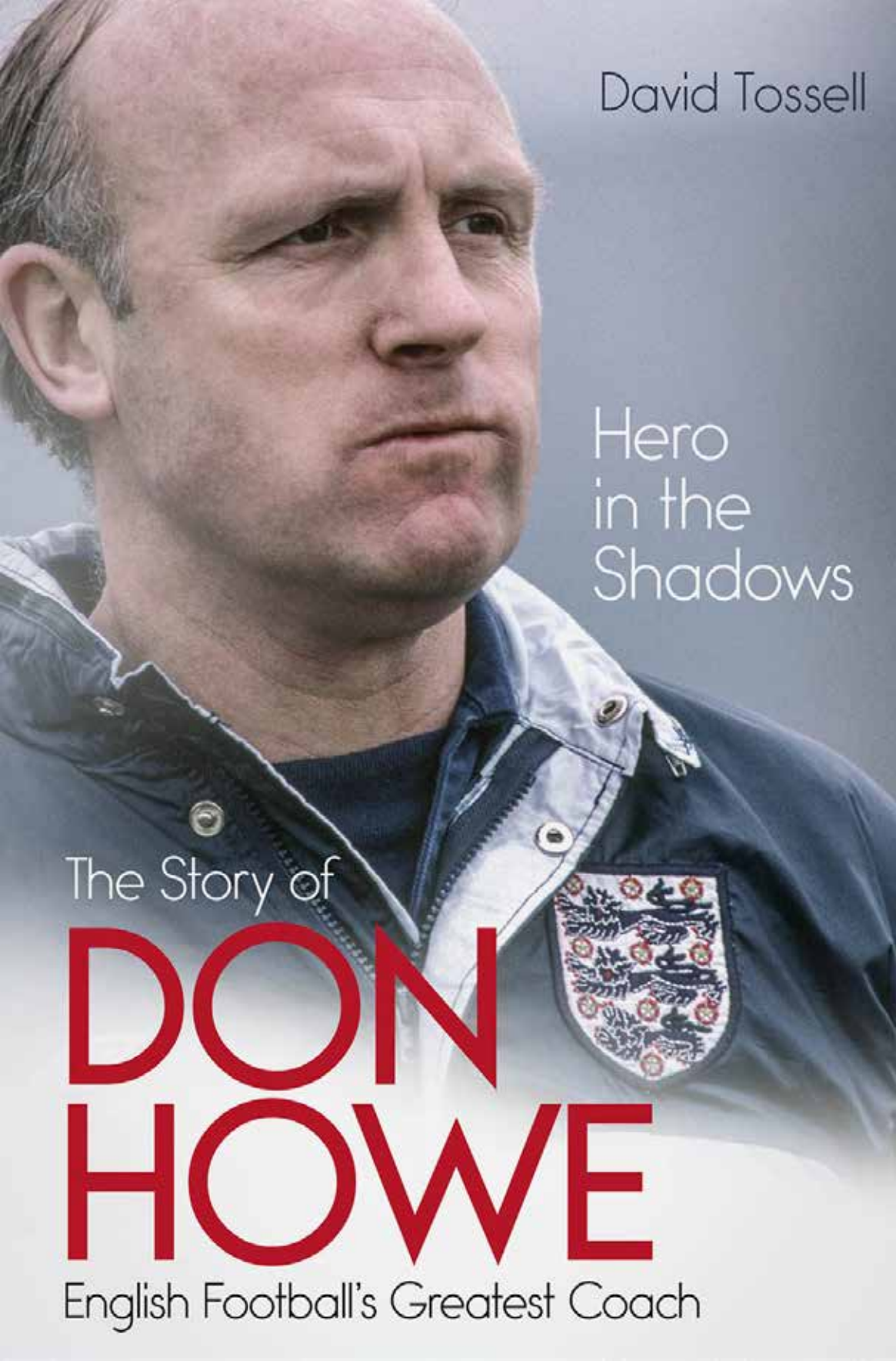

David Tossell

Hero in the Shadows

The Story of

DON HOWE

English Football's Greatest Coach

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GUNNER AT THE ALBION

The Black Country is where it all started, where I was taught what life is. I have always thought that Black Country people are very down to earth. They haven't got an easy life, they haven't got lots and lots of money. They have to work for a living and that comes across from everybody. If you are going to have something from your life you are going to have to work for it.

