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England Expects

A History of the England Football Team

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Published by Aurum Press

Extract

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Introduction

'THE LAND OF HOPE AND GLORY'

THE COMING BATTLE had been expected for weeks; but the scheming, the relentless plotting, the attention to detail went on until just minutes before first blood was finally drawn. Surveying his fleet from the poop deck of HMS *Victory*, Admiral Lord Nelson contemplated his final plans before going into battle in this foreign place many miles from home. His men needed a message, he decided, a rallying call, a few words of inspiration before they faced death or glory. And so the most famous battle cry in history went out to his fleet of twenty-seven ships waiting in the Bay of Trafalgar: 'England expects that every man will do his duty'.

Like Hastings and Agincourt, Trafalgar would become a defining moment in our nation's history, and even two centuries on Nelson's order still carries huge resonance. The admiral had no need to expand his few words as each of his men had an intuitive grasp of what England expected: that no matter how insurmountable the odds, they were to win – or at least die trying. They understood too what their 'duty' encompassed, not just as combatants, but as Englishmen as well: honour, loyalty, respect, obedience, bloody-mindedness, pride, dignity and a sense of fair play. Nelson's call was also a reminder of what was at stake on the eve of battle, as if it were these unspoken values that were being defended. Indeed the words have hummed in England's consciousness ever since.

Now that massive conflagrations on which the very future of our nation depends seem – mercifully – to be part of our past, we look to our sportsmen to bring these same qualities onto the field of play. It is common and even clichéd to use battlefield analogies for sport, but in looking at what Trafalgar meant and means I think that it is unusually apposite. Like so much of this country's history it was about pluck and punching above the nation's weight, and the effects of the victory also left a huge psychological imprint on our national consciousness. Trafalgar marked the onset of a century of unchallenged naval

hegemony and another fifty years of empire. At one stage England ruled one-third of the planet's land mass and throughout the nineteenth century was the world's cultural and scientific heartbeat. The British empire is now part of our past, but in many ways we have struggled to get over no longer leading the world. Today this heritage manifests itself in a number of outwardly eccentric ways, but never is it more apparent than in the way in which we vest colossal – and colossally unfair – hopes in our sportsmen and women. If England could dominate the globe politically and culturally back then, why not in sport – and more particularly, football – today?

Perhaps more than any other nation on earth, the England football team shoulders the insatiable hopes, dreams and delusions of its people. Whether we have Michael Owen or Michael Ricketts leading the attack and regardless of whether we're playing Argentina or Andorra, deep down we still believe that it is our right to come out on top. As well as having an entire national mood hinging on their every success or failure, our footballers also have to contend with a country of self-appointed experts, their every touch, positional nuance and decision scrutinised by dozens of TV camera angles and millions of eyes. Football is our passion and our lifeblood. Our obsession with it merely heightens the pressure, the inexorable sense of expectation. 'The point about football in Britain,' declared Arthur Hopcraft in the introduction to his 1968 exposition of the domestic game, *The Football Man*, 'is that it is not just a sport people take to, like cricket or tennis . . . It is built into the urban psyche, as much a common experience to our children as are uncles and school. It is not a phenomenon; it is an everyday matter.' Arguably the fervour of the 1960s has been surpassed in the twenty-first century's media era: had Hopcraft been alive today he might have mused that we now know our football better than we do our families.

Of course, the fate of the nation does not rest with England's footballers, but governments have stood and fallen on the back of the national team's showing and men have been made and broken by its success and failure. When, almost with a degree of inevitability, England fall at international tournaments, it is seen as symbolic of a pervading amateurishness, and national weakness and decline. No wonder the frustration and intolerable pressure facing a succession of England managers have led them to dub their job the 'impossible' one.

Fair play, decency and respect are purportedly the hallmarks of Englishness, an Englishman's 'duty' if you like, and this is also reflected in the expectations we hold for our footballers, another layer of impossibility with which they have to deal. Most obviously it is the 'duty' of England's footballers to win, but we also expect them to do so in a manner that is stylish and fair, which can afford dignity to us as a nation. England expects more than the cynicism and cheating that have characterised successive Italian or Argentine teams, or even the shabby personal affairs of its recent manager, Sven-Göran Eriksson. Perhaps more than losing, not fulfilling this lofty sense of duty is the worst crime a footballer can commit against Queen and country. From the belief that professionals were a corrupting influence in the game's early days, via the 1938 Nazi salute in Berlin, the Revie affair and David Beckham's sending-off in St Etienne, the hysterical reaction that has met those who have failed in this onerous responsibility illustrates the depth and character of England's expectation.

