

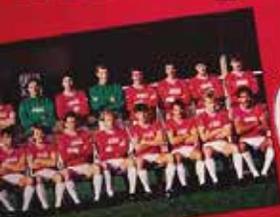
90 MINUTES FROM EUROPE

Walsall's Greatest Cup Run

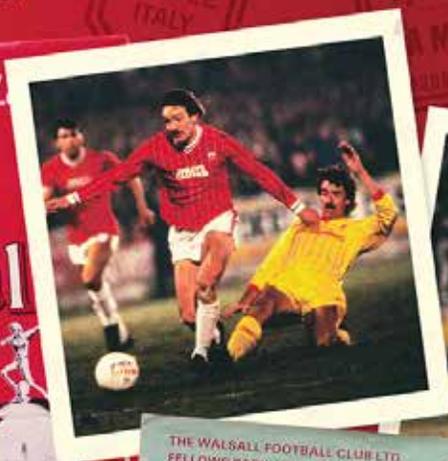
Simon Turner

Milk Cup Semi-Final 2nd Leg

Walsall v Liverpool



TUESDAY FEBRUARY 14th 1984
KICK OFF 7.30 p.m.



THE WALSHALL FOOTBALL CLUB LTD,
FELLOWS PARK, WALSHALL

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SEMI-FINAL TIE
(2nd Leg)**

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Simon Turner



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Chapter 1

The Odd Couple

IN THE space of less than a year, two men walked through the doors at Walsall Football Club for the first time. One was a balding local businessman, the other a young, flaxen-haired striker determined to make his mark on the game. Few could have predicted that together they would dominate the club's fortunes for more than a decade, building teams that lived long in the memory and propelled the club to undreamt of heights. The older man soon developed an undeniable soft spot for the goalscoring youngster, who in turn grew to have a grudging respect for his inscrutable, often crafty superior. Despite being quite different characters, they cultivated a relationship, which though occasionally acrimonious, was built on genuine affection. The two men were Ken Wheldon and Alan Buckley: the proverbial odd couple.

Wheldon was the first to arrive, taking over as chairman just before Christmas 1972. The club that he now presided over was not in the best of health, with its new owner describing it as 'wrapped in waste paper and tied up with string'. He wasn't wrong. The set of financial statements for the period prior to him taking charge reported that the club had a bank overdraft of almost £42,000 and loans totalling

over £60,000, while the opposite side of the balance sheet showed they had just £176 in cash. Not only was the club being kept alive by its benefactors, its team was in the middle of a seven-game winless run, while its chief administrator, who had been there for almost 40 years, was gravely ill in hospital. If all that weren't enough, the club was already on its second manager of the campaign, and there would be a third before it was over. Eventually, the Saddlers managed to limp home in 17th place in the Third Division, which given how turbulent a season it had been, was widely viewed as a success.

The man who took it upon himself to sort this mess out had made his money from scrap metal before turning his attentions to football. Ken Wheldon was a diminutive, dapper figure, rarely seen without a tie and smart three-piece suit. His shiny dome, circular face and deep-set eyes reminded one of a ten-pin bowling ball, with only his thin moustache detracting from the image. The street-smart local businessman would never become a particularly well-liked figure amongst Walsall fans, but then his role as chairman was never going to be one that lent itself to popularity. The Saddlers, however, didn't require a dreamer or a visionary. They needed someone who would watch the pennies and put the club on a firm financial footing, and as a man who clearly knew the value of a pound, Wheldon was indisputably the right man for the job.

Change was necessary, and it started at the top, with Wheldon appointing Ronnie Allen as manager in the summer of 1973. The former West Bromwich Albion and England striker soon recognised that the playing squad needed an overhaul, not least at the back, with no fewer than seven goalkeepers having been used during the previous campaign as the club flirted with relegation. Allen decided to bring in Mick Kearns, a 22-year-old who had lost his place in the Oxford United side after breaking his ankle. It was a fine

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acquisition for the Saddlers, not only as Kearns still had the vast majority of his career ahead of him, but also because he was already an established international, having made his debut for the Republic of Ireland three years earlier. Kearns went on to become one of the club's most reliable figures, missing only five games over his first five and a half seasons with the Saddlers, while his international career also blossomed. He played 15 times for his country during his time at Walsall, setting a club record that stands to this day. Kearns was a big man in every sense. Standing 6ft 4in tall, he had an imposing frame, hands the size of dinner plates and a gregarious personality that endeared him to many.

Another talented young player that Allen set his sights on was a striker who was struggling to break into Nottingham Forest's first team. Alan Buckley joined his hometown club from school and worked his way up, making his debut as a substitute in a 6-1 hammering away to Tottenham Hotspur. As that result suggests, it wasn't a vintage Forest side, and the club were relegated at the end of the season. Dave Mackay, the barrel-chested, square-jawed midfielder who had been the heart and soul of Tottenham Hotspur's 1960/61 double-winning side, was soon appointed as manager and given the brief of restoring the club's fortunes. He took a look at the young Buckley before making it clear that he wasn't at the forefront of his plans. Aged 22, the striker needed regular first-team football if he were to establish himself in the game, and so when the opportunity of going on loan to Walsall was presented, he grabbed it with both hands.

