

Twenty Years of Trust Control at Exeter City Football Club

By

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Foreword

Optimism that the Crouch Report, published in November 2021 would make major changes to the landscape of English football seem to diminish as The Premiership and aspirant would-be Premiership clubs, resisted any substantial changes in the way in which football is governed and financed. The high hopes engendered by the foundation of Supporters Direct, and diluted by the actions of the Football Supporters Association have seemingly disappeared, to leave just three Football Clubs carrying forward the idea of Supporter Ownership. One of these is Exeter City, and in 2023 it celebrates twenty years of fan ownership. How it has survived for that period with a largely unsympathetic tax and finance regime, but flourished because of its own human resources, is the context of this book.

It has been difficult, at times, to separate the Trust from the Club, but this is about the Trust. The book examines the circumstances which led to the formation of the Trust, its apparently quick rise to own the Club and some of the difficulties that have been encountered in the ownership of it. It then attempts to answer two further questions, firstly is the model one that is replicable, and then where/what next?

The author is all too aware of the strictures of the subject matter, and the difficulties of partiality through his involvement, but above all is cognisant of the comments made by her supervisor to Mary Beard at the conclusion of her first published works when he said “It may be true Mary, but its bloody boring”

David Treharne

Exeter March 2023

Chapter 1

Failing

Introduction

In April 2022 an Exeweb ⁽¹⁾ thread was started under the subject “Why are so few other clubs trust owned?” Answers over nine pages of the thread varied from attempts to place the factors in some sort of chronological order to those that offered thoughts like “makes me immensely proud about our wonderful club. I don't think we've ever been in a better position both on and off the pitch, the ground has never looked better and we're about to get promoted. I genuinely feel sorry for some other club fans who watch on in despair as another charlatan wrecks their club through ego and dodgy dealings. I think our model is the future.” Other posters were less detailed, one simply stating that “We are very very lucky”. Several shared a view that “By the way, I too am immensely proud of the club, but I don't see our model as the future for other clubs, it works for us, but it won't for all 92 teams.” This is the premise behind this book. It aims to look at the (relative) successes and shortcomings of the fan owned model as it applies to the English Football League (EFL) and, in particular to Exeter City, which in 2023 will mark the twentieth year of Trust control and then ownership at Exeter City. There are parallels with other football clubs, and lessons to be learned, but the common thread is what might be deduced from looking at the events at Exeter City.

From Northampton to Well Street; an overview of the influences on, and the establishment of the Exeter City Supporters Trust

By any available instrument of measure, Exeter City FC has had a remarkably undistinguished record since its inception in 1904 as an amalgamation between St Sidwell's United and Exeter United took place, with the decision taken to use the ground of Exeter United at St James Park as the 'home' ground. Thereafter until 1920, the club played in the Southern League, at which point it was invited to join the Football League where it became a regular competitor in Division 3 (S).

Three events, two still celebrated by Exeter City Supporters, interrupted this largely unremarkable sequence between 1920 and 1995. In 1931 the team reached the sixth round of the F.A. Cup, and after drawing at Roker Park were defeated by Sunderland 4-2 in the reply at St James Park (incidentally drawing the largest ever crowd at St James Park with 20,894 present). Under Trust control at Exeter a group known as the 1931 group now contribute the wages of the player wearing the number 31 shirt.

Thereafter, Exeter maintained steady, if not reliable membership of Division 3(S) though when the Football League reorganised the divisional structure in 1958 Exeter became members of the new Division 4, meaning an increasing number of trips to play teams that had previously been members of Division 3 (N). In 1963-4 they won promotion to Division 3 but lasted only two seasons before resuming their place in Division 4.

The subsequent 'high point' was the success of the team assembled by former England player Terry Cooper in 1989/90. The team was recruited at some considerable expense by the Manager, but the team got promotion largely because of a home record which

boasted 20 home wins, 3 draws and no defeats. Though the event is marked as a high point in Exeter City's history, the hidden costs were already beginning to take a toll on finances, which right the way through the 1970's and into the 1980's remained, at best, fragile. One of the responses to cash shortages ought to be mentioned here since it impinges on the subsequent history of the Club and the Trust. Put simply, the owners from time-to-time issued shares in the Club to either avoid debts or to placate or assuage local firms which were owed money. In many cases these were small to intermediate sized local businesses, since the Club tended to be run by a local 'chumocracy'.

