

Twenty-five years ago, Halesowen were involved in a tense and exciting conclusion to a fascinating 1995/96 Beazer Homes League Premier Division season, ultimately achieving their highest ever finish in the non-league structure.

The strength of the 1995/96 Beazer Premier and the magnitude of Halesowen's achievement is clearly demonstrated as no fewer than five members of that season's league subsequently became Football League members - Cheltenham Town, Burton Albion, Newport, Crawley Town and Rushden & Diamonds.

It was Rushden & Diamonds who were outright favourites to romp the 1995/96 league title with Max Griggs of Dr Martens fame funding the club towards the Football League and the Diamonds did not disappoint their fans as they led the table handsomely from early in the season. But the Yeltz gradually gained momentum throughout the campaign to move up to second spot for the final run-in.

The top pick of the games in the season to savour saw Halesowen Town pull off a remarkable 2-1 victory on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1996 at Nene Park, the impressive home of big-spending Rushden & Diamonds. The clash between the top two sides was watched by 3,481 fans and Andy Bradley astonished them all when he smashed in a stunning Halesowen winner to throw the title race wide open. Luckily, after a quarter of a century, we're now able to re-live those goals thanks to video footage retrieved and published in recent years by Rushden & Diamonds historians. But before taking a detailed look back at that Rushden game, it's important to remember the season's build-up to that late March contest and understand what it meant for the remainder of the season.

1995/96 was the first full season in charge for the Yeltz management duo of Team Manager Stewart Hall and General Manager Colin Brookes following their appointment in late 1994. Hall, an FA Football Development Manager at Dudley Borough, was formerly manager of Oldswinford and was already well known after his previous stint as Yeltz assistant manager. After Hall's appointment Brookes soon arrived from managing the West Midlands Police side.



(Left to right) Colin Brookes (gen manager), Ian Bottles, Richard Massey, Phil Wood, Mark Hart, Derek Dudley, Jason Owen, Mark Williams, Richard Crisp, Gary Hackett, Gavin Blairstwell (physio) and Stuart Hall (manager). Front: Dave Heywood, Matt Richards, Kevin Harrison, John Snape, Paul Joinson, Steve Hopcroft and Nick Colley.

The Summer of 1995 involved some hard and controversial decisions regarding player departures with new, young players added. Amongst the squad additions brought in were Matt Clarke, Richard Crisp, Gary Hackett, Mark Hart and Steve Hopcroft and they were blended in with already established players such as Andy Bradley, Kevin

Harrison, Jason Owen, Mick Shearer, John Snape, Phil Wood and Evran Wright to create a hard-working side with a tremendous team spirit. Hackett signed for his home-town club after twelve seasons in the professional game, including spells at Shrewsbury Town, Aberdeen, Stoke City, West Bromwich Albion, Peterborough United and most recently Second Division Chester City.

Later on, Jim Rodwell, a 23 year old law student and World Student Games international was signed from Nuneaton Borough in September but Richard Massey and Paul Joinson departed from the squad early in the season. Darren Marsh suffered an ankle injury in a pre-season friendly against Bilston and made only substitute appearances during the season.

Pre-season brought Football League Division Three Hereford United to The Grove on July 20<sup>th</sup> for Malcolm Hazlewood's testimonial and his final game, a full 14 years after first pulling on a Yeltz shirt. Hazlewood achieved the rare feat of being ever-present in the previous season and brought back the Joinson twins, Lee and Paul, together with Mark Penn, who acted as manager for the evening. Current Aston Villa manager Dean Smith was Hereford's team captain but was not part of their starting eleven. The Bulls took a 2-0 half-time lead and added a third in the 55<sup>th</sup> minute before Harrison pulled back two late goals in the 71<sup>st</sup> minute and the 81<sup>st</sup> minute.

Two days earlier, an estimated 3,500 fans packed the Grove for the visit of West Bromwich Albion. Paul Joinson put Crisp through with seven minutes remaining but his shot bounced off the woodwork and the Baggies ran out 1-0 winners thanks to Andy Hunt's first-half injury-time header.

As the 1995/96 league campaign commenced, the early omens were far from good after Halesowen started with two draws and then a hugely disappointing 1-0 home defeat by Cheltenham Town on August Bank Holiday Monday. On the opening August Saturday Halesowen threw away a two goal lead in a 3-3 draw against Sudbury Town at The Grove. Despite Wright scoring after just four minutes and Crisp making it 2-0 in the 21<sup>st</sup> minute, Sudbury fought back to 2-2 and although Bradley then appeared to have hit an injury time winner, a hopeful Sudbury 30-yarder flew agonisingly past goalkeeper Derek Dudley in the last kick of the game. Halesowen were also pegged back at Gresley Rovers the following Tuesday after Harrison's early goal had provided another promising start.

It wasn't until early September that Crisp finally earned the Yeltz a 1-0 victory at VS Rugby and Crisp bagged two more goals the following Saturday against Gloucester City to secure Halesowen's first home victory. Following a single goal defeat at Chelmsford on the last day of September, Halesowen then negotiated their way through October and November unbeaten in the league.



