

**File: BMD Keith Berners complete 2.mp3**

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Interviewer: Right, good morning. If we could start off with your name please.

Keith Berners: Yes, Keith Berners.

Interviewer: Welcome, Keith. I understand your association with the club goes back a good few years. Can you tell me about your first memories of your association with Stevenage?

Keith Berners: Well first memory is obviously as a child but they were just attending with my father. It was our opportunity to get together once a week, young son goes with father to football games. I mean I'm sure it happens all over the country but that was my start really. As I got into my teens I drifted away a little bit into what you called in those day mainstream football in London. That was in the days of the hooligan element and I didn't enjoy it very much to be honest.

Interviewer: You had another team that you were following at that time?

Keith Berners: I did. Then I gravitated back to Stevenage and back with father in my teens to watch Stevenage play. I saw the latter days of Stevenage town and around the time of the World Cup, when England won the World Cup '66, Stevenage Town went bust. In '67 Stevenage Athletic was rising from the ashes, a bit of a phoenix and all those clichés and so forth.

Interviewer: Do you have any particular memories of the club going bust and what that meant to you as a fan?

Keith Berners: The thing was, you almost couldn't see the join. The way that it worked there, when Town went bust and Athletic started, there was continuity there so you didn't really miss any football. My real involvement, I worked the turnstile, I did whatever jobs were necessary at that time. I felt it more when Stevenage Athletic went bust. Obviously I was a lot older, I could relate to that. The key to it was, and this is where Borough started in a sense - we never appreciated that - I mean we had a high profile manager in Alan Gilzean.

How you can get that close to the start of a new season with no administration in place is beyond me. We were approaching the August, the start of the new campaign, when we realised there was nothing here. We had a very keen grounds man and he was getting everything ready but they'd done nothing administratively. Stevenage Athletic just went to the wall.

Interviewer: Was that the time when they were having problems with the pitch as well?

Keith Berners: Well no. You mean digging up the pitch?

Interviewer: Well I meant more the playing conditions on the pitch.

Keith Berners: Oh. I mean Broadhall Way had a notorious surface. In my early days it was like a beach, it was sand so the Stevenage Town days it was yellow from end to end, side to side.

Interviewer: The Derby County equivalent in the non league?

Keith Berners: I think most football grounds in those days were not a patch on what you see these days but Stevenage being a non league club, it was very, very poor. When it moved into Stevenage Athletic, you started to get more materials that people could put on to football pitches. One of those things was a thing called [leaker 0:03:32]. Leaker was almost like an absorbent granule so where we had drainage problems, you just piled tons of this leaker on. What you got from it was just this stodge.

Because the water never drained away, the pitch was like a giant sump. It's probably not stagnant water because it sounds like mosquitoes and everything else. It was such that, I mean the odour was to behold. I think it was one of those things that if you could smell it today it would take you back to that era because it was vile, it was awful. That was the condition pitch wise.

Interviewer: If I could go back to something you were saying about, you started off operating one of the turnstiles, how did you get dragged into doing that? What was the stimulus?

Keith Berners: I really don't know. I mean it's easier to find somebody in a less populated ground. I remember in those days that night games, Monday night was always the night for Stevenage football in those days and you would get in excess of 1,000 people, which was very well supported. On Saturdays it wasn't quite so but it was still very good. When you consider in those days people's jobs were more conventional, they were eight until five, nine until five whereas in this day and age people work such odd hours, don't they?

Interviewer: What were you doing in those days?

Keith Berners: Gosh. When I left school, the town was full of engineering companies. That was what it was based on. I left school in 1969 and I took up an apprenticeship with one of the engineering companies so I did a three or four year apprenticeship. I can't remember which it was. Anyway, I did the apprenticeship and then became a draughtsman and that was my work for a few years.

Interviewer: You were working in the town as well?

Keith Berners: Yes, I worked in the town. I came here regularly with a friend.

