



NORTHWICH VICTORIA 1992 - 2012

***20 Years of
Madness***

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by

R.M.Bevan

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ISBN 978-0-949001-48-1



C.C.PUBLISHING, HARGRAVE, CHESTER, CH3 7RX

Introduction

When first setting out to piece together a twenty-years history of Northwich Victoria, I didn't imagine I would encounter so many twists and turns, so much conflict of opinion. The raw emotion was entirely predictable, from all quarters, but what I never anticipate was the shifting sands of bitterness and the supporter-heart split asunder. The latter, although strictly outside of my remit, has made the research of the past twelve months infinitely more difficult.

It was never going to be an easy task following the late Ken Edwards' "A Team For All Seasons", which I published for him in 1992. He was Vics, through and through, and he saw huge problems ahead, but nothing on the industrial scale of craziness that has evolved since 1992. It was from this standpoint that I decided to write the book, so that if anyone, in 2032, should look back, they will have a better understanding of all that which has taken place in the name of Northwich Victoria.

I have not attempted to emulate Ken's statistical records, i.e. season-by-season results, appearances, goals etc. because, frankly, the real story of Northwich Vics has been profoundly played out off the field. There have, however, been some rare performance moments and these I have highlighted, along with end-of-season league tables which also serve as useful milestones to help place events in context.

I confess that my own background, a Vics' supporter since the mid-1950s, has shaped my approach. As a youngster I was the mascot and then I became a local reporter, occasionally covering Drill Field games during the exceedingly rare absences of Mike Talbot-Butler. My Saturday assignments were, more often than not, confined to Witton Albion and the Central Ground. Years later I was appointed editor of the Northwich Guardian, but, by the time the future of the Drill Field began to be cast into serious doubt, I had already moved on. Still a green-in-the-blood, I purchased a few shares and I make no bones of the fact that I was one of the rebels opposed to the sale, basically because I believed Vics were heading in the wrong direction. A pure sentimental attachment to the Drill Field was significantly more important in others.

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So, after almost sixty years following the fortunes of Vics, I suppose I am as well qualified as anyone to offer a sequel to Ken Edwards' epic. I have strived for accuracy and endeavoured, throughout, to be objective, fair and even-handed, and I am fully aware there will certainly not be universal agreement in regard to everything I have written.

With the notable exception of Mike Connett, who did not take up my invitation, I have interviewed all of the principals involved, and carefully cross-checked one account against another. To this end, the local newspapers, the Northwich Guardian and the Northwich Chronicle, have afforded outstanding weekly, contemporaneous accounts, from which I often learned more than through a myriad of interviews. I have sourced the Non-League Paper, Daily Telegraph, Independent, Manchester Evening News, and an assortment of websites, but I am especially indebted to Paul Lavell, historian and local sports writer, for his support and advice throughout. In addition, on my behalf, he also meticulously scoured the local newspaper reports from 2000 to 2004, the time before easy internet access.

So many have assisted, including those at the cutting edge of Vics' decision-making, Rod Stitch, Dave Stone, Derek Nuttall, Jim Rafferty and Jim Rushe. Along with Dave Thomas, they have all been enormously helpful. Others, to whom I especially wish to convey sincere thanks, are: Toddy Barlow, John Buckley, Michael Chatwin (Proud to be The Dabbers), Phil Chadwick, Rory Carroll (Football Stadia Improvement Fund), Brian Edge, Martin Edwards, Colin Lynch, Clive Penny, Wayne Porter, Peter Grimes (Distant Vics News Service), Paul Stockton, Steve Thomas, Tony Vickers, Richard Ward, James Wood, Ron Woodier, Mike Worthington.

The photographs have come from various sources, including the unofficial Vics' archivist, Toddy Barlow, the Northwich Guardian, Tony Vickers, Brian Edge, Jim Rafferty, Rod Stitch and Bob Watkins. Numerous others have been submitted by supporters, but space, and a desire to keep the book at an economical price, have prevented their publication. Finally, those wishing to research the history of Vics, prior to 1992, should consult the following: *The Early Days of the Vics* (G.A.Hughes, 1931) *A Team For All Seasons* (Ken Edwards, 1992), *The Formation of Northwich Victoria F.C. – The True Story* (Paul Lavell, 2013).

Mark Bevan

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The FA Trophy and Vics' finest hour: Colin Chesters, Kenny Jones, Jeff Forshaw, John Anderson and Phil Power, celebrate in 1984.

Chapter 1

WHEN Kenny Jones held aloft the FA Trophy on a Potteries' spring night in 1984, who could possibly have foreseen the nightmare that was to engulf Northwich Victoria Football Club? Successive Wembley finals and a 2-1 replay victory over Bangor City had sky-rocketed Vics to the pinnacle of non-league football, the club's finest hour in a history stretching back to the very creation of the world game. Manager, John King, skipper, Kenny Jones, and match-winner John Anderson, will be names forever celebrated, but more, much more, this was a triumph for the supporters and the directors who were bonded by an indomitable spirit and an unshakable faith in the venerable old club.

Success in the FA Trophy, and finishing seventh that season in the Alliance Premier League, was a remarkable achievement for a small town club whose longevity had so often been pockmarked with adversity and crises. The late Ken Edwards, a dyed-in-the-wool Drill Fielder, highlighted many of the key moments in his splendid book, "A Team For All Seasons", publication of which, in 1992, sadly became a marker for the start of twenty years of raging controversy and feuding.

Ken Edwards was the club's vice-president (later president) and as early as the season following the FA Trophy victory, he pointedly expressed his frustration at the way in which the club was operating in regard to enormous operational costs incurred in what, by then, had been renamed the "Gola League". Measures to reduce away game expenses, he wrote, had failed... "due to the indifference of directors and officials who assumed that eventually someone would foot the bill." Northwich Victoria FC was running up debts at an alarming rate, but if the club was to preserve its status, the directors felt there was little alternative to this Micawberistic, do-or-die, approach, and, of

course, most shareholders and supporters expected nothing less than survival in English football's "fifth division". It was an unremitting battle for survival and the future looked increasingly bleak when Ken Edwards' "Someone to foot the bill" appeared, and most Vics' directors were rubbing their hands in anticipation that a development company, Durward Kingsley Estates, would be able to secure planning permission to build a new Sainsbury's store on the Drill Field. It didn't work out. The local authority, Vale Royal Council, was having none of it as the time and place were perceived to be wrong. A supermarket off London Road did not fit with councillors' visions for Northwich; visions, it has to be said, that became fuddled over the years and, certainly, never recognised Northwich Vics' and Witton Albion's rich footballing heritage. Fundamentally, the last place Vale Royal Council wanted either club was anywhere near the town centre.

So, as Ken Edwards explains, the plan for the Drill Field floundered and Durward Kingsley Estates was steered towards Witton Albion's Central Ground which just happened to be located in a development area, most of which, ironically, later came to be identified as sitting on the fringes of two former salt mines, supposedly in imminent danger of collapse. The rest, as they say, is history. Durward Kingsley eventually built the Sainsbury's store and an out-of-town stadium, Wincham Park, was created for Witton Albion who played their last game at the Central Ground, on May 1, 1989, against Frickley Athletic. The despair amongst Vics' directors was palpable as they eyed the good fortune of their old rivals.

However, the seed had taken root and when other companies, first Landbrand and then Morbaine Ltd, came sniffing, the board was even more steadfast in its resolve to quit the Drill Field and, crucially, at an extraordinary general meeting, on May 21, 1987, they were backed by shareholders. Mor-



Happier times: Ken Edwards and his wife, Joan, at Wembley.

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baine, principally owned by John Finlan, of Whitegate, also wanted to build a supermarket on the Drill Field, as part of a more ambitious project, and was prepared to pay £700,000 for the site. Planning permission once more hung in the balance, but a far more formidable obstacle existed in the form of legal covenant imposed in 1921 when Northwich Victoria FC purchased the Drill Field from the executors of Colonel Thomas Horatio Marshall. The covenant stated: *“Will only use the said hereditaments for the purpose of football or any game, or recreation, and will not at any time erect thereon any dwelling houses or other buildings except buildings used in connection with, or for watching the game of football or any other game or recreation.”*

In other words, the Drill Field was always to remain as an open space, although it is doubtful, when they had voted to sell the Drill Field to Morbaine, if Vics’ non-board shareholders had been very much aware of the document’s existence, or its importance. Bureaucratic planning wheels turn slowly and it was almost two years before permission, on appeal, was granted and, in the meantime, Morbaine had advanced substantial funds to help Vics pay off pressing debts. Four months after the granting of planning permission, a seemingly insignificant public notice appeared in the Northwich Guardian, dated November 2, 1988. Couched in legalese, this effectively set the mechanism in motion to remove the Marshalls’ covenant and few objected, other than the Supporters Association. The threat from the bulldozers had suddenly become a reality and, left to the board, the ground would, most certainly, have been sold as the search commenced for a new home. The Drill Field’s days appeared numbered, the ghosts of Billy Meredith, Pat Finnerhan, Drummer Boden and Wully Postlethwaite were about to be laid to rest.

What changed the dynamics was the formation, in April 1992, of the Drill Field Trust, a loose coming-together of a group of resolute supporters who, determined to save the old ground, initially set themselves to raise £50,000 to repay Morbaine’s deposit, and then pay off a further £150,000 in monthly instalments. Fortunately, the offer was sufficient for a High Court judge to rule against the Widnes-based company’s application for a possession order, “a damned close thing,” noted the Northwich Chronicle. Morbaine had every reason to be disgruntled as it had certainly kept Vics alive over a number of

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Signing the pledge: Directors and fans unite to save the Drill Field. Back (l-r): John Harrop, Alan Gleave, Mike Seaman, Geoff Daniels, Jim Rafferty, Ken Edwards, Phil Moores, Pete Southern. Front: Derek Nuttall, Jim Burton, Graham Rathbone.

years. The debt was eventually settled as a result of the trust's sterling efforts, the incredible generosity of fans, who gave whatever they could afford, and personal loans from the directors.

Tom Barlow, a lifelong and passionate supporter, was the founder of the Drill Field Trust and took on the mantle of chairman, a fancy title that never sat comfortably with straight-talking, uncomplicated "Toddy" who breathed new hope into the creaking corners and cobwebs of the hallowed ground where, as a young mascot, he had so often led out Vics. His proudest moment had actually occurred at Crewe's Gresty Road when Macclesfield were vanquished, 1-0, in the final of the historic 1950 Cheshire Senior Cup, a game played, unbelievably, in front of a crowd of 15,400.

"The Drill Field Trust was the best money-making organisation Vics ever had," recalls Toddy Barlow. "The on-going generosity and support was amazing, not only from fans and those connected with the club, but from townsfolk and local businesses. It was hard work but we grafted for years to save the Drill Field and there's no doubt whatsoever that we would have done, if only we'd been given the chance." Toddy quit his role with the trust in 1999, and he received a letter of thanks from the then Vics' chairman, Rod Stitch, who wrote: "As a leader you have provided excellent guidance in sometimes very

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difficult circumstances and we have now reaped the benefits of the hard work which you undertook. That we are playing at a much-improved Drill Field is its own reward, and you can look back with pride and satisfaction at what you have done to make that possible.”

Another leading member of the Drill Field Trust was Clive Penny who had been following Vics since his schooldays, in the 1940s, when he would sit at the front of the Danebank, then no more than a cindered embankment. “We lads would spend most of the time dodging discarded fag ends and then we’d go on special trains to away matches, even to places like Ellesmere Port which seems ridiculous now, but there were thousands of fans then.” Later he took up refereeing and spent many years in football administration, at both district and county level. “I very quickly learned that of the two senior clubs in town, Witton Albion were always far better administered. At the start of each season Vics and Witton both arranged friendly matches. As referees’ appointment secretary, the Witton secretary would give me a list. Vics never bothered. One evening the phone rang... it was just before seven. Could I find a ref for a 7.30 kick-off at the Drill Field? Impossible, so I dashed down myself and as I walked out to officiate, the Vics’ manager, Felix Reilly, started



Vics’ board of directors in the 1991/92 season, (l-r), Ian Smith, Ernie Fryer, Alan Ainsley, Dave Stone, Derek Nuttall, Bill King, Jim Rafferty, Graham Rathbone, and company secretary, Phil Sheridan. By the time of the decision to sell the Drill Field, in 2000, only Dave Stone, Derek Nuttall and Jim Rafferty remained. Bill King went on to become chairman of the Conference.

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yelling that I didn't have any linesmen. It's not my fault, I shouted back at him – I was having my tea when this lot dropped on me. It was typical Vics."

Clive Penny has never wavered in his belief that the Drill Field Trust would have saved the ground. "It was all very informal – we hardly ever held sit-down meetings, there wasn't the time. We'd just go from one fund-raising effort to the next. We weren't into the politics – our sole objective was to save the Drill Field and we knew if we didn't raise sufficient money, it was dead in the water."

In fact, the Drill Field Trust had one demand, and it was unequivocal: the 1921 Marshalls' covenant had to be reinstated. Dave Stone was Vics' chairman at the time, and he and Toddy Barlow, on behalf of the Drill Field Trust, jointly signed an agreement, dated September 9, 1993, to put the covenant back on the ground, but it never was and this has kindled much of the bad feeling that still lingers in some quarters.

From bucket collections to raffles, table-top sales and every other conceivable activity, the Drill Field Trust rapidly gathered in funds, though by far its most enterprising venture was a £10-per-month loan pledge from support-



Early days of the Drill Field Trust. Back (l-r): Mike Cooper, Clive Penny, Dave Edgeley, Graham Cookson, David Cooper, Roger Stubbs. Front: Peter Garrett, Janice Fenton, Toddy Barlow, Paul Billington. Later, Dave Edgeley, Graham Cookson and Roger Stubbs served on the Vics' board as associate directors.

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ers that helped to raise over £100,000. In spite of pressure from the board, the trust was insistent that none of this money was to be used in the operational running of Vics, a stance that did not always go down well with the board, but at least the Drill Field was on a better footing and the club was able to embark on an ambitious, £450,000 redevelopment of the Danebank, a colossal undertaking only made possible through the enormous efforts of supporters and directors.

The Sports Ground Initiative contributed £250,000, whilst, under the chairmanship of director, John Harrop, a Danebank Committee raised £35,000. The balance was loaned by chief executive John Stitch, whose son, Rod, had been appointed Vics' chairman in 1995. On January 27, 1998, prior to a prestigious friendly against a Manchester United X1, the former

Everton manager, Joe Royle, performed the official opening, and the Danebank soon became the envy of many a visiting club. However, as good as it was, the design was restricted due to access issues, and the Vics' board was understandably aggrieved. Vics had once owned, as part of the Drill Field, a plot of just under one acre, beyond the Town end of the ground. However, under a compulsory purchase order in 1948, this had been seized by Northwich Urban Council, to create a "public pleasure walk" alongside the River Dane. The council paid £455 - 10s. and many years later title passed to Vale

GM VAUXHALL CONFERENCE							
FINAL TABLE 1992/93							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wycombe	42	24	11	7	84	37	83
Bromsgrove	42	18	14	10	67	49	68
Dagenham & Red.	42	19	11	12	75	47	67
Yeovil Town	42	18	12	12	59	49	66
Slough Town	42	18	11	13	60	55	65
Stafford Rangers	42	18	10	14	55	47	64
Bath City	42	15	14	13	53	46	59
Woking	42	17	8	17	58	62	59
Kidderminster	42	14	16	12	60	60	58
Altrincham	42	15	13	14	49	52	58
Northwich Victoria	42	16	8	18	68	55	56
Stalybridge Celtic	42	13	17	12	48	55	56
Kettering Town	42	14	13	15	61	63	55
Gateshead	42	14	10	18	53	56	52
Telford United	42	14	10	18	55	60	52
Merthyr Tydfil	42	14	10	18	51	79	52
Witton Albion	42	11	17	14	62	65	50
Macclesfield	42	12	13	17	40	50	49
Runcorn	42	13	10	19	58	76	49
Welling United	42	12	12	18	57	72	48
Farnborough	42	12	11	19	68	87	47
Boston United	42	9	13	20	50	69	40

GM VAUXHALL CONFERENCE							
FINAL TABLE 1993/94							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kidderminster	42	22	9	11	63	35	75
Kettering Town	42	19	15	8	46	24	72
Woking	42	18	13	11	58	58	67
Southport	42	18	12	12	57	51	66
Runcorn	42	14	19	9	63	57	61
Dagenham & Red.	42	15	14	13	62	54	59
Macclesfield Town	42	16	11	15	48	49	59
Dover Athletic	42	17	7	18	48	49	58
Stafford Rangers	42	14	15	13	56	52	57
Altrincham	42	16	9	17	41	42	57
Gateshead	42	15	12	15	45	53	57
Bath City	42	13	17	12	47	38	56
Halifax Town	42	13	16	13	55	49	55
Stalybridge Celtic	42	14	12	16	54	55	54
Northwich Victoria	42	11	19	12	44	45	52
Welling United	42	13	12	17	47	49	51
Telford United	42	13	12	17	41	49	51
Bromsgrove	42	12	15	15	54	66	51
Yeovil Town	42	14	9	19	49	62	51
Merthyr Tydfil	42	12	15	15	60	61	49
Slough Town	42	11	14	17	44	58	47
Witton Albion	42	7	13	22	37	63	34

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Royal Council who could have helped resolve the Danebank's access and egress problem. Instead, the original purpose of the the 1948 purchase order was disregarded and the council sold, for a handsome profit, what remained of this annexed corner of the old Drill Field, now occupied by part of the Dane-side Court care home.

As to John Stitch's Danebank loan, it was the Drill Field Trust who principally undertook repayment, at a rate of £1,250 per month, topped up by an additional £300 per month from the Supporters Association. Later, Janice Fenton, the Drill Field Trust secretary, penned a detailed review to mark the group's £100,000 fund-raising milestone:

“The £10-per-month scheme was started in Spring 1993 at a time when the Drill Field was in grave danger of being sold off to a property developer.



The Danebank and the Danebank faithful. At a cost of £450,000, the old structure was replaced by one of the finest terraces in non-league football.

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At the time several directors and fans came to the rescue by loaning the club enough money to save the ground. Some of these loans were paid off subsequently by another loan from Tetley. From 1995-1997, the money raised through the £10-per-month scheme was used to make monthly repayments of £1,100 to Tetley. To facilitate the Danebank development a fresh loan was taken out in 1997 to cover the remainder of the Tetley loan and the new money required for the development, this time the loan came from our very own chief executive John Stitch.”

GM CONFERENCE							
FINAL TABLE 1994/95							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Macclesfield Town	42	24	8	10	70	40	80
Woking	42	21	12	9	76	54	75
Southport	42	21	9	12	68	50	72
Altrincham	42	20	8	14	77	60	68
Stevenage Borough	42	20	7	15	68	49	67
Kettering Town	42	19	10	13	73	56	67
Gateshead	42	19	10	13	61	53	67
Halifax Town	42	17	12	13	68	54	63
Runcorn	42	16	10	16	59	71	58
Northwich Victoria	42	14	15	13	77	66	57
Kidderminster	42	16	9	17	63	61	57
Bath City	42	15	12	15	55	56	57
Bromsgrove Rovers	42	14	13	15	66	69	55
Farnborough	42	15	10	17	45	64	55
Dagenham & Red	42	13	13	16	56	69	52
Dover Athletic	42	11	16	15	48	55	49
Welling United	42	13	10	19	57	74	49
Stalybridge Celtic	42	11	14	17	52	72	47
Telford United	42	10	16	16	53	62	46
Merthyr Tydfil	42	11	11	20	53	63	44
Stafford Rangers	42	9	11	22	53	79	38
Yeovil Town	42	8	14	20	50	71	37

Unfortunately, by the late 1990s, the feuding had begun to escalate. The Drill Field Trust was at loggerheads with the board over the worsening financial situation and the covenant controversy, whilst others, outside of the club, were challenging two of the basic premises contained in Ken Edwards’ book, i.e. that Vics had been founded in 1874 and that the Drill Field was the oldest senior ground continuously played on by one club. Many supporters and the directors believed the arguments were a soulless exercise in nit-pick-



Dave Stone and Toddy Barlow with local MP, Neil Hamilton, who hands over a letter from Prime Minister, John Major, in support of the fight to save the Drill Field.

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ing, but local historians Colin Lynch and Paul Lavell produced incontrovertible evidence to show that Vics began life as the “Northwich Hare and Hounds, and Football Club”, and didn’t adopt the name “Northwich Victoria” until September 1875. In 1890, a new club, taking the name “Northwich Victoria”, was formed with Hartford and Davenham United. This occurred on February 25, 1890, and later, on November 6, 1890, the old Vics was wound-up. Paul Lavell’s extensive research is contained in his book, “The Formation of Northwich Victoria F.C. – The True Story”. As to the “oldest ground”, the Drill

Field was knocked off its tenuous perch by Sandygate (1860 Sheffield Hallam), Bramhall Lane (1863 Sheffield Wednesday and United), York Road (1871 Maidenhead) and Boghead Park (1872 Dumbarton).

Ken Edwards’ book concludes with the 1991/92 season and, for the remainder of the decade, Vics more than held their own, notably winning Conference’s Drinkwise Cup, in 1992/93 . Honours were shared in the first leg, at the Drill Field, and, in the return, Gordon Davies scored a hat-trick as John Williams’ men vanquished Martin O’Neill’s champions and red-hot favourites, Wycombe Wanderers, at Adams Park.

A year later, 1993/94, Vics followed with the Cheshire Senior Cup, defeating Runcorn 1-0 in the final. Meanwhile, Witton Albion, playing their third season in the Conference, finished bottom and

GM CONFERENCE						
FINAL TABLE 1995/96						
	P	W	D	L	F	A Pts
Stevenage Borough	42	27	10	5	101	44 91
Woking	42	25	8	9	83	54 83
Hednesford	42	23	7	12	71	46 76
Macclesfield Town	42	22	9	11	66	49 75
Gateshead	42	18	13	11	58	46 67
Southport	42	18	12	12	77	64 66
Kidderminster	42	18	10	14	78	66 64
Northwich Victoria	42	16	12	14	72	64 60
Morecambe	42	17	8	17	78	72 59
Farnborough	42	15	14	13	63	58 59
Bromsgrove Rovers	42	15	14	13	59	57 59
Altrincham	42	15	13	14	59	64 58
Telford United	42	15	10	17	51	56 55
Stalybridge Celtic	42	16	7	19	59	68 55
Halifax Town	42	13	13	16	49	63 52
Kettering Town	42	13	9	20	68	84 48
Slough Town	42	13	8	21	63	76 47
Bath City	42	13	7	22	45	66 46
Welling United	42	10	15	17	42	53 45
Dover Athletic	42	11	7	24	51	74 40
Runcorn	42	9	8	25	48	87 35
Dagenham & Red	42	7	12	23	43	73 33

GM CONFERENCE						
FINAL TABLE 1996/97						
	P	W	D	L	F	A Pts
Macclesfield Town	42	27	9	6	80	30 90
Kidderminster	42	26	7	9	84	42 85
Stevenage Borough	42	24	10	8	87	53 82
Morecambe	42	19	9	14	69	56 66
Woking	42	18	10	14	71	63 64
Northwich Victoria	42	17	12	13	61	54 63
Farnborough	42	16	13	13	58	53 61
Hednesford	42	16	12	14	52	50 60
Telford United	42	16	10	16	46	56 58
Gateshead	42	15	11	16	59	63 56
Southport	42	15	10	17	51	61 55
Rushden & Diam.	42	14	11	17	61	63 53
Stalybridge Celtic	42	14	10	18	53	58 52
Kettering Town	42	14	9	19	53	62 51
Hayes	42	12	14	16	54	55 50
Slough Town	42	12	14	16	62	65 50
Dover Athletic	42	12	14	16	57	68 50
Welling United	42	13	9	20	50	60 48
Halifax Town	42	12	12	18	55	74 48
Bath City	42	12	11	19	53	80 47
Bromsgrove Rovers	42	12	5	25	41	67 41
Altrincham	42	9	12	21	49	73 39

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were relegated to the Northern Premier League.

