

A COMPLETE HISTORY OF SOUTHPORT FOOTBALL CLUB

(Updated 27 May 2024)



Brought together in one place by Rob Urwin

With grateful thanks to Dan Hayes Author Of The Towns Game.

Michael Braham & Geoff Wilde whose book The Complete League History of Southport Football Club is widely acknowledged as the best club history book ever written (or at least Geoff said it was before his untimely passing in 2020)

IN THE BEGINNING

Association football had been played in the town's private schools in the late 1870's but the original Southport Football club began as a rugby team. The 'handling code' had been played competitively since 1872 in Southport and there were teams under the titles of Southport Olympic, Southport Wasps and Southport Hornets.

Re-formed in 1881 after the original club had ceased to function a year earlier, Southport Football Club originally arranged rugby fixtures for the 1881/82 season but lasted only three games before switching to association football.

It was Saturday 12th November 1881 when Southport played its first Association Football match facing Bootle "second". Bootle took the lead but Jackson shot "a capital goal to equalise" The Southport team was S Platt (Goal), B Pidduck, JG Howard (Backs) P. Edwards, F Jackson and TB Burnett (Captain) (Halves), JR Topliss and F Holden (Rights) W Platt (Centre) J Melross and J. Sykes (Lefts).

The Southport Visiter commented "that the team will no doubt render a good account of themselves when they get over the difficulty of hands off and forget the rugby rules". Most of the club's rugby players had made the switch to the 'round ball game' and Dalby, Irving and Morris were also lured over to soccer from Southport Hornets.

The man responsible for the decision to switch was a former Welsh international, Thomas Blundell Burnett. In the story of Southport Football Club, Burnett's role is very significant. He was the instigator of the switch, he was the Secretary of the new club, and he was also the captain. He was the pioneer of association football in Southport, of that there is absolutely no doubt.

The club played its games on a field on a large plot of land opposite to the entrance of Chambers Road on the corner Scarisbrick New Road and Ash Street backing onto Trap Lane (today's Southbank Road), roughly where Westmoreland Road lies today. There was space enough for multiple pitches, one of which was used by Southport Olympic rugby club. Comparatively little interest was shown in Southport's matches compared with Southport Olympic who played on an adjoining pitch at Scarisbrick New Road. Spectators left the football field when Olympic began playing.

At the club's first Annual General Meeting in May, under the stewardship of Secretary Burnett, the Club opened lawn tennis courts for its members and prospective members were encouraged to apply to Burnett at the Arlington Chambers on Lord Street.

Encouraged by their first year, Southport joined both the Lancashire and English Football Associations and entered the English, Lancashire and Liverpool and District Challenge Cups.

UP FOR THE CUP

The 1882/83 season was preceded by an exhibition match between the two famous Blackburn Clubs – the Rovers and Witton – at the Athletic Society's brand-new Sports Ground on Sussex Road. In goal for Blackburn that day was Herbie Arthur, who would later go on to represent Southport Central.

The competitive element of the cup-ties aroused most interest. On 7th October, Southport entertained Liverpool Ramblers in their first ever F.A., or English Challenge Cup tie as the competition was called for years. This game was watched by 300 spectators including many women supporters and resulted in a 1-1 draw, Ambler scoring for Southport following a neat pass from Arthur Dalby. In the replay, Southport were

weakened by the non-arrival of one of their best forwards and goalkeeper, Platt, missed the train.

"The Reds", named after the scarlet colour of their shirts, had to play two substitutes and because of the re-organisation lost 4-0.



The earliest photo of a Southport team, taken after their English Challenge Cup Tie against Liverpool Ramblers. Squire Platt is pictured (sitting), still wearing his hat, having missed the train.

In the Lancashire Challenge cup, after easily accounting for Stacksteads, 4-0, Southport, lost 5-4 in a thriller at Rishton.

The rules of the game were somewhat different at that time. The game was rough with little combined play. Penalties were as yet unknown and the charging of goalkeepers was not only permissible but relished with delight by the forwards. The players boots were of the ordinary every day variety and spikes in place of studs were not uncommon.

Games were often spoilt by colour clashes. When Southport visited Birkenhead Association they were placed at a disadvantage with the home side, who also wore scarlet shirts and the ground was covered with long grass- on other occasions home games were interrupted when the ball was kicked into adjoining gardens and the players had to argue with irate householders.

The second club AGM, in September 1883, Thomas Burnett retain his position as Secretary and W.J.Conell as Treasurer. Conell was a well-known local journalist who penned under the pseudonym of 'The Sandgrunder' for the Southport Visitor. He and Burnett were also to be involved that summer in the reformation of Southport Cricket Club. Ralph Rylance, a Solicitor's Clerk from Blackburn, was appointed captain.

The highlight of the 1883-84 season was the English Cup clash with Blackburn Rovers at their Leamington Road ground. Rovers won 7-0 but Southport were far from disgraced.

Rylance's tenure as captain was short lived, Dalby taking over the role by the end of March with Rylance having departed for the USA.

In the 1884-85 season the club merged with the Southport Athletic Society. The team moved to the Sports Ground, on Sussex Road. It was unanimously decided to change their red jerseys for red and white striped flannel shirts. The Reds were thereby now known as "The Stripes".

THE CHARITY CUP

As football grew in popularity other clubs sprang up in the town. Southport Wanderers, High Park, Churchtown and Southport Old Boys were amongst the most prominent. However, Southport Football Club was considered to be the town's premier side.

In 1884 the Charity Cup was launched. Eleven local teams entered with the proceeds, £18 in the first year, going towards the Infirmary. Southport confirmed their premier spot by defeating Crescent 5-0 in the final at the Sports Ground.

The club's most notable success to date was their 1-0 victory over Preston North End in the Lancashire Challenge Cup in 1884. Although North End only sent their reserve side Southport caused something of a sensation and it was said that the Preston players were ashamed to go home after such a disgrace. Dalby scored the goal just four minutes from time.

The County selectors were present at that game and singled out Squire Platt, the Southport goalkeeper, to represent Lancashire against Hallamshire at Sheffield the following month, Lancashire winning 4-3. Platt also appeared for Liverpool and District, alongside Thomas Burnett when they played North Wales at Wrexham.

As the premier side in the town it was little surprise that Southport Football Club prevailed over Crescent in the final in the first year of the Southport Charity Cup (1884/85) in competition and success on the field locally continued in 1885/86, beating Southport Wanderers 4-0 to retain the charity cup. Southport Football Club were certainly recognised as the leading club in the town and were also recognised as one of the "senior" Lancashire sides at the time, as can be evidenced by their placing within the Lancashire Senior (rather than junior) cup.

Boarding was erected around a portion of the ground as protection against the weather. This did not prevent a match against Burscough being reduced to half an hour each way due to 'Boisterous and disagreeable weather'

In October, an understrength Southport lost 12-1 at Darwen. The following week, although Southport led Astley 2-0 at half time, they were beaten 3-2 in an English Cup-tie.

Off the field the club was not in a healthy state and in the 1885/86 season they were facing stiff competition from twenty six other clubs in the town. Southport reduced their annual subscriptions to five shillings to try and compete but were later forced to sever their connections with the Athletic Society and in the Athletic Society's Annual report the Committee regretted 'their unfortunate connection with the Football Club which resulted in the Society incurring an expenditure on their account of £88-3 shillings.

After five years existence Southport's first football club folded.

SOUTHPORT WANDERERS

Southport Wanderers, meanwhile, had been formed as an amateur outfit in 1884 by members of the Southport Olympic Rugby Club. By the summer of 1886 Wanderers had grown into one of the most popular clubs in the town. In fact, by the time of the demise of the original Southport Football Club they were able to field a first and second eleven

on a regular basis, something the original club struggled to do for much of the 1885/1886 season.

At the Wanderers AGM in June 1886, at which a representative of the original Southport association club was present, they invited Southport Football Club to amalgamate. At least six former Southport players and many of their supporters transferred their affiliations to Southport Wanderers who, although sustaining a loss of £4 on the previous season, could face the future with renewed confidence.

Southport Wanderers moved to a new ground in Scarisbrick New Road for the 1886-87 season. It was a large field, enclosed to a height of 7 foot 6 inches and big enough to accommodate three matches at once. A covered grandstand, to seat 140 spectators, and a dressing tent were provided. Three cows which grazed on the field withdrew behind the grandstand during matches.

On 25th September 1886, with the Wanderers leading 2-1, Skelmersdale United's team walked off the field after disagreeing with the referee's decision and Southport claimed the match. Three days later, at a General Meeting held in the Mather's Saleroom, it was unanimously resolved that in future the club be called "Southport Football Club" Thus imparting to it a representative character which it had not hitherto enjoyed.

Although not winning the Charity Cup, High Park defeated Old Boys 5-2 in the final, Southport's second team won the town's first regional honour by lifting the Liverpool and District Cup after defeating Earlestown 1-0 at Everton's ground in front of 3,000 spectators. The victorious Southport team and 100 supporters journeyed from the ground to Exchange Station in wagonettes amid the tooting of horns and blowing of bugles. When the train arrived at Chapel Street Station some three or four hundred people heartily welcomed the winners. The captain, Alfred Halsall was carried shoulder high to the Railway Hotel, the club headquarters.

THE INTRODUCTION OF FOREIGN TALENT

The 1887-88 season began sensationally with several members of the team refusing to play whilst "men from out of town" were being played. The offending players both professionals from Blackburn were Akeroyd (later to captain Southport Central) and Whittaker. At a clear the air meeting it was decided by a large majority to discontinue the use of the Blackburn men and play nothing but local talent.

During the season Southport Recreation amalgamated with the club and the Charity Cup Final was reached. After drawing 2-2 with old rivals, Churchtown, in the replay Southport fought back after trailing by three goals to equalise with the last kick of the game. The goal was hotly disputed as the referee added four minutes to compensate for the time lost kicking the ball amongst the spectators. The Charity Cup Committee decided that extra time should be played and when Southport attempted to score a goal and claim the game they were prevented by a number of Churchtown spectators who invaded the field. Southport eventually won the final 4-1 at the third attempt.

A NEW ORGANISATION

In the summer of 1888, the year the Football League was founded, those in charge of Southport Football Club, alongside those in charge of many of the other local clubs decided that in the best interests of the town, a new club should be formed and that it should be a professional club, able to compete with the best the country has to offer.

On 2nd June 1888 the Southport Guardian newspaper had revealed that there was a scheme in the town to provide a football club of "Mighty proportions....by raising an importation team". The initial meeting called to form such a club took place on 12th June

at Scarlett's Rooms, Chapel Street. At a second meeting, held at the Railway Hotel a week later, Mr. McGowan successfully proposed that the name of the club should be "Southport Central Association Football Club.

When the proposition to form a committee was put eleven voted in favour, none against and nineteen abstained. Mr James of Hoghton Street was appointed Honorary Treasurer, Edwin Ramsbottom Secretary and an Executive Committee was formed. At a meeting held on 29th August, Mr. J. B. Watson explaining the objects of the club said it was likely to place Southport in the front rank of football with the certain result of bringing increased crowds of visitors to the town and it was confirmed that "foreign talent" would be introduced by paying players.

Southport Central was not merely a continuation of what went before it - this was not simply a rebranding of Southport Football Club as a professional entity. This was a radically different organisation and even the name of 'Central' confirmed its intention. The club was, as the Southport Visiter repeatedly called them, a 'new organisation' and 'a new football club'.

As the primary drivers of the scheme, however, and the premier club in the town, a larger number of committee members and players moved over from Southport Football Club than any other. The 1887/88 Southport first team effectively became the reserve string, the Southport Central Swifts. The first team consisted of both local and professional players with a strong East Lancashire element including Walsh and Akeroyd (Blackburn Olympic), Mullins and Duncan (Halliwell) and Joe Sowerbutts (Blackburn Rovers).

The Sports Ground in Sussex Road, still considered to be the show ground in the town with its large 2,000 capacity grandstand, was hired and on 1st September 700 spectators assembled there for the visit of Stanley, a Liverpool club, who prevailed 4-1. The Southport team was: Tyldesley, Walsh, Aitken, Taylor, Horton, Akeroyd, Duncan, Sourbutts, Lea-Jones, Farrar and Graham.

In their first excursion in the F.A. Cup Central were drawn away at Irwell Springs, winning 5-4 after extra time.

LOCAL RIVALRY

In their first season Southport Central often experienced difficulty in arranging fixtures and when they applied for matches some clubs treated them rather curtly. Lytham simply wrote on the memorandum bearing Central's application "We do not know this club!" and returned it to their secretary.

Rivalry amongst the local clubs remained intense. After Central had defeated Haydock St. James 4-1 in a Lancashire Junior Cup tie an anonymous correspondent from Southport informed Haydock that Central had played an ineligible player. An inquiry found that there was no truth in the allegation but it typified the ill feeling that existed. Central reached the fourth round of the Lancashire Junior Cup before losing 2-0 at home to Fleetwood Rangers.

A fortnight later Southport and High Park clashed in the Charity Cup. The "Parkites" had won 4-3 at Sussex Road on New Years Day before 2,000 spectators. Whilst originally drawn to play the tie at Sussex Road due to the quality of the facilities on offer to the patrons, the Parkites refused on the grounds that it would give an unfair advantage. Agreement was at first reached to play it at a neutral venue with Portland Street, home of the Southport Old Boys, suggested. However, it was the Central players who, mindful of the purpose of the competition being to raise money for charity, conceded any advantage and offered to switch the tie to the better enclosed Devonshire

Road home of their opponents. High Park's stubborn stance had done them no favours with the local press.

Central's brave offer certainly helped the gate, as the largest crowd ever assembled in Southport to that point of 2,500 paid to watch the two teams battle it out to a 1-1 draw.

When Hill gave the home side the lead the Southport Visiter remarked "the shouts and cheers that followed the goal must have been heard miles away". Taylor equalised but Central had to thank Ingram whose brilliant goalkeeping kept them in the game.

At a meeting of the Charity Cup Committee in the week that followed it was unanimously agreed that the replay should be fixed for the following week, 26th January. The representatives of the High Park club in attendance, however, requested that the tie should be postponed owing to the absence of a couple of their players who would be unable to take part in the match (Fairhurst and Caldwell were injured). The irony had been lost on them that their request was being made even though Central had not only been willing to switch the tie to Devonshire Road, giving high Park a huge advantage in the first tie, but Central had played without fuss, with two of their most influential men missing. Their cynical request was dismissed after a brief discussion. Sensationally, High Park refused to accept the decision as fair and scratched from the competition altogether, giving Southport a walk over. High Park were not prepared to field a weakened side even if Infirmary funds suffered

Central defeated Churchtown 2-0 in the final.

In December the Athletic News commented "that football is looking up in the pleasant sea port whose only defect is being without the sea" However, the game was still in its early stages and disputes regularly occurred. These were often resolved by the captains. Akeroyd, the Central captain almost withdrew his men after half an hour in a match against Heywood due to the referees one sided decisions but they stayed only to lose 3-0. In the return game the entire Heywood team left the field disputing Central's goal scored by Horton. Southport, although trailing 2-1, claimed the match.

The club's record for their initial season was Played 40 Won 21 Drawn 6 Lost 13. The event which caused the most excitement in the town was the visit of Preston North end who had just carried off the League and Cup double. They came to Southport on 13th May and were given a rapturous welcome on arrival at the railway station. They were driven to the ground behind a marching band. There was a record gate of 3,500 and North End won 4-2 even though Central were re-inforced for the occasion by Forbes, Townley and Southworth of Blackburn Rovers.

LANCASHIRE LEAGUE AND FLOODLIT FOOTBALL

Two important events occurred during the summer of 1889. The Old Boys Football Club amalgamated with Southport Central and formed the nucleus of their reserve team, calling themselves Central Old Boys. Also, the club joined the newly formed Lancashire League. Following the success of the Football League it was hardly surprising that there would be a demand for a County Competition in Lancashire At a meeting organized by the Secretary of the Earlestown club the Lancashire League became a reality. Isaac Smith, Central's Chairman, became the league's first treasurer.

The team was strengthened with new players including Jimmy Gee (Churchtown), Dobson (Everton) Wilson (Stanley) McClaren (Vale of Leven), Fecitt, Barton and Chew (Blackburn Rovers). Fecitt had helped Rovers to win the F.A. Cup in 1885 and 1886. Travelling arrangements were facilitated by the club committee reaching an agreement with the West Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Company to obtain cheap rates for eight men coming from Blackburn.

Preston North End made a quick return the following season to open Central's new

ground at Scarisbrick New Road. The ground had previously been occupied by the Southport Olympic Rugby Club and the goal posts were directly opposite the Infirmary Clock. The Southport Visiter said that the field was "sufficiently extensive, thoroughly well laid out, capitably fenced and included two excellent pavillions and a covered grandstand." It was to be Southport Central's home for the next sixteen years.

The Lancashire League programme was opened on 9th September with a visit from Rossendale, Central winning 3 -1. On 31st December when Central met Higher Walton at Scarisbrick New Road the ground was illuminated by the Wells patent limelight.

The clubs had met a short time earlier with the home team winning 3-1 but a greater part of the second half was played in semi-darkness and it was agreed to replay the match at Southport. A torchlight procession accompanied by the 3rd L.A.Y. Band headed the visitors to the ground. Although it was raining heavily such was the novelty of the match that 3,000 spectators assembled on the ground for the 7.30 kick-off. Higher Walton took the field shortly afterwards but it was quite half an hour before Central put in an appearance they had a reputation for lateness at that time. The visitors lodged an objection before the game actually got underway so a friendly was played instead with Walton winning 2-1. It was to be more than 70 years before floodlights were erected at Haig Avenue. Later that season, 3rd March, Southport visited Bootle in another floodlit match. The lights were under the managership of Central defender Frank Sugg, a former Everton and Derby County footballer and a County Cricketer. Central won 4-1 before a crowd of 5,000.

ECONOMIC MEASURES

During 1892-93 a Special Fund Committee was formed to liquidate the clubs debts. Their efforts raised £73, a Christmas Draw realised £53 and a number of members doubled their half guinea subscriptions, resulting in the club making a profit of £38. Early in February, many supporters took the opportunity to pay a shilling instead of 6d admittance. Central meanwhile shocked everybody by defeating Bury 2-1. The season saw the introduction of the redoubtable Tom Smith at full back. He was signed from Church and rendered 10 seasons splendid service. The star capture was inside-forward Kenny Davenport from Bolton Wanderers who had been capped twice for England in 1885 and 1890 against Wales and Ireland respectively.

Early the following season, the Hon. George Curzon, M.P. promised to present medals to the players if they finished in the first four places in the league. They duly obliged by finishing third, their highest position in the Lancashire League to date.

The team was strengthened by the signing of Jimmy Tattersall a hard but scrupulously fair wing-half who had played for the defunct Accrington 'Reds' in their early football league days. "Tatt" went on to make 194 Lancashire League appearances out of a possible 204 in eight years with the club.

In the F.A. Cup, Central beat Oswaldtwistle Rovers 9—0 and Workington 5-1 but were narrowly defeated 4-3 at South Shore. The match against Fairfield on Christmas Day was the only occasion that a match was abandoned at Scarisbrick New Road, the referee calling the game off after an hour with snow freezing as it fell.

Although successful on the field Central had to effect further economies to keep solvent. The Central "Old Boys", the reserve team, cost the club £50 a season and in December it was announced that the Old Boys would be worked and financed independently of the first team. More economies were inevitable and at a meeting of the Executive a letter was read from Mr. R. S. Stuart resigning his position as Secretary. The Executive accepted the resignation and as they could no longer afford to have a paid

secretary. Don Ashton was appointed honorary Secretary. Don, one of the members of the original committee, was, like Isaac Smith, a generous benefactor during these times. Another economy measure was the Executives decision not to pay any bonuses during the summer and to run the team at £5 per week less in 1894-95.

NATIONAL FAME... then CRISIS

In 1894/95 Central won national fame by reaching the first round proper of the F.A. Cup the equivalent of today's third round. After defeating South Shore 1-0, Nelson 4-0, Fleetwood 4-0 (at the third attempt) and Workington 5-0 after a replay, they were paired against Everton at Scarisbrick New Road. A then ground record of 5000 saw the home side fight gallantly throughout but were well beaten 3-0. Like the Cup tie of 1968 Everton wanted to transfer the match to Goodison Park. However, they were-not prepared to accede to Central's £200 guarantee. Central had been promised £5 each in the event of a win or draw. The club made £59 as their share of the gate with £30 being spent on extra accommodation and snow clearing.

After only eight years in existence, Southport Central almost folded in May 1896. In December 1895 the players who had not received full wages for a fortnight sent a "round robin" to the Committee stating that unless the money was paid they would refuse to play the following Saturday. Tom Smith, who had been absent for several weeks during illness but had his wages paid regularly, also signed the document. The Executive felt he had no grounds to complain and showed their disapproval by striking his name off their books. The mutiny was eventually quelled and the players received their wages. The Executive reconsidered their decision regarding Smith who was punished only with a short suspension. In February the players, now aware of the precarious financial position, agreed to forgo one weeks wages.

Although in the middle of five consecutive wins attendances did not improve. As Central's championship challenge waned, they finished 4th, support slumped still further. A special guarantees list was started and the Honourable George Curzon MP promptly sent £5. However, only £72 was forthcoming altogether, Squire Platt, a Committee member gave a valuable fox-terrier puppy as a prize in a draw which realised £18.

A special Committee was formed to confer with the Executive on how to improve the ailing fortunes of the club. They decided not to form a Limited Company even though the Guarantors, Messrs. Smith, Ashton and Emmison were prepared to take out one third of the shares. On 24th April, bereft of further ideas, the affairs of the club were temporarily suspended.

"SHALL IT DIE?"

Four days after suspending operations, a meeting was held at which Isaac Smith expressed his wish to keep the club going. Posters were placed on the walls calling a further meeting asking "Shall it die?". On 4th May Southport Central was revived when a new committee was formed and Isaac Smith once again came to the rescue when he wrote off £290 owing to the Guarantors leaving the club with debts of £60. The season began disastrously with the first league win coming at the fifth attempt with a 10-1 victory at Rossendale. The Saturday evening Football Standard, edited by William Lymath, a Central Committee member who wrote under the name of 'Itinerant' celebrated in verse,

Bring out your brazen trumpets
Have forth the sounding drum
There's no mistake about it
That first league vict'ys come!
Then blow yer bloomin' ardest
And bang that blessed drum

Let all both near and farthest
 Know that league vict'ys come
 This latter state of Rossendale
 Must surely be their worst-
 For Central landed seven goals
 'Ere they could notch their first
 Oh! Sad the fate of Rossendale
 All hope must serve be gone
 When on their own high mountain's steep
 They're routed ten to one
 Bang, Bang, along that drumlet
 For Central's spanking team
 Who waltzed all round the Hillman
 And banged 'em through like steam

Central won the return match 10-0 on Christmas Day. Inside left Jackie Kirwan scored five goals at Rossendale and three in the return match. A native of Wicklow he was Central's most sought after player at that time and in February 1898 he was transferred to Everton together with centre-half Harry Stringfellow for a fee of £130. He subsequently played for Tottenham Hotspur in the 1901 F.A. Cup Final and gained 16 Irish International caps.

The transfer fees enabled the club to embark on a London tour losing 5-0 at Reading and defeating St Stephens 2-0.

With transfer fees and a curtailed wage bill the club's finances improved. At the end of the 1896-97 season Central met Preston North End in a friendly and to everyone's amazement won 6-1. Speedy outside-left Lollie Halsall subsequently to play for Blackpool and Preston, excelled.

RESERVES WIN THE LEAGUE

There were two important acquisitions to Southport Central's staff during the 1897-98 Season. In September T. G. Shipley became Secretary. He had been the founder of Southport Royal in 1894. In 1895 he helped found the Southport and District League. He stayed with Central for eleven years as secretary. His nine predecessors had only nine years service between them.

In March Fred Spink was signed from Clitheroe and during a career with Central which spanned 13 years he gained the reputation of being one of the best backs in Lancashire. He had several offers to assist league clubs but preferred to remain at Southport where his coolness and resource were his outstanding characteristics. On Christmas Day 1899 he missed the train from Parbold and rather than not play he walked all the way to the ground in time for kick-off.

Central at this time fielded a settled combination, Tom Abram in goal proved to be a most consistent performer and gave five years service. Smith and Spink were generally acknowledged to be the best pair of full-backs in the league, with Cunliffe, Herbert, Hallows and Tattersall at half-back and a forward line of Charles, Hallows, Long, Lawson, Sinclair and Wilmington. Central's players continued to be in demand. Bolton Wanderers offered £120 for Jack Sinclair but Central refused to part for under £200, whilst negotiations with Sheffield United for Tom Wilmington were broken-off when the price offered fell below Central's valuation.

In 1899/1900 the team finished 2nd in the table and all the players with the exception

of Richard Lawson, a prolific goalscorer were re-signed. Lawson signed for Newton Heath the fore-runners of Manchester United. In addition the side was strengthened with the signing of Scholes of Little Lever and Baxendale of Attley Bridge.

In July, an ambitious Summer draw took place. Prizes included one week's holiday in London plus five shillings spending allowance, a holiday for a similar period in the Isle of Man, three days in Blackpool and day trips to Belle Vue, Morecambe and Windermere.

Southport Central Reserves stole the honours in 1900 by winning the Preston and District league. The cup and flag was brought back to Scarisbrick New Road by Mr. Shipley. The reserves then defeated "The Rest" 6-1 in a challenge match. The centre-forward and captain, Roly Gibson, was an army international, a stalwart of the now defunct Hesketh Park Club and later became a Director of Southport Football Club. He received the trophy from the Mayor, Alderman T.P.Griffiths. Thus a Southport team had won a trophy for the first time since Southport Wanderers Reserves lifted the Liverpool Junior Cup thirteen years before.

CROWD DISTURBANCES

Like today, referees at the turn of the century had to contend with crowd disturbances. In a game against Earlstown a visiting spectator believing the referee was favoring Central called out "when tha comes to Earlstown tha may come for tay to ahr ayse" To the amusement of the spectators the referee stopped the game and ordered the offender off the field! Against Chorley a corner was awarded to the visitors which was taken by Ashton. Some nearby youngsters gave cheek so Ashton threw the ball at them. At that point a "pugilistic" spectator intervened and he had his coat off on the boys behalf. The expected fight was only just avoided by the timely arrival of the referee.

In 1900-01 Central ran neck and neck with Stalybridge Rovers but were defeated 2-1 on Easter Monday by the Rovers in front of a record Scarisbrick New Road of 6000. That was one of only two defeats during the season and Central finished second on goal average. The regular side was, Topping, Spink (who was constantly urged to sign for Preston North End), Smith, Sinclair, Tasker, Tattersall, Atherton, Shadbolt, Long, Watson and Halsall. The team was kept together with a minimum of injuries. Jack Sinclair moved from inside-forward to succeed Walter Cunliffe. Bob Tasker, formerly of Preston North End, came in at centre-half for Herbert Hallows who had signed for Manchester City. Lollie Halsall, after two years with Preston, returned to the left wing and his partner, Lionel Watson, who played for junior club Laurel Rovers twelve months previously, made such a good impression that he joined Blackburn Rovers the following season.

Meanwhile the Lancashire league had been reduced to a mere eleven clubs in mid-season by the resignation of Rochdale Town, the rugby league counter attraction and the fact that their ground was three miles from the town being contributory factors for the club's demise.

There was some dissatisfaction expressed that the Lancashire League was practically played out and supporters looked for something better. Highlights of the season were the 3-1 win over Manchester City in a benefit match for Tom Smith and the captain Jimmy Tattersall and the 5th Qualifying round Cup-ties with Darwen which Central lost 2-0 after a replay. One unpleasant incident took place at the conclusion of the last league match of the season at Haydock when a spectator hurled a brick at the referee as he left the ground which narrowly missed him and Fred Spink but caught one of the spectators above the eye inflicting a nasty gash which bled profusely.

THE SECOND DIVISION

When it became known in February 1901 that there was a proposal to amalgamate the

Football League with the Southern League and thus regionalise the Second Division Central decided to aim for a better class of football. They could do so with confidence. Due to economics by the Committee and the cultivation of local talent they had succeeded in clearing off the previous season's deficit and wiped £50 off the stand account leaving only a debt of £65 and the old Guarantors account of £70 outstanding. The Committee held a public meeting at the Temperance Institute to test public opinion on the advisability of making an application to the Second Division and the members voted overwhelmingly in favour. In a circular to all football league clubs, the club stressed that Southport was easily accessible by rail and all clubs with the exception of Woolwich and possibly Middlesbrough could complete the journey in one day. The Club was "an old and established one being the only one to have been connected with the Lancashire League from its commencement to the present date." Their ground was "one of the finest in Lancashire with plenty of accommodation, dressing rooms on the ground and every convenience provided for football teams."

The proposed regional Second Division did not materialize and Preston North End's resolution to increase the Second Division by four clubs was defeated. Central were disappointed at the result receiving only five votes. The successful clubs were Burton Swifts(23), Bristol City(23), Stockport County(21) and Doncaster Rovers(16). Stalybridge Rovers(7), Walsall(7) Crewe Alexandra(5) and Darwen(0) were unsuccessful.

