

File: BMD Ben Storey.mp3

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START AUDIO

Interviewer: Now, I'm speaking to...

Ben Storey: Ben.

Interviewer: Ben..?

Ben Storey: Storey.

Interviewer: Ben Storey, and Ben, you're a fan of the football club. What can you remember as your first memory of Stevenage Borough?

Ben Storey: My first memory was probably when we won the Football Conference for the first time, that's my first-

Interviewer: How old were you then?

Ben Storey: Oh, how old was I then?

Male: It was '96.

Ben Storey: So we're talking... I don't know, what am I, 28 now, so must've been 10, I suppose. No, 12, 12.

Interviewer: So, your first memory was winning the Conference?

Ben Storey: Yes. First real major memory. I have memories back before that, two, three, four years before that, and sitting on top of the dugouts in front of the small stand, and watching the [crosstalk 0:01:06].

Interviewer: Can you recall a first match or maybe not necessarily your first match? What is the match that, back then, you can remember?

Ben Storey: Probably the first home game in the Conference, I suppose, is the first match that I can remember, but I know I went two or three years before that, but I just can't remember it.

Interviewer: Can you describe to me, you know..? You were 10, 11 at that sort of time...

Ben Storey: Yes.

Interviewer: You know, was there excitement in coming to watch Stevenage play football?

Ben Storey: Yes, of course. I used to come down with lots of friends from school and yes, of course it was exciting, especially around that time, '95, '96. We won, gone up through the League, so it was quite exciting, yes.

Interviewer: Does a particular chant on the terraces, or a joke, or what did the fans sing back then? Was it the 'Come On Borough'?

Ben Storey: Yes, just the usual stuff that we pretty much still sing today and things, just obviously different players' names, you know?

Interviewer: What was your player of those early days? What was your favourite player?

Ben Storey: Well, my personal favourite player was Mark Smith, and he's just very, very skilful, and very talented, and just could basically play anywhere I think. I might be wrong, but I think he must've come to the club as a striker or something, and I think it was Paul Fairclough

moved him back, and he just became defender. I think Mark Smith or Martin, I think one of them, Martin Gittings, they played for the club the most, again, I think, so Mark Smith, for me, is my favourite player. He's played so many times for Stevenage, and...

Interviewer: He has played many times, is there a particular moment that makes you proud to be a Smudger lover, if you like?

Ben Storey: Just his calm, his whole calm, the way he would defend. He's just such a skilful defender, and he'd never panic. He was so fast, and you'd never get past him. Newcastle tried it, didn't they, twice, and albeit they scored, but throughout, Smudger was the best defender, in my opinion, by a mile, you know? They had some good defenders play alongside him, but they, sort of, came and went, and he stuck around for years and years.

Interviewer: Martin Gittings, obviously also another one of your favourites. Can you remember a particular goal, a particular celebration, even?

Ben Storey: I can't. The only thing I can remember, Martin Gittings, is the old fanzine that they used to call ['Gits Is Up' 0:04:20]. That's the only thing I can remember. I can't remember too many games with Martin, because, as I just spoke to him, he said that injury stopped him playing, and the '95, '96, and things like that. That is when my first memories are, so unfortunately I can't remember much of Martin Gittings.

Interviewer: So, growing up being a Borough fan, what's it like? You know, what does it mean to be a fan? It makes you happy, makes you sad? What's the feeling like when we've just won?

Ben Storey: Having lived in Stevenage all my life and coming down to watch the football club at 8, 9, 10 years old, to see the ups and downs we had, see players come and go, managers come and go, have big crowds, small crowds, you know, win things, lose things, it affects you. You have memories, and obviously the memories day to day, some good and some bad memories.

Interviewer: Bad memories, I mean, do you remember when they were denied promotion?

Ben Storey: Yes, bad memories. Even worse memories than that, I feel, is when Paul Fairclough was sacked. I think he was sacked, and then he came back, which was a happy memory, and then for him to be sacked again and, in my opinion, wrongly both times. Obviously, the club's moved on now, and that's in the past. The bad memories, I remember going on the pitch at Cheltenham Town and protesting, I think, against the Chairman at that time. It was a peaceful protest, and the stewards let us go on the pitch, and we were singing Paul Fairclough's name. I remember, in the car, on the way home from Farnborough after getting beaten 5-0 or 5-1 away at Farnborough, and rang Three Counties Radio singing Paul Fairclough's name, because he'd recently been sacked and, in my opinion, both times,

unfairly. So, it's a shame for me that Paul wasn't the one to get us into the Football League, because he certainly deserved it, you know?