Don Howe, speaking in 2005

DONALD HOWE could barely contain his excitement as he made the two-mile journey from his Wolverhampton family home to Molineux on the last day of August 1946. Born on 12 October 1935, and therefore not even four years old when the Second World War began, he had no memory of League football. But, having fallen in love with the sport through the type of street matches that not even the imminent threat of air raids could deter, he was just as eager for its return after a seven-year hiatus as any of the almost one million who attended matches around the country that day.

While the FA Cup had managed to stage a 1945/46 tournament, the change from regional competition to the reinstatement of the Football

League had taken a year of planning. 'Tomorrow afternoon is football's D-day,' the *Birmingham Gazette* had said that Friday, predicting 'the greatest season of soccer since that fateful first Saturday in September 1939'. The next day the *Gazette* announced, 'The stage is all set. Dress rehearsals are over and this afternoon – zero hour is 3pm – players and spectators will welcome the raising of the curtain.' None more so than the ten-year-old Don, attending his first match.

The cricketers of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) shared that day's headlines as they set sail for an Ashes tour of Australia that would see them not return home until the football season was close to its conclusion eight months later. Yet Wally Hammond and his men merited barely a thought as Howe found his place in the children's enclosure at Wolverhampton Wanderers' ground and waited in the heavy rain for Arsenal and the home team to take the field. By the time he departed a couple of hours later he had discovered a new hero. 'Every time the ball came to me then, because I was playing a lot of football in the playground, I was Jesse Pye,' Howe would recall of the man who scored a hat-trick in a 6-1 Wolves victory. 'That is how it affected me.'

After 950,000 attended the day's 43 League matches – a total that would have been even closer to seven figures had one match not been rained off – the *Sunday People* reported, 'The cash customers were creating all-time receipt records, turnstiles were nicely oiled and clicking the sweet music of soaring returns, jam packed stands and terraces were gay with their winter make-up.' The trends of the first day continued, with grateful crowds returning in droves and Wolves continuing to win most of their matches. Only a defeat at home to Liverpool on the last day of the season saw them surrender the title to the Merseyside club by a single point.

The performances of his local team burned deep into young Don's identity. 'Everywhere I go people say, "You are from Birmingham,"' he would explain decades later in a Black Country accent that he never lost. 'I say, "No, I am from Wolverhampton," which is important to me because it was a football town. It was not just a football town it was a world football town. They used to win the League, they had great players.'

Over the next three seasons, Wolves continued to challenge for the title – beaten on goal average by Portsmouth in 1949/50 – and would win the 1949 FA Cup. Their reputation made them popular opponents for European teams, serving to fire Howe's football imagination and ambition. 'All those things, if you are going to be a footballer, that is the way to be a footballer,' he recalled. And being a footballer was his purpose, he had decided – although it would not be his beloved Wolves who allowed him to fulfil his destiny.

Attending St Peter's Collegiate School, in the west of his hometown, Howe became known as a right-back of promise and considerable skill. Full-backs of the post-war era, when the WM formation was still in vogue, were frequently condemned to play the role of no-man-shall-pass stopper. Yet Howe saw more to the role than that. 'I was brought up on a belief that brains will always beat brawn, at least in the long run. After I had seen [Tottenham Hotspur and England's] Alf Ramsey play once, I knew that the ball-playing type of defender was suited to me. I wanted to be a defender in the so-called classic mould, where the ball is always used to the best advantage, where defending is a game of wits rather than strength.'

His father Richard – who Don called his 'fiercest critic' – had been an enthusiastic player for his works team in the Birmingham Combination, while older brother Dick played as a part-time professional for Banbury Spencer in the Birmingham League. 'Dad always said his brother, who was ten years older than him, could have been an even better player than him,' says son Rob. 'He was unfortunate that the war came along.'

