

Rebels for the Cause

The Alternative History of
Arsenal Football Club

Jon Spurling



Mainstream Publishing *ebooks*



Also by Jon Spurling

All Guns Blazing: Arsenal in the 1980s
(Aureus Publishing, Cardiff, 2001)

Top Guns: Arsenal in the 1990s
(Aureus Publishing, Cardiff, 2001)

Highbury: The Story of Arsenal in N5
(Orion Books, London, 2006)

Death or Glory: The Dark History of the World Cup
(Vision Sport Publishing, Kingston upon Thames, 2010)

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Club

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MAINSTREAM
PUBLISHING

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY SISTER, HELEN.

Acknowledgements

It has been almost ten years since I began to gather sources and interview players for this book. I must extend an enormous thank you to the following men who once wore the red-and-white shirt with pride: George Eastham, Bobby Gould, Ian Ure, Terry Neill, Alan Hudson, Malcolm Macdonald, Charlie Nicholas, Stewart Robson, Willie Young, Steve Williams, Brian McDermott, Alan Smith, Anders Limpar, Paul Davis and Perry Groves. Grateful thanks also to Charlie George, who, although unable to grant me a formal interview, was happy to field my and the audience's questions at Sportspages in late 2002. Sadly, Tommy Lawton, Paul Vaessen, Ted Drake and Stoke City's ex-striker Harry Davies died before they had a chance to read their contribution to the text. Thanks also to the two members of recent Arsenal sides, and a current Arsenal star, who were willing to be interviewed but prefer to remain anonymous, and to Claude Anelka, for being so candid during the 'Anelka-gate' saga.

I am also indebted to the following people who helped steer me in the right direction, and offered encouragement along the way: Dilwyn Porter at University College, Worcester, for his assistance on Arsenal's match against the Moscow Dynamos; the understanding staff at the Fulham and Leeds archives for information on Sir Henry Norris and Wilf Copping; Dave at the Newspaper Library branch of the British Library; David Bissmire and Kevin Witcher from the fanzine stall; Richard Lewis at Sportspages and Ian Trevett from *Highbury High*. Plus, David Scripps at Action Images

and Marina Palmer at Professional Sport, for their trawling of the archives for photographs. To the staff at The Bookcentre, Hoddesdon, for allowing me to pretend I'm a big-shot author for a couple of hours, to Meurnyn Hughes at Aureus, for giving me my big writing break and to Linda Durkin for typing the book. Thanks also to the patient folk at Mainstream Publishing. Special thanks to Tina Hudson for the cover design, Deborah Kilpatrick for her careful editing of the text and Graeme Blaikie for his incredibly understanding attitude towards deadlines. And to Bill Campbell for showing faith in the project.

To the Webber boys (Tim and Nick), Brendon, and Stuart ('The Neph') for their company, and opinions, at Arsenal matches, and John Booker for lifts to the games. To my friends, who continue to glaze over whenever I mention the 'A' word - Barry, Phil and Tatiana, Seb and Marnie, Jo and Gareth, Louise, Adam and Nicky, Brummie and Ruth, Ian and Anita, Tim and Lucy, Steve (the best best man) and Lucy, Sarah, Si Williams, Steve Davies, Andrew, Si Barrick, Charlie and Natalie, Louise and Iain, Sam and Simon, and Paul and Vicky.

And finally, thanks to my mum and dad and to my wife - Helen - who were all as encouraging as ever ('Not another bloody book on Arsenal!').

Contents

Introduction

ONE Freaks from the Factory

TWO Sleaze and the Tory MP

THREE The Iron Man

FOUR Cold War

FIVE Reluctant Rebel

SIX The King of Highbury

SEVEN Cold Eyes

EIGHT A Trip to Oz

NINE Big Willie

TEN A Song and a Dance

ELEVEN The Myth of King George

TWELVE Back from the Brink

THIRTEEN Home Truths

FOURTEEN Handbags and Verbals

FIFTEEN Bound

Bibliography

Introduction

It doesn't bother me that we're not well liked. It's part of our history.

George Graham, speaking in 1994

Rebels For The Cause takes an alternative look at the history of Arsenal. Numerous other tomes have dwelt on the club's greatest triumphs and glorious past. In this book I will focus on the revolutionaries and rogues who have shaped the Gunners' past and present and, in the process, baited authority and blazed new trails. In doing so, I will be venturing beyond the gleaming façade of Highbury's marble halls and the classic '30s art-deco stands, and shedding light on the myths, intrigue and controversy which have surrounded the club since 1886. Rich, southern-based baddies Arsenal have always been essentially an outsider's club, mysteriously strengthened by the effective channelling of the hatred they receive. They remain better than anyone else at turning a crisis into a triumph.

