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VERDANT
STADIUM**



**Emirates
FA CUP**

**BIGGLESWADE
UNITED**

v

**WOODFORD
TOWN**

EXTRA PRELIMINARY ROUND

OFFICIAL MATCHDAY PROGRAMME

BIGGLESWADE UNITED FC



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HORIZONS**



CHAIRMAN'S COLUMN



The English FA Cup is, to me, the greatest football competition in the world. Nothing else comes close. It's not just the history, or the romance, or the giant-killings — though all of those matter. It's the way the competition reaches into every corner of the game, from the biggest stadiums to the humblest grounds, and gives every club — including ours — permission to dream.

Shortly after I became involved with the club, I still vividly remember the long, snaking queues at our Biggleswade United ground when the Cup itself called in to see us. Grown men stood patiently, almost reverently, waiting for their chance to be photographed lifting that iconic trophy. It was as if the Cup had descended from some higher plane and, for a few hours, transformed our ground into the centre of the footballing universe.

There is no other club competition like it anywhere. Nowhere else does a club like ours get the chance to step onto a literal and metaphorical level playing field with teams who live in a different footballing world. The FA Cup gives us our “15 minutes of fame” — well, 90-plus minutes actually — where we can mix it with the big boys, test ourselves, and see how far belief, organisation, and sheer heart can take us.

The FA Cup is no respecter of reputations. When both sides line up either side of the centre line, everyone is equal. The badge, the budget, the stadium size — none of it matters. What matters is the moment, the whistle, and the courage to believe that something extraordinary might happen.

I consider myself a lucky man. Throughout my career in football, I’ve had the honour and privilege of witnessing some of the greatest and most momentous episodes in the sport’s history — two unforgettable World Cups, three European triumphs for Spain, my country of birth, and countless nights where legends were made. Yet even after all that, the FA Cup still stirs something unique in me.

True footballing greats like Rio Ferdinand, Alan Shearer, Harry Kane, Matt le Tissier and Brian Clough have never won an FA Cup. In a strange way, that’s something we have in common with them. We’ll never win it either. But we are also a part of it — part of its story, part of its magic — and that alone is enough to give us the encouragement to strive for our day in the sun.

And today, our battle begins again. Woodford Town of the Essex Senior League arrive at the Verdant Stadium for the extra-preliminary round — the first step on a road that stretches 13 ties all the way to Wembley. And just because it will never happen that doesn't mean we aren't allowed to dream because that at the end of the day, is the beauty and the magic of the FA Cup.

Bring it on!

Guillem Balagué
chairman@biggleswadeunited.co.uk

Aug

2026

MENS 
WOMENS 

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
					1 Everett Rovers (H) 15:00	2 Potters Bar (A) 14:00
3	4 Newport Pagnell (A) 19:45	5	6	7	8 Woodford Town (H) 15:00	9 Eaton Socon (H) 14:00
10	11	12	13	14	15 Arlesey Town (A) 15:00	16 Godmanchester (A) 14:00
17	18 Kempston Rovers (H) 19:45	19	20	21	22 FA Cup (H) 15:00	23 FA Cup (TBC) (H) 14:00
24	25	26	27	28	29 Tring (A) 15:00	30

TEAMSHEETS

BIGGLESWADE UNITED FC



VINNIE BAKER
LEWIS BARKER
KINGSLEY BATES
AUDLEY BENNETT
ROBBIE BUCHANAN
LIAM BROOKS
KIT BROWN
NEWMAN CARNEY
THOMAS COOKSLEY
KARL DALEY
STEPHEN GLEESON
MITCHELL GOOCH
JAIDEN IRISH
KYLE JOHNSON
SAMUEL LAMMIN
FREDDIE LARAMAN
RYAN LEWIS
SCOTT METCALFE
TOMMY REYNOLDS
LIAM SMYTH
CODI-LEE SPAVINS

MANAGER: KANE DOUGHERTY
ASSISTANT: PAUL DONNELLY
COACHES: RUBEN WARD-
LINDSAY, NEWMAN CARNEY
GK COACH: DEL DIGWEED
PHYSIO: KIRSTY BATEMAN – FOLEY
KIT MANAGER: TRACEY JAMES

