

# **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 Mullards 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.

## Chapter 2

### *Not so Brighton beautiful*

One night towards the end of November, a few weeks after our games with Hull and Southampton, Frank asked me if I fancied hitchhiking down to Rovers' next away match. This was at Brighton and Hove Albion, who played at the Goldstone Ground in Sussex. His suggestion took me by surprise. The furthest I'd been to an away match was Derby County in the last season's FA Cup. This next match would be one great leap forward in my travelling experience following Rovers. Brighton must be nearly twice the distance from Blackburn as Derby's Baseball Ground.

There can't be many grounds much further from Blackburn than Brighton either. It was confusing too; it always seemed strange to me how you could have a football team based in two towns. I remember AFC Bournemouth used to be Bournemouth and Boscombe. When we played them in our third division days, their fans used to shout "Boscombe". I heard they changed their name to be top of the Football League, albeit in alphabetical order. It hadn't worked so far. Now it meant Brighton and Hove Albion were on their own. Which sounds a paradox in itself. Alone in two towns.

We were playing Brighton on Saturday, November 26<sup>th</sup> 1977. Frank asked me a few nights before, possibly on Wednesday, when I'd popped in for my usual pint with my boss after work. Maybe I'd had more to drink than usual, but I agreed to accompany him on this long journey to England's South Coast. My biggest obstacle was at home. Both my parents were flabbergasted. They said I was taking things too far, like this distance to Brighton.

My dad was a Rovers fan and still went to home matches, but he never went away. He wasn't so happy about me going either because of outbreaks of violence at occasional matches. But he agreed to me going, as he didn't like the idea of me letting a mate down. He also knew what a stubborn pig I'd grown into. If I wanted to do something badly enough, nothing was going to stop me. My mum was even more worried. She hated football. Even more so nowadays with outbreaks of hooliganism graphically shown on TV every week. But realistically she knew my sense of self-preservation. Everybody knew I stood more chance of being beaten up in Blackburn Town Centre on a Friday or Saturday night. Dad looked on the bright side - an extra bacon sandwich for him on Saturday morning.

On meeting up with Frank in the Royal Duke next evening, I told him our trip to Sussex was going ahead. Customers in here and my workmates all thought we were going round the twist. We were ridiculed by many other old textile industry terms too. Looms baht shuttles, warped minds etc. Most people thought we were being tight-fisted too. Going on Rovers' own special coaches wasn't so expensive either, certainly cheaper than using service trains. But Frank reckoned a fiver apiece would cover us for a few pints and entrance to this game.

He had been to Brighton before. A couple of years ago during our only time spent in the Third Division, during our championship winning season of 1975. Rovers took a lot of fans down that day, using cars, coaches, trains and even an aeroplane of fans. This had been chartered from

Blackpool Airport. He told me tales of Rovers fans playing a hundred a side football on Brighton beach. Frank thumbed it down then, so had an idea what he was doing.

Friday November 25th 1977 came and after work it was my usual routine of going home for tea. Frank and I had arranged to meet up later in the Royal Duke at 8.00pm. Frank's plan was for us to set off after Blackburn's pubs closed. This meant we would both probably be drunk, certainly me. I had started to catch his boozing habit, but Frank was a seasoned performer going back many years, with a gut to prove it. And he had five years start on me.

After meeting up in the Duke we had a couple of pints and games of darts in here. At nine o'clock we headed towards the Turners Arms on Bank Top after listening to everybody's suggestions in the Royal Duke of how to get to Brighton. It felt like we were going on an expedition to Antarctica. Once we'd dropped a pint in the Turner's, we went across the road to the Griffin, also on Bank Top. Unfortunately its landlord refused to serve me. He reckoned I was under age. This was a problem I was having constantly, being the skinny, baby-faced creature I was at age eighteen. When my boss and I first went in the Royal Duke after working at night, Eric its landlord wasn't too sure either if I was old enough for him to serve me.

So my boss vouched for me at the time. Plus being a teenage worker, who paid his way in this world, went down well with most people in this pub. So once my age was proved, I was made welcome. Going in nearly every night then made me welcome to Eric even more. It wasn't so much being underage in here. Eric was bothered about keeping his licence. There were under-age drinkers in his pub. They just didn't look it like I did.

Also there was a lad who was a regular in here, called Steve. He really did look young for his age, like a twelve year old. He made me look like Methuselah. So much so, there was a story about him in our local paper, photographs and all, which helped get round his problem of being accused of under age drinking. He carried this newspaper report with him wherever he went. Steve and I were exceptions. Most youngsters well below our age had no problem getting served in pubs and night-clubs; some of my younger workmates had been going in pubs for years. Paying for their drinks was their only problem.

Down Redlam Brow a similar thing happened in the Bull's Head - me being given my marching orders by its landlord once again. Frank was starting to get a bit fed up of this by now. He said I was becoming a liability, even jokingly suggesting I wear a false beard. Yet he was unemployed and I was working. But his money was more welcome than mine was. What a funny old world!

Then we got lucky in the Vauxhall further down towards Preston Old Road, near Witton Park. This place was quiet tonight so we joined a few of its regulars in a game of dominoes until closing time. After last orders it was a trudge up the steep Buncer Lane to Preston New Road. Then we carried on walking towards the Saxon Inn on the outskirts of Blackburn, sticking our thumbs out for a lift as we made our way along Preston New Road.

By now I was as drunk as a skunk. Luckily Frank seemed to know what he was doing, a case of the short-sighted leading the blind. After arriving at the Saxon Inn we stood against a fence on Preston New Road, just after where you turned right from Yew Tree Drive, heading towards our

nearest M6 motorway junction and Preston. You had to watch yourself here and not lean on it too much. It looked like a few cars had tried to take this bend too quickly. There were tracks across this farmer's field too. His fence looked like many repair jobs had taken place over many years. We didn't have to wait long before hitching a lift to Junction 31 of the M6, a few miles down the road at Samlesbury.

This has the distinction of being Britain's first proper motorway, having opened in 1958, a year before I was born. As usual there was plenty of traffic heading back to Preston after work, or a night out in Blackburn, or people off to work their nightshifts over there. Our first lift was from a chap on his way to work his own nightshift at Leyland Vehicles in Leyland itself. We tipsily joked about British Leyland having a better strike-force than Rovers. He wasn't too pleased about our topical humour and said we could walk it to the M6 if we wanted to.

He must have been well used to these kind of jokes by now. At every football match you went to there would always be a banner saying such and such a body strikes faster than British Leyland. Yet at Leyland itself, the firm's truck and bus division, industrial relations had always been very good. Disputes were very few and far between at this home of our British motor manufacturing industry, as our driver giving us a lift to Samlesbury explained.

Later we even cadged a lift off a passing motorway policeman at the M6 motorway junction itself. He took us to Charnock Richard Service Station. First he asked us if we had been in trouble with the police before, then where we were going as he probably didn't want us on his patch for long. This was do-it-yourself body removal. Not that we were complaining. It was getting us to Brighton bit by bit.

A few more lifts followed and we ended up at Hilton Park Services, in the West Midlands, near Wolverhampton. We weren't on our own as football fans on this service station tonight. Across the carriageway, in the transport cafe, a few Spurs fans were having a brew whilst making their way up North for their match against Bolton. Frank and I talked football with them and had a brew ourselves. Then we left them to try our luck hitching south again.

We hadn't done too badly so far, but things got even better. We had a lift other hitch hikers could only dream about. A small car pulled up, a Hillman Imp, or something like it. There were a couple of lads inside. They were Rovers fans who were going to the Brighton match themselves. In a way it was a bit like a dream for me. I was so tired and drunk; I was falling asleep anyway.

They took us all the way down to Brighton itself. It was just a shame they were staying overnight that weekend in this resort. But Frank and I couldn't complain about our luck. Tottenham's fans across the carriageway didn't fancy our chances of making it to our match on time. They said Brighton was at least 70 miles past London. Getting through there was a job in itself. We proved them wrong on this occasion, thanks to one lucky lift.

I spent most of our last leg of this long journey sleeping and we got into Brighton for around seven o'clock this morning. My alcohol inspired evening acted like an anaesthetic. Our two good Samaritans who gave us a lift fancied shifting a right good cooked breakfast and found a

cafe in Hove. It was quite near the Goldstone Ground, which we parked round the corner from.

I noticed a story in one of this cafe's newspapers, which were made available for customers to read. It was about talks between Tottenham Hotspur and Arsenal joining together to build a shared ground at Alexandra Palace's site in North London. This seemed a good idea in theory, but a bit unlikely knowing what kind of rivalry and hatred both sets of fans had for each other. Ground sharing seemed to work in Italy, but in Britain - no chance. I couldn't imagine Rovers sharing with our nearest club, Preston. Or Burnley, which was a little bit further away from Blackburn.

Football fans see their team's ground as their spiritual home. In Lancashire there is a lot of rivalry between every town, as there is across every region. All we share is Wembley. Unfortunately we share it with too many others.

We bought our two fellow Rovers fans a brew apiece. I couldn't eat anything solid and was feeling pretty awful by now. Effects of last night's excess of ale, Frank's never-ending smoking and a lack of sleep were starting to take their toll on my body as well as my head. Even my cup of tea was like an old footballer who wanted to make a come-back. Everybody else seemed to enjoy their Greasy Joe brecky. Watching them shovel it down almost made me throw my guts up. I was never much use after a heavy night of boozing.

After their breakfast, our two benefactors went their own way to find some cheap digs for tonight. Frank and I went for a walk along Brighton's seafront after thanking them for their generosity. I couldn't remember ever visiting this popular seaside resort before, though it was beyond any doubt my parents would have taken me there at some time during my infancy.

With my dad doing Army service at the start of my life, I'd been almost everywhere in Europe and Asia Minor. Even being born in our British Military Hospital in Dhekelia, Cyprus. But like Greek Mythology's legend of Cassandra's gift of prophesy - which nobody believed - I was fated to have travelled all over Europe and Asia Minor whilst being too young to remember any of it. On the bright side, perhaps it was fitting for me to be supporting a team with an appropriate name like Rovers, rather than Ajax. They were my own Trojan Horse, definitely my Achilles Heel.

Almost immediately we bumped into a big group of Rovers fans who had either come down in cars and vans or trains, then joined up with each other. There were some fans like us who had hitched hiked to Brighton themselves. We all decided to split up into small groups so as not to be too conspicuous. Last thing we wanted was to be rounded up by Brighton's police and herded off to the Goldstone Ground hours before kick off time. After all, this was supposed to be a leisure resort. Although it looked more like a 'dirty weekend' shop to me. There seemed to be hotels everywhere. Yet not too many entertainment complexes. I had never thought much of my own local seaside town of Blackpool - far too tacky for my liking. But it appeared to have more on offer than this 'last resort'.

No doubt I'm being very unkind to what are really Britain's top two seaside resorts. Unfortunately when it comes to football towns, I tend to be incredibly biased. Travelling round



our country and spending a couple of hours or more in a place doesn't give you such a good idea of what it has to offer. Criticism was often directed at me over my neglect of taking in what was on offer in different places. No doubt the boot is more often on the other foot, when it comes to away supporters visiting Blackburn. All they probably know of my town, apart from Ewood Park, are the numerous pubs around our ground and in its town centre. But like me, they were probably not given much choice to see where they were playing.

It was custom and practice when travelling on special transport to not be given any choice in the matter. As soon as you arrived by coach or train, you would be frog-marched to the football ground. Walking past locked up pubs with bouncers on the door and grinning home fans at the windows, holding their beer up to you. No doubt they wouldn't be drinking to your health and how they would like to ruin it.

Our small group of Rovers' travelling fans decided to look for a pub when half past ten arrived. We went into a large one which looked like it catered for Brighton's traditional market of French visitors. One of its barmaids was definitely of Gallic appearance, gorgeous with it too. There was even a Boules table in this pub. This looked like a pool table, but longer. I just wondered what they did for a cue; these balls would need a mighty thump. And where were its pockets? It was definitely long enough for the Froggy bird behind the bar.

I dropped a pint and then had to rush for their bog to throw it all back up again. My guts were churning up like a whirlpool. Frank didn't have any trouble in this department, he'd done it all before many times, unlike me. He was beginning to enjoy this trip. Never mind Rovers, I was his entertainment this dinnertime. My hangover from last night had him howling with laughter.

I wasn't so bad after my 'hair of the dog' and even got a taste for this Southern beer after a while. We went in a couple more pubs then headed off for today's match. On the way we got talking with an old lady. She told us she was an Arsenal fan. I asked her whereabouts in Arsenal she came from.

Brighton at the time was pulling in crowds of near 30,000. Things had really turned round in this department when Brian Clough had his brief spell managing them. When Frank came down for our last visit, there was hardly any interest in this outpost of football. Promotion from Division 3 helped build up support even more. Now they had the kind of support Rovers would have sold their history for.

Today's crowd, I found out later, was 26,467 and some of their turnstiles were locked almost immediately after we got into the football ground. This was only the start of our problems. There was no segregation in this ground and we had to stand on a large open side full of Brighton fans. This was after we asked a copper whereabouts in the Goldstone Ground we should stand. He told us to walk right round the ground and go on to this large open side. We took him by surprise. I don't think East Sussex's constabulary expected us to bring any fans down.

I'd heard Rovers were bringing at least a couple of coaches, but there was no sign of them yet. I began to feel uneasy; we were at a fence between the smaller of two ends of the ground.

Brighton fans started gathering round and making threats to us from this end. Insults were being thrown at us through their wire netting. There seemed to be hardly any police on patrol in this ground either. They started singing songs such as "Come and join us. Come and join us over here." This was the last thing I wanted to do. My song would have been "Show me the way to go home."

All of a sudden this little group of Rovers fans I was in began to be surrounded by Brighton fans. Just after the match kicked off they gave us a kick off following Rovers scoring from an early penalty taken by David Wagstaffe. It was a case of 'Brighton Rock'. Luckily mine remained intact.

We dived over the wall and on to the pitch. Thankfully we were not followed on to the playing surface by these local yobs. Brighton's minuscule number of police officers didn't seem to know what to do, but at least there were enough of them by now. They cleared a trail for us to the top of the terraces where more coppers were stationed. Most of us sneaked away; merging with the rest of the crowd while their local yobbos played a game of cat and mouse with us.

Salvation was at hand with the arrival of our cavalry, one of these Rovers coaches which we were expected to bring down. Our fans aboard this coach were not in any mood to be pushed around. This was due to their late arrival. Heavy traffic around London had delayed their journey, I found out later. Brighton's hooligans who had earlier harassed us when we were small in number soon disappeared into their own masses on this large side as our numbers grew and we bunched together.

Now we could concentrate on what we really came to see - football. It ended in a creditable 2-2 draw thanks to a Jack Lewis equaliser near full time. Another Rovers coach arrived ten minutes before the final whistle with even angrier fans aboard. At the final whistle me and Frank disappeared into Brighton's departing crowds and started walking towards any road which headed towards London. We didn't care how long it took, escape was our priority.

When we felt we were safe, our thumbs started to be stuck out into the road. Much to our relief one of these two late-coming Rovers coaches passed us and a lad got off to relieve himself at the road-side. Then he gave us a shout after recognising either Frank or me. He invited us to come aboard his coach and travel back to Blackburn. He told us some Brighton fans had tried to attack the two coach-loads of Rovers supporters on a car park next to their ground. But the Rovers fans charged at them and they all ran away. They had picked on the wrong set of fans today. This bunch of travelling supporters was already angry and not prepared to be messed about after missing most of their match. Especially after paying a bob or two to get down here.

I was so pleased to be aboard this coach, with its relative comfort and warmth. Frank and I hadn't really had time to think about how we were getting back up north. Survival was our first priority. We didn't care if it took all week to get back home. Now we could wind down after all our anguish, torment and sore goolies.

This violent day I'd already been involved in hadn't even finished yet. A fight broke out aboard our coach when a Rovers fan kept making fun of the girlfriend of one of the driver's. I managed

to help separate this enraged driver from his intended target. It meant me partially taking a misplaced punch, which slightly glanced my ear. This was to go with my earlier kicking in the Goldstone Ground. It was one of those days. If you're going to hang the lamb, why not hang the sheep too.

These two lads on the coach stopped being at loggerheads with each other and soon buried the hatchet. Not in each other's head this time thankfully. I was then able to get my own head down at last and would have slept all the way to back to Lancashire if it hadn't been decided we would stop on the way back. Our journey was broken up by us stopping for a pint when we were north of London. We went in a pub called the Red Cow, somewhere off the M1, after we passed the metropolis. I can't remember where it was and didn't care either. It was a good pint in here and I was ready for one. Then another needed to be put away.

The couple of pints consumed helped to give me a bit of sleep. In fact we were in the northwest when I woke up after my slumbers. As our coach travelled up the M6 we knew when we were in Lancashire. It all went dark. This was a strange phenomenon I always noticed as you crossed from Greater Manchester into the rump of post-1974 Lancs. The motorway lights just seemed to stop as you hit Lancashire, just before Charnock Richard Service Station. Kind of weird, but you knew you were nearly home. Everybody else on the coach noticed it too, blaming our county council for being tight-fisted.

When we got back towards Blackburn people started getting off the coach. First stop was at Samlesbury's M6 junction for our fans from Preston and Chorley, then at Mellor Brook and Mellor itself, before reaching the Billinge and Revidge districts of Blackburn. It was funny how amiable Rovers fans could be at this late hour. Everybody who got off the coach was given a wave and a cheerio from the rest of us on board. Even Frank and I, who hadn't paid, were given a rapturous goodbye from our fellow travellers. We're a friendly bunch, us Blackburn Rovers fans.

Frank and I got off further down Preston New Road. This was handy for Frank as he lived just off the New Road on Adelaide Terrace. So he invited me in for a brew before I went home. This was quite welcome, as I was absolutely knackered and thirsty by now. I supped a cup of tea Frank made me while we listened to those wandering broadcasts of Radio Luxembourg. I couldn't stick this radio station. It reminded me of my childhood. Listening to silly adverts and even sillier music under the bedclothes. But needs must when the Devil drives. There was nothing else on in English, apart from the American Forces Network.

Then it was off home to bed, taking my life in my hands for one last time this weekend. This meant a detour through what must be classed as Blackburn's biggest bedroom - Corporation Park. My dad was still up at this late hour, watching telly. He must have been making sure I got home in one piece. "No Problem!" I told him.

Some good news came out later from this match. At least the two coach-loads of Rovers fans who were late arriving at Brighton all received their money back. Although they would probably have preferred to see this entire match like Frank and me.

*Not so Brighton beautiful  
The creatures weren't so small  
I nearly got my head kicked in  
When Rovers scored a goal*

### Chapter 3

#### *East End Blues*

Even my misfortunes in Brighton hadn't put me off travelling to away matches. In fact it had given me the away bug. Probably because it gave Frank and me plenty to tell other Rovers fans and everybody down the Royal Duke about our trip beside the seaside. People must have been pig sick of this away trip and were grateful when another one loomed on the horizon.

During this season I went to a lot of away games, mainly local matches such as Oldham and the usual Lancashire 'B's of Bolton, Burnley and Blackpool. I also travelled across the Pennines to Sheffield United, Hull and Notts County by car, coach and train.

In January 1978 Frank asked me if I fancied hitch hiking down to watch Rovers play Orient in the 4th round of the FA Cup. This was a repeat of last season when we drew them at this stage of the competition. We licked them too. Hopefully we could do it again, although we were away this time. We had already beaten Orient once this season, earlier in this current league programme. We had also beaten Shrewsbury Town earlier in Round 3 and fancied our chances of a good cup run this season. Everybody needs one, especially from a financial point of view.

Orient was one of those clubs who always seemed to be changing their name. They were actually called Orient at the time, but had been called Leyton Orient and Clapton Orient in times gone by. Funnily enough, they were currently using their original name. It all seemed like Chinese to me.

Once again my parents were worried about me hitchhiking to such a far-away match. But I reassured them of Orient's name for being friendly supporters. This was unlike some of those fans of their East End neighbours, Millwall and West Ham. It helped by me not telling them about my experiences in Brighton. Besides, this was only in London. Miles nearer than Brighton!

Orient was synonymous with London's East End. It made you think of jellied eels and Pearly Kings, followed by a right good knees up down the old rubba dub 'wiv boiled beef and carrots'. In reality they probably never clung to this image. They more than likely avoided it. We were exactly the same. Our image of clogs, terraced streets and dark satanic mills had long since blown away into mythology. Like factory smoke under the 1970s Clean Air Act. Now we would have been grateful for a few dark satanic mills for the employment they provided.

This FA cup-tie was a bit overshadowed by great news of Rovers setting up their new lottery tickets scheme. We were England's first Football League club to use scratch cards with screens.

It was advertised in our local press just into this new year of 1978. It happened while we were suffering four feet of snow around Blackburn's outskirts. These Arctic conditions took everybody by surprise. Walking to work was like an expedition in itself. I could have done with a set of skis to get to my workplace on Johnston Street.

Our new lottery was expected to raise £200,000 a year for the club. We didn't half need this bit of extra money coming in. Our small gates wouldn't buy a one-legged geriatric on a roller skate. Launch date for our new lottery was January 16<sup>th</sup>, with tickets costing 25p. Instant prizes were available, with a £1,000 prize draw. This was due to take place on the same day as our Orient cup-tie. I managed to get a few tickets into this draw, so it could be a great day out for me if both my results went the right way. By the time our cup-tie arrived, this first lottery had sold out. Things were looking good. There was talk of making it fortnightly instead of monthly.

It was a case of us following a similar routine to what we practised for our Brighton trip a few weeks before. On Friday, January 27th, 1978 Frank and I met up in the Royal Duke at 8.00pm and went on another of our pub-crawls.

After my annoying experiences of being refused service by local landlords, I now carried a British visitor's passport in my pocket whenever I went out. This had expired last year due to it only being one year's duration, but at least it proved I was eighteen. It was kept on my person just in case my age was brought into question again. I used it for a while, until eventually losing it from my pocket whilst drunk one Saturday night. A week later I was refused again at an off-licence whilst trying to buy a bottle of whisky for my dad's birthday. And I don't even drink spirits.

Out of frustration I stopped shaving and grew a beard. Not a very good one, but no landlord ever refused me for being under age any more after my bum-fluff appeared. Unfortunately it prompted ridicule; I was likened to Abraham Lincoln or Kenny Everett.

No problems tonight with service in any pubs thanks to this. We both got drunk again. I must have been, because in the Bull's Head on Redlam Brow, I put a stupid record on from its jukebox which I had to keep quiet about. This was 'Captain Beaky' by Keith Michelle. Everybody in the pub seemed to want to know which idiot put it on. I kept quiet about it, telling people of my preference for Punk Rock. Sid Vicious, not Hissing Sid.

Unfortunately it wasn't the same fortune with lifts tonight. Our luck had changed for the worse for some reason, probably because it was so cold in this everlasting Arctic winter. We seemed to be thumbing all through the night just to get down to the Midlands.

I began to question even thumbing it in the first place. It was only £5.50 on Rovers' special chartered train. The 'Orient Express' as it became known, going all the way to Leyton Midland Road rather than Euston. At least this would have got us to our cup-tie in comfort. Sadly, Frank was skint again. But you had to admire his determination to follow Rovers around wherever they played. Unfortunately I didn't tonight. My thoughts were of my own foolhardiness for going with him this way. What did I go to work for?

We were stuck on our nearest M6 motorway service station, Charnock Richard, for hours and hours. Barely ten miles from Blackburn. What few vehicles there were coming on to these services gave us a miss. For the distance we'd travelled, and in the time it had taken, we might as well have walked it from Blackburn.

Eventually and quite appropriately, a cockney wagon driver picked us up and dropped us off at Hilton Park Services a hundred miles down the M6. He then went into Birmingham to drop off his delivery. We met loads of Rovers fans going down to this cup-tie at Orient as the morning went on. They were all in full cars or minibuses. So unfortunately our luck was out here. I began to get a bit worried as nine o'clock in the morning approached, even though London was only a hundred or so miles away. We still needed a lift off this place. It had taken us all night just to travel halfway to the smoke.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man - again. Our friendly cockney wagon driver, who dropped us here before, suddenly returned from dropping his load off in Brum. He couldn't believe we were still stuck on Hilton Park after all these hours. At least he offered to take us all the way to the East End borough where he came from. This was Bethnal Green, real boxing and gangster country. Luckily it wasn't so far from where Orient were based in Leyton. He knew where all East London's football grounds were based, but wasn't a great football fan himself.

Our wagon driver was very proud of coming from the East End. He said it was where real cockneys, like himself, came from. In fact he hadn't a lot of time for London people out West. Too busy making money, so he told us.

Temperatures were really cold by now, but it had been freezing during last night. We didn't notice this at all when we set off with a few pints inside us. Also I had dropped my flat cap on the floor of his lorry's cab. It was still in the same place and was quickly reunited with my donkey jacket pocket once again.

This wagon wasn't very fast, and it didn't have the comfort of a Rolls Royce, but it was the best we had available, or were likely to get this morning. Plus, we were heading in the right direction. I fell asleep due to our exertions through the night, while Frank yapped with our Good Samaritan about lorries and every subject under the sun. We were dropped off at Bethnal Green and we caught an underground train to Leytonstone tube station. We did this because we wanted to meet up with Rovers' special train, which would be dropping our fans off at Leyton Midland Road British Rail Station.

Just down the road from this tube station is Leytonstone High Road British Railway station. Next door to here is the ground of non-league football team, Leytonstone. I think they played in the Isthmian League, or one of those obscure leagues, which appear on our pools coupons now and again, just to confuse us.

Frank thought we'd arrived at Orient's Brisbane Road ground. He commented how small it was. But I put him right after bursting out laughing. So much for his vast knowledge of football grounds across the country which he said he'd been on.

I was cheating really, having the benefit of my London street guide, which was in my other donkey jacket pocket. I'd already worked out where Orient's ground was situated. There had been plenty of time for this while waiting for lifts on Hilton Park Services.

We caught a train to Midland Road and went into a nearby pub. Then all of a sudden, this place was suddenly swamped by Rovers fans who had been on their special train and had just disembarked. They told us most matches in London had been called off due to a big freeze overnight. Tell me about it! Knowing our luck, today's game might just become one of those to befall such a fate.

As we were queuing up to go through Brisbane Road's turnstiles there was a referee's pitch inspection actually taking place on the pitch. We were soon joined by other football fans who started appearing outside Orient's ground. West Ham's match had been postponed. Their ground was not so far away. You could see Upton Park's floodlights in the distance. Quite a few of their fans were beginning to bunch together before queuing up to watch this match.

A load of Tottenham fans also turned up as their match had been called off too. We had come across a small group of these as we made our way to Brisbane Road with Rovers' army of travelling fans from the 'Orient Express'. They heckled us as we walked past. Our lads gave them back as good as they got, there were a lot more of us and these Spurs fans knew it. They kept their distance.

Good news for us was our match being given the go-ahead. This was a relief after all our discomfort of travelling through last night. We even took the lead once it kicked off. We scored after half time and led until the last quarter of an hour. But it was downhill all the way after that. Orient's Peter Kitchen was one too many a cook who helped spoil our broth. He put two goals into our net and they got another to rub salt in our wounds, all in fifteen minutes. We ended up losing 3-1; our dreams of Wembley would have to wait for yet another season.

One press headline was 'Kitchen Sinks Rovers'. This was to a team we had already beaten once in our league game earlier this season. We almost wished it had been called off now. At least we could concentrate on promotion to Division 1 after this result. Orient actually made it to the semi-final of this season's FA cup. Quite an achievement for this Cinderella football club.

During the match there was a bit of trouble from some Spurs fans who showed up at our game. Nothing the Metropolitan Police couldn't handle. A steady stream of them were frog-marched from the ground for a night in the cells. After the match was over a big group of them suddenly came charging down a nearby road to attack us as we made our way back to Orient's coach park. Rovers fans outnumbered them by a mile and charged back at them. Hobson's Choice really, there was nowhere for us to run even if we'd wanted to. There was some kind of sewage works nearby. They were going to be chucked in if we caught them.

I heard some Rovers fans ripped away either a set of railings or a garden fence, probably from in front of some unlucky person's house. Then they went for these Spurs fans with their home made row of spears. It would have looked like something out of Spartacus. Necessity is definitely the mother of invention. Besides we had nowhere else to go, apart from an East End

sewage works. We wouldn't have been smelling of roses. This seemed to do the trick and these Spurs fans turned tail and ran off into the sunset. It was like some kind of black comedy and put a poem into my mind.

*When Spurs fans charged  
They found we'd got  
A garden fence  
Which they had not*

Mounted police and dog handlers turned up later, long after this alleged improvised column of bayonets had been returned to its rightful place outside the house or works it had been borrowed from. Frank and I jumped aboard a Rovers coach on its way back to Clitheroe. This was particularly handy because we were both skint by now. We got one more free ride from the Valley Blues.

I got my head down and slept like a log all the way back to the Saxon Inn. This was where our kind driver had taken a detour, saving us a long walk from their scheduled turnoff down Longsight Road, near British Aerospace at Samlesbury. It wasn't so late either. Not compared to our Brighton trip. I was in my bed for not much after midnight. Unfortunately, like Rovers going out the cup, I didn't win a sausage on our new lottery. It was one of those days.

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There was another match this season Frank and myself attended where we hitch hiked down together. This was down in London again, at The Valley, home of Charlton Athletic. It had the distinction of having League football's largest capacity for crowds of any club ground in England and Wales.

Our own Ewood Park was a big one, having held over 60,000 on a couple of occasions back in the 1920s. Charlton's Valley had held over ten thousand more than ours had. This was probably what attracted me to this match more than anything. With a bit of luck it would also be 'Happy Valley' for Rovers.

It was quite ironic really. Frank's fifteen-year-old brother, Terry, was in this week's Lancashire Evening Telegraph, possibly the same night Frank asked me to go down Charlton with him, which was February 28<sup>th</sup> 1978. There was a photograph of Terry being presented with an autographed match ball from our recent game with Luton Town. Rovers player, Tony Parkes, presented this ball to Terry after he won a competition to do with Tony himself.

Terry's presentation was before the kick off of our home game against Oldham Athletic. We beat them 4-2 last Saturday with a debut goal from new boy John Radford. He signed for us with five minutes to spare before the transfer deadline. It was a brave move for Rovers, spending £30,000 on a player when we were £150,000 in debt. At least we were making a major attempt at getting promotion this season.

I can remember telling my parents about my intentions of hitching to Charlton Athletic and being



greeted by stoic indifference from them this time. Although my dad had actually been on the Valley for a football match himself. He had been stationed down here for a bit during his time in the Army.

This time they were more interested in knowing whether I'd be home in time for Sunday dinner. It was my intention too. I'd probably be starving by then if our usual pattern followed. Hitching to Rovers away matches had its price in more ways than one.

This match was to take place on Saturday, March 4th 1978. Once again our usual routine was followed of us starting in the Royal Duke, before going out for a few beers on Friday night, then off down the motorway when the pubs shut. Frank never seemed to travel any other way these days, whereas I usually went on coaches or trains to away matches. If I was really lucky I'd get an occasional lift in a mate's car. Frank did sort one lift out for us. We went to watch Rovers play Liverpool in the FA Cup 4<sup>th</sup> round a season later. Even then we were picked up outside the Saxon Inn. So it was almost like thumbing it to an away match.

It was our last start from the Royal Duke. Frank was getting fed up of this pub by now and had moved away from his parent's house for the time being. I was a bit fed up of the place too. Every time you went in there would be an ABBA record playing. Current favourite was their chart topper for this week: 'Take a chance on me'. I liked this group, but not as much as a few years before. Punk Rock was my favourite kind of music now. My only problem was Punk never appearing on jukeboxes very often due to it being severely looked down upon by the music establishment.

People forget how innovative Punk was due to its isolation. Independent record labels were set up because large record companies wouldn't produce Punk records and Fanzines were created because Britain's music press also boycotted Punk Rock. Working for a jukebox firm made me notice how operators stopped it appearing on their machines. It was like a mass conspiracy.

These thumbing jobs were getting more and more difficult. We seemed to be hitching all night again on this trip. We had reached breakfast time by now and still on the M6. Luckily down at Corley Services, another of our usual sanctuaries on the asphalt motorway jungle, a van full of Rovers fans pulled up. These lads came from Oswaldtwistle and Accrington. They were all regulars in the Hare and Hounds at Ossie's West End. I knew this pub well, having called in before and after cricket matches when East Lancs had played nearby Church in the Lancashire League.

A few of these lads were wearing anoraks, designed similar to Rovers' famous blue and white halved shirts. They were trying to get them made available to our fans on general release, or at least through Ewood Park's club shop.

Frank said he was interested in buying one, but knowing him this would be pie in the sky, as he never had any money. I didn't really like their anoraks. They looked more like a jockey's jersey. Also I was not in favour of advertising my presence at away matches. The lads in the van were running a bit short on juice so asked us for a contribution. Frank and I obliged. After all they were taking us right to Charlton's ground, not such an easy place to get to. They did just that and

we paid a visit to Charlton's supporters' club at the side of the Valley after we parked up.

I also bought a couple of match programmes. Charlton were obviously proud of how big their ground was. Their fans mentioned about how large their capacity was. Rovers' ground capacity was mentioned too, by me. They seemed more interested in ground capacities than football. I always thought what was the point of having a massive ground with nobody inside it? Better a small ground which was full than a large one which was empty. A big ground could be a bit of a liability. Far better spending money on players. A good team would bring success. Then the crowds would follow.

Charlton's fans were a friendly bunch though, it was noticeable how attractive some of their female fans were. It became a great atmosphere in their clubhouse, especially as loads of Rovers fans were admitted. I always noticed how much football fans had in common. Usually similar woes from supporting their team.

Also we tended to be working class people, living in similar types of housing and holding down similar types of jobs. All football fans are the same really. Charlton's fans were no different than ours.

But later there became a noticeable sense of unease amongst these locals. I asked some of them sitting around our table with us what their problem was. We were assured it wasn't us. During this very week Charlton had played local South East London rivals Millwall. The latter's fans had lived up to their unenviable reputation at the time for their bad behaviour at football matches. According to some Charlton fans, looking out their clubhouse window, it looked as though some of these 'fans' had decided to come back today and pay us all a neighbourly visit.

Millwall had been on a BBC 1 'Panorama' documentary this very season, which was not very flattering about their fans. One problem with this documentary was it smelling of being a set-up. Millwall fans in this programme looked to have rehearsed their parts, turning up at a match wearing bandages, calling themselves 'Treatment'. They also had another bunch of nutters who called themselves the 'F Troop'. These thugs were their hard core of hooligans who had all been sent down for football violence. It was a prerequisite of being a member of this band of yobbos.

Also, according to 'Panorama', there didn't appear to be such a thing as a decent Millwall fan. Every one they spoke to seemed to associate themselves with one hooligan gang or another. Football's authorities and the club itself had condemned this programme as being irresponsible and untruthful.

What worried me a bit was this documentary's mention of past fights between Rovers and Millwall's supporters. One incident recalled a Millwall fan saying: "I'll never forget the beating I got in Blackburn."

Unfortunately Rovers fans did have a small minority who caused trouble at matches, given a chance. But this was mainly back in the 1960s and early 70s. Occasionally there was disorder at Rovers matches, but this was few and far between. We were more interested in watching football and having a good time than beating someone's head in. We needed hooligans like a

Doc Martin in the head.

Inside Charlton's ground a small group from Millwall joined the Rovers fans, but we outnumbered them by several score to one. Besides they were friendly and shouted for Rovers throughout the game. Most were teenagers of school age and a bit childish. They all claimed to be friends and relatives of some of these hooligan characters in this 'Panorama' documentary. We all took them with a pinch of salt. We were expecting them to tell us the Kray twins were their uncles next.

Today's game itself started with a lot of promise for Rovers. We were 2-0 up at half time thanks to goals from Kevin Hird and Gordon Taylor. We really fancied our chances of an away win today. But after the break we showed our uncanny knack of stealing draws from the jaws of victory, not only letting Charlton's Addicks off the hook but needing a John Butcher penalty save ten minutes from the end to save our bacon. Our promotion challenge was beginning to look like the one that got away.

This left me and Frank having to go cap in hand to the lads who picked us up from Corley Services and asking them for a lift back to Lancashire. They wouldn't take us at first, but for a couple of quid apiece became very obliging. They mentioned how they had forked out enough to hire their van and fill it up with petrol. Unfortunately for them, charity had to begin at home.

We yapped about Rovers' performance and this annoying result during our journey home. Optimistically we reckoned we would have been as chuffed as Hell if it had been us who were two down at half time and fought back for a draw. But it was no good for a team chasing promotion to Division 1.

Everything was going great on our journey home until we had just come off the M6 at Samlesbury, almost walking distance from Blackburn. Then we broke down, running out of juice. It just about summed our day up - What might have been.

It was our own fault really. We were trying to run our van on a tank of air. Coughing up money for petrol almost down to its last drop. We had to knock up one of Samlesbury's roadside residents for a petrol can and hike up Preston New Road to a garage a mile away. It looked as if our Samlesbury Samaritan had seen our like before and lent us his petrol can. He probably had it in his porch waiting for fools like us.

If we had only all stumped up another 50p each for petrol, we would have made it home within an hour. One of those days again. It was well into the morning by the time I was in my bed. At least I got my Sunday dinner next day.

A week after our match at Charlton we got beat at home by Bristol Rovers then lost our manager, Jim Smith. He took up Birmingham City's offer of a job after Sir Alf Ramsey finished his job there as 'Consultant'. They really wanted John Bond. He stopped with Norwich City, so we were unlucky.

Smith said he always wanted to manage a big City club. He accused the people of Blackburn of

not responding to a successful team. Yet if he had stopped with Rovers, he might have been managing a First Division club by the end of this season. We were handily placed in the table and one final push might have got us promoted.

Alas, it was not to be. We only won two more matches this season. Smith's departure may not have been our reason for faltering, but it didn't help. Once again we had lost another manager to a bigger team, like Colchester United had when we appointed Jim Smith. A big fish swallows a little fish. A bigger one swallowed our manager.

Jim Iley was appointed as our new manager on April 14th 1978. He only had four matches at the helm of this season, as it ended on a bad note. Smith was made scapegoat. Two defeats and a similar number of draws couldn't be blamed on Iley. But his style of management didn't endear him to our players or supporters.

## Chapter 4

### *After the Lord Mayor's Show*

After our long trips to London and Brighton, Frank and I decided to hitch hike to an away match which was a lot nearer home. Rovers were playing Blackpool in an Anglo Scottish Cup match on August 5th 1978. This tournament was our usual pre-season event. It was also our first match after football's long summer break.

It was played between local clubs in the North West, apart from the Manchester and Liverpool teams. They thought they were too big for this competition and dropped out. They were probably worried about their neighbouring teams from the lower divisions settling a few old scores and giving them a good clogging.

We had beaten Manchester City in this competition when it started a few years ago. Maybe this was what made them drop out of it. Really, Division 1 clubs saw it as more unnecessary games. Too many injuries could be picked up, especially from local rivals wanting to put one over their illustrious neighbours.

Frank and I set off for Blackpool at around 10.00am, he knew this town like the back of his hand. This was helpful to me, who had never even been here for a holiday, at least none that I could remember. I had been here for an odd day out with my parents and had already watched Rovers play the Seasiders in a football league game. It just wasn't one of those places frequented by myself, unlike most Lancashire families. I found this resort a bit tacky and full of people trying their best to get their hands on your money.

I walked across Corporation Park to Frank's house on Adelaide Terrace. Then we started making our way up Preston New Road with our thumbs stuck out. We stopped outside Billinge School and didn't have long to wait before we were picked up. This first lift of our day dropped us off at Samlesbury, and then another motorist picked us up and took us all the way to Blackpool.

This was a first for me. Hitching down Lancashire's newest motorway – the M55. It was a much-needed one as they always are due to our growing use of the internal combustion engine. It made the eighteen-mile trip from Preston a hell of a lot easier. Many a time have I been stuck in long queues on Blackpool Road. Often right outside Preston's Deepdale football ground.

We were there before Midday. First stop was a fish and chip shop. We were spoilt for choice in this town. One immediate thing which hits you on arrival in Blackpool is its smell. Not sea air, or ozone, as everybody mistakenly calls it. But the smell of burgers or fish and chips. It always makes me hungry.

After a wander round, we decided to call at Blackpool North Station to see if any Rovers fans we knew had arrived. Other people must have had this idea too. There were Rovers fans all over the station foyer. We got talking to a few, but didn't stop long as Police were starting to arrive and being frog-marched to Bloomfield Road this early was not our idea of a day out beside the seaside.

Frank fancied a flutter, so we headed off down a back alley and found a bookies. Two Rovers fans were already in here, bedecked in their blue and white scarves and hats. We had a quick chat and then went to a Thwaites pub nearby. This was quite near the seafront, not far from Blackpool's Central Pier.

It felt like being at home in this pub with its beer from Blackburn. After a pint, we headed towards the famous Pleasure Beach. We bumped into a few lads we knew from pubs on Dukes Brow, which we were now using as well as the Royal Duke.

One of them, an Irish lad called Macky, had actually been attacked by a Blackpool fan already. This was after being separated from his mates. They were all wearing Rovers scarves and obviously drew attention to themselves. Frank and I always left our colours at home. We didn't want to attract attention, especially from less responsible football fans who were not as philanthropic as we were.

Also not every pub landlord wanted visiting football fans in his licensed premises. Macky was all right. This Blackpool fan had tried to throw a punch and kick him. He then ran off like a bat out of hell when Macky's mates turned up.

Frank had a problem of another kind. He still had his darts in his pocket from when we went out last night. No way was he going to be allowed in Bloomfield Road with these. There was a chance he could even have been arrested for possession of an offensive weapon. Unfortunately there had been a spate of dart throwing incidents at football matches recently. Our fans were not blameless either. One idiot threw one from our Blackburn End into the leg of Chesterfield's goalie during our Division 3 promotion season. We could have had our ground closed due to this crass act of stupidity.

I told him to tell the Police as soon as we arrived at the football ground. Spot searches of fans were routinely carried out at all football matches. If Frank was found to have darts on his person,

he would surely be arrested, possibly even banned from watching Rovers again. Alternatively, he could leave them in a pub and we could pick them up after the match. This was his suggestion. I was against doing this. My intention was to get away from here as soon as we possibly could, preferably on the Rovers fans' special train. This would probably be a free ride home for us tonight.

Before the kick off we went for a few pints near Blackpool's Bloomfield Road ground. Rovers fans had been arriving and were everywhere by now. Younger ones were on the Pleasure Beach rides, others like Frank and me were in Blackpool's hostelrys.

We eventually went to our match. Frank told a policeman how he unwittingly forgot to leave his darts at home after setting off in a rush. He handed them in to a steward and was given a receipt for their collection after the match. We were given half of Bloomfield Road's Spion Kop. Rovers had brought a big following for what was really a friendly match. It was Glasgow holidays as well as Blackburn's and our fans were joined by Celtic and Rangers fans from Scotland's largest city.

There were only a few Celtic fans in the ground, they kept themselves to themselves. But a big group of Rangers fans stood with us and sang along with us. They also sang their own incomprehensible sectarian stuff and eventually became a bit boring. This led Rovers fans to start chanting 'Argentina' after Scotland's embarrassment in the recent World Cup. Former Rovers player, Ally McLeod, was Scotland's Manager at the time, but not any more after their early exit. Neither Celtic nor Rangers fans wanted to dwell on this subject. We rubbed it in. Many football fans, mainly Englishmen, but a few Scots too, thought they had been a bit cocky over their World Cup trip to Argentina. How are the mighty fallen!

Rovers actually won 1-0 today. Appropriately our goal was scored by one of those rare species; a Rovers player who came from Blackburn itself. Paul Round, who had briefly been at college with me a couple of years ago, came on as substitute and scored the only goal of this match.

Our victory at Blackpool was a rare one. Last time we won here was back in 1968. Unfortunately this match from the swinging 60s had been overshadowed by an outbreak of football hooliganism. A Rovers fan threw an ammonia bomb at Blackpool's fans, leaving quite a few people temporarily blinded by this dangerous and foolhardy attack. He threw it against the underside of the Spion Kop roof, making it shower over Blackpool's fans. This event hit the national press. Even back in 1968 football hooliganism had become a big problem. Sadly our fans were as much a part of it as anyone.

My dad was at this game with Alan, our next door neighbour. Like the majority of people there, he was not even aware of this ammonia bomb being thrown. Luckily nobody received serious or permanent injuries. Not even Rovers for their fan's behaviour.

There was a tiny bit of trouble today after the final whistle. On our way out of the ground, a few Blackpool fans suddenly came round a corner and challenged Rovers fans to fight them. This created a surge of our fans towards them and Blackpool's tiny bunch of hooligans made a sharp exit. They were saved by the police.

We never saw any more trouble on our way back to Blackpool South Station. We were virtually bundled on to Rovers' special train; no checking of tickets tonight. So as expected it was a free ride home after all. It had been a good day out in more ways than one. Frank and I were sat behind a fan who took his cassette recorder to Rovers away matches. I had heard about this lad from one of my workmates. She was called Sue and he lived near her house. He played back our cheering and chanting during this match. Highlight of his recording was when Paul Round scored our goal. It was like an explosion hearing our reaction. He played this bit over and over again. We didn't mind at all.

My first experience of hitch hiking to Rovers away matches had found me at such exotic places as Leyton Orient and Charlton Athletic, as well as our two trips beside the seaside. Their fans probably thought the same about Blackburn; every northern working class town is only unique to its own people.

But both visits to these so-called unfashionable clubs had been good trips, with good sets of home fans, apart from their bad neighbours calling upon us. This trend continued early into the new 1978-79 season with me travelling to Orient and Charlton's East Midlands equivalent: Notts County. I went there on August 26th 1978, just after my 19th birthday. No Frank with me on this occasion, he was skint as usual. I wasn't too badly off for loot at the time. I had bought my second season ticket and was even taking driving lessons.

I wanted to travel to Notts County. They probably had English football's most civilised fans. Also they were the oldest club in the Football League. Rovers were not far off County's age, being over a hundred years old themselves.

This was my first away match thumbing it on my own. Although I'd done a fair bit of hitchhiking since the age of 15. I'd even hitch hiked in Europe, but not so far. France's northern tip to not much further than Ostend over their border into Belgium. I hadn't done very well on this occasion. My plan was to hitch hike it to a mate's place in Denmark. Sadly I ended up a long way off my goal, this sounded a bit like following Rovers sometimes. But hitch hiking gave you a sense of adventure, even freedom. This feeling of being on your own. No hanging around for buses or trains, just a hope of someone stopping to give you a lift. Luckily nobody ever gave me any problems, although a few nutters had picked me up. I'd never really felt in any danger from anybody, thank goodness.

