

CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS

Pre 1895

During the early to mid 1890s, there were already a large number of football clubs, mostly amateur, but some professional, in existence in and around the Canning Town and West Ham district of the East End of London. The most notable ranged from the successful Clapton club, the re-formed Upton Park, Park Grove, West Ham Garfield and Claremont Athletic to the north of the district, to St Luke's, South West Ham, Old St Luke's and Castle Swifts in the south. To the west of the area were the Commercial Athletic and Millwall Athletic clubs, with the latter playing their home games at East Ferry Road, Isle of Dogs and turning professional in 1893. When the Southern League was formed in 1894/95 Millwall won the title in the competition's initial season. Further to the east were Barking Woodville, Barking and the Leyton club, which was to briefly embrace professionalism later in the decade, and Ilford who spent two seasons in the Southern League. At the end of 1895/96 Ilford quit the competition and lowered its sights after failing to gain a solitary point from 18 matches.

Many other clubs with varying abilities came and went over this period and one such club that had a briefer life than most was Castle Swifts, a club that can be said to have had a considerable influence on the formation of Thames Ironworks FC.

On the banks of the River Lea opposite the Thames Ironworks & Shipbuilding Company lay the ship repair yards of the Castle Shipping Line under the trading name of Donald Currie & Co. Employees at those yards were mainly Scots who came south to work for the shipping magnate Sir Donald Currie, who was responsible for the creation of the Castle Shipping Line in 1862, later in 1900 to be merged with the rival Union Line and become the famous Union Castle Line.

In September 1892 the Castle Swifts FC was born with most of the team initially being drawn from members of the Scottish workforce at Donald Currie & Co. The club's first home ground was at the field opposite West Ham Police station in West Ham Lane. The ground was enclosed, with a charge of 3d for admission and it was named 'Dunottar Park' after the Company's steamship 'Dunottar Castle' built in 1890, a ship that sailed on her maiden voyage from Southampton with the British rugby team on board for a tour of South Africa. Donald Currie himself presented the South African Rugby Authority with a handsome gold cup for internal competition and the Currie Cup has remained the holy grail of South African rugby right to this day. Amongst other voyages the Dunottar Castle was to carry General Buller and 1500 British troops to the Boer War in South Africa in 1900.

Castle Swifts FC did not have long to enjoy its first home however. Through a dispute with the landlord the club were obliged to quit, but a new ground was soon found not far from East Ham railway station, in fields flanking Wakefield Street, known as Temple Meadows in the grounds of Temple House. This was conveniently situated for changing purposes at the nearby Denmark Inn (now the Denmark Arms, and a watering hole for a pre-match drink for 21st Century West Ham fans).

Local leagues had not quite got off the ground at this time and the fixtures of the Castle Swifts were made up of cup-ties and friendly matches, although the latter were very much fought out in a competitive manner. The club also ran a youth side calling themselves Castle Swifts Juveniles and they had many victories against local minor teams.

Throughout this last decade of the 19th Century, despite our preconceived notions of Victorian efficiency, players and officials had to suffer inconsistencies in

the rail transport system. Combined with this was the fact that most amateurs were obliged to work on a Saturday morning which meant a struggle to meet certain connections with horse drawn buses and steam trains. Referees, certainly at amateur level, appear to have been given a fair degree of flexibility and left to their own judgement regarding any amendment to kick off times or for bringing the game to a conclusion. It was not unknown for a match to be turned round at half-time and the whole ninety minutes played off in one period. On occasions whole teams might arrive late and at other times individual players could miss the start of a match. It must be remembered that there were no substitutes to fall back on, perhaps just a twelfth man taken only as a last resort.

An example of this type of situation came in Castle Swifts first season when they met St Luke's in a London Junior Cup tie in November 1892. The kick-off was originally scheduled for ten minutes to three, which for a murky, late autumn day was not exactly early anyway. Even so, one player on each side failed to arrive for the start. When they did make an appearance, at different times, the referee must have decided that such interruptions were time consuming for he did not blow his whistle for half-time until nineteen minutes to four, i. e. six minutes for wasted time! Due to this decision he allowed an interval of four minutes only, so the second half began at a quarter to four, but because the light was fading badly the referee blew for time at 4.21, nine minutes short. The game was not considered abandoned and was not replayed. This was far from an isolated case, but matches cut short by fog appear to have been treated more stringently.

