

SO MUCH MORE THAN THAT

A British Journey of
Football, Industry,
War, and Migration



Hannah Grainger-Clemson

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Chapter 1

Introduction

'So much more than that'

Bill Shankly, the Liverpool FC manager from my ancestors' village in Scotland, was on a TV chat show in May 1981. 'Somebody said that "football's a matter of life and death to you",' he recalled to the show host. 'I said, "Listen, it's more important than that."'

Any passionate player or manager might smile and nod in agreement, and so might any football fan. You could even replace the word 'football' with many sports or activities that communities of people come together to do, support, and celebrate.

To me, the 'more than that' also signifies that our lives are rarely one-dimensional. Whatever might be occupying our thoughts on one particular day, there is always something else bubbling away in the back of our minds. We might also have different personalities depending on the environment. The quiet person in the office might be saving their energy to become a demon in training that night. The kid who struggles in the classroom might be a genius outside with a ball.

The different parts of our lives can also be intertwined. Whom we meet and spend time with may be influenced

by our hobbies or our work. Travel and experiencing new places may be dictated by a need to go where the work is, or the good fortune to be on holiday, or simply to go to an away game. Families, communities and whole nations will pass on a love of particular cultural forms – sports, music, other pastimes – to their children who will then remould it in their own preferred style.

The book title deliberately paraphrases Shankly's words, rather than directly quoting him. I wanted to refer to all the different ways in which our lives and those of our families can be shaped: where we live, our relationships, our work, sport and other pursuits, and also by national and international events. For Shankly, the 'more than' might refer specifically to the coal and iron community that he grew up in, like so many of my ancestors and thousands upon thousands of families through the centuries in Britain. Other football legends, such as Pat Crerand and Jock Stein, have spoken publicly about how players coming from the mining areas were brought up to look after one another and they took that fighting friendship out onto the pitch. As Shankly is quoted to have said, they started their careers 'mining for coal and came up with silver'.

What is this book about?

This book is about the lives of men and women, boys and girls, in England and Scotland from the 17th to the mid-20th century. Some of these are members of my family. None of my ancestors were or are well-known, although some of them knew famous people. None of them did anything particularly world-changing or out of the ordinary. They could be very much like the family of someone reading this book. In fact, the people my family lived near to and worked and fought alongside could very well be the ancestors of some readers. But, even if not, those generations are still connected to us in

the present day in long chains of events and circumstances. We are who we are because they were who they were.

This book is about how these people's homes and professions developed in and around the industrial heartlands of England and Scotland. For the most part, they were not wealthy. They lived in small dwellings in heavily populated areas. They were coalminers, metalworkers, gunmakers, and jewellers. They cleaned other people's homes and clothes. They tended to other people's farms and fought in other people's wars.

It is also about the development of modern association football and how this was bound up with industrial and social developments. Key characters find their way into the stories: professional footballers, club board members and presidents, mill owners, Football Association officials, and the occasional lord, king or queen. Aston Villa and Birmingham City feature most of all, these being the favoured clubs of the two main branches of my family. However, well over 100 other clubs also have their important place, including: West Bromwich Albion; Wolverhampton Wanderers; Sheffield FC; Crystal Palace; Manchester United; Motherwell; Dick, Kerr Ladies; Borussia Dortmund; and Bill Shankly's own Glenbuck Cherrypickers.

Why did you want to research and tell your family story?

I have always been interested in history. As young children, we were lucky to be taken on numerous field trips by my state primary school. This being the West Midlands, it was the castles of Kenilworth and Warwick, the Lunt Roman Fort, Coventry Cathedral, and 'Shakespeare's' Stratford-upon-Avon. For our teachers, it was never about memorising dates of battles or the names of political leaders. It was about the lives and experiences of ordinary people and the community leaders who helped and influenced them. We drew pictures

of old buildings and imagined what it felt like to inhabit them. We dressed in Victorian costumes and learned how to add up 'old money' with chalk and slate. We stood in formation as Roman soldiers and wrote letters home as Second World War evacuees. We developed empathy and a sense of community identity; a sense of our local history. Being a multi-cultural community, we also learned stories from other continents and religions. We celebrated Diwali as well as Christmas.

