

Getting to Know Old Trafford

In the autumn of 1950 I was introduced to watching live football. In those days, the various schools throughout Manchester would receive a free allocation of tickets for reserve team matches from both Manchester United and Manchester City. These tickets would be distributed by the schoolteachers in the senior school on a Friday afternoon, together with red bus tokens for the Manchester buses which allowed free travel. My brother, Peter, got hold of a couple of these tickets and a handful of bus tokens, and so took me for my first visit to Old Trafford. I was already hooked on United, but to go and to see a match at Old Trafford – at any level – was more than I could have ever wished for at that age. My brother forever maintained that taking me to Old Trafford was the biggest mistake he ever made in his life! Unlike me, Peter was a boy who at that time could take or leave football. It never consumed him as it did me, and he had many other interests – fishing, music, and cycling to name but a few. After that first visit he never fancied having to chaperone me to matches, but he did always take the tickets and bus tokens that were on offer at school, and he did accompany me to other games for a short while. When he became quite sure that I knew my way to Old Trafford, we came to an agreement. We would leave home together about 11 o'clock on a Saturday morning, walk to All Saints, and then go our separate ways, him to do whatever he wished, and me to Old Trafford. In those days, there was no floodlighting at Old Trafford, and Saturday reserve games would kick off at 2.15pm during the winter months. Peter and I would meet up again around 5.30 and make our way home together, and our parents were never any the wiser!

On my secret trips to Old Trafford, Peter and I would part company at All Saints. I would catch the number 49 bus, and sit with my nose pressed against the window as it trundled its way up Stretford Road. The pavements were always crowded with Saturday shoppers, and in my mind's eye I can still see the local landmarks that became so familiar along the route. Paulden's store at Cambridge Street, Clynne's

pub, Braun's pork butcher's, the Fifty Shilling Tailors at Great Jackson Street, the Zion Institute, the Three Legs of Man pub, Burke's Brushes. Then the bus would take the right fork as it entered Trafford Bar at the junctions of Stretford Road, Talbot Road, and Chester Road. Turning into Chester Road, on the left hand side the bus passed the famous old dark-sooted, castellated building that was Henshaw's Institute for the Blind, where my father would go for training in woodwork just a few years later. The White City Stadium was further along on the left, a stadium that could hold 25,000 people and which hosted greyhound racing, rugby and athletics; today only its old grand entrance remains, surrounded by a modern retail park. Salford Docks would loom large over to the right. The ocean-going ships of Manchester Liners and the Royal Mail rested majestically at their berths on the various quaysides, their funnels spouting smoke as they prepared to cross the Atlantic to Canada and the United States.

Then the bus would arrive at my alighting point, just past the Trafford pub at Warwick Road. The sheer excitement and thrill of going to Old Trafford has never left me, even to this day. I still get that same delight, that surge, that same expectation I experienced as a young child. More often than not, my arrival at Warwick Road would be over two hours before kick-off, with few people around. I would walk down Warwick Road and over the railway bridge, on whose bricks, blackened with soot and grime, was emblazoned the white painted slogan: 'Ban the A-Bomb – United We Win!' Then I arrived at the brick croft that passed as the forecourt to the ground – you have to remember that it was just a few short years since Old Trafford had reopened after suffering wartime damage from German bombers. Although the stadium had been rebuilt, the service areas all around were virtually non-existent apart from United Road. What is now known as the forecourt, and also the area at the back of the Stretford End, were nothing more than cinders.

For the next 90 minutes or so I would walk round and round the ground – I never got fed up. Everything about Old Trafford used to fascinate me. I would peer through the gaps in the huge wooden gates that used

to be opened at three-quarter time to let the crowds out. Everything painted on the walls I would read – admission prices, gate numbers, you name it. Across the canal bridge, the black tower at the Kilvert's lard works used to intrigue me as it stretched high into the sky like some imposing medieval castle. On the opposite side of Warwick Road, on what is today the car park facing the United 'Megastore', was a mineral company named Aerowater – 'mineral' being the word we had for soft fizzy drinks, a phrase that seems to have fallen by the wayside today. Many was the time I slipped quietly into their yard unobserved, and 'nicked' a few drinks from the crates loaded on the back of the parked lorries. I would stand in the middle of United Road and peer up at the two great chimneys which stood atop of buildings in Glover's Cables factory, that loomed so high, and that towered above the stadium like two giant sentries on duty at Buckingham Palace. I would stand against the wall underneath the dressing room windows on the railway side of the stadium, and the smell of liniment would permeate the air – a smell that is still there today! I would walk down the side of the ground by the railway station, watching the steam trains pass by, and I'd watch the players arriving, on foot from Warwick Road. They were besieged by kids for autographs, before disappearing inside the main entrance.

