

REBIRTH OF THE BLUES

The Rise of Chelsea Football Club
in the Mid-1980s



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CONTENTS

Introduction	7
Chapter 1	11
Chapter 2	28
Chapter 3	40
Chapter 4	56
Chapter 5	72
Chapter 6	82
Chapter 7	90
Chapter 8	108
Chapter 9	119
Chapter 10	130
Chapter 11	138
Chapter 12	146
Chapter 13	155
Chapter 14	162
Chapter 15	178
Chapter 16	193
Chapter 17	208
Chapter 18	222
Chapter 19	233
Chapter 20	239
Epilogue	251

1

ANOTHER TIME in the Blues' history I recall vividly is the summer of 1977. This should have been a period to look back on with fondness, seeing that Chelsea had regained their place in the First Division after being promoted from the Second Division, finishing as runners-up to Wolves. But the sickening blow of manager Eddie McCreadie's departure had left a bitter taste in the mouths of everyone connected with the club. His exciting young side looked to be on the verge of great things when out of nowhere, the man who'd masterminded Chelsea's resurgence had vanished into the ether. What made the situation even more depressing was that he was replaced by the anonymous Ken Shellito, a reserve team coach. While Shellito was a fine full-back for the Blues whose career was cut short by an injury, it was hardly an appointment that stirred the blood around Stamford Bridge. It almost seemed perverse that Chelsea had let go of a man who could have been one of their greatest managers over a petty argument about buying Eddie Mac a new car, to replace the club's old minibus that he'd been using since he took over in April 1975. The whole situation beggared belief. In my opinion, and that of many others, the heart had been ripped out of our club when Eddie Mac left the Bridge that day in July 1977 to head for the USA. A talent like that doesn't come around too

often, if at all, and the most sickening aspect of the whole sorry affair was that the club itself had been the architect of its own downfall.

I wasn't exactly filled with much confidence when new boss Shellito announced that he'd be adapting our playing style for a return to the top flight. A much more tactical approach would be introduced rather than Eddie Mac's high-energy style of play which seemed to me to be a ludicrous decision. After all, that approach had got us promoted. Why change it now? But Shellito was the boss and it seemed he was determined to make his own mark and dispense with Eddie Mac's way. Those comments by Shellito put the fear of God into me, and I suspect many other Chelsea fans. Adapting to a new way of playing seemed to say to me that Shellito was scared of the higher-class opposition that we would be facing in the coming season.

Look, I don't want to be hard on poor old Ken; after all, the task that he had taken on from Eddie Mac was hardly an enviable one as the club was still in dire financial circumstances and there would be very little money for new signings, if any, that summer. Basically, the players who had got us promoted would now be asked to steer Chelsea through in what would undoubtedly be a long, tough, hard season. The disparity between the three sides promoted that year from the Second Division was highlighted when Nottingham Forest splashed out a record fee for a goalkeeper when they signed England regular Peter Shilton to bolster their ranks. It was an inspired acquisition by Brian Clough as that year Forest went on to triumph by claiming the First Division championship and they also added the League Cup for good measure by beating Liverpool 1-0 in a replayed final at Old Trafford.

The summer of 1977 has gone down in the national consciousness as the summer of punk. It was also the

summer that marked the Queen's Silver Jubilee. The street parties and celebrations were played out to the accompaniment of Johnny Rotten and the rest of the Sex Pistols, much to the horror of the Auntie BBC, who, in their infinite wisdom, decided that the nation should not be subjected to the prospect of the Pistols' 'God Save the Queen' single occupying the number one position in the charts that week of the Jubilee celebrations. So, in an act of what was the prime example of the Nanny State, the BBC proceeded to ban it from its shows and stations, thereby denying the Pistols their rightful place at the top of the charts. Instead we had to endure the very pedantic cover of 'The First Cut Is the Deepest' by the faux-Scottish crooner Rod Stewart. I would advise anyone who has heard Stewart's rather lame attempt at covering what is in my estimation a great song to check out the original cover version of the Cat Stevens tune, by a certain P.P. Arnold. In a word, it knocked poor old Rod's version into oblivion as far as I'm concerned.

