

Pride

The Inside Story of
Derby County



R Y A N H I L L S

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Jake Buxton	7
Introduction	9
The Beginning	11
West Before South	34
The Drop	47
Hurly Burley	65
Derby (Twinned with Panama)	81
Murdo	93
Los Amigos y Los Caballeros.	106
A Three-Year Plan	125
That Season.	150
Poor Choices, Cheap Pops	172
Nigel Howard Clough	183
The Clough Years: Part 1	194
The Clough Years: Part 2	221
Divided	242
Return of the Mac	249
Zamora	264
A Strong Dislike of Mike Ashley.	273
The Derby Way.	289
Four in One.	305
Gary's Trainers	326
Hi, Spy, Cry, Bye	348
The End	372
Acknowledgements	381

THE BEGINNING

THE BASEBALL Ground. An old, decrepit, wooden stadium. Squeezed between houses, backed on to a railway track. No executive areas to attract major international businesses; facilities that would never pass health and safety tests in the modern era. A shadow of what it once was. A stadium no longer fit for purpose.

The Baseball Ground. The home of Derby County. A place where generations had gathered, where families were united, where grandparents would reminisce with grandchildren. The place where Brian Clough and Peter Taylor did the unthinkable, where Dave Mackay followed on. The beating heart of football in a city dedicated to its club.

They don't make stadiums like the BBG anymore. Primarily because they're not allowed to by law, but more so because the game of football has moved beyond. Gone are the days of it being the sport of the working class, when supporters and players could mix freely and the divide was minimal. Instead it has been replaced by a corporate event, where money drives everything and supporters are an after-thought. Where players don't interact with those in the stands, wearing those same shirts as they do.

The moment the doors closed on the Baseball Ground, football in Derby changed. Twenty-three years have now passed since that final first-team outing against Arsenal in 1997 and the landscape

of not only the club but the sport as a whole is in another dimension to what the 18,287 experienced that day.

The Baseball Ground had been witness to Derby's rise through the divisions under Arthur Cox in the 1980s, going from the dreariness of the Third to the glamour of the First in successive seasons.

This culminated with Cox's side finishing fifth in 1988/89, the club's highest position since the glory days of the 1970s.

They were unable to progress further but the successful ousting of Robert Maxwell as chairman after relegation in 1991 lifted the shackles, though Wembley heartache against Leicester in 1994 was the closest they came to a return to the top flight in the next four years.

Enter James Michael Smith – Jim, as he was more commonly known. Or, to be more precise, the Bald Eagle.

When Smith took charge at the Baseball Ground in the summer of 1995, Derby had somewhat begun to stall. Unable to kick on from that day in the capital, a ninth-placed finish spelt the end of Roy McFarland's tenure and Smith, giving up his desk job with the League Managers' Association, returned to the dugout. Chairman and local millionaire Lionel Pickering, having already ploughed his fortune into the club, closed the wallet in favour of blooding youngsters into the first team.

Smith's entry into Derby saw him inherit the likes of Dean Sturridge and Marco Gabbiadini, but it was his summer activity that ultimately brought success. Robin van der Laan, Darryl Powell and Gary Rowett were inspired captures that led the club on the journey to the Premier League for the first time since its inception, especially following the October arrival of Igor Stimac.

It was in February 1996, during a 20-game unbeaten run sparked by the signing of Stimac, that the big news broke. Chief executive Keith Loring announced that the club would be moving for the first time since 1895.

* * *

Today, modern, soulless bowls are commonplace in football. We're somehow at a point where a visit to Turf Moor is almost a welcome treat; a throwback to a different era of the game, with wooden seats, and rickety stairs. In Burnley, they even still have those TVs with the enormous backs; prehistoric. But the Taylor Report, issued after the Hillsborough disaster in 1989, changed the game. No longer could grounds accommodate standing supporters stuck into pens and with crush barriers holding them back. All-seaters, it was clear, had to be the future.

For Derby, too, there was the wooden factor of the stadium to contend with. Following the 1985 fire at Valley Parade, there became an increased worry across British venues of a repeat. The Baseball Ground, largely wooden, was a risk. Factor this in alongside the Taylor Report and the game had to change. Middlesbrough were one of the first clubs to make the switch. Their Ayresome Park home was no longer fit for purpose so Taylor Woodrow Construction began work on the development of the Riverside Stadium, built on the old Middlehaven site overlooking the Tees. The 1995 opening, in which Boro beat Chelsea 2-0, was a success. The eyes of British football fans gazed towards it, a peephole into how their futures would look. Deep inside the Baseball Ground boardrooms, Peter Gadsby was watching on.

Gadsby, a local businessman who had made his money from business and housing developments, sat on the Derby County board. Gadsby's role as associate director led him into the potential development of the football club and avenues for growth.

