

Alba Army!

There's more to a football club than 90 minutes of action. Mike Ward unearths the individuals who have one thing in common... a love of the Albion



There are plenty of things you wouldn't expect to find at the Falkirk branch of WH Smith.

Takeaway pizzas, I'd imagine. Garden furniture. And no doubt power tools and Marmite.

But surely top of the list of unexpected items would be a Brighton & Hove Albion hat.

That, however, is precisely what Chris Knight happened to spot while he was browsing around the store one afternoon, back in 2004. It wasn't for sale, I should explain, but perched on the head of a fellow Seagulls supporter.

"I couldn't believe it," recalls Chris, who'd recently moved to the area with his family. "As you can imagine it was the last thing I'd expected to see!"

Fast-forward seven years and Chris, now firmly settled north of the border, no longer even bats an eyelid at such a sight. Move up to Scotland, it seems, and you can barely move for Brighton & Hove Albion fans.

All right, slight exaggeration. But as Chris would discover, he was by no means alone in his passion.

The Scottish Seagulls, also known as the Albas, consists of around 100 members, some of them admittedly more actively involved than others, who regularly head off to Albion games together. These days Chris is their treasurer.

Now, should you wish, at this point, to burst into a seemingly appropriate and undoubtedly very witty chorus of



Carlisle Away 2010. Alba flag with Gus (left to right) the Milne family, Kip Collins, Martin Alder, Keith Forsyth, James Small, Gavin Gray, Graeme Knight, Jem Garnett

The Proclaimers' classic (*I Would Walk*) 500 Miles – since that's almost the exact distance between Falkirk and Withead – then by all means be my guest. But actually they wouldn't. Travel that far, I mean. Well, not often. Most of the Albas, for obvious reasons, tend to stick to away games.

"Hartlepool's always a favourite with us," says Chris. "But Carlisle is effectively our home game, so we always have a particularly good day out there. About 30 of us meet up in the same pub beforehand.

"A lot of us will also do places like Oldham, Rochdale and Huddersfield.

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"As for Withead, I personally only go about two or three times a season, but a couple of our members are actually season ticket holders. James Small from Edinburgh will fly down almost every other week."

So just how Scottish are the Scottish Seagulls?

Chris laughs. "There are probably about 16 Scots among us," he concedes. "Well, they've got Scottish accents anyway!"

Some, like Chris, have simply moved up from Sussex for family or work-related reasons. Others have somewhat more tenuous connections.

"We've got people who've gone to university, for example, and stayed up here," explains Chris.

"We've also got quite a few younger people whose mums and dads moved up. My own son Graeme, who's 17, is a fan – and yes, he has a Scottish accent! He's known as Statto, because he prepares loads of Albion quizzes to keep us entertained on the journeys to away games.

"There's also the likes of Alan Welsh, from Dundee, who didn't want to follow a Scottish team and picked Brighton instead. He even runs a 5-a-side team called Dundee & Hove Albion!"

Other members include the Albas' founder member and Secretary, Tony Parsons, from Perth, along with Glasgow-based Miles Baigent and Jem Garnet (the latter runs their website, www.bhalba.co.uk) and Allandale's Mark 'Fat Badger' Nixon.

There's also David Trenner from Cumbernauld, who together with his partner Yasmin helps organise the end-of-season get-together for exiled Albion fans.

"At first you assume you'll have nothing in common with these people, apart from Brighton," says Chris. "But that's so untrue. A lot of us



Chris hooks up with Gus Poyet

have turned out to have similar interests. We go to gigs together, for example. We even went to see Attila when he performed in Edinburgh.

"The 25-or-so core members get on incredibly well. It's a really friendly bunch."

Even so, it sounds as if the Albas, for all their good intentions, may be carrying some kind of terrible curse. Well, sort of.

"We're very proud to have sponsored various players for some time now," Chris explains, "but it's become a running joke among us that any player we choose immediately has some kind of curse put on them!

"Danny Cullip left for Sheffield United, Charlie Oatway suffered two bad injuries, one of which ended his playing career, and Gary Hart and Dean Cox were told their contracts weren't being renewed.

"Harty did return, of course, but I think that was only once he knew we were sponsoring someone else!"

Joking aside, there's no doubt the Albas are a committed bunch. But given the distance, wouldn't it be more convenient to follow a Scottish team? "Some of us do follow Scottish teams," Chris admits. "But it's so poor it's just not worth watching. Even Celtic v Rangers – it's just boring."