

JIMMY ARMFIELD

THE OFFICIAL BIOGRAPHY



ROY CALLEY

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Chapter One:

The beginning

ON 13 May 1959, Jimmy Armfield was stood on the pitch at the Maracanã Stadium in Rio de Janeiro wearing an England shirt. Around him were 160,000 Brazilian supporters who had been showered from above by leaflets from political activists, meaning their frenzied-like fervour was on the verge of becoming unmanageable. Riot police circled the pitch whilst loudspeakers rang with the sounds of propaganda songs and the Brazilian national anthem. There was a lengthy delay before kick-off and the England team were nervous and overwhelmed. Jimmy was making his debut for his national side. He was 23 years of age. One can only imagine his thoughts, his fears and his excitement.

There's a lot to fill in from the moment Jimmy entered the world up to that Wednesday afternoon in the South American cauldron. A lot to digest and to savour, as the baby boy grew into a strapping young man who seemed to excel at sport almost immediately. When Christopher and Doris gazed at their newborn on that Saturday, 21 September 1935 (and that's something that was never lost on Jimmy – the fact that it was

a Saturday), could there have ever been a moment when they could have imagined how his life would work out?

It was the 1930s. Britain was in that curious state of affairs that can only be imagined at now. The country was still suffering the mental and physical hangover of the terrible First World War, knowing deep down that the threat from Chancellor Hitler was becoming greater and greater as each week passed, with a second conflict seeming an inevitability. It was a calm Britain, though, almost completely devoid of the cars, the commercialism and the American influence; a Britain where the horse-drawn carriage still worked in the rural countryside, but a nation still riddled with a rigid class system that was born and bred in the United Kingdom. Jimmy was most definitely born into a working-class family and those values that so define the people of that time could be seen throughout his life, both as a professional and a gentleman. It was what was expected.

He was brought up initially in an area called Denton, in those days a separate suburb but now completely encased in the city of Manchester. The family lived in a 'two up, two down', as it was charmingly called. It was a house without electricity and with a gas supply that needed a few pennies to top it up on a daily basis. Like all working-class families who have little, the Armfields prided themselves on their cleanliness and godliness, and the house was never a place for slovenly behaviour. Again, it's another impression that stayed with Jimmy, as there was never a time when he would be seen publicly dressed in a less than smart way. Clothes maketh the man. Jimmy was smart, both in attire and in intellect. The godliness was there from the very beginning.

Father worked in a grocer's store in the Co-op, Mother was at home keeping the house. For six days a week, Christopher would accept the back-breaking lifting and heaving of heavy sugar bags in a cellar, sweating and aching, whilst Doris made a point of keeping the young Jimmy on the right road to happiness. A deep belief in God knitted the family together and this strong faith kept Jimmy company throughout his life. It was what working-class people did. Whilst the politicians and the businessmen and the lords and the earls all took care of a country that was feeling the effects of the crumbling Empire, the families in their small, identical houses worked and accepted their lot. There was little chance of advancement but there was always time for happiness. It was a time of tension and there was no guaranteed future for anyone, so each day was lived in a way that would not register today. It was a world that bears little resemblance to the times we live in, with life in the north of England defined by soot-blackened buildings, rattling trams that pondered along the grey streets and a trip to the picture house being the highlight of a deadening week. Life was so different.

How did James Christopher Armfield get to know the game of football in those seemingly dark and depressing days? He was born at a time when the game was almost completely the preserve of the working man, so avoiding it would be an impossibility. Was he like all the children of the age, immortalised in grainy black-and-white photos, where raggedy backstreets played host to Manchester City against the Arsenal? Where the white paint on the walls signified the goal and where a bare tennis ball was used as the football that honed a thousand skills? In those days,

nearly every young lad wanted to be 'Dixie' Dean or maybe Peter Doherty or, if you knew Blackpool, then it was Jimmy Hampson. Football was on a par with cricket for popularity, whilst the other sport that nearly captured our hero, rugby, was enjoying a healthy renaissance. Having said that, Jimmy was only four years of age when the Second World War broke out, so his introduction to the delights of the national game would have been delayed and also overshadowed by the threat from above.

