

AIRDRIEONIANS F.C. and THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Airdrieonians began the 1914/15 Scottish Football League term on Saturday, 15 August, with a 1-0 victory over Third Lanark at Broomfield Park, Airdrie. All of the players whom the club had wished to retain from the previous season were available, along with various newcomers who had been brought in. On the face of it, it was business as usual in the football world, but events elsewhere would, in time, force changes to that cherished lifestyle. "Athlete," reporting in the *Coatbridge Express*, did detect a certain nervousness, commenting that "A patent fact was the soberness of the crowd and the absence of the evidences of great pleasure following a good win, as in days gone by."

Trouble had been brewing across Europe since late June, and assorted countries were at war by the end of July. Matters came to a head when Britain felt it had no option but to declare war on Germany on 4 August, 1914. The widespread opinion was that the hostilities would be short-lived, one way or another, and, with preparations well advanced for the new football campaign, the Scottish authorities decided to commence the league action as planned.

Enlistment in the armed forces was still on a voluntary basis, and, in common with several teams, the initial impact on the staff list was almost non-existent. Right-back David Templeman had been among the summer arrivals (from Arthurlie), and before he could settle in, he was on his travels with the Royal Naval Division. He returned home in October, to enjoy a period of rest prior to departure on active service, and Diamonds' captain Bob Mackie generously stood down for the fixture at Dumbarton on 17 October, allowing the inexperienced full-back to contribute to a 4-1 triumph.

The main loss was off-field though, as chairman Tom Forsyth resigned, stating that he was "opposed to the continuation of football while the country is at war". There were countless parties who shared that view, finding it hard to accept that some young men happily played football while their friends were dying on different types of fields in France. The Airdrie directors echoed the optimism of many regarding the perceived duration of the conflict when they granted Mr. Forsyth leave of absence until the completion of the 1914/15 programme.

The Scottish League was soon feeling the heat too, and in December they asked (rather than instructed) each club to approach its players and attempt to obtain agreement to a reduction in wages – at a rate of 20% in general, and 25% for those earning 50 shillings or more per week. Only two of Airdrie's pool rejected the request. That scenario probably came as a relief to numerous outfits, as attendances were on the wane, due to increased numbers of men signing up, and others working extra hours to assist the war effort.

Airdrie finished 1914/15 with the same squad as they started, but, perhaps thinking that a bit more caution was required, the League ordered that no player could take up a contract for 1915/16 earlier than 26 July 1915. There were further edicts in advance of that date, including the directives that players must have employment outside of the sport, and should be paid no more than £1 per match in the season about to kick off.

Financial problems were biting all through Scottish football, and, with scant prospect of crowds picking up, the Division Two sides resolved that they could not afford to carry on for another campaign. The Scottish Cup was also put into cold storage in the meantime.

Airdrie lost the services of winger Willie Templeman, whose unit left for the front in late May 1915, and, shortly after Christmas, his brother David arrived home, nursing wounds for a second time. The latter managed an additional three first-team appearances, although on the third occasion he had to fill in at centre-forward at Hampden, where Airdrie went down 3-0 to Queen's Park.

A versatile Ayrshire recruit, Bobby Williams, joined the army in February, 1916, and had one final outing in April when he was on leave – the last game of the schedule, at Hamilton. (Sergeant) Jimmy Reid was in France by then too, and had not featured since 12 February. Clearly, these exits strained resources, and inside-forward Alex Thomson turned out in goal at Hamilton, having already done duty at right-half and centre-half.

The League had little room to impose more restrictions, and they chose to permit contracts to be offered freely again, while stipulating that no player should receive any remuneration before 24 July 1916.

1916/17 proved fruitful for the Diamonds, with a fourth place finish achieved, in no small measure thanks to the input of Herbert George Yarnall, a Blackpool professional who had opted to come north and operate as an amateur, once the Football League discontinued official league football in England. This new centre-forward answered to the name of Bert, and his 39 goals (in 33 league fixtures) equalled the existing record for the top division in Scotland. Unfortunately there was also bad news, with the confirmation of the death of Bobby Williams, killed in action in France on 30 August 1916.

Aberdeen, Dundee, and Raith Rovers dropped out of Division One for 1917/18 as travelling became increasingly difficult, and Clydebank came in to ensure an even number of clubs. There was hope in the air, when the 1918/19 league proceedings began, that the war was reaching its conclusion, but by the time of the Armistice the programme was well under way, and it therefore continued in its recent format, although the Lanarkshire Cup had been revived in April 1918.

Tom Forsyth was re-appointed as chairman of Airdrieonians FC in January, 1919 in the clearest signal yet for the Diamonds that normality (in football terms at least) was just around the corner.

In summary, it would seem that it was not until 1915/16 that the realisation dawned that the war was likely to last longer than had been widely anticipated, and that was certainly the campaign in which Airdrieonians suffered most disruption. Things were reasonably settled at Broomfield in the following two seasons, with few alterations to the playing staff, the majority of whom were probably by then engaged in jobs considered vital to either the economy or the war effort.