

# NOBODY REMEMBERS SECOND

Aston Villa 1989-1993



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## Revival, Then Survival

*'Taylor ruthlessly advised club legend Andy Gray that he was going to move him on before embarking on a tough promotion bid. He did not wish to compete with Gray's robust personality in the dressing room. There would only be room for one boss and one leader, and he wanted that to be himself.'*

GRAHAM TAYLOR'S journey to becoming Aston Villa manager was slightly ironic and included a few twists of fate. He first became aware of Villa's interest in him in the summer of 1987 while he was at Watford. Word had reached him from the former Villa manager Dick Taylor, who was then selling training kit to clubs for his sports shop business, based near Villa Park.

Curiously, the Hornets boss had first set eyes on Dick Taylor when he was a schoolboy as Dick underwent training runs past his house while playing for Scunthorpe United in the 1950s. Graham was the son of a sports journalist on the *Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph* at the time. Fast forward more than three decades and Graham would become Villa boss, a position which Dick held from 1964 to 1967.

Graham filled the position vacated by Billy McNeill, the Scotland and Celtic legend who had been fired by chairman Doug Ellis after eight torrid months in charge at Villa. McNeill suffered the ignominy of helping to relegate Villa and his former club Manchester City to the Second Division in the same miserable season, 1986/87.

Taylor soon learned that Ellis was a more controlling, hands-on chairman than he had become used to from working with pop-star owner Elton John at Vicarage Road. Nonetheless, Taylor possessed the intelligence to cajole Ellis and allow him the egotistical space he needed but he was in total command of the area he was interested in, namely football matters.

When Taylor signed on at Villa Park, it was he who was taking a chance as he was leaving a comfortable

job at a top-flight club to drop down a division to manage a team that badly needed reorganising and reshaping to earn promotion and achieve future success. It was a gamble he was happy to take and which subsequently paid dividends for him, even if Ellis had refused to match the salary that Watford were paying him and also denied him the use of a Jaguar car that he had become accustomed to.

Taylor immersed himself in all things Villa. He gleaned, from reading the local papers, that the supporters held the penny-pinching Ellis responsible for the relegation, and not so much the two managers who had presided over the dreadful season, McNeill and Graham Turner.

Taylor was quick to assemble a staff he was familiar with. He hired Steve Harrison as first-team coach, Jim Walker as physio and Bobby Downes as his youth coach, while Dave Richardson returned to Villa from Leicester City.

The playing personnel also required surgery. Some business had been agreed before Taylor's arrival as Paul Elliott (to Pisa) and Tony Dorigo (to Chelsea) had committed to leave Villa. Mercurial winger Mark Walters soon followed them out the door to Rangers, for a fee of £700,000 that bolstered the new manager's

transfer kitty. Taylor's first signings were a central defender he knew well at Watford, Steve Sims, and striker Alan McNally from Celtic. He had agreed to sign McNally for Watford but once he took the Villa job, he derailed that move and secured McNally's services for his new club, albeit for an extra £100,000 as the Celtic chairman shrewdly noted that Villa was a bigger club. McNally, who Villa fans nicknamed 'Rambo', had been in the shadows, somewhat, of Brian McClair and Mo Johnston at Celtic and was now ready to make his name.

'When I came to Aston Villa they really were in turmoil,' McNally recalled. 'They were in such a difficult position when they got relegated. They had players in the team who weren't good enough to play for Aston Villa. Graham Taylor knew he had to bring in better players than what they had and players who would fight for the badge.'

Taylor ruthlessly advised club legend Andy Gray that he was going to move him on before embarking on a tough promotion bid. He did not wish to compete with Gray's robust personality in the dressing room. There would only be room for one boss and one leader, and he wanted that to be himself. Gray was annoyed that he wasn't given the chance to show he could be a

leader on the manager's side rather than against him, but nonetheless found a new home at nearby West Brom.

'Andy was very popular at Villa Park because of his first spell at the club, but I felt he had too much influence around the place,' Taylor commented. 'Don't get me wrong, I liked Andy, but I needed to demonstrate that I was the boss and that it was not optional to follow my rules.'

'Andy was 31 and had been at the top and I felt I needed players who had a hunger and desire to get there rather than someone who had been there already.'

