

**Richard Crooks**

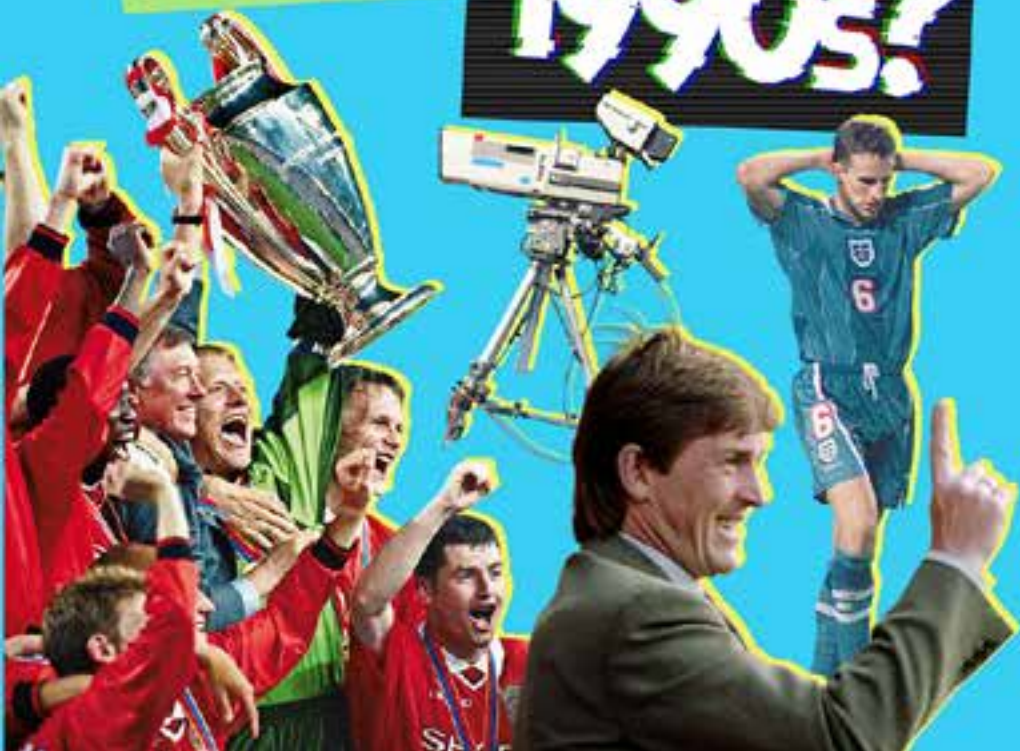


**what was**

**football**

**like in the**

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# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	9
Preface . . . . .	11
Foreword . . . . .	12
1. Euro 2020 – Wembley . . . . .	13
2. They're Up We're Down – But Not For Long . . . . .	33
3. Shots, Shrimpers and a Few Cards . . . . .	39
4. Mascots . . . . .	48
5. The Taylor Report . . . . .	53
6. Grounds. . . . .	58
7. Crowds . . . . .	65
8. The Spectre Remains. . . . .	73
9. Racism . . . . .	85
10. Players . . . . .	91
11. Bosman . . . . .	98
12. Foreign Players . . . . .	103
13. Managers . . . . .	108
14. Referees . . . . .	116
15. Eric Cantona . . . . .	125
16. Premier League . . . . .	130
17. Clubs and the League Competition . . . . .	138
18. FA Cup . . . . .	145
19. League Cup. . . . .	154
20. Wednesday's Wembley . . . . .	159
21. In the Box, and Brecon Beacons . . . . .	165
22. Commercially Speaking . . . . .	172
23. The Business of Football . . . . .	177
24. Bungs, Payments, Allegations . . . . .	186

25. Scotland . . . . .	191
26. European Club Competitions . . . . .	196
27. European Championship . . . . .	202
28. World Cup . . . . .	207
29. Television and Radio . . . . .	213
30. Newspapers and Magazines . . . . .	221
31. Programmes and Fanzines . . . . .	228
32. Boys' Football. . . . .	236
33. It Happened in the 1990s. . . . .	245
Afterword. . . . .	249
Reflections and a Further Perspective . . . . .	257
Appendix 1 . . . . .	261
Appendix 2 . . . . .	305
Appendix 3 . . . . .	308
Appendix 4 . . . . .	311
Appendix 5 . . . . .	312
Appendix 6 . . . . .	314
Bibliography . . . . .	315

## Euro 2020 – Wembley

ITALY V AUSTRIA, Wembley. June. Knockout phase – last 16. Fancied it. One thing fancying it, quite another getting a ticket. And this in Covid and lockdown times.

