



# GOOD OLD

Sussex by the Sea



**A SIXTIES CHILDHOOD  
SPENT WITH  
HASTINGS UNITED,  
THE ALBION AND  
SUSSEX COUNTY CRICKET**



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## 1953 New Elizabethans

### *'The Black Hills of Dakota'*

MY EARLIEST memory of East Sussex is of the stunning view from the hilltop council house estate where my parents and I lived for most of the 1950s. The newly built, white stippled houses were formed into a tight circle, as if defying a marauding Sioux war party. From this lofty Wealden ridge, the view extended over the undulating pastures and woodland below to the distant whale-backed downs and the glimmering sea. Had Satan chosen this spot to tempt Jesus, he might have succeeded. As beautiful as this location was, it gave little protection against the buffeting gusts of wind which would blast through our cracked walls and ill-fitting window frames with ghoulish shrieks. As for the established villagers, our reticent hosts, their frosty reception matched the elements.

But with their musty grocery store rejuvenated by our custom, the villagers' antipathy turned to tolerance, and eventually acceptance. This reconciliation allowed us, the invading 'townies', to take our place in village society, helping at its fetes, swelling its harvest festivals and participating in its sporting activities. Dad played both football and cricket for the village, but his early attempts at enticing my interest fell on muddy ground.

Dad introduced me to football in the year of Queen Elizabeth's coronation. He bought me a leather football for my fifth birthday. On a glowering winter afternoon, we tried it out in a soggy recreation field. The ball became impossibly heavy with excess moisture, barely trickling away from my flailing kicks. This was not fun.

More to my taste then was bubbly, boisterous, buck-skinned Doris Day, the star of the Hollywood musical of that year, *Calamity Jane*. With her jauntily placed US Cavalry cap and her thigh-slapping androgyny – such an alluring 'pop' commodity – she exuded high-octane fun, gymnastically belting out rowdy numbers such as 'The Windy City' and 'The Deadwood Stage'. But it is her wistful version of 'The Black Hills of Dakota' which stands my test of time, perhaps possessing greater poignancy because it signified that the heyday of the Western was passing.

In our crowded, smoky cinemas, the sweeping western panoramas of Monument Valley, Montana and the Great Plains provided a perfect antidote to grey, rationed lives. But in the brighter, more prosperous years that followed the coronation of our new Queen, we had less need of vicarious horizons.

Not that the Coronation Day weather gave any cause for encouragement. After watching, in grainy monochrome, a heavily bejewelled Elizabeth solemnly dedicate herself to a life of regal duty, we trudged in bedraggled procession towards the village hall, waving our miniature flags determinedly in the persistent June rain, and hungrily anticipating the feast being laid out on the trestle tables inside. For this was our celebration, too, of an end to austerity, as plates were piled high with sandwiches and bridge rolls bulging with scrambled egg, ham and cheese and tomato, not forgetting the abundance of jelly, fairy cakes and the ever-serviceable Victoria sponges. Our garish coronation mugs ensured it was a day we would never forget.

With the nation pumped up with patriotic pride it was entirely fitting that Len Hutton's England cricket team

should defeat the mighty Australians for the first time since 1933. At a sun-drenched Oval in August I was told that the winning runs were hit by 'pin-up' boy Denis Compton, who swivelled on Arthur Morris's wayward long-hop and smacked it joyfully to the long-leg boundary. As the ball raced towards its triumphant destination, Brian Johnston can be heard shouting, on the surviving footage: 'It's the Ashes! The Ashes!' Thousands of men and women can be seen swarming all over the turf, racing one another to embrace the not-out batsmen, 'Compo' and Bill Edrich, while women planted fat kisses on their heroes' burning cheeks. Apparently, BBC radio commentator, Bernard Kerr, found difficulty in restraining his euphoria, reporting: 'This is staggering. In fact, it's rather moving. From the broadcasting box, you can't see any grass at all, there's just a whole carpet of humanity. It really is just a wonderful sight!'

