DAVID PROUDLOVE

What Happens When Football Leaves Home

When the Circus leaves town

MAINE ROAD | ROKER PARK | HIGHBURY | THE VICTORIA GROUND | HIGHFIELD ROAD
THE VETCH FIELD | FILBERT STREET | UPTON PARK

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Contents

Part One:
To the North

Roker Raw – Sunderland

I'd always been told that Sunderland is a cold place, the front line for beasts from the east, where bitter winds whip in from the North Sea. And so when I decided that the first trip on my itinerary should be to Wearside, the first thing that crossed my mind was the old Billy Connolly line, 'There's no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothes.' I made sure I packed the right ones. And I also waited until winter had passed, though the passing of winter in the North East is all relative.

There's not much to say about a journey from the Potteries to Wearside other than it's bloody long. Nearly five hours on the train including three changes. I left home just before 7am and stepped off the train at Sunderland station just after midday. I did manage to get some sleep along the way, which is always a bonus when you're closing in on your 50th birthday.

My first destination in Sunderland was Roker Park. Well, what was Roker Park once upon a time. I knew it was about a couple of miles north of the city centre, and so I'd made the decision to walk if the weather was fine or jump on the Metro or get a cab if it was the opposite. Luckily for my wallet, the weather was good, though predictably cool, and so I let my legs transport me.

And it's not too bad a walk. I headed out of the city centre along Fawcett Street and crossed the River Wear on the iconic Wearmouth Bridge. I always enjoy looking down on to a river from a bridge, and I spent a few minutes there gazing downstream as the traffic roared past. It isn't all that long ago that the Wear was one of the filthiest waterway in the country. Upstream around Durham, the river was so black with coal dust, nothing could survive. The steelworks and shipyards left the river's mouth so clogged up with scum and shit, salmon and sea trout were unable to make it upriver to spawn. Industry left the Wear dead. Today, the river is cleansed, and nature

has fought back, and I got to thinking that there may well be salmon swimming right beneath where I was standing.

I couldn't stand there daydreaming though, and so I pushed on, but soon ground to a halt again outside the Fans Museum.

The Fans Museum is a magnificent little place. The museum opened in 2007 and is based in what was Monkwearmouth railway station, which was once Sunderland's main station. Trains and the Metro still pass through there but no longer stop, as the platforms are not fit for modern purposes. The station buildings are a lovely slab of Victorian classicism – hence the reason I stopped; I had to get a couple of photographs – and this is recognised by the station's Grade II* Listed status, which has probably saved it from the wrecking ball. And that's a good thing, especially since it provides the Fans Museum with a quirky little home.

The Fans Museum is well worth a visit. Mine has been a virtual visit via their excellent website – it was closed while I was in town – but I'd love to get in there one day. It has the most incredible collection of football memorabilia, the majority from Sunderland – obviously – but not exclusively. My words don't really do it justice; you need to see it.

While I stood outside the Fans Museum, something struck me. I was only a short distance away from Sunderland's present home, the Stadium of Light – or the Stadium of Shite as Newcastle fans would have it – but aside from the odd road sign here and there, you would have no idea that you were a stone's throw from one of the country's biggest football grounds. I looked towards where I would hope to have seen a little glimpse beyond the rail lines, but nothing. Obviously, if it was an evening and a game was on, I'd see a glow from the lit-up cauldron. But there and then in the middle of the day, well, you just wouldn't know.

After taking a shortcut down a little backstreet behind a Stagecoach bus depot to avoid a busy road junction, I found

myself on Roker Avenue, which gave some indication of where I was heading – Roker, a seaside suburb of Sunderland which gave the football club's former home its famous moniker.

Roker Avenue is long. Well, not that long. Probably half a mile. But it is half a mile of terraced housing, which can make it feel quite oppressive. But it's good ordinary housing, built to house miners and those that worked in the shipyards. Much of Roker is similar, but north of Roker Avenue is a unique community of terraced bungalows, the like of which I'd never seen before. Many have been extended upwards, but there is more than enough in their original form to create some interest.

I was intending to go straight to what was once Roker Park, or Promotion Close Park as it's now ironically known. But given the proximity to the sea and the presence of Roker Pier and Lighthouse, and my love of such maritime structures, I treated myself to a short excursion. It was bright and very sunny, but cool, though this didn't really bother me. I was there to enjoy the sea air and the sea views.