Getting to know the game of football (or soccer as it was still widely known as in the 1930s) in a period of anxiety and poverty was not a thing of the moment. The radio, or wireless, and the local newspapers were the only available sources of knowledge. Footballers weren't personalities. No one knew what they looked like. Clubs weren't community assets. The era of 'Super Sunday', where each game of top-tier football has to be bigger and better than the last game of top-tier football, was so far away it could have belonged to a different world. There was no connection between the game and money, or the game and celebrity status, or even the game and news headlines. Games of football were played out to a local audience, where the trickle of information took its time to reach those who couldn't attend. A result didn't resonate around the country but caused a minor stir in the households and the public houses over a pint of mild. Football matches were the entertainment of a Saturday afternoon on terraces that stretched as far as the eye could see, with the air permeated with the aroma of Brylcreem and Woodbines, mixed with the unmistakable smell of Bovril. Club chairmen owned cotton mills and drove Bentley cars. Men wore flat caps, women stayed at home.

Jimmy grew up at a school which encouraged physical sports, but then most of them did. The government of the time had implemented a strict physical fitness regime for youngsters, knowing that one day they would need to call upon them in a time of conflict. That time was fast approaching. This was the era in which ‘Gentleman Jim’ was brought up. This was the time that forged the man and the professional footballer. This was the time that we should explore more before continuing.

The ‘nation of shopkeepers’, as Great Britain had been described a century earlier, was now, more than ever, living up to that title. Small businesses abounded as unemployment was rife, especially amongst the working-classes. Butchers, bakers, candlestick makers were all in abundance as the government embarked on a city rejuvenation project to destroy the slums that blighted the larger areas and make affordable housing for all. Unfortunately, the advent of the second major world conflict brought such lofty ambitions to an end.

As war was declared, the cry went out to evacuate the children from areas of danger and, although Manchester was not regarded as particularly unsafe at the start of the war, despite a blitz in the first couple of years, Jimmy’s mother clearly had her concerns, as it was she who made the decision to move her little Jimmy away from the soot-grimed streets of Manchester to the clean and purer air of Blackpool.

Blackpool. The town immortalised in the morale-boosting depression film *Sing As We Go* featuring Gracie Fields, was the place to aspire to. It was the holiday getaway of a lifetime. It represented the lightness away from the mills

and the mines and the factories. Blackpool offered fantasy when the country was fog-bound in a nightmare. Who could resist it?

At the time, Jimmy was ‘about seven’, according to his autobiography *Right Back to the Beginning*, and he had absolutely no idea why Blackpool was chosen. Having said that, it probably wasn’t too difficult to guess. At least his mother had the means to make it happen. All he remembered was leaving school one day, catching a bus to Victoria Station with her and then a train to Blackpool, which in those days was not an easy task. He arrived at North Station in a pair of short trousers and a cap and opened his eyes wide to a paradise setting. Blackpool was different. Blackpool was a popular seaside resort. Blackpool now had Jimmy in its grasp and it never let go.

He did try to break that grasp, though, if only temporarily. Notably the time he rode his bicycle to Denton and back, with little clue as to the direction, a journey that took up to five hours. He went to visit his father – who was suitably shocked and impressed at the same time – stayed for an hour and then rode back again. It was a different time. Jimmy would have had the same opportunity of catching either a bus or train to Denton as we might of taking a space shuttle today. The public transport was a working-class invention but was beyond the means of those very same people it promised to serve.

The bond, though, between Jimmy, a young and excitable child who had the seven miles of sand at his disposal, and Blackpool was forged from the moment he arrived and that connection stayed with him all of his life. In those days, Blackpool wasn’t the brash and vulgar place that it portrays

today, with its stag nights and hen dos. It was different. It had class and was an escape for the mill workers, the miners and the poor, who came in their thousands to enjoy the beach, the candy floss and the ice cream. A ride on a donkey on the sands was an adventure rarely experienced and a trip up the tower was only for the brave. Blackpool was an escape, especially in the heart of the conflict, and Jimmy had this on his doorstep each and every day. Even the absence, initially, of his father, who would visit on weekends, was countered by a walk with his mother on the breezy promenade, with a weekend treat of a trip to the Pleasure Beach and its rollercoasters and laughing clown. Life was better now.

