



Black 'n' White origins

Club historian Paul Joannou attempts to unravel the mystery of why United play in black and white.

IF THERE is one question I am repeatedly quizzed about it is the origins of United's famous striped shirts. 'Why do they play in black and white?', is the question so often asked.

And, to be frank, the reasons I have managed to track down over the years appear only to be hearsay or legend, with little factual evidence to support the story.

Recently, though, another theory has come to light and one that has far more credence than any other that has been revealed so far.

It was way back on August 2nd, 1894, when the directors of Newcastle United decided to do away with their old Newcastle East End colours of red shirts in favour of black 'n' white.

The directors' minutes record the event: "It was agreed that the club's colours should be changed from red shirts and white knickers to black and white shirts (two inch stripe) and dark knickers".

The reason for the change was to stop the frequent colour clashes which were occurring in the Second Division. But nowhere in the club's handwritten records of

the day does it state why they selected black and white.

And despite painstaking research in the local newspaper archives, there is still no definitive answer to the mystery.

A few theories have been found. The most popular surrounds a fervent supporter from the Blackfriars monastery, Father Dalmatius Houtmann. This Dutchman was often to be seen with United's players in the years before the turn of the century, the monastery being just a goalkick away from St. James' Park.

He was dressed in a traditional black and white habit, and it has been vaguely noted that the club decided to adopt his colours.

Another legend that has been handed down over the years is the story of a pair of magpies nesting in the old Victorian stand on Leazes Terrace. It was said that United's players of the time became so attached to the two birds that they picked their distinctive colours of black and white and nicknamed themselves the Magpies.

Now I don't really give either story much chance of being the true reason why

United's Victorian committee men came up with those famous black and white stripes. A far more credible answer goes back deep into history and the English Civil War.

Tyneside historian Chris Goulding has unearthed another theory, tracing the black and white colours to a famous 17th Century Cavalier, William Cavendish (1593-1676).

As Earl, and later Duke, of Newcastle, he had strong connections with Tyneside and Northumberland, which have remained in the region even to this day. The City still has a Cavendish Place, and large areas of the region were at one time owned by the family.

Streets like Welbeck Road, Devonshire Place, Portland Terrace and Bentinck Road have Cavendish connections and the Earl also owned Ogle and Bothel castles in Northumberland.

From Worksop – in Nottinghamshire – Cavendish was appointed military governor in the north by King Charles I and soon his heraldic crest of three white stags on a black background – the first black 'n' white connection – was to be seen



William Cavendish, the Earl of Newcastle and the origins of United's black and white.

all over the North East. And when the Civil War raged, Cavendish was of course very much a Royalist man.

He raised a volunteer army on Tyneside, known as the Newcastle Whitecoats, nicknamed the 'Lambs' because of their undyed white jackets. And, as Chris Goulding notes, their black and white attire became very distinctive.

"Along with their black leather boots, belts and pouches, they must indeed have looked like the very first Toon Army"!

The Whitecoats took part in the siege of Newcastle and at other famous Civil War battles, at Piercebridge and at Marston Moor, near York, in 1644, when they virtually died to a man in a heavy Royalist defeat.

The Cavendish, and

Whitecoats, colours of black and white, continued in the region for many years. As Goulding notes: "I think it is entirely probable that this is where Newcastle United's colours came from; there must be a connection.

"When the club was looking for a new outfit it could well have opted for those of an aristocratic family which still has substantial land holdings in this area".

Having researched the Cavendish connection I tend to agree with Chris.

In Victorian England there certainly would have been a tendency to make links with the past and to the gentry of Tyneside.

So I reckon the mystery has just about been solved. And as a footnote, Cavendish also had the same strong connections in Nottingham and Grimsby. Now they also have football clubs with black and white colours. I wonder ...



Those famous black 'n' white colours, the mystery solved?