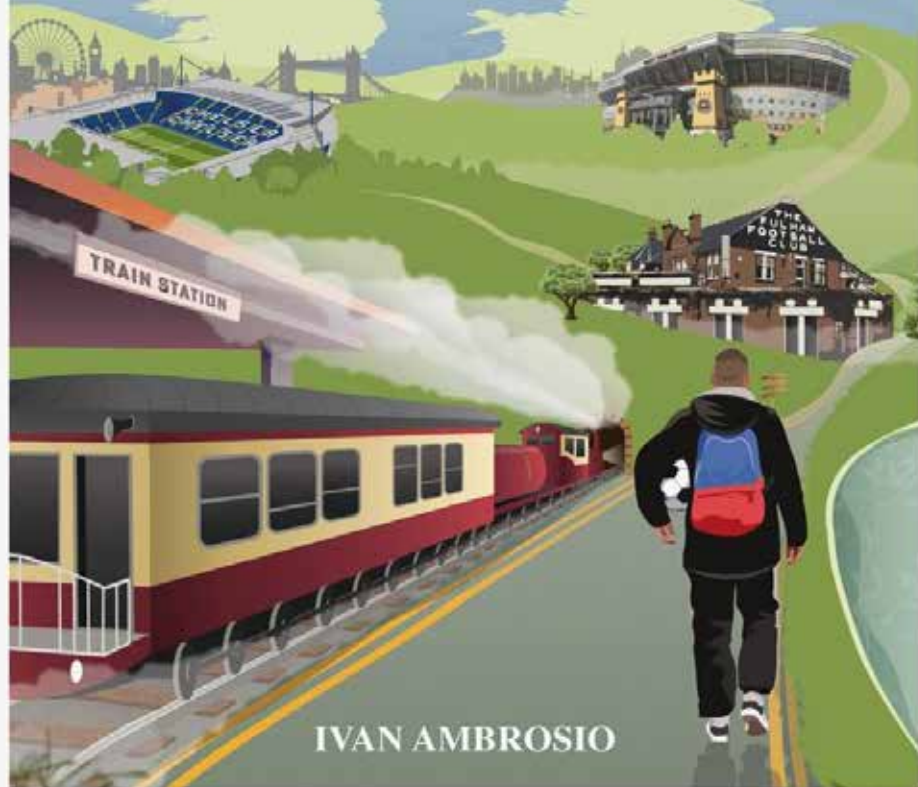


# THE ENGLISH GAME

A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY  
IN THE HOME OF FOOTBALL



IVAN AMBROSIO

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# THE PLANE TICKETS THAT CHANGED MY LIFE: 20 FEBRUARY 2013 AND 25 MARCH 2013

easyJet		easyJet	
AMBROSIO/IVAN		AMBROSIO/IVAN	
Naples (Term1)		Naples (Term1)	
London Gatwick		London Gatwick	
Flight EZY8530	Date 20FEB	Departure Time 12:15	Seat No. 16
Please go straight to departure If you're late we won't wait.		Please go straight to departure If you're late we won't wait.	
Boarding Pass		Boarding Pass	
B12		11:35	
Boarding Group 2		6C	

easyJet		Boarding Pass	
TRAVEL DATE 25 MAR 2013 MON		FROM (STN) London Stansted	
FLIGHT NUMBER EZY3249		TO (NAP) Naples	
GATE CLOSES 05:40		FLIGHT DEPARTS 06:10	
SEAT NO. JARSEN 25B		PASSENGER AMBROSIO, IVAN Mr	
25B		EL5MNN5 S600	
		Please don't be late, the rest can't wait	

# THIS IS THE LETTER I WROTE (IN VERY POOR ENGLISH) ASKING FOR A TRIAL AS A FOOTBALLER

Hello.

I'm Ivan Ambrosio and I'm was born on 13 December 1993 in Naples.. I'm playing to football for when I was 10 years old, but where I lived, the football culture never had serious consideration.. I'm here in England since 20 February, I'm alone and with a lot of hope, because I want to give a great change to my life, learning the english language and playing to football. I say you that the desire to play is very much, that I'm in the land that I love and in a place totally different from where I was, than I think that the possibilities will be more and than I put the best of me in every thing that I do. In few words, with this letter, I ask you to give me the possibility to do a proof for see if can play at these levels. Certainly it was better that I say you in words, but still I don't know speak in english, I hope that you understand me and that you give me this possibility, because for me my life has no sense without football.. I hope that you will do me this new challenge..

