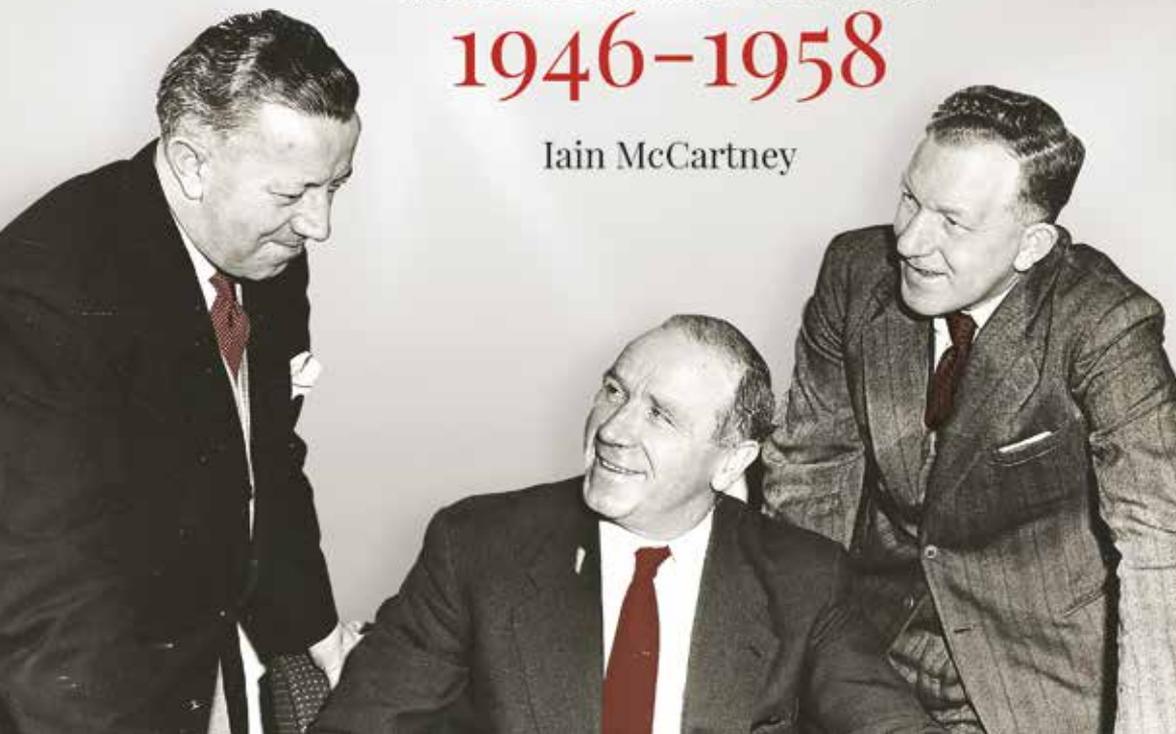




Building the **Dynasty**

Manchester United
1946-1958

Iain McCartney



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Introduction

IN the modern game, Sir Alex Ferguson's managerial achievements may be unique; but, at Old Trafford, it was as if he had found Matt Busby's recipe book, had blown away the cobwebs and was merely following it word for word from those bygone days of a wildly different era in football.

Initially, Ferguson endured a strenuous and almost demoralising few years in the manager's chair which had, in previous years, proved far from comfortable – before he went on to handsomely repay the faith shown in him by the board of directors. He assembled a squad like some leader of old and marched them to undiluted success, conquering England, Europe and the world to the acclaim and disdain of millions. Back in the 40s and 50s, however, Busby's task had been much greater than that of his Scottish counterpart, as the man from Bellshill had to start from scratch on all fronts, without the benefit of a superclub's resources behind him.

Looking back beyond these twin Scottish-Mancunian success stories, a starkly contrasting picture existed in the long-forgotten decades when the fledgling Manchester United, and its previous incarnation of Newton Heath, struggled with bankruptcy, dark days in the Second Division and the threat of dropping even further down the Leagues. Yes, there were First Division championships in 1908 and 1911, with an FA Cup success in 1909, but for long periods United were living in the shadows of others.

In 1937, Manchester United fell under the guidance of club secretary Walter Crickmer, so with the resumption of League football on the horizon following the Second World War, a new manager was a real priority.

One name that arose as a potential candidate was that of Matt Busby, who was no stranger to Manchester or indeed United, due

to his association with neighbours City and his current employers, Liverpool. Busby himself had been contemplating his future as war raged in Europe and North Africa, holding ambitions to get involved in the coaching/managerial side of the game, so when the United approach was made, he decided to grasp the opportunity.

