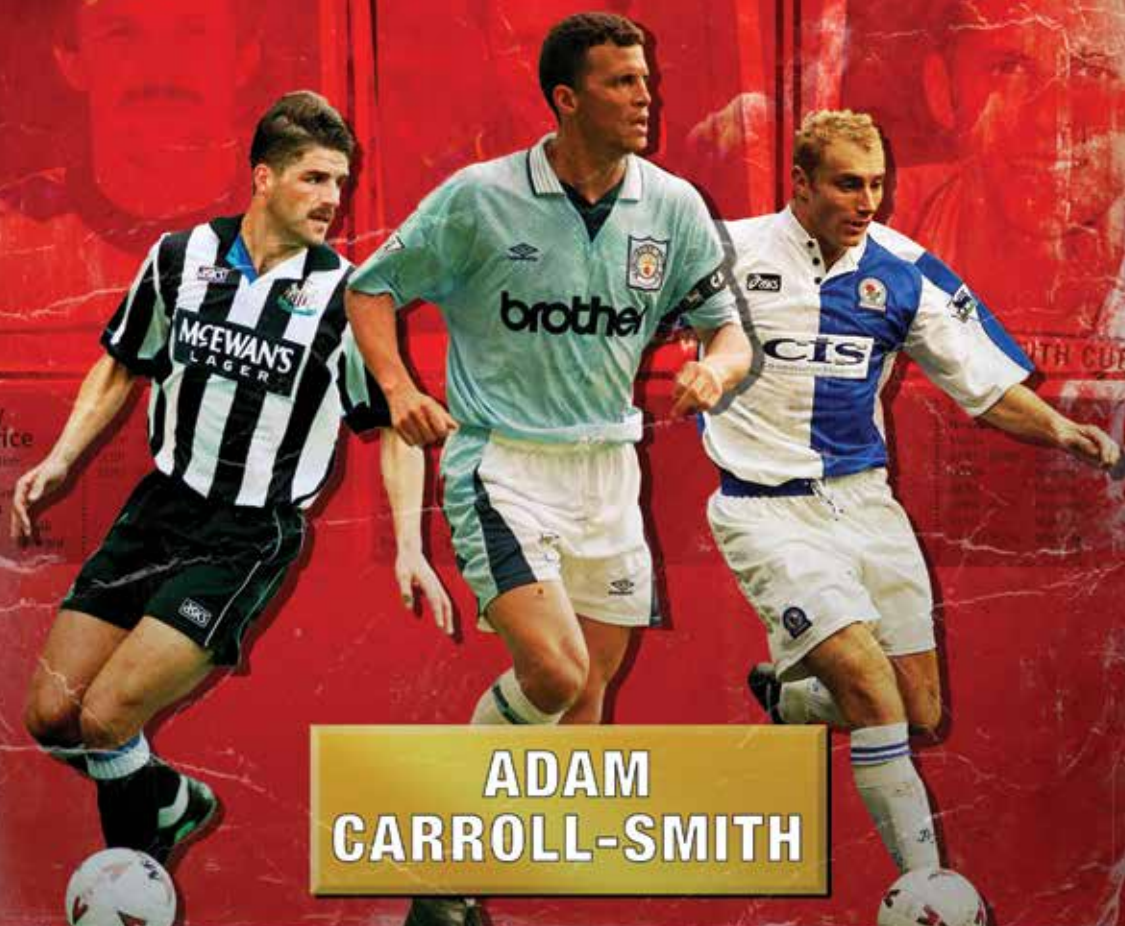


# SIX STICKERS

A journey to complete an old sticker album



**ADAM  
CARROLL-SMITH**

# Prologue

I HAD BEEN at sea for a few hours. I had browsed duty-free. I had wandered the food court. I had ducked and fired my way through a few levels of *Time Crisis 2* in the arcade. And now I was standing, alone and bored, on the deck outside. The sun was shining, the sky was blue: roughly Pantone Sky Blue 14-4318 TPX if you ever feel like recreating the scene on canvas. A marrow-cold wind whipped salt water spray across my cheeks. My face cheeks.

