Review of 1911/12 – Part 1 – Little to cheer

1911/12 squad - Back: Collins (trainer), Clarkin, Stead, Johnson, Cunningham, Heaney, Hogg, McDaniel, Murphy, Moran, A Roberts, R Roberts, Briggs, Foley, Fortune, Harbourne - Middle: H Roberts, Mulholland, Harkins, Cubberley, Scott-Walford (manager), Morris, Kelly, Enright, Croot - Front: Creighton, Affleck, McLeod, Gillespie, Bridgett

Though eleventh place in the Second Division in 1911 was Leeds City's best finish since Frank Scott-Walford's appointment as secretary-manager three years before, the grounds for celebration were meagre. For a board of directors that coveted promotion so jealously, mid table mediocrity provided no succour. Further, the club's financial position remained precarious and there were no funds to squander on expensive signings.

Scott-Walford set off on his habitual scouting mission to Ireland in May. The Emerald Isle had offered reasonable pickings in previous years, though the reward from shopping in football's bargain basement was generally budding potential rather than the finished articles that City so desperately required. But needs must and Scott-Walford had few options.

He secured the signatures of Belfast Celtic keeper Leslie Murphy and right-back Edward McDaniel, Shelbourne's Willie Briggs, John Clarkin and Joe Moran, Distillery left winger Jimmy Fortune, Jack Leney from Irish Guards and Frank Heaney (St James Gate). The eight expanded the substantial Irish contingent already ensconced at Elland Road. Indeed, when City returned to play a friendly against Bohemians in December they were able to field an all-Irish eleven, with two more travelling in reserve and a clutch of others left kicking their heels in the West Riding!

The signing of Murphy was crucial. Harry Bromage, a veteran of 143 League games, had departed for Midland League Doncaster Rovers, leaving 21-year-old Tony Hogg and the amateur, Cecil G Reinhardt, as the only keepers on the books, and City sorely needed an experienced last line of defence – their rearguard enjoyed a modest reputation. Murphy fitted the bill; he had played for the

Irish League against the Scottish League and was recognised as one of the most accomplished custodians in the country.

The keeper was the one new man included in the eleven that played at Nottingham Forest on the first day of the season. City were captained by stout centre-half Tom Morris, whose predecessor, Stan Cubberley, flanked him in the half-back line, along with the Scot, John Harkins. George Affleck and Alec Creighton continued the full-back partnership that had only been parted on one occasion in 1910/11, while the forward line of Hugh Roberts, Tom Mulholland, Billy McLeod, Billy Gillespie and Fred Croot was generally considered to be the strongest available combination.

Young Irish keeper Leslie Murphy was one of the club's key summer purchases and he began his Elland Road career with a fine performance against Forest

The game was played in tropical conditions and Forest were strong opponents. They had many years of First Division experience to their name and had only spent one season in the second tier, in 1907 when they secured the title.

Starting as if they meant their second stay to be every bit as brief, Forest were all over City from the first whistle with Hooper, Morris, Ford and Derrick all going close. After fifteen minutes they got the goal they deserved when Morris headed home from Hooper's cross.

City had hardly featured as an attacking force, but now came into the game and were on level terms within six minutes when McLeod forced the ball home after Forest keeper Hanna could only parry a Roberts shot.

City drew fresh heart from the equaliser and Gillespie and Croot both had chances before Forest regained the lead just before the break, Morris completing his brace.

The second half was all Nottingham but there were no further goals. The Peacocks could make a valid case that they had been unlucky: McLeod had a goal disallowed for offside and then justifiable claims for a penalty were waved away; the reality was that anything other than a Forest victory would have been a travesty.

That said, City's performance against a decent side had much to commend it. Wanderer in the Leeds Mercury: "The Leeds supporters need not shed any tears over their defeat. It was a big task that the visitors were faced with, and, on the whole, they came through it well ... The feature of the match, so far as Leeds were concerned, was the splendid defence, especially that of Creighton and Murphy. The sturdy little back time after time upset the calculations of the clever Notts forwards with his fearless tackling and clean kicking ... Murphy displayed a knowledge of goalkeeping which fully justified the reputation that came before him. He was as agile as a cat, and the ovation he received – quite the finest I have ever known a visiting player get – at the conclusion of the game was well deserved.

"There were many good movements worthy of a score, but failure to do the right thing at the right time in front of goal was noticeable more than once ... Gillespie did a good deal better than I expected as Croot's partner, and may prove a useful man in that position. He has plenty of tricks, but he might think a little bit more about shooting – a remark which applies to the other inside men."