The appointment itself represented a gamble by United, trusting their future in an individual untried at managerial level, with no coaching qualifications or experience other than that gathered in the army and gleaned from his time at Maine Road and Anfield. But the man from Bellshill relished the challenge and, in a relatively short period of time, transformed Manchester United into the club it had always craved to be – with a team that was the envy of British football.

Building the Dynasty takes you back to those war-torn days and the appointment of the man who was to set about building one of the greatest football clubs in the world. It narrates the club's struggle to return to its bomb-ravaged Old Trafford home whilst guesting at the Maine Road accommodation of neighbours City, and its attempts at recapturing the silverware that had for so long eluded them. It rekindles Busby's vision of producing his own home-grown talent, building on the existing MUJACs (Manchester United Junior Athletic Club) set-up, and evaluates the huge, all-too-frequently forgotten part played by his assistant Jimmy Murphy in nurturing those talented youngsters from the junior sides through to the first team. The book profiles countless players of yesteryear who are still remembered with reverence some seven decades later, and brings to life those pioneering days of European football – Busby's fight against the footballing authorities, the games, the ups and downs, and the stories of countless fans and club insiders who made a contribution.

It was at this time of icons and legends that Manchester United stretched out its tentacles and reached so many people, dragging them into the womb of what is no normal football club. But there was, of course, a cruel twist to the tale, as Busby's dream and the expected dominance of his home-produced team in the late 1950s failed to materialise due to events on foreign shores.

Building the Dynasty is more than just another football club history. This is the story of how Matt Busby lay the foundations of the modern-day Manchester United.

Iain McCartney

Chapter One

The Appointment and Those Tentative First Steps

IT was an innocuous, cold December morning in a Surrey army camp. Being miles from home, the mind would always float back to loved ones and the familiar, yearned-for environment, no matter how drab and discouraging it may have been in reality. Communication from those sitting by the fireside patiently awaiting the return of their beloved conscripts was at times infrequent, so every letter was treated with the excitement of an invitation to a royal garden party.

The buzz created by the arrival of the mail on this particular morning was little different than that of any other day, but for Matt Busby, one envelope carried an unfamiliar scrawl, the Manchester postmark intriguing him even more. The tasks at hand were now momentarily forgotten as this particular letter became the focus of his attention. Sitting down, he opened the single page and read:

“Dear Matt. No doubt you will be surprised to get this letter from your old pal Louis.

Well Matt I have been trying for the past month to find you and not having your reg. address I could not trust a letter going to Liverpool, as what I have to say is so important.

I don't know if you have considered about what you are going to do when the war is over, but I have a great job for you if you are willing to take it on. Will you get in touch

with me at the above address and when I know there will be no danger of interception.

Now Matt, I hope this is plain to you. You see, I have not forgotten my old friend either in my prayers or in your future welfare. I hope your good wife and family are well and please God you will be soon home to join their happy circle.

Wishing you a very Happy Xmas and a lucky New Year.

With all God's Blessings in you and yours.

Your old pal Louis Rocca."

It was a morning and a letter, dated December 15th 1944, that not only changed the life of its recipient but also the history of a football club. One that had tasted both the highs and lows of the English game. A club that was a slumbering giant, as success in recent years had passed it by, mother fortune off-loading her wares on others. The 1930s had been spent primarily in the Second Division of the Football League, with only a final-day success at Millwall in May 1934 salvaging pride and preventing an ignominious drop into the third tier of the English game, along with the yet more daunting prospect of financial ruin. It was a club that had been run by secretary Walter Crickmer since November 1936, and one in need of much more than a manager.

The letter, although entirely unexpected from this particular source was, in content alone, something that the Scottish international wing-half had been waiting and hoping for. Busby, considering his playing days more or less over, had aimed to secure a coaching/managerial position back in his native Scotland, but much to his disappointment no offers of employment were immediately forthcoming. Still, he lived in hope that, once clubs began to get back to some sort of normality following the hostilities of the Second World War, then something would materialise.

Little did he know that the wheels to such an appointment had actually been set in motion three years previously at Penny Cottage, near Cranborne in Dorset, during a late night/early morning chat between the Manchester United chairman James Gibson and his friend Captain Bill Williams, sports officer for the Southern

Command, who had at his disposal some of the best players in the English game. Over a few drinks, the conversation got round to Gibson enquiring of his friend if he knew anyone who might be suitable to take on the role of manager with his club once the war was over. One or two names were bandied about, but Williams put forward a strong case for a certain Matthew Busby – and slowly, as the glasses were refilled, a plan was put in place. Through his connections, Williams said he would arrange for Busby to play a couple of games as a ‘guest’ player with Bournemouth so that Gibson could run the rule over him on the pitch, whilst obtaining an insight into the Scottish international’s character.

