

Lizzy Ashcroft - Footballer

A Short Biography of Nanna Bolton - my famous footballing granny
Known universally to her teammates as 'Tommy'



Lizzy in her prime in 1925 with trademark bob

Born: 8 January 1905 St Helens - Died March 1973 Preston
Married: Preston Registry Office 21 November 1936 to Joshua Bolton

Early Years

Elizabeth Ann Ashcroft was born in 1905 in Parr, one of the four boroughs of the Lancashire industrial town of St Helens. Parr is an area which has had some difficult times and is targeted for regeneration.



Ralph + Mary Ashcroft with their 9 children
Lizzy is the tall one with her father's arm around her

Lizzy grew up with her 3 brothers and 5 sisters in a two up two down house on Broad Oak Lane in Parr. Her father Ralph was hewer in one or more of the many, many unregulated local coalmines. The hewer's job was to dig the coal out at the face - he would typically have a younger man who would shovel the loosened coal into a bucket or tub. This person would often lodge with the Hewer. Despite having 9 children in their small house they also had a lodger. In the family archive I have a letter from one of Lizzy's brothers to Lizzy (~ 1930s) begging for a few shillings because he and his mother are ill and have no food in the house. This triangulates with stories I heard from my father of a young St Helens relative being despatched to Preston on a Sunday for a joint of meat. Times were hard.

It is not hard to imagine Lizzy growing up as a tomboy and picking up her footballing skills and her lifelong love of football - rather like her lifelong mate Lily Parr.

St Helens Ladies FC

The famous St Helens Ladies FC was formed in 1919 out of the various St Helens munitionettes sides such as Sutton Bond 1201, Rainhill Munitionettes, etc. The Lancashire Evening Post records a game against the Dick Kerr Ladies on Saturday 17th May 1919 at Wigan. They are described as the 'solitary undefeated team ladies' team in Lancashire' in the newspaper article. Their Captain and goalkeeper that day was E. Waine. She was widely regarded as the best goalkeeper of her day and usually captained combined sides when they were put together to take on the DKL. St Helens were widely regarded as the second best team in 1921 after the legendary Dick Kerr Ladies. When they weren't losing to the greatest women's football team ever in its greatest incarnation they had a very impressive unbeaten record. The 27 games which have been uncovered so far in 1921 include four high profile games against the famous Stoke Ladies and include 3 draws and a win.



E Waine (Goalie in white), Lizzy (bob), Sue Chorley (front middle)

St Helens are often talked about in a negative manner - fall guys for the DKL. Rather like a 'domestique' in cycling. This is highly unfair. They were a very, very significant and important side. As we will see later in the persons of Alice Woods, Lily Parr, Lizzy Ashcroft, Sue Chorley and Lydia Ackers they provided new and much needed blood for the legendary DKL to carry on as the legendary DKL...

St Helens Debut

Lizzy made her debut on 20th April 1921 in a 2-2 draw with Stoke Ladies at St Andrews (Birmingham City Football Ground). The crowd was reported as 30,000. She had just turned 16. Imagine how she must have felt? The beautiful medal below from this game is a treasured family heirloom.



St Helens Ladies 2 - 2 Stoke Ladies
In Aid of Father Hudson's Homes

Lizzy's adversary that day was Stoke's deadly assassin Daisy Bates. Daisy was a renowned sprinter and her and my granny were to meet in Stoke Ladies last ever game in 1923...



Lizzy vs Daisy?

1921

This was the 'golden year' of women's football. Modern women's football started directly thanks to the First World War. However, despite some early games most of the intense football wasn't until the 1917-1918 and 1918-1919 seasons. The golden 'war' season was 1917-1918 as by the end of 1918 and the start of 1919 the allies were winning the war, huge and abrupt layoffs of women workers were happening and priorities were changing. By 1920 it had begun to be realised that even if we had 'won' the war we still hadn't 'won' the peace and there was an incredible amount of unemployment, hardship, injury, mental illness and ill-health without the infrastructure to cope. Women's football really started to take off again in 1920 and by 1921 the statistics are incredible. There hardly seems to be a blade of grass in the country that didn't have some form of women's football taking place. Post WW1 it makes no sense to talk of seasons (teams that had that attitude were generally doomed) as the Summer was a great time to fill stadia and bring in money for charity. This was exploited by the great St Helens, DKL and Heys Ladies who interestingly did not want to join Stoke Ladies 1922 league and seasonal model.

