

Jon Driscoll



Get it Kicked!

*The Battle
for the Soul of
English Football*

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A potted history of English football

I hate sophisticated football.

Graham Taylor, 1982

ENGLISH FOOTBALL was a hard man's sport from the off. It evolved from the incredibly dangerous folk game where teams, or mobs if you prefer, moved a ball towards a distant target by any means necessary. It just about survived various attempts to outlaw it by authorities who had a problem with the frequency of injury and death.

Towns, villages, and public schools all had their own rules so when people started travelling to play, there were arguments. Some wanted to catch the ball and run with it, or to hack their opponents' shins, literally. It came to a head in 1863 when the newly formed Football Association tried to write unified laws. At the fifth meeting Blackheath's Francis Maude Campbell declared that to abolish running with the ball and hacking would 'do away with all the courage and pluck from the game'. He added, 'I will be bound to bring over a lot of Frenchmen who would beat you with a week's practice.' At the sixth meeting he lost the argument and withdrew his club. The split wasn't clean, and it wasn't until 1871 that the Rugby Football Union was formed with its own distinct laws.

The 1863 football code didn't look like the modern game; it was more of a football/rugby hybrid. Australian rules football travelled an alternative path and gives us an idea of how things

could have turned out. It took more law changes for the sport we know and love to emerge – the one still referred to as soccer, by rugby fans, Australians, Americans, and old posh people. Campbell was certain the public would reject the softer game: he was hopelessly wrong. Football boomed and the resourceful Victorian Brits took it to the world.

In Europe, the ‘Scottish’ game with more passing and movement was influential and in South America the game developed its own style with ball skills highly prized. The Brits were the best for a while, judging by results of touring teams, although the difference in the perception of fair play often flared into mini diplomatic incidents.

There has always been a duality in British attitudes to internationalism. Some early footballers took our great game to the world – note the anglicised team names of Athletic Club and AC Milan. Check the early history of European clubs for English coaches.

The rival instinct was to pull down the shutters on the outside world and its different interpretations of football. Nowhere was this starker than in the decision by the home nations not to play at the World Cups in 1930, 1934 and 1938. There is a profound fragility about proclaiming yourself the best while refusing to prove it.

Hugo Meisl, Austrian player, referee, writer, administrator, and manager of his national team from 1919 to 1937, wrote of English football, ‘To us Middle Europeans, the attacking play of the British professional, seen from the aesthetic point of view, seems rather poor.

‘Although their passing, swift and high, is rather lacking in precision, the English players compensate for this by the rare potency and great rapidity of their attacks.’¹

Lancastrian Jimmy Hogan became known as the spiritual father of central European football. He believed the English long-ball game developed from a change to the laws. Under the 1863 code any attacker ahead of the ball was offside, except at

1 Quoted in *Inverting the Pyramid*

goal kicks; picture rugby union. A change in 1866 meant that attackers needed three opponents to play them onside but by the 1920s there was a problem: the offside trap. Teams were playing with two defenders, one of whom could sweep while the other stepped up to catch opponents offside. A decline in goals led to action. From 1925, just two players from the defending team could play an attacker onside (one of those is almost always the goalkeeper). At first there was a goal glut; these were the days of George Camsell scoring 59 in a season for Middlesbrough and Everton's Dixie Dean breaking his record with 60 a year later. Coaches soon adapted. Arsenal's Herbert Chapman was the most effective. In short, the old 2-3-5 formation was replaced by the WM with the centre-half withdrawn into defence. The Gunners won the title in 1931 and 1933, before Chapman's untimely death. Hogan, looking at his homeland from afar, thought the success of Chapman's system did great harm to the English game,² 'Other clubs tried to copy Chapman but they had not the men and the result was, in my opinion, the ruination of British football with the accent on defence bringing about the big kicking game which put to an end the playing of constructive football. Through this type of game, our players lost the touch and feeling for the ball.'

Chapman also experienced a sense of loss, but he blamed the changed nature of society after World War One:

'Football today lacks the personalities of 20 or 30 years ago. This, I think, is true of all games, and the reason for it is a fine psychological study. The life which we live is so different: the pace, the excitement, and the sensationalism which we crave are new factors which have had a disturbing influence. They have upset the old balance mentally as well as physically, and they have made football different to play as well as to watch. And they have set up new values. The change has, in fact, been so violent that I do not think the past, the players and the game, can fairly be compared with the present.'

That is not the last time you will read such sentiments.

