

**Ladies Doing it for Themselves**  
**Blyth Spartans Ladies 1917-1918**

**By Patrick Brennan**  
**with an introduction by**  
**Graham Usher**

For many years this well-known photograph of a Blyth Spartans team has existed, but few knew the intriguing story behind it:



Even fewer knew the name of one of the town's most famous footballers; Bella Reay.

The remarkable story of the Blyth Spartans Munitionettes was shown by BBC North East as part of a series that explored the tales of the British women who kept the UK moving during World War One.

The UK-wide project, World War One at Home, told more than 1,400 powerful, fascinating and moving stories across local, regional and national radio, television and online.

However, the real credit for bringing the story of these remarkable ladies back to life goes to local historian Patrick Brennan.

BBC North East reporter Gerry Jackson worked with Patrick to produce the piece:  
[www.live.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-26360608](http://www.live.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-26360608)

Patrick had completed a truly superb piece of research into Blyth Spartans Ladies way back in 2006 and published the fascinating story on his excellent local history website:  
<http://www.donmouth.co.uk/index.html>

Patrick has now kindly given permission to reproduce his work.

**Blyth Spartans Ladies 1917-1918**

The battlefield carnage during the Great War created an urgent need for women to assist their country by engaging in “munitions work.”

In practical terms this could mean any activity that was directed towards the war effort, and in the case of a group of young women working on the South Docks in Blyth, it involved unloading boxes of empty shell cases which were destined for recycling, and loading ships with fresh ammunition for the front. It was hard physical work, but youth and strength were on their side, and whenever a break in the work permitted, they still had enough energy to kick a football around on the nearby sands.

Their efforts attracted the attention of the crew of a Royal Navy ship stationed in the harbour, and a friendly acquaintanceship grew up between the two groups, with the sailors giving the women some coaching hints.

This casual encounter was to lead to the formation of the best women’s football team that the North East has ever seen – Blyth Spartans Ladies’ F.C.

### **The Girls take the Field**

On 14th July 1917 all roads in Blyth led to Croft Park, the home of Blyth Spartans A.F.C. The ladies of the Wallsend Slipway and Engineering Company and Palmers of Jarrow, the champions of Northumberland and Durham respectively, were to meet in a match to raise funds for the Blyth Military Merit and Homecoming Fund. The Blyth News reported that H.M. Navy would be well represented in the crowd, judging by the sale of tickets, and it is quite possible that the young women from the South Docks would have made up a party with some of their new friends. The match, which Wallsend won by four goals to nil, clearly inspired them, for two weeks later it was announced that Blyth now had its own team of lady footballers, who were “undergoing a thorough initiation into the art of controlling the elusive pigskin.” The training the ladies received was from their Navy friends.

They evidently were good pupils, for on 4th August they themselves took to the field at Croft Park in a match against their mentors. Mr. J. Bates of Bebside acted as referee, assisted by Mr. C. Ellis and Mr. W. Pithkealy.

The game was organised by Petty Officer Baker, who played at centre-forward for the “Jack Tars,” and who livened the proceedings by giving an impersonation of Charlie Chaplin at the kick-off. It was played according to the usual format of the day – that is, the men played with their hands tied behind their backs, and with this encumbrance the winning score of 7-2 to the ladies was hardly surprising. Playing at centre-forward for the women’s team was a 17-year-old girl from Cowpen, Bella Reay, who gave an early indication of her talents by bagging 6 of the goals.

Four days later it was announced that another ladies team had been formed in Blyth – the Blyth United Munitions Ladies.

A showdown between the two teams was arranged for Saturday August 18th, with the Cowpen and Crofton Workmen’s Patriotic Fund as beneficiary. Messrs. Herrons the jewellers, still a feature of the Blyth landscape today, would present a souvenir brooch to

each member of the winning side, and a private donor would also present souvenir brooches to the losing side.

The teams lined up as follows:

**Spartans:** L. James, N. Fairless, H. Malone, A. Sample, M. O'Brien, B. Metcalfe, J. Nuttall, M. Robinson, B. Reay, D. Allen, A. Reed

**United:** M. Spinks, E. Davison, H. Lawton, M. Foster, J. Watson, F. Thompson, M. Shields, J. Balls, S. Atkinson, H. Harvey, M. Downey

Despite all the hype the match was a no-contest, as Spartans thrashed United by ten goals to one. Bella Reay scored seven, with Bella Metcalfe, Jennie Nuttall and Dolly Allen each getting one. Miss Downey scored a solitary consolation goal for United. The United team were clearly chastened by this experience, and never again played another ladies' team, confining themselves to friendlies against teams drawn from the forces.

Not everyone in Blyth was pleased with this development, and tongues evidently started to wag. This prompted a letter to the Blyth News which was published on 30th August 1917. The author – "Munitioneer", did not mince his words in defence of the lady footballers:

*I have heard, more than once, some very uncharitable and uncalled-for criticism of the respectability of the young women playing these matches, certain of the "unco guid" asserting that it is not decent for them to appear in public in "knickers!" – pardon my mentioning the article of clothing that has raised their ire. May I say that these girls are doing an excellent work of charity in playing. We cannot all subscribe hard cash to the hundred and one deserving funds now calling for our support. They are doing their bit by work; all honour to them. I should like to suggest that they are more decently dressed in the "unmentionable" garments than their prurient minded critics who are parading the streets in blouses open nearly to the waist and skirts too short for a girl of 12.*

*I am working with these girls and I am proud of it. Some of them are a bit boisterous, but they all have hearts as big as a lion. If some of the weak-minded and weak-kneed could only have seen them stick in manfully during the recent inclement weather they would feel reassured that there is no possible doubt of our winning the war while we have such women (heroines I call them) as mothers of the race.*

MUNITIONEER

It is fairly clear from this letter that the "uncalled-for criticism" was coming from other women.

