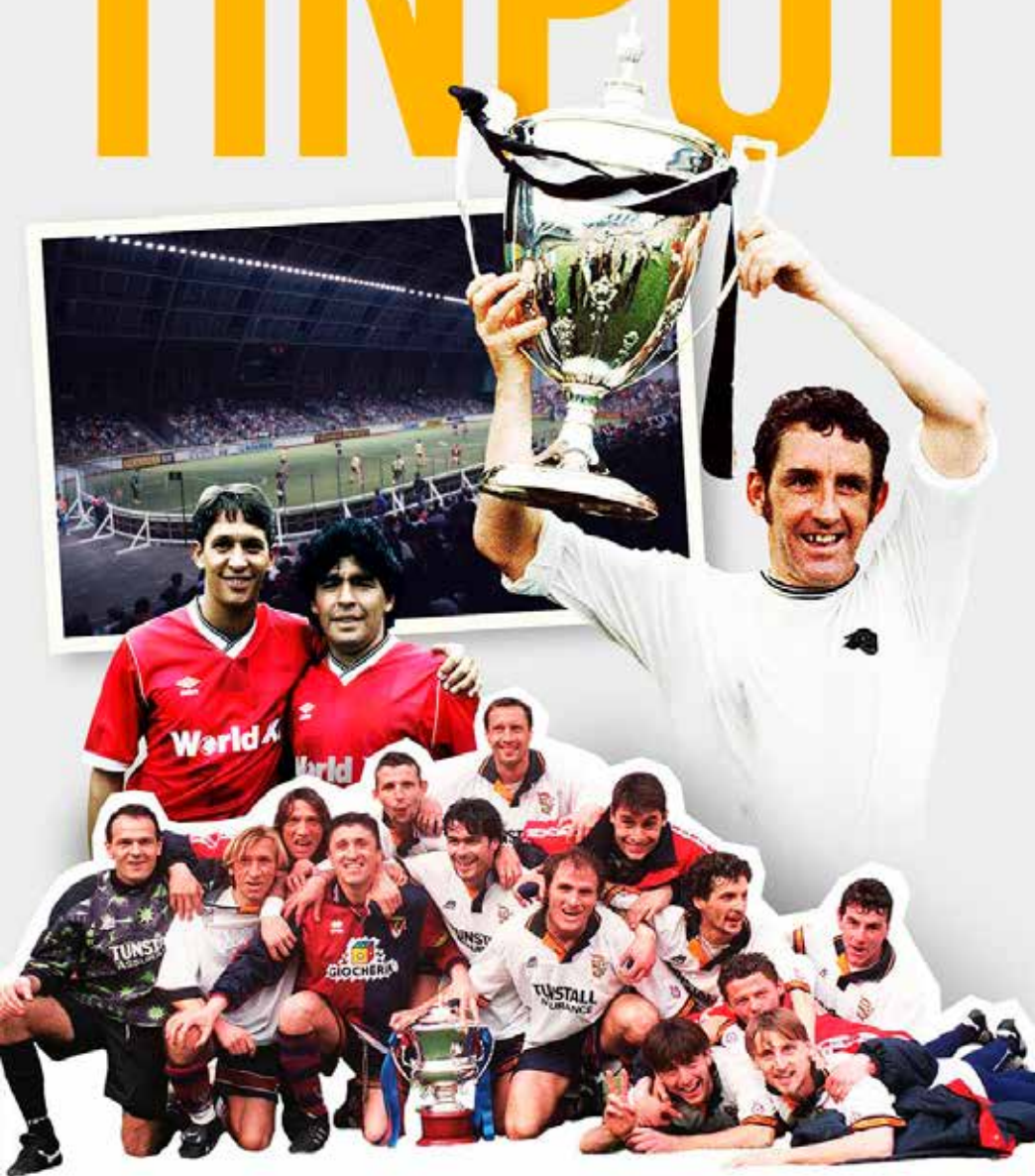


S I M O N T U R N E R

TINPOT



Football's Forgotten Tournaments

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A Question of Prestige

NOT MANY interesting stories start in Swindon, but this one does. Prior to the late 1960s, Wiltshire could reasonably be described as a football wilderness. The county's only club of consequence was Swindon Town, and they had hardly set the world alight. Founded in 1879, they didn't compete in the Football League until they became a founder member of the Third Division in 1920. The Robins stubbornly stayed there for the next 40 years or so, occasionally mounting a promotion challenge or toying with a return to the Southern League but never quite succeeding in either venture. However, as skirts got shorter and hair grew longer, the winds of change finally started to blow in Wiltshire's direction. In chaos theory, the butterfly effect occurs when minuscule events result in much greater consequences. Arguably, the germ of Swindon's exploits lay in, well, a germ, but more of that later.

A host of homegrown talents inspired Swindon's emergence from the doldrums, the first of whom was Mike Summerbee. The exciting young forward went on to win a host of trophies with Manchester City, though surely his finest hour was appearing in *Escape to Victory* alongside Michael Caine, Sylvester Stallone, and Pelé. Following hot

on his heels was Don Rogers, a left-winger of rare grace and flair. Despite being played out near the touchline, Rogers regularly found the back of the net, finishing as the Third Division's leading goalscorer in 1968 and 1969. Rogers went on to play in the top tier for Crystal Palace and Queens Park Rangers and would surely have won an international cap had he not fallen foul of Sir Alf Ramsey's legendary aversion to wingers. Another native prodigy was John Trollope, a left-back whose career lasted from the beginning of the 1960s until the start of the 1980s. Over that time, he notched up 770 league games for Swindon, which set a record for the most league appearances made by a player for one English club. Trollope held on to that record for over four decades until Milton Keynes Dons defender Dean Lewington finally broke it in 2023.

Although Swindon's young guns won promotion to the Second Division in 1969, it was in the League Cup that they really caught the eye. They moved stealthily through the rounds until being paired with Derby County in the quarter-finals. Under the inspirational leadership of Brian Clough and Peter Taylor, the Rams were romping to the Second Division title. Despite having already disposed of Chelsea and Everton, both of whom would finish in the top five at the end of the season, they found Swindon a much tougher nut to crack. A 0-0 draw at the Baseball Ground necessitated a replay in Wiltshire, which was settled by a sole strike from the prolific Rogers. First Division Burnley should have presented an even stronger challenge in the semi-finals, but Wiltshire's finest kept them at bay over two legs, meaning that a decider in neutral West Bromwich was required. It turned out to be a thriller. Swindon scored early and hung on, only for two goals in three minutes to

swing matters Burnley's way, the first coming just before the end of normal time and the second shortly after the restart. Undeterred, the Robins came roaring back, scoring two further goals in extra time without reply.

