

WYCOMBE'S REGGIE MADE SOCCER HISTORY

Living legend saved day for Gunners

This week, millions of TV viewers watched Arsenal beat Tottenham Hotspur in the 100th league meeting between the two great north London football teams. Arsenal, of course, presently head the First Division during the club's centenary year, holding the proud record of being the only club never to have been relegated from Division One. But, as Free Press writer BOB PERLIN tells here, that record was once in the direst danger — until arguably Wycombe's finest footballer stepped in.



YOUNG readers, for Roy of the Rovers please read Reggie of Wycombe Wanderers. For those a mite older, remember a man still described hereabouts as having been a "living legend".

Still, his name is mentioned in local hostelrys where gather those with shortening thirsts and lengthening memories.

"The man who saved the Arsenal," quavered one old chap. "That's Reggie Boreham, that's who."

Yet, for most, even the elderly who once idolised



him playing, the details of how Reggie Boreham did it are hazy now. And, I warrant, they are totally unknown to those below the middle years.

However, the full story exists in fading football programmes and the sports pages of old newspapers, a tale worth telling at any time but particularly in this, the 100th year of one of the world's most revered football clubs.

Reggie was born in Wycombe, lower middle-class probably, when Victoria was Queen-Empress. In his early teens, already lean and handsomely saturnine, he shone with Wycombe All Saints in the local Junior League and then, immediately before the First World War, with Wycombe Athletic.

Thankfully, he was spared the war's most appalling carnage in Europe, serving rather in India and along the way helping his regiment win football trophies.

Back in Wycombe in 1919, he was promptly signed by Wycombe Wanderers, graduating to the first team as centre-forward (striker these days) after only one match in the reserve side.

Within half a season, Reggie had attracted the attentions of the predatory professionals and the blandishments began to arrive at his home in Cromwell Road, Pinions, Wycombe.

But he was proud of his amateur status, working as a clerk with Nichols and Janes, one of Wycombe's leading furniture manufacturers in St Mary's Street, a firm of which he later became a director.

Notts County, a founding member of the Football League, knocked hardest on his door and Reggie played a couple of matches for the then Second Division team, his performances receiving glowing reviews from the local papers.

Mr S. J. Godfrey, a director of the club, enclosed the relevant cuttings when he wrote to Reggie: "You will see what the northern supporters think about you," he said. "It's all Boreham — so they

have soon summed you up."

The club sent him a formal letter offering professional terms "at the full amount allowed by the League, viz £5 per week and £6 in the first team".

Hardly a fortune nowadays but good money in the early 1920s, probably double Reggie's wages.

Those were the times, remember, when a four-bedroom semi in a "good position" in Wycombe cost £650; a new Rover car, £220; and Mrs Wheeler of the local brewing family, already with three live-in maids, advertised for a cook for £45-a-year.



Additionally, it seems, Notts County offered something "under the table". A later private letter from director S. J. Godfrey to Reggie begged: "The letter I sent you with the offer, I should be glad if you will kindly return to me as I don't want anybody else to see it. Then I can destroy it myself. It was simply a letter between friend and friend."

Ho-hum. If there was minor chicanery afoot, the club had picked the wrong man. Reggie Boreham was as "straight" as his very straight back. He soon stopped playing for Notts County, having officially signed as an amateur, and joined Arsenal on the same status.

The 1921-22 season was probably the worst ever for

the famous Gunners. The Highbury programmes were filled with snatches of doggerel from the team's despairing supporters:-

"To wish the boys a bit of luck,
Which seldom comes their way,
But determination,
Grit and pluck
Will put them through today."

Nevertheless, crowds of 50-60,000 were commonplace at a ground where the stands were still a distant dream.

In fact, in those days, the FA Cup Final was played at Chelsea's Stamford Bridge. Few grounds had stands of note.

Reggie Boreham was now playing in his more natural position of inside-left (left-midfield today) but even his renowned left-foot couldn't keep Arsenal out of the relegation zone, even though they were honoured at Highbury by a visit from the Duke of York, later King George VI.

A contemporary football writer described him thus: "He rarely appeared to exert himself very much but his scintillating footwork and rare anticipation enabled him to squirm his way through the most rock-like defence."

