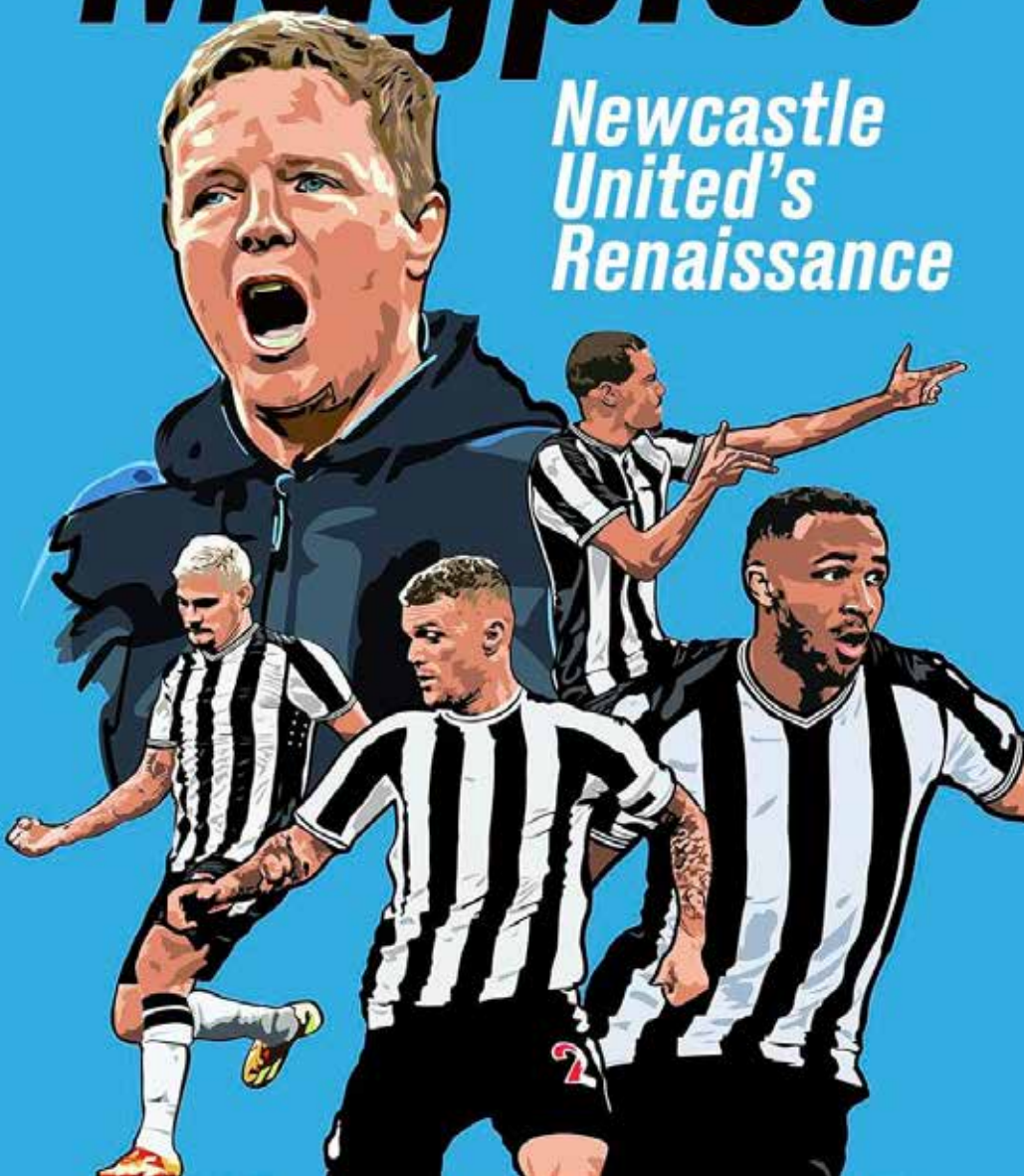


Abi Smith



Rise of the Magpies

*Newcastle
United's
Renaissance*



Rise of the
Magpies

*Newcastle United's
Renaissance*

Abi Smith



Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Prologue	11
1. The Ashley Era	21
2. Goodbye Big Mike.	34
3. Eddie's Boys	42
4. Getting the Flock Together	64
5. Starting as We Mean to Go On	82
6. January Sales.	98
7. One for Sorrow, Two for Joy	125
8. Summer Signings and Season Starters	136
9. Gimme, Gimme, Gimme a Striker from Sweden	148
10. Gordon, Goals, Going Out	165
11. Champions *Whisper* League.	182
12. Bad Times Don't Last but Legends Do	202
13. You're Only as Good as Your Last Game	224

Chapter 1

The Ashley Era

'We know if you're not being sincere, we can tell. You can't get much past the fans.'