2 More history of tactics at *Inverting the Pyramid*, by Jonathan Wilson

Walter Winterbottom

England played in the first football international in 1872 but no one in power saw the need for a national team manager until 1946. This was years after Chapman had revolutionised tactics and won titles with Huddersfield and Arsenal. It was after Vittorio Pozzo had guided Italy to two World Cup wins. The FA, with its blend of amateurish toffs and middle-class administrators, was sceptical of grubby professionalism. Throughout English football there was a reluctance to be seen to try too hard although once the whistle was blown, endeavour and spirit were prized.

A committee picked the England team while managers and ‘trainers’ from clubs were hired to oversee games on an ad hoc basis. The figure of the trainer was still around in the 1970s – a hybrid of first-team coach and physio – the man with the bucket and sponge.

The job went to Walter Winterbottom, a teacher who had played part-time for Manchester United and met FA secretary Sir Stanley Rous in the RAF during the war. His appointment was as ‘Director of Coaching’ with the England job tacked on.

Winterbottom wrote, ‘The Football Association first became “coaching-minded” when in 1934, it sent a few well-known players on coaching visits to selected schools and minor clubs.’ His 1952 book *Soccer Coaching* is remarkably basic to the modern eye, ‘Power in his boot is essential to the full-back, but the defender who boots the ball haphazardly upfield is no friend of his forwards.’

Winterbottom didn’t pick the England team despite being its manager for 139 games. They won 78 of those but his era was defined by high-profile defeats. When England finally entered the World Cup in 1950 it ended in humiliation. The players were unprepared for Brazil: exhausted from travel and spooked by unfamiliar food. They beat Chile but lost to a ragtag USA team of semi-professionals, and then to Spain. Stanley Matthews and Tom Finney both asked to stay to watch games and learn from other countries. The FA told them it wasn’t worthwhile.

Nothing was learned. The World Cup was thousands of miles away in trying conditions and despite the popularity of football among the working classes, it didn't dominate newspaper sports coverage. So, when Hungary visited Wembley in 1953, most observers expected a comfortable home victory despite the visitors being the Olympic champions on a 24-match unbeaten run. As future England manager Bobby Robson put it, 'England had never been beaten at Wembley – this would be a 3-0, 4-0 maybe even a 5-0 demolition of a small country.'

Hungary's 6-3 victory destroyed the notion of English invincibility. A lot of the analysis has focused on the respective tactics and formations: Robson said, 'Our WM formation was kyboshed in 90 minutes of football.' I think that misses the point. The Hungarians were better at everything. They resembled a modern football team while England looked like a re-enactment society. The WM formation wasn't the problem – it was that England's players were stuck rigidly in slots. The Hungarians had played together far more, they were technically superior and mostly fitter. Even their lightweight footwear brought a sceptical response from England captain Billy Wright – before the game, not after he had been dumped on his backside by Ferenc Puskás's drag-back. A rematch in Budapest the following year finished 7-1 to Hungary.

Poor old Walter. He has gone down in history as a dinosaur, defined by his failings. Yet he had the whiff of a plan. Brian Glanville wrote in his obituary for *The Guardian* in 2002 that when Winterbottom took on his dual role in 1946, 'He found himself confronted by a welter of prejudice and ignorance. If the FA coaching scheme may in later years have ossified into a new orthodoxy, initially it had much to offer; and much to contend with. At many clubs, training still consisted of endless running round the track, with nothing seen of the ball, the theory being that the less the players saw of it during the week, the more they would want it on a Saturday.'

Winterbottom's descriptions of players' roles were not those of a kick-and-rush merchant, 'The centre-half who does no more

than shadow the opposing centre-forward around the field is not doing anything like his full job. He is the pivot, for ever on the alert, his judgement always being tested.'

On the inside-forward, 'Often he is the most hard-worked member of the team, but he needs superb ball play as well as mere running fitness. He must be adept at working his way out of "smothered" conditions, often starting with his back towards goal. Above all, he must be a thinker, for he is the major tactician in attack.'

Winterbottom even advocated for deep-lying forwards – in a book published a year before, Hungary's Nandor Hidegkuti played a famously pivotal role in dismantling England. But Winterbottom had an air of defeatism, 'Remoulding the tactics of a team is not always a simple matter. After discussing an idea – and even rehearsing it – the players may still be unable to incorporate it successfully into their game. Once the whistle blows for the kick-off, previous habits start to assert themselves and the new tactic is forgotten.'