Decades before laptops, we read books in the library, went to museums, and watched well-worn VHS tapes of *How We Used to Live* (Yorkshire Television) on the school's single TV and video player. When we went to sing carols at a care home – we called them 'Old People's Homes' – we asked them about their own childhoods. I loved watching *This Is Your Life* (Thames Television), fascinated that even famous celebrities had ordinary school friends and aunts and uncles they had not seen for a long time and that they could become nostalgic about the most ordinary details. More recently, the internet and subscription sites have boosted amateur genealogy, making it much quicker and easier to find out if our family have always lived in the local area or if they have been involved in some dramatic past event. Programmes such as the BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are?* have also added to the rise in family history projects.

For many decades, my sense of family extended only as far back as my grandparents. Of my grandfathers, I only ever knew one of them who also passed away when I was too young to have ever had a grown-up conversation with him. My grandmothers told me some stories of their lives, but these were also when I was younger and it never occurred to me to write them down. I suppose, in the innocence of youth, it did not occur to me that there would not be another opportunity to ask.

Perhaps I am now at that time in my own life where my perspective has shifted. It is no longer just about me and my ambitions and where I am going. I want to know where I have come from over generations past. My father (the Birmingham City side of the family) has passed away and so my mother (the Aston Villa side) is the main source of collective family memory, and even she admits that what she remembers is limited to the more recent generations. Perhaps the global pandemic and sudden increased loss of life also prompted a broad societal reflection on who we (all) are and what is truly important to us.

The family and other historical research could have been enough personal satisfaction – just to know for myself. Indeed, that is really how it began. But then I wanted to share it with others in my family and also see if they could add to it. I wanted to give them the same satisfaction I had in discovering an interesting fact or a mysterious blank. I was experiencing the thrill of making connections between the national and local landmarks and events I knew about and members of my own family who had been nearby when such things were being built and taking place. The more I dug into the lives of my own ancestors, the more I was also adding pieces of other families' lives. The more I learned, the more I wanted to share the stories with a wider community in the same way I had heard them in school. I thought that if I shared these quite ordinary stories about quite ordinary people, it might trigger an interest or memory in someone else in a positive way.

Why did you want to write about football and social history?

Football has always been part of my family's life. One of my earliest memories is kicking a ball in the tiny back yard of my grandparents' bungalow in Birmingham. My brother and I spent Sundays hanging out and drinking lemonade at

the clubhouse where my father was captain while the men towered over us with their dimpled-glass pint tankards of beer; the classic style with the handles. It smelt of muddy boots and cigarette smoke as one could still puff away indoors back then. As Sunday was for playing football, we had Saturday lunch as a family instead, listening to the matchday build-up on the radio. By five o'clock you knew whether the rest of the weekend and following week would be upbeat. In the seasons when Villa and Birmingham were in the same division, you would also know whether there would be a little bit of mockery from one parent to the other. You knew whether or not you could hold your head high at school on Monday morning. There was even a rousing school assembly hymn ending with the line 'And a win for my home team'. You always hoped that one came up on a good Monday.

As I started to research my family history and looked in parallel at developments in football, I was struck by the similarities with today's sporting issues. As recently as 2021 the football community was collectively horrified by the proposal of a breakaway European League. How could a few clubs think that they were so special as to only want to play each other? How could a few individuals be so greedy for more money as to engineer this and ignore the needs of the ordinary fan? And yet, in the 1880s, the creation of the Football League must have seemed this way too. Most of us cannot imagine earning the kind of money that professional footballers do today and still their agents negotiate for more, justified by notions of market value and relatively short playing careers. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were also the same debates, leading to tense player meetings and union disputes.

For me, there was an important overarching story to be told about 'the beautiful game' and how it evolved as

witnessed by the ordinary folk who lived alongside it – outsiders and yet part of the fabric. Football is not the same without its supporters and amateur players. We have learned this during the pandemic. We have felt its absence and the players have felt ours. Football was prescribed as a necessary part of soldier recovery in the First World War and the wartime halt on matches lasted only a few months in the Second World War before a temporary league started up again. Viewers of *The English Game* (produced by 42, released by Netflix in 2020) may be forgiven for thinking that this is mostly about clubs in England. However, the title – proven by the plot of the television show – is ironic: it is not monocultural. The influence of Scottish players and businessmen on the formal game was enormous in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But the origin of clubs in churches, factories, and bars also resonates in other countries, as I found when tracing my grandfather's steps across Belgium and Germany.

