



From football to Flanders

A grandfather's memory and a casual conversation with his son set **Peter Holland** on the trail of a professional footballer who went on to play his part in World War I. Here he recounts the discovery of his fascinating relative.

I never set out to trace my family tree. It started quite by accident. My eldest son, Pip, was seven years old at the time and, like many boys of his age, obsessed with football. He was looking forward to his weekend match with Crowmarsh Youth Football Club when I made a seemingly innocuous comment. 'By the way', I remarked, 'many years ago there was a professional footballer in our family'. His eyes lit up as he turned to me and asked eagerly, 'Who did he play for? What was his name?' I had to confess, I had no idea.

Few clues, false leads

I had only a memory of my grandfather, Arnold Bartrop, telling me about a footballing relative, when I too was a young boy. But that is all I could remember. I resolved there and then to solve the puzzle: who was the mysterious footballer and how were we related? A simple task, or so I thought, but then I had never traced a family tree before. Little did I know where it would lead. It was the start of a fascinating journey that took me behind the scenes of Worksop Town, Barnsley and Liverpool football clubs, along Victorian canals and streets, into the houses of relatives I never knew I had, and across the battlefields of Flanders. I even found myself in

an auction room in Chester, heart pounding, as the frantic bidding for my relative's long-lost FA Cup winner's medal climbed into five figures. It was an adventure that took three years and culminated in a book charting the remarkable life of a forgotten footballer.

I started with almost no clues. I knew only that my grandfather was born in Worksop, Nottinghamshire, in 1910 and I simply hoped that our mysterious relative came from the same area and shared the same rare surname. I soon found that the Football League records included only one professional player with the surname: Wilfred Bartrop, born in Worksop in 1889. Surely, this was our man! All I had to do was trace his family tree and see where it met mine; something I assumed would be simple. I hit the first snag straight away. The Births, Marriages and Deaths indexes had no record of a Wilfred Bartrop born in 1889, not in Worksop or indeed anywhere. As a beginner at this game, I was confused. The census records, however, were more revealing. There was a Wilfred Bartrop in the 1891 Worksop Census, which was encouraging, except that his age didn't quite match.

After several false leads, I finally identified the man named in the Football League records. Charles Henry Wilfred Bartrop, to give his full name, was born in Worksop on 22 November 1887, not 1889, the first of 13 children. In the 1901 Census for Worksop he was recorded as 'Chas Hy W Bartrop'. He certainly did become a footballer, and the clinching evidence was to be found on his 1912 marriage certificate, which clearly gave his

occupation as 'Professional Football Player'. As I am sure others have experienced, I found that holding copies of the certificates made me feel a strong connection to the past – a glimpse into the lives of real people a century ago. But why the discrepancy in the date of birth? This was one mystery I never fully solved, although it seems it was not unheard of for sportsmen to be economical with the truth over such matters. Despite Alan Hansen's famously mistaken jibe 'You'll never win anything with kids', it is obvious that youth does have advantages for a sportsman. Wilfred did not sign terms with a football club until 1908, several months after his 20th birthday and a few years older than most new recruits to the game. It seems he told Worksop Town FC that he was 18, and the age stuck from then on.

Related or not?

So we had our man, but was he really our relative? Tracing my own tree along the Bartrop line, plus that of Wilfred's family, turned out to be more complex than I had imagined and, inevitably, I chased several false leads. But eventually the pieces fell together into a wonderful interconnected jigsaw in which the links were clear. It turned out that Wilfred's grandfather, Benjamin Bartrop, was my great-great-grandfather and Wilfred was



Postcard celebrating a Barnsley win in which Bartrop scored the winning goal; a swerving shot from near the corner flag that, according to one observer, 'made players and onlookers alike open their eyes in wonder'.

my grandfather's cousin. Actually, half-cousin to be precise, as Benjamin's first wife and Wilfred's grandmother, Jane Coupe, died from typhoid fever when she was just 33 years old; she was already the mother of 10 children. In 1880, Benjamin married Mary Broom, herself a widow, and I am descended from their second child William. I had finally made the elusive family link, yet somehow I couldn't bring myself to stop there. Perhaps I had been bitten by the family tree bug! Looking a little further back in history, the Bartrops came from the Barthorpe family that moved into Worksop in the early 1800s, and for several generations the family worked with horses and with horse-drawn barges along the newly constructed Chesterfield Canal. Their names came to life for me as I walked the streets where the family had lived in Victorian Worksop, and even more so when, astonishingly, I found a newspaper obituary for my great-great-grandfather Benjamin in the *Worksop Guardian* of 1910.