The summer of 1977 was my first full summer with my new girlfriend Vicky. I'd like to say that it was all plain sailing. I'd like to, but that would be a lie. Like many blokes of my age, the actual reality of having a steady girlfriend was a lot more difficult than I had bargained for. It was, indeed, my initiation into the moods and whims of the female mind. These were lessons I had to learn pretty quickly. I soon realised that the concept of having a girlfriend was not as straightforward in reality.

Chelsea were due to play West Bromwich Albion away at The Hawthorns on the opening Saturday of the football season, 20 August 1977, which coincided with my first holiday with a girlfriend in tow. Where were we bound for? Somewhere exotic, you might think. A destination that conjured up dreams of crystal-blue seas and golden

beaches that stretched into the distance. Well, not quite. I decided that my new Spanish girlfriend should follow me in my childhood footsteps, and consequently we found ourselves travelling to Ramsgate for a week in a B&B. Still, I was keeping my promise that if she stuck with me I would show her a good time. The trouble was, as she rather bitterly said after that week's holiday, it always seemed to be other people having the good time, which I thought was a bit harsh.

I had loved Ramsgate when I was a kid. It was the holiday destination for thousands of Londoners, especially those south of the river, as the Kent coastline was only a relatively short distance away from the Smoke. In reality, Ramsgate was nothing less than a home from home for Londoners. There were pie and mash shops in abundance with jellied eels and seafood stalls peppered along the seafront. When I was going to Ramsgate in the 1960s, the town was in its pomp. The beaches were crowded, there were no vacancies in the B&Bs and hotels, and queues outside cafes – not to put too fine a point on it, the place was alive and thriving. There was a strange pecking order among Londoners in those days. Those of us who went to Ramsgate looked down on people going to nearby Margate as being somewhat common. Meanwhile, the genteel holidaymakers who took their yearly break in Broadstairs (once the home of Charles Dickens, no less) looked upon the people who visited Ramsgate and Margate as nothing short of the epitome of the unwashed oiks from the lower-class areas of the capital.

Sad to say that by 1977, Ramsgate had seen better days. As I showed Vicky around the seafront and esplanade, it was obvious that my boyhood holiday home was in a very sad state of decline. The big amusement arcade looked tatty and run down, belying its rather grand name of 'Merry

England' complete with a Britannia edifice on its roof. That Morrissey track, 'Every Day is Like Sunday', sums up the sorry state of affairs of what was once a proud Kent coastal town had descended into, highlighted in the lyric, 'It's just a seaside town that should've closed down.' Still, as the saying goes, we had to make the best of it. Unfortunately our B&B didn't help matters. It was, in a word, appalling. The food was disgusting and the endemic decrepitude of Ramsgate in general seemed to have seeped insidiously through the walls of this ghastly dump.

Still, at least I could look forward to the Blues' debut back in the top flight that Saturday afternoon. I told Vicky that I would be listening to the radio back in our room, leaving her in no doubt that if she had any ideas about going to the beach, she should quickly dismiss those thoughts from her mind. After all, I told her, we have to get our priorities right, and I'm sorry but Chelsea come first. Unsurprisingly that comment did not go down very well at all.

The Blues' trip to West Brom wasn't the commentary game on the radio so I'd have to wait nervously for updates to see how we were faring in our baptism of fire. Anxiously, I laid on that decrepit old bed in our shabby bedroom, hoping against hope that Chelsea would somehow manage to beat the Baggies. To be honest, I would have taken a point, anything to get us off to a decent start. At half-time it was still goalless. So far, so good. That was until the 68th minute when West Brom took the lead from the penalty spot. Disappointingly, Chelsea then proceeded to cave in and conceded two further goals to complete a thoroughly miserable afternoon, as the home side ran out comfortable 3-0 winners. According to the match reports, Chelsea had held their own for long parts of the game until the deadlock was broken with that spot kick, and had then gone on to

fall apart as the gulf in class and experience between the two sides became glaringly obvious.

