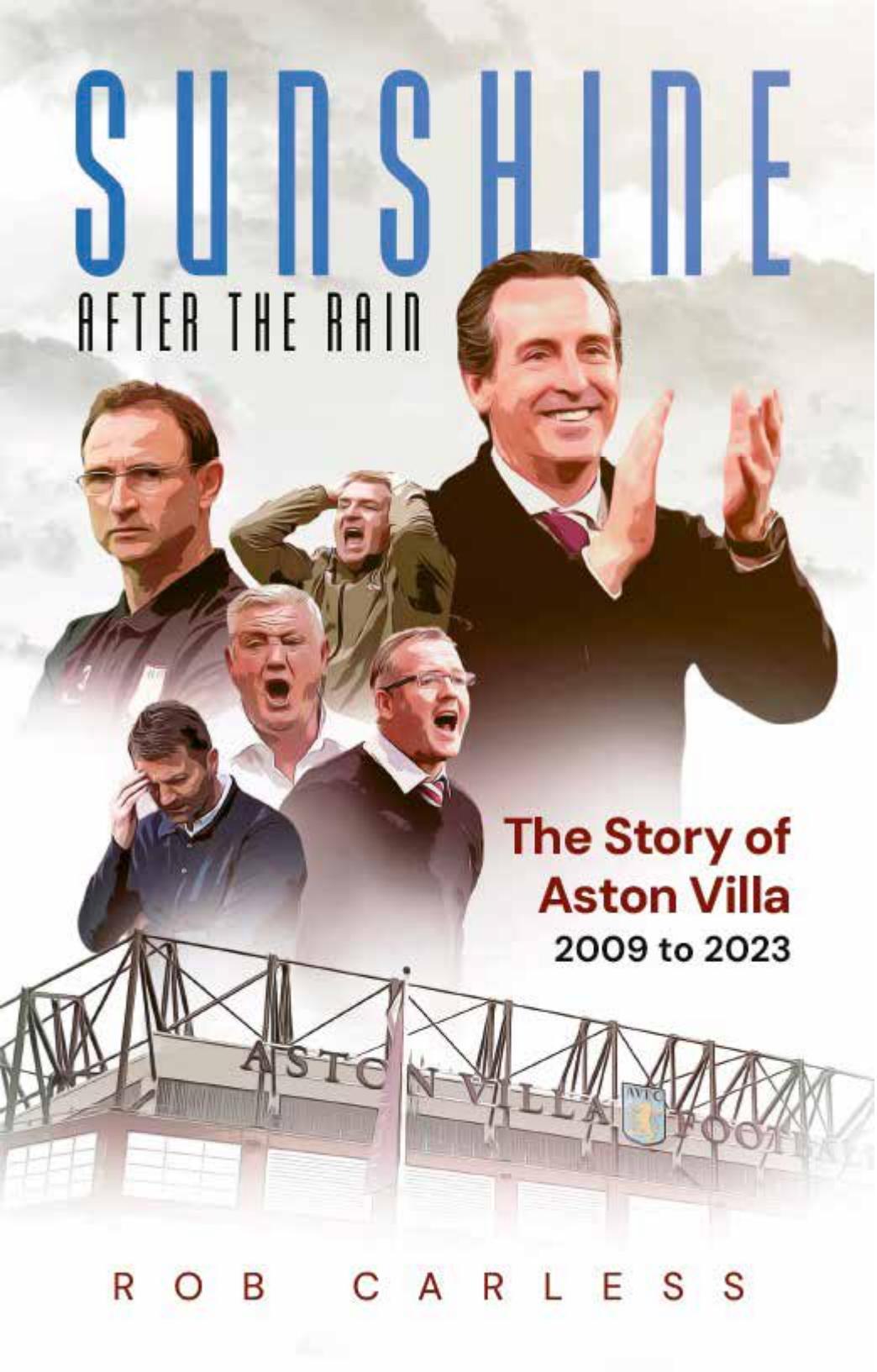


SUNSHINE

AFTER THE RAIN



**The Story of
Aston Villa**

2009 to 2023

ROB CARLESS

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From Russia, Without Love

ASTON VILLA were not able to hold on to their lead against Stoke City, thus rendering Pearce's commentary premature. Ryan Shawcross had pulled a goal back in the 88th minute to set up a very nervy last few minutes for the Villa faithful.

Stoke were fighting for their lives and were in the bottom three of the Premier League, but the equaliser (which had seemed unlikely ten minutes previously) came in the first minute of time added on, with future Villa player Glenn Whelan drilling a shot past the diving Brad Friedel from the edge of the box to send the away fans wild.

The point kept Villa in the top four with a six-point gap over Arsenal still, but the feeling, as the fans left Villa Park that day, was one of a missed opportunity.

