

## **SOMETHING SPECIAL**

Has anyone ever told you a seemingly unbelievable piece of information which is actually quite true? Many years ago my father insisted that David Lloyd George, probably the most famous Welshman in history, was actually born in Manchester. After some heated discussion on the topic he was able to demonstrate that the statement was a fact. So let me try this one on you.

Highfield Road, the former home of Coventry City Football Club, was once chosen to host an F.A Cup Final replay. Maybe, I hear you saying, but it was probably back in the nineteenth century before we had crossbars. In fact, the year was 1970. There had been, remarkably, no Cup Final replay since 1912 before Leeds and Chelsea drew 2-2 at Wembley on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1970. Eighteen days later the replay was staged at Old Trafford and, after a bruising but epic match, David Webb clinched the Cup for Chelsea by scoring their second goal during the first period of extra time. Had the game remained at 1-1 the second replay would have been at Highfield Road on the following Saturday, with a crowd limit of 50,000.

In retrospect this scarcely seems credible. Although the ground had been transformed over the previous seven years with three brand new stands it just wasn't up to Cup Final standard. At the time, however, it seemed a reasonable decision since it recognised the remarkable rise of Coventry City Football Club during the sixties. In 1962 they had languished in the lower half of Division Three, but in the spring of 1970 Coventry achieved their best ever finish in the league (6<sup>th</sup>) to qualify for Europe. Furthermore, the chief architect of their success, Jimmy Hill, even though he had by then left the club, wielded a considerable amount of influence in his new position within ITV sport.

The scale of the transformation at the club under Hill was not universally recognised at first, but the press gradually cottoned on to the fact that something special was taking place as promotion was gained in 1964. Coventry started their life in Division Two with five straight wins and after the fourth of these, a 5-3 victory against Ipswich Town, Peter Lorenzo of *The Daily Herald* reported:-

*“This might have been a European Cup match. The excitement and emotion that was unleashed at bubbling Highfield Road last night when 37,782 fanatics roared their heroes to the top of the Second Division table was incredible....Not since Wolves in their sparkling days and Spurs in their European extravaganzas have I sampled such throbbing Soccer intensity.”*

Since that night nearly five decades have passed but this particular fanatic still remembers the magical two seasons that took Coventry City F.C. from obscurity to the national renown captured by Lorenzo. What follows is an affectionate recollection of the events, footballing and otherwise, that transpired between the summers of 1962 and 1964, and the impact they had on a callow Coventry Kid. As the Sky Blues labour once again in the third tier of English football, this account offers proof that we don't need to lose hope – things can turn around very quickly.

## **EARLY DAYS**

My interest in football took off after our family holiday to Torquay in 1952 when I was seven. Not long after our return Coventry City played Torquay United at home in an early season Third Division (South) fixture, and my dad took me to my first professional match. I remember the dusty atmosphere in the stand with the smell of pipe tobacco dominating the nostrils. Also the sound of working boots on wooden boards – in those days the working week usually included Saturday morning, and it was common practice to go straight to the game after a lunchtime drink.

Most memorable of all though was the size of the crowd – I'd never seen so many people together before. Many of them wore hats or caps and seemed to be dressed in uniformly drab grey or brown clothes. After a few minutes Torquay scored and I was delighted. This was the team I had come to cheer on. Then City equalised and the roar was a total shock to me, but from that moment on, apart from instantly switching allegiance to Coventry (they went on to win the game 7-2), I became a lifelong football fan. The attraction of the sport revolves around the quasi-orgasmic nature of the goal experience, whether it is conceded or scored, and I had nine such experiences in my first visit!

After that game I was hungry for more but I was too young to play for a proper team or go to Highfield Road on my own. Occasionally Dad or one of my brothers would take me to a game, but they had lost a bit of their enthusiasm after City had been relegated to the Third Division South in 1952. In the house at the time was a faded copy of the "Midland Evening Telegraph" from May 1936 that reported on the club's last – game promotion to Division Two via a late goal by the ace goalscorer of the era, Clarrie Bourton. The

war had put paid to Coventry's subsequent progress in Division Two, and the story since 1945 had been one of almost continuous decline. Worse still, in those days there were hardly any televised games, so in the main I stayed hungry for my new passion. One glorious exception was the 1953 F.A. Cup Final between Blackpool and Bolton. This was the "Matthews Final" when Stanley finally won his elusive winner's medal by virtue of a Blackpool fight back from 3-1 down to win 4-3 in the last minute. This was a big family occasion as all of the males of the family watched the game together on our tiny television. In 2003 the BBC screened highlights of the game again to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and I was amazed at the slow pace and poor standard of football compared to the modern game, yet at the time it was regarded as the best ever Cup Final.

Over the next few years Cup Final day became as important to me as Christmas Day, and sometimes I actually resented the onset of summer because there was no soccer. Even during the football season there was very little shown on television. One year, during school holidays, I watched the one hour BBC demonstration film every morning just to catch the ten seconds when Griffin squeezed the Baggies' 1954 Cup Final winner against Preston just inside the far post. I must have watched that goal more than any other. There was one glorious exception to this televisual football drought however – the mid-week England international. In those pre-floodlight days, England tended to play their friendlies on a Wednesday afternoon at Wembley, so my task on the weekend preceding the international was to scour the Radio Times looking for that magical, if typically stuffy, phrase: - "**Association Football.**" What it meant then was that I had to fall ill on the following Tuesday night or Wednesday morning, so that I didn't

have to go to school. The games were not frequent enough, initially, to raise any suspicion on my mother's part, and by this subterfuge, I managed to witness the Hungarians thrash England 6-3 in that famous 1953 game, catch the 1956 4-2 victory against Brazil (one of Coventry goalkeeper Reg Matthews' caps), and see more than one game where Duncan Edwards was in full magnificent flow.

As time went on Mum twigged what was going on, but by then I was over 11 and at Bablake School in Coventry. This was a typical Grammar School of its day with a starchy Victorian formality and severe behavioural rules with arcane paperwork. One such was an Exeat form, which parents had to sign and submit the following day to confirm that any absence was genuine. By this time Mum was back at work, having brought up her three boys, so the house was free on Wednesday afternoons, and I quickly became an expert at forging her writing and signature, and was therefore able to enjoy a few more England games, including Johnny Haynes leading England to a 4-2 victory over a Spanish side laden with Real Madrid stars, and England winning in Italy in 1961 through a late Jimmy Greaves' strike.

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One thing that has changed over the last forty years is the way that we describe our national game. In the fifties there were two types of football played in Britain – Soccer and Rugby. The latter is clearly a corruption of the word “Rugby”, but Soccer came from a more oblique source. The derivation of the word is contained in that Radio Times phrase “Association Football”, coming as it does from the third fourth and fifth letters of **Ass**ociation. During the fifties, sixties

and seventies “Soccer” and “Football” were used equally and interchangeably to describe the game by both media and fans (Rugby tended to be dismissed as a minor sport by followers of the round ball game).

Nowadays, though, “Soccer” is decreasingly used in Britain (unlike the rest of the world), especially by younger fans. What I think caused the change in usage was the popularity here of American Football in the 1980’s, when we heard the Yanks using the word “Football” exclusively for the gridiron game, and “Soccer” for the world’s favourite sport. This was entirely logical for them, but it probably caused some resentment in Britain – “How dare they call that travesty of a game Football – this is real Football” or something like that. This resentment sometimes goes to ridiculous lengths, with some people believing that “Soccer” is a word actually invented by the Americans and should therefore not be used under any circumstances!

## **ROCK AND ROLL**

In 1955, I reached double figures. Ten year old boys in those days didn't usually have an interest in popular music, not least because of the difficulty of hearing any in the Britain of the fifties. But I had elder brothers, Terry and Brian, who were respectively 8 and 4 years older. Terry, 18 in 1955, was in full teenage rebel mode which, at that time, meant he was a Teddy Boy. Much to my dad's annoyance he wore the full costume – drainpipe trousers, suede shoes, long velvet coat, bootlace tie, and brightly coloured socks. Setting it all off was the full Tony Curtis quiff, suitably brylcreemed.

The signature dance, of course, was the jive which was most often (and most impressively) performed with a pint in one hand and a girl in the other. It is sometimes forgotten that Teddy Boys pre-dated rock and roll, and were initially devotees of big band music, with the two biggest British exponents at the time being Ted Heath and Eric Delaney.

In the house at the time was a fairly modern radiogram, as they called it, and my family would play the hits of the day: - Peanut Vendor, Mr. Sandman, Mambo Italiano, Hernando's Hideaway, Tennessee Waltz.....and many more. Today you can get compilation CD's of fifties hits, and I find myself playing them more and more. This is probably due to a combination of nostalgia and advancing age on my part, but there's no denying the melody of a lot of these hits. Despite this, fifties music represented an evolution of the 1930's and 1940's ballad-based format and in retrospect seemed an unlikely object of rebellious Teddy Boy affections. Their attention, however, was soon distracted by a new sound which was far more suited to their lifestyle.

It is well documented that the film "The Blackboard Jungle" was the launch pad for the Bill Haley and his

Comets record "Rock around the Clock". It is hard to over-emphasise the seismic nature of the impact that this one song had on popular music. Here was the start of something exciting and new and, astonishingly, we all knew it was at the time. During 1956 the kiss-curl'd Haley and his Comets were the very first group to be the subject of pop hysteria, and the Teds were among the devotees. The insistent off-beat of many of Haley's tunes was perfect for jiving and the rapid decline of the big bands became inevitable with the Ted's defection. By the end of 1956 Elvis had appeared on the scene but at that time was seen very much as the number two, or young pretender to Haley's throne.

One cold and dark afternoon in early January 1957 I emerged from the Empire Cinema to spot the glorious headline, on the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* billboards, that Bill Haley was coming to Coventry the following month to do two shows on one day. I persuaded my parents to buy me a ticket, but I was only allowed to go to the Matinee, with my two older brothers attending the evening show. Haley had appeared on the highly popular "Sunday Night at The London Palladium" show, and Coventry, surprisingly, was the first stop on his follow-up nationwide tour. The two shows were at the Gaumont Cinema, and there was a tremendous build up of excitement as the warm up acts concluded the first half. During the interval I remember getting strange looks which said "What's a kid doing here?", but I didn't care.

Then an unforgettable moment. One of The Comets' hits was called "Razzle Dazzle", which opened with the line "On your Marks, Get Set, Ready, Go!" They chose to open the set with this song, but started it with the stage curtains still closed. This had a fantastic impact as people were still in the aisles, and the air was full of screams and ice-creams as punters rushed back to their seats.



After the evening performance fans jammed Broadgate, the city's central square, outside Haley's hotel, the Leofric, but his tour marked the start of the decline of his popularity in Britain. This has been put down to people discovering that Bill was almost middle-aged, but I think it was due more to 1957 being the year that full-blooded Rock and Roll arrived. Haley's music was, after all, more Rock-a Billy than Rock & Roll. Different enough to start the revolution, but not strong enough to sustain it. That task fell to the big three of Rock & Roll, Elvis, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis, who all came through in a big way in 1957. Chuck Berry, who turned out to be very influential on some big-name 1960's groups, was far less visible to the average music fan at this time.

One of the problems for pop fans in the late 50's was access to the music on radio and television. The establishment still had a grip on radio output, with the Light programme (forerunner to Radio 2) only reluctantly yielding a few hours per year of Rock and Roll. There was Radio Luxembourg of course, on 208 metres, but reception was often flakey, with no music until 8 p.m., and even then some of the shows were dedicated to only one record label. The dearth of Rock & Roll on BBC Radio reinforced the mood of revolution, and the "establishment" was despised for the enforced starvation. It was the advent of the pirate stations such as Radio Caroline that eventually seemed to force the hand of the BBC to provide a legitimate national Rock and Roll station, but it took until late 1967 to launch Radio 1.

## **BOOM TOWN – BUM TEAM**

When I was old enough to visit Highfield Road alone I used to go spasmodically but, even with all my fervour for the game, it has to be said that there was precious little excitement or quality to be had. All that happened to the club between 1953 and 1961 was that Coventry found themselves in the brand new Division Four, having finished in the bottom half of the Third Division South in its final year, gained promotion to Division Three immediately and won something called The Southern Floodlit Cup by beating West Ham in quite a good Final. This “honour” caused great mirth among fans of the three Birmingham clubs who lived in Coventry. In the late 1950’s the Midlands was as strong a football region as any other, with Wolves, Villa and West Bromwich Albion all picking up silverware, and our trophy was as well regarded as the Simod Cup and the LDV Vans Trophy were in later decades!

It was for this reason that, when I became old enough, I used to head off to Birmingham on most Saturday lunchtimes. At Pool Meadow, the central Coventry Bus Station, you could choose the match you wanted to go to on the day itself, and then catch the coach (Red House Motor Services or Bunty), with the price of the match ticket included in the fare.

I remember the first time I went to Villa Park in 1959. I was in the side terracing which was, annoyingly, partially below the playing surface, but this only served to emphasise the vastness of the Holte End as I gazed up at it. Later I stood on that massive Kop many times, including two visits by the great Tottenham double winning team in 1961. In the Midlands we had a love-hate relationship with the Spurs. They were a fantastic side to watch, but the success-starved London press made you sick with their gloating over Tottenham’s dominance.

This relationship was encapsulated in the best match I ever saw. In 1962 Spurs retained the F.A. Cup and along the way played all three Birmingham sides. The first of the trilogy was in January at St. Andrews. Nearing half time Tottenham were 3-0 up, aided by the considerable skills of Jimmy Greaves. The Spurs manager Bill Nicholson later said that it was the best 45 minutes soccer his team ever played. Praise indeed, which made it all the more surprising that the Blues were able to mount a sensational comeback in the second half with Stan Lynn, the full-back, thundering in a free kick that led to an equaliser with about ten minutes left. He did it again just before full time, but a marginal offside decision saved Spurs' bacon. That match was three months after the Jimmy Hill era had started at Coventry City, but there was nothing happening yet at Highfield Road to attract us away from the lure of the Birmingham games. What we didn't know then was that we were in for, 1987 apart, the most exciting period in the club's history.

Jimmy Hill was appointed manager of Coventry City in November 1961 after an F.A Cup defeat by the non-league side King's Lynn. He had achieved fame the previous year as Chairman of the Professional Footballer's Association via his successful campaign to abolish the game's maximum wage. At the time that wage was £20 per week. Coincidentally, that happened to be the Coventry Toolroom rate at the time. This was the wage that a skilled toolmaker in Coventry (the centre of toolmaking in Britain) would earn. This figure was an aspiration etched in my mind as I started work that year as an apprentice toolmaker on £4.20 per week.

*In 1961 skilled craftsmen turned up at football grounds to watch professional footballers on the same wage as they earned.*

The Coventry Toolroom Rate was important nationally, because it was the benchmark against which all other national manual labour rates were measured. This emphasised Coventry's status as a boom town in the sixties. As the car industry grew through the first 60 years of the century so did the city's population, from 70,000 to over 300,000 to put Coventry in the ten most populous English cities. Apart from the car firms the city also had Massey-Ferguson, GEC, Alfred Herbert, Wickmans, Rolls Royce, Armstrong-Whitworth, and Hawker Siddeley. As Harold MacMillan would have said, Coventry never had it so good, and workers flocked to the city by the thousand from all over the U.K. I remember attending a lecture by Alderman George Hodgkinson in 1964. He was one of the prime movers behind the reconstruction of Coventry town centre after the war, and he told us that the city had the second highest cars per capita figure in the world, behind Los Angeles.

It was easy to believe this as the city's roads were prone to gridlock at weekday rush hour, particularly in the area around Pool Meadow. This continued until the quirky, yet highly effective, Inner Ring Road was built. It frightens strangers to death with its criss-cross entry/exit system, but keeps the traffic moving!

Another event which boosted Coventry's status was the consecration by the Queen of the new Cathedral, which now sits alongside the blitzed old one, in May 1962. The night preceding the main event was a splendid occasion, with a huge influx of international visitors out on the town. I was at the Locarno Ballroom, then the main dance hall situated in the Precinct. It was packed out and I remember, through the blue drunken haze, feeling very proud of my home town.

Coventry's sporting status was also high, with the leading Rugby Union team in the country, an athletics

club (Coventry Godiva) which turned out medal winning distance runners, and a top-notch speedway team.

What we didn't have was a good soccer team!

If you looked at the other major cities in England, all of them except Leeds had at least two teams, and most of these were in the top two divisions (as were Leeds). Yet here we were, languishing in the Third Division, seemingly on a permanent basis. One of the problems was that the rapid influx of workers from other areas meant that the club had a relatively low loyalty base, as football fans naturally stick with their home town club. So visiting Highfield Road to watch a Third Division game was not the most obvious activity on a cold Saturday afternoon in a strange town. Let's face it, if a Coventry Kid like me, proud of his city and football mad, didn't turn up very often then why should others go?