He said, 'By Christmas time, I saw Middlesbrough's ground on the telly. The story was all about their new stadium, basically an old harbour that had been closed in the north-east. The whole of the football world was starting to talk about new stadia due to the Lord Justice Taylor's report and the demise of traditional grounds due to safety reasons.'

'I went up to Boro and I thought it was just fantastic. One of the things about football is, because nobody would support

Middlesbrough from Derby, they were very helpful. In business, people will not be so open. The stadium had been built for approximately £18m by Taylor Woodrow and it was seen as a breakthrough for football and the model held up to be the future of football.'

Middlesbrough were national leaders. While clubs of all statures continued to struggle and look for alternatives following the Taylor Report, they had taken the initiative. For Derby, their initial plan started at home. The Baseball Ground was to be regenerated. Why move from a perfectly good stadium and where would the club get the £18m from to spend on a new home?

Ideas began to grow for the redevelopment of the ground, including the rebuilding of three stands. Gadsby was charged with looking into the plans and, with a wealth of property experience behind him, cast an eye over how it could be done. He set about designing a new stand to replace the ABC and put plans in place for the acquisition of the cottages behind. A capacity of 18,000 would be temporarily reduced to 10,000 during the work on the new stand and the board made the call to redevelop the BBG. Those fanciful plans were soon scrapped.

'At that time there was a thing called City Challenge,' says Gadsby. 'This was a thing by Lord Heseltine, which was designed to regenerate cities with bad sites. Pride Park was then known as Chaddesden Sidings and was full of old coal products, railway machinery and it was a site that needed decontaminating.'

The focused area was a barren, toxic wasteland situated right between Chaddesden and Alvaston. The original home of Derby's railway industry, it had descended into a ground solely for landfill and gas works. It was quite literally a dump. Nothing nearby, nobody nearby. A hole of Derby.

Heseltine's City Challenge was a blessing for the city and for the club. A sum of £30m was given to clear the area in the aim of creating a new hub for Derby. This hub, as Gadsby recalls, would be known as Pride Park: 'My business connected me with the local

authorities on a frequent basis. Derby City Council made a bid for the Millennium Dome. I was a board member for the government's regional development programme, so I was told that the shortlist for the Millennium Dome was between Birmingham, Derby and London. Credit to Derby City Council that they were aiming high.

'When I approached them with regards to relocating the Baseball Ground to Pride Park, they were aghast. Football at that time had a reputation of hooliganism and tribal warfare.'

The Dome, a bowl without any real purpose, was never going to be in Derby. In the same way the home of English football would never leave London, there was only ever one destination. Gadsby explained, 'There was a guy called Bob Laxton who was a Labour leader in Derby, very nice guy. I met with the council and they said, "What do you want, Peter?" And I told them I wanted to bring the football club to Pride Park. I said what's happening up in Middlesbrough is changing the world, this is what will happen.'

It was the mid-1990s though and hooliganism was still at the forefront of minds. Football and violence remained intertwined, even if things had settled since the previous decade. It was a bone of contention for the council, wary its £30m handout would become a bloodbath.

'They said, "We want to see businesses, we want vibrancy, we don't want loads of hooligans." But the reason you get hooligans is because you have no facilities. You had one toilet for 2,000 ladies at the Baseball Ground. You couldn't take kids or wives there because there was nowhere to take them to the toilet, there was no corporate stuff, but it was still a great place for all the people who wanted to watch football,' Gadsby continued.

'The Baseball Ground had been condemned because of its wooden stand, the Co-op Stand, and we were going to have the attendance reduced to 14,000. I was challenged by the board to make recommendations for the upgrade. At this point in time, work and design had been committed to pull down the Co-op and build a new stand for between £6m and £8m.'

'I went to see Lionel and he said, "You must be mad." I said, 'Lionel, it'll cost £8m to replace the Co-op Stand, a maximum of 20,000 seats, there's all the problems of buying all these cottages, you can't park near the ground, no corporate hospitality, and facilities in the football world have moved on."

Pickering, another who had grown up with the Baseball Ground an integral part of his own personal development, reacted in the manner thousands more across the city did to the suggestion. 'Ridiculous, you'll get lynched by the Derby people, I've been here for 40 years watching Derby County, you can't do it.'

Pickering would soon be swayed. Accompanying Gadsby on a trip to the Riverside, he was onside when realising the growth that moving would provide the club. 'Taylor Woodrow had a blueprint for stadia and were very keen to reproduce their model. I visited Boro and met Steve Gibson. They spent considerable time showing me around but more importantly passed on from experience many variations that would make it an even better stadium,' said Gadsby.

'First of all, we'd make the press room bigger,' Gadsby was told by Gibson. 'When you arrive in reception it should be grandiose and in the corporate, we have a wall. We should have had glass.'

