

CHRIS LEE

shades of GREEN

A Journey into
Irish Football



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Ulster

GIVEN BELFAST'S location on the Irish Sea facing Scotland with their shared shipbuilding tradition and links to Glasgow, it seems something of a surprise that it took until 1879 that Ireland's first football club was founded in Belfast, 16 years after the publication of the Football Association rulebook. Traditionally, the credit for introducing the game into the city has gone to John McCredy McAlerly, a draper and avid cricketer who had apparently seen a football match on a trip to Edinburgh and caught the bug. Most likely, though, he was one of multiple actors involved in organising an exhibition match between Glaswegian pioneer club Queen's Park and fellow Scots Caledonians. It was played on 24 October 1878 at the Ulster Cricket Ground in front of 400 spectators. Within a year, McAlerly had established the Cliftonville Association Football Club, Ireland's first and oldest association rules football club.

More Scottish clubs were invited to visit and demonstrate how the game should be played in 1880, and on 18 November of that year, McAlerly was involved in bringing together several clubs from Belfast and surrounding counties to found the Irish Football Association (IFA). The

original members were McAlery's Cliftonville, Alexander FC of Limavady, Avoniel, Banbridge Academy, Distillery, Knock, Moyola Park and Oldpark. McAlery was honorary secretary, and Major Spencer Chichester, patron of the Moyola Park club from Castledawson in County Derry/Londonderry, was the IFA's first president. The IFA launched a Challenge Cup competition, much like its neighbouring associations had in Britain. Moyola Park won the first edition on 9 April 1881, defeating Cliftonville 1-0 in front of a thousand-strong crowd.

The next step for the new association was to gather the best players from across the football-playing regions to form a national side. The England team was invited over for Ireland's inaugural football match. A crowd of 2,500 people braved horrendous weather on 18 February 1882 at the Knock Ground in Bloomfield, Belfast, to watch McAlery's side, donned in the blue of St Patrick, succumb to a 13-0 defeat. Aston Villa players Howard Vaughton and Arthur Brown contributed nine of England's goals. To this day, the scoreline is still England's record margin of victory and either Irish association's biggest defeat. McAlery was reportedly distraught, but Ireland was playing catch-up on the other home nations, who had nearly two decades' head start on the Irish game.

In September 1890, eight leading teams launched the Irish Football League, pipping Scotland by three weeks to the claim of having the second-oldest national football league competition in the world after England's. The Irish League started with eight clubs, all of whom were from Belfast, with the exception of County Armagh side Milford FC. Linfield won the first edition of the championship with 12 wins, one draw and a single defeat, kicking off their long domination of the game in the north of Ireland.

In contrast, Milford lost all 14 games in the first season of the Irish League. However, their legacy in the game is assured through an idea from the club's 25-year-old goalkeeper, William McCrum. Inspired by the amount of foul play he saw in the game around his goal area, McCrum suggested the idea of a penalty kick to Jack Reid, the IFA's general secretary. Reid sat on the International Football Association Board, which decided the rules of the game, and put forward what became known as 'the Irishman's motion'. The proposal that players intentionally impeding an opponent or handling the ball within 12 yards of their goal line concede a penalty kick was passed as Law 14 in 1891. Initially, the penalty was a line 12 yards from goal, replaced by a spot in 1902.

Originally, a goalkeeper could not advance more than six yards, but another Irishman inspired a rule change in the 1920s. Dubliner Tom Farquharson left Ireland after being arrested for ripping down British Army posters of wanted IRA men and ended up in Wales, keeping goal for Cardiff City, where he won the FA Cup in 1927. Farquharson would charge from the back of the goal to put off penalty takers. His actions led to a rule change that demanded goalkeepers stay on their line for penalty kicks. Meanwhile, the town of Milford has not forgotten William McCrum. There's a memorial to McCrum's contribution to football in the town and welcomes visitors with the sign 'Milford: Home of the Penalty Kick'.

In the early 1920s, another Northern Irish player influenced a key change in the laws of the game. Law 11 demanded three players between the final attacker and goal when the ball was passed to remain onside. Belfast-born Bill McCracken, a full-back who won three English league titles and an FA Cup with Newcastle United, perfected

an offside trap that became emulated by players across the league. The result was a drying up of goals, leading to a fall in attendances that spooked administrators into changing the offside rule to two defenders between the attacker and goal, which came in for the 1925/26 season. The move towards favouring the attacking side led to an increase in goals in the English First Division from 1,192 in 1924/25 to 1,703 in the first season of the amended Law 11, or 2.58 goals per game to 3.89.