The longest-serving England manager was an earnest man stuck between FA toffs and working-class players, unable to communicate freely with either, but affable enough to survive until 1962. He nudged English football in the right direction and although he was no inspirational leader or deep philosopher, he was a better influence than some who followed.

Hungary never did win the World Cup: they lost the 1954 final, unable to replace the injured Puskás and facing a West Germany team possibly fuelled up on amphetamines. Just 13 years after their mauling by the Magical Magyars, England were crowned world champions.

'England can play football. England have got it in the bag.'

If we don't understand how and why something worked, there is a good chance it's doomed to become dogma. We do something because we're told it worked in the past. If Jimmy Hogan was right, we can draw a line from Chapman's innovative WM

formation through a generation of copycat managers and arrive at the static setup of Winterbottom's England of the 1950s. There was an anti-intellectual streak in English football: a preference for the working-class 'do-er' over the middle-class thinker. While it is important to value experience, an unwillingness to continually reassess your actions can make success a curse.

He was an odd man, Alf Ramsey. He spoke in a weirdly affected posh voice which was occasionally exposed by his poor grammar.³ His upbringing was so humble it is hard to envisage now we have social security. He grew up in Dagenham when it was an Essex village, in a cottage with no electricity, inside toilet or hot water. He left school at 14 and, despite being a talented footballer, had two years out of the game because his job delivering groceries by bicycle involved working on Saturdays. Joining the army in World War Two rescued his career. He played in organised matches and his ability was spotted, which led to him joining Southampton when professional football returned. He was in his mid-20s but lied about his age and was meticulous about his fitness.

In 1949 he moved to Tottenham under Arthur Rowe, the inventor of 'push and run', which made systematic use of one-twos; passing and moving into space was still a relatively novel idea. Spurs were promoted from the Second Division in 1950 and won the Football League 12 months later. Success didn't last and Ramsey's low point with Spurs came in the 1953 FA Cup semi-final when he tried to dribble the ball out of his penalty area in the last minute, only to lose it and hand Blackpool the winning goal.

He won 32 international caps, including the 1950 defeat against the USA in which he claimed England had suffered a year's worth of bad luck in 45 minutes. His last match was the 1953 defeat by Hungary. Ramsey pushed against the tide,

3 I recommend the documentary *Sir Alf Ramsey: England Soccer Team Manager* and Leo McKinstry's biography *Sir Alf*

maintaining England lost because they had conceded from long-range shots. That didn't explain the 7-1 defeat the following year or England's lacklustre World Cup campaign.

Ramsey became a manager in 1955 with Third Division South side Ipswich Town. Progress was unspectacular at first. They were promoted in 1957 then consolidated in the Second Division until they went up in 1961. The 1961/62 season was a sensational one for the Suffolk club as they claimed their only Football League title, largely credited to Ramsey's tactics of using a deep-lying wide midfielder to deliver accurate balls over opposition defences. Their success didn't last, and they finished 17th the following season as opponents adapted. In October 1962 Ramsey agreed to replace Winterbottom as England manager but still led Ipswich until the end of the campaign. Ramsey insisted on picking the England team himself and told the media his side would win the 1966 World Cup on home soil.

His biographer, Leo McKinstry, wrote, 'He was a tough demanding character, who could be strangely sensitive to criticism, a reserved English gentleman who was loathed by the establishment, an unashamed traditionalist who turned out to be a tactical revolutionary, a strict disciplinarian who was not above telling his players to "get rat-arsed". His ruthlessness divided the football world; his stubbornness left him the target of abuse and condemnation. But it was his zeal that put England at the top of the world.'

The road to glory began with defeat against France in a two-legged contest for a place in the last 16 of the European Championship, England's first participation in the tournament, having been typically dismissive of the first edition in 1960. Ramsey was undeterred.

His legacy is two-fold: winning the World Cup and scrapping wingers. As time goes on, the first of those takes precedence, which seems fair. Winterbottom abandoned the WM and the side Ramsey inherited had, reputedly, been playing a 4-2-4 with two central forwards and two wingers. It took a while but his experiments with 4-3-3 convinced him it was

England's best option although it wasn't popular with older observers and the journalists with whom Ramsey shared a tetchy relationship. They missed the likes of Matthews, the dribbling right-winger who largely stayed out on his flank until fed the ball, then dazzled defenders and onlookers alike. They wanted Jimmy Greaves, who had a remarkable international scoring record as a young man but whose injury allowed Ramsey to pair up the hard-working forwards Roger Hunt and Geoff Hurst. Hurst's hat-trick in the final is one of the cornerstones of the English football story but his fitness and willingness to run were critical to Ramsey's plan. The West Ham striker's touch map for the 1966 final is spread remarkably evenly throughout the West German half.

