

SOUTHPORT FC- THE NON LEAGUE YEARS

The date of 2nd June 1978 will be forever etched in the memory of all fans of Southport Football Club. We were going to be a Non League team after Wigan won the vote, after a dramatic tied vote, to be elected to the Football League.

It was a long close season when at times it really did look like we wouldn't have a team to follow. There were many comings and goings in the 76 days between failing to gain re-election to the Football League and setting off to Holly Park, Allerton to watch us take on South Liverpool. If ever we needed a reminder that we were now a Non League team, the 19th August 1978 brought it all home in grand style.

Harry McNally had been appointed manager and we approached the season with fear and trepidation, that fear was heightened on the approach to Holly Park when we realised just exactly what we were in for and it wasn't just the welcoming party of friendly locals outside the ground!

We won the game 1-0 with Joe Turner taking the honour of scoring our first ever NL goal in front of a crowd of 296, the first of 1803 league goals scored in the Non League Years. Holly Park is now Liverpool South Parkway Railway Station, a stark demonstration of how precarious life can be as a non league football club. Those glancing at the cover of this book will wonder why we feature Liverpool South Parkway Railway Station on the front of a football book alongside our greatest moments. It's there to remind us all what can happen to a football club when things don't quite work out.

It is interesting looking back at the make up of the league in that very first season and chart the progress of the teams:-

Mossley, Altrincham, Matlock Town, Scarborough, Boston United, Runcorn, Stafford Rangers, Goole Town, Northwich Vics, Lancaster City, Bangor City, Worksop Town, Workington, Netherfield, Barrow, Gainsborough Trinity, Morecambe, Frickley Athletic, South Liverpool, Gateshead, Buxton and Macclesfield were our opposition in 1978/79.

The season of 1978-79 proved relatively successful, with 19 wins and only 11 defeats in the 44 League games played. A huge turnover of players meant that only John Higham and Chris Kisby, who was sent off after thirty seconds of his Non League debut, remained of the regulars from the previous year, though Paul Birchall and George Dewsnip were to return later in the season. Hughie Fisher had departed but his assistant Harry McNally proved a capable replacement as Manager.

Southport finished in fifth place in a season that saw some great football being played and great wins at Non league kings Altrincham in front of a partisan crowd of 1683. It was a highly creditable performance but the real turning point came at the end of the campaign with the formation of the Football Alliance. This was to be a new nationwide league comprising the elite of all the regional leagues and would in time develop into the Vauxhall Conference. Naturally enough, Southport were invited to become founder members but the Board turned down the opportunity on the grounds that the additional travelling costs were prohibitive and the view was taken that it would never last. It's still going strong thirty years later!

Failure to move up meant that Southport were distancing themselves still further from any hopes of ever recovering their League place. The supporters reaction was not anticipated and there was widespread alienation of fans that took a long time to recover because of the decision that was taken not to take the step into the Alliance and from a healthy first season it went downhill from then on!

Supporters don't always appreciate just how close the club came to oblivion in the early NL days, the articles below are reproduced from the Southport Visiter

End of the line? 10 February 1979

Has Southport Football club finally reached the end of the line? That question could be answered at tomorrow's meeting which has been called by the club's directors, following the winding-up application made by the Inland Revenue authorities.

This is by no means the first crisis the club has had to face, but it could be the last.

Certainly time is pressing, with the winding-up petition due to be heard in just over one week's time, on February 19. It is a fact that the club has suffered from being so close to such hotbeds of football as Liverpool and Manchester. And week by week those who have watched matches at Haig Avenue have been at least equalled and often outnumbered by those who have gone out of town to watch other clubs' games. So again it must be asked: Do Southport people care whether their local club lives or dies? -The club's manager, Mr. Harry McNally, summed it up this week when he commented that many local residents had written off Southport when Football League status was lost at the end of last season, and that they had not taken the trouble to go along to see them play in the Northern Premier League.

Had they done so they might have been pleasantly surprised at the standard of football, and, at the same time, might have helped to avert what could well be the Haig Avenue club's final crisis.

A Gleam Of Hope 27 February 1979

We all know that one swallow does not a summer make. One is also aware that in soccer, of all the professional sports, fortunes can fluctuate wildly in a very short space of time. Nevertheless, for Southport Football Club, currently in the middle of perhaps its worst ever financial crisis, last Saturday's match at Haig Avenue must have given a gleam of hope for the future.

Not only was the Northern Premier League's leading team beaten, but the attendance was the best in the NPL on the day and a considerable improvement on Southport's previous 'gates', this season.

Interestingly, too, the game proved quite a draw for representatives of various Football League clubs, a situation that did not often apply when Southport was in the Fourth Division.

Despite all the problems, the form of the Haig Avenue team has been good this season, and if this standard of play can be maintained then the battle to keep the club alive will have been indeed worthwhile.

Half of the 42 games were lost in 1979-80, with only one fewer in the season which followed sub-standard players were brought in.

Harry McNally resigned as Manager early in September 1979, to be replaced by Jimmy Melia in the capacity of 'acting manager' only. It was January before a proper appointment was made and Allen Hampson the former Everton and Halifax player took over. Star players, Nigel Halsall joined Runcorn for £4,500 with Graham Barrow moving to Altrincham.

Relegation was just averted and we finished in 19th place. The new manager was Allan Brown who returned for a less successful second spell and faced massive rebuilding. Just as the 1980-81 season opened, Giller and secretary Gordon Brown walked out leaving the club in a state of turmoil. It was a literal walk out as well, with Rob Urwin who at that time was running the club shop left to phone in the scores to the Press Association after the game as nobody had any idea what was going on!

A series of crisis meetings were held with the day-to-day running in the hands of an emergency committee of dedicated supporters.

The E.G.M. on September 18th 1980 was largely inconclusive, but a new board was formed comprising former Chairman John Church (elected in his absence) and supporters Len Cox, Brian Bennett and Stuart Gordon, though the last named subsequently withdrew. In due course the new board, acting on legal advice, requested the F.A. to conduct an investigation into the affairs of the club which left much to be desired. There was little the new directors could do except to promote the new lottery and dispense with the services of Stuart Imlach who had been assisting Allan Brown. There were weeks when the players went without wages and by mid-November there was an announcement that if £25,000 were not found right away the only course was a voluntary liquidation.

THE DAILY MAIL Wednesday 17 December 1980 by Colin Wood

SOUTHPORT A CLUB NO ONE WANTED

SOUTHPORT Football Club will be killed off today and I confess I am one of those responsible. Like thousands of other residents of this pleasant town, I care about football when it's played at Anfield or Old Trafford, Goodison Park or Maine Road. But I've not cared much about football at Haig Avenue.

I don't blame myself or the many like me. I've watched Southport on and off during more than 17 years on the Merseybeat for the Daily Mail. I was there in 1968 when the ground was packed for an FA Cup meeting with Everton and Billy Bingham's Third Division battlers, big Eric Redrobe and all, gave Harry Catterick's First Division giants a fright before going down 1-0.

But over the years the town of Southport has not housed enough people who bothered about the local football team.

We committed ourselves to other causes years earlier.

So this morning the shareholders will meet in a room under a stand that is still the envy of many a Football League survivor and put Southport F.C. into liquidation.

