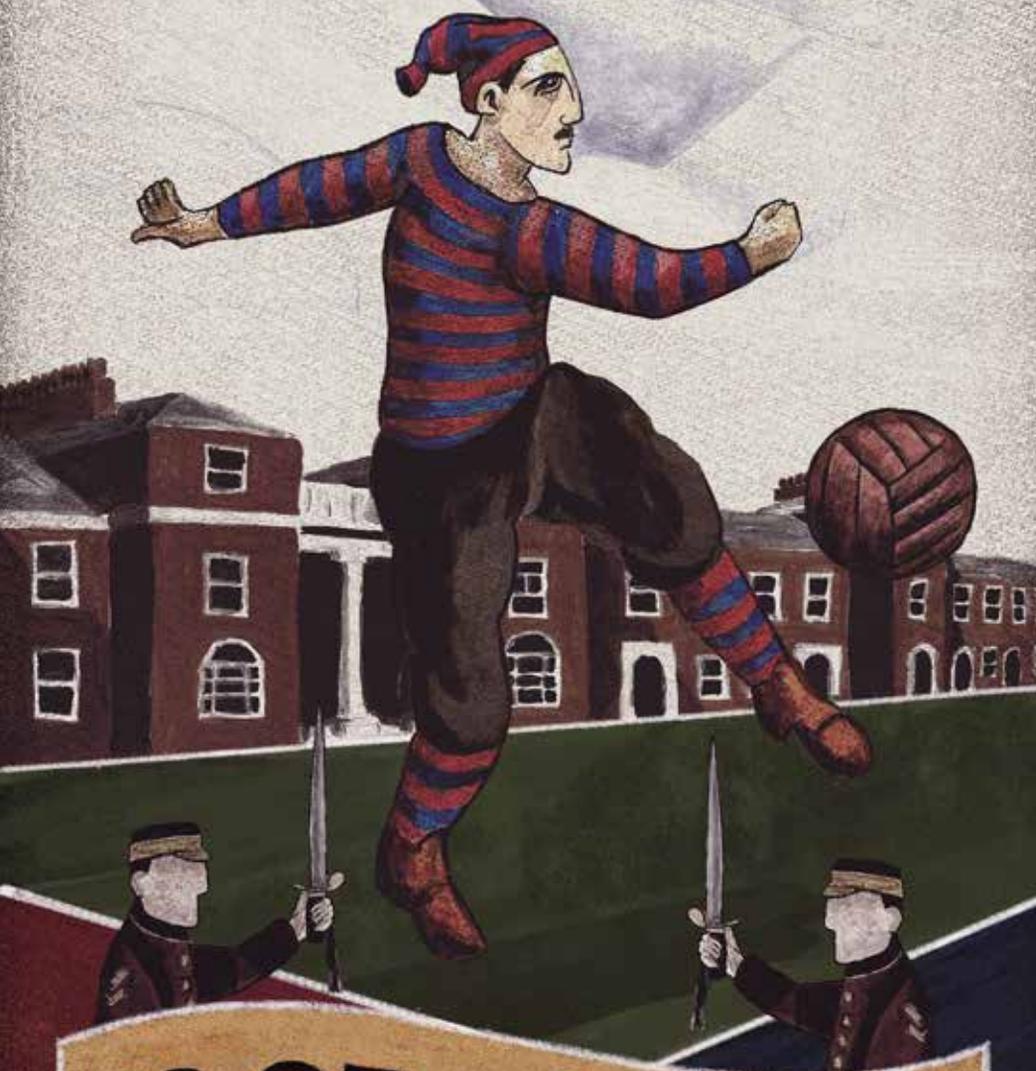


NICK COLLINS



FOOT SOLDIERS

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INTRODUCTION

‘SIR, I still do not believe he should be allowed to play.’

These impassioned words were spoken by Alfie Goodwyn, or to be more precise Lieutenant Alfred Goodwyn of the Royal Engineers.

It was Saturday, 16 March 1872, and in a few minutes’ time the first Football Association Challenge Cup Final was due to get underway, but in the eyes of some of the soldiers in that team dressing room there was a bit of a problem. His name was Morton ‘Peto’ Betts.

Captain Francis Marindin was the Engineers’ right-back and, at 34, he was the second oldest player. He was also the team captain and the most senior officer in the eleven. In addition to all that, he had seen active service in the Crimea almost two decades ago when he was just a teenager. It was no wonder he had the total respect of every man in the room.

‘Renny, what should we do? He is, after all, a friend of yours. A cricketing acquaintance I believe – only this isn’t cricket is it? And I mean that in every sense of the word.’

Marindin’s observation was directed at Henry Renny-Tailyour, a tall, handsome, clean-shaven Scotsman with deep brown eyes. His self-deprecating manner and debonair style made him a highly popular figure with his team-mates.

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He was also a wonderful footballer, possibly the best cricketer in the whole of the Royal Engineers and a rugby player of some renown. Add to that an eye for the ladies, and it was easy to see why Henry – or ‘Renny’ as he was universally known – was the focal point of this Engineers side, particularly among the younger players. They loved his charisma, his sense of fun and his ability to attract the attention of the fairer sex.