A fine FA Cup run for Vics, culminating in a 1st round reversal, 3-1, at Mansfield, and the appointment of Brian Kettle as manager, were the highlights of 1994/95. Wembley and the FA Trophy once more beckoned in 1995/96 but, for a third time, victory proved elusive on the famous turf as Macclesfield, managed by Vics' former boss Sammy McIlroy, took the honours, 3-1. Immediately after the final, Brian Kettle left the club, by "mutual consent".

The 1996/97 season kicked off with former stalwart Mark Hancock in the manager's chair but, for reasons of work, he quickly stood down and was replaced by another former player, Phil Wilson, who steered Vics to sixth place in the Conference.

Cup encounters marked the 1997/98 campaign, an FA 1st round defeat at Chesterfield, semi-finals of both the League Cup and the Cheshire Senior Cup and last sixteen of the FA Trophy. However, declining gates and a poor run of league form during the first half of the 1998/99 season led to Phil Wilson's departure and the appointment of Mark Gardiner, who succeeded in turning the season round after Christmas. The biggest disappointment occurred in the FA Trophy, a quarter-final defeat to Kingstonsians, on the Drill Field.

GM CONFERENCE							
FINAL TABLE 1997/98							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Halifax Town	42	25	12	5	74	43	87
Cheltenham Town	42	23	9	10	63	43	78
Woking	42	22	8	12	72	46	74
Rushden & Diam	42	23	5	14	79	57	74
Morecambe	42	21	10	11	77	64	73
Hereford United	42	18	13	11	56	49	67
Hednesford	42	18	12	12	59	50	66
Slough Town	42	18	10	14	58	49	64
Northwich Victoria	42	15	15	12	63	59	60
Welling United	42	17	9	16	64	62	60
Yeovil Town	42	17	8	17	73	63	59
Hayes	42	16	10	16	62	52	58
Dover Athletic	42	15	10	17	60	70	55
Kettering Town	42	13	13	16	53	60	52
Stevenage Borough	42	13	12	17	59	63	51
Southport	42	13	11	18	56	58	50
Kidderminster	42	11	14	17	56	63	47
Farnborough	42	12	8	22	56	70	44
Leek Town	42	10	14	18	52	7	44
Telford United	42	10	12	20	53	76	42
Gateshead	42	8	11	23	51	87	35
Stalybridge Celtic	42	7	8	27	48	93	29

NATIONWIDE CONFERENCE							
FINAL TABLE 1998/99							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cheltenham Town	42	22	14	6	71	36	80
Kettering Town	42	22	10	10	58	37	76
Hayes	42	22	8	12	63	50	74
Rushden & Diam	42	20	12	10	71	42	72
Yeovil Town	42	20	11	11	68	54	71
Stevenage Borough	42	17	17	8	62	45	68
Northwich Victoria	42	19	9	14	60	51	66
Kingstonian	42	17	13	12	50	49	64
Woking	42	18	9	15	51	45	63
Hednesford	42	15	16	11	49	44	61
Dover Athletic	42	15	13	14	54	48	58
Forest Green	42	15	13	14	55	50	58
Hereford United	42	15	10	17	49	46	55
Morecambe	42	15	8	19	60	76	53
Kidderminster	42	14	9	19	56	52	51
Doncaster Rovers	42	12	12	18	51	55	48
Telford United	42	10	16	16	44	60	46
Southport	42	10	15	17	47	59	45
Barrow	42	11	10	21	40	63	43
Welling United	42	9	14	19	44	65	41
Leek Town	42	8	8	26	48	76	32
Farnborough	42	7	11	24	41	89	32

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Vics celebrate winning the Drinkwise Cup, at Wycombe Wanderers, in 1993.
(Photograph courtesy of Bob Watkins)



The squad for Vics' third Wembley FA Trophy final, in 1996.

Chapter 2

THE beginning of the 21st century turned into the most eventful chapter in Vics' long history. Mark Gardiner's team had struggled for much of the 1999/2000 season and was in the midst of a depressing run, but even the threat of relegation was not a priority on the board's agenda. Far more critical was a mountain of debt, over £500,000, losses spiralling towards £150,000 a year, and new ground-grading measures about to be imposed by the Conference.

Rumours were raging on the terraces, and in the local press, that the vultures and developers were circling the Drill Field and Clive Penny, in an initial salvo of what was to become a long-running and acrimonious series of letters to the newspapers, acidly predicted that a sale of the Drill Field would unleash a "pack of hyenas in for the kill" and that Vics' supporters would be left to "lick the scraps from a pile of bones". In January 2000, chairman Rod Stitch admitted the situation was grim and the club could not support a Conference team without a major influx of money, or major cuts.

Vics had done incredibly well to remain in the Conference since 1979, but escalating costs, particularly in meeting players' wage demands, had taken a lasting toll. Similar to the other nineteen founder members, spurred by ambition and frustration at the Football League's closed shop, Vics had galloped into the inaugural Alliance Premier League. Some clubs took reckless gambles in order to keep pace with the changing landscape of semi-professional football and most have since paid a heavy price. Only a handful of the founders can look back with satisfaction, if not on their achievement, at least on their survival.

Yeovil and Barnet became members of the Football League, Bangor City developed as a power in the Welsh Premier League, whilst Bath, Worcester

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and Altrincham have continued to hold their own in the Conference regional leagues. The rest, the other fourteen, including Vics, have experienced torrid times and two, Scarborough and Maidstone United, have gone to the wall. Scarborough's plight has a resonance with Vics as, after a spell in the Conference North, the club was wound-up and two offshoots emerged, Scarborough Athletic and Scarborough Town, both run by former supporters, apparently amidst considerable antagonism. Maidstone United were declared bankrupt in 1992 and a reformed club plays in the Isthmian League. Kettering Town briefly made it to the Football League, but by 2011 debts of £1.2 million brought administration and the club now competes in the Southern League, whilst Telford United, the former Wellington Town of Cheshire League days, went bust in 2004, prompting supporters to form AFC Telford who then climbed to the Conference National.

Severe financial problems hit Stafford Rangers, Redditch United, Weymouth and AP Leamington. Another club, Wealdstone, went into freefall in spite of selling its home, Lower Mead Stadium, for a supermarket development. Barrow, placing trust in Steve Vaughan, a Liverpool boxing promoter, were served with a compulsory winding-up order and out of the ashes grew a new members' club. Boston United flirted with the Football League high life prior to administration, whilst loyal fans formed Nuneaton Borough AFC after the old club, Nuneaton, went into liquidation in 2008. Meanwhile, at Ebbsfleet, renamed from Gravesend and Northfleet as part of a novel web-based initiative, member support is declining and financial problems are rising. The Conference may have succeeded in becoming football's fifth division, but it has been on the backs of many long-established clubs, butchered on the altar of ambition.

At Northwich Vics, at the conclusion of the 20th century, six directors collectively held the majority of allotted shares: Rod Stitch, his father John Stitch, David Price (Britannia Carpets), Dave Stone, Jim Rafferty and Derek Nuttall. Building contractor, Dave Stone's involvement with Vics dates from the 1980s when he managed the reserve team, under Terry Murphy. He then joined the board and, it is said, during this period gave generously to help bring new players to the club, including Malcolm O'Connor, in 1988. In that year, for the

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first time, he was appointed chairman.

Derek Nuttall supported Vics as a schoolboy in the 1930s, and became a director in 1966, later serving as chairman, treasurer, secretary and president. He recalls: “Ken Edwards was approached to join the board and he asked me if I’d go on with him – Alf Bowden was the chairman at the time. Over the years I put a small amount of money into the club, but in the end I was just a working man. I remember sitting there as chairman at Wembley and watching the Northwich players come out. That’s a moment that I will forever cherish.”

Accountant Jim Rafferty, another lifelong supporter, joined the board in 1978, initially to represent the interests of his employers, Burtonwood Brewery and, when this connection concluded, he continued as Vics’ financial director. He had grown up listening to family football tales, not only about Vics, but also Manchester United and Witton Albion. His great-grandfather was George Hilditch who, when he wasn’t serving pints at the Blue Barrel, doubled up as Vics’ goalkeeper in the 1886/87 season, during which he sustained a double leg fracture in an FA Cup replay at Chirk. Jim Rafferty: “My great-grandmother was heavily pregnant and, when they carried George in, the shock sent her into labour, leading to the birth of my grandfather.” Another son of the Blue Barrel Hilditchs was Jim Rafferty’s great-uncle, Clarence “Lal” Hilditch, a free-scoring centre-forward with Witton Albion who, from 1915, played for seventeen years, at left-half, for Manchester United. Uniquely, Lal Hilditch is still United’s only ever player-manager, a post he held from October 1926 until April 1927. Jim Rafferty’s grandfather, born on that dramatic night in 1886, also went on to become a noted player with Witton Albion, whilst a nephew, another Lal Hilditch, served many years as the Witton’s secretary from the 1960s.

Rod Stitch had followed the fortunes of Vics, but more out of interest as a supporter on the terraces, and player in the local leagues. Owner of the Mid Cheshire Construction Company, he was one of six new directors appointed as part of a board restructuring during the mid-1990s. New blood and something of a coup, he then replaced Dave Stone as chairman and, significantly, persuaded his father, John Stitch, to join the board. John Stitch was a retired high-flyer from the insurance loss adjustment business and he was soon to be-

come the club's most influential figure, a behind-the-scenes' chief executive who injected much-needed funds and business acumen.

Rod Stitch: "My father's forte was ensuring the efficient running of the club and, in a way, he would be detached from the passion. Matches would be well underway and he'd still be downstairs sorting out the gate money, accounting for every penny, and making sure everything was right before he came trotting up the steps into the stand. He controlled everything and when anything needed doing he would do it, even down to helping refurbish the social club and upholstering the chairs. He loved every minute of it. He would write out personal cheques for wages, vat, whatever, and he purchased shares to become the major shareholder, although we didn't have the overall controlling interest. I managed to talk him out of that one."

John Stitch was bankrolling the club, a figure, in 2000, that his son estimates stood at "upwards of £500,000", but for all that, his fellow directors did not always see eye-to-eye with him. Rod Stitch: "Derek Nuttall once said 'We don't need you and we don't need your money.' My old man was furious."

John Stitch was to become the leading boardroom shareholder by a fiscal mile, eventually holding 44,384 shares, followed by Rod Stitch, 15,695, David Price 13,860, Jim Rafferty 12,520, David Stone 11,500, Derek Nuttall 4,318. The combined holding of John and Rod Stitch amounted to forty percent of the allotted shares, whilst, collectively, the board controlled just short of fifty-three percent of Northwich Victoria Football Club Limited. The other forty-seven percent was historically fragmented amongst hundreds of individuals, most of whom held little more than a handful of shares apiece. In addition, there were 56,000 unallotted shares.

Under John Stitch's guidance, the business side of the football club was reorganised and for a few, all too brief years, small annual profits were returned on the back of successful cup runs, incoming transfer fees and rising gates, double what they had been, though still well short of the board's 1,500 break-even target. The fortunes of the club seemed to be slowly improving but, as always, a fresh crisis loomed.

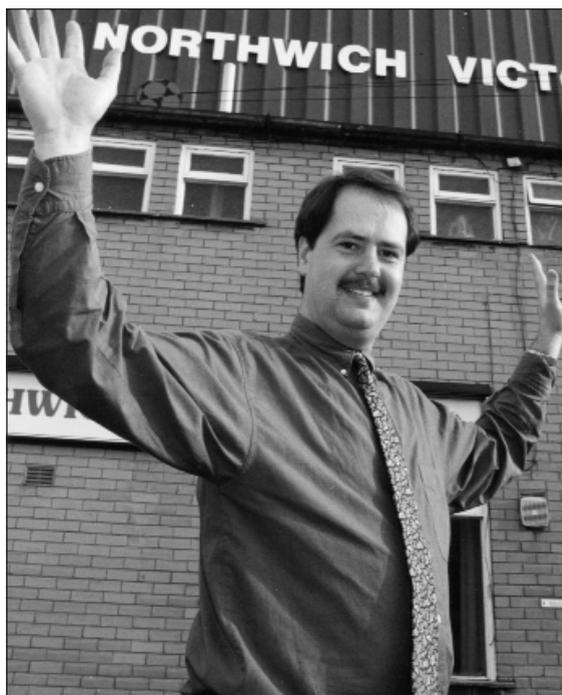
John Stitch was undoubtedly the club's most generous benefactor, ever, but a shiekh or an oligarch with bottomless pockets he was not, and Rod Stitch

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made the position clear early in 2000: “My family have put in an enormous amount of money and we are reaching the time when we can no longer afford to do so.”

The herculean efforts of all concerned were not enough and the directors, and the dedicated band of fund-raisers, were staring into the abyss as a potentially fatal combination of factors contrived to further undermine Vics and the Drill Field. Safety restrictions, Conference ground criteria, mounting debts, lack of vital fund-raising cup runs and the deteriorating health and involvement of John Stitch were enormous obstacles.

Crisis was not exclusive to Vics. Neighbours and rivals Witton Albion had been set a deadline of May 31, 2000, to settle with creditors, or go under, so it was some comfort to beleaguered Northwichers when Rod Stitch told the press that rumours of a Drill Field sale were “utter rubbish”. However, the chairman’s pronouncement was never heard of again as the pace of events began to quicken inexorably. Rod Stitch: “We had built the Danebank believing, of course, the Drill Field had a future and we planned to acquire land, at the Town end, to build a second stand and provide extra car-parking. Unfortunately, the landowners did a u-turn. In the end we were squeezed out by the Conference criteria, ground safety and the council wanting to get us out of town. Most didn’t want to go, especially Derek Nuttall. The Drill Field was one of the oldest grounds in the world, but in the end history and heritage had



Rod Stitch, one of half-a-dozen new directors appointed in the mid-1990s.

no value. We believed the heritage was worth preserving and, naïvely, we hoped a heritage organisation would come along and save the place, though deep down we knew it was unlikely.”

For several years following the introduction of the “Green Guide”, based upon Lord Justice Taylor’s report into the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, the Drill Field had fallen foul of stringent new safety regulations. The Danebank had been built to accommodate 3,600, a figure never attained, or permitted, because of access concerns and a dearth of stewards trained to nationally-recognised standards; the Water Street and Town ends had been closed and where, traditionally, hundreds had stood and watched, on either side of the main stand, the authorities brutally reduced numbers to a couple of dozen on the Town side and, quite ridiculously, sixteen in front of the social club. As the board put it, the Drill Field was effectively “sterilised”, the overall ground capacity slashed to well short of 4,000. Vics were not alone, of course. Other non-league clubs, up and down the country, were tilted towards bankruptcy by the “Green Guide” regulations, and the Drill Field, where there were often more Birtwisle meat pies than fans, was no different. Heavyweight grounds attracting tens of thousands of spectators clearly had to be regulated, but many of the stringencies seemed absurdly unnecessary at football’s lower levels.

Be that as it may, the Drill Field was showing its age, an anachronism with the new millennium imminent, and fans feared the worst when the Conference decreed an upgraded ground criteria, a minimum capacity of 6,000 for member clubs, including 1,000 covered seating, with potential to rise to 10,000. It was crazy and even John Moules, the league’s chief executive, who ardently pressed for an increase, conceded that Conference crowds hardly ever approached 6,000; the average gate was 1,400. Fired by ambition, and like turkeys voting for Christmas, the Conference clubs, including Northwich Victoria, had unanimously backed the new criteria, in what turned out to be a typical football faux pas, conjured up to woo the Football League into granting automatic promotion to the Conference runners-up. A little over two years later, the minimum 4,000 stadia capacity was restored.

In the Vics’ boardroom, and apparently after much soul-searching, the directors decided their only option was to sell the Drill Field, and what followed

may best be described as “window-dressing” in order to garner the backing of supporters and rank-and-file shareholders. Rod Stitch said: “In view of all the circumstances, the board has concluded that, very reluctantly, it would be in the best interests of the long-term future of the club to sell the Drill Field and relocate.” Derek Nuttall added: “The only way forward is to move to a new stadium. I would have liked to stay at the Drill Field, but we were squeezed out by mounting debts and new safety standards which we can’t afford to pay for.”

Presented with such a grim picture, the majority of shareholders were compliant and gave the board a mandate to investigate all relocation options. Fewer than a dozen dissented at the club’s annual meeting, on March 23, 2000, but feelings were running high and fury erupted when the board was challenged over its failure to reinstate the controversial Marshalls’ covenant, as per the 1993 agreement with the Drill Field Trust.

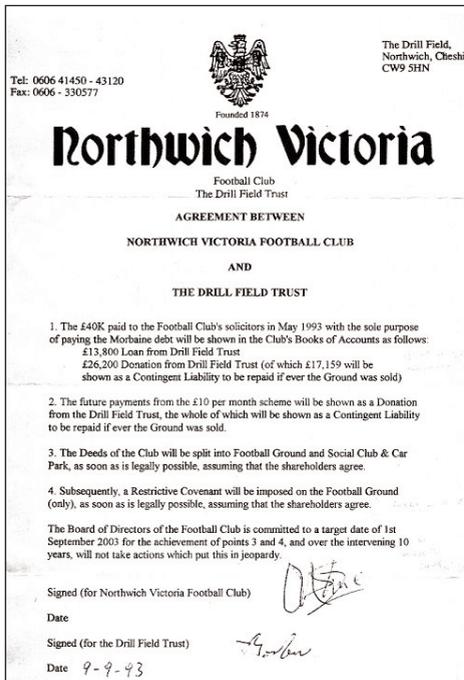
“It was never the intention of the directors to do so,” responded Dave Stone. “I would have been against it precisely because of the situation we find ourselves in when we need to sell the ground.” Dave Stone’s stance has never changed, but the fact remains he did sign the agreement and the Drill Field Trust had no reason to believe the board would not honour it. When interviewed for this book, Dave Stone dismissed the agreement as “merely a piece of paper”, that the Drill Field Trust was not a legal entity, “just a name supporters thought up”. Furthermore, he points out that the development of the Danebank could not have taken place, because the project had been contingent on a loan from John Stitch, secured against the ground. Drill Field Trust chairman, Toddy Barlow, puts the matter more succinctly: “I’m a man of my word and when I shook hands with the club chairman that was good enough for me.”

An explanation has never been forthcoming as to why Dave Stone agreed to sign the document if, as he insists, the trust was devoid of legitimate standing. In any event, it would seem he was legally, if not morally, correct. Set out on official NVFC notepaper, the 1993 agreement was beguilingly composed, its very implementation entirely dependent upon the approval of shareholders, i.e. the controlling directors in the final reckoning. Furthermore, it is

doubtful whether the extinguished covenant could ever have been reinstated, for who was there to make a new one with? The Marshall family had long gone from Northwich. Toddy Barlow: “We were misled and naïve. Perhaps we should have gone to a solicitor in the first place, but we didn’t want to spend Drill Field Trust money on legal fees.” Yet, if the trust members had taken advice, it would certainly not have been what they wanted to hear and an entirely different agreement would have been necessary. Whatever the legal position, the supporters would have continued to raise funds to save the Drill Field.

And so as the conclusion of the 1999/2000 season beckoned, with Vics just about scraping clear of the Conference trapdoor, shareholders went home to ponder the club’s future. None knew the wider reaction amongst non-shareholding fans and the Northwich Chronicle set up a telephone poll. Incredibly,

651 responded, of which seventy-five percent opposed selling the Drill Field, not that it made any difference. The board remained steadfast and Rod Stich stressed there was no alternative: “Shareholders felt that we wanted to not just be in existence, but as a founder member of the Conference, to remain there and do everything we can to retain our status. If we stay at the Drill Field we risk being relegated and we can’t develop sufficiently to meet the criteria imposed on us. In three years we have to have an A-graded ground which would cost in excess of £250,000 which we haven’t got. If we stay we could spiral into even more debt. We are not stupid – we have looked at all the problems and



The covenant agreement signed by Dave Stone and Toddy Barlow.

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pitfalls and know there is no option.”

July 12, 2000 was set for an EGM of shareholders, to nail, once and for all, the Drill Field sale issue. The non-shareholding fans did not have a real say in the decision. In a statement, the board highlighted Vics’ severe financial problems, the ground’s unsuitability for the 21st century, and the threat of expulsion from the Conference: “The historical significance of the ground is important and cannot be ignored, but neither can it be allowed to have a dominating influence over decisions about the club’s future. We are proud of our history... but we have to look to the next 126 years and ensure that future generations of Vics’ fans can continue to support the club and that facilities designed and equipped for the twenty-first century are available. The club has always played at the highest level of semi-professional football that has been available. Do you support the football club or the football ground?”

One who certainly backed the board was long-standing supporter Peter Grimes who, in a letter to the Northwich Guardian, summed up the general mood of acceptance:

“Anyone voting has to take a risk. I

believe the only hope for quality football and a future lies in trying to stay in the Conference. Fans want more than mere existence at a lower level.” For their part, at a fringe meeting, some rebels pledged to boycott Wincham Park if Vics were to ground-share, permanently or temporarily, with Witton Albion, and they demanded to know, if the Drill Field was being sold, why enormous expenditure had been committed to redevelop the Danebank and refurbish both the social club and the Ken Edwards Suite. Clive Penny, the largest shareholder without a seat on the board, voiced the view the club would be better off in the North West Counties, rather than lose the Drill Field. “It’s madness,”

NATIONWIDE CONFERENCE							
FINAL TABLE 1999/2000							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kidderminster	42	26	7	9	75	40	85
Rushden & Diam.	42	21	13	8	71	42	76
Morecambe	42	18	16	8	70	48	70
Scarborough	42	19	12	11	60	35	69
Kingstonian	42	20	7	15	58	44	67
Dover Athletic	42	18	12	12	65	56	66
Yeovil Town	42	18	10	14	60	63	64
Hereford United	42	15	14	13	61	52	59
Southport	42	15	13	14	55	55	58
Stevenage Borough	42	16	9	17	60	54	57
Hayes	42	16	8	18	57	58	56
Doncaster Rovers	42	15	9	18	46	48	54
Kettering Town	42	12	16	14	44	50	52
Woking	42	13	13	16	45	53	52
Nuneaton Borough	42	12	15	15	49	53	51
Telford United	42	14	9	19	56	66	51
Hednesford	42	15	6	21	44	68	51
Northwich Victoria	42	13	12	17	53	78	51
Forest Green	42	13	8	21	54	63	47
Welling United	42	13	8	21	54	66	47
Altrincham	42	9	19	14	51	60	46
Sutton United	42	8	10	24	39	75	34

he said. “The Drill Field is our lifeline, in the centre of town, and adequate for the crowds we’re going to need.”

Strong stuff and the EGM looked destined to be the most fiercely-contested grudge match ever staged at the old ground. It turned into a rout, 108 shareholders voting to sell, 22 against. The vote was cast on a show of hands, rather than on individual shares, and the directors took no part. Clive Penny and some of the rebels afterwards maintained the entire process had been gerrymandered, because, in their opinion, single-shareholder “ringers” had been introduced. In a second resolution there was a similar result (105-28) in favour of investigating, on an equal basis, a new stadium-sharing arrangement with Witton Albion, both clubs to retain their separate identities. Later, Witton shareholders point-blank refused to have anything to do with the idea. The Northwich Guardian commented on the EGM: “From the board’s point of view it must go down as mission accomplished.” The Northwich Chronicle, reported that the mood was one of resignation and little drama.

Survival in the Conference was of paramount concern, a new stadium and debt-free, but it wouldn’t have been Vics without the garnish... a return to the Football League in which the club had competed during the 1890s. Vics had been pushing their ambition since before 1971 when Witton Albion’s entry into the Northern Premier League was vetoed. Derek Nuttall had told the NPL’s annual meeting: “We are an ambitious club and it is our intention to get into the Football League. Our chances will suffer if Witton are allowed in to the NPL.” Nineteen years on and the board was looking to emulate Conference champions Macclesfield Town (1996/97) and Kidderminster Harriers (1999/2000), both promoted to the big-bucks’ kudos of the Football League. Wigan Athletic had also made it, in 1978, and were on their way to glory following the club’s acquisition by multi-millionaire Dave Whelan.