Castle Swifts enjoyed good support from its company employees, and at the above match the local press reported somewhat amusingly that *a number of the fair sex were present, 'maistly Scotch' to judge from their enthusiastic shouts. 'Eh, the canny laddies' and 'stick to the ba Mac.'*

Although the club lost the above match it had quite a splendid first season. It was understood to be a professional concern from the outset, but this was not strictly true as it was more likely to have been a semi-professional or sham amateur outfit with the majority of their players being Scottish employees of Donald Currie & Co., paid on a game-to-game basis. Even in the club's first campaign amateurs were engaged such as the McFarlane brothers (A. & W.) who were members of the Upton Park club re-formed in 1891. This mix of Company team spirit and first class experience from outside helped to pave way for a path to the final of the West Ham Charity Cup (played at the Spotted Dog ground) in which the club emerged victorious after beating Barking Woodville by 4-2, after being two goals down. For the record, the Castle Swifts line up was:- Lewis, A. McFarlane, Benbow, Leith, W. McFarlane, Baird, Murray, Mitchell, Fraser, Taylor, Grundy (Scorers Grundy, Mitchell, Taylor and one own goal).

The local press reported that *'After the match the crowd made a rush to the Grand Stand where the Mayor presented the large silver cup to the captain of the Castle Swifts and Mr Comerford of the Cup Committee announced that 'the medals had not yet come to hand, but they would be forwarded to the winners as soon as possible'. With that the captain was lifted on to the shoulders of several of his followers and carried from the ground.'*

The following season of 1893/94 saw a further number of individuals that were certainly not professionals making appearances in the Castle Swifts team; they included Walter Parks, John Wood and William Hickman, who were officially members of the Old St Luke's club and future players of Thames Ironworks FC. Whether their inclusion in the side was due to injuries or through lack of choice of good players within the works of Donald Currie & Co. is not known, but at the end of the season Castle Swifts amalgamated with Old St Luke's and played their home

games on the latter club's ground at Hermit Road, Canning Town. This venue would also have the benefit of convenience as it became increasingly obvious that their current home at Temple Meadows, East Ham was too far from their work's base on the banks of the River Lea.

It is of interest to note that at the time of the amalgamation, Old St Luke's honorary secretary was Mr A. C. Davis, who was later to become a Director of West Ham United in two spells from 1900 to 1906 and 1923 to 1949.

The amalgamation of the two outfits saw the new club competing, unsurprisingly, under the name of Old Castle Swifts in 1894/95, and although there was no silverware to add to that which was won two seasons before, the vast majority of matches ended in victory, including a splendid 4-0 conquest of Woolwich Arsenal reserves in January 1895. Naturally, there were a number of ex-Old St Luke's players in the side at various times such as Furnell, Butterworth, Sage, Morrison, Wood, Parks and Stewart. All would later appear for Thames Ironworks FC with most of them already in employment at the shipyard. In addition, Old Castle Swifts obtained ex-Millwall players such as Willing, Cunningham, Jamie Lindsay and Frank McCulloch, with the last two named eventually appearing for the 'Irons'. Even Bob Stevenson, Thames' future captain, although still on Arsenal's books, turned out for Old Castle Swifts in March 1895, just a few weeks before the club collapsed and disappeared from the footballing scene altogether.

It is not known why the club's demise came so suddenly. Perhaps their initial decision to pay their players turned out to be an unnecessary expense. Considering their gradual acceptance of local amateur players into the team this could well have been the case. Maybe there was not the drive and ambition to push the club on that there was to be at Thames Ironworks, or maybe it was not considered to be important enough to consistently spend extra money upon. After all, were it not for the financial backing of Mr Arnold Hills, in the five year existence of Thames Ironworks FC and his involvement in the early years of West Ham United, football in the East End of London may have followed a very different path.

It is worth recording that after Old Castle Swifts 'went under' at the end of March 1895, a pre-arranged fixture with St Luke's was fulfilled by their ex-players on 16th April, and for this one match only they went under the original name of Old St Luke's. The side included Furnell, Butterworth, Cooper, Morton, Parks and Wood, all keen players eager to get a game whatever the name of the club!

'Champing at the bit' after the demise of Old Castle Swifts was the St Luke's club whose ground was situated off the old Beckton Road. (There never had been any connections with the defunct Old St Luke's). At their AGM on 4th September 1895, the Secretary's report proved the club to be in a sound condition. Mr Anderson, Chairman of the club, stated that '...now the Old Castle Swifts are no longer in opposition there is room to make the club one of the best in the south of England. We have a good team, and the committee expects that every member of it will do his utmost to further the interests of the club.' Dave Furnell, who had now joined the team after the fall of the Old Castle Swifts, was elected as captain, with Butterworth also ex-Old Castle Swifts, as vice-captain. Decisions were made to compete for the London Senior Cup, Essex Senior Cup and the West Ham Charity Cup and also participation in the first season of the South Essex League.

