

PAUL HODGSON



100 OF THE **BEST**

**DARLINGTON'S
GREATEST
GAMES**



**FOREWORD BY
DAVID HODGSON**

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The 1970s

DARLINGTON V SOUTHPORT – 1972/73

The first Darlington game I ever saw was at a fog-shrouded Feethams on 6 January 1973 when I was only seven years old. Our visitors that day were Southport, who at the time were promotion contenders, while the Quakers were firmly rooted to the bottom of the Fourth Division.

Our home fixture against Workington on Boxing Day had already been postponed because a mixture of injuries and a flu epidemic had reduced Darlington to just eight fit players, and because of the foggy conditions the Southport game was only given the go-ahead by the referee an hour before kick-off.

Allan Jones, who had been sent on a three-week 'holiday' by the chairman, George Tait, had officially parted company with the football club on 21 December. He became the fourth Darlington manager to lose his job in only 15 months. His replacement was Ralph Brand.

The previous game, on 23 December 1972, had been away to Bradford City where we were hammered 7-0. Apparently, after the game at Valley Parade the newly installed Brand assured the press that the result had been a 'one-off' and that the team would never be beaten like that again.

Clearly he didn't believe, and neither did I, that lightning would strike twice.

Brand had an impressive pedigree as a player and knew all about scoring goals. Born in Edinburgh, he had played for Rangers, notching an impressive 206 goals in 317 games for the Ibrox club. He even ranks third among their postwar strikers, just behind Ally McCoist and Derek Johnstone.

However, the omens certainly didn't look good for the visit of Southport. On the day of the match, with only an hour to go before kick-off, Phil Owers, a 17-year-old rookie goalkeeper, was called upon to make his first-team debut in place of regular stopper Ernie Adams, who couldn't play due to injury.

The match was certainly a one-sided affair. By half-time the Quakers were 4-0 down and they went on to lose 7-0, which is their heaviest ever home league defeat to date. To cap it all, I'd pestered my mother for weeks on end to take me to a Darlington game. My abiding memory was, 'What have I come down here for in the middle of winter in the freezing cold?' Or words to that effect.

Throughout the game, as the avalanche of goals came thick and fast, much to the anger of some of the crowd, Brand remained in his seat in the directors' box instead of going down to the touchline to encourage his players. His semi-detached attitude to management was exemplified by the fact that he actually lived in Edinburgh where he was in business and only commuted to Darlington each Wednesday, when he remained until the following Saturday evening.

At the final whistle, the fans gave Phil a standing ovation. After all, he wasn't to blame for the rout. Had it not been for his bravery and agility, we might have eclipsed our heaviest ever league defeat when we lost 10-0 away to Doncaster on 25 January 1964.

As a matter of interest, Phil went on to carve out a lengthy career for himself and only retired in February 1999, still playing non-league football into his 50s, so that first appearance can't have been too traumatic!

Thinking about it, I bet that hasn't happened very often in professional football – two consecutive 7-0 defeats with two different goalkeepers. Those two results must have struck a chord with David Frost, who in February of that year highlighted our plight by making a documentary about the club for ITV.

At the end of that season, which saw Southport crowned as champions of the old Fourth Division, Brand's men finished bottom and had to apply yet again for re-election at the Football League Annual General Meeting

in June 1973. Thankfully, we managed to retain our status with a majority of 12 votes over our nearest rivals, Yeovil Town. Darlington polled only 26 votes (the lowest successful total since the war) and were perhaps fortunate that the non-league clubs that they were up against were competing with each other and had split the vote (Yeovil polled 14 votes, Kettering 12 and Wigan Athletic ten). Had the non-league applicants been better organised and hadn't put forward more than one candidate, Darlington's application may not have been successful.

Trust me to start supporting the club during our worst ever season in the Football League. Out of 46 league games, Darlington won only seven, which was one fewer than our previous worst in 1936/37. So, after such a dismal introduction to life as a Darlo fan, why did I go back for more? Over the years I have often thought about that. Could it have been the smell of Bovril or pork pies, wafting towards me from the refreshment kiosk, which indelibly imprinted themselves on my consciousness? Perhaps I was eagerly awaiting the sound of an air horn to bring the team and the crowd to life. Maybe, though, it was the devoted fans standing on the North Terrace who captivated me, drumming out that incessant 11-beat pattern, like a Morse Code message, on the resonant fabric of the so-called Tin Shed – dah, dah / dah, dah, dah / dah, dah, dah, dah / Darlo.

