

# BRITONS SEASONS LOST

**Mike Snell** tells the stories of the young Aylesbury United footballers who answered the call for their country ... but failed to come home.

It wasn't much of a game to be fair.

Aylesbury United's final match of the season on 18 April 1914 was against Tunbridge Wells – away – in the Spartan League. The Ducks needed a point to guarantee runner-up spot in the league (to local rivals Chesham Generals).

Having won a sensational Berks and Bucks Senior Cup for the first time just five days earlier, their last league game also proved eventful. Defender Rhodes missed the train to Kent but the experienced Thomas Roché was on hand to replace him. The game was played on a baked, iron-hard surface; full back Reginald Dandridge managed to kick the ball into his eye and played the rest of the game partially-sighted thanks to a huge bandage around his head. The result was a dour 0-0, but Aylesbury secured their highest finish in the Spartan League since the league's reorganisation in 1910. On their way home an axle on their bus broke and the vehicle was pitched onto its side; no-one was hurt.

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These disruptions, of course, were nothing to the horrors that awaited.

On 28 June Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria, was assassinated in Sarajevo, prompting the start of World War 1. One month later Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia; Russia came to Serbia's defence, and by 4 August Germany, France and Britain were drawn into the war.

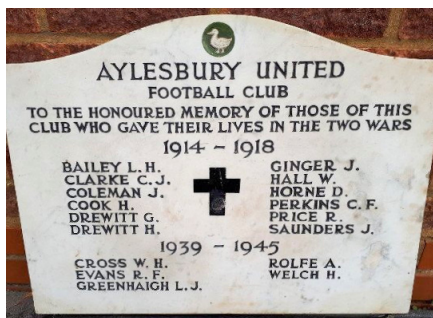
In August 1914, Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, realised Britain needed a bigger army. He made a direct appeal to the men of Britain. Posters showed him pointing his finger at anyone passing by. Men - most of them very young - felt proud to fight for their country. In the first weekend of the war, 100 men an hour signed up to join the armed forces, and by the end of 1914 1,186,337 men had enlisted.

Most young men in the Aylesbury Vale heeded the call; some joined with their friends and workmates. In the meantime local football continued to prepare for the new season ahead, which would start in September. At the end of August the club arranged their usual practice game to help them decide on the new squad for the 1914/15 season.

However, by the first week in September the club took the decision to cancel all of their fixtures for the new season. They were quickly joined by Wycombe Wanderers and many junior teams in the district. Some clubs had already been decimated by the national call to arms - 11 of Aylesbury's Rivet Works FC, for example, had already joined up!

The Football Association was criticised for not cancelling all fixtures immediately. Matches were played in the Football League throughout the 1914-1915 season and the FA Cup was held as normal. For the remainder of the war, however, the League suspended its programme but allowed clubs to organise regional competitions.

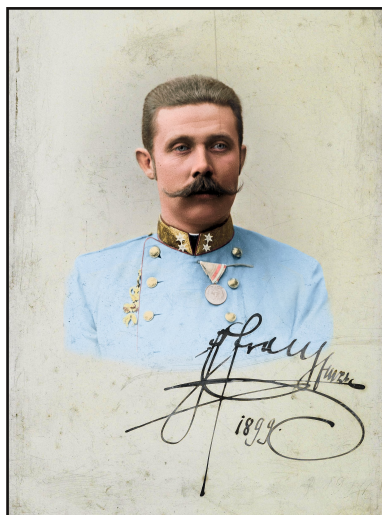
Local men joined a range of army regiments, but the most "popular" were the Bucks Territorials, the Royal Bucks Hussars and the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry.



## The players' fate

The names of 12 Aylesbury United players who lost their lives in World War 1 while serving their country are recorded on a memorial which remains in the safe-keeping of the club today. Of the 11 young men who played in the side that won the Berks and Bucks Senior Cup Final just before the outbreak of the war, three were killed in service.