City made three changes for the game at Burnley two days later, giving debuts to Joe Moran and wing-half Sam Johnson, a close season capture from Coventry City, and recalling Joe Enright, with

Harkins, Cubberley and Mulholland making way. Gillespie was tried at centre-forward with McLeod switching to No 8, but the combination was not successful and neither man played to his potential.

The Peacocks started brightly, and took a fifth minute lead. Gillespie took a pass from Morris and fed Croot. The winger made one of his customary runs down the left flank and fired in a lovely centre. Either McLeod or Gillespie could have converted the chance but it was the former who ran in to fire home.

Burnley were on level terms within six minutes after Mountford drove the ball in. Mountford then struck the crossbar before Burnley went ahead from a counter attack with ten minutes remaining when Freeman scored smartly after a Harris centre.

City lost their way in the second half and Burnley took a 3-1 lead eight minutes in. Mountford, Harris and Freeman moved away in smart combination after a throw in and fooled Murphy by some close work before Mountford slid the ball home.

Minutes later the keeper atoned for any flaw on his part in that incident when he saved a penalty awarded for a foul charge by Affleck.

Twenty minutes from time Roberts broke away down the right flank and centred to Enright, who took possession and made his way towards goal before firing into the corner of the net to make it 3-2.

City pressed for an equaliser, but the issue was ended in the 80th minute when Mountford, who had been in capital form all game, completed his hat trick and registered Burnley's fourth goal.

Billy McLeod gets in a shot against Chelsea - 9 September 1911

Two difficult away games had made for a challenging opening and the home match that ended the week, with fancied Chelsea the visitors, was every bit as demanding. However, City gave their best performance so far and secured their first point with a goalless draw.

They were the better side, as reported by Gauntlet in the Leeds Mercury: "On the one side (Chelsea) there was science, 'frigid and calculating,' on the other (City) the fire and energy of youth, and ... the unorthodox but enterprising players nearly got the verdict. As it was, they certainly had the better of the draw. In the first half they appeared to be a little overawed by the paper eminence of their antagonists, and by the memories of two previous defeats, but in the second they cast misgivings to the wind and went boldly out for a win or a whacking."

Murphy again won the praise of the local papers, with Gauntlet describing him as "that remarkable young goalkeeper ... extremely quick, cool and clever" and possessing "innate prescience of what the enemy has in his mind's eye, which marks the great goalkeeper. He gets the ball quickly, and gets rid of it with punctuality and despatch, and without any monkey tricks."

In the first half the keeper slipped to let Chelsea forward Brown in but his luck was good when the shot struck the upright. Hugh Roberts led the Chelsea rearguard a merry dance and on one occasion should have scored but his finish lacked confidence and ran wide. The winger played a storming game and made many fine openings with his smart runs and crosses, though there were no takers. On one occasion, McLeod, Gillespie and Enright all failed to act as a raking centre flew past them with the goal gaping.

The City forwards faced criticism for over complicating their play, set on dribbling the ball over the line rather than shooting. The selectors had persisted with Gillespie at centre-forward and McLeod to his right, but the combination was ineffective. McLeod did get the ball in the net in the closing minutes but was penalised for hands.

Nevertheless, it had been a promising performance. It was therefore particularly galling that City should contrive to lose the midweek West Riding Cup game at Huddersfield by five goals to one, with 'Leeds Roader' describing them as "a set of schoolboys rather than a Second Division team" in the Mercury. They fielded close to a first choice eleven and were sadly disappointing.

They played well when they visited Clapton Orient in the League on 16 September, with McLeod restored to centre-forward and Gillespie at inside-left. Unfortunately they lost again, the 2-1 reverse leaving them close to the foot of the table.

To compound their problems, the club's perennial financial difficulties were again making news. The 13 September edition of the Yorkshire Evening Post carried this report, under the headline, "Leeds City's troubles".

LEEDS CITY'S TROUBLES.

SCHEME TO PURCHASE ELLAND ROAD GROUND.

A SUM OF £16,000 NEEDED.

The Yorkshire Evening Post of 13 September 1911 reports on City's troubles

"A meeting of the shareholders is to be held in the Salem Hall, Hunslet, on Thursday, September 14th, and at that meeting Mr Alf Masser, one of the newly elected directors of the club, will outline a scheme which has the approval of the whole of the club's directorate. It aims at the liquidation of the whole of the club's indebtedness, which means that, roughly, a sum of nearly £16,000 will have to be raised.

