

## **Sandbach History Society: Report of the September 2024 meeting**

**Speaker: Margaret Roberts**

At the September meeting of the Sandbach History Society, Margaret Roberts, a local sports historian and Chair of the Family History Society of Cheshire, talked about the early history of women's football and in particular Fodens Ladies football team from Sandbach. She has carried out a great deal of research using personal sources, newspapers, archives at the National Football Museum in Manchester and the in-house newspaper Foden News. She illustrated her talk with many examples of reports of matches over the years.

Margaret began by saying that whilst women's football is flourishing today, in the past it has been subjected to sexism, discrimination and ridicule and was even banned from taking place at football league grounds in the 1920s. Early newspaper reports were uncomplimentary, for example a letter in the Manchester Evening News in 1873 stated that women's sports should not be encouraged and that women should not be playing football. The attitude that it was a man's game persisted well into the twentieth century.

Whilst there were matches previously, she said that the first competitive games were played in the early part of the twentieth century. However, it was not until the First World War when women took over the jobs of men who had gone to war in munitions factories that work-based women's teams were formed and matches were organised to raise money for local charities. Many matches are reported in the local newspapers and Margaret gave several examples. For instance, in 1917 a match was held at Middlewich between Lostock Ladies team and the local Electro Bleach Ladies team. This was attended by between three and four thousand spectators and raised money for the Victoria Infirmary in Northwich.

However, once the war ended many women lost their jobs in the factories as the men returned. Some teams were disbanded and women's football declined. The general view about women's football also began to change as many in the medical profession expressed the view that it was physically unsuitable for women. The Football Association were concerned and decided to act. They had also been made aware that there was a suggestion that some of the money from gate receipts from women's matches was not being passed on to charities but kept as expenses. So, in December 1921 the English FA Consultative Commission banned women's football teams from using FA grounds. This meant that women's games had to be played in other locations such as rugby and cricket grounds and public parks for nearly 50 years until the ban was lifted in 1971 after the Women's Football Association was formed.

Between the wars women's football was still played, for example locally the team from Zan aluminium works in Wheelock played many matches against local teams. The Second World War interrupted any further development of women's football in Cheshire until the 1960s when Fodens Ladies was formed. This was a time when women's football was still fighting for recognition and its creation was a significant step in promoting the sport. Based on Foden's works at Elworth, players were initially women working at the works but in time it came to include those who did not. Margaret's research indicates that the team was officially formed in 1961 and they first played charity matches. The team developed over time to become one of the most influential and successful teams in the North-West.

Margaret said that in the mid-1960s the team was struggling to recruit players and in 1966 there are newspaper reports of Fodens fielding Jeannie Allott, a 10 year old primary school pupil who went on to become an international footballer in later life. In 1966, a rare report in the Foden News described a charity match at Farnworth between Fodens Ladies and a Northern Television TV Select which included Stuart Hall, Kenny Lynch, Bill Grundy and Malcolm Allison. Fodens won 6-5 and the goalkeeper, Wendy Higgins was commended for her performance

At the end of the 1960s Fodens took part in organised leagues and competitions and the team travelled to various Butlins camp around the country to take part in the annual women's football tournament. Organised by the TV presenter, Hughie Green the knock-out tournament was called the Butlins Cup. Fodens won the competition in 1969 and 1970 which led them to be described as British champions. In the 1969 match Fodens played Westthorn from Glasgow and this was seen at the time as an England v Scotland match. The 1970 final was held at Minehead and Fodens beat their southern rivals Southampton 5-1.

Locally, as well as the Fodens team from Elworth there was also a women's team from ERF trucks of Sandbach and in 1974 they won the first division whilst Fodens won the first division. A joint awards evening and celebration was held. Also, in 1974 Fodens defeated Southampton 2-1 in the first final of the Women's FA Cup sponsored by Mitre.

In the 1970s the team went on several European tours and they now received more attention from Fodens management as they were seen as carrying out an ambassadorial role for the company. In the tour of Holland in 1975 the Fodens team included six England internationals. The tour was considered special by the players as firstly it lasted a whole week and secondly they were able to use the Foden's Band coach as it was not required by the band. A further tour of Belgium in 1977 was successful.

Finally, Margaret talked about some of the players who have played for Fodens Ladies. Firstly, Sylvia Gore who joined Fodens in 1967 and was in the National team in 1971 and the FA Cup final of 1974. Even though an international player she still had to play her travelling expenses. Sylvia retired at the age of 36 and became a manager. She formed Knowsley Ladies which became Liverpool FC Ladies. She died in 2017.

Margaret then talked about Joan Tench who made 200 appearances for Fodens and Sheila Parker who was captain of the England team in 1971 and subsequently a referee. One of the best known of Fodens footballers is Jeannie Allott, already mentioned as she played for Fodens at the age of 10. She played for Fodens for 8 years and then moved to Holland where there was a more enlightened view of women's football. She played both for England and for the Dutch National Team. She still lives in Holland.

More recently the era of works-related football teams has been superseded by professional women's teams associated with the larger football clubs such as Manchester United and Manchester City. However, In their time Fodens Ladies were one of the best teams in the land and Margaret is working hard to ensure they are not forgotten. She is continuing her research and is planning to write a book about the team. If anyone has information and memories of Fodens Ladies she would be very pleased to hear from them. Her e-mail is [TheWelshTerrier@outlook.com](mailto:TheWelshTerrier@outlook.com)

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society will be on Tuesday October 1st at 8.00pm at Sandbach Library when John Higgins will talk about his research into the history of St Mary's Church in Sandbach.

For more information, go to the Society website, <https://sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk> or contact Aileen Thompson at 01270 760810 or e-mail her at [aileen.thompson@btinternet.com](mailto:aileen.thompson@btinternet.com)



Fodens Ladies Football team, 1963 with the Camm Challenge Trophy (Foden News)



Fodens Ladies Football team. 1979 (Foden News)