WOODFORD TOWN FC



ANDRE ANDERSON
JAEDON PHILLIPS
JAMES RUNHAM
KAHLIL KIRWAN-MEADE
SAM OWUSU
OLLIE SOTOYINBO
MARKO PROTIC
MILES MITCHELL-NELSON
MIKE AGBOOLA
JAMES JEWERS
NORMAND KEBI
MANNY MARTINS
LUKE STEELE
ELI BENOIT
MANNY MARTINS
JIBRAN AHMED
EMMANUEL SERGIO
UKO OJI
SOLOMON OFORI
JAHZIAH BLACKFORD
TANEL AYVAZ
SIDI HAIDARA
ANGUS HASTINGS
ASHLEE JONES

MANAGER: SHANE BAPTISTE

AMAZING CHANGES AT THE VERDANT... AND MORE

By Tracey James

For our fantastic volunteers the “closed season” becomes the busiest time of the year and this year was no exception. As you arrive at the ground you cannot fail to notice the amazing renovation to the exterior of the clubhouse with the installation of cladding around what used to be a dismally poor white rendering. Our vice chairman, Dave Poole, and his band of trusty family members worked during the scorching heatwave to erect the cladding, install a lighting system and security cameras as well as other much needed exterior redecoration.

Our landlords, Biggleswade Town Council, finally accepted that the “their” building was in much need of repair and fortunately contracted a local firm to undertake the replacement of the flat roof and fascia boards. So, all in all, the outside to the clubhouse has been vastly improved.

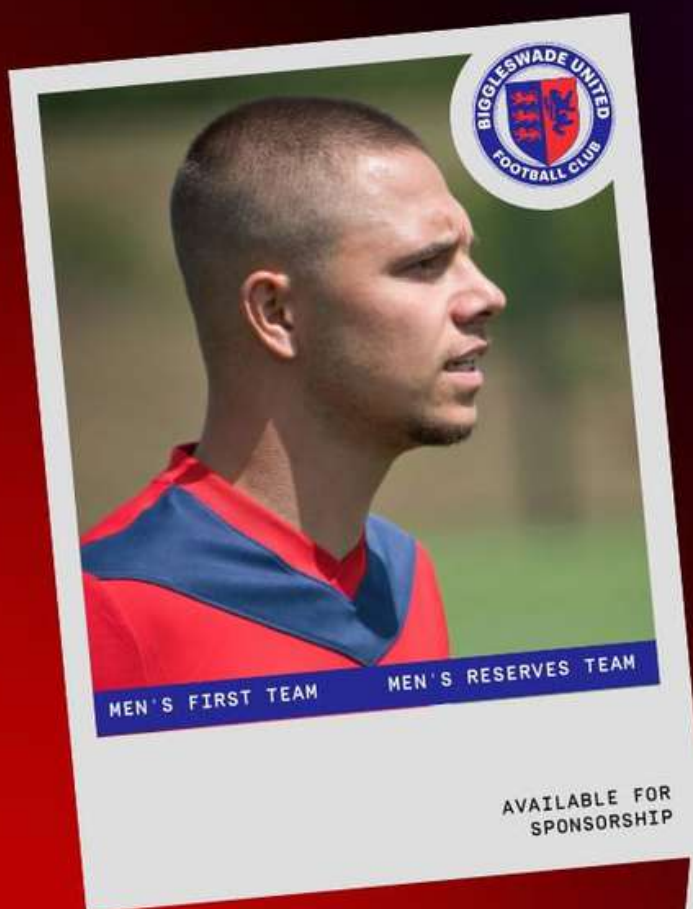
But it doesn't end there. Following two years of deliberation, consultation and design the work of installing a new, ultra-modern kitchen to replace the dilapidated industrial kitchen got underway. Having secured a Football Foundation “Gamechanger” grant, project manager, Del Digweed finally got the go ahead from funder Howdens Kitchens to overhaul and extend the kitchen area. As many of you will know, once you start removing ceilings, walls, pipes and the roof, years of deterioration, water ingress and dodgy electrics show their face. The task was immense but once more our volunteers battled on with the vision of a brand new kitchen firmly in their sights.

“Family Digweed” as they are known soldiered on together with the Pooles and various excellent contractors and now we have an amazing new kitchen that will see us through for many years to come.

