

Seventy or so years with Cov Rugby...

John Butler

Just around the time of the evening with the 'Two John's', Quent Melhuish happened to say to me, could you put something together for the Supporters' Club website, charting back your memories of Cov Rugby good & bad! 'It doesn't matter if it's a bit lengthy' said Quent.

Sure I said, no problem, then I thought to myself, wow, it is quite a task, but something I would enjoy doing, so here goes...

THE EARLY DAYS

My first real Rugby memories, well, they date back to 17th April 1947 & Cov's last match of the season against Old Blues. Thanks to modern technology, I have googled them to find they are still alive & in Surrey Division 3.



It was that day my dear Dad took me along to Coundon Road, age 4 3/4, to see my first game. I know it was then, thanks to records kindly passed on to me by my long term good friend & colleague John Wilkinson. Cov won 14 -3, I had my legs either side of the rails on the cowshed side – there was no Health & Safety then - & Dad I remember, even noted down the 13 changes to the Old Blues side. Little did I know then what was to follow all these years later.

Why though, I have been asked, did you largely remain on the supporters side of the fence? I have so much to be grateful to the

doctors at, I believe, Gulson Road hospital, for within hours of being born in July 1942, I was being operated on for spina bifida. Yes, I never try to shirk away from playing live sport, but it did leave me with a much weaker right leg, so running & everything else associated with playing was always limited.

Looking back in my early days at King Henry V111, I actually did attempt to play in the front row of the scrum – as I said there was no Health & Safety back then. There you have it though, why, even at an early age, I realised if I was to follow my passion for Rugby, Cricket etc, most ball sports, it would have to be on the admin side.

My early years were spent either at Coundon Road with Dad, or when Cov were away, with my grandfather watching the GEC at Copsewood. Works rugby then was really strong – most of the works sides at times played Cov Extras. Works Cup finals at Coundon Road are a clear memory for their passion & ferocity.

It did not take me long though to get really hooked. Early memories of the 1950's, Harry Walker, Ivor Preece, Harold Greasley, Norman Stock, Johnny Gardiner, Ray Batstone etc etc. So many of them & my real early boy hood hero, full back & one time club captain Ted Hewitt. They said of Ted " he only won his two England caps because he was a good talker", I remember really well though, 1953 I recall, with Ted as club captain, Cov lost some 10 games on the trot. I thought the world was going to end !

Little did I know at the time that something really big was about to come about with Cov Rugby. Within the space of just a few seasons, Cov were back amongst the very elite of the club game in England & Wales, drawing many internationals to join at Coundon Road, which supplemented the already talented group of local grown players. Much of it down to the drawing power & charisma of Match Secretary Alf Wyman.

One of those was Peter Jackson, who from old Boys rugby in Birmingham, joined in 1953/54. To this very day, I swear I have never seen a more devastating runner with the rugby ball, a real genius, who was to become

a great club man. Little did I know at that point we were, many years later, to become close personal friends & what a privilege that was. More on that later.

By now though, club captain Harold Greasley, who just happened to work with my uncle at Renold Chain, had succeeded in getting me my first Cov player autographs & Dad bought me my first leather rugby ball.

FIRST STEPS WITH COV RUGBY

It was in the summer of 1955 that I suddenly thought, I would love to sell match programmes. So, off went a letter to Tom Hallam, who was Club Treasurer at the time, basically saying, please, can I ! Back came the response & I was asked to report on the opening day of the 55/56 season for the Extra Firsts home game & ask for Charles Prescott. Charlie was indeed to prove to be my real driving force.

He himself several years earlier had been plucked from the cowshed by the then Supporters' Club Chairman George Clifford & asked if he would take on the role of Secretary. Charlie did & it was with his guidance that it all began, selling programmes at all matches, whilst just a little later being weaned in the old wooden clubhouse on cider. Charlie in simple terms was my real Cov Rugby mentor & it was to give me a lot of pleasure many years later to propose him to become Club President around 1983 time. He & wife Frances, later to become Treasurer, were to be the rock of the Supporters' Club for many years, with Frances setting up the Cow Shed tea bar.

Although there had been a Coventry Supporters Association from around 1920, even then engaged fully in fund raising, the actual Supporters' Club was not formed until 1935.

