

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL FROM WORLD WAR ONE

The story of women's football in England



EARLY YEARS

Although the game of football has been played for centuries – for example, Shakespeare mentions it in two of his plays: *The Comedy of Errors* (1594) and *King Lear* (1608) – you might think that women have only been playing over the last generation or so. In fact, their participation dates back much further than you might imagine. It is claimed that Mary Queen of Scots herself owned the oldest football in existence. Sir Philip Sidney's poem *A Dialogue Between Two Shepherds*, written in 1580, refers to women playing: 'A tyme there is for all, my mother often sayes, When she, with skirts tuckt very hy, with girles at football playes.'

Football remained a popular pastime, but it took another 300 years for the game to be codified into a standard set of rules by the newly formed Football Association in 1863. These rules were partly intended to stop on-pitch violence and make it more acceptable for women to play.

The first recorded women's football match was on 7 May 1881, when a supposed 'Scotland' women's team played 'England' at Easter Road, Edinburgh. In actual fact the birthplace and therefore nationalities of the players has been called into question, and it's believed at least some of the players were from the theatre community 'acting' out these team roles.

The two teams played several matches, but two – in Glasgow and Manchester – were abandoned due to pitch invasions. In Glasgow, the players had to escape in a horse-drawn bus! In the first match – which wasn't abandoned – Lily St Clair netted the first goal in front of a crowd of about 2,000 and in doing so became the first recorded female goal scorer in the history of the game. The team representing Scotland were 2-0 winners.



Image courtesy of the National Football Museum

As the 1890s unfolded, so women's club football gained momentum. Local clubs competed against each other in matches and competitions. Madam Kenney's Famous Edinburgh Team beat Grimsby Town Ladies 1-0 on 23 April 1887 at the Thornes football field in Wakefield. Some teams were formed by women working in factories. On 2 February 1899, a six-a-side game saw Greener's Violets win by 8-2 over Greener's Cutters. Both teams worked at the same glassworks in Sunderland. There are also records of clubs at this time in Grimsby and Preston.

In London, the British Ladies' Football Club (BLFC) was formed in 1895 by Alfred Hewitt Smith, with Nettie J. Honeyball (thought to be a pseudonym) as captain. President of the BLFC was Lady Florence Dixie, a renowned Scottish writer, adventurer, war correspondent and feminist. Dixie insisted players wore practical clothes, including bloomers, shinpads and proper boots, so they would be free to run around.

The BLFC staged a North v. South of The Thames clash on 23 March 1895. 10,000+ paying spectators crammed into the Crouch End Athletic ground to watch the 60-minute match. The North won 7-1, but the profile and attendance of the game made a wider point. BLFC attracted attention to the growing women's rights movement. Campaigns such as Votes for Women (1897) and the formation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and in 1903, The Women's Social and Political Union highlighted women's growing calls for emancipation. The calls were getting ever louder. Ultimately, they were irresistible.

1902 Ban Interpreted by Portsmouth FC Directors: Fratton Park has been the home of Portsmouth Football Club since 1899 and was thus under the jurisdiction of the English FA. Shortly after the game the Portsmouth Football Club had to write to the Portsmouth FA to explain their decision. On Friday 3 April, 1914 the Portsmouth Evening News reported:

At a meeting of the Portsmouth F.A. Council, presided over by Mr. H. R. Sharp, last night, a letter was read from the Portsmouth Football Club explaining why they refused to grant the use of Fratton Park for the match between two ladies' teams in aid of the Naval Disasters Fund. The letter pointed out that there would have been no objection to lending the ground but for the fact that the applicant, under a decision of the P. F. A. (Portsmouth Football Association), was not eligible to take part in the football, and surprise was expressed that the match was afterwards played at Pitt Street.

It was pointed out in the course of discussion that the Pitt Street ground was not under the jurisdiction of the P. F. A., and it was generally agreed that the Portsmouth Club took the only course open to them under

the circumstances. To prevent a repetition of a similar occurrence it was decided to refer the matter so far as the application and the granting of the Pitt Street ground to the Hants Association.

Portsmouth FC are making it quite clear that they have not allowed the fundraising games to take place because they included a ladies match. It is worth noting that this was 7 years before the infamous 1921 ban. This was not the end of the matter because the very next day a very indignant response was received from the Royal Yacht Alexandra and was reproduced in the Portsmouth Evening News:

Mr. R. Naismith, of the Royal Yacht Alexandra, writes: – *“In your report under World of Sport, re the ladies football match at Pitt Street, you state at a meeting of the Portsmouth Football Association that a letter was received from the Portsmouth Football Club stating that the reason of objection to lending ground was that the applicant was not eligible to take part in football. As the application came from the officers and men of the Royal yacht Alexandra, and as no one there is under suspension from playing football, it came as a great surprise to read the same. There was no alternative but to play the match at Pitt Street. I think that the directors have been misinformed.”*

It is worth noting that it is the staff of the ‘Royal’ Yacht, fundraising for naval disasters in the home of the navy who are being denied the use of a football ground, merely because of the gender of two of the teams. Rather than cancel the women’s game they moved the fixture. I think that they can be commended for this.

