

MARK WALDON

# LONDON'S FIELDS



An Intimate History of  
London Football Fandom

# **LONDON'S FIELDS**

**An Intimate History of  
London Football Fandom**

**MARK WALDON**



# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	10
Introduction. . . . .	11
1. Never Meet Your Heroes. . . . .	15
2. Cultural Capital . . . . .	29
<b>Introducing the Teams . . . . .</b>	<b>41</b>
3. She Wore a Yellow Ribbon. . . . .	43
4. Can't Smile Without You . . . . .	60
5. We the Kings of Orient are . . . . .	80
6. They Fly So High, Nearly Reach the Sky . .	98
7. Bob-Bob-Bobbing Along . . . . .	117
8. We Really Do Care, Don't We? . . . . .	132
9. You Say That You Love Me . . . . .	151
10. Underground, Overground . . . . .	168
11. Just a Bus Stop in Hounslow. . . . .	187
12. Hi Ho Super Rangers . . . . .	204
13. You're Just Too Good To Be True . . . . .	221
14. Carefree, Wherever You May Be. . . . .	237

## Chapter 1

# Never Meet Your Heroes

I GREW up with lots of fellow football fans. Two happened to support Arsenal. Their dads did and so did they. These were two kids who were never going to get a say in who they supported. It was handed down to them. It was hereditary fandom if you like and given Arsenal's history over the last 40-odd years, I don't think they've much cause for complaint. This may be how you came to be following your team too. Your dad handed it down to you. Some don't have a choice but many others do. Perhaps you support your team because a grandad, an aunt, an uncle or a sister did. You might have been born near the ground. Perhaps you liked the name or the colours. Maybe you fancied one of the players or maybe you *were* one of the players.

I chose Spurs against steep odds as an eight-year-old watching the 1981 FA Cup Final. I think I liked the kit. I certainly liked Glenn Hoddle, who was almost immediately installed as my 'official' idol. The odds were slim because I had no connection to Tottenham Hotspur, the area or the

club at all. I was born a wind-assisted goal kick away from Selhurst Park and raised in Croydon. From where I lived in deepest south London, the journey to Tottenham was and has remained a long and arduous one. My dad didn't and couldn't take me to football yet – he was a player himself in the Football League before I was born and afterwards in non-league football. My dad had been born near Arsenal's ground – Highbury, not Woolwich. The family left the Angel in the late 1950s. My nan says she remembered being offered council houses in Tottenham, Plumstead and Morden. Such was the experience of many at the time. They chose Morden. On such small details large events turn. How life might've turned out differently had they chosen Tottenham.

Despite being born in Islington, neither my dad nor any of the family supported Arsenal, though he does remember he and his brother being lifted over the heads of spectators and passed down to the front when they got in to see Wolves play at Highbury – Billy Wright and the glorious Wolverhampton Wanderers team of the 50s being the main draw, not the Gunners. When I pressed him on it, my dad would admit to a preference for West Ham, something to do with the World Cup win in '66 and the skill of Trevor Brooking. He was keen to remind me, however, that he was a footballer first and foremost and didn't 'support' any particular team. It was a harsh lesson learnt at a young age – those involved in the game are hard-nosed professionals making economic decisions with no room for sentiment. Beware therefore of badge-kissing prima donnas and ghost-monitored social media accounts.

My dad's siblings, growing up in Morden, chose Chelsea as their team. An aunt and an uncle ended up

working in the Chelsea offices as clerks when they left school. My dad had signed schoolboy forms with Chelsea but ended up on a professional contract with Millwall. This was the Millwall who were managed by Benny Fenton and featured Harry Cripps, Derek Possee and Keith Weller – the latter two in my dad's midfield position meaning first-team chances were rare. After retraining as a teacher and gaining some coaching qualifications, he ended up playing for Sutton United and latterly for Bromley. His period at Sutton was particularly successful as the team reached the FA Trophy Final at Wembley and regularly competed in the Anglo-Italian Cup, winning it in 1979. Another of my aunts had married a semi-professional footballer too. Ken Gross played for Sutton United, Dulwich Hamlet and Croydon. He was a far more committed West Ham fan. Football was very much in the family.

