

With the FA having written to the WFA in December 1969 to confirm that the ban on women playing was to be overturned, 71 teams (out of the 91 clubs in the UK) set out on the road to the first ever Women's FA Cup final in the 1970-71 season.

To avoid long distance travel in the early rounds, teams were split into eight geographical groups prior to the draw. Among those taking part were Welsh and Scottish clubs with one of them – Stewarton Thistle from near Kilmarnock in East Ayrshire – making it to the final. The club had been formed in 1961 at the request of their local authority to help raise funds for the Freedom from Hunger Campaign.

A first-round match in Scotland was Aberdeen Prima Donnas v Stewarton Thistle (of Kilmarnock), on 29 November 1970 at the Aberdeen Lads' Club Fields in Woodside, Aberdeen. The teams would meet again in the Scottish Women's Cup Final in 1971.

In the earliest reported fixture in the Cup, on 1 November, Leicester City Supporters LFC were drawn at home to The Wandering Angels (Lichfield), and in December Amersham Angels ("who were given a bye in the preliminary round") beat Luton Ladies, 5–3.

One of the eight zonal final matches in January was won by Nuneaton Wanderers (Warwickshire) 6–3 against Bantams Ladies (Coventry), at the Memorial Park; another zonal winner was EMGALS (from Leicester, representing the East Midlands Gas Board, EMGAS), who won 5–3 at Hull. Another zonal final match was between Chiltern Valley and Amersham Angels. The remaining Scottish club, Stewarton Thistle, played Manchester Corinthians LFC. in their zonal final. Thistle's key player in their win was Susan Ferries, recounted in a 2016 article: "Susan was the star of an early round 5-2 defeat of the Manchester Corinthians and a [semi-final] 9-2 thumping of Nuneaton Wanderers, being described in the press as the Bobby Lennox of the female football world."

The quarter-finals and semi-finals for the first women's FA cup were held as part of a one-day tournament at Woodside Stadium, Watford, a local authority venue. The day was notable because Rose Reilly, probably the best British player of her generation, netted six goals for Stewarton Thistle in a 9-2 rout of Wanderers (Nuneaton) in their semi-final tie before being rushed to hospital with suspected appendicitis.

Matches were 40 minutes each way, and the teams were divided into eight regional areas, each providing a quarter-finalist. As most of the 71 entries came from the South and Midlands of England, this produced a distorted picture of the strength of the women's game. However, the powerful teams from the North West of England and Scotland were all placed in the same group.

Thus Stewarton Thistle played and beat Manchester Corinthians (who had won the Deal Tournament in 1968 and 1969) in the northern area final. Stewarton Thistle (now known as Kilmarnock FC Women) raised funds for their long-distance journeys to the south of England by obtaining sponsorship from local businesses, Irvine Valley Round Table, local Junior FA clubs, and Stewarton Town Council. In addition, they received support from Lees' confectionary firm in 1971-72 season, changing their name to Lees' Ladies.

The remaining seven quarter-finalists comprised three teams from the Midlands League (Emgals of Leicester, Kay's of Worcester and Wanderers of Nuneaton), plus Amersham Angels (Home Counties League), Thanet United (Kent League), White Ribbon of London (South and East of England League) and Southampton.

Southampton won their quarter-final against White Ribbon 23-0 and the semi-final with Emgals 8-0. However, there seems to have been a general dissatisfaction that the Southampton team was effectively a representative side. A report from Amersham Angels noted: "Many spectators expressed the view that a representative side should not have been allowed in the competition." The Wanderers of Nuneaton complained that the second half of their semi-final against Stewarton Thistle lasted an hour and a half instead of 40 minutes. The finals were held at the Crystal Palace National Sports Centre. This is the same site as the men's FA Cup finals had between 1895 and 1914.

EMGALS of Leicester defeated Wanderers of Nuneaton to win the battle for third place, while Southampton won the 'First Mitre Trophy' 4-1 with their ability to control Rose Reilly, proving decisive.

The prolific Pat Davies scored a hat-trick. The final received no national press coverage, although reports appear in the local papers for the two participant clubs. The weekly magazine Goal carried a two-page picture spread of the match ('The Girls have their own women's FA Cup Final'), but this did not appear until several weeks later.

The Southampton entry was a representative side from the Southampton & District League. However, it was only after questions were raised about their status that this was regularised in December 1970 (presumably by the formal establishment of a club).

Southampton were representative side from the Southampton & District League, were not popular winners and even criticized in their local paper, the Southern Evening Echo, shortly before the final. Pat Dunn of Weyladies (Weymouth) was quoted as saying, "This final is a farce ... It's desperately unfair to women's soccer throughout the country, and many people agree with me. We shall be cheering for the Scots all the way, hoping to see Southampton taken down a few pegs. They deserve it, for they are not a club team."