To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. In fact I was in a foul mood and slumped into a childish sulk. Vicky tried to placate me but that only made things worse as she didn't have a bloody clue about football. How could she share my pain? I didn't need words of consolation. I just needed her to shut her trap and leave me alone. Thankfully, my conscience eventually got the better of me. After all, this was the first day of our holiday and it would have been totally unfair of me to ruin it for her due to my ever-changing moods through my fanaticism regarding the Blues' fortunes.

'Let's go out,' I said. 'To a pub that has a restaurant in Pegwell Bay, where I used to go when I was a kid.'

'Sounds nice,' she replied.

True, it did sound nice, but instead of having a nice meal and a civilised drink, I proceeded to get totally smashed on numerous pints of Stella Artois.

The last memory I have of that evening is of trying to watch *The Prisoner*, the brilliant Patrick McGoochan series from the 1960s which we'd both been obsessed with. Unfortunately, owing to the fact that I'd consumed so much beer, I fell asleep in the TV room at the B&B, whereupon Vicky had to somehow help me stagger up the stairs to our seedy little bedroom. My next memory of that bacchanalian night was waking up the following morning with the mother of all hangovers, and to my shame I found myself firmly in the doghouse.

Chelsea's next game would be against Birmingham City in midweek at the Bridge. In those days it was a lot more difficult to find out the result of an evening fixture, especially when you were on holiday. After my poor display on the Saturday night and my reaction to the debacle at

West Brom, I could hardly say to Vicky that I needed to get back to the B&B early that evening so that I could find out how the Blues had got on. These were the days when the quickest way to find out the result if you didn't have access to a radio was to watch the late news on either the BBC or ITV. There, the scores would be announced by somebody like the newsreader Reginald Bosanquet, who quite obviously couldn't have given a toss about the game, as he delivered the scores in a half-mocking, weary voice that was a personification of his contempt for all the plebs hanging on his every word. As soon as the phrase, 'Here are tonight's football results,' was uttered, I could swear that my heart always used to miss a beat. So, having to play the dutiful boyfriend, I had to face the fact that my agony would not be relieved that day.

The following morning, after breakfast, I rushed down to the newspaper stand on the seafront to nervously scan the paper for that all-important result. Gleefully, I read that Chelsea had beaten the Brummies 2-0 thanks to goals from Gary Stanley and Ray Lewington. The only blight on that game, which was played in a torrential rainstorm, was the fact that Steve Finnieston – aka Jock – had missed a penalty. Still, all said and done, it was a vital win and our first points of the season. The crowd of just over 18,000 was disappointing for our first home game back in the top flight, but as previously mentioned, the game was played during a deluge so perhaps the low attendance was not through a lack of interest from the Stamford Bridge faithful, but most probably down to the appalling weather.

Being obsessed with what kits Chelsea were wearing, I noticed from the photos in the newspaper that the Blues were now in a slightly altered strip from the previous season's. Being a traditionalist, I was not in favour of the Umbro logo that was now adorning the shoulders and

sleeves of the shirt. Gone also was the traditional white stripe on the blue shorts, replaced with another type of stripe that consisted of that bloody Umbro logo again. Personally, I much preferred the plainer kit we'd worn for the previous two seasons.

This was an era when kit manufacturers were starting to leave their mark on club colours, and, to this day, I loathe some of the monstrosities that the Blues have been lumbered with over the years. In my view I think Nike have been culpable for some of the worst examples we've ever seen the Blues wear in recent times. Apart from the kit we wore in the 2021 Champions League Final victory over Manchester City, I've not been exactly enamoured with some of their feeble efforts. I honestly believe that some of their designers at Nike must either be colour blind or have no knowledge of the Blues' traditions. The Adidas kit of the Premier League-winning season of 2016/17 was great and makes me wonder why we ever signed up with Nike in the first place – money, I should imagine. It's notable that when Chelsea and Nike got together to produce a retro version of our 1970 FA Cup-winning shirt, it outsold all of their other efforts instantly. As the saying goes, sometimes less is more. That beautiful, iconic kit still stands alone as the pinnacle of any strip that Chelsea have ever worn.

