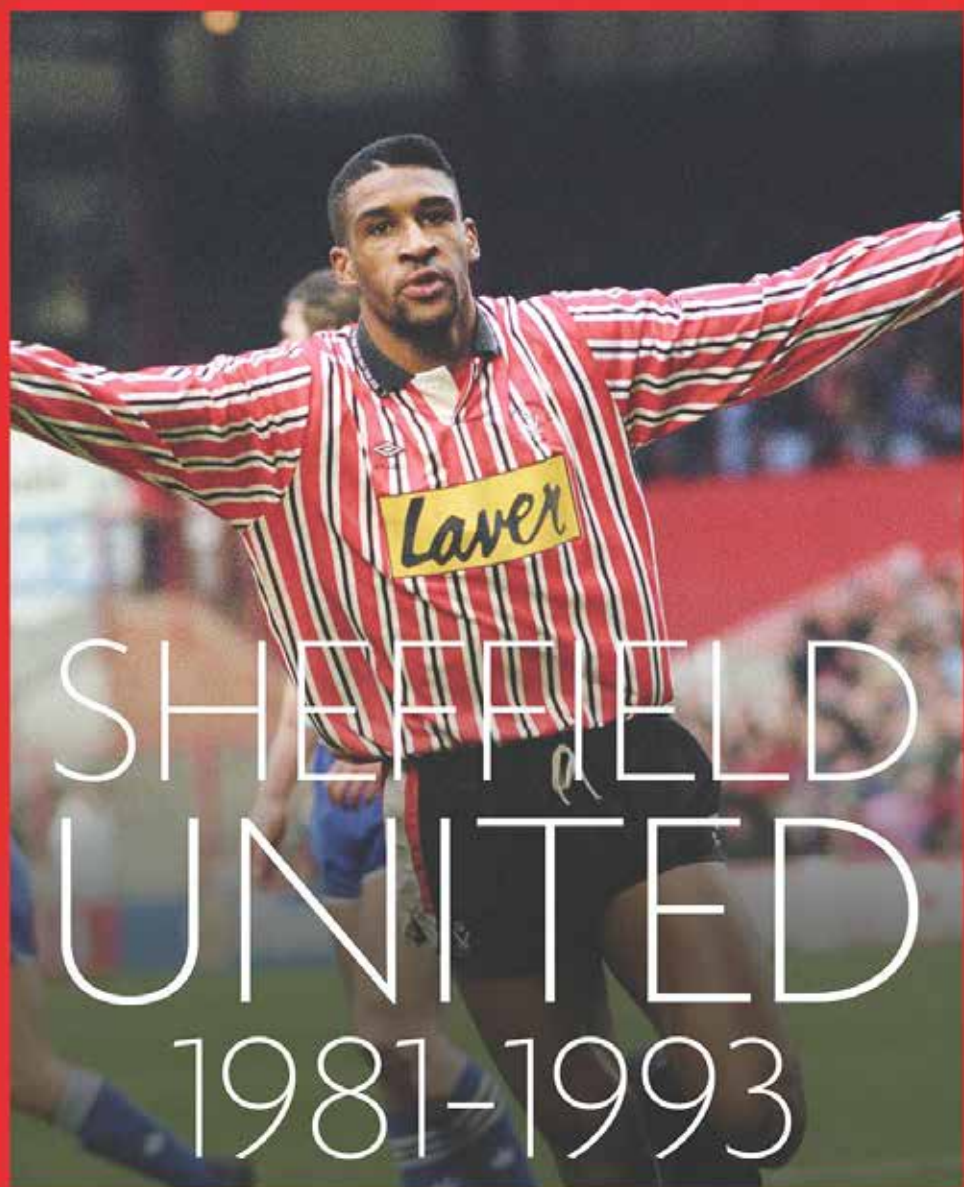


(STILL) AIN'T GOT A  
BARREL OF MONEY



J A S O N   H O L Y H E A D

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SHEFFIELD  
UNITED  
1981-1993

J A S O N H O L Y H E A D



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# Chapter 1

AT THE end of the 1974/75 season, Sheffield United narrowly missed out on a coveted place in Europe. United boasted an enviable squad, including the likes of Tony Currie with his grace and flair, Alan Woodward with his superb passing and shooting, and legends like Len Badger and Eddie Colquhoun. The Blades finished just four points behind champions Derby County. Derby would go on to play Slovan Bratislava in the first round of the European Cup, before facing Real Madrid in the second round. The Rams won the first leg 4-1 but were beaten 5-1 by the Spanish giants in the Bernabéu and were eliminated from the competition.

