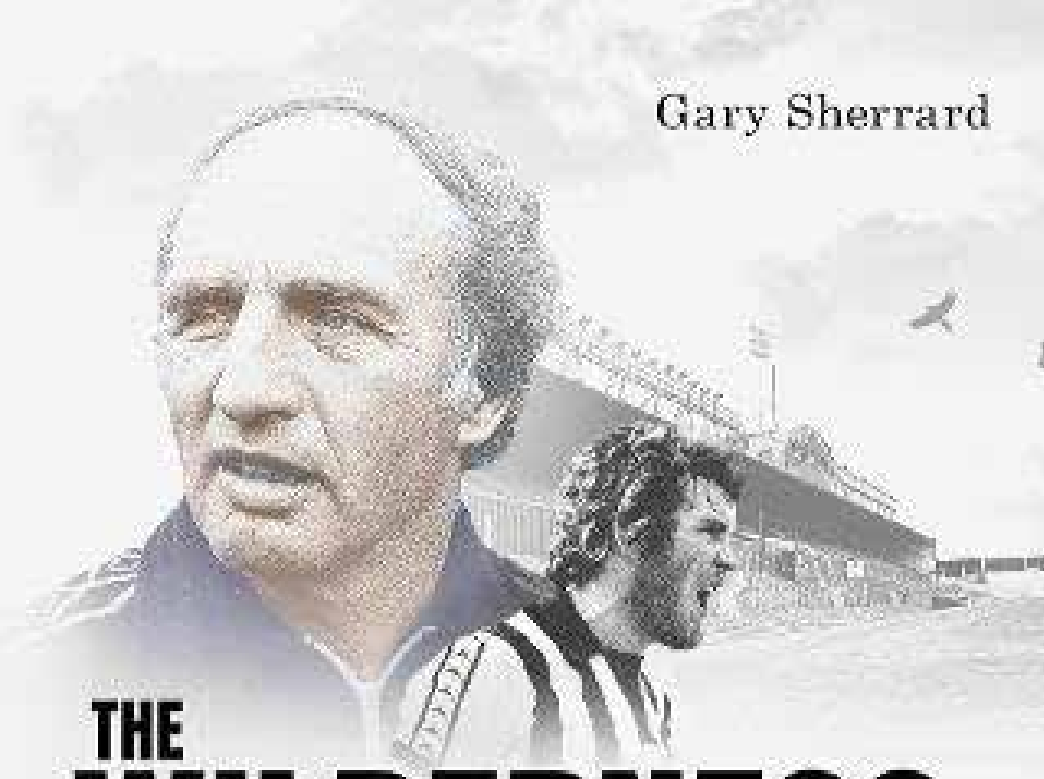
Gary Sherrard



THE WILDERNESS YEARS

Newcastle United 1978–1984

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pitch

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Chapter One:

Breaking Away

THE ATTRACTION of the first five steps behind the goal was always a mystery to me. From there, standing at the front of the terrace as a youngster, on those cold, bleak, concrete steps, with your feet below pitch level and chest on the perimeter boards, you literally looked up at your idols. You could see a little of everything but not much of anything in particular.

Too low to tell whether a shot at the far end of the field had flashed narrowly off target or squirted miles wide of the posts, you had to be in an eternal state of excitement because every effort on goal looked like it was going in – until it didn't.

The camber of the pitch meant you could perhaps follow the top third of a player at the other end, reduced even further occasionally as part of the portion you could see disappeared earthwards, put there by an opposition challenge or, as home fans called it, a blatant and vicious foul.

From those steps you had a close-up view of the Northumbria Constabulary and the volunteers of the St John Ambulance – or the backs of them, anyway. But you didn't hand over pocket money to watch *those* black-and-whites in action. Photographers, ballboys, programme sellers and other

hawkers also got between you and the match, while stadium kiosk staff headed home that way during the second half.

So, it wasn't much of a view, which is why we ended up a few yards further back, despite a height disadvantage in comparison with many of the grown men around us.

Whatever your view, the terrace is where you *feel* matchday. You could hear it and, by God, you could smell it. The fags, the beer breath, the pies and the pee, the sweat and the sulphur. Nearer the front, there would be a one-off whiff of freshly cut grass and occasionally, if the players came close enough, you could also catch the smell of liniment as they retrieved the ball for a goal kick or a corner or when they celebrated a goal with pumping fists in front of their adoring public.