"His outstanding characteristic was his unselfish passing. He was a past master in the fine art of 'drawing' the defence and then giving a colleague a gilt-edged chance to score."



But, if Reggie couldn't inspire Arsenal that much, his worth was recognised at top level. He was capped twice for the England amateur side.

Then, on April 15, 1922, came his finest hour. In one of the season's final matches, Arsenal were playing away at Tottenham Hotspur, their fiercest and most traditional rival since the two clubs had first met in 1909 at Plumstead, where the Gunners then played.

Tottenham were high up the table, headed by Liverpool who went on to win the championship that season and the next (shades of present football power!).

Arsenal had to win to avoid the Second Division. A draw wouldn't be good enough.

And what happened? In front of a capacity crowd, they did what was required by a score of 2-0, with both goals coming from Wycombe's Reggie Boreham.

The national newspapers were ecstatic, full of him, the great amateur. The Free Press, in contrast, didn't mention the feat, concentrating instead on Wycombe Wanderers losing 0-2 to Cheshunt United in the replayed Berks and Bucks Senior Cup Final before a crowd of 5,400 at Slough.



However, the Highbury club were more gracious. At the season's end, with Manchester United and Bradford City eventually relegated, "in consideration of Reg Boreham's services", they played a friendly game at Loakes Park which Wycombe of the First Division of the Isthmian League won 2-1.

More than 6,000 watched, paying a total of £85, attracted by an Arsenal side which included the



Reggie Boreham wheels away in triumph after scoring one of the goals that saved Arsenal from relegation.



Although the mighty Gunners were in trouble in 1922, the club was still visited by the Duke of York. Wycombe's Reggie Boreham is second from the left.

club's newest signing, a player called Henderson. In awe, Goalpost, the Free Press soccer writer, reported that Henderson's transfer fee had been £1,000.

He continued: "The Arsenal officials were charmed with Wycombe's ground and its surroundings (leased from the Marquess of Lincolnshire of the Carrington family). They would take no expenses and congratulated Wycombe on the useful side they possessed."

For an unexplained reason, Reggie played for neither side on that memorable day when the great Arsenal said thank you to little Wycombe.

The following season, Reggie played 27 times for Arsenal but his career at the heights of football was coming to an end.

Highbury wanted him as a professional. Reggie would have none of it and finally tired of the constant pressure put on him by officials and players, returning to Wycombe Wanderers in 1924, ever-so-slightly disillusioned.

Before his retirement from football three years later at the age of 30, he helped the Berks and Bucks side win the Southern Counties Amateur Championship, a prestigious prize in the 1920s.

Not that he finished completely with one of his beloved games (he was an

ing career," wrote Wycombe Wanderers' historian Alan Hutchinson. "he certainly put Wycombe Wanderers on the map, and he must rank as one of the most brilliant forwards the club has ever had."



"He was very fast with a lethal shot," added Wanderers' life vice-president Arthur Church.

"When I was young," his only child Jean recalls, "I can only remember football every Saturday. In the morning, if we were playing away, it was in the coach. If at home, it was the afternoon at Loakes Park. Always football."

"My mother, Nellie, delighted talking about when Dad played for Arsenal but he never bragged about it."

Her husband, Doug Littlewood, retired from his butchers' shops in Wycombe, smiles as he continues: "It was very rare you heard my father-in-law ruffled. But when he did lose his temper, then clear

the decks. Usually though, he was most jovial."

At their home in Totteridge Road, High Wycombe, the Littlewoods treasure Reggie Boreham's international caps and playing kit, his boots even, and the other memorabilia of the man who saved Arsenal.

The man himself died, frail from diabetes, at Amersham Hospital in February, 1976, aged 79.

His memory survives beyond this area, throughout the world actually, in the official Arsenal book of the club's "distinguished players". Locally, his photograph hangs to this day in the clubroom at Loakes Park.



Reggie Boreham would have treasured this week with Arsenal and Wycombe Wanderers at the top of their respective leagues.

● After all, by every account, he was top of his very own league, one of the last of the great amateurs.



In his heyday, Boreham of Wycombe Wanderers in his England kit.



In his later years, Reggie Boreham still followed the fortunes of his beloved Wanderers.



Mrs Jean Littlewood, Reggie Boreham's daughter, with her father's lovingly-preserved international caps and shirts.