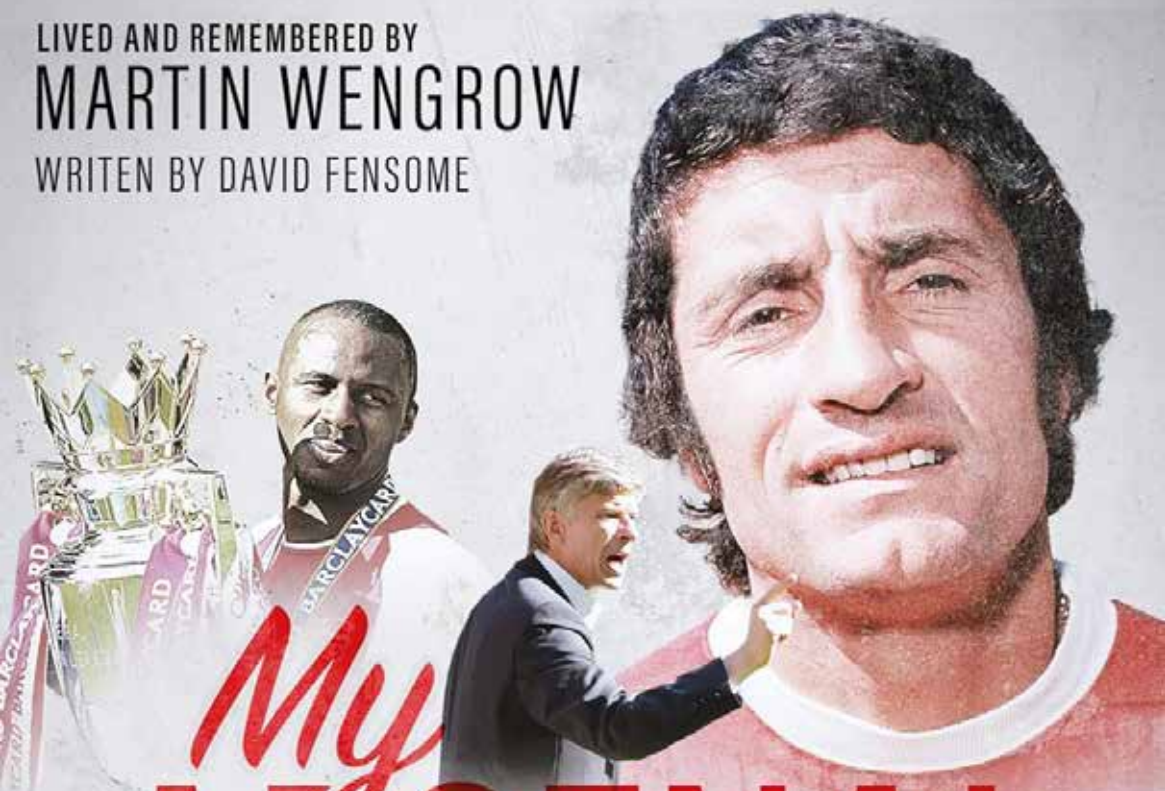
LIVED AND REMEMBERED BY

MARTIN WENGROW

WRITEN BY DAVID FENSOME



My ARSENAL Life

Doubles, Invincibles, Glory and Despair

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Foreword by David O'Leary

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Part One: Beginnings

Chapter One

1945–1952

I WAS brought up in London's East End; Hackney and then, later, Stoke Newington. I lived in a loving home where I enjoyed a complete sense of belonging but also in a home where an all-pervading sadness lingered. This sadness belonged mainly to my parents, who were Polish, Jewish refugees who had managed to flee the evil unfolding across Europe in the years leading up to the Second World War. They had found, in Britain, a welcome and a home where they could live a normal life of work, family and the uneventful hours of a wonderfully ordinary life. My parents had started to read and hear about the concentration camps and, when letters from family members left behind in Europe began gradually to dry up, inevitably a sinister implication began slowly to dawn on them.

I recall that some years later, when I was a young man, I was told by a cousin that, one day after the war, some people from the Red Cross had called and had imparted the information my parents had, perhaps almost daily, expected to hear; that all the members of their families, every single one, had perished in the Nazi concentration camps. That day, a wave of sadness descended and never really left our home. Perhaps the pursuit of glory with Arsenal has been a lifelong attempt to fill the void and the emptiness this unimaginable loss left in our home.