Swindon had done well to reach Wembley, but few gave them much hope in the final. Their opponents were Arsenal, conquerors of Liverpool and Spurs in earlier rounds. Bertie Mee had built a fine side, so strong in fact that two years later it would win the First Division and FA Cup double, becoming just the second side to do so since 1897. However, there was to be a leveller. In March 1969, Wembley's hallowed turf was anything but. The Royal International Horse Show had been held there the previous summer and the pitch had never really recovered from the damage done, with drainage problems only adding to the difficulties. And in the days leading up to the final it had rained incessantly, turning the surface into a quagmire. If trenches had been dug, Wembley could easily have been mistaken for the Somme.

The Gunners gamely plugged away in the mud but were unable to find a way through Swindon's well-drilled defence. However, ten minutes before the interval, disaster struck when a backward pass revealed that Arsenal's goalkeeper, Bob Wilson, was on a different wavelength to one of his defenders. That was followed by much slipping and sliding in the sludge as they attempted to rectify the situation before the ball was slotted into the net by gleeful Swindon inside-forward Roger Smart. The favourites spent the remainder of the game searching valiantly for an equaliser, and just as it looked like the Robins would hold out, their goalkeeper made an error to rival the one made earlier by his opposite number. After performing heroics

to keep Arsenal at bay, Peter Downsborough got to a long ball ahead of an onrushing attacker, only to kick it against his leg. The ball ballooned up in the air and Bobby Gould was first to it, heading it into an empty net.

After having the trophy snatched away from them, it would have been understandable if the underdogs had crumbled in extra time. As it happened, Swindon were the only side in it. They almost scored when a header was tipped on to the post by Wilson, and finally did so shortly before they switched ends again. A lofted corner resulted in a goalmouth scramble and Rogers was the fastest to react, forcing the ball past Wilson and three defenders, all of them standing on the goal line. The Gunners had little left to give, and all that remained was for Rogers to administer his coup de grâce. There were only seconds left on the clock when he raced forward from his own half, latching on to a ball cleared out of defence. Within moments he was one-on-one with Wilson, deceiving him with a delightful dummy before sliding the ball into the net.

And this is where the germs come in. A week earlier, Arsenal's league game against Liverpool was postponed because most of their team had succumbed to the flu. They were passed fit to play against Swindon, but their lacklustre display in extra time may well have been due to the lingering effects of their illness. Had the Gunners lifted the trophy, they would have secured a place in the following season's Inter-Cities Fairs Cup, the spiritual predecessor of what's now the Europa League. However, the rules of the competition forbade clubs from as far down the pyramid as Swindon were from taking part. Clearly this was a monstrous injustice, and to the Football League's credit they did something about it.

England and Italy had circled each other warily during the early years of professional football, with their national sides not meeting until 1933, and only playing seven further times over the following three decades. That changed in the early 1960s when a flurry of five fixtures took place. One was a conventional international friendly in Rome, while the other four were another forgotten oddity. For many years, the Football League had put forward a team to play in an annual contest against the Scottish League, but in 1960 they broadened their horizons by embarking on a series of games against the Italian League. They were curious affairs, not least because a footballer's nationality had no impact on his eligibility to be selected for the showdown. This made it a trial of strength between leagues, rather than the nations vying for supremacy.

Although English players dominated the Football League's team for the opening encounter, it did contain representatives from the three other home nations. Meanwhile, their opponents happily fielded an Argentinian, a Brazilian, a Swede, and a Welshman. In a harbinger of what was to come, the game in Milan descended into a kick-fest. Both sides lost two players through injury and subsequently blamed the other for starting the trouble. As for the football, the hosts ran out easy winners, taking a three-goal lead early in the second half before a comeback by the visitors made the scoreline appear a little more respectable. Despite the contest's ugly start, the two leagues agreed to play each other again a year later, this time at Old Trafford. The visitors selected Scottish striker Denis Law, who had appeared for the Football League 12 months earlier but was now a Torino player, while the hosts put out an all-English XI. Despite

the reliance on native talent, they crashed to a 2-0 defeat, with salt being rubbed into the wound when Inter Milan's English striker, Gerry Hitchens, scored the clincher.

The third game in the series took place at Highbury in 1962. In a thrilling encounter, the Football League finally defeated the Italian League, weathering a succession of attacks on their goal before taking the lead and eventually running out 3-2 winners. A gap of almost a year and a half elapsed before the two leagues met again, and it was the Italians who prevailed once more. A single late goal settled matters, not that many were there to witness it as Milan's San Siro stadium was almost deserted. By this time, Alf Ramsey had been given responsibility for selecting the Football League side and he appeared to treat the fixture as little more than an opportunity to experiment with his England line-up. With Italian fans shunning the encounter and the Football League scorning talent from other home nations, the argument for the contest's existence weakened and it was duly consigned to history.

Nevertheless, the sequence of fixtures had established a relationship between the English and Italian leagues. So, when a consolation prize needed to be found for Swindon Town, it perhaps wasn't too much of a surprise that the Football League looked in the direction of their Latin cousins. The two sets of administrators agreed that an annual contest would be held between the winners of the League Cup and the Coppa Italia, which would be known as the Anglo-Italian League Cup. On paper at least, the opening encounter appeared to be a complete mismatch as Swindon were invited to take on Roma. Then as now, Roma were one of Italy's biggest clubs, while Swindon could only claim to be the biggest club in Wiltshire. But

for a team that had already done for Arsenal, the Italian giants held no fear.

Contested over two legs, the first Anglo-Italian League Cup was held early in the 1969/70 season. In a sweltering Rome, the visitors battled both the elements and the hosts, almost reaching half-time unscathed, only for the Italians to convert a late penalty. Undaunted, Swindon fought back, equalising not long after the break, though Roma scored again to take a narrow lead into the return fixture at the County Ground. The Robins had recently acquired a young striker from Newcastle United called Arthur Horsfield, and it didn't take him long to make his mark. He levelled the tie early in the first half and went on to complete his hat-trick before a further strike from Rogers completed the rout. It was a second barely believable triumph for Swindon, with future England manager Fabio Capello one of those left scratching their heads, wondering quite how Roma had been bested by a side from Swindon.

