

The Walton Years

Secretary Martin Giles looks back at the legendary 'Walton Years.' Unsure what that means? Read on...

The Walton Years - Chapter 1

My first period of active service was in the Summer of 1988 but to start I will need to track back to January of that year when news of a secret meeting between Tony Walton and club officials was leaked around town. At the time, the club had been in the Kent League for around a dozen seasons and had enjoyed a fair bit of success. The clubhouse (the one behind the goal) was a busy place with full-time stewards and a regularly used functions room. It also housed the dressing rooms but the rest of the ground was largely undeveloped, with the entrance being alongside the building from the inner car park. I remember a great deal of press speculation regarding the financial state of the club and the future of its then manager (Glen Dempsey) and chairman (Mick Leach) as well as the ground itself.

By the end of February, Mick had stepped down, Glen had been offered the post of General Manager, and Walton had taken over. Neil Cugley, then playing at Thanet United, had been installed as manager, with Dave Carr as his assistant. It was apparently not a peaceful transition, with many lining up to support Glen Dempsey, who turned down the post offered to him and left the club. Thanet were also not best pleased and put out a statement to the effect that anybody else wishing to leave this club to go to Hythe had better leave now! Already Hythe were becoming the most talked about club in Kent football. Cugley's first match in charge was a 2.1 win at Cray and that was followed by an identical result against the same opposition that put the club into the League Cup final.

By now, plans for ground development were well known. The new chairman would rapidly upgrade the facilities with (eventually) stands all around the pitch, floodlights and turnstiles. More than this, he would get the club into the football league! Now I never did know if this was a serious aim or just a way of getting valuable publicity. I would have been quite happy to see our town with a club in the Southern League, anything more was pure fantasy, surely? All around the county, people shook their heads in disbelief but you had to be in and around Hythe to realise that there really was no fantasy. Mr Walton's 'empire' was there for all to see from his extensive business activities up at Lypne Industrial Park to the many building projects around the town. Down at Reachfields, work was progressing at a furious pace. As a mere supporter, I did not need to worry about anything, it was like dreaming you have won the pools, then waking up and finding the cheque on your bedside table!

The Walton Years - Chapter 2

The story so far: Following the arrival of Walton in the Summer of 1988, work has started on the ground, Neil Cugley is installed as manager, and much change is afoot

By mid-April there was still some public resistance to the new regime but, as the team continued to pick up points, this gradually evaporated and even in cautious, conservative Hythe, optimism began to grow. By the end of the month, the team had won nine matches out of eleven, moved well up the table, and were being joined by the first of the promised new players. These were former Dover and Folkestone player, Chris Hamshare, and Steve Brignall, who had actually played for Arsenal at Anfield. However, the season was to end in disappointment when Hythe travelled to Herne Bay on a sunny afternoon to play Tunbridge Wells in the League Cup final. The side were comprehensively beaten, 4.1, by a Wells team that hit top form on the day. A contributory factor in their win was the performance of their midfielder cum attacker, Shaun Carey, who was most people's man of the match. Shaun was to become the first of many opposition players who, having played well against Walton's side, would shortly be asked to join it, and most accepted.

Now the end of the season had arrived, but there was to be more news and action at Reachfields than many clubs see in the actual season. Both manager and chairman made sure the momentum was kept going with their thoughts and plans, and then the signings were soon being announced, starting with local man, Tim Hulme, who joined the club from Dover. It could be said that it was a hell of a start! There were Dover, a well supported and well organised side, playing in the Southern League Premier Division, losing one of their best players to a Kent League outfit – what was going on down there? Then there was midfielder, Paul Brenchley, and former Notts Forest goalkeeper, Lee Smelt. Lee had been Peter Shilton's understudy at Forest, and had seen many of Forest's glory nights from the substitutes' bench alongside Brian Clough, he'd do nicely!

Promising young attacker, Mark Stanton, was next along with the afore-mentioned Shaun Carey, and Dave Carr. Dave had played a lot of league football as well as having senior non-league spells at Maidstone, Folkestone and Dover, amongst others. He was highly respected and was an extremely sound signing – one of the very best. Mark Jones from Gillingham joined at the same time that former England non-league international, Frank Ovard, also made the move. Frank was an ace goalscorer and a close friend of Neil's so his signature was widely forecast. Once again there was much raising of eyebrows as Folkestone Town full-back and skipper, Kevin Smart, made himself available and was quickly accepted into the club. Kevin, seemingly playing out his career at Cheriton Road, was the sort of man who not only inspired his team but more rarely at non-league level, the supporters as well – another very good capture.

The Walton Years - Chapter 3

The story so far: Walton had arrived in early 1988. During the following Summer our Reachfields ground was transformed but how would we fare on the pitch? Martin Giles recalls the expectations and early season matches

To match all the transfer action, there was equally hectic activity going on at the ground, with the stands taking shape and the lights going up. It was an incredible sight to see Reachfields being transformed from its former state at such a speed. Virtually half of the ground was covered by rows of girders and the large number of men working gave the impression of urgency and expectation.

Would it all end in anti-climax when the football started? We were soon to find out when, in an extraordinary piece of fixture re-arranging, Hythe contrived to start their season at Ramsgate, three days before the rest of the league, on a Wednesday evening. Ramsgate, a former Southern League club and nobody's fools, took to the field in an unreal atmosphere. Some spectators at the ground thought it was another pre-season friendly, and the Ramsgate team were soon wishing it was. Seldom have I seen a team taken apart quite so ruthlessly. By midway through the first half Hythe were 5.0 up and such was their domination that one honestly thought that all sorts of records were about the fall. As so often happens though, the winning side eased off (hampered by a nasty foot injury to their player-manager, Neil Cugley) and finished the game with a 7.0 scoreline.

Strangely, the beginning of season lethargy which regularly occurs in the non-league game was still in evidence despite all the pre-season ballyhoo. Hythe would still have to earn their support, especially in those Summer days when there was so much else to do. As if totally aware of this, the team dismantled the opposition for the next two games – a 6-0 win at home to Metropolitan Police and another 7-0 scoreline, versus Herne Bay. After three games, the aggregate was 20-0 and work on the new Reachfields turnstiles was being rushed on with – surely they would soon be needed.

However, football is never that easy and the first defeat came against the hard men of Alma Swanley, who became the first to treat a match with Hythe as their cup final. A narrow win – 3-2 – over Deal Town followed and, as cricket started to peter out, the football season came into its own a little more, and an away FA Cup tie with Feltham being contemplated.

As a sign of things to come, a coach was hired and was filled with players, officials and spectators who made their way to one of the strangest games I have ever seen. We knew in advance that it was an artificial pitch but we did not know just how artificial. We sat high up in the stand listening to the ball skidding around during the warm-up and I was reminded of countless scratch games of football on the school asphalt. I half expected to see a pair of school blazers for the goalposts as we watched a game almost devoid of home support, as if the locals had long since rejected the charade. There was practically no proper tackling and the only time the game seemed real was when the ball was in the air. Once it bounced (and did it

bounce!) it was a comic circus of players jumping and prancing about trying to get it under control. The result was 1-1 but it hardly seemed to matter – how can football get it so wrong?

The Walton Years - Chapter 4

The story so far: Walton had arrived in early 1988 and Reachfields had been transformed. We'd started well in the league and drawn in the FA Cup on Feltham's artificial pitch, so it was back to our place for the replay

The scene was now set for the replay at Hythe. With the stands taking shape and the lights ready to be switched on, it was about to be one of the milestones of the 'new' club's route to the big time. The fans poured in and I remember thinking, when the night drew in and the lights perfectly and brilliantly lit the bright green turf, that this would just be the first of many such nights – this was proper football.

Unfortunately, Lady Luck had something in store and, after joyously taking a 2-0 lead, the home team was shocked by a severe injury to keeper, Lee Smelt, who eventually had to leave the field after trying to continue with what turned out to be a dislocated shoulder. Feltham, encouraged by the sight of first one then another stand-in, turned on the style to romp home 5-2. They played some beautiful football – they must have been so pleased to be playing on real grass and before a real crowd. The match attendance was over 400 and although it does not seem that much, it was around four times the old average and, of course, with the increasingly enclosed nature of the ground, there was a real atmosphere to be enjoyed.

After the cup it was back to the league with a 3-0 win over Cray and a dramatic last-gasp 3-2 win at Darenth Heathside. By now the club were established leaders and were still making the news in the transfer market. The latest additions were promising youngster, Mark Hyham, and veteran player, Ricky Fusco, who was a greatly admired former Southern League player at Folkestone and other Kentish teams.

4.1 wins over Tunbridge Wells and Greenwich Borough followed as the club pursued a policy of bringing forward matches to attract the bigger floodlight crowds to Reachfields and to guard against a possible end of season fixture pile-up in the event of bad weather. These wins were followed by an 8-1 victory over Kent Police to confirm the enormous gap that there was now between Hythe and the more modest members of the league.

Many of these lesser teams contained the sort of player who, to be quite frank, was only just up to Kent League standard. Needless to say, when they came up against a team that was a cultured blend of promising young talent and the older, experienced former Football League and Southern League players, they were made to look extremely pedestrian. As the home side wove

intricate little patterns over the tight Hythe pitch, disbelieving opposition players were left short of breath and in a state of near panic. The growing band of home supporters added another factor and, of course, were not slow to observe and comment on their inadequacies as the goals kept coming. I am pleased to report that rarely did this lead to serious foul play and all was well in the club bar afterwards as they seemed very keen to learn more about the 'new' Hythe.

The Walton Years - Chapter 5

The story so far: Walton had arrived in early 1988 and there had been a transformation on and off the pitch. We'd started our surge up the league and, despite falling in the FA Cup to Feltham, still had the Vase to come. Some sides, such as Alma Swanley, Tunbridge Wells and Faversham, who handed out a rare old drubbing at Salters Lane, saw the new Hythe as a real challenge. Faversham, in achieving the double, played to a visible plan, probably after sending scouts down to watch earlier games. This was no bad thing because there was, at certain times, a certain arrogance about Hythe's play which, considering the pedigree of the players, manager Neil Cugley did well to stifle for most games.

In truth, this was probably going to be the last time that a club would totally dominate the Kent League which was showing signs of emerging from the doldrums it seemed to have been in for a long while. At one stage the league had been one of the strongest competitions around but when a large number of its senior clubs had left to join the Southern League way back in 1959/60, it had understandably been reduced in stature. Now, with good sponsorship and a more professional outlook, coupled with the tougher attitude to ground grading required by the non-league pyramid system, it had regained much of the respect it had lost. So it was a good time for a side like Hythe to be emerging and a time when many of the Kent League were happy to treat matches against them as one-offs and concentrate on the battle for runners-up.

Despite their early FA Cup exit against Feltham, there was another major cup competition open to Hythe, one that had been dabbled in with fairly limited success, and one that was to become one of the major factors of the next few years. Some would say it was the 'icing on the cake' – the competition that actually got the supporters roaring – whilst others, the chairman included, would at times curse it as the main reason that for two seasons promotion would not be attained – it was the FA Challenge Vase.

Back in 1988 though it was really no big deal that Sittingbourne were overcome, 2-0 and a home tie earned against Hastings. Before the game could be played, though, Town warmed up with a 5-0 home win over Herne Bay and a game full of needle at Tunbridge Wells. The Wells crowd were well aware of the big spending going on down on the coast, of course, and they had lost their favourite, Shaun Carey, to Hythe. So it was with some relish that they had mocked the fluffed chances early in the game, particularly when Frank Ovard's dribbling constantly came to nothing. 'Get off', 'Big Money'. 'Show us yer wallets' were some of the cries from the bank above

the top goal. What a mistake! Nothing could be more guaranteed to stir Hythe into action than the locals taking the mickey, and a 4-1 win was the almost inevitable outcome.

The Walton Years - Chapter 6

The story so far: After Walton had arrived in early 1988, Hythe Town had begun the next season at whirl-wind pace, both on and off the pitch and now awaited the FA Vase visit of Hastings Town. Now the next big milestone was approaching with the Vase tie against Hastings Town. The Southern Leaguers were known to be big, strong and fast, and the disbelievers were predicting only one possible result now that Hythe were up against a real side. The Hastings supporters were here in some numbers to see the new boys put in their place. But with much of the ground work nearing completion and over 500 inside, at last the home fans got behind their new players.

In a game that manager, Neil Cugley, compared to the old Folkestone v Fisher Athletic wars, Hastings tough and, at times, almost cynical approach was met and defeated by a Hythe side that amazed everybody by beating their opponents in all departments of the game. The match won over so many of the casually interested as well as those who had travelled from neighbouring towns that I believe this was one of the most important occasions of that first full season. The final score was 4-3 and Hythe team on that night was: Tony Howes (the injured Lee Smelts eventual replacement for the rest of the season), Kevin Smart, Neil Cugley, Dave Carr, Ricky Fusco, Mark Hyham, Tim Hulme, Steve Brignall, Shaun Carey, Mark Stanton and Mark Valler. The latter had kept himself in the reckoning from the previous season and the squad was completed by another Reachfields stalwart, Adrian Bray and a not fully fit Frank Ovard, who were the substitutes.

Another former Folkestone favourite, midfielder, Bobby Wilson, now joined the ranks and despite occasional unavailability problems, quickly became one of the most effective members of the team. It has to be remembered that virtually all Hythe's players were stepping down a standard to join the club, and I think this gave them plenty of confidence and an inclination to switch on the style just a little. As well as this, they had picked up all sorts of tricks in their careers and consequently there was plenty of entertainment on offer for the newly-won supporters.

One particular move that regularly brought a goal was the fluffed free-kick, usually taken from just outside the area. As the taker moved to kick the ball, he stumbled or just hesitated as if the players were not quite ready. Both defenders and attackers alike relaxed and moved back to their previous positions, this often accompanied by cries of 'sorry' or 'come on!'. All the time though, both the kick takers and one attacker were, in reality, still in action and across came the little chip to the one person still aware of it, who usually had no trouble in beating the bemused keeper. By now the talk was beginning to be not so much of the current season but of the one to come. Both Mark Stanton and Mark Hyham signed contracts and became the first to do so as

Hythe thought ahead to a possible Southern League place and fending off the sort of scouts who would be attracted to the younger players.

The Walton Years - Chapter 7

The story so far: After Walton had arrived in early 1988 Hythe Town had swept most opponents aside. Chatham were to go the same way with a drubbing that featured an outrageous goal. The growing band of away support set off for Thames Polytechnic's South London ground – a venue that was to prove difficult for some of us to locate. When you travel away to Southern League grounds, you can usually pop into a shop or garage anywhere in the town and receive directions. Unfortunately, many Kent League clubs seemed to have neighbours who were unaware of their existence, and it was just after kick-off that we arrived at one of the more open grounds in the Kent League. Poly's ground is basically like a public park with just one stand overlooking the football pitch, which is bordered by other pitches, used for hockey and rugby as well as football. The changing facilities are communal and it is little wonder that some of the Hythe players took a little while to get used to all this. In fact, they took some 70 minutes to do anything at all but, no matter – final score 4-0 and get the beer in, what's the problem?

The next FA Vase match, away to Romsey, was being approached with a growing professionalism, and the team made its way down to the Hampshire club in time for a pre-match get-together in a hotel. A second coach full of supporters followed at a distance to a game that many of us saw as a formality. Unfortunately, it was one of those days – none of the intricate stuff came off against a fairly ordinary but hard-working home side and the match was lost by a single goal in extra-time. Such was the optimism, however, that the supporters returned in good spirits – indeed, the coach seemed to be loaded with most of the contents of Romsey's club bar and the singing was, well, raucous to say the least! Sure enough, the result was soon history as Whitstable were beaten 3-0 and, hardened by the Hastings battle, this time Alma Swanley's fire was well met and they were defeated 4-2.

It was now mid-December and it would be fair to say that the team were relishing some of the matches still to come against the lower sides. Poor Chatham were led like lambs to the slaughter and only just escaped a double-figure thrashing, losing 9-0. The match was memorable for the most outrageous goal I have ever seen when, in the latter stages, Hythe were awarded a penalty. Everyone was in place according to the rules of the game and up stepped Dave Carr to take the kick but instead of shooting he just pushed the ball forward a couple of feet. While the away players stood rooted, expecting the penalty to be retaken, in ran Frank Ovard to dribble the ball around the dumb-struck keeper and score. Pure entertainment! There was just time for a few cries of 'Hey, what's that?' and while the ref shot an anxious glance across to his linesman, there was Frank picking up the ball and taking it back to the centre spot. The crowd were now in hysterics and I dare say that any stranger watching his first game at Hythe would have gone home vowing to return for some more of this new sort of football.

The Walton Years - Chapter 8

The story so far: After Walton had arrived in early 1988 the ground and playing squad had been much improved and the club looked to be well on its way to the much coveted promotion. The new year was celebrated with a 1-0 win at Cray but there were then hiccups as complacency set in just a little. There was a 1-0 defeat at Deal which ended with a curious sending-off for Frank Ovard and a wee bit of trouble in the dressing rooms where, apparently, the referee's clothes joined him in the showers. The ref was Mr Steve Bennett!

It has to be said that Hythe's players were now quite a close unit and having been around a bit, they knew how to sort out any opposition players who felt like dishing out a bit of stick to the 'big money-earners'. Likewise, taunts from the other side of the railings were met with a lofty disdain – they had heard it all before – and when it came to after-match celebrations, which were always started by an order for about 20 pints of lager by the chairman, they were a match for anyone. There were plenty of hectic sessions in the Hythe clubhouse, when not all the beers went down the throats, but still, kids at heart!

In mid-January, Town were back to winning ways in a league match away to Metropolitan Police at Hayes. I remember driving down a lane near the limits of the county boundary and mistaking the ground for the entrance to a large private house. We parked the car and strolled across the grounds to another very open, and this time, very rural scene. There was just a large club bar with a sort of sloping balcony and the far side of the pitch was bordered by another pitch, all very tranquil. Into this unlikely area came the most talked about team in Kent football. 'Ere, ain't that the Peter Heritage that used to play for Hastings? How did you get him?' 'Paid 'em £4000 mate.' 'Bloody Hell!' Yes, the cheque book had been brought out to sign perhaps one of the most promising and devastating front-runners in the Southern League and, for once, any criticism of extravagance would eventually be disproved. Not only was Heritage a scorer and maker of goals but, in time, he would move on for a transfer fee that would have kept many less ambitious clubs in the black for years.

Hythe's will to win the Kent Senior Trophy was found to be wanting, at Cray's notoriously sloping pitch soon afterwards. The home side threw everything at their previous conquerors and when they let up, the local weather took over with a frightening storm that turned the pitch into a quagmire and threw the whole crowd into a huddled mass in the centre of the tiny stand. The result was 2-1 to Cray but, no matter – Walton had not spent all that money to win this comparatively modest trophy. As gossip and rumours circulated in the county regarding how much money was being spent on the team, manager, Neil Cugley, signed a contract that seemed set to tie him to Reachfields for the next five years.

Next up... Some hefty wins, more ground improvements, and the first of a number of run-ins with the league officials.

The story so far: After Walton had arrived in early 1988, the playing squad had been much improved, the team had surged up the league and manager, Neil Cugley, had just been rewarded with a five year contract.

Neil Cugley chose the timing of the new contract not so much to match the optimistic words of his chairman but to deny that silly money was being paid out on wages. True, Hythe were paying out unheard of transfer fees and treating their players well when it came to medical care and the like, but they were not paying exorbitant wages. By and large this was true, Hythe rarely paid more than their immediate rivals as far as wages were concerned, although for this Kent League season they had pursued a policy of playing players from at least the next league up, and paying them accordingly. Most of these players were happy to join an ambitious club where they would be likely to win a few trophies, and they would probably have settled for less than they were actually getting. If they were unsure of the move then, in most cases, a few minutes at the new ground, coupled with a chat with the two leading men was enough to convince them to join up.

Unfortunately, although some clubs were happy to take Walton's cash, others bemoaned the fact that Hythe were upsetting the balance of the local transfer market. Naturally, the price of a particular player went up as soon as it was known who wanted him, and Tony was well aware of this. However, it was not enough to deter him from his chosen course, and as he wanted success immediately, there was no time to waste playing financial games.

By the end of January, and with another big win under their belts, 7-1 against Thames Polytechnic, a scoring record had already fallen, that of the highest scoring individual Kent League player. Frank Ovard was the man and, despite the number of games that he had played being above average, it was fairly unusual for a season's record to go in January. The club took advantage of a first team home fixture gap to close the ground for three weeks for more alterations but omitted to ask the advice of the Kent League in agreeing to re-schedule two reserve games. This, the first in a series of clashes with the authorities, resulted in a fine, which was later doubled due to late payment.

