

Clubs Go Public

As the Football League celebrates its centenary, Steve Tongue looks back to how it all began and John Williams examines an increasingly common experience for football clubs - the threat of bankruptcy

The recent furore over Robert Maxwell's activities in the world of English football has, once again, focused attention on the finance and control of professional soccer clubs. Maxwell's brief, but highly-publicised, control of three first division clubs highlights the dominant role of private capital in the sport as well as the parlous financial state of most soccer outfits. With 80 of the 92 League clubs recently declared insolvent - and technically, therefore, to be trading illegally - it takes no genius to work out that the game's finances are in a mess with apparently few potential rescuers in sight.

The media's clamorous concern with football's individual private investors, who have ranged from absent Americans to pop stars and unashamed asset-strippers as well as major empire-builders like Maxwell, has masked, however, the fact that in these hard times more and more clubs are turning to the public sector for cash and support. In recent years, and despite constraints on local spending, local authority funds - usually from Labour-controlled councils - have been invested in a number of famous, but ailing, English clubs. Middlesborough, Birmingham City, Wolverhampton Wanderers, Preston North End, Millwall and Leeds United are among those clubs which have benefitted recently from new deals with their respective authorities. In turn, local people are getting a much greater response from clubs which, traditionally, like to lock themselves safely away between the weekly 90 minutes 'on the park'.

At Leeds, for example, the local authority recently bought the club premises and has established supporter and council representation on the club board, promising,

perhaps, increasing democratisation of club affairs. It also launched a much-needed anti-racist campaign at the Elland Road ground.

In Lewisham, local authority sponsorship of the Millwall club has produced an expansion of club activities with local disadvantaged groups and a club commitment to the council's anti-racist and anti-sexist policies. Hence the League's first creche and a match programme stripped of sexist images and innuendo. It may not cut much ice with the local Bushwhackers (the club's terrace hardcases) but such moves may yet bring a warmer and more welcoming glow to the formidably chilly Blow Lane.

More recently still, at Halifax and also at Peterborough, the local football club has been rescued from the clutches of the administrators by local councils determined to ensure the survival of a valued, if for too long an inward-looking, cultural and sporting institution. Opposition, locally, to 'football on the rates' means the final status of little Halifax Town remains as yet undecided. But Calderdale council still holds 76% of the club's shares, and leading Labour politicians seem implacably opposed to the reintroduction of the traditional model of an unaccountable club chairman and directors. Smaller clubs in terminally dire financial straits continue to watch developments at Halifax with a curious mixture of anticipation and suspicion.

With the MSC-funded 'football and the community' scheme, already successfully in operation at Preston and elsewhere and due to spread to 40 League clubs by the end of this year, it seems inevitable that links between professional clubs and local authorities will continue to grow. At the moment, club facilities and resources re-

main chronically underfunded and under-utilised, and too many clubs continue to see 'marketing' solely in terms of private sponsorship and lotteries. Perhaps these new developments will at least make it more difficult for clubs to describe themselves, schizophrenically, as 'private concerns' when, for those brief periods, the going is good, and 'community resources' only when faced with liquidation and in need of rescue. In time, too, they may mean that Captain Bob will have to search harder for clubs desperate to welcome him aboard.*

Football League

As with all the best ideas, the most surprising thing about the Football League is that nobody thought of it earlier.

The Football Association had been founded in 1863, following an inevitable split with the rugby men who wanted hacking and handling as integral parts of their sport, and in 1872 Wanderers, an itinerant home counties team, had won the first FA Cup final, beating the Royal Engineers.

By the time professionalism was legalised in 1885, avoiding the sort of split between northern pros and southern amateurs which would irrevocably divide rugby a decade later, there was already a flourishing network of clubs. They had sprung, variously, from churches and YMCAs, factories and schools. Aston Villa had been founded in 1874; Birmingham (as Small Heath) in 1875, West Bromwich Albion in 1879; Bolton and Blackburn dated from the mid 70s, Everton from 1878.

A combination of social factors, above all the Saturday half-day, meant that they were well supported at the gate. But for two more years, although committed to paying regular wages, clubs continued to play in a vacuum of friendly fixtures, filled only by the FA Cup. The Football League itself was not constituted until 1888.

Football had taken a grip on the people and within four years a vexed Tory was moved to complain that: 'The lower middle classes and the working classes may be divided into two sets: fabians and footballers. And 'pon my word it is difficult to say which is the greater nuisance.' •