

Oxblogger long read

The longest year – Oxford United in 2000/2001

Prologue

Where to begin? What about Matt Murphy's come-to-bed eyes? It's about 3.40pm on 25 November 2000 and Oxford United's go-to scapegoat Matt Murphy, is suggestively wrapped around a goalpost he grabbed to stop him careering into the London Road. He's just rounded the Notts County 'keeper and tapped home to make it 2-0 in front of a shocked home support. It's not even half-time, we're winning, and comfortably. I'm standing in the London Road, this is it, after months of trauma, months of misery, we've turned the corner. It's all coming together.

Murphy looks up and his eyes meet mine, did he just raise his eyebrows suggestively? Like he's enticing me into his footballing boudoir? It is a moment of grand hubris on his part, we're bottom of the table with two wins and two draws all season; eight points from a possible 57; and suddenly Murphy is acting like he's personally got it all under control. But I'm ready to follow the lothario wherever he wants to take me.

And yet 45 minutes later, I'm heading home *sans* Murphy and we've lost 3-2.

But, let's go back and set the scene; it's the start of a new millennium. Oxford United, with the faint echoes of winning the Milk Cup and playing in the top-flight still ringing in their ears, are reeling from the death of its wealthy benefactor Robert Maxwell in 1991. In 1997 they're plunged into even greater peril. Two years prior the club's new, well-intentioned, owner Robin Herd achieved what a generation of owners before him couldn't and secured planning permission for a new stadium. When the investment dries up the contractors walk off the site and

the club are faced with significant weekly losses and the maintenance of a rusting carcass of a stadium in Minchery Farm on the edge of Oxford.

In April 1999, mysterious hotelier Firoz Kassam buys the club and all its debt. Kassam appears quiet and unassuming and is paraded around The Manor as the saviour with an Oxford scarf around his neck. A successful man in every sense, he still looks uncomfortable, football is clearly not his setting. Kassam is one of the richest people of Asian descent in the country and a regular in the Time 100 rich list. He has the backing of Oxford's fan groups, it seems the club will not only survive, it's ready to thrive.

In 2000 Denis Smith returns to the club he steered to promotion four years earlier. While Kassam battles all-comers to get the construction work re-started, the blight on the team becomes a vice-like grip around the club's throat. At the end of the 1999/00 season they narrowly avoid relegation to the 4th tier for the first time since 1964. The season is hideous and its end comes as a blessed relief. The spring sun offers little respite from the battle ahead; to stay in the division, to find a new home and stay in existence. This is the story of what comes next. Strap in, it's going to get very dark, very quickly.

It's 4th May 2000.

May 2000

With the final embers of a tortuous season still glowing, over 6,000 fans arrive at The Manor for Mike Ford's testimonial. Goals from Chris Hackett, Derek Lilley and Jim Magilton give Oxford a 3-2 win over a young Manchester United team. It's a rare moment of light where there is otherwise a darkening mood. The return of players like Matt Elliot and Phil Gilchrist feel like the ghosts of the club's past coming back to haunt us. Ford later announces that the game is his last as a professional footballer.

The current squad is a ramshackle assemblage of panic buys, bargain bucket nomads and fading stars from the mid-nineties. Nine are out of contract including the iconic Joey Beauchamp and Canadian international defender Mark Watson. Watson's contract is particularly complicated; Canada's lengthy 2002 World Cup qualifying programme means he could miss a big proportion of the season. The club, hardly known for their largesse, aren't keen on investing in a player who won't be there.

Former Chelsea midfielder Eddie Newton, who helped steady the listing ship in the latter stages of last season opts to head for China to see out his career. Or at least that's what's reported, he doesn't seem to have ever made it, reappearing briefly at Barnet before retiring. Meanwhile giant Swedish goalkeeper, and fan favourite 'porn star' Pal Lundin is released. Also shown the door is Nigel Jemson after a dismal second spell with the club in which he played thirteen games without scoring.

A week later, groundsman Mick Moore tears his ligaments in a freak accident when defender Phil Whelan yanks his leg awkwardly in a taxi on their way to the PFA Awards Dinner in London. The incident, which is described as 'high-jinks' puts Moore on crutches just as his busy summer preparing the pitch for next season gets underway.

There's some good news as the club receives special dispensation to use The Manor for another season. Had their licence not been renewed they would have only been permitted to use The Manor's 2,800 seats and not its crumbling terrace. That would have made it unusable for the upcoming campaign, so the news is a big relief to Firoz Kassam, who is racing to complete the new stadium before the authorities grow tired of the club's incompetence.

Despite avoiding relegation by the skin of their teeth, and to the dismay of many fans, Denis Smith, fresh from his own 1-year contract extension, offers new deals to the glacially slow defensive pairing Phil Whelan and Steve Davis. Goalkeeper and fan favourite Richard Knight, who has been released by Derby, is offered a contract after completing an impressive loan spell. Off the pitch legendary midfielder 'mad dog' Mickey Lewis is confirmed as Smith's number two.