UEFA website for tickets – logged on many times looking for tickets for group games at Wembley. Each time none – ‘Sold Out’. Apparently tickets are available for games in Seville, Amsterdam, Rome and other places besides.

On their website UEFA highlighted that quarantine rules applied in each country and it would be the ticket buyer’s responsibility for checking and adhering to the rules.

No chance of travelling abroad. Academic in any event – I’d travel to Wembley and no further.

Another speculative log-on. Interesting. Tickets available, Italy v Austria on Saturday, 26 June, 8pm kick-off. Tickets available three days before the game – at €125 and €185. Steep. Still, might be the only game I get to and I’d seen no significant football since March 2020 thanks to Covid and lockdown. And I had money saved as a result.

Go for it; €125 – £113 in sterling confirmed the website.

More details required over and above those normally specified for online purchases. Individual passport ID numbers for each ticket. Unusual. Oh well – 15 minutes to complete the transaction. Done.

Covid and lockdown must have helped with the availability of tickets. Attendance at Wembley limited to 21,500, reportedly a quarter of the venue's capacity. Covid and social distancing to the fore in determining that number. Everyone from abroad subject to strict quarantine requirements – ten days' isolation on arrival into the country. All but the most fanatical and optimistic supporters of the two national teams – not based in this country – would be part of the Wembley occasion.

More restrictions and requirements for ticket holders – tickets only available on smartphones. Need the Euro 2020 app to download the tickets. Entry to the game by smartphone ticket only. Oh and the website confirmed a souvenir paper ticket (supplied after the event) was available at a cost of €15. No thanks.

More requirements – for entry into the stadium I'd need to show my Covid status which must demonstrate I'd had both Covid vaccinations or I'd had a negative lateral flow test result in the 48 hours prior to the game.

ID required to enter – passport ID used to purchase the ticket.

All spectators to wear a mask inside the stadium.

And each ticket had a timed entry – with all the checks required presumably to ease the pressure on the stewards. My timed entrance, 6.30pm–7pm.

Out of curiosity, looked on eBay – any tickets for sale? Surprised to see three separate entries with tickets for sale. How could the would-be purchasers surmount the issues of smartphone, passport ID and the rest? None of the bids exceeded the face value of the ticket; maybe secondary ticket selling has become a whole lot more difficult. If so, few would shed tears.

No matter. Looking forward to the game now.

Interesting that Euro 2020 is played in 2021. Covid had put paid to any hope the European Championship could be staged in 2020. The tournament's original name retained – maybe

the branding and merchandising necessitated it. A bit odd, but UEFA not for moving.

Four separate emails received from Euro 2020 in the days leading up to the game reminding me of entry requirements.

I thought. What if I lose the phone? Or it runs out of charge? Or the network goes down? In the event of any of those occurrences, no idea what happens. Can I still get in?

The Covid details. Had two doses of the vaccination. The NHS app on the smartphone provided an NHS Covid pass for events – check it's accessible and operational. Confirmed.

Passport I'd have with me on the night.

What a performance. Different times. Just have to get on with it.

Come the day. I live in Hertfordshire – reasonable journey to Wembley. Thought about the car – sat-nav would get me there – but not feasible, event restrictions specifying no public car parks available. Train and underground. A bit concerned about travelling on public transport with Covid infection rates increasing. Had to be done.

Pleasantly surprised most people on the train wearing a mask as per the requirements. And enough space to be socially distanced. Positive. It's £6.30 return to West Hampstead with railcard. Reasonable cost.

Underground journey quick and easy. Unnecessary concern about whether or not my Oyster card had enough credit – not used it for over a year because of Covid – £3 return journey to Wembley Park.

Wembley Way, from the underground station to the stadium, unusually quiet. No throngs of people. Scatterings of individuals and small groups. Mainly Italian colours on show. Austrian red and white difficult to spot.

The occasional hut either side of the pedestrianised footway – 'Official Merchandise' is the calling card. Quick look – overpriced. T-shirts with a cornucopia of the competing nations' flags £25, other T-shirts £25.

'Do you have a programme for the game?'

'No. A programme for all the games played in London [Wembley].'

'No thank you.' I'd like a programme for the game showing me the teams for this game.

