

The fanzine that you are reading has just passed its thirtieth birthday. 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, then, is their story – or at least, the first part of it...

Episode I – a New Hope (1986 – 1996)

“We are the major reason for there being football clubs in the first place. Without supporters there would be no clubs. It’s not as if we even threaten those who control the game and the clubs. They have to answer to no-one. Their position is unassailable. All we can do is put forward our views and possibly embarrass those who use their power poorly” Dave Knight, Founding Editor of the Leyton Orientear, 1988

God only knows what new calamity will have befallen the club by the time this article goes to print. As I write, I am reflecting on the shocking but not surprising news that Herr Hessenthaler has become the eighth and latest managerial casualty of Signor Becchetti’s short yet deeply damaging spell as owner. And between my writing that last sentence and this one, we may have set new club records for the fastest sending off in a match, and the quickest sending off for a debutant. And this entire article is based on an interview that took place the day after Dean Cox was unceremoniously ejected from E10 after 7 years of dedicated and excellent service to the club.

And yet it was a measure of how much quiet pride there was in the history of the Orientear that the editors phlegmatically avoided the whole topic in the four hours we were together, in spite of our collective expectation that that the pain from that new and very raw wound would embitter the conversation – it really didn’t.

So let us contemplate the scene – the current editor of the mag, surrounded by all his predecessors. Three decades of accumulated gnarled wisdom, acquired the hard way on the unforgiving streets of E10. These them, are the *eminence grise* of the Leyton Orientear, a council of mighty Olympian elders looking down upon our puny mortal toils, offering their counsel, solace, and – very occasionally – vengeful reaction. And they have earned their place in the constellation of greats: they are people whose selfless work in bringing this fine publication to life and then keeping it alive – for love, not profit - has been a springboard to spectacular careers in athletics, international diplomacy, journalism, and revolutionary insurrection. This then, is their story...

As you probably know very well, the Leyton Orientear is, by common consent, the second oldest English football fanzine still in production (the oldest is Bradford’s “City Gent”) - although there were probably a handful of others already around at the time the Orientear started, they haven’t survived.

Like so many good ideas, the Orientear was born in a pub – specifically, The Northcote, in a conversation between founding editor Dave Knight, club groundsman Gary “the Hat” and Stefan Pitcher. It was June 1986, and these three young Orient fans were reeling from the impact of a rotten few years for the club and its supporters. Orient had plummeted through the divisions, shedding fans along the way, and was still coming to terms with life in the basement. And now the talk in the local press was of financial difficulty and the threat of liquidation. But just a few weeks earlier the final programme of the 1985/86 season had confidently declared how safe and financially secure the club was. Our heroes wondered what to do about the nagging sense of helplessness resulting from the fact that there was simply “no information in those days, just the local paper and the programme” as Knight tells it.

Into this confounding situation these three shepherds asked themselves (in Knight's words) "why don't we do something about how we feel about the club at the moment?". In the summer of 1986, the nascent swirl of the fanzine movement was more about the indie music scene as it was about that scene's spiritual bedfellow of lower divisions football, but there was enough in it to inspire Knight, "the Hat", and Pitcher into action. "Off The Ball", irreverent and political, was a good exemplar, and feeling a duty and a zeal to fill the informational vacuum with something of value to their fellow supporters, Knight and chums went about with scissors, paper, glue, tippex, stencils, and electroset to put together the first edition in time for the beginning of the new season. Though in those days the mag was very quick to capitalise on the opportunities offered by technology, with Knight particularly excited by obtaining a pair of tweezers and, as he puts it "it was fantastic when SprayMount turned up".

The very first article was called "*What Goes On?*", and as Knight wryly asks "now here we are 30 years later, and what's the question on my lips now?". Although the yawning vortex of uncommunication they faced in 1986 has since been filled with a trillion tweets and brainfarts, it's not clear that this has made Orient supporters any less mystified. Just as Knight remarks "the situation we're in today following the events of yesterday and the last few weeks, I feel exactly the same – I wanna go up to the chairman of our football club and shake him by the lapels and say 'what the fuck are you doing!'"