Footballing career

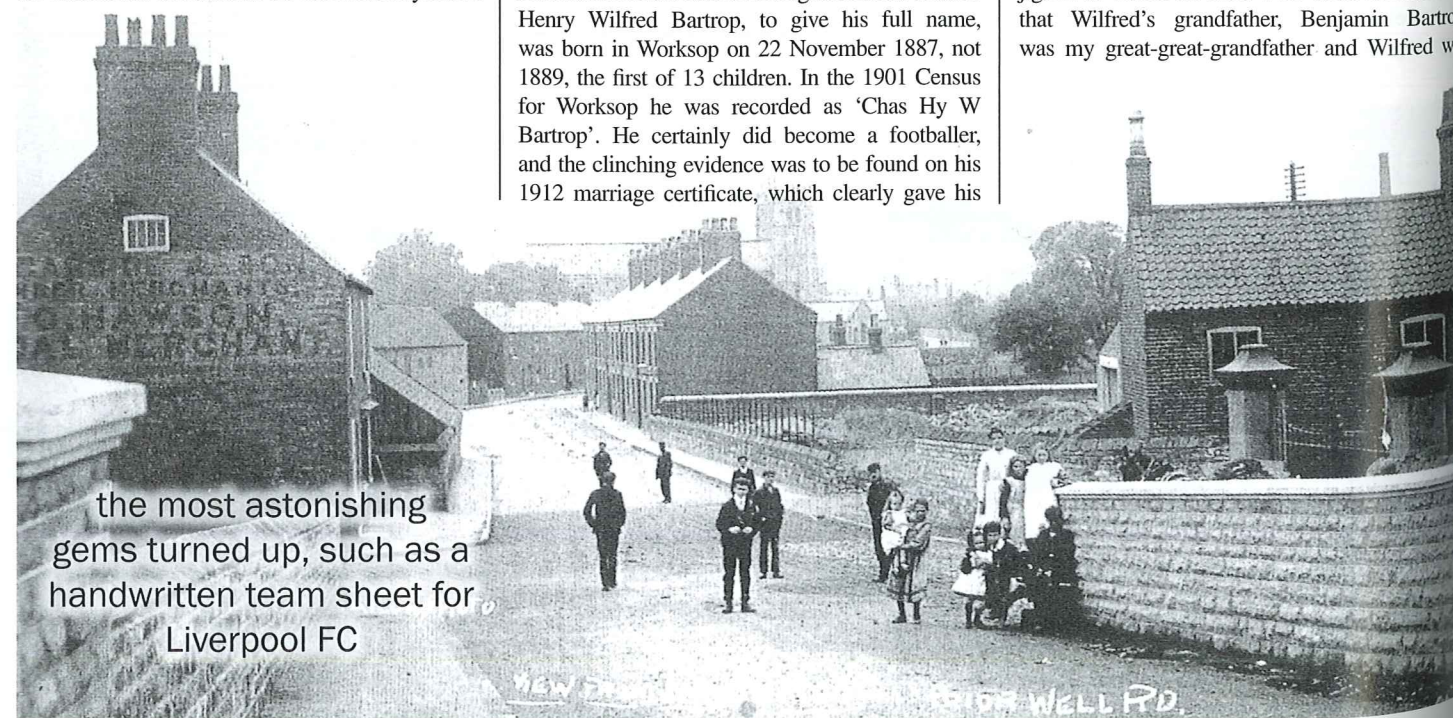
Wilfred's footballing career took him to Worksop Town and Barnsley FC, and then onto mighty Liverpool where he played during the highly controversial 1914/15 season. Controversial, as for one whole year after the outbreak of World War I, the professional leagues continued, on the basis of maintaining public morale; however they came under growing public pressure to disband as the war dragged on. Visits to each football club provided a wealth of information, as most have official historians who have painstakingly gathered and organised records, data and photographs. Sometimes the most astonishing gems turned up, such as a handwritten 1914/15 team sheet for Liverpool FC, recording exactly which matches Wilfred played in, and who

