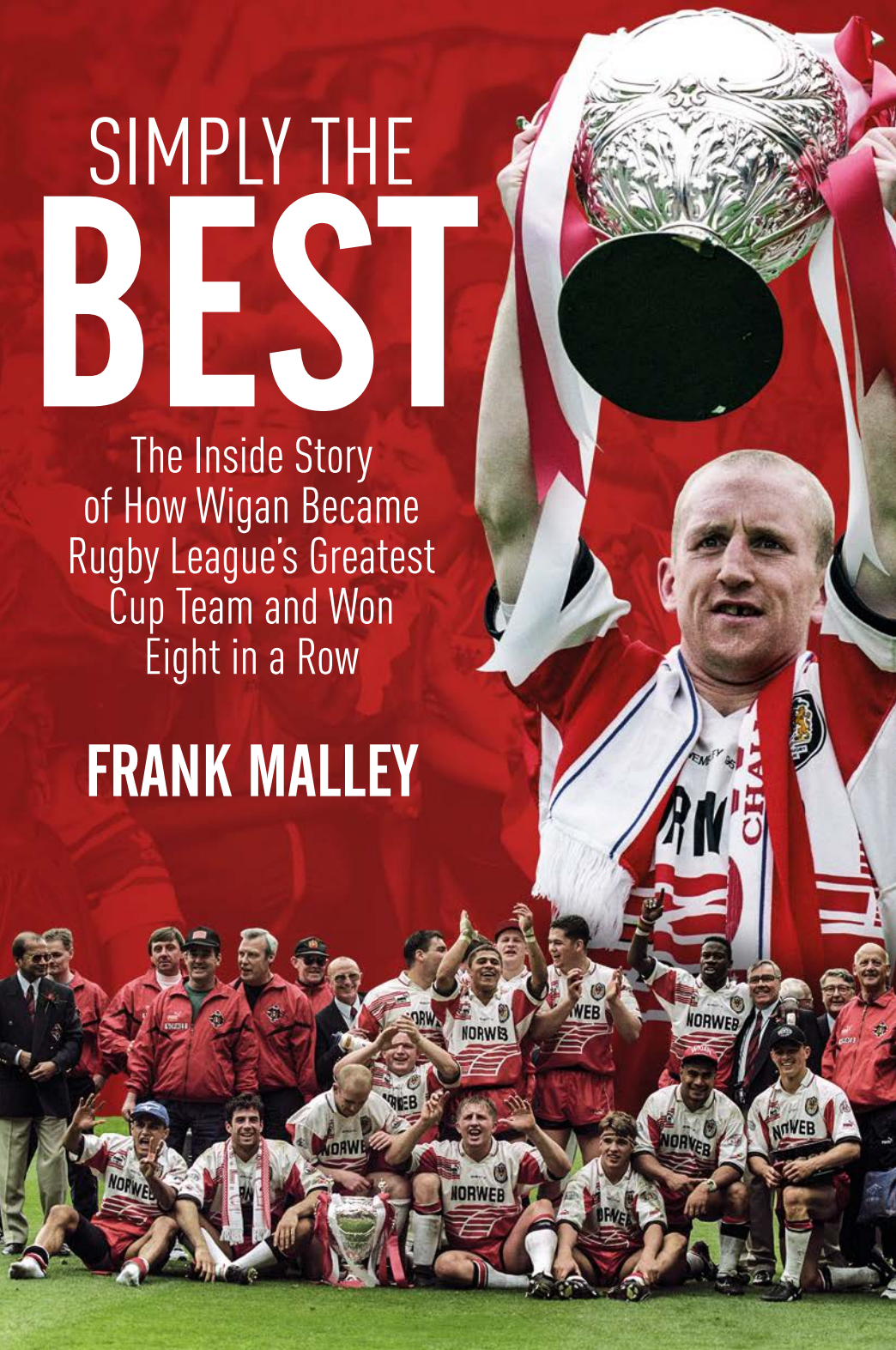
SIMPLY THE BEST

The Inside Story of How Wigan Became Rugby League's Greatest Cup Team and Won Eight in a Row

FRANK MALLEY



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Prologue

THE crowd, some 200-strong, huddled together under their umbrellas in a tight circle, craning their necks and shifting their stance like emperor penguins in an attempt to see and keep warm and dry as the rain, heavy and unrelenting, swept in from the Irish Sea.

