

# RULING THE ROOST

THE MANAGERS OF  
SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY



RICHARD CROOKS

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*The  
Managers*

## Arthur Dickinson

ARTHUR JOSHUA Dickinson – manager of The Wednesday?

In his book, *Sheffield Wednesday: A Complete Record 1867–1987*, respected author Keith Farnsworth has a chapter titled ‘Owls Managers’. Dickinson is not mentioned; the chapter starts with Bob Brown in 1920 – the latter described as the ‘first professional secretary-manager in Wednesday’s history’.

In similar vein, Farnsworth’s earlier book, *Wednesday!*, makes no mention of Dickinson in the narrative covering the club in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

For his part, Wednesday’s club historian Jason Dickinson states in *Sheffield Wednesday FC: The Official History*, ‘Although not a team manager or head coach in the modern sense of the terms ... [he] was without doubt the main figure behind team selection and the overall management of Wednesday FC from the late 19th century until 1920.’

In Jason Dickinson and John Brodie’s book, *Sheffield Wednesday: The Complete Record*, Arthur Dickinson is identified as ‘manager’ from 1880 to 1920.

The *Rothmans Football Yearbook* identifies Arthur Dickinson as ‘secretary-manager’ from 1891 to 1920.

Interestingly, the seminal work on Wednesday history, *The Romance of the Wednesday 1867–1926* by Richard Sparling, has no reference to Dickinson as the manager.

In *The Remarkable Story of Fred Spiksley: The First Working-Class Football Hero*, author Mark Metcalf observes that in 1891

Dickinson's title of financial secretary 'was slightly confusing as he effectively picked the side at Wednesday for many years, and in 1899 oversaw the club's conversion to a limited company ... and [he] joined the Wednesday committee in 1876 and stayed until 18 May 1920'.

No doubt the role Dickinson fulfilled was nothing like that of a modern manager or head coach – he was much more focussed on running the totality of the football club.

Underlining the breadth of Dickinson's responsibilities, it was he who wrote a letter to Fred Spiksley in 1907 that stated his contract would not be renewed, writing a reference for him in support of his application to be Watford manager in 1910. The letter included, 'I can say with confidence that you will not find yourself a better judge of a professional football player. If you can get him to give up his on-course horseracing activities you will have secured an excellent football manager.' Spiksley was not offered the position at Watford.

To illustrate that responsibility for the players, at a celebration meal at the Carlton Restaurant in Sheffield for the 1902/03 First Division title winners he praised the players and is quoted as stating they are a 'credit to the club' and 'I am proud to take them anywhere'.

For a dinner on 24 August 1903, at the Masonic Hall on Surrey Street 'to commemorate the winning of the Football League Championship' the invitations were sent out by 'A.J. Dickinson Hon Sec'. 'Your reply not later than Wednesday August 19th will oblige' with a return address of 5 Pool Square Sheffield.

Ambrose Langley, Wednesday's warrior-like defender of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, wrote a series of 15 weekly articles published in the *Sheffield Telegraph Saturday Sports Special* from 29 August to 5 December 1925.

He stated that Dickinson was part of the team selection committee and directly involved in tactics to be employed in games. On one occasion the team were at Saltburn preparing for a game against Sunderland and Langley observed, 'The 'Wednesday Selection Committee was headed by Club chairman, Mr John Holmes, and included the great Mr A.J. Dickinson,

Jack Earp the Club Captain, Bill Johnson the Club Trainer and Fred Spiksley.’

Dickinson spoke to the committee, ‘It seems to me that having lost twice already to Sunderland this season, we need to understand why, so that we can work out what we need to do differently to win the cup tie.’

Certainly, Arthur Dickinson’s role involved scouting for players – indeed on one such visit to Dumbarton in Scotland, in September 1891, intending to sign two players, Dickinson was attacked by a ‘howling mob’ intent on preventing any such transaction. As Sparling put it in *The Romance of the Wednesday*, ‘Wednesday have an official who actually faced a bloodthirsty mob, who really underwent a rough handling in Scotland and who is the only man who has ever shed blood for the cause of Wednesday ... Mr Dickinson was bleeding from the mouth and the nose, and felt just about used up. When his face “developed” he had two black eyes and was generally bruised...for two days he stayed at his hotel in Glasgow.’

Perhaps the best description of Dickinson’s role is provided in *Sheffield Wednesday: The Complete Record*, ‘Although Arthur Dickinson was never actually Wednesday’s official manager, it would be unfair not to include him in this section [on managers] due to his tireless work behind the scenes and sheer unswerving dedication to the club’s well-being and progression, both on and off the field of play.’

It is thought that local man Dickinson joined Wednesday initially as a member of the club in the 1870s and joined the committee in 1876.

He played an important role behind the scenes – he was a key figure in Wednesday’s move to Olive Grove in 1887, and in the same year was appointed to the position of honorary financial secretary while the club moved to its first permanent home at the Grove. Four years later he had taken responsibility for all secretarial and managerial duties.

Evidently, one of those duties was to keep all the match receipts from a home game hidden under his sofa until the banks opened on the Monday morning!

The move to Owlerton – later renamed Hillsborough – in 1899 saw Dickinson responsible for the purchase of land on which the new ground was built. It was largely down to his organisation and drive that the stadium was ready to stage football in that first season.

During Dickinson's 22 years at the helm, Wednesday's league form for the most part was impressive – very impressive in consecutive seasons in 1902/03 and 1903/04 when they were league champions – and members of the First Division for all but one of those campaigns.

During his tenure the club performed very well in the FA Cup – winning the trophy twice and additionally reaching the semi-final stage on four occasions.

