

'Classic Ridley: impeccably researched and beautifully written.
A revealing journey into football's soul.'

Henry Winter

THERE'S A GOLDEN SKY

HOW TWENTY YEARS OF THE PREMIER
LEAGUE HAS CHANGED FOOTBALL FOREVER



IAN RIDLEY

THERE'S A
GOLDEN
SKY

For Vikki.

Thanks.

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GOLDEN
SKY

How Twenty Years of the Premier League
has Changed Football Forever

IAN RIDLEY



BLOOMSBURY

*When you walk through the storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of the storm
There's a golden sky...*

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INTRODUCTION

LOOKING FOR GAZZA

THE SETTING WAS the restaurant in the tower block that housed London Weekend Television on the South Bank of the Thames, the date was Friday 16 November 1990, and the diners were six of the most powerful men in English football. After the darkest of decades for the game, they were seeking to set in motion far-reaching changes in its organisation and constitution with the aim of restoring its image and credibility, and by doing so creating new wealth and prosperity for all.

Few would see it like that, however. Rather, ITV's Head of Sport, Greg Dyke, and the men representing the then 'Big Five' clubs – chairmen Martin Edwards of Manchester United, Irving Scholar of Tottenham, Noel White of Liverpool, Philip Carter of Everton and the vice-chairman of Arsenal, David Dein – were viewed as acting in pure self-interest and naked greed, to the detriment of the game as a whole.

'We had had enough and we knew what we were doing was right,' Dein would insist to me 20 years on. 'Football had been beset by disasters and something had to change. The problem was that the voting structure in the game couldn't effect change. The big clubs had to be the ones to do it.'

Indeed, the talks would trigger 10 of the most acrimoniously controversial months in the history of a Football League three years into its second century. At the end of that 10-month period, though, on 23 September 1991, after much wrangling and politicking, the Big Five clubs had gained agreement for what they wanted: a Premier League.

While they might be deemed visionary, the quintet could never have imagined quite what they would be instigating nor what would take shape over the next two decades, given the low base they were starting from. A game and competition at the very centre of British culture, prompting an explosion in media coverage and public interest? The opening up of floodgates to a deluge of foreign players, then to overseas owners? Even the idea of taking League games to overseas cities as its

TV appeal went global? In America, they call Major League Baseball 'The Show'. It is a fair description of the Premier League today.

Football was then not quite the monster of 21st-century popular culture that it is today, before every cough, spit, groin strain and sexual indiscretion was covered in newspaper sports supplement (or, if a significant enough story, on front page) and discussed on radio, television and supporters' message boards.

The nation was also preoccupied by 'events, dear boy, events,' as the Prime Minister of the late 1950s and early 1960s Harold Macmillan replied when asked what might disturb his government. Michael Heseltine was preparing the following week to challenge one of Macmillan's successors, Margaret Thatcher, for the Conservative Party leadership. The country was in recession and people were worried about this new poll tax she was proposing. There had been riots in London the previous March.

Inflation, after all, was running at 9.5 per cent, interest rates nudging 14 per cent and petrol was costing, disgracefully, £1.86 a gallon (not a litre). Unemployment was 1.7 million and rising. The average salary was £13,750, the average house price was £59,875 and increasing by a frightening 30 per cent a year. The news abroad was even graver. Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait and George Bush was preparing to unleash the might of the United States on Iraq, while promising it would not be another Vietnam. Preparation – called Operation Imminent Thunder – for the Gulf War was underway in Saudi Arabia, with the British as major participants.

At least the TV was good, as it often is during a downturn when people go out less and the companies have to react. Television itself was in a state of flux, with the Broadcasting Act having just been passed to open up commercial TV. A new company, British Satellite Broadcasting, was merging with a controversial partner called Sky, which was owned by the Australian Rupert Murdoch, whose influence on the British media was growing beyond his ownership of the *Sun* and the *News of the World*, *The Times* and the *Sunday Times*.

The four main terrestrial television channels were the only ones then available to the vast majority, and the political comedy drama *House of Cards* was proving that art really does imitate life, not least in its title when it came to Mrs Thatcher. Another satirical comedy, *Drop the Dead Donkey*, on the six-year-old Channel 4, was also doing well while a show using current affairs for ready-made laughs was just starting on BBC2. Its name was *Have I Got News for You*, its creator a budding TV genius called Jimmy Mulville.

He also happened to be a friend of mine and a football fan, an Everton supporter who would go on to sponsor them down the years through his company Hat Trick Productions, though he would wisely decline offers to join their board of directors. On the first day of December in 1990, we had lunch on the King's

Road in London before moving on to the Chelsea v. Tottenham Hotspur game at Stamford Bridge that Saturday afternoon.

Traditionally, it was one of English football's most hostile fixtures, featuring two sets of London supporters who detested each other. You could watch games safely during the 1980s, if you knew the safe areas and times to travel to avoid confrontational fans, and there was an unwritten code that you would be left alone if with a woman, for example, or simply left the scene of trouble quickly. Even so, you could inadvertently get caught up in trouble – or you feared you might.

There immediately felt a new mood in the air that day, however. It was the one that those six men had discussed a fortnight earlier at their dinner. After the violent, tragic decade for a sport that had become a social pariah, the atmosphere along the Fulham Road was of optimism among the throng rather than gloom, of anticipation rather than menace. The taxi cab was unable to get any nearer than 400 yards from the stadium due to the crowds, whereas a few years earlier you could comfortably have parked your car in a side street nearby.

The reason was a kid by the name of Paul Gascoigne; Gazza to his teammates and now the headlines of both tabloids and broadsheets. A few months earlier, at the age of just 23, the Geordie boy had become the toast of England, his exuberance and sleight of foot having led the national team to a World Cup semi-final in Italy. England lost on penalties to old foes Germany (West and East having been reunited that very year) and Gazza wept iconically in the process. It may ultimately have represented another near miss, with the 1966 World Cup win receding into the distance, but it also brought a perverse redemption for the English.