Taylor's last quip on Gray was refreshingly honest but slightly contradictory when he also signed Derek Mountfield, who had experienced the same success at Everton that Gray had; while Nigel Spink and Allan Evans (and Gordon Cowans who he signed subsequently) had won the European Cup at Villa, and Paul McGrath was an established international and an FA Cup winner at Manchester United. The former explanation was clearly the biggest reason for Gray's departure.

Another Andy Gray then arrived, in the shape of the Crystal Palace midfielder, and his namesake Stuart, from Barnsley. Attacking midfielder Mark

Lillis joined from Derby County where he had struggled for game time, while Notts County legend David Hunt also added depth to a new-look Villa midfield that included Paul Birch, Steve Hunt and Andy Blair.

European Cup winner Gary Williams left for Leeds United after almost a decade at Villa Park and one of his replacements at right-back (Taylor also signed Chris Price from Blackburn Rovers) was Kevin Gage from Wimbledon. It wasn't long before Taylor was exploiting Gage's versatility and playing him in the centre of midfield and even at left-back sometimes.

'Once I went to Villa Park and walked around the place and met everybody, it was a no-brainer that I'd be signing for them even though I was dropping down a division to do so,' Gage said. 'Wimbledon had just finished sixth in the old First Division, but we were massively punching above our weight with an average gate of around 6,000. Taylor sold Aston Villa to me, and I didn't need much persuading. He explained that Villa did not intend on staying down in that league for very long and that my experience of promotions with Wimbledon would be very important to his Villa project.



‘Wimbledon tried to match what Villa were paying me but even if they had offered me the world, I had my heart set on leaving for Villa. I saw the potential at Villa, and I was also keen to work under Graham after what he had achieved at Watford.’

Stuart Gray also signed for Villa largely based on Taylor’s reputation. He quickly observed why players enjoyed working for the manager. Not only did he feel Taylor was organised and tactically astute, but he saw an empathy towards players that many other managers did not possess.

‘Graham took the trouble of coming to my home with his wife, Rita,’ Gray recalled. ‘He spoke to me for about 20 minutes and everything he promised he would do, he delivered on. So, to then have the privilege of him making me the Aston Villa captain made it even more special. My first room-mate was Allan Evans and he was such a great ambassador and captain of Villa and I could see what the club meant to him. So, for me to follow someone like Allan as captain, who was a top pro and a great bloke, meant a great deal.’

Evans, meanwhile, was certainly not bitter at his ousting as skipper. On the contrary – he was enjoying the fresh, positive environment that Taylor and his staff had created.

‘I know that Graham brought in Steve Sims to replace me but that motivated me and I soon found that the defensive techniques being shown to us in training by Steve Harrison were almost revolutionary,’ Evans said. ‘I learned more about the art of defending in my one season under Graham and his staff than I had in my previous ten years at Villa.’

Taylor’s home debut was against Birmingham City. Quite a baptism. It was on that day he grasped the strength of feeling, or hatred, between the two clubs and realised it was much worse than the Watford versus Luton encounters he had previously viewed as being a bit tasty. This was another level. Blues won 2-0 and the result invited some early pressure on the new manager. In fact, they were 19th in the Second Division after his first month in charge. But the more his influence impacted the players, the better results became.

Taylor gradually found the right balance with which to humour Ellis, like when he had to listen to the story of how he invented the bicycle kick when in Tranmere Rovers’ reserves. There were many more, as the manager listened and smiled politely when others might have ended such anecdotes a little more abruptly and rudely.

Taylor drove back to Vicarage Road a couple of times during that first season at Villa, not to meet old friends, but just to remind himself of the happy times he had had at Watford, which was the town where his daughters had grown up. It was not a case of self-doubt, but more a way of reminding himself of why he took on the ambitious challenge of Villa.

Another month into his first season, Villa were sixth and on their way towards an eventual promotion, as runners-up to Millwall. The Londoners finished four points ahead, while Villa pipped Middlesbrough to the second automatic promotion place by virtue of superior goals scored, despite the same points (78), and same goal difference (+27).

Taylor's first objective was complete: promotion, tick.

Along the way that season, Steve Harrison left Taylor's staff to make his first move into management by taking the Watford post, which had been vacated by Dave Bassett. Taylor filled Harrison's job with another former contact, John Ward, who had played under him at Lincoln City and latterly working at Watford, where he had been Taylor's assistant.