There were defeats against Whitstable (3-1) in the League Cup and 2-1 away to Sittingbourne in the league, when Lee Smelt's brother, Marc, made his debut and it was agreed that something was missing in midfield. Jason Wheeler therefore joined the club on loan from Crawley Town to begin a distinguished spell of service. Although their form was faltering a little, it really only served to generate more interest as 500 attended a memorable 4-4 draw against Darenth Heathside. Although Darenth played their part on the pitch, they brought little or no support so this was more or less the pinnacle as far as Kent League attendances at Reachfields went. What could not be measured though was the percentage of 'home' support coming in from adjacent towns. These matches, against the better Kent League sides were quite often more entertaining than more dour struggles between, say, Canterbury and Andover in the Southern League.

The Walton Years - Chapter 10

Walton's team are riding high going into February but there is a little reserve team related trouble, causing our secretary and author of this history, Martin Giles, to become involved.....

It was about this time I wrote a letter to the local paper which was to have quite an effect on my life for the next three or four years. The reason for this was that by bringing forward matches earlier on, Hythe had a fairly relaxed run-in until the end of the season but this was interrupted by some heavy rainfall and by at least one team being unable to get up a team to travel down to an agreed midweek fixture at Hythe. Walton and Neil Cugley's response was to send their whole first team squad down to Hastings for a reserve fixture in the Kent League Division Two – a division that had been sadly overlooked with all that was going on with the all-stars. The reserves consisted mainly of the previous season's team who had been edged out of the limelight.

It was Walton's intention to disband them but this had not been done in time the previous season, although now their days were numbered. The players, to their credit, had stayed with the club despite, with only a few exceptions, seeing very little first team football. The truth was though that, despite the fact that most of them could not match the new faces at the club, they were still a very efficient team and had little trouble with many of the opponents they encountered in Division Two. Only one team appeared to be challenging them for the championship and, of course, that had to be Hastings! Down to the Pilot Field went the entire first team, achieving the inevitable result (6-1) and attracting a fair bit of criticism from Hastings folk and from an occasional Folkestone Herald reporter (not their sports editor, however), who got a little hot under the collar.

As I saw it, it was a legitimate act by Hythe after such an unnaturally long break in fixtures – and you do not spend thousands of pounds building a side for the Southern League to risk it all because a few people might not like it. I wrote, supporting the club's actions and saying there was too much sniping going on. Tony Walton had built a ground and a side in no time at all and at no cost to the community and we should be supportive of him. This letter was gleefully cut out and posted on the club notice board, amidst all the reports and photographs from the rest of the season. I had been noticed!

Wins against Danson, Slade Green and Ramsgate followed before the club's next clash with officialdom. The reserves had also been doing well in the League Cup (Div2) and were due to play against Folkestone in the final. In one of those all too frequent scenes where football shoots itself in the foot in slow motion, the game was fixed to be played at Snowdown, a ground which was by now a pale rusting shadow of its former self. Just who was going to travel there to see a reserves final, especially if there were other first team games on the same day? Both clubs were against it and, for Hythe, it would have been especially hard on the loyal reserves to play their final game away from the support they deserved. This time the local paper sided with

Hythe (and Folkestone) and eventually the match was re-scheduled for Reachfields on a midweek evening.

The Walton Years - Chapter 11

The Kent League championship is duly won in the first full season after Tony Walton's arrival as chairman in early 1988, but all is not well between the club and the league officials. Martin Giles continues his story.....

Meanwhile, stand-in keeper, Tony Howes, continued to turn in fine performances for the first team, as the Championship was won with a 4-0 victory away to Beckenham Town, followed by a 1-0 win at Alma Swanley. Despite their, at times, uncompromising approach, Alma were gracious in defeat, and those who traveled with the players on the coach were to be detained for some hours before a departure could be made, back down the A20.

Looking back to this period, and remembering that I was still only a supporter, I can recall very little in the way of celebrations. Radio Kent later interviewed club officials and, of course, the players celebrated in time-honoured style – but to most of the county this was merely the inevitable outcome of the huge financial investment made by one man. There had been twelve hard years of trying for this title but now it had been won so easily that to many it seemed unreal.

The reserves then played their final at Reachfields and gave a typically efficient display to beat Folkestone by 3-1. A gate of 350 gave both the teams and the final itself the support they deserved and the old team were to finish their final season with the fitting double, the League and the League Cup (Walton had planned to disband them at the start of the season but had been too late and was now intent on doing so for the following season). As they made their final exit from the old stomping ground and the club they had served so well, they were hardly to know that, such are the game's fluctuating fortunes, that for some of them it was not the end of their playing days at Reachfields. They would, all too soon, be back in the first team.

The season drifted out with a win at Crockenhill and a 0-0 draw at Greenwich. Goodwill between the club and the Kent League all but evaporated when Walton let it be known that, whatever the result of Hythe's application to join the Southern League, they would not contemplate a further season in the Kent League. Although many dismissed his statement as a hot-headed reaction to recent fines, I think the idea of competing in an alternative league was novel. At least one other league had a clear route through to the Conference and the prospect of playing teams from a different area could well have caught on. Also, Tony would have been able to persuade London-based players to join the club – indeed, with the wages he was paying, he would have had the pick of the area.

Worse was to come though, when the club neglected to attend the presentation evening of the Kent League, and winnings of around £2000 were withheld. A fine was also levied for the late withdrawal of the reserve side – something that occurs quite often as, in football, the various cup and league competitions have varying withdrawal deadlines. Walton publicly threatened court action against the league, who made similarly indignant noises defending their action. One disturbing rumour going round the county was that this might affect the club's chances of getting into the Southern League.

The Walton Years – Chapter 12

The Kent League championship is duly won, in the first full season after Tony Walton's arrival as chairman in early 1988, and the club is preparing for the new season. Enter our author, Martin Giles, as club secretary

It was at this point that my idle life as a football supporter was to change dramatically, when I broke the old army rule – never volunteer! It was my practice to call into the clubhouse on the odd evening or weekend – it was pleasant enough and, in any case, as a supporter I felt I wanted to get to know some of the people better. I suppose that part of me was really still at Folkestone and I needed to make a clean break. Knowing Neil [Cugley] quite well, on one of these occasions I mentioned that if he needed extra people to help out at odd times, in the new league, to count me in. I had in mind that I could perhaps man a turnstile for bigger matches or perhaps sell raffle tickets.

Unbeknown to me, the club were already considering the job of secretary and had spoken to one or two people. I was aware of some of the club's present officers at that time but what I was not aware of was Walton's determination to blow the past away and start the club anew. The present secretary, Ted Maycock, was known to me and I knew that he had been at the club as both player and secretary for a great many years. He performed his functions in the way of so many secretaries across the country – quietly, efficiently and honestly – but what made Ted remarkable was that he was registered as both blind and disabled. The plan was to make him life-president rather than expose him to the much more onerous duties that would lie before him.

I was told that a decision on this had been made and, whilst the club had talks with other people, including someone who had been secretary of another Southern League club, they felt sure that I would be well suited to the position. I suspect that the reasons for this bolt out of the blue were threefold – firstly, that I was known and that I worked opposite the ground; secondly that, as a sub-postmaster and shopkeeper I was unlikely to be daunted by the paperwork; and thirdly that as a new boy I would start the job with no previous systems or ideas in my head and would therefore be an easier proposition to work with.

I know now how hurt Ted was to have to give up his post as he was the last person on earth to bow to his disabilities but I still believe I did him a favour by accepting the job myself, as I was able to keep him in close touch with what was going on in the seasons to come. In fact, he was to continue to be one of the few ever-present helpers at the club.

In accepting the job, I took advice from several sources, often quoting Tony Walton's estimate of 'half an hour a day', which brought wry smiles from some who knew better. Neil assured me it was mainly a question of a system – filling in a form or two after a match, making a couple of results calls etc – a doddle really to one who was used to paperwork. There were two problems to this – one being that Hythe Town FC was not going to be run as other clubs. There was no comparison and also that, given the sort of season we were about to have, I would not have been underworked if I had taken the position full-time!

The Walton Years - Chapter 13

Martin Giles has become secretary, an important cog within Tony Walton's ambitious plans. But just what does the job involve apart from fame and fortune?

For those who are unaware of such things, as I was, the job entails all aspects of player registrations for all competitions – and also their contracts. Apart from maintaining records of these, as well as keeping all other rules and regulations at hand and in the mind, there is the constant stream of correspondence to and from the offices of the various competitions and the Football Association.

On a match basis, all matches are notified to the secretary or, in some cases, have to be re-arranged. Once a date is confirmed, then match officials will be appointed and the secretary must write to all three confirming their appointment and issuing ground and travel instructions. He must also confirm the match with the opposition, issuing them with the necessary information as well as obtaining from them their details for the match programme, and all communications must, of course, be acknowledged back to the home club. It goes without saying that the various "banana skins" such as clash of team colours and kick-off time must be borne in mind. On match days, the secretary should be on hand early to deal with unexpected situations that might arise – although I was to find that at more established clubs there would be a greater delegation of responsibilities. The sort of problems at Hythe would perhaps be a phone call from an absent gateman and queries such as "Who left that door locked?", "Can you send somebody out for some sugar?", "Where have the programme boys gone?", "I know we're early but can't someone get us some tea?", "Can I have a pass for my uncle?", "Why isn't the mic working?" etc.

The secretary must take a copy of his team list, and record goal scorers of both sides, as well as any cautions or dismissals during the game. He must help to form an opinion as to the

competence of the match officials – and, however competent, he must see that they are looked after before, during and after the game including, of course, ensuring that they are paid their fees and expenses. After the game he must relay the results to his parent league and other agencies, before he finalises his match day paperwork, which can usually be done the next day, when things have quietened down. But all this is only the basics and he can still be asked his opinion on any matter during the day, as he usually has access to the information. For instance, “What time do you think we need to get away next Wednesday?”, “Is there room for my parents on the coach?”, “Is that my fourth caution?”, “What happens if I get booked at Erith next week, do I miss the next round of the cup?”

Many secretaries will recognise this as part and parcel of the job – a job that gees you up on the bigger occasions just as it does the players – a job where virtually everything of importance that goes on in a club touches you in one way or another, and a job that sees you checking and double-checking so that you don’t make a silly gaffe and let your team down. I suspect though that a good many who recognise this as their job would shy away if they were also going to be involved in producing a programme, making tannoy announcements, and being one of only three or four home officials responsible for the comfort and entertainment of a dozen or so visiting directors, league officials or match officials.

So it could be said that it was a very naïve and unaware secretary who stepped into the job that summer, unaware that in the coming season his club would end up playing and rearranging more matches than any other club in the country, and that despite all the frustrations, at the end of it he would not have missed it for the world!

The Walton Years - Chapter 14

Martin Giles is still trying to get to grips with his new secretary’s job as the first season in the Southern League looms for Tony Walton’s team

We all looked forward to the big kick-off, Tony Walton and Neil Cugley cheerfully planning both tactics and new transfers, and also thankfully taking care of the new contracts – one thing they did not want the new boy (me, as secretary) mucking up, and of course this was one of the things that outgoing secretary, Ted Maycock, could not help me with as they were the first at the club.

It was at this point that a cardboard box was to hold the fate of both the club and myself. Every day, more papers arrived by post. Some could be dealt with immediately, some needed the attention of Tony and Neil, and some had to be held until the football started. Every day, also, I would turn the whole lot out and put it back, one sheet or one batch of papers at a time, to make certain I had not missed anything out. Then it would be a case of phone calls in the evening to either the League or someone else who could put me right – and very helpful everyone was. There was nothing technically difficult with most of the paperwork but it was very daunting to see it all gradually mounting up.

Down at the ground, all was spick and span and ready for action. To most of our visitors, it was a miniature Wembley but I could see that despite all that had been spent, there would be one or two problems on match days. The plus factors were that we had a very enclosed stadium with low, flat-roofed stands completely along the south side and the east end of the ground. Set inside the east end were the turnstiles, a block of four, as well as three exit gates for the end of the game. There was a new toilet block and a snack bar leading round to the main stand and dressing rooms, and a separate gate and walkway led in behind the snack bar to the dressing room entrance. The dressing rooms were large, particularly the home one, with a long row of showers. The away room was slightly smaller and the officials' one smaller again but still a good size and with three separate showers. There was a 'manager's office' leading off the entrance hall, which was painted a vivid green and yellow (as was the exterior of the stand) but this office was never brought into use and, being next to the medical room, was mostly used as a store.

Upstairs it was really quite grand, with a large bar and seating area, all fully carpeted. Off this were a number of balconies, six in all, which could have been sold off as boxes but, in the end, were used by home and away officials, players' guests, press and tannoy. There was also the chairman's private balcony which housed a separate bar and seating area. Underneath all of this were the stand seats numbering around 400, the numbers being made up, at the request of the League, to the required amount, by adding a further length, which brought the building right up to the western touchline. The only unprotected part of the ground was this western end but even this, as the rest of the ground, was fully concreted so that nobody ever had to stand in the mud.

There were snags although, knowing how much it had all cost, it seemed nit-picking to mention them. The seats at the western end could only be reached by walking in front of the trainers' benches or all round the rest of the ground. There was no internal staircase between the dressing rooms and the bar above, and the stand on the south side was level so that there was a problem if more than a couple of lines of spectators were in there. There were also some alarming blind spots where individuals could not hope to see all of the pitch especially if there was more than 300 present. These were around and behind the eastern end goal and, more annoyingly at times, also affected the seats that were reserved for home and away officials in the stand – although most preferred to watch from the balcony above.

There were also problems with the lay-out of the clubhouse, which had its entrance outside the ground but had its two exits opening out onto the terraces. This gave us the twin problems of possible free entry into the ground and the taking out of beer glasses – a practice much frowned on for obvious reasons. Also, one of the biggest problems was because of the low, flat-roofed stands, with the ball constantly going out of the ground and, worse still, onto neighbouring army training land. The famous Snowy, our long-time ball boy, was very quick but with a hard pitch and 'big boot' defending, it was not unusual to have up to three match balls outside at any one time and this caused a lot of disruption and delay. It also meant that, every match, every kick-off time and, of course, every postponement had to be advised to the army so that they could be aware of who was on their land, looking for footballs.

Despite all of this, we were proud of our ground and looked forward to the big games to come, and the atmosphere they should create. We knew the ground was one of the best in terms of both player and spectator facilities but we were also aware that many away players would be 'gee-ed up' just as they had often been at Folkestone. With the news of the transfer fees being paid by Hythe, they would be pretty well 'gee-ed up' anyway – this was just another factor.

The Walton Years - Chapter 15

Martin Giles continues his look at Hythe's rise to the Southern League under chairman, Tony Walton. New players arrive and the signs look good as the pre-season friendlies commence....

The new players kept arriving and were, more and more, looking like individual specialists, who would do their particular jobs in the team in a way that would cause a lot of envy at other clubs. There was Simon Bryant from Deal, a very fast forward with a deadly shot; Grant Gallagher from Crawley, a very skilful winger; and Malcolm Smith from Gillingham, a tough tackling defender and just 18 years of age. These were all very good players, the sort that could walk into most other teams in either division of the League, but more exciting still was the news that Terry White had been captured from Hastings for £4000. Terry was not everyone's favourite but there was no doubting that there were aspects of his game that 95 percent of players could not hope to match. Firstly, he could distribute the ball accurately from any position, either for free-kicks or in actual play. Secondly, he had the ability to take dead ball kicks from outside the area that threatened to incapacitate anyone who got in their path en route to the net.

Another specialist was Mark Weatherley from Gillingham, a man with over 500 League appearances and very well respected in the county. Mark could have joined a number of more senior clubs but opted for Hythe – he said – because he liked the area and thought great things were about to happen at Reachfields. Many would have liked to have seen Mark taking a more leading role, perhaps doing some coaching with the youngsters and such like, but this never happened. Nevertheless, he was to play a leading part in the team with his reliable defending and organising at the back, and his occasional forays into attack to score a vital goal.

Not all was well though, and Tim Hulme and Frank Ovard left Reachfields, the former for personal reasons. Frank was never a man to commit himself to a club too early in the close season but his decision to reverse a trend and move to Folkestone caused a great deal of surprise – and was perhaps proof that Hythe were not paying 'silly' wages. A formidable list of pre-season games had been lined up and, as I frantically got players signed up – including some who never made it beyond half an hour in one of the friendlies – the first game loomed, against a very well known non-league side, Redbridge Forest. They came to Hythe – a team of a higher standard, full of tough tackling defenders and nippy forwards, with their officials barking out instructions from both sides of the pitch. They were beaten 2-0. Then we went up to Tony Walton's old stomping ground of Cray, where a more mixed side again won 2-0.

Before the next friendly, against Ashford, there was talk of a new goalkeeper, the one position that had not been satisfactorily filled, with Lee Smelt still struggling with his injury from the previous season. 'You should see this chap,' someone said. 'He comes from Gillingham, has a broad Irish accent, and is one of the shortest goalkeepers I have ever seen.' He also had a string of youth international caps for Eire and was about to start breaking the hearts of strikers and goal-poachers all over the south of England – Steve O'Brien. Steve played well enough at Ashford (where the match was won 1-0) to keep his place for the prestigious friendly against Gillingham. This match would normally have seen a mixture of first-teamers, youths and trialists from the Football League side but, with the movement of players down to Hythe from the Medway, they turned out a strong side, expecting a stern test. They not only got a stern test, they became the fourth consecutive team to succumb to a Hythe side who were already winning over the fans before the season had even started. Hythe won the game 2-1.

Now, a very hard and fit Crawley from the Southern League Premier visited Reachfields, and this time it looked as though Hythe had bitten off more than they could chew. But, really, it was as if Town were already playing for points and a 1-1 draw was the outcome of a really tough and useful work-out for both teams. The friendlies were completed with a 2-0 win at Tonbridge. So with five wins and one draw, and a number of useful signings, it could be said that Hythe were well on course for the rest of the season. The rest, as they say, is history.

The Walton Years - Chapter 16

Martin Giles continues his look at Hythe's rise to the Southern League under chairman, Tony Walton, with the first game about to kick-off but not everything going to plan – blame Bon Jovi!

Now, as we have 'reached' the day of our first Southern League match perhaps I should say just where all of these recollections are coming from. Some time after Tony Walton had left the club in 1992 I thought it might be an idea to write a short book covering the period of time he was with us – after all, it was quite extraordinary! I got as far as the end of the second year before I realised that interest in the club seemed to be dying and I just could not see that we would sell enough copies to make it worthwhile. I had the first year reviewed successfully by a journalist and as we now embark on the second year I have realised that there existed a gap between the friendlies and our preparations for our first league match!

From what I recall, the coach for the game at Buckingham Town had been booked by manager, Neil Cugley, and Tony, and my job was simply to arrive on time at Reachfields. No problem here, but I seem to recall a later than announced departure from the ground and then an on-board panic as we had gone past Ashford without picking up one of the players. The blame for this seemed to be shared around most of us, but it was a lesson learnt and the consequent delay would not have been too bad if there were not other disasters to befall us. Never mind, we were

now back on course with plenty of time and nothing else would go wrong, would it? It certainly would – just about everything that could go wrong with a journey was about to.

Firstly, being August and a sunny day, there was an awful lot of traffic on the roads, and secondly I do not believe our coach company had taken proper precautions in planning our route, so that was two more lessons learnt already. The Dartford tunnel was blocked due to an accident, so we joined the mass of traffic heading for the Blackwall tunnel and made very slow progress indeed. After the tunnel, the driver commenced a series of short cuts that did not leave me too impressed and it was a fair time before we were back on the M25 and travelling more quickly.

However, on the M1 we hit real trouble when the driver groaned at sets of brake lights in the distance and seemed to know that they were the end of a tail back that would stretch over three junctions. We edged forwards painfully slowly until we turned off and tried to cut through Dunstable only to find that a very special sort of jam was waiting for us. This sort of jam is known as a Bon Jovi jam, and occurs when a top band performs at the Milton Keynes Bowl at a time when there is already holiday and shopping traffic a-plenty. There was just no way through it, and no way round it – so we telephoned the ground and told them to expect us when we got there, but we really had no idea when.

After a long period when one of our number actually left the coach for a cigarette and outpaced us we eventually started to move more freely and were hoping for a 3.10 arrival at Buckingham. Tony's mood had changed from being concerned to a calm acceptance of our lot – 'If they fine us, we'll just have to pay', 'They can't start without us', 'Have they got lights'? The players too seemed more relaxed once they knew we were definitely going to be late; like their full-time cousins they have their pre-match routines which they like to keep to but now they would just have to make the best of it. One thing for certain was that they were not going to get involved in any comical changing into their kit on board – Buckingham would just have to wait until we were good and ready.

As we sped along the country roads the final straw was about to make its appearance! Well ahead, a tractor's snout edged out from a gate and ignoring our presence pulled out on to the road towing an enormous haycart – the road was as good as blocked. There was a collective groan from all of us as we completely gave up – what a start!!

