

ANDREW PRESHOUS

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COME ON YOU BLUES

RECOLLECTIONS OF
SHREWSBURY TOWN'S
FIRST SEASON IN
DIVISION TWO

1979/80



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1

Beginnings

Is football playing
Along the river shore,
With lads to chase the leather
Now I stand up no more?

Aye the ball is flying,
The lads play heart and soul;
The goal stands up, the keeper
Stands up to keep the goal.

A Shropshire Lad (A.E. Housman, Harrap, 1984, p42)

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As Terry goes through his 1967 address book, looking up his old girlfriends:

Bob: Nancy Ridley?

Terry: Moved to Shrewsbury.

Bob: Where's Shrewsbury?

Terry: League Division Three. About six from the bottom.

(Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads? S1 E05: 'I'll Never Forget Whatshername', 6 February 1973)

1973/74

The Fall: Relegation

Ten months after that episode of *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* aired, I went to my first Shrewsbury Town game at Gay Meadow. Terry Collier's comment was pretty close to the mark, if a little generous: Town were now second from bottom of the Third Division.

But that wasn't my first experience of a real live actual football match; that had come at Selhurst Park in September 1971. I'd gone with my friend Peter and his dad for an eighth birthday treat. Crystal Palace were totally outclassed by a Manchester United team who were on fire that day, with Bobby Charlton (later to play

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for Shrewsbury – really, do please read on) pulling the strings in midfield, Denis Law poaching two goals and Brian Kidd netting another. I remember George Best rounding the keeper and tapping into an empty net. I remember feeling gutted when the goal was disallowed. I still feel gutted about that moment. I have no idea who scored for Palace, and quite frankly don't really care. It was an awesome display from the Red Devils. To this day, I still can't quite believe how I didn't become an instant Manchester United fan. The highlights were on *Match of the Day* that night, but my parents said it was too late for me to stay up and watch. Fifty years on, I have just about forgiven them.

And as for Housman's evocative musings, although he wasn't referring to what was going on at Gay Meadow (the poem was published 14 years before the ground saw its first official match in 1910), for a stadium situated on the banks of the Severn, the image does fit rather nicely. But the poet wasn't a Shropshire lad, and nor am I (mind you, I am partial to the locally brewed ale named after that poem). My dad, however, can claim that accolade, having been born not half a mile from Gay Meadow and then subsequently living nearby on London Road. He occasionally mentions that his first game had been against Gainsborough Trinity in the Midland League, when he sat in the stand with his mates, excited by the

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small but noisy crowd and admiring the skills of players such as Jackie Butler. Other opponents that season were Frickley Colliery and Worksop Town. He also attended matches in the Third Division North and South and was privileged to witness some of the ‘golden age’ of Arthur Rowley, Town’s prolific goalscoring legend and later manager. Dad remembers the approaches to the ground, along the English Bridge, from Coleham or Abbey Foregate, gradually filling, mostly with men in cloth caps or trilbies, walking quietly but purposefully towards the shabby, unassuming cul-de-sac (‘The Narrows’) that led behind the Wakeman School to the Meadow. It sounds like a scene from a Lowry painting – blimey, talk about a different era! In 1962 my dad’s studies and then a career in education took him away from the area but after he got a job back in South Shropshire in 1973, he was eager to renew his acquaintance with Gay Meadow and share it with his sons.

My old man didn’t exactly say “Follow the Town and don’t dilly dally on the way” but he was certainly steering us in the right direction, hoping that we wouldn’t fanny around too much over the important decision on who to support.

Thankfully I hadn’t become a rabid Manchester United fan but I had plumped for another United – Leeds, partly as I copied my mate Ian in supporting

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them and mostly because they were pretty damn good. I hadn't shown much passion for following the local team, Reading, where we lived at that time, but I had enjoyed my four visits to Elm Park. I can even recall the smell of the Huntley and Palmers factory as we travelled to the ground. I did have a fondness for the blue-and-white-hooped strip but didn't really develop a strong taste for the Biscuitmen. I was happy sticking with fig rolls or Garibaldi.

So when Dad took me and my brother Steven to watch Shrewsbury v Chesterfield in early December 1973, I'd like to think I was an eager, open-minded ten-year-old hoping that Town would provide the thrilling experiences involved in supporting your local team, and that this could potentially blossom into a challenging, yet ultimately rewarding long-term relationship. Looking back, it may not have been the most auspicious time to attempt to create this bond. Up to this point the Shrews had won twice in 18 games and were second from bottom in the Third Division table. The omens weren't heeded though, and the keen young fans witnessed a continuation of the woeful form. It was a dreadful performance resulting in a 1-0 loss before a paltry crowd of 1,397.

