THE UNSEEN SIR ALF

A Different Kind of Hero

GRANT BAGE

CONTENTS

A Timeline Of Alf Ramsey's Life	
1920	22 January: Alfred Ernest Ramsey born in Five Elms, Becontree Heath, near Dagenham.
1921	Building starts of the Beacontree Estate, adding 120,000 people to Dagenham by 1935.
1934	Alf leaves Becontree Heath School aged 14 after playing for school and district teams. Starts work as a Co-operative store errand boy, then apprentice. Stops playing football.
1936	Starts playing football again: Sundays for Five Elms FC, perhaps Thursdays for Co-op.
1939	Asked to sign amateur forms for Portsmouth; signed and sent off but never hears back.
1940	24 June: called up for the army, then travels for the first time across England to Cornwall. Plays regular football at various levels within the army until 1946.
1943	9 October: signs amateur forms for Southampton covering friendly and wartime league games.
1944	Southampton professional contract: £2 per match but still friendlies or wartime leagues.
1945	December: ordered to Palestine by the War Office as still serving in British Army.
1946	June: returns from Palestine and, after some negotiation, signs a full-time professional contract with Southampton. 26 October: full league debut aged 26 years and nine months.
1948	1 December: wins first full England cap at right-back in 6-0 victory over Switzerland.
1949	15 May: becomes Tottenham Hotspur's new manager's first signing, valuation £21,000.
1950	1 April: Spurs win Division Two with seven games to spare. 29 June and 2 July: Alf wins England caps seven and eight in 1-0 World Cup losses to USA and Spain.
1951	28 April: Spurs win Division One title. 10 December: marries Rita Norris (born Welch) in Southampton. Rita has a daughter from her previous marriage.
1952	April: Spurs finish Division One runners-up. Alf starts coaching top London amateur side Eton Manor on weekday evenings, and in November publishes autobiography.

1953	5 October: initiated as a Freemason with Waltham Abbey Lodge, Essex. 25 November: wins 32nd and last England cap in 6-3 Wembley defeat by Hungary.
1955	19 May: Ipswich Town approach Tottenham to sign Ramsey as player/coach, Alf spends the summer coaching in Southern Africa. 8 August: Ramsey appointed Ipswich manager.
1956	Ipswich Town finish third in Division Three South.
1957	Ipswich Town win Division Three South.
1961	Ipswich Town win Division Two.
1962	28 April: Ipswich Town win Division One to become Football League champions. 25 October: Alf appointed England manager, but continues managing Ipswich until March 1963.
1966	30 July: wins the World Cup as England manager.
1967	Alf Ramsey given a knighthood.
1968	8 June: England beat Soviet Union 2-0 to secure third place in European Championship.
1970	14 June: Mexico World Cup quarter-final, England lead 2-0 but lose 3-2 to West Germany.
1972	13 May: England lose European Championship quarter-final 3-1 on aggregate to West Germany.
1973	17 October: England draw 1-1 with Poland at Wembley and fail to qualify for World Cup.
1974	1 May: news breaks Ramsey is sacked as England manager by the Football Association.
1976	January: becomes a director of Birmingham City.
1977	September: temporarily manages Birmingham City. November: becomes full-time.
1978	March: leaves Birmingham City after disagreement about Trevor Francis, who in 1979 would become England's first £1m transfer.
1999	28 April: Alf dies in Ipswich, Suffolk, after a stroke the previous year and suffering from prostate cancer and Alzheimer's disease. 7 May: buried in a private ceremony in Ipswich cemetery. 15 May: memorial service at St Mary le Tower Church in Ipswich, attended mostly by ex-players and friends rather than FA officials or dignitaries.

Part One

LABELLED FOR LIFE: THE WORLD ALF WAS BORN INTO

CHAPTER 1

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Alf Ramsey, Victim of Racism

Name-Dropping

ALFRED ERNEST RAMSEY was born on 22 January 1920, in a tiny wooden cottage, on the edge of the scattered rural hamlet of Becontree Heath. Becontree Heath lay in Essex, east of London and between the small market town of Romford, and the village of Dagenham. Between Becontree and the northern bank of the wide, tidal River Thames lay five flat miles of fertile, often soggy marshland. Alfred liked to be called 'Alf', even after becoming a 'Sir' in 1967. Yet, as a boy growing up in that edge-of-London countryside, Alf gained another name, a nickname he kept secret, never referred to and is known only because other people used it.