Don was clearly bound for higher achievement and was given an insight into the professional game while playing for Wolverhampton Schools. 'If you were in the schools team you went to Molineux on a Wednesday afternoon,' he recalled proudly. 'The coaches at Wolves took you training. It was lovely.'

But it was a rival club that made the important first move. While playing one Saturday morning at Wolverhampton racecourse, Howe was approached by a representative of West Bromwich Albion. 'A scout

came over and said, "Can I talk to you?" I said, "Well my dad is over there. Go and have a chat with him." And he did. He fixed an appointment for me and my dad to go across from Wolverhampton to West Bromwich on the number 90 bus.' After a promising trial match, they met manager Jack Smith. 'He sold the club to us,' Howe remembered. 'And he said, "We would like your lad to come and join us as a groundstaff boy, which means he will be doing that job for a couple of years and then if he is improving we would sign him as a professional at the age of 17."'

Howe senior was reticent about his son becoming a full-time footballer so soon. 'You've got to get a trade, son,' he said, securing Don a job as an apprentice draughtsman at his own workplace, the Boulton Paul aircraft factory in Wolverhampton. But then, as Howe would explain, 'He let me have my way and I went to West Brom.'

There was still time for Wolves to make a late play for him, carrying out an interview at Molineux, but Howe and his father were aware of the depth of young talent at the club and opted for Albion. 'I suppose the reason for my decision was that I felt there would be more opportunities at The Hawthorns,' Howe would admit. 'Perhaps I was a little bit of a coward. The competition for places was pretty fierce at Wolves in those days.' It would be an exaggeration to say that he was an overnight success. Like so many youthful recruits, Howe took time to find his feet and to feel that he was making progress. 'Dad even asked me if I wanted to leave football and learn a trade,' he explained. 'But I decided to stick with it.'

West Bromwich Albion had begun the 1950s as a top-flight team once more, promoted in 1948/49 as runners-up in the Second Division. An average Hawthorns crowd of 38,819 – a club-record figure – watched their first season back, a late surge in form lifting them to 14th place. That revival had been partly down to the form of the man signed by manager Jack Smith from Port Vale for £20,000, winger Ronnie Allen.

Smith might not have been much of a tactician and his Albion team were considered rather dour, but he had the foresight to switch Allen to centre-forward early in the 1951/52 season. Not only did Allen go

on to finish the season with 35 goals, but the move created a whole new identity for the team. After Smith was sacked in April 1952 – a development described publicly as a resignation – former Blackburn Rovers and Newcastle United centre-half Jesse Carver was appointed manager. Carver introduced The Hawthorns to some of the ideas he had been able to develop while coaching for the Dutch Football Association and Italian clubs Lazio and Juventus, where he had won the Serie A title.

As bizarre as it sounds – and as much as it was anathema to forward thinkers like Howe – this was an age when clubs typically discouraged players from spending too much time training with the ball. Promoting the theory that they wanted them to be hungry for it on match days, managers and trainers instead concentrated on physical fitness. Carver had other ideas, throwing his new players plenty of footballs and allowing them to train in their boots rather than the plimsolls that had been more suitable for endless running up and down.

Howe signed as a professional in November 1952, shortly after his 17th birthday, by which time the local press had already become aware of him. 'The success of this game was the 16-year-old full-back Don Howe, who will be seen again in Albion colours,' said Birmingham's *Sports Argus* of a Midweek League match against Stoke City a few months earlier. Reporting his promotion to professional ranks, the paper noted that 'he has developed well this season and played for the Birmingham County FA junior team'.

'In my early days we used to have eight teams,' Howe recalled, 'and you used to have to work your way through the levels to get to the top. It wasn't easy. We'd play Saturday morning, then come back to watch the games Saturday afternoon. We had jobs to do as well, but we could watch them play, be in the dressing rooms, and it was amazing how much that helped your education.'

