

“A WEALTH OF FASCINATING STORIES.”

Backpass magazine

WEST MIDLANDS TURF WARS

Port Vale



Stoke



Burton



Shrewsbury



Wolves



Walsall



Aston Villa



WBA



Birmingham



Coventry



A FOOTBALL HISTORY
STEVE TONGUE

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**TURF
WARS**
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Beginnings

1860–1887

‘Association clubs have sprung into existence rapidly all over the town, and this year I can name more than a dozen clubs playing Association rules in Birmingham alone; while wherever a field can be obtained in the Black Country an Association club will be found enjoying the healthy exercise.’

Birmingham Daily Post, March 1876

‘There can be no possible objection to the recognised payment of men who cannot afford to play for amusement.’

Sporting Life, September 1884

‘The time has now arrived when some radical reform is necessary to save the club [Aston Villa] from utter collapse.’

Athletic News, December 1885

‘The Birmingham rough seemed compelled to demonstrate his presence and snowballs were hurled about. It looked as if they were intended for the West Bromwich Albion players.’

Sporting Life, March 1886

‘I understand that... Preston North End positively refuse to play again in Birmingham and will not come nearer than Wolverhampton.’

Birmingham Daily Post, March 1886

‘No one would have ventured to prophesy that the game could ever attain its present popularity, or that it could involve so much science.’

Pall Mall Gazette, April 1887

JOURNALISM IS only the first draft of history but, rough as it may be, it can sometimes end up as the only record. The problem in regard to the history of football clubs is that most began in such a small way that not even local newspapers were sufficiently interested to write about them. As we will see, this has led to confusion about the origins of several clubs, including Stoke City, West Bromwich Albion and Port Vale. In addition, original club minutes and manuscripts also tend down the years to have been lost or long forgotten.

Up until the formation of the Football Association in 1863 and subsequent agreement on the Laws of the Game, there was dispute too about which sport many enthusiasts were actually playing: rugby with its handling and 'hacking' (at shins) or what became known as the association version.

There was clearly a football club at Cambridge University as early as 1846, recognised by the National Football Museum as the oldest in the world; two years later in rooms at Trinity College, the Cambridge Rules were formulated and then nailed to a tree in a city-centre park where the young gentlemen kicked footballs around. Cambridge brought together men from public schools like Eton, Harrow and Rugby who had taken part in their own versions of ball-chasing, and these in turn became the basis for the Laws of the Game 15 years later when the FA's first secretary Ebenezer Morley said, 'They embrace the true principles of the game, with the greatest simplicity.'

Variations were apparent, however, in different parts of the country such as Sheffield and Nottingham, two provincial centres in which the game took hold earliest. Indeed, when the Birmingham and District Football Association was founded in December 1875 it was Sheffield Rules they adopted before accepting London's version two years later. They were no doubt influenced by a Birmingham representative team having been invited to play Sheffield at Bramall Lane the previous month (losing 6-0) and arranging a return for Christmas week at the Aston Lower Grounds (lost 4-0).

Because the Cambridge University club was part of a larger existing institution, Sheffield FC is the one recognised by FIFA as the world's oldest, dating back to 1857, and followed by neighbours Hallam three years later. In the meantime the Forest

club in east London was started by former pupils of Harrow and Forest School in 1859, later becoming Wanderers and winning the first FA Cup of 1872. Cray Wanderers, the oldest surviving club in Greater London, claim 1860 for their formation and so did Oswestry Town, straggling the Anglo-Welsh border until becoming part of Total Network Solutions 143 years later.

With the exception of Wrexham (1864), evidence of earliest present-day professional clubs from the mid-to-late 1860s centres on a notably small geographical area in Nottinghamshire (Nottingham Forest and Notts County), Derbyshire (Chesterfield), Sheffield (Sheffield Wednesday) and Staffordshire. This brings us to **Stoke City**.

* * *

The Potters' claim to have been born in 1863 is contradicted by press reports five years later of Stoke Ramblers, as they were originally known, playing their first game against 'Mr E.W. May's Fifteen' on 17 October 1868, in which 'some excellent play was shown'. It was drawn 1-1, with Henry Almond, captain and one of the founders, appropriately scoring the first goal. The report in *The Field* stated that the club was 'recently started' by former pupils of Charterhouse School (then in central London, now near Guildford); so Stoke – who dropped the name 'Ramblers' within two years and did not add 'City' until 1925 – can be considered the oldest survivors among Premier or Football League clubs in the West Midlands.

The old boys were working for the North Staffordshire Railway Company, and the headmaster of the local St Peter's school, Mr J.W. Thomas, is cited in the club's centenary handbook as the first club secretary and 'virtually the father of Stoke football'.

Like that first match, many games in those days, only five years after the Football Association was founded, were 15-a-side and may still have featured aspects of the rugby code; as late as 1870 a Stoke match against Whitchurch was rumoured to have been played with a rugby ball, which may explain why only one goal was scored (by Whitchurch). Newcastle-under-Lyme and Leek were other early opponents.

According to one local spectator around that time ‘when offside was called, everyone pleaded ignorance, so the game was played without the new-fangled offside rule’ (the offside law was introduced in 1866).

Home games were played at a variety of small venues until 1875 and then at Sweeting’s Field, home of the Victoria cricket team. In 1878 Stoke merged with the cricketers, moving across the road to what became known as the Victoria Ground, originally an athletics venue that kept its oval track and would be home for almost 120 years – one of the longest reigns at any club ground in history.

By that year there were sufficient clubs in and around the heavily industrialised Potteries to form a Staffordshire Football Association. With it came competitive football and the Staffordshire Senior Cup, won in 1878 and 79 by Stoke, who defeated two clubs from Burslem – Talke Rangers and Cobridge – in the finals, and in the first season set a club-record score of 26-0 against Mow Cop. The captain that day was Thomas Slaney, who acted as the club’s first secretary-manager from 1874 to 1883 and later became a referee.

By September 1879 the *Staffordshire Sentinel* was previewing ‘the most important season they have ever had’ with matches against ‘many of the most important clubs in the country’. Stoke were among more than 40 clubs who entered the third Birmingham Senior Cup competition that season, drubbing the romantically named Hill Top Athletic 12-0 and Aston Clinton 8-0 before losing to the second city’s Saltley College. Heavy defeats by Small Heath Alliance (the future Birmingham City) and Aston Villa in the following two seasons suggested they were still a little way behind the Birmingham pair.

In 1883 shirts of blue and black hoops were swapped for red and white stripes, though only for eight years. The club entered the FA Cup for the first time, losing 2-1 to Manchester FC despite a goal by Edward ‘Teddy’ Johnson, who a few months later became the club’s first international. The forward, ‘a splendid dribbler with remarkable speed and a deadly shot’, had earned an England cap while playing for Saltley College in 1880, but now brought Stoke recognition, scoring two of the goals with which England won 8-1 away to Ireland in Belfast.

The club's opportunity to meet the mighty Glaswegians Queen's Park, the previous season's beaten finalists, in the FA Cup of 1884/85 was passed up when they decided to scratch from the away tie, presumably fearing the costs involved, if not a heavy defeat. Queen's Park would remain pure amateurs until a historic vote 135 years later, but even in the early 1880s talented Scottish players were migrating south, being found jobs by northern and Midlands clubs who were far from averse to handing them the occasional brown envelope.

