

The fanzine that you are reading passed its thirtieth birthday 2 months ago. To commemorate this, and to pay tribute to some of those who have been instrumental in making it what it was and is, all eight past and current editors came together on a balmy late summer evening for a little reminiscing about their time as custodians of this fine organ. This is the second part of their story...

EPISODE II – “The Wilderness Years” (1996-2006)

So here we are again, reflecting on further indignities brought upon our beloved club thanks to its careless capricious owner – this time, the first clear six-goal hiding in a generation, together with our first taste of the trapdoor into non-league for well over a decade. So, why not lighten the mood a little by taking a trip back to a time when Orient were... still pretty rubbish, on the whole.

This middle part of trilogy of Orient histories follows the classic form of any middle section – gloomy, irresolute, and grappling with the challenges set down by a spectacular opening chapter. And at its heart it is a character play, a story of two men and the unresolved wariness between them that supplied the tension needed to sustain the drama. Think Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, Michael and Vito Corleone, Electra and Orestes, Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele.

So, our protagonist: Jamie Stripe. The last of the original Jedi Knights that had been with the mag since its earliest days nestling in its founder’s bosom. Taking over in 1996, his stint in the editorial hotseat covers the whole of this middle decade, making him (by some considerable margin) the longest serving editor of the fanzine. And these years almost completely co-incided with Orient’s longest ever residence in the basement division.

And on the other side, our antagonist: Barry Hearn. When Jamie started editing the mag, Hearn had been the club’s owner and chairman for just one season – a season which, after all Hearn’s bluster on taking over, had seen Orient finish in their lowest league position ever (at the time of writing, anyway).

Stripe describes the moment the baton was passed to him in the Northcote (where it had all started a decade previously), with all three of his predecessors in attendance. With Tom Davies’ burgeoning career in media starting to impinge upon his Orientear duties, Knight looked around the table and uttered the fateful words “there’s just one person here who’s never edited the bloody thing”. Within moments, white smoke was sent up the pub chimney and Stripe was bundled into the back of a windowless white Transit van for his coronation.

While Stripe’s passion for Orient and his very pronounced sense of fair play are undeniable, he is probably the least overtly political of all the zine’s editors. Looking back, he points out that by the mid-90s football was starting to become fashionable (thanks in part to Sky, “Cool Britannia” and Euro 96) “what you have to remember is when Dave Knight started it, football was under attack – coming out of Thatcherism, everyone was demonising football fans”, and offers a surprisingly downbeat view that “a lot of the battles had been fought and mostly lost, but if you look at nowadays there’s a lot more to be fought now”, adding “but we thought OK if we’re gonna be political, let’s be political about Orient”.

Also, fanzines had by now become part of the mainstream of football culture, with the initial punkish energy starting to dissipate, sales plateauing and a shift from matchday purchases to subscriptions. But this wasn’t all that Stripe had to come to terms with, as the scandalous largesse of the previous administration became clear: “I took over with just £13 in the bank, we’d just sponsored a game... so we went back to basics, not glossy paper, a 24 page magazine but we crammed a lot into it”.

Presaging Cameronian austerity by 15 years, Stripe muses that his regime "reflected what was going on on the pitch, for 10 years a pretty joyless experience for Orient supporters".

From the beginning, Stripe had a very clear vision for the mag, explaining that "I kinda wanted it to be like a cross between SHOOT and Private Eye" with a shift in emphasis toward interviews because "we were awful on the pitch and you can only write 'we're shit' so many times". And so he sought out ex-players like Lee Harvey, Bobby Fisher, and Gary Bellamy as well as getting audiences with then current managers. While this shows how things had changed from the frostiness of Frank Clark's attitude to the mag when it was first starting out, the interview with Tommy Taylor (which, along with the Paul Brush interview is cited by Stripe as his worst ever), was difficult - with Taylor trying to intimidate from the off, and questioning why Stripe wanted to talk to him. Perhaps while the club, under Hearn, was starting to learn how to handle the fanzine, the managers weren't always entirely on message.

At the other end of the spectrum, Pat Holland, one of the first interviewees of the Stripe era, was much more forthcoming. Stripe recalls that he "was actually quite personable, we came in he got us a cup of tea and he started telling me things that really she shouldn't, like how managers sign players and they get part of the signing on fee or part of the wages. So they would sign players not because it would benefit the football club as a whole, but because it was a mutual quid pro quo deal". Yet again, the Orientear was ahead of its time in exposing wrongdoing in the industry.