1902 English FA Ban - Monday 25 August 1902 FA Annual Meeting -This was the last meeting of the FA at 61, Chancery Lane. Item 23 on their agenda was: 23- It was decided to instruct affiliated Associations to refuse permission for its players to play against lady football teams.

The influential Sporting Life newspaper had this to say about the ban:

“Then, as a tit-bit to close these remarks, comes the proposal of Mr Albert, of the Kent F.A. that affiliated associations shall not allow their players to play against the so-called team of “Lady Footballers,” which is about to tour the Southern Counties. Rival teams of girls may kick a football about if they please, but it is bringing the game into ridicule for men to seriously arrange matches with women. Mr. Albert’s resolution must, of course, be understood to imply that he is aware that these “matches” between the sexes are being arranged. The good sense of clubs should prevent them from doing this, and it is a matter for regret that it should be necessary to deal with the matter officially.”

A later report in the Tottenham and Edmonton Weekly Herald had this to say in a short article entitled: “Lady Footballers at Broomfield.”

“Their costumes, some in black dresses and white aprons and caps, others in grey, blended nicely, and when the game was in full swing the effect was very pretty. “Such Females Degrade Their Sex”

1902 Ban Still in Place in 1921... “Lady Footballers”

I was delighted to see that the Football Association, at the last meeting, passed a resolution declaring that no association could give permission to men to play against teams of “ladies.” I had hoped that we had heard the last of the “lady” footballer. I do hope there is no fear of their bobbing up serenely once again, after the terrible experiences of the “ladies’ who tried to make this experiment pay some years ago. The venture was a financial failure, and the “ladies” had a bad time. They richly deserved to do, but I was glad the public refused to support them. I am glad to see that the F.A. had taken a firm stand, in these times of lady wrestlers, fencers, punch-ballers and Indian Club Swingers.

These exercises are good in their places, in private gymnasiums and the home, but I do not approve of public exhibitions by “ladies.” Such females degrade their sex, and true men do not regard them as worthy of the name of women.

Whilst the author of the above article uses strong language, the tone does generally reflect contemporary views published in the press. It is worth noting that this ban was still in place during WWI when women’s

football began to increase. The matter was put to the three-man emergency committee of the FA during the war, and they referred the issue to a time when the full committee was reconstituted i.e. they 'parked' the issue.

Although the wording of the ban specifically references mixed games, the prevailing view towards women on the football pitch was of such a farcical nature that the ban really encompassed all women's football games.

WWI – The Portsmouth Trailblazers and The Dagenham Invincibles: The game above took place on Wednesday 6 September at the North End Recreation Ground in Portsmouth. The Crowd was later reported as 30,000. This is almost as silly as the 53,000 reported for the St Helens game against the Dick Kerr Ladies on 27 December 1920. The game was one feature of a huge Portsmouth Gala day to raise funds for 'Wounded Heroes.' Photographer (and women's football champion) Stephen Cribb reported that:

"Several of the players warded the ball off with their hands instead of their heads, but many of them kicked and dribbled in true professional style."

The Portsmouth Ladies continued playing and fundraising until 1919. I highly recommend the article: "Gender, Photography and Women's Football in England: The Portsmouth Ladies FC, 1916-1918 by Dr Alexander Jackson. I would also recommend the work of the Portsmouth History Society.

The astonishing rise of women's football during the 1917-1918 war season owes an awful lot to the pioneering Portsmouth Ladies. During the latter part of WWI the Dagenham Invincibles became the 'poster girls' of women's football, completing two whole undefeated seasons. They were featured regularly in the Daily Mirror and Pathe News clips in their iconic quartered blue kit. They were following the legacy of the trailblazing Portsmouth Ladies. If we include the 1918-1919 'war season' then I estimate there were around 1,000 high profile women's football matches, raising a fortune for much needed charity. The 29 games played by the Dick Kerr Ladies were a part of this, as were the over 270 recorded games in the northeast of England.

There is a strong argument that the Portsmouth Ladies FC were the pioneering trailblazers of 'modern' women's football. In my view, Portsmouth also hosted the real 'modern' game of women's football – and it was in 1914, and it was banned! Article © of Steve Bolton

1919 A Legend is born in Essex.

Saturday 26 April 1919 was a day for wretched weather in Chelmsford. 500 spectators had gathered at 3pm on the field of Hoffmann's Athletics Club to watch two football matches in driving rain and gale force conditions. Two teams, one female and one male, had journeyed the 25 miles from Dagenham in Essex to Chelmsford in Essex, northeast of London. The teams were from the Sterling Telephone and Electrical Company, based in Dagenham and they were playing the mighty Hoffmann's. Hoffmann's manufactured ball bearings and was one of the big four companies in Chelmsford, bigger at the time than Marconi. The women's game was due to start at 3pm and would be followed by the men's game at 4pm. This was the last game of the 1918-1919 'war season' and it was the women's game which was the important game. This was game number 36 for the Sterling Ladies FC and prior to this game they had drawn two and won the rest, over two entire seasons.

