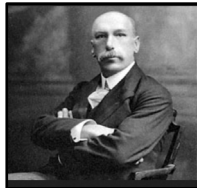


Did Arsenal bribe its way into the First Division in 1919, at the expense of Spurs?

How is this question still being asked, over 100 years later? We need to go back a few more years to understand why.

Football in 1914

Before the war, The Arsenal had moved to Highbury, but was losing money. It was thanks to club Chairman, Henry Norris, that it survived. Playing in the Football League Division Two, *Athletic News*, the leading sports paper of the time, shows the club finishing in sixth position in 1915, well behind Derby and Preston, who would be promoted to the First Division.



THE LEAGUE.—Division II.							
FINAL TABLE.							
	—Goals—						
	Pld.	Won	Lost	Drawn	For	Agst.	Pts
Derby County	38	23	8	7	71	53	53
Preston North E.	38	20	8	10	61	42	50
Barnsley	38	22	13	3	51	51	47
Wolverhampton W.	38	19	12	7	77	52	45
Birmingham	38	17	12	9	62	39	43
The Arsenal	38	19	14	5	69	41	43
Hull City	38	19	14	5	65	54	43
Huddersfield	38	17	12	9	61	49	43

Going the other way would be Chelsea and Tottenham.

Manchester United	38	8	6	5	27	19	1	6	12	19	43	30
Chelsea	38	8	6	5	32	25	0	7	12	19	40	29
Tottenham Hotspur	38	7	7	5	30	29	1	5	13	27	61	28

Bottom of Division One 1914/15

Except the next season didn't happen. The League was suspended because of war.

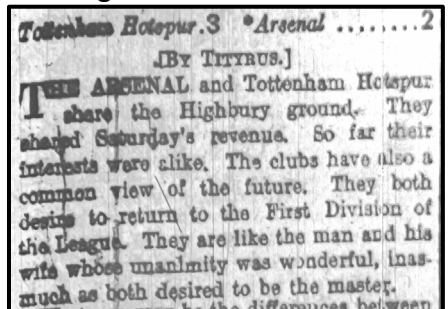


Arsenal Squad 1914-15

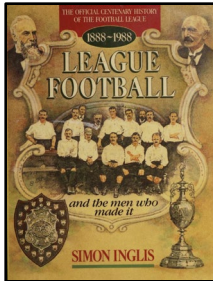
www.footballandthefirstworldwar.org

First World War

For the duration of war, London clubs played in the London Combination. *Athletic News* wrote of “no undue rivalry” between Arsenal and Spurs, though with both desiring to return to the First Division, they were like “the man and his wife,” with each wanting to be the master!



But for the Football League, the war was creating financial difficulties. According to historian Simon Inglis (*League*



Football and the Men Who Made It) the League had only £65 to its name. Who helped out? Arsenal.

Through

Henry Norris, the club came to the League's rescue by donating 1% of gate receipts to it, and persuaded the other London clubs to do the same. In the opinion of Inglis, this put Norris in a position of influence.

Who was Henry Norris?

Aside from being Chairman of The Arsenal, Henry Norris was a Director of Fulham FC, an MP, Mayor of Fulham, knighted in 1917 and more besides. Inglis describes him as a "tall, thin, domineering man with bull-terrier features." Tony Attwood of the *AISA Arsenal History Society*, sees him as "an incredibly forward-thinking politician," citing how he had

argued against the maximum wage in football, was in favour of equal pay for women and pensions for repatriated soldiers, and cutting rail fares. Added to that, he was known as the man who funded the Footballers' Battalion. Indeed, Arsenal were very much seen as 'the soldiers' team', men who made the munitions with which the British army had fought the recently concluded war. Soldiers across the country supported their local team of course, but often also supported Arsenal as well.

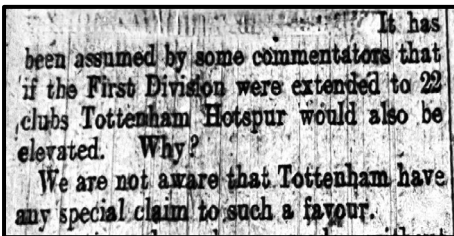
Restarting the League

Change was in the air after the war. As well as the promoted teams, it was proposed two more teams would join the First Division. One should be Chelsea because, it turned out, they should not have been in a relegation position at all. Manchester United and Liverpool players had rigged a match in 1915, meaning United escaped the bottom two. While both those teams avoided sanction, Chelsea, it was agreed, should not go down but be one of the additional

teams, to - in the words of *Athletic News* - "ensure justice." That left one place for the First Division. Surely, it was bound to be the other 'relegated' team, Spurs? Not according to *Athletic News*. "Why?" it asked.



