



'STANLEY MATTHEWS TAUGHT US THE WAY
FOOTBALL SHOULD BE PLAYED' Pelé

THE WIZARD

THE LIFE OF
STANLEY MATTHEWS

JON HENDERSON

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About the Book

Stanley Matthews is one of the most famous footballers ever to play the beautiful game. Nicknamed 'The Wizard of Dribble' for his deadly skills, he made fools of defenders around the world. He played 83 matches for England in a career that spanned an extraordinary 33 years and such was his popularity that attendance for his club teams, Stoke City and Blackpool, more than doubled when he played. He was a global superstar decades before Beckham, Ronaldo or Messi, yet what do we really know about this legendary man?

This first full and objective biography looks beyond the public face of the 'first gentleman of soccer' to explore a life not without controversy. This was a player who clashed with his managers, who felt undervalued in the age of the maximum wage - leading to a charge of blackmarketeering - and who was criticised for his showmanship and perceived lack of team spirit. There were private dramas too - an unhappy first marriage that produced two beloved children, and a second, to the love of his life, a Czech with a dark secret even Matthews never knew and which acclaimed biographer Jon Henderson reveals for the first time.

Recreating the magic on the pitch and analyzing the key moments that made Matthews great, this is a meticulously researched story of a national hero and a fascinating insight into English football in the 20th century.

About the Author

Jon Henderson, a sportswriter for more than 45 years, has reported events from around the world working for Reuters and national newspapers, including the *Observer* and *Guardian*. His assignments included five Olympic Games and two World Cups. He is the author of two previous books, *Best of British* and *The Last Champion The Life of Fred Perry*.

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For J. A. 'Charles' Cuddon who taught me all I know
about writing, which is very little of what he knew

The Wizard

The Life of Stanley Matthews

Jon Henderson



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Introduction: The Stanley Show

Stanley Matthews turned matter-of-factly, his stare fixed to avoid eye contact. His expression, washed of emotion, accentuated the slightly sunken, careworn look that made him appear at least as old as his thirty-two years. Time had already gone to work on his hair. It was combed back and still dark but was in the first stages of retreat. In close-up, something seemed to shadow his features, a sadness possibly pleated in the corners of his mouth. No one could have guessed that here was a man at the soaring peak of his powers who had just brought a packed arena to a ferment of excitement.

As Matthews turned, gently hitching the elastic of his loose-fitting shorts on to his hips, the sellout crowd of 75,000 at the Heysel Stadium in Brussels had started to applaud. Moments earlier, England's outside-right had completed a run that even by his standards was exceptional, bewildering Belgium's defence and electrifying the spectators. And that was not the end of this particular piece by Matthews on a pitch made treacherous by a violent cloudburst soon after kick-off. Having wrought havoc with the ball on the turf, he dipped his head, cocked his right boot and lifted the ball over the oncoming keeper. One reporter likened it to a golf shot, Matthews seizing a wedge and lofting the ball in a meticulous arc. All that was left for Tom Finney to do to collect his second goal of the match was to deflect his header into an unguarded net.

Four-two to England, all four goals heavily dependent on Matthews - and a fifth goal would also bear the winger's mark.

'It is Matthews's Night in the old town tonight,' John Macadam wrote in his dispatch to the *Daily Express*, 'and they do say that some more progressive manufacturers are going to make a special lace to the pattern that Matthews wove around the Belgian defence to help England's 5-2 victory at Heysel Stadium today.' Macadam said of the build-up to Finney's second goal: 'Matthews meandered in and out among the defence until the 70,000-odd of the crowd and the other 21 players were hysterical.'

Even Walter Winterbottom, the donnish and pragmatic manager of England who was not alone in regarding Matthews as flawed, particularly as a team player, was unreserved in his admiration when, years later, he reminisced to me about that fourth goal. After England scored three goals early on, Belgium pulled back to 3-2. 'We were looking a bit thin when Stanley decided to put on a show,' Winterbottom said. 'He made a run from the centre of the field. Their centre-half made a dive at Stanley, bringing his shorts down around his knees, but he still went on dribbling through the Belgian defence and finally chipped the ball over to lay on the goal for Finney. It was so spectacular that as he walked back the whole crowd started a rhythmic handclap in time with his walk. Then the VIPs joined in and in the end so did the players of both teams.'

Charles Buchan, the Sunderland and Arsenal player who turned into a prolific writer on the game, said: 'Never was a goal more brilliantly or opportunely made.'

