

R Y A N H I L L S



GROUNDWORK



The Inside Story Behind
Jim Smith's
Derby County

Forewords by
Steve McClaren & Igor Stimac



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RYAN HILLS



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THE EAGLE HAS LANDED

‘I AM not too sure I was flavour of the month with every Derby supporter,’ wrote Jim Smith in his wonderfully nostalgia-driven memoir, *It’s Only a Game*. ‘I would say it was about 50-50.’ Not one to accuse the great man of being wrong, but his maths may have been a little off. The camp of support was considerably below that 50.

By the time Roy McFarland had been moved on from the club following the disappointing 1994/95 campaign, Lionel Pickering was at a quandary. Spending hadn’t worked, and now Arthur Cox and McFarland hadn’t got the results separately either. A pair of play-off failures, followed by an abject ninth-placed finish was not the upturn in form expected by the Rams owner, and needing to re-evaluate, cost-cutting became the new focus. Therefore, any incoming manager had to have that factored in.

The still new-look Derby board had tried experienced and inexperienced to get to the Premier League for the first time, yet neither had worked. So when it came to the interview process they went for a blend. ‘Sometimes you can say it was all sophisticated, but it was people sitting down and putting names together, aided and bettered by the fans. Selecting a manager was very methodical, not like nowadays with computers and stats. And there was no social media, no John Percy or *The Sun*,’ admits Peter Gadsby who was the vice-chairman at the time. ‘We had a lovely warm day in

Ednaston Manor [the home of Lionel Pickering], sitting around outside in Lionel's mansion. There was [Stuart] Webb, there was myself, the late John Kirkland and one other. And we interviewed three people that day: Neil Warnock, Martin O'Neill and Steve Bruce.' All three have in the years since been repeatedly rumoured for the Rams' managerial hotseat at various times, yet they remain in a select group of football managers in England who have not taken the job. Stuart Webb wrote in his autobiography *Clough, Maxwell and Me* that two other names were also considered: Ossie Ardiles and Mike Walker.

Gadsby said, 'Neil Warnock had made his name then at Huddersfield. He breezed in and talked through, and you could see people were thinking, "Yeah, looks a man." And then he suddenly said, "I tell you what guys ... you're lovely people, but I'm going to say no. I left my missus a week ago and I want to be as far away from Sheffield as I can. I've got Dan McCluskey at Plymouth who wants me to go down there, so I'm going there for a couple of years.'" Warnock would be close to the Derby job many more times over the following 27 years but would never take charge.

'Then Steve Bruce came, all smart, perfect. Would have been player-manager so we'd got two for the price of one and Lionel liked that. He looked the man. Then he went away, subsequently to find out as soon as he got back that Alex Ferguson was at his house, telling him he was going nowhere and he wanted him there for another year,' Gadsby continued. Bruce would be close to the Derby job many more times over the following 27 years but would never take charge.

'Then we interviewed Martin O'Neill. [He was] doing a good job at Wycombe, been at Gainsborough before or somewhere, sat down and talked eloquently. Lionel sat there and said, "If I said to you I want to go back to the old Wolves formation, the W, attacking play and attacking football, what do you think you'd do?" He said, "Chairman, I'd look at it, I'd talk to you and then I'd do it my way." And Lionel went, "Hmm, big head, I don't like him." O'Neill would be close ... you get the picture.'

With the three options seemingly out, attentions turned from inexperience to over-experience. Brian Horton was the first name debated. Recently departed from Manchester City after Francis Lee had taken charge as chairman, Horton had pedigree in the game and was – after that initial round of interviews – left with the job as his to lose. Gadsby remembers, ‘Colin Gibson [of BBC Radio Derby] got to know that Brian Horton was coming to the Manor for an interview with Lionel. And he caught up with me and said, “[its] All over the radio, the fans don’t want Brian Horton.” It was quite vociferous, and he was very persuasive. Colin was Colin. I went into Lionel and told him that we can’t have Brian, which Lionel was very upset by, but just said “you do you”.’

