

# Endorsements

## **Mark Hornby**

This is a very enjoyable read, looking back at memories of supporting Coventry City and what it means to support this or any football club. It includes heartfelt and personal anecdotes that any football fan can identify with, and it also presents a fascinating look at the psychological theory behind supporting a team and one's attachment to a football club – and this adds even more to the story of James' support.

Mark Hornby,

*Head of Marketing & Communications, Coventry City Football Club*

## **Jim Brown**

James Adams' book impressively describes life growing up in Coventry in the 1950s/60s and goes on to relate his interesting life story up to the present day. His whole story is threaded with his passion for Coventry City, and like many who grew up in Coventry and Warwickshire, myself included, the period of 1961–1967 was of major importance. The Sky Blues have dominated James' life from Billy Frith to Mark Robins and his experiences of love, life and football will strike a chord with City supporters from all generations.

Jim Brown

*Official historian for Coventry City Football Club*

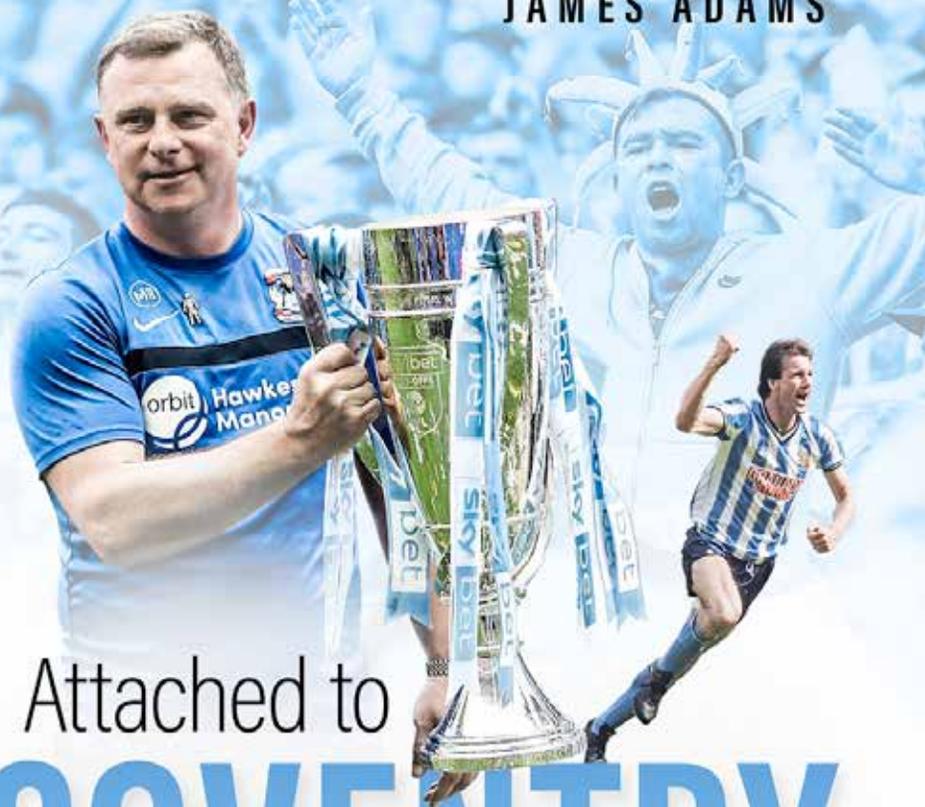
## **Rob Bonham**

This fascinating trip down memory lane recalls many great moments (and some not so great!) from many years of supporting the Sky Blues. Fans of all clubs will be able to identify with the ups and downs of being a football supporter, how it affects your everyday life – and how the occasional triumph makes all the pain worthwhile.

Rob Bonham

*Coventry City season ticket holder for over 25 years*

JAMES ADAMS



Attached to

# COVENTRY CITY

1958-2020

*A Personal Memoir*

Foreword by **Mark Robins**



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**COVENTRY**  
**CITY** 1958-2020  
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**JAMES ADAMS**



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## Highfield Road – the Billy Frith years: 1958–61

MY LOVE affair with Coventry City began when I stood on the open, concrete terracing at Highfield Road for the very first time, in the late 1950s. Before this, I have no recollection of football at all. I must have seen the BBC news about the Munich air disaster in February 1958, although I have no specific memory of it. My only whiff of football before the age of nine was that my dad occasionally disappeared for an evening with a fellow shopkeeper, to go to a match. I never heard him come back for by then I was fast asleep, and he never talked about it in the morning – probably for fear that I might ask to go with him one evening. ‘It’s far too late for you – you’ve school in the morning,’ came his firm reply when I once broached the possibility, and I never asked again.

