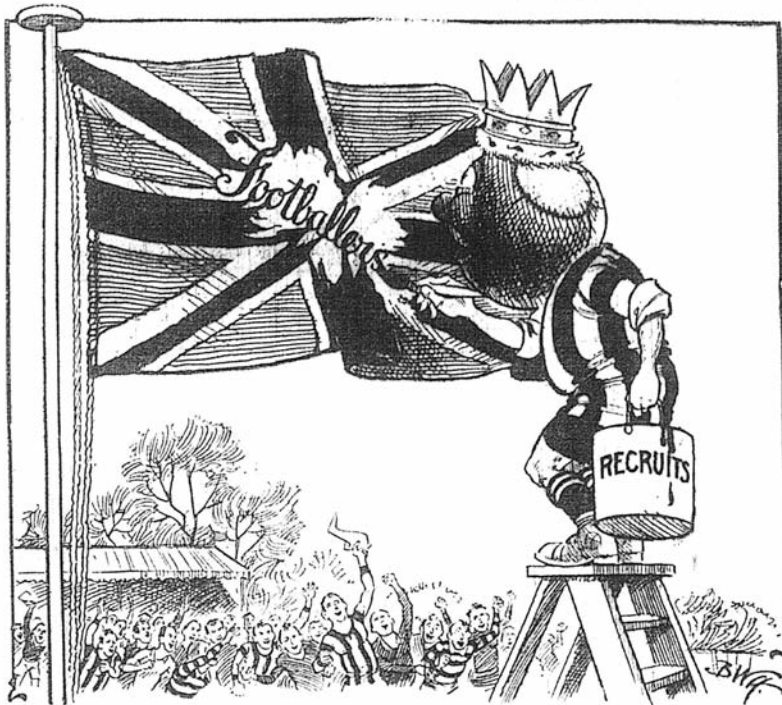


“THE CHARGE AT FOOTBALL IS GOOD, THAT WITH THE BAYONET FINER”: THE FORMATION OF THE FOOTBALLERS’ BATTALION, 1914

When the First World War broke out in August 1914, the general opinion in England was that this was to be a short-lived affair that would be concluded by Christmas. It was perhaps this sentiment, as much as their public stance that the players were under legally binding contracts for the duration of the season, which led the Football and Southern Leagues to announce that the 1914-15 campaign would run as usual. The clubs, however, showed their support for the national cause by agreeing to a series of measures to support the war effort: regular collections were held for the various war relief funds, fans attending matches were often addressed by local dignitaries encouraging them to enlist, while stadiums were made available to the military for drill and, in many cases, the erection of miniature rifle ranges. The position of the association game was not unlike that of Northern Union (rugby league) football and horse racing, all three being essentially professional sports that continued their programme after the outbreak of war. Cricket was in a slightly different position, having almost concluded its 1914 season, and did not face the same dilemma as to whether to continue or not.

“JOINING THE COLOURS!”



Mr. F. J. Wall, the Secretary of the Football Association, states that at least 60,000 or 70,000 players have joined some branch of the Services.

(*Athletic News*, 19 October 1914)



Not surprisingly, there were some who felt that all forms of entertainment should be curtailed in time of war and the campaign to close down football in particular began almost immediately. One of the earliest antagonists was FN Charrington, a member of the brewing family and a rather eccentric philanthropist, whose comments appeared in the national press before the end of August. The Dean of Lincoln, TC Fry, joined in the debate, suggesting a number of measures: that all professional contracts should be cancelled, football coupons stopped and no one under the age of 40 should be allowed to attend matches. *The Times* newspaper too entered the fray, offering a platform for the critics and even running advertisements for 'Petticoats for Footballers.' Many amateur association competitions, notably the Southern-based Isthmian and Athenian Leagues, simply closed down as essentially did the all-amateur rugby union game. The response from the FA and the professional leagues was somewhat muted, although the former continued to co-operate with the War Office and there were no calls from the government for football to close down. An article in *The Times* of 28 November 1914 gave details of how a number of professional clubs had responded to the war, but although designed to appease some of their opponents it seems to have failed in its objective. Responses from 15 Football and Southern League clubs indicated that only at Southampton had players enlisted in significant numbers. West Bromwich Albion had formed a Company attached to the 5th South Staffs Territorials to which many supporters and eight players had signed up, but only 19 players had enlisted in total from the other 12 clubs. Two days later a follow-up article noted that 20 Hull City players, 11 from Plymouth Argyle and eight from Everton had joined up. Significantly none of the clubs noted were from London, and the metropolitan clubs attracted further bad publicity when it was announced that just one recruit had enlisted at the game between Arsenal and Bristol City from amongst 5,000 spectators.

