

The most sure-handed of secretaries



Sixty-five years ago this week, the funeral of club secretary Walter Crickmer, who died in the Munich Air Disaster, took place at St Ann's Roman Catholic Church in Stretford, with three United youth-teamers as altar boys. This is his story...

The Munich Air Disaster saw Manchester United lose not only eight of England and Ireland's finest footballers, but also one of the great footballing administrators of the age, a man respected Europe-wide who had served the club with unerring enthusiasm, energy and dynamism for almost four decades.

Walter Crickmer's United contributions are unjustly downplayed, their magnitude faded in the shadow of Sirs Matt and Alex. He is known as an outstanding club secretary and a two-time interim manager who helped launch the club's world-famous Academy, but even a tribute such as this is insufficient. Crickmer was no interim. He is the club's longest-ever serving secretary (32 years consecutive) and third-longest serving manager – nine years total across two spells – behind only Busby and Ferguson. Furthermore, United have on four occasions teetered on the brink: from bankruptcy in 1902 and 1931, when Old Trafford was obliterated to rubble in 1941 and, most poignantly, after the events of February 1958. On two of those occasions, the ravenously determined Crickmer hauled United onwards, and then he perished in the Munich snow.

Organising donkeys and turkeys

When Crickmer joined United in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, in July 1920, he was called Ray, short for Raymond. But secretary-manager Jack Robson decided to call Ray by his middle name: Walter. And so it was. The Wigan-born, Salford and Manchester-raised Crickmer had just been demobbed after a brief stint as Private 78794 in Manchester's 5th Regiment, beginning from his 18th birthday in December 1917. The son of an Irish dressmaker and a Norfolk-born tobacconist salesman, Walter had helped his father out in business as a youngster, and so a position as a clerk at United was suitable. It was a small-scale operation when he arrived, and Walter's roles ranged from the basic – player registration, fixture organisation and paying referees – to the more unique: finding a new donkey to pull the roller across the pitch after the old one had tired, or replacing the bandmaster's broken drum. Upon his 1926 promotion to club secretary, it was confidently asserted by the *Manchester Evening News* that, 'Crickmer knows more about the inside working of the club than anyone'. Walter would not vacate this role until his death and the veracity of that statement would never falter.

A half-decade on, in 1931, MUFC's Mr Reliable assumed the role of secretary-manager as the club nosedived towards the third tier. Under an ostrich-like board of directors, finances deteriorated such that Amy Davies,



Crickmer (front row, third from right) joins Matt Busby and United's 1948 FA Cup winners having handed the managerial reins over to the legendary Scot three years earlier

wife of late club chairman John Henry, loaned £5,000 to cover the summer wages. Upon football's resumption in September, just 3,507 fans rattled around Old Trafford.

Later that year, James W Gibson stepped in when United became unable to pay the players' wages or gift them their customary Christmas turkey. Leading football journalist Stacey Lintott arranged a meeting between uniform manufacturer Gibson and United's secretary and in Gibson, Walter saw a proud Mancunian with sufficient wealth to restore United to greatness. In Crickmer, Gibson found an inspirational, honest passion in a determined man who could put a vision into practice.

Birth of the Academy

In February 1932, a month after becoming chairman, Gibson asked Crickmer to begin the process of setting up a 'colts team, or nursery'. The diligent secretary, still interim manager, obliged. He approached Altrincham to secure a contract to play matches at their ground, and player (and briefly player manager in 1926/27) Lal Hilditch was given a coaching offer.

In the summer, Crickmer put up the new manager, Scott Duncan, in his Stretford house for his first few days. Duncan was enthusiastic about youth and attempted to stabilise the Reds, but success was mixed. Promotion eventually arrived in 1936, but only after a last-day dog-fight with Millwall to stay in the second tier two years earlier, and United's top-flight stay was just one year long. In November 1937, with Gibson and Duncan's relationship strained, the latter was allowed to leave for Ipswich Town. Crickmer stepped in once again.