"Mr Masser, in outlining the scheme today, points out that when the company was formed in 1905, nearly the whole of the capital, £4,500, was expended upon the equipment of the ground. It is now proposed that the ground ... shall become the absolute possession of the company, and that it shall serve as security for those subscribers who now come forward with new capital and take up debentures. If the money is forthcoming the ground will be acquired as a freehold property.

"To acquire the ground at the present moment, and to relieve the club from all debt ... would involve the raising of £20,000. Mr Norris Hepworth, the chairman of the club, is the largest creditor, and he has made an offer that if the sum of £16,000 can be raised by subscription for debentures – of which he himself will take up £3,000 worth, leaving £13,000 to be subscribed by the public – he will undertake to discharge all the liabilities of the club up to the end of August last.

"The only question that arises now is whether the £13,000 can be found. Mr Masser is hopeful that it can ... If it is not raised, the only possible alternative will be the winding up of the company, for it is impossible to continue the club with that incubus in the shape of an £8,000 bank overdraft, which swallows a matter of between £600 and £700 a year in interest."

Times were serious with a genuine chance of the club being forced into bankruptcy. There had been little hint that their performances on the pitch could raise the gloom pervading Elland Road, but a first win, at home to Bristol City on September 23, brought some hope.

Fred Croot ("The fleet, though sometimes erratic left winger" according to the Yorkshire Post) had recovered from injury and returned to the side, with Enright switching inside and Gillespie making way.

Bristol had the best of the early moments, with goalkeeper Murphy forced into several good saves, but it was the hosts who took the lead after 14 minutes. Hugh Roberts threatened strongly down the right flank before sending the ball across to the left where Croot was on hand to fire home.

The visitors equalised within ten minutes and had several good chances to take the lead before the break, but passed them all up, including what Flaneur described in the Leeds Mercury as "the chance of a season". Both Affleck and Cubberley had the opportunity to clear, but each miskicked, leaving Bristol centre-forward Butler in position at the edge of the area with only the goalkeeper to beat. Murphy raced from goal to narrow the angle and managed to save a poorly struck effort.

The teams were level at the interval, but barely two minutes had gone after the restart when Leeds took the lead again, Enright firing home after Bristol keeper Anderson could only parry a shot from McLeod.

The home eleven had the best of matters from then on, but it was close to time before they wrapped up the points when McLeod punished an error by full-back Fagan to make the score 3-1.

It was a heartening win, and the Yorkshire Post offered fulsome praise: "Throughout, the home men played a good level game, a dogged determination characterising their work ... The usual fault of the forwards of not shooting often enough was almost absent. They shot hard and often, and Enright's work at times was thrilling in its fearlessness. Roberts also played a fine go ahead game, but was somewhat neglected. McLeod was not quite up to his usual standard as an opportunist, but Mulholland and Croot fulfilled their respective roles with credit."

Alec Creighton clears from a Huddersfield forward in the Elland Road derby 7 October 1911

Flaneur was just as impressed. "I have not previously seen Leeds City this season, and I am thus not best qualified to judge of their capabilities, but it seems to me that a side that could adapt themselves so well to unfavourable conditions, that could seize opportunities so smartly, and that could both hustle and stay the pace so admirably, should not be fighting in the closing stages of the campaign for existence in the Second Division of the League. Leeds City may not be potential champions of their class, but they will assuredly gain many clever victories, and not even the strongest of the Second Division teams will visit Elland Road with any sense of security.

"Even the most carping critic could find very little fault with the team that so smartly defeated a side with aspirations to return to the ranks from which they were thrust at the end of last season, and the victory created a great amount of enthusiasm among a crowd that probably exceeded ten

thousand. Such an attendance ... is a testimony to the hold the Association game has obtained on the public of Leeds, and it is obvious that, if the day of First Division football should dawn in the city within the next few years, the necessary support at the turnstiles will be forthcoming."

A week later City maintained their form in an exciting tussle at Birmingham. In the first half they twice took the lead, though the Midlanders came back to equalise on each occasion with centre-forward Hall getting both goals. The Peacocks should have been ahead at the break, but Croot fluffed a penalty. Hall scored twice more in the second half before Croot managed a late consolation in a 4-3 defeat.

City beat local rivals Huddersfield 2-0 on 7 October, their task made easier when Terriers inside-right Howie fractured his cheek as he tried to beat George Affleck in a heading duel.

McLeod opened the scoring after 23 minutes with his fifth goal of the season. He dispossessed left-back Dinnie near the halfway line, went on a run through the Town rearguard and shot hard for goal. The advancing keeper got his hands to the shot, but saw the ball bounce down and on into the goal. Moments later McLeod broke away again only to see his shot strike the foot of a post.