Rod Stitch emphasised that Vics’ ambitions could not be realised at the Drill Field, as neither the police, nor the local authority, would agree to the minimum Football League ground capacity. Derek Nuttall: “As well as obtaining ‘A’ grade ground criteria by 2004, the club is also looking for Football League grading.”

Even in the imagination of the most passionate shareholders, elevation to

the Football League was never likely to happen, but they could hope, and the hoary old chesnut served to further dissipate what little opposition existed at the EGM. Moreover, the framing of the agenda precluded serious discussion on the real cost and implications of remaining at the outdated and safety-restricted Drill Field. Whether this would have influenced the outcome of the vote is highly unlikely, but there was surely a duty on the directors to place all options before the meeting. Did the Drill Field have latent potential? Could it have been developed to basic Conference criteria standards, given that the Danebank was built to accommodate 3,600? Could the Water Street and Town ends be improved to comply with safety standard? Could a refurbished and extended main stand hold 1,000 spectators?

These questions were not considered because the board's policy was to quit the Drill Field. Ambition, survival, the weight of almost unmanageable debt, and, possibly, one other reason, dictated this course, and the Conference's 6,000 ground criteria, which the club had voted for and supported, afforded convincing and convenient leverage for relocation. Bill King, the Conference chairman and a former Vics' director, told the EGM he believed there was "scope" to develop the Drill Field, but conceded the club simply did not possess the resources to finance a £300,000 refit. Dave Thomas, who has spent almost thirty years employed on the commercial side at Vics, recalls: "The board brought down Bill King to condemn the Drill Field, but he didn't. He didn't believe it was a lost cause."

Crucially, there was football funding available. In 2003, the Football Stadia Improvement Fund (F.S.I.F.) announced the award of £500,000 to assist Vics to relocate and develop a new stadium. The details were included in F.S.I.F.'s 2002/03 annual report that also listed over 100 clubs to whom "Safety and Improvement" grant offers had been made in respect of existing stadia. The list included: Kidderminster £850,000 (new east stand), Stalybridge £340,000 (new stand and floodlighting), Lewes FC £150,000 (new stand entrance, covered standing), Belper £135,000 (new stand), Aldershot Town £132,000 (turnstiles, toilets, security fencing), Droylesden £109,000 (terracing). Generous grants, indeed, and, undoubtedly, Vics would have been eligible for a substantial sum to modernise the Drill Field, and one has to con-

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clude that the directors either did not investigate the possibilities, or decided that such a course would not be helpful in the long run, to wipe out debts, provide extra finance for team-building, and escape the overbearing pressure from surrounding developments that had boxed-in the Drill Field and restricted its development. Clinging to the Football League holy grail, they saw salvation only in a sale of the ground, a view shared by most supporters. Rod Stitch: “We needed £1,000 a match before a ball was ever kicked, never mind players’ wages.”

Was there really any other choice? The rebels certainly believed so, but they were a small minority, denigrated as trouble-makers, or, as many on the terraces dubbed them, “shit-stirrers”, mired in sentimental tosh. Football indulges those with a club in their blood, but Clive Penny’s suggestion that Vics would be better off in the North West Counties, rather than giving up the Drill Field, was not what anyone wanted to hear and the directors stubbornly refused to consider the arguments against relocation. They believed their figures stacked up, and if they didn’t, they were confident they could make them stack up. They aspired to a new stadium, with a potential 10,000 capacity, and money in the bank, to build a team to challenge for a place in the Football League.

On the other hand, the Drill Field naysayers demanded a reality check, an acceptance that the board should view the horizon beyond the promised land, that frothy ideas did not constitute a long-term business strategy. Yet they failed to come up with a viable alternative of their own, and their well-meaning ideas were equally as vague as those touted by the board to justify relocation. Vics were drowning and, as far as concerned the majority, selling the Drill Field offered the only real hope of retaining the club’s status in the elite of non-league football.

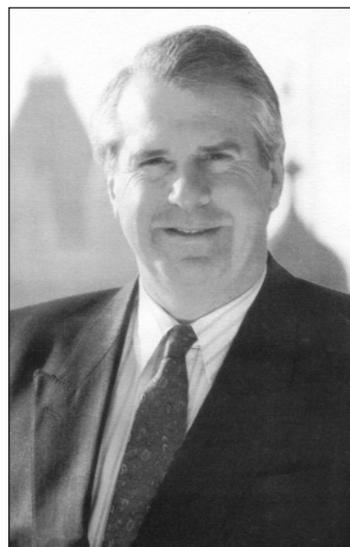
Relocation has been an unmitigated disaster, and as once-proud Northwich Vics languishes homeless, three divisions down, many supporters and former shareholders reflect on whether, in 2000, they grabbed the wrong lifeline.

Chapter 3

WITH the ink barely dry on the 2000 EGM vote, Northwich Victoria Football Club was rocked by the worst blow imaginable. John Stitch, the man who had given so much, died aged sixty-eight. A terrible tragedy, his passing at such a critical moment was to have profound implications as, within nine months, both Rod Stitch and David Price relinquished their directorships, so leaving the onerous responsibility for relocation on the “old guard” triumvirate of David Stone, Derek Nuttall and Jim Rafferty, who came to be supported in the boardroom by Dave Bush, Graham Cookson, Dave Edgeley, Dave Thomas and Ted Carthy, associate directors lacking full voting power.

Rod Stitch: “I just felt I’d gone far enough. When I joined the board there were fresh new faces, six of us, and then my father and David Price were co-opted. It was an exciting time and we were up for the challenges, but by 2001 it had gone full circle. I wasn’t enjoying it and more and more after my father’s death the board was looking to me to pay the bills.”

Of course, it’s a matter of conjecture as to how Vics’ future might have unfolded had John Stitch remained in control of the boardroom. He held, with his son, 60,000 shares, he’d brought about the Danebank development, and he was committed, wholeheartedly, to the club, in it for the long haul. Sadly, his



John Stitch who gave so much to Northwich Vics.

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involvement was all too brief, but there is absolutely no doubt that, initially, he saw Vics' future at the Drill Field and, certainly, under his stewardship, the obstacles might well have been overcome. In the end, he supported and advocated relocation and, to some extent, and quite understandably, his serious illness may have influenced how he viewed £500,000 of his family's money in Vics. Administration papers, four years after his death, show his widow and his son still had £200,000 tied-up, though by this time they had taken full settlement of the life insurance, approximately £165,000, which he had insisted the club take out against his Danebank loan. This had also turned out to be beneficial to Vics, because the Drill Field Trust and the Supporters Association had already repaid a sizeable chunk of the loan, at over £18,000 annually. The club was able to settle the full amount and retain the balance. Rod Stitch: "It always struck me that Vics were financially better off when my father died."

In spite of the Danebank development and other improvements, it was during John Stitch's control that external pressures began to seriously threaten the Drill Field. The post Hillsborough safety measures and the ground's development limitations redefined strategy, and it was decided that the only way forward was to sell-up and move, to wherever that might be. The most tempting possibility arose prior to the annual meeting of March 2000, when the board was invited, through Cheshire County Council, to prepare a draft proposal for the development of a 6,000 capacity stadium on a four-acre site at the Moss Farm sports complex, to the west of the town centre. The proposal, a heaven-sent opportunity to wipe out all debts and start afresh in a 21st century environment, was for Vics to wholly finance construction and lease the site on a long-term peppercorn rent. Witton Albion then started to take a keen interest and, whilst talks were in progress, the scheme hit the local press, galvanising the residents of Firdale Park into protest at the thought of hordes of football fans sweeping down from Greenbank station, even though the stadium access was to be via The Avenue, Winnington. At the end of April 2000, the planning authority, Vale Royal Borough Council, indicated it would not grant approval and the idea was ditched, much to the exasperation of the Vics' board. This was, by far, the best alternative to the Drill Field, and with the

proposed Cheshire FA headquarters, Moss Farm might have become the hub of county football, Cheshire's Wembley.

A further disappointment had occurred over a site at Rudheath. Derek Nuttall was the Vics' director tasked with scouring the district for potential locations and his search had taken him to several sites, including Soot Hill, Anderton, and the Gadbrook Business Park. However, the most appealing, and one largely favoured by local planning officers, was off King Street, on the Middlewich side of Rudheath roundabout. It was a perfect location, virgin land, flat, adjacent to Northwich by-pass and, most importantly, the landowner was enthusiastic. Plans were under preparation when, yet again, luck ran out as ICI, owners of the mineral rights beneath the land, refused to sanction the development, possibly because it was too close to the Holford brinefield. Morrison's giant service depot was later constructed on the opposite side of King Street. Finally and, apparently, quite by chance, Derek Nuttall hit upon a site at Wincham, a good goal-kick over the Trent & Mersey Canal from Witton Albion's Wincham Park, and just under two miles north-east of the town centre: "I was driving past the end of Wincham Avenue and noticed a sign advertising land for sale... I was amazed to find, at the end, a large expanse of what looked like wasteland. There were a number of mature trees and bushes, but it looked to be an ideal site for a stadium."

What Derek Nuttall had stumbled on was Cheshire County Council-owned industrial land upon which, coincidentally, Wincham's old Victoria Salt Works had once stood. During the First World War, the site had been leased to the Ministry of Munitions, to construct a plant for the purification of nitrate of soda, a vital ingredient in the manufacture of explosives. Eighty years later, Cheshire County Council was trendily marketing the general area as "Wincham Business Park", although a more apt description would have been "Wincham Industrial Estate". An asphalt plant was in place and Thor Specialities (UK) Limited was about to invest £946,800 to acquire neighbouring land upon which to develop a chemical works, on the south-east side of Wincham Avenue. This was later deemed a hazardous installation, and safety officers recommended the stadium should not be built. However, the planning committee, accused of political bias towards Vics, still granted approval.

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As visiting fans eventually found out, the stadium setting, more remote than Witton's Wincham Park, was always incongruous and uninviting. One from Exeter noted: "The location is terrible, miles from anywhere, with little surrounding it other than the neighbouring industrial estate." A Colwyn Bay fan dubbed the new stadium "soulless... nice and pretty, it tries and flatters people with a carvery and a fitness suite on the site of an industrial estate." As to Vics' home supporters, traditionally drawn from Leftwich, Davenham, Castle, Hartford, Weaverham, the stadium was, simply, on the wrong side of Northwich, and particularly unappealing on a cold Tuesday night in the middle of winter. Even Witton Albion, traditionally pulling from the northern side of town, had long regretted leaving "chimney pots", and if Vics couldn't attract crowds to the Drill Field, what hope was there at Wincham?

None of this overly concerned Vics' directors who were determined to get on with the job and quell further disenchantment and dissaray. They needed to grab at somewhere, anywhere, and to justify the "industrial wasteland", they convinced themselves that here was potential, Conference gates, Football League gates, and, maybe, additional revenue streams. Their market research amounted to nothing more than a gut-feeling, their business strategy simple: Build a new stadium, bolt on the Danebank, and watch the crowds flock to Wincham. Meanwhile, no doubt punching the air with delight, sat Cheshire County Council's agent and Vale Royal Council officers. In a single transaction, Cheshire was selling a large chunk of land for approximately £55,000 per acre, whilst Vale Royal was, finally, getting Vics out of the town centre.

The Vics' board was anxious to keep the location secret and shareholders were not consulted. Rod Stitch cautioned: "We don't want to go through what we had with Moss Farm where the residents were up in arms before the first hurdle. We want to talk to planners and assess costs, so we are in agreement before it's made public."

Of more pressing concern was selling the Drill Field, the key to unlocking the new stadium project. An offer of £2,385,000, from Bryant Homes, had been on the table at the EGM, but negotiations had stalled, probably due to a pending takeover of Bryant Homes by Taylor Woodrow. The board next turned to Wainhomes, one of the leading house-builders in the North West, and talks

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were progressing reasonably well when, in April 2001, this company was acquired by Wilson Connolly and so, frustratingly, the pending sale of the Drill Field passed to a third developer.

The 2000/01 season had started badly, including Vics' heaviest defeat in Conference history, a 7-1 thumping by Hednesford, and by the beginning of October, bottom of the league with just nine points from twelve games, Mark Gardiner was sacked and the late Keith Alexander was appointed the club's first full-time manager, an indicator of Vics' ambition. The managerial change sparked an immediate climb up the table, as well as an inspirational run in the FA Cup. Bury were dispatched in the 1st round and then followed an exhilarating 3-3 encounter with Leyton Orient, on the Drill Field. Vics: Bailey, Burke, Cooke, Davies, Devlin, Ellis, Fletcher, Holcroft, Key, Mike, Poland. Subs: Norris, Rigby, Robertson, Simpson, Barnard.

Gary Fletcher (2) and Adie Mike netted for Vics, and by the time of the Sky-televised replay, at Orient's Brisbane Road, the victors could look forward to a home 3rd round tie against Tottenham, of the Premier League. Sadly, the replay turned into a painful night for the five-hundred travelling fans. Vics stormed into an early two-goal lead (Ian Cooke and Adie Mike), only for Orient to equalise after the interval, their second an own goal by Wes Simpson. Deadlocked in extra-time, penalties looked a certainty, until four minutes from time, in a moment of the cruellest luck, goalkeeper Lance Key's clearance struck Orient's Scott Houghton and rebounded into the net.

Rod Stitch recalls driving to the game and taking messages from the Conference, just in case Vics pulled off a miracle. "They were really anxious to ensure I wouldn't say anything, during Sky interviews, that we wouldn't be able to play Spurs at the Drill Field – bad PR for the Conference!" Vics may have missed out on a pot of gold, but at least the cup run yielded much-needed funds, so it was with increasing confidence that directors and supporters began to turn their attention to the new stadium and, on Boxing Day, 2000, the Wincham location was officially announced. Rod Stitch told the Northwich Guardian that significant progress was being made to secure Vics' long-term future, although, he cautioned, the club could only afford a basic stadium, just enough to comply with the Conference's minimum ground criteria.

Chapter 4

IT'S impossible for outsiders to understand the bitter rivalry, but no history of Northwich Vics could ever be written without cross-referencing to Witton Albion, two clubs in a small town joined at the hip since 1890. At board level there has always been a grudging co-operation, but on the terraces, and though diehards may not exactly bare their buttocks at the "other lot", fans will rarely miss an opportunity to disdainfully wave two fingers. Their directors may not have agreed, but ordinary Drill Fielders gloated when Witton packed their bags and left town, and yet there was an inevitability that, one day, Vics would follow to Wincham.

The absurdity is that, for over sixty years, the town and district of Northwich has lacked the resources to sustain one club, let alone two. Attendances have plummeted since the halcyon of the late 1940s/early 1950s, whilst costs have soared into the stratosphere until only the family jewels, the Central Ground and the Drill Field, remained to be hocked off. As a footballing town Northwich has stood still, occasional moments of glory but forever divided, splintered by a bickering and carping that, on severe occasions, has seen one or the other at the point of oblivion.

Amalgamation, one team in town, has been talked about since 1897, although it was only during the period between the two world wars, at a time of severe economic difficulty, that the two clubs seriously considered a merger. This was almost accomplished in 1933, when it was agreed to play at the Central Ground, whilst the Drill Field was to be offered to Northwich Urban Council, for use as a children's playing field. The town's footballing history would certainly have been re-written and who knows what might have been achieved by "Northwich United"? Perhaps, today, the club would be members of the Football League, similar to Crewe Alexandra.

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Needless to say, bigotry won the day when Vics' shareholders and Witton's members roundly vetoed the proposal. There have been other occasions since, notably during the 1960s, but never was there a better opportunity than towards the end of the 20th century, when Vics' debts were £500,000 and Witton Albion were desperately trying to extricate from administration.

John Stitch and Witton Albion's Mike Worthington, a businessman about town and retired senior police officer, had come to the fore. They were not weighed down by partisanship and narrow prejudice engrained in the souls of Vics and Witton, but then, neither were they old-school, butcher and baker philanthropists, happy to pour money into their football clubs without thought of monetary return and, so, they reached the same conclusion, that the only way forward was for the two clubs to share a stadium. Perhaps merger might follow, but not necessarily, and, in the immediate battle for survival, they both held that little else made business sense.

Witton were in deep trouble when Mike Worthington joined Tom Shaw, and others, to try and save the club from administration, and, later, as chairman, he approached Vics with a business proposition. Witton would sell Wincham Park for housing and invest £500,000 to secure a half-share in the Drill Field. The Vics' board rejected the proposal and, probably sensing that Witton were on their uppers, John Stitch commenced to formulate an even more



The Drill Field was showing its age, but was it beyond repair?

audacious deal that would have stunned supporters of both camps. A meeting took place in Chester, at the offices of Witton Albion's company solicitor, to discuss a merger, or for Vics to purchase Wincham Park outright. John Stitch was seriously considering the latter.

For various reasons, neither scenario materialised, and, in January 2000, Witton Albion shareholders listened aghast as Mike Worthington reiterated stark choices to forestall their club's demise. Sell Wincham Park and share with Northwich Vics at the Drill Field; sell Wincham Park and build a new stadium; sell off six acres of land to keep the club afloat, or, the most unpalatable, merge with Northwich Vics. Needless to say, Wittoners were sceptical and wary of any involvement with the old enemy, but the dialogue continued, and, in February 2000, a joint statement was issued, admitting that exploratory discussions had been taking place to consider the "current and projected financial situations" of both clubs. Rod Stitch, Vics' chairman: "We have a duty to look at all scenarios. If we are not careful both clubs could go."

Clive Penny scented the anathema of amalgamation and a possible move to Wincham Park: "If any Vics' supporter believes that the sale of the 'gold mine', followed by an arrangement and investment in Wincham Park, will produce a happy ending... he must have rose-tinted spectacles."

Unlike Vics, Witton did not have the time to procrastinate and, with a May 31 deadline and creditors banging on the door, a life-saving deal was negotiated to sell six acres of Wincham Park to neighbouring scrap-metal merchants, W.R.Roberts. The Northwich Chronicle estimated a sum paid of £175,000, with a covenant linked to future development. Mike Worthington reported to Witton shareholders: "We have been losing an average of £500 a week but (with the proceeds of the sale) we clear all debts apart from a single bank loan which is manageable. Witton will trade on a break-even basis next season... but this is the start for Witton, not the end."

Even so, the question of a joint venture remained under discussion at board level and Mike Worthington, in spite of Witton losing the six acres of land, remained confident that Wincham Park could still fulfill the Conference's long-term, exacting standards, and it was a view shared by the Vics' board. The dialogue continued and, in August 2000, a few weeks after the epoch-making

vote by Vics' shareholders to sell the Drill Field, Derek Nuttall was writing to Vale Royal Council, pressing a joint development of Wincham Park. He proposed that the Danebank could be rebuilt on the west side of the stadium, and the north and south "goal" ends redeveloped to achieve a total capacity of 6,000-plus. He added: "The traffic implications and parking facilities in particular will have to be examined with two clubs sharing the same facility."

Witton shareholders were not impressed and, as ever, the old enmity was laid bare and when Vics came upon the Wincham Business Park land, the Trent & Mersey Canal might as well have been as wide as the Atlantic ocean.

Rod Stitch: "Witton have always known where we might end up. The offer (for Witton) to join us was there and it was recognised by everyone that the only way they could afford to join us would be if the council gave planning consent for housing on their ground." Mike Worthington: "We are studying Northwich's plans carefully. What Vics say they want to do for the community at Wincham we are already doing here. This is not a football issue, but business. We don't want ours curtailed by another business."

Meanwhile, Witton's leading shareholder, Terry Warrender reappeared. He had been on Witton Albion's board during the early 1990s, only to withdraw his support because he claimed to be "tired of simply being the bill-payer". His standing had fallen dramatically, but he was back and accusing both clubs of "madness" if they intended to separately run two grounds within a quarter of a mile of each other. He demanded an extraordinary meeting and two motions were passed by Witton shareholders: (i) To review the current financial position, (ii) To recommence talks with Vics on a ground-share. Terry Warrender said: "I want Witton to talk to Vics about ground-sharing because it is stupid in a town this size to have two clubs with no money on separate grounds. Why not halve the costs? It cannot be at Wincham Park because the land Mr Worthington sold means the ground cannot meet Conference standards. But, I stress, amalgamation is not on the agenda."

In Northwich footballing circles, the very mention of amalgamation is still guaranteed to rouse the passions, and before Witton shareholders could gather to formally consider Terry Warrender's proposals, Clive Penny, and Witton's Phil Flavell, arranged a meeting, in October 2001, of both sets of supporters,

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at Northwich Memorial Hall. Around sixty attended, including Mike Worthington and David Stone, who both affirmed that amalgamation made business sense. Terry Warrender also attended and, clearly, political infighting was beginning to overtake events at Witton Albion. “Northwich Vics cannot come to Wincham Park permanently,” he said. “It is impossible. There is no room because of the land he (Mike Worthington) sold. At Witton, before I had to leave, we were going to build a hotel and sporting facilities. All those facilities could go on a new site and generate enough money so that neither club has to worry anymore. They have to join, two on the same ground, or one team. It is impossible to carry on any longer.”

A week later, block votes ensured Terry Warrender’s two motions were roundly booted out at Witton’s AGM, “amid rousing cheers of about two-hundred shareholders,” reported the Northwich Chronicle. There would not be a permanent ground share with Vics and Mike Worthington commented: “Now perhaps we can get on with the recovery of Witton Albion.”

Probably anxious to recover his family investment, Terry Warrender was not entirely thwarted and threatened legal action against Witton. He also set up a meeting, at the Windmill, Tabley, with Rod Stitch, who by this time had



Danebank dissenters show their displeasure, including Alan Stanley, Ray Stanley, Toddy Barlow, Clive Penny and Frank Fallows.

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resigned from the Vics' board. Rod Stitch: "I received a telephone call asking if I would meet someone. It was all a bit cloak and dagger, but I knew it was going to be Terry Warrender. He wanted me to buy his Witton shares." Rod Stitch declined and, as the inference was clear, reported the meeting to the Vics' board as he could have become the leading shareholder in both clubs. "I wasn't interested. I had a business in Northwich and it would have been a brave man to take on what was being suggested."

Finally, in February 2002, the two clubs signed a conditional contract for Vics to use Wincham Park during the 2002/03 season. Mike Worthington: "It is a straight forward business deal for Witton which has been done without emotion. All we have agreed is one season at Wincham Park, but it is advantageous to Witton and will speed up our recovery. It is a revenue earner."

And so it was from Witton's point of view. Vics had to upgrade the floodlights and make other improvements to Wincham Park, in order to satisfy the Conference. The one-season agreement, during which Vics' rent was £675 per match, continued for three seasons. In 2003/04 the rent was £800 per match and closer to £1,500 per match in 2004/05 season. Witton, of course, did very nicely out of the deal and, over the three seasons, received approximately £80,000 in rent, plus significant additional income through the social club.

In a later mission statement, Mike Worthington identified some of the irreconcilable problems facing a football club at non-league level, and these rang as true for Vics as they did for Witton, i.e. the cost of players' escalating wages and the multifarious, instant attractions of modern society which were draining resources and threatening financial stability: He wrote: "Whilst any club should endeavour to achieve the highest level of football for its supporters and shareholders, the basic business approach must be the driving-force behind any decision-making process, which may, at times, be very much against the established concepts of how to run a football club."

Chapter 5

THE Vics' board was in a buoyant mood when shareholders convened, in January 2001, for their annual meeting, held in the Vics' social club. Outline planning applications for both the Drill Field housing development and the new stadium at Wincham had been submitted to Vale Royal Council, and Rod Stitch, chairing his final AGM, stressed: "Without being melodramatic we are now looking at survival, but I do believe we have turned the corner and we can look forward to a more stable period." Selling the ground and relocating, he said, would provide working capital and it was incumbent upon the board to use the surplus wisely.