Would the Sterling Ladies FC be able to hang up their boots in their last ever game and go down in history undefeated with this unique record?



Celebrated in Daily Mirror – Invincible History Makers

History records that M Reader knocked in their 200th and 201st goals for a hard fought 2 v 0 win against Hoffmann's. The men's game ended in a 2 v 2 draw. After the game a 'merry tea party' was held at Hick's on Duke Street, Chelmsford for everyone. The Eastern Counties Times newspaper recorded that:

"The curtain of the 1918-19 football season thus dropped in a very happy manner".

The famous Sterling Ladies FC finished their football careers and could proudly say for the rest of their lives:

"I was an invincible" Guy Burney – A Man Ahead of His Time

It is interesting to note that it is the women's match that is featured in the Daily Mirror and not the men's match. It is also very unusual to be able to find a photograph of the last ever game of one of the great women's football teams. However, the Sterling's were no ordinary team. This was not the first time that the Sterlings had featured in the media. In fact there is strong evidence that the 'blues' were THE national and international 'media darlings' of an astonishing 1,000+ women's games known to have been played in World War 1 seasons.

It is my intention in this series of articles to share the remarkable story of the men and women of the Sterling Factory in Dagenham. The Sterling Telephone and Electrical Co were a small family firm which grew to about 2,400 employees by the end of the War.

How were the Sterlings able to defeat?: Marconi Ladies, Vickers (Crayford and Dartford), Harrods Ladies, Woolwich Arsenal – 'The Rockets,' 'The Dreadnoughts,' 'Barker's Girls,' Burton Vowles (Stratford + City) Ladies FC., Sopwiths Ladies, Kynochs Ladies



Lenny Ann Jane Charlotte Selina Catherine
 Smith Beckwith Cant Adkins Key Durrant
 widow
 Phoebe Emma Lucy Catherine Jane George
 Potter Field Cottis Waters Chapman Walford.
 Mrs. Sarah Elizabeth Eliya Charlotte Charlotte
 Grey Bearman Naylor Woodard Eley Newman

Some of the Finishing Hands. June 1859.



Some contrasting kits and nifty footwork are on display in this short newsreel. The Topical Budget footage contains various shots - not necessarily in the right order - of a football match in Southend between the ladies' football teams of Kynoch Ltd, an explosives manufacturer based in Shell Haven Creek, Essex, and munitions manufacturer Vickers Sons & Maxim, who had factories in Crayford and Erith. The Mayor of Southend is on hand to kick off proceedings.

Handley Page Ladies – ‘The Aircraft Girls,’ Cubitts (Kings Cross) Ladies, Cairn Mills (Silvertown) Ladies, Midland Rail (Kentish Town) Ladies, Associated Equipment Co (Walthamstow) Ladies, Staines Projectile Co Ladies, London General Omnibus Co (Forest Gate) – ‘The Clippies,’ ‘The Greens,’ Great Eastern Railway (Romford Stores) Ladies, W + G Du Cros (Acton) Ladies, Brocks Laundry (Romford) Ladies, Hoffmann’s Ladies. Gnome (Walthamstow) Ladies*, Dagenham Dock Men (in fancy dress), RAF Sutton Farm (Hornchurch) Men (Arms tied behind backs).

*The Gnome game was one of several cancelled due to Spanish Flu.

It is an astonishing story of men and women combining together in a time of great need. It is also the story of an amazing man, Guy Burney, an extremely kind, talented, and forward-thinking man who started a small company in Dagenham and left a legacy which has hitherto not received the appreciation it deserves.

“Unbeaten Women Champions of the Country” – Reported in America: “They are all munition workers and put up a fast game.”