Before half time both Mulholland and Morris had found the Huddersfield crossbar with decent attempts.

Enright added the second goal after the break with City now well on top of tiring opponents and worthy of their 2-0 win.

The Peacocks could not build on the victory and lost 3-0 at Blackpool the following week in "probably their poorest display of the season" according to the Yorkshire Post, which added, "Leeds City were a spiritless and thoroughly disappointing force; a side which betrayed such a lack of enthusiasm as they did is not one to inspire any confidence ... A general lassitude and inability to do the right thing seemed to pervade the whole side. They can, as we know, play much better football than they did on Saturday, but it has been noted before that they have not apparently the heart to play an uphill game."

Tom Morris leads out City for the home game with Barnsley 4 November 1911 followed by Fred Croot

Tony Hogg had a nightmare in goal in his second game after being called up for the injured Murphy and was to be consigned to the reserves until April as a consequence. After 20 minutes he stooped to field an easy shot from Quinn and was mortified as the ball kicked up off the turf and bounced over his shoulder for the opening goal. Just before half time he committed another howler, running out to claim a long range effort from Nesbit. It looked easy enough to gather the ball, but inexplicably Hogg elected to punch clear and missed by a mile, the shot going on to enter the net.

The two soft goals were demoralising for the Leeds men, but they made little effort to get back into contention. It was a sad indictment of the team's deplorable lack of spirit.

Happily, City's form at Elland Road was better than on their travels and they beat Glossop 2-1 a week later, though the game was not a good one, Gauntlet in the Mercury describing it as "just one

of those third rate Second Division scrambles which are a weariness and a burden and a bore. Leeds City, a poor team, beat Glossop, who are slightly worse, and that is all there is to say about it."

The pattern of results continued with a single goal reverse at Hull preceding the 3-2 defeat of Barnsley at Elland Road. Flaneur in the Mercury: "There was more than a suspicion of panic in the last few minutes when Barnsley threatened to draw level, but on the whole the home team played a really good game ... One is bound to say that Leeds City were well up to Second Division class, and were exceptionally smart in raising openings in front of goal."

City could be excused their anxiety – with eight minutes remaining they were 3-0 ahead. Then Barnsley pulled two back three minutes to send a shudder of dread through the Leeds ranks. Lillycrop crashed a shot against the Peacocks' bar in the closing seconds, but the home side held out to record their fourth successive home victory. The points edged City up to 14th in the table, their highest position thus far.

The team slumped badly thereafter; following a 1-1 draw at Bradford Park Avenue on 11 November, City suffered five straight defeats. Three of those reverses came at Elland Road, where they had previously not lost since January 7.

The unbeaten home run was ended when Fulham won 2-0 on 18 November. A week later the Peacocks were leading 2-1 at Derby County when Stan Cubberley injured his knee after 20 minutes. His loss was a significant handicap for a ramshackle defence to cope with and the Rams turned the game on its head to emerge victors by five goals to two.

Cubberley would be out of action until March, with Joe Moran taking his place. The defence did not cope well with the disruption. City lost the next three games, in the process twice conceding five.

The 5-0 reverse at Wolverhampton on December 16 left City fourth from bottom of the table, having conceded forty goals, easily the worst defensive record in the division.

Worse still was the way that the team's spirit had dissipated under adversity, showing the side's lack of backbone. The Yorkshire Post complained that McLeod had "drifted back into slackness and mediocrity", while Tom Morris was derided for his lack of pace; it was claimed that "a vein of incompetency ran through the Leeds team from goalkeeper to centre-forward". The only man who escaped criticism was the consistently excellent Hugh Roberts, "undoubtedly the best man in the Leeds team".

Billy Gillespie, pictured in later years as a Sheffield United player, left City in December in a club record £400 deal

Just as the rearguard was shorn of a stalwart with the injury to Cubberley, the forward line also sustained the loss of a key man around this time. Irishman Billy Gillespie departed for Sheffield United on 22 December. He had figured in just six games all season, but City could ill afford to lose a player of Gillespie's rare potential.

The Yorkshire Evening Post: “Gates of late at Elland Road have not been sufficient to pay the ordinary expenses of the club, and when Sheffield United weighed in with what is stated to be a bigger fee than has ever before been paid for the transfer of a Leeds City player, the management felt that the interests of the club demanded its acceptance. We have reason to believe that the fee is ... £400 and if that be so the acceptance of Sheffield United’s cheque will go some way towards tiding over Leeds United’s financial embarrassments.”