* * *

After our victory against Birmingham, our next game was at the Bridge again on the Saturday Vicky and I were due to leave Ramsgate. Just my luck, I thought, that I'd missed our first two home matches back in the First Division. Still, my hopes were high that we'd see off Coventry City to record our second successive home win. I wasn't exactly sorry to see the back of that bed and breakfast. For one thing, the meals had been so disgustingly bad that I tried

out a little experiment. Suspicious that the same piece of toast had been left on our breakfast table every day without change, I left some teeth marks in one of the crusts. My suspicions were confirmed when I discovered that the same bit of toast had indeed been on our table for three consecutive days.

They also had a rule that you weren't allowed back in your room until four in the afternoon, a constant practice in those days among the harridans that passed for landladies. It really was a bloody cheek. I can recall countless times when I was a kid, walking around with my family, patiently waiting for the time when we would be allowed back in our rooms. On sunny days that wasn't a problem as we spent all day on the beach. However, on rainy days, we found ourselves traipsing around the seafront and high street of Ramsgate, trying to find something to do before we went back to the comfort of our dingy digs – digs that we'd actually paid for. Unbelievable! Thankfully, this is now a thing of the past, yet it still shows what a tolerant lot we Brits are. I can think of no other country where such a rule would have been accepted, let alone obeyed.

As if the meals weren't bad enough, there was also the strange case of the person who was occupying the room adjacent to ours. On a daily basis we could hear strange noises and mumbling coming from that godforsaken cell. We subsequently found out that it was the son of the proprietor, who seemed to spend all of his time in this dreary tomb. Heaven knows what was wrong with him. It was, all in all, very strange indeed. I fully expected Mr Rochester from *Jane Eyre* to furnish us with an explanation. But sadly this was not to be.

Our coach was due to leave Ramsgate bus station at 5pm, and, yet again, I was desperate to find out how the Blues had done against Coventry. As we boarded the coach,

I seized my chance. I asked the driver if he knew anything about the day's footie results.

'I'll put the radio on for you, mate,' he replied.

Nervously, I stood there alongside the driver while the other passengers had to push past me to take up their seats on the coach. Then I heard Chelsea's result come in. We had lost 2-1. I was totally gutted. Our second defeat in three games, and we'd lost our unbeaten home record that we'd held since Orient had beaten us at the Bridge back in the spring of 1976. I was beginning to wonder if the promised land that we'd all craved for might in the end turn out to be nothing short of a disaster. When you've enjoyed a season like 1976/77, where our defeats had been few and far between, this was all a bit of a wake-up call. While we had looked far too good for the Second Division, it now seemed apparent that we might not be good enough for the demands and rigours of the top flight. I was very subdued on the journey back to Hertfordshire. That empty, sick feeling that I always endure every time the Blues are beaten was back – and with a vengeance. Still, I thought, I'd better not risk another massive outburst, as it seemed to me that Vicky was gradually getting quite tired of my ridiculous behaviour every time Chelsea came up short. I decided just to keep my mouth shut and hope against hope that this foul mood would eventually pass.

However, there was one bright spot that raised my spirits no end on that tedious journey home. When we stopped for a refreshment break at some awful halfway house that had obviously done some sort of deal with the various coach companies, we were all duly expected to exit the coach, whereupon we would march like lemmings to the grotty pub with some sort of snack bar where we could purchase watered-down beer and sandwiches that had seen better days – all at an inflated price.

‘We’ll sit this one out,’ I said to Vicky. ‘Is that OK?’

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘Look at the queue for the toilets.’

It was then that I noticed on the coach directly opposite us, a kid of about nine or ten years old was pulling faces at us. First of all we both ignored him, but after a while I was starting to get fed up with this little buffoon. I can quite clearly recall he had the type of face that needed a good slap. His head was shaped like a butterball with a pudding basin haircut that fully convinced me that this little sod would one day turn into an even bigger Herbert. Finally, I could stand no more of his baiting and in double quick time I gave him the two-finger salute followed by the single finger and that most offensive of gestures signalling what I was convinced he would one day turn into – a wanker!

