



Managers – Gilbert Gillies (1905-08)

It took a generation for football to take more than a tenuous grip in the West Riding, but in 1904 Leeds finally threw up a club that was to enjoy more than a transitory life. The men behind Leeds City Association Football Club were committed to making their young organisation a major power and, as they prepared their bid for election to the Football League in early 1905, they were determined to recruit an individual who could secure the necessary support from the League's decision makers. Ideally, they sought someone who already had experience of League football and could satisfy their longer-term ambitions for success; they managed to find just such an individual when they appointed Gilbert Gillies as the club's first manager.

Gillies was a dour Scot, born in Kilmichael Glassary, in the Lorn district of Argyll and Bute, on 15 September 1869. chesterfield-fc.co.uk: "The son of an Argyllshire shepherd, Gillies was born on the shores of Loch Ederline in 1869. By 1891 he'd been sent to live in Chesterfield with an uncle, who kept a pub, the Square and Compasses, on West Bars. Gillies had a sufficiently good education to get work as a compositor for the Derbyshire Times." Printer's compositor was the profession he cited in the Census of 1901.



Gilbert Gillies, pictured in 1905, was the first manager of Leeds City

Gillies, sporting a huge moustache and generally to be seen wearing a sober three piece suit and high collar, was a typical example of his breed in the early years of the new century, normally referred to as secretary-manager. The role combined presiding over the club's administration with responsibility for playing matters, though it meant having to contend with the whims and fancies of a Selection Committee, comprised chiefly of the club's directors.

After moving down to the East Midlands, Gillies became connected with the Chesterfield club in 1894, while they were still a junior organisation playing in the Sheffield League. He was appointed secretary-manager in the summer of 1895.

Formed in 1866, Chesterfield is one of England's oldest clubs, and won a number of local Cup competitions in the few years before Gillies joined them.

chesterfield-fc.co.uk: "The idea of having an individual in charge of team affairs occurred to the

folk of Chesterfield as early as 1871, when the secretary was invested with 'full powers of management' on match days. This might well be the first such reference to the idea of management in football history, but Chesterfield Town's earliest secretary-managers were not professionals; their first Football League spell was very nearly over before they appointed a 'football man', and it would be the late 1950s, and perhaps even later, before Chesterfield FC trusted its manager enough to let him pick the team!

"Until 1895 the position of secretary was an honorary one, and it usually changed every season. The last of Chesterfield Town's honorary secretaries was its finest; one Edwin Russell Timmeus. Tavistock-born, Timmeus came to Chesterfield to work as an estate manager for the Duke of Devonshire. He began playing for the Town club in 1887 but was no great shakes, and usually served as a stand in goalie. He was a better cricketer, though, and played for Chesterfield against an All England side that included W G Grace at the Recreation Ground in 1890.

"Timmeus served around five years as secretary and guided the club through its first seasons of competitive football in the Sheffield League. His meticulous approach established a good reputation for the club that enabled it to make many friends on its way up. As the club grew, though, the demands that it placed on Timmeus' time proved too great, and he voluntarily stood aside in favour of Gillies.



The Chesterfield club which provided both manager Gilbert Gillies and captain Dick Ray to Leeds City

"Gillies became the Town club's secretary at the age of 26, in 1895. Quite how he made the leap to football secretary is a mystery, but the very fact that he could do probably casts light on the nature of the role at that time. Like Timmeus, most of Gillies' good work was done off the field, spreading the Town club's good reputation.

"As secretary-manager, Gillies would have been concerned with the minutiae of running the club on a day to day basis. There was some involvement on the playing side; he would have scouted, signed and paid the players, although board members would usually go to watch a player before signing him; the board decided who played each week and the trainer usually had match day responsibility for tactics, especially at away games, which were not always attended by the secretary-manager. In summary, perhaps, the secretary-manager might have run things in the way that a modern Director of Football does."

Gillies supervised Chesterfield's successful application to the Midland League in 1896 and was a leading light in their battle to earn admission to the Football League's Second Division during the summer of 1899. Earlier that year, a limited liability company had been formed to manage the club's affairs, clearing the existing debts in the process.

