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BECAUSE IT'S SATURDAY

Written by **Gavin Bell**

Published By **Pitch Publishing**

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Because it's Saturday

Because it's Saturday

A Journey into Football's Heartlands

Gavin Bell

pitch

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Gavin Bell is a former foreign correspondent of Reuters and *The Times* and award-winning travel writer whose wanderings from Antarctica to Zanzibar have failed to diminish his passion for football and supporting Motherwell FC. He is probably the only person who has cheered during heavy fighting in Beirut on hearing his team had beaten Celtic. This is his third book.

Also by Gavin Bell

In Search of Tusitala: Travels in the Pacific after Robert Louis Stevenson (winner of the Thomas Cook/Daily Telegraph Travel Book of the Year)

Somewhere Over the Rainbow: Travels in South Africa

For Claire,
the best match of my life

You never know what happens in football,
it's littered with fairy tales

– John Coleman, manager
Accrington Stanley

Even a bad day at the football is better than
a good day at the office

– Keith McAllister,
Queen's Park supporter

A football club will always be a thing
of passion

– Pat Bell, editor of the
Grimsby Town fanzine

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What a team.

Author's note

MODERN FOOTBALL is a carousel of owners, managers and players constantly hopping on and off teams in pursuit of fame and fortune. Every season sees new actors appearing on revolving stages and others bowing out, most of them leaving with more memories than medals. On average, managers in English professional leagues are lucky if they keep their jobs for 18 months.

The action and interviews in this book were recorded during season 2017/18 and since then team sheets and coaching staff have changed, but most fans remain as faithful as ever. They are the lifeblood of the game, and this book is a tribute to their enduring, defiant loyalty.

Kick-off

THE PUB was crowded after a couple of midweek games, the usual raucous assembly of celebrating, drowning sorrows and questioning the parentage of referees. A big guy I vaguely recognised detached himself from the bar, weaved his way purposefully towards us, and proceeded to regale my pal with a beery account of how his team had stuffed Partick Thistle.

Eventually he turned to me and said, 'Hey Gavin, I hear ye're a Motherwell supporter?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Tell ye whit it is, the wife an' I are movin' house and we've got a three-piece suite we don't need. If ye fancy takin' it, ye can have an all-seater stadium.'

Needless to say he was a (Glasgow) Rangers supporter. It's the price you pay for not following a big club, you become the butt of jokes, an object of bemusement and sympathy, and more often derision. Fans of Crewe Alexandra and Scunthorpe will be familiar with the scenario.

This is no bad thing in Glasgow, a football-daft city fiercely divided by historic rivalry of blue and green, Proddie (Protestant) and Tim (Catholic), Rangers and Celtic. When the 'Old Firm' clash at Ibrox or Parkhead it's like a gathering of clans for battle, massed ranks of fans roaring defiance and sectarian abuse beneath blizzards of

Union and Irish Republican flags. They are not so much rival fans as warring tribes. It is a thrilling spectacle, and the imposing presence of Glaswegian constabulary usually averts serious trouble, but inevitably when the pubs close there are minor skirmishes. At such times it is good to be a Motherwell supporter. The Old Firm brigades just laugh at you.

It could all have been different. My family left Motherwell when I was seven to move to a council flat in Glasgow, barely a mile from Ibrox stadium, the home of Rangers FC, and it was assumed at my new school that I was, or would become, a 'true blue'. But it was too late. They say real supporters don't choose their team, it's either where they come from, or it's the team their dad supports. And I came from Motherwell. I'd already been to my first games at Fir Park, near huge steelworks that had endowed the team with its nickname 'The Steelmen'. In football terms, the die was cast. Motherwell usually manage to survive in the Scottish Premier League, but this doesn't mean very much. With crowds of around 4,000 and a team that costs next to nothing, we are hardly in the multi-million stratospheres of Chelsea and Manchester United. I suppose the likes of Burton Albion and Shrewsbury are more in our financial league.

I got to meet my 'Well heroes in the 1960s as a trainee sports reporter with DC Thomson, publisher of popular Sunday and weekly newspapers. One of them was Ian St John, who a few years earlier had scored six goals in a 9-2 'friendly' hammering of Brazilian side Flamengo at Fir Park. This was the era of the 'Ancell Babes', a team of gloriously gifted ball players managed by Bobby Ancell which produced no fewer than eight Scottish

internationals. St John was one of them and later he recalled how times have changed. He was paid a pittance at Motherwell, and when playing for Scotland he went to Hampden Park by bus.

My fledgling career in journalism almost crashed and burned on my first assignment, reporting on a First Division game between St Mirren and Dundee. DC Thomson also published daily and evening newspapers in Dundee, and it was my job to provide a running commentary for half-time and full-time issues of the evening paper.

On arriving at St Mirren's ramshackle ground in Paisley, I found the wooden press box crammed with big men in bulky overcoats, and I had to scramble for a seat nearby. It struck me there was something odd about the teams when they came out, but I couldn't put my finger on it and duly phoned the team sheets to Dundee. Fifteen minutes in, Dundee scored, and I promptly filed this important news for the first edition. Then it dawned on me. When the game began the players' shorts had been dirty, and I couldn't for the life of me think why. Eventually I plucked up the courage to tap one of the big sports reporters on the shoulder and ask him. He looked at me incredulously, scowled, and turned away.

At this point my dad, a well-known and well-liked freelance journalist in the area, came unwittingly to my rescue. After a moment the reporter turned back, looked at me quizzically and said, 'Are you Gavin Bell's son?'

'Yes sir.'

'Whit time did you get here?'

'Ten to three.'

'Early kick-off son, this is the second half. It's 3-1 St Mirren.'

I don't think I cried, but I'm pretty sure my eyes were moist. My career was in ruins before it had begun, and was there even any point in going back to the office?

'Who're you writing for, son?'

'The Dundee *Evening Telegraph*.'

'Right, come wi' me.'

And with that he saved my life by striding to the press phone, catching the first edition in time and dictating a substitute story, supposedly on my behalf. Words can never fully express my gratitude to this good Samaritan who saved me from ignominy on a rainy day in Paisley.

Fast-forward to a lifetime roaming the world as a foreign correspondent and travel writer, and when Saturday came I invariably looked or listened for the 'Well result. I may be the only person who has cheered during heavy fighting in Beirut on hearing we'd beaten Celtic. At least now I'm back in Glasgow I'm not alone. The length and breadth of Britain from Elgin to Plymouth there is a brotherhood and sisterhood of kindred spirits who turn out week after week, more in hope than expectation, to cheer teams with little prospect of winning anything other than their undying devotion.

This is the world of the Pilgrims, the Mariners and the Ironsides, clubs whose nicknames are derived from the history, geography and industries of the communities that produced and sustain them. There is no logical explanation for why anyone travels from Grimsby to Carlisle on a wet Tuesday night in November to watch journeymen footballers having a go at each other with more enthusiasm than skill. It's easier and cheaper to stroll to a pub and watch the silky soccer of superstars on Sky Sports.

But they steadfastly follow their local heroes come rain or shine, in battles for promotion or dour struggles against

relegation, and for many it is the highlight of their week. Theirs is the triumph of optimism over experience, and when they lose there's always next Saturday. I am informed by a German friend that there is a saying in the Ruhr area that is the classic response of a man when asked by his wife why he is leaving their home on a Saturday. He looks at her in bemusement and says, '*Weil Samstag ist*' – 'Because it's Saturday' (and he's off to the match). The lure of the beautiful game is universal.

If the stadia of glamour clubs are like gladiatorial arenas, those in the lower leagues are more like community playing fields where matches are social occasions for friends to catch up on local news and gossip over a pie and a pint. In an era of obscene wages and payouts to superstars, agents and hangers-on, men and women who follow the likes of Accrington Stanley are the lifeblood of the game. Theirs are the teams that hold up the pyramid of leagues, nurture young talent, and provide fields of dreams for the stars of tomorrow to hone their skills and attract big-club scouts. It is they who conjure the romance of cup ties in homespun grounds against giants of the Premiership, and fairy tales when they win. Some of their supporters remember the days when the local plumber was their team's centre-half. For them, the idea of being born and bred in Rochdale and supporting Manchester United is unimaginable, and I support this view. It goes to the heart of the matter, that football clubs rooted in their communities reflect and draw strength from them and become flag bearers for them and their aspirations. Never mind another factory has closed, the team's up for the cup on Saturday.