Interviewer: Would you say that the football club was a topic of conversation in the workplace at that time? What was the profile like amongst your fellow workers?

Keith Berners: The media would drive in those days the local team. There were two local newspapers so people would pick up on that. Like I think any city or town, more town than city because support is fragmented in cities but in a town you can go to work on Monday and there's always people around you and they know where you've gone. Even if they didn't come to Stevenage football, they'd want to keep up to date with what's going on, "How did they do at the weekend? What was it like, Keith?" that sort of thing.

I just liked the camaraderie, the fact that you could go and have a beer afterwards and the players would be in the bar. When you went to mainstream football, they were people you looked at from afar and they always stayed afar. They were never close. I really don't know how I got into doing the turnstile. The fact with going into the bar, I always remember one of the management from the club came up and said, "We've got to pay you for doing the turnstile." I was like, "I don't want any pay. I'm just grateful to come in."

I'd picked a turnstile where if I lent at the right angle I could see the game kicking off so we could stay there after the kick off for a bit and then if any latecomers were coming in. I didn't want paying. In the end, the friend and I, we both did the same block. He did one side and I did the other. We used to go back in the bar and spend it over the bar. We thought, "If we're going to support the club there, I don't really want to walk away with," it was something stupid like £1. I mean in those days you could get a few drinks out of £1. It took us on.

Interviewer: Let's go back to that season where Alan Gilzean was manager. Can you remember him coming to the club in the first place because obviously that's a very big name in-?

Keith Berners: It was but it was very vague. I don't think he was hugely successful. I mean I'm not saying they don't take it seriously but I think the management who were involved, they had links somewhere with Tottenham. They came from North London and the link with Alan Gilzean, obviously he was coming to the end of his career at Spurs and he needed something to do. The chap who was here at the time was what I would call a typical football chairman and he encouraged him in. I don't think we did particularly well, from memory. I mean I don't have any great memories of it.

Interviewer: No particular games that stick in your memory from that time?

Keith Berners: Not really, no, nothing from then really. I mean I'm sure others may do but-

Interviewer: There were no knock-on effects. He wasn't able to bring any Tottenham players up to the club or anything?

Keith Berners: Not really, no. I mean I don't think so. It was nice to see football back again. Well I say back again, I mean it was almost this seamless switch and all that seemed to switch was

the league that you were playing in the name changed slightly.  
That was it really.

Interviewer: What about when Stevenage Athletic folded then, do you have memories of that?

Keith Berners: That was crucial that was because I ended up becoming the first chairman of Stevenage Borough. That's how it came from there. I mean again, it was nothing more than being in the right place at the right time. I can't put anything else to it at all.

Interviewer: What was the time and the place? Was there a specific thing that you can remember?

Keith Berners: Indeed it was. It was coming towards August of 1976, we'd prepared the pitch, it shows me that I wasn't that close to - I mean I know far more now about running a football club than I did then because I knew nothing then. The coming season was getting close. We were in the Southern Football League, or we were signed to play in the Southern Football League and we hadn't had any pre-season friendlies. That's very strange.

I mean there was some activity from the youth team but there was nothing senior happening. Then almost at the 11th hour where we must surely have been within the period of playing pre-season friendlies and nothing had happened, there's a chap whose name will come up several times, called Jim Briscoe. Jim was a previous manager of the club but he had stayed on and he had become grounds man and all sorts of things.

I mean he had various roles. He asked people who were interested in the club to come to a meeting in the old board room. Quite a gaggle of us turned up actually. It was quite a reasonable number. I mean it wasn't like having an open meeting where you've got half the town or anything but it was a reasonable collective. He basically said, "We've got no football club for next season."

Now, in hindsight, I mean I now can't understand how even the competition allowed us to get that far without making some declaration that we were either going to run or not. Anyway, that was by the by. We sat there in this meeting completely stunned and shocked. The issue that we had was the ground was leased from the local authority by a property developer and it was in the era of property developers. It's felt at this time still that all he was interested in was its potential for building.

