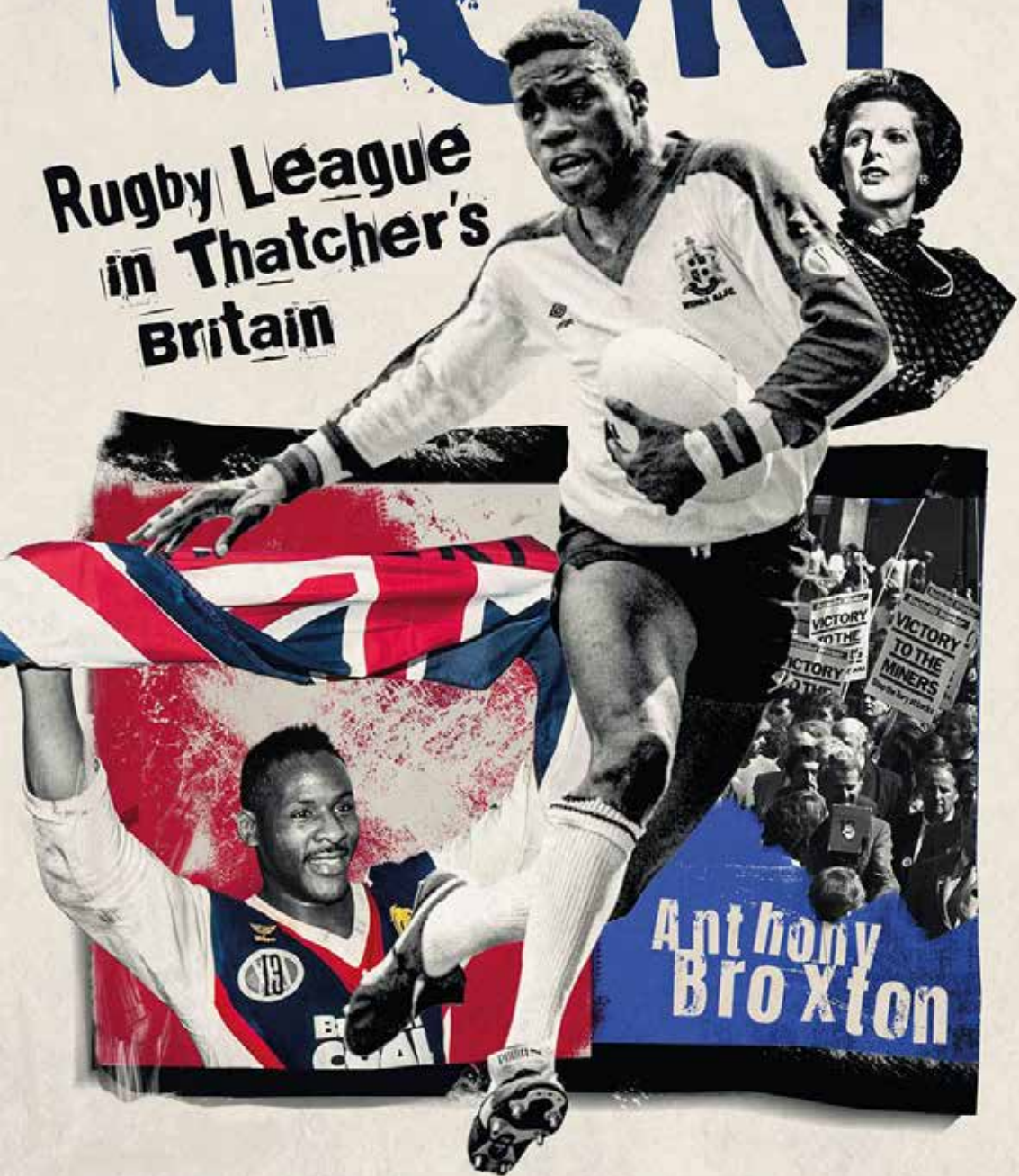


Hope & GLORY

Rugby League
in Thatcher's
Britain



Anthony
Broxton

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PART ONE:
ILLUSIONS

Chapter 1

Decline

AS BRITAIN approached the end of the 1970s, there was much talk about the managed decline of a once-great powerhouse. Debts had spiralled out of control and as the creditors came knocking at the door, people wondered just how far and how fast things had fallen. In the pubs and clubs of the North West, people traded stories of former glories and wondered just how they had become the 'sick man' of English rugby. And then, in April 1980, the inevitable finally happened. Wigan RL were relegated to the Second Division.

Wigan's descent from Cup Kings of the 1960s to the minnows of the sport made an appealing story for journalists seeking symbols of British decline. In the post-war years, Wigan had prided themselves on scouring all corners of the globe to bring the best and most talented athletes to Central Park. Over nine months in the 1940s, it was calculated that over one million people had watched the cherry and whites play across the country as they established themselves as the dominant force in the game. In one month alone in the 1950s the club played three home games to crowds of over 40,000. It put them on a par with the great northern football teams such as Manchester United, Liverpool and Everton.