Maybe it was some of the books I'd read which got me into hitch hiking. Jack London's 'The Road' or a later just as famous surrealist version called 'On the road' by Jacques Kerouac. My thumbing around Britain following a football team didn't make me a proper hobo, like London's character. But with my sometimes dodgy financial circumstances, it often felt like it.

Standing by Britain's roadsides for hours at a time gave you plenty of opportunities to watch our world go by. It was especially funny to observe motorists picking their noses or singing whilst driving. They seemed to think they were in some kind of bubble world, insulated from the rest of humanity. Many a time I've waved at them while they were picking their noses and seen sheepish grins appear on their faces, as they tried looking straight ahead.

This away match to Notts County unfortunately gave me even more time to observe other people's little worlds. Not only was I on my own, but instead of an alcohol inspired Friday night, setting off in the wee small hours, this was me stood at junction 31 of the M6 on a warm Saturday morning. I'd been to Notts County by coach before and left it to the last minute this time, only deciding this very morning of Rovers playing County to actually make my trip. My indifference up to this morning was down to Rovers having a shaky start to the season.

We had a mediocre Anglo Scottish Cup and then drew our first league match against Crystal Palace. Things got even worse when we lost to our nearest team, Preston North End, a mile or two up the road from where I was standing. It was early days, but already rumblings were starting in the crowd about our manager, Jim Iley, and his tactics.

So it was an early start this Saturday morning, around five in the morning. This wasn't so easy, getting up at this time, especially after a Friday night out. I wanted to go to this match and had decided last night only to try my luck if I woke up early enough.

It probably affected my night's sleep, but it was still a five o'clock start and another away match to add to my growing collection. At least today's weather was fine for me. In fact it was a lovely sunny day - a hitchhiker's dream. I half walked it down to Samlesbury's M6 junction this time. Motorists flew past me showing no interest in giving me a lift. Perhaps an omen of things to come. One or two people stopped, but they were either going into Manchester, Blackpool and Preston or were people who knew me and wondered what I was up to.

One van stopped for me driven by a chap I knew called Frank Campbell. He was a customer of the firm I worked for. He bought juke boxes and video machines from us, then operated them in various sites he had around the North West. These were usually pubs, clubs and an occasional amusement arcade.

Also with Frank was Alan Jones, one of his workers. He was to become a friend of mine a few years later. This was especially handy when he moved to London, his places of residence becoming like free hotels for me to crash out whenever Rovers were playing down there.

Unfortunately Frank and Alan were on their way to Blackpool with a few machines in the back of their van. They offered to take me to where they were going, but it was no good to me today. Most drivers who stopped thought my way to Nottingham was a daft one, as did my two acquaintances from the amusement machine business. But the way I'd been before by coach had taken me down the M6 to Stoke, then across via Uttoxeter and Derby, rather than the more usual M62/M1 route.

It seemed a better and more direct route for hitch hiking, even though it was a few miles longer. Plus there's no better place than Samlesbury for thumbing lifts, although not so good on this occasion. My main problem this morning was time passing rather quickly.

Was I going to get to this darned match? The longer my wait, the more attractive a pint at opening time became back up Preston New Road in a nice little pub called the Nabs Head. Also



on the other side of the road was a church called St Leonard the Less. It has a famous grave in its cemetery. Here a widower had his wife's grave bolted down for some reason. The chap used an iron stave to secure this grave. He was either superstitious or crazy.

I was in two minds about taking a look at this grave. It might have given me a few ideas for my boss, should he ever peg out. My workmates and I reckoned he wouldn't get flowers at his funeral. Just bags of cement to keep him down. This might have been wishful thinking, but there was still a match to attend this day and I was getting nowhere fast.

You kind of start out full of optimism, expecting a lift off every passing vehicle. After many plumes of exhaust smoke and a few two fingered salutes, it becomes more frustrating than boring. Sometimes you might bump into another hitch hiker; at least it gives you the chance to talk to someone while you stand by the slip-road. There seems to be quite a bit of camaraderie between hitchhikers. Even good manners and helpfulness. There is an unwritten rule of whoever has been waiting around longest gets first pick of whichever driver stops to offer a lift. If the driver is going elsewhere, then you give your fellow traveller a shout if that's where he's going. Everybody tries to help each other get to where they're going. After all, they're all in the same boat. Hitchhikers are ships passing in the night.

My object was to try and look either interesting to talk to, or at least unthreatening and in desperate need of a lift home. You want to give motorists an impression of you being the kind of person who would give them excellent company, keeping them enthralled with worldly-wise conversation. Embarking knowledge upon them which would enlighten even the most ancient of sages.

Unfortunately in my case it's usually the second objective which tends to get me lifts from drivers. I end up looking like a waif who hasn't eaten for at least half a week. I also have the unique ability of being able to talk the hind legs off a donkey. Most drivers after spending an hour or two listening to me are generally glad to put me in the right direction and drop me off.

On the motorway you can feel it when you hit the asphalt, or the concrete slab. Then your ears start popping as the car or lorry's speed builds up. You start trying your best to keep the driver talking as soon as your small talk finishes. You talk a load of crap, as every minute is a mile nearer to where you're going. Sometimes the more boring you are, the faster he drives. But most of the time you have a lot in common with your benefactor and you both even get interested in what you're talking about. I know every minute is a mile, but every mile looks the same when you hitch hike.

Being able to talk the hind legs off a donkey is useful, as most drivers who pick you up just want a bit of company to ease the boredom of their journey. After many miles of travelling, they don't want too much intellectual conversation. They want time to fly, as fast and as much as you want the miles to melt away.

Just as the thought of giving up crossed my mind, a lorry pulled up. Its driver asked me where I was going. To my delight he was going to the same place as me, or at least through Nottingham. I jumped aboard. He had his little lad with him, so he was put in the middle seat of his dad's cab.

Then we were off to Nottingham.

This lorry driver's kindness was appreciated, but he was in no rush to get back home. He couldn't anyway due to his load. I resigned myself to missing today's kick off. So what! The way we were playing, I wasn't going to miss much. My journey ended right in the city centre of Nottingham at 3.00pm. Today's match would already have kicked off by now. My main problem was finding out which was the best way to County's Meadow Lane ground. Good job it wasn't Nottingham Forest we were playing today. They were on the other side of the River Trent.

I managed to get into Meadow Lane nearly twenty minutes late. It would have been earlier, but finding an open turnstile was my biggest problem. I ended up walking to the other side of the ground, having to walk through County fans to get to the large end where Rovers supporters were congregated.

We were losing 2-1 by half time; John Radford scored our goal. And it stayed that way for the rest of this match. I got talking to a fan from County's city rivals, Forest. He was up for Rovers today, even wearing a blue and white scarf, although a Chelsea one. He made fun of his near neighbours from across the River Trent, pointing out to me part of their ground which was still bomb damaged from World War Two. Where we were standing had been the site of a machine gun turret. He was quite impressed by our volume of travelling support. But we always seemed to take a good following wherever we went. Today was no exception.

Next time for me it would be by car, train or Rovers own transport to this place. It had only cost the travelling Rovers fans a few quid to get here by coach anyway, and they got to see the entire match. Brighton had been a one off. Now it was my turn to miss out, and there was no refund for me thanks to my very private form of transport.

After the match my intention was to catch one of these Rovers special coaches back to Blackburn. A lad I got talking to called Birdy said he hadn't a coach ticket either. How he'd got to Nottingham or what he'd been doing here was none of my business. We asked a few Rovers fans who came by coach and were told one was not so full, maybe ten or more seats were empty. Their cost for tickets had been £6.00, so three quid home would be our going rate.

Birdy asked me for three quid then slipped a fiver and a quid underneath a Rovers fan's coach ticket, telling the driver mine and his tickets were underneath. This driver agreed, with a nod and a wink, and slipped the loot into his pocket very quickly. We had bought ourselves a lift home. Luckily it wasn't much of a journey back to Blackburn. I was hungry by now and even bought a meal on a motorway service station up the M1. Back home I ended up in the Swan Hotel on Whalley Street, down the road from where I lived. It was currently in use as my local.

This season became a relegation one. There wasn't much to inspire me into heading off into the freezing Winter nights to other far flung ends of England and Wales, watching a team on its way to the Third Division. We ended up sacking our manager, Jim Iley, eventually replacing him with John Pickering in a caretaker capacity. But through October and the beginning of November 1978, Rovers seemed to be on a mini revival, winning two and drawing a similar

number of matches. Appointing Pickering, albeit as Caretaker Manager, seemed to have become a master stroke. Things got even better. Our last match was on a Friday night, November 3rd, away at Fulham. We beat them 2-1.

Eighteen year old striker, Simon Garner, who was barely three months younger than me, scored both our goals. His first in the league for Rovers. This teenager was to become a legend for Rovers in years to come. His first two goals were just the start of many.

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With a chink of light piercing through this relegation tunnel, Frank asked me if I fancied thumbing down to London with him once again. We were playing Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park, in the South of the capital, on November 11th. This would be yet another new ground for me; my collection was building up considerably, so it was agreed by me to make this trip with him.

Frank asked me on the Thursday night, before our second visit to London in successive matches. There was a funny story in that night's local paper. It was about a fan who was arrested for fighting at the Reading versus Southampton League Cup tie the night before. He couldn't have been much of a football hooligan because his false leg came off as he was being frog-marched away by a couple of coppers. They didn't notice his plight at first, despite his protests. Luckily another policeman picked it up, chased after his colleagues and returned this appendage to its rightful owner. It sounds like this hooligan was caught on the hop.

Once again we followed our usual routine of meeting up in the Royal Duke then having a pub crawl. This time our route included pubs around the Revidge area, up the hill rather than across the River Blakewater. Mainly because we both frequented these boozers around most weekends. And it was easier to walk downhill from here to our favourite thumbing place beside the Saxon Inn.

It didn't take us long to cadge a lift down to Samlesbury. Getting to London wasn't so easy though. After a few more lifts we eventually hitched down to Hilton Park. There we were picked up by a wagon driver on his way to London. His lorry was nearly overloaded and he could only travel at 25 mph. This didn't bother either Frank or me. At least we would get to London before the kick off.

It had been quite an eventful journey for our friendly wagon driver. He had been across to Belfast to drop off one load, before picking up another to deliver to London. Unfortunately today was the 'Old Firm' derby between Celtic and Rangers in Glasgow. Our driver's overnight crossing from Belfast to Stranraer had been a dodgy one. His ferry had been full of police with dogs aboard to keep the two sets of fans apart. He was glad to meet a couple of civilised English football fans who had no interest in religion, or the troubles in Northern Ireland for that matter.

We were dropped off near London's North Circular Road and because it was still early in the morning, decided to take in the sights of the capital. We caught a tube train at Highgate underground station after a cup of tea in a café. Our first stop was Trafalgar Square. Then we

went to the Palace of Westminster for a tour of the Houses of Parliament. I felt a bit like Guy Fawkes, one of only a few people to enter this place with honest intentions.

Today was the Lord Mayor's Show. Frank and I decided to watch this, as there was plenty of time before our match kicked off. We just hoped it wasn't a case of 'After the Lord Mayor's Show' for Rovers. There was a big procession of floats and various people marching. There was one minor hiccup when some of the floats went down a wrong side-street. It didn't appear on any news broadcasts, so they got away with it this time. After this annual event, known for a bloke with a cat, we made our way to Selhurst Park.

From Bank tube station we caught an underground train to London Bridge railway station. There were a few Rovers fans here, but they had their own plans and didn't want to travel to Palace with us. Crystal Palace has no nearby underground station, but is served by three railway stations from Network Southeast. We caught a train to Norwood Junction from London Bridge. There were a few Palace fans aboard, so we followed them to Selhurst Park.

Rovers' mini revival came to an end today, we were beaten 3-0. Just to make things worse, we were refused a lift back on a Rovers coach. Its driver must have been to the match. I thought we were in dead lumber now. But we avoided any marauding Palace fans by walking up the road away from this coach, joining a family who just happened to be passing, pretending to be with them. I nearly thought our luck was up before the match when a young Palace fan asked me what time it was on Norwood Junction station. An improvised cockney accent from Frank seemed to do a good enough job. After escaping from Selhurst Park, I began to wonder if all my nine lives were going to run out today.

At a safe distance from Selhurst we jumped on a bus to Brixton and got on a tube to Brent Cross. According to my trusty London street map, this was the nearest tube station near the start of the M1.

Being refused by the Rovers coach was becoming a burden for us, as nobody else wanted to pick us up either. People probably thought better of stopping for two scruffy looking lads who probably looked a bit dishevelled after spending nearly twenty four hours hitch hiking after a good night out on the ale. But at almost a lift an hour we slowly headed north. Getting away from Brent Cross was our most difficult lift. Other Saturday night hitchhikers were in competition with us, but we prevailed.

Our first lift from here only got us as far as Scratchwood Services, still in London itself. Then it was hours before another. A kind Scotsman living down here took us up to his house right next to Newport Pagnell Services for a cup of tea. His house was like an amusement arcade, one-armed-bandits and juke boxes in his living room and even in his kitchen. We talked shop as my job was making coin operated amusement machines. He worked as a service engineer for a brewery in this area and had heard of the firm I worked for, although he didn't have a very high opinion of them. It sounded like we had a lot in common.

After this kind piece of hospitality, Frank and I walked back on to Newport Pagnell services and got on with our task of thumbing it back up north. By the time we got up to Corley Services on

the M6, we were into the small hours. Frank suggested we go into the cafe section for a seat and brew, before getting our heads down for a bit. I wasn't in any condition to disagree, almost asleep on my feet by now. We weren't the only hitch hikers on this service station tonight. A couple of Everton fans joined us after asking if we were in a car and going up north. They had been playing away in London too, at Queens Park Rangers. Our peace was disturbed later when a coachload of Chelsea fans arrived.

This was a bad bunch. Their coach was on the other side of the motorway, but this lot was on the rob and seemed quite menacing with it. Some of them had knives which they had stolen from cutlery points in the cafe section. They asked us who we supported, when I said Blackburn Rovers they didn't seem too bothered about us. But at one point it might have turned nasty for us and the couple of Everton fans as Chelsea had been playing their neighbours, Liverpool, today. They had a go at us for being Northerners. Luckily they didn't get a chance to do anything stupid as some more of them came across shouting that their coach was about to set off back to London.

At seven in the morning our luck changed for the better and from an unlikely source. I started asking motorists if there was any chance of a lift north. A chap in a car who turned out to be a Burnley fan offered us a lift. He had been watching his team play at Leicester City and must have stopped overnight. He took us up to Didsbury in Manchester to pick up his brother. He then dropped us off in Blackburn. This was very kind of him, especially as Burnley fans tend to have a chip on their shoulder when it comes to Rovers. I didn't get home until 1.30pm. At least my dinner could be reheated. My parents laughed about me making this long trip and said I was daft as a brush for suffering such privations. It did put me off hitch hiking long distances for a while.

## Chapter 5

### *It all went West*

And so the 1970s ended up with Rovers back in the Third Division. Where we had spent most of the early years of this decade. Probably the worst period and low-point of our history. What it showed was we didn't have any right to play in a higher division with a duff team like ours. The league doesn't lie.

Times were hard for Blackburn Rovers in my teens. We might have celebrated a hundred years as a football club, but we felt and played like a bunch of geriatrics. Things were not helped by our directors appointing Margaret Thatcher as Honorary Vice-Chairman. This in a Labour town like Blackburn. It was like making Adolph Hitler an honorary member of the local synagogue.

She probably didn't understand why this honour was given her either. Maybe one or two directors were after a gong, or a sword tapped on their shoulders. As far as I can recall, she's never been to a Rovers match yet. No doubt she cannot stand football and thought those Northern Tory oiks were crawling to her again. Her appointment didn't bring us much luck either. We were relegated not too long after gaining our new Honorary Vice-Chairman.

Luckily things were about to get better for us. We were too big a club for this Third Division, although nobody has an eternal right to their league status. But it took us a bit to get this Rovers engine running. Then it was a smooth drive to the top of the Third Division table. We bounced straight back to Division 2.

This was all down to our Player Manager, Howard Kendall. We persuaded him to leave his Assistant Manager's job at Stoke City and be his own man at Rovers. I remember him as a good player with Everton, part of the Harvey-Ball-Kendall partnership, which won them their title in 1970. He took us back up at our first attempt, making this a very enjoyable 1979-80 season.

Culmination of this was when we won promotion away at Bury. I nearly had my leg broken when thousands of Rovers fans invaded the pitch at the final whistle. I got my leg stuck on a perimeter wall as people clambered over me to run on to Gigg Lane's pitch. Luckily I didn't get hurt and ran on to the pitch along with the rest of them.

I got out of my habit of hitchhiking to away matches, preferring the comfort and reliability of coaches, trains and mates with cars. So during this promotion season I didn't actually use my own bodily resources to get away. But get away I did, to nearly every away match we played this season. It was fun going to all these places I'd only ever seen on a map. Criticism was often laid at my door for travelling hundreds of miles to spend a few hours in a town without even stopping to look around the place. But then again, would my critics have travelled to places like Grimsby and Rochdale out of choice? At least I could say I'd been to these towns and seen part of them. Albeit four sides of a football ground and a nearby pub or two.

Our first season back in Division Two was a good one. Rovers carried on where they left off in the previous campaign. Although it wasn't until late in this season when I decided to try my luck with my trusty thumb. We had an important game at promotion rivals Swansea City on April 4th 1981. This was a real 'six pointer' and I wanted to go there and support Rovers on their trip to the Principality. It could have also put us in a small elite group of teams who managed to get promotion in successive seasons if we could keep our run going.

This wasn't really a thumb job for me in the correct sense of the word, because I didn't actually physically hitch it to Swansea, even though I was prepared to. It was more of a piece of luck and cheekiness rather than effort. A bit like hitchhiking is. Although I was prepared to go through another cold night at the roadside trying to get to South Wales, but I was glad I didn't have to lose yet another night's sleep. This was hitchhiking's worse aspect. You were like a zombie next morning.

At the time Citizen's Band radio was just becoming a force in Britain after slowly sneaking into this country through the Isle of Man. It was against the law, but loads of people were using it. With me working for an electronics firm, I came into contact with a lot of people who were into this new phenomenon. It was only a question of time before I was to get my own CB radio. I got mine in 1980. It was the year before in 1979 when I decided to try and acquire one. The film 'Convoy' was probably what started this interest off over here.

People began to get them through all sorts of methods. Lorry drivers working abroad were the

main smugglers. Then there was a loophole in the law which meant you could buy and sell CB radio equipment. But you couldn't use it. The Isle of Man seemed to be the main importer and distribution point for our North West region. My first rig probably got in this way. I bought it from a leisure machine service engineer my firm dealt with. He was from Morecambe, right next door to Heysham, the ferry port which serves the Isle of Man.

My main time for using this rig was late on a Friday night, or rather Saturday morning's early hours. This was when I got home from the pub. I didn't want to annoy my parents or neighbours. One side of these wouldn't have minded much. They were on channel themselves, mainly using it in their car. Unfortunately CB equipment did interfere with other electrical equipment. But not when I went on at two in the morning. At first I used it from my car, which was parked outside my parent's house. Then someone mentioned that I could technically be done for drunken driving or at least drunk in charge of a vehicle. So my rig had to be consigned to the bedroom when I got home after work. At least until I was sober enough to drive my car. It meant me talking very quietly through the night.

I happened to be on my own rig into the late hours of Friday night before our game at Swansea. This was something I did now and again. It was still illegal doing this really, but CB radio was on its way now and would soon be legalised. Out of sheer optimism, desperation, or by a flash of inspiration, I asked if there was anybody out there who was going to tomorrow's game and had they a spare seat in a car or van. I was even prepared to pay my whack for this trip.

To my surprise there was a reply from another good buddy over the airwaves. He told me a vanload of lads from Blackburn and Darwen was travelling down very early on in the morning and picking up a couple of their mates on Blackburn Boulevard. This bloke at the other end of the microphone suggested I turn up and try my luck and see if a space was going spare.

This van was picking up at 6.00am, so I was up with the larks an hour earlier and knocked up a quick breakfast. After shovelling this down it was a rush to be on Blackburn Boulevard, outside the Star and Garter pub, a quarter of an hour before their appointed time. There were a couple of lads waiting who I introduced myself to. When their van showed up there was just enough space for one more passenger - me. It cost about £7.00 for my trip which was as good a deal as anybody could have found at such short notice.

Unfortunately Swansea was a heck of a long way in a transit van full of a dozen Rovers fans. Especially with no proper seats in its back. Most of us were bleary-eyed, some showed signs of having put down a skinful last night too. But it was going to get us to our match at Swansea, which is what mattered really. We went over the tops after turning off the M5 and using the Ross on Wye route. Then we went on to Abergavenny for a break in a pub, before landing in Swansea.

We stopped for a pint in Abergavenny, which was a relief. I was quite pleased with the beer down here. It was called Amber, their equivalent of Stones's and just as good. Then we seemed to go up and down the hills and valleys for hours. It was like going on a fairground big dipper. We came across another vanload of Rovers fans, following them for the rest of this route. This bunch were high-spirited nutters, in more ways than one. They were hanging out the back of

their van, holding up cans and bottles of booze and waving them in our direction.

Once we reached Swansea it was a great feeling after this endless journey. We parked up by an old dock near the Tawe River. I knew it was called the Tawe because under Swansea's boundary signs it said Abertawe. See - I can speak Welsh now!

Unfortunately Rovers were outplayed by Swansea City today. This put a bit of daylight between themselves and us in our battle for promotion to Division 1. It made it even more difficult for us to catch them up. The result was a 2-0 defeat for Rovers, but it looked like our promotion battle wouldn't be settled until the very last week of this memorable season.

Losing our match wasn't the end of today's story. We broke down on our way home, just to rub salt into our wounds. We were right on the border between England and Wales, somewhere near Raglan. After the van Frank and I were travelling in breaking down on our way back from Charlton and our Palace fiasco, I began to feel like some kind of Jonah. Something always had to go wrong when I was hitch hiking to Rovers away matches, not just on the field. Luckily I noticed a pub across a field from where we broke down. This had me feeling as if a friendly whale had just spewed me out. It was called the Somerset Arms.

I seemed to have a knack for finding pubs. Whilst hitching on Hilton Park Services one night, I got fed up of waiting for a lift and went for a walk. There was a pub down this country lane not so far away. It helped my night pass easier.

Most of us went into this pub for a pint while our driver phoned the AA. We got on very well with this pub's locals. A friendly hostelry with a mixture of Englishmen and Welshmen. Just what the doctor ordered after our disappointment following Rovers' defeat at Swansea's Vetch Field. It had been quite an eventful sporting day away from football. Rovers may have been beaten, but there were a couple of nice sporting stories from today. Oxford won the Boat Race, no interest for me here, apart from them having a female cox called Sue Brown. She was a first for this traditional event.

Another big event today was the Grand National. I didn't bother with a bet. But it was nice to hear about it being won by a horse called Aldiniti, ridden by Bob Champion. Quite an appropriate name for a brave man who had fought back from cancer to win this year's Grand National. It made our worries about Rovers missing out on promotion pale into insignificance.

All that was wrong with our time in here was the Eurovision Song Contest being on TV. Just to make matters worse, although not from a patriotic point of view, was Britain's entry winning tonight. This was 'Save all your kisses for me' by 'Brotherhood of Man'. I couldn't stand this song, like I can't stand the Eurovision Song Contest. The only bit I liked was where the girls had their skirts ripped off as part of their dance routine.

Unfortunately my companions on this never-ending journey home spent the rest of the evening singing 'Save all your kisses for me' all the way back to Blackburn, to wind a few of us up who had slagged this stupid competition off. Luckily I fell asleep, thanks to my part in helping this pub make a killing from our misfortune of breaking down. It was definitely not an ill wind for



this pub's landlord. We all drank like fish. I woke up with us still travelling up the M6, but being only about twenty miles from home. Back home in Blackburn it was still early, so I sneaked quietly to my bedroom and crashed out until breakfast time.

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Our last game of this season was Saturday May 2nd 1981, away at Bristol Rovers. It had all the markings of a classic end to this season. We had to win here and hope our nearest neighbours, Preston North End, did us a big favour by beating Swansea. They could do themselves one too, as they were on their way down if they lost this crucial game. It was a real Lancashire versus South Wales struggle in more ways than one. If Rovers beat Bristol Rovers and Swansea didn't win, then we were up. At the same time, if the 'Nob Enders' beat Swansea and Cardiff City lost their game or drew, and then North End would be playing Second Division football again with Swansea, whereas Cardiff would be relegated instead.

So both Taffies would both lose out depending how results went. It was all in Preston's own hands. Our equation also included Notts County. They were one point ahead of Rovers and Swansea, but had better goal difference than us. If they could manage a win or possibly even a draw away at Chelsea, then they were up with whoever. We had to hope someone did us a favour. I fancied our chances of beating Bristol Rovers though, even away from home. We had beaten Newcastle 3-0 last Saturday, with goals from Lowey, Burke and Speight.

It was a strange week really. Winter seemed to have come back with a vengeance; it became the worst April weather this century. There had been blizzards everywhere; some drifts were up to six feet deep on the outskirts of Blackburn. People had been stranded at work or in their homes and cars needed digging out. Ewood Park's pitch had been covered in snow. But after an all hands to the pumps job, our match went ahead.

It was a weird kind of week. All this out of season winter weather and another chilling story was in the news. Peter Sutcliffe, the 'Yorkshire Ripper'; was put on trial for those gruesome murders he carried out. He pleaded guilty to manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility. He might as well have admitted to murder. He wouldn't be coming out.

Once again there was no Frank with me on this long trip to Bristol. Our days of hitchhiking to away matches with each other were long gone. He was a married man now and well under a different kind of thumb - Julie's. She might have been called Julie Andrews, but she was definitely no Mary Poppins. They couldn't fly to away matches; it had to be a thumb job for them too.

He did actually thumb it to one match with Julie. Ironically to Bristol, where I was going tonight. Frank and Julie were going to Bristol's other team - City. I know because his brother Terry and I tried hitching to the same match. We had both dropped a skinful and gave it up as a bad job after only making it to Charnock Richard Services.

This took ages and set the tone of what was going to happen to us this evening. We were both drunk and it was a freezing night. Terry crashed out on the frozen ground at the side of the slip-

road. I had to wake him up when we had a lift offered us. It was only to Charnock Richard, which was probably a good thing because we both might have ended up dying from exposure. At least we could get a brew down us and defrost ourselves.

We ended up walking from Charnock Richard into Chorley and catching the first bus to Blackburn at around five o'clock in the morning. It had only been a spur of the moment thing really. Either Terry or me, probably him, fancied hitching down to Bristol City while we were out that very Friday night. We bumped into Frank and Julie on these motorway services, taking them both by surprise. At least they made it down there. When Terry and I sobered up, our trip didn't seem so attractive any more. We both felt rough and wanted to go home. I did travel to Ashton Gate a few years later. This trip was in comfort though, thanks to British Rail.

Frank might have been under it, but my thumb was going to be put to a better use for a different purpose. I decided to set off on Friday night after my usual routine of a few pubs until closing time. I wanted to get to this match, come hell or high water. Rovers were expected to take around 5,000 fans down to the Southwest. Promotion fever seemed to be gripping everybody in Blackburn. We were even expected to have thousands of our fans making the short nine-mile trip down the hill to Preston to cheer on North End. We were hoping they did us, and themselves, a big favour

It was all plain sailing until Hilton Park on the M6. A chap picked me up at Samlesbury who had been in the Three Pigeons pub, near where I worked. He was on his way to Coventry where he lived. He was a Blackburner, but had a job down Lady Godiva country. His firm had sent him to Coventry. Not his workmates this time. As is usually the case, he was there not by choice. He told me he got up to Blackburn most weekends to see his family and friends.

This time it was virgin territory for me. Thumbing it down the M5 motorway was a new experience in my hitch hiking life. Plenty of motorists and lorry drivers stopped to offer me a lift down the M6, but this was no good for where I was going. This was typical kidology. Whenever I wanted a lift down the M6 from here, everybody seemed to be going southwest. Now it was the other way round.

After a long wait I got a few lifts in the right direction, eventually landing on a motorway service station down the M5. It must have been Strensham. This motorway seemed to pack up and go to sleep during the small hours. I was tempted to crash out on these services myself, but kept awake still trying my luck for a lift.

One aspect of hitchhiking is finding yourself spending rather more time than you prefer on motorway service stations. These can often be like an oasis in a desert. Unfortunately they stop being that when you have to spend all night on them because you can't thumb a lift. They are better than motorway junctions though. At least you can put a roof over your head. Or get a brew when it's cold or you're bored stiff waiting for that elusive lift. On the other side of the coin, sometimes you can be marooned on them, they become like a desert island rather than an oasis.

Some service stations have been regular haunts for me over the years. Nowhere more so than Charnock Richard near Leyland. This is because it is the nearest one to Blackburn. It has often

been a dropping off point from when some motorist picked me up at Samlesbury and was going a different direction to one of my trips. Nine times out of ten this would be someone off to the Manchester area and me going down South.

Charnock Richard tends to be a bit quiet at night, but busy during the day. Most of my sojourns here have been after a night on the ale. So it's surprising I can even remember half my trips to this place. Not many hitchhikers have been given a lift here by the police, but I have. Strangely enough, I don't think I was ever dropped off here on my way home from an away match, it's just as easy being put down at Samlesbury or Leyland. One good thing about it is its walking distance from Chorley. A bus can always be caught here to Blackburn, as Terry Andrews and I found out after our aborted trip to Bristol City.

My other main stopping-off point on Britain's motorway network is Hilton Park Services. This is like a halfway point for most of my journeys following Rovers. We seem to have spent a lot of time playing down south, mainly London. Or so it seems, as these are long journeys. They seem even longer when you're hitchhiking. Hour after hour stood at the slip road, waiting for some kind soul who wants to do their good deed for the day.

My worst ever case of being marooned took place on this service station. Something like ten hours were spent waiting for a lift home from Crystal Palace, after a right good tubbing too. It was bad enough having Frank with me for company.

Hilton Park is near Britain's most famous junction - Spaghetti Junction itself - just a few miles down the M6. Most of my lifts here have been when I've been going down this motorway and drivers going down the M5, or into Brum have dropped me off here. My first ever long distance thumbing trip found me here and I like the place, and the pub down the lane even better.

As dawn approached a van carrying Rovers fans on their way to Bristol pulled on to this M5 service area. They were from Blackburn and Darwen, regulars of the Fox and Hounds pub at Ewood itself. They thought I was a bit crazy, like most people do, but were only too happy to give me a lift to Bristol. I was able to help them a bit as I'd done my homework on finding the best route to Bristol Rovers' ground. The M32 took you straight to Eastville Stadium when you came off the M5.

Once we arrived in Bristol we found the other team called Rovers ground and then went for a look down Bristol's city centre to find a cafe for breakfast. My body wasn't ready yet for a 'Greasy Joe' job. I threw my guts up after this plate of heart attack material, like I'd done in Brighton. One of the lads commented how he noticed a dodgy looking sausage on my plate. It wasn't really. Lack of sleep and last night's beer destroyed any chance of me taking in a right good scam. My palate was like Picasso's. Next we moved across the River Avon, following its course to Bristol City's Ashton Gate for a look at their football ground. This was after gazing at the magnificent Clifton Suspension Bridge, Bristol's docks and Floating Harbour.

After all these famous sights, we parked up not far from Bristol Rovers' Eastville stadium. This had gone to the dogs in more ways than one. Greyhound racing was obviously a regular feature here when football wasn't being played. There had been a serious fire not so long ago too. This

had been a body blow, which they had still not recovered from.

It seemed unusual to be in a city in two counties, like Brighton and Hove Albion was a football club in two towns. In this case, Bristol Rovers was in Gloucestershire, whereas City was in Somerset. The River Avon divided Bristol in more ways than one. It also had two of these county's cricket grounds. This was an unusual situation and apart from London, was unique, certainly in a provincial city. In this schizophrenic city, I just hoped their football fans were sound of mind.

We had a few pints near Bristol Rovers' ground when the pubs opened around eleven o'clock. Our fans were all over the place by now, packing every pub we walked into. One of my workmate's husband was in a pub with another woman, having a dirty weekend in Weston Super Mare no doubt. He grinned at me sheepishly when I walked into this hostelry.

The game itself was bitter disappointment. No complaints here, Rovers did their job, winning 1-0, with a goal from Kevin Stonehouse. But it was bad news from Chelsea where Notts County, who only needed a point, beat the Pensioners. Also things didn't go our way at Deepdale with Swansea beating North End 3-1 to pip us for promotion on goal difference. Such is life, such is football.

It was probably worse for North End as their defeat sent them down again. What made things worse for us was a wind-up merchant in our end, with a radio, kept shouting PNE were winning. Some Rovers fans thought he did this to help us lift our players, making them think we were going to do it. It wasn't to be our day once again.

The lads who gave me a lift down couldn't help me afterwards. They were going to Weston Super Mare themselves after this match and stopping for a long weekend. Luckily I bumped into a lad called Dave who lived just down the road from me. He'd travelled down in his mate's car and offered me a lift home after the match.

At the final whistle it was all over for yet another season. A group of silly Bristol Rovers fans invaded their pitch and taunted us, inviting us to come onto the pitch and fight them. We must have outnumbered them by ten to one, but treated their childish, almost suicidal behaviour with the contempt it deserved. We just wanted to get home.

Fortunately Dave's mate's car was a good one. He wasn't for hanging around either and we seemed to fly up the M5 and M6 like a bat out of hell, 100mph all the way to Blackburn. I was home for around eight o'clock, in time to catch my nearest chippy opening. Then it was off for a quiet evening down the Swan on Whalley Street, which was my new local. People were sympathetic to my sulkiness in here. Although one or two didn't think I'd even been to Bristol because of my early return.

A few weeks later I went with some mates into the Three Pigeons on Oakenhurst Road, near where I worked. The chap who gave me a lift to Hilton Park Services was in. He didn't recognise me at first, but accepted my thanks and a pint of bitter for his trouble. Once I opened my mouth he remembered me, as everybody does.

*On that famous Saturday  
The second day of May  
We met a bunch of Swansea fans  
On the motorway  
We said we'd win promotion  
We said we'd win the cup  
But on that famous Saturday  
Preston f\*\*\*\*\*d it up*

## Chapter 6

### *The Dying Swans*

Hitch hiking to away matches almost came to an abrupt end when I passed my driving test in 1980. This was my third attempt. Even this appeared to be going wrong. It was a wet day and I didn't know how to operate the car's heated rear window. Luckily my examiner did. Also I hadn't signed my provisional driving licence and got a question wrong after the driving part of my test was over. But I passed and that was that, they couldn't take it away from me. Now it was mobile Mick.

After buying a car my difficulties in getting to away games seemed solved for the next few years. There were usually plenty of people willing to travel with me in the Austin Maxi I bought off my dad. Although there were exceptions such as these last two away matches and others were nobody wanted to come with me.

When this car came to the end of its bloodsucking expensive life, I also bought a Fiat Mirafiori from the same paternal source. This proved to be another rust box, spending most of its time in dock. The Maxi went to its grave conveniently. By chance I broke down on Pleckgate Road, outside a repairs garage, near my old secondary school. My tax insurance and MOT were all due. I'd had enough of this beast by now and decided to scrap it there and then. No doubt my Mirafiori would one day meet a similar sticky end.

But there was one match I really wanted to attend whether my car was available or not. Swansea City didn't stop in the First Division for long, only a couple of seasons. Then they seemed to be on a downward spiral, going back where they came from - the Fourth Division. They call this 'Doing a Huddersfield', who dropped from the top to the basement of League football.

This seemed to be down to Swansea overstretching themselves in the First Division, or maybe they did too much too soon. John Toshack, their manager, was on his way out and his club had debts of around £1.5M. They had become a crisis club, possibly even facing extinction. We knew this feeling, as did most clubs. I could see this decline on its way and wanted to see Rovers gain revenge by putting one over the Swans, for pipping us to the post on that fateful second day of May two years before. Now we were playing them at the Vetch Field on October 30<sup>th</sup> 1983.

This time there would be no good buddies on the end of a CB radio to take me on that long journey to South Wales. I'd given up with planking about on my rig. It had been taken over by kiddies and like Swansea City, was in decline. In fact the worse thing which happened to this form of communication was its legalisation.

I still had a car, but no passengers on this occasion. None of my mates wanted to travel to South Wales for this revenge match. I didn't fancy driving all that way either, especially on my own. It would have cost me a fortune, definitely two fill-ups for this long distance.

During this week we lost 2-1 at home to Ipswich Town, in the Milk Cup, to make it 4-6 on aggregate. I went to the first leg at Portman Road, we lost 3-2 here. I arrived home at five o'clock in the morning, before going to work two hours later. Going to East Anglia was probably one of the major issues which cost me my job, amongst others. I was made redundant three months later. I'd escaped from my penal servitude at last.

It was Friday, October 29th 1983, my dad's birthday. I was a man on a mission and set off for South Wales after an early tea. Unfortunately this evening became a hitchhiker's dream night. One driver of a car, who picked me up from Samlesbury, was a nutter. He delighted in showing me how fast his motor could go. We blasted down the M6 at over 100mph. My ears were popping and I felt a little uneasy, though never said a word of complaint. Too many hours had been spent by roadsides dreaming of a lift like this. Now it felt like I was in Thunderbird 3 on its way to the space station.

By 6.00pm we were already at Hilton Park services. The driver then roared off into Birmingham for his tea. He probably took amphetamines with his brew. He should have been a spaceman. I needed a brew myself, just to help me come back down to Earth. This left me with an unusual problem of possibly arriving in Swansea tonight, which was far too early. If that's what you call a problem. Unfortunately I didn't fancy crashing out in some shop doorway or on a park bench. My remedy was to walk off Hilton Park's service road and go looking for a pub. At least I could be warm and comfortable for an hour or two. It would put a bit of alcoholic anti-freeze in my blood. I reckoned it would be needed tonight.

A mile or so away from this service station, in pitch black darkness; there was a welcoming light of a pub sign. It suddenly appeared through this evening's mist. I'd been in this place before whilst hitching to London, or somewhere down south. It was a handy little boozery. You just had to watch yourself going down this leafy lane in pitch darkness. Quite a few cars used this as a short cut to these services. I could see why this area was called the Black Country. You couldn't see a thing on this road.

After a couple of pints in this beacon of the Black Country, it was back to Hilton Park to continue my journey southwest. Once again my luck was in when a bloke from the West Country picked me up in his van and took me down the M5 on his way to Bristol. He noticed my Lancashire accent, comparing my Mike Harding with his Fred Wedlock. He eventually dropped me off at an M5 motorway junction, not far from Strensham Services.

This service station was handy due to it being near the M50 turn off. My unusual problem was

still there though. It was still only nine o'clock. So another pub needed to be found, just to kill a bit of time. I didn't fancy being in Swansea too early. Walking the streets or ending up in the police cells didn't appeal to me. There was a pretty big pub next to this junction, ironically the back of a road sign nearby had 'Swansea' sprayed on it from an aerosol. The bloke who did it was probably a bit of one himself. I stopped in this busy pub until chucking out time, then wandered back across the road and stuck my thumb out.

It had been an unusual lusher. This area must have been where the accents divided. Half its customers spoke Brummie; its other half had West Country accents. They probably couldn't tell a word I said. Not that I said a lot in here. I was more interested in slumping quietly in a corner by myself with a pint in my hand, beside a lovely roaring fire.

My luck had been in all day, apart from now; chucking out time. Tonight's weather began to turn bitterly cold. Soon it was freezing and there was no sign of a lift from this isolated spot. It stayed like this until nearly five o'clock before someone picked me up. By then I felt like hypothermia was setting in. This lift was only to Strensham Services, barely a mile or two away, but very welcome, in fact it could have saved my life, certainly my fingers and toes. It would probably have been better taking a chance and walking to it over the nearby fields. At least it would have kept me warm, although my feet would have been a bit wet.

At Strensham a much-desired cup of tea was the order of this morning. I felt like Scott of the Antarctic. Once I'd defrosted myself, this endless journey continued. At least people were waking up. Traffic started coming along in dribs and drabs. A wagon stopped for me and carried me down the M50 and A40 into Wales. The driver dropped me off at Newport's junction of the M4 and not long after an amiable Welshman picked me up. He took me all the way to Swansea, where he lived. He was thinking of going to the match himself, but that would have to wait. His priority after a long night's driving was to get his head down for a bit after a slap up meal. Then he was going to drop a few pints down the local with his mates.

I asked him where Swansea's Vetch Field football ground got its name from. He told me it was because it had been a field where they grew vetch. I walked right into that one. Ask a silly question, get a silly answer. After a good laugh about this, he told me vetch was some kind of bean grown for cattle fodder. I didn't tell him I reckoned his team was going to be Rovers fodder this afternoon. We were going to lick them and my ghost of missed promotions past would hopefully be exorcised.

It was only around 9.00am when we reached the city. This gave me a chance to have a look around the place. Even this became a bit of a chore once I'd been round about three times. I was impressed by Swansea's other set of floodlights. From a distance its Rugby Union ground looked as good as their Vetch Field. This didn't surprise me. After all we were in rugby-loving South Wales. It was questionable which shape of ball was more popular in this town. At the moment it was probably the oval one down here. A couple of years ago the round one was king.

There was loads of time for me to kill, so both these grounds of different shaped balls were given an inspection from outside. Eventually I'd virtually seen all of Swansea's centre too. So it was time for a wander somewhere else. A sign on a post pointed to 'Mumbles'. What a cracking

name for a location. This was a word people often associated with me and was too good a chance to miss, so off I went in this direction. At least I kept quiet here. Not a murmur or a mumble.

The sun had come out by now and Mumbles turned out to be a nice suburban seafront area alongside Swansea's coast. It gave me a chance to have a sit down for a bit of a sleep and to gather my wits about me. As the hand of time drew towards 11.00am, I set off back towards the town centre. Hunger and thirst were starting to grip me by now. This was my chance to sample their local brew. A couple of pubs along Mumbles' seafront helped bring me back to life, after I'd scoffed a bacon and egg sandwich first. I got talking to a coach driver from Bristol. He told me football fans from South Wales and his own West Country had a worse reputation down here for hooliganism than ours up North.

He told me how one night he drove a coachload of Bristol City fans to Torquay United for a cup-tie, or a friendly game of some kind. Out of around fifty on his coach, only four returned to go home. They told him the rest had either been locked up or lost their way back to the coach park. He said Cardiff City fans were even worse. They made Bristol City's look like a toddler's measles party.

Near Swansea's Vetch Field ground was a pub with a couple of coppers stood outside. I asked them politely if it was all right for me to go in for a drink. This brought peals of laughter from them as they told me to get inside. There was my answer. It was full of Rovers fans. This lot had come down from Whalley and Clitheroe, the Valley Blues, as they were known. I was in the right neck of the woods for a change. They thought I was nuts for thumbing it though.

My mission was completed by Rovers on the pitch this time. The Swans headlong plummet from above continued as we ran out 1-0 winners. That man Simon Garner did it for us again, shooting the swans down with another of his many goals. This settled our score following our near promotion miss. One of the most satisfying results in years as far as I was concerned.

During this match I stood with a lad called Ray. He had travelled down in his car with a couple of mates from Accrington and Oswaldtwistle, where they were all from. He was only too pleased to offer me a lift home when I asked. I soon understood why. Neither of his mates could read a map. No problem in this department. Not with my experience of travelling all over England and Wales following Rovers. We just had to keep our gobs buttoned while making our way back to Ray's car and walking through Swansea's disgruntled fans.

On our way up the M6, just after coming off the M5 motorway, Ray suddenly fell asleep at his steering wheel while still driving. He had driven all this way down on his own and didn't get much of a break from our long and tiring journey, due to wanting to get back as soon as possible. Driving fatigue had finally caught up with him.

Luckily I was able to grab his steering wheel in time and pull his car over to the hard shoulder. Here a groggy Ray suddenly realised what had happened. It must have been sheer instinct, as well as lucky reactions, which made me grab his steering wheel. I wasn't exactly as bright as a button myself at this time, after my own lack of sleep. I just seemed to possess extremely quick



reactions and a natural survival instinct. Thank goodness too on this occasion.

It was a good job I was there. Not only could Ray's mates not read a map, neither of them could drive either. In other words, their only use today was helping pay for the cost of this trip and keeping Ray company. They did support Rovers, which was good enough for me. At least they had paid their way and made this trip possible, which was more than I had. So I ended up earning my passage back to Blackburn by taking over at Ray's wheel while he got his head down for a few hours. We got back to Lancashire in one piece this time. Then it was my turn for a right good night's sleep back home.

My hitch hiking days looked to have almost ended during the early eighties with me passing my driving test and the purchase of my dad's Austin Maxi, then a Fiat Miraflore. But things changed a bit in early 1984. I couldn't use my car very often from now on. I was on the dole at the time, having just been made redundant from my first proper job, in February of this year. This was after nearly eight years of service for this lousy company. I could see the writing on the wall. This firm was going down the tubes. Me and one of the lasses were just the first to go. Everybody else followed within a year. It reminded me of Shakespeare: *'A fish may feed on the worm that hath eaten of a king.'*

Not that it bothered me at the time. It was great to get away from this lousy dead-end job. I was singled out for trying to get a union going, our bosses didn't realise this at first. My poor old mate, Martin Wilmot, copped for this earlier. But it's usually the people you're trying to do something for who bite the hand that feeds them. Martin and I were obviously grassed up and paid the price with our jobs.

My attempts failed. Happily, so did the firm. I even took them to an industrial tribunal, but lost. To make matters worse, my former firm's solicitor at this hearing was Terry Ibbotson, ironically one of Rovers' directors. He did me no favours that day. But I wasn't paying his wages. My ex-boss was and Terry did his job.

Any doubts this firm had about my trade union and political activities were soon confirmed a few weeks after they made me redundant. March 3rd's Saturday Evening Telegraph had a photograph of me on their front page. This was before I set off on a peace march from Darwen to Blackburn. I met up with Chris Roe and Alan Jones for this march, which passed Ewood Park. Chris would hitch hike to a couple of matches with me and Alan would put me up at his places in London in future when I came down to watch Rovers.