It now looks certain that there will be no phoenix rising from the ashes; no new club to take over the facilities and the Northern Premier League fixtures from the one that dies today at the age of 99.

There have been hopes that a Lancashire man would move in and do just that. But Geoff Clarke, the secretary who has had the thankless task of operating the life support machine, said: "I don't think the FA will be prepared to accept his plans. We've done what we could."

It's sad rather than tragic because it was inevitable.

For 57 years the town managed against the odds to support a Football League team. In 1978 the other League clubs kicked Southport out. Since then the decline has accelerated. Trains and the improved road system week after week carry fans to Manchester and Merseyside.

Southport Football Club has been a long time dying.

However we were not dead and despite the doom and gloom there appeared to be some hope.

"The Book" takes up the full story of this dramatic period in our history:-

It became known that a prominent Lancashire businessman had made an offer to help the club, though liquidation would now probably be inevitable. At a shareholders' meeting on December 17th the brothers Colin and Deric Hall (partners in a double glazing firm) emerged as the unlikely saviours; what had in fact happened, it later transpired, was that they were the 'front men' for Chorley F.C. chairman Jim Tolson whose bid to take control of Southport was thwarted by the N.P.L. itself who saw his proposed merger of the clubs as a back way into the League for the Chorley club.

To their great credit, the Hall brothers stood firm after the enforced withdrawal of Tolson's backing and at a reconvened meeting on January 14th 1981 they effectively took control. Only two shareholders present voted against a voluntary liquidation and a committee comprising Leon Rapaport, Cec Rimmer and Billy Bingham was established to oversee the winding up. The Halls guaranteed to keep the club going and to see it once more viable in what was its Centenary year.

Allan Brown's services were dispensed with (the team were currently languishing in next to bottom place) and groundsman Charlie Powell found himself in charge of the team for a brief spell until new manager John Johnson took over. The brothers staved off one other half-hearted bid from a consortium headed by ex-Skelmersdale United and Blackpool Chairman Bill Gregson and set about establishing a new limited company – Pinewise Ltd – which traded under the name Southport Football Club. Two late draws at the finish ensured that the club once again avoided the re-election issue.

Much criticism was subsequently heaped on the Hall brothers by supporters who failed to appreciate their role in the club's survival. Had it not been for their determination and enthusiasm at a time when none was forthcoming from elsewhere Southport FC would simply have gone out of existence midway through 1980-81. They kept things going for approximately twenty months until the time and effort spent at Haig Avenue had repercussions in their own business which necessitated their withdrawal, albeit too late to revive their firm.

The Centenary year was a considerable success. John Johnson and assistant Len Traynor assembled the best squad of the early 'eighties which included the returning Gary Cooper as a prolific scorer alongside Joe Strong, who took the 'Player of the Year' award. In defence, Ray Mawson continued to provide strength at full-back, and later in the season Southport gave a first chance to Paul Evans in goal; he was to render invaluable service over the next seven years, clocking up 190 N.P.L. appearances.

On the playing front matters had improved to the extent that by March the club actually made an application to join the Football Alliance, conditional upon their finishing in the top three places. Though this failed to materialise, 46 points from 42 games (in the last season when a victory earned two points rather than three) was substantially better than could have been hoped.

The troubles were not quite over. Jim Gudgeon, appointed Managing Director in March 1982, resigned in the July and rumours soon abounded that the club was 'up for sale'. Colin Hall announced that a consortium headed by player-manager John Johnson had taken over the running of the club for a month and negotiations were held with various interested parties at venues up and down the Lancashire coast. Most bizarre was an upstairs room totally devoid of furniture in the Queen's Hotel, Lytham after Southport had defeated the local side in a pre-qualifying round of the F.A. Cup; it was here that the Chorley F.C. contingent made a final attempt to get involved, but within a week or two a new board had taken shape.

Gary Culshaw, a Wigan based supporter of over thirty years standing, emerged as the new Chairman, appointing Barry Hedley as Vice-Chairman with John Johnson, Les Traynor and Charlie Powell as directors. Colin and Deric Hall along with their colleague Dave Edwards resigned, as did Geoff Clarke as Secretary, to which position Les Rimmer returned for his first involvement since the 1930s. A much more professional approach was adopted and the board was extended still further in January 1983 by the appointment of three new directors, among them present day chairman, Charles Clapham.

During the season the late Tommy O'Neil rejoined the club after spells with Tranmere Rovers, Halifax Town and Altrincham; it must have been déjà-vu for him when a third qualifying round tie in the F.A. Trophy took Southport to Spennymoor again, this time to an even heavier (5-0) defeat. Tommy was our scorer in the 4-1 defeat at Spennymoor as a league club. The season of 1983-84 was similarly undistinguished yet the side, latterly under the control of full-time Manager Bob Murphy, at last collected a piece of silverware in the shape of the Dairy Crest Lancashire Floodlit Cup; the final of this competition was held at Deepdale, Preston where Horwich R.M.I. suffered a resounding 4-0 defeat, thanks largely to an inspired performance by an emerging young striker called Andy Mutch who

netted a hat-trick. Local products Mutch, Shaun Teale and Rob Sturgeon had all made their débuts during the latter part of the season and were to play crucial roles over the next couple of years. One more boardroom shuffle was to come. During the 1984 close season, while he was away on holiday, Gary Culshaw was ousted as Chairman by the other board members and Charles Clapham was installed in his place. This led more or less directly to his resigning from the board, though, as the major shareholder, he kept a continuing interest in the club's affairs from a distance. It was an unpopular move at the time as Culshaw with his quiet ways had endeared himself to many supporters as a genuine person who had brought much stability to the club's affairs and the manner of his removal was resented. Clapham took quite a while to convince the Southport public of bona fides, enduring a long spell of latent hostility whilst all the time keeping the promise that there would be no further financial crises during his term of office.

The team displayed a startling inconsistency in 1984-85 and they were still lying eighth in the table when a heated discussion between Chairman and Manager immediately after the Lancashire Junior Cup defeat at Morecambe in December saw Bob Murphy dismissed with Brian Griffiths taking over. A sizable clear-out resulted, including the popular front men Joe Strong and Gary Cooper, but their places had long been under threat from local lad Kevin McCormack whose wholehearted style straight away won him the 'Player of the Year' trophy. Ironically the transitional period saw the team slip to twelfth position by the end of the campaign as Griffiths experimented with a fair number of sub-standard players.

Ultimately his tendency to look towards the Liverpool Sunday leagues for new faces was to be his undoing. The club had finished 1984-5 with a bang. In the final game Buxton were beaten 7-1 with Mutch (3), Teale and McCormack amongst the scorers. After a shaky start to the new season a brilliant mid-term run involving a club record ten consecutive victories in senior competitions saw Southport soar to third place in the table whilst reaching the third round of the F.A. Trophy.

The matches against Scarborough of the Gola League ranked as particular successes; eventually a strong Kidderminster Harriers side put Southport out 6-1 on a windswept night at Aggborough; but the incoming Peter King, Ronnie Naden, George Carr, Tony Quinn and John Coleman were quality performers at this level. The outstanding performance was undoubtedly the display in the first round game at Telford United where each of Southport's four classic goals outshone the one before. This 4-2 victory on the ground of one of the major non-League sides may be seen as a turning point in Southport's post-League era.