By the late 1970s, the club didn't often feature in the national news pages. But the story of their relegation was different. London

editors at *The Observer* sent special news reporters up north to unpick the story of the club's decline. The slide towards the bottom had been slow and painful. Attendances dropped and the superstars that had once packed out the terraces, such as Billy Boston and Eric Ashton, were replaced by mere mortals. Over time the better players from the local area were signed up by Widnes, Warrington and St Helens. The blame for the loss of talent was aimed squarely at the directors who seemed powerless to stem the flow.

'They began to lose credibility. They began to lose friends,' argued the *Wigan Observer* editor Jack Winstanley. And it was the little things that the club got wrong, beginning with their failed relationship with the media, that soon added to the big things: 'The club does not appreciate the value of free publicity.' Winstanley noted 'the dearth of national press coverage being especially noticeable' over the 70s. With a decline in standards came a retreat into themselves. Isolationist, the club had lost its grip on the game and the game was all the worse for it.

Within the town itself there was a mixture of shock and sadness at the turning of events. 'Badly sickening' was the verdict of the club's head groundsman Billy Mitchell who, after 29 years looking after the pitch, had taken the relegation harder than anyone else. Mitchell was 'reckoned to be the finest groundsman in rugby league'. He took his craft seriously and held 16 diplomas in various aspects of agriculture. Such was his reputation that the ground staff at Wembley Stadium once asked his advice to help them with the famous pitch.

And in the days following the result, locals came up to him everywhere he went, asking him for pieces of the turf as souvenirs. 'I can't go to a pub or a club, even the church and they're all asking me when we're selling off the ground,' he told *The Observer*. In the Royal Oak pub, journalists found fans congregated to drown their

sorrows, where a ‘combative middle-aged blonde’ reflected on the club’s decline: ‘We’ve flogged good lads, and then they’ve bought trash. Some of them couldn’t catch a bus.’ Lodged between their coverage of the Iranian Embassy crisis and a diplomatic fight over lamb quotas in Europe, a photographer for *The Observer* captured the disconsolate-looking Wigan captain George Fairbairn on the banks of the ‘infamous’ Wigan Pier. The story captured the mood: ‘If a town’s well-being is related to the success of its sporting heroes, Wigan is in deep trouble.’

* * *

Wigan rugby’s decline appeared to mirror wider changes in both the working class and the political landscape in the late 1970s. At some point in the decade, the words ‘decline’ and ‘declinism’ had become central to the debates about Britain’s place in the world. To those on the political right, these described the loss of power and influence since the retreat of the Empire after the Second World War. To the left, it was the inability to maintain levels of full employment and deliver on the promises of a more affluent and equal society.

At the 1979 general election, the Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher tapped into the feeling of decline by arguing that it was the sign of a post-war consensus that’s time had come to an end. ‘Travel round our towns and cities and see the shabby scars of Labour Britain, open and unhealing,’ she said in one speech. The eagerness for change in the country was enough to give her a landslide election victory on the biggest swing since 1945. Privately, a leaked memo from the British ambassador to Washington captured the loss of hope in the corridors of power: ‘You only have to move around western Europe nowadays to realise how poor and unproud the British have become in relation to their neighbours. It shows in the look of our towns.’

Wigan was thought to be one of the towns that had been left behind by Britain's decline in the post-war years. For journalists, writers, commentators, politicians and historians, Wigan has often been the place where people go to try and tell the story about the state of the British nation. As some historians have argued, it is 'less a place' and more a 'state of mind in the British psyche'. When the travel writer H.V. Morton visited the town in the 1920s for his book *In Search of England*, he observed how the music-hall joke about 'Wigan Pier' was enough to make the audience laugh: 'Wigan, to millions of people, who have never seen and never will see the town, represents the apex of the world's pyramid of gloom.'

'Wigan has been picked on as a symbol of the ugliness of the industrial areas,' said George Orwell after he spent a few weeks in the town for his book *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Orwell could have found a similar story in London, the North East or Yorkshire, but he chose Wigan because of its emotive connotations with the public. The success of his book, within intellectual circles, made Wigan the symbol of the 1930s, of the social deprivation, poverty and slum housing that came with it.

The success of the rugby league club in the 1950s and 60s was gradually able to chip away at those attitudes, usually formed by outsiders, who had little affinity with the town. One of the media organisations that heard about the team was the popular photography magazine *Picture Post*. At its peak the magazine used photography to communicate a range of social issues to one in three of the British population each week. And in 1950 they found themselves running a special feature on Wigan as the 'powerhouse' of British sport: 'Synonymous in most people's minds with supremacy in the world of Rugby League football.'

