



A History of African Footballers in Britain

First generation: The Victorian African pioneers, Arthur Wharton and the South Africans.

The rapid development of Association football in England in the second half of the 1880s coincided with the rising sporting trajectory of Arthur Wharton, the world's first Black professional footballer.

Arthur's father, the Rev. Henry Wharton, a Wesleyan missionary from Grenada, West Indies, was the progeny of a freeborn African-Grenadian woman and a Scottish merchant. Arthur's mother, Annie Florence Grant, was the daughter of a Scottish trader John C. Grant and Ama Egyiriba, a Fante royal. The Grant family were an influential clan on the Gold Coast, involved in politics and business.

Wharton's came to Britain for elementary schooling in 1875, attending Dr Cheyne's Burlington Road School, Fulham, West London. Returning to West Africa four years later, he came back to Britain in 1882, enrolling at Shoal Hill College, Cannock a Wesleyan Methodist institution. After its closure in 1884 he moved north to Darlington, studying at Cleveland College from 1884 to 87.

Wharton was uncharacteristic of professional footballers in ways other than just his ethnic and social background: by the time he'd signed for Preston North End in August 1886, two years before the Football League started, he was national amateur sprint champion. At the A.A.A. championships at Stamford Bridge in July 1886, he became the first athlete to record 10 seconds - even time - in both heats and finals of the 100 yards. This time was later ratified as the first official world record for the distance. A song was composed about his success at the A.A.A. championships by his trainer Manny Harbron.

In 1888 he became a professional runner, winning the 'world championship' at Sheffield in 1888.

His sporting abilities made a great impression in the North of England. He officially turned professional in football in 1889. His clubs included Darlington, Preston North End, Rotherham Town, Sheffield United, Stalybridge Rovers, Ashton North End and Stockport County. A goalkeeper noted for his 'prodigious punch', he also played outfield. He also played professional cricket.

Extrovert and proud, a letter writer to the *Sheffield Telegraph and Independent*, recalled - half a century after the event - some of his unorthodox gymnastics.

In a match between Rotherham and [Sheffield] Wednesday at Olive Grove I saw Wharton jump, take hold of the cross bar, catch the ball between his legs, and cause three onrushing forwards - Billy Ingham, Clinks Mumford and Micky Bennett - to fall into the net. I have never seen a similar save since and I have been watching football for over fifty years.

Northern sportswriters pushed Wharton's case for, what proved to be, an elusive England cap. Unfortunately, the merits of a footballer are rarely universally recognized. Wharton had a vociferous, racist critic in the 'Whispers' column of the most popular national sports papers of the day, the *Athletic Journal*.

Good judges say that if Wharton keeps goal for the [Preston] North End in their English Cup tie the odds will be considerably lengthened against them. I am of the same opinion....Is the darkie's pate too thick for it to dawn upon him that between the posts is no place for a skylark? By some it's called coolness - bosh!

Whatever doubts Wharton's use of suspense, imagination and unpredictability on the field of play may have raised about his intellectual abilities, he was a confident, acrobatic, athlete grounded in his blackness. The following incidents are examples of what *Whispers* may have felt was the actions of an (uppity) *thick darkie*: an athletics meeting Wharton overheard one competitor boasting to another *we can beat a blooming nigger anytime*. The 'nigger' offered to box them if they preferred. Both hastily declined; at another athletics meeting, at Middlesbrough in 1885, he felt he'd won his race. On being awarded second prize, a salad bowl, he smashed it in front of the organizing committee telling them to make a new one out of the bits; at a ball throwing competition his two longest throws beat all the other competitors, Wharton demanding first and second prize!

The profile that emerges from public records, newspaper match reports, letters, interviews, football club records, gossip and reminiscences is of a talented man, who knew his value, exploiting his abilities to earn a living. There seems little doubt that Wharton sold his physical skills for money even where this was deemed illegal: one of his clubs, Preston, unashamedly paid their players and was instrumental in forcing through the legal acceptance of professionalism in 1885; accepting a 'prize' at an athletics meeting could mean the equivalent reward of nearly two months wages.

