

## SOCCER'S KINDERGARTEN: KENT'S NURSERY CLUBS OF THE 1930s

The concept of the nursery club, whereby a senior club reaches a formal agreement with a more junior club that will allow youngsters to develop their skills away from the parent club, has begun to make a comeback in recent years. In modern parlance these are now termed 'feeder' or 'satellite' clubs but the relationship between, say, Manchester United and Royal Antwerp or Arsenal and KSK Beveren is essentially that of a traditional parent and nursery club. The fact that English clubs now make their arrangements with clubs abroad is a reflection both of the globalisation of the game and a desire to circumvent the more strict regulations on work permits applied here. Nurseries, of course, were commonplace in the 1930s, indeed the *Weekly Illustrated* newspaper of 29 August 1936 noted that, "Most first class clubs have nurseries for training and developing those men who have talent." In this article I shall focus on the nurseries in Kent generally and compare the situation at the two best known of these nurseries:

Northfleet United (Tottenham Hotspur) and Margate (Arsenal). At least two other full nursery relationships existed within the county: Clapton Orient and Ashford (1934-35) and Bexleyheath & Welling and Charlton Athletic

(from 1935-36), plus numerous 'informal arrangements' between the county's clubs and Football League sides, and these will occasionally be referred to. I shall consider in turn how and why the nursery arrangements were established, how they actually operated, how successful they were in developing talent and the advantages and disadvantages for the clubs involved.



*Detail from a programme cover for Margate from the 1936-37 season, proudly noting the club's association with Arsenal (Jeff Trice)*

The transition from star schoolboy footballer to professional player was not quite so smooth in the inter-war period as it is today. Boys usually left full-time education at 14 in those days and were forbidden from signing terms until their 17th birthday. There were no apprenticeship schemes, although occasionally a talented boy might be taken on the groundstaff of one of the bigger clubs, but even then few were ready to take their place in the competitive world of reserve-team football. In fact most of those who eventually enjoyed a career in professional football began their working life as an apprentice or trainee, often in the industrial sectors that dominated working-class employment. After two or three years of operating in age group or junior football they would be spotted by talent scouts and, if good enough, signed up by a Football League club. However, there was a long way to go until the youngster was ready for action in the Central League or Football Combination, and to bridge this gap Tottenham, and other senior clubs, began to develop the practice of 'farming out' youngsters to junior clubs in the local area during the 1920s. Spurs used a number of clubs in north London including Barnet and Cheshunt of the Athenian League and Haywards Sports (Spartan League) and also established a formal nursery based in Ebbw Vale in south Wales. Even when senior clubs began to run third or 'A' teams the desire to accommodate new talent was such that 'farming out' continued, but by the early 1930s these arrangements started to take on a more formal standing.

Tottenham's relationship with Northfleet appears to have been initiated by the junior club in March 1922 when they attempted to recruit reserve full back Jimmy Ross from White Hart Lane as their manager. Northfleet offered terms of £8 per week, suggesting that £1 of this might be paid by Spurs in return for their having first call on any players over a three-year period. The offer was rejected, but in May of that year a formal agreement was made between the two clubs, unfortunately the Tottenham board minutes provide no further information on the nature of this deal. However, the Northfleet club were experiencing



financial problems and in February of 1923 the situation reached crisis point. "Northfleet are passing through one of the worst seasons from a financial standpoint, that has fallen to them so far in their history," noted the *Gravesend & Dartford Reporter*. (3 February 1924) This was something of an understatement, however, for the club was in grave danger of folding with expenses well adrift of the income from gate receipts. The reasons given were familiar: high local unemployment and a run of poor results were keeping the fans away and drastic surgery was needed. Manager Bert Lipsham was sacked, star player 'Jerry' Barnett was sold to Spurs with W Pilcher moving from White Hart Lane to Northfleet. The club now adopted a policy of playing a team of promising youngsters rather than experienced professionals, thus reducing their expenses considerably, and this appears to represent the start of a more formal relationship with Spurs. From the summer of 1923 up to half-a-dozen youngsters were placed at Northfleet, the first intake including Harry Skitt and Bill Lane. The former Falkirk player Billy Houston also arrived at the same time, apparently to take on the role of senior professional. Northfleet held an annual pre-season trial match behind closed doors at White Hart Lane under the watching eye of the Spurs' management, but otherwise there was rarely any public recognition of the relationship between the two clubs. Spurs were still farming out players elsewhere and the evidence suggests that the transition to full nursery status did not take place until the summer of 1931. It is from this point that Spurs installed Jimmy Anderson as trainer, from when the two clubs effectively shared staff, and also when the Spurs' handbook officially acknowledges the existence of the relationship.

