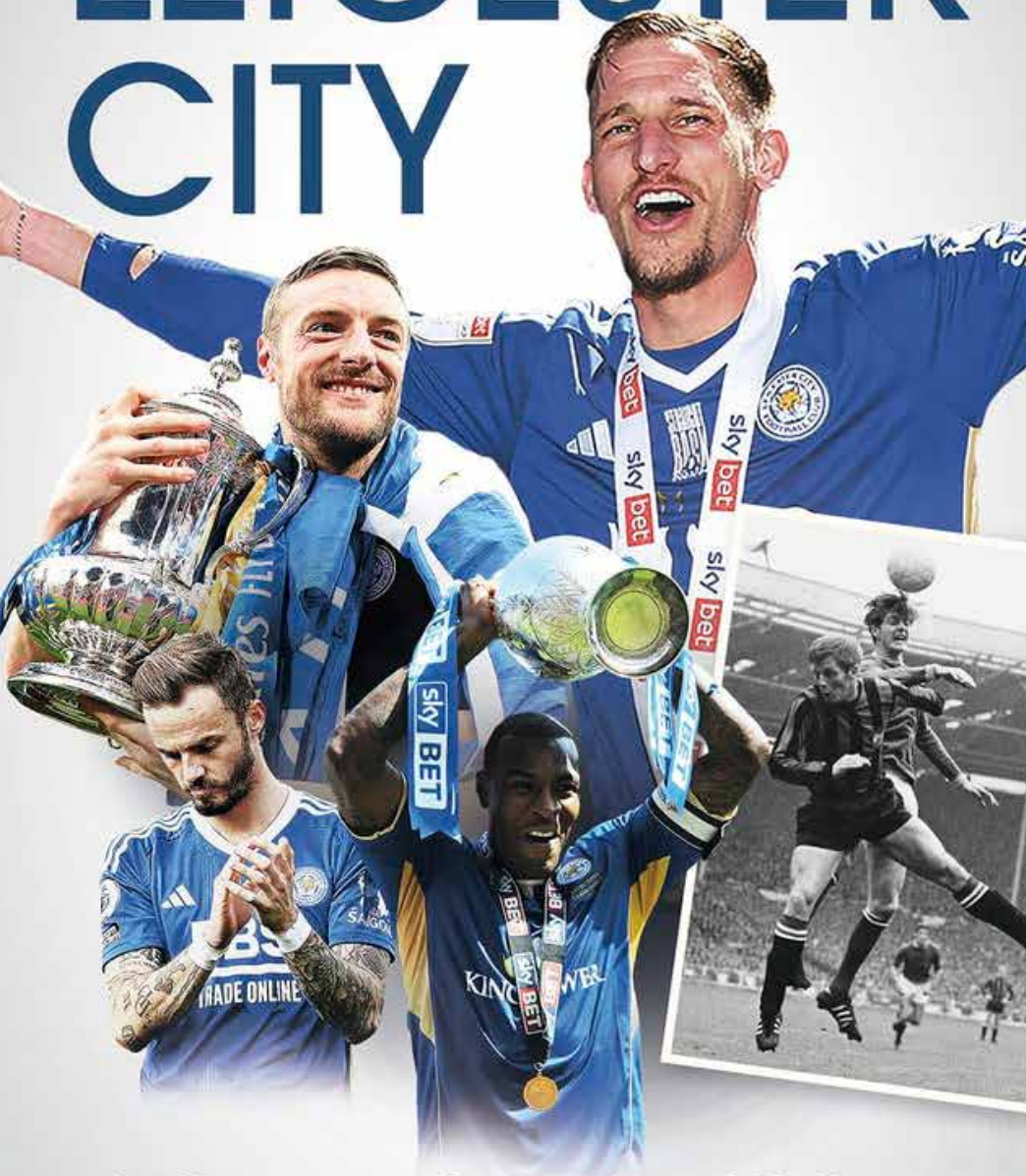


THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF

# LEICESTER CITY



A Comprehensive History  
Robert Garner

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## The 5,000/1 Long Shots

AT 6PM on Monday, 2 May 2016, according to the journalist Rob Tanner, Christian Fuchs and Robert Huth called at the studio owned by Wes Morgan to pick up Jamie Vardy, who had been enduring the pain of receiving another, his fifth, tattoo. From there they drove to Vardy's house in the Leicestershire village of Melton Mowbray to join their team-mates who were gathering there to watch a game on television. On the same evening, I was sitting in my living room with my son Keir watching that same match, being played 100 miles away. Anything but a Tottenham Hotspur win against Chelsea would see my club – Leicester City – lift the Premier League title for the first time in its 132-year history. Leicester had started the season with the bookies at 5,000/1 to win the league (a 0.02 per cent probability). Elvis being found alive and Barack Obama playing cricket for England were offered at the same odds and better ones could have been got on Alex Ferguson winning *Strictly Come Dancing* and Kim Kardashian becoming US president.

