

JAMIE MAGILL

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TRAVELS AND TRAVAILS OF A
1980s RED DEVIL



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Beware of Darkness

To celebrate the mediocre is a crime, and, if it isn't, it ought to be – Warrington, Cheshire (formerly Lancashire) is an interesting case study. For those sages in our midst who drive straight through, take a look at Warrington's most famous sons (and daughters): Jesse Lingard, Steven Arnold (before you ask, he played Ashley in Corrie), Kerry Katona, Rebekah Brooks. It's a who's who alright. But for every newspaper chief and perma-tan reality TV star there's an Ian Brown, a Roger Hunt, a Chris Evans and a Louisa from Grappenhall. Did I tell you that the armies of Oliver Cromwell and the Earl of Derby once stayed in Warrington? I bet it was for only one night. Maybe the IKEA was closed, and they had to march on warts and all without the fortification of crisp hot dogs and first-rate ice cream? How the social history of England might have been different ...

Back in 1983 Warrington did offer one unlikely crumb of solace: it gave you a legitimate reason to support Liverpool. I reckon half of the kids did back then, with

the residue mainly United with a bit of City and Everton thrown in – of course there was the odd clown who purported to support Spurs but he was usually recaptured quite soon as he protested in vain that Glenn Hoddle was the Second Coming. And why not support Liverpool? They were First Division champions after all. School playgrounds make America look democratic, so you do what you have to do to give you that edge. It's all about being first at school: you want to be first pick at break time, first in line at the Panini stickers swap shop ('Got!', 'Got!', 'Got!', when really all you have is the free packet that came with the *Shoot!* magazine the previous summer), first to stamp the marrow out of veteran conkers, first in the queue for Mild Curry crisps at morning break, first at the ice cream van for the super sour jawbreakers and Wham bars, first in the school strip at afternoon break if you're good enough or lucky enough to be selected for the school team. Get the picture? Football was currency back then – well before button pushing spoilt life for us it was the passport to legitimacy and acceptance. In that context, supporting the best team in the land clearly helped.

Nick Mahoney showed me the United way but that's only part of the background. I'll say this very quietly, but I started off as a City fan. Yes, there are pictures of me in 1982 in City strips. The light blue one. The black and red vertical stripes away kit. My dad was a blue you see. So, what happened? Two words. Raddy Antić. On 14 May 1983 City only needed a point at home to Luton Town to stay in the First Division. Luton needed a win to achieve the same purpose. With five minutes remaining it was 0-0 and Dad and I were glued to *World of Sport*. He was

too nervous to listen live on the wireless (he never called it the radio) and these were pre-Teletext days, so we had to make do with the score flashes on *World of Sport*. They were sometimes hard to notice in between the huge torsos of Giant Haystacks and Big Daddy and the bouffant of Dickie Davies. But this one wasn't: MANCHESTER CITY 0 LUTON 1. 'Fucking hell!' was all Dad said. We quickly turned to *Grandstand* (well I did as this was my job pre-remote control) and then the vidiprinter confirmed City's fate. I think there were a few more 'fucking hells' before the bacon and Super Noodles we had for tea half an hour later. A few Harp Lagers before *Juliet Bravo* calmed him down.

Anyway, what was I supposed to do? It's a bit like Matt Le Tissier has said about why he didn't leave Southampton. As long as they were in the top flight, he was OK. Same with me, but the Second Division? No bloody chance. Imagine that in the playground. 'Who you got this weekend Jamie?' 'Oh, we've got Cambridge United away. They could be tough to break down.' It was enough to get your head kicked in at our school. Everyone stayed away from one lad at school. You must remember that lad? If Paul Wood found out I was supporting a Second Division team then I would get a proper working over. Just a few months earlier John Kelly's prize for inadvertently stepping on Woody's spanking new Dunlop Green Flash was to have shit stuffed in his Yamaha recorder. That put an abrupt end to Mrs Sudlow's winter concert – in front of the parents and governors as well. Another lad nicked his Choc Dips and can of Top Deck lemonade shandy and lived to regret it. I learnt very early in life that physical

bravery is for the foolhardy and dumb: don't encourage attention from the idiots (for example, by supporting a shit team) and if they do come your way then agree to lend them your BMX, your ZX81 and your sister. They'll have forgotten in the morning and will be on their next mission.

