

A BEES UNITED PUBLICATION

BEES, BATTLES, BUCKETS AND BALLOT BOXES

C H A P T E R 1





CHAPTER

PAUL STEDMAN

WAS THE CO-ORDINATOR OF THE
BIAS STADIUM ACTION GROUP
FROM 2001 -2003, THE LEADER OF
THE ABEEC PARTY IN 2002 AND THE
CHAIRMAN OF BIAS FROM 2002-3



Paul Stedman being interviewed while campaigning for the ABeeC Party in 2002 in full Buzz Bee costume.

The Ron Noades era, from 1998 to 2006, is one of the more controversial chapters in Brentford FC's recent history. During this period the Club amassed significant debts that threatened its very existence and his relocation plans earned him deep-seated enmity. However, it's during this chapter that a sequence of events were set in motion that would change the very model of how the Club was managed and financed, setting us on course for a new stadium that could revolutionise how it is funded for generations to come.

Noades acquired a majority shareholding in the Club from David Webb in the Summer of 1998, having recently sold his interests in Crystal Palace. While some supporters may have had misgivings about Noades – always a prickly and controversial character – most

were content that he had, at least, shown an active interest in acquiring the Club and happy to have seen the departure of the reviled Webb, under whose tenure the Club had just endured a particularly miserable season which saw them relegated to the fourth tier.

Noades did indeed take an active interest in the Club, to the extent that he installed himself as team manager and hired a talented coaching squad to work under him. On the pitch also there were significant changes with the recruitment of a number of talented young players. Supporters were purring with contentment as the team won promotion at the first attempt securing the Championship at Cambridge on the final day of the season.

The next season started brightly enough but warning bells started ringing – Noades would often bemoan attendances at Griffin Park and made it plain the Club needed a new stadium. Things came to a head early in the following season when the team were humiliated at home by non-league Kingstonian in the FA Cup. Noades had had enough and resigned as manager but kept his position as Chairman of the Club.

Attention, and indeed tensions, now turned to matters off the pitch. As we've seen Noades never hid from the belief that Griffin Park was no longer fit for purpose. The Club needed a new stadium able to generate more income from match day facilities and having the potential for non-match day income. Griffin Park was not capable of such facilities. Saying the Club needed a new stadium, and spelling out the reasoning, was one thing; getting it done quite another.

Earlier in his tenure Brentford FC and Hounslow Council had undertaken a joint viability study into an alternative stadium site – the favoured location was a redeveloped Western International Market near Cranford. Noades was proudly pictured alongside Council leader John Chatt displaying architect's drawings of the new 'Bees Dome' as it had been nicknamed. However, the partnership soon soured – a change in council leadership with Councillor Chatt being removed led to the Western International project being dropped.

Noades was asked by the new Council leadership to consider an alternative site for a new stadium at Feltham, which already housed its own sports arena in urgent need of redevelopment. There was, however, disagreement on the nature of the development – the Council wanted Brentford to submit a planning application for a 25,000 capacity stadium, whilst the Club were suggesting an incremental project – starting with an 8,000 capacity and growing in stages; there was also disagreement on the means on how the site could be acquired.

It was around this time, Spring 2001, that Brentford supporters decided it was time to get directly involved. BIAS – the Brentford Independent Association of Supporters – under the Chairmanship of John McGlashan formed the Stadium Action Group (STAG) – I had always been a keen advocate for a new stadium and BIAS tasked me with co-ordinating the group. Our task was to see what we could do to break the logjam between the Football Club and the local authority and to be proponents for a new stadium among supporters. No small feat.

Our Group hit the ground running, and in the early days was broadly in step with the Club. A survey was carried out in the Feltham area and among Brentford supporters about the prospect of the new stadium development and while local residents certainly had their reservations about Brentford playing at Feltham, Bees fans gave the scheme guarded, if not exactly enthusiastic, support. Noades – not one known to have an easy relationship with independent supporters' groups – reached out to our group praising our work and offering support. However, storm clouds were gathering.

A talented playing and coaching squad does not come cheap. Clubs were still struggling to come to terms with the ramifications of the Bosman ruling that had severely restricted income from player transfer and as a result Brentford was losing significant money. Noades had made it plain that the Club's losses were being financed through financial guarantees of his company, Altonwood. To many supporters this





meant that he was picking up the bill but the penny eventually dropped that this wasn't the case – the Club's overdraft was now £4.5m and the debt belonged to the Club.

In late Spring 2001 Noades, frustrated by lack of progress on a new stadium, let it be known that he had made an application to the Football League to groundshare with Woking commencing from the 2002-3 season. Ostensibly this was to be a temporary move before the Club was able to develop the Feltham site, but Feltham – with significant opposition from local residents and a less than responsive local authority – was looking an unlikely proposition.