Hindsight tells us what a good England team it was, with the likes of Peter Shilton, Terry Butcher, David Platt, Gary Lineker, Peter Beardsley and Chris Waddle also in its number, but at the time few gave manager Bobby Robson's team much hope, particularly after dull group-stage draws in Sardinia with the Republic of Ireland and Holland, followed by a narrow victory over Egypt.

As a backdrop, England fans swaggered and rampaged around the streets of Cagliari to heap further ignominy on a country that in the previous five years alone had shown plenty of its shameful side to the world. The newspapers clamoured for the FA to 'Bring 'em home' – both the team and supporters, that was.

It appeared to be merely the latest episode in a catalogue of calamities at the end of a depressing, almost socially schizophrenic, decade that saw huge prosperity for some in the south but the miners' strike and *Boys from the Blackstuff* in the north; 'A Town Called Malice' by The Jam alongside New Romantic pop.

In March 1985, Millwall fans ran riot around Luton ahead of an FA Cup quarter-final before ripping up sections of the ground at Kenilworth Road and fighting running battles with police on the pitch after their side's defeat. Margaret

Thatcher, no fan of football, was appalled by the scenes on the TV news. She sought to impose a membership scheme on supporters but the game resisted, even if the Luton chairman, Tory MP David Evans, curried favour with his boss by initiating one unilaterally.

Worse was to follow. In May, a young fan was killed at Birmingham City's St Andrew's ground when a wall collapsed. It received little attention, though, due to a terrible, sickening event some 100 miles north that same afternoon. At first it was just a few wisps of smoke but within minutes, the Main Stand of Bradford City's Valley Parade ground was engulfed in flames, a fire having broken out underneath the old wooden edifice. The probable cause was a discarded cigarette. Fifty-six people died and another 258 required treatment for serious burns. It happened just two days before the stand was due to be razed ahead of rebuilding.

Three weeks later, Liverpool were playing in the European Cup final against Juventus of Turin at the King Jean Baudouin Stadium – better known as the Heysel – in Brussels. As kick-off approached in the crumbling, poorly segregated ground, English fans charged towards the Italians – in retaliation to taunting, it was said. In the crush, 38 Italians and one Belgian fan died. Another 454 were injured. In the shocked and shocking aftermath, English sides would be banned from Europe for six years. It was draconian punishment, but no one dared complain.

When 96 Liverpool fans died four years later before an FA Cup semi-final against Nottingham Forest at Sheffield Wednesday's Hillsborough ground, crushed against fences as South Yorkshire police failed to recognise and avert an unfolding tragedy, one sick school of thought saw it as some kind of retribution, if not for Liverpool in particular then for the English game in general.

Thus did England arrive at Italia '90 as the sick man of world football. Thus did their showing in reaching the last four after the unpromising start pleasantly surprise all. On the players' return to Luton Airport, some quarter of a million people gathered to welcome them home. On an open-top bus, the madcap Gazza wore fake breasts as an example of his puerile but engaging humour. 'Daft as a brush,' was Bobby Robson's affectionate and enduring verdict on him.

Now here we were, here Gascoigne was, in South-West London a few months later playing for Spurs at Chelsea. The boy played another blinder and scored, as did Lineker, whose £800,000 transfer from Leicester to Everton in that *annus horribilis* of 1985 had appalled Mrs Thatcher as an example of a sum that would be better spent on the game ridding itself of hooliganism.

Although Tottenham were beaten 3-2 in front of a crowd of 33,478 (about 12,000 above Chelsea's average at the time), it was a match to uplift – unlike those of the 1970s and 1980s that always seemed to finish goalless or a snatched 1-0 either way, blighted by crowd trouble and with the spectator's main aim being to get away unharmed.

These were shafts of light in a new dawn. And up at the crack of it earlier in 1990 had been another Geordie. His name was Peter Murray Taylor, though it is by a different title that he is best remembered in a game that should be forever in his debt. Following Hillsborough, Lord Justice Taylor was commissioned by the Home Office to look into the events and to draw conclusions. He sat for 31 days and the truth emerged – that this was not due to hooliganism but the dilapidated state of the stadium and fatal flaws in the police operation. Chief among his many far-sighted recommendations would be all-seater stadiums.

These factors all combined to encourage those Big Five into believing they could formalise a positive plan rather than simply, and negatively, threaten breakaways from the Football League. It also prompted me to want to catch a mood by writing about a game on the cusp of major change. Thus, in 1991, at the beginning of the last season before the Premier League was born, I embarked on a journey to take a snapshot of the English game, from top to bottom, from Old Trafford to Hackney Marshes, to try and capture its very essence. It evolved into a book entitled *Season in the Cold* and it began on opening day at Barnet, newly promoted to the Football League, and ended at Wembley with Liverpool winning the FA Cup.

In between, I travelled up and down the country for matches in order to consider the state of youth and women's football, of the England national team, of teams at every professional level and some amateur too. It was the season when Leeds United won the First Division, English teams returned to Europe – struggled to adapt, too – and Hillsborough staged a semi-final again. The backdrop was preparation for the new Premier League after bitter years of internal arguments between the First Division of the Football League and its other three divisions, and external conflict between that Football League and the FA.

As the Premier League closed on the 20th anniversary of that meeting and as the 20th season of the Premier League loomed in 2011/12, I felt drawn back to many of the venues I had visited and people I had met while writing *Season in the Cold* to see how all the promises and premises of that meeting had panned out.