'I'll have one of those drawstring bags instead.'

'That's £10.'

'OK.' Bit pricey, but nice present for one of my grandsons – Charlie, he's the one mustard-keen on football.

'Will they let me into the stadium with this large plastic bag?' Instructions on the rules for stadium entry very clear – no more than an A4-sized bag allowed.

'Yes, you'll be fine. This bag is see-through.'

Purchase made, by card. No cash. Made clear in the rules for stadium entry.

Volunteers with an oversized yellow hand covering their own fist pointing the way to the stadium. Hardly necessary even for first-time visitors – if you couldn't see the stadium, you certainly wouldn't see the large yellow hand.

Entrance two, gate J, 6.30pm. Plenty of stewards to check credentials at the foot of each stairway. Phone deep inside my pocket – any would-be pickpocket would have to travel over and beyond that which was good for him. No chance of losing it either. Located. Here we go.

'Covid test results, please.'

'I've got everything on my phone here.'

Not quite as easy to locate on the app as I'd thought.

'Here it is. Confirms I've had two vaccinations.'

'No, not that. The note from the NHS that confirms you've had a negative lateral flow test.'

'I don't have that. Look, this confirms I've had two vaccinations.'

'That's no good. You'll have to go to the Brent Community Centre over there and talk to them.' His arm pointed in the direction of a building 200 metres away.

'No, the entry requirements clearly state I can produce either confirmation of my vaccinations which is here or confirmation



of a negative lateral flow test. I have the vaccinations confirmation.'

'You can't come in here without the negative lateral flow test confirmation.'

'This is daft.'

He took umbrage that the wisdom of his words had not been instantly actioned, turned to a fellow steward repeating what he'd said and sought confirmation his words were indeed correct. His brief monologue concluded with, 'That's what we were told wasn't it?'

His fellow steward nodded in the affirmative.

'You can't come in here without that negative lateral flow test confirmation.' Uncompromising. And daft. Two stewards who both don't know the rules sent out to all spectators.

I hadn't come to Wembley and followed all the rules for entry only to be felled at the first hurdle.

'Well, I'm not going to the Brent Community Centre. I want to talk to someone who knows what they're doing.' Steward's ire stoked.

At one end of the stairway was a man with tabard – NHS Information Point emblazoned on the front. Umbraged and discontented steward left to his own devices. Made for the NHS man. Issue explained. NHS man onside. Confirmation of two vaccinations fine. Explained to him he might like to have a word with Misinformed of Wembley over there.

Made for the nearest steward – he acknowledged the vaccinations confirmation, entry confirmed. Progress. On my way up the stairway.

Stewards at the top of the stairway beckoned me through, pointing to a table. Clear see-through plastic bag on the table. Cursory look by one of the stewards. 'That's fine,' a hand motion beckoning me to move on. No body search which surprised me given the great focus on security (they'd have found nothing of concern or interest except a Sheffield Wednesday key ring).

Turnstiles. Locate gate J. Straight ahead.

Man selling programmes to my right. I'd thought about it. A programme with the team squads at least would be helpful.

'Programme please.'

'Ten pounds.'

'Do you want a card?'

'Card or cash. All the same to me.'

'Cash.' Ten pounds handed over.

Within the space of five minutes, two stadium entry requirements not in place – maximum size A4 bag only, and cashless stadium cards only.

Brief walk around the outer concourse. Make for the turnstiles. Examine phone. Have the ticket on the Euro 2020 app ready for inspection. Not many people at gate J.

Turnstile unmanned. One of those green plastic apertures just above waist height on the left side. The aperture for ticket entry, and if everything works a beep noise, flashing green light and off we go. But not obvious what to do here. No other spectators looking to enter – no one to watch and learn from.

Lady standing with yellow fluorescent tabard the other side of the turnstile. She could sense a man without a clue.

'Use your phone,' came the instruction. That bit I know.

Phone put next to the plastic green aperture, bar code facing it. Nothing.

'No, no. Put your phone in.'

Seemed odd. No matter, do as you're told. Phone turned, placed and pushed horizontally into the aperture, face up, bar code available for scanning.

Bingo. Beep. Flashing green light. Go. Push through the turnstile. Thank the helpful lady. In.

It's a good hour and more ahead of kick-off. Face mask in position. Take a walk. Concourse runs round the curvature of the stadium. Bright red seats clearly visible at each entrance.

