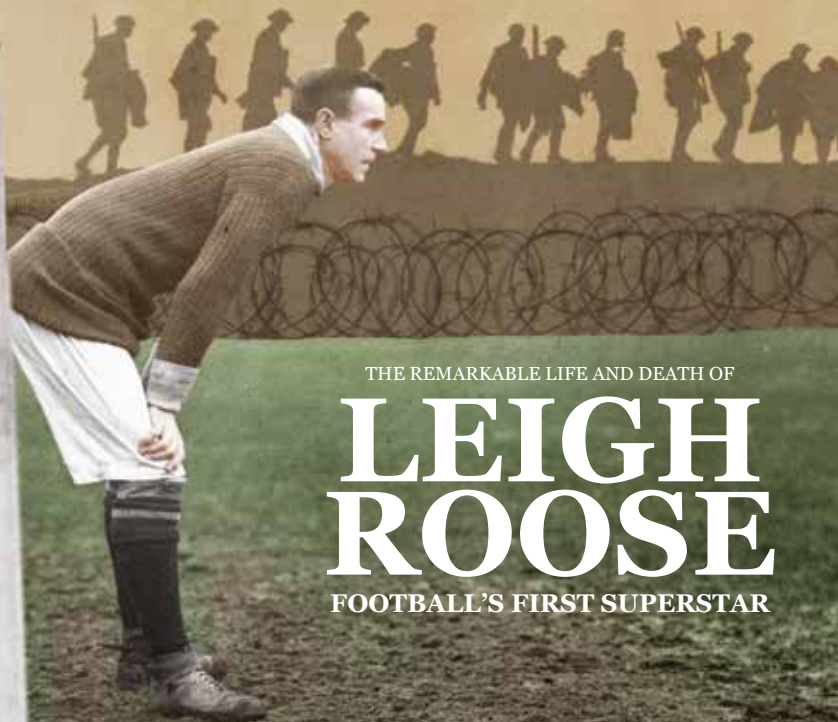


“A terrific biography that rescues a charismatic figure from undeserved obscurity.”

-The Daily Telegraph



THE REMARKABLE LIFE AND DEATH OF

LEIGH ROOSE

FOOTBALL'S FIRST SUPERSTAR

LOST IN FRANCE

S P E N C E R V I G N E S

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Introduction

DEAR reader, you and I should really have become acquainted back in 2007. That was when this book was originally due to see the light of day. The reason why it didn't is the stuff of every author's nightmares.

Picture this. You have been working on a biography about a trailblazing football player and war hero, a labour of love almost eight years in the making. You finish the final manuscript and hand it over to the publisher. They promise the world in terms of marketing and distribution, say how excited they are to be associated with a book that's poles apart from the carefully choreographed 'My Story' claptrap released in the name of so many cossetted modern day players. Then it all goes quiet. Too quiet. You hope everything is in hand, but deep down there's a nagging sense that all isn't what it's supposed to be. The advance you were promised months ago still hasn't materialised. You make phone calls seeking reassurances. It's OK, you are told – this is what happens in between the manuscript being delivered and the finished article hitting the shops. The calm before the storm. But don't worry. Everyone here is really, really excited about your book.

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And then, the very same week that it is due for release, your worst suspicions are confirmed.....

The publisher has gone into receivership.

To make matters worse, you hear the news second hand. You call the publisher's offices but nobody is picking up the phones. You seek answers. You *need* answers. None are forthcoming. In the meantime your labour of love sinks without a trace. A few review copies make it out of the warehouse onto the desks of journalists who write glowing reviews about a paperback that will never see a bookshop. In some kind of morally questionable deal which you don't fully understand the rights are later assumed by another publisher who, because your book is old news, literally shelves it. At some stage there's a clear-out in the warehouse and all copies are either binned or pulped. You don't know when this occurred. You're not told anything.

All of this really happened to *Lost In France*, my labour of love. What does such an experience do to an author's state of mind? You don't want to know.

It's at times like these that a degree of perspective comes in handy. To quote Boris Becker after he famously exited the 1987 Wimbledon Championships at the hands of a journeyman Australian by the name of Peter Doohan, "Of course I am disappointed but I didn't lose a war. There is no one dead. It was just a tennis match." How damn true. And, let me tell you, there's nothing like writing a non-fiction book in which the First World War plays a pivotal role to put your so-called troubles well and truly in the shade. Sure, I felt broken, but I also knew once I'd managed to re-secure the rights (which took another eight long years) that I would want another crack at *Lost In France* with a different publisher. It was too good a story not to be told. I also felt as if I owed it to Leigh Roose, the man

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whose story it was, unknown to modern Britain in the 21st century but a household name in his lifetime. With more information coming to light between 2007 and 2016 about someone who had been dead for almost a century, Leigh didn't exactly seem in a hurry to leave me either. In fact I'd never encountered anyone so hell-bent on raging against the dying of the light from beyond the grave, something you will discover for yourselves during the final chapters of this book.

