

SUSCT NEWSLETTER

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THE little red light on my downstairs answerphone was flashing wildly. Mid-morning, March 25 and a spot of grass cutting meant I had not heard the phone ringing. I listened to message number three and the dulcet tones of Mr G poured forth. “The time for change lobby has been vindicated at last,” he crowed. Luckily, I knew just what he was talking about. Message two was from my brother informing me he had just heard Rob Newman had been relieved of his duties, sent packing, given the tin tack.....sacked. A case of buzz off Buzz.

So should we be surprised? Well, remember what Ron Martin said at the AGM back on January 30. ‘Rob has my full support. His contract is up at the end of the season, but I can’t see any reason why I should want to change things’. In the light of that fulsome message of support from on high, our departed chief’s exit was probably guaranteed with a big pink ribbon binding.

But what clinched it for me that he was living on borrowed time was that no critical voice was raised to the Trust by anyone from the club’s upper echelon concerning that fascinating face to face I had at the Hull game with a certain former Third Division manager who just happened to have called in at the Hall to watch us in action. If Rob’s job had been safe, my hints – and remember you read them here first – would have been immediately repudiated. But not a dicky bird. And I know full well the newsletter is read within United’s corridors of power. After all, Ron banned us from using the club copier eons back because of something to which he objected within the purple prose.

The writing was probably on the wall the moment Stewart Robson walked through the Hall door – a door he was invited through by Ron and Ron only. It was noticeable against Swansea and Leyton Orient that the former Wimbledon man made no contribution from the dug-out as Rob was left tearing his hair out in frustration at the apparent inability of the players to put his instructions, such as they were, into practice. In other words, pass the ball between them often enough to set up a chance and hope that somebody in the line-up might be alert enough to get on the end of it and stick the aforementioned leather sphere in the opposition onion bag. Unfortunately, though the flesh was doubtless willing, the ability was sadly lacking.

I feel a bit sorry for Rob. His heart seemed in the right place, though there were rumours he could be a tad devious when it suited him. No one could question his commitment. He oozed it. He showed some welcome guts by fronting up at a hostile SUSCT Q & A on March 19 when he could easily have bottled it. In fact, just one failing let him down. In all honesty, he was not much cop as manager of Southend United FC. Passion alone wins nothing. And following as he did in the wake of Dave Webb Mk II, Alan Little and Alvin Martin, boy is it critical that Ron makes the right choice next time round. So far Sven, Alex Ferguson, Arsene Wenger and Bobby Robson are not believed to have made contact. But there are plenty of out-of-work managers around who would no doubt leap at one of the most prestigious posts in world football – hopefully, though, not including Howard Wilkinson, Tel Boy or Dick Bate – and numerous hopefuls are likely to be bandied around in the coming days. Steve Cotterill is one who has caught the tipsters’ eye early. But having just left Premiership Sunderland, he will not be going anywhere on a peanuts-level salary. Ron says he doesn’t know him. So get an introduction. Steve Parkin could be OK. But Spud? Why? Barry Fry? Past it and some fans have long memories. Steve Wignall? C** U connection does not bode well, but he did admit we were the best team in Essex which is a plus point.

ROBSON gets first crack and Steve Tilson surely had to stay in some capacity. After all, the axe fell just six days before his ‘star’-studded testimonial. No place left for David Crown, though, who I am told had a blub when he was told his services were no longer required. Back to the tax returns and punditry, methinks. Please Ron, just do not make the hurried appointment that has proved so disastrous in recent years. Give SR a bit of time to show what he is made of – longer than just losing to York anyway. If he cuts it, fine. If not,

there is no obligation to give him the job. It looks like he is guaranteed some post whatever happens. Look at the applications closely like, I hate to say it, C** U did. See how they have been turned round by seeming to hit on the right man in Phil Parkinson following what I gather were some detailed interviews and an in-depth CV analysis.

