



THE MAN
WITH
THE PLAN

**HOWARD
WILKINSON'S**

LEEDS UNITED

DAVE TOMLINSON

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Mr S and Mr F

*I came home knowing that I'd
met a gentleman.*

IN THE early hours of Sunday, 30 September 1888, Elizabeth Stride became the third victim of Jack the Ripper. The murder occurred in Dutfield's Yard, just off Berners Street in the east London borough of Tower Hamlets. The yard, adjacent to a Jewish socialist club, housed the printing and publication of a radical Yiddish newspaper.

Interrupted before he could mutilate the body, the killer struck again within the hour. He slaughtered Catherine Eddowes less than a mile away in Mitre Square.

A few blocks away, a chalk message was found scrawled on a wall: 'The Juwes are the men that will not be blamed for nothing.' A police officer hurriedly washed away the writing, fearing that it would incite anti-Semitism in an already tense neighbourhood.

Between 1880 and 1914, the tens of thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing economic hardship and religious persecution transformed London's small Jewish community. More than half of the immigrants settled in the East End in the area between Spitalfields and Whitechapel, drawn to the area by the idea of cheap housing and an abundance of work.

The unfamiliar language, diet and religion of the 'strange exotics' sparked suspicion; crimes that appeared to be 'foreign

to the English style', such as the Ripper murders, were commonly blamed on Jews.

A fog of resentment swirled around the newcomers. Newspapers crackled with scornful rhetoric, branding the immigrants as 'pauper foreigners', 'a pest and a menace to the native-born East Ender'. Trade unions and rabble-rousing politicians alike called for tough limits on immigration and protested that England was becoming 'the human ashpit for the refuse population in the world'.

A stone's throw from this maelstrom of anti-immigrant sentiment, tucked away in the underbelly of Dutfield's Yard, lay a narrow, cobblestoned thoroughfare named Severne Street. It was typical of the area, lined either side with grimy back-to-backs. Yet, it was the beacon of hope for many, including Isaac and Sarah Silverstein. The couple had fled their home in Poland in search of a better life with their son Ashy. They settled on Severne Street, and on 22 March 1899, their humble abode echoed with the first cries of their second son, Harry.

Severne Street soon beckoned another Polish family — Shmuel and Hannah Hoffman, and their daughter Bessie. They took up residence next door to the Silversteins, their lives intertwined by shared stories of displacement and dreams of belonging.

Life was hard. Anti-Jewish sentiment escalated following the passing of the Aliens Act in 1905. The *Manchester Evening Chronicle* promised that 'the dirty, destitute, diseased, verminous and criminal foreigner who dumps himself on our soil ... shall be forbidden to land.' The Act established a mechanism for deporting such undesirables, including Jews fleeing racial persecution in their homeland. Despite such oppression, the Silversteins and the Hoffmans were content. An attraction grew between Harry and Bessie and it came as no surprise when the couple married in February 1923.

On 22 January 1925, Bessie gave birth to their first child, a boy they named Leslie Howard.

This febrile atmosphere allowed a British fascist movement to gain traction, spearheaded by Sir Oswald Mosley, 'the most polished literary speaker in the Commons'.

Mosley quit the Conservative party in 1922 to become an independent, and two years later he shifted his allegiance to Labour. Mosley was given responsibility for resolving the unemployment crisis after the party's victory at the 1929 general election. He advocated a programme that would nationalise vital industries and introduce tariffs to protect British firms from imports. When the cabinet rejected his recommendations, Mosley resigned to become the leader of the British Union of Fascists, embracing the ideologies of Hitler and Mussolini. His supporters became known as the Blackshirts for their all-black, long-sleeved and high-necked uniform. They were little more than organised thugs who roamed the streets of London attacking elderly Jews and picking on young boys on their way home from school.

Observing such developments with dread, the Silversteins became overtly political, espousing left-wing thinking. On 4 October 1936, Leslie, then 11, took part in the Battle of Cable Street, a series of clashes that occurred in the locality after members of the Metropolitan Police were sent to protect a march by Blackshirts through the East End. The police clashed with anti-fascist protestors, who rallied 100,000 to their cause and erected roadblocks and barricades to disrupt the march.

A 6,000-strong police force attempted to clear the route so the march could pass. The demonstrators would have none of it, and Mosley was forced to abandon his plans.

In August 1938, Harry and Bessie paid ten shillings to change the family name to Silver, reasoning that the new surname would reduce antagonism and make life easier.