The formation for the final was shown on TV as 4-3-3, although by the time I was watching football Ramsey's team had become known as the founding fathers of the English 4-4-2. Gordon Banks was in goal. The back four was obvious: George Cohen and Ray Wilson were full-backs with Bobby Moore and Jack Charlton in central defence. The midfield was shown as Nobby Stiles, Bobby Charlton and Martin Peters. A nominal front three was Hurst, Hunt, and Alan Ball.

I can see why people came to describe it as a 4-4-2: Ball was a midfielder, 21 years old and hugely energetic. Peters was another newcomer, and it was obvious why Ramsey liked him too: when possession was lost, he would run back into midfield and be ready to defend. Bobby Charlton was also hard-working and at 28, much younger than he looked. His England career crossed over with the likes of Finney, starting as a left-winger but he adapted to the changing times. I rank him as the country's greatest ever player.

Stiles was the most controversial presence. The FA asked Ramsey to drop the Manchester United man after he injured France's Jacques Simon in the group stage. Ramsey stood by Stiles, partly out of principle, but mainly because he wanted a midfield spoiler. In 2006 Ball described Stiles as a holding midfielder but in the first half of the World Cup Final, he doesn't

look like that to me: he vacated the space in front of defence to join attacks, leaving England wide-open to counter attacks. He wasn't alone in that – the game was end-to-end to an extent you never see now in high-level football. In the second half he was more cautious in something more like a 4-1-3-2. George Cohen described England's tactical progression through the tournament, 'We went into a "loose" 4-4-2 from again a "loose" 4-3-3. You were able to adapt but with the front runners who were two very strong but very brave players.'

The game was fast moving, and players would rest out of possession so there was less pressure on whoever had the ball. Both keepers kicked aimlessly from time-to-time but there was no co-ordinated long-ball game. The South American teams complained about the refereeing in that tournament but there wasn't the brutal tackling that came later.

The attitude of the crowd is fascinating. With England 2-1 up in the last ten minutes, Jack Charlton turned and passed the ball back to Banks and was booed by the home supporters. England showed almost no sign of 'parking the bus', or in other words match management. The crowd chanted 'We want three!' when it was 2-1 and 'We want four!' when it was 3-2 with time running out in extra time. I find it touchingly naive, which might be a sign of how we have been conditioned to accept defensive-minded football. Ramsey's adversaries blamed him.

If an England manager were to win the World Cup now, they would be a national hero and it is amazing how unpopular Ramsey was with sportswriters, his fellow managers, and the FA. In his notorious live TV argument with Brian Clough, Sir Alf's successor Don Revie said, almost as an aside, 'I never got close to Ramsey. He was a cold man.'

There was more to the widespread hostility than Ramsey's prickly personality. Historian Frank McLynn was scathing in *The Guardian* in 2005, six years after Ramsey's death, blaming him for football's defensive shift:

'He was a humourless boor, he was the epitome of negativity and his legend far outstrips his actual achievement. No man

without a sense of humour is ever any damn good, and Ramsey raised humourlessness to a fine art.

‘As a manager, Ramsey turned football into a negative contest of attrition, predicated on the massed defence. Watch any England game from his era and it always appears that there are at least 22 white shirts clustered around the penalty area. The Ramsey method was simple: defend in such depth that the opposition eventually becomes exhausted or just plain bored, and then one of the mediocre England forwards can slip out and score a single goal.

‘There were in fact four better teams than England in the 1966 finals (Hungary, the Soviet Union, West Germany and Argentina), but the hosts secured a remarkably simple path to the final. England avoided their main rivals in the group stage but then faced a formidable Argentina team, who had qualified with the West Germans, in the quarter-finals. Man for man, the Argentinians were superior to Ramsey’s squad and they had in their captain, Antonio Rattín, the finest midfielder in the world at that time. How to sweep away this obstacle? With ten minutes left in the first half, a German referee sent Rattín off for “violence of the tongue”, even though the referee spoke no Spanish.

‘The ten-man Argentina team struggled on, only to succumb – you’ve guessed it – 1-0. In a match being played the same day, an English referee sent off two Uruguayans in their match against West Germany, handing the Germans an easy victory.

