

## Peterborough and the Wartime League in WWII – David Gray

The following article has been compiled from two main sources, a Wikipedia page on the Wartime League, and my own book, Peterborough at War 1939-1945. The paragraphs in italics are from my own book. I have tried to fit the information from my book into a rough date order to match the particular football season taking place at the time the information appeared in the local press.

Peterborough United formed in 1934 at Peterborough's Angel Hotel to provide a replacement for Peterborough & Fletton United, who had folded two years previously. Peterborough's application to join the Midland League was welcomed by the league, however, the representatives from the club did not have the money to pay for the security deposit, entry fee and subscription. Grantham Town loaned the money to The Posh who began selling shares to raise funds.



The **Wartime League** was a football league competition held in England during World War II, which replaced the suspended Football League. The exclusion of the FA Cup in these years saw the creation of the Football League War Cup.

The 1939-40 Football League season began as normal on 26 August 1939. Following the German invasion of Poland and subsequent declaration of war by Britain against Nazi Germany on 3 September 1939, football matches were halted. The Football League teams had each played two to three League matches per division, including a full matchday for the First Division on 2 September 1939. After the suspension of football, friendlies were quickly set up between regional teams.

Decisions as to whether the game should go on were connected to debates about wartime morale as football had a positive effect on the well-being of the public. The British government announced on 21 September 1939 that football games would continue but not under the divisions that the game traditionally held season to season. Games began in October.

The Football Association established a fifty-mile travelling limit. The Football League was separate regional leagues, flattening previous division statuses, with reduced attendance numbers. In the interests of public safety, the number of spectators allowed to attend these games was limited to 8,000. These arrangements were later revised, and clubs were allowed gates of 15,000 from tickets purchased on the day of the game through the turnstiles.

Many footballers during this time left their careers to join the Territorial Army. Between September 1939 and the end of the war, 784 footballers joined in the war effort. 91 men joined from Wolverhampton Wanderers, 76 from Liverpool, 65 from Huddersfield Town, 63 from Leicester City, 62 from Charlton, 55 from Preston North End, 52 from Burnley, 50 from Sheffield Wednesday, 44 from Chelsea, 41 each from Brentford and Southampton, Sunderland and West Ham United, and 1 from Norwich City.

Because of the number of footballers who had joined the services, the FA introduced the guest player system. Service personnel and war workers regularly moved around and teams changed significantly week to week. Young and inexperienced players also got their chance to feature for local clubs due to the shortage of experienced players.

### **1939–40 Season**

Each season saw the divisions switched around from region to region. The first season of the Wartime League 1939–40 season, saw eight divisions established, each with between eight and 12 clubs: South West, Midlands, East Midlands, West, North West, North East and two Southern sections, which were both played in two sections. Arsenal, Tottenham, Queens Park Rangers, and Crystal Palace were all winners of their own South section. The FA Cup was suspended and to substitute for its absence, the Football League War Cup was established.



**An Air Raid Warden at a Charlton v Arsenal Match in 1940**

By May 1940 the early stages of the conflict, known as the Phoney War, ended and Germany invaded France, bringing the war increasingly closer to Britain. Concerns for the safety of spectators increased as a result of the Luftwaffe's campaign of bombing. Despite this, over 40,000 fans braved the warnings and turned out at Wembley Stadium to see West Ham United lift the Football League War Cup by defeating Blackburn Rovers. On 19 September 1940, soon after the beginning of the Blitz, the Football Association relaxed their ban on Sunday football to provide recreation for war workers.

As early as 1939, the London clubs had called for a separate London division to be run underneath the London FA. They backed down, instead participating in the Football League's official divisions. However, the London Clubs broke with the Football League in organising the London War Cup. During the second half of 1939-40, the London clubs rejected the official Football League fixtures and organised their own, something they would repeat the following season.

Most of the London teams had not operated under the Football League umbrella during World War I, partially explaining their independent spirit during World War II. Arsenal manager George Allison and Tottenham director G. Wagstaffe Simmons both were significant figures in the breakaway movement.