It wasn't just the frustration of losing a two-goal lead that had caused consternation among the fans. It had been the actions of Martin O'Neill in the previous game

where Villa had travelled to Russia to play their second-leg UEFA Cup match against Spartak Moscow.

The love affair between O'Neill and the fans had been instant upon his arrival in the hot seat on 4 August 2006, taking them from the lower echelons in the Premier League into a solid top-six team. His arrival had coincided with the departure of Sir Doug Ellis as the club's chairman, having sold the club to the American businessman and sports-team owner, Randy Lerner. Initially Lerner obtained in the region of 60% of Villa's shares. It had been a complete changing of the guard and the relationship between the new owner and the manager was a robust one and one of fortitude.

In O'Neill's first season, Villa had finished in 11th position before securing a top-six berth at the end of the 2007/08 campaign. Now in the 2008/09 season, they were vying for a Champions League spot.

The trajectory was an upward one.

It had not been the case with some of the previous managers employed by Villa in the early part of the 21st century. John Gregory had overseen the transition into the new millennium at a time when the team made solid top-eight finishes and was replaced by the second coming of Graham Taylor. Taylor had enjoyed tremendous success with Aston Villa in his first tenure at the helm from 1987 to 1990 when he guided the club back into the First Division at the first attempt, before finishing as runners-up to Liverpool in his last season in charge. This time, the former England manager failed to live up

to previous expectations and lasted for just a season and a half.

The next person to take up the reins was David O'Leary. Initially, the signs looked good as he guided Villa back into the top six in the 2003/04 campaign. However, comments made about the fickleness of some of the Villa fan base and poor performances led to a rift that couldn't be healed and the parting of the ways was confirmed at the end of the 2005/06 season, when Martin O'Neill was appointed, which was the last act of the outgoing Sir Doug Ellis.

The appointment of O'Neill was seen as a very positive one by almost all Villa fans with the press in unison as well. The former Nottingham Forest and Northern Ireland midfielder had taken to management like a duck takes to water, gaining promotion to the Premier League with Leicester City in 1996 and winning the League Cup with them in 1997 and 2000. His charges also reached the final in 1999 but lost by a single goal to Tottenham Hotspur in the last few seconds of the match.

The success obtained by O'Neill brought him to the attention of Celtic and he was made manager in 2000. In his first season, Celtic won all three domestic trophies whilst retaining the league the following season. There were rumours that Sir Alex Ferguson was retiring from his position as Manchester United manager in 2002, with all the smart money on O'Neill to replace him. However, this intriguing proposition failed to materialise with Ferguson staying at Old Trafford and the following

year, O'Neill guiding Celtic to the UEFA Cup Final where they lost 3-2 to Jose Mourinho's Porto side. O'Neill left Celtic due to personal reasons in 2005, pertaining to his wife, Geraldine, who had been diagnosed with lymphoma. However, his last game brought more success when Celtic won the Scottish Cup and he became the second-most successful Celtic manager since Jock Stein.

O'Neill returned to management on 4 August 2006 and informed the waiting press of how delighted he was to be back in football and at Aston Villa:

It's absolutely fantastic to be back and with a club such as this. This is a fantastic challenge. I am well aware of the history of this football club. Trying to restore it to its days of former glory seems a long way away – but why not try? It is nearly 25 years since they won the European Cup but that is the dream.

The season kicked off 19 days after O'Neill's arrival and Villa made a solid start when becoming the first team to play in a competitive match at the Emirates, the new home of Arsenal. Olof Mellberg became the first ever goalscorer when his powerful header put Villa one up after 53 minutes but a goal from Gilberto restored parity, with the match finishing 1-1.

It was back-to-back home wins for the club in the next two matches, with Villa beating newly promoted Reading 2-1 then following this up with a 2-0 victory

against Newcastle United. O'Neill's first foray into the transfer market as Aston Villa's manager resulted in the capture of the Bulgarian midfielder, Stiliyan Petrov, from his old club Celtic for a fee of £6.5m. O'Neill was to return to his old club once more before the end of the year when he acquired Didier Agathe on a free transfer. This was quickly followed by a reunion with another Celtic player, Chris Sutton. The only difference with this transfer was that Sutton had signed from Birmingham City and not direct from the Scottish giants where he had once played.

The results continued their upward trajectory, with draws away at West Ham United and Watford before once more winning consecutive matches away against Lincoln City in the second round of the League Cup and at home in the league, as the team played host to Charlton Athletic. The next three matches all produced games that finished 1-1. The most notable of these came away at the champions of England – Chelsea – before consecutive home matches against Tottenham Hotspur and Fulham. It was back on the road as Villa beat Leicester City 3-2 in the third round of the League Cup, which meant that the team were now unbeaten in the first 11 games of the season in all competitions.

