

The fanzine that you are reading has just passed its thirtieth birthday. To commemorate this, and to pay tribute to 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 to reminisce about their time as custodians of this fine organ. This is the final chapter of the story that they told...

Episode III – Paper Love in a Digital Climate (2006 - 2016)

"I think nostalgia is the way forward" Matt Arnot, former editor of the Orientear, September 2016

Try and forget the paroxysms of pain that come with supporting Orient right now, and cast your mind back to a happier time, when the club gloried in its sensational escape from the basement division after an incredible few moments at Oxford. This is where the last chapter of our story begins, when the stewardship of the Orientear passed for the first time to someone who had not been part of it from the beginning. And not only that, the editorial duties were vested in not one but two people – a dual premiership that stands comparison with the great complementary double acts of history: Blair and Brown, Cheech and Chong, Barry and Paul Chuckle, Andrew Ridgely and George Michael...

Early in 2005/6, and not knowing how it would end, Jamie Stripe had used his editorial to announce he would be retiring from the position at the end of that season – and called out for someone to replace him. Rory MacQueen and Sean McNeill, who had formed a close friendship through playing for the Orientear football team, nobly decided to put themselves forward – as McNeill puts it "I talked to Rory and said 'I don't wanna see it fold, but I don't think I can do it by myself'". Seamlessly and immediately, proving that their subliminal and almost supernatural understanding still exists now, MacQueen takes up the story... "I said 'that's exactly what I'm thinking'".

Its football team was now becoming the signature Orientear gateway drug, drawing in generations of young men to its web of journalistic intrigue. And McNeill remembers how it all started for this famous partnership: "me and Rory necked a bottle of Baileys in the back of a van on the way to Shrewsbury"

MacQueen: "we lost 12-2 I think"...

McNeill: "one of my first memories is of him before an Orientear match holding a can of Red Stripe going 'anyone want some Red stripe?' ... the two of us just sat there drinking Red Stripe everyone else was out there warming up and doing proper football stuff"

However, we shouldn't be fooled by such hard-drinking buffoonery, as the pair were serious, committed advocates for greater fan involvement. MacQueen in particular brought a history of activism with him: "I'd done a few years on the LOFT committee, which the Orientear had put a few hundred quid into when it started... LOFT was very much in parallel, I always thought we were natural soulmates, although their genesis was totally separate".

Not only were MacQueen and McNeill the first editors that hadn't been involved with the mag from its earliest days under Dave Knight, they were about 15 years younger than their predecessor, and had little knowledge of the others before him. But they were acutely aware of the weight of their inheritance, and the legacy, tradition and heritage they now had to protect – particularly the tradition of drinking.

But the breaks with the past were important, like when Stripe handed over the software (known as Pagemaker) that he had been using to produce the mag, together with a painstaking explanation to the new editors about how to use it. As MacQueen recounts, "Jamie said... these are the facts of life,

this is how you make a fanzine, here's a copy of Pagemaker and by the way it belongs to my employers so don't lose it. We promptly went down to the Royal Sovereign and left it in the pub. That was the end of Pagemaker! He'd spent ages showing us how to use it". This was the freewheeling and buccaneering spirit that suffused the new era, and consigned the old to history (or, more specifically, a skip round the back of the Royal Sovereign in Clapton).

Appropriately, this youthful, progressive movement perfectly mirrored the upturn in the club's own fortunes, and the general feeling at the time that "things can only get better". With a promotion to celebrate, and a season back in the third tier and a whole load of new grounds to visit, the drunken loss of an irreplaceable asset wasn't going to subdue the mood. And in August 2006, MacQueen & McNeill started with a bang with their famous "You Never Doubted Them... Did You?" promotion special, including a 10 track CD. Even though the cover price was increased to £1.50 to help with the extra costs, they still managed to sell over 800 copies – an auspicious start for the new regime.

So, this editorial dyarchy was prepared to graft, take risks, and make sacrifices for the good of the mag, as McNeill guffaws: "I had to ring up work and say I can't come in today... why not?... because I've got 250 CD covers to fold and press and put a CD into... and they were like are you coming in tomorrow?... and I was like I don't think so... at my next appraisal they were like you took two days off at short notice to fold CD covers..."