I have Paul McCartney to thank for first introducing me to Leigh Roose. In 1983 the former Beatle released an anti-war single called 'Pipes of Peace'. It wasn't a patch on 'Yesterday' or 'Let It Be', yet still managed to reach the number one spot in the UK charts. One of the reasons behind its success lay in the memorable video that accompanied the song. Set against the backdrop of World War One, it depicted Allied and German soldiers laying down their weapons in order to play football against each other amid the mud and bomb craters of no man's land.

Being 14 years old at the time, and therefore by nature something of a cynical, cocky know-it-all, the words 'as' and 'if' were never far from my lips whenever this video appeared on our TV screen at home. That was until one evening when my father, patience exhausted, explained (a) that it was based on real events which had taken place on the Western Front during Christmas Day 1914, and (b) I should "belt up" instead of mocking things I knew absolutely nothing about. The following day at school a history teacher who was also aware of the video made a spontaneous decision to devote an entire lesson to the madness of Christmas Day 1914. We learned that there hadn't been one game of football, but several. The soldiers had exchanged gifts and cigarettes, taken photographs of

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each other, sung songs, even put up makeshift Christmas trees. Within days they'd all returned to their rat-infested trenches and started killing each other again. As a teenager I couldn't work out if this said more about the futility of war or mankind's love of football. I still can't.

Many years later, and by now working as a journalist, I received a phone call from a contact asking if I was interested in writing an article about a Welsh international footballer who had played in one of these Christmas Day matches. The player's name was Leigh Roose and he had kept goal for several leading clubs including Stoke City, Everton, Sunderland and Arsenal over a 12-year period leading up to the First World War.

Driven by the memory of McCartney's 'Pipes of Peace' video, I went off to do some digging only to discover that I'd been sent on a wild goose chase; Leigh Roose hadn't been in the trenches during December 1914 and so couldn't have played in any Anglo-German kick-around. At that point many freelance writers, strapped for time and money, would have dropped the story and moved on. However, something made me continue to dig. And the deeper I went, the more Leigh got under my skin.

Forget about Christmas Day on the Western Front – the truth was even more fascinating. Here was a man, one of the most recognisable sporting faces in Britain during the early years of the 20th century, whose unconventional yet groundbreaking style of goalkeeping had forced the Football Association into making one of the most important rule changes in the game's entire history. Throw in his outrageous sense of humour (especially by Edwardian standards), a playboy lifestyle, the mother of all controversial playing careers plus the mystery and heartache surrounding his death, and gradually it began

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to dawn on me – I'd stumbled upon a great story, and an untold one at that.

As my initial research between 1999 and 2006 revealed, surprisingly little has ever been published about Leigh considering the significant impact that he had on the evolution of association football as we know it. A handful of authors, namely Peter Corrigan, Nick Hazlewood, Geraint Jenkins and Roger Hutchinson, have touched on his career and colourful personal life in books covering the broader subjects of goalkeepers, Welsh football and Sunderland Football Club. As a player who bucked the Edwardian trend of turning professional by remaining an amateur, free from the constraints of contracts and therefore able to turn out for whatever team he liked, Leigh's name also crops up in several club histories. But that's about the sum total of it which is why piecing together his life took so long. Thank heavens for libraries. If the penny-pinching powers that be get their way and close many of them down then it will be the death knell for books like this devoted to colourful people from the pre-jet, let alone the pre-digital, age. You can only discover so much on the internet. And even then a fair percentage of it is wrong. Trust me.

So here it is, *Lost In France*, resurrected from the dead, given a major overhaul, brought up to date and released at long last by the publisher that I really should have gone with in the first place. If ever a book deserved a second chance then this is it, even though I say so myself. Leigh, I only hope I've done you justice.

*Spencer Vignes
Cardiff, Wales
June 2016*

THE FIRST HALF



**FROM THE
CRADLE TO
THE SAVE**

1

No Man's Land

IT was 1.35pm on Saturday 7 October 1916. After 99 consecutive days of fighting in some of the grimmest conditions imaginable, the Battle of the Somme had degenerated into a futile stalemate with neither side able to gain any kind of territorial advantage over the other.

In a muddy trench west of the small French village of Gueudecourt, the men of the 9th Royal Fusiliers were gearing themselves up for a large scale Allied assault on enemy lines. Morale was low. The attack had been due to take place two days earlier only to be postponed at short notice due to poor weather conditions. Since then heavy German shelling had resulted in 117 casualties, the sheer intensity of the bombardment resulting in several others going down with shell shock.

Struggling under the weight of sodden uniforms and 100 extra rounds of ammunition per Fusilier, all were agreed on one thing: if it was this bad in the trenches, God only knew what fate awaited them in the wide open spaces of no man's land.

