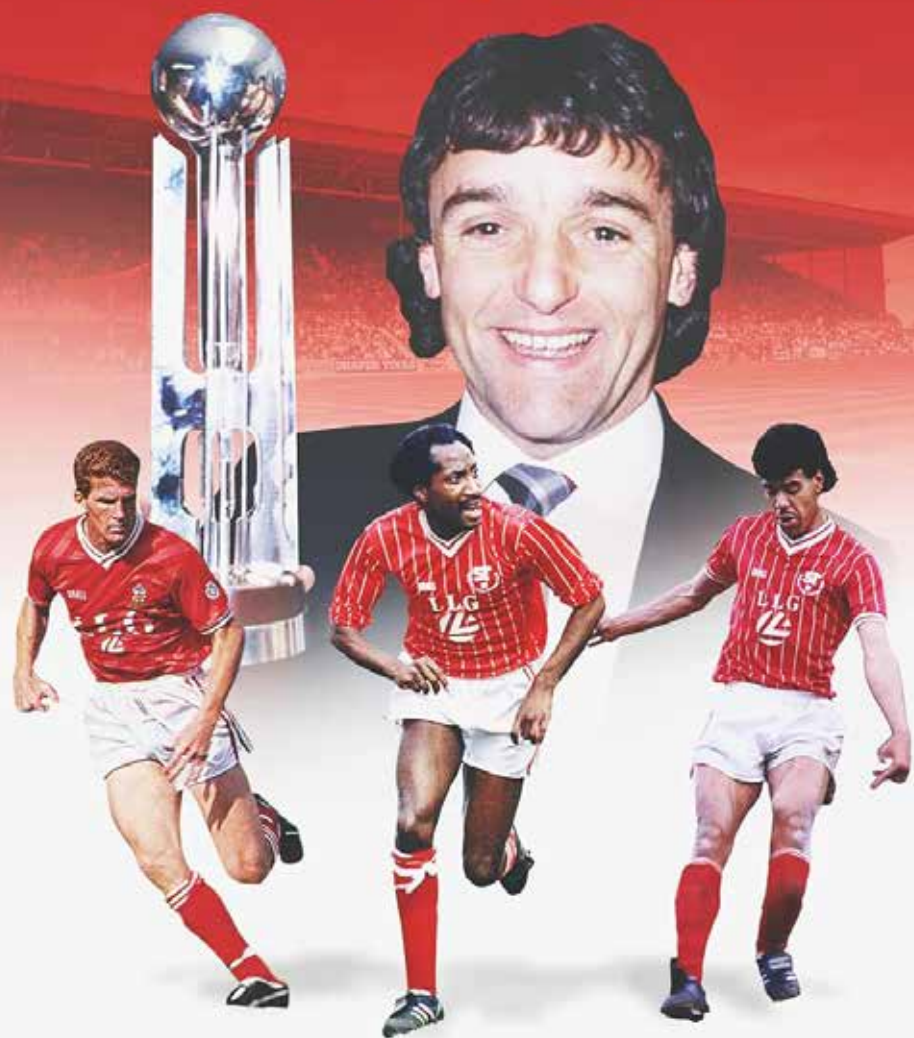


DAVID WALLIS

SWINDON TOWN



The Lou Macari Years

SWINDON TOWN

The Lou Macari Years

DAVID WALLIS



Contents

About the Author	9
Foreword by David Hockaday	11
Acknowledgements	13
Introduction	17
1: 1979–1984: from 54th to 85th Swindon Town before Lou Macari	19
2: Lou Macari before Swindon Town	29
3: 1984/85: from 85th to 76th The beginning – and almost the end	38
4: 1985/86: from 76th to 69th The resurgence starts	62
5: 1986/87: from 69th to 47th The rise continues.	92
6: 1987/88: from 47th to 33rd Consolidation	127
7: 1988/89: from 33rd to 26th On the brink of the top flight	162
8. 1989/90: from 26th to 24th Consequences	197
9: Lou’s Views	209
10: Legacy	236
11: 87th The Summer of 2024	246

1979–1984: from 54th to 85th Swindon Town before Lou Macari

IT'S DIFFICULT to be sure when the rot set in, but as the 1970s turned into the 1980s things at Swindon Town had rarely looked rosier.

