack to gain ground across the Somme battlefield. It would become a familiar story throughout the offensive; soldiers thrown thoughtlessly forward into inevitable death. As the men were ordered to run across open ground towards the enemy, they were cut down in droves. The German machine gun nest was causing carnage.

Desperate decisions have to be made swiftly in battle and on the hoof, Second Lieutenant Donald Bell spotted a shallow communications trench that led across to the German lines and resolved to act. Armed with a revolver and a rucksack full of Mills bombs, he dragooned Corporal Colwill and Private Batey and their rifles to join him in navigating a perilous way on hands, knees and stomachs through the channel nearer towards the enemy machine gun nest. The trio spent 15 long minutes propelling themselves slowly, silently, quietly through the mud until they arrived cheek by jowl next to the German trenches. They sprung up from their cover and with astonishing bravery the three men attacked the well-populated German position with rifles and revolvers, fast-bowled Mills bombs, cricket-style, into the enemy base and knocked out the machine gun, killing 50 enemy soldiers. Many Allied lives were saved as a consequence.

For their gallantry, Colwill and Batey were awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. For his quick thinking and bravery, Second Lieutenant Bell became the only professional footballer during World War One to win Britain's highest military honour, the Victoria Cross. He would never hold it in his hands. Five days later, Bell again stormed a German machine gun post near the village of Contalmaison and this time he did not escape the bullets. Newly married on leave, he died aged 26 and was eventually buried where he fell.

Harrogate-born Bell was a superb all-round sportsman excelling at cricket and rugby. But his first love was football and while training to become a teacher at London's Westminster College he signed amateur forms to play for Crystal Palace in the Southern League. After getting a job back in Yorkshire teaching at Harrogate's Starbeck College, Bell signed professional terms with Bradford Park Avenue and in 1914 was part of the promotion-winning team that helped them into the top flight for the first time. Before Bell left for war,

Bradford Park Avenue's manager Reg Hall described him as 'our new jewel in the crown, a footballer who would see us happily into the future'.

Donald Simpson Bell had reputedly been the first professional footballer to sign up for action in World War One. At the outbreak of the conflict, there were around 5,000 players in England and Scotland's professional and top amateur leagues but few initially joined up. At the start of the war, the powers-that-be were convinced that football should continue to help keep up public morale. Leagues, cups and games continued through 1914 and into 1915, but as a generation of young men began to die across the water on mainland Europe, public opinion began to turn. Well-paid, fit young footballers were increasingly seen as privileged – some even called them cowards for not joining up. In the football hotbed of Sunderland, Lord Durham hoped that the Germans would drop bombs on Roker Park to encourage players and fans to think about where they should be. In London, the jingoist *Evening News* ceased printing its football editions. There were large protests outside football grounds and some players were sent white feathers and hate mail through the post. Pressure was put upon King George V to relinquish his role as a patron of the Football Association.

It became clear that public morale would now be best served by professional players seen to be doing their bit for the cause and 'footballers' battalions' began to be formed. Clubs agreed to suspend or temporarily cancel player contracts so that they were free to join up, and over 2,000 players enlisted as volunteers, inspiring fans from their clubs to enlist alongside them. In early 1915, the first footballers' battalion, the 17th (Service) Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, was formed and included the entire Clapton Orient (later Leyton Orient) first team. A few months later, it was followed by a second, the 23rd (Service) Battalion. In Scotland, the 16th Royal Scots included

players and fans from Heart of Midlothian, Hibernian, Falkirk and Raith Rovers and became known as the Edinburgh Pals. In just six days the first Scottish footballers' battalion recruited 1,350 volunteers.

Other football battalions were formed around Great Britain, using players as the 'recruiting sergeants' to encourage fans at their local clubs to sign up. Supporters would find themselves fighting alongside a host of current and future international, including England players such as Major Frank Buckley, Captain Vivian Woodward, Lance Sergeant Jack Cock, Lance Corporal Fred Bullock, Privates Tim Coleman, Ernie Simms, Percy Humphreys and Ernest Williamson; for Wales, Acting Sergeant Fred Keenor and Private James Williams; and Ireland's Corporal Jack Doran. They shipped off to mainland Europe, footballers and fans with hope in their hearts.

Nearly 300 players would never return, killed on the battlefield or behind the lines from disease; many, many more would be injured. Nine of Bradford City's first team squad would never come home. Among them was Jimmy Speirs, the man who scored the winning goal for the Paraders in the 1911 FA Cup Final against Newcastle United. As captain of the side, it would be Speirs who would lift the new trophy, fittingly cast by Fattorini's Goldsmiths of Bradford. A unique character for his time, Speirs was a highly intelligent working-class Glaswegian who dealt in stocks and shares, oil and rubber. He moved to Bradford from the mighty Glasgow Rangers, and became the midfield playmaker, dictating games, dubbed 'the brains of the team'. He battled his way through the war, becoming a sergeant much-loved by his men, winning the Military Medal for bravery at the second battle of Arras in May 1917. Three months later he was killed during the Battle of Passchendaele aged 31, a young life robbed with a wife and three young children back home. His body would not be found until 1919.