O'Neill's first defeat came in the next match, which saw his charges lose 3-1 at Liverpool, before returning to winning ways (and back into the top six) with a 2-0 home victory against Blackburn Rovers. The League Cup adventure (in a competition that Villa and O'Neill had won four times in the previous decade) ended with

an emphatic 4-0 defeat at Stamford Bridge. It had been the second time in a few short weeks that Villa had visited Chelsea and then it was back to Merseyside, from where they returned with all three points courtesy of a 1-0 win at Everton. However, this would be Villa's last win of 2006, and indeed up to the middle of January 2007. In that period Villa played 12 matches with 11 of them coming in the league and one in the FA Cup third round. O'Neill's team shared the points against Wigan Athletic, Middlesbrough, Portsmouth, Sheffield United and Chelsea, and suffered defeats against Manchester City, Bolton Wanderers, Manchester United (home and away), Spurs and Charlton Athletic. A defeat in the FA Cup also came against Manchester United, with everyone associated with Villa happy to see the back of Sir Alex Ferguson's team after three defeats in as many weeks.

Villa ended the first month of 2007 with a 2-0 home victory over Watford before once more losing, this time at the hands of Newcastle United, to leave the club in 15th. It wasn't so much January's results that had brought fortune to those in claret and blue as much as the signings made by O'Neill, which would soon start to make an impact in the coming months and the years to follow.

John Carew had initially played football in his native Norway. The powerful striker then turned his attention to playing for clubs in Spain, Italy, Norway and France before signing for Aston Villa as part of a swap deal that involved Milan Baroš moving to Lyon. Carew made his debut in the 3-1 loss to Newcastle United but soon started

to find the net for his new club with the only goal against West Ham United just a few days later, with Martin O'Neill praising the contribution made by him.

The other major signing was Ashley Young, who joined the club on 23 January 2007 for a fee of £8m. Six years younger than John Carew, Young's path to Villa Park was in stark contrast as he came through the youth ranks at Watford and this had been his only team thus far. Young's favoured position was on the right wing and he soon made it his own after a quiet start in claret and blue.

The other January signing was Shaun Maloney for £1m from Celtic, which had started to become a feeder club for O'Neill in his early tenure at Villa Park. Phil Bardsley also joined O'Neill's ranks on loan from Manchester United, and a goalkeeping injury crisis saw Villa take Gábor Király on loan for a short period. The Hungarian was renowned for wearing tracksuit bottoms whilst in combat for the teams he represented.

Players making way during the season included notable figures such as Kevin Phillips, Peter Whittingham, Juan Pablo Ángel and Lee Hendrie.

A win over West Ham United on 3 February was Villa's last for just over two months, although they only played five matches in that time. Defeats against Reading and Arsenal came either side of a stalemate with Fulham and two later consecutive draws against Liverpool and Everton. The draw with the blue half of Merseyside left Villa in 14th place in the league but any fears of being dragged into another relegation battle were put

to bed quickly. O'Neill's team won four out of the last seven matches, drawing the rest which meant that the Arsenal defeat in mid-March was their last of the season. Villa were to remain unbeaten in the last nine matches of the season as they had done in the first nine. Three of the victories were secured on away territory, against Blackburn Rovers, Middlesbrough and Manchester City, with the team taking care of Sheffield United 3-0 in the last game of the season at Villa Park. That game was played in blazing sunshine, with the 25th anniversary of Villa's European Cup win being acknowledged. Scarves were laid on the seats of every Villa fan to celebrate the occasion, with the players from 1982 being paraded on the pitch, with the match a complete sell-out. Wigan Athletic, Portsmouth and Bolton Wanderers were the teams against whom Villa had to share the points.

The season had been a solid one under the helm of Martin O'Neill and new owner, Randy Lerner. Aston Villa finished the season in 11th place in the league and only just missed out on a top-ten berth. It had cemented the thoughts of those who acknowledged that the coming together of Martin O'Neill and Aston Villa would be a prosperous one, but even as the 2006/07 season came to a close, O'Neill was already making plans to further accelerate Villa's progression back amongst the elite of English football, and not just for a season in the way that David O'Leary had experienced with the club.

Brian Little and John Gregory had been the last managers to provide Aston Villa with consecutive top-

six finishes, and this had happened during the latter half of the previous decade. Now Martin O'Neill would set his sights on doing something similar in the latter half of the first decade of the 21st century.

