

**ITCHING**

**AFTER**

**ROVERS**

**Mick Pickup**

# ITCHING AFTER ROVERS

By  
Mick Pickup

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Also by the Author  
Blowing With The Blackburn Trades

For Sylvia

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The first couple of people I must thank for the inspiration behind this book are my parents. Having a crazy son who would have given them many worried nights while hitchhiking to the other end of the country must have had them worried on occasions. But my dad would take me to Rovers matches. He created this ‘Frankenstein’s Monster’. It’s really Blackburn Rovers’ fault though. They were the ones who I was prepared to stick my thumb out for and allow myself to get wet and have many a sleepless night.

The bloke who really got me into hitchhiking though was Frank Andrews. The night in 1977 in Blackburn’s Royal Duke pub was a watershed for me for another seventeen years. After travelling to Rovers away matches by coach, car and train, thumbing it away was a radical step. So it’s Frank’s fault as much as Rovers’.

Thanks must also go to ‘4,000 Holes’, Rover’s oldest fanzine. They seem to like my strange stories and printed them all over the years. My proudest moment was checking out their website and seeing my ‘*Men in Clogs*’ and ‘*Wino*’ stories in their *Best Of* section. The ‘*Men in Clogs*’ is top of the pile, very satisfying. Yet I’ve never actually wrote them a thumbing story. They can use anything they want from these following pages, which should do the job.

It’s ironic how during our golden age of the 1990s, I was at my most poverty-stricken. Now I’m back in the habit of going to away matches once again. No thumbing it anymore though. My crazy days are long gone. I’m getting old and like to make away matches special occasions. My interest in Blackburn Rovers is as high as it’s ever been. They are still the passion of my life.

Strangely enough, this book was also inspired, or rather encouraged by a mate of mine who doesn't even like football. 'Big Dave' Simpson is probably the biggest fan of my first book: 'Blowing with the Blackburn Trades'. He enjoyed it so much; he suggested I write another book. He also reckoned one about watching Rovers would reach a greater audience than my first offering. I agreed and here is the result of Dave's suggestion. Hopefully it will give a lot of people a lot of enjoyment and a few laughs. More than likely these will be at my expense. But why not? Serves me damn right!

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## ITCHING AFTER ROVERS

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### [Chapter 1](#)

#### *In the beginning, there was Rovers*

I had been an indifferent Blackburn Rovers fan at first really. Having only started going to matches as an eight year old when my dad began taking me. This had become a family tradition as his dad and granddad had followed Rovers too.

My family has been watching them probably since their formation in 1875. In fact you could say my old man had more of a passing interest than most people. Rovers were formed by Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School old boys. My dad was one, having attended this famous local seat of learning.

Not me, I was lazy, nicking off whenever possible and never doing any homework. So I ended up going to a local comprehensive school. End result of this was it leading to me only leaving school with one CSE grade 1. At least it was in English Language. This gave me an enjoyment of reading books.

Rovers were not even my first love. I was more interested in 'Thunderbirds' and all those other puppet classics Gerry and Sylvia Anderson used to put on TV in those happy 1960s days. Quite sad in fact, the first girl I fell in love with was Marina out of 'Stingray'. She could breathe underwater and never said a word, far better looking than Venus or Lady Penelope too. Unfortunately she looked a bit highly-strung and none of them could walk in a straight line.

But going to watch Rovers was something most of my friends in our local neighbourhood and at my school did. So in a way you would be a bit out of place by not going. It took a bit for my dad to coax me into going down Ewood Park though. Both my granddads were Rovers fans too. Although my maternal one stopped going after our 1960 F.A. Cup Final debacle. My dad's dad

was really keen. He stood on Ewood Park's Blackburn End, virtually up to his dying day. He even went to Reserve matches.

I started off this way; I seem to remember my first match being against Sheffield United Reserves. We got beat. Unfortunately trying to remember which was my earliest first team game is beyond me. Rovers' performances at the time didn't seem to be very memorable. When my dad began taking me to watch first team matches it was quite a culture shock. Standing in crowds of several thousands instead of several hundreds. It seemed a lot to me, being only a small boy. But in those days we were only pulling in gates of around seven thousand.

