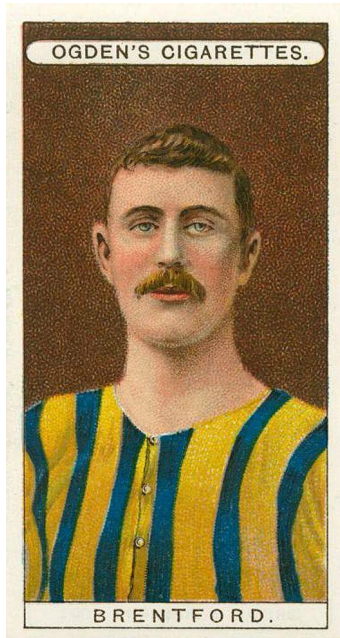


In a last-ditch effort to stave off re-election in 1909, Chesterfield Town tried to strengthen their team by signing a player named George Parsonage. The sordid tale of his uncompleted transfer to Chesterfield came to send shock waves through dressing rooms up and down the country.



Parsonage was a competent half-back, having risen to prominence with Southern League Brentford before joining Fulham. He seemed uninterested in moving to Chesterfield, for it took a lot of persuasion from Fulham before he agreed to even talk to George Swift, Chesterfield's Manager. Swift offered a wage of £4 per week and a signing-on fee of £10. These were the maximum permitted amounts at the time: for Chesterfield to have offered more would have been illegal under FA law. Parsonage's reply to the offer of a signing-on fee was reportedly blunt: "Make it fifty, or I cannot come."

Swift left Parsonage and told Fulham's officials that agreement had not been reached, mentioning Parsonage's comment, but seemed content to leave it at that. Fulham, however, demanded that Parsonage be reported to the FA, adding that, if it was left to them, both the player and Chesterfield would be reported. Rather than be cast as the guilty party Chesterfield reported Parsonage for demanding an illegal payment.

The payment of illegal bonuses was believed to be widespread. The FA, still run by the same old men that were suspicious of professionalism, were keen to stamp out the practise and in Parsonage, a well-known player from a League club in their home town, they had the ideal whipping-boy.

Parsonage was hauled before an FA inquiry. The question of his guilt, or lack of it, appeared to be irrelevant; he was denied the right to any sort of legal representation and the FA ignored a petition of four thousand signatures in his support. Before sentence was pronounced Parsonage explained that he had intended his comment as a joke: the singularly humourless men at the FA were unimpressed. For attempting to solicit an illegal payment from Chesterfield Town, Parsonage was banned for life from any involvement in football. No more playing: no coaching, nothing. Even to be seen on a street corner with Parsonage would cast doubt on the honesty of other professionals, now.

So why did Parsonage ask for the money? He may have been blessed with an unconventional sense of humour, but one might have expected him to explain the punch-line when Swift failed to laugh. It is more likely that he knew very well that most clubs were in the habit of paying over the odds to get players, and the identities of those clubs who paid up and those who didn't would have been common knowledge on the footballers' grapevine. It may be assumed that, before asking Swift for the money, Parsonage must have felt pretty confident of getting it: perhaps, then, Chesterfield Town had some sort of reputation amongst professional footballers for making illegal payments.

The maximum wage of £4 per week was a pretty fair sum, considering that the average coal-hewer in Derbyshire was on about £2.50 a week at the time. Players' contracts ran from August to April, though, and long-term job security at a club like Chesterfield was non-existent. A ten pounds signing-on fee would be no incentive at all for a man to uproot his family and move to a place where poverty was rife and the stench of sulphur and coal dust hung in the air. Perhaps the Parsonage Affair blew up not because the idea of paying him fifty pounds was so morally repugnant to Chesterfield, but simply because, in their parlous financial state, they could not afford to do it.

Chesterfield Town were voted out of the League that summer. London clubs voted against them in revenge, it was said, for Chesterfield's part in the Parsonage Affair. Not for what it did to Parsonage, you feel, but because the whole thing nearly blew the lid on what all the other clubs were up to.

Parsonage's ban was later lifted upon appeal by the PFA and he signed for Oldham Athletic as player/coach to their reserves, in September 1910. No such second chance was offered to the Spireites: a year later, they were beaten to a League place by Huddersfield, who came to London and spent freely on hospitality for the other club chairmen, buying a place in the League, in the estimation of Chesterfield's disgruntled Chairman, who was left to rue that "The power of the purse is oft greater than merit."

Stuart Basson

*The Parsonage Affair and many other fine English football scandals are covered in the excellent Simon Inglis book, "Soccer in the Dock." Happily, Simon stopped before our 2000-1 season...*