Appearing on the pavilion balcony, England's captain Len Hutton addressed the tumultuous crowd in a pastiche of Oxford diction, so different from his uninhibited, Yorkshire accent, adopted when interviewed after his record-breaking innings at the Oval in 1938. The Australian captain, Lindsay Hassett, seemed much more at ease, amiably extending his congratulations to his victorious rival. However, at the post-match party, Hassett confessed that his speech had been more sporting than he felt, remarking: 'Yes, I think it was pretty good considering Lockie threw us out.' In the maelstrom of patriotic fervour prevalent in 1953, his accusation of cheating was brushed aside. After all, a Commonwealth team had just conquered Everest and the three-year Korean War had ended with tales of British valour at the Battle of the Imjin River. But the collective euphoria was upset by a fatal crash of our pioneering De Havilland Comet, the world's first jet airliner. And the England football team's supremacy at home was shattered by the technically and tactically superior Magyars.

# Hastings United v Norwich City

**FA CUP Third Round, 9 January 1954**

*'Who Killed Cock Robin?'*

UNDETERRED BY my initial resistance, Dad tried once more to convert me to football. On a gloomy 9 January 1954, Dad took me to the Pilot Field to watch Hastings United take on Third Division Norwich City in the third round of the FA Cup.

Semi-professional Hastings United were still in their infancy in 1954, having been formed only six years before. Their birth, like mine, in that hot summer of 1948, was set against a backdrop of massive war debts, ration cards and grim austerity. Despite the welcome 'Welfare State' reforms introduced by Clem Attlee's Labour government, 'mend and make do' was a phrase of choice. But while Bradman's 'Invincibles' crushed England's cricket team in that summer of 1948, our bankrupt country laid on a cheap, cheerful, yet undeniably successful Olympic Games. Public entertainment had never been so popular, particularly professional football.

During the 1948/49 season the average crowd at a Football League game was 22,300, with attendances regularly in excess of 60,000 at top clubs. Even county cricket registered almost two million admissions during the long hot summer of 1947.

This level of popularity could not be sustained, though. Once television ownership expanded prodigiously during the mid-50s, providing an absorbing hearth-side alternative, there was a sharp drop in custom for other public entertainments, notably the cinema. But in 1948 the voracious appetite for football was such that 2,000 turned up at the Pilot Field on 14 August to watch a pre-season trial match.

According to the *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, Hastings United were created in a rush. A successful application was made by its ambitious board to join the Southern League, arguably the strongest competition outside the Football League, but by July 1948 the newly formed club had yet to secure a ground and a team. Their choice of ground was the council-owned Pilot Field, situated in an elevated position on the Eastern edge of town. However, it was occupied by amateur club Hastings and St Leonards FC, who asked the council to renew their tenancy at a previously agreed rent of £300 per year. The Hastings United board, led by chairman George Steel, offered twice that figure. *The Hastings & St Leonards Observer* reported on its front page, 'After a lively debate, the Town Council decided by a narrow margin of 18 votes to 17 to grant Hastings United use of the lower Pilot Field pitch on Saturday and Wednesday afternoons, during the 1948/49 season. The rent was set at £750 a year, inclusive of rates and maintenance.' Although the amateur club belatedly matched the United bid of £600, it was to no avail. The debate had been as heated as the outside temperature of 90°F.

The lower Pilot Field was also then the venue for speedway motorbike racing, attracting crowds of 9,000 or more. However, the objections of wealthy and influential neighbours, on grounds of noise, were sustained by the council. For 15 years after, the football pitch remained surrounded by a cinder track and 30 short floodlight pylons.

In mid-August 1948 the *Hastings & St Leonards Observer* reported that Hastings United had received 14 applications from professional footballers. While the remuneration on

offer was frugal, the Hastings directors attempted to mitigate any deficit by offering part-time work in the town. Amateur players were also signed to supplement the thin first-team squad. The amateurs were signified on the team sheet by their initials preceding their surnames, mirroring the traditional differentiation of 'gentlemen' and 'players' adopted in English first-class cricket.