We used to stand around halfway on the Riverside terraces at Ewood Park. This part of our ground was named after being alongside the River Darwen, which flowed past Blackburn Rovers' Ewood Park on its way from Darwen to the River Ribble at Walton le Dale. It used to be a fascination of mine to peer through railings above this river and look what colour it was on match days as we crossed over Bolton Road Bridge, just after the Aqueduct pub. Some days it would be rainbow coloured, with all sorts of oil, paint and other forms of pollution, which had been dumped by local garages, factories and Joe Public. This was long before proper pollution controls became mandatory.

My dad and I never stood together at Rovers matches though, apart from each game's last ten minutes or so. He used to tell me to go and find some of my friends or schoolmates to stand with. This was so he could stand with his mates, taking turns to pass their fags round and generally give Rovers a diatribe of their Anglo Saxon vernacular, especially when they were playing badly.

His main mate, who he used to stand with, was a chap called Raymond Whalley. Raymond worked at Blackburn's massive Mullard's factory, which was owned by Philips. This factory setting was used in the 1960s film 'A kind of loving'.

There is a scene where people are pouring out Mullard's factory gates, heading for home in their hundreds. Alan Bates in this bit of the film is talking to a workmate, who says: "You're playing a good team on Saturday - Blackburn Rovers". Or similar words to that effect. It would have put a smile on many Rovers fans' faces.

Raymond and my dad were good friends and used to play darts together in a pub called The Oozebooth. It was just off St James's Road, down the hill from where we lived. This pub was named after a couple of old farmhouses: Higher and Lower Oozebooth. The latter is still there, just up Bastwell Road from the Oozebooth pub and called Bastwell House now. It turned out, in generations gone by, my great-great grandfather used to actually own this farmhouse. He had been a fairly well off butcher according to family legend and 1881's Blackburn census. Even owning his own racehorse, until drink got the better of him, so the legend says. In Blackburn this is known as 'clogs to clogs in two generations'.

My dad's dad was also born on nearby Poplar Street. So his dad must have been brought up, or at least lived on this farm, one would presume. Higher Oozebooth farm was long gone. But part of its site was where St James's School was situated. This was my junior school, so there were quite a few roots for me round here. St James's school is actually located on Oozebooth Terrace.

Strangely enough, where we lived had an even greater link with Blackburn's other F.A. Cup winners - now defunct Blackburn Olympic. Our town's forgotten heroes were this competition's first winners from Northern England. They shifted the balance of power away from public school toffs to working class people.

Their historic victory was in 1883. Rovers were losers in the previous year's final to Old Etonians, but won it for three years after 'Lympic's' victory. They even had a special trophy presented to them for their hat-trick. Rovers still hold this record for the F.A. Cup's longest unbeaten run. Not losing in this competition for three years and the FA Cup stopping in Blackburn for four years in a row. That must also be a record for one town.

At the top of our road was a pub, still serving beer today, called the Hole'ith Wall. Behind this pub, one of my locals where I have spent many a happy hour, is the site of Olympic's old football ground. Most of it has been taken over by nearby St. Mary's College and is difficult to pinpoint.

There is still a picture of Blackburn Olympic's 1883 cup winning team on one of this pub's walls, complete with J T Ward their only player who played for England while with 'Lympic'. It also mentions what occupations each player in this team had. They were a collection of weavers, machine operators and all sorts of jobs related to the cotton trade. 'King Cotton' employed most of Blackburn's population at the time. My lot certainly were in the 19th century.

It would have been interesting to see how things might have ended up had Blackburn Olympic been admitted as Football League founders, like Rovers, and survived. Blackburn can be proud of the fact it is still the only town, as opposed to a city, to have produced two F.A. Cup winners. This trophy remained in our town for four straight years and was seen as more important, even when Rovers won their first Football League Division 1 title in 1911-12.

Having two professional football teams might have been difficult for both to have made any real impact. Besides, Rovers was Blackburn's establishment team and probably had resources their town rivals could only dream about. So Olympic's wonderful achievement was like that of a Mayfly - glorious but all too brief.