There were new people to meet and new stories to tell too, for the demographic of the audience had changed. Of the 96 people who died on the Leppings Lane terrace at Hillsborough, none was black or Asian, just four were women and only ten of the men were over 35 years of age, illustrating that the game's core audience was still the young, white working-class male. At an FA Cup semi-final now, were anyone to take a cross-section of 96 people in any part of the all-seated stadium, there are likely to be people from ethnic groups – if still not representative given the composition of the country – more women, more older men, and certainly more younger boys.

I also wanted to take stock, to chronicle and analyse the monumental changes to English football – and the nation's culture, indeed – brought about by the

Taylor Report and Sky Television, who would soon absorb BSB, win the rights to the new Premier League and go on to put in ever-increasing sums of money.

Clubs were now in mind-boggling amounts of debt, with 'leveraging' – borrowing to buy – the modern way of running clubs. By 2010, two years after the credit crunch had first bitten, it was estimated that the new Big Four clubs of Manchester United, Liverpool, Chelsea and Arsenal were carrying combined debts of more than £2 billion, able to service them through revenue but vulnerable to a continuing recession and the banks increasing interest rates or even calling in their monies.

Beneath them, clubs were tumbling into administration and the game finally recognised it had a problem when Portsmouth became the first Premier League club to go the same way. They were docked nine points, causing their relegation to the Championship – the Second Division in old parlance. There, they were in good company. The majority of the 72 clubs now comprising the old Football League were struggling financially.

You wondered why, for there was more of everything than ever before. Average attendance in the old First Division in 1991/92 was 21,622. In the Premier League's 2009/10 season it was 35,116. Beyond gate receipts, clubs accrued vast sums through the selling of merchandise. This added to the increased amounts from television money and sponsorship.

Sky's first TV deal to buy the Premier League's rights was worth a then staggering £302 million over five years. A three-year deal from 2009 was worth £1.78 billion to the Premier League. Sky still retained the lion's share of live matches, though other broadcasters had to be granted some rights as part of new European competition laws.

That sum was just for domestic rights. Twenty years earlier, there was a negligible overseas market for the English game. The latest deal brought £1.6 billion from countries with a voracious appetite for a league that had been attracting much of the best playing talent in the world.

The costs were now astronomical, however. Tottenham's playing budget, for example, in 1991 was £4.5 million as part of a combined £75 million for the First Division. In 2009/10, Spurs were paying out £60 million a season, with the total wage bill of the Premier League being £1.378 billion.

Therein was the problem: more was coming in, but huge sums were going out, with Carlos Tevez at Manchester City reported to be on £250,000 a week after a takeover of the club by owners from Abu Dhabi. Gazza had opened the door for players to earn more; a Belgian player by the name of Jean Marc Bosman then kicked down that door. Back in 1995, he successfully challenged in a court football's rule that clubs could retain the registration of players even at the end of their contracts. It meant that players were then free agents and consequently more

valuable with no transfer fee needing to be paid to their previous club. The power had switched from club to player and how it would change the financial landscape.

Now agents proliferated, as did new industries growing up on the game's periphery – from public relations to kit suppliers, from merchandise manufacturers to a huge array of betting companies. Astonishingly, in 2011 a quarter of Premier League clubs had their shirts sponsored by gambling concerns.

Once, it was said, the way to make a small fortune in football was to start with a big one. Now there were sizeable sums to be made in the buying and selling of clubs, at least in trading the big ones. Directors could even pay themselves large salaries. The entrepreneur Sir Alan Sugar may have lamented that 'football turns businessmen into idiots' but he did pretty well out of the game when he bought Tottenham. It gave him inside knowledge, for example, of TV deals and he all but ordered Sky, it was reported, to increase its offer for the first Premier League TV deal and see off ITV. 'Blow them out of the water,' were the words apparently used loudly down a telephone line. It so happened that Sugar's company Amstrad was manufacturing satellite dishes at the time.

On top, in return for underwriting Tottenham's debts of £20 million in 1991, he made a total of £47 million by selling his 40 per cent to a company called ENIC between 2001 and 2007. Then at Manchester United, Martin Edwards, who inherited his controlling stake in the club from his father Louis, made £98 million from selling his shares to various parties before leaving in 2003, two years before the Glazer family of Florida instigated an £800 million takeover of the club.

The deal that shook English football the most also came in 2003, when a debt-riddled club in South-West London was sold over a weekend. Having bought Chelsea and its then debt of £1.5 million for £1 in 1982, the chairman Ken Bates made £18 million thanks to a Russian oligarch who had made the bulk of his then reported £7 billion fortune through vast gas and oil concerns in the economic opening up of the Soviet Union. Chelsea cost Roman Abramovich a trifling £140 million, to include £80 million worth of debt.

And then a deal to eclipse even Abramovich's came in 2008, when a subsidiary company of the Abu Dhabi royal family paid out of its fortune – said to be anywhere between £650 and £800 billion – the footling sum of £220 million for Manchester City. The Premier League was relieved, with the disgraced former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra the seller. As somebody once said: 'If you are going to sell your soul, do it at the height of the market.'

There may have been no sign of the bubble bursting at Manchester City, but elsewhere there were warning signs about the game's financial health. Even Chelsea looked to be tightening their belts, with Abramovich's commitment coming under scrutiny after their continued failure to win the Champions League. The bloated son of the European Cup had assumed a growing importance for the

biggest clubs since their readmission in 1991 following the Heysel punishment and the Chelsea owner was especially keen to land it, as he would come to reveal in ending his budgeting and putting in yet more money.

It seemed a good time to take stock of the game once more.

Then there was Paul Gascoigne. He was back in the news, as he seemed to have been on and off over those two decades. It began that very week when those six men dined in London. Then, the big sports story was the new England manager Graham Taylor leaving Gazza out of a match against the Republic of Ireland in Dublin. Taylor talked cryptically of the player's 'refuelling habits'. What could he mean? Gradually there unfolded a frightening story of alcoholism, drug addiction, eating disorders and depression.