And as for the sainted Ling, Stripe remembers that he "was very good, very candid, we had a great chat and he just asked to be judged on what he would do, not on what had gone before - he had worked under the predecessors and suggested he knew what had gone wrong". Though Stripe adds that "that terrible run in 2004 when we won about 1 in 15... if Becchetti had been in charge then he wouldn't have survived".

Stripe points with particular pride to his interviews with the Football Licencing Authority (to check out some rather egregious claims made by the club's Stadium Director John Goldsmith) and the Community Sports Scheme (which has since become the Score centre on Oliver Road), but reserves the greatest fondness for his interviews with ex-players, especially the 2 wonderful hours he spent with Gary Bellamy in a Tesco's restaurant near Bishop's Stortford.

Although Stripe and Hearn circled one another malevolently for a decade, they never actually clashed directly in interview - with both the Orientear's pieces with him in Stripe's time (the only occasions that a fanzine has interviewed an Orient chairman) being carried out by ex-editor Tom Davies. It's curious, but perhaps strangely fitting that Stripe and Hearn never met directly in battle, but just glared and gestured at one another through a protracted stalemate.

This stand-off did have a real psychological effect on Stripe though, as he became increasingly monomaniacal. Fewer people were writing in with contributions, his predecessors were all enjoying comfortable retirements, and Stripe found himself doing more and more on his own "at one stage I was writing about half of it which was really bad, you don't wanna be doing that... at some stages I was ploughing a lonely furrow". For Stripe, it became something of a solitary vigil, trying to shine some sort of light onto what Hearn was up to.

It is worth bearing in mind that the fanzine boom times were now over, with many others closing down, and the mag's circulation drifting down to under a thousand. And with the club stuck in a rut, attendances low, and competition emerging in the form of the official online messageboard, Stripe had a lot to contend with. At one point, his matchday distribution network was looking very lean, a

situation that changed somewhat when future editor Sean McNeill joined the team “doubling the number of sellers”.

Although Stripe claims he “was never really anti-Hearn” he admits that “I spent a lot of time writing real acid articles about [him]”. He adds that “in the early days it was more like trying to prick his conscience, we are a football club first and foremost, and we are dying on our arse. What are you going to do about it?”

As time went by, Stripe discovered that the biggest question mark over Hearn was around his priorities, “he was happy to pay £320k for the ground lease, but wouldn’t pay £50k for a centre forward... he wanted to build up the business side before the football side, he was happy to knock the old south stand down and leave it as a car park for 18months while we played in a three sided ground but he was in no hurry to develop the football side”.

And Stripe remembers how that split supporters, with “a large group saying ‘if you don’t have Barry Hearn you don’t have a club’”, arguments that have been reheated recently by some defenders of Francesco Becchetti (who didn’t actually save the club from going out of business when taking over, it is worth remembering). In any event, Stripe’s determination to keep questioning what Hearn was up to earned him plenty of criticism from fellow supporters... “a lot of people had a go at the Orientear for taking a stance on this... I had a lot of people writing to me saying I was out of order”.

Apart from a couple of play-off final false dawns, success on the pitch was elusive, while Hearn was busy turning the club upside down off the pitch. And all the while Hearn’s management of press, fans and fanzines could be abrasive, but it was usually effective. As founding editor Dave Knight put it “you were always wary about having too much of a dig at him because he’d come back at ya, he’s a clever guy”. Stripe talks of a relationship that was never even moderately warm, but did have some grudging respect “I did 16 or 17 AGMs with Barry Hearn and he could just like... after that incident with the broken window we all turned up at the SC ready to go to war with him, he just took the wind out of people’s sails saying ‘I don’t need your money, I’m in charge’... thing about Barry Hearn was that no bad how things got he’s always come and front it out – he’d come out and tell you to **** off... and he would put his side of the story and he wouldn’t give a **** whether you liked it or not”.

So Stripe saw his role as editor not just as vehicle for expressing his passionate determination to see the club succeed again, but to hold BH to account for all the promises and things he spun... “alright we’re not daft enough to believe it all, but we’re gonna hold you to it. I wasn’t expecting Premier League, but I wasn’t expecting 11 years in the bottom division”. He adds “we can pressure Hearn and his stances... we had a thing about racism, we had a player from Kosovo Ahmet Berkovic – Barry Hearn made some comments and upset a few people, if it had been said now with social media, there would be more widespread uproar - we always called him out on this sort of thing”.

