Chris Bishop

FAITHFUL CITY, FICKLE FOOTBALL

Resurrecting Worcester City, the Sleeping Giant-Killers of Liverpool

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Faithful City – seriously?

WORCESTER IS a blessed city which could have been built for a postcard. The tower of its mighty cathedral dominates the many church spires over the elegant palisades of the Georgian bridge over the River Severn.

The bridge itself looks more Paris than provincial England, and glows with lamplight at night which shimmers on the dark ripples of the river.

For centuries, many have called Worcester the Faithful City because of its spurious reputation as a city with Royalist sympathies.

To this day, the footballers of Worcester City wear the word Faithful on their shirts.

Yet faith has been in short supply at the once mighty club, in its dramatic fall from grace.

In the successful 1970s, many around the country asked why a city of Worcester's size – more than 100,000 inhabitants – didn't have a Football League club. Burnley has fewer people yet managed to sustain a Premier League side.

It is not as if the club had not earned their stripes. Just over a decade ago, Worcester City dumped Coventry City out of the FA Cup.

In 1959, the blue-and-white-striped footballers of the Faithful City humbled the reds of Liverpool, in the same competition, on their way to becoming one of the most feared non-League sides in the land.

So why faithful? The history books tell us this jewel set in the green Worcestershire countryside has proved a magnet for the royals for nearly a thousand years.

When wicked King John, of Robin Hood and Magna Carta fame, was on his death bed in Newark Castle, Nottingham, one of his last thoughts was about Worcester.

The dying king, in the throes of dysentery, ordered his courtiers to haul his corpse south and bury it in the nave of Worcester Cathedral, where he lies to this day. He had spent a few merry Christmases in Worcester and days of happy hunting in the thick forest that once hemmed in the walled city.

The city draws tourists and royals alike. You can't go to Worcester without marvelling at the winding sweep of the River Severn, with its brilliant white bevy of swans gliding the green waters.

For the people of Worcester, for centuries, the river was life. A source of food, water, trade and transport.

From chugging barges carrying chocolate crumb to Cadbury in Bournville, Birmingham, to silk and spices shipped in from distant shores and hauled up the river by Severn trows.

These small, sailed, cargo boats traded with ocean-going ships calling at the port of Bristol at the mouth of the Severn.

The graceful gliding swans' idyll may draw the tourists, but they belie the deadly undercurrents of the Severn which have snuffed out many a life.

Maybe, a dark metaphor for the precarious condition of senior football in the city.

Also, in recent years, Severn Trent Water Authority has been under fire for the amount of sewage lurking beneath the swans – there, maybe, another metaphor.

The city skyline is ever dominated by Worcester Cathedral. It sits on a shelf above Britain's longest river.

The cathedral is a monument to faith and hard work. It took generations of Worcester craftsmen hundreds of years to smooth and sculpt the massive stone blocks hauled with muscle and rope from quarries miles away and floated down the river. Fathers passed the skills down to their sons in backyard workshops scattered across the city. The fruit of this labour survived wars, plagues and the Reformation.

Wherever you go in Worcester, the imposing Gothic tower peeps over the rooftops, trees and black-and-white buildings of

the ancient city. It is the abiding symbol of the administrative capital of Worcestershire – home to more than 600,000 people in this sleepy green corner of the industrial Midlands.

Every Monday night, like clockwork, the mighty bells of the cathedral ring out over the lush green of Chapter Meadows, where cattle graze on the opposite bank of the River Severn.

On summer nights, it is a sound and sight to behold as the bells peal over meadows stretching towards the hump-backed Malvern Hills on the horizon. A gorgeous view little changed for more than a thousand years.

The sound of the bells blended with the thumping flurry of wings as swans take flight on a clear summer's night is almost heavenly.

Wherever my dangerous assignments in journalism took me in Africa – that was a scene which I could close my eyes and savour. It sustained me in the worst of times, in the filthiest of cells.