Yet we have much to be proud of. We are football's founding nation (which may itself be part of the problem), and the game probably represents this country's greatest cultural export. English football is, and has always has been, revered the world over – even in countries who we feel have surpassed us. We have given birth to and been represented by great players in almost every generation, from Steve Bloomer to David Beckham and Tommy Lawton to Frank Lampard. We have won the World Cup, once, a feat only bettered in the modern era by Germany, Brazil and Argentina, equal to the achievements of Italy and France, and more than other footballing powers, such as Spain and the Netherlands have achieved. England has been led by some genuinely great men, individuals like Alf Ramsey and Bobby Robson whose names are inscribed in the game's lore. We have partaken in some of the most glorious examples of football at its most wondrous and dramatic: as losers, true – against Hungary in the 1950s, Brazil in 1970 and West Germany in 1970 and 1990; but also as winners: against the great Italy sides of the 1930s and 1940s, against Brazil in 1956, and Portugal and West Germany in 1966, against the Argentina of Maradona, and the Holland of Bergkamp, Overmars and Kluivert. Most unforgettably in my lifetime we beat Germany 5–1 in Germany. But in amongst the hysteria and breast-beating that follows defeat this all tends to be pushed to the

back, forgotten. It is perhaps symptomatic of this perpetual state of national angst and unwillingness to celebrate our greatness that it has taken 134 years of England internationals for this book to be written.

While the dreams of fans will always be of victory, in the cold light of day many in this country are actually content to see their heroes give it their all. Maybe that's what sets English football apart. In Italy, for example, stars returning home after World Cup failure are ritually showered with rotten fruit, and sometimes more overt violence. In England we celebrate defeat so long as it has been achieved in a gutsy enough manner. Witness the heroes' welcome received by Bobby Robson's England side after Italia '90, 'celebrations' more prominent than those that greeted Ramsey's World Cup winners twenty-four years earlier. Maybe, expectation is the wrong word to use after all. True, we're disappointed year after year by the relative failure of our national side, but is it the initial sense of expectation that drives this emotion? Personally I don't think so. Like football fans for clubs and countries across the planet we are driven not by expectation, but by that one thing that inspires amongst all of us our passion and unrequited love for this great game: hope.

James Corbett
London
March 2006

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MEN OF DESTINY

FULHAM BROADWAY hums with the noise of expectation. As people race to their homes or seek sanctuary in the pubs and bars of this cosmopolitan bit of London, the common chatter in the air is of diamond formations, Wayne Rooney and Michael Owen, combinations of results that will ensure English qualification for the following summer's European Championships in Portugal, and Turkish fans with murder on their minds. I'm late, but I'm not the only one. Dodging a path through tourists, non-believers and those simply oblivious to the rising exodus, I hear the slightly desperate voice of a small boy, bedecked in a baseball cap with a St George's Cross on its front.

'Come on Mum,' he implores of his all too carefree parent. 'We're going to miss the start.'

Finally, I reach the Jolly Maltster, a pub whose crapness, for this evening at least, is shrouded in the magnificence of the largest television screen in SW6. Barely have I muscled through to the bar, passed drinks over heads and put my pound in the correct score sweep (I plump for a 0–0 draw, disloyally my Belgian friend goes for a Turkey victory, everyone else goes for an England win) than the teams are coming out. A cacophony of Istanbul noise is beamed by satellite all over England, temporarily overcoming the voices of the commentators and bringing home to millions the size of the task facing our nation's footballers. This won't be a night for the faint at heart.

The players line up, the national anthems are played, England's first. In Istanbul a chorus of boos drowns out every note of music, although some of the players still mouth the words; in Fulham, the pub briefly quietens to a hush, around me faces contorted with hope, fear, pride, anticipation. This is England in the early twenty-first century; this is how many of us watch our country. No national

stadium, often no hope of getting tickets, not even allowed to visit 'dangerous' Turkey, the pub with its big screen, standing area and clientele of the fanatical and hopeful has become a latter day theatre of dreams. What makes us indistinct from previous generations is the light in our hearts that never goes out. England expects.

Football has come a long way, but in many ways it has come no distance at all. It was in another pub – the Freemasons' Tavern, near Lincolns Inn, two-and-a-half miles down the road – almost exactly 140 years earlier, on 26 October 1863, where it all began. This was the London of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, of Victorian civility and middle-class prosperity, and street urchins and dire poverty. It was the centre of a globe on which Britain was the predominant power, the heart of modern society, the birthplace of a new world order based on principles of democracy, civility and muscular Christianity. Leading the charge were what we would today recognise as 'mid-Victorians': reformers, liberals, men of education, or sometimes just organisation. It was the decade when Dr Barnardo was opening his first children's home and Florence Nightingale creating the modern hospital; railways were being burrowed underneath London for the first time and across the nation, wherever there was a cause, be it religion, science, education or even sport, the reformers would dabble, creating many of the great institutions we know today.

