

Dave Thomas



A Director's Tale



Foreword by John Helm



John Bond, Burnley, and the
Diaries of Director Derek Gill



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The background

THIS IS the story of four years at Burnley Football Club, a club with a long and illustrious history. As at any club, there were good years and bad, winning years and years of turmoil, years of success and years of failure. These particular four years saw everything; glory, chaos, triumph and debacle, all condensed into one short snapshot of time when set against the long history of the club that began in 1882. A most unexpected promotion, an immediate relegation, one season with John Bond, and on his departure, relegation the next season. If drama is what you want then look no further than Turf Moor from 1981 to 1985. And then, just two years after that came the Leyton Orient season. It was a time when strong hearts were needed.

It had everything and underlying it all were the main characters: chairman John Jackson, director Derek Gill, along with managers Brian Miller, Frank Casper, John Bond and finally John Benson. The Bouncing Czech, Robert Maxwell, had what we might call a walk-on part. One of Derek Gill's sons proudly recalls the time that one Sunday morning he bluntly told Maxwell to fuck off, when Derek was out and Maxwell insisted on speaking to him.

Owld Bob Lord was dead, the great patriarch finally gone and replaced as chairman by John Jackson. Not quite a coup but almost, too ill to attend the board meeting at which he was

replaced. Lord's daughters were furious, in particular Barbara. Lord had been replaced without his knowledge while he was as good as dying. 'Stabbed in the back,' she said. In truth, what else could the directors do?

'Burn everything,' Lord told her in his final days. 'Burn the lot.' And so up in smoke went all the records, letters, documents and paperwork he had accumulated at home over the last 25 years and more. It took a week to destroy them. Up in flames went the records of his time at the club, his legacy obliterated, or at least what was left of it. Had he not been ill he would have faced an FA inquiry into the club's finances and his involvement with them. His death spared him that. Perhaps that is why he ordered Barbara to burn everything. We shall never know.

As he lay dying, the team struggled in the Third Division; wins were rare and they were at the bottom end of the table. Ironically, after his death they recovered, bit by bit; it was the defeats that became rare. They clawed their way back up the table so well that under manager Brian Miller, and on the field marshalled by the incomparable Martin Dobson, by the end of the season they were the champions and returned to the Second Division, now the Championship. They were triumphant days for the team and the board of directors. The word 'preening' did not go amiss.

Beavering away behind the scenes, happy to let John Jackson take centre stage, was director Derek Gill. A quiet, family man, softly spoken, diligent, hard-working, accomplished, an accountant with a forensic mind, he ran his own engineering works and was an accomplished musician. Burnley Football Club was his love. Relations between him and the more gregarious Jackson were initially good; Jackson too was passionately in love with the club he had supported since boyhood. Directors don't fall out when things are going well.

Manager Brian Miller was one of the great rocks of the club – a player since his teenage years, first-team stalwart for years, coach,

assistant manager, then manager. Miller didn't suffer fools gladly. His dislike of Jackson would eventually surface.

How many directors keep a diary of their time at a club? Precious few, but Gill was one such person. The diaries came to my attention when in a previous book, an anthology of chapters about different people and players at the club, Gill was referred to in a way that he felt did him a great injustice. Derek wrote shortly afterwards:

'To my astonishment and regret I have been made aware of a publication grandly describing itself as an anthology of my once beloved Burnley Football Club, going under the title of *No Nay Never*. Nor I must confess is it a title that would ever have attracted space on my book shelf or taken up any of my reading time, but on hearing of it from an old friend originally from Burnley, but long since emigrated to London, I have to say that I found it to be well presented with some thoroughly riveting sections.

'Unfortunately, it also contains certain references to myself from which any reader unaware of the real history of an unhappy period for the club could only conclude that the club itself was the victim of a financially reckless and devious financial director who acted against the wishes of his chairman and committed the club to unsustainable levels of expenditure, that led to the decline in the fortunes of the club.

'I was that financial director, and indeed became managing director in September 1983 until my resignation in 1985. Having kept silent on many matters for these 20 years and more and more resigned to letting sleeping dogs lie, I find myself grossly offended by distortion, and the mere half truths in the recollections. I am therefore obliged to respond. The remarks of one person in particular in *No Nay Never* go far too far to be allowed to remain unanswered.'

In this latter paragraph, Gill is referring to John Jackson, who was interviewed for *No Nay Never* and that full interview appears

in this book. Gill went on to explain that had he been given an opportunity to refute the chairman's claims in the same anthology, then his ire would never have been inflamed. Thus, since then, he made his diaries available to anyone who was interested, and what an insight they provide into 'the headlines and the crazy case of Burnley Football Club from 1982 to 1985'. They present the good, the bad and the ugly of his time as managing director.

Like all diaries, they have to be treated with some caution. Many entries are factual but others are personal and judgemental. Diaries are private things where we reveal not just the good and the joyful, but angst and unhappiness. We write things that we would perhaps not say face to face. And they give our own interpretations and slant on things.