The feel-good factor that had reverberated around Villa Park against Sheffield United continued during the summer of 2007 as Martin O'Neill and his team set about bringing in fresh faces laced with quality for the 2007/08 season. O'Neill was given a sizeable war chest to achieve this; one that saw Nigel Reo-Coker signed from West Ham United for a reported £8.5m as well as Marlon Harewood for just shy of £5m from the same club. This was followed by central defender Zat Knight for a reported price of £3.5m from Fulham. The other big signings were Curtis Davies, who initially joined on a season-long loan from local rivals West Bromwich Albion in 2007, before making the move permanent the following summer for a reported fee of £9m. Later in the season he would be joined by Wayne Routledge for £1.5m from Tottenham Hotspur. There was also prudent balancing of the books, with players such as Liam Ridgewell, Gary Cahill and Luke Moore leaving for pastures new.

Villa's first game of the season on Saturday, 11 August saw them hosting Liverpool in front of a packed and hopeful Villa Park. It was not the start that they wanted however, with Villa losing 2-1, a last-minute free kick converted by Steven Gerrard making the difference between one and zero points. The first point of the season was then secured in a game which finished with

no goals scored at St James' Park, the home of Newcastle United. This was then followed up with three consecutive victories, of which two came in the league and the other in the second round of the League Cup. The wins in the league came at home against Fulham (2-1) and Chelsea (2-0), with an emphatic 5-0 League Cup victory recorded at the Racecourse Ground against Wrexham of League Two.

A 1-0 loss at Manchester City threatened to derail Villa's fine start to the season, but they were back to winning ways when they hosted Everton in the following match with John Carew and a young Gabby Agbonlahor both adding their names to the scoresheet. Agbonlahor had come through the Villa ranks and was also a boyhood fan of the team that he was now representing. He had scored goals for fun in the youth set-up and had started to show his flair in pre-season friendlies, so the move up to the senior squad was one that did not phase either player or manager, and the Villa faithful had taken the young lad from the local area to their hearts.

Villa were once more drawn against Leicester City in the League Cup as they had been during the previous campaign. There were two notable differences this time around with the game played at Villa Park, but it was the Foxes who came away with the victory, winning 1-0 with Matty Fryatt scoring in the final 15 minutes of the match.

Villa were then involved in a fascinating match against Tottenham Hotspur at White Hart Lane in the league at the start of October. The home team were

celebrating their 125th anniversary before kick-off, and this continued on the pitch when they took the lead after 20 minutes, Dimitar Berbatov rising highest to head his team into the lead. However, celebrations were cut short just two minutes later when Villa were awarded a corner, which was taken by Gareth Barry. It seemed like the threat had been thwarted by Paul Robinson in the Spurs goal, but to the amazement of the Villa players, the ball was dropped, and Martin Laursen was the quickest to react before smashing it home. Villa took the lead just after the half-hour mark and once more the goal involved some slapstick defending when Spurs were caught out following a quickly taken free kick by the visitors, which allowed Barry to once more cross the ball into a dangerous area. The ball was met by Zat Knight, whose header rebounded off his fellow central defensive partner in the shape of Laursen before it went through the legs of the hapless Robinson and into the net for his (and his team's) second goal. The lead was stretched just before half-time when Agbonlahor was able to hold off the challenge of Michael Dawson before firing the ball into the net. The game looked all but over on the hour mark when Robinson failed to keep out a low free kick from Craig Gardner, which made the score 4-1. However, the blushes from Paul Robinson were spared when the home team were able to stage a stunning comeback after the introduction of Jermain Defoe. He immediately made his presence known and Spurs reduced the deficit in the 69th minute when Pascal Chimbonda scored from a rebound

after Defoe had hit the post. It was 4-3 in the 82nd minute when Robbie Keane converted a penalty after Darren Bent had been upheld by Marlon Harewood and the comeback was completed when Younes Kaboul sent the home fans wild with a last-minute equaliser, scoring from a corner.

O'Neill's next three matches ended in a win, a defeat and a draw, taking the team down to tenth in the league. Villa were victorious against West Ham United (1-0), defeated against Manchester City (4-1) and the spoils were shared against Bolton Wanderers (1-1). A 100% win rate in November moved the team back into the top six. Derby County, Birmingham City, Middlesbrough and Blackburn Rovers were all swept aside in that period. However, the team would then lose successive home matches against Arsenal and Portsmouth before ending up with three consecutive draws. The first two matches in the sequence both finished 1-1, against Sunderland and Manchester City.

