

# *Out of the* **Wilderness**

**A DIRECTOR'S LIFE AT BURNLEY FC**

**FOREWORD BY  
SEAN DYCHE**

HALIFAX ●

ROCHDALE ●

STOCKPORT ●

WREXHAM ●

● CREWE

HEREFORD ●

NEWPORT ●

EXETER ●

TORQUAY ●



**CLIVE HOLT**  
**WITH DAVE THOMAS**

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## CHAPTER ONE

# 1986/87 Nearly the End

FOUR DECADES at Burnley Football Club. Just where do I begin? We decided the simplest way was to go through all the personal records, notes, clippings and files that I had kept and select all the interesting and key events that I had been a part of. They go back to season 1986/87.

It was the season when the Football League had decided that the bottom club of the bottom division would be relegated to non-league football; and the season every Burnley fan will remember that the final game was against Orient, that Burnley won to preserve their Football League place. Of course, that game was memorable for all the right reasons but there was one just prior to it that compounded our predicament. We lost a miserable game at Crewe having just given ourselves a lifeline by winning away at Southend. It is that Crewe game that is still imprinted in my mind just as much as the final one.

This was my first season as a Burnley director. For the first game I ever attended as a director, knowing no better, I wore a smart jacket and an open-neck shirt. First mistake, and I was told that I must wear a collar and tie to all games. Secondly, we should not stand up in the directors' box to cheer, but must remain seated at all times. But we could clap politely. I seem to remember my first away league game as a director was at Torquay. The old chairman John Jackson wished us luck and told me something I will always remember: that being

a director was the best way not to enjoy football. It would always be spoiled by the problems – gate money, attendances, injuries, manager demands and all the other 101 irritations along the way. Oh, and all the abuse and criticism. But, fortunately, I have always been able to separate the football from the business side of things and so survived 35 years as a director. Now that I am no longer a director, I miss the involvement terribly.

At the very first meeting that I attended I'd told the board that this club had to improve its public relations. I have never had any trouble with speaking my mind, saying what's what, what's needed, pointing out things that might work and things that definitely won't. There have been many times when this capacity to say things bluntly has not endeared me to various people. It meant that for the first few matches I was not exactly made welcome. One of the directors, Doc Iven, was particularly unfriendly towards me but eventually became a great friend once he realised that all I wanted was the best for the club.

It was a time when directors did put money in to help pay the wages, at that time about £5,000 a week. The £20,000 I had put in helped keep the place afloat that season. It did not buy luxuries, just the bare essentials. It was useful to be a millionaire, but I wasn't one. Twenty years later it helps to be a multimillionaire, and today a billionaire, if you want to be up in the top six of the Premier League.

The coach firm we used was called Jones Coaches and our driver was usually Hughie Jones. It was the same company that took Manchester United around and if our games did not clash, we got the best coach. The Manchester United players in their unwitting generosity would often leave various items on the coach which our players found most welcome. Goodies such as Mars bars were quickly eaten. Roger Eli, I do believe, once found a pair of boots that belonged to Steve Bruce.

It had been clear to anyone on the outside for some time that things were not right at boardroom level. Criticisms in the local press appeared on a weekly basis. A leading and vociferous supporter, Harry Brooks, was incandescent. There was an inertia, a lack of

positive decision-making, but above all there was no money. And here was the club with three games to go one point adrift at the bottom of the Fourth Division table.

That great man Jimmy McIlroy was indignant and pessimistic. Only 25 years earlier he had played at Wembley for the club. Now he was present at what he thought would be the end of the club. 'How has it come to this?' he asked in his press articles.

During that season I could only wonder, what on earth was I doing there? How had I got there? What had I let myself in for? At one of the first board meetings Basil Dearing outlined that the club was insolvent. There was a deathly silence and a sort of 'what the hell do we do' reaction. It was solved by revaluing the ground and in a stroke the problem went away with the new increased value. Who thought of that? Probably me.

It had started well enough with just one defeat in the first seven games but then the rot set in. By the end of the season and the great escape, fans and press talked of the 'miracle'. But what miracle? It was no miracle, it was simply a mess, a time of tension and aggravation and real, deep anxiety.