Surely it can't have been the quality of the football on offer at the time that enthralled me. During the 1970s the

Quakers were well and truly anchored in the doldrums and had to make five re-election applications in just 11 seasons. Was I therefore simply a glutton for punishment? I suppose I must have thought, as football fans generally do when their team is faring badly, that things could only get better. And in that respect I was right.

DARLINGTON V SCUNTHORPE UNITED
– 1973/74

Dick Connor was appointed manager of Darlington in the summer of 1973 following the ever-elusive Ralph Brand's departure. Connor had the unenviable task of reversing the fortunes of the Quakers, who had just suffered their worst season ever. Supporters voted with their feet and the average Feethams attendance was 1,697, the lowest in the club's history.

The 1973/74 season became another long struggle to stay away from the bottom positions in the league table. The team only scored nine goals in its first 15 league games and it was 10 November before they managed twice in one game. The shortage of goals wasn't helped when the previous season's top scorer, Peter Graham, was sold to Lincoln City at the end of September.

Darlington only managed five wins in their first 28 games and not surprisingly found themselves second from bottom in the table at the end of January. Their next opponents at Feethams would be Scunthorpe United on 3 February. Darlington had 20 points and Scunthorpe were

four better off but had a dreadful away record of one win and one draw from 12 games, so the hosts saw it as a great opportunity to grab two points. Connor had recently strengthened his defence with a double signing from Rochdale. Centre-half Colin Blant and left-back Dick Renwick would both be making their third appearances for the club. Midfielder Gordon Cattrell and striker Bill Atkins would both miss the game through injury. Their places went to Norman Lees and Billy Yeats.

Away from football, the winter of 1973/74 became known as 'The Winter of Discontent', a time of power cuts and the three-day week. Games under floodlights were banned because of electricity shortages, so football experimented with Sunday games for the first time and Darlington switched four home matches to Sundays. Scunthorpe would be the second of these. The previous weekend had seen the Quakers play two home games, against Stockport (1-1) on the Saturday and against Torquay United (0-0) on the Sunday. The experiment with Sunday football virtually doubled the attendance, from 1,533 on the Saturday compared to 3,054 the following day. Darlington were hoping for another good crowd against Scunthorpe, a game that I attended with my mother.

The club's hopes were realised as another healthy crowd of 3,006 turned out for the 2.15pm kick-off. They saw Darlo make a strong start and control the game from start to finish. Visiting keeper Geoff Barnard was in fine form and single-handedly kept the home side at bay. In

the early stages he punched a goalbound Colin Blant header over the bar, scrambled to smother a deflected Steve Holbrook shot and then parried well from a Colin Sinclair piledriver. The visitors simply couldn't deal with the strong running and pace of Don Burluraux and Sinclair. A goal had to come and the only surprise was that it took until the 39th minute to arrive. A long cross by Dick Renwick just evaded the best efforts of Yeats at the near post, but Burluraux met it at the far post and slid it past Barnard. I can remember being an excited little boy as my mother fed me my Bovril and pork pie at half-time.

The one-way traffic continued in the second half with Quakers goalkeeper Gordon Morrith a virtual spectator. Billy Horner had a shot cleared off the line by United full-back Barry Lynch, and then Yeats just failed to connect with another great Renwick cross. The home side lost Holbrook with a knee injury on 59 minutes but, if anything, that strengthened Darlo as substitute Alan Duffy took control of the midfield and started spraying passes around. One superb cross to the far post was met by Yeats but he headed narrowly wide into the side netting. Then, in the 65th minute, Duffy played a long, raking pass into the path of Sinclair who was brought down by Chris Simpkin as he broke into the box. Gordon Jones stroked home the penalty.

Darlington continued to look for more goals. Burluraux cracked in a stinging drive that Barnard did

well to hold, and then Sinclair hit a shot on the turn that went just wide. Duffy smashed a 20-yarder that went just over the bar, then Barnard made a brilliant reflex save from a point-blank Sinclair header. Dick Connor's men completed the scoring in the final minute. The hard-working Yeats created an opening for Norman Lees who burst through and smashed a shot in off the post from just outside the box. I hugged my mother when that goal went in, I couldn't talk very much at that time. That didn't seem to matter that day as I'm sure that the huge smile on my face explained to her how happy I was!

The 3-0 win lifted Darlington two places in the table and raised hopes of escaping the dreaded bottom four. They left it late though. A 4-2 win at home to Barnsley on the last day of the season (another game that I attended with my mother) ensured that they finished fifth from bottom, one point clear of Crewe Alexandra.