The FA Ban

The day after my granny's debut in front of 30,000 (one newspaper report actually says 40,000) St Helens played Stoke for a 1-1 draw at Port Vale's ground in front of a crowd of 5,000. A quick trip up across to Yorkshire saw them play Huddersfield Atalanta. 10,000 spectators saw them draw with Stoke at The Hawthorns. A trip to Molineux had 15,000 spectators watch them defeat Birkenhead 1-0. Horrockses (cotton mill - possibly the mill in which my other granny worked!) were despatched 5-0 in St Helens. Listers were defeated 2-0 in Keighly. Surely their finest moment followed on Saturday 28th May when in front of a crowd of 8,000 they defeated their arch-rivals Stoke 2 - 1 at Molineux. Daisy Bates gave Stoke the lead but 'brilliant dribbling' and two goals from Sue Chorley gave victory.

During August the St Helens girls were taken on a 3 game tour of the Isle of Man by the DKL. One should understand that this was not two teams of equals. This was the legendary superstars taking generally a bunch of 16 year old girls (E Waine was older) with them. Young girls from Parr did not really get to travel much in those days so I can only imagine the excitement my granny felt to be accompanying legends such as Alice Kell, Jenny Harris and Florrie Redford. Oh, and the absolutely unique prodigy Lily Parr. Despite losing these games to the DKL the St Helens girls were praised for their pluck and determination. These were not 'exhibition' games. To lose by 3 or 4 goals to this incredible team of women footballers was a tremendous achievement. The DKL were not defeated in 1921. On 7 September the St Helens ladies squeezed in 4-1 defeat of the Barnes Ladies (Bolton Factory) at Turf Moor. I will have an awful lot to say about the December 1921 FA 50 year (50 YEARS!!!) ban in my book. Suffice it say for now that very few teams were able to carry on and St Helens I think largely ceased high profile games although there is an intriguing reference to a game in 1923 which I am investigating

DKL

Lizzy teamed up with her fellow St Helens mates Lydia Ackers and Sue Chorley by joining the Dick Kerr Ladies in 1923. Her first game was I believe played in Carlisle on Monday 9th April where 5,000 spectators saw them defeat Dumfries Ladies 16 - 0.



Dumfries and Dick Kerr Ladies at Carlisle in 1923

Lizzy (4th from left in white). Lily Parr (far right) next to Sue Chorley
(My thanks to Stuart Gibbs)

This was the start of a magnificent 13 year career until her retirement in 1935. Her last game was probably on Tuesday 13 August 1935 with a 5-2 win over France in front of a crowd of 1,500 at Furness Rugby Club, Barrow. There are many highlights in her career which can wait for my book.



Lily Parr and Lizzy Ashcroft

Both Lizzy and her mate Lily were incredibly tall for women of that era. My granny was 5' 8" and weighed approx 11 stone. She was a left footed defender but her and Lily are so alike that they are often difficult to tell apart on Pathe clips of them playing.

World Champions



World Champions - Lily holding ball, Lizzy next and the rest of the gang

Marketing and branding genius Alfred Frankland used his incredible flair for publicity relentlessly. There are a whole series of these 'World Champion' and 'British Champion' postcards. We have a number of them in the family archive. This includes one signed by the entire team of legends.

1925

A very important game. In my opinion, the most important football match in the history of women's football took place on Monday 11th May at Herne Hill Velodrome in Dulwich. After the incredible 1922 story of the trip to the USA reality dawned in 1923 and 1924. Generally things were not going well and Alfred Frankland decided to try his massive throw of the dice by getting a French team over to tour. This was the first game in this ultimately incredibly successful strategy and it had to go well. A very, very strong French side came over. At one point in and around the Paris region there were over 18 sides. Femina Sport had their own Stadium, Stade Elisabeth and a strong DKL side was put together for a high profile series of (hopefully) money-spinning games. Games were played at Herne Hill, Padiham, Mellor, Fallowfield, Hyde, Kilmarnock, Dumfries, Belfast, Chorley and finally a last match at Herne Hill. The DKL won 7, drew 2 and lost one. Lizzy actually played at Windsor Park in Belfast against the legendary Irish footballer Molly Seaton.

Tea at the Houses of Parliament

There are several clips available for the Herne Hill Game as AF made sure that the media were there. The game was kicked off by George Robey who was THE music hall comedian of the day and the DKL won 4 -2. "The Lilies of England defeated the Lilies of France!"