David

THE ERA of Mike Ashley, although originally full of expectation, full of promise and ultimately and most importantly full of cash, was little in terms of deliverance. Hope can be, as they say, the cruellest emotion of them all, and although the Sports Direct CEO was initially quick to earn the handshakes and the hugs from the fans, buying pints at the local bars and sharing away-day transport with fans, he was the biggest disappointment of them all. The fans know a committed owner when they see one and the resentment started to build over the years. Now if you mention the name Mike Ashley, you're likely to be met with expletives and headshakes.

The reasons for this animosity are numerous and were built on his lack of investment in the team, his disregard for the club's history and traditions and his handling of managerial appointments. He made hasty and ill-informed decisions when it came to hiring and firing managers, resulting in a lack of stability and continuity at the club, with

numerous managers coming and going in a short period of time. Ten different managers, to be exact. The constant upheaval and uncertainty hindered the team's progress and made it difficult for any manager to build a successful team and secure success on the pitch. Coupled with Ashley's failure to invest, this meant that there was no spark when it came to signings. His reluctance to splash the cash on quality players to improve the squad was obvious, instead opting for cheap and inexperienced signings. This lack of ambition and investment led to a decline in the performance and reputation of Newcastle United. It was a vicious circle.

Under Ashley's ownership the team often struggled in the lower half of the Premier League table and were relegated twice – in the 2008/09 season and again in 2015/16, although they returned to the top flight both times at the first opportunity by winning the Championship. 'I want to have fun and win some trophies,' said Ashley when he assumed control in 2007. What a joke that statement turned out to be.

I don't want to rehash old ground and, ideally, I know many fans would like to draw a big 'Mike who?' line under that whole period. But I'm reminded again of the new generation of fans now seeing a club with a strong owner, a respected manager and a stability that shouldn't be taken for granted. *The Rise of the Magpies* is all the more poignant when you add the right context of the time their wings were clipped. There's a solidarity among the club and the fans, especially the younger fans who showcase their love of their team, not just by matchday attendance and rundown of the game with their mates afterwards, but by the many channels of social media, chat apps, YouTube channels and gaming platforms that allow this amazing and incomparable fanbase to flourish.

‘The name Mike Ashley doesn’t mean anything to Henry, it doesn’t make his blood run cold and shake his head,’ reveals my husband, talking of our 11-year-old supporter son. So, for the purposes of context and a brief history lesson for the younger generation, please indulge me. Mike Ashley bought Newcastle United in May 2007 for a reported £134 million.

Rob: When he came in, he was like, everything seemed great. He was a millionaire, he had plenty of money and, although no one had heard of him, he came in and bought Newcastle and everything was great. He would go out with fans to nightclubs and buy them drinks and everyone thought it was a breath of fresh air. And he brought back Kevin Keegan, which everyone thought was great!

Geordie hero Kevin Keegan came in as a replacement to Sam Allardyce, a popular move among the fans. Everyone who remembered the 90s remembered when Newcastle United earned the nickname ‘the entertainers’ for their exhilarating style of play and their ability to captivate fans with their attacking prowess, all under the management of King Kev. That was a time Newcastle became one of the most exciting teams in English football, thrilling spectators with their attacking football and never-say-die attitude, and fans were hoping for a repeat of history.

Cast your minds back to 1992. Keegan, a former England international and, of course, former Newcastle United player, brought a new vision and philosophy to the club. He believed in playing attractive, attacking football that would excite the fans and bring success. Assembling a team of players who’d become the backbone of ‘the

entertainers', he signed Peter Beardsley, Andy Cole and David Ginola, who'd go on to become fan favourites and play pivotal roles in the team's success. These players were not only skilled footballers but also possessed a flair and creativity and, coupled with an attacking style of play with a high tempo, speed and precision, they were a formidable force.