Thank you!

Striker - Foot right - 1.82 cm - 78 kg -

Ivan Ambrosio  
*Ambrosio Ivan*

Cognome	AMBROSIO
Nome	IVAN
nato il	13/12/1993
(atto n.	)
Cittadinanza	ITALIANA
Residenza	
Via	
Stato civile	STATO LIBERO
Professione	STUDENTE
CONNOTATI E CONTRASSEGNI SALIENTI	
Statura	m. 1,80
Capelli	CASTANI
Occhi	CASTANI
Segni particolari	

	
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## CHAPTER 1

# LEARN TO DREAM

*Good timber does not grow with ease; the stronger the wind, the stronger the trees.*

J. Willard Marriott

LET'S GET one thing straight from the start – it takes courage to dream. Dreaming is far from simple; at times it's complicated and to be honest it can be pretty tiring. Having a strong belief in something can lead to stress, attacks of nerves and even a breakdown, but I can assure you there's nothing better than fighting for your dreams. Waking up in the morning with something to believe in is one of those feelings that make you come alive, properly alive. Sometimes you can feel tired and worn out by all the attendant worries, but that's par for the course.

I'll be honest with you, brutally honest. Dreaming requires sacrifice, dedication, infinite abnegation, enormous responsibilities, organisation, attention to detail, patience and optimism, and above all it takes the one resource that we all have in equal measure but of which there's never enough – time. Once it's passed, time doesn't come back. That said, the good thing is that its management is entirely in our hands.

I could talk for hours about organising your time, but the one thing I want to say in simple terms is that you should employ your time as you really want to. You'll say that's not easy, especially under certain circumstances, but I believe that, in due course, if you give all of yourself, anything is possible. If, that is, you really want it. I've always thought that life is a matter of choices, black or white. Those stuck in between are idlers, pessimists, people who do nothing but complain all day, never getting a grip on their lives.

I have a vivid memory of the day when, as a dreamer with a capital D, I decided to leave my comfort zone and put myself on the line in the journey of a lifetime. I was 19 when I left everything to pursue my greatest dreams. By everything, I mean school, the football team I played for, my family, my friends, a well-paid job, the girlfriend I had at the time and all the certainties offered to me by that normal life. The desire to experience those far-off dreamed-of places led me to abandon all the security I had, and before long I began to discover a new part of myself.

Since that day, I've faced and lived through extraordinary experiences. I've travelled roads I could never have imagined. Travelling for four years of my life opened my mind and made me a better man.

My mission in this world is not just to realise my greatest dreams; above all else, it's to give love and to be ready always to help others, whatever the circumstances.

Obviously, with each step taken, between one success and the next, there have been plenty of problems along the way, but my determination to make it has always prevailed over everything and everybody.

Failures, fears, mistakes made, sudden tumbles, tears, pain, sleepless nights, enormous sacrifices, things you have to give up and do without, your alarm going off in the middle of the night, endless hours of work, doors being slammed in