At the club's A.G.M. in August, William Platt was elected auditor. Mr. Platt a playing member of the old Southport Association Club, continued in that position until his death in 1938.

Central, runners-up in the Lancashire League once again in 1902, had three hard F.A. Cup-ties against Blackpool drawing home and away 0-0 but prevailing 2-1 at Deepdale. There followed three dour struggles against Darwen who finally won 1-0 at Bolton. Central were weakened when Arthur Kelly received a nasty cut over the eye which had to be stitched by the club surgeon, Dr. Hall, and prevented him from appearing for the remainder of the game.

In October, Southport created a Lancashire League and club record 11-0 win over Bacup Borough. During the season Warrington disbanded and their record was expunged but not before Central had beaten them 4-0 at Scarisbrick New Road after paying their expenses to secure their presence.

THE CHAMPIONSHIP-AT LAST

The semi-final of the Chorley Rawcliffe Charity Cup was reached in 1902 before Stalybridge Rovers defeated Central 2-1. In an earlier Cup-tie in the competition a demonstration took place at the final whistle against the referee who had disallowed a Cooper goal for offside. A crowd of between 3 and 400 made a dash for the dressing tent which the referee reached in safety. Some constables kept guard at the entrance with the crowd maintaining its menacing attitude. The Committee tried to disperse the crowd. At 6.15 fully an hour after the game the referee guarded by constables and in the company of the Chairman, Mr. Robinson, was escorted to the tram. Outside the ground some dirt and a few stones were thrown, one of which struck Mr. Robinson's hat. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

At their annual general meeting it was reported that the club was at long last out of debt and had a balance of £75. It was decided not to make an application to the Second Division. Excellent work was accomplished in the Lancashire Senior Cup. Rochdale were defeated 3-0 in the Qualifying round and both the Manchester clubs, City 1-0 away and Newton Heath 5-0 at home before going out to Burnley who scored in the last minute.

After being one of the original members of the Lancashire League, Southport Central won the Championship at their 14th attempt. Their success came in what proved to be the last season of the League. Southport suffered only three defeats and won the Championship with five points to spare. They also won the Chorley Rawcliffe Charity Cup, defeating Stalybridge Rovers 4-1 in the final. Southport showed complete superiority when they gained a 3-0 win in a Champions v The Rest match.

On May 26th, 1903 the championship medals were presented at a dinner held at Hayes Restaurant Chapel Street. The dinner was marred by the season's only disappointment which had taken place the previous day. Councillor's Isaac Smith and Edwin Trounson went to London to put the club's case in their second bid for membership of the Second Division of the football league with plenty of confidence. Despite many promises of support some clubs evidently changed their minds for they received only four votes. Only one other Lancashire Club supported their application.

THE LANCASHIRE COMBINATION

Edwin Trounson pleaded Southport Central's case for admission to the Second Division. He claimed that the ground was one of the best adapted for football in the country. The grandstand held 2000 and about 20,000 more could view the game in comfort. They could call on an 80,000 population and the town was easily accessible from all over the country. A circular sent to the league clubs stated that Southport had been in existence for a "lengthy and honourable period." "The pitch had been described by a prominent Football league referee as the best in Lancashire. The financial position was sound being free from debt." It was stressed that the town was reputed to be the wealthiest in Lancashire and the population was only used to the association game but it was all in vain.

Southport were one of eight clubs to apply. Doncaster Rovers, Stockport County and Burnley sought re-election. The voting went Bradford City 30, Stockport County 20, Burnley 19, Doncaster Rovers 14, Crewe Alexandra 7, West Hartlepool 7, Southport Central 4 and Wellington 1. The result made bitter reading for club officials.

With the Lancashire League defunct, Southport were admitted to the Lancashire Combination 'B' Division for the 1903-04 season. Continuing the successful form of the previous season Southport won the Championship by one point from Earlestown and in a Challenge match against Everton Reserves, Champions of the 'A' Division, they drew 1-1 at Goodison Park.

In the F.A. Cup Central were involved in an exciting game at Accrington. Goalkeeper Jim Garvey gave a brilliant display as Stanley bombarded the Southport goal, Ben Rickerby scoring the game's only goal for Central. A Veteran oysterman Stephen Danhay of Anchor Street was one of 300 Southport supporters who made the trip. He suffered a seizure and was removed to a neighbouring cottage and was later conveyed to Southport where he died the same night. In his only interval of consciousness he murmured "Did they score?"

In the Lancashire Senior Cup, Central reached the final overcoming Bury (the holders) 6-1, St. Helens Town 1-0 and Preston North End 3-2. In the final at Deepdale, two goals from Lionel Watson, formerly of Southport settled the issue in Blackburn Rovers favour. Probably the season's most bizarre incident occurred when referee McQueen blew the 'final whistle' seven minutes early against Stockport County. Many supporters left the ground but others ran onto the field to explain the mistake to the referee who immediately restarted the game and played another seven minutes. There was no further scoring Southport winning 1-0.

LANCASHIRE SENIOR CUP SUCCESS

Southport were promoted to the "A" Division of the Lancashire Combination for the 1904-05 campaign. They finished third behind Stockport County and Liverpool, their best placing in that league.



It was also the season that Central gained their most notable success to date when they won the Lancashire Senior Cup for the first and only time in their career. To reach the final they beat Earlestown 6-1 and Blackpool and Liverpool's full first teams. The final was against Everton who fielded their reserve team at Sarisbrick New Road their first team having a cup engagement with Aston Villa the following day. Lawson and Smith gave Central a 2-0 lead at half-time and although Caldwell struck an upright and Dilly reduced the deficit, Central hung on to win a stirring game in front of 5,000 spectators. Thereafter the cup was on view in Fred Dunkerley's sports shop during the day and taken to the police station every night for safe custody.

In January, Central transferred Jim Garvey to Bradford City for a £100 fee and a 'match gate.' During his 2 ½ year spell with the club he had been a tower of strength and a wonderfully agile goalkeeper. Garvey was the highest paid member of the staff and was also in receipt of a summer wage.

The season was also the last the club played at Scarisbrick New Road, building development being imminent on the ground. The club first approached the Scarisbrick Estates with a view to obtaining a new ground but could not reach an agreement. Several meetings were held with the Athletic Society but after inspecting their ground and being mindful of the cold winds which swept through the ground in winter the offer was not accepted.

Mr Yates, the proprietor of Kew Gardens tried to induce them to enter terms there but following problems with the trustees of the property this proposal also fell through. It was then decided to meet Sir Charles Scarisbrick and the agent Captain Cross who declared that a ground must be found. A field in Ash Lane belonging to Mr Rimmer a farmer was chosen and a surveyor measured the land the club wanted. Finally it was

agreed to let the ground to them at a rent of £30 per annum on a 5 year tenancy. The final game was against Darwen where two goals were shared. At the end of the match the spectators joined with the band and sang 'Auld Lang Syne.'

PROBLEMS AT ASH LANE

Few people who attended Southport Central's Annual General Meeting in July 1905 would have believed it possible that the club would be holding a crisis meeting in December but such was the case. At the AGM, the President, Sir George Pilkington had congratulated the club on "a most successful season if not the best they had ever had." During 1904-05 the club had won the Lancashire Senior Cup and finished third in the Lancashire Combination.

It was not until 2nd December that Central recorded their first victory of the 1905-06 season, defeating Oldham Athletic 3-0. Most pre-season signings played below their reputations and a series of injuries, most notably to Syd Smith and Jack Sinclair, resulted in constant team alterations. Meanwhile the wage bill had mounted considerably but gates were down £5 per game. The move to Ash Lane, including moving the stand, erecting the hoarding and laying the pitch cost more than £200.

For the first time since the crisis of 1896 a Special Meeting was held at which it was reported that the club were £450 in debt. They had lost the proceeds of the Summer Draw due to the pressure of the removal and cup-tie income was well down. Exempt until the Fourth Qualifying Round of the F.A. Cup, Central were actually £11 out of pocket on their trip to Watford after an overnight stay in London and they lost 3-1. In the Lancashire Senior Cup, Preston North End, with former Southport player Herbie Damson scoring twice, won 3-0.

In a bid to economise, Central released Jolley and McGregor. A £60 profit was realized from the hiring of the Hippodrome for the week between Christmas and New Year. Fencing and Boxing competitions and a demonstration between footballing dogs were among the attractions.

More important, the side's form improved and after taking a mere twelve points from the first half of the season, twenty points from the second half meant that Central finished in 17th position and this retained their First Division status. Even though short of cash, the club took a collection for their former outside-left, Lollie Halsall whose leg had been amputated. The collection raised £7/10shillings. YMCA and Park Villa also held benefit matches for Halsall who had been a popular performer. The Promenade Bowling Club also subscribed twenty-three shillings.

The season's discovery was sixteen year old Lol Abram, who later played with Stockport County, Hearts, Chelsea, and Cardiff City before returning to Southport in the twilight of his career in 1921. When Oldham Athletic gave Southport twenty-four hours notice to approach Abram, Central protested that they had not received the necessary legal period. In order to keep Abram, they signed him professional and because of this they unsuccessfully claimed £18 compensation from Oldham. Nevertheless, Athletic were fined £5 by the Lancashire Combination, whilst Abram became Southport's youngest ever professional. Oldham had earlier signed Joey Shadbolt who had joined Central from Birkdale. South End as a 17 year old in 1983. A capable inside-forward with a good shot, he was sorely missed.

In November 1906 Southport Central recognised the services of two of their long-serving players, Fred Spink and Jack Sinclair. The latter was a product of the Southport Working Lads Club and the first of the famous footballing family to play for Southport. Both had been with the club for nine years and it was decided to give them a benefit match with

the proceeds of the Lancashire Combination game with Barrow allocated to the Benefit Fund; as a result £60 was divided between the two players.

In need of a good F.A. Cup run to improve their ailing finances Southport were drawn at home to Carlisle United. Although Carlisle were only a Lancashire Combination Second Division outfit, they were much better supported than Southport and when they offered a £100 guarantee Central agreed to relinquish their home advantage. Carlisle also agreed to give them 50% of the gate receipts over 4500. Just as on the occasion seventy years later involving Newcastle United, many supporters complained bitterly about the switch but it proved a successful venture. On November 24th 1906 a crowd of 4,550 saw the game and receipts totalled £122 - Southport's share being £103.10s 0d- but, most important of all, Southport won the game 4-0. Over eighty supporters paid the 4s.9d. rail fare to Carlisle.

The Cup trail came to a close when Northampton Town from the Southern League won 2-1. The Southport team had left Lord Street station at 7.50am and endured a tedious five hour train journey. An unfortunate goalkeeping error after Gara had equalised cost Central any chance of a replay. A 5000 shilling fund was launched and the usual concerts and draws kept the season's debt down to £70. At one concert at Southport's Albert Hall shortly after the Carlisle United victory Fred Spink sang the Toreador's song from Bizet's Carmen. He was greeted with a "furore of applause" and, commented the Southport Visiter, 'he delivered it in a right rousing fashion too'. The side who finished ninth in the Combination included Billy Gate, a tricky outside-right from Blackburn Rovers who was just over 5 feet tall, and Tom Edmond, a versatile performer whose unconventional methods and agility earned him the tag of "India Rubber"

BLOWICK WESLEYANS

The 1907-08 season saw Southport Central finish in sixth place. Jack Sinclair who had already wrenched a cartilage in his knee, twisted his knee in the third game of the season. At the club's expense he visited a bone specialist, who announced that the knee was not strong enough to withstand the strain of football any longer and, on his advice, Sinclair never played again. A young wing-half, Eddie Holdsworth, a product of Southport Working Lads, thus gained a place in the side and played so consistently well during the season that he was transferred for a £100 fee to Preston North End where he rendered splendid service over ten years.

When Southport Central Reserves found themselves short of players to fulfil their Lancashire Alliance commitments, Blowick Wesleyans took over their fixtures and won five out of the next six games. One of their players, seventeen year old Billy Watson, made a great impression at left half and was soon promoted to Central's first team. By March 1909 he had been transferred to Burnley for a record fee of £200. Watson went on to make 346 League appearances at Turf Moor and won England International honours. Another "Wesleyan" who was capped for England was Eddie Moscrop who joined Central some years later.

What proved to be a significant moment in the club's history came on April 13th, 1908 when Edwin Clayton was appointed Secretary of Southport Central on the resignation of Tom Shipley. Clayton was highly ambitious for Central to progress in the football world and from the outset yearned for the day when they would be members of the Football League. Almost immediately an opportunity presented itself when Stoke resigned and a casual vacancy arose.

On June 21st Central were one of five clubs to apply for the place in the Second Division, but Tottenham Hotspur were elected, while Central failed to attract a single vote: it was recorded that their representative at the meeting did not speak. Clearly Mr Clayton had much work to do if his ambition were to be realised.

Southport Central finished the 1908-09 season in thirteenth place but tighter economic management and Billy Watson's transfer fee considerably reduced the bank overdraft. A novel event at Ash Lane was the Northern Union (Rugby League) match on New Year's Day, 1909. The game between the Australian Touring Team and Widnes was staged to assist Southport Central's funds. Record gate receipts of £123 resulted in the club benefitting by £60. The Kangaroos, making their first tour of England won 55-3. Their team had taken a house in Albert Road as its headquarter and conducted their entire tour from there while training at Ash lane. The Mayor, Cllr. J.W. Paton, kicked off and afterwards entertained both teams to dinner at the Prince Of Wales Hotel.

FRED SPINK'S RETIREMENT

Fred Spink, now in his eleventh season, was honoured following the home match with Blackburn Rovers when Committee member George Cranshaw invited the players and Committee to supper at the Shakespeare Hotel. A cheque was presented by the club and a beautiful silver flower stand was presented by Richard Orrell on behalf of the players. Spink, who had been captain for eight years, had been out of the team for some weeks: his arrival was greeted by loud cheering and everybody present sang "For he's a Jolly Good Fellow". Responding, Spink said he had hoped to be playing with the club until he was in receipt of his old age pension, a topical reference to a measure which had only recently been introduced by the government.

After he had badly twisted his knee early the following season he was forced to retire: this came after he had received a further benefit cheque of £30 as a result of the match with Blackburn Rovers, when Spink and the legendary Bob Crompton acted as linesmen. Without him, Southport Central's defence was drastically weakened and they were only saved from relegation by the resignations of Carlisle United and Workington. The financial position worsened considerably, a loss of £200 making a total deficit of £500 by the end of the season.

One of the few bright features of 1909-10 was the form of George Latham. He was a full-back and a popular favourite with the crowd. He became the first player to gain International honours while actually playing with Southport when he was capped by Wales against England. At the end of the season he was transferred to Stoke City and served for many years as Cardiff City's trainer. He also won the Military Cross during the First World War.

The following season, which as it transpired, was their last in the Lancashire Combination, Central defeated their old rivals Darwen in the FA Cup. Walter Knowles-linesman and president of the Darwen club-was ordered off by the referee for arguing when he refused Darwen a penalty. An even more unpleasant incident occurred on December 17th 1910 when "Dossy" Wright was sent off for jumping at an opponent. The referee was molested as he left the field and several blows were aimed at him. As a result the club were ordered to post warning notices. Wright, the captain, was a rugged quick tackling defender. He was one of the greatest characters the club ever had. As tough as teak, his pet expression used to be "I can't play football but I can stop those who think they can" It was ironic, to say the least, that his daughter Belinda should grow up to achieve national fame as a prima ballerina. Some contrast!

THE CENTRAL LEAGUE

At the end of 1910-11, when Central finished in eleventh place, there was a rift between some of the reserve sides of Football League clubs like Manchester City, Everton and Liverpool and the Lancashire Combination. Southport Central joined forces with these teams in a bid to form the Central League. In all, thirteen clubs seceded from the Combination but the league refused to accept Southport's resignation which was sent by

telegram to a meeting of the Combination at the Pack Horse Hotel, Bolton. The Combination felt that they were entitled to more than a mere telegram for a matter as serious as withdrawal. A further meeting held at the Queen's Hotel, Southport-at which Southport were again unrepresented-turned down their resignation request and went on to draw up the Combination fixture list. Southport, together with Rochdale, stuck by their original decision and the whole matter was referred to the Lancashire F.A who found in their favour. Southport Central were duly elected founder members of the new Central league, receiving the maximum 13 votes.

In 1911-12, for only the second time in the club's history, Southport Central reached the first round proper of the F.A Cup. Home victories over Padiham, Rossendale United and Colne and a 1-0 win at Heywood (after a 1-1 draw at Ash Lane) had already brought Frome Town to Southport. The secretary of the Frome club caused some amusement by writing to Edwin Clayton to ask if accommodation could be obtained in the village! A crowd which numbered 3566 responded by shouting "Play up Villagers!" and Southport duly obliged by winning 4-1.

Reading, members of the Southern League, provided the opposition in the first round proper. This time Southport turned down an offered £125 guarantee to take the game to Berkshire. For the cup-ties the ground admission had to be raised according to F.A rules from 4d. to 6d. and the stand charges were increased from 6d. to a shilling. Although the Southport players refrained from their ordinary work during the week preceding the cup-tie and went into extra training, their efforts were unrewarded. With the scoresheet blank after half an hour's play Eddie Moss crop shot straight at the Reading goalkeeper from the penalty spot: the chance had gone and Southport were beaten by two clear goals before a crowd of between 5 and 6000 who paid £174 13s 1d. There were those in the crowd who never forgave Moss crop for that miss.

The following season he was not invited along for pre-season trials by the club and was persuaded instead by his old Blowick Wesleyan colleague Billy Watson to attend Burnley's trial matches where he shone and was duly signed up. He was subsequently twice capped by England in 1914 and in later life was Headmaster of Birkdale Council School in Bury Road for a number of years.

Another Southport product to make his mark around this time was centre-half Teddy Lightfoot, who had joined Tottenham Hotspur for £150 the previous summer. During the Edwardian period Southport was widely considered to be a footballing nursery for larger clubs. Besides the aforementioned Eddie Holdsworth and Billy Watson other local successes in League football were half-backs Lol Abram, not long transferred from Stockport County to Hearts, and Jimmy Fay at Oldham Athletic, who was originally with Southport Working Lads Club.

On December 16th, 1911 Southport Central suffered a record League defeat when Burnley Reserves thrashed them 12-3. Jack Flynn, son of the Birkdale stationmaster was the unfortunate goalkeeper on the day.

With the following season in mind, Central paraded four new signings on Good Friday 1912, one of whom, outside-left Billy Semple, had just been secured from Haslingden. Few would have predicted the monumental significance of this signing at the time. Later the same month Torn Dorward was signed from Arbroath Dorward himself gave splendid service to the club, as indeed did right-half Harry Schofield, signed some time earlier after excelling for Walkden in an F.A. Cup-tie against Southport. After several abortive attempts, the club was floated in the summer of 1912 as a Limited Company called 'The Southport Central Football Club 1912 Limited -with a share capital of 2000 Ordinary ten shilling shares. The original directors were George R Cranshaw, George H. Collinge, James Hamer, Harry Rimmer, John Walmsley and Joseph Winterbottom.

Although it was stipulated that any shareholder with more than fifty shares would be entitled to free season tickets the organisation did not create much interest among the general public; indeed, only twenty-three subscribers (beyond the eleven guarantors) took out shares. With the team also struggling, the directors offered each player a free transfer or a cut in wages. Former Welsh international Moses Russell joined Merthyr, Fred Pagnam later to become a prolific goal-scorer with Liverpool, Arsenal and Watford - went to Blackpool and Charles Pinch was signed by Preston North End. And all that after the season had begun well with five consecutive victories.

The 1913-14 season was notable for Central's record F.A. Cup win when Lancashire Combination side Portsmouth Rangers were defeated 9-0. At the end of the campaign Central found themselves in seventeenth position in the League having taken 30 points from their 38 games.

Although war was declared on August 4th 1914 the season went ahead as planned. Southport experienced a disastrous year finishing next to bottom with just 26 points. Stringfellow, with seventeen goals, was leading scorer for the third successive season while Billy Caulfield, although transferred to Blackburn Rovers in the February, notched a further fifteen.

The club decided to charge soldiers half price, with wounded soldiers and sailors admitted free. On September 19th, 1914 after the match with Liverpool Reserves the crowd was addressed by the Mayor, Dr Limont, who appealed for recruits for the forces. Tebay, formerly of Croston and a valuable member of the team, joined the Liverpool Scottish just after Christmas and Anderson, the goalkeeper, joined the King's Liverpool Regiment. He was wounded on active service and wrote from hospital to a friend " I do wish I could get home before the footer season's closed as I often feel like having a go. We do play when The German's aren't about. We play with a empty jam tin. How are Southport Central going on? By November 1915 no fewer than nineteen ex-Central players were in the forces. About this time Private Jack Flynn the former goalkeeper, wrote to Secretary Edward Clayton asking for a football. His letter was a touching one: 'We returned from the trenches after having had a bit of a rough time. We have had plenty of rain and it's been very cold with it" Mr Clayton duly complied with his request and helped out again several months later when Flynn wrote to ask for a second ball "the other having been kicked to death"

WAR TIME FOOTBALL

In September 1915 football was completely reorganized. To save unnecessary travel it was decided to run various sections for different areas of the country. With Blackburn Rovers suspending operations altogether, Southport were called upon to join the Lancashire Section of the Football League which also included Stoke City, Port Vale and Stockport County. Their first game was against Blackpool on September 4th, Southport winning 2-0. Later on that month over 5000 spectators, including 2000 soldiers billeted in the town plus a large number of wounded soldiers admitted free watched Southport Central beat Everton whilst a then ground record 6100 paid £131 when Manchester City visited Ash Lane in October. The highest gate receipts of the previous season had been a mere £37

The team which began the 1915-16 season was Drabble, Dorward, Holbern, Holdsworth, Fay, Abram, Rigby, Caulfield, Stringfellow, Garner and Semple. Southport were regularly able to field at least six players with First Division experience. Ted Lightfoot came back from Tottenham-he was stationed at Fulwood Barracks often playing at centre forward from which position he scored 4 out of 5 goals against Preston North End at Deepdale on October 30th 1915.

Sadly he was one of a number of wartime fatalities being killed in action in July 1918 *Perseus* writing in the *Lancashire Daily Post* paid the following tribute 'Edward Lightfoot was a splendid footballer but, more than that, he was a good sportsman and a player who respected both himself and his opponents. He has joined a noble company who will leave a big void in football'

Other football wartime fatalities included Gunner Jack Waring, who had played for Chorley and Burnley as well as Southport Central and Sapper William Sinclair-one of Jack Sinclair's four footballing brothers-was killed in action in France.

From one week to the next it was impossible to predict the composition of the team owing to certain players going into the Army and others coming home on leave. Even the great Charlie Buchan, who was in the Coldstream Guards, made a fleeting appearance in mid-season: he was to have held a recruitment rally immediately after the game but heavy rain left him with no crowd to address!

The team was seriously weakened in March 1916 when Billy Semple joined The 17th Battalion and Lol Abram the 13th of the Kings (Liverpool) Regiment, though Abram, based in Oswestry continued to turn out whenever available.

Southport finished the season ninth in the Lancashire section and following the passing of the Compulsory Service Act and the consequent dispersal of many guest players, bottom of the supplementary competition which was run to ensure a full season's programme. In the latter they managed only one win and a draw in the ten games.

The next season began with Corporal Kenneth Campbell, formerly of Liverpool and Partick Thistle, in goal; he was destined to be capped nine times by Scotland after the war. Admission was now 6d. for adults and 3d. for boys with an additional 1d. government tax on top. On Boxing Day 1916 Southport scored their most notable victory of the season before an Anfield crowd of 15000 and with Campbell, who had returned to Liverpool, guarding the home goal. George Schofield, a Crossens lad, scored the game's only goal from the left wing. Although they played good class football the team could again finish only ninth, though they improved one place in the subsidiary section.

SOUTHPORT VULCAN

The 1917-18 season saw the arrival of another splendid goalkeeper in Tommy Capper who went on to play for Dundee and subsequently Southend United when they were elected to the Third Division. Even so, he had to pick the ball out of the net six times in the first match against Everton. Southport born Billy Waring was in the Goodison side and Frank Jefferis was among the scorers. Bert Rigsby another to play in the early Northern Section days, was also acquired from Everton. In defence were Crump, a left-back from West Bromwich and C. Roberts, a strong wing-half from Bristol Rovers. Southport eventually finished thirteenth out of the sixteen clubs and slipped back to bottom in the subsidiary tournament.

The following season, clean out of the blue, the club was taken over by the Mayor Cllr T Hampson - a pioneer of the car industry - who had built up the Vulcan Motor & Engineering Company in Crossens. The club was financed by this company on the express condition that it be called Southport Vulcan. A new committee was formed (with Edwin Clayton still at the helm) and the original Limited Company was wound up. The 1918-19 season was only a month old when a young centre-forward, one William Thomas Roberts, who was employed in the Vulcan on munitions work, arrived on the scene, He was regarded by many as the best centre-forward the club has ever had. He netted twice against Rochdale in his first match and week after week he continued to crack in the goals; during one match at Liverpool he hit the ball with such ferocity that it burst through the netting. He possessed phenomenal ball control and was quite deadly in front of goal. In the December

against Port Vale he scored all four goals. Tommy Roberts, who was on Leicester Fosse's retained list, joined Preston North End in 1919 and remained one of football's most prolific scorers. By September 1927 he had become the first player after the war to register 200 Football League goals.

These were halcyon days as far as talent was concerned and it was generally conceded that the half-back line of C. Roberts (or Holdsworth), Fay and Abram was the best in the area. The club finished sixth and proved themselves to be one of the best sides in the North of England. There were some brilliant players working in munitions at the Vulcan: Sid Bowser-he afterwards won England International honours while with West Bromwich Albion played at inside-left and his wing partner was the former Preston North End international George Barlow.

SOUTHPORT FOOTBALL CLUB

Despite all the promise on the field, by the summer of 1919 it looked doubtful whether the club would remain in being for very much longer. The Vulcan Company had indicated that they were no longer interested in renewing their patronage. On June 5th 1919 a meeting was called for the purpose of reorganizing the Football Club and at a further meeting at which the Mayor, Cllr E. Wood, presided on July 29th it was revealed that the Vulcan Motor Company had now relinquished their control: since, however, they had taken over all the assets and liabilities along with the unexpired portion of the lease of the ground Southport were effectively debt free.

The Southport Education Committee took over the lease of the Ash Lane ground and also purchased the stands- They proposed to allow the Football Club to use the ground on alternate Saturdays. Cllr Clayton had safeguarded the club's interest by registering it in the Central League and entering it for the F.A. Cup.

It was proposed and agreed that the club should be reformed and that it should simply be Southport Football Club. The new committee which was formed comprised Messrs R.T.Bentley, J.H.Preston, H.Watchorn, J.H. Robinson, T.Rimmer, G.H.Collinge and J Winterbottom.

Prior to the upheaval, the club had applied for a place in the newly enlarged Second Division of the Football League but again they suffered disappointment gaining only 7 votes. Coventry City(35), West Ham United(32), Rotherham County(28),and South Shields (28) were elected. Realistically the application for election was always doomed to failure since the Football League has never allowed "works" teams in its ranks. The reason that the Vulcan Company suddenly abandoned its interest in Southport Football Club may be explained in part by the fact that Cllr. Hampson, Vulcan's Chairman and Managing Director, was shortly afterwards imprisoned for twelve months after having been found guilty of fraudulently applying the sum of £22,266.5s 1d. to his own use!

Southport's first peace-time game took place at Oldham on August 30th 1919. Billy Caulfield scored a hat-trick and Billy Little netted the other goal in a 4-2 win. Early in the season a young inside-forward briefly appeared to partner Billy Semple; some thirty-five years later that same inside-forward now Cllr. Fred Thornley, was to join the Board of Directors.

During the immediate post-war period Southport had no more popular player than centre-forward Tommy Green. One incident involving him was vividly recalled over fifty years later by Gordon Hunt, a young schoolboy at the time. On November 8th 1919 Green was sent off shortly before the end of the home game with Bury Reserves for an alleged kick at Watmough. So dissatisfied were the crowd with the referee's decision that many of them remained outside the ground afterwards loudly protesting about his action. Committee member Harry Watchorn advised them to leave but they stood their ground. It was only when Green himself mounted a nearby cab and asked them for his sake to go

away quietly and not create any disturbance that after giving him several loud cheers the crowd finally dispersed. At a meeting under F.A auspices on December 4th Green was fined 40s. and Southport were ordered to pay the referee's expenses for attending the meeting.

Later the same month the club were involved in further trouble over an F.A. Cup-tie. Exempted until the fourth qualifying round, Southport were drawn at home to South Liverpool and won 1-0. 'South' protested that the home side had fielded an ineligible player, in that Littlejohn had played for Hurst in an earlier qualifying round. An F.A. commission met to consider the protest and held that the game should be replayed at South Liverpool's ground at the Dingle. Two goals were shared in the replay and the tie went to a third meeting at Anfield where South won 2-0.