One of those was Jim Peters who, after moving to Becontree aged seven, became a 1950s Olympian athlete and marathon world record holder.[1] In a national newspaper interview Peters recalled playing 1930s school football 'against Alf Ramsey, then known to Essex schoolboys as D****e' (*Daily Mirror* 18 January 1952). A year later Peters again referred in print to 'Alfred *D****e* Ramsey' who 'until recently was still living' in the house where he was born.[2]

In his 1955 autobiography Peters repeated, for a third time, that 'There was a boy called *D****e* Ramsey who … lived in a tiny cottage … today *D****e* is much better known as … a captain of England and a great footballer.'[3] From 1955, Alf's childhood nickname then disappeared, on the record, until a 1969 television documentary filmed another former teenaged team-mate serving in a Dagenham shop, and recalling 'D****e Ramsey'.[4] It then vanished again before resurfacing in a 1993 Jimmy Greaves book,[5] and a 2002 Channel 4 television documentary.[6] Modern dictionary definitions are clear what 'D****e' means: 'an extremely offensive word for a person who has black or brown skin.'[7] Bringing the unseen Sir Alf into view therefore starts with a simple question,

answered in this chapter. Did that odious term mean the same then, as it does now?

Previously with Alf Ramsey, the answers have depended more upon the politics of the commentator than the evidence. The *Morning Star* ('for peace and socialism') carried a brief biographical article on the 100th anniversary of Alf's birth: 'From childhood, the black-haired boy faced rumours that his dark looks were a sign of gypsy heritage', hence his 'sensitivity to criticism and reluctance to talk about his private life' (22 January 2020). That same day, in a politically contrasting newspaper, Alf's pre-eminent biographer and prominent right-wing journalist, Leo McKinstry, downplayed whisperings that Ramsey's 'family came from a gypsy background … Sir Alf was always angrily dismissive of this claim' (*Daily Express* 22 January 2020). Over a decade earlier, his excellent biography *Sir Alf* had poured similar scorn, claiming 'the eagerness to turn a childhood nickname [D****e] into a badge of racial identity seems to have been based on a fundamental error'. That was because, McKinstry argued, 'according to those who actually lived near him, Alf was called *D****e* because of the colour of his thick, glossy black hair.'[8]

Alf's childhood friend, Fred Tibble, later Dagenham's mayor and a councillor for 40 years (*Barking and Dagenham Post* 17 June 2021), squarely contradicted McKinstry's 'dark hair' explanation. Interviewed by a local newspaper in 1999, Tibble recalled working and playing sport with adolescent Alf, and that 'his nickname was D****e because of his tanned skin'.[9] Three years later he acknowledged 'everyone used to refer to him as D****e Ramsey.'[10] Two Tottenham team-mates endorse that interpretation, in McKinstry's own book. When one met the 34-year-old Alf in 1954 he recalled someone who 'looked a little Mediterranean in appearance'. The other, a close friend during Alf's six years at Spurs, said that Alf 'did look a bit Middle Eastern'.[11] This 1949 photo reflects that.

So why did McKinstry gloss over such interesting evidence, some from his own research? Perhaps because once Alf achieved national fame everyone assumed he was ethnically white. To conventional white gazes, including the current writer, at first sight a racist nickname for Alf Ramsey makes little sense. Alf presented himself, and was pictured by others, as the epitome of a conventional, white, middle-class, middle-aged Englishman.