The Arsenal board, through its mouthpiece, the official programme, has always tried to underplay - or worse, ignore - the club's controversial past. They would rather forget about the bungs, brawls and bust-ups, which fail to fit with the Identikit image of Arsenal as a traditional, morally upright institution. For instance, when George Graham was fired in 1995, the club, on advice from its lawyers, simply did not comment on the affair. In the official programme, Peter Hill-Wood noted stiffly that while the club was 'indebted' to the Scot, it was in Arsenal's 'best interests' that he should leave. The official end-of-season video (entitled *What A Season*) was even less forthcoming. King of

bland Matthew Lorenzo commented that Graham left the club under 'unfortunate circumstances'. No kidding. The reason given by Hill-Wood for the club's reticence in discussing the Graham case was the possibility of George contesting his year-long ban from football in the law courts. Any public debate on the case would represent a form of *sub judice*. How convenient for the club; it is unlikely that the board would have released the relevant details to fans anyway. It was the same story back in 1977, when, after rebels Alan Hudson and Malcolm Macdonald were sent home from the pre-season tour of Australia and the Far East and the story dominated column inches in the tabloids, official club propaganda had you believe it had never happened.

In the same vein, finding the truth about Arsenal's dim and distant past is as tricky as discovering the whereabouts of the world's most elusive man - and, if tabloid rumour is correct, the club's most infamous fan - Osama Bin Laden. The club's former haunts in Plumstead yield little of interest, and parks and roads now cover the pitches where Royal and Woolwich Arsenal once played. The pubs where players once changed before matches have either been demolished or, in the case of the Royal Oak (situated next to Woolwich Arsenal station), contain no evidence. Most infuriatingly of all, a visit to the site of the Woolwich Armaments factory yields little either. The Ex-Employees Association proves that founding fathers David Danskin and Jack Humble worked there, but there is no information other than brief details on them and a few faded photographs. The factory itself is currently being converted into 'affordable homes'. With its easy access to London and the Thames, a one-bedroom flat will set you back £200,000. There is certainly no plaque commemorating the site of the workers' lunchtime kickabouts. Only testimonies and a selection of old newspapers can reveal the real story behind Arsenal's mutinous origins.

It strikes me as apt that so much information on Arsenal's contentious past is difficult to trace. Several of the chapters in this book are examples of 'hidden history', and the club would rather the stories remained buried. Yet I would argue that without the backstairs intrigue and occasional acts of heresy, the Gunners would probably have remained an insignificant factory team and not moved to Islington or won trophies at all. Part of the Faustian lot of the Arsenal fan is to accept that a combination of downright dodgy behaviour and rebellion has been a principal driving force behind the club during its 118-year existence.

A few years ago, Kate Adie, the erstwhile BBC reporter who was sent to any combat zone which happened to be boiling over at the time, was asked by a member of the *Question Time* audience why only 'bad news' was reported in the media. Unfazed, she replied: 'If you were lying in your garden in the middle of a row of houses, and on one side it was quiet and on the other a fight was going on, which fence would you look over?' Point taken: human nature dictates that we're far more interested in conflict and the psyche of the abrasive (the Liam Gallaghers and the Ollie Reeds) than we are in Mary Poppins-type goody-goodies. Examples: university professors constantly gripe that history undergraduates are keen to study nothing but the machinations of twentieth-century dictators; TV executives make documentaries about hell-raisers Alex Higgins and John McEnroe rather than, say, Steve Davis or Bjorn Borg; and Darth Vader merchandise still outsells all other *Star Wars* gear. It's no surprise, therefore, that Charlie George and Ian Wright are still voted the greatest-ever Gunners on various unofficial club websites.

It is ironic that a club which originally bought the land for Highbury stadium from a college of divinity should have such an excellent reputation for naughtiness. This trait is part of the genetic make-up of the club. Several of the most important officials in the club's history, including David

Danskin, Henry Norris, David Dein and George Graham, were prepared to crush existing codes of conduct and behaviour in order to ensure the success of Arsenal. In doing so, they attracted criticism from the national press and, on occasion, Gunners fans and the local community. Many of Arsenal's star players, particularly in recent years, have also made effortless journeys from back to front pages. Whether it was club captain Tony Adams in the '90s, Charlie Nicholas in the '80s or the booze-fuelled exploits of several of the club's '70s stars, the letters AFC have always sold newspapers.

This book sheds light on why Arsenal remain the club everyone loves to hate. Even in these heady days of Wenger's stylish Continental team, ex-Sports Minister Tony Banks commented in 2002 that it would be 'political suicide' for a high-ranking cabinet minister to profess love for the Gunners. He was probably alluding to the case of New Labour's former Sports Minister, Kate Hoey, whose rapid descent from bright young thing to obscure back-bencher outranks even Martin Hayes' journey from Arsenal star to second-hand car dealer on Highbury Corner. Presumably her dismissal from the Blair cabinet had rather more to do with the Wembley fiasco than supporting Arsenal, or perhaps Tony Banks has hit on a juicy conspiracy theory. Whatever the full truth, most Arsenal fans, and past managers, remain convinced that a media vendetta, dating back to the nineteenth century, has been waged against the club. A case of advanced paranoia, perhaps, or fact? ('You'd be paranoid, if everyone hated you,' Terry Neill wryly commented at a 1980 press conference when he was Arsenal boss.) In reality, from the club's formative days on Kent pitches (Plumstead and Woolwich, now in Greater London, used to be part of Kent), the press has been keen to attach an assortment of derogatory prefixes to the club's name. Those ubiquitous Arsenal tags, 'lucky' and 'boring', originate from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mud

revels with Spurs, who, in the 1890s, claimed to be purveyors of stylish football, in marked contrast to Arsenal's rumbustious approach.

