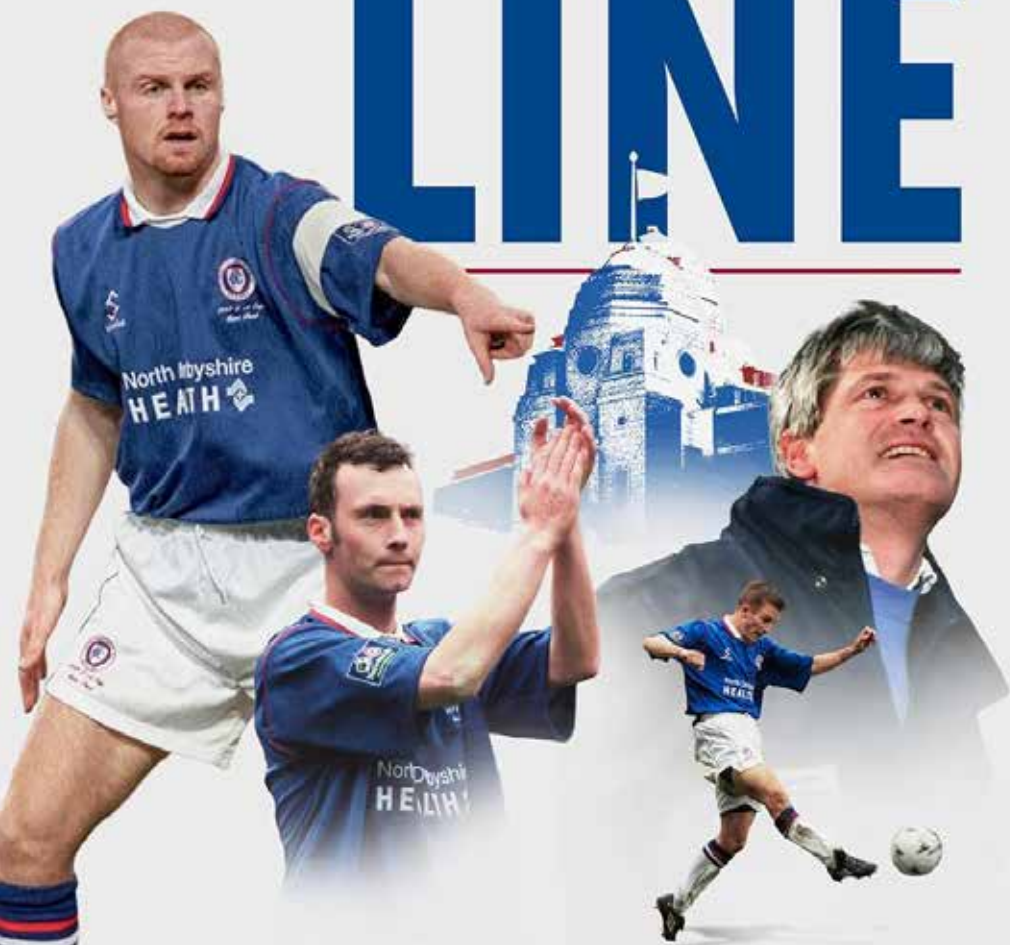


A

Matthew Rhodes



FINE LINE



How The Spireites (Almost) Reached The FA Cup Final

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**How The Spireites (Almost)
Reached The FA Cup Final**

Matthew Rhodes



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One Small Step

THERE WAS a real sense of optimism that the 1996/97 season could be a very special one for Chesterfield Football Club. This was not reserved for the FA Cup though.

The Spireites won the Third Division (what's now known as League Two) play-offs to secure promotion to the Second Division (now known as League One) in 1995. In their first season back in the third tier, Chesterfield finished in a very impressive seventh. They sat just one point behind the final play-off berth with 72 points from their 46 league games. The Spireites didn't score many goals, but they didn't concede many either. Their approach under manager John Duncan was built on a very strong and well-organised defensive backbone. They netted just 56 goals but only conceded 51 to bring them within a whisker of the top six. The side that finished one position above them were Bradford City. The Bantams ended up winning the play-offs to secure promotion to the First Division.

There was genuine belief in the summer of 1996 that Duncan's side could have a real chance of returning to the second tier for the first time since the 1950/51 season. Chesterfield, at that time, never had much money to play with at all; promotion to the First Division would have been a phenomenal achievement. What they lacked in finances, they more than made up for in grit and team spirit.