In the middle of the circle stood Billy Boston, in a blue suit and no raincoat, seemingly oblivious to the downpour as he obliged the attendant photographers by raising his hands in victory mode as they snapped him in front of the newly-unveiled bronze statue capturing him in his cherry and white jersey in his rugby league pomp.

It was 3 September 2016, almost half a century since Boston had played the last of his 488 matches for Wigan, the most famous rugby league club on the planet.

Yet the joy and affection was deep and tangible, as many who had watched him play and more, who had heard others speak so reverently of the man who scored a club record 478 tries in 15 years at Central Park, gathered on the foulest of autumn days to witness the tribute at the site of the statue in Wigan's Believe Square, at the top of Millgate and The Wiend, the town's highest point.

This book is not about Boston, who grew up in the Tiger Bay area of Cardiff, the son of a Welsh mother and a seaman father from Sierra Leone. The Boston story has been told on numerous occasions in the past half century. Yet in some ways it is all about Boston and his legacy, when it comes to the values and standards as a sportsman and as a man that he brought to the town when he signed at the age of 19 and deprived Wales of a potentially legendary rugby union star.

I first became aware of Boston at the age of four when my father would lead me and my older brother, Patrick, up to our bedroom in the terraced house above the shoe shop in which we lived on Wallgate, Wigan, 50 yards from the town's famous pier.

Looking out of that bedroom window, day or night, was like peering into an L.S. Lowry landscape. Barges sailing into dock on the canal to

the right. Cotton mill girls clip-clopping along the pavement. Chimneys belching their industrial fumes from grimy, red-bricked factories. And, every so often, the local bobby checking in with the police station headquarters from a telephone housed in a little hut, with a blue light on top, which was strategically placed in a fork in the road.

'If you are good you can stay up for 20 minutes and watch Billy Boston when he walks through that door,' Dad would say, pointing to the front entrance of the Bridgewater Arms pub 30 yards across the road where Boston took a regular drink and which was situated in the shadow of the huge and imposing Trencherfield cotton mill.

We pressed our noses against the bedroom window and waited in excited anticipation for this man who Dad spoke about with respect and reverence approaching awe.

Like Roy of the Rovers. Like Superman, like every comic book hero a kid looks up to. And when we caught a glimpse of him it was the most thrilling moment, even though, or maybe because, my only knowledge of rugby at the time was via my father's sketchy stories of Boston's thundering tackles and rampaging runs, scattering all before him. This was a real-1life hero in our street.

I recited the tale to 'Billy B' when we spoke in a small restaurant close to Believe Square and he threw his head back and chuckled.

Days previously, Boston had revealed publicly and bravely on regional television that he was suffering from vascular dementia. At 82 his memory was failing. His ability to describe those halcyon days lacked detail and precision. But mention a team-mate, such as fellow legend Eric Ashton, or his love for Wigan, and the dark eyes twinkled and the years rolled away.

'I came from Tiger Bay in Cardiff where there were loads of coloured people and when I came to Wigan I was the only one,' Boston told me. 'But they treated me like a lord and I appreciated that. I wasn't the best player and it was a great honour to play for Wigan. I just carried on what the Ernie Ashcrofts and Jackie Cunliffes started. I didn't go back to Cardiff because Wigan is a wonderful place and I love the people here. If I had my time over I would do the same thing.'

That has always been the allure of Billy Boston MBE. Modesty and humility, with an ability to keep sport and life in perspective, even though there is no question he was the 'best player'.

Wigan gave Boston, who married Joan, a girl from the town whom he met on a blind date, a new life. Boston, in turn, helped Wigan to six Challenge Cup finals, winning three of them, and then threw the rest of his life into raising cash for charity and extolling the virtues of his adopted town as the club's finest ambassador while setting the standard for generations to come.

It was a tough act to follow but in the late 1980s and 1990s a team from Wigan did just that, winning eight Challenge Cups in a row between 1988 and 1995 with the sort of style and panache which evoked memories of Boston and Ashton and Cunliffe and Ashcroft.

This book essentially is the story of those eight-in-a-row years.

The Wembley years.

The story of a moment in time when the town's rugby club dared to dream of scaling the heights that Boston and co. had achieved more than a quarter of a century before.

A time when it dared to trust in a blend of the town's young local talent and audacious big-money signings.

A time when real-life sporting heroes, in turn inspiring a new generation, once more walked its streets.