• OUT FOR THE COUNT . . . referee Paul Danson receives help after being knocked unconscious in the Dudley v Halesowen FA Trophy clash yesterday

However, Cup competitions proved to be a different story and weren't particularly fruitful throughout the season. Halesowen did manage to reach the 3<sup>rd</sup> Qualifying Round of the FA Cup in early October before elimination by Crisp's previous club Telford United for the third consecutive season in a 4-1 defeat. A depressing 4-2 FA Trophy elimination at Dudley Town's Round Oak Stadium in January then left the Yeltz free to "concentrate on the league" in a game possibly more memorable for seeing controversial league referee Paul Danson pole-axed and knocked-out by a "stray ball" before being taken away to hospital.



Back in the league, a 3-1 home win punished Newport's suspect defence on 14<sup>th</sup> October but a week later the Yeltz allowed Stafford Rangers to pick up their first point of the season at the twelfth attempt in a 2-2 draw at the Grove. It could've been worse as Halesowen trailed by two goals before Wright bundled home an 88<sup>th</sup> minute equaliser against the ten-man visitors.

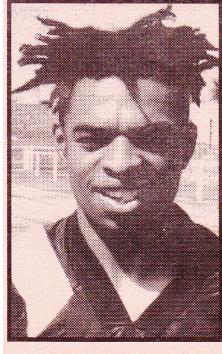


Halesowen moved up to sixth spot in late October after a dramatic 5-4 home win over Atherstone United, following an entertaining first half that produced seven goals. There were two goals each for Harrison and Wright and one for Rodwell.

As Autumn progressed, the Yeltz gradually started to show they meant business and consolidated a top six place in the league with two more victories. Owen scored with a late free-kick to overcome Ilkeston Town at the Grove on November 11<sup>th</sup> and

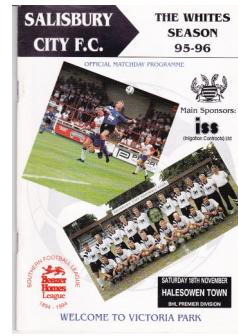
Halesowen put themselves amongst the promotion hopefulls with a superb 2-0 win at second-placed Gloucester City three days later. Despite being put under a lot of pressure, the Yeltz defended solidly and never looked in trouble. The reward for their patience arrived after 75 minutes when Crisp met Owen's corner with a diving header and ten minutes later Wright capped a superb personal performance with a second goal.





● Evran Wright

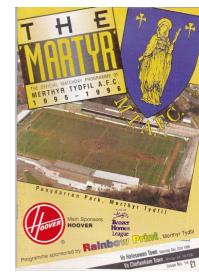
The fine win at Gloucester was followed up the next weekend with a 3-2 win at Salisbury City's seemingly open-to-all Victoria Park after Wright scored twice in injury-time to complete an excellent hat-trick. Wright's electric pace earned a 30<sup>th</sup> minute lead before Halesowen fell behind 2-1 at the break. The clock had moved beyond 90 minutes when Wright levelled with a low header from Owen's corner and Wright still had time to pounce again from another Owen corner to stab home off the post and become the hat-trick hero.



Darkening December dawned with a dismal 1-0 home defeat by Hastings Town. The Hastings goal led a charmed life as Halesowen totally dominated the second half but failed to repair the damage from a sensational early strike when Terry White spotted Hart off his line and he chipped the home goalkeeper from a centre-circle free-kick. Crisp, Wood and Owen were all denied late on in the one-way traffic at a stunned Grove.

But as the temperatures dropped, the Yeltz gradually turned up the real heat before mounting a full scale relentless charge from the start of 1996 onwards. In any other season Halesowen would've been crowned champions but the presence of cash-rich Rushden led to one the leagues most exciting climaxes for years instead.

A 2-0 win at Merthyr Tydfil's Penydarren Park kicked-off the festive programme with an early present two days before Christmas Day. Snape thundered a fierce drive against the post and a Danny Coates effort was cleared off the line before youngster Mark Williams notched his first Beazer Premier goal by heading home a Coates cross after an hour and Crisp sealed the points with a low header in the final minute.



On Boxing Day Halesowen mounted a second-half fightback to salvage a point in an exciting 3-3 derby draw against Worcester City, watched by 1,119 fans at the Grove, after two-goal Williams volleyed home an 87<sup>th</sup> minute equaliser. The game also brought an unexpected last-minute playing appearance by club legend Paul Joinson after he arrived at the game as a Boxing Day spectator – and answered an SOS as a player. The Legend had gone to watch the top of the table Beazer Premier match but after being accosted as he walked across the car park, he ended up as a substitute for the depleted Yeltz, playing a part in the equaliser.

Halesowen General Manager Colin Brookes took up the story at the time. "It was a quarter to two and we were just weighing up the line-up when I saw him walking to the Directors' Box. He'd come down to ask about training with us after leaving Blakenall and I said 'You could do better than that – do you fancy playing?' 'Give me half an hour' he said 'and I'll go and get my kit.' You should have heard the reception from the fans when he came on as substitute. Halesowen Town is still Paul Joinson's home and everybody loves him." Paul remained on emergency stand-by for the visit of Salisbury City on January 6<sup>th</sup> - his final appearance on a Yeltz teamsheet and the last remaining playing link back to the transformational FA Vase winning years of the early 1980s.

1996 commenced with a 2-0 home win in that Salisbury game and a narrow 1-0 victory at Cambridge City's Milton Road. This was followed up with a 2-1 home win over Gravesend & Northfleet thanks to goals from Wright and Shearer. Irrepressible Wright bagged two more goals in the 2-0 home win over Crawley Town on February 10<sup>th</sup>, slotting home a 19<sup>th</sup> minute rebound and Wright beat the offside trap from Snape's pass to make it 2-0 with seven minutes remaining to move Halesowen within ten points of Rushden.

