Brighton's unheralded role in **Hollywood: When the Seagulls** swooped in to help save "superstar club" Wrexham AFC This is the story of how Seagulls fans helped to write a Hollywood ending for another club 253 miles away.



different if it hadn't been for the people of Brighton. This is the story of how Seagulls fans helped to write a Hollywood ending for another club 253 miles away, Gareth Lloyd writes.

AFC and changed the face of football ownership forever. But things might have been very

In 2021, movie stars Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney officially purchased Wrexham

There was a time not so long ago when the sight of Michael Portillo at Wrexham General train station was a local celeb-spotting story to top them all. Nowadays, half the town can tell you they've shaken hands with A-lister Ryan Reynolds or posed for a picture with It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia creator Rob McElhenney.

Since Deadpool and Mac stepped off the screen and into North Wales to buy a football club, Wrexham has been up in lights - revelling in the role of a lifetime as a Hollywood fairytale unfolds on its doorstep.

The club is wealthy. The team are winning. Pubs are packed. Crowds are huge. Local business is booming. The entire town is tingling with excitement. Wrexham AFC's invitation to the red carpet was unexpected and extraordinary, yet it also

felt like worthy reward. After decades of arduous struggle, with the football club coming to the brink of extinction more than once since the turn of the millennium, the fanbase feels a

justified beneficiary of the Tinseltown treatment. For the first time in years, this town and its team can finally smile again. And the LA cameras are shooting it all for a brand new TV show.

But if there's a best supporting actor award in Wrexham's feel-good production - it's

Brighton. Sixteen years before most Hollywood celebs had even heard of The Racecourse Stadium, it was Brighton fans who were fighting tooth and nail to save it. On Saturday 20 November 2004, a flock of seagulls descended on Wales in a jaw-dropping territorial display against the developers who were attempting to tear down Wrexham's

ground for cash, flying 250 miles to show support for a community with whom they had no previous affiliation, alliance or affinity. And they brought 1,000 other fans from around the country with them.

This is the story of how it all unfolded.

Stitched up good and proper

Brighton fans being interviewed- Credit: Nic Outterside Nic Outterside can't help but smile when he looks at the certificate on his wall. Dated December 2004, the document is a personal thank-you from former Brighton & Hove Albion chairman Dick Knight, expressing gratitude to Nic for raising £200 for the football club.

Before advertising guru Knight seized control of the club in 1997 and made Brighton & Hove Albion FC as integral to the city's landscape as the Royal Pavilion or the Palace Pier, a cabal

of politicians and magnates were attempting to strip the club of its assets to make a quick

club's home for nearly 100 years - to retail park owners, leaving the team without a place to

"When clubs become worthless, they're cheap to snap up. Archer bought us for £56.25, and

Having covered Brighton football club as an <u>author and journalist</u> for many years, Nic

2,000 - not 30,000 - people were scraping through the turnstiles, and when football in

remembers all-too-well when a couple of hundred felt like a fortune. He also recalls when

"£200," Nic chuckles. "That's barely anything these days, is it?"

Brighton was an endangered species.

buck.

play.

Chrismas recalls.

"troublemaker" Brighton supporters.

attempts to expose the regime for what it really was.

"We were stitched up good and proper," Warren sighs.

Businessman Bill Archer bought the financially struggling club in 1993 and later hatched a plot with ex-Eastbourne MP David Bellotti to sell Albion's Goldstone Ground stadium - the

"Luckily, we had some smart fans who were able to look into what he was doing." As the malevolent plan became clear, supporters organised demonstrations, marches and

walkouts. There was even one match where fans bleated whistles for 90 minutes.

later found himself the owner of a prime piece of real estate in Hove.

"They saw an opportunity when a club was on its knees," Brighton supporter Warren

Warren remembers that when one protest took place inside Goldstone - with Brighton fans tearing down the goalposts in a display of defiance - the 9pm news framed the incident as an act of isolated "hooliganism", ignoring the real reason as to why it was all happening. On another occasion, when Warren and some other Brighton fans were invited to the TV

studios to talk about their club's predicament, they were greeted by police dogs upon their

arrival. Bellotti was already there and Archer tuned in by video link, suffocating any

But there were more belligerents in this conflict than just fans and tycoons. The media also

tooled up and chose the wrong target, ignoring the wounded club in peril and taking aim at

1997, as if being left homeless wasn't bad enough, relegation beckoned. "We'd gone on a run of form that left us 12 points adrift at the foot of the league," Nic remembers.

