

M I K E M I L E S



OVER LAND AND SEA

A History of West Ham United in Europe



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MIKE MILES



Contents

Introduction	7
1. Early Days: West Ham Pioneer European Friendlies	15
2. European Winners: The 1964/65 European Cup Winners' Cup Campaign	23
3. European Semi-Finalists: The 1965/66 European Cup Winners' Cup Campaign	55
4. European Finalists Again: The 1975/76 European Cup Winners' Cup Campaign	72
5. Back Into Europe: The 1980/81 European Cup Winners' Cup Campaign	95
6. Into Europe Through the Back Door (one): The 1992/93 Anglo-Italian Cup	115
7. Into Europe Through the Back Door (two): From Intertoto To UEFA Cup 1999/2000.	121
8. Blink and You Missed It: The UEFA Cup 2006/07	134
9. A (Brief) Return to Europe: Europa League 2015/16	142
10. Back Into Europe (For Four Matches): 2016/17	155
11. Bilić, Moyes, Pellegrini ... and Moyes Again	166
12. European Semi-Finalists: The Europa League 2021/22	179
13. After 58 Years, European Winners Again: The Europa Conference League 2022/23	209
14. Back in the Europa League 2023/24.	241
Line-ups	317
Bibliography	335

Chapter One

Early Days: West Ham Pioneer European Friendlies

IN THEIR official handbook for the 1976/77 season, West Ham listed ‘matches against foreign clubs’. It boasted that: ‘The Hammers have played over 200 matches under this heading. We do not claim this is a record, as several clubs which have consistently played in European competitions since the inception of the European Champions Cup in 1955/56 have also amassed impressive totals.

‘Nevertheless, our continental tours of the pre-World War Two era were occasions somewhat out of the ordinary and we can lay claim to being the first British club to re-commence fixtures against teams from the central European powers after World War One.’

In *They Nearly Reached The Sky*, published in 2017, Brian Belton reckoned that: ‘In the history of the club, West Ham have played more than 350 games against

European opposition right across the continent, some from countries that no longer exist.’

West Ham had first travelled into Europe in 1921 when manager Syd King took the team to Spain, a trip which included four matches against Athletic Bilbao which were won 6-0, 4-1, 3-1 and 1-0.

And, in the summer of 1923, as a reward for their prodigious efforts in reaching the FA Cup Final and the exalted heights of the First Division, the players were taken on tour to Hungary and Austria.

The following summer, the club visited Germany for the first time, playing five matches in that country, followed by two in Switzerland.

During a pre-season tour of Holland in 1925, West Ham even played a cricket match against a Dutch team.

However, there was one trip that unsettled the morale of the players. Touring Spain in 1926, their hosts seemed convinced that soccer was rather like bull fighting.

In one match, George Kay had his nose broken, later enduring considerable pain as the team trundled across the Spanish plain for their next match. Crossing the mountains on the way to Vigo, George made a near-fatal mistake – he pulled out the plugs stopping his nose from haemorrhaging and, in doing so, caught a severe chill. Kay’s welfare now became the responsibility of trainer Charlie Paynter, a kindly male nurse who saw his centre-half through his ordeal while the team had to go

home without their captain and trainer. Kay was not well enough to return to England for a month and when he and Paynter did arrive back at Liverpool docks, they had a halfpenny between them. Paynter had to wire Upton Park for funds for their rail journey home.

During the 1920s, West Ham had become avid travellers to the continent. These goodwill visits – to Austria, Hungary, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, France, Spain, Holland, Denmark and Norway – involved long hours of travel by boat and train, but the West Ham squad presumably enjoyed these breaks away from the routine of training in dockland.

The Hammers' last trip to the continent before the outbreak of war was to play Kladno in Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1938. Come the end of the war, they were immediately on their travels again, playing seven friendlies in Switzerland in 1946.

A little over a month after the Hungarians' famous appearance at Wembley in November 1953, West Ham entertained some special visitors of their own in an early floodlit friendly at Upton Park – AC Milan. Boasting five internationals of different nationalities in their forward line, the Italian giants handed the academy scholars a lesson in the finer points of the game as they won 6-0.

The next day, there was a special meeting in the West Ham players' unofficial headquarters and, in a heated inquest, sauce bottles, cups and saucers, knives,

forks, spoons and anything else that could be moved supplemented the salt and pepper pots as makeshift Subbuteo players in an attempt to unravel the events of the debacle.

