

Chapter 1

The family club

THERE ARE PEOPLE who consider football to be a religion but I don't see it that way. Religious faith offers certainty, salvation and, in some cases, virgins. I've never found any of those while watching West Ham United, and I've been following them for fifty years.

Fifty years – blimey, how easy it is to be nutmegged by time. One minute you're a wide-eyed kid, breathless with excitement as your heroes emerge from the tunnel; the next you're a family man with your wife's dad on one side and your little lad watching his first game on the other. Then, before you know it, you're at Wembley being held aloft like a human crucifix high above thousands of jubilant Hammers by your grown-up son as you celebrate the most lucrative goal in the club's history, glancing

skywards in the hope that the fantastic fella who was just as much your mate as he was your father-in-law might be looking down from the heavens on this unforgettable moment.

Football: how did I ever get hooked? Because if it's not a religion, it's certainly an addiction. I became a Hammerholic three weeks before my eighth birthday and have never managed to kick the habit. I've seen all the great players who have turned out in claret and blue since the mid-1960s, and rather too many of the not-so-great as well. I've been there when we've triumphed and when we've been humiliated. I've rejoiced over FA Cup final wins, despaired at relegation, celebrated promotion, savoured the sweet and sour pleasure of unlikely escapes ... and looked on powerlessly as the club that means so much to me has been taken to the brink of financial disaster more than once.

Who in their right mind would willingly become a football supporter? And why would you choose to support a club like mine?

Before we go any further, I have an admission to make: I am not a cockney. It is a source of eternal disappointment to me that I wasn't born within the sound of Bow bells, but what can you do if your parents fail to see the importance of such things and choose to move to Bristol in search of better-paid employment and a more comfortable home, then conceive you while they're there? (In their defence, they went back to London when I was still a babe-in-arms, but by that time the damage was done – and to make matters worse they decided to return to their roots on the left-hand side of the capital before moving west again to the Berkshire new town of Bracknell.)

However, I have tried to make up for their geographical failings by marrying into an East End family and, after studying their ways

assiduously, I was finally taken into the fold. It was touch and go when I failed to appreciate the wonders of jellied eels, but I went on to master the chirpy walk and then got an A-level in rhyming slang, which was just about enough to see me through.

My wonderful father-in-law, Sid, who was born and bred in East Ham, believed that fate had left him with no choice about which team he had to follow, but he couldn't understand why someone who didn't come from the area would volunteer to shoulder such a burden.

When I was first introduced to my prospective in-laws I was working as a journalist on the business pages of a national daily newspaper that was not exactly renowned for its love of the working man. High finance? Stocks and shares? The City? It was obvious to Sid that my claim to be a dedicated Hammer was simply a devious ruse to worm my way into the family's affections.

I hoped the fact that I understood West Ham followers don't always refer to ourselves as 'Hammers' – the alternative term is 'Irons' – would convince him I was genuine. To prove that I was no impostor, I made it plain that I could tell my Bobby Moore from my Bobby Gould, my Geoff Hurst from my Geoff Pike, my Martin Peters from my Martin Allen. And I shamelessly played my trump card by demonstrating that I know what the rest of the world calls Upton Park is, in fact, the Boleyn Ground. Gradually I won him round – and in doing so it made me realise how my own father had failed me when I was a boy.

When I was a teenager standing on the Upton Park terraces – sorry, Sid, the Boleyn Ground terraces – we used to sing a song to the old music hall tune of 'My Old Man Said Follow the Van' which changed the lyrics in such a way that the advice was to

follow West Ham instead. If only that had been the fatherly counselling offered to me. I was given no parental guidance whatsoever about football as a child – my old man just wasn't interested. He was hard-working, sober and rarely beat my mother; but when it came to the important things, like which team to follow until the day you die, he was an abject failure.

My choice of club was left entirely up to me – and all these years later I still wake up in a cold sweat thinking about how my life could have been ruined at such a tender age. In the early '60s, Tottenham had won the double; Man Utd were still being swept along on a post-Munich tide of sympathy; Liverpool were an emerging force. I could have ended up supporting any one of them. Imagine the shame!

Luckily for me, the 1964 FA Cup final came at just the right time. It is impossible to overstate the importance of the Cup final back in those days. It was about the only game ever shown live on telly, so people took it very, very seriously. For some reason I've still not fathomed out to this day, most of the kids where I lived got behind West Ham's opponents, Preston North End. So, being a natural born rebel – if not a cockney rebel – I went for the other lot and the rest, as they say, is history. (Although it's a good thing we weren't playing the south end of Preston as well that day because, the way we performed in the first forty-five minutes, they'd have been out of sight by half time.)