There was a good reason for the bookies' complacent optimism that they would never have to pay out (in the end, the *Financial Times* estimated the betting companies lost £50m as a result of Leicester's title triumph). In the context of the Premier League, the Foxes are a relatively

small club. In 2015, the Deloitte's Sports Business Group's Annual Review of Football Finance tells us, the club's annual football revenue was £104m, placing it 12th among the 20 Premier League teams that season. In comparison to the 80 professional outfits below them in this financial pecking order, Leicester were, and remain, a very wealthy organisation. But they are nowhere near as affluent as the super-rich clubs at the top of the list. The total revenues of the five richest in 2015 – Manchester United, Manchester City, Arsenal, Chelsea and Liverpool – amounted to £1.6bn at an average of £350m each.

Inevitably, this wealth gap is reflected in league positions. No one remotely considered a club like Leicester winning the league to be a realistic proposition, hence the extraordinarily generous odds given for those crazy enough to waste their money on a bet. And for good reason. Prior to the 2015/16 season, only five clubs had won the Premier League – Manchester United 13 times, Chelsea four times, Arsenal three, Manchester City twice and Blackburn Rovers once. By contrast, the Foxes had never won the top league (originally the First Division and now the Premier League), the highest position achieved being second in the 1928/29 season. Even that campaign was an outlier. For much of its existence, since 1884, the club had been fighting its way out of the second tier of English football with occasional bouts of wonderful mid-table obscurity in the top flight. To the astonishment of Leicester supporters, and the rest of the football world and – increasingly indeed – the world in general, this history of mediocrity looked like it might change.

### **The misfits**

The Leicester team in 2016 consisted of a combination of journeyman players who had been rejected by bigger

clubs together with some recruits previously languishing in lower leagues. The ‘misfits’ as they became known had all suffered rejection and adversity in their careers. In goal was Kasper Schmeichel, the son of the Manchester United legend Peter, who had been rejected by Leeds as not good enough and had spent his entire career in his father’s shadow. The back four was constructed around Chelsea and Manchester United rejects (Robert Huth and Danny Simpson), a lumbering ex-Nottingham Forest centre-back who had been rejected by Notts County at 15 and didn’t play a game in the top flight until he had reached the age of 30 (Wes Morgan) and an unknown (to British audiences anyway) Austrian (Christian Fuchs). In midfield, Danny Drinkwater had not made the grade at Manchester United, Andy King had been released by Chelsea and Marc Albrighton had been let go by Villa at the age of 24 before being picked up by Leicester on a free at the start of the 2014/15 season. A triumvirate of unknowns from the wastelands of football – Jamie Vardy, Riyad Mahrez and N’Golo Kanté – completed the backbone of the team. All three were told at the start of their football journey that they were too small to make it as professionals.

Jamie Vardy cost the Foxes £1m from Fleetwood Town, who had just, in 2012, been promoted to the Football League. This was a record fee for a non-league player, but still peanuts for a Premier League club. Born James Richard Gill (he took the name Vardy from his stepfather), Jamie was rejected by Sheffield Wednesday, the team he had supported from childhood, at 15 for being too small and lightweight (he was under five feet tall at that age). He signed for Stocksbridge Steel, a suburb to the north of Sheffield, in the Northern League as a part-time player while working, initially as a barman, then a trainee joiner and finally as a technician at a factory which made medical

splints. Convicted of assault for, he says, defending a deaf friend who was being targeted by a group of yobs, Jamie was compelled, for six months, to wear an electronic tag to enforce a night-time curfew. This meant that, after an hour or so of a night match, he had to be substituted in order to be home in time.