February 1956 lives real in my memory. I was selling programmes for the Cov v Stellenbosch & Cape Town Universities game. It proved to be the only game played anywhere that day due to snow & frost.

Coundon Road was covered with straw, which saved the game & although Cov lost narrowly, it didn't seem to actually seem to matter too much. Or did it ?

The Cov squad was now by now filled with a host of international players & I had graduated to help sell tote tickets on match days, which the Supporters' Club ran at the time for the Club itself. Charlie must have seen something in me, in that I was invited on to the Supporters' Club Committee.

TWICKENHAM BOUND

January 1958 & my first live game at Twickenham. England v Australia. The Supporters' Club actually ran a day trip by train & coach taking in Guys Hospital v Cov in the morning & then on to Twickenham. It was my first visit there, but one certainly to remember. I had a standing ticket in the old East enclosure & there right opposite me, deep in injury time, one Peter Jackson was to make the run which dazzled the Australians & plucked out a 9-6 win for England, who had been down to 14 men for over half the game through injury – no replacements then. I did not care that I was to lose my voice for half the next week & that try can still be found amongst the greatest scored in faded black & white film.

GREAT DAYS FOR THE COUNTY

This was also the time of the beginning of Warwickshire's great run. Six County Championships in seven seasons, with, most of the time 13 or 14 Cov men together with Stan Purdy of Rugby, Colin Payne of Harlequins or Colin Hewitt of Cardiff. Who could forget the hordes of Cornishmen descending on Coventry, with the posse of Supporters Club Committee & others helping direct them from the rail station to the city centre & beyond. And, Owen Owen's in Broadgate running out of yellow & black ribbon.

The time as well when, with the County playing Durham in the final at Hartlepool

Rovers, the Supporters' Club chartered, yes chartered, a Blue Pullman train to take supporters to the game. It was full as well & was drunk dry, I recall, on the way back. Meals as well both ways, certainly one for the memory bank.

Or the time in 1962, with the county playing Hampshire in a Twickenham staged final, when some 14 coaches left Coundon Road, full of supporters. I remember taking down with us a red & white plaque covered in poster paint, which ran simply everywhere in the rain that followed.

BACK WITH COV

A firm club memory for me around that time came in September 1960. Arch rivals Moseley had experienced a tough time against Cov, but that season at the Reddings really fancied their chances of putting one over their arch rivals. To the extent that Ted Taylor, a well known Midlands rugby writer of the time stated that he was so confident of a Moseley win, if they lost, he would shave off his handle bar moustache. Cov won 42-0 & I can still see Cov legends Phil Judd & Mike McLean, armed with a cut throat razor, marching Ted on to the Reddings pitch & shaving off half of the said moustache.

Around this period as well, the Supporters' Club took on another number of key roles. With floodlights just arriving on the scene, funding for the Coventry club was becoming even more important & required all the time. With the help of Alf Wyman, Cov's Match Secretary & so revered around the game, several Charity matches were organised. Alf at the time was also, I recall, on the Supporters' Club Committee & midweek matches were staged at Coundon Road with Alf's XV playing the Welsh Academicals, United Hospitals & Combined Oxford & Cambridge XV. The floodlights scene benefitted well.

One of those matches also saw the profits go to the Baginton Fields Schools for Physically Handicapped Children. Fred Richardson, the then Chairman, handed on something over £350 from the Supporters Club; believe you

me, £350 was a fantastic amount & profit to be able to pass on in the early 60's.

A PROUD MEMORY

By now Charlie Prescott & after him, Roland Burman had stepped aside from the Secretary's role & I was very proud to succeed to that position in 1963. Charlie, now Chairman & Frances though were both still very involved & it was in the mid sixties an excellent idea was put forward by CP to raise more funds for the Club by guessing the weight of an Hillman Imp. Sadly, for some reason, the scheme did not catch on & was a financial flop.

ONWARDS INTO THE 70'S

The 60's, into the 70's were really a dream time of success for Cov Rugby. The two cup winning sides of 1972/73 & 1973/74 saw the Club at the real top of the British club scene. People seem a little surprised now when told Cov frequently defeated the likes of Leicester, Northampton & the senior Welsh clubs both home & away in the same season.