Councillor Frank Oak became the club's full-time secretary, while George Skinner, a former Spurs player and qualified coach, was appointed as player-manager. Somehow, Skinner cobbled together a team for the opening fixture at the Angel Ground, Tonbridge, on 21 August 1948, although his final selection, George Milton, was signed just minutes before kick-off. Amazingly, Hastings won 2-1 after coming from behind. With the Tonbridge team also thrown together in great haste, the game was hardly a classic. However, the game was watched by a large crowd of 5,800, 200 of whom were from Hastings, transported in coaches organised by the club. The inaugural supporters' club chairman, Chas Harris, wished the new squad 'Good luck, good shooting and a very successful season,' while Skinner urged the fans to give his players 'throaty encouragement'.

As encouraging as the Tonbridge result was, the going became a lot tougher thereafter. Hastings did not win again until October, when they were fortified by the signing of Bernard Moore, a fine striker from Brighton. His superior technique and potency in front of goal kept the turnstiles clicking, taking the club to mid-table security in its first two seasons. But with Hastings's financial situation deteriorating, Moore was sold to Luton in 1950 for £4,000. This fee probably represents around £1million in today's hyper-inflated transfer market. The Hastings directors had underestimated the costs of running a semi-professional club. The overheads, comprising rent, rates and maintenance, amounted to £150 per year, on top of the £600 rent. This combined liability would represent around £28,000 today.

Then there were the staff costs to meet, the utility bills, catering, transport, and Southern League fees, too, plus medical and accounting expenditure. According to the *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, rent debts were mounting and the tax man had been alerted. Playing standards fell alarmingly. Over 500 goals were conceded in Hastings's first four seasons. They completed the 1949/50 season in bottom place. With the club on its knees, George Skinner resigned at the start of the following season. His successor, Bill Spencer, hung on for just over one year before resigning because of poor health. In December 1951 59-year-old Jack Tresadern came to the club's rescue.

Tresadern had been an artillery officer in World War One. He was accustomed to strife. Between the wars he had been a half-back with West Ham and Burnley, good enough to represent England twice in 1923, although he thought little of his performance against Scotland, remarking, 'I was the best player Scotland had on the field.' He was an FA Cup finalist in 1923, appearing in the first Wembley final. Here, thousands broke through the barriers and engulfed the pitch, requiring a mounted policeman on a white horse to restore a semblance of order. With hundreds of fans still crowding the touchlines, the game went ahead, Bolton winning 2-0. Tresadern recalled that after two minutes' play, he became entangled in the converging crowd while taking a throw-in, allowing Bolton's David Jack the freedom to blast Bolton in front. Apparently, Jack's shot was so fierce that it knocked out a supporter who had his head pressed against the back of the net!

Having played in 279 league games for West Ham, Tresadern was transferred to Burnley in October 1924, where he played 22 times before moving to Northampton in May 1925. Here, he completed his playing days. His transfer from Burnley was facilitated by Louis Page moving in the opposite direction. Predatory Page would become an all-time hero at Turf Moor, scoring 115 goals, including a double hat-trick. Tresadern's impact at Northampton's County Ground was also considerable.

After his playing career was ended by injury, Tresadern became Northampton's manager in 1927, guiding his third-tier side to a runner-up position a year later, and helping raise their average gate from 7,000 to 16,000. Tresadern then became Crystal Palace's secretary and manager in October 1930, helping the financially troubled south London club to evade bankruptcy. His achievements here earned him a plum post as Spurs' manager in 1935.

His subsequent managerial career at Plymouth, whom he joined in 1938, was cut short by the Second World War. Tresadern once again served in the army. However, after being demobbed in 1945, he returned to Argyll for two more years, assisting Home Park's recovery from wartime devastation. He also discovered several young talented players whose sales realised £20,000 for his club.