Gibson was duly impressed and what he saw was enough to convince him that here was someone who could have a profound effect on those around him as he was clearly a born leader. Little could be done however, with Busby still in the army and also, more to the point, still on Liverpool’s books; but Williams agreed to keep an eye on the situation and inform Gibson if the need for hasty action on his behalf materialised.

It was not, however, until early 1945 that Williams contacted his friend to inform him that if he was still interested in Busby, then he should make his move sooner, rather than later. Busby was about to be demobbed and other clubs were beginning to show interest – so it was thanks to Louis Rocca that the ball started to roll.

With much more important goings-on throughout the country than sport in general, transfers and the day-to-day affairs of football clubs were only newsprint fodder for the ‘local’ papers. Even then, it was easy for stories to slip under the radar un-noticed, with the Busby-Manchester United story being a prime example. The news was soon to break, but not on the cobbled streets of Manchester.

Whilst Busby was north of the border on February 14th, in conversation with ‘Waverley’ of the *Daily Record*, he hinted strongly that his future lay in his homeland, and it was hoped that only a matter of time would see his appointment with a Scottish League club. In the same paper the following day, it was suggested that Hibernian were keen to give him the opportunity he craved for, but their chairman gave a flat denial when asked. Busby was also tight-lipped, keeping the rumour mill alive. He had good reason

to be circumspect, as despite harbouring hopes of a return north, he had cast them aside and kept secret the fact that he had already been approached by a club and accepted their offer of employment.

But it was during those days in Scotland whilst on leave and visiting family, that his 'secret' was eventually to become common knowledge, as he was approached by 'Rex' of the *Sunday Mail* for nothing more than a friendly chat whilst attending the Queen's Park v Clyde Scottish Southern League fixture at Hampden Park on February 17th. But during the course of the conversation all was revealed.

Busby had returned north 'hoping for some peace and quiet', but was persistently asked about his future employment plans and although he had hoped to keep United's offer secret for a few more days, the *Sunday Mail* reporter was given the scoop, breaking the news in the following day's paper:

"About two weeks ago he (**Busby**) received a grand offer of the managership of Manchester United. As it happened, he had a verbal understanding with his own club, Liverpool, concerning the job of player/coach. Nothing binding of course, but Matt thought it only right he should formally ask for his release from his promise.

"On his way home on leave, he dropped off at Liverpool and explained the situation. Unknown to him, the Liverpool club held a board meeting to discuss the matter and decided to agree to his release. The press had tagged onto this story and presumed his journey to Scotland was linked with a job north of the border."

The offer may well have been made 'about two weeks ago', but it was only a matter of days since it had been discussed at Manchester United board level, with chairman J. W. Gibson reporting at the meeting on February 15th that he had been impressed with Busby during their recent conversation. He urged his fellow directors to sanction the appointment of the former Manchester City player as manager on a five-year contract, starting one month after Busby's demobilisation.

The appointment was ‘officially’ announced on February 19th, the day after the news had been broken north of the border, the United board more than likely forced into making the announcement earlier than they had intended. The new Manchester United manager had been granted a five-year contract and a reported salary of £750 per annum.

Busby himself was obviously delighted in securing such a position, but was also disappointed that no job opportunities had arisen in Scotland, saying: “I had been waiting for three years to see if a Scottish club would offer me a post.” Strangely, he was to change his tune on this matter in later years, saying; “I could have returned to Scotland to take over Ayr United, but having lived for so long in Lancashire, I was not particularly keen to leave – even for the homeland.” He had grown to realise what he had at his disposal, but his nationalistic drawstrings were to remain in place for a few more years yet.

Matt Busby had originally left Scotland in February 1928, but had everything gone to plan, it would not have been on a train journey south to Manchester, but on a steamer across the Atlantic to America to forge a new life in a land many of his fellow countrymen already called ‘home’.

Opportunities to better oneself amongst the coal mines of Central Scotland, and indeed many other over-populated areas of Britain, were few and far between. For the Busby family, poverty was never far away, mainly due to his father having been killed during the First World War, leaving Matt as the main breadwinner. Many relatives had also lost their lives during the hostilities of 1914-1918, leading their families into forsaking their homes and friends for a new life across the Atlantic Ocean, and this move was also contemplated by Matt’s mother in 1927. Although there were initial plans for her son to make a life for himself away from the coalface as a schoolteacher, the paperwork for a visa was duly filled in and the pipe dream that was America came a step closer to reality.

