

Keith Salmon

There's **Something** that the **Kop**

Wants You to Know

A Dad, a Lad, and Jürgen Klopp:
Following Liverpool FC's
Return to Glory



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Contents

About the Author.	8
Thank You	11
We'll Be as We Are.	13
Faith of our Fathers.	24
There She Goes.	50
Who Remembers the First Time?	79
The Kings of Europe	106
The Road to Kyiv.	130
See You in Kyiv.	148
Wunderbar	177
There's Something that the Kop Wants You to Know	206
We Climbed the Hill in Our Own Way	240
Tapas for Everyone!.	260
The Magic Wanda	277
The Glorious Last Chapter.	293
These Are the Days.	307
By Any Means	326
From the Mersey to the Seine	347
Allez les Rouges	361
Echoes of the Past	371
The Long Goodbye.	387

We'll Be as We Are

*'We'll be as we are when all the fools who
doubt us fade away.'*

THESE ARE prophetic words of the Liverpoolian musician Ian McNabb, he of The Icicle Works. There's a banner (actually two banners now) that proclaims those exact words, and it can be seen across European grounds nowadays, the original idea of Tigger from Twitter (X as it's now known, but I refuse to call it X, it's Twitter to me).

If you're going to have the greatest idea for a banner, then why not get it made by the best in the business, and that's what Tigger did. He asked Peter Carney, the supreme flag and banner maker, who has many of the greatest Liverpool flags on his CV, to make it for him. In my humble opinion it now sits alongside the greatest flags to adorn the Kop. The words still ring true to me. I don't feel like I've sold out, I still care about my fellow man and try to do my bit for the less fortunate than me.

Wednesday, 15 January 2020, a day of note for me. After nearly 31 years I finally sat in front of a professional

therapist to talk specifically about Hillsborough. He said I had 'deep-seated trauma', no shit!

How did I get here? A man who has spoken openly about Hillsborough for years, a man who had the memories tucked in a box that he could open on command. The man who'd talk to anyone who'd listen, do lectures on his own experience. I even wrote a chapter in a book about it, for crying out loud. How could this man need help, now?

My life had been spiralling out of control, not that anyone except Nikki will have noticed. There was a moment in time where I knew. At Gatwick Airport in The Red Lion, and Zil said to me, 'How are you doing mate?' I'd normally respond, 'Sound, mate,' but not today. Today I just blurted it out, 'In a bad way, mate, I'm really struggling, to be honest.' He was taken aback, but he did what I needed him to do – he sat and listened and then gave me the support I needed.

All it took was 15 minutes. I needed to say it out loud and put it out on the air. If you keep it in your head, it drives you mad; say it out loud and you're sharing it, and it lifts the heaviest of weights.

To the outside world I was the same. The mask was on, the smiles and jokes were plentiful. I have everything: a beautiful wife, fabulous kids, loving wonderful family, great friends, more acquaintances than I can shake a stick at and the Mighty Reds turning themselves around. See, it's always linked to football. People who know me will read these words and probably not recognise this version of me.

Sometimes the tipping point isn't the trauma itself, it's numerous things that all add up and take you over the edge. Work, life, kids, or other things (and there were a lot of other things), take your pick. Whatever it was, I needed help. The hardest thing to do is admit that you need help. Here I was, the person who listened to other people's problems, always helpful, hopefully giving the right advice. Now I was the one who needed the advice, and it wasn't a 'pull yourself together' conversation.

You always put a face on for everyone, don't you? Now, though, the doors are open to the mental health discussion, it's no longer taboo. You still need to be brave to admit you have issues, and I now see myself as a brave man.

Luckily, I was working for a company that embraced mental health issues and the need to support their staff. They had a wellbeing helpline (step one on the ladder of support) where they analysed your issues and then provided the appropriate support. In November 2019, I took a deep breath and made the call. At the end of 30 minutes, the lady clearly knew I needed help, but she needed to take advice on the range of issues I had. She needed to take advice!

It was clear that basic counselling sessions were not going to be the answer. The answer was that it would need something like CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) to help resolve my issues. I'd need to see a qualified professional, locally, to make such an assessment. Looking back, it came as no surprise that I fell over after the verdict at the David Duckenfield trial was announced. Hopefully, these words will help someone see that it does get better.

It's now over 15 years since I wrote my first book charting my first 40-odd years. This one will take you through what happened next, and it's been some journey. Writing a book changed my life and hopefully gave others the idea that everyone does have a book in them. We all have a story to tell. Some choose to tell it, while others keep it as personal memories.

There's no denying that I have stories to tell. I have more than most, maybe, but certainly not as many as others. Those boys and girls have brilliant books to write. Everyone has been asking me when I'm writing again. There's always someone asking, 'When's the next book out?' which is great, as they gave me the confidence to open my heart again. This is what happened next, and hopefully a glimpse of what the future holds. I did have a small focus group who I approached and asked them what they wanted to hear. With a loud voice it was more of the stories of the greatest trips, so that's what you're getting, and lots of other stuff thrown in for free.

