

## **Danny Wilson:**

Bob Littlewood is a Chesterfield FC fan who has meticulously delved into the last 45 years or so of the football club to show the elation, heartbreak and risks that any football club can encounter.

Bob's time and effort to bring such detail to us is more than heartening. I loved the feeling of reality of the life and issues within a professional football club, the people involved within the club but never forgetting the fans and the community who saved the club from a who-knows-what scenario.

It's a must read for anyone who is associated with a football club, whether it be as an owner, employee, fan or just someone who loves our game.

Bob's candidness and humour shows not only his affinity to the club, it also comes with a gentle reminder to others as to what can happen, sometimes through no direct fault of their own.

Danny Wilson is a Northern Ireland international who made 634 League appearances as a player and 1,066 games as a manager.  
Author of *I Get Knocked Down: But I Get Up Again*

## **Keith Hackett:**

This is a fascinating book that gives a great insight into a football club and its importance to the community. It serves as a warning to others that financial mismanagement can lead to a rapid decline that could result in closure.

It highlights the wonderful work of individuals who were prepared to fund football club activities out of their own pockets and who formed the community trust.

Football is a disease that once you catch it there is no cure.

Passion, commitment and value in people, history and local business are all highlighted. Walking Football invented by this club is now played around the world.

In my refereeing career I had the pleasure of officiating at Saltergate and meeting John Duncan and Ernie Moss

I recently watched a Chesterfield game in a wonderful new stadium sitting alongside a passionate set of fans.

This book is a must read.

Keith Hackett, author and former FIFA and UEFA referee



# THE POWER OF THE BADGE

How a Football Club Created  
Trust in the Community



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# Introduction

CHESTERFIELD FOOTBALL Club (CFC) was formed a few years after, and around ten miles south of, Sheffield Football Club, the organisation recognised by FIFA as the oldest existing club in the world still playing football. Notts County and Chesterfield were both founded in the 1860s, around 30 miles apart. The significance of these early founding dates in the development of English football seemed to have been ignored by the majority of the country's press when covering the National League play-off final between the two clubs in May 2023 at Wembley. However, its significance wasn't lost on the thousands attending the game or watching on television. The prize on offer was re-entry to the EFL, which both clubs had forfeited membership of in the previous few years, by virtue of relegation from League Two. A previous final between these clubs, in 1981, had resulted in Chesterfield capturing the Anglo-Scottish Cup, a competition in which they also defeated Sheffield United and the mighty Glasgow Rangers along the way.

Notts County won the 2023 final on penalties and returned to the EFL, while Chesterfield were left to plan for another season in non-league football. Despite a quality stadium, a popular manager and some excellent players who could easily hold their own in the Football League,

the club was back to square one. So how did it happen that Chesterfield imploded financially between those two finals? Why was a previous owner given four years in jail for a fraud which cost the club the major sums of money it had earned by getting to the FA Cup semi-final in 1997? How had the fans managed to save the club in 2001 when it was within a few days of going bust? And what is the significance of the football club being bought in 2020 by the Chesterfield FC Community Trust, which had itself been created in 2009 and run by some of the same fans who had previously rescued the club from oblivion?

What follows is a true and fascinating story about a football club from a historic market town in north Derbyshire, which played in the lower levels of the Football League and reached highs and lows in levels three and four, as well as highs and lows in the FA Cup and other trophies. The ground it vacated in 2010, Saltergate, was generally regarded until then as the oldest surviving league ground in England. From humble beginnings, Chesterfield defeated contemporaries Wrexham in the quarter-final of the FA Cup in 1997 and were close to defeating Premier League Middlesbrough in the semi-final played at Manchester United's Old Trafford ground, in a game attended by roughly 20 per cent of the town's population (said at the time to be the largest ever peacetime exodus from Chesterfield).