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Tough Love

THE images running through my mind were sharp and clear despite the mist of more than a quarter of a century as I arrived at the west London apartment of Shaun Edwards.

There was the picture of Edwards lifting the Challenge Cup trophy to the Wembley skies in 1988, the youngest rugby league captain ever to do so.

There was the memory of an even younger Edwards as a fresh-faced teenaged altar boy at St Mary's Catholic Church on Standishgate, Wigan, a church I used to attend and which is located a hefty drop kick away from where the halfway line used to exist at Central Park, Wigan rugby's old and now spiritual home after the sacrilege of it making way for a Tesco car park.

Edwards, in his black cassock and white surplice, would serve at the 11am Mass on a Sunday and often, just a few hours later and less than 50 yards away, inspire Wigan to yet another victory in the afternoon, in front of many of the same faces from the morning congregation.

Also etched on the memory was the more recent image of Edwards, the international rugby union coach of maturity and renown, invariably seated high in the stand with a face emanating thunderous intensity.

My undertaking was clear. It was not to tell Edwards's story, although his influence on rugby league over two decades was so pervasive that to analyse Wigan in the 1980s and 1990s without reference to Edwards would be tantamount to tracing the career of Ernie Wise without mention of Eric Morecambe. The mission, via the considered reflection which comes when boots have been hanging undisturbed for a couple of decades, was to pinpoint the reasons behind the most spectacularly successful team in British rugby league history.

A team that played rugby which surged with life and conviction. A team that beguiled the sporting world to such an extent that many of its main characters became household names in parts where rugby league was neither played nor understood. A team that conquered all before them, going undefeated in 43 consecutive Challenge Cup matches, lifting the trophy eight times in succession from 1988 to 1995.

Only one man experienced the soaring exhilaration which accompanied playing for Wigan in every one of those 43 matches: Shaun Edwards.

Many other characters played crucial roles down those years. Of course they did.

There were men such as Jack Robinson, a lifelong supporter who joined the board in the late 1970s when Wigan were a shambles on and off the field and turned a 12-man boardroom, whose members would defer any decision more complex than whether they should take milk or cream in their coffee, into the famous 'Gang of Four', a streamlined board with an astute eye for a rugby player who championed homegrown stars and also signed cheques in the 1980s and 1990s which would have made past board members wince.

Maurice Lindsay was one of those dynamic directors and there is no doubt his relentless energy as chairman and his slick, sharp-witted public persona promoting a fresh, modern club in the 1980s, also invigorated the place.

Yet there were also people like fitness coach Bill Hartley, physio Keith Mills and kit man Derek 'Taffy' Jones who formed a backroom alliance built on respect and camaraderie, which is still cherished today by the players of that era.

On the playing front the stars of that dynasty read like a *Who's Who* of the game.

The supreme athlete who was Ellery Hanley, nicknamed the 'Black Pearl' by the Australians, a man whose feats spoke for themselves and a good job they did because he rarely, if ever, talked to the media.

The magical Martin Offiah, simply the most clinical and charismatic finisher in the game's history, even if he did once score ten tries in a game and still failed to win the man-of-the-match award.

The freak of nature named Jason Robinson, or 'Billy Whizz', a man who wriggled through gaps as if bones were not part of his anatomy.

The enigmatic Andy Gregory, whose withering one-liners are treasured in Wigan folklore as much as his ability to offload the perfect pass for every scenario.

There were more. Not least Joe Lydon, who fans dubbed 'Royce', as in 'Rolls-Royce', in tribute to his effortless and graceful running style.

Lydon's carefree nature also went some way to demonstrating that a serious, physically-punishing sport could still be fun.

There was Andy Goodway, nicknamed BA, as in 'Bad Attitude', on account of his grumpy demeanour but who was the epitome of professionalism whenever he crossed the whitewash.

Add Denis Betts, Andy Farrell, Dean Bell, Andy Platt and the Iro brothers, Kevin and Tony. The list is long. The reasons truly are many and varied when it comes to analysing the events which paved the way to the old Twin Towers of Wembley eight times in a row. Sporting phenomena rarely owe their existence to a single cause. Invariably, they are formed by a collision of events, each one building on the last before eventually exploding to burn brilliantly for a limited time like some giant supernova.

But first and foremost in Wigan's Challenge Cup history there is Edwards.

Every great sporting team needs a constant. Lionel Messi was Barcelona's go-to man for a decade. Dan Carter fulfilled that role for the All Blacks, Dan Marino was the quarterback supreme for 17 seasons with the Miami Dolphins.

