

FIFTY SHADES OF WHITE

HALF A CENTURY OF PAIN
AND GLORY WITH LEEDS UNITED

GARY EDWARDS



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Chapter 1

Divine White

I'VE never been a particularly religious person, attending church only for the odd wedding, funeral or the occasional midnight mass on Christmas Eve after consuming a couple of gallons of festive cheer. I did once visit my local church alone one afternoon in mid-April 2004 to make a desperate plea to the Almighty asking Him to intervene and prevent Leeds United from being relegated from the Premiership. I raised my eyes to the magnificent stained glass window facing the top end of Kippax High Street.

The bright sun shone through the array of many different colours; the window depicted the Risen Christ joining the two disciples on their way to Emmaus who thought him a stranger until he broke bread with them and revealed himself as their beloved master, when he vanished from their sight with this utterance, 'All things are possible.'

A fortnight later, Leeds got stuffed at Bolton and were relegated.

The sound of my local church bell-ringing practice was serenading through my open office window at the moment I

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received an email from the BBC early one spring Wednesday evening.

Belmont Abbey sits in the heart of the Herefordshire countryside and it is a Catholic Benedictine monastery, home to about 40 monks, one of which is Father Cadfan. The BBC thought it would be a good idea for me to escort this particular monk to his first ever football match as part of a series called *The Real World*.

So, in the very early hours of Saturday 22 April 2006, Father Cadfan attended morning prayers in the Abbey Church before leaving the Belmont Abbey monastery, from which confines he rarely departed. The Earl of Belmont had a few words with him before his journey.

‘I wish you well on your expedition Father. One thought to take with you. Do you know why a football team has 11 players? It is because of the rule of St Benedict – senior monks in charge of ten others – everything is done according to the rule. When medieval monasteries played ball games, it was one dormitory against the other. It was 11-a-side – so there you have the link between football and monastic life.’

‘Well,’ said Father Cadfan, ‘you learn something every day,’ and with only a solitary call from a crow to send him on his way, he walked into town to board a train for the long journey north to Leeds and the unknown.

The Viaduct pub deep in the heart of the bustling city centre of Leeds was the meeting place for hundreds of Leeds United fans before a home game at Elland Road and it was where I was to meet up with Father Cadfan. The clientele in the Viaduct these days tend to favour size 12 high heels, have slight stubble, large hands and wear large flowery frocks as opposed to Doc Martens and Stone Island, but here in 2006 I arrived at the pub early to meet the crew of the BBC’s Radio Four programme where I introduced them to the landlord Les Hince. A female member of the crew then briefed me on the arrival of Father Cadfan and I was asked to wait in a

room at the far end of the pub where I would come face to face with the monk. I must admit to having expected your stereotypical monk, dressed in a brown cloak tied with string and a barnet resembling Friar Tuck, completed by a pair of old sandals and holding a tankard of mead. But when Father Cadfan walked through the door I couldn't have been more wrong.

For a start, he was wearing a dog collar, much like a vicar, and he was about 4ft tall. He wore glasses that looked like two transparent glass dinner plates and these were supported by the largest pair of ears I have ever seen, and in one of these ears he had a hearing aid that was as big as a 20 pack of cigarettes. I held out my hand and he shook it warmly. 'Hello,' he said, 'I'm Father Cadfan, I'm delighted to meet you.'

'Hello Father,' I replied. 'Great to meet you too. I'm Gary, welcome to Leeds.'

I got myself a pint of Tetley's bitter and half a pint of stout for my guest.

'Are you looking forward to this?' I asked.

'Yes,' Father Cadfan replied, 'I am indeed, very much.'

'Have you any questions?' I asked, picking up my first pint of the day.

'Well, where do you start? I've never been to a football match in my life; in fact, I've hardly ever left the abbey. You'll have to talk me through it. How did you start going to watch football?'

I told him how special it felt walking into Elland Road for the very first time. How, at that very first instance, I was hooked for life. I told him how my dad had tried to dilute my enthusiasm by taking me to watch Huddersfield Town when Leeds United were playing away. These days that would almost certainly result in a child cruelty charge.

'How did you start in your particular thingy?' I asked him clumsily.

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‘I took up my *vocation* many years ago,’ said Father Cadfan. ‘I had wanted to be a monk from the age of 17, but it took 30 years to do it. I’ve been a monk now for 25 years. I feel like your support of Leeds United is a *vocation* and I feel that my life as a monk is a *vocation* too.’

‘Are there any restrictions in your way of life as monks?’ I asked him.

‘There used to be,’ he said, but the days when we were forbidden to do certain things are pretty much over now. You’re dealing with grown men who we hope know how to behave themselves. Much in the same way as we hope that your supporters do themselves.’

I told him more about today’s game. ‘It’s the last game of the season at Elland Road so it’ll be a bit of a carnival atmosphere, and it’s against Crewe Alexandra, who unfortunately have already been relegated.’

‘Like the *Last Night of the Proms*,’ said Father Cadfan.

‘Yes, but there will be some sympathy for Crewe from the Leeds fans. We’ve been there ourselves and we know how it feels.’

The pub was now full of Leeds fans as we moved out into the beer garden followed by the BBC crew. It has to be said, it’s not the most picturesque beer garden, nestled beneath a railway viaduct and cut off from natural sunlight, but we liked it. I introduced my monk to a couple of friends of mine from Norway, Geir and Bjorn. He was astounded by the fact that people as far away as Norway came to support Leeds and that there were thousands of them, not just from Norway but from all across Scandinavia.