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY V DARLINGTON – 1975/76

The summer of 1975 supplied fans of Darlington Football Club with even more drama and upheaval than normal. The Quakers had finished the 1974/75 season in 21st place and so again had to apply for re-election, along with Swansea, Workington and Scunthorpe United. All four clubs successfully retained their league status at the AGM at the beginning of June. Three days later, manager Billy Horner, who had replaced Dick Connor, left to become

a coach at Hartlepool United. He'd had a long-running battle with chairman George Tait and cited 'a clash of personalities' as his reason for resigning. 'It is in the club's best interests that I leave,' he said at the time.

Horner was the seventh manager to have resigned or be sacked during Tait's four-year reign as chairman. In those four years, the club had never finished in the top half of the table, had never got beyond the second round of any cup competition, the reserve team had been disbanded and there was not a single apprentice player on the staff.

Things looked bleak, and at a stormy board meeting the following week Tait retained control of the club and appointed coach Peter Madden as the new manager. Madden immediately started strengthening the playing squad and preparing for the new season. He signed former Manchester City goalkeeper Alan Ogley from Stockport, defenders Bobby Noble from Southport and Jimmy Cochrane from Middlesbrough, midfielder Dave Crosson from Newcastle and striker Eddie Rowles from Torquay United. Pre-season preparations went well, and the team were actually unbeaten in their six friendly matches. With this in mind, everyone was in confident mood as the first day of the season drew near.

Darlington began their season with a 2-0 home win over Scunthorpe United, and then switched their attention to the League Cup. They had been paired with Sheffield Wednesday in the two-legged first round.

Wednesday had been relegated from the Second Division in the previous season and were tipped by many to make an immediate return. A crowd of 3,581 was at Feethams for the first leg to see Wednesday grab a fortunate 2-0 win with late goals by Mick Prendergast and Eric Potts.

The Quakers had fought well and more than held their own, but few people gave them much hope for the following week's second leg. In between the two cup ties, Darlington travelled down to Bournemouth for a league game and came away with a 2-1 win, so it was a confident group of players who set out for Hillsborough on 27 August. I couldn't go to this match. However, Simon Weatherill kindly supplied me with the following match report:

'Manager Peter Madden made changes for the trip to Sheffield. Club captain Colin Blant had served a three-match suspension and came back into the team for his first appearance of the season. He replaced Norman Lees, who in turn had played in place of the injured Bobby Noble at Bournemouth. The previous season's top scorer, Stan Webb, missed out with damaged ankle ligaments and his place went to the fit-again Colin Sinclair, who'd missed the last two games with a thigh injury. Wednesday would be without England international Colin Harvey, who had a thigh strain. His place went to Ken Knighton, who, as a matter of interest, later went on to manage Sunderland.

'A crowd of 7,452 were at Hillsborough to see both sides make a bright opening. Darlington almost struck

first in the fifth minute when a fierce shot by Steve Holbrook brought home keeper Neil Ramsbottom to his knees. Wednesday hit back, and Quakers keeper Alan Ogley had to be at his best to keep out Phil Henson after he had been put clear by Eric Potts. Then Brian Joicey was brilliantly denied when Ogley went full-length, diving at his feet. Wednesday's main threat was tricky right-winger Potts, but once Jimmy Cochrane had got to grips with him, the Quakers began to take control of the game. Their best chance of the half fell to Colin Blant but he headed over from five yards out after running on to Cochrane's floated free kick.

'Peter Madden's men grabbed the lead five minutes into the second half. Steve Holbrook robbed home full-back Jimmy Quinn. He moved into the area while holding the defender off and fired an unstoppable shot into the roof of the net from an acute angle, giving Ramsbottom no chance. Things got even better for Darlington ten minutes later when Colin Sinclair added a second. Former Manchester United midfielder Eric Young won the ball in midfield and advanced towards goal before sliding the ball to Sinclair. His first time shot from the edge of the box screamed past Ramsbottom into the net. The keeper got a hand to it but couldn't keep it out.

'Wednesday then had their best spell of the game as they searched for the goal that would put them through, but the Darlington defence held firm with Ogley in particular in superb form. He saved well from a Mick

Prendergast shot and a Dave Herbert header and then Cochrane headed off the line to keep Henson out. In the closing minutes Joicey put in a dangerous-looking header that just cleared the bar, but the Quakers held on for a famous 2-0 victory.

‘The only bad news on the night came after the game when Madden lost the toss to decide the venue of the replay, so Darlington would have to travel to Hillsborough again on the following Wednesday.’

