

Belfast Bhoys Remembered

A new mural honours some of the greats from the Celtic Football Club across the water

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If you know the history'. It's a phrase that resonates with every Celtic supporter, but it takes on a poignant note in the city of Belfast. The story of Belfast Celtic is one of football's great tragedies - how one of Ireland's most successful clubs, with a proud history and a long record of achievements and great players, disappeared so suddenly.

When they went out of existence on December 27, 1948, following a pitch invasion in a game against Linfield, where striker Jimmy Jones was brutally attacked and had his leg broken, there is no doubt that the game in Ireland was left impoverished by their passing.

But today, there are strides being made to recognise their history and place in the local community and ensure that Belfast Celtic are forever remembered.

Last week, a ceremony was held in Belfast where a mural, designed and painted by the local community, was unveiled, depicting their old ground, Celtic Park and three of their greatest players. On the same day, local people gathered in tribute at the restored grave of former manager, Elisha Scott.

The event was a tremendous success, attended by former players, including the aforementioned Jones, their families, community dignitaries and a large number of local people, many of whom have kept the Celtic legend alive.

Organised by the Belfast Celtic Society, it also highlighted the enduring connection between the Irish side and their Celtic counterparts in Glasgow.

As journalist, historian and chairperson of the Society, Pdraig Coyle, explained, the two clubs were and, forever will be, intrinsically linked.

"The connection goes back to the formation of Belfast Celtic in 1891, when the board actually wrote to Glasgow Celtic and asked for help in the formation of the club," he said. "They received a very kind letter in return and a donation to help them get on their way.

"They wanted to model themselves the way that Celtic were run, as benefactors, helping the local community and that was when the link was established.

"From that date on there were a lot of dealings between the clubs, players moved back and

The legendary Jimmy Jones



forth, a lot of business was done and Celtic came over to Belfast to play challenge matches and benefit games."

Belfast Celtic went from strength to strength and their record of achievements in a 58-year history is nothing short of remarkable, with the club winning 19 league titles and a total of 44 other trophies.

This record was gained despite a four-year break when the club was forced to withdraw from the league in the 1920s due to the escalation of 'political' violence, but while they enjoyed success on the park, Celtic's influence was far-reaching off it.

"When one looks at the records and minutes of the club you can see that continually they donated to various causes and benefits," continued Coyle. "They were generous, because those were the days when there wasn't insurance for people and if you broke your leg, for example, you were effectively on your own.

"The generosity of the club came into play when people had fallen on hard times and they would help people out with a few extra bob on their pension and there were benefit matches for orphanages and refuges - they even played a benefit match for an Orange Band!

"They had an open book when it came to helping whoever they could. There was a great generosity in the work that they did, but at the same time, they were run to a very harsh business model and didn't flinch when it came to selling players.

"Religion was never an issue with this club either," he added, "and when you speak to former players they say that they were respected and treated properly."

The team also had talent and when former Belfast Celtic players returned to play a game against Celtic three years after their official closure, they arrived from English top flight clubs such as Fulham, Burnley, West Brom and Huddersfield.

Several former players went on to establish formidable reputations in the English game, with several moving to Manchester United and Arsenal and another, Patrick O'Connell, won the league as manager of Barcelona and led the Catalan side during the Spanish Civil War.

"It's hard to imagine in today's transfer market, but at that time Celtic saw themselves on a level with the top clubs in England and with Celtic in Glasgow and when it came to doing business, it was carried out with that in mind," explained Coyle.

"When it came to selling players they wanted the best price for players, no-one was doing the club a favour by buying their goalkeeper or centre forward."