After this highpoint there was a rapid decline in fortunes, both on and off the pitch with subsequent relegation to the bottom tier of English football and a rapidly deteriorating financial situation. It is this financial security, or otherwise that will be a recurring feature of the events surrounding the formation of the Exeter City Supporters Trust in its present form and the management of the Club into its second decade of fan ownership.

Having noted that Exeter City Football Club had a chequered financial history it is difficult to know where to start considering the immediate issues that started the long-term decline of the Club towards potential liquidation, but the events of 1993-4 will serve as the starting point for this history.

At the end of the 1993/94 season Exeter City were relegated back to Division Three of the Football League. In August 1994 this financial position led to a transfer embargo being placed on the Club. In November 1994 the Club was also placed in Administration.

At this stage various plans were produced to move the ground from St James' Park to several locations, only two of which were actually pursued: a move to Matford Marshes, then a relatively

undeveloped area in marshland on the western edge of the city or a location nearer the M5 motorway just off the 'old' by-pass. Both schemes seem to have had adherents and supporters, though both would have required permission from City Council planners. Though they might have brought in funds, though whether sufficient to clear the increasing debt levels is unclear, since little information about discussions are in the wider public domain. Nor is it clear whether the F.A. or other interested bodies were fully consulted about such a move.

Whilst the ground was part of this deal, the associated building which housed the Club offices was not, and it came under the umbrella of a separate Company set up by some of the Directors known as O.T.R ⁽²⁾.

Thus the 1994/5 season started with only 18 professional players. On the field the team, managed by former goalkeeper Peter Fox had a very difficult season with increasingly poor results. The transfer ban from the previous season was still in place, and the Directors entered negotiations to sell the freehold of the ground to Beazer Homes, a property development company. It is possible that this came about as a result of the decision by the City Planners on February 14th, 1995, not to grant planning permission for the development at Matford Marshes. On the same day, Mike Bateson, the then Chair of Torquay United FC offered Exeter City a groundshare at Plainmoor for the following season

However, desperate the financial situation of the Club was becoming, the local press (mainly in the form of the Express and Echo, based in Exeter) seemed unaware of the ongoing financial turmoil. This could have been because all information about the Club and its financial situation were dealt with by the Club Board who evidently wished to avoid revealing how precarious the future of the Club had become. Nationally the first notice that the Club

was on the edge of a looming economic crisis was raised nationally by 'The Independent' in an article on 27th March 1995 under the headline "Little pity for poor relatives" which assessed the Club debt as "£1.2 million" ⁽³⁾. On 29th March the situation was clarified by one of the Administrators, who told the Express and Echo:

On the last day of the season, May 6th I will run out of money.
After that I will have no choice but to shut the doors ⁽⁴⁾

On April 11th the Express and Echo reported that Exeter City was for sale in a last ditch bid to save the Club. This was subsequently blocked by the Administrators who appear not to have been consulted about this move by the Board. The same day Doble was quoted as saying:

No asking price had been detailed but £750,000 would not clear the debts ⁽⁵⁾

With one game left of the season (away to Northampton) on the Monday before the game, and with relegation seeming inevitable, the Express and Echo wrote a back page article headed "The wake is on". Chief sports reporter Ed Hogg wrote:

Exeter City Football Club is dying and administrators keeping the Grecians alive have warned they will switch off the life support this week unless a donor with £300,000 to spare comes forward ⁽⁶⁾

Almost inevitably the letters page of the paper during the week carried a number of hand wringing letters of which one from Mark Stevens writing from La Marsa in Tunisia can best sum up the commonly expressed sentiment. He wrote:

City Supporters have been treated with contempt for too long ⁽⁷⁾

In preparation for the final game of the season the Supporters Club paid over £600 to arrange a trip for Supporters to Northampton.

In many ways, the trip to Northampton was both fortuitous and sowed to origins of what was to become The Exeter City Supporters Trust in its present incarnation. Many of the issues that had led to the financial situation that manifested itself at Exeter City had, as recently as the early 1990's been those that had beset Northampton Town FC.

