

Sharing not caring, the post-war roots of the North London rivalry



By the time football restarted after the Second World War, Tottenham Hotspur was a club of the past.

The one-time Flower of the South had wilted. The club had lost its way due to lacklustre performances on the pitch and lack of vision off it. And yet, the crowds still came, through the days of football and economic depression, to see the Spurs.

By 1945, the hunger for watching live football had not subsided. In fact, the dour circumstances of Britain in the immediate post-war years meant that the desire to spend an afternoon at the game was greater than ever. Rationing was still in place, clothing utilitarian at best, consumer

durables unheard of and, to add to the general greyness of a nation shattered by years of war, coal smoke pervaded the streets.

Add to that the trauma of the loss of loved ones, or the trauma of those who had survived but, after what they had seen, wished they hadn't, and it's not hard to understand that there was a need for escapism.

For years, football had been the escape for crowds of ordinary people. And in 1945 the people were eager for some regular football.

During the war football had been played in a restricted format, with regional leagues and guest players rendering club identity almost redundant. Add to that the initial restriction of crowds to just 8,000 and the fact that entry was by ticket only and you can understand that the football on offer during the war was not what one of the game's modern sponsors would call the real thing.

Plus, of course, war tends to make most things – even football – comparatively irrelevant.

The fact that Spurs once again fell foul of the football authorities may also have kept loyalties alive.

In 1941, the club was among the 12 expelled from the Football League for refusing to travel long distances for games. The refusal was based upon the fact that the clubs could not get their players released from war duties for long

journeys but the football authorities, demonstrating as ever their acute awareness of the game's place in the grander scheme of things, did not consider a trifling affair such as a world war good enough reason to opt out of travelling. So the dirty dozen were expelled, and promptly formed their own competition.

Spurs fan Harry Slater tells a tale of what life was like for those left at home during the war. "I used to play for a team, firm called John Dickenson – they had a fantastic ground, the only one of a few pitches in London that was available in wartime. I ran a league, about six teams, a couple came from south London. It was towards the end of the war, we went to play on this particular ground. I got a phone call on Saturday morning from the groundsman. He wouldn't let me play because the ground was icy. So I said, 'Look, I've got these people coming from south London.' And I talked him into it.

"The following week, the same thing happens. I went over there and this time he wouldn't have it, so we got on the bus and went to Tottenham. During the course of the match there was an explosion in the distance.

"I got in the office on Monday morning and this chap said to me, 'Do you feel lucky?' I said 'Why, what are you talking about?' He said, 'That V2 fell on the penalty spot of our ground. Wrecked the dressing room, groundsman's in hospital. There would have been 22 players on that pitch."

Slater remembers the football authorities “used to run a shambles of a league” during the war, and refers to the sharing of White Hart Lane by Arsenal and Spurs. “One time Arsenal played at Tottenham, and during the war they used to swap players. Hooper used to play in goal for Tottenham. They were short of a keeper so they played Hooper. He let in three of the simplest goals ever! We all enjoyed it! It was every other week, Spurs and Arsenal at Tottenham. We enjoyed it because Arsenal got beat.”

That ground-share between Tottenham and Arsenal is interesting. The rivalry between the clubs was already well established, in part due to the Gunners’ move from Woolwich onto Tottenham’s north London patch, and in part because of the controversial circumstances around Arsenal gaining a First Division place at Tottenham’s expense. But those events were nearly 20 years past by the time war broke out, and the 1930s had seen Arsenal established as one of the country’s top teams while Spurs languished.

It’s possible the two clubs were not seen as rivals, the modern day equivalent perhaps being the relationship between Leyton Orient and West Ham, where mutual dislike runs deep but where the gulf in playing level renders rivalry relatively minor. Certainly, Tottenham fan Peter Jack, one of four generations of Spurs fans from a family who have lived in the area since the turn of the last century, doesn’t remember any great issue when the lilywhites and the reds shared the green space at White Hart Lane during wartime.

"I used to go and see both," he says. "I used to go each week. I don't know if the people who went were Spurs or Arsenal fans, or people just going to see football. People weren't quite so ardent about their teams, they were quite nice about it. I can remember a few guest players playing, Stan Mortensen played for Arsenal, and I can remember Ted Drake. Strangely enough, I can remember a few guest players more than I can the Spurs players."

But Harry Slater remembers there was animosity between Tottenham and Arsenal at this stage. Fans "hated" Arsenal playing at Tottenham's ground, he says. "I used to go occasionally to the Arsenal stadium and do you know, they've got the worst clutch of supporters... If a player is having a bad game, what's the point of shouting and harassing the bloke? They should be trying to encourage him."

Other people have been known to say much the same about Spurs fans.

It seems that the nature of the rivalry, and the reaction to the ground-share, was often very much in the eye of the beholder – a lesson perhaps for those who are quick to ascribe a single set of attitudes to a crowd. But it's also clear that, at this stage, the levels of antipathy that would be displayed in years to come were not present.

Of course, the backdrop of something genuinely serious in the shape of a world war may have served to keep a mere

football rivalry in perspective.

This is an edited extract from A People's History of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, by Martin Cloake and Alan Fisher, available from Pitch Publishing at www.pitchpublishing.co.uk