

POTTER, HOPCUTT

AND A DESK IN EAST LONDON

The Story of Östersunds FK's
European Adventure



GEORGE MALLET

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Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Smarties & Soup	9
Off Red	17
A Kickaround in Coventry	26
A Long Way from Home.	43
Eastern Excursions	47
Herd Mentality.	53
Hertha Berlin (H)	57
A Game of Numbers	60
Once There Were Three – Athletic Bilbao (H)	63
Feltham at Dawn	75
Thor from Thornaby	85
Perched	94
The Man in the Frame	106
Calling Mister Kendall.	118
The Modern Art of Social Ineptitude	127
Real Sociedad B (A)	146
Clapham South (H)	151
Zorya Luhansk (H).	155
Hertha Berlin (A).	167
Low-Hanging Fruit.	176
Arsenal (A)	190
Epilogue	210
Östersunds FK Player Statistics for the 2017/18	
Europa League (inc. qualifying)	223

Smarties & Soup

I WASN'T hooked immediately. The 30p sweets drew me in. The room at the back of the stand reserved for children such as me. Creaking like every other cinder block staircase, rotting wood and rusting tired steel. The Smarties room it was called, that I do remember, as well as what 30p entitled me to. A clingfilm bag and an assortment of sweets from a bowl. White chocolate coins with E numbers sprinkled on top, chewy cola bottles, a mini refresher bar. The steps up to the room where I would wait. The red door that would be waiting and the walk back to my seat, two or three sweets in distance.

I now know it to be 17 February 2001, and it must have been a Saturday, although at that time Saturdays were just a day I wasn't at school. York City were in red and Exeter City in navy. York would score a goal and my dad and I would cheer. That and the sweets were promised.

It's perhaps apt that my first visit to Bootham Crescent was met with abject disappointment. Steve Flack the villain, celebrating each of his two goals in front of me, my dad and the few hundred other such groups nestled in the Family Stand. That was the first time I cried at Bootham Crescent, although I don't remember it being subtle that day.

It ended 3-0. York dropped to the bottom of the Football League for the first time since 1981, a year that

meant nothing to me. For me, football started in 2001, that first visit the benchmark for everything that came after.

The Third Division after my first York City match on 17 February 2001

<i>Position</i>	<i>Team</i>	<i>Games Played</i>	<i>Points</i>
1	Chesterfield	33	73
2	Brighton & Hove Albion	29	57
3	Cardiff City	30	55
4	Hartlepool United	31	53
5	Leyton Orient	29	50
6	Rochdale	28	49
7	Blackpool	30	49
8	Southend United	30	47
9	Cheltenham Town	30	42
10	Hull City	30	42
11	Mansfield Town	31	40
12	Scunthorpe United	29	38
13	Macclesfield Town	32	38
14	Kidderminster Harriers	30	38
15	Barnet	29	37
16	Plymouth Argyle	28	37
17	Torquay United	32	33
18	Shrewsbury Town	29	31
19	Halifax Town	29	30
20	Lincoln City	28	28
21	Darlington	28	28
22	Exeter City	32	28
23	Carlisle United	29	26
24	York City	30	26

My return did come. It must have been better, for steadily Saturdays became a thing. Football in the morning on the quagmires of the Vale of York, followed by a trip to

the ground for the 30p sweets. Each time we would pick up a programme and I learned a little bit more. Before the match I would flick to two-thirds in and look at the double-page spread. The league table on the left, Brighton & Hove Albion on top, Hartlepool United making the challenge and, moving down, York bobbing up and down towards the bottom. Each fixture laid out on the right. The players – Alan Fettis, Darren Edmondson, Graham Potter, Richard Cooper – the goalscorers, the attendance and the league position after that day's result. The sweets and the programmes appealed to me, even if the football was still a work in progress.