It was against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on Boxing Day that Villa recorded their second 4-4 result of the season, in front of 41,686 spectators. The away team dictated the pace in the opening exchanges, with Ashley Young and Gabriel Agbonlahor going close to putting the visitors ahead and it was no surprise when they did take the lead in the 14th minute, Shaun Maloney volleying the ball into the net after some good work that involved Agbonlahor and Carew. Villa continued to set the pace with Agbonlahor coming close to doubling his side's

lead on a couple of occasions. This finally happened on the stroke of half-time when Maloney scored his second goal, his 20-yard drive finding the back of the net after deceiving Petr Čech in the Chelsea goal. Perhaps the most decisive moment of the game came deep into stoppage time in the first period when Chelsea were awarded a penalty after Michael Ballack was upended by Zat Knight. Referee Phil Dowd awarded a spot kick and brandished a red card, which saw Villa reduced to ten men. Andriy Shevchenko converted the opportunity to make the score 2-1 to Villa going into the break.

The momentum had now swung in favour of the home team, and they found themselves level just five minutes after the restart when Shevchenko got his second, scoring with a vicious shot that seemed to deceive Scott Carson in the Villa goal. Chelsea had chances to take the lead for the first time in the match and the pressure on the Villa rearguard was now incessant, with Salomon Kalou and Ballack coming close, and it was no surprise when they did finally take the lead in the 66th minute, courtesy of a goal scored by Alex. This seemed to wake Villa up and they were rewarded with a third goal themselves after Martin Laursen volleyed home, following a beautiful pinpoint free kick from Ashley Young. Chelsea were down to ten men themselves when Carvalho was sent off following a two-footed tackle on Agbonlahor. It looked game over when Ballack restored the home side's lead with a wonderful free kick with just three minutes remaining, but there was still drama to come in the dying

minutes. A header from Agbonlahor looked goalbound but was cleared off the line by Ashley Cole, who claimed that he headed the ball away. However, Dowd judged that it had been a handball offence and Gareth Barry coolly slotted the ball home from the resulting spot kick to make it 4-4.

Villa finished the calendar year with a 2-1 victory away at Wigan Athletic and followed this up with a similar victory on the first day of 2008 at home against Tottenham Hotspur. A third consecutive victory was secured against Reading at Villa Park (3-1) but any hopes of an FA Cup run were dashed at the first attempt when the team lost 2-0 at home to Manchester United in the third round.

The next ten matches in the league saw Villa pick up just two wins, four draws and four defeats. The wins were against Newcastle United at home (4-1) and Reading away (2-1). The points were shared with Liverpool, Blackburn Rovers, Arsenal and Middlesbrough. The losses inflicted on O'Neill's team came against Fulham and three consecutive matches in March. The first of these were away to Portsmouth and then at home to Sunderland. The final game in the trilogy occurred at Old Trafford as Manchester United ran Villa ragged, claiming a comprehensive 4-0 victory, leaving the visitors just outside the coveted top six and a European berth.

However, just as quickly as the team had lost three games on the bounce, they followed it up with three

comprehensive victories of their own, scoring 14 goals in the process and conceding just one.

The first of these came against Bolton Wanderers at Villa Park on 5 April 2008. It took the home team less than ten minutes to make their mark when Gareth Barry headed home after some great work from Ashley Young on the left-hand side. The score remained 1-0 until the 56th minute when the home team doubled their lead with Barry turning provider, finding Agbonlahor who in turn found the net. The game was effectively over on the hour mark when Barry made it two for himself as his half-volley took a deflection off Joey O'Brien to make it 3-0. It was four with a few minutes to go when Marlon Harewood flicked a free header into the net from an inch-perfect cross from Barry, whose two goals and two assists firmly made him the man of the match.

Villa recorded their biggest win of the season when they went to Derby County a week later and came away with a 6-0 victory and arguably one of the goals of the season as well. Despite the heavy loss, it was Derby who dictated the early play, but it was the visitors who took the lead in the 25th minute when Ashley Young scored from a free kick which should have been dealt with by Roy Carroll in the Derby goal, but he failed to make any real contact under pressure from Olof Mellberg, allowing the ball to cross the line. Villa doubled the lead a minute later and once more it involved another mistake by the Derby keeper as he pushed a cross from Gareth Barry into the path of John Carew, who made no mistake, slamming the

ball into the net. Ten minutes later, it was 3-0 when a poor clearance from Carroll was picked up by Stiliyan Petrov a good 45 yards away from the Derby net. The Bulgarian international controlled the ball superbly and let fly with a shot that sailed over the head of the Derby keeper for a stunning conversion, which featured prominently in the season's best goals feature on TV. The rich vein of form for Barry continued as he made it 4-0 just before the hour mark, scoring a simple tap-in as Agbonlahor's shot was initially saved by Carroll, who wasn't at fault this time. Moreover, it was the Derby defence who were not able to react accordingly, and this continued in the same vein when they failed to clear the ball, allowing Agbonlahor to pounce and make it five. Marlon Harewood completed the rout with just five minutes remaining when the substitute raced beyond the static Derby defence to round Carroll and put the ball into the net, completing a marvellous afternoon for the boys in claret and blue.

