

SUSCT NEWSLETTER 28

LET'S face it, the general election result was only about as surprising as discovering in the light of recent delay that the plans for Fossetts Farm have suddenly been withdrawn for further discussion, assessment, tinkering, tweaking, fervent prayer to the Almighty etc etc.

I must be honest and admit I expected a landslide. Not, though, for Labour. One party's manifesto contained within it a plan so radical, so populist that it seemed to me guaranteed to bring the most fundamental change to the nation's political make-up in living memory. Was it Tory? Afraid not. Lib Dem? No, this was non-taxable. In fact, it came from the most unlikely source of all – the Monster Raving Loonies. They fearlessly pledged to‘Make supporting M***** U***** a criminal offence if you live south of Crewe’. Surely, here was a policy the whole of the UK could have rallied behind, one that should have seen the Loonies swept into power with a massive majority. Unfortunately, they failed to get their message sufficiently across with the same bold front as someone who has brought a whole new meaning to eating a Yorkie – Jordan in Manchester Urmston. So the Loonies remain in the wilderness and that pitiful band of red-shirted saddos will continue to display themselves throughout Essex's green and ‘pleasant’ land. What a missed opportunity.

So who are we left with in the corridors of power to promote the cause of SUFC, the Third Division and the future of the Football League? The great news is that Chris Smith has been consigned to the dustbin of history. The bad news is that he has been replaced as Minister for Culture, Sport and a couple of other things by Tessa Jowell. Now Tessa's is not a name I have ever heard bandied around as a political football fanatic. In fact, what she knows about the beautiful game I have a horrible feeling you could probably jot down on a neutrino* with room to spare. So precious little reason for rejoicing there. Kate Hoey has got the push as sports minister thanks to her stubborn support for an athletics track cocking up the plans for the new Wembley stadium. This is much more of a loss, as she was very much pro-seating in football stadia, was a genuine fan – even though it was of Arsenal – and was anxious to maintain a thriving sector of the professional game that did not revolve around the Premiership vultures. Instead, in comes Richard Caborn. Now ‘Dick’ likes golf, which is a big plus point. He supports Sheffield United, too, which is not. He also failed dismally when his sporting knowledge was tested live on radio. How he will fare only time will tell, but I'm not exactly holding my breath. Our Great Leader is always prattling on about being a big sports and football fan – when it suits him. If this is the evidence, we're stuffed. When (hands together, eyes closed) Fossetts returns to the agenda and those letters to MPs seeking their parliamentary backing need writing again, Messrs Amess (Southend West) and Taylor (Rochford and Southend East) are back in situ and true (Tory) blue Bob Spink has bucked the trend by recapturing Castle Point. As for the new councillors, I am sure our list on the SOS website (www.saveoursouthend.co.uk) will be updated as soon as possible. It may already be done. West Leigh Lib Dems said in their election literature they were pro-stadium (subject to....). Interesting, as the king KARER is a former county councillor for.....the Lib Dems!

I am a bit dodgy on the new council list make-up myself, as, mercifully, I was away golfing in Devon for the duration of election week along with fellow members of the SUSCT brethren Mr G and Mr I. Needless to say, the fate of the club came up for discussion more than once on our passages round an assortment of high-quality links. But it was not until I arrived home that I discovered yet another chapter had been written in the Fossetts saga – i.e. everything is back on hold.

This was obviously a vital matter for deliberation at the executive committee's meeting on June 13. First we had found out that the Fossetts Farm plans had been deferred for further consideration by Martin Dawn and that the ‘Yes’ to outline planning permission which we all want from the council had now become as likely either this month or next month as Becks winning Brain of Britain. Next up came the ‘Blues For Sale’ headlines roaring at us from the Evening Echo, with the South Eastern Leisure combo of Delancey Estates and Martin Dawn supposedly anxious to flog off their 76 per cent stake in United. Ron Martin insisted ‘Delancey

cares for the future of the football club'. Sadly, as always seems to happen, on that day – on any day – no one from Delancey with any clout was available for comment to back that claim up.

