



VISIONARY

Manchester United, Michael Knighton
and The Football Revolution 1989-2019

PHILLIP VINE

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Matters Up Front

'It is the business of historians to remember what others forget.'

ERIC HOBSBAWM

VISIONARY IS the story of the enigma that is Michael Knighton, the man who three decades ago so nearly bought Manchester United, the most famous and most highly valued football club in the world.

He had secured a watertight option agreement to purchase the Old Trafford club, only to abort the deal and hand back the contract to Martin Edwards, the club's principal shareholder, in exchange for a seat on United's board of directors.

The question, why he should have behaved in this extraordinary way, reverberates through the pages of this book.

Had Knighton completed the purchase for the £10m price agreed with Edwards, he might have been the sole owner of an institution valued by *Forbes* in May 2019 at £3.2bn.

Many may judge this maverick man an apparent loser of epic proportions, a here-today-gone-tomorrow phenomenon, but history will surely prove him to have had an outstanding and permanent influence on both Manchester United and the football industry in general. What is often forgotten is that Knighton was the club's chairman elect for sixty-two days, and that those were red hot and revolutionary times at Old Trafford.

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Visionary is the tale of the wonder and woe that has characterised the life of one of the most influential and intriguing football entrepreneurs of that generation, a man perhaps primarily responsible for the commercialisation of the football industry in England and, through an unacknowledged axis with Alex Ferguson – forged in those sixty-two days – a prime mover in the transformation of United's fortunes on the field of play.

'Give me a trophy every season,' Knighton told Ferguson in the summer of 1989. The manager responded with thirteen Premier League titles, five FA Cups, four League Cups, two Champions League titles and one World Club Cup.

The commercial revolution initiated at Old Trafford by Knighton, and the football revolution supervised by Alex Ferguson, worked together in magical symbiosis to produce hitherto undreamed of profits and Premier League points.

Visionary tells the story of an obsessive football man, a prescient and flawed genius, a man unloved and unappreciated by almost all except his family, and of a man who was misunderstood and the butt of both ridicule and venom from many within the sometimes savage confines of the football industry.

Oi, Knighton, you greedy, fat bastard!

This was a familiar refrain that greeted him both during and after his years at Old Trafford.

Yet Knighton, in stark contrast to Martin Edwards, never took one penny for any of his work at Manchester United. And in spite of it all, the condemnation and the contempt, Knighton still loves the game, and the industry, too.

Neither his feet nor his brain are ever still. He will talk into the night about any and every aspect of football. His feet still take him to support the team his great-grandfather played for, Sheffield Wednesday.

Recently, too, he has been watching Ilkeston Town and Heanor Town in the Midland League and the East Midlands Counties League, respectively. As a young man in the 1960s, Knighton played for both those teams. He has fond memories

of those days and he is fondly remembered, too, and welcomed at his former clubs.

* * *

This book is unashamedly revisionist.

Its original title was *The Truth Game* because so much that is untrue has been written and spoken about Michael Knighton.

He never had the money.

His bid was a front for an anonymous Mr Big.

He brought Manchester United and the entire game of football into disrepute.

Part of the problem for Knighton was his retreat into the silence and the collective responsibility of the Old Trafford boardroom.

Until now, he has held his peace and refused all blandishments to tell his story.

Until now, he has refused to criticise any of his former colleagues at Manchester United.

Until now, he has kept his diaries, his private papers and the documents that prove his determining influence at Old Trafford under lock and key.

Visionary sifts the evidence, attempts to set the record straight and preserve the truth for posterity, and aims to place Knighton's remarkable achievements at Old Trafford in true historical perspective.

* * *

This book rewards readers with an explosive and controversial story.

Along the way, *Visionary* provides both the background biographical details necessary for a proper interpretation of Knighton, and all the narrative twists and turns relating to his time at Old Trafford.

It is a book of stories and of stories within stories. And it has enough arguments to start a fight in an empty room. It lights the blue touchpaper and all are advised to stand well clear.

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After thirty years, it is time indeed for a retrospective and a reappraisal of Knighton and his place in football's history. Complex, enigmatic, perhaps one of the most misunderstood characters within the industry, Knighton deserves understanding at the very least.

He may well turn out to be a man more sinned against than sinning.

The debates these narratives engender, especially those involving the abuses of the powers of the press – in their hounding and harassment of Knighton – and the complicated web of relationships between sport, money and power, are as fresh and vital in the early decades of the twenty-first century as they were at the fag end of the old millennium.

There is, too, the problem of England that worms its complex way into the plotlines of Knighton's story: England's history, Knighton's history, is a matter of class.

On the positive side, there is the social mobility, the English dream, in which Knighton, a council estate boy from Derbyshire, rose through the ranks, sat within the thick stone walls of his Scottish home, Killochan Castle, the place where the deal to purchase Manchester United was done if not quite dusted, and sat in the boardroom at Old Trafford.

An Englishman's home is his castle indeed.

On the other hand, however, Knighton's story is studded with tragedies resulting from the exploitation of one social class by another.

In 1895, seven miners died at Blackwell Colliery where his great-grandfather worked. In 1989, ninety-five football fans died at Hillsborough, and a ninety-sixth, Tony Bland, died in 1993, as a result of injuries sustained on that fateful day. The home of Sheffield Wednesday was where Knighton's great-grandfather played as a professional for fifteen years.

In both cases the ruling classes of the time blamed the victims.

In some ways, this is the true subject of this book: the dark shadows of England's history.

MATTERS UP FRONT

Certainly, it is the ghosts of English history that have made Knighton the man he is, defiantly socialist, defiantly capitalist too, defiantly iconoclastic.

* * *

These narratives may be thirty years old but their themes, their issues and the sheer bloody intrigue of it all, together make *Visionary* a vital read for the twenty-first century.

As Sam Wallace of the *Daily Telegraph* wrote in September 2017, Knighton's aborted takeover was *one of the great football stories of our time*.

Book One



Games before the Game



Chapter One

The Chairman Elect

Old Trafford, 19 August 1989

IT'S HALF past two on the first Saturday of a new football season and Michael Knighton makes what will become his iconic appearance in the annals of football history.

He emerges from the players' tunnel, blinking in the late-summer sunshine, with a football in his hands and resplendent in a brand new Manchester United strip.

He pauses at the pitch edge, as if pondering the enormity of what he is about to do. He jogs on to the hallowed Old Trafford turf, makes for the halfway line, then proceeds towards the Stretford End, juggling the ball, head to knee to foot to shoulder, without once losing control. It is as if the ball is tethered to his body, or part of an invisible aura now made perceptible.

Inside the penalty area, in front of a swaying, cheering crowd, Knighton smashes the ball high and hard into the roof of the Stretford End goal.

He raises his arms aloft and receives the adulation of the crowd.

* * *

Clock hands shift imperceptibly to twenty-five to three on 19 August 1989. All is well with the world and Knighton is heir

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apparent to the ownership of the most famous football club in the world.

For him, it is a deliberately unorthodox introduction. Not everyone approves, but Knighton would not have it any other way.

Thirty years later he still feels the same, in spite of the spate of shit and spite that follows, in spite of the doubts of Martin Edwards, the disquiet of Bobby Charlton and the disorientation of Alex Ferguson. In spite of the defamations of detractors, Knighton still says he would do exactly the same again given half the chance.

And that is just one measure of the man.