But Stripe does acknowledge that Hearn’s careful stewardship had its upsides – and points to the collapse of ITV Digital in 2002, which led record number of clubs into administration and financial distress. During this time, Orient was never in trouble, although “that was the one time that Barry Hearn got involved in the playing side when Minton and Lockwood were haggling over contracts and he said they won’t play again until this gets sorted out”.

He says “I looked at my brief as being if he does something good I’ll say so, but if he bullshitting I’m gonna call it out. You’ve got to – if you don’t do it as a fanzine you’re not doing it right. It’s up to other people to write in and put the opposite view and I’ll put it in”.

But these years weren't all about Hearn – just as the Orientear revolutionised supporter communications and relationships in the late 1980s, the club's own online messageboard did the same ten years later, taking off just as quickly as the mag had done when it started out. Stripe didn't see this as a problem for the mag though - looking back, he claims it as vindication for his change in approach, "when the messageboard took off that was where people went for a rant about things but what the Orientear could do was interviews and longer articles – the emphasis had to change and it did change... messageboards were instant, but we could do more". Though Stripe observes that "the way football was being covered was changing too... we would always send a copy to BBC London, and even to this day I still get the occasional phone call saying do you wanna come on the radio and talk rubbish about Orient". And, confirming that he wasn't some type of print-obsessed luddite stuck in the 1980s, Stripe is quick to point out that the mag even briefly had its own page on Ceefax.

Of course the fact that Orient's messageboard was (somewhat unusually) owned and actively managed by the club itself, is some indication that Hearn's *modus operandi* for managing the Orient community was rather canny in spite of all his front. It would be wrong to ignore the role that the board had in diverting attention away from independent publications like the Orientear.

Stripe holds no grudges in this regard though, saying that "I'd much rather have it that way than the messageboard now, which in my opinion is toxic, people going out there to wind people up and things are getting lost".

Another intriguing character first pops up in this period too – LOFT. The Orientear and the Fans' Trust have always enjoyed a fraternal relationship, and one wonders whether the little brother is now ready to step up and take the Orientear's founding vision to the next level.

Stripe was always careful to project that guiding principle, "we've always thought that fans should have more say in the running of the club", so when another share issue offered an opportunity, he took the decision to support the fledgling trust: "the Orientear never had a lot of money, but when [LOFT] wanted to buy shares, I took £300 out of the account and gave it to them and said 'get yourself on board'". Stripe is quick to stress that LOFT (who were readers of the mag) didn't ask for money, it was the Orientear who offered it, corporately, with the blessing of all the previous editors.

Stripe goes on; "we bought £100 shares in first issue (1997) so that we could attend the AGM and ask questions, although Hearn would just bat them off... when Barry Hearn was at an AGM he's on the record, and that's why I religiously went to every AGM that he held, and the EGM which was a special vote about the ground – it was basically lip-service as BH had 1.5m shares, me and LOFT had 3000 between us". Nevertheless, Stripe does wonder whether LOFT could have done more to save for the rainy day that seems to be back on the glowering horizon again.

But there's plenty that Stripe looks back on with a smile, including an infamous letter he never published because it called Helen Chamberlain a "chicken shit tart" following an unsavoury incident involving a drum in the away end when Orient beat Torquay 2-1 in 1998 (a match that Torquay had to win to stay up). He also laughs about his unwitting continuation of the Orientear's curse, "I had the classic Orientear editorial – 'if you ask me should Martin Ling should be manager of Leyton Orient my reaction would be these three words no, no, and no' so that's my epitaph yeah!".

Stripe is also rightly proud of once selling a copy to Harry Redknapp that featured a piece "slagging him off during the era he was getting called Bagpuss", and chuckles at the memory of a 'phone call he got from the club press officer who "went months without saying anything about the ground developments, I ended up writing to the local paper – funnily enough the same month he did have something to say about it, I got a snotty phone call from Luke Ritchie saying 'you shouldn't write to

the paper talking about this without telling us first', and I had to tell him we've been talking for months about this and you haven't said anything - yeah, so I did a bit of provoking... what football clubs don't realise is that them in the stand are also allies, you've got to bring them on and not feed them bullshit all the time... there's people who are intelligent and do have expertise".