"We knew then, having lost the ground, that if we got relegated the club would fold. There

The whole world seemed to be against Brighton fans, and by the turn of the new year in

A fortune-changing weekend

The internet was still in its infancy in the mid-to-late nineties. Most people either didn't have

Goldstone Ground.

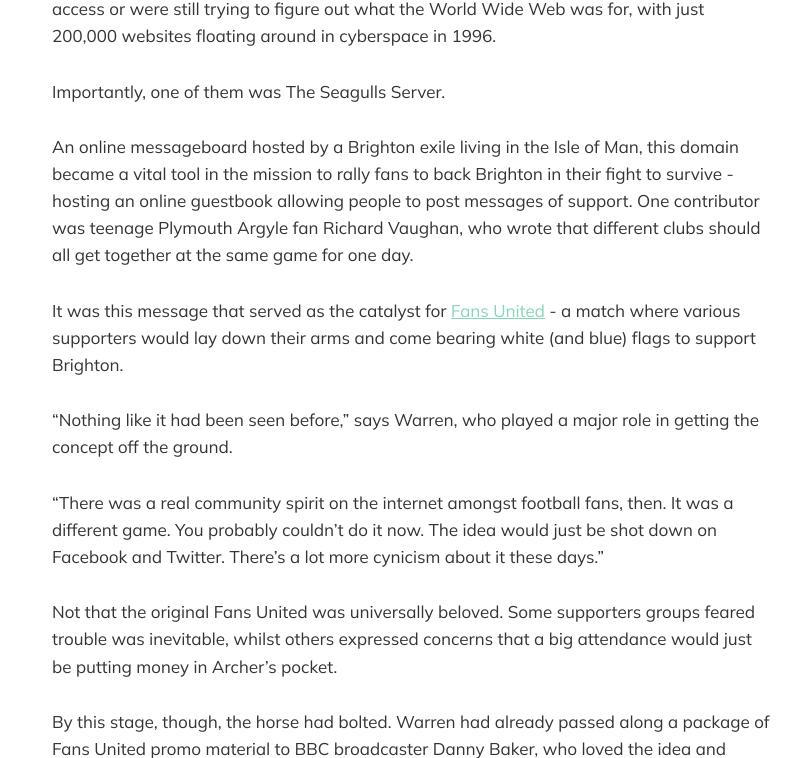
other, but the whole thing was a carnival."

"fortunes changed as of that weekend".

moving into their current home Falmer in 2009).

was no two ways about it.

"There were no other options."



"And it was amazing," Warren says, a warm sense of nostalgia creeping into his voice. On 8 February 1997 - a weekend where top tier football was on international break so there were no distractions - Fans United attracted the biggest crowd of the season to Brighton's

implored his listeners to go along, telling them it would be an amazing occasion.

Supporters from around 80 clubs were in attendance, with colours spotted from all around Britain and across the continent (like Germany's Eintracht Frankfurt and Serbia's Red Star Belgrade). "The atmosphere was uplifting from minute one," Warren gushes.

"It was a horrible misty day where you could barely see from one end of the pitch to the

Brighton won 5-0 against Hartlepool United in front of 8,000 people, and Nic says the club's

"It was that vital moment we needed," he explains. "After Fans United, there was new belief." Brighton went unbeaten for the rest of the season at home, securing their league status

with a 1-1 draw at Hereford on the final day (who went down instead). And things slowly

got better after that. The Goldstone Ground was gone, but Knight had wrestled the club

away from Archer - securing temporary residence at Gillingham and then Withdean

athletics stadium where they won back-to-back titles in 2001 and 2002 (before finally

And that was it. The dramatic Brighton tale all wrapped up nicely: A rollercoaster with heroes, villains, conflict, drama, a beginning, a middle and a happy conclusion. It should've been the end of the story. And it might have been, had the character of Archer been an anomaly.

But then, they visited Wrexham on the final day of the season. As the Welsh fans passed out 'red card' flyers containing information on how their owner was trying to sell Wrexham's Racecourse stadium - the oldest international ground in the world - to a supermarket, it rang a jarring bell among the Seagulls support. "We'd been there before - and we decided we wanted to help," says Nic.

football - and their problems of the past seemed far behind them.