Having taken their first tentative steps into inter-league competition, the English and Italian administrators bravely made a leap into the dark, organising a 12-team tournament to be played at the end of the 1969/70 season. The driving force behind the Anglo-Italian Inter-League Clubs Competition, or Anglo-Italian Cup as it became known, was one of European football's great movers and shakers, Gigi Peronace. He came to prominence during the late 1950s as one of the game's first agents, facilitating several high-profile deals such as Jimmy Greaves's move from Chelsea to AC Milan, John Charles's relocation from Leeds to Juventus and Denis Law's transfer from Manchester City to Torino. A figure whose charm was

only surpassed by his influence, the gregarious Peronace later became a leading light in the Italian FA and was clearly a man the English were happy to do business with.

The justification for the Anglo-Italian Cup was that it would fill two gaps: one in the clubs' coffers, and another in the football calendar. The English season normally ended in mid-May, but in 1970 it finished a month earlier to accommodate the World Cup in Mexico. The first Anglo-Italian Cup was duly scheduled for May 1970, with the Football League targeting clubs that had failed to qualify for European competition in the hope they would seize the opportunity to raise some much-needed revenue. However, it's fair to say that the Italians embraced the new competition with much greater vigour than their English counterparts.

Peronace put together an impressive cast, featuring such household names as Juventus, Fiorentina, Lazio, Napoli, and Roma, who evidently weren't put off by their embarrassing defeat to Swindon. By contrast, England's offering was far more mundane. Whereas five of Italy's six contestants had finished in the top ten of Serie A, the highest-ranked English club was 13th-placed Wolverhampton Wanderers. Joining them were Sheffield Wednesday and Sunderland, who had both recently been relegated from the First Division, plus Middlesbrough and Swindon, who had each narrowly missed promotion from the Second Division. It was as if the Italians had brought a case of champagne to the party, while all the English could rustle up was a crate of brown ale.

Depending on your outlook, the tournament's format was either a bit odd or a work of genius. The 12 challengers were split into three groups, each containing two teams

from England and Italy. Given that the competition's purpose was to pit the two leagues against each other, none of the clubs played their domestic rivals. Instead, they contested home and away fixtures against foreign opposition, though there was an interesting twist. The standard two points for a win and one for a draw was supplemented by the awarding of further points for each goal scored, regardless of the result. Although its purpose was to reward attacking play, the innovation did result in some perverse outcomes, such as when Napoli gathered the same number of points by losing 4-3 to Sheffield Wednesday as Wolves did for beating Lazio 1-0.

You may be wondering how three groups of four teams can produce two finalists, but the organisers addressed that conundrum with another novelty. The results of the 24 group games were collated and two league tables constructed, one for the English sides and another for the Italian teams. The clubs that finished top of each table subsequently contested the final. This arrangement ensured that both nations were represented in the final, though it did create the theoretical possibility that a club could lose all four group fixtures and still make it into the last two, thus giving hope to even the most hapless of entrants.

Eight months after winning the Anglo-Italian League Cup, Swindon Town eagerly threw themselves into another Latin adventure. They were drawn in the same group as Juventus, Napoli, and recently relegated Sheffield Wednesday. A few months after guiding Swindon to their League Cup triumph over Arsenal and winning promotion to the Second Division, manager Danny Williams had been enticed away by the South Yorkshire giants. However,

what should have been a step up for Williams became a misstep when his new club finished bottom of the First Division. Meanwhile, his replacement Fred Ford simply picked up where his predecessor had left off, winning the Anglo-Italian League Cup against Roma in only his tenth match in charge. If Williams didn't already have sufficient reason to regret leaving the high-flying Robins, the inaugural Anglo-Italian Cup would only make him rue his decision even further.

Juventus were the first visitors to the County Ground, and if the Roma players had given them any warning of what was coming, it certainly wasn't heeded. After having put four goals past Roma without reply, the Wiltshire wonders did the same to Juventus. A year earlier, *The Italian Job* had been released in British cinemas. Starring Michael Caine and Noël Coward, it told the light-hearted story of how a group of London gangsters stole millions of dollars' worth of gold bullion before escaping in three Austin Minis through a traffic jam of their own making. The film portrayed the robbery as a clash of nations, with the plucky English bravely taking on a tricky away fixture against the combined force of the Carabinieri and the Mafia. Naturally, the three Minis were painted red, white, and blue. Swindon now made their own visit to the city of Turin, where the fictional heist had taken place. Incredibly, they proceeded to do the double over the Italian giants, winning 1-0. For a side that had just finished third in Serie A (and yes, Juventus did play their first team), this was a truly humiliating pair of defeats.

The English half of the tournament built steadily before reaching an exciting crescendo. After three consecutive victories, Wolves headed the table as the six entrants went

into the final round of games. However, a disappointing 2-0 defeat away to Lazio opened the door to the others, each of whom could make the final if they scored enough goals. Then, one by one, they fell. Middlesbrough's 2-2 draw with Vicenza only enabled them to draw level with Wolves, while Sunderland and Sheffield Wednesday saw their hopes disappear after goalless defeats to Fiorentina and Juventus. Meanwhile, West Bromwich Albion's draw with Roma also left them well short of the total they needed to reach. The only club not to blink was Swindon. Despite their twin victories over Juventus being separated by a home defeat to Napoli, a consolation goal gave them what proved to be a vital point. When they played the reverse fixture, the inimitable Don Rogers scored the only goal of the game to give his side the three points they needed to leapfrog Wolves.