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WALTER CRICKMER

United had scored only four away goals all season, but when Walter immediately brought 18-year-old 'A' Team graduate Stan Pearson into the team, the local lad was a sensation, setting up four goals from inside-left in a 7-1 win at Chesterfield. Crickmer had been responsible for handling applications for the manager's job, but after 18 goals in four games under his stewardship, it became clear he'd be sticking around. United rose up the table with hardly a glance over our shoulder, and Crickmer's free-flowing side raced towards promotion back to the First Division. At a board meeting in August 1938, Gibson duly paid a 'particularly glowing tribute to the club's marvellous secretary, Walter Crickmer, who more than replaced the energies that any manager could have put in'.

Gibson's ownership, defined by an equilibrium of wealth, an ability to delegate, and ambition, stabilised United, led by Crickmer's guiding hand. After the stabilisation followed creativity and with top-flight status restored, Crickmer could turn greater attention to youth. George Vose, Jackie Wassall, Johnny Carey and Pearson's first-team contributions evidenced the 'A' Team's undoubted success, but Crickmer, Gibson and chief scout Louis Rocca wanted more. The result was the Manchester United Junior Athletic Club (MUJAC), a revolutionary schoolboy football scheme whereby Crickmer collaborated with local educational authorities to create, in essence, the club's first true youth team for Manchester's finest young talents.

Walter was perfectly placed to enact Gibson's vision here, for not only was he a United man, but a Mancunian football man, on the board for local leagues and the committee for Manchester Boys, among other things. His work ethic, knowledge and contacts were hardly paralleled, perhaps only by Rocca. Together, they displayed an insatiable appetite for progress. By the end of 1938/39, Crickmer had



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Above: club officials and the players enjoy a meal together in Belgrade on 5 February 1958

Below: restored as secretary following the appointment of Busby, Crickmer continued to rejoice in the club's rise, joining the team in toasting back-to-back titles in 1957

guided United to their best finish (14th) for a decade, the Reserves had won the Central League and the Manchester Cup, the 'A' Team had won the Manchester League and the MUJACs had romped through the open-age Chorlton Amateur League.

Overcoming the struggles of war

United's decade-long path to success under Gibson and Crickmer was derailed when war with Germany began in 1939. The Football League and FA Cup were immediately suspended. Crickmer arranged friendlies with local clubs until regional competitions began in October and, working also as a special constable in the police, he endured a weekly scramble for players, with the majority returning home for war service. However, the existence of the 'A' Team and the MUJACs bolstered his ranks and over this period, Crickmer nurtured the emerging talents of Carey, Pearson, Charlie Mitten, John Aston and Johnny Morris. Crucially, his commitment to youth and the future never wavered over the six-year war.

Walter was lucky to be alive himself, for during the Manchester Blitz he had been left buried in the rubble of the police station in which he worked. Others were killed. Then, in 1941, he was one of the first on the scene as a huge flame erupted from the Old Trafford Main Stand, the victim of a stray Nazi bomb. His sprint to the dressing rooms in hope of saving the kit and boots was futile. Everything was destroyed. Instead, after borrowing other clubs' kits for some months, he had to rely on the kind donations of local women's clothing coupons to restore United. And yet, even in this remarkable situation, he still thrust forward the baton of youth, approaching a trio of football-mad



fruit and fish-selling brothers, the Goslings, who ran a youth team. Crickmer and Rocca agreed with the Goslings that United would provide players and funding if they would handle administration and coaching. This innovative scheme produced the talents of Joe Walton, John Anderson, Henry Cockburn and Jack Crompton. Meanwhile, Crickmer took United to two Lancashire Cup trophies, the 1941/42 Northern Championship and, finally, 1945's North Cup final. While Matt Busby, three months after agreeing to be United's new manager, was in the Mediterranean coaching British Army troops (he would take charge at United in October that year), Crickmer watched the Reds lose to Bolton by a late goal, just days after peace was finally declared in Europe.

