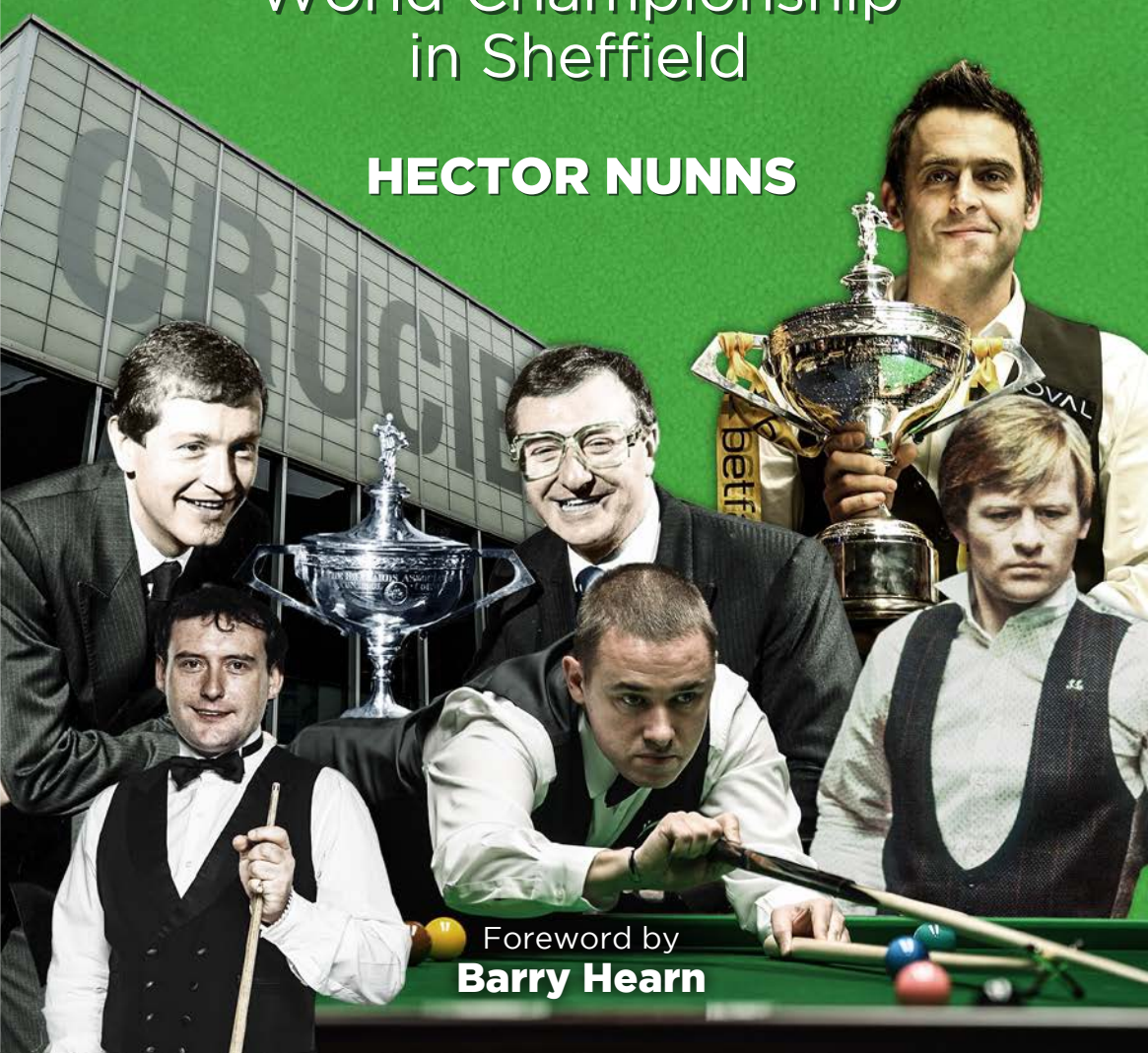
THE

CRUCIBLE'S GREATEST MATCHES

Forty Years of Snooker's World Championship in Sheffield

HECTOR NUNNS



Foreword by
Barry Hearn

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Preamble

by Hector Nunns

I CAN still recall very clearly my own first visit to the Crucible Theatre to watch the World Championship live – even though the experience was thrillingly brief.

It was in 1996 and a good friend of mine Russ Bryan, who made the pilgrimage every year with his much-loved grandfather and knowing I was a huge fan and studying at that time at Sheffield University, suggested I meet up with them and come along.

