

Sunderland A.F.C. Formation – The October 1879 Evidence

Sunderland were formed in October 1879 after a meeting at the British School, Norfolk Street. The specific day in October is not known, though the 17th has been a popular choice for those who have speculated on the matter.

This is what everyone has believed for beyond anyone's living memory. The club itself have always conformed to this view, and celebrated their centenary with a match against an England XI at Roker Park on 7th November 1979.

Most of the individuals who have studied the early days of the club have always had a nagging doubt about October 1879; mainly due to the fact that the first reported game that has ever been unearthed is the home defeat to Ferryhill on 13th November 1880, a full 13 months after the formation. Just what were the teachers who founded the club doing during those 13 months?

Many people have delved deeply into old newspapers, directories, school archives, etc. covering this period, but until recently the only facts known were: that the teachers had their first practice match for the 1880-81 season on 9th October 1880; and after their second practice match a week later they decided to change their name from Sunderland and District Teachers' Association Football Club to Sunderland Association Football Club. There was no factual evidence of the existence of any association football club in Sunderland prior to this and certainly none for 1879.

There is no getting away from the fact that the formation date and venue have persisted for more than 130 years, and for the first 30 or 40 of those years many of the founders were still alive. A meeting may well have taken place in October 1879 given the persistence of its memory. At that time, however, James Allan barely knew the teachers from other Sunderland schools, there were no local association teams to play against, and no local Football Association to affiliate to. Sunderland was a rugby town and most of the teachers had no knowledge at all of the association game. It is a stretch to believe that a virtual stranger arrives with a round ball and a set of rules and convinces all the other teachers to immediately form a bona-fide football club. A far more likely outcome of any meeting at this time would be an informal undertaking to try the game, arrange some kick-about etc.

So how did October 1879 become the accepted date of formation of Sunderland A.F.C., given there are no contemporary facts? It is all down to anecdotal evidence; books, reports and articles written well after the early years of club, each one endorsing and embellishing those that went before, none seriously questioning the veracity of the formation story.

Presented below are the main sources that the existing formation story developed from over the last 130 years or so.

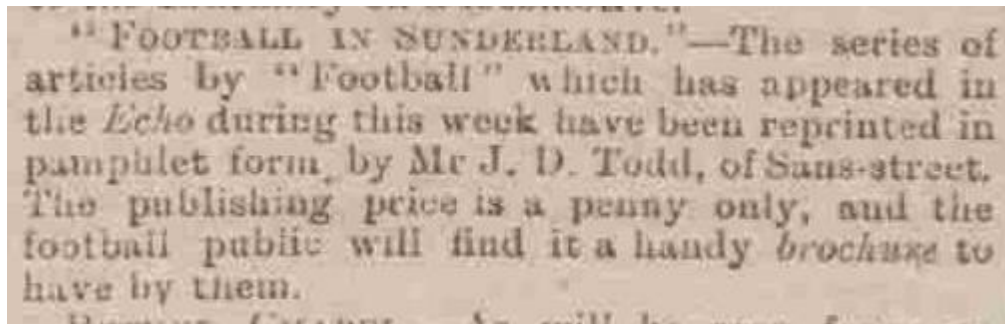
The Sunderland Echo excerpts are courtesy of <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

1) Football In Sunderland

Published in the Sunderland Echo, 19th to 21st December 1887

[Available in full in separate PDF]

This is the earliest known attempt at writing a history of Sunderland A.F.C. It was written 8 (or 7!) years after the formation of the club, by a stressed football correspondent who had been given an extremely tight deadline by his editor. Consequently it is littered with inaccuracies and inconsistencies. Regarding the club's formation, it suggests this occurred "towards the end of 1879, under the name of Sunderland and District Teachers' Association F.C.". This is the earliest reference we have found to a formation year of 1879. The articles were printed in pamphlet form, as advertised in the Sunderland Echo on 24th December 1887:



It would be interesting to know if any of these pamphlets survived.

2) Robert Singleton's Obituary

Published in the Sunderland Echo, 27th March 1895

Robert Singleton is recognised as one of the club's founders and was the first club captain. His obituary, over 15 years after the club's formation, is the first time "towards the end of 1879" becomes refined to "October 1879". It may also be the first reference to the British School in Norfolk Street as the location of the set-up meeting, though it erroneously states the club's name change took place a year later than it actually did:

THE LATE COUN. SINGLETON AND FOOTBALL.