Leslie left school at 14 and found work in tailoring through his father. Harry worked as a junior manager for the tailors Stanley Morrie, and he wangled an opening for his son.

Leslie despised the tedium and monotony but there was soon more to be concerned about than boredom. In the autumn of 1940, air raids killed over 43,000 civilians.

One of the first bombs landed on the Stanley Morrie factory – no one was hurt but the owners of the firm considered it wise to relocate to Yorkshire. Harry decided that the family should follow suit and rented a property in Leeds in December 1940.

This new life appealed to Leslie. He became an active member of the Chapeltown branch of the Young Communist League, working in the League's bookshop on Woodhouse Lane, a job that was far more to Leslie's liking than tailoring. He became a fervent advocate for communism, arguing that the party was the only one prepared to stand up to fascism.

It was a decision he regretted in later life, telling an after-dinner audience in 1998, 'It was a mistake and beyond comprehension how my generation could have been so misguided.'

Silver volunteered for the RAF in 1943 and was assigned to Bomber Command as a flight engineer. He flew with four different squadrons in Europe and the Far East, completing his maximum allocation of 250 hours of missions.

During his travels, Silver received a letter from Anita Feddy, a girl he had left behind in England. After being introduced at Young Communist League meetings, the couple had begun dating casually and Anita was now keen to understand Silver's intentions.

He had no reservations and the couple married on 31 August 1946 in Chapeltown.

Uncle Joe, who attended the wedding, inquired about Silver's plans after he was demobbed.

Silver paused for a second. He hadn't really thought about it, other than knowing with all his being that tailoring was off the agenda. He had toyed with the idea of a job as a salesman, but his thinking was vague.

Uncle Joe, a production and development chemist in the nitro-cellulose industry, suggested that he should go into the paint trade. Silver was bewildered – paint? He knew nothing about it.

Joe pooh-poohed Silver's apprehension, offering to supply cellulose thinners for Silver to sell if he could find a warehouse to use in Leeds. Joe assured him there was a national shortage for the car refinishing market, and he'd make enough money to retire in three years.

Taken by the suggestion, Silver scraped together a £1,000 investment. Uncle Joe put up £250 to supplement a £250 demobilisation gratuity and a few hundred made from selling alcohol while serving in the Far East. And so, the Silver Paint and Lacquer Company Ltd was born.

Silver started making cellulose thinners before moving on to domestic paint, all from a small warehouse off Woodhouse Lane. In 1963, he moved to larger premises in Batley, and then to Birstall. By then, the company had been renamed Kalon, taken over Leyland Paints and become a public limited company.

Silver rose to prominence in the paint industry, serving as president of the Oil & Colour Chemists' Association, the Paint Industries Club, the Paintmakers Association of Great Britain and the Paint Research Association.

Hailing from a generation that understood the needs of both the Leeds and wider Jewish community, Silver was generous to the extreme. He became involved with many organisations in Leeds, making significant contributions to life in the city without regard for personal gain. 'Leeds has given a lot to me,' responded a humble Silver when told

that he had given a lot to Leeds. He was about to give so much more.

‘I say, I say, I say, young man, how would you feel about joining our board of directors?’

Leslie Silver smirked at the suggestion that he was a youngster. At 56, he had long since stopped thinking of himself as young. By comparison to his colleague, though, Silver was young, juvenile even.

Manny Cussins, the chairman of Leeds United Football Club, was 20 years Silver’s senior but looked even older, worn down by his association with the club. Silver was in his prime, a touch overweight perhaps, but otherwise ruddy with health, sporting a thick mane of greying, wavy hair and an easy smile.

The pair were attending a charity event at the home of local philanthropist Arnold Ziff, the president of the Leeds Jewish Welfare Board.

‘Smiling at the thought, are you, Leslie?’

‘It would be a great honour. How much will it cost me?’

Cussins’ turn to chuckle now, relishing the parallels to a conversation from two decades earlier, when it was he who had been tapped up for an investment by a United chairman.

He was now the father figure at Elland Road, the elder statesman, having been invited on to the board by former chairman Sam Bolton back in 1961.

Cussins took over as United figurehead in 1974 and was now trying to persuade Silver to join a once-great club that was back in the doldrums.

‘Nothing, Leslie,’ came Cussins’ reply to the query about the cost. ‘This isn’t about money. We’d welcome an investment, surely, but this is about energy,

commitment and enthusiasm, getting someone in who can lead this club back to where it belongs, where we were when Don Revie was around. What d'you say? Interested?'

