



Who was Arthur Wharton?

Arthur Wharton was a remarkable 19th century sportsman who lived in Victorian Britain. Not only does he hold the title of the first black professional footballer in the world, he was also a world record holding sprinter, a professional cricketer and an outstanding athlete.

Arthur played football for the most prestigious team of his day in the North of England, Preston North End. His other teams included: Sheffield United, Stockport County, Darlington and Rotherham Town.

After retiring from playing, Arthur, an immigrant from Africa's Gold Coast, spent 20 years working as a Yorkshire coal miner until his death in 1930 at the age of 65. Arthur was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in the village of Edlington, near Doncaster, South Yorkshire. A local paper at the time reported his funeral was 'well attended' by people from the sporting world but sadly Arthur's achievements were largely forgotten by the history books - that is, until the 1980s, when history lecturer, Ray Jenkins, started researching his story.

Arthur the Multicultural Pioneer

Arthur's life is both inspiring, in terms of his sporting achievements, and tragic, in its 'riches to rags' ending. What these events tell us, is how much our sporting world and Britain itself has changed because of pioneers such as Arthur. Sadly, they also show us the roots of what we still see the effects of in today's society - racism and prejudice in sport and class and status divides.

Sports and social class

Arthur experienced life in the North of England through a working class perspective as the Industrial Revolution intensified. Manning factories and mines meant a large majority of people were poor and worked long hours in bad conditions for little pay.

The wealthy minority, who reaped the most benefits from the mechanical and technological advancements that came as a result, were also those who were in a position to call the shots in the sporting world. The rise in leisure time and attendance of spectator sports in the last years of the 19th Century meant more of the working class were becoming sportsmen and needed to earn a wage at the same time. But unlike today, there was little money to be made and it was not as regulated as it is



today.

Defying racist myths

Arthur was a pioneer. Not only was he an exceptional athlete, achieving so much as a sportsman within the difficult circumstances of Victorian working class life, he was doing this as a black man in a prejudiced society.

Victorians commonly believed in 'Scientific racism': the idea that the physical characteristics in Africans marked them as an inferior race in terms of their standing, intellect and capabilities.

Arthur did not fit this stereotype. In contrast, he was well educated, well-mannered, moral, religious, intelligent, strong-willed and proud- not the subordinate, savage many expected a black man to be.

Arthur was frequently described in newspapers during his career by the colour of his skin. He was most commonly known as 'Darkie Wharton', but other descriptions in the press included 'Othello', 'The dusky flyer', and 'A brunette of pronounced complexion'. Sometimes comments about Arthur's performance were accompanied by overtly racist slurs.

Achieving against the odds

It was through his achievements as a sportsman in the public eye that Arthur was a key figure in overturning the accepted Victorian idea that there was a hierarchy of different 'races' based upon our biological evolution. This combination of racism, and the lack of power that the working class had at that time to write their own 'histories', is perhaps why Arthur was forgotten for over 50 years.

Sadly the corrosive roots of these ideas about race still echo in British society today, and understanding Arthur's story can help to wipe out some of the myths that still prevail. For example, some Britons believe the myth that "Black immigrants came to Britain after World War II" and that "Immigrants take from Britain and don't give back". On the contrary, Arthur was not only a black immigrant living in Victorian Britain, he also made an outstanding contribution to both Britain's sporting heritage and its economy through his hard graft as a Yorkshire coal miner.

Furthermore, Arthur shows us that there was a black presence at the very beginnings of professional football in the world, (the oldest football club in the world being Sheffield FC). This longevity of black players' involvement in football is crucial in helping us understand the wider contribution people of colour have made to the building of modern Britain.



Why was Arthur forgotten?

Phil Vasili, who wrote Arthur's Biography, believes Arthur was not fully represented in sporting history because of several factors – his ethnicity and the fact he was a threat to exposing the falsehood of the racial stereotyping that marked Africans as an inferior race, and also because of the lack of power that the working classes (of which Arthur became when he came to Britain), had in 'writing their own histories'.

"Wharton's deeds have an overwhelming symbolic dimension to them. Here was an African, at the time of Africa's forced colonisation by the capitalist nations of Europe, beating these 'superior races' at their own sports on their home turf. That Wharton's accomplishments were quickly forgotten is sad testament to the degenerative effect of racism in relation to history. By concentrating on the colour, culture and ethnicity of an athlete, instead of their unmediated achievement, so much is missed".

(Vasili, May 2013)