Football in the north of Ireland was acutely influenced by the political change going on across the island as the game spread. Encounters between the best-supported Catholic club in the north – Belfast Celtic – and Protestant area clubs such as Linfield and Glentoran could erupt into sectarian violence. As a city based on shipbuilding, Belfast's workers had easy access to nuts, bolts, rivets and other harmful projectiles that could be smuggled into football grounds and used as ammunition. These became known as 'Belfast confetti' and became a familiar feature in early football violence before and after partition. For life – and football – in the north of Ireland, 1912 was a pivotal year. It was this year that the Third Home Rule Bill was introduced at Westminster, designed to give Ireland more self-governance from Dublin. It was introduced on 11 April 1912, just days before the Belfast-built RMS *Titanic*, a source of great local pride, sank on its maiden voyage across the Atlantic. Unionists opposed to Home Rule, led by Sir Edward Carson and Sir James Craig, threatened not to recognise Dublin's authority, and tens of thousands of unionists in Ulster joined volunteer militias to resist the motion by force, if necessary. Although defeated in the House of Lords, the UK government used the Parliament Act 1911 to bypass the Lords and force the bill through.

Football had played a small part in the process; in February 1912, Home Rule supporter Winston Churchill delivered a speech at Belfast Celtic's ground, having been advised that unionists would be opposed to him speaking at the Ulster Hall.

After partition in 1921, six of the nine counties of Ulster remained within the United Kingdom as Northern Ireland – Counties Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Derry/Londonderry, and Tyrone. Three counties joined what is now the Republic of Ireland, Counties Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan. In May 1923, Dublin-based *Sport* lamented that, in footballing terms, soccer in the six-county area was now so cut off from the rest of the island that it was 'as though it had floated away to the centre of the Atlantic Ocean'.

There have been several cross-border tournaments and encounters over the decades since partition, with mixed outcomes. The Dublin and Belfast Inter-City Cup pitted six teams from both the IFA and FAI-affiliated leagues against each other in a knockout format and ran from 1941 to 1949. Dublin club Shamrock Rovers won four of the nine editions. The North-South Cup ran for just two editions in the early 1960s, while the Blaxnit Cup – sponsored by Newtownards sock and hosiery maker Black and Company – ran between 1967 and 1974 at the height of the Troubles. Northern Irish clubs won five of the seven editions before the All-Ireland trophy was abandoned in 1976 due to the heightened civil unrest as the sponsors feared teams would not travel. The demise of the cup was a financial blow to clubs. The Texaco Cup and Tyler Cup tournaments also ran on an All-Ireland basis in the 1970s, but there was a quarter-century gap between 1980 and 2005, when the Setanta Sports Cup arrived, running for nine editions until

2014. League of Ireland clubs won all but two editions. A single edition of the Champions Cup, pitting NIFL and League of Ireland champions together, was played in 2019 and won by Dundalk 7-1 on aggregate before the Covid-19 pandemic led to its demise. In the women's game, a new All-Island Cup tournament was launched in 2023, featuring 11 teams from the League of Ireland Women's Premier Division and five from the Northern Ireland Women's Premiership. Galway United triumphed 1-0 over Cliftonville in the first final.

Within the six counties of Northern Ireland, under the jurisdiction of the IFA, the men's Northern Ireland Football League has three divisions of 12 – the Premiership, Championship and Premier Intermediate League – with its main knockout tournaments being the Irish Cup and Northern Ireland Football League Cup. The women's senior football league is the ten-team Women's Premiership. Of the eight founding clubs of the Irish League in 1890, four are still going: Linfield, Glentoran, and Ireland's oldest football club, Cliftonville – all of whom are yet to be relegated from the top flight – and Distillery (now in Lisburn). The champions of the NIFL Premiership are presented with the Gibson Cup, named after Belfast jeweller William Gibson, who donated the trophy in 1894 at the behest of the Irish League. Football historian Martin Moore tells me that, for years, the cup was thought to have been donated by Linfield president Robert Gibson, but Martin's research debunked this myth. Martin adds that William Gibson's jeweller's shop in Castle Place has long gone and now in its place is a branch of McDonald's.

Three counties of Ulster – Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan – sit in the Republic of Ireland within the jurisdiction of the FAI and League of Ireland. However,

there is one special case in Derry City, geographically north of the border, but playing in the League of Ireland. To first-time visitors to Northern Ireland, seeing the presence of flags, political murals, and graffiti can be something of a surprise. In many nationalist/republican/Catholic majority areas, the green, white and orange tricolour of the Republic of Ireland often flies, and even before the most recent conflicts in the Middle East, it was fairly commonplace to see the Palestinian flag displayed alongside it. Sympathy in Ireland for Palestinians is rooted in the country's own experience of colonisation. Conversely, in some unionist/loyalist/Protestant majority areas, the Union Flag and red, white and blue are often displayed with the Ulster Banner – a white flag with a red cross containing the red hand of Ulster within a six-pointed star topped with a crown.

