

Into the Red

Liverpool FC and the Changing Face
of English Football

John Williams



Mainstream Publishing *ebooks*



For Zelda, Sylvia, Steve, Sheila, Cath, Chris and Paul, and
for Thomas and Violet Williams, 'bunners' and Liverpool
fans.

For Roy Hammond: friendliest and nicest critic. I miss him.

INTO THE RED

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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1. SEASON'S GREETINGS?

REDS AND BLUES

Welcome to the madhouse. We are on the brink of another new football season in Liverpool, 2000-01, and already the rival Bluenose midfield is in a glorious mess. Everton's John Collins has taken his skinny six-pack waistline to join up with French mate Jean Tigana at Fulham and Don Hutchison, ex-Reds stripper of course, has got the hump with Walter Smith and has gone to join Peter Reid, Niall Quinn and the other scallywags at Sunderland. In steps Walter's prodigal 'son', the life-worn, bulging Gazza, and surely this is a blissful prospect for the whole of the city of Liverpool. But, best of all, England man Nick Barmby has walked across Stanley Park from Everton - to Anfield. Gérard Houllier, cool as you like, allowed himself a sly little smile at the press conference called to confirm Barmby's six-million-pound move to Liverpool. A local scribe, to sniggers in the audience, had asked the top table whether Barmby expected any problems in the city because of his move. 'What is this?' asked Houllier coyly. 'Is Nick changing his religion, or politics, or what?'

Any *problems*? Houllier knew well, of course, that local howling mobs lay in Barmby's path this season. Bill Kenwright, Chief Executive at Goodison, knew it too: 'The worst six words in the world,' he accuses Barmby of uttering: 'I want to play for Liverpool.' In fact, virtually everyone on Merseyside is already gleefully anticipating the first derby match, lining up fat-boy Gascoigne puffing around for Everton and Barmby, boyishly dodging half-eaten

pies and burgers, for the Reds. A gritty treat surely lies in store: roll on October 28 at Anfield, Liverpool 4.

It's not for nothing that Barmby is the first player to move directly from Everton to Liverpool since centre-forward Dave Hickson more than 40 years ago. A few have moved the other way since. The Reds have generally been lording it over their neighbours for most of the time, so players moving from Anfield to Goodison have seemed, for Kopites at least, mostly like making a patronising act of benevolence aimed at sickly, poorer neighbours who you can't really stand. The transfers of Beardsley and Sheedy to Goodison, to name just two, have shown just how dangerous this kind of condescension can prove to be. These Liverpool 'rejects' haunted us for years afterwards, and especially in derby games.

Houllier's serious point, of course, was that in the age of the 'new professionalism' in football, players will move around increasingly regularly and indiscriminately: that these old attachments, enmities and divisions no longer have the force of old. After all, (deep breath here) Liverpool may yet want to import new blood from, say, Manchester United. Of course he underestimates local football rivalries in England, which is one of the ways, after all, that football supporters still make sense of the current pick-and-mix global football transfer chaos. At the heart of this sort of talk is (inevitably) the free market, and the hidden text is that, in the age of the 35-player squads, it would be advisable if supporters did not get *too* attached to their heroes. They could leave at almost any moment.

Michael Owen's clinical assessment, at 19, that he's happy at Liverpool - 'as long as the club win trophies' - is a recent marker. But the 'lifelong Liverpool fan' claims by baby-faced Barmby really stung Evertonians. This is a painful and familiar theme of late in this city for those of the Blue persuasion. Fowler, Owen, Rush, McManaman and Carragher, even out of the very recent Liverpool crops, are

all, famously, young Evertonians, converted to Red. It's hard to think of major cases in the opposite direction, though Gladwys Street regulars will undoubtedly have a short list which will include Peter Reid.

The Heysel disaster involving Liverpool in 1985 meant, of course, that Reid's Everton champions of 1985 and 1987 – the club's best team for more than 20 years – never got the chance to run up against the top outfits in Europe. Since then, the Blues have rather struggled. The Reds of Anfield have not done much since 1990 either. Some Evertonians have never forgiven their near neighbours for this derailment of the outstanding Howard Kendall team. At the derby game at Goodison Park in 2000 some home supporters were still wildly abusing Reds fans about Heysel even as we filed out of the Bullens Road, their barely welcomed guests from across the park.

It is true that families in the city of Liverpool do harbour fans of both clubs and that there is no real geographical or important religious distinction between the clubs' fans these days, which all contributes to slightly more harmonious derby meetings than in, say, Sheffield, Manchester or North London. But the 'friendly derby' moniker is also a myth here. There is a proper unease about these meetings, which sometimes spills over later into violence. Evertonians also like to forcefully tell Reds fans to 'Fuck off back up the M62' after these affairs, mindful as they are of the *national* draw of Liverpool now, set against the stronger active localism at Everton. Local surveys show that visitors and money flood into the city at weekends, especially when Liverpool FC are at home. Unsurprisingly, football is now central to the city's post-industrial promotional work and tourist trade. Even in these lean times, football still helps the city breathe and eat.

