



Players – Harry Bromage – Custodian courageous

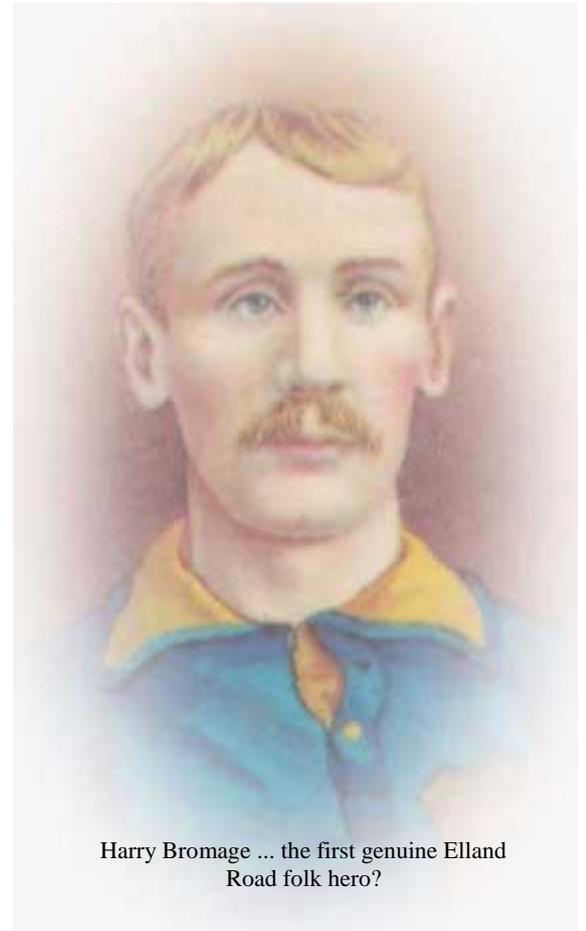
Goalkeeper Harry Bromage's displays in the colours of Leeds City were among the highlights of the club's inglorious 15-year existence. They also represented one of the most enduring themes: Bromage was there from the early days, keeping goal for the Peacocks in their first game in the Football League in September 1905, and he outlasted all his contemporaries, remaining at Elland Road until 1911.

His move to Leeds gave the keeper plenty of opportunities to shine; City's rearguard was of modest stock and on many occasions the custodian was all that stood between the Peacocks and the heaviest of thrashings. "Bromage gave a really fine exhibition, and but for his clever goalkeeping the home team would have won by a larger margin," was all too typical a quote from a local newspaper after a 2-0 defeat at Bradford Park Avenue in April 1909.

Despite a perpetual lack of defensive cover from his team mates, Bromage never lacked commitment to the cause at any time during his lengthy stay at Elland Road. He was the second player to make 100 League appearances for Leeds City, following in the footsteps of Fred Parnell, and he broke the winger's appearance record when he made his 105th start in February 1910. By the time of his final game for the club in April 1911, he had played more League matches than any other City player (143), though Stan Cubberley and Billy McLeod both overtook his total before the end of the season.

With his hangdog expression, drooping moustache and ubiquitous flat cap, Bromage cut a dour, stereotypically Northern figure, but his displays between the sticks for City brought colour and excitement to the Peacocks' early years.

He was neither the most spectacular nor the flashiest of keepers, but he was a brave and plucky custodian. He had to be, for he played in an era when burly centre-forwards habitually tested the mettle of keepers with vigorous tenacity, thinking nothing of laying them out with an aggressive airborne charge. Bromage regularly risked life and limb between the sticks for City, seemingly oblivious to the risks he took. There is no sound way of establishing the point, but his courage and commitment might have made the keeper the first genuine Elland Road folk hero. One of his favourite tricks was to launch a swift counter attack with a sharp throw out to a team mate after



Harry Bromage ... the first genuine Elland Road folk hero?

catching the ball from a cross, a move that was not common among other keepers of the day.

Bromage faced occasional criticism for a penchant for reckless sprints out of his area to confront opposing forwards as they ran in on goal, but it was an excusable flaw, given the lack of protection he was often afforded by somewhat limited full-backs. It was always a toss up whether Bromage would get the ball or not, but it made for some exciting moments.

Henry 'Harry' Bromage was born in Derby on 17 May 1879, the eldest of John and Eliza Bromage's eight children. The Bromages were a renowned footballing family: Harry's uncle was a goalkeeper with Derby County, while his five brothers all became professional or semi professional players. Bill played for Sheffield United and Doncaster Rovers, going on to be a trainer at Derby County; George played for Sheffield United, Jack for Chesterfield, Enos for Derby County and West Bromwich Albion, and Joe was a semi-pro with Denaby United, Loughborough Corinthians and Gainsborough Trinity.