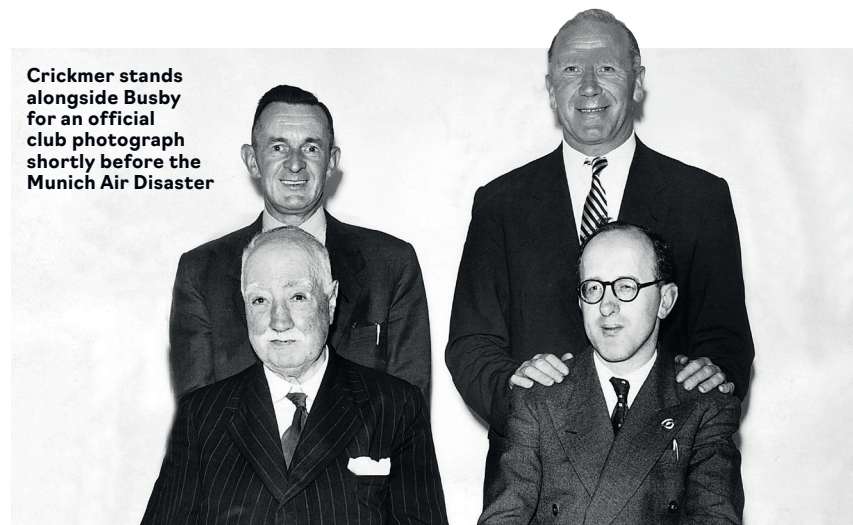
Relishing the success under Busby

When Busby arrived at Old Trafford in October 1945, he found little but rubble. The situation appeared somewhat dire, but beneath the surface, Crickmer had laid the strongest of foundations. Busby spent many an hour discussing matters with Walter, who proved to be his manual and guidebook to Manchester United. Crickmer was endlessly helpful but was the older and more experienced man who knew when to offer a firm "no". Three years on, back in his role as club secretary, Crickmer would manage the huge quantities of ticket requests for the 1948 FA Cup final, wading through piles of letters in the offices. United beat Blackpool at Wembley to win the Cup for the first time since 1909. The



Having conquered England, Europe was a new destination for the Reds in 1956 but the pursuit of glory on the continent would lead to Crickmer's tragic death two years later

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Crickmer stands alongside Busby for an official club photograph shortly before the Munich Air Disaster

team was: Crompton; Carey, Aston; Anderson, Chilton, Cockburn; Delaney, Morris, Rowley, Pearson, Mitten. All bar Chilton and Delaney were developed by Crickmer and the youth system he created. Busby never forgot that.

That same season, Crickmer's seven-year campaign for funding to rebuild Old Trafford was finally completed. He had worked tirelessly alongside Ellis Smith MP and Gibson to secure a government grant. And in 1949, United returned to Old Trafford. In 1950, he took the team on a US tour and as the Busby Babes developed throughout the decade, Crickmer revelled in their success. He was a key link between the players and the supporters, a constant presence around Busby's teams.

On those first European nights as United made our daring entrance into the European Cup, Crickmer would welcome the foreign officials and players of Anderlecht, Dortmund, Bilbao, Madrid, Prague and Belgrade. In 1957, he dealt with 250,000 ticket requests for the visit of Real Madrid. He relished the opportunity to chat to fans.

Munich and his legacy

Walter died, aged 58, in Munich. He left behind a wife and a daughter. Nellie, aged 63, died in 1967, and Beryl, aged 93, in 2015. Crickmer was the machinery of United, the principal architect of our modern greatness. The foundations he built have since come to define this club.

Remembering his lost friends and mentors a decade on from Munich, the great Bill Foulkes wrote: 'Walter always reminded me of a little dynamo. Nothing was too much for him.' We will always remember him. ●