I thought. What about the ID? I had my passport with me as instructed. Not checked. I thought more. What in theory is strong security – the instruction that passport ID number has to be provided, name on ticket, downloaded to smartphone,

personal Covid record on the smartphone – falls apart at the first hurdle.

No checking the name on the ticket, no checking the Covid record is mine, no checking the passport. Any Tom, Dick, Harry or eBay purchaser could walk in and show a smartphone with the relevant details on it.

And the initial check of my Covid credentials outside? Poor. Less than impressed.

Time for something to eat and drink. No queues. Very pricey, limited choice. Chicken strips and chips at £9.49 and a bottle of water at £2.50 looks the most inviting of what's on offer. Not particularly appetising.

A Roman centurion walks into the concourse – or rather a weak imitation of the historical figure, adorned with a red, white and blue curly wig.

Now here's a good man walking past – wearing a Sheffield Wednesday shirt, with Di Canio on the back. My kind of Italian (or Sheffielder or both!).

Walking to block 138 and at its entrance a steward notices and says, 'Would you mind wearing your mask sir?'

'Of course.' Mask now back in place having eaten.

Through the entrance, row 31 straight in front of me. Decent seat. Location same side as the team managers and their marked-out area, to the left as the television pictures show it, approaching the corner flag and elevated above the first section of seats.

Colourful moving LED adverts on the boards at the perimeter of the pitch. Don't recollect many of the adverts – FedEx, Heineken, Qatar Airways the only ones that come to mind. Marketing men would be disappointed. I suspect their main focus is the television audience.

Adverts prominent in the programme. Official Partners (Coca-Cola, Gazprom, WorldFirst, Hisense), Official Mobility Partner (VW), Official Match Ball (Uniforia, Adidas), Official Airline (Qatar Airways), Official Logistics Partner (FedEx), Official Partner (Just Eat), Official Smartphone (Vivo), Official

Fans of UEFA Euro 2020 (TikTok). Really? UEFA could be missing a trick here – what about Official Toilet Cleaner, Official Toilet Paper?

Not many in. Big screens at either end of the stadium. Pre-recorded football material showing and the occasional live piece with a quasi-master of ceremonies in his light jacket talking to the crowd, announcing two teams in sync with the names appearing on the stadium video screens. Hold on, I can see him, he's there directly below close to the corner flag, looking in my direction at a video camera.

Twenty-two names plus substitutes. I can't commit to memory. Quick turn to the programme to look at the squads. No squad names. What's the point of that? A programme with no team or squad names. Maybe the thinking is smartphones – everyone has a smartphone, teams available there.

Theory sound, practice flawed. Smartphone in hand, look for the BBC Sport website. Poor signal, one bar on the phone. No connection. Settings. Available Networks, Wembley Stadium, splendid, an open network, no security code required. Here we go. Problem. Wembley Stadium network 'not available'. Repeat. Still 'not available'.

Back to the programme – it carried important information. 'Respect' – 'Sign for an Equal Game ... we can only fight discrimination if we stand together as a team.'

Light-jacket man on screen again – informing the crowd the warm-up for each team would end at 7.40pm. Within moments the video screens counting down in seconds to the appointed time: ten, nine, eight, seven and so on. Players hurried off. All beat the deadline. Never seen that before.

At 7.50pm – action. Players in the tunnel shown on the video screen, large Italian and Austrian flags placed in each half picked up by half a dozen individuals, held up high and shaken vigorously – must be for the benefit of the television audience.

Entrance of the two teams. Noise. Loudest so far. Perfectly clear the section closest to our seats is the main section of Austrian supporters in the stadium. Loud and colourful.

Look around. Stadium not even a quarter full, certainly not in the upper sections. Seats allocated with a spare seat between each to ensure effective social distancing. Shouldn't have bothered. Groups came together and sat cheek by jowl.

National anthems. Light-jacket man again, 'Please be upstanding for the national anthem of ...' First Austria and then Italy. No clue to the words albeit the musical rhythm and gusto of the Italian anthem won it hands down for me.

Anthems over. Teams break into the respective halves, managers and coaching staff to their respective areas.

Roberto Mancini, the Italian manager, sartorially elegant in his light jacket, trousers, white shirt and tie. I doubt a hair out of place. He could easily moonlight as a model for one of those catalogues that target fashion-conscious middle-aged men.

Interesting. Neither team 'takes the knee' – in the tournament the England team prominent in going down on one knee prior to kick-off, supporting Black Lives Matter.

Game on.