Buckley's home debut came in a League Cup tie against Shrewsbury Town. Auspiciously, he scored a hat-trick in a 6-1 victory, making him an immediate local hero. Ken Wheldon was just as smitten with the young striker as the fans were and the bargain-seeking scrap metal merchant wasted no time in making Buckley's move permanent. A

union that was to last, almost uninterrupted, for 13 years had been sealed. Ronnie Allen's relationship with Wheldon, however, would prove to be far less durable. Despite the presence of Kearns and Buckley in the side, Walsall struggled and by December had slumped to 19th place in the table. Allen's services were duly dispensed with and his job given to Doug Fraser, the club's ageing right-back who had also joined Walsall from Nottingham Forest in the summer. As Buckley recalls:

Because we both still lived in Nottingham, we used to travel in the car together to Walsall. One day, I went down with him as a fellow player and when we came back, he was the acting manager! That was the bright idea of the chairman. Even though he had plenty of money, he was a skinflint. Appointing Doug as player-manager meant he got two employees for the price of one.

Buckley flourished under Fraser's leadership, embarking on a goalscoring spree that would eventually make him the club's record marksman. In his first five years with the Saddlers, Buckley never scored fewer than 20 goals a season, with his most prolific campaign coming in 1975/76 when he found the net no fewer than 35 times. The diminutive Buckley wasn't a pacey or aggressive striker, but he did have a natural instinct for scoring goals. Like a fine chess player, he saw moves ahead of others, seizing chances before defenders even realised that danger was present. Buckley was a six-yard-box assassin who crept in unawares, pounced, and then left with his arm raised in celebration as he took the acclaim of the crowd.

There were some memorable cup runs during the Fraser era, with the most notable coming in 1975 when the Saddlers reached the fifth round of the FA Cup, having knocked out

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Manchester United and Newcastle United before succumbing to local rivals, Birmingham City. As Buckley remembers:

That FA Cup run put the club on a firmer financial footing, which at least made Ken Wheldon happy. He was proud of us when we got a draw at Old Trafford, but what really excited him was getting a replay. I remember seeing the '£' signs in his eyes in the coach on the way home. It was the same again after we beat them at Fellows Park. He was pleased with the result, but what he really wanted was for us to draw another big club. To be fair, he focused on the club's finances because somebody had to.

Fraser's position was secure as long as he kept Walsall a safe distance from the relegation zone. However, the 1976/77 season saw them struggle once more. They were in and around the bottom four for most of the campaign and suffered some heavy defeats, including a 7-0 thrashing away to Brighton & Hove Albion. Goalkeeper Mick Kearns remembers the game all too well:

It was a complete and utter disaster from start to finish. The match was due to be played on a Tuesday night and our next fixture was away to Portsmouth on the following Saturday. The chairman had the bright idea that, rather than hire a coach, the players would drive down on the day of the Brighton match and then stay over for the Portsmouth game. I drove and three or four of the other players took their cars as well. It was crazy. It's nearly 200 miles to Brighton and many of the motorways that you'd use today hadn't even been built back then. It took us hours and hours to get there. The cause of all our woes was that long journey

down. We were exhausted but managed to cope until we went a goal behind. After that we collapsed, with our tiredness becoming a convenient excuse for not making runs or failing to close opponents down.

Wheldon's patience with Fraser finally snapped after a 3-0 home defeat to Northampton Town which dropped the Saddlers into the bottom four. Explaining to the players that the club couldn't afford to get relegated, Wheldon dismissed Fraser and that night a few Walsall players met up in a Nottingham pub to commiserate with their recently deposed boss. After Fraser had left, Walsall's Irish international winger, Miah Dennehy, confided in Buckley who their new manager was to be. To the striker's horror, he found out it was to be Dave Mackay, the man who had released him from Nottingham Forest because he couldn't find a place for him in his team. As Buckley recalls:

I was seething. Dave Mackay had never given me a chance at Forest like he had others. Ken Wheldon knew how I felt about that, so after training I went in to see him. 'Now then, ma' lad,' he said, leaning back in his chair, his chest puffed out underneath his braces, 'What can I do for you?' So, I told Mr Wheldon straight, 'If Dave Mackay is coming here as manager, I'm going.' Four years might have passed, but what he had done still rankled with me. Looking me in the eye, Mr Wheldon responded calmly: 'I'm here to tell you there is no truth whatsoever in the rumour that Dave Mackay is going to be the new manager.' 'Well, if that's what you say, Mr Wheldon,' I replied, 'that's fine with me.' At that point there was a knock on the door and the chairman told me, on my way out, to tell whoever it was to come in. I

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opened the door and Dave Mackay breezed right past me. I just couldn't believe it, but that was typical of Mr Wheldon.

Regardless of the chairman's shenanigans, bringing in Mackay was a real coup for the Saddlers. In addition to his illustrious playing career, the Scot was also a manager of some renown, having made Derby County champions of England less than two years earlier. One of his first tasks as Walsall manager was to keep the club's disgruntled star striker on board, as Buckley recollects:

I went to see Dave Mackay. He was one of the biggest names in football, so I asked, 'Are you really coming to Walsall?' He confirmed he was, so I said, 'Well if that's the case, I'm not staying.' 'We need you here to score goals and help keep us up,' he replied. 'Stay until the end of the season and let's see what happens.' I wasn't convinced. 'Why should I play for you?' I told him. 'You've already made up your mind about me.' 'Oh well, that was then,' he said. I wasn't about to start arguing with Dave Mackay, so I stayed, scored eight goals in the remaining 15 games and we finished well clear of the bottom four.

