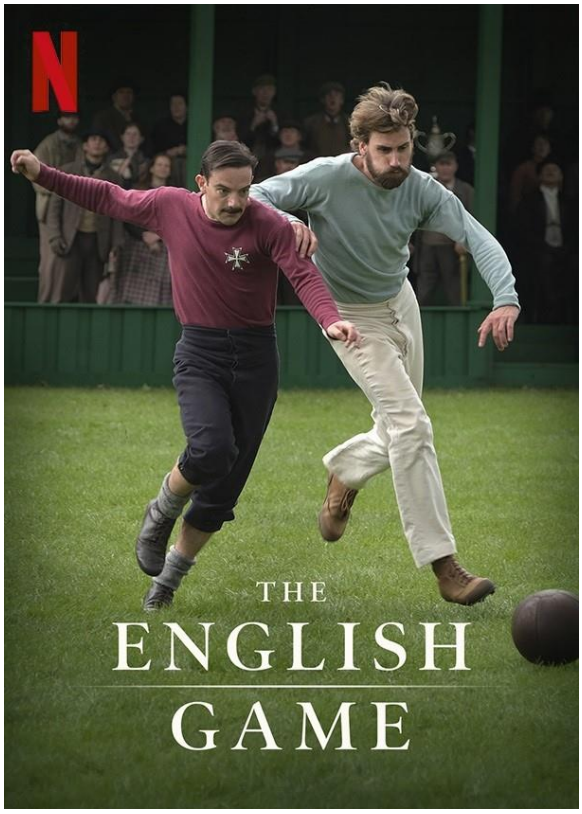
Talk by Andy Mitchell at Football History Conference 2025 in Belfast

‘THE ENGLISH GAME’

FIVE YEARS ON

Andy Mitchell



When Netflix broadcast their series *The English Game* in the spring of 2020, just as the world went into Covid lockdown, it introduced a rare dramatization of early football history by mainstream media. But although the story of Fergie Suter and his rivalry with Arthur Kinnaird was based on a true story, the screenplay contained numerous diversions from reality.

At the time, I remember thinking: this will really wake up the film world to the vast potential of historical football drama. Five years on I’m wondering, was I being naïve? Did *The English Game* succeed in popularising football history?

In this presentation I will examine that question, mention some of the positives and negatives arising from the series, and will benchmark it against some other football-related dramas. Hopefully this will provoke a lively debate and we can have a discussion at the end.

To start with, a quick show of hands. Who has actually watched *The English Game*? [*about two thirds of the audience*]. That is perhaps not surprising as only about half of UK households have access to Netflix, so even for a room full of football historians, not everyone has had the chance to see it. Eventually it might be sold on to free-to-air channels but there is no sign of that, and as Netflix don’t release audience figures it is impossible to say how big a reach the programme had.





Script by Oscar-winning Julian Fellowes

No awards, mixed reviews, eg:

“Football merely provides a background anchor point for what is basically six episodes of melodramatic, angsty, relationship mush … I watched all six episodes because I love my wife and she really enjoyed it.”

So, how good was it? Despite having Julian Fellowes on board, the celebrated Oscar-winning creator of Gosford Park and Downton Abbey, *The English Game* did not win a single award, and as far as I can tell it was not even nominated for one.

Reviews were decidedly mixed, and having read through a lot of them, the overall impression I get is that it appealed more to Downton Abbey fans than to football fans. Anyone who enjoys football would probably prefer live action, anyone interested in football history was irritated at the inaccuracies, and even Downton fans found it not a patch on the real thing.

Here's one review which sums up those views: “Football merely provides a background anchor point for what is basically six episodes of melodramatic, angsty, relationship mush … I watched all six episodes because I love my wife and she really enjoyed it.”

Worldwide reach for The English Game



On the other hand, the series did have a worldwide reach, not just in the English-speaking world where it is available in USA, Australia and Canada. It was dubbed into a number of languages and appears to have gone down well in countries like Japan and Spain.

Perhaps an insurmountable challenge for makers of drama is that by far the biggest audience for football is watching it live, and broadcasters can fill their boots with what is on offer, according to their budget. Why go to all the time, trouble and expense of making a historical drama?