replaced him when he was dropped! But by far the most illuminating, and endlessly captivating, were the contemporary newspaper reports. Local libraries turned out to be the most effective source, with crucial nuggets of information turning up in Worksop, Nottingham and Liverpool central libraries (my personal favourite being the weekly sports reports in the *Worksop Guardian* of a century ago, written by a wonderfully pithy correspondent with the pseudonym 'Wide-Awake'). However, for truly comprehensive coverage the British Library Newspapers collection in Colindale, London, is an outstanding national resource. I will not recount Wilfred's sporting exploits in detail here, except to say that it was a career with both triumphs and disappointments, taking in two FA Cup Finals, two other cup finals including one played in Paris, an early European tour to pre-war Austria and Hungary, and a scandal when Manchester United visited Anfield.

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An Allied trench mortar in action. From a stereoview photograph published by Underwood.



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Prior Well Road, Worksop, a century ago, photographed by Ezra Taylor. Wilfred Bartrop was born in a house on this road.

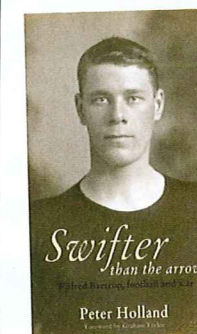
The 'Greater Game'

After the summer of 1915, professional football ceased for the remainder of the war and, like many sportsmen, Wilfred Bartrop played his part in the 'Greater Game' on the battlefields of the Western Front. In attempting to trace his involvement in the conflict, one small detail was on my side in that Wilfred had served as a gunner in the Royal Field Artillery, in Trench Mortar Battery X/40; Trench Mortar Batteries (TMBs) were teams of just a handful of artillery men, so their movements were recorded quite precisely. The National Archives (TNA) at Kew were a revelation. To be able to open a file containing the handwritten notes of field officers in battle is a moving experience. From these official War Diaries I could see the daily movements of TMB X/40 and compare these to official history of the 40th Division, and also with a short obituary of Wilfred that I had found in my trawls through old newspapers.

For this last tragic part of the story concerns Wilfred Bartrop's death. Wilfred had fought through a series of ferocious battles leading to the eventual liberation of Cambrai, and was then posted north to Warcoing, near Tournai in Belgium, where the Allied forces were holding ground along the River Escaut. As Wilfred and a fellow gunner were moving a mortar into position, an enemy shell exploded next to them. 'I am hit in the leg' he yelled, and collapsed to the ground. Those were the last words of Charles Henry Wilfred Bartrop. He died in action on the battlefields of Europe on 7 November 1918, on the very last day that his Division saw action. Just four days later the guns fell silent on the Western Front.

For three years, I had followed Wilfred Bartrop's life from the street where he was born, onto the football clubs where he had competed with such success, and across the scarred battle sites of Europe. I had held his FA Cup winner's gold medal, and stood on the site where he tragically fell. My

two sons, Pip and Jody, laid a wreath of poppies on his grave in Warcoing, as we remembered a life that had become so vivid and clear. Little did I know that tracing a family tree could be so eventful, so enlightening and, in the end, so poignant.



Peter Holland's book, *Swifter than the Arrow*: Wilfred Bartrop, football and war, is published by Troubador; ISBN 978 1848760 684; £7.99 (paperback). Available from bookshops and www.troubador.co.uk.

Map of Flanders: Shows locations including Dover, Dunkerque, Brugge, Gent, Ypres, Messines, Lys, Bethune, Loos, Lens, Arras, and Vimy. It marks the 1917 and 1918 battle lines and the location of Albert (Belgian) (1917).

Medals: A collection of medals including the Victory Medal, British War Medal, and a gold medal.

Grave Photo: A black and white photo of the author kneeling next to Wilfred Bartrop's grave in Warcoing, Belgium.

Medal Card:

Name	Corps	Rank	Regt.
BARTROP, Wilfred	R.F.A.	Gnr	2524
Medal	Roll	Page	Remarks
VICTORY	R.F.A./315	43156	
BRITISH			
SPAN			

Other Text: Cantigny 1918, Montdidier

Above right: The author pays his respects at Wilfred's grave, one of just four war graves in the churchyard of Warcoing, Belgium.

Wilfred's medal card found on www.ancestry.co.uk showing that he was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.