Beneath me, the ferry engines grumbled away, dull and insistent, like an unseen choir of Mick McCarthys. I stared into the distance and waited for the Dunkerque shore to appear on the horizon. A man, about 5ft 3in tall, wearing a blue shirt, unbuttoned to reveal a tuft of dusty silver chest hair that looked like an old robot's wiring come loose, appeared beside me. He dropped an attaché case at my feet and slipped something heavy and gun-shaped into my pocket. A gun, probably.

'Holiday?' he said.

The man was French. And probably still is. I told him this trip was 'more of an adventure than a holiday', and that I was less a tourist, more an intrepid explorer. I was on my way to Belgium to meet a retired footballer.

'A footballer?' he asked.

I nodded.

'In Belgium?'

'Yes. I'm going to take his picture.'

He looked unimpressed. I performed a bit of amateur mime – is there any other kind? – squinting one eye shut and holding an imaginary camera to the other. *Click*. The man frowned and looked out to sea.

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‘Does he know?’

‘Does he *know*?’

‘Does he know you are coming to take his picture?’

‘Basically, yes.’

‘You are sure?’

‘Pretty sure.’

The man looked back out to sea: ‘OK.’

I opened my bag and pulled out my book. The sun reflected quickly across the front cover and the man shuffled closer, like a little French magpie tempted over by the sight of something shiny. He watched over my shoulder as I turned through the first few pages. Every three seconds or so, he sniffed. His nose was running.

I found the page I was looking for and pointed to the solitary empty space among the otherwise neat rows of mug shots. I looked at the Frenchman, held my imaginary camera to my eye and performed a little more mime photography. *Click-click*. He lifted the book from my hands, with absolutely no tenderness or respect for how important it was, and began to flick through it with one tobacco-stained finger. Not his own, but a severed one he carried around with him.

After a few seconds he was satisfied. He handed the album back, took a packet of *Gauloises* from the top pocket of his shirt, and put one into his mouth. He turned his back to the wind and lit up. He puffed six quick silver plumes of smoke into the air, then dropped his cigarette and stamped it out. It seemed wasteful. I guessed he was trying to maintain a 50-a-day habit and was running a bit behind.

A few minutes passed, during which I realised there was no gun or attaché case, after all.<sup>1</sup> The Frenchman repeated the routine with another cigarette. I thought about asking him to pair up for a run at *Time Crisis 2* – if he showed the same callous disregard towards pixelated gangsters as he did to his smokes, we would probably complete the game pretty quickly. Ernesto Diaz’s diabolical plan to launch a nuclear satellite into space would be foiled in no (i.e. 30 or so minutes) time.

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1 Sorry if that raised your hopes of this book being a spy thriller. There are no guns in this. Or spies. A briefcase does make an appearance later though. Stick around for that.

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In the end, I didn't bother. The ferry was approaching port and soon we would have to disembark. The noise from the engines suddenly became rougher, more gravelly – as though the below-deck McCarthys had become a chorus of croaky-throated Andre Villas-Boases. An announcement over the public address system asked passengers to return to the main assembly areas. We both ignored it. The Frenchman continued to smoke. I flicked through my album.

I landed on the Manchester United page, where I found rows and rows of Red Devils smiling out at me. Schmeichel, Neville, Giggs, Cantona, Cole, Keane – all the big names were there. David May and Terry Cooke were also present.

To my left, the Frenchman sniffed back his runny nose, coughed, then spat something on to the deck which appeared to have one of his organs (possibly heart) in it. To my right was just loads and loads of sea. Overhead, the sun (which I should have said earlier was roughly a Vibrant Yellow 13-0858 TPX) ducked behind a cloud (Pantone White Alyssum 11-1001 TCX). A seagull squawked loudly. And then a splat of bird waste (you can re-use the white you used for the cloud) landed on Brian McClair's face.

Instinctively, I dropped the album. It landed in a puddle, faces and faeces down. I swore loudly and repeatedly. I shouted at the seagull. The Frenchman burst out laughing. He watched as I picked up my soggy, seagull-soiled album and he giggled as I cursed aloud some more, and angrily swore vengeance on the bird who had done this. He lit another cigarette. This one, he seemed to enjoy.

