



EL CERAMICO

THE STORY OF THE
POTTERIES
DERBY

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A Tale of One City

TO FULLY understand the true nature of the Potteries derby, you first have to understand the city of Stoke-on-Trent itself. There are many, many aspects about Stoke-on-Trent and the surrounding areas that make it a most unique part of the UK. Most of us Stokies (or whatever some residents would prefer to be referred to as) probably go by for much of our early lives oblivious to these quirks and oddities, and it's only when we either venture beyond the borders of the ST postcode or immerse ourselves with people from outside our fair city that we become more aware of what makes Stoke-on-Trent 'different'.

I learned a lot about the traits of my own Potteries homeland when I first attended Keele University back in 2007. Being a Keele student presents a special position for a Stoke-on-Trent original, as you're able to stay local (Keele is a village on the outskirts of

Newcastle-under-Lyme, immediately neighbouring the city), but you're essentially surrounded by thousands of staff and students from all over the world. Generally, my interactions with Keele folk have been positive towards our city, with plenty of affection for the friendliness and character of the local people, and of course the widespread approval of oatcakes. There is also a lot of fun to be had with our accent, especially the use of the word 'duck' for affection, and the way that we pronounce book, cook and look (real emphasis on the 'oo' sound). But there are certain debates and quandaries that do consistently arise when discussing the area. For instance:

- **'Where even *is* Stoke-on-Trent?'**

OK, we can all find the city on Google Maps or junctions 15 and 16 off the M6, but more specifically, is Stoke-on-Trent in the Midlands? Is it in the north-west? Does Stoke-on-Trent count as 'the north'? We're part of the county of Staffordshire, so technically we are part of the West Midlands. But we're more or less on the upper limit of the Midlands, and historically, some locals would say we're more affiliated with the industrial and cultural heritage of the more northern towns and cities. We're a BBC *Midlands Today* and ITV *Central News* area, but you only have to travel a

few miles up the road and you're into BBC *North West Tonight* and ITV *Granada Reports* territory. So maybe it depends on where you're situated in and around the city, or more typically, how you view yourself as a person.

It could come down to how the city residents vote. Historically it has always been a safe Labour seat, but even that has swung the other way in recent years. I would say that most locals I have spoken to don't really see themselves as Midlanders, even if we technically are. I'm also pretty sure that the rest of the Midlands doesn't really want us anyway. Then again, does the north-west? Perhaps we're just an enclave on the border, like Andorra between France and Spain.

Whether Stoke is in 'the north' depends on where you put the line between north and south. The newly formed Northern Independence Party has us down as some kind of demilitarised zone on the border, officially as a 'bordering area that we [the party] argue must be offered localised referendums on annexation'. So even the self-styled authority on the north doesn't know what we are.

Colloquially, some people put the border as anything north of Watford Gap, but in general, the imaginary line seems to start somewhere between Birmingham and Manchester. Once again, Stoke-on-Trent is in no man's land. These kinds of social,

cultural and political anomalies have helped to make Stoke-on-Trent a very individualistic region. Are we Midlanders? Are we northerners or north-westerners? We're just Stokies. But the segregations don't start and stop at the city limits.

- **'Is Stoke-on-Trent a city?'**

Yes, and it has been since 1910. But not like a normal city, because we're made up of individual towns. Stoke-on-Trent is 'polycentric', with numerous centres, authorities and identities.

- **'OK, so how many towns? Five? Six?'**

There are six towns – Hanley, Burslem, Tunstall, Longton, Fenton and Stoke (aka Stoke-upon-Trent). There is some possible confusion as Arnold Bennett, the Hanley-born author of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, wrote novels that referred to 'The Five Towns', omitting Fenton from his stories (a bit of an insult to a Fentonian such as myself). Despite its immediate proximity to the city, Newcastle-under-Lyme is its own town with its own governance. Having lived there myself, a lot of 'castle residents do not wish to be referred to as part of Stoke-on-Trent.

• **‘That’s a little confusing. Presumably Stoke-upon-Trent is the city centre of Stoke-on-Trent?’**

Well, no. The town of Stoke is the location of the main central government, and the main railway station, although even that’s a little bit out of the town centre too. The principal commercial centre is Hanley. This is where you will find the main bus station and shopping centre.

