**IN THE BEGINNING, 100 YEARS AGO.**

The Northumberland Schools Football Association was first brought into existence in September 1911 when a group of schoolmasters, enthusiasts all, thought to form an Association to further the very best ideals of the game in schools throughout the county….and also to follow the example of near neighbours Durham, who had already formed such an organization three years previously.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the game was booming, and many societies and groups were looking to get established and affiliated as Association Football Clubs. Newcastle United had come into existence as we now know it in 1892, and indeed had won the FA Cup in 1910, beating Barnsley in a Final played as a draw at Crystal Palace, and then replayed at Goodison Park.

A preliminary meeting was arranged in May 1911 at which a small sub-committee was set up to write a set of rules. Messrs Ridley, Stewart, White and Murray completed their task in good time, and the very first meeting of the NSFA was called for September 9th 1911, at The Roma Cafe which was a very popular meeting place with rooms for large and small functions, and which stood at the corner of Grainger Street and the Bigg Market, just up the road from Central Station, an important consideration. Today, The Roma Café today has become a branch of Pizza Hut.

One of the first decisions was to affiliate to the burgeoning English Schools Football Association, and within a month great progress had been made. Fifty schools had joined, six leagues had been formed and in the October meeting the draw was made for the very first ever County Cup.

Step forward Sir Francis Blake, a local coal and land owner, with a very fine cup made of solid silver and valued at the time at 10 guineas. The draw for the very first Blake Cup was published in the Evening Chronicle, in several regional divisions with qualifiers to progress to the final stages.

Soon, in fact in November, ambitions to stage a representative match came to the fore. Durham , the neighbours and greatest rivals then as now, were asked to provide the opposition, and Blyth Spartans, then as now, were asked for permission to use their ground at Croft Park. But then, not as now, the line-up of the County team was the subject of much deliberation by the Executive Committee, and after much discussion the very first county team was chosen in a 2-3-5 formation, as was the norm in those days.

There was great talent in almost every village, and three players were further nominated for International honours, representing England. It is an interesting fact that, even in 1911/12, those three caps were won at outside right, centre forward, and outside left….attacking football, it seems, is endemic in Northumberland. Caps were awarded to H Chambers of Tynemouth, T Johnson of Newcastle and R Latimer also of Newcastle. This was obviously a very talented team of forwards although, regrettably, when representing Northumberland in the very first county match, against Durham of course, they were on the losing side. The score is not recorded, but the match was considered to be a great success, with “a sizeable attendance” and gross gate receipts of £6-9-11p.

Semi Final Results are not recorded but the Final Tie would be between Rutherford and Seaton Delaval, to be played at Seghill Miners Institute ground on May 25th, and again a big crowd of well over 1000 was attracted.

Sir Francis Blake himself attended to present his “splendid” trophy, and Seaton Delaval were the proud winners. They were presented also with a plain oak shield, to record their achievement and which was inscribed with the names of the players. Medals were awarded and all involved then retired to the Institute for tea. The Miners Institute in Seghill still stands….next to The Blake Arms and the Institute Ground still stages memorable matches.

The County secretary, Mr E.C.Rowland records in his report that “It was a pleasant experience to see the interest which Sir Francis Blake took in the game, and his evident pleasure was a plain token that he has fully realized the value of such an institution as ours”

That first season finished with 62 schools affiliated to the NSFA, a healthy financial balance sheet, an influential patron, and a determination to go from strength to strength. There is no doubt that the inaugural season of the Northumberland Schools FA laid deep, strong and lasting foundations, both in encouraging inter-school competition and in establishing a strong association of officials. Secretary Mr Rowland summed up that first season as follows “The harmony with which the working of the association has proceeded has been most noticeable, and I trust that it will continue.” If Mr Rowland were still with us I think he would see his trust well rewarded.

# Peter Tracey Chairman NSFA 2011-12