Andy Mutch was transferred to Wolves immediately after the Trophy involvement was ended for a five figure fee and Southport slipped back finishing in sixth place with 17 wins, the most since 1978-79.

The 1985/86 proved even more successful; despite going out in the first round proper of both F.A. Cup and Trophy, an undefeated run from Christmas to March and four wins in the final five games brought 68 points and a place in the top eight. Bryan Griffiths won the 'Manager of the Month' award for February and striker John Coleman walked off with three awards at the end of the season ceremony; voted 'Player of the Year' by both supporters and players he also took the leading scorer trophy, his 25 League goals leaving him just two short of Alan Spence's post-war record.

In addition, the cup provided Southport's first League opposition since 1978 with a visit to the Old Show Ground, Scunthorpe; but a spate of early season injuries and illnesses deprived the visitors of Ronnie Naden and Kevin McCormack on this occasion and United prevailed 2-0. The 2,601 gate afforded some consolation. In fact Southport with 18 scored more goals than any other club in the 1986-7 F.A. Cup competition whilst playing no fewer than ten matches, itself a club record.

Shaun Teale transferred for a minimal fee to Northwich Victoria in the January. Problems off the field had led to his being 'left out in the cold' for a period and both management and player felt a move was best. His subsequent advancement to the highest level of League football with Aston Villa was watched with envy by supporters of his home town club who felt, with some justification, that they had been short-changed.

The summer of 1987 saw some big changes in the appearance of Haig Avenue.

Following ground safety recommendations all the covered terracing on two sides of the ground had to be demolished and for the next six years only the main stand afforded protection from the elements. Four upright stanchions and a cross-piece were all that remained at the Scarisbrick New Road end as a gaunt reminder of happier days; on the 'popular' side the bottom six steps of the once twenty deep terracing were left in place. The 1987-88 season proved a huge disappointment.

At the outset it threatened to surpass all that had gone before, since, by October 3rd, the club had won eight and drawn the other three of their opening eleven games, with a mere four goals conceded. The young Rob Sturgeon, whose father, the Liverpool comedian Bobby Kaye, was newly appointed vice-chairman, had developed into a commanding central defender and celebrated his 100th N.P.L. game early in the season. Paul Lodge lent support in midfield after Peter King departed to Marine.

Suddenly it all went wrong. Four weeks of deteriorating form ended with the shock resignation on November 6th of manager Griffiths. In a statement he dissociated his decision from recent results, referring obliquely to decisions taken off the field during a period of enforced absence through work commitments. As club captain Lodge briefly held the reins until the appointment, on November 17th, of Micky Taylor. A period of flux ensued as the axis of the team shifted from Merseyside to Central Lancashire. Paul Evans returned in goal, while one by one Coleman, Lodge and full-back Robbie Armstrong departed, the last named for a gross breach of club discipline. The club finished 14th in the table and lost two cup finals, the N.P.L. President's Cup disappearing 4-5 to South Liverpool over two legs after Southport had, at one stage, led 3-0 away.

One N.P.L. Cup game is worthy of note, if only for the attendance of just 77 spectators, our lowest ever Haig Avenue Non League gate, although some years later hundreds of people claim to have been in that crowd of 77!

Geoff Wilde told his story of that remarkable night in a programme article in 2007/08:

FREE THE GAINSBOROUGH 77 !

Just 20 years ago last Saturday (9 Feb 2008) I did one of the most stupid things I've ever done in my life, an accolade not lightly bestowed! I left a nice warm house in Crosby at 6.40. pm on a Tuesday evening and drove to Haig Avenue to see a Northern Premier League Cup second round tie between Southport and Gainsborough Trinity. We won 2-1.

Put that way it doesn't sound quite so stupid but I perhaps could add that it was a windy night, a VERY windy night. It took me about 8 minutes to get from home to the ground (the wind was behind me) despite the fallen trees, overturned lorries and tidal waves crashing over the Formby by-pass; the drive back later took three hours. (O.K. I maybe exaggerate a bit but it DID blow.)

The game itself took place at the Blowick (how appropriate!) end of the pitch, with all the spectators, that's me and the other 76 hardy souls who had turned up, mistakenly, to see a game of football packed into the upper back corner at that end of the stand.

Apparently the referee, one Mr Green from Stoke on Trent, however did HE get there? - saw no reason to call the game off since the players were not held to be in danger from anything. (Crashing airliners apart, that is.)

Once or twice the ball did cross the halfway line, though to little effect. Goal-kicks routinely went for corners and my diary records that one such kick by Paul Evans in the second half actually went out of the ground directly behind him!

Southport had the dubious advantage of the wind in the first half but obviously struggled to bring any degree of control to the proceedings. Eventually, in the 33rd minute, the inevitable happened. Gainsborough goal-keeper Kaye made a superb diving save from Colin Littlejohn's swerving shot but could only watch in mortification as David Eyres's corner-kick sailed over his head into the far corner of the net. It was David Eyres again with his trademark haircut for once suiting the conditions who put Southport 2-0 up just on half-time.

Though Trinity did pull a goal back in the 58th minute, Andy Kowalski beat the unsuspecting Paul Evans with a shot which went through a ruck of players and in off the far post, that was all they were able to achieve and the 2-1 win ensued. Not that it did us much good;

we went out two rounds later in the second leg of the semi-final at home against Goole Town.

Just one strange thing; in the intervening 20 years I must have come across over 200 Southport supporters who all claim that they were there on that God-forsaken night as part of the 77. One thing's for sure; some of them must be lying!

Micky Taylor stayed for the one season which saw Southport again finish 14th

In an attempt to rectify the early scoring problems – at one stage 292 minutes passed without Southport registering, target man Bobby Thomson from Middlesbrough who, at 33, brought a wealth of experience. Yet the player who made the real difference arrived unheralded on October 19th from Prescott Cables. Clint Neysmith, a youngster from Liverpool, scored twice on his debut and by Boxing Day had netted 11 in 8 games; but it all ended just as suddenly when he broke his leg at Goole on February 18th and subsequently disappeared back into obscurity. His final tally was 16 goals in 19 League and Cup games, one of the best strike records of any player to have played for us in the Non League arena.

Neysmith was unfortunately "cup tied" when he arrived and so missed out on the season's main story. Home victories over Penrith, Harworth Colliery Institute, Bangor City and Tow Law Town brought Southport to their second appearance in three seasons in the first round proper of the FA Cup. The added bonus this time was their immediate selection for the B.B.C Match of the Day programme, just 20 years on from the Swindon Town game.

It was unfortunate that the visitors should be Port Vale who had always been a bogey team at Haig Avenue. The attendance was 3434 and lots of MOTD viewers.

The closing weeks of the season saw another goalless sequence this one lasting 399 minutes and when the season ended manager Micky Taylor left to take over at Fleetwood Town. The club took their time in choosing a successor, by the end of May it was revealed as the former Liverpool reserve team captain and latterly South Liverpool manager Brian Kettle. There were many comings and goings in Kettle's early months in charge as he struggled to mould his side, performances suffered and it was mid-October before the 'Port scrambled out of the bottom two places. Significant steps were taking place in team building, over a period of eight weeks towards the end of 1989 Kettle picked up Ossie Smith, Bob Howard, Steve Whitehall, Steve Holden, Alan McDonald and the returning Ian Baines, all of whom were to make telling contributions to the achievements of the next few years. By the time the season ended in front of a supporters' fancy dress parade at Rhyl where the immortal line "Will Batman please come down off the Roof" was announced over the tannoy Southport had climbed back to seventh place in the table.

