

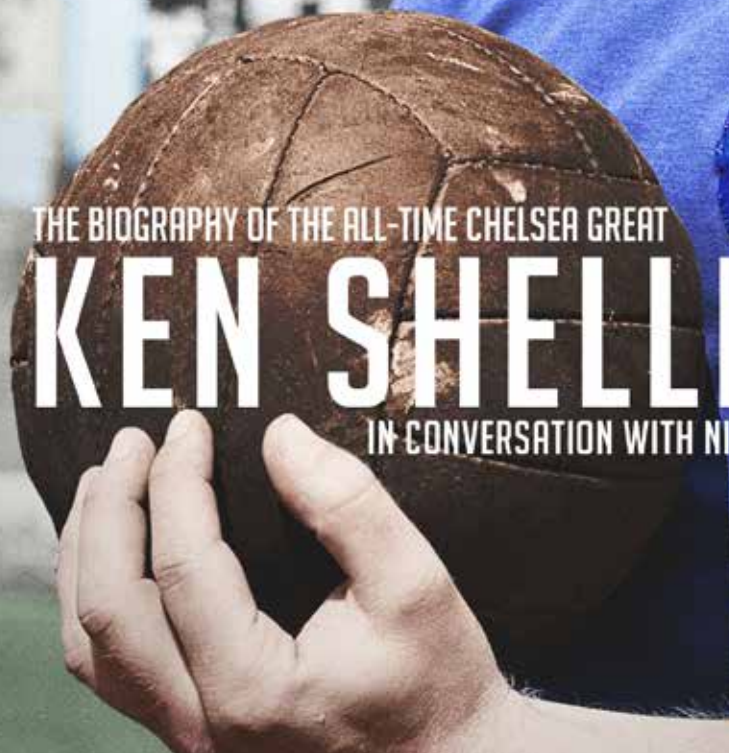
CLIMBING THE  
**CHELSEA  
HILL**

A STORY ABOUT FOOTBALL

THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE ALL-TIME CHELSEA GREAT

**KEN SHELLITO**

IN CONVERSATION WITH NICK ATKINSON



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## INTRODUCTION

IT MAKES me smile when I hear people saying that I was unlucky. 'You got a bad injury at 23 that destroyed your chances for a World Cup winners' medal' is what they say.

I don't see it that way because I am still in professional football after 60 years and to me the basis of that is from my upbringing. Two characteristics that I have are determination and companionship, which I gained from an early age in the East End of London. And I seriously think that if you've got those two things in life, especially in the world of football, then you have a fair chance of having a good life.

That is just what I have had, a good life; I have done a lot, seen a lot and am now excited that the chance to share this with you has arrived.

The determination to succeed came from being in a low-income bracket – a very low-income bracket. This did not make me financially hungry but, more importantly, it made me want to achieve something.

As you read on I trust you will appreciate what made me tick, what now makes me tick and realise that I am proud of my background, my upbringing and my life and achievements in football. The companionship comes from being born during the Second World War and growing up in an environment that

could only succeed with people working, living and believing together.

It is with pleasure that I am telling my story, in my words and in my own way. Like it or not, there will be things you may disagree with but it is a tale of a life that was fun and a life that was rewarding. Not for the money, not for the medals, but for the people I shared it with and the great friends I still have. From the start, they have been a part of my life as I made my way through the highs and lows, the ups and downs and the proud moments that have littered my career.

The beautiful game of football has been a dominant force in my life for more than 62 years and I will never tire of it. I trust you will be entertained by how the game was played at the start of my career and how it has changed in today's environment of the high-profile glitz and glamour of a money-spinning empire. At the end of the day they all still wear boots and kick a ball around on a pitch; the same markings and the same size.

I just hope that you enjoy the things I have to say and laugh when I laughed, maybe even cry when I cried but, most importantly, smile with me when you finish.

Read on and enjoy!

Ken Shellito  
October 2018

## THE EARLY DAYS

I WAS born at home on 18 April 1940. What with the war going on the women had no choice. Most of the hospitals were full of the injured, so it would have been considered a luxury to go into hospital and give birth!