I remember reading a study that showed when Newcastle and Sunderland win, production in the North East rises the

following week with a general sense of well-being. I can attest to this phenomenon. As a young lad I used to walk to my gran's for tea after games at Fir Park, wearing my claret and amber Motherwell scarf. Inevitably somebody would ask, 'Whit did we lose by the day laddie?' News of a win would bring an instant smile, and as often as not you'd see a spring in the man's step. Where Rangers and Celtic fans expect and demand victory every week, a win for a 'Well supporter comes as a pleasant surprise. The recurring prospect of relegation never bothered me much; I saw it as an opportunity to broaden my horizons in away games to places like Dumbarton and Brechin. And I'd stopped going to Ibrox and Parkhead anyway because of the intimidating atmospheres. Being forced by police and stewards to remain packed in our tiny corner of Ibrox after the match until the stadium has emptied of Rangers fans, supposedly for our own safety, isn't much fun.

Loyalty and devotion to clubs at grassroots level run so deep and span so many generations they could be in the genes. As a result, communities support their clubs and in return the clubs support their communities with extensive social welfare programmes, and the symbiotic relationship enriches both.

And sometimes it reaps unexpected rewards. The best hope of European football for most of us is probably a pre-season friendly in Ireland, but a few years ago, to general astonishment, Motherwell qualified for an early round of the Europa League and we were drawn against a team from the Faroes. The club chartered a plane from Glasgow and invited fans to help pay for the flights by joining them, and when we arrived at the wind-swept ground on a sea cliff our part-time opponents came out to greet us. There was a

practice ground next to the little stadium, and the Faroese team generously provided us with a ball for a kick-about before the match. At one point I somehow managed to lay on a pass that led to a goal, and I heard a voice from the sidelines: 'Hey Gavin, didn't know you were that good, can I put you on the bench?' It was Alex McLeish, the Motherwell (and later Scotland) manager. You don't get that at the Emirates.

Nor do you get strikers hitting seagulls. This happened five minutes into the Faroes game when a wildly wayward effort soared over the bar, slammed into a startled bird and fell over a cliff into the sea where it was recovered by a fishing boat.

Another amusing incident in Motherwell's forays to far-flung, exotic places occurred during a cup tie at Arbroath. It was a wild, stormy day and the combination of gales, a high tide and the stadium's misfortune to be perched on the edge of the North Sea resulted in an Arbroath player being drenched by the spray of an incoming wave as he was lining up to take a corner. This was viewed as a natural if rare hazard of the Scottish game, and the referee's decision to abandon the match shortly afterwards was greeted with astonishment and dismay. 'Just for a wee bitty wind, the man's daft in the heid,' was one of the more polite remarks. So it goes.

The glamour clubs and their galaxy of superstars obviously have their place on Planet Football. We all marvel at the skills and artistry of players at the top of their game, even if they are preening peacocks like Ronaldo, seemingly determined to become a parody of himself. But it's on windy days at Arbroath and dark winter nights in Grimsby that roots are nourished which allow stars to flourish at the highest levels.

Increasingly, top clubs are reaping crops of promising youngsters barely more than children to bring through youth ranks, but few make the grade and most end up playing in empty stadiums for youth and reserve squads. For those who don't drift out of the game, their recourse is lower leagues where they can revive their careers and be local heroes to fans as passionate and committed as any in the Premier League.

The purpose of this book is to take readers on a season ticket to sparsely filled grounds where managers and fans are on first-name terms and players join them for a pint after the game. Along the way, I hope to find answers to a couple of questions – how do they survive on shoestring budgets, and for how long? While the big fish funded by billionaires gobble up worldwide television and sponsorship revenues, the minnows scrape along as best they can with crumbs from the Premier League table and the support of local butchers, bakers and candlestick makers. As I write this, Manchester City have just drawn more fans to a home game against Crystal Palace than all of the two dozen clubs in League Two combined to their weekend matches, and any one of City's superstars is paid more in a week than some teams earn in a season.

Inevitably, some clubs sink into the obscurity of non-league, and others simply disappear. I remember witnessing the sad demise of Third Lanark, originally the 3rd Lanarkshire Rifle Volunteers and founder members of the Scottish Football Association, at their last home game at Cathkin Park in Glasgow in 1967. Only four years before, they had beaten Celtic 2-1 to win the Glasgow Cup. Others like Accrington Stanley refuse to die, and against all the odds climb out of administration and the depths of

regional leagues to rejoin the professional ranks. How do they do that?

My travels take me inevitably to the cradle and enduring heartland of the game in the North and Midlands of England, which produced the dozen clubs that founded the Football League in Manchester in 1888, the oldest such competition in world football. (Preston North End won the first league title undefeated and completed the first league and cup double by winning the FA Cup.) For me this is a whimsical odyssey to places long known but never explored. I know my way around Beirut, Seoul and Johannesburg, but I'd be hard pressed to find Mansfield and Rochdale on a map. They are in the outer limits of my geographical knowledge, along with Uzbekistan, and have existed since my youth only as names on Football League tables. English fans may have heard of Queen of the South, but ask them to identify and locate the club's hometown and they'd probably struggle (it's Dumfries in the Scottish Borders).

On the way I expect to encounter the homespun wit and wisdom that has enlivened my experience of the game since I was first lifted over the barrier at Fir Park as a wee boy to get in free. I recall years later a comment directed at one of our players, Stevie Kirk, who belonged to the hit-and-miss school of Scottish strikers. After one particularly abysmal miss from point-blank range, he was trotting by the main stand when a chap behind me called out, 'Hey Kirkie, ye're nae mair use than a chocolate fireguard.' It was an inspired metaphor, and to his credit Kirk looked up, smiled and applauded. He was accorded a rousing cheer. Sadly, at the time of writing, the author of this perceptive remark has recently passed away. He was a constant presence in the season ticket holders' section in the main stand, in the

row behind me, and every time I look around I still imagine he's there.

In truth, he'll always be there when Saturday comes, rain or shine, supporting a wee club. Just like the rest of us. It's what Saturdays are for.

Accrington Stanley

You never know what happens in football,
it's littered with fairy tales.

Founded:	1893
Ground:	Wham Stadium
Average attendance:	1,979
Honours:	Unibond Premier League champions 2002/03 Nationwide Conference champions 2005/06

IT IS said they used to make men as hard as the town bricks in Accrington. The bricks were the densest and strongest in the world and you'll find them in the Taj Mahal, the Empire State Building and the base of Blackpool Tower.

Local heroes include the Accrington Pals, otherwise known as the 11th Battalion East Lancashire Regiment, who went over the top in the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916. In less than 20 minutes, 235 of them were dead and 350 wounded, half the battalion was wiped out, and it was reported that not a man had wavered or turned back. Images of the smiling pals are prominently displayed on public buildings and an indoor market, ghosts of a proud past long gone along with a weaving industry that was the town's heartbeat. Accrington is a gaunt shadow

of its former self. For a sense of pride now it turns to a football team.

I've been here before. A few years ago I came with my dog Patch for a whimsical newspaper series on travels with my dog. At the time, Accrington Stanley were plying their trade in the Unibond Premier League, light years in football terms from a return to the EFL. On a shoestring budget, they might as well have set their sights on reaching Mars.

Aficionados of the game may recall that the original club went bust and disappeared from the old Fourth Division in 1962 with debts of £60,000. But a team with a memorable name and an honourable past as successor to one of the 12 founder members of the Football League in 1888 was too proud to die, and six years later it was reborn in a working men's club and began working its way back up the non-league pyramid.