Dave Mackay soon started to put his own imprint on the team, shipping out those he felt the club no longer needed and recruiting new talent. Needing some cover for Kearns, he settled on Ron Green, a 20-year-old who was playing in goal for Alvechurch, a non-league side experiencing a level of success out of all proportion with the small Worcestershire village it represented. The young goalkeeper that Mackay recruited was a raw talent with a rather unique style, as he remembers:

I never got coached at Alvechurch. I would always come off my line and try to catch everything. You watch goalkeepers today and they often stay on their line and punch the ball away. They rarely seem to catch it, but that's what I did. I would go right out to the edge of the penalty area and try to get hold of the ball if I could. That was my best attribute really. It gives confidence to the back four if you're catching the ball all the time.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the sight of talented young black players became an increasingly common sight on English football pitches. West Bromwich Albion had their famous 'Three Degrees' trio of Laurie Cunningham, Cyrille Regis and Brendon Batson, while Wolverhampton Wanderers fielded George Berry and Bob Hazell. It was no different at neighbouring Walsall, with two black apprentices being taken on during the Mackay era, both of whom would go on to become much-loved figures at the club. One of them was a local lad called Kenny Mower:

I trained with Aston Villa for a while, but they had a lot of good players coming through, such as Colin Gibson, Brendon Ormsby and Gary Williams. I thought my chances would be limited there, and then I got an offer to go to Walsall. I was born and bred in Bloxwich, so it seemed like a natural fit for me. When I first went to the club Doug Fraser was the manager, but he soon got sacked and I was worried that Dave Mackay wouldn't honour my contract. I shouldn't have been because he was the most professional man I'd ever met. I met him with my mom, and he told her, 'I'm taking a kid off you, Mrs Mower, and in two years' time I'll give you back a man.' And he did.

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It wasn't long before Mackay made a crucial intervention in Mower's career:

I was a striker when I was a kid. I wanted to score goals and you seemed to get all the praise if you went up front. So, early on in my time at Walsall, I used to start either as a forward or a midfielder. Then, for one game, they didn't have a left-back, so Dave Mackay put me there. From that day onwards, I never played anywhere else. When you're higher up the pitch it's busy around you all the time, but I soon found that the game looks easier when you can see the whole of it in front of you. Dave Mackay did a lot for me, and for Walsall. He made it a much more professional club.

When I joined, the changing rooms were in a poor state and the training kit wasn't the best. Dave Mackay burnt all that kit and made the club buy us brand-new gear with our names on, as well as new boots and new training shoes. Dave trained with us every day and never missed a session. In the afternoon, he'd take the kids to the gym and one of us would have to play against him in a one-touch match for money. He'd knock us all over the place and take fivers and tenners off us, even though we were only on £16 a week. Dave was virtually unbeatable in the gym, though Buck occasionally got the better of him. He was the only one who could. Those two would play one-on-one for hours because neither of them wanted to lose.

The move to left-back clearly suited Mower and it wasn't long before he became a regular fixture in the first team, as Mick Kearns recalls:

Kenny was solid and reliable. He was comfortable on the ball, strong in the air and his positional play showed a sound understanding of the game. Ultimately, he was one of those players who didn't excel at any one thing but was a good all-rounder.

The other black player to arrive at Walsall at that time was Mark Rees, a flying winger with an eye for goal and pace to burn. As a boy growing up in Birmingham, Rees had the world at his feet, but things didn't quite work out as he had planned:

I played nine times for England Schoolboys and could have signed for Manchester United, but I didn't want to leave home. I went to Aston Villa instead and was about to sign apprenticeship forms when I got into a fight at a club in Birmingham. This guy hit my sister and it ended up in a big brawl. The Villa scouts were there because it was a presentation evening, and so the club soon knew all about it. I was called in the following day and tried to give them my side of the story, but they just wouldn't listen to reason about what had happened. They told me they wouldn't be taking me on as an apprentice, and sadly that was the end of my Villa career.

Thankfully, Rees was rescued by Mackay, whose first full season with Walsall was relatively successful. His side finished a creditable sixth in the Third Division and went on a good FA Cup run, beating Leicester City before crashing out to Arsenal at Highbury in the fifth round. Mackay was clearly laying the foundations for future success, but just before the start of the following season he was offered a lucrative contract to coach in Kuwait. In a straight fight between Ken

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Wheldon and petrodollars there was only ever going to be one outcome, and unsurprisingly Dave Mackay opted for the big payday, leaving the Black Country for the much sunnier climes of the Middle East.

Mackay's departure left Wheldon in a difficult position. There were only days to go until the start of the new campaign, and so he turned to Buckley and asked him to hold the fort until a full-time successor could be found. Wheldon tried to entice Tommy Smith with the offer of a player-manager role, but the Liverpool legend decided, probably with good reason, that Swansea City offered better prospects. Meanwhile, Buckley did well enough, winning two games out of three, but his spell in charge was always destined to be a short one. Alan Ashman, who had guided West Bromwich Albion to the FA Cup a decade earlier, was soon given the job, which was not made any easier by the fact that Buckley was looking to move on. Now aged 27, the striker couldn't afford to wait much longer if he were to fulfil his ambition of playing in the top flight, and was understandably distracted by rumours that Derby County wanted to sign him. They were a First Division club at the time, and the only person standing in his way was his benefactor-cum-nemesis, Ken Wheldon:

My brother, Steve, played in defence for Derby and so I knew they wanted to sign me. I was in the office when they put the call through to Mr Wheldon because I'd been told they were going to make a move for me. Not long afterwards, I knocked on his door, went in and asked him straight-out whether he'd received any offers. 'No, ma' lad, no one's contacted me about you.' He'd just put the bloody phone down to them! I liked Mr Wheldon, but not that day. Derby would have been perfect for me. I lived nearby, my brother was there, and I could have played up front

with Charlie George. I would have given my right arm to go there.