Henry knew immediately his response would have to be measured. He did not want to upset anyone, but equally he wanted to set the team at ease.

‘As I see it, sir, we are professional soldiers and they are public school Old Boys. Morton Betts is a friend of mine, as you rightly say, but he usually plays at full-back. I really do not see him as a major threat.

‘Moreover, if you want to get at him, then address him as “Monty”, which was his childhood nickname. He hates being called that, so I tease him gently with that moniker when we meet on the cricket field.

‘Let him play against us and let us beat the Wanderers with him in their eleven.’

As Henry sat down again, Alfie leapt to his feet. His eyes were burning with indignation.

‘But, Renny, he is registered with the Harrow Chequers and that surely makes him ineligible! They were due to play against the Wanderers in the first round but scratched because they claimed they could not raise a side.

‘I can’t say I was surprised by that, or by them allowing the Wanderers to progress to the next round. When the draw was made, I do not think they had any intention of playing against those opponents – I mean for goodness sake Harrow Chequers and the Wanderers are almost the same team!’

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Alfie may have been the youngest member of the side that day, but he was determined to stand his ground on this issue, and he wasn't finished yet.

'We are about to take part in a momentous occasion. Who knows? Maybe one which will even go down in sporting history. We are proud to represent the Royal Engineers, and should we win this afternoon I truly believe we will bring great honour to ourselves and the British Army. That is why we must not allow Morton Betts to play, and, besides, I am convinced the Wanderers are trying to pull a fast one on us.'

Alfie produced a sheet of paper, which he proceeded to pass around. Written on it were the names of the 11 opposition players.

'Take a look at it. You won't find mention of Morton Betts anywhere. He's using a pseudonym and calling himself A.H. Chequer – a Harrow Chequer, which is exactly what he is!

'Don't forget he was the Harrow Chequers captain only last month when we beat them 2-0. Why on earth would he change his name if he thought it was all above board?'

That drew quite a reaction from a few of the players, so Henry strode into the middle of the group and held his hands up.

'Well said, Alfie, spoken like a real trooper – but please, relax. What you all need to know is that Betts is nowhere near being their best player. Don't forget we also played against him last November, when he actually captained the Wanderers team that day, so he is probably entitled to play this afternoon.

'Yes, we know he is a decent rucker and a good team man, but the one we should worry about is Robert Vidal. He's only 18 and, believe it or not, I think he is still at Westminster School. He is frighteningly quick and they call him the "Prince of Dribblers", which is exactly what he is.

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‘Worry about him, Alfie, not my friend Peto Betts.’

Alfie Goodwyn looked around and could see Henry’s latest argument had found favour with the vast majority of the team. He shrugged his shoulders wearily, knowing he was beaten.

‘So be it, let him play.’

Six words that would make all the difference.

CHAPTER ONE

BIRTH OF AN ICON

CHARLES ALCOCK liked to think of himself as a bit of a visionary, and he was right to do so. He was something of a rare breed. A top-class sportsman in his own right, but also a tireless administrator.

His goal was to establish football as ‘one universal game’ with a universal set of rules and a universal code of conduct.

That is why he had made his way to the Freemasons’ Tavern on Great Queen Street in London on a Monday evening towards the end of October 1863. This was the night when the Football Association would be founded. As he sat down, he noted that many influential figures from within the London footballing world were there.

For a start there was Arthur Pember from the No Name club at Kilburn. He was asked to take the chair and he would become the first president. Many of the leading public schools were absent, but this was still a significant occasion and Charles felt excited at the prospect of real progress being made.

At the time he was representing a team from Leytonstone in East London called Forest Football Club, but within a year they had changed their name to the Wanderers, after

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‘wandering’ across London to a new ground in the west at Battersea Park.

Charles had been born in Sunderland, which would go on to become part of one of the most famous footballing areas of all, but he grew up in the south and had gone to school at Harrow. He was a natural ball player who loved cricket as well as football – and he excelled at both.

At the age of just 17, and along with his older brother John, he had formed the Forest club in 1859. There was no doubting Charles had a talent for organisation and this was where it first came to the fore. The teenager cajoled and persuaded several Old Harrovians to join the team and soon Forest were playing regular matches. Meanwhile, Charles was fast gaining a reputation as a hard-working centre-forward with an accurate shot.

A few months after the Football Association had been formed, Charles wanted to test the water and played a key role in organising an exhibition match to see how the FA’s new rules would work in practice. This, in reality, was the very first game of Association Football. It was 14-a-side and played at Battersea Park in January 1864.

There had been other games since that meeting at the Freemasons’ Tavern, indeed Charles’s own club Forest had taken part in two of them, though in neither case were the FA rules strictly followed. In December 1863 Barnes and Richmond drew 0-0 and did play to the new guidelines, but Richmond were not members of the Football Association.