Two personal landmarks in my life then occurred. On 8th August 1970, Anne & I were married in her home village in Staffordshire. Cov supporters, armed with a big blue & white banner, which we still have somewhere in the roof, travelled all the way up, whilst the players were at David Duckham's big day, we being married on the same Saturday.

I have to say though that it might have been a month later. Some eighteen months beforehand, when Anne was home one weekend from her nursing training in London, came the suggestion we be married on the second Saturday in September 1970. The top home game of the season with Cardiff was due that day, so tactfully as possible I did suggest the wedding be brought forward.

LIFE CHANGING MOMENT

About a year later, when I was the Supporters' Club representative on the Club's

General Committee, along came BBC Radio Birmingham one night & prior to the meeting beginning asked, " would anyone be interested in providing match commentary on Cov's home games ? " They had been operating from Moseley for about a year at the time, with local radio still in it's infancy.

Just two put their hands up, former prop forward Mike McLean & myself & the rest is history.

We had no formal training, just listening to some "gash" tapes from Moseley & on the second Saturday of September in 1972, we sat in the press box, ready for match commentary on Cov v Gloucester.

The end of that season saw Cov in action v Bristol in the RFU Club Competition final, as it was quaintly known at the time. For Mike & myself, it was an experience not to forget; not least climbing in through the roof of the BBC Overseas Commentators box – high in the old West Stand.

The following year – Twickenham again for the London Scottish final, but with no other station to share costs with, BBC Radio Birmingham elected for no coverage, leaving Anne & myself to shout out heads off instead in the old West Stand.

1974 was that season as well which brought celebrations for the Club's Centenary, culminating in a match against the Barbarians & the commemorative Dinner, held at the sadly no longer to be found Hotel Leofric. Evidence of which can be found with the photograph displayed in the Jon Sharp suite.

Sadly, Mike died very early & suddenly in 1978, but some 46 years later, I am still trying to do my bit for local radio, Mercia Sound for a while in the 80's, now BBC Coventry & Warwickshire since its beginnings as CWR in 1990.

For Cov, the April 1974 final win was to prove to be the last Twickenham visit for the club, although through the remainder of that decade, there still great success. Notably at international level with some 13 England players being in the ranks.

ANOTHER MILESTONE

1977 was to prove to be something of a personal milestone, being invited by the then Club Secretary Peter Sharp to join the Club Committee in my own right. I remember later Peter Jackson explaining that with my job change & house move in 1973 to Staffordshire, plus we had my now a growing family, the Club had felt it not fair to approach me earlier. I immediately took on the role of Press & Publicity Officer, as well as editing the Club programme which I had already been undertaking from a few years earlier.

I remember very clearly an event which occurred around that time when Cov took on the South African Barbarians in the 1978/79 season. Many around from that time will remember the rumpus it caused, with the anti apartheid movement doing everything they could to stop not only that match, but others as well.

As Club Press Officer, the amount of phone calls coming in was enormous, to such an extent that I was forced to tell the switchboard at my employers to stop putting them through, so that I could get some work done ! Arriving at Coundon Road on the midweek afternoon of the fixture, police had sealed off Barkers Butts Lane by the traffic lights, meaning supporters then had to " foot it" the rest of the way.

Even then that was not the end of it. Overnight, metal tacks had found their way on to the playing area; it was a major operation to clear them all up, before Cov went on to lose 24 points - 41 in a thrilling game.

Little did I know then of what was to follow, memorable & otherwise, over future decades.

A real turning point for the Club, which Peter Rossborough & I have always agreed upon, was the death in the Clubhouse foyer in 1982 of Alf Wyman. We had gathered in the old Peter Jackson room for a Committee meeting, when Secretary Peter Sharp came in to announce Alf, minutes earlier, had died whilst training was still going on. The meeting was cancelled & as I pondered the news on

the drive home to Whittington, the effect really hit home.

Here was a man, so ahead at the time in his rugby thoughts, the innovator of the old Merit Tables nationally & so much more & he had gone. Suddenly, I realised the magnitude of what I was about to face as Press Officer; no mobile phones in those days, but so many calls to make on arriving home.

There is no doubt without Alf's guidance & input, impetus was lost in the ensuing years, with the levels of success for the Club dropping.