One day in came a 20-year-old from Sunderland. I knew Sunderland. They were in the Premier League and had Kevin Phillips. Everyone knew who he was and every eight-year-old who liked football knew his both-hands-out celebration. They also had Michael Proctor, so it would appear, although for one season he would be loaned to York.

For a couple of years I'd had heroes. Michael Owen, of course, Teddy Sheringham and David Beckham spring to mind, but in Proctor I had City's first. Short spiky blond hair, he resembled what I thought I would become when I was a grown-up. York never had a goalscorer, not since I had been watching. Few players would put the ball next to their name in the programme, but Michael Proctor did.

He always seemed to find himself in space with the ball at his feet bearing down at goal. Each time I would bounce up and down on my faded red seat and more often than not the ball would go along the ground and the net would ripple. Never in the air, always on the ground.

For his sole season on loan he would score 14 goals in 41 matches, a decent although not spectacular return. Heading back to Sunderland he would never score as many

again and would eventually retire aged just 28. His impact in York, however, lasted much longer. Now nine years old, the football pitches of the Knavesmire near my house would witness hours of football. Me in my red York City shirt, the *Evening Press* logo embossed in foam on my chest, and my brother in goal, four foot tall in a steel frame designed for grown men. When the ball slipped past him, up the hand would go. Michael Proctor scores again.

Events off the pitch took an ugly turn, although the significance for me was less clear. Douglas Craig was well known in football, often for the wrong reasons. In 1992 Craig had taken over the club from Michael Sinclair, the father of the man who lived down our street. Sinclair had become a priest and presumably also had great faith in mankind, passing over his shares to Craig and the new directors for £200,000, well below the value of the assets alone. Chairmen weren't supposed to make money out of football clubs.¹

You get a flavour of the man to say that in 1994 Craig made the club the only one in the Football League not to sign up to the 'Let's Kick Racism Out of Football' campaign.

Five years later he had transferred ownership of the ground to a new entity named 'Bootham Crescent Holdings' for another £165,000. It was a successful effort in side-stepping a new Football Association rule designed to prevent owners from profiteering by winding up a club and selling off its ground. With the new rule, if a club was to be wound up, owners could only receive the money it originally

1 Douglas Craig was also one of three sitting members of the FA Arbitration Panel that voted that the Football League would have to reconsider its rejection of Wimbledon's move to Milton Keynes, and consider the notion again in sight of the full facts.

cost to buy their shares. It all meant Craig could only sell his shares in York City for £200,000 if the club was wound up. Crucially, however, the ground and its city centre location would be in the hands of Bootham Crescent Holdings, their value unlimited (as far as real estate in York can be).

Less than three years later the club was for sale, £4.5m the asking price, and a deadline of 31 March 2002 put in place. Failure to meet it and York would be withdrawn from the Football League and kicked out of the ground by its owners, the venerable Mr Craig and his fellow directors.

Ownership and assets didn't mean much to me, my York jersey and collection of footballs being the only equivalent. But when my dad told me that we wouldn't be able to go to York matches unless they raised lots of money, I quickly began to learn. Just as I started to do the maths, and realised my piggy bank might not be enough, in came a buyer. York City were saved.

* * *

John Batchelor came from good stock, well soup, or at least that's what fans were led to believe. Part of the Cup a Soup empire so went the rumour, news filtered through of his real credentials. A former toilet roll salesman, Batchelor was worth some money. He must have been, as £4.5m was Craig's price, and the deal went through. Batchelor owned his own racing team, securing major sponsorship deals with B&Q among others, and York were to benefit from his exposure.

The honeymoon period lasted a couple of weeks but then news came through of Batchelor's intention to move the club from Bootham Crescent, a brand-new 15,000-seater stadium promised as fans' compensation for the departure. The first time I noticed the impact was when walking

in through the gates of the ground. The sign overhead, stretching from terraced housing on the right built for the city's railways workers, no longer bore the badge that I knew, a blue gate of the city walls flanked by two red lions. In its place, the black, white and red of York City Soccer Club, rebranded to capture the American lust for northern Third Division football (sorry soccer) teams.