LANCASHIRE JUNIOR CUP WINNERS

Southport did not have long to wait before winning their first post-war trophy however. Competing in the Lancashire Junior Cup. they easily accounted for Prescot and Nelson. A huge crowd of over 7000 was attracted to Chorley for the drawn semi-final but in the replay Southport won through by two clear goals.

The final was against Lancaster Town at their Giant Axe ground and Southport won the cup with a Billy Hooper penalty 12 minutes from time after Billy Little had been tripped in the area. Hooper, an experienced campaigner with Grimsby Town and Nottingham Forest signed for Lancaster the following season. More records fell as 6347 paid £340.1s.10d., Southport's share being £117.

The team which represented the club in the final was: Halsall, Dorward, Yates, Schofield, Marshall, Norton, Hooper, Caulfield, Green, Little and Semple. Shortly afterwards centre-half Jack Marshall was transferred to Preston North End. The season ended with Southport in sixteenth position, disappointing considering they had headed the table at the end of October.

The success of 1919-20 was undoubtedly full-back Wilf Yates, a Southport Trinity product, who was transferred to Preston North End in the close season and later assisted Tranmere Rovers and Crewe Alexandra. Local talent was now seizing its chance with Billy Little, Harry and "Topping" Sinclair, "Salty" Halsall and Billy Glover establishing themselves in the Central League team.

In May 1920 the question of the formation of a Third Division of the Football League with Northern and Southern sections was considered at a meeting in Sheffield and it was decided to proceed with the proposal. The Northern clubs unanimously carried a resolution that the formation of a Third Division was in the best interests of football, pledging themselves to everything in their power to facilitate its adoption: but the following month it was announced that, subject to obtaining the consent of the F.A. a Third Division of the Football League would be formed for 1920-21 with such division being composed entirely of clubs from the Southern League. The clubs in the proposed Northern Section did not commend themselves to the Management Committee as being suitable and it was agreed that the matter would be further considered the following season.

The Northern clubs convened a meeting at the Grand Hotel, Manchester on June 3rd 1920 and passed the following resolution: "That those present do all they possibly can do to press forward with the programme for the 1921-22 season" A committee was elected with Southport's own Edwin Clayton as its Secretary. A Northern Section of the Football League Division 3 now appeared a real possibility, but would Southport be admitted?

THE LEAGUE-AT LAST!

The 1920-21 season was completely overshadowed by the club's attempt to gain admission to the proposed Third Division North. Secretary Edwin Clayton played a large part in its formation but the voting could not have been much closer.

At a special meeting of the Football League held at the Connaught Rooms, London on March 7th 1921, Southport were one of twenty-eight applicants for the proposed Northern Section. After the First and Second Division clubs agreed to the formation of the section on the recommendation of the Football League Management Committee it was proposed that fourteen clubs be elected en bloc. This was passed unanimously. Thus, Accrington Stanley, Ashington, Barrow, Chesterfield, Crewe Alexandra, Darlington, Durham City, Hartlepoons United, Lincoln City, Nelson, Rochdale, Tranmere Rovers, Walsall and Wrexham were accepted. A ballot was then taken to admit four more and those who received the most votes were Wigan Borough with 34 and Halifax Town, Stalybridge Celtic and Southport with 25 votes each. For the record, the unsuccessful clubs were Castleford Town(18), Rotherham Town(13), Blyth Spartans(9), Gainsborough Trinity(8), Doncaster Rovers(6), West Stanley(6) Wakefield City(6), Lancaster Town(3), Scunthorpe(3) and South Liverpool (1). The Division was made up to twenty clubs by the inclusion of Stockport County who dropped down from the Second Division and Grimsby Town who were transferred over from the Southern Section.

Mr Clayton who represented the Southport club together with committee member Walter Parkinson, could take satisfaction from the fact that thirteen years after first proposing a Third Division his ambition had been realized. On a later occasion he was presented with an inscribed gold watch on behalf of the clubs in appreciation of his efforts.

Southport's last season in the Central League saw them finish in eighteenth position with 32 points from their 42 games. The most impressive feature of 1920-21 on the field was the Billy Semple, Tom Dorward and Harry Schofield benefit match in April which attracted a new record crowd of 7000 to the Haig Avenue enclosure, Ash Lane having recently been renamed in recognition of Earl Douglas Haig, who had been made a Freeman of the Borough the previous year.

On April 4th 1921, at a wildly enthusiastic public meeting at the Temperance Institute Assembly Rooms, with hundreds of supporters unable to gain admission the club once again became a Limited Liability Company with a share capital of £4000 divided into 8000 ten shilling shares. The qualification for directorship was then only twenty shares and the members of the first board were Richard T. Bentley (Chairman), Fred Lawlor, Walter Parkinson M.B.E, Fred Read, Fred W.Hyde, John W. Robinson, Sam H. Banner, Arthur E.Hindley, Henry Watchorn and John H. Preston. The club issued a prospectus explaining that it was being formed to promote "Football, cycling, cricket, trotting, tennis, bowls, pedestrian tournaments, athletic sports, fetes and galas" The new Southport Football Club was thus launched and after forty years of courageous and determined endeavour, the town was at last firmly on the football map.

THE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

Twenty years after first applying for membership of the Second Division. Southport Football Club were elected to the Football League with the formation of the Third Division North in March 1921.

Their election was largely due to the efforts of Edwin Clayton the hon. secretary who was one of the leading lights along with Alderman Cropper, of Chesterfield, in urging the formation of the Northern Section. He was secretary of the Northern Section until 1935, as well as being a member of the Football League Management Committee.

Having finished their last season in the Central league 19th out of 22, the team was strengthened with several new signings, amongst them were Sandgrounders Jimmy Fay and Frank Drabble from Bolton Wanderers and Lol Abram from Cardiff City. In all, 13 locals appeared in the first team that season. The only player to cost a fee was William Greateorex, a full back from Preston-and that a mere £75!

Improvements to the ground included the erection of a covered stand on the popular side paid for by the supporters club and the extension of the stand bordering Haig Avenue. Centre stand season tickets cost £2-2-0, wing stand £1-1-0 and ground £1.

Southport's first Football League game was against Durham City. A 7000 crowd saw Billy Glover score in a 1-1 draw. Southport were represented by Drabble, H.Sinclair, Bainbridge, Skinner, Little, Abram, Appleton, Glover, Wray, Rigsby and Semple. During October, Grimsby Town visited Haig Avenue and were thrashed 7-1. Billy Glover scored 6 which still remains a club record for one player and veteran Billy Semple scored the other. In addition Rigsby missed a penalty and Southport played the second half with only ten men, Skinner being injured.

In the Cup, Southport reached the first round proper, the equivalent of the present day third round and shocked the football world by holding First Division Blackburn Rovers to a 1-1 draw at Ewood Park before bowing out 2-0 in the replay at Haig Avenue before a then record crowd of 12408. They had previously defeated Second Division Coventry City 1-0 at Haig Avenue. Glover scored the goals against both of these teams, to add to his 26 goals in the League.

A satisfactory ninth position was reached which would have been higher but for a deplorable injury crisis after 20 points had been secured from the 16 games up to Christmas. Yet almost £2000 was lost during the season, a familiar story which was to recur again and again in the years that followed.



SOUTHPORT FC 1922/23

After a promising start to Southport's League career, 1922-23 was an anxious season for the club with the forward line the chief weakness. Although the directors derived a certain amount of satisfaction from the fact that the club retained their status without having to apply for re-election, fewer goals were scored by Southport than any other club in the Division, and Billy Glover's departure to Wigan Borough made matters worse. The club finished 17th, securing 31 points and scoring only 32 goals shared between 14 players with one own goal. Glover was top scorer with seven goals despite his departure midway through the season. His transfer netted £1200, which meant that the club made a small profit of £88. During the season the 'Port scored only 21 goals at Haig Avenue and a mere 11 away from home. These totals constituted the club's record low both home and away in the Football League. Only twice did the team score three goals. Defensively there wasn't much wrong with the side, only five teams having fewer goals scored against them.

On a happier note the Reserves finished runners-up in the West Lancashire League and only goal average denied them the championship. Their full record was: Played 42, Won 16, Drawn 3, Lost 3, For 62, Against 25, Points 35. In addition, they reached the semi-finals of the Richardson Cup. At the same time the 'A' team, Blowick, were playing on a ground at Butts Lane Halt, and produced one or two promising youngsters.

The Third Division North was increased to 22 clubs, and Doncaster Rovers and New Brighton were admitted. Meanwhile, Stalybridge Celtic became the Third Division's first casualty, not seeking re-election at the end of the season. With the trade depression throughout the 20's it was the industrial towns which suffered most, many would be supporters could not afford the shilling to go to the match. A list of clubs, including Southport continued solely on the prospect, even the hope, of making a substantial transfer fee.

The 1923/24 season started with Southport in tremendous form taking nine points from the first six games and led the table. Peter Mee, a 22 year old signed from Manchester City scored the only goal credited to the club in each game. Mee played in 13 games at inside-left before his mysterious disappearance on November 5th: the following month he was found drowned in the River Mersey near Sale Golf Club, an unfortunate end to a promising career.

After the early season flourish the club fell away and had to be content with seventh place. Once again the striking power of the forward line left a lot to be desired.

The Reserves rejoined the Lancashire Combination after a twelve year absence and celebrated by finishing second in the League with 48 points from 38 games and winning the Combination Cup.

The Lancashire Combination Cup Final against Morecambe resulted in a clear two goal win with the team comprising mainly of local lads under the guidance of Billy Semple. One further occurrence is worthy of note. In June 1923 the club acquired a junior clerk. The Registered Office was then in London Street and it was there that he learned his trade under the tutelage of the Secretary Edwin Clayton. Gordon Hunt remained at the club until 1975.

The 1924/25 season was the most successful experienced by the club since gaining entry to the Third Division saw Southport finish in fourth position with 51 points and make their first sustained challenge for Second Division football.

The strength of the team lay in its half-back line of Sinclair, Little and Bimson and in fact

only champions Darlington conceded fewer goals. The total of 37 against was Southport's lowest ever in the Football League and the seven goals conceded in the 21 home games is unlikely to be bettered.

The attack was more effective than before with new signings Sambrook from Stockport County and Barber from Manchester United adding much needed scoring power and accounting for 32 out of the side's 50 League goals.

Southport were never lower than fourth in the league table throughout the season, and for the greater part of the time they were in second place. The regular League team was: Halsall; Allen, Mulligan; Sinclair, Little, W. Bimson; Aitkin, Jefferis, Sambrook, Barber, Aitken.

A notable victory was chalked up on January 3rd when Barrow were defeated 5-0, all the goals coming in the first half. Barber hit a hat-trick before Sambrook added the other two.

The only black spot of the season was the level of support which was no better than in 1923-24. A loss of £424. 3s.11d. was reported at the Annual General Meeting, which was not however as bad as the previous season's loss of £974 7s. 4d. The deficit would have been higher but for the transfers of "Todger" Tootle to Derby County and James Forbes to Bolton Wanderers. Moreover, a three-day bazaar at the Cambridge Hall raised £1188 and this enabled the club to reduce their overdraft. Billy Merson, the famous entertainer, was the opener on the third day.

On April 29th three local born players-Billy Halsall, Billy Little and Tom Sinclair-were granted a benefit match against Manchester City, who were defeated 2-1. Halsall, incidentally, missed three mid-season games owing to a back injury and influenza and thereby ended a run of 103 consecutive League appearances.



Billy Little, Billy Halsall and Tommy Sinclair

During the close season the paddock in front of the stand was terraced and the drainage defect in the pitch was remedied. In addition the top of the Haig Avenue stand was re-roofed with galvanised steel.

After making a determined bid for promotion the previous season, 1925-26 was a disaster and the club only just avoided having to apply for re-election. The sudden deterioration is difficult to understand since essentially the same players were available. Injuries and the loss of form to key players were contributory factors while the team

undoubtedly missed the influence of Frank Jefferis who had returned to Preston as trainer. His generalship and experience had counted for much in holding the side together.

Billy Little, for so long tenacious and powerful in the tackle, fell away. Even "Salty" Halsall suffered a complete loss of form which resulted in him losing his place in the side. The goalkeeping spot had been Halsall's virtually without a break since the early weeks of the 1921-22 season. The defence, for so long the side's strength, crumbled and within the space of one week in April the 'Port lost 5-0 at Hartlepoons, 6-1 at Bradford P.A. and 7-1 at home to Rochdale. This latter is still the club's biggest home defeat. In addition they lost 9-0 against Manchester United in the Lancashire Senior Cup.

The support dwindled-gate receipts fell from almost £7000 in 1925 to £5683 and a staggering £2159. 8s.8d. was lost on the year.

In April, Edwin Clayton resigned as secretary, a position he had held continuously since 1908 and he was appointed a Director. The services of trainer Jimmy Fraser and groundsman Thompson were dispensed with for economic reasons. Fraser had been appointed Groundsman-Trainer by Harry Rimmer, chairman of the Central Club, in 1911. and had become Head Trainer in 1921.

In the F.A. Cup the club reached the third round for the first time since 1922 before losing 5-2 at Southend. On the run of play the score was a travesty of justice and the game was marred by some bad refereeing decisions.

At the end of the season the staff was severely pruned and of the more notable departures Billy Little was signed by Lancaster Town, Jack Barber by Halifax Town and Fergus Aitkin by Bradford Park Avenue. Most surprisingly of all, Elias MacDonald, although an ever-present, was not retained, and joined Barrow.

Edgar Raynor, a well-known fishmonger and poultry dealer and prominent Methodist Layman in the district, was co-opted to the board, He had previously been chairman of the Southport and District Football League Executive, and was to serve as a Director for 32 years-26 of them as Chairman.

The 1926/27 season will best be remembered as the year Southport first assumed their role of giant killers.

After the debacle of the previous season the Directors appointed Charles Parker as Secretary/Manager-he had just completed eight years as Secretary of PNE and wisely re-engaged Frank Jefferis as trainer-coach.

Despite a poor start to the season during which time "Topping" Sinclair was absent owing to a dispute with the club over terms the team eventually settled down. Wrexham were defeated 6-0 with Sapsford scoring four and Beadles two. New Brighton were thrashed 7-2 with both Marshall and Beadles hitting hat-tricks and Walsall were beaten 6-1. Beadles again scoring three goals. In all, 80 League goals were scored and Southport finished in a comfortable 12th position but it was in the FA Cup Competition that the club really hit the headlines progressing further than ever before and netting £2000 in the process.

They were lucky to draw with Tranmere Rovers at Haig Avenue in the first round-George Sapsford scoring a late equalizer. However, the Port played splendidly in the replay at Prenton Park. Beadles opened the scoring with a beautiful header and George Jones sealed the victory with a brilliant goal.

Crook Town were easily accounted for in the second round at Haig Avenue and the third round draw paired Southport with First Division Blackburn Rovers. Southport had an old score to settle with the Rovers, as they had knocked out the 'Port five years earlier.

Blackburn, a side with a great cup tradition fell at their first hurdle losing 2-0. Sadly an injury to Beadles prevented him from taking part in the fourth round tie at Anfield which saw the 'Port go down 3-1 in front of 51,600 spectators which drew receipts of £3200. This remains the biggest crowd Southport have ever played in front of. Shortly afterwards Tom White was transferred to Everton which together with the cup run resulted in Southport recording a profit of over £1300 on the year.

Onto 1927/28 and Southport changed their red shirts to black and white stripes. The 55 goals scored at home was to remain a Football League record.

Once again it was in the FA Cup that the club stood out with the 'Port reaching the fourth round before going down 3-0 to first division, Middlesbrough. A gate of 11000 was disappointing but the dreadful weather on the day and in the run up to the game had a massive affect on the attendance. The pitch was covered in water and had the referee arrived and inspected the ground before supporters had been let in the game would not have been played.

Short of cash, as ever, Southport got out of difficulties by resorting to transfers which saw a profit of £500 made on the season reducing the overall deficit to £2370. Prior to the start of the 1928/29 season the ground was re-drained and leveled at the Scarisbrick New Road end where there had been a noticeable dip. The old scratching shed which had ben blown down by gales the previous February was replaced by the stand on the popular side. Three hundred tons of material was used to lay the foundations of the structure and all the work was completed by a voluntary band of helpers. The finance was raised by a Special Committee consisting of directors and members of the Subscribers and Supporters Clubs.

In the league Southport finished in twelfth position. The season was of a transitional nature as Secretary-Manager Charles Parker left in January 1929 to take over at Manchester Central. During his spell in office he had paid particular attention to the financial side and made every effort to make ends meet.

By and large this was a disappointing year, the club lost almost £2000 with expenses amounting to £200 per week and average income of only £143. Too many of the close season signings had failed to live up to expectations and boss, Jimmy Cummins had a lot of hard work ahead.

Despite a lack of cup success in 1929/30 the club still managed to make a small profit thanks to transfers and a policy of strict economy with a reduced wage bill.

Ninth with 43 points was the fourth highest total since joining the league. A rebuild was taking place by manager Jimmy Cummins and this would pay dividends in the following two seasons.

81 goals was the best return to date with the majority being shared between Jimmy Cowen (24) and Ben Twell (20). Twell notched all five goals in the 5-3 Good Friday win over Wrexham and contributed three other hat-tricks in the season.

At the end of the season "Topping" Sinclair and "Salty" Halsall were awarded a benefit match and "Topping" was released from the Club having appeared in 410 first team games.

AMAZING 1930-31-SOUTHPORT CREATE HISTORY!

1930/31 was to be an incredible season. Ten records were broken and the sixth round of the FA Cup was reached. It started slowly with just eight points from 12 games but the

turning point came with the arrival of Archie Waterston. Ten games yielded 18 points and Southport raced up the table but it was in the FA Cup that success surpassed all else.

After easily accounting for Darlington and Gainsborough Trinity, Second Division Millwall were drawn at Haig Avenue and were well beaten, 3-1 before 10125 fans. Seaside rivals Blackpool were the next to fall. A crowd of 13524 saw the home side fight back to win 2-1 after losing 1-0 at half time. Another home draw saw another Second Division team, Bradford PA come to Haig Avenue and a then record crowd of 17508 were present as Southport created football history by being the first Third Division North team to reach the last eight and the whole town went wild with Cup fever hitting Southport.

Southport travelled to nearby Goodison Park for the sixth round when in dreadful conditions, the pitch was covered in snow and ankle deep in mud and it is said that the referee had to spin the coin three times before it landed even, the 'Port went down 9-1 with seven of the goals coming in the first 42 minutes. The game did have its financial compensations with a gate of 45,647 paying £3971.

In the league, Southport clicked into top gear and finished fifth with 53 points. Eighty-eight goals were scored in the 42 league games, 31 of them by Waterston in just 29 games. The highlight of the league programme was the 8-1 thrashing of Nelson on New Years Day (after going behind). "Salty" Halsall retired after 450 first team games in goal. On the managerial side Jimmy Commins who built the team didn't stay to see its triumphs. He became manager at Barrow and the ever willing Edwin Clayton filled the breach until Bert Pelham was appointed.

After winning the first five games of the 1931/32 season Southport finished a respectable seventh in the table and suffered just one home defeat.

In recognition of the side's brilliant cup performance the previous season, the 'Port were exempt until the third round-the only occasion that this has happened in the club's history. Few people gave the team any chance against Newcastle, the eventual cup winners, at St James's Park. When Southport conceded in the first minute it looked like the pre match predictions of a heavy defeat were to come true however Jimmy Cowen equalized shortly afterwards and there was to be no further scoring. The replay saw the ground record attendance of 20,010 set and another 1-1 draw with reports suggesting that with a little more steadiness in attack Southport could well have won the game. The second replay at Hillsborough saw the team run out of steam. After holding Newcastle for 40 minutes the Geordies hammered in nine goals but far from disgraced the Newcastle players acknowledged that Southport had given them their hardest game in their cup run.

The Corporation, as ground landlords, made a grant of £1000 to the club towards providing a new stand at the Blowick end of the popular side and increased the annual rent from £50 to £90. In addition covered accommodation was provided behind the Scarisbrick New Road end of the ground. The whole cost of the stand was defrayed by public subscription and the supporters club worked hard to carry out the excavations as well as providing the bulk of the cash. The Club now boasted covered accommodation for 12,000 spectators.

Few people expected the decline which followed to be so sudden. Southport's endeavour to reach a higher sphere proved to be too ambitious. Twenty-six professionals were engaged at the outset of the season and at first all seemed well as the club amassed twelve points from the first eight games. The inability to keep a settled side, with 32 players being utilized, was the main reason for the failure to mount the expected promotion bid.

After the fine cup runs of the previous two seasons 1932/33 was a bitter disappointment and a loss of just under £3000 was sustained which after making a profit on five out of the preceding six seasons was a particularly severe blow.

In February Bert Pelham severed his connection with the club and hopes were temporarily raised when a month later Jimmy Commins was reappointed manager. The season ended with the club in a disappointing twelfth place.

1933/34 saw the decline continue when the club fell to eighteenth place. 17 draws with 11 at home and only 8 wins, fewer than any other team. Despite conceding 90 goals, a scoring bonanza saw 9 clubs with a worst goals against record in a season that saw 1800 goals scored in the division.

One newcomer to make his mark this season was Jack Grainger who went on to render splendid service over the following fourteen seasons. One of the worst moments in the season came when the club was thrashed 9-2 by Stockport County with a half time scoreline of 6-1.

A policy of economy and a smaller professional staff meant a welcome profit of £219-13-5d although once again this would have been impossible but for the transfer of a leading player-this time Matt Middleton. The economy campaign meant reduced salaries, wages, bonuses and transfer fees. Travelling expenses were cut by £300 and advertising and printing expenses by £200. To achieve a profit at all was remarkable when one considers that Cup-tie revenue fell from £6416 in 1931 to £437 in 1934.

A 6-1 defeat on the opening day of the 1934/35 season set the tone and, for the first time since joining the League the 'Port had to apply for re-election.

Times were hard, the team were without a win until the eighth game and consequently the attendance levels dropped alarmingly. At one time the team actually hit the foot of the table for the first time but finally overhauled Carlisle United to finish 21st with 32 points.

The directors were continually under fire but were placed in an intolerable position. Lowest ever gates meant that it became a financial necessity to sell the best players. The "Southport Journal" newspaper expressed their views so forthrightly that their Press privileges were withdrawn and for a time they published no reports of matches. The financial crisis was so acute that often four or five amateurs were utilized to keep down the wage bill. Never at any stage of the season was the same team used for more than two successive games and in all a club record 33 players appeared in the first team. After rendering several valuable years service, JH Alexander retired from the board. As Chairman of the Finance Committee he had piloted the club through some troubled times.

TROUBLED TIMES

The fact that Southport completed the 1935/36 season at all was an achievement as support dwindled to its lowest ever level and once again the 'Port had to go cap-in-hand to the Football League but they were re-elected easily enough, receiving 47 votes to New Brighton's 38 with unsuccessful applicants Shrewsbury Town and Wigan Athletic obtaining only seven and six votes respectively.

At one point in February 1936, it looked as if the club would not be able to continue: the directors had paid the rent from their own pockets and there was insufficient cash available to take the team to Mansfield for the league match the following weekend. Average home gates were no more than 2,500-Walsall's visit attracted a paltry 1062 and there were occasions when Southport actually derived more benefit from their cut from away games. The league receipts from the visit of Chesterfield for example were £139. After distributing the relevant percentage to the visitors and deducting Entertainment Tax and the FA levy, Southport were left with £81. The weekly wage bill, although just about

the lowest in the league, amounted to £90. The transfers of Jack Seagrave and Charles Read raised £750 which although small was a life-line and undoubtedly saved the club from extinction. In a parlous position financially-a loss of £1600 meant the total indebtedness exceeded £7500-the club's whole future still appeared to be at stake. As it turned out, this was the darkest hour before the dawn.

After two rocky seasons, 1936/37 saw the 'Port finally appearing to be turning the corner. Gordon Hunt was appointed secretary-he became Secretary-Manager in 1937.

Southport finished in 14th place thus avoiding a hat-trick of re-election applications. Up front, Joe Patrick made a greater impression than any centre-forward since Archie Waterston. Dubbed "Hat-Trick Patrick" he once scored three successive first team hat-tricks for Lancaster-he only narrowly failed to equal the individual scoring record set up by Waterston six years earlier finishing on 29 goals. After two financially disastrous years a profit of £67-10 shillings was a welcome sight to the directors. Times were still hard and a 50,000 Shilling Fund was launched. This ultimately brought in £1300 and was wound up several years later.

Most important of all the team played some attractive football, crowds came back with one game against Hull City seeing the visitors third and fourth goals hotly disputed and a number of supporters ran on to the field to protest to the referee in what was termed an "ugly incident" Southport had begun to win back support.

The improvement of 1936/37 was maintained in 1937/38 with the team finishing in 16th position. A then record defeat, 10-1 at Hull was a low point and halted a club record run of six successive draws in spectacular style.

Southport won the Divisional Cup for the first time in six attempts after having been beaten finalists the previous year and further glory came our way in the Lancashire Senior Cup. After overcoming Preston and Bolton Wanderers (both after replays) and Burnley, Manchester United visited Haig Avenue. A crowd of 7931 saw United win by a solitary goal.

Average attendances at 5054 were higher than for several years and a record crowd paid £676 to see the League game against Tranmere Rovers on Good Friday 1938. A profit of £1196 was announced at the AGM, the worst was over and supporters could look forward to better things.

It was hard to believe that after being practically down and out three years earlier, Southport should make a serious bid for Third Division honours so soon. After two highly encouraging seasons during which they assembled a useful team, the 'Port got away to an excellent start, including a 7-1 thrashing of Carlisle United in September which saw "Hat Trick Patrick" score four more goals. The Championship charge was maintained well into the New Year but ran out of steam which saw the club finish in their joint highest position of fourth. Over the period October 8th to December 27th a club record was established as the side went unchanged through twelve League games-15 if cup ties were included.

During a season when Southport made a profit of £2,716 the club had, as usual to rely on transfers which drew a fair amount of criticism with the club pushing for promotion. On a sad note, Edwin Clayton, Honorary Life Member, Secretary and Director and a pillar of the club since the old Lancashire Combination days dies aged seventy.

In the summer of 1939 the club's stock was higher than for several years. It is probable that but for the outbreak of war they would have made a determined challenge for the Second Division but in the end, they had to wait seven years for the resumption of League football and by then the situation had changed completely.

POST WAR DAYS

After the seven year suspension of the Football League programme there was considerable optimism that Southport would make a serious challenge for promotion to the Second Division. During the war the combination of attractive opposition, star guest players and low wages had meant that the club was practically debt free for the first time since becoming a limited liability company.

The 1946/47 season turned out to be a disaster. A crowd of 8913 saw the 'Port beaten 4-2 at Darlington. By New Year 1947 with only one win to their name Southport were anchored to the bottom of the table. Only seven victories were gained with only 17 points collected at home and 25 points was the club's lowest ever total.

Southport were watched by an average of 4179 and finished in 21st place.

Many of the new signings were not up to the required standard and it was a season of struggle.

£578 was lost on the season's activities but on a happier note club chairman, Edgar Raynor, on completing twenty-one years service to the club was presented with an inscribed silver salver at a dinner in the Bold Hotel. Councillor Raynor had experienced many problems since becoming chairman in 1931 and still more were to confront him and his co-directors in the years that followed.

In the 1947/48 season Southport looked certain for another place in the re-election zone by January but along came the returning Alan Ball and along with Arthur Tuner who was signed from Birmingham City. An inspired run which saw 21 points from 17 games saw the 'Port well clear of danger in 15th place.

Having successfully applied for re-election the previous season the directors set about strengthening the team and assembled the costliest staff to date paying out several £1000 fees, sadly they didn't quite work out. In spite of the team's poor start the gates averaged 8000 as Southport shared in the post-war football boom. The crowd of 12829 for the visit of Rotherham United in April 1948 when the 13 game unbeaten run came to an end created a then league record for the club.

At the end of the season which saw a loss of £1204 recorded the club reverted to their black and white striped shirts and black shorts. They had changed to green and white hooped shirts and white shorts during the war. The change brought no improvement to the team's fortunes. After taking thirteen points from their first twelve games the loss of manager/trainer Arthur Turner to Crewe saw a marked dip in form and Southport finished the 1948/49 season next to the foot of the table.

A young Jimmy Meadows was promoted to the first team after promising displays in the reserves. Trevor Hitchen also made his debut in this season.

In the FA Cup the 'Port progressed to the third round before going out 4-1 at Derby County but it did have its financial compensations but also on the down side the club were without a victory until March 26th meaning twenty games had passed without a win. A final flourish which brought six wins from the last seven games could not stave off another re-election application. Southport were re-elected with 42 votes, together with Bradford City (45). Among the unsuccessful applicants were Shrewsbury Town and Scunthorpe United who were both to be elected the following year when the third divisions were increased to 24 clubs.

Into 1949/50 and Southport were in a challenging position up until Christmas but following a 5-1 defeat at Doncaster only one further victory was recorded and a final position of fifteenth was disappointing. While the team was in form the crowds flocked to Haig Avenue with an average of 7787. December 27th 1949 saw a new ground league

record of 14,766 for the visit of Rochdale. Attendances were soon to slump as the post-war boom neared its end.

