

Tickets, tension and songs on night that changed everything

Wembley in 1991 was a watershed moment for Irish football and its emigrant heroes, writes **Dion Fanning**

LIKE all Irish sporting stories, it begins as a story of tickets. The Irish in London were expected to overcome all the problems when Ireland played England at Wembley in 1991, not just their own problems but those of their family and friends back home.

There were more difficulties than some imagined. "I remember contacting the FAI and basically being told, 'Sure you'll be all right, don't you live there?'" Sean Mackey remembers, "although they came good in the end."

But the tickets the FAI could provide were never going to be enough. For the Irish in London, England playing Ireland at Wembley was supposed to be a home game.

The English FA were believed to be looking sympathetically on requests but Mackey, a committee member of the London branch of the Republic of Ireland Soccer Supporters Club, heard other stories. "I was told that anybody with an 'O' or a 'Mc' in their name was being rejected. Anybody who sounded Irish at all in fact."

Mackey was a bank manager in London. He had a secretary called Devini Patel and an idea occurred to him. That was how Devini Patel ended up with six tickets for England v Ireland at Wembley on March 27, 1991. It was also how Devini Patel's sister ended up with six tickets for the Wembley game, dispatched by the English FA with kind regards. The Patels weren't football people. Sean Mackey now had 12 tickets.

"We had Joe Delaney pestered," Niall Quinn remembers. Ireland were playing England in the heartland of the London Irish and Quinn knew those people as well as anybody.

While he was at Arsenal, Quinn had drunk in the National in Kilburn and, when he ended up in the Galtymore in Cricklewood after the game, it wasn't the first time he'd ended up in the Galtymore in Cricklewood. "I drank in those places," he says, "but I drank in pub hours."

What were pub hours exactly? "Well," he says with a smile, "I've been to a few of those pubs where they wouldn't let you out."

The Irish in London at times felt under siege then, like others do today, and some were fleeing economic despair in Ireland, just as they are today.

"When I flew home to see my family, the planes were always empty," Quinn says. "And when I flew back, they were always full."

The Ireland that arrived at Wembley represented a changing Ireland. After the 1990 World Cup, the team had more confidence and the country had elected a woman president the year before. Other changes were evident too. The day before the game, Hugh Callaghan, one of the Birmingham Six, travelled to training with the players and stood on the Wembley pitch talking to Jack Charlton.

Old consolations and old stereotypes remained about Ireland and the Ireland team.

"The Irish will play the long ball but we mustn't try to beat them at their own game," England manager Graham Taylor said the day before. "We must keep the ball on the floor and impose our own style." The game would reveal that Ireland's style was not what England expected and England's style was no style at all.

"That was the first night that we pretended not to hear Jack's instructions," Quinn remembers. The team was growing in belief, and everything that happened at Wembley,



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except perhaps the result, would confirm that belief.

The Irish supporters who were at Wembley that night recall the performance of the team with pride, but the other memories aren't as cosy. "Hostile," was how one man recalled the atmosphere, while one of Sean Mackey's tickets was given to an English acquaintance who, he was told, didn't stand for *Anhrán na bhFiann* and participated in some "vile chants".

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When Ireland played at Wembley in 1995, there had been outbreaks of trouble. The match in Dublin the year before had been rowdy and, four years after the '91 game, the friendly at Lansdowne Road would be abandoned. For some the day and night of the game was long and edgy.

Pat Redmond was drinking in the Black Lion in Kilburn that afternoon when a group of England fans charged down the Kilburn High Road and started throwing missiles into the pub. "A glass came in and cut my head open," he recalls.

The Irish fans in the Black Lion responded. Redmond recalls years later reading an account in a book about hooliganism in which an English fan remembered being hit by a pint glass thrown from within the pub. "Hopefully my fingerprints were on that one," he laughs.

The cut head was one thing, the game was another. Redmond had blood streaming from his wound but a trip to casualty was too much of a detour. "There was a bit of a gash but the blood soon stopped."

Redmond headed to Neasden, where he heard some English fans had stood on a table in a pub and sang *God Save the Queen* with predictable results, before he made the final journey to Wembley.

For those who were covering the Irish team, the night would represent the moment when Irish football was viewed differently. "Even after we beat England in Stuttgart, there was still the view that we were a crowd of Paddies," says Peter Byrne, then *The Irish Times* football correspondent. "But after that night in Wembley they totally respected us. To their credit, the English are a magnanimous race."

On the morning of the game, newspapers reported that 20,000 Irish fans were expected at Wembley but the main news concerned the announcement of what the *Irish Independent* called "historic round-table talks to devise a new beginning for the North".