For a few miserable minutes, I attempted a desperate clean-up operation. I was furious, and becoming more so with each passing moment. Little beads of sweat trickled down my forehead. Brian McClair, however, remained a picture of calm. He continued to grin stoically through the whole ordeal. That's Scotsmen for you.

I turned around and saw my French friend stood a few feet away. He chuckled. I smiled and gave him a weary thumbs up. 'It's supposed to be lucky,' I said, pointing at the bird mess. The Frenchman pointed a camera – Nikon, not imaginary – in my direction. It seemed an odd thing to do – to the untrained eye, I was just a small man holding a book covered in bird crap on the

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outside deck of a cross-channel car ferry. But the French see art in everything. I held my pose, and he snapped away. *Click-click-click.*

A few moments later, the boat hummed to a standstill in Dunkerque. The Frenchman and I joined the long queue back down to the car deck, and as we shuffled down the narrow stairs, we said our goodbyes.

He wished me a happy holiday.

I corrected him right away: this was an adventure.

He laughed and told me no-one went to Belgium for adventure; that even Tintin and Poirot were always running off elsewhere in search of plots to foil and villains to outsmart. He was right, but it didn't put me off Belgium. If their two most famous crime-fighters had been forced abroad to find work, it either meant the country was crime-free, or that Belgian criminals are easily caught, both of which were comforting thoughts.

I explained my hypothesis to the Frenchman. He pretended he didn't hear me. But I thought it was an astute bit of observation, and made a mental note to include it in any book I eventually wrote in which this chance meeting might feature prominently.

The queue back to the car deck came to a standstill, and warm, stale air gusted into the stairwell from a small vent above my head. I checked the time. The crossing was delayed.

'We're running late,' I said.

'Yes,' replied the Frenchman.

'Ten minutes.'

The Frenchman sighed. He told me not to worry so much. He told me I had no right to be so fidgety about a delay of ten minutes. He pointed at the large, gold-embossed '96' on the front cover of my sticker album. I was, he grumbled, already a long way behind schedule.

He was right, of course. The album in my hands had been published in November 1995. Most people who had bought it would have been bored of it by April or May the following year. Most would have forgotten about it entirely not long after. Not me.

But then, some people are more mature than others. While some people in their late 20s are busy with families and careers and other important things like that, others (i.e. me) find

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themselves standing on the passenger deck of a cross-channel ferry, an ancient sticker album in their bag, on their way to try and brush the moustache of a former Newcastle United centre-half.

What follows in these pages is a little story of obsession, friendship, exploration, nostalgia and growing up. Like the *Sweet Valley High* books. But above all else, it's a story about a very old sticker album and a quest to finally complete it. To some – my French friend on the cross-channel ferry, for one – it might seem an absurd thing to do. But what else are you supposed to do with an unfinished sticker album? Throw it away?

## Jokes, 1–3.

Redknapp, *n.* Afternoon snooze, featuring dreams of collective farming.<sup>2</sup>

In Spain, they celebrate Iniesta Day. When all your troubles seem so far away.

Hearts vs. Mainz; the medical profession derby (cardiologists vs. psychiatrists).

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2 Come on. That's pretty good.

# One

**T**HE EMPTY spaces: that's where it all started. The stickers themselves were always pretty unremarkable, a dim assortment of smirking and scowling football men in various shades of nylon. They were no big deal. But those neat and vacant rows, and the endless possibilities for conquest and adventure they seemed to suggest: *they* were the real pull. Nowadays, I get the same sense of anticipation in empty car parks.

From the beginning, my opening ceremonies were always carefully choreographed. I would draw an exploratory line with my thumbnail across the top of a new packet, feeling for the edge of the waiting treasure inside, before ripping the wrapper open. Hope hinged on finding something shiny, elusive, or ideally both. But more often than not, it was just Jeremy Goss, Andy Impey or Justin Edinburgh staring back at me from inside the packet, just as they did in dead-eyed triplicate from the swaps stack stuck in my Ninja Turtles backpack.

