

Marvin Close

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Seventy Years Ago

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Life in 1953

'The past is never dead. It's not even past'

William Faulkner

THOUGH THE Second World War was only eight years in the past, its legacy was still all-pervasive. Many of the country's footballers had served during the conflict and some still bore the scars. Blackpool and England ace Stan Mortensen was a rear gunner and wireless operator in the RAF, and in 1939 he narrowly escaped death in a plane crash in Lossiemouth, Scotland. Mortensen described it thus in his autobiography, 'We were on operational training; the Wellington caught fire and down we went in a dive. We finished in a fir plantation, the pilot and bomb aimer were killed, the navigator lost a leg, and I got out alive with various injuries of which the worst was a head wound.' During his slow recovery, Mortensen was told by doctors that his head injuries were so bad he would never be fit for operational duties again. They also advised him to give up his football career as heading the ball could likely cause him serious health problems. Thankfully for football, Mortensen chose not to heed the latter advice.

Many other players had joined up. In March 1939, Hitler's army invaded Czechoslovakia and war appeared so inevitable, that the FA sent a memo to all professional clubs asking them

to encourage fans to enlist in the Territorial Army and the other armed forces. On 8 April, Bolton Wanderers captain Harry Goslin stepped up to a microphone set up on the Burnden Park pitch before their game against Sunderland kicked off and urged the 23,000 crowd to sign up. Goslin told the stadium, 'We are facing a national emergency. But this danger can be met, if everybody keeps a cool head, and knows what to do. This is something you can't leave to the other fellow, everybody has a share to do.'

Two days later, 15 of the Wanderers players walked together to the town's Bradshawgate Territorial Army office to join the 53rd Field Regiment of the Bolton Artillery. Once war was declared, the 53rd were sent over to France in April 1940. During early skirmishes, Goslin helped knock out four German tanks and was swiftly promoted to lieutenant. But the British Expeditionary Force was taking a battering from the Nazis from the air and on the ground and was pushed back to the beaches of Dunkirk, where Lt Goslin and teammates Don Howe, Ray Westwood, Ernie Forrest, Jack Hurst and Stan Hanson waited prone in the sand dunes, attacked by artillery and Stuka fighter bullets, for a boat to ferry them back across the Channel. For the next three years, the Wartime Wanderers of the 53rd saw action in Egypt and then during the invasion of Italy in 1943. At the end of November they found themselves in furious fighting around Foggia. According to the Bolton Wanderers website, Lions of Vienna, 'Don Howe was wounded and evacuated to a dressing station. Ray Westwood and Stan Hanson came close to being killed after an air attack. Enemy shelling was relentless and on 14 December, after an explosion right next to the tree above the slit trench in which Goslin was situated, he was hit in the back by shrapnel. Goslin sadly died a few days later.'

Over 300 professional footballers were killed in the mass slaughter of the First World War, many sent, poorly trained, to the frontline. During the Second World War,

many players were involved in frontline fighting – but many more were held back to work as physical fitness trainers and admin staff in order to make them available to play in morale-boosting wartime matches up and down the country. In total, 15 players died during the Second World War and many hundreds were injured.

The first footballer to die in the conflict was Liverpool and England's stylish right-back Tom Cooper in June 1940. He became a sergeant in the Royal Military Police and was serving as a dispatch rider based in Suffolk when his motorbike crashed into a double-decker bus, killing him instantly. An inquiry into his death led to all army dispatch riders being ordered to compulsorily wear crash helmets. Some players became prisoners of war, including Ipswich's Fred Chadwick who nearly died of malnutrition while being used as a slave labourer on the infamous Burma Railway. Albert Hall of Tottenham Hotspur was also a Japanese POW. Many served with great distinction. Rangers and Scotland star Willie Thornton won the Military Medal for Bravery during the Allied invasion of Sicily. Thankfully, most of the footballer servicemen returned home to resume their playing careers in what was regarded as 'peacetime'.