Gillies, accompanied by Chesterfield vice-president W H Eyre, was in attendance at the century's final Football League annual general meeting to plead the Saltergate club's case. He managed to persuade the men who ran the League to admit the club at the first time of asking. They joined Middlesbrough as replacements for Blackpool and Darwen.

The club had a successful debut season, finishing 7th out of 18, one place above Woolwich Arsenal, but slumped to 14th in 1901. Gillies had used his contacts in his homeland to identify

promising Scottish talent for Chesterfield, but many of them were dismal failures. Despite little obvious criticism of the job he was doing, Gillies relinquished the reins of office over the Christmas period of 1900, before his final Scottish signing, Jimmy Haig, made his debut for the club. Haig would go on to become a mainstay of Chesterfield for most of the next decade.

Gillies' resignation allowed Edmund F Hind to take charge of the club. The new man was not a success, and presided lamely over a disastrous 1901/02 season.

Gillies continued to live and work in Chesterfield and took up refereeing, reaching a decent standard. He was asked to lend the club a helping hand in its time of need. According to the Leeds Mercury, "after an absence of eighteen months, he returned to their assistance, at the request of the directors of the club. At this time the organisation was in a very bad position, being at the bottom of the Second League. He canvassed for votes on its behalf, and spoke for its re-election at the annual meeting of the League, and it was largely owing to his efforts that the full number of votes were polled."

A successful outcome ensured, Gilbert Gillies gave way again, allowing Jack Hoskin to take over as secretary-manager at Saltergate, although he continued to attend meetings of the League, now earning his living as a journalist.

The Scot's interest was piqued when the emerging Leeds City club ran an advertisement for a new manager in the Leeds Mercury on Monday, February 13, 1905: "WANTED, energetic and efficient MANAGER. Application, stating age, qualifications, salary expected, and accompanied by copies of two testimonials, should be forwarded before the 22nd inst, and marked 'Manager,' to J Wilson, Solicitor to the Club, Trinity Chambers, 71 Boar Lane, Leeds."

Gillies was one of a horde of applicants for the job, but impressed the City directors with his credentials. On Tuesday, 7 March, the Leeds Mercury carried the news of his appointment:

"Another step towards the completion of the arrangements for the establishment of the Leeds City as a club of first-rate standing was made last night, when the recommendation of the sub-committee for the appointment of a manager was approved by the General Committee at a meeting held at the Griffin Hotel, under the presidency of Mr T Furness. There were over a hundred applicants for the position, and, after reducing the number to five, the sub-committee decided that Mr G Gillies, of Chesterfield, was the most suitable candidate.

"He has attended the meetings of the League for the past six years, and is well appointed with club secretaries, whilst his knowledge of players and the arrangements to be made for securing admission to the competition will be of great service to the Leeds Club.



Yorkshire Mercury 13 February 1905 - The advert for a manager for Leeds City

“His testimonials were of the highest character. Amongst those who supported his application were Mr H S Radford, member of the League Management Committee and the Football Council; Mr A Kingscott, divisional representative of the Football Association; Mr A G Hines, hon. Treasurer of the Nottingham Association; and Mr J Nicholson, manager of the Sheffield United Club.”

His status and references persuaded the Leeds City sub-committee to offer him the post, and he accepted a three-year contract worth £156 per annum.

The Football League had decided to increase its membership from 36 to 40 clubs for the 1905/06 season and Leeds City were duly elected, having come top of the voting with 25 votes. They were accepted into the newly extended Second Division alongside Chelsea, Hull City, Clapton Orient and Stockport County, with Doncaster dropping out of the League.

In those days much of the responsibility for onfield affairs was left to trainers, and Gillies was lucky to have alongside him in that role one George Swift, a former Loughborough left-back who had represented the Football League in 1895 against the Irish League (and who was to actually turn out for City once in an emergency). The secretary-manager's normal sphere of influence was best evidenced in a Yorkshire Post note of July 1905, which stated: "Applications for season tickets, which will be ready in the course of a week or so, should be made to the Club secretary, Mr G Gillies, of 28, Cross Flatts Place, Beeston, Leeds, up to August 10."

Working in tandem with Swift, Gillies assembled a squad for the new season in double quick time by pulling together players from the length and breadth of the country. Seeking to secure a suitable first team captain, Gillies returned to his former Chesterfield club and signed full-back Dick Ray, an experienced and dour veteran. It was understandable in the circumstances that the collection of strangers should kick off their League career on 2 September 1905 with a 1-0 defeat at neighbouring Bradford City, unaccustomed as they were to each other's play.