**Charlie Perkins**, who had scored the winning goal, was a Leighton



Archduke Ferdinand - his assassination sparked World War 1. Photo: Cassowary Colorizations, licensed under CC BY 2.0

Buzzard boy; a talented inside left for Aylesbury who had also played for his county. Before the war he lived with his mother and six siblings at 46 Shakespeare Street, Watford, and worked as a house painter. During the 1913/14 season Aylesbury United played 34 games and Charlie missed only one; at the same time he scored a total of 29 goals - practically one per match.

Charlie was a 27-year-old sergeant with the 2nd/1st Bucks Battalion,

Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry and by 1916 he was serving in France. During fighting on Sunday, 9 July he was shot through the head and died instantly. He is buried at St Vaast Post Military Cemetery, Richebourg-L'Avoué, northern France.

**Herbert Cook** also played in the Berks and Bucks Senior Cup Final that April and, as an attacking midfielder, he had been a stalwart of the 1913/14 season. Herbert was born in Fenny Stratford, north Buckinghamshire - one of the nine children of Jesse and Jane Cook. Jesse had been a railway engine driver but had died aged 60 in 1907.

A postman before the war, Herbert joined the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) and was sent to France in January 1915, shortly after marrying Jane Wallinger. On 11 May 1917 he was busy stretcher-bearing in the section of the RAMC's 11<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, when he was killed instantly by an exploding shell. His commanding officer, Captain J Harvey, reported that Herbert had "shown great courage, as there was a great deal of shelling to which the bearers were fully exposed". Private Herbert Cook was aged 29 and is buried at Crump Trench British Cemetery, Fampoux, northern France.

The third member of the cup-winning Aylesbury United team to lose his life was **Joe Saunders**.

Before the war Joe - Aylesbury-born - worked as a printer for Hazell, Watson and Viney in the town. He founded the Swifts Football Club in Aylesbury and played for them until he joined Aylesbury United in 1900. A former captain, Joe gained many honours including runners-up and winners medals in the Berks and Bucks Senior Cup in 1913 and 1914, and winners and runners-up medals for the Spartan League in 1909 and 1914.

Joe served in the Royal Garrison Artillery, where his abilities in France gained for him the rank of battery-sergeant. He received a severe injury to the thigh during action at Cambrai, northern France, in August 1918. He was invalided

back to the Nottingham Albert Hall Military Hospital. Despite receiving the best medical care at the time he died of complications at home on 28 May 1919. Aged 37, Joe left a widow, Edith, whom he married in 1909.

Sergeant Saunders' funeral on Monday, 1 June was a measure of his esteem and popularity. Headed by a firing party from RAF Halton the cortège slow marched to Aylesbury Cemetery gates. The coffin was covered with the Union flag and Joe's service cap, belt and bayonet were laid on top. After the committal the firing party fired three volleys over the grave and RAF trumpeters sounded the Last Post. Hundreds of mourners attended.

Brothers **Harry and George Drewitt** were connected at junior level with Aylesbury United – George in particular played regularly for Aylesbury Junior Conservatives as well as United's reserve team. Both boys grew up in Walton and both worked at Hazell, Watson and Viney before the war.

George, the youngest, joined the 1st Bucks Battalion, Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, in May 1915 and was sent to France. On 14 August 1916 24-year-old Private Drewitt was one of a party of soldiers carrying bombs up to the front line where they were urgently needed. When they were about 600 yards from the front line a shell fell by the side of the communication trench George was in and it killed him and another man instantly. He is recorded on the Thiepval Memorial, near Albert, northern France.

This tragedy was traumatic enough for parents Henry and Sarah Drewitt, but worse was to follow as they waited for news of their eldest son Harry at their home in Victoria Street, Aylesbury. Harry had also joined the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry at the outbreak of the war. However, after two-and-half years in France he was invalided home suffering from diphtheria contracted in the trenches. He recovered and, after a spell of home service in Ireland, 27-year-old Lance Corporal Drewitt returned to France. On 1 October 1918 – as the end of the war approached – he died in action near Cambrai. He is buried at Anneux British Cemetery, near Cambrai, northern France.