As is the case, a search for a successor to McFarland was growing long and tedious, not aided by the head-rearing presence of Barry Fry, then of Birmingham City. ‘I got a phone call when we used to do the live sports desk on a Sunday morning,’ interjects Colin Gibson. ‘I went in and I got a phone call from a director of the club saying, “Barry Fry is going to be our next manager. You can speculate on it this morning if you want to.” So, we go on and “BBC Radio Derby understands Barry Fry is being lined up”. And we did the sports desk, left at half past ten and an hour later my phone rings. “Is your name Colin Gibson?” And I can’t remember whether it was Gold or Sullivan who were the owners of Birmingham at the time, one of the two. “Have you just said on the radio that our manager is going to be the manager of Derby County? How do you know this? I can tell you he’s not going to be your next manager, he’s our manager.” Barry Fry was out of contract at Birmingham and was after a new one, and he played Birmingham an absolute blinder and the next day he got a new contract at Birmingham.’

Three managers had been interviewed. Two more were in the running. Yet Gadsby and his fellow directors were as far away from finding someone to lead Derby County into a new season as they had been weeks earlier. An impasse of days turned into weeks, with a decision still no closer to being agreed upon.

* * *

‘Jim Smith? Eh?’ That was the less than impressed consensus across the fanbase. For all the managerial experience Smith had, he would have been ‘the last on that list’ according to Gibson. Smith’s record in football management was fine, to do him a slight disservice. Managing eight different clubs in 26 years, Smith was far from a newcomer to the managerial game like the three candidates interviewed in Ednaston Manor were. But so far removed was he from the early stages of management that he had seemingly gone completely out of the other side. Employed as the chief executive at the League Managers’ Association (LMA), Smith had opted for a steer away from the grind of the training pitch and looked to have settled for life after management.

As his long-time friend and the then manager of recent First Division champions Leeds United, Howard Wilkinson, recalls, Jim and a desk job were not a match made in heaven. ‘We started it [the LMA] in 1992/93, Graham Taylor and I started it. And that weren’t a job for Jim; we both knew it. The main thing in regards to that was that I knew him and could trust him.’ The duo had built up a mutual respect and strong bond since first meeting at local Sheffield football levels decades earlier. A joint stint together at Boston United followed, and the pair met time and again on the touchlines. But Wilkinson knew that if an opportunity was to come back up in management, it would be snatched at, as Smith himself admitted. ‘As I feared, it did not take long for the doubts to be realised. To me management is like a drug and four months of cold turkey [Smith had left previous club Portsmouth after a defeat at Derby in January 1995] was more than enough. By the end of that season, I realised it was not for me.’

As the timeline turns out, it was a case of either/or between Smith and Horton, and when Gadsby and the media ensured that the latter wouldn’t take the reins, the path was clear for Smith to swoop into place. And as Smith recalled a later conversation with Lionel Pickering, ‘He [Pickering] took it upon himself to go out and give “Nobby” [Brian Horton] the bad news before

telling Stuart [Webb] to call me and tell me the job was mine.' Smith, who claimed to have eight possible roles on his desk, was only intrigued by two: Derby County and Sheffield Wednesday. Ultimately, he opted for the sleeping giant of Derby and Pickering would assure Smith in the process that he had been his first choice. For Pickering himself, that may well have been true, notwithstanding the previous interviews. Years earlier the duo had met following a victory for Smith's then Portsmouth side at the Baseball Ground, finding a mutual appreciation for each other over post-match drinks, in a theme which would play a heavy part in their ability to maintain a relationship when working together.

