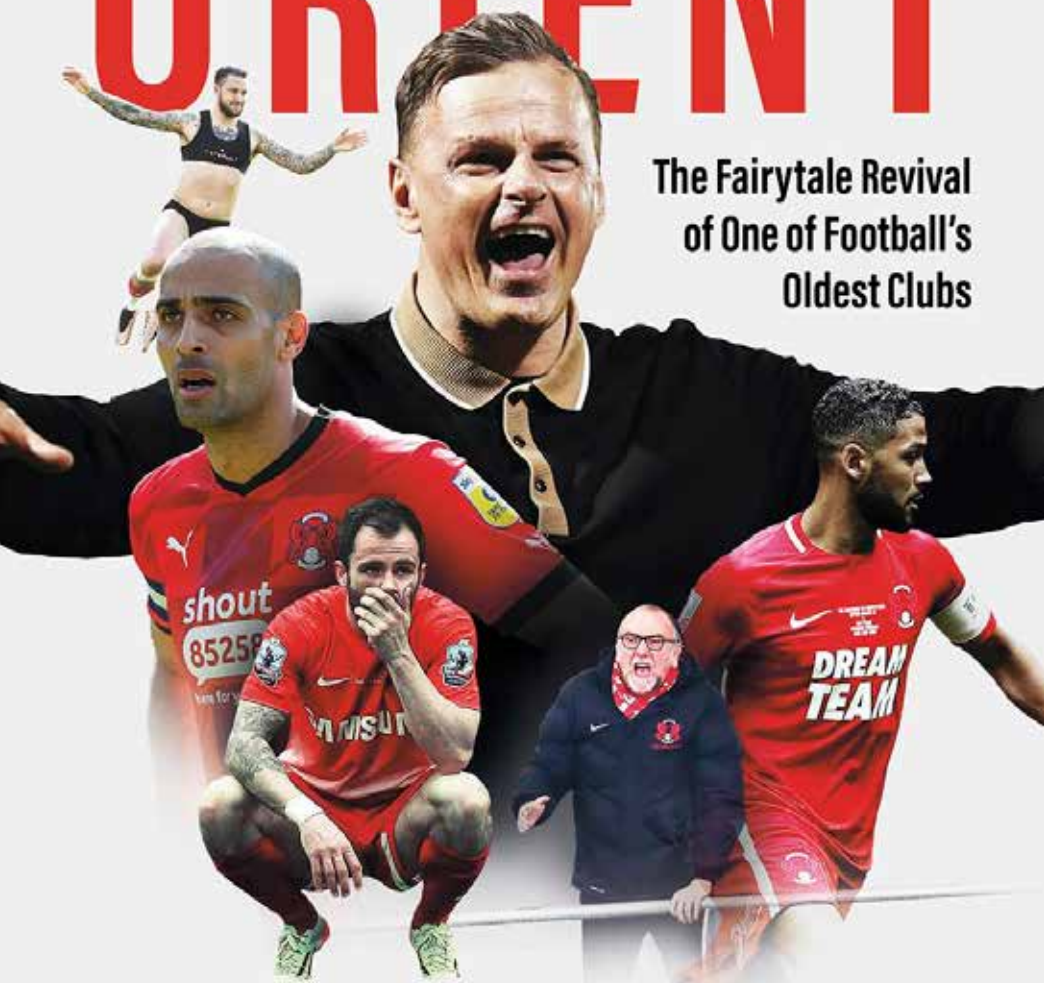


THE FALL AND RISE OF

LEYTON ORIENT

The Fairytale Revival
of One of Football's
Oldest Clubs



S I M O N C O O P E R

THE FALL AND RISE OF
**LEYTON
ORIENT**

The Fairytale Revival of One of
Football's Oldest Clubs

S I M O N C O O P E R



Contents

Introduction	9
Chapter 1	13
Chapter 2	21
Chapter 3	31
Chapter 4	45
Chapter 5	52
Chapter 6	61
Chapter 7	76
Chapter 8	89
Chapter 9	122
Chapter 10	126
Chapter 11	142
Chapter 12	164
Chapter 13	178
Chapter 14	185
Chapter 15	190
Chapter 16	193
Chapter 17	205
Chapter 18	228
Chapter 19	231
Acknowledgements	238

1

May 2014. Leyton Orient are on the brink of the Championship, the second tier of English football. Only a play-off final against Rotherham United stands in their way. Win, they go up. Lose, they remain in League One. They haven't been higher than the bottom two divisions in over 30 years.

Barry Hearn has owned the club for 19 years. He's only seen them promoted once in that time.

'It does not get any better than that!'

Sunday, 25 May 2014, Wembley Stadium

Leyton Orient vs Rotherham United, League One play-off final.

'I remember every second of that day,' says Barry Hearn. 'I couldn't have been happier.'

Walking into Wembley was the culmination of nearly two decades of his life.