Hull City visited in the FA Cup and a gate of 15,617 saw a 0-0 draw before Hull comfortably won the replay 5-0.

A surprise economy measure in June was the announcement that George Mutch's contract would not be renewed. Southport had paid Bury a substantial fee for his services but he had been unable to do himself justice in the rough and tumble of the Third Division. Bobby Jones, the former Southport and Bolton Wanderers goalkeeper, was elevated from reserve team trainer to replace him.

The feature of a largely undistinguished 1950-51 season was a small but welcome profit of £97, despite reductions in league takings of £2241 and cup tie receipts of £2109. The profit chiefly came from transfer fees, whilst £5250 was expended no less than £8675 was received.

This season saw the first outing of the lucky old gold second strip in a 2-0 Lancashire Senior Cup victory at Chester.

At the end of the season Harry Harrison retired after twelve years with the club, although he remained second team trainer on match days.

On a sad note Reuben Hilton died at Haig Avenue on July 6th 1951 aged 66. He had been associated with the club since before 1921 helping out quietly and efficiently behind the scenes, never accepting any payment for his services as assistant trainer.

Southport were in the danger zone for most of the season and finished 21st but New Brighton, regular visitors to Haig Avenue since 1923 failed to gain re-election and were replaced by Workington.

At the AGM probably the most contentious ever a motion of no confidence in the directors received strong vocal support but was rejected by 2851 votes to 1273. The shareholders and supporters generally were frustrated with the team's lack of success but they had another twelve months to wait before the club's fortunes improved.

1951/52 was to be another mediocre season finishing in 17th but there were signs of an improvement.

Southport were given a shock in the cup when Non League Bangor City fought back from two goals down to equalize but the replay was a more comfortable outing with the 'Port winning 3-0.

Jack Lindsay created a little piece of football history by scoring three goals in three minutes (and four in all) in a 5-1 win against Scunthorpe United.

The club's lack of consistent support fell still further. It was reported that they were losing £75 per week and with little revenue from transfer fees it was hardly surprising that £3631 was lost on the season, pushing the total deficit over the £10000 mark.

SENT OFF

After a few seasons in the doldrums Southport at long last gave their long suffering supporters something to cheer about in 1952/53 when they finished in sixth place, the best since 1938/39.

Had it not been for a disastrous spell between late September and mid-December which brought just one win from eleven league games, the season could have been a whole lot better.

At Halifax in the October, Wally Taylor became the first Southport player ever to be sent off the field in a league match, Lincoln City thus became the last club with a 100% record in this respect.

The highlight of the season was the 1-0 league victory over Northern Section champions Oldham Athletic before a gate of 11,376 which included over fifty coach-loads of Oldham supporters.

Only nineteen players were called on in the league compared to a previous post war low of twenty-six.

Restricted by lack of capital, the club doubled the authorised share capital by issuing another 8000 ten shilling Ordinary Shares at an Extraordinary General Meeting in March. In a year without transfer revenue Southport did well to contain the loss of £1462.

As in the previous season Southport began 1953/54 in confident fashion picking up thirteen points from the first ten games and a final league placing of eleventh was achieved.

Southport distinguished themselves in the two Easter fixtures against champions Port Vale (who won the league by eleven points) which both resulted in goalless draws, the home game attracting 12,328 to Haig Avenue with 27,000 at Vale Park for the return fixture.

At the AGM a profit of £1,625 was reported due in the main to the transfer of Alec Gaskell to Newcastle United for £5,000. The directors showed concern at the dwindling attendances as gate receipts were down by more than £2,500 but this was only the start as they were to fall still further the following season.

BACK TO OLD GOLD

Southport switched to an old gold and black rayon strip for 1954/55 and recorded the best defensive record in the four divisions of the Football League but allied to that was the fact that only three other clubs scored fewer.

The season was disastrous financially with close on £5000 being lost as support slumped to its lowest level since 1935/36. Attendances averaged 3,554 and the gate for the Chester match in March was just 1,317 one of the lowest then recorded.

One of the season's bright spots was the hat-trick Bill Holmes scored in a 4-1 win against Carlisle United on his wedding day!

Early in 1955 several old stalwarts passed on, in March Jimmy Commins, who had signed ten players without cost and created the famous cup-fighting squad of the early thirties died aged 76. In the same month Charlie Sinclair, one of the five Sinclair brothers also passed away and in May, the death of Fred W. Hyde of Everard Road, an original director of the club was also recorded.

During the course of the season and Extraordinary General Meeting was called to increase the share capital from £8,000 to £15,000 and Bob Howard a prominent local builder was co-opted to the board to become the tenth director to guarantee an ever increasing bank overdraft.

CLUB RECORDS

During one of the best seasons ever in 1955/56 Southport finished fifth with 57 points and six club records were created.

After losing at Hartlepool on October 8th the Club went a record 19 games without defeat winning 12 and drawing 7 games. Southport also won seven successive away games equaling the Football League record Doncaster Rovers established in 1946/47. A record eleven away wins brought 24 points which remained unequalled until the 1972/73

promotion season. The 'Port also created club records with 23 victories and 57 points in the season.

Southport's achievements were all the more impressive since they only had seven full-time professionals, eight part-time professionals and three forces players and their wage bill and gates were amongst the league's lowest. They were well served by the skill and speed of amateur international George Bromilow who finished top goal scorer.

Tommy Lawrenson, father of Mark made his debut in this season making 24 appearances.

Highlights of the season were the first ever league win at Bradford PA at the twelfth attempt and a first win at Prenton Park since 1921/22. Early March saw Southport topping the table but slipped back and ended up in fifth place.

In the April, Alf Barratt, Wally Taylor, and Ray Minshull were awarded a benefit match against Coventry City after completing five years service. They were presented with cheques amounting to £322 each.

Prior to the start of the season Jack Clough had become Southport FC Chairman in succession to Edgar Raynor, who had held the position for 24 years.

DISAPPOINTMENTS

After the success of the previous season, 1956/57 was a bitter disappointment with Southport finishing in twenty-second place.

Up to Christmas only one win was recorded, 2-1 at Carlisle, and were anchored to the bottom of the table. February proved to be the turning point when Stan Mortensen, the former Blackpool and England centre-forward, signed from Hull City. This saw a run of seven undefeated games which pulled the club clear of the re-election zone. The 'Port were inspired and champions elect, Derby County were beaten 3-2 before the season's highest gate of 8076 with Mortensen scoring the decisive goal.

A loss of £2,379 raised the total deficit to £16,958. Higher wages and reduced gate receipts of £1432 were the contributory factors. A stir was caused when in May a special meeting of shareholders was called to increase the qualification for directors to 1,000 shares. This resolution was passed by 6,850 to 2,389 but only attained the necessary three-quarters majority at a further meeting in July. In consequence, long serving directors, Edgar Raynor, Jimmy Green, Tom Naylor, Tom Mackereth and Gilbert Smith left the board with Raynor, a director for 32 years becoming a Life member.

During the year, Councillor Fred Thornley, Mayor of Southport and Vice-Chairman of the club, launched a £10,000 appeal to improve ground facilities and strengthen the team. The appeal raised little more than £1,000 as interest in Southport's affairs waned.

Although at the AGM the directors had resolved to do everything they could to finish in the top half of the table and made twelve close season signings Southport were to end the 1957/58 season in 23rd place and thus became founder members of the Fourth Division.

Pre-season hopes were raised when Stan Mortensen was appointed Team Supervisor in complete charge of practice, policy and tactics on the field. Previously Gordon Hunt had managed the playing and admin functions with the directors usually handling team selections.

Southport became victims of a giant killing when Wigan Athletic, under player-manager, Trevor Hitchen, ingloriously defeated the Sandgrounders 2-1 in front of a gate of 14,170 in the FA Cup and shortly after this humiliation the directors agreed to Stan Mortensen's request to be relieved of the responsibilities of his coaching duties.

Totals of twelve home league defeats and twenty-nine in all established unwanted club records. A solitary success was sharing the Liverpool Senior Cup with Everton by drawing 0-0. Thirty-one players were utilised and the rapid break up of the team was largely to blame for the slump.

A loss of £2522 on the year, despite the abolition of Entertainment Tax and £2571 transfer income. In the November the board was strengthened when John Church was co-opted. With Fourth Division football inevitable, the directors decided to appoint a team manager and in June, Trevor Hitchen reappeared. Shortly afterwards, trainers Bobby Jones and Wilf Birkett were relieved of their duties.

It was Southport's first application for re-election in nine years and went through comfortably enough, securing 42 votes to Crewe Alexandra's 36 with Peterborough United the nearest challenger with 15 votes.

ROCK BOTTOM

For the only time in their history Southport were to finish bottom of the table, the 92nd team in the league with just 28 points to their name at the end of the 1958/59 season. Trevor Hitchen's return as manager in June 1958 was no surprise. At the AGM he promised shareholders eleven fighters and was confident of producing results to arouse enthusiasm in the town but fitness couldn't compensate for a lack of ability and financial restrictions inevitably limited his chances.

In twenty-three away games only four points were gained, the home record exceeded all expectations but it wasn't enough to stop the bottom of the table finish.

With Cup receipts only £300 and league takings down £2,500 and a net £3,000 paid in transfer fees, the club suffered a record loss of £7,746 raising the total deficit over £27,000 and with finances at a low ebb, a survival appeal was launched.

At the Football League AGM, Southport were re-elected but this time around the voting was uncomfortably close.

ANXIOUS TIMES

With Trevor Hitchen replaced mid season and Wally Fielding taking over with Hitchen continuing as his assistant, the pair faced considerable rebuilding over the close season. In the bottom four practically all season, Southport were lucky to retain their league status after applying for re-election for the third successive year. After 26 games without a win the 'Port finally got a victory at the 27th attempt with a 1-0 win over Barrow. Brian Green, who was to return to assist Jimmy Meadows in the championship season was signed but suffered an injury which restricted his appearances to just eight. Champions Walsall inflicted the biggest defeat to date 8-0.

The whole town was apprehensive as the Football League AGM approached. At long last Peterborough United seemed certain to be elected with Southport favourites to drop out. Nevertheless, Southport secured eleven votes more than Gateshead who were making only their second application for re-election. Supporters could thank Jack Clough, who had carefully canvassed his many contacts, for retaining Southport's position. Gateshead with an impressive Third Division record over the years and gates no worse than Southport's could justifiably feel aggrieved. The final result showed Oldham 39, Peterborough United 35, Hartlepool United 34, Southport 29 and Gateshead 18. This year's accounts revealed a loss of £1,683. It was only kept within bounds by donations totaling £8,832 which included £5,400 from the Helpers Club (£4,000 the previous year), £1397 from the General Improvements Fund Committee and £1,750 from the Survival Appeal. The board resolved to do better and put the club's house in order and they did.

INTO THE SIXTIES AND A GREAT START

Into 1960/61 and it was under new management as Lem Newcomb took over as team manager from Wally Fielding who became assistant-trainer at Luton Town. Southport made the best start to a season in 29 years winning the first two games. Only 18 players were used in league matches the fewest ever called upon in a full season. Southport fans travelled in good numbers to the FA Cup tie at Stockport with an estimated 1800 taking to the roads only to see County come out on top by three goals to one.

The Reserves having been relegated at the end of the 59/60 season bounced straight back into the Lancashire Combination First Division.

At the end of the season Southport were involved in a tremendous controversy over the release of Peter Harrison. Many people including the local Trades Council threatened to boycott matches if he were not retained. Eventually the management reconsidered their decision and Harrison stayed on.

John Church became Chairman in the close season. Cyril Hodkinson passed away, as Chairman of the General Improvements Fund Committee, Hodkinson had considerably augmented the Club's finances and after five successive losses a profit of £2,612 provided a pleasant surprise in a season without transfer income. Despite finishing a modest 14th, Southport could face the future with renewed confidence.

FLOODLIT FOOTBALL

The 1961/62 season began badly with a 4-1 home defeat to Darlington but soon settled down and Southport confirmed the previous season's promise and played some delightful football. Reg Blore was attracting the attention and was rewarded when he represented Wales Under 23's against Scotland.

Southport's Easter programme was reduced to one game by Accrington Stanley's resignation in March. Stanley had long been popular visitors.

A finishing place of 17th was attained with 43 points, among the notable achievements were a double over promoted Wrexham.

In the FA Cup, the third round was reached after a stirring 4-2 win over Mansfield Town with Southport playing in the old black and white stripes. This was the first win against league opposition since 1953.

The third round was significant since the postponed tie with third division Shrewsbury Town saw the switching on of the new floodlights. The General Improvements Fund Committee had spent months planning and raising the £8,000 to erect the eight 40ft pylons. A 3-1 defeat but witnessed by 10,810 fans which was the highest gate for four years.

February 16th was the date of Southport's first of many Friday night floodlit games.

Amongst the 1961 pre-season signings was Arthur Peat (pictured)



from Everton who contrived to break his leg in his second Reserve game. Another profit was made, this time £1,124.

On a sad note the often criticised but loyal and persevering Edgar Raynor passed away during the year.

The 1962/63 season saw one of the coldest winters ever and the club's record defeat. Goals were going in on a regular basis at either end and the signing of Alan Spence was to prove a master-stroke.



Club Record Goalscorer, Alan Spence.

The big freeze came early in the New Year and for several weeks football was at a standstill but it came a week too late for Southport. On a bitterly cold Boxing Day the team made the trip to Oldham. Boundary Park was more like a skating rink as far as Southport were concerned and 14662 witnessed the biggest ever defeat in the Football League with Bert Lister registering six of them. The fans and players had to live with the memory of this for over seven weeks until the team could at last take the field again. Even then the next game at Torquay saw a 5-1 defeat and everyone was glad to get back on home soil for the first time in three months for a 1-0 win against Brentford.



Bert Lister scores Oldham's 7th at snowbound Boundary Park.

The bright spot was a 6-3 win over Workington on Easter Saturday and Southport only tasted defeat once in the last eleven matches to finish in a highly respectable 13th place, the best in 7 years. The goals against column showed 106 which was the most the club was to concede in a single season in the Football League. In an odd quirk the 72 goals scored proved to be the most the club recorded in all the post-war League years.

The 1963/64 season was another one of struggle with away wins particularly hard to come by, the first away win didn't arrive until January, 4-1 at Stockport with Alan Spence grabbing a hat-trick.

Lem Newcomb's ill-health inevitably affected the club. In February the director's stopped his pay pending his resuming his duties: in March he retired and former Preston North End and Scotland full-back Willie Cunningham was appointed player-manager. An administrative oversight caused Cunningham's registration to miss the Football League deadline by one day and precluded him from playing. The 'Port had long needed someone in complete authority to direct affairs and motivate the players especially away from home.

Alan Spence scored 27 goals and enjoyed the most successful of his 6½ seasons at Haig Avenue. This was in spite of losing Reg Blore's support following a £5000 transfer to first Division Blackburn Rovers. Supporters had criticised Blore's transfer just two weeks before cup ties yet Southport confounded everyone by defeating third division Walsall before the season's biggest crowd 4,768.

One newcomer to impress was 19 year-old Alex Russell whose considerable skill and midfield prompting was a major factor in the 'Port's revival after 1965. A final position of 21st saw the club's eighth re-election application. Great relief was felt when the Football League's plan to reorganize the Fourth Division into a "Football Alliance" was abandoned. Southport were re-elected comfortably with Wigan Athletic leading the non-leaguers with 5.

The Football League Cup brought little revenue, 3,469 saw Southport's first round win over Barrow and few more saw the defeat at Workington. Gates were the lowest since the mid-thirties averaging below 3,000. Despite Blore's transfer a loss of £3,048.

After his long illness Lem Newcomb, as manager, passed away in July who despite a perpetual lack of funds had relied on encouragement and understanding: the club had suffered a grievous loss.

Another disappointing season saw Southport finish 20th place, without a win in the last 17 league games in 1964/65.

The season started with 18 professionals, the pick of the new signings being the versatile Colin Alty. A Sandgrunder, Alty developed into a most dependable and valued team member. Alex Russell was top scorer with 16 goals.

The FA Cup brought the best out of Southport. After beating Wearside Leaguers Annfield Plain, 6-1 a thrilling battle at Wrexham saw a 3-2 triumph despite trailing 2-1 at half-time and having Willie Cunningham carried off with a dislocated shoulder only to return on the right wing.

In the third round an away draw to first division Leeds United was the reward. Southport performed heroically and contained Leeds to one goal until the last ten minutes when they conceded two more. The consolation was a £2,800 share from the 31,297 gate which helped to pay the wage bill for several weeks.

The club's fortunes were running low. Attendances stagnated around the 2,000 mark, six times falling below and only twice exceeding 4,000. The week after the Leeds cup-tie a crowd of 1,685, about as many as had followed the 'Port to Leeds, saw Southport score twice in the last four minutes to defeat Newport County 5-3. That was to be the last league win: the failings of the bottom four clubs ensured the ninth application for re-election was avoided but it was very close. Eight wins was the lowest whilst 16 draws told their own story.

A loss of £3,172 was recorded. With interest waning fast, no money to buy new players and the manager and trainer sacked it needed a miracle to survive. In June the board advertised the position of trainer-coach and Billy Bingham, having been prompted by his wife, applied.

THE MIRACLE WORKER ARRIVES

For the first time in almost 34 years Southport resumed their Cup giant-killers role, reaching the fifth round. Interest revived and league attendances up 30,000 contributed to a record profit of £5,825.

Billy Bingham, former Everton and Irish International winger, was the inspiration and brought the best out of his players. A fitness fanatic, he created a team spirit and professional approach long absent. Brian Reeves proved the club's best goalkeeper since Ray Minshull displaying lightning reflexes and keen anticipation and the most sensational signing of all, Alex Parker from Everton, proved his experience as club captain was invaluable.

Southport changed to a new all gold strip in the third league game season and celebrated by beating Doncaster Rovers, 2-1, the first victory in 20 matches. Bingham, later appointed Team Manager on a three year contract introduced "method" football to the Fourth Division: although not popular with spectators it certainly achieved results.

It was in the FA Cup which brought national prominence. The early rounds saw wins against Halifax and Stockport after a replay in front of 15,000 at Edgeley Park.

In the third round only Ipswich Town goalkeeper Hancock defied a luckless 'Port. In the replay at Portman Road and trailing 2-1 with just eight minutes to go it looked as though it was all over but Alan Spence equalized and with just 15 seconds left Colin Alty headed the winner.



Goalmouth incidents came fast and furious in Southport's third round F.A. Cup-tie against Ipswich, on Saturday. Above, Southport's centre-forward, Colin Alty and left-winger, Ron Smith, move to a first-half centre. Below, Ipswich keeper, Ken Hancock, makes one of his several superb second-half saves as Dickie Marshall and Alan Spence rush in.

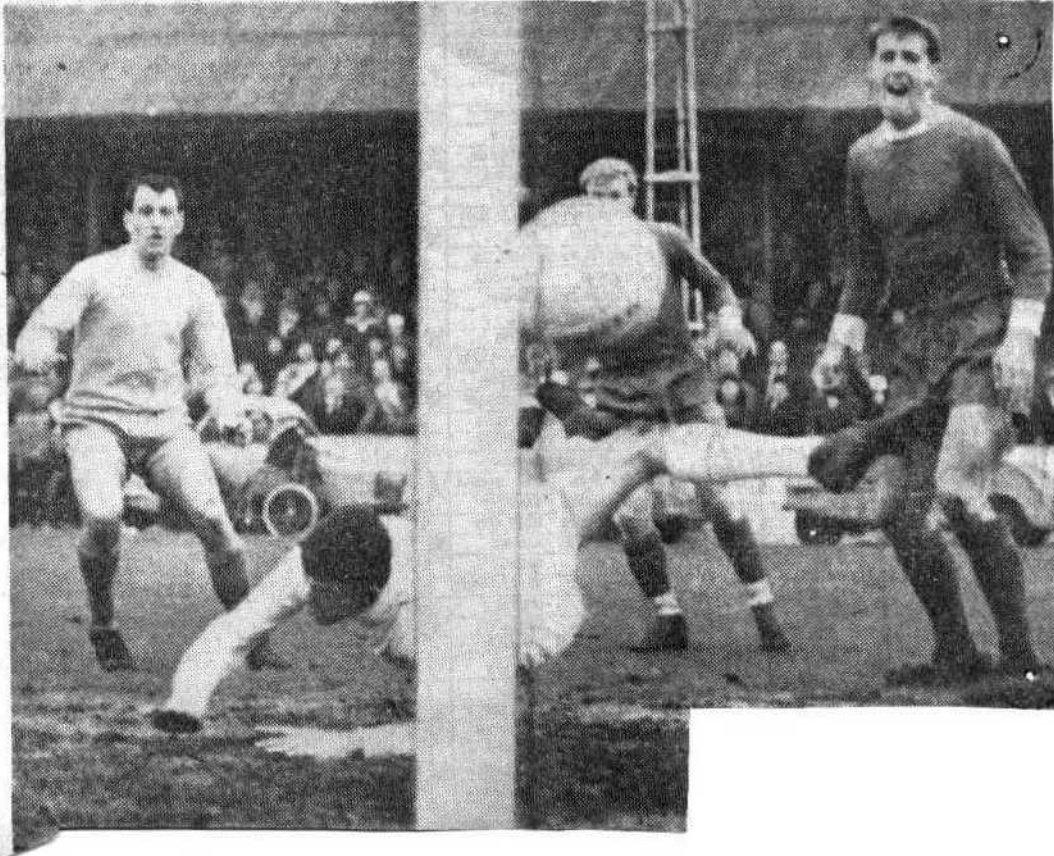
Cardiff City, another Second Division club attracted 14,230 (receipts £3517) to Haig Avenue and lost 2-0-Spence netting Alty's parried shot and Ron Smith headed home Alex



Champagne for Southport's Cup heroes after their victory over Cardiff City. Left to right: Billy Bingham (manager), A. Beanland, A. Spence, A. Russell, B. Reeves, A. Peet, R. Marshall, R. Smith, F. Molyneux, C. Alty, Mr. J. Church (chairman).

Russell's free-kick.

● It's a dive of defeat by Cardiff 'keeper Davies as a perfectly placed header from Southport's Ron Smith (left) beats him for Southport's second goal, which finally sealed the Welshmen's fate.



The Cup trail ended at Hull City who were the Third Division's giant killers. 38,811 (receipts £10,850) watched incredulously as the 'Port defence with Brian Reeves outstanding absorbed continuous pressure. The "Tigers" despite missing a penalty, triumphed through two second half goals.

Just before the transfer deadline a record £4,000 was paid out for Jim Fryatt. The record profit resulted from the cup-tie revenue and donations of over £8,000-the Development Association raised £6,820. The club could now look forward to promotion after almost folding 12 months earlier.

PROMOTION AT LAST



Forty-six years after being re-elected to the Football League, Southport at last won promotion in 1966/67 and in doing so created a number of club records. These included the 19 wins and 40 points gained at home as well as the 11 away draws, whilst the totals of 23 wins and 59 points were new records at the time. The 8 games lost away from home and the 10 defeats in total were also the lowest then recorded.

The season was prefaced by a short tour in Ireland and a game against Colchester United and it was in that game that Billy Bingham spotted Colchester trialist Eric Redrobe and on returning Bingham signed him and the big centre-forward played a notable part in the team's success.



On Boxing Day the biggest league gate for ten years, 8,197, saw a 1-0 victory over fellow challengers Wrexham with Amby Clarke scoring the only goal. Then, in the early hours of December 27th came the fire which completely destroyed the grandstand, offices, club records, dressing rooms and kit. The whole town rallied round the club in the difficult weeks that followed a temporary stand was erected, a converted caravan became the Secretary's office and for the remainder of the season the players changed at nearby Meols Cop School. A Fire Appeal Fund was launched and many Football League Clubs contributed to it.



The Morning After The Fire

The promotion drive gathered momentum with a dramatic 4-3 win over Chester, Ron Smith scoring the last minute winner direct from a corner kick. Just when the target

seemed assured a surprise 2-1 home defeat to lowly Rochdale set everyone back with two desperately tough matches to follow. Yet on a euphoric night at Prenton Park in late April before a 15,555 crowd and under pressure throughout a 2-1 win proved decisive. The game ended with Rovers going all out for an equalizer and the huge Southport contingent imploring the referee to blow the final whistle.

The worst was over: with promotion virtually certain Southport beat Southend at Haig Avenue by a George Andrews goal in an emotion charged game witnessed by 8,999 spectators thousands of whom raced onto the pitch at the end to congratulate the team. Southport had done it as last!

A satisfactory first season in the Third Division brought increased attendances and saw the erection of the new stand. Much FA Cup excitement was aroused when Everton were drawn at Haig Avenue.

A mid table position was maintained throughout, attendances didn't fall below 5,000 until December and on Boxing Day 10,761 paid then record receipts of £2,230 to see a highly entertaining 2-2 draw with Bury. In all, 135,362 spectators (average 5,885) the highest aggregate since 1950/51 paid £26,250 to see the 23 home games. Saturday evening football was tested on two occasions.

In the FA Cup a 13,353 attendance was recorded in the 4-2 win over Runcorn but Cup fever hit the town when Everton were drawn in the third round. Southport rightly refused to switch the match to Goodison and the tickets were applied for three times over: a crowd limit set by the police of 18,795 paid a record £6,175. The game was spoiled by a strong wind but with Southport running and chasing everything the Toffee's were unsettled but scraped home by an 80th minute Joe Royle goal.

In February came the shattering announcement that Billy Bingham had accepted a managerial job at Plymouth Argyle. Supporters were aggrieved at the manner of his departure but acknowledged that Bingham, earlier appointed Northern Ireland team manager, had virtually rescued the club from the point of extinction. Don McEvoy was to take over the reins and made Tony Field his first signing.

The 'Port did win the Northern Floodlight League Cup at the first attempt overwhelming Wigan Athletic 6-1 on aggregate in a two-legged final.

The Board had been strengthened by the arrival of Arthur Briscoe and Leon Rapaport and issued another 30,000 ten shilling shares in April. The grandstand, offices and dressing rooms which were completed during the season cost £75,000: the Appeal Fund raised £10,000 and insurance proceeds contributed £32,500 leaving the Board with a heavy financial burden.



Southport Football Club's new £65,000 stand in which all the seating has now been completed.

Billy Halsall, probably the club's best 'keeper ever had passed away in January in America. Halsall's career spanned 1919-1931 and he appeared in 496 games all told.

In April, nine million television viewers saw Southport visit Swindon Town on BBC's Match Of The Day and a classic 3-3 draw won much favourable comment from the enthralling game.

HIGHEST EVER FOOTBALL LEAGUE FINISH

Despite a feeling that 1968/69 would be a struggle the season would see Southport finish in the club's highest ever position, eighth, 52nd in the Football League.

An appalling start saw the first four games lost but by the end of the season only one home defeat had been recorded. The highlight was an excellent 5-0 win over Stockport with the return game at Edgeley Park appearing on Granada Television.

Terry Harkin won his second Northern Ireland cap and scored twice in a World Cup Qualifying game against Turkey but became unsettled by crowd criticism and was transferred to Shrewsbury Town for £9,000.

In the FA Cup Southport recorded a 1-0 win which was to remain the club's last win in the FA Cup as a Football League team.

Alan Spence, after netting 108 first team goals, was transferred to Oldham Athletic for a nominal fee. A profit of £4,773 was realized thanks to £10,000 net transfer income.

A Northern Floodlight League double was achieved winning the championship and defeating Wigan Athletic 5-3 on aggregate in the two legged final. The ever reliable Arthur Peat deservedly became "Player Of The Year" securing 73% of the votes cast.

HEARTBREAK SEASON 1969/70

After three seasons in the Third Division relegation was to come in heartbreaking fashion. After completing a record 25 home league games without defeat a 3-0 home defeat by eventual runners-up Luton Town in September ended the record.

The Football League Cup saw a scintillating 5-1 home win against Oldham Athletic which brought Manchester City to Haig Avenue which attracted a record League Cup attendance of 11,215 and each side benefitted to the tune of £1,000.

Arthur Peat celebrated his 300th league appearance with a 6-2 win over Reading-they lost the return game 8-0.

A poor run of results saw the director's request the resignation of manager Don McEvoy and Arthur Peat became Player-Manager with Alex Parker returning from Ireland as trainer coach. Peat inspired the team. Morale improved and with five successive home league wins looked to be pulling clear but quite inexplicably they cracked taking a mere seven points from the last eleven games. After monopolizing the crucial encounter with fellow-strugglers Gillingham they allowed The Gills an equalizer which kept them up and sent the 'Port down.

Among the eighteen players used equalling the record low of 1960/61 a young Chris Dunleavy made his debut which saw him score two own goals against Rochdale.

After six seasons at Southport Colin Alty joined Morecambe where he suffered repeated injury.

On April 28th Arthur Peat resigned as manager although he was retained as a player and Alex Parker became manager on May 8th.

A loss of £10,415 was sustained.

TURMOIL

1970/71 was to be another season of turmoil and Alex Parker was dismissed after all promotion ambitions had evaporated. The first 16 games yielded 22 points but a disastrous run of five consecutive defeats culminating in a 2-0 home defeat in the FA Cup to Boston United put a dampener on the whole season.