Leeds went on to enjoy a reasonably impressive debut season, finishing a promising sixth, with the manager bolstering their attack by signing Hull City's powerful striker David Wilson, who had impressed him when scoring against City in an early season tussle.

A year later, following Wilson's untimely death during a game, Gillies replaced him with the even more productive Billy McLeod, but the club slumped to mid-table obscurity, prompting some fierce criticism of the management in the Leeds Mercury.

Among the harshest letters received by the paper was this one from Pitchfork:

“Is the club efficiently managed? Now that we have seen the practice matches and the opening match with Bradford City, and have been mercifully spared the blight at West Bromwich, and carefully marked and digested the efforts of the club's players, such as they are, it raises the above question in our minds.



Leeds Mercury 7 March 1905 - The appointment of Gilbert Gillies as the first Leeds City manager

“We take, for instance, Bradford City, who have as manager a tried and approved player, who has this season put in the field a team that is a credit to him and his club – a team that can practically do as it likes with the Leeds team – and who have sold a player for £1,000. We dare not allude to the eight goals’ smashing the Reserves gave the Leeds Second Team at Bradford. The majority of his players are smart young athletic fellows gathered from various smaller clubs and so on.

“We take Hull City with its manager, Ambrose Langley, the old Sheffield Wednesday player, a man who can spot young talent when he sees it, and is capable of selling at a fancy price to the Leeds City Club David Wilson, a man who has had his day, and Ambrose Langley knew it, if the Leeds City management did not. Hull City Club’s players are, like Bradford City, for the greater part rising young players secured from smaller clubs, at small prices.

“Why not have secured as manager a man like Fred Spiksley, the old Sheffield Wednesday internationalist. Leeds City had him here in Leeds two seasons ago. What Fred Spiksley does not understand about football and young talent, surely, should not be worth knowing.”

Gillies was stung by the attack, and the Mercury gave space to his angry retort:

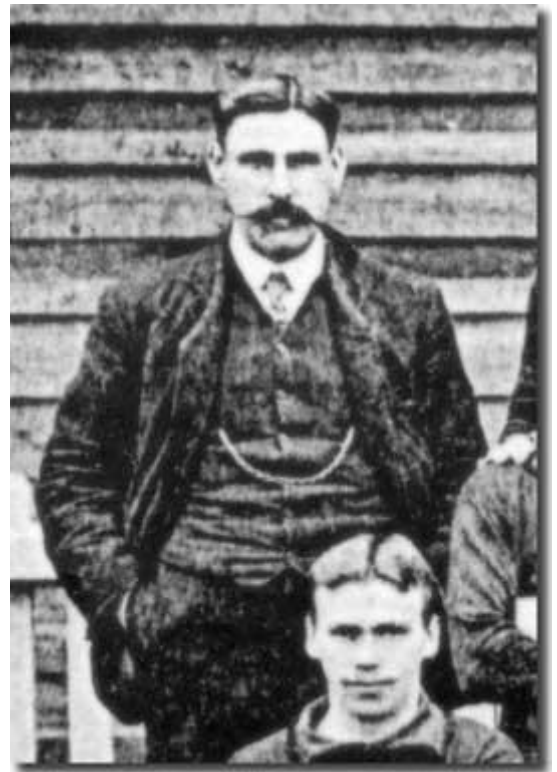
“I am rather surprised that the columns of your valuable paper should be open to letters such as the one written under the nom de plume of ‘Pitchfork’. When consideration is given to the short period which Leeds City has been in existence, I think the success it has attained is sufficient reply to the scurrilous attack.

“Comparisons are drawn between myself and other managers, but Pitchfork seems to have forgotten that two of those named had teams and grounds when they were engaged. The City ground was covered with Pitchforks – weeds – when the club was formed into a company, and the team was not even a skeleton of a West Yorkshire team, as reference to your files will show.

“The third party referred to has, I think, had an appointment as playing manager since he left Leeds, but was transferred to another club as a player.