### **The Munionettes' Cup**

Two days after Spartans' emphatic win against Blyth United, the Newcastle Daily Chronicle carried an article entitled "Munition Girls' Challenge Cup". A solid silver trophy had been donated for a knock-out competition to be held between Munition Girls. The competition would be organised along the following lines; charitable organisations would apply for cup-ties to be allocated to them, and they would be expected to make all the necessary arrangements. The teams would turn up on the day and play, and whatever takings were made at the gate would go to charity. It was envisaged that charities such as Soldiers' Welcome Home Funds, Prisoner of War Funds, Aged Miners' Homes, Soldiers' and Sailors' Orphans

Funds and such like would be supported in this way. The official title of the trophy was the "Alfred Wood Munition Girls Challenge Cup," but it was invariably referred to as the "Munitionettes' Cup."

The term "Munition Girls" was to be interpreted rather widely; "Ladies' teams from Tyneside District drawn from any establishment or concern such as works, factories, mills, railways, tramways, collieries, shops etc. will be allowed to compete." This description clearly covered the work being carried out by the Blyth Spartans, and they were one of the first teams to sign up for the competition.

The cup draw was set for the end of September, and the Spartans used the time intervening to get in some match practice. On 15th September they played once more against the "Jack Tars," this time at Seghill, and succeeded in beating them 5-3 on this occasion, with goals from Bella Reay (2), Jenny Nuttall (2) and Nellie Fairless. However, playing against men's teams, and weaker sides such as Blyth United had given the Spartans a false sense of confidence. Their next match brought them down to earth with a bump. Their opponents were Wallsend Slipway, a highly-experienced side, who had been playing since early February. The match, at Croft Park, was in aid of the widow and family of Peter Mackin, a popular local footballer, who had been killed in action on Easter Monday. Used to scoring freely, the Spartans found Slipway a tougher proposition altogether, and the game ended in a tense 0-0 draw.

The Munitionettes' Cup draw went ahead at Shield's Cafe in the Bigg Market, Newcastle on 26th September, and Spartans were drawn against Aviation Athletic. This team was based at Armstrong-Whitworth's aeroplane assembly factory at Grandstand Road, Gosforth. According to the rules of the competition teams were drawn neither home nor away but played wherever the sponsoring charity asked them to. It was expected however that Spartans' first round tie would be played at Blyth.

The team's next match was played at New Hartley on 6th October in aid of the local Military Merit and Homecoming Fund. The visitors were Palmer's of Jarrow, another strong side. There were two changes from the side which had played Blyth United; Ada Reed and Jennie Nuttall had swapped positions, and Lizzie Lowery replaced M. Robinson at inside right. Spartans' experience against Wallsend Slipway had taught them not to underestimate their opponents, a lesson they had learned well, as they defeated Palmer's by three clear goals, two scored by Bella Reay and one by Jennie Nuttall.

On 13th October Spartans played at Burradon, against a team made up of local ladies, in aid of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Comforts Fund. Jennie Nuttall was again picked for the left wing, but on this occasion, it was not as Jennie Nuttall that she turned up to play. Instead, it was as the newly-married Jennie Morgan, having hurried from St Cuthbert's church at Blyth to take part in the game. She celebrated her wedding by getting two goals in Spartans' 4-1 win, the other two being scored by Bella Reay and Ada Reed.

New Hartley had been fixed for the team's first round Munitionettes' Cup tie, and the date was set for October 20th. It had to be postponed, however, as the Sporting Man bluntly commented, "owing to the military authorities refusing to allow the game to proceed, although expense has been incurred." This was probably due to the local military commander deciding he wanted to use the ground on the day. At the commencement of the war many

football grounds had been commandeered by the Army, as they were ideal for practising field gun drills and other such exercises.

For their next outing Spartans travelled to Morpeth, to play a team drawn from the Post Office. The match took place on the Grange House Field in aid of the Rose Cottage Hospital and the local War Heroes' Fund. Florrie Harris replaced Dolly Allen at inside-left in the Spartans' line-up, which was otherwise unchanged. It promised to be a baptism of fire for the Post Office girls, as it was their first-ever competitive game, but they did not do too badly, restricting the Blyth girls to a 3-0 scoreline, the goals coming from Bella Reay (2) and Ada Reed.

On 3rd November Spartans faced Wallsend Slipway again. The venue was Seaton Delaval, in aid of the local R.A.O.B. War Memorial Fund. From the start Slipway made clear their determination to prove themselves champions of Northumberland and were leading by a single goal at half-time. Spartans fought hard on the resumption, but although they kept the play in their opponents' half, their shooting was off-target. It looked as if Spartans were heading for their first defeat, but then Bella Reay received the ball in an open position, and her first time shot gave the Slipway keeper no chance. The game finished at one goal apiece, leaving the question of who could claim to be "top dogs" still undecided. This was felt to be unsatisfactory by both teams, and a third meeting was arranged for 29th December to try to resolve the issue.

The postponed cup tie with the Gosforth Aviation team finally took place on 17th November at New Delaval, the proceeds being for the St John's Ambulance Society. Spartans were back to full strength with the return of Dolly Allen at inside-left, and she showed how important she was to the side by getting the first goal within ten minutes. Further goals followed from Bella Reay (2) and Ada Reed, and after half-an-hour Spartans were 4-0 up. Emma Waters, the Gosforth centre-forward, managed to get one back before the interval with a lucky shot which bounced off one of the Spartans' full-backs. After half-time Spartans eased off, which was the signal for Emma Waters to launch a number of individual assaults on their goal, from one of which she scored a second. As the final whistle neared Spartans got going again, with both Bella Reay and Ada Reed coming close, but there was no further score, and Spartans had secured their passage into the second round. The draw had already taken place, so they knew their opponents would be North East Marine Engineering of Wallsend – another strong team from Tyneside whose captain, Bella Carrott, was a particularly skillful player, and who would later captain the first England Ladies International team.