Cliftonville Football & Athletic Club: Ireland's first and oldest club

When writing a book about discovering Ireland through its football, it makes sense to start at the beginning. I headed to Solitude, home of John McAlery's club, Cliftonville, in North Belfast. McAlery has a blue plaque by the turnstiles, which credits him with introducing association football to Ireland and founding Cliftonville in 1879. A huge mural on the end of a housing terrace facing the entrance to Solitude celebrates 'Cliftonville Football & Athletic Club, Ireland's oldest, 1879'.

It was on 20 September 1879 that McAlery posted an advert in the *Belfast News Letter* and *Northern Whig* papers advertising for players to join his new football club, which would be playing according to Scottish association rules. McAlery was 30 years old at the time and, although originally from a farming background, he had made a

career in Belfast's drapery trade. He even had his own business at the Tweed House on Royal Avenue. McAlery had helped form Cliftonville Cricket Club in 1870, and his new football club played its first match just a week after the advert calling for players appeared. Cliftonville lost 2-1 to a team of rugby players known as 'Quidnuncs', but McAlery was not deterred and encouraged the formation of other football clubs. Right-back McAlery helped found the IFA and the Irish Cup, where it was a case of 'third time lucky' for Cliftonville as McAlery got his hands on the trophy in 1883 after losing the first two Irish Cup finals to Moyola Park and Queen's Island. In the 1880s, Cliftonville also played in the English FA Cup.

After retiring from playing, McAlery continued as an administrator with the IFA and referee until business commitments forced him to withdraw from these roles in 1888. In 1890, the same year that Cliftonville helped found the Irish Football League, the club moved into its current location, Solitude, making it the oldest purpose-built football stadium in Ireland. Cliftonville played Linfield in the stadium's opening match on 6 September 1890 at what the *Belfast News Letter* described as 'splendid new grounds' in 'splendid weather'. What wasn't 'splendid' for Cliftonville was the scoreline, as Linfield ran out 8-0 victors. Solitude also acted as the de facto national stadium for Ireland in the 1890s and 1900s, hosting 11 fixtures. The first penalty in international football was awarded at Solitude on 5 March 1892 in favour of the home side, which was apt, given the penalty kick was invented in Ulster. However, Linfield's Samuel Torrans saw his kick saved by English goalkeeper Bill Rowley of Stoke. The rebound fell to another Linfield man, William Dalton, but Rowley also saved that. Two years later, in the same

fixture, Ireland avoided defeat against England for the first time in 13 encounters, coming back from two goals down to draw 2-2. Solitude also saw the first experimental use of floodlights in Ireland as early as 1891.

'The Reds' lifted their first league championship in the 1905/06 season, sharing the title with Distillery. Surprisingly, for Ireland's pioneer club, Cliftonville spent much of the 1950s and 60s relying on re-election to the league before finally turning professional in the early 1970s. As Cliftonville's bad patch happened before relegation, they have competed in every season of top-flight football in Northern Ireland, a record they share with Linfield and Glentoran. Cliftonville have only won the title five times, most recently in 2013/14, thanks in large part to 27 goals from club legend and all-time leading goalscorer Joe Gormley. Gormley bagged a hat-trick in the game I attended at Solitude nearly a decade later, at the age of 33. The season I attended Solitude, Cliftonville went on to end a 45-year wait for the Irish Cup, lifting a ninth trophy in the final versus Linfield at Windsor Park.

To get to Solitude from the centre of Belfast, I wandered up to Cliftonville Road from the direction of the Antrim Road. At the height of the Troubles, this area was known as 'Murder Mile' and is referenced in Elvis Costello's 1979 hit 'Oliver's Army'. Although founded by a Protestant, the changing demographics over the years have meant that, for decades, much of Cliftonville FC's support has also been drawn from the Catholic nationalist community. Since Belfast Celtic resigned from the league in 1949 and with Derry City now playing across the border in the League of Ireland, Cliftonville is the highest-profile club with a predominantly Catholic following. This has led to clashes in the past between fans of other clubs and the Solitude

outfit. In 1991, disaster was narrowly averted when a hand grenade loaded with shrapnel exploded near Cliftonville fans in a match against Linfield at Windsor Park. The grenade went off in the 35th minute of the match inside a perimeter wall where Reds fans would have been had they not already been moved for their own safety. The attack was claimed by the paramilitary group UFF (Ulster Freedom Fighters) as retaliation for a Provisional IRA bomb attack on a Belfast hospital days earlier. In 2013, the British national anthem, 'God Save the Queen', was not played at the Irish Cup Final when Cliftonville faced Glentoran. In the 2018 final, Cliftonville requested that the anthem not be played again for the Windsor Park showdown with Coleraine. The IFA declined, so Cliftonville players bowed their heads during the anthem.