Despite that defeat, Napoli also progressed to the final, though it would have taken a huge turn of events for them not to have done so. Prior to that game, they led the Italian table with 14 points, half of which had been amassed by their 5-1 thrashing of Danny Williams' disappointing Sheffield Wednesday side. Their nearest challengers were Fiorentina and Lazio, and even though both won their final games, they couldn't score anywhere near enough goals to threaten the team from Naples. That club subsequently hosted the final, though it was the intrepid warriors from Wiltshire who took centre stage, shrugging off the intimidating presence of 50,000 fervent Napoli fans. They weren't happy when Swindon took the lead midway through the first half and became even less impressed when they doubled it shortly after the break. However, when the underdogs scored a third it was simply

too much for the home supporters to take. Overcome with incandescent rage, they began to break up the concrete seats with their bare hands and hurled jagged pieces of it on to the pitch. The players tried to dodge the debris as best they could, but the enveloping riot meant that the referee had no alternative other than to bring the game to an end 11 minutes early. With fires also being started within the stadium, it was decided that the result would stand and so the trophy was awarded to the deserving visitors. Italian officials later claimed that political grievances were at the root of the disturbance, though it's curious that the rioters' political consciousness was only awakened by Swindon's third goal.

Sadly, the final wasn't the only 1970 Anglo-Italian Cup game to attract controversy. Both of Wolves' ties against Lazio had their difficulties. It started at Molineux when Giorgio Chinaglia was sent off late in the game, leading to punches being thrown as the players made their way back to the dressing rooms. Back in Rome it kicked off again when Lazio's goalkeeper was dismissed for attacking a Wolves player. However, the worst outbreak of violence occurred when West Brom visited Vicenza. It started late in the contest after a rash tackle by Asa Hartford resulted in a full-scale brawl, leading to the referee walking off the pitch before abandoning the game. As a punishment, both clubs were stripped of the points they would have earned for the 1-1 draw.

After beating Arsenal in the League Cup, and Roma in the Anglo-Italian League Cup, Swindon's comprehensive defeat of Napoli completed a barely believable trio of triumphs. Yet, they were part of a wider success story for English football in the Anglo-Italian Cup. Tellingly,

for every game that the Italians won during the group stage, the English won two, their fast, attacking football proving more rewarding than their opponents' slower, more defensive approach. Financially, though, it was the Latins who prospered. Spectators turned up in far higher numbers on the continent, while attendances in England were generally only half of what they would be for a league game. Nevertheless, the tournament's organisers deemed the event to have been sufficiently profitable for a further edition to be worthwhile.

The Anglo-Italian Cup duly returned in the early summer of 1971, albeit with a much-changed cast of characters. Once more, Gigi Peronace delivered an impressive contingent of Serie A clubs including Inter Milan, who had just been crowned Italian champions, plus Cagliari, who had won the title a season earlier. Juventus would also have participated had they not been playing Leeds United in the Fairs Cup Final. Verona took their place, while Bologna and Sampdoria also entered for the first time. The sole Italian side to give the tournament a second go were Roma, perhaps seeking to right the wrong of having failed to win a single Anglo-Italian Cup game a year earlier. From England, only Swindon and West Brom reacquainted themselves with the contest. They were joined by another batch of humdrum entrants, with Crystal Palace, Huddersfield Town and Stoke City all having finished in the lower reaches of the First Division. The Football League also continued their proud tradition of entering the team that had finished bottom of the table.

Blackpool went into the 1971 Anglo-Italian Cup on the back of a wretched season. They had been promoted to the First Division a year earlier but were in the relegation zone

by Christmas, having only won three matches. In a bid to rectify matters, the club decided to appoint Bob Stokoe as manager. Stokoe would famously lead Sunderland to FA Cup glory in 1973, running across the Wembley turf after the final whistle in his brown mackintosh coat, trilby hat and red tracksuit trousers, the very image of '70s couture. Unfortunately for the Tangerines, however, matters only got worse after Stokoe's appointment. He failed to win any of his first 17 league games in charge, managing just one victory before his side were relegated back to the Second Division. Blackpool only made it into the starting line-up for the Anglo-Italian Cup because Brian Clough's Derby dropped out, so it's fair to say that little was expected of them.

The Tangerines began their campaign uncertainly. They needed a last-minute equaliser to secure a 3-3 draw at home to Verona and followed that by becoming the first side to gift Roma a victory in the tournament after losing 3-1 to them at Bloomfield Road. Their upcoming trip to Italy was beginning to look more like an end-of-season holiday than a determined attempt to win a trophy, but suddenly everything changed. A stunning 4-1 away victory over Verona earned them six points, lifting them to the top of the English table alongside Huddersfield Town. Also in the mix were Stoke City, who were unbeaten in three games, while Swindon were making a decent stab at retaining the trophy. They opened with a 2-2 draw at home to Bologna before Don Rogers spearheaded an impressive 4-1 victory over Sampdoria, though a subsequent 3-1 defeat away to Bologna checked their progress a little.

That sequence of results meant four English sides went into their final group games within a point of each other.

Huddersfield Town subsequently threw in the towel with a 1-0 defeat in Bologna, while Stoke City's 2-1 reverse in Verona did little for their cause. Yet, times started to get even sunnier for the Seasiders when they turned Roma over 2-1 in the Olympic Stadium. The Robins played last, knowing they would have to score at least three times in a victory over Sampdoria if they were to overhaul Blackpool at the top of the table. To their credit, they almost did it. They took the lead after just seven minutes, only for the Italians to equalise with a quarter of an hour remaining, meaning that Swindon's last-minute winner arrived too late to make any difference. Frustratingly, it wasn't the first time they had been edged out by Blackpool. A year earlier, the two sides were neck-and-neck in the battle for promotion to the First Division as the season reached a conclusion. The Robins subsequently managed to win only two of their final six fixtures, allowing the Tangerines to nip in and claim the prize. And now they had done it again.

Blackpool's progression was also a little hard on Crystal Palace, who were dealt a poor hand when they were paired with the two most recent winners of Serie A. Nevertheless, they managed to beat Cagliari at Selhurst Park and followed that with an impressive away victory over an Inter Milan side featuring four players who had appeared in the World Cup Final a year earlier. Yet, despite matching Blackpool's record of two wins, a draw, and a defeat, they scored so few goals in doing so that they finished next to bottom of the English table. It was a sequence of results that deserved much better, leaving the tournament's format looking more than a little suspect.

In the other half of the competition, Bologna marched serenely to the final. After opening with an

away draw against reigning champions Swindon, they beat Huddersfield Town twice before getting the better of the Robins on their own turf. With the final being held at their stadium, and only Blackpool standing in their way, the *Rossoblù* seemed set fair to be Italy's first winners of the tournament. Unusually for the times, the game was broadcast live on UK television, and those who watched were given a rare treat. Initially, the contest proceeded as expected, with the visitors going into the interval a goal behind after leaving Bologna's right-winger unmarked in the penalty area before being suitably punished. The hosts continued to look comfortable until the midway point in the second half when a series of pinball-type passes ricocheted rapidly between near-stationary Bologna defenders, ending with John Craven (not he of *Newsround* and *Countryfile* fame) slotting a shot into the net to give his side some much-needed hope.