The FA, fiercely against any form of professionalism, regularly expelled teams from the FA Cup for breaking the rules, and matters came to a head when Preston North End, thrown out of the 1883/84 competition, openly admitted paying players and found considerable support. 'There can be no possible objection to the recognised payment of men who cannot afford to play for amusement,' said the *Sporting Life* the following September. Lancashire clubs led the way in proposing a breakaway British National Association and by the end of 1884 had support from so many others, spread geographically from Birmingham to Sunderland, that the FA knew the (purely amateur) game was up. They finally gave in during the summer of 1885.

Stoke had been illegally paying players for the previous two years at a rate of up to half a crown (12 and a half pence) per game but when some of them discovered before the first official season of professionalism that one team-mate was to receive double, they went on strike until parity for all was agreed. Thus rewarded, the team set a club record still in existence (though not listed in many record books) by beating Caernarfon Wanderers 10-1 in an FA Cup qualifying round in October 1886, Alf Edge claiming five of the goals. They lost in the next round, 6-4 at Crewe after extra time, but the following season enjoyed their best run while remaining a non-league club, starting with a first major tie against local rivals Burslem Port Vale, which was won 1-0. The Potters went all the way to the quarter-final before losing to eventual winners West Bromwich Albion. It was a useful time to underline their improving credentials with Football League membership about to be decided.

* * *

The initial spread of organised football in the Midlands from the Potteries and East Midlands was south to Birmingham and west to Burton-on-Trent. In 1871 the Burton and District Football Association was formed for numerous clubs mostly based either at churches or in factories.

The original Burton Football Club, like many of the early pioneers, played both rugby union and association football, settling around the middle of the decade for the former game (and is still going strong). More significant for our purposes were a club who would bring the Football League to the town, and another with whom they later merged to keep it there – all many decades before the current Burton Albion were thought of.

Burton Swifts and **Burton Wanderers** were formed in the same year of 1871, the former possibly descended from Burton Outward Star and playing on the west side of the canal at Horninglow. Wanderers, in the north-east, had the better facilities at the Derby Turn ground in Little Burton and won the Burton and District Challenge Cup in 1884 and then 1885 by beating the Swifts. In 1886 Swifts had their revenge but a year later Wanderers beat them again 3-2 after extra time, drawing rave reviews, with one report exclaiming, ‘A more intensely exciting and evenly contested game has seldom been played in Burton.’

Both paying at least some of their players by then, they entered the FA Cup initially in 1885, going out in the first round to stronger opposition: Swifts to Wednesbury Old Athletic (5-1) and Wanderers to Small Heath Alliance (9-2).

In April 1888 the *Athletic News* correspondent reported that ‘the Burton clubs look like finishing the season well’ with Wanderers having made amends for another heavy defeat by Small Heath by winning a thrilling return game 5-4. Clearly the two leading clubs in the area, they would both be Football League teams within a few more years (see next chapter).

* * *

By midway through the 1870s, amid favourable social conditions among a rapidly increasing urban population, football’s tentacles had reached England’s second city and the Black

Country. The economy was buoyant as the second industrial revolution began; transport networks were spreading out, with Birmingham now served by three major railway companies; press interest was reflected in the publication of *Athletic News* from 1875; and working hours were being reduced. Men seeking leisure activities on their Saturday half-day were happy to go straight from the workplace to a football ground and middle-class benefactors and employers were prepared to help finance their sport.

So it was that in December 1875 the Birmingham District and Counties Football Association was founded at a meeting at Mason's Hotel, Church Street. Calthorpe FC, made up of members of the Birmingham Clerks Association, and Aston Unity were the prime movers at an initial meeting attended by nine other clubs, their names hinting at a wider area than just Birmingham itself. As well as Unity and Calthorpe, plus Aston Villa, Birmingham FC (not the present-day club), St George's and Saltley College, there were five representatives from further west: Wednesbury Old Athletic, Wednesbury Town, Tipton, West Bromwich (Dartmouth, not the Albion) and Stafford Road Works, based in Wolverhampton and who supplied the first president, Charles Crump.

Glaswegian John Campbell-Orr of Calthorpe FC was made secretary, and in March 1876 he wrote proudly to the *Birmingham Daily Post* from Sherlock Street about the spread of the game locally: 'It was not till the year 1873 that the Association game was introduced into Birmingham by the Calthorpe Football Club. Since then Association clubs have sprung into existence rapidly all over the town, and this year I can name more than a dozen clubs playing Association rules in Birmingham alone; while wherever a field can be obtained in the Black Country an Association club will be found enjoying the healthy exercise.'

As mentioned earlier, two representative matches had already been played against the Sheffield FA. The clubs now agreed to compete during 1876/77 in a Birmingham Senior Cup, which thus became the first such county cup competition, just ahead of those in Shropshire and Staffordshire.

Of the original 11 members Birmingham FC did not take part, but half a dozen extra teams did so to make up a neat figure

of 16 for a knockout cup, also helping to spread it geographically. In the first game, on Saturday, 14 October 1876, Wednesbury Town narrowly beat Walsall Victoria Swifts 2-1. In fact, in the whole competition, **Wednesbury Old Athletic's** 13-0 first-round demolition of Harborne was the only big win, hinting at their eventual triumph in the final by beating Stafford Road 3-2 in front of an estimated 2,500 at Bristol Road, Calthorpe's ground. Charles Crump, the association president, scored both goals for the Stafford Road team who took a 2-0 lead but were overcome in the second half. 'The play was very fine throughout,' according to the *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, which reported 'a very large concourse of spectators' at the ground.

Widely known as the Old Uns, Wednesbury Old Athletic, founded as early as October 1874 by scholars of St John's Athletic Club, were formidable competitors in the early years of the Senior Cup and then the Staffordshire Cup too, as well as forging great local rivalries with the town's other major clubs, Wednesbury Strollers (1875), Wednesbury Town and works firm Elwells. Such was the enthusiasm for football in the town that by 1881 the Wednesbury FA boasted 45 teams.

As holders of the Senior Cup, Athletic reached the semi-final the next season only to be knocked out by **Shrewsbury**, a team based around the ancient public school of that name rather than bearing any relation to the present-day Town club that would not be founded until 1886 (see end of this chapter). A crowd estimated at 6,000 turned up to see Shrewsbury win 2-1, after which they successfully saw off the Old Uns' protest that one of their players lived more than the maximum 15 miles away. They went all the way to the final and there beat Wednesbury Strollers 2-1, adding their more local Shropshire Cup in its inaugural season a year later.

By 1879, however, the Shrewsbury club had dissolved. The Old Uns meanwhile were winners of the Birmingham Senior Cup again, beating Tipton 11-0 along the way before repeating the 3-2 victory over Stafford Road of two years previously. They reached two more finals in succession, both lost against an Aston Villa side who were beginning to dominate the competition, winning 2-1 in 1882 and 3-2 in 1883; both finals attracted near-10,000 crowds.

Winners of the Staffordshire Cup of 1880, also against Villa, the Old Uns entered the FA Cup regularly in the 1880s, although only once in 15 games were they taken outside the Midlands. In their first tilt at the trophy in 1881/82 they were drawn away to the already famous Blackburn Rovers, who after demolishing bitter local rivals Bolton Wanderers and Darwen beat the Old Athletic by only 3-1 and went onto the final, losing to Old Etonians. That was the first appearance in the final by a northern club and the beginning of the end for all of the southern amateur teams, who never again won the world's first domestic cup competition.