Taylor soon took his revenge on Harrison for leaving by snatching the signature of the exciting

Crewe Alexandra midfielder David Platt for £200,000. Platt was set for a move to Vicarage Road until Taylor sniffed the deal. He subsequently scored a goal in each of his first three matches for Villa and played a vital role in the promotion push from February 1988.

Villa were promoted back to the First Division after just a single year in the second tier, bouncing back from a gradual decline since the heights of being European champions in 1982. A lack of investment in the transfer market and the constant sales of their best player assets eventually took its toll. Until, that is, Taylor set about the rebuilding work.

Ellis rarely satisfied the Villa supporters, but the fans would have to acknowledge Ellis got it right with the appointment. He arrived with a reputation as a manager who liked to play the 'long ball' at Vicarage Road. But in fairness to him and his coaches, his brand at Villa might have been direct with tall strikers such as Alan McNally, Garry Thompson and the rookie Ian Olney, but the football was usually vibrant and exciting.

One of the first moves that Taylor made on winning promotion was to convince Ellis to bring the popular legend Gordon Cowans back from Italian club

Bari, as Villa still held 'first option' on his signature. It was another shrewd move.

Taylor was not only a master of the transfer market and handling Ellis – he also knew the importance of team spirit, which was one of the reasons why a mediocre team like Watford that often relied on the brilliance of John Barnes and the goals of Luther Blissett was able to believe in themselves enough to finish second in the top flight in the 1982/83 season, and reach the FA Cup Final a year later.

The boss once took Villa on a team bonding trip to a Pontins holiday camp, when he'd allowed the players to think they were going somewhere more exotic after telling them to bring their passports. Still, the end goal was achieved when a healthy team spirit had been garnered prior to their return to the First Division. Perhaps the most comical moment of the trip came once he found out where Steve Sims had been going when he was supposed to be with the team. Sims, supposedly injured, had entered himself in a bowls competition against dozens of elderly holidaymakers.

Once Taylor found out, there was no rant or disciplinary action. Instead, he ensured the rest of the squad were present to cheer on Sims in his semi-

final clash. That was vintage Taylor. Not only did he make his point that he would always find out if players were being sneaky behind his back, but he did it by still managing to create a fun environment with the rest of the squad.

On another occasion, the team embarked on a more exciting trip than the English coastline, to Spain. On such trips, managers were always slightly concerned the players would misbehave once they were allowed the freedom of so many bars and the luxury of alcohol.

‘After we got promoted, Doug paid for all the players to go to Marbella for a week,’ Garry Thompson said. ‘We were drinking, carrying on and having fun as you do. But Platty was a bit distant. When Platty first came to the club, myself, Gary Shaw, McInally and Andy Gray would take him out for something to eat so he wasn’t sitting in a hotel on his own and was spending time getting to know the lads.

‘Anyway, in Marbella, me and Shawry had a word with him after a few drinks and said, “What’s the matter with you, you’re acting all quiet and strange.” Platty then explained that the gaffer had advised him to stay away from some of the lads, “especially Shaw and Thompson because all they want to do is get

pissed and chase birds”. I don’t blame Platty for that, he was doing what he thought he had to do.’

Inevitably, Taylor added to his promotion winners with more quality to help Villa through that first campaign back in the top flight. Derek Mountfield was signed from Everton for £400,000 in June 1988. The centre-half, born and bred in the Wirral, brought good pedigree with him having won two English league titles, an FA Cup and a Cup Winners’ Cup. He had formed a reliable central defensive partnership with Kevin Ratcliffe at Goodison Park but found himself surplus to requirements once the Toffees recruited Dave Watson from Norwich City. Taylor was quick to spot a player who he thought could help take Villa to the next level.

‘I’d had a difficult couple of years at Everton, partly because of a knee injury and partly because of Dave coming in,’ Mountfield said. ‘I no longer felt a part of the team and mentioned to the manager Colin Harvey that I didn’t want to go on the pre-season tour to Magaluf [in 1988]. I didn’t expect to leave Everton that summer because I still had a year left on my contract, but things changed very quickly.

‘The next thing, Villa had been in touch and both clubs had agreed a fee. I met with Graham Taylor and

it soon became clear that moving to Aston Villa would be a great move for me. It gave me my appetite back for football. At Everton, I had gone from someone who was a first-team regular and winning trophies to being on the fringes, sitting in the stands watching the first team and playing reserve team games. Graham gave me my spark back.'