Yet even as the Queen was busy consecrating, all this was changing.

## **CUSTOMERS, COMPANIES AND GIMMICKS**

A couple of seasons before the club were finally relegated from the top flight, the Chairman at the time, Bryan Richardson, had occasion to complain to the "Coventry Evening Telegraph" that ticket sales for the local derby with Aston Villa later that week were disappointingly low. He went on to castigate the supporters for their patent lack of commitment. Richardson wasn't the first football club official to make this speech and won't be the last, but when you think about what was going on it made no conventional sense whatsoever.

Here was the head of a business actually telling his customers off for not buying the goods on offer! Imagine the head of Ford, or Marks and Spencers trying this - or a restaurateur complaining that you hadn't eaten at his place for weeks. The very idea is preposterous!

And yet Richardson was on fairly solid ground. If Marks and Spencer (say) had issued a similar press release berating customers for not purchasing their clothes, then those same customers would have gone to another clothes retailer and wished M & S a well-earned early bankruptcy. In football this cannot be done, because at the end of the day the football clubs are basically monopolies. Coventry fans didn't switch allegiance to Birmingham City following Richardson's tirade and neither did they wish the club ill. The truth is that once you pick a football club, or once it picks you, it becomes a member of your family. Through the years different sets of players, managers, secretaries and administrative staff look after your relative with varying degrees of skill and success. From time to time you think ill of, or curse, these minders and wish or even lobby for their replacement, but you never have anything but love of the purest sort for your family member. More than this, the fans

are the **only** group of people associated with the club who care about it for life.

This is why the normal treatment of supporters by football clubs is so shabby. Over the years the management of Coventry City F.C. has done some pretty indefensible things to its fans. Years ago, whenever City had a mid-week home League Cup tie immediately following a home league game on the Saturday, the club would take the Saturday programme, and replace **only** the outer pages and the centrefold (the page with the teams in), and re-sell it on the Tuesday for only a slightly reduced price. On another occasion they included the price of a programme with the match ticket price, so a family of four, going to the same game together, would pay for (and get) four programmes.

During the F.A Cup winning run, having announced a limit of two tickets per person for one of the later rounds, the story was that the ticket office got tired/bored half way through the sales operation and changed the rule to a higher figure per person, leaving fans at the back of the queue without any tickets.

In the late Eighties, shortly after the Cup triumph, the club resorted to the 1950's practice of reading the half time scores out by referring to a code "Match A" etc, which could only be found in the match programme. In other words the club was saying to its customers "Unless you buy a programme, you won't get to know the scores". What they had forgotten, in their pea-brained greed, is that radios had got a lot smaller since the 1950's and were carried by a sizeable percentage of fans.

The result of this sort of treatment is that you fall out of love with the club's administration, although not with the club. I did and as a result I refuse nowadays to give them any of my money, unless I really, really

want to go to a game. But I still sweat on the club's result at 4.55 on a Saturday.

That's why Jimmy Hill's actions soon after he was appointed had such an impact. In summary he took the view that the fans were customers just like those of any normal enterprise, and as such were to be drawn in, looked after, and made to feel welcome. One of his first actions was to invite the younger fans in for autographs, drinks and crisps after the 1961 Christmas home game. He also made overtures to other city organisations to bind the community to the club. Another innovation was in the public address entertainment package. Supporters were used to a mixture of military marches and the odd pop record being played, prior to the naming of the teams. Hill initially introduced a disc jockey, but then gradually developed a total entertainment and information package, which included live pop acts on the pitch, and feeds on all sorts of sporting data happening concurrently with the game. Occasionally, when other vital games were being played which affected City, real time relays of those scores were given.

Later on came other initiatives such as the "Sky Blue Special", a train dedicated to Coventry fans travelling to away games. Hill was also the first man to introduce Closed Circuit TV broadcasts of key away games back to the home ground. Critics, and there were quite a few, labelled Hill a gimmick merchant, but all of this helped the supporters feel part of the club. You were included, part of the team. In retrospect, and this may seem naïve, during Hill's reign as manager I never once felt that the club was taking advantage of me and thousands obviously felt the same, because the spirit at the ground between 1962 and 1967 was unique and unforgettable.

On the pitch Jimmy Hill's managerial career started with a period of stock-taking during the winter of 1961/2, followed by a gradual introduction of new



blood to form the nucleus of the team which would give the club two memorable seasons. In overall terms the defence was inherited by Hill. The mainstay was George Curtis, centre half and captain of the side. Nicknamed "The Iron Man", his build was the envy of brick outhouses, and he was revered by the faithful. Then there were the two local lads, Mick Kearns at left back, and Brian Hill at right half. The latter earned the distinction of being the first man to play in all four divisions for the same club, and he also played in Europe. I should add, at this point, that in the early sixties there was only ONE team formation, the 2-3-5 version, with two full backs, (left and right) three half-backs, (left, centre and right), and five forwards, left and right wing, inside left and inside right, and centre forward. None of your namby-pamby 4-3-3's or diamond formations in those days.

Bob Wesson was a sound goalkeeper who could have the occasional lapse. His worst night was the 8-1 home mauling by Leicester City in the League Cup, after George Curtis was injured early on and left City with just 10 men. Dietmar Bruck was a German born defender who could fill in at full or half back. The one defender that Hill did sign was full back John Sillett from Chelsea. Known for his strength in the tackle he was destined to form the short but spectacularly successful managerial partnership with Curtis that took Coventry to Wembley in 1987. One of my favourite players of that era, Ronnie Farmer, was also at the club when J.H. arrived. A classy playmaker on the ball, he also had a penchant for scoring long range goals.

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It's funny how some events or scenes from your life stick vividly in your mind regardless of how long ago they happened. One such was the evening of Friday July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1962. Friday nights are nearly always pleasurable, of course, but sunny, summer, Friday nights are better, and on this particular one I was waiting to be picked up by my brother Terry. I was standing at the bottom of Raglan Street, a long hill which led up to Highfield Road itself, and was one of five streets which converged close to Pool Meadow. Glinting in the sunlight was an old circular green pissoir at the very centre of the five-way junction. (I always regarded this as a very un-English and strange structure and never once used it). Completing the tableau there was a newspaper vendor with the City Final edition of the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*. I had a few minutes in hand, so bought a copy to discover that Hill had signed Terry Bly from Peterborough for £10,000. Now before you start laughing, let me point out that £10,000 was 15 times the national average wage and was certainly a huge amount for a Third Division team to spend on one player.

What made the news so exciting was that Bly had been the inspiration behind Norwich City's fantastic cup run to the semi-final of the Cup in 1959. The fifties were notable for third division giant - killers, with both York City and Port Vale also reaching the semi-finals, but Norwich's run really fired the country's imagination. Along the way they disposed of Manchester United, Tottenham, and Sheffield United, only to lose disappointingly to Luton at the penultimate hurdle. In the 1950's, the F.A.Cup was a far more significant competition than it is now and third division giant-killers were lauded by the media, so the Canaries gained national affection on their run.

Norwich's battle song "On The Ball, City" became famous, and they played at Highfield Road not long

after their Cup exit. The ground was full of green and yellow, and you could feel the pride and enthusiasm of the Norwich fans for their team as they belted out their anthem.

Although Bly had dropped a division he was no spent force as he had netted over 50 goals for Peterborough in one season. What made the signing more exciting was that it completed a brand new forward line for the club. Over the spring and summer, Hill had secured two Northern Irish internationals, winger Willie Humphries and inside right Hugh Barr, whilst Jimmy Whitehouse (another inside forward) had been snapped up on a free transfer from Reading. Completing the line up at outside left was Bobby Laverick from Brighton.

The following week saw photos of the front five appear in the press, but there was something else fresh about the picture. The five were clad in the new strip, all sky-blue. Jimmy Hill had decided to declare that a new era had indeed begun by introducing this startling and, let's be honest, slightly poncy club colour.

Football club's colours are very important, with the rule of thumb being that the more successful the club the less likely they are to change their colours. Arsenal, Spurs, United, Everton, Villa, Liverpool etc... rarely mess with the basic colour, even though they do rip their fans off royally with yearly variations in the design detail. No surprise then, that Coventry City's club colours had been anything but permanent up to that point. Certainly, since the war, City had played in a variety of blue and white striped strips, only changing to an all-white strip just before Hill took over. Their nickname for years had been "The Bantams" but nobody I knew had any idea why!

As a result of the new strip, a local newspaperman ventured the name "The Sky Blues", and that name has defined the club to the rest of Football for over

50 years. Not that City have always had an all sky-blue strip throughout the period, and, based on the rule of thumb stated above, Coventry could have easily changed their colours almost every other year. It is ironic that they won their only major trophy in striped shirts and dark blue shorts (granted – the stripes were sky blue and white!).

Three weeks after the Bly signing saw a 2-1 victory in a friendly at First Division Birmingham City. Pre-season friendly results are often misleading, but it was the manner of the victory that impressed those who went, with City looking more like the top flight team. Once the season started, however, the gloss was soon to disappear. Laverick never looked like the proper article on the left wing, and a young Welshman called Ronnie Rees was drafted in to become an instant hit. Initially, however, consistency was to prove elusive and mid-table anonymity seemed to beckon again.

## **TEENAGE BABY BOOMER**

In 1958 we moved to a bigger council house in Canley, also a working class district, and it was here that I spent my teenage years. Like most boys of that age I was interested in football, music, and girls, but in my case it was definitely in that order. Entertainment for teenagers was very sparse by today's standards. There were only two T.V. channels, which tended not to cater for our age group and radio was similarly unsympathetic. But at least we had the Dansette! Soft floppy 45 r.p.m. records had gradually replaced the larger, more brittle 78's and you could stack up to 10 platters on the spindle of the machine.

After the explosion of the Rock and Roll kings in 1957 there followed the well-documented redneck/Christian backlash in America, which led to the promotion of white middle-class male artists singing pleasant ballads. This confused the hell out of the British pop industry, which traditionally bowed before the altar of American popular entertainment. After initially producing a bunch of sultry Elvis clones such as Marty Wilde and Billy Fury (even the names sent out the rebel message), we then had to soften up to match the transatlantic regression to the safe mid-fifties. This meant that we had a new non-pouting Cliff Richard, more able to express his true boy-next-door self with a succession of releases which were definitely not Rock and Roll.

Even Elvis, after his spell in the army, had by the early sixties been "got at", and his output veered towards the safety of balladry. What amazes me about the Elvis worship that has endured since his death in 1977 is that all the tribute artists dress up in the almost obscene white and gold Las Vegas gear that characterised his "Burger and Pills" period, and also sing the songs from that period. Anyone forced

to listen to "Moody Blue" would have to conclude that his voice in the 1970's was clapped out. No, the truth is that "The King" only actually ruled when he deserved to – between 1956 and 1962, when his voice was crystal clear and his records were truly ground-breaking. If you disagree, I recommend a listen to the albums Rock & Roll Numbers 1 and 2.

The songs that emerged from our Dansettes, however, in the early sixties were definitely not ground-breaking. By the summer of 1962, the Shadows had broken from Cliff and were dominating the British charts with their instrumentals. We even had artists like the yodeling Frank Ifield topping the charts for weeks. There was, however, a quirky American artist called Chubby Checker who specialised in new dances. One such, The Twist, took a while to catch on in Britain, but catch on it did, although at the time its significance as a milestone in social history was not appreciated.

The Rock and Roll dance – Jiving – was seen as an upstart interloper in the serene dominance of Ballroom Dancing in the dancehalls of Britain. Teenagers loved it because, apart from being a symbol of youthful rebellion against our parents, it was easy to learn compared to the traditional dances, and of course, it suited the genre perfectly. At the Locarno, Coventry's premier dancehall, Saturday nights were the preserve of Ballroom Dancing until well into the Sixties, and Mondays and Thursdays were reserved for jiving to a combination of records and bands (The Barron Knights being the resident group for a period).

As the Canley gang ventured nervously into that world in 1961 we had to hone, or in some cases learn, our jiving skills whilst trying to chat up the girls we had just met. This was not easy as our target was rarely facing us. Even though we couldn't dance the Waltz we began to appreciate its advantages. But

then came salvation – The Twist! Here was a dance that, although as energetic as jiving, allowed you to face your partner most of the time. The Twist developed into a less energetic variant called The Twang in 1963, and if you look at the dance movements of people at the average function today (nightclubs excluded) there's been very little change over the intervening 50 years. It has been ideal for those with no aptitude for dancing and, to this day, the norm is for everybody who wants to dance to do so, and for couples (where there is a couple!) to dance without contact, last – dance smooch excepted. The age of the wallflower at dances ended in 1963.

Male fashion was not foremost in our mind as we headed for a night at the Locarno, but like all teenagers then and since we fell in with it. In our case, it was suit, tie, and winklepicker or chisel – ended shoes. Take a look at some photographs of early Beatles or Searchers and you can see that the sixties fashion revolution definitely didn't start until mid – decade. In 1962, one fashion problem I was conscious of was my glasses. Myopia in the sixties meant, for the working class, NHS frames that were black, brown, or (worst of all) tortoiseshell. None of these were a hot fashion accessory when it came to chatting up birds, and were left at home on Dance Night. So when the Canley gang paired up to attack the dance floor, and I was told that there were two cracking bits of stuff just waiting to be asked to dance, it wasn't until we were five yards away that I discovered that there was one cracking bit of stuff and a friend that could easily have been her bodyguard. By which time it was too late!

What was truly devastating of course was when the bodyguard said that she didn't want to dance with you. The jive era was quite the worst when it came to male humiliation on the dance floor. In the ballroom-

dancing age ladies were propositioned on the fringes of the floor, so any rejection was localised and limited. The late fifties and early sixties, by contrast, had girlfriends jiving with each other on the dance floor, so the hopeful men had to make the request, and receive the verdict, in the centre of the action. This was particularly stressful at the Locarno as it had balconies which overlooked the floor. No wonder we all had a skinful before setting foot in the place!

One of the other Dancehalls we used to frequent was The Matrix Ballroom, situated on the outskirts of the City. On one glorious night in late 1962 we had the privilege of seeing Little Richard there on his U.K. tour. I have always thought he was the best purely Rock and Roll artist with his impeccable timing and gravel voice. Although he turned up 40 minutes late we were compensated by a fabulous set and, because the Matrix **was** a ballroom, we were actually able to jive while Little Richard sang. Just like they did in the early Rock and Roll movies! This was an opportunity not to be missed, even if you had once again chosen not to wear spectacles and were as a result dancing with the West Midlands female gurning champion.



## **JOLLY SKATING WEATHER**

In October 1962, I (along with the rest of the world) was forced to consider something more basic than football, sex, or music – the prospect of death. The U.S.S.R had been surreptitiously shipping missile components into Castro's Cuba. President Kennedy's intelligence services found out and mounted a naval blockade. I remember the gut – wrenching fear that lasted for several days as we waited for the latest news bulletin or the sound of a siren giving the four minute warning, whichever came first.

The world in the late fifties was far more aware of the nature of nuclear Armageddon than we are today. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were a more recent memory as were the belated discoveries of the effects of nuclear fall-out. On top of that, atmospheric testing was still not outlawed, and we lived with regular testing of the neighbourhood nuclear warning siren. I never really understood the purpose of the four minute warning. It signified either immediate oblivion, should the bomb explode near you, or the prospect of life in a post-holocaust country. I was fairly certain that I would rather not be told that one or other of these scenarios was about to become a reality.

The newspapers often speculated on what people should do in those final four minutes. Some suggested that making love one last time was a contender but this always seemed to me to be a most unlikely, if not impossible, prospect!.

While the rest of the world was concerned with Armageddon Coventry City had been steadily climbing the Third Division table through October and November 1962, and by early December had moved to within three points of the leaders, Peterborough, with one game in hand. The Sky Blues had also

advanced to the Third Round of the F.A. Cup with home victories over Bournemouth and Millwall, the latter after a draw at The Den.

In mid-December Hill signed Ken Hale, an inside forward, from Newcastle for £10,000. City were now well into an unbeaten run that had started in early October, and supporters' expectations were starting to rise. Then, just before Christmas, came one of the seminal days in the history of the Sky Blues. Jimmy Hill had decided that the club needed its own battle hymn. I was all for this, having listened to the Norwich fans at Highfield Road after their great Cup run. Our near neighbours, Birmingham City, also had one of the great songs "Keep Right on to the End of the Road" (Incidentally, why is it that the current generation of Blues fans can't finish this song properly. When they get to "Where all the love you've been dreaming of" they are about two octaves too high, and the song peters out pitifully. They could sing it properly in the sixties, despite the lack of opportunity to deploy it too often!)