The close season of 1990 was marked by the death of John Church, the former Chairman and latterly President of the club who had fought long and hard to keep Southport afloat in the League. Jack Carr took over as President and at the same time Apollo Leisure took over as the club's official sponsors.

We began 1990/91 in great style but the lowest point of Kettle's reign came with a surprise defeat in the FA Cup at Bootle. The signs were not that promising but the arrival of experienced defender Kevin Mooney from Bangor City had an immediate impact. Paul Moore was signed from Alvechurch and the recovery moved on at pace.

A glut of fixtures led to fixture congestion and fatigue set in and fifth place was the final outcome. We reached four semi-finals, losing just one, and the three finals provided some spectacular entertainment.

The League Cup was won 4-1 at Maine Road against Buxton, The Liverpool Senior Cup saw us triumph 4-0 against Marine at Goodison and The Inter-League Cup saw us go down 3-2 against Dover at Aylesbury. The run of comparative success saw the 1991/92 season eagerly awaited and success guaranteed?

It never came and we were actually bottom of the table in late September. We finished seventh and the expected Championship challenge never materialized. In the main this

was due to the departures of Steve Holden to Morecambe and a £10,000 move for Steve Whitehall to Rochdale. Players coming in included Tony Jarvis from Witton, Kevin McCormack returned and Steve Joel. A good run in the FA Trophy also brightened the 1991/92 season with progression to the second round before going down 5-0 at Farnborough.

The close season moves were significant, big central defenders Mark Schofield and Derek Goulding arrived and, along with the returning Alan McDonald, Kettle signed one of his former South Liverpool players whom he had long sought, goal scoring winger Peter Withers. The season started with a surprise defeat at home to Emley but it was November before the next one. In between we had won eight games on the bounce and tasted defeat just four times all season. Southport stormed to the title with 96 points and 103 goals. In addition an impressive FA Cup run took us through to the second round which ended in a 4-0 defeat at Hartlepool.

It was a season of superlatives.

The club record of 19 games without defeat dating back to 1955/56 was eclipsed as 24 consecutive League games passed by without loss. The title was won at Emley with Peter Withers scoring a hat-trick in the 4-0 win amongst scenes of euphoria, the official gate that day was 504 but those present felt there were a few more in the ground than that including gorilla's, dancing girls and clowns! Kevin Mooney was ever present and won the player of the year award. Steve Haw arrived at the club in September and went on to score 31 or 32 goals depending on whose records you look at. Goal of the season was scored by Kevin Mooney when a free-kick taken from his own half at Barrow bounced over the home keeper and into the net. The Lancashire Junior Cup was also won at Burnden Park with a 5-2 extra time victory against Chorley.

All that remained was to satisfy the Vauxhall Conference of the ability of the Haig Avenue ground to match its demanding criteria. The rigorous standards had been known since the first official inspection in January when the Conference's skepticism that the necessary work to ensure ground eligibility could be completed in time was barely disguised.

It was at this point that Charlie Clapham came into his own, the plans had been drawn up for some time and the actual improvements were set in motion on March 1st. The transformation was astonishing, a brand new covered stand was erected at the Scarisbrick New Road end, new terracing, complete with safety barriers was constructed down the popular side and at the Blowick end, and tarmac was applied to all remaining open areas. Around £250,000 was spent, part funded by a new share issue, and by the time the astonished Conference party returned on May 11th their final inspection had become a formality.

The Vauxhall Conference held their Annual Meeting on 20th May at the Café Royal in London, the same venue as that for the fateful Football League meeting back in 1978. This time the outcome of the voting was favourable, Southport were duly elected to membership of the Vauxhall Conference and we were on our way back.

Southport took their place in The Conference and it immediately became apparent it was going to be tough with the first victory not coming until 18 September down at Welling but a six match winning run took us to the top of the table, albeit briefly. Attendances were picking up. Our first home gate in The Conference saw 2423 pack into Haig Avenue but despite a thrilling home debut the next gate dropped to just 1238. A mixed bag of results followed but we found ourselves leading Kettering and Kidderminster at the top of the league going into March. The season tailed off but a finishing position of fourth in our first season was beyond most peoples expectation as in the main the same players who had been successful in the NPL had stayed at the club.

Paul Comstive, a Sandgrounder by birth, Paul Lodge and Luther Blisset were added to the squad. It was Luther who had scored against us in our last ever Football League game at Watford in 1978.

The 1994/95 season saw the team seldom out of the top six and we were seen as a real threat and a return to the Football League became a real possibility and whilst we never hit the summit a highly creditable finishing position of third was achieved. Today we would have been in Play Offs for a place in the Football League.

The real shock was however reserved for the closing weeks of the season with the sudden announcement that Brian Kettle, the manager through almost six very successful campaigns had resigned for personal reasons. 1994-95 had been Brian's first year in a full time capacity a move which was intended to smooth the transition to a place in the Football League.

Within a week or two Billy Ayre was appointed as Brian Kettle's replacement with the highly popular Steve Joel happy to remain as Ayre's assistant. The club reaffirmed the desire to push for a place in the Football League and an eleven game unbeaten run gave everyone high hopes for the 1995/96 season.

It started with a 5-2 win at Slough with Steve Haw netting a hat-trick and Gambo bagging the others and we topped the table for the only time that season! A particularly bad run saw us plummet to 18th place by the end of October but a 7-1 win at home to Farnborough signaled the team were back and a highly promising campaign saw us finish in 6th place. Andy Whittaker finished the season as top scorer with 16 league goals and Peter Davenport notched 13, Davenport was to go on and take a caretaker manager role the next season before returning to the club as full time boss at the end of the 2006/07 season.

The 1996/97 season saw Steve Joel, Peter Davenport (caretaking) and Ronnie Moore in charge and a disappointing 11th place finish, the bright spot once again being the goal scoring of Andy Whittaker who grabbed another 19 league goals. A disappointing FA Trophy defeat at Colwyn Bay (0-2) in front of a gate of 928 containing hundreds of travelling Sandgrounders put Moore under pressure but he saw the season out before leaving to manage his former club, Rotherham.

Could anyone ever imagine Southport playing at Wembley? Supporters who remembered the dark days in the Football League and the early Non League years saw it as a dream but occasionally dreams do come true and the town went to Wembley suffice to say this was the highlight of the season.

League form was however patchy and it was only in the last few league games that we got enough points to ensure we maintained our place in the Conference. Paul Futch was the "gaffer, the leader, the star" as the song goes and ensured he was afforded Southport FC legend status. His performance in the FA Trophy Semi-Final at Slough was what many think to this day the best performance ever by a player in a Southport shirt, he was awesome.