I told him that Leeds fans also came from all across the world including Europe, Ireland, Australia and America and Father Cadfan was genuinely shocked. Leeds fan Sean Ethrington joined us at our table and talked about how being a Leeds fan had changed his life and he spoke of his hatred of that team from Old Trafford and I gladly

endorsed that. 'I haven't uttered their name for more than 40 years,' I said.

'Well, a man has to keep up his standards,' said the monk.

I then dropped in the fact that I used to drive to matches in a hearse, to which Father Cadfan remarked, 'Very laid back, I'd say.'

He obviously had a keen sense of humour, but our man of the cloth had a serious side too. 'I understand that fans have to be segregated and with respect, your view of non-Leeds fans is a little provocative.'

'No, not at all,' I replied.

'Did you know,' he said, 'That more people go to church than watch football over a weekend and we don't have police sorting the churchgoers out, now doesn't that say something?' I seized on the opportunity.

'I think that if you had a church split down the middle,' I said, 'with Christians down one side and say, Muslims or Islamists down the other, you would probably need the police.'

'Perhaps,' said Father Cadfan. 'Now I hadn't thought of that – that's an interesting thought, I'd never actually considered that.'

After a couple of hours in the pub, we left to travel the two or three miles to Elland Road. Father Cadfan still had half a glass of the stout he had when he first arrived.

I directed the two cars from the BBC as Father Cadfan and I sat in the back of a small saloon, with microphones and sound equipment laid across our legs.

'So we're off to Elland Road,' Father said into the mike. 'Gary is taking me to see this match between Leeds United and Crewe. He's hoping for a convert. And I'm hoping for a convert from him.'

Ten minutes into the game, Ray Beverley, a good friend of mine, who was two rows in front of us, passed back a large bottle of whisky. Ray had brought me it back as a gift

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from his recent holiday in Magaluf, but as I took hold of the bottle, the look on Father Cadfan's face told me quite clearly that he thought I was going to start drinking the whisky there and then. I pretended to unscrew the cap and said to him, 'Fancy a nip Father?'

As we chatted at half-time, I asked my guest what he thought of it so far, to which he replied, 'I'm enjoying it, but it's a bit like being in church, standing up, sitting down, standing up.'

After the game, Father Cadfan and I assembled with the rest of the crew in the concourse beneath the Kop for a final conversation before a parting of the ways.

Father Cadfan noticed my bottle of whisky was still unopened.

'You have shown remarkable restraint there Gary,' he said.

'Yes Father,' I replied. 'That and the alcohol restriction laws upstairs.'

He smiled and then said, 'I may have a small tankard of mead myself when I return to my fold.'

He was then asked by the BBC if he had enjoyed the experience, and what his thoughts were.

'Well, that's it, the match is over and Leeds have beaten Crewe 1-0 and I have to say that I have thoroughly enjoyed it, although I have to say that I'm going to need a bit of working on yet. I didn't think that there was sufficient sportsmanship. I do think that Crewe gave Leeds a run for their money but there was too much booing. The man in front of us, I wondered at times why he was there. It's the first time I've ever been to a soccer match and I wanted to watch where the ball was going, but he seemed interested in only seeing Leeds score.'

He continued, 'I was upset when those children ran on the pitch after the game. I thought that they were encroaching on somewhere that is sacred.' I had to agree with him there.

It was the last game of the season and one or two fans had ventured on to the pitch, but it was nothing more than mischievous, as the match announcer's words echoed around the ground.

'Please stay off the pitch. We require fans not to encroach on the playing surface. Please remain in your seats.'

Father Cadfan looked at me and said, 'I've never met anyone like you. Your passion for the club is overwhelming. But I do feel that you appear uneasy in the presence of rival supporters.'

'No, not at all,' I said. 'There is comparatively little trouble inside football grounds these days. However, despite this, the police can still be overpowering and sadly, on occasion, when there hasn't been any trouble, the police have been known to provoke some. It seems like they have to justify their presence and high wages.'

This comment clearly upset Father Cadfan. 'I do find myself very disturbed to hear you say that you find the police presence provocative, I do find myself amazed that I hear you say this – I think what we have to do here is to agree to disagree.'

'In the words of Dave Allen,' I said, 'May your God go with you.'

'I'll drink to that,' said Father Cadfan.

'It's a great feeling when you wake up the next morning having won, but it's horrible when we've lost,' I said. 'Nearly 50 years on and I still get that same hurt when we've lost and I still get that same joy when we've won. It never leaves you. I have to admit to you that first and foremost I'm a Leeds fan rather than a football fan and I would sooner see Leeds win than see a good game and us lose.'

It was time for Father Cadfan to deliver a sermon. 'There is a saying in religion that God has no hands, He has no feet – He has no mouth, except ours. We are God's representatives.'

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I put my arm on the Father's shoulder. 'Well in that case, He wouldn't have to pay full whack to watch Leeds United. And I honestly think that if there had been a God we would have won the European Cup Winners' Cup in Greece in 1973 and the European Cup in Paris two years later.'

Father Cadfan and I then hugged and after shaking hands with the BBC entourage, we went our separate ways, almost certain never to meet again.

Listening back to the programme when it aired a week later, it was gratifying to hear Father Cadfan talking about his day.

'Well, I'm on the train on my way back to Belmont and it's been a very interesting day indeed. When Leeds United scored, Gary literally lifted me off my feet and almost threw me into the air. I was amazed at such enthusiasm – and it meant a lot.

'When I tell my congregation of my day out when I get back, I expect them to say, Halleluiah! Halleluiah! with the same passion and enthusiasm as the Leeds supporters shouted praise when their goal was scored.'

The programme played out with the Leeds fans chanting, 'Glory, Glory, Leeds United!'

Before ending with these words.

'Join us next week when a Buddhist nun will spend the day on the news desk of a Scottish national newspaper.'