Even at such a tender age I was learning that part of the deal when you signed up to support a lower-level team

usually involved a disproportionate share of miserable moments like this. And, of course, more bleak times lay ahead so perhaps it was good to be exposed brutally to such disappointments early on in order to become acclimatised, to keep expectations in check. But maybe if I stuck with this local team-supporting project, you never know, it might just yield some exhilarating high points too. Unfortunately for manager Maurice Evans, further opportunities to experience the ebbs and flows of Shrewsbury Town Football Club were not possible – he got the chop after the game.

Despite the desperate outlook at this point in the season, there were some shoots of hope, mainly in the form of one man: Alan Durban. Acquiring this established midfielder from Derby County in September had been quite a coup for the club as the Welshman certainly had pedigree, winning a First Division championship medal under Brian Clough and representing Wales 27 times. For a young Town fan, the impact of this player's arrival was nothing short of amazing – he had appeared in sticker albums and scored goals on *Match of the Day!* While at Shrewsbury, Durban's colour photo from *Shoot!* featured prominently on the inside cover of my silver jubilee scrapbook along with a brief handwritten profile. On the opposite page there were smaller, black and white photos of other Town players obtained from

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the *Shropshire Star* with briefer profiles, which seemed to reflect the football fame hierarchy.

Durban took over as caretaker manager and the team's form improved but I wasn't at the next home game on Boxing Day when Town beat Watford 3-2 in front of 3,875. However, later that week we were back for Cambridge with my mum coming along too. We savoured my first win with goals from the two Alans, Tarbuck and Durban. The former was a winger who had scored a respectable number of goals for Crewe, Chester and Preston and chalked up a few more for Salop. Playing at number five against Cambridge that day was Graham Turner who, later in the decade, would contribute significantly to an upturn in the club's fortunes.

I was back for Halifax in January 1974, and a 2-0 defeat. Not much entertainment for the 2,500 or so fans at that one. Undeterred, we turned up to see Port Vale at home two weeks later. On that occasion, a grubby, adolescent Vale yob, took an immediate dislike to me and the shiny new silk Town scarf I was wearing and proceeded to pin me up against some railings just outside the ground. Luckily, my friend's dad, our local vicar, was on hand to grab the spotty lout by the scruff of his collar and told him, using distinctly non-religious terminology, to buzz off. I'd been assaulted but had escaped unscathed.

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The match was terrible, and Shrewsbury were beaten 1-0. The crowd was 2,771. I was well smitten.

The less than engaging performances on the pitch and encounter with the Staffordshire oik hadn't put me off but I only returned to Gay Meadow once more that season and by then Durban had been confirmed as manager. That game against Brighton was certainly eventful: the away team's goalkeeper Peter Grummitt was carried off injured and they also had a player sent off. Town's black-bearded, piratical-looking, swashbuckling left-back, Laurie Calloway, blasted in a cracking goal, the team's first in five league games. It was a huge relief when the final whistle blew to seal the first win in 11, going back to that victory over Cambridge just after Christmas. The home supporters cheered loudly as the exhausted players (well, those who were still on the pitch) trooped off down the tunnel. Rather embarrassingly, the players then had to troop back up the tunnel and out on to the pitch again when the referee, K.W. Baker from Rugby, realised he'd blown too early. Thankfully, the score remained the same and two important points were gained. I wondered what Brighton's manager, Brian Clough, made of all the kerfuffle. A few months later, Old Big 'Ead would be back at the top end of the Football League with Leeds United, but his stay in Yorkshire would be brief.

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Ultimately for Town, though, losses to Southport, Halifax and Oldham in subsequent matches left the club entrenched in the bottom four, unable to claw themselves out of the mire. Annoyingly, Port Vale finished one place above the drop-zone. My first experiences supporting Shrewsbury had ended in relegation to the Fourth Division. The last time the club had played at this level was 1959. Great timing. Would I be back for more next season? You betcha.

1974/75

The Rise: Promotion

The two attacking players who Durban had signed from Stourbridge in the close-season, Phil 'Chic' Bates (more of whom later) and Ray Haywood, didn't take long to make an impact, both netting their first goals in the second game. They went on to grab a hatful over the season, making their mark during that successful campaign. In fact, the duo were up there with my favourite double acts of the time, better than Laurel and Hardy and Abbott and Costello (whose films were shown frequently on telly back then) and almost on a par with Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett. Starsky and Hutch would soon blow all these contenders out of the water when they hit British TV screens in 1976.

I got off to a slow start in the 1974/75 season, unlike the team, who had shot to the top of the table

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after a seven-game unbeaten run. The Hartlepool match in early October was the first I attended, and it ended in a 1-0 defeat. Great. Most of the other home fixtures I went to that season were triumphs though – Brentford (1-0), Barnsley (3-1), Southport (1-0), Newport (1-0), the thumping of Northampton (6-0 – the biggest win I had witnessed until Gillingham came to the New Meadow in 2008 and lost by seven, equalling Town's record league victory) and Rotherham (3-1). The only other home loss I saw was the top-of-the-table clash with Mansfield (who went on to become champions) before 8,913, the highest attendance I'd been part of at Gay Meadow up to that point. Against Walsall in 1961, 18,917 had jammed into the stadium, setting a record for the ground. That was before my time, but I do have the programme, obviously.