My ticket was for the middle session of a best-of-25-frames quarter-final between two young pups with a bit of ability and these days a few trophies between them, a certain Ronnie O'Sullivan and John Higgins, both at that time without a world title but ready to challenge the 1990s hegemony of Stephen Hendry.

So the first frame I ever saw at the iconic venue was a characteristically effortless century break (102) from the man known to all as the Rocket, something that arguably set some kind of tone for much of what I was to see in later years both as a spectator and then for the past 15 years as a journalist covering the tournament.

Snooker is a sport that has captured my imagination ever since my late uncle James Nunns first let me loose on a full-size table at Effingham Golf Club in Surrey. I believe it is still there; the room was grand, and dark bar the actual table lighting, atmospheric and a little foreboding. I must have been about ten and although the game seemed impossible, the possibilities appeared limitless.

I watched the World Championship on TV from 1979 but also saw snooker live at the old Wembley Conference Centre in the 1980s and early 1990s, sitting among sell-out 2,500 crowds for matches featuring the likes of Alex Higgins and Jimmy White. For those two in particular these tended to be raucous affairs that as a spectator often felt more like being in the away end at a football match.

But this, the Crucible, was different. Unlike at the Conference Centre, where you could barely see the balls if sitting right at the back, spectators from almost any vantage point felt as if they were part of the arena, so close were they to the action.

Those lucky individuals sitting on the front row could have reached out and touched the players, though that might have earned them a speedy exit from the premises.

A reverential hush descended as the play commenced, punctuated by shouts of support, bursts of applause and the obligatory 'oohs' and 'aahs' after pieces of fortune, good or bad, and bad misses. And all eyes were transfixed on the two young players and emerging talents on our side of the central dividing screen, the quarter-final being the last round with a two-table set-up.

And in this particular encounter there was plenty to applaud. Following O'Sullivan's opening contribution Scotland's Higgins, who had won the first session 5-3, hit straight back with a break of 94.

And in what seemed like the blink of an eye the frames raced by, three more 50+ breaks from O'Sullivan and further efforts of 104 and 70 from Higgins. The 'Wizard of Wishaw' won a high-quality second session by the same score, 5-3, to extend his overall lead to a commanding 10-6.

The players can't have actually been at the table for more than about an hour and a half in total, and the eight frames whistled by in what seemed the blink of an eye. Those around me exchanged knowing glances, recognising the level of what they had just seen. It was a far cry from some of the snooker produced by the master tacticians of a previous generation.

And you wandered out into the buzzing foyer thirsting for more and just wishing you had a ticket for the decisive and concluding

final session. As it turned out that match turned into something of a classic itself, O'Sullivan roaring back to win seven of the last nine frames for a 13-12 victory.

The contest could easily have commanded a chapter to itself in this book, but has not on this occasion in what all will recognise is an exercise in total subjectivity.

We will move on later to exactly what might constitute a great snooker match – but why does the Crucible Theatre merit a book all to itself on the subject?

The famous theatre in Sheffield has since 1977 staged the World Championship, the biggest, best and final tournament of the season, and the one to which so many top players gear their whole campaign in order to be in peak form and condition as they attempt to lift that famous silver trophy.

Thanks to a deal signed in 2016 between World Snooker and Sheffield City Council, the event will now be staying certainly in the city until 2027 and at the Crucible for at least half of that time, warding off any interest at least for now to take the tournament to China or elsewhere in the snooker-playing world.

While this prompted the odd howl of outrage in sections of the Chinese media, the decision was greeted in most quarters with delight and relief by players, fans and administrators alike – from overseas as well as in the UK.

World Snooker chairman Barry Hearn is a businessman to the core, and showed in the years after he took the helm that he is not afraid of change, including venues and long-established formats of tournaments, if he feels that such alterations will generate interest, money, television audiences and ticket sales.

But the World Championship, Sheffield, the Crucible Theatre and the longest matches that make up snooker's supreme challenge were pointedly left alone – a special venue and tournament, deserving of being a special case.

Mark Williams of Wales is a phlegmatic character and the Welshman was, of course, the man that found himself in hot water after referring to the Crucible as a "s***hole" on social media on

the eve of the 2012 World Championship and ended up having to apologise to staff at the theatre. The furore the incident stirred up showed, as much as anything, the peculiar hold the hallowed place has on the UK and wider world's psyche for 17 days in April and May.