All of which meant that when I had children I wasn't going to take any chances about which team they supported. Watching football on the box is all very well, but there's nothing like seeing it in the flesh – particularly when you're a kid. The thrill of reaching the top of those steps and seeing the stadium spread out before

you for the first time is etched on every fan's memory. Never again will you see grass that green. The whitewash is whiter than white. The precisely strung netting in the goalmouths is just aching to bulge in response to a thunderbolt shot from your favourite player. Combine all that with the roar of the hamburgers and the smell of the crowd and you are hooked 'til the end of your days.

Some parents, in my not so humble opinion, take their offspring to Upton Park too soon. Many of those little 'uns are clearly no more than four, and you can tell by the vacant looks on their tiny faces that they have about as much idea of what's going on as the useless Avram Grant did in his time as West Ham manager. But leave it too long and children start watching TV without you and have fallen in love with the likes of Arsenal, Man U or Spurs before you know it. As a responsible father, I knew it was my duty to prevent that happening.

I reckon the perfect age to blood them is six, and I'm happy to say it's worked for me. Both my kids first went to Upton Park at that sort of age. As a result Geoff, my grown-up son, is now claret and blue through and through. Admittedly Katie, my equally grown-up daughter, doesn't like football – but at least I can look myself in the mirror and know that I gave her every opportunity in life.

Geoff had been pestering me for while to take him before I decided the time was right, so I set him a small examination to make sure he could concentrate for the full ninety minutes. On the day he was born we had played Liverpool. Somewhat unreasonably, I felt, my wife had refused me permission to go, simply because she was having a baby. But, happily, the game was being shown on TV and my best mate recorded it for me while I did my duty in the maternity ward. (Later I had to admit that Di, the mother

of my children and custodian of my heart, had been completely right about me not going – the game ended 0–0 and McAvennie missed a sitter.) Geoff's test was to sit through the recording of this game without wandering off or falling asleep – which he passed with flying colours.

His reward was to see West Ham play Bolton Wanderers, newly promoted to the Premier League and still some years away from appointing Sam Allardyce as manager. 'So why not one of the glamour clubs?' I hear you ask. Because I didn't want his first game to end in defeat, that's why. I planned for him to have the lifetime of emotional pain and misery that I have endured; I certainly didn't want him put off at the first hurdle.

It was a proud day for me. Not only was I taking my son for the first time, Sid was with us too. Three generations of Irons sitting side by side – now that's my idea of a family club.

For the record, we won 3–0 with a goal from Berkovic and two from Hartson. Many years later Geoff and I, having failed to find a pub that would let us in, reminisced about the match as we sat on the steps outside the Tesco Express in Empire Way, enjoying the lively atmosphere and a few cans of strictly rationed lager before the play-off final against Blackpool at the end of the 2011/12 season. He reminded me how I had hoisted him into the air after the first of our goals. I thought nothing more of it – until I found myself celebrating Carlton Cole's opener several feet higher than everyone else in the south-west corner of Wembley, courtesy of a rugby-style lift by my 6 ft 3 son. How time moves on.

You never forget your first game, do you? Unusually for someone who supports West Ham, mine wasn't at Upton Park. For three years, comforted only by my collection of *Topical Times* football annuals,

I unsuccessfully tried to persuade family and friends to take me across London to see my idols. Finally, guilt got the better of my father and he agreed I could go on a works outing organised by a group of Chelsea supporters at the factory that employed him. He didn't fancy going himself, and wasn't the least bit concerned that these heathens might try to convert me to their way of thinking. Not that there was any chance of that. By the time West Ham went to Stamford Bridge in the autumn of 1967, the FA Cup had been joined in the trophy cabinet by the Cup Winners' Cup and World Cup. Besides, when I saw Bobby Moore in the flesh for the first time I knew I was in the presence of someone very special indeed.

These were heady days for a boy who had just started secondary school. The BBC had finally realised that it needed to do something about all these pesky kids who wanted to listen to pop music and had revolutionised the way it broadcast to the nation. Exactly four weeks before my introduction to the world of top-flight football, Tony Blackburn had introduced us all to the delights of Radio 1. (OK, trivia lovers, everyone knows that the first record he played in its entirety was 'Flowers in the Rain' by The Move – but what was the next single on the turntable? Give up? Hmm, thought you might. It was, in fact, 'Massachusetts' by the Bee Gees, which just goes to show that in broadcasting, as in football, nobody remembers those who come second.)

With Radio 1 came Radio 2, 3 and 4, although we had to wait several more years for Radio 5 and the 6.06 programme, which allows irate supporters to vent their spleen on the way home from a match. Not that I had anything to complain about as I walked away from Stamford Bridge that first time. We had won 3–1 and I was ecstatically happy.