Due to a six-month waiting list, however, the Busbys never did say goodbye to those heather hills of home, as a visitor appeared on their doorstep with the offer of a trial with Manchester City. Matt’s performances with local Lanarkshire junior side Denny Hibernian

(having previously turned out for the quaintly named Alpine Villa and Orbiston Celtic, where Arsenal legend Alec James was a teammate) had not gone unnoticed. Although caught in two minds, the offer was accepted and following a trial with City's second string against Burnley, a professional contract was offered – £5 per week during the season and £4 in the summer. Those plans for America were quickly dismissed.

But life at Maine Road was certainly no bed of roses, and Busby's dreams of becoming a professional footballer were suddenly looking far from certain. Failing to make much impression in the City reserves side at inside-forward in the latter half of the 1927-28 season, he was switched to the unfamiliar outside-right spot and from there to every other position along the front line. Such moves did little to instil confidence, and neither did City's signing of other forwards.

The close season offered time for thought and, had it stretched out any longer, there was every possibility that the City staff would have been one player less when the 1928-29 season kicked off; but the disillusioned young Scot decided to have one final attempt at making the much wanted breakthrough. It was to prove the correct decision, as he suddenly found himself propelled into first-team action against Middlesbrough in November 1929, but despite City's 2-0 victory, it was Central League football once again the following Saturday. This disappointment rekindled those lingering doubts of making the grade at Maine Road, whilst also doing little to abate the homesickness that had recently materialised. Only the intervention of his room-mate Phil McCloy prevented the purchase of a single rail ticket from Manchester to Glasgow.

There was, however, another intervention, although unknown to the unhappy young Scot, and one that could have changed his career and perhaps Manchester United's wartime search for a manager. Harold Hardman, United's chairman, had watched one or two of his neighbours' reserve-team fixtures and noted something in Busby's performances that prompted an approach as regards his availability. "£150 and he is yours" came City's reply, but the United chairman had to admit that his club were unable to find "150 pennies", so no deal materialised.

During his conversation with City's manager Peter Hodge, Hardman had revealed that if he had signed Busby then he would have switched him from an inside-forward to a half-back role. This information was not only promptly noted but acted upon by City, and this sudden change was to see the player finally make the breakthrough that he had thought was never going to materialise, going on to enjoy FA Cup success in 1934, whilst also winning Scottish international honours. Such were his performances that Liverpool were more than happy to pay £8,000 to take him to Merseyside in March 1936, where he took on the role of captain, but any hopes of further honours within the game were thwarted with the outbreak of the Second World War.

Having met the Manchester United directors, thirty-four year-old Busby soon became Manchester United's seventh manager¹. But had Busby not been so desperate to secure employment in a coaching/managerial capacity, to enable him to continue his career within the game, then he may have contemplated taking over the reins at United for a shade longer and indeed with a little more thought, as it was far removed from the ideal appointment.

The man from Orbiston, despite his inexperience, could be considered as no random choice, selected by closing the eyes and sticking a pin into a list of possible candidates. He was a sought-after commodity. Reading would have been more than keen to employ him, having offered him the post of assistant manager, while his former club Liverpool had, as mentioned, shown more than a passing interest. But it was just a couple of miles across Manchester from his old Maine Road stomping ground that Busby decided to cut his managerial teeth.

During the war, Busby – more correctly, 'Company Sergeant Major Instructor Busby' – had served in the Territorial Army where he had honed his coaching credentials in North Africa as player-coach of an army team that could boast individual talent such as Frank Swift, Joe Mercer and Tommy Lawton. The 'player'

¹ Or thirteenth if you really want to delve into the record books, throwing secretaries A.H. Albut, James West, T.J. Wallworth, J.J. Bentley and Walter Crickmer into the mix, along with jack-of-all-trades Louis Rocca. All these men held the reins as manager, in all but name, for periods of varying length.

part was important, as Busby could still 'strut his stuff' over the course of ninety minutes, competing with the best – and despite being a Liverpool player, he was called upon to guest for the likes of Reading, Middlesbrough and Hibernian during those wartime seasons. Indeed, he had represented Scotland as recently as 3rd February 1945, the last of his seven wartime caps, all strangely enough against the Auld Enemy. His playing CV, however, only shows one 'official' Scotland cap, won back in 1933 against Wales at Cardiff, along with representative matches with the British Army and the United Services.