There was never any doubt that Patch, an enthusiastic cross between Border Collie and black Labrador, was born to be a footballer. The first time he saw a game in a public park, he was on the field in a flash. His pace and ball control were a joy to behold, but his skills were not universally appreciated and at subsequent matches it was decreed that his enthusiasm be restrained by a leash.

His passion for the game was undiminished, however, and it was only a matter of time before we went to watch one of the most famous names in British football in action. On our arrival I bought him an Accy Stan scarf, which he wore with pride and panache as we entered the Crown Ground for a match against Runcorn FC Halton, drawing an approving comment from the terracing: 'Well-dressed dog is that.'

Those were the days when a man and his dog could wander pretty much anywhere they pleased at Conference

grounds, so we chose terracing behind the away goal. Patch quickly picked up the pattern of play, rising on hind legs with front paws on an iron rail and barking encouragement whenever Accrington forwards muscled into the Runcorn box. This was warmly appreciated by Accy fans, who suggested that Patch should consider becoming the club's mascot. A novel attraction of the Crown Ground then was pointed out in programme notes in Lancashire vernacular: 'Tha gets good crack and summat time tha con hear cherman swering is head off at corner where bogs are.' True enough, in the second half a strident voice was raised near a corner flag: 'Coom on, wake up ye lazy boogers, get stook in.' It was, as the programme promised, the chairman in full flow. Those were the days.

Accrington Stanley is more than a football club, it is a state of mind and an enduring symbol of northern grit. They call it 'the club that refused to die', and like a phoenix rising from the ashes of a post-industrial wasteland, it fought its way up through regional leagues to come freewheeling back into the English league in 2006. By the time I return they are realistic contenders for reaching the dizzy heights of League One for the first time in their chequered history. It is early in the season, but they are lying third with five wins and a draw in eight matches, and next up is Cheltenham, who are struggling at the other end of the table.

My trip begins unpromisingly when my car breaks down on the M65 a few miles short of Accrington. Fortunately, the sun is shining, and a grassy bank provides safe refuge while I await rescue by the AA. We end up at a nearby garage, where a dreary conversation about the unfathomable mysteries of modern car mechanics turns to football. The proprietor used to support Blackburn, but says he

stopped going to games in the 1980s because of violence on the terracing. He recalls police having the bright idea of ordering fans to remove the laces of Doc Marten boots to curb fighting, and to prevent culprits fleeing from the boys in blue. Apparently, this did not prevent nutters from throwing darts in the direction of rival fans. I am shocked by the painful images, but he says, 'Don't worry, times have changed. At Stanley they'd have been more likely to be throwing paper aeroplanes anyway.'

I am pleased to find my guest house is little more than a paper plane flight from Stanley's ground, renamed Wham Stadium after the main business of the club's major shareholder and benefactor Andy Holt, which is plastic home accessories and storage boxes. I suppose you could call him the plastic box king of Lancashire.

The stadium is only a few minutes' walk from the town centre in a neighbourhood of solid, suburban terraced houses lining the main road to Clayton-le-Moors, so I begin with a stroll downtown. The club's sobriquet about refusing to die could apply to the town, but the team seems to be faring better than its home. Textile mills that once echoed to the clatter of 14,000 weaving looms are long gone, along with engineering works that supplied the machinery, and the community that sustained and relied on them is threadbare. High street chains have deserted shopping centres and only Costa Coffee and Sports Direct survive in a sad array of Poundlands, charity stores and betting shops. 'The town is on its arse,' Andy Holt tells me later with northern bluntness.

The *Accrington Observer* reports that a factory outlet clearing old stock – any three items for a fiver, including boots worth £50 – was forced to close after hundreds of

'frenzied' bargain hunters cleared the shelves. It looks as if the town centre itself is in a clearance sale.

Cutting its cloth for straitened times, Accrington has reverted to old ways, with local suppliers trading in basic necessities rather than designer fashions. Some have stalls in the Market Hall, a Victorian masterpiece of lofty glass ceilings and ornate wrought-iron pillars filled with light and memories of a prosperous past. When it opened in 1868, proud civic officials proclaimed it 'A building second to none in England for beauty and design', and one of the speakers expressed the hope that it would 'save many a life, preventing them from getting cold'.

It is a blustery day in late September, and I'm grateful for the warmth of the bustling emporium as I wander around shops and stalls selling everything from meat and veg to furniture, pet supplies, wool, old-fashioned sweeties and golf shirts for a fiver. There is a sense of stepping back in time to a slower-paced era before supermarket checkout tills, when service was more personal and there was always time for a chat with a butcher about his sausages and a greengrocer about her fresh sprouts. I'm enjoying the illusion of time travel, heightened by a one-room 'Heritage Museum' with a random collection of old domestic bits and bobs including a display of antique glass bottles and china collected by 'Jim Whittaker, Bottleologist (*talks can be arranged*)'. Next door the football club has a small store staffed by an elderly couple selling an array of red and white shirts, scarves and hats, and a treasure trove of matchday programmes for diehard fans. I emerge from this Aladdin's cave of souvenirs and memorabilia with a pen inscribed with the club's name for the princely sum of £1.

In the Accrington Pals Café a few steps away, beneath a huge Union Jack, hang photographs of the pals marching to the front and sheltering in trenches from shellfire, and of German soldiers manning a machine gun that probably dispatched many of them. The images are a stark reminder of the insanity and futility of a war fuelled by the patriotic frenzy of adjacent posters declaring: 'Women of Britain say GO!'

For light relief I stroll next door to the council information office to enquire whether there are any sights worth seeing. 'Tourism has died a bit of a death to be honest,' the lady behind the desk says. 'We don't even have a town guide.' They do, however, have interesting souvenirs. In a glass case there are slate coasters, one of which is inscribed with the legend 'Lancashire born and bred so tek mi' s thi' find mi' or bugger off!' Nice one for a guest house window I'd have thought.

Among brochures extolling the delights of Blackpool, Burnley and Morecambe, I find a leaflet for the Accrington Acorn Trail, a stroll around neighbouring streets of handsome Victorian buildings that have mostly survived the ravages of time and economic decline. The former Conservative Club, bastion of wealthy mill owners and landed gentry in a dyed-in-the-wool, working-class town, is not among them. Marble pillars still adorn the club's grand entrance beneath the imperial mantra *Dieu et Mon Droit* carved in stone, but the front door and windows are gaping wounds exposing a roofless ruin of smashed stones and timber evocative of a World War Two air raid. Around the corner the erstwhile Manchester and Liverpool Bank proudly bears the cities' elaborate coats of arms, but it's up for sale and overshadowed by the sweeping, futuristic lines

of a glass and concrete supermarket across the road. It looks like a giant spaceship landed from planet Asda.

I stroll back up the road for a pint and a fish supper in the Crown pub at the entrance to the Wham Stadium, a venerable watering hole for Accy fans and weekend pilgrims from lower league citadels as distant as Crewe and Crawley. No club scarves or emblems adorn the walls, ensuring a neutral venue for visiting supporters who are as welcome in the pub as they are in the ground next door. It's midweek and there are no fans in evidence, but a woman who sees me reading a Stanley FC leaflet volunteers, 'You can go anywhere and say you're from Accrington, and they say "Accrington Stanley".'

Her husband nods his head in agreement: 'That's right, no matter where you go.' And they're quietly proud of it.

Malcolm Isherwood is the kind of supporter any club would love to have. A retired gas fitter, he is a lifelong Accy fan and former chairman of the supporters' club. Attending matches with his mates are social occasions, and the chances of him supporting Premiership neighbours Burnley or Man Utd are on a par with Cristiano Ronaldo signing for Scunthorpe. I first met Malcolm in the Unibond Premier days, when returning to the EFL was an improbable dream. His parting comment then was: 'We're just like lots of little clubs with big ambitions. A lot of it's dreams, they might never happen, but you can always hope.'

When we meet again in the club's Founder Members Lounge he says realising the dream hasn't changed the ethos of the team. 'We've moved on thanks to chairmen that have invested a lot of time and money in the club, but we've still got the non-league spirit,' he says. 'We're a good family club, everybody says we're friendly.'