But the fighting had not ended in 1945. Britain was most definitely still on a war footing. The Cold War was freezing over and from 1950 to 1953, the nation was deeply involved in the world's latest conflict, the Korean War. Added to this, Britain still had an empire to run and, following India's independence in 1947, it could no longer call on that nation's massive standing army for manpower. To face these problems, the British government established a system of national service. From 1948, all young men between the age of 18 and 30 were required to spend 18 months – later, two years – of conscription in one of the three armed services, which meant many football clubs lost players to the draft. Most were held back at home and spent their national service square-

bashing and getting bored. Others went to the frontline. East Fife's young right-half Harold Davis joined the Black Watch regiment and was shipped out to Korea where he soon saw action. During trench warfare in May 1953, Davis was shot twice while sprinting between two gun pits. He spent ten days unconscious in a Japanese hospital before being flown back home where he spent a year undergoing surgeries on a serious abdominal injury, then a further year in rehab. Davis was discharged from the army on medical grounds and told by physicians that he wouldn't play football again. Ferociously self-willed, Davis enrolled the help of physios and fitness trainers and within a further year was back in the professional game. He would go on to sign for Rangers where he would win four league titles, two League Cups and a Scottish Cup.

In truth, the Britain of 1953 was a fairly grim and grey place. The conflict had shattered the nation in terms of its infrastructure and its economy and Britain was clawing its way back from the ruin of war. Postwar austerity Britain had been forced to borrow \$3.75bn from the United States and \$1.19bn from Canada just to keep afloat – loans that would not be fully paid off until 2006. Most of the country's major towns and cities had been hit hard by the Luftwaffe and were still slowly being rebuilt in the midst of its totally shot economy. London, Liverpool, Southampton, Hull, Bristol, Manchester and settlements all points of the compass were still pocked with bombsites and broken buildings. A lot of local authorities paved over bombsites, creating playgrounds and car parks; the biggest problem for Brits was severe housing shortages. The government estimated that to rehouse those bombed out and those returning from the forces, they would need to build 750,000 new homes. They introduced a revolutionary plan of prefabricated home building to help plug the gap and promised to have erected 500,000 of them throughout the early 1950s. By 1953, cost and lack of materials meant they'd hardly built a third of that, but nearly

150,000 urban dwellers were more than happy to move into their new 'prefabs'.

Some of the structures were timber framed, many were steel framed with asbestos panels, and others were made from surplus aluminium aircraft materials. Most parts of the prefabs were pre-made in factories and then bolted together on site. All built to a central design, they contained inside toilets and bathrooms – still not common at the time – and a coal fire fitted with a gas boiler to heat the water and central heating. Though only introduced as a temporary measure – the government expected them to last for no more than ten years – many thousands still stand today. But most of the country's towns and cities were still filled with the rubble of bombed-out derelict houses, so short was Britain of building materials.

The grim nature of life in the early 1950s wasn't helped by the weather. The winter of 1952/53 threw a huge pall over the nation's spirits; two shocking disasters killed thousands. The London of 1953 was an unregulated pot of stinking pollution; heavy industry belched out sulphur, noxious gases and health-damaging smoke clouds into the streets of the capital, as did the coal and wood fires used in most homes at the time. In early December, a cold snap hit London and thick freezing fog shrouded the city for days; the crap in the air stopped rising upwards and became locked in the streets, houses and buildings. First, the smog was a sulphurous yellow but as yet more coal and wood smoke became trapped in the deadly bubble, it turned to an ominous black. Wherever you went, it was unavoidable.

Brian Commins, a London doctor at the time and a man who would later help set up the Medical Research Council's Air Pollution Unit at St Bartholomew's Hospital, described his experience of the Great Smog of London to the BBC: 'You could smell it. It tasted a bit acidic and it caused absolute havoc. The levels of pollution were horrendous. You couldn't see your feet. I remember on one occasion I wanted to cross a

wide road ... and after about ten minutes I didn't know where I was. Finally I ended up on the same side of the road as I started. The smog got everywhere, you couldn't avoid it. To see someone fighting for air is a harrowing experience. And of course, it was dirty air, even in the wards.'

Because the weather continued to be bitterly cold, people lit more fires which only made the matter worse. As many as 100,000, particularly those with asthma and bronchial problems, became seriously ill. London's hospitals were overrun, and so many died the capital ran out of coffins. Depending on which sources you read, anything between 3,000 and 12,000 Londoners perished over a two-week period. As London struggled to come to terms with the tragedy, another was just around the corner – and not geographically far away.

In the dead of night on 31 January and into 1 February, a freak storm surge hit the North Sea. Hurricane-strength winds combined with a deep area of low pressure caused massive tidal waves which crashed into the east coast, bringing devastating floods to Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Essex and Suffolk. This single night of horror would kill 300 people. Over 32,000 local residents were evacuated from the flooded towns and villages; the surge caused utter devastation. Canvey Island, which was below sea level, was particularly hard hit. Fifty-nine people perished; some had clambered on their roofs for safety and died not from drowning but exposure caused by the extremely cold freezing weather. Over 13,000 were evacuated; more than 5,000 homes, public buildings and Canvey Island FC's ground were flooded out. In Margate, the storm destroyed the local lighthouse, which was ripped off the end of the town's stone pier. The devastation was even worse across the North Sea; over 2,500 people were killed in Belgium and the Netherlands. According to the Met Office, the surge caused a tide over 18ft higher than normal sea levels, and along Britain's North Sea coast 160,000 acres

of agricultural land were so saturated with sea water they became unusable for several years. Thousands of animals were killed.