Matthews's own response to the goal was as muted as it was to anything else that he ever did or had done to him on a football field. It was as if self-possession was what nourished him. Naturally introspective, he had allowed his containment to harden because of recent events: the degradation of his relationship with Stoke City, the club that had nurtured him, to a point where in early summer he had moved to Blackpool; and the easing of another bond,

that with his first wife. Was this the sadness, rising from deep within him, that was snared in the creases of his face?

He had become the most intractable of competitors. Defenders, even those highly practised in the art of intimidation, grew tired of trying to provoke Matthews, before, in his imperious final years as a professional player, to do so was an act tantamount to treason. Teammates grew to understand that he preferred to celebrate with no more than the merest inflection of his facial mask.

The Heysel match, England's first international of the 1947-8 season, took place on Sunday 21 September. Not so long ago German tanks had been parked on the pitch, their iron-toothed, articulated tracks churning the surface. Repairs had taken longer than expected and England's visit marked the official reopening of the stadium after the war. Little wonder the visitors' fourth goal so enraptured the crowd. Their delight evinced not only their appreciation of a player who by now enjoyed worldwide renown but also their relief that football had so royally reclaimed the national arena.

And Matthews was the gleaming star of the show. When Finney looked back on his own career, he said: 'It would be foolish to try to list all the great things I saw Stan do on a football field - I can't recall a game in which his magic didn't play a key role. If I was to select one game, though, it would have to be the England fixture against Belgium in Brussels in the autumn of 1947. I called it the Matthews Match because he was responsible for putting the fear of God up the Belgians.'

No one suffered more than the left-back, Joe Pannaye, who, Macadam reported, 'took a merciless beating pretty much until the end when his patience wore thin and his elbows began to wear hooks.'

The entertainment in a match that could hardly have risen more spellbindingly to the occasion started early. The

England centre-forward, Tommy Lawton, kicked off to Wilf Mannion. The ball then went back to Lawton, on to Tim Ward, on to Matthews, back to Lawton, back to Mannion and then once again to Matthews whose cross Lawton headed into a top corner. England's travelling press corps agreed the goal took twelve seconds and that Belgium's first touch came after they were already a goal down.

After twenty minutes, England were three ahead. Matthews crossed for Mortensen to volley in from twelve yards and then, having been fouled, Matthews looped the free-kick into the goalmouth where Finney's header bounced out of the goalkeeper's grasp and into the goal. Increasingly, said Finney, Belgium 'resorted to tactics of an unpleasant nature' to try to stop Matthews. For a while this altered the course of the game with the home side scoring two goals, one either side of half-time.

Pannaye, of the hooked elbows, was one of those who tried to impede his merciless tormentor however he could. But he and Matthews both knew that this was a capitulation and Pannaye was one of a legion of players who over the years, with intended irony, spoke of the privilege it had been to spend an afternoon or evening being Matthews's dupe. The defender had done reasonably well against Matthews when Belgium lost 2-0 at Wembley in January 1946 but admitted to having been made to look ridiculous by him on this occasion. Pannaye was among those scattered by Matthews as he conjured the fourth goal after, in Finney's words, deciding to break their hearts by waltzing past three challenges. 'He was the best player I've ever seen. A ghost,' Pannaye said, and added: 'I asked some of those close to me to help, but they could do nothing.'

England's fifth goal followed yet another foul by Belgium's desperate defence on Matthews, who this time played the free-kick short, and tellingly, to Lawton. 'In all his career Matthews has never dominated a game so completely,' Frank Coles told readers of the *Daily*

Telegraph. 'He made every one of England's five goals and ran the left flank of the Belgium defence dizzy. The crowd loved the performance of the game's greatest star.'

The year of the Heysel match was the sixteenth of Matthews's career as a professional footballer, which meant it was not even halfway through. He was forty-two when he made his final appearance for England in 1957, more than twenty-two years after his first, and fifty when he played his last Football League match, for Stoke City, in 1965. By then he had long passed into football lore as the game's first player of international renown, a reputation he went on to reinforce with a number of overseas assignments playing, coaching and managing. In 1970, Matthews, at the age of fifty-five, very nearly turned out for the Maltese club he helped to manage, Hibernians, against Real Madrid in a European match in the Bernabéu stadium.

