

# GROUNDHOPPING

## MARTIN WRAY @FGIF

Speaking to **The Gate** this week is **Martin Wray** who is one of the founders of [footballgroundsinfocus.com](http://footballgroundsinfocus.com). We first got in contact with Martin to use one of his articles from his visit to Irlam which featured in our programme vs "The Shack". Martin was full of praise for our programme, and we received a 5\* special rating in his programme reviews, which you can read on the blog! Martin has kept frequent contact with us and has given us an insight into his groundhopping adventures;

### **First of all, what encouraged you to get into football, and more importantly your groundhopping adventures?**

It was my Dad, Harry who got me into football in a big way. He encouraged me to play the game from a young age and came along to watch me play my first ever match for my school, Willerby Carr Lane County Primary School. I was only nine years old and the youngest in the team (by two years) and still remember scoring my first ever goal with a header against Hesse Church of England School. He also took me to my first ever game in the same year; Hull City v Crystal Palace in the Football League played at Boothferry Park back in 1967. He used to buy me football related magazines and books such as *Charles Buchan's Football Monthly* and the end of year *CBF Annual* and my first football board game called *Waddington's Table Soccer* using hard plastic players who kicked the ball (tiddlywink style) – it came out in 1965. He also helped me collect commemorative coins made for the 1970 World Cup when he bought fuel from the local *Esso* petrol station.

When I moved away to study PE and Sports Science at Loughborough University in 1980, I started to watch Hull City play some away games and really enjoyed it. This continued when I began teaching and one day, I decided to complete the 92 Football League clubs which I finished at Swansea (Vetch Field) in 1987. My next challenge was to visit all Scottish 38 clubs which took longer but I eventually managed to do this with a trip up to Forfar Athletic (in 1992). By now the ground collecting bug had already taken hold and involved ticking off non-league football grounds from about 1989. I starting with the Conference and moving down the pyramid. Thirty years have passed since then I am still as excited to tick off a new ground as I did in the beginning. All the details of my visits have been kept in pocket sized note books to this day.

### **You run the "footballgroundsinfocus.com" blog, started taking photographs what was the influence behind that? What can readers expect to find on the blog?**

During my early years of groundhopping I liked to take photos of new grounds particularly the Scottish grounds. When I got into non-league football, I often sent my pictures to the *Team Talk* monthly football magazine and was lucky enough to have

these published including a front cover photo (action shot from Hednesford v Sutton United in the Conference) as well as a few in the annual *Non-League Football Directory* as a Senior Photographer. I also contributed to other magazines including *The Football Traveller* and starting to write reports and complete programme reviews for their weekly magazine. In the early 2000's when digital publishing became popular, I decided to set up the *Football Grounds in Focus* website to show case the wonderful world of groundhopping by featuring ground, action and matchday photos, reports, football programmes. And so *FGIF* was born in 2004.

With the help of a dedicated team of snappers and reporters who have contributed regularly over the years, the site has grown in popularity and readers can find photos and reviews from many clubs not only in the UK but also abroad. We provide a useful service for those fans looking for new ground photos and club reviews to inspire their own travels. At the start of this season we have over 100K pictures (in almost 6000 albums) in the A to Z club photo database which covers nearly 3500 clubs in total. Anyone can send digital photos or reviews from their travels to the site and we credit each and every contributor that helps us. We are always full of praise for our contributors and are only too happy to share our interest in football. Above all, it's a fun hobby, made for hoppers by hoppers.

### **You have been full of praise for the Gate programme this season. What makes it stand out from the others? What makes a good football programme to you?**

When we first received a copy of the Squires Gate FC programme, we knew it was something special. We have reviewed literally thousands of programmes over the last fifteen years but this copy (for the match v West Allotment Celtic in the FA Vase) immediately stood out from the rest. It is not only beautifully laid out and well presented but covers fresh and interesting content that is relevant to the match. It is also well researched and full of statistical information. At its heart it is aimed at you the football fan which is often lacking in many much bigger and more expensive publications. Above all what makes a really good programme for me at any level is not necessarily the number of pages (a lot of top teams produce loads of glossy pages but there's little of interest inside it) but it's more about the amount of time, effort and care taken in producing a matchday magazine. You can tell straight away how much hard work goes into compiling *Talk of The Gate* – it really is a true labour of love and excites the reader. For that reason, Dan & Jay deserve great praise.