The footballing events of the day were an almost inevitable conclusion to a miserable season. City lost the game 2-1. The major feature of the day was that Brian Lomax, the Chair of Northampton Town Trust addressed a group of City fan who had attended the game at its conclusion, reported in the Express and Echo on Monday as having said:

Our Club is on the way up. You can do it too. Never give up. ⁽⁸⁾

Amidst the turmoil that was to follow this defeat at least 2 City supporters took note of what he said, and learned more about what had been achieved at Northampton following several humiliating seasons in the early 1990's for the Club. However, this development was to emerge only slowly as a way of 'saving' the Club, as the week following the final game of the season the Express and Echo, and the Western Morning news devoted swathes of newsprint to the situation that was developing around the management of Exeter City and its immediate future. However, before looking at the aftermath of the week it seems important to mention two facets of Club that play a pivotal part in events that were to subsequently unfold.

The first is the Supporters Club: Describing itself as “the oldest established Supporters Group at Exeter City FC (it) will continue whatever ownership models exist.” It was re-established in 1988 at the behest of one of the then Directors of the Club, Gerald Vallance. It’s relationship with the hierarchy of the Club has been very mixed, depending to some extent upon the attitude of those persons who run it at any time. In 1995 the Committee appear to have been aware of the perilous state of the Club and its finances.

The Club Board: In 1995 was made up of 6 persons all of whom were involved in local commerce and business, and were involved through different degrees of financial involvement as Directors. The Chairman was Ivor Doble a local jeweller and shop owner who had become Chair on the resignation of Clifford Hill the previous owner and major shareholder. Most were ‘hands-off’ in terms of day-to-day involvement with the running of the Club, and they employed a General Manager to run the business with their close guidance.

The week (and indeed the month) following the defeat of Northampton clearly defined the issues that confronted those who ran the Club. Much of the information supplied here is to describe that period in some detail, as these issues led indirectly to the eventual takeover of the Club by the Trust when they re-appeared during the season 2002-2003.

The Express and Echo reported fully on the intervention by Brian Lomax of the Northampton Trust in the Monday 8th May editions. On May 9th the paper reported that the City Council had refused to consider a buy-out of the Club - even though there had been no previous mention of any such move being considered.

Then on Wednesday 10th May it stated:

The Administrators of the debt-ridden Club have received an eleventh hour bid from an undisclosed national Company. ⁽⁹⁾

At this point there was no indication of who this Company might have been. The paper then switched attention to the predicament that the Club faced about have finished bottom of the League, and therefore being liable to be relegated out of the Football League, before returning to the precarious financial situation just over a week later, reporting on the back page that:

The double deal that appeared to have saved debt-ridden Exeter City was on the verge of collapse, this afternoon...(the administrator said). ⁽¹⁰⁾

The same day, the Administrator told the same paper that with losses running at £300 a day:

The £300,000 gift has fallen short of original expectations ⁽¹¹⁾

On May 18th the Football Association asked for financial assurances that the Club would be able to continue to operate during the following season. Although the Exeter City Directors were evidently unaware of the fact, it was clear to them that Macclesfield who had won the Conference League were not able to move up to the Football league because their ground did not fulfil the criteria required which were a ground capacity of 6000 of whom 1000 were to be seated. (After this rejection they carried out the required work, and after winning the Conference again in 1996-7 were elected to the League).

During this period The Supporters Club together with two sitting members of the City Council planned to set up what they described as 'A Trust Fund'. Although it is not made explicit in any contemporary newspaper article the Directors clearly felt

threatened by this move. On 19th May the Express and Echo reported:

A meeting scheduled for tomorrow to help set up possible Trust fund for debt ridden Exeter City has been postponed ⁽¹²⁾

Despite this set back the Trust fund was established, and during the next week various donations were made, and plans established to engage with the wider fan base. These were mainly based around the use of the ground and were diverse and imaginative, but the amount raised came nowhere near the amount that was needed to ensure the survival of the Club. It's also worth noting that two of the leaders of the fundraising attempts were members of the City Council which had already declined to become directly involved in the financial black hole that the Club had become.