'I am, Manny, of course I am.'

Cussins was lying, of course – the interest payments on the money borrowed to pay for signings like Peter Barnes, Kenny Burns and Frank Worthington had pushed United to the brink of insolvency. Silver had to advance £200,000 to keep the club afloat, though he later claimed it was more like £2m over the years.

And thus, the die was cast. Cussins had recruited the man who would succeed him in steering a dying football club back to the top of the game in England.

Silver's lifelong passion for football was sparked in his youth. It was 1935 when Silver first witnessed the legendary Alex James command the field for the indomitable Arsenal side. James wasn't the archetypal superstar with his baggy shorts and mature demeanour. Yet, the artistry with which he caressed the ball and retained possession intelligently before releasing one of his team-mates marked him as a titan of the pre-war game.

It was Silver's uncle who took him to Highbury that fateful day. Surrounded by the roar of the crowd and the colour of the afternoon, Silver stood, mouth agape in awe. In that moment, 'I just fell in love with football.'

Silver began attending Leeds United games after the war and quickly became a devoted fan. He was present when the legendary John Charles made his debut in April 1949.

Silver befriended Leeds manager Don Revie, whom he adored. On occasion, the two holidayed together with their wives.

Silver jumped at Cussins' invitation to get involved in Leeds United in 1981. He was enthralled by the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to one of the area's great institutions.

He had the money, the time and the energy, and he made a mark on the history of Leeds United in much the same way that Revie's mentor, Harry Reynolds, did in the 50s and 60s. Silver, like Reynolds, made a significant contribution to the club.

Silver's Jewish background helped his relationship with Cussins and United, a club with long-standing ties to the local Jewish community.

Les Goldberg, born in Leeds, played right-back for United in 1937, but he reflected the fears of many in his community by changing his surname by deed poll to Gaunt.

Cussins joined the United board in 1961, along with two other Jews, Sidney Simon and Albert Morris, who briefly chaired the club until his death in 1968.

Their appointments reflected the growing influence of Jews in the local community – between 1880 and 1920, approximately 2.5 million Jewish migrants, many of them impoverished, fled Russia. Many were drawn by the prospect of working in Leeds' thriving tailoring industry – the city had the third-largest Jewish population in the country.

Leeds' Jews formed a community centred on Chapeltown. Revie moved to nearby Alwoodley in 1969 and settled at 'Three Chimneys', the five-bedroom house formerly owned by Cussins.

The Jewish community became avid supporters and benefactors of the club after being drawn to Elland Road by Revie's success.

Leeds United appeared to be designed for a man like Silver. He had lofty ambitions and was determined to do for Leeds United what he had done for Kalon. His energy

revitalised a sagging board and one of his early moves paved the way for a force of nature to blow through Elland Road's stagnant corridors.

Silver had become a patron of the 100 Club, a charitable body formed by United-supporting local businessmen to help replace the West Stand after it was destroyed by fire in 1956. The 100 Club grew into a powerful pressure group whose members included many eminent locals – it was only natural that Silver should join up.

Among the other patrons was Bill Fotherby, another local entrepreneur and a close friend of Silver's.

Fotherby was charismatic, an ebullient salesman with the gift of the gab and a penchant for fedora hats, large cigars and self-promotion. He adopted the stereotypical persona of a used car salesman, someone who 'could sell sand to the Arabs'. His extraordinary public persona was crowned with a crest of black curls and huge, horn-rimmed spectacles atop a spiv moustache – truly, Fotherby was, to misquote from *Billy Bunter*, the Owl of Elland Road (alternatively, a footballing version of *Hi-De-Hi's* Ted Bovis).

Fotherby was not a Jew, despite once joking, 'I would never deny it if someone said I was.' He became a close friend of the Jewish community, taken under the wing of a tailor as a young boy and running Cussins' clothing factory.

He played for the club's junior side, the Leeds United Stormcocks, but lacked the talent to make it as a footballer and instead focused his energies on business.

During the 70s, Fotherby began stockpiling United shares but was always blocked from joining the board by a dubious Cussins, who habitually mocked his ambitions.

Despite Cussins' reluctance, Fotherby wangled a way into the boardroom by virtue of a conditioned business transaction.

As Silver recounted, Fotherby's involvement was not entirely selfless. 'The first director we had who drew a salary was Bill

Fotherby. He came to me one day and we gave him a job as commercial director. A nominal salary, but he got a commission on business and did a very good job. He was crazy, Bill!