By this point, a Stimac-inspired Derby rocketed through the league. Sturridge, Paul Simpson, Gabbiadini and van der Laan were rampant. A side set for the top flight needed a stadium to match. Gadsby said, 'Reluctantly, Lionel said "If I am to put money in the board must also financially support me," which we did.'

'The council agreed to give us ten weeks to buy the land on Pride Park. At the time it was the regenerated former Chaddesden Sidings of many acres with just grounds around it. They were holding it back for the Millennium Dome. I told them, "You've not got it, it's going to London." They said, "Yeah, but we don't want everybody else to know that, do we?"'

'We then gave a brief insight as to the benefits and the stadia improvements including the 22 upgrades, i.e. larger reception, large corporate hospitality rooms that could look out on to the pitch,

ample toilets (at the Baseball Ground there was one toilet for every 2,000 ladies), large car parking and more importantly excellent access.'

After Loring's announcement in February 1996, things moved quickly. The blueprint was drawn up, the land was cleared and Taylor Woodrow followed on from their development of the Riverside and began proceedings on a near replica. 'People started to embrace it, companies bought boxes, we did a video thing where you could see where your seat was and it started to take off,' said Gadsby.

'The impact of the stadium was just surreal, steelwork was emerging. At last Lionel was excited and we were on course to sell 20,000 season tickets with a full house of 30,000. Wives and children were attracted to the quality facilities of the new ground.'

The construction was quick and Pickering, never shy to throw money at his club, ordered for the corners to be filled in after initially leaving them open. No expense, nor corner, was spared.

* * *

Promotion to the Premier League was confirmed on one glorious April afternoon at home to Crystal Palace. Robin van der Laan's winner sealed a return to the top flight and opened a pot of financial gold for Pickering to delve into.

The signing of Stimac had proved to be the season's crucial factor. Bar his first game, a 5-1 defeat at Tranmere Rovers, the phenomenal run of form that coincided with the arrival of the Croatian transformed the backline. Such was the long-lasting effort that he had few days go by without a mention of him on any Derby County forum. A quarter of a century after his arrival on British shores, he remains the king. But the signing of Stimac was a catalyst for Smith. A first venture into foreign markets had proved a success and the Yorkshireman's visionary plans for the on-field developments lay firmly across Europe. Come May, the Bald Eagle's transfer plans soared.

The Premier League was no step too far for his young squad. Stimac was in his element, Sturridge too with 14 goals in all competitions. Key additions in the summer of 1996 also helped drive the club forward again. Danish defender Jacob Laursen and Croatian midfielder Aljoša Asanović were signed before Euro '96 in England. Asanović, Stimac's friend and countryman, was one of the tournament's stand-out performers.

Domestic signings, too, showed Smith's canny eye for a transfer. Paul McGrath, in the twilight of his career, put in perhaps the best single season ever seen by a Derby County footballer having signed from Aston Villa in the autumn of 1996. Never training and with legs that barely functioned in the week, the 36-year-old's 24 games were among some of the best defensive performances of the Smith era.

And that's without even mentioning the limby phenomenon from Costa Rica, Paulo Wanchope. Oh Paulo. Has there ever been a more unpredictable footballer? His April 1997 goal at Manchester United is as spectacular as it is bemusing. On his debut, none of the United defenders knew where he was going or where his touch would lead him. In truth, neither did he.

'Wanchope we signed and I don't know where we got him from, but we saw a video and organised a game against a non-league team and the agent said, "He can play in a trial but it has to be under a different name." "Where's he from?" I asked. "Costa Rica."

'So we went to this game and the ball came across, six yards out and he missed a sitter. And another chance. I went, "Bloody hell, Jim." All of a sudden, the keeper kicks it and he leapt, and I remember it to this day, he got unbelievable height, chested it down and volleyed it out wide and then got in the box. Me and Jim looked at each other and went, "Get him off at half-time, get him signed." We took him off, got him signed and the rest is history. Where did he come from? No one knows! Sneaked him in for a trial and you're going, how did we do that?'

They were the words of Steve McLaren. For all the plaudits Smith received over the course of his Derby County spell, he couldn't

have done it without his number two. A primarily lower-division footballer who had appeared 25 times in a Derby shirt in the 80s, McLaren first became acquainted with Smith at Oxford, where he would serve drinks after the game to the then U's manager. Not in a barman sense, more as a buttering up process, always looking to discuss a possible route into coaching. It was Smith who made the call to his soon-to-be apprentice when moving to Derby.

'Jim was a larger than life character but he had such a great reputation in football and he was such a football man, a true Yorkshireman down to the bone and just great fun. We developed a great relationship, became very close and were very good together,' McLaren remembers.