Being a sportsman and taking prizes all too willingly offered by sports promoters, club chairman, agents and the like, while being the act of a rational man, did not increase the value Arthur to Britain's colonial bureaucrats. His national recognition and education were not enough to secure him a place in the Gold Coast Colonial Administration to which he applied in 1893 after he made pregnant his wife's sister. His status as A.A.A. Champion is unofficially listed as being 'inappropriate' for a colonial civil servant. The posts for which he'd applied - government clerk or inspector - were paid at £250 p.a. and 'entirely in

the hands of natives.’ The wages would not have been much better than his earnings as a sportsman in Britain, though the assumption is their buying power would have been greater. The point about his application is that it seems monetary reward was less important to Wharton than the status, nature and location of the work: his return to the Gold Coast would not have been as a sporting celebrity. His achievements merited no mention in the Euro-African ‘Men of Affairs’.

Wharton played professionally until at least 1901-2 (6 games for Stockport County). He also earned his living as a publican in Sheffield and Rotherham – where he married a local woman, Emma Lister – also investing as a shareholder in his former club.

Arthur spent the last twenty or so years of his life working as a haulage hand, mostly at Yorkshire Main colliery in Edlington, Doncaster, South Yorkshire. He died in December 1930 and was buried in a pauper’s grave in Edlington cemetery, unmarked for sixty seven years. On 8 May 1997, after a successful campaign to raise money for his gravestone by Sheffield-based Football Unites - Racism Divides, a ceremony to finally lay a physical memorial to Arthur’s achievements was held at Edlington attended by the direct descendents of Arthur’s two children with Martha, his wife Emma’s sister.

Lancashire hosted two Africa-born goalkeepers as the 19th turned into the 20th century. While Wharton was pulling-in the crowds with his versatile athleticism and eccentric showmanship at Stalybridge Rovers, second division Bolton Wanderers, founder members of the Football League gave six outings to (White) South African Wilfred Waller. Of his compatriots he was the first of over one hundred to play in the FL. Incredibly, by the time Wanderers had signed Waller in March, 1900, many other top professional teams in England and Scotland had played against a team made-up wholly of Southern Africans.

This first African Association football team to visit Britain was labelled the ‘Kaffirs’. Of the Basuto people in what is now Lesotho, they arrived at Southampton dock, September, 1899. Never before had a Black African squad played outside that continent. Indeed, they may well have been the first African football tourists - even if we include White South Africans. The Basutos’ trip to Britain was organised by the Orange Free State Football Association (OFSFA), administered by British expatriates.

The reasons for the tour were to raise funds for OFSFA, give the British emigrants a subsidised jolly-up in the home country and improve the standard of football played by the Basutos. With a heavy fixture list of thirty six games against the best teams of England and Scotland, the organisers determined the tour, with its novelty value, would pay its way and more. The punishing itinerary was scheduled to kick-off against Football League champions, Aston Villa.

The (Southampton) *Football Echo and Sports Gazette* informed its readers of the ‘Kaffirs’ arrival – *up come Eleven Little Nigger Boys from Savage South Africa* - via a cartoon situated centrally on its front page, featuring a sturdy but shaken John Bull reminding readers of Kipling’s description of Britain’s Black colonies as the *White Man’s Burden*.

Over the winter of 1899-1900, as the Boer War escalated, media demonisation of the Afrikaners metamorphosed Boer into Black as Black Africans, in turn, became more acceptable ‘Others’. An example of this contradictory, confused state of affairs is the description of the human exhibits of the Savage South Africa exhibition at Earls Court as the *magnificent men from the Zulu country*. Yet, so ‘magnificent’ were these men that soon after opening London County Council officials instructed the exhibition manager Mr Edwin Cleary to section off the *native kraals* in order to prevent the public – particularly nubile young women - from fraternising with the *heathen warriors*.