The annual task of pitch repair really took it's toll this closed season. We managed to get the Verti drain, fertilizer and overseeding done in early May. But the excessive heat in June and July has given the grounds team a nightmare two months with constant watering and repair. And it seems that this will extend into August despite the football season getting underway today. If, as they predict this weather will become the norm, the FA need to start to consider the playing season as two months is no longer sufficient time to renovate pitches.

While all of this manual work was going on, year long (maybe more) series of meetings and discussions on the lease of the Verdant Stadium finally came to a conclusion and we have to thank our Director, Carl Cheevers, and sponsors Pelly Solicitors for seeing it through to the end. We can now report that we have secured a further 25 year lease on the Verdant Stadium and Clubhouse. In addition, an exciting new phase in the history of our youth section will be announced shortly as Carl together with Heads of Youth Kayleigh and Josh Thomas has also secured a 25 year tenancy agreement with Biggleswade Town Council for the exclusive use of The Lakes Recreation Ground which will now become the base for all of our youth teams. This presents the potential for further enhanced playing facilities for our young players and ultimately the Biggleswade community.





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MATCHDAY GALLERIES

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Visit our website to see all of our matchday galleries, captured by club photographer Richard Southan.



OUR OPPONENTS

Woodford Town Football Club was established in 1937, and were founder members of the Delphian League. In 1950 we lost 7-1 to Colchester Utd in the 4th Qualifying round of the FA Cup in front of a ground record of 7000 at Snakes Lane. The superbly named Johnny Bee stung our illustrious opponents into action with a sensational 9th minute strike before all hopes of a famous giant killing were cruelly swatted in the second half.

Amongst noticeable players to grace the white Woods shirt was a certain Johnny Haynes soon to leave an indelible mark on the game at Fulham and England and later given legendary status as Football's first £100 a week player at a time when wages regularly failed to reach the minimum wage of the time.

In 1961 we switched to the Metropolitan League, before joining Division One of the Greater London League in 1967. We left the Greater London League at the end of the 1968-69 season and rejoined the Metropolitan League in 1970.

At the end of the 1970-71 season we joined Division One South of the Southern League but left after a single season in which we finished bottom of the table. We joined the Essex Senior League in 1976, before switching to the Athenian League in 1979.

We rejoined the Southern Division of Southern League in 1982 where illustrious Tottenham Hotspur International duo Jimmy Greaves & Joe Kinnear were among a number of eye catching signings, albeit in the twilight of their careers.

Amazingly we played in the Anglo-Italian Cup in 1986 losing 4-0 to Piacenza in the semi-final and then 3-2 to Merthyr Tydfil in the 3rd Place play-off, the former game featured on Italian TV.

After finishing third in 1986-87 and reaching the first round of the FA Cup for the first time, we dropped back into the Essex Senior League at the end of the season.

Despite the disappointment Woodford had put themselves firmly on the football map succumbing only to a very late Colin Foster goal against Leyton Orient in the aforementioned match in front of another bumper gate at Snakes Lane, a game after which star striker Paul Williams was transferred to Charlton Athletic for an undisclosed sum after an eye catching display on a bumpy surface very much of the day.