"We are not aware that Tottenham have any special claim to such a favour"



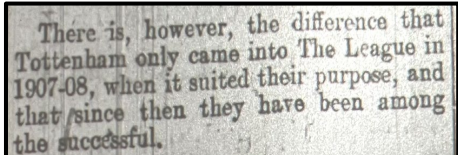
All the clubs wanting promotion canvassed for support, with Spurs and Arsenal sending out circulars on why they should be in Division One. *Athletic News* was keen to highlight "The Arsenal's Appeal" of "precedent, patriotism, privilege," alongside the club's longevity in the Football League and its loyalty and unstinting support of the League.

The Arsenal's Appeal.

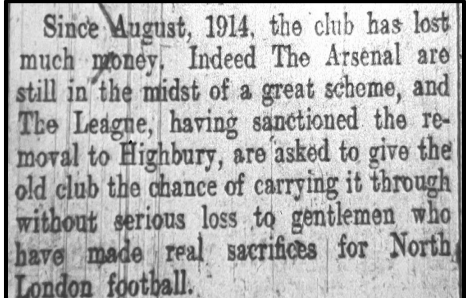
The Arsenal scout precedent, patriotism, privilege, and any other plea but one of service. The Arsenal have been members of The League for 26 years.

As the pioneers of professionalism in the South, they refused to join any other organisation. In the Metropolis The Arsenal have always kept the flag of The League at masthead.

Tottenham was different, according to *Athletic News*. They had only joined the League when it suited them, and this had led to their being "among the successful."



But for Henry Norris, *Athletic News* had nothing but praise for "the real sacrifices" he'd made for the sake of the club, through the move to Highbury. And being in the First Division was the only way of avoiding serious loss, it reasoned.



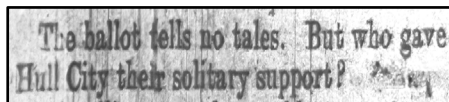
What happened?

Chelsea were duly re-elected, and *The Sportsman* newspaper reported that the meeting, “after discussion, subsequently decided that the other club for the First Division should be The Arsenal.”



The Sportsman 1919

Votes cast were Arsenal 18, Tottenham 8, Barnsley 5, Wolverhampton 4, Nottingham Forest 3, Birmingham 2, Hull 1. All appears to have been carried out without controversy, and no rumours of underhand payments were reported, although *The Sportsman* adds, rather enigmatically, “The ballot tells no tales,” and wonders who voted for Hull. (Hull, maybe?)



When did the stories of something untoward begin to circulate - and why?

In his book, *Rebels for the Cause: The Alternative History of Arsenal Football Club (2003)*, journalist Jon Spurling writes, “*Lucky Arsenal* and *Cheating Arsenal* were two of the more complimentary titles bestowed upon the club at the time.” He writes of dodgy dealings, observing that “longevity of



service” had never been a reason for promotion and accuses Norris of threatening to “force government action against a corrupt Football League.” This, he argues, persuaded the League hierarchy to push through a secret deal to placate Norris – election to División One. “It wasn’t ethical, and it wasn’t ‘right’,” Spurling says, “but pragmatist that Norris was, he would point out that the collusion between Liverpool and United was even worse and they went unpunished.”

The *Official Illustrated History of Arsenal* (Soar and Tyler, 2004) goes further, referring to 'the involvement of significant amounts of money,' and Wikipedia uses this as its source for "alleged bribery."

But Simon Inglis states quite clearly that Norris was never found guilty of improper conduct in 1919, writing, "If financial inducements were offered, nothing has been proved and there are no surviving documents to provide clues."

So where do the bribery stories come from?

Aside from the newspapers, the only written record from contemporaries comes from Leslie Knighton, The Arsenal manager in 1919. In his autobiography, *Behind the Scenes in Big Football* (1948), he describes Norris's influence as enormous, adding "Everyone was afraid of Sir Henry. And no wonder! I have never met his equal for logic, invective and ruthlessness against all who opposed him."

And of the election of the club, he says Norris had the power to

withdraw all the southern sides from the Football League. With London powering the growth of interest in professional football, establishing the Southern League as a potential rival would be disastrous for



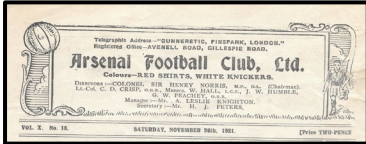
the League. Knighton also says Norris would "speak to an important person, reminding a certain financier (that he had)

once done him a good turn and been promised a return of it." Could Knighton be the source of the stories?