During the day both teams were received by the Lord Mayor of London at Mansion House. They were also entertained to tea at the House of Commons as the guest of Liverpool Fairfield MP Major Sir Benn Jack Brunel Cohen KBE. Major Cohen was a relentless supporter of disabled people after losing both his legs at Third Battle of Ypres and was one of the founders of the British Legion. An incredible man. I think that the phenomenal work and huge amount of money raised by the women footballers led to this invitation.

I have to keep reminding myself that my granny was one of nine siblings from Parr and here she is as a guest at the House of Commons and of the Lord Mayor of London.

The famous photo of Carmen Pomies kissing her great friend Florrie Redford went all over the world. Carmen scored both the French goals.

British Pathe

British Girls Beat French Girls 1925



Lizzy and Lily Parr (the 'tall' ones - Parr with bandage on left knee)

There are a number of clips on British Pathe such as the one above. This one actually has three great clips of Lizzy Ashcroft in action and a superb Lily Parr dribble - like some slightly disoriented grizzly bear wondering around the pitch!

1932

By 1932 Lizzy was vice-captain of the DKL under her great mate Lily Parr as Captain. However in one particular game she was given the captaincy.



Captains Carmen Pomies and Lizzy Ashcroft

The touring team in 1932 was Femina Sport (my thanks to Helge Faller). This game was played on Saturday 30th July in front of 2,000 people at Abbeydale Park in Sheffield. DKL won 4 - 2.

1934 - The first Belgian Tour



DKL 1 - 2 Belgium

A rare defeat for the DKL. The Royal Lancashire Show in Bolton. The game was played in front of 10,000 in an absolute quagmire. This beautiful medal was, like the others, found by myself in three suitcases which had lain untouched in my Uncle's loft for over 35 years. As well as medals there were over 200 photos, birth, death and marriage certificates, allsorts...

1935 - Captain. Tour to France. French Tour here. Retirement.

This was Lizzy's last season. In April of that year she led only the second ever DKL tour to France. They played in Paris and according to extensive French media reports lost 6 - 2. It was a young and inexperienced side that went over (particularly the goalkeeper) and they took on a very strong French side. On the crossing they were entertained by the Scots Guards Band who happened to be onboard so perhaps the odd milk stout or two went down... This is not the DKL's heaviest defeat but it certainly didn't fit with AF and his branding. Two days later they took on the French led by the legendary Madeleine Bracquemond in Rouen and lost by a much more respectable 2 goals to 1 at Stade Bruyeres.

There are only two Dick Kerr Ladies Captains who led tours to France and my granny was one of them. Again, I can't help thinking of those humble origins in Parr.

One final tour for Captain Lizzy against the visiting French team started in August with the first of 6 games being played at the West Ham Greyhound Stadium in Canning Town. Incredibly, I have just found footage of this game on the British Pathe Website.

Women's Football And Cadet Ceren



Captains Lizzy Ashcroft and Carmen Pomies

There are some great clips of my granny chasing and blocking Carmen Pomies. In Gail Newsham's wonderful book Lizzy is described as "the best defender since Alice Kell". I think that to be compared to Dick Kerr's original intelligent, sophisticated and articulate Captain/defender is quite some tribute.

Life After Football.

Lizzy worked at Whittingham County Mental Hospital from 1926 to 1936. I think that at some point in 1935 a handsome young man from well-to-do merchant stock motored out from Preston and bumped into the glamorous Dick Kerr Ladies legend. A romance ensued - The Golden Ball is mentioned in family legend!



Joshua Bolton + Elizabeth Ashcroft - 21 November 1936

Alec 'Douglas' Bolton was born on 22 May 1937. If we count back 9 months we see that August 1936 was a particularly exciting time for the young couple on the Isle of Man - 'Douglas' to be precise! (way before the Beckhams...) Thomas 'Roy' Bolton (my father) was born on 22 August 1938. There is a tangled and difficult family story from then on which I will try to untangle in my book. Lizzy was universally known as "Tommy" to her teammates and although this is my father's first name he never used it, preferring Roy. The undeniable facts are that Joshua was largely dis-inherited by his family so the new young family had to make do living in Ardee road (just along from the Dick Kerr Factory). Joshua was a Metalworking Turner at Leyland Motors. (My maternal grandparents lived 50 yards from Ardee road and in a twist of fate my maternal grandad was a turner as well: at Dick Kerr's!). Joshua died of pneumonia on 2 February 1949 and difficult times ensued. In one of my first bits of research I saw that the Dick Kerr Ladies raised money for 4,000 pairs of clogs for poor Preston children. I vividly recall my Uncle Alec telling me that he can remember children going to school in Preston in bare feet.