In retrospect though, huge damage was to be done by a 1-0 defeat on 13<sup>th</sup> February at Stafford Rangers, meaning the Yeltz took only one point from the two games against the struggling relegation certainties. Yet the reversal also proved pivotal as determined Halesowen would go on to remain unbeaten for the rest of the season – a total of 17 games.

The following week, two goals in ten minutes arrowed Halesowen to a comfortable victory at Hastings Town with Bradley grabbing the first through a 25<sup>th</sup> minute header and Wright adding to his season's tally by rounding the goalkeeper to slot home the second goal soon afterwards.

Rock-bottom Rugby then frustrated the Yeltz, who were unable to capitalise, leading to a Grove stalemate in the last match of February.

With Spring in the air, the often under-rated Harrison was the hat-trick hotshot on March 9<sup>th</sup> as Halesowen carved up Chelmsford 3-0 in the second half. Harrison poked home in the 47<sup>th</sup> minute, smashed a second in the 68<sup>th</sup> minute and completed his hat-trick three minutes later after Shearer set up Bradley to cross. An earlier letter to the Sports Argus in January noted the skilful contribution and return to form made by Harrison. Together with his high fitness level and 100% effort, he was considered a model semi-professional footballer.

Two goals in three minutes midway through the first-half maintained the championship challenge on the following Wednesday night at Baldock Town as Wood flicked on Hackett's cross for Wright to head firmly home after 27 minutes and Crisp converted a penalty three minutes later when Wright was impeded.

Relegation haunted Atherstone United defended doggedly on 16<sup>th</sup> March at bumpy Sheepy Road before Wright picked up Snape's 68<sup>th</sup> minute pass and finished brilliantly by curling into the top corner to earn all three points. Substitute Hopcroft scrambled home a late 2-1 winner on the following Saturday at home to Merthyr Tydfil for his solitary goal of an injury-hit season.

But despite the fabulous run of form, Halesowen still found themselves six points adrift of Rushden ahead of the Nene Park game at the end of March, having played two games more.

Just eleven days earlier, on Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> March, Halesowen battled out a goalless home draw in a hugely entertaining game against runaway leaders Rushden in front of 1,725 fans - the Grove's biggest attendance of the season. Despite the lack of goals, the action was non-stop and Rushden, oozing expensive class, started with all guns blazing in a previously postponed contest. Goalkeeper Hart was at his best, tipping over a 20<sup>th</sup> minute goalbound shot from dangerman Darren Collins. Collins set up Steve Taylor to miss a sitter by firing wide of an open goal four minutes later and Hart then raced off his line to win a tremendous tackle after Collins put Andy Kirkup clear. But the Yeltz weathered the storm and almost went ahead with the best chance of the game when Crisp twisted and turned through a packed Rushden defence before hitting the crossbar with a tremendous drive. The breath-taking action continued into the second half with Crisp going closest again after 62 minutes when Hackett's corner was only half cleared.

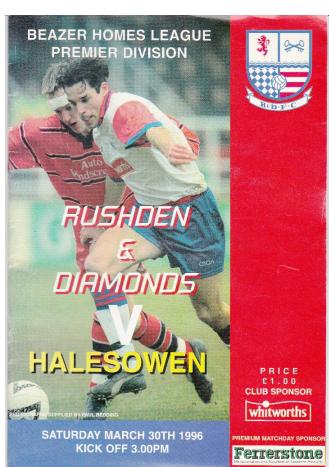
So, onto the Nene Park battle itself on Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> March where Halesowen, playing in their Hamer Ford sponsored yellow and black shirts, stunned the Diamonds in a tremendous team performance. In his programme notes Rushden manager Roger Ashby observed "Perhaps you remember that Rushden Town were promoted with Halesowen in 1990. Although we were deadly rivals on the pitch, there was always a great deal of co-operation and mutual respect off the field. If I had to pick any club other than Rushden & Diamonds that I would like to see as League champions it would be Halesowen Town." He described the earlier 0-0 draw as "a good game to watch and the atmosphere amongst the crowd was excellent. Since their relatively poor start to the season, Halesowen have been matching us point for point and a draw on the ground of the side second in the table always has to be a good result."

The programme editor's respectful introduction confirmed the high esteem in which Halesowen were held. "Over the years we have developed a special relationship with them. They have always been sincere in their friendship". But his article ended with some disappointing gastronomic news. "At the time of writing, the beef scare has caused us to remove the

beefburgers from the menu at all the snack bars. There will be an alternative although at the moment it has not been decided exactly what that will be."

**Rushden & Diamonds:** Graham Benstead; Tim Wooding, Nick Ashby, Steve Holden, Steve Stott, Al-James Hannigan, Andy Kirkup, Gary Butterworth, Darren Collins, Carl Alford, Brendan Hackett. **Subs:** Andy Peakes, David Holmes, Kevin Wilkin.

**Halesowen Town:** Mark Hart; Matt Clarke, Andy Bradley, Phil Wood, John Snape, Jim Rodwell, Kevin Harrison, Evran Wright, Richard Crisp, Nick Colley, Gary Hackett. **Subs:** Mark Bellingham, Jason Owen, Darren Marsh. **Booked:** Wood, Owen.