He and his mother lived on the top floor of a boarding house that welcomed soldiers and those down on their luck. It was a small room with a shared bathroom and it seems that Jimmy's one bath a week rule was flouted regularly, as he was a constant visitor to the local swimming pool and enjoyed the delights of the Irish Sea, even in the cold. He started school at Revoe, a well-known learning place even then, but it didn't hold him too many times. Truancy was a feature for a curious young boy, who found the stuffiness of the classroom inhibiting and, anyway, he wanted to play sport. He did, however, become a successful student once he'd settled down and the school always kept a fond place in his heart.

His introduction to football came at the ground that he ultimately graced as a player for nearly 20 years, Bloomfield Road. One of the Polish soldiers who rented a room in the boarding house where the Armfields lived was a football fanatic and took Jimmy to his first game. He could hardly have

appreciated the Pandora's box that visit was about to open up. Poland can't claim to often have been at the forefront of the game down the years but introducing Jimmy Armfield to it is something worth savouring.

Blackpool were on the verge of greatness when the war broke out, sitting comfortably at the top of the First Division (admittedly after only three games played) and were regarded as one of the strongest teams in England. The war didn't really change that, as thousands of servicemen were stationed in the town and a fair few played football.

The town was never bombed and it was said that Hitler had actually made a point of keeping it from harm's way as he saw it as the entertainment capital that would amuse the German people once his planned occupation was achieved. One can only imagine and shudder at what a German-occupied Blackpool would look like. Whatever the truth of Hitler's knowledge of Blackpool, it was safe and American, Polish and, of course, many British soldiers found themselves in the seaside town, with all of its attractions, football being one of them.

Bloomfield Road was requisitioned by the military during the war (which helped to pay the rent for the club, too) but games were played on a regular basis and the team was so successful that it became a huge draw for those looking for cheap entertainment. They actually won the War Cup and, although it was a challenge tournament involving only four teams, their 4-2 win at Stamford Bridge against Arsenal was regarded as one of the best performances ever produced by an English team. The almost amusing side story of that victory is that the Arsenal team were so confident of a win that they had

a photograph of themselves with the trophy taken before the game was played! Not only that, but they never handed it to Blackpool anyway, so the War Cup has never graced the rather bare trophy cabinet at Bloomfield Road.

It was hardly surprising that Jimmy wanted to be part of the 'tangerine dream' (well before the term was used), as the club had started to climb the hill that led to the heights of success. Watching Mortensen, Dodds and, occasionally, Matthews must have had an enlightening effect on the young boy, who was now reaching his tenth birthday. Harry Johnston was another idol and, in one of those quirks of fate, it was Harry's parents who took Jimmy's parents to Blackpool for the first time for a day out. Such things life is made of.

Boys' kickabouts under the streetlights now involved Blackpool against the Arsenal, as they were the 'coming' team. It may have been a virtually different set of players who ran out wearing the tangerine shirts in those days of watching under gloomy skies but, due to the number of footballers available in the area, Blackpool had the pick of the best. Watching 'Jock' Dodds scoring six, seven and eight goals per game at times must have had a huge impression on Jimmy, yet his dreams of playing as a goalscorer changed many years later.

Whilst the war raged on in foreign lands and the bombs fell many miles away, Jimmy took hold of his favourite possession, a well-worn tennis ball, and, like so many others, honed his football skills. He was a young lad, blissfully unaware of the conflict that was tearing the world apart. Blackpool was effectively untouched, apart from the huge posts that were buried deep into the sands on the beach, a counter to any enemy

aircraft trying to land. It was doubtful that the Germans would actually get that far north with their raids, but Blackpool played its part in being prepared for such an event. What the town did share with the rest of the country, though, was the daily struggle to get enough food. Rationing was, of course, the only way of making sure every citizen had enough to eat but it dominated the minds and thoughts of the housewife who each day had to queue and hope that the last sausage or lump of cheese or loaf of bread was still on the shelf when she got to the front. Jimmy later put his ailments down to the fact that he never really had enough to eat when he was a child. Small wonder that he ended up being as fit as he was.

It wasn't just football, though, that attracted this young athlete. At the age of ten, the war was now over and Jimmy was passionate about football, played rugby union for Arnold School and also batted and bowled to a reasonable degree in cricket. Added to that, he was a very fast runner and would regularly pick up trophies for his speed at school sports days. Any of these activities could have ensnared him but it was football that won ... and there was never a doubt.