Dad probably didn't care that much about my egregious act of treachery; at least he didn't show it, but thankfully his generation didn't feel compelled to tell the world and his wife each time they went to Tesco and bought a box of eggs with one cracked. Maybe he was hurt? Thirty odd years later I told my son that Spurs was fine, but if he went with Liverpool or Chelsea, I'd never speak to him again. Well? Fair's fair, isn't it? It was a massive thing for me though. I felt a touch of shame when on 15 May 1983 (a day after the relegation) I took down my pictures of David Cross, Dennis Tueart and Kevin Reeves and replaced them with Norman Whiteside, Bryan Robson and Frank Stapleton. Dad hadn't even come to terms with the divorce and I moved a fitter bird into my room the very next day. I didn't even close the door as she shamelessly cavorted around in a number of outfits. Announcing it to my friends was the easy bit: half of them were United fans anyway and the Liverpool lot could now take the piss even more. They could say what they liked: it was the FA Cup Final the very next week. Manchester United v Brighton and Hove Albion. My first game would be at Wembley Stadium in front of 100,000 for the biggest prize in football. Oh, I can feel your grumblings and glory boy asides from here in sunny N5!

I know the concept has been force-fed to death in recent years but in 1983 the FA Cup was the apotheosis

of football; on balance, it was probably more important than the First Division and, most definitely, preferable to European glory. Why? Because it told a good story: the artisans Brighton and Hove Albion meet the aristocrats of Manchester United on remotely even terms on a one-off, winner-takes-all occasion when anything is possible. OK, I will say it but just once: David v Goliath. But what's not to like about that anyway? And that was just the final itself. We had the mud and ice of the January third round (punctuated by the story shown on *Grandstand* of the part-time postman/butcher/baker/window cleaner/sandwich spreader/delivery man from Crewe frothing at the prospect of shaking Ian Rush's hand), the possibility of endless replays and late school-night highlights and the nerve tingling anticipation of the April Villa Park semi-finals. Cup final day in the 1980s – a huge event: football's Royal Ascot, Wimbledon final and Lord's Saturday rolled into one.

In keeping with the gravitas of the occasion, the build-up started around 9am on both channels (saving a grateful nation from its weekly penance at the altar of Keith Chegwin, Maggie Philbin and Bob Carolgees) and meandered quite delightfully towards 'Abide With Me'. I can remember I was deprived of this. Dad took us to town shopping for a Laura Ashley dress for Mum and to Marks & Spencer; maybe he was raging at me. Or he was showing me and my sister how deliciously middle class he had become with his credit card and Cavalier company car and tape deck stuffed with Phil Collins and Dire Straits. You know, in the 'football no longer matters to me' sense? Where's the antiques fair and the garden party?

United finished the 1982/83 season in third position – 12 points behind the champions Liverpool. Not bad you think? Well, before you get carried away, we (I can say we now by the way) were one point behind Elton John's Watford who had only been promoted to the First Division that year and five years earlier were in the Fourth Division – the lowest tier of the Football League. A United win was more certain than death and taxation. But neither the Grim Reaper nor the VAT man was about to spoil a bloody good day out. As Jimmy Case (of Liverpool fame), who played for Brighton that day, recalled in a MailOnline interview in 2010:

There was something about the Cup that season. We weren't very good in the league but when it came to the Cup, the whole town came alive. We just ran it as far as we could.

We were a bunch of jokers. We knew we were the underdogs against United but we were those types of characters anyway. Before the final, we had a lunch and this comedian, Bob 'the Cat' Bevan, who was a Brighton fan, came in and did a show for us before we got on the helicopter.

At least we had our own comedian in Ron Atkinson. These the days before the cult of management personality infected the mainstream: now we know all about Jürgen's glasses and teeth and favourite pasta and the boxing training of his landlord Brendan, but back then their contribution to the media was pretty laconic: there was pretty much nothing apart from the odd 'All credit to the

lads John; this is always a hard place to come but they done great today' on *Match of the Day*. But the media Ron we knew in the 90s does shed some light on what might have been going on in that dressing room at Wembley around 2pm on the afternoon of 21 May 1983. You can see him putting his bejewelled arm around Arnold Mühren and imploring the cultured left footer to 'put in some spongy balls for Frank Stapleton' and 'get it to the back stick early doors'. Over to Ray Wilkins: 'Butch, it's about the two Ms today – movement and passing.' No doubt we would have been 'firing on all cylinders' with that steak and suet ready to burn.

The team that day was as below:

1. Gary Bailey
 2. Mike Duxbury
 3. Arthur Albiston
 4. Ray Wilkins
 5. Kevin Moran
 6. Gordon McQueen
 7. Bryan Robson (captain)
 8. Arnold Mühren
 9. Frank Stapleton
 10. Norman Whiteside
 11. Alan Davies
- Substitute:
12. Ashley Grimes.

