

A town united by its love of football

A 10-year labour of love has seen Doug and Sandie Webb compile a definitive record of the football club to which they have devoted half their lives. But, as Gary Lawrence discovered, it is so much more than that.

THE HISTORY of a football club is more than just a list of trophies won, it is a story of opportunities seized and missed, crises averted and disasters survived. Its cast list of characters feature unsung heroes, shameless self-publicists, rogues, chancers, dreamers and genuinely lovely people.

Clubs are personifications of the towns where they are based and their hopes and dreams represent the ambitions of those places. Their fortunes rise and fall just as those of the populace they draw their support from.

Sandie and Doug Webb know this as well as anyone, having devoted a sizeable chunk of their lives to Chippenham Town. Both have at one time been chairman and, separately and as a couple, have given up hours of their time, put their businesses on hold and even risked their financial future for the love of the club.

Doug, who was chairman from 1978 to 1996, would often undertake gruelling sponsored cycle treks to away grounds to raise money to keep the club going.

Now they have published their history of the club to mark its 100th season at its Hardenhuish Park ground – not that that was the original intention. They began work on the book 10 years ago and intended to publish it within two years.

Sandie was given some meticulous research into the club's early years by amateur historian John Angel and she spent long hours combing through newspaper reports at the Wiltshire History Centre in Chippenham.

But as the book took shape, more and more people came forward with extra material. "Just like topsy, it grew and grew," says Sandie.

"Every time I had a target date it was set back as it went on and I thought 'okay, I'm going to stop now' someone else brought something else along that was so valuable I felt I had to include it."

The result is 450-page tome that charts the club's fortunes from its formation in 1873, a

year after the first ever FA Cup Final, when a meeting at the George Hotel in the High Street (now the site of WH Smith) agreed to form a football club initially playing both association and rugby rules at Westmead Lane.

To Sandie's surprise it became a tale of not one club, but two. She had always known that a second Chippenham club, Chippenham United, had been formed in 1947 but the research she was given showed a first Chippenham United was founded in 1895 and began playing at Hardenhuish Park.

'Thousands of fans were watching each team'

"This came as a surprise to me," she says, "to think the other club played at what we all know as home to Chippenham Town FC was amazing."

That first Chippenham United folded in 1909 but another team bearing its name re-emerged in 1947 as a semi-professional team after a disagreement between the committee at Hardenhuish Park. Secretary, Fred Evans wanted Town to capitalise on the support from crowds of over 1,000 and become semi-professional, but he was outvoted.

Instead, he formed United, rented The Firs off Derriads from the council and appealed for fans to help get the pitch ready.

If tensions between the two clubs were already high, they were strained to breaking point when on the day of United's first game, Fred poached two Town players en route to their game. He claimed later he had merely 'bumped into them' and they had decided of their own accord to switch teams.

Within two years United had been voted into the Western League and then won promotion to be in the same division as Town,

who had been forced begrudgingly to go semi-professional to compete for players and fans.

Both clubs attracted crowds of thousands and when they played each other for the first time on October 15, 1949, Chippenham came to a standstill with families divided in their support.

"It was an amazing time in the town because you had thousands of fans going to watch each team. It is hard to imagine that today," says Sandie.

There were 4,000 fans inside Hardenhuish Park that day and to put that into context, the town's population was a little over 12,000. Before the game a reporter observed:



Right: Town United proved a labour of love based on years of meticulous research



“A group of United supporters marched cheering along Bristol Road to Hardenhuish Park, their clothes decorated with red and white ribbons and carrying slogans, rattles and bells. They paraded around the inside enclosure and finally planted a small fir tree in the centre spot. After a friendly word from a police officer it was removed. By this time the ground was packed, and people were still streaming in.”

United triumphed 3-2 but it was Town who had the last laugh when both clubs faced a battle for financial survival.

United’s ambition for a main stand that could house a clubhouse and a gym to support a club that embraced football, athletics, cycling and boxing never came to fruition. By 1960, after a failed attempt to install a greyhound track at The Firs to bump up revenue, the club had losses of almost £2,000 and a huge overdraft at the bank.

Crowds at both clubs began to drop with attendances in the low hundreds rather than the thousands. The decline was easy to trace against the rise in competing entertainment, such as TV and cinema, and with cars and public transport cheaper and more prevalent, fans could afford to go to matches at Swindon, Bristol or Southampton.

United were finally wound up in 1961 and with the closure of the Nestlé factory in Chippenham, and cutbacks at main employer Westinghouse, fans had little money to spend on football.

Somehow Town survived, thanks to money raised by fans and businesses in the town. Says Sandie: “There were times in the sixties even, when how it stayed going I don’t really know. There have always been a few people there that have said ‘we’re going to do everything we can to keep the football club going.’”

It was not the only time such determination kept the club afloat. In 2000, after then chairman Malcolm Lyus suddenly left the club just months after it had taken almost 20,000 people to Wembley to see the FA Trophy Final defeat to Deal Town, Sandie and Doug had to make personal guarantees to the bank to keep Town afloat – with their house at risk if it sank.

Sandie, who was chairman from 2005 to 2008, says that whoever holds the reins of the club has a responsibility to those who have gone before.

“When Doug took over he started with a club that through generations had been looked after by people with a love of football and when the next person came along they benefitted from the work Doug put in during the eighties,” she says.

“Unlike in the professional game, you don’t buy the club, you inherit it and you are the custodian until the next one comes along.”

Time and again the couple’s book reflects on how that responsibility was discharged, but it is also full of incidents that illustrate the madcap nature of non-league football.

Not least a Town game at Wootton Bassett on October 15, 1887 (exactly 62 years before that famous local derby with United), when after some reckless challenges from the home team and threats made to the visiting players, Chippenham walked off the pitch with the score at 0-0. This did not go down well with the home fans, who chased the team all the way down Wootton Bassett High Street.

The book is as much a social history as a story about football as the authors weave local, national and international events into the narrative. Wars, social unrest, unemployment, recession and cultural changes, which have all taken their toll on the club’s fortunes, are recorded. Says Sandie: “The club’s story is also about the history of the town because as you go through the book you see the sport changing, the town changing and the country changing.”

“When I was writing the book people were thinking it would be all about Wembley in 2000 because they think that’s the be all and end all of the club but we wouldn’t have been there if we hadn’t had all this history before and that was the story to be told.”

- *Town United* is available to buy, priced £16 at Chippenham Museum, at the club on matchdays or by placing an order via email at sanddwebb@aol.com.

Above: Sandie says the book is as much a social history of the town as a story about football