Buckley was undaunted, and in the autumn of 1978, finally got his way when he signed for Birmingham City. The parting of the ways, however, would not end well, either for him or Wheldon. The club he joined was rooted to the foot of the First Division, not having won a match all season. Buckley threw himself into the fight for survival, but his eight goals in 28 matches were not sufficient for the Blues to avoid relegation. Like Walsall, their plight wasn't helped by the sale of their star striker partway through the campaign, with Trevor Francis becoming England's first million-pound player when he joined Brian Clough's Nottingham Forest. The Saddlers were in 11th place when Buckley left, but without him the goals dried up and they soon found themselves slipping down the table. Ashman was relieved of command and Frank Sibley appointed as the club's third manager of the season, though he somehow managed to perform even worse than his predecessor. Walsall won only two of their final 20 games, and for the first time in their history suffered relegation to the Fourth Division.

In the latter stages of that season, both Mark Rees and Kenny Mower made their Walsall debuts. The pacey winger was the first black footballer to play for the club, getting a game before he had even signed a professional contract, while Mower had to wait until the final fixture of the campaign to make his bow, appearing alongside fellow debutant, Ron Green:

It was a good match for both of us to start in. The club had already gone down by that stage, so there was no pressure on us at all. We could just go out and play. I remember Mr Wheldon coming and sitting with me

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on the coach up to the game. He told me to go out and enjoy myself, which was a nice thing for him to say, because he didn't have to.

Wheldon was less compassionate with Sibley, who didn't survive Walsall's demotion, meaning that the club needed yet another new manager. After just nine months apart, it was time for Buckley and Wheldon to be reunited, with the striker being persuaded to return to Fellows Park with the offer of a new role:

Only Ken Wheldon would have paid £175,000 to bring me back from Birmingham City to be Walsall's player-manager. I know that the club had received the same sum when they'd sold me to the Blues a few months earlier, but what you have to understand is that some of that fee had to go to Nottingham Forest because of a sell-on clause in my contract. I reckon it cost the club £60,000 to get me back, which was a lot of money for them in those days. I suppose what it also showed was how much Ken thought of me. In many ways I was his blue-eyed boy, but then you're going to be if you score 30 goals a season, year after year. Ken was great for me, though the two of us used to have some incredible rows when I was the manager, some real humdingers. I've always been one for saying what I thought, and he always stood his ground. But I'd go in the next morning and it was all forgotten. He'd simply say, 'All right, ma' lad,' like it had never happened. I liked that. Ken was a unique person. I suppose it was a love/hate thing between us.

The sums quoted above may not seem all that significant now, but it should be noted that the club's *total* match receipts

in the previous season only amounted to just over £100,000. If proof were ever needed of how much Wheldon thought of Buckley, this was surely it, for signing such a big cheque really wasn't in his nature. Frustratingly, just as one of the club's favourite sons was returning, another left, with Mick Kearns moving a short distance up the road to become Wolverhampton's second-choice goalkeeper:

In an ideal world I would have liked to stay with Walsall, but Wolves offered to triple my wages. I had a family to look after, so it was a no-brainer really.

One of the players that decided to stick around was Brian Caswell. He had joined the club as a 15-year-old in 1971, meaning that his time with the Saddlers predated even that of Buckley and Kearns:

Just before I left school this guy came round and asked whether I would be staying in education, or what job I would be doing instead. I told him I was going to be a footballer. He wanted to know how I could be so sure, so I reeled off all the teams that wanted to sign me. Amongst others, Wolves and Albion were keen, but they had so many youngsters on their books that I wondered whether I would ever get a game. I had been training with the Saddlers since I was 11 and it was close to where I lived, so I decided to start there instead. My plan was to work my way up the leagues, rather than go from the top to the bottom. I could see that if you were good enough, Walsall would put you in their team, which is what happened.

Caswell made his debut while still a 17-year-old apprentice, with versatility his greatest attribute. Over the following years

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he played in a wide variety of positions for the club, wearing every shirt number from 2 through to 11. The know-how that gave him proved invaluable to those who followed in his footsteps, as Mark Rees recalls:

He talked to me constantly on the pitch, telling me where I should be and what I needed to do. Despite not being captain, Brian was the best at giving instructions when we were out there. But that was what we always said at Walsall; that there should be 11 captains on the pitch, not one.

Kenny Mower had a similar experience:

When I got into the first team, he took me under his wing. He trained with me, helped me with my passing and defending and took me everywhere with him. Cassy was one of my best friends and really looked after me. I think that's why we've stayed so close over the years.

The transition to player-manager is never an easy one to make, but Buckley made it look simple as Walsall made a stunning start to his first season in charge. Two decades had elapsed since the Saddlers had last played in the Fourth Division, and it quickly became apparent that they had no intention of making their stay there anything other than a short one. Undefeated in their first 13 league matches, they were top of the table by Christmas and remained there until two games from the end of the campaign when a late stutter in form cost them the title. Nevertheless, a well-deserved promotion was secured, and Buckley's status amongst the Walsall faithful rose even higher. The relationship between him and Wheldon may have raised some eyebrows amongst

the players, but as Caswell recalls, they were prepared to give credit where it was due:

The chairman loved him. Before he became manager, he was more like Ken's son than a player. Then he was given the opportunity to take charge of the team, but to be fair to Alan, he took it and did really well.

