

The prospect of war made the 1939-40 league season a little uncertain but Germany's invasion of Poland meant that the competition was abandoned after just three games. A ban on the assembly of crowds meant no significant football looked possible.

However with the country still engaged in the "phoney war" the Government relented on crowds and allowed firstly 8000 attendances and then 15000; all tickets were to be bought on the day of the match. This meant a series of friendlies could be arranged and although competitions were then arranged the status of all war time matches was and is friendly only.

For the main part as well as restrictions on crowds there were restrictions on travel meaning all the competitions were regionalised. As the war progressed the friendly nature of competitions allowed a culture of guest players from those who had volunteered to serve their country.



Chesterfield FC, August 1939

Chesterfield in war competitions

It was in 1939 that Chesterfield played its first war competition, the East Midlands Regional League. This was an eleven team tournament involving the South Yorkshire and Nottingham sides. Chesterfield won this convincingly. There were also a dozen friendlies and a cup competition to make a reasonable set on fixtures for that first war season.

The 1940-41 season started with the situation in Europe looking bleak there were real doubts about whether a season could be completed without invasion. This meant a rather laissez-faire situation when it came to the league with Chesterfield in the 36 team North League but little organisation of games. All fixtures were arranged by the teams themselves so that between 24 and 35 games were played. Chesterfield played 35 games with multiple ties against Leeds United and the Sheffield sides. However despite registering the most

"points" Preston North End won a league determined on "goal average". We netted five goals in games against six different opponents: Barnsley, Sheffield Wednesday, Newcastle, Doncaster, Grimsby and Stoke.

The following season the competitions got even stranger with a North Regional League that used games played to forecast a wider league table. Chesterfield finished mid-table in both the published league tables. There was also a League Cup league table using projections where Chesterfield again finished mid-table. Colin Lyman of Spurs, playing for Chesterfield as a "guest," was the Club's top scorer that season.

By the 1942-43 season the threat of invasion was over and the bombing of the industrial conurbations much reduced, this meant crowds that in the previous seasons had fallen sometimes to a few hundreds rose with some matches drawing attendances close to pre-war levels. This was important as clubs were still businesses. The games were still organised locally and often counted towards more than one league table. Chesterfield again finished comfortably mid-table in the leagues although well up in the cup qualification league just behind Lovell's Athletic from Newport. Mansfield Town finished 48th and last and 54th and last in the two league tables. Stan "Dizzy" Burton from West Ham who played in an FA Cup Final for Wolves guested for most of the season.

The 1943-44 season was one to forget in terms both of results and crowds. The 47th place in the cup qualification league must be a Club record low even if we were ten places off the bottom! However the table was based not on a representative spread of fixtures but the locally arranged games. This explains the success of Lovell's who were a semi-professional team based at a sweet factory (obviously a reserved occupation) and Bath City who won one of the leagues above all the northern football giants! Harry Egan netted nine goals in eleven appearances. The Tibshelf born forward, who had been on Chesterfield's books in the 1930s without making the first team, was a guest from Cardiff.

There were guests in the following season but also a sense that the war was ending and that this might be the last without competitive football. One guest was Brimington born Joe Payne who was famous for his ten goals in one match for Luton. His solitary appearance as a Spireite was something of a let-down with just a hat-trick in an 8-0 thrashing of Notts County. Jock Davie of Brighton also appeared 28 times that season netting 19 goals.

The League North Cup

After a moderate first part of the season the team's results improved. The league table for the second half of the season reflected the matches in which the team qualified for the knock-out cup and also the two-legged games in the cup run. In the cup run we beat Halifax 4-2 with 12000 watching at the Recreation Ground and Barnsley 2-0 with a home crowd of over 14000. This meant a quarter-final against Liverpool and 35000 turned up to Anfield for the goalless game. The return at Saltergate saw 24667 fans witness



Des Collins' goal that took Chesterfield through to a semi-final against Manchester United.

Youtube embedded <https://youtu.be/V8cVwuAL9xo>

The first-leg was played at United's war-time home Maine Road, Old Trafford having been virtually destroyed during the 1941 bombing of Trafford Park. In that game another Collins goal took the teams back to Chesterfield level. That second game took place just after VE day and saw another 2400 crowd at the Rec. Isaac McDowell, a guest from Port Vale, scored the only goal for Manchester United. However the referee turned down two very good penalty appeals for the home side and such was the rage among the supporters that the Derbyshire Times carried reports quashing rumours that the official had ended up in hospital after fans intervened! With the euphoria of the VE celebrations the BBC carried the second-half of the game live on the wireless.



Youtube embedded <https://youtu.be/yZHxBuaXR-M>

Back to competition.

With the War in Europe ending competitive football recommenced but only in the FA Cup. For the only season those cup matches were two-legged. Chesterfield lost by the odd goal to a York side still strong thanks to the RAF bases in North Yorkshire. The league games were in the Football League North which was still a friendly competition. However it was now a 22 club home and away properly organised competition. The Central League was re-launched for the reserves and organised football was played by Chesterfield's third and fourth elevens. Chesterfield finished seventh in the Football League North which in the context of the opposition might make it our strongest showing. It is no surprise that the following season was our best finish ever in the League proper.

It is also significant that rationing and a lack of clothing coupons meant replacing the tradition striped shirts was impossible. Chesterfield was forced for the first time in twenty-five years to play in blue as the first choice home kit.

Stadiums in war-time

During the war many stadia were damaged as a result of German bombing. As well as Old Trafford there was significant damage to the football grounds in Plymouth, Sunderland, Chelsea and Southampton. Locally part of Bramall Lane was damaged by bombs with both the John Street stand and the pitch taking hits.

Other grounds were utilised for the war effort. Highbury sustained bomb damage but was also an Air Raid Patrol Centre. Bloomfield Road was used by the army and Deepdale was for a time used to house prisoners of war!

Players in war-time

With most of the young adult male population mobilised it was inconceivable that footballers would be excused. Many footballers during this time left their careers to join the Army. The lack of numbers in squads saw clubs inviting Guest Players to play. Between September 1939 and the end of the war, 783 footballers joined in the war effort. 91 from Wolves alone. Of course players left Chesterfield, notably Billy Kidd, right, and Irish International Dudley Milligan.



Not all the players who volunteered for service went into the armed forces and not all of those that did saw active service. Some joined the Bevin Boys down the mines while others went to munitions factories or the dockyards like Milligan. For the high profile stars the armed forces meant PT instructing or the like which meant teams close to army or RAF bases performed well during war time.



There were of course many footballers who did see active service and a significant number who made the ultimate sacrifice. Arsenal alone lost eight players during the war. Don Howe of Bolton was wounded in action and Stan Mortensen crashed in a Wellington Bomber. Eric Robinson won the War Cup with Wolves in 1942 but was killed a few weeks later. Six former Spireites gave their lives in war service including Club legends Allan Sliman who gave up football at the out-break of war and was a Sergeant in the RAF when he was mortally wounded on a bombing raid.

Peter Whiteley