Unfortunately towards the end of the 1960s, when I first started watching Rovers, badly was a good description for exactly how they were playing. I had only been watching them a couple of seasons before they went down to League Division 3 for the first time in their long and illustrious history.

This was the culmination of their decline. Although every other town club in Lancashire seemed to be going through a similar kind of metamorphosis since football's ending of its maximum wage policy. We just couldn't compete with big city clubs any more.

As I got older a lift home in my dad's car after each match was still available, but going to watch Rovers with my mates became the preferred routine. Dad first started taking me as an eight year old. I wasn't such a keen fan at first. It was just something you did as a lad growing up in

Lancashire and other similar working class communities across Britain. Now being a teenager, as each year passed I seemed to grow keener and keener.

After going on the Riverside for a year or two, I fancied seeing what it was like on the Blackburn End. My dad wouldn't let me go on here. He said it was too rough for someone my age. Being a rebellious type, this made me want to go on even more. I got my chance early into my teens when he was away one Saturday. He told me not to go on, if I got in trouble, I'd be in more trouble back home. But he probably realised where I'd be at this particular home game.

What struck me about going on the Blackburn End was how loud it seemed to be, compared with our more sedate Riverside. Here you got a bit of shouting, very occasional chanting, but not a lot. You couldn't hear yourself think on the Blackburn End, or so it seemed to me.

I didn't stand near the top. People were jumping up and down and then falling on top of each other. A few of my schoolmates were there at the top, joining in the crushes, until they fell awkwardly against a crush barrier. My dad was right. I was too small for this end. It was a site of human depravity too. Nobody seemed to bother going to the toilets. They were not much better than going behind park bushes anyway. Instead there were rivers of urine flowing down the terraces. I was told fans couldn't get into the bogs at half time anyway. They used to either go to the wall at the top, or a crush barrier. There were even stories of some dirty gets using other people's pockets.

On my first ever trip on the Blackburn End, I noticed how many men and older lads were drunk. One who was clearly well-oiled had a pint of beer in his hand. When this was spilled by another fan falling onto him, a fight broke out between the pair of them. Both were drunk, so nobody got hurt. They even watched the match standing next to each other after their little skirmish.

These two were not real yobbos. Those people were at the top, or to one side of all the singing and swaying. Some hooligans were there just to cause trouble. If they couldn't find somebody to fight they would fight amongst themselves. When visiting supporters came on the Blackburn End there was mayhem. This was very rare though. Most aggro seemed to be between yobbos and police officers, with the latter winning every time. Sadly for some coppers, it was a lousy way of making a living. They would often be deliberately crushed against the back wall at the top, or have crisp bags of urine bursting over their heads after landing on top of their helmets.

I found my trip to the Blackburn End quite scary. It was like some kind of forbidden zone. Not just orders off my dad. Eventually I was to grow older and bigger and started going on it with my mates. I even stood in the middle of the maelstrom and shouted and swayed and jumped up and down with everybody else.

My favourite song was 'We are the Blackburn End,' sung to the tune of Mary Hopkins' 'Those were the days my friend'. We would all jump up and down to this then fall forward and rise back like wheat in a field. I could never understand how nobody ever seemed to fall flat on their faces. There seemed to be a spirit of co-operation. When people fell down, they were quickly grabbed and lifted back up. Then you would be thrown forward all over again.

More football league clubs are concentrated in this neck of the woods than anywhere else in our country. There were something like sixteen league clubs in what was Lancashire and Cheshire, before metropolitan counties were invented.

Others had also been and gone. Accrington, barely five miles down the road, had lost two football league clubs. Even closer Darwen, now joined up with Blackburn as part of the same Borough, had lost one too. After all, half our Football League's founder members came from what was pre-1974 Lancashire, including Rovers.

Blackburn had four other Football League clubs within fifteen miles of its town centre. And even more as you got towards Manchester and Liverpool. Every one of them has its own pride and keen fan base. There is a lot of local rivalry between different towns and football clubs.