The Boys from Basuto, bombarded by goals, also succumbed to the propaganda barrage. In their rescheduled fixture with Aston Villa gate receipts went to a Boer War fund. And it would have been more than a blanket full of farthings and ha’pennies because, despite their inability to match the organised teamwork of their opponents, the Southern Africans attracted large crowds. Against Tottenham, the best supported club in the South, gate receipts totalled £89. Christmas Day was ‘celebrated’ with a 3-2 defeat by Brentford at Griffin Park. Against Sheffield United the legendary Billy Foulke, perhaps the only footballer who could match the Basutos for size, played at centre-forward and scored two goals.

By the close of the 19th century Africa had provided, and Britain had hosted, the world’s first Black professional footballer, the first South African to play professionally and Africa’s first Black touring team.

The second South African to play professionally in England was Alex Bell, also known as Alec, or Sandy, born in Cape Town in 1882. Like many of the early football migrants, he had British ancestry. Having Scottish parents enabled him to play for Scotland, which he did once, helping them to a 4-1 victory away to Northern Ireland in 1912.

Initially a centre forward, he played for several teams in Ayr in Scotland, after his family had returned to Scotland. Manchester United spotted him playing for Ayr Parkhouse and signed him for £700 in 1903.

Over the next ten years, Bell played 278 League games for United, settling as a left half after initially covering for injury in that position. He helped them win promotion to the first division in 1906, and their first League Championship title in 1908.

In 1909, he became the first South African to play in the English FA Cup final, helping Manchester United to beat Bristol City 1-0 in the final. United won the League again in 1911.. Bell joined Blackburn in 1913 but played only a few games before the outbreak of the First World War. He went on to be a trainer for Coventry and Manchester City before his premature death in 1934.

Second Generation

The first African side to compete on the world stage was Egypt at the 1920 Olympic Games. The team included the first North African to play in the Football League, Hassan Hegazi, who first made a name for himself with top amateur club, Dulwich Hamlet, also turning out for Fulham in 1911. In 1914 he won a Cambridge Blue playing for the University football team while a student at St Catherine’s College. Another Egypt team-mate, Tewfik Abdallah, would sign for first division Derby County after the Olympic Games. Folklore has it that, instructed on his debut, against Manchester City, to mark Mick Hamill, he apparently crossed the white line asking teammates ‘where’s me camel?’

The following decade two Egyptian internationals signed for Scottish League clubs: Mohamed Latif, a student at Jordanhill

College, Glasgow joined Rangers in 1935; a year later Mostafa Kamal Mansour played at Hampden Park for Queen's Park. Mansour went on to become Secretary of the Confederation of African Football.

Two fellow Egyptians Mohamed el Guindy and Abdul Kerim Sakr signed as amateurs with Huddersfield Town in the 1940s while studying at Leeds University.

From the 1920s numerous White South Africans had been signed by British clubs. Most notable was G Hodgson, of Liverpool, who set a scoring record. The Anfield teams of this period contained at least three other White South Africans: Arthur Riley, a goalkeeper; Lance Carr, a left winger and Berry Nieuwenhuys, an outside right. There seems to have been no reticence by the FA to select White South Africans for international caps. As well as G Hodgson also chosen were F Osborne (1924-6) and R Osborne (1927-8)

By the close of this second era of African players in the UK, while Egypt was the leading nation in African football, with a number of their footballers playing for top British clubs, the steady stream of (White) South Africans entering the professional game here led to these lighter-skinned Africans comprising the largest contingent of foreign players in the British game.

Third Generation

The 1948 Nationality Act, which guaranteed colonial and Commonwealth citizens right of entry to the UK, allowed British clubs to induce colonial players to sign. Subject to status they could also play for the national team.