The 1998/99 season was notable for some much needed Cup success when the Port journeyed to Football League side Mansfield and triumphed 2-1 in front of 500 delirious Sandgrounders whose support that day was incredible. After such a giant killing performance the club were attracting great publicity and Charlie Clapham and Futch appeared on the live draw for the third round with expectations of a home draw against a top team. Number 63, Southport came out of the hat first to everyone's delight, could it be Manchester United? No it was Leyton Orient, the feeling of anti-climax was apparent to all but it was a chance to progress further. Haig Avenue saw it's highest ever Non League gate (4950) and extensive media interest but we went down 2-0 and the run was over. The run had started at Ramsbottom in the rain when 829 packed in to The Riverside Ground to give Rammy there highest ever gate, a figure that stood for nearly twenty years until FCUM came to town.

Having been to Wembley in 1997/98, the town had FA Trophy hopes again and progression to the Quarter Finals but a poor showing at Forest Green saw us go out 4-1. In the league we finished 18th with safety only being achieved in the last couple of games with a 3-1 home win against Leek Town when Lee Elam scored what today would be referred to as a wonder goal.

Futch was replaced as boss in December 1999 with the club struggling in 21st place, his replacement was Mark Wright who was to bring about a remarkable transformation. Full of ambition and with a thirst for success Wright's impact was immediate and from looking like certainties for relegation Wright brought success and the fans returned as we went on to finish in 9th place. The FA Cup saw us go out to an unfortunate 2-1 defeat at Darlington whilst in the Trophy we again reached the Quarter Finals but lost 1-0 at home to Kingstonian having done the hard bit and drawn away from home.

Hopes of a return to the Football League were probably at their highest ever as we kicked off the 2000/01 season. One win in the first four games put us on the back foot but improved form saw us in second place at the end of November and hopes remained high. We never dropped below fourth from then on in but realistically were never in with a true shout. The gates were holding up well, the Wright profile ensured great media coverage but it was clear that his thirst for success was not going to happen at Haig Avenue and it came as no surprise when he left the club at the end of the season with several players following him out of the door. We reached the Second Round of The FA Cup going down 2-1 at home to Kingstonian in front of 3659 home fans, an excellent turn out.

Kingstonian went on to draw Arsenal. The Trophy once again saw us reach the Quarter Final and the town responded once again with 800 making the trip to Chester to see us go down to a highly controversial 1-0 defeat. No matter how many times you watch the DVD of the game you can never see why referee Bobby Pollock, famously quoted as being an "Everton Fan" by Wright, gave the free kick that led to the goal.

Phil Wilson stepped in to the managerial hot seat for the start of the 2001-02 season when mid table was achieved comfortably. We exited the FA Cup in the first round at Dagenham & Redbridge and the Trophy at Gresley Rovers (0-1) after being held 1-1 at home. Having been 4th in early January a finishing position of 15th was disappointing.

Simon Parke finished the season as leading scorer with 16 league goals

The 2002/03 season probably ranks as the most topsy turvy any club could possibly imagine. We were fourth in November, we had beaten Notts County in the FA Cup but we ended up being relegated on the final day of the season. Wilson departed at the start of February to be replaced by the hapless Mike Walsh. From hero to zero in 4 months.

Nobody knows what happened following the excellent giant killing win over Notts County but the wheels fell off in a big way. The Notts County game was on Match Of The Day and saw us come back from 2-0 down with four sensational goals, one of which, from Syd Pickford came close to winning goal of the season on national TV. It was a day of high emotion that everyone present will never forget. We went on to lose 3-0 at home to Farnborough in the next game and from then on it was down hill. Only a remarkable 4-3 win at a waterlogged Halifax in March gave us a bit of hope but things were looking bleak. We all thought we had done enough however and relegation was impossible but we went into the last game of the season at Stevenage knowing we had to win to survive. It was abject surrender and in front of a sizeable travelling contingent who made the most of a generous travel subsidy from Charlie Clapham to pack out the Stevenage away end the Yellows ten year stay in the Conference was over.

It was Northern Premier League football in 2003/04 with Walsh somewhat surprisingly being asked to carry on as boss.

A four game opening run against poor teams gave us false hope, the first decent team to come along beat us and Walsh looked out of his depth and his final game came at Vauxhall Motors when we lost 2-1 in the FA Cup.

Little known Liam Watson took over as boss, his first match seeing a 2-1 win at Radcliffe with the Yellows sitting in tenth spot. Success wasn't immediate for Watson as he totally rebuilt the team but there were some promising signs and some great results 5-0 at Whitby, 4-1 at Blyth being the highlights, gates started to improve and hopes were high for the 2004/05 season, did Watson have enough experience to carry it through, the fans wanted Conference football back at Haig Avenue, could he deliver it.

Could he!

Rob Urwin tells his story of the 2004/05 championship season:-

You somehow got the feeling after our first match against Vauxhall Motors it could be our year, 1-0 down, down to 10 men and a penalty against us. Dicko saves it and we go on to win 2-1 with Terry Fearn's notching the first of what would be a club goal scoring record 33 goals.

I think the away game at Barrow summed up the season for me, we had an excellent following for a midweek game, everyone was behind the team and the performance was superb. We should have beaten Hinckley in our next match when the most ridiculous decision of the season ruled out a perfectly legitimate goal and the match finished 0-0.

The wheels then fell off against Ashton United and we lost 2-1, it's strange but if you look at our eight defeats in this season two came against relegated clubs.

By the end of September we were 5th having been beaten at home by a very impressive Kettering team on the back of defeats at Alfreton and Gainsborough and we all felt it may have to be the play offs.

The season kick started at Droylsden with a superb 3-1 win and we all thoroughly enjoyed this victory!

An excellent 3-1 FA Cup win over previously unbeaten Hyde saw us draw Hereford at home in the 1st round proper, a game that would test our credentials against a top Conference team. We lost 3-1 and in all honesty were simply outclassed on the day against a very impressive Hereford team. In the Trophy we had beaten Gateshead after a replay and Kings Lynn (a 4hour journey for a regionalised game this one) before going out 1-0 at the eventual finalists Hucknall Town after a 2-2 draw at Haig Avenue. I groaned when we equalised in the second minute of injury time as it meant we were getting well behind with our league fixtures. In fact we only played one league game in the whole of November.

We went top on Boxing Day after the 2-0 win over Stalybridge. The return match on New Years day at Bower Fold which we won 5-3 has to go down as one of the most amazing games you have ever seen. How it finished I do not know, the pitch was underwater and most other matches in the region were being abandoned but somehow it ran the full 90 minutes.

By the time we got round to playing our next match we were down to 2nd but had games in hand on the leaders Kettering who we played next. Win and we would be within 2 points with 3 games in hand lose and we were 5 behind, it was a must not lose game. An excellent following took to the roads and made the journey to Rockingham Road with more than a little trepidation. What a game it turned out to be, the 5-0 win was easily the best performance of the season to date and for the first time I started to believe we were in with a chance of winning the league.

The 2-1 win over Gainsborough in the next home game saw us score the winner in the 2nd minute of added time to go back to the top. We went on to comfortably beat Worcester 3-1 before Droylsden came and were conquered 3-0 which we all thought would put them out of the title race, how wrong we all were.