June 2000

With contracts still outstanding, Smith begins the process of rebuilding his beleaguered squad. The work appears to get off to a flier; Richard Knight accepts his offer and Smith announces the imminent arrival of Darren Byfield, a young striker from Aston Villa with a reputation for pace and most importantly, goals.

Meanwhile in Florida, striker Derek Lilley, on holiday with his family, is held up at gunpoint. The gunman and an accomplice burst into the family's apartment one evening. The family are forced into the toilet and the gunman, appearing to panic, puts his weapon to the head of Lilley's five-year-old son. Money, about \$15-\$20, is, thankfully, all they lose and the family returns to England straight after. Denis Smith assures fans that the ordeal won't affect Lilley who has been subject to transfer speculation due to his commute from Yorkshire. "You can get over anything in life," Smith said dismissively. "It was a nasty experience, but with something like that you just think how unlucky you were that it should happen to you." He couldn't be more wrong as Lilley's daughter suffers night terrors and his wife grows homesick. While he stays at the club, his mind is elsewhere.

Bizarrely, to those who only ever saw Steve Davis as a last resort for Denis Smith, the defender has written to the club formerly turning down their contract offer. Even the players we don't want to play for us don't want to play for us. Then, at the eleventh hour, the player we most definitely do want to welcome, Darren

Byfield, opts to join Walsall. It's a major blow for Smith who desperately needs to bring goals into the squad.

There's better news from Joey Beauchamp, who had been subject to speculation linking him to Reading. Despite the opportunity to move to a club with stability and ambition, it looks like the winger may stay at The Manor after all. Days later, there's another blow as club captain Les Robinson leaves after signing a two-year deal as player-coach at Mansfield Town. After 453 games and 10 years of impeccable service, Robinson's departure leaves a gaping hole that's going to be hard to fill.

And then another turnaround; it's announced that Joey Beauchamp may be leaving after all; he's in two minds about whether to join Reading or stay with the club. Money isn't the issue with Reading offering £1000 per week more, but Beauchamp's previous experiences at West Ham and Swindon make him reluctant to take the step. As if one transfer saga isn't enough; the protracted contract talks of Mark Watson also look set to drag on. The club are wrestling to reconcile Watson's commitment to his national team and the need for him to be available to play league football. There's more World Cup woe as hapless striker Steve Anthrobus is in the frame to take part in Barbados' campaign to make it to Japan and Korea.

Elsewhere, Firoz Kassam has won another case in his battle to get work started on the new stadium; a covenant preventing alcohol sales in a half mile radius around the nearby Blackbird pub is removed by the high court. It's a small victory, as there remains a judicial review into the permission to allow a cinema on the Minchery Farm site.

The Beauchamp deal goes on ice as he heads off on holiday to think about it. Denis Smith, who has been linked with the vacant job at Gillingham, threatens to

withdraw the offer, releasing funds for other players. Meanwhile, youngsters Rob Folland and Jamie Cook turn down their contract offers.

Phil Whelan, fresh from putting groundsman Mick Moore in hospital, signs for Southend United after turning down his contract offer. With Les Robinson leaving, and Mark Watson and Steve Davis both undecided about their futures, the Oxford backline, brittle at the best of times, looks decimated. The news can't be helping Denis Smith's mood as he recovers from back surgery.

It's not just on the field that things are falling apart; off it, physio John Clinkard leaves the club after 12 years to join Wimbledon, he's replaced by Neil Sullivan.

Things start looking up towards the end of June as Denis Smith finally makes his first signing of the summer bringing in John Robertson from Ayr United. This is quickly followed with the news Joey Beauchamp, back from holiday, is due to sign. Mark Watson is still a maybe. The month closes with the signing of Ian McGuckin from Fulham and Manny Omoyimni from West Ham.

Omoyimni is a particularly interesting character; in 1999 he was on loan from West Ham at Gillingham, playing for them in the League Cup. On returning to Upton Park, he features as a substitute for West Ham against Aston Villa in their quarter-final tie. It's a breach of the competition's rules which results in their exclusion from the competition.

July 2000

At the start of July, South African goalkeeper Andre Arendse triggers a clause in his contract allowing him to leave the club. With Richard Knight signed up, Arendse's prospects for the season have become limited and he also has to consider his World Cup prospects. His time at the club has been uncomfortable, seemingly too lightweight for a lower league dogfight in a failing team.

In yet another twist, Mark Watson goes missing in Canada. The Oxford Mail eventually track him down and find out that the club have been negotiating with the wrong agent. Watson claims that the agent Denis Smith has been talking to barely talks to the player. Clearly someone is lying. Back home, it looks like the manager is giving up and moving on, inviting Welsh Under 21 defender Lee Jarman to join the squad at their south coast pre-season camp.