Brian Miller was the manager following the retirement of Tommy Cavanagh due to ill health. One of the players I remember was Leighton James who had returned to the club. He was 33 and back in the 80s this was certainly regarded as the veteran stage. Today, with sports science, diet and training techniques, it is common for many players to play to this age and beyond. By now he was the wily old fox, rather than the devastating attacking winger of the 70s, when he came into the team.

Joe Gallagher played his part and I remember this tall, commanding player because, prior to this season, he had been as good as ignored on account of his gammy knee that limited his mobility. This was now his fourth season and, with an inflation pay increase clause in his contract that went back to his arrival at the club in the Bond season, he was on a very high wage that dwarfed what some of the younger lads earned. Don't forget this was a time when the club

hadn't two pence to rub together. He had to play, with the squad so small.

Ian Britton was the player who was carried off by fans on the last day with his winning goal. Sadly, he passed away some years ago. Ray Deakin, alias 'Whoosh', another one that passed away too early, occasionally drove the team bus. Under a PFA programme, players could train to complete HGV and public-service vehicle tests. So, as we could not afford hotel stays or the luxury of two coach drivers, our captain stepped up to allow the driver his rest time and get us home at reasonable hours. Billy Rodaway was another, one of the last of the crop of good players that the club produced at Gawthorpe in the 70s – solid, tough, from Liverpool. Holly Johnson, lead singer of the 80s pop group Frankie Goes to Hollywood, allegedly was a bit of a fan of Billy.

Knowing that they and the club faced disaster, in a desperate 11th-hour measure, the directors asked the Football League to reverse the decision to relegate the bottom team of the division. We sent them this letter:

The directors of Burnley Football Club have been concerned for some time that the club, which is a founder member of the League, and which has not during this century ever had to apply for re-election to the Football League, is faced with the prospect of automatic removal from the Football League if it finishes bottom of the Fourth Division at the end of this season.

The directors believe that the present regulations, which were only implemented this season, are both unfair and inequitable.

As we believe that the management committee is committed to the principle of automatic promotion of one club from the GM Vauxhall Conference, and as the clubs in that Conference have been playing this season with that automatic promotion in mind, we accept that it would be

wrong to suggest that Scarborough should not now be admitted to the League.

However, we believe that it would not now be in the best interests of the Football League if our club were to be relegated. We are sure that the management committee are already aware of the reasons, but we will set out a few of the matters that we believe to be material.

- 1 ... We are founder members of the Football League.
- 2 ... We have never had to previously apply for re-election.
- 3 ... It is only last season that we were in the Fourth Division for the first time.
- 4 ... Our stadium is probably amongst the best 20 in the country.
- 5 ... Our average attendances over the last few years have always been higher than the average attendance for the division in which we have been playing at the time.

We now request the League to take urgent steps to reconsider the current regulations which provides for the bottom club in the Fourth Division to be replaced by the champion club of the GM Vauxhall Conference.

We accept that this request is principally motivated by the position in which we find ourselves. However, we believe that it has support from many clubs, in all divisions.

We have today spoken to the four other clubs who still face the prospect of automatic relegation, namely Lincoln, Rochdale, Torquay and Tranmere. They are unanimous in joining with us in making this request. They all believe that the present system is unfair and inequitable.

We further believe that the vast majority, if not all, of the clubs in the Fourth Division believe that the present regulation is unfair and inequitable.



We would like the League to seriously re-consider the proposition that none of the present clubs in the Fourth Division is automatically relegated at the end of this season and that, if necessary, there be 25 clubs in the Fourth Division next season.

We would all like there to be a full discussion and consultation as soon as possible with a view to a more fair and equitable method, if there needs to be one, of automatic relegation being resolved.

The letter and request, drawn up by director Basil Dearing, was rejected.

The Football League had never envisaged when they decided upon this new relegation system that a club so illustrious as Burnley might be affected. The ruling was aimed at clubs like Rochdale, Halifax, Torquay and Crewe, the perennial strugglers. But here were Burnley, this once top club in the top division that had won titles and played at Wembley and in Europe. The appeal fell on deaf ears. It is true to say that the football world waited to see the outcome, with the press descending in droves, all the great names of reporting in attendance.

My recollections of the Crewe game and what happened around it are already on paper and I have managed to fish out the copy of the interview I gave to author Tim Quelch some time ago.