Unusually, given its normally uncritical coverage of Club related matters, the leader page in the Express and Echo on Saturday May 29th clearly laid out its stance on the ongoing situation. The Editor commented:

It was not the Council that managed the Club so ineptly that it now faces a crippling debt and a crumbling stadium...at no time has there been a single goal (or) a united approach ⁽¹³⁾

The Directors were becoming aware that without a major input of money the Club could not survive. Ivor Doble, The Chair admitted to the Express and Echo on May 31st that:

The Club needs some drastic surgery to make it more healthy and streamlined otherwise it will die ⁽¹⁴⁾

Any hopes that the Trust fund would be willing to put any of the money that they had raised towards bailing out the Club were

firmly dispelled by one of the two Councillors involved, John Lloyd was quoted in the same edition of the paper as saying:

I wouldn't want the Trust fund used as another bank account for the Board of Directors ⁽¹⁵⁾

On June 1st, 1995, Beazer Homes announced that they had purchased St James Park for £900,000. The sale appears to have taken place without consultation with the City Council, who as the body responsible for any potential housing development would have the final determination about whether or not the land could be used in that way. As the local plan stood there seemed to be little chance of the area being reallocated for housing development. The day after the announcement an Express and Echo article revealed why the Board had taken this step, by outlining the level of debt that the Club had built up. It revealed the sum as:

Directors' loans	£700,000
Inland Revenue	£255,000
Customs and Excise	£22,000
Overdraft	£227,000
Bass Brewery	£31,000
P.F.A	£48,000
Other Creditors	£150,000 ⁽¹⁶⁾

In the event, the sum raised from the sale would not have covered the level of debt accrued.

This Chapter has aimed to reveal the parlous state of Exeter City F.C. finances in the years prior to the crisis that would engulf the Club during the season 2002-2003. The causes of the problems were manifold, but in summary could be described as a lack of inward investment (particularly regarding the estate), consistently poor overview of finances and financial affairs and paucity of consistent

Directorial management, mostly compounded by poor choices in personnel and consistent overspending.

Three other factors should be mentioned before embarking upon the narrative of events that led to the Trust takeover of the Club. Firstly, the City Council, despite its unwillingness to directly involve themselves in financially assisting the Club during the events outlined above, compulsorily purchased St James Park from Beazer Homes during 1996 (except for the offices and facilities of the former school building on the site). Secondly the Board of Directors was increased in size during the period 1995-2002 and included a former Chief Executive of Exeter City Council, Bernard Frowd, who was to take a role in the proposed redevelopment of the ground took place around 2000. Finally, communication within fan groups became easier during the intervening years with the establishment of two email group, firstly GNet (Grecians on the net) and in 1999 Exeweb, which established itself as the largest of the groups.

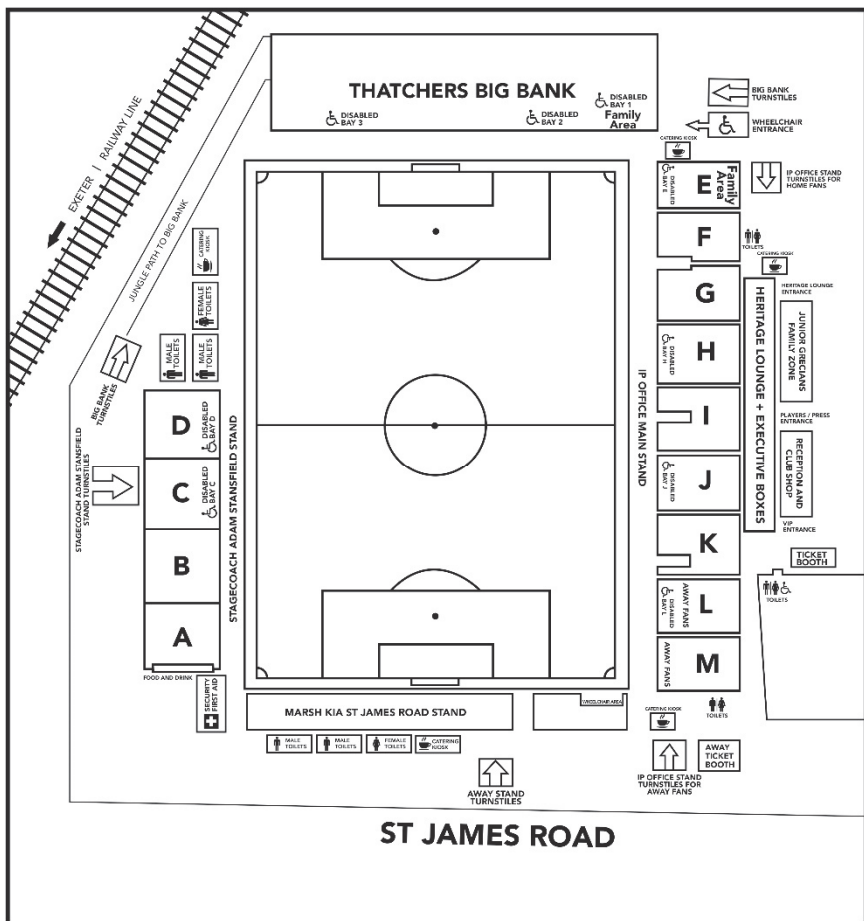
Fans were starting to coalesce to exchange information outside the channels that were being used by the Club and its Directors. It would lead to the formation of a Supporters Trust.

