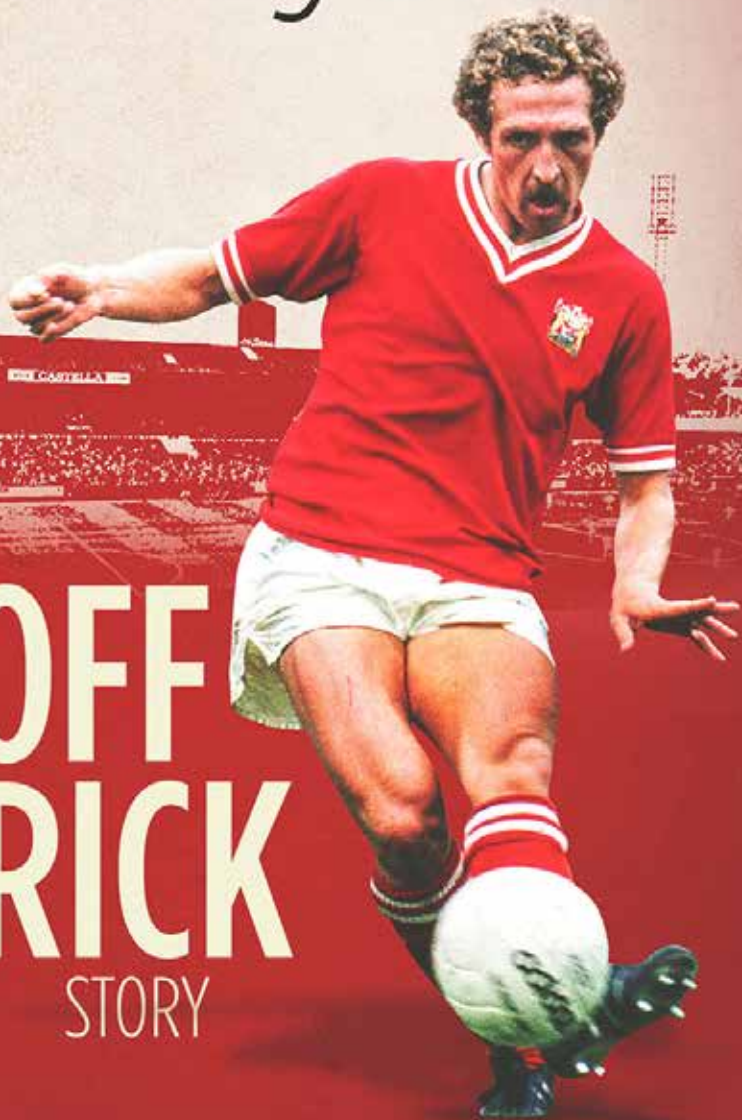


NEIL PALMER

# Life with the Robins and Beyond

THE **GEOFF  
MERRICK**  
STORY



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## Bedminster Boy

OVER THE years, I have been asked many times to write a book. The requests have come from fans, journalists I have met during my career and even family members. I always said no, mainly because I was not sure that anybody would be interested in my story. It is a trait in my nature that I probably inherited from my dad. I suppose I am just not very big in putting myself forward and being in the limelight; strange for a footballer, I know, and especially a captain, but that's just the way I am.

As a kid I was really shy and the area I grew up in and the people I lived among were not the type to bare their soul and show off as it were, mainly due to the fact that we didn't have anything to show off about, but it also kept you grounded and taught you not to get too big for your boots and I think I carried that around with me through adult life. So, as I have now said yes to the book, I hope you will get to know and understand a little bit more about Geoff Merrick the footballer and the man.

Looking back at my career and my life I can see that there is a tale to tell. I was a local lad who captained his hometown club

to football's top flight. The way it all ended for me is a book all on its own but painful though it was, I came through it with the love and support of my family and some dear friends.