The Saddlers ended the campaign as runners-up to Huddersfield Town, and in the summer Buckley made a move for their captain, Peter Hart. Despite only being 23, he was experienced beyond his years, having already played over 200 games for the Terriers. Hart had been there since leaving school and was part of the side which narrowly lost the FA Youth Cup Final in 1974 to Tottenham Hotspur. The Yorkshire club may have had a crop of talented youngsters, but their first team was an embarrassment for much of the 1970s. They were in the First Division at the start of the decade but three relegations in four seasons dumped them at the bottom of the league pyramid. The turmoil caused by that rapid descent provided an opportunity for the young Hart, who made his debut at the age of just 16, setting a club record that stands to this day. It was a wrench to leave his hometown club, but as he recalls, Walsall had its attractions:

One of the main reasons I came was because they were a very good footballing team. Alan was a very chirpy, positive, confident type of footballer and he took that into his style of management. He wanted his team to play attractive football and he gave us the freedom to go out and do just that. It was a big decision to leave Huddersfield, not least because it was my first club and I'm a Yorkshireman and love the place. However, I always believed that if you stayed at a club for a long

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time you tended to get taken for granted. I also felt that Walsall had a better chance of making the step up to the Second Division than Huddersfield did.

Hart made his first appearance for Walsall in the opening game of the 1980/81 season, alongside fellow debutant, Richard O'Kelly. Like goalkeeper Ron Green, O'Kelly was a product of the non-league game, having also joined the Saddlers from the overachieving Alvechurch:

There was no coaching there at all; it was simply 'learn on the job'. No one told me when I should turn this way or that, or how I should position myself for a challenge. I found out all about the importance of awareness when an opposition defender told me that he was going to break my legs. I suppose I had a different upbringing in the game from most professional footballers, but it worked for me. Harty signed for Walsall at a similar time to me and we ended up spending a lot of time together. We bought houses near to one another and car shared each time we went to the ground. Harty was a good tackler and, despite being one of the best friends I've made in football, he would still kick lumps out of me in training. The only way to improve your game is to play with and against better footballers, and Harty tested me all the time. I had to become a more intelligent player just to get a touch on the ball.

Like Caswell, O'Kelly's principal strength was his versatility. Most often he played behind the centre-forward, pushing and probing, but Walsall fans also saw him spearhead the attack, anchor the midfield and even occasionally appear as a full-back. Frustratingly for Buckley, his squad was

simultaneously strengthened by the addition of Hart and O'Kelly and weakened by the loss of several key players from his promotion-winning side, both through injury and transfer. The net impact was negative, and between late-October and mid-April the Saddlers won only four out of 27 league matches. With two games left to play, they were almost down and out, but then a home victory over fellow strugglers Swindon Town gave them a glimmer of hope. Both clubs went into the final round of fixtures in danger of filling the last relegation spot, along with a third which really shouldn't have been there.

Sheffield United were having the proverbial season of two halves. The experienced Harry Haslam had been in charge in the period before Christmas, during which they had rarely been out of the top ten. However, his health was weakening and so it was decided that 1966 World Cup-winning hero Martin Peters would move up from his player-coach role and take the hot seat. After Boxing Day his side played 20 league games and won just three, which dragged them down from eighth in the table to the edge of the relegation zone. Nevertheless, the odds were still stacked in their favour. They had one point more than the Saddlers, and a vastly superior goal difference to them and Swindon Town. The Robins were also better placed than Walsall, being one point ahead and facing a home game against mid-table Brentford, who had nothing left to play for. There were a variety of permutations, but Walsall's mission was clear, with anything less than a win meaning a second relegation in three seasons. And the club they had to beat? That would be Sheffield United, at Bramall Lane ...

Alan Buckley remembers what happened next:

It had been a very hard season for us. We had a lot of young lads in the team, like Kenny Mower and Mark

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Rees, and they had never played at that level before. On the Friday, Mr Wheldon said to me: 'However things go ma' lad, we'll go up there with our dignity intact, and we'll come away with our dignity intact. We'll see what happens, and then we can talk about things after that.' He put his hand in his pocket for once and paid for us to have a pre-match meal in Nottingham, and then we travelled to Bramall Lane for the game.

As can so often be the case in such crucial fixtures, the game was not much of a spectacle. Then, shortly before the end, it suddenly burst into life, as Alan Buckley recalls:

I received the ball in the penalty box and tried to get it off my chest and down on to my foot so that I could have a shot at goal. Then their centre-half clattered into me, I went down, and a penalty was awarded. Normally, I would have taken it, but my knee had locked. It had given me a lot of trouble that season because I had a floating bone in it. I would wake up some mornings and couldn't straighten my leg, and then at other times it was fine. It certainly took away some of my effectiveness on the pitch, but you feel obliged to do whatever you can when you're the player-manager. I don't think it did me any good as my knee was never the same after that.

Given Buckley's injury, Walsall needed someone else to take the penalty, and as Kenny Mower recollects, he was first in the frame:

We trained as normal in the days before the game and practised some spot kicks. Buck was our usual penalty

taker, but I must have done well as I was nominated as his backup in case he got injured. And that was exactly what happened. I don't know if anybody noticed but I couldn't even pick the ball up. I knew how late it was in the game and how important the penalty was. I was absolutely bricking it. It was the first time that I had ever felt like that on a football pitch; that I couldn't do something I was supposed to do.