Our home was in Bartle Avenue, East Ham, not far from West Ham's football ground. I will be honest in that I can't remember the number. I don't even know if it is even still standing but it was a small terraced house, the traditional two up, two down. It had a small garden but my only memory of that was the Anderson shelter, our homemade shelter from the bombs that started dropping, courtesy of the Germans, pretty soon after I came into the world. A big hole had been dug in the garden and a corrugated iron-type shed was sunk into the hole with a set of steps going down. My memories of being carried down into the shelter are fairly clear but I don't ever remember being scared.

Maybe it was the comforting arms around me and being held close to Mum that helped me through it. I did have the company of a brother who was two years older than me but as a baby, I suppose as long as I got my milk I was happy and as the months went by and I became more mobile, it just seemed a part of everyday life.

I was five months old when the German air force, the Luftwaffe, began its massive bombing attacks on Britain.

Okay, they started on aircraft factories, airfields, radar installations and suchlike. What became known as the Blitz began on 7 September 1940 and, sadly, on the first day of the Blitz nearly 2,000 people were severely injured or killed.

The frightening part when I look back is that in eight months there were more than 70 large-scale attacks on London.

From the beginning there were 57 consecutive nights of bombing raids and I consider myself one of the lucky ones because more than a million homes were destroyed and many, many thousands of civilians killed with even more seriously injured. Until halfway through the war more women and children in Britain had been killed than soldiers.

Many families were evacuated but we were cockneys and it was not the done thing. This is our home and we ain't moving till we have to. There did come a point when things got very bad though and we were forced to spend a week in Kinross in Scotland. After our brief evacuation to Kinross we moved to a flat in Elm Park, Hornchurch, not that we had a lot to move; not much more than the clothes on our backs and a few personal items. 21A Broadway was the address and this was exciting for us as kids because we were on a hill overlooking a railway station. And I do still have the vision in my mind of a sky full of aircraft.

Okay, I didn't know which were British or which were German but as a child it looked impressive.

Our flat was above a shop and the shop in those days was Tesco's. When you think of the huge stores that we have now calling themselves Tesco's this may be one of the original stores and it was about the size of my living room now! Anyway, we had one below us. It was later bought by Lloyds Bank and we



had a branch below us, and was actually where I opened my first-ever bank account when I was playing football!

Now, the flat itself was quite basic: bedroom downstairs, bedroom upstairs, bathroom, kitchen and lounge. One problem was that the flat was very close to a railway station and, yes, every time a train went by it shook! We got used to it though. Well, we didn't have a choice in the matter! Getting to the air-raid shelter was not like the old place as we had to go along the balcony, down the flights of stairs; 36 steps on a twisting metal stairway; and outside into a bit of land that was fenced off by the council that we called 'spare ground'.

Not that it was much more than a muddy allotment that each flat had as a sort of garden; it was here that we would then go down into the shelter. It was another Anderson shelter as we had before: a hole in the ground with a corrugated iron roof and four bunks underground. But to be honest we didn't think of it as a hardship. It was something you had to do; the way of life. And come to think of it, after the war we used the shelter as a store for all the rubbish and stuff that we would collect for the big bonfire on 5 November.

The kitchen was the eating area as well, no dining room to speak of, just a kitchen table. The focal point of the house was the kitchen and something that hasn't really changed in most households over the years in most corners of the world; we ate, we chatted, we joked, we had a cup of tea with our friends and my brother and I fought. In the kitchen.

We always had breakfast together in the kitchen and as far as lunch goes, well, my mother never called it lunch, it was always dinner and anything after that was tea.

Mum though was a great cook and there was always something good on the table but we used to have fun with something we called LOs. Nothing strange but always very

interesting because LO stood for 'leftovers'. How the mothers coped with bringing up a family I will never fully understand.

Food was not readily available, and I do remember many times eating stale bread, softened with milk, and the milk itself was more often than not slightly off. Food rationing had begun before I was born, and each person was allowed a specific amount of basic foods. Clothes rationing began in 1941 and a new kind of 'utility clothing' was introduced, using cheap materials and the minimum amount of cloth. People were encouraged to 'make do and mend' their worn-out clothes. My mum, like most of the other mums, was actually a master with old clothes, darning socks, sewing on buttons and repairing my trousers. The hand-me-downs that I grew up in were well maintained!

