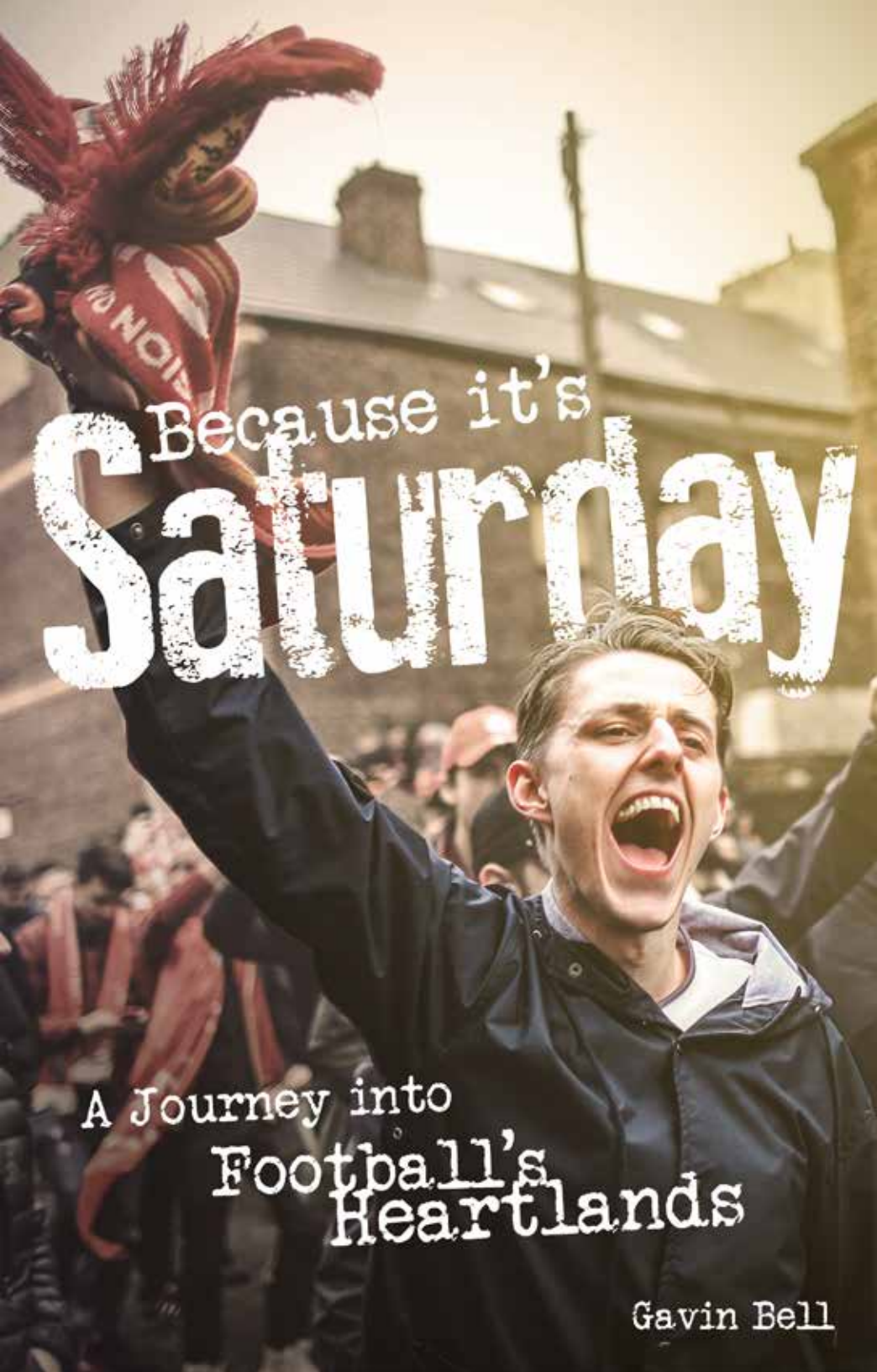
Because it's
Saturday
A Journey into
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# Because it's Saturday

## A Journey into Football's Heartlands

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# Fixture List

# Kick-off

THE PUB was crowded after a couple of midweek games, the usual raucous assembly of celebrating, drowning sorrows and questioning the parentage of referees. A big guy I vaguely recognised detached himself from the bar, weaved his way purposefully towards us, and proceeded to regale my pal with a beery account of how his team had stuffed Partick Thistle.