The clash of cultures, finding the moral high ground

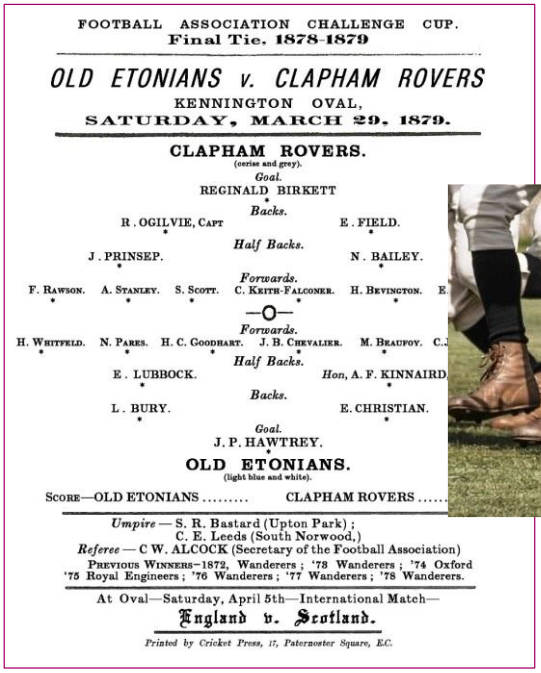


On some levels, the series does succeed. It follows the stories of Fergus Suter and Arthur Kinnaird, drawing parallels between these men who both have a love story, both have family troubles, both juggle work and play - yet they are united by football. And following the ‘HEA’ formula for romantic novels, outlined by Kasey in her talk earlier, they were ‘happy ever after’.

It captures the clash of cultures between working class and upper class, showing how football could bring them together in a way that would never have happened in their day-to-day lives. It shows the importance of football in working class culture, exemplified by the passion of local supporters.

It also carries moral messages about things like fair play and family values, and is sympathetic to forward-thinking men like Kinnaird and Suter, but critical of ‘the establishment’ such as Francis Marindin at the FA and the mill owners.

Attention to detail in some aspects, not in others



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION CHALLENGE CUP.
Final Tie. 1878-1879

OLD ETONIANS v. CLAPHAM ROVERS

KENNINGTON OVAL,
SATURDAY, MARCH 29. 1879.

CLAPHAM ROVERS.
(cerise and grey).

Goal.
REGINALD BIRKETT

Backs.
R. OGILVIE, Capt — E. FIELD.

Half Backs.
J. PRINSEP. — N. BAILEY.

Forwards.
F. Rawson. A. Stanley. S. Scott. C. Keith-Falconer. H. Bevington. E.

—O—

Forwards.
H. Whitfield. N. Pares. H. C. Goodhart. J. B. Chevalier. M. Beaufoy. C.

Half Backs.
E. LUBBOCK. — Hon. A. F. KINNAIRD.

Backs.
L. BURY. — E. CHRISTIAN.

Goal.
J. P. HAWTREY.

OLD ETONIANS.
(light blue and white).

Score—OLD ETONIANS ..... CLAPHAM ROVERS .....

Umpire — S. R. Bastard (Upton Park);
C. E. Leeds (South Norwood,)
Referee — C W. ALCOCK (Secretary of the Football Association)
Previous Winners—1872, Wanderers; '73 Wanderers; '74 Oxford
'75 Royal Engineers; '76 Wanderers; '77 Wanderers; '78 Wanderers.

At Oval—Saturday, April 5th—International Match—
England v. Scotland.

Printed by Cricket Press, 17, Paternoster Square, E.C.

