



No 12

# The Chronicle

The Journal of the  
Long Wittenham Local History Group

# **The Chronicle**

**A brief history of the first hundred years of  
the  
Long Wittenham Athletic Club 1902 - 2002**

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No.12

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## **Editorial**

There is no doubt about it, Long Wittenham is a special village. One of the features which makes it so special is the Athletic Club which has been part of the life of the village for one hundred years, a quite remarkable achievement. Enormous changes have happened over that time - two world wars, incredible advances in technology and a whole social revolution in family life and everyday living.

Yet the football section of the Athletic Club has endured and continues to thrive. This is due in no small part to the hard work and dedication of a number of key people over the century. Not just the players but also those on the administrative side - the chairmen, secretaries, treasurers and committee members who have enabled the Club to maintain teams, to train and to play, especially Stan King, Harold Thorpe, Bill Symonds and Stan Taylor. And also those Club members who have looked after the field, mowing and marking, season after season, guarding the playing areas, sometimes quite fiercely, for its footballers.

The Club's future will depend on people willing to take on these vital responsibilities and in its willingness to adapt and change to new circumstances and new interests. There are exciting possibilities currently being explored to extend the use of the 'rec' for a wider range of Sports which will enable more people, especially our young people, to make use of Sir Archibald Bodkin's generous gift of the sports field for use by the villagers. It is a space and resource which is important to the whole village.

As you read this brief history you will find names recurring - stars of the Club's past, the Didcocks, the Winters, Bert, Baba and Kenny, Ray Woodage and more recently the Cox-Rogers family, the Burton boys and the Slaters. Football families with skills and a tradition handed down from father to sons. Yet these could not have been successful without a full supporting team of good players.

My thanks to all those who have contributed to this edition of The Chronicle, especially to Pat Lay, Ruth McCreight and Janet Haylett for writing the text, to Mercy Ward for much of the early history and photographs, to Bill Symonds for the postscript, photographs and recent information and to all those who provided photographs and memories.

Janet Haylett

Long Wittenham Local History Group April 2003

## **The early days of football**

Give a few lads something to kick and it seems almost inevitable that some sort of competitive game will result. But it wasn't until the nineteenth century that something resembling the football we know today began to emerge. In the early beginnings, the ball was often an animal's bladder filled with air and the rules were more or less non-existent and varied from village to village. In those days the game belonged to the people and was viewed by the eyes of authority as a vulgar, rowdy pastime and regarded with distaste by the respectable. Some of the play was indeed extremely rough and games often ended in fights. The football field was often 'the length of the town', there was no restriction on numbers involved and windows and legs were frequently broken.

The Football Association was formed in 1863 when several London clubs called a meeting to draw up some basic rules about the size of the pitch, how goals were scored, that no tripping or hacking was to be allowed and a list of other rules, not many but enough to stop play disintegrating into a brawl. The first match to be played under the new rules was played on 9 January 1864 at Battersea Park. After the game the players and supporters adjourned to the Grosvenor Hotel where the toast was 'Success to football irrespective of class or creed'. It took a while for all clubs to follow even these basic rules and other details, such as how long the game was to last and the number of players on each side, would be agreed between the two captains before the match.

## **Early days in Long Wittenham**

Football had been played at the school before it became a club game but the older lads who had left school and gone into work, mostly as farm labourers, continued to play in their spare time so there was a local team probably in the late 1890s and early 1900s some years before the official Long Wittenham team was founded.



Fred Carter, who was born in the village in 1884 and lived to be 99 years old, recalled those early days in an interview in 1975,

*‘Now talking football, this game was played nearly a hundred years ago, men like Mr T Eason, Arthur and Alf Winter, J Latham, Edgar Broad and a few others unknown to me made up the team of players. Then in my school days it was played by lads that had left school and myself and my school friend Percy Sweeney played with them and then after a few years Perce went to South Africa with his Uncle and set up farming...*

*It was a kicking scramble lot until a good, kind gentleman and his wife came and settled down at Wittenham - Mr and Mrs Collins. He (Mr Collins) started us in a Junior Football team. Bought us a goalpost, football gear and everything’.*

It was also Mr Collins who arranged for the end of the hurdle makers shed to be used as a pavilion. In those days the pitch was at the west end of the village where the mobile home park now stands and the hurdle maker had a hut.