‘The 1966 World Cup was a murky business that has never been cleared up satisfactorily, but it is on this dubious foundation that Ramsey’s reputation as a saviour has been built ... It is difficult to see what there is worthwhile about the absurd Ramsey cult that still exerts such a powerful sway. If we are going to accept a humourless, cynical, negative opportunist as one of our sporting heroes, of what calibre will the villains have to be?’

You get the idea. McLynn wasn’t alone. Hostility grew as Ramsey failed to add to his World Cup success. England lost the semi-final of the 1968 Euros to Yugoslavia, then to West Germany in the 1970 World Cup quarter-final, and again to

the same opposition in a two-legged quarter-final in the 1972 Euros. He was sacked after England's failure to qualify for the 1974 World Cup. The final qualifier against Poland in October 1973 seared a mark on the collective English football conscience for a generation: I'm too young to have watched the game live but it was referenced for years. Having lost in Poland, England had to win at Wembley qualify. Brian Clough, working as a TV pundit, described the Polish keeper Jan Tomaszewski as a 'clown' and produced a nail that he said was 'either going in Poland's coffin or Sir Alf's'.

It went in Sir Alf's. All England fans of a certain age know it finished 1-1 after a mistake by Peter Shilton gave Poland the lead and the home side could only reply with Allan Clarke's penalty.

I have now watched the game and England were excellent. Full-backs Paul Madeley and Emlyn Hughes attacked, centre-backs Roy McFarland and Norman Hunter were comfortable bringing the ball forward, Colin Bell was a top-class midfielder and there was a fluid front three of Clarke, Mick Channon, and Martin Chivers. They missed good chances, hit the post, Poland cleared the ball off the line twice and Tomaszewski was inspired. The idea that Ramsey single-handedly sucked the joy out of English football seems nonsensical on that evidence. Poland finished third at the 1974 World Cup, losing only to hosts West Germany on a boggy pitch in what was effectively a semi-final. England would have had a chance of winning that World Cup – international football tournaments are decided on fine margins.

'We'll go on getting bad results, getting bad results.'

So did England's 1966 World Cup win, courtesy of Ramsey's pragmatism, set us on a path of negativity, paradoxically leading to these years of hurt? The declining rate of goals per game at World Cups suggest there was a general move towards cagier, defensive football. If you want to blame a single factor, I'd suggest *catenaccio* – the Italian system which raised defending to a high art. It can be thought of as a particular lop-sided formation preferred by Italian clubs in this period, or more generally as

a philosophy – pick more defenders than attackers, like every manager does now.

Dave Bowen, the Wales manager contemporary to Ramsey, reflected to Leo McKinstry how the old-school winger was doomed, ‘We all followed Ramsey. The winger was dead once you played four defenders. Alf saw that and it just took the rest of us a little longer to understand ... with four defenders the backs can play tight on the winger and he’s lost his acceleration space. Without that the winger’s finished.’

By the time I was watching football in the late 1970s, it seemed everyone played 4-4-2. Old programmes and cigarette cards described players as ‘inside-right’ or ‘left-half’, but I didn’t know what that meant.

Ramsey was immediately followed by Joe Mercer, who had won the league with Manchester City but ruled himself out of the England job in the long term because he considered himself too old at 60 and had sciatica. After one of his seven matches in charge, he gave a passionate defence of English football, offering one of the best deconstructions I’ve heard.

He said, ‘I believe, I really believe English football played at its best, played naturally, pushing forward, and playing and being tight in defence and compact, setting the thing up, getting on the end of movements, goals and goalmouth incidents. All right, we mightn’t have the technique and skill of the Brazil and the Ajax and people like that, but the game is about other things. It’s about heart and courage and organisation and belief. I believe in England.’

Not everyone did. Pomposity had given way to self-doubt. English football was unsure whether to revel in the attributes we supposed defined us or ape European or South American sophistication. Revie followed Mercer and while his tenure was a shambles, he had been one of the greats of club management and his analysis was as sharp as his tongue. Shortly before taking the job, he said, ‘It changed in 1966 when Alf Ramsey felt he had no wingers and decided to play without them which tactically was very, very good in my opinion because he felt he didn’t have the

wingers to attack full-backs and get round the back of them, so he used full-backs. He used George Cohen and Ray Wilson and he had Bobby Moore as a sweeper and used three in the middle of the field. It was very effective. He made Alan Ball come back from a front position to make four in the middle of the field, so it made it tight at the back when they lost possession of the ball. It demanded a lot of running, that system. I think a lot of teams in England at club level, because it had been successful at World Cup level, decided to copy it but I don't think a lot of clubs had the players to exploit the going forward system. Then we had the Germans and Dutch and they play a vastly different game completely, but they've got all-purpose players and that's what I'd eventually like to see with England.'

