

= Thames Valley Royals proposal =

Shortly before the end of the 1982 ? 83 Football League season , Robert Maxwell , the then @-@ owner and chairman of Oxford United Football Club , announced that he had made a deal with the owners of nearby Reading to amalgamate the two teams to create a new club he proposed to name " Thames Valley Royals " . This appellation combined a loose term for the geographical region , " Thames Valley " , with the Reading team 's nickname , " the Royals " . With each team having financial problems , Maxwell claimed that both were on the verge of going out of business and that uniting them was necessary for the region to retain a Football League club .

Maxwell envisioned Thames Valley Royals ' future home as an unspecified location somewhere between Oxford and Reading where a new stadium would be built , perhaps Didcot ; home matches would alternate between Oxford and Reading in the meantime . Both sets of supporters promptly embarked on mass demonstrations against the merger , including protest marches and a 2 @,@ 000 @-@ man sit @-@ in on the pitch at Oxford before a match on 23 April . Maxwell pressed on with his plan regardless , insisting that " nothing short of the end of the Earth " would prevent its fruition .

The proposed amalgamation was stopped by the actions of one of Reading 's board directors , Roy Tranter , and Roger Smee , a businessman and former Reading player . Smee disputed the legitimacy of the controlling interest in Reading held by the faction of three Reading board members that backed the merger plan , including the chairman Frank Waller , and Tranter launched a legal challenge to the sale of certain shares on 22 April 1983 . Waller and his boardroom allies resigned under pressure from the rest of the Reading board on 12 May 1983 , and at an extraordinary shareholders ' meeting in July , Smee took over the club , ending the amalgamation plans .

= = Context = =

During the 1982 ? 83 Football League season , both Oxford United and Reading competed in the Football League Third Division , then the third tier of English football ? equivalent to today 's League One . Managed by Jim Smith , Oxford challenged for promotion throughout the season , while Maurice Evans ' Reading team languished near the relegation zone for much of the year , despite possessing one of the division 's top @-@ scoring forwards in Kerry Dixon . The colourful media mogul and former MP Robert Maxwell owned and chaired Oxford , having prevented the club 's bankruptcy by buying it in 1982 . One of the world 's oldest football teams ( established in 1871 ) , Reading were a public limited company , chaired by Frank Waller , a prominent local businessman ; while owning Oxford , Maxwell also held 19 % of Reading 's shares . The two clubs share a local rivalry . At the time , both were in financial difficulties , particularly Reading . Maxwell sought to build a new stadium for Oxford United ; he had negotiated with the council over potential locations since the time of his takeover , favouring a site in the northern suburb of Marston , but had yet to win council permission to buy the land .

= = Proposal = =

On 16 April 1983 , about a month before the end of the 1982 ? 83 season , Maxwell told the BBC that he was close to acquiring a controlling interest in Reading , and that he was intent on merging that club with Oxford . The merged club would be called Thames Valley Royals , a combination of " Thames Valley " , a loose term for the geographical area , and the nickname of Reading Football Club , " the Royals " . " If we in Thames Valley are to retain a League club we 've got to unite Reading and Oxford , " he explained . " Everything in the world that cannot pay its way must go the way of merger to combine into stronger units . "

Maxwell made this announcement on a Saturday when most Football League clubs , including Oxford and Reading , were playing League fixtures . Oxford were playing away at Doncaster Rovers . Jim Smith learned of the announcement shortly before kick @-@ off at Doncaster 's Belle Vue ground from John Ley , a journalist with the Oxford Mail , who had heard the news from another

newsman by telephone . Smith immediately called Maxwell to ask whether or not he would be retained to manage Thames Valley Royals , and was told that he would be .

Maxwell issued a statement announcing that Oxford United were poised to acquire Reading by purchasing all of that club 's issued share capital , comprising 73 @, @ 000 shares , at £ 3 per share ( a total cost of £ 219 @, @ 000 ) , and that Waller and a group of Reading board directors , holding a majority of the shares in Reading F.C. , had " irrevocably accepted " this offer . The two clubs would continue separately for the last few weeks of the 1982 ? 83 campaign , and Thames Valley Royals would begin play at the start of the 1983 ? 84 League season . Maxwell claimed to have support in principle for this from the Football League . He said that the amalgamated team would ultimately be based at a new stadium to be built somewhere between Oxford and Reading , and that in the meantime home games would alternate between the two old grounds , Elm Park in Reading and the Manor Ground in Oxford , both of which would eventually be sold . The general public learned of the proposed merger in the late afternoon on 16 April , when it was announced by David Coleman on the television show Grandstand following the report of the day 's football results .