Hart made a great early 10<sup>th</sup> minute save at the foot of his post from Gary Butterworth following Kirkup's cross. But Halesowen took a 22<sup>nd</sup> minute lead when Snape hooked a wayward Hackett cross back towards the penalty area and Wright laid the ball off for often under-rated Harrison to lash his 20 yard shot beyond goalkeeper Graham Benstead. However, the joy was short-lived with the lead lasting just a minute after Rushden's new mid-week record £85,000 signing Carl Alford marked his debut by forcing home an equaliser from Tim Wooding's corner. The Yeltz survived a 36<sup>th</sup> minute scare when Rushden appealed for a penalty after Alford burst through and was challenged by Rodwell. Hart then blocked a Butterworth shot and Collins fired the rebound into the side-netting. Harrison was agonisingly close to beating Benstead to the ball as he chased a long pass just before the interval and Hart made another terrific reflex save to prevent Rodwell putting through his own net with a header.

Halesowen retook the lead in the 62<sup>nd</sup> minute when Nick Colley's cross was headed away but with goalkeeper Benstead stranded off his line and the home defence in disarray, Hackett beat Benstead to the ball and his cross fell for Bradley to thump the winner into the roof of the net from close range.

Owen cleared Kirkup's close range effort off the line but it was undoubtedly goalkeeper Hart who was in superb form in the final quarter, producing four inspired saves to ensure all three points belonged to Halesowen. He touched a 20 yard thunderbolt from substitute Kevin Wilkin onto the bar, clawed an Alford header around the post and blocked an effort from Collins when the striker was clear on goal.

<b>BEAZER HOMES PREMIER</b>													
Team	Goals	Match Results											
		Home	Away	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	L	F	A
Rushden	(0)	33	13	1	2	4	17	6	1	32	13	76	
Halesowen	35	10	6	2	34	21	11	4	2	25	11	73	
Cheltenham	35	8	5	4	29	16	10	3	5	32	33	62	
Worcester	34	9	6	2	29	16	8	4	5	21	16	61	
Merthyr T	33	11	1	6	37	22	7	2	6	22	27	57	
Gloucester	35	10	3	4	31	19	6	5	7	25	21	56	
Gresley	31	9	1	6	27	21	7	5	3	24	19	54	
Hastings	33	6	5	6	31	26	7	5	4	25	19	49	
Chelmsford	34	6	8	3	21	15	5	5	7	19	27	46	
Burton	34	7	6	4	24	17	5	3	9	22	27	45	
Baldock	36	5	7	6	23	22	6	4	8	24	26	44	
Graves'd & N	33	8	4	4	28	18	4	4	9	22	35	44	
Salisbury	35	8	4	5	29	24	4	3	11	18	34	43	
Newport	31	5	3	7	25	22	6	5	5	21	23	41	
Crawley	32	7	6	2	28	19	3	5	9	17	28	41	
Cambridge	34	6	1	10	21	28	5	6	6	22	25	40	
Sudbury	32	8	3	5	31	23	2	5	9	20	35	38	
Dorchester	31	6	4	7	31	22	3	2	9	18	26	33	
Atherstone	35	5	8	27	30	3	4	10	20	38	33		
Ilkeston	34	4	5	7	19	28	4	2	12	23	50	31	
Stafford	34	5	1	11	27	34	4	2	11	23	40	30	
VS Rugby	34	3	3	11	17	29	2	4	11	14	45	22	

delighted for Stewart (Hall) and all the players."

The best of his saves was undeniably his effort in keeping out substitute Wilkin's drive. From behind the goal the unforgettable incident looked even more remarkable, yet somewhat comical at the same time. Hart initially did superbly well to touch the goal-bound shot onto the bar. In what then seemed like slow motion, the ball bounced down, hit unaware Hart on the head but somehow stayed out. With Hart flat out and prostrate in the net, Alford could only hit the loose ball against the outside of the post. Some days in football, despite an onslaught you just know that the points are destined to be safe and for those of us watching nervously behind the goal, this was when we sensed it was one of those days. And so it proved to be, as Collins dragged another good late chance wide and the Yeltz took home all three points after a memorable victory.

The triumph inflicted only the third defeat of the season for moneybags Rushden and cut the gap to just three points, although Rushden still had the luxury of two games in hand. But the result suddenly changed the dynamics of the title race and set the non-league chattering world alight. Halesowen's progress towards the top had been unremitting and the title suddenly came fully into sight after the huge spanner had well and truly been thrown into the works of Rushden's finely tuned machinery. The Northamptonshire side had been 15 points clear just two months earlier but had now hit a patch of four games without a win. After the game Colin Brookes said "We put up as good a team performance as I've seen in my time at the club. I couldn't fault the workrate, effort and attitude and I'm

For many years this game remained as just a glorious golden memory in Halesowen's history. But out of the blue, three years ago, Rushden fans' desire to document their former club's history led to archive footage coming to light, so the goal action can now be enjoyed here again once more:

[Click to watch video highlights: Rushden & Diamonds 1 Halesowen Town 2 - Saturday 30th March 1996](#)

Note, however, that the date shown on the video incorrectly pertains to the date of the earlier 0-0 draw at the Grove and the cross for the winning goal is also incorrectly ascribed to Shearer instead of Colley.