Yet as most Alf Ramsey observers agree, things in his persona were not necessarily as they seemed. From the 1940s onwards, and after six wartime years spent with Army officers and BBC broadcasts, Alf gradually reinvented himself to disguise his origins. Using 'immaculate suits' and 'clipped, cultured' speaking styles,[12] especially after his 1955

move into management, he blanked out that childhood nickname; but because this book evokes 'the unseen Sir Alf' it needs to dig deeper, and construct his story afresh.[13] With someone like Alf, that is challenging. His fame retrospectively influences people's memories and any 'historical facts' that survive through individuals are 'always selectively' recorded.[14] In Alf's case, looking afresh at which biographical 'facts' matter most in his life story helps us learn not just *about him*, as an English football hero, but *from his story* about 20th-century English football and society.[15]

Which is why strong historical evidence is laid out below, showing how 'D****e' was used during Alf's lifetime racially to label people whose skin tone was not 'white'; evidence which also explains why he never publicly acknowledged, nor commented upon, his apparently unwanted boyhood nickname, even in his own 1952 autobiography. Alf 'hated to discuss the subject' of his rumoured Gypsy background, according to the young journalist who at various times ghost-wrote his newspaper column and became a close friend.[16] Only after Alf's death did that journalist feel able to confirm Alf's possible 'roots among the travelling community.'[17] During his lifetime, Alf's childhood nickname, although known by some, could also never be broached. For example, another journalist, when planning an interview in 1981, later recalled how a colleague had confided Alf's youthful nickname was 'D****e … of which Ramsey thoroughly disapproved … it was essential we did not use it … in his company'.[18] By 1993 that protocol had been breached, in a book co-written by another eminent sports journalist with Dagenham local boy and 1960s England star Jimmy Greaves: 'When I was growing up … locals used to refer to the Ramseys as gypsy stock … one of his early nicknames in his playing days was D****e.'[19] It seems that throughout his lifetime Alf's nickname, often associated with whispers about his ethnicity, was common local gossip and national media currency.

This matters because, as multiple examples shortly demonstrate, 'D****e' as a word did the same racist work in Alf's early 20th-century England as it sometimes does today. Alf acquired it because of his dark skin, dark eyes and dark hair; but as chapters two and three explore, its racist impact was magnified by his family, their livelihoods and Alf's Becontree Heath birthplace being strongly identified with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (hereafter GRT) people. The evidence below also strongly suggests that anyone living around east London in the first half of the 20th-century, and using the term 'D****e', could not plausibly deny its racist implications.

Rising Racial Tension

Alf was born in January 1920. During 1919, as his mother Florrie's pregnancy progressed, deadly race riots killed hundreds in the USA,[20] and at least five people in Britain.[21] The British riots erupted during January and February in South Shields and Glasgow,[22] followed by violent deaths, shootings, stabbings and house attacks on hundreds of people from ethnic minority backgrounds in East London, Liverpool, and other English and Welsh ports.[23] In London's East End, a few miles west of pregnant Florrie Ramsey, rioting gripped Stepney during April 1919, followed in May and June by racial violence in Limehouse, the West India Dock Road, Poplar and Stepney again.[24] Thousands of returning 'British soldiers and sailors', including ex-combatants traumatised by World War One,[25] perhaps unexpectedly found themselves competing for wages with ethnically diverse migrants from across the British Empire, who had been employed in wartime London's ships, docks and allied industries. Many 'White East Enders', this London newspaper editorial regretfully explained, were therefore returning home to:

> Enforced idleness, with memories which do not help them towards greater freedom from colour prejudice … brought up against the coloured man in circumstances only too likely to provoke disorder. Hence the distressing problems with which we are now confronted. (*London Daily News* 18 June 1919)

Casually racist language such as 'D****e' had also been common in east London for 20 years before these riots. The *Tower Hamlets Advertiser* (8 October 1904) described a Jamaican-born, Black, British East End sailor as 'now unemployed', because Australia had barred 'coloured men' landing and 'they won't carry D*****s'. A 1907 assault case heard at West Ham described an attack on three 'Lascars' by two white men. Police evidence cited a white assailant swearing at 'you foreigners' and asking the policeman, 'Why don't you take these blacks?' A different police constable then described 'several d*****s taking refuge in a shop' (*Essex Times* 30 October). Journalists used 'D****e' indiscriminately to denote anyone with darker skin, including foreign visitors to the Royal Albert Dock or Whitechapel (*East End News* 11 December 1914, 16 February 1917), and local residents in Cable Street (*Daily News* 7 March 1913).