McNeill continues... "for years after that CD I was getting pestered by Pam, the old lady in the club (the only lady who ever made Barry Hearn shut up at an AGM) asking 'when are you gonna do another CD when are you gonna do another CD?'... eventually we did another one, the Steve White one, and she was like 'I got your new CD' and I was like 'yeah OK', and she was like... 'it's rubbish!'"

After the initial hit of the promotion special, circulation quickly settled into a groove around the 700 mark, reflecting the reality of a club consistently staying just out of harm's way in the lower bowel of the third division. Like many of us, MacQueen and McNeill have particularly fond memories of the 2006/7 season, as Orient managed to survive with much the same squad that had taken them up the previous year. But so far as the mag was concerned, they point to a number of purges and denunciations as sources of pride, including people who'd previously supported other clubs (publishing scandalous photographs of well-known Orient "fans" wearing West Ham, Arsenal, and Manchester United apparel), and devoting large parts of one issue to condemning homophobia.

MacQueen explains, "though things have changed, context has changed over the years, whether it was campaigning or just ranting, the Orientear has always at the root of it always had a stance against racism and homophobia"

McNeill continues, "it was around 2008, 2009 and you [MacQueen] knew two women who'd been to an Orient Brighton game and had been upset by some of the stuff that had gone on there... all the chanting... so we wrote about it in the next issue... then someone wrote a massive thing on the message board, denying there was a problem... you emailed him saying 'go on, write something for the Orientear then'... he wrote a 300-400 word article ending with an admission that there was a homophobia problem at Orient, saying 'if me calling my brother a gaylord makes me homophobic then I guess I am!'"

Of course, the signature match from all of MacQueen & McNeill's time as co-editors is the visit of Arsenal in February 2011. And a full house also meant a bonanza special edition for the mag, with over 1000 sold (and another 800 still in McNeill's loft, accruing value by the day). But the joy of the occasion was tempered for McNeill as he realised that even a gigantic candle could only burn from both ends for so long: "it was the Arsenal game that made me want to quit being an Orientear

editor. We played Arsenal on the Sunday, and the Saturday night was my 30th birthday party... so I went out and got smashed up... got home about 6 in the morning... got a phone call from Rory a couple of hours later... 'When are you bringing the Orientears down to the ground?'... I had to bring a big bag with 1500 Orientears down to the ground on the W15 with the worst hangover in the world and then stand there all day trying to sell them". It was then that he realised "I just want to go to the game and watch the game, I don't want to have to worry about what I'm doing at half time, where am I going to sell the magazine, how many have I sold, have I got enough, have I got enough change on me, how am I going to get all the money home after the game... £200 in loose change in my pocket".

Mostly though, the memories are happy ones – the gregarious McNeill being particularly keen to share his, including one selling a copy to Donny Barnard's grandad, who asked "'is there anything about my grandson in there'... [McNeill replied] 'I can say with total confidence: no!'" . And not for the first or last time, a certain Dave Winter's name is brought up – here in the context of an ongoing spat with another correspondent that played out through the letters page. MacQueen chortles as he remembers this episode, and how the Orientear was ahead of its time in deliberately stoking controversy and inflaming passions in a manner that typifies the clickbait controversialism of online journalism a decade later.

Winter was more than just an occasional *agent provocateur* though, with all the editors agreeing with that his "photos have been a big part of the zine for a long time"... and with Stephen Harris (editor from 1991-93) adding "photos are really important, it makes such a difference if you can put out a magazine with well taken action shots, that looks so good".

MacQueen and McNeill saw their purpose clearly expressed in the strapline that had been on the cover since the first edition in 1986: "The Alternative Orient Supporters Magazine". Though they failed to settle the question of where the apostrophe should be in the word "Supporters" they were clear that the key word was "Alternative", and the club's position is what the magazine should provide an alternative to.