Taking up his new form of employment, surveying the relatively unfamiliar surroundings at United, Busby's eyes would have been opened to the size of the task ahead, and his thoughts and ideas may well have taken something of a bump against his preconceptions. Yes, he had a team. A handful of individuals, one or two little more than run-of-the-mill players and only one, Johnny Carey, who could boast of any sort of international pedigree. That, plus his own enthusiasm and ambition was about it, as Manchester United were now also homeless. Not evicted for the non-payment of monies owed, but forced to leave the confines of the Manchester Ship Canal due to the heavy bombardment of the surrounding Old Trafford area by the Luftwaffe.

Air raids on the evening of December 22nd 1940 had left some three hundred Mancunians dead. Such was the damage to United's ground, the Christmas Day fixture against Stockport County in the North Regional League was hastily switched to Stockport's Edgeley Park, along with the next home match against Blackburn Rovers, scheduled for December 28th. Strangely, moving both fixtures had little effect on the actual attendances with the 5-5 draw against Blackburn watched by 1,500 at a time when home gates would range from 700 to 3,000.

Old Trafford was consequently tidied up and normality resumed, but the 7-3 victory over Bury in the North Regional League (which saw both Rowley and Carey claim hat-tricks) on March 8th 1941 was to be the last United competitive fixture played at the ground until August 1949. On the evening of Tuesday March 11th, the 556th day of the war, the German air force once again

flew over Manchester, with a sustained attack causing more damage and devastation than before. Although Trafford Park was the prime target, the Old Trafford stadium was once again caught in the line of fire, leaving it far removed from the pictures cast up in the new manager's mind's eye from his previous visits as an opposition player.

“At times the concentration of gunfire was heavier than had been heard previously in the district,” reported the *Guardian*. “The planes came over in procession and for a long period of attack, which ended before midnight, there was not a minute during which the drone of the engines could not be heard.

“The earlier planes dropped some flares and incendiary bombs, while later planes dropped some high explosive bombs, but the barrage from the ground defences appeared to prevent the raiders from making a heavy concentrated attack.”

During the war, there were heavy reporting restrictions with exact areas and buildings that had suffered bomb damage going unnamed, but the article did go on to state that “slight outbreaks of fire were reported from a football ground.” With the following day's issue mentioning: “At the football ground, incendiaries fell on the main stand and the dressing rooms were damaged by heavy explosive.” That ‘football ground’ was Old Trafford.

On this occasion, there was no possibility of a patch-up job. Manchester United Football Club were now homeless and while arrangements were being made with the Stretford Corporation to dismantle what was left of the stand to salvage the steel, and to demolish other unsafe parts of the ground, claims for war damage to property were put forward to the authorities. This was all very well in the long term, but what was to happen in the meantime, with half a season's fixtures still to fulfil and an overdraft of £15,000 at the bank?

Assistance came from neighbours City, who offered their unfortunate rivals a helping hand, suggesting that they used their

Maine Road ground for 'home' fixtures until the time came when Old Trafford was playable again. It was a lifeline United needed and grasped thankfully, as they were determined to continue with their commitments as best they could. Following clearance from the Football League, Maine Road became 'home' for both the Blue and the Red factions of Manchester, while Old Trafford lay dormant several miles away, eventually used only for the Central League fixtures of both clubs.

When season 1939-40 had kicked off, with only a hint of the impending danger in the air, Manchester United had a cast of twenty-nine professionals, the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* hinting that they "must be the envy of nearly every club in the country" as they had "three – possibly four – first-class centre-forwards in Smith, Hanlon, Hullett and perhaps Asquith, the new man from Barnsley." That current list of professionals was soon, however, to be decimated, as was that of other clubs, with all professional contracts cancelled. Advancing age and the hostilities were soon to claim both lives and football careers.

If having no ground was the greatest minus point in Busby's notebook, the more positive points included the progressive steps that the club had already made in laying the foundations of a prestigious junior system – the MUJACs.

The 1930s had seen Manchester United struggle, in more ways than one, the new decade kicking off with a 2-0 home defeat to Swindon Town, then members of the Third Division South, in the third round of the FA Cup. The campaign drew to a close with United in 17th place, a drop of five from the previous season, with a further drop of five places twelve months later leaving the club propping up the table and sending them into the Second Division. Conceding twenty-six goals in the opening five fixtures then did little to instil confidence.

The future looked as grim as the skyline around the Trafford Park Industrial Estate, due mainly to the financial clout of J.H. Davies having evaporated upon his untimely death in October 1927. The remaining directors had neither the wealth nor the business acumen to keep the club going for any foreseeable length of time.