Dad only ever went to evening matches and never on a Saturday as he had a shop to run, soon to be two or three. As it happened, his men's outfitter's shop near Ball Hill was in earshot of Highfield Road and, if the wind was in the right direction, he could hear the crowd's roar when a City goal went in.

Dad, brought up in Mansfield, had been introduced to Coventry City through Peter Taylor, a former City goalkeeper<sup>[1a]</sup> when he ventured into dad's shop for some gloves suitable for goalkeeping. Later, in the 1960s, Arthur Lightening and Bob Wesson would follow suit. My perception is that Dad went to some evening matches in the 1958/59 season, which must have been any permutation of Gateshead (4-1), Aldershot (7-1), Millwall (1-0) or Port Vale (1-0). The first three were on Monday nights, and Port Vale on a Tuesday evening<sup>[1b]</sup> – but I never heard a comment about any of them, even though City were then a successful team, climbing from the Fourth Division back into the Third, with the gates of those four matches ranging between 15,000 and 28,000. For although Dad was vocal about my bedtimes and schooling, he was never given to any passion or excitement, so it was quite in keeping with his character that even an exciting City victory would have left him relatively unmoved – or, if moved, then inexpressive.

Dad's second shop was a general store in Wyken which Mum managed while he was at Ball Hill. It was there in the back room, on a Saturday lunchtime in late April, that I asked Mum what a football match was like. The result of our conversation was for her to scour the previous night's *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, to discover a reserve match taking place at Highfield Road at three o'clock – and that she would take me in the car and drop me off. After the match I was to return to the Ball Hill shop where she would collect both Dad and myself at six o'clock.

This turned out to be the greatest adventure of my life so far. Not because of the result or quality of football on show – it was I believe a 0-0 draw versus Millwall reserves and the last match of the season. Neither was I at all aware of a City first team battling somewhere away from Coventry to secure promotion to the Third Division. My great adventure lay in being alone and free to be myself for a couple of hours – free from the rules and restrictions of home which were suffocating at times.

Before me, the vast green and brown pitch and surrounding stands and terracing were a symbol of escape and freedom. With only a mere sprinkling of spectators enjoying the spring sunshine, I was able to venture to the top of the Spion Kop, to see the players

like ants below – and then right down to the corner flag where the shouting and swearing were real and up close. In addition I was able to skip round the whole circumference of the pitch, apart from when I reached the Main Stand which was walled off. It was a totally exhilarating experience, even though I didn't see a goal scored – and I was unable to comprehend how Dad had kept so quiet about it all. My only disappointment was that I would have to wait until August before I could visit this magical place again.

When I arrived in the 'old' stand for my first match of the new 1959/60 season, two things hit me. I was first struck by the knees of the guy sitting behind me! For there were no seats as such, just long wooden benches with no backs to them. So you had to sit bolt upright to avoid being continuously kneed. Second and more importantly was the music blaring through the tinny-sounding tannoy system: Neil Sedaka's 'One Way Ticket' was played often, along with 'Rocking Goose' and 'Red River Rock', both by Johnny and the Hurricanes. I will always associate these three rock 'n' roll numbers with my very earliest days at Highfield Road. For me they created an exciting atmosphere of anticipation well before any players emerged on to the pitch.

After a few matches I was 100 per cent certain that I wanted to see every single home game, so within a

week or so, Dad took me to the club office at the back of the Main Stand to meet Bernard Hitchiner, the club secretary, who supplied me with my first season ticket. Bernard was a regular customer at the Wyken store, so they knew each other and had become friends – and I also maintained contact with Bernard in various ways over the next 40 years. He was a lovely guy – solid, dependable and courteous, and I was sad when he left the club a few years later. But he would be back.