Later in the 1990s, Tiger Woods would elevate the game of golf to the point where sponsors and television stations all wanted to piggyback his appeal until his sex addiction intervened. Gazza did it for English football, renewing its populist appeal by injecting some showbiz and fun – as well as intriguing controversy through his wayward personal behaviour – into what had been a grim game. And just as every mediocre professional golfer owes part of his increased winnings to Tiger, so every top, made-for-life modern English pro (and vast numbers of those incoming from overseas) owes a piece of his inflated salary to Gascoigne for instigating a boom in the game.

Gascoigne was not, however, initially part of the Premier League. The talent drain after Heysel had not yet been interrupted, TV money not having kicked in, and Tottenham could not afford to turn down a then remarkable fee of £5.5 million from Lazio of Rome in 1992. It would have been £8.5 million, but the Italians had had to wait a year due to Gazza recovering from injury after his headless-chicken performance in the early stages of the 1991 FA Cup final victory over Nottingham Forest which had seen him rupture cruciate knee ligaments.

'It has been like waiting for a baby,' said the president of Lazio, Sergio Cragnotti. 'A very big baby.' In Rome, he promptly broke a leg and failed to fulfil his astonishing potential abroad before joining Glasgow Rangers, under Walter Smith's management. After a spell at Middlesbrough, he rejoined Smith at Everton before gradually sinking down through Burnley, a player-coach's stint at Boston United and 44 ill-fated days as manager of Kettering Town in the Conference.

All the while, his life was plagued by those 'refuelling habits'. And for 20 years, euphemism and denial battled with honesty and acceptance in him. There was Gascoigne, then there was Gazza.

For many, the episodes into which drink led him were laddishly amusing – this was the era of *Loaded* magazine's heyday – and there were indeed some funny anecdotes. Gary Lineker told a story, for example, of their time together at Tottenham when after a night out, Gazza commandeered a London bus and with

the agreement of the passengers, persuaded the driver to take them to Lineker's house in a residential road in St John's Wood. Gascoigne sat at the front of the top deck encouraging the gathering to sing along with 'We're all going on a summer holiday' after the Cliff Richard song and film.

Another time, at a swish restaurant in Rome, Gascoigne once ordered lobster. Invited to choose one from a large tank, he promptly climbed in and grabbed the crustacean that had taken his fancy before handing it to the astonished waiter. Dripping wet and beaming, he retook his seat, watched by a dining room part shocked, part entertained.

It also seemed a good joke, when, after boozy episodes in Hong Kong ahead of Euro '96, he scored for England against Scotland on their way to the semi-finals against Germany – and defeat on penalties again – and celebrated with Teddy Sheringham by having water poured down his throat. It was a riposte to the pre-tournament pictures of him in the Far East being plied with booze.

Much of it was not funny, however, the pain very private but the episodes public. He assaulted his wife Sheryl, who would later divorce him as his drinking worsened. And it was no laughing matter at a training camp at La Manga in Spain when he was drunk on the weekend that manager Glenn Hoddle selected England's final squad for the 1998 World Cup. Gazza was omitted, trashing the manager's hotel room in the process.

It was not long after that Gascoigne entered treatment, first at the celebrities' haunt of the Priory in London, which failed to sort him out, then at Cottonwood in Tucson, Arizona, where he seemed to be getting the message. Six months after that, he agreed to an in-depth interview with me at the Everton training ground and we got on well. He admitted, for the first time publicly, that he was an alcoholic, and acknowledged that it was not safe for him to drink 'normally'. An all-or-nothing character, the only way for him was abstinence, he agreed. For a while, his game improved to the point where he was even being touted for a recall to the England squad ahead of the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea. Instead, he began drinking again when Sheryl would not come back to him. Then ITV took a chance and recruited him to their team of pundits covering the tournament.

It did not go well. I went along to interview him again but the sober person who had made such a great spread for my then newspaper the *Observer* a few years before was gone. Instead, he was boorish and defensive. He rambled, his musings sometimes unintelligible as he chain-smoked on the terrace of the South Bank studios. It was all unusable.

It was disturbing, too. As we spoke, he picked at a sore on his finger. When we went out to a nearby bookmaker to film a small feature on him having a bet for England to win the tournament, he was accosted by a collector for a mental health charity rattling a tin. 'He'll need some of that himself,' joked his former Rangers

teammate and fellow pundit Ally McCoist. At least, at the time, he and we thought it was a joke.

Gazza was all but finished in English football, although a Chinese club took him on for a while. Soaked in booze, and struggling to get paid, he soon came home to begin some years of scrapes and escapades interspersed with spells in treatment centres. Nothing stuck, however, and he frequently spurned offers of help, trapped in his addiction. As the Premier League grew richer and richer, he grew sadder and sadder, the money he had made when in his high-earning pomp long gone.

Come the summer of 2010 and Gascoigne came again to our consciousness, if in and out of it himself. There seemed to be so many parallels with 20 years earlier. England struggled through their group games at a World Cup – even repeating in South Africa the 1-1, 0-0, 1-0 scoring sequence of Italia '90. They were receiving similar vilification, but this time were out of the tournament all too soon, hammered 4-1 by Germany in the last 16. And to think the FA backed the formation of the Premier League because they thought it would improve the England team.

I wanted to interview Gazza for a third time. What would be his take on it all? What was his current impression of English football and its standards; all the foreign players who had come here – the trickle of his day now a torrent? What did the domestic game's most talented player of his generation think about the money washing about in the game now?