In 2009, I was lucky enough to meet Paul Rogers at LFC TV (he ultimately went on to do amazing things at Roma) and he was looking to produce a show called the *Liverpool Library* where they'd interview authors about their books. Surprisingly enough, it was set in a library, the Central Library, an amazing building in William Brown Street, facing St George's Hall in Liverpool city centre. I got half an hour to tell my story to a lovely fella called Matt Critchley, who's now at ESPN. You used to see Matt sitting behind the bench on matchday looking at his notes,

one of those guys who everyone wonders who he is and why he gets to sit close to Jürgen.

Before the interview, Matt walked me through the type of questions he was going to ask, putting me at ease and settling my nerves. The interview was going great, right until the end when Matt hit me with the sucker-punch question: 'What gives you the right to write about following Liverpool?' Quick as a flash, I answered that I had no more right than anyone else; anyone can write about it, I just did it. Everyone has stories like mine, mates like mine. I chose to write it down and get a book out there. There was nobody more amazed than me that I did that, by the way. But people loved it, except one fella who gave it two stars on Amazon; he totally missed the point of the book. The point is that it's not about the football, it's about the people, the camaraderie and the journey we go on together. If you're ready to come on the road with me again, please do. It was my pleasure last time and, thanks to my readers' compliments, companionship and interest, here I go again.

What I found after the first book was that people could relate to my story and it would remind them of their own adventures, so let's see if I've still got the touch. I've been blessed to have the stories to tell and pass down to my kids and bore the arse off anyone who'll listen. I've seen things that many people have never seen, done things many have never done and will never do, and I'm thankful to all the beautiful people I've met on the way. Football is about camaraderie, following the Reds doesn't start and stop at the ref's whistle, so don't let anyone tell you it does.

When you're still trying to get back from the middle of Europe two or three days after the final whistle, people don't see that.

I'm a big Liverpool fan. I don't profess to be the biggest or the best, a long way from it, but the passion runs deep and strong. The baton has now passed on to my son Charlie, who's driving me mad, exactly like I drove my dad mad some 50 years ago. I don't get to as many games as I used to, as it's much harder, living at a distance, with kids and a life to fund. Also, years of following the Reds has finally caught up with the cash reserves. This book should be called 'Following the Reds on the Never, Never', as, thankfully, Jürgen has cost me a fortune lately.

The first book, the writing part of it, ended with one child in our lives, Charlie, but by the time I was a published author I had a second child, a girl, Izzy (Isobel officially but she prefers Izzy). Having two children has certainly impacted upon the ability to write, adding a puppy (a lively jet-black Cockapoo) into the mix at the end of 2019. Add in bouts of redundancy and being self-employed and it has all delayed the book further, but changed it immeasurably, with many more stories to tell.

My first book was written in the long hours of travelling to and from work, when to and from work meant exotic locations such as Dubai, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Gibraltar. Travelling meant you either hit the bar or you wrote, so I chose to write. Now life is much more mundane, no business-class flights, no 4- and 5-star hotels. Writing at home was often difficult due to the children's demands for me to be interested in the things

they do, then add in watching out to see if a puppy is crapping or pissing on the carpet under the table. It got that bad that I even said to Nikki, 'It's got to the stage, love, where it's either me or the dog,' to which her response was, 'Where do you want me to forward your post to.' Whoever said that a dog's not just for Christmas never met our Ringo; he was lucky to make his first Christmas!

The first book brought me all sorts of opportunities and I've met loads of brilliant Reds, from gracing the airwaves with radio appearances to podcasts and, as you've already heard, having the show on LFC TV. I found out that if you don't ask, you don't get, and if you do ask, you get to do some cool things. Living in the Isle of Man limits a lot of those things. From a literary landscape there were hardly any football fan books, other than hooliganism, to today where football writing is a career for many, but it's all bypassed me. Besides a couple of appearances on *The Anfield Wrap*, where my brother totally eclipsed me, I don't have a part in the modern fan media.

When my book was published, I was the new breed of writer. There was no fighting in my story, only lads enjoying the match, and the readers loved it. More people seemingly had my experience of going the match (we shorten everything in Liverpool, it's never going to the match) as opposed to the tales of fighting your way from a train station to a stadium on a Saturday afternoon. In fact, Saturday afternoon hardly exists anymore, as it can be anything from a Friday night to a Monday evening these days. Modern football demands that a game can be seen pretty much every day of the week, and while older

fans like me miss the three o'clock kick-offs, we have an ever-diminishing voice and influence.