Consequently, we never talked about the war; nor did I ever hear mentioned the names of friends or relatives who were lost. My mum was especially sensitive to the concentration camps; if ever they were mentioned, she would just break down in tears. My parents mostly kept their feelings hidden; people did back then. After Mum had passed away, my dad opened up to me, but not about the war or the specifics of what preceded it, only about his own life growing up and the anti-Semitism they and other Jews encountered in Poland.

Like most children back then, my time was spent mostly out on the street, playing football and cricket with mates. On Sunday afternoons, my brother and I would always be the only ones left out kicking a ball around. I later realised that the simple explanation for this was that the other children were all going on Sunday afternoon visits to see grandparents or relatives – extended family my brother and I didn't have.

After the Second World War, Oswald Mosley and a ragtag of groups, all of them racist and anti-Semitic but now, perhaps, less publicly so, with the word 'alien' becoming the catch-all word used, began to concentrate their provocative efforts in the areas of London that I was brought up in. Mosley's provocations were beginning once again to precipitate trouble on the streets of London. There were rallies I recall on Ridley Road in Dalston, which would get broken up by groups of anti-fascists. By then black people were the main target; a message of 'anti-black' was thought more likely by Mosley's mob to gain some traction than a purely anti-Semitic message. It wasn't unusual to see messages like 'blacks out' daubed on the side of houses. It seems inconceivable to think this was happening while we kids still played amongst the bomb-damaged streets and houses, which were a very visible symbol of the recent fight against fascism. What my parents must have thought of Mosley's posters and boots while they were still psychologically laying their loved ones to rest can't even be imagined.

A vivid feature of winter life back then were the sulphurous fogs which shrouded the daylight hours, unhealthy weather which famously culminated in the Great Smog of 1952. Out of this veil of acrid, misty dampness we could hear the cries of the rag and bone man doing his rounds, the sound of his horse-drawn cart; and the daily milk cart, too, echoing down streets and through yards, drawing us momentarily away from our games of marbles, of conkers, the swapping of cigarette cards and the endless games of street football. In many ways, it was a wholly typical childhood for the time: but what made it untypical was how Arsenal loomed over it so totally, so comprehensively. As I look back, it feels strange that, of all the memories I can capture, almost every single one of them has Arsenal at the centre of it.

In 1951, I would have been five or six years old and by then I knew I was an Arsenal supporter. I recall that nearly all the boys in the street, including my brother, Jack, who was four years older than me,

followed Arsenal and I suppose I must have initially simply followed suit. Arsenal had won the FA Cup in 1950, beating Liverpool 2-0. The cup final back then was such a huge deal; the FA Cup meant everything. To supporters, lifting the cup at Wembley was more important than winning the league title. I suspect that most players would have said the same; winning the league bestowed pride but winning the cup dressed you in glory.

On my first day at school, I can remember sitting and looking through a copy of *Charles Buchan's Football Annual*. In it, there was a photo of Arsenal's captain, Joe Mercer, holding aloft the FA Cup. That photo mesmerised me like a holy relic and every day, when I got the chance, I would go and take the same book down from the shelf and stare at that photo; it was like a proof that there was something special about Arsenal.

Northwold Road Primary School in Clapton was where I began my education, in 1951, and it was here that I would later prepare for my scholarship examination (later the 11-plus) for Grocer's Company Grammar School (later Hackney Downs School), by far and away the most prestigious school in the whole of the East End at the time. It was my parents' dream that I would get into the school. I was surrounded at Northwold by fellow students who would go on to leave a mark in a variety of spheres when they grew up: the entrepreneur Alan Sugar; the pop and jazz singer and actress Helen Shapiro; the psychedelic singer/songwriter Mark Bolan (Mark Feld in those days); and the businessman and, later politician, Michael Levy (The Lord Levy). I recall once having a fight with the latter, although I have no recollection of what it was about.

By the age of seven, I had read so much about Arsenal that I knew every bit of information on every single player at the club; I don't think there was anything I didn't know. By this time, I was going to Highbury to see Arsenal play. This was all accomplished on pocket money of half a crown. I recall that the bus fare to Finsbury Park was tuppence either way and admission to the ground was one shilling and nine pence. Programmes in those days cost six pence, which meant that my outing to see Arsenal cost the sum of one penny more than the value of my pocket money! As a consequence, I had to forego the programme and try to get one on the way home from an adult who, by then, might have finished reading it. It never crossed my mind to ask my dad for that extra penny, something I have no doubt he would have given me.

