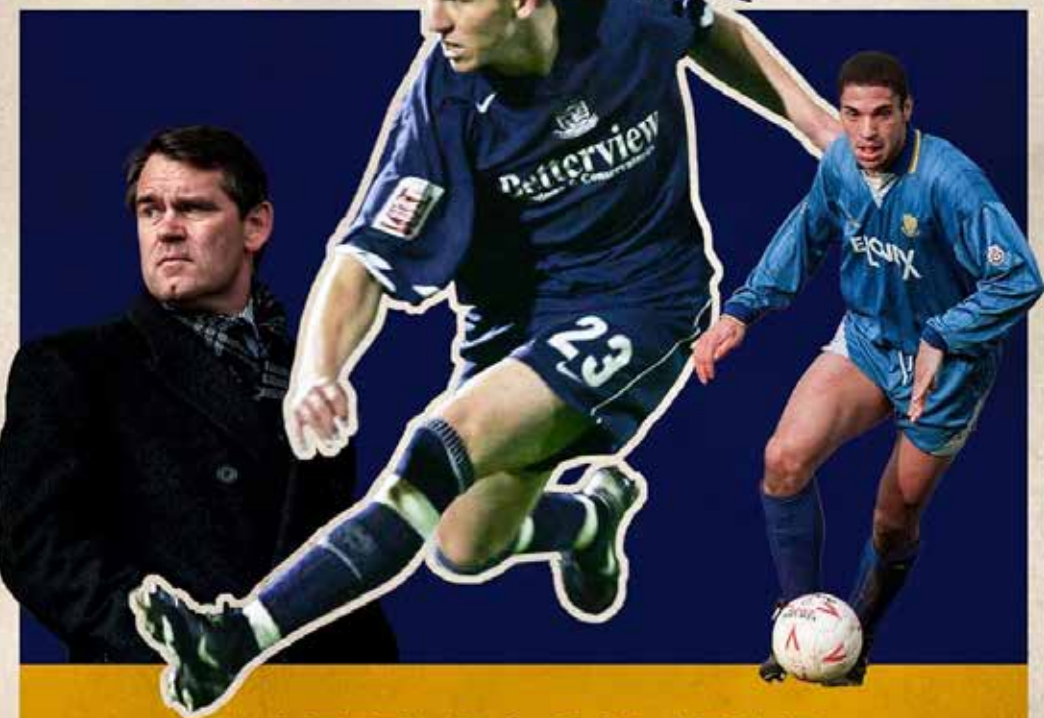


DAVID WILLIAMS

NEVER NEVER

Canal



A LIFETIME LOVE AFFAIR
WITH SOUTHBEND UNITED

DAVID WILLIAMS

NEVER NEVER *Land*

A LIFETIME LOVE AFFAIR
WITH SOUTHEND UNITED



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Chapter 1

In the Blood

IF FOOTBALL is in the blood, it runs deep in the north-west of England. On the final weekend of March 1979, everything is as it should be. Here I am in Merseyside, the land of my birth. My lifetime Football League team has just won 2-1, which is good. The winning goal comes in the very last minute, which is even better.

Football is a part of my family too. Not the kind of family that would sell their souls for FA Cup Final tickets, but enthusiastic enough with a history nonetheless. Both my parents were Liverpool born and bred. Or Scousers if you like. The consensus of opinion is that the term ‘Scouser’ was inherited from ‘lobscouse’, a beef (or something resembling meat) and potato stew introduced to the port of Liverpool by Norwegian sailors in the 18th or 19th century. My gran used to cook Scouse sometimes; it was pretty awful to be honest, but so was most of her cooking, bless her.

I arrived on the scene at Oxford Street Maternity Hospital, deep in the city centre of Liverpool, in September 1955. My father was a secondary school teacher of English in the northern suburb of Bootle; my mother had worked in accounts at the massive Scott’s Empire Bakery in the nearby suburb of Netherton, and was what used to be called a housewife. Our family home in Litherland was more or less between the school and the bakery. Litherland’s main claim to fame was

its town hall where, according to legend and my grandfather, The Beatles performed 20 times before they were famous. It was also less than four miles away from a major Liverpool landmark: Goodison Park, the home of Everton Football Club and less than five miles away from another major Liverpool landmark: Anfield, the home of Liverpool Football Club; as Liverpool as you could get.

Dad was a firm Liverpool supporter, as was his father before him – and his father before him. In the halcyon pre-second world war days, when getting into football was dirt cheap, Dad would go to Anfield one week to see Liverpool win and Goodison Park the next week to see Everton lose. Before I was born, Mum had already paid her footballing dues as a distinctly uncomfortable attendee in Liverpool's record home crowd: 61,905 for the FA Cup visit of Wolverhampton Wanderers to Anfield in February 1952. Dad's penance for this discomfort was tickets for Mum to see Frank Sinatra play the Liverpool Empire – twice – and Mum spent the years following as a mildly interested and unexpectedly insightful armchair critic.

That was the way it was. Liverpool or Everton. Red or blue. The year before I was born, Everton won promotion back to the First Division by beating Oldham Athletic on the last day of the season after a short but painful three years in the second tier. Liverpool suffered relegation by losing to Blackpool on the last day of their season after a 50-year residence in the top division, and took Everton's place in the Second Division. The Monday morning canteen banter would have been something to behold in late April 1954.

At the end of March 1979, it's more like business as usual for the red and blue sides of Liverpool. Everton are second in the First Division with an outside shot at the title. Liverpool are a few points clear in first place with a couple of games in hand, but not yet certainties for the crown. This weekend, Everton draw 2-2 with Norwich City at Goodison Park, which

does their title hopes no good at all. Meanwhile, Liverpool battle to a 2-2 draw with Manchester United in the semi-final of the FA Cup at Maine Road, the 'neutral ground' of Manchester City.

Wait a minute. I am in Merseyside, the land of my birth and the birth of my Liverpool-supporting parents. My team has just won 2-1, which is more than Liverpool and Everton are able to do. What's going on? Well, there is another English league team in Merseyside, five miles and the width of the River Mersey away from Litherland, Goodison Park and Anfield.¹

Which is where I am on the Friday evening of 30 March 1979. I'm at Prenton Park, the home of Tranmere Rovers. In a woefully semi-deserted football ground for a Third Division match, I hear a grand total of 1,220 Rovers supporters maintain a skirling barrage of relentless hostility and partisan abuse through the entire 90 minutes. Sitting in the confines of the sparsely populated Main Stand, I am comfortably detached from the barrage, apart from a reporter from the local newspaper who roundly berates me for having the audacity to sit in close proximity to the press box cheering for my team. Twenty-eight slightly intimidated, muted away fans form a forlorn mosaic in the otherwise empty 'away end'. I know because I'm quite high up and can count them. A terrier-like midfielder called Ron Pountney scores the last-minute winner for the away team. For Southend United. My team.

If you think this is all rather strange, you're not alone. Some people just don't understand it, so when the immigration official at Mexico City International Airport studies my passport a few years ago and politely enquires, 'Liverpool or Everton?' I reply 'Liverpool' because it's easier. A true Scouser

1 Prior to local government reorganisation in 1974, Tranmere was in the county of Cheshire and Liverpool was in Lancashire. By March 1979, both were in the Metropolitan County of Merseyside.

by birth, a genuine football enthusiast, but the football club I love is not Liverpool or Everton or even good old Tranmere Rovers. How could this possibly have happened?