Before heading to the pier, I paid a brief visit to Sunderland Marina, which was attractive enough, though it must seem a bit of an oddity to the city's older folk. The marina is overlooked by an incredibly dull, medium-ish density residential development which I'm sure will have looked more impressive on paper than its physical manifestation. I'm sure that its residents find it a pleasant enough place to live – apart from in the depths of winter when I imagine it may be quite harsh – but it just feels like a missed opportunity to me; it could've been so much more.

I decided not to hover around the marina for too long so as to not be viewed as a 'suspicious character' and headed off along Marine Walk and on to the promenade with its pretty timber beds and planting. The tide was out, exposing Roker's beautiful beach.

Overlooking the beach is a little modern development of restaurants and bars – the appropriately named Pier Point would have been a great place to eat and drink if I'd had the time. Instead, I made my way to the pier and Roker Lighthouse.

The development of the mouth of the River Wear began in the early 1700s, led by the newly created River Wear Commission, who began by improving the harbour. By 1750 two breakwaters – the 'old' north and south piers – had been built, and by the turn of the 19th century, a lighthouse was built on each. The port at Sunderland grew rapidly, and during the 1880s, the Commission took the decision to improve the approach to the Wear by building an outer harbour and built the two new piers that provide Roker with two seaside landmarks, though the south pier was never fully completed, and its planned lighthouse never built.

The north pier did get its lighthouse though, completed in 1903 from red and white Aberdeen granite, and utilising Chance Brothers' technology, all the way from Staffordshire.

I've always had a fascination with lighthouses. To me, they're not just phallic feats of engineering that allow man and the sea to co-exist; they're things of genuine beauty. My favourite lighthouses can be found overlooking the Irish Sea on the North Wales coast, from Point of Ayr all the way to Anglesey. And a couple of years back, I worked with my good friends the brilliant artist Ian Pearsall and writer and poet Lindsay Bainbridge, and many other creatives on an art project dedicated to the lighthouse, and so when I took the decision to get up to Sunderland, a visit to Roker Lighthouse was a must.

I spent maybe 15 minutes at the end of the pier, photographing the lighthouse, the views of Roker's seafront and the blue horizon, before heading back inland. I had to give myself a reminder that I was actually there for football-related stuff.

Slightly inland from the North Sea is another public gift from the Victorian era, the original Roker Park. This Roker Park dates from 1880 and was laid out on land gifted by Liberal politician and British diplomat Sir Hedworth Williamson and Church Commissioners. Instead of wandering the streets of Roker, I made my way through the park. And it was lovely. Yes, it was tired in places, but I'd be dead pleased to have Roker Park on my doorstep. In fact, with the beach, the pier and lighthouse, and with the city centre within walking distance, I reckon I could live in Roker.

I exited Roker Park on the appropriately named Park Terrace, which joins Roker Baths Road, my destination. It was here where Sunderland played their football – at the other Roker Park – until 1997 when they left for the newly built Stadium of Light a short distance away.

They arrived in Roker in 1898 after having six grounds in under 20 years. The move came about when the club's chairman John Henderson pledged to build them a bigger ground to replace the Ashville Ground on Newcastle Road, where the club had been based for the previous 12 years. They secured their tenancy after agreeing that the remainder of the site could be developed for housing. Roker Park was to go on to become one of the most evocative grounds in the history of English football.

The first iteration of Roker Park was developed during the summer of 1898, with the laying out of the pitch, and the building of two stands, including the Grandstand which included 3,000 seats and a paddock.

Roker Park hosted its first ever game on 10 September 1898 when Liverpool were the visitors for a friendly. The hosts won the game 1-0 before a crowd of around 30,000, with Jim Leslie scoring the only goal.

Within 15 years, development of the ground gave it a capacity of 50,000, with matches often seeing gates that

hit that mark. In the late 1920s, the club took the decision to demolish the ground's original timber Grandstand and replace it with a new stand built by the Scottish architect Archibald Leitch, who was to become a legendary figure in the construction of British football stadia. The new stand was characterised by Leith's criss-cross lattice work – which can be found in stands at other British grounds – but although the new stand was impressive, its construction almost bankrupted the club, costing £25,000 to build.

The new Main Stand gave Roker Park an official capacity of 60,000, though gates regularly surpassed this, and in 1933, an FA Cup tie with Derby County saw a record attendance of 75,118, though an FA Cup replay against Manchester United decades later is thought to have reached the 80,000 mark.

