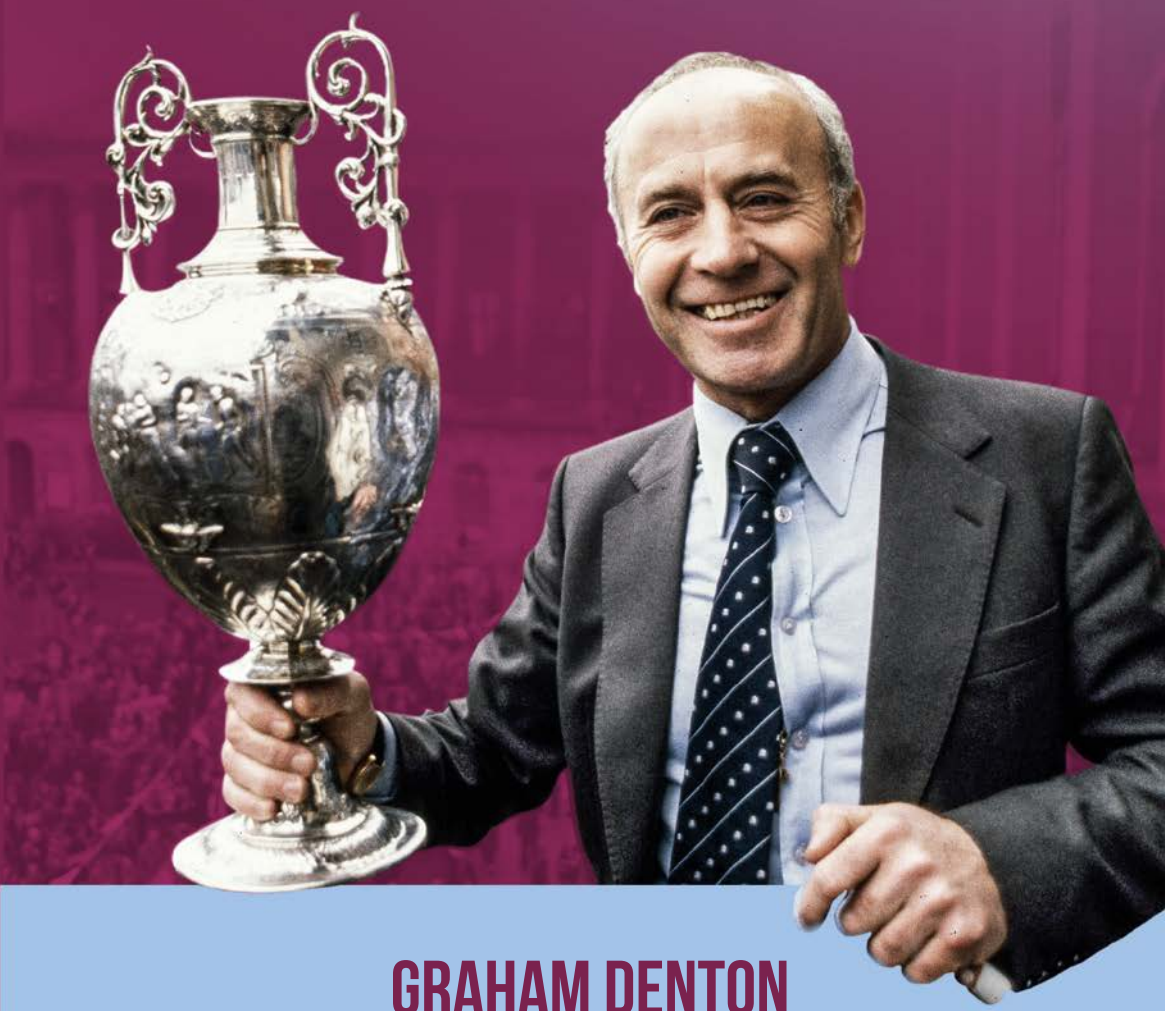
THE ODD MAN OUT

THE FASCINATING STORY OF RON SAUNDERS' REIGN AT ASTON VILLA



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pitch

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Introduction

'I'm the odd man out; the one who, as a youngster, had no burning ambitions about becoming a professional footballer and scoring the winning goal at Wembley… by the time I was 24 or 25, I had become obsessed with the idea of managing a professional club and making my mark on that side of the game.'

Ron Saunders' Aston Villa Scrapbook

SOMEONE on a Facebook page celebrating 'football nostalgia' had uploaded a photo of Ron Saunders. In it, holding aloft the League Cup trophy his Aston Villa side had just won, Saunders played host to a cheery grin that spread from ear to ear. The picture, one poster commented, had clearly 'been Photoshopped'. Why? Because Saunders looked happy! Witty as it may have been, it was a typical observation about the manager. With what ATV commentator Hugh Johns once called 'his gloomy face' and sometimes glowering expression, Saunders was persistently caricatured for his joylessness, the only Scouser in the world without a sense of humour. He 'did come over as a miserable old git', another online contributor added.