## LEARN TO DREAM

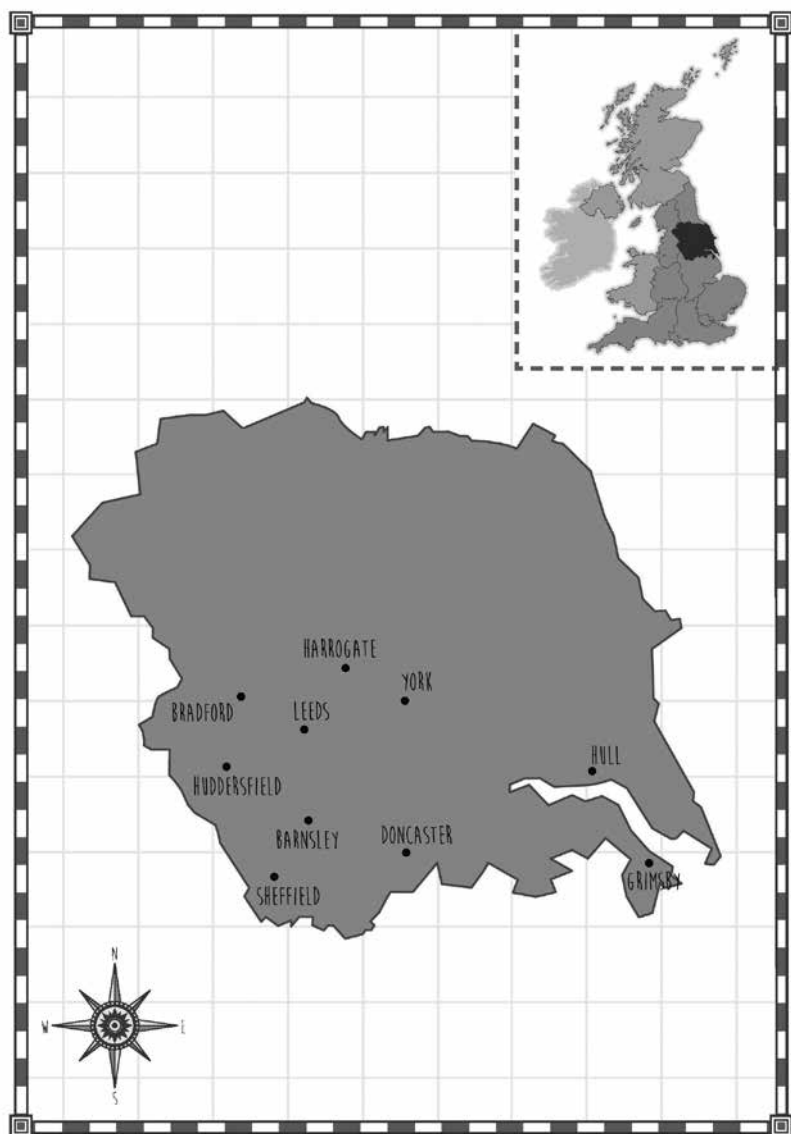
your face – I could go on – are all part of life. But without those things you wouldn't develop, and without development there can be no change ...

I think I've said enough, but there's one more thing I want to add. Have the courage to get out of that damned comfort zone and go to meet your dreams, be they great or small. Leave that job you can't stand, go and live in that city you've always dreamed of, organise that journey you've been putting off all your life, throw yourself into the project that only you believe in. In other words, do what you've always dreamed of.

Don't be afraid of making mistakes and failing – the problem isn't when you fall, it's when you stand still for fear of getting hurt. Be hungry for your dreams and for life, because this is the only one we've got. Be young and foolish, be kind to the world and open your hearts to life. Only this way will you learn to dream, and rest assured that once you start you'll never stop ...

London, 9 December 2019

## THE ENGLISH GAME



# YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER

I love England, infinitely. I've always felt at home in that wonderful land, right from day one. And experiencing it and discovering it with my own eyes has only augmented this infinite love.

London apart, I think that York is England's finest city by far. It has a rich and fascinating history, visible still in its narrow streets, where time seems to have stopped. The Minster dominates the city, just as the endless green moors stamp their authority over the whole county.

Not far from York is the pretty spa town of Harrogate, also well worth a visit. To the south, in Sheffield, where football is a religion and the steel industry lifted the city to world renown, a walk through the streets evokes a different emotion. The beautiful game was born right there, and that in itself is reason enough.

I have much more to tell, and many stories await you in the pages that follow. Sit back and enjoy the ride – my journey to discover English football starts here.

## THE HOME OF FOOTBALL

If I asked you to choose between watching a match played by Sheffield FC and spending hours and hours kicking a ball in their home ground, let's say with a good friend of yours, which would you go for? I've been lucky enough to do both.