• ON THE SPOT . . . Halesowen's Richard Crisp scores from a penalty

After the giddy heights of the Rushden triumph, the Yeltz needed Crisp's second-half penalty to earn a point at The Grove on the following Saturday after Burton Albion dominated the first period to take the lead with the Yeltz looking out-of-sorts. But Rushden's victory over Cambridge meant the title gap widened once again to five points. Further stern tests lay ahead for the Yeltz in the two-horse race for the league championship, especially starting with fourth-placed Worcester away on Easter Monday. But with momentum on their side, Halesowen rose to the challenge to remain undefeated for the rest of the campaign and finished the season with six straight wins.

Indeed, the Yeltz came away from Worcester City's St. George's Lane with a 1-0 win for their 12<sup>th</sup> away win in the league courtesy of Wright heading home Hackett's 64<sup>th</sup> minute cross, as the two best defensive records locked horns.

Late in the season Halesowen completed the signing of teenage goalkeeper Danny McDonnell and the loan signing of 21-year old striker Mark Bellingham. Bellingham signed from Chelmsford, but was studying in Dudley, on his way to becoming a non-league appearance and goal-scoring legend (and father to England's new rising star Jude). Fans' favourite McDonnell had been a Yeltz target for many months and eventually moved from Lye Town in February with an invitation to be Halesowen's goalkeeper "for the next ten years". McDonnell became Halesowen's fourth goalkeeper of the season when he made his full debut at Merthyr in late March.

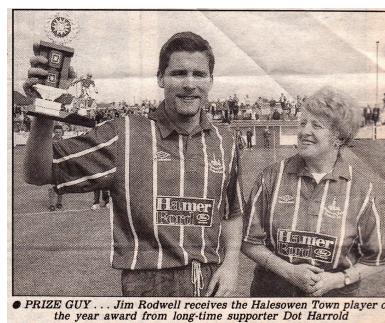
BEAVER HUMES PREMIER											
	Home	Away	P	W	D	L	F	AW	D	F	A Pts
Rushden	39 16	1 3 56 20 10	6	3	34	19	85				
Halesowen	39 11	7 2 37 23 13	4	2	27	11	83				
Cheltenham	40 10	6 4 35 17 11	3	6	37	36	72				
Worcester	39 10	6 4 33 18 8	5	6	24	21	65				
Gloucester	39 11	3 5 33 23 8	5	7	27	21	65				
Gresley	37 9	4 6 31 25 9	5	4	31	24	63				
Merthyr T	39 11	2 7 38 24 8	2	9	26	31	61				
Crawley	38 10	7 2 33 21 4	6	9	19	29	55				
Hastings	38 6	8 33 31 8	6	5	29	21	53				
Graves'd & N	39 10	5 5 34 20 4	5	10	23	37	44				
Sudbury	38 10	3 6 38 27 4	6	9	25	37	51				
Burton	39 8	7 4 29 21 5	4	11	24	31	50				
Chelmsford	39 6	9 5 22 22 5	6	8	19	30	48				
Salisbury	39 9	4 6 30 26 4	5	11	21	37	48				
Newport	38 5	5 8 28 26 7	6	7	22	30	47				
Baldock	40 5	7 8 24 26 6	6	8	26	28	46				
Dorchester	38 7	4 8 33 24 5	4	10	21	28	44				
Cambridge	38 7	2 10 25 30 5	6	8	24	29	44				
Atherstone	40 6	6 8 29 31 5	5	10	25	41	44				
Ilkeston	39 5	7 7 22 30 5	2	13	25	51	39				
Stafford	40 7	1 12 31 35 4	3	13	25	47	37				
VS Rugby	39 3	4 12 18 31 2	5	13	17	53	24				

Halesowen came from behind to maintain the title charge on April 13<sup>th</sup> with a 2-1 home win over Cambridge City, who were reduced to nine men for the final twenty minutes. Out of the blue, City took a 39<sup>th</sup> minute lead before Crisp levelled by converting a penalty four minutes later. Cambridge player-manager Steve Fallon was sent off for dissent and another Cambridge dismissal for dissent followed when Owen headed home the 67<sup>th</sup> minute winner from Bradley's corner.

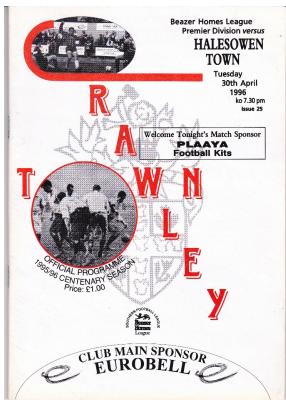
Pace on the break gave Halesowen a crucial breakthrough after soaking up pressure at Gravesend & Northfleet a week later. Bellingham collected the ball inside the centre circle and accelerated past a static, bemused defence to slide home the winner with clinical accuracy two minutes before the interval for his first Halesowen goal. Snape orchestrated the performance admirably and it never looked like the advantage would slip from their grasp. Stewart Hall reflected "it was never likely to be a classic. It was a hard, bumpy pitch and the home side played some good football. But the lads at the back were superb and the two boys up front are by far the quickest strikers in the league."

By contrast, Roger Ashby's faltering Rushden slumped to a late goal at Gloucester City, having already crashed 4-1 at lowly Sudbury Town on Easter Monday, so the gap was suddenly reduced to just two points with three games each to play.