Strangely, my overriding memory after all these years is not of the goals – although I can still clearly picture Hurst's header that put us ahead for the second time in the match. Rather, the image that burns brightest in my mind is of Moore, ball under his arm, leading out the team. I was mesmerised. This was no mere mortal – there was a god in our midst and I was duty-bound to worship him.

Behind their captain were West Ham's other World Cup heroes, Hurst and Peters. (And if anyone believes I made a mistake earlier when I said 'we' rather than 'England' won that particular trophy, let me remind you that the score on 30 July 1966 was West Ham 4, West Germany 2.) Also in the team was a man who was to go on to become my favourite West Ham player, although I would have given you long odds against it at the time. Who could ever compare with the likes of Moore, Hurst and Peters in a Hammer's affections? Answer: William Arthur Bonds, aka Bonzo. But more of him later.

I'd like to say that as an eleven-year-old boy I was able to appreciate the tactical genius of Ron Greenwood, but that would be quite a large fib. Luckily, though, the author of the newspaper cutting I have in front of me had a terrific knowledge of the game. According to the peerless Reg Drury of the now defunct *News of the World*, Greenwood had decided to dispense with his wingers and go for the 4-3-3 system that had proved so successful for Alf Ramsey's England the previous year.

The full line-up, for those who care about such things, was: Ferguson; Bonds; Charles; Peters; Cushley; Moore; Burkett; Boyce; Brabrook; Hurst; Dear. Sub (not used): Sissons. With Drury's help, I am able to report that we scored first through Brian Dear, who headed home a Hurst cross. Chelsea equalised through Peter Osgood.

Stamford Bridge began life as an athletics stadium and back then it still had the remains of a running track at each end of the pitch. ‘The jubilant Osgood kept running a semi-lap of honour behind the West Ham goal before being smothered in congratulations,’ wrote Drury. What astonished me was the fact there were people on this Earth who were prepared to celebrate a goal against the team that means more to me than life itself. It wounded me then, just as it wounds me now.

Hurst rectified matters shortly after half time when he headed home after Moore crossed from near the corner flag, then England’s World Cup hat-trick hero provided the cross for Peters to score a trademark goal at the near post. Just for good measure, Bobby Ferguson – the goalkeeper for whom Greenwood had paid a world record fee – made some blinding saves. What more could a boy want? What more could anyone want?

That was me completely and utterly hooked on West Ham United. My decision to support the Hammers, made three years earlier, had been totally vindicated. All the players I had idolised from afar had lived up to my heroic expectations – maybe even surpassed them. There was no going back after that game at Stamford Bridge. Together, we have gone in various other directions – particularly up and down – but never back. It’s true that over the past five decades West Ham have not enjoyed the success I was fully anticipating when referee Jim Finney blew the final whistle and I joined 40,302 other spectators in the queues to leave the ground, but – as I have discovered over time – true love does not depend on trophies.

So, when the object of the exercise is to win, and it is patently obvious that the overwhelming majority of supporters are destined

to spend more time contemplating failure than success, why do otherwise sane and sensible human beings invest so much time and emotional energy in following a football team? It makes no sense – yet all around the world there are millions of disparate souls who do just that (why they don't all support West Ham beats me – but I guess that's just another one of the universal mysteries that will remain forever unsolved).

Ultimately, I believe it has more to do with the people sitting next to you than anything else. Players come and go – even the great ones – but the supporters are in it for all time. It helps if your nearest and dearest share your obsession, or at least understand it, and when you discover that complete strangers feel equally passionate about your team it all starts to make sense.

And, trust me, there's no shortage of passion at West Ham.

If you doubt my word, come with me as we step forward in time from a chilly October Saturday in 1967 to a sunny Sunday in the spring of 1991. We are now at Villa Park for an FA Cup semi-final. You've already met Di and Sid, of course. And Geoff's here in the Trinity Road Stand, too – albeit as a foetus (he won't be born until November). But let me introduce you to Simon, the best man at our wedding and a relatively new convert to the claret and blue cause. He's sitting at my right-hand side, enjoying the biggest match he's ever been to.

There are just twenty-two minutes gone when Tony Gale muscles Nottingham Forest's Gary Crosby off the ball directly in front of us. I can hardly believe referee Keith Hackett has given a foul, and I'm astonished when he reaches for his pocket. You can't give him a yellow card for that! I'm right – it isn't yellow. It's red! This is, quite simply, the worst refereeing decision I have

ever seen – and I am not alone in my opinion. Even the Forest fans are baffled.

In the West Ham stands there is nothing but fury. Sitting to my left is my wife. Next to her is my father-in-law. He later admitted that he was completely unaware his beloved daughter even knew the sort of language she came out with at that moment.

