



PART OF OUR FIRST EVER WEMBLEY TEAM - ALFRED 'DICKIE' DONOVEN



In response to one of our SUEPA social media posts, SUEPA follower Richard Davies said that his wife's granddad, a former Shrimper player, would 'turn in his grave if he knew what was going on at Southend United right now' (Editor note: at that point the club was in real turmoil). We decided to make a few enquiries to find out more about one of our past players and spoke to Richard's wife Tracey. We found a true SUFC legend.

It turns out that the player in question to this day still is 15th in the SUFC all-time goal scorers list with 58 goals from 332 appearances ... and played for us at Wembley some 83 years before that JPT 'Wembley final debut' v Crewe Alexandra in 2013.

Alfred 'Dickie' Donovan was born in Bulwell, Nottinghamshire on 20 June 1900. Queen Victoria was still on the throne, the second Olympic games was taking place in Paris), the first scary German balloon named after Mr Zeppelin flew over Lake Constance and the Siege of Mafeking (look it up, it was quite bloody) finally ended as part of the Second Boer War. Oh, and Oliver Trigg was still six years away from holding a meeting in his Blue Boar public house to provide you with the reason why you are reading this missive.

Dickie began his football career with Bulwell Rangers shortly after WWI in 1919 and then signed up for Notts Forest, a year later making his league debut v Leicester in 1921. But with first team appearances limited he signed for Mansfield Town in 1922, and with 36 and 37 goals in the next two seasons, was the Stags leading scorer. Tracey still treasures a medal he received commemorating this.

After 87 goals in 119 apps, our manager Ted Bernie tempted Dickie to the newly improved Kursaal in May 1925, paying Mansfield £500 for his services (that's a shade under £40,000 in today's money).

His first appearance for us was on 5 September 1925 in a 2-2 draw v Reading in Division Three (South) in front of 8,450 – next game he scored as we won at Brentford and then we can only assume injury struck as he didn't play again until March (missing an FA Cup tie v his old team

Notts Forest) but then played out the rest of the campaign. Next season Dickie was second top scorer behind the prolific Billy Hick, and until his retirement from league football at the end of the 1934/35 season Dickie was a consistent name on the team sheet. Though his tally of 58 goals is impressive, his scoring rate slowed for us as first he was put on the wing and later converted to the sweeper position. He bagged a hat-trick at Dulwich Hamlet in the first round of the 1926/27 FA Cup competition. He scored two more trebles – indeed one was a ‘four’ in a 6-1 win v Crystal Palace.

Dickie had become our club skipper at the start of the 1926/27 season, and his time as a Shrimper was generally a very successful one as we usually finished in the top-half of the league. In the 1931/32 season we finished third, just four points behind champions Fulham. We would not get as close to tier-two football again until Benji stuck one in the Bury net some 60 years later.

Dickie was part of the first SUFC team to play at Wembley. Clapton Orient were forced by the Football League to play at a new venue due to a bad injury to a Torquay player in a home match caused by the close proximity of the pitch barrier to the playing surface. So, the O’s hired out the Empire Stadium, perhaps thinking that the attraction of the Shrimpers would need a decent capacity. Some 1,916 turned up on 6 December 1930 and the white horse was stood down, but nevertheless, and despite the 3-1 defeat, it must have been some experience.

At the start of Dickie’s last season with us we moved into a new ground, the dog-track-encircled pitch at the Southend Stadium. Dickie played in the first match there, a 2-1 win v Aldershot, but appearances were restricted during his Shrimper swansong to just seven, the last of which was in a 0-0 home draw v Gillingham on 30 March 1935. His playing days ended in local football with Gaslight of Rayleigh.

Tracey says that her granddad never once got booked and was proud of never retaliating despite the strong physical manner of the game back then. Dickie’s mum, however, wasn’t quite so restrained, she once took exception to her son being kicked by an opponent and ran on the pitch to whack the offending player with her handbag. Wonder what the Roots Hall stewards would think of that today.

After finishing playing, Dickie worked for the local council and spent the rest of his life living in Southend. Tracey remembers him as being diminutive and - surprisingly given his football skills - a bit bow-legged, and a chain-smoker as were many from that era, who remained keen on the game and saw his two sons have football trials (Tracey’s dad for Southend, his brother for Spurs).

Dickie passed away in 1978.

Thank you to both Richard and Tracey, we are thrilled to learn something of a player from our long and varied past.

Andy Leeder, September 2023