In *Best, Pelé and a Half-time Bovril* by Andrew Smart, the author describes Saunders as 'a hard man, taciturn, rarely seen with a smile'. It is another archetypal image. Mention the name and it almost instantly summons a flurry of similar epithets: *Sergeant major Saunders*, *Mister 110 per cent, The Iron Man*. Stock encapsulations are bandied about. He was a 'tough guy', a 'no-nonsense character', a 'strict disciplinarian'. Very

few are meant to be complimentary. Such was the impression of the Birkenhead-born boss as a sourpuss, when the fledgling football fanzine *When Saturday Comes* first set up in 1986, the editorial in its initial issue posited as one of the questions it sought to answer, 'Does anybody in football actually like Ron Saunders?'

With his penchant on matchdays for sporting a long, leather coat (and often matching black gloves), Saunders appeared to be soccer's answer to *The Sweeney*'s Jack Regan or, possessing a passing resemblance to Bob Hoskins in *The Long Good Friday*, seemed more East End gangster than football boss. Cynics were certain he wore it simply to look even more sinister! The general belief was that he had a personality to match. 'Saunders,' wrote Richard Whitehead in *The Soul of Aston Villa in 50 Moments*, with a touch of exaggeration for amusing effect, 'was just about the scariest man in the game, able to turn players, journalists and possibly even members of his own family into quivering wrecks with just one hard stare.'

Whenever lists are compiled of the top British football bosses of all time, cast-iron certainties to be heading the queue are Sir Matt Busby, Bill Shankly, Bob Paisley, Don Revie, Brian Clough, Sir Alf Ramsey, Jock Stein, Bill Nicholson, Herbert Chapman and the most successful club manager of the modern era, Sir Alex Ferguson. You'll seldom, if ever, find Saunders keeping them company. In fact, in a 2009 poll of the '50 greatest managers in British football history' run by the *Daily Mail*, he only registered with the various contributors at a lowly number 43. One place above him was Jim Smith. 'A manager who could make ordinary players do great things,' Smart also writes of him. He remains, however, rarely anything more than a figure in the background.

Of course, there are enough related tales about him to give them some credence, but the abiding public perception of Saunders as a tyrant who mishandled his players, upset his coaching staff and fought with members of the boardroom has undoubtedly overshadowed his achievements. While, in terms of actual silverware, the trophies his teams won were relatively few, Saunders' accomplishments were nonetheless significant and deserving of recognition. Certainly they were far more than many of his managerial peers.

BBC sports broadcaster Pat Murphy wrote in the *Birmingham Post* in 2006, 'If any journalist manages to unpick that lock, the memoirs of Ron Saunders would be fascinating.' Fascinating, yes. But as with any memoir they would only show one side of the coin. Besides, Saunders' famous reticence when it comes to talking about himself means those

memoirs will never see the printer's ink. *The Odd Man Out* – the title taken from a description Saunders gave to himself – isn't an out-and-out biography. It's primarily the story of Saunders' time at Aston Villa and the relationship he and the football club shared during a period in which Saunders enjoyed – if that is the correct word – his greatest success. It's a story worth telling. Ron Saunders may not have been one of its main protagonists but without his presence the portrait of English football in the 1970s and 1980s would undoubtedly be much, much less.

Revolutions

AT three o'clock that Saturday afternoon, had the ten bells tolled in the tower of the town's 'crooked spire' barely half a mile away, not a soul at Saltergate would have heard a sound. The home of Chesterfield FC, one of the oldest grounds in the Football League, was playing host to one of its oldest members, Aston Villa. Most of them coming from the West Midlands, 16,689 – more than double the Derbyshire club's usual gate – were there. Close to kick-off, spilling in their dozens on to the sloping pitch, the Villa fans had forced a call for calm from the team's manager Vic Crowe. Urging them to cease their surges, it took a megaphone to get his message over. Their fervour was understandable. The date was 15 August 1970. It was the opening day of the 1970/71 season. It was also the first time in their 96-year history that Aston Villa were competing in the third tier of English football.

Those 96 years had been punctuated with many triumphal moments. Villa, one of the founding fathers of the Football League, were the most successful club of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, becoming the first to win the championship six times including the 'Double' triumph of 1897. Not since 1910, though, had they registered a league title and the years when they'd enjoyed an unprecedented 'Golden Age' and, in the words of *The Times*' Geoffrey Green, 'the claret and blue shirt was the most respected and feared in the land' were fading fast into obscurity. 'Aston Villa. All that is good in the game is captured in that magical world-famous name: goals, glory in the FA Cup and league, players who have become legends, vast baying crowds in the cauldron of Villa Park,' wrote one scribe. 'The tragedy about the club is that it all happened in the past.'

Once described in the 1934 edition of *The Football Encyclopaedia* as 'the outstanding professional organisation of the world', the Birmingham

club were now English football's fallen giants. Villa, according to Green, had 'slipped down the depths'.