Not all the reporting from Heysel was an unmitigated paean to Matthews. A discordant undercurrent accompanied the eulogising, one that was ever-present during Matthews's playing days but has long since lost its tow, submerged deep beneath the golden reminiscences. Roy Peskett's report from Brussels that appeared in the *Daily Mail* stated: 'Once again the old complaint could be raised that Matthews held up Lawton's attack by not getting rid of the ball until he had beaten one or more men and that he did not come into the game until he was given the ball.'

Despite this recurring theme, Matthews remained on good, if distant, terms with most of his fellow professionals. But his refusal to make concessions, in the way he played and, in some cases, in the way he conducted himself in a wider context, did not always suit the managers he played under. Two of those he encountered at Stoke had had enough of him - and he of them - by the time he departed;

and when he left Blackpool in 1961 he said he no longer saw eye to eye with the manager, Ron Suart.

At international level, too, it seems, fans found it easier to admire Matthews than managers did to manage him. Walter Winterbottom was often exasperated by Matthews's persistence in deploying his gifts as he wished, a privilege of ownership as the player no doubt regarded it, irrespective of the needs of the team. On his side Matthews was irritated by Winterbottom's didacticism. 'I felt Walter Winterbottom never really appreciated my style of play,' Matthews said. 'He wanted a right-winger to track back, tackle and help out in defence. It wasn't my style.'

The sweet-natured Finney would never publicly criticise Matthews. Many tried to goad him into doing so and he was entitled to feel aggrieved given that his own game could be affected by his fellow forward's mode of play. In his report from Brussels after the Heysel match, Frank Coles had written 'as long as we have Matthews I do not think we have room for Finney among the forwards ... We need a more direct left winger to balance the line.' In other words, having two players who procrastinated on the wing was unacceptable. Finney, grudgingly on a few occasions when he was with close friends, accepted that Matthews's excellence placed him above the expectations that governed others.

This was the dilemma all his critics had to confront eventually. Having upbraided Matthews for aspects of his performance against Belgium, Roy Peskett added: 'But how can you judge by ordinary standards a man who not only gave the crowd and the Belgian defenders something they won't forget in a hurry, but figured in all the goals, four of which were headed from his passes?'

What distinguished Matthews was his speed and skilfulness, which he unleashed with deadly synchrony. Arthur Hopcraft, an outstanding writer on the game, said:

'Matthews did not invent dribbling with a football; he raised it to its highest degree.' He added that before Matthews and throughout his career other players did the same kind of thing, but at a lower level. Dribbling then died after Matthews retired, Hopcraft maintained, until George Best resurrected it nearly a decade later. At times Matthews seemed to be playing in a different dimension from those around him, rendering the game's old formulas meaningless. Regardless of the criticism, his nickname, the Wizard of the Dribble - in Germany they called him *Der Zauberer*, the Magician - was entirely appropriate with his sorcery forever bemusing opponents and bedazzling crowds.

The numerical evidence of Matthews's appeal is staggering. From very early on in his career he would regularly add upwards of 10,000 spectators to a gate. In 1934, during his first spell at Stoke, crowds averaged more than 66,000 during a run of six matches played by the club. The lure of Matthews helped to secure what survives as the highest attendance for an international match in Britain - 149,547 for Scotland v England in 1937 - and for a game played at an English club ground - 84,569 for Manchester City v Stoke City in an FA Cup tie at Maine Road in 1934.

They are numbers that make it almost inconceivable that, for all but the very end of his career, he earned no more from playing than £20 a week, the most allowed just before the upper pay limit was scrapped in 1961. He was quite worldly enough to appreciate the imbalance between his reimbursement and his worth and astute enough to do something about it. One obituarist noted: 'Self-effacing but shrewd, Matthews knew how to market himself at a time when professional players were restricted to a maximum wage.' For some this translated into an unacceptable acquisitiveness; for others it meant no more than a proper claim on his due.

Throughout virtually the whole of Matthews's time as a Football League player his life was sombrely backlit by a marriage that did not work. This must have had an impact on the way he was, as a footballer and public figure, but, hitherto, has been largely unexplored. It was not something he discussed either with acquaintances or with those close to him.

Soon after he stopped playing his life underwent a dramatic change. In 1967 he met the Czech lady, Mila Winterova - 'the true love of my life', he called her - who would become his second wife. It was a romance that would make Matthews's later years every bit as fascinating as his early ones. Throughout more than three decades together, starting with an elopement that a much dozier media than today's failed to register, Mila kept from Matthews a dark secret from her past - one that I happened upon only towards the end of writing this book.

