

PAUL HODGSON



ANOTHER
100 **OF THE**
BEST

DARLINGTON'S
GREATEST
EVER PLAYERS



FOREWORD BY
PAUL WARD

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Goalkeepers

Phil Owers – Career Details

Phil Owers began his football career with Shildon, making his senior debut as a 15-year-old, before signing for the then Fourth Division strugglers Darlington. While still an A-level student, Owers made his first appearance in the Football League, on 6 January 1973; the Quakers conceded seven goals to Southport, though no more than one was attributable to the goalkeeper. The local *Northern Echo* newspaper reported, ‘He was in no way to blame for the disgraceful shambles, but looked close to tears as he was applauded down the tunnel.’ A few weeks later, Owers was interviewed by David Frost for an edition of *The Frost Programme*, focusing on Darlington Football Club as an illustration of the unglamorous side of football, described 40 years later by the *Northern Echo* as ‘an insight into a town’s heart-aching relationship with its football club and a reminder of the ridiculous resilience of optimism’. Described by Frost as ‘17 and nursing a dream’, Owers said he ‘wanted to get Darlington out of trouble and would like to play at Wembley for a big club’.

Over the next two and a half seasons, he made 45 league appearances before signing for the then Third Division club Gillingham on a free transfer. He played only twice for the Gills and returned to Darlington after only one season. After 69 more matches in the Fourth Division over a four-year period, Owers moved back into non-league football with Crook Town and

then with Bishop Auckland. He was a member of the Bishops' Northern League title-winning team in 1984/85. After a spell with Brandon United, he played four matches on a non-contract basis for Fourth Division Hartlepool United in August 1987, before a further spell at Bishop Auckland and also a stint with Spennymoor United.

By 1993 he was back at Shildon as a player and left as assistant manager in 1999. Back again by April 2003, he was reported to have played for the club in four different decades. Later that year he was on the bench as Shildon reached the first round proper of the 2003/04 FA Cup, when they lost 7-2 to then Second Division club Notts County.

Owers continued to play into his 50s. He won the Durham Alliance title with Shildon Railway in 2004/05, and appeared in the Northern League while manager of West Auckland Town in April 2008 at the age of 52.

My Memorable Match Involving Phil Owers

Darlington v Southport – 1972/73

The first Darlington game I ever saw was at a fog-shrouded Feethams on 6 January 1973 when I was only seven years old. Our visitors that day were Southport, who at the time were promotion contenders, while the Quakers were firmly rooted to the bottom of the Fourth Division.

Our home fixture against Workington on Boxing Day had already been postponed because a mixture of injuries and a flu epidemic had reduced Darlington to just eight fit players, and because of the foggy conditions the Southport game was only given the go-ahead by the referee an hour before kick-off.

Allan Jones, who had been sent on a three-week 'holiday' by the chairman, George Tait, had officially parted company with the club on 21 December. He became the fourth Darlington manager to lose his job in only 15 months. His replacement was Ralph Brand.

The previous game, on 23 December 1972, was away to Bradford City where we were hammered 7-0. Apparently, after

the match at Valley Parade the newly installed manager assured the press that the result had been a 'one-off' and that they would never be beaten like that again. Clearly, he didn't believe, and neither did I, that lightning would strike twice.

Ironically, Brand had an impressive pedigree as a player and knew all about scoring goals. Born in Edinburgh, he had played for Rangers, notching an impressive 206 goals in 317 games for the Ibrox club. He even ranks third among their postwar strikers, just behind Ally McCoist and Derek Johnstone.

However, the omens certainly didn't look good for the visit of Southport. On the day of the match, with only an hour to go before kick-off, Phil Owers, a 17-year-old rookie goalkeeper was called upon to make his first-team debut in place of regular shot-stopper Ernie Adams, who couldn't play due to injury.

The match was certainly a one-sided affair. By half-time the Quakers were 4-0 down and they went on to lose 7-0, which is their heaviest ever home league defeat to date. To cap it all I'd pestered my mother for weeks on end to take me to a Darlington game! My abiding memory was, 'Why have I come down here in the middle of winter in the freezing cold?'

Throughout the match and as the avalanche of goals came thick and fast, much to the anger of some of the crowd, Brand remained in his seat in the directors' box instead of coming down to the touchline to encourage his players. His semi-detached attitude to management was exemplified by the fact that he actually lived in Edinburgh where he was in business and only commuted to Darlington each Wednesday where he remained until the following Saturday evening.

