



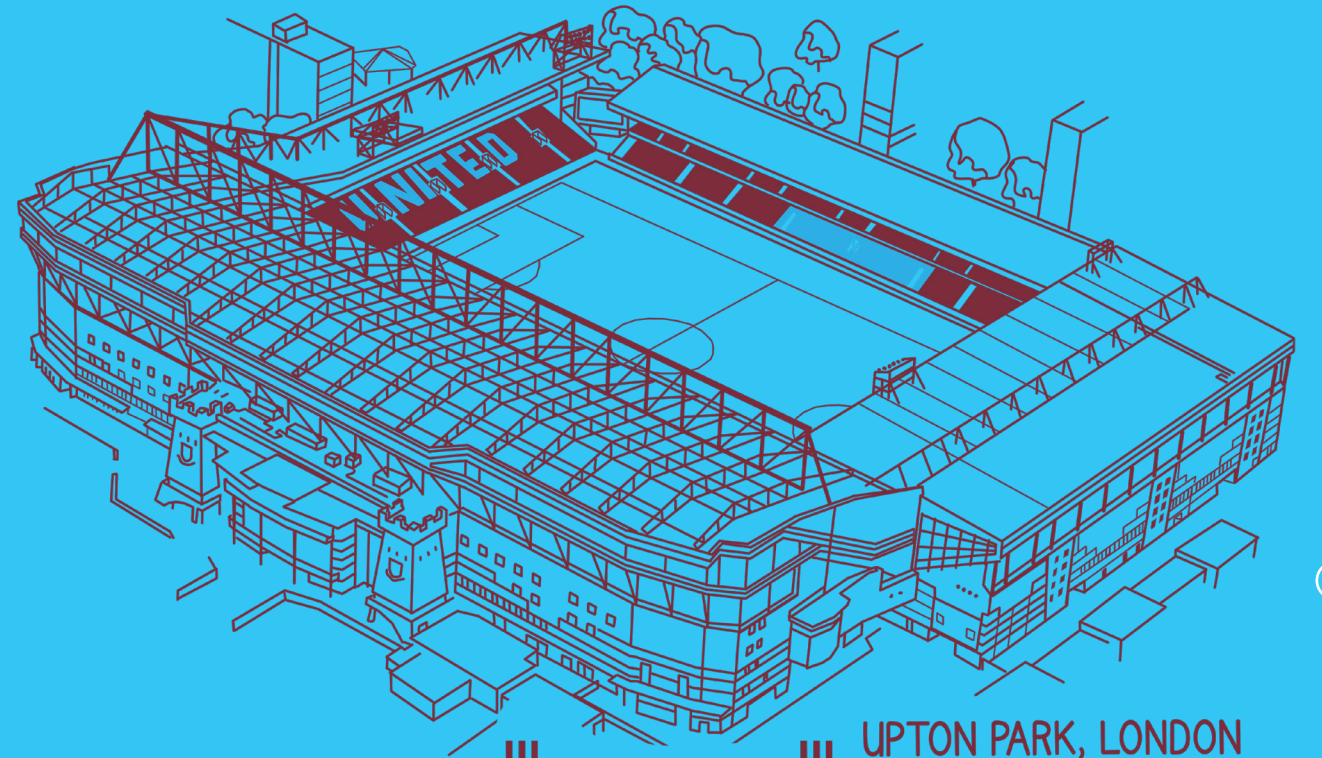
WEST HAM UNITED 3
MANCHESTER UNITED 2

Five years on from the final night
at Upton Park.

62



Words: Jack Butler
Illustration: Steve Stewart



63

UPTON PARK, LONDON
**BOLEYN
GROUND**

Slaven Bilic and Julian Dicks embrace. A packed Upton Park roars as the final whistle rings around and through the East End of London. The game that had needed a fairy-tale ending, didn't disappoint – not for a second. Indeed, ninety minutes subtly, and beautifully, evolved like an Oscar-nominated movie, full of twists and turns, goals, and a hatful of match-winners. All of which combined to bid the Boleyn farewell. Then, there was the director of the movie – Slaven Bilic. The Croatian, a fan-favourite as a player, who was now excelling as manager. Finally, on referee Mike Dean's final whistle, he could relax, knowing he had not only bid the Boleyn farewell, but he had done it in a style only capable of West Ham United.

Even before a ball was kicked, West Ham knew they had to win. No questions. No doubts. This was it. Victory at all costs on their final night. One more memory needed for a club born from an East End shipyard in 1895. A community team founded by dockers, whose home was always Upton Park – or if you prefer, the Boleyn Ground.

Whatever your namesake, the ground was adored by all, whether part of the home or away end. Rivals surveyed the fixture list for West Ham (A) because, in an era of Highbury-to-Emirates transitions, Upton Park was one of the last great old stadiums, still proudly standing, and rocking with hostility.