Monday night's paper had an even better photo of me on the march itself. I'd been drafted into being a steward and looked a bit like a Hells Angel in my leather jacket and mirror sunglasses.

One good thing I found out later was if I wanted to hang around for six months, or couldn't find another job, then a scheme would be made available for me. This paid the same wage as I'd just been on, but for only four days work. Plus it would be cheaper to get to work as a lift was provided for all the lads in each gang.

A month after my redundancy, March 16th to be precise, Rovers were playing Chelsea on a

Friday night. This was unusual and inconvenient for most Rovers fans who may have wanted to go to the match. Chelsea were being good neighbours to local rivals Fulham, who were playing Manchester City at Craven Cottage next day. Perhaps those other boys in blue encouraged this little bit of good neighbourliness from Chelsea.

Knowing this area and especially its tube stations, it wouldn't be a bad idea for these fixtures to be played on different days. Chelsea and City fans might have blundered across each other. And there would have been a few Rovers fans on the scene too, which wouldn't help matters.

I wanted to go to this match at Chelsea, even though it was on a Friday night. And so decided why not take advantage of my reduced circumstances for a change. At least time would be on my side whilst on the dole for hitching down London. It wouldn't be my first trip to Stamford Bridge either. I visited here on a Rovers coach when we played Chelsea a few seasons ago.

My sister, Carole, had moved down to Reading some years before. She was always telling me to come down and stay for a few days. This time I decided to take her up on her offer, although I had done this trip before when she first moved there. My plan was to hitchhike down on the Thursday. We would have a night out round Reading, I'd crash out on her floor, then thumb it to the Chelsea game next day. It was just a question of how early I could get down to Reading, depending whether my luck was in.

My journey began in the afternoon after scoffing a big chippy dinner. A few lifts got me down to the East Lancs Road, near Haydock Park Racecourse. Then a bloke, who I found out was also called Mick, picked me up. He told me he was on his way to British Leyland, at Cowley near Oxford, with some car parts. This was great, I could be in Reading well in time for a night out with my sister.

My namesake and I seemed to get on like a house on fire. He wasn't into football, but liked a beer or two. We must have spent the entire journey to Oxford talking about pubs and boozing. This must have encouraged him to go for a pint with me. Mick then kindly decided to take me all the way to Reading, after we dropped his stuff off at Cowley. He had a mate in the town and would be able to crash out at his place tonight. Things got even better. Mick knew about this local pub across the road from my sister's house on Southampton Street, not far from Reading town centre. It was called the Red Cow. He had been in here before.

We arrived in Reading not much after seven o'clock. When we arrived on Southampton Street, he parked his van up on this pub's car park and got the beer in from his expenses. I nipped across the road to Carole's place while he was being served. This took her by surprise, me arriving so early. She came across for a drink as I was playing darts with Mick, just after helping him fill up his wagon with diesel.

Unfortunately I smelt of its lingering odour for the rest of this evening. I'd only held a funnel over the tank, but got a bit of it splashed on my clothes. This wasn't such a bad thing, mainly because Carole lived with a lad called Harry. Plus about three of his oily mates tended to crash out in their place now and again. The boys were there tonight. They were all keen bikers, with leather jackets, long hair and beards. I had the latter and a leather jacket with tassels, but not

such long hair. They all seemed to like me and we got on very well. Probably because I stank of diesel, as well as being Carole's brother. They offered me their oily hands to shake. I was a greaser for the night.

Mick left his van at the Red Cow before heading off to his mate's, probably to carry on where he left off. Me, Carole, Harry and his mates all went to a pub called the Target in Reading Town Centre's shopping precinct. We used to have a similar looking one in Blackburn's precinct, called the Clarence. Unfortunately ours had a reputation for violence, including people even being thrown off its balcony. Eventually Blackburn Town Centre management and Thwaites' Brewery agreed it was an embarrassment to both of them and closed it down.

Carole, or Spike as they called her down here, was working behind the Target's bar tonight and set off for here while Harry and I were still in the Red Cow. Harry took me there on the back of his motorbike. I'd never been on one before. This must have been around 750cc and very powerful. I don't want to go on one again either after my ride to the Target. I felt like a moving one. Carole showed me a blackboard they had in their toilets, to stop people defacing its walls with graffiti. I chalked Blackburn Rovers on it about seventeen times, being drunk by now. One or two people asked Carole who had done it, some blamed her.

Back at Southampton Street after our night out, everybody was well drunk, me included. Two of the bikers were offering each other outside, but Harry kept control of them. Next morning I was up with the larks like normal and had to hang around while the rest of them woke up from their alcohol and cannabis induced slumbers. After breakfast I said goodbye to Carole and her buddies. Then I was on my way to one of Reading's three motorway junctions, which lead to the M4, to continue my journey to London.

It didn't take long to hitch hike to the capital. Carole suggested catching a bus as it didn't cost so much and was a nice way of seeing rural Berkshire. This didn't appeal to me; I was pushing my luck as usual with this trip. I'm not superstitious in any way, but everything seemed to be going my way so far. Getting to London as quickly as possible was my priority.

My run of good luck carried on too, I actually got a lift off a wagon driver who dropped me on the West Side of London, around Ealing. A tube took me to the centre of the city; after all there was plenty of time before this evening's kick off. After walking around the centre of London, taking in all the sights, it was time to make my way to the match. Chelsea fans had a notorious reputation for being football hooligans, they had even had their fences electrified at one time. But near their ground was a pub called the Britannia. I got talking to a few Chelsea supporters in here who were anything but that.

"Do you reckon Blackburn will bring any fans tonight?" one of them sitting near me asked his mate.

"I'm here already," I jokingly replied, much to the Chelsea fan's surprise. He told me they rarely had visiting fans in this pub. We then had a good yap about both our teams' fortunes and how sick the vast majority of Chelsea's fans were of their minority of hooligans who gave them such a bad name.

Tonight's game was Derek Fazackerley's 500th for Rovers. He was one of those rare species of a one-club man and a great servant to Rovers over many years. Funnily enough, he was actually Frank and Terry Andrews's cousin. It's a small world. Chris Roe's cousin was Mark Patterson, who was playing for Rovers tonight in the same match, by sheer coincidence.

Rovers lost the match though by two goals to one. My luck hadn't been in totally. Simon Garner scored ours. Ironically David Speedie scored Chelsea's winning goal. He was to become a big Ewood Park favourite some years later.

During the game I stood with three lads I knew. They were called Billy, Ray and John, who all went in Audley Workingmen's Club and Queens Park Club where I became a member a couple of years later. I also knew Billy and Ray from watching East Lancs Cricket Club. They had come down this afternoon in John's car and he offered me a lift home when I told them how I'd got down here.

My hopes soared like an eagle, before falling like a shot grouse, when they told me their car was parked up near Brent Cross in North London. It was a good idea really, nothing is worse than being stuck in traffic or getting lost in London. It was probably worth their return tube fares rather than parking up near Chelsea's ground. Car park prices would probably have been astronomical round here. Unfortunately it meant we would have to use Fulham Broadway tube station, running the gauntlet of any anti social Chelsea fans who fancied maintaining their Neanderthal image. But we had our wits about us. At the final whistle Rovers fans were being kept behind before being taken to their coaches.

My little intrepid group asked to be let out a few minutes before play finished and we joined a stream of home fans on their way to their tube trains. We jumped on the first train, which came in, even though it was going in an opposite direction to Brent Cross. Escaping from here was very desirable. We would then be just non-descript passengers, of no interest to Chelsea's 'Head Hunters'.

By the time it returned to Fulham Broadway, most of the Chelsea fans had gone home. We stopped on this tube train, changing further down each different line a few times until we reached Brent Cross and John's car. It had been a good idea to park here as we were soon on the M1 motorway and back in Blackburn barely four hours later.

Most of my journey was spent talking with Ray about places he'd visited during his time in the forces. He seemed to have been everywhere, even Swaziland in Southern Africa. He told me a time of remembering when King Sobhuza's family was something like 10% of the Swazi population. It sounded one big happy family.

## [Chapter 7](#)

### *Our Three-Legged Friends*

In the close season I was gripped by the travelling bug again. This was when Rovers took part in

the Isle of Man football competition. We qualified for this after winning the Lancashire Manx Cup the previous season. We were playing in this pre-season friendly tournament which went on for a week. Our opponents were Sunderland, Carlisle United, St. Mirren from Scotland and Athlone Town from the Republic of Ireland, along with the Isle of Man's national team.

This was probably made up of postmen, teachers and other players in similar jobs to whoever was watching from the sidelines. There might even have been a few doleys in their team, like half the Rovers fans and me. I went across with a mate of mine called Chris Roe. He used to go in the Trades Club with me and we went to home and away matches together.

My spell of unemployment wasn't to last much longer as I had put my name down for a Community Programme, or 'scheme' as they were better known. This would mean me starting my scheme around the time of my 25th birthday on August 4th, coincidentally on the day of the Manx Cup Final, should we get through. But the Employment Services made me fill in a form stating I would ring home every day from the Isle of Man to check if any job offers came in. A bit silly really, but rules is rules. No doubt staff here were covering themselves due to this strange way of doing things. They must have known the score when I told them where I was going.

Chris and I decided to be totally disorganised as usual and set off for the Island on July 29<sup>th</sup> 1984. This was the Sunday night before our tournament began. We bought a train ticket from Blackburn Station all the way to Douglas; this included the ferry price. Our train from Blackburn Station was at 9.30pm; the ferry sailed from Heysham at 11.55pm. We had been told what to do by Mick, the landlord of the Balaclava pub, where we went this night after buying our tickets earlier. He was a keen biker and went every year to the Island for its T.T. races. We were also regulars in his pub, which had a Harley-Davidson motorbike on its mantelpiece.

After a few drinks in the Balaclava we caught a train to Preston, then up to Lancaster, where a bus was waiting to take us to Heysham for the car ferry to Douglas. This was my first time on a ferry going west, apart from coming back to this country. I loved travelling on these gigantic ships. Normally in Blackburn we had to settle for barges on the Leeds Liverpool Canal.

There were a few Rovers fans aboard the Isle of Man ferry already, including Billy and Ray who gave me a lift back from Chelsea. Some were playing cards. One lad was taken to the cleaners by the croupier. She was very attractive and put her assets to good use. Other Rovers fans lost out to this very skilled con artist.

No cards for Chris and me. We'd had a few in the Balaclava and the luxury of being able to sup all night now we were out of territorial waters was just too good a chance to miss for us. Unfortunately by the time the ship docked in Douglas we realised we hadn't such a lot of loot left. We were going to have to be careful with our money this week.

First job was getting ourselves some digs. There were plenty of these available in the capital. A friendly landlady, called Theresa didn't charge us much, which was a good job. We went for a look round Douglas and tried our first pint of their local Okells beer. The taste was appalling, like something a Manx cat sprayed. What had we let ourselves in for? We heard there was a

Whitbread pub somewhere, I'd even checked out CAMRA's good beer guide before our trip. But could we find it? could we hell. We just had to put up with this brew and make the best of it.

Not that we would be drinking much this week. Our financial situation was dire. We seemed to survive on sausage and chips all week. We even resorted to taking our time with breakfast and scavenging grub from other guests' plates once they finished their breakfast and left the room. We got used to eating cold food.

Next day was our first game of the tournament. It was against Scotland's only entry, St Mirren - the boys from Paisley. They played at football's most romantically named ground - Love Street. But there was no love lost today. We beat them 3-1, with goals from Barker, Thompson and a Fazakerley penalty.

The only minor thing which annoyed me at this match was a besuited Rovers fan who slagged our lads off for singing a song containing a swear word. He said he felt ashamed of our behaviour. This prompted me to lose my temper and give him a right mouthful. I told him most of us who made this trip had made great sacrifices financially - unlike him. I knew, talking from my own position. Being on the dole and coming over here was going to cripple me for the next few months. Last thing I needed was some prat telling me he was ashamed of our behaviour. These travelling Rovers fans were the salt of the earth, unlike our fellow posh friend. He shut up and I never saw him again after this match. The Isle of Man Tourism Board was not ashamed of our behaviour. We were welcome any time.

We then had to travel over to Castletown next day, where we were playing the Isle of Man's own eleven. Buses were organised to take the large following of Rovers fans down the island's east coast. We had brought more fans than the rest of the other teams put together. After all we were the nearest place geographically to the island and Heysham's ferry port was easy to get to. Athlone Town could potentially have been the best-supported team in the tournament. The island was full of Irish holidaymakers, making up the majority of visitors here. But like me, they probably thought of Athlone as a radio station.

Chris and I wanted to go to our next match and I persuaded him to thumb it with me to Castletown. We made it too, being picked up by a farmer on his way home from Douglas. He told us Castletown had its own brewery, which lifted our spirits. We were fed up of this Okells beer by now. In Castletown a few Rovers fans were already there. One passing motorist wound down his car window, waved at me then shouted, "Come on the Rovers!"

Strangely enough he turned out to be one of a few regulars who came in the Trades Club at dinner times. A printer called Jack. We didn't recognise each other at the time. It wasn't until I mentioned it a few weeks later, while talking at the bar, that he remembered me in my Rovers shirt in Castletown.

We all headed for the nearest pub and it was an anti climax. Their local beer here was even worse than Okells. I began to pine for dear old Blackburn and a pint of my favourite Thwaites bitter. On the bright side, Chris and I found the ground where our match against the three-legged ones was due to take place and sneaked in without anybody asking for money from us. This was

no mean feat as it wasn't a ground at all. Just a recreation ground, or so it looked to me. We sat down at one end and were joined by a talkative chap with a pad who must have been a local reporter. A bus arrived carrying Rovers fans. They were all charged to watch the game. Chris and I got away with it; we deserved a bit of luck after our privations. This was supposed to be a holiday after all.

On the field the impossible seemed to happen before our very eyes. Rovers went a goal down to this bunch of amateurs from an island containing barely half the population of Blackburn itself. Our central defender, David Mail, seemed to loft the ball over John Butcher in our goal to score in his own nets. This was becoming a farce.

We probably had better pub teams back home in Blackburn and I was getting a little angry by now. Eventually I lost my temper and shouted to the players that we would be going home tonight if Rovers got beat. This seemed to do the job. Whether it was Rovers lifting their game, or the Manxmen thinking about the loss of revenue if all the Rovers fans went home three days early. But we scored twice with goals from a Simon Barker penalty and Glen Keeley, to win the game 2-1. This booked our place in the final with Sunderland at the end of this week. Not bad really for what our Manager, Bobby Saxton said was a pre-season warm up exercise.

The next three days were boring, not having much money to play about with. Chris and I still spent our time at night on Strand Street, the boozing quarter of Douglas. We met a few characters down here and spent what little bit of this plastic Manx money we had on an occasional beer. At least we managed to survive this week, or rather our livers did. If you want to be on the wagon, go to the Isle of Man.

The final took place in the Douglas Bowl. Sunderland showed why they were a division above us. They were a different class and beat us. At the final whistle everybody ran onto the pitch. Both sets of fans shook hands with each other and the players. It was a nice gesture. Not much of a 25th birthday present for me today. The nearest to this was our ferry ride home. I heard the ferry croupier was up to her tricks again, taking both Rovers and Sunderland fans for an expensive paddle down the Swanee.

Chris and I cadged an unlikely lift off a troupe of cubs and scouts from Accrington. They dropped me off on Yew Tree Drive, leaving me a walk up Lammack Road to my parents' house. Chris lived in the Knuzden district of Blackburn, on the way to Accrington. So he was probably in his bed before me.

Later this month the football season started properly. Rovers' first league match was down at Selhurst Park where we were playing Crystal Palace again. Not a happy hunting ground, especially for me, but I fancied exorcising any ghosts remaining from that fateful trip back in 1978. This was a good opportunity. My life had gone through a few changes this very week. On Monday August 20th 1984, I started work on my Manpower Services Commission Community Programme. Everybody knew these as schemes and they were looked down upon accordingly.

Later in this same week, Thursday August 23rd, I moved away from my parent's house to a

council flat across town in Queens Park Flats. These were high rise blocks, thirteen stories high. Luckily mine was only on the first floor.

In between all this state of flux in my life, I still managed to travel over to watch Rovers get beat in the Manx Cup Final at Wigan Athletic. A few mates went over in my car. Finding Wigan's Springfield Park ground was our most difficult problem. We lost our way and ended up at Central Park, home of Wigan Rugby League Club. This was better than the soccer ground. Eventually we found the correct ground, but for all our efforts we still got beat in the final off a team from a lower division.

It was a morning start again for my second thumbing trip to Palace on Saturday, August 25th. I was getting out of this habit of thumbing it down after the pubs shut. A good night's sleep was far more preferable and useful to me now. Growing older was possibly making me a bit wiser, though not much, probably more tired. Also on most occasions I'd had to hitch it through the night anyway. It was as easy thumbing a lift in the more sociable hours than the small ones. After my last experience of thumbing it to Palace with Frank Andrews, getting a good night's sleep was a necessity.

This morning was an early start, around 5.00am. It was a new experience for me having to get to Samlesbury's M6 junction from another side of town. Where I lived before was only a mile or two from the Saxon Inn, normally a great place for starting out for the M6 motorway. Now just getting to the hotel was a thumb job in itself, especially at this unearthly time in a morning, well before any buses were running.

My answer to this problem was to walk down to the Whitebirk district of Blackburn and try thumbing a lift on the arterial road. A lot of motorists would be using this route to the motorway from this side of Blackburn and from that side of East Lancashire. I wasn't in a bad place here, at the side of Whitebirk Drive, underneath a railway bridge. Very handy if it rained. This would become my new starting point for any future thumbing jobs. I didn't have to wait long for my first lift on this first occasion either. A car driver soon picked me up and took me Samlesbury. I didn't even have to jump out at the Saxon Inn. Then it was an easy run down to London. Only three lifts got me there for around twelve o'clock.

Not everything went my way going to Selhurst Park. A couple of tube rides took me to Brixton. Then I walked to Streatham and waited for a bus to Selhurst. To my amazement Rovers' double-decker bus, carrying some of our travelling fans, passed me while I was waiting. I jumped into the air and waved, trying to attract the driver's attention. But he either didn't see me or thought I was a lunatic. Other Rovers fans aboard did and waved back at me. I recognised a few faces, they definitely recognised me. A London transport bus was right behind Rovers' double-decker. Unfortunately it stopped loads of times before arriving in Selhurst.

I got off near Palace's ground and went for some chips and gravy from a mobile booth by the ground. Some Rovers fans were already eating theirs. They asked if it was me at the bus stop in Streatham, to which I replied in the affirmative and asked them why they didn't get their driver to pick me up. On the bright side, one of them said he was a mate of the driver and would get me a lift back to Blackburn. He introduced me to him before the kick off and told him I'd



hitched it down. At least there wouldn't be a repetition of mine and Frank's bad experience this time.

This was definitely a better trip than last time, even with half the battle over. Not just for me, for Rovers too. We managed to get a 1-1 draw this time. Chris Thompson put us ahead after 17 minutes, but they equalised in the last quarter of an hour of the match. So I was happy with Rovers' performance and my own with my thumb. Our fans got a special mention from Palace in their crowd control report. This reported on us bringing around 500 travelling supporters and said our behaviour was exemplary. It said: "Please come back". No doubt with the number of times Rovers and Palace's paths kept crossing, I would be taking them up on their offer.

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My Manpower Services Commission scheme was handy for one good thing. It got me every Friday off. I only started it in August, just after my Manx football trip. Being very nearly kicked off it due to a close call with my 25th birthday coinciding with the qualifying period for this scheme. To qualify for a scheme, you had to be out of work six months if you were under 25 or a year if over this age. My timing seemed to be just perfect. I was made redundant in the first week in February, on the third. I turned 25 on August 4th 1984.

So I just qualified for a scheme by one day, after exactly six months. Another couple of days and it would have had to be a year, which was no good to me. The organisers even pulled me into the office to check out my qualifying period, but I made it, just!

Being on a scheme was probably the low point, status wise, of my working life. These had been set up to give long term unemployed people a chance of getting back into a working environment. So in a way they were a good thing. Unfortunately they became a refuge for the unemployable. Many people who took these schemes up had either been in prison or just couldn't hold a job down. Some of the lads I ended up with seemed to go on one for a year and then spend the next year out of work, biding their time waiting until their next one started. It was a shame because these lads had set their life round their schemes. They would save up from their pittance, putting it aside until they were back on the dole again.

There was some enjoyment time at the end of the week. On Friday afternoons Blackburn town centre used to be full of the Manpower boys. We used to collect our money from the town hall then off on the pop we went. Every pub you went in would find you bumping into at least one of your workmates. Then it was back to work on Monday. Schemes were officially called 'Community Programmes'. They were run by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). They used to be five days a week, but due to financial constraints, they were cut by a day and we all got Friday off.

This suited me down to the ground, especially as in my last job the lousy bosses dropped my wage substantially. They said my job was finished. My choice, a wage cut or redundancy. Really I should have took the loot, but we're all clever with hindsight. So having every Friday off became a luxury.

What we did on our scheme was a farce. I wasn't so happy about the idea of us taking away work from Blackburn Council's Direct Labour Operations. But there was no problem here and our schemes had been agreed with the council unions. No doubt after seeing what jobs we were given, they were probably glad their members had proper jobs. We were left to cut hedges and sweep driveways.

We started off up Green Lane, based in a caravan on the car park of Trendsetter Superstore. This was handy for not only shopping, but they had decent clean toilets in here. Our caravan had a thunderbox, which had seen better days, and nobody had any intention of using it. The thought of catching every form of typhoid or venereal disease put us all off using this disgusting device.

We all seemed to get on with each other, apart from a lad called Phil. There's always one. This lad was an oddball. He used to irritate the lads who smoked by always asking them to save him a couple of drags from their fags. He never seemed to buy his own and they saw him as a sponger. He used to tap every one of us up for the odd couple of pence for the shop, or his bus fare. He eventually upset us all and was gradually hounded out of our gang.

The ganger was an odd sort too. He was called Brian and was over twenty stone. He came from Leigh and spoke with a strange dialect. His best one was pronouncing water as waiter. This used to bring us out in laughter when he was out of earshot. Our favourite phrase was: "Put some waiter in the kettle". This was in combination with a lad in the gang called Dave. He was as skinny as a rake and spoke very strangely too. He used to say kekkle instead of kettle and miggle for middle. And his cup was always on the 'mankelpiece'.

Being in our caravan could be a danger in itself. One of our lads, called Gabby, told me how he nearly blew one up on another site. He left a calor gas stove on and its flame went out, luckily a non-smoker heard a hiss and Gabby got away with it. It turns out this wasn't an unusual occurrence. Somebody actually did blow up a cabin on a site somewhere in Blackburn. Knowing Gabby, he was gormless enough to do just that to our caravan.

We were moved to another site for a few weeks. No problem of our cabin blowing up this time. It kept falling down all by itself. The MSC used to deliver us an unassembled cabin on the back of a council wagon. Our job was to put it up. It was obvious we were not cut out for this job. We could put the bolts and nuts through the correct holes, even screw them together. It was when we put nails in things used to go wrong. Every morning we would come to work and our cabin would be a pile of flattened wood, a bit like a shanty town after a hurricane. So our first job of the day was putting it up again.

We didn't mind this task and eventually got it right, it stopped falling down. Then it started being broken into. We couldn't have everything. Our task was to cut people's hedges when we were up Green Lane. The only problem here was the size of gardens on this council estate. They were enormous. Far too expansive for what most people living here wanted. It also meant them being full of dogs, cats and other assorted wildlife.

There was a bit of variety in this job. One day the boss wanted us to clear a load of material from a piece of land, then dig up the surrounding ground. I told him if we were not careful it

would fill up with water. This was because the terrain was damp and boggy. Brian had to have his way and after our morning's digging we went to the cabin for dinner and our usual game of cards. Later we went back and found we'd dug ourselves a duck pond. The rest of the afternoon was spent filling in what we had dug earlier. We decided to stick to cutting hedges after this.

Our stupidest job was being sent up Edgworth to build dry stone walls, then we had to knock them down at the end of our working day. On the bright side, at least I got a lift here from outside Queens Park Hospital, near where I lived. The council van would also drop me off by Old Bank Lane on its way back to the town centre.

Edgworth was quite a nice place to work, especially when it was sunny weather. Its only drawback was being so isolated. Most of the lads were happy to sit in our cabin and play cards. Brian used to make himself a cup of tomato soup and then drop off for our extended dinner times. I'd got into the habit of enjoying a pint on my dinner hour. Here it was the policy of staff not being allowed to go boozing at dinnertime. But we did hear of some gangs who escaped to the pub sometimes.

Our dinners could sometimes go on for up to two hours, especially when it was raining. We were always being rained off. Eventually me and a couple of our lads decided we were going to sneak off down the road from our cabin into Edgworth. We started going to a chippy in the centre of the village. One day it was a scorcher. We decided to go for a pint in one of the pubs near this chippy. This was like an oasis in a desert.

Back in the cabin, Brian was still asleep. He wasn't for doing much, so we grabbed our tools and got on with a bit of work. He never noticed whether we had been drinking. We went to the pub every day after that, while we were up Edgworth.

Another good piece of news for me, as far as hitchhiking was concerned, was a press report of the M65 motorway making good progress. There was a possibility of the stretch from Blackburn to Clayton-le-Moors being open by the end of this year. It was already open from Nelson to Clayton and seemed to be ahead of schedule due to good weather. This was good, but it was progress in the other direction I wanted. From Blackburn to the M6 which would be far more useful to me when it came to watching Rovers. Most of our away matches were down South or in the Midlands.

So a few weeks after my Manx trip with Chris Roe, the lights of London beckoned again, for the second time in my case after going to Crystal Palace again. Rovers had made a great start to this season. After our draw at Palace we thrashed Carlisle United 4-0 at Ewood Park in our first home match. Ian Miller scored, Chris Thompson got a couple, but it was great to see Simon Garner get one after a quiet pre-season. In midweek we managed to grab a draw at Huddersfield, making us undefeated in our first three games. Very unusual for Rovers, a good start like this.

Rovers were playing Fulham at Craven Cottage on Saturday, September 8th. No chance of Chris coming down with me this time. He was working, although he was interested in travelling down the morning of the match on a service train. I'd actually done this before, a couple of years before when we played them in 1982. What always stuck in my mind about Fulham's Craven Cottage ground was there actually being a proper little cottage on their ground. Although I don't

think it was the real Craven Cottage which gave its name to this ground.

One of their fans at the time told me their ground had been built on a country estate owned by Anne Boleyn. She seemed to get everywhere. West Ham's Upton Park was called the Boleyn Ground. I just hoped Rovers could give Fulham the chop.

I still had my car, but fancied hitching down on Friday and having a night out with Alan Jones. He was working in London not far from Fulham's ground in Roehampton. Even better for me was Alan would be driving up to Blackburn on Sunday. So it would be two nights out in London for me to enjoy.

Hitching down was easy, thanks to me setting off in mid morning. My journey took about six or seven hours, with me arriving around teatime. Al's sister, Barbara, made me some tea, then I was off out with Al and her partner, Derek. I never really knew whether they were married or not and didn't care either. They looked after me like I was a long lost relative. Visitors from Blackburn were especially welcome down here.

We went for a pub-crawl round Fulham itself, not Putney near where Fulham Football Club's Craven Cottage is located. In fact Chelsea's Stamford Bridge was a lot nearer, a hop, skip and a jump from where we went for a beer or two. I didn't recognise the area from when I travelled down last season. We even went in the Britannia, which seemed so different from when Rovers played Chelsea that time. I liked it round Fulham, we went in a few pubs as well as the Britannia. These included the Stag and the King's Head, well known for being frequented by Chelsea fans on match days. They were known for putting pretty good groups on at night. We watched a good one tonight.

After our night out we caught one of London's highly sociable late buses back to Roehampton, by way of Fulham Broadway and Putney Bridge tube stations. I crashed out on a settee and was lost to the world until early morning.

Next morning we had a good breakfast made by Barbara. Then me, Al, Derek and Al's nephew Paul set off for a drink round Putney then on to our match at Fulham. We were a bit boisterous in one pub, singing Rovers songs. This went down well with the pub's locals, who sang in support of Fulham, but not its landlord. He asked us to leave, at least until after the match was over. He obviously didn't know Rovers fans reputation for non-violence. But from his point of view, he was still in Chelsea land and was taking no chances. At least we weren't barred, but we had no intention of going back later.

Rovers got beat 3-2 by Fulham. Keeley and Brotherston grabbing our couple. I thought our draw at Palace was a flash in the pan. I had never seen Rovers win in London. Me going to watch them in the capital was like the kiss of death. After the match we went back to Derek and Barbara's place, had our tea, before going out again. It was great fun down here, apart from Rovers' result and London's pricey and yucky beer. And it was nice knowing there was a lift home for me next day.

## Chapter 8

### *Beware the Grim Reaper*

It wasn't until half way through the 1984-85 Season before I started hitchhiking to Rovers away matches again. My car was a waste of time, far too unreliable for travelling any great distance. It seemed to spend more time in the garage than outside my new home of Queens Park Flats. I moved up here towards the end of August. It seemed like a strange coincidence how after being offered a job on a MSC Community Programme in August, a week later I was offered a flat up Queens Park by Blackburn Council.

They were interconnected anyway, like Blackburn's old mill owner days, where your boss owned where you lived and which school your kids went to. But on the other side of the coin, I'd always said I'd leave home at the age of 25. Now my parents' comfortable nest had been well and truly flown.

At least I knew my next door neighbour in Victoria House. He was a lad I used to work with at my first job. Martin was his name. I had been in his flat a couple of times before moving up here. It was very comfortable on my first visit. Next time I called it was virtually devoid of its contents. Bailiffs had called to take stuff to pay maintenance owed to Martin's ex-wife. Strangely enough, it was the first place Blackburn Council offered me. I took it because with Martin next door, he would be handy for borrowing stuff off.

A good thing and a bad thing about Queens Park Flats was its heating system. It was an under-floor type, which heated up my living room and the corridor. It was on permanently all year round, apart from four months from May to the beginning of September. It was expensive too. You paid for heating as part of your rent. This meant residents simply turned it up and opened their windows when it got hot. And did it get hot! You roasted in these flats.

Martin next door and I were not types who missed an opportunity. He had got into a habit of making home brew beer. My mother had made this for years, so it wasn't long before I became an adherent of Blackburn's other well-known industry. My first fermenting bin was an old five-gallon paint bucket, found in someone's back garden while working on my scheme. After giving it a good washing, I bought a home-brew kit from Boots. Martin went halves with me and we used our combined collection of bottles we had been saving up for this purpose.

Sometimes it can lead you into bad habits. We used this as an excuse to buy glass bottles of cider, which we drank most nights over a three-week period. Our collection built up very quickly and soon a batch of home brew bitter was bubbling very nicely in a corner of my living room. Incredibly it only took a weekend to ferment. My biggest problem was finding somewhere cold enough to put it so the clearing process could take place. My answer to this was leaving it in my kitchen, with the window open. It took a week or so for its sediment to drop, but my flat was draughty.

This first batch turned out all right. Typical of most new amateur brewers, I couldn't wait to get stuck into it. Martin and I were guzzling it a fortnight later. It wasn't ready, but still drinkable.

We took it in turns to make it after this first batch. I got pretty good at making it. Eventually I bought a pressure barrel. So we still took it in turns to make bottled beer, but my barrel was an extra treat. All my mates ended up visiting me at some time or another.

We didn't always get it right. All sorts of experiments were tried. We shoved in double the amount of sugar you were supposed to in one batch. Our result was like rocket fuel. We had a night on the sozzle when it was ready. It made us argue all night about nothing. After this we decided to follow the instructions on the tin.

Even these didn't always work. I made a batch of stout with a kit bought from a stall on Blackburn Market. It seemed to go all right, but one night when it was clearing in my kitchen, I heard this almighty bang. One bottle had blown its top. Then another blasted its top off and half the bottle away. There was this horrible black sticky liquid all over the place. It looked and smelt like bile.

Hurriedly, I stuck all my remaining bottles in the bath and filled it with cold water. They still kept on exploding through the night. Next morning my bath was a collection of broken glass and dark liquid. Luckily what remaining booze was left was soon transferred to my pressure barrel. Then it could hiss and fart to its heart's content. This stuff was like the rot-gut cowboys gave Indians. It had to be drunk with lemonade.

One week in November I went out for a pint with Chris Roe. My sister had been up earlier on one of her visits this month and invited me to come down to Reading again some time. I persuaded Chris to come with me to watch Rovers game at Portsmouth on Saturday, December 1st 1984. We would stop off in Reading. He would have to crash out on a settee or the floor at Carole's place, but didn't mind.

At least this long journey would be broken up by a night out round Reading and somewhere where we could get our heads down. Any port in a storm, especially when it was on the way to Portsmouth. Carole didn't mind me bringing any of my mates down either. She had met Chris before, on one her trips up to Blackburn and been out with us down the Balaclava and Trades Club.

Another of my Rovers mates was also going down, a lad called Mark, who worked at NORWEB's Whitebirk Depot as a navvy. He was driving down in his car and offered to give us a lift back to Blackburn after the game. Ironically, I would manage to get a job here as a meter reader later on this year.

This lift back home was what finally persuaded Chris to take time off work and come to Portsmouth with me. Knowing there was a lift back to Blackburn made things easier. He didn't fancy spending all Saturday night at the side of a motorway. It was one hell of a way back from Portsmouth, especially by thumb.

The omens didn't look good for us though. Looking at the pop charts for that week, they seemed to sum up all the ironies and hardships of being a Blackburn Rovers fan. Top of the charts was 'I should have known better' by Jim Diamond, which is self-explanatory. No.2 was more

sympathetic, called 'I feel for you' by Chaka Khan. No.3 was 'The power of Love', which is what all football fans must have, by Frankie goes to Hollywood. No.4 was 'The Riddle' by Nick Kershaw, about why we do daft things like hitch hiking to Portsmouth. No.5 was 'Never ending story' by Limahl, which is also self-explanatory.

Also in the Top Ten for this week were records called 'Teardrop', 'Hard habit to break' and 'Wild Boys' to make even non-superstitious people like me worry what we were letting ourselves in for. This latter was the one I wanted to avoid most of all.

Friday afternoon soon came. We met up in Blackburn town centre then had a walk up to the West View pub on Revidge Road. After a couple of pints we set off down the motorway at around two o'clock. Things seemed to go very well. Lifts were in abundance and we were in Reading for eight o'clock. Carole had moved from Southampton Street, near Reading's town centre, across the River Thames to Caversham. When we found her new place, Chris and I headed for a pub round the corner. She and some of her mates joined us for a drink later. It was a good night out, both Chris and I and Carole's house-load of people all slept like logs.

Next morning Carole made us breakfast, then we were on our way to Pompey. We headed to the other side of town. One of Reading's three M4 motorway junctions, this middle one, also took you to Basingstoke. We managed to thumb a lift to the outskirts of here. Then we had a stroke of luck by being picked up by a Portsmouth fan. He was called Terry, a bailiff from Fareham. He thought we were fans of his team because I was hitching with my Rovers scarf tied round my wrist. I'd hoped this might attract the attention of any travelling Rovers fans. But Terry was more than good enough. He thought it was an old Pompey scarf.

He drove to his house in Fareham and then took us back to his favourite pub. It was called the Winston Churchill, overlooking Portsmouth Harbour and Spithead. You could see the Isle of Wight from here very clearly. I didn't realise how close it was. Terry said it was a good idea having a drink with him as Pompey had a minority of hooligans who would seek out away fans, pouncing on them in nearby pubs next to Portsmouth's Fratton Park ground. He was a big lad, a typical bailiff. We'd be all right in this pub, all the rest of its regulars were friendly too.

After an enjoyable drink in Terry's local, he dropped us outside Fratton Park and we joined the hordes of Rovers fans standing on one end. It surprised me just how many we brought down because of its long distance from Blackburn. Mark from NORWEB was on our visitor's end. He'd been down last night, telling us there had been prostitutes everywhere. A ship had been expected to dock and Portsmouth's working girls had come down expecting to make a killing over this weekend. Sadly for these practitioners of our World's oldest profession, it didn't arrive. No doubt one or two Rovers fans stopping over would have made good substitutes. Some probably were.

The match itself ended in a 2-2 draw, but we were happy with this result, knowing Pompey had a decent home record. We were actually 2-0 up at half time, with Pompey doing our job for us by scoring twice in their own nets. Their first one was unlucky. Ian Miller hit his shot against a post and it bounced out only to hit a defender running in to clear it. Their second own goal took everyone by surprise, especially their player who headed the ball over his own goalie. I say we

were happy, even after giving away our lead, because we were made to sweat for our away point. They threw everything and the kitchen sink at us. It was a point well earned. It meant for the first time in years, we were top of our league, albeit on alphabetical order. We were proud and happy Rovers fans today.

Chris was even more so. His cousin, Mark Patterson, played for Rovers today. It was also good to have a local lad in our team. It was unusual for me. My only three hitchhiking partners all had Blackburn Rovers players as cousins. Frank and Terry Andrews were also Derek Fazakerley's cousins.

Chris and I were even happier when Mark gave us a lift home like he promised. We gave him a couple of quid apiece. Later during the night I did a bit of driving for him. We wouldn't let Chris take over. He'd recently passed his driving test. Mark and I decided he could find out about driving the hard way, in his own car.

Coincidentally we drew Pompey away in the third round of the FA cup this season. It ended goalless. The follow on from Rovers draw at Portsmouth was us winning our replay 1-0. We were then drawn away at Oxford United in the next round. They had already beaten us in the League and League Cup. But tonight it was our turn and we won 1-0. Chris, Mark, another mate called Oggy and I linked up again and went to this match in Mark's car. We had a great night out, especially in Banbury after the match. It was full of Rovers fans celebrating.

In the fifth round of the cup we got a tie everybody wants. A home draw to Manchester United. Chris and Mark and I took the day off work and got ourselves sozzled before this match. We lost Mark somewhere, which was a good job for him because Chris and I got battered after the game, which we lost 2-0. We were set upon by at least a dozen United fans, leaving me with a black eye, which took weeks to clear. I was the butt of many jokes for the duration of my shiner. Even worse was the number of black eye cures people used to offer me. From ice packs to steak and leeches. None of these remedies were tried. Just dark glasses to cover it up.

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On New Year's Day 1985, a Tuesday, I'd had a skinful like most other people the night before. Upon waking up around six o'clock in the morning for some reason, there was a desire to watch Rovers today. They were playing Barnsley at the Yorkshire club's Oakwell ground. Driving there was out of the question, not only because of the petrol cost and not being able to get a few mates out to split our juice price with me, but because of the amount of alcohol in my bloodstream. I'd blown up enough balloons last night.

So after my usual big breakfast, it was a walk up Haslingden Road. This was different to my usual route of hitching down the M6. Barnsley was on the other side of the Pennines and had to be reached using the M62 and M1 motorways. Going this way wasn't unfamiliar to me. I'd thumbed it to Haslingden over this route, known as the Grane Road, once or twice for an odd night out in this town at weekends. Plus I'd been to Barnsley a couple of times before, including in my useless piece of Italian scrap metal parked outside my flat.



The Grane Road was a happy hunting ground for me and today it was up to its usual productive standard. A car soon pulled up. I nearly jumped out my skin, thinking maybe I'd had far too much last night. After all, it had been New Year's Eve. This particular car was black, incredibly it was a hearse. This grim reaper wasn't grim at all. He worked for a funeral directors and was travelling back to his home in Rochdale. I was tempted to ask him if his name was Paul Bearer.

He was quite an entertaining character, like funeral directors often are, telling me some of the funny things, which happen in his job. Some of the bodies he dealt with used to burp and fart, which used to scare him when he first started. He'd also had dead bodies, which sat up and used to make cracking sounds.

This most entertaining and pleasant chap dropped me off on the M62 at Birch Services. From here I managed to hitch a lift to Huddersfield. Time was running out by now, so I decided to catch a train from here to Barnsley. This did the trick and got me there with an hour to spare before the kick off. Loads of Barnsley fans were making their way to the match. I popped into a pub across from their station. It was called the South Yorkshireman.

The match itself was an anticlimax; ending in its usual draw like it always seemed to do whenever I'd been across to this side of the Pennines. One apiece this time. Noel Brotherston scored for us. Good old 'Broth Head' had a habit of grabbing important goals for Rovers. He got this one after quarter of an hour. Both goals were scored in the first half. Barnsley equalised eight minutes after ours, from a dubious penalty. This was after a linesman's flag too.

Just after the restart, we had a power cut and Oakwell's floodlights failed. Quite topical really. The Miners Strike was at a crucial stage; I was fully behind them too. Barnsley was their heartland and an obvious place for power cuts. I met one or two miners from round here during their strike. In our Trades Club we did everything we could to help them. A support group was set up for them. We stood with local miners from Burnley, in Blackburn Town Centre, holding bucket collections for them and raising money for their families. Sadly they were starved back to work. Then had their pits shut down. I hated the Tories for this. Britain's miners were good people. They deserved better.

Unfortunately it wasn't the heroic miners who knocked Barnsley's floodlights off, but an electric substation across from their Oakwell ground which failed. It was soon sorted out. Play only stopped for seven minutes, not even that, as football continued for a few minutes in the dim light after their lights went out. I shouted out: "Shove a fifty pence piece in your meter."

After the match finished I managed to get on a Rovers coach, after seeing Paul Astley who ran our away travel club. He made sure I paid my away travel membership subs and half the coach fare home. This was a good enough deal to me. It was quite hairy at one stage after this match. On my way back to our coach with Paul Astley, who I'd just struck up a deal with to get home, mounted police suddenly charged past me. A number of Barnsley fans had tried climbing over a wall at the top of this coach park. They were no match for the mounties though. They definitely got their men today.

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On April 27th 1985, I travelled to watch Rovers play Charlton Athletic again. It was seven years since Frank Andrews and I hitched it down here last time. I'd also been down a few times since. On a Rovers coach, by train and in a mate's car. What inspired me more than anything to travel this time, was the sad fact poor old Charlton could have been about to lose their famous old Valley ground.

Due to soaring property prices in London, a lot of football clubs in the capital seem to have been taken over by property developers. Charlton's Valley was particularly vulnerable due to its position. It was near the Blackwall Tunnel, with a motorway running nearby, and London's Docklands. They were being renovated and becoming much in demand for Yuppie housing.

Charlton were becoming victims of their own location and size of their enormous ground. Quite ironic, their well-known fame of having English football's largest club ground could have been their major downfall. But they were not on their own. And it wasn't just London facing this problem of property speculation. Things seemed to be going crazy as house prices were going through the roof. Down here you were talking about property values rising by £1,000 a week. Taking over a football team and shutting them down was a mouth-watering prospect for some greedy speculators.

I hitched it down on my own, as was my usual case by now. Setting off early on, around six o'clock in the morning and arriving in London in quite a reasonable time. This had been quite a busy week for me. On Thursday night it had been the Annual General Meeting of Blackburn Trades Council Club. I was a committee member and it was our first meeting of this kind after saving our club from going bust. Luckily it was what I call a 'backslapper' meeting. Most members who turned up for this AGM were grateful for efforts me and our other committee members had put in to save our club from what was nearly certain closure.

On Friday night, before setting off for this trip, I went to watch Billy Bragg at Blackburn's King George's Hall. What a fantastic concert he put on. It was especially poignant due to the continuing Miners Strike. I was up for the striking miners and all my efforts, apart from saving Blackburn's trade union club, were spent raising money and going to meetings in support of the miners.

On the way down I was dropped off at Watford Gap Services. Another chap was stood at the motorway slip road thumbing it down to London too. He told me he was a lorry driver. Unfortunately he was going to be in big trouble when he got there. He'd nipped into this motorway service station's transport cafe for a brew then fell asleep, due to driving all night. When he woke up his wagon had been stolen. Its load was a million cigarettes.

His boss went through the roof when he rang him to pass on this bad news. No wonder he was having to hitch it to London. He looked a very forlorn character. I can imagine what his gaffer might have said when asked to get out of bed and sort out a lift down for this driver. Not only was there going to be a UB40 in the post, but also those boys in blue would be waiting for a word with him too. My companion seemed very upset about losing his wagon though. No threats or backhander in this case, I don't think. After a while we managed to get a lift together,

from a couple of lads in a car who were going down to London themselves. They were very sympathetic to our unlucky fellow traveller. We wished him well when he got out just as we got into London.

I was dropped off near the North Circular Road and caught a tube to London Bridge Railway Station. It meant me catching a Network South East train to Charlton itself. This gave me a chance to have a look around the local area and call in a chippy for something to eat as it was now around dinnertime. This game was our last throw of the dice for promotion this season. We should have been up by now, but screwed up again. On Tuesday night of this week we got a beating at home from another South London team, Crystal Palace.

We just couldn't afford to keep throwing things away, even though it seemed to be an old familiar story. Rovers were always known for being great up to Christmas, then fading away by the time Easter came. Our promotion hopes seemed to be disappearing faster than South American trade unionists. Our problem was having no money to buy a big enough squad. We tended to run out of decent players as each season went on. By Easter they were either injured or suspended.

In the Valley, Charlton's ground was different since my last visit. Our visitor's section, behind one of the goals, was all seated. It looked as though other major improvements and building work had been made throughout Charlton's ground. Those heady days of being England's largest club football stadium were long gone. It was a shame in some ways, but progress cannot be stopped. Not even in South East London.

Now this is where my memory could be askew. I've been to Charlton quite a few times, not only by thumb, but also by train, coach and car. Rovers and the Addicks seemed to have played each other a lot through the 70s and 80s, not only in league matches, but in cup competitions too. So trying to remember which game at the Valley their fans held a demonstration at half time was no easy task, even after being there in person. I think it was our last visit to here before they had to leave - this match described here. But it may have been on another occasion. All I can do is relate my version of events. At least I saw Charlton fans at their best and most innovative, as everybody else did, in their very clever and successful political campaign to get their Valley back.

Chris Roe had travelled down by train with his mate Graham. At half time Charlton fans held a procession round the pitch calling for greater support from their people and to fight to keep their ground. Chris and Graham joined these supporters on their demonstration, parading round their pitch. This was much to the amusement of the travelling Rovers fans. Not all of Charlton's fans were pleased at this show of solidarity, some told them to get off their demo, but our two lads meant well and kept walking with them. After all, shouldn't football fans stick together? We all wanted the Addicks to keep their beloved Valley too. If it had been us in their unfortunate position, I would have welcomed them with open arms.

