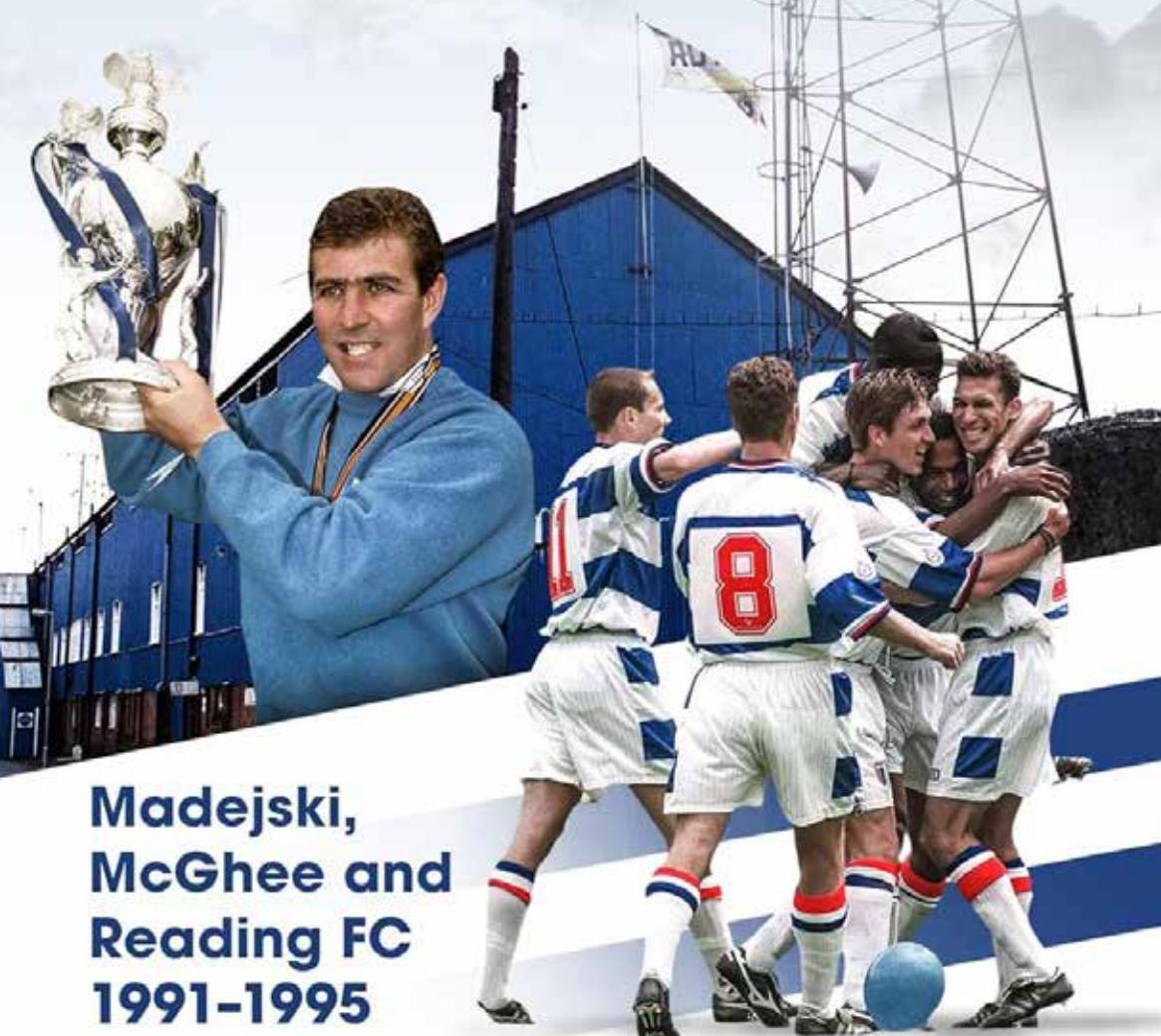


Alan Clements

MAGIC HAT



**Madejski,
McGhee and
Reading FC
1991-1995**

Forewords by Mark McGhee and Shaka Hislop

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Royals

A FOOTBALL ground is not ramshackle stands, rusting metal roofs or foot-numbing concrete terrace. It is what you bring to it. The dark and brooding recesses of Elm Park's South Bank. Standing in the rain. Disappointment or fierce pride. Family and friends. It was the ball flying high in the air and landing with a glorious 'THUNK' on the South Bank roof. An ironic cheer when the ball cleared the ground completely. The thrill of making fans around you laugh with some witty banter about the opposition keeper or an ancient midfielder.

The passing of football seasons is judged by the amount of grass left in the goalmouths and centre circle. Football smells drifted across the uncovered Tilehurst End – tobacco smoke, Bovril and greasy burgers. Every ground is unique, while sharing the same common feature. A green (in August) swathe of similar dimensions with instantly recognisable markings: 112 yards long and 77 yards wide, Elm Park's pitch was 8,624 square yards of lush perfection.

Elm Park consisted of three terraces and one seated stand:

- the open-to-the-elements Tilehurst End;
- the roofed South Bank along one touchline where the vocal support were housed;
- the uncovered Town End for away fans;
- the covered North Stand along the other touchline housing rickety flip-up seating.

By the end of the 1991/92 season Reading could attract, on average, a meagre 3,841 hardy souls. That was nowhere near the capacity, which wandered around the 12,000 to 14,000 mark. You have to wonder how the old place managed to cram in 33,042 for an FA Cup game against Brentford in February 1927.

Facilities were rudimentary at best. Everything about the ground was small and cramped, from the tiny PA announcer's box to the boardroom, and from the claustrophobic dressing rooms to the tight tunnel. The fans on every side could almost lean over the wall and touch the pitch. This led to an electric atmosphere when big crowds thronged the terraces.

