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A Biography of Football's
Forgotten Manager

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Early Life: 1921–1940

RON GREENWOOD was born on 11 November 1921. He always maintained that making an entrance into the world on Armistice Day meant there was no excuse for forgetting his birthday. His birthplace, 18 Ormerod Street in the Lancashire village of Worsthorne, was less than three miles from the town of Burnley.

An early football memory was his father carrying him as a five-year-old down the hill to Turf Moor, where he would be perched on a barrier to watch his heroes, Burnley FC, who were a First Division club in the 1920s and Football League champions in 1921.

Greenwood would describe Worsthorne as a, ‘Quiet, pretty, rather rural place in those days, with a church and a school, a big obelisk in the centre, a little row of shops and a post office. It had a couple of mills, one big, one small – the economic pillars of our community. Worsthorne was a friendly place above all.’

The entry for Burnley in Wikipedia lists some 16 sportspeople associated with the town. This list includes England and Lancashire cricketer James Anderson, former England international footballers Jimmy Crabtree and Billy Bannister, as well as current

Premier League striker Jay Rodriguez. Fabián Coulthard, second cousin of Formula One driver David Coulthard, also gets a mention.

But there is no inclusion for Ron Greenwood. I have called this book *A Biography of England's Forgotten Manager* and it is a shame this applies even to his home town as much as to his coaching record.

The start of the 20th century saw Burnley's textile industry at the height of its prosperity. By 1910 there were approximately 99,000 power looms in the town, and by 1920, the Burnley and District Weavers, Winders and Beamers Association had more than 20,000 members. However, the First World War heralded the beginning of the collapse of the English textiles industry and the start of a steady decline in the town's population.

The war was followed by a short period of prosperity, but then came the slump of the 1920s and 1930s, which led to short-time working, unemployment, and the collapse of many firms.

In *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, David Edgerton wrote, "The pre-Great War cotton industry was an expanding and world-dominating industry, and most people would have expected it to continue to be so. But in the inter-war years, apart from a short-lived boom the markets for British cottons did not resume their growth. Countries put up tariff barriers against British goods and a major competitor appeared – Japan. By the 1930s the British national industry was no longer the leading exporter of textiles, even though textiles still accounted for a quarter of its exports. The result was that the industry never retained the output of 1913 and was in perpetual trouble. Investment dried up, and most companies continued to use the

equipment they had in 1921 – most of it pre-1914, until the firms closed in the 1930s.’

English Journey is an account by the writer J.B. Priestley of his travels around England in 1933. Priestley did not visit Burnley, but he did spend a little time 11 miles away in Blackburn – which he described as a ‘sad-looking’ town – which had a similar industrial, cotton-based industry to Burnley. ‘The whole district had been tied to prosperity, to its very existence, with threads of cotton, and you could hear then snapping all the time,’ Priestley wrote.

‘That very day, a mill, a fine big building that had cost a hundred thousand pounds or so not 20 years ago, was put up for auction, with no reserve: there was not a single bid. There hardly ever is. Nobody has any money to buy, rent, or run mills anymore. The entire district has been sliding towards complete bankruptcy for years.’

He found wastelands; industrial decline had been so bad that it made him question whether the whole 19th-century industrial revolution had been worth it.

Greenwood’s father Sam was a stocky fellow, about five feet tall, a painter and decorator as well as a useful footballer. ‘He was a kind and sympathetic man who did not anger easily. He never pushed or gushed but his helping hand was always there. He enjoyed life but did not have any illusions about it. His feet were always firmly on the ground,’ wrote Ron. When the Depression hit, he moved alone to London, where he had a sister, to establish a new home. That left his wife to run the home at Worsthorne and she worked around the clock. She had a job at the big mill, where she ran six looms and would be out of the house at 6.30am. She would be back in time to get Ron and his sister Ivy off to school and then she’d return to work.

Money was short in the Greenwood household, and Ivy had a nasty accident so had to spend nearly four years in hospital, much of that time in Liverpool. Even so the children were always well-scrubbed and decently clothed. Young Ron was in the local choir, which meant church three days a week as well as Sunday school, and these were the only occasions on which he wore shoes. For the rest of the week he wore clogs with leather tops and wooden soles. He wore these out so quickly playing football that his mother had a standing order at the cobblers. ‘The oddest feature of life when we moved down south was to find that I wore shoes every day instead of only on Sundays,’ Greenwood would recall. He wasn’t alone in his choice of footwear; most people in the village wore clogs.