If I had to choose, I assure you that I'd have much preferred the second option. Not just because there's nothing better than playing football with a good friend, but doing it on the home pitch of the oldest club in the world is not something that happens every day. On that particular day, life gave us a helping hand. When we got to the ground we found an open door and a punctured-looking ball lying in a goal net, giving Giuseppe and me one of the most exciting moments of our long journey. And this was just the beginning of the adventure.

That summer, in 2016, kicking a ball around on the pitch of the Coach and Horses Ground, I felt happier than I'd ever been.

I went back to Sheffield three years later. Not with Giuseppe this time, but with Lucio, my accomplice in many adventures. I was there, again in the summer, not to kick a ball but to watch a match between Sheffield FC and Hallam FC. Not just any match, but football's oldest derby.

Take your seats, the train bound for Sheffield is about to leave. The next stop is the unassuming Coach and Horses Ground – home to the world's first football club.



'Hi, Ivan, pleased to meet you. Come in, today you're our guest. In here is the little room with all the photos and trophies in our history. I've got a few things to take care of now, but don't worry. Make yourself at home. Enjoy your day!'



That's how Richard, chairman of Sheffield FC, introduced himself. Up to then I'd been given a good many warm welcomes around the country, but being received with such open kindness by the world's oldest football club was something special. It gave me such a stupendous feeling, because in this life I've never received anything for free, because I've worked hard day and night to achieve what I've always wanted and dreamed of.

Difficulties have always arisen, but it's up to us to keep bad thoughts at bay and make room for positive ones. I've always believed that an optimistic outlook is the first step towards a happy life – for me that's not a cliché, it's how it is.

For years I'd wake up every morning with my head full of bad stuff, thinking about all the things I didn't have. Then one day somebody shouted right in my face that the life I was leading was sickening, and it was true. It was true because I appreciated nothing of what was around me. I had no time for my mother, my father, even my brother. Having a meal with my family meant nothing to me. I didn't appreciate the beauty of a ray of sunshine or a blue sky. I appreciated nothing of what life was giving me, and what's worse was that I failed to appreciate the days I had. I threw them all away, thinking that sooner or later someone would give them back to me. Fat chance. Nobody gives back the time we've wasted, nobody puts right the mistakes we've made, but this is the very reason we can develop and get better.

I've done it and will continue to do so, step after step, problem after problem. I've worked hard to make myself better, I've shed tears when I felt the need and I've never shied away from my mistakes, just tried to find solutions for them. Solutions that led me, day by day, to nurture my dreams more and more, without knowing whether they'd ever produce anything.

Nurturing is far from simple, as was confirmed when Richard began to tell me his story and his club's history. At that moment, as his words touched my heart, my mind's eye was full of images of myself in February 2013, when I was washing dishes in a London restaurant, and of a few weeks later, when I was faced with the first and biggest failure of my life.

Even then, though, instead of throwing in the towel I redoubled my efforts, by concentrating not on my failure but on the second chance that life was offering me. To start afresh, start better and pursue my dreams along another path, with better organisation and more determination.

Think about this for a moment: what would have happened if I hadn't tried? Where would I be today if I'd given up on my dreams? These are difficult questions to answer. Looking back on those years, only one thing is certain: England changed my life.

If I'd given up, I wouldn't have written the book you're reading. There would have been no adventures to relate and no other dreams to pursue. So I say, open up that box where you've locked away your greatest wishes and go after them, just as Richard did in 2001 when he became chairman of Sheffield FC.

Since then, with passion and dedication, he has been true to the values espoused by William Prest and Sir Nathaniel Creswick in 1857 when they founded the first club in the history of football: Integrity, Respect and Community. Sound and healthy values, these.

But I wanted to know more about the past of that great little club. I wanted to discover its history, go back in time and imagine myself in the streets of Sheffield with William Prest and Sir Nathaniel Creswick. I wanted to feel part of a bygone age, and as I listened to Richard's words I got flashes of actually being there with them ...

One day in the summer of 1857 William Prest and his close friend Nathaniel Creswick went out for a walk in the English countryside. Their conversation centred on cricket and fencing, which in those days were the sports most popular with the well-off sons of Sheffield.