Bromage was already a well-respected keeper when he joined City

Local club Derby County, home of the legendary Steve Bloomer, were founder members of the Football League and one of the strongest teams in the First Division, enjoying a series of exciting Cup runs around the turn of the century. They acted as a beacon for the football-loving Bromage boys.

For a couple of years around 1890, Harry's uncle, Enos Bromage, was a reserve goalkeeper with County. That gave Harry the opportunity to enjoy the atmosphere behind the scenes at a big club and sparked his interest in the game. He made his debut for the Rams on Boxing Day 1899 against Glossop.

From an early age, Harry was a keen footballer and, inspired by Enos, he also became a keeper, starting his career in junior football with Derby Constitutional. In 1898, undeterred by his uncle's experience (Enos only managed 17 appearances for the Rams before disappearing into the lower leagues), Harry became deputy to the famous Jack 'String' Fryer, who played in three FA Cup final defeats for the Rams between 1898 and 1903, including a record 6-0 reverse against Bury in the last of those finals, when he was carrying an injury.

Bromage loved his time at the Baseball Ground, but he failed to make an impact and feared he would never get a real chance with Fryer monopolising the position. After five League appearances in three seasons, he moved on to Second Division Burton United in 1901.

United had been formed originally as Burton Swifts, incorporated into the Football League when the Second Division was created in 1892. They finished bottom of the table at the end of the 1900/01 season and had to apply for re-election. Prior to the vote, the Swifts amalgamated with near neighbours Burton Wanderers to form Burton United, who were duly admitted to the League.

Harry's change of employer brought regular first team football and he played 67 times over the next four seasons for a team that habitually struggled in the lower reaches of Division Two.

They ended the 1904/05 season second bottom and had to apply again for re-election. However, Bromage proved his worth with a string of decent performances in a disappointing campaign. His reputation attracted the attention of the men who ran Leeds City, newly elected to the Football League, and they gave him the chance of a move to pastures new for the 1905/06 season.

City came top of the voting at the League's AGM with 26 votes and originally they were set to replace Burton, who got only 10 votes. The Staffordshire club were given a reprieve with the extension of the League from 36 to 40 clubs and they were voted back into the Second Division in a subsequent election.

Bromage's signature represented a real feather in the cap for Leeds City, a club that aspired to great things. Linesman reported as follows in the Leeds Mercury on May 30 1905: "For the responsible position of goalkeeper, a particularly happy choice has been made. Throughout last season Bromage played very cleverly with Burton United, giving clear proof of his ability in front of the net. Indeed, he had no superior in the Second League."

The keeper was not among complete strangers at his new club: Burton centre-forward Fred Hargraves was another new arrival at Elland Road. Former Derby winger Fred Parnell was also a new signing for City, but the paths of the pair had never crossed at County, Bromage leaving a couple of seasons before Parnell signed for the Rams.

Bromage performed well on his debut for the Peacocks, on 2 September away to Bradford City, though he could not prevent a 1-0 defeat. The Yorkshire Post: "Bromage more than once proved himself a capable defender of goal" and "displayed skill and judgement between the Leeds posts."



Bromage at the start of his lengthy stay at Elland Road

That first season it took a while for City to get into their stride. They lost their first two games, before drawing their third and then finally getting a win at the fourth attempt, but thereafter their fortunes picked up considerably and the team ended the campaign in sixth spot.

Bromage quickly established himself as a stalwart of the side, consistent, safe and reliable. He even deputised as captain in the absence of the injured Dick Ray when City faced Mexborough Town in the FA Cup in November.

The keeper enjoyed an excellent season, missing just three games and keeping eleven clean sheets. He earned some good reviews, including this from Nimrod in the Leeds Mercury after the 1-1 draw at Grimsby on March 17: "Bromage again gave a remarkable display in goal."

City signed Jack Whitley from Stoke as goalkeeping cover in April, and Bromage made way for him for three games at the end of the season, but he was back as first choice for the following campaign. Unfortunately the Peacocks could not build on their promising start and had to be content with a mid table position.

Again Harry Bromage was a star performer, earning the plaudits of the critics right from the off. After the opening day draw with Bradford City, the Leeds Mercury's Flaneur contrasted Bromage favourably with the famous Bradford custodian, Willie 'Fatty' Foulke, dismissing the veteran as ponderous by comparison: "It brought out the best qualities of the Leeds City goalkeeper, Bromage, whose magnificent defence was perhaps the outstanding feature of the match. Bromage could not possibly prevent Smith's goal, but he stopped everything else in the most brilliant fashion, and whether he rushed out or remained between the posts he always did the right thing. Leeds City need look no further for a goalkeeper."

Bromage's bravery inevitably led to the occasional injury problem and he missed a couple of games in September 1906. However, he was soon back and building himself a reputation as a specialist when it came to facing penalties.