We were in Buckingham's main street by about 3.20 and ready to start at 3.45 and perhaps a little defensively starting to wonder if we should have been advised of such a major event happening in the area. Not that we harboured any bad feelings towards our hosts, they made us new boys feel most welcome and we were often to recount our first day disasters on future occasions when we met. The ground at Buckingham is very pleasant, but the club lacks support and consequently on a warm August afternoon with just 110 folk watching quietly, the match was hardly a step up in atmosphere and excitement from last season's Kent League

championship. In fact the game was a goalless draw and Hythe's first line-up was Steve O'Brien, Kevin Smart, Malcolm Smith, Neil Cugley, Dave Carr, Terry White, Steve Brignall, Mark Weatherly, Pat Hilton, Peter Heritage and Grant Gallacher, with Mark Hyham and Mickey Heynes as substitutes.

There were some injuries that limited selection but I suppose that there were also some surprises in that first team considering what had been spent. Despite being my man of the match (for what it was worth!) Steve Brignall was soon to drift out of the reckoning, whilst Mickey Heynes, a well known local player, was to stay involved for a wee bit longer. Pat Hilton, a former Folkestone youngster who had gone on to play in the Football League with several clubs, including under Brian Clough at Brighton, was thought by most to have been signed to help out on an occasional basis. But Pat was to confound them all by outlasting many of the younger players and threaten to cap his long playing career with a Wembley appearance later in the season.

The club were of course fined for the late appearance and I had to learn very quickly that even if we had left at three in the morning it would still have been our fault if we had been late. However, I did note that a later league circular drew the attention of home clubs to being aware of local events and advising accordingly.

The Walton Years - Chapter 17

With our first game in the Southern League under our belts, Martin Giles recalls the preparations for the first home game

As the first ever Southern League match at Reachfields loomed I cannot recall any pressure visibly making its presence felt on the management. Tony and manager, Neil Cugley, clearly regarded their team as potential champions, and I believed a good few neutral supporters were keen to see how the expensive new boys would fare. Many of the locals took the view that since this had all cost a lot of money (none of it theirs), the least they could do was to turn up. There were those that were more involved in what was happening – people who would live the ups and downs of football as committed supporters do all over the country – but many were a lot more calm about things. They would come along if they had nothing else on – or if it wasn't raining, but they would never consider going to an away match. Much of the time they had no idea whether the opposition was either potential wooden spoonists or potential champions – or even if it was a league or cup match – these people had to be won over if the club was to really succeed.

Down in the dressing rooms on that first evening all was calm and professional. The time scale is inevitably more condensed for a midweek match, but there was Frank Clark (physio) and Snowy (jet propelled ball boy and assistant) with everything neatly laid out. Tony and Neil would greet the players as they arrived and all the pre-match banter would grow in volume as more

came in, before the more serious business of match tactics were unveiled. Tony was always very keen to get everyone into the right frame of mind and he would insist on little things like records being played over the tannoy sometimes even before the gates were open to build the match up in the eyes of the players.

Neil was usually quietly determined before a game and nowhere near as approachable as he is normally. I remember for one of the early matches that some small item wasn't quite right and I experienced a somewhat curt response. He very soon apologised afterwards, explaining that he just had this tremendous urge to get things right and succeed – 'I just have to win'. It was clear to me then that if Tony had a strong desire to succeed he had certainly picked the right manager to help him in that direction. The professionalism downstairs was to a certain extent missing upstairs where a handful of us (including a gateman and myself on the tannoy) awaited events. Not having the numbers or experience needed at this level we were always vulnerable to minor problems which had a habit of turning into long standing frustrations. There was, for instance, no power point in the boardroom which meant that the complimentary tea for officials had to be prepared in the main bar area. This in turn meant that all sorts of wives, friends and general hangers-on would step forward for their free cup – which of course doubled the amount of washing up to be done.

Other frustrations making their 'debut' that night were the questions of boardroom entertaining, how it was dispensed and who was to pay for it. We went through several methods, including running an upstairs raffle (which nearly brought the stand down) but in the end there had to be a problem simply because there was not a board. We eventually settled for enticing one or two extra helpers in and funding all of the liquid refreshments ourselves, whilst drawing the food money from the match raffle. Quite clearly this was considered to be one of those niggling little things that we were to solve but although it did not affect the on-field events it was a very underestimated item.

We also had to try to keep the upstairs bar as private as possible whilst at the same time not upsetting anyone who, despite have no apparent claim, was considered 'in'. This of course led to claims of elitism from patrons of the main club bar who sat down there for quite a time after games before one or two players or officials started to drift their way. What did drift their way all the time were all of the incoming calls from radio stations and absent supporters asking for scores and match details. It didn't matter too much to Tony, but all sorts used to pick up the phone and consequently there was some fairly inaccurate match information handed out in the early days – I believe we won one game 3-1 after being 2-0 down!

Nevertheless, there we all were awaiting Joe Public and by and large an attendance of 560 was not bad going for starters even if there were a fair number of neutrals just having a look. Tony had something hidden up his sleeve that was to set the scene for many similar tricks in the future. Just four days earlier the supporters' favourite Frank Ovard had appeared in Folkestone Town's colours for their first home match – so who could that be out there in our number eight shirt – it looked like Frank to me! Well, although Frank was back there was to be no fairytale goal from

either him or anybody else as the two sides fought out a goalless draw. In truth, the game was not technically bad, but at the same time it was not good enough to win over some of the new supporters and although management and players were philosophical, clearly there was just a twinge of anti-climax.

The Walton Years - Chapter 18

With our first two games in the Southern League under our belts, Martin Giles recalls the busy start to the season as the games come thick and fast.

The feeling of anti-climax after the first two games grew somewhat for the first Saturday game, at home versus Andover, which attracted only 375 – not bad considering it was still summer – but quite a drop from the 560 attendance from Wednesday. This game was again goalless to half-time, but Andover did pop one in after the interval and went home with the points leaving us with only a rather large question mark. There was to be little time for fretting, however, with a Bank Holiday derby match away to Margate scheduled just two days later. It has to be said that there were not too many supporters prepared to make the short trip, but those that did were rewarded with a game full of good-spirited teamwork and a particularly sharp piece of finishing by Simon Bryant in the first half. We walked into Hartsdown Park not knowing quite what to think, and we walked out knowing that we would be OK, it was as simple as that.

Town's next match was, on paper at least, an attractive one – with Bashley as the visitors – a village club from the New Forest who had hit the national papers in previous seasons with their exploits in cup competitions. As if to put them in their place though, Hythe sold striker Peter Heritage to Gillingham for a cool £30,000, and persuaded England international Mark Barham to turn out for the club on loan – not a bad few hours work!

It must have been, therefore, an even more optimistic than usual club chairman that drove down into Hythe on matchday, and pulled into the car park. The team was knitting together, the supporters would come round, and now even those who said he threw his cash around too much had been put in their place – all transfer fees had been recovered in just one sale. The Bashley match did not dim his enthusiasm, with Terry White, the player he had signed whilst Neil was on holiday, firing in a 25-yard opener. Bashley did equalise some seven minutes from time, but it was a game for the purists with plenty of good passing, lots of effort and pace, and some fine individual skills also on view. No-one who saw the game could have doubted that this was the finest football that had ever been played in the town – it was a real pleasure to stay for a few drinks afterwards and look forward to the games to come later in the season.

Saturday 9th September saw an away game at Bury Town (St Edmunds), and the start of a happy relationship between the two clubs. We arrived ridiculously, if understandably, early at the ground and so had plenty of time to appreciate everything that a good non-league club should

be. From the playing surface to the small, neat stands and other facilities it seemed just right. We particularly liked the clubhouse with its bar snacks and the separate players bar which in turn led into the boardroom. All of these things would be worth nothing though if the natives were unfriendly – the only trouble at Bury though seemed to be that the door you walked through on the way in had a habit of vanishing when it was time to go – so you just stayed for another drink. In the boardroom they were great believers in medicinal whiskies to warm you up or cool you down, handing it out before, during and after matches in celebration or consolation. Bury's chairman Vic Clark, who Tony nicknamed 'the maniac', had a great line in patter and soon started up a friendship with Tony which led to several prolonged stays at each club after matches, sometimes up to three hours after the final whistle.

Unfortunately on this occasion Bury's hospitality did not extend onto the pitch and a Frank Ovard goal was all we had to show in a 3-1 defeat, with Mark Barham making his second and final appearance in Hythe's colours. Boarding the coach for our return journey in a none too sober state, I realised we had not counted everyone off when we arrived so to make sure we had not left anyone behind I popped back into the clubhouse. 'Here we are – one for the road' was the inevitable response – what a bunch! The scene now switched to Reachfields and a league fixture with Sheppey United the following Wednesday. This was a match that clearly had to be won, and Neil moved himself up front to renew his old striking partnership with Frank Ovard. The first half saw a competent performance by the home side with Dave Carr giving us a 1-0 interval lead, before 367 spectators. The second half saw virtually 45 minutes of Hythe pressure and further goals knocked in at the clubhouse end by Ovard, Terry White and Grant Gallacher as the Islanders' somewhat robust defence was blown away. This was to be the first of many second half barrages that often followed indifferent first half displays. I don't know the sort of things that were said at half time – but sometimes these displays nearly took your breath away. If they could have been sustained regularly over the 90 minutes I honestly think many of that team could have accompanied Tony up into Conference level.

The Walton Years - Chapter 19

Before our next league game at Yate Town, we had an FA Cup hurdle to negotiate at Three Bridges in Sussex, and now a coachload of supporters were willing to follow their team – such is the magic of the cup. By now we were settling down nicely with our administration and I had sent our updated list of players details for the match programme. Neil was keen to have the details of the players' Football League appearances as well as transfer fees paid included, believing that this would cause a fair amount of apprehension when read by our opponents. He was certainly right, for the Three Bridges' programme included phrases like 'raising our game' and 'must not be overawed' and even 'all of which might make the casual observer wonder why we are even bothering to line up against them'. Perhaps a little tongue-in-cheek but all the same the home side started nervously whilst Hythe stroked the ball around before two early goals from Frank Ovard, the first a quick turn and shot, the second a delightful chip over the keeper, killed the game off as a contest.

Not content with a side that could afford to send on second half substitutes like brilliant youngsters Mark Stanton and Mark Hyham, Walton then moved to add steel to his midfield by signing young Gary Smith from Gillingham. Tony also off-loaded Steve Brignall to Ashford – something many of us felt very premature – and this reinforced team headed off down the M4 to Yate, which is outside Bristol. The club was starting to strut a little now, with a hotel stop included in the pre-match preparations and a request for a specially adapted coach which unfortunately did not materialise. I was unable to make this trip and see a late goal by Frank Ovard win the match and keep us on the right course.

Next on the menu was the FA Cup again, and a home game against Molesey – a game that turned into a tremendous tussle despite a soft seventh minute opener from Kevin Smart. The visitors had a dreadlocked striker named Chris Vidal who was prominent in their many dangerous attacks on Steve O'Brien's goal. So noticeable was this striker it was almost inevitable that we were to see more of him in time, and not very much time either. Frank Ovard finally gave the Reachfields kiss of death to a side that clearly had not been put off by Hythe's big names nor the money spent on them.

By now the club was in many ways hitting an early peak. Down in the High Street Neil continued to work in the family business, whilst further up the street Lee Smelt was installed in one of Walton's off-shoots, Spencer Marlborough Estate Agents. This office handled the sale of flats and houses from the many sites being developed by Tony's company Larchimage, and was usually staffed by at least a couple of typists who were always willing to do work for the football club. Now Mark Wetherly joined the clan when he took over a High Street wine bar immediately opposite Neil's shop and although Hythe was never to become a hotbed of soccer it was certainly becoming more and more prominent in the town centre.

To this could be added a very significant new area of support – the young teenagers of the town, who were starting to take an interest in the club. To me this was an important area to develop, and Tony was quick to agree once the youngsters started to add atmosphere to home and away games alike. There has never been too much for young people in Hythe and I could see that association with the club not only gave them a 'cause' to follow, but also offered them the chance to use the social club's facilities and even eventually to become part of the club – perhaps in the form of a youth team.

So our early season peak covered many aspects, from the organisational side which was fast improving, to the team itself that was starting to settle. We had an office and base in the town centre, growing support and a gradual realisation that we were becoming known and to a certain extent respected by our opponents. They admired our team and facilities and also by league and competition officials who found that not only did the team play good clean soccer, but the club was keen to observe the rules and apparently keep its house in order. Older spectators too were now aware of the new standard of football on offer – that winning the league (if we could) would be quite an achievement, and that such events as FA Cup matches against league opposition were no longer a distant dream but a real possibility.

The Walton Years - Chapter 20

For the next midweek match at Erith & Belvedere we were back in trouble with the traffic, but this time 'we' were only the officials and supporters travelling up the M2 and the victims of some man-made disaster – I think it was an unexploded bomb. Shaun Carey had given us the lead having been recalled from a period out on loan to Tunbridge Wells to keep him match fit. Unfortunately lady luck was still not smiling on Town and a disputed late penalty allowed Erith to share the points. Erith's ground was at first sight frankly depressing, but underneath the main stand was another good example of why so many prefer non-league football. There was plenty of noise and bustle, plenty of spectator facilities, a nice homely clubhouse and a very pleasant boardroom full of the right sort of people, genuine enthusiasts of the game.

With an FA Vase match due next Saturday followed by the FA Cup the following week, I was starting to experience the sometimes rather technical job of re-arranging fixtures. I am afraid there is no way I can catalogue this job as it affected Hythe for the season – it was all a blur! On the face of it there is nothing too complicated about a simple change of dates, but in reality there are all sorts of snags and the process involves much forward planning – even results prediction, when you have as many dates to re-arrange as we did. At its most extreme (which we reached), it will involve Sunday matches and switches that involve a third or fourth club as well as the two involved in the original postponement. Most alarming of all though for me was that we were starting to do so well in the cups that I found myself trying to protect the run-ups to possible finals and giving the players a bit of a break in the preceding midweek. Eventually I was to have to schedule one midweek match for each week of the rest of the season when there were 'big' matches at the weekend, and two midweek matches when the weekend matches were less challenging.

Malden Vale were the FA Vase visitors and they gave Hythe as similarly an uncomfortable time as had Molesey from the same league. Despite an injury to their keeper they led 1-0 at the interval before the Reachfields revival show took over in the second half, with goals from Ovard and Cugley. The third goal of a 3-1 win, scored by Ovard was an example of how the club's players would still enjoy themselves even at this higher level. With the stand-in keeper stranded and only a simple tap-in to perform, Ovard chose instead to get down on his hands and knees and head the ball over the line – a goal the Vale at least would remember for a fair while.

In the next round of the FA Cup Whitstable Town from the Kent League then revisited their old adversaries and despite their reputation for playing good football were contemptuously swept aside by a forceful display by Hythe that surprisingly led to only a 2-0 home win – the goals being scored by Ovard and Smart. As the growing number of youngsters related details of the win to their mates at school on the Monday, Hythe was being paired with Hayes at home in the next round.

Now there was to be no let-up in the excitement as we were next due to play Folkestone away in the Southern League Cup First Round first leg – the first ever competitive match between the two neighbours. To the dismay of the local secondary school there now appeared to be a variation in its uniform which included yellow and green scarves – indeed after school and at weekends the scarves and matching cloth hats were by far the most common colour scheme on the streets. I suspect that some of the scholars rarely came anywhere near the ground, but it was all good publicity and gave the impression of a club on the march with the full backing of the local community.

Sensing the possible needs of those young supporters who were reliant on parental transport to the game, I booked a coach for the 15 minute journey and was rewarded by a packed vehicle and a rowdy, but good natured group who cheered us on to a 2-0 interval lead via Carey and Ovard. I remember thinking that with us on the way up, and Folkestone travelling the opposite route, it was a shame that the first derby should be so one-sided. However I was then jolted out of those thoughts by a two goal home revival that left the second leg set up at 2-2. The gate of nearly 700 was the highest at Cheriton Road for some time, and with three more such games scheduled for that season, it was a welcome boost for both clubs.

We returned to our roots the following Saturday with a Kent Senior Trophy game at home to Slade Green from the Kent League. The match was won easily by 3-0 with goals from Gary Smith, Mark Stanton and Terry White, but the attendance of 170, albeit in foul weather, showed how unimportant it was to the locals. My biggest problem with this competition was that we were in it at all. We had to accept that our swift rise meant that we could not yet enter the Kent Senior Cup, which was fair enough. However, the Cup was played on mutually arranged dates whereas the County FA stipulated ‘conference’ dates for the Trophy (ie - all clubs playing on a certain day). This caused severe disruption to league fixtures, especially as I could hardly see us being knocked out in the early rounds. Placed between an uncooperative County FA, and a frustrated Southern League, I embarked on a series of challenges to the rules which eventually led to a more lenient attitude being taken by the KCFA. Unfortunately before this happened we were stuck with postponing matches against the likes of Yate Town (near Bristol) and telling them to come and visit us on a midweek date in February – they were naturally overjoyed at that!

The Walton Years - Chapter 21

The following Tuesday we embarked on our first game in the Knight Floodlight League, that had been previously known as the Eastern Floodlight Cup, and an away fixture just across the Thames at Aveley. Knowing we would not have a reserve side, Tony and Neil had entered this competition hoping to give some of the more occasional players a game. It was a good idea, but in order to progress we had to win our group of three teams to reach the quarter-finals. As the other team in the group was Dover Athletic, I could not see us fielding too many reserves, and so it was a near full-strength side that came back on that Tuesday night with a 2-1 win, the goals scored by Dave Carr and Bobby Wilson.

Now it was time to meet the might of Hayes from the Vauxhall Opel League Premier Division in the fourth qualifying round of the FA Cup. For the first time I was to start getting a little of what my senior colleagues at bigger clubs experienced more regularly when I was advised that there could be trouble at the game.

Apparently, league clubs have supporters who live near to non-league clubs and sometimes choose to support those smaller clubs when they have a big game. With little if any stewarding or police presence they sense the softer target and hope to make a bigger impact. In the event, there was no trouble, but the Police did agree to keep an eye on things for us, and Tony could not understand their (free) presence. 'If there is any bother, we'll sort them out ourselves' was typical of his attitude, but with a possible tie against league opposition to come, I resolved to go by the book with this one.

The Hayes game was for me the first big disappointment of my first year as secretary. The match itself was well fought and fairly even, with both sides looking capable of taking it, but the best chance fell to young Gary Smith in the dying seconds. With one Paul Hyde in the Hayes goal, he blasted over when everyone was sure he would score, and so a thrilling climax to the game was gone. The weather on the day was foul, so bad that on one occasion the referee led the teams off the pitch while one squall did its worst. However the game started in reasonable conditions, and this made the attendance of 489 very poor, and I recall wondering what it would take to tempt some of the locals through our turnstiles if the fourth qualifying round of the FA Cup was not enough. The final score of 0-0 meant a Tuesday night replay up at Hayes – now could we persuade some supporters to join us?

By the time we knew the draw for the next round (Peterborough United, away) we realised that there would be plenty of support, for if we did seem short of numbers at times there was a small nucleus of real enthusiasm building up at the club. To add to this we received extra support when Tony Walton gave some of his workforce an option of taking the afternoon off if they were prepared to support his team. So it was that three coaches headed towards London, with the Chairman's optimistic remarks ringing in their ears "We'll do them up there, no problem".

Unfortunately, we did not 'do them,' in fact they comprehensively 'did us'. They seemed so much quicker on their own surface, and although we were not outclassed, I could not see us taking them without any luck, and this we did not get. A defensive error let them in for the first goal, but it was one of those nights when our key players just did not perform, and although the 3-0 margin was a little flattering, there were no complaints from our club. This time there was though a wee bit of trouble when one or two of the potential London troublemakers bit off more than they could chew with some of Tony's workers, but a heavy police presence stopped this from developing into anything more serious. There was trouble for our programme editor, Mike Simmonds, who received an urgent call during the match telling him that his workplace, Alton Wire, in Pennypot Estate was the subject of a major fire. One of Mike's jobs was phoning through the results to our league, and with him rushing home, this was not picked up by any of us. This

meant another small fine, but at least put our defeat in perspective – the factory was burnt to the ground.

With the 'big one' out of the way, we turned back to the FA Vase again, knowing full well that we could just go all the way in this competition – even Tony did not think we could win the FA Cup! Unfortunately, our supporters had not yet formed the same opinion and it was a dismally poor attendance of 207 that turned up for the home tie with Littlehampton Town. Depression grew when after a goalless first half our visitors took the lead on 52 minutes and held on to it until on 85 minutes we faced our second big cup exit in five days. What followed was the sort of comeback you only read about in comics. Suddenly Hythe embarked on a series of frenzied attacks on a Littlehampton defence that was looking extremely leg-weary, and the equaliser came from villain-turned-hero Gary Smith. Seconds later Mark Wetherly calmly lobbed the keeper, and straight away Frank Ovard crossed for Mark Stanton to head home the third, and heaven help anyone who had left early.

