

'David was the visionary and driving force in delivering St George's Park, which shows just how much impact he's had on the game in this country.'

Sir Gareth Southgate

# DAVID SHEEPSHANKS

The Agony  
and Ecstasy  
of a Life  
in Football

MAN ON A

MISSION

# Contents

Introduction .....	13
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## **Part One**

1. 2000 Memories – the Most Valuable Game in Football .....	18
2. A Rather Privileged Childhood – Early Beginnings from Another Age .....	23
3. Boarding School.....	31
4. Growing Up Down Under.....	37
5. My Informal Apprenticeship and Learning to Work, 1972 to 1978 .....	43
6. Early Businesses – from Prawn Star to Mayo Man.....	54

## **Part Two**

7. Bobby Robson – Glory Days.....	62
8. The Players that Made It Happen.....	74
9. Life Without Robson ... and a Lunch Invitation .....	81
10. John Duncan Arrives: Adventures Behind the Iron Curtain .....	93
11. New Arrivals: the John Lyall Era .....	103
12. Discontent – and an Unexpected Elevation.....	112

## **Part Three**

13. 1995/96: Setting Out as Chairman .....	120
14. 1996/97: So Near, Yet So Far.....	126
15. A Day in the Year 1997 .....	131
16. 1997/98: the Same Old Questions .....	138
17. 1998/99: Third Time Unlucky.....	146
18. 1999/2000: on the Brink.....	155

## **Part Four**

- 19. A Scandalous Decision on Television Rights and  
an Unexpected Appointment..... 164
- 20. Chairman of the Football League! ..... 170
- 21. Candidacy for FA Chairman..... 186

## **Part Five**

- 22. The Wembley Showdown..... 196
- 23. 2000/01: Even More than We Could Have Hoped For..... 202
- 24. 2001/02: the Pros and Cons of Europe..... 211
- 25. 2002/03: a Perfect Storm..... 221
- 26. 2003/04: Joe Wheels and Deals..... 230

## **Part Six**

- 27. 2004/05: Punching Above Our Weight..... 238
- 28. 2005/06: Living Within Our Means ..... 244
- 29. 2006/07: Jim's First Year – Learning on the Job ..... 255
- 30. 2007/08: Under New Ownership..... 264
- 31. 2008/09: End of an Era..... 280

## **Part Seven**

- 32. Meanwhile, Back at the FA..... 286
- 33. Branching Out..... 294

## **Part Eight**

- 34. The National Football Centre: A Long-Postponed Necessity..... 306
- 35. Designing the Dream..... 319
- 36. Costs ... and Values ..... 337

## **Part Nine**

- 37. Manager, Chairman ... and Now Coach..... 352

## **Part Ten**

- 38. Reflections..... 368

Acknowledgements..... 373

Appendix: Statistics while Chairman at ITFC..... 381

## Chapter 1

# 2000 Memories – the Most Valuable Game in Football

‘NAYLOR ... HE’S stabbed it through. Reuser is ... onside ... Reuser. Premiership! Done and dusted for George Burley. Nails bitten to the quick, but elevation now surely, assured.’

Some things just send a shiver down your spine every time you hear them. For me it’s the words of ITV commentator Peter Drury. That won’t come as much surprise to many people reading this, as they probably do the same for you too.

With everything we had gone through, how could it be otherwise?

The 2000 play-off final at Wembley that put Ipswich Town back in the Premier League was the culmination of a gigantic team effort, after years of what had seemed like far more than our fair share of crushing, last-gasp defeats. They had been years of heartache and constant struggles against self-doubt and the nagging feeling that somehow it was not meant to be.

It felt as if we had climbed the mountain so many times, catching glimpses of the promised land beyond, only to lose our footing right at the end, and see the prize snatched from us. So now, finally standing on the summit and admiring the view, the feeling of relief, of release, of pure ecstatic joy was unparalleled. Indescribable. Extraordinary.

From up there we couldn’t just see the big time, we were in it!

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That Wembley match may have been the sweetest moment of my ITFC journey, but it wasn’t actually the most significant fixture I ever

went to. And again, I probably have a lot in common with other fans in saying that would have to be my first-ever game. In retrospect you could say it was a kind of baptism. A rite of passage. Or a first date that quickly turned to love and eventually marriage ... with all its ups and downs.

In my case, I was invited by three men employed on the farm run by my father, who was no fan of football, or any other sport for that matter. A strict military man, he demanded ‘Whatever for?’ when I told him they wanted to take me to a game. But go I did, and things were never to be the same again.

It was 11 April 1966.

Most fans start their journeys going with parents and even grandparents who have loved their club and had it ingrained in them for years. Not so me. How lucky I was that Bill Dickey, Don Howard and Mr Bilham took me under their wing. I went with them to all my early games, learning the ropes of being a supporter and experiencing the thrill of the crowd, the buzz and the palpable excitement.

It didn’t take long for me to get completely hooked after that (since you are no doubt interested, it was a 3-2 victory over Leyton Orient with Ray Crawford getting two and Gerry Baker the other ... I wonder how many people reading this were there too). Danny Hegan quickly became my favourite player, and a few months later the young teenage me found himself looking across to the new side of the ground and asking who got to sit in what turned out to be the directors’ box, apparently declaring, ‘I would like to sit there one day ...’

And after a fairly roundabout route, one day 20 or so years later that would indeed be me.