'I remember arriving with my family. And the excitement running through your veins ... there wouldn't be a need for illegal drugs if you could put that in a bottle and have a mouthful every day.'

It's 3pm as Hearn takes his seat for kick-off. Over 43,000 fans are in the ground alongside the Leyton Orient owner.

The stands are a sea of red reflecting the home kits of both Orient and Rotherham United. Below, the Wembley pitch is half in shadow, half brilliant sunlight; the stadium blocking the mid-afternoon sun from end-to-end down one side of the playing surface. Some players are playing in comparative darkness.

There are two sides to this match.

The occasion is everything Hearn has wanted from owning Leyton Orient, the club he first went to watch as a young boy. 'I saw it as an adventure, like a little child,' he says. 'What kid that goes to watch a football match when he's 11 years old doesn't dream of either playing for that team or owning that team. It's a dream. And I ticked my dream, which I shall forever be grateful for.'

After 33 minutes, Orient win a free kick near the halfway line. Diminutive forward Dean Cox – fan favourite and subject of the chant 'We've got tiny Cox, we've got tiny Cox' – is playing on the left wing. He launches the ball high into the Rotherham penalty area. It's headed clear and lands just outside the box, directly in front of Orient's young winger, Moses Odubajo. Twenty-five yards out, he controls the ball on his chest and strikes it with his left foot, hitting the sweetest half-volley of his life. Rotherham goalkeeper Adam Collin barely moves as the ball flashes past him into the top corner of the net. He simply holds his hands out in disbelief. Odubajo wheels away, ripping his shirt off in celebration.

'It does not get any better than that!' screams Daniel Mann, commentating for Sky Sports.

Four minutes later, it does.

Odubajo is involved again, striking the ball across the Rotherham six-yard box for Cox to tap in at the far post. Orient fans can't believe what they're seeing. Tiny Cox has done it again. The emotion is etched on the fans' faces. Barry Hearn is on his feet, a triumphant fist in the air.

Leading 2-0 in the play-off final at Wembley.
And it's not even half-time.

'They couldn't pay their milk bill'

I first meet Barry Hearn at Mascalls, the large country mansion he bought as the Hearn family home. It's now the headquarters of Matchroom Sport, his sports promotion company. Through Matchroom, Hearn built his boxing promotion empire and turned snooker into the TV sensation of the 1980s. As Steve Davis's manager, he transformed the sport, making deals around the world. More recently, Matchroom have led the renaissance of the Professional Darts Corporation, selling out Alexandra Palace every Christmas and turning a pub sport into a multimillion-pound Sky Sports event.

When Hearn bought Leyton Orient for £2.43 in 1995, they were in dire straits. As famously documented in the Channel 4 short film, *Club For A Fiver*, Leyton Orient were about to be relegated with debts of £2m. Over Hearn's two decades in charge, he stabilised the club and took them from the foot of the fourth tier to the brink of the Championship.

'They were losing about half a million quid a year,' he says, remembering the state of the club he took over. 'They couldn't pay their milk bill. Absolutely brassic. No money.'

Owning a football club went against every one of Hearn's business instincts. For once, his heart ruled his head. He describes owning Leyton Orient as 'a pile of aggravation', but he remembers his time in charge with real fondness. Looking back on the run to Wembley in 2014, his eyes light up. He's animated, excited. His manager Russell Slade (the man Hearn describes as 'without a doubt my best appointment') had curated an exciting brand of attacking football.

‘Russell Slade takes the credit for me,’ says Hearn. ‘He lived the job. He was there seven days a week. His family was living up in the north-east. He had a flat in the ground. He was a thorough professional man and a really nice guy. We had something very special in those days.’

Slade (we’ll meet him properly later) describes his squad as ‘a great group’. A team full of characters. ‘I had proper men in the team,’ he says. ‘It was a small squad, but they all knew their jobs. We all worked hard. I can go back to the first game of that season. Away from home at Carlisle, and we won 5-1. You just felt we could have something that year.’

Hearn tells the story of how he installed a giant map in the dressing room, drawing a line between London and Las Vegas. He added points along the line, with Las Vegas being the target of the 80-something points that would get them in the play-offs. His promise being that if the team got there, he’d take them on a jolly to the States.

The captain, Nathan Clark, was given a special responsibility.

‘I gave him a plastic aeroplane,’ says Hearn. ‘And I divided it between London and Las Vegas. I said, “Every time we get a point, you’re the only person who can touch this airplane, and you’re going to pull it and pull it.” They were more concerned with moving that airplane than win bonuses! They were going, “Clarkey, Clarkey – move us! We got three points! Move us! Where are we now?” “Well, we’re just going over Land’s End.” And it ran the whole season. It was just the most pleasurable season.’

Back to Wembley, and Orient are 2-0 up at half-time. Hearn is enjoying the hospitality when the chairman of Rotherham, Tony Stewart, seeks him out. Hearn describes the exchange of words, ‘He said, “Ey up lad. You’re far better than us. You deserve this.” I said, “Keep your mouth shut, son. There’s 45 minutes to go.”’