First half frankly not exciting. Little between the two teams, maybe Italy shaded it.

Interesting during the first half – man with a large video camera came into the Austrian supporters' section and sat at the front, turning to face the supporters.

Positive play by the Austrians, supporters rising from their seats, closely followed by video-camera man. Now he's focussed on two of them – camera rock-steady. The two – a woman in her 20s in a red and white check pinafore outfit over a white top, and a man with a light trilby, white shirt and shorts. Looked a picture. They could have come straight from the set of *The Sound of Music* – Heidi and Johann from Salzburg. Maybe it was Steve and Sharon from Neasden but don't spoil the illusion. Heidi and Johann flashed on the video screen for the first and not the last time.

The fact I noticed them says a lot about the game!

Half-time and light-jacket man up and running again. 'At half-time we've got DJ ...' – the name did not register. 'Here he

is now.' The DJ with the unmemorable name standing opposite light-jacket man at what looked like a mixing desk. DJ starts to move his body to each side in an unorthodox, rhythmic sway; the audio and music kick in almost simultaneously. From the back he looks as though he may be enjoying himself. Light-jacket man plays along for a short while – facing the DJ he does his best to rhythmically sway.

DJ continues for most of the half-time break. It's not obvious that anyone is taking a blind bit of notice.

Return of the teams and the coaching staff. One thing immediately apparent – Mancini without jacket. Conveys the message (to me at least) it's now down to business.

Second half.

A lot better as a spectacle. More open, Austrians coming into the game more, giving as good as they get. Heidi and Johann on their feet.

Atmosphere heightened, noise increased. In a 90,000-capacity stadium a quarter full, it felt and sounded a little odd. No matter, the supporters are doing their bit.

Goal, at the other end. Austria. Good goal. Ball moved quickly around the area, crossed and finished with a good header. Austrians in excelsis. Loud cheering. Heidi bouncing, Johann joyous.

But wait. VAR (Video Assistant Referee) check. Any issues with the goal? Nothing shown on the stadium's video screens. No ideas what the query might be. Too far away to see if any offside involved.

Loud cheers emerge from the Italians in the crowd. What have they heard? Whatever it is, a flash on the video screen – offside. Goal disallowed.

Austrians crestfallen, Italians rejuvenated. But no goals. Full-time whistle, 0-0.

Light-jacket man springs back into action, 'There'll be a five-minute break before 30 minutes of extra time.' New one on me. No idea there was a precise five-minute break before extra time. Good information.

Extra time.

Game more open, both teams going at the other.

Exciting.

Goal, the other end again. Italy. Good finish from a tight angle. Who? Light-jacket man noticeable by his absence. Except he's there directly in front looking at a television screen. Within seconds, 'The goalscorer, Enrico Chiesa.' Must have seen it on BBC One.

Italians now in excelsis. Lungs bursting. Cheering and singing. Any VAR check not apparent in the stadium. Goal stands. Austrian supporters rally.

Another goal. Italy, 2-0. Same wait for the goalscorer's name – Matteo Pessina. Italians jubilant, cheering and singing. Noise upped several notches. They think they're on their way.

Austrians subdued. All seated. Heidi has Johann's arm around her neck, consoling her.

Half-time whistle. A minute before the second half resumes.

Remote-controlled mobile television cameras suspended on wires above the pitch go into overdrive – first focussed above the Italian camp, then the Austrian.

Second half. Goal, the other end. Austria. The red and white section rises as one. Back in it. Saša Kalajdžić the goalscorer.

Italians nervous. For them, all ends well. Full-time whistle. Relief and ecstasy, exuberant players and supporters. Mancini mobbed. A frenzy on the touchline.

The Austrians? Dejection. Beaten. Players buckle at the knee with exhaustion overwhelmed by disappointment. Supporters down. Heidi seated, Johann consoling.

Italy on their way.

Time for me to be on my way.

Quickly out of the stadium, approach the main stairway down to Wembley Way. Silver-coloured barrier at the top before the stairway. Slalom round it, now down the stairway. Slows the crowd down. Sensible. Silver-coloured barriers now on either side of the stairway. Quickly down the stairs and on to Wembley Park station.

Green lights showing at intervals along Wembley Way – confirming pedestrians can move forward into the next pedestrian section. Crowd control. All green tonight – only 21,000 here. Pairs of stewards – one behind the other – at each section. Controlled.

