

FOOTBALL'S LOST DECADE

Contrary to what Sky might have you believe, football existed before 1992. In fact the 1980s saw cultural and political change that shaped the modern game. But while football wasn't cool, some of us still loved it. **JON HOWE** looks back with nostalgia at the decade that football forgot...

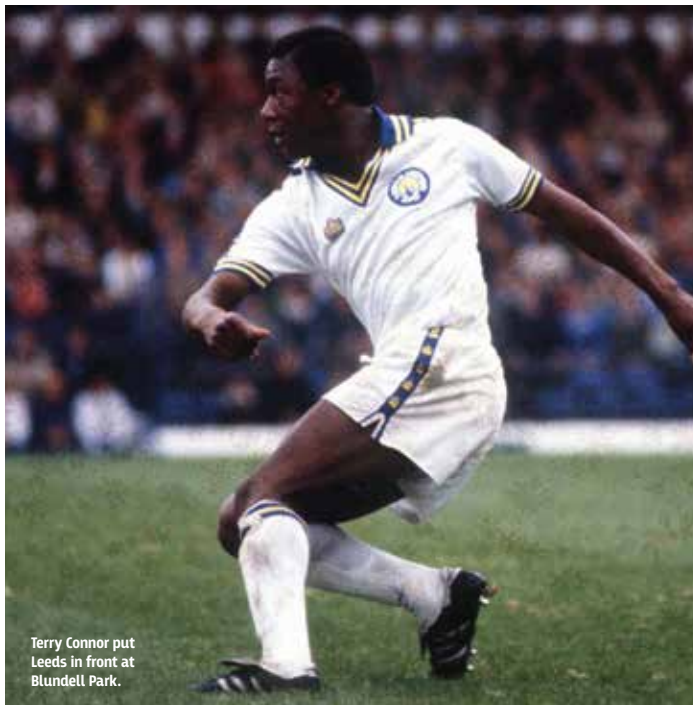
A game you might have forgotten

Grimsby Town 1 Leeds United 1
August 28, 1982

Much is made of Leeds United's "gory years" during the lost decade of football ending on a sunny day in Bournemouth, where thousands of Leeds fans followed the sun to the seaside and celebrated promotion perhaps a little over-exuberantly. Little is made of the fact that the club's Second Division torture started pretty much the same way eight years earlier.

With the riot at Leeds' last game as a First Division club at West Brom still fresh, it was clear someone had misread the manual for the FA's fixture computer when a Bank Holiday trip to Cleethorpes heralded the start of Leeds' new existence. At a time when Leeds fans, riddled by an identity crisis, were hell bent on winning battles off the pitch as a reaction to how few they won on it, it was no surprise that the weekend did not pass peacefully on the Lincolnshire coast.

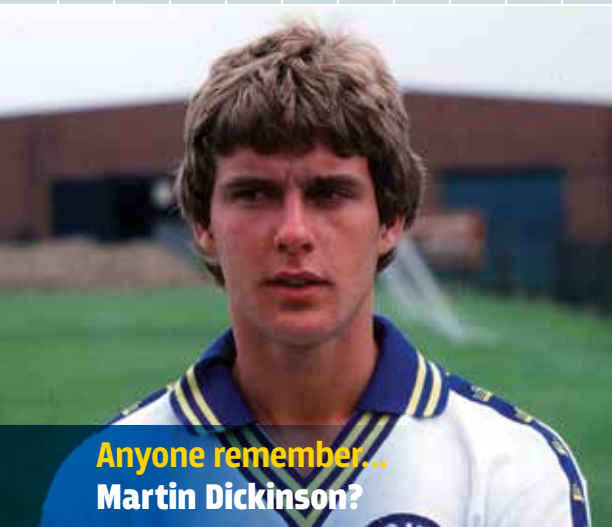
Leeds had managed to maintain the basis of a decent side, with most of the established pros staying on despite the crippling stigma of relegation. Record signing and almighty flop Peter Barnes had been loaned out to Real Betis for the season to balance the books, yet in Eddie Gray's first game as player-manager Leeds



Terry Connor put
Leeds in front at
Blundell Park.

performed with quality and spark in a goalless first half. Youngster Terry Connor gave our fallen giants the lead just after half-time, but before anyone could dream of a return to the First Division reality bit for the first of many, many times, when Grimsby's Kevin Kilmore equalised.

It was the first of too many draws. Eddie Gray's team steadied the ship, proving they had the basis of a solid side, but not enough creativity to make the crucial difference in an unforgiving division far more competitive than many had expected.



Anyone remember... Martin Dickinson?

Leeds-born youngster Dickinson had made the breakthrough from the junior ranks into Leeds' first team in April 1980, just three weeks after his 17th birthday.

But while the club turned to established pros in its forlorn hope to trade on past glories and retain a First Division status, it wasn't until the cloth had to be cut accordingly that youngsters such as Dickinson were seen as a very necessary part of the club's future.

So it was that central defender Dickinson made his first appearance since May 1981 in the "new Leeds" side fielded by Eddie Gray at Grimsby. Dickinson formed a

useful partnership with the dependable Paul Hart, and charged with shouldering the weighty expectations of supporters, Dickinson was one of a set of youngsters heralded as the club's future.

However, he was gradually replaced by Andy Linighan and Neil Aspin as he faded from the first team.

Dickinson realised the game was up when Leeds signed Brendan Ormsby from Aston Villa, and he moved to West Brom later the same day. He eventually signed for Dave Bassett at Sheffield United, but after just one game he suffered back injuries in a car crash, which effectively ended his career.

Nothing happened in the 1980s, apart from... **ID cards (almost)**

It seems implausible that in an age where our Prime Minister actively lobbies for the country to stage the World Cup and when cosy photo opportunities playing "keepy-uppy" with the England manager are embraced with gusto, that in the 1980s the government *hated* football.

The ID card proposal was put forward by Margaret Thatcher following the watershed moment of Heysel in 1985, and as part of a bill that later became the Football Spectator Act 1989. The proposal called for all football fans to register to a membership scheme which threatened imprisonment for anybody daring to enter a football ground without an ID card. It read like George Orwell's 1984 and the "bill that would have killed football" would definitely have disenfranchised the casual fan and put an end to birthday trips for the kids.

Labour called the proposal "an offence against common decency" as it treated civilians like criminals. But such was the demonisation of football that the anti-football Tories actually used it to gather public support, underlining the widely-held belief that every football match was a battleground for anti-social conduct.

The bill went as far as a first reading in the Commons before Lord Justice Taylor recommended it be shelved in his report following the Hillsborough disaster.

