

The Nick Blackburn Interview from A Kick Up The R's

When editor Dave Thomas approached the club about doing an interview with Ian Holloway about 18 months ago, the club agreed, and it only seemed a matter of time before he would be able to sit down with Ian and have a good old chinwag. I won't go into the whole sorry saga - but meetings were arranged, cancelled, re-arranged, cancelled... I think you get the picture. Bearing in mind, as many of you will know, that Dave lives a touch nearer Manchester than London, this left the poor man exasperated, as each arrangement takes some planning on his part.

Dave sits quite near me in the Upper Loft. At half-time, we often have a chat, and this usually involves Dave telling me stories about the fact that he is a sex god, how women cannot resist his charms, and how his every visit to the local supermarket leaves him breathless as he tries to shake off girls by the lorry-load in some kind of Benny Hill chase. I am sure all of these stories will feature in his autobiography one day soon, and Confessions of a Fanzine Editor is certain to be a bestseller. Occasionally, though, I do manage to get him round to the more mundane subject of our club.

So when I asked Dave around Christmas time what had happened with the Ian Holloway interview, he told me that as the club had been less than proactive about sorting it out, he had given up. When I suggested that maybe he should try again, he asked me if I wanted to do it for him. I said that I would. He laughed, wished me good luck, and he left me to set it up.

Simple, I thought, as the initial exchanges with the club went quite smoothly. Followed then by long periods of silence. Again, I won't bore you with every exchange, or lack of it; suffice to say that after several emails and calls to find out what was happening, I finally got a call back from Mike Hartwell, who was until recently the club Press and PR man. He told me that Ian Holloway was "very jumpy" about doing any kind of interview with us, because he had previously been the victim of some bad experiences with other fanzines. This was disappointing. As Dave Thomas pointed out to me when I related this reaction back to him, it would be a bit like us taking the view that all football managers were a bunch of tosspots, just because we may have endured some bad experience with one or two of our previous managers. Maybe, at some date in the future, Ian will agree to reconsider, because there is a great deal to admire in him, both as a person and as a football manager, and we would like to understand a little bit more about him and how he works.

Anyway, I therefore asked the club, as Ian was unwilling, if we could speak to a Board member instead. Again, to cut a long story short, the message eventually came back that chairman Nick Blackburn had agreed to do an interview with us. When I rang him up to arrange a date and a venue, Nick complained that he had seen a great deal of rubbish in fanzines and on websites from fans, and wanted to set the record straight on a few things. I told him that was fine, because I wanted to run through as much of his time on the Queens Park Rangers board as possible, because Nick's time has coincided with the least successful and most difficult time in the modern history of Queens Park Rangers. This was a great opportunity for him to clear things up and tell us what had really gone on.

Nick also said that he had been misquoted on many occasions and asked to see the interview before it went out. I agreed, because for me, this interview is not about misquoting him. Neither is the objective to try to catch out Nick Blackburn in some way. Just to try to get him to tell it the way it really was, and is, from his perspective - and for us, the supporters, to make the various judgements that come out of those answers, about him and other Board members, both past and present.

When I set out planning elements of this interview and what should come out of it (and I did do this, even though it may not look like it!), I felt the objective should mainly be to try to obtain as much information as possible relating to events that have occurred, and try to get him to reveal as much of the process, actions, awareness and opinions of the Board within those events.

Of course, it is an impossible task to cover completely, every single one of these areas in relation to every event and every detail over such a long period of time, and that was never going to happen. So the aim has been to try to get some 'shafts of light' into as many of these areas as possible and I recognise that I will have been more successful in some areas than I have been in others. As part of trying to do this, I decided early on to reproduce the entire interview as a direct transcript, in the hope that this helps to reveal more to you about what was asked, how it was answered, and how those answers sit in a broader context. We run through Nick's time as a director and chairman largely chronologically - again, because I felt this would be the best way to give some of the events and actions a broader context, and also because I felt it would give the story a better flow.

Some people, after reading this interview, will have wanted me to concentrate more on players, others on finances, and others perhaps about specific incidents. All I can say is that is that you may well be right - and there are some issues which, frankly, could have taken all night in discussion and still not been exhausted. I apologise in advance if I have not asked the question you wanted or pressed any particular area or point hard enough. But I have tried to get as much information as I felt at the time I could get Nick to reveal, without getting too bogged down in one area and, at the same time, keep the story moving along.

What follows is the first of this two-part interview, which took place on separate late evenings just before and after the Easter holiday period [2003]. Indeed, at the time of writing this, the second part has just taken place. They are held in Nick Blackburn's office in the heart of the West End. His office is adorned with memorabilia on the walls. Two photographs, one of Bobby Moore and another of Rodney Marsh, are on the walls behind his desk; and other football memorabilia and music industry gold discs cover the rest of it. If our objective was to get some 'shafts of light' into the inner workings of the club over the last few years, then it could be said by some that Nick Blackburn may well have also had his own objectives for agreeing to do this interview with us, and in the frank way he told certain elements of it. This also presents certain dilemmas.

One of the things you discover when you try to get more 'openness' from the people in charge is that even when they want to be totally honest, the truth is sometimes so controversial or painful that, for various reasons, it becomes very difficult for them to say things, or for us to print certain elements in the way it perhaps should be told. Some of this may become apparent. Nick was keen to stress to me a couple of times after the interview that he has told me the truth, and I have no reason to disbelieve him. Although I did say to him at one point that 'truth' was a funny thing and that if you ever listened to two people describing a relationship that has broken up, it is amazing how they can both give you completely different versions of 'truth' relating to exactly the same break up. But I have to say, Nick was polite, courteous, engaging, co-operative and generous with his time throughout, and we sincerely thank him for that.

Some of what Nick tells us here, you may have seen or heard before; others things not. Until now, none has been pulled together within the context of everything that was going on around the club until now, and certainly none with the knowledge that Nick has of actually being on the inside throughout this period and knowing the individuals

concerned. Nick is currently our chairman. He has taken, and will be taking more big decisions that affect our club. If you are interested in what goes on behind the scenes, even if it only confirms your worst suspicions, I think his view of events and incidents are worth a read. If you are bored already, then try the Dave Thomas autobiography. It should be out soon. Mind you, when was the last time Dave met a publication deadline?

Cos Atalotis

The interview

CA Nick, thanks very much for agreeing to do this. First question - you've been on the Board for seven years now, chairman for the last two, so what's it like being chairman of the best football club in the whole wide world?

NB (Laughter) Well, it's been good this year. (More laughter). I enjoy football, but it's been very difficult for us with the increasing gap between the finances of the Premier League and the rest of football and the failure of ITV Digital. The reason I do this is because I love football. I watch over a hundred games a season, live games. I've always loved the game. I watched my first in 1954, Arsenal v Aston Villa, abandoned after 22 minutes because of fog. (Laughs) Still got the programme. I was eight years old.

Background

CA Before we move on to football matters, tell us a little bit about your background? Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

NB I was born in Guildford, and brought up in my early years in Bournemouth. My mother married again when I was ten, to an officer in the Air Force and we moved around. I was educated at Millfield, and had a sports and works scholarship.

CA Were you any good at sports?

NB I was a good hockey player, funnily enough. I played under-21 hockey for Cardiff when I lived down there, and for Purley in the London League. It was a game I didn't particularly like but I was good at it. I much preferred playing football, but I wasn't as good. (Laughs) I also played rugby for Millfield first XV when I was 15 years old, and we had a good team. I just missed playing in the same team as Gareth Edwards and JPR Williams, which would have been pretty amazing.

CA Then what?

NB Then I left Millfield, qualified as a chartered accountant, got in the music business, and that's where I met Chris Wright, because my first job was at Chrysalis. I was financial controller, and I left there in 1972, but stayed friendly with Chris and we kept in touch. I then worked for Decca, and managed rock and roll bands.

CA Who did you manage?

NB Sutherland Brothers and Quiver, Procol Harum, Frankie Miller. I then fell into the ticketing business by chance, worked for Keith Prowse, and then went to Ticketmaster, which I ran for about 12 years, I built up the business there, and was then headhunted to come here to The Really Useful Company, where I am a director. We own 13 theatres and sell 2.5million theatre tickets. We've recently bought a ticketing company called Way

Ahead, which is predominantly a music and concert ticketing company. Our two ticketing companies combined are about 80 per cent the size of Ticketmaster. So the idea is that I build up another ticketing business.

Joining the Board

CA You mentioned that you stayed friends with Chris Wright even though you weren't working for him. So what was the lead up to joining the board of Queens Park Rangers?

NB Well, going back, when I came to London as an 18-year-old to qualify as a chartered accountant, I started going to games. You've got to remember then, in 1964, Queens Park Rangers were not a big club. I did actually visit Loftus Road but I ended up going to West Ham quite often. I found I liked them. It felt like a proper football club. They were in the old First Division. They had a passionate fan-base. They had Bobby Moore, Geoff Hurst, and their matches were very entertaining.

CA Were you living in East London?

NB No. I was living in Northwood, Middlesex. The other thing was at that time, none of the people I knew supported West Ham. They were Arsenal or Chelsea supporters, so I thought I'd support West Ham. I got to know people, and I was in the directors Box for the last eight years that I watched them. Then, in the summer of 1996, I went to see Clive Berlin about a ticketing proposition for Queens Park Rangers and he told me what was going on and how Richard Thompson was getting out and wanted to sell the club. I suggested he talk to Chris Wright. In fact I was at the game that relegated Queens Park Rangers from the Premier League. It was the 3-0 win against West Ham at Loftus Road. And on that performance, I thought Queens Park Rangers would return to the Premier League immediately.

CA Had Chris Wright already agreed to purchase the club?

NB He hadn't even started at that stage. He kept saying to me that it was going ahead, and then it wasn't going ahead, and then it was all on again, and so on. And this continued through the summer. Then he had the idea (pauses)... well, it was actually probably my idea, which I still think was one of the best ideas I've had, and that was to play Wasps at Loftus Road, because it gave the usage of the stadium and enabled the plc flotation to get away. To have the two clubs together made it quite sexy for investors. All of that was happening and Chris said to me, "You know a lot about football, why don't you join the Board?" I said that I wasn't sure. I said I was a West Ham fan but Queens Park Rangers were always my second team, and although I used to watch all of West Ham's matches, I used to come down and watch Queens Park Rangers too, sometimes with Chris, sometimes by myself. I liked the club. I saw them back in the Bowles period, even in the Eighties when there were only 7-8,000 attendances against the likes of Coventry and Stoke. Anyway, that's how I joined the Board.

CA So, were you keen to join the Board?

NB Well, I remember the first home game that season. West Ham were playing Arsenal and some friends were asking me if I was going and I said, "No, I'm going to see Queens Park Rangers play Oxford." (laughs) But once you get involved, it completely takes you over. Once you get involved it really matters to you and it's the only way you can change allegiance. If I left the Board tomorrow, I'd still take a season ticket at Rangers because I've been through so much with the club. It has become part of me. I

mean, I still go and watch Arsenal and West Ham and Fulham, but my allegiance is to Queens Park Rangers because of what we have been through in the last seven years. It has not been easy. It has been really hard work.

CA So, you joined the Board of Directors. You've been in senior management positions in other companies. Did it take shape and did it operate the same way that you thought it would?

NB No, it didn't! Several things went wrong. Chris Wright's takeover didn't finalise until, literally, two days before the season started, so you had no time to get your feet under the table and really understand what was going on. Also, Richard Thompson had given Clive Berlin a contract as chairman and Alan Hedges a contract as managing director, and - I have to be careful what I say here (smiling) - but I don't think that turned out to be a very good idea.

CA Were these long-term contracts?

NB Yes, they were. I can't remember exactly how long. Quite a few people in the game had expressed doubts about Clive Berlin, but he was what we inherited and it wasn't the right time to change, as he was familiar with the workings of the club.

CA What type of club did you inherit?

NB Compared to what we have now, and it's easy to look back in hindsight, there was a lack of discipline around the club. A casual nature, sloppy. Perhaps you might say a lack of professionalism in certain areas. It might have had something to do with the disappointment of being relegated, but there was an endemic culture within the club that wasn't very healthy, particularly in comparison to the way it is run now with David Davies and Ian Holloway.

CA How did Richard Thompson manage to run the club like that?

NB I don't know. We were a Premier League club then, with additional finances, so maybe that helped gloss over some of these issues.

1996/97 - Wilkins, Houston, Rioch... and counting the pennies

CA Your first season kicked off.

NB A lot of things happened very early on. We beat Oxford 2-1 having gone one down, then Kevin Gallen broke his leg away at Portsmouth on a Friday night. We lost our next home game to Bolton, when Frandsen got the winner. See, I've got a very good memory (laughter) and then we had a board meeting. It was our first meeting and there's a myth about this meeting.

CA Is this where Ray Wilkins left?

NB Yes. It's a complete myth that he was sacked. He resigned. What happened was, we asked Ray to come to the board meeting. We were nearly all new directors, and we asked him to set out how he worked, how many scouts he had, was he watching games, did he prefer playing, how could he play and keep himself fit and watch players, all this kind of thing. It was fine. At the end of the meeting, when Ray had gone, Clive Berlin said, "I don't think Ray will make a manager". We all said, "Look, come on, let's give him

a chance.” Next morning, Ray rang up and resigned. He’d booked a flight that day to go and see a midfield player in Scotland called Dave Bowman, who played for Dundee United. But Ray cancelled the flight and resigned. We think one of the directors rang him up and told him about those comments. I know for certain it wasn’t one of the new directors. We were new to it. We didn’t really know the inside of football that well and however much you think you know about it, nothing really prepares you for it. When Ray resigned, he then went out and told people he had been sacked. Frank Sibley said he would go with him, Billy Bonds went too because they all believed that he had been sacked and they all said they wanted to remain loyal to him.

CA Why would he say that he had been sacked?

NB I don’t know. I’ve never known that. I’ve seen Ray since and we have not discussed it. But he was not sacked.

CA Do you get on with him?

NB Yes! I love Ray! He’s a very nice man. Whether he will ever make a successful manager, I don’t know.

CA So how did you go about selecting a new manager?

NB The whole board was involved with this. I wanted to get Alan Curbishley, who I knew, and could have got. There were also other candidates, like George Graham, who was out of work. He was short-listed but went to Leeds in this period. And there was an approach to Terry Venables, but he wasn’t interested. We also had a strong recommendation for Stewart Houston.

CA Who did that come from?

NB He had very good references from within football.