Straight up the station's stairway and on to the platform. Underground train arrives within two minutes. On and away – or it should have been. 'We are being held here for ...' the driver's voice in the carriage. At this point vacant seats in the carriage.

Two minutes' wait. On our way. Most seats occupied but enough social distance at my end of the carriage. Four lads further up, one talking, no mask. Not good. Remind him about the mask? Thought about it. No. Only five stops to go and in any event he's five metres away. Doubtless he'd say he was exempt or something. I can think what he's exempt from.

On to West Hampstead. Home by 11.45pm – 75 minutes after leaving Wembley. Fortunate to live so close.

Enjoyed the night and the experience.

Following morning, keen to understand comments and reports about the game. The two coaches summed the game up well.

Italy's Roberto Mancini, 'There were times when the team had to battle tooth and nail ... Austria are a very tough side ... I said it could be tougher than the quarter-finals because it was our first knockout match, so from a mental perspective you approach it in a different way.'

His Austrian counterpart, Franco Foda, 'Everybody is disappointed but if we look at the performance, we can be very proud. We wrote history, we made it into the round of 16 and lost very narrowly against one of the favourites. We didn't pay attention twice and conceded as a result. It was an extraordinary performance from my team. We represented ourselves and our country very well.'

Albeit at Wembley and amid the pandemic I thought about the differences between today and the 1990s. In the 1990s:



- No online purchase of tickets
- No requirement for passport details or presenting it at the game
- No sat-nav when travelling by car
- No video screens in the stadia
- No smartphones
- No VAR or goal-line technology
- No BBC Sport website
- No social media

One thing at least better in the 1990s – more informative programmes, at least for some games.

Liked the experience of the game at Wembley. Appetite whetted.

Tried to get tickets for the second semi-final (England playing) and the final. Tickets on sale to the general public for both games on the UEFA website. Successful. Costly; €595 for the semi-final, €945 for the final. But I'd decided to forego a holiday to be there.

The chances of being able to see such games in the future minimal.

Ironically, the Covid pandemic provided the opportunity to purchase tickets – initially all tickets for games had been purchased for the original Euro 2020 before the global shutdown meant the competition's postponement. All original tickets cancelled, refunds to purchasers.

England v Denmark in the semi-final; 65,000 crowd reported attendance. Wembley Way packed more than two hours before the game. Uncomfortable to move. Social distancing impossible. Discarded cans of alcohol strewn across the floor. Smoke bombs let off in the crowd outside the stadium. Keen to get inside. Made it with time aplenty to spare.

Atmosphere electric. England behind for the first time in the tournament with the first goal they'd conceded – a stunning free kick from outside the penalty area by Mikkel Damsgaard. Roused the home crowd – resultant own goal by the Danes.

Teams level at full time. Extra time. Danes tiring. Penalty to England. Crowd on edge. Kane takes it; saved. Kane follows up; in. Win 2-1. Crowd in full-throated approval, excepting the 7,000 Danish supporters behind the goal.

Spectators departed Wembley in buoyant mood. I left straight after the final whistle – before the bulk of fans who continued celebrating.

More cans on the floor. More people making their way to Wembley Park underground station. Ahead of the main crowd I made it on to the platform and train in reasonable time. Home by midnight.

Subsequent media coverage showed the prime minister in the crowd with an England shirt on. Few people aware of his apparent keenness for football. It occurred to me it would have been helpful if he'd been on Wembley Way a couple of hours before kick-off – he could then see and explain the impact and application of the current Covid restrictions to all and sundry. The restrictions flouted openly and at will. No chance of Mr Johnson on Wembley Way.

Read that a laser pen shone into the face of Kasper Schmeichel as he faced the penalty. Outrageous. UEFA fined the Football Association alongside further fines for the unruly behaviour of some England followers – booing the Danish national anthem and letting off smoke bombs inside the stadium.

Much hype and coverage in the media in the lead-up to the final – 'Football's Coming Home', the national heroes had united the country, the boys will do it and so on. Consensus view seemed to be that Italy were tough opponents but England would be more than their match at Wembley with a raucous and passionate crowd behind them. Great anticipation and expectation.

The final on Sunday.

My partner's son, Alastair, and his family with us over that weekend. He asked a question, 'Getting nervous?'

A few moments to think.

'No, not really. Not nervous. Looking forward to it, anticipation yes.'

He seemed a little surprised given my keenness for football. I thought more.

‘Not nervous for an England game. If it was a Sheffield derby totally different. Nervous as a kitten for that one.’

