

1999 - 2006

TWINNED  
WITH

# REYKJAVÍK

STOKE CITY  
THE ICELANDIC YEARS



LIAM BULLOCK

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## Chapter 1

# The Pre-Icelandic Icelanders

*‘There are plenty of boys in Iceland who have football in their blood ... I’ve never been to a nation which has such potential to reach further if only appropriate conditions exist’*

– Freddie Steele

THE STORY of Stoke City’s relationship with the nation of Iceland actually begins before 1999. In fact, it began *long* before 1999. For many Stokies, our first introductions to Icelandic football came in 1993 and 1994, with the signings of Þorvaldur (Toddy) Örlygsson and Lárus Sigurðsson respectively. However, the Stoke–Iceland lineage goes back as far as 1946. Hanley-born Freddie Steele is a legendary figure in Stoke-on-Trent football, having played for both Stoke (from 1933 to 1949) and Port Vale (1951 to 1953). Steele racked up 152 goals for the two Potteries teams, ranking as Stoke City’s second all-time goalscorer. He went on to manage the Vale during two different spells in the 50s and 60s. However, before his return to the Mother Town of Burslem, Steele managed Icelandic football club KR Reykjavík in 1946. KR Reykjavík

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was Steele's first managerial role, although it was only for the summer of 46. During that time, he took charge of five games, winning three, drawing one and losing the other, with the team finishing runners-up in the league. He went on to become the manager of the Icelandic national team for their first-ever international match, a 3-0 loss to Denmark.

Steele left Iceland in August of that year and returned to Stoke. He spoke fondly of his time in the land of fire and ice, stating upon his return, 'There are plenty of boys in Iceland who have football in their blood, and all they are missing are the conditions for the sport to really progress. Proper facilities, rather than playing on gravel, will lift the sport to a higher level. It isn't just about coaching a man to stop the ball but to work as a team. They are not 11 individuals but one whole. It is the main thing in every football match. My stay was a pleasure. I've never been to a nation which has such potential to reach further if only appropriate conditions exist.'

Like a sleeping Icelandic volcano, the Stoke–Iceland relationship would lie dormant for several decades, before bursting into life rapidly and dramatically. In 1993, Stoke manager Lou Macari brought the exciting midfielder Toddy Örlygsson to the club from Nottingham Forest to replace Kevin 'Rooster' Russell. Örlygsson, a player brought to English football by Brian Clough, left Forest at the end of his contract. During his two years at the club, Toddy was admired by fans and management alike. He scored some wonderful individual goals, including a sweet run and 20-yard finish against Sunderland that the man himself cites as one of his Stoke City highlights. In 2018, Toddy told *Duck Magazine*, 'My goal against Sunderland at home is one of my favourites. Running with the ball from the halfway line, going past a few players and a good strike! Okay, I know the keeper could have done better – but hey, it is a good goal!'

Toddy's spell at Stoke ended in 1995 on a bit of a sour note, culminating in contract disputes and an eventual move to Oldham Athletic for £180,000. However, time heals all wounds, and fans look fondly back on his spell, and the fan-favourite chant of 'Örlygsson, Örlygsson, running down the wing ...' was eventually revived for Matthew Etherington a couple of decades later. Ultimately, the signing of Örlygsson would be the start of a chain of events that ended with the Icelandic takeover in 1999. Before departing for Oldham, Toddy recommended another Icelander to Macari – his cousin Lárus Orri Sigurðsson.

Initially joining on trial from Þór Akureyri, youngster Sigurðsson impressed Macari and earned a contract for the 1994/95 season. He went on to win player of the year in his first full season at the club. Sigurðsson was a regular for several seasons, including the 1995/96 season when Stoke reached the Division One (now known as the Championship) play-offs. He was the last Stoke captain at the Victoria Ground in 1996/97, and played regularly during the ill-fated 1997/98 relegation season, the first at the Britannia Stadium. Lárus's brother, Kristján Örn Sigurðsson, was also on the books at Stoke between 1997 and 2001, though he never made it into the first team. During his five years and over 200 appearances at Stoke, Lárus Sigurðsson was a popular figure, and a particularly important player during his early years at the Vic. He even took a training session at my brother's Lads n Dads team on the pitch next to the Florence Social Club. The team manager had built the training session up all week, saying how lucky the lads were to be getting a professional to show the team how to train in an expert and sophisticated way. On the big day, Lárus turned up, told the boys to run five laps of the pitch, then left!

