

Part 3 in our look at teams that could've made an impact on the Football League, but didn't....This week Nelson FC by Stuart Fuller

Ninety years ago, Northern Lancashire had a wealth of teams playing in the Football League. The powerhouses of Preston North End, Burnley, Blackburn Rovers and er Accrington Stanley fought out keen local derbies in front of packed houses and had been founder members of the Football League 125 years ago. All four of these sides are today still doing battle at various levels of the footballing pyramid, and have enjoyed their fair share of the limelight for good and bad reasons. But it hasn't always been a Lancastrian quartet. Some pretenders have come but all have since disappeared. The names of Darwen and Blackburn Olympic are etched in footballing history (as covered by David Hartrick in his excellent book 50 Teams That Mattered) but one name that came, saw and then complete disappeared is Nelson FC.

Nelson is a small town on the edge of Burnley. It is notable for having some of the lowest house prices in the United Kingdom, where you can still buy a two bedroom terrace for less than £20,000. But for ten years the town could also boast a Football League side that went on to beat one of the biggest and most famous teams in the world.

After forty years in the Lancashire Leagues Nelson Football Club applied to join the Football League when they announced the expansion of the divisions to accommodate the new regional third tier in 1920. They had the requisite facilities, with their Seedhill ground holding 15,000 but it was still surprising for many their application was successful, especially as the previous season they had only managed a 17th place finish in the Central League. Come the start of the following season they kicked off life as a Football League side on 27 August 1921 in front of 9,000 against Wigan Borough, taking the lead in the 2nd minute of the game when Billy Halligan scored, before falling to a 2-1 defeat. However just a few weeks later they gained revenge on Borough with their first ever league win, coming away from Springfield Park with a 4-1 win which saw them top the Football League Third Division (North) for the first time.

A 16th place finish in that first season didn't suggest anything more than consolidation after so long as a Non-League side but the next season under the guidance of player-manager David Wilson the club won the Third Division North title at a canter. The squad was almost completely rebuilt with three figure sums (a lot of money at the time) paid to bring in talent such as Mike McCulloch from Hearts and Dick Crawshaw from Halifax Town. The team were prone to the odd high scoring defeat such as the opening day 6-2 drubbing at Bradford Park Avenue, 5-1 at Hartlepoons United and 5-0 against Walsall. The other interesting thing to note in the season was that apart from a few exceptions, games were played back to back – the 6-2 opening day defeat to Park Avenue was followed up a week later by a 1-0 win at home to the same team.

The team's adventure in the second tier of English football lasted just a season as they finished in 21st place in 1923/24. Prior to the start of the following season they had embarked on a pre-season tour of Spain that saw them play Racing Santander, Real Oviedo and then amazingly Real Madrid. In fact Nelson's 4-2 win in Madrid gave them the honour of being the first English side to beat Real at home. There were few high points during the season though as they struggled with the step up in class, although they did beat Manchester United at Old Trafford – hardly a major achievement these days as it was 90 years ago!

The following season they looked to bounce straight back, but a second place finish proved to be the highpoint of their remaining time as a Football League club. With only one team promoted from the Third Division North the club missed promotion and the subsequent seasons saw them fade from prominence. In May 1928 they were forced to seek re-election for the first time after finishing in 22nd place in the third tier of English football. Fortunately they retained their place at the expense of Durham City. But three years later they were not so lucky after again finishing rock bottom of the league. After an initial tied vote with Chester City a recount was held and Nelson lost their Football League status by one vote.

The club took its place in the Lancashire Combination with avowed intent to gain their place back, but five seasons later after failing with their application to gain promotion the club's debts proved too much and they entered bankruptcy.

Today, a reformed club play in the North West Counties League One. They left their Seedhill ground in 1971, with the ground being demolished in 1980 to make way for the M65 motorway and moved down the road to Victoria Park which is more than adequate for the standard of football they play today. Whilst the club may have loftier ambitions, the presence of so many league clubs in a small area means they will always struggle to attract fans and so the thought of Football League football will always be a memory handed down from Grandfather to Grandchildren.