We now know that on, whatever it is, greenbelt and brown field site and all this sort of thing but in those days none of that was in our vocabulary at all. Anyway, the result of this meeting was we need to form an action committee to get this guy out basically because he had no intention of playing any football because he wasn't making money. All he wanted was the land so we formed a committee. The objective was to raise the profile of the situation.

I remember shortly after this meeting we did have a proper good old fashioned protest march where we walked down to Southgate House, which is where the council was at the time, banners and all the rest of it. That was our bit of profile if you like. Then we came back and said, "Well clearly we've gone past the deadline for entering the southern league again," so the club basically no longer existed. We said, "Well what are we going to do here?" We formed a new club.



We initially called it, strangely enough, what it's called now, Stevenage FC. We didn't want to attach anything like town, borough, athletic, whatever you like to it because we didn't want it to be associated with anything that had gone before because we would be pure or something. Obviously, as with every collapsing football club anywhere in the world, there are creditors left who don't get their money. There were obviously those that were in a similar position in Stevenage.

From our point of view, we just wanted to be completely new, stand alongside. One of the first things we did, we utilised the youth team that was run by a chap called Vic Folbigg and we arranged a friendly with Hitchin Town to be played here at Broadhall Way. I was working in the drawing office at British Aerospace at the time and I had a phone call through to the office which, in this day of communication and mobile phones, that didn't exist, to have a phone call for you into the office when you're working in a factory either meant somebody had died - "Phone for you, Keith."

I went and took the call and they said, "There are JCBs on the pitch digging it up." I've jumped in the car, shot down here. There is, somewhere, a really old picture taken by the local newspaper of me standing in a ditch with drainage pipe in either hand. They'd gone straight down the middle and also then bored in about five huge holes and nothing we could do. The game was off.

Interviewer: Did you find out who the perpetrators of this-?

Keith Berners: It was the leaseholder, yes. He said, "Well it's my ground and you're not playing on it, mate," and that was it.

Interviewer: Remind me the name of the leaseholder at the time?

Keith Berners: He was based in Bournemouth. How do they pronounce it? I think Javier is his first name, Revuelta, R-E-V-U-E-L-T-A I think his name is.

Interviewer: How long had his association with the club been?

Keith Berners: It had been through the Athletic years. Now Athletic had started in '67 and finished at the end of the '75/'76 season. Somewhere in that timeframe they'd obviously found themselves a little bit short of cash. They touted around and this guy from Bournemouth arrives on the scene. Every time a new one arrives, he's the saviour and blah, blah, blah. He clearly didn't want anybody-

Interviewer: I presume he was nowhere to be seen on the day that the JCB was there?

Keith Berners: Oh of course, no. I mean apart from arriving, I think he had zero profile. I mean his interest in the club was, on a scale of 1 to 10, minus 5 probably. I mean I didn't see him as anything to do with the club at all but obviously he had plenty of control over the club.

Interviewer: You're there, you're holding your pipes up, what was the next stage?

Keith Berners: The next step was to try and - this, I felt, diluted the support a little bit that we had because we started off with this - you needed numbers to give you the feeling that something was going to happen. You needed the motivation. You needed the confidence. We realised that we couldn't get in this place. Well we could because it was like a sieve. I mean there were fences broken down. The ground was allowed to go quite derelict from '76 through to 1980.

This is where the roped off park pitch thing, if you listen to other people when they talk about it, it was our formative years. We started with a local league. We even took on board an ex-player to be our manager. In this local league you were allowed to pay a mixture of youngsters and you were allowed an over age player, which he was. After a very short space of time, he felt that he couldn't play at that level. He needed to be up there with the adults and all that playing.

We were playing in King George V playing field, which is an open space in the centre of town. To be able to play in what was then a relatively senior league, the minimum requirement was a roped off park bit so it wasn't quite the same as Saturday or Sunday football where you just roll up and you play on Hackney Marsh type thing. We used to have to put this rope and stake up round this pitch every time. You had to put the nets up and take them down afterwards. There was a building there where people could go and have a cup of tea.

