

JAY MASON-BURNS

The Villa Boys from Aston

I've followed football since I was about 7 years old. I fell in love with listening to games on the radio, marvelling at the rolling roar of the crowd on my Dad's little transistor radio in our kitchen before being sent off to bed with a flea in my ear for making too much noise! Much to my Dad's chagrin I grew up supporting Aston Villa (he was a Bluenose, sadly) and I suppose there was a degree of inevitability that one day he would have to give me permission to go to a game down at Villa Park with my mates. By this time (1985) I'd missed seeing the glorious years of Saunders, Barton, Morley and Withe in person, but going to Villa Park was still such a visceral thrill.

The Holte End was, and still is, the heart of the Villa Park faithful. It is Villa Park's biggest capacity stand, situated behind the goal at the south-eastern end of the stadium. If I'm passing by on the Aston Expressway, it makes my heart sing to see the Holte's brick edifice gleaming in the sunshine, I know that I'm home.

In 1985 the Holte was a different beast. The stand was a vast concrete terrace, surrounded by fencing and an immense roof. Back then it was regularly packed out with 20,000 fans, making it the biggest behind-the-goal terrace stand in Europe! Walking up from Witton Station I remember the Holte End floodlights, arranged in a distinct AV grid, such a happy sight! Going to football in those days was a hair-em scare-em experience, an intoxicating mix of devotion, overt masculinity and barely restrained violence. If Villa played well, the Holte was a sea of joy, but the mood could darken quickly if things went wrong. When Villa scored, the Holte jumped for joy. On a primal level you were dimly aware of being swept off your feet as the tide of delirious fans plunged down the terrace. It was heady, breathless, exhilarating and scary. The suffocating crush against the bars was something to be endured, it was part of life on the terraces.

Me and my mates regularly stood in the lower half of the terraces, Holte left side, just above and behind the goal. Such things mattered to fans, people were quite territorial about their particular spots, and spats were common between regulars still steaming from their pre-match pints. Despite this, the Holte was a good natured place, full of banter, laughter and comradeship. We were fortunate in a way, a group of blokes from a local factory noticed us standing near them during one of our first games down there and they co-opted us into their

friendship group. After those first few games we stood with them at every home game for many years, and often sought them out on away day specials.

The Hillsborough disaster in 1989 changed all of that. At the time, there was not a fan in the land who, when they saw the horror unfolding in the Leppings Lane End, didn't understand exactly the horror that those fans were enduring. That crush, the unrelenting weight of people piled against you, was something we'd all experienced. There had always been that sense of danger at football matches, that sense that you could get hurt, especially if your team scored. Injuries were common, people fell over whilst celebrating and got trodden on, broken fingers and cracked ribs were common, they just happened, especially during derby games. Injuries were badges of honour, which just shows how mad things were.

Consequently, football stadia had to change as standing terraces were phased out. Villa were prompted into the biggest re-development period of the ground in their history. Between 1993 and 2002, three of the main stands at Villa Park were demolished and re-built, including the iconic Holte End. My Holte was no more.

The Holte End of today is a two-tiered stand accommodating just over 13,000 home supporters. These tiers are slightly curved in a parabola to provide good sightlines from all seats. Inside, there are three levels of concourse and the Holte Suite, a large hospitality space for supporters and corporate events. At the back of the stand, facing Trinity Road and Witton Lane, a red brick façade was built in the style of the recently demolished Trinity Road Stand. The old Trinity was itself based on the architecture of nearby Aston Hall, on whose grounds Villa Park was originally built in 1897. The Holte's brick façade consists of two large staircases, red brick pediments and Dutch-style gables.

Despite the very necessary redevelopments, the Holte End remains the beating heart of Villa Park. It is as much a landmark in our hearts as it is a landmark in the landscape. The passionate fan-base contains a broader, more inclusive cross-section of society these days, with as many women and children at games as there are men, which I absolutely love. Football had to evolve and the stadia did too. On occasion I miss those heady Holte End days, dancing about on the terraces like loons. But the reality is now the Holte is a safe place to watch footy, even when the games themselves haven't been great! Plus, having the ability to sit and get warm during chilly evening games is just an absolute must!

Continued

Besides, it leaves us with a bit of energy in reserve to sing our favourite song.....

The Villa Boys from Aston

“Every week we follow,

The boys in claret and blue,

We even conquered Europe - in 1982!

The Villa boys from Aston,

We travel near and far,

You can hear us singing,

From the stands of Villa Park,

Allez Allez Allez!!!

Allez Allez Allez!!!”

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2nd August 2023