National newspaper the Daily Mirror was the great national printed media champion of women’s football during World War 1. The photograph above shows the Sterling’s star centre forward Maude Smith in action during their last game of the 1917-1918 season and 4-year-old mascot, Maisie Smith (no relation). The game was played at the FA affiliated ‘Gordon Club Ground’ which belonged to Isthmian League founder club, Ilford FC. The Sterlings thrashed the ‘clippies’ (bus conductors) of the London General Omnibus Garage (Forest Gate) by 11 goals to 0. The game was filmed by British Pathe and in the 39 second clip Mrs Burney can be seen kicking off for the start of the game. [To watch the film please click [HERE](#)]. Champion centre forward Maude Smith recorded her 38th goal of 103 team goals with a record of 21 games with 19 wins and 2 draws from their first full season. Mr Burney awarded each member of the winning team silver medals with a gold centre. One of these medals was auctioned in 2023 for £350. By this point the Sterlings were nationally and internationally famous. Their picture had regularly appeared in the English national newspapers all through the season. This game was featured in the Winnipeg Tribune in Canada with the headline: “Winnipeg Girls Should Follow English Maidens and Get Into Football Game.” Their team picture featured in the New York Herald with the byline:

“Women are furnishing much of the athletic entertainment in Great Britain these war times. This group is the Sterling Ladies Football Club, the unbeaten women champions of the country. They are all munition workers and put up a fast game.



“What Would Grandmama Have Said!!” “Sterling Footballers and Footballesses”

The photograph above (despite the ironic title) was a coup for the Sterlings. Society magazine ‘The Tatler’ printed this picture of the Sterlings in their iconic blue quartered kit early in their second 1918-1919 ‘war season’. This was not a normal topic for the magazine to cover. This gives rise to the question of just how a working-class women’s football team from rural Essex had reached such a level of influence in such a short time? The Sterlings started playing football in the very early 1916-1917 season. The earliest reference that I have been able to find was published in the Eastern Counties Times and Barking Recorder on Friday 4 May 1917 under the heading: “Sterling Footballers and Footballesses”. The game was played on Saturday 28 April. The paper reported:

“At Dagenham, on Saturday, several of the talented lady footballers connected with the Sterling Athletic Association (Sterling Telephone and Electric Co Ltd), participated in an interesting and hard-fought game. Machine Room v. Assembly Room: the latter winning by 1 – 0. Miss A Fairman netting. “Maude” was very conspicuous at centre-forward for the Machine Room who were not at full strength.”

The article goes on to describe a game played after the women’s game by the male members of Staff of the Sterling Factory. The Tool Room defeated The Staff by 2 v 1. There is a fascinating insight into football life at the Sterling factory showing that many well-known male footballers worked at the factory:

“The rival teams contained several players of note in days of yore: Benny Cartwright (Matlock Swifts and Leyton), Baxter (Millwall), Onested (Barking), being well known locally. Others famed in other parts of the country were: Moxom (Bolton Wanderers), Wilson (Salford), Bates (Manchester United), Lloyd (London Welsh). R. Rowe, an ex-league referee, was knight of the whistle.”

Sterling Ladies Cricket Team – Summer 1917 and 1918.

Conclusion: When war was declared on 4 August 1914 it was expected that the Football Association would follow the example set earlier by cricket authorities and cancel all matches. But, despite opposition, matches were played in the Football League throughout the 1914-1915 season and the FA Cup was held as normal.

For the remainder of the war, the Football League suspended its programme but allowed clubs to organise regional competitions.



Portsmouth Ladies FC – WW1 Pioneers

1917 Portsmouth Ladies FC 5 v 3 Woolwich Arsenal Men (Army Ordnance Dept)

The striking photograph above was taken during the game on Thursday 6 September 1917 at 'The Den', home of professional male side Millwall FC. This was not the first game to be played on a 'male' ground but the fact that it was a high-profile London ground was taken as evidence that the English Football Association had completely (if temporarily) relaxed their 1902 ban due to war conditions. This was one of a number of games Portsmouth played against male teams which was championed by the national Daily Mirror and helped to popularise the idea of women playing football as a patriotic idea to be supported. Whilst their games against women's opposition were competitive affairs the games against men would be contrived for the men to sportingly lose to conform to social expectations of the time.

THE GAME GROWS

During World War One, women increasingly took on traditionally male jobs, particularly and typically working in factories. Sporting activity within these often dark and dirty factories was encouraged to benefit health and wellbeing, as well as to help aid morale and productivity. Football was a natural outlet for this, and many factories developed their own teams. In 1917 the munitions factories gave birth to the Munitionettes' Cup, with Blyth Spartans Munitionettes beating Bolckow, Vaughan & Co 5-0 in the final.

By far the most famous and one of the most successful of the factory-based teams of the time was Dick, Kerr & Co. From 1917 right through to 1965 they played 800 games - winning 746! They also produced the country's best-ever goal scorer, Lily Parr, who we think scored around 900 goals during her 30-year career.

During and after the War, Dick, Kerr Ladies toured the country playing charity games to raise money for injured servicemen. Arguably, they were the first 'professional' women's side and players were paid 10 shillings (50p) to cover their expenses.



Much of the opposition to the continuance of professional football stemmed from the concern that many men preferred to play and watch football rather than join up. However, football was also seen as a useful recruiting tool.

Men's football teams were used as recruitment adverts and examples to fans. In December 1914, the 17th Battalion (which became known as the 'Footballer's Battalion') of the London-Middlesex Regiment was created purely to provide a home for amateur and professional footballers who wished to fight for their country.

