

SCOTT WALKINSHAW

**THE**  
**GLORY**  
**YEARS**

The Rise of Oxford United  
in the 1980s



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# Contents

Preface . . . . .	7
1. Me . . . . .	9
2. Ian Greaves . . . . .	16
3. Robert Maxwell . . . . .	31
4. Jim Smith . . . . .	41
5. Desmond Morris . . . . .	55
6. Bobby McDonald . . . . .	74
7. Steve Biggins . . . . .	88
8. Kevin Brock . . . . .	100
9. Malcolm Shotton . . . . .	110
10. Dave Langan . . . . .	127
11. John Aldridge . . . . .	145
12. Jeremy Charles . . . . .	162
13. Maurice Evans . . . . .	179
14. Ray Houghton . . . . .	192
15. Jim Hunt . . . . .	208
16. Peter Rhoades-Brown . . . . .	218
17. Trevor Heberd . . . . .	233
18. Les Phillips . . . . .	250
19. Billy Hamilton . . . . .	265
20. Ron Atkinson . . . . .	282
21. Bogart's . . . . .	291
22. Dean Saunders . . . . .	308
23. Kevin Maxwell . . . . .	323
24. Elton John . . . . .	335
25. Gary Briggs . . . . .	348
26. Mark Lawrenson . . . . .	361
27. Me (again) . . . . .	375
Bibliography . . . . .	381

## Chapter 2

# Ian Greaves

IAN GREAVES looked out of the window of his cramped office under the Beech Road stand to see a playful squirrel scuttling along the wall. Something about the squirrel made him feel uneasy. It was Christmas Eve 1980, the first day at his new club. Despite spending the last few months in Hereford, helping his old mate Frank Lord, the tranquil countryside felt alien; what kind of stadium had trees hanging over the stands?

Born in Oldham, Greaves had grown up during the war in the shadows of the town's textile mills. Life in the north was visceral; he could see the factories, smell them, hear them, even taste them.

In Oxford, the offices and cloisters of the university were a far cry from the immediacy of the north. Privilege threaded through the city, future prime ministers and world leaders were moulded; aristocrats cemented their societal rites, their futures assured.

Greaves's experiences contrasted with the genteel Oxford suburbs and a city that felt somehow insulated from life's harsh realities. After being sacked by Bolton Wanderers, he'd been out of work for a year. He knew whether it was the next meal or the next day, nothing was guaranteed.

Greaves was a grafter; as a teenager he was a reliable all-rounder, and during national service he played cricket, hockey and football for the Lancashire Fusiliers, developing a reputation for hard work and steadfastness. His qualities attracted Matt Busby at Manchester United, who signed him in 1953. Busby styled him into a no-nonsense full-back and he played 15 times as a deputy to Bill Foulkes, winning the league title in 1956 as one of the fabled Busby Babes.

Five years later, as the Babes threatened to dominate club football for a generation, Greaves was due to fly with the squad to Yugoslavia for a European Cup tie against Red Star Belgrade. An injured elbow kept him at home as the team played out a 3-3 draw that eased them into the semi-finals after a 1-0 home-leg win.

The squad celebrated with a cocktail party at the British Embassy before departing for the airport. Leaving in sunshine, they landed in Munich to refuel. As they prepared to depart, the weather turned, and the temperature dropped. The pilot aborted his take-off twice, and on the third attempt the plane failed to gain height, clipped a fence and careered into trees, killing 23 passengers including eight of Greaves's Manchester United team-mates.

He was lucky, though it didn't feel like it; his injury had saved his life. With survival came guilt. 'Geoff [Bent] never came back – and he was my best mate,' Greaves recalled later. 'I now celebrate two birthdays every year, one on the day of the crash. But for the grace of God, it would have been me there.'

The grief of the city was projected on to the surviving players. Greaves, now 25, was thrust into the limelight, a senior squad member and first-choice full-back. He wore the number three shirt of skipper Roger Byrne, who'd perished in the crash. Two weeks after the disaster, Greaves lined up against Sheffield Wednesday in the FA Cup at Old Trafford. 'I can remember the dressing room was very quiet,' he said.