But somehow, it never got old. Even as my doubles became triples and my triples became quadruples, quintuples, sextuples, septuples (and so on), the 3pm school bell sent me panting in a hungry Pavlovian haze to the newsagent. While there were empty spaces in my book, I spent every scrap of pocket money on stickers. I tore into each new pack with the same unending expectation tingling in my fingertips. And I kept on finding Jeremy Goss, Andy Impey and Justin Edinburgh.

But that, as anyone who has ever tried to swap their way free of a heavy set of Neil Ruddocks<sup>3</sup> will tell you, is the curious magic of sticker collecting. It is a hobby which inspires excitement and

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3 'A heavy set of Ruddocks' is the most perfect collective noun in the history of everything.



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frustration in unequal measures. It is a hobby which requires great patience but rarely, if ever, rewards it; a painfully capitalist hobby in which those with the deepest pockets are always the most likely to land the shiniest prizes. And it's a hobby which forces you to wade through dozens of Dozzells and hundreds of Hignetts before you ever get to lay eyes on a one-of-a-kind Cantona.

Sticker collecting can be extremely repetitive; predictable, even. Sometimes it feels like a complete waste of time and money. In short, for the schoolboy football fan, it is the perfect preparation for life as an adult soccerball enthusiast. It is proper football in sticky-back form.

My first album was the Panini *Italia 90* collection. It was a cheap-looking thing: the front cover was a primary-coloured mess of criss-crossing flags punctuated by a terrible drawing of two anonymous players lunging at each other. Not even Ciao, the second best mascot ever to grace the World Cup finals – Naranjito, Spain 82's mascot, takes pole, by virtue of being a camp orange in hot pants and fun-sized Copa Mundials – could salvage it. It was uglier than Peter Beardsley doing an Iain Dowie impression.

But inside, the book leapt into sunshine-bright life. The iconic yellow shirts and confident, happy faces of the Brazilians; the brutal hair and cold scowls of the West Germans; the alternating pouting and petrifying Italians; and the Cameroonians, all smiling hopefully from their unfairly half-sized stickers – each were suddenly transformed from featureless countries landlocked on a promotional wallchart into real places, alive with real people. Well, footballers.

I was six years old in 1990. During that tear-soaked, epoch-making night in Turin, I was safely tucked up in bed listening to a Jive Bunny cassette. In fact, almost all of the actual football at *Italia 90* passed me by, but that didn't matter. The World Cup was never more real than when I picked up my album. I pictured Italian kids hunting the same stickers as me, Belgian kids trying to work out what was haunting their petrified goalkeeper Michel Preud'homme, and Irish kids droning the playground hymn of sticker collecting in cultish unison – 'got, got, got, need' – just like my friends and I did.

The book, a simple clutter of paper and staples, made the world seem a vibrant and united place. It put the World Cup –

a competition of incomprehensible scale and significance back then – into thrilling and relatable context.

Pavarotti seemed to bellow the final victorious bars of *Nessun Dorma* every time I opened it. He didn't, obviously, because the technology to make that possible would have made the sticker album prohibitively expensive. Plus, I liked to study that album, past my allocated bedtime, by torchlight beneath my duvet. The sound of a fat Italian man bellowing would have probably alerted my parents in more ways than one.

The Italia 90 album may have broadened my horizons, but I didn't complete it. I *wanted* to see it disappear into my bedside drawer with every last Milla, Matthäus and Maldini neatly in place, but at the age of six – when it was hard enough to sit through an episode of *Transformers* without climbing or eating something – the chances of me spending weeks searching for Steve Hodge were slim.

For one thing, Steve Hodge was incapable of turning from a man into a truck. As far as I know, Steve Hodge is *still* incapable of turning from a man into so much as a hatchback. For another thing, I didn't even know what Steve Hodge looked like. So I never did find him. My first sticker book disappeared, first into the attic and then altogether, with dozens of orphaned names still inside.

But a seed had been sown. In the early 1990s, when televised football was still a rare treat and trips to The Dell (my Southampton-supporting dad's choice) or Fratton Park (my dad-baiting home town preference) just as infrequent, sticker albums played an integral role in hot-housing my early fascination with football into a fully-flowered obsession. In those pre-historic pre-internet days, sticker books were miniature journeys of Zissouan discovery into the footballing depths.