These relatively new tensions, between national and local ties, have been deepened, of course, by Everton's recent financial trials and Liverpool's desperate and costly

attempts to modernise on and off the pitch – including their move for new top man, Houllier. For the Blues, the annual lashings dished out by Everton to Roy Evans's fragile Liverpool team of the 1990s have been a confirming reminder of the sweetness of local pride assuaged. Houllier's new mixture of local lads and the foreign legion is expected by Reds' supporters to conquer Europe and also routinely to beat the Bluenoses – quite different projects, believe me.

While talk of the importance of local football dominance remains loud on Merseyside, supporters of both clubs also know well that these satisfying old tribalisms are now played out in the deep shadow of a more distant neighbour up the motorway, whose mansion really does have many rooms. We sometimes maliciously accuse the Park End at Goodison of 'Loving Man U'. But no one in Liverpool really does that. The preferred Evertonian result in a match between United and Liverpool now is for both to lose.

But for Liverpool FC out-of-towners, especially, the footballing battle lines have long been redrawn. For many of them, the Nick Barmby move to Anfield is no great shakes; it's just another big-money transfer. Also, everyone living in the city, Blue or Red, is well aware that winning the struggle for Merseyside is no longer a measure of national stature. The real front line has now, depressingly, moved 20-odd miles east. That's why when the 2000-01 season started for Liverpool it was all about trying to catch Manchester United, the all-conquering new football corporation.

When I was growing up as a kid, football mad, in the 1960s on Merseyside, things seemed very different from the football rivalries and the sporting timetable we have today. For the seasonal footballing last rites, for example, we used to end up, late at night, on BBC TV (always on the Beeb) with innocent and flush-faced young men in the FA Cup winners post-banquet booze up. Most of this was

excruciating stuff. We got more and more out of the managers too, some of them noticeably freezing in the media headlights as the years wore on. In 1974, Liverpool's Bill Shankly and the clearly shaking Newcastle United manager, Joe Harvey, were interviewed on a split screen on the morning of the final tie between these keen northern rivals. At the end of the exchange and thinking himself off camera (perhaps!) Shanks made the telling aside that Cup final rookie, Harvey, was clearly 'a bag o' nerves'. On the field, Liverpool crushed the jittery Geordies. The early power of the football media?

On national TV at night, after the annual big match and the feast which followed it, these impossibly young football heroes were shown now quite spent, nerves and trauma far behind them - and they were also gently, but transgressively, pissed. Strangely, on these occasions drink and glory seemed to make otherwise monosyllabic young men, with brains in their feet but less up top, more, rather than less, articulate. Certainly, more interesting. Nothing, it should be noted, seemed to have this effect on the BBC's Jimmy Hill. All this was, above everything else, the signal for footy obsessives that it had all ended, the beautiful game, for another year.

The FA Cup final was still pretty much the only live football anybody saw on TV in the '60s; certainly the only *club* football of this type. Then there was the famous Wembley turf itself, proudly unblemished, and depthlessly green compared to the mud heaps or the dust bowls of the semi-finals played on only weeks before. But the turf (good cliché this) was also notoriously cruel, lying in wait to cramp up those for whom the nervous tension proved simply too much. And, of course, there was the inevitable sunshine, the north London summer heat, which was surely made for foreigners - for the languid but explosive Brazilians - rather than the doughty, honest, British journeymen of the English

game, now fully exposed in this last crucial act of an over-long season.

On Merseyside, as elsewhere in those days, local finalists brought a new intensity to Cup final day. Special souvenir editions of the local newspapers emerged; *The Road to Wembley* plus pull-out team photos for display in the front window. People 'dressed' their houses then to advertise Cup final footballing allegiances, though my mum would never allow my brother's Evertonian blue to go up in case neighbours or passers-by mistakenly took us for Catholics. Some people in Liverpool still do this now, put up their football pictures, though the gusto and some of the collective spirit has inevitably gone out of Cup final fever. In triumphs in 1965 (Liverpool, gloriously, for the first time) and in '66 (Trebilcock's Everton) the city of Liverpool boasted back-to-back FA Cup winners. We had no sense then, I think, that people from outside the city - unless they were actually from Merseyside, doing missionary work elsewhere - might also be closely following our own football cause.

In the '60s, after all the FA Cup hype and the TV drama was over there was - nothing. Unless, of course, as incredibly happened in Liverpool in 1966, the World Cup finals came to town. Or, of course, your club had actually *won* the thing, in which case it was a few days more, decking out lampposts and hanging bunting on the Town Hall for the obligatory double-decker parade with the trophy in the city centre. Even following a Cup final triumph, and Bill Shankly's mad and inspired speeches about how we, the fans of the 'Pool, were stronger and more passionate even than Mao's Red Army (which division were *they* in?) - fans, players and football staff, well, they soon just melted away, disappeared for the summer.

Then it was cricket: Ken Barrington, Colin Cowdrey and John Edrich (no cricketers ever had Liverpudlian roots or accents), at least until late August. One or two footballers

even *played* professional cricket. No top football player left his club in the closed season unless the club actually wanted rid of him. No one *could* leave. Few new players, if any, arrived. Managers were generally more secure and in charge. Largely anonymous chairmen wrote gnomish match programme notes and made sure the pies were hot. We *expected* the same guys to return, reassuringly, to do battle again in the following campaign. This was 1960's football, ritualised and vaguely comforting.