‘I couldn’t get Roger out of my mind; I was getting changed where he would have sat. I was wearing his shirt.’

Thirty years on, Greaves’s misgivings at his bucolic surroundings were well placed. Oxford United were a club carelessly adrift. An accidental success, conceived to occupy local young men during the cricket off-season, had grown to be a Southern League powerhouse.

Headington was a village consumed by the city’s polite urban sprawl. The Manor, their home since 1925, was stitched into the suburb’s fabric, flanked by houses, a bowls club, the John Radcliffe Infirmary and London Road, a main artery into the city. The ground offered little opportunity to grow beyond its achievements. The centre of Oxford, a hive of ingenuity, was a two-mile freewheeling downhill bike ride away, but the club were a lifetime away from the dreaming spires and the hotbeds of English football.

Fans still talked about their heroic rise from non-league and the 1964 FA Cup campaign, the club’s high-water mark which saw Oxford beat title-chasing Blackburn Rovers to reach the quarter-finals. Now, nearly two decades later, even the ghosts of the past were moving on.

To many, the Southern League days were a fresh memory, the Third Division an acceptable level of success. But, like many lower-league clubs, Oxford were heading into an abyss. Britain was an economic wasteland as recessionary pressures fuelled social unrest that channelled through to the decaying terraces of English football, which became a focus for restless, bored, disaffected young men.

Oxford’s Cowley car plant, once the largest factory outside the US, lost nearly 80 per cent of its workforce. Manufacturing was replaced by a growing service sector, working-class people serving the elite.

Football’s working-class romance was consumed by violence, halving crowds in less than a decade. Government,

the police and the media, hardened by the experience of war, saw no excuses. The economic slump didn't compare to the horrors of the battlefield. Hooliganism was the insolence of a spoilt youth – an innate moral decline. Football had no political or social capital; there was no willingness to arrest the slide. With the sport starved of money and support, those who remained were overwhelmed.

Greaves could see the inertia, the gentle passing of time, the talented but featherweight Andy Thomas, the reliable but stale Peter Foley. Greaves called it a youth club, reliant on a flow of talent produced by mercurial scout Fred Ford.

You didn't need to be an insider to see the problem. Oxford were 22nd in the division with the worst home record in the country, they were lost and in desperate need of a story.

To Greaves, football was a privilege, something to be worked for and worked at, and at home in the north-west it was integral to cultural identity. Oxford was defined by its tension between town and gown, but few could deny the gown dominated. The football club was irrelevant.

'They held Second Division status for eight years,' Greaves said. 'But the locals didn't understand what a small miracle they were part of. Human nature being what it is, they've grown disgruntled by being relegated. Gratitude for being given so much in a short time. The public doesn't know the meaning of the word. Now they may have to face up to another spell in Division Four.'

Ambition and purpose ebbing away, Greaves knew complacency would be all-consuming. The squirrel on the wall, and its ambivalence towards its predators, spoke volumes about the club he'd inherited.

During his interview at director Bill Reeves's house, Greaves told the Oxford board he wanted to grab the club. 'I know more about football than you,' he said. 'More about

selling and buying players, more about tactics, more about free kicks, corner kicks. So, no interference.'

Greaves's side had one win in 12 and four consecutive defeats. A 3-0 FA Cup exit to Plymouth Argyle had finally put paid to his predecessor, Bill Asprey, after 17 miserable months in which he failed to arrest the long-term slide.

The decay was having a wider effect – average crowds dipped under 4,000, a quarter down on the previous season. The club needed more than double that to break even. Their lottery kept them afloat, but the once healthy profits had fallen by two-thirds. Oxford were edging towards financial oblivion.

Greaves had little opportunity to meet his squad before the daunting Boxing Day home game against league leaders Charlton Athletic and their potent attacking force of the fearsome Derek Hales and youngster Paul Walsh. Charlton had been relegated the previous season and were impatient to return to the Second Division. They'd won 15 of their previous 16 games and hadn't lost for three months.

