



Sam Hardy made 21 England appearances between 1907 and 1920, at a time when England usually played only three games a season and the nation went to war for four years. Any 'keeper enjoying a fourteen-year spell as his country's first-choice in the modern era would have earned around 140 caps, knocking Peter Shilton's England record into a cocked hat.

Born a miner's son on Highfield Lane, Sam first came to Chesterfield's attention as a member of the Newbold White Star side that beat their reserves in the 1902 Byron Cup final. Legend has it that, when manager Jack Hoskin was tipped off about Derby's reported interest in him, he rushed to sign Hardy, finally getting the man's signature under a lamp post in Newbold, but not until Hardy had forced Hoskin to increase his offer of five shillings a week to eighteen shillings (90p.). He quickly established a fine reputation. His strength was the ability to do the unspectacular. He didn't possess the almost freakish physique of an Iremonger or Foulke, but had gifts of a more intellectual nature to keep him out of trouble on the field. He was all anticipation and positioning, so much so that one young lad taken to see him came away distinctly unimpressed, so the story goes, convinced that the opposition had kicked everything straight at him! In this respect, his on-field performances reflected his character off it, for he was an even-tempered, down to earth man.

It was only a matter of time before he moved to a bigger club. Liverpool put six past him in 1904-5, but remembered that, but for Hardy, it would have been closer to twenty on the day. Accordingly, they came in with an offer of £300 plus a friendly, and Sam was on his way to greatness. The friendly never took place, and Liverpool topped the fee up with another £40. Liverpool won the League championship in Hardy's first season. Aston Villa paid £1500 for him in 1912 and he twice won an FA Cup winners' medal there.

Sam was a man of strong principles and was aware of the good that a man of his profile could do towards improving the lot of his fellow professionals; accordingly, he became a prominent member of the P.F.A. In 1921 he took over The Gardener's Arms, on Glumangate: his return to town fuelled fierce speculation that Chesterfield were going to sign him for their impending return to the Football League, but Villa, who had upset the player by insisting that he travel every day to Birmingham to train, were not taken in by Chesterfield's suggestion that a free transfer might be a fitting reward for his services. Hardly surprising, really, considering that they got £1000 out of Nottingham Forest for him as the season started. He had helped Forest win the Victory Shield in 1919, as a 'guest' player, but the fee still represented a gamble, considering Sam's age by then - he was a few days short of his 38th. birthday. Of

course, Hardy became a key member of Forest's team, helping them to promotion to Division One in his first season. He paid scrupulous attention to his fitness, and this (plus his huge ability) allowed him to keep playing in the First Division until just before his forty-second birthday, in an era when most players were clapped out at thirty.

In the mid-1920s he was forced to give up the pub by a bout of meningitis that left him dangerously ill for some time. The 1930s saw him running a billiard hall in Somercotes, and in 1941, at the age of 61, Sam returned to work in the mining industry, operating a haulage engine for a small, private operation at Wingerworth. With Sam and his three co-workers all being of a similar age it must have had a "Last of the Summer Wine" look to it, but the enterprising foursome produced around seven hundredweight of coal a week for the war effort. Sam was the uncle of the Aberdeen goalkeeper Harry Blackwell.

For Chesterfield: 71 League appearances; 30 clean sheets, 81 goals conceded.