Wigan's success in the rugby league world had coincided with the post-war boom in employment and leisure that made live sport the favourite pastime of the working people. In the immediate post-

war years, sports like rugby league had grown because they were catering for a population with full employment and money to spend at the weekend. The total crowds for rugby league matches reached almost seven million in the 1949/50 season, which marked a post-war high. The nationalisation of the coal industry had brought jobs back to many rugby league towns, while the development of housing and the welfare state gave people the freedom to enjoy their time at the weekends.

But by the 1970s the much-mythologised golden age was fast becoming a distant dream. The securities of employment disappeared, and Wigan was hit particularly hard by the coal cuts enacted under Harold Wilson's government. Unemployment reached levels not seen since the 1930s and when people talked about British decline, they found themselves back in Wigan to try and understand what had happened to the working class in the post-war years. For left-wing writers such as Jeremy Seabrook, Wigan was the embodiment of what had gone wrong in the 1970s. The loss of the coal industry had seen the population struggling to find a purpose and identity. He lamented how the new jobs in factories and manufacturing had left people feeling alienated. Wigan had been built on the physical strength of its population but, suddenly, that strength was no longer required or desired. It had no outlet. 'The sense of loss,' Seabrook concluded, 'was overwhelming.'

It was a theme that the popular American travel writer Paul Theroux returned to when he visited the town at the beginning of the 80s. He wrote of a 'lifeless' town centre where fear of working down the mines had been replaced by a different fear: 'Not the blackened factory chimneys and the smoke and the slag-heaps and the racket of the machines; it was the empty chimneys and the clear air and the grass growing on slag-heaps and the great silence.' Everybody who appeared to have a view on the decline of Britain

placed Wigan as a central part of that story. It seemed inevitable that when their rugby league side was relegated, they would be the next to disappear.

* * *

Wigan rugby's decline did not just mirror the changes in the industrial working class in the 1970s. It also symbolised the problems that every rugby league town faced. In the beginning there had been just one code of rugby. But in 1895 representatives from the northern clubs met at the George Hotel in Huddersfield and broke from the Rugby Football Union (RFU) to form a northern game. Later to become known as rugby league, the rebel clubs had wanted to be able to compensate players who took time off work to play for their club (known as 'broken time') or who became injured through playing the game.

After the split, league created a sport that mirrored the heavy industries that emerged from the time of the Industrial Revolution. League became part of a working-class culture that was intrinsically Labour – played out across the coalfields of Lancashire and Yorkshire, in the weapon and shipbuilding plants of Cumbria, by the docks in Hull, and the heavy industries of Warrington, Widnes and St Helens. The sort of towns where the people often said 'a monkey in a red rosette could win here'.

The game firmly established itself in those areas as a competitive rival to football and cricket as the leisure pursuit of the manual worker. But as the author Geoffrey Nicholson identified in his book *The Professionals*, rugby league remained wedded to its communities in a way that other sports did not. Clubs often belonged to the town with most of the team working alongside the supporters in the workplaces, drinking in the same pubs and sending their children to the same schools: 'Rugby league doesn't lift a man out of his environment as soccer does.'

In the *Picture Post* feature on Wigan in the 1950s, the journalists examined how the players and the fans were united by their class: 'The Saturday afternoon stars are ordinary workmen in the week.' Players were workers by day and heroes by night. In the neighbouring town of St Helens, players such as Vince Karalius admitted that it was sometimes difficult to separate the two roles: 'If you talk to the blokes the boss thinks you're idle, and if you don't talk to them he thinks you're big-headed,' he told the *Sunday Times*.

Pride in the local side as an extension of your class was something that Richard Hoggart referred to in his hugely influential book on working-class life *The Uses of Literacy*. Hoggart had been one of the 'crowds of lads' who took to the streets of Hunslet after they had won the Challenge Cup in 1934. He watched the players return with the cup on 'top of a charabanc', following them from pub to pub and 'staying out hours after their bedtime for the excitement of seeing their local champions'. When the scene was recounted some decades later, rugby league was identified as the most 'important element in the group life' of the town – as important to the daily conversation as sex or the royal family. It was part of a working-class culture that was intrinsically local, from the local butchers and grocers to the bakers and scrap merchants. But by the 1970s, Hoggart was among the many who questioned whether the ties that bound working-class people would survive.

As early as 1964, there were already outsiders writing about the decline of rugby league. Arthur Hopcroft was a sports writer who would become well known for TV play adaptations of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and *Bleak House*. As a football writer, he had written one of the definitive books on the game in the 60s, *The Football Man*, which looked thoughtfully at the culture of the football manager. And when he was tasked with looking at rugby league for a major *Sunday Times* magazine feature, he had found it to be a sport of the past: 'Rugby league men give the impression that they know

they are tethered somewhere back in the social evolution.’ Hopcroft concluded that rugby league was played on grounds ‘bounded by the heyday of heavy industry; a railway line on one side, the eyeless wall of some tired-out old mill, the colour of dried blood’.