The Christmas holidays pushed the crowd over 5,700 – good for the season, but still only a third full. Greaves tucked himself into the tight, white brick dugout in front of the Beech Road stand with his assistant Roy Barry and 66-year-old authoritarian trainer Ken Fish, his tracksuit and hair presented to a military standard.

The starting line-up had one change from the previous defeat away at Millwall. Misfiring striker Keith Cassells was out with chickenpox and had been replaced by the disenchanted Peter Foley, a well-liked local boy who'd lost his way after missing out on a move to West Bromwich Albion, managed by former Oxford defender Ron Atkinson.

With the advantage of the slope, United took the early initiative and immediately looked more threatening. Inside 20 minutes, defender Malcolm McIntosh worked the ball



to Mark Jones, who drove in a low cross. A deft touch from Joe Cooke diverted the ball into the path of Paul Barry, who lashed it beyond Charlton goalkeeper Nicky Johns for a shock opening goal.

The breakthrough strengthened Oxford's resolve, their aggression undermining their opponents' seemingly impenetrable confidence. Wingers Jones and Tim Smithers launched hopeful crosses into the box at every opportunity in an ugly and unexpected offensive barrage.

Oxford threatened after the break; Foley and skipper Billy Jeffrey had chances but as the game moved into its final act the shell-shocked league leaders woke from their stupor. Hales cannoned a shot off the bar and, as the final whistle approached, centre-back Malcolm Shotton heroically blocked what would have been a last-gasp equaliser.

Fate? A honeymoon victory? There was no time to dwell on the miraculous performance. The following day Oxford travelled the short distance to mid-table local rivals Reading. Cooke's near-post header from Jones's cross with 18 minutes to go secured their first consecutive league wins for eight months. A third clean sheet in a goalless draw with third-placed Rotherham a fortnight later sparked the team into life.

Greaves was a realist. 'I'm not kidding myself,' he said. 'Mickey Mouse could come in and get players going for a while. But ultimately a team, like water, finds its own level and I know I'll have to improve the standard with new players.'

His first move, at the end of January, showed the constraints he was working within. An approach for Aston Villa's Scottish international Alex Cropley failed when the midfielder dithered, and Greaves walked away. Unable to change the players, Greaves needed to change the philosophy of the ones he had.

He called it 'northern football'; fair play and skill was replaced by a focus on shape and discipline. Training sessions were tightly controlled, sometimes lasting no more than 20 minutes. The team delighted in frustrating their opponents as much as entertaining the fans. For Greaves, wins made supporters happy and that resulted from a hard-working team. It mirrored his playing days.

He found his bedrock at the centre of defence: Shotton, a 23-year-old Geordie with a wide jaw and sergeant major moustache, and his partner, the stern-faced 21-year-old Yorkshireman Gary Briggs, who'd been with the club for two and a half years after joining from Middlesbrough. Greaves gave the duo licence to explore the boundary between intimidation and ill discipline.

Greaves tightened the bolts of his playing unit. His front two, Peter Foley and Keith Cassells, buffered the prodigiously talented teenager Andy Thomas, giving him space to influence the game. On the wings, the defensive-minded Jones and Smithers were preferred to the expansive Kevin Brock. In mid-February, Greaves added the experience of 34-year-old former Welsh international Malcolm Page from Birmingham.

The impact was immediate; Oxford became hard to beat, losing three of their remaining 21 games, only revealing their vulnerabilities when the centre-back partnership was broken by an injury to Shotton.

As solid as their defence was, they'd only scored more than once on four occasions and Shotton was top scorer with five goals. By March, Oxford were still just a point above the relegation zone and facing a visit to Walsall.

Oxford led with three minutes to go after Jones scored his first goal for the club. Searching for a second, the ball dropped and appeared to hit Cassells on the arm. There was a pause as the shrill of a whistle pierced the noise of the crowd.