Someone, though, has to get a grip of the squad and extract a hell of a sight more out of them than Rob managed for the most part in recent months. It has been criminal the way we have flirted with the play-off places this season and then blown up whenever we have got within genuine reach. And but for three little clusters of league wins, we would be right down with the dead men by now. Ron was clearly expecting a bit of 'shock and awe' against the Os in the wake of the Q & A. Sadly, after a promising opening 20 minutes or so, it was more cack and bore. Perhaps, as the clichés go, Rob had 'lost the dressing room' or 'lost the respect of the players'. But what the entire squad should remember is that the new broom will not stand for the short-changing we have been putting up with of late and some could find their backsides sliding out of the game altogether unless they go in for a bit of digit extraction pretty damn quick. Exciting times.....well, sort of. And Rob – keep smiling!

Oh, and that anonymous manager's name I put in the frame? Well, it has been all round the Hall for a while now. It was Tommy Taylor, late of Cambridge United, Leyton Orient and Darlington. Does he take your fancy? Let me guess. Worryingly, he might take Ron's, even though he has just gone as assistant boss to Conference FA Cup heroes Farnborough. Anyway, well done to Terry 'Psychic' Jeffreys, Jerry Moss, Ed Beavan and Phil Spooner in Barcelona who led the way in contacting me with the correct answer very shortly after NUMBER 45 appeared just about *five weeks ago*.

Rob's exit has obviously overtaken the Trust-sponsored Q & A as the key moment of the month, with what our late, lamented boss had to say on the current situation at that particular Shrimpers Club gathering now being rendered pretty much irrelevant. But for those of you – like myself – unable to join the disgruntled 200 or so in attendance on the night after the Swansea humiliation here is a resume of the best bits. Thanks to Mike Smith, Matthew Walker and Terry Jeffreys for relaying the pearls of the evening.

Ron kicked off by warning against any abuse being hurled at those in the firing-line. It was promptly agreed that expletives would be deleted.

HE then updated the position on the Fossetts Farm / relocation / B & Q situation so crucial to the club's future. While the B&Q development has been OK'd by Southend Borough Council, the government recently made the planning application the subject of a public inquiry. Cue a further period of drag estimated to be at least four to five months, meaning stadium progress has returned to the back burner until at least mid-summer. Ron insisted this had been built into the calculations. But should all go pear-shaped, alternative sites (nameless, of course) were on hand for consideration within the town's environs. Construction time remains around two years, the cost about £10million. South Eastern Leisure will run the show (head honcho – R Martin Esq) and now it is back to treading water until Two Jags and Co, who possibly have somewhat more pressing issues on their mind at present than the Fossetts Farm development, decide what is to happen. United's operating loss this year is likely to grow to £450,000, thanks mainly to falling gates. (Falling gates equates to poor performances on the pitch, ergo perhaps it is time for the manager to fall on his sword!). It seems the minimum average we need to see a profit is around 5,100, well over 1,000 more than we are getting at present. Of course, Ron said, it would help if we could sell a player for £100,000. But he doubted we could get £100,000 for the entire playing pool on current form. Warming to his task, he now became effusive on the football side of things, just when everyone was waiting for Rob to make his contribution.

On the Robson appointment, he said the ex-Arsenal player was the experienced man the club had insisted worked alongside Rob once he was appointed. Messrs Tilson and Crown appeared to be not up to it, hence Robson's arrival. Whether Rob fancied Robson being foisted on him looked to be regarded as of no import. Only the contracts of Jay Smith and Kevin Maher are not up for review this summer, when Ron said Rob would have the opportunity to clear out the 'dead wood'. Instead we now find Rob has become the 'dead wood' and someone else will presumably be doing the clearing out. But even the likes of Tes, clearly having trouble finding third and fourth gears at present, are not guaranteed anything unless they start showing some extra oomph. Talks on his new deal have been shelved for the time being. (Leon Cort can have a thoroughly deserved two more years. But will he want them?)

Rob then took centre stage and was grilled on the way Barrington Belgrave appeared to have been cast aside. He once more found himself trying to explain there was no personality clash. The same as at the AGM, when he said there was no personality clash with Steven Clark. But it certainly does appear that man-management was not one of his strong points and may have had an undermining effect on his relations with the squad. Not, I am sure, that they are all angels. Both he and Ron said they were keen to hunt down more players from within a 25-mile radius of the town, who might have more pride in playing for a 'local' team. But being realistic, it is now the first Q & A with the new manager that is likely to show how the land really lies as regards issues on the pitch.