Williams, whose head was never turned by his two world titles, has always been blessed with a deadpan sense of humour as well as a colourful turn of phrase and remains to this day baffled that such a throwaway remark could have caused such a media storm but news is often a product of its timing. The day before the World Championship starts, these things can get very big, very quickly.

The World Championship and the Crucible have no monopoly on great matches, and most reading this book will effortlessly recall plenty of classic encounters at other prestigious tournaments.

The invitational Masters has thrown up many examples, such as the John Higgins v Ronnie O'Sullivan final that provided a fitting curtain call for the old Wembley Conference Centre. Higgins trailed 60-0 in the decider but a trademark clutch break of 64 almost literally brought the house down. Steve Davis's comeback to win the 1997 Masters final at the age of 39 against O'Sullivan also springs to mind. So, too, the long-established UK Championship.

But if such encounters take place on the World Championship stage and at the Crucible, they are by their very nature often greater than would be the case elsewhere.

It is the ultimate proving ground, with the greatest spotlight and scrutiny and pressure on the players, and because of the status and stature of the tournament and the worldwide profile of the event, a classic match there will invariably burrow deeper into the general consciousness.

A longer format is part of that, of course, as it allows the narrative of a match to ebb and flow. A shock win in a best-of-seven-frame clash in a minor ranking event elsewhere holds nowhere near the value of one claimed over the best-of-25 frames at the Crucible.

If an extended number of frames is one of the contributors to making a match great, then what are the others?

If you reflect on what matches you regard as great not only in snooker but in other sports, there are a plethora of factors that can make it so – and not all of them relate directly to the action on the table. There are considerations of context, personalities, rivalry, history and even nostalgia.

At the most basic level, it can be the pure undiluted and uninhibited quality of play on show, and ideally though not necessarily from both players at the same time.

Several of the matches between, for example, record seven-time world champion Stephen Hendry and O'Sullivan would slot neatly into this category, notably semi-finals played at the Crucible. More recently the World Championship semi-final between Judd Trump and China's Ding Junhui in 2011 was a joy to behold, and a modern-day classic.

Often in sport the media are too reliant on statistics, used as a 'filler' rather than hard news reporting or an evocative description of what is occurring. Just think of the hours of coverage the organisation OPTA provide for Sky Sports News on football.

But there are sports, and snooker, baseball and cricket spring to mind, where the statistics regularly are the story and this is especially true in matches of rare quality.

You can see the centuries, the 50+ breaks, the maximum 147s, they are there in black and white on the tournament director's match sheet at the end.

If all visits to the table result in a frame-winning break and one-visit snooker, entertainment and an appreciation of the potting and positional play arts is guaranteed. The trading of big breaks in the arena is the closest snooker gets to a couple of boxing heavyweights slugging it out in the ring.

There is, of course though, more to it than that when it comes to great matches and the most intense drama in snooker is often borne out of errors and mistakes.

If there is one myth that has grown up around the fabled 1985 final between Steve Davis and Dennis Taylor, it is that the match was of high quality. It was not, with no century breaks. And yet it is

rightly the most remembered and talked-about single encounter in snooker history, and an iconic sporting moment.

The drama stemmed from many sources, and clearly the nature of the finish was paramount. After two days, four sessions and 35 frames, to have the World Championship decided on the final black after the world No.1 and dominant player of his generation had missed a chance to clinch the title took the thrill level off the scale.

And the match was great for any number of other reasons. The popular underdog won against all the odds, a classic sporting story template. Taylor came back from a seemingly hopeless position in the final, trailing 8-0 at one stage, for the most unlikely of world titles. Davis, going for a fourth world title and a third in a row, for once showed some flaws and chinks in the armour in the heat of battle. And the celebrations were unbridled and clearly unrehearsed.

A nation was gripped. The TV audience of 18.5million that stayed up until well after midnight to watch the thrilling denouement has often since been unfairly used as a stick with which to beat snooker – but quite why such a high water-mark should be seen in this light is bizarre. The nature of television has changed beyond all recognition since those four-channel days in the UK, with hundreds to choose from.

Snooker is thriving in many parts of the world helped by the efforts of Eurosport and CCTV, but it can struggle to make headway with some sections of the media in its former UK heartland away from the World Championship, and even during it. Whatever lies at the heart of this, and snobbery is sometimes advanced as a reason when the sport still produces TV audiences in the millions others would die for, it is through no fault of the current crop of players' on-table efforts. The spectacle they are providing is of a consistently high standard.

