

# Triumph and Tragedy

May 1926 - May 1951

By

Tom Walsh.

Along with the whole (almost) of Wigan I watched this year's Cup Final. I found it incredulous that the video referees decided to disallow Tony Clubb's try which arguably cost Wigan a 20th Challenge Cup win. Although to be fair Shaun Wane said Hull were worthy winners. I'll go by the mantra, Hull deserved to win but Wigan should have won.

After watching this game my mind turned to games of yesteryear, and the history of the game. My family is steeped in Rugby League. My Dad particularly so, me much less because of circumstance. I did however pay my 'Thrupenny Bit' to watch from 'The Hen Pen' every Saturday. Being a St.Pats ( the cradle the game in Wigan and arguably Lancashire ) lad and with my Dads history, many of my family thought I might take up the game seriously, alas from my early years it was very clear to everybody, including me I wouldn't make the grade, nor to be fair to get anywhere near. When playing at school and I saw someone, usually much bigger, charging towards me I thought it was a good idea to let another player have the ball pronto!

My Dads involvement with the game started in the 1920s He was a member of St Patrick's team when they won the inaugural Daily Dispatch Shield final in 1926 beating Widnes St. Bede's, whilst he didn't score he got a good critique in that week's Wigan Observer. Amazingly for a schoolboy match, the attendance for that game was 16.000. The semifinal in which St.Pats eventually (alter a reply) beat the old enemy St Helens High Grade, three points to Nil. Both games were played at Central Park, the semifinal drawing a crowd of 12.000 each game played on a Wednesday which makes the figures even more remarkable. Just a thought, the first semifinals game that ended in a draw was played at St.Helens that game watched by just 3000 spectators. I wonder if the discrepancy could be used in the oft repeated debate, which is the greater Rugby Town, as I said just a thought!

1926 had been a very difficult year economically and politically speaking. A general strike had been called on the 4th of May. The final was played on 12th of May the day after the General Strike had been called off. Briain was in turmoil, strikers in Northumberland derailed the Flying Scotsman train, there was great unease across the land. Baldwin declared that 'Britain is 'threatened with a revolution'. Tuesday 11 May: The TUC called off the strike. The strikers are taken by surprise, but drift back to work. The miners struggle on alone until November when they are forced to go back to work for less pay and longer hours. The final must have been a great source of pride for the town at such a difficult period in the history of our country, and I must admit a feeling of satisfaction; that it was 'the lads' from my parish who lifted the spirits of the town, in this one the darkest of times, certainly in peacetime.

Another distraction in these troubled times , part of the final was filmed and shown at The Princess Cinema the following week, it must have been a great novelty in the early years on cinema. It would be a great part of the history of Rugby League if that film came ever came to light, unlikely, but stranger things happen. One piece of film that has survived is the Leigh team meeting The Duke of York, later George VI, in 1934, for those with computers if can be downloaded from Pathe News, it's a very short clip, but for me seeing my Dad on film, years before I was born is quite moving.

My Dad went on to play professionally for Leigh, Dewsbury and Castleford, in 1933 he was Leigh's top try scorer and top goal kicker. He played a part in the failed attempt to widen the games appeal, from its northern power base, signing for a London team, Streatham and Mitcham, in 1936

. After some initial success the experiment failed. The concept was doomed from the outset not only the distances needing to be travelled every week but the greater appeal of Rugby Union to our southern cousins!

Wembley 1951, Wigan versus Barrow . Wigan are triumphant 10-0, Ces Mountford Wigan wins the Lance Todd Trophy. I mentioned tragedy in the title of this article and although I can recall the event quite vividly. I was very young and have relied heavily on reports in The Wigan Observer and the now defunct Wigan Examiner, along with memories from Russ Calland who is part of the story. Amidst the the scenes of joyfulness and merriment in London, in Wigan there was heartbreak for one family and a neighbourhood. A coach carrying fans from Bottling Wood was involved in a fatal accident. It left there at about 11-45 pm on the Friday before the match. It had traveled only a mile or so, when disaster struck as it negotiated Scholes crossing it was hit broadside by a double decker bus coming from its left. The force of the impact sending the coach careering into Callands Book Shop. Russ Calland, 13 at the time, clearly remember his brother's bed being moved across the room such was the force of the impact. One lady, Jane Houghton (48), a Mother of 8, from Bottling Wood was killed, there were 37 people injured including Jane Houghton's husband who sustained head injuries. I think it was this accident that was the catalyst for traffic lights being installed at this crossing. I can remember some of the old residents from Scholes referring to the lights as 'electric bobbies' that's easy to understand when you realise that at busy times there was a policeman on point duty. In some of the reports it states that on the night of this catastrophe it was only shortly before the incident that an officer had gone off duty

There was the usual crowds waiting when the team came home, but I sure that the cup lost some of its lustre that particular year. As with all accidents, you can't help but think 'if' the coach or bus had been one minute early or late, 'if' so-and-so had been on time ; then the coach party would have had a wonderful time, watching their team lifting 'The Cup' and a family and a community would be spared so much heartache. Although as it is often said "if" is the biggest word in the English language!