Chapter 2

Starting

Well Street is one of the two routes to St James Park, the home of Exeter City FC. It's the home of the designated 'away fans' pub, currently called The St Anne's Well Tavern, formerly the Brook Green Tavern. It is also the name one of the pages on the largest Exeter City fans forums. This is an unimportant fact, but since it will be mentioned in several places going forward it seems imperative that some sense of the geography of St James Park is included to help locate some of the changes that will be the subject of this Chapter (following page).

When the City Council re-purchased the ground in 1996/7 it was obvious that it was, and had been, in need of some serious investment to even meet the minimum standards of ground safety. Of most immediate concern was "The Cowshed" originally sited the area marked E-M and was long past its sell-by date. Built in 1926 after the previous stand burnt down, it contained shallow terracing and a low roof, which enhanced audibility of the group of singing supporters who became known as 'The Cowshed Choir' and the name was then applied to the whole structure. Sitting in 'The Old Grandstand' opposite where it was situated, it was noticeable that, particularly in the winter months, it was possible to see a mixture of steam and cigarette smoke emerging from its unhealthy interior.



After emerging from administration in 1996 the then Chair of the Club, Ivor Doble, was banned from holding a Directorship of the Club for a year. Although it appeared that the finances of the Club were improving, it was largely a facade, with crowds remaining disappointingly small, the football unremarkable and inward investment largely lacking, especially regarding the estate. Notwithstanding, after recruiting some new Directors a decision was made to start a rebuild of parts of the stadium. In part the need for improvements had been hastened by the 1985 Bradford City fire and by the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, but it was also proving difficult to maintain the stadium to renew the ground Safety

Certificate. After receiving funding from the Football Trust, and aided by a developer who contributed, after receiving permission to build housing on a largely unused area of the estate, the decision was made to redevelop the Big Bank area during the season 1999-2000. Those plans were outlined by Bernard Frowd, one of the newly appointed Directors, in a Match Day programme article on May 8th, 1999. The Club wrote to all other teams in the League explaining that during the next season away supporters would be relocated to the Old Grandstand for most matches, whilst home fans used the away end. What was created was an enormous, all standing, covered, tiered stand.

On the pitch, during the season 1998/9 the team finished in mid table ending in 12th place, but during the next season another wafer-thin squad slumped to 21st place, the top scorer being a loanee from Leyton Orient, Gary Alexander. Here the narrative need to switch to events involving a group of increasingly concerned fans who were to coalesce into an embryonic but as yet unfocused Trust.

Origins of the Exeter City Trust

Tim Hopkin had grown up in Sidmouth, 19 miles from Exeter, but well within travelling distance of St James Park. As a teenager he had followed City on an intermittent basis, admitting in an interview during 2022 that he had not been 'an avid fan'⁽¹⁾ He went to study at Leeds University and kept in touch with City through GNet⁽²⁾, gradually starting to meet up with groups of 'exiled' fans, and often travelling to away games in the North of England. When he graduated, he moved to Lancaster University to study for a master's degree, where, partly to finance his studies he became secretary to the Students Union. Happenstance, as will be seen later, plays a part in the development of the Exeter City Trust. The Chair of the Students Union was Emily Lomax, daughter of Brian

Lomax instigator of the Northampton Trust. In turn, she had a relationship with Dave Boyle, and Tim became more aware of the work that had been done at that Club, and continued the friendship with Boyle after he had finished his further degree and moved to London. In London, through GNet he met up with the loose affiliation of Exeter City Supporters who were known collectively as 'The London Exiles'. Going forward, Hopkin would become actively involved in the group, who later provided both personnel and support for the embryonic Exeter Trust.

