

## Hibernian in the Great War

After the outbreak of war with Germany and its allies in August 1914 there was resentment in some quarters that, unlike other sports like cricket and rugby, which had immediately cancelled their sporting programmes, professional football had decided to continue as normal.

The Germans themselves were somewhat surprised. A Frankfurt daily newspaper reported at the time that, 'The young Britons prefer to exercise their leg limbs on the football ground rather than expose themselves to any sort of risk in the service of their country'.

As the casualty figures increased on the Western Front, there was growing anger in this country that the game was still taking place. Many of the critics were of the opinion that this was hindering the recruitment of new recruits, and it was not unusual for fit and healthy young men, footballers or not, to be approached in the street by young women to be handed a white feather in a gesture of cowardice.

Some have suggested that this animosity that football was still going ahead while young men were dying in France led to many of the players of Heart of Midlothian volunteering their services in the armed forces.

Most of the Hearts players joined McCrae's Battalion, a force raised predominately in the west of the city. The Tynecastle players made commendable efforts during the Great War, and several of the footballers, particularly, made the ultimate and tragic sacrifice.

Not so well documented however, is the part played by Hibernian during the conflict.

Keen to play their part, at the outbreak of hostilities, Easter Road was immediately made available to the military authorities for the training of new recruits, as was Hibs ground at Piershill. Piershill had been acquired by the club almost a decade before with a view to moving from Easter Road. For various reasons the move failed to take place, although the club still retained the lease of the ground.



*James Hendren is 3rd from the right, back row.*

In common with most, if not all the other Scottish clubs, particularly Hearts, Aberdeen, Falkirk, Raith Rovers and Queens Park, during the four years of the horrendous conflict, many Hibs players would see service in uniform, several enlisting before compulsory conscription was introduced in 1916. At the start of the war Hibs had only a small squad of fourteen or fifteen players, but it is said that within a short period of time at least seven Easter Road players were either in the armed forces or in a war related occupation

Another, centre forward James Hendren, a prolific goalscorer, who had been signed from Cowdenbeath in 1911, registered as a driver in the Army Transport Corps, but as his wife had just given birth, he was allowed to delay his enlistment. Unfortunately, within a few months Hendren would die of natural causes in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary.

Hibs players David Stevenson and Robert Reid had played only a few games at the start of the 1914-15 season before they decided to join up, as had outside right Robert Wilson, an American citizen, born in Chicago who had played in the previous seasons Scottish Cup Final. Sadly, Wilson would die in November 1918, just a few weeks before the end of the war.



Leith born Sandy Grosert, a pre-war signing from Leith Amateurs and a registered Hibs player throughout the entire campaign, enlisted in McCrae's Battalion within months of the start, but had transferred to the Machine Gun Corps in 1915.

Second Lieutenant Grosert would win the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry in the face of the enemy at the battles for Rouex and Greenland Hill in 1918.

Although severely gassed and wounded, Grosert would return to Easter Road after the war, ending his playing career with Dunfermline in 1924 after a short period at Aberdeen.

Former St Bernard's player John Sharp, who had played for the club at the turn of the decade, would also win the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry. Commissioned from the ranks after enlisting in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders at the outbreak of war, Lieutenant Sharp's citation in the Edinburgh Gazette on September 18<sup>th</sup> 1918 reads, 'for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty throughout the week's operations, especially in rallying and organising his men during withdrawals under heavy fire. On one occasion he led a bombing party back to a trench occupied by the enemy, keeping them back until his company had reorganised in a new position. Another time he pushed forward with a Lewis gun section to meet an attack which was beaten off. Until wounded he inspired all his men by his example'.

Second Lieutenant George Rae, of the Royal Warwicks, who had been a registered Hibs player from the turn of the decade until just weeks before the outbreak of war, was later awarded the Italian silver medal of honour.

Sergeant Patrick 'Paddy' Hagan, a popular player with Hibs during the early years of the century was killed at the battle of the Somme in July 1916 while serving with the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Scots. Like many thousands of others, Hagan has no known grave, and is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial.