These days things are very different from these sepia memories. In 2000-01, for example, and for the first time in many years, the FA Cup final was not even the last event of the domestic campaign: FA Premier League matches were scheduled for the week *after* the final, to allow for more fixture space and to satisfy the new football god, television. We are also probably in a post-FA Cup era of the game's development, as the FA itself fumbled its own blue riband event, and as European club football grew ever stronger, more commercially attractive and more important to players and managers.

The 2001 final was even scheduled to take place for the first time outside England, in provincial Cardiff, while the game's administrators squabbled, without success, over the future of the crumbling Wembley Stadium. Cricket and football matches freely overlap these days, testimony to the ever-spreading domains of the global sporting calendars and signalling the demise, probably for good, of the footballing cricketer.

On our television screens, football never disappears now. As the FA Premier League goes into uneasy summer hibernation, so the satellite channels fill with live games from Asia and South America and even Australia. The TV stations also compete these days for coverage of the pre-season friendlies involving English clubs, so June is barely out before the prospects of sun-drenched strolls between

international rivals becomes compulsive viewing. Why? Because far from returning with the same staff as last year, as happened in the '60s, the new credo in the post-Bosman version of the sport is that you have to buy - and buy big - even to stand still. The increasing power of players and the huge sums pumped into the sport by television today means that 'good professionals' these days are defined less by their own loyalty to clubs than by the number of lucrative moves a player and his agents can squeeze out of a short career.

So the sign of a good football *manager* these days is one who can claim access to the top tournaments for his club and then go directly to the board with a bloated shopping list. Fans also seem to crave this sort of fetishistic collecting of players, no matter what the previous season's achievements. Pre-season friendlies are, thus, vital and lucrative forums for assessing the prospective new talent. Supporters can also spend many satisfying and inconclusive hours trying to work out exactly how their own managerial guru plans to fit 20 or even 30 full international stars into just 11 starting places. But, hey, haven't you heard? Football these days is a 14-man game: it's rotation, stupid. Liverpool manager, Gérard Houllier, would soon turn this into a new football mantra on the Red side of Merseyside. Top players, especially forwards, were increasingly expected to be satisfied with a crucial and strategic 15 minutes' playing action. For some, it was now a short sprint, no longer a playing marathon.

What is also different about football in England today, it seems to me, is the way in which, in a general sense, the season normatively opens now with the sport in some sort of identifiable crisis. This is apparently required these days in order to get the competitive juices properly circulating at all. At the start of the 2000-01 league football campaign in England, for example, the central football crisis was about the quality of coaching in England - or rather about the

dubious qualities of English footballers and their coaches. Euro 2000 had proved little more than an embarrassing farce for the English game, if not for the English Premier League, which boasted the backbone of the winning French team. We were shamed in Holland and Belgium, not only by some of our spectators (no surprise there) but also by our players and the England management team. Sent abroad on a wave of the usual mixture of media-orchestrated boasting and foreboding, England had lost a 2-0 lead to the talented Portuguese, beaten old rivals Germany in a match which was generally agreed to be the worst encounter in the entire tournament, and then haplessly succumbed in the first phase, via a late penalty, to an ageing Romania.

English footballers, it was widely said by the broadsheet media back in England, were technically limited and tactically naive. Ex-Liverpool forward Kevin Keegan also seemed hopelessly out of his depth as the England football manager. Calls were made to recruit a foreign coach for England - and to reduce the number of foreign players now playing in the Premiership. It wasn't just that the players and their English leaders were allegedly inept, but something was said to be wrong with the very culture of the English game, indeed with the English themselves. The *Guardian* sports journalist, Richard Williams, was one of many who argued that young English footballers' cultural experience was depressingly and narrowly limited to 'what they see or hear or read in the overheated and hyper-sexualised mass media, in the tabloid exposés and prying docu-soaps'. Players with limited horizons like these could hardly be expected, it was reasoned, to compete with their more worldly and cerebral counterparts abroad, who now also seemed fitter, more athletic than the English.

Similarly, John Cartwright, director of Crystal Palace's academy for young players, and one-time technical director at the FA's coaching school at Lilleshall, was positively scathing in his assessment of the dully masculinist values of

many young English footballers, arguing that the game had helped produce a 'thug culture'. He went on:

We've played thug football and we've produced a thug relationship between the player and the spectator . . . There have been gradual improvements. Coaches and players have come in from abroad and they've shown a different attitude to preparation. But we still go out there with a gung-ho attitude. If you can't think it out, fight it out.

'Fighting it out' had long-since failed the English off, as well as on, the field. New strategies were urgently needed.

Much of this myopic and outmoded reading of the game seemed mirrored in Kevin Keegan's own approach to the sport as he urged the England team to 'revert to more traditional qualities, like getting into them . . . I want intensity and aggression to become trademarks of my England side'. Keegan went on to describe the limits of continental play - and his own team - before Euro 2000: 'The foreigners don't play at a Premiership pace for 90 minutes; they play slow, slow, quick, quick, slow. If we get sucked into that, we don't look so good.' The England national team manager, someone with considerable experience of playing abroad, in Germany, seemed to insist that the 'tempo' and the 'intensity' of the English game could still bring success, even in the rarefied air of top international football competition. It seemed a faintly ridiculous claim.