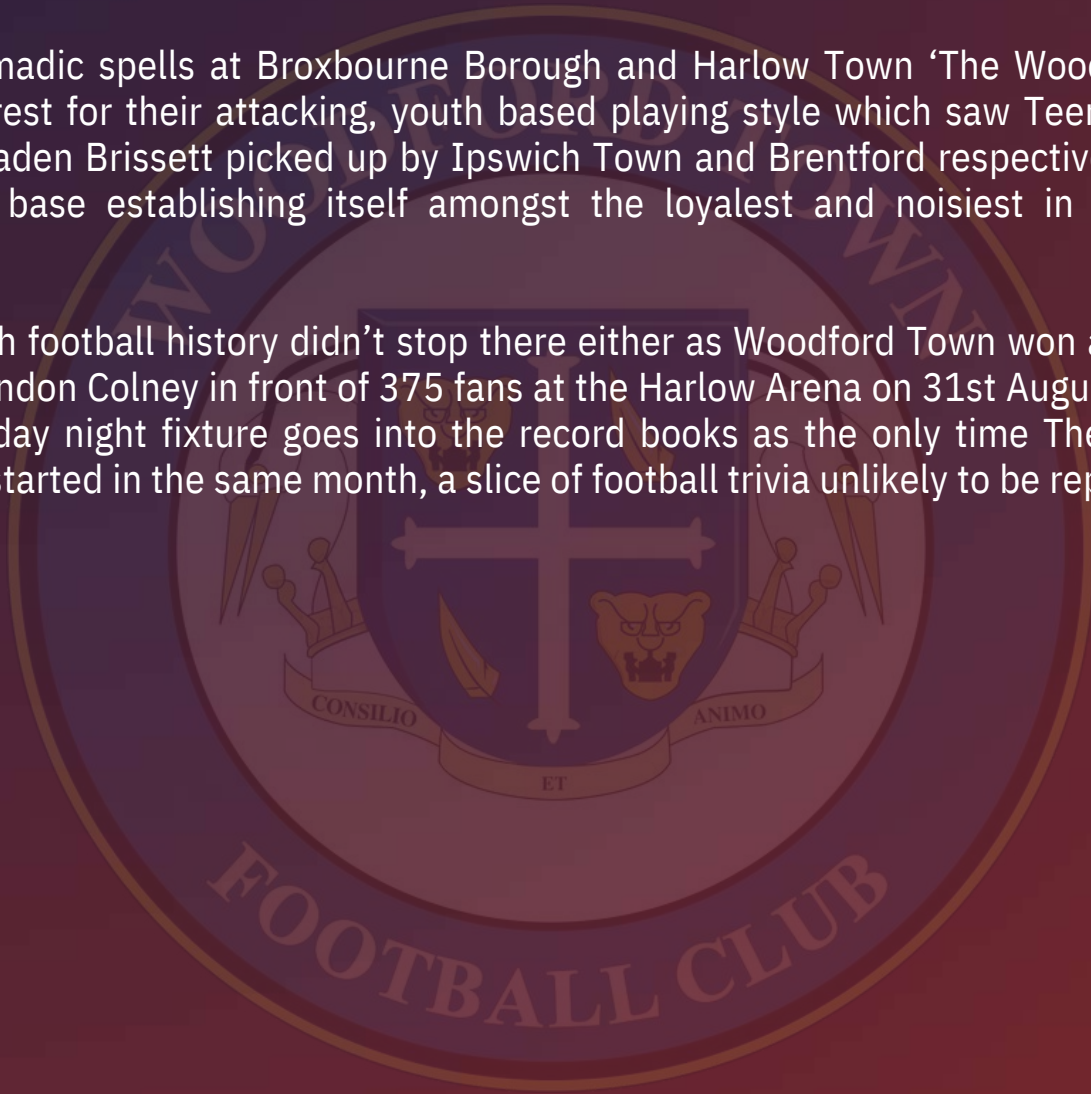
In 1993 we lost our Snakes Lane ground, and transferred to Division One of the Spartan League, which merged into the Spartan South Midlands League in 1997, with Woodford placed in the Premier Division South.

However, we left the league in 1998 and dropped into the London Intermediate League, before returning to the Essex Senior League in 1999. We remained in the league until being voted out in 2003 after finishing bottom of the league for three seasons in a row.

In 2017 we returned to the Essex Senior League reverting back to our original name – Woodford Town Football Club.

Despite nomadic spells at Broxbourne Borough and Harlow Town 'The Woods' began to attract interest for their attacking, youth based playing style which saw Teenagers Ryley Scott and Jaden Brissett picked up by Ipswich Town and Brentford respectively and their unique fan base establishing itself amongst the loyalest and noisiest in Non League Football.

The link with football history didn't stop there either as Woodford Town won a thrilling FA Cup tie v London Colney in front of 375 fans at the Harlow Arena on 31st August 2020. The singular Friday night fixture goes into the record books as the only time The FACup has ended and started in the same month, a slice of football trivia unlikely to be repeated.





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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX AMORÓS



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Be a

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STORY OF OUR CLUB

Biggleswade United Football Club was re-formed on the 16th July 1959. However, local history records indicate that there was a Biggleswade United side playing at Second Meadow as early as 1929. Our first season (1959/60) saw us competing in Division Three of the North Herts. League (NHL). After 10 successful years in the NHL the club made the step up to South Midlands League (SML) football. But towards the end of a 15-year association with the SML the club began to struggle and after three years of finishing in the bottom three of Division One we sought fresh fields. The club joined the Herts. Senior but club continued to find the going tough. In 1986 we elected to return to local League football, joining the Bedford and District Football League and began to build again.

