

## **‘The Olden Days’ – expected / unexpected challenges**

The 2019-20 season will go down as probably the most turbulent in the history of Macclesfield Town Football Club to date (whilst the 2018-19 season was not particularly ‘a barrel of laughs’ either!).

Even before the season was curtailed due to the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic, off-field issues had resulted in:

- Academy and loan players fulfilling an FA Cup tie (home vs. Kingstonian)
- a League fixture (home vs. Crewe Alexandra) being postponed, as the players refused to play, in protest over (repeated) delays in the payment of wages, resulting in their emotional and mental wellbeing being at "rock bottom"
- a League fixture (home vs. Plymouth Argyle) being postponed, as the Club were issued with a "zero capacity notice" for the Stadium, by the local Safety Advisory Group

It all seems a far cry from the great achievement of securing the National League title, for the third time, in 2017-18 - when the players, the management team, the staff (both paid and volunteer), the sponsors and the supporters came together to once again succeed ‘against all odds’; but it got me thinking about the various challenges (both on and off the pitch) that teams who have turned out for the Club have encountered in the past.

In the (relatively) recent past there was the refusal to allow Macc to step up to the Football League at the end of the 1994-95 season, as ground grading requirements had not been completed by the New Year, and a ground share with our former tenants at Chester City was blocked as it was not in the same *conurbation*!

The Club and team responded in the best possible way with Sammy’s team, backed by the late, great Arthur Jones, lifting the FA Trophy the following year, before securing the title again in 1996-97.

The Football League authorities showed they had a sense of humour when issuing the fixture list for that historic first season in the League. After opening the season at home to Torquay United, the first away game in the Football League was against Brighton & Hove Albion, a game that was played at Gillingham’s Priestfield Stadium – which is not even in the same County, let alone the same *conurbation*...

Looking further back in time there were challenges such as travel / transport, the standard of the opposition, no substitutes, no team etc.; and some examples, culminating in a prestige friendly against Dutch top flight opposition in 1948, which turned out to be a bit of headache timing wise, are noted below.

### **Christmas Day / Boxing Day fixtures**

Having been founder members of the Cheshire County League (CCL) in 1919-20, Macc played in every season until the League was suspended at the end of the 1939-40 season.

As members of the CCL whilst the distances travelled were considerably less than today, the road network and the vehicles upon them were basic in comparison, though pre-Beeching cuts rail travel may have been comparable...

The term *Cheshire* in the League's name was applied rather loosely, as it encompassed the likes of Bangor, Connaught's Quay, Frickley, Rhyl, Wellington and Wigan.

At a time when football was still seen as a sport for the working class, the vast majority of supporters were manual workers, having few and fixed holidays, e.g. Wakes, Barnaby etc. when the factories closed down, so the footballing authorities ensured that matches were arranged on the few days when people would have some free time, and it was commonplace for teams to play on both Christmas Day and Boxing Day (as long as neither fell on a Sunday).

For Macc this traditionally meant a home game with Congleton Town on Christmas Day, before travelling to Bower Fold to face Stalybridge Celtic on Boxing Day.

By the late 1950s the opposition was no longer set as Congleton and Stalybridge, but the tradition continued until 1961-62 when, having drawn at Alty (1-1) on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December, Macc beat Congleton (3-0) on the Moss on Christmas Day, before *traipsing* to Frickley Colliery (1-1) on Boxing Day.

With the exception of a defeat in the Cheshire Senior Cup in 2013, it's some 20+ years since Macc have regularly travelled to Bower Fold to face Stalybridge, but the ground always seems to be one of the first to succumb to the weather, be it snow or rain, so it makes you wonder what sort of conditions the teams played in, back in the first half of last century.

## Rigid timetables

As is still the case today, the start and end dates of the season were pretty much set in stone by the footballing authorities which, in days gone by, sometimes set up a situation where a team had to fulfil two games on the final day of the season.

For example, looking at Match Information on the Silkmen Archives website ([www.silkmenarchives.org.uk](http://www.silkmenarchives.org.uk)), the last game of the 1922-23 season on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1923 was at Prenton Park against Tranmere Rovers Reserves, which resulted in a 1-3 defeat.

