

# **Victorian Football – ‘A gentleman's game played by gentlemen’: The Demise of the Gentleman Amateur and Rise of Professional Football, With an Exploration of the Links Between the ‘Little Tin Idol’, Reverend A.H. Johnson and the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education**

Michael Freeman

## **Abstract**

The ‘Little Tin Idol’ was the original Football Association Challenge trophy (FA Cup), given to the teams that won the competition from 1872 to 1896. The commonly held view is that football is ‘a gentleman's game played by ruffians’, a quote attributed to Oscar Wilde. However, an analysis of the Oxford University team that won the FA Cup in 1874 and other early FA Cup winning teams will show this view to be incorrect. A member of the 1874 team, Reverend A.H. Johnson, had a pioneering role in the development of the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education.

---

Association Football is also known as soccer to differentiate it from rugby football and the American version. In this article the term ‘football’ will be used to denote Association Football and soccer. It has been described as ‘...a gentleman's game played by ruffians’.<sup>1</sup> Although there is no formal attribution of the quote, it is believed to have been uttered by Oscar Wilde. The basic premise is that gentlemen do not play football. However, as will be shown, this is not true of the overwhelming majority of leading teams and footballers from the 1830s to the 1880s. Until the 1830s, football was a rugged, disorganised game played mainly by the working classes.<sup>2</sup> From the 1830s it was adopted by the English Public schools and developed into two sports as Baker explains.<sup>3</sup> Some schools followed Rugby School, playing a version where the ball was carried, whilst others did not allow handling of the ball (save the goalkeeper). From this originated the formal rules, competitions and governing bodies of Rugby Football and Association Football.

Beginning in 1872, the major football club competition was the Football Association Challenge trophy, better known as the FA Cup, which survives to this day and is the premier club football competition in England. The 18-inch high trophy given to the winning team was known as the ‘Little Tin Idol’, as it had the figure of a football player on the top.<sup>4</sup> Little Tin Idol was stolen in 1895 from an outfitter's shop, whilst on loan from the then holders, Aston Villa. It was never found and a replica was made which was used until 1910. Players of the winning side were given small replicas of Little Tin Idol, so when it was stolen it was easy to create a full-size replica, shown in Figure 1. Although no longer used the replica is owned by Mr David Gold, who is joint chairman of West Ham United Football Club.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> C. Johnman, P. Mackie and F. Sim, ‘The Beautiful Game’, *Public Health*, 127 (2013), p. 697.

<sup>2</sup> James Walvin, *The People's Game: The History of Football Revisited* (London: Random House, 2014), pp. 25-40.

<sup>3</sup> William J. Baker, ‘The Making of a Working-Class Football Culture in Victorian England’, *Journal of Social History*, 13 (1979), pp. 241-51.