Harris elucidates: "other fanzines get a pass to sell in the ground and get let through the gates between stands... we were forbidden from selling sometimes... that was a big thing for us, being independent". MacQueen went on: "at some point we started selling inside the ground again though it was never with the permission of the club. We've never sought official approval". In this, MacQueen and McNeill were faithful to the longstanding Orientear tradition of independence from everyone but the fans. As founding editor Dave Knight remembers "Frank Clark once told us 'if you want to sell it inside the ground then we'll have to see it first' and I said 'I don't want that, someone having control what's the point?'" . Harris nods, "it's a really important point of principle, we've always been on the outside".

Throughout their incumbency, MacQueen and McNeill preserved the mag's tradition of high-quality and incisive interviews. McNeill considers one in particular as a high point not just of his time as co-editor, but of the entire history of the magazine: the interview with Martin Ling shortly after his sacking – an interview arranged and carried out on the initiative of the Matt Arnot, the man who was to follow MacQueen and McNeill on the editorial throne.

Of the triumph which set him on the path to editorial supremacy, Arnot says: "I got in touch with Mat Porter, who put me in touch with the press officer Leo Tyrie, who gave me Martin Ling's mobile number and I just rang him up, it was just one of those things". Arnot was making his name as possibly the finest interviewer that had worked for the mag, counting some top scalps and scoops in

his time (including Geraint Williams, Russell Slade, Adam Chambers, Gabriel Zakuani, a Jabo Ibehre/Steve Watts double header, and Brian Saah “gazing wistfully out of the window”). Arnot says “when I was younger I always wanted to be a journalist, and interviews used to be my favourite thing... Ling was very candid, he was always very honest. I was the only person to interview him out of the entire press corps, he didn’t do anything for a month after the sacking – and absolute and total exclusive!”

The fact that Arnot was able to get the interview in the first place, in the immediate aftermath of a painful episode for the club, and for the interviewee, is testament to The Orientear’s reputation. As Arnot confirms “he knew we weren’t gonna stitch him up – that’s how we’d matured” and the mag offered an opportunity for Ling to speak directly to Orient fans. In hindsight, particularly given the condition of club/supporter relations at the time of writing, it’s remarkable that the club were prepared to pass on Ling’s number to a fanzine shortly after sacking him. But in those days the links between the club, its staff and its supporters were strong: for example, Tyrie’s brother had been running the *Fantastic O’s* online message board, and a high degree of trust had been built up across the community of people in and around the club. The editors will also quietly admit that Hearn’s influence had – ultimately – been positive in this respect, professionalising the club’s operations in a way we may only appreciate now because much of that work has been squandered. Or, as Harris says, in comparison with the pre-Hearn era “the club actually had employees – in my time you could just ring the club and a director would answer”.

The Ling interview may have been unusual for the sensitivity of its timing, but the ease with which the mag secured it was not strange. McNeill laughs as he remembers how he got an interview with Craig Easton: “by writing to the club and leaving my phone number. I said if he’s interested get him to ring me. I was on the bus one day and my phone went ‘hi Sean, this is Craig!’” McNeill pauses as he remembers his surprise... “Craig who!?”

Even with the editorial burden shared, 5 years is a good stint by historical standards, and at the end of the 2010/11 season, MacQueen decided he’d had enough. McNeill says of the division of labour “I was co-editor but Rory did all the hard work putting it together, the joke was I was the post boy. I never once put an issue together”. With the club on another high, it seemed like a good time to move on, and so the time came for Matt “Dauphin” Arnot to take MacQueen’s place at McNeill’s side.

The big moment came, as it sometimes does, in the Birkbeck beer garden, with the coronation being summarily made with the customary words “you’re doing it, right?”. Although Arnot will now admit that “I expected I would probably end up doing it”, and hindsight may make him seem the natural successor, the job of Orientear editor is much like the Papacy in that any overt display of desire for the job will immediately disqualify you from getting it.