### **Peterborough United**

*The football season, which had just begun, was at first put off until further notice, and the town's remaining cricket fixtures were cancelled. Mr. Sam Haden, the manager of Peterborough United Football Club, closed down proceedings on Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> September 1939, and applied for a full time post in a first aid squad. A number of players took jobs in local factories, two went back to their homes outside the city and the rest were looking for employers to take them on. Mr. Haden kept in touch with all the men ready to recall them at short notice should the season begin again.*

*Christmas 1939 - As with the places of public entertainment, the football season was now also allowed to continue. The attendance at the Peterborough United v Boston Midland League match on Boxing Day - 1,765 - was not as big as had been anticipated, this being put down to the poor weather. Peterborough United won their two home matches during the holiday and lost away. The results were:*

*Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup>: United 15, Royal Navy Depot 2 (Friendly).*

*Christmas Day: Boston 2, United 1 (Midland League).*

*Boxing Day: United 3, Boston 1 (Midland League).*

*Peterborough set up a new club record by beating the Royal Navy Depot side 15-2. The previous best scoring feat by the first team had been 12-0 against Boston the previous season.*

*Although they let in six goals, Peterborough United still managed to win their game against Frickley Colliery 7-6, putting them at the top of the Midland League in a terrific match played at London Road on Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> February 1940.*

*Using the terminology of the time, it was stated that the half-backs and backs on both sides were frequently beaten, but they were not entirely to blame. A soft surface gave them little foothold, and once beaten, they found it impossible to recover.*

*There were three goals in the first six minutes, and then from being 3-2 down Peterborough pulled up to lead 4-3 at half-time. After the interval they took the score to 7-3 before the colliery rallied and scored three times in a quarter of an hour.*

*The United team was:*

*Shelton, Tasker, Smith (J), Fletcher, Warnes, Hewitt, Fielding, Rowbotham, Macartney, Johnston and Rudkin.*

*The attendance was 1,205. The takings were: Tickets - £53 10s. 3d. Programmes - £1 13s. 2d. Car Park - 10s. 3d.*

### **1940-41 Season**

In 1940-1941, the leagues were reduced in numbers to just two: the North Regional League and the South Regional League. Crystal Palace were champions of the South and Preston North End were the North champions.

The London War Cup, organised by the London clubs, was first played in the spring of 1940-41. At the end of the 1940-41 season, London clubs once again organised their own competition schedule.

The FA management committee publicly condemned them, but no further consequences commenced.

The West Ham chairman WJ Cearns worked to find a compromise between the London clubs and the rest of the team, but found no success. In early August 1941, all eleven London clubs and two of their Southern allies, Aldershot and Reading, were expelled from the Football League. Three further clubs - Brighton, Portsmouth, and Watford - joined the rebel league. Southend United withdrew from league competition.



**England v Scotland 1941. Note the soldiers in the crowd with their helmets and gas masks at the ready**

### **Peterborough United**

*A special meeting of the Board of Directors of Peterborough United Football Club was held on Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> January 1940, to consider the future of the club. After a good deal of discussion it was decided, in spite of the dwindling playing staff and supporters who were being taken away for war work, that an effort would be made to keep the club going for the time being. The next match had already been arranged and would take place on February 8<sup>th</sup>, against the Royal Engineers.*

*At a following meeting of the directors on Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> February however, the club secretary, Mr. H.J. Poulter, tendered his resignation. Mr. Poulter, who had been secretary ever since the formation of the club seven years earlier, took the decision in view of the directors deciding to try to carry on.*

*"I felt it would be a good thing to try to provide a little relaxation for war workers," he said, "but support has been so poor that I now feel that my spare time can be better spent in civil defence duties."*

*The City Council showed a compassionate spirit to Peterborough United F.C. towards the end of the month, in dealing with the club's difficulties over rent arrears.*

*The Park and Recreation Grounds Committee reported to the council on Friday 28<sup>th</sup> February that they had met three representatives of the club - Mr. J.E. Swain (chairman), Mr. G. Creed and Mr. H.J. Poulter - who asked whether, in view of war-time conditions, the Committee would terminate the*

*lease or grant a reduction of rent for the period of the war. The Treasurer reported that the present year's rent was still in arrears.*