Geoffrey King next stepped forward to cop the usual flak on catering and stewarding. The closure of the West Stand bar while games were in play caused friction, especially with the slow service. After all, the way we have been playing of late a few stiff ones to drown the sorrows have become essential. It seems a short 'drinking-up' period might be introduced. The North Bank was back on the agenda as many claimed the recent poll was not representative. Certainly the atmosphere at home games these days is all but non-existent and a trial game was seen as a possible way forward. At least let United make the decision and not the local constabulary or anyone else looking for an easy life. GK had also got some real ale on at the bar, as promised, and the Courage Best allegedly went down a storm. As long as it did not come up the same way. The Trust's professor of real ale, Jerry Moss, insists it is essential that the pipes are kept clean and wants to see some Essex ales on parade, but overall saluted an encouraging start to getting the usual poisonous chemic eradicated. The evening overall was rated a success. Hopefully, the Trust signed up a few new faces. Yet, speaking personally, I have to make mention of the club-imposed 'press ban', which was a nonsense and must never be allowed at a similar gathering again. It left our vice-chairman Paul FitzGerald having to write an apology to the Echo on the Trust's behalf, when the ban was nothing to do with us. It is the club who owe the apology. Ron needs the press on his side and such bans always prove counter-productive. Ask Vic if you can get through to the other side.

Paul has also spoken to Southend Council, who say the 'calling in' of the B&Q outline plan could well be to do with the warehouse's size. But the whole Fossetts creation remains part of the regeneration of Southend and fits in with the borough plan and the Thames regeneration project etc. So keep those prayers flowing.

Before we move on to the last Trust committee meeting held on March 17, a quick dip into some other matters.

WHO else has been poring through 'You Can't Always Get What You Want', Bob Sills' book on six months of following the Blues in 1996, rounded off with watching England's march to the Euro 96 semi-finals? I do not know Bob, but must give him great credit for a mostly enjoyable and entertaining read. Bob used to edit the Roots Hall Roar, the best-ever Blues fanzine I would say (sorry Tony). Pity that the only piece I ever presented through the letter box of an address in South Avenue, Southend – I assume its then HQ – never saw the light of day. There was supposed to be an edition for the last home game of the 1996-97 season v Huddersfield. I don't believe it ever appeared, I never saw the Roar again and now I cannot even remember what I wrote. Yes, it was that good. A lot of Bob's reminiscences will strike a chord with the faithful e.g. surely no one present will forget that cracking night we gubbed Charlton 3-0 at The Valley, with a young Leo Roget having a debut that suggested a far brighter future than his temperament has perhaps allowed him. Or the last-gasp 3-3 at Reading shortly after, following which I broke the world 5,000 metres record legging it to Reading station to make the last London train. A few pictures would have been nice – plus some pre-publication proof reading to iron out numerous spelling and grammatical gaffes e.g. 'Brammal Lane', 'Mark McGee', 'Glen Hoddle' etc. And naturally I always baulk at the familiar anti-Sun / anti-journalist jibes. Garry Nelson's tedious anti-media ramblings were why my copy of his first book ended up in my kitchen waste bin only half-read. I have never done that to any other literary effort before or since and, needless to say, didn't bother with his second. But a fine job none the less, Bob. And a couple of things I think we are most definitely agreed on – a) 'When Saturday Comes', starring Sean Bean trying to play a pro footballer, has to be one of the very worst films in British cinema history; b) M***** U***** 'fans' from Leigh-on-Sea (or Hadleigh, Graham!) are the pits. If any Trust members want a copy of the book, Richard Coxell may still have a few left – ring him on 01702-712339 – or it can be bought from the SUSCT stand in the Shrimpers before any home game.