The Old Uns had knocked out teams of the calibre of St George's, Small Heath Alliance and Villa in a memorable run, but never progressed as far as the fifth round again, losing three times in six seasons to an improving Villa and in the other three to West Bromwich Albion. Their last two ties in the competition proper emphasised how the likes of the Wednesbury clubs were being left behind by professionalism and then league football: in 1886 the result was Villa 13 Old Uns 0; in 1887, WBA 7 Old Uns 1.

Wednesbury Strollers, although formed a year later than their neighbours, entered the FA Cup earlier, albeit without making as much of a mark. Previous finalists Oxford University saw them off 7-0 in their first tie, played amid the dreaming spires in November 1878, and in four seasons their only victory was over Stafford Road three years later. Next up in that campaign unfortunately were Notts County and after a successful protest following their 5-2 defeat, the Strollers went down 11-1 in the replay. In the Birmingham Senior Cup, they followed defeat by Shrewsbury in the 1878 final with a couple of quarter-final appearances before becoming victims of the growing Villa-Walsall duopoly. After a heavy 5-0 defeat by **Wednesbury Town** in 1884/85 their maroon and white hoops were seen no more.

Nor were the Town, who had enjoyed one extended FA Cup run when they beat West Bromwich Albion, Walsall Town and Derby Midland to reach the fourth round in 1883/84, losing to the old boys of Westminster School.

So by 1885 **Wednesbury Old Athletic** were carrying the flag alone for their town. In 1890/91 they joined the Birmingham and District League, then played in the Midland League for two seasons, which proved too much. Their final Senior Cup match

was a quarter-final defeat in 1893 by Small Heath, the Football League Second Division champions in March, and four months later they disbanded.

Two 'phoenix' clubs emerged later; one lasted for only half a season with the second initially taking the name Wednesbury Excelsior before reverting in 1897 to Wednesbury Old Athletic. Twice champions of the Walsall and District League and winners three times of the Staffordshire Junior Cup, they showed renewed ambition in the Birmingham Combination, then the Birmingham and District League, but found both competitions a struggle against either future Football League clubs or existing reserve teams of the area's biggest clubs. They eventually gave up the ghost in 1924 after half a dozen successive seasons in the bottom two.

* * *

Other original members of the Birmingham and District Association managed varying degrees of longevity. **Aston Unity**, founded the same year as Aston Villa and playing as their name implied in the same area – as well as identical maroon and blue hoops, before switching to blue and white – were early opponents of the club that would make the district's name famous. For a while they were superior to Villa, knocking them out of the Senior Cup of 1878/79, only to lose to them the following year after hammering St George's 9-1, and in 1882/83 they suffered the humiliation of a 16-0 local derby defeat. Unity continued to play in the FA Cup for another five seasons, losing in the first round each time to stronger opponents, and 1887/88 was the last season they competed.

Calthorpe, dating from 1873, supplied the first secretary of the Birmingham Association and the ground for the first final of the Senior Cup, as well as contributing most money to the new competition (a handsome seven guineas). Founded by two Scots in an early example of heavy Scottish influence on the city's football, they suffered from playing in a public park with no way of charging admission and made no great impression in the Senior Cup. By the early 1880s they were losing ties heavily and scratched the last time they entered in 1886, before drifting into junior football.

Tipton were one of the very oldest local clubs, dating back to 1872, but they appear to have lasted no more than half a dozen seasons, featuring barely if at all even once newspaper coverage increased. Different to most in their plain dark blue shirts as opposed to more popular hoops or stripes, they beat Villa in one of the first official games organised by the newly formed BFA early in 1876 (often wrongly listed as the first Senior Cup Final) and repeated that success in the first Senior Cup tie played by both teams in November that year. But they were not heard from again following an 11-0 defeat by Wednesbury Old Athletic in the quarter-final of January 1879.

Saltley College, founded by students of St Peter's College, a teachers' training college in east Birmingham, may well be the oldest team in the second city if founded as early as 1870. They were another of the founder members prominent in the Senior Cup for a few years. Semi-finalists three times in the first four seasons, albeit often benefiting from a bye, they lost the final 3-1 to Villa on the last of those occasions in April 1880, watched by a healthy 4,000 crowd. Some heavy defeats followed by equally well-established clubs, and the qualifying competition of 1888/89 was their last recorded entry. By then the local works team Saltley Gas were representing the district just as prominently, reaching the final of the first Birmingham Junior Cup when they lost to Aston Victoria in 1888.

As already mentioned, **Birmingham FC**, like West Bromwich and Shrewsbury, bore no relation to the clubs of the present day. The Birmingham team comprised mainly workers from the Aston Lower Grounds leisure complex. They did not enter major cup competitions until 1879/80, losing 6-0 to Oxford University in the FA Cup and 4-1 to Saltley College on their 'home' ground in the Senior Cup. Those reverses lessened their appetite.

St George's, founded in 1875 and playing at Fentham Road, eventually became strong enough to be mentioned as potential members of the original Football League 13 years later. Apart from reaching a semi-final of the Senior Cup in 1882/83 where they lost to Villa, the Dragons found it hard to make progress earlier in the local competitions or the FA Cup, which would not help their argument. In 1884 they managed to win the Staffordshire Senior Cup for the first time but the best evidence of their potential was

well timed, coming in the FA Cup of 1886/87. Victories over sides as strong as Small Heath, Derby County and Walsall Town (7-2) took them to the fourth round before a 1-0 defeat by eventual winners West Bromwich Albion. By that time they had gained from amalgamating with the works side Mitchells of Mitchells brewers, changing their name to Birmingham St George's in 1888 and prompting the *Birmingham Post* to declare them one of the four best teams in the West Midlands, along with Villa, West Bromwich Albion and Wolves. Further attempts to join the big boys would only meet with frustration (see next chapter).

Various other clubs bearing the name of the city took part as the Senior Cup peaked at 60 entries in 1883/84. Quality varied with double-figure scores not uncommon, but it had become a genuine Midlands competition, including clubs from Shropshire to Nottingham and north Derbyshire.

Also worthy of mention are **Birmingham Excelsior** (1876–88). Playing in Witton and featuring the Devey brothers, who would become important players for Villa (see below), Excelsior were regular FA Cup competitors in the 1880s, beating Small Heath Alliance for two seasons running but finding Derby Midland too strong when forced further afield. An all-round sports club with a strong interest in athletics, their greater claim to fame was as forerunners of the Birchfield Harriers athletics club in 1877.

Despite the spread of teams, however, the Senior Cup was from 1884 onwards dominated by a small group of clubs still recognised today – and one in particular.

* * *

Many football teams, ancient and modern, were formed from churches, others from cricket clubs: the city of Birmingham's two biggest clubs combined the two. Further north Sheffield FC, officially the world's oldest, came about because cricketers wanted sport more suited to the climate of winter months and so it was with **Aston Villa** and a local church cricket team. In 1874 the pioneers are believed to have met in Heathfield Road about a mile to the west of today's Villa Park after watching a rugby match and decided that association football would be the more

enjoyable game. They immediately settled on a name for their new venture that would become world famous.