His success at scouting attracted the interest of Aston Villa, whom he joined as a scout in 1947. Ambitious Southern League club Chelmsford City then persuaded him to take over their managerial reins in June 1949, but, having resigned in November 1950, he looked for a similar opportunity elsewhere. It is unclear, though, why Tresadern chose to leave his native Essex in December 1951 to join a listing ship at Hastings. If he was in any doubt about the task facing him, his new side lost 7-0 at Kettering upon his arrival. But Tresadern's magic had not deserted him. In his first home game Hastings beat the famous FA Cup giant-killers Yeovil 3-0, who were pressing for the Southern League championship. Although United finished the 1951/52 season bottom again with only 11 points, a miracle was about to unfold.

At the end of Tresadern's first full season in charge, in 1952/53, Hastings had returned to mid-table respectability, despite the manager being heavily preoccupied with his club's debt crisis. Tresadern was not fazed by this responsibility – after all, he had faced similar difficulties at Crystal Palace in the 1930s. He immediately launched a 'tanner fund', requesting the Hastings public to make donations of sixpence

or more, stating, 'There are 65,000 inhabitants in Hastings. Now, if each were to give 6d to a 6d Appeal Fund it would save professional and Southern League football for Hastings.' He set up a weekly lottery, too, albeit illegally. He targeted friends and supporters for additional donations and invited those attending home games to toss loose change into a sheet carried around the Pilot Field at half-time.

While the light from the former speedway pylons was later deemed too dim for Southern League football, Jack Tresadern believed it was strong enough for another of his fundraising exercises. Capitalising upon his many Football League contacts, Tresadern staged a series of floodlit friendlies against Spurs, West Ham, Brentford, Gillingham and Charlton. These games attracted crowds of over 2,000, providing essential revenue for his cash-strapped club. The first floodlit Football League match did not take place until 22 February 1956, when Portsmouth played Newcastle at Fratton Park. Here, though, Tresadern was ahead of his time. His buoyant enthusiasm and innovative ideas were irrepressible.

Board members chipped in too. Director and garage owner Cecil Catt acquired a decrepit coach which he renovated to be fit for transporting the players to away games, thereby saving on hire bills. One of the players, Sammy Booth, drove it. The season ended satisfactorily, with Hastings accumulating 41 points from their 42 games. Their leaky back door was sealed, helped by Bill Griffiths's imposing displays at centre-half. The number of goals conceded was reduced by half while the number of goals scored had risen by 83 per cent. Things were looking up. The brilliant FA Cup runs of the next two seasons provided a seismic uplift, though.

In the 1953/54 FA Cup qualifying rounds Hastings were unstoppable. They disposed of Shoreham (3-0), Horsham (4-1) and Eastbourne (7-2) with ease. Although Ashford (Kent) and Hounslow provided stiffer opposition, the U's won both games 2-1. Keeping his beady eye on the bottom line, Jack Tresadern was delighted that the BBC chose to televise the

Hounslow tie in full, a pioneering decision by the station. This earned each club £75, around £2,000 each in present values. Hastings then faced Southern League rivals Guildford City in the first round proper. Hastings made the most of the home advantage, winning 1-0.

Almost another 60 years would pass before a team known as Hastings United would experience live TV coverage again. This was when Hastings Town, renamed as Hastings United, beat Harrogate Town at the Pilot Field in an FA Cup second round replay in December 2012 in front of a 4,000-plus crowd. This unexpected victory set them up with a third-round tie with Middlesbrough at the Riverside, earning the club around £50,000 from their cup run.

Hastings's next opponents were Third Division South side Swindon in the second round and once again they had the home advantage. According to the *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, manager Jack Tresadern ordered 'a pre-match diet of sherry and oysters'. It worked a treat! Swindon were thrashed 4-1, with Hastings snatching a three-goal lead inside the opening 18 minutes. The *Hastings & St Leonards Observer* reporter added, "Tresadern believed Burton, the Swindon goalkeeper, was suspect with low shots, so told his players, "Keep them down boys." They followed his instructions. Two of their goals came from fierce ground shots.'