To continue the book reviews, I recommend anyone who loves the beautiful game to read Tom Bower's recently published *Broken Dreams (Vanity, Greed and the Souring of British Football)*. Bower is clearly not a great football fan himself. But his experience in uncovering the dealings of crooks like Robert Maxwell make him perfect for exposing our national game, particularly the Premier League, for the cesspit of corruption, underhand dealing,

bungs and fraud that basically we all know it is yet no one wants to admit. The Premier League's clear ethos is 'All for us and everyone else can go hang'. That certainly includes SUFC. All that prevents their march to world domination is the fact that each club's big guns hate each other's guts e.g. Arsenal's David Dein and Chelsea's Ken Bates. And what a past Bates has got! The whole lot of them, including the gutless FA, know the game is dodgy. When you are looking out for your own back, though, the message is loud and clear: 'Don't rock the boat'. No wonder the Premier League likes to govern its own affairs rather than allow in outsiders to investigate. It knows it can get away with doing.....nothing. Agents? Stinking shysters who have milked football of millions, often in cahoots with managers, and in the majority of instances produced total dross for their almost never questioned fees. Wembley? What a fiasco. Watch for plenty of tears shed before that little £750million wonder (original cost £160m) stages its first game. Supporters? They hate us. We have only ever had two friends near the top as I see it – believe it or not, David Mellor on the Task Force and Kate Hoey in government. As for the rest – Blair, Campbell, Smith, Banks, Kelly, Crozier, Scudamore, David Davies and the rest of 'em – a totally venal, hand-wringing, self-interested bunch of do-nothings. Nice to see Peter Storrie gets a mention as early as Page 4 in connection with Harry Redknapp's 134 transfer deals in the seven years he was in charge of the Hamsters. Ever wondered why 'Arry was so well off?

But we get our one moment in the limelight on Page 44, down in the depths of the Tel's dodgy deals section and concerning Sir Stanley's move to Nottingham Forest. It took a little time for the transfer to be finalised, but apparently all was well once Vic had handed a £50,000 'bung' to Brian Clough's assistant Ronnie Fenton. Stan the Man then departed for £2million. And where the hell did that little lot go?

EVER heard of the self-regulatory Independent Football Commission? In fact, it is a toothless wonder sanctioned by the government, who like to think they have cleaned up the game, by the Premier League and FA, who like it precisely because it is toothless but gives them an air of respectability, and by the Football League, who are grateful that at least someone is listening to them. In its first annual report produced recently, the IFC expressed a wish that the game should move 'rapidly and decisively' to improve its relationship with supporters. In other words, us! It pointed to such things as poor communications within the football community and unsatisfactory response times to complaints. Professor Derek Fraser, the faceless IFC chairman who was probably about 68th choice for the job, revealed 22 recommendations had been made. Expect them all to be ignored – at least at the top level. The report also addressed concerns over a fair deal for away fans, the cost to supporters of buying replica kits and called for a review of ticket refund policies. Yet Fraser owned up: "The governing bodies have rules in place, but we need to see much more consistent application and clamping down on offending clubs." Yes, and we all know that is about as likely as China going Tory. The IFC recommended that the dates when club strips will expire and be changed should be attached to all replica clothing sold by clubs. But on the issue that most matters to fans, the pure rip-off prices and the clear price fixing, it is down to Trading Standards to deal what will hopefully be a massive financial hit on the likes of JJB Sports, M***** U***** and Umbro. IFC priorities for 2003 apparently include investigation of a possible 'fit and proper person' criteria for anyone becoming a football club director or senior executive. Blimey, I can hear some local knees knocking over that one! Other areas include how the football authorities respond to clubs in serious financial trouble ('Oh, bad luck old chap'), the success of the FA's Compliance Unit (a virtual one-man operation weeing into the wind), racism (high profile, relatively low problem) and the game's response to disabled supporters ('Can't we sweep this one under the carpet?'). Fraser added: 'Accountability and transparency must be even higher on the governing bodies' agendas in the coming year'. Don't bet on it, prof!

Watch out, too, for the long arm of the law interfering again. Apparently Sir Brian Mawhinney (former grey suit Tory minister and now Football League chairman) has written to 'Sports Minister' Richard Caborn to inform him of police plans communicated by ACPO (the Association of Chief Police Officers) to start charging all league clubs for policing outside grounds, at stations etc as well as turning up for a freebie inside stadia. Reaction so far from the abysmally anonymous Caborn is rumoured to be: 'Nice one, ACPO'.

OK, on to the March 17 committee meeting, held as usual now in the welcoming surrounds of the Blue Boar.