The Beckton-based club did not realise at this time what impact the introduction of a works team from the local shipbuilding yards would have on the future of football in the area, ignoring the fact that a number of experienced players employed at Thames Ironworks had already 'kicked the leather' for a number of local sides including Old St Luke's, Castle Swifts, South West Ham, Plaistow Melville and Park Grove.

In that 1895/96 season, the 'Saints' did, however, enjoy a good campaign. The South Essex League came into existence and the club finished runners-up to Leyton, beating the eventual champions 4-1 in their home fixture. In fact, any other season would have seen them finish top, as they won nine and drew one of their twelve matches with a goal difference of 40 for and 15 against.

It was something of a surprise therefore, that the following season saw the club collapse. They were defeated by Ilford in the F.A. Cup at the end of October 1896 and withdrew from the South Essex League in the following January, after fulfilling less than a handful of fixtures.

All local clubs at this time, whether their existence was short or not seemed to have a hard core of support, but like today, there was always the irresponsible element. After St Luke's cup-tie defeat, the referee Mr Kirkup, was proceeding along Beckton Road towards the Abbey Arms when he received a severe blow from a stone thrown by a youth, who was later apprehended and, it was said, 'taken to the lock-up'.

Another club in close proximity to the Ironworks was South West Ham. Like parish side St Luke's, they had been formed in the 1880s and were the first in the district to give local working-men an opportunity to take part in 'the athletic and healthy pursuit of football and experience a competitive winter sport.' The team provided some excellent players over the years, including Billy Barnes, who also appeared for Thames Ironworks in 1895/96, Sheffield United and West Ham United, and went on to have along professional career, and Aubrey Fair who captained Russell Road schoolboys as a fourteen year old and later spent six seasons with West Ham United from 1901.

South West Ham's splendid enclosure and headquarters were close by Tidal Basin Railway station and the ground was used for cricket in the summer months as it had been since 1874 when the cricket club was formed. With easy ground access and the nearby facility of a frequent train service to the City, the club were in a good position to promote themselves further, but they were not particularly ambitious, being content to exist as an amateur outfit and serve the local community. The football club continued into the early years of the 20th Century, but the cricket club were a successful side, enjoying their best period in the 1920s when they included players of County standard, one being bowler Jimmy Harrold, who also played as an amateur footballer for West Ham United, albeit in the reserve side. When Silvertown Way was built in the early 1930s the whole ground was swept away, and the club had to move to a pitch at the rear of West Ham Stadium, but the club became defunct at the start of World War II.*

As far as football was concerned Thames formed a close relationship with the 'Pink Uns' as the South West Ham club was known, and several of the Ironwork's employees had periods of playing for both clubs at various times.

So the period surrounding the birth of Thames Ironworks FC was a time of constant change. The St Luke's club (the 'Saints') established for around ten years, collapsed in January 1897. Old St Luke's (the 'Old Uns') also around since the 1880s, were amalgamated with Castle Swifts, a club formed in 1892 with high hopes and business backing, but after becoming Old Castle Swifts were dead and buried by 1895. South West Ham (the 'Pink Uns') and Thames Ironworks (the 'Irons') both existed side by side throughout the last five years of the nineteenth century, but both were

* *South West Ham played in the South Essex League (from 1895/96) and later the Eastern Suburban League (1899/1900). It has been suggested that the club were previously known as the Victoria Swifts but this is incorrect. The latter, although playing in the same area of Victoria Docks, played in the London Minor League over the same period of time. South West Ham took them over in 1900. Charlie Paynter, a future manager of West Ham United, originally played for Victoria Swifts and South West Ham before signing for West Ham United, where he played in the reserve team until joining the training staff.*

heading in different directions. All those clubs can be said to have definite links and some bearing on the birth and formative years of Thames Ironworks FC, but it would not have been possible without a considerable number of working men, who after a hard week's toil, were eager play the game for some or all of the teams at one time or another over those years. Almost forgotten in the mists of time, these small, modest, unpretentious clubs should be recognised as the foundations upon which Thames Ironworks FC and its successor, West Ham United grew to become larger and more ambitious.

