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Villa director opens Everton's way into the Football League

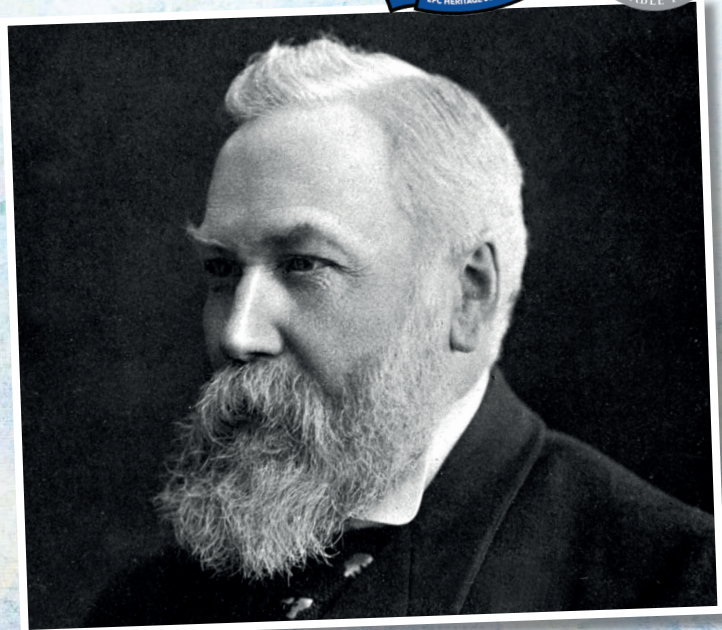


The 203 top-flight meetings between Everton and Aston Villa mean this fixture is the most frequent in English league football history. Both clubs became founder members of the Football League in 1888 and met twice that first season. The first game was a 2-1 win for Villa on Saturday 22 September at their Perry Barr ground, Robert Watson netting for Everton. A fortnight later at our Anfield home, Everton gained a 2-0 revenge with goals from George Farmer and Dave Waugh. However, those games would never have taken place had not William McGregor, a Scot from Perthshire and a Villa director, successfully resisted hostile opposition to Everton's admission to the Football League he had just created. So why did McGregor so badly want Everton in the league?

It was all about gates.

When professionalism was legalised in 1885 friendlies were football's staple diet but these were notoriously unpredictable. Games were often cancelled with a minimum of notice, kick-off times could be changed at the last minute and sometimes teams turned up with too few players and had to make up their numbers from the crowd. This unstable situation badly affected gate receipts, making bankruptcy a very real fear for some clubs.

McGregor came up with the inspired idea of "a fixity of fixtures" in which 12 elite clubs would commit to play each other on a home-and-



Aston Villa director William McGregor

away basis on a points-based system. This would generate interest and boost gates. The idea was warmly received but there was an outcry when the names of the selected clubs became known.

One of those left out in the cold was Bootle, widely regarded as much stronger than their local rivals Everton. Everton, in fact, were considered to be the weakest of the 12. McGregor acknowledged that some of the excluded clubs had better playing records than those selected, but they could not compete with them in terms of gates. He therefore fought

hard to ensure that Everton, with their strong support, were admitted.

Everton duly had the highest average attendance in the Football League's first season but otherwise it was not one for the club to remember. Everton finished eighth out of the 12 clubs and won only one away game. However, Everton claimed the runners-up spot the following season and in 1891 were champions.

The club that many predicted would sink in the Football League had vindicated William McGregor's judgement in selecting them. Their critics were now silenced.