The bad run ended with a 4-2 win at Oldham but The Latics later gained revenge by winning 4-1 before the season's biggest league gate of 6,027, the 8pm kick off greatly benefiting the sizable visiting following.

Peter Withe was to make his debut this season but injury halted his progress....he was to go on to greater things.



Peter Withe in his England kit.

In February Southport scored two bizarre goals in a 3-2 win over Peterborough. The first, a 40 yard lob by Laurie Calloway was punched into his own goal by the visiting keeper who was blinded by the floodlights. In consequence, Peterborough refused to play any evening games at Haig Avenue. In the second half a Tony Field corner was going out of play but hit the referee standing on the goal line and Dunleavy centered for Redrobe to score.

Supporters showed dissatisfaction at the club's inability to return immediately to the Third Division. Average attendances fell from 3,416 to 2,856 and with cup-tie and transfer income down a loss of £15,171 was sustained.

Alex Parker assembled a promising reserve team under the watchful eye of Alan Spence. It was later learned that Parker had established a comprehensive scouting system. A week after the season ended Parker was sacked and the youth policy was abandoned with the appointment later in May of Jimmy Meadows.

4 4 4 4

The 1971/72 season promised much but ended in disappointment with a seventh place 50 point finish.

It was to prove a season for rebuilding under Jimmy Meadows bringing in John McPhee, George Sharples, Alan Taylor and Barry Hartle.

The first four home games saw wins, 4-0, 4-1, 4-0 and 4-2 and during this spell 10,223 turned up for the Football League Cup visit of Stoke City which saw a 2-1 defeat but it was only the woodwork that denied Southport a replay. Stoke were to go on and win the tournament.

In October, the biggest ever transfer deal was completed when Tony Field was sold for £21,000, £16,000 for Southport plus the acquisition of Freddie Goodwin in part exchange. Jim Fryatt returned for £4,000 but took 13 games to register his first goal and with Eric Redrobe injured the forward line suffered.

With Bobby Sibbald brought in from York City and Mick Hartland and Micky Moore the nucleus of a championship winning side was there.

The big shock was the release of Arthur Peat after 11 years and a record 401 league appearances.

Alan Spence left to manage Skelmersdale United.

In July 1971, the board was strengthened when Arthur Horrocks (he will feature again later), for many years chairman of Wigan Athletic was co-opted. The profit of £1,024 resulted entirely from the transfers of Field and Calloway which realised £22,000. With gates averaging 3,254, the club were losing £400 per week.

"ANNUS MIRABILIS"



The 1972/73 season was to be the club's "annus mirabilis" winning the Fourth Division Championship the first honour since topping the Lancashire League in 1903. Record after record went tumbling.

Never below third in the table, the leadership came on January 6th when they recorded the biggest Fourth Division away win at the time, 7-0 at Darlington. In a fog threatened game, the 1088 spectators saw the home side completely demoralized. Jim Fryatt netted four times and the lead was maintained for the rest of the season with the Championship won by four points. 62 points and 26 league wins was the best ever haul. 7 doubles, 7

away games without defeat, only 8 away defeats and in the New Year four successive away games without conceding a goal were records to add to the collection.

It was essentially a great team effort although bargain buy, Andy Provan from Wrexham produced the scoring flair and won the Fourth Division Player of The Year award. Brian Green became trainer coach allowing Jimmy Meadows to concentrate on administration. Green, himself quite a character deserved much of the credit for the success.

Alex Russell returned to the club and eight games without defeat followed and it was to be his free-kick which rocketed home to register the dramatic injury time equalizer against Hartlepool and clinch the title. This match was watched by 6,533, the biggest crowd of the season.



Alex Russell's championship winning goal.

The low level of support was the biggest disappointment, the average attendance was only 3,577.

Eric Redrobe, the idol of the terraces joined Hereford and John McPhee retired to manage his Blackpool hotel.

Jimmy Meadows won the Football League Fourth Division Manager Of The Year award, comprising a £100 cheque and a silver salver. Before 1973 was out he was to be reminded just how precarious a Football League manager's job is.



ONE SEASON ONLY

It was to be a one season trip into the Third Division which although got off to a reasonable start proved a step too far. Injuries both serious and trivial played their part. Clive Clark broke his leg in the very first game of the season and Frank Lee also suffered a fracture and didn't appear again. The team accumulated an unprecedented 50 bookings over the season and 3 sending offs. Even as the season started Bobby Sibbald, Norrie Lloyd and Chris Dunleavy were under two match suspensions and both Tommy O'Neil and Alex Russell were to serve three-match bans for their sins.

The control of the team was in turmoil. Brian Green seeing the writing on the wall left in November for Chester and by the end of the year Jimmy Meadows was relieved of his post. Debate raged over his departure but something drastic was required. The main problem came when nobody was appointed to take the reins. Alan Ball came in as "Honorary Manager" but was needed back in Sweden in mid-February and it was left to coach Matt Woods to assume control. With all the upheaval it was no surprise the team lost its way.

The 36 goals scored was the lowest for over fifty years, after November 17th, Southport only managed to score twice in one match. Chris Dunleavy was transferred for £12,000 early on and the stability of the defence went with him.

Tommy O'Neil was to prove a great acquisition scoring the goal of the season capping a 75 yard run with a narrow angle shot into the net against Tranmere. He became a true fans favourite.

With the injury crises so bad the club requested that the Plymouth Argyle game be postponed, the request was refused.

A month later the first match scheduled to be played on a Sunday at Haig Avenue was called off. It was the time of the miners strike and with the three day week all efforts were being made to conserve manpower, energy and fuel.

A 6-0 defeat at Oldham on Good Friday saw the inevitable relegation confirmed. The return game on Easter Monday saw 9504 cram in to the ground (probably around 8500 were from Oldham) and a 2-0 defeat.

CONSOLIDATION BACK IN DIVISION FOUR

It was to be the middle of June before Alan Ball was appointed as the new manager for 1974/75, a decision that was no means unanimous and the rift it caused led to the resignation of three directors, including the influential vice-chairman Leon Rapaport.

In July the remaining directors, John Church and Gerry Troy were joined by Tom Robinson who six months later, took over the chairmanship on Church's resignation. Robinson had ambitious plans for the club but not the wherewithal to back up his promises. It is fairly well substantiated that his Rolls Royce was repossessed by a finance company outside Haig Avenue during a match. It was to prove an unhappy association that lasted little over a year.

On the field things weren't too bad and the team established itself comfortably in the top half and finished in 11th position. With little at stake support ebbed away and this saw the first sub 1000 gate in a Tuesday night game against Scunthorpe United. At this point it was hard to believe what was to happen in the next three seasons!

With Jimmy Melia appointed manager it was off field activity that captured the headlines as Albert Dunlop was suspended from his duties as Commercial Manager after his "marathon pop concert" at the ground proved a financial disaster. Only 1,000 fans turned up and few of the promised groups materialised and the naivety of Dunlop's original appointment to a position of trust was fully exposed. No monies were ever recovered from any of his ventures.

DEPRESSION STARTS HERE

The 1975/76 season descended into depression, the only bright spot being the share of the takings from a League Cup trip to Newcastle United. However having originally been drawn at home, the switch to St James's Park alienated the majority of the supporters. Eleven league matches were lost on the bounce, a club record. Jimmy Melia had resigned by the end of September and Duncan Welbourne took on the unenviable role of player coach with Bobby Sibbald assuming the captaincy.

Just how desperate things had become was epitomized by the bizarre intervention of "Romark" the stage hypnotist. Granada TV's "Kick Off" programme arranged for the team to be put under his influence before a home game. This project failed as goalkeeper, Kevin Thomas, not fully out of the hypnosis, gashed his head on a girder before the match.

After the 4-1 cup defeat at Northern League Spennymoor United the board passed a motion of no confidence in Chairman Tom Robinson and a week later he resigned and John Church reluctantly agreed to resume as chairman.

By New Year only five points were on the board. Allan Brown was appointed manager in January and a slow revival began and only three of the last 14 games were lost. The three wins over Easter provided Southport with their first six point Easter since 1930. The 3-3 draw at Bournemouth when Southport had lead 2-0 and 3-1 was halted for twenty minutes by a bomb hoax as the Cherries equalized and were totally dominating the game. Nobody ever did find out what was behind the hoax but the coach load of travelling Southport fans who were in Bournemouth for the weekend had a few suspicions!!

Seeking re-election had been a certainty since early April but the five point finish ahead of Workington gave everyone great confidence. Allan Brown left to take on the job at Blackpool and after 53 years with the club Gordon Hunt had at last decided to retire. Ray Henderson took over the managerial reins and once re-election was assured he appointed Gus McLean as coach.

IT GETS WORSE

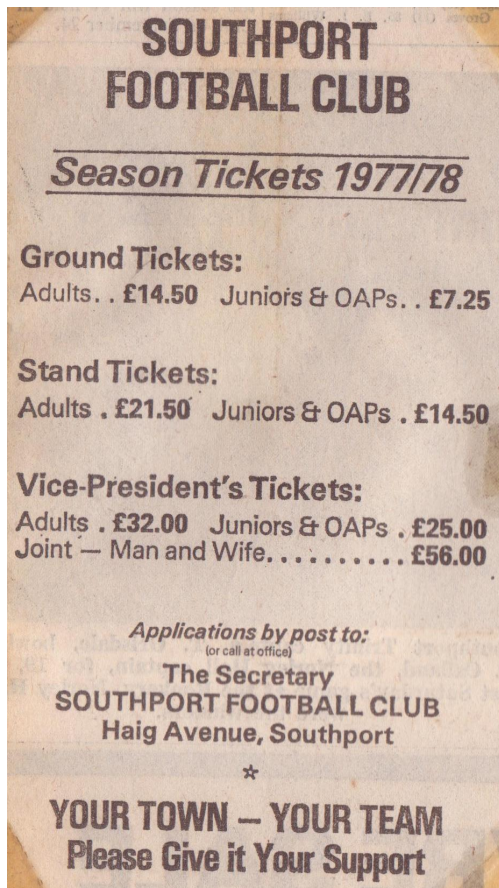
The Football League Cup of 1976/77 saw Carlisle taken to a third game (the winner had a trip to Highbury as a reward) but it was to be the only high point of another season that saw a 23rd place finish.

Southport were anchored on two points until October 2nd but a mini revival came and by the turn of the year the team had edged its way out of the bottom four due in the main to the presence of Billy Wilkinson, his tenth and last appearance being the only time he tasted defeat but it heralded another disastrous sequence of ten successive defeats.

Attendances were dropping with six gates below the 1000 being recorded and rumours of a financial crisis were rife. Ray Henderson resigned although he did stay on as Executive Manager and Hugh Fisher became the new player manager. Only three wins and 25 points was the worst ever return but again Workington filled bottom spot.

Local businessman Jack Carr, who had become a director in 1976, resigned after 14 months, though he was to remain very close to the board for many years.

By the time the season was over there were grave doubts if there would even be a next season.



OFF FIELD SHENANIGANS

It is arguable that more happened off the field in the close season of 1977 than happened on it in the preceding nine months. Amongst the welter of announcements, appeals and meetings both public and private it is difficult to distinguish truth from

rumour but the crisis which threatened Southport FC was revealed on May 23rd when the Board declared that without a substantial injection of cash by June 3rd the club would withdraw its application for re-election to the Football League.

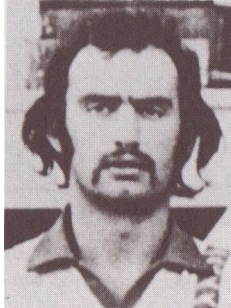
Volunteers took to the street in an attempt to distribute leaflets appealing for donations to every house in Southport. This raised a few thousand pounds but was abandoned when unscrupulous elements, unconnected with the "official" enterprise began collecting on their own account.

£11,000 was raised from the sale of George Dewsnip to Fort Lauderdale Strikers and "Mr X" had offered a "substantial loan" at a low rate of interest and it was with renewed confidence that the Board attended the League's AGM and secured re-election although Workington missed out and were replaced by Wimbledon.

Mr X never existed.

The club AGM in July saw the return of Leon Rapaport to the Board as Vice Chairman to one Walter Giller. The latter's appointment was to say the least unpopular and was to prove a disaster of fatal proportions.

The season started with another flurry in the league cup beating Tranmere over two legs before holding Hull City to a 2-2 draw and going down 1-0 in the replay. The home game witnessed one of the all time great goals scored at Haig Avenue when Gary Cooper unleashed a 30 yard looping, dipping volley.



Phil Ashworth entered the club record books when he scored in the first seven league games to claim outright the club record for successive scoring.

The elusive FA Cup victory looked to have been gained at long last when going into injury time a lead of 2-1 looked to have secured the victory. It was not to be as Runcorn equalized with the last kick of the match. An 84th minute decider saw The Linnets win the replay.

Southport collected their 2000th point in the Football League at Aldershot and typical of the season, goalkeeper Tony Harrison collected a fractured arm.

The last win ever in the Football League came in a 4-1 win at home to York City and the final home game was a 1-1 draw against Huddersfield Town. The last ever match was a spirited 3-2 defeat at Watford in front of 10,089 celebrating Watford fans as The Hornets were about to start their trip up the Divisions. Quite a contrast to what was to befall The Sandgrounders in the next few weeks.

An air of gloomy inevitability engulfed the club as the realization that yet another, possibly final re-election application would be required.

There were positives. The average attendance was 1,873, up 30% on 1976/77 and Rochdale had finished in 24th place.

On the downside was the personality of Walter Giller, an abrasive, assertive character who had upset one or two influential clubs on whose votes Southport could usually count. The voting could not have been closer. Southport and Wigan Athletic tied for fourth place on 26 apiece. A second ballot was required and this time Wigan prevailed 29-20 with Rochdale, 7 points adrift of Southport, comfortably re-elected.

It subsequently transpired that Wigan chairman, Arthur Horrocks-himself a director of Southport in the early seventies had canvassed other clubs thoroughly over a considerable period of time. Many supporters had seen it coming but the shock had a numbing effect.

Where do we go from here? The Board took the only positive step open to it and applied successfully for membership of the Northern Premier League.

NON LEAGUE HERE WE COME

The date of 2nd June 1978 will be forever etched in the memory of all fans of Southport Football Club.

It was a long close season when at times it really did look like there wouldn't be a team to follow. There were many comings and goings in the 76 days between failing to gain re-election to the Football League and setting off to Holly Park, Allerton to take on South Liverpool. If ever a reminder was needed that Southport were now a Non League team, the 19th August 1978 brought it all home in grand style.



Harry McNally had been appointed manager and supporters approached the season with fear and trepidation, that fear was heightened on the approach to Holly Park when we realised just exactly what was in store and it wasn't just the welcoming party of friendly locals outside the ground!

The first game was won 1-0 with Joe Turner (pictured)



taking the honour of scoring the first ever NL goal in front of a crowd of 296. Holly Park is now Liverpool South Parkway Railway Station, a stark demonstration of how precarious life can be as a non league football club. It is interesting looking back at the make up of the league in that very first season and chart the progress of the teams:-

Mossley, Altrincham, Matlock Town, Scarborough, Boston United, Runcorn, Stafford Rangers, Goole Town, Northwich Vics, Lancaster City, Bangor City, Worksop Town,

Workington, Netherfield, Barrow, Gainsborough Trinity, Morecambe, Frickley Athletic, South Liverpool, Gateshead, Buxton and Macclesfield were the opposition in 1978/79.

The season of 1978-79 proved relatively successful, with 19 wins and only 11 defeats in the 44 League games played. A huge turnover of players meant that only John Higham and Chris Kisby, who was sent off after thirty minutes of his Non League debut, remained of the regulars from the previous year, though Paul Birchall and George Dewsnip were to return later in the season. Hughie Fisher had departed but his assistant Harry McNally proved a capable replacement as Manager.



Team picture from the club's first Non League Season 1978/79.

Southport finished in fifth place in a season that saw some great football being played and wins at Non league kings Altrincham in front of a partisan crowd of 1683. It was a highly creditable performance but the real turning point came at the end of the campaign with the formation of the Football Alliance. This was to be a new nationwide league comprising the elite of all the regional leagues and would in time develop into the Vauxhall Conference. Naturally enough, Southport were invited to become founder members but the Board turned down the opportunity on the grounds that the additional travelling costs were prohibitive and the view was taken that it would never last. It's still going strong over forty years later!

Failure to move up meant that Southport were distancing themselves still further from any hopes of ever recovering their League place. The supporters reaction was not anticipated and there was widespread alienation of fans that took a long time to recover and from a healthy first season it went rapidly downhill from then on.

The Club was close to oblivion in the early NL days, the articles below are reproduced from the Southport Visiter:

END OF THE LINE? 10 February 1979

Has Southport Football club finally reached the end of the line? That question could be answered at tomorrow's meeting which has been called by the club's directors, following the winding-up application made by the Inland Revenue authorities.

This is by no means the first crisis the club has had to face, but it could be the last. Certainly time is pressing, with the winding-up petition due to be heard in just over one week's time, on February 19. It is a fact that the club has suffered from being so close to such hotbeds of football as Liverpool and Manchester. And week by week those who have watched matches at Haig Avenue have been at least equalled and often outnumbered by those who have gone out of town to watch other clubs' games. So again it must be asked: Do Southport people care whether their local club lives or dies? -The club's manager, Mr. Harry McNally, summed it up this week when he commented that many local residents had written off Southport when Football League status was lost at the end of last season, and that they had not taken the trouble to go along to see them play in the Northern Premier League. Had they done so they might have been pleasantly surprised at the standard of football, and, at the same time, might have helped to avert what could well be the Haig Avenue club's final crisis.

A GLEAM OF HOPE? 27 February 1979

We all know that one swallow does not a summer make. One is also aware that in soccer, of all the professional sports, fortunes can fluctuate wildly in a very short space of time. Nevertheless, for Southport Football Club, currently in the middle of perhaps its worst ever financial crisis, last Saturday's match at Haig Avenue must have given a gleam of hope for the future.

Not only was the Northern Premier League's leading team beaten, but the attendance was the best in the NPL on the day and a considerable improvement on Southport's previous 'gates', this season.

Interestingly, too, the game proved quite a draw for representatives of various Football League clubs, a situation that did not often apply when Southport was in the Fourth Division.

Despite all the problems, the form of the Haig Avenue team has been good this season, and if this standard of play can be maintained then the battle to keep the club alive will have been indeed worthwhile.

WORST SEASON EVER?

Half of the 42 games were lost in 1979-80, with only one fewer in the season which followed sub-standard players were brought in.

Harry McNally resigned as Manager early in September 1979, to be replaced by Jimmy Melia in the capacity of 'acting manager' only. It was January before a proper appointment was made and Allen Hampson the former Everton and Halifax player took over. Star players, Nigel Halsall joined Runcorn for £4,500 with Graham Barrow moving to Altrincham.

Relegation was just averted finishing in 19th place. The new manager was Allan Brown who returned for a less successful second spell and faced massive rebuilding. Just as the 1980-81 season opened, Walter Giller and secretary Gordon Brown walked out leaving the club in a state of turmoil. It was a literal walk out as well, with Rob Urwin who at that time was running the club shop left to phone in the scores to the Press Association after the game as nobody had any idea what was going on.

A series of crisis meetings were held with the day-to-day running in the hands of an emergency committee of dedicated supporters.

The E.G.M. on September 18th 1980 was largely inconclusive, but a new board was formed comprising former Chairman John Church (elected in his absence) and supporters Len Cox, Brian Bennett and Stuart Gordon, though the last named subsequently withdrew. In due course the new board, acting on legal advice, requested the F.A. to

conduct an investigation into the affairs of the club which left much to be desired. There was little the new directors could do except to promote the new lottery and dispense with the services of Stuart Imlach who had been assisting Allan Brown. There were weeks when the players went without wages and by mid-November there was an announcement that if £25,000 were not found right away the only course was a voluntary liquidation.

SOUTHPORT A CLUB NO ONE WANTED from Colin Wood of The Daily Mail 17 December 1980

SOUTHPORT Football Club will be killed off today and I confess I am one of those responsible. Like thousands of other residents of this pleasant town, I care about football when it's played at Anfield or Old Trafford, Goodison Park or Maine Road. But I've not cared much about football at Haig Avenue.

I don't blame myself or the many like me. I've watched Southport on and off during more than 17 years on the Merseybeat for the Daily Mail. I was there in 1968 when the ground was packed for an FA Cup meeting with Everton and Billy Bingham's Third Division battlers, big Eric Redrobe and all, gave Harry Catterick's First Division giants a fright before going down 1-0.

But over the years the town of Southport has not housed enough people who bothered about the local football team.

We committed ourselves to other causes years earlier.

So this morning the shareholders will meet in a room under a stand that is still the envy of many a Football League survivor and put Southport F.C. into liquidation. It now looks certain that there will be no phoenix rising from the ashes; no new club to take over the facilities and the Northern Premier League fixtures from the one that dies today at the age of 99.

There have been hopes that a Lancashire man would move in and do just that. But Geoff Clarke, the secretary who has had the thankless task of operating the life support machine, said: "I don't think the FA will be prepared to accept his plans. We've done what we could."

It's sad rather than tragic because it was inevitable.

For 57 years the town managed against the odds to support a Football League team. In 1978 the other League clubs kicked Southport out. Since then the decline has accelerated. Trains and the improved road system week after week carry fans to Manchester and Merseyside.

Southport Football Club has been a long time dying.

However the club refused to die and despite the doom and gloom there appeared to be some hope.

It became known that a prominent Lancashire businessman had made an offer to help the club, though liquidation would now probably be inevitable. At a shareholders' meeting on December 17th the brothers Colin and Deric Hall (partners in a double glazing firm) emerged as the unlikely saviours; what had in fact happened, it later transpired, was that they were the 'front men' for Chorley F.C. chairman Jim Tolson whose bid to take control of Southport was thwarted by the N.P.L. itself who saw his proposed merger of the clubs as a back way into the League for the Chorley club.

To their great credit, the Hall brothers stood firm after the enforced withdrawal of Tolson's backing and at a reconvened meeting on January 14th 1981 they effectively took control. Only two shareholders present voted against a voluntary liquidation and a committee comprising Leon Rapaport, Cec Rimmer and Billy Bingham was established to oversee the winding up. The Halls guaranteed to keep the club going and to see it once more viable in what was its Centenary year.

Allan Brown's services were dispensed with (the team were currently languishing in next to bottom place) and groundsman Charlie Powell found himself in charge of the team for a brief spell until new manager John Johnson took over. The brothers staved off one other half-hearted bid from a consortium headed by ex-Skelmersdale United and Blackpool Chairman Bill Gregson and set about establishing a new limited company – Pinewise Ltd – which traded under the name Southport Football Club. Two late draws at the finish ensured that the club once again avoided the re-election issue.

Much criticism was subsequently heaped on the Hall brothers by supporters who failed to appreciate their role in the club's survival. Had it not been for their determination and enthusiasm at a time when none was forthcoming from elsewhere Southport FC would simply have gone out of existence midway through 1980-81. They kept things going for approximately twenty months until the time and effort spent at Haig Avenue had repercussions in their own business which necessitated their withdrawal, albeit too late to revive their firm.

CENTENARY YEAR SUCCESS

The Centenary year was a considerable success. John Johnson and assistant Len Traynor assembled the best squad of the early 'eighties which included the returning Gary Cooper as a prolific scorer alongside Joe Strong, who took the 'Player of the Year' award. In defence, Ray Mawson continued to provide strength at full-back, and later in the season Southport gave a first chance to Paul Evans in goal; he was to render invaluable service over the next seven years, clocking up 190 N.P.L. appearances.

On the playing front matters had improved to the extent that by March the club actually made an application to join the Football Alliance, conditional upon their finishing in the top three places. Though this failed to materialise, 46 points from 42 games (in the last season when a victory earned two points rather than three) was substantially better than could have been hoped.

The troubles were not quite over. Jim Gudgeon, appointed Managing Director in March 1982, resigned in the July and rumours soon abounded that the club was 'up for sale'. Colin Hall announced that a consortium headed by player-manager John Johnson had taken over the running of the club for a month and negotiations were held with various interested parties at venues up and down the Lancashire coast. Most bizarre was an upstairs room totally devoid of furniture in the Queen's Hotel, Lytham after Southport had defeated the local side in a pre-qualifying round of the F.A. Cup; it was here that the Chorley F.C. contingent made a final attempt to get involved, but within a week or two a new board had taken shape.

Gary Culshaw, a Wigan based supporter of over thirty years standing, emerged as the new Chairman, appointing Barry Hedley as Vice-Chairman with John Johnson, Les Traynor and Charlie Powell as directors. Colin and Deric Hall along with their colleague Dave Edwards resigned, as did Geoff Clarke as Secretary, to which position Les Rimmer returned for his first involvement since the 1930s. A much more professional approach was adopted and the board was extended still further in January 1983 by the appointment of three new directors, among them, Charles Clapham.

During the season the late Tommy O'Neil rejoined the club after spells with Tranmere Rovers, Halifax Town and Altrincham; it must have been déjà-vu for him when a third qualifying round tie in the F.A. Trophy took Southport to Spennymoor again, this time to an even heavier (5-0) defeat. Tommy was the scorer in the 4-1 defeat at Spennymoor as a league club.

SILVERWARE

The season of 1983-84 was similarly undistinguished yet the side, latterly under the control of full-time Manager Bob Murphy, at last collected a piece of silverware in the shape of the Dairy Crest Lancashire Floodlit Cup; the final of this competition was held at Deepdale, Preston where Horwich R.M.I. suffered a resounding 4-0 defeat, thanks largely to an inspired performance by an emerging young striker called Andy Mutch who netted a hat-trick. Local products Mutch, Shaun Teale and Rob Sturgeon had all made their débuts during the latter part of the season and were to play crucial roles over the next couple of years.

One more boardroom shuffle was to come. During the 1984 close season, while he was away on holiday, Gary Culshaw was ousted as Chairman by the other board members and Charles Clapham was installed in his place. This led more or less directly to his resigning from the board, though, as the major shareholder, he kept a continuing interest in the club's affairs from a distance. It was an unpopular move at the time as Culshaw with his quiet ways had endeared himself to many supporters as a genuine person who had brought much stability to the club's affairs and the manner of his removal was resented. Clapham took quite a while to convince the Southport public of bona fides, enduring a long spell of latent hostility whilst all the time keeping the promise that there would be no further financial crises during his term of office.

The team displayed a startling inconsistency in 1984-85 and they were still lying eighth in the table when a heated discussion between Chairman and Manager immediately after the Lancashire Junior Cup defeat at Morecambe in December saw Bob Murphy dismissed with Brian Griffiths taking over. A sizable clear-out resulted, including the popular front men Joe Strong and Gary Cooper, but their places had long been under threat from local lad Kevin McCormack whose wholehearted style straight away won him the 'Player of the Year' trophy. Ironically the transitional period saw the team slip to twelfth position by the end of the campaign as Griffiths experimented with a fair number of sub-standard players.

Ultimately his tendency to look towards the Liverpool Sunday leagues for new faces was to be his undoing. The club had finished 1984-5 with a bang. In the final game Buxton were beaten 7-1 with Mutch (3), Teale and McCormack amongst the scorers. After a shaky start to the new season a brilliant mid-term run involving a club record ten consecutive victories in senior competitions saw Southport soar to third place in the table whilst reaching the third round of the F.A. Trophy.

The matches against Scarborough of the Gola League ranked as particular successes; eventually a strong Kidderminster Harriers side put Southport out 6-1 on a windswept night at Aggborough; but the incoming Peter King, Ronnie Naden, George Carr, Tony Quinn and John Coleman were quality performers at this level. The outstanding performance was undoubtedly the display in the first round game at Telford United where each of Southport's four classic goals outshone the one before. This 4-2 victory on the ground of one of the major non-League sides may be seen as a turning point in Southport's post-League era.

Andy Mutch was transferred to Wolves immediately after the Trophy involvement was ended for a five figure fee and Southport slipped back finishing in sixth place with 17 wins, the most since 1978-79.

The 1985/86 proved even more successful; despite going out in the first round proper of both F.A. Cup and Trophy, an undefeated run from Christmas to March and four wins in the final five games brought 68 points and a place in the top eight. Bryan Griffiths won the 'Manager of the Month' award for February and striker John Coleman walked off with three awards at the end of the season ceremony; voted 'Player of the Year' by both supporters and players he also took the leading scorer trophy, his 25 League goals leaving him just two short of Alan Spence's post-war record.

In addition, the cup provided Southport's first League opposition since 1978 with a visit to the Old Show Ground, Scunthorpe; but a spate of early season injuries and illnesses deprived the visitors of Ronnie Naden and Kevin McCormack on this occasion and United prevailed 2-0. The 2,601 gate afforded some consolation. In fact Southport with 18 scored more goals than any other club in the 1986-7 F.A. Cup competition whilst playing no fewer than ten matches, itself a club record.