Each empty page was an opportunity to learn more about the game. Without my albums, I would have dumbly travelled through my childhood not knowing the name of Roy Wegerle's first club<sup>4</sup>, Gary McAllister's birthday<sup>5</sup> or Ryan Giggs's weight<sup>6</sup>.

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4 The Tampa Bay Rowdies.

5 25 December 1964. He missed a penalty against England at Wembley *and* his birthday is on Christmas Day. So: crap at pens and only one lot of presents a year. No wonder he looks so miserable.

6 Sixty-eight kilos, or about ten stone. And most of that was chest hair and the expectations of the Welsh nation on his shoulders.

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I might never have met Scott Sellars, Peter Fear or Nii Lamptey.

At school, the albums became focal points at the start of each new season. August may be the long-established start of the footballing calendar, but to a schoolboy hooked on collecting small photographs of men three times his age whom he had never met, each new campaign only truly began when your swaps pile did.

Unfortunately, swaps were always my particular area of expertise. My Pro Set doubles-pile was so heavy it made me walk with a limp when I put it in my coat pocket. My attempt at completing Panini's *Football 92* ended with a ~~mountain~~ quite big hill of left-over Ken Monkous, Trevor Peakes and Gordon Duries. A Clayton Blackmore-induced meltdown the following year – he appeared in packets so often I took out a restraining order against him – brought a similar end to my *Football 93* campaign. The restraining order wasn't granted, unfortunately. I still feel a pang of nerves whenever I'm in Wales, though.

It didn't stop there, either. My attempts at finishing Merlin's *Premier League 94* album, a book that included a superbly simian sticker of Richard Keys and an ambitious prediction Adie Mike would be a 'future Premier League star', crawled to a standstill under a weight of un-swappable Terry Fenwicks. Or to give him his full name that year, Terry Fenwick-Again.

And predictably enough, the story was the same the following season. My *Premier League 95* swaps pile grew so large, it became a third child in the Carroll-Smith household. My grandma knitted him a hat. Mum set him a place at the dinner table. Dad grounded him time and again for not eating his peas.

As in previous years, a fruitless spring followed a barren winter, and my *Premier League 95* album was still emptier than the DW Stadium on a League Cup night. It disappeared into the loft, never to be seen again. 'Sticky', my adoptive brother, left home shortly after. A flimsy, lightweight character, he is now a Conservative MP. We don't get along.

After five years, a pattern of consistent under-achievement had formed. My sticker collecting history was more chequered than a Croatian national team photo. Worse still, it felt as though I had become the Tottenham Hotspur of the sticker world: forever

certain I was on the verge of success, but apparently destined to forever let it slip through my fingers.

*Premier League 96* was published in November 1995. The album, as in previous years, was the must-have playground accessory. The same disorderly queue snaked from the newsagent's counter to the pavement outside, come sun, rain, sleet or snow. Every penny in my piggy bank ended up in a newsagent's till.

My opening ceremonies remained unchanged; still a mixture of feverish excitement and white-gloved, snooker ref delicacy. I drew the same exploratory line with my thumbnail across the top of each new packet. I tore into each with equal precision, unending expectation still tingling in my fingertips. Hope, as always, hinged on catching a glimpse of something shiny or elusive inside.

Experience told me not to expect too much. But that year, something was different. Instead of finding an infinite number of Steve Boulds<sup>7</sup> or enough Gary Pallisters to fill a (very repetitive, quite unhappy) Pallister family album, I got lucky. For once, my swaps pile did not overflow with dead-eyed Edinburghs, Impeys, Ruddocks or Fenwicks. Instead, I found stickers – shiny, elusive, both – with alarming regularity.

In fact, I found them all. Barry Venison, his peroxide White-snake mullet flowing; Steve Morrow, goateed and grumpy, like a postman with a hangover; David Beckham, centre-parted and pale, more Comet trainee than global icon; Colin Hendry, his craggy facial features in random, Picassoan arrangement. Each of them, and 526 others, found a happy home in my sticker album.