Such a plummet was the culmination of decades of steady decline. After numerous disappointing post-war seasons, an FA Cup win in 1957 for a seventh and record-breaking time – a controversial 2-1 victory secured by two Peter McParland goals in five second-half minutes putting paid to Busby's Babes' prospects of becoming the first team to achieve the 'Double' since Villa themselves managed it 60 years earlier – promised a genuine revival in the Midlanders' fortunes. Instead, it marked the start of a rot that, two seasons later, saw the club condemned to Second Division football for only the second time. Less than nine years on and Villa had become, Peter Morris wrote in *Charles Buchan's Football Monthly*, 'no more than seedy "has-beens" trapped in the wrong half of the Second Division with the unfashionables'.

Cup-winning manager and former Villa favourite Eric Houghton, ex-Sheffield United boss Joe Mercer (despite moulding together a highly gifted, youthful side christened 'Mercer's Minors' that won promotion as well as the inaugural League Cup), and Dick Taylor had all paid the price for failing to halt the deterioration. In 1966/67, 'with the worst side in their long history' according to Morris, Villa lost 24 of their 42 matches, won just three league games after the turn of the year and on 6 May, following a 4-2 home defeat by Everton, were condemned to relegation back to the second tier. By the time Southampton hammered a final day nail in Villa's coffin – 6-2 at The Dell – Taylor had been shown the door.

The day he departed, Taylor issued the board with the warning, 'You must get around and find out more about what's going on at other clubs before it's too late.' Under the chairmanship of Norman Smith, a former school headmaster in his mid-60s, the five-man Villa board (three other members of which were septuagenarians) had entirely failed to keep abreast of their contemporaries. Smith, who now worked for the local council, didn't even own a car.

Rising wages and transfer fees – a consequence of the 1961 abolition of the maximum wage limit and the old 'retain and transfer' system – had necessitated clubs to source new methods of generating income. While their rivals explored original commercial avenues and recognised the need to promote their clubs in ways that would appeal to the existing support and attract entirely new fan bases, Villa had been left out-of-step.

The club's traditional motto was 'Prepared', but the board couldn't have been more ill-equipped. Ensnared by old-fashioned values, Smith and co., well-meaning as they were, ran Aston Villa like league clubs

were run in the 1920s and 30s. It was, said Scottish full-back Charlie Aitken, one of Mercer's bright young things, comparable to 'a corner shop'. Neither a scouting network nor an effective coaching structure had been developed. Villa's best players had been allowed to leave and so inferior were the replacements that Peter Morris wrote, 'Villa Park, long denigrated in Birmingham as the "Hall of Memory", has also become a tomb of unknown warriors.'

In desperate financial straits, with debt spinning out of control, bold action was patently required. Unfortunately, Smith and his cohorts didn't share the same clarity of vision. As Taylor's replacement, former Burnley player Tommy Cummings was brought in. It was another misguided act. A qualified coach with a strong reputation, having led Mansfield Town to promotion from the Fourth Division in 1963, Cummings was hardly the high pedigree manager needed to steer the club upwards. The task was beyond him. Villa ended a turbulent campaign in 16th.

Eighteen games into the following season, with just two wins and 11 points to their name, they sat right at the foot of the table. How, asked Morris, had it come to this? That while the likes of Manchester United and Spurs had 'marched forward to new dimensions of high success', Villa had 'slipped just as steadily downward'. Morris was in little doubt. 'Complacency? Muddle-headed policies? Diminished financial resources? Inability to find good players? All have something to do with it.' The bulk of the blame, though, he apportioned to the ageing directors.

On 9 November 1968, forever subsequently referred to as 'Black Saturday', a 1-0 home defeat to Preston North End (the winner an own goal by Villa centre-half Fred Turnbull) proved to be the tipping point. In the final minutes of the match, between 800 and 1,000 angry fans assembled in the Villa Park paddock, venting their venom towards the directors sitting in the main stand. Chants and banners demanding 'The Board Must Go' were accompanied by boos and slow hand-clapping. Several mounted police advanced to quell a sit-down protest. The demonstration, the *Sunday Mercury* reported, was described by the police's Chief Superintendent Arthur Brannigan as the 'most violent' witnessed at the ground. Later that evening, more than 200 youths stood en masse on the steps outside the *Mercury* offices in Birmingham city centre, echoing their calls for the board to quit, before being dispersed by police on foot and motorcycle. Inevitably, it was Cummings who paid the heaviest price. Two days later, after just 16 months in office, Cummings took the bullet along with his assistant Malcolm Musgrove, with Villa's trainer Arthur Cox put in temporary charge.