= = Reactions = =

The majority of both teams ' supporters reacted negatively to the merger proposal . While many Oxford supporters acknowledged that Maxwell had been instrumental in saving the club the previous year , most perceived merging with another club as tantamount to killing both Oxford United and professional football in the city . A spokesman for the Oxford United Supporters Club called the idea " crazy and unworkable " . Most Reading fans likewise reacted to the scheme with revulsion ; Mike Habbits , chairman of the Reading Supporters Club , said " Our fans can 't stand Oxford fans and I can 't see them travelling to Oxford to watch the new team " . Supporters and pressmen alike ridiculed the " Thames Valley Royals " name , which the sports historian John Bale later described as " mid @-@ Atlantic " ; observers at the time variously perceived it as sounding more like an American football , ice hockey or speedway team than a football club . Some Oxford fans supported Maxwell 's proposal , saying that with a new stadium and the pooled financial resources of Oxford and Reading , an amalgamated team might be successful , but these were a minority . One angry fan wrote to the Oxford Mail that " I will not follow Thames Valley Royals or whatever their name is if they played at the end of my street " .

Players at both clubs received the news with apprehension . As Ley put it , " When you merge two clubs into one , you cannot have a squad of 45 . " The Oxford team learned of the impending merger and the new name from Smith in the dressing room at Belle Vue just before the match against Doncaster on 16 April . Mark Jones , one of the Oxford midfielders , recalled that the room " went totally quiet " , and that his first thought was that it might be hard to him to keep his place in the first team with Reading 's players also on the books . According to Jones , Smith attempted to assuage the Oxford players ' fears by telling them that " we 're only doing it so we can buy Kerry Dixon . All your places are safe " . Alan Judge , the Reading goalkeeper , reported his team reacting in a similar way ? indeed , he described the Reading players as even more worried as Oxford had far outperformed them in the League that season . Ley , who accompanied the Oxford team on the bus ride home after the game , recalled that the players were almost silent , their victory over Doncaster overshadowed by " a feeling of incredulity , confusion , worry and fear " .

Oxford United 's board of directors unanimously supported Maxwell 's proposed amalgamation at a board meeting held on 20 April 1983 . Their only reservation was regarding the name ; they preferred " Thames Valley United " . The chairman of the Football League , Jack Dunnett , described Maxwell 's proposal as " a bold and imaginative move which I 'll be watching with interest " . Meanwhile , Maxwell re @-@ entered talks with Oxford City Council over local stadium sites , repeating his preference for the Marston location . The council again refused . The mayor of Didcot , a small town about halfway between Oxford and Reading , suggested that Thames Valley Royals could build a ground there , on a site that had already been picked out for non @-@ League amateurs Didcot Town . Wallingford , a similar proposition just east of Didcot , was also proposed . The residents of neither Didcot nor Wallingford showed much interest in hosting Thames Valley

Royals home matches , partly because they were concerned about football hooliganism .

= = Controversy = =

Oxford and Reading supporters embarked on a series of demonstrations against Maxwell 's proposed merger . The Reading Evening Post set up a campaign called " Save Our Soccer " , while Oxford fans launched a similar initiative called " Save Oxford Soccer " . Before Oxford 's match against Wigan Athletic at the Manor Ground on 23 April 1983 , about 2 @, @ 000 fans sat in in the centre of the pitch , delaying the start of the game by half an hour . Maxwell , in the directors ' box , was jeered by supporters , some of whom spat at him , and was confronted by a number of banners around the stadium reading " Judas " . After the match ( which Oxford won 2 ? 0 ) , Maxwell called the demonstration a " bloody disgrace " . He reaffirmed his commitment to the Thames Valley Royals project a few days later through a phone @-@ in on BBC Radio Oxford . " If they want to become supporters of someone else , they 're entirely welcome , " he said . " If the deal does not go through , both Reading and Oxford will be dead before the beginning of next season . Nothing short of the end of the Earth will prevent this from going through . " Steve Daniels , an Oxford fan opposed to a merger , called in and claimed that Maxwell 's amalgamation proposal was a ploy intended to alter the council 's line regarding a new stadium in Oxford .