Although City lost their second home game, their home form thereafter was excellent with no further defeats that calendar year. And then came Christmas Day – the last Christmas Day on which league football would be played. It was memorable for several reasons: firstly, that all the males in my extended family attended the morning match together and sat in the Main Stand (despite my season ticket being for the ‘old’ stand) – leaving the womenfolk to prepare a sumptuous Christmas meal at home, which seemed a pretty good arrangement to me. Secondly, the smell of whisky from coffee flasks and chicken sandwiches in tin foil permeated the stand and seemed fitting for the cold and icy conditions; thirdly, that an opposition player slipped on the icy surrounds when taking a throw-in and fell backwards, over the surrounding wall. He was shocked, as were we, but he was able to

carry on after receiving 'the magic sponge' and some sticking plaster.

If that were not enough, the 5-3 scoreline made for an exciting match, with centre-forward Kenny Satchwell scoring four as, terrier-like, he raced and slid around a snowy pitch. Finally that evening – after the meal and the presents were over – my uncle introduced me to the table football game of Subbuteo, which he had just bought for my cousin. I was immediately hooked, and got my own set soon after. It had been a Christmas Day to savour.

For the rest of the season, City kept up their good form and were always close to the top of the league, just behind leaders Bury. With City's excellent home record behind them, when Bury came to visit in February it was expected that another home win would take us to the top of the Third Division. By this time I was familiar with all of City's players and often went autograph-hunting. My hero was their regular goalkeeper, Arthur Lightening. He was tall, rugged and, in my mind, very handsome. He was brilliant in the air and caught every ball from corners. I also loved his cheeky trick of pulling down the crossbar so the ball could sail over it rather than under it – and I was surprised that no referee ever cautioned him for this. I met him just the once – in the players' car park behind the Main Stand – as he arrived

for training. I noted his dark green Ford, registration TOF 4, and then his remarkable autograph with steep, forward-slanting lines, close together, spiking sharply up and down – a bit like lightning, I mused. I'm sorry that I don't have it today, and Arthur himself has long since passed away.

But on the day of that match, we could all see that Bury were a good side. City's defence were just about holding them at bay until their centre-forward broke free and cracked a shot against the foot of the post. Arthur had dived full length and had perhaps finger-tipped the ball. But as chance would have it, and occurring almost in slow motion, I saw the ball rebound off the post and hit Lightning squarely on the top of his head, just as he was getting to his knees. Then, with one bounce, it ended up in the net. And that was how it ended; 1-0 to Bury. It was my first real City disappointment as I ran back to Dad's shop, just about holding in the tears.

Fortunately, however, that was not the end of things for City. For although they missed out on promotion, ending up fourth, they were still playing well in the Southern Floodlit Cup – a relatively minor competition, yet with a few First Division teams, including Arsenal and West Ham, putting out strong sides. This was the last year the trophy was being played for and City, having already beaten Fulham and Southampton,

suddenly found themselves in the final against West Ham, to be played at Highfield Road. Against a strong Hammers outfit, City played 'out of their skins' with Ron Hewitt scoring both goals in a 2-1 victory in front of a 17,000-strong crowd. I relived Hewitt's second goal time and time again in my made-up bedtime commentaries with which I eventually lulled myself to sleep. And it explains why City's all-white strip with royal blue trim holds a special place in my heart. It was the first of City's three cup final victories that I would witness, although it is the least acknowledged.

By the time of the 1960/61 season I was 'football crazy, football mad', as I imagine were thousands of other boys all over the country. But I had no one to share my excitement with as I had parted company with Adam, my best friend from infant school, when my parents transferred me to King Henry VIII Junior School on the other side of the city. And although Dad was a City supporter of sorts, he never got excited about anything and had only the briefest of comments to make about any game. My only football companion was Ivan, a fellow season ticket holder who sat behind me, and with whom I could chat my way through the matches. At the time I reckoned him to be in his early 30s – and today he's in his early 90s, having held a season ticket throughout all those years. Only recently

did he stop attending every away match as well. A truly dedicated supporter and a true gentleman with lots of football wisdom to impart to an excitable teenager like me. Today, I always make a point of seeing him whenever I'm at home matches.

My other football outlet was at school where we had a house match competition. My only fading memory of this event is that I became King's House captain and, by scoring two late goals against Holland House, we managed to snatch a draw from the jaws of certain defeat. I was carried off shoulder-high by my teammates, as if we had actually won something – whereas the only thing we were celebrating was avoiding yet another humiliating defeat, finishing the bottom of four teams with just that one point. I blame bad captaincy myself.