Liverpool, under the new direction of Bob Paisley following the resignation of the legendary Bill Shankly, finished second in the First Division. Liverpool and Ipswich Town finished on 51 points each, with Everton a point behind the pair. United were level on points with Stoke but the Potters had the superior goal difference, despite the Blades winning a game more.

United held Derby to a 1-1 draw in the opening game of the new campaign, but endured a calamitous season, winning just six games – losing a whopping 26 times – and were relegated. They scored just 33 goals all season while conceding 82. The following year, they finished 11th in the Second Division and then were a place worse off 12 months

later. Jimmy Sirrel was relieved of his duties early in the season, after winning just once. Cec Coldwell was put in temporary charge, and Harry Haslam took over in January. There was the excitement at the arrival of a little Argentinian and, despite most fans not being able to pronounce the name of Alejandro Sabella, he quickly became a favourite with the crowd. His silky skills were not enough to inspire the Blades, though, and the 1978/79 season saw United relegated to the Third Division.

Gone were the Curries and the Woodwards, and indeed the Sabellas, and in came the De Goeyes, the Butlins and the Verdes. Rather than taking the league by storm, United limped to a 12th-placed finish. The new decade did not bring new success to Bramall Lane, and Harry Haslam, in failing health, was replaced by former England hero Martin Peters. Peters undoubtedly brought pedigree; he was one of a very small group of Englishmen to have won the World Cup, and had been coached by Sir Alf Ramsey with England, and Ron Greenwood at West Ham. In 1970 he moved to Tottenham Hotspur in a part exchange for the great Jimmy Greaves. After five years at Spurs, he moved to Norwich at the age of 31, and stayed there for another five years. In 1978, while still playing for Norwich he was awarded the MBE for services to football. Haslam brought him to Bramall Lane as a player-coach initially, with the intention of training him to be his successor.

When Haslam stepped down and Peters took over, United sat 12th in the Third Division with 16 games remaining. Peters could do nothing to improve the club's fortunes and on 2 May 1981 United slipped into the Fourth Division for the first time in their history.

For many, the final insult came as a shock. The season had started brightly with United winning five of their opening seven fixtures and topping the division. In the second half

of the campaign, though, form collapsed and United found themselves plummeting down the table. Between January and the end of April they picked up just three wins. Before kick-off on the final day of the season, relegation seemed the most unlikely outcome with the Blades needing just a point to be guaranteed safety, while opponents Walsall needed nothing less than victory to stay up. Even a win might not be enough for them, depending on results elsewhere and, likewise, even defeat didn't necessarily mean United would face the drop. The game itself was a dull affair, lacking in quality or excitement until the final moments. Walsall were awarded a penalty, which Don Penn calmly converted, and all of a sudden the prospect of the Blades going down became a very real one. Two minutes later, United appeared to have been given a lifeline when Bob Hatton's cross was handled and they were given a penalty. As I described at length in my previous book, regular penalty taker Tony Kenworthy was dropped for the game by Martin Peters. Peters released a statement claiming Kenworthy was injured, but Kenworthy disputes this. According to him, he was changed and ready to play when Peters informed him that he was being sold to Norwich and would not feature in the game. Despite John Matthews, who was more than capable of scoring from the spot, being on the field, the responsibility on the day fell to Don Givens. The rest, as they say, is history.

Financially speaking, one could argue that relegation made very little difference to the club's plight. The bottom two divisions were in those days little more than associate members of the league and the 48 teams in those divisions received an equal share of the pot of whatever money was available, more or less, but the impact on those that really matter – the fans – was devastating. The very thought of Sheffield United playing in the bottom division was heartbreaking for those supporters.

The utter disaster of relegation from the Third Division at the end of the 1980/81 season marked a new dawn for Sheffield United. Martin Peters was shipped out and a new regime was brought in to turn the tide. The desperate decline of the club meant that desperate action was needed. The Blades had already turned to businessman and jute magnate Reg Brealey, who earlier had been introduced to the club by secretary Dick Chester.

When the average football fan thinks of club secretaries, most could possibly name no more than one or two. Some more interested supporters may be able to name half a dozen. Most won't even know what the club secretary does, let alone know their name. The secretary, in those days at least, played a vital role at a football club, ensuring that the full administration was done in a correct and legitimate way. They were also responsible for registering players, keeping accurate records, attending league meetings and, more often than not, dealing with the media. A good club secretary can be a valuable asset; an excellent one is priceless.