As a second division team – albeit one that was destined for promotion weeks later – we were very much the underdogs against a classy first division outfit managed by the mercurial Brian Clough. It was a tough ask with a full team; now, down to ten men, we had no chance.

Yet the lads on the pitch dug in, and their devoted followers got behind them. We had the main stand and the Holte End. There were choruses of ‘Bubbles’ coming out of both. The singing was punctuated by frequent, desperate calls of ‘Come On You Irons’. We weren’t asking – we were telling. And our boys responded – getting forward when they could, but then chasing back; all of them throwing themselves into tackles, harrying, fighting for every ball. George Parris even came close to scoring. It was a performance that truly honoured their manager – the awesome Billy Bonds.

Then the cry that was to dominate the afternoon went up: ‘Billy Bonds’ claret and blue army!’ The response came back, with interest: ‘Billy Bonds’ claret and blue army!’ There was still the occasional burst of ‘Bubbles’, but this wasn’t a day to fade and die. Increasingly, the claret and blue army chant took hold.

At half time, astonishingly, we were still 0–0. Out came the cigarettes and the Murray Mints. Some tried to convince themselves we could yet get out of this with a draw, and then stuff Forest in the replay. I don’t think anyone really believed it, though.

Clough certainly didn't. He reorganised his team during the break, making sure their eleven would out-pass our ten rather than engage in the sort of street fight that was clearly suiting us.

In our heart of hearts, we all knew what was coming – and we steeled ourselves for it. We weren't any old army: we were Billy Bonds' ultra-loyal claret and blue army, and we weren't going to go quietly. When the whistle blew to start the second half, every West Ham supporter in the ground was standing. And then it started in earnest.

Billy Bonds' claret and blue army! The martial rhythm that underpinned the words was provided by stamping feet and clapping hands. Billy Bonds' claret and blue army! You put your shoulders back, stuck out your chest, declaimed your allegiance and waited for the response. Which always came. Billy Bonds' claret and blue army! And so it went on, the volume increasing slightly with every repetition.

When the same Gary Crosby who had been involved in the incident that had sparked the outrage scored Forest's first, four minutes after the restart, we all knew our duty. As they rejoiced over their goal, we continued to celebrate the magnificence of supporting the most wonderful football club in the world. Billy Bonds' claret and blue army! No one faltered.

The goals kept coming, but we never missed a beat. Billy Bonds' claret and blue army! Louder. And louder. And louder still. By now, we weren't just standing – we were standing on our seats. When Stuart Pearce scored Forest's third after seventy minutes we saw their supporters leap to their feet, arms aloft. But we couldn't hear their cheers: the noise in the West Ham stands was so great we simply drowned them out. It was truly bizarre to watch a large group of grown men and women jumping for joy, while not having

to listen to a single decibel from them. With no sound to accompany their celebration, they looked faintly ridiculous – and the pain that always comes with an opposition goal just wasn't there for once. It was as if their fourth and final goal never happened in our part of the ground.

In many ways, it is deeply worrying how you can so easily surrender your individuality to a crowd in the way we all did in response to such incitement. Frightening, but empowering. We may have been losing on the pitch, but we were victorious in the stands.

When the final whistle went, many seemed slightly baffled about what to do next. We saluted our team, gave the referee one last volley of abuse and considered the options. As we shuffled out I heard one guy ask his mate if they should go on into the city centre for a tear-up. 'Nah, let's go home,' was the simple reply.

The journey up to Birmingham had been full of hope – scarves out the window, sausage sandwiches on the motorway, Peter Framp-ton on the tape deck. Oh baby, I love your way.

Coming back was a different story – more a case of Leonard Cohen than stadium rock. We'd lost, and our Wembley dream was over. Even the gallows humour that inevitably follows on such occasions wasn't enough to lift the sombre mood. It wasn't until later that we realised we had been part of something special.

After the cream of the British cavalry were slaughtered at the Battle of Balaclava, the French general who oversaw the massacre famously remarked that the Charge of the Light Brigade was magnificent, but not war as he understood it. We got a similar response from people who had watched the game on TV. 'If that's West Ham when you're losing, what's it like when you win?' a colleague asked me some days later. He missed the point, of course.

In historical terms this was less Balaclava and more the equivalent of Dunkirk, which in truth was a desperate retreat from a rampant enemy, but came to be regarded as a triumph for the never-say-die spirit that is one of humanity's greatest qualities.

I'm certain there will never be a show of support like that again by the followers of any club, win or lose. What the West Ham supporters did at Villa Park was unique but, as I say, we never stopped to think that our display of defiance was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. That's the trouble with making history. At the time, you have no idea you are actually doing it.