Alastair Yates was another Exeter local who moved away from Exeter to working a series of jobs that would take him all over the Home Counties. He, like Tim, had attended matches at St James Park prior to his move, and maintained contact with the affairs of the Club through the GNet network. He had been aware, though not actively involved, in the events surrounding previous attempts to form a Trust. During the 2000-1 campaign he was alerted to the movement to raise money to retain the services of Gary Alexander, and particularly the opportunities afforded by the internet to help build a database of material listing others who were involved in the movement, which in print was mainly focussed around the fanzine "We'll Score again"⁽³⁾ When his work moved him to London, he became interested in the work that was being done at Supporters Direct, as a direct result of the work on Brian Lomax at Northampton FC. He spent an afternoon in Birkbeck College and asked advice about setting up a Trust at Exeter City. With the work that he had undertaken on the website he was able contact other supporters, both in Exeter, and across the rest of England. He decided that he would float the idea of setting up a Trust at Exeter City.

In fact, before either of these two acted, an email exchange between two members of the (very) embryonic 'northern Grecians' started the moves that were to lead to the establishment of a Trust at

Exeter City. Fiona French (nee Neligan, and hereafter called by that name) was studying Russian at Sheffield University. She had, intermittently supported City, but started going to City away matches in the area and contacted a very small group of people who travelled with her.

On 21st February 2000 Fiona Neligan received an email from another Exeter City Supporter, Jennifer Stanley which read:

There was some information being handed out at the Orient (game) regarding the setting up of a football task force for Exeter by a guy called Tim Hopkin. Do you know him? Anyway, I emailed him to offer help – I have no idea what it will involve, but hey, why not. So, are you in? ⁽⁴⁾

In fact, Jennifer Stanley was responding to an email which Hopkin had sent out two days earlier in which he laid out embryonic outlines of what would become the Exeter City Supporters Trust. On 18th February he had circulated the following:

I have bought a little space on a virtual server and am just about to set up a mailing list for us to discuss the issue of greater involvement of the fans in ECFC. I did this because I think that those interested, have to, at this stage share ideas as far as possible, and I want that to be done in a slightly less public environment than GNet or a publicly available free list...for now if you don't want to be part of these discussions, please let me know there are others off-line, and I'll have to think my way around that problem. I know some of you have told me of others who wanted to be in on this list, but I haven't managed to keep a list of who they were. ⁽⁵⁾

Thereafter this email was circulated to a wider audience which included Gary Nelson, sometime Chair of the Supporters Club, and Alan Crockford (who had been an instigator of various fanzines),

Alastair Yates and Paul Garnham who was to become Treasurer to the Trust when it was finally formulated. Ahead of its foundation there was to be considerable (sometimes quite heated) debate about what the aims of the Trust should be, and how it should be formulated and remain separate from the undoubted financial maelstrom that was once again engulfing the finances of the Club. On May 15th Gary Nelson circulated a lengthy email in which he laid out his concerns:

I would like to think that this Trust was something better than another black hole...the purpose of a Trust is surely to protect the individuals from being stripped of their assets, as and when they take us over the edge...this why I think it is important to formulate what we are trying to achieve...I do not want to throw good money after bad. ⁽⁶⁾

Chronologically, this email post-dates one which Alan Crockford sent in which he laid out some ideas about planning for the formation and shape of a prospective Trust, but which was the first that was forwarded to the author, and was circulated to a wider audience than had been included in previous correspondence. In a lengthy (two and a half sides of A4) email, Crockford laid out the following suggestions:

Please feel free to forward as you feel appropriate. Does anyone have addresses for Dave Treharne and Chris Loman?...I'm really keen to make sure that we go about this in the right way. Forgive me sensitivity on this but I've spent a lot of time berating the football club for the way it handles its affairs, I'm desperate to ensure that we do this as well as possible. FORMATION OF THE TRUST; I presume that that there's more to running A Trust than opening a bank account...is anyone going to ensure that everything is established on a sure footing. STRUCTURE OF THE