So why did I say yes? I have known writer Neil Palmer for around 15 years. We first met when he interviewed me for one of his books and we just seemed to get on. Neil always asked me about a book, particularly as we have kept in touch since that first meeting, and it was when he interviewed me for his biography on my old team-mate and friend Gerry Gow that I started to think about it. Neil said that he was saddened that he couldn't sit down with Gerry and talk about his life and career due to his passing. He made it clear that, heaven forbid anything happened to me, then somebody somewhere would write about my career and life so maybe it would be best to at least do a book, to put a few records straight in terms of my career but more importantly for my family, especially my grandchildren – Harvey, Brooke, Lewis, Ethan, Daniel, Emilia, Mia and Olivia – so they could see that grandad did once play football and also they can find out a bit more about the life I have lived.

I have enjoyed the experience of going over my life and remembering some people who were close to my heart and certain events that meant so much to me. In truth, I have found it very cathartic as I grow older. I have also been able to find loads of things relating to my career that I thought I had lost over the years due to my rummaging about in the loft at home. So I said yes to Neil and here it is, a story of a lad from Bedminster whose dream came true.

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I was told by my mother that I came into this world during a snowstorm. I always told her that in my life it has been snowing ever since. She gave birth to me in a bedroom at 89 Garnett Street, Bedminster, Bristol, on 29 April 1951. I'm not sure who else was there but my dad and elder brother Vernon were keeping out of the way while Geoffrey Merrick was arriving into the world.

My parents were the most wonderful people and as they say in Bedminster they were 'proper'. Dad was Herbert Edgar; the best dad anyone could ask for, he was an unassuming man who never pushed himself to the front of things. He was always in the background with his fag in the corner of his mouth and that suited him. Dad was a carpenter by trade and he initially worked all over the country making and erecting greenhouses. Being the family man he was he soon got tired of going here, there and everywhere and missing his family, so he got a job with the Ministry of Defence based at Whitening Yard, about 15 minutes' walk from our house. He was still doing carpentry and told me once that he made some toilet cubicles on a site that the Queen was visiting. He was very honoured to have been asked to do it but apparently the Queen never used the loo and he had to dismantle them, making sure that the loo seat was destroyed in case somebody stole it and sold it.

Mum again was the most wonderful mother you could have asked for. Her name was Iris Florence, although Dad called her Flo. She kept house and it was spotless; occasionally she would

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earn a few quid cleaning at the John Collier clothing store on East Street in Bedminster.

Making up the Merrick family household was my brother Vernon, who is ten years older than me. Although there was a significant age gap, Vernon and myself were really close. He went to Bristol Grammar School and did well at rugby and cricket. He joined the army and worked in the intelligence corps, becoming fluent in Russian. He really was a James Bond character, being lowered from helicopters on to submarines during his service. Today he lives in Leicester and we talk on the phone frequently. As a brother I couldn't have asked for better.

Home for the Merricks was Garnett Street. It was a terraced house with three bedrooms, a kitchen and front room. Our home was situated on top of a hill, which was brilliant fun for a youngster on a bike like me coming down, but I moaned every time I rode up it, wishing and muttering under my breath that we lived on a flat road.

The streets were where me and my mates played. We were out there from dawn until dusk playing football, riding our bikes or playing a game called 'Kicked In', which meant leaving a ball or a tin in the middle of the road, a lad would be 'it' and you and your friends would all hide and he would have to come and look for you. While he was searching, if you got the chance you would run out of your hiding place and kick the ball before he got there. We loved it, as did the local glazing firm which was kept busy replacing the odd pane of glass across Bedminster.

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We would also play football on a bit of land called the Marsh. I used to drive my mum crazy as I would come home from a game of football covered in mud from head to toe. Mum used to say, 'Where have you been? Look at the state of your clothes.' You have to bear in mind that I didn't have that many clothes as we were poor like a lot of families around the area, but the one thing my clothes were when I wore them was clean and tidy.

Mum would say, 'Why can't you be more like Geoffrey Fleming?' Geoffrey was my best friend and we did loads together. His mum and dad had a bit more money than mine and they lived in a big house. I always remember he had a fantastic toboggan that his dad made him and we would go hurtling down Garnett Street at about 50 miles an hour in the snow. The thing with Geoffrey, which so impressed my mum, was that despite us playing football or doing all sorts he always came back immaculately dressed without a speck of mud on him whereas I was covered from head to toe.