At one point they started to talk about the new game that was developing in some of England's state and private schools – the game of football. Aware of the fact that various forms of the game had been tried out around the world, but unaware that they would be the men who founded what is today's best-loved sport, as cricketers they thought that one of the best ways to keep fit during the winter would be to play this new game. The problem was that in those days football was played only in some schools, and each school applied different rules – in some cases the rules were even decided on the day of the match by the two team captains.

As time went by, the two men developed some ideas to give the game a more structured form, and with the help of the Sheffield committee they wrote to all the state and private schools to inform them that a new set of rules were going to be introduced in the interests of the better development of the game of football.

The first of these was: 'The game shall be commenced by a place kick from the centre of the ground.'

The first brick, which would change the game of football forever, had been laid. A few days later, on 24 October 1857 to be exact, Nathaniel and his friend William announced the birth of the first football club in the world: Sheffield Football Club.

I could hardly contain my excitement. Listening to Richard was like going back in time, and when the players of Sheffield

FC and Hallam FC went on to the pitch to warm up, I realised how fortunate I was to be there with them.

It's not just that this was the oldest club in the world: I was there talking to one of the successors of its two founders. The men who had played a crucial part in forging a new era, but who also provided some of the rules and innovations known today the world over, which are applied every day, from the street to the best-known stadiums in the world.

After establishing that the kick-off would take place in the centre of the pitch, the other innovations were: the corner kick, the foul, the free kick, the throw-in, the crossbar and – of crucial importance – a red or blue cap to be worn by every player so as to avoid confusion by distinguishing the two teams during the match.

Red and blue, the same colours worn on that cool July afternoon, under the excited gaze of over 300 spectators, by the players running after that magic ball. To celebrate not just the first two football clubs in history but, above all, the 159th match of the world's oldest football derby, of which the first was played at Sandygate, Hallam FC's ground, on Boxing Day 1860 and won by Sheffield FC by the score of two goals to nil.<sup>1</sup>

The Sheffield FC members had to wait three years to play that match, since Hallam FC wasn't founded until 1860. Up to then the only games played had been within the club. The married men would play the bachelors and the professional people would play a team of farmers, all playing and training with those rules and innovations of their own creation.

As the years passed, football and its rules began to evolve. In 1863, in London, the English Football Association was founded. Three years later, for the first time ever, Sheffield

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1 Since 1860 it has been customary to play football matches on Boxing Day.



FC ventured outside their home city to play two matches, the first in Nottingham and the second in London, where the practice of heading the ball came into the game. In 1867, under the famous Sheffield Rules, the world's first knockout competition was held: the Youdan Cup. The legendary FA Cup first saw the light of day a few years later, in 1871.<sup>2</sup>

In those years, novelty and innovation came thick and fast. New clubs were springing up like mushrooms all over the country. And with them came a generation of supporters, swept up in a growing wave of popular enthusiasm. Football was able to bring together people from all walks of life, giving rise to hopes and dreams in supporters of all ages, exciting young and old alike, regaling them with joy and suffering, tears of sadness and smiles of happiness.

Smiles in which I was incessantly wreathed that July afternoon in the neat and charming setting of the Coach and Horses Ground, with which I was by then quite familiar but whose simplicity struck me as almost surreal – the pitch in the grounds of the Coach and Horses pub, the old gentleman selling tickets at the turnstile, and the club shop, as tiny as it was splendid. Non-league grounds have always held more fascination for me than the classic Premier League arenas, not only because they've retained the flavour of football as it was but also because it was there that the most remarkable and exciting stories originated.

As happened to me when, with the score at 4-0 to Sheffield FC, the referee blew the final whistle and Richard told me to go on to the pitch with him. From then on, to be honest, it's all a bit of a blur. One thing I do remember amid all the emotion is the awarding of the home side with the Alan Cooper Memorial Trophy – Richard took off his precious

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2 The Sheffield Rules were the first rules of the game, in force from 1858 to 1877.

club scarf, put it round my neck and said, 'Ivan, you give the boys the cup!'

Those years of travelling round England were full of many other experiences just as memorable. Dreams come easily to me, but I could never have imagined finding myself awarding a cup to the oldest club in the world after watching them play (and win) the 159th edition of such an important and little-known derby. Not just any derby, the derby that every lover of the game should experience at least once in their life: quite simply, the 'World's Oldest Derby'.