My brother, Andrew Rhodes, was 15 years old at the time that the incredible FA Cup run began and has an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of following the Spireites as a teenager. Andrew was also born in Chesterfield and is almost certain he attended every game of the cup run apart from the fifth-round tie which we will discuss all in good time, 'I started going in December of 1994, which was the season we got promoted. I never saw us lose for that season. We won almost every game 1-0 when we played at home. We just won constantly. It was always 1-0. When they got promoted, the thing that really stuck with me was that John Duncan played exactly the same football. We didn't change anything really. It was almost exactly the same team that went up. The only additions were Paul Holland and Mark Williams. I went to most home games in the season after promotion. We were brilliant that season. We came seventh. We beat Blackpool which is still one of the best games I've ever watched.

'I think the feeling going into the 1996/97 season was this is the year we can get promoted again. My memory is of people talking about us winning promotion. We'd still got the likes of Kevin Davies, because there was a lot of talk about whether he would go. Billy Mercer was a massive upgrade in goal. Mark Williams was a massive upgrade in defence. So people were saying this could be the year ... we were a good team. You could see it on the pitch. Kevin Davies was the star, but maybe that wasn't as obvious then as it is now. Players like Davies, Mercer, Williams and Holland; they were at least First Division players. Of course, Davies ended up playing in the Premier League as did Williams.'

While the prospect of promotion was realistic, the idea that the closest they would come to lifting a trophy that season would be through the FA Cup was laughable.

Chesterfield didn't really do cup runs. At least when it came to the FA Cup and League Cup anyway, although

they had experienced other cup successes before elsewhere. Most notably, Chesterfield lifted the Anglo-Scottish Cup in the 1980/81 season which featured a remarkable 4-1 aggregate victory over Rangers in the quarter-finals. The Spireites had also won the Derbyshire Senior Challenge Cup on six occasions. However, their most recent success in this competition came in 1936/37 and it was never deemed a priority.

In the years leading up to the 1996/97 campaign, Chesterfield's record in the FA Cup was very poor. From 1985/86 they had only won three ties and had never advanced past the second round. It became a well-known joke among the club's supporters that they never stuck around long in the FA Cup.

Before 1996/97, Chesterfield's best FA Cup runs had come in 1932/33, 1937/38 and 1949/50, when they had reached the fifth round.

In the first of those seasons, the Spireites lost 1-0 away at Burnley. In 1937/38 they forced a replay against Tottenham Hotspur after an impressive 1-1 draw at Saltergate; they went on to lose valiantly 2-1 at White Hart Lane.

In 1949/50, Chesterfield once again forced a very creditable replay, this time against Chelsea. After a 1-1 draw at Saltergate, they lost 3-0 at Stamford Bridge.

It wasn't a particular surprise to see the Spireites in the last 16 here. In each of those three seasons, they were a second-tier outfit. At the time of writing they have not featured in the second tier since 1951. If anything, it's a surprise that they did not advance to this stage of the competition on more occasions as they have played at the second level for a total of 20 seasons. It reinforces the fact that Chesterfield experiencing a good FA Cup run was rare no matter what generation you grew up in.

For any Spireites supporter born after 1950, witnessing a memorable FA Cup campaign was pretty much non-existent until 1996/97. From the end of 1949/50 to the start of 1996/97,

Spireites fans saw their side reach the fourth round just once – back in 1953/54. They also only saw the third round reached once from 1975/76 to 1996/97.

There was also very little to report from Chesterfield's experiences in the League Cup. Up to 1996, their best run came in 1964/65 when they reached the fourth round for the first and so far only time. From 1980/81 the Spireites never even advanced past the second round. In one particular lean run of cup form, they didn't get through the first round from 1984/85 to 1991/92.

In short, any excitement would nearly always be reserved for the league campaigns and the start of 1996/97 felt no different.

It was a promising start to Chesterfield's 1996/97 Second Division campaign as John Duncan's side collected five victories from their opening seven league matches. True to Chesterfield's style at the time, every single one of these wins was by a 1-0 scoreline. The famous chant '1-0 to the Arsenal' could absolutely have had the last word swapped to the 'Spireites'. Surprisingly, the two other matches were rare home defeats.