I loved those days and I have always loved Bedminster as an area. It was a real community where everybody seemed to know each other and everybody seemed to look after each other. It was home to WH Wills, makers of tobacco which they exported all over the world, and they were also the main employers in south Bristol. Their huge red-brick buildings dominated the skyline along with Ashton Gate, the home of Bristol City Football Club. From nearly every view in Bedminster you could see the ground, and for us youngsters it was a magical place. Everybody supported



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the team; my mum and dad were ardent fans as well as all our neighbours, and you just couldn't support anybody else.

Us youngsters used to go to watch the Robins every other Saturday, but we made sure we got there at half-time as then the men on the turnstiles would let you in free to watch the second half. Me and my friends loved it watching these superstars playing in the red shirts of City: men like John Atyeo, Mike Threasher and Gordon Parr, although the list is endless, and we would also be amazed when we saw them around the area. They were like gods to us all. You're so impressionable when you're young and if these men waved or said hello, which they often did, you would remember it for your whole life. I certainly have done.

Bristol City were languishing in the Second Division and managed by Pat Beasley, but to be honest we didn't care who was in charge or where in the league they were – to us they were the greatest team in the world. I always loved football and my dad, who was a good local player by all accounts who turned out for South Bristol Central, always encouraged me to play but if I'm honest I never had any real aspirations as I never thought somebody like me could become a player. I also thought that I wasn't really any better than any of my mates.

My first real inroads to football came at Luckwell Infant School, which was about a five-minute walk from our house. It was an old Victorian building which at the time I thought was huge but looking at it now, it's plainly not the big place I thought it was. There I came under the watchful eye of two teachers I

have never forgotten, Mrs Gibbs and Mr Prewitt. They both encouraged me and also taught me about the game and what was expected of you in terms of fair play and sportsmanship. Both were strict and tough but they had something about them that just made you want to learn from them.

Mrs Gibbs took us for exercise and she was the one who taught me how to play football properly, taking time with me and my mates on explaining how to strike a ball correctly. Mr Prewitt also took PE and he along with Mrs Gibbs encouraged the young Geoff Merrick to play for the school football team. Back then the schools league was a really well organised affair with league tables printed in the local paper and a list of fixtures, which considering I would have been about seven years old was an amazing amount of detail for school football. Our games were on a Saturday morning so me and my school-mates, the ones who lived nearby, all met up at the Luckwell Hotel round the corner from the school and got the 22 bus across the city to our fixture. We always got the 22 as it nearly always took us to where we wanted to go in Bristol, and if it fell short we just walked the rest of the way.

I loved playing outfield although at one time I really fancied myself as a goalkeeper, and on a few occasions I played in goal for the school. My favourite player was Tony Macedo, who was Fulham's goalkeeper. I thought he was brilliant and decided that goalkeeper was the position for me until Mr Prewitt and my dad had a gentle word in my ear about how the team needed me outfield. I wished I had gone against their advice in a local derby

against South Street School, who were just up the road from us. Mr Prewitt gave us a little team talk and warned me of their star player, a blond lad called Chris Garland. Mr Prewitt told me to watch Chris as he was an exceptionally good player. Chris was two years older than me and he lived in Ashton, which was right next to Bedminster, and although I cannot remember the result I do remember he ran rings round me that day and when we tussled for the ball, he punched me in the eye. Chris would become one of my great friends on and off the pitch; we shared some great times and some not-so-great times together at Bristol City and he will always be special to me.

I did well with Luckwell but as I said I never really had any thoughts of being a professional player. Mr Prewitt, however, believed in me and put me forward for the Bristol Boys trial at Bower Ashton, which was just up the road. The Bristol Boys had various age groups and they would play against other teams from different towns and cities. It was really prestigious to be selected as many lads who were picked through the years became professional players. I was about 11 and did well enough to get in the team.

