

INTO THE LIONS' DEN

Shaun Keogh recalls his first tentative steps into football and Borodom. Stepping off into the fires of Cold Blow Lane.... Millwall. Scarey! It's a tale from another age. Thank goodness.

You would hardly call it love at first sight.

Cold Blow Lane was Millwall's home before the New Den became one of the first of the all brand new, state of the art football stadia built in the wake of the Hillsborough disaster. As I approached it on a November morning in 1968, I took in the fact that I was in a pretty grotty part of south London. The walls guarding the outside of the ground were made of 50 year old corrugated iron, covered in graffiti; the whole area seemed to smell of stale urine. And that was just the pubs.

Extremely unsavory gangs of youths stood on the corners eyeing everybody up and down looking for 'outsiders' - away supporters, so that they could dish out some of their local hospitality. It was an era when replica kits were not available, but you wouldn't have worn one then anyway. The only way of knowing who was an away fan would be the sight of part of a scarf hidden under a coat, a small enamel lapel badge, or perhaps overhearing a conversation and noticing that the accent was 'foreign'.

That's right kids, gather round the fire and I'll regale you with pleasant stories about the jolly japes that occurred in the early days of football hooliganism.

Lets get a few things clear at the outset, however. Anyone who tells you that it was 'all a bit of fun' or 'just lads being lads' is a liar, a thug and probably in prison; or should be. Looking back, I am suprised that I fell in love with the Boro and football that November day, because it was not a good day from beginning to end. Of course, Boro lost as well. But when I get crap from my mates and new acquaintances about 'How can I be a Boro lad with a soft southern shandy drinkers accent,' I can proudly stand up and say, "Listen,

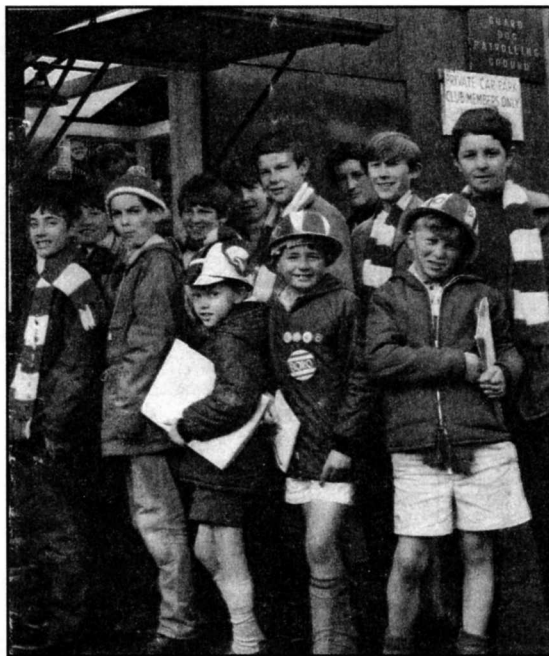


pal, the first 20 or so times that you saw Boro would have been at Ayresome, surrounded by all your Boro mates, within walking distance of home and Mum's steak and kidney pie. You probably didn't go to an away game until you started shaving."

My first Boro game was in a violent suburb of south London where several Charlton Athletic fans are still missing, presumed dead following a game in 1948. Oh, and what's more, I didn't get to see anything but away games until 1971. (v Benfica, pre-season friendly, if you must ask). It is probably very difficult for the younger generation of fans to understand what it was like to attend a football match, particularly an away one, during the years 1968-1990. My southern accent was a positive asset when watching the Boro in London, but I was always fearful that Vince, with whom I have attended all but two of the Boro games I have seen, would say something loud enough to be heard and recognised as a Boro lad, ending with us both being mashed to a pulp.

It nearly happened at Millwall during an early 70's cup game. This was a time when fans used to change ends at half-time as well as the teams. We were making our way around to the opposite end, when a couple of local Neanderthals heard Vince singing along to that poptastic hit, Son Of My Father, which was being played over the PA. Next thing I knew, he was on the floor, being kicked and beaten by these soooo brave sarf London skinheads. I didn't realise what was going on at the time; I stood there watching it all happening, thinking that it was just a few of

Vince's long lost Boro mates who he was having a rough and tumble with. However, when he emerged from the floor with a black eye, bloody nose and a few new swear words for me to learn, I started to work it all out. The trouble is, Vince can be his own worst enemy. In Liverpool for an Everton game around 1975, he was approached by an acne encrusted youth who was part of a gang of lads on an opposite pavement, and asked 'Where are ya from, wack?' Pride would not allow Vince to take the easy way out; being born and brought up in the Boro makes people quite stubborn at times. He looked the kid straight in the eye and replied 'Well, from a place where we don't have spotty faced little gits like you'. He could run a bit in them days too, which is just as well. I well remember being in a pub in the Boro just before a match against QPR when I was about 13. Now, hard experience has taught me that my London accent is treated with suspicion



even now when I am in the Boro. Imagine what it was like at the height of footballs violent period, on a matchday against cockneys. Alright, I was only a boy, hardly likely to be the target of a crack Boro fighting unit, but I was frightened all the same. I just hoped that Vince wouldn't say anything to me that required an answer, lest I be overheard. I had a cold at the time, and remember trying to cough with a Boro accent. Players, then as now, were not

averse to mixing it a bit. A couple of years ago I interviewed former Boro player Alan Moody, who told me that when he was an apprentice, he had to clean the boots of 60's Boro legend Dickie Rooks. His equipment comprised of mudbrush, boot polish, cloth and er, non-ferrous file. In those days, studs were made of metal, and Dickie, a hard tackling centre half liked to have his studs filed to a nice sharp point.

Terrace singing used to frequently be the prelude to a brawl. To hear 'Where were you when you were s****?' these days is nothing unusual. There were many songs that would rile fans to the point of violence, but I wouldn't want to repeat them here, in case they came back into fashion again. However, there is one which to this day gets under the skin of Celtic fans at Old Firm games. To have to listen to Rangers fans singing 'F*** the Pope to the tune of 'Here We Go' leaves Celtic fans feeling incompetent to reply. After all, how can you find a tune to fit the words 'F*** the Chief Procurator of the Free Church of Scotland?'