CA But Houston was a coach at that time and not a manager.

NB Well, he’d been caretaker-manager at Arsenal, which had gone well, and it was quite high-level people in the game recommending him. It was felt that because of the PLC flotation coming up, Alan Curbishley was an unknown manager. So, on balance, it was felt, particularly by Chris Wright and Clive Berlin, and I went along with it in the end, and so did everybody else, that Stewart Houston had a higher profile, and would help the flotation more in getting launched. To be fair, I didn’t think he was a bad choice. I just had a feeling about Alan Curbishley, which has since proved to be right. I knew him well. I thought he was an up-and-coming manager, but I was happy with Stewart.

CA So was it a unanimous decision, Houston as manager?

NB It was unanimous in the end, we discussed it, and on balance, we felt he was the right man, although I have to say, I was still strong for Curbishley. So we hired Stewart.

CA And then?

NB Well, Clive Berlin prepared his contract. One of the things Clive said Stewart insisted on putting in his contract was that he appointed his own number two. So we asked Stewart who he had in mind. He said: “I can’t tell you, I can’t tell you, but somebody really good.” Later, Stewart called us and he said I want to come over to Chris Wright’s office and tell you who my number two is. So we all go over. There’s Clive, me, Chris, and somebody else I can’t remember. He told us that his number two is going to

be Bruce Rioch. We said: "Are you sure?" But he thought it was fantastic. We went, "Are you sure?". But we couldn't change it because it was in his contract that he could appoint his number two. We didn't think it was a good idea at all. Not because we thought Bruce was a bad manager. In fact Bruce's track record is pretty good. But we didn't think the chemistry between the two of them would work. We kept saying, "Are you sure, Stewart?" and he kept saying, "It'll be fine." I then heard that in the first training session he took, Houston called Rioch "Gaffer" in front of the players. The other thing about Stewart was that he was a remarkably honest and decent man, and I think he was a very good coach, But he was very slow to make decisions. We had Matt Jackson on loan at the time, who I thought was a decent player, and Stewart said, "I'm not going to sign him until I've watched him a few more times." So Matt said, "I'm not going to stay here on trial" and went back to Everton. I always remember, Stewart started quite well and then the club slipped down the table, yet he had money available. But he just wouldn't sign anyone. Chris was away and he rang me up one day and said, "Tell Stewart, if he doesn't sign anybody, I'm going to sign some fucking players", because we were still slipping down the table. Eventually he signed John Spencer and Gavin Peacock, which were good signings, although too expensive unless we'd got back up into the Premier League. I also remember one of the first board meetings we had with him, when Stewart was talking about Alan MacDonald and was saying that Alan would need to be replaced at some stage. I said to him there's a centre-half I've seen at Oxford, called Matt Elliott, so why don't we go and get him? And he said, "No, he's too big and clumsy." And we all know what happened there. Elliott was a leader. He got goals. He would have been perfect for us. It's bye the bye, but ... anyway, that first season went pretty well. We finished eighth.

CA Can I interrupt you there? At this point we are spending money?

NB Yes, we're spending money.

CA Were the Board at this point aware of the finances in general?

NB There were no proper management accounts presented at the early board meetings. One of the first things we did when we came in was to appoint a managing director for the PLC, an accountant called Stephen Oakley. He started to do the work to ensure that the Board received up-to-date accounts. The directors at the time included some very experienced businessmen, such as Bob Collier, who was a senior executive at Inter-Continental Hotels, Mark Rigby, who was a partner in Lambert Smith Hampton, Nigel Butterfield, who is a financial director at Chrysalis PLC, and Charles Levison, who was a partner at Harbottle and Lewis. Clive Berlin was running the managing director at Queens Park Rangers and there was a separate chief executive for Wasps. So although we were non-executive directors, there was a wealth of business experience. We went to the matches and we always felt that Chris Wright would fund the club. He's a very wealthy man. He was always positive, with a "Yes, let's do it!" attitude, and also from the flotation there was money in the bank. But there were no real management accounts coming through until later on, probably not until around the February/March of 1997.

CA So if I just take you back to an earlier question I asked. You've become a director of the club. It's not operating like a normal business environment, which you are familiar with. So give me a kind of typical agenda of a normal board meeting both then and now.

NB Well, then, the focus was doing the best we could to get Queens Park Rangers promotion, developing Wasps, and the commercial side of both clubs. Basically, what a lot of new directors do when they first come into sport.

CA But was there an agenda at these meetings?

NB Yes, there was an agenda. And, yes, there were some form of accounts produced. It's a long time ago and I can't remember. It's just, (long pause) it wasn't very disciplined. I think that is the best way to put it. The financial performance was lower down in the pecking order than the performance of the team. Everybody was excited about the first team and how they were doing. Chris had money. It felt like you were with an Al Fayed, a Simon Jordan, that type of situation. It could have been done better, there's no doubt about it.

CA So that first year, we were going along saying, "We can afford these players, we can get these players, and whoever else we might need" and the performances are slipping slightly. But as a board, you weren't thinking that there was some kind of financial crisis pending?

NB Not then. Not in the first year. Because there was also still the feeling we could get back up as well.

CA Did you have any idea what the losses might be running at during this time?

NB We knew both Wasps and QPR were losing money. But, as I said earlier, accurate management accounts weren't produced until the following February or March by Stephen Oakley. We also inherited a team relegated from the Premier League and we were contracted to pay Premier League wages. We believed we had a chance of going up that season, and even if we didn't go up, we were optimistic about the following year. Everton came in for Trevor Sinclair and Clive Berlin said that they were prepared to pay £4m. I was one of the few who said sell him, because I didn't think he was an outstanding player for us in his last season. He wanted out anyway if we didn't go up.

CA Did Trevor ask for a transfer?

NB No, but he was restless. I said, "Take the money, he might get injured anyway." And sure enough, we played Portsmouth, in March. We won 3-1 and he got injured and never played again that season. But Stewart thought we could go up and, at that time, he also said: "Get me Mike Sheron for next season and I'll guarantee you promotion." That was a huge mistake. We paid far too much for Sheron. Clive Berlin said Bolton and Birmingham were both interested and the price kept going up and up. Stewart kept saying, "Get me him, get me him. He's the one player I want and I'll get you promotion."

CA So who was doing all the negotiations?

NB Clive Berlin. Clive was effectively running that side of the club, reporting directly to Chris Wright. Chris would also discuss things with me.

CA Did Chris just come along to board meetings?

NB No, he spoke to Clive. Clive would pop round to his office. Chris is very near the ground.

CA And so what was your role as directors? Have you got no choice but to go along with their decisions?

NB Well, Chris was the ultimate shareholder. Look, if Chris was prepared to fund it, we agreed, because it was his money. He would keep putting the money in. He put in the money to buy the training ground. That's another of the myths. We didn't actually own a training ground until Chris came in. It was rented. Chris lent the club the money to

buy the training ground and then bought it back at a profit for the club. I've always felt he's been quite unfairly treated on that one. And he was generous enough to pay the market price, even though he lent us the money in the first place to buy it. I thought that's something people have got totally wrong about Chris.

CA Back on the pitch, the end of your first season, the club finished eighth.

NB Yes. And the fans were pretty happy.

CA Were they?

NB Yes. I remember the last home game. We beat Tranmere Rovers 2-0 and the fans weren't unhappy then. They were happy that Thompson had gone and that Chris was having a go.

CA Were the fans happy with Houston?

NB There was always a doubt about Houston. But we finished eighth, beaten Manchester City away and all that, and there was a feeling of optimism around the club. The last game of the season, we played Bradford City away, and they needed to win to stay up. They beat us 3-0. John Spencer ended up having a huge row with Bruce Rioch, not about the game, but supposedly because John said he didn't want to go with the Scottish national team on a close-season tour and sit there as a reserve. Bruce Rioch told him he should be proud to represent his country, even if he carried the kit, and John told him, "You're not a fucking proper Scotsman anyway." (Much laughter).

CA There were rumours around that time about a fight between them.

NB Spencer fell out with Rioch big time, and he was never the same player after that. When Spencer came back the next season, he didn't want to play for him. We eventually sold him to Everton for £1.7m and we had to give him some money to go.

1997-8 - managerial appointments, player transfers and agents

CA So, what happened that close season?

NB In the summer, we bought Mike Sheron, Lee Harper and Matthew Rose. But Sheron didn't start straight away. He was injured. We lost to Tranmere away second game of the season. I remember, it was a Friday night game and I knew there were problems in the dressing-room. I had lost my driving licence for speeding at the time but I managed to get a lift back on the team coach. So I asked Stewart to come and have breakfast with me the next morning, because Chris Wright had asked me to have a word with him. When he came to see me the next day, I told him that I didn't think Bruce was a bad guy but that it wasn't working between the two of them. I said, "He's lost the dressing-room, and if you don't get rid of him, he's going to cost you your job." But he rang back on the Monday and said he'd thought about it, but he wouldn't push him out. When Sheron came into the team, we beat West Brom 2-0. Ray Harford, who was managing West Brom, then said to me, "If I had your two forwards, Spencer and Sheron, I guarantee I'd win the league." (laughs). An interesting thing to say. We beat Portsmouth midweek and went second in the table. But after that we took a big dip and Chris decided that he had to get rid of Houston. Eventually he told him.

CA Just around the time of the very first AGM wasn't it?

NB Yes. There was also a rumour going around at that time that Bruce had only

found out about it on Teletext, which was kind of bollocks really. We did offer to tell Bruce, but Stewart said he wanted to do it personally, didn't get around to it, and eventually the news of his dismissal broke. But that wasn't our fault.

CA John Hollins?

NB Yes, we then had John Hollins for a short period.

CA What was the feeling there, because he had a good short little spell?

NB A very decent bloke. A very, very decent man. But nobody was convinced at the time that he'd make it for us as a manager. The vibe wasn't there.

CA So how did you go about picking the next manager?

NB Well, Chris was away on holiday. We interviewed Nigel Spackman. He didn't feel right for us. He also didn't like the fact that we had no money left to spend on players. I then went back to see if I could get Curbishley, but by then it was too late, because Charlton as a club were on the move, and he said: "You've got no money now, I'd have come the first time when you had the money to spend on players." But by that time, the work that Stephen Oakley had done was producing proper accounts and we could see we couldn't afford to buy any more players after Sheron. But Ray Harford wanted to come. Ray was West Brom manager. They were second in the table. There was huge uproar there, and they didn't want him to go at all. I remember fanzines saying this is the best appointment you could have made. None of the fans criticised it and it turned out to be the worst appointment we could have made. Disastrous. Yet he was very successful at West Brom.

CA What do you think went wrong there?

NB I think he took the job for the wrong reasons. I think he wanted to come back to London. I think he was lazy. He worked through Clive Berlin and not with the Board. And for transfers, they seemed to use just one agent. Barry Silkman. And this agent brought Heinola, Kulcsar, and Scully to the club. Apart from those, we also took Mark Kennedy on loan, which was good. He helped keep us up.

CA The supporters really wanted the club to sign Mark Kennedy.

NB I know, I know! But he was a million pound player. A fantastic player. But there was no way we could afford him by that time. Anyway, in the summer, we needed a reserve goalkeeper. So Clive Berlin rang me up and said: "Nick, we want to sign this goalkeeper, Bankole." I said: "I've never heard of him." He said: "He's at Crewe, in the reserves." I said: "Who's the agent?" Clive said: "Barry Silkman." (Nick rolls his eyes at this point). I said: "What's the deal?" He told me Bankole's salary, which wasn't a lot. But he told me we had to give the agent some money. I can't remember the reason why, but there was some reason. I told him I'd have to speak to Chris Wright. When I spoke to Chris, he asked me what I thought, and I told him I hadn't heard of this goalkeeper, but they say he's okay. So I rang up Ray Harford to ask him why they wanted to sign him, and he said, "Don't worry, me and Clive will deal with this one", and they signed him. About four or five months later, I was at a game at West Ham, funnily enough, and Glenn Roeder was sitting next to me in the directors box, long before he became manager there. He said to me: "I'm surprised you signed that Bankole." I said: "I'm fucking surprised too now I've seen him play!" Glenn then said that when he was assistant-manager at Burnley with Chris Waddle, Ray Harford had called him and said Barry Silkman was bending his ear about Bankole. He asked Glenn to have a look at him in his

reserve match against Crewe and tell him what he thought. He said the score was something like 5-4, so Glenn told Ray Harford not to touch him with a bargepole. I don't think Ray had personally ever seen him play.

CA Have we had any dealings with Barry Silkman since?

NB No!

CA Hmmmmm, anything else?

NB The other thing that I found out about Ray, which worried me, was that we were on a pre-season tour of Ireland and he came back from the tour a day early to go horse racing at Epsom. I rang up Ray Harford to see how things were going on tour. He wasn't there. He didn't clear it with the Board or anything. You don't come back early as the manager from a pre-season tour to go horse racing. So you get the feeling that something is wrong.

CA So what's the feeling in the boardroom at this stage?

NB Well, we decided that Clive Berlin wasn't the right man for that job and that we needed to get a replacement. We needed to make some other changes. Stephen Oakley was going and we appointed Simon Crane.

CA Why did Stephen Oakley go?

NB It was felt that we needed somebody with better marketing skills and good interpersonal skills. Simon Crane had been working in Atlanta, on the sports sponsorship side for Coca-Cola, and had a good reputation. Although basically a rugby man, he worked on Euro 96 for Coca-Cola. He was interviewed by Chris Wright and Charles Levison, and his appointment was approved by the rest of the Board. By then the financial reality of the club was known, but we were aware that we were able to sell Sudbury and that would bring in a large sum of money. We were also by now getting proper management accounts and Simon knew he had to cut overheads on both the playing and non-playing sides, and Clive Berlin was one of the early casualties.

CA So how was Richard Thompson running things before without these accounts?

NB God knows. I wasn't there, so I can't comment. There must have been some form of accounts.

CA Anyone who works in business gets up-to-the-minute figures these days. I know, I do in my business.

NB I get management accounts here in my business. I get last week's trading the following Wednesday and I know exactly where I am. I know exactly how every department is performing, against budgets, everything. We get all that here. But there was a gap.

CA Going back to the team, just before the end of that season...

NB Lets go back, lets go back... Vinnie!

CA Aha! (Much laughter) What happened there? There are a few different stories surrounding Vinnie Jones?

NB I'll tell you exactly what happened there with Vinnie Jones. The chairman of Chrysalis Radio stations is Lady, err, whatever her name is. Anyway, she is the girlfriend

of David Mellor.