Cliftonville's big rivals are Crusaders FC, just two kilometres to the east. The two formed what became known as the 'North Belfast derby' after Crusaders were admitted to the Irish League in 1949/50. Although the rivalry had been purely geographical, the fixture took on an added edge during the Troubles and due to changing demographics. In August 1979, 1,900 officers were called in to police the derby at Crusaders' Seaview for an Ulster Cup match. It was a UK record security operation for a match and cost £30,000 after Linfield v Cliftonville the week before had led to violence. The game was attended by 4,500 fans and passed off without incident as Crusaders and Cliftonville drew 1-1.

For my game, an NIFL Premiership match against Coleraine, I arrived just in time for kick-off, which meant I did not check out Cliftonville's famous social club. I immediately noticed a significant police presence for the game compared to other matches, including armoured riot

vehicles, which is not a familiar sight in English football. Eoin O'Brien from the *Late Night Irish League Show* tells me there is still an element of sectarianism in Northern Irish football, mainly among the younger ultras (hardcore supporters). 'Cliftonville, for example, is extremely divided between the older fans and the younger fans who see what the likes of [Glasgow] Celtic are doing and want to emulate it,' he says. Eoin explains that clubs in Northern Ireland are fined for sectarian chanting by their fans; for example, Cliftonville was fined £250 for sectarian chanting during an NIFL Premiership match against Linfield in 2021. 'It's getting better, for sure, but still a long way off actual peace,' he adds.

I made my way to the top of the modern McAlery Stand behind the eastern end goal. This all-seater stand houses 1,341 fans and was built in 2008 to replace the famous 'Cage' terrace. The earlier rain has passed, and the early autumn sunset cast an orange-red hue above the moody green-black Belfast Hills away to the west. The Main Stand runs along the side of the pitch, but since 2007/08 fans can only occupy the lower terrace. Its faded red and white striped corrugated iron cladding reminded me a little of Brentford's former ground Griffin Park back in the day. The current Main Stand is the third grandstand at Solitude; the first was destroyed in a storm in 1893, while a fire accounted for the second in 1949. There are plans to rebuild the Main Stand. On the far side, 100 or so Coleraine fans gathered in the Bowling Green Stand, the away end, while the final northern side is a grass bank behind the team dugouts.

I paid just £13 for my ticket and purchased it online. It takes time to shed my mindset that has been ingrained by watching most of my football in England's Premier League

and second-tier Championship, where seat numbers are allocated. In the NIFL and League of Ireland you can usually decide where to sit on the day. I am not often this high up at the end of a pitch, so I quite enjoyed the different perspective you get in terms of team formation and off-the-ball movement compared to the more TV-like viewing of a side stand. Coleraine fans had driven 90-odd minutes from the other side of Northern Ireland to attend the Tuesday night fixture. However, they would leave disappointed as the Reds notched up a 5-0 victory. With the home fans' chants of 'You Reds' ringing in my ears as they clapped the players off, I slunk off into the dark, passing under John McAlery's blue plaque once more. McAlery passed away on 3 December 1925, aged 75, adamant that he alone was responsible for introducing the association football code into Ireland. In reality, the story is far more complex than that, but there is no doubt that he was a key catalyst.

I headed back down the Cliftonville Road in the dark but in safety, taking a post-match walk that would have been risky a few decades ago. Thankfully, times have changed.

Linfield: the world's most successful domestic side

While Cliftonville are the oldest club in Northern Ireland, Ireland's first national champions – and now Northern Ireland's most successful side – are Linfield FC. In 2022, Linfield won their 56th domestic league title, overtaking Rangers FC of Glasgow (55 titles) – with whom the club has a close relationship – as the most decorated domestic league champions anywhere in the world. Linfield have also won more league and cup doubles (25 at the time of writing) than any other club in the world. On two occasions, Linfield have even achieved a 'septuple', bringing home an astounding seven trophies in one season. Linfield

also own the land on which they share the Windsor Park stadium with Northern Ireland's national side and where the IFA has its headquarters. The IFA pays Linfield around £200,000 per year to use the ground as part of a 51-year deal. At times, this arrangement has been a source of discontent from other clubs in the NIFL. Yet, even before moving into Windsor Park, Linfield was by far the strongest team in Irish football.