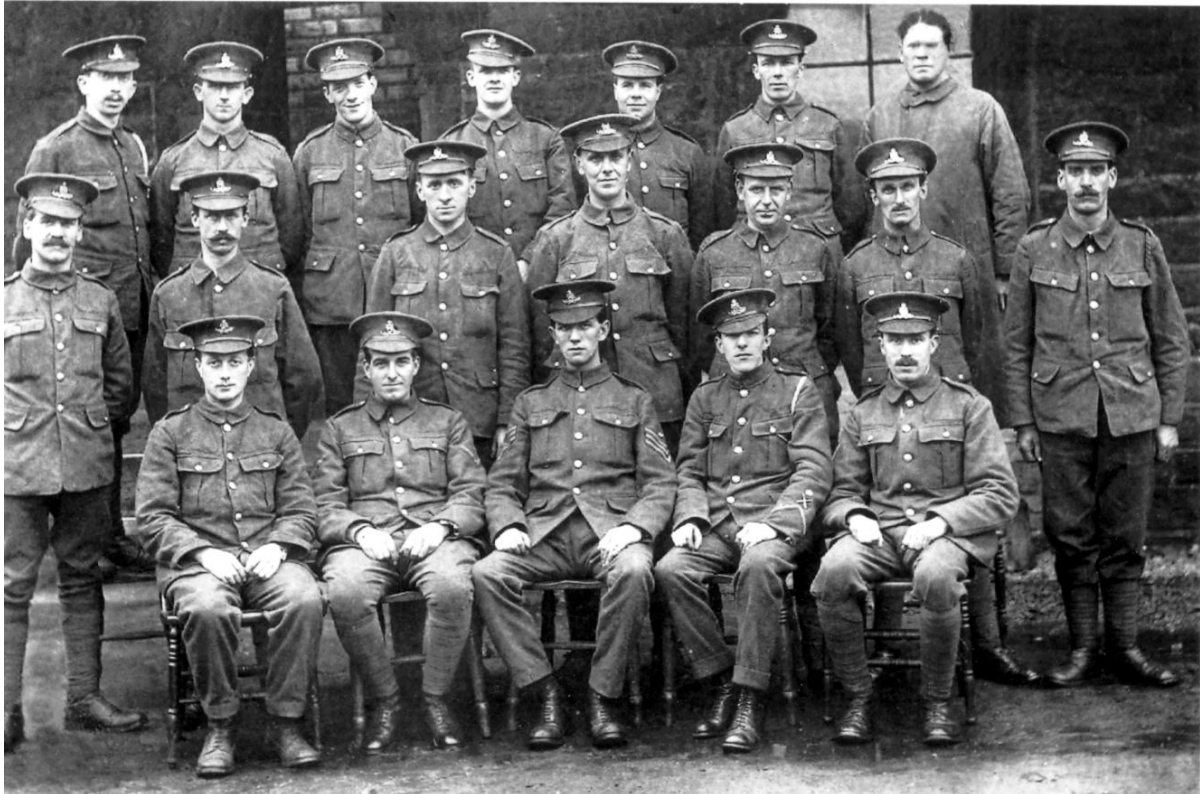
Robert 'Bobby' Atherton was another former Easter Road player to make the supreme sacrifice. Atherton, capped by Wales in 1899 and 1903, had captained the great Hibs side that won the Scottish Cup in 1902 and the League Championship the following year.

It was while serving as a steward aboard the Leith registered *Britannia* that he was lost in the North Sea in October 1917, when his ship went down with all hands after either hitting a mine or sunk by submarine action. He is commemorated on the Merchant Seamen's memorial in London.

It has been said that it was only because several of the Hibs players were married with children that they were prevented from enlisting, but statistics at the time contradict this. A poll taken in December 1915 reports that 'approximately 65,000 single men had already enlisted in the armed services, with the numbers of married men even greater'.

As at most grounds, from the start of the campaign, collections to aid war related charities had been a regular feature before games at Easter Road, as was the frequent appeal for new recruits inside the ground, both before the kick-off and at half time. All football clubs were keen to be seen to play their part, and along with neighbours Hearts, Hibs would take part in games to raise funds for war related charities such as the Belgian Relief Fund, and the Army and Navy Benevolent Fund.

In May 1915 the Gretna rail disaster, still Britain's costliest rail accident, took place near Carlisle. Over 200 soldiers making their way to fight at Gallipoli were killed and even more injured when their troop train was struck by another locomotive travelling in the opposite direction. The soldiers were from the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Scots that had been raised in Leith, the majority of men born in the port, and it is said that at least eight of the dead had been on Hibs books at one time or another. Although there is no distinction in death, it is not stretching the imagination too far to believe that a great many of the ranks would have been supporters of the club.



***Hibs long serving captain, Matt Paterson, 2nd from left, back row, with the Royal Artillery***

Many of the dead were laid to rest with full military honours at Rosebank cemetery in Pilrig Street. Several of the remainder were buried at Easter Road cemetery close to the football stadium.

In November 1918 the war to end all wars finally came to a close, leaving hundreds of thousands of Britain's dead scattered on battlefields throughout the world. On 21<sup>st</sup> September 1921, a combined Hibernian/Hearts select faced a Rangers/Celtic select at Tynecastle to raise funds for the construction of a Hearts War Memorial at Haymarket. Later, at the unveiling, a wreath was laid by the Easter Road club, all the players and staff being present at the ceremony. Today, each remembrance Sunday, a member of the Hibernian staff lays a wreath at the Memorial.

In 2004 a group of Hearts supporters were instrumental in raising a memorial to the dead of the 16th Battalion of the Royal Scots at Contalmaison on the Somme. The French village was the target for the Edinburgh and Lothian's regiment on the first day of the battle in July 1916, a target, sadly, that was not reached on the day, hundreds dying in the attempt. In particular, the cairn pays tribute to the players of Heart of Midlothian who fell at the Somme. At a ceremony held on the anniversary of the first day of the battle each year, a wreath is laid by a representative of Hibernian Football Club.

As a species, the human race is often tribal. Many of us take great pride in supporting our own particular side, but what matters most when facing the enemy, is whether or not the man beside you is reliable, not what particular team takes his fancy.

(Written by Tom Wright (Hibernian Historian), Old Edinburgh in Pictures. Images © Tom Wright)