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From soldier to soldier the message '10 minutes to go' was passed down the line. In these surroundings '10 minutes to live' seemed more appropriate.

In terms of personnel the 9th was no different to many other battalions serving on the Western Front that autumn. Formed in August 1914 in the London suburb of Hounslow, it consisted of young men from all walks of life who had answered their country's call in its time of need – bakers, bankers, bus drivers, ordinary people playing their own small part in a major world conflict. However, in July 1916 they had found themselves fighting alongside one of Edwardian Britain's more extraordinary characters. Leigh Richmond Roose had joined the regiment following almost two years in France, the Mediterranean and Gallipoli with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) providing pastoral, practical and social support to soldiers.

There wasn't a man in the 9th that hadn't already heard of Leigh, the finest goalkeeper of his generation and on the wanted list of virtually every football club in the country. A born showman so good at his position on the field of play that the sport's governing body had been forced to change the laws of the game just to keep him in check. To large chunks of the British male population he was, in short, a legend.

At 38 years of age Leigh was regarded as something of a father figure by his brothers-in-arms in the 9th, many of whom were young enough to be his sons. Standing six feet tall with broad shoulders, he was everything they dreamed of being: athletic, intelligent, famous, popular with the ladies, entertaining company if occasionally a little eccentric. He was also extremely brave. Within days of arriving on the Western Front, Leigh had taken part in an attack on an enemy position known as Ration Trench. The

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assault had been planned in a hurry and it showed. After 36 hours of heavy fighting, the Germans mounted a counter-attack led by soldiers using *flammenwerfers* – flamethrowers that belched jets of petrol. Leigh had been in a deep, covered trench known as a ‘sap’ at the time but managed to escape to safety choking on fumes and with his clothes burned. Despite his injuries he refused medical attention and continued fighting until the following morning, throwing grenades until able to lay his hands on a spare rifle. On 28 August 1916 he was awarded the Military Medal for gallantry along with seven other soldiers from the 9th at a hastily convened service in Agny, being promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal in the process.

At 1.39pm three officers began moving along the trench reminding each man of the attack’s exact objectives and to “use your bayonets.” Haversacks were pulled on and rifles unwrapped from rags designed to prevent them from clogging up with mud. For the smokers in the ranks there was just about time for one final cigarette before zero hour. Up above, the sound of artillery filled the sky. The assault would be assisted by what was known as a creeping barrage, the Allied guns co-ordinated to move with the soldiers across no man’s land into German-held territory keeping the enemy bottled up for as long as possible. Because of this there would be no period of silence just before the troops went over, as was often the case.

With 60 seconds to go the first soldiers started to mount the man-made footholds in the trench wall ready to go ‘over the top’. Those immediately behind them prayed, exchanged a few words of encouragement and made sure their bayonets were securely fixed. One or two joked that they couldn’t wait to get out into the open, so strong was the stench of vomit.

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At 1.45pm precisely the officers in the trenches blew their whistles to signal the start of the attack. Shouting with a mixture of fear, rage and grim determination, Leigh and his comrades climbed into the open and hurled themselves towards the German trenches.

At 2.33pm a phone call came through to Brigade Headquarters saying the first objective, the taking of a German position called Bayonet Trench, had been achieved with the loss of around 30 casualties. Seven minutes later another call reported that the second and final objective, an area running parallel and to the south of Barley Trench, had also been reached and that German prisoners were being escorted through Gueudecourt. This appeared to substantiate an earlier message received from Major Maurice Coxhead of the 9th who said that a wounded man had told him things were “going splendidly.”

In fact nothing could have been further from the truth. The Allied bombardment had completely overlooked a trench containing four German machine guns situated on the left flank of the planned assault, the area earmarked for attack by the 9th. Leigh's battalion hadn't stood a chance, many soldiers being shot before they had managed to advance a few feet. Elsewhere the 8th Royal Fusiliers (which along with the 9th, the 7th Royal Sussex and the 11th Middlesex Regiment made up the 36th Infantry Brigade) had initially enjoyed some success attacking a more central enemy position with one group of soldiers even managing to get inside Bayonet Trench. However, without the support of the 9th on the left flank they had been forced to retreat.

Confusion reigned. As the light began to fade two things were abundantly clear. One, the attack had failed. And two, the 9th had suffered massive casualties. A head count showed four of the regiment's officers and 21 of its ranks to

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be dead, with another officer and 131 ranks wounded. But the more telling statistic was the number of missing – four officers, 161 ranks.

Under cover of darkness a handful of survivors managed to crawl to safety having taken refuge in bomb craters. By morning over 150 men remained unaccounted for including Leigh. Ironically his relatives had already given up hope of ever seeing him alive again having been told in 1915 that he was missing presumed dead on the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey.

