



**STUART BOLTON
AND PAUL COLLIER**

TRAILING GEORGE BEST

THE MANCHESTER HAUNTS OF UNITED'S GREATEST

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**9 Aycliffe Avenue, Chorlton-cum-Hardy,
M21 7WJ**

The story of George Best leaving his native Belfast and arriving at Exchange Station in Manchester with fellow Irishman Eric McMordie in the summer of 1961, and their almost immediate return, has been well documented.

During their brief visit to the mainland the pair were introduced to their prospective landlady, Mary Fullaway, one of the Manchester United landladies who had been vetted by the club to provide decent lodgings for their apprentice footballers. The two young Irishmen had their evening meal at her small three-bedroomed council house and then spent the night there. However, the two teenagers found they were both overawed by

the whole experience and they agreed to return home across the Irish Sea barely a day after their arrival. However, upon his return to the family home, George's dad, Dickie, had a quiet, reassuring word with his son and they made the decision for George to return to Manchester in due course. It was a decision he didn't live to regret.

A couple of weeks later, Best returned to the city and moved back in with Mrs Fullaway, who was sharing the house with her son, Steve. Mary Fullaway was a widow following the death of her husband, Harold, who had passed away on 29 April 1952 at the age of 46. She also had an elder son called Graham who had got married and moved out the year before. The vacant bedroom led Mrs Fullaway to consider being a landlady for the club.

George's first room-mate was a fellow native of Belfast, Ronnie Briggs, a goalkeeper who was a couple of years older than Best. Two years later George found himself with a new room-mate – David Sadler and the story of how they ended up together owes a debt of gratitude to David's own mother. Nothing strange there, you might think; surely some mothers had a say in where their sons ended up living. Except that in this instance Sadler's mum had actually died about ten years before!

We'll let David take up the story from there, 'When I came up [north], I was put into this really nice house in Stretford – more of an older couple they were. Subsequently, at some point, the old lady said to me,

“Don’t move! Don’t move, David. Your mother’s behind you. Your mother’s looking after you. She’s protecting you in your travels.” It was all a bit spooky.

‘I was training with the youth team then and I went into the same category as George, playing for the A and B teams. At the time, George was in digs with Ronnie Briggs, a goalkeeper from Northern Ireland. They weren’t suited personally but at least they had that [background] in common. I think I had shared a room with George on a trip to a youth tournament in Zurich and we’d become pretty good pals. I was having my troubles with my spooky landlady, and I was talking to George as it got to the end of the [1962/63] season because the retain-and-transfer list was going up.

‘Ronnie ultimately wasn’t retained so I said to George, “It seems like there is a vacancy with your landlady and I could do with getting away from mine!” So, I got in there pretty quickly. We went and asked the club and it was arranged that when we came back for the start of the next season we would be in digs together. George had asked Mrs Fullaway. She knew she was losing a lodger so she wanted another one and so the club would have arranged it with her. In fact, it was probably Joe Armstrong who arranged it with Mrs Fullaway.’

David also described the set-up at Mrs Fullaway’s, ‘We shared a room and had two single beds. There was a kitchen and a front room which had a sofa and a telly in it. Upstairs, George and I had a double room.

Steve had a little single room. There was obviously a bathroom with a separate toilet and another bedroom at the back.'

With regard to their host, Sadler continued, 'Mrs Fullaway could be quite stern with us, but she never really tore into us. I don't recall her going out much but she went to church. I can't remember her having many friends, either around at the house or going out to see them. George's parents though were never far away from Manchester and they always stayed with Mrs Fullaway. She became great friends with George's parents. No question though that George was her favourite. She was great. I talked about her as my Manchester mum. I had lost my own mother when I was seven or eight. Mrs Fullaway was a nice lady. She didn't have much to her life other than looking after whoever was there. Obviously Steve, when you think back, must have been her top priority but she looked after us just as if we were part of the family.'

Somewhat spooked by his previous lodging experience, Sadler also recollected, 'It was a bit frightening because Steve sleepwalked. We knew about it and there weren't many occasions [when he did] but perhaps that made it even a bit more frightening, because you didn't click straight away what it was – someone walking in and messing around in your wardrobe.'

When asked if Mrs Fullaway imposed any house rules David recalled, 'Oh yes, we had curfews and they were, I think, imposed by the club. They would have

said to her that these are some of the things that these lads will have to know about. From memory, the curfew was ten o'clock. George and I would often go to bed at ten or 11 o'clock but we'd play cards or chat and then fall asleep. We had to be up pretty early because for the most part we were off to training and that was a ten o'clock start.'

Later on, George would go out more and more, as David recalls, 'George didn't like being sat in at Mrs Fullaway's. We'd still play cards and watch telly obviously but he didn't like being stuck in, so he would go out on Thursdays and Fridays. Mrs Fullaway wouldn't say anything but he would go predominantly to the bowling alley in Stretford. It wasn't because he was a keen bowler because, from recollection, he hardly ever played. However, the bowling facility had a sort of private bar or private club. I don't know whether they called it anything but it had an area which you could only get into if you were a member and it wasn't packed out. George would go there and he would also go to the snooker club, but more often he would go to the bowling alley.