'Who cares that I was a director of Burnley Football Club?' Gill wrote. He added that he never had any desire to see his diaries, or 'book' as he called them, fully published but was simply content to print out copies whenever anyone had the interest to read them. What particularly galled him was the inference by Jackson, in the piece he wrote for *No Nay Never*, that it was the financial director who had advocated unwise financial policies, and the financial director was, in fact, Derek Gill. Jackson maintained that in allowing John Bond to spend money, he himself was merely carrying out the wishes of the board.

'Let's get stock on the shelf,' was, he insisted, the view of the board. In other words, buy players, and let's use overdrafts and other resources.

Gill's discontent was straightforward enough. Accusations of profligacy with the club's money were pointed at him. But, he argued, how could that be? The wild spending of the Bond management period took place before he became managing director.

'I disagreed with the financial director,' wrote Jackson, thereby distancing himself from Gill, and inferring that it was Gill's policy.

‘We should have retained money for a rainy day. Lawyers are generally more cautious than successful businessmen, and I had seen enough rainy days at Burnley Football Club.’ Herein was the suggestion that Gill was not cautious. ‘What happened thereafter was a financial disaster. John Bond would ask for money. The board would authorise it. And the money was spent. I had no enthusiasm for the policies.’

All of this was part of a much longer piece that Jackson provided. On reading it, Gill was astonished. He was aggrieved when the *No Nay Never* book appeared, and to put the record straight he gave me a copy of his extensive diaries. In the local press and in the next anthology, we did indeed put the record straight. None of it was to suggest that the club’s eventual woes were solely the chairman’s fault, far from it. As in most things, a combination of factors came into play. If you read any Thomas Hardy novel, the characters are always at the mercy of universal elements, of fate, never in control of their own destiny. You could argue it was much the same when Bond, Jackson and Gill became entangled at Burnley Football Club.

The diaries provide a record of times that began so spectacularly well and ended four years later in acrimony and with Gill’s own personal disappointment at the way things had gone against him in his final months at the club.

With wit and an erudite turn of phrase, Gill thus recorded the trials and tribulations of the comings and goings, the ins and outs, the behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings and jockeying. The way that players were signed, the mistakes that were made, the good and the bad of everything that went on, the poor treatment of Brian Miller, the poor treatment of Frank Casper, the players who were bought, and the way that John Bond swept into the club and then, having been dismissed, literally disappeared into the night.

What the diaries show initially is the way in which Gill turned around the club’s financial fortunes, from the penniless shambles

that Bob Lord had left behind, to money almost overflowing from the tills, as he salvaged and rescued the situation. A promotion season and money in the bank. What could possibly go wrong? Gill recorded it all.

When, only a few years ago, we referred to him in *No Nay Never Volume One*, he re-read his diaries and added to them. They evoked painful memories. They reminded him of the time he would have loved to have become chairman; and indeed, the prize was within his grasp, but at the last minute it was snatched away, he wrote. The hurt lasted for years.

Chairmen, overall, are a much-maligned breed; when things go wrong, they are, more often than not, the first target. But they are brave men who are prepared to stick their heads above the parapet. Jackson was just such a man. After that first successful promotion year, the next three were traumatic, each for different reasons, and Jackson endured some dreadful personal abuse.

Gill wrote down the bulk of his recollections in 1987, the year of the great escape, when in the last game of the season Burnley beat Orient 2-1 to avoid demotion to non-league football. It was two years after he had left the boardroom. He shed tears of relief that Orient day, a day embossed on the mind of every Burnley fan, Saturday, 9 May. Jackson undoubtedly felt the same relief and joy.

Monday, 16 May 1985 had been the day Gill walked out of the boardroom for the last time. Three and a half years earlier he had been invited to join the board, to his great surprise, and it was a prize that he felt beyond riches, such was his love for the club. In his wildest dreams and ambition, he had never expected such a position. He wrote that he would have sacrificed so much for the club and to walk out in the way that he did was the hardest and most heart-rending decision he had ever made.

‘There were good reasons for it,’ he wrote.

‘During my years at Burnley we had four team managers,’ Gill wrote in 1987, ‘starting with Brian Miller, followed in

extraordinary circumstances by Frank Casper, who in turn was quickly succeeded by John Bond, whose one-year tenure was ended when he was replaced by John Benson. Players, other staff and supporters did not know whether they were coming or going and it is little wonder that we suffered relegation from both the Second and Third Divisions.

‘The board of which I was a member cannot possibly be exonerated from the lion’s share of the responsibility, even allowing for the ludicrous shambles bequeathed to it by the previous dictatorial chairman. But as always it is necessary to look into the background to appreciate how it all came about. Even after all this time I still find it difficult to understand how supposedly professional men could have acted so stupidly over that period and somehow failed to learn from their mistakes until it was too late for the board to survive. But never, as has been asserted, would it be too late for the club to survive.