A mock-up of the match card for the 1879 FA Cup final

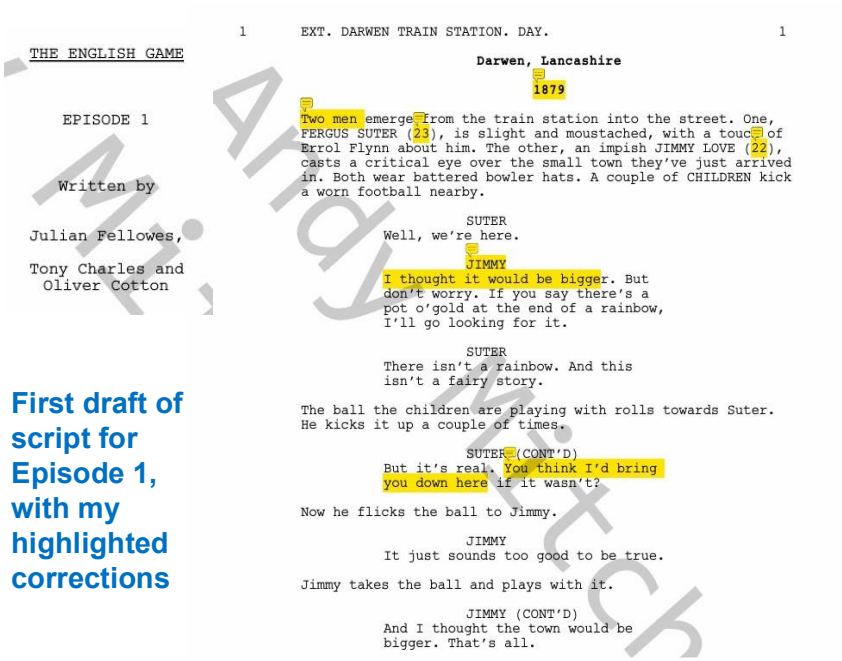


Boots, playing gear and balls – all made to order

In some respects they went overboard. As a historical consultant for the series, I had numerous conversations with the script team on things like what an umpire would wear, where he would stand, what kind of whistle he would use, and when he would use it.

The wardrobe department didn't just dress people in period clothes, they spent hours getting intricate details right - things like the balls and the boots, for example. They made exact replicas of the trophy and medals, and even mocked up a match card for an FA Cup final which I don't think ever made it on screen.

And they had a choreographer who made sure they got the football tactics right, doing quite a good job in portraying the differences between the old dribbling game and the innovative passing game that Suter introduced to Darwen.



THE ENGLISH GAME

EPISODE 1

Written by

Julian Fellowes,

Tony Charles and Oliver Cotton

1 EXT. DARWEN TRAIN STATION. DAY. 1

Darwen, Lancashire

1879

Two men emerge from the train station into the street. One, FERGUS SUTER (23), is slight and moustached, with a touch of Errol Flynn about him. The other, an impish JIMMY LOVE (22), casts a critical eye over the small town they've just arrived in. Both wear battered bowler hats. A couple of CHILDREN kick a worn football nearby.

SUTER
Well, we're here.

JIMMY
I thought it would be bigger. But don't worry. If you say there's a pot o'gold at the end of a rainbow, I'll go looking for it.

SUTER
There isn't a rainbow. And this isn't a fairy story.

The ball the children are playing with rolls towards Suter. He kicks it up a couple of times.

SUTER (CONT'D)
But it's real. You think I'd bring you down here if it wasn't?

Now he flicks the ball to Jimmy.

JIMMY
It just sounds too good to be true.

Jimmy takes the ball and plays with it.

JIMMY (CONT'D)
And I thought the town would be bigger. That's all.

Mr. Andy Partick

First draft of script for Episode 1, with my highlighted corrections

So, what about the negatives? The most common complaint about *The English Game* is that the scriptwriters diverged from history far too often.

I was all too aware of this as soon as they starting sending me draft scripts. This is just the first page of Episode 1 and the yellow marks are my highlighted corrections – the very first line describes Fergus Suter and Jimmy Love emerging together from Darwen train station, whereas they arrived a month apart. They talk as though they had never seen Darwen before, but in fact they had already visited with Partick to play friendlies. Their ages are wrong. And the whole inference is that they had been headhunted by Darwen, whereas in fact they made their own decisions to leave Glasgow.

Moving forward, it's easy to nitpick errors, large and small, because once you start looking for discrepancies, they are everywhere: the events, the locations, the characters who were not there at the time and the exclusion of people who were.

The most obvious, and most contentious, was the merging of Blackburn Rovers and Blackburn Olympic into a single team called simply Blackburn FC, to cover the inconvenient truth that Blackburn Olympic were the first northern team to win the FA Cup in 1883, beating Old Etonians, but Suter first won the trophy with Blackburn Rovers a year later, beating Queen's Park.