By the mid-1950s, I was a nine-year-old at Northwold Road Primary School. One day, the sports tutor, a Scottish gentleman by the name of Mr Burns, called me to one side and said: 'I've been watching you play football in the playground. Will you play for the school team tonight?' My first practical thought was that I had no boots but that was brushed aside with: 'Play in your school shoes.' So, I played and gave a good account of myself against Craven Park. I turned out at centre-forward and up against me that day was a young lad who already had a reputation in school football and developed into one of the toughest defenders of the 60s and 70s – Ronnie 'Chopper' Harris! I sometimes wonder what he must have thought of me, in my smart shoes!

Nineteen-fifty-two saw Arsenal back at Wembley for another FA Cup final, this time against Newcastle United. Although the 1952 FA Cup Final ended in defeat, it stands out as an illustration of what 'Arsenal' means and captures that wonderful, slightly mysterious quality that runs through this club, always has, and always will. A group of us listened to the match at a friend's house, huddled around their radio. Arsenal lost and by the end of the game, I think we only had two or three players still able to run and we had just tried to hang on. I was so hugely disappointed but proud of the never-say-die attitude of the team that day.

I have since learned that there is an honour and a glory to be found even in defeat. Nineteen-fifty-two reminds me of 1980 in a way, the heartbreak of having nothing tangible to show for the team's wonderful efforts; at one stage in 52, we were looking good for a Double but ended up empty handed.

Twelve months later, however, when I was aged seven, we claimed the league title by the smallest of statistical margins: 0.09 of a goal, with goal average being the slightly arcane manner in which things were settled back then. Arsenal's final game of the season, which we needed to win to finish top, was versus Burnley at Highbury on Friday, 1 May and, thankfully, we won 3-2. The next day was cup final day and not just any old cup final day; this was the year of the 'Stanley Matthews final' and the whole country wanted Stan to finally get his winner's medal.

That year saw my first visit to Highbury; 4 October 1952 was the day. Everyone remembers their first game: the approach to the ground as it emerges out of the streets of residential housing, the click of the

turnstiles, the eager climb to the top of the stairs with a growing expectation and then that almost heart stopping moment when the pitch appears, revealing itself for the first time, spread out before you with two goals standing at either end, the teams confronting each other like opposing armies in that moment before they are given the order to charge. The smell is uniquely of a football ground. After that moment, you are never quite the same person again; you have crossed a threshold and entered a new and different world.

We were playing Blackpool, which meant Stanley Matthews, and the crowd was 67,000 – Matthews would put 10,000 on the gate at every ground he played. It was the noise which I remember most vividly; no 'Highbury library' about it in those days. The atmosphere was electric! I was instantly caught up in it, this vast cauldron of noise; the 'Highbury roar' it was known as. I recall the flat caps, rosettes and rattles. Wonderful! We won 3-1 and from that moment on, I simply couldn't get enough of it. I was completely hooked; nothing and no one would ever draw me away from Highbury. This was where I belonged.

There were further visits to Highbury that season: a 4-0 victory against Spurs – in front of a crowd of 70,000; 5-3 versus Liverpool; and a 4-1 success towards the end of the season against Bolton. Before the match with Bolton, I can remember hanging around on Avenell Road and I was approached by a very nice couple who, it turned out, had a spare season ticket and offered to take me in to watch the game with them. I must have been only seven or possibly eight and my first thought was 'I can save the admission money and have an extra two shillings to spend in the supporters' club shop after the game!' We all sat in the East Stand and the height of it made me feel quite giddy. I'd never been so high up. It was very kind of them; perhaps they often did that? I never thought to ask, just accepted my stroke of luck.

So, my first season of attending games had finished with us crowned as champions. It would be 17 years before Arsenal lifted another trophy and I would be a man when we won the Inter-Cities' Fairs Cup in 1970 on that emotional night at Highbury. By then, the Gunners had become so central in my life that they would push everything else – family and work – to the edges. A club later famously troubled by addictions, Arsenal would become my own all-consuming obsession.

Chapter Two

1953–1962

IN 1953, when I was seven, we had a national celebration, one of the first non-Arsenal events to capture my imagination: the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Things were still pretty bleak in '53; the material side of life felt very much the same as the war years. Meat rationing was still in place and only in 1953 did things like children's sweets become non-rationed. The coronation was a welcome splash of colour in an otherwise monochrome world – well, at least it would have been if it hadn't rained all day, with the pageantry muted beneath leaden grey skies. The street parties were washed out, so the celebrations moved inside and centred round the television. People all over the country were saving to buy their first set, so events like the coronation really helped sell the idea of family TV to countless households.