I have a presence on Twitter, and many of my followers are like me, more likely to be lads I shared a terrace with 30 years ago than the 'Liverpool Family'. A grand total of 2,300 followers now, and that will do me, as I don't want to be an account with tens of thousands of followers, as they won't like what I've got to say in 200-plus characters. There's not many likes for a tweet about the injustice of Hillsborough compared to someone anonymous behind a keyboard crying about Fenway Sports Group (FSG) and transfers. I love bits of Twitter but generally it's a cesspit of people hiding behind made-up names, trolls with a handful of followers winding up the Reds, and people biting. The world that harbours the hate of the likes of Katie Hopkins, Nigel Farage and Tommy Robinson only survives in this modern world where the likes and retweets and abuse thrown back gives them the oxygen to breathe and grow. Everything is true on Twitter, everyone has a fabulous life on Facebook, and everyone is gorgeous on Tinder (or so I'm told).

None of it's real, though. You never know who's real and who's not on Twitter, and those who aren't real can still influence all our lives because they can hide behind the anonymity. The hatred seen on Twitter doesn't always exist in real life, though, when it comes to football, but everybody takes it as gospel and this causes feuds with followers of City, Everton and Spurs. Living away from Liverpool, as I do, I breathe the same air as fans of clubs such as United, City, Everton and West Brom (loads of

Baggies here for some reason) and, do you know what? They're all sound, every one of them, they have a parochial view, of course, but when it comes down to it, we all love our teams and can have a good laugh at each other.

I said it's hard to know who's real on Twitter, but one way to tell is to meet them, and that's exactly what I've done, and every one of them has been boss. How do I know who to meet? I watch what they tweet. You can tell who's funny and who's decent by the tweets they send, and if they've bought the book, even better, that's a big tick in my book.

There are the boss boys from Barrow, and one of the funniest fellas on Twitter in Paul 'Bono' Hewson (no I'm not making it up). When I met him, he brought with him the White John Barnes, his old fella, and Sempy 'the sleeping man', who can sleep on a clothesline. You've all got mates like them. Paul had seen me on Twitter, and he'd liked the tweets and interaction, so we arranged a meeting in Manchester Airport on the way to Munich, via Stuttgart, for the Audi Cup. The rest is history. It feels like you've known them forever, but in reality it's five minutes snatched here, sometimes the odd pint, but these fellas are always pleased to see you. I like that.

There's Tigger, with the banner, a shared love of the same music. He follows Our Kid's plays. We met for the first time watching a Scouse play (written by Our Ian), but 30 years earlier in the 80s we'd have been sharing the terraces of England together. Tigger's a top man. What's his real name? Who cares! There's the Loves, Daz and Fiona. I love the Loves, what lovely people they are. Daz

likes all my tweets, loves the book as it reminds him of the times I talk about. They were our times. We certainly stood next to each other in the 1980s on the terraces of Highbury, White Hart Lane and on the Kippax at City, but none of the youngsters can say this anymore.

There's the Big Red Fella, Carl's his name. I've seen him all over Europe the last few years. You can't help but see him, he's huge, about 6ft 8in. I first saw him on the way to Augsburg years ago, a friendly face in a departure lounge at Gatwick. Just five minutes here and there and an odd pint. There's Huw Jones OBE, none the less, a top man who I only met for five minutes on a never-to-be forgotten afternoon in Liverpool before we beat Dortmund, but it felt like I'd known him forever.

Then there's the younger crowd who I'm reliving my youth through while they're gallivanting through Europe living their best lives: Keifer, Jordi and all their mates. I stood next to Jordi in Madrid and became good mates with Keifer. When I first met him, I was just the old fella who liked all his tweets from my desk at work while they were sipping Peroni, Estrella and Mahou in the European sunshine.

And Vinny Banks. I can't forget Vinny. He follows Wolves, not like the Brexit Wolves, he's a top man. He took me for a pint in Birmingham before we played Wolves in the FA Cup and he paid the train fare (it was only a quid, but he didn't have to). I returned the favour in Frosts on County Road (classy, eh) for him and his mates. He has now chased Wolves around Europe, exactly like he dreamed of when we met. Friendships all formed over Twitter.

These are only some of the people I've met along the way, and there are many more. To anyone who bought the book, those who stopped to say hello, those who took time out to drop me a message saying they liked what I wrote, from the bottom of my heart, thank you so much. You'll never know how good it feels to hear from you. And to all the people who appear in this book who were happy to be named, the second part of the journey has been wonderful; it wouldn't have been the same without you. The journeys we shared and the bars we frequented were much better with you in them. Sit back and look at what came next. I've captured the experiences as I've seen them, and as a man in his mid-50s you see things differently now, maybe. If you've got a different version of events, keep it to yourselves, eh.

Come on the road with me and see where we went next, enjoy the ups and downs of following the Mighty Reds and see what it means to me now.

'We'll be as we are when all the doubters fade away.' Well, I'm still here and still the same, and the doubters who never thought I'd amount to much, well they went missing years ago. I'm happy being me, and I've been luckier than most.

Up the Reds!