We are sitting in red leatherette chairs embossed with the club badge, surrounded by framed shirts of the founding members of the English league signed by current and past players. Beside Accrington are the shirts of Aston Villa, Blackburn, Bolton, Burnley, Derby, Everton, Notts County, Preston, Stoke, West Brom and Wolves, all of them from the Midlands and North of England. All of them are from the working-class roots of the game when legions of flat-capped men crowded terracing in all weathers to cheer local heroes who earned no more than them. It is a modest lounge for club staff with a small bar in one corner and not much else. When I meet the team manager later he describes it cheerfully as a glorified portacabin.

Over cups of tea Malcolm recalls the days when the previous chairman went around turning off lights to save money. 'We had lads in the past playing with curfew tags, you could see them above their socks. Now we can afford to give decent players two-year contracts, but it's still a small club, you feel part of it. Matchdays are social events. You don't just turn up at quarter to three and go home at five, you come early to meet friends and stay afterwards in the club sports bar and the Crown. Win or lose, it's always a good day out.'

He has brought along Peter Leatham, a company manager and his successor as supporters' club chairman, and Rob Houseman the supporters' liaison officer, who earns his living as a supply teacher. Last time I was here Rob had just won himself a bride after taking his girlfriend to a Unibond away game at Pickering. After the match he asked her to say slowly the name of the team they had just played. 'Pick-a-ring,' she said. So she did, they were wed a few months later and Kerry was named Accy Stan female

supporter of the year. His second favourite memory was when Stanley beat Gateshead at home in 1992: 'I remember crying because it was the first time we'd qualified for the first round of the FA Cup.' He was 21 at the time.

Rob stresses there's more to the club than football. 'We have a social responsibility, we have to look at social deprivation and help get kids off the streets. It's fine having the community working for the club, but the club has to work for the community.' The talk is of how to aim higher with the lowest attendances of the 92 members of the Football League. The club lost a generation of supporters when it disappeared for six years in the 1960s, and their last home league match on a Tuesday night against Grimsby drew a meagre crowd of 1,288. 'If 70,000 didn't turn up for Man Utd it would make no difference to them because of corporate revenues and sponsorship, but if a hundred don't come here it affects us,' Malcolm says. A vital source of funds is the transfer market. 'We can't sell players for a million, but a youngster rising up through the leagues can be worth a lot with sell-on clauses and add-ons. We sold a teenage lad to Blackburn for a pittance, but he's moved on to Bournemouth and earning thousands for us in appearance money.' In the close season three players stepped up leagues with transfers to Barnsley, Bradford and Shrewsbury. 'They didn't say what we got for them, but it'll be a lot of money for Stanley.'

There is a sense that Accrington Stanley is the epitome of northern soul with a gritty determination to survive against the odds. I am warming to a club that fosters companionship and romance, and makes grown men cry, and it seems fitting the badge on the shirts is the town crest bearing the motto *Industry and Prudence Conquer*.

Honest endeavour on the field and careful husbandry off it by successive benevolent major shareholders are key to Stanley's survival. Promotion and financial stability have allowed the club to offer players decent contracts, and Peter says, 'It means we're not at the beck and call of big clubs any more, we don't have to lose players for next to nothing. Now we only sell for the right reasons, for the club and the player.'

Peter is the most recent convert, having been a season-ticket holder at Bolton until a friend brought him to a match at Accrington. 'I found I was enjoying myself more here, so I gave up my Bolton ticket and I've been here ever since, I'm happy to say. As an outsider, I can say this town doesn't realise how lucky it is to have this football club.'

The conversation with the three Accy Stan stalwarts is like banter among pundits on *Match of the Day*, each adding pithy comments on the merits of their club: 'At big clubs you're just a number … It's loyalty, there's not a lot of it in football … the atmosphere's good, the players like it here, the crowd's very friendly and never get on their backs … the manager keeps developing the squad, young lads come to Accrington because they know they'll be given a chance, more than at Man Utd.'

A recurring theme is that manager John Coleman insists on a passing game instead of hopeful punts up the field. 'Coleman has them playing decent football, so clubs are happy to loan us players because they'll be schooled in the right way … the loan system is very important to us, we have a strong bench at the moment.' In fact, eight of the 22-strong first-team squad are on loan from the likes of Brighton, Hull City and Sheffield Wednesday, and from what I see of them playing a couple of days later they are enjoying being here. Only one player cost a transfer fee, a midfielder signed from

non-league Southport for the princely sum of £7,500. But progress has its drawbacks. Malcolm laments that opposing fans are segregated under league rules that didn't apply in the days of non-league football, and Rob reminds me of the day I brought Patch to a Unibond game. Now he says four-legged supporters are no longer permitted – league rules again.

There have been improvements to the stadium since I was here last, but it's not quite Old Trafford. A guided tour begins with a visit to the boardroom, a small, sparsely furnished office with a few trophies on a sideboard. 'These are mostly trophies we've given ourselves,' Rob admits. The only one the team actually won is Unibond Premier champions 2002/03. Others include one inscribed 'Norway Supporters Club competition winners 1993', but Rob's not sure what it was for. 'We get a lot of fans from Scandinavia and Holland who come over to watch Liverpool on Saturday and then us if we're playing on Sunday. They drink a lot.' The idea of Accrington Stanley fans in Bergen and Rotterdam is not as far-fetched as it sounds. When the supporters' club organised a fundraising drive for a new scoreboard and video screen, donations flowed in from Australia, the US, Spain, Italy, France and Norway. This is a club that captures the heart at home and the imagination away.

When the foreign legions arrive, they enter the smallest stadium in league football, capacity 5,057, with views over hills and woodland. Seats were installed throughout the ground to comply with FA regulations when Stanley entered League Two, but the fans were not impressed and terracing with metal barriers was restored behind the goals after they voted for it. Malcolm supposes they were given permission in view of plans to build a new 1,500-seat stand opposite the

main stand. This is known as the Whinney Hill side, where Rob informs me one of the largest rubbish tips in Europe lies over the hill in a disused brickworks. 'People come from all over the North West to dump rubbish there,' he says and I detect a hint of pride. Fortunately, it is a calm day with no ill winds. Malcolm says it's mainly away fans who want seats because presently they are allocated terracing open to the elements. 'Can't say I blame them,' he says. 'Last time Grimsby came here midweek they got soaked. I wouldn't want to drive home to Grimsby at night wet through.'

Needless to say, there are no fancy airs and graces at the Wham Stadium. The prawn sandwich brigade at Old Trafford scorned by Roy Keane would be an alien species here. The directors don't presume to have their own box and place their rear ends on the same red plastic chairs as everyone else, with only a striped ribbon denoting the section reserved for them and VIP guests. Like any self-respecting club, Accrington has an 'ultras' section that goes to every match, home and away, enlivening proceedings with chants of 'Come on ye Reds' to a steady drumbeat. Rob confides, 'They were louder when they were younger, but they're a bit older now, they've got families.'

Visiting teams are not afforded luxuries in a basic changing room with plywood walls, four showers and a single toilet. Modern leisure centres have better facilities, and Malcolm says it's best not to test the plumbing by using the showers and the toilet at the same time. 'We don't want to make them too comfortable,' he says. The home dressing room isn't much better.

A couple of first-team players are coming to the club sports bar tonight for a question and answer session with the supporters' club, and I'm invited. In the meantime,

scurrying clouds threatening rain have gone so I go for a walk to the club's birthplace.

Accrington FC was founded in 1878 when a bunch of lads from around Stanley Street got together in a nearby hotel and formed a team nicknamed 'Th' Owd Reds'. Ten years later they were invited to join the newly formed Football League, where they played for five seasons until they went bankrupt and were reincarnated in the Accrington & District League under their present name. The place where it all began still bears the name 'The Black Horse', but now it's a coffee shop and 'food emporium' popular with ladies of the town. A plaque by the front door proclaims it is where the forerunner of 'the world famous Accrington Stanley' was founded, and inside there are images of teams from the 1950s wearing collared rugby-style shirts and big leather boots.