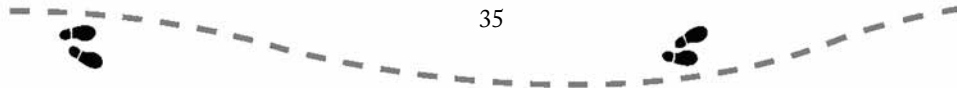
## WELCOME TO SANDYGATE: THE WORLD'S OLDEST FOOTBALL GROUND

It was just over half an hour before kick-off. The two teams were on the pitch, and I could see they were enjoying themselves. As I watched them I felt a touch of sadness at not being able to take the field myself and show everyone that I could have worn the No.9 shirt without a problem. I wished I could have been one of them, boots on my feet and that historic blue shirt on my back, fighting for a club more than a hundred years old. A club far from the limelight, playing in the most obscure of the English leagues and embodying one of the most inspiring stories ever told. One of the stories whose discovery requires a train journey to Sheffield and from there to Sandygate Road, home to Hallam Football Club since 1804. A place like no other – simply the world's oldest football ground.



I first found myself at Sandygate Road one day in December 2016. It was cold, and a wild wind blew at me all day long. It was two days before the umpteenth Christmas I'd be spending away from my family, but the happiness of that day made me forget everything ...

The half-hour bus ride separating the centre of Sheffield from that tiny historic ground was a tonic for the eyes and the spirit, soothed by the sight of the green hills picked out in sharp detail. It felt like being in a film, a short but intense journey made unforgettable by the roofs of the characteristic terraced houses. A journey to discover days gone by, difficult to relive but one I tried to imagine when I found myself outside



the old Plough Inn, standing opposite the tiny entrance to the ground.

Unfortunately, everything was shut. There wasn't a soul in sight, but rather than going away empty-handed, as I usually did, I decided to look for another way in. The Catholic church of St Francis of Assisi, standing next to the ground, is separated from it by a stone wall about six feet high. When I was a boy I used to kick footballs all over the place, and I'd climbed hundreds of walls like that one. So, having made sure the coast was clear, I quickly scaled it and in the blink of an eye I was right inside the ground.

Silence reigned supreme. The only sound was the keening of the wind as it swept impetuously through the surrounding trees. The sky, greyer than ever, promised nothing but rain and more rain. Oblivious to all that, as happy and curious as a little boy, I explored every nook and cranny of that inner sanctum. Walking across the centre circle I suddenly noticed something I'd never encountered in a football ground before.

Seemingly perfect, the pitch was on a slope, the like of which I'd never seen. I'd heard about sloped pitches before, but seeing that one and standing on it was an experience I'll not forget. Struck by that strange new sensation, I wondered what it would be like to play there, running around a pitch that was anything but normal.

As fate would have it, a few moments later I found out, thanks to a ball I retrieved from the branches of a tree behind one of the goals. Blithely ignoring anyone who might have seen me, I played with that ball for an hour, imagining myself in an age long past. In an age when, in that very place where I was playing, on 26 December 1860, football's first derby match was held between Hallam FC and Sheffield FC – the clubs who wrote an indelible page of history remembered to this day.

And in my own way I saw that history. First by playing unhindered on the grass of Sandygate, then, three years later,



by putting my hands on the world's oldest football trophy: the glorious, the unknown Youdan Cup, which came into being on 16 February 1867.

As well as a football enthusiast, Thomas Youdan was the owner of a theatre in the centre of Sheffield. After coming to the conclusion that playing nothing but friendly matches left something to be desired, he had the idea of financing the manufacture of a modest trophy that would be played for by 12 teams.

Just over a fortnight after the cup's appearance, on 5 March 1867, Hallam FC went down in history as the first team to win it, a feat proudly remembered to this day. Their success was achieved in front of 2,000 spectators in the now-famous setting of Bramall Lane. With a 2-0 victory over Norfolk Club, the boys in the blue shirts watched John Charles Shaw – founder, player and club captain – proudly lift the trophy.