Around that time, a Master organised several Saturday morning school team matches. Regarding myself as a quicksilver goalscorer I was hoping to be centre-forward, but was only selected to play at left-half. Playing out of position clearly didn't suit me and I didn't distinguish myself. In the autumn of 1961 I transferred to the senior school where, disappointingly, there was no football – but strong rugby and cross-country traditions and teams. Unfortunately, I was good at cross-country. One positive however, was that I met up again with

Adam who had also become a keen City fan – and our friendship would remain life-long.

Back at Highfield Road, the 1960/61 season got off to a lacklustre start and never got much better. Fortunately we were reasonably good at home, but we were dreadful away. An away match meant almost certain defeat, and often a heavy one. You just got used to it. But in the FA Cup first round we were drawn away to Worcester City, a non-league team – and I remember the sheer, unbelievable joy when news of our 4-1 victory came via the BBC's *Grandstand* programme with Ronnie Farmer and Billy Myerscough bagging a brace each. Perhaps we had turned a corner? We did the same in round two, beating Queens Park Rangers away 2-1. Next, round three, and another away tie – but this time it was Liverpool.

Three consecutive league wins followed the QPR match, but it was the prospect of playing Liverpool for the first time in the club's history that caught the imagination. It even caught my dad's imagination as, for one of my Christmas presents he bought two away stand tickets (via Bernard Hitchiner) and offered to take me to Anfield by train. I was beyond excited. So much so that he warned me that if I didn't shut up about our forthcoming trip, he wouldn't take me at all. So I shut up – at least within his earshot.

The long, slow, snake-like journey through the deep Lime Street cutting was very impressive, as was Anfield when we eventually arrived. At this point Liverpool were a Second Division team, but riding high at the very top – and no one was expecting anything else but a Reds win. True to form they soon went a goal up, with Roger Hunt adding a second – and all seemed lost until, from nowhere, Ray Straw and Billy Myerscough evened things up. City then hit a post and the bar as they launched themselves at the Liverpool goal for a winner. But, as often happens when a team doesn't take its chances, it was Liverpool who grabbed the fifth and final goal. We were sad but very proud of what an average City team had achieved and, according to reports, as their team coach left Anfield, the players were applauded by Liverpool fans for their brave performance. The only real downside to this, my first away trip, was that the train and its heating broke down for two hours on the return journey, and we only arrived back home close to midnight – frozen and well past my bedtime!

The following week, while watching the BBC's six o'clock news, it seemed that another breakdown was in the offing – the breakdown of talks between the Players' Union (led by a certain Jimmy Hill) and the Football League. Although I didn't understand all the details, I did understand that there was the possibility

of players striking over the £20 maximum wage, and other related matters. A football strike was the last thing I wanted to see – so I didn't like this Jimmy Hill who might bring it about. Also, when interviewed, he seemed rather outspoken and somewhat full of himself. My parents had a natural dislike of anyone who appeared too confident, or who seemed a bit 'smarmy' with a southern accent. They didn't much like beards either. To make matters worse Jimmy Hill was a footballers' trade union leader, which was total anathema to my parents' ultra-conservative, and anti-working-class values. In the event, the players got their way, the strike was averted and, for ordinary fans like me, normal football life could continue without a break – relief.

\* \* \*

The 1961/62 season kicked off rather like the previous season, with a reasonably good home record while remaining dreadful away – and we maintained a respectable but hardly exciting mid-table position in the league. But still, there was always the FA Cup and, having acquitted ourselves so well at Anfield in January, there was every prospect of another cup run – especially with an 'easy' second round home tie against non-league King's Lynn. What could possibly go wrong?

In what is now part of Coventry City folklore, a lot could, and did, go wrong – and we suffered a humiliating 2-1 home defeat at the hands of the non-leaguers. It was a dire City performance and questions were raised in *The Pink* and the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* about the current management and players. As for me, I was obviously disappointed and wondered how such things could happen. But after all, I rationalised that it was ‘only the cup’, and there was another home league match to look forward to the following Saturday. So it was back to Sunday morning maths homework, Sunday afternoon Subbuteo, then sorting out my books and brain for double physics first thing Monday morning. For despite the defeat to King’s Lynn, my football world kept on turning. It was later that week, during Wednesday afternoon games, that I first demonstrated my prowess at cross-country running – much to my surprise.

However, when I arrived home later that day, a much greater surprise awaited.