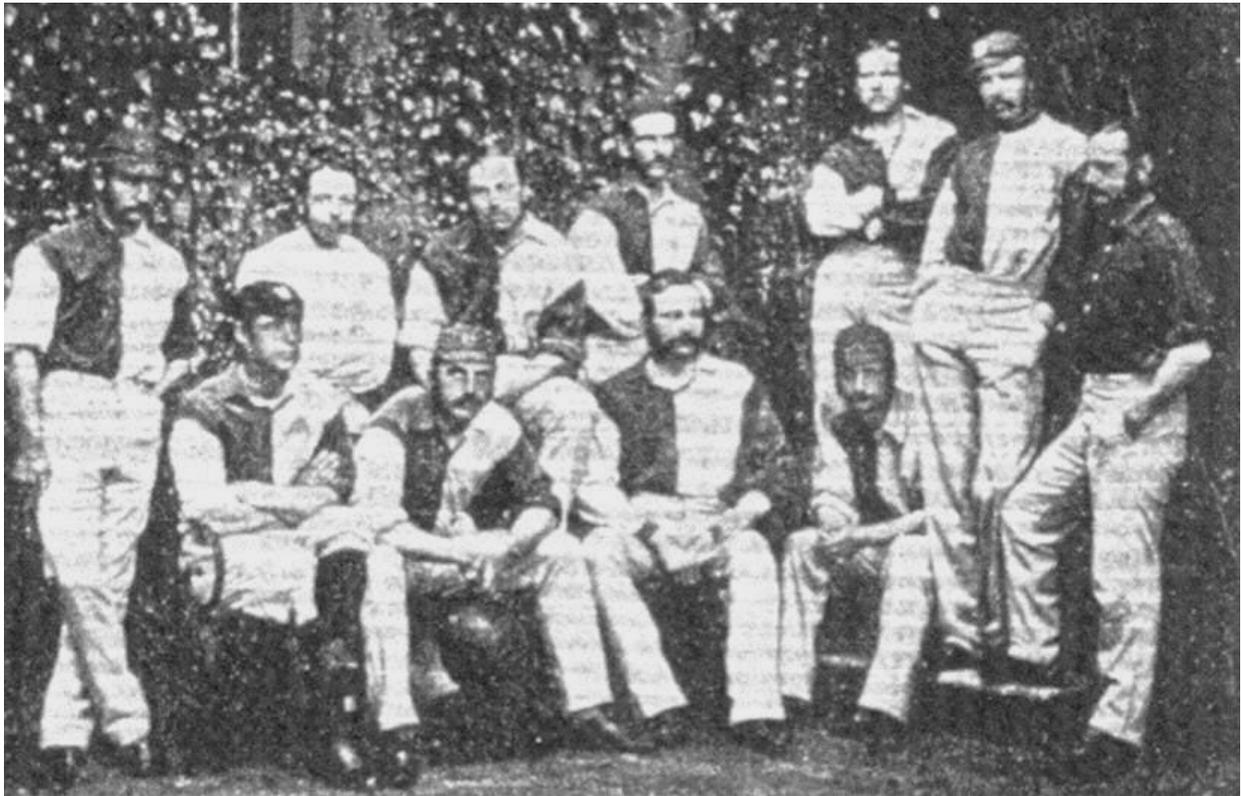
<sup>4</sup> The Football Association, ‘The Trophies’  
<<http://www.thefa.com/Competitions/FACompetitions/TheFACup/History/thetrophies>>  
[accessed 15 March 2015].

<sup>5</sup> The Football Association, ‘The Trophies’  
<<http://www.thefa.com/Competitions/FACompetitions/TheFACup/History/thetrophies>>  
[accessed 15 March 2015].



**Figure 1. The oldest remaining FA Cup, a replica of Little Tin Idol.**  
Credit – Oldepaso (Wikipedia).

If today we saw a newspaper headline saying that Oxford University had won the FA Cup, we would assume it was a misprint. Had the winners been Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur or Arsenal, we would not be surprised. However, this merely underlines the difference between the early winners of the FA Cup and the current leading teams. Yet Oxford University did win the 1874 competition.<sup>6</sup> The team, shown in Figure 2, beat the Royal Engineers 1-0 in the final at Kennington Oval, on March 14th 1874.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 2. Oxford University's F.A. Cup-winning side of 1874.** Standing: Vidal, Green, Mackarness, Johnson, Benson, Birley, Nepean. Seated: Ottaway, Patton, Maddison, Rawson. Credit – Public domain.

The 1874 Final gives an indication of the composition of football teams of the time and the social status and background of the players. It must be remembered that both teams were amateurs, although the Royal Engineers took the unprecedented step of having a training camp before the final –pioneering the now usual process of preparation for matches.<sup>8</sup> The Royal Engineers' team was composed entirely of officers; 9 lieutenants and 2 captains. The Oxford team is shown in Table 1 with their previous schools and eventual occupations.

<sup>6</sup> Jimmy Hill and Colin Weir, *The History of Oxford University Association Football Club, 1872-1998*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn (Harefield: Yore Publications, 1998), pp. 12-14.

<sup>7</sup> Keith Warsop, *The Early F.A. Cup Finals: And the Southern Amateurs* (Beeston: Soccerdata, 2004), p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> Warsop, p. 19.