My mum and dad split up when I was young. Me, my mum and my brother ended up with Crystal Palace as our nearest team. My first league match was at Selhurst Park – 26 April 1980, a 0-0 draw between Crystal Palace and Liverpool. A friend of the family was taking his grandson and asked if I wanted to go too. The main draw was Kenny Dalglish if I'm honest, not Palace's 'team of the 80s'. The enduring memory of that day, though, wasn't the sight of the champions of England strutting their stuff but of the lovely old fellow, the one who had taken us, having his wallet pickpocketed. That Palace's opponents were Liverpool was surely just a coincidence. I didn't choose Palace as my team, though. Over the years to come, I would end up living all over south London, so in retrospect it would have been a wiser and perhaps more loyal decision. However, this visit to Selhurst Park marks the beginning

of, shall we say, a more professional relationship that was to last until the late 90s. I'll come back to cover this in more detail during the book.

From 1981 onwards, though, my heart was Spurs and my idol was Hoddle. Love at first sight. My first game came in 1982 and this is where my relationship with the Lane began – in unusual circumstances that continued to grow ever more bizarre. A kid at school, Simon, had invited a handful of us to his birthday party at White Hart Lane to see Spurs take on Manchester City. The date, etched on my psyche, was 20 February 1982. His old man must have had some business connections with Spurs fans as we were sat in the West Stand executive boxes. I spent a few years in my teens wishing that my first Lilywhite experience had been on my dad's shoulders on the Shelf, or some such authentic fan story, earthier, more earnest. But alas, it wasn't to be – I can hear you all sobbing with pity for me now. The details: Spurs won 2-0, Hoddle scored both, one from the spot. The very next year, we were back. Swansea (won 2-1). Same kid, Simon's birthday party again. Although this was to be my last experience of the refined yet dull and discombobulating executive boxes, it was only just the beginning of years of privilege and an access to Tottenham Hotspur that was the envy of many fellow schoolboys.

In 1984, my dad's semi-pro career was winding down and he was looking to see where the coaching badges he had held could take him. I vividly recall the day I came home from school to hear that my dad had got a part-time job at Spurs coaching the under-15s. My mum's first words to me were something along the lines of, 'Promise not to get too excited.' Whatever she said next remained

unheard by me, hanging in the ether. Seats with the club's associated schoolboys in the West Lower became a regular thing and a number of memorable games followed: West Ham 2-2 on Boxing Day; Fulham in the Cup; a 2-1 win over Villa and my first north London derby – a 4-2 loss – the first of many unfortunately but by no means the most traumatic. Worse was to come.

Soon, the old man was offered a full-time post and worked under Shreeve, Pleat, El Tel and Ossie. School holidays meant going to work with dad and mostly to Cheshunt, then later Mill Hill, where my brother and I watched our heroes train and even rubbed shoulders with them: Hoddle, Clemence, Waddle, Mabbutt, Gascoigne, Lineker et al. After training, we often ended up at White Hart Lane when there was a bit of office work to do. On a few memorable occasions, I found myself sitting in the late Bill Nicholson's office listening to the great man wax lyrical about his days as a player, the Double-winning side and what Tottenham Hotspur still meant to him all those decades down the line. Billy Nick aside – who I revered, still revere and who was utterly charming – meeting your heroes isn't quite what it's cracked up to be. My fault. I'd only done what the majority of kids do, though. I'd put these soaring, short-shortened gods on a dizzyingly high pedestal, only to find out that they were fairly ordinary, run-of-the-mill young men who drove Ford Sierras.

My dad would often be sent on scouting missions – looking at players or more often forthcoming Spurs opponents. As the complimentary tickets usually came in pairs, he started taking me. Most of the trips were around London or the south-east and as we sat there amongst the



hoi polloi, he'd give me an invaluable footballing education – 'don't watch the ball, watch the centre-forward pulling on the full-back to make room for a runner from midfield', that sort of thing. These trips also gave me the opportunity to observe up close the habits and customs of fans at other clubs, hear their songs and chants, their moans and groans. I was sure there was some special alchemy that made some clubs distinct and lent others a mythic quality. I thought I might be dealing in some kind of occult knowledge handed down by an unseen brotherhood. It was sobering therefore to discover that most seemed fairly alike. Punters drawn from the same sections of society. Even the peanut sellers had the same cry. In fact, the peanut seller at White Hart Lane turned out to be the peanut seller at Highbury. Of course he did. Splitter.

