

RAB MACWILLIAM

ARSENAL 101



A POCKET GUIDE IN 101 MOMENTS,
FACTS, CHARACTERS AND GAMES

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INTRODUCTION

As you gaze idly eastward out the window of your train passing through suburban north London on its way to King's Cross St Pancras, it's difficult to miss what appears to be a large amphitheatre towering over the area.

This imposing structure, stretching over 17 acres of prime inner-city land, is the Emirates Stadium, which since 2006 has been home to one of the world's most famous sporting institutions: Arsenal Football Club.

The stadium rises imperiously over this busy part of north London which includes Finsbury Park, Holloway, Islington and other neighbouring areas. This new complex also overlooks, only a few hundred yards from its entrance, the site of the old Highbury Stadium, Arsenal's home from 1913 until its move to the grander premises.

Prior to Highbury, the club based itself in Woolwich, ten miles to the south across the River Thames, and that is where this book begins the fascinating story of Arsenal Football Club.

*

The club was founded in 1886 by a group of football-loving workmen at Woolwich Arsenal. Its nomadic early existence – from Plumstead Common, via Manor Ground, Invicta Ground, back to Manor Ground and, in 1913, to Highbury – was mirrored in its change of name from Dial Square, Royal

Arsenal, Woolwich Arsenal, The Arsenal and finally Arsenal, the name on which it settled after it reached Highbury.

Arsenal's first legendary period was during the 1930s when, under the formative, charismatic leadership of manager Herbert Chapman, they won five League titles and two FA Cups. After World War Two, Arsenal's status in English football became less dominant, but from the mid-1960s under manager Bertie Mee and trainer Don Howe, the club captured the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup, followed by, in 1970/71, the double of League title and FA Cup.

Arsenal again won the FA Cup in 1979 with manager Terry Neill, but it was the return as manager in 1986 of ex-player George Graham which began to revitalise the club. When Graham departed in 1995, he had managed Arsenal to two League titles, two League Cups, an FA Cup and the European Cup-Winners' Cup.

The arrival in 1996 of Arsene Wenger, however, initiated a profound change in the club's culture, and Wenger oversaw Arsenal's second legendary period. During his 22 years in charge, Arsenal won two more Doubles, dominated English football with the 'Invincibles', moved to the Emirates, gained a further League title and five more FA Cups, and reached the Final of the Champions League. He left the club in 2018, and new manager Mikel Arteta, who took over after the brief tenure of Unai Emery, won the FA Cup in 2019/20, his first year in the role.

The Covid-19 pandemic played havoc with football clubs, crowd attendances and League fixtures worldwide in 2020/21, and Arsenal were no exception to the pandemic's impact. They endured an unhappy season, finishing in mid-table and defeated by Villarreal in the semi-final of the European League. But, as ever with Arsenal, they will soon be back and competing at the highest levels of the game.

This short description obviously does not reveal anything like the full story of Arsenal (including, for instance, that they are the only club in English football history never to have been relegated from the top division).

In the pages of this book, I hope that you, as an Arsenal supporter, a general football fan or an interested reader – perhaps all three – will discover much about the history of Arsenal which will inform, surprise and entertain you.

In keeping with the other titles in this series, I have selected, on a largely chronological basis, 101 aspects of the major events in this occasionally frustrating but always engaging and intriguing football club. *Arsenal 101* considers the club's history, from the early days on the Isle of Dogs where Arsenal played its first-ever game in 1886, to the close of the 2020/21 season at the Emirates.

The relative brevity of the book is deliberately designed to eliminate unnecessary detail and to concentrate on the essence of the story. *Arsenal 101* captures Arsenal's important, interesting and most memorable moments, games, competitions and remarkable incidents; it covers the entertaining and amusing events, origins of nicknames ('Gooners') and chants, people of influence, Arsenal fans, special events at Highbury, and relations with other English (particularly Spurs) and European clubs; and the changing impact on Arsenal of the younger players and the benefits (and otherwise) of the transfer market.

Last, but certainly by no means least, it discusses the managers and the special players – from Alex James and Cliff Bastin to Dennis Bergkamp and Cesc Fabregas – as well as the perhaps less gifted team members, all of whom have excelled in their attempts to ensure that Arsenal has been and remains an unpredictable but special and much-loved football club.