In between their two trips to Sheffield, Peter Madden’s men beat Elton John’s Watford 1-0 at Feethams (a game that I again attended with my mother) to take them to the top of the Fourth Division with a 100 per cent record. Three wins out of three; their best start to a league campaign since 1948.

The replay at Hillsborough on 3 September brought even more good news. After playing out a goalless draw in front of a crowd of 6,276, the Quakers won the penalty shoot-out to advance into round two. They successfully converted all five of their penalties through Colin Sinclair, Jimmy Cochrane, Stan Webb, Alec Smith and Eric Young, while for Wednesday Mick Prendergast fired wide and Ogley saved from Danny Cameron. Darlington’s reward was a home tie against Luton Town, who were beaten 2-1 with two Stan Webb goals in front of a crowd of 6,601. This earned them a third-round tie at Upton Park, where West Ham proved too strong for Darlo and ended their excellent cup run with a 3-0 victory.

DARLINGTON V SWANSEA CITY – 1975/76

When I started supporting Darlo during the 1970s, apart from a few good cup runs, we were invariably struggling to avoid finishing in the bottom four. At the time I thought this was the norm.

With me being at boarding school during the week (up until this match) I could only go to the odd Saturday fixture; even so, it wasn't long before some of the players began to recognise me and came over for a chat prior to the kick-off. I can remember that Clive Nattress, Steve Holbrook and Colin Sinclair did this fairly regularly.

Nattress was a free transfer signing from Blackpool and played at right-back until he moved to Halifax Town in 1979, before returning to the club in 1986 for a short stint.

Holbrook joined Darlo in 1970 from Hull City and the speedy right-winger ended up playing over 100 games for the club, before eventually signing for Gateshead in 1977.

Sinclair was signed from Raith Rovers for a small fee – anywhere between £3,000 and £5,000, depending on whether you believe the club's accounts or Colin's version of events. This is how the man himself describes the fateful moment that he signed for Darlo, 'The deal was done at Newcastle Railway Station and there were a few brown envelopes handed about. One came my way with £500 in it.' He went on to score 65 goals in 223 appearances for the Quakers before he was eventually

transferred to Hereford United in 1976 for a fee in the region of £15,000.

Anyway, back to the game in question, our last of the season, against Swansea City, a match that I attended with my mother, despite it being midweek. I skived school, don't tell anyone! Darlo needed a point to avoid re-election. Stan Webb scored for the home team in the 65th minute and Swansea equalised in the 85th through Alan Curtis.

The celebrations after the final whistle were unbelievable. The players were dancing on the pitch and the fans were singing, 'We are the champions.' The club had achieved their aim of not finishing in the bottom four and therefore not having to apply for re-election. That sadly was the limit of their ambition.

Nowadays, a manager would be sacked if his team finished fifth from bottom of the table. How times change.

DARLINGTON V WIMBLEDON – 1977/78

The first half of the 1970s was not a good time to be a Darlington fan: three applications for re-election (plus another three near misses), nine managers, dwindling crowds and a constant fight for survival on the financial front. By the 1977/78 season though, Peter Madden had at last introduced some stability and hope to the club. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, he'd taken over the managerial post in the summer of 1975, so was in his

third season at the helm. In the previous season he'd led the team to a creditable 11th place in the league, their best finish for seven years, and so hopes were high that he could take Darlo to an even better result in the new campaign. He would have to do it with a wafer-thin squad though as finances dictated that he run a tight ship. They started the new season with a squad of only 15 players and still with no reserve or youth team, the club had no pool of players to call on in an emergency and so the team quite often picked itself, and players often had to turn out, even when not fully fit.

Initially, this didn't seem to affect the team too much. After a dodgy start, with three defeats and a draw from their first four league games, things improved and a run of just one defeat in the next ten games lifted Darlo into a comfortable mid-table position. By the time Wimbledon visited Feethams on 29 October, the Quakers sat in 14th place in the Fourth Division table with 14 points from 14 games.

Wimbledon would be making their first ever visit to Feethams after being elected to the Football League in the previous summer, at the expense of Workington. The Dons had won three successive Southern League titles and enjoyed some FA Cup success with high-profile games against Burnley, Leeds United and Middlesbrough prior to eventually winning their Football League place. Workington had been making their fourth successive re-election application, so it was perhaps no surprise

when the clubs had swapped places. Wimbledon had struggled with their early season form and travelled to the north-east four places and three points worse off than their hosts. Darlington were on a six-match unbeaten run and with injuries to goalkeeper Martin Burleigh (now sadly no longer with us), midfielder Eric Young and winger Lloyd Maitland, the team virtually picked itself so manager Madden had no hesitation in naming an unchanged side.