Firoz Kassam continues to make progress on the new stadium as an objection by developers, Pentith, who disagree with the plan to build a cinema at the stadium, is dismissed. It's a major obstacle removed from the process. And then, another blow. Morrells raise an objection to the removal of the covenant preventing the sale of alcohol around the Blackbird pub. The objection throws the viability of the new stadium back into doubt.

With the first pre-season game on the horizon, Steve Anthrobus heads out to Barbados for a World Cup qualifier. Anthrobus' first season with the club saw him score just two goals; the first of which was on his debut on the opening day of the season. It's been seven months since he found the net making him an unlikely candidate for a World Cup campaign. For Denis Smith, securing his squad must feel like nailing jelly to the wall, he signs Lee Jarman on a monthly contract after missing out on other targets while the Mark Watson deal remains up in the air. Still.

As the club announce a new sponsorship deal with internet agency Domino, replacing long standing shirt sponsor Unipart, Steve Anthrobus unexpectantly arrives back from Barbados. It turns out that due to administrative errors surrounding his citizenship, he's not eligible to play for the national team after all. He just had to travel 4,000 miles to find out. It's been that kind of summer.

Pre-season steps up with the club's first major friendly against Birmingham City. Denis Smith claims the 3-0 defeat in the Bill Halsey Memorial Trophy is 'brilliant' as it showed how much work there was still to do before the start of the season. Man of the Match is Richard Knight who makes six crucial saves to keep the score down.

There's better news off the field, as the appeal regarding the drinks covenant is rejected and Pentith's objection to the cinema dropped. A dispute with Thames Water is still live, but Firoz Kassam claims construction could re-start as early as September.

Ahead of a daunting friendly against a strong Chelsea team, Denis Smith gives another ultimatum to Mark Watson. He now has until the end of the week to sign, but with all communication going through his agent, prospects seem dim. Smith's patience finally runs dry following the 5-1 defeat. He laments the schoolboy defensive errors and acknowledges that, for the second thrashing in a row, the score was 'kept down'. Anders Jacobsen, a defender on trial from Stoke, says that he remains unconvinced that the result is a one-off - it's not, it's a two-off, but we know what he means. His concerns reduce the prospect of him signing permanently.

With July coming to an end, and the season less than two weeks away, the deadline for Mark Watson to sign passes with an eerie silence.

August 2000

With the club preparing its final descent towards the new season, there's a series of twists characterising the whole summer. First, Steve Davis, who formally turned down a contract in June, returns to play in a 1-1 draw with Hereford. Afterwards, to the bafflement of all, he announces that he's agreed a 1-year deal for next season. Then, as the deadline for his signing passes, Mark Watson

decides to break his silence, gushingly calling on Denis Smith to sign him up. Then, the Steve Davis deal falls through and Smith announces the arrival of Jon Richardson from Exeter City seemingly bringing the whole debacle to a close.

It takes the number of new signings to seven with Richard Knight, striker Manny Onoyimni, and defenders Ian McGuckin, John Robertson and Lee Jarman, who is on a monthly contract. In goal for the Hereford friendly is Jimmy Glass, who is most famous for scoring a last-minute goal for Carlisle United in 1999 to keep them in Football League. Denis Smith seems keen to bring him in as cover for Richard Knight.

Two days before the season starts, the squad finally gathers for its team photo; their shirts, featuring the Domino logo are made by New Balance and are a darker yellow with a strange luminescent quality. Under the lights it seems to create the illusion of turning the shirt green.

Denis Smith is bullish on the eve of the season opener against Peterborough at The Manor. The bookies have the club favourites to go down, but Smith thinks they may surprise some people. He's right, but perhaps not in the way he meant. He backs Manny Omoyimni to fire the club forward, setting him a target of 20 goals for the season. The picture changes 24 hours later as Oxford fall to a 1-0 home defeat. Denis Smith seems confused about his best team and formation with Lee Jarman being sacrificed in a reshuffle mid-game.

Days later the worsening mood grows darker still when full-back Ross Weatherstone is accused of racially abusing a taxi driver during a night out with friends. He receives a fine for his part in the incident. The club's ponderous response to the issue angers both fans and the local press.

Just two days after that, it's announced that former manager, Maurice Evans has died of a heart attack. A universally liked and unassuming character, Evans

managed the club to Milk Cup success, taking over from Jim Smith in 1985. The club would go into mourning, if it wasn't so self-absorbed in its own failure. A dismal week concludes with a 3-0 defeat to Port Vale in the second game of the season.

