

# HEAVENS!

## The young curate who united Aylesbury football

*Two young Anglican priests – both in the infancy of their ecclesiastical careers – were the unlikely inspiration for the successful foundation of Aylesbury United Football Club. **Mike Snell** explores how one of the most celebrated English non league clubs came to be formed.*

On the evening of Monday, 31 May 1897 25-year-old Arthur Jones took the short walk from St Mary's Church, Aylesbury, to the Bell Hotel in the town square. There were many things on his mind, but few were associated with his role as a curate at the parish church.

For Arthur, the meeting he was attending that early summer's evening was of great importance to his love of sport – particularly football. For Arthur was a talented sportsman – footballer and cricketer – and he was on a mission. He already played for Aylesbury's Night School team and was determined that the town could dominate local football if only it could bring together all of its footballing talents. Undoubtedly his budding Godly passion for pastoral care added to his zeal to unite the town's communities in this way.

In many ways Arthur's background was one of privilege, particularly when compared to his team-mates at Night School FC, many of whom were learning in the evening so they could earn a living during the



**Rev Arthur Jones in later life. He is regarded as the founder of Aylesbury United**

day. Arthur was born in Ruabon, north Wales, in 1871 the son of John Jones the Rector of Cerrigydrudion. He was educated privately at Lincoln College, Oxford, where he gained two degrees and then went on to Cuddesdon Theological College to train as a priest. He was ordained in 1894.

Just who exactly was the instigator of the desire to harness the combined talent of Aylesbury's three main football teams is probably lost to history. But on that night in May it was clear that Arthur Jones was very much the spearhead of a growing – and successful – campaign to get a

merger on the local agenda.

By the late 1890s Aylesbury boasted at least three popular football clubs, who played at junior levels in Buckinghamshire. As a result none had been particularly successful.

Firstly, there was the **Aylesbury Printing Works FC**. They won the Aylesbury and District Football Cup in the season 1894/95. This club drew its players from Hazell, Watson and Viney Co Ltd, an English printing and publishing firm with a large factory in Aylesbury that operated from 1839 to the early 1990s.

**Aylesbury Night School FC** saw its team largely drawn from the students that attended this institute and, like the Printers, were well-established. By 1897 Arthur Jones was one of their star players and team captain.

Finally, **Aylesbury Town FC** was the youngest of the three clubs, having only been founded in 1896. Their chairman was Thomas Kyle who, at the Club's first annual meeting on 5 May 1897 was already complaining at the poor state of football in Aylesbury – split as it was

between three clubs. It was on this night that emerged the idea of holding a meeting of all three clubs to consider their amalgamation just a few weeks later.

The clubs were keen rivals. In November 1895 the Printers and the Night School met each other in the second round of the Berks and Bucks Junior Cup. The game was played in appalling conditions (the players wrung their kit out at half-time!), with the ball reportedly getting stuck in the mud several times. Despite being a 1-1 draw at half-time, the Printers ran out 5-2 winners to progress to the next round.

## The merger meeting

The football close season (roughly May to August) was just as frenetic at the end of the 1890s as it is today. The decision to seek a merger had to be resolved quickly so a new team could prepare for the season ahead. The key meeting in the Rochester Room of the Bell Hotel, therefore, was called urgently for the end of May. It was chaired by Mr R T Elliston, the long-standing Manager of the Aylesbury factory of Hazell, Watson and Viney; he was also an official of the Printing Works FC. He made it clear that he had no great knowledge of football but was enthused by the idea of a single merged team to represent the town.

The motion for amalgamation was put by Thomas Kyle, who represented Night School FC (who later became chairman of Aylesbury United and a leading force in Buckinghamshire football); he was an all-round sportsman, captain of the local athletic club and, in his youth, was a crack cyclist.

Kyle told the meeting that as he travelled the county he came to



**Football was popular at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This crowd was at Manor Ground, Plumstead, south London, to watch the Royal Arsenal - which was later named Woolwich Arsenal, and as such came to be known as Arsenal FC**

## The development of the game of football

Football, in the dog days of Queen Victoria's long reign, was a burgeoning success story. From a game that was founded in the mid-1800s (it was codified in 1863 and called "association football") and pioneered by public schools such as Oxford University, Old Etonians and Old Carthusians the game quickly captured the imagination of all classes. As a result football by the late 1880s had become fully professional with Preston North End crowned the first English Football League Champions in season 1888-1889. Nearly 30 years after the first FA Cup Final was held, the season 1896/97 champions were Aston Villa, who beat Everton 3-2 at Crystal Palace in front of nearly 66,000 people!