Walsall's keeper, Ron Green, picked the ball up and rolled it to Colin Harrison to take a free kick. Unaware of the pause in play, Cassells darted in and prodded it into the empty net.

To everyone's astonishment, the referee Allan Banks awarded the goal. The whistle the players had heard wasn't his; the free kick was a phantom. The angry protests forced Banks to run to the other end of the pitch to consult a policeman, who hadn't heard anything, and Cassells' first goal for the club was confirmed. In the dying seconds, with Walsall still fuming, Foley made it 3-0.

The flash of good fortune catapulted Cassells forward, and ten days later he scored again in a 2-0 home win to Barnsley. The following Sunday, Oxford headed to Fratton Park to face promotion-chasing Portsmouth, whose experiment to stimulate crowds backfired when the gate fell 2,000 short of the season's average.

Pompey led when David Gregory's mishit shot after two minutes deflected past keeper Roy Burton off Briggs. Eight minutes later Cassells headed his third goal in four games to equalise. Foley had a second-half goal disallowed for offside before Peter Mellor saved Shotton's penalty after a foul by Steve Aizlewood on the increasingly dangerous Cassells. The point was the least they deserved.

In the penultimate game of the season, Oxford confirmed their survival when Smithers dispossessed Millwall's 16-year-old Keith Stevens 30 seconds into his debut and scored off the post. Having inherited a team lacking in purpose and staring at relegation, Greaves had engineered a remarkable turnaround, steering the team to 14th.

Oxford's looming financial predicament meant Greaves was forced to reduce his playing budget, losing the versatile Joe Cooke to Exeter City and replacing him with Reading striker Ollie Kearns, who'd phoned the club asking for a job.

Perversely, in just over three years, the British record transfer fee had tripled from £516,000, paid by West Brom for Middlesbrough's David Mills, to £1.5m when Bryan Robson signed for Manchester United. Both signings involved new United manager Ron Atkinson.

Oxford chairman Bill Reeves proposed a transfer levy to be shared across the 92 clubs to redistribute wealth more equally. The idea was rejected, and as the financial scramble intensified, Oxford had no money and no voice.

The players sensed the problems; overnight stays before away games became vanishingly rare, pre-match meals were downgraded to soup and sandwiches and the team coach carrying the players became smaller. There was talk of players driving themselves to games to save money.

To encourage a more positive approach, the Football League voted to introduce three points for a win for the start of the 1981/82 season. They reasoned that more attacking meant more goals and larger crowds.

Greaves's success and outgoing personality meant he was briefly linked with a job at Plymouth and the vacancy at West Brom left by Atkinson's move to Old Trafford.

The season started promisingly with four wins in Oxford's opening five games, including a 3-0 aggregate victory against Brentford in the Milk Cup, the rebranded League Cup following a lucrative sponsorship agreement with the Milk Marketing Board.

Cassells continued to thrive; the mild-mannered former postal worker was signed from Watford as part of a £100,000 deal which took Les Taylor to Vicarage Road in 1980. He and Greaves became close, the work they put in together improving Cassells' game was starting to pay dividends.

He matched his previous season's goals total before the opening month was over. The miserly defence led by Shotton and Briggs kept three clean sheets in four games – only

succumbing to a 3-2 defeat at Newport County, whose goals came from promising Liverpoolian striker John Aldridge and two from Alan Waddle, the cousin of Newcastle United's Chris.

With transfer fees spiralling, the pressure to unearth new talent was growing. An early season league win over Millwall saw the stands packed with scouts watching Andy Thomas, one of a batch of teenagers being tipped to play for England, including Charlton's Paul Walsh and Carlisle's former Oxford triallist Peter Beardsley.

Although form wavered in September and October, Cassells reached double figures in a 1-0 win over Millwall in the second round of the Milk Cup – more than any Oxford player had achieved in the whole of the previous season. The reward was a tie with Everton at Goodison Park.

Immediately before the game, Oxford adopted a notable new look. For their home game against Lincoln City they carried on their shirts the name *The Sunday Journal*, a rare commercial innovation, as the FA and media grappled with the moral panic of logos featuring on team kits.