While Hopcroft angered some within the game with his stereotyped view, the economic changes were real and the decline in people watching the sport emphasised what had been lost. Overall the game lost over one and a half million spectators from 1959 to 1964 and those running the sport struggled to find a solution to turn it around.

One of the first clubs that became the symbol of the decline was Bradford Northern. Bradford had been one of the founding members of the game and the first team to appear in three successive Challenge Cup finals, in the 1940s. In the 50s, their Odsal Stadium had been dubbed the ‘Wembley of the North’ after it hosted the best-attended game in the sport’s history. Officially there were 102,569 packed in to see a monumental Warrington win, but there were a lot more as gates had been opened to avoid a crush outside.

However, just nine years later the support for the game in the area had fallen off a cliff. Nobody living in Bradford talked about rugby league. In one fixture in November 1963, just 324 diehards braved torrential rain and wind to watch Northern play a match against Barrow. The decline had profound cash implications for the club, which was running a deficit and was soon forced to disband because it could no longer afford to put players on the pitch. In the battle for leisure time, it was clear that rugby league was losing ground. A few days after Bradford reached their lowest ebb, there was a symbol of the shift right on their doorstep. In December 1963 the city was gripped by the arrival of The Beatles at the Gaumont Cinema where they were performing on their UK tour. As the new generation of consumers turned towards different

leisure pursuits from their parents, rugby league wondered how it could win them back.

Many arguments were put forward to explain rugby league's declining crowd numbers. As the BBC commentator Eddie Waring acknowledged in the *Rugby League Yearbook*, the culture shift resulting from changes in technology, and consumer goods meant they were probably never coming back. In the immediate post-war period, 'Everything was on ration, so sport was the only free outlet,' he argued. 'Now there are 17 million cars in England, every electrical appliance imaginable, holidays abroad, new houses, changing fashions in clothes, people eating out and so many other things that have attired the pattern of life.' Others stretched to even more dramatic conclusions. Some blamed the advent of central heating – one of the arguments doing the rounds at Bradford was that people had only come to watch in the 1950s because it was cheaper and warmer to visit Odsal with the packed crowds than it was to heat the house.

One Doncaster fan wrote to the *Rugby Leaguer*, the sport's most prominent weekly newspaper, to urge the game to join the 'jet-set' age and modernise the offer to supporters: 'It is like stepping back 40 years, with corrugated metal fences, patched up wooden stands, broken down terracing and a general look which has varied little since the Second World War.' By the end of the 1960s, there was still a sense that the game's leadership was managing a decline into irrelevance. Writers in the *Rugby Leaguer* talked about how Britain had moved into a new age and left the sport behind: 'This is the age of the cabaret club, the discotheque, colour television and the sports car.' League administrators, by contrast, offered 'a pint under the bar and a warmed-up meat pie' to entice people in.

Wigan were one of the clubs that had resisted the idea that you needed to offer something else to supporters beyond the events on the pitch. At a shareholders' meeting, one director

scoffed at the idea that ‘bingo and the like’ would be able to save the game. By the early 70s, the *Rugby Leaguer* had decided to act by launching a study into what had gone wrong with the sport over the period. First, in a dramatic front-page editorial, the paper called for a ‘halt to the massive slide’ after they calculated that the game had lost over 200,000 more spectators in just a few months. Then, in block capitals, they called on the game to act: ‘IN THE PAST THREE SEASONS, MORE THAN HALF A MILLION FANS HAVE BEEN LOST TO THE GAME – AND THAT’S ONLY IN LEAGUE MATCHES – THE SLIDE MUST BE STOPPED’.

* * *

Those at the top of the RFL admitted that they no longer had the answers. ‘We try hard,’ said long-serving secretary Bill Fallowfield. ‘But your guess is as good as mine as to why the bloody public doesn’t come.’ After a decade of decline in the 1960s, administrators were increasingly desperate to find a solution to their problems. One suggestion had been to bring in management consultants to try and identify potential solutions to the decline. Consultancy had become a buzzword across British industry after US management consultants had followed leading US companies into Europe. The expansion of McKinsey across British industry was well known, after they did work for firms such as Cadbury, Tate & Lyle and Rolls-Royce. In the public sector, British Rail, the Bank of England and the Post Office employed McKinsey for advice about restructuring.