Malcolm Allison wore the number six shirt that night, with centre-half Ken Brown delegated the responsibility of marking the great Swedish forward Gunnar Nordahl. When Nordahl bulldozed his way past Brown on one occasion, Brown croaked at Allison: 'What a bloody giant!' Milan had overwhelmed West Ham so thoroughly that Allison went home to his digs in Ilford on the trolley bus 'feeling very low ... it was a painful experience'. But good often comes out of catastrophe and the West Ham team, through endless discussion, began to put things together.

Future Chelsea manager Dave Sexton, who was a player at Upton Park for nearly four years in the early 1950s, felt the same enthusiasm for experiment. 'We were all motivated by the performance of the Hungarians in beating England 6-3 at Wembley. So, when floodlighting was introduced at Upton Park, Ted Fenton made it his responsibility to bring more and more continental opposition to play us and we appreciated the experience.'

Indeed, manager Fenton used any variety of methods to get publicity for West Ham. Each spring, he would approach the board with a list of possible European tours

and matches that could be arranged with sides visiting England. He even took it upon himself to make contacts and arrange matches.

Come the Ron Greenwood era, as a reward for their efforts in the 1961/62 season, the team were taken on a close season tour of Africa and everything went well until the final Ghana leg of the trip. As Greenwood recalled in his autobiography, *Yours Sincerely*: 'Nobody met us at the airport at Accra. The excuse given later was they thought we were on another plane. By this time, though, we knew there was only one flight a day from Johannesburg to Accra. We then found ourselves being shown into a hotel that was nothing more than a doss house. The blankets almost crawled. Nobody slept, except Johnny Dick, who could sleep anywhere. The tour had a hidden bonus for us, however. Through all its adversity our team spirit grew stronger. The problems we shared welded us together. It also taught me a lot about the character of my players. I noted all those who had a good sense of humour, those I could count on, those who looked for problems and those who were idle. And on my first tour as manager, I discovered much about myself.'

In the summer of 1963, West Ham were invited to compete in the prestigious International Soccer League in the United States. The Hammers were pitted against a truly international mixture of top-class opposition and went on to win their group, which included Kilmarnock

(3-3), Mantova (Italy 2-4), Oro (Mexico 3-1). Munster (West Germany 2-0) and Recife (Brazil 1-1).

The Hammers returned to the States to play the winners of the other group, Górnik Zabrze of Poland, over two legs at Randalls Island in New York. Johnny 'Budgie' Byrne hit the goal that earned his team a 1-1 draw in the first match. In the second game, Geoff Hurst got the only goal. The final against Dukla Prague of Czechoslovakia was again a two-legged affair, with the first match staged at the 110,000-capacity Soldier Field in Chicago, where the Czechs won 1-0. Tony Scott put the Hammers level in the second game back in New York, but captain Josef Masopust got the decisive goal.

Masopust predicted that 'West Ham would win a major European tournament within two years' and manager Greenwood later reflected: 'We learned more that summer than we would have done in five European campaigns about how the game was evolving around the world. It could have taken two or three years at home to gain the experience we achieved on our American adventure. Every one of our ten games was a lesson in itself and our reward came in the form of increased confidence, understanding and team spirit.' Two years later, the football world found out how right he was.

Finally, a word about Upton Park Football Club. Situated on the eastern borders of London and Essex, Upton Park Football Club preceded Thames Ironworks,

much less West Ham United, as the first significant football outfit in the area. The club had developed during the initial decades of the Football Association and established itself as the top London club when the side won the first FA (Senior) Cup in 1882/83. The club retained the trophy the following season and went on to achieve several impressive results in the FA Cup itself.

Upton Park FC was even to make an international impact when the club was selected to represent Great Britain in the Paris Olympics of 1900. As all Olympic athletes needed to have amateur status, British league clubs would not have been allowed to compete in Paris, as they were professional outfits. With none of the remaining staunch Corinthian clubs stepping into the breach, Upton Park agreed to travel to Paris.

The matches in Paris were a haplessly organised and almost invisible sideshow to the Universal Exhibition to which they had been attached. Upton Park FC defeated the French representatives, Club Français de Paris, 4-0 in what has come to be taken as the final of the tournament, although the official records indicate that Upton Park played just that one game. There was a suggestion that they played a group of Belgian students 'somewhere in the Bois de Boulogne'. However, no medals were awarded. On a hot day, it would seem the fitness of the London players was the difference between the two sides.

From their East London home in West Ham Park – but a 20-minute walk from the London Stadium – the Parkers produced some of the first England internationals. Upton Park would fade into history after 1911, but the Upton Park Trophy, an annual play-off between the league champions of Guernsey and Jersey, still exists. First contested in 1907, the trophy was donated to the Guernsey FA by Upton Park to celebrate their tenth annual Easter tour of the islands in 1906.