

# OWLS

## SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY

THROUGH THE MODERN ERA

**TOM WHITWORTH**



**'...an excellent, passionate and forensic account  
of one of football's great clubs.'**

Anthony Clavane

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# Act I

# Fall



*Factory Demolition, Carbrook Street (1989) [John Darwell]*

# Sheffield, Some Years Ago...

**I**T began on 4 September 1867 in the Adelphi Hotel, on the corner of Arundel and Sycamore Street, in Sheffield city centre, where the Crucible Theatre now stands. The gentlemen had gathered there to consider adding a new sporting arm to their cricket club.

The club had been around for over 50 years, formed to give the skilled craftsmen of the Steel City – those ‘little mesters’ whose expertly produced cutlery and tools gave Sheffield its global renown – something to do on their spare afternoons away from the filth of the workshops and the factories. But cricket was for the summer and during the dark winter months the members had no sport to play. It was thought another option, association football, might keep them together. So that night in the Adelphi Hotel it was agreed: The Wednesday Football Club would be formed.

The Wednesday – who, it was decided, would play in blue and white (though initially in hoops not stripes) – joined Sheffield FC, the world’s oldest football club founded in 1857, and Hallam FC, founded a few years later, on the growing local footballing landscape. The new club soon took a steady footing and built up

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their following as they shifted around the various venues of London Road, Myrtle Road, Sheaf House and Bramall Lane.

Acceptance to the Football League came in 1892; the expansion of the league allowing The Wednesday to join the original founders from the north – Everton, Preston North End, Notts County and Blackburn Rovers. And as the club took to that higher stage, crowds at Olive Grove, the club's new ground and first 'real' home, averaged around 10,000 (by now, the cricketing side of the club had separated from its footballing brother: part of the reason, the football side reckoned, was that the football club earned the money while the cricket club spent it).

Following the decision to expand the busy nearby railway lines that led into Sheffield Midland station, it wasn't long before Wednesday were forced to leave their Olive Grove home. A ballot of supporters showed a site out at Carbrook in the city's industrial east end, where day and night the vast and glowing steelworks forged away, to be the preferred option.

But the move fell through when another bidder for the site got in there first. Never mind; as Wednesday's then chairman, the industrialist George Senior, declared, 'I breathe sulphur all the week, and I'm sure not goin' to Carbrook to suck it in.' So the outpost of Owlerton, a couple of miles outside the city centre, was chosen instead.

At the time, there wasn't much going on at Owlerton: an army barracks, a handful of basic roads, a park. Ordnance Survey maps show a few houses, a school and lots of meadowland. The rattle of the electric tramways had yet to reach that far out of town and the area wasn't even yet part of the Sheffield boundary. Nevertheless, Wednesday were determined to make the site work and in 1899, helped by the proceeds from a new share issue, fetched up there with the main grandstand from Olive Grove, transplanted across town brick by brick and rebuilt at the new ground.

Despite the difficulties reaching Owlerton, the crowds still came. As the city's economy, spurred on by its steel production, grew, so too did demand for more houses. A thriving community with a football club at its heart developed and in 1902/03 and 1903/04 The Wednesday – now sporting the club's new nickname, the Owls (in reference to the new Owlerton home) – won a pair of First Division titles. Three years later, they won the FA Cup.

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Two men involved in the funding of the move to Owlerton were the brothers William and Charles Clegg. Both had played for the club in previous years, and even for England in the country's first international match, in 1872. Each would go on to play pivotal roles in the game both nationally and locally.

The brothers' father was William Clegg, a distinguished solicitor who had gained notoriety after the Great Sheffield Flood of 1864 when he had helped families bring their claims against the Sheffield Waterworks Company, following the collapse of the defective Dale Dyke Dam out in Bradfield in the north-west of the city. The floodwaters swept through Loxley and Malin Bridge, through town and out to the Don Valley. Some 238 Sheffielders died, many drowning while sleeping in their homes. The Clegg sons became lawyers, too; Charles also becoming chairman of the Football Association and, in 1915, chairman of The Wednesday.

A teetotal non-smoking Methodist, Charles Clegg abhorred gambling and violence, and pursued always a path of honest righteousness in the club's boardroom. At Wednesday, explains David Conn in his book *The Beautiful Game*, Clegg 'insisted on rigorously above-board dealings', taking close care over the club's finances, refusing to spend money the club did not have; not willing to plunge the club into financial difficulty. 'Nobody gets lost on a straight road,' was his famous mantra.