The third last and final home game brought a narrow 1-0 win over resolute Baldock Town to keep dreams alive. The excellent Snape was denied by a brilliant 72<sup>nd</sup> minute save and his header from the resulting corner was scrambled off the line. Level-headed midfielder Crisp finally crashed home a crucial 76<sup>th</sup> minute penalty after Clarke's cross was handled, but with Rushden winning at Stafford to build on a midweek victory at Salisbury, the gap remained stubbornly at five points.



• PRIZE GUY . . . Jim Rodwell receives the Halesowen Town player of the year award from long-time supporter Dot Harrold



points ahead for the final Saturday on May 4th.

Halesowen played their part fully by winning 2-1 at Newport's Spyty Park after Wright headed home Snape's 48<sup>th</sup> minute pinpoint cross and Wood stole in to head home Hackett's 60<sup>th</sup> minute free-kick to overcome Newport's first half lead provided by Lee Brown. Halesowen's final goal of the campaign was Wood's first and only goal of the season, a fitting reward for another often under-estimated but constant contributor at the heart of a mean and colossal defence. But Halesowen hearts were broken as the Diamonds held their nerve to cling on, despite a late fightback by visitors Merthyr Tydfil, to record a 3-2 final day home victory and clinch the title in front of 4,664 fans.

BEAZER HOMES PREMIER							
ATHERTON	(1)	CAMBRIDGE	(1)	H 2			
Audleyton	25, Elision SO	Shuttleworth	42, Williams SO	(0) 1			
BALDOCK	(1)	BURTON	Stride 53	(0) 1			
Hovell 73		CHILFORD	(1) VS RUGBY	(0) 0			
Elmwood 65, 67, 85		CLYTHAM'NTH	(3) SALISBURY	(1) 3			
DORCHESTER	(4)	COLSTON	Emmerson 4, Carroll 58,	SUFFOLK			
Killich 42		COVENTRY	Emmerson 5, Carroll 58,	STAFFORD			
Sullivan 57, 61,		CRANBROOK	Emmerson 5, Carroll 58,	STOURPORT			
Rodwell 57, 61		GRESLEY	(1) CRAWLEY	(0) 0			
Hall 12, 44, 45,		GUARDIAN	(1) CRAWLEY	(0) 1			
Hall 12		HARROW	(1) CRAWLEY	(0) 1			
NEWPORT	(1)	HARVEST	(1) CRAWLEY	(0) 1			
Rushden 10, 11, 12		HARVEST	(1) CRAWLEY	(0) 0			
RUSHDEN	(2)	HARVEST	(2) MERTHYR T	(0) 2			
Afford 9, Butterworth 36,		HARVEST	Evens 56	(0) 2			
Colling 45		HARVEST	Knight 83	(0) 2			
HARVEST	(3)	HARVEST	Knight 83	(0) 2			
Hicks 7		HARVEST	McAuley 4, N	8, 454			
Hicks 7		HARVEST	McAuley 4, N	(0) 1			
Ferguson 28, 44		HARVEST	Morgan 29 (pen)	(0) 1			
		Home					
		F	A	F	A	F	Pts
Rutherford	42 17	1	1	2	5	2	10
Halesowen	42 12	7	2	23 8	21 2	2	32 13 92
Cheltenham	42 10	7	4	18 20 13	6	36 37 92	
Gloucester	42 10	7	4	18 20 13	6	36 37 92	
Gresley	42 10	5	6	24 27 10	5	36 31 70	
Worcester	42 11	6	4	18 19 8	7	25 26 59	
Wolverhampton	42 11	6	4	18 19 8	7	25 26 59	
Hastings	42 8	7	4	37 39 8	8	31 29 81	
Crawley	42 10	7	4	34 25 5	11	21 23 59	
Gravesend	42 10	7	4	34 25 5	11	21 23 59	
Gravesend & N	42 10	5	6	34 24 11	7	21 24 49	
Chelmsford	42 9	5	6	34 24 11	7	21 24 49	
Colchester	42 9	5	6	39 27 11	7	21 24 49	
Newport	42 5	7	9	30 28 9	6	23 30 52	
Sutton Coldfield	42 6	7	9	30 28 9	6	23 30 52	
Brentwood	42 8	7	9	30 24 5	11	21 22 52	
Atherton	42 6	7	9	30 24 5	11	21 22 52	
Woking	42 7	7	9	30 24 5	11	21 22 52	
Cambridge	42 7	12	2	28 35	8	28 23 52	
Ikeston	42 8	7	23	37 33	5	24 43	
Stourport	42 8	7	23	37 33	5	24 43	
V.S. Rugby	42 5	3	13	20 36 2	5	14 17 57	

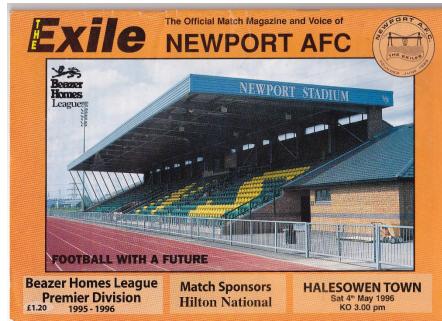


than all but two of the champions in the previous nine seasons and two years earlier Farnborough had won the crown with just 82 points.