Sometimes a match can look great on paper in advance, thanks to big-name participants and a previous head-to-head record that suggests a classic can reasonably be expected. How often do you see a football fixture between rivals hyped to the nth degree on 'Super

Sunday', only for the actual offering to disappoint. But when such clashes do deliver, they are special. And there are many, many more factors that perhaps not in isolation but when taken in conjunction with others can add to the mix. A clash of playing styles never goes amiss, summoning up matches between the likes of Alex Higgins and Cliff Thorburn, Steve Davis and Jimmy White, and more recently O'Sullivan and Mark Selby.

A new name for the wider public to conjure with can add something special, thinking here of Trump in the 2011 final against Higgins, and also Martin Gould's match with Neil Robertson in 2010. The Australian, with at the time of writing still the single world title to his name, must shudder when he thinks about how close he was to going out that year.

When players have previous history, and the latest instalment is one of a series going back years, the result can be explosive. In the same way that anticipation soared ahead of Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal's tennis matches, or the fights between Marvin Hagler, Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns and Roberto Duran, summit meetings of snooker greats often produce classic moments.

On a similar theme, the 2007 quarter-final between Matthew Stevens and Shaun Murphy was not only a superb match in its own right, its significance was only enhanced by the fact that the Magician had won a final between the two of them only two years earlier. Context matters.

In any sport a shock creates waves and headlines and snooker is no different. The first-round 10-1 win for Tony Knowles over defending champion Steve Davis in 1982 was not only an early example of the 'Crucible Curse' affecting first-time winners of the World Championship, but a genuinely jaw-dropping result. Ding Junhui's first-round defeat at the hands of Michael Wasley in 2014 was another in the same bracket.

Does a match have to be close to be great? I would say not, although many might disagree and we all appreciate the nerve-shredding tension of a deciding frame after a long struggle building to a thrilling climax.

To use a horseracing analogy, I have been to the Cheltenham Festival and other meetings to see magnificent horses at their best, wanting to see it leave the rest ten lengths adrift and show just how good they really were.

For Kauto Star and Best Mate in the Gold Cup, or Sprinter Sacre and Moscow Flyer in the Champion Chase, read O'Sullivan against Hendry in the 2004 Crucible semi-final. This was a thoroughbred at the peak of his powers, humbling a previously invincible champion 17-4.

I would argue this was an example of a match that was great in a one-sided sense, a masterclass demonstration – as were in their own way Steve Davis's 18-3 final win over John Parrott, and Hendry's 18-5 victory over Jimmy White.

The stage of the tournament at which a match occurs is also clearly important, and there can be seen in this selection a clear bias towards encounters in the final or latter stages at the Crucible. It was noted earlier that the pressure and spotlight as well as the potential rewards, glory and kudos are greater at the World Championship, and much the same can be said the further a player advances through the draw towards the final.

And magical moments can only enhance a match that is already of high quality. Cliff Thorburn's epic match with Terry Griffiths in 1983 would have been memorable enough for finishing at 3.51am in front of a handful of stalwarts. The fact that (much) earlier in the clash the Canadian had made the first 147 maximum break seen at the Crucible demands its inclusion.

It feels slightly wrong that the likes of Williams, Mark Selby and Stuart Bingham do not feature given some of their extraordinary recent exploits at the Crucible – others might have included some of their matches. I would certainly subscribe to the view advanced by Hearn in the foreword that this is more the start of a decent pub argument than any kind of definitive work.

And there are so many other fantastic Crucible matches that I either watched myself at the time, or have been made aware of since, so let's list a few of them that were close.

Terry Griffiths v Alex Higgins quarter-final in 1979; Cliff Thorburn v Tony Knowles semi-final in 1983; Jimmy White v Kirk Stevens semi-final in 1984; Tony Knowles v Jimmy White quarter-final in 1985; John Parrott v Steve James, first round in 1989; Matthew Stevens v Peter Ebdon semi-final in 2002; Ronnie O'Sullivan v Stephen Hendry semi-final 2002; Ian McCulloch v Mark Williams, last 16 in 2005; Nigel Bond v Stephen Hendry, first round 2006; Ali Carter v Joe Perry semi-final in 2008; John Higgins v Jamie Cope, last 16 2011; Ronnie O'Sullivan v Joe Perry last 16, 2014 and the final that year between O'Sullivan and Mark Selby.