Alan Davies? I know what you're thinking. Big Ron had signed Lawrie Cunningham on loan from Real Madrid that April, but he was struggling with injury. Some player

him and he played for England just six times. I hummed unconvincingly to 'Abide With Me'. Even now I don't know any of the words. Do any football fans? Does anyone? What exactly are they singing/mumbling/humming? So, here's the moment every football fan has been waiting for since circa 1927:

Abide with Me

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide
The darkness deepens Lord, with me abide
When other helpers fail and comforts flee
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away
Change and decay in all around I see
O Thou who changest not, abide with me

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness
Where is death's sting?
Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes
Shine through the gloom and point me to the
 skies
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain
 shadows flee
In life, in death, o Lord, abide with me
Abide with me, abide with me

BEWARE OF DARKNESS

*Songwriters: Henry Francis Lyte/Will Henry Monk
'Abide With Me' lyrics Universal Music Publishing Group, Kobalt Music
Publishing Ltd.*

Pretty moving isn't it, even on an implacable November afternoon in Highbury N5. Bet you feel better now? Bookmark this page for next year's cup final, if we have one that is. But at least the confusion of 100,000 souls at Wembley was drowned out by Dad's savage and, sadly for me, solo onslaught on confectionery ranging from American Hard Gums (harder back then) to Midget Gems through to Liquorice Torpedoes and white and then strawberry Bonbons (he didn't like the lemon ones). In between the infernal din were censorious asides about Atkinson 'swine', Wilkins 'pudding', Bailey 'sunbed' and, no doubt, others.

As kick-off approached and the fantastic Adidas tracksuit tops were shorn, I suddenly felt a sense of belonging. I guess at eight you only belong to things which impress superficially and while I felt a pang of guilt it didn't register on the Richter scale. Where was I in February when United were struggling in the fifth round away at Derby County at the Baseball Ground on that shit tip of a glue-pot pitch? Was I sweating at Villa Park in the semi-final when Tony Woodcock put the Gunners 1-0 up? Did I care? No, not really. There were nerves though. When City lost, the playground mafia just plain did not care, or notice. It was different with United. Losing to Brighton would be unbearable and the Liverpool contingent would never let us forget. But for Simon Stone (rabid Liverpool fan of the worst kind even now) the consequences of a United win were even more dire, for back in February in front of any

number of witnesses he had promised to 'show his arse at Market Gate if United won the cup'.

Nature wreaked its only infernal revenge on Bertie Bassett. Around 2.45pm the heavens opened in Warrington. My dad was far from impressed; he was already two parts into his third Harp Lager top and while he always did what he wanted ('There's only one person steering this ship and that's me. And if you don't like the direction in which it's heading then get off it.') he hated any form of 'mither', so he had absolutely no choice other than to brave the elements – pretending the peg bag was Gary Bailey's head. He had some work friends round at 5 for a game of snooker on the 6 x 3 table so he wanted the leg break of a United FA Cup win to be a clean and crisp one. The snooker was important. These were the halcyon days of Steve Davis, Hurricane Higgins, Whirlwind White. And Bill Werbeniuk sipping crates and crates of ale on the job. It was a status symbol too: anyone with a 6 x 3 table with net pockets and a spider rest was going places.

Because it would only take 90 minutes, wouldn't it? The painstakingly prepared and wide-ranging medley of banners (a deeply rich but sadly bygone part of the FA Cup Final tapestry) established a consensus of sorts: 'MORAN – A CUT ABOVE THE REST' seemed to resonate more than the less convincing 'WE'LL PUT WHITESIDE ON HIS BACKSIDE'. No prematch handshakes save with the royals (what a fine waste of time they both are); no diving; no histrionics; no tactical substitutions; no Gatorade or energy gels; no wanton dissent: I know life and society has moved on but we can still learn lots from the design aesthetics of a Wright Brothers plane and Donovan and

The Ink Spots are as cool now as they ever were. In front 2-1 courtesy of a sublime left-foot curler from the unlikely source of Ray Wilkins, United were home and hosed. Ten minutes or so remained. Robson was imperious; his mere presence ensured shape, balance and order and inspired confidence, even amongst the wan-faced, battle-scarred supporters. The number 7 on his back was a metaphor for the mole on my dad's face on a long car journey – no matter how treacherous the terrain, how unrelenting the elements, the mole would get you to safety, and repel everything from sleet to hail, from fire to brimstone, from Barcelona to Liverpool via Brighton and Hove Albion.