Revie failed to realise his vision. Results were poor as he chopped and changed his team and his plans. In 1977 he quit for a better-paid job in the UAE, leaving Ron Greenwood in charge as England failed to reach the 1978 World Cup.

Greenwood had won the FA Cup and UEFA Cup Winners' Cup with West Ham in the mid-1960s but had been 'upstairs' as the club's general manager for three years when the FA chose him over Clough as Revie's replacement. England qualified for the 1980 Euros but were knocked out at the group stage and then scraped through qualification for the 1982 World Cup. On the eve of the tournament, he was interviewed for the BBC by his old Brentford club-mate Jimmy Hill. Greenwood espoused a similar philosophy to Revie, and many who have followed, 'My whole philosophy has been based on the best of British and the best from the continent. I think it's ideal if you can marry them.'

Easier said than done. Hill asked him who would win the tournament and Greenwood identified Brazil, who would gain cult status but lose to a pragmatic Italy team:

'When you look at them with their skill, finesse, everything about them, the way they play, the fluid approach about their game, it was enlightening, it was frightening almost. We envy the Brazilians that, but they envy us this quality that we've got, this resilience which is our characteristic.'

Greenwood had been a 31-year-old Chelsea player when he watched Hungary dismantling England in 1953, setting him on his pathway to managing his national team:

‘I knew there was more to football than running round a track and seeing them that day epitomised to me what I felt football was all about. It was to do with thought, and it was to do with movement. Their movement and passing was so precise, and the shooting, but I don’t think people saw what was happening off the ball. They’re only seeing people on the ball, and they could see big triangles and English football went through a stage with triangles, but they were stationary. The art of football is to move triangles about and that’s what they did that day, it was a great influence on me, and I thought that’s the way the game should be played.’

Greenwood’s influence can be traced to England’s modern coaching philosophy. Trevor Brooking played for him at West Ham and England and was later the FA’s director of football development. Greenwood’s train of thought, from that 1982 interview, is almost a blueprint for what followed, eventually:

‘Lower down, I would like to see people playing man-for-man football where I’m constantly trying to dribble past and you’re trying to stop me and vice versa.

‘There are two facets to football: you have the ball, or you haven’t. In man-to-man football, from an early age, you’re in constant contact and once you’ve beaten him then you can run because there’s space. It’s helping to develop the right habits. Later on, they can talk about tactics.

‘What’s happening at football clubs and in schools is that kids of eight or nine are being taught about tactics. There are more tactics than we have in international games. They all like to play so create situations where they’re practising within that.

‘Your small-sided games will come in, because there’s constant contact: five vs five, seven vs seven, whatever. You’ll still have goals and your goalkeeper but there’s a constant repetition: I’m having to beat you and you’re having to stop me. Then you’re trying to beat me and I’m having to stop you. You don’t need any

teaching, any advice from the sidelines, just leave them alone and let them play.’

Make the language more inclusive and the FA could sign that off now. Unfortunately, youth coaching in England was very much in the wrong hands. It was a shame, too, that Greenwood’s England played dull football, despite his intentions, ‘Football is becoming too mundane and too predictable every match you watch is the same. Get some new ideas. Get people thinking about it and get rid of the fear in football and at the same time entertain the public.’

They were eliminated after drawing both second-phase group games 0-0, their play characterised by slinging in crosses from unproductive areas. Ray Wilkins put it down to nerves brought on by high expectations. Mick Channon, whose international career had ended in 1977, lamented on ITV, ‘We didn’t have people who could go past people. We didn’t have people who could score goals.’

English football would have been far better served if Greenwood had become its technical director rather than its team manager.

The best of times, the worst of times

The England team and English football are not the same, and there have been two other periods in which we can legitimately claim to be on top of the world. We will get to the current Premier League later but let me dwell briefly on my childhood days when it seemed perfectly natural that an English club would win the European Cup. Starting from 1976/77 the champions of Europe were Liverpool, Liverpool, Nottingham Forest, Nottingham Forest, Liverpool, Aston Villa, Hamburg, Liverpool. Teams usually played 4-4-2, but with exceptions such as Forest’s 4-5-1 in the 1980 final against Hamburg. The run ended horrifically when the 1985 Heysel Stadium disaster triggered a thoroughly deserved ban. Blame the hooliganism that had been raging for years.