We lost this match today, only by 1-0 though, but a loss is a loss. This virtually kicked our chances of promotion into touch, as usual. But Charlton lost a lot more than we did later this year. They had to vacate their Valley and were in exile for around seven years. But their fans can go down in history for achieving one of football's greatest examples of fan power.

They refused to lie down and give up. The 'Valley Party' was formed and campaigned for Charlton Athletic to return to their ancestral home. Their success is perhaps one of the greatest achievements ordinary football fans have ever won. The little guy standing up for his club. Charlton fans, we salute you.

One good thing to come out of this weekend was another Blackburn sporting institution having success over South East London. Denis Taylor won the Snooker World Championship. He beat Steve 'Interesting' Davis – who came from Plumstead, not far from the Valley, in what was probably this competition's most exciting final to date. All of Blackburn seemed to hold its breath when Denis sunk that last black in the final frame. What a feeling when he won. Maybe Rovers should have borrowed his 'Joe 90' glasses. After all, the theme music from 'Joe 90' was written by a chap from Blackburn and this junior puppet character did work for an organisation called W.I.N. We seemed to have forgotten all about doing this.

## [Chapter 9](#)

### *London Calling*

On October 12th 1985 we were in another season and I took my life in my hands and made the ultimate courageous journey to an away match. Quite literally the Lion's Den. Rovers were playing Millwall. This lot had the most feared set of fans in England's Football League. I likened it to something out of one of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe detective stories. Down these mean streets of Millwall a man must go who is not himself mean; who is neither tarnished nor afraid. But in reality Millwall play in London's New Cross district, Millwall's really across the River Thames, on the Isle of Dogs.

I wasn't sure whether I was neither tarnished nor afraid. These mean streets would be treated with respect and deathly silence. 'See all, hear all, say nowt' is pretty good advice. Technically I had actually watched Rovers play an away match against Millwall, strangely enough at Ewood Park, not the Den. We drew them in the F.A. Cup in the 1978-79 Season. We were drawn away, but Millwall were suspended from their own ground due to their perennial problem of football hooliganism. This match was switched to Ewood Park. Rovers had to play in away colours, but most importantly we won 2-1. A similar result at their proper home ground would be more than welcome.

I did a bit of research for this match, going through my street map of London and my copy of a CAMRA good beer guide. There had been a story in the Lancashire Evening Telegraph about Blackburn's own Thwaites Brewery opening a pub in London. Rovers' London supporter's branch would be meeting here from now on. This pub was in Islington, North London, not far from Arsenal's Highbury football ground. It was called George IV, on Copenhagen Street. I fancied going in this place and it made my Millwall trip a bit more attractive. By now I was going in the Trades Club a lot, being a committee member. So it would be from here where I set off from, after booking Friday off work from my NORWEB job.

Once again it was a letter to my little sister asking for use of her settee. No problem here, I don't take up a lot of room. She would be working during the day, but free for a jar or two at night. I decided to hitchhike to her place during Friday. Everybody thought my mind had gone this time. But I told people I would keep my mouth shut and avoid any potential trouble. Self-preservation is my greatest instinct.

This week of my trip had started by us beating Bradford City 3-0 last Saturday. Quinn, Keeley and Garner scored our goals. It set us up for our non-event mid week Milk cup-tie with Wimbledon. They were below us in League Division 2, but had hammered us 5-0 at their place in the 1st leg. We had only twelve senior players available for the 2nd leg at Ewood Park.

This match will be remembered for different reasons though. It turned out to be Rovers smallest ever gate for a major league or cup match - 2,160. After our thrashing in the 1st leg, it wasn't going to inspire a massive turnout. At least I was there. Plus we won 2-1, even though they scored first. Patterson and Quinn did our job for us. We were never going to pull five goals back and it was a lousy wet night weather-wise. Even I was in two minds about going to this match. But it was our first win in this cup competition in four years. At least our ghost was exorcised tonight.

By going to last week's Bradford match, I missed one of my best mate's wedding and reception. Keith Francis, Franny as I knew him, knew where I'd be on his big day but he didn't mind as long as I went to his night do. I did just that. Franny married Julie West. She was one of the daughters of last year's Mayor of Blackburn, Cliff West. They held their night do in St. Stephen's Conservative club. This took me by surprise, especially as her dad was a member of the Labour Party and a councillor too. Even our local press picked up on this issue. I reckoned it should have been held down the Trades Club, where I was a committee member.

Friday morning came and I started hitching a different way than my usual favourite place outside the Saxon Inn on Preston New Road. This time I walked down to my works depot at Whitebirk and stuck my thumb out just past the railway bridge on Brownhill Drive.

None of my colleagues saw me doing this, thank goodness. I would have had stick all week. They hardly had a chance as I didn't have to wait long for a lift. Besides, it was five o'clock in the morning. I'd been up since half three. My first lift took me to the Saxon and a few minutes later another lift dropped me down at the M6 junction. It wasn't a bad day either. I reckoned to be in Reading for teatime, maybe even a late dinner with a bit of luck.

Getting down the Midlands was easy, up to Stratford on Avon. But it was still early evening by the time I got to Reading. After this it was one of those usual nights out with my sister. She was back in Reading again this time. We went in one of her favourite pubs, the Travellers.

We had our usual night out, not in the Target this time. This place had shut down in similar circumstances to the Clarence in Blackburn's shopping precinct. Our town centre pub had been described as an embarrassment to the brewery and the town. Too many people had been thrown off its outside balcony.

Next day I went to one of the M4 junctions and got a lift off an Irishman who supported Queens Park Rangers. He had been into Reading to collect his jacket, which he'd lost the day before after a night out here like myself. It had been handed in, still with a wallet containing £50 he had left in his pocket. This chap was so pleased there were good people around. So in a way I may have benefited from his good fortune with a lift to London.

I was dropped off not far from where his favourite football team play on the West Side of his adopted city. My London street map was in my pocket, giving me directions to Thwaites' new pub up the Caledonian Road in Islington. A tube took me to Kings Cross Station.

Arsenal had been playing West Ham away at Upton Park this very morning. It had been an early kick off in case of drink related trouble. Policemen were all over the station. One copper told me this was in case West Ham supporters had been following travelling Arsenal fans back to their home turf. I knew what he meant. A few years ago a couple of mates and I went to watch Rovers play at Crystal Palace, using the service train. After our match we went back to Euston and had a meal in a cafe nearby. As we left this cafe loads of lads seemed to appear in the street outside from nowhere.

We quietly walked on to the railway station and broke away from this group. There were coppers everywhere, thankfully. The police then brought a hundred or so Liverpool fans into Euston. These West Ham fans must have followed them on the underground. It was like a military operation, both from the police and the pursuing yobbos. Luckily their quarry evaded them. We hadn't done so badly ourselves. East End yobbos might not have been able to discriminate between a Scouse accent and one from deepest Lancashire.

I told the policeman at Kings Cross I was a Blackburn Rovers fan and we were playing Millwall. He told me to watch myself going to their place. He said they were a bad lot, or at least some of them were. My lips would definitely be sealed, and not with super glue from Millwall's less reputable fans.

The pub I was looking for turned out to be a long walk from Kings Cross. But it really was a Thwaites house. Like an oasis in a flat ale desert. There were photographs of Blackburn on its walls. Their beer was keg; it couldn't really have been anything else. I'm a cask drinker, but compared to normal London beer, it was nectar from heaven.

Nobody came in the pub while I was there. So after the one pint my mind was made up to do a tour of the Old Kent Road and walk it to Millwall's ground. The tube took me to the Elephant and Castle and it was into the pub of the same name for a pint of bitter. This wasn't the famous original pub. It was more like an office block with a metal elephant and castle on top.

My next watering hole was the 'Henry Cooper'. It hadn't been open too long. I remember seeing the great man do the honours and open his namesake by way of the newspapers. Although to me 'Our 'enery' always looked too much of a fitness fanatic to go down the pub. Even one which was named after himself.

The next pub along the Old Kent Road was definitely one to avoid. It was called the Asylum.

With Millwall's reputation it would definitely have been pushing my luck by calling for a pint in this hostelry. So it was given a wide berth and a walk further down the road. As my walk took me towards Deptford, the floodlight pylons of the Den loomed fairly close. It was all terraced streets and the ground was down amongst them. Surprising really, maybe the Luftwaffe didn't bother much south of the river.

After a pint in Deptford, it was off to the match. The Den was down a maze of terraced streets. A bit like some of the older parts of Blackburn. My sense of direction seemed to go to pot and I couldn't find the visitor's entrance. Further down this labyrinth of streets was a Millwall skinhead. He had tattoos on his face. No chance of me asking him directions to the visiting supporter's section.

So it was a case of me taking my life in my hands and entering the ground via Millwall's end. After putting on my gormless face, I explained to a policeman my misfortune. He could see no football hooligan in my appearance so took me to a segregation area and let me through to stand with the Rovers fans. The ones who knew me asked what the hell I'd been up to, how I'd lived to tell the tale.

My luck was still with me, in more ways than one. We won this match 1-0; Simon Garner got our game's only goal. Our goalkeeper, Vince O'Keefe, saved a penalty too. We hadn't won away since our first match of the season, at Sunderland. I went to this 2-0 victory by train. A week later I actually read Simon Garner's electric meter at his house on Keswick Drive in Blackburn. I told him I'd enjoyed my time at this match and his performance. He asked me how much his bill would be. I told him to get a few more wins bonuses and he wouldn't have to worry.

A group of Rovers fans in a van offered me a lift home when I told them my plight. After the game we were given a police escort to their van, which was in a compound with Rovers' special coaches. As we drove towards the centre of London a car containing a couple of Millwall fans followed us for a mile or so, threatening us with all sorts of violence. It would have been funny if they had caught up with us, there were a dozen in this van. They would have to have been armed with guns. I didn't want to find out if they were, we never did.

They didn't follow us for long; probably realising their silly threats fell upon deaf ears. To them we were a waste of petrol. In the van we found them quite funny. It made the long journey home quite enjoyable. We got back to Blackburn in time for me to catch the last hour in the Trades Club. Nobody believed me when I told them there was a pub called the Asylum. They believed me even less when I said I'd accidentally gone in Millwall's end and lived to tell the tale.

More significant than anything though was my London duck being broken at last. This was the first time I'd actually seen Rovers win in the capital. It's definitely not been a happy hunting ground for Rovers, or me for that matter. I'd been on every league ground here, apart from Barnet, but this was the first and only time I've ever seen us win here. Hopefully now my duck was broken; Rovers would give me a few more good knees ups down the Smoke.

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In February 1986 I was working for NORWEB as a meter reader. This was a great job, much better than walking the streets. It also paid well, compared to my Manpower and first job pittance, and helped me afford to go to a lot of away matches. This was even handier, because within a month of starting here, at the end of last season, my car packed up. So hitch hiking to away matches became an attractive proposition once again. Also this job had a handy bonus. We were employed under a 39 hour week contract, but had an agreement to do 40 hours, meaning we had the last Friday of each month off. This was particularly good for travelling to long distance away matches and crashing down overnight.

By now I'd thumbed it to London a few times to stop with a mate of mine called Alan Jones. He'd been on the committee of Blackburn Trades Club briefly before going away to university. He became disillusioned with this and jacked it in. He was now living at his sister's flat in Roehampton. I was always welcome here and had stopped once or twice, usually for demonstrations of one sort or another, or the occasional night out as a change from my routine in Blackburn.

Not too far from Alan's sister's place was Fulham's Craven Cottage ground. They were the nearest football club, although Wimbledon's Plough Lane ground wasn't so far away either in the opposite direction down London Underground's Green District Line.

Rovers were playing at the Cottage on February 22nd 1986. This gave me a chance to have a night out with Alan in London, then go and watch Rovers' game at Fulham. I'd also decided to hitch it to Reading to see my sister on the Thursday to have a night out with her then crash out at her place. Three birds killed with one stone. So I took a week off work this time. No problem here as we didn't have set holidays at the Electric Board, it was all done in personal days. Plus my boss was pleased with this, because how many people take a week off in February? Only nutters like me who want to go trailing around our country watching football.

Rovers had got beaten at home last Saturday. Crystal Palace licked us 2-1 at a frozen Ewood Park. It was particularly annoying because this match only just went ahead after a fine effort by our ground staff to beat the big freeze. Only 4,825 turned up at this game. I wondered what I was doing there myself. This awful season was quickly turning into a relegation battle.

Off the field events were more interesting than how Rovers were playing at the moment. Apart from punk rock groups The Damned and Public Image Ltd in this week's record charts, our local press had been full of reports from the enquiry into the train crash from when we played Carlisle earlier this season. A special train carrying 115 Rovers fans crashed at Preston station. 42 fans were taken to hospital. Luckily they didn't panic and conducted themselves very well and there were only a few serious injuries. It was reported how Rovers fans may have to wait eighteen months before being compensated.

Vinnie Andrews, Frank and Terry's younger brother, was on this train. He told me he was getting his own solicitor. Rumours were circulating of Rovers fans who were suing en bloc would only get minimum compensation. As usual, nothing but the best for ordinary working



class football fans.

It was what was becoming my usual easy trip down to Reading. Not as quick as last time, but not so bad, about seven hours from four or five lifts. This journey's biggest problem was how cold it was. My old black leather jacket with tassels was pretty warm, but it was February after all. I didn't expect a heatwave. Carole had moved across the River Thames from Reading into its suburb of Caversham. My sister and I wandered round some of the pubs on this side of the Thames with some of her mates.

Next day I thumbed a few lifts down the M4 to London. It was dead easy from Reading. Carole suggested again I try the scenic route on a bus along the Thames Valley, but knowing what things cost in London, I needed every penny in my pocket. Besides, my hitch to the Smoke took no time at all. I even got a lift off a lady driver. Quite unusual, for obvious reasons. But this lass was built like a tank, her car sank over to one side even with me in its passenger seat. She was on her way to Heathrow Airport, and could have passed for one of the Jumbo Jets. She was good company though, jolly like all big women seem to be. We never stopped yapping. This lady driver dropped me off at Feltham and then it was a lift to London itself. After being dropped off in London, it was by tube to Putney Bridge then a bus to Roehampton.

Alan was living with Barbara, his sister, Derek her partner and their two little lads. In the evening Al, Derek and I went for a few beers round Fulham, quite near Chelsea's Stamford Bridge ground. It always seemed confusing to me down here. Fulham was in Putney, whereas Chelsea was in Fulham. Just like Millwall was in New Cross and where the hell was Crystal Palace? All these London teams seemed to be in different boroughs than their name suggested. Good job their fans didn't have to travel to Port Vale very often. I could just imagine poor British Rail staff being bewildered by a bunch of Millwall or Chelsea fans asking for a ticket to Port Vale.

There were some good pubs round here. I'd been in them all before, either with Al or when I'd been down watching Rovers play Chelsea. There was the Stag; King's Head and the Stamford Bridge Arms, along with the Britannia. As per usual it was a case of keeping my mouth shut and not upsetting the locals. Last thing they needed was some drunken Northerner telling them their football teams needed renaming.

Next day things were not looking promising weather-wise and this soon became my match that never was. All this way to London for nothing, typical Mick. It had been cold, so Fulham's pitch had frozen overnight. The referee had no choice but to call this match off.

Not to bother. I'd enjoyed myself both on Thursday and the night before. At least there was no rush to get home, Alan and Derek wanted me to stay down for another night out. As much as I would have liked to take them up on their offer, money considerations wouldn't allow me. It wasn't so difficult getting lifts north on a Saturday afternoon. One followed another, like they do when you're not in a rush. Back home it just reinforced people's belief in me being some kind of madman. All my hardship getting to London - for nothing.

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Chris Roe was back on the road again with me for our match at Wimbledon a few weeks later, on March 22nd 1986. We decided to go down on Friday and combine this trip into not only a Rovers away match, but also to show our solidarity with the Wapping strikers. They had been sacked by Rupert Murdoch's News International. We planned on visiting them on their picket line. Ironically they were actually sending up a delegation of pickets to Barnoldswick for a solidarity visit with the striking Silentnight strikers. Chris and I made sure we had our 'Support Silentnight Strikers' badges on this weekend.

Our postponed game at Fulham was eventually played and we managed a creditable 3-3 draw in my 'match that never was'. We then hit a bad patch of home defeats. Millwall and Brighton both licked us at Ewood Park. Albion stuffed us 4-1 to rub salt in our wounds.

Now we were playing Wimbledon again. They had already knocked us out the Milk Cup after stuffing us 5-0 at Plough Lane earlier this season. Plus with the way Rovers were playing at the moment, our chances looked bleak. But you live in hope.

Chris came round to my flat for his breakfast at six o'clock on Friday morning. Then we went to Samlesbury to try our chances hitching it down. No detour to Reading this time. Straight down the motorway to the Smoke. It was an easy run today. It must have only taken around six hours from Blackburn to London itself.

There was plenty of time to kill. We planned on visiting the Wapping strikers before the match tomorrow, but at this early hour of Friday afternoon, we decided to go now. After all, if Al Jones wanted to visit the strikers, he could do it any time he wanted. We didn't have the luxury of living in London.

We caught a tube train to Wapping underground station and then spent ages trying to find out where was this News International picket line. Eventually we were successful and stood with the strikers after introducing ourselves to them. We told them we were down from Blackburn, which pleased them. One or two of them mentioned their colleague's trip up to Barnoldswick this weekend. They told us about police surveillance of their picket line, pointing out closed circuit TV cameras all over the place. There was a lot of bitterness towards their proprietor, Rupert Murdoch, even more towards the electrician's union (EETPU).

They were all right with me though when I admitted to being a member of the said treacherous union. Many EETPU members like me had given these strikers a lot of support. We were the ones who had to shoulder the embarrassment caused by betrayal from our own union. But it wasn't our fault, just our leadership's.

Chris and I stopped on the picket line for a couple of hours or so. We shouted 'Scab!' at the blackleg lorry drivers who were allowed through by police. Before we left for Alan's place, I swapped a 'Silentnight' dispute badge with one of the Wapping striker's badges. It shows wherever you went across the country; there was always someone in a long term industrial dispute.

The 'Silentnight' bed manufacturer's strike at Barnoldswick was dragging on too. Chris and I

went on a coach to a march and rally there organised by our Trades Council not many months before. I delayed our coach that day because I couldn't get the top off my 2 litre bottle of beer. Luckily our Club Secretary found a novel way of opening it by using a door as a vice and putting the top between its hinges. And so we all went happily ever after to Barnoldswick.

Chris and I then made our way over to Alan's place in Roehampton. He was still living with his sister Barbara and her partner Derek. I was busting for the bog by the time we got to Al's place. Unfortunately by the time I'd relieved myself the toilet had become a no-go area, at least for half an hour or so.

Derek seemed to have a knack of getting hold of some cracking joints of meat. So we had T-bone steak for our tea tonight. Then later on we were off out down Putney. There were quite a few of us. Al's brother, Tony, came with us and a mate of Derek's. Every time us Blackburn lads came down it was an excuse for a right good piss up.

Tonight followed that pattern. We caught a late bus back to Roehampton, singing Rovers songs and being told off by an old lady on the bus for our boisterous behaviour. Then we all crashed out. Chris and I had to settle for the front room. Him on a settee, me on the floor. Next morning we all woke up to Barbara cooking us breakfast. It was after this we all set off for the Wimbledon match. Derek was our navigator. He took us to the wrong tube station via Putney Bridge. We got off at one of the Wimbledon stations, but found out later it was South Wimbledon we needed. It wasn't so far, plus we saw the police on horseback on their way to the match.

Finding a pub was the main priority for us. We did eventually. One near Wimbledon's Plough Lane ground called The Woodman, next to an enormous railway bridge. I got talking to a Wimbledon fan in here who was covered in badges supporting the Wapping strikers. He was one of them himself and very pleased when I told him where Chris and me had been yesterday.

The only thing wrong with this trip was the match itself. A one apiece draw, nothing to write home about, apart from Ian Miller scoring for us. After it was all over, we went to the correct tube station this time and back to Al's for our tea. We then had another night out. Not Fulham this time, just some of the local pubs round Roehampton. We hitched it back to Blackburn when we came round next day. Plenty of time to get home, it didn't take long either. At least we had been lucky with our timing this time.

Ironically we were to travel Wapping again later this year, for a big rally organised by the TUC in support of Wapping's News International strikers. We took a coachload down from the Trades Club. There was a lot of trouble at this event, but me, Chris and our other colleagues from the Trades Club kept out of trouble. In fact I was actually in a pub when it kicked off, having been separated from my colleagues. When I left this hostelry, the road outside was full of bricks and other masonry, yet I never saw any rioting.

Chris saw a bit of it. He was in another pub nearby when a copper on horseback actually burst into this pub. It was a clever way of calling "Time gentlemen please", then getting the place cleared.

## Chapter 10

### *Nightmare at Elm Park*

Later in the year of 1986, during Season 1986-87, I finally got a chance to stop at my sister's place and watch Rovers play in her adopted town of Reading - at last. I had visited this town once or twice, but usually to watch Rovers play other teams down South. Their team's nickname was the Biscuitmen, or Royals, as they seemed to like calling themselves at the time and they played at Elm Park.

This game was due to take place on Saturday, October 4th, 1986. It was the culmination of 2,000 miles of travelling around the country over our last three away matches. Reading had gained promotion from Division 3 the previous season. There was no way I was going to miss this away match. Especially with somewhere to get my head down after a night out. Being my sister's adopted town also made it a bit special. It was also only our second ever league visit to their Elm Park ground.

Things were not looking promising for Rovers this week. We got beat 2-1 at home on Wednesday night off Plymouth Argyle. A Derek Fazakerley penalty after 16 minutes looked to have put us on our way to an expected victory. But this was definitely a game of two halves. They got a couple in the second half as Rovers lay down and surrendered. We hadn't won in five games now.

My work situation had changed once again. No more job as a meter reader with NORWEB anymore. Trade union activities had scuppered any chance of my temporary contract being made permanent. I had been wisely advised to keep my head down and mouth shut by Blackburn EETPU Branch Secretary, Bob Horman. But I just have to keep getting myself involved when it comes to different workplaces. It's obviously my chosen path.

Being sacked or made redundant for trade union activities has become an occupational hazard for me. People make their own bullets and I end up firing them. When you live by the gun, in Mick's case, you die by it. So I've ended up becoming a martyr for others, whilst doing myself no good whatsoever career-wise.

Everybody else on temporary contracts was taken on, apart from myself and a lad called Arthur Quinn. He, like me, had been a union activist. In his case it had been at Mullards, where he previously worked. He knew Blackburn EETPU Branch Chairman, Stan Grime, who was Convenor here.

It looked like our bosses were taking no chances with Arthur or me. We were the only two casuals in our office who were not taken on. Very sad, because this must have been my best and most enjoyable job so far. It was great, apart from hazards like fierce dogs and even fiercer people. It also paid well.

Arthur fell on his feet, managing to get a good job at British Telecom. Then he took me by surprise when he emigrated to Australia. It wasn't like that for me. I was on the rock'n roll again, stuck in Queens Park Flats. Back to hitchhiking to Rovers away matches again.

Everything went to plan for my Reading trip. I set off on Friday morning, a day before our match and arrived in Reading by early afternoon. My route took me to such seats of culture and learning as Stratford upon Avon followed by Oxford. Then a chap from Kenya picked me up and dropped me off at one of Reading's M4 motorway junctions. It gave me a chance to walk past a pub call 'The World Turned Upside Down'. This was a pub I was determined to go in one day, mainly because of such a wonderful name. I did eventually on another trip to my sister's.

Carole was living in a different house once again, not actually in Reading itself. This place was a staff nursing home called Esther Carling House. She had lived here before, when she first got her job as a mental nurse down here. It was attached to Borocourt Hospital, where she worked, although a mile or two down the road from Nettlebed to Reading. Near Sonning Common.

She had a different boyfriend too, working and living at the same residential home. A lad called Les, nothing like Harry or Frank, those hairy, oily bikers she lived with before. Les was a Scouser, an Evertonian, and he had short hair. He also liked her to be wearing skirts. This must have been a total culture shock for Carole. She was normally leather clad herself, like most of the lads she had been involved with. It took me by surprise seeing her with this new look. Very prim and proper.

Les seemed a decent bloke according to Carole's letters. I'd also met him when they came up to Blackburn over Christmas. Les had stopped at his family's place in Liverpool and then came over for a night out with me and Carole in the Trades Club.

Things were helped by Carole sending me a letter a couple of days before this match. Directions to her place and bus numbers were enclosed. Her home warden, Mrs. Coleshill, also said a room would be made available for me. She must have been used to staff having friends and family visiting them for an odd day or two.

Things were getting better all the time. Unfortunately Carole asked me what time I would be arriving. The last thing you ask a hitch hiker, even when he knew his way to Reading. My answer would have been 3.00pm, our match's kick off time. I told her when my journey would begin. We just had to put it down to luck and lifts.

But our luck was in, with me arriving in good time. I'd arrived in Reading town centre by way of Oxford. A 137 red bus took me to a pub called the Unicorn. This was right across the road from Carole's residential home. She was in her room when I called and made me some tea. It was a very nice place, miles better than Queens Park Flats where I lived in Blackburn. Later in the evening we went up to Borocourt Hospital's staff social club. First of all she showed me her motorbike. She didn't do things by half. It had a 500cc engine and very powerful. She had driven up to Blackburn on bikes of a similar size before. Carole spent about ten minutes riding round her nursing home drive. She invited me to get on the pillion, but I politely declined her offer.

In the hospital staff club I met up with Les, her boyfriend, again and some of their workmates. We all had a good session in this pretty good social club. Carole was off work for the next few days and showed me her talent for playing pool. She not only played for a ladies team, but in this hospital's men's team as well. She spent most of this evening handing out a lesson to all comers. Pool is not one of my good games. In fact none of them are, apart from general knowledge quizzes and dominoes. Both of these depend on whether your luck is in anyway.

My dad and my mum's dad were both good darters. Carole must have followed in their footsteps as far as being good at pub sports was concerned. Certainly not in my footsteps, my sport is drinking beer. Maybe that's why I'm such a big Blackburn Rovers fan. It takes away aches and pains and suffering.

A few of Carole's workmates were into football. One of them was a young lad called 'Chick'. This was because of this strange haircut he sported. It stuck out in a tuft, like the duck from 'Tom and Jerry'. Being called Chick was probably better than Tufty. At least people didn't keep asking you to help them across the road. He was a bit of a punk rocker, so he and I got on like a house on fire.

Chick was a keen Reading fan and going to their match tomorrow. He told me he didn't like them not using their traditional nickname of the 'Biscuitmen'. They were using their posh one - the 'Royals'. This was because Berkshire was a royal county. Technically they could even play away matches in their home shirts because of this. They were also a pretty old team, like Rovers, having played in the FA Cup since 1877. This was well before most teams in the Football League were even formed. They were four years older than we were.

He said 'Biscuitmen' derived from Reading being a centre of biscuit production and some local factories supporting their town's team when it was formed. Maybe it was a good job Reading wasn't a centre of contraceptive manufacturing. They might have become the 'Rubbermen', or the 'Johnny Boys'.

Me, Chick and Carole arranged to have a few beers before our game kicked off. We arranged to meet up in the Traveller's pub on Oxford Road, not far from Reading's Elm Park ground. It was her favourite pub now the Target was no more. I knew this pub, having been in before on one of my trips down here. It tended to be full of nutters. Last time I was in, a drunken Scotsman gave me a bit of stick. Carole went up to him and told him I was her brother. I had a friend for life after that.

The room Carole arranged for me belonged to one of her workmates who agreed to crash out at a mate's flat tonight. It was just fine and I slept like a log. Next day she brought me breakfast, after which we set off into Reading town centre on a bus. We had a walk around for a bit, then went for a few pints and met up with Chick later.

Carole was a little cagey in these town centre pubs. She was worried about our accents, especially mine, which is as broad as a barmaid's backside. She said people down here were not friendly like we are in Blackburn. I disagreed with her. I'd always had a good time in this town.

I get on with everybody wherever Rovers take me. Those who want a fight tend to find each other.

We met up with Chick in the Traveller's then went to our match together. He went to Reading's end on the other side of the ground, while Carole and I stood in Elm Park's visitor's end, which was a big open terrace. This was just up from Oxford Road.

Rovers had brought their usual hordes down from Lancashire and beyond. One or two mates of mine were surprised and pleased to meet my sister, not realising I had a sibling. Most noticed how different we are in appearance. We don't look like each other in any way. Carole has long blonde hair, not from a bottle like the majority of her peers seem to have these days. In fact neither Carole, my parents, nor me look like anything like each other. But we all have green eyes by coincidence.

We stood with a lad called 'Big Bad Ray'. He and I usually stood with each other, and his brother Steve, on Ewood Park's Blackburn End. We had also been to several away matches and on holiday round Europe together, especially when my car would run. Ray also lived right across the road from where I used to work in Darwen.

Ray, me and Terry Andrews travelled to five countries over a week in my Fiat Mirafiori. We even got four in during one day. It had been Terry's birthday too. So we drove through Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium and France on our way back to Calais. Unfortunately my car only just made it back to Britain after breaking down near the German border in Aachen and Namur in Belgium. Luckily a kind Belgian bloke sorted us out for nothing in this latter town. At least he didn't think we looked shady. Customs Officials at Dover must have. They searched us at the ferry port, taking my car to pieces. We were clean, having already supped enough alcohol on the continent. All we brought back was our usual quota of duty-free.

Unfortunately Reading's ground couldn't have been more appropriately named, as it became a nightmare on Elm Park for Rovers. We were slaughtered 4-0. Freddie Kruger himself couldn't have done a better job ripping our defence's heart out. Just to make things worse, they had sold out of programmes. I like to get one for every new ground I visit. Unfortunately, like Rovers, my luck was out on this occasion.

Carole only came to this match because I was down and wanted to see if any of her Blackburn mates were here. She was fed up by half time, like the rest of us, and did an early runner. She even asked for a police escort away from the ground, much to my amusement. After this match finished, which was a relief, I melted into the crowd and walked up a street by Elm Park to try my luck with a Rovers coach. No problem getting on one this time. This coach took me home. It was a bit like a funeral cortege.

I returned to Reading next season. Things had improved regarding my travel arrangements. I managed to get a job with British Rail and got down to Reading and London quite a lot, thanks to my free passes. Carole didn't come to our match here on November 28th 1987. Our 4-0 tubbing had put her off watching Rovers; she wasn't a great fan of football anyway. At least we improved our playing performance on my return trip. A 0-0 draw meant us grabbing a point this

time. And I also managed to buy a programme on this occasion, to add to my growing collection.

What was significant about this match was me going for a pint in Reading Trades Council Club. It was massive compared to ours in Blackburn. Not so far from Elm Park either. It was just off Oxford Road. I asked to meet a few of this club's committee, after telling its Steward I was on the committee of our version in Blackburn.

This club must have recently been more of a workingmen's club type institution. It had been either saved or taken over by Reading Trades Council. Women went in but were still not members, unlike in ours, where they had totally equal status. But this wrong would be righted here later this year I was assured.

A few of the committee were in and they made me very welcome. They were quite political, like some of us were on our club committee. Their President was a chap called Keith Jerome. He actually visited our club a few months later. I think he may have been a full-time trade union official. Certainly active in Reading's labour movement.

My visit to Reading in season 86-87 only made things go from bad to worse. It proved to be Bobby Saxton's downfall. His services were dispensed with this season and in early 1987 we appointed Don MacKay as our new boss after Caretaker Manager, Tony Parkes, stopped us from sliding towards Division 3.

Don Mackay had played in goal, not a position Scotsmen were renown for. But he was given the Manager's job after Tony Parkes all but saved Rovers from relegation and he gave us all something to smile about later in the season. This was when we won the Full Members Cup at Wembley.

This cup seemed to have no significance at first. Some journalistic wags called it 'The Few Members Cup' and 'The Fool Members Cup' because a lot of England's top teams gave it a miss. It was set up as a distraction due to our European ban following events at Heysel. There was also a similar tournament for Third and Fourth Division clubs called the Associate Members Cup.

By now we had got fed up of these kinds of Mickey-Mouse competitions. My biggest memory of the old Anglo Scottish Cup was of falling asleep during a pre-season match. Sometimes you could get a little comfortable on the Blackburn End. One year we were playing our first match of a new season. It wasn't even a league game. Probably an Anglo Scottish Cup match, or whatever it became known as years later. We were playing Rochdale and it was a right hot sunny day.

The entire Blackburn End was in shirtsleeves and we seemed to spread ourselves out across the terraces. Like thousands of others, I flopped down on the steps at the edge of our end, near the Riverside. I watched what turned out to be a bit of a boring game. We had been in this competition and were gradually losing interest in it.

Rochdale was a Fourth Division club. Getting something off Rovers was probably their season's highlight, before it even started. Nobody scored today in what became a dull defensive display.



I stripped off my shirt and gradually began to become more and more relaxed. Before this match, a few of my mates and I had been for a few pints, like we usually did. Effects of these few beers probably didn't help my cause. Also because of this hot afternoon and relaxed couldn't-care-less attitude of the Rovers fans, made this game become even more uninteresting. As the second half went on I was growing even more comfortable, having relieved myself at half time. Eventually I dropped off with about ten minutes to go.

When I woke up there was nobody there. It was feeling cold which probably woke me up eventually. Bare-chested and possibly feeling a bit hungry made me come out of my slumbers. To my horror it was about half seven. Everybody had just left me in the land of Nod. There wasn't a living soul in Ewood Park anywhere. They had all gone home for their tea, or possibly a pint after the match. Footballers, supporters, coppers, groundsmen and even the pigeons were gone. I was all alone.

I even had to climb over a wall to get out. Getting in was a hard problem and it cost you money. Getting out was just as bad; at least it was free. Rovers made sure once they got you in, you stayed and put up with it. Everybody in football said Rovers were one of the most hospitable teams there were. I could have stopped the night if I'd wanted to. Not on this occasion. I wanted my tea too.

I went to all our games at home in this new Full Member's Cup competition. We won them, as you tend to do when you eventually reach the final. It was noticeable how interest seemed to be building up as we progressed through each round.

Our semi-final against Ipswich Town attracted a 12,000 gate to Ewood Park. When we got through we found we were playing our old friends, the Addicks - Charlton Athletic. They seemed to be one of those teams who Rovers keep bumping into, for one reason or another. They were playing at Selhurst Park at the time after losing their beloved Valley. Yet they were in Division 1 and we were 2nd Division stuff.

It seemed like no contest on paper. But every football fan should go to Wembley at least once in their lifetime. This would be my first and possibly only chance. No way was I missing my chance of visiting those famous twin towers and watching Rovers play on Wembley's hallowed turf. There would be a bonus if we could bring a pot home. Last time, but one, we were there, we did. That was an upset too. In 1928 Rovers beat mighty Huddersfield, managed by Herbert Chapman, in the FA Cup Final. Our last major trophy win.

It was beginning to look like everybody else round the Blackburn area seemed to share these thoughts. Our town was buzzing with cup fever. March 29th couldn't come soon enough. John Lynch and I decided to hire a minibus to take a few of us from the Trades Club. No way could you get a minibus or van in Blackburn, they had all been booked once we won our semi-final. I suggested we try our luck in Preston, as I was working on the railway there and Lynchy was doing a degree at Preston Polytechnic.

He got a minibus, but only just. Rovers fans were hiring them from all over Lancashire and beyond. It was going to be a big following to this match. Estimates of up to 30,000 Rovers fans

travelling down to Wembley were being talked about.

On the morning of the match I woke up buzzing, before walking across Queens Park to Lynchy's house on Lambeth Street for about eight o'clock. He dropped me off at the club and then drove over to Preston to pick our minibus up. Amongst our crew from the club were Dave Bates, Chris Roe, Dave Roberts and Lynchy's lad, Paul. A few others talked about coming, but these were the talkers, not the doers.

This is when panic stations started setting in amongst us. Lynchy seemed to take forever picking up our minibus. We stood outside the club, pacing around like expectant fathers. Eventually he arrived after 10.00am and we set off for Wembley. John and I agreed to take it turns to drive our minibus.

He drove us down to the M6 motorway and I took over until the West Midlands. We stopped at my happy Hilton Park hunting ground and swapped seats. He would then take over driving until we reached the outskirts of London, then it was me again because I know the Smoke quite well from my many visits down there.

We swapped over at Scratchwood Services later and I took over for this last leg of our trip to Wembley. My idea was we park up near Neasden underground station and catch a tube to Wembley itself. Unfortunately Chris Roe realised his ticket for the final was missing. He reckoned he must have dropped it on one of the motorway services when Lynchy and I swapped over. Luckily his luck returned. Chris managed to buy another ticket later from a Rovers fan, stood outside Wembley, who had a spare one.

We hit the North Circular Road and met up with a load of Rovers fans walking down the street as we looked for Neasden tube station. I started singing Rovers songs at them and got a round of applause for my trouble. At the tube station we caught the first train in on its way to Wembley's Empire Stadium.

There was a bit of trouble on Wembley Park tube station, this carried on outside with a few skirmishes between rival Rovers and Charlton fans. Our group kept well away from it and walked up Wembley Way to our end. There were so many more Rovers fans than our opponent's. Many Charlton fans were unhappy about losing their ground and must have decided to stay away from this match.

Three quarters of today's 40,000 crowd were Rovers supporters. Wembley was a sea of blue and white. Flags, banners and scarves were being waved. I even bought a rosette. It was a bit of a fiddle really. It had a miniature FA Cup in the middle, not today unfortunately. This was definitely not the FA Cup.

As this match went on I thought Charlton looked to be taking control of things. But new signing, Colin Hendry, had other ideas. He scored a late goal for us just as most of us had settled for extra time. Hendry must have been destined for this moment of bliss. We held on for dear life and Rovers won the cup. Then it was sheer ecstasy for those boys in blue and white.

After our player's lap of honour and fan's celebrations, we drove up the M1 and M6 motorways and arrived back in the Trades Club just in time for last orders. But there were no last orders tonight. Lynchy didn't stop long. He had to take young Paul home. Not me, I was stopping on the pop and celebrating until I dropped. At last we had exorcised this ghost of Wembley 1960. We didn't care whether it was the Full Members Cup or the Tea Cup.

Even more celebrating was to come next day as Blackburn Trades Council Secretary, Ian Gallagher, told me our organisation had received an invitation to attend Rovers' civic reception in the town hall. He had suggested myself and Chris Roe would be the most appropriate of our delegates to go from our organisation. I think we were the only two Trades Council delegates who actually went down to the match at Wembley.

So be it, we went to this great celebration. We were upstairs in Blackburn Town Hall, looking out over its balcony, both in decent gear for a change and drinking an occasional beer when it was offered. There were thousands of Rovers fans in King William Street and all over the place. People were on rooftops across the road, hanging banners over parapets. It looked a little scary and must have given the police and emergency services a headache. I got talking to Tony Parkes, Don MacKay and Colin Hendry. These lads were used to this kind of thing, so it appeared to me. They must have had some form of media training given by Rovers, unlike Chris and me. We were a bit overawed by this occasion, but we enjoyed it immensely.

Funnily enough, I gave a pint of blood at King George's Hall one night with Tony Parkes' wife. We talked about Rovers and Tony's length of time at the club. Most Rovers fans thought he should have been given the Manager's job after keeping us up, following the sacking of Bobby Saxton. But Don MacKay got it and Tony became a legend in his own right in years to come for not getting the manager's job. He became known as the 'Caretaker'.

## [Chapter 11](#)

### *In Dublin's Fair City*

In early 1987 my hitchhiking was definitely put on hold for three and a half years. This was down to me getting a job with British Rail. A football fan's dream. Not only did I get a limited number of free passes to anywhere in the country; normal fares were charged at a quarter of the price Joe Public pays. It was darned handy.

My staff railcard passes took me watching Rovers everywhere. Plymouth Argyle, Exeter City, Bournemouth, Bristol City and virtually all matches we played in London. But in 1990 I began to tire of working on the railway. Getting covered in grease every day and the same monotonous maintenance routine began to make me look for pastures new. One of few good things about my railway job was its usefulness for travel. Another was it having a good union. I was now Chairman of East Lancashire's National Union of Railwaymen.

Chris Roe had just finished a full-time course at Preston Polytechnic. He said he enjoyed it and advised me to think about it if I hated the railway as much as I said. This inspired me to enquire

about a Media Techniques course, along with Communication Studies at 'A' Level. I even decided on British Government and Politics. To my surprise I was accepted for these three courses. They would be starting in September. My escape from British Rail would be complete.

At the time my life was becoming more and more clerical. Trade union and other activities seemed to point me in a different direction from my industrial working life. Also I could see the writing was on the wall for British Rail. Horrible spectres of privatisation beckoned. Even worse, it was about to become a sackable offence to be caught drinking on duty. Definitely time to jump ship for me.

I was also getting fed up of living in Queens Park Flats. They were becoming full of idiots and vandals. Blackburn Council seemed to have an annoying habit of rotating its bad tenants around from one estate to another. It looked like it was our turn to be their dumping ground for their anti-social tenants.

Unfortunately when you live in a block of flats, having anti-social neighbours is worse for you than living on an estate. There they upset and annoy their immediate neighbours. In a tower block we all use the same lifts, launderette, entrances, public telephone and stairs. They make sure we all suffer together.

Talking of dumping grounds, dogs were running around these flats and leaving their calling cards in our lifts and stairwells. It was time something was done about this unacceptable situation. I was Secretary of Queens Park Labour Party, amongst my many other trade union and labour movement positions. One day our district Secretary left a message for me to call upon and make myself known to a party member who had just moved into Blackburn. His name was Richard Lee. He was a full-time student at Preston Polytechnic and living with a girl called Savita. She came to Blackburn to work for this town's Well Women Centre.

Richard was a football fan himself. He came from Wolverhampton and supported his local team - Wolves. We hit it off pretty quickly and got talking about how things were in these flats. After a long discussion we decided to form a resident's group to try and improve our living conditions. I'd thought about setting one up when I first moved in these flats. About three years ago a lot of people even suggested I did. What put me off on both these occasions was seeing it as yet another case of people making bullets and me having to fire them. A bit like it had been in my working life.

This time I wouldn't be ploughing a lonely furrow. Richard had been involved with a law centre in either Wolverhampton or Southampton, where he was at University. Plus we were both political activists. His student background, coupled with my trade union one, would help share out what was going to be a difficult task.

First job here was me knocking up a small leaflet inviting Queens Park Flats residents to a one off meeting in our Elizabeth House common room. This was for them to make their views known. I typed it on my old George V Imperial typewriter which my mum had given me. Two leaflets fitted on a page, and then I got them copied on our photocopier down the Trades Club. There were 80 flats in each of the three blocks, so 120 pages were printed. My punctuation

wasn't the best in town, but I was a willing volunteer.

*Dear Resident,*

*Over the last year our flats have been in the news for the wrong reasons. A few of us believe that we need our own representative body where we can put our views across collectively.*

*We have organised a meeting with ward councillors to see if we can make progress with some of the problems facing us. Also the meeting will determine whether there is demand for a residents association.*

*What are your thoughts on vandalism in the flats, the bus service, where is this £100 compensation that we are supposed to receive for the inconvenience during the balcony repairs. Is there asbestos in these flats, some residents are illegally keeping animals, when will the council act on this? These are just some of the questions we can put to the council.*

*The meeting takes place on Friday June 22nd at 7.00pm in the Elizabeth House community room. Everybody is welcome to come and put their views across to the councillors.*

Maybe there would be interest in forming a resident's group. Stranger things have happened at sea. I also invited two of our local councillors: Harry Atwal and Mary Leaver to come and join us. This meeting was arranged for June 22nd at 7.00pm.

I was expecting about a dozen people to attend, but expectations were exceeded by a mile when at least fifty residents showed up. Forty people crammed into our community room, many having to stand up, but there was a load outside in the corridor who couldn't get in.

After telling everybody it was me who organised this event, my specs went on and I asked for a bit of order. As self-appointed Chairman, it soon became obvious there were a lot of angry people there tonight. It became difficult to control. Nothing compared to some railwaymen's meetings, where I was Branch Chairman locally. Although our residents were less disciplined than my NUR members.

I had to ask people to stop shouting things out and interrupting each other during our meeting. They obviously weren't used to these kind of events. Two officials from Blackburn Council's Housing Department came for a while; Mary and Harry invited them. But they didn't stay so long. They were the butt of most abuse from our residents.

One of them, Jim Noble, who was target for most of their anger, became quite aggressive. When I asked him probing questions these seemed to upset him more. He said he had received lots of nasty letters from residents, many of which were anonymous. These went straight into his waste basket, so he told us. This prompted catcalls from our audience calling for his resignation.

When both these council officials left, our two local councillors took a bit of stick themselves whilst trying to appease the residents. They didn't have as hard a time though and conducted themselves very well. Most residents gave them the benefit of the doubt tonight.

Proceedings went on until around 9.30pm. Over forty people signed our attendance list and it was decided to form Queens Park Flats Resident's Association. This was after I asked everybody if they wanted this kind of organisation. At least nobody said they didn't. I was to be its Chairman. Richard Lee would eventually become Secretary. First we appointed a lady called Jackie Barnes. She volunteered - good enough for Richard and me.

I suggested our next meeting be in August. This was because we were approaching Blackburn Wakes holidays in a couple of weeks and it meant a lot of work organising things. Really it was also because I wanted to travel across to Dublin where Rovers were playing pre-season friendly matches on their tour of the Republic of Ireland. I'd been planning this for a few weeks and even photocopied a street map of Dublin from Blackburn Reference Library.

Working on the railway sometimes had its uses. I did go across to Dublin during our pre-season friendly tour of Ireland, on August 6th 1990, just after forming Queens Park Flats Resident's Association. We were playing Shamrock Rovers at Dalymount Park on this three-match tour. I wanted to get to at least one of these matches in before leaving the railway.

This wasn't Shamrock Rovers' usual ground; they had lost theirs, probably through economic reasons. So they had to share with city rivals, Bohemians. It only cost me £8 on a Sealink ferry, compared to what should have been around £30. I even got quarter fares on the Irish railways, which was a nice little bonus.

It was going to be my last use of this privilege though. I signed up for full-time education at Blackburn College after being accepted by Lancashire's Education Authority. I was going to be a mature student. Not many people would have put me down for that title. A student yes. Mature - no way!

Rovers had just returned from their usual tour of Sweden before our friendly across the water on our West Coast. I wanted to go over to Sweden, but heard about the price of beer over there. It cost about £4 a pint, about four times what we paid over here. One funny story, which came out of this tour, was about a group of Rovers fans who went over to Sweden. They were hit for six when they called into a bar and came across the price of beer over here. Desperately short of affordable alcohol, they went into a supermarket and bought what they thought was a tin of wine. It turned out to be a home brew wine kit. This must have been one of those weeks for our travelling supporters.