It was around this time as well when my official roles with the Supporters' Club ceased, having been initially Secretary & later Chairman before standing down to allow myself more time for club matters, plus helping bring up a young family.

FIXTURE SECRETARY

Very much to my surprise, but delight, on arriving for a meeting in 1984, Peter Jackson, then Club Secretary, took me aside to say former International John Barton had announced he would be standing down as Fixture Secretary. Did I feel I could take the role on ? A quick phone call home to Anne & there I was, voted in that night

It was a role for the Club I carried out for the next 14 or so years, which I found thoroughly demanding, but immensely enjoyable. The camaraderie amongst my colleagues was amazing – a real club in itself. Having not played the game at senior level, I did wonder at the outset what the reaction of other Fixture Secretaries might be. I need not have worried, to a man, they were fantastic.

I am also proud to say that during that time, the Club moved from two sides, 1sts & Extra First, to also embrace Colts & a 3rd team, the Wanderers. It certainly was challenging balancing everything up. On the other side, with the advent of leagues in 1987, the knowledge that I happened to be in the role when, over time, the Welsh fixtures & that with Dublin Wanderers all disappeared - &

there was nothing I could do about it !

INTO THE LATER 80'S & 90'S

The playing successes of the previous decades did dim though through the 80's & into the 90's.

Briefly, for one season, Cov were in what is now the Premiership, with the advent of league rugby in 1987.

Fast forward to the 90's, difficult times, not least in keeping the fixture lists together, particularly when early cup exits came around. Third Division rugby was now being played, which meant many traditional fixtures were lost, with Welsh fixtures now having disappeared as well.

A personal delight for me at that time though was to see both my sons graduate through the Cov Colts system, to both make 1st team debuts. Both scrum halves, David the eldest made his debut as a replacement on the wing at Rugby Lions, marking none other than Eddie Saunders, whilst Mike gained his Blue at Oxford in 1996, before his club debut came in the same season away at Moseley, when he was opposed by none other than Richard Moon. I did not realise it then of course, but 'Moonie' & I were to become & still are close friends whilst working together in later years for BBC Coventry & Warwickshire.

By this time, Gerry Sugrue had come on the scene in the early 90's, taking over from Eric Blackburn, who had served as Chairman for so long. No immediate rewards, but then at the end of the 1995/96 season came success at Reading in the old 3rd Division with Derek Eves now at the helm as Player/Coach, with promotion won back to Division Two (in later years to become known as the Championship).

In July 1996, having just been made redundant from my job in Tamworth, Gerry made contact, asking whether I would like to come on board full time as Office Manager. Not surprisingly I jumped at the opportunity. It was to prove to be just under two years of

real ups, but then sadly, some very big downs for Cov Rugby.

First, at the end of 1996/97 came the two play off's for promotion to Division One (now the Premiership). Victory at Coundon Road on the Wednesday night against London Irish, but with success over the two legs judged on a points cumulative basis, Irish, looking to hold on to their league standing, pulling away to a comfortable aggregate success ; not one of my happier broadcasting afternoons.

It was also the season when Cov achieved their 102-22 home win over Nottingham, still a club league record, on a day when the scoreboard operator had to hammer in a rusty nail to accommodate the third number digit.

Preceded of course by the famous home win over Newcastle in injury time, in front of 8,000 plus supporters. The build up & interest in the game from a club office point of view was extraordinary. We still had a queue looking to buy tickets on the Friday teatime, reaching right up to the traffic lights in Coundon Road & they had at that point been on sale for fully three weeks.

It was not to last. Cov remained in the old Division Two, but sadly, the cost of that promotion push had taken its financial toll. By May 1998, I had to witness the bailiffs come in to remove property, whilst I had been charged to remain at Coundon Road to keep an eye on things, with the Club Office having been moved into the city centre. "Don't worry" they said, " we will leave you your table & chair".