He had just been involved in a car crash, late one night in Newcastle. It seemed symbolic. I phoned an agent Gascoigne once used but after a week of trying, he reported back that he had been unable to track him down. Then, another week on, Gascoigne surfaced in a small Northumberland village called Rothbury. Why? In a story that gripped the nation for a week, a former Newcastle bar doorman called Raoul Moat had gone on the rampage having just got out of jail. Moat had killed the lover of a former girlfriend before injuring the woman with another shotgun blast. The next day, he turned the firearm on a policeman, blinding him, before going on the run.

Moat headed for Rothbury, which held childhood memories for him, and holed himself up in woods before a stand-off with police. Into this, arriving by taxi, entered Paul Gascoigne full of drink and bravado. He had, he told the assembled media, known the man for years and just wanted to talk him into giving himself up. He insisted that as soon as he said: 'Hey Moaty, it's Gazza,' the man would calm down. It was the ludicrous grandiosity of the active alcoholic.

He had, he added, brought along chicken and lager to sustain the man; a fishing rod so that the two could angle together, during which Gazza would talk him round; and a dressing gown to keep him warm. It was tragi-comic, poignant and utterly deluded. Gascoigne was naturally allowed nowhere near by police. Moat soon turned the shotgun on himself and committed suicide. Gazza,

probably shocked and shamed the morning after by his own behaviour, headed for yet another treatment centre, this time in Bournemouth.

Gazza was sick again and so was the English game. The echoes of eras 20 years apart were everywhere: back in that season of 1991/92, there was an economic recession going on and a hung Parliament had been mooted, along with the prospect of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

Through it all, the national team has usually been used as the barometer of English football's health, often to the chagrin of the FA, which could be doing remarkable work with some of its grassroots initiatives but see it ignored due to the failings of the highly paid professionals over whom it has no real control. Now the question was about the highly paid manager, Fabio Capello, and his running of the squad. His discipline, it was believed, would be an antidote to the laissez-faire regime of the Swede, Sven-Göran Eriksson, England's first overseas manager, appointed in 2001. But after the shock in South Africa, Capello was seen to have feet of clay. Why could the Italian not blend players who looked like world-beaters when playing with their clubs? Why were there no young players of international quality coming through when the Premier League had grown into the most hyped and the most exciting league in the world? While it was widely acknowledged that Spain's La Liga was technically the most accomplished, it was the Premier League that had taken over from Italy's scandal-ridden Serie A as the choice of television audiences around the world, notably in Scandinavia and – most lucratively of all – the Far East.

But, despite all this, there were some uplifting stories, too, and still some wonderful football in the various competitions. There was Blackpool's rise to the Premier League and England's fall from grace; the enduring prowess of Manchester United and the rebuilding of Aldershot; emergence of new exciting players such as Gareth Bale – and the next episodes of a previous Tottenham asset Paul Gascoigne.

Taking stock this time, my aim was to travel from Liverpool to Ipswich, Doncaster to Truro, to visit grounds, matches and people as a way of telling wider tales and truths about the game and the impact on it and British culture of the Premier League, financially and socially.

Did those Big Five back in 1990 know what they were about to unleash? 'I don't think any of us can say we did,' David Dein told me. 'TV deals worth £1.7 billion? In the end, it is a sport and the quality of the football these days is riveting. It's been taken to a new level. I was lucky through my time at Arsenal with Arsène Wenger and all the football we saw.'

Another of those present at that meeting, Irving Scholar, said in 2010: 'No one can say that the Premier League has been anything other than a success and has transformed football.' Was that wholly true of what the legendary football

writer Brian Glanville described as the Greed is Good League? As it contemplated playing league matches in foreign cities – a 39th game – it did seem to embody the words of rich-as-Croesus Nelson Rockefeller when he was asked how much was enough money and responded: 'A little bit more.'

Standards of football may well have improved, the game quicker, slicker and more athletics but was it more enjoyable and entertaining? Was the national team improved, as envisaged by the original formation of the Premier League and the FA, the latter quickly sidelined before seeing its name quietly dropped from the title as rows between the two bodies broke out all over again?

What had been the effect on the Football League, with the various name changes of its divisions – now the Championship, League One and League Two? What about non-League – the Conference and below, the women's game, the grassroots?

Is it us, along with our expectations and observations, who have changed most in a less innocent and accepting, more media-savvy modern era? I knew I had changed, for during the period I had crossed a line into involvement in the game through two spells as chairman of my home-town club, non-League Weymouth. After that, it had become impossible to view the game from a fan's perspective any more. Now I knew better what went on within clubs: the rivalries, egos, economics and politics. The dysfunction.

Fans would be asked to contribute ever more, despite a rise in unemployment and a fall in incomes. At the turn of 2011, as VAT hit 20 per cent, Arsenal became the first club to charge £100 for a non-corporate ticket. A survey of 4,000 fans conducted by the Football Supporters' Federation revealed that the average cost of a day at a Premier League game, to include ticket, food, drink, travel and a programme, was now £101.67. Given that most fans at a game were supporting the home side, that was some cost.

Armed with all the information and experience, it prompted a question in me and one I set out to answer on a journey through the 2010/11 season as we arrived at 20 years since the Premier League was first a twinkle in the eyes of the Big Five. Had English football retained its soul or did it now – as Oscar Wilde said in another context – know the price of everything and the value of nothing?

SUMMER

Chapter I

UP THE POOL

'THERE'S A FAMOUS seaside place called Blackpool, that's noted for fresh air and fun,' Stanley Holloway observed in his monologue about little 'Albert and the Lion'. All of a sudden, the resort was noted, too, for its Premier League football team.

On a glorious May day, with the temperature at the side of the pitch touching 106°F., Blackpool beat Cardiff City 3-2 in the Football League Championship play-off final at Wembley. They would be in the top flight for the first time since 1971.