Selling the mag outside the club at the first two home games of the new season, they managed to shift about 100 copies of this artisanal hand-crafted endeavour (in case you're wondering, originals can sell for north of £5 each on the rare occasion they become available for sale). And it very quickly became apparent that the chaps had discovered a significant unmet need and pent-up demand – people immediately responded to the open invite to write in with letters and submissions, and sales quickly rose – "we got a momentum going and it just took off"

In Dave's words "it was great fun" knocking up the mag in his kitchen, creating a new community in the process. His team expanded very quickly, with future editors Stephen Harris, Tom Davies and Jamie Stripe joining within the first few weeks. Lifetime friendships were forged in these early days, as they have been through all the mag's thirty years. People who didn't know one another would buy the fanzine and get involved straight away, creating a grassroots surge that inspired a generation and reportedly even gave a young(ish) Jeremy Corbyn, looking on jealously from across the Lea a few ideas. As Harris says "you really got the feeling you were part of something much bigger going on".

It's important, for our younger readers especially (yes, there are some), to note the timbre of the times too – beyond Orient and into the sport and country more generally. The mid-late 1980s was a low point in football's reputation nationally – disgraced in polite society with hooliganism rife, decrepit and unsafe facilities, the only energy coming from the often angry and hopeless young men seeking purpose and identity through tribal violence, and a government that regarded the whole sport as an ugly menace and something to be thoroughly ashamed of. Knight is adamant that the Leyton Orient was part of an emergent grass-roots supporter-led movement to restore vitality and dignity to the game, "we were giving a different side of the story to Margaret Thatcher, David Evans (the Luton Chairman who wanted to ban away fans), Bulstrode at QPR, Moynihan and all that crap about ID cards".

The mag quickly gained attention from further afield, and not just from the club itself (Knight was once called in to see Frank Clark and forbidden from selling inside the ground). Fraternal bonds were forged all across the country with other fanzines, many of which had been set up following the

Orientear's example (and many of which it has resolutely outlasted). And the mag was soon getting letters not just from frustrated bedroom-bound acne-ridden teenagers in East London, but from frustrated bedroom-bound acne-ridden teenagers all across the country (step forward Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffs Young Men's Christian Association, among others).

Amongst the irreverent and sometimes surreal mix of polemic, enquiry, and reportage, one of the key features of the early editions were match reports – these proved extremely popular because in those days it was very difficult to know what had gone on if you weren't actually able to attend. Although the vicarious experience of the day out was often what the punters warmed to, as the football itself could sometimes be deadly dull. Knight pointed to “the very first one – Orient 1-Peterborough 0 listed a load of high and lowlights, but the one that sticks out now is the complaint that it cost £3 to get in!”

The rise of the mag during its first few years of the mag was truly stratospheric, and by 1989 it was routinely selling around 2,000 copies – about half of the typical home attendance then as now. Imagine a single independent amateur channel gaining that traction today? Some exclusively Orient-related Twitter accounts may have similar numbers of followers, but no-one pays for those, and few can be said to be engaged with all the content they produce in the same way as someone who invested in a copy of the Orientear. So for all the advantages of the multiplicity of podcasts and blogs and things today, none can aspire to that kind of reach. Knight glowed with pride when asked to recall the high point of his tenure as editor – initially offering promotion in 1989 - and not just because it enabled him to sell two and a half thousand copies of the promotion special. But this was also one of the first examples of the now infamous “Orientear curse” – his editorial following the defeat to non-league Enfield in November 1988 led to him declaring that beaten side as “the worst team Orient has ever had”. Naturally, this statement resulted in an immediate surge in form that just a few short months later culminated in the Os escape from 4 years of purgatory in the basement division.

And the curse wasn't the only Orientear tradition to be established early doors – the Grauniadesque tradition of typos, only made worse when the chaps got their hands on an electric typewriter, was evident from these early Arcadian years – one well-known and longstanding Orient supporter who was caught short at an away game was later reported in the mag to have “shot himself”.