*Mr Collins arranged for this hurdle maker's shed to be used as a pavilion in the early days of the club. (photo taken before 1910)*

The Club was officially born in 1902 and affiliated to The Berks and Bucks Football Association, one of the earliest village teams on record.



*The Wittenham team of 1904-5, photographed in front of the hurdle maker's shed. This was before the North Berks Cup was instituted.*

Being a competitive game it was necessary to have an opposing team to play against. Other villages in North Berkshire followed Long Wittenham in forming clubs and by 1905-6 there were enough for local friendly games to be played. But without any formal structure or purpose a team often failed to turn up as arranged. The need for some guidelines was obvious and led to the formation of the North Berkshire League in 1907.

## **The North Berks Cup begins**

The Golden Jubilee souvenir programme of the North Berks Cup final in 1957 gave a brief history of the Cup. It said,

*‘About this time (1907), ‘Jim’ Welch {he was the last official Wantage town crier} and Arthur A Dobell, chairman and secretary of the Wantage Town football Club, decided that a competition should be formed from the clubs. Mr E A Strauss, then MP for North Berkshire, was approached and was enthusiastic about the idea and agreed to present a trophy ‘to be competed for by amateur football teams in North Berkshire for the encouragement of teams in the villages’.*

*Mr Strauss wanted to know which was the most valuable trophy in the country and it was believed that the Eastbourne Charity Cup held that distinction and despite the protests by Mr Dobell, Mr Strauss was adamant on the point that nothing was too good for North Berkshire and that is how the competition came to possess such a valuable trophy as the Strauss Challenge Cup.*

*The first meeting was called at Wantage on 28 February 1907 and a copy of that letter is now in the archives of the competition. Mr Strauss was the first president, Jim Welch Chairman, A A Dobell treasurer and E J Jones of Abingdon secretary, and a real good secretary he proved to be, for there seems little doubt the success of the competition is due to the sound basis he established.*

*It was on 30 May 1907 the ‘North Berks Junior Challenge Cup Competition’ came into being. The first final was played on the Abingdon Town FC ground between Long Wittenham and Faringdon Town and resulted in a win for Long Wittenham’.*





*The winning team on 30 May 1907 of the North Berks Junior Challenge Cup, the first time the competition was held. The photo was taken some time after the day of the match.*

Fred Carter was in the winning Team. By 1975 he was the only one remaining. He recalled that ‘of the team that played in that first final, nine of us were born in the village and one came to live and work in the village and one from outside, and there was a very good reserve team and the school lads also had a good team’.

By 1957 Wittenham had won The North Berks Cup ten times and North Berks Charity Shield three times.



*Winners again in 1910...*

*Front row next to the Cup, Sylvanus James Didcock, Cup, Frederick Thomas*

*Didcock*



*..and in 1925 with E I (Bert) Winter as captain*

*Back row third from left Alfred George Didcock,*

*Middle row sixth from left, seated Lancelot Didcock*

*Front row, next to cup Alfred Lance (Daniel) Didcock*



*and in 1927*

*The team of 1927 who again lifted the North Berks Cup.*

*Back row*

*Alf Didcot, ? Powell (Appleford), Jim Chambers, ? Woodley (Culham), Arthur Jeffries, Arthur Hermon, Victor Hermon, Fred Didcock, ? Hardson*

*Second Row*

*F.J. Hallett, J Brown (Appleford), Lance Didcock, Bert Winter, Daniel Didcock, ? Woodley (Culham), Mr Lessing (Kingston House)*