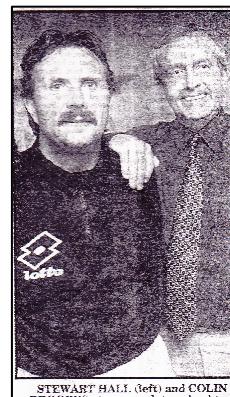
So close, yet so far – only four league games had been lost all season, each by just a single goal and for a 1-0 scoreline to be the worst league defeat of the season was a truly heroic achievement. After their 1-0 home defeat by Hastings on December 2<sup>nd</sup> the Yeltz were a formidable machine, losing only one more league game as the last 26 games brought 19 wins, 6 draws and just that one single 1-0 defeat to Stafford Rangers. The season concluded with Halesowen winning their last 6 games on a 17 game unbeaten run.

After the final game at Newport, Colin Brookes summed up the season as "a magnificent effort. To get 92 points and not to go up is obscene. We've lost four games in 42 and been unbeaten in the last 17. Unfortunately, we picked the wrong season. Halesowen can be proud of what Stewart and the players have achieved. Whether they've got money or not, they (Rushden)

The final week of the season arrived with relentless Halesowen faced with a tricky Tuesday night away game in hand at Crawley Town in an attempt to reduce the five-point gap. Crawley took a 17<sup>th</sup> minute lead as the Yeltz struggled on a hard, bumpy surface before a bizarre, lengthy stoppage to repair the goal netting required the use of ropes and ladders. But Stewart Hall's half-time team talk inspired a transformation as never-say-die Halesowen took complete control of the second half. Hackett levelled with a 60<sup>th</sup> minute solo goal from 25 yards and Crisp forced home the second goal in a goalmouth scramble three minutes later as hostility grew amongst the home crowd. The Yeltz sealed victory with the move of the match in the 76<sup>th</sup> minute when Crisp's delicate chip allowed Harrison to cross for Wright to head home. It meant the destination of the league championship trophy ultimately came down to the last game of the season with Rushden two



Halesowen's runners-up total of 92 points was just two points behind Rushden and a full 18 points clear of third placed Cheltenham. In either of the other two feeder leagues, the ICIS (Isthmian Premier) or Unibond (Northern Premier), Halesowen would've celebrated an emphatic title success. The points total was also higher



## DOOKES

responded when the pressure was on them and they won their last three games. It's been a superb battle." A philosophical Hall added: "We started the season with a completely new side and dropped too many points in our first five or six games – that's the reason we finished second."

All that remained was the receipt of the runners-up trophy and medals at the club's celebration and presentation evening at the Strathallan hotel later in May. The Supporters' Player of the Season award went to Jim Rodwell and the Players' Player of the Season trophy was given to John Snape. Stewart Hall's Clubman of the Year award was given to Richard Crisp and the Harry Rudge award for the most improved player was presented to Matt Clarke.

Wright was the leading goalscorer with 23 league goals, making 29 for the season in total. Ice-cool penalty taker Crisp chipped in with a further 15 useful league goals and Harrison bagged 13 league goals playing alongside Wright, after often playing as a sole forward in previous seasons. Snape made the most league appearances, playing in all but two games of the campaign and he formed the forward part of the very successful defensive triangle in front of Wood and Rodwell.

Classy Rodwell was widely considered the best centre-half in non-league and he attracted the attention of both Sheffield United and Leeds United throughout the season before finally making a move to Rushden over the following Summer of 1996, commanding a record transfer fee for the Yeltz. Following a successful playing career Rodwell later took up executive management roles at Boston, Notts County, Scunthorpe and Sunderland. Rushden themselves continued on their journey to join the Football League, eventually gaining promotion to the third flight of league football.

Achieving second place in the league table for the memorable 1995/96 season marked Halesowen's highest ever finish in the non-league structure to date. In those days there were no regional North and South divisions to the Football Conference (then sponsored by GM Vauxhall) with the Beazer Homes League being one of three direct feeder leagues to the top flight of non-league football. With 22 clubs competing in the GM Vauxhall Conference, Halesowen's second placed position in the Beazer Homes League (with a points total exceeding any other feeder league) would therefore justifiably equate to Halesowen being the 24<sup>th</sup> best non-league club in the country at the time. The original springboard for this achievement can no doubt be traced back to early 1980s, representing the culmination of the steady upwards progress that followed from those FA Vase and West Midlands League conquering years.

Crucially to the course of Yeltz history, there were no play-offs in those days to facilitate securing a second promotion place to the GM Vauxhall Conference as a consolation. Much debate has raged ever since on what would've happened had Halesowen made it into the top division of non-league at that time and whether it would've made or broken the club. Whilst it is true that history is littered with clubs who were promoted too soon, it is also worth remembering those five other clubs - who were routinely beaten by Halesowen in those days – that continued on to become league clubs, with four currently well-established. Alas, expectations were inevitably high in the following next few relatively successful seasons, but repeating 1995/96's achievements to gain promotion remained stubbornly elusive, as is often the situation in sport. Instead, the prospect of top-level non-league football at The Grove began to gradually ebb away towards mid-table as further seasons passed, and then receded into the far distance as time rolled over into the new century.

Although the 2008 playoffs did provide an opportunity to attain the new regionalised Football Conference status football, it was soon patently evident that this attempt was built on unstable foundations. Further serial off-the-field issues caused by opaque financing and ownership soon began to dominate, leading to a precarious decade of instability. As the club's history turned in different and often unpalatable ways, it was often the survival of the football club that became the unwanted watchword.