Our "Referee" writes us as follows:—It may not be generally known to your readers that the late Councillor R. Singleton was one of the founders of the now famous Sunderland Association Football Club. He presided over the first meeting held for the purpose of forming a club, the other gentlemen present being Messrs J. Allan, W. C. Chappell, E. Watson, and W. Elliott. The meeting took place at the British School, Norfolk-street, in October, 1879. A club was then formed under the title of "The Sunderland Teachers' Association Football Club." Mr Singleton was appointed captain, a position he filled for several seasons. In the season 1881-2 the word "Teacher" was dropped from the title owing to the extension of the club. In 1882, the late Councillor Singleton was a member of the Durham team that played against Cleveland. He also took an active part in the formation of the Durham County Football Association, and was for some years one of its most useful members.

3) James Allan's Obituary

Published in the Sunderland Echo, 18th October 1911

James Allan is recognised as one of the club's founders and the person who introduced Association Football to the town of Sunderland. His obituary accurately states he arrived in Sunderland in 1879, and also perpetuates the club's formation date as October 1879:

DEATH OF MR JAMES ALLAN.

FOUNDER OF THE SUNDERLAND FOOTBALL CLUB.

We regret to announce the death of Mr James Allan, which took place at five o'clock this morning at his residence, No. 37, Elmwood Street. The deceased gentleman, who celebrated his 53rd birthday only last week, had been in failing health for a considerable period, and the end was not unexpected.

A native of Ayrshire Mr Allan came to Sunderland in 1879 from the Glasgow University, to take up the post of second master at the Heaton (then Board) School.



He afterwards went to the Thomas Street School as assistant master, and on the 2nd of September, 1883, he was appointed head master at the Hylton Road Schools, a position he held up to his death. Owing to failing health however, he had been excused attending school since the midsummer holidays.

He leaves a widow and family and a wide circle of friends to mourn his death. Mr Allan was an active Freemason for many years, having been P.M. and secretary of the Williamson Lodge.

MR ALLAN was widely known in the town and district for the great interest he took in all branches of sport, more especially football, and he possessed the distinction of being the founder of the Sunderland Association Football Club. This came about in 1879, shortly after his arrival in the town, his original idea being the formation of a club for the teachers. He prevailed upon several friends to join him, although all, with the exception of Mr Allan, were unacquainted with the mysteries of the Association code, and the inaugural meeting took place in the Boys' British School, Norfolk Street, in October, 1879. At that meeting the club was formed under the title of the Sunderland Teachers' Association Football Club. The new organisation had many ups and downs at the outset, and for a long while a treasurer was not needed, and on one occasion the funds were so low that one of the members offered a green canary to be raffled for the benefit of the club. This realised 17s 6d, and the member who won it not wishing to be outdone in his zeal for the club's success offered it again to be raffled. It was agreed that the lot should be half the original price, and the result of the second raffle was that the bird was won by a prominent member, who did not happen to be present, but in whose name a number had been drawn. In the end some trifle was sent to the winner and the bird remained in the possession of the original owner. In the season 1881-2 the title of the club was changed to its present one. Mr Allan held various offices in connection with the club, and in 1883-4 he acted as secretary, a post he held for some time. In 1884-5 he again resumed the captaincy of the club, and then in the seasons following was respectively vice-captain, a committeeman, and treasurer two seasons. At the end of the season 1887-88 he severed his connection with the Sunderland Club and in the following season professionalism, which he favoured, was introduced into the club. In his retirement he was joined by several other gentlemen, but his interest in the game was still keen, and he formed the Sunderland Albion Club, which in its first season won the Durham Senior Cup. Throughout the competition he assisted the club. However, after a short existence—a matter of four seasons—the Albion went under, and Mr Allan's connection with the sport as a player ended with it. During his career he won many honours, including 18 medals in football and dribbling competition, several being Durham Senior Cup medals. For seven years in succession he played in the Northumberland and Durham Counties' inter-county matches in the outside left position, and he was once paid the warm compliment of being the only Durham player asked to assist Northumberland County against Queen's Park, that club being then in its prime days. These were days, it may be incidentally mentioned, when no "class" season existed. The game was played all the year round.