The learning opportunities increased after Torino tempted Carver to return to Italy in February 1953. To replace him, Albion appointed Vic Buckingham, a former Tottenham defender who had begun his managerial career outside the Football League. He had led the combined Oxford and Cambridge Universities team, Pegasus, to victory in the FA

Amateur Cup in 1951 before taking charge at Bradford Park Avenue in the Third Division North.

His first act at Albion was to allow the players to carry on the training methods practised by Carver as they progressed to a fourth-place finish. And he continued to encourage Allen to develop into the style of freelancing centre-forward that Hungary would introduce to a nationwide audience when Nándor Hidegkuti roamed the Wembley pitch to help his team to a 6-3 win over England in November 1953. That result tore down England's self-satisfaction about its status in world football and opened the eyes of disciples everywhere, from the likes of professional hopefuls like Howe to more established players such as Malcolm Allison, who was frustrated by the lack of modern thought he found at his club, West Ham United. It was Hidegkuti who defined the Hungarians' eye-opening style. Dropping into deep positions, he left England's Harry Johnston wondering whether he should trail the crimson No.9 jersey into positions that would typically have given English centre-halves a nosebleed, or stay put with no one to mark. Hidegkuti helped himself to a hat-trick and created space for the great Ferenc Puskas to score two.

Allison, like many at Wembley, had initially been unimpressed when he saw the Hungarians' overweight No.10. But once Puskas began volleying 25-yard passes to team-mates as he warmed up, Allison turned to his West Ham team-mate Jimmy Andrews and said, 'Tell you what, Jim. These aren't bad.' By the end of the afternoon he was describing Hungary as having 'arrived from another planet'. According to *The Times*, England 'found themselves strangers in a strange world, a world of flitting red spirits, for such did the Hungarians seem as they moved at devastating pace with super skill and powerful finish in their cherry bright shirts'.

Also in the crowd was Ron Greenwood, who would precede Howe as Arsenal coach by a decade and later employ him as his right-hand man with England, and Bobby Robson, the successor to Greenwood. 'In the back of my mind there had always been a vision of the way I felt the game should be played,' said Greenwood. 'My ideas on the game

were firm. But proof – undeniable public proof – was needed that football had more to offer than the average League club's performance on a Saturday afternoon. When the proof came it was as if someone had removed scales from my eyes. All my basic ideas on the game suddenly came together. Hungary's victory was written up like a national disaster but for me it was a new start.' Greenwood spoke for many when he praised the way they interrupted their short-passing game with a direct approach when needed; their ability to move the ball on the ground; their pace, use of the ball and understanding; and their disregard for shirt numbers and formalised positions.

Robson was at Wembley with his Fulham team-mates, saying that it 'had a profound effect' on him. 'It was not long afterwards that I began attending the FA coaching courses at Paddington Street with Ron Greenwood, Jackie Goodwin, Jimmy Hill and others. The English complacency had been well and truly shattered. We were no longer the masters. It's changed a lot of us in our thinking and approach to the game.'

The Hungarians' performance was rightly hailed as revolutionary. Yet to any Albion fans among the audience who watched the game live on the BBC in the afternoon or caught the rerun in the evening, there would have been a certain air of familiarity, shadows of the play of their own No.9, Allen. 'Whenever possible I would position myself so that no matter which of our players had the ball I would be nearby to receive it,' he said, although it could have been Hidegkuti speaking. He described himself as 'roving practically all over the field and only being in the centre-forward position when attacks approach our opponents' penalty area. I was a "free" man practically all the time because their centre-half stayed in the middle.'

It meant that Howe found himself in the kind of free-thinking club environment that allowed him to pursue his ambition of being a ball-playing defender; someone who could create thoughtfully in the style of Ramsey rather than simply booting the ball – and opponents – as hard and high as possible, in the manner of some full-backs of the era.

Acknowledging that Albion's style of play 'definitely came from Hungary', Howe recalled, '[Ronnie] was a good passer of the ball. We had these two old inside-forwards, Johnny Nicholls and Reg Ryan, and when the game started Ronnie was up there as centre-forward. Ronnie used to come back and get a lot of the ball; Johnny would make runs and Reg would make runs; and Ronnie would also be feeding the wingers.'

