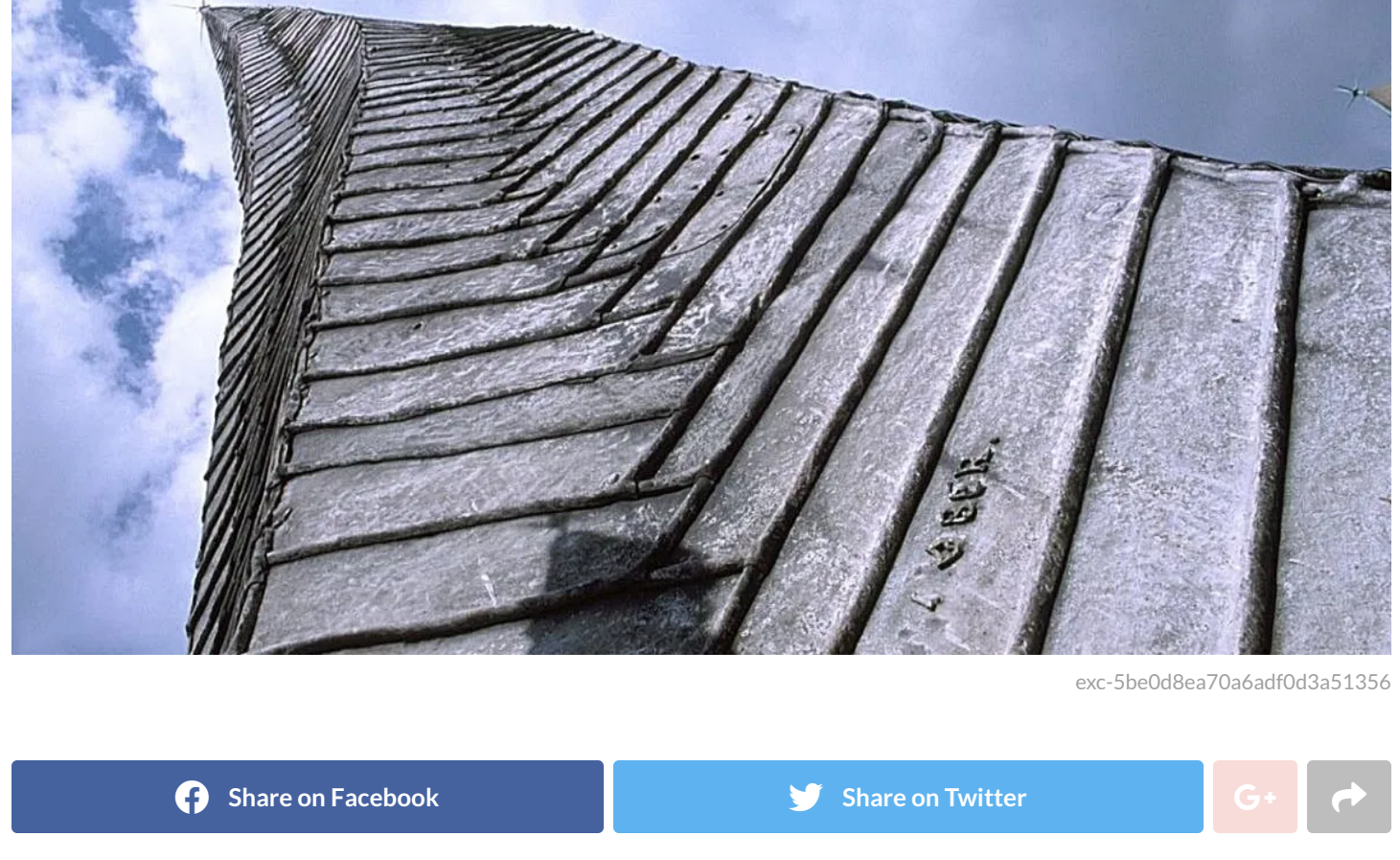


# Down the Spireites' staircase: Chesterfield's terrifying tumble into the football abyss

by **Pink** January 13, 2021 in European



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BY GARETH LLOYD

Clutching tickets for Chesterfield vs Wrexham, we're wandering somewhat aimlessly through the deep blue region of Derbyshire with time to kill before kick-off.

We vote to pile into a nearby pub for pre-match refreshments, but around halfway through pouring a second pint, the barmaid freezes and sharply pulls the pump back towards her, turning the cool flow of amber liquid into a pathetic, soapy dribble.

"Hang on, are you away fans?" she asks.

We are.

She turns, face flush with panic, to her workmate beside her. "I didn't realise...this will have to be the last one," she explains apologetically. "We're not allowed to serve away fans in here."