In 1952, Sunderland became the second club to install floodlights, after Arsenal, and further investment followed prior to the 1966 World Cup in England, when Roker Park hosted three group matches and the quarter-final between USSR and Hungary.

The 1970s saw the club invest in electronic technology at Roker Park, which led to an interesting exchange regarding the atmosphere at a 1973 FA Cup tie with Manchester City. A journalist covering the game from Manchester was convinced that the noise from the crowd was amplified in some way, and so he returned the following day to investigate. While back at Roker Park he said to one of the club's groundsmen, 'I've been reporting on top-class football all my life, but I've never heard noise like that. It's a marvellous gimmick – where are the hidden amplifiers?' The groundsman was taken aback. 'Amplifiers?' came his reply. 'There's no bloody amplifiers here mate. What you heard last night was the Roker Roar!'

Other investment during the 1970s included the installation of executive boxes to the Main Stand, and £250,000 of safety measures to comply with the Safety of Sports Grounds Act.

However, this saw the ground's capacity cut from 58,000 to 47,077.

Sunderland went into a period of decline during the following decade, which included a spell in the Third Division. And the condition of Roker Park mirrored the decline of the team, and following the Hillsborough disaster and the Taylor Report, its capacity was reduced to just 22,500 with limited seating, while the local authority was threatening to reduce it further to 17,000. This left the club with a major problem. If they wanted to be a top-flight regular, they needed to increase the capacity of Roker Park, an impossible task given its residential surroundings and issues with car parking.

Sunderland made the FA Cup Final in 1992, and at the same time began a concerted effort to find a resolution to the challenges thrown up by the Taylor Report. And the proposed solution was to leave Roker Park for a new home, with plans unveiled to move to a 48,000-capacity stadium as part of a new leisure complex – the Sunderland Centre – on a Green Belt site in nearby Washington in close proximity to the Nissan car factory. However, the Japanese motor giant opposed the development – as did local rivals Newcastle United, who were vehemently opposed to the proposed funding package – leaving the club to look elsewhere. Eventually, they settled on a site on the former Monkwearmouth Colliery – which was one of Britain's harshest pits and had closed in December 1993 – where plans for the Stadium of Light were revealed.

In the 1995/96 season, Sunderland won promotion to the Premier League, meaning that their final season at Roker Park would be in the top flight. Sadly for the Black Cats, the season ended in immediate relegation back to Division One, though their final competitive fixture at Roker Park saw them beat Everton 3-0.

The club vacated Roker Park in 1997, and ahead of its demolition played one final commemorative game against

Liverpool, the ground's first visitors back in 1898. The result was a 1-0 win to Sunderland, mirroring the result all those years ago. Following the game, club legend Charlie Hurley dug up the centre spot for it to be transported to the Stadium of Light. And following the ground's demolition, the playwright Tom Kelly collaborated with actor Paul Dunn to produce the play *I Left My Heart at Roker Park*, about a man who struggled with the club's move away from Roker Park, and what the place meant to him. The play has been reprised a number of times since to great acclaim.

Sunderland played more than 1,800 fixtures at Roker Park, and it proved to be a real fortress for them; they were unbeaten in 1,445 of those games, a quite remarkable record.

Once the Black Cats had vacated, Roker Park was sold to a housebuilder to help finance the club's move, and it was quickly replaced with a new housing estate which is what I was there to take a look at.

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The redevelopment of Roker Park was christened Promotion Close Park in order to commemorate the old place, which was somewhat ironic given the club's final season there ended in relegation. The estate is entered off Roker Baths Road along Midfield Drive, and at its heart is a greenspace and kids' play area which is presumably where the old centre circle was.

The space offered to the new community is miserly, and I can't imagine that there will be too many budding Kevin Phillips' or Jimmy Montgomeries polishing their boots here. While I was brooding on the lack of local amenities and the surroundings, I realised that I was standing on Promotion Close. The folks that built this place really had it in for the Mackems, didn't they?

Given what a special place Roker Park was to local people, its replacement leaves a lot to be desired. While I

don't wish to belittle people's homes, very little thought or effort went into what went in its place. All Promotion Close Park is is an off-the-peg, one-size-fits-all housing estate that is alien to its surroundings, has no design rationale, and a clichéd response – Clockstand Close? Goalmouth Close? – to the site's long history. It's depressing. The development industry can do better, and it knows it. And the local authority could have made them do better too. I remember ex-Tory MP and current Labour voter Nick Boles branding standard housebuilder fare 'pig ugly' while he was housing minister; I reckon this is the sort of stuff that he was getting at. It's bland and beige. Placeless. As Gertrude Stein said, 'There is no there there.'