The richness of these early years was also signified by the amount and variety of merchandise being produced alongside the mag – including music, t-shirts and badges. Anticipating the arrival of the world wide web, a whole generation of people abruptly realised there was an outlet for their frustrated artistic tendencies, as Knight explains while telling the story of when receiving an unsolicited submission (the genre-defining “*Leyton Orient Scored More Goals Than Any Other Fourth Division Team in 88/89*”) from future Protest Family heartthrob ‘Funky’ Lol Ross... “I remember playing it and being beside myself thinking ‘this is genius, this is fantastic, I’ve got to do something with this!’”. And lo, it was released as a free flexidisc with the promotion special in August 1989 – no wonder that one sold two and a half thousand copies (still thought to be the record).

With dreams of music industry domination starting to form in their heads – the Orientear team cajoled Ross to make a follow-up. “Cooperman”, written in honour of guileless striker Mark Cooper, was produced as a vinyl single and Knight recalls fondly “it got played on John Peel, it only sold about 150 but we were thrilled”. Harris adds “he sent his girlfriend into the supporter’s club to buy a copy and she said ‘I’m buying this because I’m Mark Coopers girlfriend’ blowing her cover! She could have had a free one but she said ‘no its ok he’s given me the money’”. Knight laughed, “I met Mark Cooper some years later and he remembered that, he absolutely loved that!”

Although the players were banned from reading the mag, they didn't have much difficulty getting hold of it – they were often spotted sitting in the caff and have a crafty read, and were known to tease one another with the often highly critical comments made about them within. Because communication to the staff was evidently little better than that to the supporters, The 'Ear was an equally valuable source of news to them, and it was a common for club employees (including players) to read it surreptitiously hidden in a copy of the programme when on club premises.

Knight also pointed to other proud achievements from the mag's early glory years, including the successful "Put the Leyton back in Orient" campaign that featured in the very first issue, and virtually every issue thereafter, until the location was restored a year later – Davies recalls how "we never got credit, but we made it an issue... and we put an extra thousand on the gates when people realised where we were!". Doubtless improved performances were a factor in the higher attendances too, but the impact of the mag was considerable and very real – a central part of a grassroots renewal that dragged the club out of its mid-80s trough, offering supporters somewhere to coalesce and forge an identity for themselves, restoring a sense of place, and channeling all this into a virtuous spiral that propelled the club back into its natural home: the Third Division.

But all the editors agreed that the personal relationships forged through the mag were precious – the Orientear football team came together very early on, causing Knight to add another item to his growing list of high points: "Going off and meeting other fans was the best thing the Orientear achieved... (notably)... meeting the Queens Park team, having them down for a tournament... and I remember being in the changing rooms at Hampden Park and thinking 'bloody hell this Orientear thing is really getting out of hand!'"

So, in the summer of 1991, with Orient sitting grandly and securely in the third tier, the mag enriching the lives of so many of its supporters, Knight – by now a father of two and wearying of the demands of producing the mag – decided it was a good time to hand on the reins to the next generation. Knight assembled his kitchen cabinet of hardcore loyalists, and asked who would rid him of this troublesome role. After a brief scuffle, the job somehow landed in the lap of Harris, the debonaire and urbane birder whose reputation would eventually spread across Western Europe.

New editors usually arrive with a "bang" and Harris certainly fit the archetype – not only was his first issue the mag's fifth anniversary, but the team honoured his ascension by vanquishing the dastardly Scunthorpe 3-0.

Harris quickly realised just what he had let himself in for "I hadn't realised just how much hard work it was really: a hell of a lot of typing, getting it printed somewhere, taking it to the photocopy shop, getting it reduced to 78%, cutting it up, pasting it onto the great big templates that we had, spray mounting it, doing the letraset – it was quite a manual job, it felt like every night for weeks on end to get an issue ready"

Nonetheless, Harris had no problem consolidating the mag's position, regularly selling 2,000 copies and sometimes more on a special occasion, such as the FA Cup replay against Oldham in January 1992. Though he does humbly suggest that "I could have gone down there with a load of A4 sheets with the word Orient on the top and sold them for 10p and people would have queued up to buy them".

The fact that there was now a different pair of buttocks occupying the editorial chair didn't disrupt the flow of contributions either – quite the opposite: "there was a time when we had too much, lots of people writing in with match reports – the best ones were always the ones that talked about the

experience rather than the match. We've always preferred those". Harris adds "my top 10 articles were all by Sid the Surrealist".