Twenty-four hours later and, hallelujah, Ron announced that when it came to Martin Dawn, Blues are 'Safe In Our Hands'. Some sceptics felt this had rather the same ring as Neville Chamberlain's 'Peace In Our Time'. But, for now, we can certainly give Ron the full benefit of the doubt. He deserves no less while he continues beavering away assiduously for a cause as vital to him as it is to us – even if the reasons may be slightly different. Blues owing £7million to SEL could prove a 'minor' sticking point, but a warm glow surely came flooding over us all as Ron declared: "We want Southend to survive in the long term – and it will do." He also pledged a revised planning application would be lodged with the council. So we wait. But in the meantime, let's have no more jokes about Stibbards being our shirt sponsors for the coming nine months of battle.

SEASON ticket holders like yours truly have also received a personal missive from Ron accusing the Echo of irresponsible reporting. Well I know only too well that such a judgement all too often depends on which side of the fence you are stood. It was mention of the club's lawyers getting involved that most worried me. I also know from experience that getting lawyers entangled with newspapers, rather than letting your facts and arguments prove your case, can be counter-productive. It occasionally indicates a cupboard door has been nudged open the tiniest fraction of an inch and the draught has just rustled those skeleton's bones within by the merest subtle whisper. We'll see.

It is up to Ron to prove any doubters wrong. He appears correct in saying that he and Dave Webb have strengthened the club's fundamentals over the last eight months and credit has to be due for that. Clear efforts have been made to strengthen the team in the close-season, which is crucial. But Fossetts Farm is what really counts for Martin Dawn plc and only by getting its go-ahead will they truly convince Blues supporters that United really is as important to them as they say. Perhaps they should have a word with George Reynolds at Darlington – and that should not be too difficult as we play them in our first league fixture. If you get a chance, cop a look at the new stadium currently under construction for the Quakers – a £20million, high-tech cracker housing 25,000.

Your committee were naturally keen either to meet Ron face to face or to entice him to a Q & A session to discover where we currently stand. Both Jeff Allen and Paul Fitzgerald had found that pinning him down of late had been about as easy as fixing a one-to-one with Keith Vaz. But Paul finally booked him for a Roots Hall get-together on June 28. Of course, nothing ever runs smoothly and this proved a disaster night for committee members to attend. Trevor, Chris, Dave, Theresa, Derek, Martin and myself were all unable to be present, while Paul was refused access to the area after arsonists torched a couple of buildings in Victoria Avenue and brought the area to a standstill. That left Richard, Craig and Donna to represent us and you will find Richard's balanced overview of the evening at the end of the newsletter.

Trevor, for cloak-and-dagger reasons, believes it is vital we try to ensure that Roots Hall is designated as a football ground and nothing else. After all, if Fossetts does ever take on the shape of a pear, the club is going to need a safeguarded home. The size of development to ensure financial viability strikes most people as the main red light to Fossetts going through on the nod. But at least Ron can ask: What are the alternatives? A recent walk Paul took in the area indicated a well-ordered football ground may be just what it needs. The KARERS' dog-walking zone, historic site and area of natural beauty is, it seems, currently a gypsy camp with all its attendant 'extras'. I think the phrase is: You couldn't make it up.

OVERALL, the committee feeling was that, wittingly or not, this latest knockback, added to lack of communication over such issues as the season ticket increases, kit changes etc was again fostering a feeling of alienation amongst supporters. And this can only work AGAINST Ron. Why else would a Shrimpers.net poll show that 66.3 per-cent of those who took part feel Martin Dawn plc do NOT have the best interests of United at heart? Antagonising fans is not a good idea. Fans have to believe they can trust fully the men at the top. We need to be in the loop, not out of it. Word is that more people have bought season tickets on credit card this season than ever before, simply because they felt it gave them the best chance of getting their money back if things went bang before August. (Now why didn't I think of that after paying by Switch?!).

Working together seems to be a *modus operandi* Ron has had some difficulty with. He is clearly a man of authority and some success, used to giving orders and having others jump to put them into practice. But football club supporters cannot be treated in the same offhand way. And, to me, nothing put this into starker clarity than the sad tale of the production of NEWSLETTER NUMBER 27.