At this stage, in the first flushes of euphoria, the board was suggesting that after the move, £300,000 might be left in the kitty, although finance director Jim Rafferty was far more bullish, pitching the figure, according to the Northwich Chronicle, at £500,000. As it transpired, even the lower figure was wildly optimistic and, beneath the surface, the accounts were dire. To year-end May 31, 2000, wages and expenses alone had hit £237,000, whilst turnover, all income, had just about topped £228,000, and the overall loss during twelve months amounted to £142,000. Vale Royal Council and Barclays Bank both held legal charges on the Drill Field, against loans and overdrafts totalling more than £100,000. However, due to the pending ground sale, Inland Revenue and HM Customs had agreed to hold off from taking action against Vics, and Rod Stitch remained upbeat: "The debts are less than half of what they were and the position is much healthier than it was."

Two months later Rod Stitch stepped down. Respected and trusted by the maority of supporters, he had worked hard for the club, but, in the end, he shared his father's view, that a sale of the Drill Field was the only course open to Vics. On the negative side, his position on the board had weakened

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markedly following John Stitch's death and, looking back, he has no doubt that those who become directors of football clubs are on ego trips. "It's like a drug. You get a small amount of success and then you want more, another adrenalin surge."

So, Dave Stone slipped comfortably back into the chairman's shoes he had coveted since losing his position in the mid-1990s. Determined to prove he was the man to lead the club's revival, his first task was to oversee Vics' last-gasp escape from relegation, a fate that had occupied Keith Alexander and his team following their magnificent FA Cup exploits against Leyton Orient. Vital wins over Kingstonians and Telford, together with valuable draws at Hayes and Southport, saved Vics as they finished just three points above the bottom three. The ambitious plans for Moss Farm and hopes of a £125,000 transfer fee, from Hull, for Gary Fletcher, came and went in a flash, although the striker did eventually move to Leyton Orient, but only for £50,000, plus add-ons. Then Keith Alexander announced his departure to Lincoln City and former Northern Ireland international, Jimmy Quinn was appointed for the 2001/02 season.

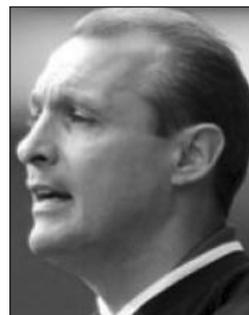
The loss of Keith Alexander to Lincoln was an unexpected setback and worse was to follow as Vics became embroiled in controversy with Vale Royal Council, what the directors still fervently maintain, delayed the move to the new stadium and financially crippled the club. To some degree they may be correct, but what is surprising is that they were surprised. Commonsense would say that matters should have run a great deal smoother, but this was local government planning



Keith Alexander

NATIONWIDE CONFERENCE						
FINAL TABLE 2000/01						
	P	W	D	L	F	Pts
Rushden & Diam	42	25	11	6	78	36 86
Yeovil Town	42	24	8	10	73	50 80
Dagenham & Red	42	23	8	11	71	54 77
Southport	42	20	9	13	58	46 69
Leigh RMI	42	19	11	12	63	57 68
Telford	42	19	8	15	51	51 65
Stevenage Borough	42	15	18	9	71	61 63
Chester City	42	16	14	12	49	43 62
Doncaster Rovers	42	15	13	14	47	43 58
Scarborough	42	14	16	12	56	54 58
Hereford United	42	14	15	13	60	46 57
Boston United	42	13	17	12	74	63 56
Nuneaton	42	13	15	14	60	60 54
Woking	42	13	15	14	52	57 54
Dover Athletic	42	14	11	17	54	56 53
Forest Green	42	11	15	16	43	54 48
Northwich Victoria	42	11	13	18	49	67 46
Hayes	42	12	10	20	44	71 46
Morecambe	42	11	12	19	64	66 45
Kettering Town	42	11	10	15	46	62 43
Kingstonian	42	8	10	24	47	73 34
Hednesford	42	5	13	24	46	86 28

with its well-known idiosyncrasies, doubly so when, as in the case of Vics' ambitions, there were complex, parallel applications and these were contingent, one upon the other. The board's initial plan had been to remain at the Drill Field whilst building the new stadium, during the period May 2001 – August 2002, so avoiding any need to ground-share, but the timetable went awry, and no wonder, for it had been wildly optimistic. First, there was a three-month delay in the granting of outline permission for the stadium at Wincham, what had seemed a formality, and then the Drill Field plan hit the buffers, putting on hold the sale, agreed in April 2001. Further problems followed due to protracted legal negotiations concerning additional car parking at the new ground, in the event that Vics were to win promotion to the Football League and require a capacity of 10,000, the very thought of which roused the ire of Wincham and Marston residents who petitioned against a second stadium in their community. Witton Albion were equally incensed and submitted a list of objections, notably citing the loss of "employment land". Cuttingly, Witton added: "It is claimed that new facilities are required to maintain status within their existing league and to enable the possibility of higher status within the Football League system. Provision of new facilities would not secure this higher status. The club has never achieved a football standard beyond their present one."



Jimmy Quinn

Vics pressed on and the board reiterated its position: "The move from the Drill Field was approved by shareholders in order to preserve the current status in the Nationwide Conference and to meet the stringent criteria for progressing to the Football League."

The building of 100-plus town centre houses and apartments on the Drill Field was of wide public interest and, regardless of Vics' financial plight, Vale Royal Council was duty-bound to afford the detailed application maximum due process. Long-winded consultations took place with case officers who, finally, recommended approval, only for the planning committee to overturn their advice and issue a refusal, on May 21, 2002. Naturally, this infuriated the

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Vics' board and the developers, as well as many supporters, and conspiracy theories abounded because the chairman of the planning committee was Ron Woodier, a lifelong supporter of Witton Albion. Peter Wilson, a former chairman of the Supporters Association, commented: "At the moment it is just total confusion. There's a fan base around the country and there's a lot of anger because the council has never been supportive and now it appears to us they are being downright destructive." Dave Stone: "It was a political decision, an absolute travesty."

Interviewed in 2012, Ron Woodier dismissed the accusations as "Bloody ridiculous!" and it's easy to see why. A supermarket and a care home had already been developed around the old terminus, and generally welcomed by planners, but there were problems unique to the Drill Field, i.e. access, via Drill Field Road, and the height of the proposed dwellings which would overlook houses in Water Street. In total, around twenty issues were raised in a planning report, many from occupants of neighbouring properties, including the Danebridge Medical Centre. These could not easily be ignored and, under such circumstances, councillors seldom rubber-stamp approval, whatever case officers might recommend. Ron Woodier: "There were only two Wittoners on the entire council and I was the only one on the planning committee. I kept Derek Nuttall and Dave Stone fully informed all the way, probably told them more than I should have done. I said years ago, at a public meeting, that Vics and Witton should amalgamate – I nearly got lynched."

At the time, Vale Royal Council's official explanation was that it dealt with the Drill Field application in accordance with all its adopted procedures, but the developer's application had been submitted in an "unsatisfactory manner" and not in accordance with "good practice". None of this was the fault of the Vics' directors, innocent victims one feels, of delays concerned with the big business, number-crunching takeover of Wainhomes, and then, later, the obtuse insistence of the new developers, Wilson Connolly, to call for a public inquiry, rather than a less time-consuming written appeal.

Ten years later, Dave Stone, Derek Nuttall and Jim Rafferty remain bitter. They still blame the council and yet, and not unreasonably for an important town centre development, it took only a year, from submission of the detailed

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Ex-Vics' players at the last first team game played on the Drill Field, against Barnet, on Saturday April 27, 2002. Crowd: 1,750.

Drill Field application, dated January 8, 2002, to the granting, via the public inquiry, of full approval, on January 21, 2003. Vale Royal Council formally cited three, rather trumped-up objections, i.e. lack of affordable housing, inadequate open space, and the effect on the character and appearance of the surrounding area. The latter was particularly ridiculous in view of the haphazard fashion in which this part of Northwich had, generally, been thrown together, and indicates that officers were not wholeheartedly in agreement with the planning committee decision. If politics played a part in that decision, it was about passing the buck and not upsetting voters, rather than heinous skulduggery motivated by a gang of Wittoners. The inspector had little choice but to dismiss all three objections and award costs to Wilson Connolly who had financed the appeal.

Dave Stone, Derek Nuttall and Jim Rafferty have never changed their public stance that Vale Royal Council's intransigence largely contributed to a £500,000 loss over three seasons at Wincham Park and this, in turn, brought financial meltdown. Their calculation is based upon "lost revenue", i.e. £60,000 per season "gate" money, reduced advertising/promotions, interest payments incurred on additional borrowing, rent and the one-off cost of upgrading Wincham Park. However, there is an obvious flaw in that under the old regime, Vics played only two seasons at Witton, not three. The third season,

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other than a few weeks in August 2004, operated whilst the club was in administration. Furthermore, when the 2003 year-end accounts are compared with the final year at the Drill Field, it is clear that combined match receipts and programme sales fell by only £6,592, whilst revenue from advertising/sponsorship increased dramatically from £42,861, at the Drill Field, to £77,467, at Witton. This was almost certainly due to the appointment of a commercial manager, Brian Edge. On the negative side, annual bank charges/interest payments went up from £28,332 to £38,356, and there was rent and the cost of upgrading Wincham Park, approximately £40,000, but it was not the catastrophe claimed, at least over the first season. We can only speculate that the situation would not have been greatly different in 2003/04.

The two seasons at Wincham Park were costly, and no-one could blame Witton Albion for exploiting the situation, but of far greater consequence was the borrowing which very quickly began to run out of control once the vote to sell the Drill Field had been cast. At year-end May 2000, Vics owed the bank £71,725. Three years later, the figure stood at £460,283, an enormous sum, the bulk of which was required to set the new stadium project in motion and, certainly, during this period the club did not seem short of ready cash, though how it all panned out is a mystery as, due to entering into administration, the accounts for 2003/04 were never filed. Nor are the books available from this time. When Jim Rafferty tried to recover these from the administrator, he was informed they had been shredded, and so an impenetrable black hole remains for the last financial dealings of the old club. What can be said is that, when the Company Voluntary Arrangement (CVA) was put into place, in 2004, all but £90,000 of the bank borrowing had been repaid, essentially from the proceeds of the Drill Field sale.

One burning question is why Vics did not continue to play at the Drill Field for a further season? At the conclusion of the 2001/02 season, planning approvals, for both the new stadium and the Drill Field development, still hung



Dave Thomas
“The club lost its soul when the Drill Field was sold.”

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in the air, and Dave Stone publicly stated that if the latter did not come through, then Vics were staying put. Three weeks later, the ground share agreement with Witton Albion yet to be signed (May 18, 2002), the floodlights were dismantled and the club headed to Wincham Park, supposedly to meet the Conference deadline. The board hoped, within three months, to hand the Drill Field keys to Wilson Connolly and collect a fat cheque. It was a desperate gamble and it backfired, spectacularly.

The planning issues certainly had a debilitating effect on Vics' relocation, but other clubs, in spite of similar frustrating constraints imposed by their local authorities, have managed to relocate without spiralling into bankruptcy, and one of the most successful transitions has been achieved by neighbours, Nantwich Town, a club never previously one of the big-hitters of Cheshire football. The Dabbers' finest season had occurred in 1980/81 when winning the penultimate Cheshire League championship under the managership of Jimmy "Nellie" Wallace, a fine Vics' left-winger from Jack Bonell's side of the early 1960s. Nantwich Town's home had been at Jackson Avenue (London Road) since 1884, but by the 1990s it had become apparent that a new ground was required.

Director and club historian Michael Chatwin: "With the boom in house prices, the value of the Jackson Avenue site, relatively close to the town centre, had rocketed. The lack of car parking provision was becoming a major problem when big matches were on and the tight space around the ground prevented the development of further facilities... Gate receipts were not sufficient to cover the costs of running a team at North West Counties League level... With some reluctance, the decision was made to sell off the old ground and build a modern new stadium."

Nantwich anticipated it would take one or two seasons to achieve (sounds familiar!) and for the 1998/99 season a ground-share was arranged with Witton Albion. Then, exactly as Vics later encountered, "legal and technical difficulties" conspired to disrupt the timetable but, rather than commit more expenditure to the rental of Wincham Park, the club returned to Jackson Avenue and finally, after eight years, moved to the new ground, at the start of the 2007/08 season. The final, detailed planning approvals took two years to pass

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through Crewe & Nantwich Council. The Weaver Stadium, as it is known, was developed on a nine-acres site at a cost of £3.75 million and the Dabbers have since gone from strength to strength and now compete in the Evo-Stik NPL Premier Division. The advantage Nantwich had over Vics was that their running costs were more manageable, and they were not constrained by the criteria standards imposed on Conference clubs.

Bangor City are another club who have a fine new ground and, although in very different circumstances, there are echoes with Morbaine Limited and the Drill Field. In conjunction with owners Bangor City Council, Morbaine developed a supermarket on City's former Farrar Road, and then built, out-of-town, the splendid Nantporth Stadium, overlooking the Menai Strait. Bangor City had also been pressing for a new stadium since the 1990s, and it took them almost twenty years to achieve their goal!

Vics' 20001/02 season can best be described as "mediocre", a 13th-place finish in the league and another good run in the FA Trophy, falling at the quarter-final stage to eventual winners, Yeovil Town. The very last FA Cup encounter on the Drill Field resulted in a 5-2 drubbing by Hull City, in the 1st round, whilst the final Conference game, on April 27, 2002, also ended in defeat, 3-0 to Barnet, watched by a crowd of 1,750. In the following week, Vics left on high note, beating Congleton Town on penalties, in the final of the Mid Cheshire Senior Cup.

NATIONWIDE CONFERENCE							
FINAL TABLE 2001/02							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Boston United	42	25	9	8	84	42	84
Dagenham & Red	42	24	12	6	70	47	84
Yeovil Town	42	19	13	10	66	53	70
Doncaster Rovers	42	18	13	11	68	46	67
Barnet	42	19	10	13	64	48	67
Morecambe	42	17	11	14	63	67	62
Farnborough	42	18	7	17	66	54	61
Margate	42	14	16	12	59	53	58
Telford	42	14	15	13	63	58	57
Nuneaton	42	16	9	17	57	57	57
Stevenage Borough	42	15	10	17	57	60	55
Scarborough	42	14	14	14	55	63	55
Northwich Victoria	42	16	7	19	57	70	55
Chester City	42	15	9	18	54	51	54
Southport	42	13	14	15	53	49	53
Leigh RMI	42	15	8	19	56	58	53
Hereford United	42	14	10	18	50	53	52
Forest Green	42	12	15	15	54	76	51
Woking	42	13	9	20	59	70	48
Hayes	42	13	5	24	53	80	44
Stalybridge Celtic	42	11	10	21	40	69	43
Dover Athletic	42	11	6	25	41	65	39

Chapter 6

IN August 2002, much to the relief of the board, Vics were preparing to play their first Conference game at Wincham Park. During the final months at the Drill Field, many supporters and shareholders had become restless and Clive Penny, in his inimitable style, stoked the fires by accusing the board of incompetence, and likening the odds of successfully pulling off relocation as being “equal to that of me going to the Moon”. Messrs Stone, Nuttall and Rafferty would gladly have chipped-in to purchase a one-way ticket to the Sea of Tranquility. Another critic, Paul Billington, one of the founding members of the Drill Field Trust, demanded to know how much Wilson Connolly was paying for the ground. When Dave Stone refused to reveal the figure, due to a confidentiality clause with the developers, the board’s trustworthiness was questioned and matters were not helped when the chairman explained the board’s failure to attract additional directors. “People are put off by the sums of money involved,” he said. Clive Penny was particularly miffed as he had offered the requisite £5,000 “joining fee” and had twice been refused a seat on the board. “Rod Stitch told me he didn’t want to start World War 3!”

For all that, the majority of fans and shareholders were still firmly supporting the board as Dave Stone announced that a non-returnable deposit of £100,000 had been received from Wilson Connolly, but over half of this had immediately been swallowed up in legal fees and the repayment of a £48,000 loan from Vale Royal Council. Still, it was the first tangible step towards building the new stadium at a cost of approximately £1,700,000. Everything was now dependent on the Drill Field planning, a “formality”, assured Dave Stone.

It wasn’t, of course, but, in the meantime, the club had upped-sticks and moved to Wincham Park, sparking accusations amongst some of their fiercest critics, that the directors were pedalling false hopes in order to recover personal

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investments in the football club. Whether, or not, this was true, it was speculation and no evidence was ever produced to substantiate the charge. That said, provided everything is conducted correctly, all football directors have a right to pull out their money, for their own private reasons, just as a supporter can always choose to walk away. The Vics' directors had an unenviable task and their burden should not be under-estimated, or forgotten. Relocation was a huge responsibility, way beyond the perception of most supporters and shareholders. Derek Nuttall had retired, but Dave Stone and Jim Rafferty were still in full-time employment and trying to juggle private lives and day jobs alongside the unrelenting pressures involved with running debt-ridden Vics, selling the Drill Field and building a new stadium. The demands were enormous: planning permissions, a conveyor belt of meetings with council officers, negotiations with developers, the purchase of the Wincham land, the chasing of grants, sharing Wincham Park, dealing with the banks and creditors, the Conference, trading standards, highways and statutory bodies. There was also the new stadium to build, the Danebank to move and re-erect, architects, civil and electrical engineers to consult, etc etc. And, throughout, the board still had to manage a football club with its inherent trials and tribulations.

The directors will always insist their intentions were for the best, that they were not reckless, nor careless with the club's money, and that they only ever had the interests of Vics at heart. Yet, as relocation began to unravel, it became increasingly apparent, as identified by Vale Royal Council, that they had not undertaken a risk management assessment, to prepare for whatever pitfalls might lie ahead and, therefore, when matters began to go wrong, particularly in regard to the planning issues, they were knocked hopelessly out of kilter. Improvisation, sometimes a grope in the darkness, often resulted and, as far as supporters were concerned, there was precious little evidence that anyone was working to a carefully prepared budget. Clive Penny had already raised this issue and he was backed, in the local press, by fellow supporter/shareholder, James Wood, who urged the board to provide independently scrutinised costs to legitimise relocation. This did not happen, of course, because, like politicians, the board only ever told supporters what it wanted them to know, and as the relocation plan stuttered along, the tendency was to

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be ever more secretive. Supporters were best seen, but seldom heard in the boardroom, and all began to degenerate into a public relations' nightmare. In the end, the move was beyond the serving directors. On occasions, bad luck played a part, but, it remains an inescapable fact, they over-promised and under-delivered, not through any lack of effort, or good intentions, but because they did not possess the business expertise, the time, or the financial resources, to drive such an immensely difficult logistical challenge whilst, at the same time, ensuring the long-term stability of the football club. They became entrenched with a them-and-us mentality and, the pity is, until the very last minute, when it was far too late, they never once, publicly, doubted their own infallibility.

Becoming tenants at Witton Albion's Wincham Park was never going to be easy and so it proved. A trying season appeared inevitable for Jimmy Quinn's men in their new surroundings and they lost their opening game 3-1, to Burton Albion. It was going to be a difficult period, especially as some fans refused to set foot on Wincham Park, and yet, due to some astute signings financially backed by the board, Vics managed to hold their own, finishing fourteenth in the Conference, with Gregg Blundell bagging twenty-four goals before signing, at the end of the season, for Doncaster Rovers, a transfer that netted Vics £25,000. Football Leaguers Scunthorpe United put paid to the FA Cup and Yeovil ended further FA Trophy glory at the fifth-round stage.

As ever, football took a back seat to the greater drama of relocation and the public inquiry, into the Drill Field housing proposal, was one confrontation Northwich Victoria simply could not afford to lose with debts of over £1,100,000, including the price still to be paid for the Wincham site. At the shareholders' annual meeting, held for the last time in the Drill Field Social Club, the board put on a brave face to those questioning the wisdom of relocation and Derek Nuttall was keen to brush away the pessimism: "I'm sitting here listening to doom and gloom when I am excited by it all. We have got sixteen months to build a stadium, or be thrown out of the Conference. How many of you want to see that?" In response, one shareholder described Vics as a "dying dinosaur", although the most surprising remarks came from Rod Stitch who was unimpressed by Derek Nuttall's call for volunteers to assist with the

move: “Volunteers won’t do it, they can’t. You have not got the time and I don’t think you have got the money.” Clearly, a great deal had changed since the former chairman had led the board’s EGM battle-cry to sell the Drill Field.

Then there was the matter of the Conference reverting to the 4,000 stadium criteria, a decision shortly to be announced. The fact is, FA and league football recommendations and decisions normally take months to pass through various committee stages, and it is difficult to believe the Vics’ board was not aware of the volte-face. If this was so, why hadn’t a single word been uttered to the shareholders? Why did they leave on that late-November evening in 2002, still believing there was no way back? Was it a deliberate ploy by the board, or just typical of how supporters were kept in the dark?

The vote to sell had largely hinged on the club’s inability to meet the 6,000 capacity, and this was no longer relevant. The Drill Field was not the lost cause it had once seemed, although a signed contract with Wilson Connolly, and a £100,000 non-returnable deposit, probably made the legal difficulties insurmountable. These matters, and the availability of F.S.I.F. improvement grants, were issues for an EGM to discuss, as was the Wincham location. The shareholders were not consulted and the board ploughed on regardless.

In December, the absurd two-day planning inquiry came and went, and neither Wilson Connolly, the Vics’ board, nor Vale Royal Council, seriously doubted the outcome and, six weeks later, the Drill Field housing development received formal approval. What Mr David Tester, the local government inspector, may not have appreciated was the misinformation concerning the Drill Field’s limitations, a matter to which he referred in his decision, as follows: “The Nationwide Conference has adopted a new policy, requiring that, by May 2004, member clubs should meet the Football League ground capacity of 6,000 spectators, including 1,000 seats, with the potential to be further developed to 10,000 in the future.” No-one had bothered to tell Mr Tester that, in fact, the Conference had changed its mind in favour of reinstating the 4,000 capacity.

Whatever, there was relief all round on the Vics’ board. Derek Nuttall: “Selling the Drill Field does not mean we are selling our heritage. This team is part of the community and we want it to stay that way.” Clive Penny offered

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the anticipated counter-balance and called for a High Court challenge: “The fact is, Northwich Vics are going bust. We cannot build a new ground because there is not enough money.” Supporters Mike Taylor and Peter Grimes were two who vehemently disagreed and, they hit back, in no uncertain terms. Peter Grimes: “This is the green light for relocation...sad to see Clive Penny’s ‘vendetta’. It is never comfortable watching someone turn themselves into a figure of ridicule and scorn.” Mike Taylor was appalled that any true Vics’ fan would stand in the way of the move: “Leaving the Drill Field is a necessary but painful decision.”

NATIONWIDE CONFERENCE							
FINAL TABLE 2002/03							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Yeovil Town	42	28	11	3	100	37	95
Morecambe	42	23	9	10	86	42	78
Doncaster	42	22	12	8	73	47	78
Chester City	42	21	12	9	59	31	75
Dagenham & Red	42	21	9	12	71	59	72
Hereford United	42	19	7	16	64	51	64
Scarborough	42	18	10	14	63	54	64
Halifax Town	42	18	10	14	50	51	64
Forest Green	42	17	8	17	61	62	59
Margate	42	15	11	16	60	66	56
Barnet	42	13	14	15	65	68	53
Stevenage Borough	42	14	10	18	61	55	52
Farnborough	42	13	12	17	57	56	51
Northwich Victoria	42	13	12	17	66	72	51
Telford United	42	14	7	21	54	69	49
Burton Albion	42	13	10	19	52	77	49
Gravesend & N'fleet	42	12	12	18	62	73	48
Leigh RMI	42	14	6	22	44	71	48
Woking	42	11	14	17	52	81	47
Nuneaton	42	13	7	22	51	78	46
Southport	42	11	12	19	54	69	45
Kettering Town	42	8	7	27	37	73	31

Now was, indeed, the time to get behind the club and, although a handful of members were demanding back their contributions from the Drill Field Trust which would soon become obsolete, other fans set off to establish, under the umbrella of the government-funded Supporters Direct, an official Northwich Victoria Supporters Trust which, initially, came to be steered by John Gleave, Maggie Nixon, Peter Grimes and Peter Kinloch. Elsewhere, the National Football Museum began, belatedly, to take an interest in the Drill Field, a stadium described as a “treasured piece of sporting heritage.” Curator Mark Bushell commented: “I think there is a case to recognise these historical sites in the same way as people revere other historical sites. Not only was it the oldest continuously used football ground, it has a rich history anyway.”

