

“HONEST” JOHN MCKENNA – LFC TRAILBLAZER



As a kid I remember coming across a piece in a magazine called Ireland's Own about a man called John McKenna who was involved in the formation of Liverpool FC. Imagine my delight when I discovered that he was also born in my home county of Monaghan, and not only that, we shared the same birthday as well, the 3rd of January bit anyhow. To a ten year old this was major news. Like thousands of youngsters in Ireland I was drawn to the red half of Merseyside. My first game, a European Cup tie in Dundalk is still etched in my memory.

Fast forward about 30 years or so and I have moved to the North West of the country, Donegal to be exact, a county with a rich football heritage. My love for the reds never waned in the interim and whenever I could I'd remind people that I came from the same county as one John McKenna. But what I realised is that not many reds knew anything about the man at all. Were they aware of his involvement with one of the world's greatest football clubs? I didn't know much myself, the liverpoolfc.tv website has a useful profile of the man but I wanted to know a bit more.

Last August I noticed that the town of Enniscorthy in County Wexford unveiled a plaque in honour of Billy Lacey. Billy was the first player from the Republic of Ireland to wear the famous red shirt. He also wore the blue of Everton, but we'll let him away with that mishap. What got my attention was that it was a redman from the area, Alan Breen, who alerted the local media of the connection. This got me thinking, if Alan can do it so can I. It's up to the fans to make it happen.

An email was sent to the heritage section of Monaghan County Council informing them off the link between John McKenna and Liverpool FC. This was met with an enthusiastic response, things were moving or so I thought. They said they would get back to me; they never did. Anyway, I still had to find out more about the man. What else did he achieve? Is he buried in Liverpool? I was certain he had to be buried in Anfield Cemetery, it just seemed logical. Various Liverpool cemetery websites were trawled through but to no avail. Help was at hand however. A new book was released about Liverpool FC and its Irish connections; this was called Emerald Anfield and was written by Keith Falkener. I emailed Keith and he pointed me in the direction of Peter Lupsons book Across The Park, he said there was even a picture of John McKenna's resting place in it. A quick online visit to Merseyshop later and the book was on its way.

What a great book Across The Park is, a must read for Reds and Blues alike. The picture was there alright, very clear, the gravestone was unusual AND it wasn't located at Anfield at all. Smithdown Road Cemetery was the place to go to. I just had to find out where this Smithdown Road was located, after all I only knew one graveyard in Liverpool and that was Goodison. Just to confuse me further, Smithdown is also known as Toxteth Park Cemetery and although the excellent Toxteth Park Cemetery website had no results for my John McKenna search, I was confident I'd find the grave and cemetery location no problem. Now I had to get to a game where I could make time to begin my search.

It wasn't hard to find where Smithdown Road was; much to my surprise it turns out I go past Smithdown Road cemetery every time I get the 86A into the city. So I was set, I had two hours to spare in Liverpool before the Stoke game on Feb 2nd. I'd have no problem finding it. It was a very distinctive headstone after all. How wrong I was. My first mistake was not taking the picture of the headstone with me. Disaster, there I was at 4'o clock on a cold February afternoon faced with 1'000's of headstones that looked more or less the same. Almost all were of a similar height, and I thought this was going to be easy. Nothing for it only to start walking, I could visualise the picture in the book after all. Row upon row, lap after lap, I knew there was a hill behind the headstone, the thing is, there were hills everywhere. Fail to prepare, prepare to fail came into my head. In total I spent two hours walking around, at least it was a bit of exercise and I was now warm. Maybe there was a place for me on the Irish road walking team for London 2012 after all. Onwards to the game at least, and standing in 305 on the KOP was probably not what the doctor ordered but a 2-0 victory certainly was.

So back to the search and that eureka moment or maybe I was just naive, naive I think. From looking at the picture of the headstone, I shouldn't have been searching for John McKenna's name at all, his wife, Charlotte Maria, had died before him; she was the one to search for. A search for Charlotte Maria McKenna later, and there it was, not only that, but I also had a map of the graveyard and the exact location of the grave, how easy was this! At last, now to get back over to Liverpool and the perfect opportunity was just a few weeks away.

I had booked flights for the Man Ure game on March 6th last October, over at 10am Saturday and back at 8.30pm on Sunday would cover all options, even pesky SKY. Saturday afternoon would be dedicated to finding John McKenna's grave, map in hand, myself and three other LFC Donegal committee members hopped on the 86A to Smithdown Cemetery. It took about 10 minutes to find my holy grail and of course I did recall walking very close to the spot only weeks earlier. My fellow travellers, Clare, Chris and Conor were probably as relieved as I was; they had to listen to me every weekend going on and on about John McKenna. One Dirk Kuyt hat-trick later and it was the perfect weekend.

I was aware that the 75th anniversary of his death was upon us, this was a good opportunity for me to publicise this man's achievements in his homeland. The pictures would also help. I was missing one but. The plaque unveiled in McKenna's honour at Anfield. I was travelling to the Braga home game so what was the harm in trying to see if I could get a picture. One call to customer services later and I was put in touch with Liverpool FC Curator Stephen Done and Steve Newton from the museum. Much to my delight there was no problem gaining access to Anfield. Friday morning it was, after we safely negotiated our way past Braga and the St Patricks Day festivities. Well, as you know, we were knocked out after failing to make the breakthrough at Anfield. It may well be the last European game for a year or so, still, I had the next morning to look forward too.

So early on Friday morning, my girlfriend Sarah, LFC Donegal member Richard, and yours truly made our way to the museum entrance. Here, we were met by Steve Brand who was to show us the way to the John McKenna plaque. Steve was great company and we even managed to get LFC legends Phil Neal and David Johnson to pose with us under the McKenna plaque. It was also great to meet Stephen Done and Steve Newton in person to thank them for their hospitality throughout the morning. We had a great time and I informed them that I planned to use the pictures for an article in

the local Monaghan newspaper with a view to creating awareness of McKenna's exploits in his native land.

So the wheels have been set in motion, I know there are plenty of like minded Reds in Monaghan and in my own branch in Donegal that are willing to make this happen. We owe John McKenna that much. It's a case of watch this space for now. As for a fitting tribute, well what about a bench in the Glaslough village churchyard where his parents got married. Bob Paisley has one in St Peters Church in Woolton, and if it's good enough for the Reds most successful manager Bob Paisley, I feel it would be good enough for "Honest" John McKenna, Liverpool FC's first manager. I think he'd approve.