Players from teams such as Liverpool, Tottenham Hotspur, and Brighton and Hove Albion soon joined the ranks of this unit.

Football was also a popular form of recreation for troops on both sides and could boost morale. On 1 July 1916, men of the East Surrey Regiment, encouraged by Captain 'Billie' Nevill even went over the top kicking footballs. This was probably intended as a distraction for nervous young soldiers but was widely reported as a demonstration of British pluck.

Many professional footballers served in the forces. Those killed in action included former Tottenham Hotspur player Walter Tull and Bradford Park Avenue's Donald Bell – the only professional footballer to be awarded the Victoria Cross.

The FA Cup Final of 1915 was dubbed the 'Khaki Cup Final' but also marked the last point when organised male football was played; as the sport and competition was effectively suspended afterwards for the duration of the war.

However, the suspension coincided with the emergence of a female workforce for munitions and other industrial sectors to fill the vacuum left by men. Women had been playing football before the war, but the sport had never gained much public acceptance or interest.

The relationship and camaraderie formed between women whilst working would develop into friendly and informal football matches.

Members of the public were missing the enjoyment provided by regular men's football and this dovetailed with the enjoyment women were taking from the opportunity to form teams within their factories.

By 1917 the Munitionette's Cup had been established and was won by Blyth Spartans and Bella Reay scored a hat-trick in the final during a 5-0 victory taking her to 130 goals for the season and the popularity of the sport did not diminish after the conclusion of the war.



Munitionette's Football Team from Newcastle.



Blyth Spartans Ladies, the football team that were never beaten



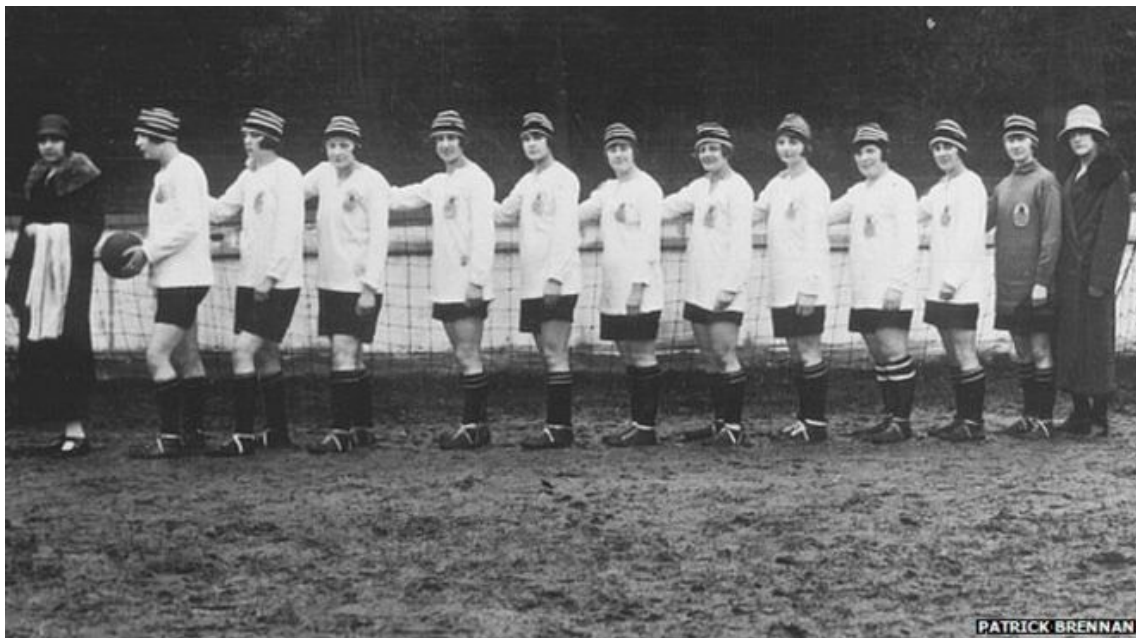
Bella Reay was an international star.

Arguably the biggest and most famous team of the period was Dick Kerr's Ladies from Preston which following their inauguration in 1917 their first match was attended by 10,000 spectators. On Boxing Day 1920, 54,000 were inside Goodison Park, Everton to watch them play with thousands being locked outside the ground.



At 6ft tall (1.83m) Lily Parr was remarkable in many ways. She scored more than 1,000 goals during her 31-year-playing career, according to the National Football Museum. Of those, 34 were in her first season when she was aged just 14.

Her team was exceptional too. The Dick Kerr Ladies were made up of 11 factory workers from Preston. They went on to become international celebrities and the biggest draw in world football. They remain the most successful women's team of all time, according to the museum.



