

From 1905 to the start of The Great War in 1914, Newcastle United Football Club was considered to be one of the finest sides the British Isles had ever seen and was labelled "The Edwardian Masters". United won three Football League Championships and reached five FA Cup finals during one of - if not the - most successful periods in the club's history.



Littered with internationals, this well-respected and widely renowned squad included three players who had the prestigious honour of taking part in each of those seven glorious seasons and collecting the full complement of eight medals. They were the club's record appearance holder Jimmy Lawrence, England international Colin Veitch, and winger Jackie Rutherford.

As the old saying goes, "all good things must come to an end" and the Edwardian Masters side gradually dispersed as the war loomed large. Amassing three league titles, five FA Cup final appearances and one victory, plus another FAC SF appearance and finishing outside the top four only once in that period of time underlines what a special side they were. So special, left-half Peter McWilliam said, that "the Newcastle United team of the

1900s would give any modern side a two goal start and beat them."

Soon war was at the forefront of people's minds as hostilities against The Kaiser had been declared in August 1914. The government announced that football would carry on as normal, it being in the best interests of the nation to give people an escape from other worries. This situation would last

until the 1914-15 season reached its bloody conclusion.

In August 1914 there were over 7000 professional footballers in Britain and calls were made to enlist them into the armed forces as a matter of priority. Calls were made to set up a "Footballers Battalion" but many players voluntarily signed up for action anyway. Eventually the 17th Service Battalion of Middlesex Regiment was set up for players to join. Part of the deal saw the players get Saturdays off to return to their clubs and play. No Newcastle United players decided to join this largely southern outfit.

As the season progressed, members of Lord Kitchener's army were becoming commonplace in Football League crowds as their call to arms gathered pace. Warfare on the continent worsened and looked fated to be prolonged, making it clear that normal football could not carry on. Players agreed to take wage cuts and donate sums to the war fund while starting their military training.

United had a disappointing campaign on the pitch during the 1914-15 season, which saw them flirt with relegation before securing a 15th place finish in Division 1. A festive Derby double took place as Christmas Day saw Sunderland thrash Newcastle 5-2 on Tyneside before The Magpies got their revenge on Boxing Day at Roker Park, winning 4-2.

The Magpies also had a mini FA Cup run that culminated in a quarter-final replay defeat to Chelsea.

United's home games were being watched by an increasing number of the walking wounded, many of whom were being treated at the nearby Rutherford College (later to become Bath Lane College and eventually Newcastle College), which had been converted



into a military hospital. Players began to join local regiments and consequently the remaining players' contracts were cancelled as football was suspended indefinitely.

Many clubs joined more localised leagues up and down the county for the 15/16 season, an option Newcastle didn't take up. United was one of the clubs to completely close down in July 1915 as football entered its first period of severe disruption. Most of the current squad had either moved on to more run-of-the-mill jobs or had signed up for active service.

A total of five "first team" friendly matches took place instead of a regular season. These games



featured unofficial Newcastle United sides set up by players Bill McCracken and Bob Hewison. They recruited a number of guest players who were either "borrowed" from other clubs or serving soldiers who had been given time off.

The results of these fixtures were as follows:

14/09/1915 - NUFC XI 2-2 "Scratch XI" (in aid of wounded troops in Northumberland Hospital, Coxlodge)

14/11/1915 - South Shields 3-3 NUFC XI (In Aid of the South Shields Families Fund)

21/04/1916 - NUFC XI 0-4 Blackburn Rovers (to benefit Tyneside brigades)

22/04/1916 - Blackburn Rovers 4-5 NUFC XI

06/05/1916 - NUFC XI 1-1 Sunderland

For the first half of the season St James' Park was occupied by the army, who used it predominantly as a firing range for riflemen. This left McCracken and Hewison without a ground to stage their friendlies. They found a solution to their problem at



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Brough Park, then-home of non-league Newcastle City and latterly the Byker home of greyhound racing and the Newcastle Diamonds Speedway team. Christmas Eve 1915 saw the "unofficial" United return to its spiritual home.

St James' Park also played host during the season to a number of other charity games featuring local sides that had guest players from football league clubs. A particular highlight was the meeting of Newcastle East End and Newcastle West End - the two clubs which had previously combined to form Newcastle United - with East End winning 4-2.

Despite cries from supporters, Newcastle United once again declined the offer to participate in competitive football for the 1916/17 season. July 26th 1916 saw club directors decide by a majority to decline the offer to play in the Lancashire section of the Combination League. This resulted in a second consecutive season that Newcastle United as we know it did not exist. The highest level of competitive football Gallowgate

saw this season was a five-a-side competition on October 14 in aid of the YMCA.

