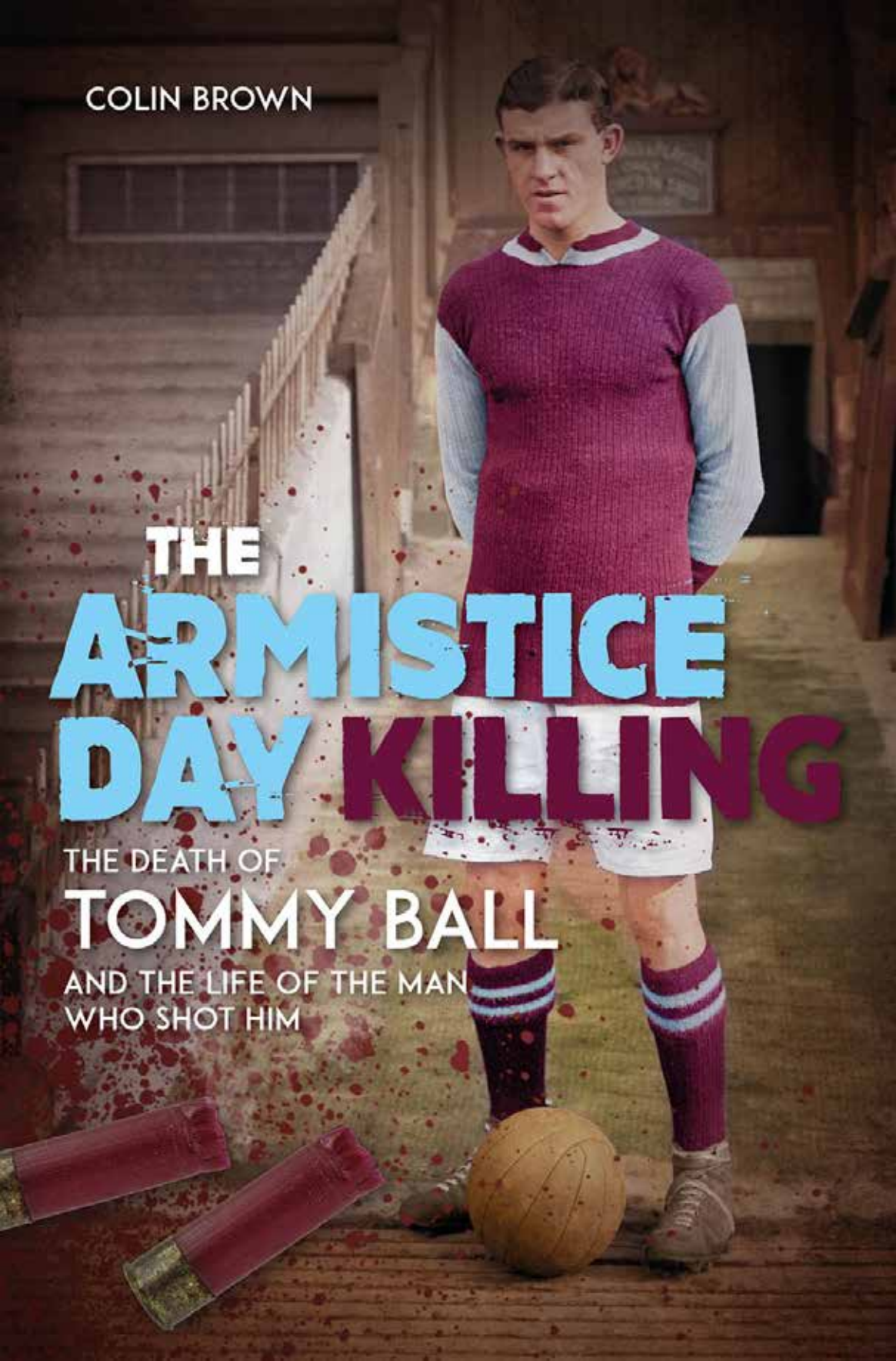
COLIN BROWN
THE
ARMISTICE
DAY KILLING
THE DEATH OF
TOMMY BALL
AND THE LIFE OF THE MAN
WHO SHOT HIM