Led by manager Bob Smith, Town had cruised towards the top of the Third Division before August 1979 reached its end.

Smith, appointed boss in May 1978 when he was 34 years old, was lured from Port Vale and had been trusted to invest large sums of money in the playing staff. With £80,000 claiming the signature of striker Alan Mayes from Watford and a similar figure prising fellow frontman Andy Rowland from Bury, big money was being found to mount a promotion push, in an attempt to regain the Second Division place that had been surrendered in 1974.

Future national TV treasure Chris Kamara already graced the midfield, and before the turn of the decade

a couple of club records were set when £150,000 was used to claim left-back David Peach from Southampton, with another £110,000 spent to bring midfielder Glenn Cockerill from Lincoln City.

Peach didn't enjoy the experience, saying in a *Backpass* magazine interview, 'Swindon had offered £150,000 for me and although I didn't want to go, [Southampton manager] Lawrie McMenemy thought it was too good an offer for a player approaching 30 to reject. They offered me a five-year contract on good money, but I should never have gone. It was a terrible move.'

Dropped almost as soon as he arrived and made to train with the youth team, Peach said, 'I don't know why. Money I would imagine. John Trollope took over from Smith and recalled me, but that didn't last for long and he put me back in the reserves.' Peach moved on to Orient on a free transfer after two years.

Cockerill also had an unhappy time, telling the same magazine, 'I suppose you could say it was a lot of money for a basement division player then, but it never really worked out for me at Swindon. Chris Kamara was there; Andy Rowland was scoring goals for fun and Bobby Smith the manager had been given a lot of dough to sign players. To be honest the manager had a nightmare, or at least the team did, and he was soon sacked. John Trollope took over, and I never really had a chance under him – but he'd take me to away games as 13th man, no bonuses, just to make my life difficult.'

Defender Colin Barrett arrived from Nottingham Forest on a free transfer, but surely on top wages, and

there had even been a national story that Swindon were preparing a rumoured £250,000 bid for Wiltshire-born England striker Mick Channon to tempt the target man back to his home county from Southampton.

Never before had such sums and the name of Swindon Town been mentioned in the same sentence, and previous accusations that the board of directors lacked ambition were being disproved in astonishing manner.

And if it was a gamble, it was one that looked like paying off big time.

On 8 December 1979 Swindon crushed one of Smith's previous managerial charges, Bury, 8-0 at the County Ground to end the day in third place in the Third Division table. But incredibly that was not even half the story that week.

Because the previous Tuesday evening, an 84th-minute header from central defender Billy Tucker had given Town a 1-1 draw at Highbury, where Smith's men claimed a replay against Arsenal in a League Cup quarter-final. A week later, an unforgettable 4-3 win at the County Ground disposed of the Gunners and took Swindon into the League Cup semi-finals where they would meet Wolverhampton Wanderers to decide a place at Wembley.

It was an eight-day period that brought Town 13 goals, five of which were against First Division opposition. As weeks went, it's tempting to suggest that there had never been a better one for the County Ground club.

Paralleling their League Cup exploits, Town had also stormed through the early rounds of the FA Cup, and in

the first month of 1980 they faced Tottenham Hotspur in round four. A goalless draw at the County Ground on 26 January was followed by a heartbreaking defeat at White Hart Lane, where a 55th-minute lead from a Ray McHale penalty was wiped out by two quick goals in the last few minutes and took the London team through to the fifth round.

All this cup activity did two things for Town's fortunes. One was to bring in vast sums of money via gate receipts. The two Arsenal games were watched by crowds totalling almost 60,000, the matches against Spurs by more than 72,000. The two home games alone were watched by over 47,000.