Then, as now, sport was a significant public arena for racial tensions and therefore labels like 'D****e'. Jack Johnson became the first Black American World Heavyweight boxing champion after defeating the white Canadian Tommy Burns, in Australia in 1908. Boxing's racialised

nature coined the phrase 'The Great White Hope', reflecting media speculation about whether a white fighter could ever beat the black, graceful Johnson.[26] His second World Heavyweight Championship win, beating another white challenger on 4 July 1910, sparked race riots across the USA and racial tension in England. Their graphic reporting showed racist language as media mainstream in English newspapers,[27] including frequent deployment of Alf's nickname 'D****e'. This national newspaper's editorial, although mocking racism, used the N-word three times and imagined:

> A feeling of terror lest Johnson may become a multi-millionaire. A *d***y* millionaire with … gold front teeth to match his waistcoat buttons and clouded cane … he may come over to England … and tell us how to run our empire. (*Daily Mirror* 6 July 1910)

Racist responses to Johnson's fame were common across England. A north London newspaper's 'joke' (*Islington Gazette* 14 July 1910) imagined a white street musician, usually blacked up as a minstrel, outside a pub in Holloway explaining his lack of make-up because 'with all this colour prejudice about' due to Jack Johnson's world-title win 'some boozy bloke might take me for a real *d****y* and go for me'. From Birmingham, a large, unusual crowd was reported outside newspaper offices awaiting the result of that distant boxing contest:

> Never before has the writer seen so many black men gathered together in this city, and the presence of the 'd*****s' testified to the absorbing interest … the news of Johnson's victory was received with great jubilation by them … and the white men … were left to mourn. (*The Weekly Post* 9 July 1910)

Even a decade later, nine months before Alf's birth, Jack Johnson was still massive news. A famous British journalist 'doorstepped' the boxer, then used 'd****e' three times in his report alongside the N-word and numerous other racial slurs (*Sunday Express* 23 March 1919).

Labelled for Life

Everyday use of 'D****e' as a racist term had a long history, persisted throughout Alf's childhood, and continued into his professional playing career. It would have been impossible for Alf, and his family, to avoid reading and hearing regular public examples of Alf's nickname being

used in racially prejudicial ways, because in football it was regularly deployed about any player from a Black or other minority ethnic background. As early as the 1880s, for example, the Black goalkeeper Arthur Wharton, who had excelled as a sprinter before joining Preston North End, had been called 'D****e Wharton'[28] and he still was 30 years later (*Lancashire Evening Post* 14 September 1918). Walter Tull (1888–1918), the best known of a handful of pre-war English Black professional footballers, suffered the same. In 1909 Tull made a whirlwind transition from playing for Clapton as an amateur, ten miles west of Alf's Becontree Heath birthplace, to signing professionally for Tottenham, then joining their Argentine tour hours before departure.[29] At which point, from the boat they were sailing on, Tottenham's tour manager publicly, racially labelled his own player, telling a journalist: 'If Tull shines at all he will be made much of, as d*****s get a good show at Buenos Aires.'[30] Weeks later, the *Bradford Daily Telegraph* commented, 'Tull, who is said to be a "D****e", played some fine games last year for Clapton' but 'is finding First League football a hue of another colour. *D*****s* are not often found in first-class English football' (8 September 1909). Tull experienced sporadic racial abuse from spectators and although some newspapers condemned it (*London Daily News* 2 October 1909), other journalists persisted in calling him 'd****e' (e.g. *Tottenham Weekly Herald* 24 September 1909, *Woolwich Gazette* 6 September 1910).

In 1921, the year after Alf Ramsey's birth, Arsenal signed Sadek Fahmy, 'an accomplished fellow speaking four languages' (*Dundee Evening Telegraph* 30 August), but who was casually and racially labelled: 'Trouble has arisen in footballing circles as to the correct spelling of his name … we had the same difficulty until the popular nickname of "D****e" came to be generally understood. "D****e" is an Egyptian' (*Wallingford and Berkshire Advertiser* 2 September 1921). In 1928, Tottenham Hotspur's London-born Arthur Lowdell[31] was similarly 'nicknamed D****e because of his complexion' (*Reading Standard* 22 December). In the same period, just as Alf was first playing football for his school, two other Black, British footballers were internationally selected: Jack Leslie for England and Eddie Parris for Wales.[32] Both were sometimes called 'D****e' (e.g. Parris in *Daily News London* 1 April 1929) but also other terms like 'DUSKY FORWARDS … Parris, Bradford's dark-skinned outside left, is one of the two coloured players in League football today. The other is of course, Jack Leslie, Plymouth's brilliant London-born Bermudan' (*Daily Mirror* 29 December 1929).

