

# CHAMPIONS' SEVEN LOST YEARS

Words // Paul McParlan

**Everton went into the 1939/40 campaign as defending First Division champions, with Brentford the visitors to Goodison Park for our opener on 26 August 1939.**

Ted Sagar made his 300th appearance in goal and Everton wore numbers on their shirts for the first time since 1933. The game ended in a 1-1 draw, with Tommy Lawton netting his 71st goal in just 95 games for the Blues... and he was still only 19! Nobody knew it at the time, but it would be the last Football League match at Goodison Park for seven years.

Events in Europe were preoccupying fans more than Everton's fortunes, which was reflected in the attendance of 30,446 – down nearly 6,000 on the previous season. When the Second World War started on 4 September 1939, football was suspended after just three matches, Everton having won one and drawn two.

A regionalised competition replaced the Football League during the conflict. The First and Second Divisions were combined and split into North and South sections with 22 teams in each. When hostilities ended in September 1945 it was too late for league fixtures to be arranged so only the FA Cup was held that season. The ties were played over two legs, with Everton going out in the third round to Preston North End.

The Football League resumed in August 1946, so Everton had effectively been the reigning League



Champions for seven years! For the new season, the original fixtures for the abandoned 1939/40 campaign were arranged again, with Everton's opener seeing them face Brentford at Goodison Park.

Only five Everton players who appeared in the original clash featured in this one – Norman Greenhalgh, Joe Mercer, TG Jones, Gordon Watson and Wally Boyes. Brentford won 2-0, with goals from George Wilkins (the father of future England star Ray Wilkins) and Gerry McAloon, neither of whom played in the 1939 meeting. The Bees won four of their opening five games but ended up being relegated, while Everton finished a disappointing 10th.

The Second World War had a devastating effect on an Everton side that had looked set to dominate the 1940s and it took the Club years to recover from that setback. Some players never wore the shirt again and others moved on to pastures new. The prolific Lawton had left for Chelsea and later spent a season as player-manager at Brentford in 1952/53. Everton fans were robbed of the chance to see one of our greatest-ever teams in their prime.

Rob Sawyer's book *Broken Dreams* provides a comprehensive insight into our 1939 team and what happened to them next.



A cartoon from the Everton v Brentford programme in 1939