All very welcome, but short-term gains.

The second consequence was the huge backlog of Third Division fixtures that the total of 17 cup ties brought.

While the first seemed to justify the faith in extra playing staff expenditure, the overstretching of the budget could realistically be accused of scuppering that season, and perhaps many more to come.

As February reached mid-term, defeat at Molineux in the second leg of the League Cup semi-final saw the much-hoped for Wembley final place go to First Division Wolves, leaving Town drained, slipping down the league table and with up to five games in hand on their divisional peers.

Even the income of another 25,000-plus gate for the previous home leg with Wolves couldn't prepare the club for the exertions still required.

Perhaps this was the seminal moment when reality struck, and the consequence of extravagance commenced.

With 20 league games crammed into the last two and a half months of the season, the previous efforts took their toll. Town slipped out of the promotion running and a tenth-placed finish was far removed from what had been hoped for earlier.

And that was just about it. It wasn't evident at the time, but the dream had ended.

Five matches into the following season, Town had lost the lot, and despite the oh-so-close exploits of the previous campaign, confidence in Bob Smith in the boardroom was draining. The disastrous run of defeats abated but results still didn't justify the contract extension that Smith had recently signed.

The manager was elbowed on the first day of October, with Swindon just two places off the bottom of the Third Division table.

A new era beckoned, and it wasn't to be pretty.

In the second week of November, legendary Robins left-back John Trollope was promoted from youth team coach to first-team manager.

The perceived safe hands, his heartfelt love of the club, coupled with the undoubted support of the County Ground faithful, meant Trollope was an obvious choice. With John already on the payroll, it surely would have been hoped that fans would have overlooked the advantage of the financial prudence of promoting a man from within.

It's worth detailing just what makes John Trollope the legend he is within the history of Swindon Town.

John had played a total of 889 first-team games for Town and accepted the managerial reins four days after the last of them. Locally born, Trollope had spent his entire playing career at the County Ground, signing on as a professional in the summer of 1960.

One of the heroes of the 1969 League Cup Final win over Arsenal at Wembley and winner of two promotions with the club, Trollope only bled red because it was the colour of Swindon Town's shirts, but the Town legend was unable to stop the rot.

With his hands tied financially and with expensive signings departing to help balance the books, an increasing reliance on the youth team members, of whom Trollope had recently been in charge, was inevitable.

At the end of 1980/81, Town finished 17th in the Third Division, just one point above the drop zone to the Fourth Division, and with little hope of change the following season there was to be little respite.

Six victories in the first ten matches of 1981/82 took Town to the very top of the Third Division table, but things slipped away such that the next league win didn't come until the last day of January 1982. Victories remained elusive with just two in the next 15 matches, and four games from the end of the season, an always welcome win against Oxford United was the last three-point haul of the campaign.

The last game of 1981/82 brought a trip to Somerton Park, Newport, and only a Swindon win would suffice.

A 0-0 draw for Walsall at home to Doncaster the previous Saturday had finished the Saddlers' season in 20th place, and looking safe, on 53 points. Meanwhile Town, on 52 points, knew a draw wouldn't be enough to overhaul Walsall's superior goal difference, but a win would lift them to fifth from bottom and secure Third Division survival for another season.

Sadly for all those who travelled from Wiltshire to south Wales, it was not to be. Town midfielder Roy Carter handled the ball which gave Newport striker Tommy Tynan the opportunity to net an 81st-minute winner from the penalty spot. Town were relegated to the bottom division of the Football League for the first time in their history.

For such a dedicated Swindon man, the pain of relegation to the Fourth Division must have been as excruciating for John Trollope as it was for the travelling Town supporters.

Trollope remained in charge as Town commenced their first campaign in the basement division with hopes of an instant return to the higher status. By mid-December 1982 Town sat second in the table behind Bury, but just two wins in the next 17 attempts saw them drop 20 points behind the division's leaders.