Imbued with this sort of reformist zeal, twenty or so men had assembled that autumn night in the Freemasons' Tavern. The meeting had been convened by Ebenezer Cobb Morley (1831–1924), a Temple-based solicitor and renaissance man. His interests were many, but most notably orientated towards sport: he was a rower of some note (later participating in the Grand Challenge Cup at Henley); heavily involved in the organisation of athletics; the founder of a gymnasium near his home in Barnes; and with a keen interest in hunting. But his great love was football. He had been born in Hull, but lived in Barnes from 1858, and after playing football on its green had formed the Barnes club in 1862.

Football in England had a long history; and beyond its waters longer still. Homer describes in the *Odyssey* how when Odysseus gets shipwrecked he is washed up on a beach where a 'princess and her retinues threw their veils to the wind, struck up a game of ball'. The Chinese of the Han Dynasty (202BC–AD220) called it 'tsu chu', the Romans 'harpastum' and the Greeks 'episkyros'. In England the first

recorded reference came in 1174 when William Fitz Stephen wrote: 'After dinner all the youth of the City goes out into the fields for the very popular game of ball, the elders and the men of wealth coming on horseback to view the contests of their juniors, arousing in them a stirring of natural heat by viewing so much activity and by participation in the joys of unrestrained youth.'[1] Variations of the game were played throughout the Middle Ages – often tied to feast days and religious ceremonies – which differed in their methods, rules and attendant levels of violence. It was usually regarded as the sport of the common man, and its participants frequently brushed with the stern face of authority. In 1314, Edward II, preparing to fight the Scots, ordered his men to concentrate on archery practice, not football; a century later, in 1457, James II of Scotland banned football (and golf) altogether; and a further century down the line Elizabeth I proclaimed 'no foteball play to be used or suffered within the city of London'.* Even as recently as 1801 Joseph Strutt had written in *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*: 'When the exercise becomes exceedingly violent, the players kick each other without the least ceremony. The game was formerly much in vogue among the common people, though of late years it seems to have fallen into disrepute and is all but little practiced.'[2] The conclusions drawn then and before were inescapable: football was rough, tough, unruly and frequently disreputable. It was the sport of the mob, and, in an increasingly civilised society, was seemingly dying.

From its early nineteenth-century deathbed the sport made a remarkable recovery. The revival began on the playing fields of England's public schools three decades after the publication of Strutt's tome. Like football, public schools of this era were distinctly removed from the institutions we know today. Conditions were frequently abysmal, education second rate, brutality rife. Charles Dickens was just one who was contemptuous of the whole shebang, satirising their squalid state in his 1839 novel *Nicholas Nickleby*. Teachers, he wrote, were 'ignorant, sordid, brutal men, to whom few considerate persons would have entrusted the board and lodging of a horse or a dog; they formed the worthy cornerstone of a structure, which, for absurdity and a magnificent high-minded *laissez aller*

*Nevertheless, recent research has since uncovered evidence that her father, Henry VIII, himself played football.

neglect, has rarely been exceeded in the world'. Little wonder then that Charterhouse was down to just ninety-nine pupils in 1835 and Harrow sixty-nine nine years later. Taking their cue – in part at least – from the moral furore whipped up by Dickens, the public schools undertook a hasty fight back. Visionary headmasters revolutionised the institutions, chastening pupils, improving their standards, instigating greater academic rigour, ensuring religious principles underpinned every boy's education and encouraging sport as a means of instilling discipline and order in their charges. Despite its reputation as the sport of the commoner, the game had long been played in the schools (in Eton, for example, since 1747) albeit without formalised rules. Instead, the game had evolved year by year, with each institution employing its own loose code.* As part of their reformist drive headmasters began to formalise the laws – on a school-by-school basis – as football became all but part of the curriculum. By the 1850s, graduates of these institutions were moving on to university and professional life but struggling to agree on a uniform code when playing old boys of rival institutions. A 250-word set of rules was agreed on at Cambridge University in 1862, but beyond its environs there was no uniformity, no central body to govern the game and provide an organisational structure, until Ebenezer Morley stepped into the void.