In contrast to the gradual development of the relationship between Northfleet and Spurs, that between Margate and Arsenal began in a hail of publicity as a full-blown nursery arrangement. Arsenal were the leading club in England at the time, having just completed the second of their hat-trick of Football League titles. Manager George Allison, who had succeeded the late Herbert Chapman in June 1934, was a regular visitor to the Margate area, where his daughter attended a local school, and had also attended the opening of the Corporation medical baths in 1932, it is through the contacts he made in the area that the deal was struck. The Margate board seem to have been quite open about their motives - not only was there the attraction of playing future stars in their team, but as the club chairman bluntly put it, "We are getting a £150 team for a £30 or £40 'gate', which suits Margate." (*Isle of Thanet Gazette*, 28 July 1934) Needless to say, Margate were experiencing some financial difficulties, having made a net loss of around £300 the previous season. Arsenal's reasons for entering into the agreement were explained by chairman Major Sir Samuel Hill-Wood at a celebratory luncheon:

*In the past we have suffered very much because we have been unable to take likely boys of eighteen or nineteen found by our scouts. We could not play them. Perhaps unfortunately our second team is at the head of the London Combination year after year, and we dare not experiment with the team. It would only offend players hoping to get their Combination medal. What we wanted was some club willing and good enough to teach our young players for us. We can and do find lots of promising young boys, but they must have somewhere to play and be taught. (Isle of Thanet Gazette, 7 July 1934)*

Arsenal installed their own manager, Jack Ramsey, and appointed Peter McWilliam as the talent scout responsible for recruiting suitable players and allocating them to Margate. This was a significant move, for McWilliam had been the Tottenham manager when the initial deal with Northfleet had been made. There was a third party to the agreement, Margate Town Council, who owned the club's Hartsdown Park ground. The council appear to have viewed their involvement as an extension of their campaign to promote the town as a seaside resort and agreed to spend around £1,000 improving facilities at the stadium. Shortly before the start of the 1934-35 season a group of seven youngsters arrived in Margate to take their places in the team and soon Arsenal were providing the majority of the players in their line-up. The initial batch of seven comprised three young professionals (Carr, Whitehouse and Tuckett) and four juniors (Brooks, Brophy, Knott and McCarthy) the oldest of the group was just 21, many were teenagers. Part of the deal was that the parent club would pay 60 per cent of their wages, leaving Margate to fund the remaining 40 per cent.



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*A Northfleet United team group from 1936-37:*

*(Back row, left to right): S Levett (Hon sec), WJ Treadwell (Vice-chairman), A Smith, L Hiscoke, H Leonard, G Barron, R Burgess, J Roberts, C Revell, JB Lingham (President), WH Hardy (Chairman)*

*(Front row, left to right): J Anderson (trainer), F Cox, G Skinner, J Coxford, C Traylor, D Coulston, A Day (Andy Porter)*

How did the nurseries operate in practise? The former Spurs player Ron Burgess provides a detailed account of life at Northfleet in his autobiography:

*Each Saturday those members of the ground-staff who were registered playing members of the Northfleet club, would meet at the Tottenham ground to board a coach for London Bridge. There we caught a train for Northfleet, or wherever we were playing in Kent, for we were members of the Kent Senior League. ... We were a young side at Northfleet, for the average age of the lads, with the exception of our skipper and centre-half, Jack Coxford, could not have been more than 19 years. Jack was the "old head" amongst that bunch of sprightly youth, and what he didn't know about the game wasn't worth knowing! He did his best to impart some of his knowledge and experience to us by his grand example and influence. ... The football played in the Kent Senior League was far better than anything I had encountered up to that time. It was hard and the opposition was robust, but it did us no harm, for it taught us the value of all-out effort for the whole of the ninety minutes of each game. (Ron Burgess, *Football: My Life*, London, 1952, pp 27-29)*

The Spurs players trained at White Hart Lane during the week under Jimmy Anderson and only travelled to Kent on match days. This was in contrast to the situation at Margate, where the Arsenal youngsters lived and trained locally. Both, however operated on similar principles, with a manager employed by the parent club and an experienced professional or two to guide a team essentially comprising teenagers. Clapton Orient, who had a nursery arrangement with Ashford Town during the 1934-35 season, similarly appointed their own manager, Tommy Lucas, to run the team.

Tottenham seem to have done much better in the long term from their nursery arrangement than the Gunners. Certainly the arrangement was much more stable - Arsenal faced a number of administration problems in the early days of their relationship with Margate, firstly over their wish to play the strongest team in the Southern League (they were eventually forced to give precedence to Kent League fixtures for 1934-35) and secondly when they were eliminated from the FA Cup over player



registration discrepancies. A total of 37 players appeared in the Football League for Spurs after developing at Northfleet, nine of whom went on to gain full international honours. Margate, which served as a nursery for only four years, was not so productive, many of the youngsters only managing just a handful of appearances for the Gunners, although often featuring for other clubs later in their careers. The *Isle of Thanet Gazette* of 4 September 1937 listed a total of 20 players who had previously been associated with the Margate nursery and had moved on. Only one of these, Reg Lewis, proved a significant figure at Highbury, and although most of the others played in the Football League only one, Mal Griffiths, went on to appear at international level. Reference to Jeff Harris's *Arsenal Who's Who* suggests that only 13 players in total progressed from Margate to make a senior appearance for the Gunners, two of whom, Griffiths and Horace Cumner won full international caps, while a third, George Marks, appeared for England during the war. It should be noted, however, that Arsenal were one of the country's top clubs in the late 1930s, with a side packed full of stars, whereas Spurs were a Second Division club. Arsenal must have regarded the venture as a success for when the agreement with Margate fell through at the end of 1937-38 they set up an 'A' team which played in the Southern League during the following season operating from Enfield's ground.

For the junior clubs involved in these arrangements the rewards seemed obvious: they were gaining a team full of talented players for an apparent pittance, large crowds, success on the field and a cupboard full of trophies would follow without a doubt. At a time when many of the semi-professional clubs in the Kent and Southern Leagues were experiencing money problems, a nursery arrangement seemed to provide an instant solution. This was only partly true, although both Northfleet and Margate enjoyed unprecedented success on the field during their nursery periods. Northfleet won the Kent League on five occasions between 1931 and 1939, the Kent League Cup four times and the Kent Senior Cup once. Margate seemed almost invincible at times during their four-year spell as Arsenal's nursery: in 1935-36 they won the Southern League Central and Eastern Sections, the Kent Senior Cup, Kent Senior Shield and Kent League Cup, in 1936-37 they won the Southern League Midweek Section, Kent Senior Cup and Kent Senior Shield, and even in the final season of the arrangement they won the Kent League.

There were some obvious downsides: the senior clubs could recall players at any moment, thus producing a degree of instability within the nurseries, and the FA eventually banned nursery clubs from



*Margate with the Kent Senior Cup, 1935-36:*

*(Back row, left to right): W Arbuckle (trainer), John Millar, Jimmy Evans, Charlie Preedy, Charlie Walker, Harry Brophy, Paddy Doherty, Bill Green (match secretary)*

*(Front row, left to right): Dave Robbie, Andy Farr, Jack Lambert, John Davie, Joe Clare (Jeff Trice)*



entering the FA Cup, thus removing the possibility of a lucrative run in the competition. The problem of what might happen if a nursery club was drawn against their parent club had already been faced when Ashford Town hosted Clapton Orient in the first round in the 1934-35 season, but no decision was made until 1937. However, these were relatively minor issues.