Dave Scriven, mastermind of the new Trust website, reported we should be up and pumping inside the next two weeks. And indeed we really do need to get back online – especially now the new committee pen pix are in!

Don't forget if you want to buy a block of 10 United shares, send your £70 to Helen Giles at United. I hear United's shares are currently rated on the stock market as the footballing equivalent of Polly Peck, but don't let that put you off. Hope springs eternal.

Terry Jeffreys and yours truly have volunteered to attend a 'Fans Parliament' at Highbury on June 21. It comes with a free tour of Goonerland. If I see Thierry, Patrick or Robert knocking around, I might suggest they could benefit from a move to the Hall. We are closer to France, after all.

MEMBERSHIP secretary Paul Yeomanson has had another cull of lapsed / lazy members who have not renewed their membership and our numbers now stand at 719 adult and 109 SJS, a total of 828. We have been giving the tardy up to four months when it comes to renewing and continuing to supply them with newsletters. This period has now been cut to a maximum of two months and, where possible, will be even shorter. So cough up or lose out. Also contact Paul on p.yeomanson@bluevonder.co.uk should you be experiencing any newsletter receipt difficulties and he will consult the master list.

On the social front the Quiz Night on March 8 was a stunning success. There were 93 people present at Boots and Laces and, following a super raffle effort by Alan Perry and an auction hosted by our genial quiz-inquisitor Guy Rickard, the night raised a record £740 for Trust funds. Alan did a great job of organisation, along with Dave Scriven, Rickard jnr gave his usual selfless performance as mc, the bloke doing the marking was like a human calculator and the fish suppers summoned by Mike Smith were awesome. 'Ninja' coughed up £40 for a club shirt in the auction, Mandy Longbottom went to £45 for a signed ball (of the football variety!) and the Rickard brigade handed over £55 for a shirt signed by, gasp, Mark Rawle. Thanks as well to Frank Van Wezel for the golf shoes and other equipment he donated from Hi-Tec and congratulations to all those on Kevin Feasey's table who took the Rudolf Keller Qualitatswein for winning. Also on the Southend Social Services front, don't forget:

- April 3 – 10-Pin Bowling Night at the Leigh Superbowl. SOLD OUT.
- May 7 – SUSCT Player of the Year awards, Shrimpers Club, 7.30pm for 8.
- May 10 – Music Quiz Night, Boots and Laces, 7.30pm for 8. Seven tables gone already. Contact Alan Perry on alanperry4@hotmail.com or Dave Scriven on dave@shrimperzone.com

If you have tickets for the end-of-season draw please flog them asap and return the stubs to Terry Jeffreys at 32 Herondale, Basildon, Essex. SS14 1RR. Those who have not yet received their tickets should be doing so very shortly. Please do your duty. It really should not be that difficult. A few hundred have already gone and anyone selling more than 25 could be looking at a cash prize.

On the Trust travel front, the inevitable has happened. The Berry computer has overloaded and blown up. But all is not lost. Normal service appears to have been resumed and bookings are now being taken through to the end of the season for the trips to Bournemouth (April 12), Boston (April 21) and Exeter (May 3). Ring 01702-558978 or 07703-898698 (no text msgs) as per usual. Entry costs for Bournemouth are £16 and £13, with £5 for concessions, at Boston it is £13 to sit, £11.50 to stand (OAPs £9.50 / £8.50; Under-15s £6.50 / £5.50) and at Exeter it is £13 to sit, £10 concessions and £10 / £7 to stand. Sorry if you have been disturbed by the volume levels of the coach video and also for the fact the coach drivers went walkabout in Hartlepool and returned 25 minutes late. Don't forget that for any Trust information you require, to book travel etc, you can also make contact at the Trust stand on match days in the Shrimpers Club.

IT is never pleasant for the Trust to have to ban people from either being members or coach travel and we are pleased that one person who has had to be hauled over the coles in this way has now been readmitted into our number. Another is on probation.

Our two youngest committee members Jon-Paul FitzGerald and Joe Elliott have excelled themselves by being part of the Thorpe Bay Athletic side which has reached the Southend and District Junior League Under-16 Cup Final at the Hall on May 11. Athletic, with eight United season ticket-holders in their line-up, will be up against Leigh Ramblers. Great stuff, lads.