Standing nervously at the opposite end of the pitch was Ron Green:

Don Penn picked the ball up instead. He usually smashed them over the bar or well wide, so I couldn't look. I turned around and then, all of a sudden, we'd scored. Sheffield United needed a goal now and finally came out of their own half. We were on the back foot when a young lad called John Horne, who had come on as a substitute for Harty, somehow gave a penalty away. I don't think any of their players wanted to take it, but eventually Don Givens stepped up.

The irony of the situation was not lost on Walsall's player-manager:

I had played with Don at Birmingham City and tried to sign him from them earlier in the season. I wanted him to play up front alongside me, but Mr Wheldon didn't fancy paying that kind of money, so Don went to Sheffield United instead. Of all people, it was Don who took the penalty that could have kept them up and sent us down. It was a weakish effort for Don, and thankfully Ron Green guessed the right way and saved it.

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Not long afterwards, the referee blew the whistle for full time, and then news filtered through that Swindon had managed to get a 0-0 draw against Brentford. That meant the Blades were down, and while their players accepted their fate with good grace, the same could not be said of all their fans. They quickly flooded the pitch and, as Mark Rees recalls, the visitors were soon caught up in the mayhem:

We went to the Walsall fans but could see from their faces that some of the Sheffield United fans were running in our direction. They started to attack us, and I think Buck was the first to get hit because he'd gone down for the penalty. One of them came towards me, and I thought, 'Sod it, I'm fighting you!' So, I ended up throwing fists at this fan and chasing him across the pitch. A few more came in and then the police got involved and escorted me off the pitch, more for my own protection than anything. There were loads of them around me by that time and I was probably going to get smashed. Back in the dressing room, the police wanted to caution me, but I fought my corner, telling them that I was acting in self-defence and blaming them for allowing the fans to get on to the pitch in the first place. Nothing further came of it, but that was probably because there was too much going on outside the ground by that point and they couldn't afford to hang around any longer.

The incident also burned itself into Kenny Mower's memory:

We were clapping our fans for the support they'd given us all season, and everyone was happy. And then we turned around and there were people all over the pitch. There was a big fence all around their ground,

so they must have climbed over it. I was terrified. This guy took a swing at Rico, and I knew he'd go after him, because that was how he was; he would confront anyone. He ran deeper into their fans, and I remember shouting, 'Mark, you're going the wrong way!' I think they had him down at one stage and the police had to get them off him. That was one of the most nerve-wracking games I ever played in.

Once they had managed to find their way to safety, Ron Green recalls that the team received a visitor:

Martin Peters came into our dressing room and wished us all the best. To have done that showed what a gentleman he was. Sheffield United were a big club and I don't think their fans could understand what had happened to them. They'd never been relegated to the Fourth Division before. When we left, there were men crying outside the ground. It was the first time I'd ever seen that.

It was a fine achievement for Walsall to have gone to Bramall Lane, beaten Sheffield United and avoided relegation, but locally it didn't really get the attention it deserved. That was because on the same afternoon neighbouring Aston Villa secured the First Division title, despite losing away to Arsenal. *Plus ça change.*

In advance of the game, Wheldon had told Buckley that they would talk about the future afterwards, and it turns out that he had something quite novel up his sleeve:

On the Monday after the match, I was in hospital having the floating bone taken out of my knee. As a result, we never really got to celebrate staying up.

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Once I got out, Mr Wheldon told me that he was bringing Neil Martin in to help me. I knew Neil because we'd played together at Nottingham Forest, and he had been a youth coach at Walsall when Dave Mackay was the manager. 'He'll be all right for you, ma' lad,' Mr Wheldon said. 'He'll get all the kit ready, pack the skips and do all the running about for you.' I wasn't all that keen, so he asked me what my plan was. I told him that I wanted to bring in Garry Pendrey to be my assistant, but he wasn't having any of it. I was sitting there with a big plaster cast on, so in the end I reluctantly agreed. Then what did Mr Wheldon do? He went out and announced that Neil Martin and I were going to be joint-managers! There was no way on God's earth that I would ever have agreed to that. But that's how Mr Wheldon did things.

It was an arrangement that neither Buckley nor Martin wanted, but initially it appeared to work. A succession of victories in the autumn thrust Walsall up the table and by early December they were in second place. And then it snowed. The winter of 1981/82 was truly appalling, with temperatures falling so low that a national record was set in nearby Shropshire which still stands to this day. Unsurprisingly, not much football got played. The Saddlers went six weeks without a league game, and when they finally got started again all momentum had been lost. They were also down to just one manager, as Buckley recalls:

When Neil Martin walked in, he thought he should be in charge. He didn't want to be a joint-manager any more than I did. Then later, Mr Wheldon asked me to step back, concentrate on playing and let Neil manage the team. My dad passed away around that

time and I just didn't have the strength to resist. I had no fight about me at all. It wasn't right but that was the way Mr Wheldon went about things. He was a clever bloke because he always ended up getting what he wanted, but it was his club, so who was I to argue?

After the snow finally cleared, Walsall's form was nothing short of atrocious. They played 14 league matches between mid-February and mid-April and failed to win a single one. The Saddlers plummeted from the promotion spots to the edge of the relegation zone, and once again went into their final game of the season with their Third Division status hanging in the balance. They managed to scrape a 0-0 draw at home to Doncaster Rovers, with the vital point enabling them to finish above relegated Wimbledon on goal difference.