*The Journal* was owned by Eynsham-based entrepreneur Tony Rosser who'd owned the club during the 1970s to feed his fledgling newspaper group with exclusive stories. Working with Rosser was his distribution manager Nick Harris, a mainstay of BBC Radio Oxford's coverage of the club.

Oxford went into their first visit to Goodison Park in good spirits but with little expectation of coming away with a result. Everton had appointed former player Howard Kendall as their new manager at the start of the season but despite an aggressive recruitment drive, his team were mid-table and had just suffered a 3-1 defeat in the Merseyside derby.

Oxford maintained a stubborn resistance with Cassells missing two clear chances. They held out until the 70th

minute when Irish striker Eamonn O'Keefe – who'd been sent off against Liverpool – redeemed himself with the opening goal.

With two minutes to go, Cassells beat Mike Lyons and loomed down on Jim Arnold's goal. Arnold's faint touch on Cassells' shot allowed Mark Higgins to clear off the line. In the dressing room, Cassells hurled his boots at the door in frustration, but Oxford left with renewed confidence as Everton fans remained to applaud their efforts.

The following month, Oxford drew Southern League side Dover away in the FA Cup. Greaves was confident of a routine win, relaxing the night before the game with an appearance on the BBC2 chat show *Friday Night... Saturday Morning* hosted by Oxford board member Desmond Morris and featuring guest Susanna Kubelka, an advocate for sex for the over-40s.

He joined the players from London the following morning and was surprised to find that the mood was tense. He hadn't accounted for Oxford's dismal record against non-league clubs. They hadn't beaten part-time opponents for 15 years, losing to Barking, Nuneaton Borough, Kettering Town, Chelmsford Town and Bedford Town.

Greaves's confidence was well placed as Foley stretched the part-timers, setting up Smithers to open the scoring. Despite dominating, a second goal didn't come. Dover had treated their players to a special pre-match steak lunch, departing from their usual poached eggs, which helped power them towards a second-half fightback. Greaves only relaxed when Thomas converted Foley's pass four minutes from time.

Oxford moved up to sixth with a 3-0 win over relegation-threatened Preston, Cassells' brace taking his total for the season to 12. Greaves had unearthed an unexpected talent and other clubs were starting to take notice.

As momentum built, freezing temperatures and heavy snow in December 1981 played havoc with the fixture list. The worst weather in a century meant the next round at Aldershot had to be postponed to the following Tuesday.

With only two fixtures in the second round reaching a conclusion, the third-round draw on the following Monday contained 82 clubs. Oxford and Aldershot were drawn away to Fourth Division Bournemouth or non-league Dorchester Town.

In the rescheduled game, Oxford looked set for a comfortable evening when Cassells started and finished a move to make it 1-0 after five minutes. A disallowed goal three minutes later just delayed the second which he nodded in after 11 minutes, seemingly putting Oxford in control.

Twelve minutes later it was 2-1 when Murray Brodie retaliated for Aldershot. Another from Ian McDonald with 20 minutes left forced a replay. 'I don't know what Len [Walker, Aldershot's manager] did to them at half-time,' Greaves said. 'But it worked. They were fantastic.'

The weather had more severe consequences as between the end of October and the start of February Oxford played at the Manor just three times. They were already haemorrhaging £2,000 to £3,000 a week; their debts mounted and their creditors grew concerned.

The players' November wages pushed the club beyond their overdraft – they now owed the bank £162,000 with a limit of £150,000. The Oxford board approached Barclays Bank seeking an extension to their facility, but the bank responded by saying they would only honour the club's cheques until the end of the year. Rather than giving the club more leeway, they'd placed a noose around its neck. With other creditors looking on, Oxford had been given two weeks to find the money or close.

The board frantically sought a solution, contacting publishing tycoon Robert Maxwell, who promised to underwrite the immediate debts to buy some time to find a long-term solution to their problems.