From that point on, Blackpool were as energised as the Italians were unnerved. The Tangerines rolled forward relentlessly, searching for a winner, while Bologna grimly tried to hold on to what they had got. As the match moved into extra time, players started to wilt underneath the fierce afternoon sun, their weary, cramp-ridden legs having to be rubbed back into life at every available opportunity. Then, with a penalty shoot-out looming, Micky Burns picked the ball up wide on the left wing, turned inside, skipped past a succession of sluggish Italian defenders before unleashing an unstoppable shot into the top corner of the net. It was a goal that Blackpool's ambition deserved, and sensing glory, they saw out the game, fighting off fatigue as much as they fought off Bologna. For the second year running, a team

from England's second tier had bested one of Italy's best, which hardly reflected well on Serie A's reputation.

Thankfully, the second Anglo-Italian Cup suffered less from crowd trouble and brawling footballers than the first, although it still had its moments. Sampdoria fans became so agitated by a late sending-off in their home tie with Swindon Town that Italian police had to accompany the English referee to his dressing room. Meanwhile, both of Stoke's ties with Roma were eventful. After the two sides played out a bad-tempered draw in England, running battles broke out between the home supporters and the police at the Olympic Stadium, lasting for so long that the Stoke players had to be kept inside the ground until the disturbances had been quelled. Despite these unsavoury incidents, attendances were up on the previous year, particularly in Italy where fans continued to turn up in large numbers to watch their teams play, frequently see them lose and occasionally riot.

Nevertheless, by the early summer of 1972 a few cracks began to show in the Anglo-Italian Cup's facade. Many of Italy's top clubs were unable to participate because of a scheduling clash with the final rounds of the Coppa Italia, which meant no Juventus, no Inter Milan and no Fiorentina. Having just finished fourth in Serie A, Cagliari were Italy's highest-ranked entry, while seventh-placed Roma continued their love affair with the contest. Sampdoria and Vicenza returned for a second attempt, while Atalanta made their debut alongside recently relegated Catanzaro. Meanwhile, the English entries were even more uninspiring than usual. Only Stoke and new entrants Leicester City played top-tier football, although Birmingham City had just won promotion from the Second

Division. Blackpool returned to defend their trophy, while Sunderland were back after a year away and there was an intriguing debutant in Carlisle United.

The Cumbrians travelled to Italy as the lowest-ranked side in the Anglo-Italian Cup, having just finished tenth in the Second Division. Clouds loomed over their preparations for the tournament as the club had dispensed with manager Ian MacFarlane less than a month prior to its start, leaving them with no alternative other than to ask trainer Dick Young to step in and take temporary charge of the team. MacFarlane had assembled a decent squad of players, two of whom particularly caught the eye. England once had a proud tradition of producing sportsmen who played professional football in the winter before switching to top-class cricket in the summer. Team captain Chris Balderstone was one of the last of that generation. Alongside a two-decade-long career in football, he batted for Leicestershire and played in two Test matches for England. On one occasion, Balderstone even managed to compete in both disciplines on the same day, helping Leicestershire to win the County Championship in the afternoon before hopping into his manager's car so that he could play in an evening game for Doncaster Rovers. The club's other rising star was maverick protégé Stan Bowles, a divinely gifted striker whose guile and panache lit up mid-1970s English football.

Carlisle were thrown straight in at the deep end, opening with a game against Roma at the Olympic Stadium. A couple of millennia earlier, Christians had probably got better odds when taking on lions at the Colosseum. Twice the hosts took the lead, but twice the Cumbrians equalised. However, with just a few minutes

remaining, Graham Winstanley buried a shot into the back of the net to secure a win that was as unexpected as it was delightful. Next, Carlisle travelled south to the small city of Catanzaro, located within the instep of the Italian boot. Catanzaro had won promotion to Serie A for the first time in their history in 1971, though just three victories over the entire campaign resulted in an inevitable and immediate return to obscurity. They carried that poor form into the Anglo-Italian Cup, losing first to Stoke and then to Carlisle, with a Bowles goal separating the two sides. Back at Brunton Park, the Cumbrians came mightily close to beating Roma for a second time. A Ray Train thunderbolt opened the scoring, and despite being pegged back, they took a lead into the interval following a strike from Balderstone. Ten minutes into the second half Carlisle extended their lead, only for Winstanley to turn from hero to villain by putting the ball into his own net before the Italians somehow found a late equaliser.

Having gathered a dozen points from their first three fixtures, Carlisle were second in the English table, with only the reigning champions narrowly ahead of them. Blackpool had made a solid start in their quest to retain the trophy, thrashing Sampdoria 4-1 in Genoa before beating Vicenza 2-0. A further victory over Sampdoria at Bloomfield Road maintained their lead at the top of the table, but with just a home tie against the ill-fated Catanzaro to come, Carlisle had good reason to believe they could overhaul them. The Cumbrians needed a high-scoring win, and Bowles was at the forefront of delivering it, scoring twice before setting up a third to help secure a 4-1 victory and six valuable points. However, 75 miles away in Blackpool, something incredible was happening.

In the days when football results came through on the teleprinter, the BBC would make it clear a drubbing had taken place by displaying the number of goals in words as well as numbers. Presumably this was to confirm that a mistake hadn't been made, though it did rub salt into the open wounds of the supporters whose team had been hammered. I speak from experience here, for the harrowing day when I read 'Bolton Wanderers 8 (EIGHT) – 1 Walsall' is unlikely to fade from my memory any time soon. While the fans of Vicenza didn't have to experience indignity by BBC teleprinter, they still suffered mightily. The game was barely 60 seconds old when the hero of Bologna, Micky Burns, opened the scoring, and it only took a further minute for Blackpool to double their lead. By half-time the Tangerines were four in front, but worse was to come for the Italians. The second half saw them concede a further six goals, with even a change of goalkeeper failing to halt the tide. Burns got his fourth with almost 20 minutes of the match to play and the hosts stopped there, seemingly showing their visitors some mercy when their tally reached 10, or should that be TEN.