Though he was lost to the football world as a player when the Albion became defunct, Mr Allan still continued his interest in the sport, and maintained it almost to the last. At one period he occupied the chairmanship of the Wearside League for several years, and had also been a member of the Monkwearmouth Charity Cup, Shipowners' Cup, Dispensary sports, and the school's swimming, football, and sports committees. He likewise took great pride in football among the juveniles, and turned out some capital players from the Hylton Road School, as well as in other branches.

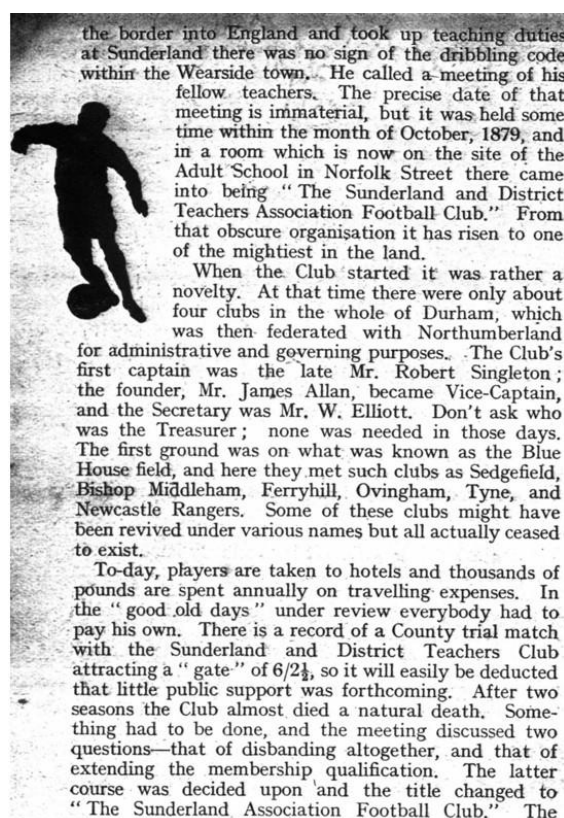
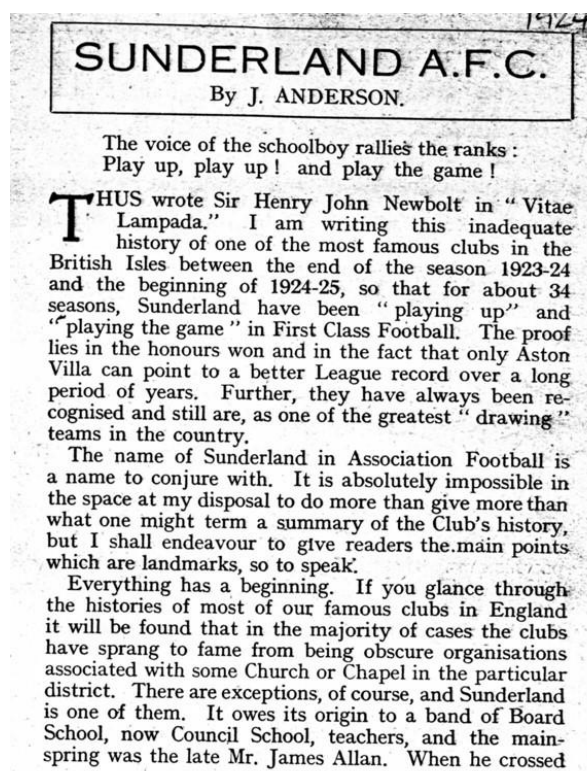
4) The Sunderland Football Club by Jack Anderson

Published by George W. May of London in 1924

This is a small booklet that probably is the first history of the club published in book form. It was priced sixpence and "Published with the approval of the club". It was written in the 1924 closed season, and covers the history of the club up to the end of 1923-24.

It states the club was formed in "October 1879 ... in a room which is now on the site of the Adult School in Norfolk Street".

The booklet itself contains around a dozen pages of text (roughly A5 size). Only the first 3 pages are relevant to the formation story:



only difference in the official title to-day is the addition of the word " Limited."