Even as a nine-year-old it didn't sit right. I liked the lions. Heading through the turnstiles and into the stand, things got worse. On the pitch the same players I knew, a smattering of summer signings among them, but dressed like ordained chefs. A red left sleeve and torso, with a white 'Y' down the middle. On the right sleeve a chess board, inconveniently placed around the less than flat surface of their arms. It's not a chess board I was told, but a chequered flag. We were a racing team now.

Football was *Match of the Day*, FIFA 2002 on the desktop computer and the FA Cup, so when York signed South Americans Rogério and Nicolás Mazzina, I didn't blink an eye. In hindsight I should have. The period was bizarre. Genuine optimism from some fans, an early season push that left York fighting for promotion, but things were starting to unravel.

Behind the scenes it emerged that Batchelor hadn't stumped up £4.5m. He had paid the slightly lower figure of £1 and essentially brokered the rest via a deal with the housebuilder Persimmon Homes. Persimmon would pay Bootham Crescent Holdings £350,000 as an initial deposit with the rest to be paid when York City vacated the ground at the end of the 2002/03 season. In addition, the housebuilder would pay £400,000 in sponsorship to York City, the majority of which was siphoned off into Batchelor's racing team, Team B&Q Jet York City.

When it became clear he didn't have the funds to sustain the club and he sold half-price season tickets for the next season in October, the game was up. Alan Fettis, the goalkeeper at the time, summed it up nicely: 'The chairman was hailed as the knight in shining armour, but now it turns out he has not got any.'

By December, York were in administration, and with it a new word was added to my vocabulary. York needed money and, from what my dad was saying, once more beyond the realms of my piggy bank. Five weeks was the deadline laid down by the courts. If no buyer was to be found, York's final match would be against Swansea City on 18 January 2003. It was almost over for me before it even started.

Huge efforts were made from all with the club's interests at heart. The Supporters' Trust, formed after Craig's initial demands, started to mobilise with force. But still no buyer came forth. At the eleventh hour one did, or at least appeared to do so. One last stay of execution.

John Heynes was the bidder, and for once a lack of due diligence played in the club's favour. A friend of Batchelor, the bid turned to nothing, but in the meantime fundraising efforts continued. Bucket sales raised thousands, £20,000 against Bury and large individual donations came from many, expecting nothing back. Some £600,000 was raised and, with time running out, the Supporters' Trust made their bid. The administrator relented and, after successful negotiations with the Inland Revenue, the Supporters' Trust took ownership of the club on 26 March 2003. York City were saved. That was the headline, and that I took to be fact.

How close to the precipice we came, how much that ownership wasn't the end of the troubles, none of this I

knew, or would have cared to have known. I could go to Bootham Crescent. I could see the red shirt and blue shorts of York City and I could visit the Smarties room once more.²

It's fitting that a few years down the line, when the Supporters' Trust spearheaded by the late, great Steve Beck and his soon-to-be successor as chairman, Jason McGill, eventually bought back the ground from Douglas Craig, that the final £100,000 came from Nestlé Rowntree, the creators of Smarties. Corporate power giving way to benevolence is rare to find. The sweeties might have drawn me in but in a funny way it was them that kept me coming, long after my sweet tooth had faded.

Bury FC's demise is a dismal reminder that in football there is no sacred cow. As in life, bad actors can, if unchecked, unwind centuries-old institutions, and journeys like mine can cease before they even start.

You don't really know what it means at the time, and in truth it means very little. It's a trip to the sweetshop, with some football on the side, but for me I had the opportunity to let it grow. Bootham Crescent became my home and York City my club. Little did I know that 15 years down the line another would be calling my name.

2 York reverted to their traditional red strip in the 2003/04 season, abandoning York City Soccer Club as soon as the takeover was complete.