That victory earned Blackpool an incredible 12 points, which was more than Stoke and four Italian sides managed to accumulate during the entire tournament. It also made reaching the final an inevitability as the Seaside finished eight points clear of second-placed Carlisle. Awaiting them were Roma, who were able to play the final at their own ground despite having lost at home to Carlisle, and only drawing with them away. Meanwhile, all the Cumbrians were left with were their plans for the summer holidays. To say they had been a little hard done to is putting it mildly. Their haul of 18 points was not only four higher

than Roma's but was greater than any other side in the tournament's history, except for the free-scoring Blackpool. Although the folly of the competition's rules had already been exposed in previous years, this latest injustice only served to demonstrate their utter daftness.

There have been greater Roma sides than the vintage of 1971/72. They were managed by Helenio Herrera, an Argentinian who made his name by leading Inter Milan to three Serie A titles and two European Cups in the 1960s with an innovative style of defensive football. The Diego Simeone of his day, Herrera arrived at Roma with a big reputation but failed to deliver, winning only the Coppa Italia in 1969. Meanwhile, his team's performances in the Anglo-Italian Cup were embarrassing, with only a single tie won in eight attempts during the 1970 and 1971 contests. Roma subsequently managed to reach the 1972 final, but that was largely due to a collapse in Atalanta's form. The Bergamo club had twice as many points as Roma at the halfway stage in the competition, having scored eight goals in home victories over Leicester and Sunderland. In England, however, they could only manage a 0-0 draw at Roker Park before suffering a 6-0 whipping by the Foxes. That opened the door for Roma, who sneaked into the final after securing a 3-3 draw with Carlisle before beating Stoke 2-1. Three English teams finished with more points than Roma, but that, of course, was irrelevant.

Blackpool took to the pitch against Roma with eight of the side that had defeated Bologna a year earlier. They started well at the Olympic Stadium, but ironically for the team that put ten past Vicenza, they soon missed a great chance to score. The Italians punished their profligacy

by taking the lead early in the second half before adding a further two goals late on. The Tangerines did get one back a minute from time, but it came too late to prevent Roma from becoming the Anglo-Italian Cup's least worthy champions. It would take another 50 years for the *Giallorossi* to win another international trophy, with the club losing a European Cup Final in 1984 and a UEFA Cup Final in 1991 before José Mourinho finally led them to victory in the inaugural UEFA Europa Conference League in 2022.

Although the 1972 Anglo-Italian Cup may not have had a deserving *campione*, the English were clear winners when it came to scoring goals. One of the competition's distinctive features was its encouragement of attacking play, and in a further attempt to increase the goals-per-game ratio they had meddled with the offside rule, determining that a player could only be offside if they strayed over a line drawn across the edge of the opponents' penalty area to each side of the pitch. Curiously, one nation embraced the rule change, while it appeared to completely pass the other by. The number of goals scored by English teams increased by two-thirds on the previous year, whereas the Italian total only went up by one. Serie A football had long been criticised for being overly defensive, and it seems its teams were simply unable to put that mentality aside, even when the laws of the game discouraged such an approach. Overall, the experimental change to the offside rule was a clear success, with the 3.8 goals scored per game comparing very favourably to the average of two for Serie A matches that season and 2.5 for First Division fixtures. So favourably in fact that it was never heard of again.

Despite the goal glut, the future of the Anglo-Italian Cup was in serious doubt. Whereas attendances had only fallen by a tenth in England, the absence of several big Italian teams resulted in crowds slumping by over 40 per cent on the continent. The competition also ended on a sour note when three players were sent off for fighting during the clash between Stoke and Roma at the Victoria Ground. Indeed, the Potters were fortunate not to be reduced to eight after an Italian had to be stretchered off following a further disturbance. Sadly, this was just the latest episode of trouble afflicting what commentators were now dubbing the 'Aggro-Italian Cup'. Players from each of the two nations evidently had conflicting views on what was acceptable on a football pitch, with transgressions against the other's code frequently leading to violence.

Recognising that all was not well, the organisers of the Anglo-Italian Cup made a raft of changes for the 1973 event. Matches were rescheduled so that most of them were played between February and April, rather than after the season ended. Meanwhile, the number of participants rose from 12 to 16. Both changes aimed to boost attendances, and hence the money to be made by clubs, which was the main reason for them participating in the contest in the first place. Instead of being split across three qualifying groups, teams were now placed into two groups of eight, though they still only played four matches. This was achieved by English and Italian teams only playing each other once, rather than home and away. Perhaps recognising the wrong that had been done to Carlisle a year earlier, semi-finals were introduced, with the top two teams from each nation in each group proceeding to the knockout stage. Nevertheless, as we shall see, that

still didn't prevent further injustices from occurring. Curiously, given how successful the experiment had been, the awarding of points for goals was discontinued, though a good behaviour award was introduced. The club that best managed to rein in the worst excesses of its players and fans were rewarded by being reimbursed the cost of their air fares to the two away fixtures.

Many of Italy's top clubs responded positively to the changes. Bologna, Fiorentina, Lazio, and Verona all returned to the fold, while Bari, Como and Torino made their debuts and Roma were back to defend their trophy, thus becoming the only club to compete in all four editions of the competition. Meanwhile, England's offering was even weaker than usual as only three top-tier sides signed up for the contest. Clearly enamoured with the event, Blackpool went back for more, while Crystal Palace also decided to give it another go. However, the remainder were all debutants. Fulham, Hull City, Luton Town and Oxford United represented the Second Division, Newcastle United added some weight to the mix, while one of England's leading clubs finally took an interest.

On the face of it, securing Manchester United's participation appeared to be a huge coup for the organisers of the Anglo-Italian Cup. However, the reality of the situation was much more prosaic. The Red Devils were one of Europe's leading teams in the late 1960s, with George Best, Bobby Charlton, and Denis Law terrifying defences all over the continent. That side reached its pinnacle in 1968 when it lifted the European Cup, but won nothing more, slipping slowly into its own shadow. By 1973, Law was a much-diminished force, Best was a troubled soul and Charlton was on the brink of retirement. United won

only one of their opening 12 league fixtures and were on their second manager of the campaign by Christmas. If the looming spectre of relegation wasn't bad enough, United also suffered a home defeat to Bristol Rovers in the League Cup. After Wolverhampton Wanderers knocked them out of the FA Cup, their only remaining chance of securing any silverware that season was in the Anglo-Italian Cup.