Ald. Dr. J. Potts was elected its first President, and Ald. J. W. Wayman was the second, being succeeded by Mr. Robert Thompson, who continued in office and assisted in weathering many financial storms until the Club was formed into a limited liability company. The season 1881-2 found the Club moving its ground to a field near the present Ashbrooke Cricket enclosure. They were beginning to make a name for themselves and reached the semi-final of the Durham and Northumberland Cup, Tyne defeating them by 2-0. Next season they reached the final but again Tyne defeated them. In the following season, 1883-4, they pitched their tent, or rather their ground on the site on which Cooper Street now stands, and which is only a hundred yards or so from their present fine enclosure. Shortly afterwards the Durham Association was formed and the Durham Cup came into existence to be won by Sunderland in its first season for competition. They were opposed in the final stage by Darlington on the old Newcastle Road ground, and Darlington entered what would now cause a sensation—a protest on the ground of " intimidation." The game was ordered to be replayed at Birtley and there Sunderland were again successful. They have held that cup almost more times than all the other teams in the county added together.

Interest in the Club began to grow. Abbs Field, Fulwell, was rented in 1884-5, and the next season Sunderland paid its first visit to Scotland, meeting Hearts of Midlothian at Edinburgh. Before another season had been entered upon Newcastle Road ground had been secured and it was on this famous old enclosure that Sunderland began making history. In 1887 the late Mr. Robert Thompson became its President, Mr. James Marr (now Sir James Marr), became Chairman of the Committee, and the late Mr. Samuel Tyzack was appointed Treasurer. That was the beginning of an historic era and while it is due to the late Mr. James

Note: The author Jack Anderson was "Argus" of the Echo at the time (and would remain so until 1951). He has almost certainly used the 1887 Sunderland Echo "Football in Sunderland" articles as reference material; naming exactly the same early opponents, in exactly the same order as that article, as well as repeating some of that article's mistakes. He may also have merged in additional information from the Singleton and Allan obituaries.

5) Alec Watson's "The Game – Past & Present" Column

Published in the Sunderland Football Echo, 29th October 1927 and 12th November 1927

Alec Watson had a regular column in the Football Echo in 1927 in which answered questions submitted by correspondents. In the two articles presented here, he discusses the formation of the club, confirming it was in October 1879. He also states that it was 2 years before they changed their name:

A FRIEND of mine who is a keen supporter of football asked me a few days ago if I could settle an argument which had taken place between some of the workmen at one of the local engine shops during their usual dinner-hour talk. The question at issue was whether Sunderland had ever played on any other ground than Newcastle Road and Roker Park, and I promised him that I would deal with the subject in this week's Notes.

The club, as many of my older readers well know, owes its origin to a number of schoolmasters, foremost of whom was the late Mr James Allan, who had come from Scotland to take up a teaching appointment in the town. Mr Allan was keenly interested in the game and he decided to attempt the formation of a club. He asked a number of scholastic friends to meet him and they did so in the month of October 48 years ago. Together they formed a club under the name of the Sunderland and District Teachers' Association Football Club. They first played on the old Blue House ground at Hendon.

After a couple of seasons the club nearly ceased to exist and a meeting was held to consider the position. Two proposals were considered—one that of disbanding altogether and the other of extending the membership qualification. The members present decided on the latter course and the name of the club was changed to the Sunderland Association Football Club. Another ground was acquired situated near the present Ashbrooke cricket and football ground, and the reconstructed Club commenced operations there at the beginning of the season 1881-82.

They played there until the opening of the season 1883-84, when a move was made to a ground at the bottom of Roker Avenue. It was quite impossible to take a "gate" there and, to assist in maintaining the Club, collecting boxes had to be used. The stay there was for only one season and then another move was made, this time to what was known as Abbs' Field, Fulwell. The next move was to the Newcastle Road ground, where many interesting matches were played and where the Club came into prominence in football circles. Sunderland's last match on this well-known ground was played on April 23, 1896, against Notts Forest; and on September 10 of the same year the Roker Park ground was opened by the Marquess of London-

IN connexion with my remarks a fortnight ago, when I gave, in response to a request, the names of the grounds on which the Sunderland Club has played since its inception, I gave a brief account of its formation in October, 1879. My readers will remember that I stated that after two seasons playing under the name of the Sunderland and District Association Football Club, there was a great danger of the Club dropping entirely out of existence. To save it the membership qualification was extended, and subsequent events have proved the wisdom of this step.