Arnot represented a further break with Orientear tradition, being its first editor not to have a direct link to the club’s heartlands of East London (being a Kentish Man). He was also the first editor to have been introduced to the Orientear community through social media, “the way I got involved in the first place was through the message board, I’d been posting there since the beginning in 1999, that’s how I met Rory and Sean, and got involved in the football team. I scored 4 goals for them in my career which makes me technically about the sixth highest all-time top scorer!” His contributions to the magazine started by “writing match reports after being browbeaten into it by Rory and Sean, and swiftly progressed to going to the training ground and doing the interviews”.

On taking over, Arnot was very aware that the media world was changing rapidly, and that the Orientear needed to keep up to remain relevant. But he was still committed to the tradition of long-form and print, and was convinced that that format still had value in the modern era. As he puts it: "I tried to introduce more of a journalistic angle, make it less about information, and more about journalistic ideals, opinion pieces, and retrospectives - I think nostalgia is the way forward because no-one else really provides that".

The previous regime had engaged actively with the message board, and made some forays into Facebook and Twitter, but it was Arnot who went headlong into the challenge with gusto: "I had to deal with the explosion of it... Twitter really took off in 2010 so that had become the mode of communication between Orient fans... Twitter with its instant delivery meant that things moved really fast and that the paper fanzine was more obsolete than ever before... with that in mind what I tried to do when I took over was to keep everything that Rory & Sean had been doing well, which was bigger magazines with more content – they were generally doing 4-8 more pages than Jamie, and what I tried to do was make it even bigger so I was putting out 52 page, 56 page fanzines, tried to make it more journalistic, more reportage... but keep the frequency, 7 or 8 each season"

At first sight, Arnot's strategy may have appeared counter-intuitive, but it seemed to work. He pushed circulation up (typically shifting between 600 and 700 copies, with the top seller doing 850, helped by the upturn in on-pitch fortunes in 2013) by expanding the mag, appealing its core readership, and making sure there was real substance throughout: "something to get your teeth into". In this he was keen to get top drawer contributors involved, and worked hard to woo professional journalists like Sam Trendall and Tom Davies (ex-editor, who hadn't written much for a while), and to commission heavyweight pieces on key issues of the day like the Olympic Stadium. To recruit and energise contributors, the amplified presence of the mag on Twitter helped, but Arnot confesses "To be quite frank I wrote an awful lot of it myself".

Of the mag's social media presence, Arnot says: "I tried to make it a bit more symbiotic with the magazine... I really like Twitter as a medium – instead of tweeting just 2-3 times a week, I upped it to 10-12 times a day, including lots of match-day updates from in and around the ground... in the same way as people follow Orient Outlook now, before they got going, people were following the Orientear and our tweets". Arnot reckons that he increased the number of followers by around 70% in his time by trying "to bring more of the anarchic spirit that characterised the old Orientears to its Twitter presence, all the while I was trying to make the mag more journalistic in the way it was written... I would try to be very funny on Twitter, and not very funny in the mag".

But the way he made his name still had a role in his overall vision: "interviews really sell the mag – if you've got an interview in there, people will stop and buy from you... it's something that people can immediately identify with". With matchday sales still making up the majority of the overall figure, having a well-known name speaking exclusively for the mag could still help shift a few extra copies and keep the loft chez Arnot free for an ever-expanding Panini collection.

Arnot's ambition was helped by a somewhat smoother handover process than the last one, with McNeill staying on for Arnot's first year, writing the editorial and doing much of the administrative "heavy lifting", while Arnot focussed on commissioning, writing, and editing content, and tweeting like a flock of ring-necked parakeets swooping over the West Stand.

Perhaps because of this relentless, gimlet-eyed focus on content, Arnot is proud to declare that he was responsible for "the fewest typos of any Orientear editor" during his time in charge – an

achievement that many would be pleased to be remembered by: a life truly worthy of having been lived.

Arnot also benefitted from a long apprenticeship, that began in now conventional way: "I'd been playing for the football team for 8-9 years, been writing for the mag for 7-8 years... I did my first interview as a callow 21-year-old, eventually taking over from Jamie as the mag's chief interviewer – I think I did all but one of them in Rory and Sean's time... I was really into interviewing, did the Sophocles Doom & Gloom Update column, all my friends at Orient I'd met through the message board and stayed with them through the Orientear".