I had been a very enthusiastic but limited player myself as a kid. My position, midfield, or – depending on the whim of the coach – substitute. Things began to change, though, when I hit puberty early. I grew about a foot almost overnight and a savvy coach, I think at my Sunday League club, moved me to centre-back and everything fitted into place. It was an auspicious conversion to the more serene waters of the back four, where everything could be seen in front of you. I was a substitute no longer. As well as school and Sunday League, I began to play representative football. At the Terrence MacMillan Stadium in Plaistow some time in 1987 or '88, the London Borough of Croydon team were there to play the London Borough of Newham under-15s and there were scouts all over the little stadium. I turned in a decent performance and after the game a Spurs scout, the wonderfully named Len Cheesewright, picked out a team-mate – Dean Gordon – and myself. He asked

my surname and he said, ‘Oh, we’ve got a Keith Waldon coaching at the club. Any relation?’

So there I was training with and playing for the club I loved aged 15. Training was on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the ground, where we used the ball court behind the Chanticleer Restaurant, in the north-west corner of the car park. I was excused half an hour of school to get up there. I met Dean at the station and began the long schlep to N17. I’ve used the wrong Yiddish verb there as it wasn’t tedious at all but an utter joy. I played and trained with the likes of Stuart Nethercott, Sol Campbell (still *persona non grata* and Judas for most Spurs fans), Ian Hendon, Jeff Minton and a young Jamie Redknapp – all of whose natural skill, touch, pace, power and vision were enough to persuade me to make the most of my GCSEs and to look for alternative career choices. Double-winning full-back Ron Henry took many of our sessions. My dad, wary of any accusations of nepotism, treated me as just one of any number of hopeful young lads. These fears receded as my limitations became obvious.

I did have trials at Doncaster Rovers, who had just won the FA Youth Cup, and also at Charlton Athletic. However, given my local connections and the fact that my mate, Dean Gordon, had already moved there meant that I gratefully accepted an offer from Crystal Palace. The first-team manager was Steve Coppell and the youth team was overseen by Alan Smith. Palace took one look at me and told me that I ‘wasn’t tall enough for centre-back’ and moved me back into midfield, where I spent most of the time watching the ball sailing over my head. After training one night, Coppell invited ten of us into his office at the training ground in Mitcham to discuss YTS contracts,

which were being tacitly offered – though I have no doubt that I was way back in that queue. My head wasn't in it by that stage, though. I was still a fan, though not of Palace. I was still going to Spurs and had started going to away games. Added to this was a burgeoning interest in music, girls, alcohol and other youthful stimulants as, although it might surprise the reader, I did and do have a hinterland beyond football.

As many Palace fans will tell you, Dean Gordon made it as a professional – the only one from that Palace schoolboy side. I really liked Dean and followed his career from a distance. I did see him years later in an unusual setting. It was in Marseille before England played Tunisia in the 1998 World Cup outside the Stade Velodrome. It was like a scene from Dante's *Inferno*, fans from both countries tearing into each other as police fired tear gas into the crowd. Through the miasma, I recognised Dean's gait (weirdly) as he ran towards the stadium and towards where I was standing. I intercepted him and he had time to briefly tell me that he'd just met with Bryan Robson and had signed for Middlesbrough. As the water cannon were being readied, we parted and scrambled for the stadium.