How Leslie could be 'London-born' but still be inaccurately termed 'Bermudan' the journalist did not explain, but historical evidence shows

Leslie spending his first 20 years in Canning Town, a few miles from the Ramsey family. Two weeks after Alf's Becontree Heath birth, Jack Leslie was then sold from Barking's amateur club, which neighboured Becontree, to the Football League's Plymouth Argyle (*Westminster Gazette* 2 February 1920). There he thrived and five years later was chosen for England, a selection reversed days before the game, in an act now recognised as racial discrimination.[33] Prejudice was commonplace then, and even a west of England newspaper had reported his England call-up using Alf Ramsey's racist childhood nickname: 'Leslie, the d****e forward of Plymouth Argyle, will fill the vacancy' (*Western Daily Press* 12 October 1925).

'Gypsies', Skin Colour and Racism

Alf 'D****e' Ramsey was not ethnically Black, nor apparently bi-racial, nor were his parents of clear Romany descent. Yet his nickname, family and birthplace were identified, as Alf grew up, with another social group often experiencing discrimination: 'Gypsy-Travellers, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a distinctive group, marked off from settled society by their types of employment and the nature of their way of life.'[34] Nowadays people from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller backgrounds are often referred to using an umbrella acronym, namely 'GRT'.[35] A century ago they were mostly called 'Gypsies', and often labelled by skin colour. This included using 'D****e' as a nickname, alongside other adjectives such as 'dusky' and 'swarthy'. In 1905 for example, local to where Alf grew up, the *Grays and Tilbury Gazette* reported an incident at Thurrock involving several Dagenham participants. The Dailey family (husband Patrick, wife Johanna and four young children) were living in a tent, whilst working on a local farm. Another male worker insulted, or possibly assaulted Johanna, and a fight ensued. At 1am the next morning the Daileys' tent was torched, the youngest child burned on both legs and the father's shirt set alight, scorching his back. A prosecution witness from Dagenham testified the accused man had threatened 'to burn Dailey out before morning' and then, referring to another Dagenham witness, threatened 'your bloody mate D****y … I'll cut his throat … and throw him in the Mardyke'. He had labelled a Dagenham resident, part of an itinerant group living in tents, as 'D****y'. In modern parlance this was a hate crime attack on people seen as 'Gypsies', just east of where Alf Ramsey's parents lived and for which a 53-year-old labourer was imprisoned for 12 months.[36]

Sport was another high-profile public arena for GRT racial nicknaming. In 1905 a Whitechapel boxing contest was reported under

the headline 'GEORGE MOORE SCORES FROM D***Y HALEY', the latter's nickname being based upon his 'bronzed, Romany-like complexion' (*Sporting Life* 12 December). Edward 'D***y' Haley was born seven miles west of Becontree Heath, in Stratford in 1884, and lived there all his life. In census returns his father worked as a hawker, sharing a house with other hawkers, an 'Umbrella Maker' and a 'Doll Maker', all popular 19th-century Gypsy-Traveller occupations.[37] He was born in Bethnal Green, a traditional location for settled Cockney Gypsies.[38] In 1878, Haley was described as 'a general dealer of Bethnal Green' who had travelled to Maldon to sell 'bacon and cheese from a cart in the market square' (*Essex Newsman* 21 September). Alf Ramsey's grandfather, in the 1891 census, would similarly be categorised a 'general dealer', who by 1901 had become a 'hay and straw dealer'. Essentially, 'D****e' Haley, much like the Alf Ramsey sketched in the next chapter, had acquired his nickname due to a slightly darker skin tone and an ancestry with GRT connections, dealing in foodstuffs, often through 'family-based self-employment'.[39]