Matthews's thirty-three years of work as a professional footballer is, though, what stands as his monument, an unrivalled body of achievement that, while rooted in England, enhanced many thousands of lives around the world by opening people's eyes to what was humanly possible.

Chapter 1

'Our father never raised his hand to us. He never swore'

Children's excited voices rise and fall in the sweet air of a spring morning. Every so often the sterner tones of a grown man take over, stilling the chatter. The party of four - a father, trim and upright as a Grenadier, and his three sons - arrive at a gate, climb it and set off across the next field. After about twenty yards the father makes them all stop. He gestures the smallest of the three boys towards him and, from a bag, produces a pair of shoes. Spikes protrude from the soles. The other three stand patiently as the boy changes into the running shoes. The father then points to a spot some fifty yards ahead of him and moments later, on a shouted command, the boy, who is no more than four years old, sets off at a sprint. He moves easily over the grass that has been cropped by grazing sheep. The party regroups and again the father and his two older sons look on as the small boy takes off on a second sprint, once again quickly gaining speed on pale, skinny legs.

The walk from Hanley to the village of Werrington and back - a round trip of some ten miles - was a Sunday ritual for the Matthews family. They would do most of the outward journey along the main road before, with a mile to go, cutting up across fields. Sometimes Ada Matthews, who had grown up in Washerwall Lane, Werrington, went with her husband, Jack, and their three boys: Jack, Arthur and Stanley. So, later, would a fourth son, Ron. He was the youngest by eight years - a span of seventeen years

covered the four sons - and sometimes later on he alone would accompany his father on the walk to and from Werrington, a village of just a few houses, much smaller than it is today. Jack had once walked there when he was courting Ada; now the visits were to see Ada's widowed father, Henry Hewitt, and her sister Emmy, a spinster who ran a shop. Ron remembered the old man, who had worked in the now extinct local coal mines, sitting in a rocking chair sucking on a clay pipe.

Jack Senior had detected Stanley's sprinting potential at a very young age. A former professional boxer with firm - cranky, some thought - ideas about physical wellbeing, he observed his sons closely, not simply to discern whether they had athletic ability but also, if they had, to classify what it was. Thus Arthur was spared doing any exercise at all although he later became a keen sprinter; Jack and Ron were simply made to run in ordinary plimsolls; and Stanley alone was coached to sprint. In spiked shoes, what is more. Finding a pair to fit someone as small as Stanley must, at that time, have required a difficult search.

But then Jack Matthews had never been one to take projects lightly, as his lives as a professional boxer and barber testified. The trajectory of his fighting career suggests success based on a strict fitness regime and perseverance rather than the quick realisation of an exceptional talent. He fought at a time when records were kept erratically and often included the results of fights in fairground booths, which were mentioned in British boxing legislation as late as the 1950s. Stanley said in an early autobiography that his father had 350 fights, losing just nine of them, but boxing historians have traced only fifty or so - between 1909 and 1921 - of which he lost at least eighteen. What is certain is that his wins comfortably outweighed his defeats and he achieved a level of proficiency that placed him well above that of 'crowd

pleaser', a boxing euphemism for jobbing fighters served up as fodder for those making their way in the sport.

Jack Matthews laid claim to two unofficial titles, the Midlands featherweight championship and the Potteries featherweight championship, and shared the ring with national and European champions. He might well have challenged for a national title himself had not the 1914-18 war interrupted normal life across Europe. When he was much older he was the modest, grey-haired little man who owned a barber's shop, Stanley said, 'but old-timers would address him with the air of folk proud to be familiar with a celebrity'.

Harold Alderman, the boxing historian, described Jack Matthews as an all-round action fighter who was very speedy, had good footwork and hit hard with either hand. He must have had a reasonable defence, too, because photographs show that he emerged from his boxing career virtually unmarked. This was quite an accomplishment considering he was active for so long and his bouts lasted up to twenty rounds. What he lacked in natural ability he made up for in time spent on physical conditioning and in training. His son Jack remembered in later life that he watched with wide-eyed amazement as his father performed one of his party pieces, lining up six chairs and clearing them with a standing jump. His athleticism may help to account for why he avoided the boxer's hallmark, the squashed nose. And his nose must have been quite a target given that just beneath it he sported what was reckoned to be the last waxed moustache worn in the ring by a pro. Many a riled opponent must have wanted to spoil its defiant symmetry.