Football was an early obsession with Ron. He went to the local school, and by the time he was eight he was playing with 14-year-olds in the first XI. There just weren’t many boys of his age in the village. Classes were unwelcome interludes between games, with teachers telling him that if he devoted half as much time and energy to his lessons as he did to football, he’d go a long way. Their remonstrations fell on deaf ears.

Greenwood got his first job in the sport aged only six. The village had two major sides, church teams but deadly rivals, who played in the Burnley Sunday League: Wesleyan, and Church of England. Ron was appointed official ball boy to both. Describing himself as simply a retriever, it was a job he did with enormous pride. Most of the players worked at the big mill, and the only time they really got on together was when they played for the mill’s own side. It was a good team and they won the Burnley Hospitals Cup – the knockout tournament which mattered most locally – with the final played at Turf Moor itself. At the age of seven,

Ron was appointed mascot for his first role at a league ground. Worsthorne won 4-1.

Greenwood had an early association with Wembley Stadium. He had an uncle who managed a decorating firm with a base in London and he used to visit him at his big house in Shepherd's Bush. Ron made his first visit to Wembley in 1925 to see the British Empire Exhibition; he was three years old and Wembley just two.

The Greenwood family followed their father to London in 1931 when Ron was ten. Their new home was in Alperton, only a mile or so from Wembley. 'Our house had a real luxury. It had a bathroom,' Ron wrote. His new school was Alperton Secondary Modern School. He described himself as 'academically average'.

But the move south posed special problems for him. 'Changing schools was difficult,' he said. 'I had a broad Lancashire accent and had to endure quite a bit of mickey-taking.' Again, he became the youngest and smallest member of another first XI. He played at left-half and went on to captain the school as well as Wembley Boys at under-13 and under-14 levels. He was also picked for a trial with Middlesex Boys but, with a rotten sense of timing, he broke an arm beforehand and could not play.

Ron left school at the age of 14. His father used his connections in the decorating business to get him a job in 1937 with a firm of sign and glass writers run by a Preston man, a Mr Westby. In return for £30 he launched Ron on a five-year apprenticeship on five shillings a week.

His new employers happened to be the contracted sign writers for Wembley, as well as the Olympia and, later on, the Earl's Court exhibition centres. This gave Ron a free seat for some of the best sport and entertainment in the country.

One of the firm's jobs, in the days before big electronic scoreboards, was writing out the team changes for the various cup finals. They had to be written quickly and legibly and were then wheeled around the stadium on a sort of mobile sandwich board. Fred White, the foreman, always did the writing for finals and nobody envied him more than Greenwood, as this was the most prestigious job of all. Eventually he was given rugby league's Challenge Cup Final, seemingly because nobody else wanted it, and finally he was given the 'big one' – the 1938 FA Cup Final between Preston North End and Huddersfield Town.

Sometimes Ron worked at Wembley for months on end, doing the signs for the dressing rooms, and later – after the war – much of the work for the 1948 Olympic Games. His dad eventually became maintenance manager on the painting side at Wembley, while Ron became so involved with the stadium that he thought of himself as part of the scenery.

Greenwood was turning out for a variety of football teams, among them Ealing Road Methodists and Alperton Old Boys, of which he was a founder member, and which his father Sam helped train. It was around this time that one or two league clubs decided they might see a future professional footballer in him.

He was picked to play for a representative side, the Wembley Juvenile Organisation Committee League, and the goalkeeper Harry Brown told Greenwood he was going for a trial with Queens Park Rangers. 'Why not go with me?' Harry asked. It seemed a good idea but when they got there they found an army of kids kicking a ball round among themselves. There did not seem to be much organisation, but they joined in. Eventually a man called Alec Farmer approached Ron and asked him what position he played.

‘Centre-half,’ was the reply.

‘Right,’ said Farmer. ‘You’re in the next game.’

Afterwards Rangers invited Ron to sign for them, but he’d heard Chelsea were coming to Alperton and told Rangers he wanted to wait before making a decision. It was Chelsea’s trainer, Norman Smith, who invited Ron to sign for them in 1940. Chelsea’s traditions and style appealed more to the aspiring professional who knew that because of the war they were forming an under-19 side, instead of the usual reserve team mixture, to play in the London Combination. That was the start of the Chelsea youth scheme, and Ron could lay claim to being one of its first products.