'He just needed company, that's all. He wanted something happening around him. George would come back early, sometimes at 11 or 12 but only because there was a match coming up. George was much better being out where things were moving about and happening rather than sitting in with me and the dog.'

The dog was a black and white spaniel called Kim, of whom David remembered, 'Nobody took the dog for

walks, we just opened the door. It eventually became a really old dog and it was lovely but then it went blind. It used to walk around and we'd still open the door for it but it would bump into everything. The dog was over everybody [in Mrs Fullaway's eyes]. She really loved it.'

Colin Burne, one of George's future business partners, also remembered Kim during his visits there: 'You walked into this little council house and, no disrespect, as Mrs Fullaway kept it lovely. She had a blind dog and George had obviously got used to it. When I first went there the dog was continually walking into things.'

Despite Kim's short-sightedness, George found that his furry friend came in handy when it came to replying to some of his fan-mail. In a story brought to our attention by the writer, broadcaster and lifelong United fan, Michael Crick, when George was in his late teens he was dating a woman from Ulster (now) called Kay Jenkins, and Mrs Jenkins revealed (in an interview with the *Belfast Telegraph* in 2007), 'He used to get hundreds of letters from females. Some asked for a bit of his hair. Once, when I was visiting him in Manchester, he asked me to help him reply, so we cut Mrs Fullaway's dog's fur off and sent it back.'¹

Crick introduced this tale to us saying it was his 'favourite' George Best story, 'It would make a wonderful opening scene to a film. Think of all those

¹ *Belfast Telegraph*, 08/10/07

adoring female fans now in their 60s and 70s who still show people locks of what they think is George's hair!

David Sadler also remembered the occasions when he and George would nip out into the street and have kick-about with the neighbours, 'You would find kids kicking a ball. George and I would go out and join in with them, particularly early on; maybe not later on when we became big stars. You cannot go playing in the street when you are a big star, but certainly, initially, that's what we did.'

In late June 1968, Sadler moved out of the house when he married his wife Christine and yet George remained at Aycliffe Avenue. By now a European Cup winner, he had just been crowned the Football Writers' Association Footballer of the Year and later on that year, on the Christmas Eve to be precise, he also won the Ballon d'Or as he was named European Footballer of the Year. The following summer George met Danish beauty Eva Haraldsted in Denmark while Manchester United were over there to play a friendly against a Copenhagen Select. She was reunited with George in August 1969 and moved in with him at Mrs Fullaway's. Unfortunately, the relationship soon turned sour and Eva attempted to sue George for breach of contract when he reneged over their engagement.

Sadler recalled, 'The situation arose where Eva and George were both at Mrs Fullaway's, so George must have gone somewhere else after the break-up. Eva was virtually on her own over here though she often had

solicitors around. I thought it was an awkward situation for Mrs Fullaway to be in, so I went around and said, “Why doesn’t Eva come and live with us?” There was a lot of press interest going on around it, so I told Eva, “You don’t have to tell anybody initially. You can just come. You don’t have to say anything and it will take the press a while to find out. It will be a lot easier for you.”

‘So, that is what she did. She came, and I never had mates call round as often as they did when Eva was staying with us. She was supposed to come for a weekend or a week or something to relieve the pressure. Six or nine months later, she was still with us!’

At the beginning of 1971 George moved out of 9 Aycliffe Avenue to move into his new purpose-built house in Woodford. He didn’t break all ties with his former digs though as Mrs Fullaway revealed during her television appearance on *This Is Your Life: George Best*, broadcast on 17 November 1971. She explained, ‘Well, I thought nobody could replace George so I told him “I’ll go and get some small little job for myself.” He said, “No, you’ve worked hard enough. I’ll pension you off. I’m going to retain my room so I can always come back to it.” He still had his key and I still come down in the morning and I’ll find little notes lying about saying “*I’m in bed, George*”.’

In fact, George moved back in with Mrs Fullaway on a permanent basis just a few weeks later, in the middle of January 1972, after a breach of club discipline. George stayed at Mrs Fullaway’s on-and-off into the mid-1970s

when he finally left the country to try and resurrect his flagging career in the North American Soccer League. On his resignation letter to the FA dated 13 May 1974, 9 Aycliffe Avenue is the address that Best used.

The much loved Mary Fullaway, whom George liked to refer to as his 'second mum', passed away on 29 March 1983. She was 74 years old.

Aycliffe Avenue is a cul-de-sac on the Merseybank council estate which was built by Manchester Corporation between 1927 and 1932. Fifty years on, the cul-de-sac has barely changed since George lived there in the 1960s and '70s. The house interiors have all undergone refurbishment since then and the roofs have been re-done, but the most noticeable changes externally are the addition of modern appendages such as satellite dishes and solar panels.