“In reply to Pitchfork’s attack on the players and myself, perhaps Nimrod’s report in today’s issue of the Mercury will be enough for him; but if he will only have the courage to sign his own name and address, he will receive a reply to that address which should remove his accumulation of bile and spleen since he found himself on the wrong end of the fork.

“As far as the players and myself know – and we have the best of grounds for saying so – we have only one enemy in Leeds. That enemy adopted several nom de plumes last season, and spent his Sundays in writing letters to the Press when we had struck a bad patch, and Pitchfork’s letter was in the same old strain. Perhaps he is a disappointed man, as his letters are all very much alike. Inquiries were made at one place last season, but no one knew the name of the



George Swift, who was right hand man to Gillies, pictured in 1905

writer, who had given a certain address.

“Having had some experience of Press work, and having on many occasions read the postscripts, ‘Whatever you do, you must not publish my name,’ etc, I may say that I have the greatest contempt for the man, if such he can be called, who attempts to injure others through the medium of the Press under a nom de plume.

“Considering the difficulties under which the season has been started, I think the team ought to be at least given a chance until they are fully represented, as it is early yet to pass, or to be a party to passing, any such sweeping condemnations as used by Pitchfork.

“For True Peacock’s information I beg to state that at the time of writing, Henderson, Morgan, Walker, Morris, Wilson and Bromage are all on the injured list; and to add to these misfortunes, Jefferson’s services have not been available up to the present.”

Gillies had his supporters, and Armley offered the following: “I sympathise with Mr Gillies in the disgraceful attack made upon him by Pitchfork, as I know that Mr Gillies is quite capable of getting together a first class team if he only had a free hand and good purse. I would like to point out to the directorate that good men can only be got by paying for them, as in every other business or profession, and even if they increased the capital by £5,000, it would take only £250 to pay the interest, and that could be got out of a couple of gates with the extra support a successful team could command.”

Gillies sought to strengthen the City side in 1907, recruiting Scottish centre-half Tom Hynds from Woolwich Arsenal as his new skipper along with the exciting Sheffield United winger Fred Croot. Initially, the new men sparked a tremendous revival, firing City to the top of the table, but the team soon stumbled back into mediocrity and slumped into a dire battle against re-election. Even the manager’s acquisition of goalkeeper Tom Naisby from Sunderland and Jimmy Gemmell from Stoke could not halt the slide, and it was perhaps unsurprising that Gillies chose to tender his resignation in February 1908, suspecting that the directors would be unwilling to renew his three year contract.

He signed off on the best possible note, choosing to resign in the week following City’s 5-1 defeat of table topping Derby County on February 15 – their best performance of a trying season.

Of Gillies’ departure, Flaneur commented thus in the Leeds Mercury: “Our announcement yesterday that Mr G Gillies had resigned his position as secretary and manager of the Leeds City club will no doubt have caused considerable surprise to the general public, though some of us have been quite prepared for the step for a few weeks past. It was hinted to me some little time ago by a gentleman who has considerable knowledge of the inner workings of the club that Mr Gillies would probably retire from his position at the end of the season, and the name of a probable successor was mentioned.



Gilbert Gillies in typical pose at the start of the 1907/08 season

“The in-and-out play of the team this season and last has led to discussions among the governing authorities, and the resignation of Mr Gillies is the result. Mr Gillies has not been altogether comfortable this season, and he has at length felt that he has no alternative but to resign his position. As one who has had the pleasure of meeting Mr Gillies, and occasionally worrying him with queries from correspondents, I have always found him a most courteous and kindly official and a gentleman, moreover, with a sound, practical knowledge of the management of an Association club. Mr Gillies put the club on its feet, so to speak, by getting together a really good team in the first season, and for that he deserves the thanks of the Associationists in Leeds. His resignation will be much regretted by a large circle of friends and acquaintances.”

Gillies was not out of work long; within three months he re-emerged as the new man at the helm of the up and coming Bradford Park Avenue club.