By the time Henry Norris had moved the club to Highbury in 1913 and Arsenal dominated the '30s, the word 'arrogant' had been thrown in by jealous rivals. This was partly because Arsenal were already known to be a club of 'firsts': the first southern side to turn professional, to be run by a football tsar and to push through a share issue. The list is endless. Before and after the Second World War, when other teams struggled to cope with turbulent social and economic conditions, Arsenal, curiously, grew stronger. During the Great Depression in the early '30s, Arsenal's 'Bank of England' status was enhanced, and bizarre encounters with fascist- and communist-controlled sides - Italy's World Cup winners in 1934 and the touring Moscow Dynamos in 1945 respectively - cemented several players' reputations. Some pointed out that only Arsenal, the team with such strong military connections, could prosper in such circumstances. They were probably right.

Throughout the book, I hope you will see that as a collective, Arsenal's rebels, several of whom have agreed to be interviewed, have made massive contributions to the club's success, and that stormy matches, bar-room bother, verbal dust-ups and high-profile brawls have often improved team spirit. Even '90s rebel Nicolas Anelka, whom many believe furthers no cause but his own or his brothers', helped the club to the 1998 Double. It is important to take into account the eras in which many of these characters played and managed. George Eastham and David Danskin - good blokes both - were only considered rebels in their particular time. Eastham's contractual demands, for example, are de rigueur in the twenty-first century, but shocked the class-ridden establishment of the early '60s. On the other hand, Sir Henry Norris's and George Graham's

financial dealings would have created tabloid headlines in whatever decade they occurred. And, presumably, Peter Storey will be remembered as arguably football's biggest rogue right through this century and beyond . . .

Jon Spurling, 2003

True story: in early April 2004, as Arsenal's Treble dreams crumbled, and even securing the Premiership title appeared - according to the tabloids - uncertain, the Gunners faced a crucial Good Friday match against Liverpool. At half-time, with Arsenal 2-1 down, the red tops, together with Chelsea fans, could smell blood. Then, Thierry Henry and Robert Pires ruined the script, and secured Arsenal's 4-2 victory with scintillating second-half performances. Two high-profile tabloid journalists were not best pleased. To the astonishment of a gaggle of Arsenal fans filing out of Highbury's East Stand, one said loudly to the other: 'That's fucked my headline for tomorrow.' The other responded: 'My editor has been kicking chairs around. He really thought they'd blown it at half-time.'

Comments that could only add to the conviction of Arsenal fans that the media vendetta against the club never quite disappears.

Since the publication of the hardback edition, I've been able to revise and update several stories, including the ongoing feud with Manchester United, which took another twist during the 2003-04 season. These changes to the text are due to those former Arsenal players, and the member of the current side, who were willing to clarify their versions of events. Thanks also to the generous help of those at the Hammersmith and Fulham archives, and the local historical centre in Islington, and to Tim Webber and Brian Dawes, who pointed out some inaccuracies in the original script.

Enjoy the book.

*Jon Spurling,
May 2004*

It's been ten years since I first put pen to paper and began writing *Rebels for the Cause*. In those intervening years, much has changed in football that has impacted massively on Arsenal. A decade ago, Roman Abramovich hadn't even begun to consider a takeover of Chelsea, and the Gunners, with the move from Highbury to the Emirates already in the offing, believed that moving out of the ground they'd called home since 1913 to a state-of-the-art stadium with all the accompanying corporate facilities would put them ahead of their only genuine rivals in the English game, Manchester United, both on and off the pitch. It hasn't quite worked out like that, of course, and in 2012 all associated with Arsenal are uncertain as to the direction in which the club is heading.

Despite the lack of silverware for more than seven years, the club still owes an enormous debt of gratitude to many of the characters whose lives, careers and impact on Arsenal are outlined in this book. It's interesting how, in the light of Arsenal's (relative) decline in recent seasons, opinions on George Graham and David Dein have shifted over time. Graham, who was compared unfavourably with Arsène Wenger when the 'Invincibles' were at their brilliant best, is now being praised on an increasing number of Arsenal-related websites for his tactical nous in crunch matches and the team spirit he instilled within his players. David Dein, lambasted by swathes of Gunners supporters in the early 1990s for the Bond Scheme, is now afforded more than a whiff of nostalgia since he left the club in 2007. Here was a man, his supporters claim, who knew how to close a transfer deal with the minimum of fuss, in the days when Arsenal's close seasons were full of hope, not despair at the prospect of losing another star player or two.

That's the thing about many of Arsenal's rebels. They divide opinion, and opinions about them change as the years pass.