Interviewer: Would that have been more the fairy tale..? The disappointment at the time when Stevenage were denied promotion, obviously young, but do you remember the emotion in the crowd? Did it feel like there was anything you could do?

Ben Storey: Yes, I mean, as a, I think, 12-year-old at the time, I thought it was just totally unfair, because I think the position we were in, in the League, at Christmas time when your ground is supposed to be of League standard at that time, and the position we were in, in the League, didn't warrant us to make the effort, to spend that money, to get the right ground for the League.

Then, to have the ground ready for the opening day of the League, albeit whether they were the rules or not, is just the position we were in. I just obviously felt very hard done by, but, you know, with Paul still here and the year after, we were pushing again, so I felt that we'd win the League again the year after, so it wouldn't be a problem.

Interviewer: There was that belief?

Ben Storey: Yes. I think we finished third, the following year. Again, I might be wrong, but I think we finished third and we lost a very important

game to Macclesfield, and we were 2-0 up, and we lost 3-2 at home. That, sort of, was the end for me, after that game. We didn't really go on to do much in terms of League football after that game, under Paul. Had a few cup runs, obviously.

Interviewer: Cup runs, it's obvious that the game that stands out is always Newcastle United back then.

Ben Storey: Funnily enough, not for me, because I went to Newcastle in '98 at home and away, and we lost the away game. A lovely day and everything, but we lost, so the other cup games leading up to that, and a year before that, I think-

Interviewer: Did you go to any of the cup games leading up to that?

Ben Storey: Pretty much all of them, your Leyton Orient away is the best.

Interviewer: What was it like, then? What was it like when we got into the fourth round of the cup, the achievement of winning that match? Did you invade the pitch?

Ben Storey: I didn't personally, no, but I mean, cup games come and go in a flash. It's nice while they last, but if you lose them, then it's over. So, it was nice while it lasted. It was like having a birthday I

suppose. It lasts for one day and it's gone. All the news was on us and all that, and I found that quite exciting, being young.

Interviewer: Was it special? In a way, the world was watching Stevenage.

Ben Storey: Yes, but at the same time, it was just for one game, and I wanted the world to watch Stevenage for every game, and I couldn't have that, but it was for one game. It was nice, and I thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed it, and remember having a day off school to go up to the Newcastle game. It's games away at Leyton Orient, and then having the Birmingham away which got switched from here, it's things like that, and taking 5,000, 6,000 to Birmingham, or maybe more. We basically took over Birmingham Stadium. For me, that leaves me happier memories than losing at Newcastle.

Interviewer: Can you remember the Birmingham away trip well? How did you go?

Ben Storey: Yes, unfortunately we lost that game as well, but I remember the players throwing snowballs up at the crowd after there was snow at the side of the pitches, and things like that. As a youngster, that was quite fun, but again, we lost the game, but we had some good players playing for us then, and then after that, I do believe we had some good players leave, your [Sodgeys 0:10:56], and Barry [Howes], and people like that.

Interviewer: Is there an away trip that stands out as being special?

Ben Storey: Yes, Leyton Orient away in the FA Cup, second round I do believe. That's my best memory, away game.

Interviewer: How did you celebrate?

Ben Storey: Well, just yes, I can't... I just remember, Orient had Peter Shilton in goal, so that was amazing. The sheer fact that we actually pretty much outplayed Leyton Orient and only won the game 2-1, I think, I can't remember, again, but I'm sure it was 2-1. Peter Shilton should've been sent off bringing down, I think, Barry Howes. For me, that was just... To beat such a good Leyton Orient team, you know? It might've been our first League [scalp 0:11:58] as well, in the FA Cup, but again, I can't confirm that.

Interviewer: Where do you stand, [broad away], where's your position?

Ben Storey: On the East Terrace, stand up.

Interviewer: Whereabouts?

Ben Storey: In the middle, yes.

Interviewer: Is that the best spot at this football ground?

Ben Storey: Yes, in the middle anywhere, either side, is good for view. The view is good, and the noise is good.