Vardy had seven seasons at Stocksbridge. Despite his chequered disciplinary record, he impressed and scored a hatful of goals primarily by utilising his express pace. A move to Halifax Town for £15,000 followed, before, less than a year later, he signed for Fleetwood in what was then the Blue Square Bet Premier League (now the National League) for £150,000. Despite watching him regularly, Football League clubs were reluctant to take a chance on him for the £1m the club wanted. Eventually, Leicester, Southampton, Cardiff and Peterborough agreed to pay the going rate. For a variety of reasons, he chose Leicester, joining in May 2012 on a salary of £8,000 a week.

Vardy was 25 when he first arrived at the King Power Stadium. At first, it seemed like the move up the leagues was too big a leap. After a promising start in his first season – he scored in the third league game against Blackburn – by the end of the campaign, 2012/13, he had scored only five goals in 29 appearances, had lost his place in the team and, according to his own account, was drinking heavily and partying hard. At the time, Vardy asked Leicester's manager Nigel Pearson if he could go back to Fleetwood on loan, and it was rumoured that Sheffield Wednesday might have been interested in taking him. After reassurances from the coaching staff in the summer that he was good enough, however, Vardy's form improved markedly during the Championship-winning season, scoring 16 goals in 41 games. The stage was set for his rise to national prominence.

Even more of a bargain was the 22-year-old French-Algerian player Riyad Mahrez. Growing up playing on the streets in a Paris suburb, Mahrez played non-league football in France before going for an ill-fated trial with Scottish club St Mirren. He played for a small club in Brittany before being picked up by French Ligue 2 side Le Havre from whom Leicester signed him for a measly £400,000 in the winter transfer window in January 2014. According to journalist Jonathan Northcroft, part of the way through the 2015/16 season Leicester had spent more money on the cardboard clappers which had been distributed to all home fans since April 2015 than on Mahrez's recruitment. Like Vardy, Mahrez, although undoubtedly skilful, had been overlooked by top clubs because of doubts over his physical stature – his legs do resemble matchsticks. Unlike Vardy, Mahrez made an immediate impact in the Championship by scoring three goals in 12 starts and registering plenty of assists.

When Kanté (who became known as NG) arrived at the Foxes' training ground in the summer of 2015, after he was signed from SM Caen in Ligue 1 for about £5m, he was mistaken by security staff for a youth trialist and asked when his parents were picking him up. At 5ft 6in tall, with a face like a cherub and an unwillingness to speak unless he had to, this mistake was understandable. Craig Shakespeare, the assistant manager, remarked later in an interview with Rob Tanner, 'I can remember seeing him [Kanté] in the canteen and thinking, "Wow, is that him? He might need a highchair, not a seat!"' Here was another player overlooked by other teams in Europe, who Leicester rated and signed.

### **It's not normally like this**

Keir was so certain Tottenham were going to beat Chelsea and stay in the title race that, in the first half, he remained



glued to his iPhone screen doing whatever it is that 16-year-olds do on their devices. His judgement seemed spot on too as by half-time Tottenham had raced into a two-goal lead. But wait. Ten minutes into the second half Chelsea pulled a goal back. Keir now looked up from his phone screen and even my partner – with no real interest in the sport – came in to watch, placing her phone in front of the TV so her friend could watch via Apple’s FaceTime. Chelsea fans held up banners with the words ‘do it for Ranieri’ written on them, a reference to the regard that Foxes boss Claudio Ranieri was still held in as a former manager at Stamford Bridge.

With less than ten minutes to go Chelsea went on the attack. A one-two between Diego Costa and Eden Hazard put the latter through on goal. We held our breath. Hazard swivelled and calmly hit the ball past the despairing dive of the Tottenham goalkeeper into the top corner of the net. Pandemonium. Only around 15 minutes left including injury time. A crestfallen Spurs team started to lose their heads, committing rash fouls and receiving countless yellow cards as they saw their title hopes evaporate. The final whistle blew – at 9.56pm – after six agonising minutes of injury time. We stared at the screen as the league table was flashed up with Leicester’s name in gold as champions and as the players, congregating in the house of Jamie Vardy, were shown jumping up and down manically, breaking their television screen in the process. ‘The greatest story in the history of sport,’ the commentator opined in typically hyperbolic fashion. As we shared a bottle of champagne (well, Prosecco to be precise), we heard cars going past the house, the drivers using their horns to announce they knew what had happened. Supporters headed for the stadium as an impromptu party began. According to the journalist Harry Harris, almost half a million tweets were sent using the word Leicester within five minutes of the end of the game.

