

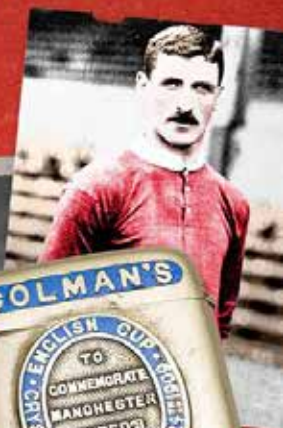
"A must-read for any Manchester United fan."

Gary Neville



The Men Who Made
**MANCHESTER
UNITED**

The Untold Story



HARRY ROBINSON

At a time when money is king in football, this is an important insight into just how humble the beginnings of Manchester United were.

'These are human football stories but they also provide a slice of Manchester's social history.' – **John Murray,**
BBC Football Correspondent.

'A fine book with incredible attention to detail as Robinson unearths and examines long forgotten United stories.' – **Andy Mitten, founder and editor of United We Stand.**

'So much of the history of Manchester United is widely documented from the Busby Babes to Sir Alex Ferguson.

'Harry's book shares the stories of the less-documented characters that came before and who instilled values in the club that have gone on to define it in youth, courage and success.

'A great background spanning almost a hundred years on the men who made everything that followed possible. A must-read for any Manchester United fan.'
– **Gary Neville, 602 appearances for Manchester United, 20 major trophies.**

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Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Introduction	11
Timeline	17
Prologue	21
Part One: Origins, 1874–1902	23
1. Meredith and coal	25
2. Stafford and rail	30
3. Meredith’s inspiration	33
4. Rocca and gelato	36
5. Meredith and City	42
6. Stafford and Newton Heath	46
7. Stafford’s reinvention	50
8. Stafford, Boers and beers	53
9. Newton Heath’s bazaar	59
10. Roberts and iron	65
11. The end for Newton Heath	69
Part Two: Birth of United, 1902–07	77
1. John Henry’s innovation	79
2. A new secretary	87
3. Falling short	93
4. Meredith and scandal	99
5. Roberts, the captain	103
6. United and riots	107
7. Promotion promises	112
8. Blue to Red	117
Part Three: Success, 1907–11	121
1. Charlie’s league leaders	123
2. Meredith’s union	125
3. Meredith in excelsis	130
4. United enter Europe	136
5. John Henry’s day in the sun	144
6. One lucky horseshoe	147
7. Red and white rosettes	155
8. Cockney Reds	159
9. United’s cup final	163
10. To Sandy	166
11. See the Conquering Heroes Come	168
12. Outcasts	171
13. Will there be football?	181
14. A legacy in Stretford brick	184
15. One-man show	189
16. United’s finesse	192

Part Four: A Slow Demise, 1911–32	199
1. Stafford's exit	201
2. Red to Blue	205
3. Pastures new	208
4. War	212
5. Futility	219
6. Crickmer's fight	226
7. Freedom	229
8. Football's return	235
9. Crickmer's new job	240
10. Davies's unique offer	243
11. Meredith's farewell tour	248
12. Mangnall's ambition	257
13. Old Trafford's curses	261
14. Barson's hotel	267
15. Meredith's film	271
16. Funeral	278
17. A threatening love	282
18. An Old Trafford boycott	286
19. Dire straits	292
20. United's Christmas turkeys	298
Part Five: Youth, 1932–39	307
1. The first 100 days	309
2. Gibson's cornerstone	313
3. Rocca's train supper	317
4. Railway	321
5. Motor car of the year	326
6. Youth	332
7. The World Cup	338
8. History	342
9. Magnificent MUJACs	349
10. Gibson's mission statement	355
11. An era's end	358
Part Six: Courage, 1939–48	361
1. A little dynamo	363
2. Little Italy's horror	368
3. The Luftwaffe	373
4. The essence of opportunism	377
5. The Goslings	381
6. Rocca's old pal	385
7. The Busby secret	390
8. Crickmer's final	392
9. Busby's final	396
Epilogue	404
Bibliography	410

Meredith and coal

'The football commentator cannot do justice to the footballing genius of Meredith. Had he lived in earlier years he would've been the subject of an epic poem and been immortalised with Achilles, Roland and the Knights of the round table.'

– Manchester United programme, 1912.

July 1874 – 'I'm putting him in the oven,' Grandmother calls out. **William Meredith**, born minutes earlier, is weak, feeble and unready for the world. His parents, recently moved north from Trefonen, a Welsh-sounding town in the English county of Shropshire, scuttle around Chirk enlisting help from their new neighbours. They are just inside the Welsh border. Had he been born 200 metres south, little Billy – who will be proudly capped 48 times by Wales – would be an Englishman. Whether it's his grandmother's warm oven or a natural determination, Billy survives. His initial deficiencies are quickly overcome even though, as one of ten kids, he elicits little direct attention from his parents, James and Jane.

Billy watches his father and his elder brothers trudge through Chirk's grassy fields, the tips of which are browned by colliery smog, and disappear over the lip of the hill to the Black Park pit. Every Chirk man works in one of the town's two coal mines. A month after Billy's birth, Parliament's

Factory Act establishes a 56-hour working week and prevents children from being used as chimney sweeps, but it will not prevent Billy from an education in coal. The chief guzzler of Chirk's produce is Manchester. As Cottonopolis throbs with the pulsating beat of industrial growth, Chirk is one of a glut of small towns providing it with the resources it needs to blossom into the heart of the country's Industrial Revolution.¹

Mining, religion and sport define the Meredith family. Two of Billy's six sisters become nurses, inspired by their Primitive Methodist faith, while his brother will be a lay preacher. Away from the pits and the church, the vast expanse of Welsh valleys and hills provides plenty of space to play, although when Billy Meredith is born, exactly what football is remains unfixed and unclear. It has been played for centuries in one form or another, as it is in Chirk, where Billy falls in love with the game alongside his brothers, Sam and Jim. In larger towns and cities, newspapers regularly report on 'football' games with scores varying from 1-0 to 43-40 and two tries to one. The organisation of what is to become England's national sport has only just begun. The Football Association (FA) was founded 11 years ago, in 1863, and England's first international match was played against Scotland seven years later. In the summer of 1871, exactly three years before Billy's birth, Parliament legalised trade unions and three weeks later, the English Cup was born.² A painfully close relationship will form between these two events for Billy Meredith, but not for another 38 years.