As the cold wind chilled me, it was hard to believe I was standing where some of the great names of English football had done their thing, and where World Cup ties had taken place. It was deathly quiet. No more Roker Roar, now it was Roker raw. I wasn't standing at one of England's great old grounds; I was standing in the middle of a run-of-the-mill suburban housing estate. It was time to move on.

I walked back on to Roker Baths Road and could imagine it heaving with Mackems in years gone by, people like my dad and I heading to the game. Now it was just traffic passing between Roker and the city centre. I was looking to make my way to Sunderland's new home, the Stadium of Light. I say new; they've been there almost 25 years now. And if you're looking to walk, it's not the easiest or most pleasant. And once again, there were very few visible signs that you're pretty close to a major sporting venue.

Eventually I reached a greenspace alongside a housing estate at the junction with Fulwell Road, and here I found a sign for the Stadium of Light Metro station which seemed like an obvious place to head for. However, the station is actually nowhere near the Stadium of Light. In fact, it should actually

be called the Sunderland Tesco Extra Metro station, as it's located at the arse-end of one of their supermarkets.

I ended up walking down the side of a Toyota car dealership before crossing the busy Newcastle Road and making one of the grimmest walks I've ever had the misfortune to make. All I can say is that I'm glad it was in the middle of the afternoon. Warwick Street and Abbs Street in Sunderland are not places I will be looking to make a return visit to anytime soon; it felt like the sort of place where gangsters carry out killings in crappy TV police dramas, though I'm sure the reality isn't quite so melodramatic. However, when I reached the end of Abbs Street, I was actually pleased to see a busy road. And it was here where I finally saw the Stadium of Light.

The Stadium of Light is located alongside the River Wear on the site of the former Monkwearmouth Colliery, at the heart of a spaghetti of heavily engineered roads, car parks and car dealerships. However, the Sunderland Aquatic Centre and Beacon of Light community sports centre stand alongside Sunderland's home, which I was really happy to see.

The Stadium of Light was named by former chairman Bob Murray to reflect the site's coal-mining heritage, and at the entrance to the ground stands a sculpture of a Davy lamp. The club explained the stadium's name in a press release: 'The name has evolved over a period of time, and is the result of ideas and inspiration from a wide range of sources, not any single individual. The naming of the stadium is a milestone in the history of Sunderland AFC – an event which only takes place once every hundred years. As such, the name itself is one which evokes both the history of the area and the international future of both the Club and the City of Sunderland.

'For many years, miners at Wearmouth Colliery carried with them a Davy lamp as part of their everyday working lives. Reflecting this tradition, the name allows the image of this light to shine forever. The Sunderland Stadium of

Light reflects the desire of the Club and its supporters to be in the limelight, and like a torch signifies and illuminates the way forward.

'The name – like the Stadium – will radiate like a beacon to the football world. It stands as a symbol of the regeneration of the City of Sunderland; the country's newest stadium in the town, which was designated a City in 1992.

'The new stadium will stand as a Sporting Cathedral for the City, a new and uplifting symbol to help promote the whole area. The City of Sunderland has a growing international reputation as a place where things are made to happen, and the Sunderland Stadium of Light is testimony to this philosophy of searching for international excellence.'

And there are links back to Sunderland's time at Roker Park. Among the landscaping of the stadium's main car park are sections of the iconic Archibald Leith steelwork from Roker Park's main stand, salvaged from the old place's demolition. It's a nice touch and given the loss of so much of Leitch's legacy, we need more of it. I hope that the owners of Everton take note.

Although the Stadium of Light can look spectacular alongside the river when lit up at night, as with the redevelopment of Roker Park, it was never going to win any architectural awards, and it's a simple, almost flat-pack design and build solution. The ground has a capacity of 49,000, though it has been constructed to allow it to be increased quite easily to 64,000. Given the size of the Stadium of Light, the construction costs were a remarkably low £14.5m, while the Tyne and Wear Development Corporation contributed £3.5m towards site remediation and infrastructure costs. The Mackems got themselves a pretty tidy deal all told, and at the time, the Stadium of Light was the largest new stadium built in Britain since the end of World War II, while they were the first English club to receive the UEFA four-star ranking for their new home.