It's worth taking a pause here to imagine what it would have been like not having Jimmy Armfield as a footballer. He was big and strong enough to play rugby and you can really imagine him running down the flanks in a Calcutta Cup game against Scotland at Twickenham. Equally, you can see in your mind's eye him sweeping the ball past square leg and to the boundary in cricket, but could you see him in a 100-yard dash? He was fast but it just doesn't look or feel right. No, Jimmy was a footballer. It was ordained.

Jimmy said that he didn't grow up supporting a team. It wasn't really possible during the Second World War, as the leagues were run on an ad hoc basis and it was difficult identifying with different players each week, but he grew up supporting football. As he lived in Blackpool, it was natural that his allegiance was there. None of his family were particularly sporting and it does seem that Jimmy was the exception rather than the rule in the Armfield clan, but what an exception he became.

How did he start his professional footballing career? It's a long story and there's so much to fill in, but we'll start with the one man, and the one event, that was instrumental in his development. The return of his father.

After the war ended, his father joined the family in Blackpool and, after a brief period of living in separate rooms, they finally became one when he rented a small shop complete with upstairs living accommodation. It was hardly luxurious and was in a part of town that can still only be described as rough. Blackpool has always had a reputation and the years after the war were no different to today. There was a pub next door where there would be gangland fights, drunken brawls and the kind of moments that few youngsters of Jimmy's age would witness, but the accommodation above the shop was home and he had his own room.

His father took a dim view of Jimmy's casual attitude to school attendance and, with his mother, made sure that there were to be no more days of truancy, no more misbehaving and a desire to make the best of his life. The image of a trouble-making young Jimmy is at odds with his later persona, but the child becomes a man and it's at that time that his direction

is shown. All parents want the same for their children but it seemed to be of even more importance at that time, especially if the spectre of poverty hovered above on a daily basis. The Armfields were never poor but every penny was worked for and every penny was accounted for. Making sure that every morsel on the plate was finished at mealtimes was an effective way of making the child appreciate the value of life.

The grocer's shop his father ran was, at times, hit and miss with its trade, always reliant on the booming tourist trade that Blackpool was becoming famous for. Mother got herself a part-time evening job, too, working in a refreshment stall on Central Pier, where she served the stars with cups of tea and a kind word for those down on their luck. Jimmy, too, was involved in helping the family survive, taking the bread round on his bike, cycling the cobbled streets of the town and receiving an occasional sixpence from a thankful customer.

It was at this time that his education took on a more serious note, with the move to Arnold School after his 11-plus, and that his faith became imprinted on his mind. Like all children of his age in that era, he attended a Sunday school, this one being at a Methodist church in the town. As a youngster, it probably just meant a trip to see friends and have fun, despite the restrictions of having to wear their 'Sunday best'. There were japes and mischiefs but nothing that any other child hadn't done before, yet his father wasn't allowing that to continue. A disciplinarian, but a kind one at that.

Kindness was probably not the way that Jimmy may have described his father after returning home with a bad mark on his daily school report. He'd struggled with his lessons and his

father decided the best way to instil a harder working attitude in his wayward son was to give him a slap around the head and then speak to the headmaster. The next morning, Jimmy was summoned to the headmaster's office, all lacquered wood and ornate portraits, where Frank Holdgate, the headmaster in question, announced that Jimmy would have to spend the next Saturday afternoon in the school writing an essay. It didn't matter that Blackpool were playing Fulham at Bloomfield Road in an FA Cup tie, Jimmy would be in the classroom.

After one seemingly innocent incident (certainly when viewed from the perspective of the third decade of this century) in which he apparently deliberately sang the wrong words to a hymn, his father took him to the nearest Sunday school to their home. It was St Peter's Church and he announced to a clearly shocked Jimmy that this was to be his new place of attendance, breaking the ties with the friends and his 'partners-in-crime' of the past. It obviously worked, as right up until his death, Jimmy continued to be involved at St Peter's. He became an Anglican and relied on his faith, born and honed in the cloisters, throughout his life. It helped with his life choices and it helped with his football, which now we will address.