Unquestionably Wednesday had their greatest success while Arthur Dickinson was in charge.

Their first success in the FA Cup came in 1896 against Wolverhampton Wanderers at the Crystal Palace.

The national newspaper, *The People*, describing itself as 'A Weekly Newspaper for All Classes', reported, 'Victory rested with Sheffield Wednesday, after a well contested but distinctly rough affair by two goals to one. This is the first time the Cup has gone to Sheffield Wednesday and the visitors are to be heavily congratulated on their success. It was estimated in the course of the game close upon 30 free kicks were given for fouls.'

After the 1907 FA Cup triumph at the same venue – defeating Everton, 2-1 – the team returned to Sheffield with the trophy and a civic reception. The *Sheffield Daily Independent* reported, 'Last night Sheffield literally went wild with enthusiasm. No other term describes it. Sheffield Wednesday brought home the English Cup. The streets were utterly choked. Seventy or 80 thousand people congregated at the very least.'

The newspaper went on to describe the civic reception at the Sheffield Town Hall, 'Mr Herbert Nixon, the vice-president of the Wednesday club, proposed a vote of thanks ... He would also like to thank their honorary secretary [Arthur Dickinson], the only honorary secretary in the First Division of the league and one of the most loyal adherents of the club that they could

wish to have for the tremendous amount of work he had put in towards securing their success.’

Alderman Hughes, a Wednesday director, ‘added his tribute to the services rendered by Mr Dickinson who, he said, spared no time nor trouble to further the interests of the team’.

Subsequent seasons saw Wednesday maintain high standings in the First Division albeit progress in the FA Cup was not so readily achieved.

The First World War intervened after completion of the 1914/15 season. Resumption of the Football League in 1919/20 saw Wednesday have a disastrous campaign – they finished bottom of the First Division on 23 points and relegated, a full 14 points adrift of safety and 13 points behind the club next to bottom.

Dickinson resigned on 18 May 1920, albeit he remained a director and was often seen around the ground in subsequent years.

It seems likely that Dickinson played a significant role in the selection of his successor, Bob Brown.

His football activities were not confined to Wednesday – he served on several football committees including the FA Council, Football League Management Committee and International Selection Committee.

He was on league business in London, travelling to an English League vs. Scottish League match at White Hart Lane, when he died suddenly on 4 November 1930 at the Euston Hotel.

The *Sheffield Independent* carried news of Dickinson’s death on its front page – he collapsed in the hall of the Euston Hotel in London. Near to him at the time, among others, was Herbert Chapman, the Arsenal manager.

For that subsequent inter-league game both teams wore black armbands as, in the words of the *Athletic News*, ‘Football parted company with a quiet, friendly little figure whose loyal and sincere labours will never be forgotten’.

Many tributes were paid to Arthur Dickinson. The *Sheffield Independent* of 5 November quoted Mr W.G. Turner, chairman of Wednesday, as saying, ‘A man for whom I had the greatest respect ... he had an uncanny knowledge of the rules of football

... Although he had a peculiar manner at times he was always good at heart. His affection for the Wednesday was his ruling passion.'

Fred Bye, secretary of the Sheffield Union of golf clubs and an ex-Football League referee, said, 'He is a man who has been heart and soul in the Wednesday, and no one has worked harder nor with more success than did he.'

In the same newspaper under the heading 'Wednesday's Great Man' it stated, 'Mr Dickinson has devoted his life to football. It was his great hobby. He had a deep love for the Wednesday and for many years his guiding hand had a great deal to do with the club's wonderful triumphs ... Mr Dickinson inspired trust and devotion. It was his remarkable gifts of organisation that enabled the club to expand and, eventually, in 1892, to gain admission to the Football League. That was the start that led to great things.'

Dickinson's funeral was held in Sheffield on Friday, 7 November and it was a significant occasion, the *Sheffield Independent* reporting, 'Leaders of the Football Association and representatives from clubs from all parts of the country were present to pay their last tribute yesterday, of Mr Arthur J. Dickinson ... the coffin was brought from London to Sheffield by train ... huge crowds had collected [at the station] and police had to clear a way ... the cortege which left the station at 3pm for the burial at the General Crematorium was over half a mile long.'

Dickinson remained a bachelor throughout his life, which perhaps gave him more time to devote to all his work activities.

Someone who never suffered fools gladly, Dickinson was 'a man not prone to small talk, who took praise and criticism with equanimity, Dickinson also loved the country life and cycling, although his main passion in life was Wednesday' according to *Sheffield Wednesday: The Official History*.

And difficult though it is to comprehend in the modern day, all of Dickinson's duties at Hillsborough were part time – his main occupation was running his Sheffield cutlery business.

For Wednesday, Dickinson's contribution was immense – his work and legacy for the club of the highest order.

# ARTHUR DICKINSON

For Arthur Dickinson's statistical record, I have included all Football League results from the first season in 1892/93 through to his last season in 1919/20, and FA Cup results from his appointment in 1891/92.

Born: 1851 (Date not known), Sheffield  
 Died: 4 November 1930  
 Appointed: 1891 (Date not known)  
 Departed: 18 May 1920  
 First game: 23 January 1892: Bolton Wanderers (h), FA Cup first round, won 4-1  
 Last game: 1 May 1920: Oldham Athletic (h), First Division, won 1-0  
 Best league season: 1902/03, 1903/04 First Division champions; 1895/96, 1906/07 FA Cup winners

<b>Record</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>Win%</b>
League	840	352	172	316	1314	1247	41.9%
FA Cup	82	42	16	24	139	82	51.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>922</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>340</b>	<b>1453</b>	<b>1329</b>	<b>42.7%</b>