He stopped a spot kick by Grimsby's Macgregor to inspire a 4-3 win on October 13, City's second victory of the campaign. At the end of November he blocked another penalty by Jones of Wolves, though the ball found its way into the net. There was a similar outcome at the beginning of December when he fended off another spot kick at Blackpool, with Scott scoring from the rebound.

He saved yet another penalty at Gainsborough on December 8, although City went down by a single goal.

The Leeds Mercury reported on an outstanding performance: "Leeds had one stroke of luck before the interval, for after Holmes had scored for Trinity as the result of a splendid centre by Northay, the home team were awarded a penalty for a foul by Henderson, and this was magnificently saved by Bromage ... The Leeds City goalkeeper played a splendid game throughout, though in endeavouring to prevent the goal scored by Holmes he collided with that player, and suffered from the injury throughout the remainder of the game. At one stage, indeed, Freeborough had to act as his substitute between the posts ... As usual, Bromage was the outstanding figure on the side, and the defeat could not be attributed to any weakness in goal."

On December 15, Bromage's reputation went before him, intimidating Stockport's Waters, who blasted his spot kick high over the bar as City pulled off a blistering 6-1 victory.

The keeper crowned a marvellous month with another splendid display at Hull just before Christmas, as reported by Olympian in the Mercury: "Bromage was in wonderful form from start to finish. It was reminiscent of his doings in the match at Hull last season, and he undoubtedly saved Leeds from a heavy beating ... Shot after shot was rained in on Bromage, who, however, stood it all like a hero."



26 January 1907 - "Bromage saves cleverly after a fierce attack on the Peacocks' citadel by the Forest's forwards in the first half" - Photo from the Leeds Mercury of City's defeat at home to Nottingham Forest - Dick Ray is also in the picture

He gave a tremendous performance in the FA Cup at Bristol City in January and "produced a series of marvellous saves in a breathtaking ten-minute spell of intense Bristol pressure when he saved shots from all angles ... Bristol, a class above Leeds, looked set for a huge score but were foiled by Bromage's heroics time after time." Unfortunately, Harry had little protection and the Peacocks were thrashed 4-1.

The keeper had a shaky time in the New Year and was dropped for a couple of games in February, prompting fans and journalists to voice their criticism of the Selection Committee. However, he was soon back at his post and was ever present over the final twelve games, keeping four clean sheets. City recovered from their mid season slump, with the goals of new centre-forward Billy McLeod promising better times to come.

Bromage was still first choice at the start of the 1907/08 season, but lost his place after shipping six goals at Derby on October 19. City's management had secured the services of the highly rated Tom

Naisby from Sunderland and Bromage was exiled to the reserves.

Nimrod in the Mercury: “The critics certainly looked forward to the appearance of Naisby in goal with some curiosity, and there were those who would have quickly said bitter things at the expense of the management for having the temerity to displace Bromage had Naisby failed to make a satisfactory debut. Bromage’s ability is well known; he still has the skill, and one must sympathise with him on having so many goals scored against him of late. But he is not primarily to blame, for it must be borne in mind that the defence has not been above reproach, particularly in the wing half-back positions, and the backs have not been too steady.”

A solitary appearance in the penultimate game of that season was all that Bromage could manage until he was recalled to the team in the spring of 1909. By now, original City secretary-manager Gilbert Gillies had departed the scene, replaced by Frank Scott-Walford in March 1908 and the new man stood by Naisby for most of the campaign.

However, when Bromage earned his recall, he made the most of the opportunity, keeping a clean sheet twice in the four games he played. He was suddenly and firmly back in favour, earning praise for some fine displays. The Leeds Mercury headlined with “Bromage in form” after the closing game of the season, a 2-0 defeat at Bradford Park Avenue on Tuesday, 27 April 1909.

The custodian, now in his 30th year, was reinstated as automatic choice for the 1909/10 season, cementing his position with some fine early displays. “Bromage was as safe as ever” and “Bromage kept a magnificent goal, and on leaving the field he received a great ovation from an enthusiastic crowd,” were two typical quotes.

It was a depressing campaign for the club, which struggled against re-election for many months. City suffered the poorest defensive record in the division (80 goals conceded in 38 League games), though they came good with a late run.

Harry Bromage was generally considered to be the best performer in a hard pressed and struggling team – “Bromage was magnificent throughout the game, but even a Bromage cannot do the impossible.” A run of six points from eight as March gave way to April saved both their blushes and their Second Division status.

The custodian’s sustained consistency had finally seen off the challenge of Tom Naisby, who departed Elland Road in the summer of 1910 for Luton Town. 20-year-old Tony Hogg was given a chance at the start of the new season, playing in the first three games, each of which ended in defeat. That was enough for the City regime and they quickly reverted to their tried and trusted favourite.