According to the FA Women's football yearbook, the original Mitre Challenge Trophy "disappeared" in 1979. With the donation of a new trophy by the Football Association, the cup was replaced.

The 71 team were divided into 8 groups:

Group 1: Blackpool Supporters, Elbeo, Macclesfield, Macclesfield 'B', Manchester Corinthians, Manchester Nomads, Preston North End Supporters Club,

Group 1A: Prima Donnas, Stewarton Thistle,

Group 2: British Rail (Leicester), EMGALS, Forest, Hull, Leicester City Supporters, Notts United, Rainbow Dazzlers, Wandering Angels,

Group 3: Bedworth, Bedworth Rangers, Connors (Nuneaton), Coventry Bantams, Keresley, Nuneaton Rangers, Renold, Wanderers (Nuneaton),

Group 4: Aston Villa, Badsey, Birmingham Beau Belles, Chelmsley Diamonds, Elkington's Angels, Kays, Lan-Bar, Lodge Park, Mid-Vale (Pershore), St Andrews,

Group 5: Amersham Angels, Amersham Imps, Arland, Bracknell Bullets, Chiltern Valley, Devizes Moonrakers, Farley United (Tigers), Luton, Phantoms, Swindon Spitfires, Talon Elite,

Group 6: Barking Belles, Cykicks, Edgware, Ipswich Avengers, Keith Blackman (Walthamstow), Orient, Spurs, White Ribbon,

Group 7: Deal & Betteshanger United, Herne Bay Ladybirds, Lydd, Maidstone Mote United, Margate Rangers, Medway, Ramsgate All Stars, Thanet United, White Wanderers (Hamstreet),

Group 8: Brighton G.P.O., Hampden Park Kingfishers, Hellingly Hospital S. & S. Club, Patstone United, Rye, Southampton, Southampton 'B', Travaux,

Round 1

Group 1

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
29.11.1970	Prima Donnas	0	15	Stewartson Thistle	

Group 2

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
1.11.1970	Leicester City Supporters LFC	8	0	Wandering Angels (Litchfield)	

Group 3

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
1.11.1970	Bedworth Rangers			Nuneaton Rangers	
	Conners (Nuneaton)			Nuneaton Wanderers	
	Keresley			Coventry Bantams	
	Renod			Bedworth	

Group 7

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
1.11.1970	White Wanderers (Hamstreet)			Lydd	

Round 2

Group 3

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
6.12.1970	Bedworth Rangers or Nuneaton Rangers			Coventry Bantams	
6.12.1970	Renolds or Bedworth			Nuneaton Wanderers	

Group 5

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
19,12,1970	Amersham Angels June Debenham (3) Nicola Coe Julia Bugby	5 (3)	3 (1)	Luton Ladies AN Others	

Group 7

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
6.12.1970	Deal & Betteshanger United	3	0	Ladybird (Herne Bay)	
6.12.1970	Medway Ladies			Margate Rangers	
6.12.1970	White Wanderers (Hamstreet)			Ramsgate All Stars	

Regional Semi-Finals

Group 4

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
10.1.1971	Elkington Angels			Aston Vila	
10.1.1971	Kays			Badsey	

Group 5

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
10.1.1971	Amersham Angels			Bracknell Bullets	
10.1.1971	Devizes Moonrakers			Chiltern Valley	

Replay

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
17.1.1971	Chiltern Valley			Devizes Moonrakers	

Group 7

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
10.1.1971	Thanet United			Deal & Betteshanger United	
10.1.1971	White Wanderers			Medway	

Regional Finals

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
7.2.1971	Chiltern Valley	0	1	Amersham Angels	
10.1.1971	Hull Ladies LFC Shelia Coble (2) AN Other (pen)	3 (1)	5 (2)	EMGALS Joan Briggs (2) Sally Clay (3)	
7.2.1971	Kays	5	2	Aston Villa	
7.2.1971	Nuneaton Wanderers	6	3	Bantams [Coventry]	Memorial Park
7.2.1971	Manchester Corinthians	3	5	Stewartson Thistle	
7.2.1971	Thanet United	5	1	Medway	

Quarter-Finals

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
25.4.1971	Amersham Angels June Debenham	1 (1)	2 (2)	EMGALS	Woodside Stadium, Watford. EMGALS were 'heavier and older'
25.4.1971	Nuneaton Wanderers	W		Kays Ladies [Worcester]	Woodside Stadium, Watford
25.4.1971	Southampton Women's FC	23	0	White Ribbon [London]	Woodside Stadium, Watford
25.4.1971	Stewartson Thistle	8 (5)	1 (0)	Thanet United	Woodside Stadium, Watford

Semi-Finals

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
25.4.1971	Southampton Women's FC	11	0	EMGALS	Woodside Stadium, Watford
25.4.1971	Stewartson Thistle Rose Reilly (6)	9	2	Nuneaton Wanderers	Woodside Stadium, Watford Wanderers fielded a weak side due to injuries

3rd Place Play-Off

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
9.5.1971	EMGALS	3	3	Nuneaton Wanderers	Wanderers claimed third place on penalties.