The popularity of football rose exponentially throughout England. Almost every town (and often villages) formed their own club to cater for the demand.

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realise that towns like Wycombe and Marlow – though smaller than Aylesbury – had stronger football teams than the county town. (Indeed, Marlow FC was formed in 1870 and is one of the oldest football clubs).

He said he wished to pay his tribute of respect to the delegates who had attended the meetings that had already been held earlier in the month to consider the subject. They had approached it "pleasantly and impartially", he

felt, and when their ideas did not exactly agree they did not get into a huff about it: "If they all considered the question that evening in the manner that the delegates had, the united club would be credit to themselves, the county town, and to Bucks," he said.

Curate Arthur Jones was next to speak. He strongly felt that it would be to the advantage of football in the town to amalgamate, and form a Club

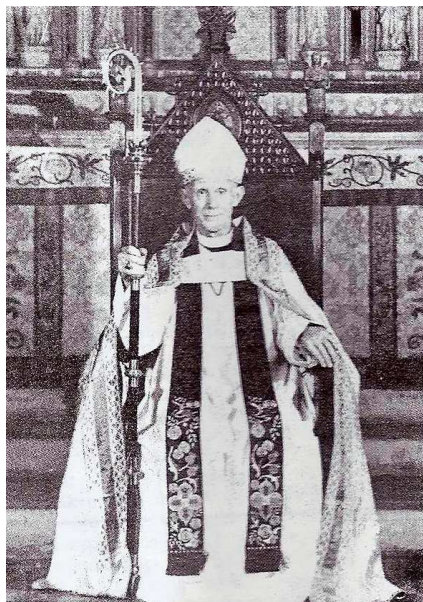
that should not only be a credit to the county, but to all England. There was plenty of talent which only wanted organising, and there was a regular spirit of football in the town.

He told the meeting that in Sunderland, one of the great centres of the game at the time, children played football in the streets, and the police could not stop them because the youngsters had that spirit of football in them. He had seen a good match in Aylesbury with only a handful of people to witness it; whereas, if there were one united club they could nearly always be sure of a good number of spectators. He thought there should be at least four teams in the new club in order that younger players in the town should have every encouragement.

The *Bucks Herald* reported that there was applause when Arthur sat down. A vote was called and, with just one dissenter (their name was not recorded!), the deal was done. Next came the choice of a name for the new club. Initially, Thomas Kyle proposed it should be Aylesbury Football Club, but Arthur Jones would have none of it. He sprang to his feet to insist the club be called Aylesbury United Football Club. He won the day ... again, to much applause!

Young Arthur Jones was now not alone in his mission. He had been joined by another young curate at St Mary's – Rev Arthur Anstey whose enthusiasm for sport was perhaps the equal of his colleague's! He was also keen to play his part in promoting the newly merged football club through his ministry.

Arthur Anstey was the same age as Jones (born in 1872). He was born in Redcliffe, Bristol, the son of Arthur Anstey, Vicar of



***The Rev Arthur Anstey – when he held bishoprics in the West Indies***

Whiteshill, Gloucestershire. Young Arthur was also privately educated - at Charterhouse School and Keble College, Oxford. He was ordained in 1898, shortly after coming to Aylesbury. He immediately became a firm favourite within the fledgling club and was quickly elected captain of the first team.

### **Birth pangs and getting started**

The first year of the new club went reasonably well on the pitch, with both curates now well-established in the team, and taking turns with captaincy. Jones was a defender while Anstey was a forward. Indeed, when Anstey returned to the town 20 years later (as Bishop of Trinidad) the *Bucks Herald* reported: "He still retains, with Rev. A. J. Jones (now Canon Jones, of Banbury), the reputation of having given considerable tone to the sporting instincts amongst followers of the game in Aylesbury and district."