In an article about Villa on 28 November 1891, the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* confirmed, ‘The club was started from a young men’s class in connection with the Aston Villa Wesleyan Chapel in 1874 under the captaincy of W.H. Price, who held that office until 1875.’ It listed the captains since then as ‘G.B. Ramsay, the present secretary, and from 1881 to 1889 Archie Hunter’. All three had a significant part to play in Villa’s early history, which for all its very local origins would be dominated by a Scottish influence reflected most obviously in the team’s shirts bearing a large badge of the Lion Rampant during the 1879/80 campaign.

Local man Walter Price set the ball rolling, almost literally, as first captain. It was George B. Ramsay, a 21-year-old Glaswegian clerk, who in 1876 spotted a group of young Villans at practice in Aston Park by Aston Hall and impressed them sufficiently with the deft touches of the more skilful Scottish game to be taken on and soon made next captain. This new tactical approach added in no small measure to the degree of success already achieved by the time, two years later, another significant figure arrived all the way from Scotland – though only by chance. Archie Hunter, a draper, travelled south from Ayr with the intention of joining leading Birmingham club Calthorpe (see above), but being unable to find their ground, he was directed to Aston and went on to succeed Ramsay as one of the club’s great leaders; in his case for their first FA Cup Final.

Then there was William McGregor, a heavily bearded teetotaler and church-goer, born in Perthshire, who moved to Birmingham to join his older brother in 1870, keeping a draper’s shop in Aston. Initially involved in football with fellow Scots at Calthorpe, he was enticed to Villa by Ramsay in 1877 and soon became a vice-president. Before long he would be a key administrator as committee member, president and chairman before moving the whole of English football on to a new level and earning the statue that stands outside Villa Park today.

Birmingham, like Manchester, was more of a rugby city in the early 1870s before football began to take hold amid the favourable conditions outlined above. Latest research suggests that Villa’s

first game of some sort was probably played in autumn 1874, though one well-documented match the following March was one of not just two halves but two codes – the first being rugby football, the second ‘association’, and both 15-a-side. Aston Brook St Mary’s, essentially a rugby club, provided the opposition and were beaten 1-0 in the second half of the fixture, once the oval-shaped ball was exchanged for a round one, by a goal from one Jack Hughes, appropriately another of the original founders. The venue was just off Heathfield Road.

The following season they used the Aston Lower Grounds, a popular amusement park at the bottom of Aston Hall transformed from a wilderness that would become the site of present-day Villa Park. Word soon spread and in a first full season crowds of 1,500 or even 2,000 were reckoned to have turned up for games against St George’s Excelsior and Wednesbury Old Athletic. Ramsay was then instrumental in finding the new ground that he felt was needed if the Villa were to charge gate money and progress. It was discovered on a stroll through the neighbouring suburb of Perry Barr one Sunday. For an initial £5 a year in rent the roped-off ground in Wellington Road was acquired in 1876 – such a good choice that it sufficed for the next 21 years, during which the club would make spectacular progress. For the first game there in September 1876 Wednesbury Town were the visitors and the receipts were just over five shillings (25p).

It might be said that there were four key steps for any club with serious ambition to be counted among the best in the land: enter the FA Cup, get international recognition for one of the players, turn professional, and join the Football League. Between 1879 and 1888 Villa achieved all four.

For the first Football Association Challenge Cup competition of 1871/72 there were only two teams from outside the Home Counties among 15 entrants: Donington School from Spalding, Lincolnshire, withdrew without playing a game and Queen’s Park from Glasgow were probably favourites but played only one match – a goalless draw with Wanderers – being unable to afford another trip to London for a replay.

Villa were confident enough to enter for the first time only five years into their existence and in the competition’s ninth season. On 13 December 1879 they travelled to play Stafford

Road, the strong Wolverhampton works team, for a second-round tie and forced a 1-1 draw with a goal by Hunter's brother and wing-half Andy, winning the replay 3-1 (not 3-2 as often reported). Sadly they then scratched, choosing to play a Birmingham Senior Cup match instead of a third-round tie against the toffs of Oxford University, who had beaten Birmingham FC 6-0 and would go on to reach the final for a second time.

There was success, however, in the Senior Cup that season, winning 3-1 against Saltley College in the first of no fewer than six successive finals, and losing only one of them. Walsall Swifts beat them by the only goal but Villa then completed four wins in a row, over Wednesbury Old Athletic twice and the Swifts twice. In the 1882/83 competition there were embarrassingly big wins of 21-0 and 16-0 over Small Heath Swifts and Aston Unity.

As well as emphasising their strength in comparison to the city's longer-established clubs, Villa were showing up well against those from further afield. It was the custom of leading Scottish clubs to venture south over the festive period and on New Year's Day 1881 Villa beat the highly regarded Heart of Midlothian 4-2, before going on later in the season to win the Staffordshire Senior Cup for the first time.

Another important step towards wider recognition was the awarding of caps. The club's first internationals were forwards Howard Vaughton and Arthur 'Digger' Brown, who scored nine goals between them on their England debut against Ireland in February 1882 – the first match between the countries – which England won 13-0.

The FA Cup meanwhile helped spread the fame of both the club and the city's football. Sheffield and Nottingham may have been the provincial pioneers, while Blackburn (Rovers and Olympic) and Preston were among the prominent north-western clubs. But for two years running, in 1881 and 82, Villa beat both Nottingham clubs, County and Forest, in reaching the fourth round each time.

In 1883 County had their revenge by 4-3 in the quarter-final, Villa having equalised at one stage from 3-0 down. The next season brought a 6-1 hammering by Queen's Park up in Scotland and in the following two seasons there were defeats by Midlands rivals West Bromwich Albion and Derby County. Suddenly there

was talk of crisis, *Athletic News* reporting in December 1885 that Villa 'has receded in the public estimation to such an extent that the time has now arrived when some radical reform is necessary to save the club from utter collapse'.

McGregor took over as treasurer, finding a parlous state with debts of almost £300 despite Ramsay's efforts in securing well-supported fixtures against Scottish opposition after Preston and then Queen's Park cried off from scheduled friendlies.

But Ramsay's appointment from 150 applications to be secretary-manager was a turning point and in 1886/87 Archie Hunter's team, now fully professional like all their major rivals and wearing claret and blue stripes, would be FA Cup winners. As such they were entitled to call themselves best team in England – if not Britain, since the competition included 131 other teams some of them from Wales, Ireland and Scotland. Wednesbury Old Athletic were drubbed 13-0, with three players scoring a hat-trick, and Derby Midland were beaten 6-1. Wolves took four exhausting mid-winter games to submit, before Villa received the relief of a bye in round four. Horncastle from Lincolnshire were seen off and then Darwen in the quarter-final 3-2, after Villa, leading 3-0 at half-time, had prematurely indulged in champagne. They had run up 35 goals in eight ties and it was 38 in nine after a Glasgow Rangers side full of Scottish internationals were beaten 3-1 in the semi-final at Crewe, with Hunter (two) and Albert Brown scoring, to set up the first Midlands derby final against none other than West Bromwich Albion.

Excitement was intense, drawing a record final crowd of some 15,500 to Kennington Oval, the usual venue until 1893. Albion, fielding eight players from the previous year's replayed final, which they lost 2-0 to Blackburn Rovers, were regarded as favourites but they lost a controversial match by the same score. Denny Hodgetts, Villa's sturdy winger with an impressive moustache, opened the scoring against the run of play, a goal which Albion protested so strongly was offside that play was held up for several minutes. Skipper and centre-forward Hunter confirmed victory just before the finish while lying on the ground after a collision with the goalkeeper.