This brief exchange focussed my thinking. I wanted England to win. But my attachment and affection for my club is far greater than my attachment to the national team.

So now travel to Wembley. Get there early, ahead of the main crowd my intention. On the underground, train packed. Arrive at Wembley Park. Thick with people. View afforded from the top of the steps emerging from the station – a sea of humanity as far as the eye could see. And this was at 5.30pm – more than two hours before kick-off.

On to Wembley Way. Social distancing? No chance. People chanting. People drinking. Drinking a lot. Discarded cans littered the pedestrian area. Cans which held lager, beer, cider. Impossible to avoid them. More cans – flattened from footfall – closer to the stadium. The occasional bottle, the occasional broken bottle. Shards of broken glass. Glass bottle thrown in the air. Too noisy to hear it shatter as it came down. Dangerous. Very dangerous.

And the smell. A distinct smell of smoking. Cannabis. It hung in the air.

Police presence in the pedestrianised area. Visible, but no apparent action. Watching. Why are they just watching?

Density of people increasing, density of cans on the floor increasing. Still 200 metres from the stadium.

Make for entrance four. Push through the crowd. More singing, more chanting. More drinking. One lad – maybe five metres away – waves a can in his right hand. Liquid sprays out in all directions as his arm moves like a crazed windmill – vertical and horizontal, and back again. People covered in liquid. Me too. It’s cider. Crazed windmill man thinks it’s funny, so do many around him. Another follows his example – more liquid.

Get out of here. Push. Squeeze through. Some lads have glazed-looking eyes. Smoke bomb – red – set off, it’s being

waved vigorously over to the right. A party, of sorts, in full swing. Except no discipline, no boundaries. People are doing what they please regardless of others. Foreboding. A real sense of foreboding. And the police are doing nothing. They're just watching. Makes no sense to me.

Exuberant, good cheer, high-spirited? Maybe for some. Not for me. This was out of hand. Nobody in control. Onwards round to entrance four. Going to go straight in. Timed entrance on my ticket, 7pm–7.30pm. No chance. Not waiting.

Small queue at the bottom of the outer perimeter wall. Stewards. Signs explaining 'NHS Check then Ticket Check'.

Mobile phone – first the app showing my two Covid vaccinations. Checked and through. Next the ticket app. Checked and through. If anyone had decided to run straight through up to the outer concourse – easily done.

Made for the turnstile. Phone scanned, through the turnstile. Escalator to the upper blocks. No programmes – sold out. Ten past six and sold out. What's that all about?

Signs on the wall – an image of a face with a mask with the words, 'Wear a mask at all times.' Ignored. At best a handful of the hundreds of people in the concourse wore masks.

Chanting. Longer, louder. Drinking, hand in hand with the chanting.

To my seat. Ask the steward at the head of the stairs.

'Where can I get a programme?'

Looked at his sheet, 'Outside block 523 and block 536. They also have people walk around the concourse selling them.'

'Really? If you can get me a programme, I'll give you £20 [they cost £10].'

'What row number are you?'

Details given. He shot down the stairs. Deserted his post for ten minutes. On his return, no programme.

An oasis of calm inside the arena. Atmosphere built as kick-off approached. Louder. Game on. Two minutes – goal England. The roar deafening, chanting louder.

Half-time.

This is interesting. During the break and into the second half a number of lads, maybe ten, walking up and down the stairs between the rows looking for seats – talking, at times shouting, into their mobile phones, identifying how many available seats they could see. Very odd.

Second half. England held back, defending deep into their own half. Little attacking threat. Why? The inevitable happened. Goal Italy. Full time, extra time, 1-1 the final score.

Penalties. Not confident. With good reason – 3-2 Italy on penalties. Roar from the Italian end, their players in ecstasy. England's the polar opposite. Slump, despondent. Time to exit. Quick as I could. Took longer than I hoped.

Top of the steps of the outer concourse down to Wembley Way – wet. Raining. Announcements to be careful. Bottom of the steps, need to be more careful. A sea of discarded and flattened drinks cans, shattered bottles of glass everywhere. Very dangerous. Slow progress up Wembley Way. Crowd cheek by jowl. Stopped three times. Wait for people ahead to move into the underground station and board trains.

Finally, up the steps to Wembley Park. Crowded at the top. Crowd pushing. Woman in front – small and she's struggling. Her man puts an arm around her and draws her close to the front of him. On to the platform. Train arrived. Pile on. Got a seat. Three people wearing a mask. No one else.

