

# Robert Main Christie: Dunblane's original sporting hero?

A man who dominated the Scotland sporting scene in the 1880s



He was a young sportsman from Dunblane who represented Scotland as a teenager, made a big impact in London, and his brother was almost as famous in the same sport. Andy Murray? No, this was the cathedral city's Victorian equivalent.

In 1884, Robert Main Christie was not just one of Scotland's youngest-ever football caps, he achieved the unique distinction of being the only man ever to score a goal for a Scottish club in an FA Cup final. If you throw in other sporting achievements which include two Scottish Cup victories, representing Scotland at curling and being President of the Scottish FA, he is surely a candidate for another golden post box to sit alongside Murray's on Dunblane High Street. Sadly, however, the only memorials to Christie commemorate his premature death in the closing months of the First World War.

Born in 1865, the son of the parish schoolmaster, Christie founded Dunblane's first football team as a boy, and hit the ground running when he went to Edinburgh University where, as a 17-year-old, he won the East of Scotland Shield and played twice for an Edinburgh select. After a year he moved to Glasgow to train as an architect and was snapped up by Queen's Park, immediately installing himself on the left wing of the country's finest team.

His first season, 1883-84, progressed in extraordinary fashion, not just for Christie and his new club but for Scottish football in general. He played in every round as Queen's Park won the Scottish Cup for the fourth time in five years, albeit with a slightly hollow ring as old rivals Vale of Leven refused to play the final and the trophy went to Hampden by default. Despite his youth he did well enough to be chosen for the Glasgow XI against London and Sheffield, and then came the greater honour of a cap for Scotland against England, aged just 18 years and four months. At the time he was our youngest debutant, a record only surpassed once since then, and his dashing runs helped to carve out a 1-0 victory. This reinforced the national team's aura of invincibility in the midst of an astonishing nine-year unbeaten run.

The icing on the cake would have been to lift the FA Cup, which Queen's Park were taking part in for only the second time in an attempt to be declared the undisputed champions of Britain. With Christie again featuring in every match, few doubted their chances of success after they destroyed English opponents round by round. The scores would be unimaginable today: Crewe Alexandra 10-0, Manchester 15-0, Oswestry 7-1, Aston Villa 6-1, Old Westminsters by a single goal and, in the semi-final, cup holders Blackburn Olympic were dumped 4-1.

Blackburn Rovers lay in wait for the showdown between the best of England and Scotland on 29 March 1884, and the Glasgow side travelled to London with confidence. They were widely considered favourites, but the boisterous Scots among the 12,000 spectators at Kennington Oval were to leave the stadium bitterly disappointed. In an early period of intense pressure Queen's Park hit the post twice and a Christie goal was disallowed for offside, but then Blackburn Rovers surged forward and scored twice in quick succession through Brown and Forrest. Christie knocked in a legitimate goal just before the break but there was no second-half fightback and the Scottish champions fell to a 2-1 defeat.

Although the Scots looked down their noses at the thinly-veiled professionalism of the Blackburn team, they were more aggrieved at being "refereed out of the game" by Major Francis Marindin, whose decisions were, according to the official club history, "peculiar and vain". The referee

rubbed salt into the wounds by visiting the team hotel the following day, to tell the players that they had the ball through the Rovers goal by a foot but did not claim, and that the first goal scored against them was distinctly offside but no appeal was made - this was at a time when, as in cricket, an appeal had to be made for every decision. In effect, he told them they should have won the cup but were not sufficiently clued up.

Queen's Park made another assault on the FA Cup the following year, again reaching the final, but Christie only lasted till February when he twisted his knee at Notts County, which also ruled him out of two internationals for which he had already been selected.

Without him, the final had a similar outcome, 2-0 for Blackburn Rovers, and this was to prove Queen's Park's last serious attempt at English glory before the Scottish FA ruled that its members could not enter any national cup competition but its own.

Having returned to fitness, Christie scored one of the goals that won the 1886 Scottish Cup final against Renton, but he wrenched his knee again in the match and that was effectively the end of his top-level football career, aged only 20. He did return briefly for Dunblane three years later, winning the Perthshire Cup, before hanging up his boots for good. Christie was a sore loss: "His runs on the left have electrified thousands," one journalist wrote, "like adder darting from the coil".

Undaunted, he remained in football as match secretary for Dunblane and was elected to represent Perthshire at the SFA as a 21-year-old - another youthful record - ultimately rising to be president of the SFA in 1903. He also had the satisfaction of seeing his younger brother, Alexander, playing three times for Scotland as well as scoring for Queen's Park in the 1900 Scottish Cup final, the last one ever reached by the club. Over a century later, his family's football connection continues with his great-grandson Ranald Gilbert, who is general manager of Ross County.

Christie's energy took him in many other directions and he was active in a range of sports, taking up curling to such good effect that he played five times for Scotland, and he was also a founder and secretary of Dunblane's first golf club. Meanwhile, he set up in practice in Dunblane as a civil engineer and architect, constructing everything from the Burgh Chambers to the local water supply, not to mention his own house, Westlands, which is now a hotel.

However, his devotion to a military career as a reservist would ultimately lead to his tragic early death. As a member of the 4th Perthshire Volunteer Battalion, he saw active service in the South African War, commanding a Relief Company of the Black Watch but, by the time the First World War broke out, he was too old to be considered for the front line.

Still, he was determined to "do his bit" and went with the Royal Scots Fusiliers to France and Salonika before being seconded to the Labour Corps in the final year of the war.

It was a non-combat role engaged in essential work ranging from road repairs to burying the dead so Major Christie, as he was by then, had a good chance of coming through the conflict unscathed to rejoin his wife and five children in Dunblane. Sadly, it was not to be.

On the night of 11 May 1918 he was commanding the 101st Labour Company, laying cables at Foncquevillers in the Somme valley, when they were pounded by German high-explosive shells spiked with mustard gas.

There was nowhere to hide and, in the resulting carnage, three officers and 136 men were killed, with Christie enduring four agonising days before succumbing in a Red Cross hospital in Rouen. He was 52. Like most casualties he is buried in France, but is commemorated in Dunblane on the war memorial and on a poignant brass plaque in the local masonic lodge, where he had been a member and his father had been master.

It was a horrible end for Dunblane's first great sporting talent, but Robert Christie's legacy lives on. He was a youthful record-breaker and there is no knowing where his precocious football ability could have taken him had it not been for that twisted knee.

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