It was the time however when one can recall another astonishing incident. Gerry Sugrue had encouraged me to take on the role of Secretary of the then Senior Clubs Association, in addition to my club function. In the early days, a clear memory of sitting alongside Sir John Hall of Newcastle Falcons at a meeting held at Coundon Road. In itself, a very interesting challenge when I look back on it. Then, just a little later, but now with sadly the late Robin Foster of Wakefield in the chair, another club's meeting held at Coundon Road & including a phone call from

Gerry to say the bailiff's had just arrived at the ground!. A whisper into Robin's ear, but I can report in total honesty that we managed to keep the news away from the remainder of the meeting.

Sadly, within days, the Club was placed into Administration & I sought some work back nearer home in Tamworth, whilst also standing down as Fixture Secretary. Effectively, at the time, May 1998, there was no club.

CLUB RE BORN

By July 1998, Keith Fairbrother, the former Coventry & England prop forward, had put his rescue mission into place, with the Club then able to honour its first fixture, just, at Worcester two months later.

My official roles with the Club, at least for time being had finished, leaving me to seek some employment elsewhere with a mortgage still to pay.

Unfortunately, in February 1999, I suffered the first of my two heart attacks, the official advice at the time being to give up full time employment.

It was advice I did follow, although the decision was eased somewhat by news that the small company I had joined some nine months earlier in Tamworth had sadly gone into administration.

Recuperation was key, which meant briefly for a few months even local radio had to go on to the back burner.

Cov though club wise were battling on in tough circumstances. Eventually, I can recall a day at Otley in early 2000's when General Manager Ian Carvell asked me if I would again take on the role of programme editor. It was a role I had relinquished when the events of 1998 occurred, but now I was more than happy to help out again.

FULL CIRCLE BACK TO THE BUTTS PARK

For some years, various Club Committee's

had discussed the development of Coundon Road, Cov's home for over 80 years.

It was not to be. Considered to be too hemmed in by industry & housing for positive improvements to happen, the ground was sold, with Chairman Fairbrother initiating the move to the Butts Park.

Cov of course in their formative years had been there, but after the cessation of fixtures due to World War One, the ground was no longer available & after brief spells at both London Road & the Coventry & North Warwickshire Cricket ground, in 1921 came the move to Coundon Road.

It was then truly full circle when the first match v Nottingham was played at the now named Butts Park Arena in September 2004. A little later that season, Stade Toulouse sent over a side for the official opening, won by the French side 19 points – 14.

It was also the period for me personally when as deputy for KF, I was asked to attend Second Division board meetings usually held in a board room in the back end of Westminster in London. I never did establish who's room it was !

Looking back as well, I recall one of those meetings was just one week before the London bombings.

Some two years later, after rumours & counter rumours had circulated for some time, news came through that Keith Fairbrother was pulling out, to be replaced by a new owner, totally new to the Club in Andrew Green.

COMETH THE NEW OWNER !

During his "challenging" time at the BPA, with positive vibes consistently being peddled by the new owner, many plans were discussed, then shelved, with, at this time, an Advisory Board being set up.

I was invited to be a part of it, all matters appearing perfectly plausible for a time.

But then, early in the summer of 2008 came a phone call, completely out of the blue, from

my colleague & old friend John Wilkinson. It was to tell me that the RFU had basically given the club very little time at all to put a rescue package together & he "JW", with the knowledge & support of his editor at the Coventry Evening Telegraph, had confirmed to the RFU that he would head it up. Would I become involved? I had to say "yes".

It was a summer I & many others will never forget. The task was to raise £100,000, with constant daily contact with the Coventry Building Society & JW being undertaken. In the Autumn that followed, a figure in excess of £50k had been reached, had enough been raised?

Whilst at one of the Second Division Board meetings I referred to earlier, which just happened this time to be at the BPA, a phone call came through from the RFU; yes, they were satisfied with our efforts & for a time we could all breathe easily again.

That time did not last too long.

With Cov battling the odds somewhat during the 2009/10 season, with the Chairman assuring all, including the Advisory Board, that all was OK, came the moment in the Spring of 2010 when all changed.

On opening emails early one Monday, we were told by Andrew Green that he planning to liquidate the Club that week. That was the last time many of us actually heard from him, indeed he was never to be seen again.

Fortunately within the Club & Advisory Board were several people, notably Chris Gregory, who were in a position to do something about it. But, time was not on the Club's side, and with a game against Bedford to honour later in the week, there could be no delay.

Thanks to those efforts, they were able to avoid the Club being liquidated, but put into Administration.