These were terrible times for Rovers though. I can remember there always being talk about us losing in 1960's F.A. Cup Final to Wolves. This seemed to be a watershed, or at least a handy excuse, for all Rovers' problems. I was only born a matter of months before this catastrophic event took place. My family were not even in this country at the time either. Archbishop Makarios put paid to that. So this defeat didn't seem like Armageddon to me as it did to older supporters.

Watching Rovers through those early and mid Seventies days wasn't aesthetically endearing for football purists either. It was more a question of survival. Gates were falling, there was a growing hooliganism problem and people were finding alternative things to do on a Saturday afternoon.

But by the spring of 1977 I'd been working in my first proper job for eight months. It put a bit of money in my pocket, this world was my oyster. It's a theory of mine how you don't get really interested in watching football until you reach about sixteen. When you're off for a pint down your local and going to home and away games with your mates or colleagues from work.

All people who support teams in places where they don't come from are the really unlucky ones, certainly not proper fans. They never managed to bridge that crucial gap of being a little kid who only likes winners, these are usually fashionable teams, then finding their own identity by supporting their own local football club.

Not me! My family has Blackburn's River Blakewater running through their blood. Both my parents were born and brought up here. Supporting another club was unthinkable. A bit like selling your soul to Satan. Or even worse - crossing a picket line.

By now I was watching every home match, not having missed one since leaving school. I'd even been to my first away match at the age of sixteen. This was over the moors at Bolton Wanderers' Burnden Park a couple of seasons before. It was March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1976, during the 1975-76 Season. We won 1-0. John Waddington scored for us. I managed to cadge a lift off a college mate called Chris Duckworth. He briefly worked for Rovers himself a few years later. About six of us managed to squeeze into his brother's car. It was a great experience seeing Rovers win away from home, especially at one of our local rivals. After the match we went to the



Strawberry Duck at Entwistle, just outside Bolton, and celebrated our victory.

Last season I travelled to four away matches. To Bolton again, Burnley and Blackpool, then on a special train to Derby County in our F.A. Cup 5th round tie. Going away was great. Even though we lost most of the time, it was becoming addictive. This made me decide to buy my first season ticket. Why not? I was going to every home match, win, lose or draw and was working in a full time job. Now more away matches beckoned. Rovers had me hooked. I couldn't even contemplate missing a home match. Also having a season ticket not only made good sense from a financial perspective, saving me a fortune. It was really handy for cup-ties too. Season Ticket holders were guaranteed a cup ticket and didn't have to spend time queuing up for one.

Working for a living, and having money in my pocket, also made a big difference to the enjoyment of watching my local team. Going for a pint before each match with a few mates, not to mention being able to afford Rovers' gate money, was turning me into a fanatical supporter.

So after reading a heartfelt plea from Rovers' Secretary, John Howarth, in our local paper, this was asking for supporters to buy season tickets early, I decided to part with my hard-earned money and cough up their asking price of £13. This was a lot of money for me to shell out all at once, about a week's wage in fact. But it was money well spent as far as I was concerned. Besides, I lived my life like a recluse even in those days. It was easily affordable and worked out cheaper overall.

Now I felt like a stakeholder in my beloved club. Owning a season ticket made this fanatical interest in Rovers soar even further through the roof. My capacity for boring other people, apart from fellow crazed enthusiasts, knew no bounds. Friends, workmates, and my family all got this treatment. People likened it to some kind of religious cult, maybe a sickness, but in all probability – madness!

My parents compared me with a couple of characters played by Michael Palin, from a comedy series called 'Ripping Yarns', running on TV at that time. One was called Gordon, who supported a Yorkshire village team called Barnstoneworth. He was the ultimate football fanatic, making his son recite various teams from over the years. Then trashing his house when his team got beat. The other, called Albert, was from a different episode of this same funny series. He was so boring, all his family did a moonlight flit together from his home one night while he was sleeping. I took all this with a pinch of salt, seeing myself following our great British tradition of eccentricity.