But there were undoubtedly glimmers of hope for the future on the domestic front. For the first time since the war, 1953 saw the end of petrol rationing, which led to a surge in car sales; most top footballers would now own their own motors. It would also be the year when sugar and sweets came off the ration. Britons, though, would have to wait another year for meat and cheese to follow. Good old British fish and chips was still pretty much the only available takeaway food, but it was cheap and readily available – every neighbourhood had its ‘chippie’.

Popular mass entertainment was changing too for players and their fans, making the nation’s continuing austerity slightly more bearable. The first half of 1953 saw a huge rise in the sale of television sets, mainly thanks to the upcoming coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June, and though Britain still only had one TV channel it was becoming less straight-laced and more entertaining. An ambitious programming plan was launched at the BBC with more varied dramas like British television’s first sci-fi epic, *The Quatermass Experiment*, and a six-part *Robin Hood* series, starring future Doctor Who star Patrick Troughton as the Sherwood Forest outlaw. For the first time, programmes for children featured on the channel, with the debuts of *Andy Pandy*, *Flower Pot Men*, *Watch with Mother* and *Muffin the Mule*. Though the BBC was still the only TV channel on offer, in late November 1953 the House of Lords voted through a new White Paper that would lead to the birth of commercial television in Britain. The following year, it would become an act of parliament and the country’s first four independent TV companies were handed their franchises. It would be a convoluted affair. Associated-Rediffusion would cover the London area with programming from Mondays to Fridays; Associated

Television had responsibility for the capital at weekends and the Midlands from Mondays to Fridays; Kemsley-Winnick Television won the franchise to operate programmes in the Midlands and the north on Saturdays and Sundays; while Manchester-based Granada Television took responsibility for the north on weekdays. But the revolution had begun and within two years this early incarnation of ITV would be up and running as Britain's second television channel, paid for by onscreen advertising.

But British television was still some years away from replacing radio as the nation's favourite mass entertainment medium. In 1953, the revolutionary and surreal *The Goon Show* was pulling in millions of listeners every Tuesday evening and already influencing committed young fans like John Cleese, Michael Palin and John Lennon. But the most popular radio comedy show of the year was almost as bizarre in concept. *Educating Archie* was essentially a ventriloquist's act on the radio. The stars of the show were popular vent Peter Brough and his haughty dummy, Archie Andrews, and alongside them, the series gave starts to future British comedy legends like Tony Hancock, Benny Hill, Dick Emery and *Carry On* stalwart Hattie Jacques. The show regularly pulled in weekly audiences of 15 million-plus and its fan club numbered 250,000 members. *The Archers* was now three years into its run and already pulling in huge audiences, as was the ever-popular *Billy Cotton Band Show*.

Cinema too was enjoying a golden age. After an immediate postwar struggle because of lack of funding, the British film industry had rationalised itself and the size of budgets made available for individual movies had shrunk to more manageable levels. Throughout the early 1950s, the major studios concentrated on popular comedies and Second World War dramas, aimed much more at the domestic market; the hope was that films could recoup their original budgets in British cinemas alone, without depending on sales

abroad, and particularly in the US market, though of course that was always seen as a welcome bonus if a British film somehow took off in foreign theatres. The strategy worked; in 1953, 111 films were produced and made in Britain, and 1.28 billion individual visits were made to British cinemas during the year. Ironically, the two biggest British box-office hits of the year became worldwide hits and extremely popular in the US.

The Cruel Sea was a Second World War film – noir, dark in look and tone, which explored the Royal Navy’s fight against Nazi U-boats during the Battle of the Atlantic. Tense and sometimes disturbing, the Charles Frennd movie was the biggest box-office hit at Britain’s cinemas in 1953. Starring a roll call of the country’s best screen actors, Jack Hawkins, Donald Sinden, Stanley Baker, Virginia McKenna and Moira Lister, *The Cruel Sea* punched well above its weight in the US, grossing over \$600,000 (approximately £5m today) at the American box office. It was perhaps not a great surprise that this dark, very well-made film was a hit across the other side of the Atlantic. Many Americans – and by association, their families – had shared in the events of these same seaborne battles and could relate to the power of its story and realistic visual style.