One theory was that Noades had no intention of moving the Club to Woking, it was just leverage on the local authority to look more favourably on his Feltham proposals.



The mock funeral procession by Brentford supporters at Woking in 2001. Paul Stedman is holding a football, leaning on the 'coffin'.

I was appalled by this proposal, one only had to look at the examples of Brighton and Wimbledon – who were given assurances, when they moved out of their stadiums, but found themselves rootless for many years – to see what our fate could be.

If we had ended up in Woking, either by design or default, the result would have been the same: it would have killed the Club.

The Stadium Action Group organised a 'No To Woking' protest meeting at the function room of the Princess Royal pub where we spelt out what was known of the Woking proposals and to hear supporters' concerns. As the announcement of the Woking proposals came late in the season, there was very little protest during games that season, but the clock was ticking.

The Football League would be considering the proposal at their next meeting scheduled in August. Garnering opposition to the Woking proposal was not difficult as the vast majority of supporters were, understandably, appalled. A protest movement was born.

Intriguingly one game that did take place was a pre-season friendly between Woking and Brentford at the non-league team's stadium in July 2001. We urged supporters to go to the stadium and protest outside without actually entering the ground. This proved a huge success as, resourceful as ever, one of our supporters had made a coffin which bore the slogan 'Brentford FC – R.I.P.'. The coffin was paraded by a group of us, in a mock funeral procession, through Woking town centre to the Club's Kingfield Stadium.



Writing in the Hounslow Chronicle, Bees correspondent John Lyons noted in his weekly column:

'I had been impressed with the way the Bees fans had carried out their picket of the match. While they handed out leaflets and asked people to sign petitions, they didn't hassle them or cause any trouble. They only came out of it with credit and the idea of bringing a coffin along was a brainwave...'

and he finished

'The plain fact is that the Feltham Arenas situation isn't progressing at all and, added to that, Feltham residents made it clear at a meeting last week that they didn't want the Bees going there. With that being the case, there is no point selling Griffin Park and going to Woking. The Club could end up moving there in a year and then being marooned for years to come. The coffin might have to be used.'

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However, the real target audience for the 'No to Woking' protest movement was elsewhere: the Football League Management Committee. Representatives of the protest group – Pete Johnston, Brian Flanagan, Matt Dolman and Jon Bishop – met with Football League officials in August 2001 and provided a comprehensive document with a number of overwhelming arguments on why the Woking ground-share proposal should be rejected. We only had to wait a week before we learnt how successful our campaign had been, as the Football League rejected the Woking proposals.

Whilst obviously satisfied with the decision on Woking, there was little room for complacency, as there was a strong feeling that Woking had only been an initial move by Noades and that he may have other similar plans up his sleeve, fears which sadly proved true. Also, while we had been at loggerheads on the Woking issue there was a residual feeling that Hounslow Council were not being as supportive as they should be in working with the Club as a partner for a new stadium. It was time for the campaign to move up a gear.

We decided it was time to take the plight of the Football Club to the heart of the local political establishment. We arranged a protest march from the seat of local power, Hounslow, to Brentford. More than 400 supporters (including another appearance of the Woking coffin) braved the atrocious weather on the day. The march was designed to underline the plight of the Club and to draw attention to the active part we believed the Council needed to play as a facilitator of a community project in partnership with the Club.

Around this time the idea was floated about fielding candidates at local authority elections scheduled for the following spring. A template for our campaign came from supporters of Charlton Athletic who, in 1990, fielded candidates at local elections in Greenwich in protest at the rejection of a redevelopment plan for their Valley Stadium. The Valley Party won more than 10% of the vote, a resounding endorsement of their platform. They hampered the re-election bids of several prominent councillors, one who lost his seat was the Chair of the Planning Committee, the body which had rejected their redevelopment plans. When the local Hounslow political establishment realised how serious we were about fielding candidates we met significant hostility,

the argument being that grievances should be addressed directly to the local political parties. The argument went on that we were harming the Club by unnecessarily antagonising local politicians. These arguments just didn't add up to me: the local ruling group hadn't shown any interest in the Club's future and only took notice when we decided to engage with them at the ballot box. Put simply, the future of the Club was so bleak things couldn't really get any worse.

Whichever way you looked at it the Club was dying – whether it was the swift death that Noades seemingly had in mind with a relocation out of the area or as a result of the indifference of the local planning authority. I felt we had a responsibility, a duty even, to supporters who had saved the Club in the past and that we should use all our endeavours to highlight the plight of the Football Club in whatever way we could.