But Keegan's ideas - defensive strength, fast pace, counter-attack where and when the opposing defence is weakest - also had some supporters in the summer of 2000 in the low countries, including from those among the very ranks of the new international modernisers of the English game. Gérard Houllier's passion for elements of traditional English football in general, and for Liverpool FC in particular, not to mention his more generalised affection for the English and English traditions, made him a keen student and supporter of the England team in Euro 2000. The Frenchman

not only defended some of the qualities of the English game (while commentators in England were ridiculing it), but identified himself as an England *supporter*, experiencing the real pain of their defeats against Portugal and Romania, and the short-lived high after the weak Germans were dismissed in Charleroi.

Houllier, especially, was convinced that some of the traditional qualities of the English game, if better channelled and allied with a more 'continental' approach to tactics and strategy, and also coupled with a much more professional attention to the conditioning and preparation of players, could indeed succeed at the highest levels of the international and club game. At Liverpool Football Club in 1999-2000, Houllier had begun to put some of his ideas to the test, first by ridding the club of influential older players who still favoured a strongly 'laddish' (and, for Houllier, distinctively unprofessional) approach to the game, and then secondly by building his new squad around younger players from home and abroad, who could not only be schooled into the new professional ethos, but who also had the pace, athleticism and the physical attributes which Houllier identified as being so central to the modern game.

Under the new player freedoms offered by Bosman, Houllier was also convinced that modern players had to be strongly connected to a 'project', to an adventure, at their clubs: they had to see themselves almost as Blairite stakeholders, because top clubs now lacked the authoritarian tools which had guaranteed player loyalty in earlier periods. This translated into offering players a real belief in their clubs and coaches - *and* delivering trophies. Money is important, sure - but footballing success is also what keeps top players motivated and interested, reasoned Houllier.

As some of Liverpool's barrack-room lawyers left the club in the summer of 1999, so Houllier started to bring in his replacements. He concentrated, initially, on defensive

stengthening, and on bringing in players who could best withstand the intense physical trials of the English game. He built the new Liverpool defence around Dutch goalkeeper Sander Westerveld, the giant Finn, Sami Hyypia, and the dogged Swiss central defender, Stephane Henchoz. The midfield he shaped around the simplicity and defensive solidity of the German international, Didi Hamann. The African Titi Camara brought hard running, strength and pace to the Liverpool attack, while the Czech, Vladimir Smicer, promised to offer invention and guile from the flanks. Houllier also knew he had some young aces up his sleeve at Anfield. Robbie Fowler and Michael Owen were already exceptional talents and Jamie Carragher an emerging and determined young defender. But the Liverpool coaching staff talked of little else other than a young midfielder from the city who they thought just might make a player; his name was Steven Gerrard.

In Houllier's first full season in 1999-2000, robbed by injury of Robbie Fowler for virtually the whole campaign, and of Smicer, Liverpool looked defensively secure but sometimes lacking in strength and variety in midfield and attack. Michael Owen seemed plagued by injury doubts. To the despair of Liverpool supporters everywhere, Manchester United were, once again, crowned Premiership title winners. Liverpool were consigned to the minor UEFA Cup.

This meant that to satisfy Anfield ambitions, Houllier's Liverpool had to do much better in the new season. The signs seemed promising: Fowler was slowly approaching fitness again, and so was the mercurial Smicer. Owen seemed more at ease. Markus Babbel and Gary McAllister, tough and experienced professionals, had both signed on free transfers and had given up international football in order to concentrate on their new Liverpool careers. The pacy Barmby had arrived from Everton and Christian Ziege had been lined up from Middlesbrough. Houllier had spent - so the press reported - in excess of fifty million pounds on

his project to produce a new Liverpool, one which both competed and created, and which had the mental strength and consistency to challenge United's stranglehold at the very top of the English game and beyond.

Houllier cautioned patience on the part of Liverpool's staunchest followers. He saw his strategy as a five-year project aimed firstly only at securing Champions League status, the new Grail. Most Liverpool supporters saw his point, but unseating the rampant United *now* was also in their minds. Neither Houllier, nor the club's keenest followers, could have quite expected the sort of trip they were about to embark upon together. Not in the '60s, nor even in the '80s when Liverpool teams had dominated at home and in Europe, had anyone in the city - or anywhere in England - seen anything quite like the ten months they were about to experience, from August 2000 to May 2001. This is a fans'-eye view of Houllier's Liverpool adventure during this seminal season, set against some of the wider developments which were occurring at the time in the English and the world game. It was quite a ride.

2. AUTUMN HOPES

19 AUGUST 2000: LIVERPOOL 1, BRADFORD 0

A new season. Opening accounts at home always invites a scouring of the 'Flattie' (the Flat Iron pub, Liverpool 4) for new faces and those lost from the last campaign. Pre-match talk at this stage in a new season is like a bout of macho non-dependence therapy: 'I hardly missed it at all', 'I can't remember the last time I looked forward to a season less than this', and so on. Of course, they've all been to the pre-season friendlies, including a 5-0 Liverpool home battering of stone-cold Italians, Parma. This kind of talk is now a ritual, part of the usual anti-Sky TV, anti-commerce, anti-'new' football venom which has been kept nicely simmering over the summer, but for us it is also partly a hangover from last season. Looking like a Champions League shoe-in, Liverpool failed to score in the last five matches, home and away; we even lost 1-0 to Bradford City in the last game, for God's sake, a gutless capitulation of Roy Evans proportions. We'll no doubt be visiting, in the impossibly difficult UEFA Cup, some unpronounceable club in Eastern Europe that used to be someone else. We could easily lose, early on.

