



# LES COCKER

The Biography

# Cocker Hoop

Key Man for Ramsey and Revie



Robert Endecott and Dave Cocker

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## The beginning

WITHOUT WISHING to reveal any major plot spoilers of Les Cocker's story, here are a couple of quotes I unearthed about him. For me, they perfectly encapsulate aspects of the man's character.

The first comes from an Accrington Stanley match programme of 1954, when Les was aged 30 and a 'seasoned' attacker for 'The Owd Reds': 'Les Cocker is now in his second season at the club and has proved a great servant with a heart to match his ability. He is a nuisance, he never lets an opponent settle and he can snatch goals in brilliant style.'

Though Les was at Leeds at the time, the second quote comes from an Aldershot versus Stockport programme in the early 1970s, referring to his playing days: 'It's difficult to remember anyone who grafted for 90 minutes as much as he did. Courage and determination were his answer to his lack of inches.'

You will see in this book that all of these Cocker qualities remained as constants throughout his life and that he shared

common bonds and characteristics with many other football men of the same era. Hardship, war and conscription undoubtedly helped to unite those of a certain age, and we owe much to Les's generation in helping to rebuild the country and enabling football to thrive in spite of all the huge obstacles.

Les was born on 13 March 1924, in Stockport. Curiously enough, Fred Perry was also born there, 15 years earlier, though the acclaimed tennis icon has nothing else to do with this book. And besides, Perry was moved away to Bolton and, later, Wallasey, by his parents when he was but a nipper. Artist Laurence Stephen Lowry created some of his wonderful paintings and drawings in Stockport, famously reproducing images of the town including, in the 1950s, the renowned Stockport viaduct which supposedly used 11 million bricks in its construction; it was at the time of its completion, in 1840, the largest viaduct in the world. The town also possesses the Stockport Plaza, a beautiful example of 1930s Art Deco architecture. Stockport would share some of the music limelight thanks to the formation of Strawberry Studios in the late 1960s, above the Nield and Hardy record store and ostensibly owned by a fledgling band called 10cc. In later years, Paul McCartney, Joy Division and the Stone Roses would record there.

Geographically, most of Stockport lay within the boundaries of the county of Cheshire, though its land north of the River Mersey was classified as Lancashire. Also news to me is that, in Stockport, the confluence of two rivers – the

Goyt and the Tame – form the famous Mersey. Since the 17th century, a main industry in the town was hat-making, and it employed a significant percentage of the local population, with over six million hats a year exported. Hence Stockport County Football Club, formed in 1883 (as Heaton Norris Rovers at the time), were nicknamed the Hatters.

Even with the constant horrors we are witnessing in today's world, I can't help but think that life felt tougher in the 1920s for most Britons, primarily due to fewer social and economic avenues of help. What life was like for a child like Les, in working-class society still overcast by silver lining-less clouds of a world war, feels too obscure, too distant a picture to realistically visualise. Was it even possible for a 1920s family to have a happy life in a small, north-west industrial town? And if the direct consequences of World War One weren't enough to contend with, the Great Depression would hit home by the decade's end.

The emphasis on a good upbringing generally rests with family, and Les's parents as well as his two sisters, Dorothy and Jessie, undoubtedly helped build a settled, secure and, I dare say, content life. With a spirit of stoicism typical of probably every region in Britain at the time, in those pre-NHS times and with acutely less awareness of mental health issues, it was considered that people ought to just 'get on with it' and 'take the rough with the smooth' even if the smooth seemed an alien prospect.

Stockport was a place of many terraced houses and cobbled streets – all very *Coronation Street*-ish, if you will,

which is not surprising as Corrie was originally, and still is, set in nearby Manchester ('Weatherfield', to be more accurate). The Cocker family home was respectable, appealing, clean, reasonably warm and 'nothing fancy' – just what a working-class home should be. Manchester is notorious for its rainy weather, but that's a rich comment coming from me, in Leeds, as I've just checked the rainfall stats for my home town. Anyway, life in the 1920s and 30s will have felt permanently gloomy and overcast for many British people in the wake of World War One and the ongoing, deeply worrying political rumbles in Europe. The nation needed that high degree of stoicism, I feel, to face up to general life and to be prepared for hard times ahead. How this affected the general demeanour and outlooks of children in such a climate is open to question, but it's a common belief that they grew up to be resilient, intuitive, independent and pragmatic.

There certainly was a baby boom after the war and generational life expectancy always improves as the years and societies progress. Those were the days when strong community spirit was vital, with family, friends and neighbours helping each other out in times of need. Of which there were many. The age-old theory applied, that households were able to happily leave their doors unlocked as the times were more innocent and neighbourly. Myself, I've always suspected that the happiest and least worried members of society in such times were the burglars of Great Britain.

Like a slow-burn virus, the Great Depression hit the United States following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, sending economic and social shockwaves around the world. For Britain and Europe the consequences were wide-ranging, thanks in part to the demand from the US for exports declining, resulting in large-scale unemployment in many countries.. Here, the number of unemployed rose in to the millions and soup kitchens became commonplace around the country. Government reports declared that around a quarter of the British population were ‘barely existing’ on a poor subsistence diet. Child malnutrition increased and this blight in turn resulted in a disturbing rise in cases of scurvy, rickets – due to vitamin deficiencies – and tuberculosis. Tuberculosis was particularly serious, a killer disease with no widespread vaccinations against it available. ‘TB’ would only begin to be dealt with proficiently in the 1950s, a few years after the National Health Service had been created in 1948.

Hard, grey times indeed, creating and reinforcing the need for football escapism on a Saturday afternoon for swathes of men around Great Britain. The sport was a cheaper form of both realism and romanticism than cinema, delivering genuine human bonding, brotherhood, hope, drama and heroes to the fore. The terraces were often packed with Mackintosh raincoats, ties, trilby hats, pipes, four-page matchday programmes, Bovril and gravy-stuffed pies to scorch the mouth. There is no surprise that today there is a yearning for these days of innocent wonder; it was a beautiful thing amidst

the hardships that were endured by so many. We, the people, were the roses growing and blooming through the pavement cracks of tough working-class towns. The likes of Stockport and Accrington were represented as tough and dour football clubs. A not too unkind summary, though both were staunch pillars of local community life. Others, such as Luton Town and Leeds United, were higher in status but, in reality not much better off.

Football was never just a game; it was important, it was significant, it was a low-cost high-value pastime, a frequently glorious pastime bringing colour to many a grey life. The young Les Cocker appreciated this, and if he wasn't playing football in the street, then it was more than likely he was playing cricket instead, and all that before the other sporting obsession of his life, golf. You probably know already, that Les would 'make it' in football, but he was also a fine cricketer, even better with the bat and ball than he was with the golf club and dimpled projectile.