Despite the Hammers lack of (title) success, the ground was home to some of the game's biggest names. England's World Cup winners Bobby Moore, Geoff Hurst and Martin Peters played, and were later immortalized by a 'Bobby Moore' statue outside the ground. Ron Greenwood, Tony Cottee, Trevor Brooking, Billy Bonds, Julian Dicks and Paolo Di Canio all graced Upton Park. Whilst Carlos Tevez, Dimitri Payet and Scott Parker would all become modern-era legends, at a ground rooted in a proud footballing legacy.

Despite its supporters, Upton Park would now find itself insufficient for the demands of modern football. But, a few miles down the road, there was a solution. A cheap glistening replacement capable of generating more revenue – the Olympic Stadium. A ground with its own sporting history, after the magical 2012 Olympic summer.

Importantly, the Hammers would move into their new stadium at the end of the season with European football promised and most likely to be delivered

(at least in the first year). Before then, the Boleyn would have its final night. May 10, 2016. West Ham vs Manchester United. A farewell against the red side of Manchester. It would be a match that would live to unfold the West Ham way.

Heading into the match, the hosts had been denied a Wembley appearance by the visitors. Manchester United striker Antony Martial's late equaliser took the FA Cup quarter-final to a replay that the Red Devils would go on to comfortably win, courtesy of the then-new kid on the block Marcus Rashford.

However, tonight would be different; it had to be. In the Hammers' favour was the 2015/2016 Premier League season becoming the year of the underdog. Leicester City, currently top of the Premier League, would become the eventual 5000-1 champions. Whilst, before kick-off, West Ham were sixth, Southampton seventh and somehow, Chelsea found themselves level with tenth-placed Stoke City, with just two games to go.

Regardless of emotion, the points were vital for the Hammers. The board, led by David Gold and David Sullivan, were set on moving to their new home with European nights as part of the first-year calendar. Something they felt could justify the switch to Stratford.

Also, on the hunt for European football were their opponents, who were one place above West Ham in 5th. Louis Van Gaal's side travelled to the East End with an abundance of their own problems. The Dutchman's future was far from set in stone, after a mixed relationship with the fans was continuing to deteriorate. Without question, it was an under-performing and ageing Manchester United, with a boss on borrowed time,

and, more worryingly, Marcus Rojo at left-back. Realistically, if a Manchester United team was there for the taking – it was this one.

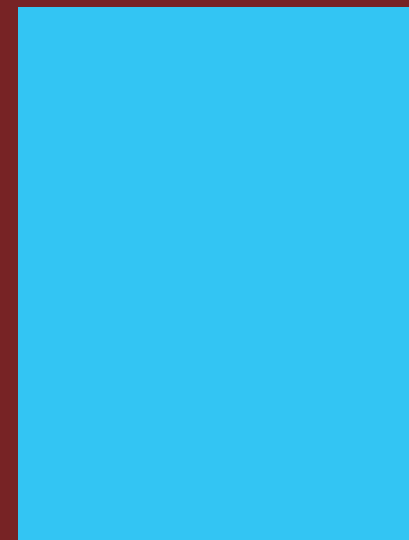
Before kick-off, the match was marred by problems outside the ground. The travelling team bus attacked as it travelled down Green Street by fans, who had gathered to be part of the celebrations. On the surface, it was as messy and horrid as it gets, but, what disappointed many Hammers was that a few fans gave the papers the headlines they wanted to write.

Eventually, with the issues outside the stadium aside (and recorded upon Jesse Lingard's Snapchat), it would be nearly two hours later that the teams were ready for kick-off. Aptly, Mark Noble, an academy graduate, would lead West Ham down the tunnel and out into a cauldron of claret and blue.

"It's normally noisy in here, but nothing like this," cries Sky Sports' co-commentator, Alan Smith, who is barely audible over the wall of noise echoing around Upton Park. The Hammers' fans, in the words of his gantry teammate Martin Tyler, are "singing into Mike Dean's opening whistle." Greeting the players is a wall of claret and blue; each participant as passionately engrossed in their rendition of 'Bubbles' as the person next to them.

Though, that's just through the television. Inside the ground, the noise was deafening. Rich in the buoyant hostility that the East End had become infamous for, the Boleyn was roaring, alive and the fans, lucky enough to get a ticket, were ready for battle. Eleven players in red versus the East End of London. I know who my money was on.

The full teams at Upton Park that evening were: (West Ham United) Darren



Randolph, Michail Antonio, Winston Reid, Angelo Ogbonna, Aaron Cresswell, Manuel Lanzini, Cheikhou Kouyate, Mark Noble (C), Dimitri Payet, Diafra Sakho, Andy Carroll. (Manchester United) David De Gea, Antonio Valencia, Chris Smalling, Daley Blind, Marcus Rojo, Morgan Schneiderlin, Juan Mata, Ander Herrera, Wayne Rooney, Antony Martial, Marcus Rashford.