Probably one of the defining moments of that era came in the 1995/96 season when Newcastle United mounted a title challenge that captured the imagination of football fans across the country. Led by the prolific strike partnership of Alan Shearer and Les Ferdinand, they were the top scorers in the league that season, netting an impressive 66 goals. Despite this impressive haul they missed out on the Premier League title to Manchester United. But the legacy of 'the entertainers' lived on, especially with their never-say-die attitude that resonated with fans, and all this had a lasting impact on the club's identity. Newcastle United became synonymous with attacking football and a never-give-up mentality. The team's spirit and determination became part of the club's DNA. It captivated football fans from around the country, even if they didn't support Newcastle, as my father-in-law recalls.

Grampy: There was a newfound respect for Newcastle. They became the second-favourite club to lots of people.

You have to remember, this brand of football wasn't known among other clubs and, of course, with matches then starting to be widely televised, people had access to watching Newcastle play this wonderful entertaining style of football.

So it's easy to see why, when Ashley brought back in Keegan in 2007, the fans were buzzing with historical expectation, as John told me:

We thought with Keegan back, we'd have the best chance of playing exciting football and score lots of goals and be talked about again. We went to St James' to meet Keegan who had Mike Ashley grinning from ear to ear next to him. Ashley could walk on water to all of us then.

But it didn't have the same nostalgic joy that the fans had hoped for. The one-time entertainers of English football were reduced to a grim curiosity. The rest of the country were smug, knowing NUFC's plight was not theirs. Supporters merely endured.

It was very clear very early on that Ashley was running the club exactly how he wanted to, to the detriment of the fans, the players and the team's success.

Rob: Mike Ashley was only concerned about having Mike Ashley people around him. He brought in Dennis Wise, and let me tell you something, Dennis Wise was hated up here in Newcastle, hated. He was a dirty player, a player who would just wind up the crowd and, out of 50,000 fans at Newcastle, 51,000 hated him.

Former Chelsea midfielder Dennis Wise joined the Magpies in January 2008 as the club's Executive Director of Football, a role that was met with mixed reactions from fans and pundits alike. But Wise laughed in the face of controversy, having had a successful playing career marred

by disciplinary issues, so he didn't care in the slightest that his appointment at Newcastle was seen as a bold move by owner Mike Ashley, who believed that Wise's experience and knowledge of the game would help the club.

One of Wise's first tasks was to assist Keegan in the January transfer window. The duo brought in several new players, including the likes of Jonás Gutiérrez and Sébastien Bassong. These signings initially brought a glimmer of hope to the fans but things turned sour as tensions between Keegan and Wise began to rise.

Rob: Keegan wasn't happy because Dennis Wise tried to get him to sign a player by just watching videos of this player on YouTube! Well, of course, Keegan wouldn't do that, he would send out his own scouts for new players, he would invite them to see them play, he wouldn't just watch videos of someone! When he left, it went downhill from there.

Keegan resigned from his position in September 2008, citing interference from the board as the main reason for his departure. This incident sparked outrage among the fans, who saw Wise as the orchestrator of their beloved Keegan's exit. Wise remained at the club and took on a more prominent role in the footballing side of things, appointing Joe Kinnear as interim manager, a decision that was met with scepticism by many fans and pundits and disappointment by even more fans and pundits alike.

Kinnear's previous managerial experience, which included stints at Wimbledon and Luton Town, didn't inspire confidence in his ability to lead a Premier League club and, from the outset, his time at Newcastle was marred by a series of questionable decisions and public

outbursts. In what's now an infamous press conference, he mispronounced the names of several Newcastle players and swore repeatedly (over 65 times to be exact), setting the incompetence tone for his tenure and immediately alienating him from the club's supporters.

Perhaps the most damning aspect of Kinnear's time at Newcastle was the team's relegation from the Premier League in 2008/09. Despite inheriting a squad that had finished 12th the previous season, Kinnear was unable to steer the team clear of the drop zone. Disheartening wasn't the word.