Running alongside the football was another love of mine, which for a lad in the middle of Bristol seemed strange – farming. I remember me and my mate Bob Locke walked to Lower Ashton, which was a few miles away, where there was a piece of land called Parsonage Farm, owned by the Withes family. We knocked on the door and asked if we could do some work on the farm and the owner Les said, ‘Yes, of course.’ He said he would pay us five shillings a

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day so we were well chuffed. We loved it and at 12 I was driving tractors around. When Les wanted me to drive the tractor he would put one of his old coats on me along with his flat cap, so if anyone saw me they thought there was a thin old man driving the tractor. I don't think Health & Safety was invented then, not that we would have paid much attention to it.

This was a love that stayed with me all my life. I worked at Parsonage until I was 21 and then worked for another lovely guy called Joe Baker at his farm. I did all this alongside my football career and loved it. Pre-season and through the summer was hard work but I felt all the better for it. I have always been happier outdoors and it's a side of my life not many people know about.

Football was kicking in for me but something was looming on the horizon that could have easily scuppered my future career – the 11-plus exam. This was introduced in 1944 by the government as a selective process designed to direct pupils to grammar school or secondary school. You had one attempt, and the exam consisted of Maths and English. My dilemma centred around the fact that grammar schools only played rugby whereas secondary schools played football. So my choices were to pass the exam and go to Ashton Park School to play rugby or fail and go to Southville School and play football.

I was quite honest about what I wanted to do, and that was to fail the exam, leaving me to play the game I loved. It shows the love my parents had for me as they knew and told me to do what made me happy. I really don't think there were many kids

at that time whose parents would have been happy with their son failing but it shows how special they were. My head teacher, Miss Withers, was so against me failing that she tried to get me to go to Horticultural College but it would have been residential so that was never going to happen.

I took the exam and I remember when the results came through, me and Mum gripped the envelope and gingerly opened it. I was so nervous I couldn't focus, and then Mum took the paper, looked at it, and said, 'You have failed.' With that we jumped around the room. Looking back, it was a bizarre situation to have been told that I had failed and for those words to bring on such joy in the Merrick household.

I arrived at Southville School happy that my football would continue. The school was only a couple of minutes' walk from our house so again it was perfect for me. At Southville, I again came under the influence of some great teachers who made a real mark on my life, such as Vernon Templar and Dick Williamson. Mr Williamson was also a Bristol Boys selector and both men had a massive influence on my life. I was still playing for Bristol Boys and I remember Bristol City having 'open' games at Ashton Gate where kids could turn up and see if they could get a few minutes in the trial. I went along with my friends, mainly so we could have a game on a proper pitch, and I must have impressed with my few minutes as they asked me to sign a schoolboy form.

The form never really registered with me. I was happy playing with my mates and of course I was thrilled that City were

interested, as were my parents, but I had the philosophy that people like me don't become footballers. It's interesting looking back now but although I was a Bristol City schoolboy I never attended the ground for any coaching. In fact they didn't have an awful lot to do with me, and how it went couldn't be any further from today's football when lads join academies for intense coaching at around nine years of age or younger.

I continued to progress with Southville and our team made it to the final of the Woodcock Shield, a knockout tournament for school teams across Bristol and very prestigious to win. It was introduced in 1907 by Herbert Woodcock who was alderman to the council in Bristol. He believed in sport for young people and thought a competitive football tournament would be good for the schools. Our final was played at Ashton Gate and we were thrilled to be on the same pitch as the one our heroes used. We played Hartcliffe School and drew 2-2, with our two goals coming from a lad who joined from South Street by the name of Chris Garland. I was just glad to have Chris on my team rather than against us. Even at an early age you could see he was a real talent and for us he was somebody we all looked up to.

The two schools shared the shield for six months each and it was a brilliant feeling to be lifting a trophy at the home of my beloved Bristol City. So, there I was lifting a trophy at Ashton Gate and a Bristol City schoolboy, so surely things could not get any better? If only I knew what was round the corner.