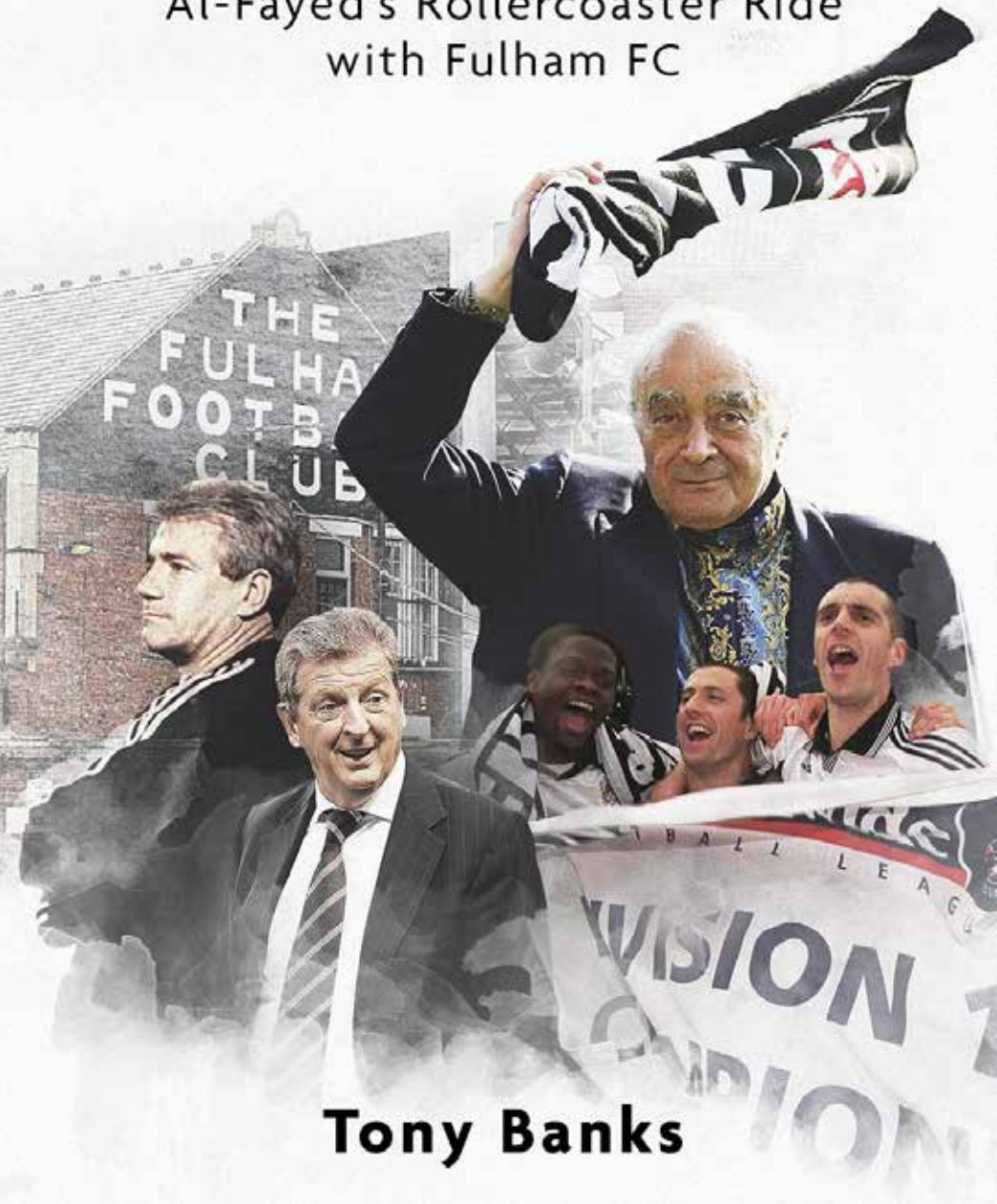


THE

GREAT ADVENTURE

Al-Fayed's Rollercoaster Ride
with Fulham FC



Tony Banks

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The Adams Family

MICKY ADAMS sits in his back garden on a sunny autumn afternoon in Leicestershire and looks back now with fondness on those days at the Cottage. It was not always that way.

In fact, there are still moments when the glint comes into the eye, the memory flares, the thought of what might have been ignites the tinges of anger that still linger.

Because, quite simply, without Adams, none of this tale is likely to have unfolded.

It was he who hauled Fulham out of that lowest point in their proud history, and then, in the 1996/97 season, won promotion from what was then the Football League Third Division by finishing second in the table, in the club's best season since those Malcom Macdonald days.

The spiky, effervescent Adams, a former Sheffield United youngster who made his name as a player at Gillingham, Coventry, Leeds and particularly Southampton, simply revitalised the ailing club.

Somehow, after succeeding Ian Branfoot in February 1996, Adams, then 35, managed to put together a team of hungry free transfers and youngsters and steer them to an unlikely promotion.

That rumbustious, giddy season is still regarded by many Fulham fans as one of the most enjoyable in the club's recent history, never mind later escapades in the Premier League and in European football.

Adams, at the time of writing the technical director at the Brooke House College academy in Leicestershire and jetting off to all corners of the world delivering coaching clinics after his last managerial stint at Sligo Rovers, is still a cult hero at Craven Cottage, some 26 years after being unceremoniously sacked by Mohamed Al-Fayed.