The following week, we play Wolves at Molineux in the League Cup allowing Dean Whitehead to make his first start for the club. Wolves are in the second tier but suffering from injuries. If the season so far hasn't been bizarre enough, a Matt Murphy goal gives us a 1-0 first-leg win and a genuine chance of getting through to the next round.

Four days later we lose our third league game of the season 1-0 to Brentford. Off the field the club suspend Ross Weatherstone for his conviction for racially aggravated assault, but with a ten-day gap between the decision and the club's action, the damage is already done. The month concludes with our fourth consecutive league defeat, at Walsall we take the lead through Joey Beauchamp, then concede twice, Beauchamp equalises before the hosts grab the winner eight minutes from time. The goals, at least, represent our first of the season.

September 2000

The Walsall game has a further casualty when Paul Powell damages knee ligaments, putting him out of the game for several months. On form, Powell represents the club's brightest prospect with Premier League teams taking an interest in his progress. The loss is another bitter blow.

Still, two days later, a 1-1 draw at home to Cambridge sees us take our first point of the season. Denis Smith isn't there to see it because he's in hospital with a blood infection (obviously). The point lifts the club off the bottom of the table setting things up nicely for the second leg of the League Cup tie against Wolves...

... to whom Oxford crash out, despite taking the lead through Jon Richardson, going 2-0 up in the tie and Wolves have Joleon Lescott sent off, the visitors turn the tie on its head with two quick goals and a winner that sends Oxford out. It's the hope that kills you.

Still, it's not all bad news as the council give the go-ahead for a leisure complex at Minchery Farm, meaning the stadium construction can get underway, at last. Probably. A local farmer, Les Wells claims he owns some of the land and may still call for a judicial review into the decision.

The season is the first to feature Oxford's three most local rivals - Swindon, Reading and Wycombe – so coupled with the bigger picture, there are local bragging rights to win. Or lose. First up is Wycombe Wanderers in a Friday night game live on TV. Richard Knight is injured in the first-half meaning a debut for Canadian 'keeper Hubert Busby Jnr. The substitution has a lengthy delay when it turns out that Busby doesn't have a goalkeeper's shirt and has to quickly find a club training top to play in. Afterwards, Oxford's kitman Ken Ridley claims he hadn't forgotten the shirt, he just didn't have any in stock. Wycombe win 3-1. Busby, playing his one and only game in England, saves a last-minute penalty, which has to be retaken. They score.

There's a hitch with the planning permission on the new stadium because, well, of course there is. With Firoz Kassam determined to get building started, it's now suggested that approval needs to go to full council. It helps that nobody seems very sure on this point.

Oxford's fifth defeat in six league games, a 4-0 thrashing by Stoke, results in a major re-think for Denis Smith. It's only September and he's already talking about a clear out; especially up front where it's been 18 hours since a striker scored for the club.

And then, a win! A goal ten minutes from time from substitute Jamie Cook against Bury sees Oxford take its first three points of the season. Even a missed Joey Beauchamp penalty doesn't bring the mood down. Denis Smith still wants to sort out his striking problem. A £200,000 bid for Torquay's Tony Bedeau falls through, so Smith turns to a loan deal for Manchester City's Leon Mike.

It's back to normal after the Bury win as Mike makes a demoralising debut in the 5-0 thrashing at Millwall. The team have now conceded 18 goals in just 5 away games. Denis Smith blames a lack of leaders, having previously blamed a lack of fire power.

Off the field, two club stalwarts leave the club, commercial manager Trevor Baxter and communications manager David Crabtree are pursuing new opportunities. A clue as to the reasons behind Baxter's decision may be in the news that the club have announced that the team's new, vaguely green, replica shirts are expected to be in stock before the end of the month - 6 weeks into the season. The month concludes with a 0-1 home defeat to Bristol City.

October 2000

The aftermath of the Bristol defeat is significant, fans turn on Denis Smith, calling for his head. The following Monday, the club announce that he's standing down but will stay on as an advisor to help appoint his successor. First to throw their hat in the ring is former Oxford centre-back who played for England in the 1990 World Cup, Mark Wright. Wright, manager at Southport, is emerging as one of the most promising managers in the Conference.

Instead, Mike Ford is given the role in a caretaker capacity, dauntingly his first game is the local derby against Swindon at the County Ground. Fans are pessimistic with only 1500 buying tickets for the game some 25% down on normal figures.

The day before the game a row erupts when it's revealed that Swindon are offering cheaper tickets to their fans, a breach of the rules. Oxford report Swindon to the Football League as a result. Ford unveils Guy Whittingham, a veteran striker on loan from Portsmouth.

Oxford create the better chances playing a more direct game. Swindon keeper Bart Griemink saves from a Matt Murphy point-blank header before Lee Jarman hits the post.

Then, inevitably, Alan Reeves sweeps it home from six yards before Whittingham connects with a Sam Ricketts' pass for the equaliser.