It tells of the trials and tribulations that the club and its locally based supporters encountered with the decline of the coal mining and steel industries and by massive changes in the local manufacturing and engineering industries. It shows how the club weathered storms (well known to many other clubs in the UK and elsewhere) of chaos brought on by dubious ownership. One owner ploughed in money with a view to reaching the Championship, then appeared to lose

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impetus when the club was on the verge of getting there. In 2018 the ultimate failure occurred on the pitch, with Chesterfield relegated out of the EFL into the National League. Two years later the owner did what the fans considered to be the right thing and sold the club to the Community Trust.

The football club, like most of its contemporaries, had minimal funds in the 1980s and 1990s. Heavy spending on players in the late 1970s created a good team and a high standard of football, but when they narrowly missed out on promotion at the end of the 1979/80 season, the financial effect of the previous team-building made life difficult for the club. Added to that, the bad reputation of professional football generally in that period discouraged investment in clubs. The local and national political and industrial context had a profound bearing on the fortunes of the club and many others like it. In contrast, the Community Trust progressed after its formation without the enthusiastic backing of the football club owner who eventually sold the club to the Trust in 2020. It was supported by local government, who had always understood the value of having a thriving football club in the town. A century earlier Chesterfield had become the first (and only) professional football club to be owned by the local council, until the Football Association stepped in and objected to that form of ownership. It didn't want local councils owning football clubs, which is an interesting position when compared to the current involvement of overseas billionaires and foreign sovereign wealth funds in several English professional clubs.

The issues discussed apply to many clubs in the lower leagues and in non-league football. Lots of clubs and supporters can tell similar stories of unsuitable owners and the havoc they can cause, either by incompetence or

design. Many clubs have been saved from oblivion by their fans, but no other at present can point to a multi-million-pound community trust owning and directing the club. The Chesterfield FC Community Trust is a charity whose foundations began when a small group of fans got together to dig into their own pockets, days before the club was due to go out of business and who became increasingly aware of the size of the task they were taking on. When the bailiffs arrived on day one of their ownership, the fans discovered the football club was financially responsible for over 40 cars that no one at the club had ever seen. Many of them were found at Manchester Airport, where American ice hockey stars had dumped them before flying home. They had left due to unpaid wages by their club, Sheffield Steelers, which was a leading professional ice hockey team at that time and part of the sports group owned by the same person who had bought Chesterfield FC the year before.

This book covers the period from the late 1970s to 2024 and involves testimony from the people who were there and from fans in this country and abroad. It also includes comments from directors of the club and the Community Trust, together with ordinary folk who have a good story to tell and who have benefitted from the Trust's work in the community. In 2023, at the annual Health Service Journal Awards ceremony in London, the Trust won the award for Most Effective Contribution to Integrated Health and Care for their innovative Thr1ve social prescribing scheme for young people. They were told that, 'It's a simple solution to a very complex issue. The service is genuinely embedded into the community and the data-sharing solution is groundbreaking. There is huge potential for spread and scale across the UK.' The Trust has been described as a 'Premier League charity



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trust operating out of non-league football' and was highly commended. The Trust has managed to remain successful and has grown from an approximate £10,000 turnover in year one to over £2m now, employing more than 70 people. This book illustrates how the lessons learned the hard way could apply to every football club in the country (and possibly many clubs in other sports, including rugby, athletics and cricket).

Women's football also features, as the club has produced international players in the past and is a growing part of the local community. The importance of a well-functioning academy is also covered and is a further illustration of the great strides being taken at Chesterfield FC and many other lower league clubs.

The mechanics of poor game play and on-field failures are given less time here than the impact on morale, confidence and supporter regard that happens naturally when relegation occurs and financial management deteriorates. What is interesting is how and why it happens and whether it is inevitably down to failures in the business management of the club, the football management or a combination of both. The fifth tier of football in this country has contained many clubs who used to be in the Football League, including some relatively high-achieving ones such as York City, Oldham Athletic, FC Halifax Town, Rochdale and Southend United, who have all suffered financial woes as part of their decline. In 2024, the level below that contained similarly well-known clubs with strong histories, such as Scunthorpe United, Hereford United, Torquay United, Yeovil Town, Darlington, Southport and Chester. Getting out of these leagues, which are currently showing massive improvements in football technique, player quality and coaching, is extremely difficult. Chesterfield's example

might just provide a blueprint of how smaller clubs, with an income potentially limited by the size of their support base, can achieve long-term success reaching far beyond the pitch, while at the same time motivating their local populace to embrace the club and all it stands for. It also explains how a well-managed Community Trust, linked to the club, can encourage people in the area, football supporters or not, to enjoy an improved quality of life and give them an increased level of hope for the future. This is the important message from the book: the model CFC has created is an example of how local enterprise linked to sport can help local people, as long as the will is there.