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That’s just a sample of the kinds of peculiarities Stoke-on-Trent and Stokies face, and we haven’t even got to the football teams yet! Stoke-on-Trent is the smallest city to house two Football League teams. Places with two clubs such as Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester, Sheffield and Nottingham all boast higher populations, while similarly sized areas such as Derby, Southampton, Coventry, Bradford and Hull are all one-team cities. The day-to-day mixing of the two sets of fans is not something that tends to happen to that degree in similar-sized cities. To put it simply: this city shouldn’t really be big enough for the both of us. It’s something that former Stoke City chairman Gunnar Gíslason openly stated in February 2003, and something that will be discussed later in this book.

Sharing a city with your main rival means it’s inevitable that you’ll also share schools, workplaces,

pubs, gyms, supermarkets and basically any public place with them. You're very likely to share a classroom or a staff room with a Port Vale or Stoke City fan in the city, so escaping ridicule after a notable defeat is unlikely to happen. Conversely, a chance to strut around the office like a peacock on a Monday morning after a weekend victory is one to relish when the bloke in the corner cubicle has his club shop tat all over his desk. Non-uniform days and sports days at school meant many kids would don their replica shirts, posturing their way around the all-weather pitch. Perhaps the only thing more annoying than seeing a Vale or Stoke shirt on one of your mates was seeing a Manchester United or Liverpool shirt on them instead.

Living in a relatively small place that has a couple of league teams knocking about also means it can be quite claustrophobic when wrestling for local media attention. BBC Radio Stoke (and local commercial stations such as Signal Radio) will run matchday reporting that gives both teams, fans and managers fair time before and after their respective games, splitting the match coverage across multiple wavelengths. Local newspaper *The Sentinel* (known online as Stoke-on-Trent Live) will give back-page coverage to both teams, normally with the more significant report taking precedence over the story of lesser interest.

If all things are equal, Stoke City receive the bulk of the coverage due to having the larger fanbase. The difference in fanbase sizes can be a detriment to the local media in terms of what could be perceived as fair amounts of exposure. While the kind of balanced coverage that I have just outlined may seem like a fair compromise, there are still fans unhappy about sharing the airwaves with their neighbour, and accusations of unjust treatment from both parties. I've heard Port Vale fans complain about neglect from the local media, and I've heard Stoke City fans begrudge the amount of airtime Port Vale are afforded. I've overheard *The Sentinel* referred to as both 'The SentiVale' and 'The Stokenel' by both fanbases. 'How long do we have to listen to this bloke drone on?' on Radio Stoke's post-match phone-in *Praise and Grumble* could be relevant to either set of supporters, and also the manager interviews. We haven't even considered the reporting that Cheshire neighbours Crewe Alexandra are also granted in the local media outlets. Dario Gradi's breathless interviews seemed to run on forever. I guess the moral of the story for the local media for a city of two teams is that you can please some of the fans all of the time, you can please all of the fans some of the time, but you can't please all of the fans all of the time.

The other important geographical aspect that lends itself to the exceptional nature of the Potteries derby

is the aforementioned six towns marvel. As well as sharing the city with the other team, there are also known territories for both teams. That means that the rivalry has both the 'shared city' aspect, but also the 'our area is better than your area' twist too, more typical of rivalries between teams of opposing towns and cities, such as Newcastle and Sunderland, and Southampton and Portsmouth. The city of Stoke-on-Trent isn't split 50/50 for Stoke and Vale fans. Generally, Burslem and Tunstall in the north of the city are the primary PVFC territories, while Longton, Fenton, Stoke and Hanley are more SCFC-dominated.

That's not to say all of Hanley is SCFC, or that Stoke and Vale fans don't live all over the city. Indeed, Port Vale were historically situated in Hanley, and parts of the city centre residential areas are very much Vale-dominated. But these general strongholds do exist. In both current and historic times, Burslem represents the home of Port Vale; the Mother Town is where Vale Park stands. Tunstall is the next town over to the north, meaning Vale is the closest team by proximity. Surrounding boroughs and villages can also boast a high number of Port Vale supporters, such as Biddulph, Bradwell and Bagnall. Stoke were historically based in the town of the same name, and now reside in the ST4 postcode on the outskirts of Stoke, Fenton and Longton. Surrounding towns such

as Newcastle-under-Lyme, Leek, Stone, Kidsgrove and Blythe Bridge host a mixture of supporters, often weighted towards Stoke City.