Dublin was definitely more affordable for me, as well as being a lot nearer. It would be a hell of a lot cheaper to get there too. A free train ride to Holyhead, then hopefully a quarter price ferry. We were playing three games on this Irish tour. Our other games were across the country. One was in Drogheda, another in Dundalk. This place was known for being a Republican stronghold, definitely one to leave my Rovers Union Jack behind. Shamrock Rovers of Dublin was the obvious one for me to travel to. I wouldn't be taking any Rovers colours anyway.

Unfortunately this was a match where my hitchhiking luck ran out. After arriving in Holyhead and going to the ferry port, I was told they would only charge me this bargain price of £8, a

saving of around twenty notes, if I caught their last ferry to Dun Laoghaire. This would be setting sail around midnight. So it was a wander round the pubs of Holyhead. One of my workmates on the railway had been here many times and called this place 'the island of free love', but it quickly became the island of paralyticus in my case.

I made the midnight ferry just in time and got my head down aboard the ship for a bit. It was well out of territorial waters by the time I returned from my slumbers. At its bar a few Irishmen were knocking their Guinness back. I had a couple of pints of this with them but found it a bit heavy going. After their advice I went on to Smithwick's bitter, which is also brewed by Ireland's most famous export company. We docked around four in the morning after what seemed like a very short trip to me, I was expecting to arrive around breakfast time.

It was a ten-mile walk into Dublin, so I was told. This meant me trying my luck walking there with my thumb stuck out. Not one single vehicle passed me at this ungodly hour. I wondered where everybody from the ferry had gone. It was as though the population of the Irish Republic were determined for me to use my cheap concessions while on this side of the water. What it showed was you can't win them all. At least it was a nice stagger to Dublin's fair city.

Ireland might be independent from Britain and classed as a foreign country, technically. But green post-boxes with George VI on their side had me wondering for a moment. Seeing a national institution with a royal crest took me by surprise. Still, Dublin had all the same problems we have in Blackburn. People were sleeping on its streets. It was a typical European city. Even more typical was it having a McDonalds in its city centre. On famous O'Connell Street itself. This was good enough for me now it was around eight o'clock in the morning, even though I tend to avoid these multinational fast food outlets. You can buy one of their burgers, shove it down your gullet, then quarter of an hour later you're hungry again. No wonder we have a generation of little fat kids.

Whilst being served I heard a familiar Lancashire accent. A family from Rishton was just behind me. Upon asking them what they were doing over here, they replied they were doing exactly the same as me. They had made their tour of Ireland a holiday and were taking in all Rovers games across here.

After scoffing my cheeseburger, it was off for a wander round Dublin. Across from Connolly Railway Station was a pub called Molloy's. We have Irish theme pubs in Blackburn, but this looked the real thing. Being in Dublin, it couldn't have been anything else. Music was coming from a jukebox and it looked to be open. At first I thought they were cleaning up, ready for opening time later on. I poked my head round Molloy's door and asked its landlord if he was serving. At nine o'clock in the morning, it was something I wasn't used to. A pub being open officially. The only time I drank at this time was Sunday mornings during pump cleaning time down the Trades Club. The committee of my club couldn't stand waste, neither could I.

My question brought peals of laughter from the landlord and his customers at the bar. "It's got to be an Englishman," was their shout. They welcomed me to a civilised country. This barman even took sterling for paying for my drinks. The Irish currency he gave me as change took a bit of getting used to. But over here they had the best of both worlds, especially when it came to

buying booze.

After Molloy's it was a tour of Dublin following a route to Dalymount Park which one or two Irishmen in Blackburn had described to me. Even then I still lost my way. I was made welcome in Dublin's pubs. People were a bit wary at first when I told them my reason for being here, but they were reassured by me of Rovers fan's reputation for good behaviour and friendliness.

Glasgow Rangers had recently played one of Dublin's other football teams. There had been total mayhem and disorder caused by Rangers fans. Knowing their sectarian opinions, it seemed a strange place for a fixture to be organised. It couldn't have been worse if they had played their match in the Vatican City itself. Even in Dublin they went round insulting Irish people by chanting: "You dirty Fenian bastards". At least Dublin's citizens wouldn't have to put up with such appalling behaviour like that from Rovers fans.

As I got nearer to Bohemian's ground other Rovers fans appeared on the scene, coming out of nearby pubs. They included the family from Rishton who I met this morning in McDonalds on O'Connell Street. So was Ray from Ossie, who fell asleep at his wheel while driving back from Swansea. There were about thirty or forty Rovers fans in Dalymount Park by the time our match started.

Dalymount Park was very big, but half-derelict. Some Shamrock Rovers fans told me it was hoped one day to use it as the home of Irish football. Lansdowne Road, their rugby ground, was being used at the moment. There was an even bigger stadium called Croke Park in the city, but this was only used for Hurling and Gaelic football. They wouldn't entertain Association or Rugby football. It was a bastion of traditional Irish sports. Some of their hard-line Gaelic sports fans called soccer the 'Garrison Game'. But this view was declining. Jack Charlton had converted Ireland. They were football daft nowadays.

I stood on the other side of the ground from where most Rovers fans were sitting in the main stand. It was mainly a grass bank. The sun was shining and very pleasant. Before kick off time Rovers' two Irish players, Kevin Moran and Frank Stapleton were each presented with a shield in appreciation of their efforts in Ireland's good run in the World Cup which had recently taken place.

Rovers were better than their Irish namesakes this afternoon. Our football league makes a big difference. We won this match 3-0, with goals from trialist Tim Bradbury, John Millar and Alan Irvine. But nobody was really bothered how it ended. Both clubs and their fans were more interested in winning friends than football matches. It was a good day out for everyone, especially me and the travelling Rovers fans from across the water.

After the match I walked into Dublin city centre, buying fish and chips on the way. This was one of the best fish I've ever eaten, apart from it having bones. I'd been told by some of my Irish friends how we are a bit mollycoddled in England. Then I caught an electric train from Dublin to Dun Laoghaire. This train passed by Lansdowne Road stadium. We seemed to go underneath it. To my welcome surprise I managed to get there at quarter fare after showing my British Rail pass. There must be a reciprocal agreement between British and Irish railways. I



could see why most of my workmates were always coming over to Dublin on ferry trips. British Rail had loads of Irishmen working for it too.

On the ferry back to Holyhead I had a good session with an Irishman who worked on the North Sea oilrigs off Great Yarmouth. He had even worked in Blackburn, but was earning real money now. He must have been because he insisted on getting mine. This had been a great trip. I'll be back again one day to enjoy a bit more of the 'craic'.

A matter of weeks after this trip I jacked in my job with British Rail and started my two year full-time college course. I took a couple of 'A' levels: Communication Studies and British Government & Politics. I also took Media Techniques, this was a City & Guilds course and my favourite of these three. This latter course got me into writing. I was able to find an outlet in Blackburn College's newspaper 'The Son of Mediator' and Rovers new fanzine '4000 Holes'.

FTH, as it is abbreviated, had been set up the previous year by a bunch of Rovers fans in the Ribble Valley. They mainly worked at two local mental hospitals, Brockhall and Calderstones, which were based round here. Many people believed I should have been committed to either of these two workplaces. Once I started sending the fanzine my offerings, their fears were realised.

## ***Where Are The Wrinklies?***

***Why are there so few mature students at Blackburn College?***

*In the midst of the teenage multitude, the occasional rare glimpse of grey can be seen creaking slowly through the campus.*

*Wrinkly watchers must be patient not to confuse them with lecturers. To distinguish between the two species get them to turn out their pockets.*

*You can tell male wrinklies by the plumage around their face. This is shed during charitable events. The female wrinkly differs from the younger members of the species by tending to wear jeans that aren't two sizes too big for her. The male is often absent on Monday morning lectures.*

*At lunchtimes if you are careful, wrinklies can be spotted outside a derelict building, behind Waves. It is believed to be what is left of one of their ancient temples. This one was 'The Peel'. These ancient temples date back to an earlier civilisation, before the High Priestess came to power.*

*The wrinklies romanticise about the good old days. They relish the days when strange creatures played in blue and white. Great herds of wrinklies would gather at the riverside. They would then roar at the other animals who were in cages. This was the forbidden zone called the Darwen End.*

*This could be a dangerous experience for some. Dark blue predators lurked at the edge of the herd. These predators hunted in packs. They would pounce on a wrinkly if he was unsteady on his feet.*

*Late in the afternoon a piercing warble would sound. This was made by a black creature called the reffer-flea. This sound would create a stampede, many being crushed as they left the riverside.*

*Later on the female would provide them sustenance. Then they would leave their den and drink liquid together. This depended on if earlier the strange blue and white creatures laid golden eggs beneath their perches.*

*If you catch a glimpse of them at the college stay clear. Wrinklies are best left alone.*

This was my first story for '4,000 Holes', although I actually sent in another with it about Rovers benefactor, Jack Walker, called 'The Man Of Steel'. It is a parody of Superman because of Jack's steel connections. It is what he was associated with and where he made his money. Both appeared in issue 13 of FTH. 'Where Are The Wrinklies?' was about going to college as a mature student and sticking out like a sore thumb. It was written for our college magazine 'The Son of Mediator'. It came out in December 1990. Then I sent a copy to FTH and they printed it in issue 13.

This latter story was not directly written for FTH, but 'The Man Of Steel' was. So technically it could be classed as my first story actually written for this fanzine. 'Wrinklies' had already been published in the college magazine before being sent to FTH. Whereas I didn't bother trying to get 'Steel' included in 'Son of the Mediator'.

## ***The Man of Steel***

***Chaos reigned upon Metropolis. Poor Rovers were in the grip of terror. They were controlled by gangsters, including the Doc, the Brief and their leader the Fox.***

*Fortunes had dwindled through chances being missed. The penalty had proved a high price for the Rovers. It was going to be a long hard winter for the citizens of Metropolis. One day they sat down in the street and cried out for a Superman.*

*Meanwhile....a mild mannered son of Metropolis was exiled to a different world called Jersey. He had been exiled by an evil super villain known as the Taxman. He vowed to return home, his mission to turn Rovers into Superheroes. Metropolis was going to see some changes.*

*A new year dawns for Metropolis, its citizens have reached the point of no return. Rovers lay dying. Suddenly a thunderbolt crackles the airwaves of the radio. Is it a bird? Is it a plane? But there's no transmitter fault! The awesome truth is revealed - It's Jack! He's back, the Man of Steel has taken control.*

*There is a new air of confidence on the streets of Metropolis. The Rovers begin to fight back. They win their battle for survival after the Manager is sent to Coventry to buy two of the Fantastic Four.*

*Using his super powers the Man of Steel flies up into the sky and bends a rainbow on to*

*Metropolis. Putting a pot of gold under Ewood Park. He becomes a human magnet, attracting the citizens of Metropolis back to Ewood Park. There is much joy as they buy season tickets and put fear into the Bookie's hearts.*

*So now Rovers are a team to be feared. Metropolis is a land fit for superheroes. May they boldly go forward to where most of us don't remember them being before.*

## Chapter 12

### *Dancing with Wolves*

Things were starting to happen at Rovers now. With Jack Walker's financial backing, we were becoming everybody's favourites for promotion to the new Premier League which was being set up for next season. Football was being revolutionised, Rovers even more.

It wasn't going to be Don MacKay who would be taking us there though. He was sacked in September and we shook the soccer world by bringing Kenny Dalglish out of retirement. Dalglish brought Ray Harford with him. We called it our 'Dream Ticket'. We had to get promoted this season. The bookies thought so too. They even stopped taking bets on them after a while.

This inspired me to write a funny story for Blackburn College's student magazine called 'Parable of the fallen Rovers'. Some people thought it was a bit blasphemous. I didn't care. After all, Rovers is my religion. In fact I'd say more people in Blackburn follow them than all the other established religions put together. They certainly cause less harm and are responsible for a lot less trouble in this world. I also sent the story to FTH and they printed it.

As part of my Media Techniques course, we published a magazine rather than a newspaper for this term. This was to give us experience of producing different kinds of publications. It was called cF, which I never did find out what it stood for.

I was in charge of pulling in advertising for this publication and we just about broke even, after a lot of false promises. I also wrote three stories in the magazine and had an unflattering one done by other students about myself after being a good sport and taking part in a makeover. cF came out in the winter of 1991/92.

### ***Parable of The Fallen Rovers***

***Last season Rovers fans spent Christmas holding sit-ins on the Blackburn End.***

*Nuttall Street became an occupied zone. The festive season at Ewood Park was only on the field. Visiting teams were given gifts of three points a match.*

*After one hellish defeat the fans were excommunicated. A pitch invasion was followed by demonstrations outside the temple. They prayed: "Deliver us from Babylon." Demanding a*

*sacrificial lamb.*

*Next day from Mount Sinai came a prophet bearing manna from Heaven. Multi-millionaire Jack Walker bought the club. The Pharisees bowed down.*

*News of the prophet rallied Rovers. They didn't fall to Purgatory. The season ended full of faith, hope and charity. Jack Walker was Moses. Manna no object.*

*Deliverance was not to be. Lineker doubted the word. So did Sheringham and Newell. Don MacKay became a martyr to the faith. He couldn't separate the sheep from the goats. Rumblings amongst the Roveralites started from the Kick off. MacKay was crucified.*

*Parkes the Baptist became our saviour, reviving fortunes. The Roveralites began the march to the promised land. Behind the scenes activity was intense. St Kenny, Liverpool's prodigal son was the scribe's choice.*

*Speculation hit fever pitch on Good Friday October 11th. Something was in the air, the miracle might happen. Saturday dawned, Dalglish mania was everywhere. TV, radio, stone tablets. Walking to the match was like climbing Jacob's ladder. Ewood Park the temple of the New Jerusalem.*

*The temple was a volcano, like a Martin Luther King rally. We all had a dream. Both teams ran onto the pitch. Then the miracle happened. The sea of scribes parted. He was here, the Messiah. He proclaimed: "I will deliver you to the land of milk and honey."*

*Rovers became a team possessed. Plymouth fell like the walls of Jericho. After the match there was great rejoicing. The Roveralites spilled into nearby churches, staying until the bells were rung at 23.00 hours. They know they will now see the promised land.*

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My next away match using the thumb was on Boxing Day 1991, of this incredible season. Xmas day found me working behind our bar at the Trades Club, for a second year running. I went down early to clean up from last night. It must have been a good one in here as it looked like a bomb had been dropped on the place. At least there were no bodies crashed out on any seats. Many a time I would go down on Sunday morning after a do in here and find sprawled out members sleeping off the after-effects of a night's over indulgence. On many occasions I was one of those soldiers.

We didn't take much over the bar this Xmas dinnertime, only about £83. But it was a service for our club members and it paid for itself as I worked for nothing. There was a nice bonus for me though. Zafar, my fellow club committee member, showed me some Xmas spirit. Particularly thoughtful as he was a Muslim, he looked after me by bringing a turkey and stuffing sandwich. This was very tasty too.

In the evening most of the committee and a few members went back to Pete and Kath Eccles'

house for a party, where even more spirit was shown and drank. They wouldn't take a penny off anybody for their drink and buffet supper. This party was up Blackburn's Fishmoor Estate, so a few taxis were laid on to get us there.

Like most parties I get invited to, it was a late job. This is because when I've had a skinful I can't be shifted, unlike my beer. So I ended up crashing out on Pete's settee. Everybody apart from the Eccles had gone home, they were already there. But getting rid of me is not the easiest of tasks, especially after a skinful of ale and Kath's buffet. Next morning I woke up before 8.00am, wondering where the hell I was. A few glances around the room told me it was Pete's place. Too much thinking at this time in a morning isn't always a good thing in my case. It put inside me the thought of watching Rovers play their traditional Boxing Day match today.

My main problem was them playing over a hundred miles away at Wolverhampton Wanderers. It was an all ticket match too and I hadn't bothered to get one. Neither had I organised any means of getting there, because I wasn't going to go there in the first place. So it had to be a thumb job. Hobson's Choice.

I wrote out a message saying I'd gone to Wolves. People were used to my eccentricities, doing crazy stunts was par for the course in my case. I needn't have bothered picking up a pen. They probably thought I'd gone to the dogs already. Try as I might, I couldn't get out of the house. Could I open the front door? Could I hell. So Kath came down to let me out. Then it was a walk back to my place up Queens Park Flats. It's a funny experience walking through Fishmoor after a late night out. You see other blokes with bleary eyes and faces down to the floor. Everybody must have been up here for a jump at some time.

After knocking up some breakfast in my place, it was a walk down the hill to the Whitebirk area of Blackburn. This was after changing my jacket and picking up an extra tenner. Here I stood at the side of Whitebirk Drive, under its railway bridge. Then I started hitchhiking after tying my Rovers scarf round my wrist and fluttering it in the wind. An old couple picked me up. They were both keen Rovers fans, but not going down to Wolves today. They dropped me off at my old staging post, outside the Moat House. Another lift got me down to the M6 junction at Samlesbury.

It was my lucky day this morning. A vanload of Rovers fans picked me up not long after my arrival down here. These lads were from the Forester's Arms on Fecitt Brow, up Shadsworth. I knew one of them by sight. He was a drayman from Whitbread. He often delivered beer to the Trades Club. For a change our roles were reversed on this occasion. In the club we always gave our draymen a couple of bottles or cans when they finished their delivery. It was a useful practice. They would stack your barrels in whatever way you preferred, making life easier for you when they needed changing.

I had been on a few trips to Whitbread's brewery at Samlesbury. The last occasion was with the temporary Trades Club Steward, John Walmsley. It was advertised as some kind of bar cellar course. Like myself, everybody on this 'course' went for the wrong reasons. Previous ones had always proved to be an excuse for a good piss-up. Whatever you learned was soon forgotten by dinnertime.

But a course is what it turned out to be after all, surprisingly. This left a few people foaming only at the mouth. We all expected to be going home absolutely bladdered. Instead I must have only dropped three pints all day. One lad was so desperate for a pint, he even drank an experimental bottle of beer which had been on display in the classroom to show a faulty fermentation. What confounded things even more was being shown a video of the inside of a pub. This had two draymen who were sat drinking cups of tea after doing a delivery. I've never seen a sight like this before and probably never will. I hope not anyway. Even the bloke taking the course made a few witty comments about this total untruth.

Draymen were also handy to know should you run out of beer and hadn't ordered enough. This time it was a drayman in this van who gave me a can of beer. I slipped the lads a fiver to help with their transport costs. When we arrived in Wolverhampton I told the lads I didn't have a ticket for the match and wanted to try my luck buying one at the ground. They very obligingly dropped me off at Wolves' Molyneux ground. Getting a ticket for the away end was no problem. After this I walked into Wolverhampton town centre, drew some money from a cash dispenser and went in a pub. I then rang up my mate from Queens Park Flats and partner in crime from the Resident's Association, Richard Lee.

He came from Wolverhampton and was down here over Xmas, staying at his parents. Richard moved into Queens Park Flats last year. He moved up North with his girlfriend, Savita. She got a job in Blackburn working for the town's Well Women Centre. She too was staying at her parents over this festive season. She came from West Bromwich, Wolves' main football rivals, down the road.

Richard and I were both Labour Party members and decided to form a resident's group in our flats. We were different kinds of blokes. I was an uncut diamond kind, which is a very flattering form of self-description, being certainly not very subtle or smooth. Definitely thick-skinned and terribly stubborn. I was active in the trade union movement, whereas Richard seemed more of a student type who had been involved in some kind of law centre in his university days. But he became a damned good Secretary of our resident's group. I wasn't a bad Chairman either. Pooling our experiences seemed to help us turn Queens Park Flats Residents Association into a pretty good campaigning organisation. More importantly - we got things done.

Richard was taken by surprise when he heard my voice at the other end of the phone. He couldn't believe I'd made it down here. In fact he sounded like I'd taken him by surprise, not being used to my crazy antics. He was a Wolves fan and we had agreed to go to the match together if I was down. He would be going anyway.

He'd been to Ewood Park with me when Rovers played a home match against his team. Richard was going to today's game with his dad and arranged to meet me in a pub next to Banks Brewery. This is Wolverhampton's version of Blackburn's Thwaites. Our meeting point was a pub - called the Clarendon - at 2.00pm.

I got there for one o'clock and stood in the doorway of this pub with a pint in my hand. I got talking with some Wolves fans. By the time Richard and his dad arrived it was overflowing on

to the streets outside. No way were they going to get served in here without missing today's kick off. So we went to another pub nearer Wolverhampton town centre. This was called The New Inn. After another pint we headed for our match.

There was time for one last beer for me as Richard and his dad went down a street to their part of Molyneux. I managed to sneak into a pub next to the ground, it was called the Fox. Hiding my scarf in my coat and walking behind a young couple was how I managed to surreptitiously gain entry to this lush. Rovers fans were being refused admittance, but not me. I have this knack of getting served at away matches. One method, which helps out, is always taking my Queens Park Working Men's Club card with me wherever I go. This shows I'm affiliated to a CIU club and am least likely to cause trouble, if I don't want my membership taking off me. So far it's never let me down. I joined this club in 1986, my granddad had been a member here too. It was also not so far away from where I lived, in the flats and local government ward which both shared this club's name.

Molyneux was being developed, so only two sides of the ground were in use today. This was the end Rovers fans were gathered on, plus a large side which I remember being built a few years ago and nearly bankrupted Wolves. Ironically I was actually at what was technically Wolves' first game of football as a phoenix risen from the ashes. This took place on August 28th 1982 after one of their former favourites and ex-Rovers player, Derek Dougan, was behind a consortium, which saved them from bankruptcy.

There was still a decent Boxing Day crowd of 18,000 inside the ground today. I stood with Ray Hacking, the Trades Club's Stocktaker. Unfortunately his car was full and so it would be another hitching job back to Blackburn for me. The game ended up as a nil apiece draw, but was very entertaining. After the match I walked down a subway, melted into the dispersing crowds and headed north towards the M6, walking up Stafford Road. I quickly got a lift to the M54, then the M6.

It took me three hours and three lifts to get down here. But as is usually the case, it took longer getting home by a similar proportion, with five lifts taking five hours. Maybe if I'd yapped with a few more Rovers fans, or tried to find the lads from the Foresters, I might have got a lift home fairly quickly. Not in my case this time. I was more interested in escaping from Wolverhampton in one piece, as quickly as possible. These years of hitch hiking had given me a strong sense of self-preservation. Silly really, because since the Hillsborough disaster the vast majority of football supporters wanted to be friendly with each other. Even in those dark days of football hooliganism, it had only been a minority who got their kicks, literally, from causing havoc at matches.

From the M6 junction I was picked up in a van by a group of crazy lads on their way up to Blackpool for a few days. This was handy for me as they could drop me off at Samlesbury, which was the junction before their turn off down the M55 to Blackpool. These lads were a good bunch, they had a mild interest in football. West Bromwich Albion was their team and they were pleased Rovers got an away point at their local rivals.

They were smoking dope during their journey, even offering me a reefer. I declined this as I've

never been into cannabis, or any other drug for that matter. Although I consider alcohol a drug and nobody likes a pint more than I do. So their use of dope was their own business. Our journey didn't take long, barely an hour due to this van's driver keeping his clog down on the accelerator.

Eventually I reached Blackburn, being dropped off at the Moat House and arrived in the Trades Club at 10.00pm. Just in time to have my photo taken by one reveller who wanted a record of this Boxing Night. Things were swinging, but not for me. I was knackered and dirty and wanted to go home to get my head down. People insisted I have a drink with them, one or two thought I'd been smoking dope thanks to my lift from Wolverhampton and made fun of me accordingly. They called me a passive junkie. I was more interested in tonight's lavish buffet and got stuck in. So it was a bit later before I shook off my chains and disappeared home to bed, where I finally got my head down at last.

My return journey home from Wolverhampton inspired me to write a story for FTH. This was about the River Darwen, next to Ewood Park, having cannabis plants growing along its banks. The lads who gave me a lift up the M6 were obviously my inspiration for this. There was even talk of some people actually believing my story. I could just imagine a bunch of hippies and pot-heads carefully combing the riverbank in search of a free smoke.

## ***Land of Dope and Glory***

***TV botanist, David Bellamy is making a documentary about cannabis plants growing along the river Darwen near Ewood Park. Experts believe a high incidence of urine entering the river on match days is responsible for cannabis flourishing. Non dredging the Ribble estuary since the Preston Dock's closure means the river Darwen is now tidal. It's also been known to rise by three feet on match days. This phenomenon usually occurs at half time.***

*Cannabis plants started appearing along the river bank about two years ago. This coincided with Rovers' increased attendances and ending of Ribble estuary dredging.*

*Nobody knows where these plants originated. They are believed to be a rare strain which thrives on hops, malt and barley. This reflects traditional pre-match activity by Rovers fans. They normally thrive along dry river banks, but need watering once a fortnight. Ewood Park would seem a natural irrigation system.*

*Police warn potential marijuana users to keep away from river banks. Drug Squad officers are empowered to arrest anybody seen acting suspiciously in the River Darwen. Their biggest fear is a chemical spillage into the river causing spontaneous combustion of the bank's flora. If this happened during a Rovers match we could have a nightmare scenario. Imagine 20,000 people taking their clothes off and singing "Wild Thing".*

*David Bellamy has this advice for Rovers fans: "These plants shouldn't give off any intoxicating aromas normally. If in doubt, hold your breath as you enter the ground."*

*Contingency plans have already been made to install giant wind machines around Ewood Park. These would blow cannabis smoke in a town centre direction. Here it may be neutralised by carbon monoxide gases.*



*Not everybody wants this. One Rovers fan commented:*

*"If I'm getting the piss taken out of me, I might as well have a good night out in town."*

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You needed nerves of steel to go through the end of season play offs. Rovers had a habit of getting there then becoming the bridesmaid, never the bride. This time we got lucky. We came sixth in the league and shouldn't really have got in the play offs after our season's disastrous second half. But make it to these plays offs we did and getting this far was a second bite at our promotion cherry.

Our first match was at home to Derby County. We were getting beat 2-0 at one stage and contemplating an early exit for last orders. But some inspiration seemed to come over Rovers. Maybe it was us, the fans, who forced our team to get up off their backsides and pull their fingers out. Derby fans were singing "Ee, eye, ee, eye, ee, eye, oh. Up the football league we go." Then we started singing our version of it and wow! what a transformation took over Rovers. We ripped them to pieces and ended up winning this game 4-2.

The second leg of this play off found me in Blackburn Town Hall at a tenant's federation meeting while Rovers were at the Baseball ground. We didn't take long with this tenant's federation one as me and a lot of others there made it known we wanted to listen to how Rovers were doing in this crucial match. At the end of proceedings Jimmy Jackson, who had accompanied me from Queens Park Flats, drove me back to my place and I caught the end of Rovers' 2-1 defeat. Kevin Moran's goal was our lifeline. We held on for dear life, but we made it 4-3 on aggregate and booked our place in the Play Off Final.

Lynch and I decided straight away we were going to Wembley. He had a car and wanted to take his son and daughter. I didn't mind because he was going to do all of the driving this time.

On the morning of the match, Bank Holiday Monday, May 25th 1992. I was up around five o'clock. A big fried heart attack breakfast was soon put away. Then it was to Lynch's across Queens Park for seven o'clock. It was going to be a scorcher today, being hot even at this early hour. Wembley would be no place for the faint-hearted.

There was a minor crisis in his household. Paul, his son, had fallen out with girlfriend Kerry over something and nothing, as often happens in puppy love. Nobody else was bothered whether they made up or not. We were going to Wembley. Their differences were soon put to one side and, Lynch, His daughter Nicky, Paul and Kerry and I left Caroline to become both a football widow and mother.

Rovers fans were asked not to travel down the M1, but to use the M40 instead. I was a bad example to the children in Lynch's car, guzzling some of my home brew beer while he was driving. It was a fantastic sight travelling through Blackburn to the motorway. Even at this early hour there were Rovers fans everywhere. Their numbers increased as we drove through the town centre, waving our flags and our knotted scarves hanging out of car windows.

We had an enjoyable drive down to London. Passing cars of Rovers fans would beep their horns at us. We reciprocated too when we passed our fellow fans. On the outskirts of London we pulled into a pub with a beer garden. This was full of Rovers fans. Everybody must have felt as thirsty as us. Lynchy sensibly only had one pint of beer. I must have dropped about three pints during our half-hour stop off.

This was a good job really, as we found out later. After parking up near Wembley, we went looking for a pub. Both Rovers and Leicester fans had the same idea. But for some reason most hostelrys were closed. One was selling cans of beer through a window, but they were charging extortionate prices. We thought sod this and went to Wembley. They also knew how to rip people off in this place. I decided to become teetotal for the duration of our match.

This match was no great thriller for either set of fans. There was too much at stake. Things looked to be going against us, but Speedie was brought down in the Leicester penalty area. The referee pointed to the spot and Mike Newell stepped up to take the spot kick.

Half the Rovers fans looked away, the rest of us took a deep breath and held our heads in our hands. Leicester fans whistled and waved their scarves. But it was all in vain for our opponents. Newell scored what became the only goal of the game and it took us back to the top flight. Ironically we had a clearer cut penalty later in the game. No way was this referee going to give us another. He didn't have to.

When he blew his whistle we exploded, but it was more of a feeling of relief. All those years of false promises and losing out in other play offs. We were almost a permanent fixture in these during the 1980s, making the season even more costly for us. At last, our day had come. It felt like a weight being lifted off our shoulders. We were subdued even during the Rovers players' presentation and lap of honour. I must have shaken hands with thousands of our people. It was a shame for Leicester, but someone had to win this match, and we both got there through the back door.

Lynchy's entourage and I were still subdued as we drove home. Things were starting to perk up though as we headed up north. Beeping horns returned to the motorway as Rovers' famous win began to sink in. We knew it was going to be a celebration in Blackburn tonight and wanted to get home as soon as possible. I must have waved at every car with a blue and white scarf hanging out its window. Some may have been Leicester fans, but that was doubtful. They probably wanted to get home as quickly and as quietly as possible. After our play off debacle at Crystal Palace, I knew exactly how they felt. You have to experience those kinds of occasions to enjoy what we had just seen this afternoon.

Back in Blackburn town centre everybody on the streets seemed to be in blue and white. In the Trades Club we got a cheer when we walked through the door. It became another late night and another crash out on the bar room floor.

## Chapter 13

### *Sent to Coventry – to the Top*

Whilst in Wolverhampton I noticed one of the main thoroughfares of its town centre was called Darlington Street. By coincidence, my next piece of hitch hiking was to Darlington itself. At the end of last season Rovers managed to scrape into the new F.A. Premier League through the back door, beating Leicester in those play offs. This route had so often been our graveyard, but the law of averages says you have to make it sooner or later. This was reflected in more of a sense of relief when the referee blew his whistle to let us know we had made it. We left Wembley almost subdued, although not as much as Leicester City's supporters. They had to wait another season before their own celebrations. The real celebration took place in Blackburn over the next few days. We were up at last!

But it now meant Rovers, as one of the founder members of the Football League and now the Premier League, would be much in demand. So we ended up organising a friendly against one of the most fashionable clubs in the Football League – Darlington! The Quakers from Feethams. I'm not being derogatory about this club. Their couple of thousand regular fans are to me the salt of the Earth.

We can all be Liverpool or Manchester United fans. That's taking no chances, an easy way out. Sticking by your team, especially someone like Darlington, Hartlepool or Rochdale shows you're a real fan. At least I stick by my hometown club through thick and thin.

I can remember being as sick as a pig when Rovers missed out in the play offs that time against Crystal Palace in 1988-89. On my way back from London I met a Darlington fan on a motorway service station. He saw my long face and remarked how at least we were still in the Football League. His team had just been demoted to the Vauxhall Conference. This was after many years of applications for re-election. It just goes to show there's always someone worse off than you are.

It was good to see how Darlington and their fans didn't give up after losing their league status. They fought their way back into the Football League. Well done you Quakers!

It was quite a week for things going on in football, the world in general and Blackburn in particular. There had been outbreaks of rioting here in two different parts of my town. Some flare-up had developed between Asians in Blackburn's Brookhouse area. A fight between a couple of Indian and Pakistani lads created almost a full-scale war. Petrol bombs had been thrown at the police and each other over two nights this week.

There had also been trouble up the Fishmoor Estate, on Blackburn's south side of town, to give Lancashire Constabulary one hell of a wakes week holiday. At least I was going to be doing something peaceful, watching a football match. It looked like Rovers fans were amongst the most peaceable people in our town.

Rovers signed former goalkeeper, Terry Gennoe, as their Education Officer this week. His job

was to run their 'Football in the community' programme. This was a pilot scheme to help bring football clubs and their communities together. It gave each club a chance to contribute to its local community. Terry Gennoe did his bit to help blow away this often held belief by supporters of all footballers being thick. He had an Open University degree and was a qualified teacher.

Also this week, John Smith was elected leader of the Labour Party following their defeat in the recent General Election. At Rio de Janeiro's Maracana Stadium in Brazil, fifty fans were injured when a barrier gave way leading to an upper tier stand collapsing. Hopefully there would be no chance of this happening at Darlington.

Two other football stories in the news were of interest to Britain's press for different reason. Sports Minister, David Mellor, was caught with his pants down, as politicians often are. He was with an actress who I'd never heard of. At least he had a Chelsea shirt on at the time.

The other major story was of Rovers closing in on Southampton's young starlet, Alan Shearer. Other clubs were interested, but we had our money on the table. Uncle Jack's loot was not only paying for ground improvements, but top players too.

This trip to Darlington would have made many Rovers fans groan - Not me. It was one of those places I never thought I would ever visit; especially now we were back in football's top flight where we belong. Besides my collection of away grounds had built up well on the way to eighty, so I jumped for joy when this friendly match was announced. I was determined to go to Darlington's Feethams ground.

An unfortunate problem for me though was being unemployed again. I'd just finished my two-year full-time courses at Blackburn College and was looking for a job. I struggled for those two years living on a student grant which worked out at £60 a week, whilst paying a weekly rent in Queens Park Flats of £42. My electric and water bills used to cripple me financially. So my life was one of really living from hand to mouth. Going up to Darlington was definitely going to have to be a thumb job.

Up at six o'clock this Saturday morning, July 25th 1992. After a good fry-up breakfast of bacon and egg, it was a walk down to the M65 motorway junction at Whitebirk Roundabout, with me getting there for seven o'clock. I'd never actually used this route before for hitch hiking from this western end of Blackburn's new motorway. So all of this day was a new experience in more ways than one.

Ten minutes later my first lift arrived; it was from a bloke I knew. Pete McDonnell who was a member of Blackburn Trades Club. He was working overtime this morning, driving his skip wagon to Burnley. He told me he would be in the club tonight and be telling everyone who he picked up on his route. Ironically, Pete wasn't just a mate of mine and member of our Trades Club, but the wagon he was driving was owned by a firm called Lethbridges. This firm belonged to Len Neale, one of Rovers' directors. It had to be a good omen for how today would go.

Pete dropped me off at Gannow Top junction in Burnley. Then it was a few short lifts in a row.

To Nelson, Colne then Skipton. My last one was from an Iranian exile who used to be an officer in the deposed Shah's army. He asked me to guess where he came from and was as pleased as Punch when I unwittingly said Persia. He preferred to call his former country by its old pre-Islamic Revolution name.

My next lift was to just outside Harrogate, near a military camp. Lady Luck was with me when a car pulling out of here stopped for me. Its occupant was a soldier who was on his way to a match too. His team, Hartlepool United, were playing Motherwell in a friendly. He supported Hartlepool and we talked about their unusual aspect of having three nicknames. They were called 'Pool' or the 'Dockers' by their fans. But outsiders like myself knew them as the 'Monkeys'.

This came from a story from times gone by when a French ship capsized off Hartlepool's coast. The only survivor was a monkey. Unfortunately it was during the Napoleonic wars and nobody at the time had seen a monkey before. So this poor hairy Frenchman was strung up for being a spy. An extreme case of mistaken identity.

Hartlepool were today's opponent's local derby match. The soldier went out of his way, dropping me off in Darlington itself. He wished Rovers all the best, that we stuff his team's fiercest rivals.

My first job once I reached Darlington town centre, was to draw a tenner from a cash dispenser. Then I rang in my club racing nap, which was done, from a pub called The Green Dragon. This was a popular competition we ran down at Blackburn Trades Club. Each Saturday, over a ten-week period, you had to pick an individual racehorse and hoped it won that week. But it was how your donkeys did over this period. Winner of our competition was whoever was in most profit after these ten weeks. I'd won it once, but still usually managed to get into the top four and win something for my troubles.

It always made me laugh how all our so-called racing experts became rather ordinary when put to this kind of test. Whereas novices like me were always more consistent, yet I've never been to a race meeting in my life or been a regular in a bookies. What a cracking idea we had with this racing nap. It made our Saturday dinnertimes.

Maggi, our stewardess, who was working behind the club bar this dinnertime, took my call. She sounded surprised when she heard I'd thumbed it up to Darlington. But she was used to my crazy antics by now. She took these with a pinch of salt. I could hear her telling people around the bar where I'd ended up. "Mad Mick", "Bloody Nutter", or "Pots for rags", were some comments I could hear while she was writing my racing nap down.

Next stop after this telephone box was a pie shop. They made good steak pies up here, so I was lucky enough to find out, and it was a nice town centre too. But proof of this pudding would be in the drinking. My first watering hole was a nice little pub in the centre called the Speedwell; hopefully it might encourage my horse to do something similar. It served a decent pint of bitter too. After this I walked to Feethams football ground.

Whenever I go to away matches, my first job is to get to know the lay of the land. This is in case a sharp exit needs to be made. Luckily those bad old days of football hooliganism looked to be long gone. But old habits die hard. I'd made it this far and took no chances.

One of Darlington's cricket grounds was right next door to their football ground. This was one of Durham County Cricket Club's homes. They were pushing to join England's first class county league and looked to be on their way. Unfortunately it appeared to be in better nick than their football ground. Once I'd had a walk round the outside of Feethams and got my bearings of this surrounding area, it was a wander back to Darlington town centre again. It wasn't so far away. I called in a few pubs and then a big one called Haggan's, which was right across the road from the main railway station. This was a really cheap boozer and convinced me to stop in here until it was time to go to the match. It was nothing fancy, which suited me. I'll sup ale from a whore's clog if it's cheap enough.

I got talking to an old chap in this pub and asked him what Haggan's was like. He said it tended to get a bit rough later on Saturday afternoons, when their cheap beer started to have its effect. He reckoned it would be a good idea on my part for me not to broadcast where I was from, or why I was up here. No problem in that department from me. I left at around 2.00pm anyway, calling in their Central Workingmen's Club nearer Feethams football ground. One or two of my people were in here. They must have had a similar idea to me. Wherever I go, my club card goes with me. It's my constant companion, never leaving my side.

Rovers fans were given a whole side to stand on today. We brought a decent following, making up around half this game's attendance. Many Rovers fans had our snazzy new black and red away shirts on. I bumped into quite a few people I knew. One was a lad who had been at Blackburn College on my Media Techniques course. He was John from Chorley; he had driven up in his company car. I persuaded him to give me a lift back to Lancashire after today's match. He was going back to Chorley and agreed to drop me off at Samlesbury's junction of the M6 motorway.

Rovers won this game 1-0 with a 37th minute goal scored by our full back, little Alan Wright. The game itself was more like a kick around. It served as a good debut for Stuart Ripley who we had just signed from nearby Middlesbrough.

Afterwards, John was as good as his word and drove me back over the Pennines to the M6 at Tebay. He virtually blasted us home like we were in a rocket. It only took an hour and a half to get all the way from Darlington to Junction 31 at Samlesbury. John told me he didn't want to hang around. He had something on tonight.

It must have been my day. I was only waiting a few minutes at Samlesbury, when I got a lift straight into Blackburn. After being dropped at the top of Montague Street, I headed down its steep slope to the Trades Club. Incredibly, I was in here for 7.00pm. Most people in the club thought I'd been making it up saying I'd been up to Darlington to watch Rovers. They believed me when I showed them a fanzine I'd bought from one of their fans outside Feethams. I'd actually bought two. One was devoted to the Quakers and another produced by Northallerton Town, a local non-league team up there. Nice to see a bit of friendly co-operation between local

fans. John Walmesley was behind our bar tonight. He had promised to give me a jean jacket, which he didn't want, and he duly obliged. It must have been one of those lucky days.

Monday night's Lancashire Evening Telegraph carried a picture of Alan Wright scoring our winning goal. In its background you can see me already jumping up in the air. I've always had fast reactions. This showed me in the air before any other Rovers fans reacted. It even took me by surprise.

This match was really overshadowed by our signing of Alan Shearer. It had been on the cards over these last few days. All week there had been speculation in national papers as well as our local press. Shearer actually signed on the day of our friendly match at Darlington. Loose ends were tied up on Monday. Sadly Shearer's transfer meant an end of an era for two Rovers players who had become heroes, albeit over a different timescale.

Simon Garner was our club's record goalscorer with 168 goals for us. Our signings of Mike Newell and David Speedie probably put an end to his career with us anyway, but Garner was around my age and I remember him starting out as a teenager and saw every one of his first team appearances at Ewood Park. He was a Rovers legend. Not just on the football pitch either. His passion for cigarettes and beer made him seem like one of us. It was said Garner scored goals like he downed pints - one after another.

David Speedie only spent one season with us, this last one where we won promotion. What an impact he had. 23 goals helped get us up. He was loved by Rovers fans. A cry of "Speedie, Speedie" used to echo across Ewood Park. Yet in this fickle, cruel world of football, his services were dispensed with as fast as they were utilised. He was upset about leaving and made a tape-recorded message, which broke our hearts after his comments about his affection for us.

Speedie became part of the deal to entice Southampton to part with Shearer. They wouldn't budge on this, which was quite understandable. Losing the most promising young striker in the country meant them needing an experienced player to step into his shoes. Speedie's efforts had not gone unnoticed by the Saints. He left us a hero and a legend.

So now we were back in the top flight. Being a Premiership club brought problems of a different kind for Rovers. From our days of four figure crowds, we were now attracting greater numbers than our Ewood Park home could manage. This created a situation of having to queue for tickets, only cup ties in my case due to having a season ticket. Our play-off game still set me back an hour or two in a queue for Wembley tickets.

Queuing became our most whinged about talking point. I was asked by a few lads from Glisten's toffee factory, who came down the Trades Club on a works do, to write something about this problem. Being stuck in a queue does give you plenty of time to notice characters who have to suffer along with you.

## ***The Long and Winding Road***

***Last season was one of Rovers most memorable in living memory. But all silver linings have clouds. The worst of these was the dreaded ticket queue. Here are some of the characters you might meet.***

***Keen Kevin:** He's been queuing all night and tells everybody so. You can tell he's telling the truth because he's stubbly and dirty. His stomach does his talking for him. Luckily being first in the queue, he isn't around for long.*

***The Reminiscer:** "Da remember 't' day when there were 60,000 on here. We ne'er queued for tickets in them days. Football were better then, and beer. Tha could go out with four pennorth, get blind drunk, eat black pudding and tripe and still catch tram home. But tha can't tell young 'uns, they don't believe you."*

***Dozy Derek:** The type who queued up for an hour and a half, never says a word. Eventually he reaches the ticket seller then finds he's forgotten his season ticket. He goes red and sneaks away quietly, depending how wet he is.*

***The Cruncher:** There always seems to be a fat kid in front of you who never stops eating crisps. For an hour and a half you hear this crunch-crunch-crunch. On and on it goes until you're doing it too. Then he wipes his hands on his tracksuit, reaches into his bag and pulls out another bag of crisps. Away he goes again.*

***Angry Andy:** "Why are we always having to queue for tickets. We never had this problem when Don MacKay was manager. It's Dalglish's fault. He wants sacking!"*

***The Jokers:** Sometimes there's a bit of light relief from queue comedians. But these come in two kinds. The older supporter who tells jokes we've all heard before. You cringe and laugh politely. Then there's the Bernard Manning type who tells the dirtiest jokes you've ever heard. He doesn't care who's listening either. You try to avoid the stare of the little old lady in front who keeps turning around. Luckily she bursts out laughing, and everybody is saved.*

*It's usually about this time when the jokes are flying and everybody is getting on with each other. Suddenly you're in the ticket office. This is where your problems really start. You realise you haven't filled in your voucher. Neither has anybody else with the rustling going on. So you borrow the pen being passed round, whilst its owner never takes his eye off it. He knows he'll never see it again.*

*At last you reach the ticket window. Here the girl looks at you like a dog that's been pissed on by a lamppost. She takes off her glasses and asks "What do you want?" But we all manage to control ourselves, she's only doing her job after all, the sadist. So we pay up, hold our ticket to our breast then leave.*

*Deliberately you walk down Nuttall Street, smiling at the long faces. The queue has hardly moved.*

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As a strong trade unionist, being sent to Coventry is the equivalent of being given the black spot. But in of Coventry City's case, it was one of only a few grounds in the top flight where I'd never watched Rovers play. This stood to reason. We hadn't played Coventry since 1966. Last time we were in Division 1. I was too young to remember 1966. Most people remember it for a different reason - England winning the World Cup. Everybody forgets Blackburn Rovers being relegated in season 1965-66. Most older Rovers fans put it down to the 1965 Polio epidemic. First Division teams boycotted Blackburn because of it being one of the centres of this Polio epidemic. Consequently Rovers had a massive fixture build up. So we were sent down by a virus.

All I remember is my mum refusing to take me to see '*Dr. Who and the Daleks*' at one of Blackburn's cinemas. This was one of the breeding grounds of this epidemic, so we were led to believe. 1966 was not a good year, apart from England at Wembley.

This new season was totally different from 1965-66. In its first week Rovers drew at Crystal Palace, with two sensational goals from Alan Shearer. We then beat Arsenal and Manchester City at home. On Wednesday, before our trip to Highfield Road, we bagged a point at Chelsea in a nil apiece draw. Things were looking pretty good. We were still unbeaten and had kept three clean sheets in a row whilst taking seven points out of a possible nine.

College finished for me a month or so ago. No sign of a new job on the horizon. So there was not even a chance of being sent to Coventry, never mind affording train or coach fares. Luckily the weather was glorious sunshine in this week of our match. Thumbing down to the Midlands looked to be quite a pleasurable experience. Hitchhiking to away matches was like a military operation for me by now, I'd been doing it long enough.