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COLIN BROWN

pitch

Contents

Part 1

Tommy Ball – From Coal Dust to Stardust

Spotted

We can perhaps imagine the excitement in the Ball household on the morning of Saturday, 17 January 1920 when the knock of the Aston Villa scout on the door at 48 Reservoir Street, Wardley Colliery, Gateshead, was awaited. The expected visitor was coming with the forms to finalise the transfer of the Balls' second-youngest son, Tommy, from a colliery football side in Gateshead to the country's most successful professional club in the relatively short history of the association football game.

Joseph Ball, a Durham-born miner of Irish descent, and his wife Euphemia had only recently moved to Wardley, but had brought up nine children, seven boys and two girls, born between 1883 and 1904, in the County Durham pit village of Usworth. The village lies some eight miles to the north of Chester-le-Street and was one of a concentration of Durham coalfield pit villages wedged between Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead to the west and Sunderland on the east coast.

Aston Villa fans reading this may smile wryly to learn that several previous chroniclers, doubtless confusing the name with

the club's extremely brief 1998 signing from Everton FC, have chosen to refer to the village as Unsworth.

The aspiring footballer, Thomas Edger Ball, was born on 11 February 1900 at 7 High Row, Usworth Colliery. His eldest brother, Joseph, was later killed in the Great War and Tommy's other older brothers, David, John, James and Hubert, all lads in their 20s and 30s working in the mines, only Tommy and younger brother, Norman, remained at home. Daughters Elizabeth and another Euphemia, had also married and moved on, and by 1921 only Tommy's younger brother, Norman, and himself inevitably a collier, was still at home.

With its two bedrooms and maybe a box room, High Row would have presented considerable comfort difficulties for such a large family. Limited sleeping, washing and toilet facilities would certainly have offset the value of sharing a home with a supportive kinship group. Nor was there an abundance of cash around, and career prospects, at least for the menfolk, were generally limited to employment in one of the local pits, a career that especially, for underground workers, carried with it an ever-present risk of injury or death.

Sometime before 1911, the family had eased their overcrowding with what may have been a dream move into a house containing eight rooms, so providing that essential additional sleeping space. This was just five minutes around the corner at 36 Douglas Terrace and close to their eldest son and his family at number 45. This was not far for daughter-in-law Sarah to run to in tears while clutching her black-edged telegram in February 1916.

High Row, which still exists, and the now demolished Douglas Terrace home were then 'tied' houses belonging to Usworth Colliery, and such dwellings were a common 'win-win' for the pit bosses who owned them. The workers virtually lived on

the job and the many male, and some female, children formed a production line of ready labour, while a percentage of their wages went straight back to the colliery owner in the form of rent.

To offset the amount of rent each might have to contribute for separate houses, many fathers would want to keep their youngsters in the family home for as long as possible, even when married, while a great many pit workers would stay in their jobs into their late 60s or 70s for fear of eviction once retired. Colliery widows were always vulnerable to destitution and a trip to the workhouse, especially those younger women, such as Tommy's sister-in-law Sarah Ball, whose husbands had been killed underground or in the war and who, like her, still had a houseful of bairns to look after.

It has always been assumed that the Balls lived in Usworth at the time of Tommy's move to Aston Villa, but the newly released census for 1921 shows that at some point after 1911, with diminishing numbers at home, they had moved into a presumably much smaller tied cottage attached to a colliery in near-neighbouring Gateshead. The move, I would guess around 1915, was probably made possible after Joseph's work transfer to Wardley Colliery and it is known that Tommy began to make his name playing for that pit's football team before moving on to the neighbouring Felling Colliery side.

When the opportunity for the move to Aston came, it would have created something of a sensation in the Usworth area. To be asked to join a team some distance away, though not rare, did not happen every day and, with due respect to both Sunderland and Newcastle United who were both giants of the game, for the buying team to be the country's premier pre-war side would have been beyond most people's wildest dreams.