Rugby league couldn’t afford McKinsey. Instead, they turned to a local Manchester firm to advise on how they could reimagine the sport for the 1980s. John Caine Associates of Manchester agreed to a £3,000-a-year consultancy to equip the game for the demands of the new age. They began by surveying club owners to

gather their opinions and there was great anticipation about what Caine could deliver. The *Rugby Leaguer* threw its weight behind the researchers, urging them to imagine selling the game like a loaf of bread. The modern supporter was affluent, owned a car and had 'the wife nagging him to go shopping' each weekend. Therefore, the sport had to offer 'more than a splinter-ridden seat and a clinker terrace to draw him to the match'.

Quickly dubbed the 'Manchester Wizkid' by his supporters in the media, Caine was soon frustrated by the 'inexplicable reluctance' of Bill Fallowfield to answer letters on the 'important matters'. Without guidance from the top, Caine had free rein to develop a set of radical proposals to change the face of the sport. And when he presented the findings to the RL Council – the game's ruling body – he refused to hold back his criticisms of the failure of leadership. Caine began by unpicking the dwindling media profile, which he blamed on the leadership's lack of resources and urgency: 'It is not sufficient for the press and others to be told that they were too busy to answer telephone calls.' The sport had little support from friends at the BBC either: 'The direction of the cameras and overall style of the programme' promoted a sense of 'slag heap and drizzle' every time a viewer tuned in.

Caine recommended that the clubs streamline, create a smaller governing body and appoint an outside chairman to manage the game's affairs. The report recommended creating a new two-division structure and converting rugby league to a Sunday sport to differentiate it from football. To reverse the slow-paced nature of the game, he proposed reducing the number of players on the pitch to 11 to promote attacking play. Caine concluded that the 'single-minded, loyal supporter' was 'rapidly disappearing' and that the only way the game could survive into the 1980s would be to appeal to the 'better-off, more mobile, more sophisticated and consequently more discriminating generation'.

The Caine Report was meant to set the sport up for the demands of a changing working class with different demands on leisure time. But it proved to be too controversial to implement. Embroiled in a debate about the role of commentator Eddie Waring at the BBC, Fallowfield quickly engineered a confidence vote in his leadership before Caine could deliver a follow-up report and a plan to enact the changes. While the sport did move to two divisions, the more radical aspects around the coverage and presentation of the game were ignored. Caine found that the clubs and the administrators were unwilling to support him, particularly in his battle with the BBC. Finally, in April 1972, the RL Council decided it no longer wanted the consultancy involved in the game and ended the contract. The RFL, it seemed, was powerless to address the problems that its own research had identified.

* * *

Nowhere had the shift in youth culture been more apparent than in Wigan. Young people had packed the terraces at Central Park in the 1950s and 60s, making its famous 'hen pen' a magnet for children and teenagers to watch their idols play each week. But by the 70s, the young people in the ground had all but vanished and many of them were using their pocket money elsewhere. In 1973, the first all-night session of Northern Soul took place at Wigan Casino where it would go on to become a magnet for young people across the country. The term Northern Soul was coined by writer Dave Godin, when he noticed northern football fans in his London record shop asking for stuff nobody had heard of.

And the casino drew a very different crowd than the ones who had gone to pubs and rugby league matches in the 1950s. For young people such as Paul Mason, it was about creating a space where people could be liberated from the day-to-day realities of industrial work. It had, he recalled, 'athletic dance, sleek fashion

and illegal stimulants' that gave people the opportunity to express themselves. While workers had previously used their weekends to stand in unison on the open terraces of the rugby grounds, the casino allowed them to dance in unison in the darkness of the nightclub. The emergence of a counter-culture was captured by an infamous Granada documentary which intercut imagery of the town's industrial past with the energy and dynamism of the scene.

Wigan rugby league didn't even try and win over those young people in the 1970s. The club had long resisted the idea that it should offer entertainment on top of the action on the pitch to attract supporters. But their outdated image could be summed up by how they rebuilt the team's post-match social club. Jack Winstanley, who had covered the club for decades in the *Wigan Observer*, was angry at their feeble attempts to build a new bar within the ground: 'Instead of equipping the finest ground in the game with the finest facilities in the game, they built a glorified "working men's club",' he wrote. And while some teams such as Salford and Warrington had built highly profitable social clubs that overlooked the ground, 'The only window in the Wigan club overlooking the pitch is in the gent's toilet.'

Wigan lived off its historic reputation for much of the 70s, but just as Bradford had found the decade before, there was always going to be a financial reckoning. Wigan's relegation in 1980 had economic consequences for the club as well as emotional ones. As the club's debt teetered towards £100,000, rumours began to spread throughout the town that Central Park would be sold off to the football side, Wigan Athletic. Fearing the worst, two club directors quit citing 'business reasons' as their motivation for leaving. Harry Gostelow, the Wigan chairman who had presided over the club's decline, was tasked with finding new investors to join the board.