* * *

Before Howe played a first-team game for West Brom, he held in his hand a letter that announced, 'You are now a Gunner.' Rather than being a message from the future, welcoming him to Arsenal, it was the introduction he received as a new member of the Royal Artillery in the spring of 1954. Like the rest of the country's male population, his career would have to be placed on hiatus for two years while he fulfilled his national service commitment.

In that regard, Howe was luckier than many. Posted to Park Hall Camp, in Oswestry, Shropshire, he was only 60-odd miles from West Bromwich, meaning he could return home to play in games and continue his development with the club when his army schedule allowed.

The base was well used to having Albion players in its ranks, thanks to an unofficial reciprocal arrangement with the club. 'The chairman, Major [H. Wilson] Keys, was involved in organising the national service for the players,' explains Howe's future team-mate, Graham Williams, 'so a few of us went there. I became a PT instructor and I hardly ever wore uniform.'

Howe would recall, 'I kept playing football. They were brilliant at Oswestry. They let me come home virtually every Saturday and play for West Brom and the lack of being in the club didn't seem to hold me up in terms of improvement.'

And, as the new recruits' introduction letter emphasised, 'There will be plenty of opportunities for playing football and other sports while you are here.' After Howe's death in 2015, *The Guardian* even printed a letter by former army colleague Mike Broadbent, who said, 'I

am ridiculously proud of having played football with Don Howe, albeit with a tennis ball at the Royal Artillery training camp in Oswestry, when he was an 18-year-old.'

According to Williams, 'Albion used to send a car on Friday night and drive me to West Bromwich. After the game on Saturday I would go back on the milk train on Sunday. Then I would go away and play for the regiment during the week.' It was the same for Howe, whose games for the regiment and the Western Command select team, where future West Brom and England colleague Derek Kevan was a team-mate, occupied much of his time and, he believed, helped develop his game. 'You've got to do your own training, but in match play most of the others are amateurs and this involves harder work in chasing the ball,' he said midway through a two-year military stint that brought him into opposition with the likes of young Manchester United forward Bobby Charlton and Sheffield Wednesday's Albert Quixall, who would become a British record transfer when joining United for £45,000 in 1958.

Howe's status as budding professional footballer earned him duties as a sports storeman, which meant handling kit for games and ensuring it was laundered afterwards. Broadbent also recalled, 'Officers made sure he was available for training in return for in-demand tickets for the popular mid-1950s floodlit matches.'

Howe's military call-up had come as his club were locked in a battle for the Championship with neighbours Wolves. Albion began the season with a nine-game unbeaten run, which concluded with a 7-3 victory at Newcastle United, although they gave up their early lead in the table to sit second at Christmas. As well as fighting for the title, they launched an FA Cup run that put them in position to challenge for English football's first Double of the 20th century.

Having reached Wembley by ending Third Division North Port Vale's run in the semi-finals, they lost goalkeeper Norman Heath to a career-ending injury in a defeat at Sunderland and went down 1-0 against Wolves. Typically of the era, the virtual title decider – which attracted 49,994 to The Hawthorns – was played while Albion's Allen

and Nicholls and Wolves duo Billy Wright and Jimmy Mullen were playing for England against Scotland at Hampden Park. Albion ended up winning only one of their last seven matches to finish as runners-up, four points behind their rivals.

In contrast to West Brom, their opponents at Wembley, Preston North End, had been turning in impressive performances after reaching the final, prompting wing-half Tommy Docherty to recall, 'Nobody in the country at that time was playing football of the quality of Preston.' Meanwhile, the public's desire to see Tom Finney picking up a winner's medal – as Blackpool's Stanley Matthews had a year earlier – made Preston the neutrals' choice. Yet Docherty felt the club made a mistake by spending the week 'stewing' in a hotel in Weybridge, while Albion prepared as usual at home. 'As the monotony increased, the tension built up in every one of us,' Docherty remembered. 'I think we all knew the atmosphere was wrong.'