For their next game, against Sunderland Ladies, Spartans made one change, Annie Allen coming in at inside-right in place of Lizzie Lowery. The Sunderland Echo had difficulty in getting their name right, referring to them as "Blyth Spurs." The venue was the Sunderland Rovers ground at Hendon, the original home of Sunderland AFC in the 1880's. The Sunderland team was somewhat unusual in that it was not a works-based side but had been formed as a result of an advertisement placed in the Daily Echo, seeking ladies to play football to raise funds for Sunderland Hospitals. Whatever their pedigree, the Sunderland team was no match for Blyth Spartans, who returned home with a 5-0 victory.

Coincidentally, 5-0 was also the score two weeks later when Spartans faced a side described as "Newcastle Ladies." This was something of a misnomer, as the side was not representative of the city of Newcastle but was in fact the works team of Angus Sanderson's motor

assembly factory. The match, which was in aid of the Red Cross, was staged at the Morpeth Road ground in Blyth, rather than Croft Park, and the visitors were given a tremendous welcome, being met at Blyth station by the band of the 3rd Battalion, Northumberland Volunteers and escorted to the ground. This must have lifted their spirits, for in the first half they held their own against the Spartans, and half-time arrived without any score being recorded. In the second half Spartans' fitness and match experience began to tell, Bella Reay opening the score, and following up with a further three goals, one of which was a penalty. The fifth and final goal came from a cross from Jennie Morgan to Dollie Allen, who sent in a fierce shot. As was customary on these occasions, both teams were entertained to tea at St John's Hall by their hosts and thanked for their services.

This match probably cost Bella Reay an international opportunity; a ladies' international had been arranged to take place in Belfast on Boxing Day, and Bella had been selected to take part in a trial match at Wallsend, playing for the "Possibles" against the "Probables." With her goalscoring abilities she would have been a hot favourite for the position of centre-forward, but by electing to turn out instead for Blyth Spartans she passed up this chance. Whether other factors contributed to this unfortunate turn of events is not known.

Christmas Day in the early part of the last century was not a time for relaxing in front of the television and trying to digest the Christmas dinner. There was no television, or radio for that matter. For this reason, Christmas Day football matches were both common, and popular. On Christmas Day 1917 the good citizens of Blyth turned out in large numbers to see Spartans play their Munitionette Cup rivals Gosforth Aviation. The match, at Cowpen Square, was in aid of the Duke of Wellington Social Club's Parcel Fund. Spartans attacked strongly from the kick-off and took the lead after only a few minutes with a goal from Dolly Allen. Bella Reay quickly added another two, as Gosforth found themselves hemmed in in their own half, unable to break out. Just before the interval Jennie Morgan added a fourth goal. Although helped by a strong breeze in the second half, Gosforth could make little progress, and Bella Reay was able to complete her hat-trick. The final goal, a penalty, was put away by right-half Agnes Sample, to make the final score a convincing 6-0 win for Spartans.

December 29th had now come round, and it was time for Blyth Spartans and Wallsend Slipway to settle some unresolved business. The third meeting between the teams took place at Portland Park, Ashington, in aid of the Ashington Soldiers' and Sailors' Christmas Gifts Fund. As expected, there was a large crowd in attendance to see the female gladiators battle for the (unofficial) title of the best ladies' team in Northumberland. The Wallsend team included no less than four members of the England side that had won 4-1 in Belfast three days earlier. One of these, Ethel Jackson, was not even a Slipway player, being the regular centre-forward for the neighbouring North East Marine. Things looked bleak for Spartans when their captain, Bella Metcalfe, had to leave the field with a sprained ankle after only ten minutes' play. Substitutes were still a thing of the future, and Spartans had to continue with only ten players. They wisely switched one of their forwards to defence, and the weakened forward line hammered away at Slipway's defence until just before the interval, when Bella Reay made an individual run through and scored the vital first goal.

In the second half Wallsend fought hard for an equaliser, Ethel Jackson in particular, making many attempts to get through, but on each occasion being held up by a rock-solid Spartans defence. With two minutes to go Spartans almost added a second; a Bella Reay shot beat the goalkeeper only to hit the upright, and from the rebound Annie Allen fired in a shot which

caught a Slipway player and went out for a corner. The final whistle marked the end of the game, and a superb 1-0 win for Spartans against the toughest opponents they had faced so far.

“From the sublime to the ridiculous,” – so it must have seemed for Spartans when they faced their next opponents, Sunderland Ladies, on 2nd January 1918. This was not the Sunderland Ladies team they had beaten 5-0 on 1st December, but the works team of Webster’s rope factory. They were back in action at their favourite Croft Park, though the pitch was in poor condition and the ground very heavy. The game was a complete mismatch; the 5,000 spectators present must have felt nothing but pity for the Sunderland girls as Bella Reay scored six goals before half-time, bringing her personal tally so far to 77. In the second half she left it to her colleagues to extend the lead, and they were more than up to the task, with Ada Reed adding the seventh goal, Annie Allen getting a brace, and a Dollie Allen penalty adding the tenth nail to the Sunderland coffin.