Another reason for gloom is that for all the talk of it being the *club* not the players you support, there is a strange and cold unfamiliarity about the Liverpool team these days, which makes loving them rather harder. We're stacked with foreign players now and some - Hyypia, Camara - have really stirred the crowd, while others - Smicer, Hamann - have found it much more difficult to make their mark. And to be honest, we haven't had too much of the technical spin-

off which a foreign squad is supposed to bring: Berger and Rigobert Song can mis-control with the best of the British and Henchoz sometimes passes like a dyslexic Phil Babb. Houllier, well aware of the physical test in the English game, has tended to go for power and work-rate rather than poetry in his signings. We've tightened up at the back, sure, but we struggle to really excite - and to engage. We are haunted by 'the nightmare scenario', as our mate and football guru Rogan Taylor calls it, as we ponder this new era on the Kop: 'Just a bunch of anonymous fellahs on a meal ticket.'

So a sort of dark anticipation, tinged with uncertainty, is the general tone among the Liverpool faithful assembled today in the Flattie before this new season begins. These are 'ordinary' fans, but in some cases with extraordinary memories: 25 years or more recall of unmatched Liverpool playing success, the heavy monkey now on our collective backs. Sheila Spiers even remembers the great Billy Liddell; Paul Hyland every Reds' signing and departure, every promising Melwood youngster since the early 1970s. There is serious knowledge here.

The anticipation comes, as it always does at this stage, from our new summer outfield signings: Bernard Diomède, Gary McAllister and German international Markus Babel, the last two on Bosmans, and the deliciously provocative addition of Nick Barmby from across the park. If Robbie Fowler can get fit we will look a little more dangerous going forward. With no goals in five games last time out it would take a true genius to move us the other way. It is sad to see local lads, David Thompson and Dominic Matteo, going before the season's start, each just failing to make the grade here. No doubt Leeds will now make some left-sided genius out of Matteo but, with almost eight million pounds banked in transfer fees for these two, the leftovers also ought to help keep the Liverpool Youth Academy running for a few years. It's good business by GH, really, and we hope the Liverpool lads do well elsewhere.

The uncertainty today comes with having no clear idea who might play in this opener, a product of Houllier's new rotation strategy. Could both Barmby and Smicer play? Who would get the nod in central midfield? Will Berger recover from a knock for the left side? Would controversial transfer target Ziege yet jet in to play at left-back, Boro's Bryan Robson trailing and whingeing in his wake? And what about current Houllier favourite, Carragher, or Kop hero, Titi Camara? Robbie's pre-season bad luck - a large Irish keeper fell on him, springing his ankle - means that we know who will play up front: Heskey and Owen: *Of Mice and Men*. But crucially, could the fêted Boy Wonder, Michael, find his old pre-hamstring form at last?

We watch home matches on the Kop these days, block 207, about a third of the way up and just to the right of the Kop-end goal. There are four of us: Steve, Cath, Rogan Taylor and me. Of course, we have our own little reference group around us, our sounding boards. Behind, it is a couple of the obligatory moaning woollybacks, panickers and complainers, but nothing too disastrous. The Fellahs in Front are more like it: a group of eight, mainly middle-aged Liverpool working men, who give us some stick sometimes for the crap we shout and the stuff we talk about. They like to roll in from the pub on kick-off. There are a couple of fellahs our age in front that we get on with really well, and there's an older guy with them I like to talk to about the great Liverpool sides of the '60s. A younger, aggressive fellah in this group sometimes gives us more grief. As Fergie said of Paul Ince, he could pick an argument in an empty house, this fellah. We have seen him carted out at away games. Fair enough.

Cath and Rogan are low-key at the match, but my mate, Steve, is usually a source of amusement or anguish for all around us. He has a compulsion, like thousands of others around the land, to stand up, arbitrarily, and make loud,

uncharitable speeches about the match officials. He does this about two or three times a game. This can grate. Maybe he was dropped on his head as a child? Or perhaps he has been secretly hypnotised to respond in Pavlovian fashion to the whistle? Some guys in front wonder why nobody has ever filled him in (next season, perhaps?). We think Steve might well have a heart attack at the match one day; he'd like nothing better, of course, than to drift away, a foaming critique of an errant referee's assistant still lingering on his quivering lips.

The Kop is not what it was. Discuss. We all have great memories of the standing Kop in full flow, of course. The writer, Arthur Hopcraft, described the Kop memorably in its pomp in the late '60s as being:

Hideously uncomfortable. The steps are as greasy as a school playground lavatory in the rain. The air is rancid with beer and onions and belching and worse. The language is a gross purple of obscenity. When the crowd surges at a shot or a collision near a corner flag a man or a boy, and sometimes a girl, can be lifted off the ground in the crush, as if by some massive, soft-sided crane, and dangled about for minutes on end, perhaps never getting back to within four or five steps of the spot from which the monster made its bite.