Morley himself had not been a public-school man, so was not inherently favourable to one variation of football or another. Yet at Barnes, the debates and disputes about the way in which the game should be played were persistent and Morley sought to bring an end to the squabbling. He led the way with an exchange of letters in the leading sports journal of the day, *Bell's Life,* suggesting that football should have a single set of rules following in the tradition of Cambridge. The correspondence eventually led to the meeting at the Freemasons' Tavern, which had been convened 'for the purpose of forming an association with the object of establishing a definite code of rules for the regulation of the game'. Present were representatives from eleven clubs (Barnes, the War Office Club, Crusaders, Forest of Leytonstone, Kilburn No Names, Crystal Palace, Blackheath, Kensington School, Percival House, Surbiton and Blackheath

* Rugby had perhaps the most famous tradition, after one of its pupils, William Webb-Ellis, picked up the ball and ran in 1823.

School), but just one public school (Charterhouse), the rest skulking suspiciously on the sidelines. Together they formed the Football Association and, in three further meetings over the following six weeks, formulated rules for the new organisation and drafted – finally – a unitary set of laws for the game. Only on the latter was there major disagreement, over the issue of 'hacking' ('I think if you do away with it,' argued Mr Campbell of Blackheath School, 'you will do away with all the courage and pluck of the game, and I will be bound to bring over a lot of Frenchmen who would beat you with a week's practice . . .'), which was outlawed by a vote of thirteen to four at the Football Association's sixth meeting in December. Sullenly, its key proponent Blackheath withdrew its membership (eight years later, in 1871, they would be one of the main forces behind the creation of the Rugby Football Union). That same month, John Lillywhite of Seymour Street in Euston was given the sole rights to issue and sell the FA law book, which appeared in a pocket-sized version costing a shilling, and in a larger 'roller' form for clubrooms, priced 1s 6d. Then, on Saturday, 19 December 1863, came the first representative match between Morley's Barnes and Richmond, on Barnes Green. 'Very little difficulty was experienced on either side in playing the new rules,' reported *The Field*, 'and the game was characterised by great good temper, the rules being so simple and easy of observance that it was difficult for disputes to arise.' The first proper match under association rules ended 0–0, yet from such humble, even dull, origins the first breath of the game as we recognise it had been drawn.

The early years of the FA were spent refining the laws of the game (any player could handle the ball until 1866; goalkeepers were interchangeable until 1871, and so on) and spreading the gospel of conformity. Consisting as they did of a few committed followers who merely preached to other enthusiasts, the missionary zeal with which they pursued their cause was hardly relentless. Charles Alcock, who had founded the Forest Club near Epping Forest (from 1864 known as Wanderers), later wrote: 'The work was necessarily slow, and for several years the history of the association was singularly uneventful.' Yet he, and other disciples, could see that their quest was not wholly fruitless: 'By degrees, though, the progress of absorption took effect,' he wrote, 'and as year by year the influence of the association extended, there was a corresponding willingness among those who had before adhered to their own particular variation of the

game to recognise the importance, if not necessity, of a uniform set of rules.'[3]

Alcock was to be the key influence in elevating association football from the pursuit of the few to the obsession of the masses. 'Like a thread of gold his career runs through the weaving of the story of "Soccer",' eulogised one early football historian. 'And his tall and dignified form strides the river of the game from its source.'[4] Born in Sunderland in 1842 and educated at Harrow, after helping found Wanderers he served as their captain and was asked to join the FA's committee in 1866. Four years later he was appointed Honorary Secretary, also finding time to hold down a similar position at Surrey County Cricket Club. From the outset Alcock sought to make his mark, introducing an agenda that even in these early days was to revolutionise the game and have an impact far beyond his own lifetime. As the legendary *Times* correspondent Geoffrey Green would write: 'It was he above all others who gave football the first real impetus that sent it rolling over hill and dale, through town and country and finally across seven seas.'[5] At Harrow, Alcock had played in inter-house 'sudden death' competitions and remembered vividly the thrill of these schoolboy encounters. Among his colleagues at the FA and *The Sportsman* newspaper (for which Alcock was a regular contributor), he floated the idea of initiating a knock-out competition along similar lines and found it met with enthusiastic approval. The FA swiftly agreed to his proposal and on 20 July 1871 put out the announcement: 'That it is desirable that a Challenge Cup should be established in connection with the Association for which all clubs belonging to the Association should be invited to compete.' Thus, in a single short sentence, the FA Cup was born.