Gostelow had become a much-maligned figure in the town. A self-employed builder, he had his own problems to deal with

in early 1980 when his firm was accused of installing faulty gas fires that were ‘in a highly dangerous condition when a gas board official made an inspection’. The *Wigan Observer* reported how Gostelow admitted to six offences relating to faulty installations at three houses in the town. There was little chance of local businesses coming on board with the club in the Second Division. The great sell-off of the club’s assets seemed inevitable.

But when Gostelow was looking for new investors to join the board, people kept telling him to approach a small business owner by the name of Maurice Lindsay. Lindsay had been one of the many young people who had travelled to Wigan from Bolton in the 1950s to stand in the ‘hen pen’. Each fortnight he would return to Wigan and look at the impact on the people around him of a successful rugby league team. He knew that if Wigan won, more coal would be produced, more baked bean tins would be made in the Heinz factory, and more money would be put in the tills of the pubs. It impacted the pride of the town and the way that people went about their work.

As a teenager, Lindsay was so desperate to find a way to watch Wigan in the Challenge Cup Final that he took a job as a porter with British Rail. The magic of Wembley and the romance of it had never left Lindsay, but after a spate of defeats in the 60s, Wigan’s trips to the twin towers dried up. Lindsay instead focused on building a business and setting up links with rugby league clubs across the North West. He popped up everywhere in rugby league circles in the 70s. A self-made entrepreneur who made a fortune hiring out construction equipment, Lindsay often used rugby league to promote his business ends. In an era when shirt sponsorship of league clubs was still forbidden, he found a way around it by plastering ‘Transkabin’ – the name of his firm – all over the shirts of local amateur club Wigan St Patricks instead.

In a sport with few rich benefactors, he was soon in demand, sponsoring man-of-the-match prizes at Salford and Warrington. There, he got to know the St Helens great Alex Murphy, and the pair could often be found putting the world to rights in saunas and hotel bars across the North West. But by the time Lindsay watched Wigan matches from the executive boxes in the late 1970s, the spirit he had witnessed on the terraces as a child had vanished.

What frustrated Lindsay was that the club had accepted its decline. After each defeat, he watched as the ageing businessmen poured the whisky and champagne for each other. Downstairs, tucked away in a tea room, the players made do with warm beer. The players were not treated as stars and there was no appetite to find a solution. Above all, the board had stopped communicating with the fans. In desperate need of some cash, Gostelow made Lindsay an offer to come on the board of directors. Lindsay was advised by his friends not to bother sinking money into a club that was beyond repair. But while Lindsay was a ruthless businessman with little sympathy for lame ducks, he was also, to his very fingertips, a gambler.

As a child on the Central Park terraces, he had been as amazed by the hustlers and the bookmakers – who he called the ‘spivs’ – as he had been by the players. Lindsay became an on-course bookmaker himself. As part of the mythology he created around himself, he framed himself as the small-time bookmaker fighting it out with Ladbrokes, the Tote and William Hill each week. But there was also a subtle truth to it. To be successful, he had to quickly master the art of making calculations in an instant, a trait that was all too rare in rugby league circles. At that moment, just days before Wigan were relegated to the Second Division, he decided that Wigan was still worth a punt.

Within hours of his appointment, he was already working with the media and framing a new narrative in his direction. The *Wigan*

Observer put his picture on the front page and ran an interview where he promised to put the pride back in the shirt. 'Any effort I can make to improve the club's fortunes will be made,' he revealed. 'I am not afraid of a struggle.' He even appeared to embrace the dreaded relegation that had long been feared by everyone else in the town: 'If Wigan go down it is not the end of the world and if it means hard work to get back up then let's get to it.'

* * *

The decline of Wigan was part of a wider trend in which the bigger clubs had felt that they had lost control and power over the decision-making in the sport. But the consequence of this was that the 1970s became one of the most equal and highly contested decades in the sport's history. Rugby league culture was dominated more than anything by its supporters' addiction and obsession with cup tournaments. Cups had been at the heart of British sporting life in the post-war years. 'Instant death,' argued Ray French in *Simply the Best*, is what appealed to supporters. 'They like to go to a match where it is all or nothing.'

In the 70s the rugby league season could be broken up into four different distinct phases to ensure that every team had something to play for at any given time. The season kicked off with the Yorkshire and Lancashire Cup, which was soon followed by the John Player Special (JPS) Trophy that ran through the autumn, leading to a final in January to kick off the New Year. Both were seen as important precursors to the main event of the season which was the Challenge Cup. This ran from January to May and drew in most of the media attention, and the prospect of playing at Wembley was the dream of every player who ever picked up a rugby ball.

Then after the climax of the Challenge Cup, the top eight sides competed for the Premiership trophy to round off the season.