The team were playing well - pushing for promotion back to the second tier of English

A few months later, a cadre of Brighton fans travelled with Wrexham to show their support

The Seagulls had previously joined Doncaster fans in storming the directors box of their

up chatting to Radio 5 Live on the way home, realising the story - Brighton supporting

"It made us think - can we replicate Fans United at Wrexham?" he says.

unscrupulous owner Ken Richardson - who attempted to burn down Doncaster's stadium

for the insurance money - so they were greeted warmly when they returned to Yorkshire in 2004 with Wrexham, even being invited onto the pitch. Nic was among them, and he ended

"I put out press releases to North Wales media, emailed every single fan site and suddenly it

On 20 November 2004, Wrexham kicked off against Bristol City - with the kick-off delayed by 15 minutes due to crowd congestion - and The Racecourse was awash with a rainbow

Things were good in Brighton in May 2004.

during a game at Doncaster Rovers.

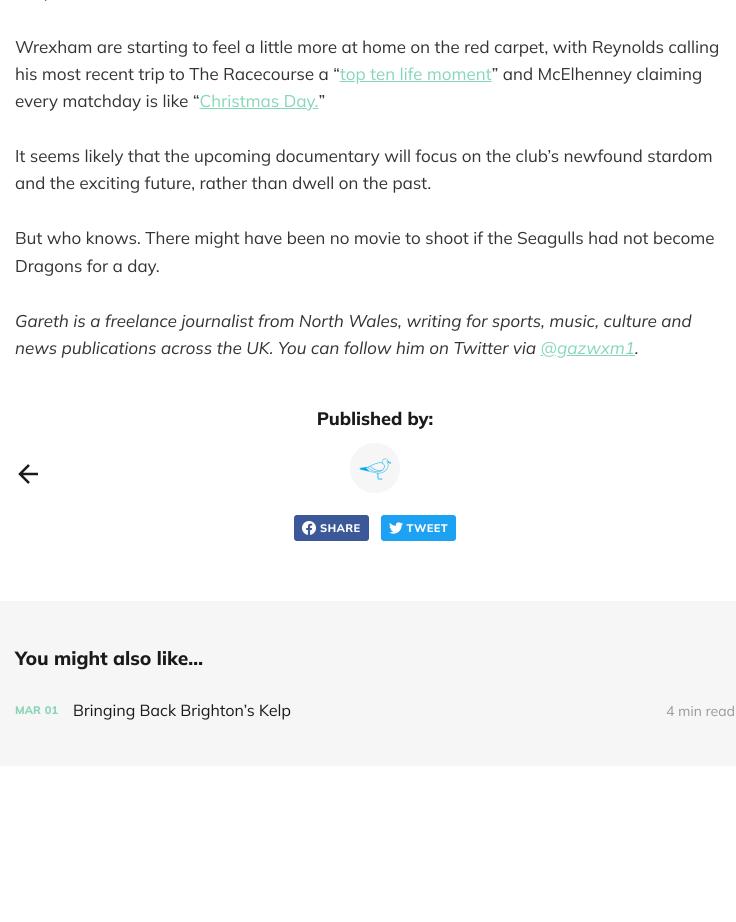
Wrexham at Doncaster - had captured the imagination.

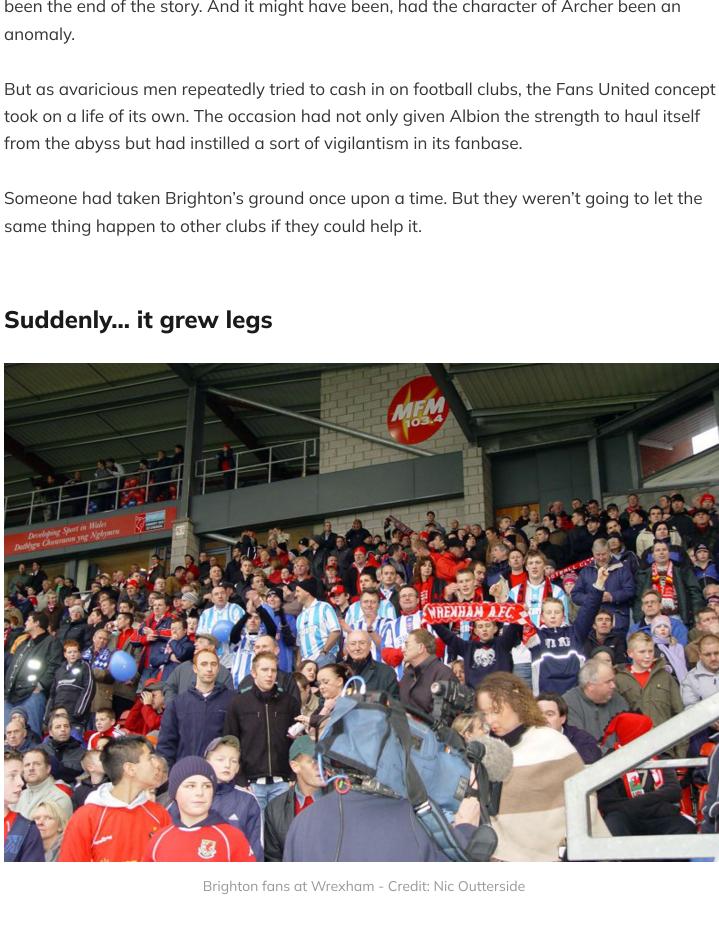
grew legs... and then the legs got longer!"