His young team-mate Ernest Goodwin was a local lad still making his way in the game; not yet a first-team regular but a doughty and promising reserve. He arrived in this world as a home birth in a house that was later demolished to make way for one of Bradford City's new Valley Parade stands, a player literally born into the club. He volunteered in person at the West Yorkshire Barracks just half a mile up the hill from where he was born. Like many young footballers who joined up, he was sent abroad for the first time in his life, to France and the front line, where he spent precious few weeks before being blown up and killed, aged 22. Team-mates Bob Torrance, Evelyn Lintott, James Conlin, James Comrie, Harry Potter, Gerald Kirk and George Draycott would also perish in France and Belgium.

Eleven players from Hearts died; Brechin City lost five of their men in the war, while Orient lost three. Tragically, 34 players and staff from top amateur side Corinthians were killed. Name a club, they all lost men. Northampton Town's 35-year-old player-manager Fred Lessons was killed at Pas-de-Calais on 7 September 1918, just two months before the end of the war. His team-mate Walter Tull had perished a few months earlier, also at Pas-de-Calais, leading an attack during the first Battle of Bapaume. The first black officer in the British Army, he was struck by a single bullet, his body never found.

Not all died on the battlefield. Disease was rife in and around the trenches. Even before the Spanish flu pandemic began to decimate troops on both sides in 1917, the Great Conflict proved once again that there are many ways to die in the filth and squalor of war. Arsenal favourite Pat Flanagan, who played over 100 games for the Gunners before the war, died of dysentery in German East Africa in 1917.

Over 1,700 players made it home but in no way unscathed. Many who did return were severely injured, shell-shocked and perhaps the worst of all for a professional footballer, minus legs

or feet, never able to play again. On the outbreak of war, Exeter City's highly regarded Billy Smith had agreed a move from the old Southern League club to join First Division Everton but then volunteered to fight. He made it through the entire conflict, but the day after Armistice had been declared he was shot in the leg by a sniper. The wound led to his limb being amputated. Exeter fans collected £40 for Smith, worth around £4,000 today, his footballing career done.

Smith's team-mate Fred Goodwin had already experienced crushing tragedy before the war began. Playing for his former club Brighton & Hove Albion against Luton Town in April 1912, he accidentally kicked Town player Sam Wightman in the stomach, which caused a severe rupture to Wightman's small intestine – he later died in hospital from peritonitis. The coroner exonerated Goodwin of any blame, deeming the fatal tackle to be unintentional, but it mentally scarred the player for the rest of his life. Goodwin also volunteered to fight, and soon afterwards he suffered serious injuries in battle and would never play football again. Everton's captain, Scottish international Jimmy Galt, was also wounded in action, and the severe shell-shock he suffered robbed him of a postwar career. Galt, Goodwin and Smith were just three of a legion of young sportsmen who had committed their lives to football and then bravely served their country and were now faced with uncertain futures, careers lost.

Many of the homecoming injured did get to play football again, but their experiences lived with them throughout their careers. Everton's 1914/15 top scorer, Bobby Parker, returned home with a constant physical reminder of war, a bullet lodged permanently in his back. Blackburn Rovers' Sam Wadsworth was wounded in action serving as a gunner in the Royal Garrison Artillery. He was invalided home not just physically injured, but deeply mentally scarred. For years after the war he would suffer from debilitating blackouts with what we

would now probably classify as the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. His immediate return from the Western Front was not a happy one. Demobbed in July 1919, he returned to Ewood Park to meet with the manager Bob Middleton to talk contracts. Throughout the four and a half years that he served on the front line, he would regularly return home on leave to be asked by Blackburn to play in friendlies and exhibition matches for them. In a series of autobiographical recordings made later in his life, Wadsworth recalled, 'They were glad of my services and I was pleased to play.'

Wadsworth had signed full-time for his hometown club in 1914 as a 19-year-old, in what was a dream come true. He had supported Rovers since he was a child and to pull on the blue and white quarters was all he had ever wanted in life. The ultimate kid in a sweetshop who ends up earning a living playing for the team he loves. But at the Ewood Park meeting with Middleton, his dream turned into a nightmare. The manager, clearly a man of few words, simply told Wadsworth, 'Sorry Sam. I have no vacancy. You may have a free transfer.'

He was devastated by the news. In his private recordings, Wadsworth later emotionally articulated his feelings at the time: 'That was all. What a blow. I had lived my life for Rovers. It had been all I had lived for, for four and a half years in the mud of Belgium and France. Not very nice treatment. I came back home broken-hearted. I was never to play again for my favourite team. I thought is this what I receive after nearly five years' service for my country? I was very bitter.'