Under Clegg, on that straight road, Wednesday picked up another couple of First Division titles in 1928/29 and 1929/30 (by which point The Wednesday had been renamed Sheffield Wednesday and Owlerton re-christened as Hillsborough), and in 1935 won the FA Cup, the deadly wing pairing of Mark Hooper and Ellis Rimmer getting three of Wednesday's four goals against West Bromwich Albion. Captured on film was the team's welcome home from Wembley: an open-top coach creeping and weaving through the packed, waving Sheffield crowds.

After Charles Clegg passed away in 1937, a memorial brass plaque dedicated to him was unveiled in the Hillsborough boardroom. Many years later, when the plaque had for some reason been discarded by the club, the Sheffield and Hallamshire Football Association would rescue it – supposedly, as one story goes, from a skip.



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After the Second World War and the break in the nation's regular footballing programme, emerging for Wednesday was the original goal-machine centre-forward, Derek Dooley. Over two brilliant seasons for Wednesday, the local lad, one-man powerhouse battering ram, would notch 63 goals in 61 games for the club he supported. Tragically, his promise was cut short when, on one icy afternoon at Preston North End, having chased down a through ball, he collided with the advancing goalkeeper and broke his leg. As Dooley lay in his hospital bed, gangrene set in from an infected cut on the back of his leg. The leg had to be removed and his career was over. 'I might as well snuff it,' said Dooley later, 'because I've not got a lot to live for.'

For Wednesday, that decade, the 1950s, were the yo-yo years – three promotions to the top division and three relegations. To arrest the unstable situation the club turned to a new manager, Harry Catterick, a dour disciplinarian brought in from lowly Rochdale, who managed to build a formidable side with a group of promising players. Using the experience of the future England centre-back Peter Swan, alongside the talented youth of goalkeeper Ron Springett, full-back Don Megson and forward Johnny Fantham, the new manager forged a stern yet attacking unit that saw Wednesday entertain and succeed. In his first season in the job, Catterick led his men to the Second Division title. Two years later, in 1960/61, they finished second to the great double-winning Tottenham Hotspur side.

The 1960s were something of a boom time for the club and the city. In the Don Valley to the east and Stocksbridge in the north, the steel factories were forging and hammering away at a great pace, sending millions of tons of the highest-grade specialist metals and the most robust machine tools and cutlery out across the world. Order books were full and employment levels were high.

The city's landscape was transforming too.

In 1961 Park Hill and Hyde Park flats, the concrete 'streets in the sky' which sat above the train station, replaced the nearby slums to provide high-rise living with panoramic views of the city from their Brutalist concrete grid frames. The sleek concrete-and-glass University Arts Tower, and white modernist Hallam Tower Hotel

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in well-to-do Fulwood would open in 1965. They, along with new measures like 'operation clean air' – which since 1956 had sought to control fuel usage and reduce smoke levels in the city – would help further shed the city's grimy and smoggy industrial image. While the Tinsley viaduct, running over the River Don – the city's main river which cooled the furnaces of the vast steelworks that lined its banks – and past the imposing power station cooling towers, brought the M1 to the city, serving to better link Sheffield to the economic power of the south. Sheffield, proclaimed the book *Sheffield: Emerging City* optimistically, was moving 'into a richer future'.

Wednesday's contribution to this emergence was a groundbreaking development that would give its Hillsborough stadium the status of being one of the best in the country.

Opened in 1961 the North Stand, a cantilevered masterpiece – the first of its kind to run the full length of the pitch – was designed by Sheffield engineers and constructed using metals forged in the city. It held 8,000 spectators, its curved concrete walkways taking fans up to the top half of the stand, while its girders stretched backwards like a claw to support the acre-sized roof, providing all with an unobstructed view of the play. From the outside it looked like a spaceship.

However, such development came, at least in the eyes of Owls manager Harry Catterick, at the expense of his playing budget. Even though the £150,000 cost of the new stand had been funded by a share issue (the proceeds never destined for new football players) the Wednesday boss began to feel restricted and aggrieved. His side that had returned to, and gone on to compete well in, the First Division had cost only £17,000 to assemble, a fraction of the £250,000 the Tottenham 1961 double-winning team had been brought together for, and Catterick wanted more cash for players so that he could achieve more with his team.

But club secretary Eric Taylor, emulating the beliefs of Charles Clegg decades before, could not and would not risk jeopardising the club's financial health by investing heavily in both the club's infrastructure and the team. So Catterick, realising that while he was Wednesday's manager he would never have the riches some of his rivals had, left the club before the 1960/61 season had even finished. At Everton, where he was given the budget he desired, he

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would go on to win a pair of First Division championships while, post-Catterick, Wednesday's fortunes would wane.