But when someone slams the brakes on in thick, pea-soup traffic what can one do? The equaliser came through Gary Stevens with minutes left on the clock – I would never trust my old man again, but I would always find a way to forgive Robson. On a bog of a Wembley surface (these were the days long before Freddie Mercury when Evel Knievel would merrily hack away at the hallowed turf and what little he left would be gaily eviscerated by Princess Anne and her equine lot) United were done, and extra time seemed a punishment prescribed by Beelzebub himself. You don't see it so much these days but back then extra time was like the Somme battlefield – shell-shocked men plodding forlornly forward, armour (shin guards) shorn, socks rolled to jackboots; this was the final push, over the top, mind over matter, will to win. The growing number of casualties succumbed to muscle-knotting cramps and looked desperately to the bench for medical discharge, but the one sub had been on since the 55th minute and Wembley was no place to desert.

There seemed slightly more life in Brighton – maybe it was the sea air or the fish diet or the sprightly night scene, but they pressed forward with greater purpose. And then? Gordon Smith. Clean through. Seconds left. He must score. I can see it now. Bailey made a fine half-stop with his legs and then clung on to the loose ball as if it was an orphaned koala. A replay secured. People criticise replays which seems a little odd in today's age of mental-health awareness. Replays made sure I lived beyond the age of 15. I would probably have killed myself if we had lost a cup final on penalties. I told my dad 'I feel like I have kicked every ball' and he smiled. An unprompted cliché at the age of eight shows you are a lifelong member of the club every dad wants his son to be part of. I remember being pissed up in Altrincham in 2005 watching the Ashes and my mates and I spotted Norman Whiteside. So, I go up to him and ask about the 83 final and whether we underestimated Brighton? I know it was a shit question, but it was the first thing that came into my head. 'Fuck off' was his reply. In an interview with Newstalk on 19 May 2018, when asked the same question, he was a little more forthcoming:

I don't think we did actually. I just think it was a poor performance and that can happen.

We had looked over so many FA Cup Final games and every year it's not the best game of football because sometimes they become an anti-climax and I've heard that commentated many times but we just went into it hopeful we were going to play well but it never turned out that way and Brighton gave us a really good run for our money.

Maybe Big Norm is sick of answering this question or he was more interested in the blonde he was with?

United won the replay 4-0 and, aside from the early goals and the deeply unfathomable concept of how the same game can start in broad daylight and end in pitch black, my most vivid memory, strangely, was Norman Whiteside drinking milk in the post-match interviews. 'Why not Coca-Cola?' I thought. I didn't think that for long. Good bit of work from the Milk Marketing Board. Mind you, with Thatcher taking it away from the kids they needed to target a new demographic.

But what if Smith had scored? Simon Stone did show his arse at Market Gate – but we only have his word for that. And this is the kid who swore blind that he did meet you as planned at 6am at the M56 services to go to Chester Zoo and further lamented that he had to flour bomb the warders, fight the chimpanzees, strap rubber on the water buffalo and watch the elephants shit bricks all alone. If Smith had scored, I may have gone back to City and you would have been spared all this nonsense. Robson may have gone – Juventus and Sampdoria went in for him that summer and without silverware and the old 'cup winners make strong title challengers next term' syndrome, which was prevalent back then, the allure of the land of sunshine and pasta may have been irresistible. What about Big Ron? This would have been two years in the job with no trophy. And to lose to Brighton deserves some punishment surely? Maybe we would have got someone more stout than champagne, perhaps Ferguson slightly early. But he has just beaten Real Madrid with Aberdeen in a European final so why would he swap that for the dross of a faded

giant? What about Cloughie? That would have been fun; but the best girlfriends are fun, until they are not. Unlike Ferguson I think his best days were behind him. Maybe if that *éminence grise* Peter Taylor had joined him it could have been different but they were estranged by then. With Taylor who knows? Keep Peter Beardsley and David Platt, buy a young Gary Lineker and we may not have had to wait until 1993 for a title. Anyway, hindsight is an easy vantage point. And there again we could have got Jock Stein or Billy McNeill.