I took on the leadership of the party which was christened 'The ABeeC Party' (full credit to the genius of Jim Levack for the party name) with the tagline 'A Future for Brentford FC in Your Community'. The ABeeC Party was formally recognised as a legally constituted political party by the Electoral Commission in Spring 2002, just in time for elections on 2 May.

Whilst the Charlton 'Valley' Party in their 1990 election campaign went for full impact fielding three candidates in each of the 20 Wards – the maximum available - we decided to take a more nuanced approach fielding no more than one candidate in a selected number of wards across the Borough. Our appeal being that as voters in the elections would have three votes, supporters of the traditional parties were encouraged to 'lend' us one of their votes and in doing so show their support for the Borough's only professional Football Club.

The ABeeC Party fielded 14 candidates: John Anderson (Hanworth Park); Jon Bishop (Hounslow South); Paul Brownscombe (Cranford); Neil Durman (Feltham West); Peter Gilham (Hounslow Central); Lionel Girling (Hanworth); Mark Hannah (Bedfont); Luke Kirton (Brentford); Phil Marchant (Hounslow West); David Merritt (Chiswick Riverside); John Pain (Osterley & Spring Grove); Joanne Sewell (Heston West); Sacha Syed (Heston East); Andrew Wainwright (Turnham Green).



The Woking coffin is brought back for a 'Walk for Brentford FC' starting in Hounslow Hugh Street.



400 supporters marched to Griffin Park in heavy rain to 'highlight the plight of Brentford Football Club'



The ABeeC Battlesbus campaigning in Feltham in 2002

Local elections are notoriously low-key affairs, with poor turnouts and widespread apathy. Our ABeeC Party captured attention from the outset with a vigorous, energetic campaign that bought much-needed colour and enthusiasm – including an open-bus tour of the constituency and an appearance by the Club's mascot 'Buzz Bee'. The campaign was chronicled by journalist Adrian Goldberg, in his film 'Political Football', which followed us from the initial launch at one of the local pubs, through to campaigning on the streets of the Borough and the drama of the election count.

To my mind our campaign was never about getting councillors elected, our emphasis was on providing a platform to highlight the plight of Brentford FC, to draw attention to its importance as a local community resource, not least its 'Football in the Community'



programme and the Club's desperate need for a new stadium which would be able to provide fresh revenue earning streams. The campaign was always a Borough-wide campaign, from Cranford and Bedfont in the West of the Borough, close to Heathrow Airport through to the leafy suburbs of Chiswick and Turnham Green.

Our party had only been established

a few weeks and being a single-issue group – focusing on the Football Club and its need for a new home – we were always fighting an uphill battle against the established parties with their existing networks and support structure. However, it was clear early on that in one ward in particular our campaign was gaining significant traction – the Club's home ward of Brentford.

The candidate in Brentford was BIAS Committee member Luke Kirton – Luke and his family had been long-term residents in the area and were well-known, popular members of the community. Luke also had the support of Steve Cowan, an eloquent and formidable campaigner who had stood as a candidate in previous local elections. Luke was quite adamant that he stood a good chance of being elected, in fact going on record as saying that he would be disappointed if he wasn't.

The election count at the Council HQ in Lampton Road, Hounslow on the evening of 2nd May 2002 was as memorable and dramatic an occasion as any big match. ABeeC supporters attended in full force, sporting party T-shirts. My main concern was that our candidates were



Luke Kirton (right) the ABeeC candidate for Brentford campaigning with supporters

not humiliated; it's all very well asking for the public to show their support, but what would happen if our candidates only received a handful of votes? The people would have spoken and we obviously wouldn't have liked what we heard. This alone emphasised that our campaign was not without its risks.

It was obvious early on that the fear of humiliation at the polls was not going to be a problem. The polls closed at 9pm, the first result affecting any of our candidates was in Cranford where Paul Brownscombe polled 279 votes – a long way short of the 1,035 votes for the third place candidate in that ward, but it was certainly an indicator that our polling was going to be respectable. Some of our candidates polled better than the Conservatives, LibDems and the Greens – no small feat for a single-issue party that had only been existence a few weeks.

Early signs of what was to unfold came at 1:14am when it was announced there would be a recount in Luke Kirton's Brentford ward. Our supporters, who had been keeping an eye on the counting, reported that Luke's votes were stacking up respectably. I made sure that we redoubled our efforts to get our supporters to pay particular attention to the Brentford count. I wanted to believe it could happen, but... This being Brentford, I am sure you know what I mean!