It would be another 87 years before Leigh's family finally discovered what happened to him that grisly October afternoon.

2

No Place Like Holt

IN north-east Wales, football rules. It always has and probably always will. Forget about rugby union, traditionally the preserve of the old industrial heartlands of the south. As far as most people in Flintshire, Denbighshire and Wrexham are concerned the round ball game (often referred to as soccer to avoid any confusion with rugby football) is king.

Journey into this picturesque corner of Britain, where Wales rubs shoulders with the English counties of Cheshire and Shropshire, and you will discover that just about every town or village seems to have spawned a football hero. Ian Rush from St Asaph, Michael Owen from Hawarden, Gary Speed from Mancot, Billy Meredith from Chirk, Mark Hughes from Ruabon to mention a few; famous names who more often than not grew up dreaming of donning the red shirts of Liverpool and Manchester United rather than the ones worn by the Welsh rugby union team. Men who realised those dreams, and then some.

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Five miles east of Wrexham on the border with England lies Holt; population circa 1500, pubs two, shops six including one which up until 2006 served as a florist owned by Paul Burrell, one time butler to Diana, the Princess of Wales. Situated on the west bank of the River Dee, Holt has become over recent years a popular commuter village for professionals earning their crust in nearby Chester and Merseyside. Young families want to live there because crime levels are low, the local schools are good and, above all, it's peaceful.

It wasn't always this way. During the second half of the 19th century Holt developed something of a reputation on both sides of the border for two things – unemployment and violence. Outside the summer months, when the strawberry crops of the fertile Cheshire Plain needed picking, there was simply very little work to be had, especially for men. Rather than live in abject poverty many upped sticks and made for the burgeoning industrial centres of north-west England, to places such as Liverpool and Crewe with their docks and railway workshops respectively. Those that stayed found an outlet for their frustrations in the mass brawls that would break out around the village most Sunday evenings. With alcohol consumption outlawed in Denbighshire and Flintshire on the Sabbath, groups of men would travel from far and wide to Holt, leaving their carts and carriages on the Welsh side of the border before crossing the Dee to drink in the pubs of Farndon on the English bank of the river. Afterwards, fuelled up to the eyeballs with ale, they would return to Holt and fight – man against man, village against village, England against Wales. It was, as one local remembers his grandfather telling him, “a bloodbath.”

Quite what Richmond Leigh Roose made of Holt when he arrived to take over as minister of the local Presbyterian

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church in 1877 we can only guess. Richmond, a tall Anglesey-born man with a long, distinguished flowing beard, had spent the previous nine years in a similar position at a church in Hay-on-Wye, 90 miles to the south. He and his wife Eliza had been happy there and weren't too thrilled at the idea of uprooting their young family. However, duty called, and Holt needed a new minister.

On the evening of 26 November that same year, Eliza gave birth to the couple's fourth son in one of the upstairs bedrooms at The Manse, their home adjacent to the church in Castle Street. Family folklore has it that they were stuck for a name for the baby having already used their favourite boys' names – John, Edward and William – to christen the previous three. It was Eliza who came up with a solution, switching her husband's first and middle names around to create Leigh Richmond Roose. After some initial reservations on the part of the father, they finally had the name registered the following January.

Leigh was born into a rapidly changing world, with 1877 in particular proving to be a year of 'firsts'. In July Alexander Graham Bell launched the first telephone company, serving rich businessmen in the north-eastern cities of the United States of America. Earlier the same month the inaugural Wimbledon tennis championships had got under way in south-west London, sport having already made the headlines in March with England's cricket team facing Australia in the first ever Test match between the two countries. Before the year was out Thomas Edison would have recorded sound for the first time on a new invention of his called a phonograph.

Even Holt had begun to move with the times. In 1855 the Reverend Ebenezer Powell and his wife Mary Anne opened Holt Academy, a school directly opposite The

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Manse with a broad curriculum including English, French, arithmetic and art. By the time Leigh started attending lessons in 1882 the school had over 80 students, the majority being boarders from all over north Wales and Cheshire. The students brought with them outside influences including one that proved to be an instant hit with local men of all ages – football. The village even spawned its own side, Holt Nomads, which frequently made round trips of up to 200 miles to play friendlies against other clubs.

In 1879 Eliza gave birth to a fifth child, a girl they called Helena. Although the labour process went according to plan, the pregnancy itself was anything but straightforward with Eliza frequently complaining of aches and pains, ones she hadn't experienced while carrying her previous four children. These continued well after Helena had been born, eventually becoming so bad that she sought the opinion of a doctor. A series of tests followed, the results of which confirmed her biggest fears – she had cancer. Eliza died at home on 11 June 1881 aged just 35.