CA David Mellor?

NB David Mellor. And through that, Chris Wright knew David Mellor. And David Mellor kept bending Chris's ear, saying, "You've got to meet Vinnie Jones. He could be a fantastic person for you." One morning, Chris rang me up, and said: "Look, can you come over, David Mellor is insisting I meet Vinnie Jones. Can you be there?" So I went over and Vinnie came across very impressively. This was about September 1997, and he was saying, "I'd like to play for Queens Park Rangers and I'd like to be a manager," - things like that. Then, by the following March, I remember we lost a game at Stoke, who had been relegated, 2-1. Simon Barker had scored in the last minute, but we'd been terrible. Chris was away, and he rang me up and asked how the game had been. I said: "Bloody awful, terrible, we didn't show any spirit at all." And the next thing I know, Chris had remembered Vinnie from their meeting. He rang Ray Harford. Ray approved of signing him. Chris did the deal, got Vinnie in, overpaid him. But Chris was funding it, and said he was going to do it, so he was going to do it.

CA But was he funding it?

NB Yes, he was putting money in. Chris has walked away with a net loss of around £13m. He funded the rights issue, and so on, and his heart was in the right place. Look! He made mistakes, and he'll admit to them. But he still thought what he was doing was right for Queens Park Rangers. And I think you could argue that Vinnie helped keep us up that year. Well, him and Neil Ruddock. They were men. After that Stoke game, when the team played like a bunch of fairies, they did come in and give it a bit of oomph about the place.

CA Vinnie Jones has consistently said in the media that there was something in his contract that he would be the next manager. Was that true?

NB No. There was a vague thing that he would be considered.

CA No absolute?

NB No absolute at all. We also sold Trevor Sinclair too, in February, just before Vinnie. What happened there was Sinclair was playing badly. I remember getting knocked out at Middlesbrough in an FA Cup third round replay, and a lot of northern managers were there to watch Sinclair play. Roy Evans was one, and I remember coming in at half-time and they were all saying he was playing poorly and looked overweight. I think we had to sell him because he was coming out of contract, and he'd have been a Bosman. All that Bosman stuff had come in, which made life a lot more difficult. There was a period when you knew Bosman was coming, but you didn't know what it was going to do exactly. Anyway, Clive Berlin said we had this offer from Harry Redknapp. Clive said it was the only offer on the table and it was around £1.8m, plus Dowie and Rowland. And we were selling Brevett to Fulham, but nobody minded at the time. The other thing we did was we sold Andy Impey the previous summer to West Ham too. Impey and Rioch didn't get on, but Impey was very difficult to deal with.

CA Was he?

NB Yeah. We agreed a deal with West Ham, but he had a toe injury and he couldn't go until his toe was right. The day before he was due to sign, he was passed fit, and then I got a call from Clive Berlin saying that Impey was demanding £200,000 to go.

CA What did you say?

NB I was flabbergasted. But there was Bosman, (pause) and so we had a face-to-face. Impey said he would sit on his contract and leave at the end of the season for nothing. West Ham were going to pay us £1.4m and eventually he got some of that £200,000 he demanded, so that he would go.

CA How much did he get?

NB He got £120,000. But some players can do that, and will do that. And it was our very first experience of it. At that time, it wasn't so prevalent in football, but it is now. I couldn't believe it! He was leaving us for a lot more money, to a Premier League club, a longer contract. You know, the sad thing about football sometimes is that these people are your heroes, and you find out sometimes that they are not. It's sad.

1998/99 - Goodbye Ray, hello again, Gerry

CA So, moving on, the new season started with Ray Harford.

NB The new season started badly. And things got worse.

CA Is Clive Berlin still with us at this point?

NB Yes, he's still there to start with, but Simon Crane let him go in about September.

CA Why did he let him go at that point?

NB Well, (pause) because, (pause, sigh) because he bit the bullet and decided that he had to get rid of him.

CA How much longer did he have on his contract?

NB Not sure. He may have been out of contract, but anyway, we had enough reason to get rid of him without paying him too much.

CA Sorry, I interrupted you, team performances had started badly?

NB Chris was unhappy with Ray Harford and I think he had been talking to Gerry Francis about coming back. Then we lost that infamous game at Oxford, 4-1. Chris was away, so I had to deal with it. But Ray Harford called me up at 8.15am on the Sunday after the game and said: "I think I ought to resign." I said "I think you ought to as well, Ray, frankly. I'm not going to argue with you." (laughs). Because the performance at Oxford was one of the worst footballing performances I've ever seen in my life. I remember one ping-pong goal, where the players kept kicking it against each other. Pathetic! It was sad, because I'd also known Ray Harford personally for a long time, and I was surprised to some extent that it hadn't worked out. He's a good coach.

CA A very good coach. But as a manager?

NB Well, you say that, but he'd proved as a manager in certain places that he could do the job

CA He'd succeeded at one or two, but he'd also failed at one or two, hadn't he?

NB I know, but the club that we took him from, West Brom, were doing well and were

second in the table.

CA And a lot of stories around this point about Vinnie Jones getting the job. He claims he was only left a message on his answering machine, telling him that you couldn't contact him, so you were giving the temporary job to Iain Dowie.

NB What happened was, Chris wouldn't bloody call him!

CA Why not? Because he was frightened of him?

NB (laughter) Well, Vinnie had gone racing at Ascot and switched his mobile off all day. I didn't get hold of him until 9.00pm, by which time we'd given the temporary job to Dowie, because he had to take training the next morning.

CA Did you leave a message for him?

NB Yes, but I still called him up later when he got in. And he went: "Fucking hell, you've got to give me the fucking job, I'm the right fucking person for it." (Much laughter) He said to me: "Does the chairman know about it?" I said "Yes, Vinnie, he does." But Vinnie still wanted to speak to Chris Wright. So I rang Chris, and I said: "Look! Ring him! It's your job!" So he did, and next morning Vinnie came round and we made a settlement with him. He'd been doing his film in the summer, and he wasn't really fit at the start of the season. Of course, it all cost money. Chris had given him a big contract. Funnily enough, I saw Vinnie a year later at a film premiere, and I said to him, "What do you prefer, Hollywood or managing Queens Park Rangers?" - and he laughed.

CA But he was finished as a player by then.

NB Well, he had got into films and its difficult to run two careers. He's a mixture, Vinnie. He's a very good bloke and he does want to win. And then he's also got a side to him where he can be a bully. There was a terrible row when we lost at Watford. He apparently picked on the weaker players like Paul Murray and Mike Sheron.

CA Again, clear up some of those rumours of fights and pinning players up against the wall.

NB Well, that Watford incident is the only one that I'm aware of. But I believe he did have fights and incidents at Wimbledon. Marcus Gayle has been mentioned in relation to them.

CA So, you appointed Iain Dowie. Was that always going to be a temporary appointment?

NB Yes, because we were pretty certain that Gerry Francis was going to come back. But when Gerry came in, we did say to him that Iain had been very impressive, and asked if he would he use Iain as his number two, and he did. He was happy with Iain, and it also saved us a fair bit of money. Plus Iain was showing all the signs that he would be a good coach and a good manager, and that worked quite well.

CA Gerry was appointed manager. Did anything change?

NB Well, for starters, Gerry didn't really like Simon Crane. Simon was a rugby man. Gerry said he wanted someone he could deal with. Chris Wright was away on business a great deal, and because Gerry didn't think Simon knew anything about football, he said: "I want somebody I can discuss football with." That's when I really got involved, and me and Gerry got on very well. I remember we lost our first five games, and we didn't know where the next win was coming from. I was up in Manchester on business and I

got a call from Gerry. We had a midweek match against Barnsley. He starting saying, "Get the match off! Everybody is injured! Look it's raining! Let's water the pitch and flood it!" I said: "Look, the forecast is for very good weather, and even if we water the pitch at 4.00pm it will have drained by 6.00pm." He just continued: "I've got nobody fit! Cancel the game..." And so on. Well, we played the game. It turned out to be Richard Langley's debut, in which he scored, and we won the game 2-1. And then we beat Bolton on the Saturday and that set everything off. He got the confidence back, and we pulled away. Then we had another bad run. We couldn't score goals. I remember Chris Wright virtually in tears in a last minute defeat at Birmingham. And we lost a number of other matches 1-0, until that last game of the season against Crystal Palace, the 6-0 that secured our place in Division One.

1999/00 - Mid-table success

CA So how did we approach the following season?

NB Well, Gerry brought in Rob Steiner.

CA I thought he was a good player, although not everybody liked him.

NB A very good player. If you watch the video back that season, you'll see, apart from scoring, he made so many goals. Gerry also brought Stuart Wardley in. And we started the season really well. We really thought we'd turned the corner. Stuart started scoring goals and I remember going up to Nottingham Forest and Gerry said to me Stuart was playing in midfield. I said that he had been signed as a centre-half, but Gerry said he had done really well in training that week in midfield. Well, we drew 1-1, Wardley hit the bar, and we played with 10 men when Jermaine Darlington got sent off at half-time. And in midweek, we played Port Vale at home, Wardley scored twice and we won. That set everything off and we had a very good season.

CA Halfway through the season, that's when things started to change, wasn't it? Steiner got injured, Danny Maddix got injured, the spine of the team wasn't quite as strong, and things started to drift.

NB Well, you say that. The last game at Portsmouth, we won 3-1 and the crowd were singing "We're going up next year". We beat Ipswich, who were virtually promoted. I disagree. I thought we finished pretty strongly.

CA So what was happening financially at this point?

NB Well, we knew we couldn't renew certain contracts in the same way. Around this time, Kevin Gallen had been dropped by Gerry.

CA Clear up the rumours again here, that Gerry Francis didn't like Kevin Gallen, that he didn't rate him.

NB Gerry didn't think he was playing well, so he dropped him. Kevin was also on big money, on an old contract. We couldn't renew it at the money Kevin wanted.

CA Did we make an offer to him?

NB Yes, but he thought he could get more.

CA And did he?

NB Yes. But it's good to have Kevin back now.

2000/01 - Resignation, relegation, and Chris Wright

CA So how were we approaching the new season?

NB By that time, we knew the budgets, we knew where we were, we knew what the problems were. We also sold Sudbury, which paid back all the Wasps debt, and that covered what Wasps had cost us. And the financial situation had got slightly better by then and we thought that Gerry could maintain us in the First Division for the following season. Gerry told the Board in the summer that he felt the team had over-performed finishing 10th, and said we were likely to really struggle the following season to beat that. But he was convinced that we could finish around 14th on what we had. Then Gerry went out and signed Clarke Carlisle cheaply, because Blackpool needed the money. Chris Wright stumped up all the money so we could pay in one go, so the price fell from £500,000 to £200,000. It may have been £250,000, not quite sure. But whatever it was, it was a great buy. He was cheap. But Steiner never really played again and we were forced to start signing loan players. Although Gerry did sign Peter Crouch, who again, turned out to be a very good signing, an excellent signing. But the injuries... we had so many injuries. We lost Murray twice with broken legs, we lost Peacock during the season, we had Maddix still injured, we lost Ready, we lost Carlisle and Langley in the same game, and others. We lost so many players. I think Gerry's head, at this point, just dropped.

CA At what time did you think "This is going wrong"?

NB Around mid-November, end of November.

CA Did the Board do anything about it?

NB We were about to. We thought, what shall we do? Shall we get rid of him? Shall we not get rid of him? And then December came and we drew away at Blackburn, beat Nottingham Forest and drew away at Birmingham, who were all in the top six, and all without conceding a goal. So we began to think it was turning around, which I think was a fair decision to make. But I went away on a short Christmas break, where we were poor by all accounts against Norwich and Crystal Palace, and then there was the FA Cup third round at Luton which we drew 3-3, but results kept deteriorating after that and we lost badly against Arsenal in the next round, 6-0 at home.

CA Just before we go on, can I take you back to that Luton Cup match. If you know the ground, the tunnel is just alongside the away fans, and the dug-outs are across the other side of the field. So at half-time, we were losing, the performance had been very poor, and Gerry had to walk right the way across in front of our fans. And I remember the supporters not just berating the players, but they were snarling and openly, for the first time, really angry at Gerry Francis, virtually showing contempt. He couldn't even look at us. He looked almost ashamed, and my brother turned to me and said: "He's going to resign. He's given up." OK, we managed to get out of that hole with a last-minute penalty, but didn't the Board think at that time, he looks a beaten man, this can't go on?

NB We'd definitely been thinking about it. But things kind of happened quickly after that. We had a bad January, we beat Luton in the replay but we had that heavy loss to Arsenal at home in the FA Cup. We also lost Langley and Carlisle with cruciate injuries in the same game against Fulham, and then we lost 5-0 at Preston. We could have been 5-0 down at half-time. We were awful and Gerry decided at that stage to go.

CA Was it Gerry's decision?

NB Yes. I think that he didn't want to be the manager who took Queens Park Rangers down. So he told us he wanted to go, and that we should start looking for somebody else.

CA So at this point, Gerry is about to leave. I remember Gerry saying at an AGM just before this, as an aside to some shareholders who were asking him about signing more players, that the finances at the club were "completely fucked".

NB Yes, they were. We were really struggling financially then. By this time, Chris had decided he couldn't put any more money in. Or at least decided that he wouldn't put any more money in.

CA Sorry, when you say "put money in", he was 'loaning' this money, not 'giving'. He was loaning.

NB Yes. He was loaning.

CA So effectively, that money was always going to have to be repaid?

NB Yes. But Chris wrote off a fair amount of it in the end. Yes, he was loaning it, but he was still funding it out of his own money. He was having to borrow it from the bank, because Chris is not 'cash rich'. A great deal of his wealth is tied up in paper and in Chrysalis. You could also say in relation to Gerry's point, that the finances have been very tight since Ian Holloway has been here. I think Gerry was using the 'finances' excuse slightly. Gerry did like finding excuses. The worse it got, the more depressed he got. There were some problems on the training ground, when he didn't change the training and things like that. The science of football is not exact, and the previous year, using the same methods, we'd finished 10th. But he didn't change when things were going badly, and I think you have to do that.

CA Another thing here. Gerry had divided many of the supporters in the end, but they were incredibly loyal to him, because he was a great player for us and had been a fine manager. There was some criticism from some quarters about the style of play and so on, but generally, he was very well thought of. But there were other things. His title the second time around was 'Director of Football'. Now perhaps you can explain to us what that meant because my understanding of that title, and I suspect of many fans, is the management of the wider football club. In other words, how it is structured, how the youth team is run, how the scouting operates. Was that part of his remit? And how do you think that worked? Because at that time, that part of running the club was heavily criticised by supporters.