Dick Chester began his long career in football in 1971 at Sincil Bank, Lincoln, at the tender age of 31. Before he became Lincoln City's club secretary, he was a keen cricketer and a qualified football referee. He'd barely warmed the chair in his new office by the time he realised he was opening 'enough final demand letters to paper the secretary's office walls'. He set about putting into place controls to ensure each area of the club's operations was effectively managed, all expenditure subjected to competitive quotes, creditors received regular payments and a system of accountability. He also worked tirelessly to ensure that Lincoln City as a club were at the heart of the community. While he was with the Imps, there were significant improvements on the pitch – a fact that he denies is entirely down to him – and there were also changes in the boardroom. The club

usually changed chairman each year, but in the early 1970s, following the appointment of four new directors and their associated investments, the first newly introduced member to that role was a Lincolnshire businessman called Reg Brealey. By this time, the club had cleared the £40,000 bank overdraft at the bank that Chester inherited and Lincoln were now debt-free.

Chester prides himself on respect and morals. Much of his recent book, *Football – An Insider’s Job*, is dedicated to his determination to keep confidences and not hold grudges. It is abundantly clear that he is a man of integrity. One thing that Chester thought was important, possibly stemming from his time as a match official, was ensuring that visiting referees were treated with respect and he made sure they were comfortable on matchdays. One of the referees he spoke to, Keith Walker, mentioned to Chester one day that he wished he had a job like Chester’s.

Fast-forward to 1978 and Chester received a phone call from the very same Mr Walker, who was now employed at Bramall Lane. In time, Walker introduced Chester to the club’s then chairman, John Hassell. After a meeting at Hassell’s home a couple of days before Christmas 1978, where Dick was asked if he had much experience of handling debt, his appointment as club secretary was rubber-stamped shortly afterwards. He began working for the Blades on 2 January 1979.

His initial assessment of the situation at the Lane was that the club were in a very similar position to the one he inherited at the start of his Lincoln City job, but on a much bigger scale. He quickly discovered that United’s overdraft at the National Westminster Bank was just shy of £1m. Once again, Chester would need to introduce some controls, but decided it was only right and proper to contact all the club’s creditors, put the cards on the table regarding the current



position and look for a period of time to settle the debts, which was accepted and put in place.

He and the chairman were called to the offices of the Inland Revenue to discuss non-payment of salary deductions for tax and national insurance. Chester negotiated a deal to pay off the amount due in instalments. That very same afternoon, at the club's board meeting, manager Harry Haslam told the board that he had agreed a deal to sign Les Tibbott from Ipswich Town. The directors were clearly unaware of the meeting with Revenue officials, and the manager even less so. At least, if Haslam was aware, he didn't appear to care. Despite the opposition from Chester, Haslam got his way and Tibbott was signed, but the resulting press coverage prompted a difficult conversation between the new club secretary and the Inland Revenue. United were put on the dreaded 'watch list'.

As club secretary, Chester tried to not get directly involved with player matters once they were signed, but one of his early tasks was to sort out Alex Sabella's tax affairs. Sabella had been on an emergency tax code but with Chester's intervention, the Argentinian received a massive tax refund. This led to a fairly close relationship where the player seemed to turn to Chester for guidance and advice on a lot of personal matters.

Another early task of Chester's was to go and acquire a Scottish defender called John McPhail. Chester says, 'The first week I was at United, I went with Neville Briggs, the chief scout, to Dundee to sign McPhail. He'd played in a reserve match the week before and Haslam wanted to sign him, but Harry wouldn't go, so I went. One of the questions usually asked at pre-signing meetings was what was the player's disciplinary record like. He said he'd had one or two bookings and the odd sending off. Duly signed, he was sent off in one of his early games and received the

customary charge from the FA, identified as a potential suspension.

‘Again, Harry didn’t feel it was his role to defend the player, so I went to the FA offices, so I went with John in the car to FA headquarters. Jack Wiseman, [the] head of the hearing, came to see us and he asked the officer to read out John’s disciplinary record from Scotland. There were yards of it. We went to wait in a room while they reached a decision and Wiseman came to fetch us again and he said to John, “You need to be more honest in football than what you are, that record of yours is abysmal.” I expected a three-match suspension but they said the honesty of our presentation saved him, and he only got a warning as to his future conduct. Bearing in mind that the manager was solely responsible for player issues, I nevertheless gave him a bit of a stripping-down in the car afterwards.’

Chester set about contacting investors and negotiated new deals. This was made more difficult by the recent decision to stop playing first-class cricket at the Lane, a decision that irked many locals. Although the last game in which Yorkshire played at Bramall Lane took place in 1973, the old pavilion stood as a reminder for many years. Chester also renegotiated deals with hotel companies and travel companies to reduce the overheads at the stadium. In spite of the new controls and improved deals, there was still very much a need for new investment. Chester says, ‘United couldn’t provide me with a car. I’d done some work for Reg Brealey’s own business when I left Lincoln, and he loaned me one of his cars until we got sorted out. When it was sorted out, I said to the chairman do you think we could invite Reg as a guest? But I couldn’t host him because I’d got a matchday management job to do which took precedence, and which couldn’t be left unattended, so the chairman said he’d look after Reg.’