From the early days of the club, there are references in the *Derbyshire Times* of 2 January 1864 to a game against Norton Football Club of Sheffield. However, official records were few and far between in those days. An advert in the local press of 19 October 1867 seemed to announce the club's formation and it is recorded that a match took place against Sheffield Garrick on 19 February 1868. While the actual founding date of any football club is less important than the bragging rights would dictate, the greater significance of these specific dates is in comparison to what was happening in other parts of the world at the time. It illustrates how life was generally being lived relatively peacefully in England at that time, compared to other countries. The dates when the first games were played in the Chesterfield area were around the time that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and the American Civil War was ending (1865), plus the transportation of Africans to North America as slaves was beginning to be confined to the history books (it was abolished in England in 1833). In 1866 France was at war with Mexico; Prussia and Italy were battling with Austria and Paraguay was fighting Argentina and Brazil. In 1867

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the Dominion of Canada was created when the territories of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec and Ontario came together and Alaska was purchased by the United States from Russia for \$7.2m (or two cents an acre). The move was criticised by some newspapers in America at the time as being 'a waste of money'!

In contrast, British people were allowed some brief respite from international conflict during the 1860s. The Industrial Revolution was in full flow and engineering plants in Chesterfield were heavily involved in what is generally considered the second phase of the revolution – the results of the change in the main fuel for the industrial machinery from coal to gas. The new leisure activity of football became immediately popular and progressed quickly from park games to competitive league football, often between workplace teams or local village teams.

In 1871 a formal constitution was created for the Chesterfield football club (which by then had played several games) through the formation of a committee which voted in a president of the club, eight committee members and an honorary secretary and treasurer. Among the by-laws, rules and regulations for 1871/72, it stated that the committee would meet 'at least once a month during the season, that the season would commence in October and end in March and that there should be two practice days per week, Wednesday and Saturday. The secretary would have the sole management of the matches and the selection of the teams.' Since inception the club had played at the Recreation Ground, but the 'Rec' actually moved location in 1871 to the site it occupied until CFC left in 2010. In those days it was little more than a mowed, enclosed field with a small cover on the halfway line. The original Rec was under what is now the nearby Tennyson Avenue.

The team played in the Sheffield Association Cup in 1879, three times in the Barnes Cup from the 1889/90 season and in 1891/92 won the local treble of Sheffield League, Derbyshire Minor Cup and Barnes Cup.

The club became a limited company in 1899 and competed in the Football League (which had been formed in 1888) between 1899 and 1909. In its first season it finished seventh in the Second Division. It was put into voluntary liquidation in 1915, due to the particular and unusual situations that sport had to deal with during the First World War. It was re-formed in April 1919 after the war ended. This was instituted by the local council and the team played as Chesterfield Municipal FC for a short time, but the football authorities were not happy with a municipal authority owning a football club. They forced the club to become independent of the council and so from December 1920 it followed the same administrative path as the rest of the teams in the league.

Chesterfield played in the Third Division North from the 1921/22 season until 1930/31, when they were promoted as champions to the Second Division. They had two seasons there (interestingly, in that season the division included Tottenham Hotspur, Manchester United, Southampton and West Ham). They then spent three seasons in the Third Division North before being promoted again as champions in 1936. Three seasons in the Second Division followed, playing the likes of both Sheffield clubs, Manchester City, Newcastle United, Leicester City and Burnley. The war years of 1939 to 1945 disrupted the Football League system, but when it resumed for the 1946/47 season, Chesterfield continued in the Second Division until they were relegated in 1951. They were in the Third Division North – which became the Third Division in 1958 – until 1961, when they

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were relegated to the Fourth Division. There they remained until 1970, when they were promoted as champions back into the Third Division. They played in the Third Division until 1983 and the rest of their story is covered in greater detail later.