I have since been asked, whether the schoolmasters retained any share in the management, and my answer to this is, that several of them continued as members of the Committee, including the founder of the Teachers' Club, the late Mr James Allan. In fact, for a considerable number of years, he took a leading part in the management of the reconstructed Club and it was due almost entirely to his initiation that the Club made such progress. He, it was who first induced players from Scotland to come and play for the Club, one of the earliest arrivals being James Hunter, who helped considerably in bringing the Club into prominence.

6) Argus' "Roker Reflections" Column

Published in the Sunderland Football Echo, 1st August 1929

Argus made specific mention that the club would be 50 years old shortly, when he presented his thoughts before the start of the 1929-30 season. He was simply repeating what had become the accepted formation story:

"In the course of another couple of months another chapter in the glorious history of the Sunderland Club will be finished. In October the club will complete 50 years of its existence. When that small and enthusiastic band of members of the scholastic profession met in a small room in Norfolk Street, now the site of the Adult School, few of them even in their wildest dreams could have possibly have imagined to what heights of fame the club would eventually rise."

Curiously, there are no signs of a celebration of the half-centenary in the Echo / Football Echo during October 1929.

7) W.T.Wallace's "Peeps Into The Past" Column

Published in the Sunderland Football Echo, 14th September 1929

William T. Wallace was Sunderland A.F.C.'s first paid secretary in 1888 (replacing John Grayston and Edward Woodward), after an earlier unpaid spell in 1885-86. He was subsequently a leading light in the Durham F.A. His column began on the 31st August 1929 and ran for nearly 2 years. Much of it was memoirs of his own time at the club, but he did cover the formation in his 3rd week. He endorses the by now fairly standard story, gets the original name of the club and the year it changed wrong, and throws in the infamous "canary raffle" story – see James Allan's obituary – for good measure:

PEEPS INTO
BY W.T. WALLACE.
THE PAST.

CONTINUING my remarks regarding the team I named in my last article I feel I must again place on record the extent to which lovers of the game are indebted to Jimmy Allan and James McMillan.

These two players were really the founders of Association Football on Wearside, and the former, by virtue of his profession as a schoolmaster, was in a unique position for training the "young idea" of these days in the rudiments of the game. It was in 1879 that James Allan, a native of Ayr and a student of Glasgow University, came to Sunderland to take over the position of second master at Hendon School, and afterwards was transferred to Thomas Street School, where he remained till 1888, when he was appointed head master of Hylton Road Schools, a position he held until his death in 1911.

It is by the pupils of the Thomas Street School that he will be perhaps best remembered, as about that time the club transferred its playing pitch from the South-side to the North-side of the water, and the writer has been particularly pleased to have had several little conversations with some of Jimmy's former scholars since these articles commenced, and he feels that their old teacher's services to the game are still remembered by them.

Shortly after his arrival he gathered a few friends around him with the intention of forming a football club for the teachers. As a result of his enthusiasm the Sunderland Teachers Association Football Club came into being in 1873.

To start a new type of sport is always difficult, and the new club had many ups and downs in its early years. Funds were always low and the duties of the treasurer were practically non-existent. In fact it is on record that on one occasion the exchequer was so empty that one of the members offered a green canary as the price in a raffle, and in this way the sum of 17s 6d was realized. My readers will have difficulty in appreciating in the light of last Saturday's 33,000 gate, how valuable this paltry sum of 17s 6d was.

Like J. McMillan, Allan was on many occasions selected to play for his County, and besides the great service he rendered the club as a player, he acted in various capacities as committee-man, and secretary and treasurer until he severed his connexion with the club in 1887-88 and started a rival club known as the Sunderland Athlon, of which I will have more to say later.

It ought to be mentioned here that the title of the club was changed from the Teachers' Club to its present name in 1881-82, although it was not until about 15 years later that it was converted into a limited liability company.