Shortly thereafter, however, the cup somehow got lost – it vanished into thin air and wasn't seen or heard of for over a century. In 1997 it was spotted by a Scottish antique dealer, who contacted the club and sold them their precious trophy.

Despite its history, Hallam FC is a club far removed from the attention of the big television channels. Which is a pity, considering the simplicity and warmth to be enjoyed by spending a day in the splendid setting of Sandygate. A special place with extraordinary people who spend their free time working for the club without getting a penny, who do it out of undying passion for the game of football. A passion that on one October afternoon, at a league match against Nostell Miners Welfare FC, my friends Fabio and Giuseppe and I witnessed with our own eyes, after being welcomed to the club.

Club volunteer Sharon, together with Hallam FC chairman Steve, made us feel at home, offered us something

to drink and took us on a tour of the club's history, showing us photographs and various memorabilia.

Hallam FC owes its existence to John Charles Shaw and the 300-plus members who in 1860 belonged to Hallam Cricket Club, founded as long ago as 1804. Since its inception, the cricket team had played its matches there at Sandygate and had its headquarters at the Plough Inn.

The Plough is a historic pub for the city of Sheffield. It was there that Hallam FC was founded and there that the footballers would gather before and after the matches, using it first as a changing room and then as a place to relax with a pint or two. A pint that on that October afternoon I didn't have to drink away from the terraces, as is the case in every Premier League ground these days, but took with me right beside the pitch, leaning on a small steel crash barrier as I watched those lads give battle on the sloping field. A slope like that, and a ground that's been there for more than two centuries – it's a unique experience.

And it's a ground on which I've had the honour of chasing a football, grinning uncontrollably and with my mind going back in time, picturing myself alongside John Charles Shaw in the discovery of a football long gone. A moment that I've tried, in my own small way, to relive. Not wearing those historic club colours, but at least kicking a ball in the place where it all started.

So now I can say I've played, at least once, in the world's oldest football ground.

## THE BLADES

In the Cricketers Arms, traditional watering hole for Sheffield United fans, the atmosphere was electric. All fired up for the new season, Blades shirts on and pints in hand, the supporters sang and sang at the top of their voices.

Their eyes shone with belief, displaying an unbreakable bond I'd rarely seen before – not just with the colours, which were part of their identity, but above all with the city itself, to which they were so proud to belong. A city with a wealth of stories to tell, many of which were set right there, at Bramall Lane, a stone's throw from the pub. Sacred to every supporter, the ground is home to relics and photographs of unrepeatable times – some in black and white, many others in red and white.

On that blazing early August afternoon those two colours made me feel as if I belonged to those people, supporters who couldn't wait for the season to start. People who nine months later would be celebrating promotion to the Premier League, so nothing would have been better than spending the entire season at their side. Not just to feel part of them, but to experience the spectacular setting of Bramall Lane, the oldest professional football ground in the world.



My eyes were pricking with tears and shivers ran up and down me. Three months was too long to have been away from the packed ranks inside the ground. So when the 24,000 fans in Bramall Lane burst into the 'Greasy Chip Butty' song, my emotions got the better of me and the passion of those people transported me into their world. An unbelievable experience, to be sure, but it was actually the best thing that could have happened to me. Seeing men, women and children feel so alive and so ecstatic in belting out the song that stood for

their identity, their city and their club – it was like entering another dimension. A dimension that can't be explained in writing, nor by word of mouth, because to capture the true essence of the support at Bramall Lane you have to be there, to feel it on your skin. Over 160 years of history around you, which you can sense before you go through the turnstiles, with small round plaques marking the buildings along Cherry Street, overlooked by the magnificent Tony Currie Stand. Red plaques to commemorate important events in the club's history, to remind any passer-by that they're not in the presence of just another football ground, but a place that turned football into an institution: this was the venue of the first floodlit football match in history.

A visit to the ground makes it clear. Bramall Lane was the first real home of football for the city of Sheffield. The home that in those early years became the headquarters of Sheffield FC and Sheffield Wednesday. It then became the permanent home of Sheffield United, founded in March 1889. In the first 30 years of its existence the club won the FA Cup four times and the First Division title once, but since 1925 it has been unable to put any major silverware in the trophy cabinet at Bramall Lane. The cupboard may be bare, but all the lean years have done nothing to dull the fans' commitment.