When the *Birmingham Daily Times* sent a reporter to doorstep the victorious captain the next day, Hunter said that

Albion had become ‘very downhearted’ after the opening goal, which he denied should have been disallowed: ‘A fairer or more deserving goal never was scored. We simply ran away from them subsequent to half-time. I hardly expected that the change of ends would have such a discouraging effect on the Albion. With the exception of Green, they almost all appeared to have lost their heads.’

1887 FA Cup Final: Aston Villa 2 West Bromwich Albion 0

Aston Villa: Warner, Coulton, Simmonds, Burton, Dawson, Yates, Davis, Brown, Hunter, Vaughton, Hodgetts.

West Bromwich Albion: Roberts, H. Green, Aldridge, Horton, Perry, Timmins, Woodhall, T. Green, Bayliss, Pearson, Paddock.

An article in London’s *Pall Mall Gazette* made a wider point about the quality of the game and football’s progress as a social phenomenon: ‘To those who remember the game as it was played 20 or even ten years ago, Saturday’s match was a marvel by comparison. No one would have ventured to prophesy that the game could ever attain its present popularity, or that it could involve so much science.’

It was an opportune time for both sides to reach the final, confirming their position among the country’s elite, which would stand them in good stead when Villa’s William McGregor composed his famous letter of invitation to a league competition exactly 11 months later (see next chapter). And a week after the final, Villa followed up their semi-final success over Rangers by beating the new Scottish Cup winners Hibernian 3-0 to justify the *Birmingham Daily Post*’s description of them as ‘champion team of the United Kingdom’.

Villa’s defence of the trophy comprised three easy victories and a bye, before they came up against a club who would become national rivals. Seeing off Oldbury Town, Small Heath Alliance 4-0 in the club’s first FA Cup meeting and Shankhouse from Northumberland 9-0, the Villans welcomed to Birmingham in January 1888 a Preston North End side whose scoring feats in the competition made their own seem modest. The Lancastrians were run by the formidable Major William Sudell, whose illegal recruiting of mainly Scottish incomers had effectively forced the

FA to accept professionalism. In 1885/86 they played more than 50 games before losing one and the following season beat Queen's Park 6-1 then lost narrowly to Hibernian in a game billed as the unofficial world championship.

In Jimmy Ross and fellow forward John Goodall they had prolific scorers from north of the border who helped the team pile up no fewer than 45 goals in just four FA Cup ties before meeting Villa. It was a run that included the competition's record score of 26-0 against poor Hyde FC (whose goalkeeper later said the total could have been 40), and Villa could not stop it. At least the 3-1 defeat, adjudged to be a fair outcome, was more respectable than most of North End's opponents managed.

The game attracted tremendous interest, and a record crowd of almost 27,000 overwhelmed the Wellington Road ground, crowding the touchlines so much that mounted police and even a few Hussars twice had to clear spectators from the muddy pitch. Some reports on the day suggested that because of these incursions the match had been reduced to a friendly, but Villa's hopes of a rematch were quickly dashed by the FA who added insult to injury by rebuking the club for not maintaining better order.

Beating West Brom in the final of the Birmingham Senior Cup for the first of four successive wins from 1888-91 was a consolation, but by then McGregor, a strong supporter of professionalism, was formulating his visionary plans for a new competition that would transform English football.

* * *

Early **West Bromwich Albion** history has been a subject of some confusion, not to say misinformation. They were not directly descended from the West Bromwich (Dartmouth) club who were founder members of the Birmingham FA, and latest research by reliable local historians suggests that matches like that on 23 November 1878 against a team called Hudson's, from the local soap works factory, were actually played by a separate club, West Bromwich Strollers.

One of the Strollers' founders, Harry Bell, said in a later newspaper interview that they disbanded and several of the

players, including future England goalkeeper 'Long' Bob Roberts, formed a new club the following season. The name 'Albion' is believed to have been taken from a small local district with an industrial estate.

In 1879/80 this new club played a full set of matches, beginning on 25 October 1879 with a thumping 7-0 win over West Bromwich White Hart. There were several others well before the December fixture against Black Lake Victoria which is sometimes cited as the first match.

As with both Villa and Small Heath Alliance, many of the pioneering players were cricket enthusiasts, in this case from the George Salter Spring Works factory team. They reputedly had to trek to Wednesbury to acquire a football but George Salter himself, a goalkeeper for the West Bromwich (Dartmouth) team, and a figure of considerable local influence, encouraged the new club and would become chairman and then president.

Changing grounds almost every year in those earliest days illustrated the club's ambition. The initial campaign of 1879/80 had been at Cooper's Hill, the second at Dartmouth Park. After two successful seasons there, another new venue was found in Walsall Street, on the opposite side of the current Expressway, where crucially the club were able to charge admission, albeit for very basic facilities. It opened in September 1881 with a visit from Oldbury but served them for only one season. Confident enough not only to charge at the gate but to enter the Birmingham Senior Cup, in which the original West Bromwich club were also competing, they reached the semi-final, losing 3-2 to Wednesbury Old Athletic.

Next stop was the Four Acres ground off Seagar Street shared with the West Bromwich (Dartmouth) club who began concentrating on cricket. The same Wednesbury team beat them in the quarter-final of the Senior Cup after Albion had thrashed Coseley 26-0 (it was 17-0 at the interval before they generously eased up). They then won a first meeting against Wolves 4-2 and in the Staffordshire Cup they went all the way to the final and beat Stoke 3-2 with George Bell's header. Having beaten Villa in an earlier round before almost 10,500 spectators they were now a force, finishing the 1882/83 season beaten only five times in almost 40 matches.

By November that year it was time to go national and attack the FA Cup, although their inaugural tie brought a 2-0 home defeat by more Wednesbury opposition, this time the Town. Albion would, however, soon reach a remarkable three successive finals to establish them as one of the top teams in the country. Beating the mighty Preston North End on Boxing Day confirmed the progress being made which was enhanced the following season, 1884/85, with an excellent second tilt at the rapidly expanding national cup competition.

Four wins (one against Villa) and one bye took them to a home quarter-final against another of Lancashire's finest, holders Blackburn Rovers, who proved too strong, coming through 2-0 and going on to win the trophy for a second successive year. 'Those who witnessed the match must unanimously agree that though beaten, the Albionites were certainly not disgraced,' reported *Athletic News*, which may have underestimated the crowd in reporting 12,000.

In the summer of 1885, having turned professional like most of their serious rivals, Albion were on the move again, this time a short distance away to Stoney Lane, and a new era of success. For three successive years they were finalists in the Birmingham Senior Cup, winning against Walsall Swifts (1886) but losing to Long Eaton Rovers (1887) and Villa (1888); and regular finalists too in the Staffordshire Cup, adding to the success of 1883 against Stoke with four successive finals from 1886-89, winning three of them against Stoke, again in 1886, Walsall Swifts (1887) and Leek (1889).

More remarkable were the three successive FA Cup finals from 1886-88, a feat not matched after that until Arsenal did it nearly 100 years later. In that time they played 26 ties, losing only twice. It was a settled squad in which seven players played in all three finals: Bob Roberts in goal, the first Albion man to be capped, for England against Scotland in March 1887; full-back Harry Green; half-backs Ezra Horton, Charlie Perry and George Timmins; and forwards George Woodhall and Jem Bayliss. Perry, Woodhall and Bayliss were England players too.