It was a joyous occasion and a privilege to be present. Blackpool's shirts of tangerine – please, not orange – are among the most distinctive in the English game and one end of the rebuilt stadium was a shimmering sea of replica tops, waving to acclaim their heroes. Their talismanic midfield player, Charlie Adam, scored with a beautiful curling free kick. Their manager, Ian Holloway – no relation to Stanley – had for years been an astute lower division operator, hitherto underestimated due to his Bristolian burr and fondness for a tortured metaphor. Now he was a mastermind. He deserved to dance a jig on his day in the sun.

And there in Wembley's Royal Box, applauding proudly, stood Jimmy Armfield, a reserve here in 1966 for England's World Cup triumph. He was a Blackpool player then, and he first came to this stadium in 1953 as a young professional on the fringe of the first team who beat Bolton Wanderers to win the FA Cup. He would also be a member of the side relegated in 1971 when he played the last of his record 627 games for the club. Now he was a Blackpool vice-president.

His Pool had made history as the first club in English football to win the play-offs out of each division, and in just a decade at that. Down the years plenty have decried the play-off system introduced in 1986, mainly because a team finishing third can lose to a team finishing below them and a near miss means a year's work going to waste. But the enticement of the end-of-season jamboree has enlivened

many a season that was otherwise going nowhere. Certainly no one in Blackpool, who had finished sixth in the Championship, will ever again have a bad word said about play-offs.

The last time they had won at Wembley, winning the League One play-off three years earlier, Armfield had watched on television at his neat detached home just a few leafy streets back from Blackpool's Pleasure Beach on South Shore, with a blanket wrapped around his shivering shoulders. The chemotherapy for his cancer of the throat was extracting its vicious toll.

Two days after his more warming experience this time around, Armfield declined an invitation to join the team on their open-top bus ride down the Golden Mile of Blackpool's seaside attractions and boarding houses, all overlooked by the Tower, at the top of which fluttered a tangerine flag. It should be about the players today, he said, illustrating his selflessness. Everyone else in the town's population of 142,000 seemed to be there.

The win would be worth an astonishing £80 million – at the very least – to Blackpool, making the play-off final the world's richest one-off match. The Premier League club who had earned least from TV appearances the previous season, relegated Hull City, still received £32.6 million (compared to Manchester United's £53 million). New Premier League arrangements also meant that any clubs relegated would receive basic TV money – the 'parachute payment' – for four years now, not two. That would mean another £48 million. Then there was increased gate money and merchandise sales...

Blackpool had won football's lottery but the days in the immediate aftermath of victory were about kudos, not cash – that would arrive later in staggered payments. There was something fatalistic about their victory. They had sneaked into the play-offs with a late run and the momentum and force were with them, Holloway's brand of attacking 4-3-3 football taking all by surprise in the season's denouement. There is a team in Sierra Leone called the Mighty Blackpool. Now the adjective applied here.

It was, too, achieved against all odds. The team had cost £815,000 in transfer fees – £500,000 of that for Adam from Rangers – and their budget had been so small that they had been favourites for relegation rather than promotion. 'I come from a council house, so all this money is beyond my wildest dreams,' said Holloway in the euphoria of the Wembley win.

Two months later I travelled to Blackpool as the manager and his squad returned to pre-season training, and it was almost as if the weather was warning of what lay in wait in the Premier League. Rain was driving in from the Irish Sea, the sky slate grey and the wind whipping up white horses on the waves. Families were diving into amusement arcades for shelter and even the weather-hardened donkeys on the empty beach looked to be pining for the stables.

This was July on the Fylde Coast where they hold the Open Golf Championship at nearby blowy Lytham and St Annes a Japanese journalist once asked why it wasn't staged in the summer. What, you wondered almost gleefully, might it be like when Manchester United came to town in midwinter?

For more than a quarter of a century, Blackpool Football Club had mirrored its environment and reflected the fortunes of the town it represented. Both seaside resort and club had known glory days but they seemed to be just black and white photographs, as colourful changes in English culture and its national sport passed them by.

The arrival of cheap foreign package holidays with their certain sun did for many a bucket and spade shop (which also offered windbreaks and umbrellas). And with the disappearance of the maximum wage in football 50 years earlier came the decline of the small-town club – notably some other Lancashire powerhouses who had been among the founder members of the Football League, in Blackburn Rovers, Bolton Wanderers, Burnley and Preston North End. Blackpool the resort grew seedy; Blackpool the club almost went bust.

'I must say,' Blackpool FC's chairman Karl Oyston admitted to me, 'if it was a choice between an all-inclusive week in a new hotel in Spain and a week with variable weather and queuing up to use the toilet in a hotel in Blackpool, I'd be off to Spain.'

Now a possible revival was in that stiff wind. Recession and a poor exchange rate with the euro meant that the town was becoming a holiday destination once more for some who might otherwise have taken a cheap package abroad. Now it was seeking a more upmarket clientele for short breaks and long weekends while working out a way to retain the stag and hen party income without upsetting either faction and their disparate views of modern excess.

The gains had to be set against losses, though. The political parties had stopped coming here for their annual conferences. Property prices were still below the national average. The scrapping of a scheme for super casinos had also set the town back. Pound shops abounded.

On the cheap seafront stalls, mugs and cushions proclaimed Liverpool, Everton and Manchester United, though not Blackpool. In the Hounds Hill shopping centre, there was a pair of tangerine-coloured underpants on display but they were in a designer men's clothes shop window. The club's success had taken even the merchandisers by surprise.

But not Gypsy Leah Petulengro, a fortune-teller in her booth opposite the Central Pier. As I gazed at the pictures of celebrity clients from days gone by, mainly black and white images of stars such as Cilla Black and Diana Dors, she invited me in to the musty, windowless room. It seemed worth crossing her palm with silver – actually £30 is the minimum for a 'consultation' – to ask her about

Blackpool FC's prospects in the interests of research. And to be told that my health will hold out for a while yet and my children will do me proud.

