

THE WORLD'S OLDEST FOOTBALL TEAM - Stuart Fuller finds a 156-year-old team playing in a pub car park

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Real Madrid and which other football club have been awarded the FIFA Order of Merit, the highest honour that could be bestowed by the Gods of Football? Barcelona? Manchester United? The great Ajax team from the 1970s? Wrong on all counts.

The honour, bestowed back in 2004, went to a club who play in the eighth step of English football, who see less than 250 people come through the turnstiles every fortnight. This is the ultimate football trivia question, unless of course you have read the excellent *50 Teams that Mattered* by David Hartrick and know the answer is Sheffield FC, the world's oldest football club.

Back in 1855, members of a Sheffield cricket club organised an informal kickabout with a medicine ball. Two of the players decided that they preferred the game to cricket and so formed Sheffield Football Club. The inaugural meeting of Sheffield FC took place on 24 October 1857 and, initially, games were played amongst club members and took the format of "Married v Singles" or "Professionals v the Rest", as there weren't any other clubs around until 1860, when local side Hallam were formed.

The club drew up a list of rules by which the game should be played, known as Sheffield Rules. These first laws of the game included the fact that players could handle the ball, though not catch it; could push each other over but not kick or trip; and each player should come prepared with their own red-and-blue-flannel cap.

Not only did Sheffield give us the beautiful game, they're a club that has a habit of collecting firsts. First football club, first winners of the FIFA Order of Merit, and first and only club to win an FA Cup tie on the toss of a coin, back in 1873 against Shropshire Wanderers.

Despite all they did for the foundation of the game, within a couple of decades they were amateur outsiders looking in at the developing professional game. They won the 1904 Amateur Cup against Ealing, a competition that they championed, but a few years later they moved into the local leagues where they stayed until only five years ago, finally earning a place in the Northern Premier League.

That same season, Sheffield celebrated their 150th anniversary with a game against a small side from Italy at Bramall Lane, the club's original home. Almost 18,500 turned up to see Pele introduce Inter Milan as opponents for the celebratory match, which the Italians won 5-2.

Now the world's oldest club plays its home games in the Coach and Horses pub car park, which is all part of one of the best away days in non-league football, with a raft of local beers from the Thornbridge brewery and some outstanding food - including black pudding fritters and wild swan sausages (named after a beer, not the bird) – to choose from.

Inside the ground you cannot fail to be impressed by the list of club members displayed on a wall: Pele, Joseph Blatter, Jack Warner (still listed as a FIFA vice-president which is a bit of a joke), Sir Bobby Charlton, Clare Tomlinson and the drummer from Def Leppard.

With the FA celebrating its 125th anniversary, it's worth remembering that more than 25 years previous, the fine fellows from Sheffield FC were plotting tactics against the likes of Hallam, and the third oldest club still in existence, Cray Wanderers. Sheffield FC – we salute you!