

Bitten by Wolves

Stories from the Soul of Molineux



Johnny Phillips

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Chapter 1

THE HISTORIAN

'Every club needs a Graham Hughes'

WOLVES SUPPORTERS are walking up to Molineux for the opening game of the 2018/19 season with a sense of anticipation not witnessed here for generations. It is the first season of Premier League football under the ownership of Fosun International. Navigating the close season is always easier when there is nothing to look forward to. No hope or belief. But this was a summer that tantalised like no other, filled with so much expectation.

The memorable Championship winners' promotion parade around the city is still fresh in the mind, when over 80,000 lined the streets of Wolverhampton and West Park on that May Bank Holiday. The new kit, the new Premier League fixture list, the new players. Most of all the new players. Fosun backed up the previous season's expenditure with another round of squad-strengthening. Mexican striker Raúl Jiménez arrived on loan from Benfica. Full-back Jonny Castro Otto came in on loan from Atletico Madrid. The club-record transfer fee was broken when capturing Spanish winger Adama Traoré from Middlesbrough for £18million.

But it was the signing of Portuguese star João Moutinho that genuinely stunned supporters. The 31-year-old arrived

from Monaco on a two-year deal for just £5million. The midfielder stands as the third-most-capped player in Portugal's history, after Cristiano Ronaldo and Luis Figo. In addition to 113 caps for Portugal, he was a key member of the team that won the European Championships in 2016. He also has three Portuguese league titles, three Portuguese cups, the Europa League and a Ligue One title on his curriculum vitae.

All around, there are signs of change. The infamous subway underneath the city ring road, once a congregating point for crowd disorder in the 1970s and 80s, has been given a bright and colourful makeover. An admirable collaboration of club, university and council. A timeline of images, from the club's formation in 1877 to the current team of Championship title-winners, adorn the walls.

The Civic Centre piazza has been transformed into an inner-city beach, playing host to a pre-match entertainment roster of events such as penalty shoot-outs, football darts, table football and face-painting. Local radio station, Signal FM, have brought their roadshow to the event, with live music being performed. Street food stalls and a bar ensure the hundreds of supporters who have been drawn to the fan park are fed and watered. It is not everyone's cup of tea, but it is a thoughtful and concerted effort by the club and city council to put something more into the matchday and modernise a day out at the football.

Yet Wolves are unable to escape their history. It is all around them. The Billy Wright Stand and Stan Cullis Stand are the two largest structures of the four stands. Statues of the two giant figures of Wolves' glorious past watch over fans as they wander up to the turnstiles. At the worst of times it has weighed heavily on the subsequent custodians, almost a shameful reminder that the club should be doing better. At its best, the club's illustrious past acts as a guardian, as if watching over owners, management and players, checking that they are aware of what has been

achieved here, inspiring them to aim higher. History is strange like that.

The seemingly unattainable benchmark for any success at this club is the 1950s. Wolves ended the 1949/50 season as the second-best team in the country, missing out on the league title, on goal difference alone, to Portsmouth. They finished the 1959/60 season lifting the FA Cup at Wembley, pipped to a league and cup double by Burnley by just a single point.

During the ten years between those points, under the iron-fist management of Cullis and led on the field by the England captain Wright, they won three league titles. Wolves were the pioneers of international club football during this time, hosting prestigious floodlit friendlies against the top sides in Europe, which in turn led to the inception of the European Cup in 1955.

A museum at Molineux, inside the Stan Cullis Stand, charts the history of the club from its inception to the present day. There is also a smaller display of artefacts in the reception area inside the main entrance of the Billy Wright Stand. On any given matchday, the club's current custodians will walk past this display on their way to the first-floor boardroom. Jeff Shi is the Wolves chairman, appointed by the owners Fosun International. Occasionally he will be accompanied by Guo Guangchang, chairman of the Chinese conglomerate itself. Jorge Mendes, football's widely tagged 'super agent' and unofficial adviser to the owners, also checks in from time to time.