It should be noted here that enlistment in the forces at this stage was purely voluntary and conscription was not introduced until 1916. Nationally recruitment figures had been poor in August before picking up in September and October. One of the strategies introduced was to establish what became known as 'Pals' Battalions' whereby groups of young men with a common background through their work or sporting activities could enlist and fight together. One of the earliest of these was the Sportsmen's Battalion, but there were also bodies such as the Artists' Battalion (principally cricketers and rugby union players), the Cyclists' Battalion and even the Veteran Athletes' Battalion. Although large numbers of amateur soccer players had enlisted the response of senior clubs, as we have seen, was not enthusiastic. Leading rugby union clubs such as Wasps and Saracens proudly announced that 98 per cent of their players had joined up, yet prior to conscription the 11 Football League clubs in Lancashire had provided just 40 recruits in total (although over 4,500 junior players had enlisted). It was against this background that William Joynson-Hicks, MP for Brentford, was given permission by the War Office to form a battalion of footballers, the 17th Service Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, in December 1914.

Who were the men behind the Footballers' Battalion? It is interesting to consider who was present on the platform at the inaugural meeting at Fulham Town Hall, and indeed what significant figures were absent. Joynson-Hicks' main ally in the football world and the key figure at the meeting was Henry Norris, a high profile and somewhat controversial figure in London football. A wealthy South London property developer he first came to prominence as a director of Fulham, whom he guided to successive Southern League titles in 1905-06 and 1906-07, and subsequently a place in the Football League. He then attempted to merge the club with Arsenal but when this failed to materialise he joined the Arsenal board and went on to become chairman. He was behind the Gunners move from Woolwich to Highbury and for a short while he ran both



clubs before pressure forced his resignation from the Fulham board. Mayor of Fulham from 1909, like Joynson-Hicks and William Hayes-Fisher he was a member of the Conservative & Unionist party. William Joynson-Hicks seems to have had little involvement in the game of football, being more of a motoring man (he was chairman of the AA from 1908 to 1923). A patriot and hard-line right-winger (politically) he eventually served as Home Secretary in the Conservative government from 1924 to 1929. William Hayes-Fisher was trained as a barrister but, apart from a brief spell from 1906 to 1910, he had sat in the House of Commons as MP for the Fulham constituency since 1885. One of the original directors of Fulham FC when the club became a limited company in 1903, he maintained an interest in the game and had recently sponsored a Parliamentary Bill on behalf of the FA aimed at halting football coupons during the war. Captain Henry Wells-Holland, the Clapton Orient chairman, was another individual with strong aspirations. A former Mayor of Hackney (where he had been an Alderman on the Borough Council), he had tried and failed to win a place on the Football League Management Committee on numerous occasions. He was not a natural ally of Henry Norris, having strongly opposed Arsenal's move to Highbury, but clearly he had now put this behind him in favour of the national interest. The Football Association were strongly represented through both the secretary (Frederick Wall) and the president (Lord Kinnaid), but the Football League had no official presence. The Southern League provided one of their leading officials, treasurer JB Skeggs of Millwall. In the light of the Conservative Party connections of several of the politicians, it is perhaps significant to register here that the Southern League president, the Right Hon. Sydney Buxton, a prominent Liberal MP, was a notable absentee. The two Army men appear to have been from the London recruiting office. Also on the organising committee, but not apparently on the platform, was Sir Henry C Eggar. The political background through the key figures on the platform, and Norris's reputation as an ambitious wheeler-dealer suggest that the venture was as much about increasing his own personal profile as about appeasing football's critics. He went on to become MP for East Fulham in 1918 and when the professional game recommenced in 1919 he successfully negotiated Arsenal into the First Division despite Tottenham having a better case. His career in football ended in 1927 when he was banned from the game after financial irregularities were uncovered at the Highbury club.