At the final whistle the fans gave Phil Owers a standing ovation. After all, he wasn't to blame for the rout. Had it not been for his bravery and agility, we might have eclipsed our heaviest ever league defeat when we lost 10-0 away to Doncaster on 25 January 1964.

Thinking about it, I bet that hasn't happened very often in professional football – two consecutive 7-0 defeats with two different goalkeepers.

Martin Burleigh – Career Details

Martin Burleigh was born in Willington, County Durham. He played football for his hometown club, before joining Newcastle United as a 17-year-old, signing amateur forms in October 1968. He replaced the injured Dave Clarke in a strong Newcastle team for Barrie Thomas's testimonial match in November and turned professional in the December of that year. Burleigh was also a member of the Newcastle United youth team that won the 1969 Rotterdam International Youth Tournament, defeating Arsenal's youngsters in the final.

He made his first-team debut on 26 December 1970, in a 3-0 defeat away to Leeds United in the First Division. Martin had to wait over a year before making another senior appearance. His home debut came on 8 January 1972 in a 4-2 league victory over Coventry City.

An injury to undisputed first-choice goalkeeper Willie 'Tam' McFaul in February 1973 allowed Martin a run of games in the first team, which ended when his left index finger was broken by a kick from Mick Channon during a 1-1 draw away to Southampton and he was ruled out for the rest of the season. A dispute with manager Joe Harvey stemming from his return to pre-season training seriously overweight caused him to walk out of the club. He returned, but played only twice more, the last of his 15 first-team appearances for Newcastle coming on 11 May 1974 against Tottenham Hotspur at St James' Park. When he again reported overweight for the 1974/75 season, the club threatened to cancel his contract, at which point he resigned and considered joining the RAF.

The club retained Burleigh's Football League registration and loaned him to Darlington in October 1974, and made the transfer permanent in December for a fee reported as £3,000 plus 50 per cent of the profit on any future sale. He spent that season as Darlington's first-choice goalkeeper, and then moved on to Carlisle United, newly relegated to the Second Division, in June 1975. Although a transfer request was accepted in

November that same year, Burleigh remained with Carlisle until 1977. He then returned to Darlington for a further two-year spell; in the first he was the club's player of the season. He finished his professional career with three seasons at then Fourth Division Hartlepool United, for whom he made 96 appearances in all competitions before moving into non-league football in 1982 with Bishop Auckland and then playing for Spennymoor United and Langley Park.

After his professional football career ended, Burleigh worked as a painter and decorator based in Ferryhill, County Durham. He died on 27 September 2021 at the age of 70.

My Memorable Match Involving Martin Burleigh

Everton v Darlington – League Cup third round 1978/79

Unfortunately, I couldn't go to this match because I was at boarding school at the time. But I feel that I must include it because it was one of Martin's best games for Darlington. I can remember as if it were yesterday, being glued to the radio in my bedroom at boarding school listening to the game. Here's what I recall. It goes without saying that I have checked the facts using an old match report, (kindly supplied by Simon Weatherill) given that I was a child at the time the match was played.

As I listened to the radio, I quickly realised that Darlington had packed their defence and in the early stages had easily snuffed out the home team's forwards, Bob Latchford and Mick Walsh. However, they missed a golden opportunity in the 16th minute when Jimmy Cochrane's free kick from the left was headed down by centre-half Derek Craig to striker Jimmy Seal, who miscued his shot from six yards and the ball ended up in the arms of an extremely grateful Everton goalkeeper George Wood; the chance was gone. The home side came more into the game and Martin Burleigh made a brilliant save from Andy King in the 37th minute. The visitors continued to cause their First Division opponents problems and just before the interval, Wood grabbed the ball off John Stone's head, following an excellent free kick from Quakers winger Dennis Wann.

Burleigh was the first keeper to make a save of any worth in the second half when in the 54th minute he dived full length to keep out a rasping 20-yard drive from Everton midfielder Geoff Nulty. Shortly after that, the home side took the lead. Future Darlington manager Colin Todd crossed, King flicked it on and midfielder Martin Dobson slotted the ball home. Not long after his goal, Dobson thought that he'd doubled the lead when he put the ball in the net following a weak back-pass from defender Clive Nattress, but it was chalked off for offside. Just prior to that, Stone had blasted a free kick wide for Darlington after Lloyd Maitland had been brought down by Nulty 30 yards out. The Quakers continued to press and in the 60th minute Wann put another 30-yard free kick inches wide with Wood well beaten. Later in the game, Wood was in trouble again when he handled outside the box. Unfortunately for the visitors, captain Barry Lyons blasted the free kick just wide of the post with Wood again struggling. In the final ten minutes, Peter Madden's men laid siege to the Everton goal, but the home team held out to ensure their somewhat lucky passage into the fourth round.