Right, back to basics. It was supposed to be farewell to Phil Whelan, BB and Graeme Jones. But Rob's departure means Barrington (61 games, 10 goals) at least has had a reprieve when he was all set to sign for the might of

Ryman Premier leaders Aldershot. Whelan (119 games, 8 goals) is beyond his peak and should still go. I reckon even I could beat him over 50 yards. Jones, for me, shot his bolt with the penalty fiasco at Rushden earlier in the season, which we have been paying for ever since. As I commented back in NUMBER 39: 'OK, he scored 32 for Wigan in 1996-97. So what. He bagged only seven for St Johnstone last season'. True enough, he had nowhere near the impact we were led to expect. Already offloaded to new boys Boston, he scored on his debut and doubtless will hit a hat-trick against us on Easter Monday! I don't think we will miss Dominic Foley and Daniel Marney now they have returned to Watford and Brighton respectively, but losing Jay Smith to injury for possibly the rest of the season is a major blow. We must hope Gavin Strachan can do a midfield job in his place. Stephen Kelly is also a loss, having now gone on loan to QPR. Let's hope Spurs compatriot Ronnie Henry (son of the Spurs 1960-61 Double-winner of the same name?), is as good. Likewise John Sutton, brother of Chris.

So how have the rest of our heroes, or should that be zeroes, been responding to the fact plenty of other contracts are nearly up? So well it seems that the boss has just lost his job! The usual match-by-match comments.

MACCLESFIELD (A, 1/3, L2-1): Bad enough for Ron to head straight for the dressing room to pronounce on the unacceptability of the Southend show. 'The manner in which we surrendered is completely unacceptable' / 'There are far too many token gestures out on the pitch'. No doubt one or two from our three Trust coachloads, travelling at just a fiver a head thanks to United's subsidy, would have passed on the same message. The lowest Division Three gate of the season of 1,917 saw Macc rack up their first home win in four months. The early edition News of the World report declared: 'Southend lacked ideas and rarely threatened the Macclesfield goal in a dire display'. Which seemed to reflect opinion quite accurately. Neil Jenkins netted his fifth goal of the season too late to undo the earlier damage. At least we get an early chance to make amends at Kidderminster.

KIDDERMINSTER (A, 4/3, L1-0): Today's Echo reports Tes is up before the beak on charges of drink-driving, driving with no insurance etc. Is he really a total idiot? With that sort of cretinous behaviour on his CV, the nearest he will ever get to emulating Premiership brother Titus is in his dreams. Talking of a dream, that is now the strength of our play-off bid. Hoped to travel to this one, but a major telly installation during the day had to take precedence. So it was down to Essex Radio to keep me posted. Sounded a better performance than Saturday, though Daniel Marney seemed to have a Daniel Mare-ney, while Rob appeared to break his AGM promise not to 'put square pegs in round holes' by playing Tes wide right and the aforementioned Marney as a central striker. I am afraid most of us believe Tes belongs up front and nowhere else! Rob gave it the usual 'we deserved something' afterwards, but the simple fact is we got nothing – again – thanks to another concentration lapse among our rearguard. A couple of SunSport losers backed us for a defeat and Bristol Rovers to win at Bury, so they were happy with a few tawdry quid in their back pockets.

LINCOLN (H, 8/3, L1-0): Manned the magnificent Trust stand in the Shrimpers for half an hour, then headed towards the scene of the action. Lose a 6ft 6in bloke in your six-yard box at a corner and you are asking for trouble. Needless to say, we got it and conceded the one goal of the game to make it three defeats in a row. Eight losses at the Hall is also a nonsense. Neither keeper had a single save of note to make in the 90 minutes. It never used to be like that. Kevin Maher kept plugging away and Stephen Kelly looked relaxed now he could forget about heading for the Gulf. But again we had no penetration and that equals no goals. Why was Steven Clark subbed, when he had their right-back on toast? I've no idea. Top seven? I think not. Bottom seven looks more likely. The priority is the two more wins that should see us safe. And only Hartlepool to come next.... Rob branded the players under-achievers who need to wake up to their contract situation. But let's face it, I am not sure one or two of them take anything on board that involves brain usage, so he is probably whistling in the wind. Farewell Dominic Foley – absolutely average I am afraid. Great work by SJS member Billy Brock, 7, in handing over the Trust's Player of the Month award to Damon Searle. For some reason the woman 'security' guard in the East Stand asked me if I was carrying any bottles or cans. Give me a break.