By this point, and also true to form, Chesterfield had already been eliminated from the League Cup in the first round. The first round was still a two-legged affair and the Spireites lost 4-2 on aggregate to Stockport County.

By mid-November, Chesterfield had played 18 league games – winning nine, drawing three and losing six. With 30 points already collected before the halfway point, Duncan's outfit were certainly in the mix for a top-six finish. There really did feel like there was a chance that the Spireites could return to the second tier for the first time since 1951.

Then the first round of the FA Cup arrived. Andrew Rhodes summed up the feelings of many supporters at the

time, 'I remember when I was younger, I was always really excited about the prospect of the FA Cup draw. And then not being excited because we always got knocked out! At the time, going to FA Cup games felt a bit like, "Hmm, we're doing well in the league, oh well, let's go to an FA Cup match."

Chesterfield were drawn at home against Bury. It wasn't a tie that was met with particular enthusiasm. Early rounds against clubs in the same division never usually are. At this stage, it would have just felt like an extra Second Division match but with no points at stake. Bury had already defeated the Spireites at the same venue earlier in the season – 2-1 on 24 August, Chesterfield's first home league game of 1996/97. A penalty from Nicky Law wasn't enough to secure a point in front of a crowd of 3,763.

An FA Cup first-round tie against a non-league side would have garnered more interest at this stage. Interestingly and impressively, four eighth-tier clubs (the fourth tier of non-league) featured in the first round proper. All four though would see their Wembley dreams dashed. Consett lost 4-0 away from home against Chesterfield's arch-rivals, Mansfield Town. Newcastle Town put in a valiant effort at home against Notts County but lost 2-0. Wisbech Town lost 2-1 at home to sixth-tier outfit and fellow non-league side St Albans City. Meanwhile, North Yorkshire side Whitby Town were involved in a remarkable tie against Hull City. The Seasiders shocked everyone by holding the Tigers to a 0-0 draw at home; 12 goals were then scored in the replay back at Boothferry Park as Hull won 8-4 to finally end Whitby's remarkable run.

Also of note was Second Division side Wrexham needing a replay to knock out non-league outfit Colwyn Bay in a very rare all-Welsh FA Cup affair. More on that Wrexham team later on in the book.

So, at 3pm on Saturday, 16 November at dear old Saltergate, Chesterfield's FA Cup journey began.

Spireites defender Jamie Hewitt recalls an incredible line from manager John Duncan in the match programme, 'I think John Duncan, bless him, wrote in the programme for the first round match against Bury that this is our year and we'll get to Wembley! Which was pretty strange for him to have put that in. With our past cup runs, I think it was a bit tongue in cheek.'

The match was notable for multiple goal-line clearances from the Bury defence to keep the score goalless, but the Spireites finally broke the deadlock in the 41st minute. An excellent corner from Hewitt was met by centre-half Mark Williams whose close-range header found the back of the net. This was Williams's third goal of the season and the second match in a row that he had found himself on the scoresheet.

Following the goal, Chesterfield did what they did best and defended a 1-0 lead. The victory already marked the seventh occasion they had won 1-0 in the season so far.

Mark Williams recalls the game that started it all off well, 'It was always going to be a tough game ... they were a similar kind of team to us: big, aggressive. We won 1-0. Jamie Hewitt sent a corner over. I was quite good at free kicks, corners, stuff like that. I was quite aggressive ... the flight of the ball that came across, Jamie used to put really good deliveries in. He set a lot of my goals up actually. When the ball was in the air, I knew that if I could out-muscle their centre-half, then the ball was going in. I made contact with it and it was like a bullet header. Then, like usual, we kept it tight and won that game 1-0.'

Chris Bigg is an avid Chesterfield supporter who attended every single game of the FA Cup run that season, 'I would have been 21, 22 at the time. There was a group of about eight

or nine of us that had been going to home matches regularly since we were about 14. We'd been to a few away matches as well. We always used to love the FA Cup ... the FA Cup was a massive thing for us. It's just a shame to see how it is now with teams putting reserve players out. It used to be a massive thing. The first round of the cup was always a brilliant day. A bit of a party day sort of thing. The first round of the cup was always a fixture on our calendar ... we used to go to the first round game every year and nine times out of ten we'd be knocked out!