On 19 March 1983 a 2-1 home defeat against Darlington, a team threatened with having to seek re-election, was witnessed by fewer than 3,000 supporters. The result left Town eighth in the Fourth Division table, but a significant 14 points off a promotion place having taken just one point from the previous seven games.

The following Monday brought the dismissal of John Trollope as manager. Contractually it had been agreed that he could return to youth coaching if it hadn't worked out.

In Peter Matthews' book, *John Trollope Record Breaker*, Trollope says about his managerial stint, 'I wish I hadn't done it! I really didn't enjoy dealing with senior players, I found having to keep them happy just too difficult. I didn't think I did badly, given the financial position I worked under.'

It's easy to sympathise with the much-loved left-back, that this was the poisoned chalice that he accepted when Town were desperate for a saviour. Such a dedicated Robins servant would surely have found it impossible to ignore the call from his only footballing love, when asked to give the County Ground outfit the new direction so desperately sought after the sacking of Bob Smith.

Charged with completing the last four games of the season was Ken Beamish, who had joined Town from Tranmere Rovers as player-coach in August 1981.

A striker as a player, Beamish had taken to the pitch during the relegation season, coming on as a substitute for Brian Williams in a home defeat to Burnley in February 1982 and starting in a draw at Reading a week later.

Beamish did his best to complete the season as boss as optimistically as possible, overseeing two wins and two defeats, but still the club finished the season in eighth place in the Fourth Division.

But in truth, as the summer gave way to the 1983/84 season, nothing had changed for the better at the

County Ground in three years. Still there was no money, supporters had become apathetic towards their team, and it wasn't unusual to hear laughter from the gathered few at some of the perceived ineptitude that they were witnessing on the pitch.

Attendances had dwindled to an average of 4,195 and expectation had plummeted, perhaps to its lowest depths so far.

Four games into the new season, Town were 20th in the table having lost three times already. By the beginning of December they had risen to the dizzy heights of ninth, the highest place to be achieved that campaign.

Tuesday, 17 April 1984 brought a new low for Swindon Town when just 1,681 witnessed a home win against Darlington, the lowest-ever Football League attendance at the County Ground.

One win in the last five games of the season then brought about the lowest-ever finish for a Swindon team in the club's Football League history. That was confirmed when a 2-1 defeat at Bury on Saturday, 12 May brought a 17th-placed finish in the Fourth Division.

That final placing, with a tally of 58 points, has become known as 'The Beamish Line'. Like its nautical namesake 'The Plimsoll Line', and similarly named after the man responsible for it, it was an indicator of just how low a vessel (this one carrying a cargo of hopes and dreams) could sink.

An all-time low in the history of Swindon Town.

Attendances had now dropped to an average of 3,344, but with little money available and so little optimism to offer supporters, Beamish was still offered a new 12-month contract to carry on for the following season. That was until 21 June when club sponsor Lowndes Lambert offered a significant cash injection, dependent on a new, high-profile player-manager being appointed.

As a result, the offer of a contract extension to Beamish was withdrawn unsigned, leaving Beamish to consider his future after leading the club to its worst-ever league finish.

The contrast between the optimism, financial profligacy and sheer excitement of the Bob Smith era, with the austerity and despondency of the three subsequent seasons, was stark. The conclusion that one undeniably led to the other seemed inevitable.

In little over three seasons, Swindon had dropped from just a few places below what would one day be rechristened the Championship, to only six places above the Alliance Premier League, the top echelons of non-league football.

Their league status had plummeted from 54th in the pecking order of English football, to 85th.

That John Trollope and Ken Beamish were victims of their circumstances is also undeniable. It took an upturn in opportunity, a cash injection from new sponsors and perhaps a celestial alignment of fate to offer the right man the chance to grab the opportunity.

Lou Macari was that man.