And so it was that the fans turned up at Highfield Road on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1962 for the Colchester United game knowing that the new club anthem was to the tune of "The Eton Boating Song". The words were about as prosaic and uninspiring as you could make them:-

*Let's all sing together,  
Play up Sky Blues,  
While we sing together  
We will never lose  
Proud Posh or Cobblers  
Oysters or anyone  
They can't defeat us  
We'll fight till the game is won*

“Posh” and “Cobblers” were references to Peterborough and Northampton Town (One of the memorable headlines at that time from the Coventry Evening Telegraph Pink sports edition following a 1-1 home draw with Northampton was “City held by the Cobblers”). These two clubs were leading the Third Division at the time, whereas “Oysters” was the nickname of that day’s opponents, and this word would change with each game.

Before the game started we were treated to a rendition by the manager and I was probably not alone in having my doubts about the song catching on. The match started in poor visibility, due to fog, which was typical of the bad weather we had been suffering during the early winter. City had established a 2-0 lead by the interval, but by this time the fog had got a lot worse, and the resumption of play was deferred by the referee. Cue our Jim, ever the opportunist, to appear on the pitch to encourage the crowd to sing several verses of the song. Hopeful that the game would restart soon we went along with it and, having sung it a couple of times, realised that it wasn’t as bad as it seemed on paper. That was the end of the entertainment for the day, though, as the murk thickened and the match was abandoned.

You wonder what would have happened to the song if the club had not experienced what it did over the next few months but there’s no doubt that it has become, surprisingly, one of just a few anthems that are identifiable with only one club.

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Now Christmas was upon us and City faced a daunting home and away double with the leaders, Peterborough. I had thought about going to London

Road on Boxing Day but the weather forecast was for heavy snow, and so it was that I missed one of the club's best away performances. The Sky Blues won the match 3–0, with Terry Bly notching a couple against his old club, and Ken Hale showing what a shrewd purchase he had been, but it was the manner of their win that caught the attention of the press. Harry Langton, of the Express, said he had never seen better Third Division play. City's large following certainly agreed and they even tried out the new club song in tribute to a team who were, ironically, dressed in all red.

On the following Saturday quite a few games were called off due to the bad weather, but Coventry managed to clear the worst of the snow to allow the return match to go ahead. Midway through the second half that seemed to have been a mistake as Peterborough turned the tables and gave City a footballing lesson on the icy wastes of Highfield Road. The Posh centre forward, George Hudson, was the man who took the eye, showing astonishing levels of skill and balance for a big man on such a surface. He inspired his team to a 3-1 lead in front of the biggest Coventry crowd, 25,400, for some time. Showing typical fighting spirit City managed to extend their unbeaten run with two late goals to force a rather fortunate 3-3 draw, but it was Hudson's display that stayed in the memory, not just of the crowd but the bearded Coventry manager as well.

That match against Peterborough would be Coventry's last competitive game until February 23<sup>rd</sup>. On the night following the game it snowed again, very heavily, and the Big Freeze of 1962/3 had started. It is hard to imagine such a winter now, following the recent impact of global warming, but it was truly depressing, particularly if you were a football fan. The weather seemed to follow a cyclical pattern – heavy snow, followed by cold, sunny days and night frosts.

The snow would be cleared from the roads onto the pavements, where it would rut and make walking very difficult. The resultant surface would start white, but slowly turn grey from road dirt and brown from dog mess. A slow thaw would ensue followed by a more severe, brief thaw, which promised to remove all the old ice and snow, but hope was curtailed by the next heavy fall of snow and the cycle would begin again.

There was an expanse of grass outside our house in Canley which didn't see daylight from December to March, and when it was finally freed of ice it had turned light green and emitted an evil smell. Most people in 1963 travelled by bus, so the permanent near-zero temperature and rutted pavements were felt severely on the walk to, and the wait at, the bus stop. On the other hand, we didn't have to drive!

In retrospect, that winter can be viewed as a metaphor for the death of the old social order in Britain, and some people cite 1963 as the first year of what we now know as "The Swinging Sixties". On the political front the Profumo Affair broke just as the Freeze ended, by which time Harold Wilson had taken over as Leader of the Labour Party. On television working class dramas such as "Z Cars" were being shown and disrespectful political satire made its debut with "That Was The Week That Was".

Musically there was still dross aplenty in the charts, but during the Freeze the Beatles second release "Please Please Me" had climbed to number one (according to most of the charts). So, despite the cold there was a cultural and political spring under way.

British Soccer was being decimated by the real winter and many games were called off, and this disrupted the Pools so badly that the Pools Panel was introduced for the first time to "decide" the results of postponed games. Jimmy Hill, always the action-man, arranged two friendly games in a relatively mild

Ireland against First Division opposition, and after almost upsetting Manchester United and eventually gaining a draw, they lost to Wolves. When the competitive matches started again three unbeaten league games were followed on March 6<sup>th</sup> by the Third Round F. A .Cup tie away at Lincoln City, originally scheduled for January 5<sup>th</sup>! Such was the severity of the weather that the match was arranged and postponed fifteen times, an F.A. Cup record. At the sixteenth attempt City turned on the style to beat their Fourth Division opponents 5-1.

During the Freeze the Football Association, in their wisdom, had insisted on making the draws for the fourth, fifth and sixth rounds at the appointed times, with the result that the cup draws looked something like: - Teams A or F or P or L versus Teams C or X or P or H. This was mildly amusing but irrelevant to supporters of a Third Division outfit, even though their team was playing well. There was no great expectation of any further progress particularly as we knew we were playing away to Portsmouth, then a Second Division side, in the Fourth Round. Pompey had already beaten us 5-1 in the League Cup earlier in the season, so nobody at this stage had Cup fever. But this was all about to change.

## ***EIGHTEEN DAYS IN MARCH***

Cup Runs were something that other teams had. This was the mindset of the average Coventry fan in 1963. The club had an abysmal F.A Cup record and had only reached one quarter final, in 1910! So it was with no great optimism that we listened for the result of the away fourth round tie at Portsmouth on Wednesday March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1963. With no live TV feed of results and no local radio, the first data of any sort that you normally received then was the final score on the radio news.

Amazingly, City had snatched a late equalizer to bring Pompey back to Highfield Road for a replay on the following Saturday. More significantly, when we read the morning newspaper reports, it turned out that the Sky Blues (again in red) had been much the superior team after Ron Saunders (the future Villa manager) had given the Second Division team an early lead. Willie Humphries had been the man of the match and had laid on the City goal for Ken Hale.

This was the result that sparked interest in the developing Cup run. We also knew that Sunderland awaited the winners of the tie, and that Manchester United were possibly lying in wait at the quarter final stage. So there was quite a bit of tension as the replay got under way at Highfield Road in front of a fairly disappointing gate of 25,000. This was eased significantly in the third minute when Jimmy Whitehouse scored with a low shot. Coventry then dominated the first half in much the same way as at Fratton Park and deserved their second goal, a header from Whitehouse, just before the break.

City probably had too much time to think at half-time, but whatever the reason they played like a third division side for the rest of the match. Portsmouth fought back to square the game with goals by McCann and Saunders (again). Extra time was really

taut with chances for both teams, but it all ended a bit flat with a 2-2 draw. Most of the home fans I spoke to thought we had blown our best chance and that we were definitely second favourites to go through.

Nevertheless quite a few people had resolved to go to the second replay, at White Hart Lane, on the following Tuesday night. I cadged a lift from a colleague at the Toolroom where I was working. He had a mid-range Vauxhall and we were mightily impressed with his being able to maintain 55 mph in the centre lane of the relatively new M1 motorway. Even then our leaving time combined with the heavy traffic trying to reach the ground meant that we arrived late. As we were running up the steps we heard a roar and then discovered that Ron Saunders had done it again with (apparently) a great shot on the turn high into the corner of Bob Wesson's net.

But from then on it was all City, with Brian Hill having a fine game at half-back. Terry Bly equalised after 20 minutes and Jimmy Whitehouse gave us the lead before half-time. Cue loud renditions of the Sky Blue Song, which proved we had the bulk of the 16,000 crowd. The second half progressed with no great danger to the lead, and we were through to the fifth round of the Cup after three gruelling games.

The Cup schedule was so disrupted by the weather that ties took precedence over league games, and Coventry had played four of these in just 13 days. They did return to league duty on the following Saturday with a 1-0 home win over Crystal Palace, but all that people could talk about was the Cup run and the game versus Sunderland on the following Monday. Excitement was running high in Coventry town centre that weekend. From today's perspective it seems hard to understand why – it was only the fifth round after all! But this was now a big city with a team punching two divisions below its



footballing weight, and its supporters starved of any real success for many years,

The Precinct shopping centre had also become one of the social meeting places. It was completed in the late fifties in a cruciform shape which was considered a fine example of contemporary architecture. The view from the centre of the Precinct up to Broadgate, and the statue of Lady Godiva had always impressed me as its perspective frames the spire of the old cathedral. Within that view was (and still is) the elephant symbol of the city perched on a pole on the shopping centre side of Broadgate. Many a date has started under that top heavy totem pole.

At 90 degrees either side of that view ran two pedestrian thoroughfares. Go in one direction down Smithford Way and you would find the Locarno Ballroom; go the other way into Market Way and you would come to The Market Tavern. This was opened in the early sixties as a fairly luxurious watering hole, placed just in front of the city's circular Fruit and Vegetable Market – hence the name. Early visitors couldn't fail to notice the deep pile carpet and posh seating fabric in the Tavern. On Sunday nights table service was available from a waiter bedecked in white gloves. Twenty years later this would have been dismissed as a joke as punters ground their cigarette butts into the self same carpet. Sadly, like the Locarno, the Tavern has now gone, but on that March Friday it was packed to the rafters with City fans, all looking forward to the fifth round home match against Sunderland on the following Monday.

Now, it so happened that the landlord of the Tavern was a keen Sunderland fan, so the night included several loud choruses of The Sky Blue Song just to wind him up.

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There are probably two candidates for Highfield Road's greatest ever game. The first was the match against Wolves that effectively settled the Second Division Championship in April 1967. The Sky Blues won 3-1 in front of the record gate at the ground, 51,455, after being behind at half-time. While this was indeed a memorable occasion, it came after five years of Jimmy Hill magic. The record gate and the result all seemed part of the club's inexorable rise to greatness. Even though the match was groundbreaking it was bigger but similar to what had gone before, and no doubt smaller than what was to follow (we didn't know that the era was to end within a few months when Jimmy Hill left the club just before its first division debut).

For that reason I would place the Fifth Round F.A. Cup tie versus Sunderland on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1963 in first place. As I walked up East Street to the old, high, field in the gathering dusk on that crisp Monday night, the fans alongside me were fairly quiet, even reflective. Underneath, though, there was an incredible tension created by the excitement of the Portsmouth games and the fact that we, a Third Division team, had reached the Fifth Round!

Once inside the ground I met my brothers in our usual position by the corner flag between the West End cover and the Main Stand. As kick-off approached it was clear that this was going to be no ordinary night. We had never been so densely packed in this area of the ground before. Unbeknown to us, at the Swan Lane end, gates had been broken down by the pressure of the crowd trying to enter the ground. Even then it was said that 5,000 fans could not gain entry. Inside the ground, children had been allowed to sit between the terrace walls and the pitch; such was the concern of the police. Some people had climbed the floodlight pylons and others were on the

roof of the West end cover. The official gate was 40,000, but it was probably nearer 50,000.

Floodlit games in 1963 were less than a decade old, and Coventry City had never experienced a major occasion under lights. It seemed that a lot of the economic migrants had chosen to come and support the football team of their new City, and it seemed they all knew the words of the Sky Blue Song! This was a brand new and fantastic experience for all the home fans. The tension was almost overwhelming as the teams emerged to a huge roar. One of the younger Sunderland players was physically sick on the pitch as the teams warmed up. He didn't know it, but that was how a lot of the crowd felt! The squeeze was so tight now that people were being passed over heads to the front of the terrace. My older brother, Terry, who always suffered from claustrophobia, decided to seek a place at the front, although I can't remember how he made it there.

The game started with frenetic attacks from City to a seemingly continuous roar, but the truth was that Sunderland, who topped the Second Division, were a classy outfit and they took the lead on the half hour through Johnny Crossan. The hordes were momentarily silenced, but the Sky Blues' spirit never faltered and they pressed more and more, without success, throughout the second half, with the fans giving them continuous support. Then, with eight minutes left, Dietmar Bruck swung in a shot-cum-centre from the right. Jim Montgomery, the goalkeeper who was to achieve immortality in the 1973 Cup Final, seemed to think that the ball was going wide, but it hit a post and sneaked in. Pandemonium! The grass disappeared beneath a sea of fans, and it took a while to clear the pitch. When the game restarted, there was barely time for an ear-splitting version of the anthem before City took the lead. John Sillett took a free-kick and George Curtis

leapt high to beat Montgomery's attempted punch and loop the ball into an unguarded net. The Sillett-Curtis partnership would not play such a key role for the club in the F.A Cup for another 24 years.

The pitch invasion this time was taken more seriously, and referee George McCabe threatened to abandon the game if it happened again. The remaining five minutes were played out to yet more singing and furious tackling from the home side. Terry, who had found a place by the sideline in front of the Main Stand, told me afterwards that McCabe positioned himself near the tunnel just before the final whistle so he could avoid the invasion. So City had reached the quarter final for only the second time in their history. The opponents at Highfield Road were to be Matt Busby's Manchester United who, five years after the terrible events at Munich, were the embryo of the team that were destined to achieve European glory after a further five years.

The gap of five days between the Sunderland and Manchester United games kept the excitement going, but strangely deprived the club of the two to three week publicity build up that giant killers normally received.

The Police, relieved that there were no casualties on the Monday, set a crowd limit of 44,000 for the Saturday game. Once again my parents did the honours and queued for hours in the rain to get tickets. Came the big day and severe anti-climax. The rain was incessant and this kept the crowd well below the police limit, with many tickets left unsold as touts came unstuck. The club had lain on an entertainment programme which included a turn by Ken Dodd. I can't recall how tickled we were but my main memory of the pre-match was listening to "The Rhythm of the Rain" by The Cascades as the rain cascaded rhythmically down my neck.

The weather and the fact that the match was played in the afternoon combined to temper the Cup fever generated by the Sunderland game, and although the crowd gave tremendous support I never felt confident or hopeful of victory, even after Bly had given us a five minute lead. United had a bundle of class and experience. Their starting line up was; - Gregg, Dunne, Brennan, Setters, Foulkes, Crerand, Charlton, Law, Herd, Quixall, and Giles. Little wonder that City went under 3-1, with Bobby Charlton scoring two, but City gave a good account of themselves in going down to their first defeat in 24 games.

## **CROWD TROUBLE**

And so it was, in those five short days of March 1963, that Coventry City entered a new era of large crowds. The ground itself was only ever really comfortable with about 30,000 or less inside it, but in the next 10 years, there would be many occasions where the attendance topped 35,000. The gate would top 40,000 for the big-name first division clubs, and 45,000 when the “Law, Best, Charlton” United team were in town. Although I had a grandstand season ticket for the first few years of life in the top flight, I often stood in this tight squeeze, but never once felt as though I was in any danger due to the size of the crowd. In 1964, I saw the Preston – Swansea F.A Cup semi-final from the Holte End kop at Villa Park, and changed positions wildly on the large bank as the crowd swayed to and fro in reaction to match incidents. Nobody was bothered and no-one was hurt. I have several times been inside The Baseball Ground at Derby in desperately tight situations, and all passed off safely without injury.

So, when the move towards all-seater stadia started, I was not in favour. It was therefore ironic that Highfield Road became, courtesy of Jimmy Hill (back at the club in a directorial capacity) the first such top division stadium in the country in the early eighties. I know that you can't stand in the way of progress, and that grounds are undoubtedly safer, but I still believe that a lot of atmosphere has been removed from the game. The Anfield Kop is perhaps the best example of how a footballing institution was lost when we went all-seater. It just hasn't been the same since the events of Hillsborough sealed its fate.

I haven't read the Taylor Report in full, but at the time and since, I have read summaries and critiques of the Report's findings. The strange thing is that the most significant reason for the tragedy was

apparently not pinpointed by the report. I had personal experience of Leppings Lane in March 1987, when the Sky Blues played a quarter final tie at Hillsborough en route to their Cup Final success against Tottenham. I and my mate Dave had arrived at the ground with only about five minutes to spare, and were anxious to get in for the kick-off. City fans had been allocated the Leppings Lane end and we had planned to stand behind the goal. We were confronted, however, by a high brick wall with a space the size and shape of a household door in it, and this was the only way to reach the area which gave access to the central tunnel. We had to wait while fans that were coming from this area passed through the hole in the wall before we could go through in the opposite direction. Once we were through to the other side, we could see the crush in the tunnel leading through to the central section of the terracing. Dave and I looked at each other, both thinking the same thought – “There’s no way we’re going into that tunnel”, and so we headed back through the strange hole in the wall and made our way up to the high section of the terracing that overlooked the corner flag between Leppings Lane and the Main Stand.