'I predicted the team would win the play-offs,' she insisted. 'And they are going to be fine next season. They are going straight to the top. They will surprise a lot of people.'

The football ground was busy as I passed the statue of Stan Mortensen, the man who scored a hat-trick to win that 1953 FA Cup final. Locally at least it ensured that his name was billed equally with Stanley Matthews, who was nationally more celebrated for his part in the proceedings as at last, after two final defeats, he got his hands on a winners' medal at the age of 38.

The club shop was experiencing the lull before the storm as it waited for new replica shirts to arrive and accompany the lonely 'We are Premier League' flags. Inside the stadium, however, the tempest was raging. The finishing touches were being put to the Armfield Stand while the erection of a new covered stand to bring the capacity up to 17,500 was hurrying along, though it was looking tight for August's opening day home match against Wigan.

The new stand, billed as temporary until the club decided whether it was worth putting up something bigger, would complete the rebuilding of the ground in just 10 years. Although it would be the smallest ground in the Premier League, replacing relegated Burnley, it would at least be modern and tidy.

'Manchester United won't have any reason to complain the way they did about Burnley,' said Oyston as he took me through the dressing rooms on a tour of the ground. Indeed, there was plenty of room for the entourage of a modern-day Premier League club, with all their coaches, physiotherapists and seven substitutes. (As a reminder of lower-division times, mind, the referee's room still bore on its door a sponsorship plaque of the Pump and Truncheon public house.) It might also be a bit of a squeeze, you thought, underneath the pillars outside the main entrance on Seasiders Way, where the latest luxury coaches would debouch visiting squads before they went through the freshly painted reception area and on to the re-laid, lush pitch.

Much of Blackpool's revitalisation was down to the 41-year-old Oyston, who had picked up the pieces in the spring of 1999, having previously run family businesses that included property management and magazine publishing. It brought the Oystons a fortune of more than £100 million and a place in the top 1,000 wealthiest people in Britain. But there was scandal and misery to accompany the money.

Karl's father Owen, who grew up in the surrounding streets, had bought the football club in 1988 and announced grand plans for its future. A flamboyant bearded figure who wore fur coats and fedoras, Owen loved the high life, running a string of racehorses all bearing his surname. He also had a financial

stake in a Manchester model agency, a concern that would bring about his downfall.

After a long police investigation, Oyston senior was charged with four counts of rape involving women on the agency's books. He was cleared of three but found guilty of the fourth, the alleged victim a 16-year-old girl, and in 1996 was sentenced to six years in prison. He appealed – and continued to protest his innocence down the years – but served three years.

During that time, his wife Vicki was unable to cope with the demands of running the club and called in Karl. Supporter unrest at Blackpool had reached fever pitch – even though gates were down to around 3,000 at times – with the team mid-table in League One (then named Division Two). The board was threatening to sell the ramshackle ground, which was struggling to get safety certificates and was considered one of the worst in professional football. Mirror of environment. Reflection of town.

'I was not a fan at all. I had only been to a handful of matches,' said Karl, all sober black suit and white shirt as if rebelling against his father. 'I went to a rugby-playing school and had no interest in the football club. I just took it on to help my poor mother out. She was under unjust pressure.' He implemented a series of 'kill or cure' measures.

Oyston junior was astounded by football's practice of paying players through the summer when there was no revenue coming into clubs. Ignoring any discontent, he began negotiating ten-month contracts, immediately cut the playing budget, and began applying for grants from the Football Foundation (a charity set up by the Labour Government in 2000) to rebuild Bloomfield Road. Gradually the strategy worked, though some supporters would resent Oyston's practice of renting out offices on the new premises to local concerns, including the local health trust, with his private company also involved.

After an initial relegation to the bottom division of the Football League, Oyston turned fortunes around to the point where the club became attractive to outside investors again. In 2005, a Latvian businessman by the name of Valery Belokon, who was interested in involvement in English football, bought 25 per cent of the club from Owen Oyston, who had retained his majority shareholding. That state of affairs would prompt the Premier League to seek ownership clarification, given rules about 'fit and proper persons' sitting on the boards of clubs, though in reality they could do little since Oyston senior had been in situ before those rules were brought in.

Belokon's investment was believed to be £5 million of his £200 million fortune and a portion of the money enabled the then manager Simon Grayson to stabilise Blackpool in the Championship before he decamped to take over at his home town club, Leeds United, in 2009.

In came Ian Holloway, who was given enough money to purchase Charlie Adam, previously brought in on loan by Grayson. And in return for what was a modest investment by modern standards, Belokon got that memorable Wembley day in the sun, resplendent in a tailor-made tangerine suit.

The revenue from the play-offs helped raise Blackpool's income for the season to £8.5 million. Now they were looking at it reaching £40 million at least. The previous year, their playing budget was £4.8 million but even with the new wealth, they – in reality the powerful, parsimonious Karl Oyston – did not plan to spend more than £10 million, preferring to invest the money in infrastructure.

Indeed, Oyston had set a ceiling of £10,000 a week as their maximum wage to a player and it meant that Blackpool would be paying their entire squad around £200,000 a week. Manchester City had just signed the Ivory Coast midfielder player Yaya Toure from Barcelona for £25 million. His salary alone was £200,000 a week. 'We can spend every penny we get on transfer fees and salaries and still get relegated, leaving ourselves with a lot of increased costs for the seasons following,' Oyston told me. 'I am absolutely adamant we will not change the approach we have had for the last 11 years and what has got us here.'