The appointment of Brian Swords as first team manager in 87/88 proved to be the turning point in the club's fortunes. During the next ten years the club achieved a tremendous amount of success on and off the football pitch. Our record of League and Cup honours speak for themselves but aligned to this a great deal of work went on behind the scenes to match the on-field success. The club now boasts one of the best clubhouse and ground facilities in the Mid-Bedfordshire area. The success of the club also attracted many new players as well as commanding a great deal of loyalty from those players who helped the club progress from Division Three of the Bedford and District League to County Senior Club status in just 15 years.

The 1995/96 season was the most successful in the club's history - winning five major honours; the Beds Intermediate County Cup, Bedford and District League Championship, League Cup Championship and as the League's representatives the club won the Beds. FA Centenary Cup. Having won every major Bedford League honour the club felt it was time to move on and made the decision to make the step up once again and returned to Division One of the SML. In an exceptionally successful first season we celebrated a Division One "double" by winning the Championship and the Division One Cup. We also retained the Beds. FA Intermediate County Cup, only the second club in the competition's history to achieve this feat. To crown our success the club were awarded the SML Special Achievement Trophy in July 1997.

In the season 1997/98 we finally achieved Senior status. This was achieved not only through the endeavours of the players on the field but ultimately as a result of an extremely hard working committee. With the help of the Biggleswade Town Council a new stand was erected and perimeter fencing installed. And two seasons later the club erected floodlights and on the evening of 26th October 1999 we played our first-ever floodlit game at Second Meadow, Ryman League side Leighton Town were the visitors in the Bedfordshire Premier Cup.

The next eleven years saw the first team led by Steve "Snowy" Wright and under his management the club continued to enjoy a very high level of League and Cup success ultimately achieving promotion to the Molten Spartan South Midlands League Premier Division and with it the opportunity to compete in the FA Cup. And under Snowy the club made three Beds FA Senior Challenge Cup final appearances, winning two of the three with victories over Stotfold (4-1) and Leighton Town (1-0) but missed out in 2006/07 going down 2-0 to Dunstable Town.

Snowy's other cup successes came in the form of the Hunts Premeir Cup, North Beds Charity Cup, Hinchingsbrooke Cup, the SML Division One Cup and the SML Special Achievement Award once again. The end of the 2006 2007 saw Snowy step down as manager with his assistant, Nick Burton taking over the first team reins. January 5th 2009 saw the club embark on further ambitious ground improvements. With financial backing from Biggleswade Town Council, Mid Beds District Council and the Football Foundation we installed a 260-seater stand, fully enclosed the ground with a double turnstile entrance and players' secure walkway which raised the ground to Grade E status. After several years of stability in terms of first team managers the next six years saw a regular turnover of first team and reserve team managers with Nick Burton, Dave Elkin and Phil Childs all taking over the first team reins for a time.

At the start of the 2013 2014 season we appointed Mick Reardon and Mark Royal as first team managers both of whom had enjoyed success as coaches at the higher levels of football. Their disciplined approach was quickly adhered to and responded to by the players and under their stewardship we achieved the highest Premier Division position in nine years and first silverware in seven years winning the North Beds Charity Cup for the first time in the club's history.

In November 2014 the club took a further positive step to realise our ambitions with the appointment of Sky Sports Presenter and renowned author, Guillem Balague as Biggleswade United's Director of Football. Following Mick and Mark's decision to step down at the end 2014 2015, Guillem was quick to act and recruited a new Head Coach in Cristian Colas Beccera. Cristian was assisted by former professional player, Stuart Bimson, and under their guidance the team finished in eighth spot in the Premier Division in 2017 2018 - the highest position in the club's history. Having built a strong reputation for their outstanding coaching ability and playing philosophy Cristian and Stuart moved up to Step 3 level club, Staines Town, for the start of the 2018 2019 season. Guillem was again in search for a high quality coach and Jimmy Martin came highly recommended by his predecessor, Colas, who worked with Jimmy at Stevenage FC Academy. Jimmy was appointed Manager in May 2018 but he tendered his resignation in October 2018 having been offered a "hard to refuse" opportunity to take up a coaching role at Premier Division club Watford. Despite the setback the first team went on to record their highest ever League placing – a fourth spot in the Premier Division.