**Did you have any football shirts growing up? Who was your footballing idol?**

Although I knew the club colours of most football teams when growing up, I don't think I ever owned a shirt in my younger days. I think I have only ever owned four shirts since and these include various styles of Hull City FC, Portsmouth FC, Raith Rovers FC and Hertha Berlin SC (don't ask why, they were all given to me as presents!). The proudest moments wearing the Tigers' shirt has been our family trips to Wembley for the Play off Finals in 2008 and 2016 and the FA Cup Final v Arsenal in 2014 – it was definitely team Hull. My footballing idol growing up was the Hull City inside-forward Ken Wagstaff, a smiling roly-poly figure who had a penchant for scoring goals and who played for the Tigers between 1964 and 1975. Whenever 'Waggy' (as he was known) got the ball on the edge of the box you got excited because you knew something was about to happen – hopefully a goal. During his 374 appearances for the club he scored 173 times.

**Which team did you support growing up? What was the reason behind supporting them?**

As you've probably guessed I supported Hull City growing up. It was my Dad who took me to watch football first before I was old enough to go with my school mates. During the seventies I attended most home games with my best friend Nigel whose parents ran the local greengrocers store in Willerby where we lived. We used to travel to the ground by bus getting off at Spring Bank West and walking the last mile to the ground. We used to queue for ages before making our way to stand in Bunkers Hill, a large covered terraced stand behind the goal. We used to stand in the same place about halfway up the stand. Along with many other fans we often joined in the singing and over the years knew many variations to many well-known tunes. I also liked to follow some of the top First Division teams (as many youngsters do) and supported Chelsea growing up and can still remember when they beat Leeds United in an FA Cup replay in 1970. The reason I liked them was because they played in royal blue – my favourite colour still to this day!! As for non-league I also supported Newmarket Town FC (Eastern Counties League) my local club when I moved to East Anglia to start my teaching career. It was quite a family affair as my Dad-in-Law Eddie was club secretary for many years.

**Which non-league club to you live closest to? Can you give us a brief insight into their ground, their league, etc?**

Although there are a large number of clubs from the Humber Premier and East Riding County Leagues all within a few miles of FGIF HQ, the nearest team of note is North Ferriby FC members of the Northern Counties East League Division One which is about three miles away and easily found off the A63 by-pass. The former Conference North club and FA Trophy winners in 2014-15 (known then as North Ferriby United FC) hit the headlines last season when they were expelled from the Northern Premier League after getting into debt and being wound up in the High Court in March of this year. Newly reformed this season the club still plays at the Dransfield Stadium, a tidy covered little ground that holds up to 3000 spectators and is found off Grange Lane in the village. Technically, Costello FC and Malt Shovel FC (both ERCL) and Hessele Sporting Club (HPL) are all within a mile of my front door.

**How many grounds have you visited?**

Including nearly all the former and current English and Scottish League grounds as well as many non-league clubs, my total number of grounds is probably just over 2000 now. I say probably - although I have recorded every visit to a new ground in a number of note books and on-line for each season I have yet to add them all up. Maybe now I'm semi-retired and have a bit more time to devote to it, I hope to log all the details on one single spread sheet to get the exact number. In terms of targets I originally wanted to get the 92 Football League and 38 Scottish League clubs done. After that it was to reach 1000 non-league grounds (achieved at Tooting & Mitcham FC in 2005) and to visit 100 non-league grounds in one season (the only time I've done this was back in the late 1990's). I would in the future like to re-complete those new FL and SFL grounds which have opened over the last few years.

**Do you remember the first game you attended? What was the score?**

My Dad took me to my first ever game. It was Hull City v Crystal Palace in the Football League Division Two played at Boothferry Park on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> September 1967, kick-off 3pm. Although the Tigers lost 1-0, I will never forget the experience – seeing the big stadium with tall floodlights, the railway platform behind the stand, the atmosphere of a big crowd and the 'hoppertunity' to watch top footballers. I was hooked there and them.