One of my oldest friends, Patrick Floyd, grew up a Port Vale fan in Meir, very much a Stoke City bastion. When asked about his experiences as a kid in that area, Pat told me, ‘I started following Vale in 2001. In Meir at 11 and 12, you had to be good at taking the banter as well as giving it, you just had to roll with it. It would have been easy to crumble, especially as everyone would say, “Don’t be a Vale fan.” It’s simpler to not care when you’re an adult, but when you’re a kid, it would have been easy to say, “OK, I’ll just support United, or Liverpool, or Stoke.” I don’t know how we managed to get any young supporters from that time in those areas. There was no infrastructure or foundations to entice the young kids. I became a Vale fan because I was taken to games by my uncle. I had even been to Stoke games before that, but something just didn’t click with me. But when I went to Vale, it clicked.’

Ally Simcock, FSA board member, Port Vale fans’ liaison officer and former chairwoman of the Port Vale Supporters’ Club, echoed the notoriety of being a Valiant in Potters territory, ‘It was difficult for me as a Vale fan because I tended to be the butt of the joke on many occasions and still am living in the south of

the city. However, it spurred me on to really know my stuff. People underestimated me as a female football fan, and I made sure I could hold my own. I was taken to watch Vale first, so my team picked me. Now I'm loyal. As one of only two Vale fans in my year, it was great being able to have the upper hand, but if we lost, it was pure hell.

'The derby was an occasion, not just a match. You had a build-up for a couple of weeks where the other kids at school would be giving you grief. The excitement, the anticipation that anything could happen. This wasn't just about points, it was about pride! Walking to the game, I wasn't allowed to show my colours (living in Stoke, it wasn't recommended). Once in the ground though, my Vale top and scarf would be on show, and I would be singing loudly.'

Tom from the *Ale and the Vale* podcast grew up just on the outskirts of the city, and calls to mind the footprint that Stoke had over the area, 'Growing up in Clayton, at school, it was tough being a Vale fan. I think there was about five of us in a school of 1,000! I was ridiculed for most of it as we were in a lower division. One of the closest places to play football was also Stoke's training ground, so that didn't help!'

Kirsty, co-host of the pod, continues the shared Valiant feelings, 'Stoke fans used to give me stick all the time at school in the '90s. They'd walk around

at primary school with their Stoke scarves in groups, holding them high and trying to get people to join them! But it was good because, as I got a bit older, Vale were genuinely better than Stoke. It was short-lived, but great years.'

Fellow *Ale and the Vale* co-host Dan grew up on the black and white side of the border, with a much more pleasant experience, 'I went to school in Burslem, and the majority of us were Vale fans, so it wasn't too bad at all. There was the odd Stoke fan, but I can't really remember any issues or trouble, as most of us followed Vale.'

The further out of the city you go, such as towards Stafford, Crewe, Macclesfield and Shrewsbury, the more diluted the Stoke-on-Trent representation becomes, mixing in with more proximal professional clubs and yet more support for more successful Premier League teams. It's quite poetic that the city of Stoke-on-Trent represents this grey area between the north and the south nationally, because parts of the city are similarly grey for Stoke and Vale areas. For me, the line pretty much straddles Leek New Road, separating Tunstall, Burslem and northern parts of Hanley from the rest of the city. There are pubs in parts of Sneyd Green, Abbey Hulton and Birches Head that have often run matchday coaches to both Stoke and Vale games, which suggests this is the area of the strongest

mixture. Anywhere else, and you might just find yourself in enemy territory.

* * *

These lessons in local geography are meant to act as a bit of a scene-setter for the real factors that forged the Stoke City–Port Vale conflict – the actual football matches. The strong hatred hasn't always existed; it built over the years, with humble beginnings and a period of 'friendly' co-existence, through several players and managers crossing the divide, and eventual development into the fierce rivalry we know today – or at least, those of us who are affiliated with one of the two clubs know. A 2019 study named the Potteries derby as the 28th-biggest rivalry, below the likes of Doncaster Rovers v Rotherham United, Accrington Stanley v Morecambe, Cheltenham Town v Forest Green Rovers, and Crewe Alexandra v Port Vale. That simply won't do, and that's why I'm here writing this book, and righting this wrong. Yes, I'm a Stoke City fan, but this book isn't going to be all about Stoke's local triumphs. Let's face it, that would be a pretty short book. Besides, there is so much more that could, and should, be written.

It's time to delve into the history of the Potteries derby.