It says much about Richmond Roose's courage, faith and inner strength that life at The Manse in the years after Eliza's death continued very much as it had when she was alive. Supported by Annie Blackwell, the family's domestic servant, together with kind-hearted local souls, Richmond did his level best to ensure that the needs of his children were catered for.

The house and its surrounding garden remained one of the focal points of the community and continued to do so right up until his death in 1917. "There was always something going on there," remembered the late Arthur Tapp, in his nineties when interviewed during 2000, who was born in the village and baptised by Richmond. "If the church was being used for a wedding, then the gathering

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afterwards would happen at The Manse. In the spring and summer there would be get-togethers where anyone could come along and mingle, have something to eat and relax. It was a great place for us kids to play and we were always made to feel welcome there.”

Richmond’s ‘open house’ policy ensured that his children came face to face with a raft of people belonging to different social, economic and political backgrounds, from eminent members of the religious order to publicans, school teachers to grave diggers. Many years later the Sunderland and England forward George Holley would remember Leigh as the kind of person “who could put any man at ease with his company,” a personal quality that probably owed much to his upbringing at The Manse.

One name almost certainly on the guest list for gatherings at the house would have been Herbert George Wells, better known today as H G Wells. Before embarking on a writing career that produced such classics as *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine*, the father of science fiction spent a year working as a teacher at Holt Academy. Whether he would have bothered attending any of the Roose family functions is, however, debatable as Wells grew to hate the village and its people, in particular the Academy headmaster James Oliver Jones.

‘From the first few weeks, I knew I should have to escape from this flat, grey, desolate land, the dirty school and its Presbyterian habits’, Wells later wrote. ‘Holt turned out to be a squalid ill run travesty of the word “Academy” where boys slept three in a bed, lessons took place with the uncertainty of April showers, and downright disorder threatened with such persistence that the headmaster freely advocated in private the physical punishment that he abhorred in public’.

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Wells also noted that there seemed to be ‘an inordinate quantity of football to fill the gaps between learning’. Part of his teaching duties included refereeing matches between the boys, albeit reluctantly and without appearing to know the rules. It was during one of these games that he slipped on the muddy ground and was kicked hard in the back by Edward Roose, one of Leigh’s elder brothers. It proved to be the final straw and Wells left a matter of weeks later after the kidney ruptured by Edward’s boot had healed. Nobody ever did establish whether the kick was intentional or accidental.

If the athleticism and drama of this relatively new sport was lost on Wells, it certainly hadn’t escaped the young Leigh Roose. Inspired by the thrilling tales of FA Cup finals and international matches told by boarders at the Academy and visitors to The Manse, he was busy playing as much football as possible. Like any concerned father, Richmond insisted his son’s schoolwork came first (Leigh was always among the brighter pupils in his classes) while Sunday remained a day of rest. Attendance on family trips to places such as Lake Bala and the north Wales seaside resort of Rhyl was also mandatory. But by the age of 11 large chunks of Leigh’s time both inside and outside school were spent with a ball at his feet.

Within a couple of years, that had begun to change. Like most footballers of any standard, Leigh had initially been drawn to the game as a child by the idea of kicking a ball into a net. Yet as time went by he found himself attracted to the one position on the football field where the player was free to handle the ball – that of goalkeeper. Created specifically to act as a last defender, the role of goalkeeper had only been embraced by the Football Association (the sport’s governing body in the UK) as recently as 1871. Up

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until then teams had usually played with nine attackers and two defenders, with each side abiding by what was known as the 'fair catch' rule. This allowed any player close to the goal to catch the ball and take a free kick providing they made a mark in the pitch with their boot, similar to the rule still observed to this day in rugby union.

With hindsight it's easy to pigeonhole anyone wanting to become a goalkeeper around this period as being completely crazy. They were, to put it bluntly, on a hiding to nothing, largely unprotected by referees and regarded as cannon-fodder by outfield players who developed a practice known as 'rushing' to deal with them. This involved one or more players using physical means to 'take out' the goalkeeper, giving a teammate the opportunity to score. Bones were broken, heads split and very occasionally someone died. The Scottish international Teddy Doig, a predecessor of Leigh's between the posts at Sunderland from 1890 to 1904, recalled how the West Bromwich Albion and England forward Bill Bassett once prevented him from reaching a loose ball by sitting on his head. On another occasion Doig was sent flying by a punch from Aston Villa's Harry Hampton while defending a corner kick. However, he managed to exact some revenge by rising to his feet, pinning Hampton to a post and hitting him with an uppercut before clearing the ball.

Despite the risks it is easy to see why Leigh took to the position like a duck to water. As a teenager he was tall and powerfully built, rising to 5ft 10in by the time he was 15 years old, and would have had no problem whatsoever looking after himself during school kick-about. Though popular with his peers, Leigh was equally happy spending time in his own company. At university some went as far as calling him a loner, a description many goalkeepers of

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subsequent eras might identify with. Years later Leigh himself wrote, 'In other positions in the field, success is dependent on combined effort and the dovetailing of one player's work with another. With the goalkeeper, it is a different matter entirely. He has to fill a position in which the principle is forced upon him that it is good for a man to be alone'.