Bromage was reinstated for the trip to Huddersfield on September 24, though he “was not quite the Bromage we are accustomed to see”, according to Wanderer in the Leeds Mercury. He retained his place the following week against Birmingham and it took a penalty to beat him as City secured their first point of the season. A week later the Yorkshire Post claimed that the keeper “gave one of his best displays” away to West Bromwich Albion.



Harry Bromage takes a breather during the win against West Bromwich Albion in September 1907

He was now firmly back in harness and enjoyed a fine season, his last for City as it turned out. He gave a string of high class performances through a long and testing winter and reached new heights in the spring.

He excelled against Gainsborough Trinity in March 1911, as reported by Wanderer in the Mercury: "He had practically nothing to do in the first half, but after the interval he was sorely pressed. What are commonly called stinging shots were few and far between, but those long dropping shots and accurately placed corner kicks, which must be the bane of a goalkeeper's life, were as common as lost golf balls. In the last few minutes the popular custodian saved a penalty and this was the crowning effort of a really fine forty-five minutes' work."

Bromage followed up with a clean sheet as City beat promotion-chasing Bolton a week later. He was rewarded for his efforts when City held a benefit game for him, on Easter Monday against Burnley at Elland Road. The contest had originally been arranged for March 11, but the Turf Moor club had to cry off due to FA Cup commitments against Bradford City, and the game was rearranged for the 27th of the month.



Bromage is second from the right in this photo of a City party during their Cup training in January 1911 - Alec Creighton, Harold Bridgett, George Affleck, Tom Mulholland, Bromage, Joe Enright

City's management lodged a claim of £72 against Burnley for the postponement, though the Football League decreed that Burnley should pay damages of just £27 16s.

The game kicked off late in an experimental move to pull in a bigger attendance. It was a dismal failure in that respect, attracting just 5,500 spectators, in stark contrast to the previous Saturday when 15,000 fans paid to watch the win over Bolton. Bromage did have the satisfaction of keeping another clean sheet and a guaranteed pay out of £500, a welcome reward after his years of service in the Elland Road cause.

A couple of weeks later the keeper played his 143rd and final League game for City. The day ended unhappily with Chelsea winning 4-1 as Bromage was left badly exposed in the second half by a tiring defence. It was a sad way to end a six-year association with the Citizens.

City already had the young and potentially very good Tony Hogg waiting in reserve, and in May, Frank Scott-Walford signed the promising Irishman, Leslie Murphy, from Belfast Celtic. Content that the two men provided adequate goalkeeping cover, the board sanctioned the release of Bromage at the end of the season. He departed for Midland League outfit Doncaster Rovers, along with City's reserve inside-forward Tommy Astill, leaving their erstwhile colleagues to a dire struggle against the spectre of re-election during the campaign that followed. At Doncaster, Harry was reunited with brother Bill, who was his new captain, as well as a regular contributor of goals from his position on the wing.

Doncaster had been elected to the Football League in 1901, but returned to the Midland League in 1903 when they failed to gain re-election. They re-entered the Second Division for the 1904/05 season, but finished last with eight points and were demoted once more.

They were a much stronger force on the non-League scene - they finished 3rd in the Midland League in 1911, a feat they repeated after the addition of Bromage in 1912.

Among the other major forces in the competition were Leeds City Reserves, and Bromage had the opportunity to renew acquaintances with his old colleagues on a couple of occasions during the season. Unfortunately, in the tussle at Elland Road in February, the keeper allowed a Billy McLeod header from twenty yards to beat him and break the deadlock in a 2-0 reverse.

Buoyed by their strong showing, Rovers applied for election back into the Football League that summer, but received not a single vote and remained in the junior competition.

Doncaster were among the front runners in the Midland League again in 1913, finishing fourth, and also won the Sheffield Challenge Cup, but faded badly thereafter and eventually disbanded after the onset of war.

Harry's ability and experience made him a key man for Rovers in those few years prior to the Great War. He moved on to nearby Bentley Colliery in 1913, where he ended his playing days.

In 1912, the Bromages had their eighth and final child, though sadly Harry was left an only parent in 1917 when his wife died.

In the 1920s, Harry's son, George, kept goal for Barnsley, Doncaster Rovers and Scunthorpe United, while daughter Lucy was a renowned player in the women's game. She played for Doncaster and Bentley Ladies, one of the sport's earliest powers after their formation in 1921. Both offspring thus played their part in keeping alive the memory of one of Leeds City's most loyal servants.

It was sad that Harry Bromage rarely got the defensive protection and support that he deserved at Elland Road, but he will be forever remembered as the Peacocks' best last line of defence, a brave and respected opponent, truly a custodian courageous.



Harry Bromage at the height of his powers in 1907