*Front row Harold Belcher, Cup, ? Woodley (Culham)*

## **The Jubilee Sports Cricket Field**

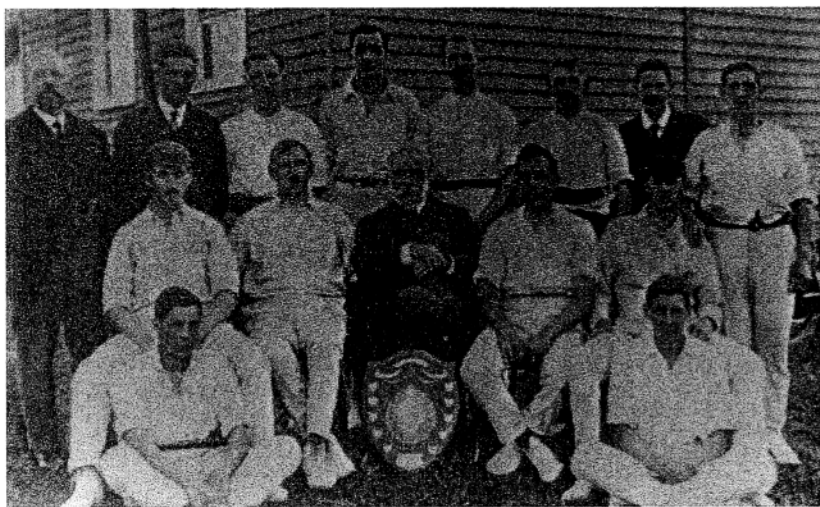
A huge step forward came in 1935 with the presentation to Long Wittenham by Sir Archibald Bodkin of the Jubilee Cricket Field as a Jubilee Gift on Monday 6 May 1935 to mark the Silver Jubilee of the accession of King George V in 1910. It was formerly opened in 1937.

The field is 3.836 acres and was given to the Parish Council for the use of the village. It is leased to the Athletic Club who maintain and use it.

## Cricket

The name of the field is a reminder that since Victorian times cricket has also been played in the village. Indeed the footballers would hang up their boots at the end of the season and take up bat and pad instead for the summer season.

Miss Wilson, the school mistress, recorded in the school logbook for Wednesday 18 March 1872 the following entry, '*Several boys away cricketing*'. On Tuesday 20 May 1873 '*One child away for the cricket match*'. And again on Friday 11 July 1873, '*One or two children away for the cricket march today*'.



*The cricket team of 1920. The match was against Harwell at the Pavlova ground.*

The shield was presented by Capt H Rew and was only played for three or four seasons. Wittenham won the first time and once more. Compton won it the last time after which it was never seen again.

George Garth was the star player in 1958 and was awarded the trophy for the best batting and bowling averages in the village cricket team. Mr S R King presented the trophy at the annual dinner of the club in May 1958. Mr H H Thorpe, the treasurer, reported a successful year especially for the soccer section. However he emphasised the club was an 'all year round' organisation with the cricket section always able to turn out a good cricket team.



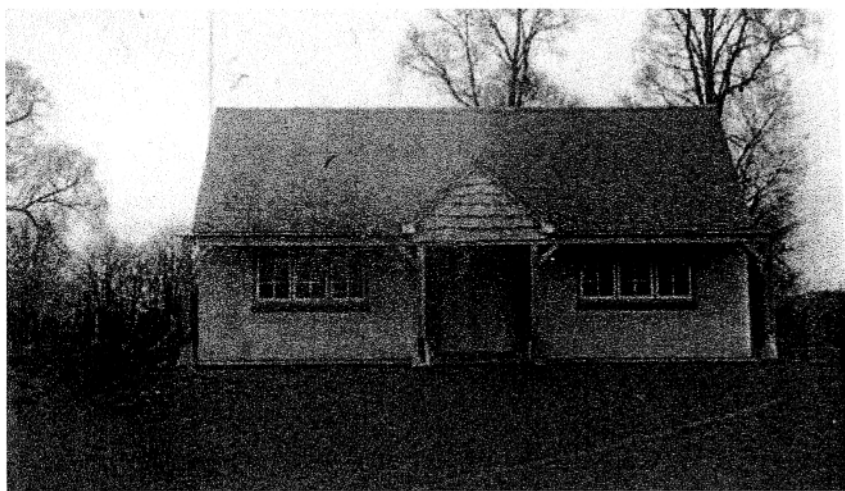
*Mr S R King (right) presenting George Garth with the trophy in 1958*

## **The fifties and sixties**

The Club was riding high in the late fifties and early sixties, headed by sportsmen such as George Garth and of course Ray Woodage who played in both the football and cricket teams. But as one player reminisced, players had to be tough.

*'There was no proper pavilion, only a wooden shed with shutters that opened outwards: We used to go down to the football field already dressed in our kit. There was no water down there. We got water out of Mr Lay's rickyard for watering the pitch etc. After a match we used to rinse our face and hands and go home for a bath.'*

But in 1958 conditions improved with the opening of the new Club pavilion on the recreation ground. It had been built by the members themselves and the money raised by the Club although generous donations were made by Brigadier Harrison who regularly gave the Club substantial sums (100 guineas in 1956 and again in 1958).