A group of home supporters wearing replica shirts stretched over thick hooded jumpers (a familiar winter get-up for the football crowd) are sat within earshot, and they seem disappointed that we'll have to leave.

"We've barely seen any away fans here all season," one explains.

"In this league, nobody brings any supporters. It's awful down here."

It seems Chesterfield fans still haven't quite got to grips with their non-league surroundings just yet.

And it's understandable. The sight of a lone minibus – opposed to a fleet of packed coaches – trundling up to the away stand takes some getting used to. But it isn't just the tiny turnouts of visiting fans that have left Spireites stunned. Their team have endured the kind of fall that has actually killed football clubs before. They're still reeling from the impact. Both off the pitch and on it.

Competing in the play-offs to earn promotion to the Championship just over three years ago, Chesterfield walk into today's fixture teetering just above the drop-zone to football's sixth tier.

Embed from Getty Images



The frightful tumble has happened in the blink of an eye. After a dismal wooden spoon-winning season in League One in 2016/17, the unthinkable then happened as they were relegated for a second successive season. In April, Chesterfield fell outside the professional pyramid for the first time in their existence.

This nosedive into non-league has left fans with more questions than answers, and with a former league club in town this afternoon, one Spireite seizes the opportunity to ask us something that's clearly been playing on his mind.

"How have you coped with this league for eleven years?" he probes. "I don't think I could do it."

He might have to. Chesterfield have completely forgotten how to win, and their lacklustre start to their new life in the National League is already shaping up to be a facsimile of last season – scrabbling around at the bottom when they should be at the top.

Chesterfield FC officially turn one-hundred-years-old in April (1866 is considered their birth year by most, but they actually folded and set up again in 1919). The National League North is far from a fitting platform on which to host centennial celebrations for a club of their stature. Yet it appears a very real possibility.

"The problem is, we have an owner who just doesn't care," one supporter tells us, batting his palm in a wave of exasperation.

"There have been fans demanding a change, but nobody seems to be listening.

"A few of us think we're doomed. Something needs to happen quick."

But what? Unsettlingly, a solution seems elusive. Whilst Chesterfield's current owner, Dave Allen, is one of the least popular men within a ten-mile radius of the Proact Stadium, he's also the one who's holding all the cards.

Fans could stage protests in an attempt to force him out but given the cobweb-covered bank accounts and no well-meaning, lotto-winning Chesterfield supporter in sight to cover the costs, rushing the directors' box could prove to be a massive gamble.

And Chesterfield have already suffered enough from haphazard betting. The proof is in their recruitment history.

Granted, there's no guarantee any move they make will pay dividends. But like a drunk punter pushing chips onto the roulette table at midnight, Chesterfield have demonstrated a frustrating habit of being unable to hedge their bets – instead making a series of speculative moves that set the course for the club's downward spiral.

"Dean Saunders is where the problems all started," explains another supporter, referring to the 2015 appointment of the head-scratching manager who seems to pluck his post-match stats from games being played out in some other dimension.

Embed from Getty Images



"He didn't have a clue. But that was just the beginning. Some of the player signings were mad, too.

"Ched Evans invited a lot of criticism given the situation at the time, which was the last thing the club needed. We made a bit of money off him in the end, but we're still struggling financially because of some of the other silly signings we made.

"Just look at Chris O'Grady. He was supposed to be on four grand a week here. Four grand! That's just unsustainable."

Chesterfield's visibly desperate decision-making proved to be their undoing. Saunders, Danny Wilson and Gary Caldwell were all hired then dismissed as the rot set in, and Evans scored a handful before returning to his favoured team (and local rivals) Sheffield United.

Then, as if things couldn't get bad enough, a club legend's reputation became forever tainted.

