



## THE MOST FAMOUS SHRIMPER EVER? HAROLD HALSE



If you are given a name which has the same initials then maybe you are off to a head start in life. Billy Best springs to mind – it just kinda trips easily off the tongue.

Now, Billy was prolific – 123 goals in 246 matches as a Shrimper from 1968 to 1973 sets him apart from most. That was over half a century ago, but if you go right back to the very beginning for the Shrimpers someone else blessed with same letter initials was about to create a real stir – Harold Halse.

Born on New Year's Day 1886 in Leytonstone, Harold started his footballing career as an amateur with Wanstead and soon earned a reputation as someone who knew where the net was (well, when they had a net and not just posts), scoring 125 times in just one season. He then moved on to Newportonians, Barking Town and Clapton Orient. It was with the O's that he made his Football League debut, scoring once in just two appearances before on 21 July 1906 signing for the newly formed Shrimpers.

On 1st September 1906 Harold took part our first ever match, a 1-0 defeat at home to Swindon Town Reserves in the Southern League Second Division. A slow start, but he was soon off and running, notching our first ever goal in a 4-0 win over the Depot Battalion of the Royal Engineers. Indeed, he scored three, so also has the honour of scoring our first ever hat-trick, something our Billy would become a specialist at over 60 years later. And another first – it would have been four but he missed our first ever penalty!

Harold then went on to become our first ever player to score four in a match and then go one better with five in a match, the latter being in a 12-0 riot over the Royal Engineers. Our first campaign turned out to be rather a good one – we ended it as champions of both the Southern

and South-Eastern Leagues. The Southend Standard reported that, if you added the 25 friendlies we played to the 22 Southern League and 18 South Eastern League games from that inaugural campaign, we scored a total of 222 goals of which Harold notched 91. Ironically Harold did not play in the biggest win that season – a 13-0 drubbing of Chesham Generals – we wonder what the score would have been had he been in the team that day!

The following campaign saw us enter the FA Cup for the first time, and Halse scored (twice) in that too as we ran out 3-0 winners over East Ham in front of a then record crowd of 3,000 at the original Roots Hall.

Harold just kept on scoring, and it was somewhat inevitable in the end that a bigger team would come calling. After our match at Maidstone United on 21st March 1908, we accepted £350 for his services (the maximum fee allowed at the time ... and just over £53,000 in today's money, a bit of a bargain really it seems). The club were in debt (a familiar story – it hadn't taken long) and despite fan protests they were left with little choice but to sell their prize asset. It was recognised that the fee for Harold should have been much greater, so as a 'work-around' we also sold to Manchester United for £350 his fellow teammate Jimmy Axcell (who never ended up playing a first team game for them).

So, after 54 goals from just 46 first team appearances in the Southern League and the FA Cup (and around 150 goals in all competitions including friendlies), Harold was off to First Division Manchester United. As part of the transfer deal Manchester United travelled down to Roots Hall to play a friendly match on 13th September 1909 – it finished 2-2 and Harold was reported to have received 'a warm and friendly reception'.

Success continued for HH, and he was now in the fast lane. Goals were not unexpectedly a little harder to come by, but he still notched nearly one goal in every two matches by bagging 56 in 125 appearances for the Red Devils.

Top-level honours were gained too – First Division titles in 1908 and 1911, an FA Cup winners medal in 1909, and in the 1911 Charity Shield, Harold scored six in an 8-4 win over Swindon. He also played in the first ever match at Old Trafford in 1910 – more on that later. And (yes, there's more), Harold earned an England cap in 1909 (oddly his only one) when he scored twice in an 8-1 win over Austria. He also made five appearances for the Football League between 1908 and 1914.

In 1912 he was on the move again, this time to Aston Villa, who at that time were perhaps the premier team to be, having already won the Division One title six times and the FA Cup four. A £1,200 fee secured his services, and in 1913 he helped Villa to another FA Cup by beating Sunderland 1-0 in front of over 120,000 at Crystal Palace.

Harold's tenure at Villa Park was relatively short – after 21 goals in 31 appearances he was off to Chelsea. Another FA Cup final beckoned – this time in 1915 against Sheffield United. It became known as the 'khaki cup final' due to the large number of uniformed soldiers present in the somewhat restricted (due to travel embargoes) crowd of 50,000 at Old Trafford. With war raging in Europe the pressure was on the footballing world to cease playing, and indeed this proved to be the last FA Cup match until the competition resumed for the 1919/20 season. Harold this time just picked up a runners-up medal as The Blades ran out 3-0 winners, but in making this

appearance yet another 'first' was achieved as he became the first ever footballer to play in three FA Cup finals for three different teams. An interesting video about the 1915 FA Cup final can be found at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fokl48iObao>

During the war Harold initially worked in a munitions factory in Birmingham before joining the Royal Navy in 1916. He left the navy to join the fledgling RAF in 1918 before being discharged in 1920. During this time, he still managed to play 90 games in the wartime Football Combination competition scoring 34 times, with a further 15 appearances in various other competitions.

Harold remained with Chelsea after the war, helping them to finish third in the first season after the war in the First Division and playing in the 1920 FA Cup semi-final losing out to his old team (and eventual winners) Aston Villa. He left Stamford Bridge in 1921 with 21 goals from 111 appearances to his name, moving on to Third Division (South) Charlton Athletic (five goals from 21 appearances) before hanging up his goal-laden boots in 1923.