It was then the turn of local rivals Birmingham City to feel the wrath when they visited Villa Park on Sunday, 20 April 2008. As in the previous week's romp, it was Villa's opponents who took the game to them in the early stages, but Villa soon regained the momentum with Carew and Barry coming close to giving the home team the lead. However, the deadlock was broken just before the half-hour mark when Ashley Young pounced with a terrific drive from the edge of the penalty area. Villa's lead was doubled three minutes before the break when Young turned provider, his free kick being nodded home by

John Carew from close range. Any hopes of Birmingham getting back into the game were well and truly quashed when Carew scored his second goal of the match after a good link-up between Young and Barry. It was now the turn of Young to gain his brace when he made it 4-0 after 63 minutes, beating two players before firing in a low shot. The Villa faithful were now in full voice and urging the team to score more goals, but it was 4-1 just four minutes later when Mikael Forssell converted. But any thoughts of an improbable Blues comeback were firmly taken off the table when Gabby Agbonlahor scored to make it 5-1. It was a sweet moment for the Villa fan-turned-player as it was his first goal against Birmingham City – and it wouldn't be his last.

The win took Villa back into the top six with European football firmly on the horizon as outlined by Martin O'Neill in his press conference afterwards:

Winning was the most important thing, but to win so convincingly is a great boost for us. I thought we played brilliantly. We are a really decent side going forward. Ashley Young and John Carew were both absolutely outstanding. Ashley couldn't have done any more in front of Fabio Capello [England manager]. We're still there fighting for the UEFA Cup.

Villa's final three games of the season saw them pick up just two points, but it was enough to retain sixth place,

and a UEFA Cup spot would be assured providing the club navigated the early-season qualifying rounds. Martin O'Neill's team drew at Everton and West Ham away (both ending 2-2) which sandwiched a 2-0 home defeat against Wigan Athletic.

The West Ham United game was the final one of the season and it was poignant as it was Olof Mellberg's last game in Villa colours before becoming a Juventus player. There was a fine gesture before the match, which involved the popular Swedish defender (signed by John Gregory in 2001) presenting each travelling fan with a home or away shirt with his name and number, along with the message 'Thanks 4 Your Support' on them. These were carefully placed on the seats prior to the game and 3,200 were made, which was Villa's allocation at Upton Park. Such was the popularity of Mellberg that the defeat against Wigan in the final home game was renamed 'Olof Mellberg Day'.

Martin O'Neill's second season in charge had brought the club more progression with the team finishing five places higher and ten points better off than the previous campaign. His signings had blended well with the players that had come in before his tenure and with the prospect of playing football in Europe once more (albeit the qualifying rounds needed to be negotiated first) was an enticing one.

The relationship between the owner, manager and fans was a strong one. If Lerner was not on point, then he had Charles C. Krulak (made a non-executive board

member) on the fans' forums which had started to gain in popularity since the turn of the 21st century. Krulak was affectionately dubbed 'The General' by Villa fans on social media platforms and this was largely down to distinguished military career in the US Marines and the fact that he was very vocal and interactive. Highly decorated, Krulak had seen action in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War.

The trajectory was still an upward one as thoughts turned to the 2008/09 season. Martin O'Neill's quest to make Aston Villa a top-six club once more continued with the signings of Steve Sidwell from Chelsea for a fee of £5m and the midfielder was joined by several defensive players. These included Brad Friedel (from Blackburn Rovers) and Brad Guzan, who were both American goalkeepers. They were joined by Nicky Shorey (from Reading), Luke Young (from Middlesbrough) and Carlos Cuéllar, who joined Villa from Rangers for a fee of £9m, taking their overall spend to around £25m. Leaving the club were Thomas Sørensen who went on a free transfer, Shaun Maloney signed for Celtic for a fee of just under £3m and Wayne Routledge went to Queens Park Rangers for £603,000 to balance the books somewhat.

The first matches of the season focused on European qualification. Villa were drawn against the Danish side, OB (Odense BK), in the third round of the UEFA Intertoto Cup with the first leg away. The match finished all square with four goals shared, John Carew and Martin Laursen scoring for the visitors. There was only one goal

scored in the second leg and that came from Ashley Young in the 51st minute to wrap up a 3-2 aggregate win. This was then followed up with a convincing 4-1 away win in the first leg of the next qualifying round in Iceland against FH Hafnarfjarðar. The match was effectively over in the first 40 minutes with Villa running rampant as they went three goals up courtesy of Gareth Barry, Ashley Young and Gabby Agbonlahor, and although the home team managed to pull one back on the stroke of half-time, the lead was once more stretched when Martin Laursen scored to make the final score 4-1.