This area was very crowded, but then we looked down from our vantage point and saw just how tight the crush was behind the goal. The reason for this was obvious. There were two fences running at right angles to the pitch either side of the goal and going all the way back to the Leppings Lane grandstand behind the goal. These fences, I assumed, had been there for years, but the fence at the front of the terrace had only been erected in the early eighties, as part of the football authorities’ response to the crowd invasions and hooliganism of the 1970’s. This front fence combined with the two fences at 90 degrees to it formed a lethal cage, (pens 3 and 4 in the report)

where there was no escape from the pressure of extra fans coming in from the tunnel entrance. A few weeks later we were at Hillsborough again for the semi-final against Leeds. This time, the Leeds supporters were at the Leppings Lane end, and it was clear from the match video that conditions were again extremely unpleasant in those pens.

There were probably other grounds where the addition of the front fence had created cages just as dangerous as the one at Hillsborough, but none which were as likely to be tested by big crowds on a big occasion. When the front fences were erected, did no-one spot the fact that a potentially disastrous cage had been created? All of the other factors, such as the late arrival of fans and police decisions to open the gates would have been irrelevant if the cage had not existed. Had the two lateral fences been removed when the front fence was erected 96 deaths would have been avoided. We would also have been able to modernize our stadia at leisure to both improve safety and retain atmospheric terraced areas like the Kop for all those who prefer to stand and watch their football.

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City's cup run coupled with the desperate winter of 1963 meant that they had a huge backlog of league games to play during April. They were in a strong position to gain promotion (two up and two down in the sixties), but had to win the games in hand. On the Monday following the United game they played at Wrexham and took the lead early on, only to concede the remaining five goals in the game. This was a surprising start to the week for City fans but it got stranger on the Wednesday when Jimmy Hill paid a



club record fee of £21,000 to Peterborough for centre forward George Hudson. He immediately let it be known that he saw Hudson as a replacement for Terry Bly.

This move was a tad controversial for Sky Blue fans, given that Bly was **the** hero of the cup run, and the letters page of The Coventry Evening Telegraph was bombarded with hate mail for Hill. I even wrote a letter of protest myself directly to the man. The truth was, though, that Jim was right and we were wrong. Hill had clearly seen the potential of Hudson in the home game against Peterborough at Christmas, and he also correctly spotted that Bly's illustrious career was coming to an end. The bearded one was planning for the future and we were mesmerised by the excitement of recent events. Less than five months later City played away at Notts County, who had purchased Bly in the close season. Hudson put on a devastating display for City and this killed the controversy stone dead. Hudson was the new hero and he was to become one of the most celebrated players ever to don a City shirt.

Hudson's debut against Halifax foreshadowed what was to come. In an amazing game Hudson hit a first half hat trick and City led 4-0 at the interval, only to be pegged back to 5-4 at 90 minutes. For the rest of the season, though, the Sky Blues were very patchy with some good results but far too many mediocre performances to allow them to make up the ground on Swindon and Northampton, the eventual promoted clubs. The Bly-Hudson arguments rumbled on for the rest of the season, temporarily assuaged for the game at Bristol Rovers on Easter Saturday when the couple played together for the one and only time. Ironically, this was the game when I personally concluded that we weren't going to make it. Rovers equalised with the last touch of a thrilling game. As we made our way out of Eastville and Dusty

Springfield was belting out “Island of Dreams”, our own dreams of promotion were increasingly focusing on season 1963/4.

## **RIO – SAVE A PRAYER**

Just after the 1962-63 season ended England played one of their occasional games against Brazil. At this stage of their history the Copocabana kids hadn't reached their zenith of popular acclaim even though they had won the World Cup twice with the help of Pele. The match turned out to be a fairly tame 1-1 draw, which didn't begin to compare with the notable English 4-2 victory in 1956 at Wembley. Ever since that day I had had a fascination with the Brazilians which was pretty much down to their sheer ball skills combined with the very low centre of gravity of some of their players. This gave them a split-second edge over their longer-legged opponents when they suddenly changed direction or dummied. It was a technique deployed over the years by many Brazilians, including Garrincha, Pele, Jairzinho, and Tostao in the great teams that tormented England in the World Cups of 1962 and 1970.

The first round game in the 1970 competition has been hailed as one of the greatest contests in history, when both countries were fielding probably their best ever sides. The goal that clinched the match for the South Americans was certainly in keeping with such an auspicious occasion, as they worked the ball brilliantly across the England defence before releasing Jairzinho for the crucial strike, and it reminded me of another classic goal scored by another great Brazilian side – that of 1982. By this time, the whole world seemed to love Brazil. In England in 1966 we had seen glimpses of their magic before they were knocked out at the first stage in a very strong group. Then in 1970, having overcome the disappointment at the defeat by Brazil, and the grief brought on by the West German defeat, most English fans drooled with the rest of the world at the master class given to Italy in the final.

In 1982 we were able to follow Brazil's magnificent progress through the first stage matches against the USSR, Scotland, and New Zealand. Every match produced sensational skills and memorable goals by their great stars, Socrates, Falcao, Eder, and above all Zico. Has there ever, Pele apart, been a better Brazilian player? Watching him play in the '82 tournament was a lip-smacking experience with his scissor-kick volley against New Zealand, a deliciously curled free kick against Scotland, and then, against Italy, the best shimmy and blind-side pass of all time to set Socrates up for that other memorable goal, the first equaliser. That seminal game against the Azzurri in the Sarria cauldron was played on the afternoon of England's crucial evening game against Spain. I can remember jumping with relief when Falcao made it 2-2, because it seemed to ensure their passage to the next stage and more sheer joy for all football fans. Sadly, it was not to be and I was so gutted about Brazil's exit at the hands of a Rossi hat-trick that I wasn't really bothered about England's tame surrender later that night.

Were we never going to see them play again, I kept asking myself, such was the pleasure they had given over the previous few weeks. It just seemed so wrong until you realised that here was a team that had nearly reached the semi-finals of a World Cup despite the fact that they were playing with two passengers! The simple truth was that they had a third rate goalkeeper and centre forward. Serghinio, the big striker, did actually bag a couple of goals but he was the most unlikely Brazilian you ever saw. With his lumbering stride and inept ball control, he reminded me of Herman Munster in boots. As for Perez, the goalkeeper, I invite you to watch the Rossi hat-trick and observe the grey object with the balding head seemingly trying to prove that you can keep goal by using only your feet.

Since that tournament there have been good Brazilian teams and players, but none that delivered the magic of the 1970 or 1982 squads. Indeed, despite winning the competition twice more they have developed a more prosaic character and are definitely less easy to love. Perhaps the most irritating development was their collective public display of prayer and thanks to God after the 2002 victory. Although this may well have been heartfelt following the astonishing flight path of the totally unintentional Ronaldinho free kick goal against England, it annoyed this atheist that these skilful players who practiced long and hard to perfect their craft gave credit to something else for their success. That's why I particularly enjoyed Chelsea's aggregate win over Barcelona in the Champions League in 2005. After the same Ronaldinho had scored a truly brilliant toe-poke goal from the edge of the area, he looked heavenward whilst making the "Number One" sign as if to say "Thank You, God, for making me so special". The deciding John Terry goal late in the game perhaps gave the gap-toothed one pause for thought that there are many factors that decide football games other than divine intervention. Having said that, a prayer would have been useful in 1982, if only to ask God to restore to goalkeeper Perez the use of his arms for the game against Italy.

## **WHEN WE WERE KINGS**

There was some significant musical consolation to the disappointing outcome of the 1962/63 soccer season for City fans, via the release of the first Beatles album "Please, Please Me". The Fab Four had not set the world on fire with their first single "Love Me Do" in the previous autumn, but had broken through with the single "Please, Please Me", and Gerry and the Pacemakers had fuelled the advent of Mersey beat with their own number one "How Do You Do It?" Nearly all of my friends bought the Beatles' album, and were tremendously excited by the content. Although the songs were by no means all Lennon & McCartney compositions (or McCartney/Lennon, as the sleeve interestingly had it), they all had a fresh, raw feel which set the album apart from its contemporaries.

The record was to top the Long Player charts for 30 consecutive weeks that year, and became so well known that I guarantee that Baby Boomers can recall more lyrics, even now, from that one album than any equivalent age-group can remember from any other album. That summer I was working in a Coventry Toolroom as an apprentice toolmaker and, as is the custom, the apprentices got the worst jobs in the shop. The booby prize in 1963 turned out to be the gang-milling of the punch guideways in the bench presses that we used to turn out as a bread and butter revenue earner. The job entailed lifting the one hundredweight cast iron press frame from the floor to the milling machine table, clamping it to the milling fixture, and setting the gang-milling cutters on their way. Time to unload/load – 5 minutes; gang milling duration – 45 minutes: Result – boredom, but otherwise a fine opportunity for me and fellow apprentice Keith to treat the adjacent toolmakers to loud, discordant renditions of "I Saw Her Standing

There” , “Do You Want To Know A Secret?”, “Anna” etc... for hour upon hour. As the summer wore on, amazingly, the toolmakers stopped throwing spanners at us and started to join in some of the tracks.

Even while the L.P. was topping the album charts, Parlophone released an extended play record (E.P), containing four of the tracks from the album, titled “Twist and Shout”. Astonishingly, this sold enough copies to be number 2 in the singles chart and secured the Beatles’ status as Kings of the music scene in Britain, especially after “From Me to You” went to number one in the singles chart in the early summer. In cultural terms, this was a dramatic shift. Although there were a few decent records and artists around in 1962, the undisputed King was still Elvis, despite a downturn in the quality of his records. Now, in 1963, he had been toppled in Britain. The USA and the World would soon follow suit.

Each locality in each era has a number of “in” places where the latest music can be heard. One such in the Coventry area in 1963 was “The Oak” at Baginton on Sunday lunchtimes, where you could hear local bands play live and the latest hit records. “Twist and Shout” would get regular plays as the packed bar stood, drank, sang and twanged. One morning I went with brother Terry who, despite enjoying the atmosphere, professed a lack of enthusiasm for the Liverpool quartet. It wasn’t until four years later that I understood his feelings.

I was by then 22, married, and still appreciative of the British dominance of the pop music scene that had accelerated since 1963, with The Stones, The Kinks, The Who and others all adding to the fun. Working in the office of the same Toolroom were two sisters in their late teens who were deeply into soul music, and in particular the Stax label on which Otis Redding and Sam and Dave, amongst others,

recorded. Initially I put this down to a love of a niche genre, but later on was really upset when I realised that **my** music venues were full of **kids** dancing to this self same soul music. My (rather ridiculous) reaction was to form an instant dislike of Stax which in time, of course, changed to a genuine love of the label. Only then did I understand that there is a period, usually in your late teens and early twenties, when **your** music is played, and when **you** are the Kings of the music venues or clubs. Then, one awful day, you realise that your era has gone and you rule no more. This is what had happened to Terry, and to me in 1967, and it has no doubt been happening since, to devotees of Genesis and Floyd, Glitter Rock, Punk Rock, The New Romantics, House music, Britpop, and through the unknown (to me) club eras, each chapter having its Kings followed by their inevitable usurpation.

The unique blessing of the Baby Boomers, however, is that we were in at the start of it all and that **our** music was the 1963-1967 British hegemony. I was lucky enough to have been able to follow the development of pop music from the birth of Rock and Roll through to the early nineties. Every new musical era offered something different and exciting such that Live Aid in 1985, with an emerging U2 and a fading Bowie, was a testament to the enduring health of the Rock and Roll project. But all the time I was getting older, and as we moved into the 90's I had a problem with both house music and rap. Although there were examples of both that I liked, I generally didn't enjoy them as genres. This was the moment I had been dreading, it seemed. Up until then I had appreciated all of the new types of music that had emerged as "flavour of the month" and as such had maintained a musical bridge with my teenage children. Now here were forms of music that would herald my



oldfogydom and the musical parting of the generations.

Amazingly, this did not transpire. It seemed that my kids weren't desperately keen on rap and house either. The generation gap was created by something else, something quite arbitrary, and something that really irritated me. In 1993, Radio 1 acquired a new Controller, Matthew Bannister, who decided that the station didn't need, and should not have, any listeners over the age of 45. Overnight my station of choice for 26 years, the station that I fondly believed was helping to delay the ageing process started to favour rap and club music with its sub-woofer bass dominated rhythms. This meant tolerating 15 minutes of torture for 5 minutes of pleasure, when they happened to play something else. I couldn't keep it up for long and so suddenly found myself without a home station that was both advert-free and of FM quality. It wasn't for a few years that Radio Two effectively filled the gap in the market, but for me that meant missing the advent of Britpop, and an irreversible separation with what was hip and trendy in the pop world.

Now, nearly 20 years later, I still enjoy listening to some new artists, but increasingly play tracks from the 50's, 60's 70's and 80's, aided by the fantastic Ipod. By definition, nostalgia means different songs for each age group, but I can't help wondering whether in forty years time there will be any pensioners playing Eminem tracks with a nostalgic tear in their eye.

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In 2012 the cost of chart CD's, which for years had been at rip-off levels in Britain, had fallen to an

average of around £6.50, including those bought on the internet. I spent the identical sum in the summer of 1963 – on a Coventry City grandstand season ticket! It wasn't just the cup run that made the fans so optimistic but the football that had been played during the second half of the season and the great relationship that Jimmy Hill had created with the fans, and excitement was already mounting for the coming league campaign. The club itself was making big changes to the ground, with the construction of the wing sections of a new cantilever stand on the Thackall Street side of the ground. Wedged in between these two bookends for the whole of the 1963/4 season was the old grandstand, which had a semi-circular roof giving it the appearance of a very long Nissen hut. At the same time, the six foot slope across the pitch as it followed the hill down Swan Lane was removed. This made the boundary walls on the old stand side of the ground eight feet high in some places. These changes gave the stadium a bizarre appearance as we waited for the season to start.

Just opposite the stadium on the corner of Swan Lane and Thackall Street was a large pub, "The Mercer's Arms", which housed many a visiting fan over the years. In the early sixties on a Friday night the Mercer's played host to traditional jazz fans at the Abracadabra Club. Jazz was very popular at the time with Kenny Ball, Acker Bilk, and Chris Barber all having hit records in the inter-regnum between Elvis and the Beatles. Many top line jazz bands appeared at The Abracadabra along with lesser known outfits such as Dick Charlesworth and The Clyde Valley Stompers (I always loved that name). The evening followed a standard pattern. In the first half everyone would listen intently and sup ale, along with the band, which would usually play a few bum notes. In the second half, the performance would definitely

improve (or seem to), and inhibitions would be cast aside as the noise increased and dancing started. This would be led by couples dressed entirely in black, with the men sporting beards and the ladies purple lipstick, and they would perform this strange version of jiving (“The Stomp”) where the bit where the woman is twirled around would be performed in several jerky interrupted movements of the overhead arms, in time with the music. These mortals were called beatniks, closely associated with CND, but were later to metamorphose into hippies, becoming Dylan fans and summer-of-lovers in 1967.

Anyway, I spent my 1963 summer Fridays at the Mercer’s, nerdily excited at being in proximity to the object of my main love, but also because it offered a good night’s drinking. Otherwise, I was busy taking my Ordinary National Certificate finals, going to the Locarno in search of talent, and preparing for the new season. Having committed to a season ticket for the first time, Terry and I, along with our other brother, Brian, had also resolved to go to as many away games as possible. This involved dressing up in the club colours, as it does today, but we didn’t have today’s opportunity to pay twice as much for a club shirt as it was worth. We had to make do with scarves, hats, rosettes and rattles

The scarves then were pretty much the same as today, as were the rosettes. Only used by political parties these days, the rosettes were easy to make up out of ribbon, with sky blue being a popular colour. Less easy were the hats. We’re not talking bobble hats here, but full-blown top hats and bowlers painted sky blue. These were usually reserved for cup-ties, but we had already decided that Coventry City were going to have a special season and we would treat each away game as a cup-tie. We procured three hats from a second hand shop and proceeded to totally ruin the nap by applying sky blue gloss paint.

Then there was the rattle, provided by Dad, I think from ex-WW2 air raid warden stock. Whatever its provenance, it weighed a lot, and would definitely have been classified as a potentially offensive weapon in the eighties when they started to ban such objects from entering grounds. What's more it was deafening with the decibel level only limited by the short duration of rattle that was possible due to its size. A quick lick of paint and the old navy and white colour scheme disappeared for ever. Our total sky blue away outfits were ready for the off!