Howe was among those who would be watching on television, albeit in the NAAFI at Oswestry. 'Me and the other soldiers doing their training there were allowed to watch the final on television, so I saw the game in the army camp,' he said. 'I think it was about 12 weeks, the training to make you into a soldier. After that 12 weeks they would think, "He has done his training, he is going to be a footballer, we will give him Saturdays off." [But] you couldn't get that while you were in the first 12 weeks, and the FA Cup Final was in those weeks.'

Howe and his fellow squaddies saw Allen's 21st-minute goal quickly cancelled out, with Preston going on to take the lead after 52 minutes. Nine minutes later, Docherty was ruled to have taken down Ray Barlow in the penalty area and Allen scored from the spot to make it 2-2. It was Albion who snatched the trophy two minutes from time when outside-right Frank Griffin ran after a lofted through ball to score the winning goal.

For a brief period the West Midlands could argue to be at the centre of European football. Wolves had already embarked on a series of prestigious floodlight friendlies against some of the Continent's leading teams; a schedule that would be highlighted by victory in December

1954 against the brilliant Hungarian army club, Honved. Albion had already left their mark on those opponents when, early in the new season, they led them 3-1 during a four-team tournament in Belgium before going down 5-3. Puskas was moved to declare, 'The Hungarians are the best footballers in the world, but the England of West Bromwich is not far behind us.'

Offers to play all over the world came Albion's way, including a Russian tour in 1957 and a North American trip two years later. 'We were always invited to go abroad to sell football,' says left-back Graham Williams, who joined the club in 1954. 'Vic was brilliant at mixing with people and talking to them about the game. It was why he was able to go on to Ajax in Amsterdam and help develop Total Football, and why so many of his players went on to coach in the England set-up. We were an academy of players with a lot of knowledge under Vic.'

Yet, with Buckingham missing for much of the 1954/55 season after being injured in a car crash on the way back from a testimonial game in Hereford, Albion could only manage 17th place. Fate, in the form of bad weather, prevented Howe making a first-team debut before the season ended. 'It seems a moral certainty that this lad will command a regular place in the Albion defence in due course,' Charles Matheson wrote in the *Sports Argus*, and within days Howe was named to play for the senior team in a friendly against Leeds United.

Home on leave from military duties, he performed well enough to be chosen for a League debut at home to Chelsea four days later. When that game was frozen off, he was selected to face Tottenham Hotspur at The Hawthorns another three days hence. Again, bad weather intervened and by the time Albion returned to the field Howe was back in uniform and Stuart Williams was fit to play in his place.

But when the next campaign began it was clear that new blood was needed if Albion were to recapture the momentum of two seasons previously. In the second game, against Everton on 24 August, two significant changes were made. Centre-forward Kevan, who had played under Buckingham as a teenager at Bradford Park Avenue and been

his first signing at The Hawthorns, stepped in for the injured Allen and scored both goals in a 2-0 win. At right-back, Howe, a couple of months short of his 20th birthday, finally made his League debut and 'calmly asserted himself', according to the *Birmingham Gazette*. Despite his previous near misses, Howe would recall his selection, in place of the injured Stuart Williams, as 'a big surprise to me and a big surprise to everyone else'. He added, 'It went okay because we won – it always does if you win. I think I took it in my stride. I didn't let nerves get the better of me and I did what I had to do.'

He might not have been expecting to play his first Albion game right then, but Howe was already aware that Buckingham would be a positive force for his career. The new manager had been part of the formative years of Arthur Rowe's famous 'push and run' Tottenham team, which went on to win the title in 1950/51 with Ramsey at right-back. 'Vic was great for me because I was a footballing full-back,' Howe explained. 'I loved the ball, I liked to go forward. The word "overlapping" was not used in those days, but that is what I did. I used to overlap the winger and get the crosses in. Vic encouraged me to do that; to attack from the full-back position. With Jimmy Armfield, and a lad named [John] Angus at Burnley, we were the start of the overlapping full-backs.' Until then, Howe added, 'You never went forward. It was looked on as madness. But TV came in and we saw continental full-backs going down the line and crossing the ball and it opened people's eyes.'