Going to away matches was becoming an even more enjoyable experience. Not as though I'd been too far from home yet. Just local derby matches, like the Lancashire 'B's. Apart from last season's FA cup tie down at Derby itself. This new season of 1977-78 arrived and my anticipation was already high in expectation. Hope springs eternal for every football fan, especially at each start of a new season. With my home matches already paid for, the idea of a bit more travelling appealed to me. The only things which had put me off were incidences of football hooliganism, which I had seen a bit of now and again. But in reality violence was a rare phenomenon, even rarer at Ewood Park. Also you tended to find how those idiots who wanted

aggro were usually the ones who found it. What they all had in common was running a mile when police showed up.

Not me, I had a strong sense of self-preservation. Besides, what was clever about attacking someone because they supported a different team than your's. Football fans were becoming a diminishing minority who should always stick together. There were enough problems for most clubs just trying to survive. Wage bills and ground maintenance were bleeding many clubs dry. The last thing they needed was for people to be frightened of going to matches because of what was happening on their terraces.

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In 1977 I worked on Johnston Street in Blackburn, about twenty minutes walk from where I lived. It was my first proper job, but it was a typical dead end one. Unfortunately in Blackburn you were grateful for whatever you could get, especially me who hated school so much and got hardly anything in the way of qualifications. School had been a depressing place for me. Whoever said your schooldays were the happiest days of your life didn't go to mine. If this old adage was true, then my life might as well have ended as soon as I walked out the door.

I left Pleckgate Comprehensive with a CSE Grade 1 in English. This was a miracle because most of my time was spent nicking off. But English was the only subject I didn't mind doing and I got on with my teacher. Maybe this was because I was an avid reader.

But now it was my first venture into this big wide world of earning a crust and I felt I was contributing my little bit to society. Plus my job was quite interesting compared to most. I even learned a few skills here and was quite good as a worker. My bosses were quite pleased with me too. They knew a mug when they saw one.

This firm manufactured jukeboxes and played around with other kinds of coin operated leisure machines such as space invaders, pinball machines and pool tables. They also carried out a few repairs on machines of this type and an occasional telly. Low paid it might have been, but there was all the overtime you could ever want and a decent chip shop down the road. This was called Verity's, they filled my energy gap at dinnertimes. I worked nearly every night and at weekends to earn a few coppers over my pittance. My bank balance eventually began to rise, mainly because I hardly ever went out. Rovers was my biggest if not only expense.

Most nights after my extra stint of work, one of the firm's bosses, a bloke called Andrew, and myself began to get into a habit of going for a pint down the road in the Royal Duke pub. This was further down on Johnston Street itself, the same road as my workplace. This was a pub which seemed to reflect the area we were in. It was one of Blackburn's last areas of rows of back to back terraced housing. Most regulars in here were Scottish or Irish, employed in manual or unskilled jobs. A lot were unemployed too.

I wasn't a big drinker, not on my wages, neither was Andrew due to coming to work in his car and having to drive home to Ribchester where he lived. But after a long hard day's work, a couple of pints of bitter was something to look forward to. We both started playing darts in here

and ended up as members of the Duke's dart team. Andrew was a half-decent player. Not me, I couldn't play for love nor money. But I turned up for matches, which was half the battle.

This was a real Rovers pub. Most of the lads and a few of the girls who went in here were regular attenders of Rovers matches at Ewood Park. Some went to away matches like me. Andrew couldn't stand football, which was a shame because he had a good car and would have been handy for away matches.

I became friendly with a bloke who went in this pub called Frank Andrews. He was about five years older than I was, and just as crazy about Blackburn Rovers. Frank came from a big family and lived just off Preston New Road, not too far away from the Royal Duke and was captain of their dart team. He was into Northern Soul, telling me many a story of his nights out at Wigan Casino. These were the stuff of legend. All night dance parties with people taking illegal substances to keep them going on and on. Definitely not my cup of tea, I didn't even smoke cigarettes. Nor did I like Northern Soul. It never occurred to me how Black music from America could be seen as belonging to Northern England. But Frank was into this like I was into Punk Rock. He had a similar opinion of my favourite music as I had of his. We agreed to disagree.