<u>Name</u>	<u>School</u>	<u>College</u>	<u>Occupation</u>
Charles Edward Burroughs Nepean	Charterhouse	University	Clergyman
Charles Coleridge Mackarness	Winchester	Exeter	Clergyman
Francis Hornby Birley	Winchester	University	Barrister
Frederick Thomas Green	Winchester	New	Barrister
Robert H Benson	Eton	Balliol	Banker
Frederick Brunning Maddison	Marlborough Grammar	Brasenose Christ	Barrister/Solicitor
William Stepney Rawson	Westminster	Church	Schoolmaster
Cuthbert John Ottaway	Eton	Brasenose	Barrister
Rev. Arthur H Johnson	Eton	Exeter Christ	Clergyman
Robert Walpole Sealy Vidal	Westminster	Church	Clergyman
Frederick Patton	Eton	Balliol	Barrister

**Table 1. Members of the Oxford University 1874 FA Cup Team.** Compiled from Warsop (2004).

Of the players, all were students apart from Reverend Arthur Henry Johnson, who was at the time Fellow and Chaplain of All Souls College, having graduated from Exeter College in 1868.<sup>9</sup> Johnson was to become a well-known Oxford character over the next sixty years and had a key role in the founding of Oxford Extension, the precursor of the Department for Continuing Education.<sup>10</sup>

Oxford Extension lectures were designed to give the Oxford experience to a wider audience. The original idea was to have satellite colleges all around the UK, which were affiliated to Oxford and providing an Oxford education to more people.<sup>11</sup> Although this did not happen, Oxford Extension lectures did start to be given outside Oxford. The first Oxford Extension lecture was given by Johnson on 26 September 1878 at the King Edward VI School in Birmingham. At the time, he was a lecturer in Modern History to four Oxford colleges (Trinity, St John's, Wadham and Pembroke).<sup>12</sup>

Johnson, also known as 'the Johnner', spent his life in Oxford, from his matriculation at Exeter College in 1864 to his death at 5 South Parks Road on 31st January 1927. Apart from football, he was an accomplished runner, winning the Eton school steeplechase when he was fifteen. He won Blues in 1865 and 1866 for long-distance running. His running prowess was very useful when he was a Pro-proctor chasing errant students who were unable to escape him.

Johnson was a lecturer in Modern History at University College (from 1885) and at Trinity, Hertford, Merton, St. John's, Wadham, Worcester, Corpus Christi, Balliol and Pembroke Colleges, often seen dashing between colleges to give lectures. An appreciation beneath his Times obituary described as 'legendary' the number of colleges at which he had been a lecturer and tutor.<sup>13</sup> From 1906 to his death he was a Fellow of All Souls College and College Chaplain. He previously held these positions between 1869 and 1874. He wrote many books on history including *Europe in the XVI Century*.<sup>14</sup> He

<sup>9</sup> Warsop, pp. 90-91.

<sup>10</sup> 'Taking the University Outside Oxford', Oxford University Department for Continuing Education <<https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/about/history/extension.php>> [accessed 19 March 2015].

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Goldman, *Dons and Workers: Oxford and Adult Education since 1850* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 26-32.

<sup>12</sup> Goldman, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> *The Times*, 1 Feb. 1927, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Warsop, p. 91.

was appropriately described as 'a country gentleman in holy orders'; apart from football, his interests were fishing, hunting and shooting. As Goldman notes 'He was a hunting, shooting, and fishing don, whose attachment to field sports was legendary and accomplishments at them prodigious'.<sup>15</sup> Johnson's obituary in *The Times* recorded his running skills, but made no mention of his part in the 1874 FA Cup winning side.<sup>16</sup> The appreciation beneath his obituary likewise says nothing of his footballing past, although it remarks, 'But at all forms of sport he was *facile princeps*' (roughly translated as 'easily the best').<sup>17</sup> His wife Bertha was principal (1894-1921) of what became St. Anne's College Oxford.<sup>18</sup>

Johnson, with his background, interests, sporting prowess and profession, is typical of the type of gentleman playing football for the leading teams of the 1870s and 1880s. It is quite clear that the Oxford team was drawn from men who had come from leading public schools (apart from Maddison), who then went on to enter one of the main professions. Additionally, the biographies of these men show they were playing football at school before going up to Oxford; this is evidence that football was popular in some of the public schools.<sup>19</sup> A review of the finalists in the first ten seasons of the competition also shows the connection between football and the public schools, universities and armed forces.