I was basking in the watery late-spring sunshine of success. I played like Maradona the day after at school. Maradona in a Bryan Robson shirt. I felt like I improved as a player. I was already on the school team and featured for a local junior side and somehow my volte-face towards United instilled me with greater confidence on the park. I felt like a player returning to his club side after his first England cap. Of course this had nothing to do with an improvement in size, skill or tactical acumen but if you play as Kevin Reeves on the playground you perhaps, subconsciously, believe you are Kevin Reeves when you cross the white line. If, suddenly, you become Bryan Robson three times a day (and again after school), same thing. I was now drumming in Monaco not Macclesfield. Confidence is so easy to acquire when you are a kid. Maybe I should pretend to be George Carman or T.S. Eliot when I wake up tomorrow and I'll be in Cannes this time next year.

It wasn't long before I added a Charity Shield winners' gong to my collection. We had started training at Grappenhall Sports early in August 1985 so there

was plenty of banter between the United and Liverpool elements in advance of the game. Chris Kinsey provided the most acute insight: ‘The thing about the Charity Shield is that all the money goes to charity.’ Thanks Chris. You can always tell those destined for the Senior Civil Service. It’s an odd game the Charity Shield. Is it a trophy or not? I think the confusion is in the branding. If it was called the English Super Cup (with money to go to charity) and the shield was dispensed with then it would no doubt be a major honour. As it stands it’s a major trophy if you win it and just a preseason friendly if you get battered. I watched the BBC highlights recently and how football has changed for the worse. Before the game Bob Paisley and Matt Busby did a lap of honour hand in hand on the back of a truck milking the applause of both sets of fans. Giants of both clubs.

The anti-football 1980s Tories with their overzealous police force and ID cards would have us believe that this would lead to some form of pitchside sectarian warfare. It was impeccably observed by the fans on both sides. Imagine Dalglish and Ferguson doing it now? In apparently more temperate times? Believe me, they would both be lynched before the halfway line. Then in injury time, with United two to the good and cruising, Robson is pulled down by Souness and denied a hat-trick. Robson implored the referee not to send off the Liverpool captain. Imagine the number of modern players brandishing mock red cards before the 250 million substitutes and nutritionists emerge from the respective bench to make matters worse? You can keep all that. My Sky Sports subscription was cancelled a long time ago.

So, we beat Liverpool with ease and two games in I had two medals. It's a bit like joining Barcelona in the summer and then three games into the new season having Super Cup and Spanish Super Cup winners' medals in your cabinet – you did nothing to get there but it will never show that in the book. Not bad this supporting United lark! I just remember wishing we could go to school on the Monday. Though I never knew it at the time, that post-victory Monday morning at school was the apotheosis of life – things could never get better and they didn't. I experienced this in the late springtime of the Brighton cup win, but this was Liverpool. It was different. It meant more. Their pain uplifted our pleasure to chemical heights and vice versa no doubt. True football fans are not only crypto sadomasochists; we are all addicts looking to recreate the first hit of that win over Liverpool or Bournemouth or Colchester. That is our whole *raison d'être*. Nothing more. Nothing less. No wonder we are all malcontents and misfits. No wonder we can't concentrate on our careers. No wonder we hate decorating and DIY. No wonder we hate garden parties and barbecues. No wonder we hate holiday brochures. No wonder we can't relate to women. No wonder we hate our in-laws. No wonder we hate the enthusiastic go-getter at work. No wonder we hate PowerPoint and Nintendo. No wonder we hate the non-footballing public. But like a true addict we will keep looking. One day we might find what we're looking for.

Back in the day the cup winners always trotted out a load of mince about 'mounting a serious title challenge next year, Brian'. Brian being Brian Moore of course. I loved Brian. John Motson was too loud and affected and

it always annoyed me and my dad (OK my dad) that he pretended to trot out the most bizarre statistics from the top of his head ('I think Simon Stainrod started out at Orford Rovers in Warrington back in the day unless I'm very much mistaken, Trevor') as if we didn't know he had been locked underground with his football cards for a week beforehand. That sheepskin coat was the final nail in the coffin, not the first. The BBC coverage back then was awful. Five words: Jimmy Hill and Bob Wilson. I can remember Jimmy Hill inanely babbling on after we had lost to Argentina in 1986 and my dad, obviously pissed and pissed off anyway, said 'Shut your fucking chin up.' He hated Bob Wilson as well: he never trusted blokes in short sleeves and with eyes 'like piss holes in the snow'. Brian Moore was the Richie Benaud of football: a proper bloke. No bullshit. Anyway, of the mounting a title challenge next season it was imperative to add to the squad in the summer. The rhetoric was no different back then: 'We need strength in depth, Brian. Competition for places at 1 to 11. Especially as we'll be fighting on all fronts.' So, who did we acquire that summer? Charlie Nicholas? Steve McMahon? Mark Hateley? Paul Walsh? Ally McCoist? Andy Gray? John Barnes? Gary Lineker? Alan Smith? Lawrie Cunningham on a permanent? Arthur Graham was our sole addition to the squad that summer. A winger from Second Division Leeds United on the wrong side of 30 for £45,000.

