

BOBBY STOKES

The man from Portsmouth
who scored Southampton's
most famous goal

Mark Sanderson



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WHO SCORED SOUTHAMPTON'S
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Having carried out something in the region of 70 interviews with people who knew Bobby before, during and after his football career, I did finally speak to Bobby's family. Although I was unable to trace Bobby's ex-wife Janet – who I'm led to believe now lives abroad – I did make contact with his cousin Maria Johnson and her parents Albie and Helen Harris. Maria was kind enough to invite me to her house for a long chat between the four

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of us. Although I felt the material I had prior to meeting them stood on its own two feet, without their contribution this would be a far weaker book. I remain very grateful to them for being so open and generous with their time.

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Foreword

THERE were times while writing this book when Bobby Stokes would appear in my dreams, stopping me in the street to ask me how I was getting on. This suggested the responsibility of writing about his life was taking its toll. Some of my early research did little to boost my confidence. The lady behind the counter of the Harbour View Café in Portsmouth, where Bobby once worked, looked confused when I told her about the book. ‘Why do you want to write a book about Bobby Stokes?’ she asked. Well, this is as good a place as any to explain.

Football is everywhere today. Each and every nuance of every game is picked to pieces online, on TV, radio and in the newspapers. Following that logic it would seem reasonable to expect a certain degree of prestige and posterity would be bestowed upon those who contribute to actually winning something for a club, like Bobby did when he scored Southampton’s winning goal in the 1976 FA Cup Final. Many in the game have dined out on far more having achieved far less than Bobby did on that day at Wembley.

The first thing former Southampton manager Lawrie McMenemy asked me when I cold-called him at home was how I knew Bobby. I didn’t. We’d never even met and

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I'm not old enough to have seen him play. My motivation to write this book comes from being a Southampton supporter; one who grew up in the eastern suburbs of the city during the 1980s, a time when talk of the 1976 FA Cup Final was never too far away. The book is not an analysis of every game Bobby ever played in, nor is it a blow-by-blow account of his entire life; that would be tricky, as sadly Bobby is no longer with us to re-tell it. He is brought to life in this book through the eyes of those who knew him, it is their voices and memories that tell the story, so any error in the weaving of what they said to me can only be the fault of the weaver – namely me.

The story is as much about place as it is about Bobby's achievement. Set against the backdrop of the rivalry between the two cities of Southampton and Portsmouth – both of which Bobby is equally and intrinsically linked to – the book aims to serve as a sympathetic, but hopefully objective assessment of Bobby's life and career. On some nights when writing it, when midnight soon became one in the morning, I became very aware, perhaps even paranoid, that such objectivity was nigh on impossible for me to maintain while writing from the perspective of a Southampton supporter. But if this book can in some small way remind people of what Bobby did and what he was like as a person, then its objective will have been achieved.

Mark Sanderson

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View From A Hill

LOOK over the edge of Portsdown Hill and Portsmouth just happens out of nowhere, rolling its way out to sea. The country roads preceding it provide none of the usual physical evidence to suggest a fast-approaching city; there are no industrial estates, retail parks, petrol stations or suburbs, just green fields rolling south until you reach that edge.

Below is Paulsgrove, a housing estate built on the hill's chalk-faced slopes, where Bobby Stokes grew up on Leominster Road in the 1950s and 60s, dreaming of becoming a professional footballer for his boyhood heroes Portsmouth. The dream came true, just not in the way he imagined it. He played briefly for Portsmouth, but Bobby is far better known for scoring the most famous goal in the history of neighbouring Southampton, who beat Manchester United in the 1976 FA Cup Final. After that his life was never the same.

Paulsgrove looks quaint from the top of Portsdown Hill. Squint down on it when the sun is shining and the terracotta-roofed houses make it look like a Spanish

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town somewhere in Andalucía. It's less Spanish when you get down there. A sign put up by the council in the park on Leominster Road warns that golf is banned to avoid causing nuisance to anyone else in it. Nuisance is an understatement; putting your back into the park's slope with two hands full of shopping from the Co-op at the foot of the estate can be a nuisance – having to do that while outmanoeuvring a shower of incoming golf balls is a serious pain in the arse.

The area has suffered from negative stereotypes over the years, which has left some with the impression it is an area to be best avoided. But when Bobby grew up there it was home to the working man and his family. That the council deems the anti-golf sign necessary suggests the park has already been used as a makeshift driving range. You can see why. Long and thin, much like a fairway, the park undulates at a steady 15-degree angle out towards a view of Portsmouth, where the Spinnaker Tower rises nearly 200 yards into the sky like the flag on some far-flung green.