Graham Williams, who would spend several years across from Howe at left-back and go on to represent Wales, says, 'He was the first attacking wing-back. He used to have a guy playing in front of him called Ken Foggo and he would end up playing full-back because Don went past him and ended up being the attacker putting in the crosses.'

Howe recalled Buckingham as someone who 'loved flair', adding, 'He loved the players to express themselves and he was a bit that way himself. He was a debonair man. He would come in the dressing room with a lovely suit on and he'd have his handkerchief hanging out of his top pocket.'

And he enjoyed the sound of his voice. 'The average time of a Vic Buckingham team talk was about an hour,' said Bobby Robson, soon to join Albion. 'His record was two hours. No one dared fall asleep or let his attention wander. Vic was very strict and commanded the respect of his players.' Even if, on occasions, he confused them.

Howe continued, 'Every now and again when he was giving us a team talk he would break into French. No one understood him.' Remembering him slipping in phrases like '*comme ci, comme ça*,' he added, 'We would look at him and think, "What's he saying?" Can you imagine these Midlands boys talking French? He loved flair and imagination and I loved that because it suited the way I played. If I had to be just an ordinary full-back, clomping the opponents' outside-left, I wouldn't have been the player that eventually I became.'

The combined influence of Ramsey, Hungary and Buckingham shaped not only the way Howe played football, but also the manner in which he studied the game. Commuting from Wolverhampton early in his Albion career gave him the opportunity to get to know Johnny Nicholls and goalkeeper Norman Heath, who travelled from Wednesfield on the same bus. 'That was an education,' Howe recalled in 2002. 'It started once we'd finished training. We'd get the bus into West Brom, stop and have a cup of coffee, and then get the bus home. In this little coffee shop, there'd be six or seven of us, Joe Kennedy, Derek Kevan, lots of the lads, and it was a great talking shop, which players miss these days, I think, because they get in the car and go their separate ways. We went upstairs on the bus and talked football.'

The discussions continued in later years once Howe had moved closer to the Spring Road training ground and was no longer catching buses. Williams explains, 'We would meet in the morning and have coffee and a custard tart before training. We would go into a café bar and we would talk about football and tactics and individual players. He was absolutely brilliant at analysing players and opposition – different class. He was always going to end up a coach. He was so bright. On Friday morning we would be sitting there saying, "Right, this is what this winger does and we should be attacking this area and we should

be doing this and should be doing that." As a defender he would always be aware that they were trying to get into a certain area in order to do damage. And he would have been looking at that during the week or talking to other people in football who had played against our opponents. I learnt so much from listening to him and talking to him. The only time he wouldn't speak to me was when England and Wales were playing each other.'

By the end of Howe's first season in Albion's senior team, midfielder Robson had arrived on a £25,000 transfer from Fulham. 'Over the next two years Robson, Howe and Kevan helped revitalise the team,' is the citation in Gavin McOwan's *The Essential History of West Bromwich Albion*. Significantly, the signing began a footballing relationship that would last for almost four decades and a personal bond that extended even further.

'We quickly became friends as we shared the same intense dedicated approach to the game, always wanting to discuss its finer points,' Robson explained. 'Playing in front of [Don] helped us to develop mutual understanding on the field and we progressed together into the international team and both decided to go into coaching at the same time, attending the same courses.'

Howe remembered, 'Bobby lived just up the road in Handsworth. He had three boys, I had got four boys, so we had things to talk about. "How were the kids last night, did they keep you awake?" I could always get on with Bob; he has got a nice steady personality. He keeps his head at all times, he doesn't get carried away. That is why he was good in the England team. He didn't let the press rile him, he didn't let the press put him off, he didn't let any criticism get too deep inside. He could handle it.'

A great respect developed in Howe for a man who would end up making his England debut a month after him in 1957, having moved from inside-forward to half-back at Albion. 'Bobby took over the mantle of the playmaker. He could win the ball back, could pass the ball, but he really wanted to get forward. Down the right side at West Brom, as the game went on, I was going, Bobby was going, and we left

it to the others to look after the back door. I suppose in some ways it was a bit risky but when it came off it was wonderful. The two of us could make goals.'