But the other truly unexpected hit internationally was something very different: a gentle, quintessentially British light comedy, *Genevieve*. Following the exploits of two young couples taking part in the annual London to Brighton vintage car rally, it was a miracle that this slowest of road movies had ever been made. Director Henry Cornelius had struggled to get funding, with virtually all of Britain’s film production companies passing on the idea. Ultimately, Rank Studios somewhat reluctantly agreed to back the project, but only if it could be made for the at-the-time low budget of £115,000. The actors that Cornelius wanted as his first-choice leads – Dirk Bogarde and Claire Bloom – turned him

down. In their place came Kenneth Moore, Dinah Sheridan and John Gregson, plus original choice Kay Kendall, who together suffered through a nightmare filming schedule. Blighted by bad weather, constant vintage car breakdowns and filmed at a dizzying pace because of its low budget, star Moore described the experience as ‘depressing’. Cornelius had also spooked the conservatively minded Rank Studios board by employing the left-leaning American harmonica virtuoso Larry Adler – exiled to London by the McCarthy witch hunts – to compose the film’s highly unusual and idiosyncratic score. Rank had had just about enough of Cornelius by the time the film wrapped, £20,000 over budget. However, against all the odds, *Genevieve* was not only a domestic box-office hit but hugely popular in the US and nominated for two Oscars. The first, for Best Story and Screenplay by William Rose – a writer who two years later would win a British Academy Award for his script for legendary *The Ladykillers*; and then over a decade later, the Oscar for his groundbreaking script for *Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner*, the pioneering Sidney Poitier film about mixed marriages. The second nomination? Yes, Larry Adler for Best Music Score of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture. And this, after his name had originally been taken off the US credits for the film because of his blacklisting. Kudos to Henry Cornelius; against all the odds, job done.

Though very much pre-rock’n’ roll, popular music was becoming a big deal in 1953. The year before, Britain’s first top-ten charts were started by the *New Musical Express*, though it was calculated in an incomplete and fairly rudimentary way. Music journalist Percy Dickens gathered a pool of over 50 music shops around the country, and each week would ring 20 or so of them to discover their ten best-selling songs. These were aggregated together and the week’s top ten was announced; 1953 was most definitely the year of the solo singer and was dominated by American crooners

like Perry Como, Eddie Fisher and Guy Mitchell, all of whom had number ones. But by far the biggest musical phenomenon of 1953 was Frankie Laine. Born Francesco Paolo LoVecchio and brought up in Chicago's Little Italy, his father had been mobster Al Capone's personal barber and his family reportedly had Mafia connections. But boy, could he sing. Nicknamed 'Old Leather Lungs', Laine sang across a dizzying range of musical genres from big band crooning, jazz and blues, to folk and country – and Britain loved him. In 1953, three of his songs – 'Answer Me', 'I Believe' and 'Hey Joe' – topped the charts between them for an astonishing 28 weeks.

Alongside popular entertainment, two major events in 1953 enlivened the gloom of postwar Britain and made the country feel a little better about itself. One occurred thousands of miles away on the other side of the world, led by Col. John Hunt; it was a battle but not of the military kind. Hunt had assembled a huge team of ten mountaineers, 20 Sherpa guides and 350 support staff in an ambitious bid to conquer Everest. Carrying baggage and equipment that weighed over 10,000lb, the men arrived at Earth's highest summit in May in an attempt that was run like a military campaign. The year before, a Swiss team had reached 28,210ft, just 800ft from the summit, but were forced to turn back; the British expedition aimed to make it to the very top. Hugely experienced climbers Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans were chosen to make the attempt. The pair reached 28,700ft, just 330ft shy of the summit. But Evans was suffering from exhaustion and the duo were having potentially lethal problems with their oxygen equipment; they too were forced to turn back.

The second attempt was made three days later by an experienced Nepali sherpa Tenzing Norgay and a professional New Zealand beekeeper, Edmund Hillary. Both had experience a plenty. Tenzing had been a vital part of 1952's Swiss expedition and knew the mountain well. This would be

Hillary's fourth Himalayan expedition in just over two years; as a climber he had been described by top mountaineering pundit Ken Wilson as 'a sleeves-rolled-up, get-things-done-man'. The rest is history, the duo setting foot on the highest point on Earth at 11.30am local time on 29 May. The news of their triumph reached the UK in time for it to be announced on the morning of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation on 2 June, perhaps the biggest, most-keenly anticipated global event of the year.