His greatest fight was undoubtedly the first of his three contests against George Mackness, a renowned scrapper from Kettering, that fifty years later was still being talked about as 'the greatest fight ever'. It was held at the National Sporting Club, the prestigious members' club just

off London's Covent Garden. Founded in 1891 by the 5th Earl of Lonsdale among others, it is credited with having had a huge influence on establishing professional boxing in the form we know it today. Matthews's first bout against Mackness took place there on 13 May 1912.

How Jack Matthews came to be in the ring at all was just one of the remarkable aspects of a fight that *Boxing* magazine said was 'simply astounding from start to finish'. Mackness had been due to box Albert Hough of Stafford, whose manager had been pressing for some time for his man to be allowed to showcase his skills at the NSC. But Hough failed to appear and Matthews, who was there 'to hurl challenges at various featherweights', took his place.

The fight lasted only until the fourth round. The fury with which the two men went at each other must have tested the NSC's tradition of requiring its members and their guests to remain silent during rounds. Both men, eschewing all but relentless aggression, narrowly beat the count on at least two occasions. In total there were seventeen knock-downs, Matthews suffering eleven of them. Matthews, though, triumphed in a climax that turned *Boxing's* prose a vivid purple: 'Still his [Matthews's] bolt seemed shot, and probably would have been, had it not been determined that the last stage of this miraculous contest would transcend even all the miracles which had gone before. Matthews reeled up weak, and looked a beaten man, but covering well and keeping his head, called up his old guard. Mackness charged in like a tidal wave, and might have got home with a finisher had he not allowed Matthews a clear glimpse of his uncovered chin. This was enough, and the fatal right hook whizzed through the air to connect with the angle of the chin. The punch lifted Mackness from his feet, and, spinning him over, dropped him on the back of his head with a thud which sent the last of his senses to oblivion.'

Neither of the Mackness-Matthews rematches, in November and December of the same year, produced quite the same drama, although both did end eventfully. Matthews dominated the first but was disqualified for a low blow after the ringside doctor 'humanely grasped the situation, and ordered the contest to cease' in the fourth round. Matthews won the final fight, held at the Shelton Drill Hall in Hanley, where in due course he would present himself to enlist in the 3rd/5th North Staffordshire Regiment before going off to war for three years. In the second round Mackness missed with a right uppercut, fell through the ropes and landed heavily on the back of his head. Mackness being unable to continue, the referee awarded the fight to Matthews.

After the war Matthews was no longer the fighter he had been. In September 1919 he and the Scotsman Bob Donati left a bad odour in Manchester's Free Trade Hall. One account said that Matthews, who used 'to hit like a horse', had lost his power. Donati was even worse and his corner threw in the towel in the seventh round, sparing the crowd, as much as their man, unnecessary punishment. Jack Matthews fought only a handful more fights before packing it in in 1921 to spend more time in his barber's shop.

Two stories Stanley Matthews passed down about his father's boxing career are worth retelling even if neither contest is in any official record. Soon after he started fighting professionally, Jack Matthews was approached by a promoter who had accepted a wager to find a novice capable of beating a promising young Manchester fighter called Chambers. The Manchester publican who offered the wager was so unimpressed by Matthews, whom the promoter had spotted in a Hanley gym, that he said he would not pay him for the fight. The publican was further discouraged about the quality of the contest about to take place when Matthews stripped off to reveal a concave, etiolated body with no obvious source of power. Matthews

proceeded to dominate the fight, knocked Chambers out in the fifth and so dazzled a group of Mancunians that they offered to set him up in a hairdressing business in the town. 'But Dad loved the Potteries,' his son said, 'and could never be persuaded to leave Hanley.'

The other story concerned a bout at Liverpool Stadium. After it, Matthews spent the night at a police station while his beaten opponent battled to regain consciousness. Fortunately for all concerned he did. If he had died, Stanley said, his father would have been charged with manslaughter. The fact that the police became involved and no record exists of the fight suggests the contest may not have been officially sanctioned.