A journalist close to the club, Stacey Lintott, had been part of a lunching circle that included a Mr James Gibson, a “successful businessman with a weakness for taking over failing companies and restoring them to solvency.” An approach was made and Gibson, who knew little or nothing about football, let alone United, agreed to step into the breach and to shoulder the ever-growing debt; but this arrangement carried conditions. Gibson wanted to start at Old Trafford with a completely clean sheet which included the resignation of the current board, although at the suggestion of Lintott, secretary Walter Crickmer was retained.

Following the influx of the much-needed cash, a manager was the next priority on the list as Crickmer had been juggling his role with secretarial duties – and, once again, Gibson passed the job of finding a capable individual over to Lintott. The journalist had no hesitation in earmarking Frank Buckley for the position, a friend who had cut his teeth as a manager with Norwich City and Blackpool before moving to Wolves, where he was beginning to attract attention. Coupled with that, he was himself a Mancunian and had played three games for United in season 1905-06.

Buckley was favourable to returning to Manchester and a meeting was arranged, but nothing more was to come of the get-together, mainly due to the fact that the prospective manager and the new chairman had something of a personality clash, the latter wanting to retain supreme control of the club, the former not wanting to be little more than a superior office boy. Although he had never guided a team to a notable triumph, Buckley had certainly made his mark as a manager of note with a wealth of ideas, and would have brought undoubted success to Manchester United. But it was not to be.

Mid-table in 1931-32 was followed by a jump into sixth place in the Second Division, with the hope of further improvement, but season 1933-34 turned into a near catastrophe, with only a 2-0 victory at Millwall on the final day of the season saving the club from relegation into Division Three and an unknown fate.

The future, however, soon looked brighter as, within two seasons, United were back in the top flight, having won the Second Division championship in 1935-36. But it proved to be a false dawn,

as they were to spend only one season back amongst the elite, finishing second bottom, arguably due to the fact that manager Scott Duncan left the club in the November. Thankfully, only one season was spent in the lower division, as they were again promoted, as runners-up, at the end of 1937-38.

In their determination not to simply maintain their place in the First Division, but also to build the club into a formidable force, much discussion was held at boardroom level and it was decided that while there would always be some activity in the transfer market, if and when required, the club would attempt to nurture their own footballing talent.

Agreement was reached that an approach would be made to schoolmasters and other individuals interested in schoolboy and junior football in the Manchester, Stretford and Salford area, with a committee of fifteen elected. Trials would be held and the most promising youngsters invited to come and train at the club, under the watchful eyes of Tom Curry, Jim McClelland and other members of the coaching staff. A further proposal held that the team or teams, depending on the number of suitable players, would be entered into one of the local Manchester leagues, under the name of MUJACs – the Manchester United Junior Athletic Club.

In the Altrincham, Hale and Bowdon *Guardian* from mid-August 1957 to March 1958, Harry Renshaw penned a history of Manchester United and in the weekly segment of December 27th wrote:

“At school a boy’s progress was closely watched by the teachers, who are and always have been the real foundation of soccer.

“But once they had to make their way in the world the boys were left to their own devices for most part, for the youth organisations with their lack of funds could never be expected to cater for the thousands of youngsters who become available each year. In consequence many thousands of promising boys dropped out of the game through lack of encouragement and it was this tragic gap that United set out to fill within the limits of their means when they formed

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the Manchester United Junior Athletic Club, commonly called the 'MUJACs'.

“By running these junior teams they were able to take youngsters straight from school, and by playing them in leagues of their particular age group gradually bring them to maturity without any harmful effects that inevitably fell to the boy who, because of superior skill was forced with open age teams and then suffer the consequences.”

During the summer of 1938 the trials were concluded and season 1938-39 saw two teams, one made up of players aged around sixteen thrown into an open league set-up, with the younger lads enjoying a more leisurely introduction into competitive football with friendly fixtures.

Initially, the foray into an open league was difficult, but the experience gained was priceless, as local leagues were made up of a variety of players on different levels of fitness and skill.

United's set-up was certainly not unique, as other Football League clubs had also embraced a youth programme and towards the end of that inaugural MUJACs season, their fixture list was expanded to take in fixtures against two neighbouring Lancashire clubs, Everton and Preston North End, who had also become involved in bringing local youngsters into the fold.

The first such outing was against a previously undefeated Everton side at Old Trafford, the home side clearly geared up for the confrontation and stunning the visitors with a 3-0 victory. In the 'return' at Goodison Park, Everton were certainly not going to underestimate their opponents for a second time and, in a pulsating encounter, eventually ran out 5-3 winners. The fixtures against Preston North End produced identical outcomes – victory at home, but a defeat away, the latter mainly due to an emphatic display from a youngster by the name of Tom Finney.