Devastation and desolation

By 60 minutes, it's 2-2. In the 54th minute, Orient goalkeeper Jamie Jones fails to clear a set piece. Former Os striker Alex Revell pounces, stabbing the ball in from close range. 'The battle rages again!' says Daniel Mann in the commentary box.

Five minutes later, Revell scores again. This time it's the goal of his life.

'He scored a wonder goal from like 35 yards,' says Barry Hearn. 'I was directly behind him. I actually saw from the moment he kicked it, and I see Jones was off his line. I thought, "That's in." It was one of those prophetic moments. I can't describe the feeling.'

It is an exceptional strike. And there are still 30 minutes to go. Will both teams try and shut up shop?

'None of it, they're going for the win,' says co-commentator, Andy Hinchcliffe.

It's frantic. It's end-to-end. Both teams have a couple of half chances, but neither can score. Not Orient. Not Rotherham. It goes to extra time. It goes to penalties.

Orient fans still struggle to talk about what happened next. Taking penalties towards the goal in front of their own fans, the Os are 3-2 up after the same number of penalties taken. On the brink of the Championship, they throw it away again. Missed attempts from defender Mathieu Baudry and substitute Chris Dagnall hand Rotherham the victory.

'Pure delirium at one end. Devastation and desolation at the other,' says Daniel Mann.

'Therapy kicks in from that point,' says Barry Hearn.

It would take a decade for the club to recover. Things would get far worse before they got better.

Fine lines

The 25,000 Orient fans walked away from Wembley that day, all devastated. All feeling slightly different about the future.

Paul Levy is a lifelong supporter. He presents the *Orient Outlook* podcast. He wasn't just devastated. He was angry.

'We're done,' he thought. 'It was just outright annoyance and frustration that we'd not done the job, considering we'd been in the top two for 75 or 80 per cent of the season. We just didn't manage the game well enough.'

Dave Victor, BBC Radio London's Orient correspondent, was slightly more positive, 'I felt relieved that we were there. I didn't take the run for granted. And I didn't know what was going to happen next. I thought that the Os would probably have another good season.'

Keren Harrison is the Leyton Orient Supporters' Club membership secretary and former supporter liaison officer for the club.

She said, 'I was completely gutted. I think I cried all that weekend. I felt like I was grieving for two weeks. I remember going back into work and somebody asked me who had died.'

Matt Simpson is a blogger, author, podcaster, and another lifelong fan. For Matt, Orient missed their chance. This was their time.

'It's the most gutted I've ever been as an Orient fan. That was our shot. It really felt like the stars were aligned for us. And in the penalty shoot-out ... I still thought we were going to do it. It just felt like it was our year.'

Manager Russell Slade was heartbroken.

'Fine lines, isn't it? We could have quite easily gone up, whether either winning it in 90, winning in extra time, or winning it on penalties. We were in it. And it was heartbreaking. Heartbreaking not to take this club up to the Championship.'

Alex Revell, who scored both Rotherham goals, reflected on his equaliser from 35 yards.

'It's what dreams are made of,' he said. 'The feeling when that hit the back of the net is one of pure jubilation.'

Fine lines, isn't it?

Tears for years

Matt Porter was also at Wembley in 2014. He hasn't spoken about it since. 'I remember at the end, I went in the toilet and I just cried,' he tells me.

We're sitting in the academy office at Leyton Orient in autumn 2023. A midweek game, under the lights. It's the only room free. Club staff are buzzing around before the kick-off later that evening. A couple of squad players walk through as one of the investors sips a coffee before his next meeting.

Desks are messy, people are busy. Matt is the only person with nothing to do tonight. Even if he did have something to do, he's the sort of person who would make time to chat. Chief executive under Barry Hearn in 2014 (the youngest CEO in English football when he was appointed in 2006 at 26 years old), he's once again a key member of the Leyton Orient board. He first got a season ticket in 1995/96, under Hearn's famous £10 for under-16 season tickets. He loves this club.

We dive straight in. Wembley, 2014.

'You know, I still don't talk about it now. Just heartbreaking, just heartbreaking. If there was ever something that the club deserved to have, it was that. You know? And we just threw it away.'

At this point, Matt is holding back the tears, his voice choking as he revisits that day at Wembley.

'It's just horrific. I didn't watch Rotherham come up the stairs. I couldn't do it.'

The tears come now. And even though every Orient fan was hit hard by the result, for Matt the defeat was even more poignant. He'd been talking to Hearn, his boss and mentor. He knew what was coming next.

'I knew it was over. I knew it was done. You just felt like everything was being ripped away. We knew that was our last

game regardless of what happened. Obviously, I didn't know how things were going to go.'

All he knew was that his boss had made a decision.

Barry Hearn was selling Leyton Orient.