After a downpour, the fans at the front felt it from the ground up as much as head down, with water filling the void between the bottom step and the perimeter wall. If it rained on a Friday, the standing water absorbed dust and litter in a slimy film guaranteed to soak into your shoes by Saturday afternoon, too.

All the senses combined in an incident we witnessed on those front five steps in the Gallowgate End of Newcastle United's St James' Park. A pitch invader – either joining goal celebrations with the team or possibly providing entertainment for his mates with a fleeting beer-fuelled appearance on the turf – had just given the police and stewards some afternoon exercise with a runaround on the grass and then, rather than being caught and thrown out into the street, possibly via plod's charge room, he instead headed back in our direction and launched himself at full pelt from the cinder track towards the safety of numbers on the terrace.

As everyone at our end followed this action, there was a hush in full realisation of what was coming next as the fan

took off from pitchside. Even the cheers which followed – you cheered anything at the expense of the local constabulary – could not fully muffle the thud of his bare feet at the conclusion of the steep drop towards sanctuary. Becher's Brook on Grand National day had a smaller fall than the plunge to the unforgiving concrete of the front five steps and a notably softer landing.

That sound was something you experienced rather than simply heard. While the escapee was swallowed up into the bosom of black-and-white kith and kin, disappearing into the mass of bodies behind the goal, I could still hear the thud echoing inside me. Concussion by proxy, it rattled my skull and I know it's still there, a pinball making regular ricochets against the other memories of afternoons spent supporting my team.

When we grew into terrace regulars with a defined place that was ours behind the Gallowgate goal, well back from the front five steps, a piece of the concrete from our perch found its way into my possession. It was a jagged fragment about an inch across and had cracked off the leading edge of a step due to wear, tear and salt tears, and I claimed it as a souvenir. It lived in a jacket pocket, taken out ceremonially and offered to the football heavens on matchdays as we reached our spot where the step continued to gently crumble under our feet.

Looking at the results, you couldn't say it was much of a lucky charm but it *was* a piece of St James' Park. And it was mine.

* * *

Perched on an abrupt hill, just a few hundred yards beyond the edge of the city centre and an easy walk from car parks, bus stops and train stations (unless you were an away fan, of course), St James' Park has always stood out as home to what

one-time club chairman Sir John Hall revelled in calling the 'Geordie Nation'.

When you follow a team around the country and have had to navigate your way from transport hubs or shopping areas to another club ground before the invention of GPS and Google Maps in places like Leeds or Manchester or many of the newer venues, it makes you appreciate the location, location, location that Newcastle United possess.

We would see its concrete pillars on the approach from the north without even sitting on the top deck of the bus and St James' was just a short sprint back downhill to catch a return ride home – red buses bound for the county towns of Northumberland or yellows for the city area. It could not have been simpler.

Unlike many other league grounds which were established during Victorian times and enhanced piecemeal over the years, St James' was not hemmed in on all sides by residential rows. Unlike, say, Ewood Park in Blackburn, Coventry's old Highfield Road home or Liverpool's Anfield at the time, you didn't suddenly 'happen upon' it if you were walking. You always knew you were getting close, with clear lines of sight for its landmark stands or imposing floodlight pylons in all directions.

At Ewood Park, Highfield Road and Anfield, you could be anxiously unaware of your proximity to the stadium from even just a couple of hundred yards away, so camouflaged were they among the rhythmic brickwork of traditional local housing. Turnstiles were hidden among rows of terraced houses at places like Leicester City's Filbert Street and Luton Town's Kenilworth Road, with stadium urinals adjoining private backyards, and I remember matchday programmes being sold from a window (or maybe a coal-hole) in a brick outhouse just outside the gates of Anfield on my first visit

there just as the turnstile blocks came into view at what was then the home of Europe's dominant football force.

Standing on top of a hill above a compact city centre, St James' Park is often described as a cathedral, but it is even more a medieval castle. You approach onwards and upwards right to its ramparts, with the imposing position accentuated even within its own boundaries as the original official car park behind the old West Stand during our early fan days dropped down towards the Gallowgate End like lava flow from a great volcano.

Long overdue redevelopment work has provided a rejuvenated, bustling, vibrant, energetic post-industrial modern city and the stadium has, likewise, become more impressive, its walls far higher, its approaches grander, its footprint larger and its floodlights brighter as it preserves its place as the icing on the city's cake. It is visible for miles around – across the Town Moor from the north or through Gateshead on the other side of the Tyne – keeping watch over a region which has known some tough times and whose fortunes have often been reflected in its football team.