Stanley Street probably hasn't changed much since then. There is a supermarket at the bottom of the street, and rows of red brick and stone houses slanting up a hillside are festooned with television aerials and satellite dishes, but they would be instantly recognisable to lads who kicked around balls with cans and clothes as goalposts in streets empty of cars a century ago.

But time has taken its toll. Since my last visit the corner butty shop has gone, and Stanley Social Club is boarded up and for sale. The HQ of the Accrington Detachment of the Lancashire Cadet Force looks forlorn and abandoned, with metal grilles on its windows. A de facto *Upstairs, Downstairs* scenario seems to have evolved, with the lower end of the street showing signs of weariness and decay, while houses higher up appear better cared for, with smartly painted windows and doors, some with small gardens filled with

flowers. I am reminded of Motherwell after its steelworks closed, a working-class town with not much work to be had, but where a wee boy felt safe in familiar streets with corner shops where people looked out for each other. I feel as if I'm rediscovering my roots, and I'm enjoying the experience.

At the top of Stanley Street, town gives way to country in Peel Park, a wooded hillside and open grassland of 100 acres dominated by a viewpoint called the Coppice, where the Accrington Pals trained before being sent to the hellfire of the Western Front. It is a delightful tangle of deciduous woodland, ferns and mosses, where orchids and wild primrose grow and sparrow hawks and tawny owls nest. Braving blustery weather, joggers and dog walkers offer greetings on footpaths that meander by rows of lime trees to a hay meadow and the Coppice, where you can see forever.

On maps, Accrington is sandwiched unpromisingly between Burnley and Blackburn in a tangle of motorways in east Lancashire. What the maps don't show is a small town in a green valley, with a canal running through it, surrounded by hills and moors and great country pubs. Up on the Coppice I am deep in hill country framing the town crouching darkly in the Hyndburn valley, its uniform rows of terraced houses like ranks of soldiers drawn up on a parade ground, the regiments that manned clattering mills now silent and empty. Glistening beneath wintry sunshine and passing showers, it is a quintessential panorama of northern life worthy of a poet or a landscape painter. In its industrial heyday it would have been a living Lowry painting. A few chimney stacks still stand like gaunt tombstones of the era when the town helped to build the Taj Mahal and the Empire State Building.

Scots may be bemused to learn the town also boasts what is claimed to be the oldest civilian pipe band in the UK and reputedly the world, formed in 1885 in an ex-serviceman's club by a local gamekeeper and a man from Stanley Street, whose pipers and drummers wore doublets fashioned from billiard table cloth. They still perform every year at the Royal British Legion's Remembrance Day parade in Accrington and Skipton Christmas markets. This is also the town that invented snooker tables and floating soap, and produced the composer Harrison Birtwistle, the runner Ron Hill, and a couple of *Coronation Street* actors who probably felt at home on the TV film set.

In the middle distance Wham Stadium is a postage stamp field of dreams. Previously Stanley played at Peel Park, where a photograph taken in 1921 shows a huge crowd of men standing around an open ground bordered by farmland. I am reminded of a comment by Malcolm: 'People forget we started from a field, there weren't even a rope round it.' In 1954 a friendly against Blackburn attracted a record crowd of 17,634 to Peel Park – more than three times the current stadium capacity. The town's future may be uncertain, but with brave men, hard bricks and passion for football it has history.

It is Thursday evening and about 30 supporters have gathered in the sports bar to meet two recent first-team recruits. They all seem to know each other, and it's like a family gathering to welcome home prodigal sons.

Malcolm insists on buying me a beer and the barman pulls a pint of Hen Harrier from Bowland Brewery. 'It's a good beer is this, we go through two barrels on matchdays,' he says.

Peter is in the chair and introduces Kayden Jackson, a striker signed from Barnsley after a loan spell at

Grimsby, and centre-back Ben Richards-Everton, who left Dunfermline in the summer with a knee injury.

Ben is asked if the game is more physical in Scotland. He reckons it's more physical in England because there aren't many players his size and physique north of the border. He's a big strapping lad is Ben, a traditional centre-half. He raises a laugh when asked what level Stanley would be at in Scotland, and he says, 'SPL of course,' though it's probably not far from the truth.

A wee boy who has to stand on a chair to be seen asks who their favourite players are. Ben says Rio Ferdinand and Kayden says Thierry Henry, but he'll never forget the day he was on the same pitch as Gareth Bale when Swindon played Spurs in a pre-season friendly. 'I just got a few minutes on the field, but to be on it with him was amazing. I'll probably never get the chance to play against a player like that again, it was like a dream.'

The boy wants to know if they like the manager and his assistant Jimmy Bell. Kayden says, 'They're straightforward. From the first day you know what you'll get from them, and I believe under the gaffer and Jimmy we'll be playing in League One next season.' Ben agrees: 'Their philosophy and the way they want us to play is good. No reason we can't get promoted. We can't underestimate any team but we've got nothing to fear from any team in the league, even in the big games against Luton and Mansfield.'

This is what the supporters want to hear and there is a buzz of expectation. Bring on League One Wigans and Scunthorpes is the mood.

'The team spirit is massive,' Ben says. 'Some teams have cliques but here everyone just gets on. Come Saturday we never fall out.' His best moment so far? 'Mansfield came out

with a big fancy coach and dozens of staff and we turned them over and sent them on their way, it was great.' Stanley's facilities may be modest, but Kayden feels at home: 'I enjoy the pitch and the changing rooms, it's got a family feel about it.'

When the meeting breaks up I have a chat with Kayden, who tells me he got into the game when he won a football talent competition on Facebook that led to a contract with Swindon, followed by moves to Wrexham and Barnsley, with loan spells at Oxford and Grimsby. A lean, whippet-like 23-year-old with a turn of speed, he's happy to be where he is. 'Obviously we're not the biggest club, it is what it is. I think a lot of people turn up their noses at the ground and facilities, but for young lads it's a great opportunity to play league football. Most lads where I come from never get that chance.'

He was brought up in a Bradford council estate where he says it's hard to find work and lads end up involved in 'illegal stuff'. 'I'm lucky. I feel valued by the gaffer and the fans have been great, they always support you home and away. We know we're playing for a small club, but everyone thrives on it. I just want to repay them by scoring goals.'

So far he has been as good as his word, forming an effective partnership with top scorer Billy Kee, notching seven goals himself in ten matches and earning a nomination for League Two Player of the Month. Kayden comes across as a modest young man who loves the game and appreciates the support of those who help him play it, a credit to the values of his club.

Friday morning and I'm back at the club in the hope of meeting manager John Coleman. His assistant Jimmy Bell is in the Founder Members Lounge with a member

of the coaching staff, watching a video of tomorrow's opponents Cheltenham on a laptop, analysing their play. Close attention is paid to their movement at corners and set pieces, and tactics to counter them.

I'm invited to join them and the conversation turns to poor attendances. Jimmy says he'd like to know where all the supporters have gone since the 1960s when the club went out of business for six years. The simple answer is that Burnley is six miles in one direction and Blackburn five miles in the other, and Man Utd's Theatre of Dreams is barely half an hour down the M66. In six years it's easy to form an allegiance to another club.

'Going out of business was massive,' he admits. 'But the town is poor, a lot of shops have closed, and people can't afford £15 or £20 to watch a game. It's cheaper to go down the pub and watch the big guns on Sky, and I don't blame them.'

Paradoxically he believes lack of support works in their favour: 'At least there's not a lot of pressure from them. With more fans come higher expectations. If we get promoted the games will be bigger and better supported, but I don't think the club will change our mentality. We're always striving to be better and we use the underdog mentality as a tool. We're like the mindset of Mourinho, who's managed the best teams in the world, it's us against the world.'