Gaining an insight into the minds of top sportspeople before, during and after they compete under the most intense pressure has always fascinated me and hopefully the series of interviews undertaken for this book will offer some kind of window into how the very best snooker players cope with the mental challenges, and deal with victory and agonising defeat.

Covering snooker has been an immense privilege for me, ever since my esteemed predecessor as correspondent at the *Daily Express*, John 'Tex' Hennessey, threw a World Championship accreditation form at me over the sub-editing desk as he was leaving the newspaper and said, "There you go, you might be needing that." The long snooker-related chats on a late shift were not wasted.

As a job it has been like any other; many moments of great pleasure, joy and satisfaction, along with the occasional frustration. I have made many friends along the way, both in the worlds of snooker and sports journalism, and got to travel to some incredible places – notably China, a country that is now so important for the sport, and India.

Being from a school of journalism that believes it is all about the main actors in sport, ie the players, and that the media is there to report on them rather than be personalities in their own right, I have always been hugely appreciative of the players' efforts to make themselves available and try and represent their sport and help it compete with all the others vying for space in newspapers.

Almost without exception, even the game's legends will answer phones and go beyond their contractual obligations for the benefit of snooker, the game they love, and it is to their immense credit because clearly along the way there will be the odd story that ruffles feathers.

And for that generally over the last 15 years, and specifically for the time willingly given to assist in the interviews that form the basis of this book, I am extremely grateful.

If there is one thing that has astounded me writing this book, it is the clarity of memory of shots and matches from 20, 25, 30 or more years ago from the players who took part. Often I would call with no notice expecting to request they have a think about it and I would get back to them – but usually there was no need.

The notion that snooker is one of the most mentally demanding of sports is not a new one – I and other observers have been claiming that for years. But the extent to which in the great Crucible matches good and bad shots, and key moments, observations and feelings from decades previously stay burnished into the brain was more of a surprise.

That warm thanks extends to those in the non-playing snooker family who have assisted in the realisation of the book (even unknowingly), including Barry Hearn for kindly agreeing to write the foreword, Ivan Hirschowitz, Brandon Parker, Mike Watterson, Pat Wells, Phil Yates, Chris Downer, Ron Florax and Tai Chengzhe – as well as picture providers Ernie Whitehead, Trevor Smith, PA Images and Getty Images.

The fan's view pieces provided by my good friend John Airey, who has forgotten more about snooker than I will ever know, for two of the most famous Crucible finals – the 1985 black-ball epic between Taylor and Davis, and the 1994 showpiece between Hendry and Jimmy White – are superb. I would like to express my gratitude to him for penning them. They must be worth a beer or two in the Mercure Hotel bar. Another falling into the 'experts' expert' category is Matt Huart, huge thanks to him for his proofreading of the manuscript, and other helpful suggestions.

There are more people to thank. Paul and Jane Camillin at Pitch Publishing gave me some freedom but also nursed me through my first book with skill and understanding, and Duncan Olner came up with the cover design concepts that also frightened the life out of me, bringing home the fact I now had to get this written. Thanks also to Graham Hales and Dean Rockett.

But most of all I would like to thank my wife Sarah and daughters Rebecca and Rosie for their unfailing love, support and enthusiasm throughout the process, despite taking myself off to the cabin 'office' in the garden for long spells over Christmas and the New Year.

As a nostalgia victim myself, I hope the matches featured stir up a few good memories and that there is at least something for everyone within – and apologise in advance for any outrage provoked by glaring omissions.

Please enjoy reading the book,

Hector Nunns

Chapter 1

The World Championship finds a spiritual home

"My wife Carole had been to the theatre – she knew what I had in mind for a World Championship and came back one day saying she had seen the perfect venue for snooker"

WHEN looking at the history of snooker's World Championship, you might easily conclude that 1976 – when the tournament was staged at the Wythenshawe Forum in Manchester – could best be described as 1 BC, where BC stands for 'Before Crucible'.

From 1977 the greatest and final event on the season's calendar has taken place at a small theatre in the South Yorkshire city of Sheffield in the United Kingdom, a place where history has been made, legends created, dreams made real and plenty more hopes dashed.

The word 'Crucible', at least to fans of sport outside a theatre-going community equally in love with the place at the bottom of Tudor Square, has become almost synonymous with the game itself – as much as Wimbledon for tennis, Augusta for the Masters golf, and Silverstone for the British Grand Prix in Formula One.