The attraction of becoming a nursery was such that towards the end of the decade it almost reached a point when any Kent club facing financial difficulties would actively seek a senior club to provide salvation. Shortly before Ramsgate folded in the summer of 1936 the *Isle of Thanet Gazette* (9 May 1936) noted that, "The most common opinion now is that only by setting up as a rival nursery to Margate can Ramsgate hope to attract sufficient support." Chelsea and Fulham were both mentioned as possible partners but nothing materialised and the club folded. The truth was that the economic recession had a severe effect on Kent football for most of the 1930s, the semi-professional clubs in particular found that attendances (although in excess of today's levels) were producing income well short of that needed to pay wages and other expenses. Clubs unable to find a full nursery partner opted for 'informal' links with Football League clubs, presumably enabling the senior outfit to farm out players on a regular basis for a fee. Canterbury Waverley had an agreement with Crystal Palace and Ramsgate with Fulham during the middle of the decade. However, the nursery arrangements needed careful financial management to enable the junior club to cope with their additional expenses. Northfleet seem to have managed this, although it may have been because they had the solid backing of president Joe Lingham.

However, although Margate's arrangement with Arsenal produced success on the field of play, it was a disaster financially. Each season the Kent club seemed to produce a larger deficit and after the team had won almost everything they entered in 1936-37 they were forced to withdraw from the Southern League for the following season. The situation went from bad to worse, and the club was reported to be losing around £30 a week on the deal. Arsenal, who claimed the nursery arrangement cost them around £2,000 a year, refused to renegotiate the terms and by the start of 1938 it was clear the arrangement would end when the season closed. The Highbury club were clearly happy with the way their youngsters were developing in Southern League football, for they entered the competition under their own name in 1938-39, but refused to increase their financial commitment. "We cannot go on being a Santa Claus," announced George Allison, and although the Margate directors grumbled on about the 'tragedy' that was about to take place, they had little choice but to close down in the summer of 1938. When the *Isle of Thanet Gazette's* correspondent 'Full-back' wrote (23 April 1938), "The Margate club will never succeed until they stop building castles in the air," he was probably correct. That early comment about getting a £150 team for a £30 gate was of course naïve in the extreme and ultimately the venture failed because the directors had been living a dream - the reality in football has always been that if clubs cannot match their income to their expenses they will find themselves in trouble eventually, however many trophies that find their way into the boardroom cabinet.

The outbreak of war in September 1939 effectively brought an end to the nursery club arrangements and with the development of a more formal national structure for youth football from the late 1940s, most senior clubs began to run additional teams: 'A' teams and even 'B' and 'C' teams became widespread. Most nurseries did not recommence, although one famous nursery that did exist in the 1950s was the Wath Wanderers club, which operated as the Yorkshire subsidiary of Wolverhampton Wanderers. The nurseries themselves had provided a successful developing ground for the Football League clubs, although the junior partners, as we have seen, rarely gained any long-term advantage.

*Main sources: Gravesend & Dartford Reporter; Isle of Thanet Gazette; Kentish Express; A Porter, 'The Northfleet Nursery' in Spurs Magazine, Feb 1996; R Burgess, Football: My Life (London, 1952); J Jones, A History of Northfleet United to 1938 (unpublished work held at Gravesend Library); J Harris, Arsenal Who's Who (London, 1995) Also thanks to Andy Porter for his considerable assistance, Jeff Trice, whose website [www.margatefchistory.co.uk](http://www.margatefchistory.co.uk) is well worth a visit, the staff at Gravesend Library for their help and Paul Harrison for his comments.*