It took time, though. McLaren, still new to coaching and with the side struggling in the first half of 1995/96, had to work at the relationship before they could look to the future arrivals. 'The initial first three to six months was a difficult time because Jim had taken over and the squad needed reinventing. The first month or two we stayed in a hotel together and we developed a close relationship, we'd just drive to every game going, so it was really hard work and he worked me hard,' said McLaren.

It was on these hotel nights that Jim would introduce McLaren to one of his true loves. 'We'd chat so much usually over a bottle of red wine. I'd never drunk it before but I discovered it with Jim and it was always Rioja! Oh, he was very honest, very demanding but great company and a great football man,' he said.

The pair achieved greatness. From the early days of McLaren's development, there was little doubt he had an ingenious knack for developing sides. He'd go on to drive the introduction at Derby of ProZone, the player tracking system that in part transformed how clubs look at their players in training and on matchday. The combination of Smith and McLaren was a Clough and Taylor for the modern era, even if McLaren was often left infuriated by the master.

McClaren said, 'His strength was in building his team with the players he signed and he built a great team. They were generally

mavericks and foreigners which really helped my coaching in terms of developing myself. I always remember he used to come in and say, “What are we doing today Stevie?” and I had a plan for a training session and he’d say, “Oh rubbish Steve, rubbish.” And I didn’t have a plan B so I always tell the story that he always taught me to have a plan A, plan B, plan C all the way to Z.’

On the same day as McClaren met Wanchope and Costa Rican midfielder Mauricio Solis for the first time, he was shaking hands with Mart Poom too. Having had issues with a work permit after signing for Smith at Portsmouth, it was a stroke of luck that led him back to the Bald Eagle, the infamous game that never happened between Scotland and Estonia in Tallinn where the two teams turned up at different times and Scotland kicked off against nobody. It was rearranged for February, by which time Smith needed competition for Russell Hoult. ‘The February game, Jim asked Alan Hodgkinson [the Scottish team goalkeeping coach] who he knew to have a look at me,’ Poom begins.

‘That time was much more difficult to get videos for every game, the scouting was much more live. We drew 0-0 and soon after that I heard Derby wanted to sign me. We flew from Cyprus to Monaco, back to Cyprus and then in March I flew from Cyprus to England to have a medical and sign the deal. The day after the game, I think Jim wanted to see if I could still catch a ball so they got me to train on the Baseball Ground with just Igor, Asanović and McClaren. We signed the contract and the deal was done but because Estonia wasn’t EU, I had to leave the country again, I couldn’t wait for the permit while in the UK. Finally, all the paperwork was done before the window closed at the end of March.’

The victory at Manchester United is best remembered for Wanchope’s wizardry and Graham Richards’s beautiful piece of commentary, but it also marked the debut of Poom, in front of thousands watching back in his home country as he became the first Estonian to appear in the Premier League.

He continues, ‘We had one session at Raynesway and then we had to go away to Manchester. The shirt for me, Puma was the sponsor, the kitman had to get one of Russell’s shirts because we didn’t have one. He went to the Man United superstore to cover the old name and number and then put POOM 21 on. [Saturday] 5 April 1997, a date I’ll never forget. Playing against my hero Peter Schmeichel and United, my favourite team. People in Tallinn were able to watch the game via Finnish TV, who translated that game live. It was big news in Estonia. What better start than to beat Manchester United at Old Trafford?’

Recalling the signing of Poom, McClaren breaks into a grin when remembering a routine he’d have to endure with Smith on a weekly basis, ‘Oh, Poomy got constant stick over every goal that went in. It was to such an extent that I used to say to Jim, “Look, let’s make a pact that you won’t kill him until I see the video and I’ll tell you on Monday if it’s his fault or not.” Every Monday he used to come in and ...’

At this point McClaren adopts one of the finest impressions you can imagine. “Stevie! Was it his fault?” and I’d say, “No Jim it was so and so” and he’d grumble and get somebody else but when it was Poomy, he used to kill him!

Derby’s return to the big time was an unparalleled success. Comfortably safe in 12th place, the final campaign at the Baseball Ground took in some of the finest days in decades. The win at Old Trafford was joined by home successes over Chelsea and Tottenham, and a run to the FA Cup quarter-final. It was a season that meant more than just results though and after 102 years, the gates closed on first team football at the BBG.

* * *

Barely five miles away, Pride Park was ready to welcome its tenants. Polished, prepared and with the smell of the paint still wafting, it was given the royal seal of approval. Queen Elizabeth II had never, at least knowingly, opened a football stadium. Quite what made her

choose to do so in Derby, 126 miles from her Buckingham Palace home, is a mystery. In what would turn out to be a horrendous year for Her Majesty with the death of Princess Diana a month later, it was her arrival in Derby that provided the first opportunity for thousands to get their first experience of the stadium.