On hand to greet the owners, officials and the steady stream of guests who walk through the doors each matchday is Graham Hughes. Although, sometimes, he will have to take a seat and watch the arrivals go by. The years have taken their toll on Graham, who walks with the aid of a frame now. Aged 86, he has seen more than most. First as a supporter, and later as an employee, Graham carries with him more than just the history of the club. He holds some of its secrets too.

Graham began his job as the club's dressing room attendant 30 years ago, although that job title does not do justice to the roles he has undertaken at the club, which have ranged in variety from running the post-match baths, stadium maintenance, sorting the post, tending the pitch and arranging players' tickets. 'Every club needs a Graham Hughes,' said former manager Mick McCarthy during his time here.

'I used to help out here back in the 1981/82 season and then I went full time in 1989,' Graham recalls. 'Everybody mucked in. The motto in those days was, "If the job wants doing, do it."'

But his association with the club began much further back. 'The first game I can remember is against West Bromwich Albion in the 1941/42 season,' he says. 'It was the semi-final of the wartime League Cup. That was when Billy Wright broke his ankle and he had to come off. In those days they used to open the gates about 20 minutes before the end, so, as we had no money, we used to come in. Sometimes we'd sneak in, but one day we got chucked out by one of the directors. To work here now, well, it's a privilege and an honour.'

When the club built their museum in 2012, Graham played an important role. 'Being a collector as well, it's great,' he adds. 'There's over 25,000 items in it. The earliest thing we've got is from 1730, a brass kettle from the Molineux Hotel.' Graham points to an old sheet of paper that has been delicately laid out in his reception display. 'This is the wage book for the 1888/89 season.'

Graham was a teenager when the country's post-war football boom began. Wolves' attendances would regularly break 50,000 as the club swiftly established itself at the top. Christmas Day 1948 is etched in his mind – not for anything that happened on the pitch, more for the unconventional build-up to a home fixture with Aston Villa, during an era when games were played on 25 and 26 December, usually against the same team.

‘We cycled in from Codsall, which is five miles away, with my brother on the crossbar,’ says Graham, recounting the story with a smile. ‘He put his foot in the front wheel and I went straight over the handlebars, there was blood everywhere. We were about 200 yards from the village doctor. So I got into the surgery and he patched me up. My wheel was wobbling away, but we still got to the match.’

In the 1990s, as a member of staff, Graham was knocked off his bike again. This time the players had a whip-round to buy him a new one, along with a high-visibility jacket. He saw the funny side, continuing to cycle in to work until the years caught up with him more recently.

Back in those halcyon days as a supporter, it wasn’t just the bike he relied on to get to the ground. More often than not he would bump into the heroes who helped Wolves become one of the giants of the English game. Wright, the man who captained England on 90 occasions, was one of those who would join supporters on their journey to Molineux.

‘He was on the same bus that we got to the match,’ Graham explains. ‘Five past one bus from Codsall. Billy Wright used to get on halfway and it was always packed. He’d walk through with all the supporters, who’d be shouting, “Have a good game Billy.” And he’d reply, “And you enjoy it.”’

Graham reveals that when Wright was made captain of England the news was broken to the player on the bus.

‘He was coming back home from the match one day, on the bus, and the conductor said, “Congratulations, you’ve just been made captain of England.” It was in the stop press of the *Express and Star*, but he didn’t know about it.’

Wright is regarded as the club’s greatest player. He was made captain of Wolves in 1947, taking over from Cullis, who became assistant manager to Ted Vizard before taking the managerial reins a year later. After captaining England in the 1950 World Cup, Wright won the Footballer of the

Year in 1952. He was the inspirational leader on the pitch during the club's three title wins, making 541 appearances before his retirement in 1959. A colossus of the game, who caught a bus to the match with the supporters.

'Wolves were the first club to sign a television deal, you know,' Graham continues. 'When they played Honved. They only had two cameras, like. They agreed on a match fee of £600 to televise the second half of the match. I've still got the letter that Sir Stanley Rous had written down.'

The floodlit friendlies are as much about European football history as they are about Wolves'. In 1953 the club installed floodlights at Molineux at a cost of £10,000. A number of friendlies were organised against international opposition, including Racing Club Buenos Aires, First Vienna, Spartak Moscow and Honved. They captured the public's imagination at a time before the advent of European club football.