The next game was easy, an away match at the leagues whipping boys, Bradford (Park Avenue). Oh dear, everything went wrong and we were hammered 3-1 and in all honesty it could have been 6 or 7. The gloom set in, we were still top but could this be the game that would cost us the league, we followed this up with a dour 0-0 against an incredibly boring Lancaster City team and I was starting to get jittery. A 3-1 home win against a poor Alfreton side and a very lucky 2-1 win at Worksop raised the spirits and we were back on track.

However, two consecutive 0-0's at home followed by a 3-2 reverse at home to Harrogate really saw the panic button being pressed. By this time Droylsden and Nuneaton had started making a surge up the table and were clearly emerging as the main challengers. A comfortable 3-0 win at Ashton followed by a 2-1 win against Moor Green and an excellent 3-0 win at Vauxhall Motors saw us maintain top spot but the pack were closing. Next up was Redditch. A poor ground and a poor pitch but after 70 minutes we were 2-0 up and cruising. We lost 3-2 with the winner coming in the 88th minute. We went down to 2nd place with Droylsden taking over at the top for the first time.

It was a midweek trek to Hucknall next. After 30 minutes we were 2-0 up and cruising, by half time it was 2-2. History had repeated itself but this time we were playing well and I felt that at half time we could still win this one. Carl Baker's super free kick which the keeper said "he didn't see until it hit the back of the net" put us 3-2 up and then a wonder strike from the goal machine that is Fearn's made it 4-2 we were back on top. The next home game was Hinckley and the 3-2 scoreline flattered Hinckley in a game we dominated from start to finish.

It was then Hucknall again, this time at home. Poor old Hucknall had had to play 9 games in 18 days because of their Trophy exploits but they came and put up a good fight. All ears were on the score at Worcester were Droylsden were playing and when the

half time score of Worcester 1 Droylsden 0 was announced we were feeling pretty good however we were only 0-0 so work to be done. At the moment we scored, through Terry Fearn who in doing so broke the club goalscoring record, Droylsden equalised. Ten or so minutes later we heard Worcester had scored to go 2-1 up. The roar that greeted the news that they had scored again to make it 3-1 made the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end. It was back in our hands. If Droylsden didn't win at Hucknall, on the Wednesday night the title was ours.

Several Southport fans including myself went to Hucknall. I know that is a bit odd but you had to! Hucknall missed an open goal after 40 seconds and were playing well but at half time it was 1-0 to The Bloods. Up until the 70th minute I thought they might do it but they ran out of steam and Droylsden won 4-0.

It all went down to the final day of the season but the good thing was it was in our hands, however, Droylsden had a home banker against Worksop and we were at Harrogate who needed a win to qualify for the play offs. It looked bleak on paper. Nuneaton had kept on winning but needed to win 15-0 on the last day of the season so they were out of it.

The build up to the game was great, the club had given everyone a £5 voucher for Harrogate which saw us get in for half price and coaches were laid on for £10. The highest ever following for a league game (I think it just about beats Marine in 1992/93) took to the roads. The away support all season had been magnificent but this was incredible and easily surpassed expectations.

By half time we were leading 3-0 and Worksop were beating Droylsden 1-0, it was dreamland! After 67 minutes it was 5-0 and Worksop were winning 3-0, the title was ours! The celebrations at the end of the match reminded me of Emley in 1992/93. These days come around so infrequently for a small club that you have to make the most of them.

An excellent finish to certainly the most exciting season I can remember in my 33 years as a fan. How would we do back in a much changed and more professional Conference? 2005/06 was to be a long hard season but Liam Watson never had any doubt, we would not go down and he was proved right. Survival was assured in the penultimate game at Grays Athletic

It had looked impossible in October when the NL club record for time without a goal was broken with 618 minutes being notched and we also experienced seven consecutive defeats but the team spirit and fight in the team was never bettered in all our thirty seasons and it was this that was universally accredited with being the reason for our survival. We also won the Lancashire Junior Cup at Leyland in a very subdued game and on a night that saw us go bottom of the table.

The 2006/07 season started early and in chaos. Liam Watson left the club on 23rd May 2006 and from then on it was downhill. It depends who you listen to and which version you believe as to what actually happened. Liam had resigned and it left us in a mess and with the appointment of his replacement being left until 13 June we effectively lost 6 weeks of the close season.

His replacement was Paul Cook, no managerial pedigree but lots of experience and with lots of contacts in the game, or so we thought. It started to go horribly wrong as player after player left and the ones coming in didn't really inspire or enthuse the fans and by the time kick off came around we didn't know what to expect as a virtually new team took to the field against Woking. We could and should have won that game as Mark Boyd missed a penalty. Next up was Halifax (late goals guaranteed) Town and they didn't let us down scoring with the last kick of the game for the second season running to deny us 3 points. Instead of 6 points we had 2. The late goals were going to be a major feature of the season with 18 coming in the last 10 minutes and we dropped 11 points and suffered an FA Trophy exit between the 89th and 97th minutes of matches, they would have made a big difference in the final reckoning. A bad home defeat against Rushden & Diamonds was followed by a fortunate but very welcome win at Burton Albion with the goal of the season being scored by Mark Boyd. We kept getting some good results, 2-2 draws at (runaway leaders at the time) Oxford, York and Aldershot were interspersed

with poor home performances. An FA Cup defeat at home to Conference North Kettering was what we thought the result that would possibly see the end of Cook. It was not to be. Results continued to be mixed but a disastrous spell over the Christmas period culminating in a 3-1 defeat at Northwich which saw us go bottom saw Cook sacked. Dino Maamria and Steve Whitehall were put in charge for the home game against Grays which we won 3-1. A very unlucky 94th minute defeat at Salisbury in the FA Trophy saw us exit that competition. Peter Davenport took up the reins at Crawley where we lost 2-1 with, you guessed it, a goal in added time. A highly creditable point at Morecambe was followed by a home defeat to Forest Green. However we now embarked on a decent run which saw us climb up to 21st. We then came up against the top two with the new runaway leaders Dagenham & Redbridge hammering us 4-1 and Oxford just scraping home 1-0 a defeat which put us bottom of the table. The crunch game at St Albans saw us draw 2-2 with another late goal going against us and most of us starting getting out the maps to Workington and Redditch. Defeats at Stevenage (two late goals again) and at home to Weymouth when Jason Matthews (the keeper) scored with a wind assisted clearance in the 89th minute saw us way behind with no hope, or so it seemed. A good point at Woking followed up with a point at home to Halifax who again scored in added time was not enough and most of the supporters had given up. Some hope with a 5-1 win against Stafford followed by an excellent 3-2 victory at Rushden & Diamonds followed by a super home showing against Burton Albion and we were back in the mix. This was followed by a 4-0 win at play off contenders Gravesend & Northfleet, we were still in with a chance. Unlikely but possible. The downside was we had to play York and Exeter who both needed wins to confirm their play off places. Excellent marketing of the home game saw our home NL home attendance record shattered as 3206 turned up at Haig Avenue, the highest home league gate for 33 years. It was not to be though and the 1-0 defeat virtually condemned us to relegation. It was confirmed the following Tuesday when results went the wrong way and we were down. A full Trust In Yellow coach made the trip to Exeter out of loyalty for what turned out to be a big game for The Grecians who needed a win to qualify for the play offs. We gave them a mighty scare and lead up until the 65th minute but two goals in two minutes saw Exeter take command and make the play offs. The atmosphere once they scored was probably the best ever heard at a Southport NL game, they were noisy! This was the highest away NL gate (6670) we had ever played in front of, in two weeks we had beaten the home and away attendance records. We had to build to bounce back stronger than last time. We had struggled for the two seasons we spent in The Conference National

The positives, Haydn Preece, whose appointment as Chief Executive was a masterstroke, Haydn loves the club and the energy and enthusiasm he showed during the season was unbelievable. Some great off field activity which considering the poor season on the field saw even the most perennial of moaners admit he was doing a good job in that area.