For Peter Gadsby, it too was an opportunity to see years of hard work be gazed over by the hardest-to-please eyes. He said, ‘John Bather, the Lord Lieutenant at the time, came to see me and said, “The Queen would like to open the stadium.” We had wanted a royal and we had gone through his office to see if we could get maybe Prince Charles for the opening. To our pleasant surprise, the Queen agreed.

‘She was wonderful but Prince Philip was very prickly! I remember walking out with him into the stadium and he asked, “How much steel has gone in the stadium?” I said I was unsure and he said, “Hmm, I’d have thought you’d have known that. How much are these footballers being paid?” I said, “A lot, sir!”

‘So we walked out in front of 30,000 people on a cold July day. The players were lined up across the centre circle and the old boys including Dave Mackay, Reg Harrison, Angus Morrison and Jim Bullions, formed a guard of honour.

‘Halfway across the pitch, Lionel, who worshipped the old players, left the Queen to go and shake their hands. The Queen was stood on her own looking around bewildered! The Lord Lieutenant gave me a shove and I had to immediately go and accompany her.

‘I arrived at the line of players, led by the captain Igor Stimac, and then Stefano Eranio and Mart Poom. I was then faced with a player who when I looked up at him I didn’t recognise.

‘The Queen said to me, “You don’t know his name do you?” “No ma’am,” I replied. It was Mauricio Solis who came with Wanchope from Costa Rica. This amused Her Majesty intensely. Her words were, “How many of these players do you know?”

The players, too, looking resplendent on the pitch, were given a day to remember. Poom, as he turns away, reveals in the living

room he sits in he's staring back at a photo from their meeting that day. He goes on to add that he's met the Queen twice since, which for most would seem like a brag, but not from Poom.

The afternoon acted as a realisation for McClaren though. When he should have been embracing the situation, the dawning of what was to come struck him. 'To put it in easy terms, the Queen would never come and visit us at the BBG. Now she was riding in an open top car with Jim, that's how big it was. But we were frightened to death because the Baseball Ground kind of kept us in the Premier League and all of a sudden, moving to Pride Park with a carpet of a pitch, we'd have to start playing proper football.'

The Baseball Ground's fear factor would be lost. Gone would be its intimidating nature, where the players could feel the breaths of the crowd, sense the almost impending realisation that a stray fan could wander on at any point. It was a cauldron that oozed charisma, where the walls told stories of the club Derby had been and could be again. Sit in the changing rooms and the noise from above was unavoidable. To ease them in, the club needed to find something new to provide the momentum on the field, a new reason for fans to generate the excitement that came so naturally in the Pop Side.

'Milan to Derby? Now that was a big change!' Stefano Eranio was a giant of European football, having earned three Serie A titles, three Italian Super Cups, one Champions League and played in two other losing finals. He'd appeared 20 times in one of the finest Italian sides ever forged and had shared changing rooms with George Weah, Paolo Maldini and Marco van Basten. On paper, he was the biggest signing in the history of Derby County, and he arrived for nothing.

'In that period I was in the national team and I had many possibilities to become a player-manager. Porto wanted me to play there, Munich too. But my dream was to join a team in England because I used to watch the games and the atmosphere was brilliant. I always believed that the real football was there and for that reason

I had the possibility to speak with a very big friend of Jim Smith's. Jim had his Italian friend too who he spoke with about which players he'd like to take and he decided to watch one game in Milan.

'When Jim came to Italy, Milan played Udinese. He came and in that game I played right-back and we won 1-0, I was the best player on the field. In two days, he came back again to England, called me and said, "Stefano please, I'd like to come to Milan and sign you for Derby." He came and then we went along to sign the contract.'

Eranio was an enormous capture as a footballer, but Smith and McLaren both knew what would really be setting them apart from others was the Italian's footballing mindset. A brain elevated beyond what many British players possessed, his ability to see the game in slow motion took Smith's side from a steady Premier League side to a force to be reckoned with.

Beyond that majestic mind was a work ethic though, one unseen at Ramarena in the past, as McLaren recalls, 'I remember Eranio's first training session coming from Milan and it was incredible. He did everything perfectly, just spot on. He'd be passing, every pass and every run. I stopped and I just said, "Have a look at that. That's what being professional is all about. He's there early, warms up properly and is ready to train, trains perfectly and stays afterwards to do extra. That is it boys! And he's got European Cup medals!"'

That ethic was evident from day one. Upon his arrival in the East Midlands, Eranio met Jon Davidson. A former Derby trainee who represented the first team, Davidson had grown back into the club under Smith. Now working directly with club legend Gordon Guthrie, Davidson was still young enough to get involved in sessions from time to time.