A betting scandal in 1964 saw the Wednesday captain Peter Swan, along with his then teammates David Layne and Tony Kay, sentenced to a few months in prison and banned from the game for life after they had been found to have bet on a Wednesday defeat at Ipswich a few years earlier. The scandal reached all levels of the game in England but the Owls trio were the highest-profile culprits and their careers were all but finished because of their actions.

Then, in 1966, there was the heartbreak of an FA Cup final defeat to Catterick's Everton. The Wednesday lads, in their whiter-than-white change kit, took a 2-0 lead over the Merseysiders. But Everton were to pull it back to win 3-2 and take the trophy. Afterwards, captain Don Megson led his team on an unsmiling losers' lap of the pitch; an enduring metaphor, perhaps, for the fortunes of the club in years to come.

After Wembley came the spectacle of the World Cup, hosted by England. Sheffield and Wednesday played their part: Hillsborough staged four games; over 40,000 were there for the West Germany-Uruguay quarter-final. Yet whatever good feeling remained from Catterick's days, or from the cup final, or even from the World Cup, would be gone by the end of the decade as Wednesday were relegated from the First Division.

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A few years of hanging around at the wrong end of the Second Division led to the promotion of Derek Dooley from his role in the club's development office to first-team manager: he was back again in a prominent role at Wednesday following the ending of his playing career on that icy Preston pitch two decades before. However, with little money to spend and serious injury problems, Dooley had a hopeless task and struggled to turn the club around. On Christmas Eve 1973, he was sacked by the club. A cruel blow for one of the club's greatest ever players; his second major hurt in football.

The backdrop to these footballing dramas was the contraction of the city's steel and engineering industries. Increasing competition from overseas devastated orders, while roller-coasting inflation

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rates compounded the problem, which in turn produced turbulent unemployment levels in the city. Partly because of these economic factors, and partly because the team was so bad at the time, crowds at Hillsborough were down (at times even below 10,000). During some of the more lowly attended midweek games of that time, the heartbeat sound of drop-hammer on metal coming from nearby steelworks on nightshift could be heard over the quietened Hillsborough crowd.

In 1974/75, after winning only five games all season, Wednesday were relegated to the Third Division.

Around this time, the Hillsborough-born Bert McGee took over as chairman of the club. Recently, Wednesday had developed a habit of making losses and being overdrawn with the bank (since 1966, the club had lost money nearly every year) and McGee, a bluff, strong, industry man who had risen from apprentice to chairman of the tool-making company Presto, sought to reverse the trend of losses, instituting a necessary policy of financial prudence and living within your means. As McGee explained of the club's attempts to address its financial problems, 'We stopped spending and started earning, kept a tight control on all overheads, instituted rigorous, sensible housekeeping, appointed sound management, and let them get on with it.'

After sacking the club's manager Len Ashurst, McGee brought in someone who would be able to get the best out of what was a lowly paid and, in terms of footballing ability, limited group of players: Jack Charlton.

Charlton, World Cup winner in 1966, armfuls of trophies with Leeds United before a few successful years managing Middlesbrough, was ready for his next challenge in the game.

Under him, Wednesday's decline levelled off before curving upwards. In 1977/78 he kept Wednesday up in the Third Division, progress consolidated the year after, and then the following year brought success. The 4-0 Terry Curran-inspired demolition of Sheffield United at Hillsborough on Boxing Day 1979, in front of 49,309 humiliated hated city rivals, spurred the club on to promotion. Happy days.

Less happy was from January 1980 onwards, when almost 100,000 steelworkers up and down the country went on strike for 13 cold weeks over pay rises and potential job losses in their

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industry. In Sheffield there was picketing of the vast Hadfields East Hecla Works in the Don Valley. One day saw 2,000 pickets (their numbers swelled by supporters from the National Union of Mine Workers) confront 2,000 police. The South Yorkshire force was well-drilled and ready for such a dispute: arrests were made and snatch squads used to get the ringleaders. The industrial battle ended with pay rises for the workers in the short term, but job losses and plant closures in the long.

Politically, at the time the city was renowned for its council-led radicalism and alternative socialist ideas. Its leader, David Blunkett, went against the Thatcher grain by doing things like keeping bus fares low – freedom of movement for a few pence a trip – and business rates high.