Eventually he turned to me and said, 'Hey Gavin, I hear ye're a Motherwell supporter?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Tell ye whit it is, the wife an' I are movin' house and we've got a three-piece suite we don't need. If ye fancy takin' it, ye can have an all-seater stadium.'

Needless to say he was a (Glasgow) Rangers supporter. It's the price you pay for not following a big club, you become the butt of jokes, an object of bemusement and sympathy, and more often derision. Fans of Crewe Alexandra and Scunthorpe will be familiar with the scenario.

This is no bad thing in Glasgow, a football-daft city fiercely divided by historic rivalry of blue and green, Proddie (Protestant) and Tim (Catholic), Rangers and Celtic. When the 'Old Firm' clash at Ibrox or Parkhead it's like a gathering of clans for battle, massed ranks of fans roaring defiance and sectarian abuse beneath blizzards of

Union and Irish Republican flags. They are not so much rival fans as warring tribes. It is a thrilling spectacle, and the imposing presence of Glaswegian constabulary usually averts serious trouble, but inevitably when the pubs close there are minor skirmishes. At such times it is good to be a Motherwell supporter. The Old Firm brigades just laugh at you.

It could all have been different. My family left Motherwell when I was seven to move to a council flat in Glasgow, barely a mile from Ibrox stadium, the home of Rangers FC, and it was assumed at my new school that I was, or would become, a 'true blue'. But it was too late. They say real supporters don't choose their team, it's either where they come from, or it's the team their dad supports. And I came from Motherwell. I'd already been to my first games at Fir Park, near huge steelworks that had endowed the team with its nickname 'The Steelmen'. In football terms, the die was cast. Motherwell usually manage to survive in the Scottish Premier League, but this doesn't mean very much. With crowds of around 4,000 and a team that costs next to nothing, we are hardly in the multi-million stratospheres of Chelsea and Manchester United. I suppose the likes of Burton Albion and Shrewsbury are more in our financial league.

I got to meet my 'Well heroes in the 1960s as a trainee sports reporter with DC Thomson, publisher of popular Sunday and weekly newspapers. One of them was Ian St John, who a few years earlier had scored six goals in a 9-2 'friendly' hammering of Brazilian side Flamengo at Fir Park. This was the era of the 'Ancell Babes', a team of gloriously gifted ball players managed by Bobby Ancell which produced no fewer than eight Scottish

internationals. St John was one of them and later he recalled how times have changed. He was paid a pittance at Motherwell, and when playing for Scotland he went to Hampden Park by bus.

My fledgling career in journalism almost crashed and burned on my first assignment, reporting on a First Division game between St Mirren and Dundee. DC Thomson also published daily and evening newspapers in Dundee, and it was my job to provide a running commentary for half-time and full-time issues of the evening paper.

On arriving at St Mirren's ramshackle ground in Paisley, I found the wooden press box crammed with big men in bulky overcoats, and I had to scramble for a seat nearby. It struck me there was something odd about the teams when they came out, but I couldn't put my finger on it and duly phoned the team sheets to Dundee. Fifteen minutes in, Dundee scored, and I promptly filed this important news for the first edition. Then it dawned on me. When the game began the players' shorts had been dirty, and I couldn't for the life of me think why. Eventually I plucked up the courage to tap one of the big sports reporters on the shoulder and ask him. He looked at me incredulously, scowled, and turned away.

At this point my dad, a well-known and well-liked freelance journalist in the area, came unwittingly to my rescue. After a moment the reporter turned back, looked at me quizzically and said, 'Are you Gavin Bell's son?'

'Yes sir.'

'Whit time did you get here?'

'Ten to three.'

'Early kick-off son, this is the second half. It's 3-1 St Mirren.'

I don't think I cried, but I'm pretty sure my eyes were moist. My career was in ruins before it had begun, and was there even any point in going back to the office?

'Who're you writing for, son?'

'The Dundee *Evening Telegraph*.'

'Right, come wi' me.'

And with that he saved my life by striding to the press phone, catching the first edition in time and dictating a substitute story, supposedly on my behalf. Words can never fully express my gratitude to this good Samaritan who saved me from ignominy on a rainy day in Paisley.