He said, 'I remember Jim nearly gave me the sack one day for tipping Mikkel Beck's shot on to the bar and he went mad at me for saving it. But there was another one with Stefano. We were in this practice match and he's taking me on one-on-one, so I've come

flying out and saved it but just caught him. He's gone rolling over and I'm whispering, "Stef, get up. Please get up, you're going to get me a bollocking here!" The bollocking was avoided, and Davidson is still the glue holding the changing room together to this very day.

Immediately, Smith and McClaren got to work on plucking some of that brilliance from the brain of the Italian – starting with his contact book. Jim told me, "Stefano, our team is not big enough. We came up last year but we'd like to build a good team. If you come you can help us to sign different players." So, when I moved, the manager asked if I knew anyone who could play as striker and who would score a few goals. I called Baiano!' Eranio said.

Francesco Baiano was the latest in a long, beautiful list of imports who would transform the face of the club. McClaren, following one of Baiano's first practice sessions, reminisces on picking up the phone to Smith and simply saying, 'Wow. He is a player.' In his first eight games, he found the net eight times.

It was a time where Derby could attract almost anyone. Smith wrote in his autobiography about being close to enticing Emmanuel Petit to Derby, but it was another ponytail that really would have astounded.

Eranio's contact book stretched to one of the best players on the planet, Roberto Baggio. Smith flew to Milan to discuss a deal, describing the likelihood as '50/50'. Terms were agreed before a last-second intervention from Baggio's agent led to the move collapsing. Ultimately it was Baiano who got the call.

* * *

Those eight games saw Baiano kick off not only his Derby career but the life of the club at Pride Park Stadium. After years of preparation and a visit from Her Majesty herself, it was an August night that was to provide the first taste of competitive football at the new home. At the time, it was a sparsely populated Pride Park from the outside. Absent were the businesses and the buildings, the Derby Arena, the pubs and even the Wyvern. It was simply a stadium.

'If you go there now you've got Frankie and Benny's, Harvester, Merlin, Subway,' recalls journalist and supporter Nick Britten. 'But you had to go to the pubs in town beforehand if you wanted a drink or something to eat. But if you walked from town and walked from the flyover to Pride Park, as you walked up the road would come into view and as you got to the top, you just saw this shiny cathedral of football which was surrounded by nothing, it was absolutely fantastic.'

That was the view that 24,000 had on their maiden voyage. Bar a pre-season friendly against Sampdoria, this was the first taste of football at the stadium largely expected to guide the club into a new, exciting era. Gadsby recalls seeing a mother and son walking towards the Rams' new home, the thought of 'that wouldn't have happened at the Baseball Ground' running through his head. Neither would what happened next though, an omen as to what life would feel like over many of the next 22 years.

I was working at the *Daily Record* and travelled down and of course the fucking lights went out and it was a nightmare. Everybody could see the floodlights of the Baseball Ground from the stadium and you just looked longingly at them,' Britten remembers.

Fifty-six minutes into what should have been a landmark evening, the floodlights failed. More than half an hour of darkness followed, a boardroom in despair and a group of men frantically running around with pliers hoping to find the answer. Gadsby, welcoming a raft of new sponsors to the new stadium, was in among it all.

The first proper game of the season was a nightmare. We were 2-1 up against Wimbledon under the lights with a full house. We were playing well and at half-time, the lights went out. Minutes ticked by and Jim was going mad shouting to me "this bloody club, get the bloody lights on".

I went in to the Wimbledon dressing room and Joe Kinnear faced me. I explained the problem, that the surge at half-time had created a circuit break, and we anticipated the lights coming back on in a few minutes so please could they be ready to go out to play

again. Kinnear said, “Is that it? You can fuck off.” They had already changed.

Wimbledon forced the hand of referee Uriah Rennie, on his first night officiating in the division, and the match was abandoned. ‘The mistake we made was not testing it for a half-time. The peak time at Christmas is 3.10pm when the Queen comes on and everybody puts a cup of tea on. All the stations have a surge. But we hadn’t tested for half-time, which is the same,’ said Gadsby. It was a shambolic beginning, albeit one never repeated from that day on.

Ashley Ward was the first man to score in a Derby shirt at Pride Park, before the lights went out, but it’s Eranio who takes the credit after striking against Barnsley. ‘Baiano shot the penalty but he made a mistake in his step or someone moved before he touched the ball, so I took the ball and I scored instead. So I am the first scorer. Nobody can ever cancel that out now, I will always be the first scorer there!’ Eranio smiles.

For two years, Pride Park was a haven. The atmosphere of the Baseball Ground may have been sacrificed but it mattered little on the field when Eranio, Wanchope and Baiano were on top form. It took 12 games to be beaten on new home soil, in that time dispatching champions-elect Arsenal 3-0 on one of the great days. By the end of their first year in DE24, Derby had risen to the brink of a return to European football. Just two points away from the UEFA Cup, Smith and McLaren had transformed the club and they had the facilities to match off it. In many ways, it was a brand new Derby County.