### **Trouble on the Terraces**

The Blyth Spartans team had now formed themselves into a well-honed footballing machine. The stability of their team, as well as the individual skills of its members gave them a tremendous advantage over opponents who were scratch sides at best or lacked the Spartans’ extensive match practice. Their opponents in the second round of the Munitionettes’ Cup, North East Marine, were by no means novices themselves. As mentioned earlier, their captain, Bella Carrot, had captained the England side in Belfast, and two other N.E.M. players, Hilda Weygood and Ethel Jackson had taken part in that game. The two sides met at a most prestigious venue – St James’s Park, Newcastle, on 12th January. The match was in aid of the Joseph and Jane Cowen Training Home at Benwell, and Sir Thomas Oliver performed the customary formal kick-off. The conditions were poor, with the pitch covered with snow, and this favoured the bigger and heavier Spartans side. Play was fairly fast to begin with, and both goals were visited in turn, but Spartans soon got the upper hand. Ada Reed got the first goal, and then Bella Reay opened up firing on all cylinders, adding a further four goals before half-time. She continued in like manner after the interval, but her fifth goal was hotly disputed by the N.E.M. players, who claimed it was offside. When the referee refused to change his decision N.E.M. walked off the field. The pitch was invaded by spectators, and a heated argument ensued. Meanwhile, behind the scenes the organisers were making frantic efforts to persuade N.E.M. to return, fearing a riot if they refused and the crowd demanded their money back. After an anxious fifteen minutes N.E.M. agreed to restart the game, but the farce was not yet over as the referee now refused to take any further part in the proceedings. Fortunately, a substitute referee was found, and the game continued, Bella Reay rubbing salt in the wound by notching up a seventh goal. Ethel Wilson managed to get one back for N.E.M., but it was too late, and their cup run was over, in circumstances which they could not have imagined, and certainly would have wished to avoid.

Spartans had now reached the third round of the Munitionettes’ Cup, in which their opponents would be Armstrong’s Naval Yard at Walker. The tie was fixed for 23rd February at Westoe, South Shields, and in the run-up to this game Spartans fitted in an 8-0 thrashing of Morpeth Post Office Girls, in which Bella Reay scored another seven goals, and a 4-2 victory over Jarrow Palmers. Against the Naval Yard they took control from the start and breezed past them into the semi-final by a margin of three goals to nil. (Some newspapers, notably the Newcastle Journal, mistakenly reported this game as the semi-final) They should have scored

four, but Bella Reay surprisingly missed an early penalty. She did however score two of Spartans' goals.

The competition had been organised on a "seeded" basis, with the Tyneside and Northumberland clubs being in one half of the draw, and the Teesside clubs in the other half. This ensured a North-South confrontation in the final and helped to contain travelling costs in the earlier rounds. It also meant that the semi-final, in which Spartans' opponents were Armstrong-Whitworth's 57 Shell Shop would be, in effect, the Northern section championship.

St James's Park was the venue for the semi-final, and 10,000 spectators made their way there on the afternoon of March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1918. Play was evenly balanced for the first 30 minutes, with each side testing the other, but then Spartans made a breakthrough with a goal from Annie Allen. 57 Shop came back however, and Ethel Wallace equalised just before half-time. Play resumed in the second half much as in the first, with the sides engaged in a ding-dong battle in which the respective defences had the upper hand. With five minutes to go a draw seemed inevitable, but two minutes later Bella Reay eluded her markers, and dashed through to score a fine individual goal. 57 Shop frantically piled on the attacks, and gained a corner, but before it could be taken the referee blew for full time, and Spartans advanced to the final with a 2-1 victory.

The Teesside section semi-final had taken place on the same day at Darlington Forge Albion's ground, the opposing sides representing Bolckow, Vaughan & Co. of South Bank, and the Rise Carr steel mill at Darlington. It ended in a 1-1 draw, necessitating a replay. This was played the following weekend at South Bank, and Bolckow, Vaughan gained the victory with a single goal from their captain, Winnie McKenna, who had established a goalscoring reputation in the south of the region equal to that of Bella Reay in the north.

The final was fixed for 30th April 1918 at St James's Park. There was high excitement in Blyth at the prospect, and the band of the 3rd Battalion Northumberland Volunteers was given permission by their commanding officer to travel with the team on the 12:30 train from Blyth. Bob Pailor, the pre-war Newcastle United centre-forward was to referee the game, which would be recorded for posterity for a newsreel company. The team selected to represent Spartans was as follows: Lizzie James, Hannah Malone, Nellie Fairless, Agnes Sample, Martha O'Brien, Bella Metcalfe (capt.), Ada Reed, Annie Allen, Bella Reay, Dollie Allen, Jennie Morgan. The Bolckow, Vaughan team was not published. The game ended in a 0-0 stalemate, which is probably why I have been able to find only one newspaper account of the event.

This appeared in the Shields Daily News and is reproduced below.

### ***BLYTH SPARTANS V BOLCKOW***

*Weather conditions were no better than Friday when the Bolckow-Vaughan's played the Blyth Spartans for the Tyne, Wear and Tees Munitionettes' Cup Final at St. James's Park, Newcastle, on Saturday. But a crowd of about 15,000 persons assembled and followed the game with the greatest interest. A strong opening was made by Blyth, but the Bolckows proved a good match, and when they had once got going proved themselves no easy opponents. No goals were scored in the first half, but there were some exciting moments. A*



*shot from Reay, the Spartans' centre, bounced on the crossbar, and then Powell, rushing in, all but scored for the Teessiders. A penalty was granted when, during an exciting moment around the Blyth goal, Malone handled. In the second half Blyth again opened vigorously, but, owing to the smart play of McKenna for the Teessiders, a corner was forced. There followed in quick succession five corners for Bolckow's. Reay would have scored an easy goal for Blyth, but Kirk thwarted her efforts. There was keen play to the last, but no goals were scored.*

Needless to say, no trace of the newsreel film can be found.