NB Yes, it was part of his remit. Look, we had the Academy then, and I don't think Warren Neill and Gerry Francis saw eye-to-eye on certain things. Warren was very focussed on getting his results in the Academy and not feeding players through for the first team. There were some disagreements, with Gerry wanting players and Warren wanting to keep them. The first team, the reserves, scouting, Gerry had a scouting network. That was all Gerry's responsibility. I'd say the youth side, because of the rules for the operation of the Academy was slightly separated off from him, but they still reported into Gerry.

CA But was that working, because we weren't really getting any youth players coming through? Or was that a historical thing?

NB Well, you could say his players... well, they are going to come through now. They take a few years. I mean, Pacquette was there, Bean was there, and Burgess was there. I remember Gerry really used to like Burgess a lot. He spotted him in the youth team and was really keen to bring him on. So he knew the players, and I think that criticism is unfair.

CA What about the other rumours that Gerry couldn't be bothered to look at players.

NB Rubbish! He did go and look at players. (long pause). I will say this, the harder the going got, I felt the more Gerry's head dropped. This is where I admire Ian Holloway so much, because he's the opposite. Very near the end, maybe, Gerry stopped looking, but that was all. Look, that season was all about staying up. We knew we weren't going to win the league or a cup. Surviving the season and getting rid of the players who were either on high wages or weren't delivering when their contracts were up, that's what it was all about. Staying up, clearing the dead wood and moving on.

CA Do you think he was hampered by the fact that he had all those players on expensive long contracts?

NB No. The players were good enough to stay up. I think all the injuries we had, they really got to Gerry. Talk to anybody in the game about what happened in our last season and they can't believe what happened to us. We had two Under-21 internationals injured with cruciate ligament injuries within seven minutes of each other in the same game. It's simply unheard of. It's not happened to another club in the last 20 years. Things went wrong that year that made the situation exceptionally bad. Perhaps it was fate! I could have wept for Carlisle and Langley. It was soul destroying. And I think it all really got to Gerry.

CA But also at this stage, the Chris Wright incident had occurred at the Fulham game, and he'd resigned, so he wasn't involved any more.

NB Well, Chris was still involved in the background. Because it was his money funding it, and we were already talking privately about whether we should go into administration.

CA So, tell us honestly now, Chris was clearly already aware of the serious financial situation.

NB We all were.

CA Was he using that incident to finally get out of a difficult situation?

NB I think quitting had been on his mind for a long time. He wasn't enjoying it. His attitude was, if I'm putting in money and losing it, but I'm enjoying myself, that's fine. But if I'm putting in money and not enjoying it, and being abused, which had started some time before, because he'd got abuse at the Colchester game when we lost 4-1 and Lua Lua destroyed us, then what is the point. So it was on his mind and it just needed something, and the Fulham game was the final straw. But it was definitely on his mind before that. The truth is (long pause) he's not the right person to be chairman of a football club.

CA Why's that?

NB Chris didn't like to fail, and was frustrated that he couldn't find the answers to

bring success to the club. He's also very sensitive to criticism, and a worrier. The lack of success at the club was really getting to him. Whatever the fans think, it really was getting to him. He's been a hell of a successful businessman. He's built up two successful businesses. He's used to winning. But you can't win every football match. You've got to deal with it. You've got to plan. And I think it's just not in his nature to be like that. If it had all gone well, he would have been fine, but largely it didn't. We've had some very tough times, and with the money he was spending, whether it was just loans or whatever, it was still coming out of his pocket. He'd just had enough. The first call I get every Saturday night, anywhere he is in the world, is from Chris Wright asking how we got on. And he did play a part in appointing Ian Holloway. On the whole, I think Chris Wright behaved honourably. When we came out of administration, he wrote off £3.5m worth of loans and gave us half his shares. You could say, he should have written off the whole amount of the loans, and you could argue it both ways. But I think he behaved fairly decently, personally, but then you could say 'I would say that' because he is a friend of mine.

CA Many people might say that it's because he's a friend of yours...

NB I think you could argue it both ways. I think one of his big problems was, when you appear in that bloody Sunday Times Rich List, people think you've got all this money, and his problem is, he does not have cash. Chris had a £10m divorce settlement and he didn't have the cash, so he was borrowing the money to put into the club. That's why he needed some of the loans back, to pay back his bank. There is an argument to say he should have written it all off, he was running it, so it was his fault he got in a mess. You could say that. But I think he was fairly decent, let's put it that way.

CA Has he been to any games since he resigned?

NB No, he's not been to a full game since. Actually, he turned up at half-time to watch the second-half of one match having just arrived back at Heathrow, but that's been the only time. He still feels very uncomfortable about attending games because he's unsure how he'll be received by the supporters and fears the worst. But I know he'd like to come back and watch.

David Davies

CA A couple of other things I'd like to discuss with you, which happened before Chris Wright's resignation. You appointed David Davies as Chief Executive. Was Chris Wright involved in that decision?

NB Not really. I brought David down, and Chris endorsed him before he took the job. I've known David through business for many years. He was running the Newcastle and Manchester Arenas. I knew he was not particularly happy in his job there, and asked him to come down. It was the summer before we were relegated, and I warned him before he took the job that he might find it difficult, because we knew by then the financial problems that were facing the club. But he wanted to come and he moved his family to the south of England. In the time I've been at the club, he's proved to be far and away the best Chief Executive we've had.

CA What are the differences you've noticed between David and past Chief Executives?

NB He's a very determined man. He works well with the Board, and he understands clearly what his responsibilities are and the issues that the club faces.

CA And what are his responsibilities?

NB The day-to-day running of the club. Basically, the way it works now is that the Board, including David, sets policy. Then, David has to carry that out. As Chairman, he probably rings me about three or four times a day, mainly as a sounding board for how to deal with problems, predominantly on the football side. And he also talks to Ross Jones, who works in the city and has a financial background. David is a paid executive. The rest of us are non-paid. Last year, there was only David, Ross and myself running the club, and it was not easy, as we went into administration. For David, it was long hours, and uncertainty. His wife was worried about their family and where administration would leave them. It was tough.

CA Was he into football before he came to us?

NB No. He was a rugby man. But when we played in the north of England, I used to invite him to games as my guest. He likes all sports, cricket, golf, but rugby is his main interest. Just like I quite like rugby, and quite like cricket, but football is my big love.

CA The reason I asked is that I remember I got a sense of it the first time I saw him at an AGM, where I wasn't sure about his general understanding of football. Whereas when you hear him now, he seems to be very clued up on everything...

NB He's certainly learnt a lot. But, yes, when he came down to us, he knew more about rugby. One of the attractions to him taking the job at the time was that Wasps were part of it, so that he was Chief Executive of both Wasps and Queens Park Rangers.

CA He came across to one or two of the supporters in those first meetings as a bit abrupt, a bit sharp. Is that his way?

NB Maybe it was because he was new to the job. I can't really say I got that impression.

CA He also seems to have irritated many supporters with suggestions that we might ban away supporters because of the high cost of stewarding and policing. Those ideas about banning away fans were dismissed years ago, and could lead to tit-for-tat retaliation from other clubs...

NB At the start of the season, we were forced to employ more stewards and our costs in this area increased dramatically. But we are currently negotiating to get stewarding costs down, although this is all dependent on our crowd continuing to behave themselves. As things stand, we have no intention of banning away fans. And anyway, the Board would make this type of decision.

CA David also received a pay increase. Why did he receive that, at a time when money at the club is tight?

NB David hasn't received an increase to his basic salary since he's been at the club. It's just that when he joined, he joined after the start of the financial year, and so it may not reflect that on a first glance at the accounts. Yes, he did get a bonus in the second year, for all his work in the year we were in administration and that, which enabled us to come out of it.

Youth team and contracts

CA One of the other things that started coming out during Gerry Francis time as manager, were these stories about big contracts for youth players...

NB (Interrupts) Well, that was very unfair on Gerry...

CA (Interrupts) No, I'm not saying Gerry was responsible for them...

NB (Interrupts) Yes, but I've heard that stuff and it was unfair on Gerry and, to a certain extent, it was unfair on the Board. I'll tell you the truth about that, because the history of it is very interesting. If you remember, there was a time knowing that the Bosman ruling was coming, and not knowing what it was going to mean. There was speculation that players could walk out of any contract, and so on. The Board decided to ask Clive Berlin and Chris Gieler to identify the players who were most likely to make it as professionals, and get them on long-term contracts. At the time, I think it was a perfectly sensible decision because of the uncertainty surrounding Bosman. The two players they picked in particular were Michael Currie and Mario Lusardi. For me, the fault didn't lie with the Board, because all we could go on was the recommendation of the youth team manager about the players who were going to make it, and Chris Gieler recommended those players to us through Clive Berlin. Now, we all know both of those players failed to make the grade, but they were given five-year contracts. Clive had the authority to make those contracts. Maybe he shouldn't have had that authority. And maybe those contracts should have had option clauses inserted which would have given us the chance to release them if they weren't progressing. But again, in our defence, we were being told that even options in contracts could be invalidated after Bosman and we were trying to secure the major talents in the club as recommended by the youth team manager. So who is to blame? I feel it is the youth team manager for recommending those two players.

CA Sorry, just to interject again, is it just the youth team manager who takes those decisions? Does he not involve the manager?

NB This was pre-Gerry Francis. This was around Stuart Houston's time.

CA Surely Stuart had a say? He must have looked at the youth team players?

NB Well, Stuart and Bruce were very much first team orientated. There was another thing that went wrong anyway around this time. It was very early days in our reign, and we had Ray Graydon in our youth set up. Stuart Houston had brought him in and he was very good. He came to see me when he went, because I now believe that Chris Gieler had engineered a situation that made it difficult for him to work at the club.

CA Why was that?

NB Well, I believe that Ray could see what was wrong with our set up and was fighting it.

CA And what was wrong precisely?

NB He wouldn't tell me. He was trying to tell me, but he couldn't. He wouldn't say anything in the end. And looking back on it, we lost a very valuable person. Chris Gieler had control of the youth section, and ran it with other coaches. He wasn't a coach himself.

CA He was at the club a very long time...

NB He was, but the person who found a lot of our young players was a man called Pat Nolan, who Chris employed. Whether Chris himself was a good spotter, I couldn't say. We were also told by Clive Berlin, in those days employed as our Chief Executive and supposedly au fait with these matters, what the going rate was for youth team players, and we took his advice on it. We subsequently found out that we had been overpaying these players, because when we'd taken the likes of Leon Knight from Chelsea, Leon was on about £25,000 per year, and we had youth players on £35,000 per year and going up, in a couple of cases, to potentially around £80,000. Or others roughly on the same money as Leon but nowhere near as good as him. But the major problems were Currie and Lusardi.

CA You've mentioned those two players again. Why do you mention them specifically?

NB Because they had five-year contracts with escalating salaries, with no get-out options. The Board should have checked it, but Clive had the authority to do it because he was the Chief Executive of the club.

CA Some people might say it is precisely your job to scrutinise this kind of thing...

NB We should have. But when you are running a business, you take recommendations from the managing director, until you find out that things are going wrong, and then you get rid of them, which is eventually what happened here. But you have to have trust in your executives.

CA You've only mentioned two players, but the message that has come out of the club is this was a serious problem. How many players are we talking about?

NB Well, there were two on big and long contracts, and maybe up to another 15 who were overpaid by about £10-15,000 per year. Over a period of time, it really adds up. But equally, if a couple had come through big time, it wouldn't have been such a problem.

CA Have we still got youth players on these contracts?

NB By the end of this season they will all be gone.

Taking over as Chairman

CA How did you become acting Chairman after Chris Wright resigned? Did you just stick your hand up?

NB No. Chris asked me to do it. Ross Jones was new to the club, and I was already working quite closely with Gerry. Chris also knew I would keep him in touch with what was going on because he still had money in the club. Did I want the job to last? No! To me, it was just going to be a temporary thing, because I thought we would find investors and somebody else would come in. Being a Chairman is not a great job.

CA Why do you say it's not a great job?

NB Well, for the last two years, we've faced a lot of problems and there is rarely any good news. I still love football, going to the matches, and overall, I really enjoy it all. But every day, there's a problem that David Davies is going to ring me about.

CA Give me an example...

NB Well, money is obviously a frequent part of it, but its always problems. He never rings me up with good news. He's never once rung me up to say we've had a £5m offer for Danny Shittu from Manchester United, or for Clarke Carlisle or any other players (Much Laughter)

CA (Laughing) It might still come!

NB It might! But day in, day out, it's problems I have to deal with, which takes up much of my time, and remember, that I've got a day job to do as well, which does pay me. This Easter week, there was the Notts County match on Monday, Tuesday night, I went to see Bristol City in Bristol. Wednesday, 8.30am, a Board meeting. Thursday, all day, I've got a Football League meeting to attend. Then in the evening there is a fans forum at Slough. And on Friday, I've got to meet Ian Holloway to discuss next year's squad and player contracts. That is all taken out of my working time or free time, and it is all non-paid, and it's all very hard work. But I do it because I love the game. The real joy, however, is in winning the matches. The joy is seeing the team win at Cardiff and Brentford in the last minute. That is absolutely fantastic! It is the most fantastic 'up'. But for five or six days out of seven, it's not great. And when you add in our recent history, it's been really tough. You see, the difference between being a fan and being on the Board, is that purely as a fan, and I have been purely a fan, you can sit there and say, "The Board are fucking useless, the players are fucking useless, the manager is fucking useless" and you don't have to do anything about it. But if you are on the Board, you have to do something about it, and sometimes you are totally restricted by the amount you can do.

CA On the other hand, supporters might say you are privileged to have the power to do something about it...

NB Well, sometimes you don't have the power. Or the fan doesn't understand the whole of the situation. One of the reasons I wanted to do this interview is because I wanted to put straight many of the stories I hear. Occasionally, I have a look at the Internet and there is so much rubbish put out there and there is a real lack of understanding. But coming back to the workload, it isn't just me. I'm not making a special case for myself. When we play other clubs in the Nationwide League, they all have non-executive directors, who love the game and are doing the best for their clubs. They are facing the same problems every day. Fans often know the problems but they don't have the solution. They know what the problems are, but where have the fans helped? Our fans have supported the club very well for the last couple of years, and they have helped us by turning up in large numbers to our matches. However, nobody from the fan-base has come up with a long-term solution to our problems. But then again, why should they? I feel that is our job.