Rab MacWilliam
May 2021

Where it all kicked off

At the end of the 19th century, Woolwich was a fairly nondescript town in Kent lying to the south-east of London on the south bank of the River Thames.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the town's relative anonymity, it was home to Woolwich Arsenal, one of the country's largest suppliers of military weaponry and munitions to the soldiery and artillery of the far-flung British Empire.

As that century drew to a close, in the south-east of the country the 'gentlemen's sports' of cricket and rugby were the prevailing leisure activities, but the relatively new game of association football was quickly catching up. In the Midlands, northern England and Scotland the game was also rapidly gaining in popularity. Woolwich Arsenal hired workers from across the country.

In 1886 two artisans named Fred Beardsley and Morris Bates, from the ordnance works at Nottingham, arrived at Woolwich and met with Kirkcaldy-born David Danskin. Both newcomers had played for one of the leading clubs of the period, Nottingham Forest, while Danskin and several of his co-workers shared their fascination for the game and had been considering the idea of setting up a football club at the Arsenal.

Danskin organised a 15-man whip-round, bought a ball from the proceeds, and the fledgling players, needing a name for the team, settled on **Dial Square**, one of the Arsenal workshops. Dial Square had been established in 1717 as the Arsenal's main canonry workshop (a fact which contributed to the club's later nickname of 'the Gunners').

Left-back and team captain Danskin was the first but certainly not the last Scotsman to influence the club's history. Along with fellow workmate Jack Humble, he organised the team's first game, which was played on marshy ground – lacking crossbars and pitch markings, and located alongside an open sewer – across the Thames on the Isle of Dogs, better known today as the location of Canary Wharf.

On 11 December 1886, these Dial Square players crossed the river on the long-established Woolwich Ferry, made their way to the Island, and defeated Eastern Wanderers 6-0. Enthused by their victory, the players met again two weeks later on Christmas Day at the Royal Oak public house in Plumstead, near to the Arsenal, and began to make plans.

Plumstead welcomes royalty

The players decided on a new name for the team and, combining a mention for their local pub with a rather ambitious flourish, they opted for **Royal Arsenal**. As they needed their own home pitch, they chose the run-down but adjacent Plumstead Common. Finally, in the interests of team cohesion, they required a unified strip. Beardsley contacted his old club, and Nottingham Forest obliged with the loan of all-red shirts (the white sleeves were adopted in the early 1930s) and a ball. 'The Reds', as they soon became known, then wasted little time in demonstrating their footballing credentials.

The team's first game as Royal Arsenal was a 6-1 victory over local rivals Erith on 8 January 1887 at Plumstead Common. The Reds won seven matches that season, losing two. The following season Royal Arsenal played 24 games and won 14. One of their defeats, by a 2-1 margin, was on north London's Tottenham Marshes on 19 November 1887 against Tottenham Hotspur, the first encounter in what was to become an enduring rivalry.

By season 1889/90 Royal Arsenal's prowess on the pitch had earned them the soubriquet of 'Football Champions of the South', having established their supremacy over such London clubs as Tottenham, Millwall, Fulham, QPR and Clapton Orient.

That season the Reds won three cups which included the London Charity Cup at The Oval, beating Old Westminster 3-1 in the Final, a game which

was watched by over 10,000 spectators. They were, however, defeated 5-1 at home by the Swifts, one of the oldest and most experienced southern clubs, in the fourth and final preliminary round of the FA Cup, a national knock-out competition organised almost 20 years previously.



The Royal Arsenal team for the 1888/89 season. *Alamy*

On the road again

By now Royal Arsenal had outgrown the limitations of Plumstead Common. In 1888 they moved to the Manor Ground, where military wagons acted as grandstands, and by 1890 the club's home was the Invicta Ground ('Invicta' being Kent's motto), still close to the Arsenal but with a significantly increased capacity.

The club remained at Invicta for the following two seasons, where they attracted a crowd of over 12,000 for a friendly against Scottish champions Hearts and where they were building a sizeable local support: the *Guardian* noted that 'the Royal Arsenal was not without a considerable and confident following'.

The club's early success prompted the Invicta ground's owner to suggest a substantial rent increase, but this was rejected by the Reds. So, the start of season 1893/94 found the club back at the Manor Ground, opposite Plumstead station, where they were to remain for the following 20 years.