Another Chesterfield supporter who attended every game of the cup run was Jon Baines. Jon was a teenager at the time and still at school, 'All I remember is that it was a Mark Williams back-post header ... you don't know what's going to happen, do you? Being a Chesterfield fan, you're used to being knocked out in the first round all the time. So all you're thinking is, oh great, we're through to the second round. And all you want as a lower-league football fan is to get through to the third round and let's get a decent game against a big side. Even as a fan now, that's all you ever want. So, you don't really go back and remember those days so much do you?'

Speaking to Dave Garratt in 2021 for the *Legends of the Spire* podcast, John Duncan recalled the first-round tie well and remembered Bury as a very hard team to play against, 'Bury was the toughest! They came closest to causing us a problem. They were a real strong team, not dissimilar to ourselves. Mark Williams scored a header from a corner but, for the last ten minutes, we just survived it. We were clinging on. It was a great victory and that was a big game for us.'

It's interesting to note that the audio commentary by Jon Champion for the highlights of the game refers to Chesterfield's poor record in the FA Cup right from the off. As the players of both sides exit the tunnel and step on to the Saltergate turf, Champion states, 'Saltergate may be a world

away from Wembley, but it marks the start of another FA Cup campaign for two clubs who have notoriously stumbled early in recent years.'

After the final whistle was blown, many fans would have either gone back home or flocked to the pub and discussed who they wanted to play in the next round.

A huge local game against Mansfield or a romantic tie against a non-league side would surely have been top of the wish list. Remarkably, nine non-league teams had advanced to the second round proper.

Chesterfield's stadium announcer Howard Borrell, a huge Spireites fan, very rarely missed a game, but the Bury tie was one of them, 'I had a period where I organised a trip to Belgium every year, and that was always in November. So for round one, I was actually in Belgium. So when we played Bury, I missed that. We saw the result on TV and made a couple of phone calls to check on the score. We never, ever thought that this would be the first match of a cup run to the semi-final. I think we went the longest a Football League club has ever gone without reaching the second round. We were always knocked out. So in Belgium, we thought we'd miss our FA Cup season again. But I was back on Monday and ready for round two!'

When the second-round draw was eventually made, Duncan's side were rewarded with another home draw, against Scarborough who played one tier below them in the Third Division.

While it may not have been the 'glamour' tie fans would have wanted, it did represent a real opportunity to reach the third round for the first time since 1980/81.

The possibility of playing a Premier League side in the third round was a fantastic thought. What a cup run that would be! But there was no denying whatsoever that the league was the top priority and would remain so. Surely?

No Spireites supporter, young or old, could have foreseen what they were about to witness over the next few months. They had no idea what had just begun.

Fiona Stubbs was in the Saltergate press area for the Bury game working for the *Sheffield Star* as the paper's Chesterfield reporter and kept a diary of her first season covering football, which she still holds to this day, 'It was a bit of a fairytale personally, because I had grown up watching Chesterfield. My dad and my uncle had season tickets ... I remember from being very small, I always wanted to go and watch Chesterfield with them. I went to my first game when I was three. Then as I grew up, I became a Sheffield United fan. But I always knew I wanted to be a journalist. From being a kid, I wanted to be a sports journalist, but at that time there weren't many girls who did it at all. In the summer of 1996, there were two football teams that the *Star* covered that nobody from the sports desk wanted to cover. One was Chesterfield, the other was Barnsley. I think the deputy editor at the time thought it would be quite novel to have a girl doing one of them. I was given a choice and obviously it had to be Chesterfield. Then one of the other younger reporters took on Barnsley and then of course that season ... Barnsley went into the Premier League. All the old sports hacks were really annoyed that these two kids had come in and got all the glory that season and said so!

'It was a strange thing with the cup run because Chesterfield had a pretty dreadful record in the FA Cup. When it started, you thought they would just be knocked out by Bury and they were a bit of a bogey team anyway. But Sky had picked it out as the tie of the round and featured it on their highlights that night. You did think, that's a bit weird. It did give you a little bit of a frisson right at the start, even though you expected them to go out.'

Maybe the world of Saltergate could spin far closer to the world of Wembley than anyone had ever thought possible?

The most optimistic person seemed to be the manager himself! On *Legends of the Spire*, John Duncan stated, ‘If you look at the programmes from the FA Cup [from that season], I said “Wembley here we come!” right from the start ... I had a feeling we would have a good cup run. We hadn’t done particularly well in the cup, but we had a team that wouldn’t lie down anywhere and we had pace and power to score.’