The penultimate game was at Crewe. We were losing 1-0 but pressing hard for an equaliser. Then, with what seemed to be several minutes left for play, the referee blew the final whistle. I think he was bothered by the large number of supporters preparing to rush on at the end. I turned round to see the Football League assessor sat behind me, to complain at this blatant injustice. He waved my protest aside, kidding me that he did not have a watch when I could see that his match record of refereeing decisions had their respective

timings. Since there was not a clock inside the ground it was obvious that he had access to a watch or a small clock. But he refused to address my objection. From that match onwards I have always had a stopwatch which is now approaching 34 years old.

Our collective protest that Burnley had been short-timed fell on deaf ears as did a plea to the Football League to reprieve the club from relegation because of its historic founder status. We were almost out of time and running out of ideas to save the club. We had considered the ruse of buying the almost bankrupt Cardiff City and bringing it back to Turf Moor in what would have been the Football League's first franchise operation. It looked as if Cardiff might enter administration but nothing came of the idea.

So, we were destined to go to the wire, a last chance home game with Orient who were expected to provide stiff opposition as they were pursuing play-off ambitions. I am brought to tears whenever I think of that fateful day. It was like a near-death experience. However, it became the day when folks reclaimed their team when 16,000 to 17,000 turned up at Turf Moor. Before that the average league gate had been around 2,800. It was pitiful. In Burnley's heydays of the 50s and 60s there had been crowds of up to 55,000. Only the threat of losing their club forever caused the local people to return in large numbers. Having said all that, had the worst happened, I don't think the club would necessarily have expired. I think we might have been able to keep it alive. In those days it was possible to buy a club for a few hundred thousand pounds and I was prepared to consider paying that sort of money to save the club. As it turned out it was not necessary.

Ironically it was Lincoln and not Burnley that fell through the trapdoor, but then Lincoln staged a return to the League one year later. So, relegation for Burnley might

not have been a terminal disaster; if Lincoln could return from the Conference, then why not Burnley?

Besides, I'm not a pessimist. I held a firm conviction that all would be well. I was sure that if we beat Orient that this would be sufficient for survival although salvation was not solely in our hands. I did not expect that both of our rivals, Lincoln and Torquay, would both win as well. I thought that at least one of them would lose and of course, that is what happened. When we heard that Lincoln had lost their final game at Swansea 2-0, sealing their relegation, I had a wry smile thinking of the Lincoln directors who had smugly presumed that their club would be safe, after our defeat at Scunthorpe.

The truth was it was a wretched time, very much hands to mouth with a threadbare squad, one physio, Jimmy Holland, and a 'bucket and sponge' trainer in George Bray, a former player. I remember George getting fed up with one of our players who kept going down. George's patience finally snapped in one game resulting in him emptying the bucket of cold water over him. It was a rare funny moment.

Threadbare and penniless, scrabbling for cash, economising to the bone just about summed up this season. We planned to have car-boot sales every Sunday in the car park. They would have been a winner but the council intervened. Because we were within two miles of Burnley market, the Market Charter did not allow us to do this. We were seen as a threat to the market and were threatened with legal action if we continued. How could a car-boot sale once a week be a threat to the market? It was nonsense and denied us the chance to run something that might have raised some decent money. The one that Walsall Football Club ran raised them thousands. The other thing we offered to do was let the supporters' club run the club shop at £20 a week. But they wanted the stock for nothing, so that was a

non-starter. They did generously offer us an interest-free loan. But, dammit, we wanted donation, not loans.

Meetings with the bank were frequent. The local council had told us they could not help, early in 1987. The Trustee Savings Bank completed another valuation of the ground at £850,000. As a potential supermarket site, it was worth, they said, £1.8m. Read into that what you will. A family member worked at the Midland Bank in a senior position in London. It was not an immediate no. He was an uncle and wanted cash flows and projections. Alas, as soon as he got those it was a polite no. All we could do was to get money from sponsors up front and push all those who owed us money. But there was some good news when I managed to get Barclays Bank to agree to a loan of £50,000. The bad news was it was set against the directors giving personal guarantees.

One way of getting money into the club was to invite new directors to join us, or their money of course. We invited John Wilkinson and, yes, he joined the board in 2004. Harry Brooks was another we invited, but at that time he was wound up in his work at Loughborough University. He would become more and more of a critic of the club and his name would crop up many times. It was a strange refusal because prior to this we had a letter from him asking to become a director. His letters to the local press slamming the club for this and that would become a regular page filler.