Then, the cheeky little sod repeated everything I’d just done and gave it back to us in spades. He seemed to find this hysterical as he jumped up and down on his coach seat. So pleased was he, by his demonstration of how quickly he could learn those signs, that he then made the schoolboy error of taking it one step too far and decided to give me one final two-finger salute before our two coaches went their separate ways. It was at that precise moment that his mum, who was sitting alongside this kid’s dad in the seat in front, noticed what her errant son was up to. Horrified at what she’d seen, she then proceeded to give the little bugger a right backhand that put a stop to his little game in an instant. While he was rubbing his recently cuffed head, his mum made him apologise to us. I could see that the little kid was protesting that she’d got it all wrong, and that we were just as guilty as him. Sadly for him, she didn’t believe a word of it and gave him another cuff round the head for good measure. The last we saw of this little monster was his pudding face with tears streaming down his fat rosy cheeks, resorting finally in him perpetrating the most childish of

all gestures which was to poke his tongue out at us. And then he was gone.

I've often wondered how he turned out and if he remembers that bizarre incident in that car park all those years ago. Did we feel guilty about the punishment he received from his mama? No, not one bit. In fact we laughed our heads off. How cruel, you might think. But in those days, seeing mums and dads belting their kids was not at all unusual. Today, that kid would most probably report his parents for child abuse but back then, no one on that coach took any notice of a mother chastising her child in public. Having said that, this type of thing never happened from either of my parents. Though to be honest I most probably deserved it many times.

* * *

School, however, was another matter. Unlike today, we lived in fear of certain teachers and they thought nothing of dishing out corporal punishment. The more lenient of this particular breed would give you a slap across the back of the legs, but some sadists who passed for educators preferred the ruler across the hand, or the slipper. The biggest psycho I ever came across was the headmaster at my junior school who gleefully used to dish out his favourite form of punishment with a bat that had a smiley face on one side, which was shown to his victim before the beating, and a crying face which was shown to the poor boy or girl – yes, girls as well – after they'd received their thrashing by this complete and utter nutcase.

The worst example, however, occurred when I was in the second year at senior school. We had a maths teacher, Mr Bailey, who also took us for games. Bailey, with his chiselled face and swept-back blond hair, resembled something that Adolf Hitler would have held up as the

prime example of Teutonic manhood. Like the Nazis, Bailey was a complete bastard. Before one games lesson, my mate Tony asked Bailey if he could be excused from taking part in the game of football we were due to play as he had a bad stomach ache and had been sick a couple of times. 'Nonsense!' Bailey replied to Tony's plea. 'If you can't run around, you can go in goal.'

Tony, like all schoolkids in those days, dutifully complied. During the game, which Bailey was refereeing, Tony looked ashen-faced. It was obvious to all of us kids that he wasn't at all well. Still, Bailey totally ignored his pleas to be excused and berated Tony, 'Get on with it, boy!'

It was then that Tony threw up in the goalmouth and fell to the ground clutching his stomach. What followed next still leaves me in a state of disbelief to this day. Bailey actually stood over Tony, prodding him with his foot, shouting, 'Get up, boy!'

Thankfully, one of the other kids playing in that travesty of a game had the gumption to go and get another teacher, who took one look at Tony and told someone to phone for an ambulance which thankfully arrived within minutes. And thank God it did. Because it most probably saved Tony's life seeing that his so-called feigned illness turned out after all to be a burst appendix. You might think that, all things considered, Mr Bailey was for the high jump. But these were different times and not one word was ever said about his brutish behaviour. In those days teachers were held in a mixture of high regard and fear by both pupils and parents, and the whole episode was swept under the carpet.

There was some form of rough justice coming Mr Bailey's way when a gang of fifth-formers decided to give him a taste of his own medicine on their last day at school before venturing out into the world of work. I was one of

the second-years told politely to fuck off as me and my classmates tried to get into the boys' changing room for our games lesson. Those fifth-formers scared the living daylights out of us puny little second-years, so not one of us protested too much and we quickly scarpered and ran for cover. I don't know for sure what happened behind the closed doors of that changing room, but when we saw Bailey later in the afternoon he was sporting a black eye. I'd like to think that in some small way, Bailey had finally got what he so richly deserved. As the old saying goes, what goes around comes around.

After this brief history of corporal punishment in the educational system of the 1960s, I hope you can begin to understand why that incident in the coach with the little brat being belted by his mother hardly caused anyone who witnessed it to bat an eyelid.