Villa were back in Premier League action when they hosted Manchester City in the first home game of the season on 17 August 2008. A crowd of 39,995 were treated to a goal fest with Villa scoring four for the second consecutive match, all the goals coming in the second period. The first came just two minutes after the restart when John Carew powered home a header after some good work between Barry and Young, but the home team were pegged back when Michael Johnson was felled in the box by Luke Shaw. Elano sent Friedel the wrong way with the resulting spot kick in the 64th minute. The home side were back in the lead just five minutes later and it was the turn of Agbonlahor to score with a right-footed volley following a flick-on from Curtis Davies from a corner. The lead was extended soon after and once more came as a result of the interplay between Barry and Young, which resulted in Agbonlahor heading home. His third of the match was assured straight after the young striker

was put through by Barry to clip the ball past Joe Hart in the visitors' goal. The game ended with Vedran Ćorluka pulling a goal back to make the final score 4-2.

However, O'Neill's team were brought back down to earth when they visited newly promoted Stoke City in the first away game of the season, losing the match 3-2 after conceding a last-minute goal to send the team down to sixth place after the first two games of the campaign.

Villa's place in the first round of the UEFA Cup was assured, firstly with a 1-1 draw in the second leg at home against FH Hafnarfjarðar, to make the overall score 5-2 in favour of the team in claret and blue, then thanks to a 4-2 aggregate victory over the Bulgarian side PFC Litex Lovech. In the group stages, they were then drawn in Group F alongside SV Hamburg (Germany), Ajax (the Netherlands), MŠK Žilina (Slovakia) and Slavia Prague (Czech Republic).

Villa's next league game saw the visit of Liverpool to Villa Park with the points being shared and no goals scored, but the team were back to winning ways with a 2-1 victory at White Hart Lane to take them into the top four. Nigel Reo-Coker gave the away team the lead on five minutes, and this was doubled just after the break when Ashley Young converted. Darren Bent pulled a goal back for Spurs three minutes before the end of the match, but Villa held firm to collect all three points and the theme of winning by this scoreline continued with away victories at West Bromwich Albion and Sunderland. The

latter two victories sandwiched a 1-0 home defeat against Championship side Queens Park Rangers in the third round of the League Cup, which ended the club's interest in the competition.

Villa were now in third place in the league but would pick up just one point in the next two league games before entertaining Ajax in the UEFA Cup group stage. A 2-0 away defeat at Chelsea was followed up with another goalless draw at home to Portsmouth.

Villa's first ever competitive meeting with Ajax took place at Villa Park on Thursday, 23 October 2008 in front of 36,657 in attendance. It was the away team that took the initiative in the early stages of the match without creating any chances of note and they were made to pay for this when Villa took the lead in the 15th minute. Awarded a corner kick, Ashley Young's delivery was powerfully headed home by Martin Laursen. Ajax were back in the game seven minutes later when Thomas Vermaelen headed home in a similar fashion from a corner. The game was now an open one with both teams looking dangerous, but it was settled on the stroke of half-time when the home team once again took the lead, with Ashley Young finding Gareth Barry, who clipped the ball home from 15 yards out. There were no further goals in the second period despite both teams having chances and Martin O'Neill was quick to praise his charges in his post-match interviews:

We were terrific and fought back magnificently to get ourselves back in front after their equaliser.

In the second half we pressed them higher up the pitch and we took the ball off them. They are a good side and pass very well indeed but we have excellent players and that should not be forgotten.

The team then recorded their biggest away win of the season when they beat Wigan Athletic 4-0 in their next game to maintain a strong grip on the top-six placings. The goals were shared around the team with Barry, Agbonlahor, Carew and Sidwell all contributing. The winning run continued with a 3-2 home victory against Blackburn Rovers to creep back into the top four, with the goals once more shared evenly throughout the team. This time Luke Young was on target alongside Barry and Agbonlahor.

Villa were back in European action following a 2-0 away defeat at Newcastle United in the Premier League and made it two consecutive wins in their UEFA Cup group with a 1-0 victory against Slavia Prague. **Ian Hunter** was part of the travelling Villa group for the match and very nearly missed his coach to take him from the city centre to Stadion Eden. He takes up the story:

I had flown over with the official Villa travelling party with a couple of friends who were both season-ticket holders like me. The flight and the connection to Prague was spot on and we were left to our own devices to sample the sights and sounds of Wenceslas Square. I think that it's fair

to say we really sampled the excellent beer over there and perhaps too much and it meant that we missed our rendezvous where we were told to get back on the coach. There were still a few hours to go and we were not overly worried but as time went on we started to panic as we found that there was no public transport to get us to the ground and what made it worse was that our tickets (as well as our passports) were on the coach and we had no contact numbers. We were running around like headless chickens pleading and shouting at the good people of Prague to give us a lift or a piggy back (we were that desperate) to get us to the ground, but all they wanted to do was get home in rush-hour after a full day at work.