The following Saturday we went to the King Power Stadium, the new focal point for fairy-tale lovers everywhere, for the last home game of the season. The match was irrelevant, merely an irritating formality that had to be gone through before the lifting of the Premier League trophy. The goosebumps began early as the world-famous blind tenor Andrea Bocelli (who had lost his sight in a football accident), led on to the pitch by Claudio Ranieri, treated the crowd to a rendition of 'Nessun Dorma'. I barely remember the match – a 3-1 win against Everton – but the post-match celebrations were unforgettable: the players being cheered, one by one, on to the pitch, the handing over of the trophy, the victory streamers and fireworks, the playing of Queen's 'We Are the Champions' – as naff as ever but we didn't care – and the parading of the trophy by the club's owner, 58-year-old Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha. This was followed a few days later, after the final game of the season at Stamford Bridge, by an open-top bus parade through the city streets lined with, it seemed, most of Leicester's population, leading to Victoria Park where thousands of fans got another chance to honour their heroes. Once the players had left, we were then treated to an impromptu set by the Leicester band Kasabian. I had to remind Keir that it is not usually like this.

And indeed, it isn't. Not even in the recent past. In 2008, Leicester had been relegated to League One for the first time in the club's history. The Foxes only suffered one term in the third tier. Records were broken as Nigel Pearson led them to the title with striker Matty Fryatt top-scoring on 32 goals. However, City then languished in the Championship for a further five seasons. During this time, two traumatic play-off defeats added to the pain. In the 2009/10 season, a penalty shoot-out against Cardiff City in the second leg of the semi-final went horribly wrong when the French striker Yann Kermorgant tried a Panenka

penalty – named after the former Czech international – which involves chipping the ball towards the middle of the goal. When it goes to plan, the goalkeeper dives out of the way and looks foolish as the ball rolls slowly into the net. When it goes wrong, the keeper stays where he is and picks the ball up. That is exactly what Cardiff's David Marshall did and Leicester were out. Kermorgant never played for the Foxes again.

As if that wasn't bad enough, worse was to follow. Pearson – a no-nonsense, gruff coach who wouldn't take any messing from anyone whether player or supporter – moved on to Hull City at the end of that season. According to Rob Tanner, Pearson's relationship with chief executive Lee Hoos had broken down to such an extent that Hull were allowed to speak to Pearson without the then owner Milan Mandarić – away on a safari with his grandchildren – being consulted. The club, very soon afterwards bought by the Thai King Power Group, looked for a star name to lead them to the Premier League. Paulo Sousa, the former Portuguese international, and twice a Champions League winner as a player, lasted only three months, with his team dangerously close to the bottom of the league. Even the appointment of the former England manager Sven-Göran Eriksson didn't do the trick. Despite signing a host of quality players – David Nugent, Kasper Schmeichel, Neil Danns and Matt Mills among them – he couldn't get the team to gel, and he was dismissed after a 3-0 defeat at home to Millwall in October 2011 left the club in the bottom half of the Championship. The surprise reappointment of Nigel Pearson (rather than one of the other reported possibilities such as Kevin Keegan or Roy Keane) wasn't met with a great deal of excitement from the fans but, as before, he did a very steady job leading Leicester into mid-table obscurity. The following season, Pearson again took the Foxes back

towards the top of the table and they finished sixth, earning another shot at the play-offs.

What happened in the second leg of the semi-final at Watford's Vicarage Road on 12 May 2013 is written in football folklore. By the final few moments of injury time, a 2-1 Watford lead, reversing a 1-0 Leicester win in the first leg at the King Power Stadium, threatened to send the game into extra time. As the referee was about to blow his whistle for full time, the Foxes' French winger Anthony Knockaert went down in the area. Penalty. A Wembley final was in sight. In 30 seconds, that dream was destroyed. Knockaert's soft penalty, and his follow-up, were easily saved by the Watford keeper Manuel Almunia and Watford cleared upfield. Fernando Forestieri crossed, the ball was headed across the area and Troy Deeney thumped it into the net to win the game. As the commentator covering the game live on Sky Sports shrieked, I threw something at the wall and Keir buried his head in his hands.