In a sport with a profile not nearly so elevated, Edwards was Mr Wigan for 14 years, a man famed for his intensity. A man who gained his appreciation of the values associated with one of the toughest games on Earth from his father Jackie.

His relationship with his father forms my first question, after, that is, Edwards demonstrates the northern hospitality housed deep in his DNA by insisting on making me a steaming mug of tea and offering up a helping of his partner Maggie's fish pie.

'Better have some Daddie's sauce, it's a bit bland,' he warns, out of earshot of Maggie, before reminding me proudly that his dad was one of the top young rugby league stars of the 1950s, signing for Warrington on his 16th birthday in 1954 for a world record £1,000.

Within months he was the youngest player to captain a professional rugby league team and would have gone on almost certainly to be one of the enduring scrum half stars of the sport if he had not suffered a crippling, career-terminating spinal injury in a match in 1963.

At the age of 24 he was finished, never to work again, with four spinal operations necessary to spare him from life in a wheelchair. It is a measure of the Edwards family tenacity that it did not prevent him encouraging his son to take up the game.

'It had always been a regret of my dad's life, it still is really, that he never played for Wigan,' said Edwards, the Lancashire vowels clattering flat and purposefully from his lips as if wearing the clogs worn by the cotton mill girls of yesteryear.

'A couple of times he went on the transfer list for £10,000 and was persuaded to come off the list and a week later Wigan came in for him with a £10,000 offer but his chance had gone. It was always natural he wanted to play for Wigan.'

Instead, he became young Shaun's personal coach, a tough, no-nonsense taskmaster.

Was he hard on you?

'Yeah, yeah, very hard. I read a book recently about different places of excellence. It was about how Russian girls became good at tennis all of a sudden and how Kenya was the place for long-distance running.

'There was one common denominator and that was really pushy parents. It ended up being the right thing for me. It's tough love. That was the right way to bring up a young man, particularly at my size.

'I was only 12st and 5ft 8in. You are going to have to be a pretty determined person to make it against blokes, especially against Australia, six or seven stones heavier than you and half a foot taller.'

By 1983 his dad's 'tough love' had fashioned a teenager who was being touted as the brightest prospect in the world of rugby, having become the only player to captain England schoolboys at rugby union as well as rugby league.

The only doubt was which direction to take. Wigan were still in a moribund phase which had kept them bereft of league titles since 1960 and without a Challenge Cup appearance since 1970 when they had lost 7-2 to Castleford.

There was, however, £35,000 on the table at Central Park, a world record for a 17-year-old, if Edwards signed, at a time when the average price of a house in the UK, according to the Office for National Statistics, was just £24,000.

The size of that first cheque, seven times more than the ordinary highly-talented rookie player would have received and yet still £7,000 less than St Helens reportedly offered, clearly remains a source of pride to this day, perhaps mainly because it was vindication of the expert coaching he had received from his father.

'Actually, I got offered more, not just from St Helens, but from Leeds and from Widnes too,' said Edwards. 'At first I was thinking Widnes were the best team. That was the place to go. They had Joe Lydon and Andy Gregory playing for them.'

He was wrestling with the decision when he picked up the special notebook in which his dad used to compile hand-written match reports on his son's contribution to every game he played as an amateur or as a schoolboy. He flicked through the pages, searching eagerly for the latest critique.

'It used to say things such as, "Shaun was terrible today, too slow into position," said Edwards. 'Or, "Shaun did well today, his support play was excellent but needs to improve on his tackling."

'But this day it said, "Shaun has a big decision to make. Does he want to try to play at Wembley in front of 15,000 Widnesians or 35,000 Wiganers?" That was it. As soon as I read that my decision was made.'

The story made sense of one of the most touching quotes I have read about Edwards. When asked well into his 40s what inspired him to continue searching for success after winning 37 major rugby medals, he answered, 'Everything I do really is to try to make my mother and father proud of me.'

Thus he signed for his hometown club on his 17th birthday, 17 October 1983, making headlines next day on the back page of every national newspaper with Alex Murphy, Wigan's coach at the time, justifying all the hullabaloo by saying, 'If this lad was a horse, with his pedigree he would be worth £1m.'

His debut at scrum half came in a 30-13 triumph against York three weeks later.

A fellow debutant that day was full back Steve Hampson, who was four years older than Edwards and who picked up a more standard signing-on fee of £4,500.