For the first time, the people of Britain were able to watch the pomp and pageantry of a new monarch being crowned as it happened on television. It would be the most complex and biggest-ever live outside coverage in the history of broadcasting and logistically offered up a hornet's nest of problems. First of all, the BBC had to fight hard for permission to make the broadcast. Ranged against them were many influential voices within Buckingham Palace, the Church of England and the Houses of Parliament who found the whole notion distinctly unseemly. Winston Churchill himself advised the new Queen not to allow the BBC into Westminster Abbey, worrying that the cameras would bring an unnecessary pressure to an already highly pressured day. However, without knowing it at the time, the BBC had a very strong ally on their side – the Queen herself. Already beginning to show a self-willed confidence in her new role, Elizabeth personally let all of the establishment naysayers know that she wished for the coronation to be filmed live so that her subjects the length and breadth of the nation could share in the event. And so it came to pass – but only just.

The BBC Outside Broadcast Unit were forced to go on a charm offensive with Westminster Abbey's hierarchy to gain their begrudging co-operation and went to great lengths to demonstrate how discreet their cameramen and technicians would be during the ceremony. Five cameras would be

used at different angles around the abbey and each of them 'camouflaged' inside small wooden structures. Constant BBC rehearsals took place in the empty abbey, partly to convince concerned clergymen how quietly in the background the technical team would be. But more importantly, to meticulously choreograph their one-chance-only attempt at delivering a highly professional portrayal of one of the postwar world's most important events.

The task the BBC had taken on was, if anything, even more complex outside of Westminster Abbey. To cover the processional route to and from Buckingham Palace, 15 more outside broadcast cameras, five outside broadcast control units and mile upon mile of cabling would be required – and these would have to operate in and among the hundreds of thousands of people crammed into central London for the event. It was the epitome of the logistical nightmare and made ever more complicated by a deal the BBC had struck with TV networks in the US and Canada. To wit, the Outside Broadcast Unit's engineers were also tasked with making a high-quality 35mm film recording of the broadcast as it aired. As soon as each reel was made, a helicopter took it from the BBC's base at Alexandra Palace to London Airport and it was then flown in an RAF Canberra bomber across the Atlantic. On board the plane, BBC technicians processed the film as it flew to North America, so that Americans and Canadians were able to watch the coronation in full just a few hours after it had happened.

So it goes without saying that the technical challenges of covering the seven hours of the coronation, both in Westminster Abbey and outside, were immense. At the time, the BBC's assistant head of outside broadcasts, Peter Dimmock, baldly described his feelings before the event, 'We all got to our control room at about five in the morning – I've never been so nervous in my life.' Things did not begin well. The central control was inside Broadcasting House and

disaster struck just before transmission was due to start when all the screens there went blank. As pulses raced and engineers madly set about identifying the problem, it soon became clear that the nightmare had been caused by something incredibly simple and prosaic – a technician had accidentally unplugged a vital connection – and the fault was hurriedly rectified. The BBC's live coverage went ahead and was regarded around the world as a tour de force in broadcasting history. The success of the broadcast not only led to the expansion of the BBC's Outside Broadcast Unit but a burgeoning international respect for the corporation's utter professionalism, particularly in the US.

Though weather on the day was grey and rainy, the British people loved it. Up and down the country, thousands of street parties took place, but the greater majority were watching the coronation live on the telly. Throughout the first half of 1953, sales of televisions went through the roof; by the time of the coronation, 2.5 million sets had been installed around the country. According to the British Science Museum, 20 million people watched the live coverage on television – twice the amount who listened to it on the BBC's radio broadcast. Families, neighbours and friends crammed into nearby homes too and national surveys taken after the event revealed that for each TV set, an average of 17 people were watching. It's worth bearing in mind that most television sets had tiny grey 14in screens housed in big heavy wooden cabinets, so to gain a decent view of the event in a small parlour room would have been a triumph within itself.

It's worth remembering too that many of the BBC staff who'd shown such massive talent, skill and sheer white-knuckled stamina to pull off the success had gained their experience working on live outside broadcast football and sporting events. The previous biggest live outside broadcast undertaken by the BBC was filming the 1948 Olympic Games over its two weeks in London; coverage of the

Oxford–Cambridge boat race had become a regular fixture; and in 1953, the corporation had not only gained plaudits for its live televising of Football League matches but also the groundbreaking coverage of one of the most exciting FA Cup finals in history – and more of that later.