There is, though, no question that, had Adams not taken Fulham out of that lowest rung of the Football League ladder, Al-Fayed would not have looked at the club. Even for the unpredictable Egyptian, investing in a club lying 91st in the league, or even quite possibly in non-league football, would have almost certainly been a step too far.

So Fulham have a lot to thank Adams for. And, though angered at his dismissal at the time, the Yorkshireman has since admitted that it might just have been the right decision for the club at that moment in their history.

Adams had been brought into Fulham by Branfoot, his old manager at Southampton, in July 1994, as a player-coach, on the understanding that he would be

learning the ropes of management under the hugely experienced former Reading and Saints boss.

But with things rapidly declining under Branfoot in the spring of 1996, on the back of a dreadful run of one win in 21 games and with the club lying one place off the bottom of the Football League, Adams was quietly handed the job as his mentor moved upstairs.

The effect was almost immediate. Fulham lost only seven of their remaining 19 matches to end up safe in 17th place. Still their lowest-ever league finish – but things were turning.

Adams now remembers, 'I had said to Ian, if I come in as player-coach, I want to learn the ropes. I wanted him to teach me how to be a manager. And he did.

'I was responsible for the reserves. I used to drive the minibus to games, go scouting. One time we went to Manchester. Ian did United's reserves, I did City's. I remember, one o'clock in the morning, Ian had dropped me off, I got in my car, going down the A34, sirens go off and I got done for speeding – got a two-week driving ban!

'But I managed to change the mentality of the group when I got the job. When I came in that February I said to them, listen, you are playing for your futures. I am going to try and change it around. I want you to buy into what I am doing. I tried to change the style of football.'

That summer, Adams, who was to be handed a five-year contract by then Fulham chairman Jimmy Hill the following January, set about rebuilding his team with some shrewd signings, all for either small fees or on

free transfers. His battling, youthful side lost only nine games all season, with Mike Conroy top-scoring with 23 goals as they finished runners-up to Wigan Athletic, after leading the table for most of the campaign.

Adams says, ‘I’d seen Gillingham come to Fulham at the end of that season when I took over. They finished second under Tony Pulis. I studied his team, and I knew what I wanted to do when I got the job eventually.

‘Which was – make us bigger and stronger. Gillingham weren’t a good team, but they were big and strong, seven six-footers in the side. If you wanted a scrap they were going to scrap you, if you wanted to play football they would try. I had studied that.

‘I gave about 14 free transfers that summer, to most of the smaller players, much to the disgust of the chairman, Jimmy Hill. I said to Jimmy, I’m going to recruit bigger – and that’s what I did. With Mike Conroy, who had been a big signing for Ian but did not show any confidence in front of goal, I just had to get him firing and believing in himself mentally, and we were there.

‘Simon Morgan, though, was key to it all. He was captain of the team, pissed off, had heard it all before from various managers, “We are going to do this and that.” He wanted to leave, was under contract, had been tapped up by other clubs. We went to Hartlepool early on after winning our first game, and lost. I pulled him at the back of the bus and said, “Listen Morgs, you are key to what I am trying to do here. I know you have heard all this shit before, but stay with it, and things will improve.” And they did.

‘The spirit we had. One game, Darlington away, we won 2-0, they had two players carried off in the first 20 minutes. It was uproar! The police came into the dressing room after the game. I told them get the fuck out.

‘That summed us up. I wanted to create an atmosphere where if teams wanted to play football we would play them, if they want to scrap, I’m fucking going to get some people that can scrap – Richard “Chippy” Carpenter, Danny Cullip, Morgs. They could all put their foot in – but they could all also play. I had Nick Cusack as a sweeper. I changed the formation. Suddenly Conroy started scoring from everywhere. It just showed what confidence and belief could do.

‘I used to take them up Epsom Downs every Tuesday, run up and down the hills, we didn’t touch a ball. We’d get a result and I’d tell them to lay down and think, “Do you think other teams are doing this? Are they fuck. But we are, and look where we are now. Look at the table – top of the league. That’s why.”

‘Once you get people buying into your philosophy, you have half a chance. But they were clever with it as a group – they used to go and have a beer thinking I didn’t know, but I did.

‘We should have won the league. That really grates with a lot of people. We lost at home against Northampton late on. But we finished level on points with Wigan, had the better goal difference – lost the title on goals scored!

It had been decided by the league, helped by our chairman – Jimmy – that that would be the rule for that

season. Goals scored rather than goal difference. So we lost the title! That was Jim. Very Fulham.'

In the October, Fulham had celebrated 100 years at Craven Cottage with a 3-1 win over Doncaster Rovers, which at that point made it nine wins from their first dozen games. Their first recorded match at their famous home had been in the Middlesex Senior Cup in the mists of time back in 1896, against Minerva, when Fulham won 4-0.

Promotion was mathematically clinched with a goalless draw at Mansfield on 8 April 1997, which had followed a famous win at Carlisle three days earlier, when Irishman Rodney McAre'e's long-range drive earned a crucial 2-1 victory. It was the club's first promotion in 15 years.

Adams was handed the Third Division Manager of the Season award, presented by Sir Alex Ferguson. All seemed set fair for one of English football's brightest young managers.

But things were about to rapidly change. Very rapidly indeed.