Interviewer: Is there something special about being in the middle of the Barmy Army?

Ben Storey: Yes and no. It allows you to sing and get behind the team, which sometimes can help. It really helps the players, so yes, it's good.

Interviewer: Is there a particular chant that you remember, one that got everyone going? Is it very much a, sort of, having a laugh that makes it enjoyable?

Ben Storey: Any chant of 'championnes' and things like that, because they're happy chants, you know? Players' names, your favourite players' names, and some got sung loudly, and others, certain songs that went with players names, it's a good laugh. It really helps the players, gets behind the players.

Interviewer: Would you switch your spot on the terrace to sit down?

Ben Storey: No.

Interviewer: What's special about being part of the Terrace crowd? The ground, for you, has it changed much?

Ben Storey: Oh yes, yes.

Interviewer: Can you remember what it was like when you first came?

Ben Storey: Yes. Just really small. I remember sitting on top of the dugouts, like I said, watching the game. You wouldn't be allowed to do that now. I remember peering over the fence or whatever, or something like that. It was obviously a lot smaller and stuff. It's fantastic now, it was fantastic then, you know? It's just got bigger and better. It's a good little ground now.

Interviewer: You talk about sitting on top of the dugout. Did you ever lead the team out as mascot?

Ben Storey: I didn't, no. My daughter did in our first ever Carling Cup game against Portsmouth, a couple of years back, a year back, just a year back. So, she got the privilege to do that, so that was good for her.

Interviewer: Was that special for you?

Ben Storey: Yes, yes. I want to bring the kids down here, the family down here, because I've met so many good friends through the football club and coming down here. So, hopefully they can enjoy the memories and the ups and downs that I've had. Hopefully, both my kids can, as they get older, come and support their local football team.

Interviewer: Stevenage are a family club. Why do you think it is that we're not getting as many through the turnstiles as perhaps the football club might have hoped? You know, Football League One, you got any thoughts on..?

Ben Storey: It will come, it will come eventually, but it doesn't bother me personally. Obviously, it bothers the Chairman and stuff, because you need more to spend on the players, and the facilities, and resources. It shouldn't bother fans that much, really. It doesn't bother me. As long as the people are here that want to be here, and supporting their club. It's not about having 10,000, 15,000. There are other clubs that have that and they're playing a lot lower down than us.

Interviewer: Being a fan, does it feel tribal? Do you feel part of something?

Ben Storey: Yes, very much so. You have to. If you don't then... Of course, everyone feels part of it. It's our football club, there's no one person

bigger than the football club. It's the fans' football club, so why it's the way it is at the moment is because of the fans.

Interviewer: Whose football club is it? I mean, is it the fans', is it the Chairman's, is it a manager's? How do you feel about that?

Ben Storey: I'd say it's the town's, it's as simple as that. I'd say it's Stevenage as a town. It's their football club, hence the name. That is it, and if people want to come and support their own town or want to come further afield to support this town and this football club, then that's brilliant.

Interviewer: The big rivalry games, you know, why do we hate teams?

Ben Storey: I don't know. Obviously-

Interviewer: Do you remember a particular away game where there was a special atmosphere?

Ben Storey: Yes.

Interviewer: We're looking, I think, Woking.

Ben Storey: Yes, those games for me, personally, first away game at Luton that I went to and we won, so I mean, to have 7,000-odd of their fans and 1,000 of our fans, and win, just proves you don't need 7,000 fans to win a game of football. That was a great atmosphere, because it's, you know, in an old ground like Luton, so fantastic atmosphere. Luton away and things like that, and they're so local. Then, obviously, Woking away games, Woking at home. You know, the crowd just sang that bit louder and the players put that extra in for whatever reason, I don't know.

Interviewer: Do you hate Woking, do you hate Luton, or is it just special that it's people that are so close to Stevenage? You know, the local Derby, I suppose.

Ben Storey: At the time, when we were in the same league as them, yes. You felt if you hated them and that, you'd be more up for it, so yes, but not now, because your Lutons and Wokings are nowhere near us, so we've got bigger fish to fry than them.

Interviewer: Is beating Woking as good as beating Altrincham? Does it have a special feeling when you win those 'big games', if you like?