My tumble down the football pyramid was alarmingly rapid as league clubs turned into non-league, eventually becoming pub teams. I'd probably found my true level. If I was holding on to any faint hope of making it as a footballer, they were dashed on one memorable night at Gander Green Lane, Sutton. I was at sixth-form college and had started playing for Sutton United's youth team. We were entered into a Cup competition that pitted amateur youth teams against the youth teams of professional clubs. Our opponents that night were Tottenham Hotspur. My

dad was bringing his side (and mine!) to play us. The Sutton manager pulled me aside before the game and, wary of my connections to Spurs and how emotional I might be, urged caution and calm restraint. I was going to be marking Darren Caskey in midfield. The Sutton manager needn't have worried; I couldn't get near enough to Caskey to kick him if I had tried. Little feints and dips of his shoulder left me floundering. My misery was compounded when someone shouted out from the stands, 'He's all over you number eight, you're useless.' I turned around with an open-armed gesture, as if in agreement, and got a bollocking from my coach! My dad eventually left the club too under Ossie – sacked by Alan Sugar – and I could put an end to my schizophrenic double life as a Spurs fan at White Hart Lane.

You see, matchdays at the Lane always meant the rather staid conditions of the West Stand and its attendant bars and lounges. Without wishing to seem ungrateful, the Shelf and its songs; fanzines instead of programmes; and the full experience of being a Yid\* was what I had always been after. Whenever I could I found this at away games but home matchdays had always been different. With all professional and familial ties with the club now ended, I chose to sit with my mate Steve, first in the East Lower, then the Paxton as season ticket holders.

\*I don't feel particularly comfortable typing the Y word but it and its uses by Spurs and others fans is a theme I will return to a number of times in the book.

Despite being free to indulge my footballing passions to the fullest, I wasn't and never have been one of the die-hard, home and away; rain, sleet or snow; domestic and European trips all included superfans. Most clubs have these, you

might know one or two. People who haven't missed a game for decades. Spurs had one of the most famous superfans of all time in the shape of Maurice Keston. A tailor by trade, Maurice started watching Tottenham in the 1940s and from the 50s onwards would see the club play all over the world. Sometimes attending up to five games a week, including youth and reserve matches, he also arranged testimonials for Spurs and non-Spurs players. Keston is featured in Hunter Davies' *Glory Game* and even had an autobiography published called *Superfan: The Amazing Life of Maurice Keston* with a foreword from Terry Venables.

For my part, here are my credentials, take them or leave them. I've been a sometime season ticket holder and a sometime club member. In the days when going away was relatively easy and didn't require more planning than the average family holiday, I used to go to the odd far-flung place (I'm talking Derby or Leeds, not necessarily Barcelona or Turin) and always London derbies. I've flounced off vowing never to return, owing in large part to the changes in modern football (corporate greed and vulgarity) and in small to my own team's ineptitude (Spursey). I've lived overseas and followed fervently at some God-forsaken hour of the night or morning on the telly. Somehow, though, I always come skulking back. I'm a season ticket holder now in the new stadium, surrounded by tourists.

The Crystal Palace connections I alluded to earlier are many and varied. One of my first after-school jobs as a young kid was selling lottery tickets door to door for the club. I did my work experience there as an apprentice to the apprentices. I spent a whole two weeks mopping the floors at the training ground and cleaning the youth team's boots – not even the first team's. What glory the game provides.

Years later, my mum got a part-time job behind the bar at the club. When I was looking for work and the catering manager needed an extra pair of hands at Christmas, she got me in. I stayed there for a few years, becoming the bar manager and licensee for the whole Selhurst Park complex – pub, matchday bars, nightclub and function rooms. This was a time when Wimbledon were tenants at Selhurst, so home games for both the Eagles and the Dons flew thick and fast. I'll revisit one or two incidents from this time in the Wimbledon and Palace chapters.

In my teens, when not playing myself or watching Spurs, there was always a little crew of us picaresque waifs, happy to go and watch QPR or Orient, Charlton or Brentford, Fulham or West Ham. And on one or two memorable and life-affirming occasions, Millwall. These were the last days of the dark ages, the time before the game's corporate renaissance and the advent of the Premier League. As many would have it (certainly the marketing department at Sky TV), this is when football was (re) invented.