Born in the second half of the 60s, we grew up in an unkind era for football in this country, in the middle of a 12-year drought between England appearances at a World Cup, in the days when the game put an emphasis on defensive strength over attacking skill and of some horrendous tackling to go with a thuggish, abusive and discriminatory culture on the terraces and the streets outside. But this is where we started. Even coupled with some desperate times on the field, none of it did anything to dim the lure of matchday in support of our team.

Thanks to a neighbour with a spare ticket, I first got to experience St James' Park from plastic seats in the New Stand

(as it was then) on the east side of the stadium. Just a year earlier, the team had been to Wembley for the first time since the mid-century glory days and there was still a remnant of a swagger about the place. The team still fancied themselves to give anyone a game on their good days, though they finished between 7th and 12th in the league table during the opening years of the decade and the only consistency they could find was in annoyingly then finishing a remote 15th for three seasons in a row.

The last trophy had been won six years earlier during a groundbreaking journey into Europe, though even that had been born in the more regular surroundings of a mid-table finish in the league during the previous season. According to long-serving full-back Frank Clark, everyone thought it was a joke that Newcastle had even qualified for the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup. 'To be perfectly honest, we could hardly blame them,' he said. The competition's one-club-per-city rule had played into Newcastle's hands, though skipper Bobby Moncur defended the team, pointing out they had not bent any rules 'or crawled in on our bellies'.

Instead, in an age when few of the fans would have had much use for a passport, manager Joe Harvey and his team set out to enjoy to the full a first experience of Europe while also proving to doubters that they were worthy of the opportunity. They were not going to look this gift horse in the mouth. As Roger Hutchinson described it in *The Toon,* his history of the club: 'Newcastle United had traditionally fed upon a diet of passion and drama … What was needed, said the fans of the late 60s, was another burst through the pack, another full-speed chase with winners take all.'

They did it in style, too, beating some top names, starting with the elimination of a Feyenoord team that would become European Cup winners just a year later, even before their

Dutch domestic rivals at Ajax, Johan Cruyff and all, had reached that level.

Despite an inferior pedigree and a team inexperienced in the home-and-away format of the competition, not to mention the novelty of travelling abroad before foreign holidays became mainstream, Newcastle marched on. The bulk of the team, without any international football experience, had to adjust to alien conditions and diverse temperaments and would do so without any great knowledge of their opponents in an era when sport was so much more insular and short-sighted.

After beating Feyenoord, enormous crowds packed into St James' as the Geordies saw off Sporting Lisbon, Real Zaragoza, Portugal's Vitória Setubal and a Glasgow Rangers team that had already been to two European finals. The name of their last opponents, Újpest Dozsa, may not mean much now – and it would be years before I even learned which part of the name referred to their location – but the Hungarians were, at the time, embarking on a run of seven successive league titles and were described by legendary Leeds United manager Don Revie as the best team in Europe when they eliminated his side at the quarter-final stage. That attractive but ruthless Leeds team were partway through a spell in which they finished in the top two places in the Football League seven times in ten years and also had the more than adequate consolation of winning it for the first time in their history in that 1968/69 campaign, so Revie knew a good team when he saw one.

Newcastle scored three times in each of the home and away legs of the final, with skipper Moncur remarkably contributing half of the total. The Scot had played all over the field in his early days with the Magpies after turning down both Manchester United and Wolves to take the train

to Tyneside and join the youth ranks. He eventually settled into a sweeper role in defence and made such a good job of it that he became a senior international and captained Scotland in just his sixth appearance.

But before the European final, Moncur had never scored for United. After it, he added just seven more to total ten in 350 games with the club.

Moncur was among five of the European heroes who stayed around long enough to play in a run to the FA Cup Final in 1974, though the appearance at Wembley would be his last before a shock free transfer (and an even more shocking switch to Wearside). Full-backs Frank Clark and David Craig, goalkeeper Iam McFaul and midfielder Tommy Gibb, who had just arrived from Partick Thistle in 1969, were the other survivors of those two campaigns. Only Craig would remain by the time Newcastle returned to Wembley in 1976, though injury unluckily kept him on the sidelines once again.