Sheffield would be called ‘The Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire’; on May Day the red flag could be seen flying over the Town Hall; and as the academic Paul Lawless would observe, ‘Hardly any retail, commercial or industrial development took place in the city in the first half of the 1980s.’

Meanwhile, Jack Charlton’s Wednesday side, now in the Second Division and with an increasingly local and youthful feel (the promising Mel Sterland, John Pearson and Mark Smith supplementing the older heads), crept closer and closer towards the First Division. In 1981/82 they fell just short of promotion and in the years that followed finished fourth and sixth.

Thanks to Bert McGee’s tight control of the finances, Charlton would spend little over a net £500,000 (the sales of players offset by the purchases) during his six seasons with the club. During the same period, about the same amount was spent on upgrading the club’s infrastructure (the focus of much of this spending being the club’s Hillsborough home). Partly because of the club’s approach to spending in these two key areas, Wednesday moved to a position of profitability, or at worst one of posting limited, manageable losses, which spiked after the club became established in the Second Division. Live within your means was McGee’s way, and Charlton accepted that.

After 1982/83, however, when Wednesday had finished sixth in the table and reached an FA Cup semi-final (losing to Brighton at Arsenal’s Highbury), Jackie decided it was time to move on. He had picked the club up, dusted it off, reversed the slide and taken

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it back up close to the top. But for Wednesday, that was their lot. Charlton believed he had taken them as far as he could.

Taking on the baton, to finish the job Charlton had started, was the Sheffielder Howard Wilkinson.

Back in the 1960s, local lad and Owls supporter Wilkinson (who grew up in the Netherthorpe area, not far from Hillsborough) had played for the club, making a handful of first-team appearances before moving down the levels with Brighton and Boston United. Thanks to his work at Notts County, where on a limited budget he had taken the club to the First Division and kept them there, he was now a growing name in management.

At Wednesday, Wilkinson instilled great levels of fitness in his players. A qualified PE teacher, he ordered notorious gruelling runs in the green north Sheffield hills on the edge of the Peak District that meant his players would be able to outlast most opponents. The 'Wilkinson Way', a direct and effective pressing style underpinned by the excellent levels of fitness, and the principle of 'get a goal and don't let them back', worked well for the team. Wilkinson had Mick Lyons blocking at the back, tough-tackling Gary Megson battling away in the middle (Megson, son of Don, captain of the club through the 1960s, was also a passionate Wednesday supporter) and Imre Varadi knocking in the goals up front. Wilkinson's team of triers weren't pretty to watch, the ball ping-ponging around the place, but it worked.

After only one season, it was job done: Gary Shelton's overhead goal at Newcastle in April, followed up by a couple more wins, secured promotion back to the First Division. After 14 years away from the top tier, Wilkinson had finished the job Jack Charlton had started and the Owls were back.

For 1983/84, that first season back, the 'Wilkinson Way' remained and Wednesday comfortably settled down to life in the top division, taking some fine scalps along the way – Liverpool at 'fortress' Anfield (they'd lost there only twice the season before) and Manchester United at Old Trafford. The Owls reached as high as second during the course of the season, eventually taking eighth place.

From March 1984, the season had as its backdrop the miners' strike: a year-long struggle between the nation's colliers and the Margaret Thatcher regime and her police army.

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Of Britain's 170 working coalmines in 1983, around a third were in Yorkshire, over half of those in South Yorkshire. But Thatcher said that over two-thirds of the mines were not profitable so the closures would be made. In response over 140,000 miners would come out on strike, over 54,000 of those in Yorkshire.

At Orgreave, a coking plant six miles from Sheffield city centre, there would be a violent pitched battle between at least 5,000 miners and 5,000 South Yorkshire Police practised from the steel strike in 1980 and bussed-in coppers from other forces. Coppers without numbers on their chests and coppers waving their overtime-swelled pay packets at, and laughing in the faces of the striking miners.

The police lines were pushed by the pickets and stones were thrown. Dogs chased the miners, the police lines opened and the horses charged. Then the snatch squads waded in along with the truncheons and the boots. Civil war.

Later, in court in Sheffield the Orgreave 'rioters' went on trial for their alleged part in the violence. When it was found that police evidence had been fabricated, though, with statements dictated and coordinated identical paragraphs produced and at least one forged signature identified, the prosecution's case broke down. The lawyer Michael Mansfield called it the 'biggest frame-up ever' as nearly 100 miners were cleared and no charges were brought against the South Yorkshire Police.