## **FLYING START**

When The Beatles recorded "All You Need Is Love" live on television on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1967, it was the British contribution to the world wide link-up programme to celebrate the fact that the network of communication satellites was now sufficient to provide live pictures from anywhere in the world. This had enormous implications for sports fans. From that point on all the big sporting events were to be seen live, starting with the two Mexican jamborees – Olympic Games in 1968 and World Cup in 1970, and how we lapped it all up (except for the game against West Germany!)

Prior to then we were limited to filmed highlights shown the next day in glorious black and white, as was the case with the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 and the World Cup in Chile in 1962. Now, the summer of 1963 was not a vintage sporting season. To start with it was an odd-numbered year, which meant no Olympics, World Cup, European or Commonwealth Athletics, and then there were no World Athletics Championships to conveniently fill those un-even years. Wimbledon had been devalued temporarily with the departure of the best players (Laver et al) to the professional game, and England's cricketers were being hammered by Wes Hall and Charlie Griffiths. The only "highlight" was Henry Cooper decking Cassius Clay before losing the fight on a cut-eye decision.

And so when August 24<sup>th</sup> came around with City's opening home fixture against Crystal Palace we were somewhat starved of sporting action. Remarkably, Hill had made no new purchases during the close season (which had not helped to relieve the sporting boredom), but Ernie Machin was now preferred at inside forward to Hugh Barr. Machin had been signed during the previous season and was known as Jimmy

Hill's "Blue Eyed Boy" because of Hill's comments when he made the purchase. Before the game, there was a huge sense of expectation from the crowd.

In a strange game Palace took the lead just before half time, only for Machin to equalise immediately. The parity at half-time disappeared as City took control to score four more in the second period, with Ronnie Farmer nabbing his only ever hat-trick courtesy of two penalties and a free kick. It was not a vintage performance but it was a very good result, particularly as Palace would become contenders for promotion.

The following Thursday the three brothers set off for Meadow Lane with our newly acquired hats and rattles, and 4000 other City fans. We were all slightly uneasy about the match as Terry Bly would be itching to prove how wrong Hill had been to sell him. As it turned out, although Bly had one shot saved by Wesson, this was to be Hudson's night as the Sky Blues turned on a class performance to win 3-0. This included a bullet header from Hudson and a thunderous drive from Willie Humphries to complete the scoring.

Hudson and Humphries were to become the two most popular forwards over the next few months. George Hudson had a large body and quite short legs, which no doubt gave him a low centre of gravity and therefore his Brazilian-style skills, even though his running style was splay footed, but he was also excellent in the air. One of his most celebrated performances came in the 1964/5 season. Newly promoted City played Preston away on Boxing Day and lost a great game to a very late goal by *wunderkind* Howard Kendall. The return fixture was played on an icy pitch at Highfield Road and George was in his element just as he was two years earlier. He crowned a virtuoso display with a memorable goal – a deft chip over the advancing Preston goalkeeper.

Hudson had a slightly mysterious air about him and you could easily believe that he had a cynical outlook on life, Later in his Coventry career he would sometimes cause exasperation with his relaxed attitude, and more than once he left the field on a rainy day with totally clean shorts, but in 1963 he was the subject of adoration from Sky-Blue fans.

Willie Humphries was very small and bow-legged, but was tricky and fast and was typical of the old-fashioned wingers such as Matthews or Finney in that he would attack the full-back with the ability to jink inside or outside his man. He had an engaging smile and was easy to like and was nowhere near as enigmatic as Hudson.

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Following the game at Meadow Lane, Alan Williams of the Daily Express said he couldn't recall a more impressive display from a third division side for years, and added that the intensity of the away support was almost as remarkable. It seemed that the Osmond brothers were not the only ones who had prepared for the new season. This performance contrasted starkly with the one given the last time we had visited Meadow Lane a couple of years earlier, when we witnessed one of the "finest" own goals ever by Frank Austin, the City full back. As I recall the County left winger had placed a shot under the keeper from an acute angle and the ball was rolling slowly towards the goal line when Frank came in at ninety degrees to the line, stopped the ball, flicked it up in the air with his toe, only for the ball to hit his shin and bounce over the line. This encapsulated everything we had come to expect from pre-Hill City

and it was part of a 3-0 defeat that day. Now we had reversed that scoreline.

By coincidence, the last time I had been to Fellows Park Walsall had also slammed us 3-0, and who were we up against on the second Saturday of the season? Walsall, away! It was too much to hope for a repeat of the score reversal, wasn't it? This time the travelling fans constituted up to half of the crowd of 17,000, and the atmosphere during a niggly first half was just as tense as any cup tie. After the interval City turned on the pressure and broke through with a tap in goal from Hudson. This opened the flood gates and Rees thumped home number two high into the far corner, before Ronnie Farmer regained the top scorer slot from Hudson with a trademark 30 yard shot. Walsall were glad to hear the final whistle, and the second 3-0 score reversal had been achieved, and Coventry had their best start to a season in living memory.

<b>P</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>Pts</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>

Next were two home games - against Reading and the return match against Notts County. City's start to the season had not gone unnoticed and both teams came to play with a massed defence. This worked for Reading, who held an off-form Sky Blues to a goal-less draw. Notts County were not so lucky with Humphries and Hudson scoring late goals in front of 28,000 nerry fans. The following Saturday brought the next away game at Luton and once again about 7,000 supporters made the trip. This may not sound a huge amount by today's standards but in those days it was not the norm for clubs to get this much support away from home. Even first division clubs normally took only a couple of thousand to routine away games. So the journey down to Luton



must have surprised more than a few M1 travellers, as the scarves and hats emerged again.

The bad news was that George Hudson was injured; the good news that Hugh Barr, his replacement at centre-forward, opened the scoring after two minutes, and Humphries made it 2-0 four minutes later. Thereafter City totally dominated the game with a great attacking display, and despite Luton pulling one back Humphries netted to make it 3-1. The return trip up the motorway was a very happy one, with confidence in the team now fully established in every Sky Blue heart, and this feeling was fully reinforced on the following Tuesday when just under 30,000 witnessed a 5-1 thrashing of Crewe.

Hudson scored two of the goals on another great floodlit night and City's record now read:

<b>P</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>Pts</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>13</b>

A flying start indeed!

## **ROLLER COASTER**

It couldn't last, of course. The next away game at Hull was the longest journey yet and the distance restricted travelling support to a couple of thousand. City's 2-1 defeat, however, was not attributable to the lack of fans or indeed to a below-par display. What cost them the game was the most incredible refereeing decision I have ever witnessed. Late in the game with City on top and drawing 1-1 George Curtis was clearing the ball midway between the touchline and the penalty area. The referee blew for hand ball, which no-one else saw. The Hull player placed the ball at the scene of the "infringement" ready to take the free kick with a cross into the box, when referee Ken Howley picked the ball up and walked it to the penalty spot. Cue fury among the Coventry contingent, delight and amusement for the home fans. Hull duly scored to register our first defeat. It is said that these things even themselves out, and the injustice of it came back to me in the early eighties when Clive Allen scored for Crystal Palace at Highfield Road in front of the Match of The Day cameras, but his shot hit the stanchion at the back of the net and flew out again. The referee and linesmen must have been the only three people in the ground who couldn't see what had happened. I knew how the Palace fans must have felt!

I missed the next home game against Mansfield at home due to a party at a friend's house in London, but could not believe the score line of 0-3. Apparently it was a game, and a performance, well worth missing. These two setbacks had us slipping to second place and with a mini crisis on our hands. The following Wednesday, City pulled off a fighting 2-2 draw at Crewe thanks to a late goal by Ken Hale in a thrilling encounter. This was followed by the best performance of the season to date at Brentford where

a 3-2 victory could easily have been 5-1. Three more victories were gained as October arrived, with a mid week double over Bristol City (2-1 at home and 1-0 away) sandwiching an easy 3-0 win at home to Wrexham. The Sky Blues had recovered their form and regained the leadership of the division. The statistics reflected the evenness of their home and away performances: -

Home: Won 5 Drawn 1 Lost 1  
Away: Won 5 Drawn 1 Lost 1

Next up was a long trip to Colchester on one of the first ever dedicated Sky Blue Special trains, which was probably the slowest that had ever moved, and a bafflingly poor performance against a team that played massed defence at home and came out winners 2-1. In the lower divisions the two games a week routine lasted well into October, so City had an immediate chance of redemption on the Tuesday after the Colchester debacle via a home match against Shrewsbury Town. Terry's wife Jean was expecting their second child on the night of the game, so Terry popped in to the Hospital on the way to the game, and arrived after three minutes of the game, when I had to tell him that he had missed two goals, one for each team. "Bloody Hell" he said, "I'll bet there'll be no more scoring!" He needn't have worried as City went on to complete their biggest league victory since the war, winning 8-1, with Ronnie Rees getting his first hat-trick. Strangely, Shrewsbury played very well in the first half and could even have been leading at the break, but it was Coventry who led 3-1 and went on to dominate the second half in another fantastic floodlit atmosphere. So far all City's defeats had been on a Saturday but the home midweek matches had all been full of excitement as the spirit of the Sunderland match continued.

On the following day the Football Association celebrated its centenary with a match between England and The Rest of The World at Wembley. England's 1966 World Cup winning side was slowly being formed, with Moore, Banks and Wilson all in the side, but it was Jimmy Greaves who snatched the glory with a late winner after Denis Law had equalised for the World team. Greaves was the most natural goal scorer that I ever saw and it was rough luck on him to miss the final stages of the 1966 triumph through injury. In a match at Highfield Road in 1967, just after we had reached the first division, he scored a sublime goal for Spurs to win the game. As he raced towards the goal from about thirty yards out Bill Glazier, the City keeper, advanced towards him to narrow the angle. My seat was positioned such that the viewing angle was directly behind Greaves' run. I could see that Jimmy only had a ball's width to aim at between Glazier's outstretched hand and the post. He placed it perfectly and City were beaten, a common occurrence from that season onwards.

Thinking back to the rest of the England team in 1966, it makes you realise how talented the players were in that team, and how lucky it was that they all came together at the right time to win the Cup. Look at the names – Moore, Charlton, Wilson, Hurst, Peters, Ball, Hunt, and don't forget the goalie! Gordon Banks was a great guy to have in your international team, but the most annoyingly brilliant keeper if he was up against Coventry when playing for Leicester or Stoke. You could almost scream with frustration at his positioning, as he seemed able to stand still and catch shots that other keepers would be stretching to save.

When serendipity provides a team as good as that the fans tend to think that the good times are here for ever and winning silverware again is just a matter of course. This is far from the truth, of course, unless

you happen to support Brazil! But for British teams, as England Rugby Union supporters found out following their World Cup triumph of 2003, you have to enjoy the rare successes when they occur. It was beginning to feel a bit like that with the Sky Blues, in a much smaller way of course. Here we were, top of the Third Division and playing football that would not have been out of place in the First. Then, the roller coaster took another turn, when City let slip a 2-0 lead at home against Watford, and Ernie Machin received an injury that would keep him out of the team for some time. The 2-2 scoreline was a real anti-climax after the Shrewsbury game, and worse was to follow as Hudson, Hale, Humphries, Kearns and Hill all joined Machin on the injured list as we headed to Gay Meadow for the last midweek game of the autumn.

In a fighting defensive performance where we fans played a part in giving great vocal support for the many reserves in the team, City held on for a 0-0 draw at Shrewsbury, in which a young Bobby Gould made his debut. By a quirk of the fixture list, on the following Saturday we found ourselves traversing Essex again on the second slowest train ever but this time going to Southend, where City returned to their winning away form with a workmanlike 2-1 victory, with Hale and Rees netting. Amazing as it may seem now, this was a game where the bulk of City fans spent the first half at the home fans end, where there was considerable banter, but no violence. Then, at half time, we were allowed to walk the length of the pitch to be behind the goal that City were due to attack in the second half.

One week later and a glamour match against Peterborough. This was Coventry's first game against Peterborough since the memorable Christmas fixtures. United had secured a new centre forward to replace George Hudson, a certain Derek Dougan.

Prior to the game Radio Sky Blue was on the air as usual, but this time supplemented by a dancing display by The Butlin's Ladies which included The Twist. This had the near 30,000 crowd nicely warmed up, but after 20 minutes Posh were deservedly leading 2-0, with Dougan scoring one of the goals. Yet again the team showed their fighting spirit to equalise by half time through Hale and Hudson, and went on to prevail 3-2 with a winner from Hale. A pulsating game, and by far the best Saturday home performance of the season.

## **DEATH AND GLORY**

On the following Saturday the Sky Blue army made its way down to Wiltshire for the first round of the F.A. Cup. This was our first Cup game since the United quarter final and gave us a welcome break from the tensions of the league season. In the Third Division, then as now, you started the Cup in Round One and the draw had City away to Trowbridge of the Southern League. The 3,000 travelling fans numbered five times the average home gate, but they were not really needed as Hudson grabbed a hat-trick in a 6-1 demolition.

The confidence in the club was such that the prospect of defeat never even entered the supporter's minds, despite the King's Lynn fiasco two years previously. However, after Coventry reached the first division in 1967 and became a "giant", things took a different turn. In fact, during their epic thirty four year stay in the top flight, the Sky Blues were beaten by sides from the Third Division or lower no less than eleven times in either the F.A. or League Cups. Tranmere (twice!), Rochdale, Luton, Swindon, Mansfield, Walsall, Northampton, Scarborough, Gillingham, and of course, Sutton made up the roll of dishonour for all Coventry fans. And yet I'm sure that all of them, like me, are quite happy to regard those embarrassing defeats as the price we had to pay for that stunning triumph in 1987. City are, after all, the only Midlands F. A. Cup winners since 1968, and are one of only four sides that have broken the grip of the "Big Six" (United, Chelsea, Arsenal, Spurs, Liverpool, and Everton) on the Cup since 1980.

This last fact is one of the saddest aspects of the modern game, since the Big Six see the F. A. Cup as almost a consolation prize and often play reserves in the earlier rounds, whereas a winning Cup run by a medium sized club such as Southampton, Ipswich, or

Sunderland creates an amazing and uplifting experience for that community and instills a feel-good factor that supporters of the top clubs must have long forgotten. At Wembley on our great day, the Spurs fans were understandably nonchalant about their chances before the match and chanted "We've seen it all before" as they looked over at the massed ranks of tension-gripped Coventry Cup Final rookies. After the game though, to be fair, the Tottenham supporters that we met were very sporting and seemed to quietly acknowledge our excitement despite their own disappointment. The journey back up the M1 was long but unforgettable, and the truest and most uttered phrase was "They can't take it away from us!"

Twenty four years earlier, on the journey back from Trowbridge, we were nowhere near as elated, especially as it had started to rain. In 1963, with no M5 motorway, the best way to Wiltshire from the Midlands was down the Fosseway and through Cirencester. We had been offered a lift with one of dad's workmates, Gordon, who had a small Ford. If you see one of these on the road today alongside an equivalent modern car, it looks like a toy. The size and power of modern vehicles means that only the severest road inclines cause any sort of problem, but back then the hill at Fossebridge necessitated a degree of forward planning to make sure that you could get to the top of the hill on the other side of the river bridge. This usually meant a run at full tilt down the hill, slowing down briefly to traverse the chicane that is the bridge, before putting your foot hard down until you were forced to change down a gear, and then again before squeaking over the brow. The plan needed a clear road, but this time we had the Sky Blue Army to contend with. Gordon did his best by holding back a little at the top of the hill, but halfway up the other side, the load of four people in such a



tiny car was having its effect. What made things worse was the vacuum assisted wipers on the car, which stopped completely at this point and took visibility down to almost zero. Only our funereal pace gave us any confidence that the road ahead was clear, and we eventually made it home safely.

Motor cars, of course, have been of central importance to citizens of Coventry in the forty years since that Trowbridge journey. The heady days of the early sixties, when production volumes were very healthy at Coventry car firms, masked the fact that the know-how required to stay competitive was sadly lacking. The Japanese had already started to deploy their practice of “Kaisen” or continuous improvement to the automobile business, and were using the statistics-based philosophy of W. Edwards Deming to take the lead in vehicle quality. Ironically, it was many years before Deming’s home country – the United States of America - started to adopt his methods. The take-overs and rationalisation that started in the 1960’s and carried on to the end of the Century left the British car industry in a permanent state of crisis, and robbed it of the stability that its European competitors enjoyed and it needed to become competitive.

The change in the driving experience on the roads has also been remarkable. When I was learning to drive people taking their driving test had to use hand signals to perform left and right turns and whenever they were slowing down. This was probably due to the fact that wipers were only just becoming standard fitments on vehicles, and older cars were fitted with trafficators – those weird illuminated yellow arms that used to jump out of their sockets on the side of the car to announce that you were going to turn. Whatever the reason, hand signals meant having the window down fully for each driving lesson, which was no joke at all in the winter.