Shaun Teale transferred for a minimal fee to Northwich Victoria in the January. Problems off the field had led to his being 'left out in the cold' for a period and both management and player felt a move was best. His subsequent advancement to the highest level of League football with Aston Villa was watched with envy by supporters of his home town club who felt, with some justification, that they had been short-changed.

CHANGING FACE OF HAIG AVENUE

The summer of 1987 saw some big changes in the appearance of Haig Avenue. Following ground safety recommendations all the covered terracing on two sides of the ground had to be demolished and for the next six years only the main stand afforded protection from the elements. Four upright stanchions and a cross-piece were all that remained at the Scarisbrick New Road end as a gaunt reminder of happier days; on the 'popular' side the bottom six steps of the once twenty deep terracing were left in place.







The 1987-88 season proved a huge disappointment.

At the outset it threatened to surpass all that had gone before, since, by October 3rd, the club had won eight and drawn the other three of their opening eleven games, with a mere four goals conceded. The young Rob Sturgeon, whose father, the Liverpool comedian Bobby Kaye, was newly appointed vice-chairman, had developed into a commanding central defender and celebrated his 100th N.P.L. game early in the season. Paul Lodge lent support in midfield after Peter King departed to Marine.

Suddenly it all went wrong. Four weeks of deteriorating form ended with the shock resignation on November 6th of manager Griffiths. In a statement he dissociated his decision from recent results, referring obliquely to decisions taken off the field during a period of enforced absence through work commitments. As club captain Lodge briefly held the reins until the appointment, on November 17th, of Micky Taylor. A period of flux ensued as the axis of the team shifted from Merseyside to Central Lancashire. Paul Evans returned in goal, while one by one Coleman, Lodge and full-back Robbie Armstrong departed, the last named for a gross breach of club discipline. The club finished 14th in

the table and lost two cup finals, the N.P.L. President's Cup disappearing 4-5 to South Liverpool over two legs after Southport had, at one stage, led 3-0 away.

One N.P.L. Cup game is worthy of note, if only for the attendance of just 77 spectators, our lowest ever Haig Avenue Non League gate, although some years later hundreds of people claim to have been in that crowd of 77!

Geoff Wilde told his story of that remarkable night in a programme article in 2007/08:

FREE THE GAINSBOROUGH 77 !

Just 20 years ago last Saturday (9 Feb 2008) I did one of the most stupid things I've ever done in my life, an accolade not lightly bestowed! I left a nice warm house in Crosby at 6.40. pm on a Tuesday evening and drove to Haig Avenue to see a Northern Premier League Cup second round tie between Southport and Gainsborough Trinity. We won 2-1.

Put that way it doesn't sound quite so stupid but I perhaps could add that it was a windy night, a VERY windy night. It took me about 8 minutes to get from home to the ground (the wind was behind me) despite the fallen trees, overturned lorries and tidal waves crashing over the Formby by-pass; the drive back later took three hours. (O.K. I maybe exaggerate a bit but it DID blow.)

The game itself took place at the Blowick (how appropriate!) end of the pitch, with all the spectators, that's me and the other 76 hardy souls who had turned up, mistakenly, to see a game of football packed into the upper back corner at that end of the stand. Apparently the referee, one Mr Green from Stoke on Trent, however did HE get there? - saw no reason to call the game off since the players were not held to be in danger from anything. (Crashing airliners apart, that is.) Once or twice the ball did cross the halfway line, though to little effect. Goal-kicks routinely went for corners and my diary records that one such kick by Paul Evans in the second half actually went out of the ground directly behind him!

Southport had the dubious advantage of the wind in the first half but obviously struggled to bring any degree of control to the proceedings. Eventually, in the 33rd minute, the inevitable happened. Gainsborough goal-keeper Kaye made a superb diving save from Colin Littlejohn's swerving shot but could only watch in mortification as David Eyres's corner-kick sailed over his head into the far corner of the net. It was David Eyres again with his trademark haircut for once suiting the conditions who put Southport 2-0 up just on half-time.

Though Trinity did pull a goal back in the 58th minute, Andy Kowalski beat the unsuspecting Paul Evans with a shot which went through a ruck of players and in off the far post, that was all they were able to achieve and the 2-1 win ensued. Not that it did us much good; we went out two rounds later in the second leg of the semi-final at home against Goole Town.

Just one strange thing; in the intervening 20 years I must have come across over 200 Southport supporters who all claim that they were there on that God-forsaken night as part of the 77. One thing's for sure; some of them must be lying!

Micky Taylor stayed for the one season which saw Southport again finish 14th In an attempt to rectify the early scoring problems – at one stage 292 minutes passed without Southport registering, target man Bobby Thomson from Middlesbrough who, at 33, brought a wealth of experience. Yet the player who made the real difference arrived unheralded on October 19th from Prescott Cables. Clint Neysmith, a youngster from Liverpool, scored twice on his debut and by Boxing Day had netted 11 in 8 games; but it

all ended just as suddenly when he broke his leg at Goole on February 18th and subsequently disappeared back into obscurity. His final tally was 16 goals in 19 League and Cup games is one of the best strike records of any player to have played for us in the Non League arena.

Neysmith was unfortunately "cup tied" when he arrived and so missed out on the season's main story. Home victories over Penrith, Harworth Colliery Institute, Bangor City and Tow Law Town brought Southport to their second appearance in three seasons in the first round proper of the FA Cup. The added bonus this time was their immediate selection for the B.B.C Match of the Day programme, just 20 years on from the Swindon Town game.

It was unfortunate that the visitors should be Port Vale who had always been a bogey team at Haig Avenue. The attendance was 3434 and lots of MOTD viewers.

The closing weeks of the season saw another goalless sequence this one lasting 399 minutes and when the season ended manager Micky Taylor left to take over at Fleetwood Town. The club took their time in choosing a successor, by the end of May it was revealed as the former Liverpool reserve team captain and latterly South Liverpool manager Brian Kettle. There were many comings and goings in Kettle's early months in charge as he struggled to mould his side, performances suffered and it was mid-October before the 'Port scrambled out of the bottom two places. Significant steps were taking place in team building, over a period of eight weeks towards the end of 1989 Kettle picked up Ossie Smith, Bob Howard, Steve Whitehall, Steve Holden, Alan McDonald and the returning Ian Baines, all of whom were to make telling contributions to the achievements of the next few years. By the time the season ended in front of a supporters' fancy dress parade at Rhyl where the immortal line "Will Batman please come down off the Roof" was announced over the tannoy Southport had climbed back to seventh place in the table.

JOHN CHURCH RIP

The close season of 1990 was marked by the death of John Church, the former Chairman and latterly President of the club who had fought long and hard to keep Southport afloat in the League. Jack Carr took over as President and at the same time Apollo Leisure took over as the club's official sponsors.

1990/91 began in great style but the lowest point of Kettle's reign came with a surprise defeat in the FA Cup at Bootle. The signs were not that promising but the arrival of experienced defender Kevin Mooney from Bangor City had an immediate impact. Paul Moore was signed from Alvechurch and the recovery moved on at pace.

A glut of fixtures led to fixture congestion and fatigue set in and fifth place was the final outcome. Four semi-finals, losing just one, and the three finals provided some spectacular entertainment.

A certain John Bishop made 35 (plus 3 as sub) appearances and scored 7 times between March 1990 and April 1991.



Team Picture From 1989/90 which includes John Bishop (middle row third from left) who went on to grab fame and fortune as a comedian.

The League Cup was won 4-1 at Maine Road against Buxton, The Liverpool Senior Cup saw a triumphant 4-0 win against Marine at Goodison and The Inter-League Cup saw a 3-2 defeat against Dover at Aylesbury. The run of comparative success saw the 1991/92 season eagerly awaited and success guaranteed?

It never came and Southport were actually bottom of the table in late September. We finished seventh and the expected Championship challenge never materialized. In the main this was due to the departures of Steve Holden to Morecambe and a £10,000 move for Steve Whitehall to Rochdale. Players coming in included Tony Jarvis from Witton, Kevin McCormack returning and Steve Joel. A good run in the FA Trophy also brightened the 1991/92 season with progression to the second round before going down 5-0 at Farnborough.

A SEASON OF SUPERLATIVES



Captain, Kevin Mooney is carried aloft at Emley after the Championship was won.

The close season moves were to be significant, big central defenders Mark Schofield and Derek Goulding arrived and, along with the returning Alan McDonald, Kettle signed one of his former South Liverpool players whom he had long sought, goal scoring winger Peter Withers. The season started with a surprise defeat at home to Emley but it was November before the next one. In between eight games on the bounce were won and only four defeats all season. Southport stormed to the title with 96 points and 103 goals. In addition an impressive FA Cup run took us through to the second round which ended in a 4-0 defeat at Hartlepool.

The club record of 19 games without defeat dating back to 1955/56 was eclipsed as 24 consecutive League games passed by without loss. The title was won at Emley with Peter Withers scoring a hat-trick in the 4-0 win amongst scenes of euphoria, the official gate that day was 504 but those present felt there were a few more in the ground than that including gorilla's, dancing girls and clowns!

Kevin Mooney was ever present and won the player of the year award. Steve Haw arrived at the club in September and went on to score 32 goals. Goal of the season was scored by Kevin Mooney when a free-kick taken from his own half at Barrow bounced over the home keeper and into the net. The Lancashire Junior Cup was also won at Burnden Park with a 5-2 extra time victory against Chorley.

All that remained was to satisfy the Vauxhall Conference of the ability of the Haig Avenue ground to match its demanding criteria. The rigorous standards had been known since the first official inspection in January when the Conference's skepticism that the necessary work to ensure ground eligibility could be completed in time was barely disguised.

It was at this point that Charlie Clapham came into his own, the plans had been drawn up for some time and the actual improvements were set in motion on March 1st. The transformation was astonishing, a brand new covered stand was erected at the

Scarisbrick New Road end, new terracing, complete with safety barriers was constructed down the popular side and at the Blowick end, and tarmac was applied to all remaining open areas. Around £250,000 was spent, part funded by a new share issue, and by the time the astonished Conference party returned on May 11th their final inspection had become a formality.

The Vauxhall Conference held their Annual Meeting on 20th May at the Café Royal in London, the same venue as that for the fateful Football League meeting back in 1978. This time the outcome of the voting was favourable, Southport were duly elected to membership of the Vauxhall Conference.

Southport took their place in The Conference and it immediately became apparent it was going to be tough with the first victory not coming until 18 September down at Welling but a six match winning run saw the club top of the table, albeit briefly. Attendances were picking up. The first home gate in The Conference saw 2423 pack into Haig Avenue but despite a thrilling home debut the next gate dropped to just 1238. A mixed bag of results followed but Southport were leading Kettering and Kidderminster at the top of the league going into March. The season tailed off but a finishing position of fourth in the first season was beyond most peoples expectations as in the main the same players who had been successful in the NPL had stayed at the club.

Paul Comstive, a Sandgrunder by birth, Paul Lodge and Luther Blisset were added to the squad.

IF ONLY PLAY OFFS EXISTED NOW

The 1994/95 season saw the team seldom out of the top six and were seen as a real threat and a return to the Football League became a real possibility and whilst they never hit the summit a highly creditable finishing position of third was achieved. Today that would have been good enough for the Play Offs for a place in the Football League.

The real shock was however reserved for the closing weeks of the season with the sudden announcement that Brian Kettle, the manager through almost six very successful campaigns had resigned for personal reasons. 1994-95 had been Brian's first year in a full time capacity a move which was intended to smooth the transition to a place in the Football League.

Within a week or two Billy Ayre was appointed as Brian Kettle's replacement with the highly popular Steve Joel happy to remain as Ayre's assistant. The club reaffirmed the desire to push for a place in the Football League and an eleven game unbeaten run gave everyone high hopes for the 1995/96 season.

It started with a 5-2 win at Slough with Steve Haw netting a hat-trick and David Gamble bagging the others and topped the table for the only time that season! A particularly bad run saw the drop to 18th place by the end of October but a 7-1 win at home to Farnborough signaled the team were back and a highly promising campaign saw a finishing position of 6th. Andy Whittaker finished the season as top scorer with 16 league goals and Peter Davenport notched 13, Davenport was to go on and take a caretaker manager role the next season before returning to the club as full time boss at the end of the 2006/07 season.

The 1996/97 season saw Steve Joel, Peter Davenport (caretaking) and Ronnie Moore in charge and a disappointing 11th place finish, the bright spot once again being the goal scoring of Andy Whittaker who grabbed another 19 league goals. A disappointing FA Trophy defeat at Colwyn Bay (0-2) in front of a gate of 928 containing hundreds of travelling Sandgrunders put Moore under pressure but he saw the season out before leaving to manage his former club, Rotherham.

Could anyone ever imagine Southport playing at Wembley? Supporters who remembered the dark days in the Football League and the early Non League years saw it as a dream but occasionally dreams do come true and the town went to Wembley suffice to say this was the highlight of the season.

THE WEMBLEY EXPERIENCE

By Alan Jones



Etched in the history of Southport Football Club are a number of landmark days, but of all the achievements and special occasions, no date evokes fonder memories than May 17 1998. Carved deep into the club's fabric, ingrained in the minds of everyone for whom it was the fulfilment of a lifetime ambition. "We lived the dream today," said Brian Butler, captain of the team that achieved the distinction of the first to represent Southport on the grandest stage of all. Forever it will be ranked as one of the club's finest hours.

Although the pain of defeat in the 29th FA Challenge Trophy final was particularly tough to take given the noble performance which could easily have produced the most famous win in Southport folklore, it proved to be one of those rare moments in football when the magnitude of the occasion eclipsed the result. After 117 years in existence, Southport had finally embarked on the road to Wembley Stadium; the Venue of Legends, the home of heroes, albeit in this case fallen heroes.

Alas there was no silverware, no tangible reward for a valiant effort, but the archive of memories, the unique sense of pride and privilege, stretches far beyond the final scoreline. For the entire afternoon, Southport toiled against a much-fancied Cheltenham Town, but dreams of a Wembley victory were ultimately shredded by a late sucker punch landed by Jason Eaton. Among the many individual emotions, nothing captured the tide of feeling better than the front page of following day's Daily Post. "You did us proud," the headline read, as an image of a solitary Butler, slumped disconsolately on the pitch, adorned the whole page.

In 19 attempts, the Sandgrounders had never previously ventured beyond the third round of the FA Trophy, Non-League football's premier knock-out competition which was introduced by the Football Association in 1969, let alone dreamt of a Wembley final. In fact, the closest they had got to the Twin Towers was an appearance in the FA Cup fifth round in 1966. And although Southport reached the quarter-finals of the FA Trophy in the three successive seasons after playing at Wembley, the class of 1998 are yet to be emulated.

Few experiences make the hair on the back of the neck stand on end like the sight of Butler and Paul Fitcher emerging from the tunnel at the East End of the stadium, leading the team as they strode into the Wembley sunshine, replicating the famous walk of so many footballing greats and onto the hallowed turf. "It does not matter how many times we come back to Wembley as a club, this is the one everyone will remember," Southport Chairman Charlie Clapham said. "The older supporters I know look upon it as a day they never thought they would see while the younger ones can associate their club with success and can look forward to more."

For the 10,000-strong contingent of Southport supporters - the young and the old, the ardent and the fair-weather - it was something to behold. A capacity crowd had crammed into Haig Avenue for the semi-final second-leg against Slough Town, and in the month prior to the final the entire town was captivated by a wave of great anticipation, a temporary shop opened on Lord Street as the club became the talk of the town. On the morning of the match a fleet of coaches transported the mass exodus of fans on an unparalleled scale.

Although outnumbered by an estimated 17,000 Cheltenham fans, the travelling Sandgrounders were not outclassed: a sea of gold and black contributing in no small measure to a vibrant atmosphere, the fans as determined as the players to savour the occasion. True, Wembley might have seen better days - indeed the old stadium hosted only two more Trophy finals prior to demolition - but to have finally made it to the Home of Football was priceless.

Basking in the 90 degrees sunshine, Southport fans arrived from mid-morning onwards to make the most of an unforgettable day: the thrill of a walk down Wembley Way, the sight of the Twin Towers and a lap around the outside of the grand old stadium. The inside of football's national theatre: the faded grandeur, the sweeping splendour, the characteristically lush playing surface and the memories. The stage where history had been shaped, where legends had been formed, and our players would grace it in front of our very eyes.

Sporting flags, scarves, face paints and replica shirts, the colourful throng roared their team on with non-stop support from the start, right through until the Southport players reluctantly exited as gallant losers. While the players deservedly earned plaudits for a wholehearted display, so did the supporters. "Futcher's weary troops were given an appreciative ovation by their followers, decked out in black and gold on a glorious summer's afternoon," reported the Daily Post. "The Haig Avenue faithful had rallied their side from the start, trading good banter with their rivals from the Cotswolds, refusing to give up hope after Cheltenham's goal." It was a carnival atmosphere, the attendance of 26,837 the best FA Trophy final crowd in five years. "And although they're outnumbered, it's the Southport fans you can hear," Sky Sports commentator Alan Parry told the television audience.

Twenty years after being discarded from the Football League, it was fitting that the club should be projected in such a healthy condition, in a showpiece occasion and backed by a fantastic level of support. "From the depths of despair to this glory," commented President Jack Carr, it was a poignant milestone. Although defeated, the players were afforded a heroes return the following day, thousands of supporters lining the streets as the players were paraded in an open top-bus. No trophy to display, but plenty to thank them for.

A moment which sums up the emotion of the occasion is captured on the club's official video. Futcher, the player-manager, having realised a personal dream by taking to the Wembley turf for the first time in a distinguished 25-year playing career, presented his medal to Clapham at the club's Player of the Year awards evening. As the Chairman struggles to hold back the tears, a packed Floral Hall broke into applause.

In many respects it was the complete cup final experience, televised in the glare of the nation live on Sky Sports, while both teams were together for three days prior to the match, a rarity in the part-time world far removed from those more accustomed with the Wembley surface. Also synonymous with the occasion is the specially commissioned Trophy final song "Come On You Yellows," recorded by the team with the Houghton Weavers in the build-up to the big event.

For both clubs, each with over a Century of history, it was the first Wembley experience. As the even-money favourites, Cheltenham were more fancied than Arsenal had been at Wembley the previous day when the Premier League champions defeat Newcastle United in the FA Cup final. Cheltenham had recorded two victories over Southport in the final month of the Conference season, ending their best ever campaign as runners-up to champions Halifax Town. For many clubs, winning the FA Trophy has served as the prelude to promotion to the Football League, and Steve Cotterill's side followed suit, clinching the Conference championship the following season before earning promotion to the third tier of English football in 2002.

Conversely, Southport took to Wembley on the back of their poorest league finish since promotion to Non-League's top flight in 1993, their Trophy exploits acting as an obvious distraction as Futcher's side, who had started the season strongly, won just two of their final 17 Conference fixtures, ending the campaign 16th. That said, the Sandgrounders had been rampant in the Trophy, amassing a magnificent 17 goals in seven matches, with Futcher adding well to the squad he inherited, his team boasting greater Football League experience than Cheltenham. Priced at 2/1 they were the outsiders, making their plucky efforts all the more commendable.

Many expected a Cheltenham win to have been a formality. Far from it. For large parts of the match the Sandgrounders dominated, but despite their energetic and enterprising approach in stamina-sapping conditions, their hard graft was undermined by a lack of quality in the final third, the absence of a real cutting edge. It is often said that statistics do not always tell the whole story in football, but in this game the match facts underlined

the Sandgrounders' superiority. Futchers side outstripped Cheltenham in terms of attempts at goal 12-5, shots on target 4-3 and corners 6-1, while they controlled 54% of the possession.

Chris Banks, the Cheltenham captain, reflected what seemed to be the consensus of opinion. "I thought Southport were the better side on the day," he acknowledged. "They surprised us and we struggled to cope, especially in the first-half. But towards the end of the first-half we got to grips with them and I thought we were better, although not the best side, in the second-half. We got the vital goal, and it's goals that count."

"I have to give the fullest of praise to Southport," added Sky Sports' Alan Parry. "They came here as massive underdogs but didn't play that way. When they look back on this eventually and slip the video in over the winter months, they'll realise it was a great day, even though they didn't collect a winner's medal."

At 33-years old, Cotterill, the Cheltenham boss, became one of the youngest ever managers to have plotted a Wembley victory. Clearly a manager whose stock was rising rapidly, he went on to take charge of Stoke City and Burnley.

For Clapham, the Southport Chairman since 1984, it literally was a dream come true. When, at the outset of the 1997-98 season, he dreamt of a Southport appearance at Wembley, little did he know that the campaign would end with a famous day beneath the Twin Towers. Fittingly, Clapham's first ever visit to Haig Avenue, in November 1982, was to see an FA Trophy tie - a 2-0 win over Gateshead. Reaching the final could not have provided more of a marked contrast to the state of the club he first saw teetering on the brink, in a state of disrepair.

Futcher, the player-manager, had experienced many things in football, but appearing at Wembley was a personal landmark. He enjoyed a prominent playing career spanning more than 750 professional appearances: encompassing international honours at under-21 level, transfer fees totalling £450,000, promotion and playing with and against some of English football's most revered names, though never before had he strutted his stuff at the Home of Football.

It was Futcher's first season at Haig Avenue, arriving in the summer of 1997 as replacement for the Rotherham United-bound Ronnie Moore. Futcher, with Manchester City, Luton Town and Barnsley listed among the clubs he had played for, was appointed Southport boss on the back of masterminding Gresley Rovers' Southern League championship the previous season. The Derbyshire club were denied promotion to the Conference on ground grading, with their place taken, somewhat ironically, by Cheltenham, who had finished runners-up, 11 points adrift of the champions.

In managerial terms, Futcher was still a relative newcomer, but his leadership proved invaluable. In his playing capacity he marshalled a durable defence, though the absence of a prolific forward-line was a major factor in the Southport's poor league position, as highlighted in the final itself.

At 41 years and 235 days old, Futcher made history, taking the mantle of the oldest player to appear in a Wembley Cup final, even surpassing Clive Walker, Cheltenham's FA Trophy veteran. On the pitch he exuded experience, directing operations from the back, his shrewdness translated into the way the team functioned.

"To me personally, it is very special as it is a milestone in my career which I thought had passed me by," said Futcher, as appreciative as anyone of the importance of the occasion. "Many famous players have finished their careers without having had the opportunity to experience the occasion of walking out onto the hallowed turf."

"Supporters of the club will be able to relate to this when I say you cannot express in words the feeling of the initial realisation that Wembley was no longer just a dream but reality. I am not a highly emotional person on the field but I have to admit that I did feel somewhat emotional for a short period of time!

"A secret that I am sure the Chairman will not mind me sharing is that early in the season he had a dream about reaching the FA Trophy final - something he reiterated after every round. I am sure everyone realises that without his efforts and work over the years Southport FC would not be in the position it is today. At the beginning of the season I had no such dream. In football you learn to take the rough with the smooth - Sunday 17 May 1998 is a day for everyone in Southport to be proud of and enjoy with memories for all of one of the better times in football."

Futcher's wit and wisdom was an integral part of the Trophy run. He commanded respect, not least from Clapham. "Working closely with Paul I felt his professional approach to the preparation of a game and his superb leadership on the field was suited in his first season in the Conference to providing us with a team that would perform well in cup competitions," the Chairman said. "I would like to go on record as saying that working with Paul has been a pleasure and watching him play in the shirt of Southport Football Club has been equally pleasurable. I am sure that we have all been amazed at the level of performance that Paul has put in week after week, he epitomises the expression of leading by example."

And on his big day Futcher again used his experience to maximum effect; one of several outstanding performers in a gold and black shirt. As the organiser in chief of a well-drilled rearguard that seldom gave Cheltenham a sniff, he led with authority as the central pillar between Phil Horner and the tenacious Tim Ryan, the Player of the Season, who also recorded an excellent display.

No-one encapsulated the Southport spirit more than Butler, the consummate captain and midfield dynamo, deservedly named the Sky Sports man of the match. "He's been excellent," said former Ipswich Town striker Alan Brazil, the co-commentator. "A huge heart, he's got through so much work and doesn't deserve to be on the losing side." A defeated Trophy finalist as the skipper of Northwich Victoria two seasons earlier, Butler was the driving force; competing for every challenge, efficient in his distribution and tirelessly patrolling the midfield. The 31-year old, whose seven-year old son Callum was the Port mascot on the day, never missed an opportunity to stamp his mark on the game and could not disguise his emotions as he tearfully led his defeated team-mates up the famous 39 steps.

"We had the chances," he reflected. "We did everything. The lads gave everything and the supporters were brilliant but it just wasn't our day. You come to Wembley, you give it everything and getting beat is not easy. But you've got to take something away from the occasion. We're working lads and we don't often get time to play on here, but give me a couple of hours and I'll look back on it with relish."

A strong contender for man of the match was the experienced Dave Thompson, predominately a winger, who was somewhat surprisingly selected on the day as the partner for striker Brian Ross. Thompson grafted endlessly, a persistent pest to the Cheltenham defence, and his endeavour was epitomised as he fashioned arguably Southport's best chance of the opening period. Chasing what appeared to be a lost cause, he charged down Banks' clearance on the left flank, stealing the ball off the Cheltenham defender before supplying a measured pull-back to the onrushing Butler. The Southport captain looked poised to score, only for the recovering Bob Bloomer to intercept as he was about to pull the trigger.

On the stroke of half-time, it would have been a timely moment to have opened the scoring, but Southport were ultimately made to pay for their missed chances. Indeed, they engineered a number of clear-cut openings during the first period. Butler whipped a cross-shot over the bar in the 13th minute after springing from midfield to meet Thompson's intelligent pass, but it was indicative of the fact that the Sandgrounders' fine approach work was continually undermined by their final ball. Kevin Formby was foiled by goalkeeper Steve Banks, before Andy Farley shot over after combining with Dave Gamble.

Although largely restricted, Cheltenham created flashes of danger, with Eaton's claim for a penalty dismissed by referee Gary Willard after Ged Kiltey had grabbed his shirt as the striker bore down on goal, before goalkeeper Billy Stewart came to the rescue with a courageous save on 38 minutes, racing off his line to smother at the feet of Dale Watkins on a rare occasion when the Port defence had been breached. The chance was preceded by a passage of incisive play, in which Bloomer threaded a delightful pass to Eaton, whose touch released Watkins, only for Stewart to prevail with a characteristic act of bravery.

As ever, the 33-year old custodian was assertive in all he did, underlining his status as arguably the best goalkeeper in Non-League football at the time having been presented prior to kick-off with a cap to mark his recent appearance for the England National Game team in the 2-1 win against Holland. The presentation was made by Gordon Banks and Roger Hunt, two of the guests of honour, and Stewart had already become something of a cult figure in his two full seasons at Haig Avenue, proceeding to become an all-time crowd favourite.

"The closest I can compare it to would be the birth of my kids, yes that good!" said Stewart said of his Wembley appearance. "I know how much this all means to the people of Southport - you can feel a buzz throughout the town from the youngest to the oldest person. It has been special for me personally since leaving the Football League. I have enjoyed playing for England and to receive my international cap before the Wembley final is something I couldn't have ever dreamed of."

Big matches are often determined by narrow margins, and the spurning of a glorious chance in the 64th minute by Ross, who had scored in every round prior to the semi-final, will be remembered as the moment which could have changed history. Having been released by Farley down the inside-right channel, Ross shrugged off Freeman, the last defender. With only Book to beat and the angle narrowing, the striker attempted to round the Cheltenham goalkeeper but saw the chance disappear as he dwelt too long, allowing Book to clasp the ball at his feet. As a rare occasion when Ross had got goal-side of the Town defence, it was a priceless opportunity lost by a moment's hesitation.

Southport had begun the second period by again setting the pace, with Book racing out of his goal to thwart Thompson, while Horner placed a header over. As the game started to become stretched, Book produced an excellent double-save; fisting clear Thompson's hanging cross as Ross loitered before foiling the follow-up from Formby. The left wing-back then squandered an excellent chance after being released by Kielty's deft pass, but a heavy touch gave defender Banks the chance to intercept.

Four minutes later disaster struck. Cheltenham had started to impose more influence and showed glimpses of what they were capable of when Keith Knight found Watkins, who produced an air-shot when well-positioned, but there was to be no let-off for the Sandgrounders in the 80th minute. Cotterill, the Cheltenham manager, helped bring about the change with a double substitution - an inspired switch, it reaped immediate reward. Off came Knight and Walker, sacrificed for Russell Milton and Jimmy Smith. Within two minutes, the latter won a free-kick on the right flank after being tripped by Formby, who had failed to complete a clearance. Milton whipped in the delivery, Jamie

Victory beat Ryan to flick it on and Eaton, having peeled away at the far post, headed into an unguarded part of the net. Heartbreak.

"We didn't defend the set-piece and they scored, and that gave us a mountain to climb," said Futcher. For Eaton, already a firm crowd favourite at Whaddon Road, it was a moment that guaranteed his place in Cheltenham folklore. A 22nd goal of the season as vindication for cancelling his stag night which had been scheduled for the previous evening.