However, these credentials weren't enough to satisfy everyone of his suitability for the job. Arnot remembers another fanzine editor expressing his disgust at the appointment in a characteristically long missive. Mindful of the duties and responsibility he was taking on, Arnot determined to be gallant and mollifying as the spirit of fanzine solidarity required.

And this wasn't the only issue Arnot had to contend with – he describes his first issue in August 2011 as "a disaster". Being totally unfamiliar with the software he had suddenly become reliant on, he got the margins all wrong: "it was like reading it through a letterbox – when the mag arrived at home, I looked at it and went 'oh fuck!'... no-one complained though, and I didn't seem to lose too many readers". Thankfully, the Orientear readership was as patient and understanding as ever, in rightful anticipation of better times to come.

Showing that the post conferred maturity and grace, Arnot also resolved to put some of his own opinions to one side in the interests of the wider Orient family, remembering that at the start of his tenure in autumn 2011, "we were awful... personally privately I wanted Slade gone, and was involved in the chants at Crawley, but in the mag I was much more measured". He adds that "a lot of people were writing in in support of the club, not least Dave Knight – I am a curmudgeon, but I wanted to keep the true spirit of the mag and encouraged people to come in with the opposite viewpoint... I would wait to get an article that was either pro or anti something that was going on at the club, and then I would start begging people to send me something that was the opposite viewpoint – I'd regularly have two utterly conflicting articles in the magazine, it would create some interest".

Self-aware enough to make the comparison with the new President of the USA (Mr Trump recently claiming he wants to be a president for all Americans, after slagging so many of them off) Arnot maintains "I always wanted it to be a magazine for all the fans – so I wanted a little bit of positivity, so long as it was based in reality" in spite of his own self-confessed and profound doom-and-gloom tendencies.

He was also drew inspiration from the (then) Chancellor of the Exchequer, in confronting the financial laxity of the previous regime and ruthlessly bearing down on costs: "I inherited about £100 in the bank, but finished up with over a grand... financially it was much healthier, I did have a vision to help it survive in modernity".

The energy around the club in the last days of the Hearn/Porter/Slade regime also helped, as Arnot could rely on "a great sales staff, Steve, Jim, Sean, little Pete (not so little now), me, Chris Knight... same old faces would come up and buy it every month – people assumed you were in the know as you were the Orientear editor". So for Arnot, the biggest challenge remained, as it had for so many of those who had gone before him, editing and drumming up good content.

When asked to say what he was most proud of from his three years in charge, Arnot doesn't miss a beat "I did a funny front cover once... I always enjoyed doing the front cover... the two Kevins [Nugent and Dearden] and Russell Slade sat in the dugout reading newspapers... I pretended they were doing crosswords and made it obvious that the answer was 'home win' but that they couldn't work it out". But in a more general sense, he is visibly gratified when he talks about "being part of an institution, part of a select group of individuals that are keeping something going over many years in the face of adversity"

And yet, editing a fanzine is a game for the young and ingenuous. In early 2014, with Orient riding impossibly high, and Arnot due to become a husband and a father, he slowly realised that his older child would have to seek aegis elsewhere: "I didn't really wanna give the mag up – but I made the decision for the benefit my family". Just like most of his forerunners, Arnot timed his exit well, bequeathing his successor a mag in rude health and a buoyant football club behind it.

The mag was now supported by a model fit for the digital world, some fine new contributors that had been assiduously groomed through social media (Arnot cites Pete Warnall (East Side Story) and Constanza amongst his favourites), which Arnot also used in the build up to a deadline for a new issue, to ask for articles on certain topics, and to chase outstanding contributions... "it piqued people's interest and got a lot of new people involved".

So although, as Arnot says "it's another Orientear tradition that ex-editors drop off the face of the earth when they give up the job – with the honourable exception of Dave Knight", he concedes he may have a few drops left in the tank should there ever be a need for a McGleish-esque return... "I will find the time to do it again, because I wouldn't let it go under, I'd make sure it wouldn't stop because it's too important it's just been going too fucking long now!"