The 28 players that turned up at Battersea were split into two teams – the President’s Side and the Secretary’s Side. It was very much a family affair, with Charles turning out for the president (Pember) and his brother John for the secretary (Ebenezer Morley).

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In the end the President's XIV prevailed. Charles's team won this close-fought competitive encounter 2-0 and, to cap it all, he scored both the goals. Afterwards the two teams dined together at the Grosvenor Hotel in Pimlico. The toast that night was: 'Success to football, irrespective of class or creed.'

Over the next few years there would be inter-county matches (Middlesex v Surrey & Kent for example) in an attempt to influence more and more clubs to play under the Association rules.

There was no doubt the sport of Association Football was starting to grow fast. Through the 1860s both Charles and the Wanderers prospered. By 1870 he had been appointed secretary of the Football Association and a grand plan was beginning to take shape in his head.

In the early summer of 1871 he called a meeting in Holborn at the offices of *The Sportsman* newspaper where he worked as a journalist. He chose this venue because he felt that it was important to be on 'home ground', and he invited along many of his influential contacts from within the sport of football. They included club administrators, officials and, of course, players. Plenty of his team-mates and opponents on the field had packed into the smoky room to hear what Charles had to say.

He wanted to see if there might be a rough consensus in favour of a new competition – a competition that he believed could transform the fortunes of the emerging sport of Association Football.

He soon caught sight of a close friend and fellow Old Harrovian, Morton Betts. To almost everyone Betts was known as 'Peto', his rather unusual middle name. It came from his maternal grandfather and he liked the fact that it was different, lending him, almost, an air of mystery. Like Charles, he was a very gifted sportsman – cricket and

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football were his twin passions. But unlike Charles, he could sometimes be unreliable – he was what people called ‘a bit of a character’ or ‘a maverick’. To be fair, Morton Betts was still young, and his occasional eccentricity certainly didn’t affect his popularity. Charles was happy to count him as a friend.

‘Peto, how are you? I hear you are scoring lots of runs, I’m sure it won’t be long until Kent come calling for your services!’

Peto smiled and shook Charles’s hand while waiting to see what he had to say.

‘I have a plan and I need your support. You have plenty of associates involved in football and I have a rather splendid idea for a competition.’

That caught Peto’s attention, so Charles pressed on.

‘Remember the inter-house matches at Harrow? We called it knock-out. One team was left standing at the end, unbeaten, and they became the winners of the Cock House Cup. I was in a victorious team and so were you, I believe?’

Before Peto had a chance to respond, Charles was talking again.

‘My intention is to invite the premier teams in the land to compete in a national knock-out competition under the auspices of the Football Association. You have a team, Peto, don’t you, will you back me?’

‘I do have a team. As I’m sure you know, Charles, we are called the Chequers but, even though we also have some Harrow Old Boys playing for us, we are nothing like as good as your Wanderers side.’

‘That doesn’t matter, taking part is the important thing. I would love the Harrow Chequers to be involved, I am pretty sure Crystal Palace can be relied upon too, and I want to invite the Scots from Queens Park in Glasgow to enter as well.’

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‘Can you imagine? A competition to find the finest eleven in Great Britain – now that would be something!’

Peto Betts could not help but agree, and he was not alone. As Charles unveiled his plan it was clear there was huge support in the room for such an idea, even amongst the military. Captain Francis Marindin stood near the back, listening on in appreciation. He had first come across Charles Alcock a couple of years ago, after agreeing to keep goal in an exhibition match. Now he reflected wryly that the young Alcock had scored against him with a rasping shot from several yards out.

Yes, he thought, we will take part in this fledgling competition. I fancy my Royal Engineers team might be a match for anyone. His quiet confidence was not misplaced – the Engineers had been unbeaten since 1870 and were building a formidable reputation in the Association game.

Up at the front, Charles formally announced his proposal.

‘That it is desirable that a Challenge Cup should be established in connection with the Association for which all clubs belonging to the Association should be invited to compete.’

Unsurprisingly, the motion carried the day. It would be a few weeks later, on 20 July, that a seven-man committee from the Football Association formally ratified the decision. Marindin was one of the seven, and so too was Peto Betts. Again, that meeting would take place at *The Sportsman* and again Charles got his wish. The FA Cup had been born.

A few months later Charles got his way one more time, when it came to the decision over which venue to use for the final. For someone so young, he seemed to have a happy knack of persuading people to his viewpoint.

Early in 1872 he had been lined up to succeed Billy Burrup as the next secretary of Surrey County Cricket Club

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(eventually taking over on 6 April) and one of the very first things he did was to bring to a speedy conclusion some confidential discussions he had been having with the club's hierarchy.

Over the winter he held secret talks with Surrey about playing this prestige match at their headquarters. Burrup, who had built the pavilion at The Oval in 1858, was more than happy to make way for the younger man and readily agreed to his suggestion.

Surrey and Burrup were convinced by Alcock's arguments that the arrangement would generate some useful revenue, and who knew how this new competition would grow? In Charles Alcock's eyes it was a sensible and logical choice, but there was also another reason. The Oval was the Wanderers' home ground.