The corrugated North Stand loomed ominously over the terraced houses on Norfolk Road, while floodlight pylons stood watch over the four corners of the ground. A landmark for fans to locate the game and a magical sight when arriving at night. Rain through the beams of the Elm Park lights transported fans to the heart of a noir movie.

Shaka Hislop came to England having only played collegiate soccer in the United States. Mark McGhee was showing him around Elm Park. He couldn't believe it. He thought to himself, 'This is the greatest ground I have ever seen in my life!' By contrast, when Borislav Mihailov joined from Botev Plovdiv, he had recently played for Bulgaria at the 1994 World Cup. On being shown around he assumed it was the training facility. When told it was Reading's home ground he remarked in thickly accented English, 'But your ground, it is shit!' Despite its superficial shortcomings, for me, and for so many Royals fans, it was a magical place.

As nicknames go, Royals is not terrible. It lacks the quaint early 20th-century charm of Reading's previous nickname, the Biscuitmen. That moniker was inspired by one of the town's few landmarks, a red-brick biscuit factory owned by Huntley and Palmer. In the late 1970s it was decided that Reading's connection to biscuits was waning and a new nickname was required. The old name was consigned

to dissolve at the bottom of the teacup of history. The *Berkshire Chronicle* and supporters' club were charged with the unenviable task of running a competition to find a new nickname. The 'Royals' nickname chosen is a nod to the royal county of Berkshire where Reading resides.

The royal county connection leads to an hilariously apocryphal story about Reading. As the figureheads of the royal county of Berkshire, the Royals could, if they so chose, force the opposition to wear their change strip. It does the rounds every few years and it's clearly not true. There is always a little part of me that would love the team to try it at Loftus Road.

Every kit contains a recognisable badge, and in 1981, Reading introduced an aesthetically pleasing shield design. The badge depicted a tall elm tree, front and centre, flanked behind by two elm trees over a river representing the Thames. The words 'Reading FC 1871' were at the bottom. It was simple, elegant and referenced the name of Reading's home ground while depicting the locale and history of the area. I think I'm safe to assume most fans look back on that badge with great fondness.