And in between all the knock-out fixtures was a 30-game league season to determine who the champions were. It meant that if you were fortunate enough to play in every round of every competition, you could be involved in over 50 matches each season. More cup games suited everybody. The clubs had opportunities to make extra gate revenue while the administrators had the opportunity to sell each one to a different sponsor.

And for all the talk of decline and the reduced national profile, the sport had never been as competitive and equal in sharing out the trophies amongst its clubs. Over that decade, if you supported Castleford, Leigh, St Helens, Featherstone, Warrington, Widnes or Leeds, you saw your side lift the Challenge Cup. If you supported Dewsbury, Salford or Hull KR, you watched as your team lifted the Championship title. Bradford fans enjoyed a Premiership win, while strugglers Wigan and Workington could point to victories in the Lancashire Cup. Halifax fans saw their side win a JPS Trophy. Even Bramley enjoyed a rare moment in the spotlight when they lifted the BBC Floodlit Trophy, before it was axed. And while all those clubs tasted some success, other smaller clubs came very close to doing so. Swinton, Blackpool, Rochdale and York participated in a major final in the decade.

But when Maurice Lindsay looked around the game for a side that he could model a potential Wigan revival on, he was inevitably drawn to Humberside. Just as Wigan had grown on the back of coal nationalisation after 1945, Hull's fishing industry had been pinpointed as an area for expansion to ship fish exports to Britain and the rest of the world. At one point in the 1960s, there had been over 8,000 trawlermen working out of Hull, with economists calculating that three times that figure earned a living off the back of the fishing industry. Hull was one of the world's biggest fishing harbours and by 1970 its people landed 197,000 tonnes of fish a year.

Fishing was integral to both the economy and the identity of the local population. Deep-sea trawling was respected as one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. Locals used to argue they were much tougher than the mythologised coal miners in Yorkshire and Lancashire. On Humberside, workers would say that four fishermen died at sea for every miner killed in an accident. It is estimated that more than 6,000 trawlermen from Hull alone died between 1835 and 1980.

The area was also famous for its rugby league team. Hessle Road, where Hull's trawlermen and families lived, was where Hull FC developed a club that became one of the biggest names in the sport. The workers around the area would spend weeks away at sea and, upon their return, fill the pubs and restaurants with their bulging pay packets. They would then head straight for Hull's notorious home ground, the Boulevard. Johnny Whiteley was a Hull legend who had been central to the team's success in the 1950s. He recalled how fans 'would come down the North Sea, flat out, to catch the tide for the match singing "Old Faithful"', which was the club's anthem.

In the 1960s, one of the most famous residents of Hessle Road was Lillian Bilocca, who led a women's movement known as the 'headscarf revolutionaries', to improve safety at sea after a tragic accident had killed local workers. The 70s would, however, change debates around fishing from issues of safety to issues of survival. Just as the coal industry had begun to decline in areas like Wigan, the fishing industry was hammered in Hull by Britain's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. This had flooded the market with cheap frozen fish. The much-reviled policy had been the subject of considerable debate in Britain in the 1970s. But it had been put together before Britain entered and gave the country very little control over its fishing quotas.

In the mid-1970s, the public had been gripped by a diplomatic stand-off between Britain and Iceland over the so-called 'Cod Wars'. The Labour government, led by Jim Callaghan, tasked the Royal Navy with protecting British trawlers against the Icelandic boats who wanted to fish in the same waters. As a result, tensions between the two countries began to rise. But when the Icelandic government threatened to withdraw from NATO as a retaliation, the British government had little option but to compromise.

The trade-off was not a hugely significant one for the British economy as it accepted the inevitable decline of the fishing industry. But in places like Hull, Grimsby and Peterhead, it was a seismic blow to their industries and their identity. And the debate over fish and the fortunes of Hull as a fishing port symbolised Britain's decline in some quarters. Journalists, commentators and politicians soon started talking about the great betrayal of Humberside. For the *Daily Mail*, the fish workers had been 'sold down the river', the innocent victims of 'the most abjectly disgraceful surrender of traditional rights in our island's seafaring history'.

The blame was squared at the EEC 'bureaucrats' who had told them 'where and when they can fish, and how much they can catch even in British waters'. Within the space of a decade, exports had been massively reduced. By 1980, just 15,000 tonnes of fish came from Hull. As the industry declined, a young photographer called Alec Gill captured the changing fortunes of working-class people on Hessle Road as the community was slowly broken up. As people left the squalor of housing that had been left to rot, the community spread out across new housing estates with the offer of inside toilets and hot running water.