At the start of the war **Laurence Bailey** was a clerk in Aylesbury's General Post Office and lived at 28 Whitehall Street, Aylesbury, with his

wife Edith and their young children. Private Bailey had been a regular in the United first team in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His highlight was undoubtedly earning a winner's medal in the 1908 final of the Bucks Charity Cup, in which Aylesbury beat Wolverton FC 4-0. He joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Hampshire Regiment, and was sent to France. On 4 September 1918 at the age of 31, he died of wounds received in action. He is buried at Terlincthun British Cemetery, Wimille, near Boulogne-sur-Mer.

Wingrave boy **Fred Coleman** often played for Aylesbury United's first team in the years just before the war. He was a defender – centre half, sometimes full back – who could be relied upon by his team-mates. He was a key part of the successful 1913/14 season, but wasn't picked for the last few games including the Berks and Bucks Senior Cup Final.

Fred was the only son of John and Mary Ann Coleman who lived at the Recreation Ground, Wingrave, near Aylesbury. John was a hay binder on a local farm while young Fred was a brickmaker's labourer before the war. He joined up with the 1<sup>st</sup> Bucks Battalion, Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, and was sent to France.

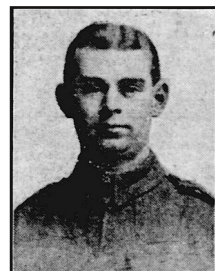
Private Coleman, aged 25, was shot near the German lines on Saturday night, 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> April 1915 while trying to bring a fallen comrade back to shelter. He managed to get into a trench, but died shortly after from his own wounds. With terrible irony his parents and younger sister had been told coincidentally on the weekend of his death by another Wingrave soldier that Fred was due to come home on leave within three weeks after 14 months of trench warfare. He is buried at the Hebuterne Military Cemetery, near Arras, northern France.

**Joe Ginger** was another of Aylesbury United's footballing stars, although he wasn't a local. Born in the Golden Bell pub, Church Square, Leighton Buzzard (where his father – also called Joe – was landlord), young Joe attended nearby Pulford School. Prior to enlisting in September 1914 he was employed by Cook and Sons as a carpenter and was a member of the local fire brigade. He had also been a bell-ringer at All Saints' Church.

More particularly, Joe was a promising footballer. As a lad he showed skill with



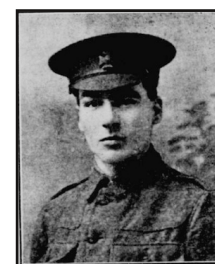
Pte Herbert Cook  
Photo: Bucks Advertiser & Aylesbury News



Pte George Drewitt  
Photo: Bucks Herald



L/Cpl Harry Drewitt  
Photo: Bucks Herald



Pte Fred Coleman  
Photo: Bucks Advertiser & Aylesbury News



the Pulford School team and later played centre half for Leighton Town FC. He also played for his county and appeared for Luton Town reserves.

He joined Aylesbury United and quickly became an attacking mainstay, scoring 19 goals in the team's successful 1913/14 season (in the season before he had been top scorer with 15 goals from 31 games, and six of them penalties!). However, Joe was another to miss out in the winning Berks and Bucks Senior Cup Final team, with talented winger Herbert Cook being preferred on the day.

Joe and two close friends enlisted together in the Bedfordshire Regiment in September 1914 and served with each other until the summer of 1916 when they were all reported killed around the same time. Sergeant Ginger, aged 30, died on 1 July 1916 and he too is recorded on the Thiepval Memorial, northern France.

Aylesbury United's Spartan League match against Newportonians on 29 March 1913 may not have produced the result they wanted, but for the Horne brothers it was still a game to savour as they found themselves playing together for the first time. On the day of the match Aylesbury were without some key players thanks to injury and unavailability at the last minute – including their captain Joe Saunders. Dennis Horne was drafted in as a defensive midfielder and Oscar,

who was vice-captain and a United regular, was given charge of the team for the first time. It must have been a proud moment for both boys to walk out onto the Printing Works pitch with Oscar receiving a special ovation from the big crowd. Oscar won the toss but, sadly, his depleted side went on to lose the game 2-5.