We knew each other from watching one of Blackburn's other sporting institutions, East Lancs Cricket Club. Ironically their Alexandra Meadows ground was one of the places where Rovers used to play their home games before moving to Leamington Street in 1882, then Ewood Park a few years later. This was probably because it was next door to Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School, some of whose old boys formed Rovers in 1875.

One distinction Alexandra Meadows had was hosting an England international football match. It took place on February 26th 1881 and there were three Rovers players in the England team. Funnily enough, the referee really was called Mr. Bastard. Somebody once told me the Meadows was England's second oldest international football ground, after the Oval, which is still in use as a sports ground.

There seemed to be a bit of a crossover of sport here. All East Lancs fans appeared to be Rovers supporters too, or so it looked to me. I can remember seeing most of East Lancs' Grammar School End all stood together near where I went on Ewood Park's Riverside. At East Lancs' Alexandra Meadows ground they would argue about Rovers whilst East Lancs played cricket. It was the other way round at Ewood Park at the beginning of each season. They would argue about cricket in general and East Lancs in particular. Maybe they should have been in Australia, living an upside down existence. No wonder Rovers were heading down under too.

Frank went to a lot of away games. If he couldn't afford the coach or train fare his answer to this would be to stick out his thumb by a roadside and hitchhike his way to matches. This seemed a good idea to me, but a bit on the dodgy and unreliable side. I'd thought about it myself though, having already hitchhiked part way round Northern France and Belgium as a seventeen-year-old. My first lift was in the Ribble Valley a year before. A mate and I had stopped at Slaidburn Youth Hostel around Easter and hitched a lift from Whitewell to near Chipping, barely two miles. This was more out of desperation because we had lost our way.

Thumbing was great and a bit of fun when things went well. Not costing you a penny in theory, apart from buying a brew on motorway service stations for whoever was kind enough to pick you up. It was like having a sense of real freedom. Something I was into, being a teenager and a keen fan of Punk Rock.

This was very popular amongst some of my generation towards the middle and end of the 1970s. It was such fast exciting music, with a bit of rebellion thrown in. Nothing wrong with that at all, especially for young people. I didn't dress up with all the safety pins and coloured spiky haircuts like a lot did. These people seemed to have hijacked Punk. But my spiky haired friends and I were kindred spirits. One, two, three, four!

Enjoying Punk Rock and watching Rovers made people think I was a bit nutty. My boss said I belonged to the 'Bogus Generation'. He said we were all either punk rockers or football hooligans. This sounded a bit rich coming from this child of the sixties. I accused him of being all beads and acid trips.

My obsession with Rovers did me no favours though. On October 29th 1977, my dad's birthday coincidentally, it turned out my mum's cousin's daughter was getting married. My sister was going to be one of her bridesmaids. I was invited to this wedding too. Unfortunately for my half cousin, or whatever she was, Rovers were playing away at Hull City. I was determined to go to Boothferry Park. So my poor mum had to make up an excuse over my non-attendance. She said I had to go into work this Saturday morning.

Things got worse for my mum as one of the wedding cars came to pick up my sister. With perfect terrible timing, it was just as I was setting off for my Rovers coach. I was not only bedecked in a Rovers scarf, but also had on my woolly blue and white hat, which had been knitted for me by my mum.

The bride's father was in this car and couldn't help but notice me on my way to Foundry Hill for a Ribblesdale coach. His side of the family didn't speak to or bother with me again after that. I didn't mind. We won 1-0 with a goal from Kevin Hird. Our coach was a slow one, but we made it on time and a good time was had by all, apart from Hull City's fans. We continued our ambitions for promotion.

Our next game was at home to Southampton on November 5th. This became a fireworks display in its own right. The Saints did not live up to their nickname tonight. Two of their players, Peter Osgood and Steve Williams were sent off in our 2-1 victory. Noel Brotherston and a John Waddington penalty gave us our points. This match will probably be remembered for an outburst made by Southampton Manager, Lawrie McMenemy. He attacked Rovers defender, John Bailey, accusing him of being a disgrace to his profession. This created a row at our end. At least McMenemy apologised to every Rovers fan who wrote to him complaining about him shooting his mouth off.