I saw living proof of this during the Blades' Championship match against Swansea City when, in the 62nd minute, George Baldock smashed the ball into the net to put his team into the lead. The supporters went wild, jumping for joy as if they'd just won the title. Then, in little more than 20 minutes, Swansea turned the game around and claimed all three points, but none of the home supporters lost heart. They left Bramall Lane solidly behind their lads, letting loose with another refrain of the 'Greasy Chip Butty' song and showing the whole world that no defeat, no missed trophy would ever change their love for their team and their colours.



## YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER

This is a historic club, passion for which has been passed down through the generations for 130 years, from father to son, grandfather to grandchild – with the oldest pointing the way to Bramall Lane and reminding the youngsters that there will never be anything better in the world than Sheffield United.

One curious and well-known fact about Bramall Lane is that it started life as a cricket ground and was used for cricket as well as football matches until 1973. Until that time the adjoining football stadium had only three stands, the fourth side being open to the cricket outfield. The ground acquired its current form in 1975 with the opening of the new (Tony Currie) stand.

## IN MEMORY OF THE 97

It's a sad thing to say, but every time I think of Sheffield Wednesday the first thing that comes to mind is that ill-fated day, 15 April 1989. It was a Saturday afternoon. On the neutral ground of Hillsborough, the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest was due to kick off at 3pm. The referee blew the whistle to start the game right on time, but what happened in the minutes that followed has gone down as one of the darkest and most painful episodes in the history of English football. Below is a brief summary of what has come to be known as the Hillsborough disaster.



I'll never forget the first time I set foot in Sheffield. On that summer's day in 2015 high winds and driving rain welcomed me to a city of workers, famous for its steel industry and as the birthplace of football. Football not just as a sport, but a way of life. Something that bestows hope on an entire population, split in two and always ready to follow their respective colours around the country. Colours that in the north of the city shine blue and white for Sheffield Wednesday, who owe their existence to members of the Wednesday Cricket Club.

This new team was founded on 4 September 1867. The main aim of the Cricket Club members was to keep the players busy during the winter months, when the willow and the leather are in mothballs. In the first 30 years of its life, the club known as Sheffield Wednesday played at four different venues, spending some time at the historic Olive Grove ground before settling at Hillsborough in 1899.

Hillsborough is not the same as other grounds. It stands in the suburb of Owlerton, which I've visited a couple of times, always with a heavy heart. With sadness at the thought of the



worst tragedy ever to have struck English football, a tragedy that took the lives of 97 people and broke the hearts of an entire nation that only four years earlier, in May 1985, had to face the Bradford City fire (in which 56 people died) and the Heysel disaster in Brussels, in which Liverpool supporters were involved and 39 Juventus fans died. There's a small plaque in memory of those fans at Anfield. A few yards from that is a bigger memorial bearing the names of the Liverpool supporters who lost their lives at Hillsborough's Leppings Lane end, designated for them on that day and subsequently written into history for the saddest of reasons.

The Leppings Lane end is skirted by the River Don and shrouded in complete silence. Not only on that rainy morning in 2015 but, above all, a few years later when I returned to Hillsborough for a Championship match against Brentford. To me that night the match was of secondary importance – as I looked around I tried to go back in time, picturing myself there on the terrible afternoon of 15 April 1989. In those days English football grounds were not the ultra-modern stadiums we see today, and although Hillsborough was considered one of the best grounds in the country, nothing and nobody was able to prevent that awful tragedy.

It was caused by a serious error on the part of the police. To ease the pressure of the mass of Liverpool fans trying to get through the seven turnstiles at the Leppings Lane end, match commander Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield gave the order to open Gate C and let over 2,000 fans on to the terraces in time for kick-off.<sup>3</sup> A kick-off that the police decided not to postpone, and by the time the thousands of supporters started to flood through Gate C, disaster was inevitable.

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3 Before the Hillsborough tragedy, most English football grounds had large sections of terracing. Nowadays terraces are mainly confined to non-league grounds.