At this stage, the popularity of women's football could well have seen it rise to the level and exposure of the men's game in today's society, but this was not to be. The return of soldiers from the forces was to have drastic consequences on female employment and their opportunity to play football. Many would lose their jobs in factories and other industries in order to make way for the returning men.



Dick Kerr's Ladies team unbeaten in the 1920-21 season.

As part of a wider movement to return these women back to household roles, the view of women's football began to change. No longer was it seen as beneficial for national morale or as helpful for women's health. Instead it became viewed as an unhelpful and unsuitable way for women to spend their time and potentially detrimental to their health.

This was compounded by the FA's decision to appeal to all football ground owners to support a ban prohibiting women playing matches at their premises. Some teams continued to play small games in front of reduced crowds, but most women's teams disbanded or drifted away.

In 1971 the FA finally lifted the ban on women's football. In the same year UEFA recommended the women's game should be taken under the control of the national associations in each country. This move signalled the start of a female football revival, not only in Britain but across Europe and the rest of the world.

The first official European Championship was held in Sweden in 1984 with the inaugural World Cup taking place in 1991. Fast forward to now and women's football is a global phenomenon. At the 2012 Olympic Final at Wembley Stadium between the USA and Japan, a record-breaking crowd of over 83,000 was in attendance.

The astounding fact is that only now, nearly 100 years later, are women attracting the crowds and attention experienced by their predecessors. These pioneering women not only managed to achieve phenomenal success and recognition, but they did it at a time when it would have seemed nigh on impossible.

They defied society, changed the mindset of a nation and took women's football to unprecedented new heights, all within a couple of years. And what of Lily Parr? Her achievements were finally recognised in 2002, when she became the first woman to be inducted into the Football Hall of Fame at the National Football Museum in Preston, 24 years after her death.



Vanquished: The Bolkow-Vaughan team from Middlesborough was beaten by the Spartans in the final.



Female munitions workers were encouraged to play sport, especially football, and many factories set up their own ladies teams and a women's football team from the Associated Equipment Company (AEC) Munitions Factory at Beckton, London.



The East India Company originally established gunpowder mills at Chilworth in 1625, on land leased from the lord of the manor of Chilworth. The Chilworth Gunpowder Company Ltd was founded there in 1885. During the First World War the Company fielded a women's football team.

By 1921 there were about 150 women's football clubs. Matches were popular spectator events, and some drew up to 45,000 fans. The future of the women's game looked bright.

Despite its growing popularity and the re-emergence of international matches after World War One, controversy was just around the corner. Many factories closed and women went back into domestic life or retrained in professions such as bus conductors and nurses. At the same time, some people questioned whether football was damaging women's health. Dr Mary Scharlieb of Harley Street for example described it as the "most unsuitable game, too much for a women's physical frame."



BANNED

On 5 December 1921, The FA met at its headquarters in London and announced a ban on the women's game from being played at the professional grounds and pitches of clubs affiliated to The FA, stating "the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged."

The ban meant the women's game was side-lined to being played in public parks for nearly 50 years.

Despite this, women were determined to keep playing football and around 30 teams from across England met in Liverpool on 10 December 1921 to formalise the English Ladies Football Association (ELFA). This aimed "to popularise the game among girls and to assist charity".

The following year saw the first and only ELFA Challenge Cup competition. Stoke Ladies lifted the trophy, beating Doncaster and Bentley Ladies 3-1 in the June 1922 final.

Dick Kerr Ladies – Latecomers to Women's Football



Dick Kerr Ladies at Herne Hill Velodrome in 1925 (Source: Lizzy Ashcroft Collection)

1,000 Games in World War One Seasons

When the Dick Kerr Ladies held their first game on Tuesday 25th December 1917, the footballers of the Northeast of England were about to hold their 115th game. Remarkably, the game was an international against a Northern Irish selection in Belfast. Women's football had established so much during WW1 that if we include the 1918-1919 'war season' then over 1,000 high profile games were played. A vast fortune was raised to support the war effort. The highly influential national newspaper the Daily Mirror championed all aspects of the national interest through its patriotic articles and highly evocative photograph pages. Although the bulk of women's football took place during the two 1917-1918 and 1918-1919 'war seasons' the newspaper championed one particular pioneering team from as early as September 1916 – the Portsmouth Ladies FC. After four early games starting in August 1916 the team was formally constituted in December 1916. Unusually, the bulk of the Portsmouth teams early matches were played against men's teams.

Though stymied by a lack of decent-sized facilities, women's football carried on throughout the '30s, '40s, '50s and most of the 1960s. Games were played at rugby venues and smaller grounds which couldn't house many fans. Though the women continued to play, they became increasingly overshadowed by the men's game. In 1947, Kent County Football Association suspended a referee because he was also working as manager of the Kent Ladies Football Club. It justified its decision saying that "women's football brings the game into disrepute".

