



London Wolves present their player of the year award to Steve Bull in 1996 and, right, the London Wolves football team pictured in the 1980s

# London pride at fifty years of loyal support

**EVEN** for a group that's 50 years old, this lot have got some outlandish tales.

One of their members has missed only one home game in 40 years, they used to run out of the players' tunnel at Molineux to supporters chanting their name, and they've travelled to matches with players, millionaires and a famous pop star.

Welcome to London Wolves.

The club's oldest supporters' club – and one of the oldest of its kind in the country – is about to turn 50.

They've experienced dizzying highs and endured devastating lows over the past five decades – and that's before you even get started on the football.

It all began in a very different era. Stuart Earl, who was there from day one and is the club's chairman, takes up the story: "Me and Dave (Slape, current secretary) met on the 9.15 out of Paddington. We saw each other every week and just thought there had to be a cheaper way of doing it, so we set about organising coach travel and it took off from there."

Dave added: "I was on the first trip. Two weeks earlier we met Jack Howley, the secretary, with about 12 people saying we wanted to form a club. The first trip was Plymouth (October 22, 1966, a 2-1 home win)."

Football worked very differently back then. London Wolves would be let in to Molineux games for free, with chairman John Ireland believing fans who travelled that far shouldn't have to pay.

They would board a coach from Victoria station (they switched to train travel after a couple of years) and have a corner of the North Bank allocated to them.



London Wolves members at Wolverhampton Railway Station before the recent Norwich game

Stuart added: "We used to come out of the players' tunnel and the North Bank would chant 'London Wolves' and point at us! It was quite embarrassing."

The club's numbers soon grew. At its peak, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they had almost 400 members, with the 1981 FA Cup semi-final against Spurs at Hillsborough attracted a record booking of 108 fans.

Just a few years later, with Wolves' rapid decline in full flow, things were very different.

Travel secretary Peter Woodfield has been with the club since

its formation and still kept attending in the dark days of the 1980s. Yes, he even went to all three Chorley FA Cup games.

"In the Bhatti era you had to be a bit more dedicated!" he said. "The Third Division, when we were still on our way down, it was a real effort to go to those games."

Mark Feehan joined in 1976, aged 12, after spotting an advert in a Millwall programme.

"You hear people complain today about bad games, but you really had to be a die-hard in the 1980s," he said. "You didn't even know if they would put a team out

some days.

"We had the conversations about what we'd do if the worst happened and Wolves no longer existed."

But London Wolves, like the club, survived – and thrived.

Sir Jack Hayward used to travel with them for midweek games (even taking part in Dave's 'guess the score' competition), as did a host of former players.

Dexys Midnight Runners singer Kevin Rowland is a former member, as is BBC presenter Jacqui Oatley.

John Richards is the club's hon-

orary president and the likes of Carl Ikeme, David Edwards and Karl Henry have travelled back to London with them in recent years.

That's not to say that travelling from London to every game hasn't been without its pitfalls.

There have been several mishaps, delays and breakdowns over the years, even as recently as last season when horrendous motorway traffic forced the group, who travelled to that particular game by coach, to abandon in Sheffield and watch the match in a pub.

Peter, who sorts out the club's bookings and match tickets, added: "There was one at Huddersfield in the 1960s the coach broke down just on the outskirts of Huddersfield and we ended up pushing it up a hill! I'll never forget that. We missed the first 25 minutes of that one."

The 50th anniversary year was marked in style with a golden anniversary dinner at Charlton's ground, The Valley, in July, attended by a host of ex-players and then-boss Kenny Jackett.

A special reception will be held in Molineux's WV1 bar on the day of the Leeds game on October 22, marking 50 years to the day since that first ever trip.

"I think the reason we all enjoy it so much is the social side of it and the camaraderie," Mark said.

"We have a lot of away fans travelling with us too. Brentford brought a bag of Chinese fortune cookies with them the other week to share out."

"Everyone knows everyone and we're all friends."

Stuart added: "My mother thought I'd grow out of it, but 50 years later I'm still here."

Teaser answers: 1 Charlton Athletic; 2 Stamford Bridge; 3 Christopher West; Picture: Graham Stack