ORGANISATION; It would be wise to have solid legal foundation. REPRESENTATIVES OF THE TRUST: (We need) a named and accountable Treasurer, a diverse group of active Trustees, and maybe some old duffer to act as a President. Do we want to appoint a chairperson? AIMS OF THE TRUST: Short term: Transfer fund Ongoing: Regular Subscription fund of some sort, backed by a partnership with participating Businesses. Short term: Communication between Trust and Club. Longer Term; Representation on the Board, Maybe using the Supporters Trust Model.⁽⁷⁾

The email continued by looking at notions of the operation of the Trust, marketing, and publicity:

Concurrently, Alastair Yates was working on a set of proposals to promote discussion amongst those who were part of a rapidly growing mailing list. His paper entitled "Outline proposal for the 'Exeter City Transfer Trust' structural development and ongoing management" was a 12-page document. The version held by the author is marked Version V1:2 and had evidently been modified to include suggestions made by various members of the internet group. It retains the idea of raising funds, but continues the theme that had vaguely emerged during discussions with individuals of supporting players In the preface it suggests:

...(it) should be an independent body that works in unison with the needs of the club. The aims of the Trust should be to provide valuable and sustainable revenue flow for the club, and to support business ventures and staff development.... The aim of the Trust should be to support the business aims of Exeter City AFC on a long-term basis. ⁽⁸⁾

This document was circulated immediately after the first attempt to set up a formalised Trust body which occurred on Saturday 6thth

May 2000. This subsequently elicited a series of responses which indicate the widely dispersed views of those who attended it. Subsequently there was a flurry of emails which indicated the differing strands of opinion about how to proceed. Below, is a small selection of subsequent emails:

I am unsure as to where this fund will go, as it is effectively going to The Board 'for nothing in return'. Surely, if the Club says it needs the money we would be obliged to donate suitable funds. Otherwise, how would we be described as supporting ECFC. Therein lies the problem, the Trust remains absolutely toothless...this has been tried before, there was a separate fund for the managers budget into which all the 50-50* money went... this is just another piece of the Black Hole story. ⁽⁹⁾

I briefly explained why I didn't want to carry on working with this Group.... To my mind the next steps should be to do some quiet work behind the scenes to establish the Trust and prepare for a launch. It would only have taken a few days; it would have enabled us to bring on board a variety of expertise, including the support available to us through Football Direct, and the very useful contact that Tim Hopkin has with Brian Lomax. ⁽¹⁰⁾

NOTHING concrete has been decided re: any committee, the aims of the Trust, contact we should have with the Club, bank accounts etc. Anything that has been said/written/ done is because somebody had to do something, rather than leaving it to everyone else, and nothing getting done at all. ⁽¹¹⁾

*50-50 Half time draw at Exeter City by Supporters Club

What it all boils down to is that I don't think we should be 'donating' any money at all to the Club. What caught GNet's

attention was that we were going to invest in 'something', and this is the approach that I think we should take, we take OUR money and INVEST it in something With the chance of a return ⁽¹²⁾

In many ways (in the author's opinion) the most coherent response to the initial meeting came from Fiona Neligan, in which she laid out a series of suggestions for moving the embryonic Trust idea onto a more substantive basis. In a one-page email she made the following suggestions:

As far as Trust structure is concerned a chair is essential. The organisation of the meeting last Saturday proved to the Club that we are prepared to do this properly in a business-like manner, and we need to continue in that vein. In my opinion we need to widen the catchment area from GNet, because of the large volume of mail receive at work... there are still many people who don't have access to email and it is essential that we avoid a 'clique' mentality... meeting on Saturday morning before a match means that exiled City fans have a chance of attending. ⁽¹³⁾

At this point there was still no coherent or formulated ways forward towards what a Trust might be capable of achieving at Exeter City. There were divergent views about what the aims should be, about what the relationship with the Club might be, or a defined attitude towards those who were running it. A bank account had been set up, mainly because of the work of Paul Garnham, and money had been received, as well as pledges of further funding when the embryonic organisation had taken more concrete shape. Two further events were to shape the future of the Trust.