Sports researchers Adam Benkwitz and Gyozo Molnar argue, 'Far from being passive cultural beings, the working classes, from the beginnings, actively negotiated the development of their own emergent football culture.'¹ Football was a necessary winter alternative to cricket. Organised sport also fitted the religious ideal of young men who were 'strong in body, pure in heart, faithful to friends, family and country and knew their duty before God'. However, rather than being promoted by a higher authority, it is argued that the ordinary members of communities organised themselves into teams as suited their own lives and interests. By 1880, there were 214 cricket teams in Birmingham alone: 64 were church teams, 16 were

1 Adam Benkwitz and Gyozo Molnar (2017). The emergence and development of association football: influential sociocultural factors in Victorian Birmingham, *Soccer & Society*, 18:7, pp.1027-1044.

pub teams, 25 came from places of work. Once the football season extended beyond March, players – and supporters – then had to make a choice.

Seeing history through my ancestors' eyes, it has been important to balance the stories of the professional players with those of the fans. I wanted to draw more attention to the people and the emotion of the football terraces that J.B. Priestley wrote about in his 1929 novel, *The Good Companions*:

‘It turned you into a member of a new community, all brothers together for an hour and a half ... you had escaped with most of your mates and your neighbours, with half the town, cheering together, thumping one another on the shoulders, swapping judgments like Lords of the Earth, having pushed your way through a turnstile into another and altogether more splendid life, hurtling with Conflict and yet passionate and beautiful in its Art.’

Football crowds and terraces were understood as joyful places to be, away from the hardship of work and the horrors of war. It is argued that this changed in the latter half of the 20th century as those in positions of power became concerned and suspicious about the close-knit people that the football grounds contained. There was an obvious overlap with the communities that were enduring financial and social hardship and it was these people – the miners, the factory workers – that the authorities perceived as needing to be increasingly controlled. This was *Peaky Blinders* territory. Tensions increased as the ordinary supporter was suspected, condemned, and penned in by external rule-makers. It was counterintuitive and counterproductive to a sport which, yes, has some structure but is also of-the-moment grassroots stuff; ‘jumpers for goalposts’. Football’s enduring appeal relies on and celebrates the ordinary person and their friends watching their humble ‘one of our own’ heroes in flashes

of improvised genius. This is why I wanted to go back to the start of it all: with the kids, the families, and the local entrepreneurs who made it happen.

I am aware of my own gender when writing the stories but only to the extent of trying to give equal voice to the females in my family and wider community. This was a challenge given that the details of women's lives feature much less in official records. If a woman did not have a trade other than 'domestic duties' – being a housewife – there would be nothing in the census or trade directories to give a sense of her competences or interests. I have not set out to put forward a particularly feminist perspective on history, although women's rights are mentioned as a key part of social change in the early 20th century. Along with descriptions of home life and having children, I have included the emergence, and the decline, of ladies' football teams. Their existence pleasantly surprised me and the attitude of the English and Scottish football associations to exclude them disappointed me. However, I leave the reader to reflect for themselves whether or not they agree with the FAs' actions. The only moment I faltered was when it was suggested to me that my book 'might not be credible enough' for some men to read. To that I can only say that I am a fan of football, and have been all my life, as have the men and women in my family for generations. I hope that to write as a genuine fan is good enough.

Despite being quite ordinary members of society, there are odd tales and rumours surrounding my family that also inspired the research. The first is the friendship between my Scottish grandmother's family and that of William McGregor, legendary Aston Villa committee member and 'father' of the Football League. This connection is one that started me on the long journey of discovering many more links between Scottish and English football and industry.

My grandmother also delighted in saying that the famous Robert Burns, national poet of Scotland, was a friend of our ancestors. This always seemed rather far-fetched and I am not sure that anyone really believed her. However, history reveals not one but two or more possible connections by circumstance. If only my grandmother were still here to tell her tale.