Interviewer: Even as chairman you were getting your hands dirty and everybody was involved?

Keith Berners: I think then, I mean you took on titles for roles that it was just people who would do a job. I mean it was a learning curve for all of us because I mean we were supporters who had been standing on the terraces and all of a sudden you had to conduct yourself differently. I found it a challenge, I suppose is the best way to put it. Again, for me, it brought me back to my father again because he was one of them.

I've brought along a copy of our original minute book, the very first meeting that we had. When I look at the people who were there, we started off with quite a big number and then as they realised it wasn't going to be a quick fix, the numbers dwindled a little. It's back to the old quality/quantity thing. I wouldn't degrade anybody who walked away because they didn't want to go for the hard slog. They either stopped watching football or they went and watched some of the clubs around the area, the Baldocks, the Hitchins and people like that. I couldn't really bring myself to do that so I stuck with this park pitch thing.

I mean when you look back and you say, "Which game do you remember from that?" we played Luton Town on the park. It wasn't their first team by any - I mean in those days I think they were up in Division One as it was but it was one of their third or fourth teams. We had I think it was over 1,000 people standing around a football pitch in a park. It's sad that maybe there isn't any record of that because I mean to see that many people round a football pitch on a playing field I would think - you don't see that very often. I'm sure it's not happened in Stevenage before.

We stuck at it. Eventually, I mean all we could do is, if you like we were playing this part time football and being a pressure group. The pressure group was saying to the council every opportunity, "Come on, what are you doing about getting this

ground back? What are you doing?" They were saying, "Well is there an interest?" You struggled. Clubs were always going bust. We'd be fighting for this and what's the point. If we just leave it there to rot or whatever, I mean we'll put enough covenants in place to prevent the property developer from coming and doing anything there but we really don't want to get involved in anything if we can help it.

We had to raise the profile to be able to get them to do something. You were badgering your local councillors and all these sorts of things. I mean the newspapers were a great help in those days because you had more than one, whereas now, I mean local newspapers we're down to one. We were using all means that we could.

Interviewer: How much of your time was this taking up then?

Keith Berners: It was a part time thing but it was - after work, it was the next thing really. I mean for me in those days, I mean we didn't have our family until a bit later so there was just the wife and I.

Interviewer: She was involved as well?

Keith Berners: Absolutely, yes. I mean it's one of those, now there are more ladies involved in football, which is nice but in those days there were not so many ladies. It was more of a blokey thing. She was one of those that I think she took it off of her mum really because her dad used to play cricket a lot. Mum was involved in doing the teas because that's how she supported her hubby sort of thing.

My wife, she always came with me when I met her. She intimated she was interested in football when in effect she lied, she didn't have a clue but because I was going to football, she thought, "Well I'll go to." It came on from there. For us, it was this case of getting back to Broadhall Way was the thing. It got closer and closer.

Interviewer: Had you found allies on the council by that stage or were you still battling?

Keith Berners: To their eternal credit, and I don't want to sound political at all because it's always dangerous when you start talking councillors and things like that but as I got to - because when we did get back to Broadhall Way and we started to go through the more senior non league areas, we would go into the board room, like we are today. You'd have your cup of tea and you'd chat to other clubs, which there are some really senior clubs that are known in the non league circles who go back to the days of amateur football. Their history was infinitely greater than dear old Stevenage.

We were a fledgling with the club at the time but even historically Stevenage were not that well known. They came to us and said, "If we had a local authority like yours we'd be absolutely over the moon." The support you get, and I mean in the early stages we were having a laugh, we were reading the old minutes and we needed £5 to buy wool to do knitting because we had a bazaar to raise funds. I mean it is real - it aged me over night reading these old minute books because you can't believe that that's what you did but you did.