Plenty of people have criticised the series because the balance between accuracy and drama swung too much in favour of drama. But does it really matter? Most historical dramas on film and TV are based on true stories, but they add or subtract detail for the sake of telling the story. That's how drama has always worked – did people complain about the historical accuracy of Shakespeare? So in a sense it is best not to get too worked up about accuracy and enjoy *The English Game* as entertainment rather than pseudo-documentary.

Restoration of Fergie Suter's grave in Blackburn Old Cemetery

Carried out by local woman Jacqueline McAleese, who was inspired by the programme.



Returning to my core question, it is hard to measure what impact the programme had on inspiring an interest in football history, but there were certainly some tangible outcomes.

Fergie Suter's gravestone in Blackburn was restored by Jacqueline McAleese, a local woman who was captivated by the series.

It was also effective in inspiring people to do their own research, to find out more, as clearly people who watch the show then google the key characters and events. If you track certain search terms and names on the internet there is a massive spike in 2020 which took a while to subside.

Visits to my own website soared, and stories I had written a few years earlier about Jimmy Love and Fergie Suter attracted many thousands of new readers, many of whom left complimentary messages. Similarly my biography of Arthur Kinnaird took on a new lease of life and I brought out an updated edition, which paid off rather nicely. And even Jimmy Love, previously a shadowy figure, now has his own Wikipedia page.

But has there also been a downside? Views on social media tend to be polarised and opinionated among football historians, but clearly some people think *The English Game* was a travesty, complaining about the inaccuracies and insisting that there were much better stories out there that should have been filmed instead.

The term 'Scotch Professor', ie paid professional footballers from Scotland, entered the mainstream, having previously been a fairly obscure description but I get the

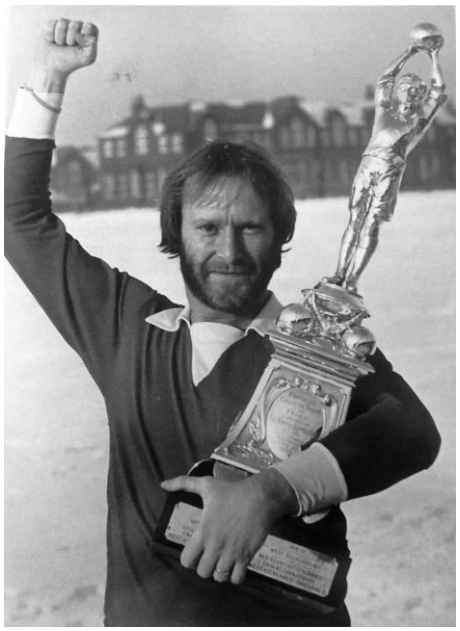
impression that a lot of people have jumped on the bandwagon, and the term is now bandied about either as though it was a mass movement or an insult.

Perhaps it is a coincidence, but a year after the programme, in 2021, no less than two football city bids for UNESCO world heritage status were launched, in Sheffield and then Glasgow. In their eagerness to be declared ‘the home of football’, whatever that means, I do feel that the promoters have tunnel vision about the importance of their own city to the exclusion of all else. Similar arguments could be made for London, Edinburgh, Cambridge or other places, all of whom contributed significantly to the growth of the game, and clearly there is no single ‘home of football’.

As people get entrenched in their views, there appear to be more arguments on social media - and yes I’ve been a part of that on occasion. It almost feels like a reopening of the ‘origins of football’ debate from 20 years ago, but largely based on emotion and vested interest, rather than facts and rational discussion.

Overall, however, the pros and cons of the series are almost impossible to measure, so let’s compare *The English Game* to some more football history on film and TV.