My alarm had been set for 6.00am. Last night I took bread and cheese from my freezer. My milk was off, so it was a lousy cup of coffee which definitely woke me up for different reasons. Hopefully it wouldn't catch me up on my way down. I walked down Shadsworth Road to Whitebirk, arriving there around 7.15am. Twenty minutes later came my first lift of the day. A Scotsman picked me up, although he was living in Accrington. He seemed quite well-to-do, in a flashy car. But wasn't very clannish though, slagging off his fellow compatriots. He also hated football, very unusual for his nationality. So he didn't get to hear my real reasons for hitch hiking down to Coventry. I told him a cock and bull story about meeting my sister here because it was halfway between Blackburn and Reading.

This unpatriotic Scotsman dropped me off at Samlesbury for the M6. There was already another hitchhiker trying his luck. He was called Michael, so it wasn't just thumbing a lift we had in common. He looked every inch a student, even thumbing his way to Oxford. I had just been one myself and didn't want to be one again.

A Calderstones Hospital minibus picked us up. Two staff were taking a similar number of clients down to Cornwall. They dropped me off at Junction 5 of the M6, near Walsall. I didn't have long to wait before being picked up by an elderly Asian couple. They very kindly took me right into Coventry itself.

My run of good fortune meant me arriving quite early. So it was a walk to Coventry's Highfield Road football ground to get to know the lay of the land. Then a walk into the city centre. Spon Street was my destination. I'd read about this place in one of many good beer guides in Blackburn Library. It was where the theatres were located, but I wasn't interested in that. It was also where a few pubs could be found which interested me.

On the way I passed the famous Cathedral. Noticing what a good job the Luftwaffe had done to the original structure. Their new rebuilt one inside the shell of the old one was pretty impressive. I also passed a statue of Lady Godiva. She wasn't so impressive though, not being naked at all.

Doing a bit of research into the local environment can sometimes pay dividends. As was the case today. I had a cracking time down Spon Street, calling in three pubs. Getting friendly with the locals in one of them. We took turns to crack dirty jokes. Mine went down really well. They remarked on me being a typical Lancashire stand-up comedian.

After my sojourn in entertainment land, it was off to the match. Rovers had brought a big following down from Lancashire. We filled our away section on one of Highfield Road's ends and used an overspill section on one side of the ground. We witnessed a goalless first half, although we were all over Coventry. Things were different in the second half. We opened the scoring from an Alan Shearer penalty after 69 minutes. Then Mark Atkins scored a strange goal from a header nine minutes later. Everything he did seemed to be strange, not one of my all time favourite Rovers players. But he was our hero today for a change. This win took us to the top of the Premier League.

When the final whistle was blown, I made my way to Junction 3 of the M6 and started thumbing whilst walking along. A chap who looked to prefer two wheels was in a car and gave me a lift to another junction further up the motorway. He told me about a biker's festival due to take place somewhere round this area. He then dropped me at junction 3. Then it was a case of looking out for Rovers fans in cars. Unfortunately they probably used the other junction, leaving me up it.

Eventually a Scouse chap from St Helens picked me up. He was a taxi driver who had been to London on a delivery, he didn't want a fare from me on this occasion. He told me he was originally from Liverpool when I remarked on his accent. We yapped about a club I knew in St Helens, their Centre for the Unemployed. We had a similar institution based in Blackburn Trades Club. We didn't have such a good relationship with our version. He knew his St Helens one as 'Tressell's' and said it was full of drunkards. A similar thing was said about my place in Blackburn, although not in the Centre for the Unemployed here. The staff were known for being too lazy to be drunkards.

This taxi driver dropped me off near St Helens at 7.45pm. Not too far to get home really, but it took me a while. Four lifts and two hours later, I still got back to Blackburn and the Trades Club in time for 'Match of the day' on TV. Rovers' game at Coventry was their second featured match. After watching this I went home. Maggi behind the bar gave me her keys to open up the club tomorrow morning. She agreed to come in later and sort out her cash till.

This first season back in the top flight became a cracker for Rovers. We signed Alan Shearer from Southampton for around £3.5M. What a bargain for even such a large amount of money. Rovers came fourth in the Premier League. This season was full of highlights. One of my favourites was beating Newcastle in the 5th round of the FA Cup. This event inspired me to write a story for '4,000 Holes' about our triumph and Roy Wegerle who scored our winning goal.

### ***The Good, The Bad and The Wegerle***

*There came a man from a strange land, where liquorice allsorts are eaten in separate bags. He was the fastest gun in the West, known as the man with no claim. He was good, he was bad, he was Wegerle. His bounty, a first team place in the magnificent eleven.*

*Many people heard about this man, yet nobody was sure where he came from. Roy kinda drifted into town, wearing a poncho, needing a shave.*

*One day he walked down Loftus Road, home of the Texas Rangers. Tumbleweed rolled as he pushed open the batwings of Gerry's saloon. Gerry was in a poker game, having a shot of redeye. The bar room cleared as Wegerle stepped forward. Roy picked up the deck and dealt the cards. "What are we playing for?" Gerry asked.*

*"Your life" replied Roy. "I win this hand and I'm leaving town."*

*Gerry went for his gun, but Roy had already drawn. "I guess you win" Gerry sneered. "I gotta hand over my star."*

*So Wegerle blazed the lonesome trail north from the lone star state and drifted into Blackburn. But he had to wait on the edge of the gold field before staking his claim. That chance came when the good sheriff was shot in the back by a bad outlaw. Roy joined the magnificent eleven.*

*The dry season hit Blackburn. People began to think maybe the magnificent eleven were just cowboys after all. But their fears were blown away like tumbleweed one afternoon.*

*Rampaging comancheros from the North East hit town. They treed a saloon and made Blackburn look like Dodge City. Ewood Park became the OK Corral. Things were getting pretty rough, shots were whistling past people's ears. Rovers couldn't drive the renegades out of town.*

*Then at the eleventh hour a mysterious man was on his own. It was Wegerle against three comancheros. They tried to take him out, but he was too quick for them. He went for his gun, shot one, then another, leaving only one man to beat. The final renegade tried to bring Roy down. But the fastest gun in the West left him bleeding in the dust.*

*Blackburn was saved, this strange man from the west became a legend. So now our magnificent eleven are on the Klondike trail, trailblazing their way across the continent. This was how the West was won.*

## Chapter 14

### *Heavy Going*

My beloved Trades Club had shut down the previous month. This was definitely an end of an era for me. Now our old club members were using the Star and Garter pub, next to the bus and railway stations in Blackburn town centre.

Maggi Small, our former club Stewardess, John Lynch, our club Secretary and John Tobera, Blackburn Trades Council Chairman, who had a bit of redundancy money in his back pocket, all got together and formed a partnership to take over this pub on the Boulevard next to Blackburn railway station.

I was involved in this right from its early beginnings. There had been a strike on the railway. I was still Chairman of East Lancashire's local RMT branch and organised a picket of Blackburn Station. A journalist, called Katrina Dick, from the Evening Telegraph, across Railway Road, interviewed me and her story appeared on its front page that very night. There were a few funny quotes from me. At least I didn't make myself look like Katrina's surname.

After this particular session of picketing Blackburn Railway Station, a few railwaymen and I went for a pint in the Adelphi pub nearby. One of these lads, Dougy Bromley, told me about the demise of the Star and Garter a bit further up Railway Road from this pub. With the imminent closure of our Trades Club, I thought Maggi could not do any worse than putting in for this pub now its landlord was coming out. She could put a good case to Thwaites Brewery who owned it. After all, most Trades Club members would want to stick together. This pub could almost become a new Trades Club. A few of the trade unions who met in our place would join us over in the Star and Garter too. My colleagues from British Rail certainly would.

To cut a long story short. Maggi grasped this lifeline, joining up with the two Johns and she became new licensee of the Star and Garter. A spin off from this was Maggi telling me she would pay for my new season ticket if she got this pub. Thanks were due because of all the work I put in trying to keep her job alive in the Trades Club. Then successfully helping her find another way of making a living after it closed. She may have said this in jest, but I was never more serious and took her up on her generous offer. I was skint as usual, having not found a job after my college course ended. She would definitely be allowed to put her money where her mouth was.

One problem with Rover's newly found silver lining was a cloud which went with it. Last season I paid just £114 for my season ticket. That season would actually be my last as a full-time student and being entitled to discount. It would be a different story this time. It sent shivers down my spine after finding out I would have to part with £200. This was nearly double what I paid before. I paid £67.50 for my Blackburn End season ticket for season 1990-91. Whereas for 1991-92 it cost me the same price and to sit down too. This was because Rovers had raised the price of a Blackburn End season ticket to £75. Now I was in the comfort zone.

I didn't want to uproot from my favourite Blackburn End standing place, but it was on the cards Ewood Park was going to be all seated within a couple of years. So why not go and pick my own seat before everybody else jumped on Uncle Jack's bandwagon. I did just that. This offer was for the newly seated Riverside, or Walkersteel Stand as it was going to be known as from now on.

Another good thing about becoming a student was it giving me a way of cocking up my Poll Tax. The council sent me a bill for of over £300, near enough a quid a day. But when I went to college it dropped to around £90. When my summons for non-payment came, I was able to win my case by saying their summons was invalid. It was nearly two years later before they pulled me again. I coughed up once the government gave up with it. I appeared in court eight times. The finance chap from Blackburn Council became quite friendly with me, admiring my principles. He said I set the record number of court appearances for the Poll Tax. He was glad they got rid of it too.

Whilst at college, I wrote one of my funny stories for the student magazine. Unfortunately they wouldn't print it, saying it was too political. Sadly the days of student radicalism were long gone, very unhealthy for today's generation. But a lot of people still enjoyed my parody of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

## ***CURSED BY THE POLLTAXGEIST***

*Beware the age of 18. It is the three sixes, adding up to the number of the beast. You are liable to be cursed.*

*There is a horror sweeping the nation. An evil spirit called the Polltaxgeist. You know you have one, when things go bump on the doormat. The dreaded brown envelope arrives to haunt you. Poltergeists are assisted in their work by a blood-sucking vampire, known as the bailiff. These monsters show no mercy, especially with weaker members of society.*

*Across the land are found Witchfinder-Generals, who having sold their souls to the Devil, worship the Polltaxgeist. They drag innocent victims before the kangaroo courts, known as 'Bloody Assizes'. There they unleash the evil bailiffs upon their victims.*

*The Polltaxgeist originated in Scotland. Here the wicked witch of the West turned five million people into guinea pigs. Then like the Black Death, it was the turn of England.*

*The creature takes many forms. Sometimes known as the Community Charge, it disguises itself in blue. After infiltrating the household, pretending to be junk mail, it begins to fester. The evil smell attracts the Witchfinder-General. The horrors that follow are too awful to repeat.*

*After being tortured at the 'Bloody Assizes', you are given a choice: Make a pact with the Devil and he will exorcise the Polltaxgeist. Or face the wrath of the bailiffs.*

*Do not despair, there are many who fear not the Polltaxgeist. Brave men and women who stand up to the Witchfinder-General. They wear garlic around their necks and carry a cross – which they draw upon a*

*paper. It is that cross which frightens the Polltaxgeist more than the Devil himself. Fear of the cross filled his zombies with such fear, they kicked out Old Nick and put a stake through the heart of the wicked witch – replacing her with the Major. But it is too late for the zombies. A new spirit is sweeping the land.*

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When I called at Ewood for my new 91-92 season ticket, I had to take written proof of my full-time college course. Counter staff gave funny looks to me. Their idea of a full-time student was probably of a pimply teenager in a baseball cap and tracksuit. Not a 31-year-old man in a leather jacket with tassels.

After showing them a letter from college, to my surprise I was then asked whereabouts I wanted my seat to be. It sounded like one of those old football jokes.

“What time’s the kick off?”

“What time can you get here?”

I asked to be near the halfway line and as high up as possible. They offered me a seat three places away from the halfway line at row U. Obviously the bottom row was A, so I was quite pleased with this, especially as it was underneath the roof.

What I didn’t realise was it going from A to Z then starting again at AA, BB etc. I could have been higher, but it was good enough for me. Strangely enough, it was very close to where my dad used to stand when he watched Rovers home games.

These times of milk and honey carried on in season 1992-93. Not only on Ewood’s pitch, but also I managed to get my student discount again. Albeit by still technically being at college, even though my exams were over. I qualified by something like a fortnight. This time I paid £90; a few quid up on what it cost last season, which was still a lot of money to someone in my perilous financial position. This hike in prices showed Rovers wanted their money back after making the Walkersteel Stand all seated. It was debatable whether this was a student discount at all.

But those nice committee lads of the Trades Club were very helpful and they let me borrow £50 of it, so I got my season ticket as usual. The difference had been scrimped and saved for. I paid back my debt by working behind our bar for nothing.

It was well worth all my privation. Our first season back in football’s top flight found us finishing fourth in the Premier League. A sensational start beyond our wildest dreams. I would have liked to have travelled to more away matches, only going to Darlington in a friendly and Coventry in the league. But as usual, I never missed a single first team home match. Like I haven’t since being at school.

For this season of 1993-94, Rovers had put their prices up once again, to £200 this time. It seemed even more for me after paying their student rate last season. I wasn’t the only one affected by this price hike. They then abolished the student discount across the board. At least

my timing was as precise as ever.

As if these people hadn't got enough financial problems to worry about with their grants being cut and a new loan system being brought in by the Tories. There was no job on the horizon either and I was still skint. Queens Park Flats was my prison block. They didn't need to send me to the nick for not paying my Poll Tax. I was there already. To make matters worse, Ewood Park was being developed into an all-seater stadium at a cost of £20M. It was now limited to a 15,000 ground capacity. 12,500 season tickets were available and these were selling like hot cakes. It was a bad time to be unemployed, even more so if you were a Blackburn Rovers fan.

Luckily Maggi did come to my rescue. She gave me the necessary £200 needed to pay for my new season ticket. My biggest financial problem was now off my mind, at least for this coming season. I'd made it again, but only just, by the skin of my teeth.

Maggi got value for money from me, not just for always paying her wages on time and helping her get her pub. A week or so after moving in, a journalist from the Evening Telegraph next door called in and interviewed Maggi about her plans for the pub. This nosy hack asked her lots of pointed questions about the pub and about her personal life. She didn't deny anything about either subject. This was a big mistake. She should have told him to mind his own business and barred him. Maggi had no experience of dealing with the press and this journalist took advantage of her good nature.

A week later a story appeared in Blackburn's Citizen newspaper, sister paper of the Evening Telegraph. It said Maggi was planning to turn the Star & Garter into a gay bar. This was just not true. She told the journalist gay people would probably use her pub, but most of her customers were straight. The status quo would continue.

I was invited to an emergency meeting with Maggi and both Johns to figure out what they were going to do about it. My idea was to write a press release, signed by Maggi, putting things straight – in more ways than one. They all agreed with me and I went home to my typewriter and knocked up an article in time for deadline day. Next day I showed them my press release and they all agreed with my submission. Maggi thought it was a bit strong, both Johns thought it wasn't strong enough.

My article appeared in next week's Citizen. Strangely though, it appeared as a letter signed by Maggi, not a press release. At least it did the job and everybody was happy in the pub.

Unfortunately the Star & Garter had a different kind of clientele outside its doors, compared to the Trades Club. Whereas the Trades had been in Blackburn's red light area and often had prostitutes touting for business nearby. It was a different kettle of fish round these parts.

The Star and Garter is situated on Blackburn Boulevard, in a corner next to the railway station, at the bottom of the 'Fish Hillock', a narrow alleyway, or guinnel as we call it in Blackburn. It is one of the main gathering points for this town's local winos and down-and-out population. Many a time I have been tapped up for any spare change available when trying to catch a bus, or on my way to use the railway station.

They never got any money out of me. I do buy the 'Big Issue' though. At least their vendors are trying to help themselves and not blowing it on booze or drugs. As a consolation for the Boulevard's winos, I wrote a silly story about them for FTH. So at least they can now be classed as part of Blackburn folklore. As usual, people gave me stick about my offering. They said it attacked a set of people who cannot defend themselves. I never asked them what they thought. Some are the type you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. They can defend themselves - very well.

## **WINOS FORM ROVERS SUPPORTERS BRANCH**

***Blackburn's town centre winos are to set up their own Rovers supporters' branch.***

*The news comes following reports of the Ewood Blues Independent Supporters Association being sponsored by Scottish and Newcastle Breweries. The winos believe they could win a similar deal from one of the local breweries, or even better, a cider company.*

*A spokesman for the Boulevard Branch of the winos, Cider Bob, would not give interviews until he was paid some loose change. He reckoned he was short on his bus fare home. After disappearing for ten minutes then returning with a bottle, he spoke to our reporter. Once the shakes had stopped.*

*"We're all Rovers fans round here. Look, we've even got blue noses."*

*"Every time Rovers are on satellite TV we crowd into the precinct and stand outside the telly shops. I just wish they could stop those green snakes and pink elephants from invading the pitch."*

*Cider Bob also reckons having their own supporters group could open a lot of doors for the winos. Normally these get slammed in their faces.*

*"We must be a charity case because people are always giving us money. Maybe we could get a European grant from Blackburn Council, or a lottery handout. We'd really prefer sponsorship from a brewery though. After all, they want people to drink more of their beer. We agree, we're trying our best to do just that."*

*The first thing the winos want is their own premises. Shelter H on the Boulevard is cold and draughty and lacks privacy. Bob believes the Pavilions on Church Street would be ideal for Blackburn's wino community clubhouse. This would kill two birds with one stone. Nobody seems to know what to do with the Pavilions. What better use than letting Blackburn's oldest minority take over them.*

*For now though, the winos have to settle for watching live Rovers matches outside TV shops, or through the window of the Adelphi. This is all right, apart from when it rains and waters down the booze. But one day the winos may have their own independent supporter's branch, meeting in their own premises. It would be interesting to see which player they would pick as their Honorary President.*



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With my favourite watering hole gone, interest further increased in my other favourite institution - Blackburn Rovers. I had been away to many pre-season friendlies before, but never up in Scotland. Plus, in all my years of hitch hiking to away matches, I'd never actually gone up the M6. Apart from the short distance to the M55 turn-off, when I thumbed it to Blackpool with Frank Andrews. Even though I had been down this motorway countless times. There was only really Carlisle United to travel to in our league were you could go north up the M6. Unless you wanted to go a round-about way to the Northeast. I'd been to Carlisle a few times, including in my own car. Even having a rear tire blow-out last time I went. So when Rovers booked a friendly with Motherwell, I jumped at the chance of charting out new territory.

This match took place on July 31st 1993. I got up early at 5.30am, made myself a bacon sandwich, then three boiled ham butts for my journey up to Scotland. Then it was a walk down Shadsworth Road to my usual spot under the Whitebirk railway bridge. It didn't take me long to hitch it over to Samlesbury's M6 junction. Then a chap who had just finished his nightshift at nearby British Aerospace picked me up and gave me a lift up the M6 to Lancaster. It had started raining by now when he dropped me off.

Luckily there wasn't long to wait before a nice old lady picked me up and took me to Penrith. She said she felt sorry for me standing by the slip road all alone. I must have looked like a little boy lost.

It was throwing it down at this latest junction and I got wet this time. But my patience paid off with another lift getting me over the border into Scotland at Gretna Green. There was no rain now, in fact the sun was shining and my luck was in.

My next lift was from a couple towing a caravan, on their way to the bonnie bonnie banks of Loch Lomond. They took me right up the A74 dual carriageway, to where it became a proper motorway again – the M74. I was dropped at Motherwell's motorway junction. From here it was a short walk into its town centre. I'd arrived just in time for this town's pubs opening time and saw one called the 'Electric Bar'. There was a sign on one of its walls saying 'football shirts must not be worn in here'.

But the chap behind the bar didn't mind my Rovers tee shirt when I asked if it was all right for me to come in here for a pint. He said it was mainly to stop Celtic and Rangers fans having a go at each other and trouble kicking off. Plus Motherwell themselves and Hamilton Academicals were only around five miles apart and sometimes could also be hostile to each other. This sounded a right place. Four sets of crazy football fans in the same town. I thought we had enough local rivalry in Lancashire.

After a pint in this pub, I had a wander over to Motherwell's ground at Fir Park to get my bearings and polish off a potato pie. I avoided the ones known down south as Scotch pies. These were horrible, although a lot of people I knew swore by them. Not everybody up here did though. One match I hitched to was when Aberdeen played Hibernian in the Scottish Cup at

Easter Road in early 1983. Rovers didn't have a game that day. So I decided to go up to Edinburgh for a night out with my mate, who really was called Jock, and take in a football game whilst up here. Hibs were at home to Aberdeen, good enough for me, so we stood with the Dons fans.

Jock was called Mark really, but being a Scotsman who had spent most of his life in Blackburn, he called himself Jock. He told me how bad these pies were and at the game pointed out the mass of discarded ones at the bottom of the terraces. These had been thrown by Aberdeen fans, after taking a single bite from them. Now there was a mass of congealed meat, pastry and blubber. I am talking about the pies, not the football fans.

Once Motherwell's football ground was found, and a couple of programmes for today's match were purchased, I went looking for another nearby watering hole. On the way I saw a carload of Rovers fans filling up at a garage. They saw what was printed on my tee shirt and waved and grinned at me. A couple of Motherwell fans in the street pointed me in the direction of their team's supporter's club. It was just round the corner from Fir Park, as expected. There were a couple of bouncers on its door. When asked if I could have a drink inside, they practically dragged me in after I told them where I was from.

This was a cracking supporters club and these Motherwell fans were really friendly. So was their beer. They called their bitter 'heavy', which took a bit of getting used to. I was surprised how knowledgeable they were about Rovers. They said they watched our English Premier League up here, some of them preferring this to their own league, which they said was a bit top-heavy due to the Old Firm totally dominating Scottish football. England had a lot more competition and was less predictable.

More Rovers fans started arriving and it became a great atmosphere in this super little club. Then it was off to what we were here for. Rovers had brought a big following for a friendly game. It was noticeable how many were from Scotland. You could hear an occasional strange oath, but not understand it.

The Scottish season tended to start a week before ours. You could see a bit of a difference here between these two teams. Our opponents seemed slightly sharper and much fitter. They deservedly beat us 1-0. Rovers should have had an equaliser, but it was a fair result. Amongst our travelling Rovers fans was a lad called Andy who like me, lived up Queens Park Flats. I'd seen him during this very week, telling him of my plans to attend Rovers' friendly match up here. He and his mates were travelling up in a minibus and a couple of cars, before stopping overnight in Kendal. The married ones were in the cars. They had to go home tonight.

Andy said he would drop me off at the Kendal turn-off of the M6 after the match. Any lift in the right direction was welcome. In my case, beggars couldn't be choosers. First we went back to the pub where he had parked his van. On the way inside he stuffed a fiver in my top pocket for a few pints. He said he knew I was skint, but admired my determination in hitching it all the way up to Scotland.

In this pub there was a mixture of Celtic, Rangers and Motherwell fans, plus a large contingent

of travelling Roverites who outnumbered them all. It was probably our sheer weight of numbers, which made us popular with this pub's landlord. We helped keep the peace, as well as drinking his pub dry. He wanted another friendly arranged.

We just had one last pint in here, said goodbye to our new friends from Motherwell, then we were on our way back to England. It didn't take long to arrive in Kendal.

Andy and his mates were all regulars in the Knuzden Brook and Forester's pubs around Shadsworth. There were a couple of lads in their van today who were in the one from the Foresters, which gave me a lift down to Wolverhampton that Boxing Day morning. They were pleased to meet up with me again, even offering to let me crash out on the floor of their digs in Kendal.

This was very kind, but I was knackered by now and just wanted to get home. I did eventually, but it took me a few more hours. A posh couple gave me a lift to the next M6 junction. I had waited for ages at the one where Andy dropped me off. But it was another wilderness for hitching. Instead I tried walking to the next one and needed to thumb a lift there after getting sick of walking.

Things got better further down the M6 and I managed a lift straight down to Samlesbury. This was after being picked up in a classy black Rover, quite an appropriate car to pick me up. It was driven by the Chairman of Netherfield F.C. from Kendal. He was on his way to do some work at his business in Manchester. Not my idea of a Saturday night out in Manchester. He knew where I'd been today and picked me up after seeing my Rovers gear. He was interested in Rovers asking how they played today. He mentioned about the extra week start Motherwell had on us. It does make a difference, so he agreed with me.

Netherfield's kind Chairman dropped me off at Samlesbury's motorway junction and not long after a driver picked me up, taking me all the way into Blackburn town centre. I ended up in the Star and Garter after all. There was time for a drink and yap with everybody before catching a bus home to get my head down.

My life changed quite radically a couple of weeks after travelling up to our friendly in Motherwell. There would soon be a move on the cards for me after living in this pigeon loft for nearly nine years. I met a woman, also living in Queens Park Flats, and we ended up doing a runner from here and setting up home together. We were both out of work and totally broke. This knocked off my travelling to away matches for the time being. She was slightly interested in Rovers, her dad had been a supporter for a long time, while her brother still was and went to most home matches. So my going to home matches didn't really bother her too much. She even came with me a few times and enjoyed it.

Once she realised trying to stop me going to Rovers games just wasn't going to work. Canute had more chance with the sea. It doesn't take people long to work out where my priorities are in life. They were more important to me than she was. This is a terrible thing to say, but you can't hide away from the truth. Old habits die hard. Even more so in my case. I'm Rovers till I die.

I'm always one to make compromises though. I agreed to stop going to away matches. This was a pity because Rovers were in the middle of a golden age. Our first season in the inaugural Premier League found us finishing fourth. Last season we were runners up. We were one of England's top teams again. Like we were when organised football started in those pioneering nineteenth century days. This was all down to Jack Walker's millions. People started to sit up and take notice when he first became involved in 1990.

Unfortunately the national press and media seemed to have a hang-up about Rovers being up with the big boys. It was as though we shouldn't have been amongst the Liverpools, Arsenals and Manchester Uniteds. Yet where were these three teams when the Football League was formed in 1888? A hundred years later they may have been the glamour boys. But who knows whether they will in another hundred years. We'll have to wait and see.

## Chapter 15

### *End of the Odyssey*

My life changed quite radically a couple of weeks after travelling up to Motherwell. I met a woman called Caroline in Queens Park Flats. She was called Carole really, like my sister, but didn't like it, so she changed her name by deed poll. We ended up doing a runner from here and setting up home together. We were both totally skint, so this knocked off my travelling to away matches. She was slightly interested in Rovers, her dad had been a supporter and her brother still was. He went to home matches with his two sons. So my going to home matches didn't bother her. Once she realised stopping me going was not going to work. It doesn't take people long to work out where my priorities are in life.

I'm always one to give a bit and make compromises though. I agreed to stop going to away matches. It broke my heart, but needs must when the Devil drives. This was a pity because Rovers were in the middle of a golden age. Our first season in the inaugural Premier League found us finishing fourth.

Last season (1993-94) we went even better and finished runners up. We were one of England's top teams again. Like we were when organised football started in the nineteenth century. This was all down to Jack Walker's millions. People started to sit up and take notice when he first became involved in 1990. Most Rovers fans couldn't believe what was happening either. It was as though clubs like us were not meant to be up amongst the big hitters. But we weren't complaining. Having a 'Sugar Daddy' was making life very sweet for us down at Ewood Park.

Unfortunately the national press seemed to have a hang-up about Rovers being up with the big boys. They used to print insulting stories about Blackburn and its lack of prosperity, such as what a million pounds would buy you in Blackburn. They called us cloggies and showed pictures of terraced streets and dark satanic mills. Yet we never seemed to see pictures of Salford, Leeds or Liverpool. At least our fans lived in the terraced houses portrayed in the press.

I used the pages of FTH to give them a bit back. They played on stereotypes of northern mill

towns. I threw it back at them were they were a bunch of dishonest, drunken, cowardly parasites. My story went down well with Rovers fans. I'm not sure how well it went down in Wapping and Fleet Street.

## ***THE MEN IN CLOGS***

***The tabloid press have once again been slagging off Rovers and the people of Blackburn.***

*This follows the decision of Dion Dublin, or his agent, to turn down a transfer here. Some elements of the press blame Dublin's decision on the image problem Blackburn Rovers and the town seem to have. But the problem is really a conspiracy originating in Wapping. We have uncovered a secret file giving details of how tabloid journalists behaved in Blackburn during the early days of the Walker Revolution. This is what really happened.*

*In the Wapping office of the Sun during 1991 Editor Kelvin Mackenzie hastily called a meeting of his sports reporters and news journalists.*

*"Nah listen to me you useless barstards! Where's this bladdy place called Blackburn?"  
A newshound replies: "Why boss that's where that steel magnate has bought the football club."*

*"Shut yer marf you smart alec. The word's magnet, not magnate you ignorant prat. I know all about that. It's where he comes from I wanna know about. Now where's Blackburn? I won't arsk you again."*

*Another reporter says: "It's up Norf Boss, near Scotland. Thay've got a football team called Rowvers and they make bread at their grahnd."*

*"Right, that's unusual. A football clab which makes bread," says Kelvin. "Seeing as you're such a bladdy expert on the subject, you can get on the train and dig the dirt on this place. Take a few of your useless mates with you."*

*So the hacks board the train and head up North. At Blackburn they come out the station and go straight into the Star and Garter. Three hours later they are all legless after drinking the local bitter. Later they realise they have a job to do.*

*"The boss is gonna kill us, we're supposed to dig the dirt not get pissed up all day," says one of the hacks.*

*"Don't worry about Kelvin," his colleague replies. "He's as fick as pigshit, how do you fink he got the job? Creeped up Murdoch's arse!"*

*"Tell him what he wants to hear. Now shat yer marf and get some more of this strong Norfern beer in."*

*The reporters leave the Star and Garter and fall into the Adelphi. After more rounds of drinks the pads come out and the scribbling starts. 'Coronation Street' is on TV. Everything stops while the journalists watch the episode. Then 'Brass' follows the 'Street'. This seems to inspire them even more and they produce loads of copy about life up North. After last orders they*

*stagger back to the station and head back to the Smoke. They never did make it to Ewood Park, or find the bakery.*

*Next day the splash on the Sun's front page is **IT'S BLEAK UP NORTH**. Sun reporters visit the land of cotton mills and coalmines. They go on to describe Blackburn as a place populated by men in clogs and women in shawls climbing hills of cobbled streets. Where nobody has a job and everybody lives on tripe and black puddings. They also list ten things you could buy in Blackburn for a million pounds. This style of reporting becomes the stereotype used ever since to describe us.*

*So now every Rovers fan knows what really happened back in 1991. We just have to put up with the drivel written about Blackburn by the gutter press. Remember it doesn't matter whether they say good things or bad things about us. At least they are saying things about us. Next time we'll send them to the Postal Order, where they don't have a telly.*

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By now my girlfriend and I had moved from Queens Park Flats to the other side of Blackburn. Just down the hill, near the district where I came from. Not for long though, maybe a year. The bloke who owned our rented house wanted us out after losing his job in London. It was his house after all. Not a lot of choice in the matter. We had to start looking for somewhere else to live after being given a month's notice to get out. This was a shame. It was a lovely little bungalow in a nice part of town.

Luckily I had a mate who owned a house down Wensley Fold. He was glad to have us here, so we upped sticks and moved on once again. I knew this area almost as well as our previous address. It was only a few hundred yards from my old workplace on Johnston Street.

Unfortunately I was still on unemployment benefit and going to a job club. My life seemed to be all Restart interviews, back to work plans and one job interview after another. All with the same result: "Don't call us, we'll call you."

I wouldn't have minded if any of these jobs was decently paid, or had any prospects. They were all rubbish wages, usually in little non-union sweatshops. My fellow sufferers on the job club and I used to have a laugh about this and come up with all sorts of plans about getting out of being offered a job in one these little hell-holes. I said the best way to screw up your interview was by walking in with a copy of 'Militant' or 'Socialist Worker' under your arm and asking which union you were supposed to join. And would they be taking subs out your wages. If the gaffer said he didn't recognise unions, you said: "Well I do. We'll soon put that right!"

Being out of work made things difficult financially too. We had to go cap in hand to my bank to borrow the money for my new season ticket. They were very obliging, as banks seem to be when it comes to throwing loans at you. At least I was able to pay for season ticket number eighteen in a row.

What Jack Walker was doing for Rovers made many football fans sit up and take notice. He

gave everybody in the Blackburn area a sense of pride and happiness in our local football team. When Uncle Jack unveiled his plans for Ewood Park, Rovers fans like me were overjoyed and taken aback by its scale of size, design and comfort.

I liked our old Ewood Park and its terraces, but it was over a hundred years old, its capacity seemed to reduce year by year. Now we were going to have a new stadium fit for the twenty first century. It would have a proposed capacity of over 30,000.

Unfortunately for one 50-year-old man in Accrington, called Brian Blakemore, this was bad news. He was also having to sit up and take notice when Jack Walker arrived on the scene. Not quite for the same reasons as us Rovers fans. He would have been taken aback too when building plans for Ewood Park were revealed.

In the Lancashire Evening Telegraph on Wednesday, July 20th 1994, there was a grisly story on its front page. This was about a decomposed body being dug up by contractors yesterday, working on Rovers' new Jack Walker Stand. This new stand was the largest part of the ground and replaced the old Nuttall Street one.

The dead body was found in a sewer pipe as it was being removed from a backyard by a workman using a JCB or some other earth moving machinery. As his machine dug a channel, a human head was seen gazing through a large crack which revealed itself through the side of the pipe. Police were called. They reckoned after forensic examination, how it could have been in this shallow grave for anything up to ten years. Not a very dignified last resting place for the corpse inside - a sewer pipe in someone's back yard. The area was sealed off and became the scene of a murder investigation.

Blakemore owned number 84 Nuttall Street. This was due for demolition to make way for Ewood's new phoenix rising from the ashes. I had actually been in this house, along with many others, once or twice during my visits as a meter reader with NORWEB. No doubt I would have been in his other property to read his meter.

At the time police were also looking into the West murders, possibly even taking advice from detectives who worked on these grisly and infamous cases. It made me wonder if I had ever visited other houses with dead bodies secretly hidden under their floorboards or buried in backyards. I had come across coffins with bodies inside whilst letting myself into houses where keys had been given to meter readers. But these were all deaths by natural causes, so I hope.

After some good detective work, the body was identified as 19 year old Julian Brookfield from down the road in Darwen. He had been missing from home for a number of years. One of Julian's friends saw the publicity and immediately contacted the police. They identified him from his dental records.

Brian Blakemore was eventually brought to trial, he was found guilty of killing Julian Brookfield in bizarre circumstances. The teenager went missing from home exactly ten years to the month in August 1984. He had previously worked in a sex shop in Blackburn town centre. This is where he met the man who would ultimately kill him.

Blakemore, 51 at the time was jailed for twelve years. Seven for manslaughter and five for perverting the course of justice after denying any knowledge of Julian's disappearance.

Rovers booked a pre-season friendly match against Celtic for early August 1994. I wanted to go to this match for one or two reasons. It was a good chance to see how Rovers, who were runners up in last season's Premier League, would fare against one of the top two clubs in Scotland. Another reason was the game's venue.

This match wasn't at Celtic Park, unusually. Like Rovers, the Celt's ground was being redeveloped. Their plans were to turn Celtic Park into Britain's largest club ground, with a capacity of around 70,000.

Ironically Celtic Park was supposed to have a ghost of its own. One of their former goalkeepers who died during an 'Old Firm' game in 1931. This was after a collision with a Rangers player. He is said to haunt one of the goals. No doubt the Julian Brookfield story would give Ewood Park its own supernatural legend in years to come.

The ground improvement work meant Celtic would be playing their home matches at Hampden Park this season. There was no way they would play at their 'Old Firm' rivals, Rangers, Ibrox Park stadium. So I was given a unique opportunity of watching Rovers play at both the home of Scotland and England in the same week. Hampden on Monday then Wembley on Sunday

Before this match Rovers had been on their Scandinavian tour. They lost their first match to a Steinkjer SK 2-1. This sounded a right one too. Warhurst scored our goal here. It was also new signing Chris Sutton's debut match. We signed him from Norwich City for a colossal £5M. Once again breaking the British domestic transfer record, like we did with Alan Shearer.

Another thing Suttty had in common with Shearer was being in a losing Rovers team on his debut. Shearer made his debut for us in our friendly at Hibernian. Just after my trip up to Darlington in 1992. Rovers were on the end of a 3-0 hiding in Edinburgh despite Shearer's presence. Hopefully great things were round the corner.

At least in his next match Suttty scored. We beat a team called Pons 6-1; they sounded a right bunch too. This looked more of a case of who didn't score for us. But before we started getting excited, our last match of this tour brought us a defeat at Brondby. So it looked like more work needed to be put in before our Premier League's big kick off at Southampton's Dell.

Before our friendly at Celtic, Rovers played in a testimonial match up in Aberdeen. Rovers got beat 1-0 against a team who were in UEFA Cup action a week later. This was a pretty good result, especially as we had hit an injury crisis all of a sudden. It meant even Kenny Dalglish and Tony Parkes having to put on the blue and white halves and playing for us. There was even a possibility of reserve team goalie, Bobby Mimms having to play outfield. It meant we were going to be depleted in our games against Celtic and Manchester United.

We were playing our match at Celtic on Monday August 8th 1994, four days after my 35<sup>th</sup>



birthday. Then we were up against Manchester United at Wembley in the Charity Shield during the weekend after. We had been put in this Charity Shield match almost by default due to Manchester United winning the double and the FA not wanting a repeat of their Cup Final with Chelsea. So Rovers had to take part in this big non-event of the season.

My girlfriend was supposed to travel down to Wembley with me. But she wasn't really into football, only the social side of it. So she decided she didn't want to go. That was no problem, expecting her to hitchhike up to Scotland was not the most chivalrous idea. The real problem for me was Rovers allocation of tickets for our Celtic match being sold out before I could even get one.

Rovers themselves even announced in this week's Evening Telegraph that our fans should not travel up to this match without a ticket for the game. They had a point. Last place I wanted to end up in was Celtic's 'Jungle' wherever it was these days in Hampden Park. I was still determined to go to this game, so decided to hitch up to Glasgow early on the morning of this match and try my luck getting a ticket for another part of the ground reserved for home fans. Normally this is not recommended. But Celtic had a good reputation for being friendly with everyone, apart from Rangers. Plus they also had many English fans, I would pretend to be one if necessary.

On the day of the match I set off after Caroline had gone to work. I walked from where she was working across Corporation Park to the Revidge district of Blackburn. Next stop was a phonebox on Granville Road. All week I had been trying my luck ringing Rovers to find out if any tickets for the Celtic match had been returned. Every time there was a recorded message with no mention of this match. Even at half nine this morning it was still playing its silly tune. I decided to chance my arm hitch hiking anyway. It was early enough. I rang Caroline to tell her where I was going.

Then it was a walk to what was then called Billinge School. My sister used to go to this school. Quite a few lifts had been given to me from here. Not much of a wait this time before two sisters picked me up. When I told them where I was headed they said their brother was on his way up to Glasgow, or thereabouts. He'd set off around the same time as his sisters. We might be able to catch him.

On the M6 they spotted him and waved him over to stop at Forton Services, which was a few miles up the motorway. These two lasses had a word with their brother and he told me to jump in and he would take me all the way to Glasgow. This was an offer I couldn't refuse.

It turns out his sisters were friends of a political and green activist called B.J. He and a few of his mates were in the news in Blackburn this week. Their organisation, called the 'Campaign for real democracy', occupied the old derelict Pavilions on Church Street in Blackburn town centre. They renamed it 'The Alamo Free Cafe' and turned it into their headquarters for fighting the Government's Criminal Justice Bill.

In my 'Wino' story for FTH, I suggested these buildings could be given to Blackburn's winos as their own community centre. The Campaign for real democracy got in before them. They said

anybody was welcome here, except druggies and drunks. They must have read my story. Sadly Blackburn's oldest and most shunned minority had to stay in their bus shelter on the Boulevard.

We blasted up the motorway into Scotland, stopping at a transport cafe just over the border. Here my benefactor demolished a massive fried breakfast. This was no problem for him. He was a big lad. It was a shame he wasn't coming to tonight's match with me. Not even Celtic's notorious 'Jungle' would have tangled with this gorilla.

We then carried on to Glasgow itself, where he dropped me off not far from its city centre. He thought I was taking a chance sitting with Celtic's fans and told me to watch myself.

During the week I'd taken some advice from Maggi in the Star & Garter. Her brother was going to the match and she was a Celtic fan herself. Unfortunately her brother was only thirteen, so it wouldn't be a good idea to meet him in a pub. She made fun of my naivety and told me things I had to do so as not to be recognised as an away fan, especially an English one who had been brought up a Protestant. I was shown how to cross my heart the correct way. And not to ask if Celtic players had a slice of orange at half time. This was all a load of cobblers. Maggi told me most of Celtic's fans were bigger heathens than I was.

On the serious side, Maggi said Hampden Park's nearest railway station was at Mount Florida, not much of a walk away. So I went there to try my luck for a match ticket. I had to catch a train from Glasgow Central Station. This cost me 95p to Mount Florida. Then it was a walk down the hill to the ground.

My luck was out this time. After walking round what was a deserted stadium, I eventually found a groundsman. He told me tickets for tonight's match were on sale at Celtic Park itself, which I could see was a few miles away. So it was a bus ride to Parkhead. There was a massive queue outside for tonight's match, which took me by surprise. I walked around what part of the ground I could, but there was only one area with the ticket outlets. This was disheartening. I could have been here all day trying to get a ticket.

Fortunately I had another stroke of luck. This was when I went for a pint in a pub just round the corner from Celtic Park. A couple of lads talking at the bar said tickets for tonight's match could be bought from the Celtic Supporter's Club. My pint of heavy went down like water down a plughole once I found out where this club was situated. As soon as I walked through the club's entrance I bought a ticket from a chap on the door. Now I could relax and start to enjoy myself.

I got talking to a few Celtic fans. They were very friendly and welcoming, telling me how to get to Hampden Park and which bus to catch. Later on a few Rovers fans came in. There were a couple of lads amongst them who I knew. One was Pete Kennett who used to be on the committee of Blackburn Trades Council Club with me. The other was a lad called 'Bunny' who used to go drinking with me round Revidge. He was a supporter of both teams, a handy position tonight.

I left this very good club about an hour before tonight's kick off. A bus took me back to Mount Florida. It hit home to me what kind of intense rivalry there must be between Glasgow's big two.

A couple of young lads on the bus pulled their green and white scarves from their coats as we neared Hampden Park. These were tightly rolled up with rubber bands round. Like me, they must have had instilled into them a strong sense of self-preservation.

Next stop was a chippy. My improvised broken Scottish accent was noticed by a couple of Celtic fans in the queue behind me. They burst out laughing. One of them commented to his mate about me putting an accent on, obviously an Englishman. I felt a right prat, but my chips were all right, which is what mattered.

Outside here I bumped into Tom Fox, landlord of the Jubilee in Blackburn town centre, taking him by surprise. After a walk to Hampden's ticket office, I came out with a cock-and-bull story, which was half-truthful. This was about how Rovers had to return their allocation of tickets for tonight after a seating mix-up. I told them I'd just returned from a holiday today and didn't have time to exchange my ticket, but still had my original.

This did the job and I was given a ticket for the section where the Rovers fans had been allocated. Our section of Scotland's home ground didn't impress me in the least. In fact it looked like they had reserved the worst part of Hampden Park for their Sassenach visitors. This section of seating given to Rovers fans wasn't so clever at all. It was the last bit of this historic ground to be rebuilt and needed it, but it was good enough for me tonight after my dodgy story.

We had brought a good following tonight. Once again, like at Motherwell, we were joined by a lot of our fans from up here in Scotland. Rovers had become quite popular north of the border. This match looked to be heading for a goalless draw, certainly nothing to write home about. I decided to avoid any rush and left about five minutes before the final whistle.

As I left Hampden Park there was an almighty cheer, Celtic had scored; Willie Falconer put in their late winner. So what! It was only a friendly, who cares? My interest in this season's friendlies was fast diminishing after yet another defeat. We did deserve something from tonight really. I merged with the leaving crowds as they left for home.

Hampden had been partially developed with it being all seated now. It had a 38,000 capacity. It wasn't too far off that for tonight's match, there was a crowd of 29,497. This surprised me; I've never been in a crowd like that for a friendly match. Although I suppose, apart from 'Old Firm' matches and an occasional foray into Europe, we were probably Celtic's most attractive opposition this season.

After walking for miles I started hitchhiking. Eventually a bloke picked me up, dropping me off at the Bellshill roundabout. Then I had to wait even more hours for my next lift. A wagon driver dropped me near the M74. More hours later, an empty coach picked me up and dropped me at a transport cafe on the A74 not far from Carlisle. I tried my luck from here, but to no avail. Motorists seemed to have wrapped up by now and gone to bed. A minibus full to the brim with both Rovers and Celtic fans pulled on to this cafe's car park. There were about twenty people in a van meant for a dozen. No way could they get one more passenger in.

Eventually I became sick of hanging around this bleak spot and started walking down the road

just to get away from this god-forsaken place. At last I reached the start of the M6. It was five o'clock in the morning by now. It only took me five hours to get to Glasgow when setting off from home. I was expecting an earful when I got back.

My luck changed once I crossed the border into England. A wagon driver from Plymouth, but living in Milton Keynes, picked me up and took me down to my turn-off from the M6. He was a great bloke, a shop steward too and a strong trade union man like me. We got on like a house on fire, slagging off the Tory Government.

At Samlesbury I thumbed a lift to Blackburn, being dropped off at Billinge and walking the last couple of miles down Revidge and Pleckgate Roads back to where I lived. My girlfriend was in bed and nearly had a fit when I got in. Bursting into tears and giving me the earful I'd been expecting since last night. Luckily she had to go to work as it was after nine o'clock. It had taken me nearly twelve hours through the night to travel barely 200 miles. It was a hard away match this time.

On reflection, this was going to be my last trip to a Rovers away game using my thumb. She had been so upset and I was absolutely knackered. I didn't enjoy hitchhiking anymore either. All the good times were long and conveniently forgotten about.

I was beginning to feel like the Ancient Mariner. Rovers had always been an albatross round my neck, but tolerable at home matches. Going away was a bit of fun too, but spending all night trying to hitch a lift wasn't fun anymore. I was cold, wet and knackered.

