



BACK IN THE  
**BIG TIME**

Sheffield Wednesday's Return To Division One  
1984-1986



John Dyson

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Foreword by Alan Smith



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## 1.

# Context

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY were relegated from the top flight of English football in 1970. The 14 years that passed before their return to Division One were often difficult ones for the team and its supporters. In the early 1970s, the team produced a series of mid-table finishes under the management of Derek Dooley before a collapse in form at least partly related to a mystery virus led to his sacking on Christmas Eve 1973.

Dooley's successor, Steve Burtenshaw, helped keep the team up that season, but led them to an ignominious relegation the following year. Burtenshaw was in turn replaced by Len Ashurst, who helped avoid a disastrous relegation to the fourth tier in 1976, the team winning the final game of the season against Southend to stay afloat, before achieving an eighth-place finish in Division Three in 1977.

When Ashurst was sacked after a poor start to the following season, Owls stalwart Ken Knighton was placed in temporary charge.

After one game with Knighton as caretaker, Jack Charlton was offered and accepted the job. Charlton was a legendary figure in the game – a World Cup winner with England in 1966 – and had recently left his first managerial position at Middlesbrough. He had led the Teessiders to promotion from Division Two as champions in his first season, 1973/74. Boro were presented with the trophy in advance of their final home game, ironically an 8-0 victory over the Owls.

Charlton was also presented with the manager of the season award, the first time it had been given to somebody outside the top division. Charlton remained in charge of Middlesbrough for three more seasons, achieving a series of respectable finishes in Division One, before leaving the club at the end of 1976/77, arguing that four years was the optimum time to spend in any position.

He then applied for the vacant England manager's job when Don Revie quit the role to work in the Middle East. After not even receiving a reply, Charlton swore never to apply for a job again, and instead would wait to be approached. England's loss was Wednesday's gain. In his autobiography, Charlton relates how he was approached for the post at S6. He chose to watch the team in action ('they were bloody awful'), but before the day was out he had taken the position. 'Perhaps it was the realisation that we could move only one way that attracted me,' he said. Legend has it that sitting among Owls fans that day, seeing and hearing their devotion to the club, ensured Charlton could not turn the job down!

Charlton's appointment was a major turning point in the Owls' move back towards the big time. It was not an immediate success, though, as Charlton battled to find a route to success in Division Three. 'The only gambit that I thought might work,' he said, 'was to throw the ball into the box and take it from there.' The Owls finished safely in 14th in his first season but were humiliated by non-league Wigan Athletic in the FA Cup. To add insult to injury, the club's coach got stuck in the mud trying to leave the ground after the game.

There was another lower mid-table finish the following season, 1978/79, a campaign that was famous for the epic FIVE games that the club played against Arsenal in the FA Cup third round. A series of replays eventually ended with defeat for the Owls at the neutral venue of Filbert Street, Leicester. In January of that season, Charlton made the audacious signing of Terry Curran, persuading him to drop two divisions to sign from Southampton.

Curran's signing provided the momentum that the team needed. The following season he scored 22 league goals in 41

appearances as the Owls finished third in Division Three, finally gaining promotion back to the second tier. One of Curran's goals was in the Boxing Day Massacre of city rivals United, the Owls' 4-0 victory helping provide the push needed for an excellent second half of the season.

Charlton then led the team to a series of top-half finishes in Division Two. The Owls' first overseas signing, Ante Miročević, joined the club in time for the 1980/81 season. A number of players also came through the youth system to become regulars in the first-time squad, including Mark Smith, Mel Sterland, Peter Shirtliff and Kevin Taylor. In 1981/82 the team finished fourth in the table, one point and one place away from promotion. This was the season in which a system of three points for a win was introduced. Ironically, under the previous method of two points for a win, the Owls would have been promoted.

The next season, 1982/83, was Charlton's last as Owls manager. The team finished sixth in the league and reached the FA Cup semi-final. A rare Miročević goal was not enough to prevent a 2-1 defeat to Brighton & Hove Albion. The team had topped the table earlier in the season but ended the campaign with, as Charlton put it, 'nothing to show ... except a series of hard-luck stories'.

Despite the board's best efforts to persuade him to stay, Charlton chose to leave that summer. Nearly six seasons was somewhat longer than the optimum of four that he had suggested when he left Middlesbrough. The Owls had returned from the brink, with renewed confidence and vigour. They had not yet, though, returned to the top table.

The man who was responsible for overseeing promotion back to the top flight was Howard Wilkinson. With the assistance of former Owls player Peter Eustace, he saw the team to a 15-match unbeaten start to the 1983/84 campaign. With goals coming from all round the team – eight players netted five or more times – the team lost only six league games all season. Twenty-six victories and 88 points were enough to see the club promoted in second place, losing out on the championship to Chelsea only on goal difference.

The team lost a League Cup replay to Liverpool at Anfield in January 1984, when the Owls fans sang, 'We'll be back.' Come the following season, the Owls were back. Wilkinson had completed a 14-year rebuilding process. The Owls had dropped to their lowest ebb in the mid-1970s. By 1984, the club was back in the big league.