The newsletter, in its present guise, has been hitting your doormats about every 4-5 weeks now for around two-and-a-half years. It is basically a two-man production. I, for my sins, write it, while Richard Coxell takes charge of distribution with assistance from me if it fits in with my days off.

The contents, hopefully, keep all our current 749 SUSCT members up to speed with what the Trust is up to, what the club is up to and what the team is up to – remembering particularly that a large number of the signed-up faithful do not even live in the vicinity of Southend and have no access either to the local media for news or to United games. I also like to stick my own oar in at times on assorted football and SUFC issues, chiefly to try to get some comeback and, hence, future material. If I see positive I praise, negative I'll have a go. Overall, I am delighted to say that the response I have pretty much invariably had from the readership has been very much in favour. And that gives me the encouragement to carry on scribing for the time being at least.

At the end of each newsletter, by my initials, I always put the date it is completed. Number 27 was done and dusted on May 20 (20/5). It was then immediately sent out to our e-mail subscribers by Richard, who also put it on the SUSCT website for anyone who reads it there. But we also have more than 400 members who receive the purple prose by post as far away as Denmark. In the past we have always been very grateful to the commercial department at the football club for actually printing the newsletter – free, too – on the A4 paper we provide. Richard will by then have already stamped and addressed his mountain of envelopes, the printing gets done, he collects the 2,000-plus sheets of paper from Jon Child or whoever.....and then comes the hard part. He alone, or with my help if he is lucky, folds, envelopes up and sticks down all the newsletters to be posted before delivering them personally to Southend's central sorting office. Solo, this is a four to five-hour labour of love!

ANYWAY, there seemed no reason to suspect anything would change when Richard presented Number 27 at the club on the morning of May 21. He expected to collect that evening or maybe the next day, as the United printer has always been prone to mechanical mayhem. But May 22 arrived and – not done. May 23 brought the same. Finally, on May 24 Richard elicits the reason why. There is a problem. There is something in the newsletter.....*Ron doesn't like*. Richard is promised that the next day all will be made clear to him. But despite making three phone calls to the club on May 25, there is never anyone available to speak to him. My e-mail address is also always on the newsletter and commercial has my home telephone number – but nothing. After all, only one person could make a decision on changing anything – me. And I can assure you I would need good reason.

Now I cannot believe that if by not doing the print job the club thought the newsletter would fail to appear. But if that was the line, they could not have been more wrong. The SUSCT operates to the vintage 'publish and be damned' maxim. And, sorry, the newsletter has never been written so someone at the Hall can first give it the once-over and then decide if the contents are acceptable.

Clearly we now had to come up with an alternative plan. There was only one fly in the ointment – Richard's wife, Moira, had arranged a week's holiday back home in Jockland. And the departure date was May 26. But this little inconvenience was not going to beat us. Even with a nine-hour hack north in his Nissan Micra looming, Richard found time after ironing his kilt to drop off another No.27 top copy at my house – along with all the envelopes. It was now all down to yours truly. The decision had been made to go to a printer in Westcliff we had used once before. I was due in work that Saturday morning so could not get down there to do the business. But my brother volunteered to go for me and arrived there at 2.30pm. Only one minor difficulty. The place was shut! Sunday is Sunday and Monday the 28th, remember, was a bank holiday. Finally, on Tuesday the 29th at 9.45am I was in the shop. The job would be done by 12.30 – and was. All 2,500 sheets of A4 were ready in two cardboard boxes. By the time I had lugged them back to my car, my arms felt like I had been carrying a couple of those huge stones on The World's Strongest Man. Before leaving for the office I got 65

newsletters packed and posted. On the 30th, I was up to 330. And by the 31st, all 406 were on their way to you, dear readers.

Sorry it took so long. But I think you will have seen the problem we had and understand we did our best in the circumstances. Once again I would ask that anyone who can have their newsletter sent by e-mail, it would really help us. Just contact Richard on Coxell@btinternet.com and he will add you to his mailing list. And the craziest thing of all? Ron's beef, not discovered until the June 28 meeting, was over a throwaway remark about the commercial department reported from the mid-May committee meeting. Yet whatever the rights or wrongs, the sheer lack of courtesy directed towards us was, frankly, unimpressive. I still believe Ron is genuinely trying to do his best for United, but, to me, this little adventure also says to the Trust: Keep your guard up. Needless to say, we will be using an independent printer from now on and we already have a couple of irons in the fire. Even so, any one of you who knows someone who could do us a stonking good deal, again please get in touch with Richard.