The following season was far less dramatic and in a positive sense too. Pearson galvanised his squad and with Vardy coming good, Leicester easily won the Championship title with two games to spare, amassing 102 points in the process (19 ahead of Burnley in second place and 17 clear of Derby in third). Us Foxes supporters, and much of the media, were expecting a further season or seasons of toil towards the bottom of the Premier League, if we survived at all. Much of the season justified the negativity. A stunning 5-3 win against Manchester United after being 3-1 down, in which Vardy – then 27 and starting his first Premier League game – scored his first Premier League goal and made the other four, was a false dawn. By the turn of the year, we had won only three out of 18 games and were rooted to the bottom of the table. Two wins out of the next 11 – and only 17 points from a possible 87 – reinforced that position. Up

to this point, Vardy's goal against United represented his only strike of the season. Bottom of the league and seven points from safety by March with only nine games left, the team looked dead and buried. One shudders to think what would have transpired had Leicester not survived that season, not least because written into Vardy's new contract, signed just before the start of 2014/15, was a £6m release clause made active in the event of relegation.

### **King Richard's legacy?**

But then something strange happened. Leicester had become the epicentre of the Richard III saga: three years previously, a skeleton, subsequently found beyond reasonable doubt to be that of the last Plantagenet King – who died at the Battle of Bosworth in Leicestershire in 1485 – was discovered underneath a car park in the city by an archaeological team at the University of Leicester, then my employers, after a concerted campaign by Philippa Langley. In 2014, opponents of the plan to re-inter the remains at Leicester Cathedral mounted a legal campaign to secure York as Richard's final resting place. The court sided with Leicester's claim and on 26 March 2015, with the world's media focused on the city, the King was laid to rest.

As if by some divine inspiration, the troubled football team responded. A narrow 4-3 away defeat to Spurs on 21 March, with Vardy again on the scoresheet, seemed to be the turning point. This was, remarkably, followed by four straight wins – against West Ham United and Swansea City at home and West Bromwich Albion and Burnley away – with Vardy picking up a further three goals. As Steve Jacques, in his account of the time, tells us, four successive victories had last been achieved in the top flight way back in 1966. Even more remarkably, Leicester won three of their remaining games, drawing one and losing only once

– a 3-1 home defeat to eventual champions Chelsea. The great escape, as it was called, was complete, the Foxes finishing 14th in the table and six points clear of the bottom three. The icing on the cake was Vardy's first call-up to the England squad in May. It is perhaps inevitable given what followed that we focus on Vardy. The unsung hero of the 2014/15 season, though, was the Argentinian striker Leonardo Ulloa, an £8m signing from Brighton, who scored 11 goals, more than double Vardy's total of five, and almost three times as many as Mahrez's tally of four.

Despite surviving, we expected another struggle the following season. Our view on this didn't change with the club's failure to hang on to the central midfielder Esteban Cambiasso – the legendary and highly decorated Argentinian, who decided not to renew his contract. Cambiasso had been instrumental in the great escape, scoring vital goals and providing much-needed leadership, winning the club's Player of the Year accolade in the process. Even more disturbing was the managerial upheaval which occurred that summer. Much to everyone's surprise at the time, Nigel Pearson departed with some acrimony. This followed the sacking of three young Leicester players – including Pearson's son – after images emerged of what seemed to be an orgy involving them and some Thai women. To make matters worse, a racial slight directed at the women could be quite clearly heard on the video, which had got into the hands of the *Daily Mirror*.

The club's Thai owners had already been concerned about Pearson's behaviour during the season, grappling with a Crystal Palace player on the touchline, telling a Leicester fan during a game to 'fuck off and die' and, in a memorable – and a little bizarre – episode, having a go at a journalist during a post-match press gathering. Pearson got regularly annoyed at journalists questioning the quality of

his team. On this occasion, he said to reporter Ian Baker, who had questioned the manager's claim that the media were negative towards his team, 'I think you must have either your head in the clouds, or been away on holiday, or reporting on a different team.' Pearson continued, 'Your question is absolutely unbelievable, the fact you do not understand where I'm coming from. If you don't know the answer to that question, then I think you are an ostrich. Your head must be in the sand. Is your head in the sand? Are you flexible enough to get your head in the sand? My suspicion would be no.' Pearson apologised to Baker the following day. The players thought it was hilarious and ostrich burgers were served up at the training ground in celebration. Relations between Pearson and the board were finally breached beyond repair when, it is alleged, he fell out with them over their failure to explicitly confirm it wasn't his son who had made the racial insult.