The revolutionary air that had been prevalent in Paris earlier in the year had at last reached B6. After voting with their feet, the restless natives were now up in arms. A threat to withdraw their support by a splinter group of fans was issued. Assurances were demanded that the board resign by the start of the next season. Smith kept denying any financial difficulties but, with the announcement that re-capitalisation of the club had been discussed and the directors were 'considering concessions', it was obvious that a crisis existed. Essentially, Aston Villa was now up for grabs and a takeover bid imminent. The board's position was untenable.

As results continued to nosedive and numbers through the turnstiles dried up – on 7 December, 12,747, an all-time Saturday low for Villa Park, watched a goalless draw with Charlton – speculation about potential new owners gathered pace. Various offers of assistance were forthcoming, with rival consortiums expressing an interest in assuming control. Finally, on 16 December, news was released: a proposal by a group, the Birmingham Industrial Trust, led by wealthy London financier Pat Matthews, was accepted. A buy-out of the existing Villa directors' 800 shares at £60 for each £5 share signalled a behind-the-scenes revolution and a whole new regime was swiftly convened, with only Bob MacKay, recruited just a few months earlier, retained from the deposed board.

Harry Kartz, owner of a string of racehorses and Harry Parkes, a Villa full-back from the club's post-war years, whose Birmingham-based sports goods business had made him a wealthy man, were brought in. For chairman, Matthews had but one man in mind: Doug Ellis, a Cheshire-born businessman who'd been so successful in pioneering the package holiday with his Birmingham-based travel company, he was a millionaire by 40. Though a self-confessed Villa fan who claimed he'd first seen them play in April 1948, Ellis's three years spent as a Birmingham City director didn't exactly enamour him to large sections of the Villa support. Gratitude that their beloved club now had in place some possible saviours was, however, the overriding emotion.

'I am not unaware of the formidable task I have before me,' the new chairman declared. One of his first jobs was to fill the empty hotseat. Two days later, he did so with the exuberant figure of Tommy Docherty. The charismatic Scot who'd won his managerial spurs at Chelsea between 1962 and 1967 was renowned for his hard-fighting personality. If anyone was brave enough to take on the challenge of leading Aston Villa, it was Docherty. 'I'd love to stay at Villa Park for the rest of my career,' he stated in his opening gambit, 'but in football who can tell?' Longevity and

Docherty weren't two words that went together. His previous tenancy at QPR had lasted all of 29 days.

He wasted little time in imposing himself. Within a week, Brian Tiler arrived from another of Docherty's former clubs, Rotherham United – in February 1968 Docherty's Rotherham side had dumped Villa from the FA Cup at Villa Park – and was instantly made captain. Under their new manager's charge, Villa won their first five games, the fifth a sweet 2-1 FA Cup victory over Docherty's last employers from Loftus Road. 'To call Tommy Docherty rumbustious is like calling a tornado a gust of wind,' one journalist wrote. Docherty breezed into Villa Park and players and fans alike were swept up by his enthusiasm.

Buoyed by a newborn sense of purpose, the club's latent support resurfaced; 41,250 watched a Boxing Day clash with Cardiff. At January's end, nearly 60,000 at Villa Park witnessed a 2-1 beating of Southampton in an FA Cup fourth-round replay. Bottom of the division with only 15 points from 23 games when Docherty arrived, by the season's finish Villa were in 18th, staving off what had seemed like a nailed-on relegation.

The financial problems were still considerable. In debt to the tune of £182,000, with no money in the bank when Ellis took over, Villa remained on the edge of disaster. Ellis had inherited a club he later described as being 'low in morale and spirit and bereft of ideas'. The ground was dilapidated, glass was broken, wooden doors and windowsills were rotting. There was graffiti everywhere. Aston Villa had become, Graham McColl wrote in *The Hamlyn Illustrated History of Aston Villa, 1874–1998*, 'a down-at-heel aristocrat, forced to struggle for survival in sometimes seedy surroundings'. The situation was, in Ellis's words, 'so bad as to be indescribable'.

A long, hard economy drive had to be undertaken. 'A once proud club,' journalist Ian Johnson put it, 'suffered the humiliation of having to hold out the begging bowl.' They launched a massive appeal for public support. Companies were asked to provide services gratis. Fans were invited to send in money for shares, sold at £5 each, which they would eventually be issued. Ellis and his staff, using the boardroom as an office, were opening an average of 200 letters a day.

To those who couldn't afford a £5 share, Villa, in conjunction with the *Birmingham Mail*, asked for a pound to be donated, if people could. No fewer than 2,000 responded and were each presented with a parchment scroll in recognition of their support. By April 1969 the share issue, the club's first since 1896, was subscribed to the tune of £205,835. In Villa's hour of need, help seemed to come from every quarter. 'We got barrels

of beer off Ansells and buns from a cake shop and asked the tradesmen, plumbers, painters, decorators to bring all their gear,' recalled Ellis.

A commercial manager, Eric Woodward, was persuaded to return from the States to organise a new set-up. Fundraising became a fine art. Off the pitch, lights were switched off to save money. Staff wore overcoats just to keep warm. The club, Ellis said, 'wouldn't spend a penny if a half-penny would do.' The price of season tickets rose by 60 per cent. It all saw much-needed revenue pour in.