Gillespie never achieved his full potential at Elland Road, scoring just 10 goals in 24 appearances for City. He went on to find stardom in a 21-year career with Sheffield United, playing 575 first team games for the Blades and earning an FA Cup-winners medal in 1925. He won 25 caps for Ireland and his 12 goals set a national record that stood until David Healy broke it almost 80 years later. According to Martin Jarred and Malcolm Macdonald, “His thinning hair belied his speed and skill, which marked him out as one of the outstanding inside-forwards of his generation.”

Two goals from Joe Enright brought a welcome 2-1 win against Leicester Fosse on 23 December, with amateur goalkeeper Cecil G Reinhardt retaining his position in goal after a promising debut in the 5-0 defeat at Wolves on the 16th. Reinhardt, a German by ancestry, who later changed his surname to Goodwin, was studying to be a doctor at Leeds University. He was delighted to be given a chance to stake a regular place in the team and had some useful moments at Wolverhampton.

City faced a festive double header on Christmas Day and Boxing Day against bottom club Gainsborough Trinity. The first game at Elland Road saw Leeds without all of their first choice half-backs, John Harkins and skipper Tom Morris joining Stan Cubberley on the injured list. Sam Johnson, Chris Kelly and Joe Moran were their replacements. If City thought that Trinity would be easy meat, they were sadly mistaken.

The Mercury: “The usual dash and brilliance which has hitherto characterised the play of Leeds City ... was woefully absent in their encounter with Gainsborough Trinity ... It was confidently anticipated that the Trinitarians, who only won their first match of the season against Stockport on Saturday, would fall easy prey ... Let it be at once said that Gainsborough thoroughly deserved their point for this goalless draw.”

The next day things went even more badly; City lost 2-1 in the return fixture despite playing well. The result left Leeds deep in trouble.
There were three teams beneath them, but they all had games in hand on the Peacocks.

Bottom of Division Two – 26 December 1911

Pos	***P***	***W***	***D***	***L***	***F***	***A***	***Pts***
13th Blackpool	***19***	***7***	***4***	***8***	***20***	***26***	***18***
14th Bristol City	***20***	***6***	***3***	***11***	***20***	***37***	***15***
15th Leicester Fosse	***21***	***5***	***5***	***11***	***18***	***40***	***15***
16th Birmingham	***20***	***5***	***4***	***11***	***26***	***38***	***14***
17th Leeds City	***20***	***5***	***3***	***12***	***25***	***43***	***13***
18th Stockport County	***17***	***2***	***7***	***8***	***16***	***25***	***11***
19th Gainsborough T	***19***	***2***	***7***	***10***	***14***	***34***	***11***
20th Glossop	***18***	***1***	***7***	***10***	***13***	***30***	***9***

In such sorry circumstances, Nottingham Forest’s visit to Elland Road on 30 December represented a stern challenge, but City rose to the occasion, emerging with a creditable 3-1 victory. The result was particularly heartening, considering that City had to play most of the game with ten men. Debutant full-back Alex Campbell, formerly of Middlesbrough, suffered a bad knee injury in the first twenty minutes and limped off, never to play again for the first team. Moran dropped back to partner Affleck and Enright played at half-back.

City made light of their handicap and stormed to victory. They were 2-0 ahead when Campbell went off and never gave Forest a look in, though the Midlanders got a consolation goal in the closing minutes.

Inside-forward Joe Enright enjoyed a decent season - he had to play in a deeper role against Forest on 30 December when Alex Campbell limped out of the game

Wanderer wrote in the Leeds Mercury: "It is undoubtedly some time since Leeds City showed such all round excellence ... There was no holding the front line when they were at full strength. They went through the Notts defence in fine style, and, even when Enright was playing half-back, they were always a force to be reckoned with. There was real method in their work; every man was in deadly earnest ... The men, in addition to combining smartly and forming a good plan of campaign, shot well and shot frequently. There were none of those attempts to dribble the ball into the net."

The victory saw the Peacocks end the year in 14th position and spirits were indisputably lifted. On the debit side, they were just four points clear of the re-election positions and there was hard work to come in the New Year if they were to preserve their Second Division status.

The endless struggle against playing and financial misfortunes was proving a heavy burden for Frank Scott-Walford and the players. They should have been competing with the very best rather than struggling in the depths of the second tier. It was a mystery for which there seemed to be neither a satisfactory explanation nor a happy ending.