

Across The Great Divide

A History of Professional Football
in Dundee

Jim Wilkie



Mainstream Publishing *ebooks*



Table of Contents

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Conclusion 1984

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Conclusion 2000

Bibliography

Copyright

ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE

A History of Professional Football in
Dundee

Jim Wilkie



MAINSTREAM
PUBLISHING

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE CITIZENS OF DUNDEE
AND MY FAMILY, IN AND AROUND THE TOWN.
LOVE TO LORNA, EOGHAN AND JASMINE.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express his thanks to Flora McNeill (Glasgow/Uig), who typed above and beyond the call; the staff of the Dundee Library, Local History Room; the staff of the Mitchell Library (Glasgow), the Glasgow Room; Kevin McCarra; Pat Woods; George Hill; Lochee Harp; D.C. Thomson Photofiles; Donnie Coutts; the Scottish Football League (David Thomson); the Scottish Football Association (Marjory Nimmo); and the legendary Billy Kay.

INTRODUCTION

If you were to describe the City of Dundee, probably the last word which would come to mind is 'beautiful'. More than likely you would use adjectives like 'grey', 'grim' even, 'industrial' or 'peculiar' – and Dundee certainly is an unusual city. For a start its history and dialect are unique – subcultural almost – but it's tucked away in an obscure corner of the Scotland's east coast, bypassed almost invariably by those heading north to the 'romantic' Scottish Highlands, or south to the 'glittering' conurbations. And you'd never call Dundonians romantic (or glittering). Hardened by centuries of economic and political uncertainty, their appearance and manner are often regarded as dour and uncompromising. Yet anyone who has spent any time actually living or working there knows that this is nothing like the whole story.

Dundee's splendid situation on the north bank of the Tay estuary can be seen to good advantage from Balgay Hill. And if that view of the old town at the foot of the Law, linked to the green hills of Fife by two spectacular bridges, with the promontory of Broughty Ferry beyond, doesn't strike a chord, then you might as well carry on looking, either for your fortune, or your Granny's Hielan' Hame.

One way or another, when Dundee United Football Club won their first Scottish Premier League Championship in season 1982–83, the city was described by one of the country's best football writers, Ian Archer, as 'lonely, neglected and almost beleaguered'. It was true. Dundee, like everywhere else in Britain, was trying to combat the

worst economic conditions for 50 years; that very week the large workforce of the Timex Electronics Company was under siege by a Tory government for daring to strike on a point of principle when the employment rate stood locally at 16 per cent; and the red, black, white and green flag which hung in the City Chambers acknowledged the achievements not of their now-famous footballing sons, but of the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

The city, of course, did pay handsome tribute to the club and players who brought such honour to it by winning the most keenly fought and thrilling Premier League competition since its inception, and civic chests swelled with additional pride, for this relatively small club had secured its victory with a pool, generally speaking, of 14 players, eight of whom came from the Tayside Region and seven from Dundee itself. Aberdeen FC, by comparison, with a city to themselves, oil rich and booming, won the European Cup-Winners' Cup some three days earlier with a pool of 16 players, only four of whom could be regarded as locals.

And Dundee United certainly do not have their hometown to themselves. Literally across the street from their ground, Tannadice Park, in the north end of the inner city stands Dens Park - in some ways a more imposing stadium which, for many years after its construction was the home of Dundee Football Club, cast something of a shadow over Tannadice. For whilst their rivals languished in the old Scottish Second Division for the greater part of the first 60 years of their existence, Dundee FC won every major trophy in the Scottish game, had a substantial number of their players capped for Scotland and reached a European Cup semi-final in 1963.

As surely as the seasons change, however, so too do footballing fortunes, and the early 1980s saw Dundee United finally and conclusively emerge from that shadow as a leading club, not only in Scottish, but in European football. And these things are important. Why else, for example,

would anyone remember Jock Stein, Bob Shankly or Jim McLean?