**Dennis Horne** was one of eight siblings – four boys and four girls – the son of Edwin and Sarah Horne who owned Cottesloe, a substantial farm at Wing, near Aylesbury. Dennis played regularly for Aylesbury junior teams and was a rising football talent.

Dennis – the youngest boy – had gone to work in Canada with another brother but when war broke out they returned to England and Dennis joined the Royal Buckinghamshire Hussars in October 1914. He was sent to the Dardanelles, Gallipoli, and was killed in action on 21 August 1915. Private Horne, aged 23, is recorded on the Helles Memorial, north western Turkey.

**William Hall** was another talented local footballer on the fringe of Aylesbury United's first team prior to the start of the war. He was a defender who on several occasions stood in for United's regular full back pairing of either Dandridge or Halsey when they were unavailable. In the spring of 1913 he played in the final of the Bucks Charity Cup against Wycombe Trinity in front of a crowd of



Sgt Rollo Price  
Photo: Bucks Herald



Pte Dennis Horne  
Photo: Bucks Herald



British soldiers on the first day of the Battle of the Somme - 1 July 1916. Photo: Cassowary Colorizations, licensed under CC BY 2.0



2,000 at Loakes Park, High Wycombe. Luck didn't go his way and in the second half the ball struck his hand (commentators felt it was accidental) but Trinity scored from the resultant penalty. Led by a decidedly off-colour forward line United lost the final 2-1.

Private Hall was the son of Richard and Mary Hall. He served initially with the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry but later transferred to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Hampshire Regiment. He was wounded early in 1915 and was invalided home, but he recovered and returned to fight at Gallipoli. William, aged 28, was reported missing (presumed dead) on 6 August 1915 and his name is also recorded on the Helles Memorial, north western Turkey.

Preston-born **Rollo Price** had a difficult start in life, losing both parents when very young. However, he clearly had intelligence and determination. He, and his sister Winifred, were brought up by their spinster Aunt Jane Holland and her bachelor brother James, who was a nightwatchman at Aylesbury Prison. Like so many young men in the town, Rollo became an apprentice with printers Hazell, Watson and Viney. In January 1913 he gained a City and Guilds first class certificate in typography – achieved through evening classes in Aylesbury – which was presented by his employer Walter Hazell. Rollo was a regular defender with the Aylesbury United Reserves team in 1912 and 1913 and was always on the fringe of the first team.

When the war started Rollo joined the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry and he was despatched to northern France to fight. On August 15 1915 Sergeant Price, aged 25, was holding a trench which he and his comrades had just captured. The trench was heavily shelled by the enemy and part of a large shell that burst nearby hit Rollo and he died instantly. His name is also recorded on the Thiepval Memorial, near Albert, northern France.

**John Clark** was another popular local footballer who played at junior level and, occasionally, for Aylesbury United Reserves. However, his identity is uncertain. While there is a C J Clarke recorded on the memorial in Aylesbury Market Square, and on the one held by Aylesbury United, he is thought to be Rifleman John Clark of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps. He was the son of brickmaker Joe and Annie Clark, who lived before the war with their large family at 41 St John's

Road, Aylesbury. Twenty six-year-old Rifleman Clark died of wounds received in action in Flanders and is recorded on the Ypres Memorial (Menin Gate) in Belgium.

A few former Aylesbury United players – who competed at junior level or with the reserves – perished in the war but are not included on the club's roll of honour. One such was Private **William Dormer** of the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry who was killed in action in Belgium in September 1917 at the age of 21. He is recorded on the Tyne Cot Memorial, near Ypres. **Arthur Wesley** played for both Aylesbury United and Aylesbury Thursday FC. A member of the reserve force attached to the Army Service Corps as a driver, Arthur came home on leave on 28 December 1914. He contracted pneumonia and died in Royal Bucks Hospital, Aylesbury, at the age of 31. He left a wife and child. Arthur was buried in Aylesbury Cemetery with military honours.