The first was a document circulated by Alastair Yates to GNet members, circulated after Ivor Doble Chair of the Club had asked local businesses and fans to raise £50,000 to pay for the transfer of Gary Alexander (that seasons top scorer) to remain at the Club. Thus, Yates' document was headed "GNet Noel's Fighting fund/ Trust Fund questionnaire" and was in the form of a questionnaire. The first four questions were binary yes/no questions with the fifth asking for 'Comments on the Constitution of the fund' and allowing a space for response. This was followed by an enquiry as to how much anyone agreeing to become part of it would be prepared to contribute either as a one-off donation or a monthly contribution before adding space for what were headed as 'general comments'. It was solely circulated to members of the GNet community.

The second was a meeting with Club representatives in the shape of Bernard Frowd and Julie Richards the Club secretary. It was intended that the manager (Noel Blake) should attend, but he was absent, taking an exam. For the embryonic Trust, Alistair Yates, the author, and Martin Ellicott attended (and took the minutes).

The meeting started with the Club asking questions about the legal status of the Trust. Alastair Yates replied that a solicitor had been appointed to put together legal documentation. Discussion then moved on to medium- and short-term planning with Martin Ellicott stressing that "the fans want to see specific and clear areas where their money has been spent". Club representatives then outlined their plans for the money that was being raised. These were fourfold and were:

1. To top up wages for players.
2. Fund the Youth scheme – including expenses for trialists.
3. Fund the purchase of the St James' School building.
4. Invest in a 'youth hostel' for young players. ⁽¹⁴⁾

From the point of view of the author the outcome was extremely disappointing. It was evident that the Club was cash starved and that any Trust initiative was seen by the Directors as a “cash cow” with little attempt to involve either the Trust or the wider community. However, the ‘Trust’ representatives thought it worthwhile to maintain a link with the Club Board, and to continue a dialogue.

After this meeting a small group of supporters continued to contribute to the fund of the embryonic Trust. However, during December 2000 planning continued with a plan to ask for terms relating to the appointment of a Director on the Club Board. In January 2001 the Trust handed over £500 towards the establishment of the post of Trust Director with the promise of another £500 to follow in February, even with the understanding that whoever was chosen to be the Trust Director would have no voting rights. At a meeting on 13th January between the Trust representatives and the Club, the Club offered the position of a non-voting, non-executive Director, with the details to be confirmed and arranged later.

These actions prompted a reaction from the Exeter City Supporters Club. In a letter to all its members circulated during January 2001 called for an EGM to be held at the start of February. In the letter The Chair and the Vice Chair wrote:

At the Football Trust meeting on 13th January the Directors of Exeter City accepted the Football Trusts proposal for them to be represented at Boardroom level. As this has been a long-term aim of Exeter City Supporters Club we feel the Supporters Club future has been compromised. ⁽¹⁵⁾

The letter provoked a series of responses across GNet, many of which warned of the difficulties of becoming involved in a

management which was clearly in financial difficulties. A post from 'Joe R' on 27th January pointed out the potential pitfalls.

In a lengthy posting to GNet he posted:

He (Ivor Doble) can do exactly as he wants, and can validate any decision he takes, because of his position of shareholder with a voting majority. Ironically one of the decisions that he couldn't take is to wind the club up, since that takes a 75% + 1 majority....Basically the Club is seriously insolvent (the accounts carry the appropriate 'going concern' qualification) ... I think anyone accepting the post of Director should take independent legal advice as to their potential position. I think the stumbling block must be that having lost a million quid running the company, they are looking for someone who is a) rich and b) foolish enough to repay their loans... the Trust is a great idea but £100k or whatever is just a plaster, not a cure. The club needs comprehensive refinancing, putting on a sound financial basis and professional management and a much more powerful commercial dept.... I would just be very careful that the fans money doesn't get put under the control of the board, none of whom seem to have any real financial/management experience at all, and it shows ⁽¹⁶⁾

Looking at the postings on the topic with twenty-one years hindsight the support for the idea of a Trust was about 60/40 in favour of the idea of the Trust involvement, though the caveats about the likely financial health of the Club are a prominent feature.

It's also worth noting that most of the people who were involved in these early discussions were not, or did not at the time, live in Exeter. This meant that correspondence was usually carried out by email over quite extended periods of time. Of those already