Heritage, or no heritage, the fact was the Drill Field was finished and, understandably, the directors were anxious to finalise the sale with Wilson Connolly, and complete the purchase of the Wincham land. According to Land Registry documents, both transactions occurred, of all days, on April 1, 2003. A sum of £495,000 was handed over for the Wincham land, and the club was also required to pay £30,000 to create a site entrance on Wincham Avenue.

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More importantly, Wilson Connolly purchased the Drill Field for £2,125,000, i.e. £260,000 less than the original offer, in 2000, from Bryant Homes. However, outside of the sale, there were to be add-ons from the developers, a £75,000 bonus, payable upon the ground being vacated by September, and a sponsorship deal totalling £125,000 over five years, although due to the club later entering into administration, this was never paid.

Bizarrely, the exact price received for the Drill Field always remained a closely-guarded secret, known only to the board, and non-disclosure was often a source of great annoyance amongst some shareholders. In fact, the Vics' directors had little choice, bound as they were by a strict "confidentiality clause". Nantwich Town had a similar restriction imposed when, in 2006, their Jackson Avenue ground, just over three acres, was sold to Barrett Homes, for a hefty £3,150,000.

It is interesting to compare the football grants and financial support Nantwich received for their relocation. Nantwich Town Council and Crewe & Nantwich Council donated £160,000 to the club, whereas Vics received nothing, absolute zilch, from their civic leaders who were hogtied by the district's divided loyalties. Give to Vics, and quite rightly, Witton Albion, and perhaps Winsford United, would demand the same. It was always a dilemma for Vale Royal Council, and yet, today, Cheshire West & Chester Council, seldom seems constrained in its support of Chester F.C.

As regards football grants, the Dabbers of Nantwich were dab-hands. Vics went for a F.S.I.F. grant and received £500,000, whilst Nantwich did their homework, set their stall as a "community club" and landed just short of £1 million from the Football Foundation, a different funding body. It seems Vics missed out, on a grand scale. An extra £500,000 from either the grant, or the



Vics 1 Chester 1, season's best Wincham Park gate, 2,305. Boxing Day 2002.

sale of the Drill Field, could have turned relocation fiasco into a triumph. So, considering the boom in house prices during the opening years of the new millennium, did Vics get a good deal? In 2012, Zoopla, the property search website, quotes 104 properties on the Drill Field site, with an average price of £140,386. This is equivalent to a current total of approximately £14,600,000, or, in 2004, about £10,900,000, which leads one to conclude that Vics received below the market value, and, for good measure, it's worth pointing out that the Witton Albion chairman, Mike Worthington, also in 2004, announced he was only prepared to listen to offers of over £3,500,000 for Wincham Park.

The final ball was kicked on the Drill Field on Easter Monday, April 21, 2003, when Vics' Reserves beat Barrow Reserves 4-1, in front of a mere eighty spectators, and within days, the commercial office/club headquarters were transferred to temporary accommodation, in Queen Street. The Vics' directors were confidently predicting completion of the new stadium by April 1 (that date again!), 2004. "We will hit the budget, no problem," Dave Stone promised, and all were further cheered by the announcement of the F.S.I.F grant of £500,000, made up of £100,000 to assist the move from the Drill Field, and £400,000, the "maximum available", to build the new stadium.

Yet one thorny issue remained for the club to resolve. The 2001 accounts had noted £131,929 collectively loaned by Drill Field Trust members, to save the old ground. This amount was considered to be a "contingent liability", repayable if the Drill Field was ever sold, and a handful of incensed members, those who didn't agree with the new stadium, were agitating to recover their money. The irony was, in committing to the terms of the F.S.I.F. grant, the Vics' board had transferred the trust liability into a ring-fenced "escrow" account, to demonstrate to the F.S.I.F. that other "partnership funding" was in place, to help build the new stadium. In truth, of course, the funds had been raised to save the Drill Field, although, for the purposes of the F.S.I.F., it was little more than a figure on a sheet of paper, a phantom partnership, a sleight of hand. Trust members were not consulted and, eventually, around twenty percent of the £131,929 was reclaimed, but, due to administration, a mere pittance was paid.

Nevertheless, this juggling of figures had helped Vics land the F.S.I.F.'s

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£500,000 and Dave Stone was in celebratory mood: “This is great news – now we can really get stuck in and have the ground open by the start of the 2004/05 season. The decision to leave the Drill Field was an emotional one, but now, after almost three years of crushing frustration, the time has come to look forward and to concentrate our efforts towards the construction of our new home.” Derek Nuttall: “The old ground, as attached to it as we were, simply could not be brought up to Football League standard. Health & Safety checks also established that there were at least two points on the pitch where people could not exit the ground quickly enough in an emergency. It was a momentous decision and one which was very hard to make, but it was the right thing to do.” Soon there was more good news. Britannia Carpets, former director Dave Price’s company, announced a three-year £40,000 sponsorship deal, and, at last, work was gathering pace towards construction of the “Victoria Stadium”, a name chosen by supporters via an internet poll.

At the start of the 2003/04 season, the second at Wincham Park, Vics marked their 1,000th game in the Conference, a milestone shared with their opponents, Scarborough, along with Gravesend & Northfleet, Barnet, and Telford United. Jimmy Quinn had left to manage Shrewsbury Town and, operating with one of the league’s smallest budgets, his successor, Steve Davies, survived only until October. Alvin McDonald, next in the proverbial hot-seat, fared little better and, by December, with Vics adrift at the foot of the table, he too was on his way, replaced as by former star, Shaun Teale, until the end of the season. Even Dave Stone, the ever-optimistic chairman, had his doubts and commented: “There are certain advantages to playing in the Conference North. The travel would be cheaper and you’d expect the wages not to be so high. But it is important for the fans to stay in the Conference. The whole idea of sport is to play at the highest level possible.”

Meanwhile, David Conn, a national journalist who had followed Vics’ fortunes throughout the tumultuous years, noted of the Drill Field housing: “Some at Vics think they are naming roads after old players, there will be a plaque; but they are not, and there won’t. It’s hard to decide: is this philistinism, or progress? Is this a comedy, or a tragedy? A huge step forward, or just a tale of the way things are?”

Chapter 7

THE year 2004 was to be the year of promise, the year of dreams – a new stadium, a new dawn. What it turned into was the most shameful year in the club’s history and by the time it was over, the dead counted, the wounded bayoneted, only the once-proud name of “Northwich Victoria” remained. The storm clouds had begun to gather in February, when only 428 hardy souls bothered to watch a miserable Wincham Park home defeat by Margate, and relegation was uppermost at the 2003-year-end annual meeting, held in Wincham Community Centre. Was the unthinkable about to happen... a new stadium to mark Vics’ fall from the top flight of non-league football? To add to the woes, the financial situation was horrendous, with an annual operating loss of £245,000, wages and administrative costs running at £5,000 per week, and £101,000 owed in tax and social security. The bank debt had been substantially cleared and fifty percent of the F.S.I.F. grant was still to come, but, looking back, it was obvious Vics were hemorrhaging money. Still, there was one snippet of good news. Sir Alex Ferguson and Manchester United had agreed to officially open the stadium.

No-one realised it, of course, but this was to be the old club’s final AGM, the very last occasion when the directors would ever be required to face shareholders, and, within a few months, all accountability ceased. First, the building programme began to fall behind schedule, ostensibly due to bad weather and complications over a public footpath through the site, and then, in April, the coffers ran dry, prompting one supporter to incisively comment what many were beginning to fear: “If the stadium gets finished, Vics will be massively in debt and everyone will be asking what the point of it all was.”

Jim Rafferty and the board had estimated a further £600,000 was required to finish the ground and they were confident of securing a bridging loan of

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£350,000, to add to the remaining balance from the F.S.I.F. grant, £250,000. The Victoria Stadium land was offered as security, only for sixteen banks/lenders to either turn Vics down, or quote extortionate interest rates. Jim Rafferty: “At the time of the annual meeting we were certain we’d get the mortgage... it had virtually been promised. We didn’t expect to run out of money.”

All this was considered to be confidential, a “sensitive” financial matter and, even at this late stage, the directors certainly had no intention of letting down their defences. They were still clinging to the hope that they would deliver on their promise, that the club would arrive debt-free at the new stadium, even if there was never going to be £300,000+ left in the bank. Failure to secure the bridging loan proved fatal.

Up to this point, and by their own admission, the directors had made mistakes, some of them serious, but, in the main, they had tried to conduct the club’s business in good faith, for the right reasons, to ensure the long-term stability of Northwich Vics, and they did what they did to save the club, not destroy it. However, what went on during three months, from the end of May until the end of August, 2004, was inexcusable, an outrageous betrayal of supporters and ordinary shareholders who were disregarded, swotted aside and disenfranchised by the would-be new owner and a coterie of directors and former directors.

For their last match of the season, Vics travelled to Gravesend, a fittingly-named venue to conclude a disastrous season. Manager Shaun Teale had already walked out and, twenty-one points adrift of the safety zone, a bottom place in the Conference was assured, although by a stroke of amazing good fortune, relegation did not follow as Telford went bust, Margate volunteered

NATIONWIDE CONFERENCE FINAL TABLE 2003/04						
	P	W	D	L	F	A Pts
Chester City	42	27	11	4	85	34 92
Hereford United	42	28	7	7	103	44 91
Shrewsbury Town	42	20	14	8	67	42 74
Barnet	42	19	14	9	60	46 71
Aldershot Town	42	20	10	12	80	67 70
Exeter City	42	19	12	11	71	57 69
Morecambe	42	20	7	15	66	66 67
Stevenage Borough	42	18	9	15	58	52 63
Woking	42	15	16	11	65	52 61
Accrington Stanley	42	15	13	14	68	61 58
Gravesend & N'fleet	42	14	15	13	69	66 57
Telford United	42	15	10	17	49	51 55
Dagenham & Red	42	15	9	18	59	64 54
Burton Albion	42	15	7	20	57	59 51
Scarborough	42	12	15	15	51	54 51
Margate	42	14	9	19	56	64 51
Tamworth	42	13	10	19	49	68 49
Forest Green	42	12	12	18	58	80 48
Halifax Town	42	12	8	22	43	65 44
Farnborough	42	10	9	23	53	74 39
Leigh RMI	42	7	8	27	46	97 29
Northwich Victoria	42	4	11	27	30	80 23
Burton Albion deducted 1pt.						

for demotion and the Northern Premier League's top clubs failed to comply with necessary ground standards.

About this time, the Northwich Chronicle picked up that Vics might be on the verge of a takeover. Dave Stone: "The situation is delicate but, yes, we are in discussions and negotiations with someone. Nothing's been decided, but the party does see a leisure business opportunity rather than simply a football club." The following week, Dave Stone went further: "... it really all depends on what the chap we're speaking to wants to do. Whether that's a takeover, or just members coming onto the board we just don't know, so it's a case of waiting to see what the offer is going to be."

The mysterious businessman, whose name would not be officially revealed for over three months, was Mike Connett, the father of Vics' goalkeeper, Ben Connett. His approach to the Vics' board had been through Rod Stitch: "He said he had a proposition and he wanted to get involved, so I introduced him to the directors." A number of wining and dining meetings followed, at venues such as Piccolinos Restaurant, in Knutsford. Rod Stitch: "He was extremely plausible and had all the trappings of a highly successful businessman. At first he wanted to buy the shares of the main shareholders, at face-value of

£1 per share; then the offer shifted to 50p a share." Dave Stone: "We were told categorically by Mike Connett that he could raise the money. There was never any talk at first of going into administration."

The principal parties to Mike Connett's "buy-out" proposal included Rod Stitch, Dave Stone, Jim Rafferty, Derek Nuttall and Graham Cookson, and if money was on the table, and Vics' future could be assured, they were in favour of selling the business assets and their shares. Rod Stitch: "We all fell for it and he promised faithfully I would get back £100,000 for my mother." Mike Con-



At Wincham Park, April 2005.

nett had identified Rod Stitch as the man to help front what the newspapers began to speculate was a “consortium”, a “board-in-waiting”, and the former chairman’s first task was to bring in Steve Burr as manager, an appointment that confirms Mike Connett was certainly in the driving seat by early June, the books and finances laid bare to his scrutiny. Rod Stitch: “I was to be the director of football, and I signed the director-appointment documents, but later found that Mike Connett had never submitted them to Companies House.”

Mike Connett was an enigma. On the face of it, a successful entrepreneur, his interests including a central Manchester bar and health club frequented by theatre and football stars. He lived in millionaire’s row, appeared to have a millionaire’s lifestyle, and his company, Hallmark MSO, was flagged as one of the leading confidential paper-shredding and recycling businesses in the country. It was an impressive c.v., a well-heeled saviour to launch Vics into the Football League. The other side of 48-year-old Mike Connett was not so palatable. His name was attached to a string of failed companies and, in relative terms, he had only recently emerged from personal bankruptcy, imposed in 1993. For all that, he later passed the Football Association’s “Fit & Proper Person” test.

Negotiations between Mike Connett and the Vics’ board continued throughout the early summer of 2004 and there was no shortage of coverage in the media. *Non-League Daily*: “Crucial talks with the board-in-waiting. The takeover involves a cash injection. The consortium still to identify themselves”; *Northwich Chronicle*, July 14: “... the long ground-out rescue and takeover of Vics is at last reaching an end, the announcement may be made within the next week. The deal will see a new majority shareholder at the club with big plans to develop the Victoria Stadium for sport and leisure.”; *Northwich Chronicle*, July 28: “... still no confirmation of Vics’ takeover.”

The buzz words on the street were “takeover” and “buy-out” but, clearly, Mike Connett was formulating a different strategy as, in July, he moved to register a new company, “Hallco 1081 Ltd”, a name he was to change, on December 8, to *Northwich Victoria Football Club (2004) Ltd*. The directors were faced with a stark choice... put the business into administration, or it goes bust, and to back his scheme, Mike Connett introduced Gordon Craig, a rep-

representative of the Preston-based insolvency practitioners, Begbies Traynor. Like a cat with a mouse, the directors were cornered as the plan unfolded. Dave Stone: “Mike Connett brought in Gordon Craig to arrange a back-to-back administration, a sort of administration one day, a buyer the next.”

Almost certainly, in business-recovery parlance, this was a “pre-pack”, whereby an administrator brokers an advanced agreement to sell, to a nominated party, a company’s assets as soon as the business enters the formal administration process. In Vics’ case, there were insufficient funds to continue to trade and, under normal administration procedures, they would, probably, have been liquidated anyway, with the immediate cessation of business. Nevertheless, “pre-packs” are controversial, due to what is perceived as a lack of transparency. Unsecured creditors, and most small shareholders for that matter, often do not realise that a “pre-pack” is going to happen, and so do not have an opportunity to vote on the proposal. The process normally leads to a quick and relatively smooth transfer of business, although critics argue that where an administrator is introduced in order to broker a “pre-pack” deal, he will have an inherent preference for the proposal when, later, he comes to be officially appointed.

So there it was, not uncommon and, apparently, all perfectly legal. The Vics’ board took advice from a Manchester firm of solicitors and agreed to accept a carefully scripted route to administration, the business and assets to be sold to Mike Connett, without recourse to the rank-and-file shareholders and fans, just as the procedures permitted. Unsecured creditors were treated with the same disregard, including JRC Steel Frame Buildings Ltd who were owed £77,843, David O’Donoghue Electrical Services Ltd (£20,601), Tarmac Central Ltd (£17,309), Architect Frank Escourt (£1,251). Most, if not all, of these businesses had carried out work connected with the new stadium project, and these were debts that could, surely, have been settled, paid on invoice by the so-called “board-in-waiting”, and reimbursed by the Football Stadia Improvement Fund where £250,000 lay unclaimed in the Vics’ pot. Instead, these unfortunate, unsecured creditors were, literally, hung out to dry and, eventually, got back 15.59p in the £. This occurred almost two years later, by which time the F.S.I.F. had granted Mike Connett’s stadium company, Beaconet Ltd,

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full access to claim the outstanding £250,000 towards continuing construction of the Victoria Stadium. Due to the absence of accounts and books for the 2003/2004 financial year, there are no records to show to whom the first £250,000 grant was distributed, but the F.S.I.F. states this would have been paid upon receipt of individual invoices.

As to administration, Vics' ordinary shareholders, fans and unsecured creditors, outside of the "director" clique, were all in the dark. No accounts, no vote, no announcement, nothing until after administration was put into place. Not a single director, or former director, broke ranks, presumably still believing they were acting in the best interests of Northwich Victoria and, when it seemed a "buy-out" was likely, they were probably correct. Mike Connett appeared too good a business opportunity to miss, but, as the scenario of administration began to unfold, the ordinary shareholders and fans, the living spirit of Vics, should have been alerted. What was there to lose, or was it about saving face and the backlash that would, inevitably, have followed? It really didn't matter. Someone "in the know" should have raised his head above the parapet, and given their experiences of the past, was £350,000, to complete the stadium, really beyond the fund-raising ingenuity and tenacity of the club's amazing supporters? If only they had been given the chance!

Jim Rafferty resigned as a director prior to administration, due to health problems and work commitments, and so Dave Stone, Derek Nuttall and Graham Cookson, and, through his family's major shareholding, Rod Stitch, were the only ones left, the last to leave before turning out the lights on over eighty years of Northwich Victoria Football Club as a supporter/shareholder-owned company. Finally, the unconfirmed name of Mike Connett began to appear in the press and talk of "bankruptcy" was soon being mentioned in the same breath as "takeover". Northwich Chronicle, August 4: "There are constant and growing rumours that Northwich are about to go into liquidation and the takeover abandoned." Non-League Daily: "Northwich Victoria beset by damaging rumours of impending bankruptcy. It seems the longer the takeover takes, the worse the shambles of communication with supporters who need reassurance."

When supporters paid their entrance money to watch Steve Burr's team

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kick off the 2004/05 season, they hadn't a clue what was going on and Dave Stone added to the confusion: "I know I have said it before, but I expect the takeover to happen soon...". Very quickly, the true situation began to emerge and it certainly wasn't a takeover. Northwich Victoria Football Club Ltd was a busted flush and, by August 25, the date of Dave Stone's comment to the press, someone had already sprung the mechanism to place the business into administration. Dave Stone is adamant that it was not the old club directors: "We had nothing to do with anything after Mike Connett and Begbies took charge."

Of note, here, is that only three directors were still actively serving on the board, i.e. Dave Stone, Derek Nuttall and, in an executive directorship capacity, the company secretary, Graham Cookson. Northwich Victoria Football Club Ltd's Articles of Association stipulated that a quorum of four directors was required to enact a valid transaction of business and, therefore, it remains a moot point as to whether the formal move into administration was entirely correct under company law. In any event, at the end of July, Dave Stone met with the Witton Albion chairman, Mike Worthington. Reporting the talks were "informal and confidential", the Northwich Chronicle noted: "The only thing certain about their discussions was what was not said."

So, Vics officially entered into administration on September 1st, 2004, although details did not become fully public for almost a fortnight. Gordon Craig, on behalf of Begbies Traynor, told the Northwich Guardian that talks with a prospective buyer were continuing and that administration was purely a defensive measure to protect the company from being wound up, following an action by Tarmac Central Ltd. He certainly did not mention the name Mike Connett, who had been involved for months, nor that a new company had been registered in readiness for the CVA. Adding to the accountancy-speak, David Appleby, also of Begbies Traynor, told the Northwich Chronicle that Begbies was obliged to obtain the best deal possible for the creditors: "We are involved in exclusive negotiations with a consortium," he added. In fact, there wasn't a consortium as such, really just Mike Connett, and there was little evidence to suggest that anyone was seriously looking any further. Mike Connett was not available to comment on his "£1 million rescue package",

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although he would certainly have echoed the view of “Northwich Fan” who wrote to the Chronicle: “Vics’ fans can now look forward to a prosperous and exciting future. Mike Connett, Rod Stitch and the remainder of the new board will ensure that Northwich Vics return to being one of the best semi-pro clubs in the country. The professionalism they bring will ensure Vics become bigger, better and stronger with a fan base that can take the club forward into the Football League.”

For now, Vics had to take a more serious hit, a deduction of ten points for entering into administration, the first club in the country to become recipients of the dreaded sanction and, at the beginning of October, they were on minus points as Mike Connett strode confidently onto the scene, to meet with around seventy-five fans, at The Floatel, in Northwich. Born in Salford and trained as an engineer, he said he had worked in the leisure industry for fifteen to twenty years, owning and/or running night clubs, restaurants and hotels. He had always enjoyed football, both playing as a “short-arsed” goalkeeper and forward, or watching, in his youth, Manchester United.

Vics, he emphasised, would have been in dire straits without his input and the greatest task ahead was to complete the stadium to a capacity of 10,000 - 12,000 and, yes, he was serious! “We can stay at Witton until the end of the season if necessary, but I would hope to be in the ground much sooner than that.” His plans, the main stand interior already redesigned, included two all-weather, five-a-side pitches, a sports shop, three restaurants, three bars and four executive boxes. He added: “We would like to develop the canal side location, but as with everything else it would be done in-house, so we control it. If we get the product right then people will buy it.” The new board was to comprise of himself and his eldest daughter, plus Rod Stitch, Duncan Crawford and two others, whom he was not prepared to identify.

The “Distant Vics New Service” website afterwards commented: “This was one of the best meetings of fans in a long time and it is fair to say that people felt really upbeat and optimistic. Mike was good to listen to, stressed the need that we need to work together and reminded us that he wanted us all to have some fun and get the good times back.”

The “good times” were not on Clive Penny’s mind when he set-up a meet-

ing, at Hartford Hall, with David Appleby and Andrew Haslam, of Begbies Traynor, who had been unaware of the existence of the Drill Field Trust funds, amounting to £131,929. Clive Penny had long since relinquished his role with the trust, but he was enraged that, just days before the scheduled creditors' meeting, the administrators had not started to look into the club's repayment obligation to trust members. He told the *Northwich Chronicle*: "They had not even heard of the trust until we contacted them, yet it is just about the biggest creditor of the lot." Gordon Craig, of Begbies, responded: "The trust itself is the creditor, but I have seen no documentation to prove it was a proper trust and no-one has any idea who to write to." In a sense, he was correct.

Others were equally incensed by Begbies' initial report that stated, "... shareholders, directors, creditors, and others connected with the business favour the assistance of a new purchaser." This was misleading nonsense as far as concerned the large number of ordinary shareholders. They had certainly not been consulted and when, on October 14, Clive Penny received a general letter, marked "Strictly private and confidential/not for public disclosure", he tore into Begbies Traynor: "Northwich Victoria's roots are deep in the town. It is not a subject for confidentiality. Public disclosure is our duty."

To add insult to shareholders' injury, the formal meetings, to confirm Vics' insolvency, were to take place at the Thistle Hotel, near to Manchester Airport. This was a deliberate ploy, argued many, to discourage attendance. Begbies' Gordon Craig issued a denial, stating he had contacted five venues in Mid Cheshire and none was capable of hosting potentially three-hundred creditors and members, and, anyway, the Thistle Hotel was only twenty minutes up the motorway. Clive Penny was far from satisfied and confirmed the availability of several local venues, including Northwich Memorial Hall and Winsford Civic Hall. The meetings went ahead at the Thistle Hotel, although, since so few were present, they might comfortably have been accommodated in the tap-room of The Volunteer. Meanwhile, John Buckley, of the *Northwich Chronicle*, following up on rumours that Mike Connett was not all he made out to be, engaged a private detective to make inquiries. At the last minute, his exposé was cancelled by his editor-in-chief, following "external" pressure.