The Liverpool side that won the first division championship on its resumption in 1946-47 included White South African, Robert Priddy. However it was Charlton Athletic, managed by Jimmy Seed, who employed the greatest number: Dudley Forbes, Stuart Leary, Ronald Oosthuizen, Sydney O'Linn and Eddie Firmani, the latter becoming a household name in Britain and Italy through his much publicised transfers. The British FAs continued to select South Africans for their representative XIs: W Perry for England(1955-6); J Hewie for Scotland (1955-60); P Kelly for Ireland (1949-50);

The apparent eagerness of British clubs to scout, trial and sign White South Africans was down to a number of factors: the early development of competitive football in South Africa; the superior facilities enjoyed by White South African footballers; familial and fraternal contacts between members of clubs in Britain and South Africa; and racial prejudice. The primary factor however, more important even than the last named - but linked - is cultural prejudice: British club managers thought White South Africans would fit-in to the dressing-room/training ground environment and settle comfortably in Britain.

Incredibly, three Black players were signed from apartheid South Africa between 1956 and 1961: Stephen Mokone by Coventry City; Gerry Francis and Albert Johanneson by Leeds United. Described as *easily the greatest soccerite South Africa has ever produced*¹, Mokone was the first Black South African footballer allowed a passport to play abroad. Imprisoned in the USA, where he was also a university professor, on the victory of the ANC he became the new government's goodwill tourism ambassador in New York. His compatriot, Johanneson, was the first Black South African to play in an FA Cup final. He died alone in his Leeds flat a penniless alcoholic in 1995.

While the post-war march towards independence among Africans speeded to an unstoppable momentum, the colonial powers, notably Britain and France, were obsessed with peaceful, sympathetic transitions. Uppermost in the minds of diplomats and politicians in this regard was the need to maintain and continue, as far as possible, profitable economic relations. The necessity of not alienating Africa's ruling class, a delicate and difficult task during the Cold War, demanded a diplomatic offensive on many fronts. Sport, in particular football, was one.

Between 1949-56, there were three football tours to Britain from African colonies: Nigeria in 1949, the Gold Coast in 1951 and Uganda in 1956.² While the footballers may have seen them as great fun and invaluable learning curves, their domestic football and political masters, and the Establishment in Britain, were aware of their wider significance. In the UK the tourists were treated as vip guests: as minor politicians or diplomats. But these were no ordinary footballers, trainers and managers. The agenda was as political as it was sporting: to instil in the mind of the African an attitude that was sympathetic to capitalism and western ideas; to illustrate how superior the British political and economic system was to the alternative (Eastern European) model on offer; and to comfort a domestic audience that handing political power to Africans would not lead to a disappearance of British influence on the continent.

These tours, while attracting interest from professional clubs in the UK, did not yield a bountiful harvest. Only Tesilimi 'Thunder' Balogun, a tall Nigerian centre forward, made it into the Football League. However, he was soon followed by two other Nigerian internationals, Elkanah Onyeali and Francis Feyami. Though none played at the top level their presence testified to the thaw in the historic unwillingness of many British clubs to consider African players. Many of the tourists did reach important and influential positions in football in their home countries: CK Gyamfi managed the Ghanaian national team, the Black Stars. Previous to this appointment, in 1959, he joined Fortuna Dusseldorf staying a couple of years, adjusting to the cold winters, but playing only friendlies for the club in pre Bundesliga days; QPR and Peterborough United's 'Thunder' Balogun coached for the Western States Sports Council.

Up to 1962, Africa provided the largest proportion of foreign-born Black players, still comparatively few in number. The passage to Britain of Black footballers, always a trickle rather than a flow, slowed appreciably with the introduction and gradual enforcement of the 1962, 1968 and 1971 immigration acts, which had as their aim the restriction of people of colour entering the country. British football in the 1960s and 70s was notable for its absence of African footballers. A lucky few had arrived before the new immigration restrictions, such as Albert Johanneson. One or two managed to duck under the colour bar, such as Zambian Frederick Mwila who played one game for Aston Villa in 1969 and Ghanaian John Mensah at Cambridge City.

These acts tended not to affect the movement of White Africans who could often depend on the patrilineal or matrilineal clauses for entry, such as Liverpool's Zimbabwe international Bruce Grobbelaar.