Even after falling behind, Southport missed a golden chance as Gamble curled free-kick to Horner, who failed to make proper contact with a free header. In the end, they were left to rue what might have been, Cheltenham becoming the 18th different name inscribed on the FA Trophy. "For the first 30 minutes we did ever so well," Futcher reflected. "We were on top and created a few half chances without really testing their keeper. The second-half was similar to the first really, with the better chances going our way, but it's the old cliché about taking those chances. You cannot be too critical of the players, it was hot and very demanding and on the whole we played very well. The supporters were fantastic and the players responded to that with their performance."

An appearance at Wembley was far from the minds of Southport supporters when the Trophy trail began in January 1998 - 127 days before the final. Although the Sandgrounders were afforded four matches against lower league opposition en route to the Twin Towers, their first round tie against Winsford United was the only time they were drawn at home. The journey started in front of 996 spectators and a comfortable 3-0 victory against a robust Winsford.

The Sandgrounders' impressive goal tally on the road to Wembley began in eye-catching fashion, Butler steering home a sublime 20-yard volley after Thompson had combined with Kielty to give the Sandgrounders a foothold after 15 minutes against their Northern Premier League opponents. Although goalkeeper Stewart was drawn into a number of saves, any doubts were erased five minutes into the second-half as Ross converted a Kielty centre from close range. Kielty's contribution drew special praise from Futcher - and the midfield player was again the conjurer for the Sandgrounders' third, crossing perfectly for substitute Gamble to apply the finishing touch to a crisp move.

Futcher branded the win 'emphatic', but even more resounding was the second round annihilation of Yeading. The in-form Andy Whittaker bagged four as the Sandgrounders smashed six without reply at The Warren against their beleaguered opponents who ended the season with relegation from the Isthmian League Premier Division.

A key ingredient in the victory was the ingenuity of Gamble, whose near-post cross was met by Whittaker's header to begin the rout in the 26th minute, before his deep cross was again nodded in by Whittaker 12 minutes into the second period. Whittaker completed his hat-trick by coolly rounding keeper Dean Honey after sharp build-up play and a driving run, and the striker then turned provider as Ross scored the fourth on 82 minutes. Whittaker, whose exploits earned him the award of Player of the Round and £200 in Umbro vouchers, hit the target again within 60 seconds, before Kielty added number six after Ross had been foiled by Honey.

After the long-haul journey to The Warren, the third round win at Altrincham, of the Northern Premier League, was a much more local affair. Having made a high-tempo start, Futcher's side scored twice before half-time to seal progression beyond this stage of the competition for the first time ever. Ross gave Southport the lead on 23 minutes with a towering header to convert a free-kick from Butler, who was again the creator as Whittaker flicked his cross on at the near post, allowing Phil Bolland to drill home an eight-yard shot against the club from whom he joined the Sandgrounders.

While Southport's foray into the fourth round was a club first, Grantham Town, their next opponents, were also experiencing their best-ever run in the FA Trophy. The Lincolnshire team ended the season as Southern League Midland Division champions, and it proved to be an arduous tie for the Port, who were taken to a replay after conceding their first Trophy goal amid contentious circumstances.

In front of a crowd of 3695- the largest quarter-final attendance of the day - Ross put Southport ahead at the Kesteven Stadium on the hour with a firm 14-yard finish, only for Grantham to level with a penalty 12 minutes before time after Phil Horner was harshly deemed to have handled. The Sandgrounders' woes were compounded as their defender was sent-off, and Mark Harbottle decisively converted the subsequent kick. "It was like being stabbed twice," Horner admitted.

Futcher reflected: "We did not kill them off and we paid the penalty." Fortunately, the Sandgrounders were given a second bite, and they suffered no hangover from the disappointment of the original tie, putting Grantham to the sword three days later in the re-match beneath the Haig Avenue floodlights.

"The biggest night in Southport's Non-League history," proclaimed the Southport Visiter, and the Sandgrounders lived up to the billing, registering a 3-1 win courtesy of a Ross hat-trick. Conference class ultimately prevailed over dogged opposition, with the Sandgrounders making a good start and taking the lead on 9 minutes. Ross dispatched a clinically-taken strike after a raking pass from Gamble had dissected the visiting defence, before the striker doubled the lead three minutes into the second-half with a fine volley having been played in by Thompson. Dave King halved Grantham's deficit on 72 minutes with a strike across the dive of Stewart, but Southport fashioned an instant response, with Kiely releasing Ross, whose goal cemented an all-Conference two-legged semi-final showdown against Slough.

With four league positions separating the teams as they entered the first leg, the Sandgrounders faced higher-ranked opposition for the first time in their Trophy campaign. It was a tricky task, emphasised by the fact that Slough also held the advantage of having already notched two Conference wins against Futcher's team earlier in the season. The Berkshire side proceeded to finish the league campaign in a very respectable eighth place but it proved to be their final season among Non-League football's elite as their inability to satisfy ground-grading requirements prompted relegation.

Critically, Southport won the away leg at the Wexham Park Stadium, meaning a sell-out crowd packed into Haig Avenue eight days later knowing the dream of reaching Wembley was tantalisingly close.

Despite fielding a make-shift back-line in the first encounter due to injury and suspension, Futcher's side successfully withstood early pressure from Slough, who continued to force the issue throughout the opening half. But the Sandgrounders exercised increasing influence as the match progressed, culminating in Steve Morris' crucial 68th-minute strike. Having been released by Farley, a shot from Ross beat goalkeeper Paul Wilkerson but appeared to be trickling wide when Morris arrived at the far post to squeeze the ball between the legs of a defender and over the line. A sloppy but vital goal.

The Sandgrounders survived a strong Slough finish, preserving a vital lead to lay down a marker prior to the second leg. "The carnival atmosphere was electric," reported the Southport Visiter, a day after Earth Summit, donning yellow and black, had triumphed at the Grand National. Kick-off was delayed 15 minutes to ensure that around 300 latecomers did not miss a kick of a nerve-jangling contest.

In front of a 4,895 sell-out crowd, Southport started shakily. They were muted, seemingly struck by stage-fright, as Slough began with gusto, intent on negating their first leg deficit. At times, with passions running high, tensions boiled over, resulting in Matt Stowell's reckless head-high challenge on Andy Farley. The Southport crowd were incensed, but only a yellow card followed.

Futcher acknowledged that the Sandgrounders owed a debt of gratitude to goalkeeper Stewart for a string of quality saves, but even their heroic shot-stopper was rendered helpless as Slough struck on the half-hour. Southport's failure to fully clear allowed the ball to drop to Danny Bailey, whose first-time piledriver from 20-yards nestled in the bottom left-hand corner.

The aggregate score was level. Southport needed inspiration, the supporters duly responded. "The reception from the crowd was incredible," said Futcher. "They really got behind us and gave the players a tremendous lift. We had to have a serious talk at half-time because the players had not done themselves justice."

Cue the fightback - and a 66th-minute equaliser. Futcher split the visiting defence with a sweeping 40-yard pass to Morris. Having dashed down the right, his pull-back was met by Ross, whose shot was tapped over the line from a matter of inches by Formby to restore the aggregate lead. Haig Avenue exploded. Offside? It mattered little to the jubilant home crowd, but Slough were vehement in their protests. Referee Brian Coddington spent several minutes dealing with the remonstrations, Slough manager Brian McDermott was banished from the touch-line, but nothing could temper the home crowd's outpour of raw emotion, the unrestrained joy, which greeted the final whistle.

"Emotional scenes of elation at the end of the match will live in the memories of all who attended this great occasion for Southport Football Club," reported the Southport Visiter. After 117 years of waiting, Futcher's team had crossed the threshold of history, and in history their legacy will forever be remembered.

Our resident poet put pen to paper:-

OUR GLORIOUS RUN by Russ Broadbent

January the tenth and here we go,
It's the FA Trophy with Winsford on show.
In years gone by they gave us a game,
But it's different now they look so tame.
In front of a crowd of just under a thou,
The port won the game and we showed them how.
Three nil the score, we did it with ease,
It's the second round now and the Chairman looks pleased.

Out of the hat on the following day,
We're drawn against Yeading, playing away.
We all heard the draw and were down in the mouth,
It's another long trip down to London down South.
Doing well in their league so a good team we thought,
But we were on form, their defences were caught.
Six nil the scoreline the Port a safe bet,
Andy Whitti the striker put four in the net.

The draw for the Third round was out of the hat,
Again it's away and at Alti at that!
Now here is a team that's a thorn in our side,

But the lads played tremendous with heart and with pride.
Sandgrounders galore filled the Altrincham ground,
And when Rossy scored what a wonderful sound.
Two nil the score when the Ref finally blew,
The quarters are next and Southport are through.

Now we all thought that we would be due,
A home tie next to help see us through.
But the draw it was made and another bad day,
This time it's Grantham, once again drawn away!
The day of the game and we waited an hour,
Then up popped our Rossy we could smell the twin towers.
But the Ref had a brainstorm and gave Grantham a pen,
So it's back to Haig Avenue to play them again.

By the time of the kick off on Tuesday night,
Our Semi opponents Slough Town were in sight.
And although they were willing to put up a fight,
The boys from the Grantham were beat out of sight.
The crowd they had gathered and singing with joy,
Shouting praises to Rossy the Ports' golden boy.
He scored a hat trick not one goal but three,
One more win will do us then YES Wem-ber-lee.

The first leg of the semi away at Slough Town,
And the motorways were full as we all headed down.
The sunshine was hot we were all in good heart,
The port took the field and the lads played their part.
For over an hour we kept them at bay,
And then young Stevie Morris completed our day.
He scored the goal for our one nil lead,
And it's back to Haig Ave to complete the Clubs need.

Nearly Five thousand had gathered this day,
They all came to Mecca to see the Port play.
The first half was sloppy we kept losing the will,
And Slough scored a goal which did make it one nil.
But after the break and a roasting from Paul,
A goal from Kev Formby to make it one all.
The supporters erupted and the noise was so loud,
We're leading two one and we all feel so proud.

Now the Port are at Wembley the Final to play,
And one thing to remember is Enjoy the day.
Because whether we're feeling ecstatic or blue,
To walk out at Wembley is our dream come true.
So in Yellow and Black we will fill the ground,
And our SUPER SUPPORTERS will make all the sound.
And when it is over and the lads have fatigue,
Just think of next season and let's WIN THE LEAGUE.

League form was however patchy and it was only in the last few league games that enough points were gained to ensure a place in the Conference was maintained. Paul Futchter was the "gaffer, the leader, the star" as the song went and ensured he was afforded Southport FC legend status. His performance in the FA Trophy Semi-Final at

Slough was what many think to this day the best performance ever by a player in a Southport shirt.

GIANT KILLERS

The 1998/99 season was notable for some much needed Cup success when the Port journeyed to Football League side Mansfield and triumphed 2-1 in front of 500 delirious Sandgrounders whose support that day was incredible. After such a giant killing performance the club were attracting great publicity and Charlie Clapham and Futch appeared on the live draw for the third round with expectations of a home draw against a top team. Number 63, Southport came out of the hat first to everyone's delight, could it be Manchester United? No it was Leyton Orient, the feeling of anti-climax was apparent to all but it was a chance to progress further. Haig Avenue saw it's highest ever Non League gate (4950) and extensive media interest but also a 2-0 defeat and the run was over. The run had started at Ramsbottom in the rain when 829 packed in to the magnificent Riverside Ground to give Rammy their highest ever gate, a figure that stood for nearly twenty years until FCUM came to town.

Having been to Wembley in 1997/98, the town had FA Trophy hopes again and progression to the Quarter Finals but a poor showing at Forest Green saw a 4-1 defeat. A finishing place of 18th, with safety only being achieved in the last couple of games with a 3-1 home win against Leek Town when Lee Elam scored what today would be referred to as a wonder goal.

THE WRIGHT WAY

Futcher was replaced as boss in December 1999 with the club struggling in 21st place, his replacement was Mark Wright who was to bring about a remarkable transformation. Full of ambition and with a thirst for success Wright's impact was immediate and from looking like certainties for relegation, Wright brought success and the fans returned as a finishing place of 9th place was achieved. The FA Cup saw an unfortunate 2-1 defeat at Darlington whilst in the Trophy the Quarter Finals were reached but a 1-0 home defeat to Kingstonian having done the hard bit and drawn away from home was a disappointment to everyone.

Hopes of a return to the Football League were probably at their highest ever as the 2000/01 season kicked off. One win in the first four games was a setback but improved form saw second place by the end of November and hopes remained high. Southport never dropped below fourth from then on in but realistically were never in with a true shout. The gates were holding up well, the Wright profile ensured great media coverage but it was clear that his thirst for success was not going to happen at Haig Avenue and it came as no surprise when he left the club at the end of the season with several players following him out of the door. The Second Round of The FA Cup was reached before going down 2-1 at home to Kingstonian in front of 3659 home fans, Kingstonian went on to draw Arsenal. The Trophy once again saw a Quarter Final match and the town responded again with 800 making the trip to Chester to see a highly controversial 1-0 defeat.

Phil Wilson stepped in to the managerial hot seat for the start of the 2001-02 season when mid table was achieved comfortably. In the FA Cup first round at Dagenham & Redbridge a 1-0 defeat and the Trophy at Gresley Rovers (0-1) after being held 1-1 at home were disappointing. Having been 4th in early January a finishing position of 15th was something of a let down. Simon Parke finished the season as leading scorer with 16 league goals.

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF FOOTBALL

The 2002/03 season probably ranks as the most topsy turvy any club could possibly imagine. Fourth in November, a fantastic giant killing win over Notts County in the FA Cup but ended up being relegated on the final day of the season says it all. Wilson departed at the start of February to be replaced by the hapless Mike Walsh. From hero to zero in 4 months.



Steve Pickford, Peter Thomson and Chris Lane, scorers v Notts County

Nobody knows what happened following the excellent giant killing win over Notts County but the wheels fell off in a big way. The Notts County game was on Match Of The Day and saw a come back from 2-0 down with four sensational goals, one of which, from Syd Pickford came close to winning goal of the season on national TV. It was a day of high emotion that everyone present will never forget. The disappointing thing was the next round defeat, 3-0 at home to Farnborough and from then on it was down hill. Only a remarkable 4-3 win at a waterlogged Halifax in March gave a bit of hope but things were looking bleak. Everyone thought enough had been done and relegation was impossible but going into the last game of the season at Stevenage knowing a win was needed to survive. It was abject surrender and in front of a sizeable travelling contingent who made the most of a generous travel subsidy from Charlie Clapham to pack out the Stevenage away end the Yellows ten year stay in the Conference was over.

It was to be Northern Premier League football in 2003/04 with Walsh somewhat surprisingly being asked to carry on as boss.

A four game opening run against poor teams gave false hope, the first decent team to come along beat us and Walsh looked out of his depth and his final game came at Vauxhall Motors when we lost 2-1 in the FA Cup.

LIAM WHO?



Little known Liam Watson took over as boss, his first match was a 2-1 win at Radcliffe with the Yellows sitting in tenth spot. Success wasn't immediate for Watson as he totally rebuilt the team but there were some promising signs and some great results, 5-0 at Whitby, 4-1 at Blyth being the highlights, gates started to improve and hopes were high for the 2004/05 season, did Watson have enough experience to carry it through, the fans wanted Conference football back at Haig Avenue, could he deliver it..... Could he!

Rob Urwin told his story of the 2004/05 championship season in the Matchday Programme:-

You somehow got the feeling after our first match against Vauxhall Motors it could be our year, 1-0 down, down to 10 men and a penalty against us. Dicko saves it and we go on to win 2-1 with Terry Fearn's notching the first of what would be a club goal scoring record 33 goals.

I think the away game at Barrow summed up the season for me, we had an excellent following for a midweek game, everyone was behind the team and the performance was superb. We should have beaten Hinckley in our next match when the most ridiculous decision of the season ruled out a perfectly legitimate goal and the match finished 0-0. The wheels then fell off against Ashton United and we lost 2-1, it's strange but if you look at our eight defeats in this season two came against relegated clubs.

By the end of September we were 5th having been beaten at home by a very impressive Kettering team on the back of defeats at Alfreton and Gainsborough and we all felt it may have to be the play offs.

The season kick started at Droylsden with a superb 3-1 win and we all thoroughly enjoyed this victory!

An excellent 3-1 FA Cup win over previously unbeaten Hyde saw us draw Hereford at home in the 1st round proper, a game that would test our credentials against a top Conference team. We lost 3-1 and in all honesty were simply outclassed on the day against a very impressive Hereford team. In the Trophy we had beaten Gateshead after a replay and Kings Lynn (a 4hour journey for a regionalised game this one) before going out 1-0 at the eventual finalists Hucknall Town after a 2-2 draw at Haig Avenue. I groaned when we equalised in the second minute of injury time as it meant we were getting well behind with our league fixtures. In fact we only played one league game in the whole of November.

We went top on Boxing Day after the 2-0 win over Stalybridge. The return match on New Year's day at Bower Fold which we won 5-3 has to go down as one of the most amazing games you have ever seen. How it finished I do not know, the pitch was underwater and most other matches in the region were being abandoned but somehow it ran the full 90 minutes.

By the time we got round to playing our next match we were down to 2nd but had games in hand on the leaders Kettering who we played next. Win and we would be within 2 points with 3 games in hand lose and we were 5 behind, it was a must not lose game. An excellent following took to the roads and made the journey to Rockingham Road with more than a little trepidation. What a game it turned out to be, the 5-0 win was easily the best performance of the season to date and for the first time I started to believe we were in with a chance of winning the league.

The 2-1 win over Gainsborough in the next home game saw us score the winner in the 2nd minute of added time to go back to the top. We went on to comfortably beat Worcester 3-1 before Droylsden came and were conquered 3-0 which we all thought would put them out of the title race, how wrong we all were.

The next game was easy, an away match at the leagues whipping boys, Bradford (Park Avenue). Oh dear, everything went wrong and we were hammered 3-1 and in all honesty it could have been 6 or 7. The gloom set in, we were still top but could this be the game that would cost us the league, we followed this up with a dour 0-0 against an incredibly boring Lancaster City team and I was starting to get jittery. A 3-1 home win against a

poor Alfreton side and a very lucky 2-1 win at Worksop raised the spirits and we were back on track.

However, two consecutive 0-0's at home followed by a 3-2 reverse at home to Harrogate really saw the panic button being pressed. By this time Droylsden and Nuneaton had started making a surge up the table and were clearly emerging as the main challengers. A comfortable 3-0 win at Ashton followed by a 2-1 win against Moor Green and an excellent 3-0 win at Vauxhall Motors saw us maintain top spot but the pack were closing. Next up was Redditch. A poor ground and a poor pitch but after 70 minutes we were 2-0 up and cruising. We lost 3-2 with the winner coming in the 88th minute. We went down to 2nd place with Droylsden taking over at the top for the first time.

It was a midweek trek to Hucknall next. After 30 minutes we were 2-0 up and cruising, by half time it was 2-2. History had repeated itself but this time we were playing well and I felt that at half time we could still win this one. Carl Baker's super free kick which the keeper said "he didn't see until it hit the back of the net" put us 3-2 up and then a wonder strike from the goal machine that is Fearn's made it 4-2, we were back on top. The next home game was Hinckley and the 3-2 scoreline flattered Hinckley in a game we dominated from start to finish.

It was then Hucknall again, this time at home. Hucknall had to play 9 games in 18 days because of their Trophy exploits but they came and put up a good fight. All ears were on the score at Worcester where Droylsden were playing and when the half time score of Worcester 1 Droylsden 0 was announced we were feeling pretty good however we were only 0-0 so work to be done. At the moment we scored, through Terry Fearn's who in doing so broke the club goalscoring record, Droylsden equalised. Ten or so minutes later we heard Worcester had scored to go 2-1 up. The roar that greeted the news that they had scored again to make it 3-1 made the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end. It was back in our hands. If Droylsden didn't win at Hucknall, on the Wednesday night the title was ours.

Several Southport fans including myself went to Hucknall. I know that is a bit odd but you had to! Hucknall missed an open goal after 40 seconds and were playing well but at half time it was 1-0 to The Bloods. Up until the 70th minute I thought they might do it but they ran out of steam and Droylsden won 4-0.

It all went down to the final day of the season but the good thing was it was in our hands, however, Droylsden had a home banker against Worksop and we were at Harrogate who needed a win to qualify for the play offs. It looked bleak on paper. Nuneaton had kept on winning but needed to win 15-0 on the last day of the season so they were out of it.

The build up to the game was great, the club had given everyone a £5 voucher for Harrogate which saw us get in for half price and coaches were laid on for £10. The highest ever following for a league game (I think it just about beats Marine in 1992/93) took to the roads. The away support all season had been magnificent but this was incredible and easily surpassed expectations.

By half time we were leading 3-0 and Worksop were beating Droylsden 1-0, it was dreamland! After 67 minutes it was 5-0 and Worksop were winning 3-0, the title was ours! The celebrations at the end of the match reminded me of Emley in 1992/93. These days come around so infrequently for a small club that you have to make the most of them.

An excellent finish to certainly the most exciting season I can remember in my 33 years as a fan. How would we do back in a much changed and more professional Conference?



2004/05 CHAMPIONSHIP WINNING SQUAD

COULD SOUTHPORT SURVIVE?

2005/06 was to be a long hard season but Liam Watson never had any doubt, "we will not go down" and he was proved right. Survival was assured in the penultimate game at Grays Athletic.

It had looked impossible in October when the NL club record for time without a goal was broken with 618 minutes being notched and seven consecutive defeats but the team spirit and fight in the team was never bettered in all of the thirty seasons and it was this that was universally accredited with being the reason for survival. The Lancashire Junior Cup was won at Leyland in a very subdued game and on the night that saw the club end up bottom of the table as other results went against The Sandgrounders.

The first ever Supporters Trust was started on 26 April 2006 as Trust In Yellow were born.

CHAOS!

The 2006/07 season started early and in chaos. Liam Watson left the club on 23rd May 2006 and from then on it was downhill. It depends who you listen to and which version you believe as to what actually happened. Liam had resigned and it left the club in a mess and with the appointment of his replacement being left until 13 June, effectively six weeks of the close season were lost.

His replacement was Paul Cook, no managerial pedigree but lots of experience and with lots of contacts in the game. It started to go horribly wrong as player after player left and the ones coming in didn't really inspire or enthuse the fans and by the time kick off came around you didn't know what to expect as a virtually new team took to the field against Woking. Late goals were going to be a major feature of the season with 18

coming in the last 10 minutes and 11 points were dropped and an FA Trophy exit between the 89th and 97th minutes of matches summed the season up. These points would have made a big difference in the final reckoning. A bad home defeat against Rushden & Diamonds was followed by a fortunate but very welcome win at Burton Albion with the goal of the season being scored by Mark Boyd. Decent results, 2-2 draws at (runaway leaders at the time) Oxford, York and Aldershot were interspersed with poor home performances. An FA Cup defeat at home to Conference North Kettering was the result that would possibly see the end of Paul Cook but it was not to be. Results continued to be mixed but a disastrous spell over the Christmas period culminating in a 3-1 defeat at Northwich which swathe club go bottom saw him sacked. Dino Maamria and Steve Whitehall were put in charge for the home game against Grays which was won 3-1. A very unlucky 94th minute defeat at Salisbury in the FA Trophy saw an exit from that competition.

Peter Davenport took up the reins at Crawley. A highly creditable point at Morecambe was followed by a home defeat to Forest Green. However a decent run which saw a climb up to 21st. Matches against the top two followed with the new runaway leaders Dagenham & Redbridge hammering us 4-1 and Oxford just scraping home 1-0, a defeat which saw the club go to the bottom of the table. The crunch game at St Albans saw a 2-2 draw with another late goal and most people were getting out the maps to Workington and Redditch.

Defeats at Stevenage (two late goals again) and at home to Weymouth when Jason Matthews (the keeper) scored with a wind assisted clearance in the 89th minute saw the club way behind with no hope, or so it seemed. A good point at Woking followed up with a point at home to Halifax who again scored in added time was not enough and most of the supporters had given up.

Some hope with a 5-1 win against Stafford followed by an excellent 3-2 victory at Rushden & Diamonds followed by a super home showing against Burton Albion and Southport were back in the mix. This was followed by a 4-0 win at play off contenders Gravesend & Northfleet, and Southport were still in with a chance. Unlikely, but possible. The downside was the games to come, York and Exeter who both needed wins to confirm their play off places. Excellent marketing of the home game saw our home NL home attendance record shattered as 3206 turned up at Haig Avenue, the highest home league gate for 33 years.

It was not to be and the 1-0 defeat virtually condemned the club to relegation. It was confirmed the following Tuesday when results went the wrong way and the drop was confirmed.

A full Trust In Yellow coach made the trip to Exeter out of loyalty for what turned out to be a big game for The Grecians who needed a win to qualify for the play offs. Southport gave them a mighty scare and lead up until the 65th minute but two goals in two minutes saw Exeter take command and make the play offs. The noise once Exeter scored was probably the best ever heard at a Southport NL game. This was the highest away NL gate (6670) Southport had ever played in front of, in two weeks the club beaten the home and away attendance records. The club had to build to bounce back stronger than last time. It had been a struggle for the two seasons spent in The Conference National.

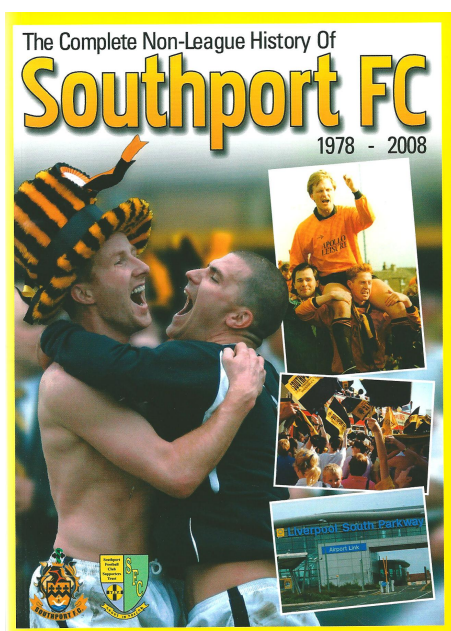
The 2007/08 season saw the club stay full time, a decision which came as a welcome surprise and one which saw Southport installed as one of the favourites. The season started with a bang and Southport were top after day one. It was to be the only time the club did hit the top though. Never out of the top seven the play offs were always looking likely, but very rarely looked like getting the automatic promotion place. Poor home form was largely responsible for that with far too many draws. There were some sparkling

away showings with the highlights being a tremendous 5-1 win at AFC Telford and an excellent 2-0 win at Nuneaton Borough. Peter Davenport was sacked after a disastrous showing at Solihull Moors which saw a 4-1 defeat with Tony Gray breaking a club record of scoring in eight consecutive matches. Tony Gray did actually score in ten consecutive games if you include Lancashire Junior Cup matches. There were just five games to go and most supporters, particularly those who had been to Solihull, had given up hope of even reaching the play offs. The inspired appointment of Gary Brabin until the end of the season saw him lose his first game in charge against already crowned champions, Kettering 1-0, but the remaining four games were won, needing a win in the last game at Vauxhall to ensure a play off place. It was to be Stalybridge Celtic in the club's first ever venture into play off territory. Considering the poor home form, playing away in the second leg was what all supporters wished for. However it was a great home showing when a 1-0 victory was the least deserved. The town responded well and three coaches were organised by Trust In Yellow for the trip to Stalybridge with everyone in high spirits and over 500 fans made the trip. Celtic went 2-0 up and all looked lost but a late own goal saw the game go in to extra time. No further goals and it was penalties where it was heartbreak time, particularly for Liam Blakeman who was the one to miss the penalty and Southport went down 5-3 to ensure another season in Conference North.

The Lancashire Junior Cup was won once again, 4-1 against Chorley at Leyland. The sixth time Southport had won it in thirty seasons of Non League Football.

Having been appointed as manager on a permanent basis, Gary Brabin quit the club and took up a post at Cambridge United to leave the club in turmoil. It took until June 23rd to appoint a replacement and that replacement saw Liam Watson return to the club bringing virtually the whole of the Burscough team with him. The circumstances surrounding Liam's return were shrouded in sadness as it was an unfortunate illness to The Linnetts chairman, Chris Lloyd, that saw a massive cost cutting operation put in place at Burscough which saw the wholesale transfer, at a cost of £30000, of players to Southport.

Trust In Yellow produced The Complete Non-League History Of Southport Football Club to coincide with the club completing the thirtieth season in Non League Football.



The 2008/09 season saw the play offs again, this time going out 2-1 on aggregate to Gateshead. It was another up and down season with the highs being a super 3-0 home

win against high flying Torquay United in the FA Trophy, a great night in Wrexham for a 2-1 win in the Setanta Shield and some sparkling individual displays from Mark Duffy who was transferred to Morecambe.

Inconsistency in the league was to be the club's undoing and the season tailed off culminating in a 5-1 defeat in our last league match away at Farsley.

All this was forgotten in the 2009/10 season as Southport stormed to the Conference North title after a titanic on and off field battle with Fleetwood Town. Trust In Yellow produced a superb brochure entitled A Season To Savour and this piece by Alan Jones sums the season up perfectly:

A SEASON TO SAVOUR



At four minutes to five on a bright, spring afternoon at Coronation Park, the curtain fell on a season that Southport supporters will never forget.