Vics entered into a Company Voluntary Arrangement with debts of just

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over £522,000. The 2001 end-of-year accounts, prior to the Drill Field sale, had revealed a similar debt, approximately £550,000, so, in three years, the club had spent around £2,370,000 (including the first part of the F.S.I.F grant) covering annual losses, purchasing the Wincham land and part-building a stadium... and £600,000 was still required to complete the job. To develop even a basic stadium, these figures suggest the true cost must have been nearer to £2,500,000. So much for the board's wildly optimistic estimate of £1,700,000.

As well as previously mentioned businesses, the CVA creditors included Mrs A.Stitch (£131,618), Barclays Bank (£96,811), Dave Stone (£28,470), Jim Rafferty (£14,792), Rod Stitch (£8,225), Graham Cookson (£5,780), Derek Nuttall (£5,000), Inland Revenue (£40,888), HM Customs & Excise (£10,896) and a small number of Drill Field Trust members (£28,216). Amongst shareholders who voted in favour of the CVA were Mrs A.Stitch (44,384 shares), Rod Stitch (15,695), Dave Stone (14,000), Jim Rafferty (12,520), W.J. (Bill) King (5,250) and Derek Nuttall (4,000).

The last rites were performed at a final meeting of shareholders, at Wincham Community Centre, and then Mike Connett, through his company Beaconet Ltd, helped himself to a Christmas cracker, paying £225,000 for the Victoria Stadium, part-built at enormous cost and incalculable effort, on land the old club had purchased for £495,000. The football business, the goodwill and Vics' status as one of the oldest football clubs in the world, was knocked down to Hallco 1081 Ltd/Northwich Victoria Football Club (2004) Ltd, for a pitiful £5,000. The Vics, The Trickies, sold for a mess of pottage.

During the remainder of the season, the old club continued to compete in the Conference as "Northwich Victoria (in administration)" and, according to a later report by Begbies, Mike Connett was to contribute towards trading losses, to "steady the business". One message boarder extolled: "I think Mr Connett has worked a miracle. It's an extremely good business deal for a man who clearly knows how to make money. Mr Connett is the only winner here, but he was the one who wanted the club months ago, could have been the one to have stopped administration; stopped the club losing ten points, but why didn't he? Because he knew, by letting it go, he would get it for a song. Shrewd, or what?"

Chapter 8

MIKE Connett was a man on a mission to complete the Victoria Stadium and the repercussions were to be catastrophic for the long-term future of Northwich Victoria. Apparently, no other serious purchasers were in the frame, the price had not been tested on the market, and, consequently, he snapped up the ground for a song. A formal transfer, to his family-owned company Beaconet Ltd, took place on December 23, 2004, by which time he had already received a positive response from the Football Stadium Improvement Fund concerning the outstanding £250,000 grant which, when it finally filtered through, more than covered the full sum he had laid out for the stadium and the football goodwill/assets. Manna from heaven, and all Beaconet had to do, in order to satisfy what can only be described as the F.S.I.F.'s cavalier attitude, was commit to abide by the grant terms and conditions imposed on the old club, and demonstrate that a lease was in place for NVFC (2004). A F.S.I.F. spokesman: "For any offer we make (and grant payments we release), F.S.I.F. insists that the applicant, or applicants, have security of tenure of the site, which in this case was Beaconet Ltd who were offering a 15-year lease to the newly-formed club (NVFC 2004)."

Everything concerning the grant transfer and the lease remains a haze of confusion, but as the F.S.I.F. correctly points out, the stadium was completed with the help of the grant, and this should have been for the benefit of the club and its supporters.

Of course, Mike Connett developed the Victoria Stadium way beyond the basic level the directors of the old club had envisaged. The restaurants, and other additional amenities, were principally incorporated within the main stand infrastructure, although, in the absence of available accounts, it is impossible to determine the precise cost. All that can be said, is that the former directors

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had estimated it would cost £600,000 to complete, whereas Mike Connett's plans were far more grandiose, and when, four years later, Beaconet Ltd was wound-up, the company had debts exceeding £1 million.

This was in the future as Mike Connett set about creating his dream stadium, to meet the Conference deadline of May 31, 2005. Work had fallen behind schedule, in spite of the valiant efforts of an intrepid band of volunteers, and so Rod Stitch's company, Mid Cheshire Construction, was engaged to expedite matters and, soon, everyone connected with the club was on a high, especially the supporters whose optimism was reflected in the message boards. "The VS is going to be much better than originally planned... NVFC enter the most positive period of their history... Money will be no problem, the more Mr C. puts in, the more he will make as crowds swell and business thrives... After 130 long years we have finally got rid of our financial worries."

To add to the euphoria, Steve Burr, incredibly, managed to keep Vics clear of the Conference drop zone, a feat that had seemed impossible when the league invoked the ten-point penalty due to the club entering into administration. The run-in to safety reached a climax early in April, with four victories in ten days, Barnet 2-0, Forest Green 2-1, Exeter 3-2, Leigh RMI 2-0. Vics were later named "Club of the Year 2004/05" for what was described as "one of the most remarkable relegation escapes in living memory". This was Vics, however, and nothing, absolutely nothing, was ever straightforward. Behind the scenes, there were mounting problems and, at the end of April, both local newspapers reported that Dave Stone and Rod Stitch had been banned from the club, and that commercial manager, Brian Edge, had resigned. The Northwich Chronicle further stated that a Cheshire businessman had lodged a £500,000 bid to buy out Vics, to which Mike Connett retorted: "What offer? There's been no offer. You are talking to idiots."

The dramatic banning of two former chairman was not so easily brushed off. Rod Stitch had fallen out big-style with Mike Connett over what he claimed to be "non-payment" for work carried out on the Victoria Stadium. Rod Stitch says he was left with little option, other than to pull his workforce, and this precipitated the ban. "Stewards were instructed to prevent our entering Wincham Park, so we offered to pay at the turnstile, and stood on the ter-

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races.” After the match, a further confrontation took place in the Wincham Park social club when Mike Connett demanded that Rod Stitch and Dave Stone be evicted. Rod Stitch: “The Witton chairman, Mike Worthington, intervened, said it was Witton Albion’s social club and that we were always welcome.” According to Rod Stitch, he did, eventually, manage to obtain an initial down-payment of about £70,000 from Mike Connett. “Some of the rest came in dribs and drabs, payment in lieu, more or less as agreed,” he added.

The fall-out from this unsavoury episode was to continue throughout Mike Connett’s involvement with Northwich Victoria and it soured the relationship with many supporters. Rod Stitch had looked into Mike Connett’s business affairs and four members of the Supporters Trust tackled the owner, head-on, with their concerns for the future. A frank discussion ensued and James Wood, Mark Edgeley and Richard Ward, the “VS3” as they became known, were, subsequently, banned.

By now, Mike Connett was a familiar “news name” in the North West and the PR wheels were in overdrive. Reflecting on his acquisition of Northwich Vics and the Victoria Stadium, he told the BBC Website: “I came to see if there was anything I could do and one thing led to another. I had recently sold some property and had some cash available. You can't just put money into a football club. Commercially it has got to be viable.” He said he had already spent around £2 million in rescuing the club and getting the new ground project back on track. “It's a serious operation, up to Football League standard.” Big ideas and big money, and to raise funds, Mike Connett’s Beaconet Ltd was very soon heavily mortgaging the stadium, principally through Clydesdale

NATIONWIDE CONFERENCE							
FINAL TABLE 2004/05							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Barnet	42	26	8	8	90	44	86
Hereford United	42	21	11	10	68	41	74
Carlisle United	42	20	13	9	74	37	73
Aldershot Town	42	21	10	11	68	52	73
Stevenage Borough	42	22	6	14	65	52	72
Exeter City	42	20	11	11	71	50	71
Morecambe	42	19	14	9	69	50	71
Woking	42	18	14	10	58	45	68
Halifax Town	42	19	9	14	74	56	66
Accrington Stanley	42	18	11	13	72	58	65
Dagenham & Red	42	19	8	15	68	60	65
Crawley Town	42	16	9	17	50	50	57
Scarborough	42	14	14	14	60	46	56
Gravesend & N'fleet	42	13	11	18	58	64	50
Tamworth	42	14	11	17	53	63	50
Burton Albion	42	13	11	18	50	66	50
York City	42	11	10	21	39	66	43
Canvey Island	42	9	15	18	53	65	42
Northwich Victoria	42	14	10	18	58	72	42
Forest Green	42	6	15	21	41	81	33
Farnborough	42	6	11	25	35	89	29
Leigh RMI	42	4	6	32	31	98	18

Tamworth deducted 3pts.
 Northwich Victoria deducted 10 pts.

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Bank, and it is little wonder the directors of the old club were irked. Sixteen lenders had turned them down when they wanted only £350,000. What they had lacked was Mike Connett's guile to woo the money-men with, according to Dave Thomas, champagne dining and a bevy of lap-top dancers in his best VS restaurant.

Of greater concern to Vics' fans was the thought of life in the Conference North. Despite the monumental effort to avoid relegation, the club was dumped out of the top flight, not through any problems associated with the new stadium, but because it was leased, by Beaconet Ltd, to Northwich Victoria (2004) which, as far as the FA and the Conference were concerned, did not exist as a football club. They only recognised Northwich Victoria (in administration). If this was so, why had the Football Stadium Improvement Fund, chaired by Dave Richards, a serving FA luminary, agreed to transfer to a non-football company, Beaconet Ltd, the grant balance of £250,000, to complete a stadium for a football club that, technically, did not exist?

Who said football was a simple game? Rules, regulations and technicalities are the lifeblood of football officialdom and there was no escaping that Vics, in one form or another, were in serious breach of rules, and supporters were divided as to whether the blame lay with Mike Connett, or the administrators, Begbies Traynor, or, indeed, both parties. Following the Conference decision, Begbies sought a "significant amount of detailed legal opinion" and lodged a 40-page appeal that was, subsequently, withdrawn when the club agreed to accept relegation into the Conference North. However, it had been a hugely expensive exercise and it was to seriously impact upon the final dividend that creditors of the old club were to receive.

Relegation to the Conference North was a hammer-blow, another appalling injustice to add to the litany of woes heaped upon supporters, although, on this occasion, there was at least an antidote to deflect the worst excesses of depression. On July 7, 2005, against Greenock Morton, the eagerly anticipated opening of the Victoria Stadium took place. It had been a long, hard road, five years since the old club's shareholders voted to sell the Drill Field. In his programme notes, Mike Connett commented: "I know how much all of you have been waiting for this historic moment when Northwich Victoria Football Club

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play our first game at our new stadium. I sincerely hope that tonight's game kicks off a fantastic new chapter in the club's history."

To match the mood of celebration, Vics won 2-0. However, the attendance was disappointing and there was general dismay when Mike Connett confirmed the banning of the VS3, James Wood, Mark Edgeley and Richard Ward. The newspapers reported that, at the next friendly, against Port Vale, James Wood was refused admission to the game, and events took a farcical twist when he tried to watch proceedings through

the railings, prior to departing over the canal, at which point, stewards were dispatched to stand guard on the canal bridge, in case of his return. The acrimony continued unabated and even the Supporters Trust's best efforts hit a brick wall. In November, the trust arranged a meeting with Mike Connett who claimed the VS3, whilst airing their concerns about the future of the club, had made a personal attack against himself and his family. The three fans denied this was their intention and, to clear up any misunderstanding, offered to apologise through a joint-statement, the wording of which then became a further bone of contention. Both sides beat a hasty retreat to their trenches and a "Ban-of-the-Month" award seemed appropriate, with Rod Stitch, Dave Stone, Brian Edge, James Wood, Mark Edgeley and Richard Ward vying to be the first recipient. Another in the running was John Buckley who would never forget his first, chance encounter with Mike Connett: "I held out my hand and said, cheerily, 'John Buckley, Northwich Chronicle.' 'Fuck off,' he said."

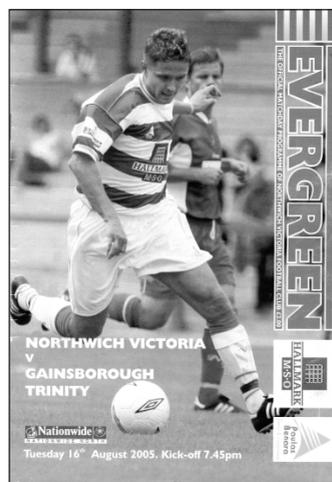
Every football club's support ebbs and flows according to the tides of fortune and, generally, as long as results favour their team, most fans are oblivious to the nuances of club politics, and so it was as Vics began to enjoy unprecedented and forgiving success during the 2005/06 season. The new sta-

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dium was shaping up and, from the very first home fixture, a 2-0 victory over Gainsborough Trinity, the Conference North certainly proved to everybody's liking. By Christmas, Vics had played twenty league and FA Cup games and lost only once. The Gainsborough programme – Derek Nuttall back in the fold, listed as a director, team secretary, and president – gave Mike Connett an opportunity to publicly thank his staff and loyal helpers who had worked tirelessly on the stadium. “None of this would have been possible without the backing of many Northwich Victoria supporters over the last twelve weeks. My full-time staff, Ian Massey (Site Manager), General Manager, Dave Thomas, and Joe Biddle (Groundsman and much more!) have been fully behind the Victoria Stadium project. In the site office I am indebted to Len, Bill, Doug, Arthur, John, Alan and Reg for all their continuous help. Walton Bowyer and Pete Wythenshawe, in particular, ensured we made the stadium ‘right’ for the inspection on May 31. To the volunteers, too numerous to mention by name, but from the infamous ‘Wallgang’ to the taskforce securing the last bolt on the last seat, I am so very much indebted to you all.”

Not everyone was reassured by the back-slapping cordiality and one anonymous doubter penned a rather prophetic missive: “I can't help feeling that Mr Connett will be laughing all the way to the bank. He's managed to get loads of work done gratis. NVFC have no assets. They are leasing the ground, with the money going to Mr Connett's business. NVFC will have no source of income from the stadium, other than gate money. Without assets, and with no income streams other than football, it will be very difficult to maintain the current position.”

Did anyone really care at this moment? Vics were setting the Conference North on fire and a mouthwatering FA Cup tie was in the offing.



The Victoria Stadium's first Conference North fixture, Tuesday August 16, 2005.

Chapter 9

BY the start of 2006, money was finally on the table from Northwich Victoria Football Club's CVA, but nobody was jumping for joy. Creditors were to get 15.594p in the £, about half the dividend the administrators had originally forecast, due, they said, to unexpected problems associated with the appeal over Vics' enforced relegation from the Nationwide Conference. For the full period of administration, Begbies Traynor, and the solicitors, Halliwells, of Manchester, together, accrued charges of approximately £210,000, but settled for a self-imposed cap of just over £100,000, thus leaving £93,803 for distribution amongst creditors, basically £93,803 out of £2,125,000 Northwich Victoria Football Club had received for the Drill Field.



Mike Connett, a news name with his “£2M rescue package”.

Still, the broad sunlit uplands of the Stadium of Light beckoned for the new Northwich Vics as 3,500 supporters began booking their tickets for an historic FA Cup 3rd Round encounter at Sunderland. With players attired in smart suits, and sponsored by Rod Stitch's Mid Cheshire Construction Company, this was to be a day out of all days out, a “cup final” of Wembleyesque proportions. None, in the name of Vics, had previously aspired to such dizzy heights as a Premiership club and it was testimony to an outstanding team being built by Steve Burr and his assistant, Dave Moss. In earlier rounds, Vics had defeated Frickley (a) 4-1, North Ferriby (h) 1-0, Morecambe (a) 3-1, and Woking (h replay) 2-1. Ultimately, of course, there was an enormous gap for Vics to bridge and, though never outclassed, they looked unlikely to pull off

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The Vics' squad line-up for the historic cup-tie at Sunderland.

a shock after falling behind to a Neill Collins' goal in the sixth minute. The Wearsiders went on to win 3-0.

Sunderland: Davis; Hoyte, Stubbs, N.Collins, D.Collins; Lawrence, Whitehead (Welsh 85), Miller, Arca; Le Tallec (Murphy 79), Stead. Vics: Rogers; McCarthy, Payne, Charnock, Chapman (Sale 79); Mayman (Bryne 72), Carr, Elliott, Roca (Devlin 83); Allan, Brayson. Attendance: 19,323.

The following is extracted from an atmospheric article written after the game by Tony Francis, of the Daily Telegraph:

“I'll be surprised if Arthur doesn't kick-start the gang-mower this morning. The retired master butcher won't be alone either. Bill, a former secondary school headmaster from Manchester, will be applying the domestos to the club toilets, while Walton, erstwhile engineering manager at ICI, fills in the forms for yet another grant application. He's already been credited with securing £500,000 from the Football Foundation. Yes, the Northwich Victoria Road Show goes on despite their eventual removal from the FA Cup. There's a new stadium to be completed, a 50-bed hotel and a marina to be built – not to mention the little matter of winning promotion back to the Nationwide Conference. Arthur, Bill and Walton are the Last of the Summer Wine. Part of the owner, Mike Connett's, hidden band of volunteers. ‘They're the ones who

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made me buy the club,' said the man who once ran one of Manchester's hottest nightspots and compounded his fortune by selling a company which shredded confidential documents. The 53-year-old sat in the front row of the directors' box with his girlfriend, Sue, pinching themselves that the Vics had made it to the Stadium of Light, even if they were humbled. The Summer Wine Boys enjoyed the proudest moment of their Northwich lives..."

Around the corner there was even greater glory as Vics stormed to the Conference North title on the back of a record-breaking run of victories, culminating in a 3-1 victory over closest rivals, Stafford Rangers, on the penultimate Saturday of the season. A Victoria Stadium crowd of 3,154 witnessed the crowning moment, the first championship since the Cheshire League title of 1956/57, whilst, for Steve Burr, it was the seventh championship of his career, four as a player, three as a manager with different clubs. "This is definitely, definitely, the best," he beamed.

The Vics' line-up versus Stafford was: Rogers; Battersby, Handyside, Charnock, Garner; McCarthy (Roca 84), Carr, Elliot, Williams (Byrne 87); Allan, Brayson (Sale 26). Goalscorers: Jonny Allan (2), Chris Williams.

In the afterglow, Mike Connett was busy rolling out his latest plans to the press, and anticipating a return to the Nationwide Conference: "We are going to carry on from here and we're looking to make it into the Football League play-offs next season." A sports clinic, two executive suites, six executive boxes, Italian and Spanish restaurants and a piano bar would, he promised, be finished in time for the kick-off, and then all-weather pitches, canal-side pub, marina and hotel were to be developed. The Manchester Evening News had earlier reported: "Salford-born Mr Connett was asked to leave the terraces and make a B-line for the boardroom to save the club, as well as saving his goalkeeper son, Ben's football career. Now he has ploughed £2 million into the club to get the new Victoria Stadium up and running and providing support to manager Steve Burr's team. Mr Connett expects to spend a further £2.5 million..."

A "smokescreens and mirrors" exponent as far as Vics were concerned, Mike Connett liked to project himself as an immensely wealthy, godfather figure, and, no doubt, he lapped it up when Chris Williams, whilst celebrat-

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ing his goal against Stafford Rangers, revealed a t-shirt with “Get me on that!” emblazoned above a picture of a boat. The midfielder explained afterwards: “The chairman promised us a holiday on his yacht if we won the title today.” And when Clive Penny, utterly disenchanted with the way things had gone over the Drill Field, donated his treasured number-plate, “N1VFC”, to the St Luke’s Hospice, it was Mike Connett, the “Roman Abramovich of Cheshire”, “Mr Northwich Vics”, who snapped it up, at an auction price of £750. Later, Mike Connett’s successor, Jim Rushe, acquired the number-plate.

Mike Connett basked in the limelight and the Victoria Stadium, which, under a sponsorship deal, he renamed the “Marston Arena”, was to be his masterpiece, his milch cow, his “pension fund”, at the centre of a restaurant and leisure complex fronted by Northwich Victoria. The stadium would turn out to be superb and, at first, the restaurants did a roaring trade, but as commercial manager, Dave Thomas, reflects: “They were the business, but who wanted to look out of the windows on a cement works and a chemical plant?” And, therein, lay the prob-

lem. Mike Connett, of course, saw enormous potential, but if potential existed, then why hadn’t a prowling leisure/hotel company acquired the site, long before Derek Nuttall and Vics began to take an interest in 2000? Location is the be-all and end-all for leisure/hotel companies and they would have run a mile from this particular location. Still, there was no stopping Mike Connett as he continued to seek planning permission to increase stadium capacity to 10,000 and beyond. At the same time he was berating Northwich folk for not “getting off their backsides” and supporting the club: “Nobody else in the 130-year history of the club has supported them like I have, and the fans

CONFERENCE NORTH FINAL TABLE 2005/06							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Northwich Victoria	42	29	5	8	97	49	92
Stafford Rangers	42	25	10	7	68	34	85
Nuneaton Borough	42	22	11	9	68	43	77
Droylsden	42	20	12	10	80	56	72
Harrogate Town	42	22	5	15	66	56	71
Kettering Town	42	19	10	13	63	49	67
Stalybridge Celtic	42	19	9	14	74	54	66
Worcester City	42	16	14	12	58	46	62
Moor Green	42	15	16	11	67	64	61
Hinckley United	42	14	16	12	60	55	58
Hyde United	42	15	11	16	68	61	56
Hucknall Town	42	14	13	15	56	54	55
Workington	42	14	13	15	60	62	55
Barrow	42	12	11	19	62	67	47
Lancaster City	42	12	11	19	52	66	47
Gainsborough	42	11	13	18	45	65	46
Alfreton Town	42	10	15	17	46	58	45
Vauxhall Motors	42	12	7	23	50	71	43
Worksop Town	42	10	11	21	46	71	41
Redditch United	42	9	12	21	52	78	39
Leigh RMI	42	9	13	20	45	79	39
Hednesford	42	7	14	21	42	87	35

Leigh RMI deducted 1pt.

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Something to cheer: Mark Sale and the Vics' team celebrate winning the Conference North championship.



Cheshire League champions 1956/57. Back (l-r): A.Simcock, P.Willdigg, L.Mellor, R.Hancock, H.Hodges, A.Mullard, R.Adams, C.Cunningham, W.Kay. Front: J.Boothway (Manager), P.Burns, L.Barber, E.Williams, T.Brown, M.Hulligan, A.Crompton (Trainer). Inset: M.Jones.

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need to give something back,” he told the Northwich Guardian. Rod Stitch had pleaded for, and seldom managed to get, 1,500 at the Drill Field and Mike Connett was dreaming of average gates of 1,700 at Wincham. Looking back on the Connett years, Rod Stitch shakes his head: “He was spending silly money – it didn’t make sense.”

Wherever the “silly money” was coming from, Northwich Victoria (2004) was £170,000 in debt at year-end July 2006, the first hint that the wheel was turning full circle, that the new club was racking up debts at a rate commensurate with the old. The £170,000 had accumulated over less than two years of trading, initially in tandem with NVFC (in administration), and Mike Connett was anxious to point out that losses amounted to only £36,000 during 2005/06. However, this had been abnormal, once-in-a-lifetime year, a championship-winning team and hefty gate receipts from a 3rd Round FA Cup tie at Sunderland.