The trophy which closed the 60s provided a wave of optimism just four years after United had come out of a spell in the Second Division. They had dropped out of the top flight after conceding more than 100 goals in the 1960/61 season but the anguish was mostly forgotten thanks to those new challenges abroad, not just in 1969 but also a strong run in defence of the silverware a year later. Defeat eventually came on away goals in the quarter-final when Belgian outfit Anderlecht supplied the killer blow in the final minute when some fans were already celebrating their team's progress.

The European experience captivated Tyneside and provided Harvey with some decent cash to attract new talent. A sizeable chunk of it was used to make Scottish midfielder Jimmy Smith the club's first £100,000 signing, brought in from Aberdeen, and another part of the pot was earmarked

for development of the stadium in a rare example of long-term planning.

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The Leazes End terrace, to the right of where I sat for my debut, traditionally housed the hardest and hardiest of the hardcore support, as well as the noisiest and most partisan. Unchanged since the addition of a roof in the 1930s, this is where the masses roared on the cup kings, the European winners and everything in between. It was where Milburn, Mitchell and Macdonald were worshipped; where Brennan and Moncur were backed in defensive resistance; where toasts had been made recently to Bryan 'Pop' Robson and Wyn 'The Leap' Davies as it rocked during the Fairs Cup runs and where favourites like 'Jinky' Jimmy Smith and 'Terry, Terry, Terry Hibbitt on the wing' had their public.

From here, the rattles and rosettes of the flat-capped 40s and 50s had given way to the singing and swaying of the 60s, to those floodlit Fairs Cup nights when more than 50,000 Geordie voices filled the air, where the rounds of 'Blaydon Races' and the chants of 'Supermac, Supermac' were captured by television cameras, though many of its residents were shrouded in the gloom under the roof during the depths of winter.

By the time I started attending regularly a few years later, the roof had come off in more ways than one and ambition had crumbled like the old beams.

The Leazes was cut off at the knees at the exact same time that the team slumped, suffering a humiliating relegation from the top division in 1977/78. That end of the ground was unceremoniously torn down, originally as part of a redevelopment programme, but instead was left, uninspiring and forgotten, mirroring the status of the team.

There were reports and artists' impressions published in the local newspapers of what the stadium could look like by an undetermined date in the future but only a blank, bleached concrete stump of a wall remained, marking a boundary at the back of a short set of grey steps which formed a truncated terrace. With no Liverpool or Manchester United in the second tier of the league, a single corner of this ramshackle remnant was sufficient to house away fans most weeks. With an extra length of fence added a short distance away to serve as segregation before the black-and-white pen directly behind the goal. Occasionally, too, the club had to find a more fluid solution in line with the numbers of travelling fans, increasing their accommodation to include the centre, while also pinning Magpies fans into a smaller area in the other corner, outnumbered in their own home.

The state of our stadium uncannily echoed the club's declining fortunes and it was both humiliating and embarrassing that this backdrop remained for so many years. Even the fabled Keegan-Waddle-Beardsley line-up went to work in front of a terrace which would have done a disservice to a lower league club as the redevelopment took not so much a backseat as a place in a flatbed trailer behind it.

My first experience in the Leazes End was shared with a friend's family for a midweek win in the First Division over a Leeds side who had already started their own transition. They had left their greatest era behind, though they had still been good enough to reach the European Cup Final just a couple of years earlier, with Jimmy Armfield doing the rebuilding job as manager after the bruising arrival and swift departure of Brian Clough once Don Revie had taken the England post.

Their team for the trip to Tyneside featured a selection of heyday survivors including the evergreen Peter Lorimer,

Scotland international goalkeeper David Harvey and defenders Paul Reaney and Paul Madeley, while big blond centre-back Gordon McQueen led a younger generation at a club so many football fans loved to hate. Growing up, all I ever heard about them was 'Dirty Leeds' and opinions on how they had bottled it at various points under Revie but it was only after revisiting highlights of their better days in later years that I could properly appreciate just how good players like Bremner, Giles, Clarke, Gray, Madeley, Jones, Reaney, Cooper and Hunter had all actually been.

On the night we went to watch them against Newcastle, the team list in the programme must have been put together by Eric Morecambe – with all of the correct numbers and all of the correct names but just not necessarily in the right order – and the maze of arrows I drew to the correct spots made the back page look like the *Dad's Army* map rather than a precious souvenir of a Leazes debut.