CA Some of the fans have helped. You've got the Wintons...

NB Yes they have, fine, and we've brought them in, we'll talk about them later, and there are a few others, but what I'm saying is that it's not provided a solution to the club's long-term problems.

CA You do get a lot of criticism, and I want to throw some of those criticisms at you, but before I do, I wanted to ask you, have you ever considered quitting? Have you ever thought "Oh, to hell with all this"?

NB Yes I have. But the people who know me, who work with me at the club, have

asked me not to. They have said "Don't go". Because those people know I work hard for the club. That's why I say that the fans sometimes don't know everything.

CA But one of the reasons why fans don't know everything, is probably because they haven't been told 'everything'...

NB Well, I think we are a very open club. We've had fans forums, regular meetings with supporters groups etc, where we try to answer all questions. But there is a need for some confidentiality on occasions. People have to understand that, but generally I think we are very open about things.

CA Let me throw at you one or two of those criticisms and indeed of several other Board members, that you and the others are taking money out of the club, living the life of Riley...

NB (Interrupts) That is absolutely untrue! That is categorically untrue! I find those accusations really insulting. I pay my own petrol to go to away games. Yes, I get a free ticket in the directors box to watch games and we entertain visiting directors, sparingly, for lunch. But apart from that, nothing. I don't charge the club for my telephone bills, petrol for going to meetings, Football League meetings and the like, or for my time. Nothing! The only paid director is David Davies.

CA There's no hidden expense account?

NB Not for me or anybody else. Complete and utter rubbish. (Quite animated) I've seen this stuff on one of the websites, and I find those accusations, more than anything else people might say about me, really insulting.

CA And one of the other accusations levelled is that with all the money and contracts available in football, it's a great opportunity for conflicts of interest amongst the Board. Anything in that?

NB Nothing at all. Three of the directors have put money into the club, and rightly or wrongly, I introduced Chris Wright and he's put more money into the club than anybody else has ever put into Queens Park Rangers. David Davies is the only one who is paid. Nobody takes a penny out of the club. Look! If people want to say that the Board made mistakes and we are a bunch of idiots, I can live with that, because we did make some mistakes. But there are two things I find insulting. The first is all this stuff that we are all getting paid, and the other is that I am Chris Wright's puppet, which is complete and utter bollocks! I run a big business. I am my own man. I wouldn't be running a business of this size if I were anybody's puppet. I haven't worked for Chris Wright for over 30 years. It's a complete joke!

CA You've kind of pre-empted my last question here, that you were made Chairman to look after Chris Wright's interests...

NB Not true. Nothing would give me bigger joy, than to get Queens Park Rangers back into the First Division this season and helping towards that because that's where I came in and at least that way I could say it's got back to where I started.

Appointing Ian Holloway

CA So, you were acting Chairman, and you had to appoint a new manager to replace Gerry Francis? What did you do which finally ended up with choosing Ian Holloway?

NB This time, I was responsible more than anybody else in drawing up a shortlist

CA How did you go about drawing up a shortlist? Did people apply to you? Is there an application form? Do people ring you up and tell you they want the job?

NB Not on this occasion. We approached everybody that we put on our shortlist. We had Lawrie Sanchez, Steve Coppell, Steve Bruce, Ian Holloway, Iain Dowie and Dave Bassett. The only one in work apart from Iain Dowie, who was working for us, was Lawrie Sanchez. One of the problems of losing a manager in mid-season, is that you are normally looking at other managers who are out of work.

CA Was Lawrie interviewed?

NB No. I happen to know all of them, but in Lawrie's case, I approached the Wycombe chairman. Wycombe were doing well at the time. Lawrie knew about our financial problems and he quickly made it very clear that he didn't want to come. The rest we selected from a list we compiled of those who were out of work, and Gerry Francis recommended Ian Holloway.

CA Why did he do that? Just because they were friendly?

NB Possibly, but Gerry genuinely thought Ian was a good manager. I don't think he would have done it just out of friendship. We did two sets of interviews. The person who did best from the first set of interviews was Steve Bruce. But on the second interview, not so well. He also did a very strange thing. He rang me up and told me, that for his 'image', he would publicly turn down the job. But privately, he was still interested, (Laughing) which I didn't think was a very clever thing to do.

CA Why on earth would he do that? Something to do with his ego? Another job?

NB Who knows! It left Steve Coppell, who I really liked, a really good guy, but we felt at the time that bringing him in to a club with a financial crisis might not be right.

CA But he seems to have that with every single job he does and he does very well, doesn't he?

NB I know. But that was the decision we made at the time about Steve. Of the others, having interviewed him, we felt Dave Bassett was not the right manager for us at the time. Iain Dowie came very close to getting the job. We all thought he'd eventually make a good manager, which he's proving at Oldham. But we thought he needed a bit more time, and also, he'd been associated with the club at its bleakest time, and we felt a change of voice would be better. And so it came down to Ian Holloway, who really, really wanted the job. He's a good coach. He'd had experience of working with no money at Bristol Rovers, and he understood how he could do that. In addition, he had a very good record of finding and developing players, Jason Roberts, Barry Hayles, Nathan Ellington, which we thought would benefit us. These were the main criteria we made the choice on.

CA When Ian was appointed, were the Board still believing that we could escape relegation?

NB Yes. We thought maybe we could escape, although we knew it was going to be difficult. That was one of the things we were looking for in a new manager, somebody who felt that we could genuinely escape relegation, spread some optimism about the

place, and Ian did that.

CA One of the first things Ian did was buy Andy Thomson. But how could we afford him when we were in such desperate financial trouble, and as it turned out, about to go into administration?

NB Well, Chris Wright put that money in. We felt we had to give Ian something to give him a chance and Chris agreed to help out.

Going into administration

CA Ian tells this story, that he was sitting at the training ground, having finished training, eating his lunch with all the players, when you and David Davies walked in and announced that we had gone into administration. He said he was gobsmacked! Had you not told Ian when you appointed him what was likely to happen?

NB Obviously Ian was aware of the financial situation of the club, but he had no idea we would go into administration, because you can't announce it in advance. We had a game on the Saturday against Blackburn Rovers, and the following Monday, David and I went down to the training ground the day it happened and told them all.

CA How long had you been considering going into administration?

NB Well, (long pause) it was one of a list of things going on in and around that time. There was the Wimbledon merger, which was on the cards by then. There were a number of people saying they wanted to take over the club, but they all turned out to be useless. And then there was Chris Wright, who ironically, was probably the most reluctant of all of us about going into administration. He felt that we could save the situation and not have to go down the administration path. But we were discussing it for about two months. In the end, you look at the books and take advice from your accountants, and it was the only course of action in order to give us protection from creditors. And it also gave us time, because we had to make sure we could continue to trade.

CA How did you go about finding an administrator? Did you pick one out of the Yellow Pages?

NB On this occasion, we knew the people at BDO Stoy-Hayward. We met them, and we decided that they were people we could work with. Actually, they are appointed by the creditors, and the major creditor was Chris Wright. But you need somebody who is sympathetic and you can work with.

CA So, did Chris Wright appoint them?

NB Well, it was Charles Levison who introduced them to us, but BDO Stoy-Hayward is well known for handling the administration of football clubs.

CA And how did that change the day-to-day running of the club?

NB Well, you are completely under the control of the administrator in terms of what you can do. I mean, for example, the administrator signed all the cheques.

CA Isn't the administrator effectively Chairman and Chief Executive of the club? He's taking all the decisions.

NB Well, this is why you want an administrator that you can work with and discuss things with. It was down to David Davies, Ross Jones and myself, to work with the administrator and influence him on quite difficult and critical decisions.

CA Do you think the administrator, in his time at the club, did a good job?

NB Yes, I do. Although, I have to say, I think administration is a very expensive process in terms of fees. But, yes, he was good. He was very helpful.

CA In what way?

NB Well, for a start, when we had a cashflow deficit, he helped raise some money for us to get us through that. And he was very sympathetic to the club. Because he could have said that we were not going to be allowed to do anything. He could have said, "You can't sign any players". Or that if you do, you can't pay them more than £100 per week. He could have made life even more difficult than it was, but he didn't do that. He was sympathetic to our view that you had to try to get a balance between being sensible financially, and at the same time try to make sure that there was some measure of success on the football field, and not end up getting relegated from the Second Division to the Third Division.

CA One of the criticisms that have been levelled at the administrator is that at other clubs, like Leicester, their administrators appear to have managed to secure them a much better deal, whether that has been paying their creditors a much smaller percentage of what they are owed or whatever else. Why didn't he manage to do that?

NB Well, the bulk of the money was owed to Chris Wright. He was the biggest creditor. So you could argue, that we only paid off 50 per cent of Chris Wright's debt. The next biggest creditors were the Inland Revenue and Customs & Excise and in the days we were in administration, the Crown were preferential creditors. The law has changed this year and they are no longer treated as preferential creditors and that's why Leicester have been able to do what they have done.

Proposed Wimbledon merger

CA Around this time of course, there were also 'noises' of a proposed merger with Wimbledon...

NB Well, we held discussions with Wimbledon. They were in terrible trouble, because they had nowhere to go. Their gates were very poor, they didn't own their ground, and they were in the First Division...

CA Hold on, lets go back. Did you approach them?

NB Well, it came up over conversation at lunch when we were playing Wimbledon at Selhurst Park, when we lost 5-0. We said "Shall we look at it?" and we continued to talk about it.

CA Sorry, who was talking about it exactly?

NB Charles Koppel and Mattius Hauger from Wimbledon and our directors. We got to the stage where (pauses) we decided it had some advantages. The advantages were that we had approval from the Football League to do it and we would have remained in the First Division. Wimbledon had another year of Premier League parachute money,

plus they would have invested money into the joint venture and we would not have had to go into administration. I also believed that we would swallow up Wimbledon with the strength of our support in a short space of time, so let's say if it had been called QPR and Wimbledon for the first couple of years, I believe it would have gone back to QPR again. And, it would have straightened out our finances. The disadvantages were, that for fans, a merger is a terrible thing. It does away with some of the history of the club, and so on. The idea was, that having worked it all out, we were going to write to all season ticket holders, members and shareholders asking them what they thought about it, giving them the pros and cons and asking them to vote on it, and we would carry out their wishes. We were never going to railroad it through. Because if we wanted to, as a Board, we could have done it. But we were never going to do that. It was going to be a perfectly democratic thing. If supporters and fans voted for it, with a decent majority, we would have continued. But then, somebody at the Wimbledon end leaked it to the Sun newspaper, and after that, it couldn't go ahead. The amazing thing about it was, that we had a reasonable amount of letters from various people afterwards, supporting the idea.

CA From our fans?

NB From fans.

CA So what was your personal position on the merger?

NB I thought it was worth looking at. It had the advantages I mentioned earlier, and it also had disadvantages. If our fans had said 'Yes' because we're going to stay in Division One, solve the financial problems of the club. Then, fine.

CA Wouldn't you feel guilty, as you said earlier, about swallowing up another club?

NB No. Because I cared about Queens Park Rangers. To me, it was a way out for Queens Park Rangers. You have to remember, the club had been effectively already up for sale for a couple of years, and nobody had come in for it. We were also unsure at the time whether Chris Wright would be able to purchase Wasps and the training ground, which would have provided us with the funds to get through. We weren't sure how the Football League would react to us going into administration. It was a potential way out. But I want to emphasise this, it was never going to be a Board decision, it was going to be a democratic vote.

CA So, just explain how this would have worked in practice...

NB The squads would have merged. It would have been a merged club. We would have had all their good young players, stayed in the First Division, had our ground, the parachute money, and additional investment from Wimbledon. Against it of course, was the dilution of the history of both clubs.

CA There are many of our supporters, many supporters of other clubs, who could not even contemplate the thought of something like that...

NB (Interrupts) And I understand that! You know, we didn't think or suggest it as a done deal. It was just going to be a question: Here is an option for our football club. What do you think about it?

CA And were the Wimbledon Board in favour?

NB Yes.

CA Unanimously?

NB Errr, (long pause) I don't know the answer to that, but the people who were running Wimbledon were in favour.

CA And what about our Board, were you all completely in favour?

NB We were all completely in favour of putting it to the fans. We had strong doubts whether the fans would accept it. But it would have been all down to the fans. And we wouldn't have done it if it had been 51 per cent for and 49 per cent against. We would have wanted something like an 80/20 vote in favour at the very minimum.

CA There were all kinds of denials once the story broke. Was that just to protect yourselves?

NB Well, I didn't put out any denials. It was an idea that was floated, and that's all it was. The one thing I will swear going to my grave on, is that it was always going to be a decision that would have been taken by the fans, supporters, members, and shareholders. Not the Board.

Prospective buyers

CA One of the things that you touched on earlier, was that the club was on sale for a while, and you said there was little interest, yet there were so many rumours about this and that person, about consortiums. I don't know how much you can tell us, but who was interested exactly?

NB Well, there were loads of people mentioned. Who did we have? Well, there were various property developers who came to us, and so on. I mean, perhaps it's worth explaining that the two things we ask of any buyer is a) have they got the money?; b) what is their long-term plan for the club? These are the two things we look for. It is never going to be a 'take the money and run' scenario for us. We feel we have a fiduciary duty to pass Queens Park Rangers over to somebody who can take it on. We have to be sure that they can do better than we can do. If we feel they are going to take it backwards, or they look like they are going to rape the club for a property deal, or something like that, then we wouldn't do a deal. The people I can tell you about. Well, Andrew Ellis came in. He made a lot of noises in the press, but he never started the process of due diligence. We finally said, "Look Andrew, if you are going to do it, we'll give you a period of due diligence." But he never started it even after our offer. Recently, he went to Northampton.

CA (Interrupts, laughing) Disappeared very quickly...

NB (Laughing) Disappeared very quickly...

CA Why was that?

NB Well, (laughter) I've said what I'm going to say about Andrew Ellis. We also had a guy called JR Ivan, who came in leading a consortium that fell away, and we were told later, that he was planning to take a large fee out of this, for helping to raise the money in that consortium takeover. There were also strong rumours that Richard Thompson wanted to come back in. Eventually, I was so fed up with them, because I just knew they weren't true, that I rang Richard.

CA Do you know Richard Thompson?

NB Yes. So I said: "Look, can you just clarify do you want to come back in to Queens Park Rangers?" He said: "If I can get in for nothing and make some money, then yes, but I'm not interested in coming back for any other reason." So it was complete bollocks about him wanting to come back in.