HARTLEPOOL (A, 15/3, L2-1): Make that four defeats on the trot and this was a loss that sets us apart in the Third Division. We have now been beaten in more games – 20 – than any other side. Still, the performance was apparently good enough for Rob to announce that the players could hold their heads high. We gave it plenty of effort and matched the table-toppers in many respects except one key one – the number of times we found their rigging compared to the number of times they found ours. In other words, we ended up with sweet zip once more. We were already two-down, the first an excellent strike by Richie Humphreys, by the time Daryl Sutch notched with a 76th-minute header judged to have crossed the line by a referee's assistant. A crumb of comfort for the

brave band of SUSCT travellers who wended their way up to the outback of the north-east for the second time this season. They deserved better. Even if the new League plans to extend the play-offs to the top nine clubs were in place for this season it looks as if we would now be stuffed. And what's worse, it looks like C** U are going to stay up under new supremo Parkinson, so we won't even have the big Essex derby to look forward to next time round.

SWANSEA (H, 18/3, L2-0): Up to five – and 21. Well worth taking a day off to attend. Match night got off to a bad start as I went arse over you know what in the East Greens while mountaineering my way to my seat. Resultant leg bruising was severe. And things certainly did not improve, apart from the moment the mighty Mr Moss turned up straight from a break in Macclesfield sporting an immaculate homberg and overcoat plus umbrella. The sort of regalia Trevor Howard always sported in those films where he invariably had to contact a Nazi spy under an old gaslight in the middle of a swirling London fog. Blues were certainly in a fog on the pitch. One real chance in 90 minutes against the then bottom club and Tes failed to beat the Welshmen's keeper – even though the custodian was stretched out on the ground at the time. Tes looked unfit and disinterested and has not scored for 10 games, while Rob was very quiet on the touchline as the first real vitriol of the season poured across from the West Stand. Swansea were by no means the worst team we have faced at the Hall, but this result was a shocker. We conceded a daft penalty, then compounded the error with some free-kick sloppiness. 'Dreadful, toothless and gutless', said Rob. 'A million miles away from being anywhere near good enough,' admitted Kevin Maher. And no one in the desperate 2,832 crowd was disagreeing. I wondered if we had ever lost nine home games in a season before. We have – as recently as 1998-99. We are even closer to the pit of doom and the lads seem to be bewitched by that 'we're too good to go down' mentality. Big mistake. Ask Barnet.

L EYTON ORIENT (H, 22/3, W1-0): For the third time this season I plunged £1 on Steven Clark to score the first goal and was already counting my £18 return when he had a golden chance one-on-one with the keeper after just two minutes. Needless to say, he fluffed it. Mark Salter opened his Blues goals account after five minutes and we were lively for a while (well, relatively). Then Gary Alexander headed a golden chance against a post for the Os, in deep bother themselves, we took fright and the rest of the action was instantly forgettable. Rob, presumably not knowing he was about to bow out, looked horrified at the ineptness of his players as once more they relied on hoof it and hope tactics which never get us anywhere. A crowd announced by Jeff Allen as 5,602 has since mysteriously been reduced to 4,148. Is Anton Johnson back? Our average gate is now 3,976, down by 0.15% from last year's 3,982. Darryl and Stephen Kelly were about the only ones to perform up to par and as a swansong for Rob this was definitely far from the greatest. Even fans of the longevity of Richard Coxell have cracked. He went AWOL to make a gate. The crowning glory for Rob must have come on hearing Graeme Jones had scored within eight minutes of coming on as a sub for Boston. Rarely can three points have brought such little joy.

