

# Total Belief

How Bruce Rioch  
Brought the Good  
Times Back to  
Bolton Wanderers



"A warts-and-all telling  
of how one of the game's  
great names returned to its  
rightful place."

Mike Keegan, *Daily Mail*

Chris Evans

Foreword by  
John McGinlay

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## Walking Down the Manny Road

IF THE decline of Bolton Wanderers could be summed up in a physical form, Burnden Park in August 1992 would be about right. Since 1895 Bolton had called Burnden Park home, but what was once a cavernous stadium filled with flat-capped, pipe-smoking mill workers was now as sorry-looking as the team on its bobbly pitch. Burnden Park will forever be known for two events, the first being an FA Cup Final replay in 1901 that ended up being known as 'Pie Day'. After a 2-2 draw at Crystal Palace, the replay between Tottenham Hotspur and Sheffield United was switched to Burnden Park due to the relatively large capacity. However, the distance from London and issues on the railways meant that only 20,000 turned up on the day, meaning that tens of thousands of pies remained unsold.

The second infamous event was a more sombre one: the Burnden Park disaster of 1946. Over 87,000 fans were thought to have entered the stadium for a match between Bolton and Stoke City, well above capacity. The Railway End of the stadium became far too crowded, causing crush barriers to mangle. The crowd surged forward and, in total, 33 people sadly lost their lives. Remarkably, the match resumed and was played to a morbid conclusion, with dead bodies piled up along the side of the pitch. It would be another 50 years

before the football authorities saw fit to bring in minimum standards that were anywhere near to being sufficient.

Less than a decade after the disaster, Burnden Park would be immortalised by the painter L.S. Lowry in his *Going to the Match* masterpiece. The Football Association would later pay £1.9m for the work that depicted trademark matchstick men in cloth caps rushing towards a packed Burnden Park for a big match.

\* \* \*

Sadly, by 1992 the number of people required to pack the stadium has become less and less as various regulations and restrictions have reduced the capacity of Burnden Park, which is still made up largely of imprinted concrete terracing and wooden seats.

Part of the matchday experience for many is the walk from Bolton town centre down Manchester Road to Burnden. Public houses such as Churchill's, the Waggon and Horses and the King William are filled with smoke from nervous fans smoking their Benson and Hedges before the game and, more often than not, by supporters drowning their sorrows after another miserable loss. Fans can call into the Bolton Pie Shop which sells its savoury delights for 40p (or three for £1.10) or Rice'N'Easy, the Chinese chippy. The smell of Bovril, and hawkers calling 'Programmes for sale' give Burnden a real by-gone era feel.

In the summer of 1992 Burnden Park is a mess. The main stand, or Manchester Road Stand to give it its proper name, has barely changed since it was constructed. A wooden seating area houses basic facilities which sit above a small terraced area to either side of the players' tunnel. Down the tunnel is a narrow corridor leading to the small changing rooms. On the outside, a carbuncle of a structure has been

added to house the offices and boardroom. Below this is the old-fashioned ticket office with its tiny windows, sticking out like a sore thumb into the recently tarmacked car park. The club shop run by Alan Bell is also found in this stand. A small operation, known as Happy Shop to older fans, sells Matchwinner replica kits, old programmes and little else.

To the South is the Great Lever End, 'great' not being the most appropriate word to describe the 1992 version. The Lever End of the ground is still surrounded by rows of tightly packed Victorian terraced houses, which branch off at right angles from Croft Street in a gridiron pattern. Dim orange street lamps and the shadows cast from the rusting floodlight pylons at either side of the badly painted roof give a real throwback feeling to fans as they walked down the partly exposed cobbles to the main home supporter sections of the ground.

Formerly a large terrace area, the decision was made to install seats in the Lever End at the end of the 1970s. The reason for this may have been linked to the ongoing hooligan problem, but was possibly more to do with safety issues in the decrepit stand. Whether it was the fact that seating would have a reduced capacity, and thus weight, allowing the stand to remain in use, or the idea that installing seats was cheaper than upgrading the twisted cast-iron crush barriers is irrelevant as the seats were installed despite the protests of regulars. Some may have seen the installation of seats as a bold and modern move; however, these seats are not the comfortable kind. These seats (presumably cheaper) are a strange green colour and are not retractable, resembling the sort of thing you might sit on in a factory canteen in any of the aging red-brick mills scattered around the town. The seats are bolted to the existing terrace, meaning little leg room and no real steepness of angle. This is not the place to sit if you

want a great view of the game. The stand, like most stadiums in England in 1992, has large metal fences at the front but the attempt to combat the ongoing hooligan problem also obstructs the view for those sitting near the front. Add to this the fact that the old terrace has several pillars holding up the leaky roof, and a planning oversight which means that some seats have been installed directly behind the pillars and this is possibly one of the worst examples of an all-seater stand in the Football League. To top it all off, they have even put seats directly under some of the drainpipes, so people not only don't see much of the game, they get soaked doing so.

To the east of the stadium is the Burnden Terrace and stand. From pitch-side, this stand looks the part when packed full of supporters; however this is something of a rarity in 1992. It is in the bowels of the stand that you get more evidence that the stadium is well past its sell-by date. Overflowing toilets, a caged-off area housing training equipment, and minimal facilities make every game feel like you have clicked through the rusting Ellison iron turnstiles and stepped into a time machine (or into a pool of water overflowing from the patched-up plumbing of the basic toilets). The capacity of the stand has been reduced over the years, but it is still something to behold for the big matches. Behind the terrace is a wooden seated area that has similarly poor facilities for fans willing to pay a little extra.

Finally, the laughing stock of Bolton. The once gigantic Railway Embankment, well one third of it anyway. In 1986, Burnden Park was clearly too big for the current levels of attendance. The club was in serious financial trouble and the answer was to sell off some land to Normid, a brand name used for the largest of Co-op superstores. The original designs looked futuristic with a supermarket sat behind a small terrace and even a sports hall on the roof. What was

eventually built is a monstrosity. Taking up two-thirds of the stand, a giant brick wall now blocks the views of half of the remaining third. A yellow line is marked diagonally across the terrace with a sign warning visiting fans that views may be obstructed for those unfortunate enough to stand beyond it. For big away followings, half of those fans will have no option but to stand on the wrong side of the line, thus missing out on half of the action on the pitch. Once a massive terrace complete with steam engines passing mid-match, the Embankment is now one of the worst stands in English football. Away fans regularly mock Bolton by singing 'You only sing when you're shopping' while getting a soaking from the elements given the open-air nature of the stand.

Bolton fans are strongly attached to Burnden, but as the modern game begins to change, the reality is that the board will eventually have to make big decisions about modernising the ground, or relocating. Either will require huge investment, something that Bolton simply do not have unless the team can get back to the big time. Finding the right man to replace Phil Neal seems like a crucial move for the future of the club.