We were completely skint and the only monies we really made was a little bit of raffle money that we got. We had kids going

round - we hijacked the old football club's lottery and so we had a team of youngsters who would do the town and they would come and pay in once a week. We kept that going so that gave us a bit of fairly regular income. That was difficult to keep that going because you needed the profile to make sure that people bought the tickets otherwise they said, "Well where's our money going? There's no football down there anymore."

We had to make sure there were news items as regularly as we possibly could. No, the key, we worked towards this all star game in May 1980.

Interviewer: That was the one which was the reopening of the ground here?

Keith Berners: It was the reopening of the ground. I mean that was the we've made it. It was purposely done for the end of the season because May is the very last of the previous season. It was a real statement to everybody to say, "Come and watch Stevenage next year." Come the start of the following season, '76/'77," no, sorry, '80/'81, that's better, I'll move on a bit, "80/'81 come to Stevenage and you'll see football here again." We must have been inspired because we joined the United Counties League and we were put at the lowest level.

We had some cracking players for that level. In mean in fact, a bit like Stevenage are today but they should have been two divisions up from where we were. The goals, I mean we just absolutely battered all the opposition. I don't think we lost a game all season. If we did it was one or something like that. Of course, people will come and watch a winning side and so we moved up the non league pyramid as they say.

Interviewer: Let's go back for a moment to the moment when the council said to you, "You can come back to Broadhall Way." Talk me through the move up to that all stars game and exactly what your part was in arranging that.

Keith Berners: I'm not sure health and safety had such a big profile then as it does now but you had what was a derelict ground for four or five years. The council, I think they got their ground staff in. I mean I still talk to some of the people who used to be their ground staff, to this day. I mean they're retired fellas now. They came on to the pitch, filled the holes and just basically re-laid a new football pitch. They had other guys going round making sure the plumbing was working in the loos and the showers and that sort of thing. They had to put in-

Interviewer: What sort of infrastructure did the ground have at that time?

Keith Berners: Where we're sitting now, they had what was called the Main Stand which was half standing and above it was seated, made of brick and a corrugated roof. It could take probably about 300 or 400 maybe. There was a little tiny tin shack on the other side and then everything else was completely open, open to all the other three or four sides. We'd got a completely derelict changing facility so that was demolished. It was the era of the portakabins so we had two portakabins, one was classed as a board room and an office, the other one was the changing rooms.

We didn't have a club house either because that went with the crumbling of the old facility. We had to try and work money out



to get that but that came a year or two later once we'd got going. It was very interesting. I mean portakabins, if you've got a vision of what a portakabin is, I mean there's no room to swing a cat round in the thing. Some of these pre-season friendlies, we were trying to get as many names as we could. You don't get the first team but we were playing West Ham and people like that.

They would turn up, as they do these days, with these kit boxes on wheels and these things were stacked up outside the portakabin because they just couldn't get the things in. They could just about get the players in. With the pre-season friendly, you're always running with more players than you would normally do anyway because you want to give everybody a run out. Yes, but it did the job. These portakabins lasted for - crikey, I'm trying to think, this building went up about middle '90s. They lasted 15 years or so.

Interviewer: Were those portakabins in place for that opening game?

Keith Berners: They were. The one that I remember to this day was we had to de-stone the pitch. There was a team of us who had to do this. If you've ever crouched on your haunches for hours on end, and I was a few years younger then as you can imagine, but to be in that position picking stones, you felt it for days and days afterwards. The people who did it, we just put lines up the pitch so that we didn't miss anything. Yet there was a very bad injury here where at one end of the pitch somebody had gone in for a sliding tackle and they'd found one of these flints that we hadn't found. It sliced half his kneecap off. It was quite gory but it just showed you how bad it could be.

Of course, when they did the pitch originally, I think now you have de-stoners or something but in those days definitely not, no.

Interviewer: No. The game itself, what can you remember of that day?