Goods such as bread, alcohol and tobacco were not rationed, to keep up morale. As the war went on though, even bread became in short supply and long queues would form outside shops. Mum would always take me and my brother along with her when she had to go and queue. I think the thought of an air raid and not being with us would have been too much.

We never had a fridge at home, so everything used to go into the parlour. There was a flow of air in the parlour from a window that wouldn't shut, which kept things relatively cool!

But the air was not the only thing circulating. There were creepy crawlies and all that and I must say that some of the things Mum cooked were different. We've all had bubble and squeak, well now you know where it comes from. What with the leftovers of potatoes and cabbage and anything else, all fried up very crispy but very, very delicious. We always enjoyed our food though. I think when there is the element of survival and an unconscious thought about where and when your next meal might be, you ate what was put in

front of you and you cleaned your plate – no leaving this, no leaving that.

Even if it made you feel sick, you ate everything. You daren't leave a thing!

I sometimes wonder how my mum managed everything but I come back to the camaraderie and friendship that became the norm during the war years. Everyone worked together, everyone joined together. If somebody needed help, there was always somebody there. Despite the whole tragedy of the war, the human spirit was amazing, and I can be honest and say I've never seen anything like it again. The resilience of Londoners in the face of the nightly attacks has quite deservedly passed into legend. Ordinary men, women and children showed amazing and continued courage just by carrying on with their daily lives in spite of the bombing raids.

In the end, many people became almost so immune to them that they just carried on with what they were doing. I even remember being told that some cinemas would continue to show films during raids and the audience would remain to watch them!

Some people have even credited the evolution of the 'Welfare State' to this. I still value the lessons I learnt through this time, not least the determination to succeed and the companionship of our friends.

The Germans introduced another danger to us all: we called it the Doodlebug. I am sure you have heard of it. This was a rocket-shaped machine, had flames coming out the back, and it rattled along through the air making a terrible racket.

When the noise stopped, that's when you would run like bloody hell because that meant it was coming down. One came down about a mile from us and crashed into Chase Farm House and they said the whole family was wiped out.

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Even years later we used to go there to play but we were told to stay away as it was haunted. Being the little sods we were though we ignored this. Funnily enough every time we went there one of us got hurt. It was a cut knee or standing on a nail, tripping over and cutting your head and stuff. So many accidents, and after a while we did as we were told.

Did I come through unscathed? Physically, yes, but I do have a vivid memory of explosions and I think this is why I still to this day have a fear of thunderstorms. Constant noise from the bombs day after day is something very difficult to make people appreciate, especially when they haven't experienced it. I think I was blessed because I don't remember actually mourning the loss of a friend or family.

And do you know what seems crazy to me now as a child spending the first few years of my life in this situation; it was like a game to us. One of the things we found was that we didn't really know what the fighting was for and at the end of the day we was fighting for food and fighting for survival and nobody really told us what the war was about, let alone where our fathers were. Apart from when he was wounded and came back for a couple of weeks I never saw my dad for my first four years and I still wonder to this day how things would have been for me and my family if Dad had been around. I remember asking Mum on many occasions, 'Where's Dad?' and she just told me 'He is working, he is working' and nothing more was said.

As I said before, for us kids the war was really just a game and the fantastic part was that our mothers did not dispel that myth for us. With no dads around they were really all we had as our role models and better still they continued to let us believe it was a game and I thank them for that.

They didn't block the thought of a game; they didn't give us the fear of what was likely to happen or what could happen.

Because of this we didn't understand the fear and again I thank the mums for not putting that fear in us. It was a case of 'get on with it!' – blissful ignorance I think they would call it! We would always make an amusing picture as when we were outside we invariably had our helmets on. I say helmets but they were actually the old metal colanders! If we wanted to play outside we had to wear them, and they were orders from the boss, our mum! But the fun we had as we scavenged around was amazing. The amount of shrapnel was huge and we never thought what damage it may have done, the people it may have injured, or whether it was anything dangerous. We just thought about what we could do with it, what could we make? A part of the game!