In 1975 the team clinched promotion in second position, but the most unforgettable game that season was the bonkers 7-4 defeat of Doncaster Rovers. 'What a match' was the caption in my silver jubilee scrapbook along with Bob Davies's match report from the *Shropshire Star* on 3 February 1975, with its headline 'Haywood leads Gay Meadow goal riot'. It was only 2-0 at half-time, then Town went 4-1 up before Rovers brought it back to 5-4, but two late goals completed what was indeed, a goal riot. It was also a notable home debut for

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Alex McGregor, who nabbed two. The Scottish winger's tenure at Shrewsbury may have been over in a flash but is remembered for some flamboyant flourishes.

My early years at the Meadow had been spent in the Enclosure where my dad used to take me and my brother. We'd take up positions behind the wall at the front of this section, the players' tunnel nearby and facing the Riverside terraces across the pitch, with the trees that lined the Severn poking up above the stand. Our central location offered perfect views of the playing area. At this time, away to the right behind the goal were the rowdiest home supporters – the singing, chanting, shouting contingent, the ones with thin silk scarves tied around necks or wrists: aka the Station End aggro. Here this smallish, loudish, laddish cohort would cordially invite visiting fans to come and have a go if they thought they were hard enough or suggest that the same travelling group would be going home in a flipping ambulance. Welcome to Shropshire. This rather ramshackle part of the ground was later designated as the away section.

The Enclosure was home to a character more than capable of generating his own distinctive sound and fury. A man known as 'Anti-tank' was a master at rattling off a stream of invective towards the officials, the opposition and on occasions, a hapless Town player who had just made a wayward pass. It was quite entertaining, but

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you did fear for your eardrums if this chap suddenly pushed forward to launch one of his verbal missiles in your vicinity.

In later years, we migrated to the Riverside, often perching ourselves on a pitchside wall near the corner adjoining the Wakeman End (referred to by some as the Tech End), but far enough away to avoid the unpleasant aroma emanating from the rather basic toilets situated nearby. I can't recall these conveniences having facilities available to dry your hands. Or to wash them, for that matter. Whatever. This was a football ground, not a hospital. More importantly, we did have a fine view of the old blue scoreboard, where a chap climbed a ladder, then manually 'loaded up' the half-time scores in the gaps A-X. From our mid-teens we ventured up to the noisier part of the Riverside terraces (which now housed the former Station End aggro), just below the buffet, where we could sing our allegiance to the team or aim disparaging chants at the away end. A home goal invariably led to a mini surge, causing a temporary displacement from your original position before order was quickly restored. In the closing stages of a game, we'd merge with the general throng of fans heading towards the Wakeman End exit, often congregating behind the goal to will the Town on for the last few minutes and joining in

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with the stirring renditions of 'Come on you Blues' that echoed around the ground.

As well as keeping cuttings from matches I'd attended, the programme was also an essential accoutrement to purchase, scrutinise and caress. The A5-size programme in 1973/74 set you back 5p with the cover depicting two faceless orange (it wasn't amber) and white figures tussling for a high ball. The number five was in a striped top so presumably the other player was meant to be the Town keeper. To the right of the image was the loggerheads badge and motto. This was bordered in blue and white with the club name at the top. Match details were in simple black text between the players' legs. I preferred this design to the subsequent three programme front covers. Next to the line-ups in the centre were prominent adverts for local institutions: Wem Best Bitter and Sidoli's Restaurant. The programme also contained a supplementary publication, *League Football* (formerly *Football League Review*), which I considered an inconvenience as it kept dropping out of the main feature, making me think that two publications for one game was unnecessary. However, I did appreciate the colour pics, which showcased the variety of the league. One edition that season (number 819 for the obsessives – we know you're out there) had Keith Newton of Burnley in action on the cover, City's Franny Lee inside as well

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as Jeff Wealands and Jimmy McGill of Hull guarding a near post. There were West Brom and Everton team groups and a view of Swindon's County Ground. On the back cover was an ad for Park Drive tipped cigarettes with a Kop-like backdrop of fans holding red and white scarves.

For the Fourth Division season of 1974/75, the front cover of the programme had Shrewsbury printed in capitals six times in blue and amber and placed diagonally with Town FC below the lowest one, just above the match details. This design wasn't going to win any awards, but its simple, visual impact does the job. For the following two years, the cover showed the three loggerheads with the latin motto, Floreat Salopia below. In 1975/76 the leopards were given a metallic bronze colouring on dark blue. The next season, the creatures gained an amber hue and the blue became lighter which brightened and improved the cover. Throughout this period, Wem Best Bitter and Sidoli's retained their advertising space in the centre pages. After this season, however, I wouldn't need to worry about the *League Football* supplement dropping out of my main programme, as its publication came to an end. It had ceased to be. I'd miss those lovely colour snaps, mind.