



## **A year defined by takeovers and disappointment**

Let me take you back to August 2013. For those of you who attended last years' AGM, you will recall John Ryan stood up here and explained his vision of new investment and a bright new future for the club. Whilst not greeted with universal acclaim in the room, as a fan I have to admit I was excited.

The thought of millions of pounds of investment coming into my club, little old Donny Rovers, and the calibre of players that would allow us to get certainly set the pulse racing. Then I and the rest of the VSC board put on our Trust hats and the questions started to come out.

These questions were formulated into a letter and put to the potential new investor via email, and in the interests of balance we also put the questions to the existing owners. In our opinion there was nothing contentious in them, nothing which could be construed as challenging or disrespectful; the letter was a simple introduction to the Trust including our capacity as shareholders in Patienceform, and simple questions surrounding plans and intent and various scenarios. The kind of questions a supporters' trust SHOULD be asking, and certainly a Trust of a club with our past history of "benefactors" like Ken Richardson and the how that panned out.

We received a detailed response from David Blunt on behalf of the existing owners, addressing each of the points raised. We received letters from a solicitor acting on behalf of the potential investors stating that the questions were defamatory and the trust would be taken to court.

And that set the scene for the year. Legal letters passed backwards and forwards, us asking for clarification on why the questions we asked were defamatory and getting no answers.

The Trust's opinion was it was a process designed to stop the supporters discussing the takeover. It didn't work. Other letters followed, to the home

addresses of Directors of the Trust, stating that our houses had been valued and damages would be sought. There were even emails sent to Director's employers.

The takeover split the fanbase. The forums were filled with acrimony and finger pointing. The Trust took the brunt of some of this. Some fans even accusing us of being "anti-John Ryan", which is utterly ridiculous. How could any Rovers fan be anti-John Ryan after what he had done for the club? We were pro and anti no-one - we just wanted assurances over the safeguarding of the club. The decision one way or the other was to be taken between the club and the potential investors, and that was a decision we couldn't influence directly.

As a supporter base, lots of us were there in 97/98 to see Ken Richardson get thwarted in his plans to sell Belle Vue and subsequently run the club into the ground, and since then there have been many cases of clubs having big plans and failing catastrophically when something fails to go to plan. Portsmouth, Rushden and Diamonds, Gretna, even Leeds United. Our focus had to be on safeguarding the club, remaining independent from any particular person, owner or potential investor, and we are satisfied that the Trust stayed true to its objectives and that is what we did, and we knew that we might take flak for that, and boy did we take some flak!

On the pitch things didn't quite go to plan either. Despite assembling a competitive side, and strengthening again in the January transfer window, as we all know, we cruelly fell into the relegation places in the final few moments of the season. And it was heartbreaking, but completely overshadowed by the passing of Rovers fan Ray Dunning in the stands at Leicester that final day of the season. RIP Ray.

So, this season we find ourselves once again preparing for life in League One, and another closed season takeover bid. This time, John Ryan had teamed up with One Directioner and Donny lad Louis Tomlinson to launch a Crowdfunder project to raise £2M, which wasn't to buy the club the fans were told. As John had resigned from the board of Directors of the club the previous year, the remaining Directors agreed to sell the club to John. Just the little matter of raising the funds to secure the deal to be sorted out.

The trust contacted John, congratulating him on his return to the club and stating we look forward to working with him again.

On Thursday 17th July, the Crowdfunder project closed, having fallen very short of achieving its £2M target.

Surprisingly, John then announced that the deal to buy the club couldn't be completed as he had been blocked from taking over by the Football League. Louis announced he had been misled. The current owners then issued a statement saying that they were happy to continue funding the club and would remain as owners. We also understand that 3 subsequent takeover approaches, from parties alerted following news coverage of the takeover failing, were rejected immediately by the board.

This late U-turn in plans clearly affected Paul Dickov's summer transfer activity and meant fans had to suffer a period of uncertainty over whether favourites like Richie Wellens and James Coppinger would be staying or leaving. Thankfully, deals were done and both stayed. I think it's fair to say the summer's events have once again contributed to an inconsistent start to the season.

Throughout this backdrop of uncertainty over the club's direction, many of the initiatives the Trust had pioneered with the club, like IRWT and Tomorrow's Rovers had to be parked. Now that the current owners have reaffirmed their commitment to the club we have started discussions to bring these to the fore again, and the first fan survey of a re-booted IRWT was released a few weeks ago with the findings to be released to fans soon.

The Trust's Secretary, Martin O'Hara, will also provide details later this morning of a new initiative we are developing around the Tomorrow's Rovers ethos, and helping young players from across the Borough and surrounding areas come closer to the club and maybe take a step closer to playing for the club too.

The big success for the Trust in the past year has been to successfully list the Keepmoat Stadium as an Asset of Community Value under the Localism Act 2011. This means that the stadium owner (currently the council) cannot agree to sell any part of the stadium complex without notifying us and giving the Trust the chance to prepare our own purchase offer. The ruling lasts for a period of 5 years and will be re-applied for as it comes close to expiry. We hope that this protection will ensure that the club has a home for generations to come. Work has already commenced on investigating an ACV protection for the training ground at Cantley Park.

The next year will see the VSC focus again on bringing supporters and club closer together, as well as negotiating some changes to the way that the trust is legally positioned and how it operates.

Interestingly, we recently reviewed the trusts objectives, and as an acid test compared them to the original objectives of the trust from way back in 2001.

These are the 2001 objectives.

(Read them out)

And the core belief of the Trust and why it exists clearly has not changed. We believe, and I hope you do too, that everything we do and plan to do in future still align to these aims. The Trust has moved forward through a difficult period for all fans, and will remain doing so.