YORK (A, 29/3, L2-0): If Stewart Robson was expecting a miraculous transformation with Rob out of the way, he was sadly mistaken. I hear he had the lads watching videos of Holland in the pre-match build-up to show them how he wants them to perform. Sadly, the squad probably only responds to another type of Dutch video. Lee Nogan, who only ever seems to score against us, put the home side ahead and not for the first time we let in a second in that 'I could murder a cuppa' zone right on half-time. The initial NoW report said York were 'never in danger'. Robson was not happy and reckoned only David McSweeney, back at centre-half, did the bizzo. It was hardly a boost to his hot-seat chances – though playing Tes wide right again can hardly have helped. **IT DOES NOT WORK!** York's Supporters Trust were looking for a good result to celebrate their taking over of the club, so finding they were playing us must have been a godsend. To cap it all, Daniel Webb scored for Lincoln.....

Good news for Southend youngsters. There is a new free series of weekly coaching sessions for 7 to 11 year olds being run at the Southend Leisure and Tennis Centre off Eastern Avenue. Bad news for Southend United. The sessions go under the name of the Tottenham Hotspur Football Development Centre.

After the recent Battle of Villa Park, starring Dion 'Nutter' Dublin, the 'You're On Sky Sports' phone-in featured none other than one Ronnie Whelan. All I will say is he is looking much fuller in the face.

Encouraging to see all 49 of United's stewards recently passed their FSQ exam, involving questions on dealing with possible public safety issues at football matches. I understand this was one of the posers: A mob of Welsh looners is rampaging from the North Bank towards you and a section of Southend's finest up for it in the West Stand. What do you do next? A) Smash the world 100 metres record running in the opposite direction. B) Break out the club's

emergency supply of brown underwear. C) Bleat like a sheep, bend over and hope for the best. D) Nothing. As it seems all these answers were correct, no wonder everyone got the pass mark.....

I trust Steve Tilson's testimonial went well. Details in NUMBER 47. If you want to give Steve some further backing he has a Sportsman's Dinner at the Essex County Hotel, Aviation Way, Southend on November 27, due to be hosted by the one and only Barry Fry, plus a golf day at Channels on October 1.

While Huddersfield look like the next basket case for administration, York suddenly seem to have risen phoenix-like from the ashes of oblivion under the guidance of their Supporters' Trust. The club now looks set to move to a new ground in 2004 and a spokesman revealed interestingly: "This will hopefully fulfil a crucial Football League requirement of security of tenure at a ground for a minimum of 10 years." Presumably the League have altered the wording for us in our current situation at the Hall to.....'a minimum of 10 minutes'.

Our Czech badge-buying pal has a new fellow European enthusiast – from Malta.

Parking my car in Leigh station car park on March 7, I noticed a uniformed, number-taking jobsworth cruising round looking for the guilty who had not put their parking tickets on display. He eventually found a little red Renault and the sad thing about it was the car had a Support Southend United sticker in the back window. Pity the warden, or whatever he was, clearly did not follow Blues as well. Then again, he was probably on work experience from C*****.

THIRD FOOTBALL MEMORABILIA and PROGRAMME FAIR

Trust member David Stacey, editor and events organiser of the Football Programme Directory, invites all members along to the above event at the Shrimpers Bar on Sunday, April 27 – kick-off 11am, entry fee 50p.

And finally, if you are feeling a bit depressed in these troubled times you need only mull this over and over to put that big smile back on your face. Old Wilko's five months of unadulterated failure at the Stadium of S**** have netted him a £1.1million pay-off, while chairman Bob Murray, the man who appointed him and sanctioned further millions tipped down the toilet by predecessor Peter Reid on a ragbag collection of duds and non-entities, remains in place as if nothing had happened. And Reid, of course, has just been called up as stand-in manager in charge of the Elland Road asylum. Anyone still wondering why football is in the state it is?

And that is finis until the next time. Any comeback, and I had a bit of explaining to do last month, the address is as ever nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk

NR (30/3)

PS 1. Which of these would-be Trust travellers is the odd one out: Seymour Butts, Phil Cox, Wayne Kerr, Amanda Hugankiss and Phil Mycock? Answers on a postcard to Paul Yeomanson.

2. Our thoughts are firmly with any Blues fans involved in any way with the conflict in Iraq, which tends to put United's current plight on a somewhat lower level of importance. Return home safely.

3. Who wants that pink-haired Womble?

4. If we have a new commander-in-chief by the time you read this, my apologies. As ever, there has to be a cut-off point some time.