In 1930 Harold became manager of Clacton Town who at that time played in the Essex & Suffolk Border League. It is also known that he managed a hotel in Walton-on-the-Naze.

He then became landlord on The Sun Inn in Kelvedon, and in 1948 he and another seven of the 1909 FA Cup winning team were invited by Manchester United to attend the FA Cup final and the post-match banquet. Commenting afterwards, he said "It was the best I've ever seen. It gave me a really great thrill to see my old team triumph." [Manchester United beat Stanley Matthew's Blackpool 4-2]

Harold passed away not long afterwards, on 25th March 1949, aged 63. However, our story doesn't end there.

Our interest in Harold was piqued a couple of months ago within the SUFC History Group when the club asked us to consider who we believed to be the 15 greatest-ever Shrimpers as they wanted to name 15 of the East Stand Executive Boxes after them. Much debate ensued, with us ultimately deciding that we should only consider players who had graced the Roots Hall turf from when we moved into the current ground on the site in 1955. So, though Harold's name had been mentioned in the initial deliberations, he was excluded from consideration. It prompted though some investigation to find out a bit more about the man and why someone, mostly long-forgotten apart from a few mentions in the history books, might be viewed as one of our 'greats'. The evidence above confirms why.

An internet search also revealed that, in 2021, Chelsea and Manchester United fans had traced his grave to a cemetery in Walton. Sadly, for someone who had achieved so much in the game, the grave was found to be in a poor state of repair. Although at the time the possibility of conducting some restoration work was considered, without being able to trace living relatives the idea did not move forward.

Now, SUEPA loves a challenge, and having previously been contacted by Southend fan and genealogist Terry Hamlyn regarding an article we had penned on one of our World War One heroes, we put the challenge to him to see what he could find and ... result!

Terry's investigations found that Harold was one of six children (five boys and one girl) born to ironmonger from Devon - Frank and Emily (nee Yapp). Harold married Leytonstone lass Alma Young in April 1908 (shortly after he left us but perhaps just before he moved house up to Manchester as they married in West Ham). By the time of the 1921 census, he had moved back down south to Walton. They had two children, Winifred (born in 1909) and Harold (the younger) born in 1925. The 1939 census reveals that Winifred is married and now has the surname Emslie.

After Harold Halse's death the family emigrated to Australia. First to leave is Harold Junior with his new wife Olive, setting sail for Brisbane on 6th June 1951 on the P&O ship Mooltan but ultimately landing in Perth. They are followed by Winifred and husband Richard Emslie (a pharmacist) with their three children Alma, Iain and Alan, and Harold Senior's widow Alma, on the ship Orcades on 19th December 1951, also landing in Perth. By that time young Harold was working in the accounts department for Norseman Gold Mines at Norseman, a town south of Kalgoorlie. Iain did his apprenticeship with his father and qualified as a pharmacist, working with him for a year before moving to the country to open his own business.

Terry then found a record for Alan who it seemed had also followed his dad into the pharmacy profession and who sold the family business 'Emslie & Son' in 1999. The new owners still traded under the Emslie name, and they kindly responded after a message was sent to them stating they were in touch with Harold Halse's great granddaughter Linda (Alan was her uncle). We have since been in touch with Linda, Iain (Harold's grandson) and Bruce (Alan's son) and have learned a few more details (Winifred is the only one to have continued the family line as her brother Harold Junior did not have any children) and received the fabulous picture you see here of Harold (known as 'Bubba' within the family) meeting King George V (believed to be at an FA Cup Final).

Iain told us that, prior to emigrating, Bubba had spent time with him teaching him how to kick with both feet which helped him represent Essex at under-15 county level. Then, on landing in Australia, Iain was chosen to represent Western Australia in the under-21 side whilst still only 16-years-old, where he went to Adelaide to play against the other states. WA made the final, losing out to Queensland, but Iain, like his grandfather so often before him, was on the score sheet.

The footballing story continued – Iain went on to coach a successful school side (who only lost once in three years), coached another team in the same town (Geraldton), and Iain's sons three boys played a lot of football in the Queensland league, one winning a scholarship to play in a USA college team. Iain's son Peter also became an accredited referee. So, Harold's legacy has lived on and spread across the world.

Included in the picture montage provided here is one of a family gathering in Australia not long after they arrived which includes Bubba's wife and young Harold. The other is of the State team Iain represented,

Iain added that, in 2010, he was invited to and attended a centenary match at Old Trafford and whilst there spoke to another relative of the 1910 team and who lived in Southend – we believe that they are related to Sam Blott who played for Southend from 1908 to 1910. We will look to get on that trail soon.

It is clear that Harold had an incredible football journey and perhaps achieved as much if not more than any other former Shrimper in our club's 119-year history, but our story on Harold is not

yet complete. Earlier this month I visited the cemetery in Walton where Harold is buried but could not find the grave (until we had got in touch the family did not know exactly where Harold was buried) – it is perhaps in a poorer state than what it was when Chelsea fan Andrew Rowley found it to be in some four years before. So, Andrew and I will meet up there again soon to examine the site and discuss with Harold's family whether anything should be done. We will let you know the outcome.

Andy Leeder, September 2025