Bill McCracken was once again on hand to provide the city with a series of friendlies, however, which met the Geordie public's craving for football, even though only one match was played at St James' Park. McCracken called upon his extensive contacts list developed the previous season to pair together Newcastle United and guest "Select XIs". Once again guest players came from a number of different Football League clubs and the matches were staged in aid of several different causes. Sides comprised of war workers often provided a useful outlet for maintaining the fitness of players in between matches. The results of the four recorded games are as follows:

11/11/1916 – Bill McCracken XI 0-2 League XI (benefit match for the widow of recently deceased United Chairman John Cameron)

10/02/1917 – Sunderland Rovers 2-2 Bill McCracken XI (in aid of Sunderland Rovers)

06/04/1917 – Wallsend 2-1 Bill McCracken XI

05/05/1917 – Ashington 1-2 Bill McCracken XI (in aid of Ashington Nursing Association & the VAP hospital)

McCracken also arranged a return fixture against Sunderland Rovers on April 28th, though no record of the match could be found.

During August 1916 a top boxing event was staged at St James' Park in aid of the local Red Cross Funds. The open air promotion saw an attendance of around 11,800 that included a number of wounded soldiers who were allowed to enter for free. The main event saw British Heavyweight Champion Bombardier Billy Wells taking on Light Heavyweight Champion Sargent Dick Smith. Wells won the bout in the 9th round.

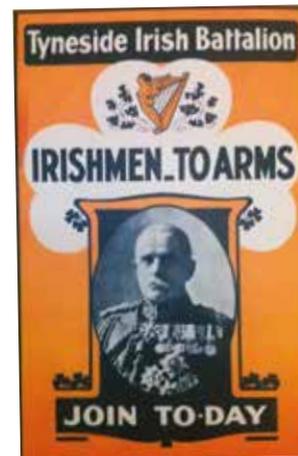
Newcastle United's final season of non-existence was the 1917-18 season. Glimmers of an official team were starting to shine through; a number of official fixtures took place as the war neared its conclusion. United took on South

Shields at St James' Park in the Hospital Cup, winning 4-1. The sides then met again in a charity fixture, with United prevailing 2-1 this time in Shields. Sunderland visited St James' Park for a match in which all the proceeds went to the war fund with the Black Cats running out 3-1 winners. United and Boro then played out a 3-3 draw in another war fund match.

United also entered a squad of youngsters, named the Newcastle Swifts, into the Newcastle and District United League for clubs within a 10-mile radius of the Newcastle Central Post Office. The young side did well, finishing 3rd out of 18 teams.

After two and a half years in the wilderness, Newcastle United officials started to resurrect the club as the Armistice was signed and the Great War came to an end in November 1918. To celebrate peace the Northern Victory league was created as part a series of "Victory" competitions inaugurated around the country. January 1919 saw the fixtures kick off with United facing Hartlepool at St James' Park. The Magpies struggled to field a full strength XI as many of the team had not yet returned home.

Pre-war regulars Jimmy Lawrence, Bill McCracken, and Frank Hudspeth were accompanied by a series of



young local talents. Newcastle finished fifth from eight as Middlesbrough were crowned champions.

Newcastle United unveiled a Roll of Honour memorial bronze plaque to commemorate those players, officials, and staff who served and lost their lives in the Great War while with the club. The plaque is currently situated in the Club Museum after residing in a dusty corner of St James' Park for many years.

Five players are recorded as being killed during action. They were Tommy Goodwill, Dan Dunglison, George Rivers, Richard, McGough, and Thomas Cairns. Ex-United players James Fleming, Tom Hughes, Tom Rowlandson, and Donald Bell also lost their lives. Several players returned with injuries that ended their playing careers.

Stan Hardy was badly gassed while James Esther was wounded.

Several celebrated names served their country during World War One, especially in the

local Northumberland Fusiliers and Durham Light Infantry. Frank Hudspeth was in the Royal Navy, John King in the Scottish Rifles, and Alex Ramsay in the Machine Gun Corps. The legendary Colin Veitch rose to the rank of Second Lieutenant and served in France.

A number of players were awarded medals for bravery during the conflict; Tom Rowlandson received a Military Cross while James Esther and Sandy Higgins both received Military Medals. Ex-United inside-forward Jack Thomas was captured at Ypres. He escaped and was later attached to the Intelligence Corps as an undercover agent in Europe, winning the Meritorious Service Medal.

Special mention must be reserved for Donald Bell. He was a reserve full back at United in 1911 and 1912. As Second Lieutenant, Bell of the Green Howards became a national hero. During the Battle of the Somme, Bell's company came under heavy fire and he led a head-on charge on a German machine gun post, killing several of the enemy in the process. Not long after, he was killed in similar circumstances at Contalmaison Village. Bell was awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery and a memorial in France stands to his honour.

After the war United had to put in place a complete rebuilding strategy both on and off the pitch. A new side was needed, and a mixture of pre-war veterans, local talent, and big-name signings was put together with a view to the Black & Whites developing a side capable of recapturing their pre-War status as the Kings of England. ☐