The bookmakers' favourite to replace Pearson was the Bolton Wanderers manager Neil Lennon, a former City midfielder signed from Crewe Alexandra by Martin O'Neill in the 1990s, but much to everyone's surprise the board turned to the 63-year-old journeyman Claudio Ranieri who, although he had managed some of the biggest clubs in Europe – Inter Milan, Roma, Juventus as well as Chelsea – had never won a domestic title. He was available because he had recently been sacked as the Greek national team coach after four successive defeats which included one to the minnows from the Faroe Islands. There was an almost universal lukewarm response to the Italian's appointment with Gary Lineker echoing many fans' reaction in his tweet, 'Ranieri? Really ... uninspired choice?' and Robbie Savage commenting, 'It will be a relegation battle whoever is manager.' What perhaps the critics had missed was the success of the new Leicester boss in taking smaller clubs to

a higher level as he had done with Cagliari, Fiorentina and Monaco. He didn't do a bad job at Chelsea either, bleeding several young players – such as Frank Lampard and Joe Cole – and finishing second in the Premier League before his brutal dismissal by Roman Abramovich.

The pre-season games did little to assuage criticism of Ranieri's appointment. Yes, the Foxes won four and lost only one of their friendlies, but all were against lower-division or non-league opposition – Lincoln City, Mansfield Town, Burton Albion, Rotherham United and Birmingham City. At least one goal was conceded in all of them. The signings that summer, too, did little to inspire. Few had heard of N'Golo Kanté, Gökhan Inler, Christian Fuchs and Shinji Okazaki. Most of us shared Steve Jacques's pessimism. 'I consider myself to be a positive person,' he later wrote, 'but it was difficult to see anything other than another battle against relegation.'

To our amazement, though, there was a great start to the season. A 4-2 win at Sunderland on the opening day having been 3-0 up in the first 25 minutes was followed by victory at West Ham and draws against Tottenham and Bournemouth. At third in the table, the odds on the Foxes winning the league had already tumbled to 2,500/1. The resilience of the team was astonishing as they came back from 2-0 down to beat Aston Villa 3-2 and from 2-0 down against Stoke and Southampton to draw 2-2. However, watching Arsenal demolish the team 5-2 at the King Power Stadium on 26 September brought us all back to earth. After this game, Ranieri made changes, the only time in his Leicester tenure that he remotely resembled the 'Tinkerman' of myth. In typical Italian style, the boss wanted the back four, split open time after time by Arsenal's counterattacks, to be tighter. For the next game, at Norwich City, and the rest of the season, in came Simpson and Fuchs as full-backs



and out went the more adventurous pairing of Ritchie De Laet and Jeffrey Schlupp whose defensive frailties had been exposed.

Not many Leicester supporters thought the players would maintain their winning run and Ranieri, exercising a not-so-subtle exercise in reducing the mounting pressure on the players, announced after the win at Norwich in early October that his team were well on the way to amassing 40 points and avoiding relegation. However, not dimmed in the slightest by the Arsenal setback, the momentum continued apace in the following ten games, winning eight and drawing two. After the first clean sheet against Palace on 24 October, Ranieri, as he had promised, bought the players a pizza, although only on the condition they made it themselves. With a 3-2 victory against West Bromwich Albion at the end of October and third place in the table, the odds were slashed again, this time to 500/1. Vardy's scoring streak went on and on. On 28 November, his goal in a 1-1 draw against Manchester United in a late kick-off on Saturday evening broke the record, previously held by Ruud van Nistelrooy, by scoring in his 11th consecutive Premier League game. After finding the net, Vardy ran down the touchline, past the United fans, screaming, 'It's me, me – all fucking me.' The odds on winning the title were now down to 50/1.

Vardy's scoring streak ended in the next game, the mantle being passed to Mahrez who scored a hat-trick in the 3-0 victory over Swansea City on 5 December. Nine days later Vardy rediscovered his scoring touch in the next home match, netting both goals in a 2-1 success against defending champions Chelsea to put the team two points clear at the top. José Mourinho lost his job soon after the game. To celebrate Vardy's record, Walkers produced a limited-edition pack of 'Vardy Salted' crisps given out free to every

Leicester supporter at the Chelsea match. Nine years later, I still have mine, unopened. I suspect the contents have ceased to be edible.

