

William Garbutt

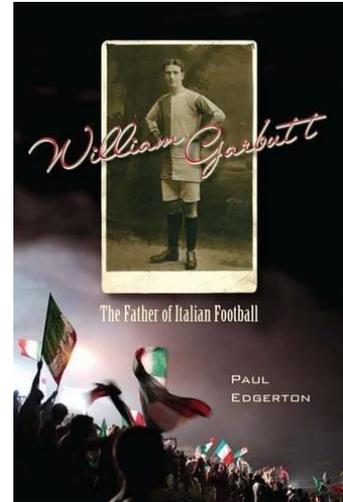
“The most important man in the history of Italian Football”

The Daily Mail dated Friday 15th April 2016 reviewed a new football related book entitled ‘Mister’. Part way through the article there is a reference to William Garbutt, an anonymous octogenarian living in ‘reduced circumstances’ in Leamington Spa. It seems that when Garbutt died in 1964 every newspaper in Italy carried a lavish obituary. He was deeply mourned, and in the words of Vittorio Pozzo, manager of the Italian World Cup winning teams of 1934 and 1938 Garbutt “was the most important man in the history of Italian football.” But in this country, nothing! So who was William Garbutt, and why did he come to Leamington Spa?

A little more research found that author Paul Edgerton had traced Garbutt’s adopted daughter Maria for a unique insight into an extraordinary man and in 2009 his book ‘William Garbutt - The Father of Italian Football’ was published.



William Garbutt was born at the family home in London Road, Hazel Grove, Stockport on 9th January 1883. As a young man he joined the Army serving with the Royal Artillery. While playing for the Royal Artillery football team he was spotted by Reading F.C. In 1903 he joined them, then in the Southern League, until December 1905 when he moved to Woolwich Arsenal, which we now know as Arsenal F.C; he played 52 times and scored 8 goals. In 1908 he moved to Blackburn Rovers making 82 appearances and scoring 10 times.



Garbutt with Blackburn Rovers - back row, second right.

As a reasonably successful outside right [winger] he was good enough to have played for the English Football League against the Scottish Football League in 1910. Around the same time he met Dublin born Anna Marie Stewart and they quickly became inseparable.

On 16th September 1911, William Garbutt's life changed forever. That afternoon he lined up for Blackburn Rovers against Notts County in the First Division, but during the game he was on the wrong side of a bad tackle that ended his career - he was only 29 years old. To add to his concerns Anna had become pregnant. The two were married on 29th November 1911 and their son Stuart Paul Garbutt was born in Fylde on 15th April 1912.



He now had to decide what to do next? For many years a number of ex-professional footballers went on to run pubs. One of those was George Henry 'Daddy' Green, Leamington's most famous footballer. He played 8 times for England and over 400 times for Sheffield United. In 1939 George went on to run the Ranelagh Tavern in Ranelagh Street.

William Garbutt had other ideas; in May 1912 he moved to Italy and accepted the manager's job at Genoa. In doing so he became the first professional football manager in Italian football.

He introduced the importance of physical development in football. He also introduced dribbling practice and jumping exercises as Genoa went on to build possibly the fittest group of players around. It was often said that Garbutt's players had the stamina to take the game to the opponents in the latter part of a match due to their physical superiority. He had an immediate impact on Genoa as the club finished second in 1913, following it up with the top spot the following year. Even though the 1914-15 Championship was suspended due to War, Genoa were declared champions. Under his guidance Genoa won the Italian League Championship three times - in 1915, 1923 and 1924.

In 1915 William, Anna and Stuart returned to Lancashire, and at the age of 32 William re-joined the army, serving in France and working his way up through the ranks to become an officer. On returning to Italy, and Genoa, he helped Vittorio Pozzo with the Italian team that was knocked out at the quarter-final stage at the 1924 Paris Olympics.

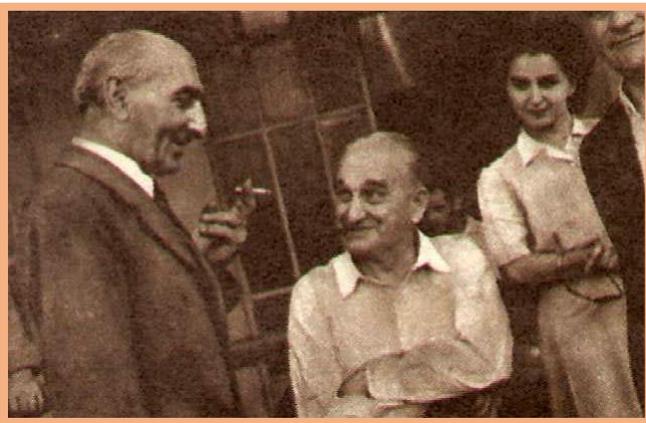


In 1927, in search of new challenges, he left for a newly formed club from the capital, AS Roma, guiding them to the Coppa Coni in his first year. He stayed with the side for one more year before moving to the southern city of Napoli in 1929. During the next six years, he took the little known Napoli club to dizzying heights as they finished 3rd on two consecutive occasions in the 1932 and 1933 seasons. During his time at Naples, he adopted an orphan, Maria which further endeared him to the Italians.