But clubs continued to start up, a notable example is Manchester Corinthians Ladies FC founded in 1949. Percy Ashley, a scout for Bolton Wanderers, founded the club so his daughter Doris, a talented footballer, could play in a team. The Corinthians played at Fog Lane Park in Didsbury, a suburb south of the city. Players often had to clean themselves in the local duck pond after matches as there was no running water in the changing rooms. The team were very successful, winning many domestic trophies within their first two years. As there were very few local women's teams, Ashley set up a second team, The Nomads, in 1957 so they could play against the Corinthians in charity matches.

The Corinthians went on to win an unofficial European club championship in Germany in 1957. The team was accompanied by Manchester City's German goalkeeper, Bert Trautmann, who acted as their interpreter.

More overseas trips followed, including to Portugal/Madeira, The Netherlands, South America and the Caribbean, and Morocco. The team won more than 50 trophies and raised £275,000 for charity.



REVIVAL

As society began to change during the 1960s, women started to campaign more for their social rights. On 1 November 1969, representatives of 44 clubs attended the first meeting of the Women's Football Association (WFA) in London. Arthur Hobbs, a carpenter and amateur footballer, was the first Honorary Secretary of The WFA and Pat Dunn was its first Chair. In 1967, Hobbs had organised a women's tournament in Deal, Kent, with the support of local miners from Betteshanger Colliery. The Deal Tournament, played on the Colliery's playing fields, showcased and celebrated women's football. It was a pre-cursor to the Women's FA Cup, which would go on to be first played in 1971.

In 1972, Hobbs stepped down as Honorary Secretary due to ill health. He was succeeded by Patricia Gregory, who had been instrumental in setting up the WFA. Gregory founded and played for White Ribbon, a team in London who participated in the Deal Tournament. She went on to have a long career in football administration, serving as a member of the UEFA Women's Football Committee from 1980 – 1994.

The FA were coming under increasing pressure to lift the ban on women's football. In December 1969, the FA's Executive Committee recommended that what they termed 'ladies' football' should no longer be classified as unaffiliated. In the following month, at a meeting of the FA Council on 19 January 1970, The FA finally voted to rescind the controversial resolution of 1921 that had banned women's football for being "unsuitable".

But it took a lot more deliberations, crucially including a meeting of The FA's Rules Revision Committee in August, to prepare the way for an amendment to be made to the relevant FA rule. This couldn't be made until The FA's next Annual General Meeting, which was held at The Great Western Royal Hotel in Paddington on 24 June 1971. Women's football could now be played on FA-affiliated grounds and registered referees could officiate at women's matches.



In addition to official league matches, came the launch of a women's club knock-out competition, later to become The FA Women's Cup. In 1971 Southampton won the first final and they would go on to lift the trophy eight times in its first 11 years. In 1971, UEFA recommended that the women's game should be governed by national associations – then numbering 32 – across Europe. The FA made their announcement on recognising The Women's FA (WFA) on 29 February 1972.

In November of the same year – 1972 – the first official WFA England team travelled to Scotland for an international match in which England came from behind to win 3-2 with goals from Sylvia Gore, Lynda Hale and Jeannie Allott. That 2-0 defeat between two unofficial sides some 91 years earlier had finally been avenged. The match itself came exactly 100 years after the first recognised men's international, also played between Scotland and England. At this time opportunities for women to represent England in international competitions were still scarce. Between 1972 and 1978, there were only 25 international matches played.

Now the push was on to integrate women's football into the fabric of our national sport. That push continued to be led by the WFA. In 1981 they opened their own administrative office although the sport continued to be largely run through the dedication of volunteers. The WFA grew the women's game throughout the 1970s, '80s and early '90s.

The FA however was beginning to take a keener interest and in May 1984 the WFA was affiliated with the same status as County FAs. This opened the doors to more central FA support, but much more still needed to be done. That same year, 1984, saw England lose to Sweden – 4-3 on penalties – in the two-legged final of the first UEFA competition for national representative women's teams. This was the predecessor to the Women's EUROs.



The 1990s saw the first strategic plans to develop the women's game in England, together with the first 20 Centres of Excellence for girls and also, in 1998, the first full-time England women's coach, Hope Powell – later to be honoured with both an OBE and CBE.

1991 saw another key moment when the WFA launched a 24-club national league which the following year was expanded to three divisions of 10 teams (Premier, Division 1 North and Division 1 South). Further fundamental change happened two years later, in 1993, as the WFA voted to pass over its activities to The FA. It no longer had the financial resources to develop the game it had nurtured. The FA established a Women's Football Committee and with it the full-time post of Women's Football Co-ordinator.

The 1993/94 season also saw the WFA Cup brought under the control of The FA - 137 teams entered. A year later and the WFA's national league and league cup were also managed by The FA. This saw the birth of the Women's Premier League (FAWPL).