Jim Wilkie
October 1984p

* * *

It is very satisfying to be writing the introduction to a new edition of *Across the Great Divide*, especially when the original is now 16 years old. This means, of course, that there is a completely new generation of football fans in Dundee and I hope that, as they begin to grapple with the complexities of the modern game - Bosman, satellite TV, internet, boardroom extravaganzas . . . and all this before a ball is kicked - it might help to know something of the origins and history of professional football in their home town. In 1984 United had reached the European Cup semi-final and Dundee were threatening a revival under Archie Knox and Jocky Scott. Change was, of course, inevitable but no one could have predicted what form it would take.

J.W.
October 2000

ONE

Although there are no records, it can be assumed that some kind of football has been part of man's life for thousands of years. Classical Egyptian, Greek and Chinese literature contain explicit references to the sport - in one exotic Chinese version, teams vied with one another to score goals by kicking the ball through an opening in a silken net - and the Romans, who are said to have fostered football as part of their military training, are generally assumed to have brought the game to Britain. Football probably belongs to the category of primitive fertility rites, with the ball representing the sun or the head of an animal sacrifice and, given that reliable references to the game occur only after 1066, some believe the Normans developed it from the rites of Roman saturnalia (a feast concerned with fertility).

The first extensive description of British football dates from the London of 1175. It is an account by one William Fitzstephen of how, on Shrove Tuesday that year, the youth of the city spent part of the day cockfighting 'and in other boyish pursuits, and after dinner, they went to a local piece of ground . . . just outside the city for the famous game of ball'. Soon, authorities came to view the game as a nuisance and, as in the case of other sports, a danger to national security on the grounds that it interfered with the country's defence, in which efficiency with bows and arrows was most essential. There were other grounds, too, on which the authorities based their opposition of football, for the lack of any code often caused the games to degenerate into riotous running battles. This 'mob' or 'rough' football, as it

was known, probably was not dissimilar to the famous 'Ba' game' which still persists in Kirkwall.

In 1314 King Edward II of England, following his humiliation at Bannockburn, where his archers were thought to have performed particularly badly, issued an edict forbidding football in his domain. Now, whereas it might be supposed the Scots would logically adopt the opposite viewpoint, and cultivate the warlike potential of their football, this proved not to be the case. Indeed, the game was also frowned upon by Scottish kings of the fifteenth century. In 1603, however, James VI of Scotland assumed the crown of a united Britain as James I ('the wisest fool in Christendom'), and football was again recognised, and even encouraged. By then, of course, archery had become redundant with the introduction of firearms, and by the nineteenth century the more refined and organised form of man's primitive kicking games were becoming popular everywhere. In this refinement and organisation, the educated classes played a prominent part.

In keeping with earlier aristocratic interest, 'rough' football was played at the English public schools, and playing it was one of the ways in which senior boys dominated others. During the 1830s and 1840s, however, the public schools - like several other important institutions - underwent reform and that included the reform of football. Also, many of the pupils wished to go on playing at university, and different schools had different ideas as to how the game should be played. It was at Cambridge University, first in 1848 and then in the 1860s, that experiments finally produced a body of rules which appeared to have a fairly wide acceptance, first in England and then in Scotland, where Queen's Park Football Club was established in 1867 and the Scottish Cup instituted in 1873. Eight teams competed for that first cup - Queen's Park, Clydesdale, Vale of Leven, Dumbreck, Third Lanark Volunteer Reserves, Eastern, Granville and Kilmarnock - and

they effectively thus formed the Scottish Football Association. This was followed by the formation of the Scottish League in 1890, and the first League Handbook of 1981-82 listed a First Division of twelve clubs, Alliance of twelve, a Federation of twelve a Midland League of ten, an Ayrshire League of ten, and a Northern League of eight - three of whose members came from Dundee.

* * *

Dundee, in the late nineteenth century, was a textile town, with jute its most valuable commodity. Jute had come to Dundee for a variety of reasons: the uncertainty of flax supplies from territory controlled by Russia, with whom Britain had recently been at war; jute's relative abundance and cheapness; the impact of exceptional demand as a result of the aforementioned war, and the cotton famine of the 1860s; local technical progress in engineering; the willingness of Victorians to plough back profits; and the almost universal economic boom in the 1870s. All these factors served to stimulate expansion.