The popularity of the game in the 1890s also saw the advent of minor football. That is to say another level existed outside that of schools' football. Some clubs ran junior sides such as the Castle Swifts Juveniles and Thames Ironworks Juniors. We have already seen that Castle Swifts amalgamated with Old St Luke's, but in 1892/93 a minor side of 13 year-old boys was formed calling themselves Old St Luke's. Whether the team was a junior side of the original club is not known, but the lads stayed together as a team and after their first four seasons they had the incredible record of having played 114 matches with 104 wins, 3 draws and seven defeats with 558 goals for and 49 against! As the younger men matured the club provided five players for the 'Irons' including Fred Corbett and James Bigden, who both eventually went on to play for West Ham United and then continued their careers with other clubs.

It must also be acknowledged that there were two clubs in the wider area of the local district that had an earlier influence, albeit indirectly. Firstly Upton Park, one of the oldest clubs in the south, formed in 1866, just three years after the formation of the Football Association, who played their matches in West Ham Park. They were one of the fifteen original entries in the first-ever F.A. Cup competition of 1871/72 and participated for many seasons afterwards. Players of the 'Scarlet & Black' gained representative honours for both London and Essex and some made full international appearances such as Clem Mitchell who played for England on five occasions. Charles Alcock, recognised as the founding father of the Football Association and organiser of the modern game, was a member of the club from 1869 to 1872. Upton Park, unwittingly, played a part in the recognition of professionalism in the game in 1884, when after an F.A. Cup tie at Preston, they appealed to the F.A. that the home side had fielded paid players and Preston were subsequently disqualified from the competition. There had already been rumours of payments to players of northern clubs so the F.A.'s decision was significant as the problem was brought to a head. The following year, after a vote, professionalism was accepted and the whole structure of the game was altered for ever.

Most of the members of the Upton Park club were drawn from the nearby area of Forest Gate, a district full of large houses and upper class residents, and the majority of the players in the side were ex-public schoolboys; their occupations ranged from surgeons to solicitors, stockbrokers, surveyors, barristers, clergymen, accountants, tea merchants and many more of that ilk. This was a club of pure amateur players, built on the idea of 'muscular Christianity', where professionalism was taboo, and only the elite of society would be accepted. The idea that a riveter, a boilermaker or a plate-layer from the local shipbuilding yards would take his place in the side would not be considered at this time.

To their credit, ex-University and public school men did spread the gospel of the game far and wide from the 1870s onwards, unaware perhaps of the social impact that the sport would have, especially in the north of England, where the administrators there quickly turned it into a 'business first, sport second', with local working men finding a financial reward for their athletic endeavours. Unfortunately, with the administrators seeking instant success the locals in these clubs would soon

find themselves forced out by the pure professionals recruited from Scotland and other parts of the kingdom. Meanwhile the pure amateur at Upton Park, with the only reward that of being able to play the game, would continue to appear for his local side or any club close by that was 'untainted' with professionalism. Gradually however, the influence of the Old Boy teams from the universities would decline, as did the Upton Park club, which was wound up in 1887.

Although the club rose again in 1891, with its acceptance procedure not so strictly enforced and including such local working lads as Ernie and Fred Roberts, Upton Park FC never regained the reputation that it previously enjoyed. There is an interesting post-script to their 'second coming'; the club was chosen to represent Great Britain in the 1900 Olympic tournament in Paris and won the competition beating France in the final without celebration and very little post-match publicity!

Arnold Hills, Chairman and Managing Director of Thames Ironworks & Shipbuilding Co. was an ex-public schoolboy and university man himself, and was instrumental in the foundation and establishment of his company's football club. He had also enjoyed a successful footballing career in his earlier days, playing for Oxford University in the F.A. Cup Final of 1877 and gaining a runners-up medal. Two years later he was capped for England against Scotland. His sporting prowess also extended to athletics as he was the A.A.A. one-mile champion whilst at Oxford.

There were no firm links between Thames and the Upton Park club, although solicitor Harold Lafone, a brother-in-law of Arnold Hills, was a member of Upton Park FC from 1881 to 1886, and played at outside-left in the first ever London Senior Cup final when the club beat Old Foresters 4-0 in 1883.

The other successful and reputable club in the district was Clapton FC. They conveniently came into the limelight in 1888 after Upton Park disappeared from the scene one year earlier. As London Junior Cup holders they moved to the Spotted Dog ground in Upton Lane at that time, a venue that had been previously used by St Bartholomews Hospital. In the following season they won the London Senior Cup, beating Royal Arsenal on the way to the final, and the Middlesex Senior Cup. 1890 saw them lift the West Ham Charity Cup followed by the Essex Senior Cup in 1891. The club was therefore well established with a number of trophies in the cabinet by the time the 'Irons' came on the scene.