For historians of the game, Tommy was not the only player with Usworth connections to end up at Aston Villa. In 1937, the

club signed Ronnie Starling who had previously worked in the village pit and had been picked up by Hull City in 1925 after he had moved to nearby Washington Colliery. Ronnie was 11 and living in Pelaw, next door to Wardley, when Tommy went to Villa and would certainly have known about the move and pondered the glamour and riches that lay in the world beyond the pit villages.

The Colour of Money

As Tommy, when on the point of signing for Aston Villa, was not quite 21 years of age, he was still below his legal 'majority' and it was his father's responsibility to undertake negotiations and approve the contract. Preliminary discussions had doubtless taken place between Aston Villa's representative and Mr Ball senior in the company of Felling Colliery FC club officials. Tommy's guaranteed wages and bonuses would have been established and the small matter of a fee to the Felling club, who held Tommy's professional registration, would have been agreed.

Thereafter, a few unofficial loose ends to 'look after' the Ball family would have remained to be tied up before the contract was signed. Despite wanting the best for their lad, the Balls would have been acutely aware of how much money Mrs Ball would lose in weekly housekeeping once another breadwinner had left home. I would guess, therefore, that Joseph Ball's signature would have come at a price.

Such negotiations were probably 'bread and butter' to a club like Villa, whose astute club secretary, and long-standing team manager, Mr George Ramsay, would have given clearance for any additional unrecorded monies which would secure Joseph's assent.

To give an idea of the sort of money Villa had access to, their 'gate' income for the 1920/21 season, as illustrated within the

pages of *Aston Villa: The First 150 Years* by Farrelly, Abbott and Russell, was just over £39,000. Even when wages, bonuses and taxes were deducted from that figure, the Villa club, with a bank balance in April 1921 of £23.898, or £1,196.999 in 2022 figures, was doing very well indeed. Ramsay would not have let a few bob a week to help with Mrs Ball's housekeeping stand in his way.

In addition, although players were not allowed by league rules to take a 'cut' of the fee paid to the selling club, it is inconceivable that buying clubs did not offer personal inducements to persuade players to move, especially when it meant a young man having to relocate some distance away from the security of his family. For certain, a few notes would have been slipped into Tommy's pocket, perhaps to get a new shirt, tie, hat and suit and have a bit of ready pocket money to start off his life in the Midlands. The club would also have been paying the costs of his lodgings.

A Newcastle United Link?

Tommy is said to have moved to the Felling Colliery side after shining with the Wardley Colliery team. I am open to correction, but employment at a given pit does not seem to have been an absolute qualification for selection for that pit's team and as Wardley and Felling were neighbouring collieries, it is possible that football transfers from Wardley to the more senior neighbouring side were common.

There is a story that Tommy moved from one or the other of the colliery sides to Newcastle United, and it has become a commonly repeated error to say that Tommy was signed by Aston Villa from Newcastle United rather than from Felling Colliery. In welcoming him to the club *The Villa News and Record*, Villa's match programme, for 7 February 1920 is quite specific in saying he was signed from the Felling club and I am indebted

to former editor Rob Bishop for providing original text with this information.

In fact, there is no evidence that Tommy ever played for Newcastle. That club's very obliging official historian, the prominent football writer Paul Joannou, was kind enough to check both the club's surviving player ledgers and their Football League registration records and found no mention of Tommy Ball anywhere.

Why the legend persisted is a mystery, but I suspect it was a result of easy 'Chinese whispers' journalism on the part of reporters who covered the trials of Tommy's killer in 1923 and 1924. Paul does correctly emphasise that in those days many professional teams' players began their careers as trialists and then amateurs in a club's, often extensive, lower sides. Aston Villa, for instance, were regularly fielding six junior sides beneath first-team and reserve-team levels well into the 1960s. It would have been quite possible that Tommy had put on Newcastle's black and white shirt as a trialist or occasional amateur player, though, with no known surviving record, this cannot be proven. If any newspaper or photographic evidence to support such an appearance by Tommy does exist, both Paul and I would be keen to know.