The Italian additions had the desired effect. Baiano’s 13 goals saw him crowned player of the season, Eranio’s impact as powerfully felt. But it was the old guard of international additions who had started the movement and laid the foundations for a universal football club.

One of those, Poom, remembers a changing room on the turn: ‘When I signed, Eranio and Baiano came a bit later but it was a multicultural club. It was full of characters and interesting with

these different nationalities. I knew a little bit about British dressing room banter from my time with Portsmouth. When I was young and I signed for them, I was taken aback by the football language and the English humour but Derby, I knew what to expect. We had a great team spirit and Jim's strengths were that he had a good scouting network where he knew a lot of people in football. He knew all the managers, players, coaches, across Europe.'

For Eranio too, it was people like Poom and Stimac who allowed him and Baiano to bed in. 'It was great to have people from all over the world,' begins Eranio. 'Stimac helped me because he knew the Italian language, he would speak to me if the boss or a team-mate had something important to know, I would call him and say, "Stimac, please come here and help me" because I learned some phrases and it was not easy for me to make questions because I didn't know words. I'd point at the object or whatever and ask how you say it in English and he'd just help me.'

And McClaren? A man who went on to redefine his management after failure in the England role over a decade later, the chance to work with minds established far from the British Isles saw his methods and thinking grow. He says, 'I was always looking at new ideas, thinking of new sessions. You're eager to find out what's out there, what's new and what's coming, and so we used to do all sorts. But I think the key thing was relationships with players. In terms of where the game was going, it was going more foreign so therefore I knew that foreign players were coming, and we needed to adjust. I used to say, "Look Jim, foreign players, they don't like this. They don't like staying over at games" etc., but it was an "Oh they're in England, they adapt to us" and I understood but we also needed to adapt to them. That's what people like Eranio brought. They weren't just foreign players, they were characters.'

Beyond being good for McClaren, it was the same for the youngsters emerging too. While Eranio and Poom had little idea just who Derby were when first presented with the name of the club, Chris Riggott certainly did. His childhood Saturday

afternoons were spent standing on a milk crate at the BBG and Derby County was firmly running through the Riggott blood. To have the chance to represent the club, and with some of the finest minds in European football, was an opportunity he could barely believe.

'I remember one day when I was a young pro, Steve Round told me to come and do some bits after training where I'd be doing some one v ones. I looked up and it was against Wanchope,' laughs Riggott. 'He didn't know what was going to happen so there's no chance that I would! But that type of thing was surreal for me, especially as a fan. I'd be training with Wanchope and Sturridge and Baiano. Not just football stuff, you learn from people like Eranio. He is a fantastic man in how he conducts himself with everybody. He had this amazing career but was the most humble of men. These are important lessons for a young lad when you're watching these guys and how they interact and how they handle themselves.'

The Riggott family would have been part of that outpouring of sorrow upon leaving the Baseball Ground, but they would have been heartened to know there was still one key remnant of the old club. Tradition remained on a daily basis in the form of a grassy knoll beside Raynesway. Like the Baseball Ground had been, Ramarena was no longer fit for the purpose of a Premier League football club. Situated by a main road and adjacent to the Rolls-Royce factory, it provided easy access to anyone who fancied popping to watch training for the day and had barely enough room to run a practice match. It was a far cry from the state-of-the-art facilities Eranio and Baiano had been shown at the stadium, perhaps hidden away for good reason.

'The training ground today? Yeah, I'm very jealous!' Poom laughs. He wasn't used to quite the luxury Eranio may have been, but even he found Ramarena to be a culture shock. 'I came from Estonia so Raynesway was still okay, I was just grateful to be on grass. We had one and a half pitches here, we had this little

canteen and two small dressing rooms, a boot room. It would get very muddy during winter. I remember we had a little corner for goalkeepers behind this building where we worked, then we had a gym where it was freezing cold.

'We'd have the canteen where it was always chicken and beans. We had this gym which had a little indoor hall so you could play a bit of basketball, which Wanchope was good at. Next it was a small weights room downstairs and then a little fitness room with boxing bags. I used to go there before training and do my exercises and a bit of boxing to try and get more aggressive. Jim was very demanding of his goalkeeper dominating the box, getting every ball and it was my strength. I remember I would run against the boxing bags and then jump against the wall.'

One man who regularly made the drive down from his university home of Sheffield was Ross Fletcher. Already aware his decision to study advanced econometrics was a poor choice, he soon found himself spending more time standing around in Ramarena than in lectures. 'You had one and a half muddy fields with a ramshackle office area, then the little five on five bowling green for short-sided games which Jim would get involved in and that was about it,' he looks back.