Mountfield was virtually a household name in English football at that stage given the medals he had accrued. But Taylor was not a manager who only liked to recruit established talent. He was prepared to take a punt on someone if he believed he had something he could work with and nurture.

Bradford City attacker Ian Ormondroyd would be one of the more extreme examples. Taylor invested £650,000 on the 6ft 5in Yorkshireman and signed him in February 1989, along with right-winger from Derby County Nigel Callaghan, who he had worked with at Watford. Few Villa supporters would have remembered that Ormondroyd had scored for Bradford in a shock 5-0 win at Villa Park the season before in the Full Members' Cup.

'That was a strange result,' recalled Ormondroyd with a chuckle. 'Then Villa pipped us by a point in the league to go up ahead of us.'



‘I was a hometown boy and it was a bit of a shock when Villa came calling. But I was going from a middling team in the old Second Division to a massive club that had an incredible history. I knew I had to go to try and improve myself, but it was a big jump for me. The huge transfer fee was an added burden because the expectancy levels were high.’

Ormondroyd, warmly nicknamed ‘Sticks’ by the Villa fans for his beanpole frame and long, skinny legs, was able to help his new club to a 2-0 win on debut at home to Sheffield Wednesday. Soon, his wife would be able to watch most of his home matches from the Holte End as she transferred from West Yorkshire Police to the West Midlands and often worked on matchdays as an officer in charge of crowd control. Future manager Ron Atkinson mischievously retold a quip by team physio Jim Walker. It is said that Mrs Ormondroyd was heard in the players’ lounge after a match complaining about the level of abuse that her Ian was receiving, and she was tempted to arrest them. ‘In that case,’ Walker interjected, ‘you’d have arrested the whole of the bloody Holte End!’

Villa endured a difficult season back in the First Division, finishing on 40 points and one place above

the relegation zone in 17th and just a single point ahead of relegated Middlesbrough, who went down with bottom club Newcastle and West Ham. Villa won only two of their last 15 league games and managed a 1-1 draw in their last game of the season at home to local rivals Coventry City. Atkinson's Sheffield Wednesday beat Boro 1-0 and helped themselves and Villa to steer clear of the drop. Interestingly, the Owls were relegated a year later, with 43 points!

The campaign had started encouragingly enough with no defeats in their first six matches and a 3-2 win against Arsenal away at Highbury in the second league game. McNally notched two of those goals and he eventually scored 22 for the season, despite the team's indifferent results.

His haul included two against Millwall in the third round of the League Cup, the second being one of the goals of the season. He collected a punch from goalkeeper Nigel Spink midway in his own half before beating three Millwall players and slipping the ball past opposition keeper Brian Horne.

'It was a season of transition,' reflected Gage, who missed the last two months after getting badly injured at Millwall. Kevin O'Callaghan's tackle injured his knee ligaments and kept him out for six months.

‘That was the season where I started playing in midfield. Initially, Chris Price was brought in to compete with me for the right-back position and, somehow, he got the nod over me, which I wasn’t too pleased about as I had been an ever-present in the promotion year. But Graham knew where he was taking this squad, and he knew I could play in midfield. It worked out well until I got injured.’

Taylor phoned all the players at the end of what was a difficult campaign, with an important message. This was where his sublime man-management skills came to the fore. In one sense, he was praising them for avoiding a second relegation in three seasons. But more poignantly, he was already setting about raising the bar and he needed his players to respond accordingly.

‘Graham kept saying, that first season back was all about survival,’ winger Tony Daley revealed. ‘But what stuck in my mind was when he called me at my home as soon as our survival was assured. He said, “Well done this season, staying up is a great success. But next season we are going to kick on. We are going to go places.” He actually said those words. He filled me with confidence – it was nice to hear. But I honestly never expected to do as well as we did the following year.’

**1988/89 season:**

League position: 17th (of 20)

League Cup: quarter-final (lost 2-1 at West Ham United)

FA Cup: fourth round (lost 1-0 at home to Wimbledon)

Full Members' Cup: second round (lost 2-1 at Derby County)

Top scorers: Alan McInally 22; David Platt 15; Kevin Gage 7