The pair were pals and enjoyed mutual respect, much of which came from the fact that both of them trained under the tutelage of Shaun's dad.

'I knew Shaun picked up more than £30,000 when he signed and I got just £4,500. There was a massive difference but, do you know what, it really didn't bother me,' said Hampson when I met him at his Orrell home. 'Shaun was an international in both codes. When we played against York I got man of the match and I was so pleased with that.'

Hampson's delight did not last long. There was no sponsor in place so a whip-round was instituted among directors, etc., for a man-of-the-match prize and Hampson was duly presented with £25 in notes, whose condition could only be described as 'very well used'.

'I'd like to thank you all,' said the courteous Hampson, starting a short address to the gathered throng when a hand appeared from behind his head and reached down to snatch the fivers out of his grasp.

'It was skipper Graeme West,' recalled Hampson, who supplemented his rugby earnings in the early years with a job as a drayman. 'He said, "That goes into the players' kitty."

'I was a bit gutted about that. Nobody told me. My first game after converting from rugby union, where you got no cash, and I had my money taken off me.'

The next couple of years were something of a whirl for Edwards, who became the youngest player to feature in a Challenge Cup Final at Wembley in the 19-6 defeat against Widnes in 1984 before securing his first Challenge Cup winners' medal the following year in a final generally regarded as the best in Wembley history.

True, Wigan's 28-24 victory against Hull did contain ten sumptuous tries and Wigan stand off Brett Kenny did enhance his reputation as the best player in the world at that time, but while it was a match of thrilling entertainment there was a measure of defensive frailty on show which also presented British rugby league in a dubious light.

No matter, Wigan had won at Wembley for the first time in 15 years and Edwards is convinced it was the catalyst for the great things to come.

'People don't believe me but I am sure there were 110,000 people in Wembley stadium that day.

'I think all the blokes on the turnstiles were getting a bit of dropsy. There were loads of people on the pitch at the end. There was a lad who was in my year at school and he slipped one of the stewards 30 quid or so for his yellow jacket and he is on all the Wigan photographs with the players.

'Wigan had signed Brett Kenny and John Ferguson and decent players such as Graeme West. It gave us a taste of what was to come.'

The work of Lindsay was also gathering pace. He was the leader, the public face of the club.

Lindsay was a self-made man via the success of his plant hire company and his business as a bookmaker. He knew how and when to gamble big. Most importantly, he knew when the odds were stacked in his favour, a crucial quality when you are trading in big-money sporting signings that invariably depend on an element of fortune.

He also possessed a natural charm, a welcoming demeanour and a disarming manner, all of which hid inner steel.

As Edwards reflected, 'A lot of people underestimate Maurice. They see this small and gentle guy and don't realise he used to be a boxer when he was a kid.

'He could run 100 yards in 11 seconds. He was a good athlete in his own right. He is not a person to be underestimated, a real competitor. He was the figurehead, the spokesperson, in the eyes of the players.'

He was also from Wigan, or to be exact Horwich, a small conurbation nestling on the lower slopes of Winter Hill on the West Pennine moors.

Why was that important?

Maybe you have to be from Wigan to properly understand the nature of its heritage. Some people perhaps still form their opinion of the area from George Orwell's 1937 book *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which cast the town in a bleak, depressive light. A town of hardship and deprivation.

A town surrounded by slag heaps and cloaked in industrial grime and which was even more graphically described in Martin Cruz Smith's novel *Rose* as 'at first sight looking more like smouldering ruins than a town'.

All that was true back then. After all, there were 133 collieries in the Wigan area in 1880, a figure that had fallen to four in 1980, the year Lindsay came to the Wigan club.

Bickershaw, Parsonage, Parkside and Golborne were the only ones remaining, the latter making national headlines in 1979 when ten miners were killed in an underground explosion, a story I helped cover as a young reporter on the local evening newspaper, the *Post & Chronicle*.

The point is that the area, despite being cleaner and greener than once it was, remains steeped in hard graft and working class values. Edwards himself came from a family of pitmen and famously marched with them during the miners' strike of 1984. Wigan was no place for prima donnas as it struggled to come to terms with the death throes of an industry, which had been its life-blood for more than a century.

The irony, however, was that as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the Tory government were snatching away the jobs and livelihoods of Wigan's hardest men, the town's rugby team, packed with local talent and a pleasing balance of overseas players, were on the rise.