A look at the team sheet for the match against Everton reveals only two names of note in the United side – Harry Haslam, who failed to make the grade with United, but who made a name for himself as manager of Luton Town, guiding them to the old First Division in 1974, while the other name of note was J. Aston, lining

up as an inside-forward, one individual at least who was to progress through the ranks.

So, with that initial season out of the way, the men in charge sat down and discussed how things had gone, deciding that the scheme had indeed been a success that could be built upon. But no sooner were the MUJACs up and running when war was declared and suddenly the recently established committee of fifteen found itself reduced to four, with three of those remaining being unable to devote as much time to club business. On the playing side, many of the older boys joined the services, so in order to continue, the age of the players dropped to around fifteen.

In order to keep this area of the club alive, Mr John Bill was asked by United secretary Walter Crickmer if he would take on the role of secretary/manager of the MUJACs, to which he readily agreed and in November 1939 the first fixture of the new season was finally played.

Between that opening game and the first week of the New Year, a total of ten fixtures had been fulfilled, all against teams of an older age group, with one such outing, against Moss Rovers on Boxing Day, bringing considerably more than a dramatic 9-0 defeat.

With an average age of 17, the Moss Rovers side were one of the youngest teams the MUJACs had come up against, but they were still almost 18 months older and were predominantly individuals who had made up the Manchester Schoolboy side for the past two years. Not only that, they were commonly acknowledged as being 'unofficially' affiliated to Manchester City, adding an additional touch of spice to the fixture. John Bill, however, was reluctant to set his youngsters up for what would undoubtedly be a bruising defeat. In the end, he decided that there was more to lose by not playing, and in any case, whatever the outcome, it would simply be part of the learning curve for the youngsters. Although defeated, the manner in which the MUJACs played did not go unnoticed and, at the end of the game, they were invited to join the South Manchester and Wythenshawe Football League for the remainder of that season.

Due to the war creating a shortage of teams, the South Manchester and Wythenshawe League had only run their league

programme up until the end of 1939, with Moss Rovers clear winners, but it was proposed to run a cup competition during the second part of the season. Being members of this well-established league also ensured closer contact with other clubs, opening more doors – and so the MUJACs had their first taste of competitive football.

Early forays brought instant success, with four wins out of four, scoring twenty-nine goals and conceding only two, but on Saturday March 2nd 1940 the fixtures conjured up a return against Moss Rovers. John Bill still expected to endure a defeat, but did insist that his team had “improved” and that “if we can reduce the deficit to 5-0 or so I shall be very pleased”.

In the early exchanges, the United youngsters held their own with right-half Tony Waddington² stamping his authority on the game. Their opponents struggled to gain any sort of momentum as the half wore on and were somewhat stunned to find themselves a goal behind at half time. The Rovers did, however, manage to find a smattering of their usual form during the second forty-five minutes, finally managing to break down the MUJAC defence, but this solitary goal mattered little, as John Bill’s youngsters scored two more, to earn a notable victory in those early days of the fledgling club.

The Second World War continued to have a telling effect on the MUJACs progress as a club and also for their players, as many could find themselves in their regular employment on a Saturday afternoon instead of pulling on their football kit. Much to John Bill’s relief, however, he usually managed to field eleven players except on one occasion, in April 1940, he found himself without five first team regulars, all calling off at the last minute. Recruiting two reserve players, he was still three players short, but instead of calling the game off, decided to play with only eight men.

2 Tony Waddington was to move to Crewe after the war, where he enjoyed a seven-year career before moving into coaching with Stoke City. After a spell as assistant manager, he stepped into the hot seat in 1960, lifting the beleaguered Potters from a relegation-threatened side to Second Division champions and Football League Cup winners, while also bringing European football to the Potteries.

Playing something akin to a 2-1-4 formation, with Joe Walton doing the work of two men and on this occasion outshining Waddington, United surprisingly took the lead mid-way through the second half through leading scorer Hall, and held on to it to secure a surprise victory.

Throughout the Second World War, it was difficult to maintain the momentum of those early days, but nevertheless, the club never faltered in its decision and through consistent endeavour, success was achieved in various competitions with the United 'Colts', as they were to become known. Well, can you imagine standing there shouting "Come on ye' Manchester United Junior Athletic Club"?

Although there were league and cup triumphs, few of those youngsters who represented the club at this level during those war years were to make the step up to the Football League with United, but the seeds had been sown and through time would be cultivated with the club to reap the benefits.