Park Avenue had been formed a year earlier in the wake of the successful entry to the Football League of a host of Yorkshire neighbours, including their local rivals, Bradford City. They sprang out of a Rugby League club, Bradford FC, who were Northern Union champions in 1904 and Challenge Cup winners in 1906. Simon Inglis from Engineering Archie: Archibald Leitch – Football Ground Designer: “For the club’s benefactor, Harry Briggs, the owner of the Brigella Mills at nearby Little Horton and much else in the wool business besides (with interests in Russia and Poland as well as Yorkshire), honours in the parochial world of northern Rugby were not enough. First Briggs tried to persuade Bradford City to merge with his club and make Park Avenue the new base for football. This made some sense. Park Avenue offered more potential than Valley Parade while Briggs was wealthier and better connected than any of the City directors. But City’s members voted against the deal ... leaving Briggs more determined than ever to bring professional football to Park Avenue. Funding this seemingly reckless move ... cost Briggs at least £10,000 in 1907 alone.”

In May 1907 Bradford unsuccessfully applied for membership of the Football League, but were then admitted to the Southern League, where they enjoyed a nondescript debut season, trailing in 13th.

They were undaunted by this setback, and, like Chesterfield and Leeds City before them, enlisted Gilbert Gillies to spearhead their application for League status, which was successful in May 1908.

Bradford Park Avenue website: “In February (1908) Tottenham announced they were quitting the (Southern) League at the end of the season and Queens Park Rangers and Bradford followed. The result was a bitter battle between the clubs

and the League. The AGMs of the Football League and the Southern League were the same day, 27th May. Bradford resigned from the Southern League and the other two clubs were expelled. Fortunately the Football League accepted Bradford into the Second Division while QPR withdrew



Gillies is standing on the extreme left in a Bradford Park Avenue team group in 1910

at the last minute and were accepted back into the Southern set-up but made to play most of their games midweek. Spurs were rejected by the Football League and remained in limbo until mid June when Stoke had second thoughts about Division Two and resigned.”

Their new status crowned the astonishing progress made since the club's formation. In 1907, the ambitious Briggs had enlisted the eminent engineer Archibald Leitch, who had designed the stands at many grounds, including Rangers, Liverpool, Fulham, Chelsea, and Sheffield United, to rebuild Park Avenue's ground. Leitch designed the Main Stand, with its distinctive three gables, and the adjacent 'Dolls House', which housed the changing and committee rooms. According to the Yorkshire Daily Observer: “A sum of over £6,000 is at present being expended in order to make Park Avenue one of the most convenient and commodious grounds for Association in the country.” The ground, with its capacity now increased to 37,000, reopened in September 1907 to widespread acclaim.

Having once again worked his magic on the men who mattered at the Football League, Gillies then steered Park Avenue through a challenging first season in the Second Division. They had to struggle fiercely the entire campaign to avoid re-election and limped in 16th, just two points clear of Chesterfield, Gillies' old club, who returned to the Midland League; Leeds City finished 12th.

That narrow escape provided the springboard for a pleasing 10th spot in 1910, seven places above Leeds, who flirted with the bottom reaches of the table. Bradford slipped back to 12th a year later, level on points with Leeds. Gillies wasn't there to see the season out, having departed the club in February. He resigned his position, feeling that he had lost the confidence of a nervous board of directors. By 1914 he was out of full-time football altogether and running a hotel in the Derbyshire town of Matlock.

Gilbert Gillies was a man of exceptional organisational and administrative abilities, who was never reluctant to ring the changes, but he never achieved the success he sought with any of the clubs he managed. However, his presence at the helm was a key factor in getting Leeds City's life off to a good start and he managed to attract a host of decent players to Elland Road. That they never successfully gelled as a cohesive unit for any sustainable period was the rub, but Gillies deserves recognition for thoroughly cracking the secret of securing Football League status.



Gillies, the typical secretary-manager in the 1900's

Flaneur of the Leeds Mercury was a loyal supporter of Gillies and deserves the last word with his tribute to him as he quit Elland Road:

“Mr Gillies showed ... that it was possible for an association manager of experience to build up a good side. Perhaps if the purchase of players had throughout been left entirely to him Leeds City would have had an equally good side today.

“In the first year of the existence of the Leeds City club Mr Gillies ... built up a really good team, a team that played clever football and achieved good results. The fact that many subsequent importations have not been up to the standard set at the outset of the club's career is not the fault of Mr Gillies, who, after working hard and successfully to secure a place for Leeds City in the Second Division of the League, has been largely engaged in superintending the great improvements in the ground, while less experienced officials have undertaken the task of team building.”