The way some motorists looked at you made you feel like the beggar of the road. They saw you as a parasite, not prepared to pay your way, like all other road users had to. Yet when I first started hitching, there was this sense of freedom. Nobody ever slagged me off for doing it. Maybe had the odd dig at me for being tight-fisted. Although in most cases, thumbing it to Rovers away matches tended to cost me a lot more money than if I had paid to go on a coach or special train.

People were more worried about me, as was the case of my parents and girlfriend. There was the occasional news report of hitchhikers robbing and attacking drivers who picked them up. But more often than not it was the other way round, usually the poor old thumber who ended up as a victim.

I had always been lucky here. Both as a driver and hitchhiker. I'd met the odd nutter; usually people who wanted to show me how fast their cars could go. But the vast majority of drivers, and people I'd picked up in my cars and works vans had been not only decent, but good company too.

So it was with regret that I finally hung up my thumb at the age of 35. At least this friendly at Celtic led on to my greatest ever season for watching Rovers. After this match came our Charity Shield kick-about. We were beaten by Manchester United on this occasion. But at the end of this 1994-95 season we had the last laugh over them.

We won the Premier League Title. This became the greatest day of my life so far. Not only were Rovers founder members of both the Football League and FA Premier League, like Aston Villa and Everton too. We were the first of these three original members to win both titles. Happy days being a Rovers fan. I still couldn't believe it.

## Chapter 16

### *Champions*

This book might have been about my experiences hitch hiking to away matches played by Blackburn Rovers. But at the start of my season when I gave it all up, we had our greatest achievement in modern times. We won the Premier League title.

Everything was going great for Rovers. Jack Walker not only made money available for buying players, but also spent millions on turning Ewood Park into a superb 30,000 capacity all-seater stadium. My girlfriend and I used to take our dog down Ewood and go and watch the building work taking place. This might seem a strange or even sad pastime to most people, but we were not on our own. Thousands of Rovers fans used to spend their time visiting Ewood Park, or rather the fields above our ground, in most cases to watch construction work and see our new stadium all starting to take shape.

It was strange when they knocked down the Blackburn End, then the Darwen End. You could look right through the gap where these two ends had stood for over a century. It looked a bit like a racecourse. When it was finished it looked superb. No great luxury for me though. I was still in my seat in Ewood's Riverside, what was now called the Walkersteel Stand. This was what survived from our pre-Walker era. Our fans actually raised the money for this, although Uncle Jack may have thrown in a shilling or two. He was known for helping Rovers out long before he actually took over officially. It still looked well compared to many other football grounds I've visited.

I wrote one of my silly stories for FTH about our new look Ewood Park. It gave me a chance to indulge in my naughty blasphemous hobby of poking fun at religion.

### ***EWOOD PARK TO HOST MASS MOON DANCE***

***Bizarre rumours are flying round over Ewood Park being used as the venue for the world's largest ever mass wedding.***

*This follows a relaxation in the UK law where buildings for entertainment can now host wedding ceremonies. Leaders of the World Unification Church - popularly known as the Moonies - are looking for a suitable venue in Europe. Most of their adherents speak English and Ewood Park is close to the geographical centre of the UK. So it would be ideal for the event.*

*The previous world record for a mass wedding was 5,837 in Seoul, South Korea, in 1982. It was officiated by Sun Myung Moon himself. Ewood Park with its 30,000 plus capacity is expected to*

*shatter this record easily.*

*Controversy has dogged the World Unification Church in general, and its leader Sun Myung Moon in particular. He is thought to be the owner of a dozen Rolls Royce's. To get round this, the Reverend Moon came up with the idea of bringing his religion to the people by taking part in popular activities like watching football and getting married. At least he should feel at home on the Rovers official car park.*

*The mass wedding is expected some time during the close season. Rovers officials are remaining tight-lipped about the event. But information has been leaked over orders not to throw away any cans or confetti from the ground. This means Ewood Park may become a little bit more untidy than usual for the remainder of the present season.*

*On a secret visit to a recent Rovers match, the Reverend Moon was particularly impressed by the home supporters' friendliness. He also liked our beer and the potato pies from the bakers across from the Ewood Park ground.*

*What made up his mind though, was the Lancashire dialect spoken by Rovers fans. It seems our 'Aye' also means 'Yes' in Korea - Reverend Moon's home country - and the word he would be expecting to hear thousands of times that special day.*

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Last season we were runners up. This time we fancied our chances of going all the way. Fourth in our first season in Premier League football. Now second. All we had to do was go one better. Not an easy task. Manchester United had won their second title in a row. They were in Liverpool's old mantle. We were now the new pretenders to their throne.

Pretenders was a bit self-deprecating. What a team we had this season. In goal was Tim Flowers. Our backs were Graeme LeSaux and Jeff Kenna. In the centre of defence we had Colin Hendry, Henning Berg and Ian Pierce. Midfield was Tim Sherwood, Paul Warhurst and David Batty. Up front was English football's most feared pair of strikers. The SAS. Alan Shearer and Chris Sutton. Along with Stuart Ripley and Jason Wilcox on our wings.

There were also others who could fit in and win games for us. People like Mike Newell and Kevin Gallagher. Even Mark Atkins had his fans. Not me though, but he shut me up a few times when I slagged him off. Especially that time at Coventry City.

Once again it was what to do about my biggest problem. How was I going to pay for this season's ticket? Still out of work, plus Rovers upped the price from £200 to £235. They knew how to tackle inflation. Make us mugs pay for their season tickets through the nose. It left me with a tricky problem. Where the hell was I going to get £235 from?

There was only one answer. Be nice to my girlfriend and put in for a loan from our bank. She didn't need a lot of persuading, wanting some loot herself to buy more clothes to add to her vast collection. We decided to put in for a £500 loan, £250 each. I was determined not to let the

price of my season ticket stop me from going to matches. I was one of Rovers true fans. Not having missed a first team home game since being a schoolboy. Why should all our 'new' fans get to see these long awaited good times, while people like me could be missing out because we couldn't afford to pay for a season ticket.

It was actually starting to cause a lot of bad feeling amongst Rovers fans, especially ones from our pre-Walker days. People who I knew seemed to be jumping aboard our bandwagon. Those same folk were the ones who used to ridicule me for going to matches. At least I could go with a clear conscience and agree with away fans when they used to sing at us "Where were you when you were shit?" I know. I was there when we were even worse.

Buying my season ticket looked to be a good investment. We had a pretty good start when the season kicked off. We were seventh in the Premier League table after its first month. Everything seemed to be going just dandy. We even got it right with our new away strip. It was a black shirt with thin red stripes. I would have bought one if it hadn't been for McEwans Lager sponsoring us. I refused to buy any Rovers shirts with their name on the front. This was because of them taking over Blackburn's Lion Brewery, and then closing it down. I liked a pint of Matthew Brown's Lion bitter. It was a part of our heritage.

I even did a press release for Blackburn Trade Union Council in support of the Lion Workers' fight to save their jobs. But S&N were clever. They paid them off with generous terms of redundancy. So Matthew Brown's workers went out like lambs, not lions. S&N then pulled off another master stroke. They curried favour with Blackburn's football loving population, by becoming Rovers' new shirt sponsors. This was their ultimate PR job after their disgraceful criminal act against my town.

By now I was pig sick of being unemployed. Halfway through this season I decided to try and find a job by going on a community type programme, like I went on back in 1984. This would show potential employers I was doing something useful with my time. Not just sitting on my arse at home. Also these community programmes meant you had no need to sign on and you were given an extra tenner a week on top of your dole money.

In February 1995 I put in for a community programme with EMDA. This stood for Ethnic Minorities Development Association. They were based in the old St John's church on Victoria Street. What attracted me to this was when its advert said the job entailed publishing a community newspaper for Blackburn's Asian community. This was right up my street. After all, I'd passed a City & Guild in Media Techniques. I might as well use this qualification for something.

By now my conclusion was most media qualifications were red herrings, certainly false promises. So many young people take these kinds of courses and think they will walk straight into some glamour job, i.e. newspapers, radio or TV. No chance, this industry is ruled by nepotism. You need a lot of luck or a rich well-known mummy or daddy. I had neither. But my course had been enjoyable and my line of thinking was any qualification was better than a kick in the rump.

My interview with EMDA was on February 8th. A chap called Nadim Qureshi interviewed me.

We hit it off straight away. He was a Labour councillor in Bradford, commuting to Blackburn every day by train. I told him my own labour movement background and he realised we were kindred spirits. Not totally though. He wanted me and the other chap who got the job to do thirty hours a week. This was cobbles, as you only needed to do fifteen hours on one of these programmes. I accepted this job when it was offered to me, but kept quiet about doing thirty hours. This could be tackled once my feet were under the table.

I actually knew the other chap who started with me. He was on the same Media Techniques City & Guild course as I did at Blackburn College. Ian McIntyre was his name. He went working for our lecturer, John Coops, for a while. Ian started this course a year before me, so we didn't know each other very well. His group was tied up with putting their portfolios together and doing radio and TV work. My group was learning about the media and publishing our college magazine.

We started at EMDA that same week and helped produce a publication called 'Awaaz'. This meant the voice. Funnily enough, Radio Lancashire in Blackburn had a programme called the Asian Word. EMDA and our local radio station should have swapped their names. The voice should have been on radio and the Word in print.

Awaaz was written in three languages: Urdu, Gujarati and English. It was worth working on this paper just to learn how to pick up computer skills. Nadim and Ian were both very good here. I became quite useful myself after a while. In this paper I tried an experiment writing funny stuff, like my daft stories for 4,000 Holes. One story I did for 'Awaaz' went down very well in EMDA's office, so this was also sent to FTH. It appeared in both publications and was my ultimate tall story.

## ***WORLD'S TALLEST MAN IN BLACKBURN?***

***Rumours are rife over sightings of the world's tallest man in Blackburn.***

*Mohammed Alam Channa is nearly eight-foot tall (231.7cm) and weighs thirty stone. He is believed to be on holiday from his job as an attendant at the shrine of Lal Shahbay in Qaladar, Pakistan. And is rumoured to be visiting his little sister in Bank Top, Blackburn.*

*Reclusive Channa is known to be shy of the fame and publicity surrounding his enormous height. He reputedly turned down millions of dollars when the Chicago Bulls basketball team tried to secure his services. Channa is known to like British football instead and is a strong Blackburn Rovers fan. But being the shy individual he is, he attended the last match disguised as a floodlight pylon.*

*While in Blackburn, Channa is expected to visit the grave of Blackburn's own giant, Fred Kempster. Fred lived in the town around the turn of the century and is buried at the top of Whalley New Road Cemetery. He was well known for lighting his pipe with the gas street lamps in use at the time. Channa won't be able to do that, but may entertain his family hosts with other tricks. He could do a window cleaner's job without a ladder, impersonate a barge by swimming in the canal. Or look the statue of Queen Victoria straight in the eye.*



*Sightings of Channa are expected to be rare. The occasional size 35 footprint may be the only tell-tale impression of his visit to the town. But at the next Rovers game if you see an extra floodlight pylon swaying in the wind, remember the tallest man in the world is entitled to his own bit of privacy like the rest of us.*

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Not everything went right for Rovers in this season's first half. We were in Europe for the first time. Incredible to believe a few years ago. Our idea of a European match was playing league games at Wrexham, or my trip to Shamrock Rovers. Now, thanks to last season's runners up position, we were in the UEFA Cup.

This fairytale soon lost its gloss very quickly. We were drawn against a Swedish team called Trelleborg. Our first reaction to this was - Who? Nobody had ever heard of this port on the Baltic Sea. Only my mate Mike Hindley, our local Member of the European Parliament, had ever been to this place. Sadly my financial state of affairs meant I wouldn't be travelling to this outpost of European football. I would have settled for Wrexham after all. Trelleborg might as well have been Timbuktu.

At least I went to our first ever foray into Europe. We played our part-time Swedish opponents on Tuesday, September 13th. This was a week before we moved house to Wensley Fold. Incredibly our debut on the big stage, in front of TV cameras, became a nightmare. We got beat 1-0. What an embarrassment!

I had only one explanation for this European shock. Before the game Ewood Park's pre-match entertainment was made up of them playing ABBA records. It was a nice gesture of welcoming to Trelleborg's small following of supporters. But what Rovers entertainment people didn't realise was how much constantly playing records from Sweden's most famous foursome does to their compatriots. Nothing winds them up so much. It's a bit like Rovers fans going to an away match and having brass band music blaring at us before the kick off. This is my theory and it could be true. We even got a draw in Trelleborg; not one ABBA record was played over there. I watched it on TV at my girlfriend's workplace and didn't hear a single one. Sadly this match was our Waterloo.

Fortunately we put our first venture into Europe and a dodgy home defeat from Manchester United behind us. By November we had moved up into fourth place. Newcastle were top. But at the end of this month we were top. Our strike force of Shearer and Sutton, the SAS, were awarded joint Carling Player of the month for November. Dalglish also got Manager of the month.

We were still top in March. But then it all started going pear-shaped in April. Rovers had been well ahead, unfortunately Manchester United kept winning too. Things became rather nail biting. We were five points ahead with four games left. We thought we'd done it by then. Eric Cantona helped us out a bit by getting into a fight with a Crystal Palace fan. This moment of madness took everyone by surprise, probably the Palace fan more than anybody. Cantona's ban seemed to disjoint United. I reckoned nothing could stop us now. Hand the pot over Alex!

So we needed five points from three games. It didn't seem too difficult, but West Ham had other ideas. They licked us at Upton Park, which meant we had to beat Newcastle at our place. This match was going to be known as V.E. Day - Victory at Ewood Day.

Our last home match of this magnificent season. We won it too. This bloody title had to be ours now. Even Newcastle's 'Toon Army' applauded us for the electric atmosphere we created. A railway bridge had a banner with 'No Surrender' written on it draped over its side. We could handle the pressure. But it was getting to us. All of Britain, apart from the other end of the A66 seemed to be up for Rovers. Blackburn was like a town under siege.

We nearly won the title on Wednesday night, May 10th 1995. Man United were awarded a dodgy late penalty in their last home match against Southampton to give them a 2-1 win. Most of Blackburn watched this match on TV. A lot of champagne remained on ice. Hopefully it would be cracked on Saturday. We were five points ahead of them before this match. Their win against the Saints cut our lead to two points, with one more match to play. It was still in our own hands though. If we beat Liverpool on Saturday, who cared what Manchester United did? We didn't. After being on top since November, we deserved it. They had a trip to West Ham. They beat us recently. They were no mugs.

May 14th 1995 would be a day to go down in history for every Blackburn Rovers fan. It still felt like a dream to me, and everybody else who supported Rovers. On this day it was a bad one for Manchester United. We were top of the league. If we could win at Liverpool, we would be champions.

Caroline and I got up at half seven. Radio Lancashire was talking about this afternoon's matches. Good luck messages were coming in for Rovers from all over the world. Funniest news was of six thousand Rovers shirts being sold in Liverpool. It was as though the whole country wanted us to win this Premier League title. Well not everywhere. Some parts of Manchester and Salford probably didn't.

After a cup of coffee I fed our dog and then took him a short walk to relieve himself. Back in our house I made Caroline a boiled egg for her breakfast. This was my second attempt. My nerves were fraying even at this time and I burst her egg in the pan. Barney didn't mind his extra treat. I settled for a couple of slices of toast, not being able to even eat a substantial meal due to my jitters.

Later on we took a photograph of the dog in one of my Rovers shirts. We then took him another walk with him wearing it. My hope was of him not cocking his leg up in the wrong direction and this shirt becoming blue and white and yellow. We went to Buncer Woods, passing houses with Rovers flags flying and blue and white balloons tied outside and in windows. It was a lovely day and very nice in here this morning. I took my Rovers shirt off the dog while he ran around in Buncer Woods.

On our way back along Livingstone Road people were on the streets and not just the dog or me had a Rovers shirt on. Blackburn Rovers' big day had caught everybody's imagination. And

this was just along the road from where we lived. A few little children pointed and commented on this dog in a Rovers shirt. He probably wouldn't be Rovers' only four-legged fan by the time this day ended.

Before returning home, Caroline bought a Sunday People. Its sports pages were all about what might happen this afternoon. In the paper shop I noticed one paper had a quotation from Jack Walker saying:

"We're going to win that bloody title. No ifs or buts!" This was the stuff of legends. He was one himself.

Back in our place I read her paper and we kind of went through the motions, passing time before Caroline had to go to work. She was skint but wanted a video for night time viewing at work. This was because she was on a sleep-in tonight of all nights. I lent her a couple of quid so she could rent one from her favourite place on Simmons Street.

This place was our first stop when we set off at 2.00pm. Next stop was Morrisons. I bought a three-litre bottle of their own brand cider for me to drink while listening to the match at 4.00pm. Whilst in this superstore I bumped into Bert Turner and John Lewis, two of my mates from our old Trades Club. John was with his girlfriend and three month old baby. Only one subject dominated our chinwag. Everybody was up for Rovers pulling it off. Lots of beer and spirits were being sold to people bedecked in blue and white throughout this superstore.

After walking with Caroline to Ribble Street, near where she worked, I legged it home as fast as I could. Then settled down on the settee, in front of my radio, with my big bottle of cider. Those next two hours can only be described as 'Bloody Hell'. At four o'clock this most important match of my life kicked off. Up to half time things seemed to be going Rovers' way. Shearer gave us a 1-0 lead and news from Upton Park was of Manchester United losing by this scoreline to West Ham. It was looking good.

Things were different after half time. United equalised, while Rovers seemed to be throwing it all away. We ended up losing 3-1. I'm not sure Liverpool were even happy about this situation. When Redknapp scored their third goal at the end, Radio Lancashire's reporter said there was hardly a cheer from Liverpool's fans and he showed no emotion. The referee blew his whistle after their winning goal. We were beaten and things felt terrible.

But while Radio Lancashire's reporter was saying we were well and truly beaten, there was a slight gap in his speech. He suddenly said: "But they've won the title!"

I was nearly sick. Tears streamed from my eyes and I ran down the back to the phone box. I rang Caroline at her works. She was ecstatic too. Then it was off to the Lion for the start of my celebrations. Other happy Rovers fans were going in too. We sang "Championess" and hugged each other whilst dancing round the bar. We were champions. Our first time since 1913-14.

Next I walked into the town centre. Cars were beeping their horns. I'm sure Blackburn's church bells were ringing, a bit like Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, the bit before the cannons in the

1812 Overture. But that could have been my head after drinking three litres of cider and a pint of bitter afterwards.

Outside the Jubilee hundreds of Rovers fans were dancing in the street. Traffic was having to edge its way round Blakey Moor, which soon became blocked as more people arrived to celebrate. After a pint in here I went to see Caroline at her workplace. I didn't stop long due to wanting to be a part of these wild celebrations. It was back in town for me until I was as drunk as the rest of our growing multitude. Eventually I had to go home to crash out. It was late by my standards, but celebrations went on all night in certain establishments and a lot of people missed work next day.

It was next day when our official celebration was to take place. It was going to be held at Ewood Park itself. This was because of crowd safety. I can remember when we won the Full Member's Cup, then got promoted, how on both occasions people outside Blackburn Town Hall were hanging off nearby buildings. They were also sitting on shop roofs, even the cinema's. Last thing Rovers wanted was people falling to their deaths from some of these tall buildings. Therefore Ewood would be an ideal place to fit in 30,000 happy supporters. Unfortunately many would not be able to get in. It was a case of first come, first serve.

My girlfriend and I took no chances. We went early and got in without having to queue for too long. My workmate Ian, from Awaaz, pulled a masterstroke. He managed to persuade Rovers to let him in as a member of the press. He actually went on Ewood's hallowed turf with his camera. Unfortunately his girlfriend arrived too late and was turned away when the ground was full. Everybody had a superb night. It was in my case a culmination of all those years of false promises and missed opportunities. You have to suffer to enjoy the good times. I'd done my share, but not tonight.

## [Chapter 17](#)

### *Nearest and Dearest*

Travelling to Rovers away matches has found me using every form of conveyance. But there is only one which has never been used fully to get me there, or back – Shank's Pony. This compares to home matches. Most of my trips to Ewood Park over the years have been on foot, usually in both directions.

The last match I hitched it to was Celtic in 1994. But in 2001 we had a crucial game away at our nearest rivals, Preston North End. I was going to go to this away match come hell or high water. Living only eight miles away from PNE's Deepdale ground made me decide I wanted to walk it to this away match.

It sounds a bit daft, but football is all about madness. Plus I was in my forties now. Doing crazy things wasn't as acceptable nowadays. Maybe I'd reached the comfort zone at last. This could be my final act of barminess. At least it wasn't so far to go. I live on the Preston side of Blackburn. A couple of miles from Ewood, eight from Deepdale.

Last time this ground was visited by me was in 1997. We played the second leg of our League Cup tie here. It was handy for me working in Preston. Not much of a walk from the docks where my office was situated. Also there was no pressure on Rovers thanks to our 6-1 victory in the 1<sup>st</sup> leg at Ewood Park. They licked us 2-1 on the night – so what! It was a good do for me, apart from getting soaked to the skin on my way back to Preston Railway Station.

This season of 2000-2001 found Rovers and North End playing each other on level terms after nearly twenty years. We were spending our second season in Division 1, North End were back in this division for the first time in ages. I wanted to do something different for this game. It was going to be a walk from my house, or back to it, depending when this match was going to be played. It kept being cancelled. First of all because of TV commitments. Then Rovers had a good run in the FA Cup.

Tickets for the away match went on sale at 9.00am on Saturday February 24<sup>th</sup>. This was the morning after we thrashed Bolton 4-1 in the league, at their place. I missed this match due to being in Liverpool for a health & safety meeting. It wasn't the meeting which did this. It was my Friday lifestyle which was to blame. My plans had originally been to attend the match. Then I was going to watch it in a pub as it was being covered by satellite TV. Eventually it had to be good old Radio Lancashire who brought it to me.

Back home I caught the first half of this match, including Marcus Bent's opener for Rovers. But I fell asleep at half time, waking up in time for the final whistle. Rovers had won 4-1, which put a smile on my face. Things were looking good for Souey's boys.

After cursing myself for missing one of our most important victories for years, I decided to make sure no mistakes were made for the PNE match. Tickets were on sale tomorrow at nine. I would be there at least half an hour before they went on sale. It would be an early night for me tonight.

Up next morning for six o'clock and my usual bacon sandwich washed down by a cup of coffee. It was cold outside, possibly a bit of snow on the way. This was good news. Hopefully not so many would be in the queue by the time I got to Ewood Park. I took no chances, putting on my thick woolly jumper and a pair of boots. At eight o'clock I set off for my tickets. Not only would a PNE ticket be purchased, but one for me and my mate Parky for the cup replay with Bolton. This match would be taking place the week after next at Ewood Park. Hopefully Wanderers would still be deflated from last night's match. Not relishing a trip to our place.

Half eight was my arrival time. A small queue was already in place in front of the ticket office. There were thirteen Rovers fans in front of me. Others started arriving right after me. Woody from Bamber Bridge came over and spoke to me. He had been there since 7.00am. Others had been there earlier. All the talk was of last night's game at Bolton. I half expected there to be fans in the queue who had come straight from Bolton's Reebok Stadium.

We had a minor scare. A wind-up merchant reckoned the ticket office wouldn't be open until half nine. But staff were arriving at quarter to the hour. Being no.14 in the queue meant I didn't have to queue for long. But the lad behind the counter seemed very slow. By 9.10am he had

only sold one ticket, much to the growing wrath of people behind me. By my calculations he would have barely sold fifteen tickets by this morning's closing time of 12.30pm. Fortunately there were quite a few other ticket windows open.

My tickets were all purchased by 9.15am. Not much of a wait at all. Rovers had dropped prices for our cup replay to £15, as opposed to the normal price. Not something I was used to, being a long-term season ticket holder. PNE did even better price-wise. Their ticket cost me £13. Not bad value compared to some of our Division 1 rivals. It was to stand on their now doomed terraces. After this match, they would be consigned to history and the bulldozer. England's oldest league ground would be all-seated and I would be one of the last to use these remnants of a bygone era.

Back home Parky rang me. He was pleased I'd picked up his ticket for the cup tie replay. During the week he said he didn't want to go to the North End match. He was at Bolton last night, raving about our performance. Now he wanted to go to Preston after all. He even wanted to join me on my hike. What a difference a day makes.

I had been working in Preston four years by now. Still with the civil service, but not the Benefits Agency anymore. In 1997 I started with Benefits Agency Medical Services. In August 1998 employment with Invalid Care Allowance was gained. After eight months here, I managed to get a higher grade job with Family Credit.

Fam.C, as we called it, was transferred to Inland Revenue and renamed Working Families Tax Credit. I fell on my feet with this agency. Due to the sheer numbers of staff taken on by the Tax Credit Office, the PCS union was given its own branch. I was asked by a couple of my colleagues from our previous branch to stand as Vice Chair of this new organisation. This was because two inexperienced new starters put themselves forward for the position. I was successful, probably because of my involvement in the previous branch and my trade union experience over the years.

This new branch even managed to get a taste of my writing ditties. As usual, controversy followed me around like it did everywhere else. A story called 'Beware of Cable Bugs' making fun of management's lacklustre attitude to staff being bitten by insects, or static burns, got me into trouble. Senior management demanded retraction and an apology. They didn't get either from me, but the union issued one in our next newsletter. My funny material afterwards was either severely edited or banned. I decided to change one of my banned stories into something FTH could use.

## ***ACNE CREAM FOR BROCKHALL TOILETS***

***Due to the high proportion of young people playing for Blackburn Rovers, club management has decided to install acne cream machines in the academy toilets.***

*The solution is in sachets and will be inside boxes of similar size to ones used for other popular products. Management has also decided to remove existing condoms, replacing them with boxes of acne cream. This has proved cost-effective, as there is no need to replace any of the*

*dispensers. They will be re-labelled instead, but the cover photographs will remain on machines to aid morale. Also the acne cream is available in a wide variety of flavours, i.e. strawberry, banana, chocolate etc.*

*A survey was carried out to decide whether there was a demand for acne cream. It seems surveyors did not need to physically ask any questions. Their results were self-explanatory, after individuals were pointed out at random. Complaints from cleaners about difficulties scraping toilet mirrors also swayed opinion. It was expected there could be a backlash over non-availability of contraceptives. But it seems usage has dwindled due to the number of transfers, loan deals and responsible usage of disabled toilets.*

*The marketing team is now looking into a new sponsorship deal with a cleansing lotion company. Rover's management has decided to set up a joint working party to look into this issue. Counselling will be made available for complexion challenged teenagers. They will also be provided with free facial patches and dark glasses. Emotive words such as spots, zits, crates and squeeze will be removed from all future Blackburn Rovers literature.*

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My epic journey to an away match really under my own steam, began right across the road from my house on May 2nd 2001. The Dog Inn is my local since moving up Revidge, just before the year 2000. Quite a fitting start as this is where the majority of my home matches start. Parky and I usually meet here before each home game around twelve o'clock. We have a couple of pints, and then the Outer Circle bus takes us on a journey to nearer Ewood Park. Mill Hill, and its working men's club, has been where the majority of our pre-match drinks have been consumed.

Sylvia, my new girlfriend, had turned up out of the blue last night. She comes from Bolton, although living in Chorley now. Unlike me, she was pleased they won at Wolves last night. We watched this match live on satellite TV in the Dog. This has kept the pressure up on us. So it was a victory at North End which was much sought after tonight by Rovers fans.

Before setting off, I walked Sylvia to her Chorley bus from Blackburn town centre. Then it was a bus ride of my own up to my parent's house. They were off on holiday to Croatia this Friday. So my mum was out shopping down town, missing me both there and at home later. Dad was in though. We chatted about tonight's game at Preston. He reckoned as North End had just got themselves into the play-offs, their priority wouldn't be beating us. Why go in too hard and pick up injuries or bookings? I hoped he was right. They would certainly be more relaxed than Rovers and their fans. Although we had two bites at the cherry. Sunday's trip to Gillingham gave us another chance of automatic promotion. Whereas Bolton had to beat Sheffield United, or else we were up - no ifs or buts.

After a right good dinner of gammon and chips, it was across the road at 12.15pm to the Dog. They thought I was a bit daft after telling them my means of getting to Preston. Although an old chap saw nothing wrong in this unorthodox method. He said it was a nice day and would make for a pleasant stroll, by way of a pub or two on the way. He had spent a lot of years in the Army and had been on many a 25 mile forced march. My eight mile or so walk this afternoon was easy.

My route to the new road was down Beardwood Brow, past another Blackburn sporting institution. The golf club, or at least one of the three of them. I nipped down Wycollar Road, and then it was a nice walk to The Windmill at Mellor Brook. Before nipping inside, I bought tonight's Evening Telegraph from the paper shop across the road. As expected, tonight's game was heavily publicised. This took up my time at the bar with my pint of bitter. The landlady told me she expected a busy night tonight. A lot of Rovers fans would call in on the way to Preston and on their return home. Then there would be the ones watching it on her satellite TV. Her till would be jingling.

After my little stop-off, it was on the road again. This would be the longest part of my journey. It was tempting to call in for another pint at the Half Way House, but by now I was enjoying this walk and time was moving on. My intention was to arrive in the Tithebarn around fourish. I could have gone in the Half Way House, but not on this occasion.

As the road descended from the Little Chef cafe, my route began to smell very strongly. In fact it stank all the way down to the River Ribble. Very near where the A677 meets the A59 is a sewage works. Everybody using the new road between Blackburn and Preston knows this smell. Luckily for most people it only lasts a minute or so as they zip past in their motor vehicle. When you walk past at barely four miles an hour, you notice this smell for quite a long time. It didn't go away until I crossed the river near the Tickled Trout. Not stopping for that extra pint was probably a wise move.

The Hesketh Arms at the top of Brockholes Brow became very desirable to me by now. I was sweating like a pig and extremely thirsty. I was quite surprised how quick my walk had been. It was only quarter past three when I got into the Hesketh, exactly two hours from leaving my house. Considering my stops in the Dog and Windmill, it was only one and a half hours actual walking. I didn't realise Blackburn and Preston were so close together. Although not at Deepdale tonight.

After my sojourn and a pint of bitter in the Hesketh Arms, it was a walk down New Hall Lane. At four o'clock I passed the bus stop at the bottom of the lane, expecting to see some of my workmates who usually catch the Blackburn bus at this time. Alison from St.Mark's and Jenny from St.Mary's are often at the bus stop around this time. Not tonight. I used to work at these two civil service buildings myself, still calling there regularly for meetings.

Next I walked past where I worked at the time - the Unicentre. People were spilling out from this office block as I passed by on my way across the bus station to the Tithebarn. There were a fair few people inside. The lad behind the bar told me a couple of my workmates, Dave and Mick, had been in after work. I'd missed them by a matter of minutes.

But my brief period of loneliness was broken when Rob and Paul, my workmates from the union office called in. They slagged me off for being a nutter after my walk from Blackburn. I made fun of them for being dressed like dog's dinners. They had been to a meeting with management and looked out of place in the Tithey. My scruffiness was evened up when Parky came in after work to meet me. He was working in Preston at the time, refurbishing Avenham Flats.



We all had a few pints then made a move. Rob went for his train to Blackpool. Me, Paul and Parky nipped round the corner into Kwik Save. I was hungry and bought a couple of pork pies for my tea. Paul bought a veggie sandwich. Not Parky. He was still thirsty and bought some cans of beer. He supped them as we made our way to Sumner's. This is a pub near North End's ground. Paul worked behind the bar here. He was on tonight. His boss wouldn't let him wear a Rovers shirt though, in spite of his request to do so. It might not have been a good idea if Rovers were to win.

Sumner's was already busy when we arrived. Paul soon disappeared while I bought a round in for Parky and me. We went outside with our drinks and sat at a table. The pub was half North End, half Rovers. I knew a few of our fans sitting outside. After our drink here, it was off to Deepdale Labour Club to meet Alan, one of Parky's workmates.

One the way to the club we were stopped by Richard Connolly, a sports reporter from Radio Lancashire. He asked us who we were up for and how tonight would go. I said Rovers and did most of the talking, slipping into my media automatic pilot. Parky was thrilled about this. He'd never been interviewed before, unlike me. In Deepdale Club he found Alan and told him of his new experience. He paid for our drinks in Sumner's, nipping to the bog while I got them. This time I not only bought them, but carried our pints of bitter to where Parky was sitting with Alan and his other PNE mates.

A few seats away one of my colleagues was sitting. Sharon our branch Treasurer was with her boyfriend. They were going to the match. She looked a bit surprised seeing me in here. There were one or two Rovers fans in, mainly with North Ender mates, like Parky and me. It was a nice little club. I'd been in the Deepdale pub last time we played here, but this was my first time in this club.

After a lot of friendly banter and ribbing, mainly me and Alan's mates slagging off him and Parky as being cowboys, we set off for tonight's game. Rovers fans were given the same old paddock we had last time we were here. Terraces again, like we had at Stockport. These would be knocked down during the close season and replaced by a new stand. The old Town End was in that process now.

We hung around our paddocks entrance and waited for Phil who was giving us a lift back after the match. He turned up with his brother, Baz and another lad I know called Harvey. Then we stood on the terraces amongst the swirling army of excited Rovers fans.

This was not a game for the faint hearted. Not so bad if you supported North End. They were in the play-offs anyway, putting one over Rovers and entertaining their fans was their priority tonight. But for us Rovers fans from nine miles up the road, it was sheer torture. We had a goal disallowed from Damian Johnson. But for most of the match it was one-way traffic. The first half finished goalless.

All things come to he who waits and our big break came in the second half. Rovers were awarded a corner. All our big guns went up for this. But it was the young maestro himself, Mat

Jansen, who scored our goal. This sent us into raptures. North End were not finished though. They nearly made us die of heart attacks by hitting the post ten minutes before the end. Our luck was in this time as their attempt on goal bounced out of harm's way and we held on to our lead.

Finally the referee blew his whistle to send the travelling Rovers fans into ecstasy. We were promoted to the Premier League. What a relief after this long hard season. The next half hour was spent in wild celebrations with the players on the pitch bouncing up and down. Graeme Souness spoke to us, enjoying the wild celebration as much as the fans and players. He thanked us for our patience and we shouted his name and eventually left the ground.

Baz had parked his car on Sumner's car park. A policeman on the way told us to watch ourselves. We didn't have to bother. There were coppers everywhere around Sumner's. Our biggest problem was getting off the car park due to the amount of other cars parked up. It was just the same on Blackpool Road. One long queue all the way to Blackburn no doubt.

We decided to do a U-turn away from the traffic and ended going down Deepdale Road to the town centre. Then we drove down London Road, turned left at Cuerdale Lane and came out at the Swallow Hotel. Phil and Harvey had parked their cars up here. Parky, Baz and I jumped in with Phil, going back to the Lion for our own celebration of promotion.

It was absolutely heaving in here. Most people in the pub had watched Rovers on TV. They had started celebrating well before us, like during the match. So we had a bit of catching up to do. This was a great end to a great day. Good job I'd arranged to take next day off. That was spent in Chorley with Sylvia. I had to rub it in how we pipped her Wanderers to the post. Rovers' last match at Gillingham could look after itself now. We didn't care. I couldn't get a ticket anyway, more's the pity. My money could be spent on Wednesday night at our Ewood Park pageant.

I must admit it would have been better to have a parade through Blackburn town centre. But when we won the Premiership in 1995, holding our celebration party at Ewood Park did work. Last time people had to be turned away as the ground was filled to its 30,000 plus capacity. This time there wasn't such a big crowd, only about half full. Rovers youth team was playing Liverpool's in the semi final of the Youth Cup. This was a bonus for everybody. Although I wasn't so bothered about this. I'd had my belly-full of football by now and wanted a break before our triumphant return to the top flight. My batteries and bank balance needed rejuvenating.

Parky and I met up and did our usual trick of catching an Outer Circle bus to Mill Hill. But no boozing before this event. He was starving, not having had any tea. I was more interested in not missing any of the celebration. So we didn't do our usual trick of stopping off at Mill Hill club. It was straight to the ground. Our abstinence was worth it. We enjoyed the presentation of medals to the Rovers players. We then watched the first half of the youth game, before doing a runner to the Lion. We later heard Rovers kids won their match on penalties. Sadly they lost in the final to Arsenal. But what a good effort. Signs of great promise to come.

Back in the Lion we finished our season as we started it, with a good session. Full of anticipation for what the coming one would bring - now we were back where we belong.

## Chapter 18

### *Uncle Bulgaria*

Perhaps my greatest ambition was to see Rovers play away in Europe and travel to a match abroad. Well this dream was finally realised in October 2002. It was our first season back playing Premier League football. For most of the season we were looking over our shoulders at the relegation pack. But for a change all three promoted clubs managed to stop up. Rovers were the pick of our trio at the end of this season. After a late spurt we not only finished tenth in the league, but also won the Worthington Cup. Not bad for our first season back in the big time.

Our day out at the Millennium Stadium brought us our first piece of silverware since the title win and our only ever League Cup victory. It was called the Worthington Cup at the time, but a 'Worthy' Cup all the same. Even better, it got us back into Europe again. I was there in Cardiff to see Rovers win the cup. Parky and I decided to take advantage of one of many trips available to take 30,000 or so Rovers fans down to the Welsh capital for the final. The trip we picked followed us being handed a leaflet outside Ewood Park before a match.

This fortuitous deal included Saturday morning travel to Bristol. A hotel for the night, then off to Cardiff next day for the match. Then back to Blackburn afterwards. It suited both of us. Not a bad price either. It looked pretty good at £59 all in. We booked it once Parky was given permission by his wife, Josie.

The double-decker coach picked us up on Blackburn Boulevard and we arrived in Bristol for mid afternoon. After checking into hotel digs – near Filton aerospace factory – we were off on our travels. Our plan, to booze our way to the centre of Bristol then have a night on the town. First we went in a couple of the pubs near our digs, yapping with some other Rovers fans stopping in the same venue. They had a similar idea to ours, but intended travelling to Bristol city centre by more comfortable means. There was a little train station nearby. So after a couple of pints, it was a parting of the waves. Parky and I set off using Shank's Pony – we didn't need a train or a bus.

What we hadn't realised was Bristol city centre must have been at least seven or eight miles away from where we were staying. So one pub become another and our walking pace became slower and slower. We went for a beer in a pub outside Bristol Rovers' new Memorial Ground. They were playing too. By the looks on their fans' faces when they came in for a pint after, it transpired they lost at home.

Their fans were friendly enough, especially when we told them our reason for being in their neck of the woods. Like everybody else we came across on our hike down town, they wished us all the best in beating Tottenham Hotspur in tomorrow's final. Being underdogs sometimes has its advantages.

In the city centre we arrived by bus, despite only having a mile or so to walk. A combination of

too much ale and tiredness had worn us both out. We saw a few Rovers fans knocking about, but in one pub we were massively outnumbered by Spurs fans. They were a great bunch. We got in with them and added even more beer to our over-stretched tanks. What a great night out. We all wished each other the best at the end of the night – apart from the result of tomorrow's match.

It wasn't all easy going. Parky and I had to get back to our digs. We were dropped off in a taxi nearby, but managed to get ourselves lost. We ended up walking on some grand circular tour before we found our way back to the hotel. At least we didn't wake up late. In fact it was so early when we did, we decided to have a look for somewhere we could get our breakfast. After a walk down the main road where we were staying, we did another circular tour to some kind of retail park. At least it had one of these fast-food outlets we all seem to have wherever we come from.

We got stuck into the rubber stuff they sell in these kind of places. After my so-called eggs, bacon, sausage, and something else which tasted of rubber, I made a decision never to go in one of these places again. Parky seemed quite happy with his fayre. Being a builder, he's probably used to getting whatever he can. Me being a civil servant, I've gone soft over the years. My days of a good Greasy Joe's from the railway are long gone.

Our coach to Cardiff was on time. Unfortunately the drive there was a slow one. Spurs fans were coming from London down the M4. Tons of them as they had sold their 50% allocation. The most irritating aspect of this journey was Duane Eddy. I used to like his records, despite their age. But when they were played over and over again I began to hate the guitar man. All I remember from this coach journey was "Dang De De Dang De De Dang De De De De De De De. Dance to the Guitar Man. Can you hear me?" Yes I bloody well could! I just wish he'd broken his strings.

But eventually we got to Cardiff. It was goodbye to Spurs as they got off at a different junction. Rovers coaches were arriving from the North down the M50 and on to the M4. We were dropped off in the centre of Cardiff and tried to find a pub amongst all this multitude of Rovers and Spurs fans. Ironically the first one we went in we met in its doorway one of the Spurs fans we were socialising with last night. He was pleased to see us and drew me a map of where his local was should I call down for a beer before a match at White Hart Lane.

It was busy all over the place. Parky had arranged to meet his brother in Yates's Wine Lodge near the stadium. We found it, but had to queue to get in. My idea was we stopped in here until kick off time. It was a good idea too. The beer was cheap enough and Parky's brother found us. It was chock-a-block everywhere, so we were as well stopping here. Then it was off to the match.

I thought we were going to screw up today. Spurs were favourites, we were more interested in the day out and weekend of fun than winning a pot. But we won 2-1 and booked ourselves a place in next season's UEFA Cup. Not bad for our first season back. Now my passport could be dug out. I hadn't been abroad for ten years. Lost time needed making up.

Rovers didn't need to take part in the qualifying round for this season's UEFA Cup. We were in

the first round proper. The draw for this would be taking place at dinnertime on Friday August 30<sup>th</sup>. I was at work this day. But being a Friday, it was off to Ye Olde Bluebelle on Preston's Church Street with my work buddies.

As well as being full of civil servants from my place on a Friday, this pub also packs in prison officers from the gaol just up the road. One of them is a keen Rovers fan like me. We kept our eyes on the teletext when it was announced the draw was being made from Geneva. Our hopes were for an easy draw against some third-rate team from somewhere hot, like Spain or Greece. For obvious reasons, my first choice was being drawn away to a Cypriot team.

It took three pages of the teletext to be filled up before we got to Rovers. They must have been one of the last clubs to be drawn out the hat. It meant me stopping down the pub until two 'clock. We drew CSKA Sofia. Not the most glamorous of draws, but at least we were away in our first leg. Unfortunately because of the political situation in the Middle East, both games were reversed. Our match at Ewood Park on September 19<sup>th</sup> became the first leg. This was because Levski Sofia, CSKA's fierce rivals, also had a UEFA Cup match on the night. Plus an Israeli team was scheduled to play their tie in Sofia around the same time. Last thing they needed was the arrival of a load of British football fans in the same city.

Next morning I was up with the larks. No different than most Saturdays, but my first few hours up were spent on the Internet. I wanted to find out everything about CSKA Sofia and how to get there. Luck was on my side. They had a few websites about them in English. They looked to be your typical former Eastern Bloc club. CSKA stood for Central Social Club of the Army. And their ground was the Army stadium. It looked very concrete and circular.

Unfortunately their fans had a bit of a bad name for hooliganism. Not everything about Bulgaria's political change was for the better. At least Rovers had one fan already there. He was called Alexander Georgiev. His English was excellent. I noted down his email address and planned to contact him if my chances of getting a ticket for the away leg were successful.

A few weeks later there were reports in the local paper about 150 CSKA supporters being refused admittance to Britain. This was for not only football hooliganism, but for bogus asylum seeking too. They seemed like a right motley crew from Sofia. At least there were a few good omens. About twenty years ago Liverpool knocked them out of Europe. Graeme Souness played a leading role in their demise. Now he had the chance to do it again, as a Manager – for Rovers.

As well as checking out various CSKA sites, my time was spent looking for cheapo holidays to Bulgaria in early October when the second leg was due to take place. My idea was to ideally get a cut price week in the country itself. Failing that, a week in Greece and travel from there would suffice. Unfortunately it dawned on me the best deals might have to wait until nearer the event.

Later this morning it was my usual trip across Corporation Park to my parents' house. They had actually been to Sofia about five years ago. They said it was cheap then, but no doubt prices had probably risen a lot since their visit. They reckoned Greece could be a bit pricey. It was on their last trip, although now it had the Euro which was good value at the moment. Plus it was out of

season for holidays.

In the afternoon I gave my mate Parky a ring about going to Sofia. He wasn't interested. He'd been to York races a few weeks ago and lost his shirt. This made me consider Rovers official supporters trip. Going on my own to such a far-flung place didn't seem such a good idea. Miles better with other Rovers fans in tow. I also talked to lots of Rovers fans about last time we played in Europe. We were knocked out by Olympique Lyonnais. Most fans said the official trip was too expensive, preferring to fly to St Etienne or catch a French TGV train from Paris. This away match needed a lot of careful thinking and planning.

But it looked like this wasn't going to be a lonely trip after all. Another mate, Phil Kinney, said he was up for it. He liked the idea of us finding a holiday on the internet should Rovers official trip sound too expensive or restrictive. We both spent loads of time on the internet checking out cheap holiday sites. I also printed us both copies of the form Rovers insisted their fans filled in who intended to travel to Sofia for the second leg on October 3rd.

Rovers drew the first leg with CSKA 1-1. An equaliser from Ciccio Grabbi saved our blushes. Our awful record in Europe looked to be continuing. After the match Phil and I met up and arranged to sort this trip out pretty quickly. We arranged to meet on Saturday and book something off the web.

We booked a holiday over the web after looking through various deals. Ours had to be from Saturday September 28<sup>th</sup> to Saturday October 5th. Rovers were at home on the Sunday and we didn't want to miss this match.

For £168, including taxes, we booked a holiday at a place called Paxos. You flew to Preveza to get to this place. It turned out to be an island off the Greek coast, not so far from Corfu. It looked like a good deal to me and Phil. We immediately filled in the Rovers form, once Phil booked it with his mobile phone. We couldn't really ring up while on the internet. At least we had it sorted now.

Not quite. On Sunday, after our 1-0 win over Leeds, I queued up at the ticket office and bought our tickets for the away leg in Sofia. These cost £12 each. Phil joined me in the queue. Quite a sizeable number of Rovers were after these tickets. Our allocation looked to be sold out very quickly.

Next day after work it was off to WH Smith's in Blackburn Shopping Precinct. There were all sorts of books about Greece in here. Tracy Sumner, who I knew from working behind the bar of the Lion, was also in. She'd been to Paxos and liked it. She said it was a fair journey for Phil and me to get to Sofia. At least I'd have enough loot for the trip. Next day £250 was drawn out my bank and £200 of this was exchanged for Euros. It came to €305.

September 28<sup>th</sup> came, a Friday. After my few beers with the lads it was off home to get my head down. Phil had arranged to pick me up at half past three in the morning to drive to Manchester Airport. An email was sent to Alexander, the Bulgarian Rovers fan. I invited him for a drink with me and Phil at the rendezvous point Rovers fans had been told to meet at before the match.

