

In more than 50 years as a journalist, I have covered war, terrorist attacks, disaster, major trials, riots, serial murders and political drama.

But I have been a Sunderland supporter for longer.

And while my working career has been varied if often challenging, one of my proudest achievements – thanks in huge measure to the people well known to most readers – is salutsunderland.com.

It was therefore a real pleasure to accept the invitation that came my way from Joan Dawson, then in charge of organising the content of what was called 5573, the newsletter of the London & SE branch of the SAFC Supporters' Association. We hadn't known each other for long – the odd meeting in the pub before London away games – but she wondered whether I'd be willing to contribute. I vaguely recall coming up with a handful of high-minded, pointy-headed ideas. She, almost in the manner of a hard-nosed, possibly Glaswegian news editor, ignored them all and asked for Celebrity Supporters.

Thus was born a series that began life in 5573, continued when the magazine was renamed, by popular vote **Wear Down South**, and eventually found a second home on the pages of Salut! Sunderland.

There are the **ones we got and the ones we didn't**. (*use link to visit original article*)



Sir Tim Rice was the first interviewee and we moved on to various other candidates including Kate Adie, Alan Price, David (Lord) Puttnam, the actor Joe Simpson and a couple of pop singers.

We – I – failed to persuade Dave Stewart (ignored all approaches), Gina McKee (not really a fan, she insisted), Peter O'Toole (his SAFC, he said, vanished along with Roker Park) and more. One or two suggested by others, Bryan Ferry and a Pet Shop Boy among them, turned out not to be Sunderland fans at all.

Sir Tim in search of his northern roots.

I wrote this here a little while ago:

'In one of those periodic threads at Ready to Go about celeb supporters of Sunderland, I yet again pointed out that the most comprehensive and reliable list, with interviews, had appeared here. And someone came back like a rocket to say he hadn't even heard of half my candidates?!

Fair cop. There's a folk singer, a career criminal turned football club chairman turned Back to Jail, a North African athlete, the umpteenth lead singer of a 70s band ... you get the drift.

But these are life's Mrs Richards moments. That wonderful curmudgeonly old guest at Fawlty Towers who demanded a better view from her window. The view of Torquay is the view of Torquay. If my interviewees are Z-listers but the nearest things to famous people who support the Lads, so be it.'

The series produced some memorable interviews all the same.

The chart-topping singer Tasmin Archer, introduced to Sunderland by her boyfriend, was **misty-eyed about the Roy Keane promotion season and loved away games most of all**.

"I hate not being there....cannot even listen on the radio because it's just not the same," she said. "When you're there, you feel as if you can actually do something about the way the game is going."

Was being at Luton, seeing us clinch the championship in spectacular style, better than reaching number one in the charts? She simply couldn't say.



Alan Price sat me down in his front room at home in Barnes and told me over a Chinese takeaway that **he was a Roker man, too**. "I used to go by train [from Jarrow], get off at Seaburn and buy liquorice root at the chemist on my way to the ground," he said. He was mortified by the historic relegation, our first from the top flight, in 1958 and blamed the illegal payments scandal that had engulfed the club. "I'm sure it was happening everywhere. But it was Sunderland who paid the price.

"I screamed when we went down. We hadn't won the league since 1936, the Cup since 1937, but we had never played out of the top division and it was the one thing you'd been able to hang on to."

Robert Kane, who became Dr Feelgood's lead singer after the death of Lee Brilleaux, had a [wonderful anecdote](#) from a gig in Newcastle three weeks after we'd won the Tyne-Wear derby 2-1 (Nov 2000). This is how I related it:



'As Dr Feelgood left the stage at Newcastle Opera House, one more treat lay in store for the cheering fans. "Robert has something he'd like to show you," the compere, John Otway, told them. With one bound, Robert Kane was back. Only this time he was wearing a Sunderland top.

In that instant, he went so completely from hero to villain that the Hamsters, due on next, feared the booing was for them.

"One of their guys was setting up his kit, and couldn't believe what he was hearing," says Robert.

Looking back, Robert can see why the crowd seemed cross. "I only did it for a laugh, thinking it would be taken in that spirit. How wrong I was. I just took a bow and walked off"

If you missed the series and various re-runs, or just want to be reminded of some of the interviews, trawl through the [Celebrity Supporters category link](#). You'll find most photos have "fallen off" the pages, victims of changed hosts for the site, and you'll spot typos galore (Joan's eagle-eyed brother, Malcolm, was not in those days connected to Salut! Sunderland).

But you'll also find some really good reads, thanks to the stars or near-stars or in one case (and I don't mean Robert Kane) villain who were happy to talk to us about their SAFC passion.