Standing just eighteen inches high in its original form, the FA Cup dominates the early history of football.* In its first year only fifteen of the FA's fifty members entered, almost all London-based, and Alcock himself captained Wanderers to a 1–0 victory over Royal Engineers in the final. Although the first seven finals would each see either Alcock's men or Royal Engineers emerge with their name inscribed across its

* It was stolen in 1895 and never recovered. The second trophy was presented to Lord Kinnaird to commemorate his twenty-first year as FA President in 1911; the third trophy was replaced with an exact replica in 1992 – the cup that we know today.

base, with every passing year the competition – the *only* competition – increased in strength: its number of entrants (some of whom had initially been put off through fear of it leading to an 'unhealthy rivalry' or worse still 'bitterness') rose exponentially, the level of interest it attracted – while not quite that of a national obsession – certainly moved football on from being the leisure pursuit of a few former public schoolboys to become a sport which attracted national attention and participation.

For most men, creating the FA Cup then captaining your side to victory in the inaugural final would be the achievements of a lifetime, but Alcock was no ordinary mortal. Already his mind had been filled with ideas of international football between England and Scotland or, in the absence of a Scottish equivalent of the FA (Queen's Park were the one team of any repute north of Hadrian's Wall), a representative match between the players of the two countries. On 3 November 1870 he had written to the *Glasgow Herald* announcing that a game between England and Scotland – 'the best elevens at their disposal' – would take place in London in sixteen days' time, adding: 'In Scotland, once essentially the land of football, there still should be a spark left of the old fire . . .' Scottish players were invited to send applications to Alcock's friend and fellow FA Committee member, Lord Kinnaird. But when the game was played at Kennington Oval – Alcock in the England line-up, Kinnaird in Scotland's – it turned out to be a humdrum affair, with the English winning 1–0. Subsequent matches the following February (1–1), November (2–1) and in February 1872 (1–0) failed to arouse widespread enthusiasm. Alcock concluded that matters as they existed simply would not do. The problem, as he saw it, was that there were no Scottish players prepared to make the onerous journey south and a lack of ready recruits in the capital. As he later put it: 'The eleven which represented Scotland was, in great measure, composed of players merely of Scottish extraction and, in some cases, perhaps of even less substantial qualifications.'[6] To counter such difficulties he turned his missionary zeal northwards.

These were football's pioneer days. The preoccupation still lay with spreading the word, reaching the masses and attaining uniformity. If something was absent – like the FA Cup – you invented it; if you sought to internationalise the code, you sent away a delegation and hoped that they could wow the locals. On 3 October 1872 the FA put

out another missive: 'In order to further the interests of the Association in Scotland, it has been decided that during the current season, a team should be sent to Glasgow to play a match v Scotland.' The aims of the English were twofold: to 'teach' the Scots how to play the association game and to broaden its Caledonian appeal. Nevertheless, their plans were not without controversy; indeed those who followed rugby rules – the dominant strain of football in Scotland – were furious at the notion of the English challenging their hegemony. 'The very suggestion of such a contest under association rules was quite enough to rouse the ire of the rugby union players north of the Tweed,' Alcock remembered. 'The captains of the Scotch rugby clubs were determined to not have their rights usurped.'[7] A furious volley of correspondence was fired off to the *Scotsman*, but to little avail. On Saturday, 30 November 1872 at the West of Scotland Cricket Ground in Partick, players from Scotland and England lined up for the first ever international match.

After three days of heavy rain and a morning of light drizzle, the clouds had opened up to let in bursts of late autumnal sunshine to beam down delicately on west Glasgow. The pitch was a little greasy but otherwise considered to be in 'good order'; the admission fee, as it had been for the first FA Cup final, was a shilling – a steep price given the average industrial wage was just 20s per week. Still, it didn't put people off and estimates put the attendance at between 2000 and 4000 (though reported receipts of £109 suggest a figure somewhere in between). Whatever the precise figure, it was universally acknowledged that the game was played, in the words of the *North Daily Mail* correspondent, 'in the presence of the largest assemblage seen at any football match in Scotland . . . including a good number of ladies'.

The England team was drawn from eight different clubs, including four from the ranks of Oxford University, but Alcock himself was absent from his country's line-up. Despite playing on home soil, Scotland's old problem of getting players of sufficient quality resurfaced. Lord Kinnaird and Lt. Renny-Tailyour, the Scots' two most prominent English-based players, had each been unable to make the journey and the hosts were also apparently blighted by a lack of preparation, having had 'the greatest difficulty in performing at practice before the event'. But, in selecting six men from Queen's Park, they stumbled upon the secret of success that was for some years to elude their English counterparts – teamwork.