



THE HISTORY BOYS

PART II



More Iconic
Nottingham Forest Goals

DAVID MARPLES

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Sam Widdowson v Sheffield; 18 February 1880

THE POET Edward Thomas was a busy man who got an awful lot done in a short space of time, leaving a lasting legacy.

Thomas was a biographer, literary critic, travelogue writer, and prolific book reviewer, sometimes reviewing up to 15 books every week. He even squeezed in time to do the work of Joseph Conrad who, despite having a column in the *Daily Mail* in which he wrote essays, reflections and reviewed literary works, was apparently a little lethargic when it came to actually writing them. So when required, in stepped Thomas to add to his own busy workload. Bizarrely, Conrad was not a fan of the *Daily Mail*, once calling it 'that abominable rag' in a private letter. For his part, Thomas was not Conrad's biggest fan either, expressing unease when in his company, prompting him to say things he neither meant nor wished to happen.

Thomas didn't turn his hand to poetry until the age of 36. His life as a poet was cut tragically short as he was killed in the Battle of Arras in 1917, after willingly volunteering to enlist, partly down to the influence of his great friend and fellow poet, Robert Frost. Yet in his short career as a

poet, his depiction of rural England and profound love of natural beauty played a seminal role in the development of modern poetry.

Like Thomas, Samuel Weller Widdowson wasn't one for wasting time either. He had things to do, aims to achieve, legacies to be established.

He was named after his father's fondness for Charles Dickens, in particular, the character Sam Weller from *The Pickwick Papers*, a confident and exuberant cockney boot-polisher. He excelled in many areas, especially football, and shortly after the formation of Nottingham Forest in 1865 he was a regular for the Reds from the age of 15, taking the captaincy in 1873. But he was just getting started.

He invented the shin guard in 1874, stuffing cut-down cricket pads into his socks in order to prevent bruised shins from brutal boots which to the modern eye look more like some kind of medieval torture tool. Clearly, the nuts and bolts of the game intrigued him and he was an early exponent of the 2-3-5 formation, which was used extensively until Herbert Chapman established and popularised the WM formation in the 1920s.

Widdowson also played an instrumental role in the introduction of a whistle for the referee, rather than a white flag. This came about after a match between his Forest side and Sheffield's Norfolk FC in which the peep of a whistle, not a silent wave of the flag, was trialled. After consultation with Widdowson, the whistle was subsequently adopted. He sat on the FA council and introduced the FA Amateur Cup which ran from 1893 to 1974. In this role, he also experimented with floodlit games and refereed the first game to involve a net in 1891. On top of all this, he was a notable amateur sprinter, hurdler and cricketer for Nottinghamshire.

Was there anything this man couldn't do? Was there no end to his talents? In short, the kind of chap who gets things

done and has the annoying knack of being rather skilled at getting things done. For him, life's looming and Sisyphean administrative tasks were just things he breezed through.

It just so happened that he was an excellent footballer too. He reached the semi-finals of the FA Cup twice in two years and was capped for England in 1880 against Scotland. His eye for administration naturally led him to taking the role as Forest chairman from 1879 to 1894.

His career spanned 20 years and predated Forest joining the Football League, but he made 177 appearances in non-competitive games and 23 in various cup competitions, most of them in the FA Cup. It was in this competition that Widdowson scored a legendary goal.

Forest were 2-1 down to Sheffield in the fourth round and struggling. Widdowson had seen enough. He hadn't reached the semi-final stage the previous season to go out so early on home turf less than a year later. According to the *Sheffield Independent*, he 'took the ball into his possession and ran it the whole length of the ground. On arriving near the Sheffield goal he was opposed by two Sheffield backs, but he managed to give another kick, and the ball passed off the goalkeeper into the goal amidst prolonged applause.'

The *Sheffield Telegraph* was more effusive. Widdowson collected the ball near his own goal line and 'fairly raced Marsden down, and going the whole length of the ground with the ball under his feet ran within a few yards of the Sheffield goal where he floored the goalkeeper and put the ball through. The run was the most brilliant one ever seen on the Trent Bridge Ground, and the cheering which followed were long continued.' All of which sounds like a serious case of limbs and scenes.

The *Nottingham Evening Post* was more effusive still in describing how 'Widdowson revealed his genius by dribbling the ball almost the entire length of the field and scoring a glorious equalising goal'.

A draw then, but the fun and games were only just beginning. Naturally, with their tails up and at home, Forest were keen to play the extra 30 minutes and were under the impression that to do so was conventional under the current rules of the competition. Sheffield felt differently. They ambled off the field, assuming a replay would be the natural course of action, at which point Forest claimed the victory.

Two days later, the *Nottingham Evening Post* carried a piece in which a correspondent stated, 'The referee, Mr C.W. Alcock, had left the ground, and the game could not very well be continued without him. If the rule has been passed, it is very little known and under the circumstances, the Committee of the Association will not venture to award the tie to the Forest without another trial.' The correspondent got it wrong. Forest were awarded a bye, 'in consequence of the Sheffield Club having declined to continue the match when called upon to do so by the referee', informed the *Post* on 26 February.

Alcock was unhappy with the claim that he left the ground and wrote a letter to refute this, which was widely published. He was very much still in the ground and in fact, consulting a copy of the competition rules in the dressing room along with Forest umpire Mr Spencer, Sheffield secretary Mr Matthews, and most of the Sheffield players. He proposed to Sheffield captain Thomas Sorby that they should play the extra time. But Sorby declined and that was the end of that as far as Alcock was concerned: 'As the matter was then practically settled, and it was very important for me to get back to London, I left the Trent Bridge ground.'

Sadly for Widdowson – who weighed in with seven of his team's 18 goals in the competition – and Forest, they lost their semi-final tie 1-0 to Oxford University, who duly lost to Clapham Rovers in the final at the Kennington Oval. This was a bitter pill to swallow, having lost at the same

stage the previous season to Old Etonians in their very first FA Cup campaign. In the other semi-final, Clapham Rovers were given a bye to the final, which easily could have been Forest.

There was some consolation, or at least a degree of satisfaction, to be had for Widdowson as in 1898 he saw his beloved Forest lift the trophy, rather fittingly on his 47th birthday, as they vanquished Derby County in the final.

In May 1927, Widdowson was taken ill with a chill and developed pneumonia. He died on 9 May at his home in Beeston.

Samuel Weller Widdowson matched Edward Thomas's insatiable appetite for creativity and left a seismic contribution and legacy to craft he loved. 'No man did more than this famous all-rounder to bring careful thought and inventive genius to the game,' declared the *Nottingham Evening Post* in 1950. 'But then everything Sam Weller Widdowson did in sport had the hallmark of class, and the brilliance of a genius.' Moreover, he scored one of the greatest Nottingham Forest goals you've never seen.