For those 17 days in April and May a tournament over distance which can even be seen in certain quarters as quaint, eccentric and anachronistic in today's world of reduced concentration spans provides the supreme test for a snooker player over matches that can take up to three days, and captures the imagination of the world.

For this period a very different kind of stage to the usual one affords its star performers the opportunity to delight the audience, or drive it to distraction. There are plots, pots and pathos in abundance, and regulars at the venue come to know every nook and cranny, from the location of the various players' guest boxes, to the seats that view over both sides of the partition, to the best places to lurk with an autograph book.

One of my own favourite Crucible traditions was the poster on the side of the church opposite the stage door at World Championship time that read: 'Without God, you're snookered', now sadly taken out of commission.

And yet it is only by the moment of inspiration of Carole Watterson and the vision, risk-taking and perseverance of husband Mike, together with the subsequent efforts of so many more, that the Crucible ever became the spiritual home of snooker and the setting for not just the great matches featured in this book, but so much more besides.

The 1976 World Championship, despite being the first to be sponsored by tobacco giant Embassy and producing a good level of snooker, had not been considered a huge success as an event. Split over two locations, the Middlesbrough Town Hall and the Wythenshawe Forum, which hosted the final itself, the showpiece was won 27-16 by Ray Reardon against Alex Higgins.

With real doubts and concerns over the 1977 tournament Watterson, a businessman with diverse interests from cars to

recycling, a fine amateur player and already a promoter of snooker exhibition matches, started to take an interest.

He takes up the story. "Wythenshawe was appalling for snooker really, it was like an aircraft hangar," said Watterson.

"My wife Carole had been to see a play at the Crucible Theatre a short while before we were talking about it, and she knew from my discussions the kind of venue I had in mind if the opportunity came along to put on a World Championship. She came home one day and said she had seen the perfect venue for snooker.

"So on my way to the Gimcrack meeting at York I dropped in at the Crucible and spent ten minutes with Arnold Elliman, the theatre manager. I knew we needed 36 feet to get two tables in and the necessary room either side, and a thin partition but at first he said 'I think it's 34 feet, but I'll check that.'

"And luckily when he asked Malcolm, the stage manager, it turned out it was exactly 36 feet and just what we needed. The stage had apparently been designed to that length because that was the time it took an actor walking slowly across it making a speech from a Shakespeare play from start to finish. So that was fortuitous, and it worked out perfectly. My first thought when I first walked into the place though, it just knocked me out and I remember thinking so clearly, 'This is the kind of place I would love to play in as a player, and watch as a spectator,' and I knew I wanted to get hold of the deal to stage the World Championship.

"We didn't have the current practice room facility then because that was a separate theatre called the Studio Theatre. But being a theatre the dressing rooms were just off stage, and that worked.

"We were a bit restricted for space as today, and to start with we were interlopers as we were not producing anything theatrical. But as the snooker event grew, and brought good publicity for the theatre and the city, then that changed."

So how did a Chesterfield owner of businesses selling and repairing cars, and selling computer materials to wastepaper companies to be recycled as envelopes, come to win the rights to stage snooker's greatest tournament at the Crucible?

"John Pulman, a close friend who was involved with the WPBSA, had been staying with Carole and I in 1976," Watterson said. "He told me, 'We are in big trouble for next year, we have no promoter, no venue, no sponsor, no TV, nothing,' and this was in the August.

"I am not saying there would have been no Championship, but it would have been cobbled together at the last minute at somewhere like the Selly Oak British Legion where it had been four years before, with some seating two bricks and a plank.

"I stuck a bid in with none of these things in place, underwriting it with my own money. I guaranteed £17,000 in prize money, and other costs including venue hire another £13,000 or so, making the total I could have lost £30,000. In today's money that would be around £500,000.

"My bank and solicitor confirmed I was good for the money, I think I paid a £2,000 deposit, and it was ratified in the November. From November to March when the qualifiers started wasn't long, and Embassy didn't come back on board until the February.

"Rex Williams had asked me to give Embassy first refusal before it was offered to another sponsor, so I did that and waited until the absolute death and had to give Peter Dyke, their then sponsorship manager, a strict deadline.

"And it wasn't always easy dealing with Rex Williams. He had a beef with me because I got given the great Joe Davis's famous CUE1 car registration plate, something Joe had kindly promised me.