The Football League had been forced into a premature hibernation after only three fixtures of the 1939-40 season, with United having beaten Grimsby Town 4-0 at home on the opening day, going on to draw 1-1 at Chelsea and losing 2-0 at Charlton before war became more than simply a passing threat. With football understandably taking a back seat, it was a few weeks before competitive fixtures were considered by the powers that be. In the months and years that followed, football was played on a regional basis in order to keep travel to an absolute minimum, with United playing in the War Regional League Western Division, then the North Regional League and Football League North, as well as numerous cup competitions and friendlies.

Although games were competitive, results were relatively unimportant, with actual team selection often unknown until minutes before kick-off. 'Guest' players were the norm due to actual signed professionals being engaged in the hostilities on a foreign field, while players from other clubs, unable to make their way 'home' for certain fixtures, would line-up for a club, or clubs, near wherever they happened to be stationed with the various armed forces.

Such circumstances led to United fielding what is arguably their best forward line of all time against Everton on June 1st 1940 – the

only time they have ever played a League fixture in that month – with the front five reading: Stanley Matthews, Alex Herd (father of David), Tom Burdett (the odd man out), Peter Doherty and Raich Carter. Even with such illustrious individuals in the line-up they could do little to prevent a 3-0 defeat.

Almost all of the United players were, by now, in the forces, including Johnny Carey who could have opted to return to his native Ireland, a neutral country, but he decided his duty was to follow the route of his team-mates and join the army, spending most of his active service in Italy. Charlie Mitten was in the RAF, with Stan Pearson, Allenby Chilton and Johnny Morris in the army. The latter found himself stationed at Stromness in the Orkney Isles, while Smith, Warner and Bryant all worked in munitions.

Crowds in those wartime days would vary considerably from week to week with travelling support at a minimum, if any at all. A couple of thousand would be considered about average for a Maine Road ‘home’ fixture, although the ninety minutes against City would see 10,000 click through the turnstiles. Attendances for many of those wartime fixtures can be found as simply rounded up to the nearest hundred or thousand, but even giving or taking a few, something of a record was set on November 30th 1940, when the crowd for Liverpool’s visit to Maine Road was given as a mere 700. The lowest attendance ever to watch a United home fixture?

The forced move from Old Trafford to Stockport in December 1940 saw little change in numbers. As previously mentioned, the attendance for the fixture on the 28th against Blackburn Rovers was given as 1,500. For those who made the short journey from Manchester, or the locals who decided they had eaten and drank enough, they were treated to a real goal feast, with United putting nine past their opponents without reply. For those who were not present, the result was somewhat misleading, showing a considerable turnaround from three weeks previously when the two teams shared ten goals.

With kick-off approaching, Blackburn had still been four players short, and a blackboard with a chalked-up message requesting

players was carried around the ground. In true pantomime fashion, if the boots fitted, you got a game.³

Guest players, unknown men off the street and seasoned professionals littered those early wartime games, producing an excellent ninety-minute distraction from the events on foreign fields and the night-time bombings. The entertainment may not have been of the highest quality, but it often conjured up goals by the barrow load.

Season 1940-41 for example, not only produced the 9-0 and the 5-5 scorelines against Blackburn, as Bury were beaten 7-3 on March 8th, Manchester City 7-1 on April 14th and Chester 6-4 five days later. Such results were certainly not simply oddities throughout a particular season, as 1941-42 kicked off with a 13-1 victory over New Brighton, Jack Rowley claiming seven (two more items of note that would never feature in the record books), bettering his four against City and three against Bury the previous season. Ironically, Brighton held United to a 3-3 draw on their own ground the following Saturday. Stockport County, however, were not so fortunate in the next two fixtures, as United hammered them 5-1 away and 7-1 at Maine Road, that man Rowley scoring four in both fixtures. Chester fared little better, losing 7-0 at home and 8-1 in Manchester, while Tranmere leaked six at Maine Road, Rowley scoring five, with Wrexham returning to north Wales on the back of a 10-3 defeat, Rowley on this occasion overshadowed by Johnny Carey who scored four to the United sharpshooter's three.

Such results saw United lift the North Regional League title. Well, sort of, as it was played in two sections with the first up to December 25th and the second to May 23rd. To confuse matters even more, some games in the second phase were also War Cup qualifiers and Lancashire Cup fixtures.

³ Strangely, a similar story unfolded at Norwich, where Brighton arrived with only five players and soldiers on leave made up the numbers – again to no avail, as the home side went on to win 18-0. Further trivia can be gathered from the Christmas Day fixtures when some clubs actually played both morning and afternoon, with England international Tommy Lawton having the distinction of playing for two clubs in one day, turning out for Everton against Liverpool in the morning and Tranmere Rovers against Crewe in the afternoon.