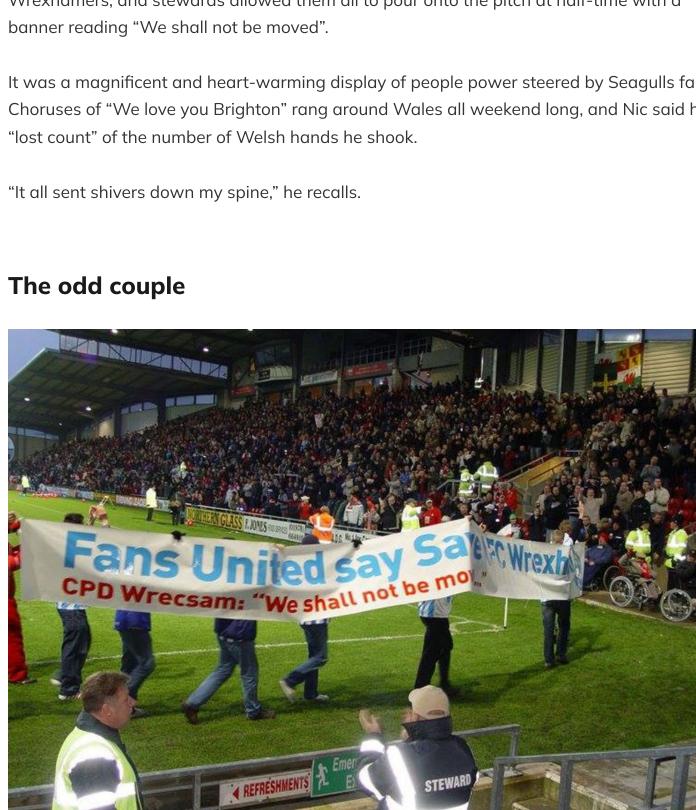
of colours and crests. Over 1,000 people from other teams - Grimsby, Stockport, Northampton, Everton, Wolves, Cardiff, Bury - were in attendance on top of 7,000 Wrexhamers, and stewards allowed them all to pour onto the pitch at half-time with a banner reading "We shall not be moved". It was a magnificent and heart-warming display of people power steered by Seagulls fans. Choruses of "We love you Brighton" rang around Wales all weekend long, and Nic said he "lost count" of the number of Welsh hands he shook. "It all sent shivers down my spine," he recalls. The odd couple

Wrexham's celebrity owners - Ryan Reynolds & Rob McElhenney - Credit: Wrexham AFC

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Brighton fans at Wrexham - Credit: Nic Outterside

Wrexham lost the battle on their Fans United Day, defeated 3-1 by Bristol City. They also

won the war. The fight to keep The Racecourse - today the set of Welsh football's first

After learning of Wrexham's predicament, Brighton fans could have simply shaken their

world to them - red not blue, Welsh not English, sheep not seagulls. But despite the two

"There's nothing really similar about the places, but as football communities we've both

The main parallel these days is that both Wrexham and Brighton believe in their owners.

Whilst Reynolds and McElhenney are lauded as fun-loving superstars in Wales, Sussex is

right behind Albion chairman Tony Bloom - who took the reins from saviour Knight in 2009 and has been voted as the <u>second most popular Premier League owner</u> after Leicester City's

gone through the same experiences in a very similar way," Nic says.

"It's great we've maintained such a close relationship."

heads, sighed, and pressed on with another promotion challenge. Wrexham was a different

regions bearing little resemblance or traits in common, they've become firm friends: An odd

Hollywood movie where a documentary titled Welcome to Wrexham is being shot -

remained out of developers' hands.

couple brought together by football.

Srivaddhanaprabha family.

lost their league status in the following months after suffering relegation. But crucially, they

The Wrexham Hollywood experiment remains in its beta phase and is yielding some wonderful early results for the club and wider town, and whilst its unclear what kind of legacy "RR McReynolds" will leave behind, there can be no denying the success of this first chapter.

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