***The best game you have ever watched? The worst? In general, and ones that you have attended on your travels?***

There are three live games that stand out the most: The first was Orient v Hull City in the FL played at Brisbane Road back in November 1984. Hull were losing 4-0 and miraculously came back to win 5-4. An unforgettable experience. The second also involved Hull City when they beat Bristol City 1-0 in the Championship Play-Off Final at Wembley. We only managed to get tickets the day before and drove up to Hull from Newmarket (where I used to live) to collect them at 5pm. It was a terrific family day out with my wife Frances and twin daughters Steph and Jo. It was also the first time in the club's (then) 104-year history that the Tigers joined the top flight Premier League. A couple of years ago whilst hopping in the Norfolk Broads I visited Hickling FC (v Runtun United) for a North East Norfolk League match. The visitors won 17-1 which at the time was (and still is) the highest number of goals I've seen in a game of football. My worst experience watching football was an evening Isthmian League cup game at Croydon FC in South London. The game started at 8pm, went into extra-time during which a player sustained a serious injury. The match stopped for 40 minutes until an ambulance arrived to take the casualty to hospital. The match finally re-started, went on to penalties and finished at 11.15pm – over three hours after the kick-off. With essential maintenance work (re-surfacing) on both the M25 and M11 I didn't get home until 1 o'clock the following morning!! Definitely an experience to forget!!

***What makes non-league unique to you?***

For me non-league football represents everything that is great about football. It stands for pure enjoyment, meeting lovely people and represents the true love of the game itself whatever the result. It also provides the chance to travel somewhere new, you don't need a ticket (99% of the time), you always meet like-minded people and get a friendly and warm welcome wherever you go. The people who run clubs or get involved are the life-blood of the game – they represent the community and as unpaid volunteers deserve great credit. Without their efforts the game would not exist and we should always be grateful to them. I also love it because it offers unlimited access to the ground, the chance to take photos from different sides and at different angles without the interference or hassle of stewards or CCTV which is commonplace at the pro-level these days.

***What is the best goal you've ever seen, live and in general?***

The best live goal I have seen was scored by Dean Windass for Hull City when they beat Bristol City 1-0 in the Play-Off Final at Wembley Stadium in 2008. Frazier Campbell crossed the ball for Windass who volleyed it from just outside the box into the top right-hand corner of the net. This proved to be the match winner and importantly, sent the Tigers into the Premier League for the first time in their 104-year history. A surreal moment in football. I have seen many cracking goals on TV including those scored from free-kicks, bicycle kicks; long

shots and even some from the goal keeper. One that stands out above all others is Ryan Giggs' wonder goal (almost a full-length pitch dribble beating half a dozen players before shooting). He scored for Manchester United against Arsenal in an FA Cup Semi-Final replay in 1999. The winning goal came in extra-time to make it 2-1. Check the *You-Tube* video to see it for yourself.

***Your favourite grounds?***

There are far too many to list here. My favourite pro club grounds other than the KCOM (Hull City) would be Old Trafford (Manchester United) and Ibrox (Glasgow Rangers) purely based on sheer size, viewpoint of fans watching the game and atmosphere created. Apart from the old-fashioned grounds with vast terraces and large cantilever stands (pre-Taylor report) I am also drawn to those grounds with a unique setting. Here are three of my favourites and ones I would recommend to your readers: *Gayfield* - Arbroath FC of the Scottish Football League (next to the North Sea); *The Nest* - Lakenheath FC of the Eastern Counties League (set well below ground level in a pit) and *The Wellesley* - Great Yarmouth Town FC of the Eastern Counties (beautiful ornate grandstand – built in 1892, a grade II listed building and believed to be the world's oldest stand still in use!). Check them out in the *FGIF* album gallery if you get chance.



***What is your usual matchday routine when visiting a new ground?***

I usually check that the game is on first before setting off either by: referring to the relevant *FA Full-Time* league fixture board, by using the club's *twitter* account or by phoning the secretary (especially in cases of bad weather). I like to get to a new ground up to 45 minutes before kick-off so that I can get a programme before they get sold out. Before the match starts, I try to find a club official or team manager to confirm I can use my camera in the ground and then spend a few minutes taking some photos covering a few personnel (with the home club); main club buildings (inside and out) and a quick circuit of the pitch taking pictures of the stands and dug outs from different angles. Where time permits, I try to get a few shots of the teams coming out onto the pitch and a group picture of the referee and team captains just before kick-off. Once the game is underway and depending on the light (position of sun) I try and capture a mixture of action and general crowd shots etc

from a number of positions (near the half-way or the goal) using a variety of different lenses. On a busy afternoon I can take up to 1000 photos during my visit to a new ground.