Success on the field was papering over the cracks. Steve Burr was named Conference North “Manager of the Year”, Jonny Allan “Best Player” and Vics’ exile was brought to a conclusion by formal re-admission into the Nationwide Conference. There was also Sir Alex Ferguson’s formal opening of the stadium to look forward to, accompanied by friendly game against a Manchester United XI. In the meantime, the Registrar of Companies posted the following sad notice:

*Dissolved: Northwich Victoria Football Club Company Limited
– This company was struck off the Register under Section 652(5)
of the Companies Act 1985 on 15 August 2006 and dissolved by
notice in the London Gazette dated 22 August 2006.*

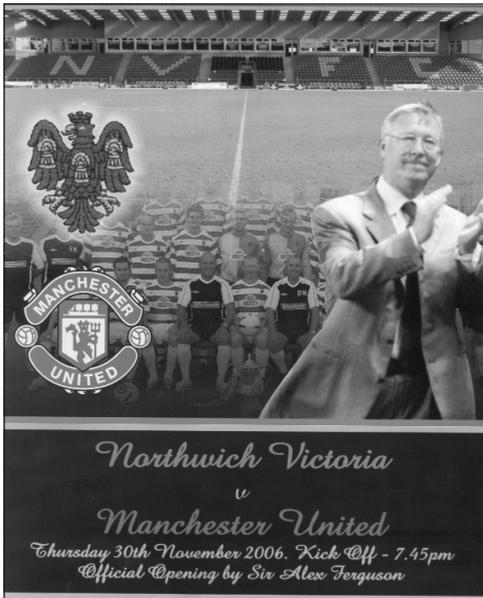
Born in 1920, died in 2006, there was neither wreath, nor headstone, to mark the passing of the old company.

Back in the Conference for the 2006/07 season, Mike Connett’s Vics were finding life difficult and, in the FA Cup 1st Round, they were cruelly exposed by an in-form and ruthless Brighton & Hove Albion, at the Withdean Stadium. The score was 8-0, the first time Vics had conceded eight since a hammering at Altrincham, in January 1969, although, on that occasion, they had, at least, managed a goal, from full-back Johnny Leigh.

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The red carpet rolled out, at the end of November, for Sir Alex Ferguson and Manchester United, and in the Official Opening programme, the great man commented: “I first received a letter from Northwich Victoria Secretary, Derek Nuttall, inviting me to officially open the superb new Victoria Stadium back in 2003. I had no hesitation in accepting the kind offer for I consider it an honour to be here, at what I consider to be the beginning of a new era for Northwich Victoria Football Club. Owner Mike Connett has built tremendous facilities here in Northwich that all all the area can be proud of and he has had the foresight to realise that football clubs cannot survive on football alone, and needs restaurants, bars and executive suites to support it.”

Mike Connett: “It seems a long time since my early meeting with the old directors to rescue the club, but the ‘vision’ in those early days has now taken shape and can be seen by one and all tonight. Of course, there have been sceptics who shook their heads when Italian and Spanish restaurants, private boxes,



Official opening of the Victoria Stadium. Was Sir Alex Ferguson thinking of Vics when his biography came to be titled, “Football – Bloody Hell”?

sports bars, executive bars, cocktail lounges, were planned, but look around the stadium now and they are all completed. Phase two is now in the pipeline, which will include all-weather pitches, marina, 20,000 sq. ft. office block, sixty-bedroom hotel and an all-seater covered stand at the canal end of the stadium. The ‘Stadium of Vision’ is now here and growing.”

Long-in-the-tooth terrace realists might have reminded both Mike Connett and Sir Alex that this was Northwich Victoria, this was an industrial estate in Wincham, and this was the king in his new clothes.

Agonising defeat by Kidder-

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minster Harriers, in the second leg of the FA Trophy semi-final, Saturday March 17, 2007, was the precise moment when the bubble finally began to burst on Mike Connett's short-lived footballing adventure. A final and the christening of "new" Wembley was his last great hope, and, when it all went wrong, the club's future, once again, hung by a slender thread. Vics came close, but not close enough, following the sort of impressive run that had previously taken them to three memorable trophy finals. Farsley Celtic, Eastbourne, Histon and Ebbsfleet were all dispatched and Kidderminster remained the last formidable barrier before the Wembley Way.

NATIONWIDE CONFERENCE FINAL TABLE 2006/07							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dagenham & Red	46	28	11	7	93	48	95
Oxford United	46	22	15	9	66	33	81
Morecambe	46	23	12	11	64	46	81
York City	46	23	11	12	65	45	80
Exeter City	46	22	12	12	67	48	78
Burton Albion	46	22	9	15	52	47	75
Gravesend & Nor.	46	21	11	14	63	56	74
Stevenage Borough	46	20	10	16	76	66	70
Aldershot Town	46	18	11	17	64	62	65
Kidderminster	46	17	12	17	43	50	63
Weymouth	46	18	9	19	56	73	63
Rushden & Diam.	46	17	11	18	58	54	62
Northwich Victoria	46	18	4	24	51	69	58
Forest Green	46	13	18	15	59	64	57
Woking	46	15	12	19	56	61	57
Halifax Town	46	15	10	21	55	62	55
Cambridge Utd.	46	15	10	21	57	66	55
Crawley Town	46	17	12	17	52	52	53
Grays Athletic	46	13	13	20	56	55	52
Stafford Rangers	46	14	10	22	49	71	52
Altrincham	46	13	12	21	53	67	51
Tamworth	46	13	9	24	43	61	48
Southport	46	11	14	21	57	67	47
St Albans City	46	10	10	26	57	89	40

Crawley deducted 10pts.

Trailing 2-0 from the first leg, Vics surged into a two-goal lead (Matthew Shaw and Carlos Roca) only for the visitors to level in the 68th minute. A penalty in the closing moments, by Mike Carr, earned Vics a 3-2 victory, but it was scant consolation and Mike Connett was incandescent with rage. Dave Thomas recalls: "The referee let us down, a clear sending-off only got a yellow card. After the game Mike Connett practically threw the referee out of the stadium, and when he heard the Kidderminster manager criticising Ben Connett, he threw him out as well."

Just a week after the semi-final disappointment, rumours began to circulate that Vics were about to go bust for a second time and, on his return from honeymoon, Mike Connett warned staff at the Victoria Stadium that they would be out of work if he didn't find a buyer in five weeks. The newspapers reported he was asking £400,000 for the club, plus a five-figure sum in annual rent to Beaconet Ltd. If he could have pulled this one off it would have been amazing, considering he had paid only £5,000 for the old club.

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Predictably, he issued a denial, but it was obvious the situation was out of control, and, by early May, he had started to close down his much-touted restaurants and then plunged into a venomous dispute with Steve Burr, initially over remarks concerning the sale of the club. The popular manager, possibly Vics' best ever, alleged that Mike Connett had tried to interfere in team matters, whilst, after one defeat, he had ranted at the players. Goalkeeper, Ben Connett also found himself in the crossfire. The Northwich Chronicle reported: "Burr says the chairman did not speak to him for two weeks after he dropped Ben Connett and reinstated Phil Senior.

He claims (Mike) Connett then took all of Senior's 'clean sheet' bonuses off him for the entire season, but Ben was paid his." Naturally, Mike Connett claimed the allegations were "spurious and untruthful" and that the manager had broken his contract, specifically to take up employment at another club.

Northwich Vics were again the laughing stock of football and over two-hundred fans signed an on-line petition asking for explanations and assurances that the club was not in financial difficulties, and would remain members of the Conference. In the meantime, the Non-League Paper reported Mike Connett driving around Stalybridge Celtic's car park, looking for Steve Burr's NVFC company car. To add to the public ridicule, a cheeky Wittoner posted a sarcastic message: "It is being bandied around that the Vics are up for sale for £1.00. I believe in value for money, so is the price negotiable?"

Steve Burr gone and the squad falling apart, Neil Redfearn became the new manager, an appointment that hardly inspired confidence, given distinctly unimpressive, if brief, records at Halifax and Scarborough. At least, there was something for supporters to smile about when Mike Connett lifted his ban on the VS3. The Distant Vics News Service commented: "... It may be no coincidence that the club has suffered dreadful publicity over the last two or three months, and sales of season tickets etc have been poor. Whatever the reason, the move is to be welcomed and closes an unsavoury chapter in the club's history."



Steve Burr

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Vics made a disastrous start to the new season and Neil Redfearn was soon on his way to a less stressful existence and, later, had two short spells as caretaker manager of Leeds United. At Vics he was replaced, in rapid succession, by Paul Warhurst and then Dino Maamria. Paul Warhurst survived for just two games and Dave Thomas, who has a fund of anecdotes, vividly remembers the dismissal of the former Blackburn Rovers' player: "He walked into the office and handed me his programme notes for the next game. He said he was going upstairs to give Mike Connett a list of players he wanted to get rid of. Within five minutes he was back, ripped up his programme notes and walked out – he'd been sacked. His list had included Ben Connett!"

Three managers, shocking results, the season not into its third month, and Mike Connett was on the warpath over declining attendances: "There was 640 here on Saturday and we gave 150 tickets away to kids. I won't keep funding the club if people from around here won't come and support them." Yet, with Derek Nuttall, he had managed to pull a rabbit out of the hat, by negotiating for Manchester United Reserves to play home fixtures at the Victoria Stadium, and, on August 30, the Reds duly kicked off against Everton Reserves. Dave Thomas: "The rent for the season was £30,000 and we were to keep all the gate money which was substantial when the likes of Liverpool came and the crowd was 3,500."

Sadly, it was too little, too late, and the local press broke the news that Vics, owing the taxman between £200,000 and £350,000, were facing a winding-up order from HM Revenue & Customs. Northwich Victoria Football Club (2004) was due to appear in London's Royal Courts of Justice and, to make matters worse, Manchester County Court had ordered the payment of a further debt, amounting to £56,000. Corporate recovery specialists, Begbies Traynor, who had previously "rescued" the football club and the Victoria Stadium, were again called in, and, if administration was to follow, Vics, bottom of the Conference and without a win, were doomed to certain relegation.

Chapter 10

WHEN the Supporters Trust gathered to consider forming a new club, it would have been an understatement to describe cash-stricken Northwich Vics (2004) as being in crisis. Mike Connett's presence in the London Courts of Justice was imminent and, with no assets against debts, there was every chance that Vics would be plunged back into administration, or wrapped up entirely.

Many fans feared this really was the "beginning of the end" and, for once, Mike Connett did not disagree. Finances were in a "desperate state," he admitted. "I have tried everything possible to keep this football club running, but every club need supporters and, at present, Northwich simply does not have enough. It's easy for people to criticise and over the last three years some of the personal abuse has been sickening. There are not enough people coming through the turnstiles. In this division we need home attendances of 1,500 just to break even and we are well short of that. If Northwich wants a football club the local community need to support it – and so do local businesses."

All connected with the club were bracing themselves for the worst possible news as members of the Supporters Trust began to identify Vics' debts, approximately £587,000. Their calculations also suggested that Mike Connett had put only £110,000 into the football club, considerably less than he had claimed. Paul Stockton, of the Supporters Trust: "One or two individuals were considering making financial investments and joining us to take over Vics. We looked at the debts and decided we would have to wait for the club to be liquidated, and then we'd start again, a new club in Evo-Stik Division 1, just as Telford had done before, and like Chester since."

In the midst of the crisis, in October 2007, the Supporters Trust convened at The Floatel, Northwich, and, out of the blue, an unfamiliar face appeared,

Jim Rushe, a Manchester businessman, who said he had reached an agreement with Mike Connett to buy the football club. Northwich Guardian: “His revelation was met with spontaneous applause.”

The following day, the Distant Vics News Service reported: “Mr Rushe was introduced to the meeting. There had been telephone contact the previous week between the Trust and Mr Rushe where he had expressed an interest in buying the football club as part of a consortium of ‘football people’. In the minutes before the meeting started he had informed the Trust that he had agreed a deal, that afternoon, with Mike Connett. Mr Rushe explained that the consortium wanted to buy the club for footballing reasons. He runs a team in the Mid Cheshire League and they want to buy into a bigger club to continue the development of the players and ideas. Their strategy is to offer creditors so much in the pound, run the club, but reduce the wage bill and make the existing Mid Cheshire League team the reserve team.”



Jim Rushe:
A born survivor.

It almost sounded too good to be true, but most supporters welcomed Jim Rushe with cautious optimism. In 2004, Mike Connett had been a similar knight in shining armour, riding to the rescue, and look how that had turned out. And who, exactly, was Jim Rushe? Well, he’d grown up in a large family in the notoriously tough Manchester district of Gorton, a born survivor, as they say, a teetotaler, but certainly not everyone’s cup of tea, and he certainly appears to suffer from the same business malaise as his recent Vics’ predecessors, in permanent fire-fighting mode, shooting from the hip. A football and Manchester United fanatic, fiercely independent, he has always, more or less, worked for himself and, before taking over at Vics, operated a go-karting business near Manchester. He was also a director of Woodley Sports Football Club for whom he ran the reserves, in the “Mid” Cheshire League, the nucleus of which eventually formed Vics’ second string, Northwich Villa.

“I’d always wanted to be involved with a decent non-league club and de-

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velop a model of nurturing young players, especially those tipped out of the professional academies. I wasn't a millionaire – I was thinking more of North West Counties level, and then Vics came up. I came to the club when it was at rock-bottom, initially to be involved in a development role working with the reserves and the junior players, but that changed quickly as the full extent of the problems, both on and off the field, started to become clear.”

As it transpired, the “consortium” basically amounted to Jim Rushe and Great Budworth businessman, Nick Bone, whose company, Encia Group Ltd, was a “UK leader in brownfield and regeneration solutions.” They were joined on the new Vics’ board by Ian Campbell, a construction engineer, and former long-standing director and chairman of Woodley Sports F.C.. Later, both Nick Bone and Ian Campbell left Vics.

On the takeover front, Jim Rushe and Nick Bone purchased Northwich Victoria FC (2004) Ltd from Mike Connett, for a nominal £1.00 and, critically, they inherited debts that turned out to be far more than expected. Even so, a decision was taken to try and “trade out” of the financial mess left by their predecessor, rather than accept administration and resurrect the football club under a new company, Northwich Victoria FC (2007) Ltd, which Jim Rushe had formally registered in October, 2007. With hindsight, this was the wrong decision and a terrible price was paid. Jim Rushe: “Things didn't get off to a very good start. On the first day I was at the stadium looking round and thinking what a special place it was. Then, two guys turned up with a writ for an unpaid debt for work carried out on the ground. As the new owners we had become responsible and we had to pay the £56,000 between us.”

Finally, on December 5, 2007, following weeks of negotiation the HM Revenue & Customs’ winding-up petition was adjourned and Jim Rushe completed the formal takeover of Northwich Victoria FC (2004). In a lengthy statement, the club announced: “The deal marks the culmination of a great deal of hard work carried out by Jim Rushe and his team and has resulted in the football club avoiding administration and the penalties that go with it. The agreements that have been finalised with the football club’s creditors now allow the Vics to have a sustainable future.”

There was further good news. Nick Bone’s Encia Group Ltd committed to

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a five-year shirt sponsorship deal, and, more importantly, the football club had negotiated a twenty-five-year lease with Beaconet Ltd, to secure Vics' tenancy of the Victoria Stadium, i.e. ten years beyond the fifteen stipulated by the Football Stadia Improvement Fund when Mike Connett had taken over in 2004.

It was not all a bed of roses, however. Jim Rushe: "We were getting 700 supporters and we had a £10,000 weekly wage bill. We had to, personally, keep covering the shortfall. Then I pulled the plug on the £17,000 transfer of Gareth Seddon, from Hyde. We just couldn't afford it."

Dino Maamria was handed an 18-month contract to maintain Conference status, a tall order given an appalling start to the season that had brought only three points from the first sixteen games, so justifying bookies' odds of 200-1 to avoid relegation. Fortunately, the manager was unfazed and, with a raft of new players, masterminded what had seemed impossible, a 2007/08 Houdini-like escape to match the Steve Burr-inspired exploits of three years earlier.

At last, and though huge debts remained and Mike Connett's legacy lingered to alienate many would-be supporters, Vics appeared to be turning the corner, and even Wayne Rooney, Cristiano Ronaldo and Carlos Tevez pulled

on their boots, in February 2008, for cameo filming, at the Victoria Stadium, of a £multi-million Nike advertisement. Whatever his business failings, Mike Connett was, unquestionably, commercially savvy when it came to exploiting his assets for financial gain, and the sportswear giants chose the VS as one of three European locations, with Arsenal's Emirates Stadium and Barcelona's Nou Camp. The famous film director, Guy Ritchie, husband of Madonna, spent the best part of a week rubbing shoulders with the VS owner who, later in the year, went on

BLUE SQUARE PREMIER LEAGUE							
FINAL TABLE 2007/08							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pt
Aldershot Town	46	31	8	7	82	48	101
Cambridge United	46	25	11	10	68	41	86
Torquay United	46	26	8	12	83	57	86
Exeter City	46	22	17	7	83	58	83
Burton Albion	46	23	12	11	79	56	81
Stevenage Borough	46	24	7	15	82	55	79
Histon	46	20	12	14	76	67	72
Forest Green R.	46	19	14	13	76	59	71
Oxford United	46	20	11	15	56	48	71
Grays Athletic	46	19	13	14	58	47	70
Ebbsfleet United	46	19	12	15	65	61	69
Salisbury City	46	18	14	14	70	60	68
Kidderminster Harr.	46	19	10	17	74	57	67
York City	46	17	11	18	71	74	62
Crawley Town	46	19	9	18	73	67	60
Rushden & Diam.	46	15	14	17	55	55	59
Woking	46	12	17	17	53	61	53
Weymouth	46	11	13	22	53	73	46
Northwich Victoria	46	11	11	24	52	78	44
Halifax Town	46	12	16	18	61	70	42
Altrincham	46	9	14	23	56	82	41
Farsley Celtic	46	10	9	27	48	86	39
Stafford Rangers	46	5	10	31	42	99	25
Droylsden	46	5	9	32	46	103	24

Halifax 10 pts deducted
Crawley 6 pts deducted

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to produce a real-life drama of his own.

This was the day, in October 2008, when the lights went out, literally, on an FA Cup-tie featuring Northwich Vics and AFC Telford, staged at the Victoria Stadium. Due to an enormous, unpaid electricity bill, some reports quote £84,000, Mike Connett was running the stadium power, including the floodlights, off a generator that, just before kick-off, spectacularly exploded, sending clouds of black smoke billowing across the pitch. A back-up generator then failed and with Vics leading 1-0 at half-time, the referee abandoned the game. As Dave Thomas recalls, the paying fans, especially five-hundred from Telford, were furious: “There was nearly a riot. Mike Connett was hemmed in the cabin and fans were slinging meat pies at it. He turned white with fear.” To add to the farce, and Mike Connett’s misery, Manchester United Reserves immediately switched all their home fixtures to Altrincham’s Moss Lane, and a vital source of income disappeared with them.

It had been mooted for some time that Jim Rushe was on the verge of purchasing the Victoria Stadium, for what seemed an incredibly over-inflated price, allegedly £3 million, demanded by Mike Connett, on behalf of Beaconet Ltd. Jim Rushe declared he had found a backer and, if the deal went through, he might not be in sole charge of Vics. He said: “To move to the next level we have to have affluent people who can write cheques themselves, or who are in a position to borrow large amounts of money. At the moment this club has a poor reputation for managing its finances and so can’t borrow under any circumstances.”

The backer and the affluence failed to materialise. Jim Rushe did not buy the stadium and Clydesdale Bank ordered business advisory specialists, Deloitte Touche, to commence proceedings to seize the Victoria Stadium. Mike Connett’s company had borrowed from three lenders using the stadium land as surety, and the debt alone to Clydesdale Bank was well in excess of £1 million. He had twice managed to stave off formal winding-up and was allowed to continue operating Beaconet’s business from the Victoria Stadium, at least until January 2009, principally collecting rent from Vics, said to be £1,000 per



Dino Maamria

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game.

Meanwhile, Jim Rushe had other troubles to worry about. Vics were running out of money as a string of disappointing results and poor attendances evaporated pre-season confidence and, consequently, the entire squad was placed on half-pay and manager, Dino Maamria, was fired. He was replaced by his assistant, Mike Marsh, but this didn't work out either and, underlining why such rapid hire-and-fire reaction is often a bellwether for football clubs in trouble, Steve King was named as the sixth manager in just two years.

Once again, problems were escalating at an alarming rate and fans were beginning to wonder if Jim Rushe's dreams were heading down the same plug-hole as those of Mike Connett. In order to pay players' unpaid wages, he asked for, and didn't get, an £18,000 loan from the Supporters Trust, and then the FA weighed in over the non-payment of gate money, to AFC Telford, due from the re-arranged cup-tie that had followed the farce of Mike Connett's exploding generator. On this occasion the Supporters Trust agreed to help and Paul Stockton, personally, delivered a cheque for £2859.75 to AFC Telford.

January 2009 was unfolding into a month of infamy in the continuing decline and debacle of Northwich Victoria. Mike Connett's company, Beaconet Ltd, and Jim Rushe's NVFC (2004), were individually facing winding-up petitions, on the same date, in different cases, in the same London High Court. It was unbelievable, as was Mike Connett's pre-emptive strike. He locked Vics



Vics' fans make their feelings known outside the Victoria Stadium, in January 2009. One said: "This will probably be the last chance, fingers crossed, we get to say goodbye to Connett in a way he deserves."

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out of the Victoria Stadium, i.e. owner, manager, players, officials, the entire shooting match, and proceeded to remove just about everything that could be easily removed, including CCTV, public address system and generator. He also demanded £2,000, in cash, before he would allow the football club to collect the first-team strip. Deloitte Touche, selling the stadium on behalf of Clydesdale Bank, was unable to intervene and when Cheshire Trading Standards issued a prohibition notice, Vics were, humiliatingly, forced into thirty-seven days of ground-begging and sharing before being allowed by Deloitte to return to the stadium.

On the legal front, Beaconet Ltd finally got its comeuppance in the high court and, a month later, Mike Connett was personally declared bankrupt. His debts, it was said, included a six-figure tax bill. All links with the man who had promised to transform Vics into the “Chelsea of Cheshire” were severed and, the HMRC winding-up order deferred against Vics (2004), Jim Rushe renewed efforts to purchase the Victoria Stadium. Property agent, G.V.A.Grimley, on behalf of Deloitte Touche, Clydesdale Bank and other creditors, was initially asking £1.6 million for what it described as “... an excellent facility, with development opportunities, in an ideal location for a university or sports club seeking new facilities, or for an existing football club looking for a new stadium, or training ground.”

Mysteriously, all mention of a ground lease vanished into the ether, legal eagles conveniently suggesting the arrangement had lapsed because Beaconet Ltd had gone bust. Vics were not protected under the 1954 Landlord and Tenant Act and so, Jim Rushe had to be satisfied with a “licence to occupy” which, at least, allowed the club to return to the Victoria Stadium, although he still had to finance replacement of essential footballing fixtures and fittings.

BLUE SQUARE PREMIER LEAGUE							
FINAL TABLE 2008/09							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pt
Burton Albion	46	27	7	12	81	52	88
Cambridge United	46	24	14	8	65	39	86
Histon	46	23	14	9	78	48	83
Torquay United	46	23	14	9	72	47	83
Stevenage Borough	46	23	12	11	73	54	81
Kidderminster .	46	23	10	13	69	48	79
Oxford United	46	24	10	12	72	51	77
Kettering Town	46	21	13	12	50	37	76
Crawley Town	46	19	14	13	77	55	70
Wrexham	46	18	12	16	64	48	66
Rushden & Diam.	46	16	15	15	61	50	63
Mansfield Town	46	19	9	18	57	55	62
Eastbourne Borough	46	18	6	22	58	70	60
Ebbsfleet United	46	16	10	20	52	60	58
Altrincham	46	15	11	20	49	66	56
Salisbury City	46	14	13	19	54	64	55
York City	46	11	19	16	47	51	52
Forest Green R.	46	12	16	18	70	76	52
Grays Athletic	46	14	10	22	44	64	52
Barrow	46	12	15	19	51	65	51
Woking	46	10	14	22	37	60	44
Northwich Victoria	46	11	10	25	56	75	43
Weymouth	46	11	10	25	45	86	43
Lewes	46	6	6	34	28	89	24

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Steve King had just celebrated his first win as manager, at play-off chasing Kidderminster Harriers, a result that prised Vics off the bottom of the league, though it didn't save his job, and Andy Preece was appointed into a caretaker role, until the end of the 2008/09 season. The former Worcester City player-manager was unable to prevent relegation, but, such were improved performances and results, he was offered a one-year contract and became the best Vics' boss since Steve Burr.