A crowd of 2,710 were at Feethams for the Saturday afternoon fixture; my mother and I were among them. We saw the home side very nearly take the lead in only the second minute when centre-forward Ron Ferguson (one of my favourite players from the 1970s) cut in from the right and drove a low cross/shot into the goalmouth. Dons defender Dave Donaldson deflected the ball and it seemed to be sneaking just inside the far post before keeper Richard Teale launched himself full-length and clawed it wide.

The game then developed into a scrappy, hard-fought stalemate with chances at a premium. This was eventually broken in the 30th minute with a spectacular strike by Neil Hague. Barry Lyons intercepted a clearance and made progress down the right. His cross into the box was headed wide by Dons centre-half Billy Edwards. From the resultant corner Jimmy Seal headed towards goal but it was hacked clear by full-back Dave Galvin. The clearance fell perfectly for Hague who smashed a

left-footed volley into the top corner from 30 yards out with Teale absolutely helpless.

Wimbledon scored a shock equaliser a minute before half-time when the ball bounced awkwardly in the Darlington penalty area and referee Mike Peck ruled that John Stone had handled. Billy Holmes stepped up to send Phil Owers the wrong way from the spot.

The second half began with the home side on top and they almost regained the lead when Eddie Rowles broke clear down the right and squared the ball into the middle where Lyons volleyed just over. The Quakers were back in front after 58 minutes. Jimmy Cochrane played a short free kick to Stone whose deep cross to the far post was missed by Steve Galliers but met by Clive Nattress. He completely mishit his shot from an acute angle but the ball bobbed across the goalmouth and into the net just inside the far post. The visitors tried to respond and went close to an equaliser when Owers misjudged a left-wing corner, but Derek Craig was on hand to head the ball out for another corner from underneath his own crossbar.

Darlington made the game safe in the 81st minute with another controversial penalty decision by Mr Peck. Ferguson went down just inside the box after an innocuous-looking challenge by Edwards. Mr Peck thought it worthy of a penalty and Dennis Wann sent Teale the wrong way from the spot. I can remember leaving the ground with my mother thinking that we

could gain promotion. Looking back, I was being very optimistic.

The 3-1 win lifted Darlo up to 11th place in the table but inconsistent results meant that they failed to improve their position any further. Their season was further hampered by the sale of top scorer Eddie Rowles to Colchester United for £15,000 in December 1977. They continued to struggle along with their tiny squad and eventually finished 19th with 41 points, only securing safety from the bottom four with one game to spare. Interestingly, Peter Madden only used 17 players throughout the whole season. This included Chris Jones (who was signed on loan from Doncaster Rovers to replace Rowles) and player-coach Len Walker who had to step in and play as an emergency centre-half for two games at the end of the season when the club was down to ten fit players. Rowles finished the season as joint top scorer, with Dennis Wann, even though he left after 21 league games.

DARLINGTON V FULHAM – LEAGUE CUP SECOND-ROUND REPLAY 1978/79

The 1978/79 campaign would see Peter Madden begin his fourth season as manager – quite an achievement in the unpredictable world of Darlington Football Club in the 1970s. Things started promisingly in the League Cup with a victory over Mansfield Town in the first round.

Their league form was less impressive though and one win from the first six games, with only two goals scored, meant that the Quakers were already struggling at the wrong end of the table.

Madden had identified the need for a centre-forward and spent the summer and the early weeks of the season trying to recruit the man he wanted. He made a £15,000 bid for Terry Eccles from Huddersfield Town, then a £16,000 bid to Cambridge United for Sammy Morgan, but both players chose to try their luck abroad. Madden then made an incredible £35,000 offer for long-term target Joe Cooke from Bradford City but that was rejected. The breakthrough in the transfer market came in October when Madden paid Middlesbrough £20,000 for Alan Walsh (I'm still in contact with 'Walshy' to this day). At that time, that was a lot of money and quite a risk, to spend that kind of money on a 21-year-old with only three substitute appearances for the Boro.

Once again I skived off school to go to this midweek League Cup second-round replay at home to Fulham with my mother. Thinking about it, not many mothers would let their child stay off school to attend a football match. I was very lucky that mine did, more than once!

Having drawn 2-2 at Craven Cottage, with Derek Craig and Dennis Wann scoring our goals, I can remember entering my beloved Feethams in the pouring rain eagerly anticipating the match.