In the season 2019 2020 the club were sitting in a highly commendable third position in the Premier Division and under the management of Chris Devane and Trishnan Patel were hoping for a promotion play off opportunity. However, in March 2020 the season was declared Null and Void by the FA after the devastating outbreak of the Coronavirus. The club were also to learn that Chris and Trishnan had accepted the offer to work at Step 4 and departed the club at short notice. Fortunately the club were able to call upon the services of former Head Coach Cristian Colas Cristian took the club to its highest ever position in the club's history at the curtailment of the 20/21 season leaving us second in the table on PPG. The club applied for promotion to Step 4 but were unsuccessful. A double whammy came when the club were subjected to a lateral move to the UHlsport United Counties League. The FA's actions had a devastating effect on the club and we spent most of the 2021 2022 season at the foot of the table. But we rallied and secured Step 5 football on the final day of the season. The club have now been re-instated in to the SML and with a strong squad will be looking to put that season's nightmare in to a distant memory and push on to return as a top of the table club.

With the nightmare season confined to the history books we kicked on and finished a very creditable 8th in the Premier Division but the highlight of the season was achieving the best ever run in the FA Vase. Starting at the qualifying round stages we came through five rounds reaching the fourth round proper but fell to Coventry Sphinx. At the end of a great season Cristian Colas made the difficult decision to step down after 7 (-2) seasons as head coach. Two United players came forward with the right experience, credentials and knowledge of the football world at this level and the decision was felt to be the right one. Gareth Hunt, who had captained the side and had been instrumental in helping us through the difficult season, will be partnered with Jordan Wright who captained the FA Vase winning Newport Pagnell Town team. Sadly though their tenure lasted just the one season and in May 2024 the club moved on with the appointment of Kane Dougherty who has enjoyed success at Shefford Town and Campton. Kane's coaching team for the 2025 / 2026 season will comprise of Paul Donnelly, Ruben Ward-Lindsay James Taylor, Del Digweed, and Martin Russell.

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FA CUP HISTORY

The FA Cup was the first of football's great competitions, providing the blueprint for structuring the game in more formal fashion and has proved to be, both at home and abroad, organised football's founding father.

More than simply the showpiece occasion to bring down the curtain on an English season, it became the world's cup final, the best loved and most watched domestic game on earth, the fixture that people all over the planet would do anything they could to catch.

It is the competition that fostered professionalism, created and fuelled the rivalry between clubs great and small, instigated the game's global television market and yet still reminds us that, be they ever so mighty, the biggest and the best in the world can still be brought down to earth by a committed bunch of journeymen, hurling themselves around on a mud heap on a biting cold January day.

It's the competition that began by drawing together the elite of Victorian society and those from its humblest strata, and one which still, despite the league pyramid that followed, is the only way in which a team of postmen, office clerks and production line workers might get the chance of walking out at Old Trafford, Anfield or Stamford Bridge.

The FA Cup. All human life is here.

Following the formation of the Football Association in 1863 and the early work done in codifying the game by producing its first set of laws, it was that vision of bringing the nation's teams together - the public schools of the south and the team's forged from industry, church and philanthropy in the north – that formed The FA's next guiding task, one ideally suited to a competitive arena.

The burgeoning game was still in its infancy as we entered the 1870s, teams playing in a patchwork of local friendlies for the most part, few venturing beyond the most parochial of boundaries to play games. As the national association, it was incumbent upon The FA to show leadership and draw all these disparate clubs into a cohesive whole and a countrywide competition seemed the best method of doing so.

Charles W. Alcock, the Secretary of The FA, had already been a prime mover in trying to get international football off the ground by arranging a controversial first meeting between England and Scotland in 1870.

Clearly a forward thinker, on 20 July 1871, at a meeting of The FA committee at the offices of The Sportsman newspaper, he drew on memories of his schooldays and the inter-house matches at Harrow, concluding that with the growth of the railways in particular making national travel possible, there was now no longer any impediment to teams from all over the nation meeting one another on the sporting field.

So it was that at that committee meeting, Alcock proposed, "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".

