

Owner Ron Martin's near 25-year association with Southend United Football Club, and his relationship with the club's supporters, is probably best described as complicated.

When he initially arrived in 1998, with his property development company Martin Dawn forming part of a joint-venture with Delancey Estates under the moniker South Eastern Leisure that acquired the club from former Chair Vic Jobson, he wasn't particularly fond of football. He admits that he has fallen in love with the game since then, having been installed as Chair a couple of years later.

His tenure has coincided with some of our most memorable moments – a League One title-winning campaign ahead of local rivals Colchester United in 2006, a 1-0 League Cup victory over Manchester United at Roots Hall early in the following season and a Wembley play-off success to earn promotion back to the third tier in 2015 – but also some crushing lows.

The first flirtation with the High Court came in July 2000, when a debt to the Inland Revenue was paid off a couple of days before a winding-up petition was due to be heard. Ten years later, the Professional Footballers Association became involved when players weren't paid amid further winding-up petitions served by HMRC which were finally settled in August 2010.

The club had suffered relegation back to the basement division of the Football League against that backdrop in 2010 and, when those financial problems resurfaced in 2019, the outcome was even worse. Players were paid late, the PFA were involved again, and again there were unpaid taxes owed to HMRC, with the EFL fining the club and imposing a suspended points deduction.

A succession of poor managerial appointments, from Kevin Bond to Sol Campbell to Mark Molesley and culminating in Phil Brown's second spell in charge, together with repeated transfer embargoes stifling their ability to strengthen the squad, meant the club were relegated into non-league football for the first time in over a hundred years in 2021.

Through that, with supporters restricted to two limited-capacity fixtures at Roots Hall in December 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the fans felt distanced from the squad and the club, having watched its demise chiefly through the EFL's streaming service.

Stan Collymore – who launched his career during a short spell with the Shrimpers in the early 1990s – has retained his love of the club, and he helped encourage Ron Martin to appoint a Chief Executive for the first time in five years in 2021. He then helped convince the owner to install former captain Kevin Maher as Head Coach alongside Darren Currie and another former player, Mark Bentley.

The relationship between the supporters and the squad began to be rebuilt, and results on the pitch have turned around spectacularly. From a dalliance with the National

League relegation zone when they arrived in October 2021, the coaching team now have the squad sitting in a play-off place in the top tier of non-league football and in the last sixteen of The FA Trophy.

Despite that on-field success, many supporters find it difficult to forgive Ron Martin for being responsible for the club not being in the EFL, and this has been exacerbated by his inability to pay the taxman, local suppliers, players, coaches and hardworking non-playing staff on time.

Having arrived at the club with dreams of developing Roots Hall and masterminding the construction of a new stadium at Fossetts Farm, planning permission for which was initially granted in 2008, he has shown himself to have been incapable of delivering that ultimate dream alone.

Indeed, so dire has the situation become, the Shrimpers Trust made a loan of £40,000 to cover a serious shortfall in wages due to non-playing staff in November 2022, and this was matched by the club's main shirt sponsor, PG Site Services. A GoFundMe fundraising initiative then generated a further £20,000 contribution towards the wages of backroom staff later that month.

The club's reputation amongst players, other clubs and local businesses, not to mention football and Government authorities, has been tarnished and, despite the £2 million development of a new training ground (albeit without any permanent buildings), opening the path for building work to begin on the existing training facility, the club remain at a crumbling Roots Hall for now.

With that work potentially set to start in the summer, Ron Martin is reliant on bridging finance to ensure the club survives to that point. The fans love Roots Hall, but appreciate that, for the long-term future of the club, a move is imperative and, even though potential revenue streams appear to have been cut out of the Fossetts Farm stadium plans, it still appears beneficial to the club.

That bridging finance, reported to be around £5 million to settle the outstanding HMRC debt as well as ensuring the club, and Ron Martin's other companies, can survive until the summer, was promised in "weeks not months" in a club statement in October. Having seen a winding-up petition adjourned in November and again in January, the next date at the High Court has been marked "final".

Of course, "final" might not actually mean "final" in this definition, but we don't want to wait to find out whether that is the case. The Shrimpers Trust, together with other supporters' groups, have united to encourage Ron Martin to accept outside investment to ensure the club overcomes its current financial difficulties and the Fossetts Farm stadium project progresses.

The supporters' groups fear that the very worst could happen, and have established a working group to explore the possibility of setting up a phoenix club should Southend United FC be liquidated in March. But we would rather be able to continue to support the existing club, as generations have before us, and implore Ron Martin to find a solution to the current situation.