The new 5,000-seater stand would replace an open area known among away fans as the Gene Kelly Stand – so called because they were left singing in the rain. The new capacity would more than double their mere 8,611 average attendance of last season and they expected to be full every home game this time around, with 14,000 season ticket holders, 2,000 away fans and just 1,500 kept back for pre-match sales. Season tickets were remaining a basic £355, though fans got only 19 home games compared with 23 in the Championship. None seemed to be complaining, however.

In addition, plans had been submitted to the local council for a swish new training ground, complete with restaurants and rehabilitation pool, to replace the antiquated facility (with its Portakabin toilets just inside the fading tangerine painted gates), and the windswept field next to Blackpool Airport on which Stan Matthews perfected his dribbling 50 years earlier. For now, Oyston saw no reason to spend money to rebuild the spartan canteen, manager's office and dressing rooms. They would also keep their backroom staff to a minimum, just increasing their full-timers from 25 to 30, with the new people on one-season contracts, there mainly to deal with the increased level of media interest. The number would more than double on match days, but compare and contrast with Manchester United. At 75,000-capacity Old Trafford, they were employing some 550 full-time staff; four times that on match days.

Blackpool's kit man, meanwhile, was considering going full-time so that the players would no longer have to wash their own training gear. Even that was causing problems, though, since there had been no laundry room at the training ground.

'The day after we won promotion, the Premier League called us and said they wanted to meet with our eight heads of department,' Oyston recalled. 'We said, "We don't have eight departments, let alone eight heads."' Instead the majority of the administration fell to him and Matt Williams, the club secretary who doubled as press officer. 'We don't want to lose focus and become big-time Charlies,' said Williams, who was relieved to be getting two helpers. 'That's something Blackpool have never been. We don't want to forget everybody.'

That was why, despite new sponsors suddenly wanting a piece of the action, they would retain such local concerns as Clifton Quality Meats. 'Too right,' added Williams. 'Imagine the meat we get through here.'

They would take new shirt sponsors, though, in a company called Wonga.com, providers of short-term loans and one of those growing modern companies instantly recognisable to regular watchers of daytime television – its cash-strapped core market. When it was revealed that Wonga's annual interest rate was the equivalent of 2,689 per cent, Oyston duly took the flak, saying that it was a good deal for the club at least.

'I already had a thick skin before I took on this job,' said Oyston. 'It's a must. I feel a great deal of sympathy for people who take over football clubs with really good intentions but who want everyone to like them. Because the wheels fall off so regularly, being a football club chairman is not a role you should take on if you want universal popularity.'

The team, meanwhile, was left to Holloway, a terrier-like character of shaved head and angular features whose bark was worse than his bite. After a playing career in the midfields of Bristol Rovers and Queens Park Rangers, he had managed QPR, Plymouth Argyle and Leicester City, where he struggled and was dismissed by a serial-sacker of a chairman in Milan Mandaric. After a year out of the game – a year of self-examination – Holloway returned with Blackpool and a determination to implement an attacking playing style that would pay immediate dividends.

'We had got into a mindset that matched people's perception of us,' said Oyston. 'Poor little Blackpool, who will struggle to attract decent players and stay in the Championship. But Ian made us look at ourselves and change our views of what was possible. He made them all better players with his leadership. It was like Wimbledon of the late 1980s when the spirit and everything else all came together.'

Holloway did seem made for Blackpool. His career may have been a hard struggle to reach the top – the lot of the modern English manager who seemed to have to get a side promoted if he was to manage in the Premier League, since he was unlikely to be offered a top-flight job – but it was as nothing compared to the ordeals life had thrown at him. He had helped his wife Kim through lymphatic

cancer. Three of his four children had been born deaf and finding special schools for them had always informed his job choices. He himself had come through a skin cancer on his face. Through it all, however, there was an enviable humour and fatalism.

'He's bright and breezy, like the town,' Jimmy Armfield told me. Or as Holloway said of himself and Blackpool: 'Well, we both look better in the dark.'

Holloway invited me to his office at the Squires Gate training ground. There was a list on the wall showing potential transfer targets, as he laboured to assemble quickly an improved playing staff in the face of new Premier League rules dictating 25-man squads with eight 'home-grown' players. It was a delicate balancing act to bring in the required quality without disturbing the wage structure and the camaraderie he had fostered, which was evident as a jovial group of players outside began the pre-season slog with less gloom than was normal for the first week of vomit-inducing running. In another week, it would be down to the South West for pre-season games against the likes of Tiverton Town. Not for Blackpool nor Holloway yet the lucrative overseas tour.

'We are a little bit different. What that means is when I ring my chairman and I tell him how much players are going to cost, he shouts, "How much? What? I am not paying that. No way. They are all bloody wrong."' By now, Holloway was impersonating the shout. And then he launched into one of his trademark mangled themes. 'We have bitten off more than we can chew but we have got to chew as fast as we can. But what we are realising is that what we have chewed up, we have got to bite off again and make sense of these bite-sized chunks. How we used to deal has changed so dramatically. It's nerve-wracking but it's exciting because if we do it right, we have got no baggage whatsoever and we can end up with a nice new ground and training ground. But I want a really good team. Last season's team was so good it got us this money when it shouldn't have done. What we are trying to do is be very proud of our product that we put out there and be very proud of our unique colour. There is no fear in me because I don't fear losing my job. I didn't have one for a year.'

New signings were needed, however, and the wealth had clearly brought tensions. 'What we are finding is parasite upon parasite out there in the world after the money we have just been given,' Holloway added. 'If you are not careful, all you do is make massive mistakes by bringing in someone who isn't motivated by the right thing and kills your football club stone dead.'

He was, he railed, beset by agents sending in DVDs of their players. 'I have put the discs on a big line stopping the huge horde of crows eating my chickens' food. So thank you some of these agents who think a bloke with one leg hopping about with it videoed on his phone, is good enough for Blackpool. He might have been a couple of years ago but he ain't now.'