*The 'new' sports pavilion, built entirely by members of the Athletic Club and opened by Brigadier Harrison on Whit Monday 1958.*

As well as the teams there was the social side to the club. From 1956 it organised an annual fete on Whit Monday which was a highlight of the village year. More recently the Club has helped organise the Fun Run round the Clumps, and for many years the Athletic club also looked after the Village Hall.





*Fancy dress parade at the Athletic Club Fete on Whit Monday 1958*

There was a fancy dress competition, sports for the children, sideshows and various attractions; in 1959 there was a display of model aeroplane flying by the Maidenhead Model Makers and a judo display. The report in the local paper read as follows:

***Fete proves popular  
500 attend Long Wittenham event***

*The high wind on Monday interfered with the fourth annual fete held by Long Wittenham Athletic Club on their sports ground. It caused two powered model aeroplanes, being used in a display to crash, snapped off some flag poles used to decorate the ground and caused the cancellation of a book balancing event in the children's sports. Nevertheless the fete was again a popular local attraction and was visited by about 500 people.*

*Apart from the children's sports which went on all afternoon, there were numerous sideshows and American Air force personnel from Upper Heyford gave displays of judo, and a dancing display was given by Mrs June Grundy and her troupe. Despite the wind, the Maidenhead Model makers gave several exhibitions of powered aeroplane model flying. (The fete raised £41 for the Club funds.)*

## Golden age

The late nineteen fifties and early sixties was a golden age for the football team under the captancy of Ray Woodage.



*The team of 1957 who won the reading Town Junior Cup defeating Finchampstead 3-1 in the final at Elm Park Reading. Wittenham's goals were scored by Ray Woodage (penalty), Andy Stone and Danny Wrench. However they missed out of the North Berks Cup that season; Stanford in the Vale beat East Hendred in the final.*

*Back row Don Chantler, Ivor Belcher, Walter Mitchell, Owen Gill, John Cully,  
Michael Winter  
Front row Andy Stone, Danny Wrench, Ray Woodage, Fred Wigley, Albert Aldridge*

In 1957 Long Wittenham became the first winners of the Lockinge Challenge Cup, given by Mr Christopher L Loyd and the first winners of the North Berks Football League when they beat Steventon 5-3 at Wittenham.

Wittenham were also good at six-a-side football. In 1956 the team of O Gill, D Chantler, W Mitchell, D Wrench, R Woodage (captain) and K Winter, won the local tournament.



*Wittenham A and B teams contested the final of the Aston Tirrold six-a-side football tournament. The B team won!*

In 1956 the 'Nairne Paul', a six-a-side tournament for the reserve players was begun. To be eligible to play in this a player must have played in at least eight games in the North Berks League for his club's reserve side during the current season. In 1956 the team of J Preston, R.T Stratton, D Lay, A Greenough, L Robins and P Clark were runners-up.



*Six-aside runners up in the Nairne Paul competition 1956*

*Back row Ardington, winners*

*Front row*

*Len Robins, Tom Stratton, David Lay, Pete Greenough, Philip Clark,*

*Jim Preston*



*The Wittenham players chair their captain, Ray Woodage, after defeating Milton United 2-0 in the final of the North Berks Cup April 1960*

## Team of 1959

From the programme for the final of the North Berks Cup on 25 April 1959 when Long Wittenham played Faringdon Town and won.

### LONG WITTENHAM

**KEN RUMBLE** (31), carpenter. Second season with Club, but previously with Didcot Town and Cholsey United. This is his first Final.

**JOHN CULLEY** (25), egg packer. Native of South Moreton for whom he played before moving to Wittenham four years ago. Has represented North Berks League.

**DON CHANTLER** (28), factory worker. A "Taffy." Came to Wittenham whilst serving in Paratroop Regt. Married local girl. Had trials with Reading F.C. Has this year reverted to his best position.

**FRED WIGLEY** (31), railway worker. Native of Didcot. Was with Wittenham for two years, left to go to Didcot Town for six years, but returned to Wittenham three years ago. Has gained local representative honours.

**RAY WOODAGE** (32), atomic worker. Captain and Secretary of the Club. Born in Wales but left at early age. Has been with Wittenham for 15 years. Has quite a collection of medals, but not a North Berks Cup winners yet. Hoping to provide for this omission to-day.