A stocky, middle-aged man walks in from the boardroom towards the bar and calls, 'Jimmy, does your pal want a cuppa?' This is my introduction to manager John Coleman, who brings me a cup of tea. Like Jimmy, he's a veteran of non-league football, a prolific striker who scored 200 goals for Morecambe in the Northern Premier and Conference leagues. He first came to Accrington as manager in 1999

and stayed for 13 years before committing what he calls an error of judgement. 'I went to Rochdale thinking it was a step up, but it wasn't.' After spells at Southport and in Ireland with Sligo he got the call to come back to Accrington in 2014 and he jumped at it. It was like coming home: 'When I came back here at first we had crowds of 300 and I probably knew a hundred of them.'

He points out that at bigger clubs you don't get to have a pint with supporters after the game, and he says he and Jimmy have been to more than one fan's funeral. The rewards of his job are sparse given the club's limited resources, but Coleman is aiming high. 'Every year we emphasise promotion. We never put a ceiling on ambitions, and in the short term we'll definitely get into League One. You never know what happens in football, it's littered with fairy tales.'

His other ambition is to take the club to Wembley – Accrington is the only club in the English leagues along with Crawley Town that has never played in the national stadium. 'It would be nice to get to Wembley before Crawley, I must admit. Reaching the play-offs this season is a realistic prospect. There's never been a better time to be at Accrington on and off the pitch. We've got a good squad and ongoing ground improvements, everything's going forward.'

All this with players' wages that are the second lowest in the league in relation to turnover, which is an improvement. Last season they were the lowest. 'I pay the lads what we can and I'd like to pay them more, but if the chairman told me we could pay them £5,000 a week I wouldn't want to, because then they'd not be playing for the club, just for the wages.'

It is heartening to hear this take on club loyalty in an era of agents tearing up contracts and millionaire mercenaries switching clubs for astronomical salaries.

Coleman has been offered jobs in League One but says leaving would be disloyal to his players. If ever a big club came in for him he believes he could leave with the blessing of the chairman, but in the meantime he savours memories that will never fade. The day Stanley beat Farsley Celtic in the Unibond Premier in the last game of the season in the spring of 1999 didn't feature on Sky Sports or *Match of the Day*, but for Coleman it was one of those football fairy tales. Stanley had been 17th in the league at Christmas but a good run had taken them to a game away from promotion. 'If we drew or lost we'd be third, but a win would take us up to the Conference. It was all or nothing. A lot of other teams were wanting us to lose. It was a sunny day, I was player-manager and I scored and we won. It doesn't get any better.'

Stanley has another claim to fame, as the only club in all of the English leagues without its own training facilities. Today they are preparing for the Cheltenham game with a workout on a plastic pitch at a local leisure centre and Coleman takes me along. Fortunately it's not raining.

The players are in high spirits and there's much laughter in one-touch passing warm-up drills, while Coleman tests his keeper with shots from outside the box. He still knows where the goals are, sending in full-blooded drives that produce flying saves and I have to duck to avoid being decapitated by a rare miss.

There is another spectator, retired lorry driver and Accy fan Callan Killeya, who often attends training sessions. 'You can't just turn up and watch players at Man City, can you?' he says. 'This is a good friendly club, they have time

for you and the players speak to you, they don't look at you as if you're stupid.' On cue Ben Richards-Everton trots by and my companion asks him how the injury's going. 'Injury's 90 per cent there, I'll be back soon,' he says. Echoing an earlier comment by the manager, Callan says, 'The players we have want to play football, they're not just here for the wages, and they're doing grand. Be alright if the season ended now.'

On the field the laughing has stopped and a practice game is underway. It is fast-paced football with a repertoire of tricks and flicks, dummies and defence-splitting passes, with time and confidence to occasionally put a foot on the ball. Long balls are few and far between and as often as not find their man. Jimmy is in charge of the match, barking instructions on positional play while Coleman supervises from the sidelines. It is easy to see why the John and Jimmy double act is popular with fans. They are likeable characters, plain-speaking aficionados of the game who know it inside out from non-league grassroots where they forged their playing and management careers. I'm looking forward to tomorrow.

Saturday dawns bright and blustery, the kind of weather that's as unpredictable as the match. It would be misleading to say the town is buzzing in anticipation of the game. If it wasn't for a few flyers advertising it you'd never know it was on. So I go for another walk before lunch.

In the nearby hamlet of Church, a footpath leads past a 15th-century church with a medieval tower to the Leeds and Liverpool canal, where its halfway point is marked with Victorian precision on a white stone inscribed 'Leeds 63⅝ miles'. I am greeted by a noisy gaggle of ducks on the canal bank, and an equally gregarious bunch of cyclists

out for a morning spin. They call out cheery greetings in impenetrable accents, the cyclists that is, and I don't understand a word.

Here the distance between town and country is the width of the canal. One side is dominated by industrial skeletons, textile mills crumbling into dereliction, and the other opens out to a patchwork of fields and common land grazed by horses, cows and a few bored-looking goats. At this point the towpath crosses a long-distance cycle route that passes over an old stone bridge and by a dilapidated farmhouse, heading invitingly for the hills. I find myself wishing I was on my bike.

Instead I stroll along a footpath by the canal, where I jogged with Patch years before. It's not the same without him; I still miss my faithful companion and best pal trotting beside me and barking encouragement at the Crown Ground. So as I meander along I have an imaginary chat with him about the fun we had then. Dog lovers, as daft as football fans.

The canal is a conduit through the past and present of the industrial heartland of England. Among the reeds and rushes I pause to admire hand-crafted Victorian stonework on quays and bridges, built on a scale and with artistic flourishes barely conceivable today. Long-abandoned mills and brick factories loom out of early morning mist, silent memorials to an industrial revolution that ran out of steam, but in their own way works of stark architectural beauty. Where steamers once plied their trade in textiles and coal, I pass only a couple of fishermen trying their luck with rod and line. In spring and summer the canal comes alive with swans and butterflies among banks of meadowsweet and willow herb, and gaily painted barges bedecked in flowers

and proclaiming where they come from in ornate letters. Last time I was here cyclists were obligingly opening swing bridges for *The Great Escape* from Barnsley. But now it's autumn, the skies are clouding over, and kick-off is approaching.

By one o'clock the Crown is filling up with Accy Stan scarves and yellow shirts of Cheltenham, all sitting together and chatting amiably about past games, players' performances and prospects. The Robins have come a long way, but they're on home ground here among kindred spirits who share a love of lower league football with all its crazy ups and downs. It reminds me of Ayrshire poet Rabbie Burns's eulogy to the brotherhood of man:

'… Man to Man, the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that …'

Admittedly it was written before local mini civil wars between Kilmarnock FC and Ayr United.

Outside the ground I find Malcolm selling pin badges, and he points to a man in a woolly jumper, jeans and trainers. 'You might want to have a word with 'im, he's our MP.' Graham Jones, MP for Hyndburn constituency, says his family has been in the area for a century or more and are 'Accrington through and through'. But when he was a boy in the 60s Stanley didn't exist, so he went to Blackburn. 'It just goes to show that when a club dies, the consequences last for decades. People here come to odd games, but they've already pledged allegiance to other clubs,' he says sadly.

When Stanley was revived he came back and now he has a season ticket, though parliamentary duties prevent him from using it as often as he'd like. 'The future looks promising,' he says. 'The new owner is making every effort to make the club more successful. I'm optimistic, there is

a fondness for Accrington Stanley, and whether or not it's based on nostalgia, it's famous worldwide. People have an affinity for the club and are proud of it, the challenge is to translate that into financial support.'

In the new fan zone, basically a covered catering section round the back of the William Dyer Electrical stand at the Clayton End, Ken Jefferson is doing his best to help fill club coffers by selling tickets for supporters' buses to away games at Port Vale and Forest Green. He has a steady stream of customers and hopes to send a couple of coaches to Forest's home in the Cotswolds next weekend. They manage to get to most games, and six coaches went to the Olympic Stadium in London last season for a League Cup tie with West Ham, which Accy only lost 1-0 with the last kick of the game.

I pick up a programme and find the anonymous author of *The Stanley Scene* is in a buoyant metaphorical mood: 'Once again under the guidance of John & Jimmy and the staff, the good ship expectation has set sail and we hope to dock in faraway places in early May. There will undoubtedly be choppy waters along our route but with our current captain at the helm, and with his capable lieutenants alongside, we appear to be set fair for a decent trip.' Beat that, Chelsea fanzine.

