

Church and pubs led to football clubs

Modern football was born of the social conditions in the late Victorian era, writes **Peter Taylor-Whiffen**.

JUST two goals confirmed the horror. A disparate collection of artisans from the bleak Lancashire cotton mills had challenged the titled and privileged public school old boys at their own game – and had dared to win.

It was an unlikely and unprecedented triumph for the honest working man over his natural lord and master, and was celebrated loud and long. But neither victors nor vanquished had any idea that in the course of one afternoon, they had changed sport in Britain forever.

The year was 1883 and Blackburn Olympic's 2-1 victory over the Old Etonians wrenched the 10-year-old FA Cup away from the old boys' network of universities and public schools for the first time. It would never return. Football had suddenly become a different ball game.

This wasn't supposed to have happened. The game had been the preserve of the privileged few through most of the nineteenth century and had been introduced to the proletariat only because philanthropic business owners thought a game they had enjoyed at university would

Blackburn Rovers emulated their success. "Rovers caused an even greater stir because they paid their players," said Mr Shiel. "They took advantage of new rules and professionalism began to rear its ugly head."

As football became more popular, so clubs began to grow out of communities. Aston Villa, who won the cup the following year, had started life as a group of Wesleyan churchgoers who took up football only to fill their time in the winter when they waited for the cricket season to begin.

Young worshippers at St Domingo's Church became Everton and members of Christ Church on the outskirts of Manchester evolved into Bolton Wanderers. Other church groups spawned Birmingham City, Wolverhampton Wanderers and Liverpool.

"The origins reflect the society at that time," said Mr Shiel. "In 1883, many clubs were born of church groups. Even now, football continues to grow from the focus of its community. Where I live in Devon (he is finance director for the county's football association) there are about 70 teams and about 60 of those are pub sides. It's still the focus of a community, but that focus has moved away from the church, which in many ways is a shame."

workmates

The growth was not confined to community groups. Like Rovers, Stoke City and Crewe Alexandra were formed by teams of labourers. Workmates who founded Yorkshire and Lancashire Railways FC had no idea that their team, which then changed its name to Newton Heath, would within a century become the biggest football club on earth – Manchester United.

Community teams inevitably drew partisan support and clubs began to build 'fan bases'. Wanderers' triumph in the first cup final, at the Oval cricket ground, was watched by 2,000 people. Just 20 years later the fixture was attracting more than 25,000 and the venue was switched to

Crystal Palace. In 1901, when Tottenham Hotspur recorded the last FA Cup final victory by a non-league club, the crowd numbered more than 100,000.

"The industrial revolution played an enormous part in the growth of the sport," said Mr Shiel. "Not only did clubs grow out of communities working within the new industries, but people also had more leisure time, with many now given Saturdays off, as well as Sundays."

The growth of railways, too, undoubtedly contributed to the success of the infant Football League, which was founded in 1889 and comprised 12 teams across the Midlands and North of England, as far apart as Everton, Aston Villa, Blackburn Rovers, Derby County and first champions Preston North End.

"Railways meant people could go to watch their teams, which could never have happened before," said Mr Shiel. "Even as early as the 1890s there were the equivalent of football specials – trains which took supporters to matches."

crowd trouble

"As club loyalties became more entrenched, so passions sometimes got out of control. There is a record of crowd trouble at Aston Villa in 1890."

For all its rapid growth in Britain, it would be some time before football began to attract interest away from home. The first international, between England and Scotland in 1872, had been followed by games involving other home countries. But further afield, nations were less impressed.

"The British did take the game abroad but strangely it never took off in the colonies," said Mr Shiel. "Cricket was the more popular sport in, say, India, Australia and New Zealand and even all these years on, there are not particularly strong football nations. Eventually it seemed to flourish through expatriates in rather more unlikely places, such as Italy and Argentina."

However, there was one team flying the flag for English football around the world. A loose-knit group of public school characters who called themselves the Corinthians played between 25 and 30 games a year, at home and abroad, through to the 1930s.

"I have a soft spot for the Corinthians," said Mr Shiel. "They were very keen to uphold the spiritual ideals of sport. Their rules prevented them from joining the league or entering the cup and they rarely played any competitive matches at all."

The club's refusal to do so may well have contributed to the tipping of the balance of football power in favour of the industrial north. Just after Blackburn Rovers' first



Football's popularity spread in Victorian times

role in the game, As, of course, it does to this day. Just ask Newton Heath.

Mr Shiel, who is a mental health consultant for FA Cup sponsors AXA, would like to hear from anyone who has any interesting cup anecdotes or artefacts. He can be contacted on +44 (0)1392 434553 or at shielglobalnet.co.uk

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Newcastle United's goalkeeper Steve Harper (left) is pictured with John Shipley, Regional Director OU in the North. An open event organised by the OU in the North held at St James Park was kicked off by Steve. An OU student who successfully undertook DD100 Introduction to the social sciences in 2000