The game at Crewe was a sickener. It was a Monday night. We all knew that we had to win two of the last three games to have any chance of avoiding the drop. But the second game, Keith McNee reported:

A simple goal after five minutes by striker David Platt for Crewe Alexandra was enough to see off Burnley in yet another away performance that wasn't good enough to deserve any reward. The Clarets again received terrific vocal backing in a crowd of 4,175 but failed miserably to produce the goods, especially in attack. It seemed to me that any of

the players were drained from the tremendous effort they put in on Saturday at Turf Moor to defeat promotion candidates Southend.

Platt was left with the relatively simple task of scoring his 23rd goal of the season with a near-post header after fellow striker Chris Cutler found space on the left of the penalty area to provide the short centre. It has been the same sorry story all season, goals given away so easily and often, as last night. Crewe applied all the early pressure in their hustling, bustling style, with the Burnley defence not at all comfortable. But they did not go close to scoring again until near the end of the game when Peter Leebrook kicked off the line from the lively Platt.

The closest the Clarets went to equalising was with a Leighton James free kick that giant goalkeeper Brian Parkin just managed to tip over the bar for a corner. James occasionally threatened but Burnley were badly short of thrust and firepower in attack and Crewe contained them fairly easily. Burnley were nowhere near inventive enough to worry the likes of Steve Davis and Geoff Thomas at the heart of the home defence.

Skipper Ray Deakin battled hard in defence as usual and Leebrook stuck gamely to his task but there was little sparkle from the forward players and even Neil Grewcock had a pretty lean time. This was another sickening result for the Turf Moor club and supporters, and with only one match left, it leaves them in the most terrible situation they have ever had to face.

We were furious at the referee, Ken Lupton, for blowing the whistle early. Maybe he was intimidated by the sight of massed Burnley fans almost encroaching the pitch. Frank Teasdale immediately wrote to the Football League with a vigorous appeal that the game be replayed, and at the very least an investigation on the grounds that

this was a result that could decide Burnley's fate that season and that a point gained if Burnley had scored might determine their survival. It fell on deaf ears. It wasn't rocket science to suppose that someone at the Football League had thought to themselves that there had already been nearly a whole season of games that had put Burnley in this position. If the worst happened, it would not be because of one result at Crewe even if the referee had blown too soon. The records say that he ended the game three minutes early. To this day I'll say it was double that.

On the coach back after the game ... can you be sombre and angry at the same time? Yes, you can and that was certainly the mood in the coach on the way back. To lose this game was a stunner. It meant that the final game was all or nothing. We could go down in history as the directors that oversaw the end of a once-great club. To this day I cannot imagine the pressure, stress and anxiety that Brian Miller must have felt.

Brian Miller was furious and a furious Brian Miller was not someone to ignore. He called it scandalous and that the second half did not run for the full 45 minutes. He had been told that the press-box stopwatches had timed the second half at 42 minutes and that the referee afterwards admitted that he had deliberately blown his whistle early because he was frightened of crowd trouble and the crowd getting out of hand. Miller complained strongly that three minutes was a long time in football and a complaint would be made. But would the assessor agree? he asked. The referee later changed his story, saying that he had not said previously that he had blown early. He insisted he had played the full 45 minutes and this was confirmed by his linesmen. Another Football League referee added to the controversy saying that each half had to be 45 minutes long and that Burnley had a good claim to get the game replayed. But this won't be easy for them, he added. And so it proved.

Immediately after the Crewe game I bought a stopwatch – expensive as well; a Tag Heuer 1010 – and used it at every game. Somewhere I still have the old box and paperwork. It lasted until

November 2021, so with over 30 years of use I call that good value. The replacement was just £3.69. Maybe this one won't last 30 years but I'm 78 so one presumes it will outlast me.

To use a well-known phrase, 'drink was taken' after the victorious Orient game, so much so that Brian Miller had to call a taxi to take secretary Albert Maddox home. My own celebration was with Sylvia and friends, but, perhaps with a few too many drinks, I cannot, understandably, remember much about the evening.

At the celebratory meal after the game, I had euphorically exclaimed that there would be no repetition in the next season. In fact, I said we might even get to Wembley. To my astonishment, we did just that.