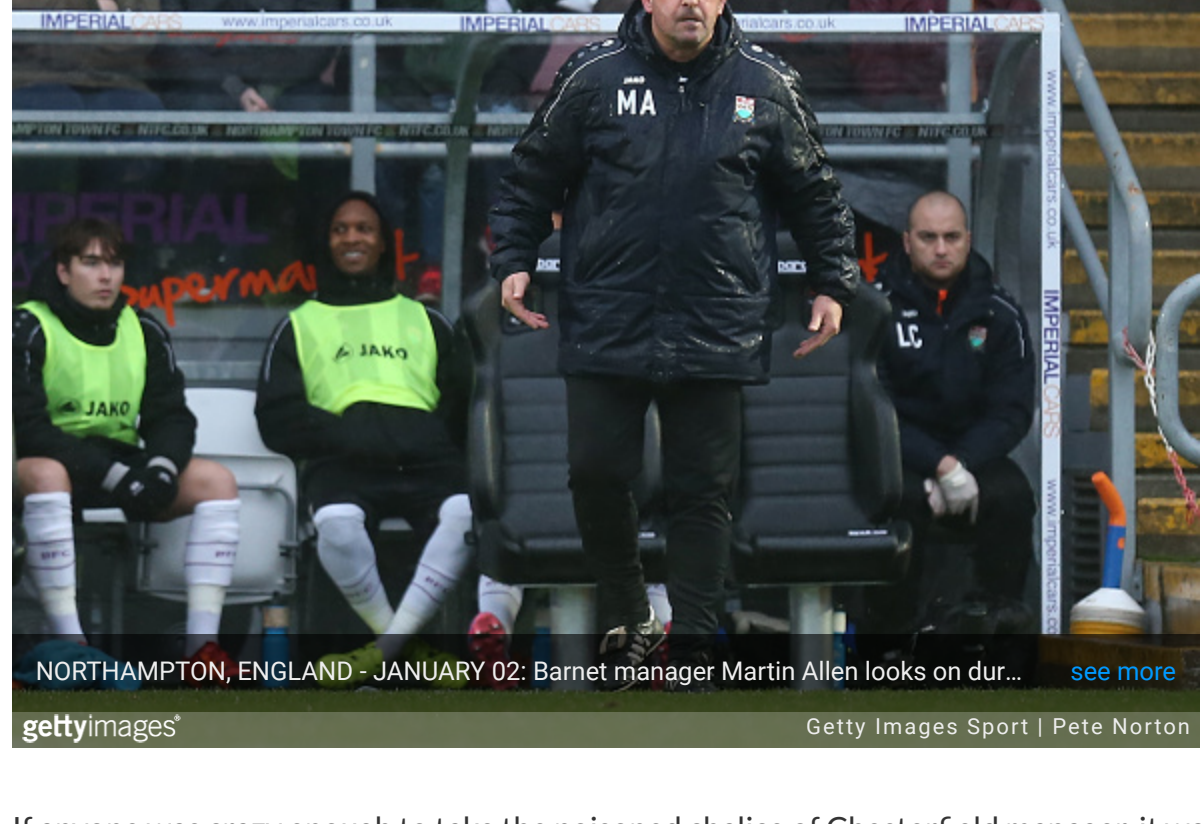
With Chesterfield limping along in League Two, the managerial reins were handed to former star striker Jack Lester – who bagged the best part of 100 goals for the Spireites in six seasons. Heartbreakingly, Lester failed to emulate any of his playing heroics on the touchline, and before long the club were trapped in an irreversible descent that condemned the club to non-league.

Winger Morecambe's offer of no respite from humiliation signalled their demotion was confirmed, either. After Morecambe's 0-0 draw with Cambridge United signalled the end of their near-century-long stay in league football, Chesterfield's Twitter account completely ignored the momentous result, electing to focus on a youth cup game instead – leading to a bizarre spike in Google searches asking "Are Chesterfield relegated?"

And on the circus went. The Player of the Year award for 2017/18 was completely withdrawn (with a club statement confirming there'd been an "orchestrated attempt to scupper the voting"), and there were multiple departure announcements concerning both first team members and backroom staff.

Recolouring the red mist around the club into a celebratory blue seemed an unenviable challenge. But it didn't scare Martin Allen.

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If anyone was crazy enough to take the poisoned chalice of Chesterfield manager, it was him. In charge since May, the veteran coach affectionately known as "Mad Dog" hasn't enjoyed a brilliant start by any means, but a solid run of recent results has at least curbed the plummet and kept the club clear of the National League North entrance point.

And it's imperative it stays that way. Three relegations wouldn't just be extraordinarily cruel on Chesterfield, it could spell the end for them – period.

Fans of fellow free-fallers like Stockport County and York City could remind Spireites that no club has a God-given right to remain in any division, no matter how big they might be compared to the competition. Supporters of the liquidated Chester City and Darlington would confess that no team has a right to exist at all.

As punishing as it may be to cheer for Chesterfield in the current climate, it is nothing compared to the pain of having to see your club close forever.

Ultimately, Chesterfield's (technical) anniversary in 2019 could prove to be their most pivotal season yet. Fans might look back decades from now and put a pin in next year's calendar to mark the point where fortunes finally started to turn. On the other hand, it could be another dark chapter they'll want to erase from their minds forever.

In either case, the club is perilously positioned on a knife-edge. Whether they'll kick on or continue to fall down remains to be seen. But we'll know soon enough.

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