Hull FC was not expected to survive those wider economic changes. In the mid-1970s, they had become a symbol for the game's ills when they infamously drew in a crowd of just 721 people for a match against Huyton. They too were relegated to the Second

Division towards the end of the 70s. Yet somehow the club had been able to defy the logic of managed decline and revitalise their fortunes both on and off the pitch. A new coach in Arthur Bunting proved to be the spark that reignited the city's passion for the black and whites when he brought in some old heads, such as Steve Norton, to play alongside players Vince Farrar, Charlie Stone, Sammy Lloyd and Paul Prendiville. Despite languishing in the Second Division, the club managed to reconnect with its supporters by playing attractive rugby league. When promotion to the First Division was secured in front of 12,000 people, the club sensed that it was on the cusp of a revival.

The supporters stuck around for the next few years as Hull assembled a Championship-winning side that took the league by storm. By the early 1980s, their turnaround was evident in the sheer number of people who wanted to watch them play. While historic clubs around the game struggled, Hull had become the talk of the city again. Within just 12 games of the 1979/80 season, almost 120,000 people had passed through their turnstiles, which was the highest attendance of the decade.

Hull's revival was boosted by their rivalry with their city neighbours Hull Kingston Rovers. KR had long lived in the shadow of their neighbours, waiting until the 1960s before appearing at Wembley for the first time. Formed in 1882 by a group of boilermakers, they played on a ground west of the city. Like their rivals, they had been relegated in the 1970s, and it proved the catalyst for a revival. The directors responded to the setback by signing several experienced players, including rugby league greats Neil Fox and Clive Sullivan. By the beginning of the new decade, the Humberside derby was the number-one fixture in the game. When *The Observer* football journalist Phil Shaw visited the city in 1980, he discovered that 'the youth are drawn to rugby league like wasps to a picnic'.

In the 60s, the sport had longed to see the giants of Lancashire, Wigan and St Helens battle it out in the Challenge Cup Final at Wembley. The pair met twice; once in 1961 and again in 1966, when Prime Minister Harold Wilson joined a record crowd inside the stadium to watch the heavyweight rivals Alex Murphy and Billy Boston face off against each other. There were more people in the ground in April 1966 to watch Wigan v St Helens than there were at the World Cup Final between England and West Germany a few months later. But by 1980 there was little doubt that the Humberside derby had now replaced it as the top rivalry in the sport. Those running the game dreamed of an all-Hull derby to generate the same kind of impact. And in 1980 it finally happened.

‘Humberside is gripped by Wembley fever,’ declared the *Rugby Leaguer* as supporters across the city queued in the middle of the night to buy the first train tickets when they went on sale. In the build-up, the *Hull Daily Mail* found that few people could speak of anything else in the pubs. One landlord found a way to cash in on the hype by painting two large arrows (one in black and white, one in red and white) pointing to two separate areas of the bar. A local hair salon offered supporters the option of coloured dye in their team’s colours. ‘It started off with people wanting either squares or stripes in their hair,’ said the owner.

With Hull the subject of much debate in the 1970s as a symbol of British decline, the interest in the 1980 Challenge Cup Final went far beyond the sports pages. The *Daily Mirror* sent a special investigator to the area to capture the mood on the ground. They found that the players would face a rather ‘gloomier homecoming’ than usual with ‘One in ten out of work’ and ‘Its unemployment record is among the worst in Britain.’ Most significantly, reporters highlighted how nearly four-fifths of the local fishing industry had been wiped out: ‘Empty docks and factories, shuttered shops and boarded-up stores stand as silent witnesses to a sad slump.’

At the same time, the success of the two rugby sides had given people a sense of pride and optimism for the future. One trawlerman, who had spent 21 years at sea, said the final was the catalyst to begin a new chapter of his life – ‘I decided there was no way I could miss it’ – so he spent his last pay packet on seven tickets for him, his wife and his children. Another supporter revealed how he had saved up all his earnings as a part-time barman to pay for a ticket. The BBC ran a special feature on the packed trains as they arrived at Euston station. ‘Will the last person to leave,’ a banner draped over a bridge on the A63 asked, ‘please turn out the lights?’ In front of the Queen Mother, who was the guest of honour, Hull KR lifted the trophy. But the organisers were the big winners. ‘The attendance could easily have topped 100,000 had we been allowed,’ admitted an RFL spokesperson.

The challenge for the 1980s was to foster the spirit of Humberside and spread it across the league. Over in Wigan, Maurice Lindsay studied Hull and wondered whether Wigan would ever make it back to Wembley at all. A few weeks into life as a director at the club, he was finding out how difficult it would be to enact any actual change. Initially, Lindsay found that his wealth didn’t actually buy him any influence or power in the world of rugby league. Joining an unruly board of 12, alongside another young and ambitious businessman, Jack Robinson, the pair found the club still run by tradition, the ‘rulebook’ and hierarchies. Decisions were made collectively and often kicked into the long grass, meaning the lines of accountability were blurred. At his first board meeting, Lindsay began to propose some solutions to the problems they faced when he was interrupted mid-sentence and informed that his job as the most junior member was simply to pour the tea for the others.