The motion was swiftly carried, the rules of the knock-out competition agreed and invitations issued to The FA's 50 member clubs of the time, just 15 of whom responded – Alcock was clearly ahead of his time. Following further withdrawals around a dozen clubs ultimately took part over a competition that spanned just 13 fixtures, the first round of games taking place on 11 November 1871.

The competition culminated in a final at Kennington Oval on 16 March 1872, the Royal Engineers taking on Wanderers FC, a side drawn largely from old boys of the public schools, notably Harrow, and including one Charles W. Alcock in their side. It was fitting that the man who did so much to bring the Challenge Cup into being was on the winning side and became one of the first to lift it. The cup was actually presented almost a month later at Wanderers' annual dinner at the Pall Mall Restaurant, The FA issuing each player with a silk badge to commemorate the victory, the club presenting each player with a gold medal. The only known medal still in existence was bought by the PFA at auction in 2010 for £70,500.

As a consequence of that win, Wanderers received a bye to the following year's final, the original concept of "challenge cup" competition, although this was to be the only year in which that rule applied. They retained the trophy with a 2-0 win over Oxford University, going on to win five of the first seven finals, Oxford University and Royal Engineers winning the other two.

But as Wanderers were busily underlining the fact that the cup had been born from the great amateur bastions of the nation, the spread of The FA's influence via its county and district satellites would spawn the next great change in the game – the arrival of professionalism, legalised in 1885.

By that time, the provinces had started to show their mettle, Blackburn Olympic carrying off the trophy in 1883 before Blackburn Rovers began the roll call of winners familiar to us today, winning a hat-trick of cups before triumphs for the likes of Aston Villa, West Bromwich Albion and Preston North End. By the mid-1880s, winning The FA Cup had already become the holy grail for the rapidly organizing football clubs, and they weren't shy of spending the money required to do it, Rovers forking out some £615 on wages in the cup winning season of 1885/86.

Professionalism contributed to a shift in the game's axis, the new clubs of the north with their players dedicated to the game quickly usurping the amateur sides typically from the south.

That led to the creation of the Football League in 1888, but it was still The FA Cup Final that was the showpiece occasion of the season, even after it moved to the Crystal Palace in 1895, the year in which the original trophy was stolen from a Birmingham shop window, displayed there after Aston Villa had won it. A replica was made to replace it and that survived until 1910 when it was replaced by the trophy that we know today.

By then, the cup was not only the most desirable piece of silverware in the English, and perhaps the world game, but the competition was a byword for the unexpected, the heroic, the romantic – the idea of the “magic of the cup” had taken hold in popular culture, the concept of “giant-killing” central to it all. Notts County became the first winners from the Second Division in 1894, beating Bolton of the top flight, while Tottenham won the competition as a Southern League outfit in 1901, the first final to be filmed by Pathe News, defeating Sheffield United in a replay.

The competition’s hold on the national consciousness took another great leap forward in 1923 when the final was hosted by the Empire Stadium at Wembley, a purpose built stadium, designed, in part, to accommodate the growing appetite for attending The FA Cup final. Completed only four days before Bolton Wanderers were to play West Ham United in the final, demand for entrance overwhelmed even this new “cathedral of football” as Pele would later call it. With an announced crowd of 126,047 – although many believe that perhaps more than twice that many might have been inside the stadium – spectators spilled onto the field, eventually only cleared by the intervention of mounted police and, in particular, George Scorey and his horse, Billy, gradually eased them back into the surrounds, to allow the game to go ahead. The “White Horse” final remains one of the most iconic moments in world sporting history.

Wembley and The FA Cup Final went hand in hand thereafter, each adding to the other’s lustre. Cardiff City became the first – and so far, only – club to take the cup out of England when they defeated Arsenal in 1927, the first final to be transmitted live on national radio. Television arrived in 1938, broadcasting the Preston versus Huddersfield final in full, though there had already been limited coverage of the previous year’s final between Sunderland and Preston.

But it wasn’t all happening at the national stadium, the 1933 FA Cup tie between Walsall and Arsenal, the archetypal giant-killing feat as the Gunners, well on the way to the first of their hat-trick of First Division wins, were humbled by the Saddlers of the Third Division (North), manager Herbert Chapman so angry that he sacked one of his defenders on the train home from Fellows Park.

