

# 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

April 27, 1985

Leeds United 1 Oxford United 0

**A run of four straight wins to kick-off the 1984/85 season had Leeds fans dreaming after a torrid few years. However, the foundations of a successful promotion bid were again built on sand, and although Eddie Gray had established a promising and largely settled side, there was still the nagging inconsistency that dogged the club's progress.**

Topping the Second Division table in April 1985 were Oxford United, funded by the dubious wealth of flamboyant and ultimately disgraced media tycoon Robert Maxwell. Oxford had humbled Leeds earlier in the season when strikers Billy Hamilton

and John Aldridge turned around Leeds' 2-1 half-time lead in a humiliating second half onslaught. In front of the *Match Of The Day* cameras, typically, it ended 5-2 and as if that hadn't discredited the club sufficiently, the Leeds fans then took their frustrations out on Oxford's deficient and crudely-built Manor Ground.

By the time of this penultimate home game of the season, Oxford were Champions elect for the second season running, under the stewardship of manager Jim "The Bald Eagle" Smith, and Leeds retained faint hopes of promotion. The game attracted a decent

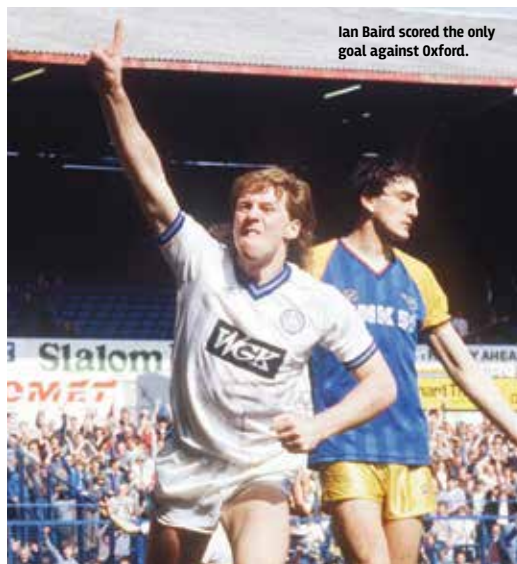
crowd of 17,992 and Leeds set about their confident opponents from the first whistle.

A tight contest on a sunny but blustery spring afternoon was settled by a fine Ian Baird strike midway through the second half. Frank Gray halted an Oxford breakaway and Baird picked up the loose ball to stride purposefully at the retreating Oxford defence. He cut inside and drilled a low right-foot shot passed keeper Steve Hardwick from the edge of the penalty area for the game's decisive moment.

Leeds hung on for a notable victory but couldn't do enough in the last few games, and an inglorious 1-0 defeat to Birmingham City in the season's last game resulted in a hollow seventh-placed finish.



Frank Gray



Ian Baird scored the only goal against Oxford.



## Anyone remember... Ian Baird?

**Nobody who saw Ian Baird play will forget him; the snarl, the clenched fist, the shoulder barge, the raised studs, the mullet flapping majestically in the wind as he charged in on a wincing goalkeeper. Oh, and the goals. We loved the goals, too.**

Ian Baird was the poster boy for the 1980s generation when heroes were thin on the ground, and commitment, earthy challenges and the odd goal were all we really wanted from a Saturday afternoon. If we won the game as a result, that was a bonus, but during a period of little cheer, Ian Baird was the perfect icon for the new generation of impressionable Leeds fans.

With Leeds struggling for goals Eddie Gray bought Baird from Southampton in March 1985, and he made an instant impact, mixing a healthy goals tally with a highly questionable disciplinary record. Combining endeavour, honesty and muscular guile, Baird led the Leeds line as a crowd favourite for five years, though he twice left the club after hasty and regretful decisions.

The first time he went to Portsmouth for a miserable goal-shy spell and then midway through the 1989/90 promotion season he left for Middlesbrough when Howard Wilkinson bought Lee Chapman.

## Nothing happened in the 1980s, apart from... The Bradford Fire Disaster

**The climax of the 1984/85 season was probably the darkest period the English game has ever seen. Weeks before the Heysel Disaster, and on the same day that Leeds and Birmingham fans rioted at St Andrew's, with one young Leeds fan (CHK) killed when a brick wall collapsed, was the Bradford Fire which saw 56 people die at Valley Parade.**

Bradford City had won the Third Division and a day of celebration had begun with the Championship trophy being received by manager Trevor Cherry's men. Lincoln City were the visitors, and five minutes before half time, ITV commentator John Helm was among the first to raise the alarm of a visible glow in the main stand with smoke emerging from it.

The stand was almost entirely wooden, and had already been identified as a fire risk, even in the days before stringent fire safety laws. Central to the disaster was the stand's antiquated design, with wooden floor slats that allowed litter to fall through and build up below the stand. It is believed that a discarded match or cigarette ignited the litter and from the first sighting of flames it took just four minutes for the entire stand to be engulfed.