Keith Berners: I think we were so busy doing other things and shaking hands and talking to people, for us, it was still a case of selling the club because that was the first opportunity we could show anything in the flesh. I mean from memory as well, we'd just gone about starting to get a side together to compete the following season. I think these guys had had their last season with us on the park pitch with the promise that next season we'll be down Broadhall Way.

A lot of the guys, they were local players that were of a reasonable standard in those days. They had moved on and started to play their football at a high level. They were happy because it was Stevenage they'd come back and play again. I mean it wasn't huge money. I mean we did get to a point where it was an expensive level you were at. You had to try and find money to pay players. Certainly not masses amounts but then when you had no income to speak of, it was extremely difficult, hence the balls of wool and all the rest of it.

I mean we were going round and round just trying to raise money. The key was always to try and pay the electric bill. I always remember that. The treasurer would come along and say, "We've got a bill here lads," "How much is it? Oh gosh." It was so hand to mouth you wouldn't believe. You started to realise what it was like. At that point we were fortunate in as much as the success in the United Counties League enabled more people to come and watch us.

They will try and say to you that the money for a football club is not in the gate, it's in its off the pitch activities because off the pitch you can be raising money week in, week out. Whereas if you rely on a gate, you need a game to do that and you've got one opportunity and that's it. Well, I don't know how we did it. I know the one thing we learned from Stevenage Town was that you needed, at that stage, to be in a league which you didn't travel far for because where we are in Stevenage, we were in that almost no man's land.

We couldn't go in the Midland Division but we did. We couldn't go in the Southern Division. Of course, most of the clubs were London or south and the Midland clubs were Midland and north. I think our nearest club was probably Cambridge City which was right on the doorstep and everybody else was miles away. The cost of travel, you were going to Barry in Wales and places like that. Well I mean the cost even in those days, pro rata, the cost of a coach and we said, "Well we can't entertain this. It will break us before Christmas."

The United Counties League was very good because United Counties was up to Lincolnshire, just south Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire, out to Wisbech so it was all reasonable travelling distance. We then had the opportunity to jump across the pyramid, which is very unusual but the Isthmian League had got sponsorship from Vauxhall Motors. Vauxhall Motors is only round the corner in Luton but getting this sponsorship, they wanted to be able to boost their numbers.

Instead of just having an Isthmian League, you had an Isthmian League and then there was a Division One and a Division Two North and South. We saw the opportunity that we might be accepted because we were still considered a well supported club in that level of football.

Interviewer: What sort of level were the gates at at that time?

Keith Berners: Well the Monday night games were around 1,000 which was a great atmosphere. Monday night had always been terrific at Stevenage. I remember as a lad, there was that real buzz on Monday nights which you didn't get on a Saturday and I don't know whether that was down to darkness and floodlights and all that which enhanced the atmosphere but it was terrific anyway.

I'd like to think that the people at the Isthmian League thought, "Well we need numbers and Stevenage is the place." I had to be down here when these two guys from the Isthmian League swept in. I don't think I've ever felt so put down as when they - I mean I suppose they had to try and be neutral and you always look when you see a delegation of people arrive, you want to see who's on your side.

You look around and there's the stony faced and you think, "Well I'm not going to get through to him." Then you look at the other one and he looks at you, you make eye contact and he gives you a bit of a smile and you think, "Right, okay. We're in here then." They disappeared off up the end of the pitch to be able to talk and they walked around. I'd made them a cup of tea and they said they didn't want a cup of tea because they were going up the road to meet somebody else, "We haven't got the time," and all this and you think, "Are we going to get in here or not?"

We got accepted. Somewhere along the line we got accepted. By going into Division Two North, we had a couple of seasons where we were playing sides that were all within spitting distance. We were going there in cars rather than coaches. It was Hemel Hempstead and people like that, Hertford, just

down the road. Really it's what we wanted. We needed that otherwise I don't think we would have got through. If we'd have stayed in the same level of football that the previous Stevenage clubs had been we'd have gone the same way as them I'm sure of it.