Writing insightfully and with an honesty now alien in the modern game, Pickering's programme notes in the Arsenal edition of *The Ram* in 1997, the final game at the Baseball Ground, stated, 'By the time the Derby vacancy came up, Jimmy would have been first choice on my list and I told the board so. But we believed he had a pretty cushy number ... and we thought no one in his right mind would leave that job! Despite reports to the contrary, plenty of managers – some available, some already with clubs – would have jumped at the chance to manage Derby County. We were accused of dithering – not so. Eventually it came down to Jimmy and one other – and the board's unanimous decision was Jimmy – the **only** person to be offered the job!' Pickering would add, in a lovely sense of Alan Partridge-like 'Needless to say, I had the last laugh' one-upmanship, 'Jimmy has earned the respect of all those Doubting Thomases who wrote in or phoned us. One guy had the shock of his life. His letter to the board was so nasty, so vicious – suggesting we were all stark, raving mad setting on Jim – that I phoned him immediately and gave him a mouthful! Late in the season he had the grace to write again – this time apologising for what he had said. He even offered to buy us a meal.'

A master of the boardroom and management of senior directors, Smith's instantly likeable persona only built on Pickering's already positive impression of the man. And weeks after the search had

begun, Derby opted to appoint the 54-year-old as the 19th manager in the history of the club.

It seems the right time to run through just who Jim Smith was, for those who need it. A confident midfielder who made his progression through the Sheffield leagues as a player, the man who would become known as the Bald Eagle plied his trade primarily in the lower divisions of the Football League, appearing over 100 times for both Halifax and Boston. But it was 'to 'in management is where he would become part of the footballing furniture. Heading up Boston and Colchester in his formative years, it was with Oxford, Blackburn, Birmingham, Newcastle, QPR and Portsmouth where Jim became synonymous with the gruff style of coaching that matched the 1970s and '80s in England.

Often overlooked and unappreciated by supporters in equal measure, Smith's tenures had a common theme of coming to an abrupt close after a certain level of disappointment. Even in a time where managers could expect a longer shelf life, his longest continuous run at a single club was barely four years.

With a new man in place, the immediate inquest would begin with Rams supporters. Gibson immediately thought to Smith's career thus far. 'You look at the other clubs he was at. He got near with Portsmouth, nearly got them promoted. Newcastle, he didn't really do anything. Oxford, he worked wonders with but he'd gone by the time they won the League Cup in the mid-'80s. So it was when Stuart Webb phoned me and said, "The new Derby manager is ... Jim Smith." And I went, "Oh ... OK." Legendary BBC Radio Derby announcer Graham Richards, adding, 'I remember being sat down on the chairs with you [Gibson] at Radio Derby and going, "Oh God, Jim Smith." A hastily arranged episode of the Monday night *Sportscene Talk-In* show drew dismay from fans that felt they had missed any opportunity for Derby to progress. Supporter Jamie Allen remembers, 'It was so unexpected with Jim because when he was appointed, he wasn't even a manager at the time. He was a chairman at the League Managers' [Association].

We knew about him obviously, but he came in and it was “Jim Smith?”

* * *

The latter days of Arthur Cox and the tenure of McFarland had flattered to deceive, the collective play-off failures and subsequent mid-table finish meaning Lionel Pickering’s early days of investment had failed. That was an awareness Smith would come in with, and the summer of 1995 was always destined to see him need to arrange a squad in the knowledge that many of those at the club would be moving on shortly. Writing in *It’s Only a Game* that his brief was simply to cut costs and achieve a mid-table finish, Smith would soon meet a selection of first-teamers disgruntled with life in Derbyshire. Craig Short, the man who had epitomised Pickering’s initial carefree attitude to squad spending, ‘was the first to knock on the door and announce, “I’m leaving. I’m going to Everton”’. The next player to present himself was Paul Williams, who was equally belligerent, declaring, ‘I don’t care who came [sic] in as manager – Alf Ramsey or Joe Bloggs. I’m on my way’ The duo would leave, Mark Pembridge too as nearly £5m was raised in exchange for two part-exchange arrivals: Gary Rowett and Sean Flynn. Dean Sturridge would also look set for a departure to Torquay where he had spent previous months on loan, but they couldn’t raise the £75,000 asking fee.