Association football was invented in this country and later became the worldwide phenomenon that exists today. Its introduction to the rest of the world took place after the initial founding of many of the British clubs that are around now. Brazil, for example, may be the country most associated with the World Cup, but it was the British who pioneered the sport in South America. In the 1890s, Charles Miller, the son of a Scottish-born businessman living in Brazil, returned home from studying at an English boarding school, proudly clutching a document. His father presumed it was his diploma. It was actually a list of the rules of football. Most Brazilians' first reaction to watching football was one of 'incredulity and horror'. 'A group of Englishmen – a bunch of maniacs as they all are – get together to kick something that looks like a bull's bladder,' read a report in a Rio newspaper. 'It gives them great satisfaction or fills them with sorrow when it passes through a rectangle formed of wooden posts.'

From the early beginnings of football in Britain, the following chapters cover some of the changes locally which have resulted from the popularity of the sport in Chesterfield. The fillip of a new stadium, conceived by the fans and financed by a new owner, Dave Allen, is discussed, including the assistance given by the local borough council in making it happen. Also how, despite the trauma over some years leading up to the ground's relocation, planning and creation, it is now an increasingly popular part of the town and its development has reinvigorated the Whittington

Moor area. It is also one of the grounds favoured by the FA for youth and women's international games and has hosted concerts by Elton John and Lionel Ritchie, among others.

The fact that a new stadium was needed can be best illustrated by the story about a film production company, who were seeking a football ground of sufficient age and decrepitude to be used for filming scenes of Derby County's old Baseball Ground from the 1960s. This was for their film, *The Damned United*, about Brian Clough's career. The most dilapidated stadium they could find anywhere was Chesterfield's home, situated in the same place that they had begun playing on as a local recreation ground. It was on Saltergate near the town centre and was so run-down that the club, with typical Derbyshire humour, later sold commemorative mugs proudly showing the rusty state of the wall cladding at that time. The gents' toilets near the entrance to the Kop had to be seen to be believed and the stench tended to put you off the half-time pies. Rendered brickwork was the place to aim and the drainage was a u-shaped trench in the floor screed which disappeared under the end wall, to who knows where? In comparison, the new ground felt luxurious. In fact, at half-time of the first game at the new stadium in 2010, one wag in the gents' toilets in the East Stand was heard to ask, in a loud voice, 'When did they invent stainless steel then?'

The changes brought about by the development of a new ground were not just cosmetic. As part of the agreement to sell the majority of the fans' shares to Dave Allen in order to facilitate the new stadium, an accord was reached that any new ground would contain an area of an agreed size to accommodate community affairs. This wasn't intended to be just a single office, but needed to be a sizeable area behind one of the stands to allow a full set of community facilities

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to be incorporated, which subsequently included a cafe, play area, administrative offices, a gym and a hydrotherapy pool. The fans had specific plans as to how it should be done and what they wanted to do with it. When the ground was eventually built the space was created as agreed and handed over to the fans, who formed the Community Trust to administer and supervise the ideas they had to help the local populace. However, there was no money forthcoming from the football club to finance the fitting out of the space and how this was done is a result of the determination of a few individuals, one in particular, to make the concept work. Some £1.7m was raised through a variety of devices and a lot of hard work by specific individuals. The fit-out was completed in 2012 and from simple beginnings the organisation, which plays a substantial role in both the local community and the football club itself, was born.

Events on the football field over the next few years produced highs and lows – Wembley appearances, promotions, relegations, boardroom rows, a variety of managers, players coming and going – in effect the usual items encountered in any club in senior football. However, after the sensational resignation by the owner as chairman in 2016 and gradual deterioration of on-field results, disaster in footballing terms occurred in 2018 when Chesterfield were relegated out of the EFL and into the fifth tier of English football, the National League. The mechanics of this are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, but the result was potentially catastrophic. The club subsequently narrowly avoided relegation to the sixth tier – a demotion which would have further increased its debts and could easily have led to its closure completely.