During Alf's 1920s and 1930s childhood, numerous other examples surface of 'D****e' being used to label GRT people. The *Sevenoaks Chronicle* of 29 April 1921 casually referred in a court report to 'Jobey Collins, alias D****e Smith, 25, a gipsy.' The *Police Gazette* of 25 January 1921 described someone wanted for horse stealing and called 'D***y Simpson … complexion swarthy, hair dark brown … dealer … frequently attends horse sales … resides in neighbourhood of Deptford'. In 1934, a fairground worker was referred to as 'D****e' four times in an article, describing him as 'illiterate' and 'having been with the fair nearly all his life' (*Birmingham Daily Gazette* 22 January). Such casually racist language and labelling continued across Alf's playing career. A front-page story in the *Daily Herald* of 28 September 1945 contained veiled, possibly fanciful, but clearly stereotypical 'Gypsy' allusions. It reported how in Essex:

> The charred remains of a man were found in a burnt-out caravan by the side of a lonely country road at Great Leighs … occupied by a man known locally as 'D***y' … He did casual farm work in the district … It is said he had a premonition that he was going to die soon.

Hackneyed, demeaning references, associating darker skins with GRT people, had deep journalistic roots. They adorned stories in some left-of-centre newspapers,[40] and were deeply embedded within English class

structures. Reporting on a New Year's Day fox hunt in Warwickshire *The Field* of 4 January 1908 lamented how an otherwise excellent chase by the Warwickshire hounds was disrupted by 'a camp of … dusky Gypsies':

> For these dusky nomads had built their wigwams in the gorse and follow the pursuit of cutting umbrella handles. The tribe turned out in full force, most of the children being without shoes or stockings, and with true vagrant whine … won a handful of coppers.

This journalist's chosen language reveals what Alf would face as he grew up: not just everyday English racial prejudice specifically against GRT people, but racism as a world mental map encapsulating the British Empire's social and ethnic hierarchies. Note how 'camp', 'dusky nomads', 'wigwams', 'tribe' and 'whine' were deployed as descriptors, words deliberately implying that these GRT people, despite living in the geographic heart of England, were alien, foreign or 'other'.

Such terms were paralleled, 62 years later, by Alf Ramsey's first (1970) biographer. Whilst deriding Alf's partly ghost-written 1952 autobiography,[41] he sneered that 'the word pow-wow appears so often it makes the reader wonder if maybe there is something behind the story of Ramsey looking so much like a Red Indian.' Some of Alf's England players, the biographer claimed, had joked that 'Ramsey would make a fortune playing a Red Indian chief'.[42]

During the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, as Alf learned to live with his own nickname of 'D****e', stereotypical connections continued to abound between GRT people, skin colour, and terms like 'swarthy'.[43] A *West London Observer* headline shouted 'SEQUEL TO A GIPSY MARRIAGE', then pictured the defendant as 'a swarthy complexioned man described as a dealer'. His first wife said in court, 'We are both gipsies' (19 May 1925). In 1943 the *Sunday Dispatch* carried the death of the Reverend G. Bramwell Evens, a BBC radio celebrity who had broadcast as a 'true Gipsy' whose 'mother lived in a caravan. He was tall, swarthy with jet black hair' (21 November 1943).

Discrimination, Global and Local

Bramwell Evens's media career rested on him publicly 'being' a 'Gypsy'. Alf Ramsey did exactly the opposite by strenuously avoiding any public reference to his childhood nickname. Yet his secrecy did not stop the rumours referred to above nor, in 1981, prevent a national award-

winning, 'fervently anti-apartheid' sports journalist (*The Guardian* 25 January 2013) slyly describing Alf as 'the swarthy knight'.[44] Widespread local and national examples show how Alf's 'D****e' nickname was associated, throughout his lifetime, with racial and racist world views; how GRT people were often stereotyped as 'dark', 'dusky', or 'swarthy'; and how such attitudes slotted into the everyday mindsets underpinning a global British Empire. These stereotyped images were also explicitly taught to children. In 1931, when Alf was 11, a newspaper column aimed at children of Alf's age explained that 'gipsy folk' are always 'dark haired, dark-eyed and dark skinned … largely due to ancestry … their tents and caravans are their homes'. Although Gypsies were, somewhat patronisingly, portrayed as 'an honest enough crowd', they were also categorised as 'a race apart' (*Sheffield Daily Independent* 18 July).