We stood near the front of the big, dark, roofed terrace, to the right of goal as the players looked from the pitch. An oddity of the original stand was that, as well as running behind the goal, it also took in one corner before giving way to the New (East) Stand, built as a replacement in the early 70s for what in previous generations had been known as the Popular Side terrace.

We were, of course, blissfully unaware that we would watch that traditional home of black-and-white support reduced to a blank concrete wall which would remain through year after year of my youth. Almost everyone I have met subsequently who visited as an away fan or even viewed television highlights at the time has asked what the club planned to do there. They'd expected to see it once but then roll up for a return and enjoy new facilities in a new stand. But this was Newcastle United and that was not how the club worked.

* * *

Ground development has regularly been a hot potato in the history of Newcastle United, most notably when the club missed out on the status of a World Cup host in what turned out to be the glorious summer of 1966.

There was a fallout with the city council, which held the lease on the stadium and insisted on seeing a reshaped management structure at the club before providing further commitment. A standoff with the elder statesmen who comprised the United board followed and there was even talk of the club having to find a new site to call home.

In the end, the World Cup went ahead without Newcastle and, instead, the spotlight switched to the neighbours. Roker Park welcomed Italy, Chile and the USSR to Wearside, while an Ayresome Park stadium which was home to a Middlesbrough team freshly relegated to the Third Division enjoyed an unexpected share of global headlines when North Korea – who played all three of their group games there – sensationally beat two-time world champions Italy. Newcastle United, on the outside of the party, could only watch jealously through the steamy windows.

Ayresome, surrounded by the terraced rows of local housing, had been built at the turn of the century, with its last major improvements in the 1930s, but they still managed to beat the clock in replacing the East Stand roof and adding more than 7,500 seats before the tournament kicked off. At Roker, with its pre-war main stand designed by the renowned Archibald Leitch, they lengthened the pitch, while also adding extra seats and a roof to the Fulwell End. The reward was to join Wembley, Goodison Park and Hillsborough as a World Cup quarter-final venue, with the USSR beating Hungary there ten years after Soviet communist authorities had crushed an uprising on the streets of their Eastern Bloc neighbours.

The annexation of St James' must have hit a nerve because Newcastle City Council suddenly produced plans to involve the club, the community and the university in proposals to build a sports complex based on a redeveloped 60,000-capacity stadium. Multi-use proposals of this type are common in the 21st century but were almost unheard of back then.

Newcastle United and the city that the club represents would have been pioneers of public planning, joining forces to put sport at the very heart of the community during the redevelopment of a modern city. Obviously, though, the proposals got no further. Simon Inglis wrote in his original guide to the nation's football grounds that 'United's willingness to enter such a scheme was not the major barrier. Money was. The scheme never left the drawing board.'

The consequence was that, not only was the carpet pulled from under these ambitious plans, but also that any future development would be done without input from the council or any other major organisations and at the club's exclusive expense. They were on to another loser.

For much of the 70s and 80s, beauty at St James' was only ever in the eye of the beholder. Even then, you still had to turn a blind one to blot out the more basic elements.

As I walked up to those seats for my debut, the statement concrete construction of the unimaginatively named New Stand was just three years old. The pillars on its outside included large chipped corners as a design feature, though they looked more like they'd been modelled on careless car parking, and the stadium's most striking feature was not this new cantilever roof but, instead, the floor-to-ceiling letters which ran along the full length of the brooding Old Stand opposite.

Looking down the hill from Barrack Road, the back of the stand spelled out the name of the club and simultaneously provided a giant and obvious link to its glorious past.

In his guide to the football grounds of England and Wales, Inglis compared this façade with the side of a battleship. Forty years later, best-selling author and travel writer Bill Bryson echoed this view in the pages (and website) of the *New Yorker*. Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa, and followed a different ballgame as he accompanied his journalist father on the baseball circuit but when he wrote that 'the stadiums I spent my childhood in seemed to be built of iron and girders and outsized rivets, as if from old battleships', any Newcastle fan would know exactly where he was coming from, even from a spot thousands of miles east of the pitcher's arm.

The Old Stand dated from 1906, from a time when Newcastle had just become league champions for the first time and were quickly on the way to doing it again. By the years of my first appearance, it came in two shades of corrugated grey on the outside, while the seating deck was wooden and dark, very dark. 'Surely there are no stands so dark, so grey, so brooding,' Inglis commented. 'Gritty' is a word frequently used to describe the overall ambience of St James', though a rhyming alternative would be more descriptive. And accurate.

