

Commemorative postcards celebrate penalty king

by Eric Villiers

Armagh City FC, formerly Milford Everton, are to publish a set of commemorative postcards to celebrate the club's association with William McCrum, the Victorian linen magnate who gave football the penalty kick, arguably world sports' most dramatic rule.

The commemorative cards will mark City's return to the Irish Premier League, 115 years after McCrum's village team Milford FC entered the inaugural competition.

In 1890 McCrum's idea for penalising foul play around goalmouths rocked the Victorian establishment that ran football. The English FA regarded it as a contradiction in terms: only gentlemen played soccer and gentlemen didn't cheat, while the press angrily condemned the "Irishman's motion" as a "death sentence" for the game.

Although an Irish league founder and one of their key administrators, the young goalkeeper got little or no credit and the penalty rule passed into history as a happy accident. But then who could have foretold just how important the kick would become, going on to decide the outcome of some of the world's greatest cup competitions.

However the 'penalty' was no 'lucky strike' by McCrum. His background as a classics scholar, chess-master and amateur dramatist is evidence that his idea was a much more profound strategy and one that sprang from two philosophies dear to him: a keen sense of justice and a love of drama. Stopping a game for cheating in order to stage a mind-game between kicker and goalkeeper while the other players stand by - an immobilised audience - is pure theatre.

Fair-minded ethos.

The importance of fair play had been instilled in McCrum on the playing fields of the Royal School Armagh. The famed Irish writer Frank Harris, a friend of Oscar Wilde, and McCrum's contem-

porary the village sports clubs and amateur theatre group. His attachment to his rural community probably grounded him and he became County High Sheriff and a Justice of the Peace.

In 1890 he entered his team in the first Irish League and soon became



Milford Football Club 1888 - 89

porary at school later wrote that, unlike English public schools, the masters, ruling with 'wisdom and subtly...' inculcated in their students the fair-minded ethos that stood to them for the rest of their lives.

After studying Greek and Roman drama at Trinity College Dublin where he graduated with honours McCrum globe trotted as a playboy before settling down to business and his hobbies, running all

determined to rid the game of its biggest problem, the constant and bloody goalmouth battles to stop scorers, who were kicked, punched and body tackled with impunity.

It wasn't the only headache he had that year. He spent that season picking dozens of balls from the back of the net as the likes of Glentoran and Linfield pummelled Milford. The minnows crashed

out pointless and disappeared into junior football. It would be the 1970s before the village name re-appeared in the Irish League as Milford Everton in the old 'B' Division.

In the interim the Wall Street crash of 1929 wiped out McCrum's empire with its factories in Milford and Armagh and outlets in London and New York. Two years later he died a broken man, reduced to living in lodgings after the bank seized everything including the village and his Armagh and London mansions.

Football legends

Without him the team collapsed and a new football club only re-emerged in the village a generation late. Milford Everton, formed by schoolboys in 1960, went on to dominate junior football in mid-Ulster; thanks to the sporting infrastructure built by McCrum between the 1880s and 1930s. The facilities included the Holm Park pitch and magnificent three-storey McCrum Institute, complete with an auditorium, proscenium-arched stage, changing rooms, library, reading rooms, snooker hall and kitchens.

In the 1980s football legends, the late Jock Stein of Celtic and Billy Bingham, the former Northern Ireland manager, performed the opening ceremony at the newly refurbished headquarters.

By the 1990s financial imperatives forced the small but ambitious club to change its name to Armagh City and a move to a purpose-built sports ground, New Holm Park ensued.

Although he died penniless McCrum's rich sporting legacy lives on globally and locally. On the world stage football has been blessed (some say cursed) with the nail-biting drama of penalty shootouts.

Meanwhile he would have been just as proud of City's success, especially since its been laced with some poetic justice that would have pleased the amateur thespian: in 2001 Gary McKinstry their striker, and current manager couldn't have won the Ireland's Golden Boot award as top scorer without McCrum's help. Ten of Gary's 36 goals were penalties!

NEWS

MILL FIELD RE-OPENING

WOULD HAVE PLEASED FORMER YOUTH LEADER

Although he died several years ago the re-opening of Armagh's Kingston Memorial Playing Fields, popularly known as the 'Mill Field', will forever be associated with Selwyn Tarleton M.B.E. who devoted his life to the work of Armagh Boys' Club for well over 50 years. The sports ground has lain idle for a number of years but has undergone a face-lift that will see football posts once again raised on a pitch that has been traditionally regarded as one of the best surfaces in Mid Ulster football.

The glory years for the Boys' Club at the Mill Field began in the early 1960s when they won the Armagh League and Dungannon Cup double and by the early 1970s they had won the Northern Ireland Under 18 championship, beating George Best's old team Cregagh Youth Club in the final.

By the mid 1970s they were winning nearly every youth competition they entered and only just missed out on winning the top trophy the IFA Youth Cup.

By 1986 with the glory years coming to an end there was to be one more spectacular, in the Armstrong Cup, the premier summer competition at the Mill Field. That year the club put together a side mostly of old boys to win the big senior trophy that had eluded them.

Appropriately 1986 was Selwyn's testimonial year. His association with the Boys' Club began in 1946 when, demobbed by the RAF, he was appointed part-time club leader.

In the early 1960s the ground was bought by the Boys' Club from the War Department thanks to a 50% grant from the Ministry of Education.

Selwyn was the driving force behind a public subscription fund that raised £2,165 in less than a year to more than match the government grant of £1,200.

The ground was officially opened in 1963 and dedicated to the memory of the late Arthur Kingston, founder of the club and the leading light in local youth work.



This article and photograph were taken from the official programme for the re-opening of the Mill Field donated to Armagh & District History Group by Mr D. Fields