A popular make then was Rover with its 90 and 100 models, but after the introduction of the more modern SD1 in the mid-seventies, the numbers of the older models naturally declined. By the mid 1980's a curious phenomenon developed – Rover 90's and 100's were only ever spotted at the front of long queues on country roads. In fact when you came to the back of an extra long tailback moving at 35 miles per hour, you just knew that, when you eventually overtook the slow car at the front some three hours later, it would be a Rover 90 or 100. You also knew that the driver would be wearing a hat and smoking a pipe!

Nowadays of course the person driving the slow car at the front of queues is defined not so much by the make of car, but by the fact that the driver (male or female) is old and white-haired and is so small that they are only able to view the road by looking through the steering wheel. Similarly, at the other end of the spectrum, the car being driven dangerously fast is nearly always a small Peugeot and the driver, if not wearing a baseball cap back-to-front, always has a head shaped like a peanut with sticky-out ears.

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Now here's a question you don't often get - "Can you remember where you were **the day after** John F. Kennedy was shot?" Well in my case it was at Highfield Road watching Coventry City beat Bristol Rovers 4-2 in an exciting game, with Hudson yet again on the mark twice. There was a minute's silence prior to the game, black armbands were worn by the teams, and people were genuinely moved. Kennedy was regarded as a young man of principle who offered hope of an end to the Cold War and an improvement in civil liberties in the States. The darker

side of his character was not generally known then. What I think really let America down was the way that Lee Harvey Oswald seemed to be almost led into Jack Ruby's bullet by the Dallas police a couple of days later, and as the conspiracy theories emerged over the months and years following the assassination, they found sympathetic ears on this side of the Atlantic.

In the late sixties, I can remember reading an article on the events and facts surrounding the shooting and its aftermath (in Playboy, of all organs) by Jim Garrison, the then District Attorney of New Orleans. Garrison was the key character in Oliver Stone's film J.F.K., which more or less maintained the veracity of the conspiracy theory. Interestingly there have been recent works, including a TV programme which used a computerised reconstruction of the ballistics, that point to the likelihood of a single assassin. I normally tend to be sceptical about conspiracy theories on the basis that they need excellent organization and water-tight secrecy, and these are rare human commodities. In this case, though, I still think it likely that Oswald did not act alone, but at this distance what does it matter now?

On the day of Oswald's death, City played a friendly match with the West German first division club Kaiserslautern, and absolutely murdered them 8-0, with an inevitable Hudson hat-trick. The German side had beaten Luton the previous night and so this was obviously a sign that the Sky Blues were hitting top form. The victory reinforced my perception of the quality of German football in the early sixties. We used to get the odd televised match from Germany on Sundays, and our continued TV football drought had us watching any old rot. They all seemed to run bolt upright and be wearing diver's boots, such was the clod-hopping impression they gave. The Kaiserslautern skills were on the same level, and I

was gobsmacked three years later to see people like Beckenbauer and Haller parading their silky wares in the World Cup. Where did that team come from? Talk about Ugly Duckling to gorgeous White Swan! It just goes to show, there's always hope – no matter how bad your current team is, there may be little Beckenbauers coming through the youth system.

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I was now approaching the end of my first term at Lanchester College, and had inevitably joined the Football Club. We used to play games against other Universities and Colleges on Wednesdays. Lanchester had five soccer teams, three rugby and three hockey teams, and once a year we made our annual pilgrimage to Manchester to play Salford C.A.T. These were great trips and the evening social venues were usually divided between the rugby teams (generally strip clubs) on the one hand and the soccer and hockey teams (Manchester University Dance) on the other. Lanchester allowed the various societies to run the Saturday dances at the College and to keep the revenues. For the soccer club, this allowed us to buy a new set of kit every year for all five teams. The profit from such an evening was due mainly to the fact that Lanchester had two dance floors, the lower main hall, and the refectory on the second floor. Sandwiched in between was the Students Union bar. You could therefore have two live bands playing in one evening, and this proved a huge draw for the local youngsters. The use of the refectory was stopped after a while when the floor started to vibrate badly one night in the middle of one of the sets as people were bopping around.

In the meantime, The Beatles were going from strength to strength, having appeared at The Royal Variety Performance in early November. The press had started to hype them up, and they were about to take America by storm. Such was their dominance of the British music scene that "She Loves You", having gone to number one in September and then started to move down the chart, actually climbed back to the top spot at the end of November. That Saturday, November 30th, produced the most memorable match of the season, at Queens Park Rangers. We provincials arrived via the Sky Blue train, which was mercifully quicker than our two previous journeys, on a murky afternoon. Our spirits were not lifted by a strong Rangers start in which they took the lead and forced Bob Wesson to make two smart saves. City gradually started to play some vintage first time football, even though the pitch was typically sticky for a late autumn fixture, and after 35 minutes gained a deserved equaliser through Hudson. Five minutes later came the goal of the season. Humphries picked up the ball in his own half on the extreme right hand side of the pitch, Beating his full back on the inside he set off on a diagonal run towards the QPR penalty area, outpacing a couple of defenders, before unleashing a rising cross-shot into the top-left hand corner beyond keeper Ron Springett's outstretched fingers. From our position in the stand we were right behind the flight of the ball, and the noise was deafening as the fans celebrated with a chorus of "She Loves You". After the break came some sublime football as the score became 5-1 inside the hour, with Hudson scoring another hat-trick. Rees made it 6-1 as City piled on the class, but we noticed it was getting distinctly foggy, and fears grew of an abandoned game. Then Rangers mounted a fight back to score two goals before Coventry finished the game strongly as the visibility stabilized. On the way

out of the ground, the QPR fans were very complimentary about our team, as were the press and Alec Stock, the Rangers manager who said that Coventry were the best third division team he had ever seen.

We were well content with a four point lead at the top and the side's record was now: -

**Played 22; Won 15; Drawn 4; Lost 3; Goals 59-26; Pts 34:**

Since October 23<sup>rd</sup>, City had scored 39 goals in 9 games, and were well on target for 100 league goals by the end of the season. The supporters knew now that they had a class team and fully expected them to finish up as champions.

## **ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY**

One aspect of sixties football life that is no longer with us is the Home International Championship, which used to be staged every year between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It was played at convenient points during the season until the late sixties, when it became a post season tournament played over one week. In a November 1963 game England's rising stars had buried Northern Ireland 8-3, and goal fests were a regular occurrence for England in the early sixties, putting nine past Scotland and Luxembourg and eight past Switzerland and Mexico.

It was always nice to beat your closest neighbours in one of the Home Internationals, especially Scotland, who had always punched well above their weight at soccer and, at that time, had the better of the total matches played against The Auld Enemy. Scotland had produced some great players down the years and in this period had struck a particularly rich vein, with the likes of Jim Baxter, Ian St. John, and the best British player I ever saw, Denis Law. They bounced back from their 1961 9-3 thrashing at Wembley with a great 2-1 win in 1963, and this was in the middle of the England high scoring run. From my point of view, and I'm sure most English fans, it was never nice to lose to the Jocks, but you just had to put your hands up and admire their fine players.

I was quite shocked, then, to discover the lack of Scottish support for England in the 1966 World Cup. Mum and Dad went on holiday to Scotland during the tournament and were disappointed at the antagonism towards the World Cup hosts. On the day of the final, Denis Law played golf and was mortified when England won. It's been the same ever since – the Scots always support whoever is playing England, and I have to say that it's a pretty pathetic and

juvenile attitude from such a normally mature and streetwise nation. But why is that the Scots and, to a lesser degree, the Welsh hate the English to win anything? The answer is clearly historical and is a sort of retained grievance against the exploits of the English from Edward the First (well – kind of English!) through to Margaret Thatcher. Can't they see though that the sportsmen that they are willing to be defeated aren't the ones that killed their chieftains or closed their mines? The lads on the pitch and on the terraces supporting England are no different to them, and a lot of them have Scottish or Welsh family members, so does it really make sense to support the Croatians or Paraguayans when they play the English? When Celtic scored their memorable European Cup triumph in 1967 in Lisbon, all of my English friends cheered the Bhoys on, even though we had only a month before "lost" the title of World Champions to Scotland, by dint of their 3-2 win over an injury-ravaged England side at Wembley.

Although there is evidence of some recent movement, the fact is that English people used to consider themselves as British first and English second, and were slightly embarrassed at any overt celebration of Englishness such as St. George's Day. So we always supported any British sporting competitor regardless of where in Britain they came from. At the World Athletics Championships at Stuttgart in 1993, Tony Jarrett and Colin Jackson were together on the starting line waiting for the gun to start the 110 metres hurdles final. I was desperately hoping that one of them would get the gold and didn't care which one. In the event Jackson, the Taff, won with a world record that stood for 13 years. Jarrett of England won the silver medal, so a great result for Britain, but I wonder if Welshmen would have regarded it so if Jarrett had won and Jackson been second.



One of the problems is that the Celtic nations do tend to rub it in when they produce a sporting success story. Remember the legendary Welsh rugby team of the seventies. It would have been nice to have sat back and taken our beatings at the hands of Edwards, John, Bennett, and various Davies's and Williams's and admire the great rugby. But oh no, we had to have Max Boyce and "Hymns and Arias" rammed down our throat as well didn't we? I was lucky enough to get a ticket for the Wales – England game of 1981 at the Arms Park. I had always wanted to be there when the crowd sang "Land of My Fathers" and when it had finished and my spine had stopped tingling I could have gone home satisfied without seeing the game.

See – that's my point, isn't it? Even though the team were Welsh, they were British too, and by extension that song is partially mine, as were the team, such that I always shouted them on against France, or any other non-British side. I suspect, though, that only the English have this sense of Britishness. In the 2011 Wimbledon tournament, I remember Brian Moore, the manic English hooker, going demented with support for Andy Murray. Any Scot watching this display must have been truly baffled!

## **SO THIS IS CHRISTMAS**

December 1963 started disappointingly with a 2-1 F.A. Cup defeat against the same Bristol Rovers side they had beaten two weeks previously. In the event, though, most fans had their eyes firmly focused on the league, and the defeat was soon forgotten as City put in a battling performance at promotion rivals Crystal Palace to draw 1-1. George Curtis was the inspiration as he suffered a badly gashed leg, only to come back on the field after 20 missing minutes to finish the game. (There were no substitutes allowed then). In the week before Christmas there were two more victories, the first against Hungarian Champions Ferencvaros 3-1, and then a 1-0 league home victory over a defensive Walsall team, with Ken Hale starring in both games and scoring the vital goal against the Saddlers.

Christmas in the Sixties meant two games against the same team, with one of them usually being on Boxing Day. It was not uncommon for games to be played on Christmas morning, one such occasion being in 1959 when I was down with Asian flu. I remember my brothers returning to tell me of a 5-3 win over Wrexham and a Ken Satchwell hat-trick. In 1963 our opponents were Barnsley with the away trip on the 26<sup>th</sup>. I cadged a lift with my mate Rod and his dad on a cold day which carried a threat of fog. The City faithful were in good spirits and fine voice in the pub before the game and during it at the ground. A routine performance resulted in a 1-1 draw, and we were reasonably satisfied as we made for home in a real pea-souper.

Fog was a regular feature of British winters in the sixties, and it was far more prevalent then as most people still had coal fires. On winter days in Coventry, what would have been a clear blue sky was often turned grey by the Industrial and domestic gases that

lingered over the town centre. This was nothing compared to the pall that hovered over Sheffield for years and they had the smell to contend with as well. Coal fires were a major part of domestic life when I was a child, with the morning purgatory of twisting up newspapers to act as firelighters as your fingers turned blue with cold, the drawing of fires by using newspapers as a curtain across the opening (a practice which often led to it catching alight), the more serious chimney fires, the soot falls and the chimney sweeps. There were consolations, however, in the glorious taste of bread off the end of the toasting fork, and roast chestnuts.

We were patently less aware then of the environmental issues and threats that confront us today, but nothing has changed with the way that the average person reacts to these threats. It's true that the majority today will make more effort to recycle, but this would have been the case forty years ago, had people been asked to do so. However, there is no way that people then (as now) were prepared to forego their affordable standard of life to aid the environment. What the coming Global Warming crisis calls for now is a massive reduction in air travel and much more car-sharing to conserve fossil fuels and reduce pollution, but there is no chance of this happening voluntarily,

Christmas was radically different in the sixties. The 1 – 2 week break that applies today was unimaginable then. Christmas Day and Boxing Day were bank holidays but New Years Day was not, so the proximity of the bank holidays to the weekend determined the length of the break. As far as the BBC was concerned, Christmas was strictly a two day affair with the special Christmas Channel Identifier Screen switched off abruptly on December 27<sup>th</sup>. This always rankled with me because the build up to the festival, even then, took months, and then it was all

over in two days and we were back at work. The arrangement today is far better if, like me, you enjoy being a lazy slob for 10 days, and it makes the playing of "Merry Christmas, Everybody" in supermarkets on September 1<sup>st</sup> just that little bit more bearable.

One pleasurable aspect of the Holiday was the first showing of a Hollywood blockbuster on British T.V. The gap between this and the original release of the film was a lengthy five years, so the Christmas edition of the Radio Times was eagerly snapped up and searched to see what was on. The advent of Video and DVD has obviously been a big advance for home entertainment generally, but one downside has been to eliminate the "Christmas T.V. Film Premiere". Another T.V. treat that adult and child alike looked forward to was "Disney Time", which showed extracts from the famous cartoons and features for about one hour. The Disney Empire used to only ever allow their films to be shown in cinemas, and about one feature length cartoon would be re-released every year, so fresh generations of children got to discover anew the delights of "Snow White" or "Lady and The Tramp". This strict control of the supply made the Christmas programme very attractive, and the familiar extracts which now induce boredom if not contempt (such as "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" from Fantasia) were lapped up, even in glorious living monochrome.

Teenagers can have quite boring Christmases, but for me 1963 wasn't one of them, as my obsession with the fortunes of the Sky Blues continued. In the last game of the year they beat Barnsley 3-1 in the return holiday game to go seven points clear at the top.

*"Oh What a Sight - Late December back in '63"*

as Frankie Valli might have put it, had he been a Coventry fan reading the Third Division table.

On the following Friday, in the first game of 1964, another home game yielded two more points as City put three unanswered goals past a young Alex Stepney to beat Millwall, and the lead stood at nine points. As we City fans soaked up the Saturday newspaper reports, we had no idea that it would be our last glad, confident morning.

## **PLEASANT AND UNPLEASANT**

As my brothers and I made our way on the train to Elm Park with 4,000 other Sky Blue fans on January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1964, we were slightly anxious, despite our huge points advantage. To start with, the injuries were beginning to pile up. Apart from Ernie Machin's long term problem, Sillett and Hudson were both missing for the game against Reading. On top of this Coventry had not won for 55 years at the ground, and Terry told us that he had once attended a game here where City were 3-0 up at half-time only to lose 4-3! In the previous Cup Run season, a 4-1 hammering there had finally ended City's promotion hopes. Reading were also in the top six in the division.

The game started in a cracking atmosphere engendered by the large crowd of the sort that now always attended every away game; such was the reputation of our team. Jimmy Whitehouse had been signed on a free transfer from Reading and the home side must have been regretting it at half-time as he scored twice, the second a strange foreshadowing of the 1980 Clive Allen "goal" at Highfield Road when Jimmy's shot hit the stanchion and rebounded out, only for the referee to claim it had hit the post. The difference this time was that the linesman saw what had happened and the goal was eventually given. In the second half, Reading mounted a furious comeback to gain a deserved 2-2 draw in a riveting game. So the old hoodoo continued, and we never played at Elm Park again (but, strangely, won all of our first three games at The Majeski Stadium by the same score, 2-1).

Confidence was high for the next home game versus Luton, as the visitors were rock bottom and hadn't won away for 12 months. In the event a goal by a non-regular player, Frank Kletzenbauer, two minutes from time salvaged a 3-3 draw for the Sky

Blues. This was a poor City display, lifted only by a fantastic long range volley from Farmer for the second goal. Another aspect of the afternoon that was unsatisfactory was the encouragement given to the crowd by Radio Sky Blue to clap along to the two drumbeats in the execrable Dave Clark Five hit "Glad All Over". Unfortunately the crowd took this up as a suggestion and we had to suffer it for the rest of the season and beyond, despite the fact that it was clearly the Crystal Palace theme song. The Dave Clark Five, of course, were a symbol of London's denial that any world-wide British success could possibly emanate from anywhere but the capital. So we had to suffer further rubbish ("Bits and Pieces") from the white polo-necked nerds until authentic Home Counties talent (The Rolling Stones, The Kinks, and The Who) arrived to complement The Beatles.