How successful was the Footballers' Battalion in its early stages? The organisers hoped to enlist a full battalion of 1,350 men apparently from the ranks of both amateur and professional players and staunch supporters of senior clubs. *Athletic News* dreamed of a future where there might be "the Chelsea Company, the Tottenham Company, the Millwall Company, the Fulham Company, and so on," but the reality was somewhat different in relation to professional players. Recruitment at the time was principally aimed at unmarried men, of whom there were estimated to be around 600 amongst the ranks of professional footballers. A significant proportion of these were based in the north of England, although the battalion announced it would only recruit men from clubs south of the River Trent. Initial interest was high, with 4-500 present at the meeting, but of these only 35 enlisted on the day, and by the end of the year *The Sportsman* recorded just 34 additional names. Only Croydon Common and Clapton Orient can be said to have responded with enthusiasm, while not one player from either of the clubs associated with Norris actually signed up at the inaugural meeting (Ratcliffe of Arsenal was an administrator and not on the playing staff). By March the number of recruits from amongst professional players had reached just 122. Even then the men had an assurance they would not see active service until the end of the 1914-15 season, and there was an agreement they would be released to play on Saturdays.



The inescapable conclusion is that the Footballers' Battalion was little more than a publicity exercise, designed on the part of the football authorities to try and halt the wave of criticism and used by the War Office for propaganda. Ultimately however, it was the first step on the path to closing the professional game down. With gate receipts reduced by around 50 per cent many clubs began to suffer financial problems and it was perhaps no surprise when wages were reduced in March 1915 (the maximum wage dropped from £208 per annum to £156). Professional football in England closed down at the end of that season, a result of financial considerations as much as public pressure.

*Principal Sources: The Times; The Sportsman; The Athletic News; The History of the Football Association 1863-1953, G Green (London, 1953); League Football and the Men Who Made It, S Inglis (London, 1988); Association Football and English Society 1863-1915, T Mason (Brighton, 1980); Not Just on Christmas Day, J Bailey (Upminster, 1999); Who's Who of British Members of Parliament, M Stenton, S Lees (Brighton, 1978, 1979).*

**From: *The Sportsman*, Wednesday 16 December 1914**

## **F. A. WAR RALLY.**

### **BIG MEETING AT FULHAM.**

### **THE BATTALION STARTED.**

### **FIRST BATCH OF ENLISTMENTS.**

Yesterday's meeting at the Fulham Town Hall, kindly lent for the purpose by the Mayor, Mr H. G. Norris, must be pronounced a success. It was arranged for the purpose of giving a send-off to the Footballers' Battalion, officially known as the 17th Service Battalion Middlesex Regiment of Kitchener's Army, and was attended by four or five hundred officials and players and others interested in the Association game. It had been intended to use the smaller hall, but the players trooped in as one party just before the time fixed (half-past 3) in such numbers that a move was made to the larger one, which was practically filled.

Mr W. Joynson-Hicks, M.P., occupied the chair, having on his right Mr H. G. Norris (the Mayor of Fulham) and on his left the Right Hon W. Hayes-Fisher, P.C., M.P., whilst others on the platform were the Right Hon Lord Kinnaird, K.T. (President of the Football Association), who could not arrive until some time after the meeting had been in progress, Col Grantham, Capt Whiffen, Capt Wells-Holland (Clapton Orient), Messrs J. B. Skeggs (Millwall) and F. J. Wall, who is acting as hon sec of the project. In the body of the hall were directors and officials of most of the leading professional clubs in and around the metropolis, including Messrs C. D. Crisp, J. Hall, and G. Morrell (The Arsenal), A. J. Palmer (Chelsea), S. Bourne (Crystal Palace), T. A. Descock, M. F. Cadman, and P. McWilliam (Tottenham Hotspur), P. Kelso (Fulham), and others too numerous to mention.

The Chairman opened proceedings with a splendid speech, in which he stated that most of those present were fully aware of the reason for which they had assembled, nor were they ignorant of the amount of correspondence and articles which had been appearing in the Press attacking footballers, football clubs, and even those who looked on. But the present was not a meeting called to answer those attacks. The country was at war with a great Power, Germany, and not until the stern struggle was over was it the time for recriminations. There was for the time being