Now there was still time to put the upstarts in their place, when Ovard went on a lengthy dribble around virtually every member of the away side's defence. He was cynically brought down, and on protesting was booked, before being sent-off for his further observations. The game ended in bedlam, with Hythe reporting the match referee, and with certain Town supporters resolving to stay until the end next time.

The Walton Years - Chapter 22

As stated earlier, there was no shortage of enthusiasm from our nucleus of support, and together with our growing number of youngsters who had by now claimed their own part of the ground and were inventing their own songs. I was experiencing 'total football.' All through the day the phone rang at my shop, and in the evening there were calls coming in from supporters and the many clubs that were re-arranging matches with – it was getting out of hand. We solved this problem by using a premium phone line initially and later a plain answerphone which gave out details of coach travel and forthcoming fixtures. The main trouble was that people wanted to talk about the club, and with the lower social club now only open on an irregular basis, I was the only one readily available.

As was widely expected, our playing ranks were swelled by a certain Chris Vidal in time for the next big one, the second leg of the Southern League Cup tie against Folkestone. Equally predictably a new ground record (726) was set for the match. Unfortunately the evening did not justify the attendance and the game was goalless and decided on penalties after extra time with Folkestone going through 4-2. We were totally swamped upstairs and found it impossible to control the mass of 'friends' and hangers-on, many of whom had been unwilling to pay the modest admission price. Despite Folkestone receiving a number of extra passes, I was disturbed to find that each pass had been 'amended' and was being used to admit several

persons each time. There was a feeling that our club was being taken for a ride and we clearly had to sharpen up our act.

The next few days were to become very significant for all of us, as we set off on a November Saturday to Dunstable – ‘the end of God’s earth’, as one respected fellow club director had called it once. Despite looking to have an infinitely superior team, we conceded an early goal, spent some 70 minutes trying to equalise, and as our efforts grew more frantic, conceded again in the final minute. Our hosts in the boardroom afterwards were most hospitable, but we felt frustrated – did they know who they had just beaten? We also knew that if we were frustrated, then Tony would be far more so. How could it be that after all he had invested in the club and its players we were becoming league also-rans. Our position was made to look worse because, with all of our cup successes we were well behind with league fixtures and they in turn created more pressure for each match we played.

I received a phone call from the Chairman on the following Sunday in which he informed me that it was his intention to dismiss Neil Cugley from his post and appoint Dave Carr, with Lee Smelt as his assistant. It was a bombshell to me, even if the Hythe ‘grapevine’ had forecast this some weeks before, something that I took to be just a rumour. I had found Neil to be a very thorough manager, and at times a quite demanding one. He had phoned me (or vice versa) at least once a day, often much more, and was always keen to inform me of what he was doing, and check what I was up to. Although time consuming, this was really a good thing as it helped me to settle into the job, and meant that Neil had a good knowledge of what was happening off the field as well as on it.

As a manager, the worst thing that could be said of Neil was that he was learning the job of managing a Southern League club, but Tony Walton’s problem was simply that if he spent any longer learning, it would be too late for us to win the Championship that season. I could not argue with that, and in any case it was not my job to do so, I just waited for the news to break, having been asked to keep it to myself until all had been properly announced. Unfortunately, well into that week, I was still receiving calls from Neil who was obviously unaware, and I found this very difficult to handle. Tony, knowing I was a friend of Neil’s, had obviously sounded me out in advance not knowing how I would react, but I was more concerned with how the town would react which I thought might be more of a problem. The ‘town’ was not as impatient as the chairman and although they wanted success, they were quite happy with the new ground and the football being played on it. They had heard Tony’s ambitions of Conference football – League football even - and were gradually adjusting to the fact that we were actually going for it – but really for the time being let’s just take it easy. So there was a clash between a slumbering, conservative population who were trying to adjust to a man who seem determined to change their little club into the most successful non-league outfit in the country.

Well the news trickled out, missing the weekend local papers in a way that seemed to add insult to injury. Neil took it philosophically but made the point that it was not so much the decision, but the way it reached him, that would affect the standing of the club locally.

It was a very strange and quiet next home game, when Margate were the visitors. Bobby Wilson gave us a 13th minute lead which was lost in the second half with the final result 1-1. In the absence of newspaper reports, the local grapevine reported that the new manager would be ex-Chelsea star John Hollins, and this was a name that cropped up quite often in the next year or so. Of course, by the next weekend, the papers confirmed what I already knew and the new management team of Carr and Smelt were in place. As usual, Tony had one or two things up his sleeve, and Terry Collins from Folkestone joined newcomer Chris Vidal in the team. Another debutant was Gerald (Ged) Nohilly, a very skilful player who could play anywhere – he must have wondered what he had walked into.

The Walton Years - Chapter 23

Football, like life, goes on and with our fixture list there was not a lot of choice, as we had a midweek league game at Baldock due next. Apprehensively I boarded the coach in thick fog and wondered just what the atmosphere would be like. I knew where I was with the chairman, having asked for one or two assurances to be made and in turn assuring him that I would continue to do the job to the best of my ability. The players took it all in their stride as players do; after all they knew whose pockets their wages were coming from. And we did not expect to see many supporters up at Baldock on a murky Tuesday evening.

Despite the fog, we arrived at our by now customary early hour, and adjourned to the nearby pub, whilst the players continued to watch video films on the coach. When we returned it was as if nothing had changed, with the team having a kick-around and Tony watching from the touchline. Lee Smelt and Dave Carr were deep in conversation out on the pitch and when the whistle went it was a very determined set of Hythe players who immediately took a hold on the game. Mark Stanton gave us a 23rd minute lead, and although Baldock equalised, Shaun Carey converted a second half penalty and Chris Vidal headed his first goal for the club. A late consolation somewhat flattered the home side but afterwards it was business as usual with a few celebratory drinks and a noisy journey home.

Rumours continued to circulate the town regarding the manager's departure with most saying that Neil had gone because he was not being allowed to manage the team in the way he wanted to, and had not picked the players that Tony wanted picked. I don't know about this but it could be said that if Neil was persuading the chairman to buy new players, then refusing to play them in the most effective way then you could see Tony's point. However, if the chairman was both buying and picking players and suggesting how they should all be used, that made Neil little more than a puppet.

All I actually knew was that the pair remained on good terms, regularly exchanging phone calls. I also knew that Tony had picked his time very carefully and having won the Baldock away game, was facing two more games away from Reachfields. His obvious intentions were to win all three

thus quashing any adverse reactions, and this is precisely what he did. For the next Vase game at Camberley Town, our supporters coach provided 75% of the match attendance and a somewhat makeshift side that included Lee Smelt as a substitute went a step nearer Wembley via a Terry White headed goal.

This was followed by another midweek game at a bitterly cold Hounslow, where we played in front of 82 spectators and roughly the same number of jet airliners. Lady luck was now on our side when Hounslow put on a good show only to miss a late penalty. Hythe's response was to awake from their slumbers and rattle in two quick goals at the other end through a delightful Nohilly chip and a Vidal header.

Town returned to home base the following Saturday with a Kent derby against Corinthian. The new regime of Dave Carr and Lee Smelt was settling in well, and so it should have done really with gifted players on good contracts, but how would the public react? Despite a lot of talk, their reaction was rather indifferent, some staying away citing the sacking and Christmas shopping as their reasons, while others hurried in about two minutes before kick-off in their normal way. There were one or two shouts but it was a generally quiet game with the score standing at 1-1 before Frank Ovard came on as a late substitute and notched the winner in injury time. With Cugley gone, many thought that Frank would follow, but there were to be many twists and turns before that tale was concluded, although an unhappy Terry White did put in a transfer request.

The Walton Years - Chapter 24

On another cold midweek evening, a handful of supporters travelled to north Kent for a league fixture at Sheppey United. I found the ground and atmosphere depressing beyond belief, and I can only assume that the players had similar thoughts as they allowed their winning run to come to a sudden halt following a late winner for the islanders. We waited patiently for 90 minutes for the only little piece of skill that was needed to win the game, and when it did come it was delivered by our humble opponents – how could we have lost? Strangely, the mood in the clubhouse was quite upbeat afterwards, almost as if Tony had finally realised that if success was to come that season it would not be in the league, but a few cups would not go amiss. I couldn't help wondering if on that bleak night at Botany Road, the twin towers of Wembley had become our main target.

A more realistic aim was the Kent Senior Trophy and I found our next game a real test of patience. We were due to play at Faversham and it seemed unbelievable that we could not agree a replay date despite the fact that we were at Fareham in midweek. At half-time I was advised that they would not 'travel' down to us in midweek, but would come on Saturday instead. I was thankful that we had a prior engagement with Deal Town in the FA Vase which obviously took precedence, but the matter remained unresolved and we were relieved to leave Salters Lane with a 2-1 win thus making further negotiations with a rather jealous home club unnecessary.

So it was off to Fareham, and I was beginning to find these excursions a bit of a chore now that the evenings were closing in. Struggling through rush-hour traffic, albeit on a luxury coach, with the prospect of a mundane match before about one hundred spectators, one could be forgiven for questioning the fact that we considered ourselves 'big time.' The game was tedious in the extreme, with the only light relief coming from a late Mark Wetherly equaliser and the wonderfully warm welcome from the home officials. A strange icy mist seemed to hang about waist-high all over the pitch and the gate just crept into three figures. We had dreamed of the local derbies and a dramatic run in the championship in March and April but the reality was we were not doing the business in deserted stadiums on midweek dates when it really mattered.

Hey – but we are Hythe and we are different. The players were dragged out of the showers, the 'board' plucked from the cosy boardroom and here we are a hundred yards down the road with an order for about 40 fish suppers all on the chairman. Tony had paid for the coach, the players, and all drinks and food and here we were still an hour after we started ordering food, a noisy laughing bunch of people with nothing better to do than enjoy ourselves for the next few hours as the good folk of Fareham dribbled past us on their short way home. Suddenly there was something acceptable about speeding down the motorway in our little bubble while everyone else was going to bed.

In the next round of the Vase we were away to Deal, a team with a reputation for good football, but hardly a major hurdle if we played reasonably well. We took a supporters coach, but on a miserably wet day a crowd of 278 must have been a let-down for the home club. Deal played very well, but as we huddled in the stand with the rain lashing down, we witnessed a strong display by a Hythe team who were in no mood to allow any giant-killing. Terry White, back in the starting line-up, revelled in the conditions and fired in a beautifully placed shot in the seventh minute that proved to be the game's only goal. Afterwards in the clubhouse, the scorer laughed at talk that he might be leaving. There was little doubt in my mind that the players knew what was at the end of this particular road, and how the journey was well within their capabilities.

We now had one more match scheduled before the Boxing Day league clash with Folkestone, it being the return floodlight cup tie against Aveley, and as it was just before Christmas, we shouldn't be expecting much of a turnout. Although the gate of around one hundred proved predictable enough, the rest of the evening was not, and we won the game 5-1 against a side that totally lost their composure and had a man sent off in the process. Our young supporters treated the match seriously enough and chanted their way through the entire evening from 6.45pm until 9.15pm – well it was nearly Christmas!

The Walton Years - Chapter 25

The big Boxing Day derby was set for a late morning kick-off, and with the ground filling up nicely I took a stroll down to the turnstiles to see how we were coping. Basically they were not! There

was a mass of supporters outside the ground and I set about getting a fourth turnstile working, only to be told that it was alright, as the referee had agreed to put the kick-off back to allow people to get in – now this really was the big time. The eventual attendance was over 1100, and with Steve O'Brien stranded at Dublin airport, Lee Smelt was preparing to make his first appearance of the season in goal. After the match we were discussing how fortunate it was that the kick-off had been put back, because another Hythe player had been delayed en-route to the ground and was thus able to start the game rather than being named as a substitute.

It then dawned on me that we did have four turnstiles working originally, but when I had called down to see how they were coping, there were only three in use. Now surely the fourth one hadn't been closed just to create the sort of queues that would allow us to ask the referee to delay kick-off and enable our eleventh player to make it to the ground on time – surely not – we wouldn't do that, would we?

Tony produced a nice piece of public relations by sending the players out with sweets for the younger ones in the crowd, and the big attendance settled down to enjoy the match against a Folkestone side that included none other than Neil Cugley at the heart of its defence. In a typical second half blitz, Hythe won the game with a Dave Carr header, and then a Mark Stanton conversion from a Frank Ovard cross. By the time Jason Wheeler finished the visitors off, there was a carnival atmosphere in the ground, and I recall glancing down at the packed terraces and seeing a well known local clergyman virtually leaping with delight as little old Hythe trounced the big time visitors 3-0. The true facts were that it was Folkestone who were the underdogs and having a wretched time trying to keep going at all. Fittingly though, the match scoring was completed by their centre-half, and our old manager, Neil Cugley – a festive consolation if ever there was one.

The year ended with a slightly less festive encounter with Canterbury City, before a crowd of 424. Hythe overcame some very robust tackling to win 4-1 with goals from Mark Stanton, Simon Bryant and Chris Vidal (2), and the junior choir was in full voice. "Frankie, Frankie, give us a wave" – wave from Ovard. "Oh Chris Vidal, he's got long hair" – embarrassed looks from our dreadlocked striker. "He's big, he's round, he's spent a million pounds" – regal wave from Tony Walton's balcony – and so on. By and large, it had been a good year, and despite the managerial changes there was a buoyant good humour about the club and a realisation that we had fitted in well in the new league despite the fact that we were quite obviously different in many ways. Most of our opponents were first-time visitors to Reachfields, and normally they went away well fed and watered and impressed with the set-up.

However, it was only the turn of the year, and there would be plenty more excitement still to come, and a small matter of some 37 games still to play – although for all we knew at the time it could have been nearer 50 if we went all the way in cup competitions.

New Year's Day saw another full coach of supporters optimistically making the 30-mile trip to Hastings and the Pilot Field, and so help to give the newly formed home club their biggest attendance ever – over 600. Hastings Town had taken over from Hastings United when the latter had folded, but of course it was very difficult for outsiders to see any difference. The game was a wee bit aggressive at times, but our noisy hordes witnessed a late header by their new hero Chris Vidal, and celebrated through to the final whistle. Unfortunately, five seconds before this Frank Ovard was felled in an appalling tackle in the area that hushed the crowd, and left both players motionless. In one of the most amazing pieces of refereeing I have ever seen, the official totally evaded his responsibilities and blew for full-time and left the field. In the event Ovard was only badly bruised, although the Hastings man had to be rushed to hospital. I was so incensed by what I had seen that I was very glad to have the excuse of being in charge of the supporters coach rather than going to the boardroom. where I surely would have said too much.

Ovard recovered enough to be named as substitute for the 'easy' home game with Hounslow the following Saturday but despite a brilliant goal from Simon Bryant, we conceded a silly equaliser in the final minutes and were unable to regain the lead. Despite this, the plan to take two coaches on the long journey to Trowbridge the following week went ahead. It was Lee Smelt's feeling that the mixing of supporters and players might at times lead to problems, and this meant that we needed at least 30 supporters to book to make the coach viable. I had to respect this view which was also to some extent shared by Tony – but I did not agree with it. My attitude was that if I had a dozen fare-paying passengers for a long-haul trip, it was a little difficult to tell them that they could not travel, when the official coach invariably had that number of spare seats available.

The Walton Years - Chapter 26

Although Dave Carr was very much the manager on match days and would be consulted for any major decision, Lee was the man who ran the club throughout the week. He made most of the training and travel arrangements, and was constantly on the office phone keeping in touch with many of the contacts he had established in his football career. When I needed to check a particular piece of fixture rearranging I used to call into the office to speak to him, but as our fixtures got more and more complicated, he tended to leave it all to me. Lee and Dave got on very well together and I in turn found them very easy to work with. David's job in the City meant I could only speak to him in the evenings, and so Lee's role for the club was absolutely essential. It was a great joke between the two of them that Lee would do all the donkey work only to hear the fans singing about 'David Carr's yellow and green army' on the Saturday.

Anyhow, we managed to get a decent number on the second coach to Trowbridge, and had a pleasant first visit to the Wiltshire club. The pitch had a fair slope and tended to get quite boggy in wet weather and so Simon Bryant's equaliser five minutes from time was a satisfying conclusion to a game that produced seven bookings. Games between the clubs were as physical as they were frequent, but looking back there was always a feeling of mutual respect

and friendship. Like Hastings, it was a case of “Oh no, not them again” which soon gave way to “Now when do we see you next?”

Our next game I would include in my top ten if I had to make a choice – it was the Knight Floodlight Cup clash away to Dover Athletic, and my suspicion that both clubs and their supporters would take this seriously was soon confirmed. Dover were unrecognisable from the old outfit that had folded a few short years earlier with attendances of just two or three hundred. Now they were a club very much on the march and seemed to have the whole town behind them. They were a club setting a good example, with priorities in the right place, and in short they were everything Hythe wanted to be. Yet us upstarts were, in playing terms, progressing upwards at such a speed that we might well overtake them as champions of east Kent. The coach I had tentatively booked – was this the first ever supporters’ coach for this competition? – made its way barely one third full to its final pick-up in Red Lion Square, and there was a mass of young folk waiting to get on. When our illegally overcrowded vehicle reached the Dover turnstiles we were amazed to see the numbers queuing to get in.

In what was supposed to be a low-key floodlit competition, both sides battled for local pride before two very noisy sets of supporters whose numbers came to over 1100. Despite generally conceding territorial advantage Hythe established a superiority over our illustrious rivals that was to last for several games. Town’s goals on the night were scored by Simon Bryant, Frank Ovard and Terry White with a penalty, after Shaun Carey’s goal-bound shot was handled.

More league action was still some way off as Hythe prepared to receive Collier Row in the battle to reach the last 16 of the FA Vase. Row were a competent bunch and it was they who took the lead just before half-time, and the signs were not good, unless you were familiar with the normal Reachfields pattern of things. Sure enough, despite the visitors continuing to play well, Hythe raised their game and Ovard forced the ball home ten minutes into the second half and with the tie about to go into extra time we were awarded a penalty. Terry White had only missed one penalty in four seasons but as we prepared to celebrate he chose to make this miss number two and we were therefore forced to travel to Essex for a midweek replay.

Unfortunately there was some bad feeling around Reachfields after the first match and the talk was all about the behaviour of some visiting supporters. I had seen plenty of drunks at football matches before, but I had never seen people relieving themselves over the barriers during play – it was a wonderful spectacle (not). Coupled with the fact that some of our players had taken some unpleasant knocks during the game, it was a fairly determined after-match session in both bars that resolved that the road to Wembley was not going to end in South Essex.

Tony soon tuned in to this and not only gave his workers time off to make the replay but also decreed that, on a school-day, any youngster that could make the departure time would travel for free. Three coaches of supporters therefore made their way through the Dartford tunnel and with their backing, Hythe stamped their authority on the home side with goals from Ovard and Bryant. Although Row pulled one back, they were killed off again by Bryant who was now in a purple patch of scoring and benefitting from a spell without the many injuries he seemed to pick

up. In one of those 'never seen on TV' moments, the home keeper responded to some merciless barracking from the Hythe hordes by scooping up handfuls of mud from the saturated surface and throwing them at his tormentors – quite incredible.

Next Saturday brought us back to basics at Alma Swanley's wide open ground adjacent to the M20, and a 2-2 draw in the Kent Senior Trophy with goals from Terry White and yet again Simon Bryant. This was followed by the Knight Floodlight Cup return game against Dover. Heading up to the game there was a spell of torrential rain which continued up to and after the kick-off. The match referee, one John Moules, took a brave decision in allowing things to get underway. The rain then got heavier, but the winners were Terry White, who scored the only goal, and the near 700 crowd, who were rewarded for their optimism in turning gout at all. The only loser, apart from Dover, was the pitch!

The Walton Years - Chapter 27

As Neil Cugley took over as the new Folkestone manager, Hythe disposed of Alma Swanley's challenge in the Kent Senior Trophy replay with a 5-2 victory and the next FA Vase tie at Abingdon Town was being contemplated. There seemed to be enough interest to take up to three coaches to the Oxfordshire club, but there was a problem because the Hythe social club had been closed for redevelopment and this caused me a problem taking coach bookings. I decided to use my shop, The Gem, as a booking office, but then 'Murphy's Law' swiftly moved into action and the River Thames rose to flood our opponents' ground and cause the game to be postponed.

This caused a nightmare scenario. As each new date was arranged, one batch of supporters found themselves available to travel, while another batch found that work demands meant that they would be unable to attend. I believe there were four postponements in the end, but what was even worse was that we were calling off league games to fit in the Vase match, so when each postponement was announced we had in effect lost two matches.