Ben Storey: Of course it does, and you can tell that around the whole football club, but it's another win, isn't it? It's three points or another way through to a cup, or whatever, so yes, it does. You [punch the air 0:19:11] and they're [like] that little bit harder, but when you look at it, it's just another win.

Interviewer: You stand in the middle of the East Terrace, why do you think it is that today the fans are away at Bury, and the chances are that they will sing for 90 minutes and be able to keep it going? You know, why do you think it's easier for..? Why is it that we can go away from home and basically take over the ground and sing all the way though, but yet, maybe here at home, it's harder to keep the atmosphere going and to keep the crowd motivated to cheer the team on?

Ben Storey: I think it's an air of expectancy, especially over the last three, maybe four years, our home record, I'd like anyone to challenge it in football. It's fantastic, so it's an air of expectancy. We're expected to win our home games no matter who we play, and we've proved that. Then, you go away from home, and for some strange reason, we're not expected to get anything from these games.

It's all new territory for the players and fans, as we're climbing the leagues in the last two or three years. So, it's new grounds, it's new surroundings, you know? That's why I think you get a bit more excited about going to a new team, and a new ground, and playing there for the first time, winning there for the first time, and things like that. That's all you think about.

Interviewer: Does being a fan affect your life? You know, do you plan your personal arrangements around Stevenage playing football?

Ben Storey: Yes and no. It affects my bank balance quite a bit.

Interviewer: Does that stop you from going to more games than what you'd like?

Ben Storey: Of course, yes. You can't afford... When I was younger, I went every week. There would be three seasons on the trot, I probably wouldn't miss one game, and now you hand pick them, because of finances and that. You're still a fan no matter what. Whether you go or don't go, you're still a fan. You watch them on telly, watch them on Teletext or whatever. You're still a fan. If you can't afford to go to the game, then it's just...

Interviewer: Back when you were talking about the earlier days of when you first came and the Stevenage team today, you know, fans would talk then about the 'expectancy' of Stevenage winning and Stevenage doing well. Fans are ever critical and the people that pay to come through the turnstiles, do you feel that you should have a greater voice in the football club? Do you feel that you're listened to? Does it still feel like a closely linked, local team where you can talk to the players?

Ben Storey: Yes, of course. That's what we must keep. I've been brought up supporting this football club, being able to speak to the players. There are a lot of players we've had here that might not have been so successful for the club, but they're very generous towards the fans, and respect the fans for coming to support them, you know, and pay to get in. That's what it's all about. The players at Stevenage, most of them, since I've been supporting them, have

wanted to play for the club and wanted the fans to cheer their name and do well. So, that is what it's all about, I suppose.
Communicating with the fans is the most important thing.

Interviewer: Is the culture of criticism and impatience in the soccer world perhaps too extreme? Do you think that any players have received, perhaps, you know, negative chants from the crowd, or negative moans, or cheers when they're finally being taken off?

Ben Storey: Of course. I don't feel that should be the case, but it does happen. You come and you want your team to do well, you want your team to win, you pay your money, and if someone, you feel, is not putting it in or whatever, or doesn't feel like they want to play... Then, if someone's having a bad game, I don't think you need to tell them. They should know themselves.

Interviewer: Relationships with the players, you say you're brought up coming here, and meeting the players, and seeing them. Are they still accessible? You know, can you meet the players?

Ben Storey: Yes.

Interviewer: Are they available for a drink?

Ben Storey: Yes, definitely. I would say all of them today would be, and you know, you ask them to stop and autograph photos... I got a signed shirt Ronnie Henry gave my daughter. He got all the boys to sign it. It's actually a match-worn shirt, so this is the sort of generosity we're on about, from people like Ronnie Henry. Not mentioned him, but, you know, he's up there with your Mark Smiths, and your Martin Gittings, on appearances.

Ronnie's played 300 games for this club, and in my opinion, other than Mark Smith, he's the best footballer that, in my time, has been here. To be communicating with him, and for him to call me up and say, "I've got a signed shirt for your daughter," and things like that. People hear about this. You go and tell your mate of a mate, of a mate [crosstalk 0:24:55].

Interviewer: He sorted the shirt out for you?