CA There was a story that Richard Thompson would have come back for a property deal on the ground...

NB I think if he could have seen some money to be made out of the club, he might have done it. But he realised there was simply no money to be made. So, he wasn't interested. The American who we've done the deal with, who owns the club in Milwaukee, he was interested but wanted to back it with a proposal that didn't work, and so on, and so on. It is so tiresome to keep going through this process, but you have to go through the exercise every time, just in case it is 'the one'. But genuinely, there is nobody to date who has come forward, that we have felt has been in a position to take it on. The only people who have put money into the club are the new directors. And that's it really.

CA Ron Noades?

NB No.

CA There was also Winkelman, who wanted to move us to Milton Keynes...

NB That was never on the cards. He did approach us, but we were never going to move there.

CA He's succeeded with Wimbledon...

NB Yes, but they have real problems. I understand Wimbledon's problems. They were going nowhere, and I think their Norwegian backers would have pulled out, and there wouldn't have been a club. There was no future in playing in front of two thousand people in a ground they didn't own. The feeling, rightly or wrongly is that they've got a chance of building a new club in Milton Keynes. Whether they'll succeed or not, I don't know.

CA But that's not Wimbledon, it's just franchising...

NB Well, I don't think it is franchising. I think franchising is slightly different. I think Wimbledon are a unique case, and if it were any other club it would be very difficult. They were lodgers with no ground. Averaging about 4,000 gates, and a base support of about 1,500

CA But they are getting more than that as Wimbledon AFC...

NB I think that's just because it's new and they are doing well, but their gates are dropping. Look! I'm not saying it is right or wrong, but if you are an investor in the club, you have to feel there is some future, and there was no future where they were.

CA Coming back to offers for the club, are they the best of the offers?

NB Well, we are continually talking to people. I can't say too much about what is going on now, but the Board believe we need more funding to strengthen the base of the club.

2001/02 - building a new team

CA So, we went into the close season. Quite a summer! Lets just recap, we've been relegated, we're in administration, in pretty desperate straits financially, a fairly new manager in charge, and about 8-9 possible first team players on the books. But apart from that, things are really good!

NB Well, that's what I remember, the lack of players. I'd got my new job with Really Useful, but Ticketmaster wouldn't release me to go and work for them straight away, so I was able to spend more time at the club. I remember being at the training ground in July, and Ian saying we've probably got around seven players that could possibly have a chance to play for our first-team.

CA What were you doing as a mini-Board there?

NB We were continually talking to the administrator about what funds we could have. We'd sold Peter Crouch by then, and we'd sold Jermaine Darlington. So we were asking him about what budget we could have for the season. And we worked out a budget with him that we felt we could work with. Then, I think we made two key appointments, and they were both from Watford. One was to bring in Steve Palmer, and the other was to bring in Kenny Jackett. And both have worked remarkably well.

CA Who picked Kenny Jackett?

NB Ian Holloway picked them both. I think Kenny probably had some say in Steve Palmer, because he obviously knew him. But Ian picked Kenny. Ian came to us and said that he wanted him as his assistant. Kenny had been let go when Vialli came in, and I think Watford really regret it now. They always ask about him when I go there. He's got a contrasting personality to Ian.

CA Can you expand on that?

NB Well Ian is very spontaneous. He's very lively, emotional. And Kenny is quieter, more serious, they just bounce off each other, it's a perfect combination, and their different personalities work well as a whole. I think Kenny has been very, very important to the club, and to Ian's success.

CA You mentioned Steve Palmer, he was the very first player the club brought in that summer...

NB We managed to persuade the administrator that we should bring Steve in. His salary was going to be higher than we wanted to pay for a player at the time, but we were convinced that he would be a very important acquisition to the club and it's proved to be so. After Steve came in, we also picked up Terrell Forbes who was on a free from West Ham, and he's been a terrific signing too.

CA How were we finding these players? Were they just on the lists that are circulated to clubs?

NB Yes. And Ian and Kenny watch a lot of football at all levels. The other person we brought in was Mel Johnson as chief scout, who also came from Watford, and he had a good knowledge and is a very hard worker.

CA We seemed to bring in half of Watford! There was Chris Day, and Bonnot as well...

NB Yes, it was an interesting starting line-up, there were some very good signings.

CA Those three French speakers that came in, really lifted the place, Bonnot, Doudou, and Ben-Askar...

NB Yes. The Doudou thing was very interesting. I'd first met Harold Winton previously, because he was one of the supporters of the Wimbledon idea.

CA Was he?

NB Yes. He called me up about it. And we got to know each other. We told him about our problems at the club and he wanted to help. We were having a meeting and he asked about Doudou, because he'd appeared in a pre-season friendly, and Harold had seen him.

CA I remember it. He only played for 45 minutes of the second-half, but he made quite an impression. Was it just based on that?

NB I think he may have also played another friendly. Harold was at the game and liked him and asked why we hadn't signed him. I said we couldn't afford him. We had reached our maximum budget. Harold said maybe he could help. We called Ian Holloway, and asked him if he wanted the player and he said yes. And Harold said he would fund the signing. And that's where the Wintons came in.

CA So, you'd managed between you to put together this collection of players, a brand new team. What were your expectations as a Board? Just to survive, or the play-offs, the championship?

NB I was scared, to be perfectly honest.

CA Why were you scared?

NB Well, I was scared, until I heard that idiot Ron Atkinson had tipped us for relegation! Then I knew we would be okay! (Laughter) No, seriously, because I knew that gates would have really dropped off if we'd gone into the bottom six area of the Second Division. I wasn't sure that we had a team that could get us into the top half of the table.

CA But you had a seemingly enthusiastic manager and players...

NB One of the great things about Ian Holloway is that he has tremendous spirit. When things have gone wrong, he hasn't allowed them to get him down. I mean, there is no doubt in my mind, when we beat Stoke in January last year, and we were fourth in the table, we should have strengthened the team to go for promotion. But we couldn't afford to. Ian understood the situation and didn't allow that to get him down. If we'd had that funding, we would have taken a couple of loan players and pushed for promotion, but we were in administration and we also had the Football League block on us bringing players in too. But Ian loves managing the club, he has his down periods like all of us, but it doesn't last a long time with him, he's very good at getting on with the job. And that's one of the things I most admire him for.

CA Was there any moment last season when you thought we could make the play-offs?

NB Yes. When we beat Stoke. But at the same time, underneath, I just had this feeling that we didn't have enough in the squad. I mean, again, with the administrators help, we went and got Gallen back after our thrashing at Swansea in the FA Cup which was quite an ambitious thing to do. Given the financial state we were in, Kevin wasn't cheap. But he's been fantastic since we signed him, we beat Swindon 4-0 in his first game back, and he hasn't looked back. Also, going back to your earlier question about whether the administrator was good or helpful, this is a good example of where he was very co-operative. He allowed us to keep some ambition in the club within pretty strict financial constraints.

CA You've mentioned one or two players coming in, there were also some other comings and goings, I remember Alex Bonnot left after several months during what seemed a critical period about two-thirds of the way through the season...

NB Well Bonnot was above budget, and Ian felt at that stage that he had enough in midfield to release him. That also freed up some money to bring in somebody else, and that somebody else was Jerome Thomas. Bonnot wanted a longer-term contract as well. I'm glad we signed him when we did, but nice guy that he was, we couldn't give it to him.

CA There's also a lot of people who want to know and are interested about Aziz Ben-Askar. He impressed a lot of people, he was a ball playing centre-back for a start, and people tended to like him for that, as well as a good defender. But he was in and out of the side. Is there a story behind that?

NB No, not at all. Aziz was a really great character to have around, but Danny Shittu came in and displaced him. Again, that was where the Wintons were really good and came in and got Danny for us. At the end of the season, Laval would have been entitled to a transfer fee if we had kept Aziz, and Ian felt there were better ways of spending that money. I think everybody who knew Aziz would say that he was a good player and he did a good job for us when he was at the club. I've been told he's also had a good season in France this year, playing Division Two football.

Coming out of administration - and a big loan

CA Towards the latter part of the season, we were coming out of administration, and the Board was getting a loan together to do this. What was the background to how and why you did it?

NB Because there were no offers to buy the club. I mean, we've said it very clearly at fans forums, we are not holding on to our positions jealously. If the right person wants to come in and take over, and says David Davies has got to go, or Nick Blackburn has got to go, then we'll go. But nobody like that has come in. Nobody! We'd been in administration for a year. The Football League came in and was warning us that by the start of the next season, we had to come out of administration.

CA So, how did you get the loan?

NB The administrator helped us get this loan. He knew the company ABC, and got the loan for us. We were very near getting a loan from a bank, but they decided they didn't want to lend to a football club. So, we were left with no choice.

CA A number of questions here. It's obviously not the kind of loan you get in your local Tesco's and...

NB (Interrupts) Well, you say that but we were very near getting a similar loan from a Bank at eight per cent interest.

CA A lot of people will find it difficult to believe that you couldn't find a loan from a bank, particularly as this loan is secured against the ground. It's a no lose situation for the Bank, with a prime piece of real estate as security if we default...

NB No. I'll tell you what the problem is here. In the case of the bank we were dealing with, we were told that as a matter of principle, it had been decided not to lend to football clubs. Banks are worried about their PR image. They feel that they can never call in these loans. Because if they do, and they are seen to be closing down a football club, and it looks very bad for them. Believe you me, we spent the whole of that season searching for money, and searching for a buyer. So with the help of BDO Stoy-Hayward we found this loan.

CA So was this the best deal available?

NB This was the best deal on the table to enable Queens Park Rangers to come out of administration and start the following season.

CA But it's a pretty bad deal...

NB It's about two per cent too high. We all think this loan is too expensive and we all think we should replace it. The thing was we knew we had Fulham coming in so we can just about cover it at the moment.

CA Just two per cent too high? The base rate is less than four per cent...

NB I think we would have struggled to get a loan for anything less than eight per cent. Look! If I tell you, we pay a higher rate of interest on the Mezzanine finance we raised on some of the theatres owned by Really Useful, that should put things in perspective. I think we are two per cent too high. The offer we were working on from the bank was eight per cent and that was a reasonable deal.

CA And what about the penalty clauses in this loan?

NB You have those in any loan. It's no different to paying penalties for coming out of a mortgage early. They are not huge penalty clauses. I mean, let me put it this way: Was it the only deal on the table? Yes Did we need to do it to come out of administration to be able to start the season? Yes. Are we happy in thinking this is one of the greatest deals we've ever done? No. Should we replace it? Yes. But it was just borne out of necessity.

CA When you took on this loan, Philip Englefield joined the Board at the same time, but he didn't last long. Why was that?

NB He joined as a representative of ABC, the company who were giving us the loan. They wanted it as a condition of the loan.

CA Was he a Queens Park Rangers fan?

NB No

CA Was he a football fan?

NB - I think he was.

CA Why did he leave?

NB Because we were advised about elements of his past that should have been disclosed to us initially. Something came up and he decided to resign.

CA What came up?

NB I really cannot discuss this issue any further. I am bound by confidentiality. Sorry.

CA You've also been pretty secretive about where the loan came from...

NB That's because that was asked for by the lender. We've said as much as we've been allowed to say. It's not down to us.

CA But you must have known that this would arouse suspicion, rumours, people would think that there was a hidden agenda.

NB Yes, we did. But that was one of the terms of the loan.

CA Michael Hunt has been mentioned in connection with this loan.

NB One of the terms of the loan is confidentiality.

CA Are you prepared to say whether he's behind the loan?

NB I can't. It's not that I am not prepared to tell you. I can't.

CA But David Davies did say, that it wasn't Chris Wright who was behind the loan, and that it wasn't Ron Noades, and that it wasn't Al-Fayed...

NB He's allowed to say that.

CA But when he was asked, he wouldn't say that it wasn't Michael Hunt behind the loan?

NB (Smiling) OK! (Much laughter) I've told you, I can't say anything!

CA OK, just one other thing on that point: did you care where the money came from?

NB Well, the loan was found by BDO Stoy-Hayward, who are a reputable firm of accountants. We obviously asked the questions: Who is the lender? And are they reputable? And we were assured they were.

CA Is the loan repayable? Is even the interest on the loan repayable?

NB The interest is payable every month.

CA And are we paying it?

NB Yes.

CA But we are losing money as a club?

NB We are losing money.

CA So how are we funding the club if we are losing money?

NB We budgeted this year to lose money with the intention of introducing new

capital. But all the new financial issues affecting football have harmed us. We thought we'd be able to bring in some capital to cover it. The situation is improving, but there is still a need to be ambitious on the field and also to be financially prudent. There is a need to carefully balance the two.

CA One of the other things that you touched on earlier, in relation to new buyers coming in, is that you've asked them for a business plan. I don't know whether it was yourself or David who said this, but you've admitted you haven't got a business plan...

NB That is a complete misquote! What we have is budgets based on what division we are in and 'what happens if' scenarios. If you are asking: Do we have a five-year business plan? No. Do we have three-year budgets? Yes. These are based on what divisions we are in and 'what happens if' scenarios come about. All this is run to very tight budgets, and management accounts are produced at every board meeting. We look at our cashflow all the time. So there is very strict management accounting and very strict budgetary control. I've got to say, I'd like to know how anybody could have a five-year plan in Football. I don't think any club does. Ipswich used to claim they had a five-year plan, but that's been well and truly blown out of the fucking window! (Laughter) And were all told that Ipswich are a well-run club. I don't see how any club can have a five-year plan. But, can we budget against certain scenarios? So if we are at point X, we can spend Y? Yes! Absolutely! You can do that. But even then, just this year, we've had extra security charges imposed on us by the police, we've lost the NTL money, and we've lost the ITV Digital money, and all that has come after we budgeted. It's hard. Very, very hard. And as if all that isn't enough, the bottom has fallen right out of the transfer market. The transfer market has gone completely. People think we can just sell the likes of Shittu or Carlisle. Well, the last player to be sold from a Second Division club to the Premier League is Brett Ormerod, and that was a year ago. There is such a huge gap now between the Premier League and the Football League as a whole. I don't believe that there are any players we've seen playing for Queens Park Rangers or for any team against us, that you could say would walk into any Premier League team. There are certainly players who could play in Division One, but it's those clubs that have suffered most from the ITV Digital collapse. They've got no money, so there is no transfer market for us.

CA Have we had any offers for players?