But there were ructions and dilemmas too, with some anonymous donor pushing '*20 reasons why you shouldn't buy shares in Leyton Orient*' under his door: "I ummed and ahed about publishing it as we didn't wanna be seen to be undermining the share issue but in the end I did with a disclaimer", and Stripe reflects on how the "Taylor Out" protests went on for months and "was much worse than anything Becchetti has had yet".

These were fractious times, with a stone getting lobbed at a window in front of Barry Hearn's gurning face, and semi-retired peripatetic troubadour 'Funky' Lol Ross's career-defining cardboard box protest. Orient may have had a new stand, but prices had gone up, no new players were being bought, and Hearn was publicly quoted calling his detractors "morons".

Curiously, although time has seemed to vindicate Stripe's dogged focus, he's now not so sure: "the big thing about my time as editor was that we'd end up not owning our own ground, which was a major concern because of what was happening at the time at Brighton and elsewhere... We spent a lot of time writing about the ground, it actually got boring for me in the end - looking back at it now it wasn't the greatest idea. In Barry Hearn's mind it all made sense but in any meeting any AGM anything he ever said never came to fruition... the two things we moaned most about were the ground and the team - I could go on for hours about this", he warns.

But, thankfully, the conversation moves on - "when you're editor of a fanzine you get roped into all kinds of weird stuff". It turns out this wasn't anything to do with PVC, car keys lobbed into pyrex bowls, or bacchanalian orgies at massage parlours on the High Road - instead "the people who were developing Championship Manager got in touch, asking me to come up with ratings for the Orient players - and I can't say they are all shit!"

Stripe can also claim some tenuous credit for Orient's modern-day peak in 2013/14: "I would write to BBC London and Trevor Davies at the Hackney Gazette to let them know what was going on at the club - who if he wasn't an Orient fan when I started out, he certainly was by the time I finished!" - so perhaps we should thank him for his role in creating the monster that is Jonny Davies.

The Stripe years may have been tough and bleak at times, but he did his bit to weave the mag and the club ever deeper into the local fabric "just to get Orient into the general consciousness". Barry Hearn, while always a skilled operator on his own account, took some time to get the press and media operation at the club up to scratch, so there was still a big role for the mag in filling that vacuum - not just with supporters, but with the local community and the wider football community. Stripe recalls that "one of the first letters I got was from BBC London saying they're looking at cutting *Sportscene* back and 'can you put something in your magazine to say we should be kept going?' Which we did, and after that they were the only station willing to give Orient some coverage". And "when the Vestry House museum had the (2005) centenary of Orient being a Football League club, we donated loads of stuff to the exhibition".

So what kept Stripe going for so long, given the largely cheerless *milieu* in which he was operating? After all, he freely acknowledges that "Orientear had got a bit stale, it was a new era, and at times it was boring". What's more, he had got married and had two children, more than just a minor distraction, surely? Stripe points to how production became easier, with desktop publishing, the arrival of emailing, and his easy access to his employer's publishing facilities. But the real truth

seems to lie in the conviction with which he says that “as fanzine editor you want to help push the club forward, you want to give people a platform to air their views, and you just want people to be accountable and if you do that I think you’re doing your job”.

Nonetheless, even such incredibly single-minded individuals as Stripe have their shelf-life, and eventually the wear and tear took its toll – “I said in an early season editorial in 2005 that it would be my last season, to get me to 10 seasons”. Indeed, before one particular on air appearance with Danny Kelly (ex-editor of the NME and Q magazine), Kelly asked him “how long have you been editor? 10 years? That is far too long to be doing that!”.

But there were no more of the original crew left to pass this great responsibility on to, so Stripe was immensely relieved one day to be greeted by a couple of young whippersnappers at an Orientear match, offering themselves completely, in body and soul, in service of the mag. But more on them next time...

So it was fitting that Stripe should be rewarded for his endurance by going out on the massive high of the incredible last gasp promotion at Oxford. And it was characteristically gracious of him to bequeath such a promising legacy to his successors.

Jamie Stripe, then – the *Venerable Bede* of the Orientear, bravely keeping the candle of knowledge burning during Orient’s Dark Ages, while savages and pagans rampaged all around him. Or as he more eloquently puts it: “it was hard times”.