On the roof of the Old Stand was the precipitous press box, which by then had been given a grey paint job but was highlighted in white in older images. Jackie Milburn, Len Shackleton, Ivor Broadis and Dave Hilley were some of the past players who moved to this lofty perch as members of the press once they'd hung up their boots. They must have had a good head for heights and some serious stamina.

On a stadium tour with a school group in the early 80s, we climbed up to sample its rows of stacked seats and wooden

window frames and it felt like the way up went on forever. The bird's-eye view was accentuated by the way the whole structure seemed to lean forward over the crowd below. In the days when just about every media man was a serious smoker, though, they were probably lucky if they could see through its windows at all.

My memories of our tour through the bowels of the stand below are of grimy corridors, dulled and flaking paint on old wooden panels, an associated smell of damp and of one lad helping himself to a pair of shorts he found stuffed behind a heating pipe in the narrow corridor. Thereafter, he strutted around in his player-issue cotton kit while the rest of us could buy only the nylon replicas. It didn't make him any better on the pitch though.

The dressing rooms felt as ancient as the rest of the stand. I think there were white wooden lockers where the players could hang up their flares, though they would not have been wide enough for the jacket lapels worn by Malcolm Macdonald and his mates.

To be able to go behind the scenes was much more unusual then than now and it was only a basic walk-through compared with the sensory overload experiences marketed today. We didn't even get to sit on the benches where Milburn, Mitchell, Macdonald, Moncur and Mick Martin had prepared for a game or celebrated a win with bottled beer in the communal bath, let alone walk on to the pitch. I don't think we even got as far as the tatty little wooden dugouts either side of the tunnel.

My entire experience of the Old Stand seats amounted to just a couple of games, including a mid-season friendly against Eastern Bloc heavyweights Dynamo Kiev, but any visit there or in the paddocks below did inspire feelings of travel through time. It looked like Edwardian Newcastle

because most of it *was* Edwardian Newcastle. The only things missing were woolly moustaches, suffragettes and a Liberal government.

You could almost feel a presence of earlier times when you took your place in those tip-down wooden seats, burnished by backsides over the generations. The stand had been built shortly after Edward, playboy heir to the throne for the best part of 60 years, finally got a chance to reign over us following the death of Queen Victoria. By the time he died in 1910, Newcastle had already won the league title three times. If he'd lived for another hundred years, he would have seen them win just twice more.

When construction finished in the early years of the 20th century, with the Magpies chasing league and cup glory (in finals played mostly at Crystal Palace before the birth of Wembley Stadium), St James' Park could hold 60,000 supporters. Even 70 years later, only 4,600 of them could claim a seat, all in the upper half of this stand. When the New Stand was added shortly before I started out, there was still seating for only 8,000 fans in the whole ground.

So, the stadium of my formative years would win no awards for appearance but I did claim one for myself as 'First Fan in the Ground' and made the most of it, basking in the glow as thousands of others followed me in.

It was season 1980/81, when Newcastle, going nowhere fast in mid-table of the Second Division, suddenly found themselves just 90 minutes away from the FA Cup quarter-finals and with even lower league opposition standing in the way.

After regular failure to get beyond the opening rounds, this time the Magpies beat Sheffield Wednesday and Luton Town by matching 2-1 scorelines to reach the fifth round, where we had been drawn to face Exeter City of the Third Division.

While no one was being fitted for their Wembley suit or booking Inter-City train tickets just yet, such a plum draw had fans starting to ponder the possibilities. So much had changed – not least the standards and expectations – during the five years since the team had last made it this far that it seemed like a dream to those of us experiencing it from the terraces for the first time.

It was a curious year, with Barnsley, Bristol City, Peterborough and Wrexham – more of them to come – also among the competition's last 16 teams. There was no Manchester United, no Liverpool and no Arsenal. There was no Aston Villa, who were on their way to a first league title since World War One and no West Ham, winners at Wembley a year earlier thanks to the only header of Trevor Brooking's long career (TV commentary on one channel initially credited it to Stuart Pearson on the grounds that Brooking would not have put his head in the way, though it was edited later).