The *Hastings & St Leonards Observer* correspondent reported that, "The Hastings United forwards broke quickly and decisively while their defenders tackled with gritty determination.' Hastings's sturdy centre-forward, Tommy Huckstepp, bullied the hapless Swindon defenders throughout, while his strike partners, Asher and Parks, led them a merry dance. Although a defensive error allowed Swindon to reduce the deficit, flying winger 'Dickie' Girling quickly restored Hastings's advantage with a penetrative pass that Hillman latched on to and put away with aplomb. The *Hastings & St Leonards Observer* reporter concluded, 'It was an incredible feat for a side that had managed only six wins so far in 18 Southern League fixtures.'

Given that the Norwich game took place 65 years ago, my memories are shaped by the *Hastings and St Leonards Observer's* coverage and what my now deceased parents subsequently told me. Apparently, I had not been keen to go, especially after Mum pinned a claret-and-blue rosette on my winter coat. But once I was on the green-and-cream Maidstone & District bus, Dad said my mood changed. There were many family groups aboard, in their claret-and-blue bobble hats, scarves and, yes, rosettes. I no longer felt a fool. Apparently, one grinning chap leaned across me and said loudly, 'Up the U's!' as Dad and I found our seats upstairs. It seemed that at every village stop more supporters joined the throng. Their excited chatter became intoxicating. Dad told me we were going to see a battle between 'David' and 'Goliath', a stirring biblical story I knew from Sunday school. By the time the packed bus had growled along the wet, deserted seafront and reached the centre of Hastings, my appetite was sharpened.

Many years later I heard an Everton fan recount his first experience of going to Goodison Park with his grandfather. He said that despite the excited chanting inside the ground, his granddad would not quicken his slow, measured stride. He later realised that he was being initiated into the foreplay of football. Without having any comprehension of this term, then, years later, I realised so was I.

Having left the bus in Wellington Square we joined a large queue outside the Central Cricket Ground waiting for the special buses to take us to the Pilot Field. I hadn't realised that 'Pilot' was a distortion of an Old English term 'Pilate' meaning hair oats. I had wrongly assumed that we were going to an airfield. As the special bus laboured up the hill out of town, I could see other supporters emerging from the side roads. Some had large bells which they were ringing with gusto. Others had huge wooden rattlers that required a two-handed grip to turn. Even above the noise of the straining bus engine I could hear what a din they made. Dad told me that the rattlers were originally used as a wartime warning against gas attack. I was

in no doubt then that this was a much bigger event than the town's annual carnival procession, which attracted thousands to its promenade.

With the approach road blocked by converging fans and the lengthening queues for the turnstiles, we had to leave the bus and walk the final 100 yards to the lofty ground. On a better day than this, its long-side grassy bank afforded panoramic views of Pevensey Bay and Beachy Head. Dad was keen that we obtained stand seats, though, as he was doubtful that I would see much of the game from below. Fortunately, the queue for the more expensive stand was less congested. But had we not arrived so early we would have been forced to make for the grassy bank.

The attendance was 12,527, a club record, smashing the previous one of 9,917, set in the preceding Swindon tie. The gate for the Norwich game represented almost one fifth of the town's population, bearing in mind that many of those there came from outlying villages, such as ours, and local towns including Bexhill, Rye and Battle, and possibly Eastbourne too. Looking back, there seemed to be something reverentially ceremonial about this occasion, a massive coming together of local people in shared parochial celebration. How quaint that seems when compared with what happens now. As LP Hartley wrote, 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.'

On the crackling loudspeaker a song was played repetitively. I asked Dad what it was. He said, 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' The *Hastings & St Leonards Observer* reporter informed us later that Tresadern wanted it played loud and often so that it might disconcert the Norwich players in their dressing room, given that Swindon's nickname was the Robins. Tresadern told the *Hastings & St Leonards Observer* reporter, 'I hope we knock the feathers out of the Canaries.' Norwich were formidable opponents. They were then the leaders of the Third Division South. They posed a much harder test than Swindon.