A note on the text. In some of the later chapters, the tense remains in the present to bring home, for example, the shock value and the immediacy of 'Anelka-gate' and the Old Trafford dust-up in 2003. I hope it doesn't detract from the general flow of the story. Grateful thanks to Andy Kelly and Tony Attwood for pointing out a few inaccuracies in the original 'Freaks from the Factory' chapter. Their research into the club's formative years has been an invaluable source of information.

Enjoy the book.

*Jon Spurling,
October 2012*

ONE

Freaks from the Factory

One of the Derby chaps was heard to mutter that: 'A journey to the molten interior of the earth's core would be rather more pleasant and comfortable an experience than our forthcoming visit to the Royal Arsenal.'

Derby Post, 15 January 1891

The *Derby Post's* is a typical view of the time on the Gunners' distant forefathers - and that was in an era when any team south of Watford was invariably dubbed one of the 'southern softies'. Not so Royal Arsenal, the roughest, toughest crew of their time, apparently. After 90 minutes of mortal combat against the likes of Morris Bates, John Julian and Jimmy Charteris, the battered opposition would limp home, recounting tales of carnage in Kentish fields. Ten years later, perceptions of the newly titled Woolwich Arsenal had barely changed. The entire Second Division winced at having to venture south, such was the dread engendered by a trip to the Manor Ground in Plumstead. To many, it seemed entirely appropriate that the only footballing fatality of 1896 happened to be Woolwich Arsenal's own Joe Powell, whose broken arm became infected after a clash with Kettering Town. The Woolwich boys became everyone's least favourite second team. It was a situation to which those connected with the club quickly became accustomed. Throughout the late 1880s and into the 1890s, the team's infamy grew fast.

The fact that the club was distinctly mediocre and very dirty was some consolation for their rivals. Years of plugging away in Kent meant that the club missed out on the gravy train of talent which flowed north to the likes of Wolves and Sunderland. Even when the Royals had attempted to play decent football at their first ground, the crater-ridden surface at Plumstead Common scuppered their efforts. The Highbury mud-flats, which almost derailed the 1989 title challenge, were like a billiard table compared to the Common's pock-marked surface. Army manoeuvres meant it was littered with holes, ruts and hoof and wheel marks. There were no crossbars - tape was used instead. It was the latest comical instalment in a long-running saga. The official story goes that Dial Square had played their first match against the Eastern Wanderers on the Isle of Dogs. Resplendent in a variety of multi-coloured knickerbockers, the boys won 6-0, but were hardly enamoured when the ball kept landing in the open sewer which ran behind the goal. Club secretary Elijah Watkins reported that players had to scrape off the 'mud' - as he tactfully put it - before the game could restart. Little wonder that the local sanitary inspector, the aptly named Mr Fowler, deemed the pitch 'an obvious health hazard'. Heading the old-style football was one thing, being splattered with human excrement was quite another. Ironically, the club's sewer-related problems didn't end there. All this contributed to the fact that, despite their regal name, Royal Arsenal were a rough and ready outfit.

It was hoped, by club officials and opposition alike, that the move to the Manor Ground in 1893 would benefit everyone. In time, the team gained from the improved facilities, the existence of stands and terraces, and cheaper rent. Visiting teams looked forward to parading their skills on a croquet lawn surface and in a generally more pleasant atmosphere. But after a couple of months, the Manor Ground became every inch as inhospitable as Plumstead

Common had been. There were several advantages to being regarded, in the words of the *Liverpool Tribune*, as the 'team who played at the end of the earth'. Teams such as Newcastle and Rotherham dreaded the trek south, especially as rail travel was so slow and unreliable at the time. On top of a seemingly endless journey into London, there was an uncomfortable 40-minute trek from Cannon Street Station to Plumstead in an overcrowded steam train, often filled with heckling home fans. Overnight accommodation was also a real pain, particularly as no self-respecting hotelier wanted a bunch of working-class oiks wrecking the joint. So when teams arrived in Woolwich, they were usually knackered, hungry, bad-tempered and in no fit state to play football. Little wonder that during the club's 13-year stay in Division Two, home form was excellent.

The Manor Ground also acquired its own unique notoriety thanks to the tactical deployment of the huge engineering works nearby and the proximity of the southern outfall sewer, the main liquid waste disposal for the whole of south London. The grotesque vision of the factory, belching out noxious compounds, meant that a thick mist and rancid smell hung in the air. The sewer pipe provided opportunists with a chance to watch the team for free, though occasional leaks of raw effluent meant that Arsenal games often stank, literally and metaphorically.

Of course, some of what happened in those early years is open to conjecture. The Arsenal History Project, operating under the auspices of the Arsenal Independent Supporters' Association (AISA), has undertaken a review of the club's formative history. The research is especially prescient given that Arsenal celebrated their 125th anniversary in December 2011. The club has always been proactive in acknowledging its past, but, as with all forms of history, there needs to be rigorous scrutiny. One of the main drivers of the Arsenal History Project, Tony Attwood, commented on his blog:

In the early days of writing histories of the club, people relied on their memories, or occasional comments from others. This built up a range of documentation all based on the flimsiest of evidence . . . later writers reprinted the story, and so it went on and on.