On that day Tranmere still had two matches to play in the CCL - the game against Macc, and another one at Congleton Town - so as Tranmere's first team had completed their season in Division Three North the previous week, Macc lined up against their Football League side at Prenton Park, whilst Rovers' reserve team fulfilled the fixture at Congleton, with the matchday programme noting:

*"...This afternoon, Macclesfield are the visitors to Prenton Park, and the Mid-Cheshire side have been one of the strongest sides throughout the season. At present they figure higher in the chart than we do, and they are certain to be all out to maintain their good position. Seeing that the full Third Division side has been selected to do duty against them, Macclesfield have a stiff task in front of them..."*

As there was no promotion or relegation in those days, and as both teams were in mid-table, this was of little import, but had Macc or Tranmere been pushing for the title – when would that ever happen! - I wonder if a Football League side would have been allowed to fulfil the CCL fixture.

## Re-forming the Football Club

After World War II, the CCL recommenced in 1945-46 with 20 teams, and Wellington Town (forerunners of future FA Trophy final opponents Telford United) took the title.

Macc, along with Alty and Congleton rejoined the League for the 1946-47 season, with Oldham Athletic Reserves dropping out after just the 1 season, thereby seeing the CCL return to a 22 team league.

Whilst having to build teams (first team and reserve) from scratch – Sir John Askey would have been in his element ☺ - Macc introduced a change off the pitch by adding **Town** to the team's name, having been Macclesfield AFC prior to World War II.

With no real infrastructure in place, over and above having to recover from the privations and traumas of the War, it must have been a harsh environment to try to re-establish the Club and to establish yourself as a player, and the season proved to be a considerable challenge, including for example having to put out requests for clothing coupons to help towards the football kits.

In the programme for the visit of Stockport County Reserves on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1946 it was noted:

*“There are two reasons why Macclesfield accords a specially cordial welcome to Stockport County Reserves. One is that our visitors invariably play good football; the other is that the Stockport County Directors very sportingly and generously helped Macclesfield to build up a team from scratch.*

*A notable instance of this was the waiving of the transfer fee on F. R. Needham, who returns to the Macclesfield team to-day and will thus be playing against his old club...”*

My own knowledge of links between Macc and Stockport began with County being the first Football League team that Macc beat in an F.A. Cup tie, so to now understand this special link between the Clubs some 20 or so years prior to those Cup ties reinforces the positive view I have of the Edgeley Park outfit.

However, in this particular instance it doesn't look as though it was a great success as Needham only made 4 appearances for the Club, though in this he fared better than poor Birch, whose only appearance for the team had come the previous week at Alty, where having had the upper hand in the early exchanges, and leading until losing their goalkeeper (Foxcroft) to injury Macc eventually lost 1-5.

In the days, prior to the use of substitutes, first Oakes (for whom it was to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> of just 2 appearances) and then Birch took over in goal, but it was noted in the Stockport programme:

*“...Altrincham netted five goals, several of which would have been saved by Foxcroft. Macclesfield were disorganised and the game lost its interest.*

*Birch, a newcomer at left back did not make an impressive debut during the period he played in that position...”* – and that was the last that was seen of Birch in a Macclesfield shirt!

## Zeeburgia FC

Against this backdrop, it can be assumed that the 1947-48 season – like 2017-18 - did not hold out much expectation of glory but both the first team and the reserve team saw success in Cup competitions, and this is where the inconvenient timing of the Zeeburgia FC fixture arose.

Zeeburgia, who were managed by Robert Edward 'Ted' Savage, had just completed the 1947-48 season finishing in 4<sup>th</sup> place in the Dutch top flight.

During his playing career as a wing half, Ted Savage had played for Lincoln City (1928-31), Liverpool (1931-37: signed for £2,750), Manchester United (1937-38), and Wrexham (1938-39), before making a number of guest appearances for teams around the country during World War II.