The teams came out to a ferocious roar, the PA system blasting out 'Sussex by the Sea', sung ardently by thousands of home fans. This was football at its tribal best.

'Oh Sussex, Sussex by the Sea!  
Good old Sussex by the Sea!  
You may tell them all we stand or fall,  
For Sussex by the Sea.'

Hastings won the toss and chose to attack the Elphinstone Road End. The pitch was like a ploughed field with both goalmouths engulfed with cloying clay, sand and sawdust. With the Hastings boys high on adrenalin and driven on by savage support, they poured forward immediately. After only four minutes Hastings went in front. A glorious move resulted in Parks hooking the ball past Oxford in the Norwich goal. It was as if a powder keg had been ignited. But Norwich were not easily subdued. Even on this sludgy surface they were frighteningly fast, producing a succession of rapier-like thrusts, which left the Hastings defenders hot in pursuit. Against Swindon, Hastings's canny positioning, timely tackling and decisive interceptions kept the Football League side at bay. Here, Norwich fomented indecision and distributional error. It was no surprise when, in the 23rd minute, Brennan – a star in Archie Macaulay's heroic giant-killing side of 1958/59 – nipped in as Barr and Griffiths dithered, and calmly equalised. Then nine minutes before the interval, Hansell escaped the attentions of three hesitant Hastings defenders, and nonchalantly slotted in Norwich's second. Norwich were clearly in charge at this point, but on the stroke of half-time the nimble Parks was chopped down in the box. Alas, Asher's penalty was a poor one, allowing Oxford to save easily.

Recharged by the half-time break and the huge reception they received at their re-appearance, Hastings pinned Norwich back, forcing successive corners, one of which resulted in a frantic goalmouth tussle. It seemed sure to yield a goal, only for a Norwich defender to block a goal-bound effort on the line.

Nevertheless, Parks eventually found a way through Norwich's stonewall defence, smartly heading a crisp cross past Oxford. Driven on by the febrile crowd, Hastings sensed that the tide had turned and committed themselves to all-out attack. But Norwich ruggedly defied them before producing a brilliant breakaway that resulted in Gavin putting the Canaries 3-2 ahead. There were only 12 minutes left. Although dismayed by this sucker punch, Hastings girded themselves for a final push. With just five minutes remaining, Parks, who had a grand game, carved out a decisive opening. Having received the ball from a throw-in, taken deep inside Norwich's half, he beat his marker and instantly struck a teasing cross towards the near post. The fleet-footed Dickie Girling confounded both mud and the Norwich defence with a diving header that found goal to the left of the statuesque Oxford. The Pilot Field erupted. Minutes later, a blistering drive from wing-half George Peacock smacked against the Norwich crossbar, leaving a muddy stain as proof of how near Hastings had been to a fifth-round tie at Highbury. What a game! Tresadern's reaction was, 'Worth a Guinea a Box. The Canaries were so lucky to hop away on level terms.'

I could not recall experiencing anything quite as exciting as this. My parents said I chattered obsessively about the game for weeks afterwards. Dad had achieved his purpose. On this dank, grey afternoon, spellbound by the game's switchback fortunes, the never-say-die determination of the Hastings players, and deafened by the unrelenting roar of a huge, partisan crowd with their horns, bells, rattlers and firecrackers, I had been turned on to football forever. Moreover, I had been baptised in claret and blue, directing my allegiance not only to Hastings but, in time, to Burnley, too.

Hastings were defeated 3-0 in the replay at a sopping Carrow Road. Their pride was undiminished, though. 17,027 fans were there, lifting the aggregate attendances for Hastings's brave cup run to 71,543, the proceeds of which were shared with their opponents. Alby Parks (7) and Syd Asher (6) had

been Hastings's principal goalscorers, followed by Phoenix (4), Girling (3) and Hillman (2). Asher, like Bernard Moore, would later play league football, in his case for Northampton.