Trust In Yellow continued to flourish with 345 members in place. Coaches ran to 18 of the 24 first class games, a superb effort. The idea had been to run the coaches at break even and this was achieved. Considering some of the fare on offer at times it was a remarkable achievement. A regular group of followers took to the roads and the 45 minute stops at Norton Canes Services on the M6 Toll Road became legendary. The Trust also worked closely with the club in a number of other areas and relationships between fans and officials improved.

The 2007/08 season saw the club stay full time, a decision which came as a welcome surprise and one which saw us installed as one of the favourites. We started the season with a bang and were top after day one. It was to be the only time we did hit the top though! Never out of the top seven we were always looking likely to be in the play offs but very rarely looked like getting the automatic promotion place. Poor home form was largely responsible for that with far too many draws. There were some sparkling away showings with the highlights being a tremendous 5-1 win at AFC Telford and an excellent 2-0 win at Nuneaton Borough. Davenport was sacked after a disastrous showing at

Solihull Moors which saw us lose 4-1. There were just five games to go and most supporters, particularly those who had been to Solihull, had given up hope of even reaching the play offs, all was not well! The inspired appointment of Gary Brabin until the end of the season saw us lose his first game in charge against already crowned champions, Kettering 1-0, but the remaining four games were won, we needed to win our last game at Vauxhall to ensure a play off place, and it was Stalybridge Celtic in our first ever venture into play off territory. Considering our poor home form, playing away in the second leg was what we all wished for. However it was a great home showing when a 1-0 victory was the least we deserved. The town responded well and three coaches were organised by Trust In Yellow for the trip to Stalybridge with everyone in high spirits and over 500 fans made the trip. Celtic went 2-0 up and all looked lost but a late own goal saw the game go in to extra time. No further goals and it was penalties where it was heartbreak time, particularly for Liam Blakeman who was the one to miss the penalty and we went down 5-3 to ensure we had another season in Conference North.

Tony Gray broke a club record when he scored in eight consecutive league games. He did actually score in ten consecutive games if you include Lancashire Junior Cup matches. Talking of the Lancashire Junior Cup we won it 4-1 against Chorley at Leyland. The sixth time we had won it in our thirty seasons.

Having been appointed as manager on a permanent basis, Gary Brabin quit the club and took up a post at Cambridge United to leave the club in turmoil. It took until June 23rd to appoint a replacement and that replacement saw Liam Watson return to the club bringing virtually the whole of the Burscough team with him. The circumstances surrounding Liam's return were shrouded in sadness as it was an unfortunate illness to The Linnetts chairman, Chris Lloyd, that saw a massive cost cutting operation put in place at Burscough which saw the wholesale transfer at a cost of £30000 of players to Southport.

The 2008/09 season saw us once again reach the play offs this time going out 2-1 to Gateshead. It was another up and down season with the highs being a super 3-0 home win against high flying Torquay United in the FA Trophy, a great night in Wrexham for a 2-1 win in the Setanta Shield and some sparkling individual displays from Mark Duffy who was transferred to Morecambe.

Inconsistency in the league was to be the club's undoing and the season tailed off culminating in a 5-1 defeat in our last league match away at Farsley when an under strength Southport side took to the field in a game when a win could have still seen us finish and have the benefit of a home second leg in the play offs. It was not to be and we ended up losing disappointingly in the Play Offs 1-0 at home and drawing 1-1 at Gateshead.

All this was forgotten in the 2009/10 season as we stormed to the Conference North title after a titanic on and off field battle with Fleetwood Town. Trust In Yellow produced a superb brochure entitled A Season To Savour and this superbly written piece by Alan Jones sums the season up perfectly:

Southport Shine In Title Race To Remember By Alan Jones

At four minutes to five on a bright, spring afternoon at Coronation Park, the curtain fell on a season that Southport supporters will never forget. Scenes of jubilation and cheers of joy marked the end of a fiercely-contested quest for promotion, with victory for the Sandgrounders as they brought to a conclusion their three-year exile from Non-League football's top flight.

It had been an exhilarating battle for the Conference North championship, a tale with just about everything. The drama, excitement and controversy had reached a crescendo, and in the end gave way to a wave of elation.

A 3-0 win over Eastwood Town on the closing day of a thrilling campaign brought Southport fans the prize they had patiently waited for. In the summer of 2008, after defeat in a play-off semi-final and the departure of their manager, a return to the Conference Premier seemed a distant prospect for the Haig Avenue faithful.

Yet as supporters poured onto the pitch in Nottinghamshire, the anguish of previous seasons was finally banished.

This has been a season to cherish, an achievement to rank alongside any other in the club's history. Not only have Southport secured a return to the national stage, they have done so against the financial might of their rivals and in a plot full of twists and turns. At times, it looked as though the chance to claim the championship might have been lost in the two-way tussle with Fleetwood Town.

Having charged to the top of the league in October, Southport occupied pole position at the turn of the year, but an enforced three-week break saw them toppled. Dropped points against Redditch, Corby and Gloucester City and defeat at Hinckley United raised question-marks, but Southport ensured they were in a position to seize control of the title race when the opportunity arose.

The chance finally came on Easter Monday, with Fleetwood's loss at Workington meaning Matty McGinn's 90th minute penalty against Northwich Victoria took Southport top, and they would not relinquish their grip.

From then on, the Sandgrounders took full control, and as the march towards the title gathered pace, they looked ever more worthy champions.

Of course, the added ingredient in the promotion mix was Fleetwood's appeal against the expunging of Farsley Celtic's results, lodged in March but not resolved until 24 hours before the final match of the season. In the end, it only added to the sense of achievement within the Southport squad, who overcame all that their rivals could muster.

As things turned out, the removal of the Farsley's record meant the Sandgrounders suffered only four defeats during the course of the season - equalling a club record set in 1992/93.

Their final loss had come in the penultimate match against Alfreton Town. It would have been fitting had the Sandgrounders secured the championship at Haig Avenue - a feat not achieved since 1973 - but there is something about last-day drama that Southport seem to relish.

With 86 points, the Sandgrounders surpassed the tally with which they last won the Conference North, while they suffered half the number of defeats. Yet perhaps the most noticeable improvement from 2005 was the form at Haig Avenue, collecting a magnificent 49 points from a possible 60 at home.

The most satisfying scoreline of the season was the Boxing Day trouncing of Fleetwood, displaying the sort of ruthlessness that will have served notice of the Sandgrounders' intentions for the rest of the campaign.

With the exception of the defeat against Alfreton, Southport have always risen to the big occasion. Eastwood Town and Corby Town sat in first and place respectively when they visited Haig Avenue, but each fell victim to merciless performances from the Sandgrounders.