If fighting a second successive relegation battle wasn't bad enough, Saddlers fans also had to contend with a markedly different type of threat. Worryingly, this one came from inside the club. As the campaign drew to a conclusion, news emerged that Ken Wheldon was proposing that Walsall leave Fellows Park and play fixtures in Wolverhampton instead. Unusually, the club had incurred losses for the past two years, which must have caused such alarm for Wheldon that he felt driven to consider such a divisive cost-cutting move. Saddlers' fans reacted with predictable fury to the prospect of Molineux becoming their new home, quickly organising themselves into the Save Walsall Action Group, or 'SWAG' for short. Immediately prior to the decisive home fixture against Doncaster Rovers, over a thousand fans marched from the town centre to the ground in protest at Ken Wheldon's hare-brained scheme. The players did what was needed on the pitch, and the fans won their battle too, with Wheldon quietly dropping the idea over the summer.

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Neil Martin was held accountable for the collapse in Walsall's form during the second half of the season, which left Wheldon with little option other than to ask Buckley to take charge of the team for a third time. Now aged 31, Buckley was older and wiser, and so made his return conditional on a specific demand being met:

I told Mr Wheldon I would do the job again, but there was to be no iffing and butting this time: I wanted Garry Pendrey to be my assistant. We had played together at Birmingham City, though there had not been any special relationship between us. We were just two players in the same team. However, I had seen how he was in and around the dressing room, particularly with the younger players. He was so experienced and knowledgeable about football. It only took one phone call, and he was down at Walsall with me. We ended up having some amazing laughs together. I'd trust him with my life.

As Pendrey recalls, the call from Buckley came out of nowhere:

I was coming towards the end of my playing career and had always wanted to go into coaching. When I was 20, Birmingham City made me their youngest-ever captain, so I was used to leading people, putting ideas forward and having an opinion. I had an offer to work with Bobby Gould at Bristol Rovers, but then Alan rang out of the blue and asked me to come to Walsall. I much preferred going just up the road rather than all the way down the M5, so I grabbed the opportunity with both hands.

Walsall's new coach added a valuable new voice alongside that of Buckley, as Mark Rees recollects:

Garry had a lot to say about positional play and was excellent at getting his message across. I can see him now, standing in front of me, reminding me where I had been at a particular point in a game before telling me where I should have been, chiding me for watching the ball rather than concentrating on where I needed to be. He drilled that into all of us.

Kenny Mower also remembers the impact that Pendrey had on the club's culture:

After a home game, everybody used to get into their cars and shoot off home. Garry stopped that straight away. He told us that we had to go in the Saddlers Club after every match and have at least one drink together. Garry reminded us that the fans paid our wages and so had a right to say what they thought about us. For the first few weeks after he arrived, we got beaten on a regular basis and were slaughtered by the fans in the Club afterwards. Then, all of a sudden, we began to win games and the fans would pat us on the back and buy our drinks, so we started to stay there for longer and longer. Over time, that helped us to build up a bond with the fans, which I think was good for the club.

The partnership between the two men also worked well, as Ron Green recollects:

They were a bit like Brian Clough and Peter Taylor. As with Cloughie, Buck could have a bit of an edge to

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him, whereas Garry was more subtle. He was the one who would pull you to one side, put his arm around you and have a quiet word.

In addition to recruiting Pendrey in the summer of 1982, Buckley ended Mick Kearns's three-year sojourn at Wolverhampton Wanderers by bringing him back to his spiritual home. As with the management duo, the Irish international goalkeeper's career was coming towards a conclusion and so he found himself as backup for Ron Green, their respective statuses having been inverted since he was last at Walsall. Unfortunately, the club he rejoined was in a relatively poor state. Not only had they avoided relegation by a whisker for two successive seasons, its relationship with the fans was also brittle following Ken Wheldon's proposal to move home games to Molineux. This was reflected in attendances at Fellows Park, with just under 3,000 spectators gathering to watch the opening league game of the season against Portsmouth, a figure which sank to just over 2,000 for the visit of Preston North End on the following Tuesday. These were not the good old days.

In keeping with this rather desperate state of affairs, Walsall's form in the first half of the 1982/83 season was woeful. By Christmas they had sunk to the foot of the table, having won only two of their previous 17 games, and appeared odds-on to secure relegation at the third attempt. The tide, however, was finally about to turn. There was no one single cause for this; no pivotal game or landmark signing. Rather, it was the slow fruition of the hard work that Buckley and Pendrey were putting in on the training ground, plus the gradual maturing of a group of young players who were ready to make their mark on the game. Chief amongst them was the blond-haired David Preece, who at 5ft 5in tall, was affectionately known as 'Mini' to his team-mates. As

Alan Buckley recalls, the teenage midfielder's talents soon became evident:

I ended up playing in the youth team a fair bit when Neil Martin was in charge. That gave me the chance to play alongside Preecey, and it was only then that I realised what a clever little footballer he was. After Neil left, I was walking into the ground one morning and Mini arrived at the same time. He greeted me and said: 'So, what do I call you now you're the manager again?' 'Never mind what you call me,' I replied. 'Let me tell you something. I'm going to get you in the first team, and when I do, there's only one way for you. Once you get a chance to show them how good you are, there'll be no stopping you.' He was a fantastic player.

Buckley wasn't alone in his high estimation of Preece, as Brian Caswell notes:

I remember when he made his first start against Brentford as a 17-year-old. I was at left-back that day, and he was at outside-left, so I had him to look after. I soon saw how good he was. He had a nice left foot, could work the ball, and even though he had no pace, the opposition couldn't get close to him because he was so quick with his passing. If he had a weakness, it was that he didn't score enough goals, but that was because he was so unselfish and would sooner play someone else in than have a go himself. David Preece was different class.