Fotherby adored Silver; he never had a bad word for him. 'A wonderful chap, a real gent.' But he was equally clear that it was he, not Silver, who ran the club. 'From the day I joined, I made a difference at Leeds United. I changed Leeds United. God gave me a gift of convincing people that Leeds United was the best club in the world. I would have stayed there until I died. It was my club.'

Fotherby was not everybody's cup of tea as evidenced by fans' graffiti on a bridge on Whitehall Road East, a couple of miles north of Elland Road. 'Fotherby = Liar Thief Crook Cheat'. The accusation was daubed there after one of Fotherby's rumoured big transfers came to nothing. Such a teller of tall tales could not but attract critics.

There were other newcomers in the boardroom: Maxwell Holmes and builder Peter Gilman joined a board which also included Rayner Barker, Jack Marjason and Brian Woodward.

The club Silver and Fotherby inherited was in dire straits – football fans across the land oozed hatred for anything different, but those who followed Leeds were in a different league.

Racist chants filled the Elland Road stadium, which was rarely more than half-full at the time. Matchdays were a magnet for the far-right National Front, doing a roaring trade in sales of its magazine, *The Flag*, outside the ground.

The club was on its financial uppers. Revie's legacy when he left to manage England in 1974 was £200,000 in the bank and one of the strongest squads in the country. By the time they were relegated in 1982, there was an overdraft of £1.8m secured against the stadium. The club only made it through the next year by selling off the few players who could command a fee, slashing the payroll by 23 per cent, and

banking donations of £200,000 from the 100 Club. There were few positives – a mediocre team meandered without direction in a mediocre Second Division.

The club's accounts carried the doomy warning from the auditors that 'the company has incurred substantial losses during the year and is dependent upon the financial support of its bankers and its directors through their guarantees'.

The magnitude of the club's problems didn't deter Silver and Fotherby; their resolve only grew stronger. As Fotherby remembered, 'We needed money, and I was commercial; my job was to bring money into Leeds United and get us publicity, because what were Leeds? Who were Leeds? Don Revie had gone ... how do you follow that?'

Following that was exactly what Silver and Fotherby had to do, and it wouldn't be easy.

Their first season on the board wasn't a pleasant one – Leeds United were relegated after 18 years in the First Division. It was a miserable campaign and manager Allan Clarke paid the price with his job.

Eddie Gray, another United legend, was named player-manager. Gray, like Revie 20 years earlier, pinned his hopes on youth. That went down well with supporters, made for some pleasant afternoons and brought an exciting breeze to Elland Road, but ultimately Gray's time ran into the sand.

Cussins believed that in hiring Silver, he had found the man who could succeed him as chairman.

Silver had substance that the other directors lacked, a gravitas that made him the obvious choice when Cussins' thoughts turned to retirement.

Silver was appointed vice-chairman when he arrived and assumed the chair when Cussins stepped down in 1983.

Cussins was named vice-chairman, but it was always clear that Fotherby was Silver's right-hand man. They spent hours playing snooker together, with Fotherby always contriving to lose, keen on remaining 'in' with the chairman.

The pair were at the snooker table when Silver revealed that he had been invited on to the United board. 'How the hell did you pull that one off, Leslie? You're not a fan of Leeds like I am. I'll have Manny's ears for this.'

They were in the same location when Silver's financial adviser told him that he had disposed of his shares in Kalon in 1991. 'Get a bloody bottle open!' exclaimed Fotherby at the news.

He knew what side his bread was buttered, did Fotherby.

There was no honeymoon period for Silver – within a couple of years, the new chairman had become one of the city's most disliked men as he took the steps he believed to be necessary to improve the club's fortunes.

Leeds hinted for three seasons in a row that they could reclaim their top-flight status under Eddie Gray, but the closest they got was seventh in 1985. It was hugely disappointing – a decent start suggested that Leeds might be able to secure the promotion they craved, and they sustained their push through the winter months but they couldn't finish the job.

Silver was forced to accept a harsh reality as he thumbed through the club's financial results, pondering how to keep United's heads above water. If Leeds could not return to the First Division – and there was no indication that this was going to happen any time soon – then something had to be done.

The interest on a bank overdraft, which remained stubbornly above £1.5m despite the club's penny-pinching over the previous three years, was the biggest expense after players' wages.

It was obvious to Silver that this was madness – the only option was to sell off the club’s one concrete asset, the Elland Road stadium.