It was not until 1978 that the FA relaxed the rules governing the signing of foreign-born players of non-Commonwealth status. With the emergence of African national teams as competitors at the highest level - Cameroon beating Argentina in their opening group game at the 1990 World Cup, progressing to the quarter final where, in a close game they lost 3-2 to England - the skills of the continent's footballers became, once more, sought after by British clubs.

The successful careers of Ghanaian Tony Yeboah, South Africans Lucas Radebe and Gary Bailey and Zimbabweans Bruce Grobelaar and Peter Ndlovu all helped re-establish an African presence in England at the highest level.

Michael Essien's 2005 move from Lyon to Chelsea at £24m is the African record, a move that simply shifted money around Europe. With talent leaving Africa at a young age, fees are often low. It is a movement that is little regulated, allowing dubious characters a worrying degree of freedom. EU immigration law and Uefa restrictions on non-EU players have had the dual impact of encouraging agents and European clubs to scout African players at increasingly younger ages in order to circumvent these restrictions.

By the end of the 2005 season, African players were household names in the Premiership: Geremi, Kolo Toure, Mido, Kanoute and Yakubu were all holding down first team places in top teams. By the start of the following Premiership season, only 2 out of the 20 teams in the Premier League did not have African players on their books. In 2007, Chelsea's Ivorian striker, Didier Drogba, was crowned the Ivorian Player of the Year, African Footballer of the Year and named in the FA Premier League Team of the Year. He was also runner-up to Cristiano Ronaldo in the PFA Player of the Year awards.

By the 2010 season, there were over 50 African players signed for Premiership teams. With teams like Chelsea, Arsenal and Portsmouth loosing key players to the African Cup of Nations tournament, some questioned the timing of the competition and whether it should be changed in line with the European football season. However, the debate, further underlined the importance of African players to their respective teams.

The success of African players in the Premiership has been remarkable. Racism has subsided as the fans and clubs have realised how vital the African presence is to their team's survival. The footballing pioneers of the 1870s through to the players of today, together with the work of fans groups and, latterly, national organisations such as (now defunct) The Commission for Racial Equity, Kick it Out, the Footballers Supporters Association (FSA), Professional Footballers Association (PFA) have paved the way the Premiership to be a more enjoyable league to play in.

These ambassadors from Africa have distinguished themselves on and off the pitch. Off the pitch, they have become role models for many young people. They have broken down cultural, racial and social barriers. The good work that most of the players do stretches back to Africa, where many of them are involved in charity work, giving back to those whose support and adoration cannot be quantified. The English Premiership is also the biggest crowd puller in Africa. Presently, African footballers in Europe exceeding the totals of all Asian, North American and Oceania representation combined. Only South America supplies more players.

More Africans have also broken through into coaching and management, the Malian born Jean Tigana having found success as a player with France, later became a trainer and manager of note, including seasons at Fulham where he guided them into the Premiership.

It remains to be seen whether the investment in infrastructure in South Africa for the African continent's long overdue World Cup in 2010 will push the professional game in that country onto a level where it can compare with the North African leagues, such as Egypt which manages to retain a large number of its players. Of the team that won the 2008 Africa Cup of Nations, all but a few of the Pharaohs played domestic club football.

Thabe (1983) p24.

See appendix for more material on these tours and West African footballers in Britain.

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Peterborough Citizen & Advertiser 30 August 1955.

Ibid., 2 September 1955.

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Ibid., 27 September 1955.

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Rogan Taylor and Andy Ward *Three Sides of the Mersey. An Oral History of Everton, Liverpool and Tranmere Rovers* (London 1993) p208. Thanks to Andy Ward for drawing this to my attention.

Phil Vasili 'The Entry of Young Black British Players into Professional Football at Elite Level' a report for *Black Britain* BBC 2, broadcast October 1997.

Cambridge Daily News, 11 October 1961.

Ibid., 7 October 1961.

Ibid., 10 October

Ibid., 11, 17 October; 21, 27 November 1961. Thanks to Neil Harvey for information on Feyami.

Ibid., 14th December 1961.