In 1839 the industry did not exist; in 1890, out of a total workforce (i.e. those in employment) of 80,000, more than 40,000 worked in jute, nearly all of them in or around Dundee. Perhaps the most astonishing thing, however, is that at least 30,000 of those were women and children (female labour being thought cheaper and more pliable than its male equivalent) and the result was the development of a kind of 'mill-girl culture' which would have touched most families in the town, and therefore been an important factor in the shaping of the Dundee character and way of life.

Textiles were not the only source of employment in the town, however. Shipbuilding and engineering were also major employers - although at this time printing and confectionery were not - and by the 1880s and 1890s, most working people had won the privilege of a Saturday half-day.

Saturday afternoon, therefore, became a great time for 'true' leisure (as opposed to the 'enforced' leisure of unemployment) and a general interest in sports began to develop among the masses.

Initially, the geography of Dundee, with its steep, south-facing site, was not particularly suited to sport. But this began to change, since flat land was sought-after, for industrial premises as well as for sports grounds, and both the Harbour Road and Town Council were beginning to reclaim land. Indeed, the reclamation of Riverside Park (or the 'Cowp' as it is sometimes known) to the west of the Tay Bridge was begun at this time. It now, of course, also houses Dundee Airport.

There is no fixed date for when football first began in Dundee. A game called 'football' is first recorded as being played in the city in the early 1870s but this, as previously stated, was a time when Association Football was still in an experimental stage throughout Britain, and the (amateur) game which was played by the Dundee clubs bore a greater resemblance to present-day rugby than football, with opposition coming from 'good' schools and universities. Even at this, however, there was still some confusion, as a letter to the editor of the *Dundee Advertiser* of 17 January 1873 illustrates:

Sir,

The report in Monday's *Advertiser* of the football match played at St Andrews between the University team and those of Dundee and Broughty is not altogether correct. The match was to have been twenty a side, but the North of Tay only succeeded in mustering 14 players.

Four St Andrews men, however, were transferred to their side and the game was played eighteen a side. Your report should also have stated that an additional touch-down behind goal was claimed by the St Andrews team.

I am, etc.,

Joseph Brown,

72 North St, St Andrews.

In his footnote, a slightly rattled editor remarked: 'It seems impossible to get reports of these matches to which objection is not taken by some of the players.' How right he was.

Between 1874 and 1876, two clubs, one called Dundee United and the other Dundee, had fixtures at Blackness Park and Baxter Park respectively, playing rugby rules. But many experiments were taking place locally now, and the following year an *Advertiser* report (13 March 1877) referred to one side's 'splendid passing game which brought out the great superiority of the Association over the Rugby style of play'. The game, between Dunmore and Strathmore, was played 11 a side, with a goalkeeper, two backs, two half-backs and six forwards. In September of that year, the SFA meeting, with a Dundee representative present, announced that there were now 91 clubs in the Association, an increase of 23 since the previous year. Rugby and football were going their separate ways - and the operation was sometimes painful. In a match between Vale of Strathmore (Coupar Angus) and Dunkeld, which was theoretically played under Association rules, one of the Strathmore team had an arm dislocated, another bore 'visible marks of rough treatment' and a third was unable to finish the game. The *Advertiser* commented that the rules 'must have been disobeyed'.

In the west, however, the game was flourishing. Twenty thousand had watched Vale of Leven defeat Glasgow Rangers in the 1877 Scottish Cup final, and in 1878, Glasgow outfitters R.W. Forsyth began to advertise 'football costumes' in the Dundee newspaper. 'Jerseys, hose, belts, caps, cowls and knickerbockers' were all available by post from the Renfield Street shop which claimed to supply 'over 300 clubs'. This, more than anything else, confirmed that football was becoming big business throughout Central Scotland. By the end of the decade, at least three more clubs had added their name to the growing list in Dundee.

They were Our Boys (founded 1877), East End (also founded 1877) and Dundee Harp, who were formed in 1879.