The woolwicharsenal blog has already highlighted and questioned several elements of the story of the club that had previously been taken as 'gospel'.

Given the sporadic nature of newspaper reports, and the absence of any surviving eyewitnesses or visual evidence, it's hardly surprising that there is debate about what really happened 125 years ago. The historical waters are murky. Official histories have mentioned that there were other Woolwich Arsenal armament factory clubs which pre-dated Dial Square, but as no written evidence exists of their playing records, it seems to have been taken as read that Dial Square were the distant forefathers of Arsenal FC. The fact that Dial Square also travelled to the Isle of Dogs (an arduous journey and a venue with precious little available municipal land) seems curious given that there must have been some football pitches in nearby Woolwich. There is no record anywhere of the Eastern Wanderers in 1886. Crucially, the evidence that exists of that first match hinges on the testimony of just one onlooker - Elijah Watkins, whose tale was published in Association Football and the Men Who Made It in 1906 - some 20 years or so after the event. The suggestion is that the dates, the venues and even the teams may well have become muddled over time.

The team also had a plan B when it came to strategy and weren't solely reliant on long-ball tactics. A match report from an FA Cup clash with Crusaders in 1889 read: 'From the outset it was seen that there was no child's play . . . The Reds were as smart as ever in pursuing, turning, passing and propelling the ball . . .' The team, when the occasion suited, could play a fast, short-passing game due to the number of Scottish players that were on the books.

But the overriding facts are clear.

Horried southern rivals watched in disgust as this bunch of nomads – the bastard offspring of a munitions factory side – rose to become the south’s most powerful footballing outfit. Northern opposition, who’d originally invited Woolwich Arsenal to join Division Two on the premise that they could give these Kentish bumpkins a good kicking twice a year, began to regret their decision. The intense dislike aimed at the club wasn’t simply due to the occasionally loutish behaviour of the home crowds or the motley crew of ‘soccer mercenaries’ within Woolwich Arsenal’s side, though of course these factors added to the team’s notoriety. The hostility that greeted the team had rather more to do with the actions of Jack Humble and David Danskin. Throughout the latter years of the nineteenth century, the club’s bloody-minded founding fathers saw fit to slaughter every sacred cow and destroy virtually all the existing codes of conduct in Victorian football. Humble and Danskin were ruthlessly professional at a time when bumbling amateurism appeared to be the order of the day in southern football. That Dial Square had even got as far as playing their first organised match was down to their rebellious streak and a dash of sheer good fortune. Even in the embryonic stage of AFC’s development, those two crucial factors were indelibly imprinted upon the club’s DNA. No one liked us and we didn’t care; it was a mantra that would ring true throughout the twentieth century, and beyond.

In the mid-1880s, David Danskin came south from Scotland to take up a post at the Royal Arsenal, Woolwich. Brought up in the rough end of Kirkcaldy, a town in Fife, he’d taken the brave decision not to work at the Ravenscraig shipyard with his mates and went into the munitions business instead. According to Mrs R.H. Wyatt, one of Danskin’s descendants, he was actually forced out of the family home by his parents because they needed the room for his four sisters. He

couldn't have timed his move to Kent any better. Europe was already in the grip of a frantic arms race. The in-bred mutants that passed for European royalty flexed their muscles by building gargantuan armies and navies, requiring for both branches of their armed forces powerful guns and a bottomless pit of ammunition. Europe was already well down the road to war, but ironically the French were considered the real enemy at that time, with the Napoleonic wars fresh in the memory.

For Danskin and thousands of other immigrant Scots, the flourishing Woolwich Arsenal offered them jobs, with as much overtime as they wanted. It also gave them the chance to socialise with others who shared their interest in playing football. Jack Humble arrived in Plumstead in 1881. Humble, whose poverty-stricken upbringing in Durham had prompted him to move south in order to find work, had experienced massive hardship as a child. His mother died and his father committed suicide within just a few months of each other. Known for his stubbornness and unwillingness to accept defeat, Humble, along with his brother Arthur, walked the 400-odd miles to Woolwich and on the way had plenty of time to ponder life in southern England. Like Danskin, he did not suffer fools gladly, and looked forward to getting involved in organising football matches with his new workmates.