Interviewer: The planning was important. How long did you stay in that level of football and how long did your involvement as chairman last?

Keith Berners: Well again, as I say, what was the term? I mean titles were irrelevant really. I mean we all moved around in what we could do. I think at some point I became press officer because my job - I had a major change in my job. I got fed up with doing what I was doing and I went out and I became a rep on the road, which was completely different to working in an office. All of a sudden - in those days you didn't have mobile phones and the communication that you have now so once you moved off town working, nobody could get in touch with you.

I mean in my case, a chap from a local building society came on and he still comes in to this day watching. A chap called George Clarke. He took over the chairmanship. He was locally based. I think he worked in Luton. The key to it all is his working day was spent next to a phone so if anything was needed. Then my father, first he was treasurer and then he took on the secretary's position. Really, people took on titles but we all did pretty much the same job. I mean I'd like to think there were no egos there so nobody was driving to be anything more than another.

Interviewer: Did anyone take responsibility for being involved in player recruitment or was that just purely down to the manager?

Keith Berners: I'm sure that was solely down to the manager if I remember. I mean we had a local councillor as chairman, Ken Vale, for a period of time. Great style of management in as much as the team manager was given the chance to manage. I know Paul Fairclough is coming along here later this morning. One of the best quotes I'll always remember, he'd done quite well at Hertford Town and we went and recruited him for the following season for us. He finished second with Hertford Town but in those days only the champions ever went up.

When he said, "Well what's my target?" I remember Ken at the time said to him, "Look Paul, there's no pressure but as long as you finish one position higher than you did with Hertford, we'd be delighted," and he did. The manager did all the recruitment all the time. It's a thing you always feel that there's an awful lot of board room involvement in football teams. It's alright if it's done for the right reasons and with the right encouragement and support but when you're trying to control, that's a different thing. There's support and control.

As long as you maintain it as being a supportive position then it works. I'd like to think we did but we were as keen as the next person to give our advice but you kept biting your tongue and thinking, "No, leave it to the manager."

Interviewer: When did that shift come from we're just going to play in a league where we don't have to travel too far to that one, we really want to move the club on to the next stage now?

Keith Berners: I mean it was always the Isthmian League but the name - I mean as they started to do, names of leagues changed as the sponsors changed. When Vauxhall Motors sponsorship finished, a kit manufacturer called Diadora took it on.

Interviewer: I remember that, yes.

Keith Berners: It then became the Diadora League. You were still playing the same teams, everything else, nothing changed in that respect. We moved from Division Two North, we were promoted to division one. It was our one and only, he says touching wood furiously, the only time we'd taken a backward step as a club, we got relegated from division one. If you look at the records for that season, we had the best defence of the whole league I think it was. We let in fewer goals than any other team but it was all 1-0 stuff. Our goals for were poor.

Interviewer: What year was that?

Keith Berners: Pass. I can't remember.

Interviewer: It must have been in the '80s at some stage was it?

Keith Berners: Yes, it's going through the 80s. It's gone in the midst of time.

Interviewer: Probably one you wanted to forget that one.

Keith Berners: I mean it was hugely frustrating. We've been to some funerals over the years and a lot of these guys still turn up. The main strike guy we had that year turned up at Frank Cornwall's funeral recently. I saw him then and he's as lovely a guy now as he was then so you couldn't really get on his back. Whether he just had a lean season or he genuinely couldn't hit a barn door from five paces I don't know.

It was frustrating because as soon as you let a goal in you knew you stood little chance of getting back. That was our one relegation. We'd obviously gone one step too far. We couldn't get the players in that we needed. I remember money raising its head even in those days. There were guys who were playing for clubs that I look at now, I mean it's not a joke, no club is a joke but you look at it and if you were looking for the future and the potential, they should have come to us but they didn't. They were getting a better pay packet from the clubs they were at.

Interviewer: Can you remember the moment when you were relegated?  
Can you remember a game when you thought, "That's it, we're down"?