It was here that Fletcher would wait, patiently, in anticipation of capturing a few soundbites for BBC Radio Derby. 'Then you had the off room where Steve McLaren built up the ProZone suite where they had the comfy chairs but that was about it, nothing like the palatial surroundings of Moor Farm and the multiple fields of different sizes and the sport science set-up. It really was the bare bones but it had a genial charm about it.'

Look at greying images from the time and describing Ramarena as 'nothing special' is putting it lightly. To the more recent mind, it was simply a target for arsonists and travellers. But within, particularly the work that McLaren was doing, was slowly beginning to change the face of the game. Analysis was to grow in importance thanks to McLaren, along with new ideas in terms

of treating the body in the right way in between matches became the focus.

McClaren was at the forefront of these ideas, ‘Jim was 58 when he got the job. Many called him an old dinosaur but we created at Derby, we were way ahead of our time in terms of technology, we brought a fitness coach in which nobody had done before, a sports psychologist in. We helped develop ProZone, no one was doing that. We had a meeting room with massage chairs, we’d do yoga, he was up for anything. That is great for me because it threw me lots of ideas and I got my reputation from it. I have to thank Jim because he allowed me to bring these ideas in and he’d say yes. We were so forward-thinking.’

The methods only improved the club’s on-field fortunes, and second season syndrome at Pride Park (which had by now had its capacity increased) never materialised. An eighth-place finish only brought the club closer to European football, but again they fell agonisingly short. Never, at least by the time of writing, would the club get close to it in the following years.

It wasn’t for the want of trying, as Lionel Pickering continued to plough his fortune into the club. Seth Johnson arrived in the summer of 1999; powerful Belgian striker Branko Strupar in the following December.

Promising young forward Lee Morris came in October 1999 on a club record deal. He recalls, ‘It was Derby and Arsenal who were both in for me and I believe Derby outbid Arsenal. I got a phone call on the Sunday afternoon from our manager and he just said, “You’re going to Derby tomorrow.” There wasn’t anything specific in terms of Europe, but it felt like a club on the up. Pride Park was fantastic at the time compared to a lot of the stadiums around and they were established. They were going in the right direction, it just felt like a nice, stable club to go to.’

All were strong signings, particularly when following on from individuals such as Horacio Carbonari a year earlier. The issue was the other way though. By now, Derby were a known force

and those with wider wallets began to circulate around key assets. Chris Powell departed for Charlton Athletic in the summer of 1998, followed by Christian Dailly and Lee Carsley to Blackburn Rovers a few months later. By the summer of 1999, Igor had left his kingdom for Upton Park, following Paulo Wanchope to the capital. The tide had begun to turn. Whether driven by potential financial worries or ambition, the loss of the latter two can be traced back to McClaren's own departure.

The tactical side of the management duo, he had by now become the most talked about coach in the country, arguably Europe too. Plucked from obscurity by Smith, his nous was outgrowing the club and come February 1999 he linked up with one of Smith's closest friends, Alex Ferguson. He remembers, I think it was a logical next step. We came to a stage where I was thinking maybe if Jim retires, but he would have worked and worked and he loved football, so that move was just a logical next step. I had no hesitation and Jim just said he'd drive me there himself because it was such a great opportunity. He knew it would happen one day, but the grounding with Jim in terms of dealing with the manager, the demand and the honesty, was vital.

Jim had a hairdryer and I saw more from him than with Sir Alex, we had some right ones in the dressing room. But it was a great grounding with foreign players and big characters. I remember asking Sir Alex what he wanted me to do and he'd say, "What would you do at Derby? Whatever you did there, that's why you're here so go out and do it" and that was it. They were the words, no advice, just get on with it and do your job.'

The loss of McClaren put Derby back on a downward curve and Pickering sensed it. Gadsby recalls the words of the chairman in response to the approach, 'Alex Ferguson came calling for him. And Lionel said to me, "Steve's your mate, isn't he? Tell him he can't go; we can't lose him. Just tell him he has to come back, Jim and him are a team."

I rang Steve and asked him where he was and he said he was in Stockport on his way to United.

‘I said, “Well Lionel wants you to come back. Will you please consider it?” “Yeah, I will Peter, but United are currently top of the league, in the semi-finals of the European Cup and in the quarter-finals of the FA Cup. And I’m on £38,000 here and they’re starting me on £180,000.” So I asked him to think about it.’

Almost immediately, with McLaren gone, Smith suffered. His invincibility cloak had been torn away and by the end of 1999, with a side a shadow of the one he had at his disposal in his previous two seasons, talk of Europe was silenced. Come the millennium celebrations, Smith’s Derby were in the thick of the relegation battle. The city was about to experience its own Y2K problem.