

Thirty years since 'Hands off Hibs' victory over Wallace Mercer

Thirty years ago, Hibs' fans spent an agonising summer worrying about whether they would have a team to support in the future after Hearts' chairman Wallace Mercer tabled an audacious £6.2 million bid to take over their club.

Three years earlier, 33-year-old Swindon based solicitor David Duff had taken over as Chairman of Hibs but a series of disastrous business deals left the club open to a hostile takeover and Mercer took advantage.

He unveiled what he described as 'his vision for the future that would see one Edinburgh side challenge the dominance of Rangers and Celtic and an end of tribalism in the city' but in reality, everyone knew that the move was actually a take-over bid with the aims of acquiring Easter Road and the substantial property owned by the club.



Disbelief turned to anger and outright condemnation, not only among the Hibs support but throughout the entire country including many Hearts fans.

When the news broke Easter Road was besieged by worried fans, and later that night at a crammed Supporters Club, with hundreds more packing the street outside, a 'Hands off Hibs' committee was formed led by the former Hibs' director Kenny McLean as chairman.

Edinburgh District Council and the Lothian Regional Council immediately gave Hibs their backing, the Leith MP Ron Brown promising to raise the issue with both the Monopolies Commission and the Office of Fair Trading.

Permission for a mass protest march through the city was refused by the police who feared possible trouble and it was decided instead to hold a protest rally at Easter Road Stadium.

Attended by thousands of supporters from all over the country, plus several former Hibs' players including Pat Stanton, Jimmy O'Rourke, Tony Higgins and Jackie McNamara all rallied to the cause, with messages of support from golfer Bernard Gallacher and Gordon Strachan.

A succession of impassioned speeches all condemning Mercer's plans were met with enthusiastic applause, but perhaps the most poignant moment of the entire afternoon was when the legendary former Hibs player Joe Baker knelt and kissed the Easter Road turf.

The biggest cheer was reserved for Kenny McLean who told Mercer: "Keep your predatory hands off Hibernian Football Club."

The afternoon ended with an emotional rendering of You'll Never Walk Alone by the Proclaimers.

For weeks fans had taken to the streets collecting petitions, and later a packed 'Battle Bus' delivered the signatures to Tynecastle where the Hands Off Hibs committee were said to have been received cordially by some of the Hearts directors who may well have been sympathetic to the Easter Road cause.

The previous day Brian Rogan and Tony Connor, two Hibs supporters living in London, had presented a copy of the petition to Margaret Thatcher at 10 Downing Street.

Several supporters had also staged a five week long picket of the Bank of Scotland's main offices on the Mound, the on-going campaign even receiving an airing on the popular kids TV show Blue Peter when presenter John Leslie, against the orders of his immediate bosses, appeared on screen wearing a Hands off Hibs T-Shirt.

As part of the campaign the Battle Bus containing amongst others Gordon Strachan and the Proclaimers joined that years Leith Festival Gala Parade, receiving tumultuous applause and support from the many thousands packing the route.

A protest rally also took place at a packed Usher Hall chaired by Margo McDonald where amongst the speakers was the Hearts player John Robertson who had disobeyed Mercer's order not to attend.

Robbo recalled: "They asked me to go along just to show support to the Hibs' players because that was the other thing. If the teams were to merge at least one full squad of at least 30-odd players would have been lost so I just told the truth.

"I just felt that the city was big enough foe two clubs. I didn't believe in it and I knew a lot of the lads in the Hearts' dressing room didn't believe in it. I didn't feel it was right. It didn't go down too well with the chairman."

On Saturday 14 July 1990 Mercer finally admitted defeat and called off his attempt to destroy Hibs claiming that "although

he had won the financial implication, he had been defeated by the sheer ferocity of emotion displayed by the fans of the Easter Road club.”

His humiliating climb-down had been a tremendous victory for the club and its fans. Ironically his attempt to ‘end the tribalism in the city’ had backfired spectacularly.

SNP Leader Alex Salmond said: “His idea of taking over Hibernian Football was a totally disastrous idea. Anybody who really understands football knows you can’t have Hearts without Hibs and you must not ever effectively deprive people of their football.”

Eighteen months later, the Hibs’ fans would pack out Hampden Park to watch their heroes lift the Skol/League Cup following a 2-0 victory over Dunfermline.