RIGHT, back to the committee meeting and a big 'Well Done' to Trevor and Derek for getting up at 4.30am – that's in their own homes, not together – to go to attend the 'Supporters Direct' conference in Huddersfield. This gave an overview on how fans can best get involved with their clubs, right through to help on arranging postal votes on important issues and even using the Supporters Trust to aid getting meetings fixed with the boardroom bigwigs. It was stressed that Trusts like ours need to operate as professionally as possible and we like to think we do just that. But more and more specialist skills are needed these days and the committee will not hesitate if we think it necessary to ask people we feel can really help us to do so. Garry Smith's efforts on the planning front, for example, have been invaluable. United have problems, but it was clear from fan representatives of other football and rugby league clubs present that we are by no means the only ones. We have to show we mean business – and, with your backing, on all issues Blue we aim to do so.

The Fossetts delay has, inevitably, slowed the momentum that was building around the Save Our Southend campaign. But once the next Fossetts step is announced, we will know where we stand. Good news will mean the petitions, postcard-sending and letter-writing to the new councillors, MPs etc can resume in earnest, building to the plans we have for D-Day at the council offices. Talking of SOS, did anyone see the way the football club website just 'borrowed' the SOS Field-Marshal Haig 'We Need You' logo to back up some request of their own. No 'Do you mind?' Tut, tut.

We are committed to doing our best for our members and are investigating if there are any particular 'benefits' we can obtain, such as special loan rates.

Trevor amused us with a letter – whisper it - from the commercial department giving us first refusal on sponsoring Phil Whelan again next season. We had to smile because we never sponsored Phil last season – or any season come to that. Oops. We kicked off with Martin Carruthers and Tom McDonald, who, needless to say, saw their campaigns disintegrate as the curse of the SUSCT sponsorship kicked in. We finished with Chris Hutchings and, I think, Stuart Thurgood. This season we hope to get our money on Darryl Flahavan or Ben Smith. Sorry, Phil!

Quotes for the Oliver Trigg grave renovation are being sought and that should be a nice publicity bonus for the Trust when the work is carried out.

WE have been considering joining either the Football Supporters Association or the National Federation of Supporters Clubs for a while now. And that decision about which could soon be made a little easier as the two are supposedly planning to merge. More on that to come.

Craig hobbled to the meeting on crutches following knee damage sustained while doing his Darren Gough act for Hullbridge CC. He announced our finances remain solid and is currently working on the accounts for our year end of June 30. If only United had been as fastidious down the decades. Apparently one or two things are being 'looked at', according to a source close to the board, before the latest United accounts come on stream shortly.

The fixtures are out, so Chris Berry will be cranking the Travel Club back into life and making a final decision on our coach company for the coming season. It still looks like Supreme.

Anyone who applied for United shares should have certificates by now as, I believe, the club have banked the cash. The Trust aims to try to set up a 'Shareholders Association of SUFC' to monitor all 'goings-on'.

It was good to see that the bucket collection and assorted other activities at the Mansfield game at the end of last season raised £6,500 for the family of Mike North. I may have been critical of Ron earlier, but on this issue he, Southend United and our supporters set an example for the game in this country. United's superbly organised shirt auction raised around £11,500 more and not one club failed to deliver, though M***** U***** presented theirs direct to the family. The Liverpool kit was the best-seller at £800. A fantastic effort with which everyone involved can feel justifiably proud.

Webby has been trying to wheel and deal as he looks to strengthen the squad and we say welcome to Gareth Risbridger and Ben Smith from Yeovil, great work for succeeding in keeping hold of Stephen Broad and welcome back to Darryl Flahaven, Kevin Maher and Scott Forbes. The latter were surely players we could not afford to lose. David Lee opted not to accept just a one-year deal and has headed for Hull, who, from being the paupers of 2000-01 with the bailiffs at the door, have now splashed more than £800,000 on nine new players. A veritable phoenix from the ashes.