The Honved fixture, on 13 December 1954, broke new ground. A crowd of 54,998 packed inside Molineux for the game. Wolves wore a specially made shiny satin shirt, designed to stand out under the floodlights for the benefit of millions of television viewers, who were watching live night-time football for the first time.

The match took place a year after England had been stunned by Hungary at Wembley, losing 6-3 to a Ferenc Puskas-inspired side, and just six months after the Hungarians had routed England 7-1 in Budapest. Honved were the champions of Hungary and their side contained five of the 'Mighty Magyars' team who finished runners-up in the 1954 World Cup Final. Wolves were champions of England, scoring 96 goals on the way to their first league title under Cullis.

The game was billed as a European club final by the international press. When Wolves came back from 2-0 down to win 3-2, the British press was enthralled. Peter Wilson, a widely respected Fleet Street sports journalist,

wrote in the *Daily Mirror*, 'I may never live to see a greater thriller than this. And if I see many more as thrilling I may not live much longer anyway.'

Headlines such as 'Hail Wolves – Champions of the World' and 'Wolves The Great' were written. This reaction was greeted with scepticism in the European press. It set in motion a chain of events that led to the formation of the European Cup.

In France, *L'Equipe's* football editor, Gabriel Hanot, a former French international and long-time proponent of a European club competition, wrote, 'Before we declare that Wolverhampton are invincible, let them go to Moscow and Budapest. And there are other internationally renowned clubs, Milan and Real Madrid to name but two. A club world championship, or at least a European one, should be launched.'

L'Equipe produced a format for a European club competition, to be considered by UEFA. The UEFA congress of March 1955 saw the proposal raised, with approval given in April. The first-ever European Cup competition was held in the 1955/56 season. But Wolves could not retain their title. Instead, it was Chelsea who won the First Division, only to be barred from entering the tournament by a Football Association concerned that their participation would affect domestic midweek attendances. The FA relented the following season, and Wolves entered the competition for the first time in 1958, after securing their second league title of the decade.

By then, Wright's career was drawing to a close and his half-back colleague Bill Slater was emerging as the natural successor as captain. Graham recalls, with great fondness, the time Slater walked through the Molineux reception doors ahead of Manchester City's match here in 2003.

'He had his grandson with him. I saw him in reception and Bill asked if it was possible to get some Manchester City players' autographs, because his grandson was a City

fan,' Graham explains. 'As it was early, I just knocked on the away dressing room door. Kevin Keegan, who was their manager, opened the door. I said, "Bill Slater would like some autographs." He said, "Bill Slater? Bring him in." So he came in with his grandson and had photographs taken with all the players.'

Four months into the 2018/19 season, in December, Slater passed away at the age of 91. There are very few more iconic photographs in the history of Wolves than the one of Slater holding up the FA Cup at Wembley in 1960, sat on the shoulders of Ron Flowers and Peter Broadbent. Slater was a unique figure in the history of Wolves. His was a career that was fulfilled just as much away from the game as in the throes of title battles and cup finals. Slater was the last of the great amateurs.

His move to Wolves happened purely because of a posting in his professional day job. He was appointed as a lecturer of physical education at Birmingham University in 1952. His early career with Blackpool and Brentford had always played second fiddle to his academic studies. When he was posted to Birmingham he wrote to Cullis asking for a game. On signing, he received a stern rebuke from the disciplinarian manager because he had politely asked only for a match with any of the club's teams. Cullis told him that he wanted men with ambition whose only desire was to play for the first XI.

Two months after signing amateur terms, Slater made his debut in October 1952, replacing Wright, who was playing for England that day. It was an unforgettable experience as Wolves thumped Manchester United, the champions of England, 6-2.

The three league titles Slater won in the 1950s owed much to the strength in depth of the half-back positions. He earned an international call-up for England, along with team-mates Wright, Eddie Clamp and Ron Flowers. It was Slater, Clamp and Wright who made up England's half-

back line on three occasions at the 1958 World Cup finals, on one occasion famously shutting out eventual champions Brazil, who averaged three goals a game in their other matches.