Considering that Clapton was purely amateur, the club's committee was not lacking in enterprise, often arranging a number of fixtures against Football League opposition and competing in several cup competitions including the F.A. Cup. They were founder members of the Metropolitan Amateur League, and also the Southern League, which originated in 1894. Entry into the latter however, proved to be a mistake as most of the opposing clubs were already professional outfits, with the remainder soon to follow. With a poor playing record after two seasons, and realising that trying to compete on a regular basis with professionals was not to their advantage, they withdrew. On the plus side a number of the team members gained representative honours with London F.A.

Most of Clapton's players came from a middle to upper class background, but the ability, quality and skill of the men in the side overrode any matters of class distinction between the club and its supporters, who were mainly the workers of the Great Eastern Railway employed at the nearby Stratford Works, where there was a large enough base to maintain healthy support of the club providing it continued to produce the entertainment for which it was renowned, which it did over the last decade of the 19th Century despite the ever encroaching advance of the professional clubs which would however, eventually lure support away to the developing West Ham United and the more-established Tottenham Hotspur.

During its peak period the Clapton club, affectionately known as the 'doggies', had a regular following of 4,000 spectators. The amazing thing is that they all entered through a small gate, one by one. There was no shelter, and the field was initially just roped off, until iron rails later replaced the ropes. Originally players used a barn as a dressing room until the 'Spotted Dog' pub was used for a period of time. The first improvements came when wooden crate sides were laid down for standing, and a small member's stand erected where accommodation was provided for four members of the Press. After well over one hundred years, the Spotted Dog ground is one of the oldest remaining, despite some very close calls to develop it.

Over this great decade of change, with the blossoming of some clubs and the demise of others, and the growth in the number of players and the increase in spectators from 1890 to the dawn of the 20th Century, the local district has been rightly described as a hotbed of football. In the early part of the 1890s however, the football editor of the 'West Ham Herald' was not satisfied with the progress of the game in London and stated his case for the future in his football editorial in January 1892 after a week-end of F.A. Cup matches:-

'I wonder what the London players think of themselves. Not a single team can get through the first round, and yet you hear on some sides of London very soon becoming the centre of Association football. It will have to vastly improve before such an event occurs. The reverses the Southern teams have met with should be the means of causing them to look to their laurels, and to give such attention to football as would place them on a footing, at any rate, with the Northern and Midland clubs. How long the players of the South will allow themselves to be eclipsed by their Northern confreres is a question that requires immediate attention. There has been plenty of talk about starting a first-class team for London, but hitherto matters have ended in talk only. Surely, there is now sufficient enthusiasm in the game to support a good team in London, and it is my firm conviction that in no part of London would such a team take better than in Forest Gate—easy of access and full of football enthusiasts. We have, it is true, some fair teams in the neighbourhood, and as football goes in the South, Forest Gate is more fortunate than most places, and the clubs get well patronized. But only fancy what support a club would get which could announce fixtures with the League clubs and hold its own against them.'

The writer of the above must have had an insight into the future or a crystal ball as there certainly would be a club in the vicinity of Forest Gate within a dozen years of his above article at the nearby Boleyn ground at Upton Park, although it would not be until 1919 that the West Ham United club would be competing with Football League sides after a number of seasons in the Southern League.

The argument, however, of there being no first-class team in London at that time (1892) would soon be proved a fallacy as Woolwich Arsenal entered the Football League Division Two in 1893, Fulham in 1907 and Tottenham Hotspur in 1908. All those clubs had progressed from humble beginnings but as for the Chelsea club, it did not exist until 1905 when Mr H. A. Mears, a rich man by the standards of the day and who owned Stamford Bridge decided to develop it as a football venue and 'manufacture' a new club by persuading star players from other clubs to join the new venture. Forgive the author's cynicism, but it seems a bit familiar somehow!

Footnote: In other local histories and those of West Ham United it is stated that Old Castle Swifts amalgamated with St Luke's. This is not correct. Old St Luke's and St Luke's were two distinct clubs that had existed since the 1880s and often met in opposition. As explained in this chapter, the Castle Swifts club was formed in 1892 and amalgamated with Old St Luke's for the 1893/94 season, becoming Old Castle Swifts. After two seasons the club collapsed. It was not until halfway through Thames Ironworks' second season in January 1897 that St Luke's also disbanded.