Ah, happy days. The Kop today is quieter, nothing like Hopcraft's image. It is certainly safer, too. The Kop *is* less collective and less spontaneous today than its old standing version; it misses its ribald and fluid young core, from where most of the early songs sprouted. We miss the flags and the swaying and these days attempts at songs often roll forlornly around small banks of seats all over the Kop, most of them not taken up by the whole. We do stand up for European games - but it's not the same. Like most football ends - and public culture itself - the Kop is also much cruder today than it was in its prime. Hardly the march of progress, then - or a winning argument for those who claim for a creeping football gentrification, by seats.

Inside Anfield today, the Kop faithful gather for what promises to be another spluttering seasonal journey. George Sephton, our familiar master of musical ceremonies at LFC, works from a glass box elevated to our right. George has gotten all hip lately, by playing Cast and Pete Wiley, but inexplicably today he also plays the most unfamiliar Frankie's 'Two Tribes' - very loudly - as the teams come out. This is well out of order, as he knows: our song at this very special moment is 'You'll Never Walk Alone', which George now plays later, just as the players line up to kick off - a right royal bollocks. Already the Kop is confused and annoyed, even before the first home booking.

Houllier was right when he said that Bradford would be sharp, having played competitively for a month already in the crass Intertoto Cup. Vladdy Smicer starts - and even finishes - for Liverpool, a nice change and a good beginning. Young Frenchman, Traore, plays at left-back, warming the place for Ziege, and he looks solid if not exactly Maldini material. Barmby is busy and lively, a new Craig Johnston perhaps, and McAllister eventually comes on, a proper footballer, one right in the Anfield mould. Babbel shows some good things, too, but he'll need time to get used to the pace of this. Camara, ominously for him, doesn't even make the bench.

In a patchy first half, Westerveld keeps us intact as Bradford make chances on the break. The second half is more like it, as the Reds begin to get on top. But the 'best fans in the world' are just beginning to jump on Heskey's vast back when the big man turns and bursts away on the right, swatting defenders, before planting it in the opposite top corner. Compared to the rest of this opener, these five or six seconds have been a startling blur. Cue 'Em-ile Heskey' chants from around the ground, naturally. The words 'shamelessly two-faced' come immediately to mind. The manager says Emile scores like this in training all the time, but he 'lacks confidence' in match situations. Sounds like

the Anfield crowd whine might already be having its terrible effect.

Noticeably, Michael's continued form trough produces nothing like the same narky reaction from the Liverpool crowd, but his real performance dip must be worrying the coaching staff. It worries me. He's substituted, another passive home display in a season when we have to score more goals. Heskey will probably get 15 or so, if he stays fit, but someone else will need to come up with 25. Robbie could do it standing on his head - if he was right. Michael still looks like he has a severe bout of self-doubt about both body and mind. Let's hope it somehow dissolves. Let's hope he *smiles*.

But this is a reasonable start, three hard-won points at home. We move to Arsenal on Monday night. Arsenal have so outplayed Sunderland today - with Vieira sent off - and *lost*, that you have to feel they will be really up for it on Monday. There is a kind of hidden football DNA here which connects all clubs: the chemistry of the season and its mini-contests. Exactly *when* you play teams, what mood they are in, whether it is best that they have previously won or lost, etc., is a mysterious formula fans spend many wasted hours trying to unravel. But this is the worst combination you can face, really: they've played well and lost. Arsenal won't be complacent, they'll be the opposite; they'll want a win against us to get their own season started.

YOUR MONEY, OUR PRIORITY

Liverpool have introduced a new Official Supporters Club. For £22 you get a video and a CD, plus free access to reserve games. For £32 you are offered the above and priority access to tickets for four home games. Effectively, it is an extra charge simply to be eligible for match tickets at home, tickets you are not even guaranteed to get for the matches you choose. If you don't pay up, your chances for home tickets look poor. Great scheme, obviously.

21 AUGUST: ARSENAL 2, LIVERPOOL 0

I love going to the Arsenal: the pubs; the location; the great modernist tube sign; the historic stands close to the pitch; the price. My God, the price. A decent seat at £19.50 puts their London neighbours (all close to £30) to shame. When Arsenal move from here - plans are afoot - I'll really miss it. There are black and brown faces and plenty of father-and-kid couples in the Liverpool section tonight, a typical *London* away end for the Reds, in fact. A drunken scouser behind us spends almost all the first half chanting 'tatty head' at unidentified Arsenal players. It could be at the newly pony-tailed Seaman, or else their new man, Lauren, from the Cameroon, who has natty little locks. Our own new Frenchman, Diomède, has his own fly-away stuff of the 'I can't do anything with it' variety. Anyway, this fellah moves in front of us for the second half, still chanting, still pissed.

There have been no Liverpool defeats in the last 12 against Arsenal, so cometh the hour, cometh the man: take a bow, referee Graham Poll. Last season the comic Rob Harris was the refereeing dunce in the Premier League and he eventually got sent down to the Nationwide as a result. Poll may soon have to join him if this is anything to go by. Hugh Dallas's abject performance in Euro 2000 is also a sign that the Scots have it no better than us. We have fallen behind Europe in this area, refereeing, just as we have in most other things football-wise.