As Alf was growing up in the 1930s, that phrase 'race apart' acquired ominous weight, when perhaps half a million GRT (Roma and Sinti) people perished in the Nazi Holocaust.[45] Whilst some of the conditions enabling that holocaust were specific to inter-war Germany, the generic racism assisting it was present in England. Alf's Becontree, by now concreted over with thousands of new houses,[46] witnessed local fascism publicly paraded in street marches. Four years after Hitler's 1933 accession to power, in precisely the same streets where adolescent Alf now lived and worked, local fascists held regular demonstrations. From June 1937 Romford's British Union of Fascists were active in Dagenham, holding:

> Weekly meetings at Chequers Corner and Becontree Heath. This political activity was supported by street newspaper sales, house-to-house leaflet distribution and, on occasion, propaganda marches. By October 1937, Romford District felt able to claim that Dagenham-ites were 'willingly turning to National Socialism' and towards the end of the following year reported that the locality now possessed a 'strong organisation'.[47]

During 1939, Israel Rees, a Jewish fruiterer and grocer, was fitting out his new shop at number 786 Green Lane in Becontree. Two local fascist agitators, a father (Frederick Hunt) and his daughter (Irene), were bound over for a year, and paid costs, after being found guilty of threatening the shopkeeper. Rees testified in court how:

> On several occasions, Hunt had remarked that the Blackshirts would drive him out of Becontree. The court was also informed

> that the grocer had received similar threats in anonymous postcards and telephone calls … British Union of Fascist parades marched past his shop on Saturday nights.[48]

Alf Ramsey, nicknamed 'D****e' during the early 1930s, worked in a grocery store less than a mile from that 'Blackshirt' hate crime, and, through the windows of his own workplace, would have watched fascist parades marching past. Nor did local fascism simply disappear when war broke out in September 1939. In May 1940, a few weeks after German armies invaded Denmark and Norway, and a few weeks before Churchill became British prime minister,[49] the British Union of Fascists was strong enough to hold a 'Combined Rally' in Dagenham; one of only two they managed across Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex.[50]

Conclusion

As a white liberal writer, with a lifelong love for football, researching this chapter has been unsettling and sometimes shaming. Cataloguing each grim example of 'D****e' being used in racist ways, before and during Alf's 20th-century lifetime, illuminated the resultant pain both from individual instances, and a prevailing climate of bullying based on skin colour and ancestry. Given this book reimagines Alf's biography, how might that have influenced him during his lifetime, and his historical reputation since?

Awareness has been widening on both fronts. A fascinating recent exploration of 150 years of 'England Football' highlighted racism as a thread, fleetingly pointed at Alf's racist nickname, but lacked space to further pursue it.[51] In 2023, another account of England's 1966 World Cup team and its manager finally acknowledged claims that 'Ramsey … acquired the nickname D****e purely on the … suspicion … of at least a pint and a half of Romany blood'.[52] Yet in the rest of its brilliant 400 pages that suspicion lay unexamined, and its lifelong legacy for Alf ignored.

Assembling new evidence about Alf's life helps redress that, and prompts rethinking his story to reflect changing knowledge. Some scientists now argue 'whiteness' as a skin tone was a relatively recent, evolutionary variation from universally darker shades.[53] As recently as 8,000 to 12,000 years ago 'all humans were dark-skinned. Pale complexions … only evolved as humans migrated beyond Africa.'[54] But whilst discrimination based upon skin tone may make little evolutionary or intellectual sense, that does not reduce the destructive impact of the belittling 'D****e' nickname with which Alf was lumbered. Those

painful, prejudicial aspects of Alf's life story also play directly into current discussions around 'Englishness' and the problem of how to construct, as a recent expert commentator phrased it, a 'more generous and harmonious English identity which is not inward looking or defined by resentful nationalism' or 'pre-occupied by loss and nostalgia'.[55]

Given Alf's iconic status in the history of English sport, uncovering his hidden diversities may assist with that mission of reimagining modern Englishness. It is now clear that Alf's 1930s childhood nickname was known, by journalists and others, from the 1950s until his death. Strong historical evidence similarly shows it was often associated with racism, or actively racist in intent. Importantly, though, as the next two chapters reveal, a darker skin tone and racist nickname were not the only aspects of Alf's background to make him vulnerable to prejudice.