At 16, Leigh was ready to leave Holt Academy having excelled in all areas with the exception of Greek, a subject he despised. By now he had set his heart of pursuing a career in medicine. Football remained very much an amateur sport. Making a living out of it wasn't something he even considered, no matter how promising a player he was. When the University of Wales offered him a place to study science at its campus in Aberystwyth, Leigh didn't have to think twice. The only problem on the horizon was money, or more specifically a lack of it. Although middle class and comfortably off in comparison with the majority of Holt residents, the Rooses were far from wealthy. Richmond had struggled to send his eldest son John to Oxford University (John would end up following in his father's footsteps by becoming a church minister). Yet any potential hardship would be offset by there being one less mouth to feed at the dinner table every evening. Leigh started classes at Aberystwyth two months after his 17th birthday.

Study may have been the number one priority but there was another reason why Leigh was so keen to take up his place at what, in Wales, is known as 'the college by the sea'. Though damned by some as little more than a chapel-obsessed backwater (the Welsh-born writer Goronwy Rees, later exposed as a Soviet spy, went as far as calling it 'a theocratic society, ruled by priests and elders') the university was fast developing a reputation for sporting

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excellence. And it had a football team. Leigh joined up immediately, eager to put the skills honed during his youth in Holt to good use.

In truth, Leigh didn't have much competition for the goalkeeper's jersey. The majority of Aberystwyth's 450 or so students, split roughly 50/50 between men and women, came from rural areas across the Principality as yet untouched by the football revolution sweeping the UK. The north-east corner of Wales had succumbed years earlier with Wrexham staging the country's first international match in 1877 and the town's club side winning the inaugural Welsh Cup the following year. But south Wales remained almost exclusively rugby territory, something that would only start to change during the early years of the 20th century with the influx of workers from northern England and Scotland into the region's coalfields and ports.

Leigh, nevertheless, made the position his own. And it was clear from day one that he was very good. His style of play was also completely different from any other goalkeeper of the time. Here was someone prepared to take on menacing centre forwards at their own game, rushing out to break up opposing attacks by whatever means possible – diving on the ball, kicking it clear, or resorting to more brutal means such as clattering into a player with his six-foot frame. Up until then, this just hadn't happened.

Goalkeepers were supposed to stay on or at least near their goal line at all times, daring to venture out only on rare occasions. Not Leigh, who spent long periods of each match playing in the position known today as sweeper, tidying up every loose ball in the gap immediately behind his defenders. Unbeknown to them, those spectators that gathered on the college playing fields were, in effect, watching the forerunner of today's modern goalkeeper in

action. As George Holley put it, “He was the mould from which the rest were created.”

Leigh’s reflexes were astonishing and he could punch the heavy brown footballs used in Edwardian days further than many of his opponents were able to kick them. Then there was his very own secret weapon, bouncing the ball all the way up as far as the halfway line before punting it towards the opposition goal with one of his monstrous trademark kicks. This was perfectly within the letter of the law, though few goalkeepers risked doing it for fear of either leaving their goal unattended or being steamrollered by a centre forward. It became a highly effective, direct way of launching attacks and Leigh used it to his side’s advantage whenever possible.

Occasionally, things didn’t work out as planned. In one University of Wales inter-college match between the Aberystwyth and Bangor campuses, Leigh had bounced the ball almost as far as the halfway line when he was knocked to the ground by an opposing player. Climbing to his feet, Leigh kicked out at the Bangor man, sparking a mass brawl that left him nursing several cuts and bruises.

Within a short space of time, Leigh became the unrivalled star of the Aberystwyth University side. Attendances rose as word of his remarkable talent spread. Puerile regulations preventing the mingling of the sexes at the Vicarage Fields ground were ignored as female students, drawn by the goalkeeper’s good looks, came to watch him play. Revelling in his new-found celebrity status, Leigh would playfully flirt with them before, during and after matches. Free from the constraints of his father’s relatively strict domestic regime, he began dating girls for the first time. He also discovered another new ‘vice’ – alcohol – through regular visits with teammates to The Central Hotel in Portland Street, now an upmarket coffee shop.

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Besides openly flirting with girls, Leigh's behaviour on the football pitch began to change in other ways during that first year at Aberystwyth. In an era when players walked sedately on to the field of play, Leigh chose instead to run, acknowledging any applause with either a raised arm or by clapping in return. On reaching the goalposts he would embark on a bizarre ritual, pacing from one side of his penalty area to the other muttering to himself as he went. Was it some kind of mantra, or all part of his act? Nobody knew. But it all helped add a little mystery to the growing enigma that was Leigh Richmond Roose. Some cynics argued that was exactly what he intended.