A Windfall for Felling

As a great many professional players of the time came from humble social backgrounds, and many had been spotted playing for works football teams, it was not unusual for working lads from the Northumberland and Durham coalfields to be picked up by professional clubs. Felling Colliery FC gave its young players a decent chance of moving upwards as it was rather better than an ordinary works team and played in the highly competitive Northern

Football Alliance, which had been founded in 1890. With its better clubs not far beneath Football League level, the Alliance was considered a fertile breeding ground for ambitious players.

It would not be an overstatement to describe the wider area as a hotbed of the game and a lot of lads, supported by their parents, would have seen football as their way out of the pit or the shipyards: the most usual lucky ticket was if one of the area's First Division outfits, either Newcastle United or Sunderland, showed an interest. Otherwise, it could have been one of the several other north-eastern sides who were then playing, or aspiring to play, in the Football League. South Shields, for instance, was a mid-table Second Division team in 1920, while ambitious clubs Darlington, Hartlepool, Durham City and Ashington each joined the newly formed Third Division North in 1922. Predictably, scouts from clubs further afield also turned up at matches in the area and the growing strength of the Felling Colliery side, which went on to take the Alliance title in 1922, attracted considerable interest.

In the years just after the Great War, and following a complete lack of competitive football since April 1915, most professional clubs were busily rebuilding their playing strengths. In the spring and summer of 1919, for example, the Aston Villa club had trawled the country to sign nearly a dozen young hopefuls in readiness for the forthcoming season when league and cup football were to begin again. Being aware that professional clubs needed to fill their books with new talent, many of the more 'savvy' and affluent junior clubs hedged against their better players being lost to one of the league clubs by shelling out a few shillings per week to tie their leading lights to a small professional contract.

A lad's signature thus represented a potential hard-cash bonus should a small club be lucky enough to negotiate a fee to transfer the player to an outfit further up the pecking order.

At some point, maybe in late 1919, Tommy was playing well enough to be included in such a group and, with parental permission, Felling obtained Tommy's signature. It proved to be a shrewd move. It would not have made Tommy a full-time player as he and other young hopefuls would hold down the 'day job' Monday to Saturday lunchtime and then get paid a couple of shillings on what, for others, would be Saturday afternoon off. It was a classic football scenario which enabled ambitious young men to move through the ranks.

Following this model, Felling Colliery FC's treasurer must have thought Christmas had come a little late as on 30 January 1920, almost two weeks after Tommy signed for Villa, the colliery club continued its good business by selling Gateshead-born centre-forward Dicky Johnson to Liverpool, where he had moderate success in scoring 28 goals in 77 appearances over a five-year stay. As an interesting footnote, on 25 November 1922 Tommy Ball made an appearance for Villa at centre-half in the 0-1 home defeat to Liverpool and found himself directly marking his former Felling team-mate. For the record, Johnson failed to score, but the 'banter' would have been worth listening to.

While the fee they paid for Ball's services is not known, history tells us that once he had his eyes set on a player, Villa's Mr Ramsay rarely came out of negotiations without getting his man, even if it meant finding a few pounds over the odds. At around this time transfer fees for the leading players were just nudging £3,000, so the fee authorised for a young untried lad playing with a non-league side would probably have been measured in, at most, the very low hundreds of pounds.

Although that level of outlay would have been a mere trifle for a club with Villa's budget, it is worth noting that in 1920 £1 was equivalent to just over £34 a century later. Even a modest fee of

£100, quite probably doubled when Dicky Johnson's transfer fee was added, would have kept the colliery club solvent for several months, if not seasons. It almost certainly enabled them to rebuild their team for their successful push to the Alliance championship the following season.

Not that Tommy would have needed much inducement to sign for the Villa. The phrase 'the world at his feet' has often been used to describe Tommy's ascent to stardom, and in the exciting days of January 1921 the prospect of earning good and regular money playing in front of large crowds alongside and against international players, and in the world's most famous football ground, must have seemed exactly like that.

For Joseph and Effy Ball, the famed 'brown envelope' that doubtless found its way into their house would have been manna from heaven.

An Escape from Jeopardy?