The sustained period of bad weather meant the FA Cup replay with Aldershot was delayed for two weeks until five days after Christmas. Despite the turmoil, Oxford felt confident of progressing but fell behind when Stuart Robinson scored for the Fourth Division side after 11 minutes. Cassells equalised 15 minutes later with a far-post header and grabbed his second just before half-time from a penalty after being fouled by Joe Jopling.

Twenty-five minutes from time, Andy Thomas put the game beyond doubt following a mazy solo run. Cassells completed his first professional hat-trick with two minutes remaining, heading in David Fogg's cross, before Aldershot narrowed the gap to 4-2 in injury time.

The fixture backlog meant the next round against Bournemouth was just three days later. Cassells and Thomas took their good form into the game, both scoring to complete a comfortable 2-0 win.

The fourth-round draw was kinder with a trip to First Division Brighton & Hove Albion. A large crowd and half the gate receipts would keep Oxford afloat for a while longer.

After weeks of uncertainty, Maxwell committed to the club and was elected chairman. He wanted to attend the game, but when Brighton refused him permission to land his helicopter on the Goldstone Ground's pitch, he remained at home. An early sign that he and football were not the most natural bedfellows.

Over 3,000 Oxford fans travelled to the south coast on specially commissioned coaches and trains. Ninth in the First Division, Brighton, managed by Mike Bailey,



Charlton's manager for Greaves's first game at the Manor a year earlier, were beginning to lift their sights towards a first trip to Wembley.

Oxford opened brightly with eight players who'd faced Charlton for Greaves's debut, an indication of how much they'd developed as a team. After just 30 seconds, Thomas troubled keeper Graham Moseley with a 25-yard shot and seven minutes later Jones fired narrowly over. Cassells rattled the Brighton defence with his pace moments before Gordon Smith nearly broke through but Briggs and Shotton combined to tidy up.

It was a frenetic opening; Jones grazed the bar before Tony Grealish's volley went close for the hosts. Then Oxford started to take control; Cassells nearly gave them the lead before Steve Foster cleared a Smithers shot, then Jones nearly made a breakthrough with Moseley happy to cling on to the ball on the line.

After 19 minutes, Cassells pushed the ball past defender Steve Gattling, who tripped as the striker accelerated, offering a free run on goal. Cassells approached Moseley as he had Jim Arnold against Everton, and this time he struck it cleanly into the net for 1-0.

Oxford's relentless pressure gave them momentum and five minutes later Moseley pushed the ball on to the post from Jones's shot. Thomas released Cassells to test Moseley again, but the ball was cleared off the line by Garry Nelson.

Just before half-time, Jones worked the ball out to Billy Jeffrey on the right. Jeffrey's cross found Foley, who volleyed home for 2-0. It had been a blistering first half of forceful attacking from the Third Division side. Mike Bailey thought his team had been 'murdered'.

Moments into the second half Gordon Smith nearly pulled a goal back, forcing Roy Burton into his first meaningful save. Any hope of a Brighton comeback was

extinguished five minutes later as a short corner from Jones was played to John Doyle, whose cross found Foley to guide a looping header beyond the keeper for the third.

The win was the result of the round and one of the club's greatest FA Cup giant-killings. It was the biggest winning margin for a lower-league club at a top-flight team for 20 years, a new high-water mark for a team Greaves had transformed in little over a year. 'This is probably the greatest day in my career,' he said. Oxford supporters, packed into the corner terrace, celebrated as Cassells ran a solo lap of honour. Mike Bailey, having witnessed the start of Greaves's revolution, couldn't explain what he'd seen at its peak. For Greaves, it was a fairy story.

*Match of the Day* chose Watford's win over West Ham, Tottenham's home victory over Leeds and Coventry's defeat of Manchester City as their featured games, but Greaves was the guest of honour.

Afterwards, he headed back to Oxford, passing a billboard for a local newspaper advertising the day's headlines. The local media were leading with news about university places in the city. Despite Greaves's efforts, the transformation of his team's fortunes and a historic giant-killing, the club still hadn't penetrated the city's consciousness. The sense of unease that Greaves felt on his first day returned.