In 'Coley's Comments', the manager is upbeat: 'I think we've got strength in depth now … it's going to be tough to pick a bench, let alone a starting XI … as I say time and time again I will back this side on our home ground to give anybody a hard time.' Fighting talk from a wee team punching above its weight is what the fans want to hear, and hopes are high for today's game. The last time the two clubs met, Cheltenham came out on top 3-0, but now they're at

opposite ends of the table, with Stanley third from top and Cheltenham fourth from bottom, and the home side starts 6/5 favourites.

The programme also has news that newly formed Accrington Stanley Girls & Ladies FC got off to a flying start in their first-ever league match by thumping Barrowford Celtic 13-0, including three hat-tricks. And the club's community trust is celebrating its seventh anniversary, having raised £2 million from the Premier League, National Lottery, Sport England and others for projects engaging 10,000 local folk in sports, health, social inclusion and education. At the last count more than 400 adults were playing in its seven-a-side football tournaments, and walking football for over-50s is proving popular. The town may be 'on its arse', as the chairman succinctly puts it, but it has a football club doing its best to lift it up.

I meet club secretary Mark Turner rummaging around electrical equipment in a shed, hoping he has enough power for the floodlights. It's still early in the season and the lights may not be needed, but the dark days of mid-winter are approaching. I ask if he's worried. 'Very,' he admits. It's ten minutes to kick-off, the skies are darkening and he is aware that beer pumps in the new fan zone and the electronic scoreboard are drawing power from a limited electricity supply. Chances are if he has to switch on the lights, and a player comes off early and switches on an electric shower in the changing rooms, the lights will fail. Last season one pylon failed before a match, and when Mark went to investigate he found a youth player who had joined the warm-up having a shower. 'Poor lad didn't know what he were doing, I just got him out of it quick.' Welcome to life in League Two.

When electricity was installed in the Crown Ground in the 1970s, nobody dreamed the club, then toiling in the Lancashire Combination, would reach the giddy heights of the EFL and need more than 200 amps to power floodlights and heat the pies. 'If you'd thought then we'd be in the Football League, the men in white coats would've taken you away,' Mark says. Now he says Accrington's rise up the league has drawn scouts from Hibs and Motherwell to today's game.

The ground is filling up but there are spaces in the terracing and the shed opposite the main stand, and the Robins have brought only about 100 fans, scattered on terracing behind the goal they are attacking in the first half. Malcolm has insisted on buying me a ticket and we sit together in the main stand, so close to the pitch we can hear every grunt and crunching tackle.

Cheltenham start well and the game is evenly balanced with chances at both ends, belying the contrasting league positions. The ball is played mostly on the deck with hardly any long balls or speculative punts and the crowd is appreciative, applauding every good pass, move and tackle.

'He's doin' alright is the lad,' goes a chorus of approval. 'They're playin' fast, that's what John wants.' From his demeanour it's not clear whether the manager is satisfied. In contrast with Cheltenham gaffer Gary Johnson, animatedly urging on his side from the touchline, Coleman is relaxed, arms folded, leaning on a barrier and watching impassively. Neither manager has the luxury of a sheltered dugout.

Eventually there is a lull in the action, prompting a disparaging comment from the row behind me: 'I could've been gardening this afternoon.' But Stanley are gradually gaining control of the midfield, and on the half-hour mark

midfielder Liam Nolan rouses the crowd when he unleashes a ferocious strike from 20 yards that crashes off the bar. In the stand behind the Cheltenham goal the Accy 'ultras' are in full cry, filling the air with 'Come on ye Reds' to a rousing drumbeat. A few minutes later they're silenced when Cheltenham open the scoring against the run of play with a scrappy goal in their first real attempt on target. Within two minutes Accy are level when Kayden Jackson latches on to a through ball and fires low and hard past the keeper. It is a goal worthy of the Premier League, and Accy should have gone ahead before half-time when another well-timed pass splits the Cheltenham defence, but the ball is blasted over from point-blank range. I have been to matches where such profligacy raises loud queries about the legitimacy of a player's birth, but all I hear is, 'Brilliant move, he were very unlucky wi' that.' When the half-time whistle blows someone says, 'We could be three up, couldn't we?' and receives a pragmatic northern response: 'It is what it is.'

Malcolm says, 'There's no animosity, you haven't seen a policeman, have you?' League rules insist the game must be policed by stewards, but most of them appear to be huddled in a corner chatting and watching the game. Security duties here must be the least demanding in professional football.

Malcolm and I repair to the sports bar for a pint, where it seems word of my presence has spread. 'Are you the writer?' a man asks. This is Accy fan Rick Gater, who tells me a tale of good fortune, and the rewards of supporting a team that values its fans. After helping to sponsor the new scoreboard, he won a club competition that made him 'director for the day' for an away match at Chesterfield. This involved travelling with the team, a three-course meal with drinks before the match, and a seat in the directors'

box. He was allowed to bring along his father-in-law, and together they had fish and chips at half-time, and more drinks after the match. 'It were brilliant,' Rick says. 'We won and the lads were singing on the way back, and we had Dominos pizzas on the bus, and John and Jimmy invited us for a drink when we got back. We love it here, they look after you.'

Malcolm is upbeat as the game resumes. 'Don't think we're playing that bad really, we're just not finishing them off.' And they don't, in a second-half, midfield battle full of honest endeavour largely devoid of goalmouth incidents. Unlike at bigger grounds, the crowd doesn't become restive and even an opposition move gets credit where due: 'Good ball lad, brilliant ball,' Malcolm says. 'To be fair they're not a long-ball team this lot, they're trying to play football.' Evidently, I'm among fans who appreciate decent football, no matter who is playing it. There is no industrial language, and the harshest criticism is directed at a winger who balloons a cross high over the heads of assembled strikers in the box: 'Oh come on, they've got red shirts on, they're not hard to identify, are they?' An abysmal miss is greeted with 'Good gracious!' and a crunching late tackle by a Cheltenham defender elicits only a mild rebuke: 'Stupid person.'

With 20 minutes to go Malcolm says, 'There's a case for putting McLeod on, he's got a bit of pace.' Coleman must have heard him as two minutes later the pacey winger is on and promptly overruns the ball with his first touch, prompting amused calls of 'take 'im off'. The game ends 1-1, and Malcolm concludes, 'That was one of our poorer displays.' The man behind me who had been thinking of gardening is philosophical: 'Oh well, I suppose if you can't

win you have to make sure you don't lose.' The players are cheered off the field and striker Billy Kee gets special plaudits: 'Unlucky Billy, well played, well worked Billy lad.' Kee promptly trots over to say thanks and ruffle the hair of a young admirer.

Back in the bar Malcolm spots somebody he knows and calls out, 'Andy, will you have a word wi' Gavin, he's writing a book about us.' Andy Holt, major shareholder and bankroller of Stanley, is what you'd expect from a northern businessman, straight-talking and canny with his money but generous when he wants to be. Deep pockets, a big heart and an irrational devotion to a plucky underdog in league football make a powerful force for progress. The story goes that he used to have a box at Old Trafford, when he was invited to Accrington for a pre-season friendly against Burnley, and the bar ran out of beer because the brewery hadn't been paid. 'He likes a drink, does Andy,' Malcolm had said. A conversation took place and since then it's reckoned he has spent well over a million on the club. 'He liked the club and he got involved right away. It were a good day for us.'

Holt is no dreamer with fanciful ambitions for Stanley. Having built a successful business in plastic boxes, construction and other enterprises, he is determined to keep a tight rein on finances. 'We work to a budget,' he says. 'We're not in debt and I don't borrow. It's important not to grow too fast or too big. We've got to be sustainable or we'll go bust again, and that won't happen as long as I'm here.'