Danskin and Humble remain original working-class heroes. Association Football, traditionally the preserve of public schools, was gradually becoming the working man's game. At the turn of the century, southern football was still mired in the game's equivalent of the Jurassic age. Thousands of amateur work teams jostled frantically for position, desperately trying to attract the best local talent. In the future, they could maybe even dream of emulating northern clubs like Blackburn Olympic who'd already turned professional. Roughly 90 per cent of clubs south of Birmingham died out in this atmosphere of social

Darwinism, mainly due to a lack of cash and an unfortunate geographical position. Kentish teams appeared to have little going for them. The Factory Acts gave Danskin and his ilk Saturday afternoons off, and they'd just been given the vote. In these pre-Labour Party and trade union days, workers who campaigned for better housing, health care and leisure activities (including football) were considered gobby upstarts. Unsurprisingly, Humble quickly joined a left-wing political group - the Radicals - and later became a fully fledged member of the emerging Socialist Party. The pair passionately believed that every man should have the right to play Association Football. When Danskin and Humble found that others in their workplace shared their enthusiasm, the boys had a whip-round to pay for a ball, which they kicked about at lunchtimes. After all, there weren't many other appealing distractions during their lunch breaks. The skin and hair of the girls in the nearby TNT section was dyed a sickly yellow by the corrosive chemicals they used, hence the 'Woolwich Canaries' nickname.

Getting beyond a lunchtime kick-about was considered a virtually impossible task. For a start, there were widespread reports across south-east England that migrating Scots were actually being mistaken for French spies on a regular basis, leading to some serious beatings in city alleyways. Victorians weren't too clued up on accents, these being the days when a day-trip to Bognor was the equivalent of travelling across the Australian outback. Not only did Danskin encounter xenophobic attitudes towards Scots, he also ran into class snobbery. Rugby and cricket, he was told, were true Kentish sports, not soccer. Joseph Smith, another worker at the factory, had earlier tried to set up a football team that, he hoped, could share a pitch with the cricketers. Smith had been told to bugger off and his dream had died, but Danskin was more determined, and after a second whip-round, some 'kit' was hastily arranged. The Scot was gaining

a deserved reputation among fellow workers for sheer doggedness.

Danskin took the bold step of signing two ex-Nottingham Forest players in order to add some experience to this rawest of teams. Morris Bates and Fred Beardsley (a goalkeeper of some repute) taught the lads the tactics of the day and helpfully blagged a full set of red shirts from Forest into the bargain. Bates, a pugnacious full-back, led by example. Nicknamed the 'iron-headed man', he was capable of heading the ball, which in those days was almost the weight of a cannonball, half the length of the pitch. Given the Victorians' obsession for freaks and the bizarre, he could probably have made a fortune in the circus. It's a wonder that he actually had the brain-power left to instil 'tactics' into his teammates. At Forest, both men had become used to exhausting training regimes, which put a special emphasis on building up leg muscles. Little wonder that Bates's and Beardsley's new charges had, in the *Kentish Mercury's* words, '. . . thighs like oak trees'.

Even in those days, the players had a fine reputation for quaffing ale. Pubs and the history of Arsenal Football Club are intertwined. After a riotous post-match session at a pub in Erith, the boys decided on the 'Royal' Arsenal title, which was a bit of a cheek. There were plenty of other teams from other workshops inside the factory, but Danskin and his Dial Square boys, full of boozy bluster, reckoned they now represented the whole factory. Still, where would the club be today without that special blend of nous and arrogance?

The Royals' early sides, moulded in Danskin's own image, were stuffed with burly, mustachioed Scots, which only increased the team's notoriety and unpopularity. Not for the last time, a Gunners team was accused of being loaded with foreign mercenaries. In such frugal times, the players wore factory boots with strips of wrought iron fixed onto the bottom, making it all the easier to maim the opposition. It was the football equivalent of bare-knuckle boxing. Royals

strikers, fully bevvied up after a liquid lunch, hunted in packs and practically assaulted any hapless goalie who was stupid enough to block their path. Opposition defenders, whenever they believed they had control of the ball, would be splattered, with teeth and blood everywhere. Foaming at the mouth, gangs of red-shirted strikers bore down on the opposition's penalty area like rabid extras from *Braveheart*. Bear in mind that the Royals were given further incentive to play well by being taunted for hailing from 'the sinister factory', with its 20-foot-high walls, where workers weren't allowed to discuss with 'outsiders' the nature of their work.

It should be added that the Royals weren't entirely to blame for the on-pitch maiming. Football was a good deal tougher back then and other assorted psychopaths from teams such as Clapton and Thorpe weren't exactly averse to 'mixing it'. If the other side did try to 'play a bit', one of two things could happen. John Julian, an innocent-looking Royals midfielder, would saunter over to the offender and boot him up towards Mars. Almost always undergoing treatment for blows to his ankles or knees, Julian reckoned the majority of his injuries resulted from his own fouls. Canny Royals defenders were under strict instructions to steer the opposition towards the craters on Plumstead Common. There, the ball would veer off at crazy angles and often the other players would disappear down the nearest hole, spraining their ankles and ripping ligaments in the process. If all else failed, Jimmy Charteris, who appears to have been a Grant Mitchell-like midfielder, would constantly harangue the referee and try to ensure that decisions went the home side's way.