On Christmas Day, for the first time in their history, the Foxes were top of the league. It wasn't until Boxing Day, and a 1-0 reverse at Anfield, that they lost again and they only suffered defeat once more in the entire season, 2-1 at Arsenal in February when Danny Welbeck scored a very late winner after a dubious decision by referee Martin Atkinson to send off Danny Simpson as well as playing well over the indicated four minutes of stoppage time. By the end of the year, the odds on Leicester winning the league had tumbled to 12/1. Still we had our doubts whether this remarkable run could be maintained and there were blips – a failure to win and even score in three games at the turn of the year got plenty of pundits declaring, 'I told you so.' But a 1-0 victory against Tottenham on 13 January got the team back on track.

It was only after a stunning 3-1 victory in the early kick-off against Manchester City at the Etihad on 6 February – four days after a 2-0 home win against Liverpool at the King Power Stadium – that us fans, and the football media, really thought Leicester, who were now six points clear with 13 games to go, could well win the Premier League. Vardy scored a brace against Liverpool, with the first – a volley from fully 30 yards out which dipped deliciously over the keeper's head – arguably the moment of the season. Our seats were close to the point at which the number nine unleashed his shot, and blurred images of us looking on appeared in virtually all the national newspapers. 'What is going on?' my son tweeted in disbelief the following Saturday when, out with friends, he heard that Leicester had gone three up early in the second half at Manchester City. The bookies now made Leicester title favourites and, in

order to minimise their losses, were now offering to pay out on bets (at a reduced rate). The world's media were taking notice. Leicester City had become a global news story and many football fans now regarded the Foxes as their second favourite team.

In March and April, a series of 1-0 victories (always the sign of a team able to grind out results even when not at their best) kept Leicester at the top. By this time, a Champions League place was secured. Then there was a hiccup. On 17 April, Vardy was sent off and only a point rescued by virtue of a late penalty in the home game against West Ham. A one-match ban would have been the punishment for two yellow cards – the second for what the referee saw as a dive in the penalty area – but the ban was extended to two games for Vardy's reaction – jabbing a finger in referee Jon Moss's face and uttering the memorable words, 'That's a fucking shambles, you fucking cunt.' It didn't hold things up, though. In the next match, a home encounter with Swansea, Leonardo Ulloa – who by then had become something of a bit-part player – came up trumps, netting twice as Leicester eased to a 4-0 victory, the crowd chanting '4-0 to the one-man team'. The following night, Spurs slipped up when conceding a second-half goal in a 1-1 draw with West Brom.

Leicester's 1-1 draw against Manchester United at Old Trafford on May Day meant Tottenham had to beat Chelsea the following evening – which they hadn't done for two decades – to stay in the title race. The rest, as they say, is history. Spurs, who had not at any point been top of the Premier League in the 2015/16 season, ended up in third place behind Arsenal, who themselves finished ten points adrift of the Foxes. 'Who came third in a two-horse race?' City fans chant whenever they have played Tottenham since.

By the end of the season, the ‘misfits’ had proved everyone wrong. The back four – Simpson, Morgan, Huth and Fuchs – were rock solid. Vardy’s electric pace and fine finishing enabled him to score 24 times in 36 games played, the first Leicester striker since Gary Lineker in 1984/85 to score 20 league goals in a top-flight season. Vardy’s strikes were also often crucial. In nine games during the season his goals were decisive in either securing wins (four times) or draws (five times). That’s a total of 17 points won by vital contributions from the man who stepped up from non-league right to the very top. The Football Writers’ Association named Vardy as their Footballer of the Year and the *Sunday Times* later listed him as one of the ‘500 most influential people in Britain in 2016’.

While Vardy was the artisan, all aggression and pace, Mahrez was the artist, his ability to drift in from the right wing on his left foot with extreme levels of skill making the whole football community sit up and take notice. With 17 goals and 11 assists he won the PFA Player of the Year award. Kanté, too, was a revelation. Called ‘The Rash’ by his teammate Danny Drinkwater – and ‘the Kanté twins’ by Steve Jacques – because he was everywhere on the pitch (hence the meme ‘70 per cent of the planet is covered by water, the rest by N’Golo Kanté’), his ability to tackle, intercept and win the ball back was crucial to the team. Last but not least, Ranieri was inevitably named Manager of the Year.

The big question was what would happen next? Could the club possibly maintain their newfound status?