This was outside the Nevski Cathedral. I'd printed off a map of Sofia city centre from the web.

At one in the morning my alarm clock woke me up. A bowl of cornflakes was put away and the computer went on. The Bulgarian blue replied to my email, saying he was looking forward to meeting me, Phil and other Rovers fans. It was to be his first time watching Rovers. At least he hadn't too far to travel compared with us.

Phil turned up on time. There was no rush really. Our flight wasn't until 7.45am. We parked up his car then had to wait. I'd never actually flown from here. In fact it was twenty years since my last time up in an aeroplane. On my way back from Berlin in 1982.

Our flight took three hours. When we landed in Preveza a coach took us to Parga for the ferry to Paxos. Unfortunately we'd missed it, so had to drive further up the coast for another boat. This was two hours later. No problem for Phil and me. We had a couple of beers in Parga before being picked up again.

The crossing took an hour. We got a soaking, but it was fine when we arrived in Gaios, the main place in Paxos. It was only a tiny place and water was running everywhere. This weather was out of character for here. We were told the island had never been greener. At least our hotel room was functional. Spartan, but after what we paid for this trip, we weren't expecting the Ritz. We didn't need much of a place to stay in anyway. Saturday, Sunday and Monday nights were spent going round the bars of Gaios. But we decided it would be a good idea to set off for Sofia on Tuesday morning.

There was a car ferry a couple of times a day to Igoumenitsa on the Greek coast. The first one was at 8.45am. We got it wrong though, not realising the ferry port was further down the coast and not in Gaios itself. I'd wondered how they could get a car ferry here anyway. We eventually caught the one at 1.30pm.

After a nice pleasant crossing we disembarked in Igoumenitsa. We had a wander round the town, then called in a car hire place. This was a bit too expensive for our needs. Besides, would the Bulgarians have let a hire car into their country? We decided to go and see if there was a bus to Salonika (Thessaloniki).

Our luck was in. There was a bus a bit later on. It cost twenty euros to Salonika. It was going to be a long haul though, all through the night. The distance was equivalent to going from Blackburn to London, but these were going to be mountain roads in the dark. Hopefully we could get our heads down on the bus.

We went for a meal in a café near the bus station. Unfortunately my biggest problem over here was the food. I just didn't like Greek food. It was served either cold, or lukewarm. There's nothing worse than cold chips. Plus the chicken bought with this meal was full of the spice they seem to shove in everything. I ended up living on chocolate and crisps or nuts on this trip.

On the bus north, our chances of crashing out were limited. We were sat right at the front, by the door. Most of the people seemed to know the driver and he spent most of the journey yapping

with his passengers. It was a long haul too. Good job it was dark because these roads were scary in some places. Looking out the window I could see sheer drops of what looked like thousands of feet down the sides of ravines. My trust was in this gallant driver. He seemed competent enough. It was not a journey for the faint-hearted. The roads seemed to snake along the mountains like tinsel on a Christmas tree. Up and down over again.

Six and a half hours later we arrived in Salonika. It hadn't taken as long as expected. At the bus station we looked at options for travelling to Sofia. I'd done my homework here. We decided on going to the railway station and checking out our options from here.

The best way of getting to Sofia in our present circumstances was by coach. The office for this was on the railway station complex. We'd sooner have caught a train, this looked favourite for our return journey. The coach was run by Hellenic Railways, based here in Salonika. This left for Sofia at half past seven.

At half past two everybody was kicked out the station. We went across the road to a café, but it had just shut. The weather was all right, so we sat outside the railway station for a couple of hours until it re-opened. After sitting inside the station, boredom made us look for another café. We were in luck this time. One was open. We killed well over an hour in this place.

At 7.00am we bought our Sofia tickets then hung around for half an hour. Quite a sizeable number of travellers built up for this journey. Greek police arrived on the scene. They checked passports of a few young people, asking them their business. Good job they didn't pull me and Phil. Being a couple of British football fans, they might have given us a hard time, even stopped us going.

Our coach set off late. This was due to us having to go through electronic search treatment. The journey itself was a long slog. Things were not helped by two border crossings. We were stuck here for over two hours. We also stopped for everybody to call in a duty-free shop on the way. Then we were stuck behind loads of wagons on roads which were barely passable, thanks to money from the EU. It was darned hot on this coach too.

We arrived in Sofia around 2.00pm. This didn't give us a lot of time to sort out a return journey. The next bus to Salonika was at ten o'clock in the morning. Then we had to get to Preveza. We'd given up on the idea of going back to Paxos by now. This match could have done with being on a Wednesday rather than a Thursday.

At Sofia's railway station we locked up our bags. Mine was a big one with a large Blackburn Rovers badge displayed on its side. Last thing we wanted to do was advertise our presence, especially with the reputation some CSKA fans had. We then found out the train from Sofia to Salonika was at 11.05pm. We plumped for this, reckoning we could get here after the match finished. At least we could get our heads down on the train. A better journey too we hoped, compared to the ball-ache of the one we had by coach on these mountain roads.

Our next stop was what we thought was the rendezvous point for Rovers fans to assemble before the match. We sat down for a beer here after bumping into a few other Rovers fans. One was



the daughter of former Evening Telegraph Rovers columnist, Phil Lloyd. The other was my old mate Ray Almond. We then had a walk around the city centre, bumping into loads of other Rovers fans and the odd dodgy CSKA one. They didn't seem too bad at all.

Eventually we found an area set aside for tourists with a beer tent and chairs laid out. Lots of Rovers fans were here, including Woody, a mate of mine who seems to be at every away match. He was pleased to see us, even offering Phil and me somewhere to stay in Sofia after the match. We told him our situation and politely declined his kind offer of hospitality. Former player, Ken 'Beamo' Beamish also paid us all a visit.

Later we all went to our proper rendezvous point, outside the real Nevski Cathedral. What seemed like hundreds of us were frogmarched to CSKA's ground. We passed what I thought was Levski Sofia's ground, but wasn't. I've never come across a couple of closer football grounds. The other stadium looked the better of the two, but CSKA's was full of red and white by the time we got inside. It was your typical Eastern Bloc Stadium.

They were a passionate lot here though. Our journey through the park where the grounds were situated had not been for the faint-hearted. Now they kept playing this song, which I later found out was called 'Red Hearts'. It was quite catchy. I rather liked it.

Unfortunately for the passionate CSKA fans, we spoiled their party and broke their red hearts. Thompson put us a goal up, then Ostenstad and Duff put us in what looked like an unassailable lead.

Now only Rovers can steal defeat from the jaws of victory. And we nearly did tonight. CSKA came back to make it 3-3. But they needed another because of the away goals rule. If five more minutes had been played they might have got it. Fortunately the ref wasn't going to do them any favours after being pelted with plastic water bottles and having his pitch invaded by angry Bulgarians. He needed a police escort at the final whistle. We'd already been targets for their water bottles. Fortunately for us the reputation of the CSKA hooligans was only exceeded by their police. They were known for their brutality and they marched us through the dark woods without any sign of ambush around the corner. It seemed a longer walk though than before the match.

Phil and I a couple of other Rovers fans sneaked away from our escort when we came out the park and looked for a taxi to the railway station. Eventually we flagged one down. The driver spoke no English, but understood what a 'choo-choo' was. This did the trick.

Sofia station was full of CSKA fans, but also plenty of coppers too. We bought our train tickets and boarded the train for Salonika. Phil and I paid the bit extra for sleeper compartments. Our bunks were good enough and we were out of danger. Now we could relax and get some sleep once the train set off.

Our journey was comfortable, just a bit long. Having to stop at two sets of customs caused this delay. We arrived in Salonika for around 7.30am. Over eight hours of travelling made this our longest single journey time-wise, even though it only about 140 miles. But it was worth it,

compared to our journey in the other direction from Sofia.

We were into trains now and decided to catch one to Athens as far down the Greek coast as Larissa. Hopefully we could catch a bus to Ioninna or even Preveza, if our luck really was in, from here. Our train set off at 8.20am. The Greek railways quite impressed me, but then again I've never worked on them like our ones in Blighty. It looked like the EU is putting a lot of money into the Greek transport infrastructure. At least we got to take advantage of this. It only took us around an hour to get down to Larissa. Not bad at all.

We had a bit of a problem in this place. There didn't seem to be a bus station. For what seemed a large town, with a Greek inter city railway station, surely it must have had a central bus station. Maybe it did, but me and Phil couldn't find it. So we decided to try and find the right bus stop to Preveza.

At least Larissa was the friendliest place we'd come across over here. Helpful people pointed us in the right direction until we found an agent for a bus firm situated in a shop on the way. We met a nice girl on a scooter who spoke good English. She sorted us out with the Preveza bus. It set off at noon, we didn't have long to wait this time. We'd decided by now to get digs in Preveza and then we could have a night out before making the short journey to Axion airport next day. We'd had enough of travelling by now.

There was one last hellish journey to make - over the mountains to Preveza. Good job they have decent drivers over here. The one we had was good, he had to be. Once again we were looking down thousand foot drops and traversing hairpin bends. But I felt better with every mile as we neared Ioninna. This bus didn't stop here though, carrying on until Preveza itself. Then we checked in to the Minos Hotel after looking around for somewhere nearby. Thirty Euros bought us a double room, it was well worth it. After one more night on the beer we were up for a shower and shave and a decent night's kip when we got back.

Next morning normality had returned with me waking up at sevenish. Phil was left sleeping for another couple of hours while I had a walk round the town. Finding our bearings, especially the taxi rank for our airport journey was my priority. Phil was up on my return. He went for a walk while I watched Greek TV. We then went for a beer before catching a taxi to the airport. Our driver didn't speak English, but my rudimentary German did the job.

We met up with some of the people on the holiday, told them we'd made it and then it was off to Blighty on a jet plane. At Manchester there was even more good news when Phil's car started first time. Even better news was when we returned to our respective homes and found neither of them had been done over.

And so endeth my longest ever Rovers away match. I was hoping we might get somewhere easier to travel to next time we got into Europe. And I hoped there would always be a next time. Many fans would gladly have swapped places with me to see their team in Europe. I enjoyed this trip too. Hopefully there would be more foreign visits to come.

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Maybe I spoke too soon. My desire for a more accessible away match in Europe was answered in the next round. Unfortunately we were drawn away to Celtic. When we were drawn against CSKA, it had been my hope not to get a Welsh or Scottish club.

Wrexham was the ribbing everyone gave me before the draw. Though I wasn't sure they made it into Europe this time. They regularly appeared in the UEFA Cup through winning the Welsh Cup. Yet the Principality's oldest team was only around fifty miles from Blackburn and often classed as part of the North West. It was almost a regional derby match.

I'd have even settled for teams from either side of the Irish border, though not Shamrock Rovers again. Plus Celtic tended to beat English teams in Europe. I could see our UEFA Cup adventure ending up in Glasgow.

This also felt like *deja vu* to me, I'd already watched Rovers play the green half of the Old Firm on my last ever hitchhiking foray. Albeit at the crumbling Hampden Park, while Celtic Park was being turned into their 70,000 capacity gleaming new state of the art stadium.

But Celtic didn't feel like a European game to me. I'm not even sure about the Home Nations having their own leagues and teams in Europe either. If I was a continental European, I don't think I would have been happy about a country off the coast being able to play four separate teams in the World Cup and European Championships.

There was some good news from Parky about the away leg, which was the opening match. A workmate of his wife was prepared to give us a lift up to the first leg at Celtic Park if I could get him a ticket. I was able to manage this.

We were given a lift in a car which used liquid petroleum gas as well as petrol. This brought the cost down to only £8 apiece for Parky and me. It was as cheap as my ferry ride to Shamrock Rovers. They played in green and white hoops too and had even more of an Irish connection than Celtic.

Sadly the similarity ended when Celtic beat us in both legs. At least we had a good time in Glasgow before the game. We parked near the ground and went looking for a pub. The ones we tried to get in were full to the brim. Our luck was in when a friendly doorman directed us to a nearby bowling green, which had its own bar.

We managed to gain entry to the club house and were made welcome by the Celtic fans inside. Their main topic of conversation was the possibility of them and their 'Old Firm' rivals, Rangers, joining our Premier League at some time in the future. These two had become like whales in a duck pond and had outgrown their own Scottish League.

I had reservations about UEFA allowing the Glasgow giants into English football. The whiff of sectarianism was something I didn't fancy at our football grounds. Not that I told the Celtic fans this. They were as friendly a bunch of football fans as I'd ever met at an away match and I wanted to keep it that way.

On the night the match looked to be heading for a draw. But Celtic scored a late goal. They did even better in the second leg at Ewood Park. They beat us 2-0 and won the latest in this overworked term of 'The Battle of Britain'.

It could be argued that this match could actually be classed as my last occasion of thumbing it to a Rovers match. I had been working in Preston and caught the 4.00pm bus home. Quite a few Rovers fans, and a couple of Celtic fans, were aboard.

At Mellor Brook the bus broke down, something which wasn't unusual for me on the X59 service. I wanted to get home for some tea, before going for my usual pint before the match. So my thumb was stuck out and I started running down Preston New Road.

I hear a car beep behind me and, of all people, it was Parky driving. He was also working in Preston today and due to meet up with me before the match. He picked me up and dropped me off at the top of his road, two blocks away from my house nearby.

Normally it's me who sorts out our away matches. But at least on this occasion he was responsible for me getting a lift to both legs for this UEFA Cup tie. Maybe he was even my last ever lift as a hitchhiker.

## [Chapter 19](#)

### *Tulips and Aspirins*

My longing to follow Rovers on another trip to continental Europe came to fruition in season 2006-07. Graeme Souness, who gave me my enjoyable trip to Greece and Bulgaria, left us to take up the poisoned chalice job of Newcastle United manager. I thought he might have hung around with us for long enough to set a club record as our longest serving manager. But he seemed to lose interest in Rovers and made the mistaken decision to fall by the wayside on Tyneside.

He was replaced by our former player and Worthington Cup winner – Mark Hughes. This was a landmark for me personally. Hughes was the first manager Rovers appointed who was younger than me. It was a strange feeling, more a sign of age for me really. I had been supporting the club since the age of eight. So it was only a matter of time before my advancing years would lead to younger people coming along to determine our destiny.

'Hughesy', no stranger himself to playing in Europe, ended his distinguished playing career winning a medal for us that wonderful day in Cardiff. After managing the other team in the Welsh capital – Wales itself – he returned to club football at his last employer. This time it was his turn to be the gaffer.

He managed to save Rovers from relegation in his first season. Then he then did even better next season by taking us into the top ten in 2005-06. Due to a combination of how the Premier

League ended that season, our sixth position was good enough to land us yet another European adventure. We were only four points away from a European Champions League place. But a UEFA Cup place was the icing on the cake for me and most Rovers fans.

Ironically, we had to beat the team again who we beat to enable us to play in Europe last time. Our 4-0 away win at Tottenham Hotspur on the last day of the season had us jokingly describing Spurs as our gateway to Europe.

And so Rovers were in the 1<sup>st</sup> round of UEFA Cup. We were given what looked like a decent draw with a good chance of making progress. Red Bull Salzburg were our opponents, with the first leg away at their place on 14 September 2006. It looked like Red Bull was a team in turmoil. Clues to this could be gleaned from the club's very name. Austria's most successful club, Austria Salzburg, was taken over by drinks manufacturer – Red Bull. Not only did they change the club's kit from its traditional violet and white to red and white. But they also took marketing to its unsavoury limit by changing the club's name to Red Bull.

This brought a similar reaction from the Salzburg fans to what might have been if Mozart was called a German. They were incensed over the way their club was downgraded to nothing more than a marketing tool. By the time it came for Rovers to play them in the UEFA Cup tie, most of their supporters were voicing their support for us. I really fancied our chances of winning this tie.

Unfortunately I left it too long trying to sort out a flight for the away leg in Austria. But we managed to get through thanks to a 2-2 draw in Salzburg and a 2-0 win I attended at Ewood Park a fortnight later. This made me more determined to catch at least one away match from the group stage we had made it into.

Rovers were in Group E, along with Basel, Nancy, Feyenoord and Wisla Kracow. Our games were on a one leg basis, with Basel and Nancy at home and Wisla and Feyenoord away. I was interested in going to Poland, but determined to go to Feyenoord for our game on 23 November 2006.

As with our trip to Salzburg, I didn't get in fast enough. But my mate Parky said he was up for going on the Dutch trip with me. So my computer went into overdrive, with me checking out cheap flights and digs in Amsterdam. I'd been to this wonderful city a few times over the years. It would be our base, rather than Feyenoord's home of Rotterdam.

Bad reports had come from here about potential hooliganism from Feyenoord's unruly element. But it was looking like Rovers were going to take a large following there, with the majority of our travelling support stopping in Amsterdam.

Parky and I had to move quickly as regards booking our flights and accommodation. Rovers insisted fans making the Dutch trip fill in a booking form for tickets. This included which flights we were on and where we were stopping. This was on a first come, first served basis. So if it was over-subscribed, you could end up with spending a lot of money for nothing.

Fortunately I was able to book us a return Jet2.com flight to Amsterdam from Blackpool. The

cost was 126 euros each. This was more than normal, but the airline must have got wise to Rovers' game in Europe. Other fans managed a better deal than us, but more paid through the nose.

I managed to book us a couple of nights on the Amsterdam Boatel, where I stopped back in 1987. This cost 78 euros apiece for a couple of nights, which was pretty good at short notice. It looked like they hadn't upped their prices for visiting Rovers fans. It might have been different if we had been playing Ajax – who were also in the competition, rather than their fellow countrymen and bitter rivals.

My biggest problem with going to this match was having just had one of my eyes lasered the week before. The other one had been done a month ago. Last thing I needed was some crazy Dutchman's boot in my face. Hopefully there would be no trouble at this game, or on our stopover in Amsterdam.

Parky and I arranged to catch a train to Blackpool Airport. One of my workmates told me there was a pub next door to the airport, called the Air Balloon. Many passengers would check in their baggage then go for a pint and a meal in the Balloon. This is what Parky and I intended to do. We caught the 10.42 am Blackpool South train to Squires Gate. It was only a hop, skip and a jump to the airport. Our flight was at 5.00pm, giving us plenty of time for a few pints and our tea next door. Going to Amsterdam, why not start as we meant to continue?

After a couple of hours in the Balloon, we went through the ritual of boarding our flight. I liked Blackpool Airport. It was a lot simpler and less time consuming than the procedures and bureaucracy you had to follow at Manchester. No doubt the sheer weight of numbers dictated this. But being able to catch a train directly from Blackburn to Squires Gate was very handy. Having a pub next door was even handier.

Our plane was full of Rovers fans. No doubt the word had got round about this service from here to Amsterdam. It was a quick flight too. We almost seemed to go up in the air and then come down again after a very short time, barely an hour. This was great for me, not being a fan of flying too far. Only problem was having to put our watches ahead an hour to Central European Time.

After checking out the airport, it was off to the city centre on a double-decker train. I'd never been on one of these before and was very impressed. Our digs were round the corner from Amsterdam's Centraal Railway Station. We checked in here and found ourselves bumping into people we knew who had come over to watch Rovers play at Feyenoord.

The Boatel was nice and clean and even had its own in-house porn channel on the TV in our room. There would be no problem getting to sleep in here, the boat gently rocked from side to side. No doubt most of its occupants wouldn't need rocking to sleep, thanks to their alcohol and chemical induced nights out.

As expected, it didn't take long before Parky and I had dropped off our gear in our room and went out for a night on the town. We headed into the famous Red Light area. The first bar we

called in had a gang of young Rovers fans smoking dope and knocking the beer back. We didn't bother with the former – not that there was any need as the smell of wacky backy was everywhere - but we were soon in to the latter. Further visits were made to other hostels.

I had been told lots of Rovers fans would be congregating at a pub called the Olde Sailor. Parky and I landed there later that night. It was full of Rovers fans, who could be heard halfway down the street from the pub. We joined in the singing, once inside the pub.

After a couple of pints in here, we ventured elsewhere. Outside we saw the famous 'Flower Pot Man'. We left him to endure the cat-calls from the Rovers fans and other punters before making our way to the Bulldog, one of my favourite bars when I visited the city nearly ten years previously. There were two of them this – one for the smoke, the other for the beer. We stuck with the latter. It was so late, it was early, by the time we returned to the Boatel.

We were up early enough to get ourselves a good breakfast apiece. We wanted to go for a beer in Rotterdam, but started off with another pub crawl round Amsterdam. We had plenty of time. Tonight's kick off was at 8.45pm. It was very late for a night match, no doubt for British television audiences - a sore point with me and many others.

We were told it would be really late by the time we returned to Amsterdam after the match, as the police would be keeping us in the ground until after they had dispersed Feyenoord's fans. They also warned Rovers fans about going for a drink in Rotterdam before the match. This followed attacks on British fans in previous matches. Sadly, football hooliganism - Britain's worst export to Europe - was starting to become very irritating.

Parky went for a pint with one of his building worker colleagues. They wanted a look around some other pubs. I wanted to go for a pint in the Olde Sailor. We arranged to meet up later.

Around mid afternoon Parky and I met up and caught our train to Rotterdam. Our plan was to get off in the city centre and go for a pint somewhere. Unfortunately Parky and his mate had been eating space cake and he was off his head. I was tasked with getting him to the match as well as avoiding any marauding Dutch football hooligans. All this with a still-healing lasered eye.

There were a few Rovers fans on the train who had a similar idea. We got talking to them and they mentioned a place where Rovers fans had been advised they could get a drink before the match. This was the Oude Haven, on Rotterdam's waterfront.

Unfortunately this didn't happen. Our train ended up at a station called Feyenoord Blaak. We had to wait for another train to the De Kuip Stadium and run the gauntlet of some Feyenoord fans. Fortunately for us a train came in not long after and we all jumped aboard. We heard other groups of Rovers fans had been herded all over the place, including the ones who were staying in Rotterdam. The Dutch police were taking no chances.

At the football ground railway station there was a separate gate for visiting fans to access the area we were allocated. At least we arrived in one piece, though Parky thought his head was

going to fall off. Fruit cake for him next time, he's nutty as one at the best of times.

The game itself was a goalless draw, but enough to see Rovers into the knockout stage of the competition. Our 2,500 strong following was well behaved. But it was a different story with our Dutch opponents. Rovers' midfielder, Morten Gamst Pedersen, was hit by a plastic glass of beer. Fortunately it didn't hurt him, just left him wet and sticky.

After the match we were kept in the ground for about an hour. We had a bit of a wait on the railway station too. It was after midnight by the time we boarded our trains back to Amsterdam. The journey took two hours, Parky and I were knackered by the time we got back to Centraal Station. It was straight back to the Boatel and a sleep for us. No point in going out at this time. We wanted an early start for a few beers before catching our plane back to Blighty in the evening.

We got up in time for our breakfast, checking out the Boatel after our meal. One bonus for us was still being able to leave our baggage here while we went out. This could be collected later when we went for our train to the airport.

Parky had received a phone call from his boss. The brother-in-law of his boss had overslept and missed his flight back to Britain. So Parky was charged with making sure he didn't miss his replacement flight. We arranged to meet the dozy lad and some of Parky's mates at Dam Square for a drink or two.

We found the lads in a bar on Dam Square and had a mini pub crawl with them. I knew a few of them from the Lion on Wensley Road, from when I lived nearby in the 1990s. Sadly our trip had to come to an end and we returned to the Boatel for our baggage and the short walk to the railway station. One last double-decker train took us to the airport for our flight at 7.45pm. At least the hour we lost on the way was returned to us. We arrived at Blackpool at 8.00pm British time.

I was pulled by customs – as usual. This always happens to me, mainly because I usually carry a PCS union bag as my hand luggage. It's the same union the customs staff are members of, so must flash something through their minds to investigate me. There was still enough time to check-out from the airport and catch a train from Squires Gate to Blackburn even after my frisking.

Rovers finished top of the group after we won all our matches, apart this last one. Our Dutch opponents were kicked out of the tournament following their fans' behaviour in Nancy. It meant we had to wait until the European Winter Break passed before getting back into action in February. We were paired with Bayer Leverkusen in the knockout, the first leg being in Germany on 14 February 2007.

I wrote a couple of stories for 4,000 Holes about the Dutch trip. One was a travelogue about mine and Parky's time over there. The other was one of my spoof stories.



## ***I'VE GOT YOU UNDER MY SKIN***

*During Rovers' UEFA Cup trip to Feyenoord, it wasn't just football our officials went to watch. A nightclub in Rotterdam has its own unique membership scheme. Entry to the club is by a scanner picking up your details from a silicone chip embedded in your arm. Should Rovers set up their own similar system, it will be known as the 'Shoulder Charge'.*

*So forgetting your season ticket on match days will soon become a thing of the past. Rovers are about to offer season ticket holders the option of having a similar kind of microchip implanted in their arm, taking away the need to carry our little card in its blue plastic pouch.*

*Although it does sound very Orwellian, it is certainly practical. The 'Shoulder Charge' is the size of a grain of rice, does not set off airport scanners and contains no power supply. It is encased inside a tiny glass and silicone cylinder and implanted by injection. It is similar to what they do with dogs, cats and racehorses. But in humans is injected between the layer of fat and skin on the upper arm where it meets the shoulder. You can also request other parts of the body to have it implanted. But short people are asked to consider their choice very carefully. This is because the existing scanners at the turnstiles will remain in place as no modification is required.*

*The silicone chip, which has a life span of about 20 years, lies dormant until a scanner is passed over it, sending out a low-range radio frequency. It responds to the signal and supplies the scanner with its unique ID number, photograph and membership details. The chip is similar to more than 25 million already embedded in animals across the world acting as 'pet passports'. It can also be used for tracing missing persons. Before being used in humans, it has undergone stringent tests and doctors say it is extremely safe. But, in the case of Rovers fans, we become the pets – Guinea Pigs!*

*Another aspect is what happens when season ticket holders don't renew their subscription. The chip automatically deactivates. This releases a mild irritant to the skin, causing an itching feeling. So if you don't fancy a trip to the doctor, or the vet, make sure you renew your season ticket.*

*So in future Rovers fans will be proud to say we have a chip on our shoulder.*

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Bayer Leverkusen had similarities to our first round opponents, Red Bull Salzburg. Both were owned by huge multinational corporations. The difference was Salzburg was seen as an unwelcome predatory purchase. Whereas Bayer was the heart and soul of Leverkusen, in a similar way to Philips in Eindhoven. As the inventors of the aspirin, owning the local football club was no headache for Bayer's fans.

Parky couldn't make it to this match. No doubt his wife had heard reports of our trip to Amsterdam and put her foot down. My girlfriend, Sylvia, wasn't bothered about going either. The German winter put her off. So it was going to be a lone trip back to that city and subsequent journey to Cologne for me.

Getting a match ticket was my first priority. It was easier for me than the Dutch game. Rovers still insisted on an application form for tickets, but only fans who had travelled to either Salzburg, Kracow or Feyenoord would be considered for a Bayer ticket. These cost £17 and my application was emailed to Rovers on 13 January 2007. Four days later the money was debited from my bank account, which told me I was going.

I put down the flight I was hoping to catch on my form and the Amsterdam Boatel as my accommodation. The flight had been booked, but not paid for yet. It would cost me £43, rising to £82.68 with all the extras. Meanwhile, other digs were booked in Amsterdam because the Boatel was full. The Hotel Quentin, not so far from the railway station, cost me 39 euros for the night.

Once my match ticket money went out, the flights and digs were booked online. A couple of nights in Cologne were also booked. It cost me £61.85 to stay at the City Class Europa Am Dom. Not sure if this was what it was really called, but it was booked without any problems. The name told me it going to be near Cologne's iconic cathedral, or 'Dom' as they call it over there.

All that was left for me to do was book train tickets online for the two hour journey between Amsterdam and Cologne. These were bought through German Railways and were a special offer. They cost me 79.30 euros, with the booking fee included. Money for these went out very quickly and the tickets arrived three days later.

Rovers sent me a 'Rough Guide to Bayer Leverkusen' with my match tickets. It was very glossy and contained useful information about the football club and its Bayarena Stadium. There was also a handy map as part of the guide. I had already done my research into the club and ground. It turned out anybody with a match ticket could use any public transport for free to the ground from Cologne on match days. I wasn't going to miss this opportunity.

There was a nice omen for me on the Friday night before my trip to Europe. I won £17.60 on the Euro Lottery. It wasn't much, but paid for my match ticket in Germany. Hopefully another good result would come my way on Wednesday night.

The whole week, starting Monday 12 February, was booked off. Once again it was a train from Blackburn to Squires Gate on Monday afternoon. My bag was carted over the bridge and the Air Balloon visited. My flight was at 5.00pm, so Blackpool Airport's check-in procedure was followed. Then it was back to the Balloon.

I didn't have to go back for my flight until 4.30pm, but was a bit earlier. It was slightly quicker than my last flight to Amsterdam, arriving ahead of schedule. At Schiphol it was a train to Centraal Station, getting me into the city for just after 8.00pm local time. It didn't take long to find my digs on Haarlemmerstraat. Not only had I done my research, but still had my city street map from coming here in the last round.

The hotel was being done up and I my room was up three flights of dodgy stairs. The room was adequate, but too hot. Its heating was on at full blast and I couldn't turn it down. I wasn't for

hanging around, this bridge could be crossed later. It was time for a few beers.

First stop was De Wildeman - Amsterdam's beer emporium. Three different beers were put away, the last one after swapping recommendations with this enormous American beer monster. It was off for a wander after this.

It had to be the Olde Sailor. No Rovers fans were in, as far as I could see, but plenty of British tourists. A pint was dropped in here and then a café bar was next for a beer and a meal. After this it was back to the Hotel Quentin for midnight.

Next morning was a seven o'clock start, but eight o'clock over here. Didn't get a lot of sleep due to the room being so hot. I ended up opening the window because the radiator wasn't for being turned down. At least I got an electric shave, thanks to my plug adapter. It also allowed me to charge my mobile phone.

At nine o'clock it was time to sling my hook from the hotel. Breakfast was a cold cheese pasty, eaten on the way to the railway station. My train to Cologne was at 12.34pm. This gave me time for a look down the harbour. It's a spectacular sight, especially watching some of the huge barges on their way down the North Sea Canal.

There was still a bit of time to kill, so off for a pint in the Red Light area. A cake shop was called in and some banana cake was scoffed. One of the Bulldogs was visited. This was called the Bulldog Mack. After a pint in here it was off for my train. It was right on time. It was called an ICE train and looked like a rocket. I was in wagon 23.

The journey took quarter of an hour longer than it should have. It was delayed through Holland due to a level crossing failure. After working on enough of these barriers in my time, it was nice to see they had similar problems on the continent. My only annoyance was caused by my mobile phone receiving a text saying I had crossed from the Netherlands into Germany. Then another one charging me 50p for this information.

In Cologne it didn't take long to find my hotel. It was a very nice room and facilities this time. After dropping my stuff off, it was off for a pint in an Irish bar, called Barney's, round the corner. I got talking to an Irish lad, called Mike, who had been working here for over twenty years. This pub had a lot of Rovers fans in already.

After a couple of pints I went searching for something to eat. I hated myself for it, but McDonalds was called in for chicken burger and chips. It was back to the digs after this, to get my head down for a couple of hours. At half nine it was off out for a look round the centre of Cologne. I went in a bar on the other side of the Dom, bumping into a couple of Rovers fans called Alec and Mike. I went for a drink with them in a couple of other bars, returning to my digs at midnight. There was no problem dropping off in this comfortable bed, especially with a couple of beers left in the room for guests.

Next morning found me up before seven o'clock. A shower was next, I wouldn't have dreamed of having one in the dirty Dutch one the day before. It was full of grit from the building work

going on. It was breakfast next. One person was down before me when I landed in the dining room at eight. Usual continental breakfast, a few slices of bread with different kinds of cold meat and cheese were eaten.

Three Rovers fans came down, looking a bit worse for wear. They told me they stopped in Amsterdam the same time as me. Only their digs were in the Red Light Area itself. They wouldn't be doing it again, far too noisy for any sleep. At least my Spartan room was quiet when the builders knocked off for the night.

After breakfast it was a walk round the centre looking for fags for Sylvia and my dad. It was no mean feat and meant me walking all the city centre of Cologne, all to no avail. One idea which came to me was to go and ask the lads in the Irish bar round the corner. Some of them must have smoked, unlike me. Unfortunately I had to wait until 11.00am before it opened.

A look at the River Rhine was taken and some tobacco was bought for Sylvia nearby. Fags were bought for my dad further down the street. These were dropped off at my digs. Then it was off to Leverkusen, in the pouring rain.

My match ticket got me a freebie ride when I caught the train. It dropped me off at Leverkusen Mitte railway station. A walk to the ground followed and today's match programme was picked up. This was given to me as a freebie when I showed the people in the club shop my match ticket. I wanted two, but they would only allow me just one programme, so getting one for the lad across the road from my house would need another visit later. I wanted a pint by now and found a nice little bar down the road from the Bayarena. My rudimentary German got me served and I sat in a corner with my beer. Rovers fans started arriving and a friendly German couple, who spoke good English, helped to make it a good atmosphere in the bar.

Later we received a visit from the Polizei. They told me and the other dozen of my compatriots it was too dangerous to stop here and they were moving us on. This didn't go down well with the German couple or the Rovers fans. But I could see why when we stepped outside. There was a reception waiting for us, these Bayer fans had been in the side bar of the pub. But any hopes they had of avenging the last century's conflicts were taken away from them by the coppers.

I managed to pick up another programme on the way to the ground. Inside the Bayarena, these Channel 5 reporters stopped me and asked what I was doing over here on Valentine's Day and what present had I got for my girlfriend.

By now I was soaked to the skin and had just been kicked out of a pub. So I retorted: "200 fags, I got her something she'll appreciate."

This brought peals of laughter from the Channel 5 crew. They insisted on recording what I said on camera, asking me to say it again for them while they filmed me. To this day I have yet to see this recording of me drunk and dripping in Leverkusen. Enough people have though. I have had friends, workmates and complete strangers come up to me coughing and spluttering, asking did my girlfriend enjoy her Valentine's Day present?

As for the match itself, Rovers were rubbish tonight. Bayer beat us 3-2, but goals from Bentley and Nonda gave us a fighting chance of winning the second leg at Ewood Park next week.

Just to rub salt in the wound, I got lost after the match, trying to find my way back to Mitte Station. Got there eventually after calling into a police station for directions and yet another soaking. Back in Cologne a couple of beers were put away. Off to bed after this long, tiring and wet day.

Next morning a British style breakfast was available. It was nice to be back to bacon, egg, sausage, beans and toast to start my long trip home off. At 9.20am I checked out of the hotel and noticed the crowds of people outside. It was the first day of Cologne Carnival. Today was 'Women's day' and they had a custom of cutting men's ties off. I hoped that was all they cut off.

I yapped with another Rovers fan beside the Dom. There had been some kind of drunken fight between a couple of our fans. This lad said someone slugged him and others joined in the fracas. Fortunately it was stopped by the rest of the Rovers fans before the German police got involved. This was the last thing we needed as representatives of our club and country.

There was time for one more beer in Germany before my train to Amsterdam at 10.48am. By now thousands of people wearing fancy dress were streaming from the railway station. I wish I'd known about this festival and booked another night, like the Rovers fan I'd just been talking to had done.

But it had to be the train and off I went. No answering the texts which came on my mobile phone this time as we crossed into the Netherlands. Unfortunately this train broke down at Arnhem. Luckily another Amsterdam train wasn't far off and was caught across the platform.

In Amsterdam it was another look at the harbour and one last pint in the Bulldog. Then it was off to Schiphol for my 7.45pm flight to Blackpool. This time I was pulled at the check-in by customs. I hadn't got to Britain yet and they wanted to go through my stuff. As usual it was only the regulation fags and baccy which was being carried on my bag. There was no problem with customs at Blackpool though, with me putting my watch back and arriving at 8.00pm GMT.

I was actually coming to the Fylde area again tomorrow for the Fleetwood Beer Festival. My retired workmate, Ron Miller, who got me into the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) invited me over to his hometown festival.

Ron was given a ring about tomorrow while waiting on Squires Gate Station for the Blackburn train. He wasn't in, due to volunteering behind the bar on the first night of the festival. His mother answered and when I introduced myself she told me Ron had seen me on telly. No doubt others would be letting me know about seeing me too. I would never live it down.

A week later Rovers and Bayer met in the second leg at Ewood Park. The match finished goalless, meaning our longest run in Europe came to an end. At least it gave thousands of Rovers fans a couple of enjoyable trips abroad – me included.

In my desire to foster healthy Anglo-German relations, I wrote a story for 4,000 Holes with a German theme. At the time of my trip there, I was working for the civil service at Cop Lane in Penwortham. I was the union rep here and many staff described these government buildings as being like a prison camp. This inspired me to write a spoof story for the union newsletter. Unfortunately they banned it due to political correctness. So another version was created for the 4,000 Holes fanzine. They had no problem publishing it.

## ***The Curse of Ewood Park***

*During car park resurfacing at Ewood Park, a secret tunnel was found. This prompted an investigation into possible asbestos dangers. But it seems this tunnel was much older than everybody thought. Ewood Park was used during the last world war as a POW camp. Some things never change. This discovery was really a German escape tunnel.*

*In August 1943, during the height of World War 2, Hans and Fritz are locked in their cell planning an escape.*

*“Zis Stallag Ewood Park is such a depressing place mein freund,” said Hans.*

*“Ja” said Fritz. “They must be breaking ze Geneva Convention with zis overcrowding.”*

*“Don’t you think it is about time we escaped and returned to ze Fatherland?” asked Hans.*

*“Jawohl mein Herr! But how do we get out of such a secure prison?” his cellmate replied.*

*The three years Hans spent at Ewood Park had not been wasted. He was an avid reader, taking in all the numerous leaflets dropped at his workbench and he had come up with a daring plan of escape. He explained his idea to Fritz.*

*“Ve are going to dig a tunnel.”*

*“What do you mean mein freund?” Zat is ze oldest trick in ze buch. Tommy is not ein dumkopf. He must have read ze Count of Monte Christo - I have.”*

*“I know” said Hans, “My last attempt found me ending up in ze smoke room. Listen to me Fritz, I now have a stolen map. Ve can dig a tunnel down to ze River Darwen, then stow away on board a ship to Germany. We will then be as free as a vogel.”*

*Later in the evening Hans and Fritz are on washing-up duty after their tea. Both secrete spoons, forks and knives about their person and try not to rattle. After locking-up time they begin to remove a slab from their cell floor. To their utter joy, underneath it the ground is soft. They begin their task of digging an escape tunnel.*

*Over the next few weeks things go to plan. The tunnel makes progress. They dig thirty feet under Ewood Park’s car park. Getting rid of the soil is their hardest job. Goose-stepping on the*

*car park gives other prisoners cause for concern. Hans and Fritz look like they have chronic diarrhoea. But the hot weather helps their trail of soil blow away. The two Germans are pleased with their progress. They dream of lager and lederhosen.*

*One afternoon though, it all goes terribly wrong for the two POWs. In a moment of madness Fritz sees a wooden vaulting horse. He cannot resist diving over it then hiding inside, he had seen this in a German propaganda film. A prison officer sees this happen. When the top of the wooden horse is taken off Hans is found to be lying there, with soil streaming out of his trousers.*

*He and Fritz are immediately sent to the cooler - a secret secure prison block in Blackburn town centre called the Town Hall. Despite intensive interrogation, the Germans do not talk. Nobody ever found their escape tunnel. After the war Hans and Fritz decide to stay on in Britain. Their extravagant plans for a channel tunnel are eventually accepted.*

*Meanwhile back at Ewood Park, rumours of a German escape tunnel are soon forgotten. Britain joins the Common Market and old enmities are brushed aside. But the sands of time cannot cover the past for ever. A trade union health & safety rep asks awkward questions about asbestos in an old boiler room. After an investigation, the tunnel is found.*

*It is a sensation, like the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb. But as with the boy Pharaoh's lost secrets a century ago, a curse goes with it. People working here soon go through a strange metamorphosis. They start smearing themselves in tomato sauce, then they turn into sardines. It becomes known as 'The Curse of Ewood Park'. Scientists are baffled. The football club has no answer either. They decide to make the best of the situation by resurfacing the car park and painting the walls blue and white. The paint used contains a mild hallucinogen. Successful experiments with Napoleon Bonaparte on St Helena proved useful. Management anticipate similar results at Ewood Park.*

*As for the tunnel. Management decide not to look a gift horse in the mouth. It is now going to be used for storing old away kits. This is after they are sure there are no traces of asbestos remaining, and its walls won't collapse.*

## [Chapter 20](#)

### *Postscript*

A year after becoming a working man again, I split up with Caroline, my then girlfriend. We both bought our own houses eventually. I now live in Blackburn's Revidge district, not so far from where I come from. At the bottom of my road used to stand Rovers' old Leamington Street ground. It is completely covered by houses and there are no signs of there ever having been a football ground in this vicinity. Even what was 'Rover Street' has been renamed Wellfield Road, though it remains cobbled. At least Alexandra Meadows, Rovers' first decent home, is still there round the corner.

So now there was no excuse for me not going to away matches once more. I really enjoyed

getting back into travelling again and intended to catch up where I left off, following Rovers around the country, and even Europe.

Who knows, if Jack Walker had not got involved with Rovers, what might have happened to us? Since Uncle Jack passed away, once again the future for Rovers is uncertain. But that is the story of Blackburn Rovers. We have been up at the top, down at the bottom and back up again in our long history. But it's been a good ride.

This brings me to the point. Would I recommend hitchhiking? I wouldn't like to say really. Yet even after giving up using this means to follow Rovers, I have still thumbed lifts. The last time was after missing an early morning bus following a night out in Preston with my old friend and former workmate, Dave France.

I would never advise a girl to hitchhike, unless it was me who was lucky enough to be driving the vehicle. Maybe if there were two of them, or she was with a lad, things would be safer. I thumbed my first lift around the age of fifteen. Nowadays I wouldn't advise anybody so young to do such a thing. But similar advice was probably given to me and as usual, went unheeded.

When I started hitching it was looked upon almost as a romantic pastime. You were like a successor to the hippies and other free spirits. Unfortunately transport firms began to crack down on their drivers giving people lifts. Insurance companies virtually stuck a prohibition notice on motorists, stopping them picking up passengers. This even included members of their own family. No doubt the idea of paying out compensation for victims of car crashes put the kibosh on most drivers' generosity.

In the mid seventies, when I first stuck my thumb out. You could go down to Blackburn's nearest M6 junction and there would be as many as a dozen people stood at the slip road waiting for a lift. When I went to Brighton in 1977, there must have been this number of Rovers fans who hitched it down here.

Now you are lucky to see a hitchhiker these days. By the mid eighties and early nineties, it seemed to be becoming a thing of the past. Sadly young people are either too prosperous or couldn't be bothered going out of their way and enduring the kind of discomfort I was prepared to go through. I don't blame them really.

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On Friday August 14th, 2000, it was sadly announced Jack Walker had died. He had been fighting cancer, but sadly passed away after a brave struggle. This was devastating news for all Rovers supporters and football fans in general.

How many so-called businessmen have actually dug into their pocket, put their money where their mouth is and come up with the loot like 'Uncle Jack' did? He transformed Blackburn Rovers from being a team of 'also-rans', who gave us false promises every year, into England's Premier League Champions.



After watching Rovers rise from Division Three, then become Champions, still hasn't sunk in to this very day. I was there outside Ewood Park after our debacle against Oxford United. We held sit down protests on the Blackburn End, then in Nuttall Street itself after this match. Our Chairman, Bill Fox, kept his head and persuaded Jack Walker to become involved. Although he had already been helping Rovers behind the scenes for years before buying the club. What followed is history and very pleasurable for me too.

How many football fans will ever have the pleasure of seeing such a transformation? It was the stuff of dreams - I still pinch myself today - Not many saw both sides of Rovers. Poverty then plenty, but I did. And I'm still there enjoying it all. The truth is it was all down to one man – Uncle Jack. I believe he should have been given the freedom of Blackburn. But for some reason only politicians ever seem to get this honour from my local council.

I would like to finish my book with a tribute to Jack Walker. It was written in the form some people think I do best - the spoof story. It also kills two birds with one stone by cocking a snook at the council for their failure to reward one of Blackburn's finest sons. It appeared in 4,000 Holes, although they changed the title to 'Walker On'. Amazingly quite a few people believed it, including a lady from the council's Public Relations Unit. Her blushes were spared when I told her she'd been had.

## ***DEVIL'S ROCK TO BE JACK MEMORIAL***

***Blackburn with Darwen Council received universal criticism for not making Jack Walker a freeman of the Borough during his lifetime.***

*Now the council has decided to create a permanent memorial to the great man in Corporation Park. The site chosen will be Devil's Rock. Known to generations of children who have skimmed their knees climbing its rockface. The proposed work will come out of the council's public works of art budget.*

*Plans have been submitted to carve a Mount Rushmore style commemoration to Blackburn's most celebrated son of the latter years. Stonemasons have been contacted and suggest this work will take around six months to complete. It was felt Corporation Park was the best site due to regeneration money being available. The park has been plagued by vandalism of late. Councillors believe a major works such as this will help to bring more visitors into the park. This in turn should deter vandals from causing problems.*

*Councillors have been stung by recent criticism over their policy on honouring the borough's citizens. Only politicians have been made freemen. Snubbing sporting heroes like Ronnie Clayton, Brian Douglas and Carl Fogarty has made councillors even more unpopular than usual. Jack Walker's non-recognition caused particular bad feeling in the borough. Aside from his Rovers involvement, Uncle Jack gave work to many people over the years. Not only through the family steel firm, but through other successful business activities. Many people feel there would never have been a more fitting recipient of the borough's freedom.*

*There has also been criticism of the council over its public works of art policy. Some of the*

*creations in Blackburn town centre have received mixed receptions. The grandmother and grandchild statue on the Boulevard seems to be the only one which has proved popular. Even this suffered a vandal attack, the little boy having his arm amputated despite the presence of cctv cameras. Other artefacts have received scathing criticism. The musical note outside King George's Hall has been likened to an expensive twisted rail. Whereas people have laughed about daleks suddenly appearing from the strange triangles on Church Street.*

*To make amends the council has decided to create something which will be genuinely popular with its citizens. Suggestions of a council funded memorial to Jack Walker have been put forward previously. These were shelved following the erection of the statue at Ewood Park. This new erection in Corporation Park could prove just as popular.*

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