On the football front, things got worse on the following Wednesday at Boundary Park as Oldham, their nearest rivals, deservedly beat City 2-0 on a cold winter's night. As we left the ground with City's smallest following of the season, Brian and I witnessed our first ever piece of football hooliganism, when Oldham fans attacked some City supporters carrying a banner. Nothing too serious, but it was still a bit of a surprise and a foretaste of nastier things to come. On the coach on the way home the faithful were starting to get worried. Machin, Sillett and Hudson were all still injured, but the team seemed to have lost a bit of confidence. As it happened Hudson and Sillett returned for the next home game against Hull City but after dominating the first half City led only 1-0. In the second half the Tigers came close to completing the double by netting twice, with Ronnie Rees making it 2-2 only ten minutes from time. Seven days later, Mansfield did what Hull couldn't by completing the double over us, winning 3-2 at Field

Mill, despite a cracking long range opener from Brian Hill. This time City's big following had a depressing journey home, as their lead at the top had been trimmed to three points with Palace and Watford leading the chase, and City had now gone five games without a win.

We went to Mansfield in Terry's car and on the way back stopped at our regular Saturday night watering hole, the Mount Pleasant on the Hinckley Road. This is now adjacent to the massive retail, industrial, Hotel and entertainment complex (the Walsgrave Triangle) that runs right up to Junction 2 of the M6, but then it was the first building that you came to in Coventry after a journey from the East or North East. The pub backed on to an estate which housed a number of the Coventry team, and one of the pleasures of an evening out there was to hold a conversation with George Hudson or one of the other players that frequented the pub. Mind you, there was not much opportunity for this on Saturday nights as there was always a sing-song led by the pianist, a nice guy called Keith who played all the old favourites. It was hardly surprising that the songs were either traditional or from the first half of the twentieth century, but this didn't stop the younger ones like us joining in lustily to "California, Here I Come", "Bye, Bye, Blackbird", "Green Grow The Rushes", and "The Holy City", not forgetting several choruses of the Sky Blue Song. These were really enjoyable nights.

A lot of these songs were familiar to me anyway because of the sing-songs we used to have over Christmas at my Uncle Arthur's house, including the old World War One songs "It's a Long Way to Tipperary", and "Goodbye Dolly Gray". It's only now that I realise that some of the 1964 patrons of the Mount Pleasant must have fought in World War 1, and a majority probably did take part in World War 2,



so those two particular songs had real meaning to them. Now, of course, the pub sing along has largely been replaced by Karaoke, but this form of entertainment is led by the more extrovert amongst us whose vocal talents usually make the meaning of the phrase "Ignorance is Bliss" as clear as crystal.

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You might remember Doug Saunders missing the 3 foot putt to win the 1970 British Open at St. Andrews. Easier to recall is Paula Radcliffe pulling out of the Olympic marathon in Athens, or England's failure to hold on to a 2-0 winning lead against West Germany in the 1970 World Cup. These are examples of the worst sort of sporting failure, the ones where you are expected to win and then you don't, the sort that leave you with that wavy-lipped smile that Charlie Brown used to sport in the "Peanuts" cartoon. Well, the Coventry City team and fans were starting to get that old sinking feeling that comes free with the smile, as February 1964 wore on.

Hot on the heels of the Mansfield defeat came two home games and two away during which the confidence, nerve, and faith of the Sky Blue Army were to be put to the severest test. Earlier in the season every match was something to look forward to in lip-smacking anticipation of a great attacking display, but with the lead now down to three points anxiety had set in and the fans almost dreaded the next failure. It was no longer an excuse to blame injuries to key players because, Machin apart, City were back to 100% availability. Even Jimmy Hill recognized the signs of stress and urged the fans and the team to try and lose their edginess, but events conspired to increase it. A 2-2 draw at home to

Brentford (which included a good debut from forward Graham Newton) was matched by a 1-1 scoreline at Wrexham, where Newton scored his first goal for the club. These displays were mediocre by the standards of 1963, and both of the opponents had been outclassed before Christmas.

A much improved display at home on the last day of February still only yielded one point as Bournemouth fought back from 2-0 down. Then came a key clash with Watford in a four pointer at Vicarage Road, with the Sky Blue Express once more delivering a huge body of support. Watford had young goalkeeper Pat Jennings to thank for gaining a 1-1 draw, and the talk on the journey home was, at long last, infused with optimistic forecasts of a City revival to maintain their lead (now down to goal average). The position at the top looked like this:-

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts.
CITY	36	18	13	5	83	47	49
PALACE	36	20	9	7	60	38	49
WATFORD	36	20	7	9	64	46	47

What was more, we had a chance to open up a gap again as our next match was on the Friday night, at home to lowly Southend, which meant floodlights! Sure enough, the atmosphere was electric as a 29,000 crowd turned up, no doubt encouraged by the Watford performance, and they witnessed an unforgettable game. Bob Wesson was unavailable and reserve keeper Dave Meeson came in to the side. The superstitious amongst the crowd may have recalled that Meeson had experienced a disastrous debut in a home game some 18 months previously, that was instrumental in a 4-3 defeat, after City had led 3-1. The opposition that day – Southend! This time he didn't concede four goals – he let in five, the

first time this many had been conceded since the war at Highfield Road.

After a crazy, defence-free opening spell during which Southend scored three times, the crowd lifted the team and Farmer and Hudson pulled it back to 3-2 just after the hour. Expectations rose of a memorable comeback victory, but Southend scored again from the restart, and burst the bubble of hope that had existed for just 60 seconds. The atmosphere as we trudged out of the ground, beaten 5-2, was truly funereal. The date was March 13<sup>th</sup>, exactly one year since the touch paper had been lit by the 1-1 draw in the F.A.Cup at Portsmouth but on this particular March 13<sup>th</sup> which, aptly, was a Friday the Sky Blue Rocket was earthbound. Our team of heroes had lost their golden touch and we were looking at another season in Division Three. If we failed this year, after all the fabulous football and hype surrounding the team, how could we ever hope to challenge again? One thing was for sure, something had to happen to turn things around.

## **GEORGE AND JOHN - MARK 1**

Jimmy Hill now took action as the transfer deadline approached. Jimmy Whitehouse and Frank Kletzenbauer were sold, and £23,000 was spent on George Kirby, a tall athletic centre forward from Southampton, and John Smith, a more sedate midfield player from Spurs. Jim insisted that Kirby would not supplant Hudson but would play alongside him, as indeed he did in his debut at Bournemouth. The game was probably the most tense of the campaign so far, with Bournemouth on the fringe of the promotion chase. Meeson saved an early spot kick but not long afterwards we went a goal behind anyway. Ronnie Rees had the away contingent on its feet with a stunning 30 yard equaliser, and the score stayed 1-1 until the death, when the Cherries snatched a winner to really deepen the gloom. I had travelled down by car with Mum and Dad to make a weekend of it and that night we went to see "Zulu" in Bournemouth, but we would have been more cheerful if the cat had died.

One novel aspect of "Zulu" was that it had been released in 70 millimetre format, and I saw it again later in Coventry in a specialist 70mm cinema. The experience of the curved screen and surround sound was stunning, and it wasn't long before we had seen "Dr. Zhivago", "Lawrence of Arabia" and "The Sound of Music" in this format. Nowadays there are very few 70 mm cinemas in the country, which is a bit of a mystery given that we have become more avid cinema buffs over the past thirty years. Quite a few of the recent blockbusters would have been even more spectacular if we could have viewed them on 70 mm in these specialist cinemas.

I had just passed my driving test and drove Mum and Dad to Bournemouth and back, having spent the night in a hotel. Dad's car had a radio fitted and we

were able to listen to the Beatles' latest release "Can't Buy Me Love". This was a follow up to their first smash American number one "I Wanna Hold Your Hand", which had made them a world wide phenomenon. I was particularly disappointed with the track, especially as it came from the soundtrack of their first film "A Hard Day's Night", and there were, in my opinion, far better songs on the LP that could have been used as singles, like "Things We Said Today". Later that year, they compounded the mistake by releasing the title track, which was also a relatively poor song.

Pop journalists who weren't even around in the sixties have recently voted "Revolver" as the best Beatles album and in the seventies "Sergeant Pepper" won that accolade. This is fair enough, because tastes obviously change with age, but I never rated these two albums in the top three of the Beatles output. I believe that the four albums released in 1964 and 1965, contain a cornucopia of great pop songs, and represented the golden period of Beatles music. "Help" probably had more potential hit singles on it than any other Beatles album, and "Rubber Soul" with its absolute stereo separation of singer and instrument wasn't far behind and contained my particular favourite all time track "I'm Looking Through You". Even "Beatles for Sale", which included several covers, had some excellent tracks on it.

The strange thing is that many of these tunes are unknown to the younger generations of pop lovers, who are more familiar with the group's hit singles. Over the last few years there has been a lot of cover versions of old pop tracks, but I can't recall any of these being from this wealth of material on the Beatles' albums. Surely someone soon is going to take advantage of this huge opportunity.

As for the ailing Coventry City F.C., they had no Paul or Ringo, but they had two sets of George and John. The established pair in the team was later to manage the club to its only major trophy, but now Messrs Kirby and Smith had joined the desperate battle to claw the club back into the promotion places from the dreaded third place that the Sky Blues occupied as Easter Saturday dawned. Oldham were the visitors that day and they were the club that had started the terrible win-less sequence back in January. Hill dropped George Hudson, who in truth hadn't been performing even when he was fit, and Kirby became the second successive centre-forward signing to score a hat-trick on his home debut as City at last won a game, by the convincing margin of 4-1. Although this made everyone feel happier, there were two immediate fixtures against Port Vale to face on Easter Monday and Tuesday.

Some of the early season enthusiasm had returned for the supporters and another large army made its way to Vale Park to watch a game that City should have won, but were denied by a late Vale equaliser. There was a huge traffic jam on the way home, but we were fairly upbeat now that we had the opportunity to complete a five point Easter the following night. As it turned out four points were all we got, thanks to Port Vale's solid defensive effort which threatened to gain all three points. A 30,000 crowd was mightily relieved when Kirby scored, soon after we had gone behind, to make it two 1-1 draws with the team from the Potteries.

There were now only five games left, and three of them were away from home, starting with the trip to Bristol Rovers. The Sky Blues won the game in a canter to record their first away success since the 6-3 win at QPR. Although that memorable Loftus Road performance in November was part of the same season, it was hugely different in essence to the

performances in the second half of the season. The first half was glorious anticipation and delivery of great entertainment, the second half full of tension, anguish and the fear of failure. It was just like the “Hunky Dory” L.P. by David Bowie. A superb Side 1 followed by a mundane Side 2.

At Eastville although the score was only 1-0, thanks to a Ken Hale goal only seconds after the restart, the easy manner of the victory was as mysterious as the Rover’s surprise F. A. Cup win over us the previous December. This win was psychologically important because it had put City back in the driving seat in that promotion was now in their own hands. The positions were:-

	<u>P</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>Pts.</u>
PALACE	41	23	11	7	67	42	57
CITY	42	20	15	7	93	57	55
WATFORD	41	22	9	10	74	54	53

The penultimate home game was against Queens Park Rangers, and 28,000 turned up to see an exciting game with Coventry starting well by taking a 2-0 lead through Humphries and Rees after seventeen minutes. As had happened so often before, though, they lost it to a feisty QPR team inside five minutes, and nerves began to take hold again. City didn’t really look like scoring again until they gained a dodgy penalty decision midway through the second period. Farmer converted his eighth penalty out of eight in the season, but convincing it was not as it went in via the goalkeeper’s hand and the post. The home games kicked off at 3.15 that season and as the clock reached 4.45, Radio Sky

Blue announced that Palace and Bournemouth had both lost. What an electric effect this had on the crowd and an immediate rendition of the Sky Blue song was followed by enormous roars of encouragement for City to seal the game. This they did when Kirby leaped high to head home a corner after 85 minutes. A national newspaper report commented that the match was a cameo of the whole season, with its winning start followed by a long period of mediocre football, only for there to be a happy ending. We desperately hoped the journalist was right.



## ***RETURN OF THE KING***

There were now three games left in the last eight days of the season and the first two were away from home, at Millwall and Peterborough. Going to the Old Den was never a comfortable experience, and we had been warned to expect hostility from the home fans. We were not disappointed as 8,000 Sky Blue followers contributed to the biggest crowd of the season at Cold Blow Lane (fifteen of the twenty two away games had attracted a season's best crowd). The pitch was as bumpy as pitches in Spring were in the sixties (something which groundsmen have definitely improved upon since) and the game was not a glorious spectacle. It was important to avoid defeat, but City could have won had it not been for Ronnie Farmer's first failure from the spot all season just before half-time. He had decided to change his technique as he suspected goalkeepers were wise to his placement to their left, so this one went to Stepney's right, hit the upright, and bounced out. The second half was played out in a very tense atmosphere and City had one or two close shaves, but they held on for a goalless draw with George Curtis having another sterner.

All clubs, then and now, had their penalty specialists like Farmer, but with the advent of penalty shoot-outs in Cup competitions, every professional now needs to practice twelve yard shots. I hate penalty competitions with a vengeance, mainly because it usually makes the experience after the normal 90 minutes very boring. More often than not one of the teams will conclude that their best chance of victory lies with playing defensively and holding on for the shoot-out. Sometimes this decision takes place during the second half of normal time, and as a strategy it is often successful because both sides are tiring and the "superior" team has trouble raising the

energy to break down a massed defence. The shoot-out itself can be very cruel, as it has happened that a player who has had a stonking game is the very one to miss the vital kick. This stigma has been the fate of Roberto Baggio (World Cup Final 1994), and Alexander Shevchenko (Champions League Final 2005) amongst many others. The damp squib ending to the 2005 F.A.Cup Final between Arsenal and Manchester United was an insult to all the clubs that had participated throughout the season. How can they allow a major competition to end in this manner?

A far better method is available – it’s called The Golden Goal, and before you say “That’s been tried!” I’m sorry, but it has not. When they tried something similar briefly, they left in place the safety net of the penalty shoot-out in the event of no Golden Goal being scored. This enabled teams to defend and play for the shoot-out as per normal, and we saw some pretty boring extra times under this system. The obvious answer is to take penalty shoot-outs away altogether, and encourage teams to attack by having **just** the Golden Goal to decide the game. This too had been tried in the past, and failed, because it often took a long time for a goal to be scored in extra time. So, to combat this, two players should be removed at 90 minutes, and coaches should be able to play any nine men from the allowed squad, even if they had already been substituted. Sent-off players would not, of course, be reintroduced, and any team having a player dismissed would carry the disadvantage into extra time.

After 15 minutes with nine men and still no winning goal, the teams would be reduced to seven a side. On a full-sized pitch, a game with only six outfield players each would soon yield a goal. This method would allow the match to be settled on skill, teamwork and fitness, instead of a set of single kicks with the keeper doing his best to cheat. Teams who felt they

were inferior would see their best chance of winning as the adoption of attack rather than defence. Finally, a great deal of time would be saved. Extra time plus penalties often finishes nearly an hour after the full-time whistle, with the last twenty minutes entertainment consisting of around ten to twenty kicks of the ball. The pure Golden Goal method described would most likely take less than thirty minutes on average, and we would be treated to two teams striving to score goals instead of prevent them.

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As we read about the missed Farmer penalty in the Sunday papers on the morning after the Millwall game, the league table was still fairly encouraging. It read: -

	<u>P</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>Pts.</u>
PALACE	44	23	13	8	70	46	59
CITY	44	21	16	7	97	59	58
WATFORD	44	23	11	10	76	55	57

Our goal average was much better than the other two, so we could afford to drop one point and still beat Watford to promotion. What was more the next game, on the following night, was to be at London Road against Peterborough, whom we had not lost to in the previous three games. George Hudson was still out of favour and Ken Hale was dropped to make way for Graham Newton, with Bruck coming in for the injured Farmer. The road to Peterborough from Coventry is not great now, but in 1964 it was tortuous, and on Monday April 20<sup>th</sup> it was clogged with cars and coaches carrying the highest number of Coventry

City fans up to that point to travel to an away game. The 12,000 in the Sky Blue Army boosted the crowd to a League record attendance of 26,000, and once again we had a fabulous atmosphere.