On a mission from God, Benedictine monks founded an order at the cathedral in the 10th century. They were called the black monks, because of their dark habits. In 1501, the monks brought a bit of light to Worcester in the shape of four prized cygnets bought for 13 shillings and four pence – many times the cost of a flock of sheep.

For years, the black monks kept the white swans as pets in a pool in the cathedral grounds.

Then came all the king's men, armed to the teeth.

The split from Rome meant a nationwide purge of Catholic buildings. The soldiers of Henry VIII destroyed the priory in Worcester, in 1540, as part of the dissolution of the monasteries during the Reformation.

The fleeing monks turned the swans free into the nearby River Severn where they've survived, just, for more than 400 years.

Careless fishermen almost wiped them out in the 1970s. They tossed lead weights and nylon fishing wire into the waters that almost strangled and choked the swans into extinction.

A ban on discarding fishing gear into the river saw the swans recover, from a handful, into a bevy big enough to block the river with a fleet of white feathers.

Henry VIII's daughter, Elizabeth I, made a much more graceful and peaceful entry on horseback into Worcester on 16 August 1575, a warm and rainy summer's night, according to contemporary accounts.

It was part of her frequent and popular royal progress around the country on horseback. In modern parlance you could call it a PR tour.

By royal decree, the citizens of Worcester painted their houses with white-lime and lit torches, lanterns and candles in the fading light.

Thousands cheered as Queen Bess emerged, riding side saddle as ever, from under the turreted Foregate that stood guarding the road through the forest to the north of the city. She had spent the previous night in the village of Hartlebury, ten miles north, as a guest of the Bishop of Worcester.

Legend has it that her entourage stopped at the Rose and Crown in Hartlebury – now a home – in what is still called Inn Lane to raise a pint with astonished villagers on a hot August afternoon. She very likely did – there were very few places that she could have gone to on her way to a night at Hartlebury Castle.

The next day, in Worcester, torch bearers flanked her as she trotted slowly into the city. At the Cross, in the heart of the city, she stopped and turned her horse deftly 360 degrees – like a modern-day dressage rider – so all could see her.

Eyewitness accounts say she spoke from the saddle to plough boys and patricians alike.

On her way into the Faithful City, Queen Bess saw a couple of black pear trees that historians think, maybe, were planted hastily for the occasion. She decreed that three black pears should be incorporated into the crest of the city.

Nearly 450 years later the black pears remain on the city coat of arms and the badges of the footballers of Worcester City.

Aside from pears, war has been as much a part of the history of the city as royalty. The two often arrived in Worcester hand-in-hand; the people who ran the country fortified Worcester as far back as the Romans.

In the dark days of 1940, the British government saw Worcester as its Alamo if the Germans invaded.

The king was expected to move to Worcestershire, with his ministers setting up government in Worcester, as the city braced for a bloody last stand against the Nazis.

The army readied heavy guns on the roofs of buildings overlooking the Severn. Anti-tank guns were even in the back garden of the Bishop's Palace, the residence of the Bishop of Worcester.

The River Severn was seen as the last line of defence against the German panzers in a plan that could have been hatched by Captain Mainwaring of *Dad's Army*.

The British army figured that Hitler's tanks couldn't cross the river. They thought they were likely to try to force their way into the city down New Road, past the cricket ground, and across the 18th-century stone bridge over the Severn.

So, soldiers set explosive charges in the trees lining New Road. They set the charges in such a way that the trees would fall into the road and block the path of the panzers. Then more charges would blow the palisades off the sides of the bridge so the guns could have a clear field of fire against any troops, or tanks, who had the audacity to try to cross.

Thankfully, the panzers never turned up to test the theory. You can't help thinking the Wehrmacht would have found a way around this defence.

Fire, fury and fortifications were at the heart of Worcester's strongest link to Royalist sympathies in a war that many say gave rise to the Faithful City tag.

