



PLAYING THE GAME

Pom Pom Whiting

Robert 'Pom Pom' Whiting was born in Canning Town in 1883. He first found employment as a dock labourer before finding a more stable job at the Thames Iron Works Company, where he soon established a reputation in their football team as a goalkeeper. The team had recently changed its name to West Ham United, but Whiting never managed to make their first team. Instead, he joined Tunbridge Wells Rangers, where he was spotted starting in an F.A. Cup tie against Norwich City by Chelsea scouts, who were seeking a replacement for their mammoth 24 stone goalkeeper Billy 'Fatty' Foulke. He joined the 'Blues' in 1906, and ironically made his debut against Foulke's new club, Bradford City, at Stamford Bridge. He would play 54 games for Chelsea F.C. before joining Brighton and Hove Albion in 1908, where he played 320 matches.

Legend has it that Whiting once cleared his opponent's crossbar with one of his mighty goal kicks, which led to Chelsea fans nick-naming him 'Pom Pom' –after the deadly naval gun of the same name.

After war was declared in 1914, Kitchener's call for recruits led to the formation of the famous 'pals' battalions whereby recruits could join up with friends from the same town or profession. One of these was the 1st Footballers' Battalion – later known as the 17th Battalion, Middlesex Regiment – which Whiting, aged 30, joined on the day it was established at Fulham Town Hall in December 1914. Thirteen of Whiting's Brighton and Hove Albion team-mates and officials also joined up with him that day, along with 22 other footballers. Even so, some sections of the British press complained that

footballers' were shirking their duty since by March 1915 only 122 men out of an eligible 1,800 had joined the new Footballers' Battalion. The Football League came under increasing pressure to abandon their fixtures so that both fans and players could 'play the greater game.' In the event, this did not happen until after the 1915 'Khaki Cup Final' which Chelsea lost 3-0 to Sheffield United.

In May 1916, after six months on the Western Front, Whiting was sent back to the UK as unfit with scabies. His wife Nellie was able to stay in Brighton, where he was recuperating, and became pregnant with their third son Joe. When the time came to return to France, Whiting could not bear the thought that he might not see his unborn son, so he deserted the army. He was absent from his unit for 133 days, for which he was demoted from Lance-Sergeant to Private and was sentenced to nine months' hard labour.

The following year, his sentence was suspended and he rejoined his unit in time for the start of the Arras offensive in April. On 28th April 1917, Private Robert Whiting was among 462 men from the Middlesex Regiment killed while fighting at the northern end of the village of Oppy, four miles north east of Arras.

When news reached England of his death, a nasty rumour circulated that 'Pom Pom' had been shot for cowardice rather than killed in action. His wife provided a Sussex newspaper with copies of letters from his officers and the unit's padre attesting to his courageous death declaring that Whiting had been assisting wounded comrades while under shellfire.



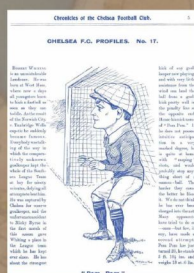
Pom Pom Whiting footballer at Chelsea FC, 1906
Chelsea F.C. Historian Rick Glenwill



Pom Pom Whiting footballer at Brighton Hove Albion, c.1912.
Brighton & Albion Collectors' and Historians' Society



Recruitment poster for the Footballers' Battalion.
Imperial War Museum



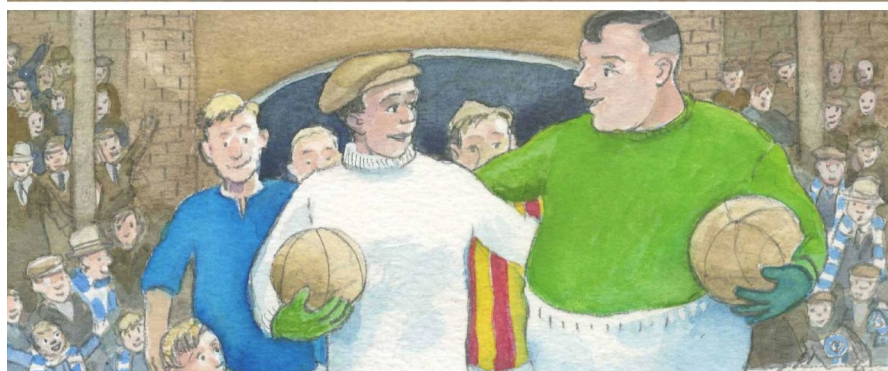
Pom Pom Whiting's profile in the Chelsea Chronicle, 1906.
Chelsea F.C.



The Brighton and Hove Albion Charity Shield Winners, 1910-1911.
Brighton & Albion Collectors' and Historians' Society



Pom Pom during his Chelsea days.
Whiting Family Photos, Peter Burgess



Illustrations by
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