City started well enough and Newton hit a post, but the large away following only served to inspire the home team and their supporters, and Peterborough looked the more likely to score. After half an hour they did, and from that point on the Sky Blues rarely looked like winning. Dougan sealed the points for the home team twenty minutes from time with a typically flamboyant shot past Wesson, and this was not the last time that the Doog caused us major grief in a vital game. The journey home was slow and black, with Watford now in the pound seat with a home game against lowly Brentford on the following night. Two coaches carrying City fans went to the game to cheer on the away side, and the rest of us tried to keep up to date with the score by phoning the Coventry Telephone Exchange or the Supporter's Club. The BBC didn't broadcast the score until 10.30, and these were the days well before Sky Sports, Local Radio, Radio 5, mobile phones, The Internet, and Ceefax, so phoning the supporter's club was the only means of communication during the game. Eventually we all got to hear the splendid news – Watford had been held to a 2-2 draw, and had only equalised in the last five minutes. You could almost feel the relief flood through the city, and now we were down to the wire. Coventry only had to win the last home game against Colchester on Saturday to reach the second division.

In the days leading up to the game, an expectation built up of inevitable success. They had blown it once and wouldn't do it again, especially against Colchester, who were just the team you would have chosen to play in such a fixture. Our spirits were lifted further when Jimmy Hill reinstated the King, George

Hudson, for the crucial game. Farmer was also fit again, so everything was set. The table was: -

	<b>P</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>Pts.</b>
PALACE	45	23	14	8	72	43	60
CITY	45	21	16	8	97	61	58
WATFORD	45	23	12	10	78	57	58

A club record third division attendance, 36,901, welcomed the teams onto the pitch for the crucial last game. What the crowd didn't know was that the manager had asked Liverpoolian comic Jimmy Tarbuck to address the home team prior to the game, and we all thought their grim faces when they emerged from the tunnel were the result of nervous tension! Colchester deployed a massed defence, but weren't really up to holding out for the full ninety, and shortly before half time Rees crossed to Hudson for a simple tap-in. This reduced the tension somewhat, although the news at half-time was that Watford and Palace were both leading, so there was absolutely no room for error. The opposition didn't really threaten the City goal after the break, but our nervous and digestive systems really needed that second goal. Then, once again at 4.45, came a magical moment – the Radio Sky Blue host (who happened to be Godfrey Evans, the legendary England wicketkeeper) came on air to announce that both Watford and Palace had lost.

All the pent-up emotion of the long season was released by the crowd in wild celebration. We were up now regardless of our result, but hold on to the lead and we were Champions as well! The City players looked a little non-plussed, but luckily Colchester were in no mood to be party poopers and the match progressed to the final whistle and a 1-0 win accompanied by incessant cheering and singing.

The celebrations started immediately with Jim leading the crowd in a rendition of his fine club song, but Terry and I made our way to the Mount Pleasant early enough to get a decent seat. Even when we arrived the pub was busy, but by 9.00 p.m. it was as packed as the West End had been earlier in the day.

At 18, I had already gone through the usual rites of passage for drinking beer. Starting on lemonade shandy at about fourteen, you progressed to brown and mild, and then onto mild ale, before moving on to bitter at about sixteen. After a short apprenticeship on bitter, you could graduate to the two monarchs of the public house, Worthington E and Bass. Four pints of either was usually more than enough for a good night and to induce impressive bouts of flatulence for the next 18 hours. On April 25<sup>th</sup> 1964, though, we wanted to drink and drink a lot, so we stuck to Ansell's or Marston's, or whatever Midlands beer they served at the time and probably shifted a dozen pints. Long before we got legless, luckily enough, we all received a lovely surprise. During the sing-song in walked the Coventry City football team and squeezed through to the middle of the room. They were carrying a huge cake, decorated as a soccer pitch, with goals and sky blue clad subbuteo players. This sparked yet another chorus of the Sky Blue song as the players cut the cake.

Somehow this act symbolised the great spirit that existed between the supporters and the team, and I wonder if this sort of tableau, where players, however briefly, willingly celebrated with their fans could possibly be repeated today, even in the lower divisions.

## **UNLUCKY BLACK CATS**

On the Monday following the final game, the talk at work was of the dramatic Radio Sky Blue intervention. This had happened two matches on the bounce now and had been enabled by our "later than the rest" 3.15 kick-off time at Highfield Road. This late start continued through the second division years and was used again to good effect when City won the second division championship. Although Wolves had been beaten 3-1 in the battle of the two promoted teams a fortnight earlier, the Black Country club were still favourites to finish first as Coventry hosted Millwall and Wolves travelled to Palace on the last day of the season. Radio Sky Blue was soon in action to inform us that Palace were 1-0 to the good, and this continued throughout the afternoon as Wolves went on to lose 4-1, and City clinched the title by winning 3-1.

Today the same sort of excitement is created by people's use of radios or mobile phones, especially on the final day of the league season. The authorities now ensure that all the games are played on the same day and that all games kick off at the same time, so no one team gains an advantage by knowing exactly what it has to do to succeed. This is a fairly recent innovation, and prior to this arrangement postponed final games were played on different nights at the end of the season, the result being that the last team to play had a distinct advantage. On one famous (infamous?) occasion in May 1977, this was, by sheer chance, not the case and the teams facing relegation all had their final games kicking off on the same night at 7.30 p.m. The teams in question were Sunderland, Bristol City and Coventry. The table was a statistician's delight (In 1977 two points for a win and three up/three down): -

	<u>Played</u>	<u>Points</u>
WEST HAM	42	36
SUNDERLAND	41	34
BRISTOL C	41	34
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COVENTRY	41	34
STOKE	42	34
SPURS	42	33

Intriguingly, Coventry were at home to relegation rivals Bristol City. Sunderland were away to Everton, and if they won or drew they survived, with the winner of the other game also staying up. If the Coventry game ended in a draw with Sunderland avoiding defeat, then Coventry would take the drop. Even a small defeat for Sunderland would still see them safe, unless the other game ended in a draw, in which event they would be relegated.

When I reached the ground at 7.20, I was amazed to see Swan Lane heaving with people queuing to get in, and it was clear that Bristol had brought an army of support. At 7.30, I was still outside and heard that the game had been put back by 15 minutes. I just about made the kick-off. City took the lead before half time through Tommy Hutchinson and he increased it midway through the second half. This goal had totally the wrong effect on Bristol (from our point of view) and they started playing out of their skins to hit back immediately and then, with 15 minutes to go, they equalised, which put us into the relegation slot. Bristol had momentum with them now and pressed forward for the winner. City seemed to have shot their bolt, and we started to feel sick to our stomachs.

Then, with about 10 minutes to go, the final score from Goodison was flashed up on the electronic scoreboard at the Kop end. Everton had beaten Sunderland 1-0 and a draw at Highfield Road would



keep Coventry and Bristol up. Both sets of supporters inside Highfield Road went crazy! The teams had also noticed the announcement, and they knew a draw would keep them both safe, and now started the most bizarre few minutes of football I have ever witnessed, with the ball being kicked from one team to the other in the middle third of the pitch to the wild cheers of the crowd. After the final whistle, something happened which I am sure wasn't spotted by some of the crowd, such was their delight. The phrase "CORRECTION TO SCORE" appeared on the scoreboard, followed by a long pause and then - the words.....

## EVERTON 2 SUNDERLAND 0

This was no doubt a little Jimmy Hill trick, but as we were the ones to be relegated if Sunderland hadn't lost after all, the word "Correction" caused a moment of panic for those of us who spotted it.

The controversy sparked by this event lasted for a while, but accusations of skullduggery against Hill, who was back at the club as Managing Director at the time, were wide of the mark. There were genuine crowd problems outside the ground and it was a wise decision to delay the game. In any event, the Coventry game could easily have been the night AFTER the Sunderland game, and nobody would have complained then. But the draw would still have been the obvious solution to both teams from the start of the game, not just the last ten minutes. In any case, I really don't see why Sunderland fans remember the occasion with such bitterness. All their team had to do was draw to stay up, and they failed. End of story!

## **END OF THE BEGINNING**

1964 witnessed the consolidation of the social revolution in Britain. Harold Wilson led the Labour Party to a narrow General Election victory in the autumn, the mini skirt arrived, and male haircuts started to get longer. On the pop front the Rolling Stones had their first number one record and the explosion of new British bands continued. In football, as in pop music, the City of Liverpool dominated. Everton had won the League Championship in 1963, and then Liverpool followed suit in 1964, and the Kop and "You'll Never Walk Alone" became famous. In the years that followed, as the Sky Blues improved, I had the opportunity to visit both Anfield and Goodison, and they are without doubt the two most atmospheric football grounds I have ever visited.

My first match at Anfield was a Cup replay in 1970. Coventry were well beaten 3-0 but this didn't detract much from the magnificent experience of being part of a packed house at an Anfield night game, and being able to witness the massed ranks of the Kop in full voice. Truly, a Cathedral of Soccer! On the way out Terry, his friend Rob and I had decided to remove our scarves for the bus trip back to Lime Street station, and we exited the ground to look for the buses. We could see some at the end of one of the parallel streets leading down from the ground to the main road and were surprised to be able to jump straight onto one with no one else on board. The bus then inched slowly forward and eventually reached the intersection with the road one along from that which we had walked down. To our horror we saw a huge queue winding back up to the ground. Our bus had been just one of a number creeping forward to service this line! Worse still the people in the queue were all wearing red scarves, and we could sense the hostility as they mounted the bus platform and

realised that someone had jumped the queue. The journey back to the station was tense with the most popular word being “scab”. The three of us kept our eyes on the floor as we pushed our Sky Blue scarves deeper into our coat pockets.

In 1966, City, then in the Second Division, played a fifth round tie at Goodison. Everton won 3-0 on the way to their Wembley triumph and I was again mesmerized by the atmosphere at the ground, with its huge triple-decker stand and 60,000 fans packed in. On a couple of magical occasions the fantastic and special nature of these two grounds on big match night even seemed to transmit through the medium of television. The first was in 1965, just after Liverpool had won the F. A. Cup for the first time. The team paraded the Cup around the ground before the first leg of the European Cup semi-final against Inter Milan, masters of catenaccio defence. All we had to view were grainy black and white highlights after the event, but the frenzy and excitement of the night burst into our living rooms as the Reds won 3-1, and the crowd sang “Go back to Italy” to the tune of Santa Lucia.

Twenty years later, Howard Kendall’s Everton faced a 1-0 deficit against Bayern Munich at half time in the second leg of the Cup-Winner’s Cup semi-final at Goodison. The passion of the crowd that night just refused to let Everton be beaten and the Champions elect went on to win 3-1 with the ground positively rocking in jubilation at the end of the game. Again, I have to say that the intensity of emotion engendered on those two nights has now been lost forever with the advent of all-seater stadia.

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Coventry had its own smaller-scale celebration on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1964, with their first game in the Second Division for twelve years. It also marked the grand opening of the new Sky Blue Stand, with the three middle sections having been added to the two wing sections during the summer. 34,500 people turned up to witness a 2-0 home win against Plymouth with the two wing halves Farmer and Smith grabbing the goals. The midweek game was away at Ipswich, newly relegated from the top flight only two years after being Champions. We made the long journey by coach and were rewarded with a 3-1 victory, after City had gone behind to an early goal, with Rees, Humphries and Hale replying in a stylish display. Having missed the 11.00 last bus to Canley by an hour, the three mile walk home was more pleasant than it might otherwise have been. On the following Saturday, City played the other team relegated from the First Division – Bolton Wanderers, and managed the same scoreline with another impressive performance. A young Francis Lee scored an own goal for us with George Kirby netting twice with headers.

So it was that Coventry found themselves top of the Second with a 100% record. There was a feeling of déjà-vu about this start to the campaign, and City went one better than the previous season with a fourth consecutive win in the return match against Ipswich. This game ranks in my top three matches of all time at Highfield Road, where 38,000 fans witnessed a pulsating contest between two sides committed to all out attack. After Gerry Baker had put Ipswich in front with a fine solo goal, Kirby scored two in quick succession in the first half. Ken Hale did the same in the second half with Hudson adding the fifth, the final score being 5-3. This was the game where Peter Lorenzo compared the atmosphere to Molyneux and White Hart Lane on their most frenzied

European nights. The fifth win in succession followed with a 3-0 home victory over Middlesbrough on a humid Saturday afternoon in front of 36,000. The game was tense and niggly and a lot closer than the score suggested.

It turned out that this was the high point of the campaign. Reality quickly set in as five consecutive defeats followed and City settled down to mid-table respectability for the remainder of the season. More exciting times were to come under Jimmy Hill, but the five losses marked the end of two amazing years. On Wednesday September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1964, Coventry City and their fans set off on the long journey to Swansea in an attempt to avoid their sixth consecutive defeat. I calculated that I had seen every game City had played for a year, home and away, but soon realised that I might miss this one. We had turned up at Pool Meadow in response to the Red House Motor Service advert that they were running coaches to the game, only to discover that eight of us were “remaindered” after the company had filled four coaches. They flatly refused to lay on any form of transport for us, and it was lucky that two of the group had cars and were prepared to make the journey with three passengers each. This sort of incident typified the attitude of British companies in the sixties. This situation must have occurred before where there were not enough customers to justify a large coach, so why didn't they think flexibly to satisfy their punters? A mini-coach could have been on standby and would have fitted the bill, as well as providing a job for the driver, but instead RHMS decided to abandon their customers, some of whom like me had probably used them countless times before (but never again).

## **MESSIAH**

Just after City had won the Second division Championship in May 1967, there was a testimonial game at Highfield road for two of the defensive stalwarts of the team, George Curtis and Mick Kearns. Liverpool were the opponents and, as both teams were warming up, Jimmy Hill, in full hunting gear, rode out on to the perimeter of the pitch and cantered round on a lap of honour. I remember being slightly embarrassed as Hill took a well-merited ovation from the home fans and a verbal pasting from the scouse visitors. The cause of my discomfort was something that probably never came into the manager's head. Here we were at a football match between clubs representing arguably the two most consistently socialist cities in England, and we were treated to a demonstration of a despised activity, a symbol of the establishment. Such was the regard for Hill, though, that the City fans shrugged it off as a typical "Jim thing", and cheered him anyway.

This anecdote typified what an unusual character Jimmy Hill was and still is. In the sixties I and countless other socialists saw ourselves as one side in an ongoing battle against the forces of Conservatism, The Coventry City manager, on the other hand, seemed to have no such identification with either side in this battle. He made his name initially by being essentially a rebel against the soccer establishment in the fight to scrap the maximum wage, and yet in other ways he adopted the manner of a shires toff. Take his foray into song-writing. The tune to the Sky Blue Song is that of the most famous and select public school in Britain and his other notable club song, penned for the Arsenal Double team of 1971, was to the tune of "Rule Britannia". The words of "Good Old Arsenal" are so naff that I doubt whether any Gooner has dared sing them since. The

point is that Jim saw these two traditional Establishment tunes as perfectly acceptable for use in a working class sport, at a time when we had a host of great British pop songs available for adaptation. I suspect his popular music preference never stretched much beyond Frank Sinatra.

Hill was probably born about forty years too early, as his fresh thinking and entrepreneurial spirit would have been perfectly matched to modern-day Britain. As he rolled out all of the off-field innovations during his six year stay at Coventry the fans lapped them up while the more reactionary forces in football tut-tutted, and his treatment of the fans as customers to his business was revolutionary at the time. In fact it would still be revolutionary at most clubs if it were to be adopted in the twenty first century.

He also had a gift for public relations, knowing exactly how to use the media for promotional purposes. In February 1964, right in the middle of the Sky Blues' poor spell of form, Hill allowed himself to be "kidnapped" by students of Lanchester and Rugby colleges as part of their Rag Week. At the Rag Ball in Rugby on the Friday before the home game against Bournemouth I watched and cheered as the students "released" him on the main stage. He didn't have to spend any of his personal time to take part in the stunt, but it created a bit of publicity for the club, and cemented his bond with the local population.

When he left the club to join ITV, he continued to utilize his innovative skills in that sphere, and was an integral part of the first soccer "panel" during the 1970 World Cup. Since then, he has always been involved in TV football punditry, and his always jovial manner has irritated some people. The fact remains, though, that Hill has always been a clear thinker and has been able to distance himself from the "everything is all right" ex-players lobby that often dominates post-match discussions. In one of his most accurate

observations, after yet another England failure against one of the Scandinavian countries in the Eighties, Hill said that the England players were “professionals who were not masters of their craft.” This comment could have been repeated many times by countless ex-players since, but they have only recently started to admit that it is true.

When Jim did return to Coventry as Managing Director in the Seventies, I felt he had lost just a touch of his old customer focus. At one early season night match against Derby County, I arrived at the Swan Lane end of the ground to find huge queues waiting to get in. It soon became obvious that only two turnstiles were open and I missed twenty minutes of the game. I wrote to Hill to complain, but his reply, much to my surprise, blamed “the Coventry public” as the two absent turnstile men were from this constituency. This Richardsonsque response would never have been written by the Jim of the Sixties. Nevertheless, I and many other Sky Blue supporters who witnessed those amazing five seasons will always be grateful to the man who made it all happen.