Swindon's substitutes combine to take the winner, Giuliano Grazioli, who four years earlier had put into his own net to spark Oxford to promotion against Peterborough, tucks away Sol Davis's low cross.

Whittingham's is the first Oxford goal by a recognised striker for five months, however, things are moving quickly back at Portsmouth; manager Tony Pulis is sacked and replaced by Steve Claridge whose first act is to recall Whittingham. He leaves with one goal from one game and a legacy which will last longer than many other Oxford players in the current squad. The club has to seek special dispensation from the Football League to replace Whittingham with another loan player.

Two further names are thrown into the ring as a replacement for Denis Smith; Steve Coppell and Ian Atkins. Meanwhile two senior professionals; Matt Murphy and club captain Peter Fear ask to be put on the transfer list, the latter, looking overweight and disinterested, can't get into the team. The club secedes to both requests.

Cheltenham manager Steve Cotterill turns down the opportunity to take over the Oxford hotseat after meeting with Firoz Kassam. Following a farcical 4-3 defeat to Wrexham, Denis Smith, who appears to be both an ex-manager and manager simultaneously, signs 38-year-old ex-Arsenal defender Andy Linighan to try and shore up the leaky defence which has shipped 27 goals in 12 games. The impact appears immediate as a man of the match performance from Richard Knight results in a 0-0 draw with Luton Town picking up our fifth point of the season. Every silver lining has a cloud as the game is marred by Paul Tait breaking his leg.

Any sense that the point offers a fragile platform on which to build a recovery is blown out of the water the next day as Firoz Kassam goes on the offensive. Kassam, who has been largely silent when it comes to team matters, is ostensibly there to trailer a double announcement; the first of which is expected to be the restart of building work at the stadium. However, the club's dismal start to the season cannot be ignored. Kassam explodes.

His particular gripe is the supposed lack of investment in the team, he claims to be £5m out of pocket and has a clear message for the media and fans; "So all I can say to the media and to a few supporters who make unnecessary threats to me and my family is: if you don't like it, piss off, go away." The rift is never fully healed.

The next day, as if nothing has happened, Kassam announces Joe Kinnear as his new director of football with David Kemp coming in as manager. It's quite a coup; Kinnear is a manager with Premier League experience. Kassam also announces Birse as the construction partner on the new stadium.

The impact is, well, minimal. Kinnear and Kemp's first game is our seventh straight away defeat, 3-1 to Rotherham. Derek Lilley contrives to have a goal

chalked off for offside after he converts a shot that was already going in from Jamie Cook. The loss is followed by a 2-0 defeat to Wigan. It's not even Christmas and we're already looking for a miracle to survive.

The following week we head to Reading. Despite the mocking by Oxford fans about their toy town stadium and plastic fans, the Madjeski Stadium is in such stark contrast to the collapsing Manor Ground it illustrates the growing chasm between the two clubs. The game is a classic. As the rain lashes down, Oxford come from a goal down to lead 2-1, Reading equalise before John Richardson makes it 3-2. Just as it looks like an unexpected three points is on the cards, a late Tony Rougier double in the last 12 minutes turns the game around. Another 3-4 defeat. It's made all the worse as the win sends Reading to the top of the table.

November 2000

A 1-0 defeat to Bristol Rovers sets David Kemp on a search for new blood, he signs Keith Brown from Barnsley and Keith Andrews from Wolves both on loan along with Northern Ireland international striker Phil Gray from Burnley. The impact is immediate as the new look team head to Swansea and come away with a 2-1 win. Andrews stands out, scoring the winner and running the midfield. The result was the first win in nine, and just the second league victory of the season. It wins the club Performance of the Week by Sky.

Kemp, never one to play down his contribution, declares his team are on the up; but Joe Kinnear is not resting on his laurels, tracking Jamaican international Onandi Lowe and sacking Mickey Lewis, who has become surplus to requirements since Kemp and his assistant Alan McLeary took charge.

It doesn't dampen the mood as we secure a 1-0 FA Cup win over non-league Macclesfield, the game is marred by trouble in the Oxford end when we concede

a penalty two minutes from time. Richard Knight's save preserves the lead and sends Oxford into the second round.

Suddenly, there seems to be stability at the club which Kinnear wants to leverage with a cash bid for Birmingham's Steve Robinson. I mean, obviously he doesn't sign, but remember the name. As if to illustrate the positivity, Oxford race to a 2-0 first half lead against Notts County with two goals from Matt Murphy. Suddenly the fight-back is truly on. Then, it all falls apart again. Three second half goals and we collapse to yet another defeat. All confidence seeps away.

Despite the big money bids, Kinnear and Kemp struggle to bring anyone in, as if to illustrate the frustration both Lee Jarman and Jimmy Glass, who have been on weekly contracts, are signed until the end of the season.