Having given my readers short sketches of the personnel of the players who invariably took the field in the season 1882-84, I am now pleased to be able to give a resume of the very successful season which this team gave us, in a "playing sense" at any rate. At the annual meeting the then Secretary, Mr J. McMillan, reported as follows:

"During the past season the first team have played 30 matches, 24 of which have been won, four drawn, and two lost. In all they have scored a total of 110 goals and lost 16. This must be considered a first-class performance. The clubs beaten included South Bank, Darlington, the District, Hartlepool, Hobson Wanderers, Castle Eden, and other prominent clubs.

"The defeating clubs were the Rangers (Newcastle) once, and the District, but on neither occasion was the club represented by the best team. Besides being entitled to call themselves the winners of the Durham Football Association Cup and medals, the team also won the first prize offered at the Northern Temperance Festival on Newcastle Town Moor, June 25, beating in the different rounds some prominent Northumberland clubs, the first prize being 11 gold medals valued at 25s each. A team of five also won first prize at the Birtley Athletic Sports."

From this it will be seen that five a side games formed a prominent feature in clubs' athletic games, there being practically no enforced "close season" as at the present time.

It is to be regretted that the records of the club are not sufficiently complete to enable me to give the names of all the officials during the year under review, but the following gentlemen were certainly among those who guided his fortunes at that time: the Rev. R. Hinde (who later had a great deal to do with securing our admission to the League), Ralph W. Herbert, Thomas Round, J. Barlow, sen., J. Reed, and Dixon Robson, with W. D. Todd as Hon. Secretary. Of these names only one repeats with us, viz. W. D. Todd, who was joined by the writer as co-secretary at the beginning of the following season.

Although it is obvious from the foregoing report that this was a very successful year from a playing point of view, I cannot say the same from a financial aspect; but it must be remembered that all games were played on an open space, and our source of income was principally derived from our patrons and players' subscriptions, supplemented by our non-playing members taking the first round among the few spectators that gathered round us. The net result of the year's effort was a deficit of £2 14s 0d on a total revenue of £19 2s 1d.

To emphasise my remarks on the services rendered to the club by its player members, I would state that this deficit was for the most part made up of cash owed to Messrs Allan and McMillan, as shown in the cash book now in my possession.

Up to 1883 the club had played under the jurisdiction of the Durham and Northumberland Association, but in the early part of 1884 this was dissolved each county forming its own organization, and in this work the members of our club took their share.

8) John Grayston's Memoirs

Published in the Sunderland Weekly News, September through October 1931

[Available in full in separate linked PDF]

John Grayston was one of the first Sunderland A.F.C. players, a colleague of James Allan at Hendon Board School during 1879 and 1880, and a secretary of the club in the mid-1880's; these are definite facts. In these memoirs, published when Grayston was nearly 70 years old, he claims a significant role in the original formation of the club. He maintains the October 1879 / Norfolk Street narrative putting himself right at the centre of it.

However, the memoirs themselves are littered with inaccuracies, so this engenders a general doubt about how well he was remembering events that happened over 50 years earlier when he was a teenager.

9) 1937 Football Echo Article & John Grayston's Response

Published in the Sunderland Football Echo, 1st May 1937, response in daily Echo 5th May 1937

Argus took the opportunity of celebrating Cup Final day with a potted history of the club from formation to date. He sticks with the established narrative and makes no mention of John Grayston. An indignant Grayston writes to the Echo a few days later, trying to re-establish his central role, but receives short shrift from the Editor:

SUNDERLAND'S CUP PLAYERS



John Mayson, goalkeeper, born at Sunderland 20 years ago, but was taken to London when still a boy, his mother being a baker's wife when he was a year old. He had to leave school to find work, but after signing for Sunderland he had the money to buy a house for his mother and a sister at 20 years of age.

James Gunn, right back, born at Sunderland, Liverpool, but was taken to London when still a boy, his mother being a baker's wife when he was a year old. He had to leave school to find work, but after signing for Sunderland he had the money to buy a house for his mother and a sister at 20 years of age.

Sunderland's Rise From School-Teachers' Organization

The Men Who Made the Club and Famous Players Who Have Been Associated With it

By ARGUS

It is a pleasure to me to see that the rise of Sunderland from a school-teacher's organization to the position of a leading football club is being celebrated on the 10th anniversary of the formation of the club. The men who made the club and the famous players who have been associated with it are the subjects of this article.