As I switched my radio off, I can remember thinking that I was proud of my team and wished I'd been there to witness such a brilliant Darlington performance.

* * *

Pat Cuff – Career Details

Pat Cuff was born in Middlesbrough and was an English schoolboy international.

He began his football career as an apprentice with his hometown club in 1968. He made his debut in the Football League while on loan at Grimsby Town in the 1971/72 season, but had to wait until April 1974 for his Middlesbrough debut, by which time the club had already won the Second Division title. He continued as backup to regular goalkeeper and future Darlington manager Jim Platt, until a dispute between Platt and manager Jack Charlton in late 1976 gave Cuff a run in the side.

Pat finished his Middlesbrough career with 31 league appearances, and moved to Millwall in the 1978 close-season on a free transfer. He spent two seasons at The Den and in 1978/79 he was ever-present with 46 appearances in league and cups as the club were relegated to the Third Division but then lost his place to new signing John Jackson and never played for the first team again.

After three years in the then Fourth Division with Darlington, which took his total league appearances to 185, Cuff retired, and later became a bookmaker.

Interestingly, his son Phil played rugby union for West Hartlepool.

My Memorable Match Involving Pat Cuff

Darlington v Doncaster Rovers – 1980/81

I went to this game with my mother. I have to say, the pair of us saw a brilliant second half from the Quakers.

The hosts made a strong start but they found the Rovers defence to be in a determined mood, with goalkeeper Willie Boyd in inspired form. Darlington dominated the first half with some slick, attacking play but couldn't find the breakthrough. Boyd made superb saves from John Stalker and Alan Walsh and several other chances went begging.

It took Darlington only four minutes of the second half to grab the lead. Rovers skipper Hugh Dowd played a wayward back-pass towards his keeper and striker Stalker nipped in and steered the ball home. Ten minutes later Harry Charlton sent Walsh away down the right and he finished off a 50-yard run with a trademark powerful cross-come-shot just inside the far post. It was truly a brilliant goal! In a rare attack, Stewart Mell went close for the visitors, before Dave Hawker scored Darlington's third after 72 minutes, Stalker finding him with a neat pass across the edge of the box and the midfielder firing a low, hard drive into the corner of the net. David Speedie created the fourth when he broke through the middle and unselfishly pushed the ball into Charlton's path and he picked his spot

from 12 yards out. The scoring was completed on 84 minutes when a Stalker cross was handled by Pat Lally and Hamilton drove home the penalty. Five unanswered second-half goals had completely destroyed Billy Bremner's team.

As my mother pushed me home, I can remember saying to her that I could have played in goal in my wheelchair as Pat Cuff was a bystander for almost the whole game. That's why this match always reminds me of Cuffy – because of that throwaway comment.

* * *

Fred Barber – Career Details

Born in Ferryhill, County Durham, Fred Barber began his career at Darlington in 1979, where he served his apprenticeship. He made 135 Football League appearances for the club before a £50,000 move to First Division champions Everton in April 1986.

He was signed as understudy to Neville Southall but after six months and no first-team appearances for Everton, Barber was sold to Walsall for £100,000. In his second season with the club, Walsall were promoted to the then Second Division, but then suffered successive relegations. Fred was loaned out to Peterborough United in 1989/90, where he made six appearances. He was again loaned out in 1990/91 to Chester City on two occasions, in October 1990 and March 1991, accumulating eight appearances, and to Blackpool in November 1990 where he played twice. He also made appearances for Walsall during the same campaign, but moved to Peterborough on a permanent basis in the summer of 1991 for a £25,000 fee. Fred made a total of 153 appearances for Walsall between 1986 and 1991.

He made his second debut for Peterborough on 17 August 1991, keeping a clean sheet against Preston North End in a 1-0 victory. He helped the club to promotion to the Second Division with a 1992 play-off final victory over Stockport County, but they struggled in the second tier and Barber found himself

out on loan once again, at Chesterfield in February 1993, but he didn't make an appearance for the Spireites. He was then sent on loan to Colchester United, making his debut on 20 March 1993 in a 2-0 victory for the U's at Brunton Park against Carlisle United. He made ten appearances for Colchester before returning to Peterborough. In the following season, despite Peterborough finishing bottom of the Second Division, Luton Town made a £25,000 offer for Barber, and he transferred in August 1994, ending his stay with 63 appearances in three years.