The replay was delayed for some time, due to difficulties encountered in arranging a venue. There seemed to be no difficulties in securing suitable grounds for these matches, so the likely scenario is that Bolckow's were holding out for the South Bank ground, but Spartans would not agree, on the grounds that this was Bolckow's home pitch. Spartans went ahead with a busy schedule of matches while negotiations continued; on 1st April they travelled to Jarrow to play the women of Palmer's shipyard. Spartans won the game 4-2, with goals from Ada Reed, Bella Reay and two from Violet Bryant, who had been "borrowed" from the Wallsend Slipway team. The trip was significant for another reason; they would have seen a young inside forward named Mary Lyons for the first time. She was to play an important part in Spartans' future success. A match against Birtley scheduled for 6th April at Seaton Delaval failed to take place when the Birtley team got on the wrong train, and did not arrive at the ground until 5.30 pm.

Spartans were the first team, other than district representative sides, to play outside the North East, when on 20th April they journeyed to Brunton Park, Carlisle to face the Carlisle Munition Ladies. The defence remained unchanged, but the forward line included two new names – Ethel Jackson of Wallsend Slipway and Mary Lyons of Jarrow.

The venture was a success; Spartans returned 3-0 winners with goals from Jennie Morgan and Bella Reay (2)

## Carlisle Munionettes



*In common with most Cumbrian sides, they played in skirts, which must have hampered them considerably*

*(Photograph courtesy of Sheila Angus)*

On 4th May Armstrong-Whitworth's 57 Shop visited Blyth, but with a below-strength team, only nine players having made the journey. This almost certainly contributed to their 6-0 defeat. Lyons played again for Spartans, and there was another new name at right-back – S. Rhodes in place of Hannah Malone. The following weekend they were once again at St James's Park, but this time it was not the famous Newcastle football ground, but the similarly-named park in Alnwick which was the venue. Their opponents were Armstrong-Whitworth's 60 Shop, who faced a Spartans team which the press described as "weakened," but without giving any details. Weakened or not, Spartans proved more than a match for 60 Shop, with a 4-2 victory in which Bella Reay bagged another hat-trick. This was the first time women's football teams had been seen in Alnwick and District, and the event was a success, raising £43 for the Discharged Soldiers' and Sailors' Federation

### *The Cup comes to Blyth*

On 14th May it was announced that the teams had agreed to replay the Munionettes' Cup Final at Ayresome Park on the following Saturday. Spartans made one change from the team they had fielded in the first encounter; Mary Lyons of Jarrow was drafted in at inside-left in place of Dolly Allen. The fact that Mary had already played in the tournament for Palmers did not seem to worry the organisers. Another apparent change, at left-back, was the name of Hannah Weir, but this was, in fact, Hannah Malone playing under her newly-married name.

The two teams lined up as follows:

**Blyth Spartans:** Lizzie James, Hannah Weir, Nellie Fairless, Agnes Sample, Martha O'Brien, Bella Metcalfe (capt.), Ada Reed, Annie Allen, Bella Reay, Mary Lyons, Jennie

Morgan

**Bolckow**, Vaughan: Greta Kirk, V. Martin, Amelia Farrell, E. Rowell, Emily Milner, Anne Wharton, Mary Mahon, Mercy Page, Winnie McKenna (capt.), Gladys Reece, A. Leach

22,000 spectators turned up to witness the showdown. Bolckow's won the toss, and Spartans had to kick off facing the sun and the wind. It did not disadvantage them however, and within ten minutes they had taken the lead through Jennie Morgan. Bolckow's made tremendous efforts to equalise, the crowd cheering Winnie McKenna whenever she got the ball, but Martha O'Brien had her well under control and made sure she had no chance to score. The interval came with Spartans still leading by a single goal.

The second half saw Spartans at their very best; their half-back line was solid, not only breaking up the Bolckow attacks but carrying the play forward, making it possible for their own forwards to maintain constant pressure on the Bolckow defence. The Blyth News reported that "Bella Reay and Mary Lyons were in their element, the former completing the hat-trick. The latter was repeatedly cheered to the echo for her work and dribbling, which reached a point of brilliance when, beating four opponents in succession, she dashed through and beat the fifth, the goalkeeper, thus securing the fifth and last goal." After their lacklustre performance in the first meeting this was a tremendous achievement for Spartans, and they came home to a heroes', or rather heroines' welcome. One might have expected the team to have rested on their laurels for a little while; not so the football-mad Spartans. Two days after the final they entertained Armstrong-Whitworth's 58 Shop at Croft Park. The Munionettes' Cup was on display, to the delight of their fans, and Spartans gave them more to be happy about by beating 58 Shop 4-0. Bella Reay scored one goal and Mary Lyons, who had become almost a regular in the side, celebrated with a hat-trick, a remarkable achievement considering she was only 14 years old!

### **Blyth Spartans Munion Girls – Munionette Cup Winners 1918**



**Back Row: Hannah Weir, Lizzie James, Nellie Fairless**  
**Centre Row: Agnes Sample, Martha O'Brien, Bella Metcalfe**

**Front Row: Dollie Allan, Annie Allan, Bella Reay, Ada Reed(?), Jennie Morgan**  
(Photograph courtesy of Yvonne Crawford)

**Bolckow, Vaughan Ladies – Munitionette Cup Runners-up 1918**



**Back Row: Emily Milner, Amelia Farrell, Greta Kirk, Violet Sharples**  
**Front Row : Elizabeth Powell, Mary Mohan, Mercy Page, Winnie McKenna, Gladys Reece, Olive Percival, Anne Wharton**  
(Photograph courtesy of Peter McNaughton; identifications thanks to John O'Neill,  
Grangetown in Times Past)

Although the cup had been presented to Spartans immediately after their victory at Ayresome Park, a more formal presentation took place at the Theatre Royal in Blyth on 31st May. Jonathan Ridley, President of the Northumberland Football Association, handed the Cup to Mr. R. Thompson, the Secretary of the Blyth Spartans team. In doing so he said that his audience would agree, “that if ever there was a team that deserved a set of medals these girls deserved them. They had had many good football teams in Blyth, but never one with the record the ladies possessed. They had won the Ladies’ Challenge Cup and had played the whole of their ties away from home. Since August 1917 they had played 30 games, and had won 26, drawn 4 and lost none, and the goal-getter – ‘Wor Bella’ had scored 133 goals. The team had travelled through the principal parts of the three adjoining counties playing for charity, and the sum reached was over £2,000.” Responding, Mr. Thompson thanked both the Chairman, Colonel Christie, and Mr Ridley for their interest in the team, and also Mr. D. Hardy, who had been so confident in the success of the team that he had offered the use of the theatre for this ceremony long before the close of the competition. They were all very proud of the team’s record, which had not been achieved without some sacrifice and self-denial. In closing, he too thanked the public for the support they had shown the team.