But with stability now thankfully restored through sound finances and ownership, sights are once again focused in an upwards direction. The pursuit of sustained progress on the pitch with realistic targets is well underway. Could this one day bring the dreams and aspirations of National League football to Halesowen Town and complete the unfinished business from a quarter of a century ago?

*David Johnson, DJ, April 2021*

# PLAYERS PENS PICS

## HALESOWENTOWN

**MARK HART** ★ Goalkeeper  
A 'keeper who signed in the close season. Aged 29, his previous clubs include Moor Green, Stratford Town and Coleshill Town.

**DANIEL McDONNELL** ★ Goalkeeper  
A 22 year old 'keeper signed in February 1996 from West Midlands League club Lye Town. He has seen previous experience with Stourbridge.

**MATTHEW CLARKE** ★ Defence  
A defender signed in the close season from local rivals Halesowen Harriers. Aged 21 he has seen previous experience with Cradley Town and Wolverhampton. He had trials with West Bromwich Albion last season.

**JASON OWEN** ★ Defence  
24 year old defender now in his third season at The Grove, having signed from West Midlands League club West Bromwich Town.

**PHILLIP WOOD** ★ Defence  
27 year old defender in his third season having signed from West Midlands League club Pelsall Villa where he spent one season. Previous clubs include Bilston and Dudley Town.

**STEPHEN HORCROFT** ★ Defence  
A defender, aged 28 who signed in July 1995 from West Midlands Police where he spent three seasons. He was previously with Worcester City.

**JIMMY RODWELL** ★ Defence  
Aged 24, Jimmy is a defender who signed in September 1995 from Nuneaton Borough where he spent two seasons. He has previous experience with Huddersfield Town, Boston United and Bedworth United. Represented the British Students in the World Student Games held in Japan in August 1995.

**ANDREW BRADLEY** ★ Defence  
Aged 27, Andrew is a very versatile player now in his seventh season having joined from West Midlands League side Tividale and progressing through the Reserve team.

**RICHARD CRISP** ★ Defence/Midfield  
A 23 year old defender or midfield player who signed from Telford United in July 1995. Has had previous experience with Aston Villa.

**JOHN SNAPE** ★ Midfield  
Midfield player in his fourth season after joining from Stourbridge where he spent four seasons. A former West Bromwich Albion apprentice he has also played for Northfield Town and is now aged 26. Last seasons Player of the Year.

**Derek Dudley (Goalkeeper)**; Goalkeeper in his second season having signed from West Bromwich Albion following a three month loan. Age 25, he has seen previous experience with Stourbridge, where he won a Southern League Midland Division Championship medal, Worcester City and V.S.Rugby.

**Ian Beetles (Defender)**; In his second spell with the club having rejoined from Racing Club Warwick in October 1994. Previously with The Yeltz for four seasons, he is a 32 year old defender.

**Richard Massey (Defender/Midfield)**; Club record signing when he joined from Stourbridge in January 1992 for a fee of £5,000. He made several Football League appearances for Exeter City before moving into the Vauxhall Conference with Kettering Town. Age 26, he is a defender or midfield player.

**MICHAEL SHEARER** ★ Midfield  
Midfield player signed in February 1995 from Gloucester City for a fee of £3,000. Aged 29 he gained previous experience with Nuneaton Borough, V.S. Rugby and Kettering Town.

**GARY HACKETT** ♦ Midfield  
An experienced 32 year old midfield player signed in the close season from Chester City. Previously with Lye Town, Bromsgrove Rovers, Shrewsbury, Aberdeen, Stoke, West Bromwich Albion and Peterborough. He played almost 350 Football League matches over a 13 year period.

**NICHOLAS COLLEY** ★ Midfield  
Young midfield player who progressed through the Reserve team. Aged 20, he was previously with Chasetown.

**PAUL JOINSON** ★ Forward  
Local hero who returned to the Club in January 1993 from Stourbridge. Previously with The Yeltz for ten seasons when he scored 320 goals from 523 appearances. Now aged 35, he has also enjoyed short spells with Worcester City, Redditch United and Dudley Town.

**DARREN MARSH** ★ Midfield  
A midfield player who is now in his second spell with the Club having returned from Dudley Town. Aged 23, he has previously been with Stourbridge, Lye Town and Oldswinford.

**KEVIN HARRISON** ★ Forward  
A 28 year old forward in his sixth season with the Club having joined from Stourbridge. Previously with West Midlands League club Tividale.

**EVAN WRIGHT** ★ Forward  
Joined the Club in December 1994 from Bilton Town. Aged 31, he was previously with Oldbury United, Springvale Trance and Stourbridge before being transferred to Halesowen Town in July 1993 and then moving to Walsall before playing a competitive match. He has also had short spells with Barry Town and Stafford Rangers.

**MARK WILLIAMS** ★ Forward  
A promising 19 year old forward who has progressed through the Reserve team. One for the future.

**ANDREW DALE** ★ Forward  
A forward signed in February 1996 from Sutton Coldfield Town. He was previously with Dudley Town and Bromsgrove Rovers.

**MARK BELLINGHAM** ★ Forward  
Forward signed on loan until the end of the season from Premier Division rivals Chelmsford City.