In the summer of 1969, with money raised from the shares, Docherty entered the transfer market, wheeling and dealing with typical gusto. Southend's Ian 'Chico' Hamilton – first acquainted with Docherty at Stamford Bridge – was happy to reunite with his former boss. Midfielder Pat McMahon, Jock Stein's first post-Lisbon signing, joined on a free from Celtic. Most significantly, in July, Docherty pulled off the sensational double signing of brothers Bruce and Neil Rioch from Luton Town for a combined total of £110,000. The acquisition of Bruce Rioch, 21 and a rising star coveted by many, was viewed as a major coup. His £100,000 fee – inconceivable only months previously – was the first such sum to be paid by a Second Division club. 'The only way we got him,' Ellis later said, 'was to convince his mother, who was a Tommy Docherty fan.' The common consensus was that Villa, now the most expensively constructed side in the division, would be on the up and up.

All three made their debuts in the opening league game – against Ron Saunders' Norwich City side. But when the Canaries came away from Villa Park 1-0 victors, all the pre-season optimism seemed to vanish in that one afternoon. Instead of a road upwards, the signposts clearly pointed towards a season of struggle. Villa took ten games to register a win, 3-2 at home to Hull City. The patient was still ailing and even a massive blood transfusion – £275,000 was spent on new players – looked to have had little effect. Harry Kartz would later say, 'Tommy Docherty brought the place back to life. He had personality.' The media-savvy manager 'lifted morale and spirit and changed the outlook overnight,' Ellis reflected, 'because he had such a magnetic appeal in the eyes of the public.' But the disease infecting the club had gnawed at its very bones and was still spreading.

There was to be no miracle cure. By mid-November 1969, Docherty had tried 27 different players in the first team. Villa were 21st in the table and in dire trouble. Arguments broke out over contracts and discipline. Docherty made enemies in both the boardroom and the dressing room, with senior players feeling he treated them unfairly. They were no longer performing for him. All that initial sunlight had now been clouded. By

the turn of the year, Villa had gained only three more victories. Hoping for a new morning, the supporters had suffered another false dawn.

Nonetheless, Docherty remained a firm favourite. Dissent and disgruntlement was aimed primarily at Doug Ellis. The loud cries for him to leave, he ignored. In the week before Christmas, after Watford won 2-0 at Villa Park, the Villa chairman convened a marathon board meeting. The manager was given the time-honoured vote of confidence but the writing was on the wall in bold lettering. Docherty, in one writer's words, had been 'feted like a Roman Emperor by fans grateful for the way he had restored Villa's self-respect'. Now the assassins were plotting behind his back.

When, shortly after an FA Cup third-round replay exit to Charlton, Villa suffered a humiliating 5-3 defeat at home to Portsmouth – another once-great club struggling near the bottom – Docherty's doom was sealed. Villa's first league game of the decade had left them nestled at the very foot of the division. During the match the Holte End had chorused, 'Walsall, Walsall, here we come.' Whether it was gallows humour or a cry of resignation didn't really matter: either way, no one was laughing. Two days later, Ellis announced, with regret, that Docherty's stormy, controversial 13-month tenure in B6 was over. He'd been in charge for just 397 days. According to *Rothman's*, Docherty was number 712 on the list of managers who'd lost their jobs since the war. Football management sure was a precarious profession.

Ellis, Docherty would later say, 'has claret and blue blood in his veins'. It had turned icy cold. Recalling how Ellis had initially said he was right behind his manager, Docherty quipped, 'I told him I'd sooner have him in front of me, where I could see him.' The board, Docherty felt, acted too hastily in dismissing him. Lifting the club from the pit of despair into which it had fallen had still been possible. The timing of Docherty's sacking was thought ill-judged by others, too. With just 16 games to salvage Villa's pride if not their Second Division status, the new incumbent in the hotseat had a thankless task.

The man handed it was former Villa wing-half and captain Vic Crowe. Welsh-born but raised in the Birmingham suburb of Handsworth from the age of two, Crowe had established himself in the Villa team when Danny Blanchflower vacated the right-half berth in 1954. He missed the 1957 FA Cup Final due to injury but captained the side to the Second Division title in 1960 and League Cup Final success in 1961. The chalk to Docherty's cheese, the quiet, thoughtful Crowe had been coaching for three years with Atlanta Chiefs in the States when Villa's call came and together with newly

appointed first team trainer Ron Wylie (Eric Houghton's last signing as Villa manager), they instilled a fresh competitive mentality into the ranks.

The February signing of experienced centre-forward Andy Lochhead from Leicester would prove a key acquisition. But it was all too little too late. In March, after just one win in Crowe's first 11 games, Villa were still marooned at the bottom and, despite beating both Middlesbrough and Sheffield United in their final two fixtures, the battle had already been lost.