**Munitionettes' Cup – winner's medal awarded to Jennie Morgan**



**(Photograph courtesy of John Morgan)**



Their season was not yet over; on 25th May a return match against the Carlisle Munition Ladies took place at Croft Park. Spartans fielded the same team that had won the Cup – with one exception, Rhodes coming in for Lyons at inside-left. Carlisle were the first to make a serious attack on goal, their left winger Howson putting in a speculative shot which was saved. Spartans responded by besieging the Carlisle goal, and forced a corner after three minutes. Martha O'Brien connected with the ball as it crossed the penalty area and sent it into the net for Spartans' first goal. Carlisle continued to mount attacks, being particularly dangerous down the right flank, and from one of these sorties their right winger sent in a shot that James had to go full-length to save. Play was end-to-end, and on Spartans' next attack Annie Allen managed to put the ball beyond the reach of the Carlisle keeper for the second goal.

Spartans thought they had a third goal a short while later when a Carlisle defender miskicked in front of goal. The keeper failed to stop the ball, and when another defender ran across and cleared it from the goalmouth it was claimed that it had crossed the line. Play stopped, but the referee had not blown for a goal, so the game was restarted with a bounce-up. There was no further score in the first half, but after the interval Spartans stepped up a gear, Bella Reay getting a hat-trick. This brought her personal tally to a remarkable 113.

Spartans had three more games before they took a well-earned summer break. On 15th June they played Walker Naval Yard at Croft Park, winning by 3 goals to nil – another Bella Reay hat-trick.

On June 22nd a large crowd made their way to the Friarage Field, Hartlepool, to see them take on a Hartlepool representative side, but Blyth Spartans were not playing!.

Instead, it was a composite team, with only members drawn from Blyth Spartans, the rest coming from Wallsend Slipway, North East Marine, and Bolckow, Vaughan. It is not clear whether or not this was a deliberate ploy by the organisers to get a bigger attendance, but the crowd were disappointed, although they did see Bella Reay score the only goal of the game.

Their last match of the season was held, fittingly enough, at Croft Park, against a side representing the North of England. The teams lined up as follows:

**Blyth Spartans:** Lizzie James, S. Rhodes, Nellie Fairless, Agnes Sample, Martha O'Brien, Bella Metcalfe, Ada Reed, Annie Allen, Bella Reay, Mary Lyons, Jennie Morgan

**North of England:** Ada Shaw (60 Shop), Maggie Short (Slipway), Amelia Farrell (South Bank), Bella Willis (60 Shop), Ethel Jackson (NEM), Annie Wharton (South Bank), Ethel Wallace (57 Shop), Minnie Seed (Naval Yard), Winnie McKenna (South Bank), Violet Bryant (Naval Yard), Lizzie McConnell (Slipway)

The game got off to a sensational start, Bella Reay charging through on her own and scoring within the first few seconds with a well-hit drive. The stunned North of England team rallied and worked hard through the remainder of the first half to get an equaliser, but several promising runs by Minnie Seed, the Sunderland international, failed due to her holding on to the ball too long.

In the second half Jennie Morgan gave the North of England no end of problems, but it was from the centre that the second goal came. Bella Metcalfe released Reay with a clever pass,

and the latter eluded a desperate tackle to stab the ball wide of the keeper. A fitting unbeaten finish to the season for a remarkable team!

The team's season had closed, but for Bella Reay there remained two more matches before she could hang up her boots. On 6th July she played for a North of England side against the so-called "Tyneside Internationals." This was the team which had defeated Ireland on Boxing Day. The match took place at St. James's Park in Newcastle and attracted a crowd of 4,000 who witnessed a 1-1 draw. Two weeks later, on 20th July, she was at St. James's Park again, this time as an international herself, playing in her favourite centre-forward position against a Scottish representative side. Also making her debut as an international was Mary Lyons, who had played an important role for Spartans in the latter half of the season. The match was a rough affair, and some of the Scots women had to be cautioned by the referee. It ended in a 3-2 win for England, but Bella for once failed to find the net.

It seems incredible that Bella Reay was the only member of the Spartans side to achieve this recognition, especially when one considers that the Blyth Spartans team itself could probably have beaten any international side of the day. The organisation of Munitonette football was, however, controlled from Tyneside, and one suspects that an element of favouritism may have been at work.

## **Bella Reay**



**The reverse side carries the following inscription in Bella's own hand:  
"Bella Reay age 17 in Blyth Ladies Spartan team  
Trained by Navy Lads whose boat was in Blyth Harbour"  
(Photograph courtesy of Yvonne Crawford)**

**Now you see them, now you don't**

When the 1918-19 football season commenced, the supporters and players of Blyth Spartans Ladies' FC were no doubt looking forward to further success on the field. Sadly, they were to be disappointed. The season began in unremarkable fashion on 31st August, with a visit from the women of Angus Sanderson, Newcastle. It was known in advance that this would be the last match at Croft Park; the Navy and Garrison department had requisitioned the ground and would take possession on September 1st. There were a number of new faces in the Spartans line-up; the Blyth News reported that the team would be selected from the following: M. King (captain), N. Fairless, H. Weir, A. Sample, M. O'Brien, B. Metcalfe, A. Allen, S. Rhodes, B. Reay, J. Morgan, M. Jayne, N. Cocks, N. Scruffin. A detailed account of the game did not appear in the newspapers, but the score was reported in the Daily Chronicle; 3-0 to Spartans, with Bella Reay getting her first hat-trick of the season.