NB Not a single one. We had a vague enquiry from Stoke, who suggested they might be interested in a player exchange for Shittu or Carlisle, but that was the only one.

CA Who did they suggest they offer in exchange?

NB (Laughing) Nobody we would have been remotely interested in! That shows you how dead the transfer market is. Look at transfer deadline day. It was dead. Loan deals. That was all. In the seven years I've been on the Board, you've had Bosman, the huge gap that's developed between the Premier League and Football League, the NTL collapse, the ITV Digital collapse, and the collapse of the transfer market. It has been a lot to deal with in a very short space of time. But I think we have become a bigger club and I am really pleased about that. The fans have responded, and our gates this season have been fantastic.

CA The fans have responded for lots of reasons. The club have certainly improved the marketing side...

NB (Interrupts) And I think we are very cheap, compared to Fulham and Chelsea. It's more affordable for families to come to Queens Park Rangers, and there are all sorts of

other things. Its encouraging, and compared to what the club was averaging when it was in the Premier League, it all looks very good.

Fulham

CA During the year we were in administration, Fulham also announced that they were coming to share Loftus Road. How did all that come about?

NB Well, they knew they needed to redevelop Craven Cottage, and they were looking to go to either ourselves or West Ham whilst this happened. Obviously, we were the better bet in terms of location. West Ham had the advantage of a bigger ground, but given their attendances at Loftus Road, I'm sure they would have got even less at Upton Park. They approached us and we did the deal. It happened fairly quickly. They came to us around January/February 2002 and we completed the deal around April. I think it was a reasonable deal based on the size of the ground and the income they could earn.

CA There's been criticism of the Board for not getting more money out of Fulham and letting them off cheaply...

NB It's all based on the size of the ground. Chelsea will ask them for a lot more money, but it's a bigger ground so more revenue from the big home games, more hospitality revenue, and so on. And Fulham are restricted under Premier League rules to 17,500 attendances at Loftus Road, because they are not allowed to sell the 'restricted view' seats.

CA Is that right? We used to sell them when we were in the Premier League...

NB The rules have changed.

CA So if we went up to the Premier League?

NB As things stand, we couldn't sell all the seats in the ground either.

CA Fulham have also said that the Premier League have stated that our ground is not up to the standards they now require. What do you know about that?

NB Well I don't know what that's about really. I know the away dressing-rooms are too small. What I also know is that they have reconfirmed that they are staying next year, which I'm very pleased about.

CA Same deal as last year?

NB Yes, they had an option for a second year at the same money. Believe me, it's a fair deal. We did a lot of checking to find out what other clubs were paying before we did the deal. Based on the size of the ground and the income, it's a fair deal.

CA Do you deal with Al-Fayed personally?

NB Not really. I tend to speak to the other Fulham Board members

CA Do you get on with them?

NB Yes. They are extremely nice people. Very good people to deal with. I've got a lot of time for them.

CA So, at what point did they tell you that they needed to build a special toilet?

NB (Laughing) I don't know! I think that happened during the summer at some time, (still laughing) and Al Fayed's people requested his own toilet

CA (Laughing) Have you used it?

NB I'm not allowed to. It's locked when we are at home!

CA Have you seen it?

NB Nope!

CA Really? I think there have been pictures on the Internet somewhere...

NB I've only seen the locked door. It's not something I'm particularly interested in!

CA (Laughing) And what happens when they go? Do they take their toilet with them? (Laughter)

NB (Smiling) We'll donate it to charity!

2002/03 - the lowest low and the highest high?

CA So, we've now come out of administration, and we've had a solid season in Division Two. What was the Board thinking during the summer and going into this season?

NB We had to do better than last year. That was the thinking. To improve. My two ambitions this season, were to at least make the play-offs and to raise some more capital for the club. I felt if we did both, that would be a job well done for this year. I'd like to think we might secure some more finance by the end of the season. The response from the fans has been great, and we've managed to exceed the budgeted gate targets we set ourselves.

CA Lets go through the season, because it's been quite an extraordinary season in some respects. Started off OK, went top against Bristol City away, and then it all started to go wrong...

NB After we beat Blackpool at home on October 12, we didn't win a game until December 26, when we beat Wycombe at home. There were some interesting things happening at certain points. Jerome Thomas left us shortly after the Blackpool game. We didn't get another wide player in until Lee Cook came in for the Brentford game on December 22, and I think that's where we started off again as a team, when we had some balance.

CA Jerome Thomas was a very good player. He left very suddenly...

NB No. His loan was up. And it was not renewed.

CA There are stories going around about that...

NB (Very long pause) Jerome was a real talent.

CA (Interrupts) He IS a real talent...

NB Yes, he is a real talent. (Very long pause) Errr, (pause) but ... (long pause)

CA Were there difficulties behind the scenes with him?

NB (Long Silence)

CA There are rumours of him not turning up to training...

NB Errrr, no.

CA Rumours of him turning up late?

NB He turned up late for the Oldham game. Ian Holloway is a great believer in team spirit, team morale and discipline, and I'm sure that contributed to why Ian decided not to renew Jerome Thomas's loan. There is no doubting his talent.

CA Would we ever have him back?

NB Yes

CA Whilst Ian Holloway is manager?

NB Yes

CA Coming back to that slump in form...

NB Furlong was injured and off form, Gallen was out and didn't play, and they are important players for us. I think it all helped us get in to a rut.

CA Then there was the Vauxhall Motors debacle, and the pressure started mounting on Ian Holloway...

NB Actually, there was a hell of a lot of pressure to get rid of Ian at that point. Websites, fans outside the ground, letters coming in, all saying 'Get rid of Ian!'. And it does start getting to you. It's tough! But I took a deep breath. I looked at things, and we were still sixth in the table. I kept asking, "What is wrong?" And I thought about it and concluded that Ian wasn't doing anything wrong. The players might have been doing something wrong, but Ian wasn't. His tactics seemed spot on. I did an interview for Talksport after the Vauxhall Motors game the next morning, they called me at 7.15am, and I made the point that their players get £100 per game and nothing else. Yet our players, some with very good track records couldn't do better than get a 1-1 draw. Why was it the manager's fault? Why isn't it the players? But you can't stop thinking about the manager's position, and it's a terrible time, because everywhere you go, all the clever dicks out there are saying, "Get rid of Ian Holloway, he's tactically naïve." The pressure is tremendous.

CA Supporters were questioning some of his tactics, and some of his playing selections. They might say he was making the wrong choices...

NB He was picking what he had available. Look! You've just got to stick with it. History teaches you that it doesn't do you a lot of good to make a change every time you have a bad patch. Every club goes through a bad patch. Look at Cardiff City now. They've lost three games on the trot without scoring a goal, two of them against Peterborough and Colchester.

CA I know! It's great! (Much Laughter)

NB But believe me, it was really tough around that period, because of all the pressure.

CA So was sacking Ian something you were thinking about?

NB Well, you can't help thinking about it because a lot of people are telling you to get rid of him.

CA Was it discussed at Board meetings?

NB Yes, but it wasn't a very long discussion.

CA Was he close to being sacked?

NB No.

CA Despite all that pressure you mentioned...

NB No, he wasn't. Why? (pause) Why? Thank God we did stick it out, because we'd have looked a right bunch of idiots now. If we'd been bottom of the table, then I think there would have been a case, but we were sixth in the table. He'd taken us to eighth last year starting from scratch! And we'd improved up to sixth. So why should we sack him?

CA So, your feeling and that of the Board was there had been improvement, so stay loyal during a bad patch...

NB Yes, exactly. It would have been a short-term decision in the middle of a long-term job. It would have been a terrible decision.

CA Were the Board all united in keeping Ian?

NB Well, when you sit around the table and you ask, "What is the alternative?" Some might say, "Well, let's give him two or three more games" but you stick with it, and it was obvious it was the right thing to do. But it was tough at times, I can't stress that enough. I mean, people rang me here in the office and said: "Why don't you get rid of Ian Holloway?" They emailed me, sent me letters. It goes through your mind. You start questioning your judgement, even when you know it is sound.

CA You must have had meetings with Ian throughout this time?

NB Yes. We talked about what he was doing. Ian got very down on a couple of occasions. The Vauxhall Motors exit; he's said himself that it was his lowest time in football. And the other was Notts County away. That was the last game in our bad run. We were terrible, a 3-0 defeat, they really did us.

CA But what was Ian saying to you during this period? The players are letting me down? We're not good enough? I need more players? What was his view to improving things?

NB Well, he said he was looking at players to bring in, and we discussed what we had left to spend against the budget. I mean, the other thing was not to panic, not to suddenly be rushed into taking decisions. To give you an example more recently, we talked long and hard when Nicky Culkin got injured. We thought about bringing in a goalkeeper, and we were very near to doing so. I had these nightmares before the

Oldham away game, because we only had Chris Day left who was fit. If anything happened to him, say, for example, he got ill on the Friday night, Steve Palmer would have had to go in goal. So we had a look at Phil Whitehead, the Reading reserve goalkeeper, who was out of contract, but he had a trial and didn't play that well, and we couldn't find another goalkeeper available. Then Nicky started getting fit again, which suited us because Ian wanted to use that money he had left, on an outfield player that could make a difference. We were also going to try to bring in Martin Rowlands from Brentford as a right-sided player, but then Terrell Forbes got injured and then it was no decision, we needed a right-back because we've got nobody else at the club in that position, so we had to use up our last loan on Stephen Kelly. So it was good that we didn't panic way back then too, and leave ourselves exposed later

CA As we speak, we are on the verge of the play-offs. Is this where you expected to be?

NB Yes, automatic would obviously have been better, but this is an improvement. I think if you don't rush at things and you say "every year we're going to improve", then you eventually get to where you want to go. Every year, we should try to get a little better, and eventually, if you keep that up, if you do it sensibly, you might end up in the Premier League.

CA Can we do that as we are structured at the moment?

NB Whether a club the size of Queens Park Rangers can get back into the Premier League again is debateable. There's always a chance we might get up, like Watford did, and Bradford City. But you can't sustain it. It's impossible. Even Arsenal are having trouble keeping up with Manchester United, and need a new ground. I believe Arsenal take a £1m less per home game than Manchester United with hospitality earnings and everything else thrown in. It's becoming harder for the likes of them too.

Loftus Road

CA What is your opinion of our ground? Do you like it?

NB It's a lovely ground for football. It's a great ground to watch it in. It's a good location and it's fine for what we have at the moment.

CA That's not what the Board were saying several years ago. When you first came in, I remember Chris Wright slating the ground. He was saying "The transport is terrible, the seating is terrible..."

NB (Interrupts) Well, the seating is not comfortable, but it's fine for what we've got. It's not the best ground; it's not the worst ground. But if we want to be ambitious, we need to think about it. The one thing I know, is that if we ever became a top six club in Division One and were looking at the Premier League, it's not big enough, and there is no room to grow it. And then we would have to make a decision.

CA There was an opportunity to grow it when the school behind the away end was knocked down and the land became available...

NB But that would have been just another 4,000 on the capacity.

CA (Interrupts) But that was an opportunity to take everything one-step further. If you are looking to move to a bigger ground eventually, that would have given you the chance

to grow the support, and then a bigger ground becomes more plausible and an easier jump...

NB Look! I was up in Newcastle recently, and there was a 52,000 attendance. What you have to remember with these clubs is it doesn't stop there. There was parking, corporate hospitality, massive restaurants, I mean really big restaurants, 5,000 people sitting down to eat before the game. Huge profits in all of that. You sell more shirts, you sell more merchandise. The truth is, if you want to get back to the Premier League, that is what you have to look for.

CA I wouldn't disagree with what you say, but that wasn't my point. We have a small stadium by comparison to these teams, but my point is that if you are ever to look at moving in to a stadium that might sustain us at a higher level with all those spin-offs, it needs to be around the 30,000 capacity mark. To make that step feasible, shouldn't you as a Board have taken advantage of the extra land behind Loftus Road, expanded to 23,000 capacity, grow the fanbase and then, if we want to make that next step in five, 10 or 15 years, it's achievable, because the jump from 19,000 to 30,000 is too big...

NB The return we would have got against the cost of building in those extra 4,000 seats just wouldn't have been enough. You just won't make enough money going from 19,000 to 23,000, and there would have been no room to build in hospitality or anything else. Plus there are restrictions on what you can build because of the area, so it was never a viable option. The truth is, since I've been on the Board, there are not many games which we have sold out. I would love to get back into Division One, get into the top six, to see what happens with our gates. Would we get 17-18,000 every game at home in that situation? I think we might.

CA One other thing on the ground: Is the subject of Queens Park Rangers moving to a green field site of some description out in Heathrow, or some similar place, currently ongoing, or is that well and truly buried?

NB I would say it's currently parked to one side. We keep an eye open for potential opportunities to evaluate, but there are none at the moment.

CA Would we ever share with Brentford on a site like that?

NB (Pause) Would we ever? (Pause) We can't say 'never' to anything. It's what the circumstances are when an opportunity comes up. When anything is put to us, we'll consider it.

CA Rumours about Brentford permanently coming across to us. Any truth in that?

NB Well, they are trying to get to a new stadium in Lionel Road.

CA Any truth in the rumour that they are interested in purchasing part or all of Loftus Road?

NB No. I mean, we believe that groundsharing is a good way to go for us, because we can use the stadium, and we need the income, whether that's sharing with a rugby club or a football club.

CA I don't think our fans are too concerned about some elements of groundsharing. Where they do become concerned, is where the ownership and control of the ground is not within the club's remit...

NB I absolutely agree. It's about who's in control. I think groundsharing is largely accepted now. But it's about control.

CA And would we ever relinquish that control of Loftus Road?

NB (long pause, sigh) The question is. 'Would I want to relinquish it?' and the answer is not if we can help it

CA And are we anywhere near those circumstances?

NB No.

CA If I asked you to describe our financial situation in one or two words, how would you describe it?

NB Tight. (Pause) Very tight.

The supporters

CA There's a Hoops Fund being launched, and I know you and David Davies have had some discussions about that. How do you view the proposal?

NB We've felt in the past that QPR 1st have been negative.

CA In what way?

NB Their comments tend to be critical against us as a Board. At certain times, they've had every right to say what they have said. At other times, they've been negative, when I feel we have actually changed the mood of the club, and got the club moving forward...

CA (Interrupts) Give me an example of that...

NB Oh! Have a look at their website. Have a look at their copy going back. It's knocking copy.

CA It's scrutiny of the Board, isn't it?