Jack Matthews's *nom de guerre*, 'The Fighting Barber from Hanley', was apt given that it was with his fists that he secured the capital to set himself up in business. With purses and side stakes, even fighters of Matthews's weight and ranking could make tidy money. Information about the exact amounts is scant - inevitably, much of the dealing, particularly in small halls, was done in dark corners - but enough can be gleaned to get a good idea of the sums involved. In 1911, Matthews himself 'challenged any 9 stone man in England, for any amount up to £200'. A few weeks before his second bout against Mackness, Matthews fought Tommy Mitchell of Chesterfield at the NSC, standing to win a £75 purse and £50 side stake, but lost despite a strong finish in a fifteen-round contest. He was more successful a year later when he beat Billy Gerkin of Newcastle under Lyme in another fifteen-rounder at the Hanley Skating Rink, this time picking up £85 - the purse was £60 - for his points win. Considering how often he fought and won, these sums would have mounted up to a significant total.

Matthews, whose father Henry had worked as a potter, was as assiduous in the business of tending heads with scissors and razor as he was when preparing to belabour

them with his fists in the ring. His shop at No. 7 Market Street – now Huntbach Street – was a shortish walk from the family's terraced home in Seymour Street. 'It was quite a big place: four basins, hot towels, the lot,' Ron Matthews said. Opening was six days a week, sometimes seven: weekdays from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., except Thursdays, when it shut at 1 p.m. in line with early closing, and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. On some Sundays he would open from 9 a.m. until noon for Jewish customers, whom he would also serve on Christmas Day. A press photograph taken in his later years shows Matthews Senior standing in the doorway of his shop in a white overall coat, buttoned down the front, and with an immaculately knotted tie. He is still handsome, distinguished even, with strong features and incorruptible expression, the picture of an honest proprietor. His premises shared space with a tobacconist's, which is why the shop window is filled with a range of pipe-smoking paraphernalia. A clearance sale is advertised: 'All pipes, pouches &c in the window 5D. each. Pick which you like. Must sell.'

As well as employing a full-time apprentice, Jack Matthews received varying levels of assistance from each of his sons. Jack Junior eventually opened his own shop, while Arthur stayed on as his father's number two. Before football monopolised Stanley's life, his tasks included sweeping up, brushing the hair from coats and preparing customers for a shave by lathering their chins. He said he enjoyed the work mainly because he liked listening to the yarns his father exchanged with customers. These were invariably about boxing. One tale involved a threat of violence against Jack Matthews unless he threw a certain fight. Stanley said that when he first heard it he was chided by a customer for paying more attention to the story than his lathering, which became increasingly wayward as the plot unwound. In 1964 the BBC made a documentary about

Stanley called *Saturday Hero* and filmed him armed with shaving brush lathering up Billy Thompson. Four decades earlier, Thompson had been the first customer the nine-year-old would-be footballer had made ready for his father's cut-throat razor.

John 'Jack' Matthews and Ada Hewitt had married on Tuesday 10 July 1906 in St Mark's, the parish church of Shelton in Hanley. He was twenty-one and, as the marriage document certifies, already a 'hairdresser'; she a year younger and a slight figure even beside her featherweight husband, although a little less slight than usual, possibly, on account of her being nearly six months pregnant. It would be hard to imagine someone further removed from the popular image of a pugilist's wife - several degrees of separation existing between her and the boxer's moll beloved of American fiction - and she lived in a state of suppressed anxiety whenever he fought.

The addresses of the bride and groom were given as, respectively, Nos 77 and 88 Mill Street, which was in an area that in the recent past had been described as 'very unhealthy'. A local history talks of 'open middens', or refuse heaps, draining into Mill Street, which soon after the couple married would be renamed Etruria Road. The first son, Jack, was born at No. 77 on 26 October 1906 and by the time Ron arrived in 1923 the family of six fitted rather too cosily into 89 Seymour Street, a small terraced house with no garden. They stayed there, though, until 1934, shortly before Stanley married, when they moved a few doors down to No. 63. This was a superior property with a small garden and greenhouse but still with an outside lavatory.

Seymour Street could have passed for one of many thousands of streets that grew up in manufacturing towns in central England during the country's industrialisation. They had little to commend them bar the fact that the

closeness of the rudimentary terraced houses fostered a sense of community, of which, in the case of Seymour Street, impromptu games of twenty-a-side street football were a good example.