We had all but given up hope and then one of us saw a coach coming up and in our desperation we decided to stand in the middle of the road and hope they would let us on and get us as near to the ground as possible even it wasn't a football coach. Our only other alternative was to get to the airport and wait for the official travel to come back after the match. It really was now or never, and it turned out that lady luck had decided to give us a leg up as it was OUR actual coach. The coach driver let us on and informed us that he had been stuck in traffic for a lot longer than they had anticipated. The three of us got on looking rather sheepish, much to the amusement of the rest of

the fans on the coach. We got to the ground and were just about to go and get some beers from the local Tesco and just sit outside, but we found a fan zone and we managed to have another good drink with some Slavia fans who were just great company. We were so relieved when we finally got into the ground to witness a 1-0 victory courtesy of a goal scored by John Carew. To this day we still have a great laugh about this and what a day it was.

Despite only picking up five points in the next four league games, Villa remained in fourth place ahead of their next UEFA Cup match against MŠK Žilina. A defeat against Middlesbrough at Villa Park (2-1) and victory against Arsenal at the Emirates (2-0) was then followed up with two more matches at Villa Park that both ended 0-0, against Manchester United and Fulham, respectively. Villa encountered their first defeat in the European group stages against MŠK Žilina, losing 2-1 with all three goals coming in the first half. Vladimír Leitner and Peter Štyvar scored, before Nathan Delfouneso pulled one back to put his team into contention, but they could not capitalise on it.

December was not a good month for Martin O'Neill's charges in Europe as they also lost 3-1 to SV Hamburg in Germany. Villa finished the group in third place with two victories and two defeats, but it was enough to qualify for the knockout stages of the competition. However, the

rest of the festive period proved to be a successful one in the league as they played five matches, winning four and drawing the other one. One of the wins came against Everton (in a thrilling match that ended 3-2) with Ashley Young scoring a last-minute winner at Goodison Park. This was followed up with a 4-2 home victory against Bolton Wanderers before winning on the road against West Ham United (1-0). The draw came against Arsenal at Villa Park on Boxing Day, the game finishing 2-2 with the home team completing a fine comeback after being 2-0 down for a period of time. Zat Knight restored parity in the dying minutes of the match. The team finished 2008 with a 1-0 victory away at Hull City, courtesy of an 88th-minute own goal by Kamil Zayatte.

The winning streak continued in January with three consecutive 2-1 victories. The first of these was away to Gillingham, which was chosen for the TV cameras in the third round of the FA Cup, with James Milner bagging a brace. The other victories came against West Bromwich Albion at Villa Park and an away win at Sunderland, with Villa's top-four credentials strengthening by the match.

It was back to FA Cup action when Villa were once more drawn away to lower league opposition in the shape of Doncaster Rovers, with the game finishing goalless. The replay back at Villa Park saw the home team progress with a 3-1 win to ensure their place in the fifth round. Villa's reward was yet another road trip and this time it would be against fellow Premier League outfit, Everton. Before that, the club had three tricky league matches to

negotiate, and the first of these was against Portsmouth at Fratton Park. The away team picked up all three points in a 1-0 victory, Emile Heskey separating the teams with a 21st-minute goal. Villa were fighting on three fronts, but if there was any criticism that could be levelled at the team, it was that they had drawn four matches in the league that had ended goalless. That was upgraded to five following another 0-0 at home against Wigan Athletic.

Villa's last match before turning back to cup competitions was played on Saturday, 7 February 2009 away at Blackburn Rovers, with the team coming away with a 2-0 victory thanks to goals scored in each half by Milner and Agbonlahor. Aston Villa were now in third place in the league and could put all their energies into the Everton match and their last UEFA Cup round of 32 match against CSKA Moscow, with the first leg played at Villa Park. The question on everyone's lips was could O'Neill's team maintain competing in the three competitions that they were in?

The FA Cup fifth round was played on Sunday, 15 February at Goodison Park, and it was the home side whose name went into the quarter-final draw with a 3-1 home victory. Jack Rodwell gave Everton the lead on just four minutes before James Milner equalised from the penalty spot four minutes later. The home team restored their lead on the 24th minute when Everton were themselves awarded a spot kick, which was converted by Mikel Arteta, before Tim Cahill put the match beyond the visitors with 14 minutes remaining.