Docherty, with typical frankness, opined that, although it was a 'tragedy' that his former club were relegated, 'I will back them to bounce back. *Then* watch them go!' Any betting man would surely have done likewise. Crowe, however, was under no illusions. 'This is going to be a tough, demanding season,' he said on the eve of the historic campaign, 'and we will need all-out professionalism to get through in the manner we are hoping for.'

After only two minutes of that opening day game at Saltergate, Pat McMahon fired Villa into the lead. Two Bruce Rioch thunderbolts ensured a 3-2 victory. Further journeys to unfamiliar destinations – Wrexham, Reading and Fulham – had the Villa faithful referencing their British atlases but rewarded with witnessing vital wins. Despite the blow of losing Rioch at the end of August to an injury that later necessitated cartilage operations on both knees, the early signs were positive. Villa kept pace with the frontrunners and, with attendances at Villa Park averaging around 28,000, their supporters had every reason to suppose that their travels to strange outposts would soon be at an end.

Towards the end of January 1971 Villa were top of the table. They also had a League Cup Final to look forward to. In Christmas week, before more than 62,000 fans packed tight into Villa Park, the Third Division underdogs claimed a memorable semi-final second-leg victory over First Division Manchester United. A goal down on the night to a Brian Kidd strike and trailing 2-1 on aggregate, Villa bagged a place at Wembley with two headed goals from McMahon and Lochhead, delivering a knockout blow to a United side fielding Best, Charlton, Law et al. For United boss Wilf McGuinness, it was one punch too many. Less than a week later, McGuinness was sacked and Sir Matt Busby was back in charge at Old Trafford.

At Villa Park, there was, wrote Ian Johnson in the *Sports Argus*, 'an air of quiet authority generated by Vic Crowe'. In tandem with the tactically astute Wylie, within the space of less than 12 months they'd engineered an amazing transformation.

In the final, making a mockery of the gap between themselves and a Spurs side boasting internationals such as Jennings, Mullery, Gilzean, Chivers and Peters and riding high in the First Division, Villa produced so dominant a performance they might well have pulled off a shock win. Had fortune been kinder – Lochhead's too-soft shot towards an empty net was swept away by the back-pedalling Steve Perryman and Ian Hamilton saw a long-range effort clip the Tottenham crossbar – they would have.

While Villa bemoaned their luck, Spurs rode theirs and two late strikes in the 78th and 82nd minutes by England striker Chivers gave them their expected if undeserved victory. With what *The People*'s Maurice Smith termed a 'bitter, tantalising failure' in the famous old stadium, Crowe's side endeared itself completely to the hearts of the football public. More importantly, it reminded them that a dormant giant was, if not exactly flexing any muscles, at least stretching its limbs once more.

Alas, it soon started nodding again. The cup run, while providing a huge financial boost to the club – helping towards a record profit of £84,452 – brought a distraction to the players; amid the glamour and the glory they became blinkered to the more earthy demands of Third Division life. No longer able to raise their game against opponents all too keen to lift theirs, there were too many Davids for Goliath to conquer.

In the lead-up to the final Villa had headed the table by two points. The week before, they lost 3-1 at Bury to lie second. In the six matches following their Wembley appearance, though, only five points were mustered and just 15 from the final 18 games. Villa's promotion push faltered and ultimately fell away. Fourth spot, seven points off the top two of Preston ('The Invincibles' of the Football League's early days) and Fulham was all they had to settle for by the season's end.

Yet the shoots of recovery were showing. It wasn't long before they flowered in the most spectacular fashion. Crowe bought well. After Geoff Vowden, added in the spring from Birmingham, Bristol Rovers' Ray Graydon arrived, Crowe so determined to bag the fast, incisive winger he was willing to let his captain Brian Godfrey go in the opposite direction. When, in November, £35,000 for West Brom keeper Jimmy Cumbes further strengthened Crowe's hand, the spine of a title-winning team was in place. 'The strange, half-believable life they were leading in the Third Division underworld,' as Peter Morris put it, 'was not fated to last long.' With Rioch the midfield's cultured and competitive heart and the tall, balding Lochhead piloting the frontline, an almost unstoppable Villa dictated the pace throughout the 1971/72 campaign, romping away as runaway champions with a record 70 points.

An astonishing 32 league victories were racked up. Villa failed to score in only five of their 46 league fixtures. When, despite the presence of BBC's *Match of the Day* cameras, 48,110 watched their vital top-of-the-table encounter with Bournemouth (a game Villa won 2-1), it set a new Third Division attendance high. More than a million people in all watched Villa's home matches, with the average home gate 31,952. Football correspondent Geoffrey Green celebrated the unwavering support in an article entitled 'Over the Claret and Blue Rainbow'. 'The old cry of the Villa is being heard again ringing round Villa Park,' he wrote, and added, 'What has been abundantly revealed it that the soil of Birmingham is ripe for sowing and that the long tradition of loyalty to Aston Villa still lives on.'

