

# Is the little 'un a girl?

## *A case of Victorian gender confusion*

The increasing urbanisation of Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century led to the development and rapid growth of organised sport. Both the working- and middle-class sectors of society were affected by this phenomenon, and many of the sports familiar to us today were codified during this period. Although the participants were mostly men, women too were attracted to sporting activities, but found themselves accused of 'unfeminine behaviour.' One sport in particular – football, was considered to be completely unsuitable for women, on the grounds of decorum, and supposed risks to the delicate female constitution. However, it was a time when educated women were beginning to agitate for equal rights, and many believed passionately that equality should not just be confined to political rights. One woman in particular, Nettie Honeyball, believed that women had a right to play football; on 23 March 1895 she and the members of the British Ladies' Football Club, which she had founded, played a match before a paying crowd of 10,000 spectators at Crouch End, North London. Press reports of the match were scathing, the following being a typical example:

It would be idle to attempt any description of the play. The first few minutes were sufficient to show that football by women, if the British Ladies be taken as a criterion, is totally out of the question. A footballer requires speed, judgement, skill, and pluck. Not one of these four qualities was apparent on Saturday. For the most part, the ladies wandered aimlessly over the field at an ungraceful jog-trot. A smaller ball than usual was utilised, but the strongest among them could propel it no further than a few yards. The most elementary rules of the game were unknown, and the referee, Mr. C. Squires, spent a most agonising time.

*The Sketch*, 27 March 1895

Although the match was generally regarded as a farce, two players on the North team nevertheless received praise for

their knowledge of the game and their abilities; Mrs Graham, the goalkeeper, who was said to come from Glasgow, and Miss Gilbert, a diminutive left-winger. The latter was described as being 'built like a boy, ran like a boy, and she seemed to know too much about the game for a girl of any size.' The crowd refused to believe she was a girl, and immediately christened her 'Tommy.'

Photographs of the two teams were published in *The Sketch*, but they do not help to resolve the issue, as none of the players look like a young boy. Furthermore, the player they identify as Miss Gilbert is quite evidently a woman in her mid-twenties.

Following their debut at Crouch End, the BLFC set off on a tour of the country, staging exhibition matches at a variety of venues, and generally attracting large crowds, though not as large as the 10,000 who had witnessed their first performance. Wherever they went the gender of 'Tommy,' who was now being listed on the team sheet as 'Daisy Allen,' was called into question. At Doncaster, one of the spectators got close enough to the players to put the question, 'Is the little 'un a girl?' He received the enigmatic answer, 'Yes, he is.'

On 20 April 1895 the ladies stepped onto the turf at St James's Park, Newcastle. The populace of the city had been eagerly awaiting their visit for some time, the *Daily Chronicle* having jumped the gun and announced that the match would take place on 6 April. This led to the Newcastle United office being bombarded with enquiries, and a notice was placed in the *Sporting Man* on 10 April to advise that tickets would not be sold in advance, but that the gates would be opened early in view of the high level of public interest.

The format for the occasion was carefully stage-managed; as a warm-up a match was played between two teams from the Newcastle Schools' League, and the Gateshead Borough Band then gave a musical interlude. After a short delay the ladies, organised into two teams designated Reds and Blues respectively, trooped onto the pitch, and the main entertainment got under way, watched by 8,000 spectators.

The *Sporting Man* carried a long article on the event, which managed to avoid mentioning the play altogether, whilst describing the players' attire in great detail. 'Orthodox jerseys were the basis of the attire ... but a great deal had been left to the coquetry and taste of the wearers. In many instances they were made loose after the manner of blouses, and were relieved at the edges by a little white embroidering.' The reporter seemed to be satisfied as to the gender of



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*'PHOTOGRAPH OF LADY FOOTBALLERS IN DARK JERSEYS': (L to R) Back row: P. Smith, Nettie Honeyball, Edwards, unknown. Front row: Compton, Lily Lynn, Nellie Gilbert, F. B. Fenn. Seated on floor: 'Tommy'*

'Tommy,' describing her as a little girl aged 11.

The ladies' presence in Newcastle attracted the attention of Robert Barrass, a young photographer whose studio was at 180 Westgate Road, and it is thanks to him that we have the only known photograph of the mysterious 'Tommy.' Barrass photographed both teams, and, evidently with an eye upon a commercial return, registered the pictures at Stationer's Hall under the respective titles of 'Photograph of Lady Footballers in Dark Jerseys,' and 'Photograph of Lady Footballers in Light Jerseys.' The pictures are reproduced above. Barrass's photographs did not include the names of the players, but they are easily recognisable from the earlier pictures published in *The Sketch*. Seasoned observers of football will notice immediately that each team has only nine members, instead of the usual eleven. This was a recurring problem for the organisers, and it was often the case that a couple of local gentlemen would be prevailed upon to act as goalkeepers. Whether this happened at Newcastle or not is unknown. There is no mistaking which of the players is 'Tommy.' But is it a boy – or a girl? It could be either, and it is easy to understand the incredulity of the spectators up and

down the country whenever the ladies made an appearance.

On 28 April 1895 *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper* claimed to have uncovered the truth, citing an 'important disclosure' made to a reporter by one of the lady footballers: 'Tommy ... is a boy of 13. His name is Richardson. He is the son of one of the players.'

Despite this, 'Tommy' continued to appear as 'Daisy Allen.' Further revelations appeared in June in the *Belfast Newsletter*, when the teams played at Cliftonville. The mother of the child was revealed as the player known as Nellie Gilbert, real name Mrs Richardson, however 'Tommy' was said to be her daughter. (There is a distinct facial resemblance between the two in the photograph above.)

Although the BLFC continued to tour throughout 1895 and into 1896, playing more than fifty games in total, no further information emerged regarding 'Tommy,' other than the fact that she/he was the star performer whenever the ladies played.



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*'PHOTOGRAPH OF LADY FOOTBALLERS IN LIGHT JERSEYS': (L to R) Back row: Biggs, Clarke, Eva Roberts, Clarence. Front row: Lewis, Ellis, Lewis, Edwards. Seated on floor: Rosa Thiere*

Amusing as this little vignette may be, it also contains an important lesson for genealogical researchers. When conducting research on a person who was a performer/entertainer of any kind, one must always consider the possibility that the name they were known by was a stage name or pseudonym. This is probably an obvious statement in the case of a music-hall star, but as this example shows, Victorian performers at all levels often chose to hide their real identity. In the case of the British Ladies' Football Club, there are at least two other examples. Nettie Honeyball, the founder of the club, and captain of the North team, almost certainly concealed her true identity. A 'Janetta Honeyball,' born Pimlico, appears in the 1891 census, but she is absent from the 1881 and 1901 censuses, and there is no trace of her in the BMD records either. 'Mrs Graham,' the Scottish goalkeeper and the only other player to be praised by the newspapers was actually Helen Graham Matthews, a fact which was revealed in 1900 when she appeared in court in connection with the non-payment of a bill for some football jerseys.

As to the true identity of 'Tommy'; *if* we assume that his mother's forename really was Nellie, and *if* we assume

that Tommy's age was approximately 13, then he *may* have been John Richardson, born Bethnal Green 1883. Interestingly, these assumptions throw up no obvious female candidates, so were the suspicions of the Victorian football spectators justified?

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## NEW NDFHS BRANCH PROPOSAL

Do you live in the Alnwick area? If so, would you be interested in attending branch meetings there?

The suggestion has been made that a mid-Northumberland branch should be formed based upon Alnwick.

If this would be of interest to you please advise our Secretary, Richard Calasca.