Between the park and the tower is junction 12 of the M27, leading traffic west to Southampton and further south towards Portsmouth's ferry terminals. It's all visible to the naked eye, but it would take some tee-shot to reach these landmarks from Leominster Road – as the crow flies, the Spinnaker Tower is four miles south of Paulsgrove.

You won't find a plaque or memorial of any kind in Paulsgrove to commemorate Bobby's famous Southampton goal. These kinds of accolades are reserved for other figures. Former Prime Ministers Clement Attlee and James Callaghan have nearby roads named after them. At the top of Portsdown Hill stands Nelson's Monument – a 110-foot tribute to Britain's most famous naval leader that has stood for more than 200 years in front of panoramic views of Portsmouth and the surrounding Solent water. These

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views offer great perspective. Not that perspective will do you much good in Paulsgrove, especially on the subject of Southampton. Public mentions of the city are sparse round these parts.

In Paulsgrove, Southampton tends to only be referred to by name by the road signs leading you to the motorway. For many the city is called Scum, and those who play for, or support, Southampton, are Scummers. The term is based around an alleged dock strike in Portsmouth which was broken by the South Coast Union Men (SCUM) of Southampton. The acronym has stuck with many Portsmouth fans, although it's proved difficult for historians to pinpoint exactly when that strike took place, if indeed it did at all. With nobody able to reach an agreement, the entire population of Southampton continues to be labelled by some, by the actions of a mysterious group of, as yet, unidentified people, who did something nobody can be sure about at a time that cannot be confirmed.

Not that Southampton fans are innocent bystanders in the rivalry. They have their own name for Portsmouth Football Club and its fans. It's a reference to their rivals' nautical roots. So in Southampton, Portsmouth are known as the Skates – the fish whose mouth bears a sufficient enough resemblance to female genitalia. Rumour has it this part of the fish is lubricant enough to have been used by lonely seamen to relieve themselves of the growing sexual urges brought on by many months spent at sea. This handpicked image was chosen by Southampton fans to demonstrate exactly what they think of their neighbours. But the back story of the rivalry is immaterial; quite simply it wouldn't do to wear a Southampton jersey in Paulsgrove.

Walk down through the park on Leominster Road, past St Michael and All Angels Anglican Church, and the well-tended flower beds that can be seen towards the

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parade of shops at the foot of the estate, and you will see several Portsmouth flags flying from the windows and balconies of flats. It's not exclusively Portsmouth shirts worn in the area though. Walk into the bookies and you will see the usual mixture of Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool shirts. That tolerance of the colours of other club's shirts only stretches so far. Place a bet dressed in a Southampton shirt and you'd most likely be chased out of the estate through Portchester and up the A27 to the village of Titchfield and beyond.

Bobby did eventually play for Portsmouth, but the seven months he spent at Fratton Park between August 1977 and February 1978 are no more than a footnote in his career compared to the famous goal that turned him into a household name to sports fans overnight. They remember his goal and his mop of wispy hair, like a cross between a grown-up Artful Dodger and a session guitarist for The Faces. Southampton have not won a major honour since. The Johnstone's Paint Trophy they won at Wembley in 2010 does not count as the competition is only eligible to those in the lower two divisions of the Football League. Without it though, Southampton supporters under the age of 45 wouldn't know what it's like to see their team win a trophy at Wembley.

Even 45-year-olds would struggle to remember 1976. You'd have to be pushing 50 to have really experienced it. Southampton hadn't won a major honour in the 91 years of existence prior to the cup final, either. The trophy remains the only major honour the club has ever won in what is at the time of writing 131 years of football and counting. In that context, Bobby is in a league of his own. His goal remains a unique contribution to the history of the club.

Run the clock forward 19 years from 1976 and Bobby was back in his home town of Portsmouth, cooking breakfasts and serving mugs of tea in a traditional greasy

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spoon café on Portsmouth harbour. The years may have passed, but his goal was never far behind him. It defined the rest of his life. Seldom would a day go by when he wasn't asked about it by customers – often tourists, or journalists, who knew where to go if they needed a quote for a story relating to the FA Cup.

Bobby was proud of the goal, but he would never boast about it. Quite the contrary – he wouldn't even bring it up in conversation. Having a laugh and joke was one thing, but making out like he was the main man was beyond the pale. Still, Bobby would open up to those who showed an interest. 'I don't wear my medal around my neck, but I'll happily recall every detail of the match with anyone who has 90 minutes to spare,' said Bobby, in conversation with a reporter in early 1995. 'It was the best day of my life.' This interview was most likely to have been his last.