Of all the Royals players, Charteris was the most notorious. His troubled background could be the key to understanding why he played at such a furious tempo. As a child, he'd seen his bigamist father jailed, and the young Jimmy, who'd originally been born illegitimate, was palmed off to various members of the extended family. For opting to

move to Royal Arsenal, he was virtually ostracised by his local community. In October 1887, the *Motherwell Times* noted: 'He will find out that he has made a sad mistake. There is little honour playing for some of these English clubs.' To say that Charteris arrived in Kent with fire in his belly is an understatement. This was certainly no haven for southern ponces. Unsurprisingly, the Royals' home record was excellent. At the end of 1886-87 - the first official season - the overall playing record was pretty good, too: Played 10, Won 7, Drawn 1, Lost 2.

But Danskin and Humble were still not satisfied. Any method going was used to recruit better players. Already they had in operation a spy network that would have been the envy of MI5. The spies, who often worked in other munitions factories, would watch games all over the country and if the report on a player was a positive one, the young lad would be 'found a job' in the Woolwich Arsenal (50 shillings a week was the normal going rate) and thrust into the first team. Danskin would stop at nothing to improve the team. Rivals complained about Danskin's and Humble's questionable recruitment methods, but more than that, regarded the boys as cocky young upstarts from south of the river. Just who did the Royals think they were, adopting grand-sounding nomenclature while not even having a permanent ground? Despite the opposition, by 1891 this band of desperados were the best team in the south-east. They'd already secured the Kent Senior and, crucially, the London Senior Cup after defeating St Bartholomew's Hospital 6-0. Though these titles may sound little better than nineteenth-century versions of the Sherpa Van trophy, the club's cult following grew. The disapproving *Kentish Independent* reported that pubs in Woolwich did a roaring trade when the team returned with their rabble-rousing supporters and the silverware: '. . . there was shouting and singing everywhere all evening and, we fear, a good deal of drinking was mingled with the rejoicing and exaltations.'

The Royals' success had also been noted by future rivals north of the Thames. Established London clubs like Tottenham were haemorrhaging support to these upstarts, especially once the Royals secured a 'lucky' (according to the *Weekly Herald*) victory over them in 1887. Keen fans from the capital would frantically 'penny-farthing' it down to see the boys play, rather than watch the Totts. The Royals considered themselves so superior, in fact, that as early as 1891 they labelled themselves 'Champions of the South', and there were even whispers that the club was about to turn professional, which appalled high-minded thinkers at the time. After all, to lose the true Corinthian spirit - guts, high tackles and weekly hacking competitions - was as unthinkable as, say, losing the Empire.

Danskin and Humble finally had their minds made up for them after the events of 1890 and 1891. The FA Cup was the only chance the Royals had to pit their wits against the might of the northern professional sides. In 1891, Derby visited the Invicta Ground, and narrowly won 2-1 before a then-record crowd of 8,000. The previously accepted version of events claimed that Danskin was alarmed that Derby representatives immediately offered professional terms to Connolly and Buist, the Royals' two best players, after the match. It didn't quite happen like that. In the 1914-15 handbook, editor and future Gunners boss George Allison made the claim that Connolly and Buist were approached by the East Midlands' club boss John Goodall with a view to offering them terms. The handbook piece was based on an article Allison wrote for the *Athletic News* some years before and has been repeated numerous times since. The truth is that Buist didn't actually play in the game, joining Arsenal some months later. The Scot realised that in the grand scheme of things, his team was merely a bit player. An even more alarming game came a year before when Swifts arrived for a fourth-round qualifying game. Despite 15,000 Royals' fanatics sweeping the snow off the pitch, and the

team's Herculean efforts, the legendary E.C. Bambridge inspired his team to a 5-1 victory. Hack-fests were all well and good, but when it came down to it, the Royals couldn't cut it against the very best from the north.

No one at the club, or the factory, wanted to see the team pootle along in the wilderness, so in 1891 the board - badgered by William Jackson - unanimously voted to turn Royal Arsenal professional. The club was by far the most forward-thinking and revolutionary in the south-east, but the conventional story goes that within just four years of being formed they were also the most hated. Retribution, as expected, was swift and decisive. Woolwich Arsenal, as they were now renamed, were made outcasts, branded with the name of 'traitor', for the next two years. The decision to cast the team into the wilderness was taken at an extraordinary general meeting of the London FA, held in Fleet Street's Anderson's Hotel. The truth was that the club never were turned into outcasts.

The oft-reported ostracism by Royal Arsenal's Southern rivals (hinted at by Allison and repeated down the years) never happened. The club resigned from the London and Kent FAs, which outlawed professionalism. They were not expelled at all, as has often been suggested. Another myth was that the Royals' Southern rivals from the amateur London and Kent leagues and cup competitions, including Clapton and Chatham, refused to play the newly professional outfit. Of the 35 Southern opponents who faced the Royals in friendlies during the 1891-92 campaign, many of those had also done so in the previous seasons when the Royals were an amateur side. Southern clubs were happy to play Arsenal, as they were big crowd-pullers. So, although there may well have been a lingering suspicion and mistrust of the club from rivals, there was no boycott on the pitch, despite what a raft of Arsenal historians - me included in the 2003 version of *Rebels for the Cause* - have claimed down

the years. Time for a spot of revisionism on all our parts, perhaps.