The invitation was accepted, and a second invitation was made for Brealey to attend as John Hassell's guest in the directors' box, which was duly accepted. Chester recalls, 'They spent ages talking in the corner of the director's office, particularly after the game. Reg phoned me the following Monday morning and said I need a meeting with you, Harry Haslam and Derek Dooley – saying that he'd been invited to join the board and needed an in-depth meeting with the three of us to get an insight into all the workings. We had the meeting, which seemed to go OK, and later that evening, while I was at home, he phoned and asked me for my ideas on how to develop and stabilise the club.'

Chester obliged with a paper outlining his thoughts, which included the need for new investment – not in the shape of loans, but as capital, as well as the need to improve the ground, particularly the completion of the 'new' South Stand and improved facilities for officials and supporters alike, long-awaited recognition of the excellent fanbase, which hitherto had been overlooked, and the importance of same and the belief that they needed to be better engaged. He also suggested closer relationships with local and national press. His final suggestion I find more difficult to believe, as one might naively think that it was a given. That suggestion was that more attention was paid to the observation of players that United bought – actually watching them play for example. It seems that the famous wheeler-dealer Harry Haslam had a knack of presenting his case for incoming transfers to the board, without actually seeing them play, instead making good use of the *Rothmans Yearbook*. Brealey's invitation to join the board was accepted, as were all of Chester's suggestions.

One of Brealey's first acts was to appoint and pay for solicitors to arrange a special general meeting to create £1m of new shares to be sold. The board agreed to buy any

outstanding shares once existing shareholders had been offered the opportunity. The uptake was somewhat less than anticipated, possibly due to the economic situation in South Yorkshire at the time, possibly due to United's dwindling success. The result was that none of the board would keep their side of the deal and Brealey bought all the outstanding shares, worth £900,000. He immediately sent a cheque over to Chester, and United were in the black. Chester insists, 'If Reg hadn't done that, as previous enquiries had established, there was no one in Sheffield that would have come forward to save the club. As well as buying the remaining shares, Brealey personally funded the completion of the work on the South Stand and the demolition of the remains of the redundant cricket pavilion and resurfaced the car park.' Brealey also funded transfers. Chester is of the firm opinion that were it not for the involvement of Brealey, Sheffield United may well have ceased to exist.

One could argue that had Dick Chester not taken the time to make Keith Walker comfortable when he was a referee at Lincoln, and taken the time to socialise with him, Reg Brealey might not have had the opportunity to save United. Thus, it's fair to say that Chester's involvement with the club was indeed priceless. He can also be thanked for the creation of the Blades Executive Club, the Travel Club, the Future Players Fund and the Junior Blades (an organisation which saw Chester joining his grandson, who still supports the club today). He said, 'I draw comparisons with the club now to the club I joined in 1979. Neither were interested in the fans. John Hassell and I had some right ding-dongs about the value of the fans.'

In writing my first book about United's fall from grace, I relied greatly on research, trawling through history books, black-and-white videos and old newspaper articles, as the bulk of the story took place long before I was born. One of my

earliest visits to Bramall Lane with my dad allowed me the privilege of seeing Alex Sabella play, although from memory he spent most of the game laying in the mud. Another early visit was the defeat at the hands of Walsall from the vantage point of the Bramall Lane upper tier. When Walsall's penalty was converted from 12 yards, the ten-year-old me suddenly realised that the club I had supported for as long as I could recall – because it was my dad's team, and before that his dad's team – could actually face the humiliation of relegation to the Fourth Division for the first time in our illustrious history, just as I'd reached the age where I was allowed to actually go to games.

I did personally benefit, though, from at least one of Dick Chester's initiatives as I was enrolled in the Junior Blades. This would entitle me to a birthday card, signed personally by the great George McCabe, who also helped to co-found the Senior Blades club with Chester, as well as access to games in the Junior Blades pen (almost on the Kop) for an entrance fee of something in the region of 70p per game.

In June 1981, following the departure of Martin Peters, chairman John Hassell also left the club. Reg Brealey, who was already a director and major shareholder by then, was appointed chairman at an urgent board meeting.

Brealey set about finding a new manager to lead the revolution. The previous season, while the Blades were being relegated to the Fourth Division, less than ten miles away neighbours Rotherham United were romping to the Third Division title. The Millers finished 20 points better off than the men from Bramall Lane. Millers boss Ian Porterfield's name was top of a shortlist of one.

Brealey was so sure Porterfield was the man to revive United's fortunes that he gave him a rolling five-year contract, with a proviso of getting the club back into the top flight.