The 1885/86 cup run started with Albion's ten-shillings-a-week (50p) men now playing in blue and white stripes after a bewildering variety of colours and styles. After comfortable

wins over local rivals Aston Unity, Wednesbury Old Athletic and Wolves (3-1), they saw off two lots of southern amateur old boys teams, from Charterhouse and Westminster. A first semi-final was played at the familiar Aston Lower Grounds, where Small Heath Alliance were comfortably beaten 4-0 to earn a final against holders Blackburn.

The final at Kennington Oval was a goalless anticlimax for 12,000 spectators. West Brom had the better of it and Rovers, in poor form according to their local reporters, were reluctant to play an extra half hour. An impromptu FA committee meeting voted narrowly for a replay at Derby a week later. It was threatened by a morning snowstorm that abated in time for Rovers to run out 2-0 winners, completing a hat-trick of FA Cup triumphs. 'Play in no way realised expectations,' said the *Daily Post*, and Albion 'never looked like winning.'

Their run to the following year's local derby final against Villa (teams above) was tougher, including four single-goal victories after Burton Wanderers had been beaten 5-0, and a replay after the Sheffield works team Lockwood Bros successfully protested their extra-time defeat.

In the semi-final at Trent Bridge, Preston were beaten 3-1, despite goalkeeper Roberts not arriving until the team were on the pitch warming up; and the same day Villa defeated Rangers in the last FA Cup game the Scottish side ever played. The Midlands then descended on London for the final where, as described above, Albion appeared demoralised by feeling the first goal should have been disallowed and conceded a second before the end. Their secretary offered the rather lame excuse that the players should not have insisted on going for special training at Ascot, but should have stayed at home as they had for previous rounds. 'We have discovered since the match that the air at Ascot was not bracing enough,' he told the *Birmingham Daily Times*.

Albion won the Birmingham and Staffordshire cups as small consolation and no excuses were necessary a year later when the FA Cup finally made its way to West Bromwich. Wolves were again among their victims (2-0) in a run of five successive home ties as centre-forward Jem Bayliss led the goalscorers throughout the campaign. He hit a hat-trick against old but now fading rivals

Wednesbury Old Athletic (7-1), got all four goals against Stoke (4-1) and in the semi-final at Stoke's Victoria Ground against Derby Junction he scored again in a 3-1 win.

The final was the occasion on which over-proud Preston – who had beaten Hyde by the record score of 26-0, then knocked out Villa, and were now clear favourites – requested a photograph with the trophy before the game, while their kit was still clean. 'Had you not better win it first?' enquired regular referee Major Mandarin.

They were unable to do so. Albion's teenage forward Billy Bassett, a future club chairman, was the star, laying on the first goal for Bayliss early on. Fred Dewhurst deservedly equalised in the second half as Albion protested the ball had not crossed the line but in the 77th minute local man Woodhall scored the goal that gave Albion their first national trophy. The *Daily Post* felt Preston had the better of the first half but praised Albion's defenders and also Bassett. Much local pride was evident in the paper's opening line that, following Villa's win the previous year, 'The English Cup is to remain in the Midlands after all.' Twelve months later it would be Wolves' turn in attempting to keep it there.

1888 FA Cup Final: West Bromwich Albion 2 Preston North End 1

West Bromwich Albion: Roberts, Aldridge, Green, Horton, Perry, Timmins, Woodhall, Bassett, Bayliss, Wilson, Pearson.

Preston North End: Mills-Roberts, Howarth, Holmes, N. Ross, Russell, Gordon, J. Ross, Goodall, Dewhurst, Drummond, Graham.

As English champions, Albion were invited to meet their Scottish counterparts in a game variously described as the championship of the United Kingdom, or even the world. Unlike the Wolves when Stan Cullis described his team as world champions some 65 years later (see Chapter 6), Albion could not claim that boastful title: in May, amid a Glaswegian thunderstorm, the Scottish Cup holders Renton beat them 4-1.

* * *

Few major or even minor clubs can have sprung from a pair of families in quite the same way as the one that would come to be known as Birmingham City, but began under the name of **Small Heath Alliance**. An alliance it was, of the Edden and James clans, no fewer than five of whom played in the team's first recorded match, in November 1875. Had Arthur James, later to captain the club for seven years, been available, it would have been six who took on Holte Wanderers, a team who, as their name hints, came from Aston. The result was a 1-1 draw in a 12-a-side game, one David Keys scoring the club's first goal.

The two sets of three brothers had come together, just like Aston Villa, in a church cricket club, in their case from Holy Trinity, Bordesley, which decided to start a football section in September of that year. Pleasingly, the venue for the first match was a piece of wasteland on Arthur Street barely a couple of hundred yards south of St Andrew's.

Ambition was such that for only their second season they found an enclosed ground, just over a mile south in Sparkbrook, only to return closer to their origins in Muntz Street. Sloping, uneven pitch or not, loathed by most visiting teams, the ground would be home for almost 30 years from September 1877 and may well have contributed to an undefeated first season there of 22 matches.

The following year the Heathens – who would not wear blue until 1890, preferring navy shirts most of the time before then – competed in the Birmingham Senior Cup for the first time in 1878/79, its third season, although Muntz Street saw a 1-0 first-round defeat by more experienced visitors Calthorpe. In September the following year there was a first game with Villa, which was won by what was described as 'one nil and a disputed goal to nil'.

The Senior Cup was a competition that, apart from occasional results like the 13-0 win over Coseley in 1886, never brought them much joy until finally winning it as late as 1905. The first trophy was therefore the Walsall Cup of 1882/83, after accepting £5 from Wednesbury Old Athletic, one of numerous opponents who disliked the Muntz Street pitch, to give up ground advantage in an earlier round and winning 4-1 anyway.

Nor did the FA Cup bring much joy early on after the 4-1 debut win over Derby Town in October 1881, including a goal from Arthur James, the brother who missed that opening match

six years earlier; Jones was a star captain from 1878–85 and a regular for the Birmingham Association in matches against Sheffield, Glasgow and London. In the next round Wednesbury Old Athletic knocked the Heathens out 6-0. First-round defeats followed in the next three seasons, all by local opposition, before the dramatically improved run of 1885/86 carried the new professionals all the way to the semi-final.

Victories over Burton Wanderers (9-2), Darwen, Derby County, Davenham and Redcar led to the excitement of a local derby tie against West Brom at the Aston Lower Grounds. As mentioned above Albion won 4-0 on a snowy March day which did nothing to enhance the Heathens' reputation on or off the pitch. 'So far the spectators had conducted themselves properly but towards the end the Birmingham rough seemed compelled to demonstrate his presence and snowballs were hurled about,' reported the *Sporting Life*. 'It looked as if they were intended for the West Bromwich Albion players.'

A letter to the *Birmingham Daily Post* also complained about 'rowdies' snowballing Albion players, especially goalkeeper Roberts, and bemoaned the presence of only one policeman for a crowd reported to be upwards of 10,000. Such behaviour, the writer added, was not unknown, claiming, 'I understand that ... Preston North End positively refuse to play again in Birmingham and will not come nearer than Wolverhampton.' Half a crown in appearance money was small consolation for the beaten players.