December 2000

David Kemp splashes out £35,000 for Forest Green Rovers defender Wayne Hatswell. Hatswell has already gained notoriety lashing in an own goal for Morecambe in the FA Cup last year. The goal, in which Hatswell under no pressure, three yards out, manages to find the top corner of his own goal, is shown repeatedly on Match of the Day. He sounds like our kind of player.

With Hatswell, Manny Omoyimni and Jimmy Glass, the club are building quite a collection of players people will reminisce about on podcasts in years to come.

Another 3-2 defeat, this time to Oldham is followed by a 4-1 Auto Windscreen Shield defeat to Brentford. Although the result is largely meaningless, Kemp apologises for the performance, it's the thirteenth time the team have conceded three or more goals.

An old wound is opened in December when Ross Weatherstone announces that he doesn't plan to appeal his conviction for racially aggravated assault. He

continues to insist that he isn't a racist and that not appealing is down to the club's suggestion that everyone needs to put the issue behind them.

There's another 3-2 defeat, this time to non-league Chester in the FA Cup, David Kemp turns his ire on shell-shocked 'keeper Richard Knight. Knight has conceded a bucketload of goals but is still a fan favourite and contender for player of the year due to his performances. Knight's error in the Cup triggers Kemp to bring in Neil Cutler on loan from Aston Villa. The endless merry-go-round of players continues as Derek Lilley leaves to return to Scotland; he's had a torrid time and failed to settle down south.

Cutler is far from popular with the London Road faithful, who feel Knight has been scapegoated. His debut, however, sees a 3-1 win over Northampton Town, Steve Anthrobus scores for the first time in the league in nearly a year. We're in a parallel universe. Star of the show is 17-year-old Chris Hackett, who Joe Kinnear offers a five-year contract to days later. Youngsters Jamie Brooks and Simon King are also offered long term deals.

Days before Christmas it's revealed that The Ackland Hospital has re-submitted planning permission to relocate to the Manor site once Oxford leave for Minchery Farm. The stumbling block is traffic, but the plan would provide essential finance to the club.

A 2-3 defeat to Colchester before Christmas is followed by a dismal 1-2 Boxing Day defeat to Bournemouth with two goals from teenage superkid, Jermaine Defoe, who is on loan from West Ham. The goals are in a sequence of ten consecutive games, a post-war record. After a fleeting flicker of hope, Oxford head into 2001 needing a miracle if it is to salvage anything from the season.

January 2001

The New Year brings no rest bite as Oxford collapse to a 3-0 defeat to Brentford. David Kemp thinks the answer is in the transfer market. When it comes it's pretty remarkable. Brentford's Andy Scott, one of the division's top goalscorers, teammate Rob Quinn and Kevin Austin - a loanee from Barnsley at Brentford all sign in a deal worth £250,000. Also arriving from Swansea City is defender Garry Monk.

With Austin's signature held up, Quinn, Scott and Monk all make their debuts and Andy Linighan is sacrificed for the 2-1 win over Walsall. Days later, Austin's move collapses due after he fails a medical. A 1-0 defeat to Colchester precedes a 4-2 defeat to Peterborough - it's the 16th time Oxford have conceded three or more goals. David Kemp resorts to tortured analogies to explain the latest failure: "We're like an old car. You think you've got one part mended and then the bumper falls off." he says before adding "We're like a bucket with a hole in it, you patch it up and then another hole appears." Yes David, we get it.

Elsewhere, St Andrew's First School are the latest people to take an interest in moving to the Manor Ground site next year.

February 2001

101 days after arriving at the club, Joe Kinnear announces that he's leaving the club to spend more time with his family. It comes as something of a surprise when two days later he's unveiled as Luton Town's new Director of Football.

A 0-2 defeat to Wycombe prompts David Kemp, who is already on the ropes with the fans, into action. He attempts to alleviate the pressure by diving into the transfer market again to find the latest solution to the club's endless woes. Northern Ireland international Darren Patterson is signed after completing a short-term contract with York City. While the door is open, the Weatherstone

brothers - Simon and Ross are shown the exit as they head off to Boston. There's no immediate impact as Chris Hackett is sent off after 20 minutes in the game against Bury as the team collapse to a 1-3 defeat, number 25 of the season.

Patterson, who is made club captain, puts in a man-of-the match performance three days later scoring in a 1-1 draw with Stoke. One beneficiary of the Kemp-era is Matt Murphy, who has cemented a place in the team since asking for a transfer, now he's even talking about getting a new contract.

The month concludes with a routine 0-2 defeat to Millwall, after which Neil Cutler is sent back to Aston Villa. Although not popular with the fans, David Kemp is angry at the decision which appears to have been made by Firoz Kassam.