Final

Date	Home			Away	Match Details
9.5.1971	Southampton Women's FC Pat Davies (3) Dot Cassell	4	1	Stewartson Thistle Rose Reilly	Crystal Palace National Sports Centre, South East London Game commenced at 3.30pm The Kilmarnock-based club, whose Rose Reilly later won eight women's Serie A titles, were the first winners of the Scottish Women's Cup in the same year; the team also reached the second WFA Cup Final in 1972 under the name Lee's Ladies. Southampton player Sue Lopez reported that the WFA subsequently fined the winners, a league select team, for "misrepresentation as a league club". Southampton were "fined £25 at a WFA tribunal". Stewartson had considered withdrawing from the final

					over the issue, however Southampton were allowed to keep the trophy and went on to win eight WFA Cups.
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Mitre Cup Final 1971-72

Crystal Palace National Sports Centre, South East London

Southampton

- 1.Sue Buckett
- 2.Pat Judd
- 3.Karen Buchanan
- 4.Barbara Birkett
- 5.Jill Long
- 6.Maureen Case
- 7.Dot Cassell
- 8.Lesley Lloyd (c)
- 9.Pat Davies
- 10.Sue Lopez
- 11.Lynda Hale

Substitutes:

- 12.Jean Seymour
- 13.Louise Cross

Southampton

Pat Davies (x3), Dot Cassell

Manager: Norman Holloway

Referee: Mr Bryn Poyner (Worcester)

Linesmen: Mr Dulton (Hull) & Mr Read (Swindon)

Stewarton Thistle

- 1.Gerry Chalmers
- 2.Isobel Howie
- 3.Sophia McDonald
- 4.Linda Kidd
- 5.Elsie Cook (c)
- 6.Sandra Walker
- 7.Rose Reilly
- 8.Jan Lightbody
- 9.Susie Ferries
- 10.Moira Redmond
- 11.Mary-Jane Lindsay (sub 60)

Substitutes:

- 12.Yvonne Bolton (sub 60)

Joint-Managers: Elsie Cook and Tom Strawthorn

Despite the fact that the ban on women playing was about to be lifted, no Football League club was willing to provide their stadium to host the final, so the WFA secured the pitch at the Crystal Palace National Sports Centre, the site where 20 men’s FA Cup finals had taken place, the most recent in 1914.

Surviving match footage of the final shows long grass on a pitch of poor quality by today’s standards. A sparse crowd is scattered around the barriers which separate the pitch from the running track. In the main grandstand though nearly every seat is filled by expectant spectators.

Southampton raced into a 2-0 lead inside the opening 20 minutes with 16-year-old Pat Davies – who would go on to complete a hat-trick – scoring both. One of the goals (which some newspapers wrongly reported as an own goal) came from a dreadful back pass which evaded Thistle keeper Gerry Chalmers who had already raced to the edge of her box to collect the ball. As it trundled towards the empty net Davies sprinted in to the six-yard box to apply the finishing touch.

Rose Reilly had a fine game for Thistle at outside-right. She pulled a goal back just before the break but the half-time whistle prevented her side gaining any momentum and within minutes of the restart Southampton’s talented left-half Dot Cassell put them 3-1 up with a rocket of a left-foot shot.

Sixteen-year-old Reilly would go on to become one of the finest players of her era. She had started playing at the age of seven with a Scottish League club scout having apparently tried to sign her when she was 14 mistakenly thinking she was a promising young male player.

She was banned for life by the Scottish FA after turning professional with French side Reims and Italian outfit AC Milan. Having seen her own country turn her back on her she went on to represent Italy and won the 1984 Mundialito with them – an unofficial precursor to the World Cup.

Thistle certainly had their chances, with Reilly and Susie Ferries hitting the bar three times between them. Jan Lightbody's neat dribbling ability saw her put Southampton on the backfoot on several occasions but Thistle couldn't force the goal that would have brought them right back into the game.

Just moments after Thistle had made their one permitted substitution, with Yvonne Bolton replacing Mary-Jane Lindsay, they lost Isobel Howie who had to be carried off with torn ligaments. They were therefore left a player short for the final 20 minutes.

Southampton put the result beyond doubt when Davies struck her third to secure herself the match ball. Relaying her memories to us in early 2020, victorious captain Lesley Lloyd said: "Cup final day was fantastic. For me, it felt like being at Wembley. The feeling of lifting that cup is something I will never forget, thinking that we had actually won it, and the feeling that after all that time the FA had finally recognised that women could play football."