Meanwhile , efforts to stop the merger were stepped up at Reading by Roger Smee , a former Reading player , born and raised in the town , who had become a millionaire in the construction industry . Smee , who strongly opposed the merger plan , had read the club 's accounts the previous year , and so was aware of how the team 's stock was allocated . He knew that Waller and his boardroom allies , Leslie Davies and John Briggs , had not held a controlling interest in the club in 1982 and that a large number of Reading shares had then been noted as unissued . His interest was therefore piqued when the Thames Valley Royals deal was declared " irrevocable " on the basis that Waller 's faction controlled the majority of the shares in Reading . " A year ago they didn 't have a majority , " Smee later said , " so how on earth have they issued these shares to themselves while Reading was a public company ? That would be against the law . " Smee contacted Roy Tranter , a director at Reading who opposed the merger , and Tranter 's legal team filed a complaint with the High Court objecting to the sale of the unissued shares .

On 22 April 1983 , just as Waller and Maxwell were about to officially announce the merger , Tranter 's solicitors handed Waller a High Court injunction temporarily blocking sale of the disputed stock . Three days later , the High Court imposed a further injunction preventing any dealing in Reading shares until a further hearing on 3 May . Maxwell insisted that there was no problem , calling the legal challenge a " side show " ; he made a fresh bid to all of Reading 's shareholders . On 1 May , the Oxford chairman told the press that he and his supporters at Reading controlled 40 % of the shares . Meanwhile , Oxford City Council offered Oxford United a new " £ 6 million sports complex " in the western suburb of Botley . Maxwell said that he was still pursuing the merger with Reading , but would look into the Botley proposal .

Reading supporters marched from the town centre to Elm Park in protest against the merger before the team 's match against Millwall on 30 April . Two days later , Oxford and Reading met at Manor Road in what the Glasgow Herald commented might be " the last Thames Valley derby " . Oxford fans held another protest march before the game , which Reading won 2 ? 1 . At the High Court on 3 May , Mr Justice Harman sided with Tranter and Smee , and handed down a new injunction forbidding trading in Reading stock until 13 June 1983 . Following a Reading board meeting on 12 May , Waller , Davies and Briggs resigned their positions , and returned the disputed unissued shares to the club . The Reading Evening Post saw this as the end of the episode , and jubilantly bannered the news across its front page on 13 May : " We 've won ! Merger off " . The next day , Reading played Wrexham at home on the last day of the League season , needing to win to have any chance of avoiding relegation to the Fourth Division ; they won 1 ? 0 , but still went down because of results elsewhere . The club held an extraordinary meeting of shareholders in July 1983 , at which a vote was taken to decide between Maxwell 's takeover bid and a rival offer from Smee , supported by Tranter . The latter proposition narrowly won , and Smee took over as chairman of

Reading , putting an end to the planned merger .

= = Aftermath = =

Maxwell reluctantly dropped his amalgamation plans , but retained his 19 % stake in Reading . Under Smee 's chairmanship , the team won promotion back from the Fourth Division at the end of the 1983 ? 84 season , and won the Third Division title two years later , taking it into the Second Division . Smee remained at the helm until 1990 , when amid a financial crisis at the club he sold it to John Madejski . Meanwhile , Maxwell made Oxford United profitable , and oversaw two successive promotions for the club during the 1983 ? 84 and 1984 ? 85 seasons . The team played in the First Division , then the top level of English football , for the first time during 1985 ? 86 , and won its first major trophy , the League Cup , in April 1986 . Despite Maxwell 's reservations about the Manor Ground , the club remained there throughout this time .

Maxwell ended his chairmanship of Oxford in 1987 , when he took control of Derby County and became that club 's chairman ; still owning Oxford as well , he installed his son Kevin as chairman there . In late 1987 he attempted to buy Watford from Elton John , prompting the Football League to institute new regulations preventing the major shareholder of any member club from owning more than 2 % of another League team . While Maxwell was able to keep his stakes in Derby , Oxford and Reading under a grandfather clause , the new rules prevented him from adding Watford to his football empire . He grudgingly accepted this . He retained his football club shares until his mysterious death in November 1991 , when he apparently fell off his yacht near the Canary Islands .