Just four months later, Barber found himself back at London Road with Peterborough. Having made no first-team appearances for Luton, he was sent on loan and played five league games. After this stint, he played one league game first at Ipswich Town in November 1995, and one league game in a return to Blackpool in December 1995. The much-travelled keeper finished his Football League career by joining Birmingham City in 1996, again making just a single appearance. The last club he actively played for was Kidderminster Harriers, where he made 21 Conference appearances before stepping into coaching with Bolton Wanderers, West Bromwich Albion, Northern Ireland, Bury, York City, Oman, Jamaica, Sunderland, Stoke City, Blackpool, Burnley, Bradford City, Stockport County, Rochdale and Crewe Alexandra.

My Memorable Match Involving Fred Barber

Darlington v Stockport County – 1982/83

My mother dropped me off at Feethams for this match and I witnessed a stuttering start from Darlington, who despite their recent improvement in form had still only won one home game in the previous four months. Their nervousness showed as the visitors enjoyed the best of the opening half. County took the lead in the 38th minute with a straightforward corner routine. Dean Emerson's flag kick was met by Tommy Sword who scored with an unstoppable header. They could have increased their lead but Fred Barber, who was making his league debut following an injury to regular number one Pat Cuff, produced

two brilliant saves to keep out Nigel Smith and Mike Power. Stockport went into the break with a comfortable 1-0 lead, with the Quakers seemingly sliding towards yet another home defeat.

Barber continued his man-of-the-match performance by saving twice more from Power at the start of the second half, before providing an assist for Alan Walsh's equaliser in the 65th minute. He launched a hefty kick deep into Stockport territory that found Walsh breaking through a gap in the centre of County's defence. He rounded visiting keeper Brian Lloyd and slotted into the net from an acute angle. Peter Cartwright, signed on loan from Newcastle United prior to the match, was not to be outdone by his fellow debutant, and then took centre stage by creating the opening for Darlington's second goal in the 75th minute. He ploughed through three tackles in a determined run in central midfield and played a pass out wide to Walsh, who made progress down the left and crossed to the far post, where the ball was met by the onrushing Dave McLean, who headed home. The victory was completed in the last minute when Tony McFadden outpaced three defenders before drawing Lloyd and sliding the ball wide of the advancing keeper. Three goals in the last 25 minutes had turned what looked like being Darlington's eighth home defeat of the season into an important victory that moved them up another two places in the table. Fred Barber continued his great form and kept his place in goal for the remainder of the season. I had seen him develop for three years in the reserve and youth teams, so it came as no surprise to me when he grabbed his first-team opportunity with both hands, so to speak.

* * *

Mike Astbury – Career Details

Mike Astbury became York City's youngest ever goalkeeper when, as a 16-year-old, he played in City's 1-1 draw at Bournemouth in the 1980/81 season. He had spells in and out of the side over the next few years, with one of the highlights being when York surprisingly knocked Arsenal out of the 1984/85 FA

Cup, where some brave goalkeeping from Astbury kept City in the game before their late winner.

He moved to Peterborough United on loan in January 1986, two months before signing permanently for Darlington. Astbury moved on again in July 1987 to Chester City. Injured shortly after arriving, Mike had to wait until December 1987 for his first-team debut. He played in five successive games during the month but was never picked again as Billy Stewart became the regular goalkeeper for the club.

Astbury was released at the end of that season and joined Chesterfield, where just eight league appearances were made in a relegation season from the Third Division. That marked the end of Astbury's professional career as he joined non-league side Gainsborough Trinity.

Mike later emigrated to play in the USA.

My Memorable Match Involving Mike Astbury

Darlington v York City – 1986/87

Darlington's first match of the 1986/87 season was away at York City. I went there on the train with my friend Ian Carter, and two other associates, Malcolm and Clare. Stephen Lowson, who by now had moved to London, travelled up from there and met us at York station for a game in which David Currie, signed from Middlesbrough in the close-season, and former Grimsby player Mark Hine were making their debuts.

Derek Hood scored first for the Minstermen from the penalty spot in the 17th minute after Darlington central defender Phil Lloyd was adjudged to have handled the ball. However, when Tony Canham scored their second goal on the stroke of half-time he appeared to be yards offside, but the linesman didn't raise his flag even after I shouted at him, so I turned my attention to Viv Busby, the York coach, who by that time was jumping up and down celebrating (you'd think his team had already won the league judging by way he went on) and said he must be blind to think that the goal was onside. But he was adamant that it was and simply ignored my protests.