***Do you have any rituals or superstitions when it comes to supporting your team?***

As I choose to travel to a new ground each week, I have not been to watch a game at the KCOM this season, yet. However, I do keep a close a close eye on what is happening at Hull City by checking the *Hull Live* website and club *twitter* apps at least three, four or even five times a day to follow all the latest club news. It's become quite a habit now. We are also lucky to subscribe to *Sky Sports* on TV and this now makes it possible to watch scheduled live games and those

Championship matches covered on the Red Button menu option. In fact, I have managed to watch the Tigers half a dozen times already this season. The latest match saw us get a point against Charlton Athletic at the Valley scoring the equaliser with the very last touch of the match to make it 2-2!

***Have you ever visited any games abroad? What makes the experience different in other countries?***

With over thirty years of hopping experience I have actually only ever visited two foreign grounds, both totally unique experiences. In the early 2000's during a family holiday I had the opportunity to visit to AC Venezia (1907). We travelled by boat to the game (it's not often you can say that, is it?) and got off on Sant'Elena island where the Pierluigi Penzo stadium (second oldest in Italy) is located. Visitors Cagliari won the Serie B game 2-1 with Gian Franco Zola (ex-Chelsea) scoring the winner amid great scenes of excitement and bright flares blazing in the stand. My wife who speaks Italian was chief translator and told us what the crowd was singing (including some choice swear words). When the home fans realised that we were visitors from England they gave us their (green & orange) scarves which still sit proudly on display in our study today. Our second game a couple of years later was again attended on holiday, this time in Berlin when we attended the Olympic Stadium for Hertha v SC Freiburg in the Bundesliga (2-0). It was a superb atmosphere and the partisan home crowd really got behind their team who won 2-0 with the second goal being scored from the half-way line. Watching football abroad is different experience both in terms of travel and atmosphere.

***Have you visited any obscure grounds? What made them different to the others?***

There have been quite a few over the years. It's always exciting to visit a ground that's set in a unique location or has an interesting backdrop (especially from a photographic point of view). Here are five examples (in no particular order) of the more obscure grounds I've been to (quite a few are fairly low down the football pyramid: Hatton Lane - Bedfont Sports FC (next to the run-way at Heathrow airport); BS Sports Ground, Bury St Edmunds - RF Saints FC (inside the grounds of the imposing British Sugar plant); Khalsa Avenue- Guru Nanak FC (behind a beautiful Seikh temple); Old Church Road - Snettisham Maroons FC (large church on an embankment)

and Rockland United FC (cracking wooden stand with seats built by dub who play in the Central & South Norfolk League). Check out the *FGIF* album gallery to see more photos of these and many other wonderful gems found off the beaten footy track.

***Can we expect to see you down at Squires Gate in the near future?***

I have visited Squires Gate Football Club once already for a memorable FA Vase Fifth round tie against Newcastle Benfield Park played at School Road on 11/02/2006. The Gate opened the scoring through Chris Palmer after only 93 seconds before the visitors equalised from the spot minutes later. Chris Cairns scored the winner in the second-half to earn the hosts a place in the last eight. According to my archived report the attendance was 146 and the chips from the tea bar were apparently some of the best (apart from Hull) ever eaten on my football travels. If I'm ever in the area one day I won't hesitate to take in another game – oh, and to pick up a cracking programme and decent bag of chips!!

***What grounds are you planning on visiting in the next few months?***

Having re-located back to my native East Yorkshire I still have plenty of grounds to visit in many of the local leagues from the Northern Premier League down to county level. I don't really set out to complete a particular league but am often attracted to new ground that may be unique or even visit somewhere based on the importance of the game (such as an interesting FA Vase tie). I also try to visit about 50 new grounds a season. On my list at the moment are Salford in the Football League as well more local lower league stuff – Sheffield County League, York League, West Yorkshire League etc which always spring up a few (photographic) surprises along the way.



We would like to thank Martin for his contribution to our programme, and we hoped you all enjoyed reading his trips to various grounds. If you would like to visit his blog, you can find it at [footballgroundsinfocus.com](http://footballgroundsinfocus.com). Some great content on there for all football fans.