Like Distillery before them and many other great sides, Linfield started life on the factory floor. 'Linfield Athletic Club', as it was first known, was founded in March 1886 in the unionist Sandy Row area of Belfast by workers of the Linfield Mill, which was owned by the Ulster Spinning Company. Its players used land behind the mill called 'The Meadow' and also played cricket. The new football club opened its new ground on Linfield Road on Saturday, 11 September 1886, with a match against Distillery. General admission for the 3.15pm kick-off was 3d, with ladies entering for free. Despite a heavy storm, Linfield's combination game saw the 'Blues' win a high-scoring game 6-5, which surprised many as Distillery had dispatched Linfield 3-0 in their previous encounter.

Linfield even competed in the English FA Cup. Their FA Cup tie with Cliftonville on 25 December 1888 is notable for being the only FA Cup match ever to have been played on Christmas Day. The *Belfast News Letter* reported that the match took place in driving rain on a difficult pitch. Linfield ran out 7-0 victors. Irish Cup clashes with Cliftonville the following year would see two Linfield men suspended for rough play. One, named McKeown, was banned for a whole year, while another, named Morrison, was sanctioned for two months. The English FA had already censured Linfield for their players' tough approach

to the game. Despite the millworkers' apparent rough play, the club was picking up support among the Belfast public and moved to a new ground at nearby Ulsterville Avenue in 1889. Linfield had to move on after four years as the land was being developed for housing. After some nomadic years, Linfield bought some land called the 'bog meadows' in 1904, and the following year, the new ground – Windsor Park – opened for the new season with a curtain-raiser against Glentoran. The new stadium was not quite finished, but 4,000 fans were present to see Linfield win an open game 1-0. The club continued to add to the ground, with a grandstand completed in 1907. Ireland soon started playing at the ground, eventually establishing it as the main home national stadium. Further additions were funded by fans and board members. In 1926, the club added the 1,700-seater Balmoral Stand, which was purchased from the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society. Famous stadium architect Archibald Leitch designed a new grandstand, opened in 1930.

By the time Windsor Park opened, Linfield were already the dominant force in Irish football, having won the league and cup double seven times between 1890/91 – the first season of the Irish League – and 1903/04. While Linfield's leading competitors for silverware in the early years were often Glentoran, Distillery and Cliftonville, the arrival of Belfast Celtic in 1891 would provide Linfield with a fierce rivalry for the next 60 years. There is more on Belfast Celtic later in this chapter, but when the club was founded at the Beehive pub on the nationalist Falls Road in the model of its inspiration and namesake in Glasgow, the Catholic community now had a focal point to counter the majority unionist football scene. Belfast Celtic fans had already been involved in incidents with East Belfast club Glentoran in

the 1890s, but in the fevered atmosphere of 1912, with the Home Rule Bill creating dividing lines across Ireland, the Falls Road side met traditionally unionist Linfield in a league match in September that had to be abandoned due to crowd trouble with the Blues 1-0 up. Stones flew, and at least three shots were fired, according to reports, with around 50 people hospitalised. The incident led the Irish League to outlaw banners and flags from grounds and later agreed that matches where gunshots are heard should be abandoned and replayed behind closed doors. Linfield and Belfast Celtic did manage to come together for a charity match in February 1940, during the Second World War, providing a combined side to take on an Ulster Hospitals XI drawn from various clubs across the Irish League and even one player from Chesterfield in England. The hospital side won 2-0 at Windsor Park, earning a gate of £45.

Linfield and Belfast Celtic fans would clash again as the clubs vied for supremacy, with both winning all but one Irish League title between 1925/26 and 1949/50. An infamous clash between the two sides at Windsor Park in December 1948 ended in a vicious post-match attack by Linfield fans on Belfast Celtic's Protestant forward, Jimmy Jones, leading ultimately to the Catholic side withdrawing from the league at the height of their success.

Since Belfast Celtic's departure, Linfield's key rivals have become East Belfast side Glentoran. In 1921/22 and 1961/62, Linfield achieved a remarkable milestone, even by their own silverware-laden standards, winning an incredible seven trophies. Linfield regularly enjoy European football. In 1966/67, the club progressed as far as the quarter-finals in the old knockout format European Cup, having overcome Luxembourg's Aris and Norwegian side Vålerenga before falling to Bulgarian army team CSKA Sofia in the last eight.