

AN ORAL HISTORY OF BRENTFORD FOOTBALL CLUB

INTERVIEWEE:	William (Billy) Grant
DATE OF BIRTH	1964, Isleworth
PARENTS' OCCUPATIONS	Father: electrical engineer (BBC) Mother: receptionist
INTERVIEW LOCATION	Griffin Park, Brentford
DATE OF INTERVIEW	24th February 2020
INTERVIEWER:	David Christie
SUMMARISER:	Celia Holman

Billy's parents immigrated from Jamaica (father) and Guyana (mother) in the 1950s, and his interview provides a wide-ranging account of being a black supporter at a time when there were very few black fans and even fewer black players. Since first coming to see Brentford in his mid-teens, Billy has been a loyal, involved and 'entrepreneurial' supporter, and he speaks eloquently and with enthusiasm about a range of topics. As Billy ends his interview saying, "this has been my home for 40 years."

A schoolmate encouraged Billy to first go to a match when he was 14-15: "it was brilliant". A group of 12 mates used to go together, "bunking over" the turnstiles to avoid paying.

He soon became a regular on the "huge terrace" at the Royal Oak end. "Everyone knew each other" and it was "singing section" of the ground, consisting of several hundred people: "anybody could make up songs." Brentford was "not the best team in the world in the world, but that didn't matter".

The late '70s/early '80s found the National Front campaigning in the vicinity of football grounds, to include Brentford. Billy goes into detail about skinhead gangs e.g. the Hounslow Skins. He was "always on [his] toes" and made sure people had "got [his] back". He also needed to avoid certain fellow Brentford supporters. He felt the club "turned a blind eye" to the behaviour of some supporters so as not to lose ticket revenue.

The late '80s/early '90s saw a change in "terrace culture". The rave/warehouse/acid house music scene brought people together outside of football. "Gazza [Paul Gascoigne] crying" at Italia '90 was also a turning point - football was no longer perceived as a violent game.

In the early '90s, Billy started to run a travel scheme for away matches - "The Official Unofficial". This was coaches for fans that would fly "under the radar of the police", with different pick-up points for each match. It was "proper luxury travel", stopping off at locations on the way. Billy also introduced boat travel to certain away matches, much to the annoyance of the police.

He also informally joined forces with Dave Lane of the fanzine 'Beesotted' and they "combined their fan base."

It was while attending away matches that Billy encountered violence between supporters, some of it racial. Birmingham City "were on another level" and at Cardiff "they just didn't care", throwing sharpened coins at visiting supporters. He recounts an example of racially

motivated aggression when, aged about 15 at an away Reading game, a gang of fans shouted “get the black bastard” in an underpass and he “legged it.”

In terms of rival football clubs, whilst QPR (Queens Park Rangers) has been Brentford’s “historic” rival, “for me, it’s all about Fulham”, even though the two teams weren’t in the same league for almost 15 years. He also speaks of the “cauldron of noise” in the stadium when Brentford played “proper rival[s]” Birmingham City in the ‘90s.

Billy speaks of some of the early “role models” - 1st generation British West Indian players - and of black players on the international scene e.g. Pele. Chris Kamara was “a bit of a hero” for Billy and Francis Joseph “took no messing from anyone” when it came to racial abuse from supporters. Certain supporters “didn’t hold it back” and “no-one would pull you up on it”. Billy briefly mentions homophobia and the prevailing attitude of “Who are we offending? There’s no-one around us who’s gay.”

David Webb (“Webby”) - Billy started to get more involved with the fanzine ‘Beesotted’ at this time as it was a “way of getting out alternative info about the club” reflecting the fans’ discontentment. He recounts hiring a large van and pasting a slogan on the side criticising Webb’s actions. He drove it to David Webb’s house and then around central London, to include Trafalgar Square.

Ron Noades - he had “one objective in mind” and “we were in a lot of trouble”. Initially, though, “Noadsey” was welcomed and fans would attend matches wearing white wigs. The ABeeC Campaign was launched to save the ground from being sold and the club moved to Woking. Billy has “a lot of time for folk who were involved.”

2012-3 saw the fanzine ‘Beesotted’ embracing digital platforms and “reaching out to different people.” Billy and others had been making videos since the early ‘90s, hiring a video camera from Radio Rentals. ‘Beesotted’ launched video blogging before many of the large clubs, and moved quickly into doing podcasts. Digital platforms were also a way of engaging positively with ‘rival’ supporters - digital media “helped to facilitate football friendliness.”

Women and football - as women’s football has become higher profile, so the game in general has become more relevant to women. Billy talks of his daughter’s relationship with football, as both a player and a spectator.

Billy characterises Brentford as “friendly in a proper way”, reflecting a relationship between people from all sorts of backgrounds with a shared love of football. At Brentford “we don’t buy into the bigness” and “we’re a little bit left field”. He ends the interview with the hope that the move from Griffin Park, and perhaps into the Premier league, won’t alter the ethos of the club which has been “my home for 40 years.”