And the prime minister intends to rely on people's common sense and responsibility to wear masks in crowded public spaces. Jubilee line, Sunday, 10.45pm. Common sense and responsibility have left town.

On to West Hampstead for the journey home. Train due at – 'Cancelled', 'Cancelled'. Damn. Train due at 0024. Shortage of crew the reason for the two cancellations. Had they been watching the final on television?

Train arrives. Heaving, sardine-like. Everybody on. Squashed sardines. Really uncomfortable. Slow progress. At each stop an announcement stating people need to be clear of the doors, for the doors to close. Further announcement – there are

smoke detectors all over the train. If people smoke, all detectors have to be reset. Delays the train further. Home, 1.30am.

Reflecting – I'd enjoyed the occasion of the final. The atmosphere, the game and everything about it. Everything else not one bit. Spoilt it. I certainly would not have wanted my 13-year-old grandson, Charlie, to have been with me. Great, great shame.

The following day, lots about the game, appalling racist abuse on social media of the three players who'd missed their penalties. England manager Gareth Southgate commented it was 'unforgivable'. That's the least of it. It's appalling. Southgate goes on to state the team has been 'a beacon of light in bringing the country together'. No doubt. Players of different colour as one. I thought about the crowd the previous evening. Diversity very much in evidence. Positive.

But racism. A mural of Marcus Rashford on a wall in Manchester had been vandalised with vile racist graffiti. The *Daily Mirror* headline, 'Sickened by Racists'.

Prince William, the prime minister and the England team manager, among many, many others, slammed and condemned the racist trolls.

In the *i* newspaper, editor Oliver Duff commented, 'Off the pitch, these young men have transformed fans' relationship with the team. They play with style and spirit. They take the knee, campaign against homophobia and promote mental health awareness. They raise money to alleviate food poverty, fight childhood illiteracy and help NHS workers. We can take pride in the character of these people who represent England.'

And of Gareth Southgate, 'He upturned cliches about success in sport and business. Winning does not need to come at any cost. His leadership of this squad has been built on decency, compassion and humility.'

*Daily Mail* headline, 'Chaos as fans rush Wembley' – 'English football's biggest night since 1966 was marred last night by the actions of hooligans that eye-witnesses described as "terrifying".'

‘The atmosphere on Wembley Way had been febrile for most of the day ... The doors to gate G were smashed off their hinges and more than 1000 ticketless yobs hurtled into the stadium ... shortly after kick-off there were still hundreds of individuals streaming in.

‘It created an atmosphere of high tension ... in block 102 at least 40 hooded youths, many carrying cans of lager, raced down the steps. A group of four stewards were powerless to stop them. There was no visible police presence in the stadium.’

Front page of the *Daily Mirror* – ‘The Ugly Face of Football Returns’. ‘Hooligans Storm over Barriers into Wembley.’ The narrative included, ‘A steward told of being threatened with a knife, a woman was allegedly sexually assaulted and children were traumatised by the storming of Wembley.’

In *The Times*, Jonathan Northcroft observed, ‘There was a bloke lighting a firework between his bum cheeks on Wembley Way, there were glazed-eyed lads, frightened kids, and songs you mistakenly hoped and thought had been left behind.

‘There was a storming of barriers and turnstiles from ticketless fans ... There were probably not enough police and there was certainly ... a vibe. Not a good one ... In the air there hung sulphur. Underfoot there was litter and broken glass.’

‘Wembley “shambles” investigated after fans fight their way into final’ headlined the *i*.

Much concern that the proposed England and Ireland bid to host the 2030 World Cup now in significant jeopardy after the appalling security shambles at Wembley.

Twenty-four hours before kick-off, the deputy assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Laurence Taylor, was reported as saying, ‘The Met is very experienced at policing large football matches at Wembley and is fully prepared to meet the demand of the Euros final match.’

In his immediate response after the game FA chief executive Mark Bullingham was quoted as saying Wembley is ‘a stadium not a fortress’.

The Met prepared? The Football Association ensuring the safety and welfare of the spectators?

In October 2021 came an email from Baroness Casey to all attendees of the Wembley final. She was leading an independent investigation into the events at and around the stadium.

A detailed questionnaire attached – the focus on the experiences of spectators inside and outside the stadium.

I did not hold back.

Early December 2021 and Baroness Casey's report was damning. Anything different and I'd have been staggered.