Oxford reached the final in 1873, 1874, 1877 and 1880. The Royal Engineers contested the 1872, 1874, 1875 and 1878 finals. The Wanderers appeared in the 1872, 1873, 1876, 1877 and 1878 finals. They were formed in 1863 by a group of Old Harrovians (ex-pupils of Harrow school). Old Etonians played in the 1875, 1876, 1879 and 1881 finals, formed of former Eton pupils. Old Carthusians, drawn from former pupils of Charterhouse school, played in the 1881 final. Clapham Rovers appeared in the 1879 and 1880 finals. They were a team of men generally working in the City of London in the professions or as traders or brokers.<sup>20</sup> Most players were educated at public school and some had played for other leading teams.

Thus in the first ten seasons of the FA Cup, the six clubs that contested the finals represented the social, professional and institutional elite of English society. In this period, football at the highest level was an elitist sport. From the description of the membership of leading teams, and the social backgrounds and professions of the Oxford University 1874 FA Cup winning side, it is clear the gentlemen and professional classes pervaded the leading football teams of the 1870s and 1880s.

This argument is further strengthened by a review of the background and future/actual professions of the 158 players who competed in the first ten FA Cup finals. As an example of the 158, 25 were barristers, 15 solicitors, 38 Army officers and 16 clergymen. Nearly all went to public schools; for example, Eton supplied 48 players and Charterhouse 15 players. Many of these players excelled at other sports, with 46 of them playing cricket at first class or minor counties level.<sup>21</sup>

It is also clear that these are teams from the south of England, and the north-south divide will be discussed below. When the Football Association was formed in 1863 it was regarded as a southern-centric organisation of upper-crust clubs.<sup>22</sup> All the early southern football clubs were amateur, and the relationship between the amateur and the

---

<sup>15</sup> Goldman, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, 1 Feb. 1927, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> *The Times*, 1 Feb. 1927, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> 'St Anne's College, Oxford: About the College, Bertha Johnson (1894-1921)', <<http://www.st-annes.ox.ac.uk/about/history/principals/bertha-johnson-1894-1921>> [accessed 18 March 2015]

<sup>19</sup> Warsop, pp. 55-140.

<sup>20</sup> Clapham Rovers – A Brief History – Clapham Society Talk – Clapham Rovers FC', Pitchero <<http://www.pitchero.com/clubs/claphamroversfc/a/clapham-rovers--a-brief-history-23649.html>> [accessed 12 March 2015].

<sup>21</sup> Warsop, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Warsop, p. 7.

gentleman was defined in 1866 by the newly formed Amateur Athletic Association as follows:

Any gentleman who has never competed in any open competition, or for public money, or for admission money, or taught, pursued or assisted in the pursuit of athletic exercises as a means of livelihood, nor as a mechanic, artisan or labourer.<sup>23</sup>

The effect of this was to exclude manual workers and the working classes, be they skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled from most forms of 'organised' amateur sport. It was considered that manual workers could be tempted to take bribes from gamblers and therefore only men of independent or substantial financial standing would not need such financial inducements.<sup>24</sup> This points toward amateurs as gentlemen who are either members of the aristocracy or the professions. The idea of the amateur gentleman was firmly rooted in the upper and middle classes of society. The other result of this definition is a form of segregation, whereby the gentleman classes did not engage in sporting contests with the working classes. These lines were blurred to some extent with football, especially with the clubs which developed in the north of England and the Midlands. Teams from northern England and the Midlands began to emerge in the 1870s and by the 1880s were a serious threat to the FA Cup dominance of the southern gentlemen teams.

The non-southern clubs had different histories. Blackburn in Lancashire provides an interesting comparison. It had two teams in the 1870s and 1880s. Two old boys of Shrewsbury public school founded Blackburn Rovers in 1875. Members of the team came from Blackburn Grammar School and Malvern public school. The blue and white team colours owed much to the influence of Cambridge graduates amongst the membership.<sup>25</sup> To some extent these were 'northern gentlemen' although in the long term, Blackburn Rovers was one of the teams to eventually benefit from the introduction of professional players as discussed below.