Isaac: I remember watching week-in, week-out, losing every week. I remember sitting watching us get relegated from the Premier League with my uncle and just being so upset. Even now I just remember how little Mike Ashley did for our club.

Kinnear's transfer dealings during his time at Newcastle were equally underwhelming. While he was given control over player recruitment, he failed to make any significant signings that would improve the squad. Instead, he brought in several mediocre players who failed to make an impact on the team. He was responsible for bringing in the likes of Xisco and Ignacio González, two players who failed to make any significant impact at the club. These signings, along with others, were seen as a waste of money, lacking in ambition and further fuelled the fans' frustration.

Kinnear's management style also came under scrutiny. He was known for his abrasive and confrontational approach, often clashing with players and staff. There was a toxic atmosphere within the club and his inability to build positive relationships with the players and foster a cohesive

team spirit was evident in Newcastle's performances, which were consistently uninspiring. It didn't help matters that the likes of Wise and Kinnear, along with Tony Jimenez, a close associate of Ashley who was also involved in the club's operations and played a role in player recruitment, were colloquially known as the 'Cockney Mafia'. The exact composition of this group isn't clear but it's believed that they were all involved in various capacities at Newcastle during Ashley's tenure.

Rob: They brought in Joe Kinnear, who'd been out of the game. He was in charge of Nottingham Forest, I believe. Why was he in? I have no idea, pet, he was Dennis Wise's friend. Kinnear was manager at Wimbledon when Dennis Wise was a player. Wise was always disliked as a player, and bringing in Joe Kinnear was a joke. He actually tried to sign a player who was on our books but we'd loaned him out, and he couldn't get to grips with some of the players' names. All the Newcastle fans used to call them and Ashley the Cockney Mafia.

The term was often used by Newcastle fans and critics to express their frustration and dissatisfaction with the perceived influence of these individuals over the club. It was a nickname given to the group of London-based businessmen who were believed to have significant influence over the club's operations and decision-making processes. More significantly, these individuals were thought to have no understanding of the club's values and traditions, a sacrosanct value for Geordies. 'Out Cockney Mafia' signs were displayed by fans, particularly during the time Londoner Alan Pardew took over as manager.

Ashley gave him an eight-year contract in 2012, which raised eyebrows, although it confirmed Pardew's status inside Ashley's inner circle. It's important to note that 'Cockney Mafia' is subjective and has been disputed by some individuals associated with the club, but it remains a part of the narrative surrounding Newcastle United during Mike Ashley's ownership.

In April 2009, Wise left Newcastle United by mutual consent, ending a tumultuous period for both the club and the former midfielder. His time at Newcastle will be remembered for the controversies, poor transfer decisions and the strained relationships with managers and fans. But things could only get better, right? This would be a fresh start for everyone and a brighter future for the club, wouldn't it? Not with Ashley still in charge. He was the figurehead for all that was going wrong with the club.

Alan: I think he was just a ruthless businessman. He put a lot of money into Newcastle but he took a lot out. He ruined the club. He wasn't a football man, he was a businessman and wasn't interested in the football side, the talent or who was playing.

Furthermore, Ashley's lack of transparency and rare communication with the fans was creating a sense of disconnect between the owner and the fanbase, leading to a breakdown in trust and a feeling of being ignored. The fans felt their voices weren't being heard and their concerns, namely that he didn't care about the club, weren't addressed. He appointed golden boy Shearer as interim manager when Kinnear left the club but, with only eight games in charge before the end of the season and no money

to buy new players as the transfer window was closed, the club was relegated.

Ashley decided Shearer wasn't cut out to be manager. ('I told him what I thought should happen next,' revealed Shearer, 'and I never heard from him again. All of us were ostracised from the club we used to be. We were alienated. I felt so unwelcome.') Ashley brought in Chris Hughton and renamed Shearer's Bar, the famous drinking place attached to the stadium in honour of the Magpies' leading goalscorer, as Nine Bar.

Sharon: Ashley made huge profits from the club and all of the fans but none of that money was invested back into Newcastle in the 14-odd years he owned the club. There was no investment in the team, the stadium, the training facilities or coaching. Which ultimately meant no progression for the team in any cup competitions, no hope for the players, who eventually left when fed up of not achieving much, and no hope for the fans.