* * *

The Dock Office, Trafford Road, Salford Quays, M50 3XB

When Best returned to Manchester after his initial dash back home as a shy 15-year-old, he expected to be training at United day-in, day-out but was soon disappointed to find that wasn't the case at all. For reasons to do with dodging the (not unreasonable) demands made by the Scottish and Irish Football Associations about Football League clubs not signing apprentices from those countries, the teenaged Best was sent to work at the offices of the Manchester Ship

Canal Company for a couple of weeks, training only on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Best later reflected, 'I was basically a tea-boy and general gofer, running errands for all sorts of people. I really hated it.'²

Unhappy with the work that he was being asked to do, Best soon put in a complaint and 'the shipping company moved me to another office at the Canal.'³ While we have not been able to ascertain precisely where these offices were, it seems fair to conclude, given that Best described the work as being 'local' and the offices as being 'not far from Old Trafford'⁴, that at least one of these offices was at the Dock Office building on Trafford Road. One of Salford's most famous buildings, the Dock Office was opened by Queen Victoria in 1894 and is still there today, with its offices recently converted into luxury apartments.

Best also remembered, 'Twice a day, sometimes more, I had to leg it into the centre of Manchester to the Company's city office delivering and collecting letters.'⁵ The Manchester Ship Canal Company's head offices were at Ship Canal House, 98 King Street, M2 4WU. This impressive building was the tallest in Manchester when it was built in 1924–26 and it apparently required an Act of Parliament to allow it to be built so high.

2 *Blessed*, George Best, Ebury Press, 2001, p.50

3 *Blessed*, George Best, Ebury Press, 2001, p.51

4 *Best of Both Worlds*, George Best, Pelham Books, p.28

5 *Best of Both Worlds*, George Best, Pelham Books, p.28

Another place that George worked at during his spell in the club's youth and A teams was an electrical goods firm in Broughton. George's team-mate John Fitzpatrick also worked there at the same time and this was much more convenient for the pair, given the firm's close proximity to United's training ground at The Cliff. As George later reflected, 'It meant that we could get a full morning's training in before reporting for work and I am sure our football benefited greatly from the change.'⁶

Unfortunately, despite our efforts to find out more, we haven't been able to identify exactly where this electrical goods company was situated.

* * *

The Plaza, Oxford Street, M1 4PD

Irish writer and outspoken football pundit Eamon Dunphy, who was on United's books as a youth team player at the same time as George in the early-to-mid-1960s, wrote in *A Strange Kind of Glory*, his acclaimed biography of Sir Matt Busby – or perhaps *joint* biography, as it traces the history of Manchester United Football Club as well – that one of the regular venues where United's youth-team players, including Dunphy's shy teenaged compatriot, used to hang out was the Plaza ballroom.

Business at the dance hall wasn't great in the late 1950s until the owners, Mecca, appointed a certain

⁶ *Best of Both Worlds*, George Best, Pelham Books, p.30

Jimmy Savile to take over there as their new manager-cum-disc jockey. The least said about Savile, the better of course, but in 1959 Savile began hosting lunchtime dances there and the popularity of the place took off. From today's perspective, this sounds rather odd – lunchtime dancing sessions? – but in those days offices, factories and other workplaces used to shut completely for lunch and young workers would seek entertainment, and not just food, during their dinner hour. Because of licensing laws at the time, the Plaza only sold soft drinks and anyone caught smelling of alcohol was forcibly ejected from the premises. The place became so popular that it also began attracting large numbers of truanting schoolchildren.

David Sadler also remembers frequenting the dance hall, 'We used to go to the Plaza at the end of Oxford Street – up the stairs and into the ballroom. It was a bit glitzy, with a big round spinning ball with mirrors on. We used to go in there and the young City players would also go in there. There were lots of girls about and they got to know that the young United lads and the young City lads used to go there. So, the more they went, the more we went! Once you did your training, if you didn't get the early afternoon call back, it was somewhere to go in the afternoon. It was a question of time-filling really. We also had free passes for more than one cinema, maybe four or five of them.'

The Plaza was located immediately south of the grand Odeon cinema, which may be the reason that

David suddenly remembered those free cinema passes.

The venue later became Tiffany's, then the Tropicana nightclub and was demolished sometime in the early 2000s.

The new block built in its place currently houses at street level a Turtle Bay bar and restaurant, which specialises in Caribbean food and drink, especially cocktails.

* * *

**Chorlton Snooker Hall, 21a Manchester Road,
Chorlton-cum-Hardy, M21 9PN**

Before Best became a regular in the United first team, with requisite first-team wages which would enable him to buy a car and get out and about more, he would often spend evenings playing cards with the Fullaway family or he would nip into the centre of Chorlton for a few frames of snooker.

Joining him for a few hours on the green baize would be the likes of fellow club apprentices John Fitzpatrick, David Sadler, Jimmy Ryan and Peter McBride. One of the budding amateur snooker players who used to hustle at the hall was Radcliffe-born John Spencer, the future world champion. Spencer would, apparently, give George a 50-point start but always beat him, sometimes only on the black, which wasn't too bad given that Spencer would go on to be a three-time winner of the sport's biggest prize.