But the landscape was changing – as other rival 'zines started to appear around the club on a matchday. Although all the former editors were very keen to stress the fraternal bonds of solidarity between fanzines, it was obvious that at least one of the newcomers ("West Side Story") had been set up in opposition to the Orientear. And success inevitably brings criticism as well as resistance, as Harris remembers only too well: "I remember being on the bus once and there were a couple of kids sat in front of me were talking... 'do you buy that Orientear?'... 'nah, it's all done by in-tee-leck-choo-als'"

This was the era when the fanzine scene was exploding all over E10 – apart from West Side Story, the editors cite such fantastic, exotic, and half-remembered titles as Frankly Speaking, All Aboard the Wagon Train, Panda, Cheery Os, Donut, Pigeon, and Grizzly Banter. Harris even had faint memories of "Orient Blackbird Crew" a folded sheet of A4 from some primordial time before the Orientear had even been one of the many twinkles in Knight's eye.

But this wasn't unusual – in the halcyon "peak-fanzine" days of the early 1990s, it seemed like even the typical lower division club had at least 3 or 4 fanzines, which led to a whole extended network of reciprocal cross-pollinations. Harris remembers that around this time they would send off around 120 copies or every edition to their counterparts at other clubs.

Harris went on, "you felt you were part of something quite big that was starting to make a difference - that supporters were beginning to get heard. The ID card scheme was scrapped, Charlton were going back to the Valley, and when Colin Moynihan [the somewhat gormless Tory Minister for Sport] condemned the violence in Malmo when England played France [in Euro 92] it felt like now our voice was beginning to get heard when we said it wasn't like that it was just half a dozen idiots - all football supporters aren't just lowlife hooligans. Writing about this to an audience of around 2000 we felt almost influential!". Younger readers will be astounded to note that twenty four years later the same arguments were advanced when Russia met England in Nice.

But the Orientear wasn't sailing into headwinds just because of straightforward envy or incomprehension – the mag had already developed a reputation for being political, and those politics weren't to everyone's tastes. Knight admits that "in the early days we were quite political, I wrote articles about the Wapping strike, and we had an anti-fascist action special about racism". Harris adds "and people didn't like that – the NF were handing out leaflets saying 'don't buy the Orientear - the editors are well known in the pubs of Camden collecting money for the IRA!' - but I hadn't been in a pub in Camden since I was a student!" But that wasn't all – Harris was getting leaflets through his letterbox and knew that his home was being watched "one morning one of them was right outside my house and I had to push past him". The memory caused Knight to chuckle "I got them too... one was like a Monty Python letter 'you know what Dave, things burn, things burn down' and it did scare me at the time".

A generation ago, before most of it got displaced into social media, violence and intimidation was much more physical, as Knight and Harris recalled flashpoints with "fellow" Orient fans on the terraces at Fulham, Bournemouth, and Hereford and even at some home games. The action drew attention from further afield when "a load of equal idiots from Red Action came down and had a punch up with them". But our brave boys didn't yield, as Knight says "all of us at the time though thought if the racists were gonna come and have a go at us for being anti-racist then that's fine".

Indeed, it's with uncharacteristic pride that Harris points to the NF leafletting episode as his own high point from his time in charge, because "in the next editorial I was able to say how pleased I was that I'd seen my biggest ever sales, it seemed like people had made a point of buying it".

Through all of this, the Orientear was helping to establish a new identity for Orient fans (or at least those who wanted one), based on tolerance, independence of mind, authenticity, and drink. As Harris would have it "we were trying to say that the ID card scheme was complete and utter nonsense, don't brand every football supporter in the land as a hooligan because it's not true. For some people that's a left wing view – that's not how I saw it, anti-establishment view maybe but not necessarily left wing". Though as often is the case, when an edgy, innovative phenomenon becomes successful, the establishment might come out to meet it halfway – just like when Harris started to write a column in the East London Advertiser – in those days the paper of choice for the great and good of the area.

Harris compressed a great deal into his relatively short time in the hotseat – as he says "I only did two and a bit years but it felt like a lifetime". Reflecting on his tenure, he is quick to say that he remains proud that a whole bunch of other fanzines started up in response to the Orientear: "the fact that other people decided to do it too was quite good, I enjoyed that" and that they were never seen as competition but as part of a great movement.