The short Saturday trip up to Gay Dawn Farm to play Corinthian came as light relief, and by now we were running coaches to every game. However, our supporters failed to raise their distracted team in the rural atmosphere and despite being gifted two goals which put us 2-1 up, we conceded a late equaliser and more points were dropped. At the final whistle a grim-faced chairman led his players into the dressing room and locked the door. When he emerged later he told the press that he had done this to make sure that they would be back to their best for the Vase game. Did he really throw the teacups, or was it a bit of bonding from a man who was close to his team? Nobody knew the answer, but Tony was an expert in mind games and I imagine that the atmosphere in that dressing room was a lot better than many thought it was.

We finally arrived at Abingdon on Wednesday February 21st, and despite good support and a better than expected pitch, we froze for the first half and trailed to a home penalty. The second period was our salvation again though, and Simon Bryant rescued us with a 72nd minute equaliser that took the game into extra time. For virtually every minute since that equaliser the pressure on the home side had been getting stronger, and when we reached the second period of extra time all outfield players were encamped either inside, or just outside, the Abingdon penalty area. As the shots rained in, only to cannon off defenders, or be saved by the heroic goalkeeper, we dreaded the single breakaway which might seal our fate. It never came though, and we knew that the Abingdon saga would have one more chapter at least before its conclusion.

We were left now with just ten days before the next round, if we got through. In that period we had to play league games against Poole (Saturday) and Buckingham (Wednesday), both at home. The replay was to be sandwiched in between these two games, on the Monday night, with hopefully the quarter final away to Rushden Town on the following Saturday. We therefore had three match programmes to prepare, as well as to organize transport into Northamptonshire – and sell tickets for it. By now we were almost all full-timers; players, officials and even regular supporters! My main problem was to get across to the town at large just what was scheduled and how important it was because by the time the local papers came out it would be almost too late. Fortunately those two league matches were at Reachfields so there was an opportunity to get the message to our fans, but it did seem a shame that at a time when I believe the club was reaching its all-time peak, it was all such a rush and the players would be so tired.

We faced Poole Town on the Saturday, and gave a debut to new signing Tom Warrilow. Although no veteran, Tom had been around a bit and was playing for Crawley Town in the Southern League Premier Division. Tony Walton knew of him, and as the story goes he suggested to John Maggs, the Crawley manager, that being the strapping lad that he was, Tom should be moved forwards and given his chance as a striker. Although this free advice was not taken immediately, the player was later tried up front and did start to score goals. With his point proven, in stepped Tony with a cheque for £15,000 and Warrilow joined Hythe amidst a considerable amount of publicity in the south east.

Unfortunately the Poole game was played in very difficult windy conditions and Tom, still unaccustomed to playing up front, and even more unsure due to the weather and his new teammates, looked fairly ineffective. The game was drawn 1-1 with the Hythe goal coming from Ged Nohilly, who possessed the natural skills needed to overcome the conditions and who was by now really turning on the style and proving to be a great signing. The Vase replay against Abingdon two days later was one of the most exciting nights of football ever seen at Reachfields.

After the show we had eventually put on up there, many of us thought that the game was little more than a formality, but we were so wrong. Terry White opened the scoring early on – a terrific shot from the edge of the area that seemed to settle any big match nerves. However, our visitors replied from a free-kick and despite Hythe having the edge throughout the game, they remained

a constant threat. As the game went into extra time, and with me nervously consulting the fixture list and the rule book, suddenly it all came right with ten minutes to go. Firstly Simon Bryant raced clear to score a classically simple goal, then there was young Mark Stanton producing a last minute rocket of a shot in the Town end that was signalled by a roar from the gate of 560 that could be heard throughout Hythe.

The scene as the youngsters poured over the barriers at the final whistle remains one of my favourites, and as the kids hugged the players, the dream was surely becoming a reality. As with the old Folkestone FA Cup giant-killers, Hythe had the sort of players who seemed to rise to the occasion, not as individuals, but collectively. Special mention, though, must be made of the performances of Terry White, Steve O'Brien, and particularly Dave Carr who held the side together in the absence of the injured Mark Wetherly. Two days later came the inevitable anti-climax when the home game with Buckingham was lost 2-1. Dave Carr scored an early goal but later picked up an injury that was to rule him out of the Vase quarter-final, and give Lee Smelt and Tony Walton real team selection problems for surely the biggest match that the club had ever been involved in.

With just a day or two left to take bookings from the supporters, myself and one or two helpers embarked on a series of 'vigils' which if they did nothing else at least proved our loyalty to the club. The clubhouse was now closed for redevelopment for what was meant to be around a fortnight. I am afraid that this soon became one of those "we'll do it next week" matters, and when the time came to reopen it, work had never actually started! The regular steward had parted company with the club, and Tony Walton instead installed trusted members of his workforce to open the bar on match-days for a fairly lengthy period of time. So at a time when new and old supporters alike wanted to make enquiries and bookings, and buy hats and scarves, we had no base to work from. To demonstrate that we were still there for everyone we managed to open up the entrance porch of the club, and with the aid of a table lamp, and a phone pulled through from the closed bar area we 'opened' from 6pm to 9pm each night. This new service soon became well known, and I would arrive at 6pm, switch the light on, and the phone would start ringing immediately. We still had the office in the town, and the official clubline giving out information, but just what people thought as they drove down the lane in pitch darkness to find this dimly lit 'booking office' that they could do their business in I hate to think.

The Walton Years - Chapter 28

Three coaches embarked for Rushden on the Saturday full of optimism despite the team news. Tony never allowed anybody to be other than optimistic, so if we were bringing in 'reserves', they were far superior to other clubs' first elevens, and there was no need to worry. With Dave Carr and Mark Wetherly out, he and Lee Smelt did the only thing they could do, and that was to play Tom Warrilow in his old position in defence, and ask the brilliant but injury prone Mark Hyham alongside him. Kevin Smart and Malcolm Smith completed the back four with the ever-present Steve O'Brien in goal. Jason Wheeler and Terry White provided the engine room in the middle, with Mark Stanton and Ged Nohilly on the flanks. Up front were Frank Ovard and Simon Bryant,

with Pat Hilton and Terry Collins as subs. Perhaps the line-up lacked a little speed in places, but it was a formidable team with plenty of potential match winners.

Such was our club's fame by now that our games were regularly 'scouted', and most were frightened silly by Bryant's pace and Ovard's skills. When they tried to close these two down though, there were Stanton and Nohilly, jinking in from the wings, each with lethal shooting powers. If the ball ran loose anywhere in the last third of the pitch, both White and Wheeler had the ability to tear holes in the back of the net, whilst not many opposing forwards relished the tigerish tackling of Messrs Smart and Smith at the back.

Amazingly though, despite all of these doing well in the quarter-final, and despite Frank Ovard's quite brilliant opening goal – a typical dribble to the line and a shot from the narrowest of angles with everyone expecting a cross – it was the remaining three players who won us the match. After the goal, and a miss only seconds later, Hythe's defence came under increasing pressure as Rushden, roared on by a partisan crowd of 1500, mounted attack after attack. Both Warrilow and Hyham were absolute giants in the middle, but when it was too much even for them, Steve O'Brien was absolutely unbeatable – and please read that again – unbeatable.

We watched open-mouthed at the other end as each time a ball seemed bound for the net, this incredible little Irishman flew through the air to keep it out. One word hardly ever in Steve's vocabulary was 'rebound', - the ball was either fended away from a corner, or if he got behind it, it stuck to his chest. For all their frantic efforts, for all their roaring fans, Rushden never had a chance – it was an absolute master-class, and I forever regret not insisting that the BBC, who were filming the match, made the film available to us. As the second half commenced and the attacks grew in number I remember hoping that one of our breakaways would kill the game off. I glanced at my watch to find there was still 25 minutes to go and mentally settled myself to the fact that we were bound to lose. Unbelievably O'Brien got better as the game went on, and although the crowd were baying we started to believe that we might just do it.

With full-time approaching and with many of us looking away, one last attack swept towards Hythe's defence. Before it could succeed though, a wonderful noise sounded out from the man in black – we had done it. For the youngsters, and for many of us who were not so young, there was only one place to be – the middle of the pitch and I remember nearly colliding with Kevin Smart who was beside himself with joy. As the teams went into the dressing rooms, one of our supporters asked me what time the coaches would be leaving. I just pointed to the Rushden bar, and after a very brief visit to the boardroom, I joined him there. When Steve O'Brien emerged from his shower, the most tremendous cheer sounded around the clubhouse, and one home supporter told some of us how lucky he was. I told him it wasn't luck, it was his job to keep the ball out and that was just what he had been doing. Later we found out that our little keeper had been seen as the one weak link in our team by some Rushden folk – well they certainly knew differently now! A more reasoned fellow came up to me just before we left and said "In all the years I have watched the game, I have never seen anything like your goalie – if he was taller he would be in Division One" – I could not possibly argue with him.

As the team coach meandered home dropping players here and there, the supporters' coaches hot-footed it to Reachfields to give the Hythe-based players one final cheer as they arrived – it was a lovely moment. Now everybody wanted to talk football and although I cannot recall the timetable of events we received many calls from the national papers and the BBC who wanted to come down to the ground. We received congratulations from all quarters – our league, the KCFA, and many people who had moved away from the town.

However we also had some more practical things to plan and discuss. One of the first things I did was to enquire about the cost of a special train to Bridlington, one of the northern teams still involved. On learning the cost we then made enquiries for coaches to the same venue, but of course we had to await the actual semi-final draw. With two northern sides, Guiseley and Bridlington, joining us and Yeading in the draw many were saying that they knew what the likely pairings would be, and although I did not doubt the due process, it did turn out to be Yeading that we would be playing for a place at Wembley.

The Walton Years - Chapter 29

Some time earlier I had persuaded the chairman to install a step all along the flat covered standing on the Ranges side of the ground. Although he was at first reluctant to agree to this, we were both now glad that the job had been done as the Police were due to put an official limit on our capacity. In the event, they made the figure 3000 – which was good, whilst the FA insisted on segregation – which was bad!

Before any negotiations could take place we had to travel to Andover on the following Tuesday and what would surely be an anti-climax. The Andover ground was situated in an industrial estate and was one of those new places that all looked the same. They did have a large bar upstairs but as with many similar stadia there was none of the character and atmosphere you get at the older grounds. We arrived long before any home officials and had to sit outside waiting for them – well, they weren't full time like us! As the small crowd assembled, I tried to get it into my head that despite Wembley looming, this was still a very important game. I need not have worried, for as soon as the whistle went we were in top gear with early goals from Nohilly, Bryant and White and the game was over. The final score was 3-1, and we only really played for 20 minutes, but that was more than enough.

We returned home and, at the FA's request, started preparing material for a possible Wembley programme. We also decided to make the first (home) leg of the semi-final all ticket, not so much because we thought we would get 3000, but more to make things easier on the day. Amazingly, the hard-headed businessman that was Tony Walton stipulated no increase in admission charges and this meant we would be charging the FA minimum price, which was £2/£1. People often criticised Tony for being a bit distant from some supporters, but when I think of these prices, plus the free coaches he put on for the youngsters, I don't know what else they could have wanted.

Although our little committee was still meeting, it remained largely unrecognised by the chairman, but it did provide a useful think-tank, what with some of the problems we were now facing. It had occurred to me, that if we were to have say two thousand supporters at home to Yeading, we might reasonably expect at least twice that figure if we got to the final. Bearing in mind that Yeading was a club from a lower division I thought it was time to do some advance planning. Now let me see – if one thousand make their own way to Wembley, that would leave three thousand to arrange transport for – blimey, that's 60 coaches. The size of the operation that may need to be planned by our little group was starting to frighten me. Tony assured me that the clubhouse would be open soon – finished or not – but even if we only took 40 coaches, where would we put them? Eventually I made enquiries about lining them all up on Hythe Green – now that would have been a sight – and I provisionally arranged for a major firm to either provide or sub-contract out at least 30 coaches for the time being.

My conversations with the Yeading secretary made me realise that they were not a well-supported club and would certainly not be able to segregate at their place in any case. We therefore decided not to segregate at Hythe, and to prevent problems on the day make both ties all-ticket, with a 1600 limit at Yeading. Despite having already started a new toilet block to aid the Hythe segregation, both clubs were able to convince the FA that in the best traditions of non-league football, we would all be 'together' on the day. Tickets were rapidly printed for both legs, and together with coach tickets they all went on sale at various points, both in the town and the neighbouring 'village' of Folkestone! There was an immediate response from all quarters and I remember thinking that we no longer needed to 'sell' ourselves to our public, they were all watching us intently to see what was next – it must be like this in Liverpool and Manchester!

Cup fever or not, we were still a very busy league club and the next few days would certainly prove that to be the case. We were due at Burnham on Saturday, Salisbury on Monday and Bashley on Wednesday, some 18 hours of travelling and three luxury coaches to pay for in five days, and that was only the start. Burnham was very rural with a good-sized clubhouse, one modest stand, and if you want a crowd, then bring your own. Knowing we were doing well in the Vase, their officials were keen to tell us of their own recent successes in the same competition that had them also dreaming of those twin towers. It was difficult to imagine cup fever striking this little outpost though, and our two coaches provided three quarters of the match attendance. The result was a 0-0 draw; now could we get back to Hythe before it was time to leave again?

Monday night (or rather Monday lunchtime) saw us heading towards Stonehenge and Salisbury City. It was a place I took a liking to right from the first view of the cathedral as we drove down into the city. It was a ground where everything had to be carried in, as there was no room for a coach. I found the tree-lined surrounds and the rather rickety clubhouse with its cosy boardroom quite appealing – but perhaps more importantly the folk were warm and welcoming too. Unfortunately the result was a 2-0 defeat for us, although by now the league results were seemingly of less importance to many of us. As we supped our after-match refreshments and

contemplated our long journey home into the small hours, we looked ahead some 36 hours or so to the time we would be leaving Hythe again for our next fixture.

If it is Wednesday, it must be Bashley – it was as if we were involved in some ancient ritual. Down to the ground we would all go, shortly to be followed by another large coach, on we would all get, and off we would go, picking up here, there and everywhere. Somehow, what with the publicity we were all getting, the players seldom had difficulty getting time off work, and I suppose it was the nearest some of them would get to being full-time. Certainly after a poor result, those employed by Tony Walton would often be directed away from their work-places and down to Reachfields for a spot of moving target practice. Steve O'Brien was our entertainment man and would be up to the front of the coach to ask "What videos you got drove? Nah, saw that last week – saw that one Monday." Soon we rented some out to cut the boredom a little.

Tony had decided to sign a local player from Folkestone Town, Andy Allon, a keen sportsman who had made his debut for Folkestone at the age of sixteen. Andy was a very competitive player who always gave 100% and he soon became very popular with the supporters. Unfortunately at Bashley he could not make enough difference to a tired and jaded team to prevent a 6-2 thrashing, perhaps one of the worst results of Tony Walton's reign. Long before that scoreline had been conceded though Steve O'Brien had been carried off seemingly badly injured, and I did not find the remarks of some of the locals easy to stomach. After the match in the boardroom I attempted to be civil, but they were so full of themselves they had little time for us."Anybody know how our goalie is? Yes, our third away game in five days, so we are a bit tired. Hello – is anybody interested?" Suddenly I felt the way that Tony Walton always felt about boardrooms and before I said something that would have burst their little bubble I went and joined our driver for a coffee on the coach. So it wasn't only the players that were getting a little tired and jaded!

On Saturday we at least had a break from league action with a Kent Senior Trophy game at Sittingbourne – actually, it was the semi-final. Yeading sent a team to video what was a dreadful game which we lost 1-0. It was an inevitable result from a match where one side displayed a keen interest in getting through, whilst the other looked casual and detached. Looking back on those eight days in which we performed dismally in three games, and only marginally better in the other, it was strange to think that in between each of those matches came all of the ballyhoo and nonsense that lead up to a really big football occasion.

The Walton Years - Chapter 30

Obviously we were a good story to all of the Kent papers, as well as the nationals and radio stations. Sure enough, the BBC came down to do their spot at the ground which consisted of interviews with Lee Smelt and Tony Walton, particularly concentrating on Tony's attitude to boardrooms and the management of the Kent League. Lee came out with the typical football

manager-speak, “Yes, Yeading are a good side, because they have reached the semi-final – but we’re not afraid of them, and we haven’t been to watch them.”

Both interviewees came across very well on camera, before the TV crew moved outside to film the ‘training’. This was quite amusing because it must have been obvious to any football person that a team playing every two days was not going to be anything other than playing matches. What we did was to persuade some of our local based players to put some kit on and go through some basic routines – as soon as the cameras stopped, they all went home!

Tickets were going well considering that most of our regulars were unconvinced that there would be much more than our previous highest crowd (1109) at the game. We did receive an awful lot of requests for complimentary tickets with a number making unrealistic demands for special treatment on the day. I suppose that if we had had the time and the bodies we could have made a few extra friends but this was not really Tony’s style, although we were pleased to welcome our mayor, our MP Michael Howard and some top brass from the FA at the game. We also made the car park ‘private’ on the day and allowed the Yeading coaches in as well, with Hythe Green taking most of the overspill.

We had one more coming together before the big day, and thankfully I had done my stuff and fixed up for Fareham to visit us on Monday night to give us as much rest as possible. The game was an improvement on our recent form and we led 1-0 but had to concede a draw when a highly dubious late penalty was awarded against us. Afterwards we reviewed our arrangements and anticipated no last minute problems as long as there were plenty of helpers – and naturally there were plenty of volunteers for this one. For the first time ever, we had stewards, St John Ambulance personnel, and a reasonable Police presence, and I suppose you could say we were ready for anything.

On the morning of the match I made several visits to the ground before arriving in time to locate TV and radio teams. I suppose that with around 1500 tickets sold, we were looking for a few hundred extra on the day and it had occurred to me that these might not turn up if they thought they would not get in. I phoned up the BBC on the Thursday and asked them if they would put out on TV that although the game was all-ticket, there would be plenty of room for latecomers and this they duly announced. It was some time after that I realised what I had done – phoned up national TV and told them what to put in their programme – extraordinary.

Well before 1pm we were all in the main clubhouse downstairs looking forward to opening the turnstiles at 1.15pm. The place was buzzing with sales of hats, scarves and alcohol in equal quantities. Suddenly I looked through the windows to see an enormous crowd of people waiting a little impatiently outside the gates. You cannot begin to realise what this scene meant to many of us at that time. We had done our best to elevate and publicise our little club and were at last seeing the fruits of our labours. Not only were we the most famous non-league club in the

country on the day, but here we were with this crush of supporters striving to get into our stadium some two hours before kick-off.

By the time the Yeading team bus arrived, well before 2pm, there was a really good-sized crowd already in the stadium and they were making quite a noise, with our youngsters already crowded into 'their' spot and spreading well along the Town end terrace. As I led their players to the dressing room and they got their first glimpse of the enclosed nature of the place and the size of the crowd, I caught the eyes of one of their squad. Basically, he was glancing across at one of his teammates and saying "Bloody hell!" – well actually it was worse. As far as I could see, we were already winning!

Our crowded fixture list had meant that by now we knew our players very well, and as they arrived for the match, I felt quite nervous for them. To the younger players a chance like this was coming very early in their career, especially those who had been at league clubs and had suffered the knock-back of not making it at full-time level. To those like Dave Carr and Mark Wetherley who had played the game as full-time professionals it must have been an entirely different feeling. Each season they had played their games, some perhaps struggling to hold on to a first team place, and then at the end of their season had settled down to watch the FA Cup final at Wembley. Now, nearing the end of their careers, and especially for Wetherley, having made the conscious decision to drop down and play for as long as he could, here they were at little Hythe, just two legs away from treading that turf in their own right. Kevin Smart's fate was particularly poignant having been booked in a non-event of a second half at Andover and so being suspended for the home leg when he would have revelled in the atmosphere.

I felt excited for our young supporters because they would be going to Wembley if we did and no question. Not for them the anxious wait for the result of a ballot that the supporters of Manchester United, Arsenal and the like faced – there was room for all of them.

The Walton Years - Chapter 31

The teams entered the arena just before 3pm, and what could be their finest hour. In the crowd were representatives from the FA, KCFA, Southern League, and Vauxhall Opel League, our MP and Mayor, and all sorts of other folk who would be making their first visit to Reachfields. The TV cameras were rolling, radio commentators were introducing listeners to the players, and it seemed that the eyes of the footballing world were focused on our little club.

You always get told at any big event, be it football, weddings or other celebrations to try to remember what is happening because it all goes so quickly – it is very true. I remember a great first half goal from Simon Bryant, I remember the noise coming from our youngsters who at one time surged forward and actually buckled the railings, so tightly packed in were they. Then I remember some bother down in front of the seats which was quickly stopped by some Police action. In the second half, there was Frank Ovard stroking the ball home to make it 2-0 and surely leaving us just a goal from Wembley. But then I recall Yeading's dangerous and athletic

strikers suddenly becoming more apparent with first one goal and then another that saw Steve O'Brien sitting in his area berating his defenders.