Sister Alice McGrath - Mental Health Nurse 50 years.

Alice was born on 16th August 1894 to a bootmaker. Their house was by the main entrance to the Whittingham County Mental Hospital and records show that she started work at Whittingham Hospital at least as early as 1915. She died in Goosnargh on 28th March 1965 aged 70. For most of those 50 years she worked at the mental hospital reaching the rank of Sister. Alice and Lizzy were very close. Photos show that they knew each other before the marriage. There are also a number of photos showing Lizzy, Josh, Alice and the boys enjoying time together. When Joshua died suddenly of tuberculosis in 1949 Alice took on an even greater role of co-mother to the two boys. I have recently found a wonderful tribute to her 50 years on a memorial on her grave stone.



Alice aged about 24 and Sister Alice McGrath proudly wearing her union badge

Whittingham County Mental Asylum was the largest in the country. Prior to the second world war it had a patient population of 3,500 and a nursing staff of 550. The hospital had dairy cattle and pig farms, a slaughter house, brewery, church, tailors, chapel, sewing room, laundry, upholsters, print shop, post office, tinsmiths, cobblers, basket makers and joiners. It even had its own railway line connecting to the Preston - Longridge line. Sport was extremely popular with staff and patients. In the 1930s for instance there were 8 cricket teams made up from just patients. On 5th September 1918 the National Asylum Workers Union organised a very short and successful strike which gained employees a 60 hour week and overtime payment. It also abolished the management's right to withhold wages. In 1918 the War Office commandeered the new Annexe to convert it into a war hospital for 1,000 shell-shocked soldiers. These very damaged and possibly dangerous men were transported by night in sealed trains to the large asylums. They needed strong and brave women to look after them.

Football Retirement

Although this was my Northern Granny I do remember her. She came to stay with us one time and whilst babysitting myself stayed up to watch Match of the Day and drink Mackeson. Like her great mate Lily Parr she was an incorrigible smoker of cigarettes and this finally got her in the end. She died in March 1973. I was taken to visit her shortly before she died. She was living in a grotty bedsit above my Uncle's shop on Deepdale Road (just along from North End). She had a hacking cough and her last few years were not great. By this time we were back in Preston and I was playing cricket for Whittingham juniors. I was introduced to Lily Parr one day as she was being walked around the ground being supported by two women as 'someone my granny played football with' - Now there is an understatement... I wish I knew what I know now. My Uncle and my dad were like chalk and cheese. Lizzy and my dad Roy shared a lifelong passion for football. One of their favourite occupations was to sit in front of the Saturday afternoon football on TV and eat cold rice pudding out of tins.



Lizzy and Alice taking the young Roy out for a stroll

I think that after her Captaincy in 1935 and leading the legendary Dick Kerr Ladies on a foreign tour she had decided to retire. She was 30 years old and had met and fallen in love with a handsome (and well-off!) man and if ever she was going to have a family it was now. Things didn't go to plan - but then they rarely do...

Thanks

My family and myself owe a deep debt of gratitude to Gail Newsham. Infact, I think the Nation owes her a deep debt of gratitude. Her pioneering work rescued this magnificent and socially important story way before anybody was interested and just in time for some of the legends to be appreciated.



Roy Bolton's 80th Birthday in August 1918 with Gail Newsham at Whittingham

This photo was taken at Whittingham Hospital Social Club where Gail very kindly came and gave a talk and signed copies of her super book. Gail's book is the must read for any student of women's footballing history.

Until I read Gail's original book I was vaguely aware that granny had played football and being a Preston lad I had heard of the Dick Kerr Ladies. I had one photo of my paternal grandmother and my youngest cousin had none! I remember begrudging the price of Gail's original book because I wasn't sure that Lizzy would be mentioned. Imagine the shock to the family that Lizzy was a major part of Chapters 7 and 8. It is quite something at the age of 54 to find that your granny was 'England Captain'. It is also quite something to find that effectively you had another granny... I have been fortunate to be able to make use of online resources such as British Newspaper Archive, Gallica and others but my first point of reference for research is always Gail's Book: "In a League of Their Own".

Steve Bolton
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