With a group of my usual mates, plus a few extras now that interest had risen with the cup run, we queued from mid-morning at the gates to the 'E' Wing paddock in the Old Stand. Crisps eaten, can of pop gone and that perforated piece of pink paper which served as a match ticket thumbed a hundred times, we eventually heard the rattle of chains and locks from behind the metal doors and, as the turnstiles finally clicked open, I was right at the front. I immediately realised what this meant and, with the entrance block located at a 90-degree angle to the terrace, as soon as it released me, I raced like a dog out of the Brough Park traps, turned right and dashed across the terrace to the fence separating us from the Centre Paddock. I stopped and looked around all four sides of the ground and for a second or two I could not see another soul. I had a claim to fame to take home.

I miss the excitement of that run from turnstiles to terrace. You don't do that as an adult or when you're in charge of your own kids. And you don't have to be so zealous in orderly, allocated, numbered seats. But that run was a part of matchday on the terrace and if you had an innocent face and didn't get body-searched on the way in, you were already jumping the queue ahead of the adults who had been stopped by stewards or police.

When the turnstile clicked, the charge was like news footage from the January sales before the days of Black Friday or the race to get up close to the stage when a major rock band comes to town. Getting to the front of the queue and hearing the mechanical click constituted the first thrill of matchday, with the emergence of the players for a warm-up and then the whistle to get the game started still to come. It's completely different when you're told where to sit on tip-up plastic perches, where there are access aisles and a constant bobbing up and down of fans in their seats.

The camaraderie is different when you're all moving together, too, holding up or clambering over each other, craning to get a better view of the pitch and your one chance to see a goal which is not going to be caught on TV cameras from any angle, let alone multiple vantage points in high-definition super-slow motion. Terraces are more spontaneous, free flowing and, in their own way, welcoming. Also, it was easier to move away if you didn't like the company you were keeping and you can't do that in a stadium of taken seats.

Another 37,000 fans followed me in for that tie against Exeter, sharing the return of cup fever for one afternoon. Pity then that we could only manage a 1-1 draw and the team had to take on the long midweek trip down to another St James Park (the one without an apostrophe) in Devon for a replay a few days later. Cup holders Tottenham were waiting

after the sixth-round draw had been performed in its usual Monday lunchtime slot but a tantalising glimpse of the big time died in embarrassing style as United were beaten 4-0 in the rematch. One of the goals was scored while midfielder Kenny Wharton played the opposition attack onside by virtue of being stretched out cold on the turf closer to our goalline than they were but it was still over for another year.

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As young fans, we served our apprenticeship chiefly in the paddock (is that word even used any more in all-seater stadiums?) known as 'E' Wing. At the front of the Old Stand, it was on the same corner as the away enclosure in what was left of the Leazes, so some of the likely lads liked to gather closest to the fence on that side to share their animosity. Otherwise, nothing much happened other than the enterprising few who waited for a steward to turn their back so they could go over or round the fence to access the more expensive Centre Paddock. When one of our crew did it, he ended up standing right next to us and remained part of our conversation, separated only by our black-and-white 'Berlin Wall'.

Two good friends were already season ticket holders with dads and grandads in the seats above us, which may have been one reason why we started on that side of the ground. The main consideration, though, was deciding this was probably our best chance to get in as cheaply as possible and actually see the pitch while also being away from the intimidating terraces behind the goal. I don't know now why we selected 'E' Wing rather than the identical 'A' Wing at the other end of the same stand, which we actually had to walk past to get to our entrance, though perhaps the reason was as simple as shorter queues the first time we tried because 'E' Wing

was further away from the city centre. Also, the ticket office was closer to our end. So that was it, decision made and the habit formed.

I don't know who decided we should go to games unaccompanied by parents or if we even asked permission; it was probably just a decision taken as a group and our folks would have been satisfied that we were safer travelling in numbers. Going in the paddock was also an easier sell to telling them we'd be mixing it in the mayhem elsewhere.

Most weeks, there would be up to half a dozen of us, some who met at our house in time for *Football Focus* on BBC One and then *On the Ball* on ITV before going to catch the bus, and others who we met on the way. Then, as we moved on to senior school, we grew brave enough to graduate to the Gallowgate End, which had become host to home fans by default after the sacrilegious demolition of the Leazes.

The Gallowgate, in front of land which would become St James' Metro Station and now the fanzone on matchdays, was a completely spartan terrace. It had never had a roof. Like many things down St James' way, apparently there had been proposals but they'd never got off the ground after the builders put in their estimate.