**DAVE BELCHER** (28), electrician. Born at Little Wittenham, but this is his second season with the Club, for he has been with Oxford City, Didcot Town and Athletic.

**KEN WINTER** (25), motor engineer. Was centre-forward last year. One of the well-known Winter family of footballers. With Club 13 years except one.

**DANNY WRENCH** (28), roads constructor. A Cockney who was evacuated to Wittenham, liked the place and stayed. Another long-serving member of the Club.

**IVOR BROOME** (31), oil merchant. In his first season with the Club after service with Didcot Town.

**DON WOODWARD** (28), railway worker. Another newcomer to the side. Was previously with Didcot Town and Barn Club.

**PETER WINTER** (23), factory worker. Brother of Ken. Both have instructions from their Dad ("Baba" Winter) to do like Dad and get a winner's medal.

## **Memories from those heady days of the fifties and sixties**

*‘In the 1959-60 season we won everything: the North Berks Cup, the Charity Shield and on one occasion playing six-a-side the B-side beat the A-side’*

*‘We used to cycle to some of the matches if they were nearby. If we had to cross Clifton Bridge we always tried to avoid paying the toll. Ray would quietly open the gate and then we would pedal like hell to get across before one of the Gowers come out.’*

*‘We had lots of battles with Hanney - they had a good side - the Nobes family were strong. I remember we beat them in a Charity Shield final once. Geoff Barratt (goalkeeper) got injured and Ray had to fill in.’*

*‘Childrey were a rough lot: 5 Nolan brothers used to play - they were big chaps: Geoff got a fractured shoulder saving a goal against them.’*

*‘I played in the reserves. We played Buckland. They had a huge player called ‘Dynamo’ Zyrini who played inside right and wore glasses and a peaked cap. We had Buster Jones who was nearly as big. When they both went for the ball, no quarter was given and neither would give way.’*

## **Annual dinners**

Another annual event was the dinner, usually held in June. This would allow reflection on the past season and was the time to present the awards.

The report from 1960 dinner contains a very familiar sentiment and one which has been echoed many times in the years since then. The Athletic Club committee of today feels much the same!



### ***People would rather watch than play***

*Far too many people are prepared nowadays to sit and watch sport instead of playing games, said Maurice Edelston, the former Reading footballer, at Long Wittenham Athletic Club's annual dinner in the Village Hall.*

*Mr Edelston who proposed a toast to the club congratulated the football section in winning the North Berks Cup, the North Berks League (Premier Division) with 19 wins and two draws in twentyone games, the North Berks Charity Shield and in being runners-up in the Abingdon Centenary Cup and the Didcot Festival Cup.*

*The cricket section had won 16 games, lost ten and drawn six of its 34 games. He said the transformation of the recreation ground in a few years was remarkable and showed there must be a good spirit throughout the club which was fine and active. ....*

*'It strikes me' said Mr Edelston, 'that an awful lot of people are content to watch games as opposed to playing them. It is prevalent in villages, small towns and big towns alike and the sooner this attitude can be altered the better. There is no thing more wholesome than belonging to a club and actively participating in sport instead of sitting in front of a television set and watching other people play'. Ray Woodage was described by the chairman of the North Berks Football Council as a 'great footballer and sportsman in the true tradition' who had filled almost every position on the football field without a quibble and had set an example to some of the youngsters who had said they could only play in one position.*

*Ray was presented with a tankard for the best bowling average and Bob Webb with the tankard for the best batting average.*

### **Cricket moves on**

The dual use of the field for both football and cricket became harder to reconcile as both the football and cricket seasons became longer and longer and in the 1960s it became clear the two sections of the Club could not both continue to use the same pitch. The cricket section had to find another ground and found a home in Clifton Hampden leaving Long Wittenham to concentrate on the football.

## Clubhouse fire

On 19 January 1986 disaster struck the sports pavilion at Bodkins Field when fire destroyed the building. Two fire crews from Didcot attended at 2.15 am but the building was already well alight. Thousands of pounds of sports and recreational equipment including a brand new pool table was lost.



*Charred remains of the pavilion at Long Wittenham*

The Club's Management Committee immediately held an emergency meeting. The estimated cost of rebuilding would be between £20,000 and £30,000 plus more for equipment.

The Club chairman, Mr Bill Symonds, was delighted to receive much help and support from other clubs and local companies: particularly welcome was a prefab building for use as a changing room. The football team continued to play in the North Berks League.