Fast-forward to a lifetime roaming the world as a foreign correspondent and travel writer, and when Saturday came I invariably looked or listened for the 'Well result. I may be the only person who has cheered during heavy fighting in Beirut on hearing we'd beaten Celtic. At least now I'm back in Glasgow I'm not alone. The length and breadth of Britain from Elgin to Plymouth there is a brotherhood and sisterhood of kindred spirits who turn out week after week, more in hope than expectation, to cheer teams with little prospect of winning anything other than their undying devotion.

This is the world of the Pilgrims, the Mariners and the Ironsides, clubs whose nicknames are derived from the history, geography and industries of the communities that produced and sustain them. There is no logical explanation for why anyone travels from Grimsby to Carlisle on a wet Tuesday night in November to watch journeymen footballers having a go at each other with more enthusiasm than skill. It's easier and cheaper to stroll to a pub and watch the silky soccer of superstars on Sky Sports.

But they steadfastly follow their local heroes come rain or shine, in battles for promotion or dour struggles against

relegation, and for many it is the highlight of their week. Theirs is the triumph of optimism over experience, and when they lose there's always next Saturday. I am informed by a German friend that there is a saying in the Ruhr area that is the classic response of a man when asked by his wife why he is leaving their home on a Saturday. He looks at her in bemusement and says, '*Weil Samstag ist*' – 'Because it's Saturday' (and he's off to the match). The lure of the beautiful game is universal.

If the stadia of glamour clubs are like gladiatorial arenas, those in the lower leagues are more like community playing fields where matches are social occasions for friends to catch up on local news and gossip over a pie and a pint. In an era of obscene wages and payouts to superstars, agents and hangers-on, men and women who follow the likes of Accrington Stanley are the lifeblood of the game. Theirs are the teams that hold up the pyramid of leagues, nurture young talent, and provide fields of dreams for the stars of tomorrow to hone their skills and attract big-club scouts. It is they who conjure the romance of cup ties in homespun grounds against giants of the Premiership, and fairy tales when they win. Some of their supporters remember the days when the local plumber was their team's centre-half. For them, the idea of being born and bred in Rochdale and supporting Manchester United is unimaginable, and I support this view. It goes to the heart of the matter, that football clubs rooted in their communities reflect and draw strength from them and become flag bearers for them and their aspirations. Never mind another factory has closed, the team's up for the cup on Saturday.

I remember reading a study that showed when Newcastle and Sunderland win, production in the North East rises the

following week with a general sense of well-being. I can attest to this phenomenon. As a young lad I used to walk to my gran's for tea after games at Fir Park, wearing my claret and amber Motherwell scarf. Inevitably somebody would ask, 'Whit did we lose by the day laddie?' News of a win would bring an instant smile, and as often as not you'd see a spring in the man's step. Where Rangers and Celtic fans expect and demand victory every week, a win for a 'Well supporter comes as a pleasant surprise. The recurring prospect of relegation never bothered me much; I saw it as an opportunity to broaden my horizons in away games to places like Dumbarton and Brechin. And I'd stopped going to Ibrox and Parkhead anyway because of the intimidating atmospheres. Being forced by police and stewards to remain packed in our tiny corner of Ibrox after the match until the stadium has emptied of Rangers fans, supposedly for our own safety, isn't much fun.

Loyalty and devotion to clubs at grassroots level run so deep and span so many generations they could be in the genes. As a result, communities support their clubs and in return the clubs support their communities with extensive social welfare programmes, and the symbiotic relationship enriches both.

And sometimes it reaps unexpected rewards. The best hope of European football for most of us is probably a pre-season friendly in Ireland, but a few years ago, to general astonishment, Motherwell qualified for an early round of the Europa League and we were drawn against a team from the Faroes. The club chartered a plane from Glasgow and invited fans to help pay for the flights by joining them, and when we arrived at the wind-swept ground on a sea cliff our part-time opponents came out to greet us. There was a

practice ground next to the little stadium, and the Faroese team generously provided us with a ball for a kick-about before the match. At one point I somehow managed to lay on a pass that led to a goal, and I heard a voice from the sidelines: 'Hey Gavin, didn't know you were that good, can I put you on the bench?' It was Alex McLeish, the Motherwell (and later Scotland) manager. You don't get that at the Emirates.