Many other players returned home hoping, nay expecting, that their suspended early wartime contracts would be renewed, but like Wadsworth they were shown the door. However, thanks to a single-minded determination, Wadsworth himself would make a phenomenally successful return to football. After being given the heave-ho by his beloved Blackburn, he was so distraught he'd considered burning his boots and giving up the

game aged just 23. But fortunately, his family persuaded him to carry on and he dropped through the leagues to get a contract with nearby tiny Nelson. Wadsworth quickly impressed and soon First Division Huddersfield Town were in for him. With the Terriers, Wadsworth went on to win three league championships, the FA Cup and the Charity Shield. He would also captain England and win nine international caps.

Jimmy Seed came from a footballing family. When he signed on for Sunderland before the war, his elder brother Angus was already playing for Reading and his sister Minnie would become one of the first stars for the Dick, Kerr Ladies team. Jimmy played in the reserves for a year and a half and was being tipped for promotion into the first team. But before he could make his full debut, Seed made a momentous decision. Writing in his autobiography, *The Jimmy Seed Story*, he recalled, 'Football had ceased to be the most important thing in life for me. Britain and Germany were at war and playing football was no longer such a thrill.'

Along with team-mates Tommy Thompson and Tom Wilson, he became the third Sunderland Tommy and signed up.

Fast forward to July 1917 and Private Jimmy Seed awakes choking. He is sleeping alongside nearly 1,000 Allied troops in a long street of bombed-out buildings in Ostend, Belgium, when a German plane flies overhead and drops mustard gas canisters. The chemical covers the rubble street in a deadly mist, blinding, horrifically blistering skin, destroying lungs and killing. Alongside 700 other men, Seed would be one of the lucky ones. Though severely injured, they would survive the gassing. One hundred of their compatriots would not. Seed was shipped home for rehab and after spending many months recovering, he was sent back to the front in early 1918 – where he was gassed for a second time. His lungs were shot and this time around, the road to recovery would be a much longer one. Seed was sent to a sanatorium in Wigan to recuperate.

It was while returning to Wigan one Saturday morning after visiting his family that by total chance, Seed bumped into his Sunderland team-mates on a railway platform. He hadn't clapped eyes on most of them for years and they welcomed one another warmly. Stupidly, he allowed them to persuade him to play in a Victory League match – an interim set of fixtures put together before the Football League was able to start up again in earnest – that very afternoon. They were a man short and needed Seed to step up. Flattered that the first-teamers had such faith in him and convinced his recovery was going well, he agreed to play. It was an unmitigated disaster. The exertion of playing full-on football again nearly did for Seed. Choking, coughing and throwing up, his lungs and chest were burning. The last thing he should have done was play in a football match. That was hammered home further when alarmed Sunderland board members saw the state of health he was in and let him go.

When his recuperation finally ended, Seed went back to the pit where his working life had begun aged 14. He played some low-key pit football for Whitburn Colliery's team but had largely given up on the idea of playing professionally again. Then Seed was handed an offer that would change his life. He was asked to transfer down to the South Wales coal fields, so that he could work as a miner and play for the tiny Mid Rhondda FC in the coalmining town of Pontypandy. And then proof that miracles really do happen, he was spotted playing, rather brilliantly, for the little pit team by a Tottenham Hotspur scout. Spurs signed him up and by 1921 he was an FA Cup winner and earning the first of five England caps. After eight years at White Hart Lane, he moved back up north to sign for Sheffield Wednesday, where he captained them to back-to-back league titles in 1928/29 and 1929/30. Though he suffered lung and breathing problems throughout his career, Seed learned how to manage his disability and carved out a superb career.

One of Seed's fellow Sunderland reserve players, Norman Gaudie, did not sign up during World War One, even when compulsory conscription was introduced in 1916. Gaudie was sent his call-up papers but never showed up to enrol. A committed Quaker pacifist, he refused to take up arms. Other footballers who were conscientious objectors, such as Burnley's England international Edwin Moss crop and West Ham's Leslie Askew, had also refused to fight but were granted exemption status and allowed to serve in non-combatant units working in factories and farms, mines and on port docks. But Gaudie refused to take part in any work that contributed to the fighting of the war. He told the military authorities that due to his religious beliefs he was 'bound to disobey any military orders in loyalty to those convictions, which are based on the spirit and teaching of Christ'.