Further painful derby defeats in the FA Cup followed for three more seasons against Birmingham St George's, Villa (4-0) and Albion again, underlining that Small Heath were not quite at the level of other Midlands clubs pressing claims for Football League membership. One major step, nevertheless, was to become a limited company in July 1888 and announcing a handsome profit 12 months later. 'Alliance' was also dropped from the club's name, and would take on a new meaning when they joined a league of that name in the new decade.

* * *

By the mid-1870s Wolverhampton had a thriving cricket and rugby club bearing the town name, while Stafford Road FC on

Fox's Lane, the railway works team, were regarded as the strongest in the immediate area. It was to their match at home to West Brom on 11 November 1876 – one of the first fixtures played in the new Birmingham Senior Cup competition – that those who had attended a meeting called the night before by a putative Goldthorn Football Club at St Luke's School in Blakenhall for 'any Gentleman interested in the game' were taken to have their interest piqued.

Goldthorn Hill are recorded as having played a Stafford Road reserve team in mid-January 1877. In that year the school leaving age was raised to 14 and St Luke's pupils were clearly encouraged by young headmaster Harry Barcroft, who noted in one of the school logs having let the boys out early one Friday afternoon 'and they had a Football Match'. He was almost certainly the Barcroft listed as playing in goal for that January match when in his early 20s.

Like Villa, Small Heath and others, there were strong links with local cricket clubs and, in the summer of 1879, it appears that one of them – possibly Blakenhall Wanderers – merged with the best of the local football teams to become the **Wolverhampton Wanderers**.

From the Windmill Field in Goldthorn Hill they then moved to Harper's Field in Lower Villiers Street. One of those connected from earliest days told the *Express and Star* years later that the name Wanderers was copied from the London side of that name who had just won five of the first seven FA Cups.

Jack Baynton, a vigorous half-back and one of the founding members from St Luke's, who played in the January 1877 game, was still in the side for that first season under the Wanderers name and was listed as captain (and treasurer) early in 1880/81. In 1889 he would be their goalkeeper in the Football League and an FA Cup Final.

Local interest was no doubt stimulated during that season by Stafford Road's exploits in the FA Cup, winning through three rounds, the last of them away to Villa, before narrowly losing 2-1 at home to the Old Etonians, who went on to a second final in three years.

Ensnconced at Dudley Road opposite the Fighting Cock hostelry with only a small shed for cover, Wolves were considered

ready for the Birmingham Senior Cup in 1881 but lost 3-2 to Walsall Alma Athletic in a replayed first-round tie. The overall playing record, however, showed only four games lost from 18 including two against Alma, and treasurer Baynton was able to record a profit of £5 6s (£5.30).

The quality of opposition was becoming stronger, with a 1-0 win over Stoke at Christmas and then the first reported meeting with WBA in the Birmingham Cup third round, when 3,000 watched a 4-2 win for the Albion. And by 1883, when the old red and white school colours of St Luke's were adopted (old gold and black would not be seen until 1891), smaller teams were being swatted aside: victories of 9-1, 10-0 and 15-0 in the first three rounds of the Birmingham competition brought another competitive meeting against Albion, who won the quarter-final 2-1 after a 1-1 draw, both games attracting good crowds.

The two clubs were mirroring each other's progress, both entering the FA Cup in autumn 1883. Unlike their rivals, Wolves were victorious in the first round, beating Long Eaton Rangers 4-1 with two goals each from Jack Brodie and John Griffiths before losing 4-2 to Wednesbury Old Athletic despite two more from Brodie. Reaching a first final of the Staffordshire Senior Cup the following season was a further small sign of progress and when professionalism was declared legal in the summer of 1885 Wolves were ready to take on another challenge, joining the major Midlands clubs – a group of which they could now count themselves members – among the paid ranks.

In fact, a table of those leading clubs published at the end of the 1884/85 season based on the number of games lost had Wolves on top with only two defeats in 22 matches. Awarding two points for a win and one for a draw (a system not introduced until midway through the first Football League season) would have given them an average of 1.59 points per game, with Albion and Small Heath on 1.48 and Villa, who lost half a dozen of their 18 games in a weaker season than normal, on 1.22.

Two of those other big rivals, Albion and Villa, both proved a nemesis in the FA Cup, knocking them out in the three successive years before league football began; the fourth-round defeat by Albion in 1885/86 after three wins (including one over a declining Stafford Road) being their best run. The following year's defeat

by Villa came in a third replay, a special train carrying Wolves supporters to swell the crowd at Perry Barr to 10,000. Earlier, there had been a record-breaking 14-0 win in the previous round against Crosswell's Brewery from Oldbury with Tommy Hunter (four) one of three players to score a hat-trick; it remains the club's biggest victory in any major competition.

In 1887/88 Wolves took revenge on Albion by 2-1 to win the Staffordshire Cup Final in a second replay. Much better was to come in the FA Cup; and with the club's reputation firmly established, international recognition quickly followed. Right-back Charlie Mason played for England against Ireland, followed within a year by four team-mates (see next chapter). Now the Football League awaited.

* * *

The number of different Walsall clubs already mentioned a good few times confirms the town's importance from earliest days. To recap, one Saturday in October 1876 **Walsall Victoria Swifts** took part in the first match played in the new Birmingham Senior Cup, losing out 2-1 to Wednesbury Town. By the fifth edition of the competition in 1880/81 four other teams all bearing the town's name – Albion, Athletic, Town and White Star – were taking part, though it was already evident that the Swifts were the strongest of them.

They soon became strong challengers in local competitions: semi-finalists in the third and fourth years of the Birmingham Senior Cup, winning the next one in 1881 by surprising Aston Villa in the final, stealing a goal and clinging on. *Sporting Life* commended 'splendid goal keeping of Hobson for the Swifts, saving his charge on several occasions'. Villa had been heavy favourites, a feeling strengthened when the Walsall team were involved in a crash on the way to the game as their 'brake' lost a wheel.

They had beaten **Walsall Town** 3-0 on the way to the final and the pair would regularly meet in the competition and the Staffordshire Cup. In the Birmingham version in 1881/82 holders Swifts beat their rivals again 2-1 in front of some 4,000 at the Chuckery, which may have prompted their unneighbourly

opposition when Town applied to join the Walsall and District Association that summer, having implied that they would only field their reserves in the local cup competition. The *Walsall Observer* reported that a motion supported by Swifts was passed, rejecting the application because it conveyed the impression that 'clubs connected with the association are only equal to the second team of the Town club'.

Swifts were Birmingham semi-finalists in 1883 and beaten finalists for the next three years (twice to Villa and once to West Bromwich), knocking out Town again along the way in 1885 and 86. One of their star individuals was full-back Alf Jones, who in 1882 became the first international from any Walsall club, playing for England against Wales and Scotland.

One competition in which Town narrowly surpassed them was the FA Cup, progressing as far as the last 16 in 1883 and only losing 2-1 to Villa.

By 1887/88, however, as thoughts turned to league football, the Birmingham Cup semi-finals gave clear indication of the respective strengths of West Midlands clubs: the four teams were Aston Villa, Albion, Stoke and Wolves. Defeats for the two Walsall teams by Wolves and Mitchell St George's suggested they were not ready for the Football League and the decision was taken to amalgamate as **Walsall Town Swifts**. Donning red and white for the first time, they played away to Villa in the Birmingham Charity Cup semi-final (not the final as sometimes stated) with six former Swifts and five from Town, forcing a draw after extra time in front of a five-figure crowd. Having failed to have the replay scheduled for their Chuckery ground, the new club declined to play it in Birmingham again and withdrew, leaving Villa to play Mitchell St George's in the final.