The Balls' exciting stroke of good luck was, however, to have a wicked irony. For one of their youngest children to have the prospect of what, on the face of it, was a career which was not life-threatening would be a massive contrast to the daily worries about the dangers of mining faced by Mr Ball himself and by his five working sons.

Pit life was, of course, exceptionally dangerous and fatalities within the Durham and Northumberland coal fields were commonplace until well past 1945. By the time its closure in 1974, over 200 men and boys had died in accidents at the Usworth pit alone, and by the same date 50 had been killed at Wardley and 190 at Felling.

The Ball family knew the dangers better than most as the pit had taken the life of Tommy's grandfather, John Ball, who was

killed in 1885 at the age of 68 in an underground gas explosion in Usworth Colliery along with 41 others. The obelisk memorial erected by their fellow workers in tribute to Tommy's grandfather and the men who died with him can be found in the grounds of the Usworth parish church of Holy Trinity, Donwell, which lies just to the east of the A194. To emphasise the dangers, only a few steps from the memorial is the grave of Jared Ball. As far as I can ascertain, he was not related to Tommy but was of similar age and, working as a surface pony driver, was crushed between coal tubs at Springwell Colliery, Gateshead, in May 1913 aged 14.

Tommy's move into the apparently safe environment of professional sport would certainly have gone some way towards offsetting his parents' lasting grief for their eldest boy, Joseph Junior, who had been killed in action in France in February 1916 at the age of 33.

As an historical curiosity, though born and bred in Usworth, Joseph had served in the Tyneside Irish Brigade, which recruited heavily into the many local families of Irish descent and comprised four battalions, initially just over 3,200 men in total. The battalions were later subsumed within the Northumberland Fusiliers and, four months after Joseph's death, the regiment took considerable casualties during the infamous 'first day on The Somme' on 1 July 1916. Joseph Junior left behind a 30-year-old widow and three daughters aged nine, eight and six, so perhaps the sweetener paid by Villa to the Balls included some recognition of the family's commitments to their daughter-in-law and to the bairns – one certainly hopes so.

Joseph and Euphemia could never have imagined that his move to Aston to play sport would cost them the life of a second son killed by gunshot.

Tommy's Heritage

Apart from the Irish connection through the Ball family, there was Scottish lineage as Euphemia's paternal family, the Edgers, were originally from Kelso before her father moved to Byker in Newcastle where she was born and married. I mention this because, although the common assumption has been that Tommy was destined to play for England, football historians have never appeared to consider that he was equally qualified by descent to play for Scotland or for Ireland.

The Scottish connection also brings me to a common error in the telling of the story which involves the spelling of Tommy's second given name. This was Edger, after his mam's maiden name, but incorrectly shown in many accounts as Edgar. The initial error may have come, somewhat unforgivably, from incorrect typesetting in the Aston Villa match programme's obituary notice within its 24 November 1923 edition and thence passed on via the popular press to posterity.

Observers seeing Tommy's grave may therefore be excused for thinking the mason who inscribed Edger on its surround had made an embarrassing mistake. He was, however, evidently better informed than either Villa's programme editor or the West Bromwich registrar who chose to record the name incorrectly on Tommy's death certificate. It is not quite a dismissible offence, but, as many readers will know, modern registrars are ever fearful of allowing that sort of mistake to creep into a legal document for which they have the responsibility of signing off.

While we are commenting on inaccuracies it is worth noting that following his death, *The Scotsman* of 19 February 1924 was amongst several papers referring to Tommy as a 'native' of Newcastle upon Tyne. That his mother was native of the city by birth is correct, but Tommy was not. The mistake possibly came

about because the Felling Colliery club for whom he played was situated within Gateshead and thus incorrectly seen by casual observers outside the North-east as part of Newcastle. A bit like accusing a native of West Bromwich of being a Brummie!

Usworth, where Tommy was born, has never been part of Newcastle and nowadays is formally located within Washington, thus being part of the city of Sunderland. Indeed, the local motor works, constructed on the old Second World War RAF Usworth site, is invariably referred to by news outlets as Nissan's 'Sunderland factory'. It is perhaps not stretching a point to say many Usworth residents, now and then, may not have looked west to Newcastle for their regional identification or for their footballing loyalties.