Nor do you get strikers hitting seagulls. This happened five minutes into the Faroes game when a wildly wayward effort soared over the bar, slammed into a startled bird and fell over a cliff into the sea where it was recovered by a fishing boat.

Another amusing incident in Motherwell's forays to far-flung, exotic places occurred during a cup tie at Arbroath. It was a wild, stormy day and the combination of gales, a high tide and the stadium's misfortune to be perched on the edge of the North Sea resulted in an Arbroath player being drenched by the spray of an incoming wave as he was lining up to take a corner. This was viewed as a natural if rare hazard of the Scottish game, and the referee's decision to abandon the match shortly afterwards was greeted with astonishment and dismay. 'Just for a wee bitty wind, the man's daft in the heid,' was one of the more polite remarks. So it goes.

The glamour clubs and their galaxy of superstars obviously have their place on Planet Football. We all marvel at the skills and artistry of players at the top of their game, even if they are preening peacocks like Ronaldo, seemingly determined to become a parody of himself. But it's on windy days at Arbroath and dark winter nights in Grimsby that roots are nourished which allow stars to flourish at the highest levels.

Increasingly, top clubs are reaping crops of promising youngsters barely more than children to bring through youth ranks, but few make the grade and most end up playing in empty stadiums for youth and reserve squads. For those who don't drift out of the game, their recourse is lower leagues where they can revive their careers and be local heroes to fans as passionate and committed as any in the Premier League.

The purpose of this book is to take readers on a season ticket to sparsely filled grounds where managers and fans are on first-name terms and players join them for a pint after the game. Along the way, I hope to find answers to a couple of questions – how do they survive on shoestring budgets, and for how long? While the big fish funded by billionaires gobble up worldwide television and sponsorship revenues, the minnows scrape along as best they can with crumbs from the Premier League table and the support of local butchers, bakers and candlestick makers. As I write this, Manchester City have just drawn more fans to a home game against Crystal Palace than all of the two dozen clubs in League Two combined to their weekend matches, and any one of City's superstars is paid more in a week than some teams earn in a season.

Inevitably, some clubs sink into the obscurity of non-league, and others simply disappear. I remember witnessing the sad demise of Third Lanark, originally the 3rd Lanarkshire Rifle Volunteers and founder members of the Scottish Football Association, at their last home game at Cathkin Park in Glasgow in 1967. Only four years before, they had beaten Celtic 2-1 to win the Glasgow Cup. Others like Accrington Stanley refuse to die, and against all the odds climb out of administration and the depths of

regional leagues to rejoin the professional ranks. How do they do that?

My travels take me inevitably to the cradle and enduring heartland of the game in the North and Midlands of England, which produced the dozen clubs that founded the Football League in Manchester in 1888, the oldest such competition in world football. (Preston North End won the first league title undefeated and completed the first league and cup double by winning the FA Cup.) For me this is a whimsical odyssey to places long known but never explored. I know my way around Beirut, Seoul and Johannesburg, but I'd be hard pressed to find Mansfield and Rochdale on a map. They are in the outer limits of my geographical knowledge, along with Uzbekistan, and have existed since my youth only as names on Football League tables. English fans may have heard of Queen of the South, but ask them to identify and locate the club's hometown and they'd probably struggle (it's Dumfries in the Scottish Borders).

On the way I expect to encounter the homespun wit and wisdom that has enlivened my experience of the game since I was first lifted over the barrier at Fir Park as a wee boy to get in free. I recall years later a comment directed at one of our players, Stevie Kirk, who belonged to the hit-and-miss school of Scottish strikers. After one particularly abysmal miss from point-blank range, he was trotting by the main stand when a chap behind me called out, 'Hey Kirkie, ye're nae mair use than a chocolate fireguard.' It was an inspired metaphor, and to his credit Kirk looked up, smiled and applauded. He was accorded a rousing cheer. Sadly, at the time of writing, the author of this perceptive remark has recently passed away. He was a constant presence in the season ticket holders' section in the main stand, in the

row behind me, and every time I look around I still imagine he's there.

In truth, he'll always be there when Saturday comes, rain or shine, supporting a wee club. Just like the rest of us. It's what Saturdays are for.