MEN IN PRESTON'S TEAM



Michael Burns, goalkeeper, well-known Durham as a player, but known to Sunderland as a goalkeeper. He was taken to London when still a boy, his mother being a baker's wife when he was a year old. He had to leave school to find work, but after signing for Sunderland he had the money to buy a house for his mother and a sister at 20 years of age.

Andrew Beattie, left back, and right back, right half, left half, were the mainstay of the team. They were taken to London when still a boy, their mother being a baker's wife when they were a year old. They had to leave school to find work, but after signing for Sunderland they had the money to buy a house for their mothers and sisters at 20 years of age.

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BACK ROW (left to right): F. Callumore, Shankley, Holdcroft, J. C. Bates, R. Bates, Milne, and Fagan. FRONT ROW: Douglas, Beresford, Tremelling (capt.), F. O'Donnell, and H. O'Donnell.

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SEEKING SHILLINGS

Supporter wanted to see the team... [Text continues]

BETTER AS BACK

When it is true that Port Vale... [Text continues]

CUP GATES AND CASH

The following are the official accounts... [Table with financial data]

Grayston's response (several aspects look like they are lifted from his 1931 memoir):

Early Club History

Sir,—I read with avidity the article on Saturday in The Football Echo on Sunderland Football Club's history. Argus does not credit me at all as being a founder or even a supporter in the formation of our great club, to which we must pay great honour for bringing the Cup to Sunderland after so many years.

James Allan was an assistant in Hendon Board School in '79 and I was a P.T. only 17½ years of age. Walter Chapell was first assistant. "Jimmy" got me to call a meeting at the Quaker School and I did.

The Sunderland Teachers' Association was the result. We booked the Blue House Field at £10 a year. We had no funds but managed to scrape along. I played in the first match as goalkeeper as we could get nobody else in those

days, and was in the position for two years until we reached the semi-final for the Northumberland and Durham Cup and we got beaten. No wonder we could not get a goal-keeper. He could in those days get a knock-out blow even if he was not stopping a ball.

I went centre-forward afterwards, and kept that position till I went to Chelsea College. On my return, Christmas '83-'84 I again went as centre-forward on Horatio Street ground, and from there to Abb's Field, and was one of the team that won the Durham Cup and now the only one alive, and played against Redcar (English Cup) as we were beaten. We won the gold medals on Newcastle Moor at the Temperance Festival.

We had formidable foes in Shankhouse, Morpeth Harriers, Castle Eden and Darlington. I ceased playing on Abb's Field after a dislocation, and was secretary after that, and Argus who denied me that honour affirmed I was not, but retracted this when I sent him a fixture card with my name on it. I was the individual who went for Tom Watson, he was out of work, and Mr

Robert Thompson our chairman asked me to get a secretary.

I knew Watson was unemployed and brought him to our Saturday night's committee meeting and he contracted a whole time job at £120 a year. Our first semi-pro was Jimmy Hunter who took my place as centre-forward. We found him a job and a "douce" to help him on as we then took a threepenny gate at Abb's Field. Then we went to Newcastle Road and got good gates. We had to pay £50 a year for that field.

The Rev. W. A. McGringle and I went to interview the Misses Thompson and his gracious pleading won our case as they were opposed to having a noisy crowd in the vicinity.

One of our present directors asked me, "Has Argus got a spite against you Jack?" "I don't think so," I said. "He was a pupil under me at Stansfield Street School and I don't think he is trying to get his own back."

I can, I think, claim to be an early "pillar" of the club as dozens in Hendon and Monkwearmouth can testify, some of whom are nearly 70. Probably Argus after this will give me a "little" credit for the part I played in the birth of the club.

My reward was the physical fitness which I obtained—oh yes! Our directors graciously bestowed on all a "pass"—this shows a recognition of my early efforts. I would like to add one word relating to an old stager. Ted Watson, master of Monkwearmouth National, and I are the only ones alive who played in the first match on Hendon Blue House Ground. He went to Montreal and if alive will be about 79 while I am 75. Sport does not kill but keeps one alive.

In conclusion, let me once more congratulate our directors, who have always been my friends, in achieving their great desire and to the lads whose earnest efforts have culminated in such a crowning victory. As one Sunderland supporter said, "They're full of 'gan on.'"