To United's credit, they had a decent stab at winning the trophy. After opening with a draw at home to Fiorentina, they survived a violent encounter against Lazio, breezed past Bari before finishing with a four-goal victory away to Verona. That final fixture proved to be historic, for it was the last time that Bobby Charlton wore a Manchester United shirt, fittingly ending his magnificent career by scoring a couple of goals. However, the six points gathered from those two wins and two draws was only good enough for second place in the group, with United being edged out of a semi-final spot by one of their relegation rivals.

Crystal Palace struggled throughout the 1972/73 season, spending much of it propping up the First Division table. With only eight matches remaining they gambled on a new manager, enticing the cigar-chomping, fedora-wearing Malcolm Allison away from Manchester City. Palace had already played two ties in the Anglo-Italian Cup before Allison arrived, having beaten Verona convincingly at Selhurst Park before squeezing past Bari on their travels. Palace were able to field two Anglo-Italian Cup veterans in Don Rogers, the driving force behind Swindon's 1970 triumph, and John Craven, who captained Blackpool to victory a year later. Clearly enamoured with the contest, Craven got Allison off to a winning start in the Anglo-Italian Cup by scoring a hat-trick against Lazio.

That meant Palace only needed a draw from their final group fixture to make the semi-finals, which they duly got after sharing four goals with Fiorentina in Tuscany.

The other group witnessed a fierce contest between old hands Blackpool and newbies Newcastle. The Magpies gained the initiative after their 2-0 victory over Roma outdid Blackpool's one-goal defeat of Torino. The Tangerines later took over at the top after smashing three goals past Como on the same night that United narrowly defeated Bologna. After the third round of fixtures, there was nothing separating the two teams, with Newcastle's two-goal win over Como trumping Blackpool's 1-0 away victory over Bologna. Progress now rested on whichever side could get the best result in their final group game. Blackpool avenged their defeat in the previous year's final by beating Roma 2-1 at Bloomfield Road, but it was to be a pyrrhic victory. Over in the north-east there was a goal-fest as Newcastle hammered Torino, the 5-1 scoreline a fair reflection of their dominance. Carlisle may have been hard done to a year earlier, but the outcome for Blackpool bordered on the ridiculous. Despite winning all four ties and scoring seven goals while conceding only one, they still exited the competition.

To make matters worse, Blackpool and Newcastle weren't the only English teams in that group to put in a fine set of performances. Oxford acquitted themselves admirably, drawing with Bologna and Torino before beating Roma in the Olympic Stadium and Como at home, while Fulham also remained unbeaten. Those results meant that all four English clubs finished with better records than any of the Italian sides, yet the tournament's rules dictated that one of that hapless bunch would proceed to the last four.

The desire to have a final between a team from each nation was noble enough, but in fulfilling it a measure of sporting integrity clearly got lost along the way.

Bologna profited most from the Anglo-Italian Cup's inequitable rules. Despite only managing draws against Oxford and Fulham, they found themselves in a semi-final against Fiorentina, who had at least won a game in the tournament, though only one. The first leg ended in a 1-1 draw, and when the scoreline was repeated in the return fixture, extra time was needed. Fiorentina scored a late winner, and with it secured the right to host the final. Meanwhile, Bologna exited the contest, somehow having finished in the last four despite failing to win any of their six ties.

The English league season was over by the time that Crystal Palace and Newcastle met in the semi-finals. Malcolm Allison had failed to prevent the south London club from being relegated, but he did succeed in keeping the Magpies at bay in the first leg at Selhurst Park, despite the visitors dominating the game. Newcastle soon put matters right at St James' Park, hammering Palace 5-1 as Malcolm 'Supermac' Macdonald notched a hat-trick. Frustratingly for the English finalists, Macdonald was unavailable for the showdown in Florence as he had been called up for England's vital World Cup qualifier against Poland. Despite missing his star striker, manager Joe Harvey was still able to field an impressive XI, including left-back Frank Clark, who later became part of Brian Clough's European Cup-winning Nottingham Forest side, and Terry McDermott, a midfielder who went on to win a hatful of trophies with Liverpool. Newcastle had already swatted aside a raft of challengers for the Anglo-Italian

Cup, and they dismissed Fiorentina with similar ease. One up at the break thanks to a rare goalkeeper own goal, they doubled their lead after the interval before holding on for a deserved triumph after a late Fiorentina strike made for a finish that was nervier than it should have been.

It would have been a travesty if an English club hadn't lifted the 1973 Anglo-Italian Cup, given how dominant they had been. Having won only two of the 32 group games, none of the Italian clubs gathered more points than the eight English entrants, who in turn hit the back of the net almost three times as often as their foreign counterparts did. With points no longer being awarded for goals scored and the relaxation of the offside law having been abandoned, the goals per game ratio predictably fell, which did nothing for spectator numbers. English fans routinely turned out in much smaller numbers than they would for league games, and in addition to fans voting with their feet, the 1973 contest had its usual share of on- and off-field problems. The Italian police had to use tear gas to deal with angry Torino fans after their side lost to Blackpool, followed by a referee suffering a broken finger when he attempted to part brawling Manchester United and Lazio players. Meanwhile, trouble seemed to find Newcastle at every turn. Joe Harvey was peppered with missiles as he sat on the bench in the away tie against Roma, while his side's victory over Bologna was marred by Malcolm Macdonald and an Italian player being sent off for scuffling with each other. However, the worst disturbance occurred during Newcastle's home tie with Torino when both sides had two players dismissed for fighting.

The dual purpose of the Anglo-Italian Cup was to generate income for participating clubs and to foster better

relations between the two footballing nations. Despite featuring many exciting games, the competition ultimately failed to achieve what its creators intended. Sadly, too many games were played in half-full stadiums, or were disfigured by brawling players whose notions of what was permissible on a football pitch often proved to be irreconcilable, or were marred by violent fans, or occasionally all the above. The writing was on the wall for the tournament, and it was quietly announced that it would take a break in 1974 because of the World Cup finals (a competition that England subsequently failed to qualify for, and which Italy probably wished they hadn't). The Anglo-Italian Cup did make a return a couple of years later, but only as a low-key contest for semi-professional teams.