Worcester saw the first and last shots of the English Civil War in the 17th century. A bitter conflict that divided families and killed around 200,000 soldiers and civilians, a loss to the population proportionate to that of World War One.

The first shots came in a skirmish between dashing cavalier commander Prince Rupert of the Rhine and a 1,000-horse against around 1,000 Parliamentary dragoons. It happened at Powick Bridge just south of the city on 23 September 1642; it lasted 15 minutes, cost around 30 lives, and went down in history.

You could argue Worcester was among the first to declare for the Royalist cause and the last to surrender the fight for the crown at the Battle of Worcester in 1651.

The city also held out for the king under two months of siege in 1646 where the Faithful City name took root.

For months 5,000 Parliamentarian besiegers fired shots into the city held by Governor Colonel Henry Washington, a relative of the first US President George Washington. His 1,500-strong garrison gave a good account of themselves sallying beyond the city walls for skirmishes. In one short, sharp clash, in what is now Cripplegate Park on the banks of the Severn, they captured a couple of Parliamentarian battle flags.

The next morning, the Royalist defenders hung the flags from the Cathedral tower to taunt the besiegers about this defeat. Football-style mind games, 17th-century style.

The Parliamentarians fought back with bullets and their own brand of mind games, shouting: 'Washington's bastards!' and 'Papist pigs!' across the river.

In these hungry and desperate days, legend has it that the defenders painted, in Latin, on the drawbridge of the bridge over the river: '*City Fidelis Deo et Rege*' (City faithful to God and King).

Words that also found their way on to the city's coat of arms, and the badge of the football club, which carries the legend: '*Civitas in bello et pace fidelis*'. A city faithful in peace and war.

Eventually, the Parliamentary forces bombarded and starved out the defenders and the poor city folk who suffered with them. You can be sure faith and love for the royals were wearing a bit thin by the end of the siege.

Tempestuous times tested the faith of the people of Worcester, even more, in the final battle of the English Civil War. A story I learned at my mother's knee.

On a glorious August morning in 1651, a slender 21-year-old with long black curly hair rode into the city knowing it was crown or coffin for him.

The man, who was to become Charles II, had marched from Scotland at the head of around 16,000 Scottish soldiers determined to reclaim the throne.

Historians believe Oliver Cromwell and his Parliamentarian army merely shadowed the invading Royalist army; allowing troops to advance deeply into England, closing off escape and supply routes, so he could surround them and wipe them out.

The young claimant to the throne arrived in Worcester the day after his troops. Royals always knew how to make an entrance into Worcester; the crowds feted Charles, and the mayor held the civic sword high above his head as he led the future monarch to the Cross in the heart of the city. Here Charles was proclaimed as the King of England, Scotland and Wales.

Charles hoped a solid victory at Worcester would spark a Royalist uprising and bring people to his colours to unseat Cromwell and his po-faced puritan Republican regime.

Think again. If anything people ran from the royal colours; there was an embarrassing call for recruits on Pitchcroft, just outside the city, which drew a mere handful.

This is where the Faithful City narrative starts to look a bit queasy. People in Worcestershire were tried of looting, raping armies marching through their land; they wanted peace – no matter who was winning – and didn't want to have the expense and pain of garrisoning hungry, thirsty, troublesome soldiers.

In short, Cromwell took Worcester in a ruthless pincer movement. As his forces swept through Sidbury gate, from the south of the walled city, many of the Scottish defenders threw down their weapons. The sweating and bloody Charles II made an impassioned plea to his beaten troops.

'I would sooner you kill me now, than allow me to see the consequences of this day.'

You can imagine, in the confusion, some of his soldiers may have considered it. Charles fled the city out of the back door of his digs in New Street as the London dragoons kicked down the front door; his soldiers died in their hundreds so the narrow streets of Worcester were blocked by the bodies of men and horses.

So faithful?

Adrian Gregson, former Mayor of Worcester, once told the Battle of Worcester Society: 'I think the people of Worcester were faithful, but only to whoever was in charge!'

I rest my case.