no party in the House of Commons, and he wished them to take the same line. Everybody to-day was for the State, everybody against Germany: all were anxious to make the path of those in charge easy, and assure ultimate victory. They could only endure, and then if they thought it worth while after the war was over they could answer their critics. His own view was that that magnificent meeting was an answer, and the best that could be made was to ensure the successful formation of the Footballers' Battalion, or a Footballers' Brigade. (Hear, hear) He had slipped rather curiously into this matter. He had been engaged in an attempt of another kind which doubtless for good reason did not receive sanction, but he was told by the War Office that if willing he could join with the Football Association in raising a Footballers' Battalion. He was delighted to do so, and had the previous day received the sanction for the formation of the 17th Service Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment, "the Die Hards." (Applause.) There were, however, several essentials required. First, the players must have the sympathy of their clubs. A meeting was held last week at which the London professional clubs unanimously decided to grant every possible facility to the players, and also for recruiting on their grounds. They also wanted a battalion for themselves; footballers who were used to playing together on the field wished to be together on the battlefield of Flanders, and to be side by side with those with whom they fought at football. The third point was that those men under contract should have the Saturday off to play in matches, and as the result of several interviews with the War Office he was able to state that Lord Kitchener had granted that request, and players under contract will be given time off to enable football to be played till the end of the season in accordance with their contracts. They had secured on the Committee Lord Kinnaird, Mr J. C. Clegg, Mr Hayes-Fisher, whom they in Fulham know so well, the Mayor of Fulham (Mr Norris) and last, but not least, Mr F. J. Wall had consented to act as hon. Secretary, and the Football Association had placed the offices at 42, Russell-square, at their disposal. As soon as it was known that the battalion was to be raised there were many applications received to become officers and non-commissioned officers. It was better to be led on the field of battle by men who had led them on the field of football, and there was a certainty of first-rate N.C.O.'s, and the whole strength of a battalion depended on its N.C.O.'s. There were numerous officers in the Guards, etc., who had played in football teams, and who would like to rejoin and take their places in the Footballers' Battalion. He would be glad, after Mr Hayes-Fisher had spoken, if those thinking of joining would ask him any questions. He did not wish to enlist them under false pretences, for they were not asked to engage in any picnic. It was a war of business, bitterness, and danger. They were not merely fighting for Belgium, not for a mere "scrap of paper," nor even for the honour of Great Britain; they would be fighting for their homes, their wives and their children. Terribly as Germany had treated Belgium - (A Voice: And Poland too) - this would be multiplied tenfold if Germany got across to our shores, and the question one had to ask was, "Can I live as an Englishman without doing something against the barbarians?" Don't think the war will soon be over; don't think they were to remain in comfort. The game they had been playing was great, the game in Flanders would be a greater; the charge at football was good, that with the bayonet finer; the cheers of the crowd were not to be compared with the sound of the bullet and the noise of the big guns. If asked years hence what they had done in the Great War, what would they be able to reply? He appealed to them to rally round and form a battalion that would redound to the honour of footballers, not only throughout the length of this country, but from the confines of Flanders to the centre of Berlin. (Loud applause.)

The Right Hon. W. Hayes-Fisher, who also had a hearty reception, said that as president of the Fulham F.C., he was proud of being a profound believer in sport, in most branches of which he had indulged in his earlier days, and he was one of those very wicked individuals who did not object nowadays to looking on at football. (Applause and laughter.) He earnestly appealed to



footballers and the friends of footballers to join, and they ought easily to raise the 1350 for the battalion. He could not altogether fall in with the chairman's idea that they should not at the present time reply to their critics, who altogether misunderstood the facts, and treated them to the worst nonsense that had ever been written. There were about 2000 players actually earning their livelihood at football, and some seemed to think that the moment these enlisted they would have been fit to fight as soldiers, and if only they had crossed over those 2000 could have driven the Germans out of France and Belgium. (Laughter)

A query was interposed as to whether there were not over 4000 registered professionals in England, but it was explained that many of these were at work all the week and earned a few shillings by playing on the Saturday.

Mr Hayes-Fisher, continuing, said that critics argued as to the thousands whom, by playing, they were keeping from joining. In connection with the famous crowd at Chelsea he pointed out that nearly one-half were in khaki, fully a thousand under age. Football would not keep away one in a thousand who really wanted to join, and if there were such a man he would scarcely be a desirable. Recruiting had not failed; they had it on the authority of Mr Bonar Law on Monday, and Lord Kitchener and the Prime Minister had said the same thing. London had done well, Fulham better than any other district and of amateur footballers the metropolis had sent 8700. The attendances had fallen off 50 per cent. What had become of the absent crowd? Most of them were now playing the game elsewhere. He did not care how unpopular he became, but he felt bound to refute the unjust charges which had been made.