As the match drifted towards its closing stages there was Jason Wheeler intercepting a loose ball at the edge of the Town end penalty area. It may not have been the best of shots, but it was hard and low and it went straight through the crowded area and buried itself in the back of the net. The place exploded, and as the players raced to congratulate the scorer, experienced teammates like Andy Allon and Mark Wetherly turned back to the crowd behind the goal and raised their fists in triumph as if to say 'whatever they do, we can always go one better.'

Pandemonium ensued after the whistle and there was so many people just milling about you really could not do anything or go anywhere. Then there was a report of some Yeading folk causing trouble outside the clubhouse so I dragged my opposite number down to help sort it out, only to find that some Hythe 'lads', the same who had caused the earlier problems, were in fact to blame – cue humble pie for me! When all was counted our gate was 2147.

Just imagine all of the above – the crowds, the celebrations in the two drinking areas, and the planning for the second leg in seven days time – and by the way, we have another game tomorrow (Sunday) afternoon.

Coming to the ground the following day was strange to say the least. It was our first Sunday match but there was none of the build-up that there might have been, and we were only really playing on that day to give us some sort of free time before any Wembley final. Hang on a minute though, the opposition is coming from deepest Wiltshire (Trowbridge) and they are a hell of a team to be playing if you are not up for it. In the event, the only problem that we had was that although the programmes had been prepared, they had not been actually printed. Any problems on the pitch? Our lads were obviously made of stronger stuff and goals from Mark Stanton, who had a superb game, Ged Nohilly and the prolific Bryant put us 3-0 up within 56 minutes although we did concede a late consolation goal. The gate was just over 300, which was reasonable enough, but perhaps a hint to us to not get too carried away, when the talk in the bars the previous evening had anticipated at least twice that number.

As things grew ever more tense for the first time I had players coming to me querying the fact that in addition to the Sunday game, we had to play at Witney on the Wednesday evening. They could see that if we did not want to play in the week before a possible final, there was nowhere else to fit it in – but basically they wanted the season extended, and that was something that I had been told unequivocally was not going to happen. Basically our league had told us a date that all league fixtures had to be completed by – even if it meant playing every day. For each match, or matches, that had been called off, I had a free rein to re-arrange with the co-operation of the opposition, or refer to the league in case of a dispute. I cannot recall ever having to do the latter because there was very little envy in the Beazer (Southern) League, and if you were being successful people wanted to help you, which was very nice. I did however feel that the league

management could itself be just a little bit more relaxed and perhaps grant an extension of even only a week which would have solved most of our problems.

With work still needing to be done around town, I bowed out of the Witney game which was lost 2-1, Malcolm Smith scoring his first goal for the club. I had been having a wee spot of bother booking a number of coaches for the second leg of the semi-final, due to the rather lax way that the club had paid some previous bills. Perhaps it was just 'business' or perhaps it was the first signs of what was to come, but the reality was that the coach firm would invoice me personally, but not Hythe Town FC! This did not cause me too much of a problem as I already had a large amount of cash from coach tickets already sold and I relieved myself of any problems on the day by paying everything off in advance.

The Walton Years - Chapter 32

One coach left Reachfields quite early on, and was filled with players, wives, families etc., whilst another was picking up at various other pick-up points in the area, but it was a very large number of excited supporters that started to gather at the ground in mid-morning. We bundled a lot of the youngsters onto one coach, and told all boarding another coach that we would be stopping for a drink on the way home – whatever the result! The rest of our support filled the fifth and sixth coaches, or made their own way to Yeading. It was a convoy totalling 400, our ticket allocation for the tie. The journey passed off quite well, apart from an emergency stop for the drinkers' coach, who had already made good use of the Reachfields' main bar. I did hear that the youngsters were fairly vocal on their bus and were loudly practising some new chants. The convoy of coaches took up position just outside Yeading's ground and was an impressive sight.

It is, of course, always nice for club officials to attend away games. Not only are there the obvious advantages and 'perks', but you have none of the worries that an important game would normally place on you. No change at the turnstiles? Somebody boxed in, in the car park? Programme seller not shown up? – let 'em get on with it!

Well, not quite, for I was amazed to find that the local police had taken exception to the noise levels our youngsters were reaching – was Yeading ready for a Wembley final? Never mind though, our team started as if they hardly needed that noise, or the rest of the yellow and green bedecked support that seemed to ring the ground. With the aggregate score at 3-2, and none of this away goals nonsense, I suspected that our tactics would be quite simple, and I was right. The idea was to go out and attack them, establishing a two goal lead which would take some of the heat out of the thier pre-match team-talk and build-up. I recall feeling uneasy in the early stages, even so as apart from the problems with our young supporters, I thought that luck did not seem to be with us, and there was a nasty atmosphere on the pitch. As usual I had declined a seat in the stand with all of those neutral officials and gone to stand with our most vocal behind-the-goal crowd.

In my opinion, we looked streets ahead of them in class, but they still continued to look the more hungry and dangerous. I recall thinking that sheer brute force seemed to be the most evident part of the game on view, and it would be a shame if such a match was decided in such a way. Perhaps others from Hythe also had that slightly hushed acceptance that something horrible was about to happen to us with every decision that went against us. The Yeading goal led a charmed life throughout the first half with Frank Ovard going close twice and Andy Allon hitting a post and seeing the ball run along the goal-line. As our supporters continued to out-sing the home fans I found myself wondering how we would all take a possible bad result, and what were we thinking of to be here just 45 minutes from Wembley anyway.

With half-time though, and with most of the rough stuff out of the way, I found my mood improving. We were going to win, it was going to be our day, and to hell with all those officials in the boardroom. I went straight up the other end and prepared for the most important 45 minutes I would ever watch – we would all make it happen.

And happen it did, right until twenty minutes from the end when a Yeading man was bundled over and the penalty was neatly tucked away. Suddenly I had a sinking feeling as I thought back to that Witney game and its possible repercussions if we went into extra time. If we could get another goal they would surely never come back again, or if there was no further scoring surely a replay at Gillingham would be just the job with all our connections at Priestfield.

Now with only a few minutes left and our older heads steadying the ship, there was a home attack from the right but surely no danger. Their man hit a hopeful cross but it cannoned off one of our lads and shot into the air only to land down behind Steve O'Brien, who was off his line. All over the ground Yeading folk went wild and Hythe people looked sick. Now it was a race against time, a fight against the injustice of it all as Hythe pounded forwards and tired players suddenly looked fresh and strong as we moved towards injury time. It seemed that Yeading's defenders were trapped between this on-field onslaught and the hundreds of us that were almost on the pitch and baying for that goal. When the final whistle went we looked at each other in disbelief – how had we lost that game – how had we possibly lost?

People reading this will never really know unless they were there. We had just come up from the Kent League and we were on the march to Wembley. Up to that wicked deflection it was actually going to happen, and now all of a sudden reality had struck. Despite this, we were the better team, the better club and we did have all of the publicity and identity that would have graced the final – except that now, on that day, we would be away to Poole Town.

Of course Wembley could have been a disaster. We could have had a few hundred up there, we could have been trounced, we may not have coped with all the bally-hoo. Or we could have gone up in our thousands to see our experienced and skilful players stoking the ball around those wide open spaces. We would have had a victory parade down Hythe High Street that would have had the town lavishing such praise and affection on Tony Walton that he would

become a local celebrity for life. On the night of our successful cup final appearance, Reachfields would have been drunk dry and celebrations would have lasted all night – would have!!

As we made our way back to the line of coaches I felt again how I shared the chairman's dislike of boardrooms. I did not want some neutral telling me how sorry they were for us – and I certainly did not want to be telling Yeading how pleased I was for them and I wanted them to win the final for us – if they won it was for themselves. Then I thought, no, I should at least go in and show my face – nobody likes a sore loser. As I prepared to do so I realised the turmoil there was with some trying to get on different coaches, and others looking for an early start back. So I jumped on the drinkers' coach which was now nearly full and said to them "You wanted a drink – we're going to find one." Ten minutes more and we were on our way.

After a few miles we spotted a roadside pub that was just opening up and I asked them if they would accept 53 people intent on drowning their sorrows. There followed one of the most extraordinary drinking sessions I have been involved in – and yes, it does work, because after an hour of noisy, defiant, behaviour we were ready to go home in a way we could not have done earlier. Then we were rewarded for our defiance because as the driver went to start his engine another coach pulled in ahead of us. By this time it could only be our players. Out came Dave Carr and he was cheered on to our vehicle as if we had won. He made a short speech, including thanking us all, and after he had finished we knew there would still be plenty to look forward to this season, and next.

48 hours later the Burnham heavies came to town to test the resolve of our tired team even further. They scored three times against us, which should have been enough, but as we scored four (Carey 2, Carr and Wheeler) it was not.

The Walton Years - Chapter 33

Now we were off to the wide open spaces of Kingsmead, Canterbury, and people were starting to wonder if even now the promotion issue could be resurrected. To be frank I had little time for pitches that sit in the middle of all sorts of other clutter – in this case a dog track – and offer as the only cover a licensed bar. In the old days of Kingsmead I recall a decent match atmosphere with stands on opposite sides and another behind one of the goals. However, speedway and, later, greyhounds took over and now it was a place to be endured and not enjoyed. When some of our supporters tried to get nearer to the action and stood on the dog track, the tannoy announcer nearly had a seizure. What a pity a city like Canterbury has such a place for its 'home' football club. Never mind, our lads kept their heads on the game and Sean Carey, fast becoming our main strike force, scored one in each half for a comfortable 2-0 victory.

Next Wednesday we entertained Witney Town and this time it was Ovard's turn to put on the style with two goals, the second of which was a quite brilliant little chip, eight minutes into the second half. The Premier Division still seemed a long way off, and we would surely need an unblemished run if we were to get there, but then since the big Vase let-down we were 100% - could we keep it up? Without the fixtures backlog I think we really could have done so, but our situation that week was an illustration of just how hard things had become. We had cracked the tough nut of Witney, and had an even tougher nut in three days time when we had to play Hastings again. In between those fixtures though, we had a Knight Floodlight Trophy Quarter-final away to Heybridge Swifts – a new ground to visit – and another coachload of supporters already booked.

Heybridge were duly conquered with Frank Ovard scoring the only goal of a game that was more important than was immediately obvious. Not only did it give us a home semi-final versus Harlow Town, but it kept alive our chances of ending such a momentous season with something to show for our efforts if we did fail in the promotion race.

On the Saturday Hastings did eventually burst our bubble when they had enough energy to beat us at last, even if they did need a penalty to do so. The gate was 418.

More local business was transacted two days later on Easter Monday at Cheriton Road where, before 762 spectators, Hythe easily overcame Folkestone by 3-0. Chris Vidal had joined our neighbours on loan due mainly to the fact that he was cup-tied so much that he was not getting a look-in at our place. On the day he had more support from our kids than his own teammates though, as they tried to get across to Tony Walton that it was time for the dreadlocked one to return home. Unfortunately this never happened and Chris became the first of many quality players who were seemingly allowed to drift away without any apparent effort being made to keep them. Hythe's scorers were Carey, Stanton and Wheeler and we left Cheriton Road in good spirits little realising the significance of the occasion for the home club, who were virtually on their last Southern League legs.

The on-off promotion issue continued to flicker with the 4-0 demolition of Erith & Belvedere two days later at Reachfields. Stanton gave us the lead on 28 minutes before Nohilly on 62, and then 'wonder-boy' Carey finished them off with two goals in the closing stages. Once again the team were refusing to give way to fatigue as the Yeading factor was still in evidence.

However, Town's sixth game in eleven days was very much a game too far. Reachfields was by now a dustbowl, and Dunstable were keen and very big – indeed they were the only side that season who managed to exploit Steve O'Brien's lack of inches in goal. Unfortunately they used their physical presence in less legitimate ways and it became a thoroughly unpleasant afternoon of niggly fouls, and crowd reaction to the fouling and the actions, or lack of it, from the officials. One of the linesmen very unwisely decided to answer some of the crowd – something he must have instantly regretted doing. Perhaps everybody needed a break!

Unfortunately, a break was not on the schedule just yet, as with eight days of the season left we still had up to six games to play. It was not quite as bad as that though, because I had 'sussed out' that whereas the Southern League could make us finish on time, the Floodlight Trophy competition was a softer nut to crack. Again, all opposition teams were co-operating – we really were that famous!

We had a free mid-week, with Bury and Yate both at home at the weekend, followed by our Knight Trophy semi-final with Harlow on the Wednesday. This was followed by our 'Cinderella' trip to Poole on the day of the FA Vase final. Hopefully we would be playing in the Knight final the following mid-week, with a party night at Reachfields on the Friday evening.

Both Bury and Yate were duly vanquished, the first by 4-3 in a game that saw Bryant, White and Allon give us a 3-0 half-time lead before Bury replied only for Allon to put us 4-1 up. Roared on by their chairman, they knocked in two late goals which at least gave the 'main men' something to drink about afterwards. Hours later followed another Sunday game and another Andy Allon goal coupled with a Ged Nohilly master-class. Nohilly was the main reason so many scouts were coming down, but when they identified themselves they would talk to me in awe of our little goalie. If we could have put him on the rack, we would have been sitting on a fortune!

Harlow rolled into town on the Wednesday as the floodlight trophy brought us another 400+ crowd. Promotion had now gone and this 30-club competition was our last chance saloon, but Harlow looked big and strong and had certainly not played around 70 matches before the game! By now though, we had seen it all before and they were clinically despatched with two Terry White free-kicks. I don't know if they had not done their preparation, I suppose it wasn't really that sort of competition, but if they were surprised at the ferocity of the first kick, it left them no better prepared for the second one. At the final whistle the youngsters needed no encouragement to once again pile over the barriers as they had done against Abingdon and celebrate with their heroes on the pitch. The celebrations were noisy, and possibly even out of proportion, with the players actually being recalled from the dressing rooms – but it was a semi-final, and this time we had won it.

The Walton Years - Chapter 34

So to the last Saturday and a game I was dreading. No disrespect to Poole Town, but this rather eerie ground, with one giant stand, was not where we wanted to be today. The FA had sent us two tickets for the Vase final, and two of our committee, Jack Marsh and Ted Maycock, had agreed to represent us, thoroughly enjoying the game and the hospitality.

At Poole, though, we were reminded with what might have been as they needed to beat us to win the Championship. Given Tony's natural aggression, and the attitude of our players, they never

stood a chance and we won with a Terry White penalty. After the game it was a case of 'don't mention the Vase' as our coach failed to negotiate the first off-licence, and the drop-off at Wrotham turned into a lengthy session in the neighbouring hotel bar where I recall Pat Hilton put on something of a cabaret!

We were now left with our final game, number 71, and although our final would not be at Wembley, it did at least have something of a Vase connection – we were going back to Collier Row. I can only recall a couple of coaches of supporters in 'consolation' mode and saw some fairly determined play that left us 1-0 up through Frank Ovard. Sure enough there was a Yeading-like revival by the home side which led to a second-half equaliser and left some of us fearing the worst. Collier Row had been tough opponents in the Vase and certainly had their own reasons for wanting to beat us, but our lads hit them with everything in the last ten minutes and a soaring header from Mark Wetherly won us the game and the trophy, as the travelling hordes went over the barriers for one last time. To many people this competition was a little second rate, but in reality the huge cup displayed some impressive previous winners and we were not the only club to take it as seriously as it deserved to be. There was a fair bit of travelling involved, (even the AGM was in Chelmsford) but the novelty of visiting new grounds added to the local pride issue with Dover made it very worthwhile, plus there was cash for the winners!

On the following Friday night, a team drawn from our young choir of supporters were due to play the first team in a charity game. It was an idea born in all probability after a recent victory when Tony would have been particularly approachable. Some of the youngsters would come up for a chat after games, and whatever the Chairman's faults, he and the players always had time for them. Obviously the players liked the attention, but to some of the kids Tony Walton was almost a God. He had given them a club worth following and with the games that we were playing it was an interest that lasted through most of each week. The club was better than any other locally, was becoming more famous seemingly nationally, and they were the ones responsible for most of the atmosphere with their non-stop chants and singing.

At many clubs this match could have been a bit of a disaster – surely not all of the players would come down on a Friday evening after the season they had just finished. We reckoned that with pre-season and practice friendlies they would have lined up around 85 times – would they all do it one more time?

What a night it was though, for each player was there on time just as if it was a league game. There were official programmes, music and tannoy announcements, and over 300 spectators – although the match itself did manage to bend a few rules, thanks to the very lenient refereeing of a certain Barry Vincer! I recall Snowy Prebble scoring goals for the players, and I know that Mark Stanton decided he was young enough to play for the supporters. Substitutions were a little bit wayward, and when a new youngster was introduced to the game, there was not always a teammate ready to come off, so they just became numerically stronger. Steve O'Brien played on-field and Terry White played in goal for the players, but at one stage I spotted him being kidnapped and tied to the perimeter fence.

After the game, with nobody really knowing the score, the supporters team emerged from the showers and joined their heroes in the bar with kit-bags everywhere – just like the real thing. It had been a long hard season with many highs and a few lows. We had almost certainly played more games than any other non-league club in the country and there was a feeling that quite possibly it was better to be at Hythe than anywhere else in football. Against that, we also knew that we had not quite seen things through and there had been no promotion and no Wembley either, both of which had been real possibilities for long periods.

On this evening though, it was a time to have a beer, and draw a line under things before we thought about next August. Except that nobody really wanted to go home, nobody wanted the season to end, and as I looked around that crowded lower clubhouse, with the chairman beaming, both sets of players chatting together, and the parents patiently waiting to take the younger ones home, I remember feeling that in many ways this was the social highlight of the season. More sadly though, I was later to realise that whereas there would be other good days, good results and good times, the Tony Walton era had just peaked.

The Walton Years - Chapter 35

The story so far - I had become a regular Hythe Town supporter when businessman Tony Walton took over the club in mid-season in 1987-88. In the spring of 1989 I had taken over as Secretary, and sometime after the Chairman had pulled out in 1992, I had decided to write about those incredible 4 and a half years – the Walton years. I had in mind that my scribblings might be published in some small way as a record for local supporters and others who take an interest in these things – groundhoppers, as they are known. With the club seemingly settling for life in the Kent County League and support dwindling, I abandoned the project after the first two and a half years. Now with our club back in the limelight and aiming for the Ryman League, those 2-and-a-half years have been serialised in our club programme and on our website and we have now reached the point where my writing ended and I must rely on old newspaper reports, programmes, and that most unreliable of all ingredients – memory – so here goes.....

The close season from May to August 1990 was a very odd time at Reachfields. The contrast from the previous close season was immense, for then it had been all about buildings, promises, publicity, and talking the talk. Now, although we had established ourselves and done great deeds, we had not actually matched our own high expectations. Promotion had been looming – but we had finished sixth. Wembley itself had been within our grasp, but although Yeading were a dangerous side, we had lost in the semi-finals to a team from a lower division. Yes, we had had a fantastic season, but now we knew that it was not quite as easy as Tony had said it would be. As the summer dozed on, the local papers concentrated on their cricket, and supporters switched off almost entirely, probably nearly as exhausted as the players and officials after those 73 competitive matches. Every now and then, something stirred – Frank Ovard signed a new contract, Dave Myers joined from Dartford, and David Carr and Kevin Smart moved on.

Over at Folkestone the struggle for survival was deepening and Neil Cugley moved to Ashford, with Alf Bentley taking over the reins. There was talk of 'huge debts' which were increasing rapidly as the situation worsened (how things go around), and so we all felt fairly cosy in the company of our multi-millionaire who was preparing for his second Southern League season. Every now and then came the odd setback and perhaps the occasional warning sign although we did not put two and two together at the time. The intention of re-entering a reserve side into the Kent League was thwarted at the AGM as in those days the league was 'full' and we were not popular enough to gain the votes we needed. There was talk of business problems for the chairman and these were not completely denied. The explanation was given as "just business, nothing to do with football." In July it was announced that there had been a break-in at the club and two team strips and some other gear had been taken. The insurance company therefore replaced everything and the club had its new kit for the season – how convenient was that?

The Walton Years - Chapter 36

The reserves were to play in the top section of the county Amateur League, and Tony made it known that he would support the idea of a Southern League reserve division rather than play in the Mickey Mouse League again (Kent League Division Two). The chairman also registered his disgust at what was happening at Cheriton Road and revealed that he had offered to talk about merging the two clubs before being put off by the hierarchy at Folkestone. The laid back approach to the new season was such that neither the local papers nor my memory seems to have registered much of it. All friendlies were away, which was probably more due to a lack of pitch preparation than anything else. I recall a visit to Crawley for a 2-0 defeat, and there was a 2-1 win at Slade Green where Tom Warrilow scored his first goal for the club and ex-Harvey Grammar School pupil Jamie Carney got the other. Terry White, Andy Allon and Shaun Carey helped to give us a 3-1 victory at Tunbridge Wells, and a match at Horsham was scheduled – anybody remember the result? Oh, and one other little announcement – Tony Walton was now the manager, with Lee Smelt as his assistant. This did not surprise me one little bit, because I had first heard mention of it in the Collier Row toilets after the Knight Floodlight Cup success (I did say Tony Walton did not like boardrooms!).

