

## WALTER WINTERBOTTOM: MEMORIES OF MY FAVOURITE SCHOOL-TEACHER

My primary education was at Alexandra Road School, Oldham from 1932 to 1937 and my secondary education at Oldham Municipal High School from 1937 to 1944. I must have had at least two dozen teachers during those years. One of them was outstanding as a mentor and role model. This was Walter Winterbottom, who was my class teacher at Alexandra Road in the school year 1936-37.

When I moved up into Standard Five classroom in September 1936 we could pick our own desks and I chose one on the back row. Throughout primary school I had always been top of my class in arithmetic. However WW soon noticed that although I was quick and accurate at mental arithmetic, I was getting some of my written sums wrong. He realised it was because I was copying down some sums incorrectly from the blackboard. One afternoon he asked me to stay behind at the end of school, and asked me to name the letters on an opticians test card. I could only read those in the top half!

He informed my parents that I was short sighted and thereafter had me sit at a desk nearer to the blackboard. My parents took me to an optician for glasses, my sums regained their accuracy and I began to live in a world where all objects had a sharper outline. How many teachers would go to such trouble for a pupil?

I had two passions at the time. When the weather was fine it was playing football (cricket in summer). When wet, it was reading; both fiction for excitement and non-fiction in the pursuit of knowledge. I enjoyed WW's PT lessons which were held outdoors in fine weather, especially if it involved a kick about on the school playing field in which we boys, unsuccessfully of course, tried to dribble our way past him.

My father had taken me to Boundary Park for the first time in the spring of 1936, the year Oldham Athletic was relegated from the Second Division. WW must still have had some connections with the club in that year because on a few occasions he gave me and my classroom friend tickets to Latics Reserves home matches. One weekend in 1937 he took my autograph album and brought it back signed by the whole Man U team that he had played with that Saturday. This was another example of his extreme kindness.

In the summer of 1937 I passed the eleven plus to Oldham Municipal High School, along with my close friend and two girls (one of whom later married the brother of onetime Latics manager, Gordon Hurst). This was, of course, the same school that WW had attended a decade and a half earlier. I only returned to Alexandra Road school once after that summer and that was many years later. For more than seventy years until this month, I had no idea that WW left the school at the same time as I did in 1937 and that he went on to a college in Leeds in that year.

At the High School our gym teacher in my first year was the veteran Mr Wood, who had probably been teaching there since its inception. One day he asked our class "Is there anyone here who was taught by Mr Winterbottom?" I was the only one to put my hand up. "Walter Winterbottom is the finest athlete that I have taught" said Mr Wood.

In April 1938 my family moved outside Oldham to Greenfield, Saddleworth, Yorkshire but I continued to attend Oldham High School; my scholarship being transferred to a West Riding County Minor. One day in that year, to both my surprise and his, I met WW in Greenfield village. He was close to the home of Arthur Buckley, a professional footballer at Leeds United, who played for the Latics from 1932 to 1936 but in 1938 was playing for Leeds United. I don't doubt that WW was visiting him.

Although I followed WW's career throughout his life with great interest from the newspapers, I only saw him again in the flesh on one further occasion, many years later. Following a business trip to London, I was travelling back to Manchester on an early evening train. On my way to the dining car for high tea I passed a lively-looking group of men and saw that one of them, in a window seat, was none other than WW. So the other men were clearly the England football team. I decided that after my meal I would make my return slowly through that coach and make myself known to WW. However, in the event, when I was level with him I found that he was engaged in a lively conversation with his companions. It would have been rude for me to butt in. Besides, I was more than foot taller, double the weight and three times the age that I was when he last saw me. It would have been embarrassing for us both if he had not been able to recall me at all! So reluctantly I let the opportunity pass.