* * *

Port Vale are another club whose early history is so uncertain that they almost certainly celebrated their silver jubilee and centenary prematurely in 1926 and 1976 respectively. In doing so they were ignoring a letter appealing for funds written by the club chairman Robert Audley in 1907 that talks about 28 years of existence, and a long newspaper article from 1898 (*Golden*

Penny, 12 November) that also suggests 1879 as the founding date. They also appear to be yet another club with cricketing origins, as suggested by the first football captain, Enoch Hood.

According to the *Golden Penny* article, members of Porthill football club playing in Wolstanton held a meeting in Limekiln Lane, Longport, and decided to start a new club nearer their Burslem homes. At a further meeting they settled on the name Port Vale and played at a patch of ground in Longport dignified with the semi-official name The Meadows. A second venue, from 1881, was at Westport meadows, where the club grew and began charging admission.

There was little publicity, however, in the local press at the time apart from a mention of one reserve game in October 1880 and then the club joining the Staffordshire FA in September two years later.

There were at least a dozen teams in and around Burslem, one of the six towns of the Potteries, the others being Fenton, Hanley, Longton, Stoke-upon-Trent and Tunstall. Novelist and football enthusiast Arnold Bennett, born in Hanley, confused matters by writing about the fictitious 'five towns', turning Burslem, which lay in 'a heavy pall of smoke', into Bursley.

By 1879/80, Burslem (formerly and later known as Cobridge), Stoke and Fenton Sutherland were all competing in the Birmingham Senior Cup. After joining the Staffordshire FA, Vale first took part in the association's Senior Cup competition of 1882/83 and in the second round had what was almost certainly their first joust with Stoke, losing a replay 5-1, in which Enoch Hood is listed as captain. They managed to win the North Staffordshire Charity Challenge Cup by beating Leek.

In the 1883/84 season double-figure wins over Newcastle St Giles and Middlewich proved that some opposition was becoming too easy, although results against the more established clubs were mixed: a 1-0 win away to a modest Everton team in November and a draw in the return next month gave a less reliable impression than defeats by Preston (4-1), West Bromwich Albion (6-0), Birmingham St George's (7-1 in the Staffordshire Cup semi-final) and Stoke (3-0, 5-3). The local paper did, however, refer to one of the Stoke fixtures as a meeting of 'our two local champions'.

In 1884 there was also a change of name to Burslem Port Vale and a move to the Moorland Road ground next to Burslem Station, only a third of a mile south of the current Vale Park and now part of Burslem Park. The first game on the sloping pitch there was a handsome win over Everton by either 6-0 or 7-0 (sources differ), followed by heavy defeats against the stronger Blackburn Olympic and Bolton Wanderers. But at more local level Vale won the Burslem Challenge Cup 12-0 against Ironbridge and shared the North Staffordshire Charity Cup with Leek. Early rivalry with Wolves centred on a Staffordshire Cup tie that was ended early because of failing light; Wolves were found to have an ineligible player and Vale lost the away replay which they felt should have been on neutral ground.

In the summer of 1885 the club felt sufficiently confident to turn professional and form a limited company with £2,000 capital. Entry to the FA Cup followed with a good run to a controversial tie against Brentwood. After two draws Vale scratched rather than travel to Brentwood as the Essex amateurs did not charge gate money.

The first two appearances in the Birmingham Senior Cup also brought impressive campaigns, before ending in each case with heavy defeats in the semi-final to West Brom. There was a drawn friendly against FA Cup holders Blackburn Rovers, but Stoke could still not be beaten, despite the presence of a record 10,000 crowd on May Day 1886. They saw Vale's star goalkeeper Billy Rowley break a rib, souring relations between the clubs even more when Stoke wanted him to break his contract with their neighbours and join them. The dispute, which went to court, resulted in a fine for the Potters, whom he nevertheless joined early in 1887, going on to win two caps for England and later becoming Stoke manager.

For 1886/87 there was another new ground, at Waterloo Road, Cobridge, where Preston unkindly won the opening game 7-0, and another FA Cup controversy when drawn against Leek in the third round. The away game was a 'fast and exciting' 2-2 draw, abandoned in extra time because of failing light, after which Vale's secretary wrote to *Athletic News* to complain about its comment that striker Billy Reynolds should have been sent off. After an abandonment and another draw, the fourth attempt

at Stoke brought a goal for Leek within ten seconds and an early curtailment with Leek deemed 3-1 winners after Vale players walked off in protest that their third goal was offside.

Stoke beat them twice more before the end of the season and in 1887/88 knocked them out of both the Staffordshire Cup and by 1-0 in the FA Cup after Vale in the latter game 'lost several easy chances by wretched shooting'.

A table of results for the main north, Midlands and Scotland clubs put Vale 37th. Stoke cannot have been pleased with a ranking three places below them.

* * *

The first team from Coventry to enter the Birmingham Senior Cup, as early as the second season of 1877/78, were from the private school **Allesley Park College**, an establishment charging up to 50 guineas a year. Narrowly beaten in the first round, they did not take part again. The college's first matches were in December 1875, both against a side described as 'Coventry Association Football Club', the college winning both of them (*Coventry Herald*, 18 December 1875).

Rugby union was more popular in those parts until the growth of local industry in the 1880s and Coventry City, of whom we will hear much more, did not begin until 1883 as **Singers FC**, a works team of the bicycle factory, with company founder George Singer as president. Given impetus by an employee named William Stanley, they started playing on a pitch to the east of the city centre between the London Road and Gosford Park.

By 1887 they were a club on the way up with an enclosed ground off Stoke Road; too late for consideration as Football League members, though within a couple of years of winning a first trophy, the Birmingham Junior Cup.

* * *

Shrewsbury Town were not founded until 1886, being unique in having their origins in a riot. A team called Castle Blues, one of around 40 in the town, developed such a rivalry with Wellington Town that some of their players were among spectators arrested

when the Wellington team were attacked during a match in 1886 against another local side. Castle Blues soon folded in disgrace and in May that year several of their more innocent players joined a new Shrewsbury Town club, who became winners of the Shropshire FA Cup in their first season, beating Wellington Town in the replayed final. Entering the FA Cup the season after, they defeated Macclesfield 3-1 with a hat-trick from captain Harry Pearson before going down heavily to the Welsh Cup holders Chirk 10-2.

Home was the Racecourse Ground at Monkmoor, north-east of the town centre, where they stayed until 1889, the course having staged its last race meeting in October 1887 amid allegations of widespread fixing.

One last club deserving a mention in this chapter are **Shropshire Wanderers** (1872–1880), also based in Shrewsbury, who were involved in the only FA Cup match ever decided by tossing a coin. After two goalless draws with Sheffield FC in their debut in 1873/74, the teams declined to play a third game and Wanderers lost the decisive toss and were eliminated. In the first round the following season they were again drawn against Sheffield, who scratched, whereupon the Wanderers won two ties to reach the semi-final, losing only 1-0 to Old Etonians at Kennington Oval.

The club did not play in the FA Cup after 1877 and disbanded within three years. Their most notable player also achieved an unusual distinction: John Edwards, later known as John Hawley Edwards, won a cap for England against Scotland in 1884, and after moving to the London-based Wanderers and scoring for them in the 1876 FA Cup Final he played for Wales, also against the Scots.