When the turnstiles opened I would be one of the first inside. There were always hordes of kids at reserve team games, and as the seasons went by it was inevitable you would get to know each other. We would have sprint races, up and down the Old Trafford Paddock terracing. A tennis ball would often appear, and we would play football, even on the terraces. We would talk about our favourite players, and dream our dreams, then as kick-off time drew near, we would make our way to our selected vantage points to watch the game. I laugh now as I think of the many times I sat on top of the old concrete dug-out by the players' tunnel. Sometimes during the course of the game I would hang over the top, and peep down to see who was inside. It must have frightened the occupants to death to see this little urchin's face suddenly appear, with its unkempt hair dangling down, and snotty 'candles' upon his top lip! Dear old Billy Inglis, the reserve team trainer, used to scream at me. He

would be sat in there, sometimes with Jimmy Murphy for company. Billy would be dressed in his white overall coat, Jimmy in a suit.

As the weeks and years rolled along, I got to know who the players were in the reserves: Jack Crompton, John Aston, Billy Redman, Tommy McNulty, Don Gibson, Mark Jones, Jeff Whitefoot, Harry McShane, Johnny Scott, Noel McFarlane, John Doherty, Eddie Lewis, Lawrie Cassidy, Stan Pearson, Jackie Blanchflower, David Pegg, and a number of others. Opposing reserve teams in those days mainly comprised old pros coming to the end of their careers, and a sprinkling of younger players trying to make their way in the game. I used to love watching these games, as they were so competitive – some of those hardy old pros were tough beggars to say the least. I recognised many of the older players from magazines or newspapers, those who had been dropped from their first teams and were trying to play themselves back into form, or were making their way back into the game after injury. The Central League, in which United reserves played for many years, was in those days certainly no place for the faint hearted. For young players on the way up it was a tough school, but it sorted out the men from the boys, and gave managers and coaches a good insight into the kind of character that these young players had.

After a game we would hang around outside the Old Trafford main entrance. Unlike today there were never any autocratic commissionaires or security men policing the door, and often we would go inside. The area immediately inside those solid wooden doors was quite open, and led to the stairway that went up to the directors' box and to the posh seats in the main stand. If you turned left there was the sliding door which led to the dressing rooms – Mecca for us, young starry eyed kids. Immediately inside the main door was the players' tunnel, a surprisingly steep and narrow concrete ramp that led down and out into the stadium and then onto the pitch. The number of times I ran down that tunnel as a young boy, imagining that I was carrying the ball and leading out my heroes to a full house – Oh! What a dream that used to be. We kids would fight to be first in the line to run down that tunnel, followed by the rest of the 'Ragged Arsed Rangers'! It must

have been so funny for the ground staff, who after a game would be tending to the playing surface, replacing divots and forking areas around the goalmouths, to watch this assembly of scruffy street urchins emerging from that old tunnel. They never chastised us or interfered with our innocent play; usually they would just smile, or make a few witty remarks. The kids would wait for the players in the area immediately outside the dressing rooms. If you waited long enough you could even travel home on the same bus with your hero. In those days there was a very close bond between the players and the fans, the community and the club. These days, at every top club, all that has changed. Back then it was such a very rich, fulfilling, and heartwarming experience for fans of all age groups. You felt part of it all, and the club embraced both the fans and their local communities with great warmth.

There have been so many changes in the game since those first visits of mine, and some for the good. But other changes have, in my opinion, caused major damage to the game and its structure. I think it is true to say that today the game has lost its roots in the working class community, and in future years it will be interesting to see what football (and social) historians make of it all. In today's society, youngsters will never enjoy the sheer elation of the freedom that my generation enjoyed. We were free to come and go as we pleased, without supervision, fear, or hindrance to watch our beloved football teams.