Along with 15 fellow Quaker, Methodist and Socialist war dissenters, Gaudie was locked up in Richmond Castle in Yorkshire where it's alleged that the men, who became known as the Richmond Sixteen, were systematically beaten up and attacked by their guards. The men began to gain some degree of notoriety, which enraged secretary of state for war Lord Kitchener. He ordered them to be shipped to France and made to undertake non-combatant works on the docks, loading and unloading supplies and military material. If they refused their orders, the Richmond Sixteen were to be court-martialled and executed. All but one of the men refused to carry out the orders, so they were summarily court-martialled and incarcerated in military prison to await their deaths. The case caused a furore across large parts of British society with many seeing them as yellow cowards; many others, as men of deep religious and political conviction. In the end the matter went right to the very top, and to Lord Kitchener's fury, Prime Minister Herbert Asquith decided to commute the death sentences to terms of prison hard labour. On his release from prison some years later,

Gaudie would be utterly shunned by the sporting world and would never play competitive football again.

There were also the more fortunate ones. Hearts defender Paddy Crossan was hit by shrapnel in the leg and 'labelled' for amputation. Frantic for his footballing future, he pleaded with the German POW surgeon not to perform the operation. The medic relented and after further lengthy treatment his leg was saved. After the war, he played six more seasons for Hearts. Cardiff City's 20-year-old Fred Keenor took a shattering gunshot wound to the thigh and spent nearly two years on crutches. But after lengthy rehab he managed to walk again and then run, and finally became fit enough to play football once more. Keenor would go on to lift the FA Cup for the Bluebirds in 1927 and win 32 caps for Wales.

No one who was lucky enough to survive the slaughter was unaffected. All the young players who returned had been robbed of their innocence, the horrors of war forever imprinted upon their minds, a party to carnage and savagery they could never forget. But at least those who returned uninjured had their football. And the nation was more than ready for it. The leagues in England and Scotland began again in earnest in 1919. It was a soaring and inspirational joy for fans to experience life back on the terraces for the first time in four years, but it was hardly business as usual. The standard of play was poor. A generation of Britain's footballers had been robbed of their best years. Those not dead, badly injured or mortally traumatised by their wartime experiences returned to their clubs from the war not having trained for years. Most were unfit, some malnourished or recovering from trench foot and a staggering range of health problems caused by everything from typhoid and pneumonia to poorly treated venereal diseases. With precious little coaching many largely untrained and inexperienced teenagers, too young to fight in the war, were thrust into first team action, asked to learn 'the job' as they

went along. It became a season of continual injuries to players, many of whom were never fully fit. Games often became a lottery, with players becoming exhausted as second halves played out. But at least football was back again.

The 1919/20 season's league champions were, for the first time, West Bromwich Albion, and their inside-left Fred Morris was the top scorer in the country with 37 goals. Aston Villa narrowly beat Huddersfield Town to lift the FA Cup, while Tottenham Hotspur were promoted as Second Division champions. The British public's thirst for the game was insatiable; the return of league football was greeted with record attendances at almost every league ground. Though it may be dwarfed today, Manchester United's average gate of 26,000 was more than double that of their last season of play in 1914/15. The Old Trafford match against Liverpool drew a crowd of 45,000.

But the simple truth was that the nation was well short of good footballers. And referees, coaches and trainers, many of whom had also died during the Great War. And the country was short of men. The 1921 Census revealed an astonishing statistic. For the first time in recorded history, Britain contained far more women than men. So many males died during World War One and then through the global Spanish flu pandemic that by 1921, for every 1,000 men there were 1,096 women. And that had a big impact on football. From the top leagues into non-league, football was struggling not just with quality but quantity. The talented shone through as they always do and quickly got signed up on decent wages. But up and down the football pyramid good but perhaps not brilliant players came back from war wanting more secure livings. Many survived the madness of the front by throwing themselves forwards, ever hoping, becoming engaged and marrying their sweethearts. The lucky ones who did return soon sized up their married futures. Being a footballer only promised a short and precarious

career and many working-class men came back from war deciding to take jobs in factories and industries that would offer longer, regular careers. The government pledged servicemen first preference on available work and having survived the sheer horrors of war, many players were desperate for some stability in their lives.

Most clubs were not in a position to offer them that kind of job permanence. After years of war and no income from matches, they were skint, many hanging on to stay alive. At the time, all clubs depended financially on one single source of income – fans coming through the gate. Until clubs got a few seasons back under their belts earning money from matches, money was in short supply. It would be a long haul back to pre-war standards on many fronts.

Not that this particularly bothered the fans – they were desperate for football and wanted more professional clubs. In 1920/21 they got their wish when the new Third Division was added to the national structure. Made up of clubs from the south, north and the Midlands, the new division included the likes of future powerhouses West Ham, Leeds United, Nottingham Forest, Wolverhampton Wanderers and first champions Birmingham City. In 1921/22 it was all change again when the new Third Division was separated into two largely regional sections, split for the north and south. The number of professional Football League clubs now increased from 66 to 86. By 1923 everything began to change. Five years on from the end of the war, a new generation of fitter, better-trained young players started to make their mark on the game. This was the year when football truly began again.