Houllier's tactics at places like Arsenal are always ultra-defensive now, so they are also high risk - we think unnecessarily so. So it proves here: with Owen left out, we never look like scoring. Tony Adams baulks Westerveld at an early corner (really?) but in the end it has to go down as a goalkeeper's mistake. 'Sandra' drops the ball at Lauren's feet, all girls together, who must think this English football is easy. On other occasions, Wester does well tonight, but this

was a crucial lapse at a place where mental strength in the first half-hour is vital. We haven't shown it.

We could still come back, of course, plenty of time, but with the willing but pedestrian Carragher in a defensive and crowded midfield, the ideas and movement we needed have to come from out wide, from Smicer and Barmby, and both do far too little tonight. It isn't pretty, but McAllister's first-half clumsy challenge on Vieira deserves only yellow. The red which Poll delivers instead means we just have to battle on and hope for a break. And there's more. Arsenal's Vieira is talented and looks at home in international football, but he's not in love with the physical buffeting and the (racist) baiting which goes on in the FA Premier League, on the field and off it. He loses his head here in the last 20 minutes and Poll despatches him, too, soon followed by Hamann - for shirt-pulling.

It takes a special refereeing performance to unite a *whole* crowd in collective free-flowing abuse, as happens here in the last 15 minutes, after they get a late second. It gives us all something enjoyable to do at least, in the Liverpool section, as this misery winds down. Let's hope the FA sees sense (fat chance) and doesn't hide for once behind its 'referees, right or wrong' stance. We don't deserve points *or* suspensions from this, but it's been a lousy start on the road.

WORLDWIDE ATTENTION

McAllister's global profile will certainly suffer with suspension because the FA Premier League, warts and all, is now watched every week by an international TV audience of 440 million, up 12 per cent on last season. No wonder sponsors queue here to offer investment for attention. Thirty-seven per cent of these armchair fans live in the Asian Pacific region, one-quarter in North America - juicy markets. Rumour already has it that new global brands - McDonalds, Coke, Budweiser, Sanyo - are lining up with

bulging wallets to sponsor the Premier League. Manchester United's new shirt sponsorship deal with Vodafone alone clocks in at thirty million pounds over five years. It's crazy money. It's the FA Premier League.

26 AUGUST: SOUTHAMPTON 3, LIVERPOOL 3

This is a scrawny ground, tight, difficult to play in, usually difficult to see from. This is the last LFC visit to the Dell, another new ground coming, and Southampton make loads of fruitless early chances to mark the occasion. We make a bundle of chances, too, and score *three*. With Smicer at the controls, and Michael alone up front because of an injury to Heskey, the little fellah even scores two with his *left* foot. The message here is if you can get Owen isolated against lumbering defenders like Lundekwam and Richards he will score: even at half pace and low on confidence, he will score. With Hyypia heading in from a corner, and only 17 minutes left, we are a massive 3-0 ahead - home and hosed.

Except they keep coming. A far-post cross to Pahars, and dopey Westerveld actually *steps* out of goal, expecting it to be headed across the area, and the little striker scores, easily. *Embarrassingly*. This is the goal that lets them see light when there has only been gloom. It's like any Sunday football match: you are strolling and then the opposition get a pawky goal, and suddenly it all looks different, panic takes over. Hoddle, the pass master, is not so proud as a manager, so now Southampton bomb us and torment young 'Jimmy' Traore down the left. This is all new to the inexperienced Frenchman, and even to the tested Babel on the right.

'What kind of crazy football is this?' our new men must ask themselves. Firstly, this Southampton team should be dead, it *should* lie down. Secondly, this is not football at all - this is an assault. We look flustered and can't keep hold of the ball in midfield. When the second Southampton goal

comes from El Khalej you know there is more. Finally, in injury time, they pump it in again, high to Jimmy's side once more. He stretches to try to get to a ball he can't possibly deal with and heads it directly into Pahars' path on the penalty spot. The Latvian can't miss - and he doesn't: 3-3.

Afterwards, Houllier is apoplectic with rage. You can see him positively fizz with it. 'A time for throwing teacups,' he jokes between gritted teeth. But he also expects more than these players can yet deliver. He expects them to close down games like the old Liverpool could. But his team is young; it is full of young foreigners, players not yet used to dealing with this sort of peculiar British way, this kind of abuse. This Liverpool team cannot keep the ball yet, not even like Roy Evans's fragile team could.

OWNERSHIP MATTERS

The new owner at Notts County is an American Pulitzer Prize winner who ominously likens football clubs in England to a *television* show. Talking of which, Granada reportedly buy a 5 per cent share in Arsenal for forty-seven million pounds. A 10 per cent share in us recently cost the same company only twenty-two million. Admittedly, my mathematics are not brilliant but . . . Liverpool FC also reveal multi-million pound plans to update their Melwood training ground, to make it a 'state of the art' location for players to train and to be treated for injury. 'Our players deserve the very best,' says Houllier, surprising no one. Call me cynical, but with these sort of comforting improvements on the way it makes you wonder if we will ever get Redknapp, Berger, Robbie and the rest back on the pitch where they, supposedly, belong.