Maybe Tommy supported Newcastle United – he may certainly have been keen to play for them – but it is just as likely that his favours and ambitions centred on Sunderland FC, in those days virtually the equal of Aston Villa in reputation and historical deed. The clue to Tommy's loyalties probably lies in the fact that Sunderland FC was one of only two non-Midlands clubs represented at his funeral either by personage or by floral tribute, the other being Middlesbrough FC, though Tommy was certainly not from Teesside.

Assuming Tommy's supporting loyalties may have lain with Sunderland, there is some irony in the fact that it was Aston Villa who, by beating Sunderland 1-0 in the FA Cup Final in 1913, prevented the Wearside club from achieving the first 'cup and league double' of the 20th century. Equally, by drawing a league match a week later and, would you believe, at Villa Park, Sunderland effectively secured the league title, and, in their turn, denied Villa the 'double'. What a time for football supporters, with the season going into its final two weeks with either Villa or Sunderland able to win both major trophies and having to play

each other in both competitions to decide things. Imagine what Sky would have made of that!

I write, of course, in the certain knowledge that many modern football fans will find it a little difficult to imagine that immediately before the Great War these clubs were, to use modern media parlance, the 'big two' of English football.

Growing Up

Tommy would have had the advantage of having received a relatively good education for a working-class lad of the time. Up to the age of 11, and like his brothers, he would have attended Usworth Colliery School, which had been built in 1863 and lies a short walk from High Row. Though the pit is long gone, with a sentimental and proud nod to the past, the school still thrives today under its original name.

Usworth children had been lucky as the school was one of several in the area built by philanthropic money. In Usworth's case, it opened seven years before the introduction of compulsory elementary schooling and had been funded by the local pit's then owner. Sir George Elliot was a Newcastle-born former miner who had made a bit of money and, evidently for good reason, was known locally as 'Bonnie Geordie'.

Thereafter, Tommy would probably have spent a year at Usworth Central School, which was built in the wake of the 1870 Education Act by Durham County Council. The Act had established basic compulsory education for all children up to the age of 12 and Tommy, having stayed in school probably until at least his 12th birthday and possibly a little beyond, would have been both numerate and literate. This was still something of a novelty when many of the adults in labouring families in the early 1900s, without the advantage of schooling, were signing their

names with a cross. This was true of Tommy's mam Euphemia when registering his birth and also his father when signing off the 1921 census return.

Around the age of 13 we might presume that Tommy would have been in pit service. This career was hardly a choice but virtually inevitable as the Balls had been pitmen for several generations and it was usual for a serving man's son to follow on when the time came. As Durham coalfield pit employment records for the time are virtually non-existent, it is not possible to say, categorically, where Tommy or any of his immediate family worked, but their occupation of one of Bonnie Geordie's tied properties strongly suggests that Joseph Ball, at least, worked in Usworth colliery before eventually moving to another pit cottage, and presumably employment to go with it, at Wardley. There is a clear likelihood that Tommy would have also gone to the Wardley pit for whose football team he played.

I have, to this point, used the shorthand 'coal miners' to describe the dominant local occupation, but, interestingly, Tommy's father and older brothers are recorded on 1911 census returns not as coal miners but as 'stone miners', most likely bringing up ironstone. None of the local pits appeared to have specialised in this, though it is quite likely that many pits took advantage of ironstone seams found while working the area.

Wherever he spent his working life, it is possible that Tommy initially saw service underground doing 'lads' jobs' like operating the tunnel ventilation doors, pushing the tubs of freshly hewn coal or rock, or leading pit ponies through the tunnels. Approaching his 20s, he may well have graduated to face work and, under normal circumstances, freedom from accidents permitting, another 40 or so years of this would have been in front of him. But he now had his escape route.

Industrial Birmingham, and notably its Aston district, was a tough, overcrowded place with no shortage of poverty. Looked at from the dirt and death of the north-eastern coalfields, however, the prospect of going there to be paid to play football in front of large crowds, with the seemingly realistic prospect of winning medals and newspaper headlines, must have seemed a ticket to paradise.