### The survivors

Two former Aylesbury United first-teamers suffered serious injury in the war but are believed to have survived. **R V Ravenscroft** played at outside right for United and was a member of the Berks and Bucks Senior Cup Final winning side in April 1914. Before the war he worked in the office of Aylesbury United Chairman Thomas Kyle (who was Chief Inspector of Weights and Measures for Buckinghamshire County Council). Trooper Ravenscroft was seriously injured at Chocolate Hill on the Gallipoli peninsula, Turkey, in August 1915. A comrade reported that he had "got it badly," and was taken to hospital at Alexandria, Egypt. He had been wounded in the upper part of the leg and arm but while lying waiting to be dressed Trooper Ravenscroft received a shrapnel wound in the head. Sergeant **Raymond Bateman** of the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry played for several seasons with Aylesbury United Reserves and, on occasion, for the first team. On active service in 1916 he received shrapnel wounds to both legs and the right arm. He was invalided home to recover at Chester Hospital.

Two regular Aylesbury United first team players were decorated for bravery.

**Tom Hearn** was captain of United for a number of years before the war, but also represented the Berks and Bucks



Pte William Dormer  
Photo: Bucks Advertiser & Aylesbury News



Sgt Tom Hearn  
Photo: Bucks Advertiser & Aylesbury News



Sgt Arthur Disbury  
Photo: [www.oxonandbucks.co.uk](http://www.oxonandbucks.co.uk)



FA, including in a game played in Brussels, Belgium, in 1910. He joined the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry at the outbreak of war and gained the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) in 1917 during fighting. When his company commander was killed Tom assisted in reorganising the company and consolidating the new position. The DCM was a decoration established in 1854 by Queen Victoria for gallantry in the field. It is the oldest British award for gallantry and was a second level military decoration, ranking below the Victoria Cross, until it was discontinued in 1993. Tom Hearn returned to football immediately after the war and was once again appointed captain of Aylesbury United. Sergeant **Alfred Disbury**, also of the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, was awarded the Military Medal (MM) for taking his platoon of 14 men under a heavy gas bombardment to reinforce their comrades while fighting off an Austrian attack on the Asiago front, Italy, in 1918 - and also for bombing an enemy machine gun post! The MM was established in 1916 and was

awarded to soldiers for "acts of gallantry and devotion to duty under fire". Arthur was another to play regularly for United's reserves and for the first team from time-to-time. His son, Ronald Disbury, also played for Aylesbury United Minors, Aylesbury Swifts and the Bucks Territorials between the wars. Ronald was mentioned in despatches for his involvement in the 1<sup>st</sup> Bucks Battalion's rearguard action at Hazebrouck, France, to protect the British Army's withdrawal to Dunkirk in May 1940. Some 340 officers and men of the Bucks Battalion, including Sergeant Major Ronald Disbury, were captured and held as prisoners for the rest of the war.

### After the war

When the war ended in November 1918 football returned to normal remarkably quickly. By September 1919 Aylesbury United were well prepared for their new season and played their first game - a friendly - against Chesham United (a new amalgamation of Chesham Town and Chesham Generals) on

Saturday, 13 September at the Printing Works ground. Playing in front of more than 500 people, Aylesbury won 4-3.

The team, however, was very different to the one that represented the club in April 1914, and only striker Aaron Ellis survived from the side that had won the club's first Berks and Bucks Senior Cup five years earlier. For Aylesbury's first Spartan League game of the season - on 20 September, again at home - former captain Oscar Horne and defender Reginald Dandridge returned to join Ellis. Full back Halsey also rejoined the squad later in the season. Tom Hearn and Thomas Roché - who had been Aylesbury United Reserve regulars before the war - were also available for the first team.

The 1919-1920 season failed to deliver any trophies for Aylesbury United, although they finished a creditable fourth in the Spartan League. The club also returned to a sound financial footing.

## World War 2: another generation is lost

In the 1920s and 1930s Aylesbury United had made significant progress as a football club, becoming more technically competent and competitive. They became well established in the top tier of the Spartan League (which had expanded to at least three divisions per season) throughout this period and won the League's Western Division in 1928/29. In 1932/33 United were relegated from the Premier Division but returned in 1934/35. They were relegated and promoted again before the start of World War 2.