Sharon's opinion was that he was lining his pockets and the club was just left to survive. Another frustration for Newcastle fans was Ashley's blatant disregard for the club's history and traditions, renaming the stadium from St James' Park to Sportdirect.com@StJames'Park, before rebranding it again to the Sports Direct Arena. This move was seen as a disrespectful and a commercialisation of the club's heritage, showcasing Ashley's selfish agenda, promoting his own business, Sports Direct, over the club's proud and historical identity. The stadium wasn't then, isn't now and never has been just a sporting ground. St James' Park is a symbol of the city's identity and a gathering

place for the community. From its humble beginnings as a cricket ground to its transformation into a world-class stadium, St James' Park has witnessed the triumphs and tribulations of the club. It stands as a testament to the city's love for football and remains an iconic landmark in Newcastle upon Tyne.

Grampy: St James' Park ... it's hard to describe what it is. Whichever direction you go in, it's the first thing you see, it stirs something that's in you. It's iconic because it's well known to everyone, but here's the funny thing, whether you're a home or away supporter, you're proud of it. You're proud of what it represents. And not many clubs can say that about their ground.

The passion and loyalty of fans make St James' Park a bastion, creating an electric atmosphere on matchdays. It's incredible to witness first-hand, and for my son, coming up to watch a game at St James' for the first time, an experience he'll never forget.

Henry: The songs are loud, Mum, everyone is singing or waving a flag. It felt like I was home, everyone just wanted to be there for the same reason and I was hugging everyone!

Quicker than a hiccup, Henry was part of the Toon Army and submerged in the cauldron of passion, excitement and unwavering support for the home team.

Isaac: The atmosphere is like music to your ears. As soon as you hear the crowd roar it's like adrenaline

like you have never felt before rush through your body.

It's a sentiment that's echoed far and wide. The passion and energy create an atmosphere that's unmatched in any other club. The chants, flags and sheer volume of noise make the stadium a deafening place for opponents and a serenade for the home team.

The origins of St James' Park can be traced back to the 19th century when a group of cricket enthusiasts formed the Newcastle East End Cricket Club. In 1880, the club decided to add a football section to their organisation, and St James' Park became their home ground. The park was named after a nearby church dedicated to St James and was a modest venue. Six years later Newcastle East End merged with a local club called West End to form Newcastle United. The newly formed club became one of the powerhouses of English football, and St James' Park became their fortress. 'It's the fortress on the hill, it's the first thing you see when you come to Newcastle, our welcome home sign to supporters,' confirms fan Tommy James.

For those who don't know their fortress history (and for those that do, humour us), the Leazes Stand was built in 1905, followed three years later by the Gallowgate End. During the 1920s and 1930s, St James' Park witnessed some of its greatest moments. Under the management of legendary manager Stan Seymour, Newcastle won three league titles and reached the FA Cup Final four times, winning it on three occasions. In 1953, floodlights were installed and a decade later the Milburn Stand was constructed. With a capacity for 52,000, it has not only been a venue for football but has also hosted other sporting events – it's a regular venue for rugby union matches, for example.

Beyond its sporting significance, St James' Park holds a special place in the hearts of the people of Newcastle. The stadium is a symbol of the city's identity and a gathering place for the community, which is why, when Ashley reportedly prioritised his own business interests over the well-being of the club and used the stadium as a platform for advertising his own company, it was a bitter pill for fans to swallow. And how much did he really care about football in the end?

Rob: Mike Ashley had the money to spend but he didn't buy any players or do anything with his money for the club. He went out and bought Debenhams instead! He's a businessman, I get that, but you don't run a football club and buy Debenhams!

Ashley presided over two of Newcastle's six relegations in their 129-year history, so his departure from the club was met with both relief and optimism by the fans. After a tumultuous tenure as owner marked by a lack of investment, poor decision-making, alienating icons and overpromoting interlopers, spending money begrudgingly and intermittently, and a strained relationship with the fanbase, many supporters saw Ashley's departure as a positive step towards a brighter future for the club. Things can only get better, as the song goes, and they did. They very much did.