At the following home game, on 12 February 1972, Villa banked record receipts of over £35,000 when Pelé's Santos appeared in an 'International Friendly', with fans among the 54,437 crowd scaling floodlight pylons or clambering on to the scoreboards to see a Pat McMahon header and Graydon's penalty, after Rioch had been upended, give the home side a morale-boosting 2-1 win.

Forty-eight hours later those profits went towards the £70,000 fee laid out for 24-year-old Ian Ross, a useful all-rounder who'd had many a run-out with Liverpool. It said much for Villa's renaissance that the Glasgow-born Ross, witness to the Santos game and suitably enthused by the club's ambition and fanaticism of its followers, wasn't fazed by dropping down two divisions to join the Midlanders. Ross, ignoring all Bill Shankly's last-minute attempts to persuade the player to remain at Anfield, was convinced that Villa would soon be back among the elite. Shankly, too, was confident of better things to come. 'Son, in ten years' time, there will be a super league,' the Liverpool boss told the departing Ross, 'and you can be sure Aston Villa will be in it.'

On transfer deadline day in March, Crowe also brought in Luton Town centre-half Chris Nicholl, with the initial £75,000 rising to £90,000 if Villa secured promotion. They did. Nicholl, who'd already helped the two Towns, Halifax and Luton, in his first season at each club to achieve promotion, now completed a notable hat-trick. On Saturday 29 April, needing only a point from the home game with Torquay to confirm the title, Villa swept aside the Devon club 5-1 and the boom of 'champions, champions' echoed around all four sides of Villa Park.

The highlight of an emphatic victory was a scintillating debut by youngster Brian Little who'd first appeared for the senior side in October 1971, coming on as a substitute against Blackburn Rovers. Handed his

full debut against Torquay, the sharp, elf-like striker responded by netting once and setting up two. Four days earlier the 18-year-old with the nickname 'Superboy' had stolen the show, scoring twice at Anfield as Villa became the first Third Division club to win the FA Youth Cup, with a 5-2 aggregate triumph over Liverpool. The feeling was that Villa had unearthed someone genuinely special.

Running parallel to the transfer activity, a policy of homegrown youth (set in place by Tommy Docherty and Peter Doherty three years previously) as part of the overall blueprint, was producing a wealth of exciting talents. Nurtured under the guidance of Frank Upton, Little, John Gidman, Bobby McDonald and Jimmy Brown were all blossoming within the system. 'To actually go into the Third Division was to us almost the end of the world,' Doug Ellis would say, 'but we knew it would only be a matter of time before the young players would come through.'

On 5 May, Villa's adventure in the third tier ended against the same club with which it began, Ian Ross's first goal in claret and blue putting the final stamp on the triumphant season in a 1-0 home win over Chesterfield. Even the news that arch-rivals Birmingham City had satisfied a seven-year itch to return to the top flight, winning promotion with a late-season push – they'd also reached the FA Cup semi-final before losing to eventual winners Leeds – couldn't deflate Villa's spirits. 'After a period of crisis when ageing hands were prised from the tiller and a younger generation took over,' wrote Geoffrey Green, Villa, under the driving chairmanship of Ellis and the managership of Vic Crowe – 'realists whose eyes were not grown misty by heroic deeds of the past' – were 'on the rise again.'

In *The Official Football League Yearbook 1972/73*, Crowe, deservedly named the Third Division Manager of the Year, was hailed by Peter Fay as the man who had 'restored that age-old pride' to an ailing club. 'The flame-haired Welshman with the Black Country accent,' Fay declared, 'is the new messiah of Villa Park.' Irrespective of how miraculous Crowe's feats were, 'the staid old club with the red brick image, the massive ground and the unique support' were now seen as being very much 'back in business'.

Having 'successfully rid the club of the cobwebs of failure', Crowe was fully expected to lead the club ever upwards. His recruitment continued. In the close season, Alun Evans, like Ross before him, left Liverpool, the ex-Wolves striker who'd become the country's first £100,000 teenager when joining the Merseysiders from Molineux in September 1968, returning to the Midlands for £72,000.

Evans made his debut (substituting Lochhead) as Villa pitted their wits against top-flight opposition on 5 August in the Charity Shield. With both champions Derby County and FA Cup holders Leeds United declining to take part, the curtain-raiser to the new season was contested at Villa Park between Crowe's side and Manchester City, who'd finished fourth in the First Division. In a 1-0 defeat to a Francis Lee penalty, Villa showed they weren't that far away from being ready to compete at the highest level. 'Our aim,' Crowe announced, 'is to regain our First Division status for 1974 — the club's centenary year.'