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Lárus was a present senior figure through an intriguing time at Stoke City. The club was under the ownership of Peter Coates and Keith Humphreys, and in the summer of 1997, the club moved from the Stoke town centre-hosted Victoria Ground to the Britannia Stadium in the newly built Trentham Lakes estate. The imposing new purpose-built stadium had cast a long shadow from the side of the A50 over the Vic for several months during construction. Though the Vic had amassed a huge amount of sentimental value and fan adoration, the move, spearheaded by chief executive Jez Moxey, was seen as the next inevitable step in pursuit of top-flight football. The shiny new all-seater stadium came with all mod cons, a new bar, a flashy scoreboard ... even cheerleaders ('The City Slickers') and a hippo mascot. The future looked bright. However, the departures of the hugely popular manager Lou Macari and top-scorer Mike Sheron prior to the move were the prerequisites to a massive downturn for the Potters. Following a prolonged period of increasingly poor results, questionable managerial selections and a perceived lack of investment into the squad, the fans turned on the board. This manifested as stay-away protests, organised campaigns, property damage and even death threats. Fans that weren't staying away from games stormed the pitch and the directors' box following a humiliating 7-0 defeat at the Brit in the 1997/98 season. The Britannia Stadium was feeling cursed and didn't feel like home.

The Coates and Humphreys regime oversaw the club's miserable relegation to Division Two in 1997/98, mainly thanks to a string of poor managerial appointments and weak squad additions following Macari's departure. The board had initially appointed Macari's former assistant manager Chic Bates as the Scot's replacement, before opting for former player Chris Kamara after a poor start. Kamara's performance was even more disastrous, winning only one of his 14 games, before

being sacked and replaced by former manager Alan Durban. His caretaker position showed slight improvements, but he couldn't prevent relegation on the final day of the season. As well as the drubbing at the hands of Birmingham, the final-day 2-5 home defeat to fellow relegation-stricken Manchester City was particularly ugly, both on the pitch and in the stands. To make matters worse, one of the teams to beat the drop and seal Stoke's relegation on that final day was none other than Port Vale. The 'SOS – Save Our Stoke' campaign was launched to oust Coates, Humphreys and Jez Moxey. Even my own mild-mannered family had an 'Enough is Enough – COATES OUT' poster in the back window of the Cavalier. Things were really bad at the football club.

\* \* \*

The Potters started 1998/99 back in Division Two. While the tensions between fans and the board kept rising, it seemed like maybe, just maybe, on the pitch, the team had finally turned a corner. The experienced Brian Little was appointed as manager, following a four-year stint at Premier League Aston Villa. Lárus Sigurðsson was still at the club and was part of Brian Little's team that started the season so well, winning our first six games, and 14 of the first 20. The fan chants of 'We're only here for the season' during the opening game at Northampton were perhaps slightly tongue in cheek, but it was impossible not to be optimistic when we were sitting pretty at the top of the table as summer turned to autumn. Needless to say, the season didn't end with promotion. We ended up missing out on the play-offs, finishing eighth following a calamitous second half of the season. The collapse included embarrassing defeats of 2-0 to nine-man Millwall, and a 4-1 loss at home to Bristol Rovers, met with yet more on-field protests against the board. Brian Little left at the end of the



season, although he seemed to be mentally out of the door weeks before that formality. Perhaps the only rays of light in those two dismal seasons were the performances of Irish midfield talisman Graham Kavanagh and newly signed ex-Blackburn forward Peter Thorne, two of our better performers in an otherwise uninspiring squad.

Our failure to secure promotion back to Division One at the first attempt also meant the inevitable departure of Sigurðsson. In the summer of 1999, he moved to West Bromwich Albion for £350,000, eventually helping the Baggies win promotion to the Premier League. I spoke with Lárus, and he cited the ‘fantastic, passionate supporters’ as the main highlight of his time at Stoke. He also fondly remembers being voted player of the season in his first year and being made club captain at such a young age. He said, ‘I came to Stoke as a young man, went through some great times and some difficult times, and these experiences stay with you forever. Stoke City and the supporters will always hold a special place in my heart. Thank you for the five years we had together.’ Simon Lowe, editor and author of several Stoke City books including *Potters at War*, *Stoke City’s Greatest Games*, *Delilah Roars Again!* and *Stoke City: A Nostalgic Look at a Century of the Club*, recounted the final months of the Coates-Humphreys regime: ‘Selling Lárus Sigurdsson to rivals West Brom for a paltry £350,000 in August 1999 told us exactly where the incumbent board were in terms of ambition. The new Britannia Stadium had instantly become something of a noose around the club’s neck. Fans were increasingly concerned that it was a bit of a white elephant, as crowds were often around 50% of its 28,500 capacity. Coates was still in the realms of selling pies through his company Stadia Catering at that point; not the multi-billionaire he would become through the arrival of the internet and online gambling when he returned.’

Managerless, a mess off and on the pitch, seemingly going nowhere in Division Two and a heavily damaged relationship between the club and the fans. How does all this directly relate to the now-departed Lárus Sigurðsson? Well, despite all his merits in the centre of defence, his true impact on Stoke City may have been even greater off the pitch, and it would only come to fruition after he had left.