We cast ourselves as young Blackguards, paying cash at the turnstile or just bunking in. We felt like we could do whatever we wanted to and often did. Along with many of the same mates we even signed up to an employment agency, one that had contracts at Stamford Bridge and Plough Lane, to be stewards and got paid to watch football instead. Halcyon days for some they may have been, but these were grim times for the game in general. The twin tragedies of Heysel and the Bradford fire occurred in 1985. Football's popularity had been on the wane for many years following its post-war boom. It suffered from the negative publicity of hooliganism and from a burgeoning choice

of leisure activities. Attendances were dreadfully low. In the light of what happened at Hillsborough at the end of the decade, the memories of me and my mates larking about; our bunking in; and when there was a sufficiently big crowd, our involvement in what we saw as adrenaline-fuelling crushes on the terraces took on a dark and sinister aspect. In the post-Taylor Report world, let alone the post-pandemic world, it's impossible to imagine someone screaming and spitting in your ear, sneezing on the back of your head and pissing in your pocket at a game of football and still finding it fun, even exhilarating. But that was the reality. My sons today would never enjoy such affordable access to so much football across London, from the top division to the bottom. However, given what I saw, I'm not sure I'd want them repeating many of my experiences.

During the 90s, as football became more corporate and gentrified, we still got up to some of our old tricks. I had a mate who worked in the corporate ticket industry – not a million miles from touting and certainly an avenue through which lots of players and managers topped up their already bloated bank balances. We came up with a scam whereby he would pick up his tickets at the office and while the receptionist was turning around to retrieve the correct envelope from a pigeonhole, he would read the next unchecked name in the ledger. *Bona fide* tickets in hand, he would then walk round the corner and tell me the name before I bowled confidently up and collected said tickets. At Spurs, I once took on the persona of a certain Kenny Jackett, a well-known ex-player and manager, alarmingly considering what transpired, at least ten years older than me. My mates John and Ben were hosting a couple of Spurs fans over from Sweden, who had tickets to a home game

against Everton. Keen to impress and give them a day to remember, I queued up at the window that issued various matchday passes and using the aforementioned technique claimed Kenny's players' lounge passes for after the game. 2-0 to the Swedes. If memory serves, we all (around six of us) went a bit blagging bonkers that day, securing gratis tickets for a forthcoming fixture after deploying a hard luck story and then capping it all off by sneaking into the ground. I went in via the West Stand, finding the fire exit door next to the ball court where I used to train open. I simply walked up the stairs to the upper level and into block 8, where I knew the club kept back a small number of complimentary tickets. Different times. Different attitudes. It could never be done now.

While writing this I've been dipping in out of a lot of memories, frequently harking back to my adolescence, when so many impressions and vital memories were made. I've delved into some YouTube clips and a few books on my shelves that I hadn't looked at for nearly 30 years. Chief among the books is Simon Inglis' imperious and poignant *The Football Grounds of Great Britain*. For all my teenage swagger – I'm now keen to tell anyone that I modelled myself to varying degrees on Shaun Ryder – being reacquainted with this book has reminded me that there was a time when as well as club colours and nicknames, I knew the name of every ground in the league; its capacity and record attendance. And I was determined to see as many of them as possible. As much therefore the slightly obsessive nerd as the swaggering anti-hero.

During these years of odyssey, I became aware of the names of not only some of the heroes of London football but many of the demagogues and villains too. We all



know the impact that players have had on our clubs, with pride of place given to the local lads – Bobby Moore, Jimmy Greaves, Ian Wright and so on. However, as an increasingly politicised teenager, with a love of the fanzines that had emerged during the 1980s, I began to familiarise myself with some of the murkier, more opaque characters too. Thus, the names Jim Gregory and David Bulstrode; Ron Noades, Ken Bates and Irving Scholar; Stan Kroenke, Francesco Becchetti and Roland Duchatelet would become just as familiar.

When my first son was born and he showed an interest in football, I didn't want to be one of those dads who told his kids who to support – the hereditary principle. After all, I reasoned, London has all these teams; let him pick and choose. I felt an enlightened obligation to show him the ropes and we took in games at Craven Cottage, Selhurst Park, The Den, Loftus Road and, of course, White Hart Lane. However, when I went to his first football practice at his primary school, I noticed that almost every kid was decked out in a blue Samsung Chelsea strip. Worse still, his maternal grandad – himself a late convert to Goonerism – was making dark threats about taking him to Arsenal. I decided to waste no further time and stuck him in a Spurs shirt, telling him, 'You're Tottenham now, son.' His little brother didn't have a chance when his time came.