March 2001

March sees the relegation doomsday clock on countdown. The only bit of light that seems to be shining; progress on the stadium, is stunted when Les Wells wins the right to a judicial review into the decision to allow a leisure complex on what he claims to be his right of way. Wells isn't looking to kill the project, but instead is looking for compensation of around £20,000. Firoz Kassam is taking a different tone. He says the issue threatens the whole project. Once again, the club's future is in the balance.

Richard Knight makes a triumphant return to the first team with a clean sheet in the 0-0 draw at Bristol City, but it's business as usual three days later as we go down 3-5 to Wrexham.

The final visit of Swindon Town doesn't sell out with just over 7,000 attending. Dean Whitehead is sent off before half-time after kicking Steve Robinson, a transfer target for David Kemp earlier in the season. Matt Murphy follows him with 25 minutes left for two bookable offences. The home fans hurl coins and

bottles at Steve Mildenhall in the Swindon goal forcing the referee to take the players off with 12 minutes to play. By this point we're already a goal down to a Robinson (yes him) first-half volley, he fires another one in with a minute to go.

"This is Oxford United and the way things are going you get a large kick in the balls as opposed to a little tap," says analogy magnet David Kemp "The thing to do is not sulk about it but just hope that the tide turns and surely it will."

It won't.

23 points adrift from safety, with the future of their new stadium in the balance, Firoz Kassam has taken decisive action to do nothing about the club's parlous state until the outcome of the judicial review forced by Les Wells.

The double threat - the right of way and the judicial review into the planning decision - could be resolved if Kassam is prepared to compensate Wells. With the transfer deadline approaching, Kassam confirms that nobody will be signed as the club may not exist in a week's time, despite having no cover for Richard Knight.

With Firoz Kassam ratcheting up the pressure on the council and Les Wells, Wells takes to the Oxford United Forum ThisIsUnited to make his views clear. Kassam responds by revealing that The Manor has been sold, though to whom remains a mystery. The sale will render the club homeless if the stadium isn't complete. This is brinkmanship of the highest order.

Four days later, Les Wells demands £1m for his land, which Firoz Kassam looks set to pay. If legal costs can be agreed, the crisis may be averted.

Ironically, as the club teeters on the brink of oblivion, the team hit its best form of the season; first comes the most extraordinary result of year as the team contrive to beat league leaders Rotherham 4-3 at the Manor.

Man of the Match was Manny Omoyimni scoring twice, his first of the twenty Denis Smith had predicted for him, plus having another one ruled out for offside and an assist.

Omoyimni's cross allowed Rob Qunn to score after six minutes, Mark Robbins on 24 minutes before he fired in a 25 yard drive three minutes later. The third came on the hour with Andy Scott heading the fourth seven minutes later. Two later Rotherham goals made it an uncomfortable finish, but the three points were secured.

That David Kemp said: "I hope the penny has dropped for him." Omoyimni scores once more all season.

The game preceded a council meeting on Tuesday whether to give the go-ahead on the stadium. Chairman Firoz Kassam, continues to ratchet up the pressure saying saying: "If the conditions are not lifted I will no longer support the club and will stop paying the contractors. It is in the hands of the council."

The restrictions are lifted and it appears, finally, it's all steam ahead.

Oxford then lose to Cambridge, but only by a last minute goal from Paul Wanless. The month concludes with a 1-0 win over Northampton.

The Northampton game isn't without its own dose of farce; the team coach fails to turn up meaning the players have to make their way to Sixfields, like wacky races, in a fleet of cars. The coach company take the blame saying "I do apologise to the club. It was a new driver who had problems because the toilet on the coach wasn't properly drained and then the fuses kept blowing." which sums the whole season up.

April 2001

A Phil Gray goal after 8 seconds doesn't prevent Oxford from falling to yet another 4-3 defeat to Bournemouth. It is the fourth 4-3 of the season, and the 13th game with five goals or more. We are nothing if not entertaining.

The defeat sets up the inevitable; we are now just one defeat from relegation. The night before our home game against Oldham, the new stadium is struck by an arson attack. The damage, which is estimated to be worth around £60,000, appears to have been done by kids.

The following day, a last-minute goal condemns Oxford to a humiliating relegation. They are the first team in the country to do it.

With the misery over, Oxford pick up a point at Luton before narrowly losing 3-2 to Wigan. David Kemp is bullish about the future calling for Firoz Kassam to invest in the team. Days later, the team meekly surrenders 2-0 to Reading. It is the club's sixth defeat in six derby games. And if you want to argue about whether to include Wycombe as a derby or not, you really haven't been paying attention, we simply no longer care. Fans continue to call for David Kemp's head, who hits back saying that fans need a reality check.