I ask why he decided to help the club, and he says bluntly, 'Somebody had to, they couldn't pay the wages.' Now they can, and are enjoying better facilities, including an impeccable new pitch with improved drainage. Plans are well advanced for the new stand and increased electricity

capacity, and the word is that Holt has bought land from a farmer that would do nicely for a training ground. But much remains to be done. He admits that if they put the sprinklers on at half-time the showers probably wouldn't work, and Malcolm says flushing the changing room toilets has much the same effect.

So what does Holt get out of it? He says there's no answer to that, and then provides one: 'It's a great club, but it's not just a club, it's a community. Accrington isn't known for much else. I'll tell you what I get out of it, I get a lot of pride and job satisfaction. It's like when you plant bulbs in the garden in January, you get a good feeling when the flowers come out in March. It's summat I can do.'

Planting the seeds of revival in an economically depressed community requires careful husbandry. Holt is incredulous that a non-league club recently offered one of his players £2,300 a week. 'It's reckless,' he says. He confides that Accrington's first-team squad is paid a total of £15,000 a week, and says, 'We played Middlesbrough in a cup game and they didn't have a player earning less than that.'

He is particularly proud of the club's community involvement: 'There's no other way a thousand people can get together every other week for a drink and a chat, and we have a real good mixture of young and old. It's about dealing with social isolation and getting people out of houses. There's so many things about the club you don't see. Man United's community is the world, ours is Accrington.' A passing fan pats him on the back and says, 'You're doin' a brilliant job Andy,' and Malcolm concurs: 'Andy's taken us to another level.'

In the process he has incurred the displeasure of his lords and masters in the EFL for the heinous offence of

buying burgers for the team when they win. He has been officially informed that giving them a couple of hundred quid to get 'McDonald's or the like' contravenes an EFL regulation that all payments or benefits must be included in standard contracts, and told he should ensure the club 'complies with all appropriate HMRC guidance in such matters'. In a series of tweets, Holt defended his 'right to buy anyone a burger with my own money', adding, 'You have to wonder what these folk would do with their lives if it wasn't for my errors of judgement.'

Holt and his predecessor Eric Whalley are largely responsible for taking Stanley to where it is now, local entrepreneurs applying business acumen to a hobby that rewards them with the satisfaction of giving something back to their community. But perhaps the underlying reason the club keeps bouncing back from bankruptcy and oblivion is the simple resolve of fans to support their hometown team, no matter which league they're playing in. Burnley and Blackburn may be just down the road, but they're not Accrington.

Star centre-forward Billy Kee wanders into the sports bar with his young son, and Holt offers him a pint and commiserations for not winning. 'Yes but it's a point, better than a kick in the face,' the player says matter-of-factly. Every club has its Roy of the Rovers, the striker who scores vital goals in the nick of time to win cups and championships, and Kee is Accrington's Roy Race, a cheerful, seemingly well-adjusted young man enjoying his football and racking up goals for the fun of it. As well he might, a happily married man on a decent wage, he is his club's top scorer and local hero.

What I don't know is that he is afraid of an imaginary rat running around inside his head that makes him want to

drive his car into a wall. This shocking confession comes a few months later in interviews in which he speaks of crying through sleepless nights with severe anxiety and depression that threatened to end his career and his life. The trigger was an away game at Cambridge last season when he couldn't face taking a couple of penalties. 'I didn't want to be on the pitch the whole match … it all hit me and I just didn't want to play football ever again.' That's when the rat began running around his head, depriving him of sleep. 'You are at home not wanting to go in to work and crying. You start thinking, will I just drive my car into a wall? Why does someone with the best job in the world want to kill himself? That's the thing with depression, it doesn't make sense.' The worst of it was the effect on his family. 'The lads at the club probably thought I was okay as I was putting a brave face on it here, but my missus was going through hell at home and that was the worst thing. You don't want the person you love going through hell.'

Fortunately his manager was sympathetic and told him to take a month off, he moved back in with his mum and dad and spent his days working with his dad on a building site. The change did him good and Kee is now on medication that keeps the black dog of depression at bay and helps him cope with the unremitting pressures of the modern game. 'With football there are so many ups and downs and emotions. You might get injured, you might get subbed, you might be flying. You can't sleep after midweek games and there is a lot of pressure, and you have to maintain your level of emotions.'

Kee is lucky to have the support of a club that is aware of psychological stresses on players and does what it can to help. 'The gaffer and Jimmy have been good to me. I

can come in in the morning and say "I'm really struggling today". They'll put an arm around you and they'll give you a cuddle. You don't get that in football. It's a lot of fronts, but with our team there are no fronts. They are so honest.' It was a brave, eloquent confession which Kee hopes might help others to understand and cope with the illness, and in a BBC sports report his manager agreed: 'It's a dark word, depression. People are afraid of the stigma. Until you've been depressed, you can't tell people who haven't been depressed what it's like. You can try and describe it but it doesn't make any sense really in your own head. One of the first ways to rectify anything is to admit that it's there in the first place and so Billy should take a lot of credit for the way he's done that. I think it will help other people in the long run.' Wise words and compassion, rare qualities in the fiercely competitive world of professional football.

And badly needed. Every season dozens of footballers in Britain are left without clubs, but with pressures of families to support and mortgages to pay that can lead to mental health issues. A 33-year-old defender who was released after helping St Mirren win the Scottish Championship tells a BBC interviewer he is getting 'twitchy' as he sees men he played with starting pre-season training. 'You hear of players without clubs struggling, they've grown up in a dressing-room environment and had a team mentality their whole life and they feel isolated, missing out on that. I totally get that. It's tough. You don't know what direction you're going, if a team's going to come in, if you're going to get the next wage packet. It's challenging mentally.' Worth bearing in mind the next time you want to yell at a player for a missed pass or mistimed tackle.

Coleman had invited me to join him in his office after the game, and I find him in a sparsely furnished portacabin at the back of the ground, sharing pizza with his staff. He's pleased with the way his team played in the first half, but disappointed the game tightened up after the interval. 'I can't fault the lads for their efforts. It's a setback, but we haven't become a bad team overnight.' I ask about his football philosophy, and he says it was influenced by the World Cup finals in South Africa when he was impressed by patterns of play in the Spain v Holland game. He came back full of enthusiasm for Spain's 4-3-2-1 setup, which he has evolved into 4-4-1-1 with emphasis on passing through the lines and no long balls. 'I think it's been a success so far,' he says. Not that it's made much difference to crowds coming through the gates. Today's official attendance of 1,321 is the lowest in all four leagues, less than a tenth of the League Two crowd at Notts County's clash with Lincoln City, but Stanley are still joint third and Kayden's goal took him to joint second-highest scorer in League Two.

Malcolm and I return to the Crown, where he is philosophical: 'We know our limitations and I think we're doing well to be where we are. To be realistic, League One is the best we can hope for and if we get a good cup run and get on the telly it'll be a bonus. About the only thing Accrington has got going for it is the football club. At least people know we exist, don't they?'

There's always next Saturday and he's looking forward to the coach trip to the Cotswolds: 'The Forest Green lads will make us welcome and it's a nice part of the world, even if the pies are vegetarian. There's no aggro, we're all in the same boat, aren't we? It's not like the Premier League.' With that we part and in view of my beer intake I wander off

in search of a decent restaurant within walking distance. I don't find one and end up with a Chinese takeaway. Accrington has its limits.

Maybe one day its team will be in League One with a new stand, electricity to spare and a training ground of its own. And the dressing rooms might even be tarted up. 'If we get a good cup run we'll do up the changing rooms, that's the script,' Holt said. At least then Fulham might use the showers if they come calling again on cup business. The last time they turned up at Accrington with Roy Hodgson they took one look at the dressing rooms and asked if their hosts would mind very much if they changed and showered in their country house hotel out of town. 'They were very polite about it,' club secretary Mark Turner recalls. 'We didn't mind a bit and we all shook hands. Happy days.'

When Tony Pulis brought his expensively assembled West Brom for a League Cup tie more recently, he wasn't fazed by the facilities. 'Do the lads good,' he said. 'Remind them where they came from.'

Good advice, that.