The next scheduled appearance for Spartans was at Burradon on 7th September, but this game was cancelled by the hosts at the last minute.



A return match against Sandersons was arranged to take place at Stakeford on 14th September. The Blyth News announced the team selection in advance:

M. King (captain), N. Fairless, H. Weir, S. Rhodes, A. Sample, M. O'Brien, N. Cocks, A. Allen, B. Reay, J. Morgan, N. Scruffam; reserve, Mary Lane.

Whether the match took place or not is unknown; no report of it appeared in any of the usual newspapers, nor, in the weeks to come, were there any further reports of the team's matches. It was as if Blyth Spartans had vanished without trace.

The names of some team members were mentioned from time to time; for example on 12th October Nellie Fairless, Martha O'Brien, Bella Reay and Jennie Morgan were all members of the Northumberland side which beat Durham 1-0 at St. James's Park.

Bella Reay also played for Tyneside against Hartlepool on 14th December, and for Palmer's of Jarrow in their Munitionettes' Cup campaign, which culminated in a victory against Brown's of West Hartlepool on 22nd March 1919. It was a good move by Palmer's; Bella scored the winning (and only) goal on a snow-covered St. James's Park.

Blyth Spartans' name cropped up in three enigmatic press clippings which were published subsequently. On 8th October, the Northern Echo listed the entries for that Munitionettes' Cup, and Spartans were included in the list. On 25th November the Newcastle Journal, reporting on a first-round tie between 43 Shell Shop and the Newcastle Motor Company, stated that the winners would meet Blyth Spartans in the second round. Finally, on 16th December, the Middlesbrough-based North East Daily Gazette, describing a forthcoming game at Stockton between Teesside and Palmers, stated that Palmers were the only team to have beaten Blyth Spartans.

Simple explanations can be put forward for the first two of these reports. It is probably true that Spartans had entered the Munitionettes' Cup. As holders, they would have been keen to defend their title. They may well have received a bye in the first round, which was not uncommon – in the previous season 6 teams had received a bye in the first round. The third statement is more problematic; there is no record of Blyth Spartans having been defeated by Palmers. In the absence of any corroborative evidence this statement must remain suspect.

What could have brought about this state of affairs? We can dismiss the loss of Croft Park as their home ground; there were many other venues available in the Blyth area who would have been delighted to have the famous Spartans as residents. Three possibilities come to mind:

Firstly, by October 1918 it was clear that the Allies had won the war. Austria and Turkey were crumbling in the face of determined Allied offensives and Bulgaria had already surrendered. Germany itself was exhausted, and the only question outstanding was the terms on which an Armistice would be signed. Already the Allied requirement for munitions was diminishing, and it was uncertain whether the munitionettes themselves would continue to be employed for much longer. Given the nature of the work carried out by the Blyth Spartans women it is possible that their jobs were among the first to disappear. The loss of a common centre of employment may have led to the team breaking up.

Secondly, a virulent strain of influenza had reached the UK in May 1918 and spread to the whole country during the summer. In all, 228,000 people died before the epidemic ran its

course. At least one Munitionettes' Cup tie was directly affected by it; the second-round tie between Armstrong-Whitworths and North East Marine was postponed when N.E.M. could only field two players owing to the 'flu. Could it be that the Spartans' team was badly hit by 'flu in October 1918, and were unable to continue with their commitments?

Finally, we cannot rule out the possibility that the break-up was caused by personal differences between the team members. The announcement of the new squad on 1st September must have caused some raised eyebrows in Blyth. Throughout the successful campaign of 1917-18 Bella Metcalfe had held the team captaincy, and the half-back line had been renowned for its strength and stability. However, for 1918-19 a new captain had been appointed – M. King. This lady had never appeared previously for Blyth, nor indeed for any other munitionettes team. What had qualified her to assume the captaincy of the most successful side in the region? Furthermore, when the team to play Sandersons at Stakeford was announced, Bella Metcalfe had been left out altogether. Could this factor have led to a split in the camp, making it impossible to put a side together?

The true explanation for the disappearance of the team may never be known, unless somewhere, in an attic in Blyth, there is a personal account by one of its members, just waiting to be discovered.

### **Postscript**

As the munitionettes were laid off, so their football teams were wound up. It is difficult to accurately assess the rate at which munitionette football declined, as the local press lost interest in it after the resumption of the men's professional game. The last game to be reported in the Newcastle Journal, was billed as Newcastle Ladies versus Sunderland Ladies. It took place at St James's Park on 31st May 1919 in aid of the St John's Ambulance Brigade, and Newcastle won 4-1. Both Bella Reay and Martha O'Brien were included in the Sunderland squad!

Women's football continued elsewhere in the country, notably in Lancashire, but as far as the North East was concerned, it either ceased to exist, or went completely underground. It experienced a brief, but interesting resurgence however during the Coal Dispute of 1921.

Following the return of the collieries to private control on 1st April 1921, the Miners' Federation withdrew their labour. In their opinion they had been locked-out, as the private owners proposed to reduce their wages. In the press the dispute was referred to as a strike. The dispute lasted three months until a settlement was reached on 7th July.

Miners' families were suffering right from the beginning of the dispute, and soup kitchens were quickly established in pit villages to relieve hardship. Various fund-raising initiatives were started to support them, and some bright soul remembered how successful women's football matches had been at raising money during the war. Before long women's football teams were once more taking to the field – this time in support of their own families.