The question of joining must be left to every man's conscience. Let each one ask himself whether he ought not to be fighting against the tyranny of an evil monarch, an evil people. He pointed to the example of their leader (Lord Kinnaird, who had just entered the hall), who had given his nearest. He merely asked for fair play for football; there ought to be an equality of sacrifice. A point he wished to bring home was this: He and Lord Kinnaird were directors of a certain company. They had let 25 per cent of the staff join the colours and were able to pay them their salary and to promise reinstatement when the war was over. But take a football professional who returned with the loss of a leg or had one shattered. The clerk might still be employed, but the professional footballer would no longer be able to continue his profession or earn money. He suggested that something might be done to arrange some special system of insurance with the insurance companies to meet such cases. It would be idle to disguise the fact that they would be running such risks, but he knew that footballers were courageous and would not be deterred for that reason. There was under consideration some further scheme as to pensions, etc. They should pay no heed to the unfair criticisms, but show by conspicuous courage and patriotism how false the accusations were, and he was certain that they would secure some of the best men in the Kingdom to fight their country's battles.

It was stated that enrolment could be made either at the meeting or at 42, Russell-sq. They wanted each to become, as it were, a recruiting officer to his club; they wanted the amateurs, the people who played, and those who looked on. Several queries were asked, which elicited the fact that the pay of the single men would be 7s. per week with all found; for the married men the same with 12s. 6d. allowance for their wives (3s. 6d. extra if resident within the London postal area) and further allowances for children, according to their number. The pay of the players will be provided as usual, and the committee will furnish the travelling expenses of those returning from camp to take part in Saturday games. Until their quarters were ready 2s. 9d. would be allowed to each man.

Lord Kinnaird, who was warmly cheered, said that the movement was a right one. Footballers had come to the front in times of stress in the past and were doing so now. He believed that large numbers would flock to the rally, especially as their wages, supplemented by the Government



rates of pay, would be forthcoming to the end of the season. What London did that day the country would doubtless follow, and they were to have the privilege, as banks and insurance offices had done, of being together as "pals," which Lord Derby had said made for success. Moreover, each club could act as a rallying party. He referred to Scots who had in a few weeks become famous and earned the V.C. He cordially endorsed the appeal to them to set the example by being the first to join the Footballers' Battalion, and to follow the 100,000 connected with the grand game of football who were already serving their King and country.

The first player to step on the platform was the Clapton Orient right-winger, F. W. Parker, who was born at Weymouth twenty-eight years ago. Buckley (of Bradford) and Needham (Brighton and Hove) were also in the first batch. Once or twice there was a lull, but a few inspiring words from the platform - Mr H. Glibbery, father of the Essex goalkeeper, also addressed a few words as to the excellent way in which his sons found themselves treated at the front - provided a stimulus, and eventually thirty-five were secured. Clapton Orient and Croydon Common responding especially well. These were at once enlisted.

Mr S. Bourne (Crystal Palace) enquired whether it might not be possible to secure the transfer to the Footballers' Battalion of some of those who had recently joined but would prefer to be with their old football friends? The chairman replied that it was, of course, a matter for the War Office authorities, but the committee would see what could be done in the matter.

The Mayor of Fulham (Mr H. G. Norris) moved a very hearty vote of thanks to the chairman and the other gentlemen who had kindly attended and spoken, stating that several of the directors of clubs intended joining. Captain Wells-Holland seconded, stating that the players were not being forced into joining, though he hoped to see Clapton Orient with a platoon of its own. The battalion would be a splendid answer to the unjust strictures in the press.

The vote was carried with enthusiasm, and in replying the chairman said he did not require any thanks. Turning to the players grouped behind him, he explained: "These are the thanks, the expression of loyalty footballers have given to the King." He stated that Mr Hayes-Fisher had kindly consented to answer by return of post any queries as to pay, allowances, etc., on which matter he was an authority.

The meeting concluded with the hearty singing of the National Anthem by the whole company.

### **THE ENLISTMENT LIST**

ARSENAL: ... Ratcliffe.

BRADFORD: F. C. Buckley.

BRIGHTON AND HOVE ALBION: A. Needham, R. Routledge, F. Spencer, and J. Woodhouse.

CHELSEA: W. Krug, D. Girdwood, and E. Foord.

CLAPTON ORIENT: F. W. Parker, J. Hugall, N. Evans, H. Gibson, R. Dalrymple, W. Jonas, E. King, A. W. Tilley, R. McFadden, and ... Pearson.

CROYDON COMMON: E. C. Williamson, T. Newton, D. Upex, C. Smith, A. J. Tomkins, and P. Barnfather.

CRYSTAL PALACE: J. Bowler and ... Middleton.

LUTON TOWN: H. P. Roberts and F. Lindley.

SOUTHEND UNITED: F. Robson.

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR: G. Bowler and J. Oliver.

WATFORD: R. Williams, A. Stewart, and J. McLaughlan.