When football returned after the war, the appetite for the game was greater yet and The FA Cup duly stepped up to the plate. 1949 saw another huge upset as Yeovil of the Southern League defeated big spending Sunderland, the “Bank of England” club as they were known, in the fourth round.

Even so, it was the final that really caught the imagination and in 1953, with the nation newly equipping itself with grainy black and white sets to watch the Queen’s coronation, came the game with everything. The nation’s favourite footballer, Stanley Matthews, seemed to be nearing the end of his career at 38 and still had never won an FA Cup winner’s medal. This appeared to be his last chance but Bolton had other ideas and, with just over 20 minute to go, they led 3-1. Matthews conjured up a cross for Mortensen to reduce the deficit but as the game entered its final minute, Bolton were still in front, only for Mortensen to score direct from a free-kick. Impossibly, Matthews then conjured up the fairytale finish, the “wizard of the dribble” crossing for Perry to score the winner in injury time.

That began a run of extraordinary finals – former prisoner-of-war Bert Trautmann playing on to win with Manchester City in 1956 despite a broken neck, Manchester United dragging themselves from the wreckage of Munich to contest an emotionally exhausting final in ’58, Spurs completing the 20th century’s first double in ’61. Year after year, The FA Cup Final threw up indelible memories that will last as long as the game is played – a delirious Everton fan invading the pitch and slipping off his jacket to avoid the attentions of a policeman in ’66, the conflict of 1970 as Chelsea and Leeds declared war on each

other over two games, Charlie George slumping to the ground, overcome as he sealed Arsenal’s ‘Double’ in 1971.

And yet there was more to come.

In January 1972 came perhaps the most memorable FA Cup tie of all-time, played on the unpromising mudheap of Hereford United’s Edgar Street as the non-leaguers prepared to replay against top flight Newcastle United. When the Magpies took the lead, the game seemed up, but then came one of the greatest FA Cup goals, Ronnie Radford defying the conditions to smash the ball across 35 yards, searing into the top corner to level matters before Ricky George twisted and turned his way to the winner in extra-time.

As if desperate to live up to that early round magic, The FA Cup Final of ’73 provided a shock of almost similarly seismic proportions as second tier Sunderland beat Leeds United, as good a team as there was in Europe, courtesy of an Ian Porterfield goal and a double save from Jim Montgomery that’s almost as legendary as Radford’s rocket from the previous season.

Hard on its heels, we had the seeming impossibility of Second Division Southampton defeating the might of Manchester United in 1976, the similarly unlikely climax to the 1979 final between Arsenal and Manchester United as the last five minutes saw United salvage a draw from 2-0 down, only to lose it again in the final seconds.

There was Ricky Villa dancing through the City of Manchester to win the final replay of 1981, just days after trudging away, disconsolate and alone, after being substituted in the first game. Coventry won a first trophy in 1987 courtesy of the horizontal Keith Houchen, the “Crazy Gang beat the culture club” a year later, Dave Beasant saving a penalty and lifting the cup for Wimbledon.

And then there was Hillsborough.

That a competition that through over a century had seemed so much about joy and celebration should be the backdrop to such tragedy was heartbreaking in itself and, though Liverpool went on to win the cup in all-Merseyside final that year, the horrors of that semi-final day cast a long shadow. Perhaps it always will.

In 2001, a temporary move to the Millennium Stadium reinvigorated the tournament, and the first final there saw Michael Owen step up to rescue Liverpool from a losing position by scoring twice in the last seven minutes to defeat Arsenal.

Liverpool’s flair for the dramatic was there again in 2006, the last Millennium Stadium final, as Steven Gerrard took the game with West Ham to extra-time with virtually the last kick of the 90 minutes, from all of 35 yards.

Back now in its rightful home of Wembley Stadium, The FA Cup continues to generate the moments that stop the nation in its tracks, be it Ben Watson’s near post header to win the 2013 final for Wigan against one of the world’s richest clubs, Manchester City, League One Bradford City’s extraordinary run to the sixth round in 2015, winning at Chelsea’s Stamford Bridge on the way or non-League Lincoln City’s adventures in 2017 beating top-flight Burnley en route to the quarter final.

There’s nothing like an old-fashioned cup tie, and there’s nothing which draws us together as one footballing nation like the Football Association’s Challenge Cup.



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