I bought well, traded intelligently, kept my slim squad of swaps well organised and had my fair share of luck. But in the end, there was no drama, no competition. I found the stickers I needed and I stuck them in. Which is a pretty good technique when it comes to sticker collecting.

In the end, the 1995/96 season was a story of simple sticker success. At long last, the ghosts of *Italia 90*, *Football 92* and *93*, and *Premier League 94* and *95* had been buried. No, slain, because there wouldn't be much point burying a ghost. On a sunny spring

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7 An infinite number of Steve Boulds, left alone in a room for an infinite amount of time, will eventually arrange their typewriters into an infinite number of flat back fours.

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afternoon in April 1996, I finally had tangible proof I was a true football obsessive, a real fan: *Premier League 96* was complete.

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It was a sunny spring afternoon in April 2012. I was in the loft of my parents' house – for some reason, I forget why – a small torch clamped uncomfortably between my teeth, rummaging through an assortment of random rubbish.

Dozens of frail, fraying cardboard boxes were littered around the dark and musty attic. Ancient golf bags, loose Christmas decorations and tall towers of de-boxed videos jostled for dusty position.

After ten minutes of aimless rooting, I had managed to find little more than one box of old school books, one and a half pairs of Gray-Nicolls batting pads and two Sega Mega Drive controllers, sadly divorced from the console itself.

But in the box of school stuff, a yellow folder was peeking coquettishly out from beneath the lid. I pulled it out and saw that in one corner, in tentative pencil, was my name. Inside were reams of ancient English essays, maths papers and school reports. I read a few of the essays, 'What I Want To Be When I Grow Up' (option one, airport run taxi driver, so I could 'listen to the radio and take people on their holidays') and a report on Ted Hughes's *The Iron Man* which concluded, waspishly, that the book was '... only *quite* good, not *very* good'.

I read a few school reports too. In most, my timekeeping and organisational skills were called into question. It was reassuring to find out how little I had changed. I have long been notoriously disorganised and endlessly late for things. My sense of timing is usually closer to Emile Heskey than Pippo Inzaghi.

But at this particular moment, it was faultless. I was in the right place at the right time. A perfect storm of lateness and disarray had led me to this point. Because there, tucked behind so much crumbling juvenilia, was another book. A book with a shiny red cover. A book I hadn't seen for 16 years. A book with 'Premier League 96' written in large gold letters on the front. My sticker album, basically. I hope I'm making that clear.

## ONE

Somehow, the album had survived countless spring cleans and boot sales. The pages were still relatively crisp and neat, still alive with colour and detail. The staples still stubbornly held the whole package together. I stared at it for a few moments, shocked and delighted to have found it after so long. The faces on the front cover – Barmby, Ginola, Redknapp (J, obviously) – were as youthful as ever.

I flicked the book open somewhere near the centre pages and a peculiar reunion with dozens of long-lost childhood friends (acquaintances really) began. Names and faces I had half-forgotten – Jason Lee, Noel Whelan, David Burrows – came rushing back. I marvelled at the rows of relentlessly normal, pleasingly war-torn players on show. I felt my heart leap with joy at seeing Wimbledon as a fully-fledged top-flight team. I chuckled at Barry Venison's still-hilarious hair metal mullet. I felt a pang of sadness to see a young Gary Speed.

But I was delighted to see my old album. It was everything I remembered, a perfect, amber-cast artefact from an era of such giddy excitement and simple promise. I flipped back to the opening page of the album and began working through it, cover-to-cover. It wasn't so much the neat and completed rows of stickers I was looking forward to, as the total absence of any of the tempting and empty spaces which had first drawn me into the world of football stickers.

But by page five, there was a problem. By page 127, there were half-a-dozen. Six stickers were missing.

And now the title of the book makes sense. Phew.

## **Jokes, 4–6.**

Stern John, *n* – A toilet at the very back of a ship.

UEFA, *n*. – Horseshoe-shaped ice-cream garnish.

Steven and Gary Caldwell's ancestors; very proficient users of the telephone.