TALKING of Scott Forbes, he was pictured recently in the Echo alongside Millwall goal machine Neil Harris and Leyton Orient's Matt Lockwood during their heady days with Rayleigh Boys. Trust us to let players of that quality slip through the net at a young age. Best wishes from the Trust, too, to Neil Harris – still living in Rayleigh – following the cancer operation likely to keep him out of action until Christmas.

Our esteemed manager has been having to get by without the aid of his now departed No.2 Mick Gooding. Mick became the voice of Teletext before his departure, having something totally bland to say on some Blues issue of no note almost every day just before heading into the sunset. But so far I haven't seen a peep about why he seemed completely incapable of galvanising the side at any time from the touchline – or anywhere else come to that. A dud, it would seem. Somewhat like Ronnie Whelan when it came to managerial duties. Ronnie has recently been shown the door at Olympiakos, Nicosia, which I believe is the Cypriot equivalent of Grays Athletic. He told SunSport that while on his brief earlier sojourn with Panionios of Greece, he had bottles thrown at him when things turned sour. What he neglected to say was that he deserved bottles (empties?) thrown at him for the hopeless job he did at the Hall. Anyway, take it away Rob Newman.

Becks' madcap mohican has had plenty of publicity, though he looked not much dafter than Blondie Houghton in the Third Division play-off final. It was a nasty moment when it looked as if Scotty's goal might take the Os up. But, typically, his clanger let Blackpool back in the game, he ended up throwing a wobbly as he was substituted and we get to tackle the old enemy once again.

Our current promotion odds are a miserly 20-1 with the internet bookies. I think I will look around for some longer odds before lashing out the annual £5ew on our boys to take the division by storm. The fixture list did not impress me – chiefly because the one week I'm unlikely to be around in late September is the one in which we have two home games. Typical! As for the Worthington Cup, is anyone really bothered? Just talking of holidays, Richard spotted Plymouth boss Paul Sturrock strolling near his in-laws' residence in Dundee. Let's hope that was not the high point of his trip. Dundee, it seems, could also teach Southend a solid lesson when it comes to redevelopment of the city centre, providing facilities for residents and rebuilding football grounds – both of them.

I see Cardiff have signed Spinner from Manchester City for £7,000 a week. Has the world gone mad? Yes, actually, it has. Look at the Patrick Vieira situation and ask yourself if the future of British football looks a picture of health. Methinks not. Spinner's contract, drawn up by Lebanese loonie Sam Hammam, apparently claims he must eat sheep's testicles and have 'liaisons with sheep'. Hamman even wants to change the Cardiff

bluebird to a sheep. Imagine anyone trying that here with the shrimp. Spinner, why didn't you tell him to stuff it? Or perhaps he already has.....

It was fascinating to discover medical evidence that being a mascot like Sammy the Shrimp or Elvis the Eel is a health hazard. Back trouble, strains etc are prevalent among these madcap monsters, though I would have felt the biggest danger was to the mental health of the brave soul sweating inside.

Credit where it is due. Colchester have won a trophy. Yes, the dogs of Essex have shown they are animal crackers as a Basenji owned by some sad inhabitant of the Roman ruin claimed the star prize at Crufts. In case you were wondering, a basenji looks like a small gazelle and does not bark. In other words, it's a freak and, therefore, living in the right place. It is certainly the only silverware they will be seeing in that part of the world over the next 10 months. I hear the poor creatures at Layer Road were devastated when Barry Conlon was allowed to return to York on top of the town's port closing after 2,000 years in existence. My sad C** *-supporting colleague, Andy 'Fixed Odds' Totham, was so moved he wrote a letter of protest to the Colchester Evening Gazette. And they printed it. His doctor has already been in touch to ask him if he 'would like to have a little chat'. In other words, the boy is barking.

