

# Fan meets his match



Andrew Chatfield  
meets photographer  
Stuart Clarke

**W**HILE you are sweating, swearing, chanting, yawning, praying, cheering or weeping your way through tomorrow's epic Wycombe-Norwich clash, just bear one thing in mind: Stuart Clarke could be watching you.

This soccer-crazed photographer has been to more than 900 grounds and matches in the last four years, but rarely sees more than half a game. He would visit up to 30 grounds a week in the early Nineties, but his rolls of film would feature few players.

That is because his principal subjects are not on the pitch. Stuart's quest is to present in colour photographs what it means to be a football fan, during a period (1989 to 1998) of huge change in the complexion of soccer grounds. His lens will more often be tilted towards the packed terraces, or the car park, or the stewards, or the empty stands, than the pitch.

On Thursday, his exhibition, *The Homes of Football*, comes to High Wycombe's Guildhall. It has been brought to town by Wycombe Museum (run by the district council) and is backed by Hall and Co and Wycombe Wanderers, which features in the show. Stuart himself also benefits from financial backing from the Football Trust. The 28 venues the show has so far graced include the House of

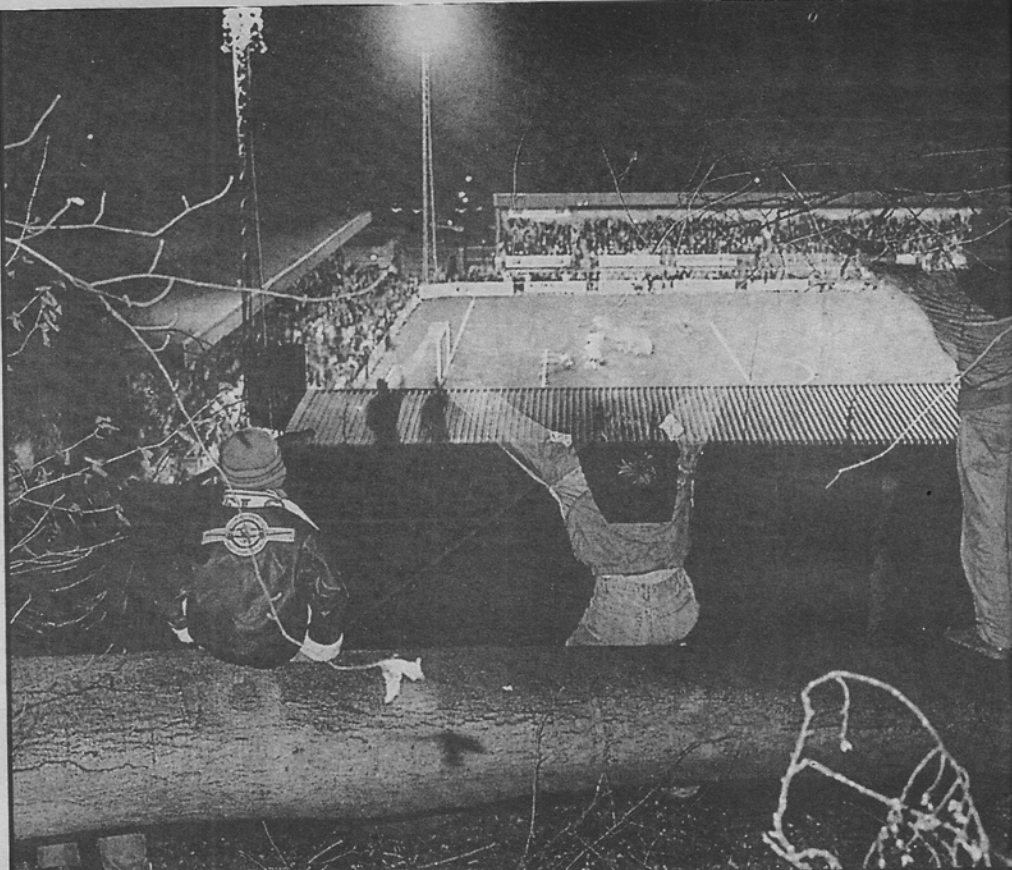
Commons. It all began when the Berkhamsted-born 33-year-old started a photographic project with a social angle. His studies in film and photographic arts at the then Polytechnic of Central London had inspired his love of the medium.

"The main thing I was interested in was what it is like to grow up in different parts of the country. Football was always there," he says.

"Everywhere I went, I reacted to seeing games of football. I couldn't help going to see games."

The Hillsborough disaster was the spark which focused the soccer project in his mind. The ground changes demanded by the Taylor report, plus the resurgence of interest in the role of football in society, meant he had found a subject with significant artistic and commercial merit.

"Traditional sports photography has been about the moment the ball hits the net, or captures the manager's face before and after they score - it is about the moment. I have set out to make living history. I call myself a chronicler," says Stuart, himself a keen "midfield dynamo" in the amateur game and an erstwhile supporter of Watford.



**Pitching In:** Jubilant fans greet a Wanderers goal in Stuart Clarke's picture *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The result is an antidote to the clichéd hooligan image of footy fans, presenting instead the more mundane realities and absurdities of life on the terraces. He has experienced hooliganism (notably when he was the only photographer on Bournemouth beach when Leeds fans started rioting) but refuses to get it out of perspective.

"Foremost in my mind is just to take pictures that sum up the experience of people, sometimes in quite a wonderful way because I think football is a wonderful experience to them."

His images tease, amuse or amaze by, in his words, transforming a subject we thought we were familiar with. A picture called *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (shown on this page, though not in its original colour) captures the ghostly outlines of jubilant fans greeting a Wycombe Wanderers goal against Peterborough. Stuart prides himself on finding different perspectives from which to record the football experience and that picture proves it. The fans are sitting on a log in the wood high above the ground.

Another shot, entitled *A Bellyful of Burslem*, was taken at struggling Port Vale during a dour relegation battle. "There are these men in boiler suits and caps, looking pretty glum, square-jawed, thick set, and in the middle there are these two ladies absolutely laughing their heads off. I always wonder what they are laughing at."

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Stuart has a pass which enables him to get into all British soccer grounds. But he must cover his own travel expenses. He began by going everywhere by car, but now favours the train.

The only English grounds he is yet to visit are Torquay, Plymouth, Exeter and Hereford. Although he is now based in Cumbria, he counts Wycombe as one of his five favourite clubs. He loves not only the success story (relatively near his birthplace, too) but also the romance of the Adams Park location.

"You could look at the stand and think there is not much to it. But there is just something great about the idea that somebody took this patch of land and brought the club here and now they are working their way through the divisions on this nice grass sheet that used to be a cornfield, or whatever it was."

It is this lyricism, which many football fans must frequently have shared, that is celebrated in his work.

But it is not merely art. His ambition to "chronicle" these key years is serious; the Football Trust is backing him; and one exhibition was at the House of Commons, bringing the changes in the game to the attention of those who make the decisions about its future.

As it stands, it is a British project. "I have been to a few grounds abroad. There is certainly room to expand this abroad, but Britain will always be the focal point for me because I understand it better than I do the Italian game, say."

He still has four years to go, but the project is not palling for him. "I thought it was a great artistic opportunity and a commercial one, using something that I