The old history was played out in the crowd, especially for the many Irish among the home supporters.

£20 tickets were selling for £120. On the field, there was a new story and the respect for the Irish team centred, as it so often did, around one man.

"Paul McGrath," Taylor would say later, "was outstanding within the context of the way the Irish play."

Taylor may have been hinting at his desire to adopt a similar way of playing. But there was more than just brutality about the first-half Irish performance as they recovered from England's fortunate early goal to dominate as few Irish teams have ever dominated in an away match.

For 15 minutes, England couldn't leave their half and when McGrath floated a ball into the box, Quinn, who had dominated in the air, gently side-footed the ball past David Seaman.

Quinn had been enjoying a fine season at Manchester City, scoring 12 league goals before that night but he changed when that goal went in. "It turned me into a different player," he says. "When we were playing up, Allan Clarke used to finish like that but after that night I had the confidence to try it all the time." Quinn scored another eight goals in the final nine games for City that season.

At half-time, Ireland were level and everything everybody knew was wrong. Ireland, Eamon Dunphy said on RTE, had broken England's nerve. On the BBC, Terry Venables and Jimmy Hill were acknowledging this new force.

"Their success is based on as

good a midfield as any," Venables said. Hill added that "the Irish are under-rated as footballers."

At half-time, Taylor abandoned his system of three centre-backs and sent England's latest wonderboy Lee Sharpe on to make his debut. This, Dunphy remarked, was another sign of a manager losing his nerve.

If Ireland had won, they would have gone top of the group but their chance went when Ray Houghton missed an opportunity which was never forgotten by Charlton.

When the time came to collect his money, Quinn found that he was £50 light

"Jack gave me an almighty telling off after it but he didn't do it in front of the lads," Houghton recalled last week. "He did it up in the bar, in front of my wife. He told me I could have been a hero again, but I messed it up. That's the polite way of saying it."

Ireland were still in a strong position but a scoreless draw at home to Poland and the 3-3 in Poznan allowed England to qualify. By that stage, Roy Keane had been added to the Irish team and Byrne is not alone in thinking that if Ireland had made the finals, they would have had a real chance of winning it. "It was,"

Quinn says, "a travesty we didn't qualify."

But on that Wednesday night at Wembley, Ireland felt they could celebrate. While the VIP guests — Gay Byrne and Fr Michael Cleary — were among those at the game — made their way to central London, others headed for more traditional haunts. Mulligan's in Kilburn had hired 'Vance and the Dark Secrets' to entertain supporters.

Pat Redmond's head had stopped bleeding and he went to the team hotel after the game and then accompanied the Honorary President of the RISSC, Chris Hughton, to the National in Kilburn. "It was a normal night in the National," Redmond says.

Byrne's clearest memory is of David O'Leary heading up to talk to reporters in the press box at the final whistle, with O'Leary still in his Ireland kit.

Quinn's night hadn't ended. After the game, he joined a queue for a payphone outside Wembley as he wanted to call his then girlfriend Gillian, who would soon become his wife.

"A man behind me offered me a hand [£500] if I'd come up to the Galtymore in Cricklewood," Quinn says. Quinn took up the offer and recalls singing on stage with Kathy Durkin in front of 3,000 people. Just a normal night in the Galtymore. When the time came to collect his money, Quinn found that he was £50 light.

Representations were made that it wouldn't be right to short-change

the man who had scored for Ireland at Wembley earlier in the night. "He held up his hand and he was missing half a finger," Quinn recalls. "He said, 'I didn't say whose hand!'"

A lifelong friendship developed. Quinn returned to Manchester a different player and Ireland could expect a different future. In that weekend's *Sunday Independent*, Dunphy pointed out that this result shouldn't be confused with previous Irish moral victories. "The moral victories we used to crowd about were usually valiant defeats or desperate survival jobs. On Wednesday, the desperate men were wearing white."

Some of the men in green had desperations of their own. "Peter Reid had said he'd sack me if I didn't make training," Quinn says. He made it, but in his own fashion. "I had won a Jag playing Kalooki in a snooker hall," he says. "And the guy I'd won it from drove me to Manchester. I stepped out of a smoke-filled 1960s battered old Jag at the training ground."

Quinn got on with training having scored at Wembley the night before, taken £450 from a man missing half a finger, sung on stage in front of 3,000 fans and got home in a car he won playing cards in a snooker den. The next week, he scored a hat-trick.

"It was a friendlier time," Quinn says, "and London was a better place."

It was a story that ends, as all Irish stories end, with wonder that they managed to make it home at all.