In Northumberland the greatest degree of activity was in the Blyth and Wansbeck valleys. In a remarkable parallel with wartime women's football, once again a single team emerged which stood head and shoulders above the others. This time it was the ladies of Barrington Colliery, who between May and August played 23 games, winning 22 of them, and in the

process scoring 77 goals, for only 10 conceded. They too had a hot-shot centre-forward – Lillian Ritchie, who was responsible for 43 of their goals.

A more detailed account of women's football in Northumberland and Durham during the dispute can be found at:

[http://www.donmouth.co.uk/womens\\_football/soup\\_kitchen\\_soccer.html](http://www.donmouth.co.uk/womens_football/soup_kitchen_soccer.html)

Bella Reay, now Mrs Bella Henstock, and the mother of a young daughter, had been tempted out of retirement to help the fund-raising efforts, and she turned out for a number of teams, including Cowpen, Cambois, and a team known simply as Blyth.

She could still score goals; in a match between Cowpen and Bebside on 25th May she got all four in Cowpen's 4-0 win.

It was inevitable that a comparison would be made between the young lass from Barrington and Blyth's wartime heroine, and equally inevitable that efforts would be made to arrange a show-down. On 29th June 5,000 spectators packed into the Barrington Institute ground to see a reformed Blyth Spartans Ladies take on the local upstarts.

The Spartans' team, which included many members from their war-time heyday, lined up as follows:

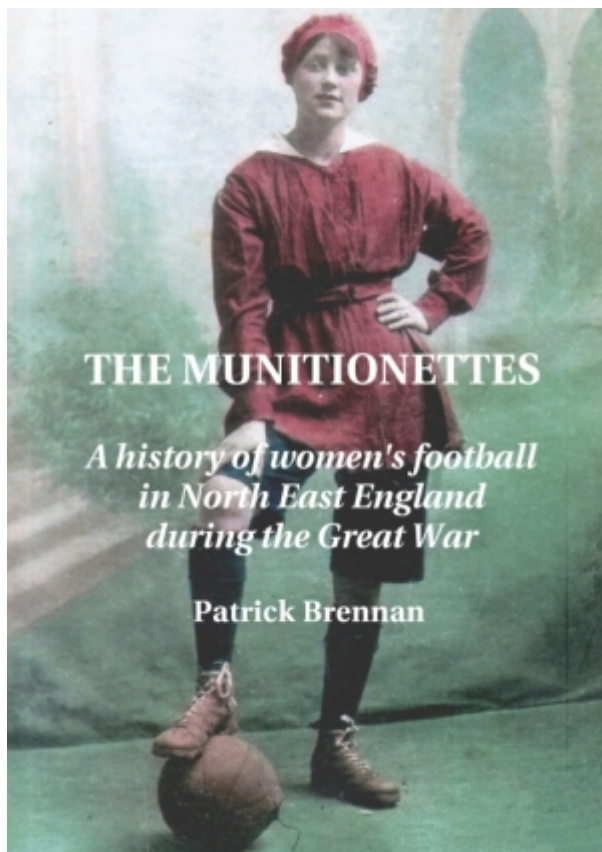
Lizzie James, S. Rhodes, M. Long, Agnes Sample, M. Douglas, M. Snowdon, Ada Reed, M. Reay, Bella Reay, M. Scuffham, Jennie Morgan

Bella Reay kicked off, and for the first half Spartans were the better side, serving up some of the best football witnessed at Barrington. It was not all one-way traffic however, and Ritchie brought a fine save from the Blyth goalkeeper. For a short period at the beginning of the second half Barrington had the upper hand, but Spartans once more established their superiority, and had it not been for a text book display of goalkeeping from the 12-year-old Miss Scott in the Barrington goal their unbeaten record would have been brought to an end. The game was nearly marred by an incident close to time; Spartans took a corner which went straight out of play, but a spectator mischievously tapped it back onto the field, and Spartans forced the ball into the net.

Fortunately for Barrington the referee had a clear view of the incident and the goal was disallowed. The game ended goalless, but honour had been preserved all round; both teams had held on to their unbeaten records, though no doubt the argument as to which was the better side continued to rage for some time to come

## **Biography of Patrick Brennan.**

Patrick was born in Danesfield, Jarrow-on-Tyne, on 14th October 1948, describing himself as another product of the post-war baby boom. His godfather, Jim McConnon, was an England Test cricketer. He took up researching family history in 1993, and after running out of new material, he started researching local history. This led to Patrick, publishing a history of womens' football teams during WW1 - "The Munitionettes", which is selling slowly but steadily. His research led to him to being invited to become editor of the Journal of the Northumberland and Durham Family History Society, a position he held from 2007 to 2011. Patrick has created an excellent local history site entitled Donmouth - <http://www.donmouth.co.uk/index.html>



## **Biography of Graham Usher**

Graham is a life-long Spartan, proudly born and bred in Blyth. Fiercely proud of his club, he has lived through some great times and tough times. As a 'fifty-something', Graham has seen his team have four cup runs to the FA Cup 3rd Round (one being to the 5th Round as readers will now doubt be aware!).

Graham has been in the design and print trade all his life. It helped him start a Blyth Spartans fanzine back in the late 90's when the club, finally joined the pyramid in 1995. It ran for several years before a change in work commitments made it impossible to carry on producing it.

Graham started his historical blog about the club six and half years ago which has been hugely successful, well over 100,000 reads so far. He documents the famous games,

personnel and players from the club's long and proud history. Graham also runs a popular Facebook page and Twitter page ([@BlythSpirit66](#)) about the club's history and facts and statistics

The aim has always been to give the club's rich history an online presence so it's there for many years to come.

Graham has become a bit of an amateur historian over the last six years while writing his blog, recording and documenting the club's history and building a database of results and line ups and so on.