And while neither of the new faces were known particularly in the game, Smith knew what he was looking for in arrivals: fight. That was evidenced throughout his first transfer foray, with a succession of new players entering Raynesway who had endeavour over individual ability. Darryl Powell, a stalwart of his Portsmouth side, would arrive for £750,000. Exciting forward Ron Willems joined from Swiss side Grasshoppers for less than half of that. Then there was just enough time to bring in a new skipper.

Robin Van Der Laan wasn’t your typical mid-1990s Football League signing. The Dutchman arrived in Britain after serving a long suspension in his native Netherlands, and his first port of

call in England was the sunny streets of Port Vale. Now a coach for Manchester United's academy, Van Der Laan has made the UK absolutely his home from home, with Derby his second stop. 'I was out of contract,' he remembers, 'so we went on holiday to America, and my sister-in-law was housesitting for us. I said, "Listen, if anyone comes into contact or any clubs when I'm out, just let me know." And I got a new offer from Port Vale but I thought, professionally, if I want to achieve things and play as high as possible, I would have to move to a bigger club. The first two weeks we were on holiday and nobody contacted me, and in them days it was a little bit different because most managers signed players at the end of the holidays so they don't have to pay them all the way through the summer. And then we had Portsmouth, West Brom, and I ended up provisionally signing for West Bromwich Albion and that was going to end up going to a tribunal. The deal was made with West Brom, which was a player exchange plus cash, and I trained there for a week before getting the call that John Rudge had spoken to Jim Smith with a better deal for Port Vale, and was I willing to go and speak to Derby. Derby had been trying for the last few years at that time to get up into the First Division, they spent a lot of money and didn't really get there, so I knew they were very ambitious and it was a great opportunity to come on board at that time. I spoke to Jim and we made a deal with Lee Mills going the other way.'

In actuality, when considering the incomings across the summer months, it was relatively serene for the contract-makers. Powell, Rowett, Flynn, Van Der Laan and Willems. Steady footballers, some of whom had been proven at various levels and some who were striving for their first real breakthroughs. Just like another man who arrived: Steve McClaren. It's known what became of McClaren, but turn the clock back to the very beginning of his coaching career. Semi-retired after injuries at Oxford United, it was there that McClaren first began to plant the seeds of a career which would take him to the pinnacle of European football. Speaking in the midst of the liquidation threat,

McClaren proudly joined a Zoom call sporting his Derby County club jacket. Recently departed to Manchester United after his fifth spell in various capacities, and even opting to work unpaid in 2022, he is a man who has been one of few (almost) constants across 35 years of the club.

McClaren said, 'I'd almost finished playing and I was injured, when I had an opportunity to take a coaching role at Oxford. I was youth coach and reserve coach for maybe four years and it was a great grounding, and I loved it. The connection with Jim is quite interesting because Denis Smith was manager at the time, but because Jim had an affinity with Oxford and he lived in Woodstock, at games he used to come to the Manor Ground. We'd call the manager's office "The Bunker" because there were no windows and, after every game, managers would come in and Denis would invite any manager who was at the game to come on in. So, Jim always used to come for a drink. And at that time, I was, well, I was the drinks man. So I was kind of like the water boy. Jim used to come in, I used to do the rounds of, "What do you want to drink? Jim, what do you want to drink?" "Oh whisky, water and three ice cubes." And I used to say, "OK, no problem." So every time, whisky, water, three ice cubes were delivered to him. And eventually I got to know when he was coming in and instead of him asking as soon as he sat down, there was a whisky, water and three cubes of ice. So that's how we got to know each other.

'He knew Maurice Evans very well and Maurice was the chief scout at Oxford and kind of my mentor in my early coaching days. So they knew each other, Maurice gave me good references and Jim always kept an eye on me, when Maurice said, "If you ever get a job again, you want to take Steve." So I said to Jim, "Why did you take me?" and he did laugh and said, "Well I liked your smile when you delivered the whisky, water and three cubes of ice. And then Maurice gave you a good reference. So, I thought you were a good lad and apparently a good coach." And that's how I hooked up with Jim initially.'