Was this inertia Big Ron's fault? Something told me we needed an Ian Rush. A natural goalscorer with pace to burn. Thirty-plus a season guaranteed. But they do not grow toothbrush moustaches on trees. Ian Rush was at

Liverpool so out of bounds and if you look at the England international strikers of 1983 (Trevor Francis, Paul Mariner, Tony Woodcock) none of them were prolific. A punt on Gary Lineker would have been a huge gamble. To be fair to Big Ron he had brought Norman Whiteside through the season before as a 16-year-old and Mark Hughes was on the way too so you probably could not blame him for not paying a fortune for a more seasoned striker. We had Frank Stapleton too who was excellent. You can't praise managers for bringing through young players and then blame them a bit later for doing exactly that. He should have invested more in young players if anything. Peter Beardsley and David Platt? Did he see them play? Did he see them train? Did he speak to them? Did he know they were at the club? Did he fall out with the reserve team manager? Where was he at the time? From Crewe to Juventus. From Vancouver Whitecaps to Liverpool. That's one thing, but via Manchester United is criminally negligent. It's easy to be angry but you can't get them all right can you? Ronaldo (the Brazilian one) was released by Flamengo, Ruud Gullit shown the door by Arsenal at 19. It's a very long list: Platini, Zanetti, Diego Costa. It does happen. I was still very angry back then though, especially when Beardsley, who I loved for Newcastle and England, joined Liverpool. The silent rebellion? Around the autumn of 1987, I asked my female hairdresser (who was a proper dreamboat) for a Peter Beardsley haircut; I even brought her my *Shoot!* magazine to show her exactly what I meant!

The midfield was strong as well of course with Robson and Wilkins in central partnership; Arnold Mühren lent some class, quality and balance with that (wait for it ...)

‘cultured left foot’. I never understood this blanket bias to left footers. When have you heard ‘a cultured right foot’? And why the hell not? It was no better at school level either. Richard Gallion ‘could open a tin of peas with that left foot’ but never did, yet still remained in the side. He was as ‘slow as a tax rebate’ as well and in later years quite literally ‘could not pass a pub’. It’s not just football either: in cricket when have you heard of the ‘elegant right hander having all the time in the world and making the game look easy’? Or a right-arm quick having the skill and variety of Wasim Akram?

Gordon McQueen and Kevin Moran were quality centre-backs and Mike Duxbury got up and down on the right flank before suddenly and inexplicably around 1986 he didn’t. Arthur Albiston was ‘Mr Consistency’ at left-back and ‘rarely had a bad game’. Roughly translated? He was an uncultured left-sided player who left the field drenched in sweat. So, 1 to 11 we were pretty decent, and this was before the isotonic days of the squad culture and rest and rotation and benches the size of Southend pier. Every First Division side would play its strongest side for a League Cup game at Rotherham and then again for whoever they faced that Saturday. That was just the way it was. And you were only allowed one substitute anyway. First-team squads were probably 13 or 14 at most and if there was an injury someone would be dragged in from the reserves. In 1981, Aston Villa used 14 players in their title-winning season. United in their last title-winning campaign of 2013 used 29 and 33 back in 2009. Villa played 42 games in 1981 compared to the 38 United played in 2009 and 2013. Big Ron had won the FA Cup in his

second season and had built a decent side. He was doing well at this point.

So why then did my grandad, who visited us now and then for his tea after bowling at the Red Lion, once proclaim Atkinson to be a 'swine' when he barely said two words in life in general and didn't even like football that much? What inspired such ire from the man on the Clapham omnibus? Maybe it was the jewellery? The cream suits? The slip-on shoes? The perma-tan? The Arthur Scargill Shredded Wheat trim? A bit rich from a fella who wore three bad sweaters at once and managed to look like Bing Crosby and Val Doonican with a hint of Seve Ballesteros and the Michelin tyre man all at the same time. He preferred horse racing although he never bet. He also did not fear my fearsome dad. He would happily hog the Boxing Day TV with horse racing (the King George VI Chase), flick Embassy Mild fag ash on the snooker table and drop pint after pint of ale on the new carpet. Dad could not say a word. My sister and I loved it!