The Zeeburgia squad included 3 Dutch internationals – J. Verhagen, Draaier and H. Smit, whilst Verbruggen was expected to be involved in the Dutch Olympic team later that year at the London *Austerity* Olympics, so the fixture would have been something of a coup for the Football Club.

The game was scheduled for Mon 26<sup>th</sup> April 1948, two days after the final League game of the season, so should not really have been an issue.

### *Cup Runs*

Whilst suffering defeat at the first hurdle in the FA Cup (1-6 at Buxton) and in the Cheshire Senior Cup (2-3 at home to Winsford – in front of the home record attendance of 9,003!), the first team made progress in the CCL Challenge Cup.

Victories over Congleton Town (2-0), Wellington Town (2-1), and Mossley (3-2 in a replay, after a 3-3 draw), saw Macc reach the Final where they were to play Alty.

The initial draw with Mossley probably added to the impending fixture pile-up, with the replay (for some reason played at Stalybridge) taking place on Fri 16<sup>th</sup> April 1948.

Meanwhile the Reserve team had reached the final of the Gilchryst Cup beating the likes of Glossop (in front of 3,600 on the Moss Rose) and Manchester City 'A' en route.

Having completed the League campaign with games at Tranmere (0-0) on Thu 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1948 and at Stockport (2-2) on Sat 24<sup>th</sup> April 1948, the Gilchryst Cup final was scheduled for Tue 27<sup>th</sup> April, with the CCL Challenge Cup final at Alty the following night.

In view of this now cluttered fixture schedule, the Committee asked the F.A. if they could play a number of guest players on the Monday night in the friendly fixture, *but the F.A. did not favour this course*, something the Football Club noted on the single sheet programme produced for the game. No doubt today, such comments would result in some sort of sanction by the F.A. – I don't know if this resulted in a rebuke back then.

Due to the lack of common sense from the F.A., Macc used a mixture of first team and reserve players in the game, and earned a creditable 2-2 draw with Walker and James scoring for Macc, whilst Dickoff scored both of Zeeburgia's goals.

Line ups (with team changes noted):

**Macclesfield:** Liddell; Harris, ~~Ross~~ H. Stott; ~~H. Stott~~ Davies, Vennard, ~~Warren~~ James; Jackson, Ramsbottom, Graine, Walker, Smith

- Scorers: James, Walker.

**Zeeburgia F.C.:** Altena; Slouch, H. Smit; Verbruggen, Bonkirk, Th. Corver; G.P. Nieland, J. Verhagen, W. Biljouw, Dickoff, Draaier

Scorer: Dickoff 2

Overall things turned out well with the Reserves winning the Gilchryst Cup (which is still competed for today by teams in Manchester); whilst – though having had to play on Thu, on Sat, (some) on Mon, on Wed and - having let a 3-1 lead slip in the last 6 minutes at Moss Lane - as it turned out, again on Fri 30<sup>th</sup> April 1948, the first team eventually beat Alty 3-1 at the Moss Rose in a replay, in front of a crowd of 6,949.

Imagine that, completing a football season...

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### **Zeeburgia Programme (incl. team changes / scorers)**

(an image, without team changes, can be found at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/macclesfield/sets/72157626635120799/> )

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On behalf of the Directors of the Macclesfield Town Football Club and of all the supporters, we extend a hearty welcome to the members of the Zeeburgia F.C. who to-day oppose a Macclesfield eleven. The referee is Rev. H. J. Pethybridge.

Our visitors are members of the first division of the Dutch National League, in which they have finished in the fourth position. In to-day's team are three Dutch Internationals – Verhagen, Smit and Draaier – and Verbruggen is expected to be included in the Dutch Olympic team. Last season they engaged Ted Savage, ex-Liverpool, Manchester United half-back, as Manager-coach. Coaching in Holland is on a grand scale and Zeeburgia have 250 signed players. They run nine teams of boys of various ages up to 18 and have six senior teams. Corver is regarded as the best uncapped player in Holland.

As Macclesfield have to play Cup finals on Tuesday and Wednesday, they had hoped for the assistance of several guest in their team in order to ease the position, but the F.A. did not favour this course.

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