While their rivals continually made additions to their already expensive squad, Southport's success was achieved with a core of just 17 players, remaining largely unchanged from the previous season. Manager Liam Watson acknowledged that the Sandgrounders were not quite ready for promotion 12 months ago, but his team have clearly matured. Every player has raised their game, with the likes of Matty McGinn and Michael Powell seemingly coming of age.

There are many qualities that define a title-winning team, and Southport have demonstrated them all over the course of the season.

As early as the opening day, the Sandgrounders showed their ability to come from behind against Gloucester City, with Watson's side repeating the trick with a degree of

regularity. Even when performances have dipped below par, such as the visit to Vauxhall Motors in late October, Southport maintained the capacity to eek out the points.

Perhaps the hallmark of a championship team is never knowing when they are beaten. As impressive as the wins were against Fleetwood, Eastwood and Corby, it is the points snatched from matches against Alfreton, Stafford Rangers, Droylsden and Northwich that have separated Southport from the rest.

Although the Sandgrounders' most emphatic wins this season have come at home, it is on the road where they arguably registered their most accomplished team displays. October's victory at AFC Telford United was probably as conclusive as it gets, with Southport oozing authority against one of the division's traditional heavyweights. At Stalybridge Celtic, the Sandgrounders executed their game-plan to perfection, while the first half display against Droylsden, netting three goals in the space of 18 minutes, was simply breathtaking.

As the man responsible for assembling the squad from scratch, Watson has instilled within this group of players many virtues - signing players who have the desire as well as the necessary quality. It is said that a team usually reflects its manager, and this squad has never been lacking in inspiration.

The players will rightly take the plaudits for their endeavours on the pitch, but you have to wonder where Southport would currently be had Watson not returned to Haig Avenue in that summer of 2008. On his arrival, the manager inherited five players - the remains of a squad decimated by defeat in the play-offs and the collapse of the club's foray into the full-time ranks.

The situation was not dissimilar to the one he took over five years earlier. Again Watson has overseen an immediate transformation, and probably no other manager could have performed such a remarkable turnaround. Watson left the club prematurely in 2006, and this time it is hoped that he has the chance to see the fruit of his work.

After three years in the shadows, Southport have stepped back into the limelight, and in doing so they have lit up Haig Avenue with a season to remember.

It was to be a difficult return to football in Non Leagues Premier Division. We opened up with our second best home gate of the season, 1802, against AFC Wimbledon who I think most supporters will agree that over the two games we played them were the best team we played all season.

It was hard to believe that by the end of August we had ten points and sat in fifth place having secured our only away win of the season to date at Kidderminster and two home wins against Alty and, one enjoyed by every SFC fan, a win over Fleetwood.

By the end of September we were 18th having picked up just three more points from home draws against Forest Green, Rushden & Diamonds and Hayes & Yeading. Just four goals scored.

We started October with a win against Tamworth which in retrospect was a vital three points. It was to be an exciting month as we recorded a surprise 2-1 FA Cup win at Wrexham courtesy of two own goals and had a visit from the Premier Sports TV crew for our game against Kidderminster. It was a great game for the watching armchair fans as we shot into a 2-0 lead before being pegged back to 2-2. The downside was the rather harsh sending off of Tony Mc which meant he would miss the big FA Cup tie at home to Sheffield Wednesday but it did give "Dicko" a chance to make his first appearance of the season as sub and he made a couple of outstanding saves which attracted the attention of the post match interview team.

November was dominated by the big FA Cup tie against Sheffield Wednesday with a great buzz about the Club in the week leading up to the game. The day dawned bright and all was set for a great day in front of the live ITV National audience. The gate of 4490 was a bit disappointing but the TV audience witnessed a great game when we twice pulled the score back to level pegging before The Owls ran out deserved 5-2 winners. Unfortunately we went on to lose the remaining games in November which saw us end up in 22nd place with just 18 points.

The weather then took over with just one league game taking place in December, a 2-0 defeat at Fleetwood on the 28th. John Paul Kissock and Karl Ledsham made their debuts in this game and whilst they had little chance to show at Fleetwood, January was to be different. The New Year started with a 1-1 draw at Barrow before our first home game of 2011 saw us thrash Gateshead 5-1 with both JPK and Leddy getting on the scoresheet. It was only a tap in but the build up play to Leddy's goal was excellent. We played eight games in all competitions in the month, crashing out of the FA Trophy to Gateshead. The month ended with a somewhat surprising 4-0 win against York when Shaun Whalley took centre stage and put The Minstermen to the sword with two goals on his second debut. We ended the month in 18th with 28 points and our home form was giving us hope that we could escape the bottom four.

Into February which was to be a cruel month, a 2-2 home draw against Grimsby followed by a 4-0 win against Forest Green but then we had three away defeats on the spin a, disappointing performance at Hayes & Yeading saw us go down 1-0, we then faced Crawley away and go down 1-0 in what was, by all accounts, a good show against The Champions. The month ended with a 2-1 defeat at Bath when Kevin Lee grabbed our 2000th away league goal.

March and nine games on the list. Another home win to start the month, 3-1 against Histon and we were 18th on 35 points but a poor display at Eastbourne when in front of an exuberant away following, the majority of who had booked for the weekend to swell the travelling ranks to 121 we went down 4-1. A shocker at home to Barrow (lost 4-2) was bolstered by a battling 2-2 draw at Rushden before we managed to shock the BSP with a 2-1 home win against Luton in a stirring fight back with two super goals by Moogs and Kev Lee. This defeat led to the sacking of Luton manager Richard Money and the appointment of former 'Port boss, Gary Brabin.

Three days later and we went to Altrincham and scrapped out a vital point to end the month on 41 points and sat in 19th place.

April and Eastbourne came and conquered again and proved once and for all they are our bogey team of the season. A decent 2-2 draw at Mansfield before a 6-0 hammering at Luton although the scoreline flatters the Hatters. Champions Crawley came and beat us 4-0 but won few friends with a cynical display of play acting. It was on to Tamworth and a six pointer. 175 travellers took to the roads and we came away with a 1-0 win. It was a dreadful game but the points edged us ever closer to safety. It was a tepid affair until the 90th minute when all hell broke loose on the pitch with the Tamworth 'keeper getting sent off for spitting in Aaron Turner's face and at the fourth official. Two more Tamworth players saw red in a remarkable end to the game.

Easter Monday saw Darlington at Haig Ave and it looked good when we went 1-0 up with JPK scoring a great free-kick before The Quakers pegged it back and we were hanging on grimly in the final few minutes for the point.

Last match of the season and a point at Kettering would see us safe. When Shaun Whalley equalized mid way through the second half it was looking good but a free kick three minutes from time and a tap in in added time put paid to BSP football in 2011/12. 353 travelling fans gave the lads great backing but it was not to be and we will be back in Conference North for the 2011/12 season.

Oh no we won't! in a dramatic turn of events Rushden & Diamonds were expelled from the Blue Square Premier giving The Sandgrounders a reprieve at the AGM of the Football Conference. A threatened appeal never materialized which meant it was July 4th before our place in the premier division of Non League football was confirmed. An interesting summer to say the least.