Ironically, the nation that showed least interest in the Anglo-Italian Cup was by far and away the most successful. Apart from AC Milan, all of Italy's top clubs participated at some point, including Fiorentina, Inter Milan, Juventus, Lazio, Napoli and Roma. By contrast, England's leading sides of the early 1970s, such as Arsenal, Derby County, Leeds United, Manchester City, Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspur were conspicuous by their absence. Despite leaving the task to their weaker brethren, English teams performed admirably, winning three of the four tournaments, though their dominance went much deeper than that. Over the four contests, Football League sides won over half of their encounters with Italian opposition, who by contrast were only victorious a fifth of the time. This comparative level of success was mirrored in wider European competition, with English sides winning two UEFA Cups, two Fairs Cups and two European Cup Winners' Cups between 1970 and 1973, compared to a solitary continental trophy for Italy.

For this short period of history at least, the prestige was clearly England's.

You may be wondering what became of the forerunner to the Anglo-Italian Cup. Not only did the Anglo-Italian League Cup continue to be played alongside its big brother, it even managed to outlive it for a while. After Swindon won the inaugural contest, it fell to Manchester City to maintain English pride in 1970. Joe Mercer and Malcolm Allison created a fine City team which won the league title in 1968, followed by the FA Cup in 1969. A year later they beat West Bromwich Albion in extra time to lift the League Cup, which put them on course for a showdown with Coppa Italia winners Bologna. It took only three minutes for the Italians to open the scoring in the first leg and Manchester City were on the back foot from that moment onwards. When the two sides reconvened at Maine Road a few weeks later, the hosts conceded a second goal before finally getting one of their own. The pattern repeated itself after the interval, resulting in Mercer's team crashing to a 3-2 aggregate defeat. At the end of that season, Blackpool succeeded where City had failed by beating Bologna in the final of the Anglo-Italian Cup.

England's next entrants in the contest were Tottenham Hotspur, who lifted the League Cup for the first time in the club's history in 1971. Bill Nicholson's side benefitted from a relatively kind draw in the competition, playing every tie at home until they took on Second Division Bristol City in the two-legged semi-final and Third Division Aston Villa at Wembley. The Italian opposition this time were Torino, not that they provided much opposition. Spurs beat them by a single goal in Turin before scoring a further couple back at White Hart Lane for a straightforward

3-0 aggregate victory. Later in the season, Torino suffered at the hands of the British once more, crashing out of the European Cup Winners' Cup to its eventual winners, Glasgow Rangers.

A year later, the paths of the Anglo-Italian Cup and Anglo-Italian League Cup crossed, though not in a positive way. Stoke were England's latest League Cup champions, having won the club's first (and so far, only) major trophy. Despite being eligible for an Anglo-Italian League Cup Final against AC Milan, they steadfastly refused to take part. The Potters had played Roma a couple of times in the 1971 Anglo-Italian Cup, and twice again in the 1972 tournament, and almost each time there had been trouble. After their fourth cantankerous encounter, which saw three players dismissed for brawling, their patience finally snapped. Stoke said '*no, grazie*' to any further encounters with Italian opposition, and that appeared to be the end for the Anglo-Italian League Cup.

Following the cancellation of the 1972 Anglo-Italian League Cup, 1973 and 1974 also passed without the contest being played. However, in 1975 the stone was rolled away from the tomb, and Lazarus-like, the competition burst into life once more. This time England were represented by the winners of the FA Cup, rather than the League Cup, which was arguably a fairer equivalent of the Coppa Italia. The 1974/75 FA Cup saw many of England's leading teams drop away in its early stages, which opened the door for others, and it was two London clubs that prospered most. Fulham finished some way off the promotion spots in the Second Division but, inspired by ageing veterans Bobby Moore and Alan Mullery, they fought their way through 11 ties to reach the Twin Towers. Awaiting them were Moore's

old flame, West Ham United. Two goals from Alan Taylor gave the Hammers the trophy, plus the distinction of being the last all-English XI to win the FA Cup.

Meanwhile, Fiorentina won the Coppa Italia, having twice been pegged back by AC Milan before finding a decisive third goal. In the resurrected Anglo-Italian League Cup, Italian defending emerged as the clear victor. West Ham were firmly contained throughout 180 minutes of football, with one goal in Florence in September and a second in London in December being sufficient for the trophy to return to Italy, where it was destined to stay forever. The change to the contest's format meant the two sides also competed in that season's European Cup Winners' Cup, although their paths did not cross. The Italian side were knocked out before the second leg of the Anglo-Italian League Cup, while the Hammers fought their way to the final in Brussels, where they were outplayed by Anderlecht in a 4-2 defeat.

The clear favourites to win the 1975/76 FA Cup Final were Manchester United, who had recently finished third in the First Division. Few gave Second Division Southampton much of a chance, but they pulled off a huge shock, scoring the game's only goal seven minutes from time. Two months later, Napoli pummelled Verona 4-0 to win the Coppa Italia, which set up a clash against Lawrie McMenemy's Saints. They edged ahead in the first leg at The Dell after teenager Steve Williams scored his first goal in professional football, but that narrow lead proved to be woefully inadequate when they reconvened in Naples and the home side hammered Southampton by the same scoreline that had won them the Coppa Italia earlier in the year.

Southampton had to contest the second leg of the Anglo-Italian League Cup without star striker Mick Channon though, ironically, he was in Italy at the time, preparing for a vital World Cup qualifier in Rome. Channon played in that dispiriting game, which saw England lose 2-0 to an Italy side that were very much their masters. That defeat contributed mightily to Don Revie's squad failing to reach the 1978 World Cup finals in Argentina; a tournament which saw the resurgent Italians defeat the hosts and eventual winners before finishing fourth. The 1975 and 1976 Anglo-Italian League Cups may be dismissed as an irrelevance by many, but Fiorentina and Napoli's comprehensive triumphs accurately foresaw a shift in the balance of power between England and Italy. Had it taken place, the 1977 Anglo-Italian League Cup would have been an intriguing heavyweight encounter between Manchester United and AC Milan. Instead, the contest was finally consigned to history, though as we shall see, the fires of Anglo-Italian club competition were not entirely extinguished. Deep within the glowing embers, a small spark still burned bright.