But in the summer of 2014, it was time for the Orientear editor to undergo another regeneration. So, after the usual round of BBC special effects, pulsating multi-coloured mists, and funky swooshing sounds, out of the Birkbeck one evening came the present-day editor: Jim Nichols.

And with Nichols, we move toward the present day. Nichols has had to contend with a tumultuous and unhappy time for the club, which needs no explanation here. So the mag has had to grapple with a number of challenges, not limited to this. So far as the mag is concerned, circulation is slowly drifting downward, with around 500 copies usually selling each time.

Doubtless most of you reading this will remember the changes that Nichols has made to the magazine – most controversially moving "Olly" off the front cover, something that provoked much wailing and gnashing of dentures amongst his predecessors. Nichols is quick to defend his decision though, claiming "I get a lot of praise for the look of the front cover" though others are not convinced his decision was wise, pointing out that Orient's dire performance can be linked to Olly's move. Did we lose the wrong Olly then? Arnot thinks so: "Olly on the cover can clearly kick a football properly".

In spite of all this, Nichols does not shy away from the difficult subjects – making editorial *haute cuisine* from the raw meat of the "East London is Wonderful" farrago of 2014/15 that polarised fans and split the Orient family asunder.

Nichols has a clear view of the challenges the mag is facing though, starting with the capricious nature of Signor Becchetti: "it does make it difficult particularly under the current ownership because of the speed things have happened I've had to do two or three total re-writes". And the speed and amount of information whirling around a dysfunctional fourth division football club is

quite remarkable, and a universe away from the circumstances that drove Knight to start up three decades ago. As Arnot exclaims “last season there were four podcasts about Leyton Orient. Four podcasts!!”. Nichols sighs: “there’s no way we could get an interview now and be the exclusive”. McNeill agrees “when the Orientear started we were the only source of news, now we’re the slowest form of news”

So the Orientear continues with its test match pacing in a 20/20 world of hits and giggles of bloggers, twitterers, podcasters, trolls and bots on social media, but Nichols is confident that the format still has a place: “a lot of fanzines have gone online in the last ten years, but I still get a lot of people coming up to me and saying ‘I’m so glad you’re still doing this’ and I have thought about having more online, but you have to be fair to people who still want to buy the product as well. While none of us are dipping into our own pockets to keep it going then it’s still got a life”.

Harris concurs: “it’s fantastic that other people are doing stuff on other media and we can all contribute to that, but it’s also brilliant that I turn up once a month and there’s some bloke shoving an Orientear in my face”. Tom Davies (editor 1993-96) adds: “the Orientear is a valuable resource for Os who no longer live in London, it’s a great thing to still get something every month”

Although Nichols admits that he rarely sees people under the age of 30 buying the mag, he is committed to long-form and maintains a steady flow of new contributors every year.

Nichols is also follows in the noble journalistic tradition established by his predecessors and offers a blank canvas for readers and contributors to express their opinions, debate, and challenge one another’s views. Which does risk causing offence, as Stripe recalls: “Clyde Loakes once threatened to sue for libel over an article I wrote that said ‘Clyde Loakes will do anything for a £10 note’” – but as MacQueen says “if you ever start getting afraid of libel writs then - give up”.

Knight is more measured though “when Bill Songhurst’s solicitor got in touch I was terrified – we accused him of breaking a needle in Andy Sussex’s leg at a game in Sheffield Wednesday, and probably finishing his career... ‘OK, I’ll do an apology...’” he chuckles.

Nevertheless, Nichols is still waiting for the opportunity to publish something outrageous enough to offend the sensibilities of all decent, honest, hardworking members of society: “if someone wrote to us every month and said FB is the best Chairman we’ve ever had and here’s why, we’d print it... I’m still waiting for that letter”

to be continued...

The editors collectively wish honourable mentions to go to many people for their contributions to the Orientear over the thirty years it has been published. Their names include (but are not restricted to):

- *Martin “which Chelsea game is he writing about this month” Strong*
- *Gary Winch*
- *Steve White*
- *Keith Emerson*