ARE you there Barry Harris? Barry has lived in the States for the past 35 years, but must have hit the SUSCT website (www.susc.co.uk) because he suddenly contacted Richard and nominated Frank Sheard for the Hall of Fame. Frank is described in Peter Mason's mighty tome on the Blues as a "pugnacious, thick-necked centre-half with a bull terrier build" and he operated to great effect for 180 games in the 50s. Thanks for that Barry and we hope you have now decided to join the Trust.

Any sign of those flags stolen from the Hall? They are probably making very nice tablecloths.

Time to call a halt there, I think. Any feedback, backlash, whatever, the address for EVERYONE is the same as usual – nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk

NR (24/6)

PS. It's tax return time. When you send yours back, join me in asking the Inland Revenue how the likes of £30,000-a-week David Seaman are still entitled to tax-FREE testimonials. The aforementioned Seaman grossed just the £600,000-plus from the visit to Highbury of Barcelona.

*Neutrino – elementary particle of zero mass which travels at light speed and can pass through matter.

WE'RE HALL IN IT TOGETHER

Ron Martin meets Richard Coxell, Craig Fillary and Donna Fillary, 28/6/01.

First off, our thanks to Ron for taking the time for a get-together. It was just unfortunate that the date which suited him ruled out so many of the committee. Paul's enforced absence, after doing all the prior arrangements, was simply down to the fickle finger of fate.

Richard was impressed with the way Ron put himself across, though felt he, perhaps naturally, gets defensive if criticised. He sees himself as an able businessman and is proud of the college building getting the go-ahead. When told some supporters still regard him as something of a Vic, he looked somewhat hurt. He knows Vic's background and believes his has no connection.

Sensitivity to criticism within commercial was the reason for the problems with the last newsletter, though Nigel has made it clear that everyone is prone to criticism/cynicism/digs/jokes etc when it comes to the newsletter. Even him. Anyone with a gripe has only to make contact, which is simple to do. There are bound to be some negatives along with a fair few positives.

Ron revealed that the revised Fossetts Farm plans will go back to the council in SIX weeks' time. You can take it that the split between retail and leisure facilities has been revised to a degree that should satisfy the concerns regarding competition with the seafront. Nor will the retail element compete with the High Street.

He is apparently willing for an SUSCT rep(s) to go with him to the council. That would seem like a very good idea and would certainly appear to show acceptance that we all want the same thing when it comes to Fossetts Farm and can work together to achieve it. Ron need have no fears about the Trust when it comes to any matter of confidentiality when necessary. His plan suggests something like a 'steering committee' to include 2 board members and 2 SUSCT members. Details on what this will do and how it will work to be discussed in the near future.

A Q & A session was suggested for before the Leicester game on either July 18 or 20. Richard feels this should be a Fossetts meeting rather than a football meeting, otherwise the impact of the worries about Fossetts may be lost as members prefer to linger longer on our prospects for the new season. But this is open to debate. Tell Richard what you think.

Anyone with a shares problem need only contact Helen Giles on Southend 304135.

Ron asked what fans thought about the new shirt. We said he had told us there definitely would not be one, which he had forgotten. We informed him fans were a bit miffed that it was the second one in two years. However all the money from sales will now go to the club and it seems likely that in the end our fans will buy just as many as ever.

We let Ron know about dissatisfaction with the United website. The new NTL one will be up and running soon, though we must hope what goes on it is not solely down to NTL to decide.

United's accounts should be available in a couple of weeks or so. Large management fees included within revolve around pay-outs to Peter Storrie, John Main and two secretaries.

Courage are to stock the Shrimpers Bar next season, so with any luck our members, especially Jerry, will see standards rise. The Trust reckons the venue remains a missed opportunity, though Ron says the aim is to make it more user friendly.

Ron's overall message was this: Don't worry. The club is in good shape, Dave Webb is doing an excellent job with the team and we are now living within our means. Fossetts Farm WILL happen in some shape or form.

He insists he has the best interests of the club at heart and will not shaft us. The Fossetts Farm development will only be of benefit to the club. Delancey would always have bailed out once planning permission was granted. The Council want the club to survive and the Priory Park scheme is not a factor in the granting or otherwise of planning permission.

Overall, Richard believes the basis for co-operation is sound and we can only take Ron at his word. Again we have to trust him – just as he must trust us.