Howe remembered the latter years of the 1950s as 'good times' when Albion 'played some great football'. He said, 'We were part of a new side with Maurice Setters, Derek Kevan, Alec Jackson, building again after the 1954 team. Ronnie Allen was still there of course, and Ray Barlow, who was a very big influence on my career. They both passed things down, which was the way it was at the good clubs then.'

Playing just over half the League games in 1955/56, Howe took only six months after his first-team debut to win selection for the England Under-23 team. He had been preparing to play for his Royal Artillery unit at Oswestry when a call came through from The Hawthorns telling him he was stepping in for an injured Armfield in that night's game against Scotland at Hillsborough. Albion coach Freddie Cox went to collect him, only for his car to break down. Howe eventually got to the ground an hour before kick-off. The drama ended there as England, including five new caps, proceeded to a comfortable 3-1 win with a team skippered by Johnny Haynes and including the brightest of Manchester United's young stars, Duncan Edwards, born a year after Howe a few miles down the road from Wolverhampton in Dudley.

Packing away his army uniform permanently on the final day of February 1956, Howe was able to sign as a full-time Albion professional – a turn of events welcomed by *Sports Argus* columnist Matheson, who said, 'He plays his football as if he enjoys almost every minute of it and means to go on enjoying it. He has confidence in his own ability, plus ideal build and the qualities of pace and perception. In short, he looks a natural.'

According to future colleague Fred Street, Howe appreciated his fortune in being good at something that distinguished him from many of those he had been with at school or in the army. 'Don told me that as a young full-back at West Brom he earned first-team money, £18 a week with a £2 bonus, while the mates he left school with were earning £3 or £4. Add all the perks and he was quids in – even in those days.'

Once Howe became a fixture in the West Brom side in the 1956/57 season, it took only a couple of months before discussion began about his suitability to take over from Birmingham City's Jeff Hall as England's right-back. Prompted by a good performance for an FA XI against the RAF and selection ahead of Armfield for another Under-23 game against France at Ashton Gate, the *Sports Argus* argued, 'Howe is not so sharp in the tackle as Hall, but he has been in better form recently.' According to *The Times*, the brightest part of the Under-23s' 0-0 draw were the floodlights at Bristol City's ground, but at least Howe's proximity to achieving a senior cap was endorsed when he was named as a reserve for Walter Winterbottom's full team when they took on Yugoslavia the following month at Wembley.

February 1957 brought a first selection for the England B team in a 4-1 defeat of Scotland in front of almost 40,000 at St Andrew's.[1] Within the next few weeks he played again for the Under-23s and was named by Walter Winterbottom to represent the Football League against the Scottish League at Ibrox.[2] Despite being 'steadily groomed for stardom' – according to the *Daily Mirror* – an unconvincing performance in the League side's 3-2 defeat meant Howe remained at home when the England Under-23 team went on a summer tour to Bulgaria, Romania and Czechoslovakia, the No.2 shirt being worn instead by Armfield.

The season ended in disappointment at club level when Howe was denied his burning ambition to play in the FA Cup Final by local rivals Aston Villa. His failure to clear the ball late in the semi-final at Molineux, booting the head of Villa centre-forward Bill Myerscough instead, helped the opposition level the game at a 2-2 draw. The teams moved on to a replay at St Andrew's, where Allen went off after 20 minutes following a tackle by Jimmy Dugdale, a team-mate until a year earlier. Albion went down 1-0 and Howe remembered, 'They scored a

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1 It was the last B international played by England until facing West Germany in 1978.

2 The Football League team – selection for which was limited to English players – was used by England managers to give potential full internationals the chance to team up with current England men in games against representatives of the leagues in Scotland and Ireland. The team continued to operate until 1976.

goal and it didn't matter what we did. We played well. It just wouldn't go in the net for us.' Howe would make it to Wembley soon enough, though, wearing the white of England rather than Albion's stripes.