Therefore, by the late 70s, our ground was without cover at both ends. It not only left the majority of supporters at the mercy of the elements in the English game's most north-easterly outpost but also allowed some of the noise to escape into the city skies rather than bounce round the rafters. It did, though, mean that the terrace crowd remained entirely visible in natural light. Kevin Keegan's memorable debut goal in 1982 and the Peter Beardsley beauty in the final game of the promotion campaign a season later would have looked very different against the backdrop of a hooded terrace, even in the bright afternoons of early and late season.

The Gallowgate End was described by Simon Inglis as dour, 'bordered by thick concrete walls like a huge open bunker'. He was not wrong. In rain, hail and snow, you could walk back towards town and spot anyone who had been at the game, not by their striped scarves but rather on the evidence of a wet head and shoulders above dry legs and feet where the huddled masses had provided partial mutual shelter on the terrace.

If you looked at the Gallowgate from anywhere else in the stadium or through the television cameras, you could observe the seething masses, watch the clapping hands and constant cigarette smoke and see the scarves, denim and donkey jackets long before replica kit took over. You could also observe the surge of bodies from back to front and the swaying from side to side and the heads and limbs when a goal was scored or a chance went begging in the goalmouth. You'd see momentary pockets of space quickly filled by staggering and bouncing groups followed by a shuffling retreat to restore some kind of equilibrium. It looked great from elsewhere in the ground, though not so good to your mam when you pointed out your position during the TV highlights the following afternoon.

But that swaying mass was what you went to the game for and what you talked about afterwards, especially if you ended up miles away from where you started, carried away from your mates on a tide of bodies. A crowd surge was like a mosh pit at a rock festival but more unpredictable and on a sloping, unforgiving, stepped concrete floor. You were pushed ten yards down the steps by blokes twice your size, copped an occasional elbow in the ribs or a hand in the face and neither you nor anyone else batted an eyelid. The lads who instigated the surge and everyone else just picked their way backwards and upwards again, then you waited for the next one. You

moved as one mass and you either edged a way back to your spot or you made do with where you ended up. Either way, your eyes rarely left the action on the grass.

Sometimes in the early days, we got a good view by sitting on the concrete barriers before being catapulted off. You didn't climb back on; you'd had your warning. Safety considerations never really came into it, which made the tragic terrace events of later years even tougher to contemplate.

The mutual movements had a tribal hold and the adrenalin just heightened the excitement, with the air filled by nervous laughter as you moved one way and then the other. If a shot hit a post or a goalkeeper parried the ball in making a save, you were neither quite up nor down when another player followed up to hammer it into the net and there was a split-second where you almost recovered equilibrium before bouncing again in celebration.

It wasn't just the terrace that neglected to have a roof. The toilets at the back of the Gallowgate were open to the elements through all weathers, too, though the access to fresh air was actually among their few plus-points.

These small red-brick enclosures within the banked steps up from the turnstiles featured a wall painted black from chest height down and a shallow concrete gutter overflowing below. They wouldn't have been out of place in a zoo but they catered for thousands on the terrace, many of them straight out of the pub. I've no idea what the arrangements were if you wanted or needed to use a proper toilet; I was never brave enough to find out. There would be no toilet paper, that's for sure, because that had been lobbed across the terrace at the start of the game.

Where did the toilet roll throwers come from and why did it become such a thing? How many schools and factories experienced an embarrassing shortage on Friday afternoon

and Monday morning? I can't imagine the circumstances where I would get ready to go to a game, picking up my match ticket and scarf while ensuring I also had a bog roll on my person. The rolls of paper always found a way to either tangle in the net, where they might be removed by the linesman, or land at the side of the posts, where they inconvenienced goal kicks or necessitated collection by the goalkeeper when the ball went out of play. No wonder they started wearing gloves.

The solidity of the St James' Park brickwork, the concrete and the crash barriers provided the backdrop to where we grew up as diehard fans, where going to the game and talking about it meant almost as much as the result itself.

The stadium did look down on its luck but we hadn't lived through its glory days and its appearance somehow strengthened our identity with it – 'you don't like it, we don't care' – because this was home and these were our people, the people we wanted to grow up to be and to be around. It was ours, for good or for bad.

There was nothing we could do about the timing of our introduction or the results which followed, but it was still our home in one of football's traditional hotbeds and it was still our team. As a fan, there are no transfer windows, no negotiations over terms – when you're in, you're in to stay. Welcome aboard.