

Introduction

This is a book about the wisdom of the masses, and the madness of the crowd. It's about football and Britain, and Britain and football, because you cannot fully understand one without the other. If you haven't got a sense of humour it's not worth even trying, as wit runs through both like the Clyde through Glasgow and the writing through a stick of Blackpool rock.

It's about people with a little education and a lot of intelligence, and vice versa. Unfortunately, it also has to be about people with little of either. Crucially, it's not supposed to be too serious, but at times you must bear with me – the songs and chants will start again. They always do.

My name's Tim Marshall and it's been a week since my last match. I support a football club. That's not just five words; it's a life sentence.

I came late to the game. You do hear some fans recounting how they first heard the roar of the crowd from within their mother's womb, aged minus four months. More plausibly, others will tell

“Dirty Northern Bastards!”

you about being hoisted onto their dad’s shoulders, aged five, or being passed over the heads of fans to get to the front of the Kop, aged seven. I confess to being a johnny-come-lately ten-year-old when, armed only with a pair of Joe 90 NHS specs and an impressionable mind, I first clicked my way through a turnstile, mounted the concrete steps and emerged into another world.

It was love at first sight, and my first sight was at 2.30 p.m., Saturday, 18 April 1970.

The old adage ‘The past is another country: they do things differently there’ was only ever partially true – and so it is with football.

For the first few years, when I began going, the game was usually on a Saturday afternoon. The crowd was 90 per cent male in the standing areas and the ground would already have been half full an hour before the 3 o’clock kick-off. By then the singing would be well under way – the PA system didn’t bother blasting pop music at us to distortion levels and things would build to a natural crescendo.

By 3 p.m. we were jammed together so tightly that it was difficult to turn around, as your shoulders would be pushing into the people each side of you and there was pressure from front and back. We never thought about these conditions. It was all we knew and, until Hillsborough, all we would know. Behind you there would be a surge of people and you would stagger down three or four steps, struggling to keep your footing, before surging back up the terraces, sometimes having moved across to the left or right by several feet.

The noise was deafening, wave upon wave of songs crashing along the terraces and surging out onto the pitch. The Kop at our

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ground held 17,000 people, the ground 50,000. Sometimes, in the second half, the PA would announce the attendance. When it came out as being in the 30,000s, and yet we could barely move for the crush, a knowing laugh would go up. It was cash at the gate and we always reckoned that the club, for obvious reasons, might want to knock a few thousand off the attendance figures.

Those were also the days when two of you could push through the turnstile together as long as the guy taking the money got something out of it. Another way of getting in was to slip some money to the man on the sliding gate at the end of the stand. In extremis, you could try to crawl through your friend's legs while he fiddled for the right money to give you time to get through the turnstile, but this often ended with a bruised forehead and deep embarrassment when the turnstile man looked down and said, 'What you doing down there, lad?' In that event you'd have to go along to the next turnstile and try again.

If the stand behind the goal was sold out, you could try the most difficult trick. Pay the cheaper price for the family section along the side of the pitch, work your way to near the corner flag, then jump over the barrier, sprint across the grass, and dive into the Kop. If you made it, the crowd would part, you would disappear, ducking down as it closed behind you and you worked your way up to where you might, or might not, find your friends. The stewards didn't really care and the police had better things to do than push through hundreds of people in order to catch you.

Try doing that in an all-seater stadium these days. You'd never make it to the stand and you'd probably then be arrested and banned for life. I'm not defending my various attempts to defraud my club of money, and will be happy to send a cheque for the £5 or so I might have saved over my first few years of attending. But