In 1935 he moved to Spain repeating his remarkable success by guiding the Basque club Athletic Bilbao to the championship of the Spanish League in his first season fighting off Real Madrid. However, in 1936 the Spanish Civil War erupted and so he returned to Italy, managing A.C Milan to a 4th place finish before returning the following year to his beloved Genoa once more.

Garbutt is still considered an icon in Genoese football circles and is the reason why, to this day, Italian players call their manager 'Mister'.

Despite this he didn't manage to escape the Second World War. Italy joined the Axis powers in 1940, and as William was a British citizen, he was interned in Genova's Marassi prison by Benito Mussolini's Fascists. Conditions in the prison were basic bordering on primitive and it wasn't a very hygienic place to be either. With access to the football club's lawyers, Anna appealed to the authorities citing various reasons why her husband should be released. After a couple of weeks William's health was deteriorating rapidly. Whether the authorities were worried about having the country's most famous football manager die on them or whether it was for other reasons, they relented and the family were sent to an isolated backwater called Acerno.



The Garbutt's suffered a lot, but the worst was to come on 13th May 1944 when Anna was killed during an Allied bombing raid. William returned to England a broken man, but the Genoa club was starting up again and who better to guide them once more? Genoa took him under their wings and offered him the position of a scout, chiefly due to the financial pay that went with it. A grateful club stood by him as Garbutt recovered slowly. When the liberation came, William and his son, Stuart, who by sheer coincidence was serving with the Eighth Army in Italy, were briefly reunited.

On 22nd September 1946, Genoa met Brescia in the Stadio Luigi Ferraris and the crowd stood to applaud the 63 year old Englishman, who saw his team win 4-0.

But there was to be no fairy-tale end for either Genoa or for William. The side finished joint 10th, along with Inter, Lazio, and their newly formed city rivals, Sampdoria, who scored a league double over Genoa.

Italian football was about to be dominated by the great Torino side and in 1949, after agreeing, against his better judgment, to stay for one more season, William resigned. He was exhausted, he was 65 and he was a sick man.





The photo above shows Garbutt surrounded by former players at a benefit match arranged for him by Genoa FC on 24th June 1951.



In the same year, he returned to England, a country in which he had lived for only one year [in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War] since 1912. His all-conquering spree had seen him conquer Italy and Spain but there was no welcome and no fanfare. Sadly, his achievements did not even get a mention in the English Press other than a cursory column in an obscure newspaper. William came to live with his sister in law in our town of Royal Leamington Spa at 42 Regent Street. In 2016 it is a small two-storey building with a restaurant on the ground floor.

In 1960 William moved to a small mid terraced house at 16 Priory Road Warwick; in this May 2016 photo it is the one with the brown door. When he died on 16th February 1964 at the age of 81, his death barely generated any news in the British newspapers, only one British newspaper carried an obituary and that was our beloved Morning News: -

***Garbutt** - On February 16 1964, at his home, 16, Priory Road, Warwick, after a long illness, William John Garbutt, aged 81 years. No flowers please.*



In Italy newspapers covered his passing in detail, almost a national mourning was in place. Elaborate anecdotes of him filled every newspaper that day as players fondly recalled the words and action of the man whom they called - Il Mister.

On 24th February 1964 William made his final journey to Canley Crematorium in Coventry. There were no crowds lining the streets; only Maria, son Stuart and daughter-in-law Ivy, niece Joan and sister-in-law Dorothy.

His story would have remained untold but for Paul Edgerton, whose interest was aroused when he read John Foot's 2006 book, *Calcio, History of Italian Football*, and who then wanted to know more about this man called William Garbutt. Edgerton traced Garbutt's adopted daughter, Maria, whose help proved invaluable as she made available family documents, letters and photographs.

Sadly, Maria died two months before her adopted father's meticulously researched and entertainingly written biography was published. She would have been proud of both the subject and the author.

William Garbutt may not have been given the plaudits he deserved in the country of his birth – England – but he was, and still is, seen as the one and only “Mister” by the Genovese people. Indeed, throughout Italy players call their Coaches “Mister” as a direct result of his time in football. His success with his beloved Genoa - where he won the Championship in 1915, 1923 and 1924 – and his achievements in the modernisation of Italian football have him firmly fixed into the history books.

Allan Jennings

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Acknowledgements

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