FIFA introduced the women's World Cup competition in 1991 and as the women's game started to grow globally, the decade culminated in the finals in the USA in 1999 that featured sold-out stadia and a 90,000 crowd at the final.



The game was gaining media attention by the day and more importantly, more participants. By 2002 in England, it had become the top participation team sport for women and girls. This FA target was achieved three years ahead of target. In the same year, Lily Parr of Dick, Kerr Ladies became the first woman inducted into the National Football Museum Hall of Fame. This was in part the game acknowledging its roots, but also building its future foundations.

These foundations were given a further boost in 2005 when England hosted the UEFA Women's EURO. Records for crowd attendance and TV audiences were smashed. England beat Finland 2-1 in front of a then European record crowd of 29,092 at the City of Manchester Stadium. Crucially, the talent pool was getting deeper - there were now England teams at various age groups and the senior team – the Lionesses – were beginning to show their talents on the world stage. The 2000s ended with the senior team winning the Cyprus Cup which was their first international trophy and later in the same year, reaching the final of UEFA Women's EURO 2009, albeit losing out to Germany who were the dominant force at the time. The U19s however won their UEFA Championship in Belarus.

As England's international teams were getting ever stronger, club football re-formed itself and 2011 saw the inception of The FA Women's Super League (WSL) which was initially an eight-team summer competition. This replaced The FA Women's Premier League National Division as the highest level of women's football in England and ran on this basis until 2017 when it finally grew into the two-division fully professional game we know today, taking its place alongside the traditional men's professional season, with media interest, spectator levels and sponsorship income having established a solid commercial platform. The top three teams each season qualify for the UEFA Women's Champions League. The WSL has increased the visibility of women's club football across the world, attracting star players from overseas and broadcast partners in Australia, Canada, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Germany, Italy, Scandinavia, New Zealand and the US. Below the two professional divisions, the game's pyramid – the Women's National League – has continued to develop. It now means there are recognised pathways into the women's professional game, with clubs themselves operating Academy structures.



The London 2012 Olympic Games gave women's football in this country a further boost, when the Team GB Women reached the quarter-finals of their competition. Significantly, a 1-0 win over Brazil in Team GB's third group match was played in front of 70,584 fans at Wembley Stadium. This contrasted markedly with the very first England women's international match played at Wembley only 23 years beforehand (England vs Sweden on 23 May 1989) which took place as a 'warm up' before a men's international kick off.

NEW ERA

The last ten years have seen some major developments for both women and girls. In 2013, The FA, Sport England, The Premier League and The Football League Trust launched their first joint national participation programme for girls' football.

In 2014 England Women played their first match at the new Wembley Stadium, attracting a then record crowd of 45,619 for their match against Germany. The senior team was by now a serious contender on both European and world stages. They took bronze in the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup in Canada and reached the semi-finals of UEFA Women's 2017 EURO and got to the same stage again in the FIFA Women's World Cup two years later in France 2019. Their semi-final defeat to the USA attracted a record 11.7m viewers on BBC One. Earlier in the same year they won the SheBelieves Cup for the first time.

This success saw ever-increasing crowds at England matches, with 77,786 fans at Wembley to see the senior team face Germany in November 2019. It is little wonder then that Barclays wanted to secure its place as the title partner of The FA WSL in what is believed to be the biggest-ever investment in UK women's sport by a brand.



Double participation, double the fanbase and consistent success on the world stage. Those were the three bold goals in The Gameplan for Growth, The FA's first formal strategy for women's and girls' football in England, unveiled in March 2017. All three goals have been scored – and now one million girls (aged 5-15) and 1.9 million women (16+) play the game in England. Numerous FA participation programmes are bringing girls to football at various age groups and the fan base continues to grow.

Following the first three-year strategy, a new one – Inspiring Positive Change – was launched in October 2020. Among its eight goals, one stands out – to give every school-going girl the same access to football as boys, whether at school or in clubs.

A home win in Wembley at the UEFA Women's EURO 2022 in front of a crowd of 87,192 has firmly established the women's game in the national psyche. Media coverage and general interest in the game has never been higher. As well as huge success on the field, the game-changing tournament created over 400,000 new opportunities for girls and women to engage in grassroots legacy football activities. The win was the glorious icing on the cake of a decade of growth and investment. It was a wonderful serendipity that the win came in the 50th anniversary year of England Women; a moment we all got to celebrate at Wembley on 7 October 2022 when Jill Scott presented the original 1972 team with their long-awaited caps.

A year later, the Lionesses made more history in Australia when they reached the FIFA Women's World Cup Final in Sydney, a first -ever appearance at that stage of the competition following an exciting campaign 'down under'.

Unfortunately, Sarina Wiegman's team came up against a Spanish team who had swept all before them in the competition and lost by 1-0 in the Final.

Basildon Borough Heritage Society – Updated December 2024.