"When I went in to show Peter Dyke the theatre it was a no-smoking venue in the theatre and auditorium itself, and I remember standing in front of a 'No Smoking' sign while we were talking, and I don't think he was that happy afterwards but luckily it got signed.

"Funnily enough people will remember players such as Alex Higgins smoking in the auditorium at the Crucible, but they were allowed to. It came under the same kind of loophole that allowed actors to smoke as they were 'stage props'. And the police had to accept that.

"Ray Reardon rang me up and asked, 'What the bloody hell are you doing…and where's Sheffield?' And that was occasionally what you got at the start."

Reardon, of course, was to become rather better acquainted with the Steel City when winning the sixth and last of his world titles the following year in 1978 with a 25-18 victory over Perrie Mans, not to mention helping mentor Ronnie O'Sullivan to a second title in 2004.

With the deal done with the WPBSA and a venue sorted, there were still the small matters of sponsorship and BBC TV coverage to be arranged, if the £30,000 guarantee put up by Watterson was not to disappear into a financial black hole.

Nick Hunter, a senior BBC sports producer in Manchester, was key to the TV negotiations.

Watterson said: "The BBC had covered the final in 1976, and Nick Hunter, who was a senior producer, initially said the Crucible was 'too good' for snooker when I got in touch and showed him the venue, and said 'Have you thought of a Gerry Cottle's Circus tent?'

"I started laughing, but that reflected the view of some of the venues that had been used. And he agreed to coverage for the last three days. The final session of the final would be live, and the semi-final highlights would be shown over the rest of the three days of the final.

"And the format to get strategic finish times for TV was set up that year, tweaked in 1978 – and that latter one is pretty much the format in use today."

And the lighting, probably taken for granted by many of today's professionals, raised difficulties for those more accustomed to setting it up for the *Pot Black* one-frame programme at Pebble Mill.

"We had a lighting meeting in March of 1977 together with Mike Green of the WPBSA, Nick Hunter of the BBC, and a *Pot Black* lighting engineer, and another lighting engineer John Crowther and I took my cue as requested so we could do a few tests," Watterson recalled.

"But the lighting for *Pot Black* was simply not suitable for the World Championship. It was no good, the whole place was lit up like Blackpool Illuminations. The number of lights shining on the balls from all around, the balls looked like flying saucers. So by turning everything off bar the lights over the table, it was far better.

"And there were other changes for the following year, using neon lighting and diffusers and lowering the canopy overhead to get the best effect."

The larger the World Championship has become and the more countries take TV pictures or send media to the event, and the more people want to host corporate hospitality functions at a major event on the sporting calendar, and the more fans want to buy tickets, so the limitations of the building itself and arena capacity can get highlighted.

When Mark Williams, another multiple winner of the title, made his unfortunate comment about the venue on the eve of the 2012 tournament, he was genuinely stunned at the furious reaction, much of it from people who were not familiar with his sense of humour, laconic delivery and occasional industrial language. Plenty were very defensive about their favourite sporting arena.

But somewhere in that 'Williams-speak' and beyond the offence caused and taken by the theatre's management and governing bodies there was a half-legitimate observation about the facilities compared not only to other venues used by snooker, but other sporting events.

That first year saw Watterson find his own office, and a press room – also upstairs – albeit one that was tiny by today's standards.

"The first press room was upstairs and there wasn't much there – a couple of telephones, and you had usually Ted Corbett, Janice Hale and Clive Everton," he said. "That was the press, nothing like today, and it wasn't until the second year we had monitors installed so we could see what was happening in the auditorium. I used the room that was called Room 10, which had racks where the bands for the theatre shows used to hang their instruments."

But the real proof of the Crucible pudding in 1977 was always going to be in the tournament itself, the spectacle it provided, the memories made, the personalities on show, the tickets sold, satisfaction among sponsors and broadcasters and the quality of the matches.

And for Watterson the 'Field of Dreams' moment and relief when on that first morning, Monday 18 April at around 10.40am, the audience came has remained with him to this day.

"The first two matches on the first day in 1977 were Fred Davis against John Pulman, and Ray Reardon against Patsy Fagan," he said. "I stood on the stage about 10.40am when they opened the doors and had my fingers crossed, praying, 'God I hope someone turns up.'

"And when they opened up about 200 people came in and I remember thinking, 'I love every one of you.' There had been about £1,000 worth of ticket sales, but mainly towards the end of the tournament and a lot of people were paying on the door. I think it was 75 pence for early-round matches.