In 1987 a new badge was introduced by managing director Mike Lewis. It was possibly the blandest badge in the Football League. It maintained the shield shape, but little else. It featured the words 'Reading FC 1871' in the world's plainest font at the top of the shield, then four vertical stripes filled the shield. From left to right the stripes were yellow, sky blue, navy blue and white. That's it. It was reported by the *EP* that Lewis and manager Ian Branfoot had designed the badge themselves. Chairman Roger Smee defended the new badge as 'fashionably continental'. Good grief. The new badge was roundly panned by supporters.

I will give Reading fan Mark England, who wrote to the *EP*, the final word. 'I really do think this new badge is the final travesty. First it was the disappearance of our original nickname "The Biscuitmen", next to go was our hoops, and now it's the badge.'

Personally, when I think of a Reading kit, I think of beautiful broad blue and white hoops, hooped sleeves, white shorts and ideally hoops on the white socks. Football shirts are more than just something we wear to the match. They are a link to teams of the past, a link to the team of the present, displaying a shared and communal passion for our club and our town.

The shirts of the 90s were often voluminous affairs, completely in contrast to the form-fitting efforts of today. This led to tricky wingers jinking and bursting down the flanks in what looked like club-coloured duvet covers. Just imagine how much quicker flying winger Michael Gilkes could have been without the massive drag coefficient of those old shirts.

At the start of the 1989/90 season, Matchwinner took over production of Reading shirts from Patrick. Matchwinner's first effort was a fairly modest plain sky blue shirt featuring navy trim and an alternating square pattern woven into the fabric of the shirt. Local firm HAT Painting took over shirt sponsorship duties from the Courage brewery.

Then, in the summer of 1991, Reading unveiled an extraordinary pair of kits. The home kit featured a navy collar and cuffs with buttons at the neck. The main pattern of the shirt was described as reminiscent of television interference. Narrow silver and navy diagonal stripes of fluctuating widths created a headache-inducing strobe effect. The material of the shirt was possibly the shiniest substance known to man. The away kit was even more 'spectacular', consisting of a red shirt with white arrowheads in an alternating right-side-up/upside-down pattern. The away kit was likened to venetian blinds, but could just as easily have been described as a psychedelic convict outfit.

In the summer of 1992, after ten years in the wilderness, the club made the hugely popular decision to return to hoops. The new shirt from kit manufacturer Brooks was a cracker. The Reading badge was subtly woven into the fabric in a repeating pattern covering the whole

shirt. The royal blue and white hoops were back. The kit featured a new and more recognisable sponsor with an aesthetically pleasing logo, the John Madejski-owned *Auto Trader*.

The away kit was very similar to the home version, but the white hoops were replaced with yellow and the white shorts and socks were replaced with blue. The keen observers among you will note that the away shirt was really very similar to the home shirt.

For reasons of which I'm unaware, the club switched manufacturers from Brooks to the equally long-forgotten Pelada. Referees were still unhappy with Reading's clash-prone change strip of yellow and blue hoops, so a third kit was introduced. It's a wonderful shirt: broad and bold red and yellow hoops and a great big black collar.

Reading stayed with Pelada in 1994 and set the trend for sticking with hoops which has lasted for over 30 years. The all-over badge pattern remained, but the collar was gone, to be replaced with a v-neck consisting of red, white and blue trim pulled together with a red square on its point at the v-neck.

The away kit was plain red at first sight, but on closer inspection featured subtle red on red hoops. The *Auto Trader* logo was placed on a massive white patch stitched on to the shirt so it could be seen properly. It all looked a bit amateurish.

During Mark McGhee's reign the design of Reading shirts went on something of a rollercoaster, from the low of the TV interference kit to the high of a return to hoops. As one of the few clubs in England who play in hoops, it is a much loved part of the club's identity.