"He was something of an exhibitionist," recalled Dick Jenkins, Leigh's nephew and only child of Helena Roose, when interviewed in 2000 aged 95 (he would live until shortly before his 103rd birthday). "It didn't matter whether he was playing in front of thousands of spectators or just a couple of people in the back garden. He would always play to a crowd. He saw himself as an entertainer."

At the beginning of May 1896 the entertainer and his side travelled to Liverpool to play against University College, later to become the University of Liverpool. The match was played in conditions more akin to winter than late spring with driving rain falling throughout the day. Among the spectators was Edward Roose, the second eldest of the Roose children, who had journeyed from Holt for the game. Afterwards both Leigh and Edward returned to The Manse for dinner. It was by all accounts an evening to remember with Leigh regaling everyone present with tales of college life and goalkeeping.

The following afternoon Leigh caught the train back to Aberystwyth leaving Edward battling the early stages of a cold, one he apportioned to standing in the Liverpool rain

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watching the game. Over the next few days his condition gradually worsened until he developed hypothermia. Rather than be transferred to hospital, Edward was cared for at home by the local doctor with Richmond and Helena acting as round-the-clock nurses. He never recovered, dying on 29 May aged just 21.

There's no doubt that the Leigh Roose who eventually returned to Aberystwyth after the funeral was a more subdued version of the one that had wisecracked his way through the previous 15 months at college. In time, elements of the old prankster would once again emerge. Yet Edward's death helps explain why Leigh came to be regarded as something of a Jekyll and Hyde character around the corridors of the university during the remaining three years of his course. Jekyll took the form of a flamboyant athlete who enjoyed the attention of women and a drink with friends. Hyde was the self-possessed outsider, at odds with his latter day reputation as a man of the people, who would rather read a book than attend any of the at-home gatherings that featured so prominently in the diaries of students and staff alike. While Leigh's inability to speak Welsh may have contributed to this, the common consensus within college circles was that he simply couldn't be bothered.

On the rare occasions when he did grace the college's intellectual social circuit, Leigh nevertheless made his presence felt. During one debate he won thunderous applause by vigorously opposing the motion that athletics was 'detrimental to the best interests of the nation'. In February 1899 he was even talked into appearing in a mock trial. Cast as a policeman, his sole contribution was to roar the line 'Silence in court!' He did so with such feeling that many present believed it was the highlight of the evening.

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In the autumn of the same year, with his goalkeeping exploits continuing to wow spectators at college matches, Leigh was asked by Aberystwyth Town Football Club if he would be prepared to play for them. Town's first-choice goalkeeper, Jack Jones, had been poached by Manchester City and they needed a replacement. Keen to play at the highest level and mix with 'real' people away from the cossetted student scene, Leigh jumped at the chance.

Town, who shared Vicarage Fields with the college side, were an ambitious amateur club that had recently been forced to leave the Welsh League because of escalating travel expenses, not to mention difficulties in finding players willing to spend hours travelling from isolated Aberystwyth to all corners of Wales. For the 1898/99 season they had turned their attention to cup competitions and friendlies, organising matches against anyone who would play them from village sides to mighty West Bromwich Albion. Leigh made his debut that October in a 6-0 win over the Shropshire outfit Whitchurch. He made a few good saves and employed the same tactics that had served the university side so well, venturing out of his goal with the ball and, whenever possible, appearing to play as an extra defender. For those spectators that hadn't already seen him in action, this took some getting used to. But as the clean sheets (games completed without conceding a goal) piled up, so any murmurs of discontent faded away.

In December Town were drawn at home in the first round of the FA Cup against the professional side Glossop of the Midland League. They won 1-0 with Leigh putting in yet another outstanding performance. In his autobiography *Atgofion Cardi* (Memoirs of Cardiganshire) the Welsh historian Tom Richards, in the crowd that day as a young boy, wrote that Glossop's 'dreams were ended by that

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wonderful goalkeeper Roose, particularly by his diverting a penalty into the middle of the gorse on Buarth Hill. I saw him play dozens of times afterwards, but never with greater zest and effect than that first time at Vicarage Field'. The mini cup run was ended in the next round by Stockport County but Town, and Leigh in particular, had made an impression.

In the summer of 1899 Leigh finished college having passed his science preliminary exams. He still wanted to be a doctor, intending to attach himself to a hospital where he would be able to study for a degree in medicine. However, that would mean walking out on Aberystwyth Town and his regular girlfriend, a local woman by the name of Catherine Lewis. With time on his side (he was still only 21) and club officials willing to pay generous expenses, Leigh agreed to stay for another year.