The Promised Land

Allowing a day or two for Tommy's registration to be lodged with the Football League and for his 'digs' to be sorted out, we can reasonably presume the grand adventure would have begun sometime around 22 January. This allowed a week or so for Tommy to settle in before making his Aston Villa debut for the reserves away from home on 31 January against Rochdale's first team in the Central League.

Tommy would have turned up, smartly dressed, at Newcastle Railway Station to make the nervous cross-country journey to Birmingham New Street. There, a club official would have met him and taken him, probably on a number three tram, to the terminus depot in Witton, a short walk from 11 Woodall Road, in those days a smartish terraced lodging house virtually over the road from the Villa Park ground. It is worth considering how much of a fish out of water Tommy may have felt himself to be when he arrived at New Street. From the broad Brummie accents on the station platform and those on his first tram ride, to the street children's voices around Woodall Road, he would have felt himself to be almost in a foreign land. The grid pattern of the terraced streets of the immediate area would, however, have had the comforting familiarity of similar roads in Usworth and in Gateshead.

It was good practice for Villa to place a new boy so near to their ground. At five minutes walking distance away from Villa Park, it was handily placed for daily training. In those days the notion of dedicated training grounds did not exist, so daily journeys to the ground for training were necessary: the present out-of-town Bodymoor Heath complex was not opened until 1971.

I once took a non-Villa-supporting work friend to see a match at Villa Park. As a keen amateur player his immediate reaction was 'I would give my right arm to play here'. I bet Tommy felt the same way when he walked over for his first day in his new workplace. With its beautiful barrel-vaulted main stand in Witton Lane, which remained a feature until 1963, it was the world's premier football stadium and was constructed to hold around 60,000 spectators: in the first season of competitive post-war football, the club welcomed over 40,000 on nine occasions. It was heady stuff for a young hopeful.

Meeting the Gaffers

Tommy's first day at the club would have involved a formal welcome from the man who sanctioned his signing. In those days clubs did not use the terms 'manager' or 'head coach' and, as with many clubs, the Villa sides were theoretically selected into the 1930s by the club's committee. In Tommy's time, and for many years beforehand, the reality was that the team was selected on the committee's behalf by the nearest thing to a manager any club at the time had. This was the legendary figure of club secretary, former captain and probably de facto match programme editor George Burrell Ramsay.

Scotsman Ramsay had been at the club in many roles since joining as a player in 1876 and had run the senior side for over 30 years before the war. In that time, Ramsay had won six Football

League titles and five FA Cups, including the mythical 'double' in 1897, and was to bag another FA Cup win three months after signing Tommy in 1920. Ramsay would have wanted to check very quickly that he was getting his money's worth with Tommy and would have left the newcomer in no doubt as to what was expected both on and off the field.

Since the early 1890s, Ramsay had worked in partnership with the equally legendary 'trainer' Joe Grierson, though whether a trainer decided tactics, was responsible for fitness or was simply the 'sponge man', or a combination of all three, would vary from club to club. Whatever his precise role at Aston Villa, there could be little doubting that the autocratic style reportedly employed by Grierson had helped maintain the high levels of on- and off-field discipline which had contributed to the club's success. Approaching the age of 60 when war finally brought an end to organised football, Grierson decided it would be the right time to retire.

In deciding who would succeed Grierson on the resumption of competition in 1919, Ramsay had gone for a local Aston-born man, and former star full-back in the team, Alfred 'Freddie' Miles, who was to be a key figure in this story. It has always gone down well with the crowd to have a 'Villa man' in key position at the club and he looked to be a very safe pair of hands: one imagines that he might have been expected to replicate Grierson's famously glacial relationship with the players. Miles was probably hopeful of eventually taking over day-to-day team management duties when the ageing Ramsay finally decided to retire to the committee room.

When he took over from Grierson, Miles was, in effect, being promoted from the dressing room and this has always brought challenges to those similarly advanced within team sport. He was