1 Peters, J. and Edmundson, J. (1955) p.1
2 **Valence House Archive and Local Studies Centre** *Dagenham Characters* (1953) p.14. I am indebted for this and many other references to Teresa Trowers, Local Studies Officer, and other archive staff
3 Peters, J. and Edmundson, J. (1955) p.3
4 **London Weekend Television** (1969) *Sir Alf Ramsey – England Soccer Team Manager* Producer Adrian Metcalfe
5 Greaves, J. with Giller, N. (1993) p.31
6 **Channel 4** (2002) *Sir Alf* Director Ken McGill
7 Cambridge Dictionary website (no date)
8 McKinstry, L. (2007) pp.15-16
9 *Barking And Dagenham Post* 5 May 1999 'World Cup King Sir Alf dies at 79'
10 **Channel 4** (2002) *Sir Alf* Director Ken McGill
11 McKinstry, L. (2007) Ed Speight p.138, Eddie Baily p.14
12 *Daily Express* 22 January 2020
13 Bage, G. (1999)
14 Beales, D. (1980) p.277
15 Ibid. pp.282-3
16 Nigel Clarke, quoted in McKinstry, L. (2007) p.15
17 **Channel 4** (2002) *Sir Alf* Director Ken McGill
18 Cooney, B. (2011) chapter 4. Cooney was also an associate producer for **Channel 4** (2002) *Sir Alf*
19 Greaves, J. with Giller, N. (1993) p.30
20 The National WW1 Museum and Memorial website (no date) 'Red Summer: The Race Riots of 1919'
21 Open University website (no date) 'Making Britain: discover how South Asians shaped the nation 1870-1950'
22 Griffin, P. and Martin, H. (2021)
23 Jenkinson, J. (2008)
24 Fryer, P. (2018)
25 Lawrence, J. (2003)
26 Kent, G. (2007)
27 E.g. *London Evening Standard* 5 July 1910 'The fury of the whites at the victory of the [N word] is said to be indescribable'; *Lloyd's Weekly News* 10 July 1910; *The Illustrated Police News* 16 July 1910 'Race riots all over America – N word and whites at war'
28 *The Athletic News* 6 July 1886, also in Goldblatt, D. (2014) p.149
29 *Tottenham Weekly Herald* 18 June 1909
30 Ibid. 4 June 1909
31 See 1901 and 1911 census
32 See BBC Sport website (18 October 2020) 'Eddie Parris: The forgotten story of the first black footballer to play for Wales'

33 See BBC Sport website (8 October 2022) 'Jack Leslie - the first black player to be picked for England' and Tiller, M. (2023) pp.21-25, 129-151
34 As defined in Mayall, D. (2009) p.181
35 The acronym 'GRT' reflects the 2021 UK Census see UK Government website (29 March 2022) 'Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller ethnicity summary'
36 *Grays and Tilbury Gazette* 26 August, 2 September, 18 November 1905
37 Mayall, D. (2009) pp.47-59
38 Taylor, B. (2014) p.119
39 Mayall, D. (2009) p.181
40 E.g. *Daily Mirror* 29 September 1915, 3 March 1947, *Daily Herald* 1 August 1938
41 Ramsey, A. (1952)
42 Marquis, M. (1970) pp.41, 17
43 E.g. *Westminster Gazette* 24 April 1923, *Daily Mirror* 12 January 1926, *Sleaford Gazette* 27 August 1927, *Illustrated Police News* 17 June 1937
44 Keating, F. *Illustrated London News* 18 November 1981
45 Kenrick, D. (2004) also Taylor, B. (2014) chapter 5
46 See chapters 3-5
47 Mitchell, A.M. (1999) p.242
48 Ibid. pp.273-4
49 Roberts, A, (2001)
50 Mitchell, A.M. (1999) pp.242, 338
51 Hayward, P. (2022) p.155
52 Hamilton, D. (2023) p.21
53 Jablonski, J. and Chaplin, G. (2010)
54 Badawi, Z. (2024) p.17
55 Cowley, J. (2022) p.265