It was to prove a wise move. Having secured a place in the North Wales Combination League, Town embarked on what would become the most successful season in their entire history. Cup matches remained a priority and the club entered as many competitions as the fixture list would allow. Leigh was once again on top form, to the extent that calls were made for him to be included in the Welsh side for the Home International Championships (the annual competition between England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland – or latterly Northern Ireland – which ceased in 1984) of 1900. Though keen to play for his country, Leigh was reluctant to do so at the expense of his club which, he couldn't help but notice, had a cup tie scheduled for 3 February, the same day Wales were due to play their opening game against Scotland at Aberdeen. In the event he was spared the dilemma of having to choose between club and country when Blackpool goalkeeper Fred Griffiths was

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named in the squad. Confident that his big chance would eventually come, Leigh swallowed his pride and focused instead on the relatively mundane world of the Towyn Cup.

Just three weeks later, that chance duly arrived. Griffiths had a nightmare in Aberdeen, making a string of mistakes as Scotland cruised to a 5-2 win. In a bid to turn things around (Wales were already regarded as the whipping boys of Home Nations football, the Scotland defeat being their eighth on the trot), the Football Association of Wales named Leigh as their goalkeeper to face Ireland in Llandudno on 24 February. Also in the squad was a man already on his way to becoming a bona fide star of Welsh football. With his spindly legs, drawn face and moderate pace, Billy Meredith looked anything but one of the most exciting players of his generation. Yet the statistics help tell a different story. By the time he retired in 1924, just a few months short of turning 50, Meredith had played almost 1,600 matches scoring 470 goals in the process and winning 48 caps, an incredible number considering the international fixture list consisted of three annual games against each of the Home Nations. He also won a brace of league championship medals with Manchester United and starred in two FA Cup final victories: one with United, the other with Manchester City. Together Leigh and Billy would form the backbone of Welsh sides for years to come, becoming firm friends in the process.

The game against Ireland gave Leigh the opportunity to show off his entire repertoire of tricks. Receiving the ball in the opening minute he advanced as far as the halfway line, bouncing it as he went, before sending a giant kick downfield towards the Irish goal, only returning to the safe haven of his own penalty area once he was sure the Welsh attack had broken up. Shortly before half-time he saved a

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shot from six yards out by trapping the ball between his knees. When the referee blew his whistle for the interval Leigh turned and bowed to the supporters behind his goal before running from the pitch to join the rest of the team. Few in the crowd of 6,000 had ever seen anything like it.

But it was to be one particular incident during the second half that really made people's heads turn. With Wales leading 1-0 thanks to a goal from Thomas David Parry, the visitors launched an attack down the right wing through Harry O'Reilly. Eager to nip any danger in the bud, Leigh sprinted from his goalmouth and deliberately bundled the Irishman into touch, knocking him unconscious in the process. Today such a challenge could well end up as a civil action in court. In 1900, while encapsulating the physical nature of the sport, it still proved to be the main talking point in the local taverns afterwards. Goalkeepers were meant to be the victims, not the aggressors, right? Leigh disagreed. If a centre forward could do that to a goalkeeper, then a goalkeeper was perfectly entitled to do something similar in return. The referee must have been thinking along the same lines as he didn't even award a free kick.

During the closing minutes Meredith added a second goal from the penalty spot and Leigh had made a winning start to his international career. Unfortunately Wales' final Home Nations game against England in Cardiff clashed with another cup tie for Aberystwyth Town who had advanced to the latter stages of three competitions – the Towyn Cup, the South Wales Cup and the prestigious Welsh Cup. With the club now reportedly covering Leigh's living as well as match expenses, there was only ever going to be one winner.

By the middle of April Town had already captured both the South Wales and Towyn Cups, defeating Rogerstone

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in the former by 1-0 after extra-time. Only one game now stood between them completing a unique treble. On 16 April over 3,000 people descended on Newtown in mid-Wales to watch Town take on the powerful Ruabon side Druids in the final of the Welsh Cup. Though Druids had lost several of their best players to English professional clubs during the 1890s, the result was expected to be close. It wasn't, and Town cruised to a comfortable 3-0 win. After the final whistle the crowd carried the victorious goalkeeper shoulder high from the field, even though it had been one of his quieter games.

Remarkably neither the *Western Mail*, the self-proclaimed national newspaper of Wales, nor the *South Wales Echo* saw fit to print the result of the 1900 Welsh Cup final let alone a match report. The one page of sport carried by the *Western Mail* the day after Aberystwyth Town's win was devoted entirely to rugby union and horse racing. Another decade would pass before the Welsh press finally woke up to the burgeoning interest in the round ball game, their coverage of international and major domestic club games finally doing justice to the thousands flocking to see the action.

With the 20th century less than four months old, Leigh already had three medals and a first international cap to his name. But he remained a big fish in a parochial Welsh pond. After 85 appearances for the side known as the 'Old black and green', it was time to move on.