Blackburn Olympic was the other club, and its membership was mostly local mill workers. Olympic became the first northern and truly working class club to win the FA Cup in 1883, when it beat Old Etonians 2-1. This was a crucial turning point in the rise of the northern clubs, the migration to wider social participation in football and the move towards professionalism. The Olympic win over a leading team of southern gentlemen caused a major controversy in the south. It had long been thought that the northern clubs were paying players, which was not allowed under the amateur rules, but there was little direct evidence.<sup>26</sup>

Before the final, Olympic had taken their players on a training trip to Blackpool, and the argument was that as these players were manual workers, they could not afford to take time off work so they must have been paid. Of course this contrasted with the Royal Engineers who trained intensely before playing Oxford University in 1874, but as officers and gentlemen the financial queries did not arise. Another issue was that one player, Jack Hunter, had relocated to Blackburn to play for Olympic, having been given a job at the local mill. This trend was seen in many northern clubs, and the suspicion was that good players were induced to join clubs with offers of jobs and payments.<sup>27</sup> No action was taken against Olympic; however, later it was found that Olympic had indeed arranged jobs, paid time off work for players, and made additional off-balance sheet

---

<sup>23</sup> David Allen Pierce, *Applying Amateurism in the Global Sports Arena: Analysis of NCAA Student-Athlete Reinstatement Cases Involving Amateurism Violations* (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2007)

<sup>24</sup> Warsop, pp. 7-8.

<sup>25</sup> '1875 - 1884: The Early Years' <<http://www.rovers.co.uk/news/article/1875-1884-the-early-years-223575.aspx>> [accessed 12 March 2015].

<sup>26</sup> Hunter Davies, *Boots, Balls and Haircuts: An Illustrated History of Football from Then to Now* (London: Cassell Illustrated, 2003), p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Graham Phythian, *Shooting Stars: The Brief and Glorious History of Blackburn Olympic F.C., 1878-1889* (Nottingham: SoccerData, 2007), p. 54.

payments to them.<sup>28</sup> Such activities beckoned the professional era and the end of the gentlemen football player. None of the Old Boys' teams appeared in a FA Cup final again. The finals were dominated by professional northern teams, and the next southern club to win the FA Cup again was the amateur team of Tottenham Hotspur in 1901 and 1902. Northern dominance was then reasserted until 1921, when Tottenham Hotspur, now professional, won the FA Cup for the third time.

The growth of the northern clubs resulted in the Football Association allowing professionalism under its rules in July 1885. The rules were strict, and players could only represent a team if they were born within the same area as the club they played for, or had lived within six miles of the club for a period of two years.<sup>29</sup> However, this still maintained the distinction between amateurs and professionals. The privileged amateurs continued to govern the game through the Football Association, and professional players were seen as employees, almost servants, of the clubs.<sup>30</sup> The new FA rules caused issues for professional clubs in the subsequent FA Cup competitions, especially where players had been 'imported' from outside their regions, and did not meet the two-year residency qualification. Thus in the first few years of professionalism, the professional clubs often fielded under strength teams.<sup>31</sup>

As professional clubs developed they needed to generate income, and more regular matches were needed to attract paying spectators. The cup competitions such as the FA Cup and Lancashire Cup were limited and, of course, there was always the prospect of being knocked out of the competition. Infrequent friendly games also gave no certainty of financial stability. The solution was the formation of the Football League in April 1888, with 12 founding teams, Accrington, Aston Villa, Blackburn Rovers, Bolton Wanderers, Burnley, Derby County, Everton, Notts County, Preston North End, Stoke, West Bromwich Albion and Wolverhampton Wanderers. These were all professional teams from the north of England or the Midlands, and the split between the amateur south and the professional north and Midlands was complete. The first games took place on 8th September 1888, and the season comprised 22 games for each team, playing twice against each of the other 11 teams.<sup>32</sup>

The unstoppable tide of professionalism in football swept aside the gentleman amateur. The great Old Boys' teams of the 1870s and 1880s could not compete with the strength of the professional teams where players dedicated more of their time to training, perfecting skills and tactics. Whether this change classifies football as 'a gentleman's game played by ruffians' is open to debate. It is interesting to note that in *The Times* obituary (and appreciation) for Reverend A.H. Johnson, no mention is made of his footballing achievements. By the time of his death in 1927, football had become a professional sport, watched largely by working class men. Perhaps *The Times* thought the association with ruffians was more apt. In which case, it would probably not have been acceptable to associate a distinguished Oxford Don with football!