With relegation confirmed, thoughts turn to damage limitation, with four games left and 90 goals conceded, the club set themselves a goal of avoiding conceding 100 goals before the end of the season. I mean, it feels like Fergie in his pomp doesn't it? Fittingly, even that target looks beyond them when they concede six in a 6-2 defeat to Bristol Rovers. Richard Knight is sent off for a professional foul, only the leniency of the referee prevents substitute keeper Phil Wilson - who saves a penalty before watching the rebound go in - going after he commits a similar foul ten minutes later. Had Wilson gone, it would have left the club without a 'keeper for the last games of the season.

It's some great irony that David Kemp is fired after a 3-1 win over Swansea. The result turns out to be the final win at The Manor, which is 2,500 short of capacity for the farewell game against Port Vale. Mike Ford takes over as caretaker manager fielding a young team of local kids.

May 2001

The Port Vale game features fireworks and a speech from Firoz Kassam who promises to build 'a team to be proud of'. It's a promise that would haunt him in years to come. Andy Scott slots home the final Oxford goal in the first half and then, somewhat fittingly, Port Vale equalise in the last minute.

The final game of the season, away to Notts County, features an inexperienced team with eight home-grown players. Against the odds, a Rob Folland goal gives Oxford the lead, but County hit back as Oxford concede their 99th and 100th goal.

Oxford United end the season bottom of the table, 10 points behind second bottom, 35 points from safety. They've won seven games, drawn six and lost 33. They've scored 53 goals and conceded 100. They have had three managers and played forty-one players including five goalkeepers.

On the morning of the final game, Firoz Kassam finally reveals who bought The Manor. It's Firoz Kassam. One of his companies - Firoka - buy the ground for £6m from the club, which is set to be bought by The Ackland Hospital who are planning a £25m development. Although Kassam claims there are no other buyers, the purchase deprives the club of the full market value of their own ground.

Post season

The clearout of the squad begins almost immediately; Peter Fear and Steve Anthrobus are both released with Lee Jarman and Jon Shephard also likely to leave. John Robertson also heads back to Scotland because his wife is homesick.

Mark Wright is announced as the club's new permanent manager. Wright has built a reputation as a bright young manager after a stellar playing career. But, if the end of the season is expected to herald a new dawn, the misery continues to when the Voice of the London Road Andrew Knapton dies suddenly.

This casts another shadow over the final game at The Manor, a charity re-run of the Milk Cup Final organised by Alan Judge. Many Oxford players from that game return, though not Malcolm Shotton, Ray Houghton or John Aldridge.

Mark Wright starts re-building his squad, trying to sign younger players such as Dean Whitehead and Jamie Brooks. Wright sacks Denis Smith, the man who recommended him for the job.

Domino, who step down as the club's shirt sponsor, have no regrets as the club announces a new shirt for next season. The kit, voted by the fans, is brighter and made by TFG and will be sponsored by local company Buildbase. Completing the exorcism of the last 12 months, the club hold an auction to sell off parts of the old Manor Ground.

Thoughts turn to the new stadium – which Firoz Kassam bashfully names after himself - as local residents worry about parking issues on matchdays. The club setting aside nearly £250,000 to support traffic management and announce a price freeze on season tickets. The announcement has the desired effect there is brisk business for renewals.

It's not all good news as the stadium is subject to another attack of vandalism, this time windows are smashed using catapults.

Still, the squad re-building continues with the signing of Martin Thomas and Sam Stockley. Mark Wright's attempt at luring Neil Ruddock and Dean Saunders fails, and the signing of John Dreyer is blocked by Firoz Kassam. One of the issues is the stockpile of defenders at the club; with two more added - Scott Guyett and Phil Bolland from Mark Wright's former club. As a result, Ian McGuckin is shown the door to try and release more budget.

With the new season less than a month away, the club's pre-season starts with a game against Brackley Town, Paul Tait scores in a narrow 1-0 win over Didcot. Mark Wright solves his goalkeeping difficulties with the signing of Ian McCaldon from Livingstone. He signs after Dave Beasant turns down the opportunity to see out his career with the club.

The rush is on to finish the stadium and gain its safety certificate in time for its opening game - the Bill Hasley Memorial Trophy game against Crystal Palace. Days beforehand, the club confirm that the upper section of the South Stand won't be available for the game, but they remain confident it will go ahead. It's that close.

The club's staff finally take up their new position at the stadium and three days later the Palace friendly gets the go-ahead. There's traffic chaos as the kick-off is delayed; a majority of the crowd haven't bought tickets in advance meaning there are long queues at the ticket office. Still, despite the ground still being covered in dust and tape from the construction work, the game goes ahead. Paul Powell scores Oxford's first ever goal at the new ground, a penalty. The 1-1 draw results in penalties, which Oxford win. Work continues throughout the week to finalise the stadium in time for the season opener against Rochdale. On 11 August 2001,

after 15 psychologically exhausting months, Oxford sit on the cusp of a new dawn. The day is grey and the weather is cold, but finally it's here. The future.