A Captain’s Tale (1982) – West Auckland





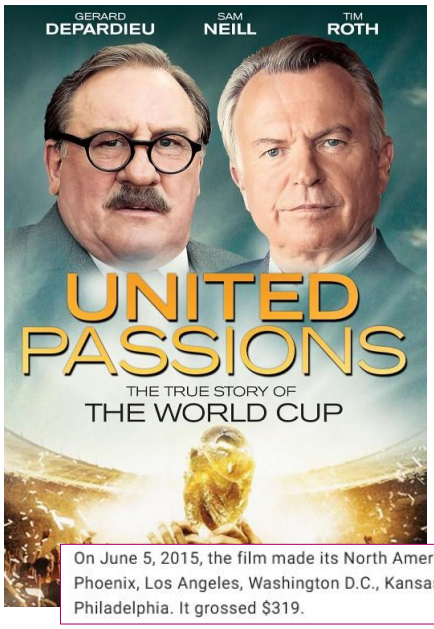


Perhaps the closest was the 1982 television drama, *A Captain’s Tale*, which told the wonderful tale of West Auckland winning the Lipton Trophy in Italy in 1909. It’s online if you haven’t seen it. Again it takes huge liberties with the truth in an effort to spin a good yarn, and parts of the story have entered legend despite being demonstrably untrue – perhaps because they didn’t have social media warriors in those days to put everyone right.

For example, there's the suggestion that the Italians thought WAFC were going to be Woolwich Arsenal – but local papers actually wrote about West Auckland for several weeks beforehand, so they knew who they were getting. Or the idea that Sir Thomas Lipton masterminded the competition, whereas he didn't even attend and was on his yacht at the time. And it certainly wasn't a World Cup, it was the second edition of a four-club tournament organised by a Turin sports paper.

Which all goes to show that television dramas can colour public perceptions of football history.

United Passions (2014) – FIFA vanity project





On June 5, 2015, the film made its North American premiere at 10 movie theaters in New York, Phoenix, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Kansas City, Miami, Minneapolis, Dallas, Houston, and Philadelphia. It grossed $319.

From the sublime to the ridiculous, *United Passions* was billed as the true story of the World Cup, which sounds like an enticing prospect, but in fact it was film's equivalent of vanity publishing, a hugely expensive flop that was bankrolled by FIFA in the Sepp Blatter era.

It set records for the lowest amount of takings at the box office, and the lowest ratings ever seen. As almost nobody saw it, it had no influence whatsoever, and if it has any virtue at all, it stands as a testament to how not to do football drama.

Football movies, a selection through time



Thankfully there have been a number of decent football films, and here are a few of them.

Escuela de Campeones (the School of Champions) – a 1950 film telling the life story of Scottish pioneer Alexander Watson Hutton and his impact on Argentinian football.
The Game of their Lives – there have actually been two films of this name, one on the USA at the 1950 World Cup, and another about North Korea in England at the 1966 World Cup.
Das Wunder von Bern (The Miracle of Bern) – Germany win the World Cup in 1954.
The Damned United – Brian Clough's turbulent time at Leeds.
United – about the 1958 Munich disaster.
The Keeper – about Manchester City's German goalkeeper Bert Trautmann.
Pele, birth of a legend – which speak for itself.

All of these have been single-episode films rather than a multi-part drama series, which makes *The English Game* all the more unusual.

It is perhaps surprising that other historical topics have not yet made the silver screen, and on the face of it there is enormous potential: obvious subjects might be the British Ladies Football Club, England's World Cup win* or the Dynamo Kiev team that stood up to the Nazis. Or some remarkable characters, perhaps Billy Meredith or Hughie Gallacher - you could take your pick.

But perhaps it is easier just to make it all up. Once you move into the realm of fiction, there are dozens of films and TV series, from the pre-war *Arsenal Stadium Mystery*, to modern classics like *Escape to Victory*, Ally McCoist's *A Shot at Glory* and of course the mighty *Ted Lasso*. There are plenty more, and of course I haven't even mentioned the theatre.

** One of the audience pointed out the TV drama series Tina and Bobby (2017) which included the 1966 World Cup, and which I had forgotten about.*

Thank you!



Andy Mitchell

www.scottishsporthistory.com

So to conclude, what I really want to ask is – do you think *The English Game* has been a force for good, and brought more people into football history, or has it simply muddied the waters, provoking needless arguments?

More widely, is drama the best way to cover football history, or do you think it would be better to focus on factual, and accurate, documentary?

And finally, what topics or stories are crying out to be covered by the big screen?

Over to you! Thanks for listening.