Another youngster who established himself in the Walsall team that season was Craig Shakespeare, a left-

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sided midfielder who, like Mark Rees, had found himself surplus to requirements at Villa Park. It was, as he recalls, a disappointment that quickly turned into an opportunity:

My biggest break in football was not getting taken on by Aston Villa. Within a day of being released, Walsall's chief scout, Ron Jukes, turned up at my house and offered me an apprenticeship. I jumped at the chance and by my 21st birthday I'd played 100 games for the Saddlers. I'd never have got the chance to make anywhere near those number of first-team appearances if I had stayed at Villa Park.

Shakespeare was Buckley's first signing when he returned from Birmingham City to be player-manager in 1979, and he soon became a fixture in the Saddlers midfield. Possessing a fierce shot and strong technical skills, Shakespeare gave Walsall an added dimension, as Mick Kearns recalls:

You didn't have many natural left-footers in wide positions in those days, which meant those who played there were always turning inside and not using the full width of the pitch. Shaky had a great left foot and he took full advantage of it.

The mid-season upturn in form also coincided with the arrival of Kevin Summerfield, a Walsall-born, 23-year-old striker of whom much had initially been expected:

I went to Joseph Leckie Secondary School, which was just two minutes' walk away from where we lived in Walsall, although I didn't do particularly well there. I found one of my old reports when I went in the loft recently, and it was all 'he can't do this' and 'he can't

do that! I just couldn't wait to get outside and play sports, particularly football. I started off at Coventry City when I was about 11 years old, but then West Bromwich Albion came on the scene. I saw them as a bigger club, so I trained there twice a week and then joined them after I left school. My first taste of success came in the FA Youth Cup, which Albion won in 1976. Our best match in that run was a replay against Manchester United at Old Trafford in the quarter-finals, which we won 4-1. I managed to get a hat-trick, scoring with my right foot, left foot and a header.

The final was a two-legged affair against Wolves, but even though they had defenders like George Berry and Bob Hazell in their team, we were confident of lifting the trophy. Our tails were up, and we beat them comfortably in the end, winning 5-0 on aggregate. Some of us went on to be picked for the England Youth team later that year, playing alongside the likes of Gordon Cowans, Sammy Lee and Kenny Sansom. One tournament we went to was in Monte Carlo. Can you imagine us kids in a place like that? We didn't know what day it was! It's a long way from the Black Country, that's for sure. I scored against West Germany in one match, and it was only when I looked back at the programme a year or two ago that I realised Joachim Löw was in their side.

Despite these early triumphs, Summerfield struggled to break into Albion's first team, as Kenny Mower recalls:

I remember Kev from when I was growing up because we were a similar age. He was tipped to be one of the top players from the Midlands, but West Brom

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had a great first team, what with the likes of Laurie Cunningham, Cyrille Regis and Bryan Robson. If you're going to get a game, you've got to get those players out, and Kev found that hard to do.

After playing only a handful of matches for the Albion, Summerfield moved to Birmingham City in the summer of 1982:

Ron Saunders got in touch and said that he was interested in me, so I decided to join the Blues. However, it didn't take long before I realised I'd made a mistake. I could tell straight away that I wasn't his kind of player, so why he signed me I do not know. That move was a real disaster.

After only a few months at St Andrew's, Summerfield was loaned out to the Saddlers, where he soon impressed by scoring on his home debut. Then after just four games, he was recalled by the Blues, who had a big third round FA Cup tie coming up against ... Walsall. In front of almost 13,000 fans at Fellows Park, Alan Buckley's side secured a creditable 0-0 draw, though it could have been a victory, had the player-manager not hammered an early penalty against the crossbar. Goals continued to be hard to come by in the replay, and it wasn't until extra time that the deadlock was finally broken. The goalscorer? A substitute called Kevin Summerfield. You really couldn't make it up.

After three further games for the Blues, all of which ended in defeat, Summerfield cut his losses and signed for the club that he had just knocked out of the FA Cup. He was soon joined by Phil Hawker, a versatile defensive player who had also failed to establish himself in Birmingham City's first team.

The team that Summerfield and Hawker joined was clearly on the rise. In the second half of the season, Walsall won eleven matches, drew six and lost six. Not only was that promotion-winning form, the manner of some of their victories was also starting to turn heads. Millwall were beaten 4-0 and then promotion-chasing Bristol Rovers were sent back down the M5 smarting from a five-goal thrashing. It was a defeat so comprehensive that it persuaded Alan Ball, who was playing out his career with the Pirates, to finally hang up his boots. It appears that where ageing 1966 World Cup heroes were concerned, the Saddlers were anything but kind. Buckley's team signed off the campaign with a 3-1 victory away at Doncaster Rovers, which secured them a top-ten finish. After two close shaves with relegation and a first half to the season which threatened to fulfil that fate, it was a rather unexpected but much appreciated improvement.

The 1982/83 season was notable for being the final one that Buckley made a significant contribution to as a footballer. He played in all 50 of Walsall's fixtures and scored 15 goals, one of which made him the first and, so far, only player to score 200 times for the Saddlers. From then on, he would make only intermittent appearances on the pitch. Partly that was because he was now 32, but it also reflected the fact that he was on the cusp of fulfilling that noble objective that all player-managers should aspire to: he had built a team that was too good for him to get into. Experience had taught Walsall fans to be cautious, but they were starting to whisper quietly amongst themselves that a bright dawn was beckoning. The signs for the future were very promising indeed.