

Steve Bloomer

So all-powerful has the football industry become that it now has the capacity to create its own saints. Outside every ground the statue of one or more of its heavenly beings - manager or player - is on display, where wreaths and candles are laid at moments of public sorrow.

Before every home game at Pride Park - the Derby County stadium - the tannoy pipes out a hymn to one of those sainted few.

Steve Bloomer's watching,
Helping them fight,
Guiding our heroes
In the black and the white...

None in the ground, I imagine, would be old enough to have seen Mr Bloomer kick a ball, let alone play for the Rams. The player in question died 73 years ago, even before the Second World War. Yet Steve Bloomer is one of those soccer immortals, up there with Wright and Matthews and Duncan Edwards, and arguably the very first superstar the game produced. There is a bronze bust of him next to the home dug-out at Pride Park, and another memorial plaque in his home town in the Black Country, was unveiled in the presence of Nat Lofthouse, Tom Finney and Wilf Mannion. Could there be a higher endorsement of Bloomer's pedigree than this ?

So Steve Bloomer came kicking into the world in Bridge Street, Cradley, the little Worcestershire town now in the borough of Dudley. His father was a puddler, and there were Bloomers still active in the Black Country iron trade as late as the 1990s.

Steve Bloomer was born in 1874. Had his parents - Caleb and Merab - remained in the area, their son would surely have joined the ranks of the Albion or the Wolves. But they moved to Normanton in Derbyshire, when their son was about five years old, and so Bloomer's footballing career was nurtured there, along with a brief spell at Tutbury Hawthorn. Initially he found work in a foundry, but by 1892 Bloomer had signed for Derby County at a weekly wage of seven shillings and sixpence; three years later he was playing for England.

Bloomer was a centre-forward of the old school, powerful, good with both feet and blessed with a lightning turn of pace. The Black Country tended to forge footballers of that ilk. Bloomer's goalscoring record, for club and country, was nothing short of phenomenal. For England (where internationals were few and far between) he scored 28 goals in just 23 internationals, and was the first player to score four goals in a game for his country twice. He scored five in a single match against Wales.

Over the 22 years of his professional career - with Derby and Middlesbrough - Bloomer found the net 392 times in 599 appearances, and this with two clubs that were rarely challenging for honours, and he was the leading goalscorer at Derby for fourteen consecutive seasons. When he joined Middlesbrough in 1906 it was for a hefty fee of £750.

Bloomer retired as a player in the summer of 1914, just before his fortieth birthday, and shortly afterwards moved to Germany to coach a team called Britannia Berlin. Here, for the first time in his football career, Bloomer's timing misfired. To be in Germany in August 1914 was, needless to say, unfortunate. Within five weeks of arriving he was in an internment camp at Ruhleben near Berlin, and remained there for the duration of the war.

The camp contained some 5,000 prisoners, a number of whom were professional footballers, and the war passed, remarkably pleasantly, in football and cricket tournaments. While their compatriots waded through the mud of Flanders, the prisoners at Ruhleben tramped through it on the football field instead. On one occasion Bloomer captained a Tottenham Hotspur XI to victory in the internees' cup-final.

The tale of Ruhleben is, I guess, the other football story of the Great War, to set alongside that of the Christmas truce.

Only in November 1918 were the internees released, and transferred by ship to The Hague. "You won't get me to there again in a hurry," commented Bloomer. Nevertheless, he did not head straight for Blighty; that career in football management had been rudely interrupted.

English players, let alone managers, have not covered themselves in glory in Europe; it's equally true that great players rarely make great coaches. But Bloomer was a notable exception to the rule. After the war was over he coached a team in Amsterdam, before moving to Spain, where, in 1923, he became the manager of Real Union.

Bloomer's success in the 1924 Copa del Rey - effectively the Spanish championship - set the seal on a remarkable managerial career. In the semi-final his team defeated Barcelona 5-1 (also managed by an Englishman), before beating Real Madrid in the final.

In the following year Bloomer returned to England and was briefly the coach back at the Baseball Ground in Derby, also playing for the reserve team. He ended his days at the club as a general assistant and groundsmen.

When he finally hung up his boots, Bloomer went to live with one of his daughters, who ran the Junction Inn in Junction Street, Derby, and there he remained until that final transfer - to the celestial team - in April 1938. He lies buried in the city's Nottingham Road cemetery.

But, as we have seen, he is still watching all the games at Pride Park; some season tickets never end.