Keith Berners: Not so much that. To me the game of football on a Saturday was a release because it was flipping hard work running a football club. I mean when you're trying to keep a day job going and then you were involved in doing that, it was mainly fundraising. It had to be fundraising. I'm sure if I read through more of that minute book, I mean there are all these crazy things that you had to ask at committee meetings to be able to get things passed.



I mean you can see why these days there's directors and things who hate committees because it's not instant. You have to call a meeting and everybody has to sit down. You debate spending £5. Well I mean £5 then is considerably more now. It was everything. You learned what a committee is and you can't do anything without consulting anybody. I think we then realised you needed an executive committee to be able to pass things a bit quicker.

You could get on the phone and talk it through rather than call a meeting. Then that person justifies it at the next officially scheduled meeting and all that but it had to be done. We were at a point where we'd got to the next level financially and we were not really in a position to support it or consistently support it. I mean there was a chap we did get on board who had quite a bit of disposable income in his back pocket. He helped us along for a while but let's say we moved on from him fairly quickly.

Again, when I look back, all these people were a stepping stone and gave us a leg up in our hour of need. I mean one chap in particular, he tapped me on the shoulder at a game one night. I knew he always used to be a fan and he was quite well positioned in his business life. He said, "How are you fixed?" It was always the electric bill I think. The electric bill was the killer. He said, "Can I help you?" and he dropped us some money to pay off this particular electric bill. I mean it's always a struggle, right up to the Victor Green days.

We realised that we'd got to a point as a committee, and Ken Vale was the chairman in those days, when he said, "As a committee and basically just general working people, we can't take this club any further." The next era was Victor Green and it became full time and so on.

Interviewer: Did that Victor Green era coincide with Fairclough's appointment?

Keith Berners: He was the manager when he came on board. This was when we won the conference in our second season I think it was in the conference, '95/'96. That was when the ground hadn't quite kept up to speed. I mean the council - this is back to their supporter game - they had given their okay to develop the ground but again, they had to find the money to do it. It wasn't done in time. I think the league's position was that you had to have your improvements in place by the Christmas of the particular season you're talking about.

Well I mean you've got to try and balance your money to get the right squad together and then also find some money to build a ground. Well I mean it was so difficult. We'd played Hereford away in a cup game and they were way above us at the time. Did we win the game? Whatever it was it was a real major day out. We took a coach load of councillors with us as well. Coming out of the ground they said, "We'll give you the money. You can develop the ground," but it wasn't in time.

It was being built as the people were coming round and saying, "You can see the rules. It says end of December it's got to be in place." We said, "Don't worry, it will be there for the start of the following season, sorry."

Interviewer: That five years leading from Fairclough's appointment in 1990 to that almost promotion, winning the championship, there must have been some marvellous moments on the way.

Keith Berners: There were but I can't remember them. I mean for me, the real key moments for me, the best game ever was Leyton Orient away in the cup. The only reason being, it was the first time we'd ever beaten a league team and it was on their patch. Peter Shilton was in goal. He was in the twilight of his career. There is a picture in the upstairs gents in here, a picture of Barry Hales completely upside down because Peter Shilton took him out, literally took him out and pinged him up in the air. He got a yellow card for it. I mean we're talking about last man and everything else here.

I think just his stature enabled him to say on, put it that way, but we still won the day. For me, I don't know, if you can look at all that we did from '76 onwards, I drew the line under the FA Cup game at Leyton Orient. I don't think I've ever been as happy as I was then. I'll even stand that up against the first Newcastle game and all those sort of things which obviously got the profile and everything else and I'm sure there are others.

Interviewer: I'm sure there'll be lots of people talking about that. Where were you on that day? Can you remember how you got down there?

Keith Berners: Yes. I mean we took the supporters club coach and we were in with the masses. I mean when we were in the first throes of these sorts of matches, we used to take lots of people away, loads of people away. I mean around about that time we were drawn against Birmingham - they're all cup games - and we couldn't-

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