Garry Birtles was part of Nottingham Forest’s two European Cup-winning teams, both led by the charismatic Clough. He says

the glory days of English club football were not about the long ball, 'We got it down and played. Cloughie wasn't worried about what you couldn't do; he was worried about what you could do. When you went out on to the pitch, he made you feel a million dollars. It was very rare that we played it in the air although we could because Tony Woodcock was quick, and I had a little bit of pace, but we had two widemen in Martin O'Neill and John Robertson, and we tried to play through and round teams. Liverpool were the best club team in the world, although for two years they couldn't beat us. I still think that side was possibly better than Liverpool now.

'It's often forgotten and decried that era. There were some great teams and not just Liverpool. There weren't many teams who outmuscled you or tried to go through you. We all could play. At Forest we had Archie Gemmill, Ian Bowyer, John McGovern, great passers of the ball. They talk about attacking full-backs now, but Viv Anderson was doing it then. Kenny Burns and Larry Lloyd at the back were the retainers, if you like, but Burns had played up front and was a great passer of the ball. Brian Clough in the second semi-final, we were playing 4-4-2, but we were getting battered in the first ten minutes, so he changed it to 4-5-1. It's a myth that's only happening that way now.'

Tony Gale made his debut for Fulham in 1977 and moved to West Ham in 1984. 'There were so many skilful players in my time,' he recalls. 'Alan Devonshire from my West Ham side, who'd run with the ball, would be worth about £200m now because players couldn't touch him. We played with intensity. In football now you get some intense games, and you get slow games where people are tactically sitting with 11 behind the ball which really didn't happen in the old days. Everybody went at everybody.'

The games do look end-to-end compared with now, but English success was built on sound defence. The seven European Cup-winning teams played 61 matches and conceded just 33 goals while six consecutive finals finished 1-0. Goals were also becoming scarcer in domestic football. In 1960/61, there were

3.73 per game in the First Division and champions Tottenham scored 115 in their 42 matches. In 1965/66 there were 3.15 per game. By the end of the decade, goals were going out of fashion and Revie's Leeds won the title in 1968/69 by scoring 66 in 42. The low point was 1970/71 (2.36) and goalscoring has never hit the pre-1966 heights again. We can't blame it all on Ramsey, but he was part of the trend of football becoming more defensive. It wasn't just an English phenomenon: at the 1954 World Cup there were 5.38 goals per game; by 1990 that figure was 2.21. FIFA was wise to change the offside and back-pass laws. English football did strike out by awarding three points for a win from 1981/82. It made no difference in the first season but there was a four-year spell with more goals in the mid-1980s.

No club retained the English title between Wolves in 1959 and Liverpool's successes of 1975/76 and 1976/77. The Merseysiders were largely dominant from the mid-1970s through the '80s but with challenges from Forest, Villa, Everton, and Arsenal. The games are worth watching. Play was noticeably faster than the mid-60s, although ragged compared to today; possession swapped over, and teams could break against each other quickly. I've just watched a game from Aston Villa's title-winning season in 1980/81 in which commentator John Motson remarks on the patience of the build-up play when to me it looked as though the ball was crossed as the first opportunity. They recycled possession once when Middlesbrough's Mark Proctor put pressure on Gordon Cowans, so he passed to Tony Morley who crossed. Contrast that with modern teams recycling possession time and again probing for opportunities. There were still players who were described as wingers, but unlike Stanley Matthews they didn't wait for their moment. They were skilful or pacy wide midfielders, who weren't expected to regularly track deep into their own half. Teams got the ball wide and looked for crossing opportunities.

The state of pitches makes the quality of play remarkable. At times there was little choice but to get the ball off the ground,

as Ray Lewington remembers, ‘English football was known for being more direct than European leagues and that was due to the state of the pitches and climate, as much as preference. Most teams started the season passing a lot more but when you got to winter coaches would say you can’t play through the middle, get it over the top. We tried to play football at Chelsea, but when you got to October/November the pitches were getting so bad, playing primarily through the middle was impossible.’

Tackling was robust but less violent than it became although there existed then as now the common narrative that ‘you can’t tackle any more’. English football in the 1970s and early ’80s was packed with paradoxes: the atmosphere at games was better than now if you value singing and roaring crowds, but it came with the sad stain of hooliganism and throughout the period of European domination, attendances were dwindling. The football authorities, police and governments failed ordinary football fans until after the 1989 Hillsborough disaster which heralded the Taylor Report and a vast improvement in stadiums and fan welfare. A period of glory for English football on the pitch was one of shame off it. It wasn’t just football to blame – the attitude of the establishment contributed, reaching a grim climax at Hillsborough which claimed 97 lives while another 766 people were injured.