*The Committee decided that, if the club were unable to pay the full rent of £50 a year, half may be paid and the arrears carried forward until after the war.*

*Mr. Wright, [history does not record his status within the proceedings], asked if it was any use spoon-feeding the club in that way.*

*Alderman Snowden said the club would pay up after the war. They had had a bad time. [It should be recorded that the city has Alderman Snowden, and not Mr. Wright, to thank for the continuance of the city team].*

*The report was adopted.*

*Not only were United short of money, they were short of players too, (and spectators, which created the cash flow problem). Owing to short notice, United and Phorpres fielded depleted sides at London Road on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> March, and two reporters present joined in on opposite sides. United still won 4-1.*

### **1941–42 Season**

For 1941–1942, the two Football League competitions were renamed to League North and League South. The new London War League began their first season. The London clubs had argued that their plan was closely connected to the national war effort as it would reduce long-distance games and travel. However, they faced many of the same struggles as the Football League competitions including depleted teams, travel difficulties, and one-sided matches.

According to wartime sport scholar Matthew Taylor, the London Wartime League was "a qualified success." However, other regional teams suffered as the Football League South was extremely stretched geographically. Some Southern clubs played only five different teams.

At the end of the 1941-42 season, the Football League agreed to allow the London clubs back as long as they wrote a formal apology letter and paid a fine. The Football League still mostly acquiesced to the London clubs demands, instituting a slightly larger London League with two additional teams, renamed League South.

### **Peterborough United**

#### ***The Survival of Peterborough United in the Balance***

*Described by Mr. H.J. Poulter, the secretary, as "a last-minute effort to save Peterborough football," a meeting was now organized for anyone who cared to attend at the Rechabite Hall, at 7.45pm on Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> March 1942. The question being the future use of the London Road ground.*

*Peterborough United F.C. rented the ground from the corporation and had asked to be released from the agreement for the period of the war in lieu of the improvements that they, and the Supporters Club had made – shelters, railings, baths and dressing rooms.*

*The Council's Parks and Recreation Grounds Committee did not see eye to eye with the club's directors and were considering an application from the Newall Engineering Sports Club, who were prepared to pay double the rent that United were paying and take a lease on the ground for a period of years. Because of this, Peterborough United was in danger of having to close down permanently. The improvements that had been made would then become the property of the landlord, (Council).*

#### ***A Reprieve for Peterborough United***

*It was announced on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March 1942, that the London Road football ground would remain in the tenancy of Peterborough United F.C. for another year at least. Rent of £50 was owed and the city council had given the directors to understand that until it was paid there was no possibility of a new agreement being considered. In the meantime Newall's F.C. offered a rent of £380 a year for a ten year lease.*

*The United directors could see no way out of the crisis and a meeting was called at the Rechabite Hall at which little progress was made until word was sent to the chairman (Councillor J.E. Swain) that*



*County Councillor W.H. Tebbs, of Eastfield, and his brother, Mr. A.E. Tebbs, of Fulbridge Road, had offered to loan the £50 required. This was accepted with grateful thanks and much relief, and a subscription list was opened immediately with Mr. T.H. Peake, Mr. J.A. Ladds and Mr. J. Blades in charge. Several offers up to £10 were received at the meeting.*

#### **1942–45**

In the summer of 1942, Bournemouth and Norwich withdrew from League competition for the rest of the war due to transportation and other difficulties. Southend United also remained outside the League.

From 1942 to 1945 the leagues were continued as three, now established as League North, League South (the expanded London League), League West, and now a League North Cup as opposed to the London War Cup. The Football League War Cup continued on in these years.

#### **Post-war**

Following the surrender of Germany in May 1945 and the end of the war in Europe, The Wartime League's structure continued for one more season from 1945–1946 with just the League North and League South. This season however marked the retirement of the Football League War Cup and the return of the FA Cup with a new structure; seeing home and away leg ties for the first time in its history with results being decided on aggregate goals and extra-time, followed by a replay.

In 1946–1947, the league was then returned to pre-war four divisions, First Division, Second Division and Division 3 with its north-south split.