When the strike was over, the pit closures came – scores of them, every year. By 1990, 11 mines had gone in South Yorkshire alone and by the mid-2010s only one would remain.

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Through 1985/86, Wednesday improved further under Howard Wilkinson. Fifth spot in the First Division was achieved and, were it not for the ban on British clubs playing in Europe following the Heysel disaster and defeat to Everton in another FA Cup semi-final, there may have been a European place and a Wembley cup final for the club.

Bert McGee's tight housekeeping continued to keep the club's finances under control. Wages were relatively modest (Manchester United finished one place above the Owls that season and had a wage bill twice as large, as did West Ham United who also finished

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above the Owls), as was net spending on player transfers (between 1982/83 and 1986/87 less than £400,000 would be outlaid by the club in total). Meanwhile, over the same period Hillsborough would receive only limited investment too, with around £1.5m spent on construction at the club's home (of which at least £600,000 was provided as grants with about £1m spent on the new roof for the Kop end). But the club had been profitable – decent six-figure surpluses had been posted in 1985/86 and in 1986/87 – and generally Wednesday covered what it owed to others. The club didn't need or want to hammer the overdraft, or take on significant loans.

For thousands of people in the region, this approach mirrored the reality of life. The aftermath of the miners' strike had led to thousands of job losses across South Yorkshire. Meanwhile, the city's metal and engineering industries were finding ever-increasing competition from abroad. In 1987 unemployment across the region stood at 16.3 per cent – with the structural decline of the region's industries seeing the reduction of 'working-class affluence' – which, naturally perhaps, meant that for many doing things like going to Hillsborough or Bramall Lane was more of a struggle.

Such struggles, however, conflicted with Wednesday manager Howard Wilkinson's desire to spend on his overachieving squad. He believed that he was getting just about as much as he could from his players and that in order to progress – or indeed simply avoid falling behind other clubs – his team required substantial investment. Yet because of the level of wages Wednesday were offering at the time, Wilkinson found it difficult to attract the calibre of players he sought. So his band of honest triers began to drift down the table, finishing 13th in 1986/87 and 11th the year after.

In private, Wilkinson had attempted to persuade Bert McGee to change his approach to spending, but had gotten nowhere. He respected his chairman too much to go public with his thoughts, and so much like Harry Catterick had done back in 1961, he packed up and left for greener grasses; on this occasion 30 minutes up the M1 to Leeds United, then a struggling Second Division club.

The Leeds hierarchy wanted promotion and top-level success. They had to return to the days of Don Revie, of championships and cup finals. Howard Wilkinson, they believed, was the man to take them there.



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Wilkinson thought about what he wanted to achieve; thought whether he could leave the club he had supported as a child, played for as a young man and was now managing successfully. He thought about the assurances Leeds were making about finances and their commitment to the plan of getting back to the top. In the end, he accepted their offer.

He said an emotional goodbye to his staff and his players; then, as he sat alone in the Hillsborough boot room underneath the South Stand, he wept into a blue towel, damning the board and the tightfistedness that had caused his departure. By 1992, his efficient and well-funded Leeds side would be First Division champions.

Wilkinson had wanted to take his assistant Peter Eustace with him to Leeds, but Eustace was a Wednesday fan himself and also a former player for the club (a classy passing midfielder who had started the 1966 FA Cup Final), so couldn't resist the offer to take over as Owls manager. He didn't take well to management though and after less than 20 dreadful, largely winless games, was sacked.

Someone better was required. A bigger figure in the game: Ron Atkinson. Flash 'Big Ron' had managed West Bromwich Albion and Manchester United, winning two FA Cups for the latter. After he returned from a short-lived spell with Atletico Madrid (he lasted only three months in Spain), Wednesday, hoping he would be the man to set the club on a positive course, somehow managed to tempt him to Sheffield.

An excellent man-manager who could inspire players, Atkinson immediately injected a spark into the Wednesday team, creating a relaxed and happy playing atmosphere; reviving a Wilkinson-esque work ethic while encouraging an attacking, passing approach which led at times to a beautiful fluidity. The 'Atkinson Way' suggested a new purpose for the club.

Under the new manager, results through 1988/89 improved and relegation looked as though it would be averted. And with a few new arrivals, like the young defensive midfielder Carlton Palmer, added to the likes of the emerging Barnsley lad David Hirst (a Wilkinson signing who was blossoming into a powerful and brilliantly effective striker), Atkinson was building a team that looked to have a good future.

Things looked well.

Then came the Hillsborough disaster.