Heroic failure

Bobby Robson’s enduring popularity in England’s collective consciousness represents his remarkable renaissance. He was treated abominably by the tabloids while he was the national team manager – human collateral in a circulation war which saw him ridiculed and abused. But after the 1990 World Cup he left on a high and was thereafter football’s favourite uncle, especially in a successful spell at Newcastle from 1999 to 2004. I interviewed him at Villa Park when I was working for BBC Radio 5 Live and afterwards, he took me to task – with great vigour – over the rise of the football phone-in, which he felt gave a voice to ignorant people.

Our desire for neat narratives serves us badly when we assess Robson's England. I remember most of the games as dull, his team fearful and overcautious but they reached quarters and semis of successive World Cups and their legend grows with time.

He started with failure: drawing 0-0 at home to Greece and losing to Denmark meant England missed out on Euro 1984 with the Wembley crowd singing 'What a load of rubbish!' In three major tournaments, Robson's men played 14 games and won only three in normal time: Poland, Paraguay, and Egypt. They beat Belgium and Cameroon in extra time. They scored only 16 goals and with three periods of extra time included that was the equivalent of 15 matches. They conceded 14 – the games were boring compared to club football with the performances at Euro 1988 especially abject.

John Barnes was an exhilarating left-winger for his clubs, but not for England. It was a similar story with Glenn Hoddle who was revered in France after he moved to Monaco but was never a settled presence for his country. He was a technical, creative midfielder – not a natural fit for 4-4-2 and was often shoehorned in for his 53 caps. Robson's caution also held back Paul Gascoigne, the most gifted English player I've seen, who didn't start in a competitive international until the 1990 World Cup when he was 23. Gascoigne was as reckless as he was brilliant, and his career was blighted by injury and wild behaviour. The conservatism of English football still discourages individualism, and it is striking how many of our more creative players have been difficult characters.

For the most part, England played 4-4-2; the main concession to the international football environment was a turgid tempo. Again, it wasn't long-ball football. Robson and his assistant Don Howe did change formations, but it was tinkering rather than strategic. For example, in 1986 winger Chris Waddle started the tournament and was allowed to switch flanks while Bryan Robson, Wilkins and Hoddle covered the midfield.

I don't want to heartlessly trash the childhood memories of middle-aged England fans so let's get to the glorious failures.

Facing elimination from the Mexico World Cup after losing to Portugal and drawing with Morocco without a goal scored, England switched to a 4-4-2 with wide midfielders rather than wingers, and Gary Lineker became a hero, hitting a hat-trick against Poland and two more against Paraguay.

The infamous quarter-final against Argentina allowed England to depart with dignity, telling tales of skulduggery and what might have been. Another slow game on a sweltering afternoon was defined by Diego Maradona. His first goal was obviously handball – although not so obvious that it was spotted by either the officials or the BBC commentators. The second showed off an unshackled genius as Maradona danced through England's midfield and defence to score the 'goal of the century'. At 2-0 down Robson threw on Barnes and Waddle to attack from wide: Barnes set up Lineker's goal and another chance that was miraculously cleared off the line. Argentina beat Belgium in the semi-final and West Germany in the final. If only!

Four years on, Robson's England failed gloriously at Italia '90. This time they came through a stupefying group stage thanks to a 1-0 win over Egypt and were rewarded with a welcoming path to the semi-finals. The players persuaded Robson to abandon the 4-4-2 and use three centre-backs and wing-backs, in what could be described as either a 3-4-3 or a 5-4-1. David Platt's volley in the 120th minute against Belgium is one of English football's iconic moments and the quarter-final against Cameroon was a rare great game – although check out England's savage tackling.

In the semi-final against West Germany, Gazza's tears as he was shown a yellow card that ruled him out of a potential final secured his legend. Pearce and Waddle missed penalties in the shoot-out and 40-year-old Shilton didn't get close to a save. England fans have fond memories of Robson's World Cups, with good cause, but as each major tournament rolls around and I have come to regard the growing nostalgia as a rewriting of history. Tournaments are short and luck matters; the obsession with finishing with a scapegoat or neat narrative puts a cap on how much we learn.