From there the Bedford game was played at the Ricoh Arena on the Friday night, as sanction to play at the BPA again was to take a little longer.

The Club had survived another crisis, but come the end of that 2009/10, with the Championship as it was now known, bringing

in end of season play off's, it was Cov who were to fall, following the away defeat at, of all places, Moseley. Third tier rugby was again about to happen.

EIGHT SEASONS IN NATIONAL LEAGUE ONE

The day in September 2010, when many set off to travel to Tynedale was certainly an eye opener & a prelude for many ups & downs during the ensuing years in National League One.

If anyone had even the slightest doubt as to extent of the challenge for effectively a new squad, then the 20 pts -45 defeat at Tynedale Park spelt it out.

Players & Supporters though were to experience some really traditional club & settings on their travels. Tynedale already mentioned, Wharfedale, Old Albanian, Hull Ionians, Henley Hawks & Worthing Raiders being just but a few.

Survival, no mean achievement for Phil Maynard, his team & the playing squad in April 2012 was secured.

This though was the significant time when Coventry born Jon Sharp first came on to the club's scene & in taking over as Chairman, it soon became clear, whilst taking time, circumstances & events would begin to happen.

The following September, 2012, saw the arrival of Scott Morgan, who as a player & Head Coach & then Director of Rugby, certainly had a significant & steadying effect over the next four seasons.

The former Welsh International lock forward came on board at a particularly difficult time, but Coventry rugby will & should always owe him a great debt of gratitude for the time & effort he put in.

Fast forward to 2016/17. In the preceding months, John Sharp & the Board had clearly identified a need to change & move forward even more positively, if Championship rugby was going to return. Scott Morgan left the Club, as clearly owning his expanding

business & travelling constantly from South Wales was not going to allow the time needed to move the Club further forward.

In the months leading up to September 2016, came the announcement of the arrival of Rowland Winter from the Cambridge club as Director of Rugby. It was to prove to be another significant milestone in the long history of the Club.

The target for potential return to the Championship had been set for three years. In the final analysis, that was reached a year early in two.

Over the period, Rowland was to build a squad & team around him which surpassed many of the hopes & aspirations of supporters. The first season, 2016/17, was certainly one of building an even stronger base in National One. What was to follow, frankly was astounding.

The second season with Rowland Winter at the helm will always be remembered as the one where numerous team & personal records were set.

James Stokes set a club league record of 21 tries in a season, with the squad equalling the club league record of the longest winning run, whilst also achieving a winning sequence overall of 24 games. Twenty-five victories at home in succession also being yet another record.

The superb season ended with 27 matches won, a magnificent 183 tries touched down & 1,213 league points scored, each of them club league records.

A truly magnificent way to finally jump back into the Greene King IPA Championship after nine seasons away.

Ultimately though, promotion back to the Championship secured on a freezing cold March afternoon up at Caldy on the Wirral.

From a personal perspective, that afternoon will probably go down as the greatest challenge, hopefully passed successfully, in 46 years broadcasting in local radio. Radio car positioned behind the goalposts, not on the half way line as had been promised! 42 points scored by Cov in the opening half & all

towards our broadcasting end of the ground. Thank goodness!

Into the second half & a catch & drive by the Cov forwards, which from a viewing point of was difficult. Five minutes later, social media confirmed to us it was Tom Jubb who had been driven over.

The seasons in National League One had certainly been challenging. Many of us remembered the first game in the Division, when Tynedale had imposed a significant defeat on a much changed squad, but Phil Maynard, then Scott Morgan & finally Rowland Winter steadied the ship & the final record breaking season saw the squad finally really delight the club's following.

BACK IN THE CHAMPIONSHIP

It had taken eight long seasons to come to pass, but 2018/19 saw Coventry Rugby back in the Championship.

An opening day home win over Jersey Reds set an exciting trend, it taking though to the two closing away matches at Doncaster & Jersey for the away losing bogey to be cast off.

The scenario though is clear. Nobody is expecting an early rise to the Premiership, who's door hopefully always remain open in some way or other, despite threats of ring fencing.

The story as far as I am personally concerned, even after some 72 years, is not yet complete though. Hopefully, many more personal memories still to come...