TWO

The last 20 years of the nineteenth century were traumatic for the British people. The Victorian era of expansion was drawing to a close and, curiously, an event in Dundee helped to bring this realisation home. On the night of Sunday, 28 December 1879, the high girders, or central section, of the Tay Bridge – at that time the longest railway bridge in the world – collapsed in a high wind, taking with them an engine, six coaches and 75 passengers. The event, according to historian John Prebble, shook the British Empire to its very foundations, since it destroyed the Victorians' smug pride and their belief in their own creative infallibility. One intrepid *Advertiser* reporter managed to keep his head, however. In the detached manner for which certain east coast newspapers were to become famous, he reported that a match played between Arbroath and Glasgow Wanderers on New Year's Day 1880 (i.e. four days after the disaster) 'was advertised to commence at 2.30 p.m. but owing to the Glasgow players having lost the connecting train at Dundee . . .' began late. 'A strong gale,' he continued, 'blew from the commencement of the match which towards the end increased almost to a hurricane.' What style!

The effect of this great trauma was a kind of preparation for the new world which change was about to bring. The 1880s and 1890s also witnessed first the adoption of football by the working classes as their national game and then its transition from casual amateur status to organised professionalism and the object of a kind of religious fervour. Leisure time had been hard won and if the Victorian promise

of eternal prosperity through hard work and faith in the Lord was not to be fulfilled then, metaphorically speaking, the freedom train was approaching Wormit and the wind was getting up . . .

It was then that men, in their frantic escapist search, first discovered the spiritual qualities of football – for although to play at the highest level was the achievement of few, it was the aspiration of many. Merely watching its matches brought a new kind of release, a new kind of solidarity and a new kind of sociability. Of course, the fact that there might be a job of work at the end of the line, or indeed a business investment, did not go entirely unnoticed.

At the beginning of the 1880s, however, the game was still strictly amateur and the quaint names of some of the local clubs bore testament to the Corinthian spirit. There were 'Perseverance', 'Try Again' and a particular favourite, 'Our Boys', with teams from Brechin, Blairgowrie, Arbroath, Dunfermline and Dundee all adopting that title. Originally it had been a nickname given to Glasgow Rangers during the 1870s and was probably the origin of the expression 'The Boys' as in 'C'mon the Boys!'. The first match between Our Boys (Dundee) and East End (Dundee) took place on Saturday, 24 February 1880. It was an occasion which was eagerly anticipated and the teams met on a local farmer's land, Lawton Park. Tapes were used instead of crossbars at the time. Our Boys won by two goals to nil. Their colours were red and black stripes with white shorts, but in 1882 they changed to the now more familiar dark blue jerseys and white shorts and acquired a 'home' pitch at West Craigie Park, on farmland to the west of Baxter Park. (The Tayside works later expanded northwards to cover part of this ground and Morgan Place was built on another part in 1937.) East End, meanwhile, who played in blue and white stripes, made their home ground Clepington Park near the present site of Tannadice and the Harp (green jerseys, harp

on breast, dark shorts) acquired their own Harp Athletic Grounds in East Dock Street, near the large gas tanks.

Both Harp and Hibernians (Dundee) had been established to cater for the immigrant Irish population of Dundee. In 1861, out of a population of approximately 100,000, between 14,000 and 15,000 were Irish-born citizens attracted by the prospect of work in the rapidly expanding jute industry. This was roughly the same proportion as existed in Glasgow at the time, but whereas in that city, or indeed Greenock, Edinburgh or Aberdeen, there were more Irish males than females, in Dundee there were twice as many women as men.

According to William Walker, author of *Juteopolis*, Dundee appears to have attracted only the Catholic Irish. But the fact that there were more women than men, that Dundee was a Liberal 'frontier town' where anti-Irish prejudice would be no more serious than, say, prejudice against Highlanders or country folk from Fife or Angus and - perhaps most significant - that membership of Orange Lodges was very small and politically unimportant, went a long way to explaining the relative absence of Irish sectarianism in the city. Also, socially, the two nations which existed in Dundee were not Scots and Irish, or Protestant and Catholic, but rich and poor for while some inhabited mansions in the West End or Broughty Ferry, virtually all the others shared the tenements in conditions which were grim even by the standards of comparable industrial towns. The infant death rate in these tenements was ten times as high as in the suburbs, and the general physical, moral and mental degradation contributed to the need for some kind of diversion and improvement. In 1873 the Catholic community, which by then owned a number of churches and schools, acquired a 'Young Men's Hall' in Tay Street. This was designed for the purposes of recreation and education and was said to be the finest in Dundee. It was therefore but