Within two and a half weeks the club had set up a fund-raising committee. On 5 February they met to discuss the target amount of money to be raised and how to raise it.

By the beginning of April a series of events had been organised in the village enabling all those who wished to help to get involved. A disco in the Village Hall, a fun run, and a barbecue and disco in the grain barn were held. A great Beer Barrel race with Mini Olympics was held on August Bank Holiday Sunday.

The fund-raising efforts were obviously very successful and in September 1986 the new Clubhouse was opened by Oxford United and Wales star, Jeremy Charles. Only the walls and windows had remained of the old building. The rebuilding cost £35,000, most of this being covered by insurance. However, the Club took the opportunity to improve the bar, club room, dressing rooms and referees' room at an additional cost of £5000.

It was a great effort by club and village to achieve rebuilding and reopening in such a short time. Well Done!



*The pavilion is opened by Jeremy Charles, here pictured with  
Front row left Paul Jones, Darren Kent, Michael Little, Sean Holbrook, Barry  
Hudspeth, David Fulker, Terry Hudspeth, James Taylor  
Back row David Barnes, Tracy Cox-Rogers, Social Secretary, Jeremy Charles*

## The nineties

The village saw major changes over the nineteen seventies, eighties and nineties with many of the older village families declining and being replaced by newcomers. The teams were no longer dominated by Wittenham residents but included a number from Didcot who brought fresh energy to the Club. There was and still is a family atmosphere about the Club and perhaps this is the key to its continuing existence and playing success. Sons still follow fathers into the team. Wives and girlfriends still cheer on the touchline and make the teas.

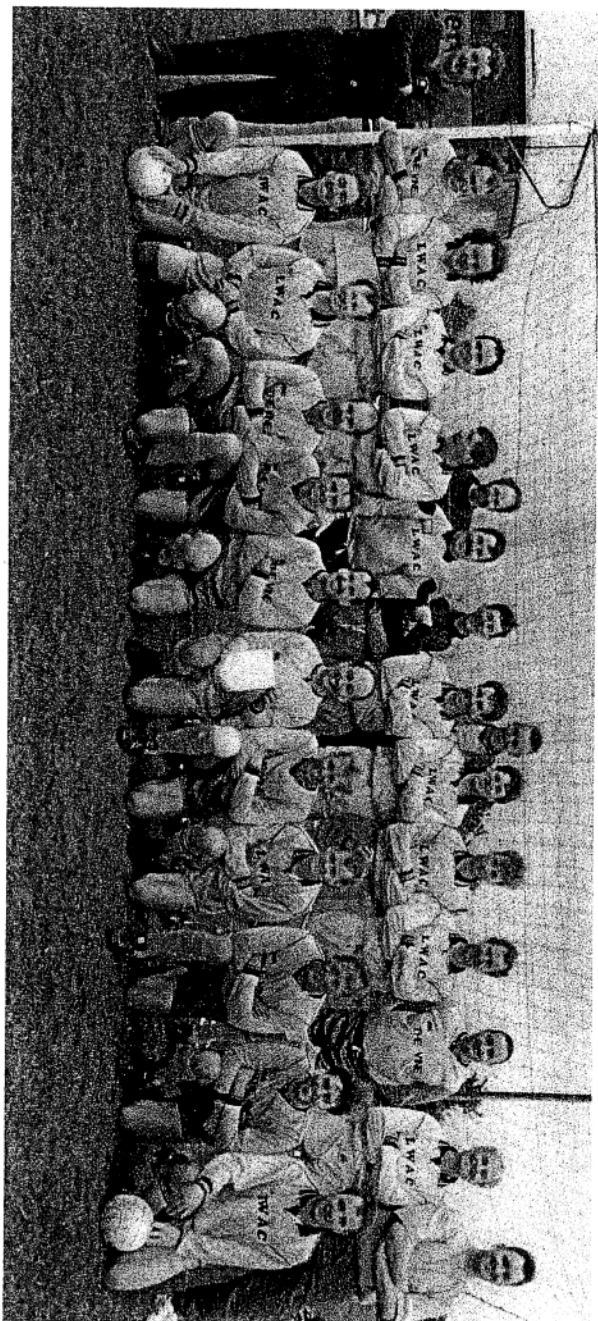
The club played in the Oxford Senior League for a while but returned to the North Berks League. And still the teams do well although as with any club fortunes go up and down.