Ben Storey: Yes, yes, Ronnie. Yes, he sorted the shirt out for me. I've got three signed shirts with him on, and things like that. There are a few players, I think, and I know there are two or three that live locally, and maybe more. That's important. They live locally, and they're communicating with fans, and they're generous, and you can have a drink with them. That's the best bit about it.

Interviewer: You talked about Mark then, and the Captain now. What's your favourite player of all time for Stevenage? Can there be one, or have you got more than one, you know? Is it those two?

Ben Storey: There's more than one. For me, it will be Mark Smith and Ronnie Henry, Mark Smith being when I first started watching, and obviously Ronnie now. So, there have been fantastic players come and go.

Interviewer: What makes you connect with those two particularly? What's special about their game?

Ben Storey: Just the consistency, basically, the week in, week out, and the long serving... You're looking at 300 with Ronnie and probably 400-odd games with Mark. You know, these people just keep turning up week in, week out, and trying their best.

Interviewer: Do you feel that a player could be a fan? You know, do you feel that Mark is a fan now, perhaps?

Ben Storey: Yes, definitely. It's the success we've had in the last three years, just tells you that. You see the joy, you know, on their faces. What we've got at the moment at our football club today is we work hard, and the boys earn everything that's successful. Hopefully, that can continue for another 18, 20 years that I'm supporting them, then my kids can see how hard they work, and they still communicate with the fans. So, that's good, yes.

Interviewer: Favourite manager or the greatest managers?

Ben Storey: Greatest manager would be Paul Fairclough.

Interviewer: Not Graham for promotion to the Football League?

Ben Storey: Graham is-

Interviewer: Are the two comparable?

Ben Storey: No, it's hard. Graham is a fantastic manager, and he will be the greatest manager. I have no doubt about that. Graham Westley will be the greatest manager at this football club. At the moment, Paul is just so... You know, but-

Interviewer: What makes Paul the greatest manager?

Ben Storey: Just himself really, mate. Just everything about the guy is just... I remember so many happy memories with Paul, you know? The only sad memories are when he had to leave the club. When he was at the club, there were just never any sad memories. He brought us from three or four leagues, down in non-league, up to the Football League.

Interviewer: You remember winning those leagues, did you feel that Stevenage weren't going to stop going up?

Ben Storey: No, it would've happened. What we're doing now would've happened under Paul. We would've gone up and up again, but it didn't, so...

Interviewer: Wembley, was that special, the first game at Wembley, and winning?

Ben Storey: Yes, of course. First game at Wembley, of course it was special, and winning, and the way we won, came back, yes.

Interviewer: Can you describe the emotion during the game? Did you think they were ever going to get back? What was the feeling at 2-1?

Ben Storey: Well, the feeling at 2-1 was a lot better than the feeling at 2-0, so yes, they were always going to get back, of course they were. It's easy for me to say now, and I said it at the time, but it's fans like us that just believe that we can keep doing it.

Interviewer: Finally then, promotion to the Football League under Graham, the aim, the goal, and now, what's the feeling when that was finally achieved two years ago?

Ben Storey: That is the best feeling I've felt. You'll hear it time and time again, it's probably 16 years of hurt, of not getting into the Football League. Now, I believe that we're just going to keep going. There's no need to stop, just keep going.

Interviewer: Were you at the game when it was mathematically done?

Ben Storey: Yes, Kidderminster away. Yes, I remember that one. Yes, of course.

Interviewer: What was the celebration that day like? Was that one of the best moment of being a Stevenage fan?

Ben Storey: Yes, it's 16 years of hurt. I mean, 16 years ago, I was young, not able to enjoy an alcoholic drink, so we drank some beer, champagne, whatever, and really had a good time. Train back from Kidderminster, things like that. They're memories that will stay with you forever.

Interviewer: Now the team are League One, last year, getting promotion in the play-off final, are we in a place that you never thought would happen? Did you believe that Stevenage, once promoted, would go on to win back-to-back wins?

Ben Storey: At certain times, you just thought we were going to be in the Conference forever, but you never give up, so we deserve to be where we are, and long may it continue. Just keep going.

Interviewer: Can you see Stevenage going higher?

Ben Storey: Of course, yes. No doubt about it.

Interviewer: You can imagine a Stevenage team in the Championship?

Ben Storey: Yes, no problem at all.

Interviewer: What's the biggest challenge that faces the football club today?

Ben Storey: The next game.

END AUDIO

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