By 1968/69 I had passed my motorcycle test, and would regularly go with my friend Charlie Croll (and sometimes his sister Caroline!) and take our place standing in the North Stand, joining in all the chants. I had also learnt to drive on an old Hillman Husky I had inherited from my father’s aunt. It was no longer roadworthy, but so devoted to the Town was I by that stage that I painted it blue and white and tormented the farm workers as I careered around the place.

I became a director in the mid-1980s, which was not a time that evokes many happy memories among the Tractor Boys of an age to remember it. After over a decade at the very pinnacle of the English – and indeed European – game, the departure of the late, great Sir Bobby Robson to manage England had triggered a long, slow decline. There was a brief resurgence in the early 90s with John Lyall at the helm, but the trend was distinctly downward, and by 1995 there was no hiding the fact that we were in trouble. And not just on the pitch. As well as the perennial financial problems, there was also a tangible, widening (and distinctly alarming) gap between the club as an institution and the supporters who are, and always will be, its very lifeblood. So, I like to think, it was partially because at heart I was, and still am, an ardent fan who bleeds blue and white – with all the joy and pain that comes with it – that I was called upon to step up and become chairman. The invitation came as a wonderful surprise to me, although I would soon feel that the rest of the board were making a statement of intent by going for young blood and vigour.

There were plenty of sceptics, of course. Everybody seemed to be asking who the new chairman was and, more importantly, how much money I had to put in. The answer was, of course, none to speak of. But I had a deep love for the club and a clear idea as to the energy and business organisation needed to turn things around. Not that saying so cut much mustard with the critics. We were going to have to walk our talk!

Even before things came to a head during the disastrous 1994/95 season, I already had a fairly good idea of what exactly that walk, and that talk, should actually involve. I had, after all, done an eight-year apprenticeship as director dealing with club affairs. Plus I had spent lots of time with sponsors and supporters – including on coaches to away games – as well as mixing with the self-appointed great and good in boardrooms around the country. And I could count on the invaluable experience of having started and run several food companies, where I had found success using some of the sales-driven approaches I would later introduce at Portman Road. The definitive

blueprint of everything we needed to do crystallised in my head during our traditional pre-season Nordic tour. It's a part of the world that I know well, and where I instinctively feel at home – not only have I done dozens of trips up there buying prawns, but my wife is actually Swedish, and we were married in Stockholm.

And so it was, in a land of cray-fish barbeques, Aquavit schnapps drunk under a midnight sun, and skinny-dipping in crystal-clear lakes, that I shaped my plans for how I hoped we could reignite the club.

I had come up with a five-year plan!

### **The five-year plan**

Having read this far, you could be forgiven for thinking that this is all about me. And, there are certainly plenty of egomaniacs lurking in the business world and, if anything, even more so in football. It's easy to say, but I genuinely hope that I am nothing like that. The simple fact is that my view of leadership was, and always has been, to consult and delegate and involve as many people as possible at all levels. I strongly believe that an essential feature in any business is ensuring that people throughout the organisation feel a clarity of purpose and ownership for final outcomes, so that everyone pulls together as a team.

I had come home from Finland with a plan of what was required, a pretty clear plan. But, more importantly, I knew that I would have to engage with, and draw out, a similar outlook from the people around me, so that it became *our* plan and not just *my* plan imposed on them.

I discussed it with the board. And one of the first things I did was to ask then-manager George Burley and the senior coaching staff to a meeting in the boardroom. Morale was low.

I started by saying that I wanted us to devise a plan together for how we could recover and start the process of getting back to being a Premier League club once more. I asked them if they thought we could realistically be promoted within a year. I remember it vividly, the heads went down and I could hear them thinking, *Who's this joker!*

'Okay then,' I asked, 'what about in two years?'

Again, heads down ...

‘Alright then,’ I ventured, ‘what about in five years?’

‘Okay,’ said Paul Goddard, the youth coach, who was the first to speak, ‘I think we could in five years.’ George nodded, as did a few others. Progress.

‘Okay then,’ I continued, ‘what would we need to do to make that happen?’

‘We’d have to invest in youth, the Ipswich tradition. It’s always been the way here with Bobby Robson,’ said George. Others agreed.

‘What else?’ I asked.

‘We have to get the supporters back outside,’ said someone.

‘We need to re-engage with the community,’ someone else proffered.

‘We’ve got to become more professional in our commercial management’ was mentioned.

And so, the eggs began to hatch. And I added, ‘We have got to get our heads up and start believing in ourselves, because if we don’t, nobody else will!’ We had to rally the club both on and off the pitch, bring it together again and take 100 per cent ownership and responsibility for what we were going to do. It was as fellow director John Kerridge had said to me, we had to ‘bring back the loving feeling to Portman Road’.

When I told them I was going to go public with our plan, one or two directors questioned whether it was the right thing to do. But I felt strongly about it, and was sure that it would be much more effective to release a five-year plan to return the club to the Premier League, and make ourselves – and myself in particular – accountable for it.

Of course, the most important stakeholders for any club have to be the fans. And going out so openly with not just a declaration but also a deadline became an increasing burden as the seasons passed by, and with them our chance of getting back to where we knew we belonged.

Nor did it take the sharpest of minds to realise that, having released the five-year plan in 1995, we would really have to be delivering something by 2000. So, as that fateful day at Wembley dawned, I wasn’t going to pretend there wasn’t immense pressure ...

But more of that later. Let’s go way back, and start at the beginning.