After the end of World War 1 junior football had also developed well across Aylesbury district. As well as the first team the club also fielded Aylesbury United Minors (a youth "nursery") and Aylesbury United Reserves. All of the talented young men who perished in World War 2 came mainly from these teams.

**Victor Clarke:** For no obvious reason Victor's name is not included on the Aylesbury United memorial. However, he was a well known local footballer and he played in the Aylesbury United Minors side that won the Anstey Minor Cup\* in April 1938 (beating Wendover Minors 5-0). Victor joined the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry on the outbreak of the war and served in France. Private Clarke was killed in the Battle of Dunkirk aged just 19 on 28 May 1940, and his name is recorded on the Dunkirk Memorial, northern France.

**Walter Cross:** Another to play in the Anstey Minor Cup final in 1938, Walter also played several times for the Reserves. Before joining the RAF in July 1940 Walter worked as a clerk in Aylesbury Post Office. He was promoted to sergeant in 1942 and was commissioned in 1943, but was killed in air operations over Germany on 31 August that year

*\*This trophy was donated by the Rev Arthur Anstey, a star player and former captain of Aylesbury United after the club was formed in 1897. Anstey went on to become Bishop of the West Indies and his cup was competed for until the 1970s.*

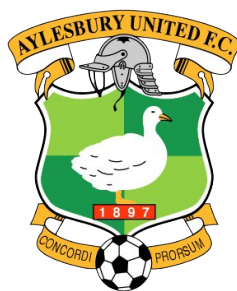
aged 23. Pilot Officer Cross is buried at Rheinberg War Cemetery, Germany.

**Ronald Evans:** Prior to the outbreak of World War 2 Ronald, despite still being a teenager, was regarded as an experienced member of the Aylesbury United squad and scored one of the five goals against Wendover Minors in the 1938 Anstey Minor Cup Final. He was also a very talented athlete who represented Buckinghamshire and - competing in Wycombe Phoenix Harriers' colours - he won the Buckinghamshire senior long jump championship in 1938. Lance Bombardier Ronald Evans was serving with the Royal Bucks Yeomanry Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, when he was killed in action on 27 May 1940 aged 19. His name is also recorded on the Dunkirk Memorial.

**Leslie Greenhalgh:** A well respected member of the "Goalkeepers Union" Leslie too played for both Aylesbury United's Minors and Reserves teams, and was "between the sticks" for United in their Anstey Minor Cup Final win in 1938. In March 1944 he married Brenda North but sadly, just a few months later, while serving with 245 Squadron, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, Flight Lieutenant Greenhalgh was killed in action over France on 7 June 1944, aged 22. He is buried at Espins Churchyard, south of Caen, northern France.

**Alfred Rolfe:** A particularly bright star in Aylesbury United's youth firmament before the war, Arthur quickly became a regular in the Aylesbury United Minors side of 1938 (he scored one of the five goals in his side's 5-0 win over Wendover Minors in the 1938 Anstey Minor Cup Final). Arthur joined the Army at the age of 18 when he served with the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry before being transferred to the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Durham Light Infantry. Private Rolfe died on 14 June 1944, aged 21, in northern France and is buried at the Bayeux War Cemetery.

**Henry Welch:** Henry was a regular member of the Aylesbury United Reserves and captained the side in 1937. He signed for the club again in August 1938, but just three months later he was granted a transfer to Wendover FC to play for the first team. He married Winifred Bateman at Holy Trinity Church, Walton, a few days after Christmas 1939. Henry, who had been a regular soldier before the war, was sent to France shortly after his wedding but was evacuated from Dunkirk in 1940. Lieutenant Henry Welch, at the age of 30, was serving with the East Surrey Regiment when he was killed in action in France on 19 June 1944. He, too, is buried at Bayeux War Cemetery.



### Sources and acknowledgements

*Aylesbury United Football Club  
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