*Final of the North Berks Memorial Cup 1991*

*Back row from left Eddie Ireson, Hal Sortell, Andy Marriott, Bill Symonds, Paul Garth, Andy Dix, Mark Carrigan, Jimmy Marshall*

*Front row Jimmy Lawton, Mark Pryor, Addie Evans, Phil Walters, Chris Barker, Barry Hudspeth*



*1993 Long Wittenham Athletic Club v Ex-Arsenal and Celebrity XI*

*Back row from left*

*Mark Cox-Rogers, S Stannett, A Briggs, A Burton, Malcolm Cox-Rogers, W Symonds, P Akid, Martin Cox-Rogers, P Phillips*

*front row from left*

*Bob Turton, J Marshall, A Marriott, S Dix, D Slater, K Winter, B Vass*

*S Slater, M Tilbrook, T Devlin, C Armstrong, B Robins, P Garth, E Ireson, M Richmond, B Hill, A Swiergon, P Lynch*

## **The Club celebrates its ninety years...**

The club like to celebrate and a ninetieth birthday was certainly worth celebrating in style. The highlight of the season was a charity match in aid of 'Barnados' on 16 May 1993 when Long Wittenham played an Arsenal ex-professional and celebrity XI at Bodkins sports field. The list of Wittenham players illustrates a feature of the Club - the player nicknames. There was Andrew 'Victor Meldrew' Burton, Andy 'Lovely Legs' Marriott, Brian 'Nobby' Robins, Dave 'Chippy' Slater, Steve 'Spud' Slater, Simon 'Psycho' Stannett, Ken 'Uncle' Winters, Stan 'Geordie' Taylor ..... the list goes on.

## **..and plays on**

This earthy, club camaraderie showed through strongly in the feature article about the Club which appeared in the June 1998 edition of 'Country Living' magazine. In the old days football was about being part of the village, part of a family and part of a tradition with all sections of village society represented. In village football what the players lack in terms of skill and sophistication is more than compensated for by enthusiasm, raw energy and team Spirit. As Bill Symonds put it then *'Win, lose or draw, we play to enjoy our Saturday afternoons. That's what being a good club is all about'*.

## **..and on to its centenary**

The 2002-3 season has been celebrated with enthusiasm although sadly without a win in the Cup. It began with a special footballing weekend including a match against an Oxford United XI and it will end with the traditional end-of-season dinner-dance and presentation of Club awards. Invitations have gone out to Club members past and present and they will come from far (as far as Canada) and wide to celebrate the past one hundred years, to toast the Club's future and to echo the toast of long ago, 'Success to football irrespective of class or creed'. What a night that will be.





*Team of 2000-01*

*Back row from left*

*Alan Bowler, Eddie Ireson, Danny Shurmer, Bill Symonds, David Bowler, Paul Jezzard, Danny Thomas, Derek Jezzard*

*Front row*

*Derek Meadham, Nigel Cook, Ian Burton, Tim Millard, Michael Lough, Andy Burton, Andy Dix*

## **Postscript**

### **What does the future hold for Long Wittenham Athletic Club?**

The Chairman, Bill Symonds, writes

We are proud of our 100 years history but to prosper we will have to continue to work as hard as our predecessors. Village life has changed dramatically during our hundred year existence and the Athletic Club has had to change with the times in the same way as other village organisations. One of the biggest changes is that today's youngsters have many more ways of spending their leisure time than playing football. Whereas in the past village youngsters would eagerly join the club, we now have great difficulty in

encouraging villagers both old and young to take an active role in the club. Although the nucleus of the club retains strong links with the village, we are having to maintain a wider catchment area in order to keep our playing numbers up to the strength necessary to ensure the Club's survival.

Football is the only sport to survive the test of time in the village and that is wholly due to the enthusiasm, time and effort put in by the footballers and their supporters over the years. Other sports have been tried and have fallen by the wayside. New ventures will always be welcomed but to be successful they will need an equally enthusiastic set of volunteers. Our aim is to remain as a village team playing local football and to retain our strong links with the local community. We have continued to improve our amenities, from the humble hurdle maker's shed to the fine clubhouse recently refurbished by today's members. We hope to improve our amenities further; new floodlights are a future goal and we hope to achieve this with help from the next generation of enthusiastic members.