One defeat in their first ten games was an impressive start. But, plagued by infuriating inconsistency, Villa failed to make good on their early promise. Players lost form. The new attacking spearhead, Evans and Lochhead, lacked any edge. Even Mr Reliability, Rioch, the club captain and fans' favourite, looked out of sorts and found himself the victim of terrace dissatisfaction. He wasn't the only one singled out. A 3-0 defeat at home to league leaders Burnley saw a rousing chorus of 'Crowe Must Go' ring out from a large portion of the crowd. At the season's conclusion Villa were in third spot, but it was highly misleading; champions Burnley and second-placed QPR were, in truth, streets ahead in both the table and in talent. Twelve months later, the Football League introduced the three-up and three-down regulation. It was perhaps a blessing that Villa had missed out – they clearly weren't yet equipped for top-flight football.

Crowe reiterated his hope that Villa could celebrate its 100th birthday in grand style. 'The club and our thousands of faithful supporters,' he said, 'certainly couldn't wish for a better present.' Aware that the weight of its tradition was a burden the club was still bearing, Crowe added, 'Tradition is all right if it is kept in its proper place. But it mustn't dominate the progress of the club or hinder it. And I think we have overcome the problem.'

During the summer, he spent again. Lochhead, sold to Oldham, was replaced by Northern Irish centre-forward Sammy Morgan. The much-travelled Welshman Trevor Hockey bolstered the midfield. Villa entered 1973/74 as one of the firm favourites to go up. They never really justified the tag. Although unbeaten in their first seven league games, just two of them were victories and, while form picked up, it was only briefly; from early November Villa embarked on a disastrous run, winning just one of 15 league games, including a club record 12 without victory. By the start of the following March, they were fifth-bottom.

A notable 2-0 success over Arsenal in an FA Cup fourth-round replay – the Gunners, finalists in the previous two seasons, succumbing to goals

by Evans and Morgan before 47,821 at Villa Park after a 1-1 draw at Highbury – gave notice of what Crowe's side were capable of. But against Second Division opposition they were simply unable to replicate it. When First Division high-flyers Burnley knocked out Villa in the cup's next round, it marked the final appearance for Bruce Rioch.

Citing his desire for top-flight football and his belief that Villa wouldn't be playing it 'for a couple of years at the earliest', Rioch headed to Derby County for £200,000. 'I would love to keep my best players and have unlimited funds,' Crowe said, but with a reported transfer budget of only £65,000, Derby's offer was just too good to refuse. The young, ambitious Rioch had seen a much brighter future on the horizon and must have felt totally validated the following season when, as an ever-present in Dave Mackay's side, he helped the Rams become league champions for the second time in four years.

Ironically, with the loss of arguably their most influential player, Villa's best run – one defeat in nine matches – followed soon after. That defeat, 3-1 at home to West Brom on 2 March, 100 years to the month since Villa's first-ever fixture, was an afternoon on which hooliganism – so common a feature of 1970s football – stamped its foot over the headlines again as fans from both sides rushed each other, such ugliness emblematic of the mood now pervading Villa Park.

Four more defeats in their last six fixtures, including two at home, meant a 14th-place finish and the end of the road for Crowe. A week after the final game – a 1-1 draw at Orient – Crowe and his assistant, Wylie, were handed their P45s and scanning the Situations Vacant ads. According to Peter Morris in *Aston Villa: The First 100 Years*, 'Out on the park, Villa teams had been disturbingly short of flair. There was no recognisable style to their play, no panache, no hint of something just around the corner. Despite certain individual skills and the promise of youth, the team looked mediocre. And mediocrity is just what Villa cannot afford — not when there is so much potential at stake.'

Like Docherty before him, Crowe believed he could have turned things around. Such was his self-conviction, the day before his dismissal Crowe had declined an offer to take over the Welsh national team. But Crowe wasn't the right man for Ellis. Geoffrey Green had written, 'Aston Villa's real place of course is among the elite. Tradition demands it.' More to the point, the board demanded it, too. The club appeared to have headed into a cul-de-sac. Ellis, who, according to Chris Nicholl, 'wanted it all now', wasn't prepared to let them stand still. Although the *Evening Mail* front-page headline read, 'Villa Sensation: Crowe Sacked', it was hardly unexpected.

It had become, Peter Morris stated, 'depressingly apparent that the Crowe–Wylie tandem had achieved as much as it was ever going to'. In Crowe's opinion, though, there was far more than poor performances behind his sacking. Ellis's dislike of the manager's 'attitude' was, Crowe felt, a chief contributing factor. There was also a sense that the fall-out from further boardroom battles in 1972 – when Ellis had regained his chair just 43 days after losing it to Jim Hartley – was still affecting the club. The Villa directors, to Crowe's mind, remained divided as to the direction the club was going.

While Docherty was the figurehead of the revolution, Crowe had carried the flag and made much greater advances. Yet, as in 1968, Villa were now a struggling side in the lower reaches of the Second Division watched by ever-dwindling crowds and, like then, were searching for a new manager. 'Before Villa can make any real progress,' Morris wrote, 'they must get back to the First Division.' The man charged with the responsibility of guiding them there had a gargantuan task ahead of him.