Almost unnoticed, the league season started with a 0-0 home draw with Burnham in front of 249 supporters. It was hardly a bright start, but the side: O'Brien, Myers, Weatherly, Allon, Nohilly, Wheeler, White, Smith, Carey, Bryant and Ovard, with Stanton and Carney as substitutes, looks pretty fearsome even now. A few days later the team got its first win at Canterbury, where Ovard (2) and Bryant had us coasting at 3-0 before the home side scored a late consolation. However, the following Saturday we went down 2-1 at Baldock, and although we put on a late show with Ovard's 83rd minute strike, there must have been some uneasy shuffling about on the coach home. To me at the time I can remember thinking that prospective champions, if that is what we were, really should not have had such a lethargic pre-season and even if they did, should have focused on getting nine points from a far from demanding start to the season.

Two days later on Bank Holiday Monday we came back from behind against Margate to gain a 1-1 draw, when Ged Nohilly presented Tom Warrilow with a perfect aerial opportunity on 78 minutes. Dunstable were next in town and looking back now, we had the perfect opportunity to get our own back against a side that were either outrageously lucky or unduly physical in our matches with them. This time they were a very modest and unthreatening outfit and after Warrilow and Myers had given us the perfect platform, Frank Ovard punished them with two second-half goals that meant a 4-0 scoreline. The following Saturday we were off to our old friends at Bury again and after drawing us level at 1-1 Sean Carey put the boot in again in the dying seconds of the game to make sure the copious amounts of alcohol available in the boardroom were better enjoyed. Our late departure also saw our coach break down at Wrotham, and our return to Hythe delayed until 1.00am.

Next Saturday we continued our superiority against Hastings Town with a 3-1 win that moved us up to third place. Although our Sussex neighbours were also ambitious and had been in the league for many more years than us, they came to Reachfields, like many local sides, with a huge inferiority complex whereas many more distant clubs were less 'in the know' about our players. I remember one occasion in their boardroom after yet another home defeat, their chairman spluttered out something along the lines of "Why do you b**gers always have to beat us?" It was said with a smile on his face but I think their people were staring to get a little frustrated. Today's goals were scored by £15,000 Tom Warrilow and £4,000 Terry White – with both of White's goals being penalties. Where had we signed Terry from? Hastings, of course. Happy days – we didn't even play well.

The Walton Years - Chapter 37

Following last season's FA Cup exploits we did not start playing in this competition until September 15th when we travelled to Kent League Tonbridge and their new ground at Longmead. Local cub reporter Simon Denyer was fairly scathing about what happened next, commenting about the strange substitution of Ged Nohilly at half-time and the absence of coach/manager Lee Smelt on a scouting mission. Our only goal in a 3-1 defeat was an own-goal, and young Simon reckoned it was about time we appointed a manager. Needless to say, relationships with the local paper became a little strained after that. A low-key Knight Floodlight Cup game followed in midweek at Crawley where Simon Bryant emerged from his many injury problems to score the only goal. Then it was Salisbury at home on the Saturday and down in the dumps again as we needed a superb display from Steve O'Brien to keep the score down to 1-0 to the visitors.

Crowds at Reachfields were holding up well with people starting to recognise the better opposition at some games, and this one attracted 358, with obviously very few away supporters. Burnham (away) was next up and this strange little place was one that I always remember with mixed feelings. We always got there earlier than expected, but even allowing for this there was a deathly quiet that made you wonder if you had got the date wrong. Behind the scenes they were always organised and welcoming with everyone 'dressed-up' impeccably – but when we

emerged for the game it was as if their players were just waiting for us before they could start. Considering we were always well supported on our travels the gate of 54 on a nice day was pretty alarming – or so it seemed to us. September ended with a rash of transfer dealings involving Tony Walton and his ex-manager Neil Cugley, now at Ashford Town. Local favourite Tim Hulme was still an Ashford player but had been out on loan and was also being stalked by another club. Tony Walton in his own words though took a bit of a gamble to bring Tim back to his old stamping grounds, and in the opposite direction went two who had become fringe players at Reachfields – Mark Stanton and Simon Bryant. Both of these players had been closely involved with some of our biggest successes but Tony Walton had ‘got to win this league’ and the wind of change was blowing all around.

Although attendances were generally holding up there was definitely a different feel to things – signs of the odd economy or two, signs that sentiment was less evident, and signs that the pressure might just be building up a little. Our young ‘choir’ was now much reduced in numbers and although a fair few youngsters continued to attend, the times when they would get together and give the ground that sort of enthusiastic noise they used to were few and far between. Now it was off to Erith & Belvedere and another game that showed how it only needs a good result to heal any doubts. Their old ground was a quirky place – normal enough on the outside, with a very ‘footballly’ feel to it as you went in under the main stand and players’ tunnel, and the cosy formal sort of boardroom. Watching the actual game though, the surroundings were a bit depressing and shabby and on this day the wind and the rain were at full throttle. However, by now we were a top-of-the-table side and after Ged Nohilly’s curling 51st minute opener, we sent in the big guns of Carey, Allon and Warrilow to wrap things up with three more in four minutes for a 4-0 away win. Added to that, the somewhat mysterious relationship between Tony and Lee Smelt was confirmed with the league’s Manager of the Month award – to Lee Smelt.

There followed a hastily-arranged friendly against Football Leaguers Maidstone United which we lost narrowly 2-1. The idea of such a game seemed pointless to me as with a little bit of notice and publicity we could have had a decent crowd in – but many of our regulars never knew about it at all. Then it was Gosport’s turn to suffer and the former Premier Division side came down blissfully unaware of the skill of some of our players and left with a pretty fair idea of what we were about. Frank Ovard opened the scoring with a glorious chip early in the second half and when Sean Carey gave us the margin to turn on the style we did just that. One Ovard run from deep in his own half through virtually all of the Gosport team brought the crowd to its feet, but only to see the striker miss the final target. No matter, 2-0 was good enough, but as some of the supporters made for the exits Frankie had something else in store, and another piece of magic made it 3-0. When I mentioned previously that the Tony Walton era peaked at the end of season 1989-90 I also said there would be other good times still to be had. This was clearly one of them as we were top of the table and playing like no other team in the league.

We then popped up to Premier Division Gravesend & Northfleet in the Southern League Cup, although this was now known as the Larchimage Windows Cup. Larchimage was of course Tony Walton's company – or one of them and he had spotted that the league cup no longer had a sponsor. He had set up a lunch date with the League's full-time secretary, Dennis Strudwick. At the lunch a deal was done and the Larchimage brand thus appeared regularly in national and local papers – but unfortunately before the end of the season Larchimage Windows had ceased trading and one or two local wags were calling it the Bankrupt Cup and other unkind names. We came away with a 2-0 first leg lead courtesy of Terry White and Jamie Carney, who had been on the verge of first team selection for a while.

I recall Tony coming round to us before the game saying he was about to sign a big defender from Crawley Town, Alan Lester. Alan was to become a significant signing and be installed as club captain in due course. He was also typical of the players Tony was now looking at – physically strong and tough tackling, but also plenty of pace and skill. Lester would be the last player picked up on away team coaches because he still lived in Crawley. When we picked him up there was always a two-way greeting cry – we're alright now the skipper's on board.

Next was Chatham in the Kent Senior Trophy, and there was to be no letting up as a full-strength side gave notice that it was time we won this competition – especially since we felt we should have been entered into the Kent Senior Cup this season. The Kent League side were demolished 8-0 and who scored? – just about anyone who wanted to! A sterner test followed and a very significant one too as this was the first of many battles against Trowbridge Town this season. In a physical and tense tussle at Reachfields we established early bragging rights after a solitary 57th minute goal from Sean Carey. With those three points we regained top spot from our Wiltshire visitors who had taken over from us due to the Chatham cup game. The few visiting supporters (this time) were obviously impressed and fans from both clubs were to be involved in a whole lot of banter in the coming months which never once turned sour.

The second leg of the Gravesend League Cup tie now looks like a close result at 2-2, but the truth was that we had gone 2-0 up at Reachfields giving us an aggregate lead of 4-0 (Carey and Ovard), before conceding a couple of late consolations to our Premier Division visitors. Now some of the recent physical encounters were beginning to take their toll and we showed a little frailty down at Andover the following weekend. We kept the score at 2-2 going into the final minutes after a Terry White penalty and another strike by Tim Hulme. However as league leaders we continued to press and forced the home defence to concede an own goal. Seconds after that a furious Tony Walton saw us lose the lead and with it two vital points – more transfer dealings might just be due very soon. Against Witney, who held the lead until the 83rd minute at Reachfields when Tom Warrilow grabbed the equaliser, the chairman decided there might be one or two prima-donnas in the side. His interest in Ashford's full-back Dave Lee was soon made known and within a very short time the stylish and pacy attacking defender was a Hythe player for a fee of £5,000. Dealings with former managers were going to get even more expensive than this in due course.

The Walton Years - Chapter 39

Our second-ever visit to Buckingham Town was to be less traumatic than our delayed arrival on the first day of the previous season, but unfortunately even less lucrative. We played very well as I recall but with no luck and despite a good debut from Dave Lee we conceded the only goal of the match. We sank deeper the following Tuesday when in front of a noisy and passionate Reachfields crowd of 667 we lost to our former manager and our former players – the score Hythe 0 Ashford 1 – the scorer – Mark Stanton. The only good news was that this was the first leg of the next round of the Southern League Cup and we would have a chance to redeem ourselves.

Now we were due in deepest West Sussex in the FA Vase against Pagham and it is amazing to look back at this, the first of four games (to the present day) against this little club and to realise that each match was an absolute blockbuster. The drama started with an early Ovard tumble in the box, and Dave Lee put away the spot-kick for his first goal for Hythe. Our spirited opponents not only managed to equalise before the interval but came out like mad things in the second period and with less than 20 minutes to go we were 3-1 down. Cue much discussion on the sidelines and on came big Tom Warrilow for an out-of-sorts Andy Allon. Within a very short space of time Frank Ovard had scored one of his impossible-angle goals, Mark Weatherly has stayed upfield from an earlier corner and blasted an equaliser, and then there was substitute Warrilow jinking around the home goalie like Ovard himself and planting the winner joyously into the net. It was all too much for some Pagham people and whilst the keeper lashed out verbally at the world as a whole, the home manager was sent from the dugout (only to emerge seconds later on the dugout roof). At the final whistle remarkable scenes followed and by the time us 'directors' had emerged from the packed little boardroom the Hythe Town roadshow had taken over their clubhouse. Home supporters (and later their players) looked on as our lads managed to party without upsetting their hosts. As well as the normal noise we had all sorts of nonsense going on – such as Tim Hulme throwing whole tangerines high into the air, catching them and then swallowing them whole. Brian Clough (alias Snowy) circled the bar with a live microphone doing interviews! I seem to remember the same fellow being involved in the Cheeselet Cup – which was basically all about getting as many of the biscuits into his mouth as possible without actually swallowing any. It all went on for hours – yes, hours – and I can remember little about the long journey home which did not start until 8pm.

By the following Tuesday all had sobered up for the League Cup second leg at Homelands, where the home side were swept aside without mercy. The goals came from Ovard and Carey and two from former Ashford man Dave Lee. Anything you can do ... ! There then followed a curious little game up at Danson in the next round of the Kent Senior Trophy. Once again we felt a bit put out at having to play these sort of games on a Saturday, but this modest little place only had a tiny stand and certainly no floodlights. Torrential rain throughout spoilt the occasion for the home side and Hulme and White gave us a 2-0 win despite the atrocious conditions. Then we had another tortuous journey to the Pagham area to play Fareham Town and came back with just a single point following a goalless draw.

The result of our Pagham game had given us a home FA Vase tie against Haverhill Rovers. The result of a game that was almost too easy for us was 4-0 (Ovard 2, Hulme and Carey). Before the match I realised that we were getting used to a 'running-out' record and I had left it at home. This started to play on my mind and by 2.45 the pressure was growing on me (totally self-induced) not to be responsible for a shock defeat. By 2.55 I had been home and returned with our lucky tune which in retrospect was hardly needed. One local scribe picked up on this and remarked in his report that Walton's Warriors hardly needed an ancient pop tune to confirm their superiority. Ancient eh! – what a cheek. It is even more ancient today and scarcely a single Cup or Vase game has been played without its assistance – Hot Chocolate's Everyone's a Winner!

The Walton Years - Chapter 40

With Christmas approaching fast, the Chairman decided it was time to buy a couple of matching gifts for his club and he entered into a sponsorship deal with a local soft drinks firm, Silver Spring. This allowed him to go to Ashford Town and come back with striker Dave Arter and his wing partner Jeff Ross. This was a return to our big spending days of the past two seasons although it was perhaps significant that we needed sponsorship to achieve it. None the less, to bring in this pair certainly signalled the Chairman's intentions and sent shock waves throughout the county –nothing was certain in sport, but with these two in the side more goals were virtually guaranteed.

Leading up to the holiday period we "entertained" our friends from Bury and Dave Arter was off right away with both goals in our 2-1 victory. Strangely, I cannot recall either these or the actual game, but I do remember the aftermath when Tony took on his opposite number, the 'maniac', at pool. Just who won I am not sure but there was some money involved and given the time of year I don't think it would have travelled any further than the bar till. We were due to be playing at Folkestone on Boxing Day but with exquisite timing, after months of struggling, suddenly the Cheriton Road side were no more and were out of the league. The extra rest did not seem to have been an advantage however when a little later we took to the pitch up at Hartsdown Park. We were soon on the back foot and Steve O'Brien made a fantastic early save but Margate duly won with a solitary strike just ten minutes later as we waited in vain for our lads to shake off their turkey and Christmas pudding.

At about this period it became noticeable that the local press seemed to contain a fair bit of criticism about team selection, tactics and even our supporters. We were certainly not consistent and perhaps our Chairman-cum-manager was an obvious target but it was not the first time and most certainly not the last that some of us sensed some resentment, envy even, flowing ever so gently down Sandgate Hill! We could of course see that our league standing was slipping and it might well be that we would miss out on promotion again and this was disappointing for all of us. Although Tony remained bubbly about things it must have been annoying that all was not exactly as it should be, and that people were having a go. The fact is that apart from some gate money our club had been built on the investments of one man so what did people want – the stands knocked down again and a return to the Kent League? What I

was quite certain about, as Secretary, was that no club under Tony's control would ever fare relegation – it just would not be tolerated.

Next up were Corinthian who managed to stem the Reachfields tide in a one-sided first half before crumbling and eventually collapsing. Dave Arter started the rot after 50 minutes but the sight of a fresh Ovard entering the fray 20 minutes later was too much for them to take and three further goals were added, all either scored or made by our Frank. Again, though, we tasted defeat after the long journey to Salisbury and this time Tony had his say in the local press – “They won because they wanted it more.” At 2-0 down a Dave Lee penalty had given us hope but with us chasing a result Steve O'Brien, who often resembled a sweeper rather than a keeper, came out of his goal but missed his tackle and it was all over at 3-1.

The Walton Years - Chapter 41

Big-time Dover were now due in town for the first leg of a Southern League Cup tie – the Larchimage Windows Cup no less! It was not enough that our little club could manage a decent draw against the Crabble outfit but the press were now calling us ‘big spenders’ and were picking up on one or two of our supporters’ moaning about our inconsistency as supporters will do. References to Tom Warrilow’s ‘critics’ and Alan Lester’s ‘arrogance’ were mixed with more favourable remarks about Chris Kinnear’s ‘astute’ management and his ‘settled’ side. So we were not settled enough for the Folkestone press eh? One wag said in the bar one night that at least Folkestone have settled now – on the bottom!

Settled or not we were off to Harefield for an important Vase game that if we were victorious would see us in the last sixteen – it was all happening again – Wembley, here we come! Back into the side after injury came Warrilow and Weatherly and, surprise, surprise, we were back to our best. Actually, this was more Arter and Ross’ game and Harefield hopes were snuffed out ruthlessly as our skilful winger crossed perfectly for Dave Lee in the third minute. Next he went on a 50 yard run but this time cut in and fired home himself. Two more Arter headers saw the first half end at 4-0 and the Harefield right-back looked as if he wanted to give up the game for good. Sometimes Rossy would turn him inside out, and at others he would just give him a straight run down to the corner flag. With the back apparently blocking him off, across would come the centre as if he was not there at all. The poor fellow was substituted but his replacement fared little better and although we eased off a little there was time for the combo to complete Arter’s hat-trick.

I well recall the Harefield clubhouse after this trouncing and for once I departed from the usual boardroom ‘speak’ when one of their committee came up to me. Perhaps it was the press criticism but after he had told me that (we) had been brilliant and (they) had been below par I just said “With what we have paid for some of these guys we expect them to play like that.” He seemed quite astounded that the club that his side had hoped to knock out of the Vase actually paid transfer fees and when I told him that there was probably about £150,000 worth on view

today, he shook his head as if to say “What was the point in turning up today then?” – I was reminded of the match at Three Bridges the previous season when their match programme said just that. The draw for the next round paired us with Hastings. I spoke to the media about us being just four games from Wembley and Tony was quoted as saying “What a shame, it would have made a great final.” In reality though we were both rubbing our hands in anticipation because whilst it would not be easy there was certainly no ‘fear of the unknown’ and we knew that Sussex hearts were sinking fast.

In the Kent Senior Trophy Sittingbourne were brushed aside 2-0 at Reachfields and with the side getting back to full strength Tony set out to defend Alan Lester from any further criticism. “A very important player (for us), but if some people don’t like him, they don’t have to come” was his highly typical response. After this match another was played at Reachfields, against Sudbury, in front of the same referee, a fellow from Tenterden, who seemed to hear Tom Warrilow say something untoward on the Ranges side. It was one of those times when you say that if he sends him off for that, there won’t be any players left on the pitch. It meant a ten-man battle to hang on to a 2-0 lead with goals from Arter and Weatherly. It also meant that Tom would not be available to us for the Hastings game and there was a very animated ‘discussion’ in the corridor afterwards between the referee and Chairman. This was quite rare for Tony for although he was known as a rough diamond himself his teams were no thugs and he rarely got involved with match officials. Of course the only winner was the referee and the club was reported and the player suspended.

The Walton Years - Chapter 42

Off we went to Crabble for the second leg of the League Cup tie and now surely the bigger and better club with the astute manager would end their poor run against us upstarts. Despite taking a first half lead however, they were duly mugged after the interval via another Weatherly strike and a Dave Lee penalty. The 1050 crowd shuffled away into the night as we happily reflected on the local bragging rights. Dover had never beaten us, Folkestone were defunct and clubs like Ashford and Canterbury were clearly inferior – now what about Hastings; surely they couldn’t touch us either. It was announced that the match referee would be no less than David Elleray. The same David Elleray who had just sent off three in the Tottenham v Luton game and who had followed that by booking Vinnie Jones in the opening seconds of his last match, following that with a red card later on. Better behave ourselves at Pilot Field then!

Before that we had the long haul to Frome Road, Trowbridge where before 446 people with funny accents we were unable to inflict the first defeat of the season on the powerful westerners, losing 2-0. Tony then sprang a surprise by swooping on Fisher’s 6’ 4” keeper Simon Jolley – talk about from one extreme to another. Jolley was indeed a very big lad and Tony seemed to know all about him but although he had some fine games, he was quite injury prone for a player of that size and I wondered if that was why he might have been freed from his contract up there. We took on a strong Crawley Town in what was becoming ‘our’ cup, the Knight Floodlight, and powered our way to a 2-0 victory courtesy of Dave Arter and Jason Wheeler but sure enough

Jolley was replaced through injury at half-time by Steve O'Brien, who would always be a Reachfields favourite. There was some concern about the weather for the following Saturday's big Vase game and while Hastings appealed for supporters to clear snow from the pitch, Tony got in a snow-blower at Reachfields in case there was a postponement and we could re-arrange a home league match at the last minute. There was a real determination to avoid the sort of fixtures backlog that had given us all of our problems the previous season but this was really a bit of a long-shot.