Within a year, a Woolwich Arsenal committee put forward yet another revolutionary idea. Why not form a southern league, which, in time, could grow to be as powerful as the northern-dominated First Division? Staggeringly, Woolwich's southern rivals (most of whom wanted to turn professional but didn't dare do so) actually backed the idea, aware it could lead to their coffers being rapidly filled. A selection committee elected Royal Arsenal, along with the mighty Chatham, Marlow and West Herts, to the ten-team strong league, ahead of London's most established club, Tottenham, who received only one vote. Known as the 'Marsh-dwellers', the Totts were mightily annoyed, but their fans' habit of throwing mud at their own players was held against them.

Due to a lack of cash, the southern league never took off and by 1893, Woolwich Arsenal had once again alienated themselves from their neighbours. But the club then applied to join the Second Division. Danskin and Humble realised the enormity of the decision and what could happen if Woolwich Arsenal struggled. There would certainly be no way back. This truly was the point of no return. Danskin and Humble went ahead.

Then, as now, the Second Division was tough and brutal – about as welcoming as a wet weekend in Skegness. The Manor Ground did little to add to the ambience. Woolwich Arsenal's crowds, consisting mainly of squaddies and factory workers, were regarded with unmitigated fear by visiting northern teams. The fans had a reputation for hurling ale-fuelled foul-mouthed insults and the opposition would dread having to take throw-ins or corners, as they were likely to be on the end of some fairly rough treatment. A letter of complaint in the *Kentish Independent* noted 'the conduct of fans who spouted foul language and coarse abuse'. On one occasion, the referee actually abandoned a

match due to crowd swearing and, in a game against Burton, a Burton fan beat up the referee, who, incidentally, was a former Wolves player. No wonder the *Newcastle Echo* described the Geordies' trip to the Manor Ground as 'an annual visit to hell'. The *Kentish Independent* also reported that the hooligan element wasn't simply confined to the squaddies who attended en masse: 'These were not weedy uneducated hooligans but well-dressed middle-aged gentlemen,' one journalist wrote. A glance at the Woolwich Arsenal team group from the late-nineteenth century, ten years after that first match on the Isle of Dogs, suggests that the boys remained an intimidating crowd. With their handle-bar moustaches and unsmiling faces, they resembled a group of desperados from a silent movie – the type who'd tie hapless maidens to railway lines and be shot out of a cannon in their spare time.

If the crowd's belligerence continued to bring the club unwanted headlines, the club's officials were also regarded with trepidation by rival clubs and within the local community. That Woolwich Arsenal remained a viable concern for so long was largely due to the brilliant juggling and spivvy methods employed by these men. Shimmying and swerving around innumerable obstacles, with sometimes questionable legality, they dragged the sickly football club behind them. Star players were sold in the hope that local talent could be nurtured, and novel money-spinning schemes became legendary in Woolwich. Archery competitions, raffles, open days – anything went, as long as it brought much-needed cash flooding into the coffers. On one memorable occasion, with the accounts suffering from scarlet fever and the bailiffs poised to break down the door, Jack Humble was dispatched to Woolwich High Street to see if anyone wished to become a club director. One G.H. Leavey, a prominent outfitter, agreed. In a jiffy, Humble yanked £60 from Leavey's till and ran back to the ground. This covered the boys' wages for the next week and the

long train journey to the forthcoming away match. Though Leavey was granted his place on the board, he never saw his cash again. Leavey was one of the Arsenal's first benefactors, and ploughed money into the club for nearly ten years.

Jack Humble, in particular, grew to love the club, seeing his mission as more than just a job. He spotted early on that the growth of professionalism – though a necessary ‘evil’ – threatened to divide players from fans. So players were encouraged to collect gate money prior to games and mix with supporters in various Woolwich hostelrys. It was all a far cry from www.icons.com, through which modern players ‘communicate’ with fans.

To other clubs, Woolwich Arsenal's officials were a militant lot. Southern rivals didn't care much for Danskin's and Humble's ‘foreign’ accents, much less the heinous practice of professionalism in their midst. Directors of northern clubs simply believed the two had ‘sold out’ by emigrating south. They remained very much ‘hands on’ at away games, cajoling the troops and urging the travelling support to ‘sing up’. But it was the board's continued discussion of subversive ideas that made them pariahs in the football world. In 1893, a committee formed a limited liability company and pressed on with a share issue scheme in order to make the club a more financially viable outfit and to purchase the freehold of the Manor Field. Humble protested: ‘It is my intention to see it [the club] carried on by working men.’ A letter to the *Kentish Independent* questioned the wisdom of mixing football with business: ‘The funding of a soccer club should be left to the working men and those who know the game. Surely allowing clerks or accountants to control a football club through buying shares is a retrograde step.’ For some it was, and Humble especially would feel uncomfortable with the unwanted interference from shareholders. Even as early as 1893 – a century before David Dein pressed ahead with the Bond Scheme – Humble