Incredibly, Slater's trip to represent his country left him out of pocket. He was given leave of absence by the university but his wages were docked accordingly. The Football Association's own expenses for players representing their country did not quite cover the loss of earnings. Cullis persuaded Slater to turn semi-professional during his time at Wolves. His ten-pound signing-on fee came with the player's stipulation that he be allowed to carry on teaching at Birmingham University.

A young Alan Hinton joined the club in 1957 and, on hearing of his passing, recalled the dedication Slater showed to his football: 'He often ran alone around Molineux in afternoons when he missed normal Wolves sessions due to his university lecturing job,' Hinton revealed. 'He always pushed himself to keep his fitness. A real gentleman.'

Graham, and all those who knew him, describe a man of great humility and dignity. Cullis himself acknowledged as much during a dinner at the Victoria Hotel in Wolverhampton, held in Slater's honour, in 1963. 'I know of no one who created a greater impact on the players at Molineux than Bill, with his self-discipline, good behaviour and sportsmanship. I wish we had many more like him.'

After leaving Wolves, a short second spell at Brentford followed, before Slater retired from football and went on to become director of physical education at Liverpool University. As well as his academic post, he became warden of McNair hall of residence and enjoyed his time participating with students in the competitive halls league each week. There he earned a reputation for never crossing the halfway line unless McNair were losing, in which case he would amble forward and invariably come to the students' rescue.

His successful career continued as he later took a role on the National Olympic Committee, before becoming president of the British Amateur Gymnastics Association. In 1982 he was awarded the OBE and in 1998 he received a CBE, both for services to sport.

But that iconic portrait at Wembley is a fitting way to remember his talents on the pitch. To become captain of one of the very finest teams in England was a monumental achievement. He was named Football Writers' Association Footballer of the Year the season he lifted the cup, as Wolves finished just a point away from a league and cup double. Slater's passing breaks another tie with that golden age, but he will be remembered as a true great. Only the senior generation of supporters can recall what it was like to follow Wolves in that golden age, but the stories have been handed down by men like Graham.

Back in 2012, the club held a retirement reception in Graham's honour, not because he was retiring – he'd never do that – but just to mark three decades of service as he approached his 80th birthday. Graham Taylor, who managed the club in the mid-90s, was one of those who paid him a fitting tribute. 'He's a first-class man. All my memories of him are good ones,' said the former England manager. 'As a manager I always considered it important to be surrounded by good people and you knew he was very loyal. You never had to worry about him talking behind your back or saying something out of place.'

Goalkeeper Mike Stowell, who joined the club before the redevelopment of the ground in the early 90s, remembered how players became reliant on him. 'There would always be leaks from the home dressing room roof when it rained, sometimes so bad that we had to stand on the benches to get changed,' he added. 'Hughesie never complained though. He'd just get his mop and bucket out and clean the place up. They were character-building days and we looked on him as our one luxury.'

Even now, he is known to wander out on to the pitch while the groundsmen are mowing the grass to take over the lawnmower for a few steps. 'He is the life of Wolves,' says one of the ground staff, Chris Lane. 'I don't think that there is one member of staff here who he doesn't know.'

Graham's work on a matchday is restricted to a meet-and-greet role these days. He retains a sharp sense of humour. When asked how he is feeling ahead of kick-off, he replies, 'I don't think I'll make it, my pace has gone.' John Bowater, one of the club's directors, takes Graham in to his executive suite to enjoy the match now that he no longer has the mobility to work in the dressing rooms.

Years after most people are enjoying retirement, Graham continues to devote his life to Wolves. He has had other jobs, and national service of course, but none of them quite compare to this. 'I used to be in the heating trade in the south-west, working all over that region,' he adds. 'But it's just great being part of the club that I've supported since 1941. It's a privilege and an honour. I still get the buzz now. We get people from all over the world coming to see us. I remember an American chap who came here. He'd come over to London to go to university. He was walking through London Euston station and he saw one of the platform destination signs reading "Wolverhampton", so he said to his mate, "I'll see you later." He just got on the train and came here. He signed the visitors' book in reception. They come from all over the world.' And when they arrive, Graham Hughes is on hand to tell them everything they need to know.