If so, what's significant here is that Knighton had been sacked as Manager by Norris in 1925 - and had taken it badly. "My years with The Arsenal," Knighton wrote, "helped bring that club to the doors of the hall of fame; and my disagreement with my Chairman (Norris) as to how we should conduct ourselves within those alarming portals led to my dismissal."

So, can his memoir be trusted? Not according to Tony Attwood, who adds, "My feeling is that the story about

the 1919 election being fixed started to emerge some 24 or 25 years after the events,” he says. “This was after Norris was removed from the Arsenal



Board following a variety of other allegations, including match-fixing and players being given performance-enhancing drugs.” Attwood continues, “The Arsenal Board was not interested in promoting the image of Henry Norris as a ‘good guy’. The story that he fixed things illegally played into their hands, and they didn't care anymore. With Norris dying in 1934, anyone who wanted to spread malicious rumours about the origins of the Arsenal triumphs had little chance of being taken to court.”

So what is the truth?

Perhaps the answer lies in that Sir Henry Norris, being rich, powerful and a knight of the realm, outranked all his rivals in the Football League. He would have made full use of his

influence to persuade his fellow chairmen before the meeting. After all, the vote was never going to be a show of hands any more than a UN or G7 decision is. But bribery? There is no evidence.

Yet the anecdotes and rumours continue to swirl, serving to damage, as Tony Attwood observes, “the reputation of the man who saved Arsenal from extinction and invested much of his fortune in the club.” Ironically, while Norris eventually realised his dream of making Arsenal a ‘super club’ (Spurling’s words), he died before its first great successes. What’s indisputable is that Arsenal has been in the top tier ever since, with this season the 99th consecutive season of playing at the top – way ahead of anyone else.

One final thought

Before those from N17 voice a complaint, all this research has dug up one little talked-about nugget.

Spurling’s book notes that Tottenham gained promotion themselves in unexplained

circumstances. “When Spurs gained Football League status in 1908,” he writes, “they didn’t win the Southern League at all. They’d finished eighth that season but still mysteriously gained promotion. The story behind Arsenal’s rivals’ elevation to the Football League has never been properly explained and is conveniently forgotten when the insults start flying around.”

But the 1919 election? Perhaps it’s like the Loch Ness Monster - a better story if it doesn’t have a proper ending!



For more insights and details about Henry Norris, check out: blog.woolwicharsenal.co.uk/henry-norris-at-the-arsenal

Rebels for the Cause – Jon Spurling (Mainstream Publishing - 2003)
League Football and the Men Who Made it - Simon Inglis (Willow - 1988)
Official Illustrated History of Arsenal - Soar/Tyler (Octopus - 2002)
Behind the Scenes in Big Football - Henry Norris (Stanley Paul - 1948)

The 2023-24 season with AISA

What have we done over the past twelve months?



Standing on the surviving terraces of the Woolwich Arsenal ground in Plumstead

One event took us to Plumstead; at another, ex-youth team coach Roy Massey told us of his time at the club, including about Harry Kane, Jack Wilshire and more;

Liam Brady explained - when he was quizzed about his new book -



why he bottled some tackles; and Stuart MacFarlane opened up about life as the club’s official photographer, showing us some of his favourite

Arsenal pictures and explaining why he's safe from losing his job to Martin Ødergaard!



We have been very involved in match day Foodbanks, helping donations grow from collecting £50-60 per game to exceeding £1,400, thanks to the generosity of our passionate fan base.



Foodbanks will run this coming season at all men and women's daytime matches.

We are also becoming more involved with *Arsenal In The Community* in the coming season. Watch this space!

Behind the scenes, we have continued to be members of

working groups and club consultations on ticketing and the women's game.

As members of the Arsenal Advisory Board (AAB) we have continued to push the club on things that matter to our members (ticket prices, the ballot, the match day experience) and, perhaps most importantly, helped to shape the AAB so it functions as a properly democratic and inclusive institution, where the voices of fans are not only heard but are listened to.

We have also forged closer links with the fan representatives on the board so we can hold the club to account more effectively. The AAB remains a 'work in progress' but we believe the effort is worth it and that relations between the fans and the club have never been better; a positive echo of the relationship between supporters in the stadium and the players on the pitch.



Please keep checking our social media, including aisa.org; <https://aisa.org/members/> Twitter/X: @AISA_Arsenal Facebook: ArsenalAISA