Seymour Street is in the heart of Hanley, originally one of the separate towns now joined under the title Stoke-on-Trent. Arnold Bennett, the author who was born a short distance from Seymour Street in 1867, changes Hanley to Hanbridge in his novels and refers to it as one of 'the Five Towns' that make up the Potteries. In fact there are six, Bennett having omitted Fenton apparently because he preferred the literary ring of 'Five Towns'. Bennett's novels gave a romantic, if not necessarily flattering, sheen to the sort of setting in which Stanley Matthews was raised: 'The rows of little red houses with amber chimney pots ... all netted in flowing scarves of smoke.'

A rather grittier view of Stoke in general and where Matthews grew up in particular comes from Derek Hodgson, who was in charge of administration and publicity at Stoke City Football Club in the 1960s: 'Stanley came from a pretty poor background and of course money has always been tight in Stoke-on-Trent. It's one of the most plundered areas of Britain. When you think of all the craftsmanship that has always gone into the product of the Potteries and how little has come back it's scandalous, absolutely scandalous.'

This heartfelt assessment would have horrified the most famous founding father of Stoke's pottery industry, Josiah Wedgwood, an abolitionist associated with the 'Am I Not A Man And A Brother' anti-slavery medallion. But Hodgson received support for his view after helping to redesign the football club's logo so that it honoured the town's heritage by incorporating a pottery kiln. 'A lot of the supporters won't like that,' he was told. 'It will remind them of being sweated to death for very low wages.' After Hodgson left, the kiln disappeared from the logo.

Jack and Ada Matthews fitted a stereotypical image of working-class parents: he very much in charge, she the homemaker who, although possibly coming across as submissive, was quite capable of mounting effective resistance if she felt it was needed. They were the staunchest of couples. 'My father was devoted to my mother,' Ron Matthews said. 'I don't mean this in the sense that they went around holding hands. Simply that his life was devoted to her.' Among other things he relieved her of some of the household chores by paying for the laundry to be done and employing a Mr Holland to clean twice a week.

Ron Matthews described the barber's shop as his father's second devotion, which was why, given the long hours he worked, the family did not see much of him. Unfailingly, Jack and Ada would go out together on Thursdays, after early closing. A day at Uttoxeter races, a short train journey away - they never owned a car - was a particular favourite. They would always be back around seven o'clock. When Ron was still young, Stanley would be detailed to look after him on the afternoons their parents went out. 'When I returned from school, Stanley would always be there. He told me that all I ever wanted to eat was custard.'

'I've heard people talk and you would think my father was a Victorian or Edwardian type ... everything black and white,' Ron said. 'It wasn't like that. There were grey areas. He never raised his hand to us; he never swore. But he was of a firm disposition. And not one for jokes. If he cracked more than one I can't remember it.'

When Ron started saying 'Crikey!' in imitation of the comic-book character Billy Bunter, his father admonished him: 'I want a word with you. I'd like you to stop using the word crikey.' Later Ron plucked up the courage to seek an explanation. 'Because it's worrying your mother and me that every time you say it we think you're going to say something else,' his father said. Even in a non-churchgoing

household an exclamatory 'Christ!' would certainly have been forbidden.

Apart from boxing and managing his own business, Jack Matthews's only other occupation that we know about was his brief stint as a conscripted soldier in the First World War, when his starting pay would have been a shilling a day and would not have gone much higher.

In March 1915, soon after his third son, Stanley, was born, Jack Matthews joined up with the 3rd/5th North Staffords. It was a territorial force with headquarters first at Shelton and then at Stoke Drill Hall. The men often trained in Hanley Park. The Victoria Ground, home of Stoke City Football Club, was also used for training and as a parade ground on Sundays before the battalion went to church.

Jack appeared in an exhibition bout in May and, a few days later, refereed two bouts at a professional show in Longton. *Boxing* magazine said at the time: 'By the enlistment of Jack Matthews, the Hanley feather-wt, who now holds the rank of corporal, and his brother, [Private] George Matthews,^{fn1} the cream of the boxing talent here are serving in His Majesty's Forces.' Jack then fought two bouts at Hoxton in London in February 1916 just days before the 3rd/5th moved to hutments at Catterick Bridge near Richmond in Yorkshire. He did not box again until September 1919 when the war was over.

Apart from this, records of Jack Matthews's wartime activity are not easily found. Nor was it something he talked about at home. 'Looking back, fighting in the Great War did have an effect on my father,' Ron said. 'When I was small I asked him how many Germans he killed and he told me firmly never to talk like that again. He came through unscathed, but he always said that they should have put the generals in the trenches.'

Stanley's birth was at a time when the hostilities were coming perilously close to home and the weapons of war