Silver opened discussions with Leeds City Council to see if a deal could be done. Elland Road was a vital municipal amenity, attracting thousands of visitors to the city each year, and the council saw the value in keeping such a local business going. Leeds United’s demise would be disastrous for the city.

The club’s valuation was an issue. The stadium and the land on which it stood were valued at £8.5m on the balance sheet. The council would not accept such a fee, and beggars cannot be choosers. Recognising that the accounts showed the ground’s replacement value as a sports stadium, Silver accepted a £2.5m offer as a more realistic estimate of its commercial value and closed the deal.

That sum enabled the club to clear its overdraft and reduce operating costs. The agreement included a 125-year lease of the pitch and stands, ensuring that football would continue at Elland Road.

The shareholders approved the sale of the freehold at an extraordinary general meeting in September 1985, with Silver reporting that the transaction ‘removed the intolerable burden of debt’.

The motion was approved, but its passage was far from smooth.

Dr Aubrey Share, a serial agitator, demanded to know how the proceeds had been used. Silver informed the meeting that all the club’s debts had been paid in full, including directors’ loans of £368,000, with the remainder placed on deposit. He emphasised the reduction in operating expenses and bank charges, which would lower the break-even figure from 16,000 to 12,000 spectators.

Mutterings that ‘the directors are taking their money and running’ were clearly audible in the room.

When it was suggested from the floor that the cash would be gone within three years, Silver said Leeds United were in a better financial position than 75 per cent of Football League clubs.

Responding to questioning, Silver confirmed that there was no buy-back clause in the agreement and that the council would be the beneficiary of the revenue generated by hosting rugby games at the stadium.

United's increasingly cynical supporters saw the sale as a hugely symbolic admission that the club was in terminal decline. If their reaction to the sale was hostile, their outrage at Eddie Gray's dismissal was even more intense – for a time, Leslie Silver was the most unpopular man in West Yorkshire, his Rolls-Royce vandalised by enraged fans.

A disastrous opening to the 1985/86 season saw Leeds dip as low as 20th after winning just three of their first 11 games. A 6-2 defeat at Stoke City was especially humiliating, forcing the board to admit that enough was enough.

Silver drove youth-team coach Keith Mincher to a League Cup game at Walsall in early October with the intention of announcing that he would be taking over from Gray after the game if Leeds failed to win.

The players had not read the script and a comfortable 3-0 victory stayed Silver's hand. It was a temporary reprieve – Gray was fired on Friday morning.

The decision wasn't unanimous. Barker, Cussins, Fotherby, Marjason and Gilman backed Silver, but Holmes and Woodward voted against.

Woodward was so adamantly opposed that he resigned from the board.

A resolute Silver followed through and showed Gray the door, putting coach Peter Gunby in temporary charge.

The sacking sparked outrage among fans and players alike, with veteran skipper Peter Lorimer reading out an angry

statement of protest before the following day's game against Middlesbrough.

Leeds won 1-0, though Lorimer was said to have considered messing up his penalty winner to express his displeasure with the board's decision. Supporters called for Silver's resignation, but he resisted their demands, helped by Gray's dignified words as he urged the players to act professionally.

Gray's departure cost the club its greatest advocate of youth development. Following his exit, there would be a sharp volte-face in approach.

Prompted by a recommendation from Revie, Silver persuaded Doncaster Rovers to release legendary former United captain Billy Bremner. The Scot set about reshaping the squad, ditching the youngsters in favour of more experienced journeymen who he believed were better equipped to win promotion.

There was no new-manager bounce – Leeds struggled to keep their heads above the quicksand of relegation. They finished 14th, the same position they were in when Gray was dismissed.

Even the cash injection from the stadium sale could not fully address Leeds United's financial problems. Silver reported a loss of more than half a million and net liabilities of nearly £200,000.

'I trust ... you will join me and my fellow directors,' Silver begged the shareholders, 'in the confidence that the alterations are already showing the desired improvement in the financial and playing position of the club.'

His words rang hollow as he was forced to acknowledge the increase in costs from 'rent to our new landlords'.

Silver looked around a cold boardroom but there were no solutions there, just the bonhomie and madcap schemes of Fotherby.

THE MAN WITH THE PLAN

Leeds United was a club in crisis, seemingly doomed to struggle forever in the mind-numbing limbo of the Second Division.

That is, for as long as they could avoid the dreadful prospect of bankruptcy.

A shaken Silver held his head in his hands, knowing that the task ahead of him was far more challenging than Manny Cussins had suggested.

Silver sighed as he considered an uncertain future. 'What on earth can I do?'