‘Directors often seem unable or unwilling to differentiate between the club and their own personal interests but football clubs are not unique in that respect. Rather, it is that they are very high profile in smaller confined communities such as Burnley, beautifully dubbed “Grumpy Town” by Tommy Hutchison during his spell at the club.

‘It was late October/early November 1981, when Colin Sanderson, at that time solicitor to the club, introduced me to the chairman, John Jackson, and we met at his home. Colin was to join the board sometime later, only to resign after a short period in an unhappy manner following what by then was a routine boardroom row.

‘My first impression of Mr Jackson was of a man exhilarated by the prospects before him but also seemingly aware of the magnitude of the task that lay ahead, and disarmingly frank about his lack of administrative experience therein. All this had been the sole preserve of “Mr Lord” as he invariably referred to

him and to Lord's trusted lieutenant, the long-serving secretary Albert Maddox.

'John did not seem to be under any illusions and made it perfectly clear that he was looking for sweeping changes in the club starting right at the top with a reconstructed board, something he confirmed to the Annual General Meeting in January 1982, when my appointment was ratified. At that first meeting with him he told me of the infighting within the board relating to the succession as chairman following the resignation¹ of the legendary Bob Lord due to what was to prove to be a terminal illness, and it was clear there were old scores to settle.

'All my life I have enjoyed a passion for music but there was never a sweeter sound to my ear than the melody that said the old regime at Burnley was on the way out and big changes were imminent. My discussions with John Jackson left me in no doubt that it would not be long before I would have a part to play.

'For years I had felt a distaste for Bob Lord and had been on the receiving end of abusive correspondence, particularly for being critical of his dismissal of team manager Jimmy Adamson. Some of his actions are related elsewhere in this book, but for now I will simply state the obvious that it is an invariable characteristic of dictators (which he most certainly was) that they fail to make any meaningful provision for their succession. The first consequence was an inevitable boardroom fight for the "chair" shortly to surface with the forcing out of Mr Jimmy Wilde, a respected solicitor and one of the consortium of four that had acquired the shareholding of Mr Lord. It was the incomparable Jimmy McIlroy who made the dry but apt comment to me when I had the privilege of inviting him back to Turf Moor, for the first time in almost 20 years that, "Even dictators are not immortal."

1 Bob Lord did not resign. He was simply replaced in his absence as chairman at a board meeting that he was too ill to attend. Gill did not know this at the time of writing but acknowledged it later.

‘My part in the story had arrived much earlier than I had ever imagined when John Jackson asked me to examine the affairs of the club and to submit a report and with it any proposals I might have for the future. He promised me total access to any and all information and documentation within the club and access to whatever I needed to carry out the job².

‘For me, it was the ultimate labour of love and John was totally true to his word in backing me to the hilt as I threw myself into the task. One thing has always struck me in business when dealing with consultants, which I have to say in passing is not one of my favoured pastimes, is that reports always carry that little bit of extra weight when they contain those juicy morsels which the commissioner of the report wants to hear confirmed. I was not so daft as to fail to realise the content of my report could well put me on the board, if it confirmed what the chairman wanted to hear, that is to say already knew.

‘So, John got to hear what he wanted to hear and he was very close to the mark in his own assessment of the state of the club. All I needed to do was to suggest a basic standard management structure to replace the *ask the chairman everything and never use any initiative of your own*. A mentality that had been all-pervasive under Bob Lord. I thought that John was going to be a brilliant chairman and all he needed was a good organisation man and I had no doubts that I could fill that role. The reports that I submitted are reported elsewhere in this book and reflect accurately and honestly the situation that I found. A situation that could not possibly be allowed to continue without the club sinking still further into oblivion.

2 One does wonder if Gill knew at this point that Lord had ordered all documents and correspondence that he kept at home to be destroyed. In addition, another cache of documents went missing, no doubt incinerated, when the old Brunshaw Road Stand was demolished, and the old offices within it. Nevertheless, what he was left with enabled him to produce a damning report.

'Memory can play strange tricks and it is worth a brief summary of the legacy left by Mr Lord. Ask many, indeed most, people where Burnley were when he left and they might be surprised to learn that the position was second to last in the old THIRD DIVISION! The administration was a shambles. Suppliers were not being paid. The position with PAYE, National Insurance and the Inland Revenue was chaotic. VAT was something to ignore and hope it would go away³.

'The chalice inherited by John Jackson, however, was not entirely poisoned. But neither did it smell of roses. But at least it was in a position where any optimist feels there is only one way to go. And that is up. We set to work with enthusiasm and I was virtually full-time in the place. There were good prospects of an early boost in income and for me, the whole place, being there doing this work, was just too good to be true. My own business was left almost unattended. And I loved every minute of it.

'Then began a run of success on the field and in the next 41 league games only two were lost. It was too easy by half.

'What clever buggers we thought we were.'

3 The club was, in fact, teetering on insolvency.