NB It's knocking copy, it really is! Look! We accept that they didn't like the Wimbledon proposals, and they've got every right to criticise them. They've got every right to question the past profligacy of the Board and Chris Wright, and they've got every right to say Chris Wright should have wiped out all of his loans if he were able to. All of that is fair criticism. But anyway, we talked to them at the start of the season, and asked them to be more positive. We said Ian is very positive, we as a Board are positive, the players are very positive, lets all get together. Then they came back to us, and said they understood the club still needed money, we said we did. They also said that they would like a fans representative on the Board.

CA And how do you feel about supporter representation on the Board?

NB We said we are not against it. We don't mind at all. We know QPR 1st are not a popular organisation with the other fan groups, and they were in open disagreement with the LSA. Their membership has been declining, and I am told they have less than one hundred members. We wanted all the fan groups involved so there is one constituency moving forward, and they agreed with that, and once they raise a certain amount of

money, we will look at it. One thing that gets me, is that there is this demand that they should have a fans representative on the Board, as if the Board is not made up of fans. What do they think we are? We are fans too! But anyway, we are encouraging them, we are working with them, and we want them to cover the whole fan constituency.

CA What do you expect to get out of this?

NB I don't know. Because the Wintons attempt didn't take off, did it? Harold thought that the more wealthy supporters around the club would contribute. They didn't. I think it's very difficult. I think the way to do it is to take a small amount over a period of time. Let's say, a fiver a month multiplied by 10,000 fans. That's £50,000 per month, about £600,000 per year. A very useful sum to the club, if it could be achieved.

CA Both 'We are QPR' and the 'Hoops Fund' are good initiatives. I was discussing this very point recently with somebody about what our fans could raise financially. It would be good for them to succeed, but in my opinion, I think it is difficult at the moment to raise that sum of money you talked about. I can think of two or three reasons straight off why fans and supporters might be reluctant to contribute. The first is that most supporters don't believe that the club is in crisis, like it was a year or two ago.

NB (Interrupts) I agree with that.

CA A second reason why this might struggle is that quite a large number of supporters have got burnt as shareholders. They have lost considerable amounts of money. And a third reason might be that I'm sure many supporters might chuck some loose change in a bucket now and again, but can they afford to give bigger sums than that regularly, and indeed many might say, "What am I giving this money for?"

NB I agree with all of that. Maybe the funds should go to a specific thing, the youth scheme, or ground improvements, or something like that where the money can be ring-fenced. And we have already said to QPR 1st that fans should be able to pick projects that the money can go into. I think it is perfectly fair that some supporters who are shareholders and who have already lost money will be reluctant to give any more. They've probably bought their season tickets, buy merchandise, and contribute that way. That's a perfectly fair attitude. At the end of the day, we keep being told that it's your club. If supporters want to help, then great! And we are happy to have a representative on the Board to speak for them.

CA You've mentioned elections right the way across the fanbase, I presume that is QPR 1st, the LSA, and the Official Supporters Club. Would an election take place that includes candidates from all these areas?

NB Yes, and I don't think there are any issues, except for the responsibilities and obligations of becoming a director.

CA And so how would supporter representation work? Would they have the same representation and voting rights as you do?

NB Yes, but the difficult thing is, once you become a Board member, you have a fiduciary duty. And your fiduciary duty is to the shareholders, not the fans. There is also confidentiality, and all the other things that go with being a director.

CA Sounds like you still have some issues to iron out as to exactly how this will work?

NB Yes, to an extent. But then, there aren't any issues, in as much as you would all be required to have the same responsibilities when you become a club director.

CA What kind of timescale do you envisage for all this to happen?

NB I think that very much depends on how the fundraising goes. As far as I am concerned, it can happen at anytime.

CA Is there an urgent need for the money they may bring in?

NB It depends, (long pause) there might not be an urgent need, if the things we are working on to bring in extra funds come off, but I can't say too much about those at the moment. But if they don't happen, there will be a need.

CA You've mentioned QPR 1st, but you also speak to the LSA. I know, because we stopped our first interview so that you could go to one of their meetings. How do you view them as a Board?

NB Well, the LSA has a bigger membership than QPR 1st amongst our fanbase, and we view them as a valid voice of our fans. I think we have a good working relationship with them. They criticise us when they need to, but they have the good of the club at heart.

CA There's a feeling that you have a more comfortable relationship with the LSA, and that with QPR 1st it has been a little 'spikier'...

NB I think at the start, QPR 1st had a political agenda. I think it's slightly different now, they are much more positive.

CA Aren't you just more uncomfortable with QPR 1st purely because they have offered greater scrutiny of your behaviour as a Board?

NB No, I have no objection to scrutiny. That's fine. It's just that in the past, we felt that they were very reluctant to applaud us for anything, for any good news, they were always looking for the negative angle. But as I've said, I think that's changing.

CA What about the supporters? What do you make of us?

NB I think we've got really good support. However, I think there have been some bad developments that have affected football, involving supporters. The Internet has become a way of spreading innuendo and rumour, and a way of really working people up. I look at some of the stuff on the websites, and it is so far from the truth. People talking to each other, seen by others, and stirring things up that aren't true. Phone-ins are a real problem, because the presenters are always trying for sensationalism. I remember last year, I went with Ian Holloway to see a player. We were sitting in the car on the way back, and 6.06 came on. It was the night Arsenal had been knocked out of Europe. The first two callers that came on the programme said Arsene Wenger was past his sell-by date (much laughter) and Arsenal went on to do the double of course, but I just think: "Where on earth are these people coming from?" (laughter) Look, I'm not saying people shouldn't have a go at times, they've every right to. I think our fans have every right to be pissed off with what has gone on, and it is obviously difficult for many people to cope with having gone from being a Premier League club eight years ago, to where we are now. If I was an ordinary fan, I'd find that hard to swallow too.

CA So why shouldn't people criticise?

NB I'm not saying they shouldn't. I'll probably get shot down in flames for saying this, but I think we are naturally a First Division club, given the size of the crowds and the ground. If we achieve more, we will have done fantastically well. We've achieved less. We are not a Second Division club. We went down and that's very hard to take.

CA This is failure, isn't it?

NB Yes, this is failure. I think if you look at it in terms of our average gate, as it would be in the First Division, we would be about 16th. Better than that position, in terms of our league placing could be classed as success, and worse than that should be classed as failure. You can't divorce the income streams of clubs from their league positions too much. There are exceptions, we hope to be one of them, but over time, they can't last.

CA But if fans have been critical, they have surely had every right, for the reasons you just mentioned. The team has under performed, the position of the club doesn't equate to its modern history and status, the players and standard of football our fans have got used to down the years, and all the mistakes that have been made...

NB (Interrupts) Well, in the first part of the interview, I mentioned the culture of the club, the malaise that had set in, the lack of professionalism, and actually, that is one of the hardest things to cut out. It takes a while to recognise it, and then address it. That's all contributed to it.

CA What makes you proud of us?

NB What makes me proud? (Pause) Well, seeing everybody's faces at Cardiff and Brentford this season, smiling, happy. Fans jumping around with joy. And that buzz, that feeling of hope and expectation around the club. But, I'm proud of what we've achieved in the last two years as a club. Considering we started at such a low ebb, I feel that everybody has come a long way. Players, Board, Ian, David, all the staff and the fans. They've all battled away in tough conditions, and brought about all this optimism for the supporters, and I'm proud of that. Today, I think we are a very united club, with a clear vision of where we want to be. It is an absolute pleasure to go into the dressing-room before matches and see the high moral and unity amongst the players.

CA Is there something, you feel, we could do as supporters that you feel could help the club?

NB I'll tell you what I notice. Away from home, when we have our hardcore support following us, they never stop singing for the team. At home, I just feel there are a few too many people who sit back and say to the team: "Come on, impress me." Whereas, I went to Bristol City last night and the noise before the game and as the game started was tremendous. And you rarely get that at Loftus Road. More often, the noise goes up when the team is playing well. I'd really like to see that really rocking atmosphere going before and during the game regardless. Notts County on Easter Monday, for example.

CA Yes, that was very flat, but that followed Brentford away on the Saturday, and also, we were cruising in that game against Notts County...

NB (Interrupts) Yes, but that's what I mean, Brentford, you had that hardcore support who go to virtually every game. At home against Notts County, it really could have done with more of a lift from the crowd. Really getting behind the team, so that even before the kick-off, it's really pumped up. That is the one thing I'd like to see. Do you agree?

CA My opinion? Well, I think you are being a little harsh. There's certainly a great atmosphere for some games, many games, but I accept it could be better on occasions, although I don't think you can entirely separate the team performance or the mood around the club on this...

NB Well let me ask you something else. Yesterday, at Bristol City, they had The Wurzels doing the pre-match entertainment singing a cider song, and it gets people going. Now do you think we do enough? Do we stir it up enough? What do you think?

CA (Laughs, pause) If you are asking my personal opinion, that kind of stuff can work both ways. If you get it right, then it's great, but some of that kind of 'entertainment' stuff is very corny, it can be very cheesy. But then, I might be the wrong person to ask, as I'm the world's greatest cynic. I've got to say, I don't think there's much wrong with the current DJ and the music as it is builds it up as the teams come on. Maybe when people read this, they'll want to respond more.

NB Well, I like it really buzzing before the kick-off and during the game. I think it makes the team feel they want to die for you.

Season tickets

CA There's been a reaction to the price increases in season tickets. Can you explain why you did this?

NB David Davies set the season ticket prices with Sam Taylor, our commercial and marketing director. They brought them to the Board and we approved them. There is an increase, the first for some time, and there is a discount if you pay early, which means that if we go up, supporters will get First Division football at Second Division prices. We believe our prices are very competitive. Where I do sympathise with our supporters is that if we are in the play-offs, there are more games to pay for this year on top of their season ticket, and it's tough for the average working man to find the money.

CA Just on that point, whilst some people would accept your arguments for a price increase, there was a very, very short period of notice to get that early bird discount. Had it been announced a little bit earlier on in the season, let's say January/February, at least it might have given some people a little more time to prepare and get that money together. Because it's not just the average working man who might struggle. Even somebody on a good salary has commitments, and if you are talking about a family coming to the game, it becomes serious money, doesn't it?

NB I think you are probably right. But one of the attractions of doing it this way now, is that we know we've got a chance of the play-offs and a one-in-four chance of making Division One which you wouldn't have known in January/February. David did signal an increase was coming in one of his programme notes. I don't think the increase is excessive, I think we were entitled to put the prices up this year, but I do sympathise. I wish, for example, we could find a way which people could pay over a period of time without paying interest.

CA Any chance of the deadlines for the early bird prices being extended?

NB I don't know the answer to that without discussing it with the rest of the Board.

CA So just to finish, you've enjoyed your time on the Board so far?

NB Yes, despite everything

CA Despite all the things that have gone wrong or have upset you?

NB Yes, although some things have upset me more than others. From a Queens Park Rangers perspective, I think the thing that has upset me most was our relegation at Huddersfield. After the game, I couldn't speak. I was so low, I quickly left the ground after the match. I've also got to say, I had a real feeling of humiliation when we went into administration too. And I'll tell you what else upsets me.... Have you read Tom Bowers' book Broken Dreams?

CA Yes I have.

NB Well, you must have seen in that, the references to the transfer policies of certain managers. The thing that disgusts me most about football are the stories of corruption. If you've read that book, look at the people mentioned and where those clubs are now - Sunderland are relegated, West Ham are almost relegated, Portsmouth and Crystal Palace have both experienced serious financial problems. I think if a manager buys a player anywhere in the world because he is receiving a backhand from an agent, then he is effectively stealing from the club and from the fans.

And finally - next season

CA There is one last question I want to ask you about next season. And that is: Kevin Gallen has got a hat-trick. And Richard Langley has curled in a free-kick to complete his hat-trick. It's 6-0. Obviously, the half-time whistle goes. The teams are in the dressing-rooms. At this point: Are you going to come down from the directors box and go into the dressing-rooms at Upton Park, and tell Ian to make the players ease off a bit...?

NB No! Definitely not! The last time we played West Ham we lost 2-0 in Steve Potts testimonial, and I really wanted to win that game. And that was only a testimonial. Believe you me, I really want to beat West Ham if we play them next year. I mean, I really want to beat them. You really want to beat your old team, just ask Ian Holloway!

CA (Smiling) We are going to play them next year, you know that don't you?

NB I know! It'll be the first game I look for on the fixture lists when they come out. It'll be the biggest game of the season.

CA It will be the biggest game of the season. (Long Pause) For them! (Much Laughter)

Interview ends

Postscript

Or, that's where things would have ended. I sent the interview to Nick when I'd written it, and he rang me back on the morning of the last game of the season at Colchester, to confirm that he was OK with it, and that I hadn't misquoted him or got anything wrong. He was keen on pointing out to me my various grammatical errors; with me also keen to remind him that it was the way we both spoke! Still, I thought it was a good opportunity to ask him a few questions over the phone on the topic of the last few days, if he was agreeable. He said he was, up to a point. And so, for a last few questions, this time on:

Haleem Kherallah

CA Since completing the interview, it's become public knowledge that Haleem Kherallah was the potential investor you were talking to...

NB Well, No. He is one of a number of people we are talking to. There are others.

CA But he appears to have advanced and it has become public knowledge. Where does he stand in terms of buying a stake?

NB He's put in an offer to purchase the shares passed over to us by Chris Wright, and which are held in trust. This offer is subject to due diligence.

CA Can you say how much he has offered?

NB It's around £1m and this will give him a shareholding of around 25 per cent

CA Can he purchase other shares?

NB Yes he can, but if his shareholding exceeded 29.9 per cent, he'd have to make an offer to all shareholders to buy their shares. An expensive process.

CA Is it a serious offer?

NB Well, as I said, it is subject to due diligence and it's up to him to push it forward.

CA Have you read the Evening Standard article on him?

NB I was disappointed about that, and I've spoken to him about it.

CA Did he receive any advice before making it?

NB Not that I am aware of.

CA It flies in the face of many things you've said in this interview as your stated objectives...

NB I know elements of it have disturbed some of our fans, and I don't want to say much more at this stage, because it is not helpful or appropriate. But what I will say is this: as a Board, we have worked hard in the last couple of years to establish a measure of stability within the club and all of us are keen to keep it that way.

CA And the statements, amongst other things in the article, that Mr Kherallah wishes to bring Gazza and other Middle Eastern players to improve attendances...

NB All I'll say on that, is that as far as I am concerned, the manager decides which players come in. Only the manager. And that policy will remain unchanged.

END