Build-up aside, it came down to ninety minutes of football. And, even without the romance of a ground's final hurrah, the match itself was still a corker. Ten minutes in, the Hammers took the lead through Diafra Sakho, who finished off a move straight out of the 'Academy of Football' manual. Aaron Cresswell and Manuel Lanzini combined, before Sakho swiveled, and, with his weaker left foot, calmly slotted the ball in the bottom left corner. The net bulging. 1-0. Suddenly, it was on.

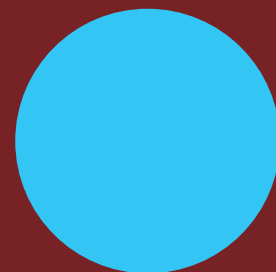
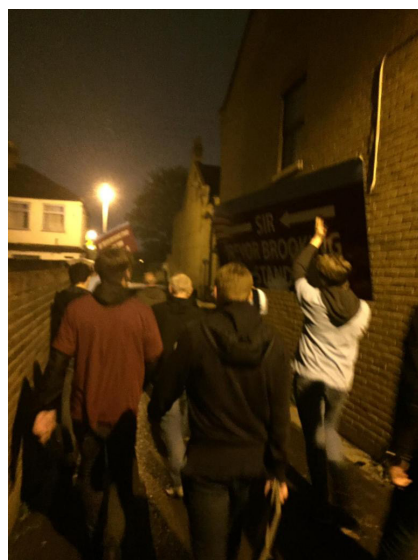
Then, well, it wasn't. It was off, and rather quickly too. Despite leading at half-time, Manchester United scored two quick goals through Antony Martial. The French striker set to well and truly spoil the party (once more), with the visitors' first two shots on target expertly converted.

In fact, with twenty minutes to go, few inside the stadium had much faith in the Hammers turning the game around. Despite their position, the Irons kept going. Boss Slaven Bilic encouraged his team forwards as the East End faithful continued to support regardless of their side's perilous position.

With 15 minutes to go, the Hammers were awarded a free-kick. Payet over it, of course. The French superstar hit the wall, before picking up the loose ball and firing a cross towards Michail Antonio, who guided his headed effort past De Gea and into the net. 2-2. Game on. The Trevor Brooking Stand bellowing once more and, all of a sudden, the Hammers had ten

66

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minutes to find a winner.

From that moment, it felt inevitable. After the Manchester United kick-off, each challenge was met with a chorus of 35,000 ordering their side forward. Bilic's instructions barely audible as Upton Park roared again and again.

A few minutes later, when Cresswell was fouled wide left as West Ham launched forwards, it felt like the stage was set. The pieces ready for the movie to reach its finale. A free kick. A chance. The players. The stage. The moment. Bilic orchestrating from the side.

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In the aftermath came the realisation that the Hammers had to defend a lead, something they rarely manage to make look easy. Thus, it would be ten (painful) minutes later, that the Hammers fans could finally

relax when the final whistle eventually came. 1-0. 1-2. 3-2. Perfection. The narrative. The uncertainty. But, West Ham had done it.

Now amongst the smiles, every fan looked at each other. Each one knew that this chapter was over. Regardless of the uncertain future, they had to be in the now. They had to celebrate. They had to enjoy the Boleyn.

"It's a lot of pressure because we don't want to lose," said Bilic, after the match. "Together with the crowd we believed we could turn it around. This ground deserves a farewell like this."

Alongside the boss, the players couldn't quite believe it. No more so than the skipper, Mark Noble. "This is a family," he said, addressing the fans in the ground's closing ceremony. "When you come to this club, you get embraced. We've given you something back that you will never forget, and we are proud of that."

"It was the last game in the stadium, so we didn't want to let the fans down", said Winston Reid, looking back on his late winner, back in 2018. "It was a good time to be at the club, it was a great year."

Reid had a point. The final few

matches of the 2015/2016 season saw the Hammers secure European football for the first year at the Olympic Stadium, even if the club would eventually exit via the first qualifying stage of the Europa League, a few months later. Even so, a final sixth-place finish was far higher than what the Hammers are accustomed to. Most fans, myself included, will admit West Ham aren't and probably never will be a side steeped in success (the last silverware, a FA Cup, came way back in 1980). What has always stood out, however, is the community. The location. The passion. The identity. The ground was all of that – and more. Here – just past Upton Park Tube station, the walk along Green Street and at the heart of the East End of London – was where the club belonged.

Now, five years on from that magical night, and the London Stadium is still yet to fill that Upton Park void of pie and mash on matchdays, pints in pubs and walks through the East End. Things that made West Ham – West Ham, have all been sacrificed for a brighter and better future that is still yet to materialise.

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67