

## Chapter 1

### Let's make a soap...

River City 1 Manchester United 0: Some may struggle to recall the big game, but Stephen Greenhorn remembers it well. Tuesday, September 24, 2002, as River City – making its debut on BBC Scotland – went head-to-head with United's Champions League match against Bayer Leverkusen. Almost 750,000 people tuned in to the opening episode, and the final result was a spectacular home win for the residents of Shieldinch.

When BBC Scotland first decided to create its own drama serial, pitches were invited from independent producers. But the Corporation decided to launch an in-house bid and turned to Stephen for his thoughts. The 48-year-old West Lothian man had just created Glasgow Kiss and was 'in the building' for a series of meetings on a BBC part-funded play.

At one such get-together he was let in on the top-secret plans for the soap. 'Good luck', he thought and moved on. But he wasn't getting off that easily and was eventually invited to form part of the in-house bid – with just one rule: it wasn't to be set in either Glasgow or Edinburgh.

Stephen said, 'As far as I was concerned, these were the only two choices for an urban soap, and I mean no disrespect to Aberdeen and Dundee.' BBC Scotland felt Glasgow was over exposed at the time but Stephen was of the mind that a soap set in, say, Stirling, simply wouldn't work.

'I had been working on a story about the opening of the Scottish Parliament and was spending a lot of time in Leith. One night I was sitting outside a bar when it suddenly came to me. Leith was buzzing and had such a rich mix of social classes that would lend itself perfectly to soap. 'There was the new Malmaison Hotel and the Royal Yacht Britannia, but just 50 yards away you still had girls working the streets. Across the shore there were millionaire's flats. We were looking to create a microcosm of modern, urban Scotland and, here, we had it all in one little street.'

Stephen shared his Eureka moment with BBC Scotland. 'I think I've solved your problem. A show that's not Edinburgh or Glasgow, has a real sense of community and will incorporate all types of social classes.'

The BBC loved the idea, thought it worth pursuing, and asked Stephen to put his ideas down on a document of sorts. It was the summer of 2000 and the first episode was still some two years away.

Stephen said, 'That 'document' took me around six months to complete. It was, effectively, BBC Scotland's in-house bid. It was around 50 to 60 pages in length and I was thrilled to be told just before Christmas that it had been successful.' Stephen's soap was to be set in Leith and called The Shore. That was, until he was summoned to another meeting and a BBC Scotland executive said, 'we love the concept ... but ... we would like to set it in Glasgow!'

Stephen was already some way down the road of producing storylines and characters, and the decision set him back. 'Glasgow tends to separate its social classes and therefore you would need an excuse to, say, build a wine bar in a working class area. With Leith, none of these issues existed, but Glasgow it was and I set about 'westernising' what was salvageable.

'I knew it would be a mammoth project but it's not every day someone asks you to create what will hopefully turn out to be a long running television show. It was a massive undertaking but also an incredible opportunity.

'The first thing I had to do was discover exactly where in Glasgow it was supposed to be set. It wasn't Partick, Govan or anywhere on the south side.' We settled on Whiteinch, which isn't a million miles away from Partick, and the geographical uncertainty, which had initially clouded matters, lifted somewhat. Despite the massive shift in geography he was determined to hang in there, probably out of loyalty to the stories and characters he had been working on for six months. His original commission covered the first three episodes, although he planned to stick around a bit longer to contribute to what he hoped would become an accepted and established Scottish soap.

'Another reason for sticking with it was to try and establish a drama factory. It was becoming increasingly difficult for Scottish actors, writers and crew to get a credit on their CV, so this 'factory', which would produce more than 50 hours of drama a year, was vital to the industry north of the border. There are loads of people working in theatre who simply can't get an opportunity to make the transition to television.'

Stephen and the team started producing script outlines and character biographies. Meanwhile, an old whisky and vodka bottling plant in Dumbarton, once the largest of its kind in Europe, had been identified as the setting for the show. BBC Scotland set about creating Shieldinch from scratch, with purpose-built backlot, studio facility and office accommodation.

Previous working title, The Shore, was dropped and programme bosses searched for a simple, but striking, alternative. At a brainstorming session, Stephen suggested, simply, Shieldinch, but it was rejected. He recalls writing River City People on the whiteboard, which was later shortened. The show had a title, but it was kept under wraps and referred to merely as the Scottish Soap.

It was decided to have two main families, one intact, and working class, and the other, a fractured family unit. Two sisters sharing a flat, a couple of grumpy OAPs and a dynamic entrepreneur made up the original cast list.

One character that made the initial leap from bit-part player to 'best boy' was Shellsuit Bob, who, Stephen admitted, was introduced to help 'make up time'. He explained, 'Initial timings were a bit out and we decided to introduce an extra element, but, as we were working so far in advance, it had to be something or someone that wouldn't impact on future storylines.'

'We needed a bit of Glasgow humour: a wee pal for Derek Henderson. Someone with a swagger and a great sense of fun. Shellsuit Bob was that character. 'One of my favourite lines arrived in episode three, when Bob was talking to Roisin in Lazy Ray's. She's flicking through a novel and he says to her, 'oh, you can read then!' It was fantastic, and the look she fired back...'

Apart from taking its toll on his health, Stephen looks back on his time in Shield-inch with fondness, although he admitted to being perplexed at the initial media reaction.

‘It was predictable, to say the least. They put the show on a pedestal before it had even started, got everyone excited, and then slagged it off after just one episode. It was a bit like writing a film review based on the opening credits.

‘It wasn’t relevant that 750,000 people tuned in for the first episode because we always knew that wouldn’t be anywhere near our core audience. Lots of people were curious to see what all the hype was about.

‘BBC Scotland had commissioned 104 episodes and we had storylines in place for three years. These were short, mid and long term. We knew where these characters were going years down the line but still we were judged after 30 minutes.’

The bottom line, though, was that the BBC had always been in it for the long haul and both parties were confident they could ride the waves of scepticism. The Corporation had initially targeted soap fans: those who watched Corrie and EastEnders were invited over to watch River City as well.

As the big day edged closer, and Stephen was spending more and more time away from set, racing to prepare scripts for the first day of filming, late-night writing sessions were beginning to take their toll on his health and while he vowed to see it through to its start date, he had long decided not to stick around as part of the soap’s writing pool.

‘It was so stressful that even after I’d been gone for months, I was still struggling to write. River City had drained me, but had been such an important project in the first place that I stuck with it.

‘It was my baby, but I soon became that estranged parent who watches from the window and says, ‘that’s them off to school now!’

'I'm glad I stepped back when I did. I may have been a wreck but I learned so much, which has stood me in good stead ever since. After the soap I was exec producer on a programme called Marchlands and was able to see problems from both sides.

'But I remember heading down to Dumbarton one day with BBC Head of Drama, Barbara McKissack and thinking, 'this is massive' – like a shopping centre development. I suddenly became aware of the scale of River City, but now I can look back on 10 years of the show and while I'm not a faithful viewer any more, I try and catch up whenever I can.

'I'm so glad they've retained the sense of humour that we set out to achieve. It's the essence of the Glaswegian character and so important to the show.'

He added, 'The first time I set eyes on the backlot I got the 'wow' factor. I had been so busy writing that I hadn't seen it for a while and when it was complete it just blew me away.

'I'm so proud of the part I played in making it all happen. Here's to the next 10!'