Aylesbury United's first game of the 1897/98 season was an inter-club affair between a First XI and a Next XV. It was played at the Club's Bicester Road practice

ground on Saturday 4 September, which resulted in a win for the first team by five goals to one. Their first fully competitive match came the following Saturday when they played the London Guildhall Club on the home Printing Works ground.

The first time the Club turned out in its new home team colours was on Saturday 18 September against Bowes Park FC. The *Bucks Advertiser* reported: "The homesters donned their new colours for the first time, and the dark green though not very showy, is decidedly neat". United went down 2-4 to the visitors.

Two cup games came in the autumn against Slough Town FC. The first was at home on Saturday 30 October - an FA Amateur Cup tie held in delightful weather in front of about 300 spectators. The Amateur Cup was an English football competition for amateur clubs. It commenced in 1893 and ended in 1974 when the FA abolished official amateur status. The game saw the debut of Arthur Jones as a defender for the united football team that he had worked so assiduously for. His side won 3-1. The Aylesbury team: F. C. Brazell (goal), A. J. Jones (capt), E. E. Wright, H. Smith, W. Scott, W. Turnham, A. H. James, W. Adams, H. Cowley, H. E. Fellowes, W. L. Birtchnell. Cowley scored twice and Birtchnell bagged the third.

These teams met again at Aylesbury a week later in the Allied Counties Cup, in which Aylesbury United were making their first appearance. They ran out 3-0 winners, with goals from Turnham, Cowley and Birtchnell. The Aylesbury team: F. C. Brazell (goal), A. J. Jones (capt), W. Panter, W. H. Adams, W. Scott, H. Smith, A. H. James, W. Turnham, H. Cowley, W. L.

Birtchnell, H. E. Fellowes.

Financially, Aylesbury United did not fare quite so well and after just three seasons the club was £50 in debt. Early years continued to be up and down on and off the field as United found its feet, but greater times were to follow with the happily merged club - who celebrated their 125th anniversary in 2022/2023 - going on to make a memorable contribution to English non league football.

### **What became of our footballing curates?**

Arthur Anstey left the town in March 1900 to serve as a curate at Bedminster, Somerset. He was presented with an eight-day clock in a gilt case by the football club. Before he left the town Arthur commissioned a trophy – the Anstey Minor Cup - which was played for by teams across Aylesbury Vale until the 1970s.

From 1904 he was principal of St Boniface Missionary College, Warminster, Wiltshire, before becoming chaplain to the Bishop of Barbados. Arthur was Bishop of Trinidad and Tobago from 1918 to 1945 – the fourth bishop of the twin islands. In 1921 he started a church school for girls – the Bishop Anstey High School.

Arthur visited Aylesbury twice in the 1920s and was warmly welcomed on both occasions.

On 3 July 1943 Arthur was elected Archbishop of the West Indies, a position he held until 1945 when he became seriously ill. He died in November 1955 at



***Rev Jones's grave in Bray Cemetery, Berkshire. Sadly, for safety reasons the large stone cross has been laid flat on the grave, partly obscuring the monumental inscription.***

the age of 83. Arthur had three siblings: two sisters and a brother. He did not marry.

Arthur Jones spent a remarkable 12 years at Aylesbury as curate. He was appointed Vicar of Banbury in 1906 and in an astonishing mark of esteem a huge farewell meeting was arranged in Aylesbury Town Hall where he was presented with a cheque for £175, which was raised by public donation. Taking into account inflation, this would be equal to around £18,000 today! He was also presented with a writing desk and chair.

Arthur spent a further 25 years at Banbury where he was clearly held in equally high regard and affection. When he left in 1931 the now Canon Arthur Jones was presented with a Morris 12 car to help him navigate the largely rural and widespread living in Bray, near Maidenhead, where he had been appointed Vicar. In 1919 he became an honorary

Canon of Christ Church, Oxford. During his long ministry Canon Jones had refused offers of an archdeaconry, suffragan bishopric and diocesan bishopric.

Arthur died in February 1945 after a long illness at the age of 74. In an obituary in the *Bucks Herald* he was rightly described in a headline as ... "the founder of Aylesbury United".

Canon Arthur Jones is buried in Bray Cemetery. He had three brothers - Herbert, Ernest (a modest Edwardian artist) and Reginald, and a sister Winifred. He never married.



## Sources and acknowledgements

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