Andy Preece

As the season drew to a close, a newly-formed Jim Rushe company, Northwich Victoria Developments Ltd, exchanged contracts and handed over a deposit to Deloitte Touche, to acquire the Victoria Stadium. The balance, approximately, £1.35 million, was to be financed through a mortgage and, in the long-term, Jim Rushe said he intended to return the VS to the football club's ownership. Was it time for rejoicing? Not likely, for as Tommy Docherty, that doyen of football cynicism, once remarked: "When one door closes, another slams shut in your face." And doors were certainly slammed in Jim Rushe's face: "The mortgage was in place. I'd shook hands on a deal, the money was promised and then withdrawn because of the moratorium brought on by the banking crisis. I tried all the financial institutions. I couldn't borrow the money anywhere. I met with all sorts who appeared to offer finance, or knew how to raise the money – they were all cranks and time-wasters."

When the stadium was eventually sold from under Vics' nose, Deloitte Touche issued a statement explaining events in 2009: "Northwich Victoria Developments Ltd paid a non-returnable deposit to our solicitors. This was not a six-figures sum as has been reported, and completion did not occur on the date agreed because NVD did not have the money to do so. Since then the firm has been trying to raise the funds and, to our knowledge, approached numerous funders who, for reasons unknown to us, either declined, or withdrew their interest."

If there was a European Cup for running foul of football authority, Northwich Victoria would be guaranteed a place in the champions' league. Barely

clear of the Connett eviction disaster, Jim Rushe dropped the next bombshell. NVFC (2004) was broke and, for the second time in less than five years, the football club found itself in administration. With Nick Bone, he said, he had paid the taxman £175,000 since taking over from Mike Connett. “We’ve entered into administration voluntarily. It’s a move I had to make,” he added as he called in Lancashire-based insolvency experts, Refresh, and prepared to switch the football club under the umbrella of NVFC (2007), the company he had registered when he first appeared on the scene.

Needless to say, an overwhelming feeling of déjà vu gripped supporters as Conference chiefs began, once more, to deliberate on Vics’ plight. At the heart of the financial problems lay the Connett legacy of debts that hung around the neck of NVFC (2004) like an albatross as claims, counter-claims and threats of litigation swayed back and forth, until an edict was issued, that Vics were to be ejected entirely from the Conference.

Jim Rushe was not a man to take the decision lightly and, immediately, hired a top lawyer to contest the ruling, by way of a high-noon appeal at the Football Association headquarters, in **London’s Soho Square**. Incredibly, Vics won the day and, though some of the difficulties were of his own making, Jim Rushe, undoubtedly, pulled off a minor-miracle to preserve the club’s Conference North status, though, starting the 2009/10 season with a ten-points penalty and a transfer ban, the doom mongers were adamant it was merely delaying the inevitable.

Most thought otherwise and, for once, the newspapers and the twitterati had something to cheer. “A fantastic result – I can hardly believe it,” raved one fan. “Well done to Jim because it’s not common for the FA to uphold an appeal.” Peter Grimes, chairman of the Supporters Trust, was equally relieved: “We are really pleased about the outcome. We would like to congratulate Jim Rushe in taking the fight to the FA and winning the right to stay in the Conference.” An exalted Jim Rushe remarked: “The decision to let us stay in the Conference North with a points deduction was what we were after. I know people might not think I care as much, as I have only been here two years, but I do care just as much as anybody else attached to the club.”

For the time being, the future certainly appeared more promising, espe-

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cially as the stadium buy-out remained a strong possibility. Furthermore, Andy Preece's team, now flying the flag under Northwich Vics FC (2007), began to enjoy unexpected success, both in the Conference North and in the FA Cup, the latter generating much-needed positive publicity when former Premier League club, Charlton Athletic were pulled out of the hat, to visit the Victoria Stadium. Charlton had not previously lost to non-league opponents and, potentially this was the "giant killing" of the 1st round. An estimated 1.5 million, live television audience, witnessed Vics register the shock of the day, 1-0, thanks to a goal, nine minutes from time, by young substitute Wayne Riley. Jim Rushe described it as a "Roy of the Rovers' moment."

Vics: (4-4-1-1): Aspden; Aspin, Bailey, Brown, Kerr; Connor, Herring, Newby, Elam (Riley 75); D'Laryea; Allan (Winter 86). Subs: Vaughan, Edwards, Cadwallader, Richards, Spencer (g). Attendance: 2,153.

Oliver Brown, of the Daily Telegraph, remarked that this was what the aficionados call a "proper cup tie", and that Vics were so old, they had played Blackburn Olympic in the FA Cup of 1884. More memorably, and perhaps unknown to the national scribe, Vics had actually beaten Liverpool, in the last sixteen, in 1892/93, reached the 4th round against Oldham Athletic, in 1977, and exchanged cup blows over the years with the likes of Watford, Wigan Athletic, Blackpool, Hull City, Leyton Orient, Brighton and, more recently, Sunderland. The FA Cup is woven into the psyche of Vics' supporters and confidence was high that Lincoln City could be seen off in the 2nd round, another televised home tie. However, The Imps proved too strong and eased their way to a 3-1 victory, with Mat Bailey scoring Vics' consolation.

A more important consolation was an FA Cup prize-pot nearing £200,000



Wayne Riley celebrates scoring the decisive goal against Charlton Athletic.

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and, with the promise of most of this sum to come, Jim Rushe persuaded creditors to accept a CVA for NVFC (2004), paying back approximately one-third of the debts over a fixed period, an arrangement that instantly raised the ire of Conference bosses who railed that it was in breach of the league's financial rules. The FA, meanwhile, refused to release the cup money, because NVFC (2007) had not put everything in place to take over the football business of NVFC (2004), and then, Jim Rushe announced that, as there wasn't enough money to pay wages, he had transfer-listed every single player. Poor gates, he insisted, were at the root of the problem... "not enough people coming through the turnstiles." Over 3,500 turned up for the Lincoln cup-tie, but only 451, the lowest of the season, had watched a following midweek league fixture, at the Victoria Stadium.

Whatever was going on at NVFC (2007), or NVFC (2004) for that matter, this was the seminal moment when Jim Rushe began to lose the majority of hardcore supporters, those who had hoped, beyond hope, that he could rescue the club and set it on its way to a bright future. Some did keep faith, but even they had to admit that the situation was chaotic... the stadium uncertainty, administration, the team, transfer embargoes, appeals, fines, litigation and even the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Northwich Vics, other than in name, had morphed into an entity few could recognise from the Drill Field days when directors, shareholders and supporters had dared to dream

No-one could deny that Jim Rushe was a fighter, and fight he did, maybe as a matter of pride, maybe for personal reasons, maybe, as he said, to safeguard the club's future. He said: "I consider it a privilege to be the chairman of a football club with such a long and successful history." In any event, con-

CONFERENCE NORTH FINAL TABLE 2009/10							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Southport	40	25	11	4	91	45	86
Fleetwood Town	40	26	7	7	86	44	85
Alfreton Town	40	21	11	8	77	45	74
Workington	40	20	10	10	46	37	70
Droylsden	40	18	10	12	82	62	64
Corby Town	40	18	9	13	73	62	63
Hinckley United	40	16	14	10	60	52	62
Ilkestone Town	40	16	13	11	53	45	61
Stalybridge Celtic	40	16	7	17	71	64	55
Eastwood Town	40	15	9	16	50	55	54
Telford United	40	14	9	17	52	55	51
Northwich Victoria	40	15	13	12	62	55	48
Blyth Spartans	40	13	9	18	67	72	48
Gainsborough	40	12	11	17	50	57	47
Hyde United	40	11	12	17	45	72	45
Stafford Rangers	40	10	14	16	59	70	44
Solihull Moors	40	11	9	20	47	58	42
Gloucester City	40	12	6	22	47	59	42
Redditch United	40	10	8	22	49	83	38
Vauxhall Motors	40	7	14	19	45	81	35
Harrogate Town	40	8	6	26	41	80	30
Farsley Celtic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Northwich Vics 10 pts deducted
Farsley Celtic resigned 8/3/2010 - record expunged

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clusion of the 2009/10 season sounded the death knell on thirty years of unbroken membership in non-league's top flight. NVFC (2004) had failed to exit administration to the satisfaction of the Conference and, despite an impassioned plea, the Appeal Board of the FA Sanctions Committee endorsed the decision. Vics were expelled to the Evo-Stik Northern Premier League.

The very last Conference North game took place on April 24, 2010, a 2-1 defeat at Harrogate. Under the circumstances, Manager Andy Preece had worked wonders to maintain a mid-table position and, along the way, Vics also lifted the Cheshire Senior Cup, beating Woodley on penalties at the conclusion of a 1-1 draw. Symptomatic of the declining magic of the Cheshire Senior Cup, and indeed local football generally, only 281 attended the final.

The next stop on the line to nowhere was a return to the Northern Premier League that Vics had graced from 1968 to 1979, and supporters were soon Googling the likes of North Ferriby, Chasetown, Mickleover Sports and Stocksbridge Park Steels, clubs and venues they neither knew nor cared about when glamorous Conference encounters were in the offing at such as Torquay, Cambridge, Wrexham and York. Quickly adapting to their lower status, Andy Preece's team kicked-off with four straight victories, but then the season rather fell away to a twelfth-place finish. In the league cup, Vics lost 1-0 in the final to Ashton, but retained the Cheshire Senior Cup by defeating Altrincham 2-0, at Nantwich. Vics: Spencer; Disney, Collins, Monteiro, Fitzpatrick; Fowler, Summerskill, Riley, Peers; Phoenix, Ryan. Subs used: Evans and Preece. Both goals were scored by Dave Fitzpatrick.

EVO-STIK NORTHERN PREMIER LEAGUE FINAL TABLE 2010/11							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
F.C. Halifax Town	42	30	8	4	108	36	98
Colwyn Bay	42	24	7	11	67	56	79
Bradford P.A.	42	23	8	11	84	55	77
F.C. United	42	24	4	14	76	53	76
North Ferriby	42	22	7	13	78	51	73
Buxton	42	20	10	12	71	52	70
Kendal Town	42	21	5	16	80	77	68
Marine	42	20	7	15	74	64	67
Worksop Town	42	21	6	15	72	54	66
Chasetown	42	20	6	16	76	59	66
Matlock Town	42	20	6	16	74	59	66
Northwich Victoria	42	18	9	15	66	55	63
Stocksbridge Park	42	17	6	19	75	75	57
Ashton United	42	16	5	21	57	62	53
Mickleover Sports	42	15	7	20	70	76	52
Whitby Town	42	14	9	19	58	77	51
Nantwich Town	42	13	7	22	68	90	46
Frickley Athletic	42	11	11	20	43	68	44
Burscough	42	12	7	23	56	73	43
Hucknall Town	42	11	10	21	57	80	43
Ossett Town	42	9	5	28	45	103	32
Retford United	42	5	2	35	31	111	17

Worksop deducted 3pts

Chapter 11

SELDOME able to distinguish one excruciating blow from another, punch-drunk Vics kicked-off the 2011/12 season into their biggest crisis ever, the nightmare scenario everyone had been dreading. On Thursday January 19, 2012, the club was devastatingly evicted from the Victoria Stadium in order for Clydesdale Bank to recoup some of the enormous debt left by Mike Connett. Time had run out on Jim Rushe's promises that a consortium was "95 percent" in place to purchase the ground through Northwich Victoria Developments Ltd, and nothing had come of a £multi-million project he'd touted, involving an American marketing company and plans for a hotel, cinema and marina on the nine-acre site. Now it was all too late. Clydesdale Bank and Deloitte Touche had run out of patience and sold the stadium site to neighbouring chemical manufacturers, Thor Specialities (UK) Limited, for £598,000, a final figure, with VAT, nearing £720,000, but a long way short of Deloitte's original asking price of £1.6 million. Clydesdale Bank refused to say why the figure had been reduced, whilst Jim Rushe, quite legitimately, demanded to know why he hadn't been offered the same favourable terms. It was odd.

Deloitte Touche commented on Vics' eviction: "It is with some regret that we have come to this stage. However, after providing Northwich Victoria Developments with several years to find the required funding to acquire the stadium, this has not been forthcoming and so the principal charge-holder and their agents have been left with no option but to consider alternative offers for the site." Northwich Victoria, who had once boasted one of the world's oldest grounds, could now lay claim to the most expensive new stadium cock-up in footballing history. The Drill Field had survived circa 1875 - 2003, the Victoria Stadium 2005 - 2012.

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Meanwhile, Thor committed to hand over approximately £530,000 to Cheshire West & Chester Council, for the provision of sport in the district, principally, it was suggested, to carry out long overdue improvements to the Moss Farm complex, an undeserved windfall under the circumstances. The district's sporting public will benefit, and rightly so, but pure football funding it isn't, and, given the way Vics were picked up and dumped, in 2000, over the proposed Moss Farm stadium, it's ironic that so much money will fall into the lap of the local authority from the club's disastrous, alternative relocation. Eventually, few will know, or care, that funding came from the sweat and tears of a famous football club that graced Northwich for the best part of 120 years.

Vics played their last league game at the Victoria Stadium on January 28, 2012, a 2-1 defeat by Marine. Afterwards, the bailiffs moved in and the club moved out and, this time there was to be no reprieve. Thor Specialities had watched from the sidelines, initially expecting Vics, through Northwich Victoria Developments Ltd, to purchase and, when this had not occurred, to ground-share with Witton Albion for the 2011/12 season. Thor stated: "It was only when we became aware that Northwich Victoria had made an agreement to ground share with Witton Albion that we approached the receivers with respect to the future plans for the site."

In fact, Thor was not alone in believing that Jim Rushe had negotiated a deal with Witton Albion. Northern Premier League bosses also thought an agreement was in place, but there wasn't and this, in turn, led to Vics being fined £1,500 for breaking rules and, technically, failing to play their first scheduled home fixture of the 2011/12 season. Eventually, Thor took possession of the stadium and was prepared to allow Vics to see out the season, an offer rejected by Jim Rushe who cited "restrictive terms". He still believed the ground could be saved, but Vics were homeless and, later, when the council agreed to revert the site to "industrial" status, the final nail in the coffin was driven home to pave the way for the storage of toxic chemicals on the Victoria Stadium.

Jim Rushe could offer little comfort, other than to announce that a fact-finding meeting had taken place with Cheshire West & Chester Council, the Football Stadium Improvement Fund, Cheshire FA and the Evo-Stik League.

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He commented: “In the meantime the football club will continue to source a suitable ground between now and the end of the 2011/12 season.” He was also critical of those whom he described as a “minority of supporters who at the slightest sign of stormy waters, jump into lifeboats and start to row in the opposite direction.” He was missing the point. This was the culmination of almost twenty years of chaos, the last of the faithful waiting and praying for a miracle to save their beloved Vics, and when he was unable to raise the funds to purchase the ground, he became as guilty as the old club directors who had not alerted supporters when a similar crisis of epic proportions loomed.

Of course, Jim Rushe was the only one left in the firing line and when it was announced Vics were to be expelled from the Northern Premier League, supporters erupted into a collective show of protest at the final match of the season, against FC United of Manchester, at Bury’s Gigg Lane. Organised by fan, Mark Riding, this became dubbed as the “1874 Protest” and on eighteen minutes, and again on seventy-four minutes, the vast majority held aloft red cards to demand change. Insensitively, Jim Rushe also waved a red card of his own, apparently, he said afterwards, to protest against the protest. He added: “I’m no wiser as to what the majority of protesting fans actually want.”

It was a bewildering situation. Jim Rushe, cautiously welcomed as the latest saviour when he took control of the club from Mike Connett, had presided over an astonishing decline and, on top of this, the Victoria Stadium had turned toxic to further enflame the fury of supporters who were demanding control of Northwich Victoria. Jim Rushe, their public enemy number one, resolutely refused to budge, which is more than can be said of exasperated Northern Premier League officials who finally threw the book at Vics for failing to comply with financial rules concerning the administration of NVFC (2004) and non-payment of creditors, as agreed in a CVA of December 2009. Vics were to be expelled, at the end of the season, from all Northern Premier League football. Jim Rushe strongly objected and the FA ruled the punishment was, indeed, excessive, so Vics were not totally barred. Instead, the club was relegated, one step, to the Northern Premier League first division.

The 2011/12 season had degenerated into open warfare all round, but, at

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least, the team performed brilliantly and may well have become champions had it not been for the meteoric rise of supporter-owned, phoenix club, Chester F.C. who had recently emerged from the discredited ownership of Chester City. Ironically, it was against Vics, at the Deva Stadium, in April 2012, that Chester F.C. sealed the Northern Premier League title in a thrilling 1-1 draw, watched by a crowd of 5,009. It was Chester's second successive championship since being reformed and Vics' supporters were green with envy. The old Chester club had needed to die so that a new club could be born.

By the time of the Chester game, Andy Preece had been three months in charge of Welsh Premier League club, Airbus UK. With his assistant, Andy Morrison, he had dramatically walked out in January, during the very week Vics were turfed off the Victoria Stadium. His replacement was Stockport County's former manager, Paul Simpson, who left after a month to take a coaching role in Portugal. Martin Foyle, the ex-boss of York City, then took over until the end of the season as Vics finished in second place and were awarded the runners-up trophy.

EVO-STIK NORTHERN PREMIER LEAGUE FINAL TABLE 2011/12							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Chester	42	31	7	4	102	29	100
Northwich Victoria	42	26	8	8	73	43	83
Chorley	42	24	7	11	76	48	79
Bradford P.A.	42	24	6	12	77	49	78
Hednesford	42	21	10	11	67	49	73
F.C. United	42	21	9	12	83	51	72
Marine	42	19	9	14	56	50	66
Rushall Olympic	42	17	10	15	52	51	61
North Ferriby	42	16	10	16	56	70	58
Nantwich Town	42	15	13	14	65	61	57
Kendal Town	42	15	8	19	78	83	53
Ashton United	42	15	8	19	61	67	53
Buxton	42	15	8	19	64	77	53
Matlock Town	42	12	14	16	52	54	50
Worksop Town	42	13	10	19	56	76	49
Stafford Rangers	42	12	12	18	60	65	48
Whitby Town	42	12	11	19	57	80	47
Stocksbridge Park	42	10	12	20	57	75	42
Frickley Athletic	42	10	12	20	48	69	42
Chasetown	42	10	11	21	50	75	41
Mickleover Sports	42	11	10	21	67	85	40
Burscough	42	5	11	26	54	104	26

Northwich Victoria deducted 3pts
Mickleover Sports deducted 3pts
Nantwich Town deducted 1pt

Lamentably, a route back to the Conference North, via the play-offs, vanished with the club's expulsion from the Northern Premier League's top division.

It was a tragedy and those final months of the 2011/12 season were heart-breaking as Vics had not only become nomads, but pariahs in the eyes of those who ruled the Conference and the Northern Premier League. Macclesfield, Nantwich and Leek were amongst clubs who made their facilities available to Vics in their latest hour of need, but finishing the season as homeless down-and-outs was a degrading and costly experience for the club, as well as the fans. The madness of two decades, would see Vics compete in the lowest

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league for over a century, the Northern Premier League Division One South, of Market Drayton, Coalville and Rainworth Miners Welfare. In 2012/13 they would play “home” fixtures at Stafford Rangers, forty miles away, and for the first time, the bitterest pill for Vics’ fans to swallow, Witton Albion would compete at a higher level.

Jim Rushe insists that somewhere in the region of £400,000 has been invested during his time at Vics, and he has pledged to return to a new stadium in the town, and reinstate the club in the Conference North. It’s a hell of a challenge and, whether he pulls it off, or not, his tenure can only be judged at the conclusion of what, so far, has been a hugely controversial and divisive ownership.

In the final analysis, Vics’ troubles did not commence with private owners, answerable only to themselves, but with the Drill Field days, before the murky depths of administration and long before anyone in Northwich had ever heard the names Mike Connett, or Jim Rushe. Dreams of glory and advancement pumps football’s adrenalin, but somewhere beyond the ferment of aspiration, there has to be bloody-minded pragmatism, an acceptance, especially at non-league level, that every club has its limitations. In Vics’ case, regular gates of thousands a phenomenon of the dim and distance past, a place in the Conference National was difficult enough to sustain in 2000, whilst the Football League was always an illusion, a giant leap too far. As to the Victoria Stadium, its location totally alien to most would-be Northwichers, utterly wrong as a perceived leisure venue, this was finally lost as a consequence of Mike Connett’s profligacy and his grand ideas, whilst under Jim Rushe, the club, demoted three divisions, principally due to administrative and financial irregularities, has plummeted into turmoil.

The Drill Field sold for £2,125,000, plus £75,000 “early exit”, whilst the Football Stadium Improvement Fund gave £500,000 and the Sports Ground Initiative £250,000, towards the original Danebank development. A battalion of disenchanted creditors and a posse of insolvency experts, twenty years’ of madness reached a climax in 2012, with supporters at one another’s throats and almost £3 million of football money washed away on the banks of the Trent & Mersey Canal.

Farewell to the Drill Field

(Demolition pictures by Tony Vickers)







The Wincham Business Park promised land, in 2000.



The Victoria Stadium 2005 - 2012.



Conference North champions 2005/06. The trophy is presented to Pete Handyside and Steve Payne.



A magnificent non-league stadium to match FA Cup glory against Sunderland, in 2006, and Charlton Athletic, in 2009.



The Mary Céleste of football stadiums at the end of 2012.

2012/13 Notes

- August 4, 2012: Following approval by Cheshire West & Chester Council planners, Sport England announces continued objection to former Victoria Stadium being used to store chemicals.
- August 18, 2012: At Stafford Rangers' Marston Road, Northwich Victoria kick off new season against Stamford, in the Evo-Stik Northern Premier League, Division 1 South.
- November 15, 2012: Breakaway football club founded by members of the Northwich Victoria Supporters Trust. Vote in favour, 141-4, to form a new community-owned club.
- November 29, 2012: Members of Supporters Trust choose name of their new club: "1874 Northwich".
- December 17, 2012: Manchester County Court formally closes down Northwich Victoria Football Club (2004).
- January 3, 2013: 1874 Northwich registers with Cheshire Football Association.
- January 24, 2013: Long-standing fans, loyal to Jim Rushe's Vics, form a new Supporters Association to help ensure the club's continuing existence and bring about a new home stadium in Northwich.
- March 21, 2013: 1874 Northwich sign agreement with Winsford United, to ground-share, for "two or three seasons", at the Barton Stadium, commencing with the 2013/14 season.
- April 24, 2013: Northwich Victoria Supporters Association stages first open meeting. Derek Nuttall (Acting Chairman), Jason Dudley (Acting Secretary), Colin Buckley (Acting Treasurer).
- April 2, 2013: FA approves Flixton's Valley Road as Northwich Victoria's "home" ground. From 2013/14 season, enabling the club to compete in Division 1 North of the Evo-Stik Northern Premier League.
- April 27, 2013: Northwich Victoria finish eighth in Evo-Stik Northern Premier League, Division 1 South, twenty-five points adrift of champions Kings Lynn, and seven points short of the play-offs.
- | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|
| 42 | 19 | 10 | 13 | 88 | 58 | 67 |
- May 24, 2013: 1874 Northwich admitted to Division 1 of the North West Counties League.
- June 10, 2013: Demolition of Victoria Stadium commences. Scrap value, including Danebank: £30,000. Site owners, Thor (Specialities) Ltd to hand over approximately £530,000 to Chester & Chester West Council for the provision of sport in the area, principally at Moss Farm. Floodlights removed to Witton Albion's Wincham Park. Seats allocated to Nantwich Town (Weaver



“But I don’t want to go among mad people.”

"Oh, you can’t help that," said Trickie: "We’re all mad here.

I’m mad. You’re mad."

"How do you know I’m mad?"

"You must be," said Trickie, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”

(With apologies to Lewis Carroll)