* * *

On the Sunday morning after the 2-1 home defeat to Coventry, the papers didn't exactly make happy reading for all Blues fans. Apparently Chelsea had been outplayed by Coventry, who had effortlessly moved into a two-goal lead by half-time. According to reports, Coventry had spurned numerous chances to increase their lead. Their profligacy almost came back to haunt them when Tommy Langley pulled a goal back for the Blues, but what I found to be most alarming was that, according to the papers, Coventry had been a class above the home team. Who would have thought that the once-mighty Chelsea were now considered second best to a team like Coventry?

When I first started going to Chelsea in 1968, I and many others saw the likes Coventry as nothing more than makeweight outfits that consistently flirted with relegation. But now, to my horror, apparently, they were considered to

be a superior side to the Blues. Still, it was no good harking back to the past. In August 1977 it was apparent that Chelsea would have a fight on their hands to preserve their place at football's top table. Two more defeats followed in quick succession, both against Liverpool at Anfield. The first was a League Cup tie that the home side won comfortably 2-0; the second loss, a few days later in the league, pretty much followed the pattern of the first match as Liverpool ran out 2-0 winners for the second time in a week. In both games Liverpool's new signing, Kenny Dalglish, had been a thorn in Chelsea's side. The Scot already looked to be an upgrade on the recently departed former Kop hero Kevin Keegan. Just when a lot of people thought that Liverpool would sadly miss the all-action dynamic style of Keegan, it seemed regretfully that for everyone apart from the Liverpool faithful that in Dalglish they had found an even better player, which made the £440,000 that Liverpool had paid for him that summer nothing short of a bargain. Though those two results were disappointing, you could hardly call them unexpected. This was an era when Liverpool dominated the English game and as far as Chelsea were concerned, our focus was on the teams around us and below us, not on such teams as Liverpool who occupied the lofty heights of the First Division.

The first match I went to that season was against Derby County at the Bridge. The game itself was pretty undistinguished apart from one incident. Derby's Leighton James had tormented the Blues' defence all afternoon. The former Burnley winger always seemed to play well against Chelsea and this day was no exception; the Welshman was having one of those days when everything seemed to come off for him. That was until Bill Garner, who'd hardly featured at all in the promotion-winning season of 1976/77, suddenly found himself back in favour under the new boss

Ken Shellito. Garner was a rather gangly, awkward type of centre-forward whose main strength was in the air. But believe me, he was no Ossie or Hutch. That being said, he hardly came across as a player with a vindictive side to his game, but it seemed that day that poor old Bill had had quite enough of James's flicks and tricks and proceeded to totally clean him out with a savage tackle that resulted in James being stretchered off. It was nothing less than GBH. The Derby players went mad trying to get Garner sent off but, in those days, you could get away with tackles like that and still stay on the field. After the game, the Derby boss Colin Murphy blasted Shellito, piously claiming, 'Any manager who condones such tackling must surely look to his conscience.' He might as well have saved his breath as no punishment was handed out to Garner, who walked away from that incident totally scot-free.

What about the result, you might enquire. Well, after Gerry Daly had put Derby ahead from the penalty spot, the game descended into what can only be described as nondescript. Once again, Tommy Langley came to the Blues' rescue when he equalised in the second half and that's the way it finished. Still, at least it was a point. But a 1-1 draw against a mediocre Derby side was hardly expected to set the pulses racing.

On top of all that, the following Saturday we were due to face Manchester United at Old Trafford. To say I wasn't very hopeful would be an understatement. With only one win so far, it was a bit of a stretch of the imagination that we'd actually come away from Manchester that sunny afternoon in September with anything. But yet again Chelsea, as they so often do, upset the odds by running out 1-0 winners after Garner's second-minute goal stunned the home crowd. Could this be a harbinger of an upturn in the Blues' fortunes? Well, not really. As autumn turned

Chapter 1

into winter, a long struggle to remain in the top flight lay ahead of us. It seemed that every decent result was usually followed by a couple of defeats just for good measure. It was almost as though the footballing gods were saying, 'Don't get ahead of yourself.'