After a second recount the result for Brentford ward was finally declared at 3:10am – this being a Labour stronghold we always knew who the opposition were going to be for the three seats. The three Labour candidates polled as Ruth Cadbury 1186 votes; Patrick Edwards 933; Seema Malhotra 870; for ABeeC Luke Kirton 883 votes and the reasoning



The moment of victory as Luke Kirton (third from the left) is declared as the new ABeeC councillor on Hounslow Council. The defeated Labour candidate, Seema Malhotra, next right, is now the MP for Feltham and Heston.



Luke Kirton celebrates with Paul Stedman

behind the recounts became clear now. There were only 13 votes between Luke and Labour's Seema Malhotra; but he had done it and we had done it – we had got one of our candidates elected.

BIAS and ABeeC activist Richard Merritt recalls the emotion of the evening:

'We knew it was close, we knew it was very close, throughout the evening

in the main hall we could watch the piles for each candidate grow on the table but I suppose when there is only 13 votes in it the piles look the same height.

'The results were read out and there was a massive cheer, in fact a roar at Luke's third place. Third was good enough. We had won and won in a safe Labour seat. We were bouncing, texting friends, hugging, pinching ourselves.

'Not only had we done it, we had taken a massive step forward.'

One change came straight away, a leadership challenge took place within the Labour group and the Council Leader John Connelly, who had shown himself to be, at best, indifferent to the Club's plight was replaced by former leader John Chatt, he of the 'Bees Dome' project. Our optimism about the change in Council leadership was well founded. There was an immediate change in the relationship between the Council leadership and the Football Club or, at least, supporters' representatives. Monthly meetings were organised with the Council leadership and it was clear there was a genuine desire to work for the Club's best interests.

No sooner had we toasted our success at the local elections, however, when we hit another major potential calamity. In June 2002 it was announced that Brentford had paid £60,000 to Kingstonian's owner, Anup Khosla, for an option for the Club to ground share at their Kingsmeadow Stadium. Noades' rationale was that he could sell Griffin Park to a developer for between £12m and £19m. This would clear the Club's overdraft and providing working capital with something in reserve.

Noades emphasised that a move to Kingston would only be short-term and would serve as a link to a new stadium. The objections to the Kingston plans were many, and obvious, not the least being that there was no long-term stadium site available. As a supporters' group, BIAS vowed to resist the Kingston move as resolutely as we had Woking. From the outset it was clear the Club would face significant obstacles if they were to move to Kingston. BIAS petitioned local councillors in the area close to the Kingsmeadow stadium and it was understood that Kingston Council would have strong reservations about allowing League football at the stadium at that time. There was also strong opposition internally as Club director Martin Lange had a veto on the sale of Griffin Park and had let it be known that he would exercise this veto without legal guarantees for an alternative stadium.

At around this time the influence of Bees United, the Supporters' Trust, was starting to be felt. Bees United submitted their own proposals on how the Club could be managed at Griffin Park. By the following Spring, April 2003, the Kingston ground share proposal was quietly dropped and Ron Noades stepped down as a Director of the Club with the Trust now having three representatives – John McGlashan, Andrew Wainwright and Stephen Callen – on the Club board. Around the same time an offer was made by Bees United for the option to purchase Ron Noades' majority shareholding, an option finally exercised in January 2006.

So with the Feltham Western International projects long forgotten and ground-share schemes in Surrey consigned to the bin, attention turned to finding a new stadium site. There had been talk amongst Bees fans – one fan, Caleb Cowan, had been a particularly keen advocate – about a triangle of land at Lionel Road owned by the then Strategic

Rail Authority who were reviewing their land portfolio. It appears that this land had been considered in the past by the Club but rejected as being too small. However, BIAS Committee member, Matt Dolman, a talented architect, looked into this site in detail and found that by altering the shape this could be the site for a new stadium.

With the influence of Bees United growing, the Trust adopted Lionel Road as their preferred option for a new stadium. In stark contrast to the pre-ABeeC days, the Council were supportive from day one and whilst they did not own the land they did as much as they could, being the Local Planning Authority, to let it be known they looked favourably on the Club's plans. We had turned a corner. While it would take several years actually to acquire the land and obtain the necessary planning consent and forge commercial partnerships, the train was at last on the track and heading in the right direction...



The triangle of railway land at Lionel Road when the idea of a stadium was first suggested.



When Lionel Road was first considered the site was a hotch-potch of ageing garages, portacabins and huts. The largest tenant was a waste transfer business. When BFC acquired the site in 2012 it was discovered there were a dozen businesses operating there, many more than was realised. They ranged from scaffolding storage to commercial tyre repairs plus a classic car repair unit. In the summer dust often swirled around and in the winter mud and mini-lakes were a constant feature.