

THE MAN FROM ANOTHER PLACE



71 BC – Spartacus; although presumed killed in battle, the body of the rebel slave was never found and his fate remains unknown.

1611 – Henry Hudson; an English explorer and seafarer who discovered New York harbour, but was set adrift in a small boat by mutineers in what is now Hudson Bay and was never found.

1829 – John Lansing Jr; a politician who left his apartment in Manhattan to post a letter and was never seen again.

1944 – Glenn Miller; American jazz musician and band leader, on a flight from England to Paris disappeared over the English channel and neither the plane nor any bodies have ever been recovered.

1995 – Richey Edwards; songwriter and guitarist in the Manic Street Preachers, disappeared and never found. His car was found abandoned in a services adjacent to the Severn Bridge.

A year later, Mark Jackson made his debut for Leeds United as an 80th minute substitute against Middlesbrough at Elland Road. Although he is recorded as making this and 22 subsequent appearances for Leeds United, he was never actually seen again. Life went on around him, football matches with 30,000 plus crowds took place, but Jackson was nowhere to be seen.

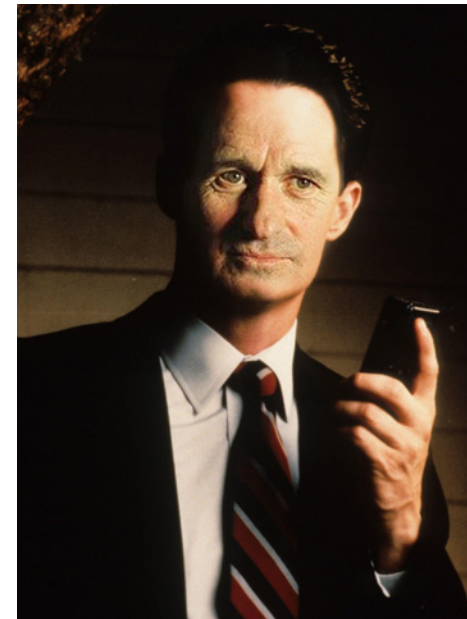
That was until approximately 8.45pm on Friday 20th July 2012. I was stood at Throstle's Nest, home of Farsley AFC, and had just enjoyed the first half of Leeds United's first pre-season friendly. I was wading through Twitter and posting a first half summary, as I tend to do at half-time because it's far too complicated and distracting during the game, and I wouldn't want to miss how Danny Pugh was shaping up for the new campaign.

by John Howe
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Mention was made on Twitter of Mark Jackson appearing for Farsley and suddenly it was like the season climax in Twin Peaks. Slowly a few things came together, but crucial elements didn't make sense, or weren't supposed to.

An unsettling rush of white noise and static flashed through my mind. I looked up from my phone and abstract images began to appear; Warnock walking through the crowd in the distance, someone having a barbecue behind the main stand, a man sat in a tree in his back garden watching the game, and a one-armed midget carrying a log trying to sell me drapes. Okay, I made that last bit up, but also there was Mark Jackson playing at centre half for Farsley. Fourteen years after the last alleged sighting, sixteen years after I had first seen him. There was Mark Jackson: stepping out from the Red Room, the man from another place, talking backwards in a dream sequence, he of George Graham's Leeds United.

I was slightly aghast because I actually knew he was going to be playing. I'd read it on the YEP website only hours previously, but something about Mark Jackson just cannot maintain a place in my short, medium or certainly not long-term memory. Somebody takes Mark Jackson away, possibly a redneck truck driver, and there is no evidence of him being there.



I had been watching the game for forty-five minutes and not noticed he was playing: an ex-pro who had played for my beloved club, at a time, in 1996, when I was still impressionable and slightly in awe of Leeds players, before cynicism and a lifetime of shattering disappointment had truly taken hold. But this was totally in keeping with Jackson's Leeds career. He was there, but he wasn't there.

A week prior to Jackson's debut in March 1996, Leeds had been routinely humiliated at Wembley in the Coca Cola Cup Final. A thick, suffocating fog engulfed our lives, but I vaguely remember Mark Jackson's appearance. It was notable because Sgt Wilko, in a desperate and almost forlorn last throw of the dice, also handed debuts to Harry Kewell and Jason Blunt.

Jackson was a centre half of some distinction. He had captained the reserves and won trophies alongside Kewell and Woodgate, but for reasons best known to himself, new manager George Graham, who thinking back now, does resemble Deputy Andy, elected to play him in centre midfield. It was great that Graham felt he could blood a youngster, but Leeds were embroiled in a monstrous pig of a season, and the landscape was bleak; every game was cold, windy and wet and utterly devoid of entertainment. And into this unforgiving arena George Graham threw poor Mark Jackson.

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Week after week we would watch Jackson toil fruitlessly in the wastelands of midfield. With a solid back five behind him, and Halle and Radebe playing alongside him in midfield for a little added security, Jackson ran around for ninety minutes furiously skirting the edge of the action. Reports suggested a possible touch of the ball in the 0-0 draw at Goodison in December, but it was dark, and there were empty roads and dense forests...

Of Jackson's 23 games for Leeds we won six, drew eight and lost nine. Of the eight draws, six of them were goalless, and indeed of the 23 games in total a whopping 13 of them did not witness a Leeds United goal. Now of course I don't blame Mark Jackson for this, but at the time he was the focus for my ire. George Graham was strangling the life out of me, match by match. The 0-0 draw at Everton in December was the third one in a row, with nine goalless draws in total that season. You turned up for matches already knowing the result, and if we actually scored it was a bonus.

Jackson's penultimate game for Leeds, and the last of his 11 starts, was a 0-0 draw at home to Blackburn in April 1997. That day I finally snapped and let out all my vitriol at poor Jackson on the pitch. But it was really Graham I was angry at. Jackson was so clearly a centre half lost in midfield he was actually a waste of a player, he was contributing nothing and everyone in the ground but Graham could see it. Graham was ruining his career before our very eyes, but still he persevered.

I am glad that Mark Jackson has finally been found. In another life he has enjoyed a decent career at Scunthorpe, Kidderminster and Rochdale. I knew this, but somehow it had slipped my mind, as if Audrey Horne had entered my hotel room one night and anything that had happened since wasn't worth remembering. Jackson is now assistant manager at Farsley and coaching a team at Leeds City College. He's done more in football than I could ever dream of. Me, a loafing smart arse, him, a footballer who has played 23 games for Leeds United. Welcome back Mark Jackson, I'm sorry I shouted at you. Have a seat and a coffee. Now tell me, who the fuck is Bob?