After the club was put up for sale following that relegation, a previous owner offered to buy it, but his

unpopularity would certainly have led to further losses in attendance numbers and what would have been seen as a backward step, when CFC should have been looking forward. After much discussion and negotiation with a variety of suitors, the club was sold to the Community Trust – effectively the same fans who had kept it alive over the years. It is a beacon of optimism for football clubs and for the communities which run side-by-side with the clubs, that despite the possibility of corruption from above and desperate local need from below, good things can be created by honest local folk.

An excellent embodiment of this principle is the conception of the relatively new sport of walking football, now played internationally by hundreds of thousands of people. This was invented at Chesterfield FC by John Croot, now chief executive of the Community Trust and the football club, after receiving a £20,000 grant from the Football Foundation to investigate ways of improving the health and fitness of over-50s. After trying out some preliminary ideas in the local sports hall, using local people of the right age, a set of rules was devised, teams formed and tournaments created. One of the Chesterfield FC coaches worked part-time for Sky Sports reporting on local games and, when he told them about it and they produced a short piece on air talking about the initiative, the sport exploded. It is now the most rapidly growing sport worldwide. By using local expertise and intelligence, a knowledge of football and an incentive to create something for the good of the community, this simple exercise is now helping thousands of people overcome physical and mental problems and gives others the sheer enjoyment of playing a sport that they felt was beyond them due to age or infirmity.



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One of the following chapters also looks at the effect that the club and Community Trust have had on fans outside this country. Chesterfield FC has fans in many areas abroad. This is not unusual for any club, as supporters go abroad to work and take their loyalties with them. What is different about this story is that Chesterfield are followed by fans who have no connection whatsoever with the town or the East Midlands. A group of young men in Belgium, for example, has been following the team for over ten years, attending dozens of matches in England and even cycling from Brussels to Chesterfield to raise funds for the town's Ashgate Hospice. Why they chose Chesterfield rather than a Premier League club (the usual choice for foreign nationals due to TV coverage abroad) is a revelation in itself and will be explored later.

A Norwegian father and his two sons have travelled on many occasions to the ground from their isolated home near the Arctic Circle; a Ukrainian fan is supported by Chesterfield fans since he lost his job during the war with Russia and reciprocates the help he gets; there are followers in Japan who were visited by Chesterfield supporters during a previous World Cup and several new fans from the USA have bought shares in the club 'to own a bit of the UK soccer scene.'

To describe what follows in more detail: **Chapter 2** examines why the football club always seemed to be short of money and looks at the decline in the local economy from the 1970s onwards due to de-industrialisation, focusing on the effect this had on local incomes and an inevitable fall in gate receipts for the club. It also looks at other factors nationally causing falling crowd numbers, such as 'the English Disease' of hooliganism and the poor state of football grounds generally. **Chapter 3** looks at the

club during the period from the late 1970s to 2024 and gives a summary of the people leading the board at the club and their apparent relationships with the managers of the teams. **Chapter 4** comprises interviews with some of the key people involved with the club since the 1970s and with the ongoing discussions about a new stadium, which covered a period of around 20 years. **Chapter 5** relates the drama and trauma surrounding the rescue of the football club in 2001 when it was forced into administration and describes the eventual formation of the Community Trust. **Chapter 6** explains how the Community Trust works in practice and **Chapter 7** is given to fascinating interviews with the people who actually make the Trust work. **Chapter 8** looks at the birth of walking football and **Chapter 9** discusses overseas supporters (a possible source of increased future income and exposure for the club). **Chapters 10 and 11** look at the future of the club from the viewpoint of the reinvigorated academy and the expanding women's football setup. The **Conclusion** includes the recent addition of two Chesterfield fans who are hoping to make a specific difference to the future of the club; who have been tempted to get involved by their fascination regarding the work of the Community Trust and its beneficial effect on the community; and who are intent on ensuring the previous financial woes are a thing of the past.