But, like all great leaders, Harris knew when to quit. Davies, who was next in line, was young and energetic, had been involved from the early days of the Knight regime, and was already a prolific writer who went home and away every week, and had been a key instrument in forging the Orientears ethos. But he would have to deal with a very different set of challenges during his three seasons in charge.

Davies' time was characterised by decline on and off the pitch (or as he rather more poetically puts it "the club went down the toilet") – a process which was infamously embodied in "Club for a Fiver". And all this was set against the backdrop of Sky's new Premier League, which hindsight now allows us to see as a seismic fracture in the bond that had held the sport together until that point. With the biggest clubs heading one way, and Orient the other, Davies remembers that "the alienation that we talk about now, people at Orient felt that already back then".

So, he made the conscious decision to focus the mag more on Orient than it had been in Harris' time, when readers enjoyed a more tangential and discursive style that was perhaps fitting of the happier, more luxurious milieu of third division stability punctuated only by the distant promise of the second on the horizon.

The *fin de siècle* vibe of the era was compounded by the "Orient 2000" stadium development plan that the new owner (Barry Hearn, remember him?) devised, in part to capitalise on the M11 link road that was being built, not the last time that new infrastructure was to cut through communities and prompt opportunism from a local football club. And this gave the 'Ear a whole new bunch of chewy issues to consider – did it make sense to rotate the ground round by 90 degrees (or even 180, as the club tended to put it), or to block Oliver Road?

So, in some respects, it felt as if things were back to where they were when the mag started – a club in crisis and adrift in the nether regions. But as Davies observed, the reputation of the mag and the influence of fanzine culture more generally had changed things in the intervening 8 or 9 years... "the thing about the financial crisis season was that Orient were getting loads of attention that year, and suddenly I was getting rung up by the BBC, I was on the radio, the telly about 3 times that season". And now the Orientear was the main outlet for supporter's concerns, because it seemed to be the

only place where questions were being asked on their behalf – “this was before Supporters Direct and trusts, the Orientear was all that people had. People would actually come up to you in the street and ask so what are we gonna do about this? We were almost seen at that point as an organisation rather than just a magazine”.

And so it proved that Davies was the right man for these less frivolous times. As he recounts the story of being contacted by Phil Wallace (who almost bought the club, and now owns Stevenage) “it felt like that we actually had to be quite serious, as we had to think about how the financial side of the club was run”. Though Davies is quick to stress that the peculiar humour that helped to define the mag was still there, sustained in ways that are no longer possible - “a lot of it came from the North Terrace banter, it was just stupid in-jokes because we all stood together”.

But although media interest was heightened, the club itself remained inept at communicating. The fourth editor Jamie Stripe (more on him next time) explains “the board of directors had more or less done a bunk, and the club didn’t even know what a press release was”. Yet again, the Orientear had a leading role in expressing fans’ concerns and trying to make sense of the mess.

And the mainstream media had woken up to the importance of the mag, helped in part by Davies’ own fledgling career in the press. Harris notes that “the progression from when we edited it and the club treated us with complete suspicion, some other fans were just hostile... By the time Tom edited it the media were starting to get really interested and the fanzine was getting a voice beyond just the 2000 people that were buying it every month”. Knight contrasts this with his own unsatisfying one-off experience with the Observer some years earlier – “they didn’t really get it... it was a very patronising piece”.

But now the mag would have a cameo role in Orient’s biggest ever TV smash – acting as executive consultants to its Director Jo Treharne, and featuring in one of the documentary’s most poignant moments – as Stripe recalls “we sponsored the game that led to Sitton and Turner’s sacking - if you watch Club for a Fiver during the bit when all the fans are shouting ‘Sitton Out Turner Out’ you can hear Nick Ballard one of our guys sitting in the sponsors area really going for it!”

And yet, in spite of Davies’ sterling efforts, circulation was waning along with Orient’s declining fortunes and crowds, with the mag now tending to sell between 1,000-1,500 copies. With Euro 1996 completing the preparations for the wholesale gentrification of top level football in England, and with Orient floundering in the bottom division under the stewardship of a cocky but rookie owner, the auspices for those who likes their football gritty, witty, noble, and soulful were worrying...

Next time: Part II: “The Wilderness Years” ...