Those words appeared in the pages of a newspaper. In isolation they don't reveal how Bobby actually said them. If it was the best day of his life did he sing it down the telephone line? Or was he suggesting the life that followed the goal struggled to live up to the achievement? Video footage from a few years before this interview is more candid. *The Official History of The Saints* was a video commemorating the history of Southampton Football Club. Released in 1990, it features plenty of interviews with former players, the majority of which are conducted on the pitch at The Dell. The consistent overcast weather during these interviews suggests they were scheduled on the same day, so as to minimise costs.

Bobby looks smart – more so than his peers. Peter Osgood's plunging white v-neck sweater looks dated compared to Bobby's well cut grey suit, offset by a paisley tie fastened in a Windsor knot and pushed neatly into his shirt collar. The hairstyle remained the same, with his fringe dancing over his eyebrows. He knows full well what

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he's going to be asked about. And although he has little to add to what he said in the post-match cup final interviews in 1976, how he says it is telling. 'I'll always talk about it, but I'll never bring it up,' said Bobby, a grin spreading across his face.

His accent reveals his Hampshire roots, whereby Hampshire becomes 'Ampsher, but was it really the case that he wouldn't bring that goal up in conversation from time to time? What is life if you can't occasionally boast about scoring the winner in any cup final, let alone what some will have you believe is the most famous cup competition in the world? When pushed on the subject Bobby returns to the default interviewee mode of the footballer, firstly underplaying the achievement by suggesting it was a long time ago, then dismissing his goal as merely one of the responsibilities of his job.

'It's water under the bridge – it's a nice memory within me; especially for my family,' said Bobby. 'But on the day I suppose it was part of my job, or Ossie's [Peter Osgood's] job, or Mick Channon's job. We had to try and win and fortunately I got the goal.' Somehow, Bobby manages to take the least amount of credit possible for the goal. Deep down he was bursting with pride, then when he spoke about it in public the words that came out of his mouth couldn't rank the achievement any higher than something he was obliged to do. It's telling that in a video with a running time of just under 90 minutes Bobby's total contribution is a 20-second interview. No doubt those making the video were looking for something more substantial from him, maybe a soundbite nailing what it feels like to score in a final. That wasn't his style.

During those 20 seconds Bobby shuffles from side to side, skimming over the surface of an incident many others could and would have waxed lyrical over until the tape ran out. His eyes dart off into the distance, perhaps waiting for

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his old friend Peter Osgood to join him for a round of golf, followed by a drink or two.

Bobby had separated from his wife shortly before Christmas 1994. His health then began to deteriorate. By May 1995, his family were concerned about his ability to look after himself. Maria Johnson was Bobby's cousin and, as owner of the Harbour View Café, his co-worker. But their relationship was closer than that. Having grown up on the same Paulsgrove estate in a tight-knit family she was more of a sister to Bobby. 'I knew he wasn't right, he went downhill after his marriage broke down,' said Maria, who convinced him to stay at his parents' house, back in Leominster Road, in order to convalesce. The family rallied around. Bobby's mother Marjorie kept a bedside vigil, with his aunt Helen on hand to offer further support. Maria remembers having spaghetti bolognese and talking to Bobby about Elvis Presley one evening. The next morning Helen went to the bathroom to empty the bowl of water she had used to wash Bobby in bed with when she heard him breathing heavily. Panic set in. She ran into the bedroom, attempting to resuscitate Bobby while screaming out to his dad for help as she telephoned for an ambulance. Bobby's mother couldn't face going up the stairs. The paramedics broke the news to Helen in the bathroom. They said it was too late, there was nothing they could do. Bobby was dead. Four months earlier he had turned 44. Bobby spent his final days being cared for by those he loved most, but Maria sensed something, 'I think he knew he was going to go.'

At first, it was suspected Bobby had died of a heart attack. The post-mortem established the cause of death as bronchopneumonia. Several different groups of people are at risk of that infection, including those who smoke and drink alcohol. There were times towards the end of his life when Bobby did both. Chinese whispers often implied

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Bobby's death was a direct result of cigarettes and alcohol, or to be more precise, that unconsciously or not he had declared some kind of war of attrition on himself which led to his death; but like so many aspects of Bobby's life, the reality was lost amid rumours and half-truths.