Looking back, it is easy to see how the cups were once again keeping our season alive and maintaining our high profile, and so it was that a record cup gate of 1189 assembled at the Pilot Field once the snow had been swept away. Hastings were a big side at the back and with man-mountain Carlton Wynter leading the attack, they were hardly lightweight up front either. It was a cagey sort of game with both sides having periods on top but we did not have to endure a Rushden-type siege towards the end and home supporters could not really complain that they would have a trip along the coast three days later. The replay drew 857 and although the Sussex side managed to equalise Dave Arter's early strike, we lasted the pace better, pressing hard in the last twenty minutes and scoring through a Weatherly header and a Dave Lee penalty, given after keeper Carmen had hauled down Ovard in a late act of desperation. Incredibly with this victory sealed and with league leaders Baldock due in four days' time, we were off up to Dunstable on the Thursday. Once again we had to hear all about George Best – has any clubs' history covered so few games before – after conceding a late penalty we drew 2-2. Soon we were glad to be travelling away from the place once described by a top local official as 'the end of God's earth.'

The Walton Years - Chapter 43

Without a doubt, tiredness was the main cause of the next home disaster 48 hours later when we went down by the only goal to Baldock. We were in no mood to put up with some over-robust play from the visitors though, and the afternoon was marred by several set-to's. At one point substitutes rushed off the away bench and such was the confusion that the referee seemed unable to sort out who was doing what to whom. Fair enough I suppose, but I was not so sure that he could not have taken action against those subs! Sean Carey and Timmy Hulme scored the goals to give us a 2-2 draw in the first leg of the next round of the League Cup down at Waterloooville, before we contemplated the FA Vase quarter-final at home to Trowbridge. On the day, two coachloads of extremely thirsty away supporters were able to make the best use of our cavernous clubhouse after a very early arrival at the ground. Thus fortified they ventured out and started to create a frightful din under the low Reachfields' stand rooves. Not just a din though, for they thumped the back wall so hard they actually caused some damage – Lord only knows what they did to their hands! They were supporting a very good side, physically and technically strong and although we matched them we were unable to break through even after extra-time. Our two best players were Andy Allon plus of course little Steve, back in goal for the again-injured Jolley.

Predictably the Folkestone-based local paper made no mention of our hectic schedule but instead focussed on a lack of passion, both from the players but also our crowd who were, it has to be said, a good deal more sober than their opposite numbers. I suppose that many neutrals would have seen us as underdogs following the long trek westwards for the evening replay which was played in front of 1656 people – four times Trowbridge's average. The two clubs did not see it that way however, especially as Frank Ovard had once scored five goals at the ground whilst playing for Folkestone Town. Tony of course never saw us as underdogs against anybody, less so after Dave Arter had given us a tenth-minute lead. Our opponents equalised on the half-hour and the following 90 minutes, including extra-time, were played out in a real cup-tie atmosphere but without further score. Afterwards there was to be a toss-up to decide the venue for the second replay but by the time I had got through the crowds and back into the boardroom, this had already been done and we would be back here the next week – great!!

Before that we had another home stumble, against lowly Andover and with only one win in the last seven league games promotion was becoming a little-used word. Never mind, it's cup time again and Tony decided on free transport to Wiltshire as a hint as to how important the game was to the club. The trouble with this was that very few parents would be likely to let their offspring leave school early enough to make the early afternoon departure time, especially when they would not be back until two in the morning. To counter this, the Chairman gave his staff paid leave if they would add their presence to the two coachloads of regulars that were prepared to travel. As his workers arrived at Reachfields it was clear that some of them had not paid attention during Geography lessons when they were at school, as they expected to be back in time for News at ten! When I answered their questions about the distance and likely return arrival time, which would probably be about three hours before they had to get up for work again, some of them started edging away. Together with them and the usual 'no-shows' I was left with only a car-load over a two coach capacity, so perhaps we could save the club some money. In the end though, everyone was on board and nobody else seemed to care so with the engines all running and with one eye on the clock I just gave the go-ahead and three 49-seaters pulled away with just over 100 on board.

What an atmosphere awaited us down at Frome Road. We were designated a special parking spot and we soon joined the home fans in a short walk to the ground along some very busy streets. Once in, we marvelled at the expectant atmosphere as the turnstiles just kept clicking until they registered the largest attendance that a Hythe team has ever played in front of – 2468. True to form, Tony had all sorts of tricks up his sleeve, plucking Tom Warrilow out of defence and playing him up front with Dave Arter. Shuffling things further back he brought in reserves' assistant, veteran Pat Hilton to midfield and everything went like a dram with Dave Arter giving us another first half lead. Disaster was to strike though – in a stunning eleven second half minutes we fell apart completely and conceded three goals. Additionally it seemed to us watching from behind the goal that not only was our Wembley dream dead again but there was some sort of row going on at the side of the pitch. By the time we were back home, rumours were everywhere and naturally everyone knew the truth even though they all had a different story. Eventually it was clear that there had been a certain falling out and the net result was that Frank Ovard had been put on the transfer list. A little later Mark Weatherly was also on his way, to Margate and although we heard that this had nothing to do with what went on at Trowbridge, surely the actual result and its disappointment would have affected the decision.

Frank did venture into print offering to sit down and sort things out for the benefit of the club, and the reasons given for Mark's departure was that he was a proud man and could no longer be guaranteed his first-team place. Apart from that, he wanted to start to do some coaching – many Reachfields folk would have been happy for him to do that at Hythe! It was a time of change though and as the fans lost interest in the league, once more to concentrate on the 'minor' cup competitions, I too realised that sport was not all about football as my wife Sue came third in a 20-mile race at Thanet and prepared for her first (and only) London marathon. So the Wembley dream was buried again for another season but somehow it did not seem so bad this time. Perhaps it was because it was not the semi-finals, perhaps it was because we had been beaten by a fine team, or perhaps it was because we did not think we were the best anymore – too many teams were showing that to be the case. Top signings were leaving the club and although replacements would come in, these would be less spectacular, less exciting. In truth, from this part on we would often stir into action and make two or three great strides forwards again, but these steps would always be followed by three or four backwards.



elight. The project was half-abandoned (see chapter 35) when it became apparent that interest in the club had dwindled to the point where any book sales achieved would not justify publishing costs.

Much later though those chapters saw the light of day in our match programmes (and this was the reasoning behind the word "chapter" as each number represented one programme issue.) Encouraged by the response at that time I returned to the project and advanced up to chapter 43. Interest in the club was now starting to grow again as it seemed to me that achieving the level we were at in 1992 was no longer an impossible dream even if it was still some distance away.

There was a problem though. Up to that Trowbridge saga I had relied on my memory with the actual results acting as my prompt. When I had written about some games, some events, I had good recollections of what had gone on both on the pitch and behind the scenes. Suddenly now I was relying ever more on a list of results and they have now been covered in excellent fashion by our unofficial club statistician Alan Beecham who is largely responsible for our Club History on this very website. Alan has given the club something that, perhaps due to our previous amateur status, we have never had--a good solid record of our time at Reachfields. It is indeed a

fascinating read and one that I heartily recommend to all supporters, old and new, many of whom have either forgotten, or never knew, how we came to be where we are today.

As for myself, it is perhaps now time to tidy things up rather than leaving them in mid-air. In doing so, and for the reasons already stated, I will just be using my memories so that will be nothing like the more complete version that appears on Alan's pages.

I will start off with the remainder of 90/91, continue with 91/92, and then finish with the sad events of the Summer of 1992 that came after the Kent Senior Cup appearance at Gillingham's Priestfield Stadium.

Chapter 44

The final weeks of Tony Walton's penultimate season were duly played out without any realistic prospect of that longed-for promotion en-route to the Football League. There were still signs that our club was the real deal though when the Chairman filled a sponsorship gap, and the Southern League Cup became the Larchimage Windows Cup in the name of one of Tony's companies. This positive and ambitious move was made that much more significant when it became apparent that the cup might find its way to the Reachfields trophy cabinet in due course. We progressed by a narrow margin past the obstacle of Waterlooville in the quarter-final and on to a two-legged semi-final and a fourth and fifth meeting of the season against our friends from Trowbridge, this time winning at their place and drawing at ours.

This led us to a final, again over two legs, against non-league giants Chelmsford City who would be obvious favourites to win "our" trophy. Hythe gave a good account of themselves in both matches losing each by a one goal margin, but I found the away leg a little depressing. This was a prestigious final but there was very little support travelling from Hythe for this midweek fixture in front of a crowd of just under a thousand in total. True the second leg brought in around 600, but as we chased that single goal deficit the Reachfields faithful were largely shouted down by our enthusiastic friends from Essex which was disappointing as I could remember those days when our young supporters would have risen to such a challenge.

Still, we clutched at our cup straws to overcome a resolute Deal Town in the Kent Senior Trophy final at Ashford where a single Jeff Ross goal was the decider. The final had a bit of an odd feel to it as we had expected to have been entered into the Senior Cup as a now Southern League side and I never did find out if that was an error as the following year, without any change of league status we were duly promoted to the higher-level competition.

And then there was always the Knight Trophy--our Knight Trophy--to compensate for our lack of league success. We were still unbeaten since entering the competition the previous season and were clearly up for a long midweek quarter-final trip to Harwich --so much so that our coach arrived well before ANYONE from the home club. To have hung around in the car park would have been a bit of a bore so off we all went to the nearest pub for a game of Killer on the darts board with our players restricted to "one beer only" by the Chairman.

That extra team spirit saw us happily through both that tie and the semi-final up at Harlow, duly setting up a home final against Halstead the following week which was to be the final game of the season.

Just over 400 attended but this time there was a real atmosphere in the ground where two goals from Andy Allon helped us towards a 3-1 lead before Halstead got into the game with two late goals to take us into extra time. No matter. Andy completed his hat trick and there were grand scenes on the pitch as players and supporters defiantly celebrated another unbeaten season in the competition. The final winner though was the Reachfields bar despite the late finish, as Halstead showed little interest in setting off for home and we later found that they had much enjoyed our ground and the atmosphere generated by the fans.

So, another "minor" game that I make no apology for placing above more important matches in that season. We were truly a cup team!!

You can read the previous chapters by [clicking here](#).

Chapter 45 to come



I found season 1991/92 to be a time of huge contrasts and a certain amount of frustration. As Football Secretary, answerable only to Tony himself and with just a few helpers on our unofficial committee, it was a bit lonely at times. A lot of the important stuff only reached me when it was

a done deal, and this included new player registrations and player contract business and that really wasn't a problem since I still had a busy shop to run for up to 50 hours a week.

The only thing that was reaching me now though were the various rumours that the club was in some financial difficulty--oh, and that we were playing Fulham in a pre-season game. That last bit was good news of course but here I was standing out on the pitch in mid-June; nothing had been touched since that Halstead game in May and the whole place seemed like it had been abandoned. As I looked at the actual surface it was obvious that it needed a whole lot of TLC before a league side would risk playing on it and yet all I heard was silence.

Sure enough not only was the big match eventually called off, but we ended up playing no friendly matches before the new season, with just one game in the newly re-named Eastern Floodlight Trophy (ex-Knight FT) up at Ashford to help get us ready for another tilt at promotion.

But now came the contrast. No sooner had we kicked-off then we could not stop winning. We had established a link with Brighton FC and the useful Sean Edwards and Chris Lyons joined us, with the very useful David Coldwell following them. One league match down at Andover was so one-sided that we could not take it seriously as we went 5-0 up in 22 minutes before becoming a little bored and finishing with a 7-2 margin.

By mid-September and despite an FA Cup exit in a replay at Croydon Athletic after a 4-4 draw at home, we were top of the table seemingly without much effort. The results brought in a couple of decent attendances, but this was mostly due to them being local derbies with good away support. Was this the moment that the Chairman decided that little old Hythe was not really worthy of his ambitions? Who knows but he did speak to the press expressing his disappointment about our support? To be brutally honest many of the Hythe public deserved some of this criticism as very few of them seemed to appreciate the amount of money that had been spent on giving them a good facility and an attractive side.

Unfortunately, our early form, for one reason or another, did not last, and by the New Year we had dropped down to 12th place and it was to be another failed attempt at promotion. With unrest growing and support falling Tony picked up on this and assured me that all would turn out fine and he would certainly not be walking away after all the time and money he had invested in the club.

We travelled down to Havant and another unsuccessful league game and things started to fall apart. After the match it was alleged that some of our players had been assaulted as they prepared to re-board the coach. A complaint was made to the FA, and a hearing was scheduled but amazingly nobody from Hythe turned up. I found this quite astounding and yet another sign that the whole structure of the club was falling apart.

Yet again though Wembley was on the horizon and our previous exploits meant that we were still one of the favourites to win the Vase, more so when we advanced to the 4th round proper. We were drawn against Evesham United and hoped for both a big win and a large crowd but got neither. I recall Tom Warrilow scoring a late "winning" goal only to have it chalked off for no apparent reason and then facing a long midweek haul for the replay. It was a cold and still evening when our lads came out for a warmup with the lights not yet switched on, but when they were the grass was no longer green but pure white and the referee quite correctly called it off. Travelling up for the second time we were worried about the amount of rainfall, but this time found the pitch was now bright green and clearly playable. However, the rainfall continued up to kick-off and then intensified alarmingly as we took the field. Even after only 20 minutes or so it was obvious to me that the match would not reach its conclusion and in comical scenes well captured by the press the game was called off and 720 folks got a soaking on their way home. The third match was duly played and was a bit of an anti-climax for us as we went down 2-0 after extra time. The home club had attracted a total of over 1300 for the second and third games and were jubilant afterwards --that is until they were handed our travel expenses for the three trips.

Although this latest Vase saga seemed to put a downer on the rest of the season, players had continued to be recruited and big striker Graham Matthews came in together with gifted midfielder Peter Jarvis. Later they were to be joined by keeper Joe Radford, Adrian Lemoine, Paul Collins and Del Deanus--all really good signings and brilliant news for all of us were it not for the gradual departure of many Reachfields favourites. To see the likes of Tom Warrilow, Dave Arter and Jeff Ross going out of the door for much-needed cash was bad enough, but they were later joined by Kevin Smart, Andy Allon and everybody's favourite, Steve O'Brien.

Not surprisingly attendances plummeted to the point where two home league games were played in front of 75 and 78 so recalling those early Kent League games at the ground long before Tony's arrival.

The Kent Senior Cup semi-final at home to Ashford not only brought people back but also gave us a final at Gillingham's Priestfield Stadium to look forward to.

Although the player turnaround was a distraction, we still had a decent line-up with returning former favourite Sean Carey and the lightning Danny Whyman up front and the prospect of the now departed Coldwell and Andy Allon returning from loan to make up for others being ineligible for the final hurrah.

As we played out the remaining fixtures with little interest being shown by Joe Public, I was aware of a bit of a build-up with extra programmes being printed for the last league match against none other than Havant FC. It was all a little desperate to be trying to make something out of this after we had not even bothered to turn up for the hearing, but the league made certain that they would have an official there to help ensure there would be no trouble. In the

event just 141 turned up and the league official happily watched a peaceful 3-3 draw without apparently noticing my choice of tannoy music which included "Saturday night's alright for fighting" and "Someone's gonna get their head kicked in tonight". Not for the first time in life was my wit wasted!!

The Kent Senior Cup Final was yet another example of how our support had deteriorated. We did take a full supporters coach for the short trip up to Medway, but they looked a little lost on Priestfields big open terrace. Sure, enough Coldwell and Allon made the match, Sean Carey scored the early opening goal, and we were set for what would have been a shock win until Bromley's late equaliser took us into extra time. Two more from the London team then sealed our fate, and we were left reflecting on the number of times this had happened in big matches.

Never mind though, we were by now an established Southern League club and there was always next season to look forward to--or so we thought.



Club Secretary Martin Giles concludes his review of the Walton Years with Chapter 46.....

A few weeks had passed since our Kent Senior Cup Final defeat at Gillingham and the club seemed to be settling into its sleepy close season mode when all of a sudden it happened!

I started receiving calls (I cannot recall who told me first) that Tony Walton had pulled out and Hythe Town Football Club had effectively ceased to exist. My first reaction was one of disbelief but when I heard talk of the involvement of the Official Receiver, I soon got the message. I was told that the ground and other sites would be sealed up and I soon realised that not only would any of us be denied access, but also any reliable information would not be given either.

It is perhaps worth noting here that apart from the odd rumours, nobody apart from Tony and his trusted staff had ever had any sight of papers or documents that would have given us warning of the size and scale of any financial problems. My job, and those of a few unofficial committee members, was to attend to day-to-day football matters and so none of us had any idea of what was owed and to whom. We were advised that the club had been "resigned" from the Southern League and that the resignation had apparently been accepted without any reference being made back to any other parties. We were truly "locked out " in all senses of the phrase.

I came into contact with a number of people who wanted to help and/or find out more although I see no point in mentioning their names now as it seems so long ago and some of them have passed on and in any case memories of such a difficult time are no longer reliable.

One (unnamed) person did stand out though when I was advised that a local guy who worked in the movie world was preparing to step in and rescue the club so that senior football could continue in Hythe. Currently this fellow was in the States but was soon available for a meeting in which he would detail his plans to any former committee members, or any other locals prepared to come in with him. The size of the problem was of no concern to him, and we all thought that this would be of great interest to the Receiver who he would be in touch with on his imminent return to the country.

I immediately contacted the league only to find that not only had our resignation been accepted, but they had also got in touch with Canterbury City, who were due to lose their place after finishing bottom of the table and told them that they would be reprieved. Even now after all these years this still seems to smack of indecent haste, and I cannot help thinking that such action was not entirely fair or reasonable. I was well aware that as a club we had given few problems to the game's administrators, that our ground was one of the best in the league, and one that other clubs enjoyed visiting. Not only that but we still had contact with a pretty decent squad of players who could be the foundation for a fourth Southern League campaign.

But it was now all too late and even now we found that getting any relevant information that might guide us was nigh on impossible. We did find out though that when Reachfields was handed over to the club by the Army authorities a covenant was made that stipulated that the land could only be used for sport and recreation and that in the event of bankruptcy ownership of the site would go to the local town council--soon to be absorbed into Shepway DC. We were then reminded of the time we signed Jeff Ross and Dave Arter for 25K when apparently a loan was taken out from the Brewery with the lower clubhouse named as security and of course this premises would also be lost to the club.

As our movie man drifted away from the scene in a disappointing mixture of missed messages and unreturned calls, a few of us defiantly got together and resolved that although the level of the game we had been in would be lowered, there would still be football at Reachfields as long as the local authority would permit us to take over the ground. Our reasoning was that otherwise

the place would be a millstone around their necks which would deteriorate badly unless maintained.

We called a public meeting at the local Royal British Legion club and in front of an enthusiastic attendance Hythe United FC was launched with the new club being permitted tenancy to all of Reachfields Stadium, save the lower clubhouse.

It is at this point that the "Walton Years" can be finalised but my time with the big man was not quite done. I never did find out very much about the crash, but I had taken a phone call from Tony once he had heard about the public meeting. Basically, he tried to warn me off, but in the nicest possible way. He could see no way that either myself or any other local person would be able to afford the sort of budget needed to regain our status as an ambitious non-league club, and of course he was correct. What he could not quite understand though was that I had found the experience of the last three years to be very enjoyable for much of the time and would settle for a little less, and many others felt the same way. Tony in all honesty had come to realise that when he had embarked on his adventure, he had chosen the wrong place for his ambitions. Hythe had reacted well to start with but generally it is a quiet place with a public that springs to life for certain local events, but it was never going to be caught up in a fanciful drive towards the Football League or even two or three levels below that. We agreed to disagree though regarding the future of any newly formed club with me keeping my ultimate ambitions to myself and resolving to tell him "told you so" in a few years' time.

Sometime later Tony came to see me and brought with him a number of photos and mementos from our times together which was a nice touch. Our only other contact was by the odd phone call to me for a bit of a catch up. After one of those I realised that he was aware of the early stages of this saga coming to light and I was able to reassure him that I had no intention of upsetting anyone, least of all himself, and just wanted to create a record of the exciting period when Hythe Town became a prominent name in non-league football.

As I recall it our final conversation came when we were due to play a Vase tie (our first since reforming) and I invited him to Reachfields. Whether or not he thought that we were trying to lure him back, he politely declined, and I saw this as a missed opportunity as I knew that although not everyone was a fan of his, he may have been surprised at how many would want to shake his hand.

Writing these notes in November 2020 I had a couple of last thoughts, firstly that awful deflection up at Yeading in 1990. What might have happened if that ball had instead gone into the crowd rather than skewing into the net? Seeing all of those coaches lined up on Hythe Green and afterwards the victory parade down Hythe High Street would have been quite something--what a pity that neither happened.

Secondly, and very recently, at an FA Trophy game versus Ashford United I became aware that those "terrible two", Rossy and Arter were in the ground, together with Andy Allon and of course the now Ashford manager Tom Warrilow. No prizes for one name being on their lips in the bar after the match!! That is when I realised that I had to somehow tidy this story up and give it some sort of conclusion because although many have served the club since 1992, we have all done so in the place that Tony rebuilt, with all of its unusual quirks and features. Less obviously some of us also remember some of the fantastic players he brought in to entertain us.

Reachfields Stadium, a little forlorn in places, and quite grand in others, still stands to remind us of an amazing four-year period--the Walton Years.