Fresh from a seeming retirement, Smith returned to the training field alongside a man 30 years his junior, a relatively unproven coach and one who the board almost refused to sanction at a time when assistants were still frowned upon by some. Gadsby adds, 'He brought along Steve McClaren and his words were, "He's a great pourer of red wine," in a mischievous way. Anybody who knew Jim knew that, after the game, it was always red wine. It's what he presented young McClaren as, who was his coach at Oxford, but a nice capable lad. They came in and started quite gingerly and they had to move and shake people out because our wages were too high, players were in there who weren't really devoted and Jim wanted to get together his side.'

Arriving almost in conjunction with Smith was another man who would help to shape the look, feel and immediate prosperity of the club, Keith Loring. Loring, who arrived as chief executive off the back of almost ten years with Brentford, was installed prior to the managerial unveiling and would bridge the gap between board and manager. Together, the duo would build a working relationship that would take Derby County levels beyond their own expectations and would, in time, put the eyes of world football on them. Spearheaded by Lionel Pickering, ably supported by the likes of Gadsby and Webb, a core of management was being built which hadn't been in place for several years. The long run would see manager and board members intertwine. In the short run, there were three aims: build a side, finish comfortably, consolidate.

As things tend to occur with Derby County, it didn't go *exactly* to plan.

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An opening day in front of just under 11,000 was what greeted Jim Smith's new-look side in August 1995. Growing disgruntlement since the play-off failures, along with a cap on the Baseball Ground's capacity following the 1990 publication of the Taylor Report, had driven casual supporters to new hobbies for their Saturday afternoons. Considering the first outing of Smith's side,

it looked like he'd have a job to convince them to return from perusing market stalls at the Eagle Centre. In fact, things would get worse before they would get better.

That opening on 13 August produced little in the way of excitement, a goalless draw against Port Vale. To follow that up with two away defeats – one of which saw Derby fall to a 3-0 hammering at Wolverhampton Wanderers – did little to endear the already disappointing new management team to supporters. Attendances would fall further, dropping to a less-than-impressive four figures by mid-September. Only eight goals were scored in the opening nine games, and 15 fixtures had produced a paltry four victories, nailing down an early expectation that the season would be more about anxiously picking up points for consolidation than anything else. Smith was struggling to find the right personnel for his system, evident by the bold choice to replace his goalkeeper Steve Sutton at half-time of a 2-0 victory over Sheffield United, bringing Russell Hoult on in his place. That result was a rare bright moment though. With little in the way of hope and a squad failing to gel on the field, it all culminated in one of the most important fixtures in the history of Derby County: a 5-1 defeat to Tranmere Rovers.

'The first few games were a bit of a nightmare really,' admits McClaren. 'At one stage I do know Jim was very concerned. He was making signings and they were good signings, but we just couldn't find the right formula, the right personnel, the right system and the right identity or way of playing. We were a bit in between everything. We lost 5-1 and most people would think, well that's the end of us because we were under severe pressure anyway.' As Jim's son-in-law Andy Dawson puts simply, 'He was getting a lot of abuse wherever we went for those first games.'

For many managers – especially one as unpopular as Smith in those early months – four wins in the first third of the season would have spelled the end, and both McClaren and Smith could sense that the discontent in the stands was beginning to seep through to the boardroom, including to Gadsby: 'That night

we had Bonfire Night at Markeaton Park down in Derby. Jim and all the family were there, and he and McClaren must have absolutely hated me because I just moaned and groaned about what the bloody hell is going on.'

From trying to understand how their side had been beaten quite so easily to being heavily quizzed on his direction by one of the men who had opted to appoint him, it was a painful Saturday for the duo. And they knew that with fan opinion plummeting, media attention would not provide a respite for them either. Returning from his first journey to Prenton Park, Graham Richards had an expectation that he would be discussing a side with a new man at the helm a week later: 'We came back in the car from the Wirral that evening convinced we were heading for relegation. We were talking about chances of going down. We thought there was a very fair chance we were going to be relegated under this bloke who we considered a very nice chap, but a nothing manager.'