British sport overall is finding its feet. The first England versus Australia Test cricket match is held in 1877, two months before the first Wimbledon Championship at the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club. Its victor is Spencer Gore, the Harrow-educated great-grandson of an earl. Football's 'English Cup' features similar public school

1 Manchester is known as Cottonopolis as it's the city at the centre of Britain's globally dominant cotton industry.

2 Now known as the FA Cup.

dominance. The 1873 final is moved to 11am to allow the players to attend the afternoon's Oxford versus Cambridge boat race. A 'games cult' has overtaken England's public schools, whose teachers believe team sports will produce good men suitable to fight for the Empire, men who are courageous and athletic but also unselfish, gentle, fair, restrained and unpretentious. At Harrow, boys are made to play football with the direct intention of producing good warriors. Old Harrovians dominate the Wanderers Football Club, who win five out of the first seven cups.

With most prestigious public schools located in England's south, the north is playing catch-up football-wise until a wave of new Lancastrian teams are founded in the 1870s. Included amongst these is the predecessor to Manchester United.

In Newton Heath, just north-east of Manchester's city boundaries, signs of grass to play football on are hard to find. Once a Lancashire farming town, the area has been rapidly industrialised. It is now criss-crossed by the lines of the vast Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway Company, which employs a couple of thousand local men. The company's Dining Committee has begun to put on 'Improvement Classes' which include opera but are primarily sport-based. The result is the formation of various clubs including Newton Heath L&YR, formed by the Carriage & Wagon Department in 1878 to develop team spirit and social skills. While they usually play cricket against other departments of the railway company, hence their predominantly white strip with blue trim, they do dabble in 'soccer' and football soon takes precedence over cricket. Teenager Sam Black buys a football from a Market Street shop in Manchester's city centre and soon, in November 1880, the team are playing their first recorded match, a 6-0 defeat to Bolton Wanderers' second XI.

The Heathens play friendlies against varied opposition which includes Hurst – the pioneers of Mancunian football – Manchester Arcadians, Blackburn Olympic's reserves and St Mark's. The latter, who will undergo three name changes

before settling on Manchester City, played their first recorded match one week before Newton Heath, who triumph 3-0 in the sides' first encounter.

They face off at Newton Heath's North Road, a just-about-suitable patch of ground immediately next to the Carriage & Wagon Works in which the team's players are employed. The ground is owned by the Manchester Cathedral authorities and the Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway company agree to pay a small rent on behalf of their employees. In the summer months, North Road is uneven, stony and cracked. In winter, it's muddy and swamp-like. All through the year, passing trains cast a thick fog of steam across the pitch. The players change in the nearby Three Crowns pub on Oldham Road and walk up to play. As crowds begin to develop and grow, the 'Coachbuilders', as the team becomes known due to their occupations, have to jostle through their own supporters to get access to their pitch, bursting randomly out of the mass of people on the touchline like corn kernels do in Charles Cretors' newly invented popcorn machine in Chicago.

Football is receiving increasing focus in Manchester as many northern sides flourish, Newton Heath L&YR included. The *Manchester Guardian* still prioritises rugby, but the *Manchester Courier* brings on a dedicated football reporter named 'Dribbler'. A 10,000 crowd at the neutral Whalley Range ground for an English Cup semi-final in March 1882 certainly helps the status of the game and while Manchester's teams are not yet at the level of those in neighbouring towns, important sporting events are common within the globally renowned city's boundaries. In late 1882, the International Football Association Board (IFAB) is founded in Manchester, perhaps the most powerful governing body in the game.³ In the same season, Blackburn Olympic's FA Cup victory represents the sudden wrestling of football power away

³ It remains football's most powerful governing body, ranking ahead of FIFA in that regard.

from the public school alumni and towards the northern professional classes.

Months later, the Manchester and District FA is founded, comprising 16 clubs. Meetings are well-attended and, after campaigning from Hurst, Newton Heath and West Manchester, a Manchester Cup is begun. This will be the making of both Mancunian football and Newton Heath L&YR, whose side's diversity reflects that of its birthplace. Newton Heath is typical of Manchester in that its community is an ever-changing mosaic of 'locals' and immigrants. The Railwaymen's key organiser is Frederick Attock, a 36-year-old Carriage & Wagon Works superintendent who lives with his two sons, elderly mother and two servants, none of whom are Manchester-born. They have moved from Essex for work. Vice-president Thomas Gorst, 53, is a Liverpool-born railway clerk who lives with railway workers born in Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Back down in north Wales, 12-year-old Billy Meredith has joined his father in Chirk's Black Park mine. Due to his slight frame, he's employed to unhook the tubs at the pit's bottom. It's a risky business, one of many roles down the mines that lead to all-too-common deaths of children who should be playing in the fields, or getting a good education. Stories are regularly told of children's heads crushed between the tubs and doors, underneath horses or enormous cages, but Billy survives and enjoys himself. Unwashed, grimy and with blackened faces, he and his mates sprint off at the end of the working day and out on to the fields where they play football, the light dying behind the rolling hills.