You know you have got a father but during the war the only men I remember seeing were the air-raid wardens. As I said before, I did see my father once during the war but he spent that two weeks in bed getting better and then he was off again and I was still only a couple of years old! When he did finally come back for good we all went up to Victoria Station to meet him as that's where his train came in and we were there to welcome him back and take him home. I can always remember standing at the station and seeing all the soldiers walking along the platform but not actually knowing which one was my dad. Maybe my brother knew but I'd never had the chance to get to know Dad before. The funny thing was that when they were sent home they came back in what they called a 'demob' suit. They all looked the same. It was a strange feeling just standing there watching and not knowing the face I was waiting for.

People have asked me about when I did meet my father, in effect for the first time, what was the feeling? What was the emotion? Strange you might say, but there was an immediate bond. Don't ask me why as I haven't got a clue, but the bond

was there. When he finally came back for good he didn't have a job and I remember sometimes he'd just say, 'Come on, let's go for a walk' and we'd go down the pub. Those days the pubs opened at 12 and closed at two and children definitely weren't allowed in. So he would sit me down on the steps outside and say, 'Stay where you are' and he would go and get me a half of bitter, but he would always say don't drink it too quick. Wise words because I was only six years old. People would look down at that nowadays I know but back then it was just the way it was.

My brother and I had also developed a knack for helping Mum. We used to climb the wall into the dairy nearby and steal the milk. Okay, it was short-lived as when the milkman caught on he got two very large dogs to watch over things.

Our local off-licence was slightly more amenable to us climbing their fence, taking the empty bottles out and then returning them to the pub off-licence to get the 1p deposit per two bottles. Not a lot but it all helped, and I am sure the guv'nor knew what was going on but he let it go. Maybe his way of helping out!

My father was also a very heavy smoker.

He smoked a brand called Weights. I could never understand why he smoked so much but I do remember the day when Dad said, 'Son, you know why they call them "weights", simple, it's because When England Invaded Germany Hitler's Troops Surrendered.' I started smoking at 14! I soon stopped though but started again later during my coaching career.

You know, the pressure and all those excuses.

Next to our flat used to be a greengrocer and it was always a laugh for us. The shop was on a hill and there would always be the table outside with the potatoes neatly stacked. Being one of those foldaway tables, it was too much temptation for us not to

knock the legs from underneath and watch as the potatoes all rolled down the hill. Not that we would waste the vegetables as a few of us would be at the bottom of the hill to catch the spuds. I remember we would tuck our tops into our trousers and stuff our shirts with as many as we could then run like bloody hell around the corner.

One day while doing this prank, I think the greengrocer must have informed the police because the local PC was waiting round the corner and we ran straight into him. You would never run away from a policeman and anyway it was his beat so he knew us all! We just stopped and stood still while he spoke to us. We were bloody frightened but all he said was, 'Take them back and if it happens again I will come to your flats to tell your dads.' We knew that would hurt us a lot more than he could. That prank didn't happen again.

From my young eyes the whole world had seemed to be fighting; fighting to survive the war and, for my father now, fighting to find a job when he came home, and then fighting to keep his job. Remember, there were thousands upon thousands of soldiers returning from the war. I was only five years old when Dad returned from the war and we saw it all.

But this is where the environment that my mother and others like her created came into play. During the war, the backbone of Britain was the women. I can't think of a better way to describe it. Everything they did was for survival and they brought everybody together. It was a way of life and at the end we would still ask, 'Where are the planes?' or 'What, no more fights?' It was the attitude, the security and a safety net that the mums had created to make our lives as normal as possible.

Finally, the war was over, and I still remember to this day the soldiers coming home and all over the country there were

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street parties. The streets were lined with tables and piled with food and I still don't know where the food came from. But it was a big celebration and a wonderful time to be here in London. The street parties were great and the parents organised lots of games for us to play, such as egg and spoon races, with real eggs but hard-boiled so there was no waste if it dropped to the ground; wheelbarrow races, not with a proper wheelbarrow but anything with a wheel and a seat; three-legged races; chariot races; and to be honest it was anything to celebrate together ... and a great time was had by all.