

Neil Kerr: From Bowling to Ibrox

William Wilton had an ever-expanding list of contacts when he first became the de facto manager of Rangers. His official title was Match Secretary and a year after he had taken over the job from James Gossland he was tipped off about a young prospect who was making the good people of Springburn sit up and take notice.

Wilton went along to Gourlay Park, home of Cowliars FC, to watch the player in action and liked what he saw. Young Neil Kerr looked a very competent centre forward, and could also play on the right wing. It was 1890, and Cowliars - who were one of the founding Scottish Football League clubs - had produced many players of note. Another of those was John McPherson, whom Wilton would also offer a contract to - and he would become one of the greatest Rangers of the club's first half century.

But Rangers had high hopes for the lad from Bowling, who was just 19 when he signed up for a stint at First Ibrox Park. He was quick and agile, but perhaps lacked the finishing skills to be a long-term success with Rangers. He scored goals, but just not enough of them.

Kerr (and McPherson) made his Rangers debut on August 2nd in a Rangers Sports Trophy tie at Ibrox. Local rivals Linthouse provided the opposition - after Vale of Leven were forced to call off - and after a keen battle Rangers won 3-2. Kerr also filled the inside-right berth as the Light Blues beat Dumbarton 3-2 in the final seven days later. For playing his part in the narrow victory, Kerr and his teammates each received a handsome tea set.

The teenager, who lived on the banks of the River Clyde, made his competitive debut against Hearts at Ibrox in Rangers' first ever Scottish League match. It was history in the making but Kerr, just like the 10 others chosen to represent Rangers that day, no doubt saw it as just another football match. Rangers won 5-2 in front of 4,000 fans and Kerr got them onside immediately by scoring twice. His former Cowliars buddy John McPherson also scored. In fact, the Kilmarnock-born striker, known as Kitey, would score nine goals in two of Rangers' next three league games. In between beating Cambuslang and St Mirren 6-2 and 8-2 respectively, Rangers lost 5-1 at Dumbarton, so it was a topsy-turvy time to be a Rangers supporter.

Kerr played in every league game that season and his eight goals helped Rangers share the inaugural title with Dumbarton. In all, he scored twenty times in his debut campaign in light blue. He was a great favourite of the Ibrox crowd by reason of his dashing and fearless play. The spectators could always rely upon getting something good from Neilly, who was one of the fastest men on the ball the Rangers ever had. Latterly he played outside right and was no less effective in that position.

He remained at Ibrox for four years although, unlike McPherson, his appearances soon became limited. His highlights at Ibrox included a hat trick against Sunderland and a goal in the 1891/92 Scottish Cup final against Celtic, but in 1894 he signed for Liverpool as they too embarked on their first ever English League campaign. He stayed just a single season before moving to Nottingham Forest, where he also remained for a season. After his short spell in the East Midlands, where injury hampered any progress he might've made, he headed back to a Scotland for short stints at Clyde and Falkirk. A surprise move back to Rangers in 1897 failed to re-ignite a career which was already on a downward trajectory and Kerr called it a day at the age of 27. It was an ignominious ending to a career which had at one point taken him to within the fringes of the Scottish national team.

While on the books of non-league Falkirk, he was enjoying the last few days of the close season back in Bowling, and on the evening of Friday, July 24, decided to go out for a sail with two of his friends. They were on the small yacht, Arab, which belonged to Mr Petrie, the pier master at Bowling. On board were his son, Archibald; Kerr, who lived at Clyde Villa; and Robert Clacher, son of the gardener at Glen Avon, also in Bowling. All three had grown up by the coast and sailing had been a normal part of life for as long as they could remember.

The small boat had been cruising about in the channel between Largs and Bute. The good friends had been having fun and reminiscing about the 'old days' and the mood was one of general relaxation. They decided to moor the boat at Largs for the evening, but round about midnight the anchor dragged, and they were driven out to sea. They tried to make for Rothesay, but when they were about mid-channel, Kerr, who was repairing a lamp, noticed that the yacht had sprung a leak and that water was coming in rapidly. He shouted to the others, and got them to put on life-belts, as he was the only strong swimmer among the three. They were just clambering into the small punt when it capsized and the young men were thrown into the water. Kerr, who was 25, managed to give the others an oar each, and shouted to them to do the best they could for themselves. Kerr saw a light on the Bute shore, and made straight for it, and after swimming for about an hour and a half, landed at Millhole, Assog, in a very exhausted state.

He was immediately taken to the house of Mr Gibson, the gardener at Mountford, and attended to by Dr Lawson, who had been sent for.

The doctor, after attending to Kerr, went straight down to the shore to look for the others, and about a mile and a half down, found the body of young Petrie. Much later on, Clacher's body was also discovered on the Assog shore.

Mr Petrie, harbourmaster and collector at Bowling, went to Rothesay on the Saturday morning, accompanied by some friends of Clacher's. Sadly Clacher's mother was so ill that his father wasn't able to go.

The bodies were taken away on the Saturday afternoon on a North British steamer. Neil Kerr went with them but was still in a terrible state due to his awful experience. He appeared to have mostly recovered physically, despite being in the water for an hour and a half, but mentally was a shell of his former self. It appears that all three had lifebelts, and Kerr's opinion is that the other two succumbed to exhaustion and exposure.

An oar was found beside Petrie's body, showing that he had clung to it till the last. When Kerr landed on Assog shore it was about three o'clock in the morning. An attempt was at once made to launch a boat to rescue the other two, but the weather was so wild that it was found impossible to proceed.

Petrie, who acted as assistant to his father, was 24 years of age, an only son, and a very promising young man. It is said he was engaged to be married. The yacht formerly belonged to Mr J. Hope McBrayne, son of Mr David McBrayne, and was for sale at the time of the accident. It was a tragedy of massive proportions and left a dark cloud hovering over the small settlement of Bowling for many years to come.

I think it's fair to say that the former Ranger never got over the terrible tragedy. He became a commercial traveller but never married and despite surviving the horrendous boating accident, died five years later at his home in Bowling. He was just 30. He had been suffering with gastritis, and had also contracted hepatitis. He was afforded a public funeral in his home town, in which Rangers directors AB McKenzie, his brother Dugald, and George Small, were in attendance as the talented young footballer was laid to rest. His old comrade, Andrew Hannah, the once-famous back of the Renton and Everton was also present.

Neil Kerr had made history with Rangers, and won his biggest battle with mother nature, only to succumb to illness while still a young man. It was a sad ending to a life which had promised so much.