The Reverend A.H. Johnson was a member of the Oxford 1874 FA Cup winning team and a key figure in the development of the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education. His background (Eton and Oxford) and profession were typical of the amateur gentlemen playing football in the Victorian era. From the 1830s until the early 1880s, the leading football teams were made up of gentlemen amateurs from the social, professional and institutional elite of English society. Team members being drawn from the Public Schools, Oxbridge and the armed forces. Therefore, we can justly say that for many years, Victorian football was a 'gentleman's game played by gentlemen'.

---

<sup>28</sup> Davies, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> Philip Gibbons, *Association Football in Victorian England: A History of the Game from 1863 to 1900*, 2nd edn (London: Upfront, 2002), pp. 82-83.

<sup>30</sup> Gibbons, p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Gibbons, p. 84.

<sup>32</sup> Gibbons, pp. 103-105.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Association, The Football, 'The Trophies', <<http://www.thefa.com/Competitions/FACompetitions/TheFACup/History/thetrophies>> [accessed 15 March 2015]

*The Times*, 1 Feb. 1927

### Secondary Sources

'1875 - 1884: The Early Years' <<http://www.rovers.co.uk/news/article/1875-1884-the-early-years-223575.aspx>> [accessed 12 March 2015]

Baker, William J., 'The Making of a Working-Class Football Culture in Victorian England', *Journal of Social History*, 13 (1979), 241–51

'Clapham Rovers – A Brief History – Clapham Society Talk – Clapham Rovers FC', Pitchero <<http://www.pitchero.com/clubs/claphamroversfc/a/clapham-rovers--a-brief-history-23649.html>> [accessed 12 March 2015]

Davies, Hunter, *Boots, Balls and Haircuts: An Illustrated History of Football from Then to Now* (London: Cassell Illustrated, 2003)

Gibbons, Philip, *Association Football in Victorian England: A History of the Game from 1863 to 1900*, 2nd edn (London: Upfront, 2002)

Goldman, Lawrence, *Dons and Workers: Oxford and Adult Education since 1850* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1995)

Hill, Jimmy, and Colin Weir, *The History of Oxford University Association Football Club, 1872-1998*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn (Harefield: Yore Publications, 1998)

Johnman, C., P. Mackie, and F. Sim, 'The Beautiful Game', *Public Health*, 127 (2013), 697–98

'Taking the University Outside Oxford', Oxford University Department for Continuing Education <<https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/about/history/extension.php>> [accessed 17 March 2015]

Pythian, Graham, *Shooting Stars: The Brief and Glorious History of Blackburn Olympic F.C., 1878-1889* (Nottingham: SoccerData, 2007)

Pierce, David Allen, *Applying Amateurism in the Global Sports Arena: Analysis of NCAA Student-Athlete Reinstatement Cases Involving Amateurism Violations* (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2007)

'St Anne's College, Oxford, About the College, Bertha Johnson (1894-1921)' <<http://www.st-annes.ox.ac.uk/about/history/principals/bertha-johnson-1894-1921>> [accessed 18 March 2015]

Walvin, James, *The People's Game: The History of Football Revisited* (London: Random House, 2014)

Warsop, Keith, *The Early F.A. Cup Finals: And the Southern Amateurs* (Beeston: Soccerdata, 2004)

Brown, Paul, *Goal-Post: Victorian Football* (Seaham: Goal-Post, 2012)

Holt, Richard, *Sport and the British: A Modern History*, New edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)

Woolridge, Joyce, 'Mapping the Stars: Stardom in English Professional Football 1890-1946', *Soccer & Society*, 3 (2002), 51–69