"And there was a cracking match between Alex Higgins and Doug Mountjoy in that first week, a very close match, and maybe the first time the place was full and buzzing. Doug won the match 13-12, and potted an amazing blue down the side cushion that helped him win. Perrie Mans said at the time, 'That's not fair, you can't pot balls like that!' because the tables in South Africa did not allow that.

"And of course we got a good final, with John Spencer beating Cliff Thorburn 25-21 over the three days.

"There were only 16 players that first year, but the exposure convinced others to turn professional, and the number was growing as they all wanted to play at the Crucible, and by 1982 that had gone up to 32, the same as it is today.

"I think I made about a £12,000 profit that first year – but then lost £5,000 on the UK Championship that I promoted later that year. It summed up perfectly the swings and roundabouts of promoting events.

"The greatest indicator of success to me was the enthusiasm of the crowds at the Crucible, and the appreciation of the players. And we knew once the BBC started to cover the whole event, a format could be worked out to engineer good finishes at the right times for TV."

Needless to say when Watterson in recent years has made the short trip to Sheffield and the Crucible from his Chesterfield home just over the county border in Derbyshire, it is with a sense of pride that he surveys the tournament in its long-time home.

"Of course when I look at the event still being staged there and some of the things players and fans say about it, it does give you a sense of satisfaction and achievement to have played some part in creating that," he said. "Of course you feel some pride.

"And the profile and success of the Crucible helped the snooker boom in the 1980s, with TV viewing figures up to around 13 million by 1981.

"I would say that by about 1979 the Crucible started to be taken more seriously and seen as a real part of the sporting landscape in this country, that marked the start of the bonanza and you could see it in the World Championship attendances and viewing figures."

Surely with all that history and tradition the event could never move away? The announcement by World Snooker chairman Barry Hearn in 2016 that the tournament would remain at the Crucible for at least another five years and in Sheffield for at least another ten was greeted with both delight and sighs of relief, even in some of those countries who might be interested in staging a World Championship elsewhere.

The commercial nature of sport makes it almost impossible to ever say 'never' about anything and the Crucible's capacity of just 980 that contributes to the intimacy in the arena hands promoters a headache, only in the sense that you might easily sell 5,000 tickets for a final or other big match.

Ronnie O'Sullivan, a multiple world champion who features heavily in these pages, has always loved actually playing at the Crucible even if sustaining form and concentration for the duration of the event has occasionally been more of a struggle – and has made the arena as special as most through his efforts. On the Crucible's commercial conundrum, he observed: "I think there may inevitably be a move away from the Crucible at some point.

"There will come a point where they want 128 players at one venue like Wimbledon, and that won't be this one. It is a great playing venue but not the best venue for getting in and out of, and for the capacity.

"As the game grows and prize money grows I'm sure they might want to expand to somewhere where they can sell 4,000 or 5,000 tickets for a match – which we could."

However, the 1997 world champion Ken Doherty of Ireland, now a successful BBC presenter and commentator, was certain the case to keep the blue-riband tournament where it is was unanswerable.

Doherty said: "Some things money can't buy – they are just more important than that, and the Crucible is one.

"You could play in a place where you had 5,000 people and make more money – but would it generate the same atmosphere? Sometimes places can be too big. Even at the old Wembley Conference Centre where we used to play the Masters, it was brilliant when it was full, but some early-round matches fell a bit flat.

"Only if Jimmy White or Ronnie O'Sullivan or Steve Davis was playing was the atmosphere great. At the Crucible, it is great for every match.

"I am very nostalgic about the World Championship, about the Crucible, and the city. Okay, behind the scenes the scope for large-scale hospitality is more difficult.

"But you can't move the Masters golf from Augusta. I am all for it staying here as long as possible, though I know there will be temptations to move it elsewhere in the UK or the world.

"I just prefer it here. There is a commercial pressure and that side of it will make commercial decisions. But I hope they consider all aspects, and for me it wouldn't have the feel of the World Championship anywhere else.

"For fans and players it is like a pilgrimage, from all over the world. I'm just an old nostalgic fool that loves it. And as a player, there are just so many memories here. Every time you walk through those curtains, they come flooding in to your mind.

"You really feel them around the place, walking down the corridors, around the city – and your personal ones. And I have great memories of the theatre."

Everyone has their own great memories of the Crucible, and hopefully the matches featured in this book will stir a few.