J. Grayston,

18, Park Place West, Sunderland.

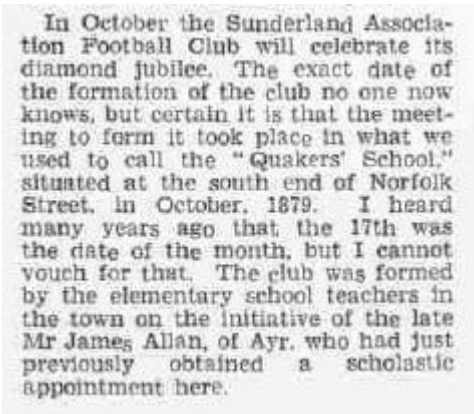
***Space prohibited mention of everyone connected with the earlier days of the Sunderland club.

—Editor, The Sunderland Echo.

10) James Douglas Looks Into The Past

Published in the Sunderland Echo, 4th September 1939

James Douglas had a regular column in the Sunderland Echo in the late 1930's, in which he looked at the history of the town. Occasionally he covered the past exploits of Sunderland A.F.C., and in his article on Monday 4th September 1939 he mentions that the club is about to celebrate its Diamond Jubilee:



In October the Sunderland Association Football Club will celebrate its diamond jubilee. The exact date of the formation of the club no one now knows, but certain it is that the meeting to form it took place in what we used to call the "Quakers' School," situated at the south end of Norfolk Street, in October, 1879. I heard many years ago that the 17th was the date of the month, but I cannot vouch for that. The club was formed by the elementary school teachers in the town on the initiative of the late Mr James Allan, of Ayr, who had just previously obtained a scholastic appointment here.

Note that by this time it is believed that it is "certain" that the formation meeting took place in Norfolk Street in October 1879, and this is the first attempt at providing a precise date, the 17th.

11) Arthur Appleton's "Hotbed of Soccer"

Published by The Sportsman's Book Club 1961

Arthur Appleton was the most well-known North-East football history writer in the 1960s and 1970s. In this book he explored the origins of all the well-known North-Eastern teams. His section on Sunderland, as for all the other teams, is a bit of a "whistle-stop" tour of the significant moments in their history. In respect of the formation story, only the first three paragraphs are relevant:

"The Association Football Club, soon to be simply known as Sunderland, was born at a meeting of Sunderland school teachers in Norfolk Street, in October 1879. It was appropriate, in view of what was to follow, that a Scotsman, James Allan, called the meeting: and Allan, a teacher at Thomas Street Boys' School, was made vice-captain. Robert Singleton, with bushy side-whiskers and the drooping, Chinese-looking moustache of the time, was the club's first captain.

The Sunderland and District Teachers' Association Football Club played their home matches on the Blue House Field, at Hendon. They joined the newly-formed Northumberland and Durham F.A. and in 1880-1 were beaten in the Third Round of that Association's cup by Newcastle Rangers, eventually the winners.

There was next to no curiosity about the game in the North East, although the handling code, which had been first in the field – the Sunderland Rugby Club was formed in 1870 – had managed to create some interest. As a result, the few scattered soccer clubs were troubled by travelling costs and, after two seasons, the Sunderland teachers were faced with the choice of wiping their club off the blackboard or sending out of the schoolroom into the care of other protectors.

They chose the latter course and, under the presidency of Alderman Dr. J.Potts, Sunderland Association Football Club played at Ashbrooke. In 1881-2, the club was beaten by Tyne in the semi-final of the Northumberland and Durham Cup; in the following year they reached the Final, but were beaten by Tyne again."

Note that aside from repeating the established story, Appleton makes no attempt to pin-point the name change, and makes the mistake of placing the club at Ashbrooke a season too early; probably because he has assumed the two seasons at Blue House Field were 1879-80 and 1880-81. He implies that the team played matches at Blue House Field under their original name, but there is no evidence for this. It would appear that Appleton located either the 1887 "Football in Sunderland" articles, or Jack Anderson's 1924 history, as he makes exactly the same mistake regarding Sunderland's Northumberland and Durham Cup Campaign of 1881-2 (they actually lost to Sedgefield in the first round). He also erroneously has Allan at Thomas Street Boys' School at the time of formation; Allan moved there later in his working life.