Other stories are the mysterious twists and unfortunate ends to my ancestors' lives: theft, witchcraft, prison, battlefields, disappearance. Perhaps they are not epic enough for a new Netflix series but it was real life.

How did you go about writing the book – what were the steps and challenges?

I started, as many do, with a subscription to an ancestry website. I was lucky that other relatives – in my close and more distant family – had also made a start in checking census, birth and marriage records. As a warning to those starting out, this can quickly turn into quite an obsession. Many nights after work, training, and food, I would log in with the intention of a quick browse. After a particular success I would then be spurred on to find 'just one more' relative or factual detail to add to the tree, and then one more, dragging me into a black hole until the wee hours of the morning.

Digital records also have to be carefully checked. Census records have original errors from poor handwriting and manual copying mistakes. Digital databases made from these also have typed errors. Other amateur internet site users sometimes make a link between their relative and yours when they coincidentally have the same name, and were born in the same year and city, but are not the same person. One click and you can end up attached to the wrong tree. It can also be frustrating when dealing with popular

names that bring up more than 1,000 search results. The monthly subscription costs to these various sites also adds up over time.

The next step was to choose the people and the stories to base the chapters on. Guided by geography, there were three distinct industrial areas: around Glasgow in the south of Scotland; around Sheffield and Manchester towards the north of England; and around Birmingham in central England. Chronologically, there were also distinct eras in the development of football: before the Football Association and rules that gave more structure; the early years of the Football League; before and during the world wars; and the postwar era (1950s–1960s).

I then chose family units across the different branches of the family tree and across the generations that seemed to fit with and complement the stories of developing industry and football. For each family unit, I followed the path of their personal history and then added in the details of local history and any relevant sporting stories. Doing so then opened up even more questions about a particular family member or about the industry in which they worked. After a while, the stories could only go so far when based on information generated online. I needed to come home: to walk down the same streets, and look through family photos. I retrieved national and regional archive material, went to the National Football Museum, visited the very helpful people at Birmingham, Manchester, and Edinburgh city libraries, and reconnected with relatives who might be able to fill in the other gaps.

I sent over 100 emails to historians, creatives, and media specialists to enquire about image copyrights. I babbled on to friends and begged them to proofread chapters. I am truly indebted to every single person for their patience and mutual passion.

How should the book be read?

Ever since deciding to write book chapters, I had an idea that I wanted the reader to be able to make sense of the stories depending on their own memories and interests. There should be no fixed start and end point.

The chapters are present in a rough chronological order according to the years that the main characters were alive. Like the adventure books I loved as a child, I would encourage the reader then make a free choice at the end of each chapter: to continue through history to the next generation; to read a different chapter about the same industry or town; or simply to skim through the many pictures or anecdotes about particular sporting events.

What I hope is that the reader does not see this as just about my own family or football team. From my travels and from my little life so far, I sense that we are all connected in some way, and, even if not, we try to be. It is part of our human, communal nature that our ears prick up when we hear a familiar place or event talked about: 'I don't suppose you know so-and-so?' 'Do you remember when this happened?' 'Oh, yes, I [or he, or she] was there too!' Even if we have never met, and do not even speak the same language, we can still dance along to music together or have a kick-about if someone brings a ball. I hope that every reader is able to find a moment to smile or be nostalgic when they come across something they can relate to.

Finally, I hope that reading the book can be both an enjoyable trip into the past but also a way of reflecting on how society and sport are today. There are so many issues raised by looking at the past that it can shine a light on what we think is currently important: what is a fair salary? What kinds of conditions are some people living in? How can we best educate and feed children? Who stands up for the rights of those who do not have a voice? What does being

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'professional' mean? How can sport improve our mental and physical wellbeing? These are big questions and no less important are all the others: who is on the team sheet for the next game? When did the bibs last get washed? Will we have enough points to stay up?

If there is one thing that my amazing journey through history has constantly reminded me, it is that, however lost you feel, there is a community somewhere looking out for you. And if the sporting losses come a little too often, there is always next season.

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