

Teasing out the story

Mike Raggett on compiling a 25th anniversary history of the Watford FC Community Sports & Education Trust...

Despite my great age, I've only been a Watford season ticket holder since 1995-96 when I was introduced to the Watford family by my soon-to-be second wife, Denise Lesley. She'd been going to games since before she was born. We then became very involved in the establishment of the other (Watford Supporters') Trust, made a video, helped it become a significant force and became involved in other parts of the club including the Community Trust. I've been working with Rob Smith and his team for about 10 years, helping with the writing and production of annual reports, brochures for the new Cedars Centre and other projects. So, when Rob approached me last year to look at the Trust's Heritage Lottery Fund bid and asked me, if it succeeded, to write the anniversary book I was highly honoured, if a little nervous.

The bid was approved by HLF, Derrick Williams was appointed project manager and we started work early in 2017 with a view to publishing in April 2018. There was no way that Derrick and I could comb through the complete archive of material ourselves, so Derrick recruited a team of volunteers who, rather like John Lloyd's 'elves' on Q1, took batches of programmes home to scavenge for relevant items. They also looked through newspaper archives and presented us with a Dropbox full of fabulous material which forms the basis for what I was to write. They did a brilliant job and we had a superb platform from which to spring into action.

I had however suggested that in order to give the book real life and energy we should interview people who had helped provide the Trust's services, and also people who had consumed and hopefully benefitted from them. We also decided that starting in 1992, when the original Football in the Community scheme (FITC) was inaugurated, should be prefaced by a couple of chapters to set the context. This would include the efforts of Graham Taylor and Elton John to establish Watford as the family club back in the 1970s.

Finding the name that everybody mentioned in connection with the Family Stand, Ann Swanson, took some detective work on the part of one of our volunteers, Tim Streeton. But we managed to interview Ann both at The Vic and in her home for some great stories from the early days. The picture of this period was also painted for us in interviews with Caroline Gillies, Ed Coan, Mike Sullivan, Tony Quick, Oli Phillips and others involved in that era, so we had a powerful base from which to tell the story of the Trust over the last 25 years.

The first two officers of the FITC were very willing to speak to me but both proved the dangers of making arrangements purely by email. John McDermott kindly agreed to see me at Spurs' fantastic new training facility in Enfield at four o'clock one very hot July afternoon, but he forgot to tell the security lodge. Bizarrely, they were not able to phone his extension. So my only recourse was to email him and hope he picked up. Thank



goodness he did and gave us a generous length of time for some tales of the early days as a one-man-band community officer.

His successor Jimmy Gilligan had also agreed by email to meet me in Costa Coffee in Chelmsford High Street. There are three Costa Coffees – two actually in the High Street, one nearby. He was in that one. I was emailing from the High Street wavering between the cafés in Waterstones and WH Smith, both of which I'd checked out first. He too picked up my message and my sign off has my phone number attached, so we talked each other in to a successful meeting.

These were among the early interviews on a list that grew to well over 60 that I, Derrick and other volunteers conducted over the next months. They took place in sessions at Vicarage Road, at the Premier League, Sport England, in contributors' homes, in a variety of cafés as well as via Skype. The audio files were transcribed for use in the book, and extracts from the recordings will also form part of the exhibition at the Watford Museum and be available on the anniversary project's own website to be launched later this year.

The Museum proved a fertile hunting ground for another of the volunteers, Geoff Wicken,

who researched a series of 'fascinating factoids' about the history of Watford Football Club itself. These will be incorporated into the Anniversary Book as a frieze at the foot of each page to parallel the club's progress alongside that of the Trust.

The entire process to-date has been a fascinating journey which has filled me with a sense of pride that the charity associated with the club I support has been able to offer such a wealth of wonderful experiences for the whole community, for people aged four to 104, for sporty people and not so sporty people. We've included some numbers and these are impressive in demonstrating the enormous reach of these activities. But what is even more impressive is that the book shows what a massive influence the Trust has had on the lives of those that it has touched. Its efforts and innovations have been recognised nationally with awards on a number of occasions, and projects begun in Watford are now being offered nationally. But the Trust's head has not been turned by such accolades as it remains firmly rooted in the heart of the community.

I hope next year you'll enjoy reading the book as much as I've enjoyed writing and compiling it.