6 SEPTEMBER: LIVERPOOL 3, ASTON VILLA 1

The talk in the now famous Flattie - as glamorously featured in tonight's impressive new-style Liverpool matchday magazine - is already of our apparent lack of progress from

last season. Babbel still looks slow, Jimmy Traore is inexperienced and why sell Matteo so quickly with no real replacement available? (Ziege has yet to materialise.) The goalkeeping isn't right. There are glum faces and much finger-pointing at Westerveld for the collapse at the Dell.

On the way to the ground today the prospective local touts get ever younger; kids who look about ten are asking for 'spares'. The heritage police horses, not needed now for bruising supporters into line outside the Kop turnstiles, are stationed instead at the corner of the Kop and the Kemlyn Road. One of the police mounties is a black woman. West Midlands Asian Reds are regular sights on the Kop these days, turbans and all, and they will turn up tonight to see us beat the Villa. But I bet this is the only black woman anywhere on these embargoed premises.

The Kemlyn Road lower tier, where I'm temporarily based tonight, is a less grizzly crowd than on the Kop: more women, a wider range of accents, macs, and the occasional soup flask - you know the sort of thing. There's no singing here either, the punters lost instead in the new matchday mag. You can also really see the extreme pace of the English game from this lower pitchside spot and you can *feel* the tackles thudding in. Hyypia puts in a huge first-half block tackle on Villa's Nilis, for example - and comes up limping, but unbowed. He stays on, but the injury he receives in this moment will keep him out of the next few games. From here you can see why.

Villa have turned up in a truly gothic shiny all-black number, which makes them look like a bunch of Chicago pimps; our pukey new orange away kit seems positively traditional by comparison. The Kop gives ex-Red keeper David James a great welcome, a sign of affection and maybe a hint that we might need Jameo's multiple weaknesses to help us win here. Last season Villa came for a snore-inducing point - and got it - so an early goal for LFC would be a blessing.

Liverpool line up very 'narrow' as we coaching gurus say. Smicer seems to be playing between a middle three and a front two, with Hamann, strangely, on the left. Villa opt for a Roy Q-style five across the middle, with the impressive Barry and little Alan Wright getting chalk on their boots and Merson adopting the Macca free role. This means they see a lot of the ball and play some pretty football but without too much end product (Roy Evans, again, circa 1995-96).

After five minutes, Heskey, impressively, bursts down the right and slides a great ball early into the Kop six-yard box and, lo, the Boy Wonder scores. Soon after, our transferred goalkeeping hero comes and misses a corner and Michael outjumps a defender to head in. After barely half an hour, and under George's very nose, we score a third: 'Nicky Barmby!' according to our eagle-eyed man in the PA box. Of course it is Owen again (how could we doubt him?), stealing the ball from James for his hat-trick. Villa miss their chances in an open first half and then we shut up shop in the second - at least until Stone scores a clever late consolation. Ginola comes on for them and looks - well, fat. The appearance of the hapless, hardworking Dutch forward, Erik Meijer, on as a sub for us, is tantamount to Houllier putting up a big red sign saying: 'We have now officially stopped trying to score goals'. It ends 3-1, and they're three welcome points.

Later, in the pub when we watch the highlights, a drunk stands up and yells at the TV: 'Michael, you are the best fella around. No one is better than you, Michael.' Playing like this, he may be right. Elsewhere, there is more keen football controversy. 'David Ginola no longer has a sexy backside' - Sheila Spiers (retired).

THE LANGUAGE OF DEFENCE (FROM *FOUR-FOUR-TWO* MAGAZINE)

In the Liverpool FC English language laboratory, Terry, a 'specialist', is working with new Liverpool defenders on communicating in match situations.

Rigobert Song pipes up in his Cameroonian accent: 'When I give the ball, I want to speak to him that there is another player.'

'You know this, Rigo,' says Terry.

And Song does know: 'Man on,' he announces confidently, and leans back in his seat.

Corners are a bit more tricky. 'What is it called when you stand next to opponents?' asks Terry.

'Marking,' says Traore, which has Terry scurrying back to the screen.

'But what is he doing?' asks Terry, pointing at a player who's not doing very much at all.

'Looking ze ball?' suggests Song.

He's nearly there.

'Ballwatching,' Terry corrects. 'Ballwatching. So what do you tell him?'

'When they get a corner, you have to mark your man,' says Song.

Another stage of the Liverpool defensive rehabilitation is successfully completed.

1 OCTOBER: CHELSEA 3, LIVERPOOL 0

A scrambled 3-2 home win against Manchester City, Hamann weighing in with two goals, is no real preparation for this trip. A real Colombian on the station platform, wearing a Colombia football shirt and drinking Colombian beer. Groups of young Japanese in replica shirts, mixing with the locals. The gargling laughter of large Thatcherised baseball-hatted white boys. Haughty women with some style. This is Chelsea, where else? The Sunday underground in London is the usual nightmare, and the Mancs are playing Arsenal at Highbury at the same time as we meet Chelsea. Presumably someone is marking the Euston Road down for later wide-boy stuff.

The original outer wall of the old Shed is still standing here and is now marked, outside the new Stamford Bridge consumption palaces and Chelsea Village paraphernalia, with one of Ken Bates's own dodgy blue plaques, like some noted archaeological exhibit from the time when man ran wild. They should excavate here for the bones of missing visiting fans from the 1970s.