Scenes of jubilation and cheers of joy marked the end of a fiercely-contested quest for promotion, with victory for the Sandgrounders as they brought to a conclusion their three-year exile from Non-League football's top flight.

It had been an exhilarating battle for the Conference North championship, a tale with just about everything. The drama, excitement and controversy had reached a crescendo, and in the end gave way to a wave of elation.

A 3-0 win over Eastwood Town on the closing day of a thrilling campaign brought Southport fans the prize they had patiently waited for. In the summer of 2008, after defeat in a play-off semi-final and the departure of their manager, a return to the Conference Premier seemed a distant prospect for the Haig Avenue faithful. Yet as supporters poured onto the pitch in Nottinghamshire, the anguish of previous seasons was finally banished.

This has been a season to cherish, an achievement to rank alongside any other in the club's history. Not only have Southport secured a return to the national stage, they have done so against the financial might of their rivals and in a plot full of twists and turns.

At times, it looked as though the chance to claim the championship might have been lost in the two-way tussle with Fleetwood Town.

Having charged to the top of the league in October, Southport occupied pole position at the turn of the year, but an enforced three-week break saw them toppled. Dropped points against Redditch, Corby and Gloucester City and defeat at Hinckley United raised question-marks, but Southport ensured they were in a position to seize control of the title race when the opportunity arose.

The chance finally came on Easter Monday, with Fleetwood's loss at Workington meaning Matty McGinn's 90th minute penalty against Northwich Victoria took Southport top, and they would not relinquish their grip.

From then on, the Sandgrounders took full control, and as the march towards the title gathered pace, they looked ever more worthy champions.

Of course, the added ingredient in the promotion mix was Fleetwood's appeal against the expunging of Farsley Celtic's results, lodged in March but not resolved until 24 hours before the final match of the season. In the end, it only added to the sense of achievement within the Southport squad, who overcame all that their rivals could muster.

As things turned out, the removal of the Farsley's record meant the Sandgrounders suffered only four defeats during the course of the season - equalling a club record set in 1992/93.

Their final loss had come in the penultimate match against Alfreton Town. It would have been fitting had the Sandgrounders secured the championship at Haig Avenue - a feat not achieved since 1973 - but there is something about last-day drama that Southport seem to relish.

With 86 points, the Sandgrounders surpassed the tally with which they last won the Conference North, while they suffered half the number of defeats. Yet perhaps the most noticeable improvement from 2005 was the form at Haig Avenue, collecting a magnificent 49 points from a possible 60 at home.

The most satisfying scoreline of the season was the Boxing Day trouncing of Fleetwood, displaying the sort of ruthlessness that will have served notice of the Sandgrounders' intentions for the rest of the campaign.

With the exception of the defeat against Alfreton, Southport have always risen to the big occasion. Eastwood Town and Corby Town sat in first and third places respectively when they visited Haig Avenue, but each fell victim to merciless performances from the Sandgrounders.

While their rivals continually made additions to their already expensive squad, Southport's success was achieved with a core of just 17 players, remaining largely unchanged from the previous season. Manager Liam Watson acknowledged that the Sandgrounders were not quite ready for promotion 12 months ago, but his team have clearly matured. Every player has raised their game, with the likes of Matty McGinn and Michael Powell seemingly coming of age.

There are many qualities that define a title-winning team, and Southport have demonstrated them all over the course of the season.

As early as the opening day, the Sandgrounders showed their ability to come from behind against Gloucester City, with Watson's side repeating the trick with a degree of regularity. Even when performances have dipped below par, such as the visit to Vauxhall Motors in late October, Southport maintained the capacity to eek out the points. Perhaps the hallmark of a championship team is never knowing when they are beaten. As impressive as the wins were against Fleetwood, Eastwood and Corby, it is the points snatched from matches against Alfreton, Stafford Rangers, Droylsden and Northwich that have separated Southport from the rest.

Although the Sandgrounders' most emphatic wins this season have come at home, it is on the road where they arguably registered their most accomplished team displays. October's victory at AFC Telford United was probably as conclusive as it gets, with Southport oozing authority against one of the division's traditional heavyweights. At Stalybridge Celtic, the Sandgrounders executed their game-plan to perfection, while the

first half display against Droylsden, netting three goals in the space of 18 minutes, was simply breathtaking.

As the man responsible for assembling the squad from scratch, Watson has instilled within this group of players many virtues - signing players who have the desire as well as the necessary quality. It is said that a team usually reflects its manager, and this squad has never been lacking in inspiration.

The players will rightly take the plaudits for their endeavours on the pitch, but you have to wonder where Southport would currently be had Watson not returned to Haig Avenue in that summer of 2008. On his arrival, the manager inherited five players - the remains of a squad decimated by defeat in the play-offs and the collapse of the club's foray into the full-time ranks.

The situation was not dissimilar to the one he took over five years earlier. Again Watson has overseen an immediate transformation, and probably no other manager could have performed such a remarkable turnaround. Watson left the club prematurely in 2006, and this time it is hoped that he has the chance to see the fruit of his work.

After three years in the shadows, Southport have stepped back into the limelight, and in doing so they have lit up Haig Avenue with a season to remember.

A DIFFICULT RETURN

It was to be a difficult return to football in Non Leagues Premier Division. Southport opened up with the second best home gate of the season, 1802, against AFC Wimbledon who were to go on and gain promotion via the play-offs.

By the end of August ten points were on the board and sitting in fifth place having secured what was to be one of only two away wins in the season at Kidderminster and two home wins against Altrincham and, one enjoyed by every SFC fan, a win over Fleetwood. It looked plain sailing.

By the end of September Southport were 18th having picked up just three more points from home draws against Forest Green, Rushden & Diamonds and Hayes & Yeading with just four goals scored.

October started with a win against Tamworth which in retrospect was a vital three points. It was to be an exciting month as Southport recorded a surprise 2-1 FA Cup win at Wrexham courtesy of two own goals and had a visit from the Premier Sports TV crew for the game against Kidderminster. It was a great game for the watching armchair fans as Southport shot into a 2-0 lead before being pegged back to 2-2. The downside was the rather harsh sending off of Tony McMillan which meant he would miss the big FA Cup tie at home to Sheffield Wednesday but it did give Steve Dickinson a chance to make his first appearance of the season as sub and he made a couple of outstanding saves which attracted the attention of the post match interview team.

November was dominated by the FA Cup tie against Sheffield Wednesday with a great buzz about the club in the week leading up to the game. The day dawned bright and all was set for a great day in front of the live ITV National audience. The gate of 4490 was a bit disappointing but the TV audience witnessed a great game when Southport twice pulled the score back to level pegging before The Owls ran out deserved 5-2 winners. Unfortunately a bad run followed and Southport went on to lose the remaining games in November which saw the club end up in 22nd place with just 18 points.

The weather then took over with just one league game taking place in December, a 2-0 defeat at Fleetwood on the 28th. John Paul Kissock and Karl Ledsham made their debuts in this game and whilst they had little chance to show at Fleetwood, January was to be different. The New Year started with a 1-1 draw at Barrow before the first home game of 2011 saw a 5-1 thrashing of Gateshead with both JPK and Karl Ledsham getting on the scoresheet.

It was only a tap in but the build up play to Ledsham's goal was excellent. Eight games were played in all competitions in the month which also saw us crash out of the FA Trophy to Gateshead.

The month ended with a somewhat surprising 4-0 win against York when Shaun Whalley took centre stage and put The Minstermen to the sword with two goals on his second debut. We ended the month in 18th with 28 points and our home form was giving us hope that we could escape the bottom four.

Into February which was to be a cruel month, a 2-2 home draw against Grimsby followed by a 4-0 win against Forest Green but we then suffered three away defeats on the spin a, disappointing performance at Hayes & Yeading saw a 1-0 defeat, before Champions elect Crawley were played away from home, a game that resulted in a 1-0 defeat. The month ended with a 2-1 defeat at Bath when Kevin Lee grabbed the clubs 2000th away league goal.

March, and nine games on the list. Another home win to start the month, 3-1 against Histon and Southport were 18th on 35 points but a poor display at Eastbourne when in front of an exuberant away following, the majority of who had booked for the weekend to swell the travelling ranks to 121 Southport suffered a 4-1 defeat. A shocker at home to Barrow (lost 4-2) was bolstered by a battling 2-2 draw at Rushden before Southport shocked the BSP with a 2-1 home win against Luton in a stirring fight back with two super goals by Moogs and Kev Lee. This defeat led to the sacking of Luton manager Richard Money and the appointment of former 'Port boss, Gary Brabin.

Three days later and Southport went to Altrincham and scrapped out a vital point to end the month on 41 points and sat in 19th place.

April and Eastbourne came and conquered again and proved once and for all they were the bogey team of the season. A decent 2-2 draw at Mansfield before a 6-0 hammering at Luton although the scoreline flatters the Hatters. Champions Crawley came and won 4-0. It was on to Tamworth and a six pointer. 175 travellers took to the roads and Southport came away with a 1-0 win.

The last match of the season saw a point needed at Kettering to ensure safety. When Shaun Whalley equalised mid way through the second half it was looking good but a free kick three minutes from time and a tap in in added time put paid to BSP football in 2011/12. 353 travelling fans gave the lads great backing but it was not to be.

This was not the end to the season as news was circulating about a number of clubs experiencing financial problems none more so than Rushden & Diamonds. It seemed to take an eternity to sort out and everything seemed shrouded in so much secrecy but as the picture became clearer it looked as if Rushden's financial problems were to prove fatal.

It took until 11.32am on June 11th at the Conference AGM for the confirmation to come through that Rushden & Diamonds were being expelled from the Conference and Southport's place in the premier division of Non League football was reprieved.

The 2011/12 season saw the 'Port installed as hot favourites for relegation with not too many fans arguing the decision of the bookies. A finishing position of seventh surpassed everyone's expectations and in the end the fans were asking what might have been. It was a remarkable turnaround. 2010/11 saw the club struggle away from home picking up just two victories, it was to be the home form this term that proved costly. The home points total for 2011/12 was 32 against 44 away from home the previous season saw Southport amass 33 home points with just 13 away from home.

The 13 away wins was a Conference best, 76 points was a Conference best although the 72 achieved in 1994/95 was in a 42 game season.

The coup de gras however was breaking a long standing club record from 1955/56 of eight successive away wins.

THE RECORD BREAKERS



Karl Ledsham grabs the record breaking goal at Stockport

Between 5pm on Saturday 27th August 2011 and 5pm Saturday November 26th Southport Football Club went from 23rd place on 2 points to 3rd place on 41 points and in that time (including the record breaking eight away wins) played: 16 Won: 12 Drawn: 3 Lost: 1 For: 31 Against: 18.

Considering everything that had happened the previous season it was a quite unbelievable run which nobody could have anticipated.

The record breaking run:

1 Sat 10-Sep-11 BATH CITY W 2-1 Dan Walker & Tony Gray Att 663-57 Away

2 Sat 17-Sep-11 FOREST GREEN ROVERS W 3-2 Earl Davis, Simon Grand & Shaun Whalley Att 873-57 Away

3 Tue 27-Sep-11 DARLINGTON W 3-0 Simon Grand, Kevin Lee, Tony Gray Att 1637- 38 Away

4 Sat 08-Oct-11 NEWPORT COUNTY W 3-0 Simon Grand, Karl Ledsham, Tony Gray Att 1576-62 Away.

5 Sat 15-Oct-11 MANSFIELD TOWN W 3-1 og, Shaun Whalley & Tony Gray Att 2406-114 Away.

6 Tue 18-Oct-11 GATESHEAD W 3-2 Shaun Whalley (2) Vinny Mukendi Att 737-57 Away

7 Sat 05-Nov-11 KETTERING TOWN W 3-2 Simon Grand, Tony Gray 2, 1 pen Att 1368-109 Away

8 Sat 26-Nov-11 STOCKPORT COUNTY W 1-0 Karl Ledsham Att 4540-406 Away

It was a remarkable winning run and brilliantly captured in the Trust in Yellow booklet "Southport's Great Eight"

With expectations raised after a seventh place finish, Southport started the 2012/13 season without a win in the first four games. The win duly arrived on Bank Holiday Monday at Hyde but was immediately followed by a poor home showing and a 3-0 defeat to relegation bound AFC Telford.

Inconsistency was to be the key as well as the story of the season, conceding late goals which saw an incredible 21 points dropped in the closing stages of a game.

Only once did Southport drop into the bottom four but a late slump in form saw the club flirt perilously close to relegation and after a 2-2 draw at Gateshead after leading with a minute to go was followed by a 2-0 reversal at home to Alfreton things were looking bleak. A lot of criticism was levelled at both manager and players and the response was a 3-1 win 48 hours later at Braintree. This was followed by a 2-2 draw at Grimsby (again leading going in to added time) and a 1-0 win at Forest Green Rovers which all but made the club safe. Another season in the top flight was assured on the final Tuesday of the season when Gateshead and Stockport played out a 1-1 draw which made the final game of the season a meaningless affair. However on the Wednesday morning the news broke that Liam Watson had decided to call it a day after the final game. It was a shock to everyone connected to the club. It is not often that a manager leaves a club with a standing ovation but this was the case as Liam said his farewells on the pitch.

Liam had built up a great rapport with a large section of the fanbase and will be sorely missed by everyone at The Merseyrail Community Stadium.

A finishing position of 20th was harsh particularly as 54 points were on the board but in a very open division it was down to fine margins 72 goals scored was the same as the previous season when a 7th place finish was obtained. It was the 86 conceded that were the problem and with an aggregate of 158 a new record was created. There were also no 0-0 draws and by the end of the season our Conference record of 52 games without a 0-0 had been equalled, Just 4 clean sheets was a Non League all time low.

As the season ended the identity of the new gaffer remained unknown.

The highlights of the season? A 4-3 win at Stockport County after a 3-0 lead was pegged back to 3-3 and we won a game in added time with an own goal |(despite Karl Ledsham's claims otherwise). The Christmas double header against Macclesfield saw a 3-2 win at home and a 2-2 draw away (again leading going into the last 10 minutes and against 10 men).

The lows? Some poor home performances and after the Alfreton game the feeling that relegation was inevitable.

Player Of The Season by a landslide margin was Shaun Whalley after quite an exceptional season.

Goal Of The Season was very close between Steven Tames at Hyde and Andy Parry at King's Lynn with Tames just coming out on top by one vote in a record poll.

After 205 games Tony McMillan was released following a horror show at Tamworth. After being a regular for 205 matches we then used 3 further 'keepers in the remaining 8 matches.

In the cups the club exited the FA Cup at the first hurdle at Wrexham whilst in the Trophy a run to the Quarter Finals was halted by.....Wrexham!

It was the 15th May when Alan Wright was appointed as manager with John Hills as his assistant.

Unfortunately things didn't work out for Alan who was always up against it. He got off to a great start with a win against hot favourites, Luton Town and followed up with a win at Hyde that took Southport to the top of the table but it was downhill from there and after six consecutive defeats and just 205 days he left the club to be replaced by former 'Port striker John Coleman. John lead Accrington to Conference Premiership glory in 2005/06 and hopes were are high that he could do the same for The Sandgrounders.

Under Coleman Southport continued to pick up some excellent home results and ended the season with a very proud record of beating every team in the top five at The

Merseyrail Community Stadium. Life wasn't as good for the travelling supporter as the Club created an unwanted Club Record by failing to win in the 22 games after the first game victory at Hyde. Useful points were gained on the road at Grimsby and Gateshead. The final game of the season at Welling was typical of the season, 3-1 up at half time....4-3 down after 90 minutes.

Conference Premier safety had been assured in a pulsating Easter Monday home fixture against FC Halifax Town when a David Fitzpatrick screamer brought the house down and a 2-1 win against the high flyers. The Goal of The Season had been awarded pre match to Brice Irie-Bi for his effort at Aldershot but this was surpassed on the day with a goal of supreme quality and of far more significance.

Shortly after the season ended John Coleman left the club and was replaced by Martin Foyle who became the club's 25th Non League Manager. By October 5th and after 14 games Martin Foyle had left the club following a string of poor performances and results. He was replaced by Gary Brabin who returned for his second stint in charge at the Club having had 7 games in charge at the end of the 2007/08 season.

After just 13 league games in charge Gary left the club to take up a coaching role at Everton with Gary's number two, Paul Carden taking over the hot seat.

It was to be a shaky start for Paul but after seven winless games he steered the club to safety despite an horrendous end of season injury and suspension crisis which saw the club able only to field a three man bench at one point and one of those was a 'keeper. Safety was assured with a surprise home draw against Grimsby when despite the lack of available players the last home league game of the season in front of the best gate of the season ended 2-2. The thirty nine players used, the highest number we have used in The Conference, along with three managers tells its own story of a season of instability.

The overall highlight of what was a pretty miserable season was the FA Cup Run to Round Three which saw 2652 (plus a few more) Southport fans make the trip to Derby County to see the side get within 30 seconds of bringing The Rams back to Southport for a replay with a very late but undisputed penalty going against the heroic Sandgrounders. Southport's cup run had seen the club beat Tamworth after a replay, Football League Dagenham & Redbridge also after a replay and big spending Eastleigh to reach Round Three. The win against D&R was the club's first against a Football League team since 1998.

Paul Carden lasted 299 days in the managerial hot seat before he left the club by mutual consent after a run of bad results including a very disappointing 1-0 defeat in the FA Cup at Salford City.

Next to take up the reins was Dino Maamria. Dino oversaw a transformation that saw the club equal its Conference winning run of six consecutive wins lifting the club up to 14th place at one point.

However, after just 116 days in charge Dino stood down as manager citing family and travel reasons and he was replaced on a caretaker basis by Andy Bishop.

Andy led the club to safety finishing in 16th place and was rewarded with the job on a permanent basis ahead of the final game of the season.

The 16th place finish was the club's highest placing since 2011/12.

A poor start to the 2016/17 season saw Andy Bishop dismissed after just eight games in charge to be replaced by Steve Burr. Steve oversaw a revival which saw the club climb to safety before, after a poor run of results, three defeats including a home FA Trophy defeat saw his services dispensed with. It was a move that took many people by surprise as once again the club were to go through three managers in a season and the stability everyone craved was once again lacking.

Andy Preece was appointed and steered the club to relegation with a record of just two wins in 15 games. Relegation became inevitable as early as March and the season petered out with little or no hope of survival.

Our home league attendance record was broken when Champions Lincoln City came to town on the last day of the season bringing close on 2500 supporters with them to set the new high at 3462.

It was a very disappointing season to say the least with very few highlights. The exception was a first round FA Cup tie which went out on BT Sport against Fleetwood Town. The game took place on a Monday evening with the actual FA Cup draw taking place in the small bar at the ground. The game was drawn 0-0 and Southport battled to a 1-1 draw at Fleetwood in the replay before running out of steam in extra time.



Rob Urwin and Alan Jones pictured practicing the draw.

Problems off the field with a group of supporters calling for the head of chairman Charlie Clapham which saw him stand down as chairman ahead of our final game. He was joined by Vice Chairman Sam Shrouder and Chief Executive Haydn Preece although the why's and wherefores remained unclear for some time in what became a round of accusation and counter accusation.

It all became quite unsavoury. Charlie had intended staying on another year, not wanting to go out on a relegation but such was the feeling against him he departed ahead of the plan. It all got very messy after this. James Treadwell and Adrian Shandley took over the ownership of the club in a move that didn't go down well with a group who were hoping for a takeover of the club by new on the scene Phil Hodgkinson, former director Nigel Allen and former manager Liam Watson.

2017/18 Close Season-How it all unfolded

2 June: Statement from Southport FC regarding Phil Hodgkinson's attempts to gain a controlling interest. "We have not received a valid offer from Mr Hodgkinson which could have been accepted," it states. The statement adds: "The club did receive a brief one-

page letter over a week ago detailing Mr Hodgkinson's interest, which had conditions attached.

5 June: The Annual General Meeting for Pinewise Limited sees James Treadwell elected as director but only by utilising the block vote as he lost on a show of hands. Adrian Shandley is also voted as a director.

Reports from the meeting suggest the club will be appointing a "marketing manager" as well as a "general manager". Manager Alan Lewer and head of development Mark Wright are not present.

13 June: Phil Hodgkinson tweets: "Our #BACKTHEBID website will be live in a few days.

19 June: Southport announce long-standing supporter Martyn O'Hara has joined the board as a "volunteer director" taking the number of directors to three. "He has an excellent marketing and sales background and will be heavily involved with developing our revenue streams," says director James Treadwell.

28 June: The #BACKTHEBID website is launched – 50 days after James Treadwell and Adrian Shandley took control of Southport. "The #BACKTHEBID campaign was recently set up following the controversial events surrounding the bid for the ownership of Southport," says a statement on the website.

2 July: Ian Kyle, a partner and joint owner of Liverpool-based law firm Irvings Law, is announced as a new director. "We welcome Ian to the club and thank him for his initial investment in new share capital of £125,000," says director James Treadwell.

A club statement announcing Kyle's arrival adds: "The board of directors would like to confirm that they have not to date received an offer from Mr Phil Hodgkinson which would see any immediate introduction of funds to the club. However, a date for a proposed meeting between the board and Mr Hodgkinson is currently being discussed."

Hodgkinson responds on Port Chat. "The club have received two written offers from me offering cash for shares, plus they haven't confirmed a date to meet yet.

4 July: Minutes from the Trust In Yellow board's meeting with club directors on 28 June are made public. They reveal new director Ian Kyle is vice-chairman, with director James Treadwell listed as chairman and Adrian Shandley "special projects" director. "We are currently in confidential discussions with Phil Hodgkinson, so it is not appropriate to answer some of the questions asked at this stage.

11 July: The moment many Southport fans have been waiting for. Southport reveal the eagerly-awaited meeting with Phil Hogkinson will take place "later this week" between the businessman, Nigel Allen and the club's board. "The board look forward to progressing discussions with a view to a positive outcome in the best interests of Southport Football Club," says a club statement

12 July: Former Southport striker Steve Haw rejoins the club as general manager.

15 July: A second #BACKTHEBID meeting takes place at the Railway Club on Sussex Road at 12 noon – the same time as a 'Family Fun Day' at the football club is taking place ahead of the first home pre-season game with Blackpool.

Phil Hodgkinson and Nigel Allen address the meeting and urge supporters to respect the decision of fellow fans in regards to whether they attend, boycott or go to away games only in 2017-18.

On the field the club get off to a fantastic start losing just one (at runaway Champions Salford City) of the opening 8 games and sat in 3rd place at the end of August. It was a start that took many people by surprise.

The much heralded arrival of new Director Phil Hodgkinson on September 5th coincided with a heavy 6-0 defeat at Stockport and a run of 20 games without a win. Alan Lewer and Mark Wright left at the start of October and a high profile appointment was made in Kevin Davies. After a shaky start the 3-0 home win on New Years Day against Chorley was the start of a record breaking run of six home wins in succession and a rise up to 8th in the table.

That was as good as it got as eight out of the last nine games ended in defeat and Kevin Davies left the club at the end of the 2017/18 season.

The club flirted with relegation but other club's results helped stave it off and a somewhat surprising 4-2 away win at Darlington ensured safety and a 15th place finish.

Kevin Davies was dismissed at the end of the 2017/18 season and replaced by Liam Watson who returned to the club for his third spell in the hot seat.

Off the field the club revealed ambitious plans to regenerate the ground and reinvigorate the club. The exciting new vision was presented to the supporters at the Southport Conferencing Centre.

The club then came under the directorship of Phil Hodgkinson and Ian Kyle following the decision of firstly Adrian Shandley to be followed by James Treadwell to stand down as directors.

The club went into the 2018/19 season with a completely new off field team and a squad filled with experience at this level and above and hopes high that the much needed stability on and off field is in place to allow the club to progress.

However as so many have been at Southport Football Club the season was one of ups and downs. A dreadful start in the league saw the club sitting bottom of the table at the end of October but a fine run of form in November saw manager Liam Watson pick up the Manager of The Month award and a climb up the table.

Cup runs were to be the main feature of the season. An FA Cup run to round two saw the club one game away from a tie against Tottenham Hotspur after holding Tranmere to a 1-1 draw at Prenton Park and very nearly winning the game. It was not to be as front of a new ground record 5414 gate and TV audience Tranmere won the replay 2-0 and the dream was over.

The league form improved and a 14th place finish was attained.

Silverware came the club's way in the form of a Liverpool Senior Cup, Lancashire Junior Cup double with wins against Prescott Cables and Colne, the first time the club had done the double since 1992/93.

As soon as the season ended the club were rocked by the news that owner Phil Hodgkinson was leaving to take over as chairman and majority shareholder at Huddersfield Town. Many promises left unfulfilled and most of the permanent staff appointed long since departed.

Ian Kyle presented a much more realistic vision for the club and a new Board of Ian Kyle, manager Liam Watson and Steve Porter lead the club into 2019-20.

A season brought to a premature halt with the Coronavirus Pandemic seeing all football suspended in March 2020. Southport had played 32 games of the season which ended up being decided on a points per game basis and a finishing position of 12th which was the same as the actual finishing position.

Southport sat in twelfth place when the season came to a halt on March 7th with little chance of going up or down and we could sit back and watch everyone else argue about the rights and wrongs of how the season should be completed.

No awards and no records to report and the same manager started and ended the season.

If the 2019-20 season was unique we have to qualify that by adding that 2020-21 was somewhat similar with the pandemic once again bringing to an end a season that few people thought should have started.

We had played 14 games and sat in 17th place when, after a lot of arguments, the season was declared null and void.

For statistical purposes the club have included the games played in appearance and games played records. A decision unanimously agreed by all parties involved at the club.

What a strange old season 21-22 turned out to be.

Sitting bottom of the table after a 3-1 defeat at York on October 9th yet playing some decent football and getting three decent home draws the season changed around dramatically when after a 3-0 home win against Darlington at the end of October the team embarked on a run that was to push them into the play off zone by Boxing Day.

A fall off in form caused by a dreadful run of injuries saw a slide back down the table and a finishing place of 11th the best since our relegation back into the NLN was a fair reflection of the season.

The 15 draws, 11 at home is a record for our Conference North games and the most since 1991/92 when we had 17.

Cameron Mason was the only ever present and joins only 14 other people to have completed a full season. He also had 15 league clean sheets, the best since 2008/09 and he was voted Supporters Player Of The Year.

Leading League Scorer **Jordan Archer** with 16 plus 6 in cup competitions. He now has 35 goals for the club in all competitions

Doug Tharme won the Media Player Of The Year for the most MOTM awards in all competitions.

Adam Anson played in 53 out of 54 of our games.

Goal Of The Season-Was it ever in doubt? Marcus Carver's overhead kick against Chorley in the FA Cup won the vote by a considerable margin.

Assists- Four players had 8 assists each, Jack Doyle, Doug Tharme, Charlie Munro and Niall Watson

Best Home Attendance 1565 v York Lowest 686 v Alfreton Best Away Attendance 3199 at York
Lowest 450 at Curzon

3 doubles for, Hereford, Guiseley and Bradford PA. 1 against Kettering.

Undefeated at home against all the play off sides. Failed to win against any of the top 10 away.

The last day 5-0 win at Bradford equals our record away winning margin of 5 which has now been achieved on 7 occasions. Our 13 games without a win was a new (unwanted) club record of games without a win.

Into 2022/23

5-0 up at one of the favourites for promotion (Boston United) at 4.20 on the opening day of the season and top of the table what a start and could this be the season. Well, the game ended 5-3 and that was as good as it got. A season described by manager Liam Watson as the most difficult ever beset by injuries from day one and off field issues made for a poor season which we were all grateful ended without a relegation after a record breaking eight defeats on the run as the season closed.

Enough points had been put on the board early on the season but we did end up looking over our shoulders.

The injuries started in pre-season when major signing Nyal Bell was injured at Bootle and never played a competitive game for the club. And so it continued throughout the season.

Crowd issues were unfortunately at the fore as appeared to be the case across many clubs but they cost the club money with extra security having to be brought in.

Player Of The Year was Adam Anson. We did retain the Lancashire Junior Cup now renamed The Lancashire Challenge Trophy after a 5-3 penalty shoot out win against Atherton Collieries following a 0-0 draw.

One to forget.

2023-24

With the 2022-23 season ending with 8 league defeats in a row and this season starting with 4 more including an opening day 4-0 home humbling by newly promoted Warrington Town it saw the end of Liam Watson's managerial reign. Liam had amassed 660 games in charge in his four spells across all competitions since coming to the club in 2003. Liam "moved upstairs" and Jim Bentley took over the hot seat. Form improved and by mid October we had risen to 12th place on the edge of the play off zone. It was to prove a high point as inconsistency was the order of the day and by mid February we were flirting with relegation again. Three wins in a row at Warrington, Banbury and Chester in March put some daylight away from the bottom four but it was only in the penultimate game when a 3-0 win against Rushall saw National North football assured for 2024-25.

Jack Doyle swept the board winning Supporters Player Of The Year, Players Player Of The Year and also chipped in with Goal Of The Season after a fine free kick at King's Lynn.

Off the field Ian Kyle relinquished control of the club to Peter Mitchell and the Big Help Group.