At the age of eight or nine, I learnt one of those valuable, but uncomfortable lessons that life can teach us every once in a while. During the school holidays, I helped out Bill, our local milkman, to deliver bottles. Bill was a nice chap and I got the grand sum of six pence for a couple of hours work a day. One day, after running up the stairs to deliver some bottles to a flat, I noticed that there, on the front doorstep, was a shiny half-crown piece. As soon as I noticed it, something within me didn't feel right. I picked it up and popped it into my pocket. I knew it wasn't the right thing to do, so I have no defence. I was probably a bit sheepish when I got back to the cart and I certainly didn't mention it to Bill. It was on my mind for the days that followed and, of course, in the end, Bill tackled me about it. I was walking home from school for my dinner one day a week later and Bill was waiting for me on the corner of Osbaldeston Road, where I lived. As soon as I saw him, I knew. He asked me if I had taken it, a customer's money left for him to collect. I was totally ashamed of myself, humiliated and

that was it for my job. I felt awful about it and I've never lost the taste of that experience. Bill did me a bit of a favour by tackling me and it became a lesson I didn't need to learn twice. I've never done anything like it again. Bill was a decent man and I let him down.

By the end of the 1953/54 season, I had become a regular at Highbury. It was also the season of my first away game. We made a poor start; in fact, we didn't even manage a goal until the fourth game and after ten games we stood at the foot of the table. On 10 October, I made the shortest of journeys for my first away game, travelling to White Hart Lane to take my place in a crowd just short of 70,000. That afternoon, Arsenal hit Spurs early and hard and by half-time were leading 4-0 through two goals from Logie, one from Milton and one from Joe Mercer's swashbuckling wing-half partner, Alex Forbes. Arsenal claimed the points with a 4-1 win.

There is a vivid football memory from that season, too; a sad affair involving one of football's gentlemen, Joe Mercer, who captained Arsenal to two league titles and an FA Cup during his time with us. On 10 April 1954, Liverpool journeyed down to Highbury for a match Arsenal won 3-0 as the season drifted towards the sort of benign conclusion that would soon become commonplace at Highbury. I think everyone in the 33,178 crowd would swear they heard the crack of the bone when Joe broke his leg; it rang out across Highbury like a death knell. There had been talk of Joe's retirement for years; he had his grocer's shop back in Wallasey. Colliding with a team-mate, Mercer sustained a double fracture of his leg. I can still picture him being stretchered off and before he left the field of play, he still managed, despite being in absolute agony, to raise his arm and quite clearly wave to all four sides of the ground in response to the standing ovation ringing around Highbury. He was 39 and must have known instantly that he'd never play again; we all realised that was the end. Joe had been a wonderful player, a decent man and a really fitting symbol of what Arsenal meant back then.

Despite a downturn in results and a growing sense of the end of an era, Arsenal remained a massive club; its reputation preceded it wherever football was played. It is interesting to note that as attendances at Highbury began to fall, Arsenal still attracted enormous crowds whenever they travelled; every year, some club would set a new record

for their home attendance when the Gunners visited. Everyone still wanted to see Arsenal. Everything goes in cycles and, deep down, I feared that this was the end of the years when Arsenal dominated. Not only were Arsenal in decline, by the mid to late-50s, Wolverhampton Wanderers and Manchester United's 'Busby Babes' were just two of the teams moving upwards and away from Arsenal.

In the years after the war, there was a national sense of decline; Arsenal probably just illustrated that in microcosm. The country had the Suez Crisis, when perhaps a bloated idea of our national importance and power skewed our thinking. In lots of ways, Arsenal mimicked that. You could see it in how we viewed ourselves as a club; the board thought it didn't need to try too hard when we wanted to sign players and having Highbury as our home probably helped sustain this presumption of unending superiority. Players still wanted to come to Arsenal, certainly; the facilities and the history of the club helped to impress them but perhaps the board overplayed it and thought they really didn't need to offer any perks to get top players to sign. For a long time, the idea that it was a privilege to pull on the famous Arsenal shirt was thought to be enough. It certainly didn't do Arsenal any favours and to the players we were courting, we must have seemed arrogant; 'look, we are doing you a favour by signing you', had had its day as a recruiting slogan.

Arsenal's manager at the time, Tom Whittaker, in some ways illustrates the problems that confronted Arsenal, as the world changed into a different, modern place. Tom had been at Arsenal since 1919, first as a utility wing-half, then as a physiotherapist and then as manager. He had a vast array of abilities. He served in both world wars and was a man known to be loved by the players; he was a very popular figure. But, looking back, I think he had struggled with problems at Arsenal since the mid-1950s and this had taken its toll on his health. In the end, as results declined, I don't think the board knew what to do with this great servant of the club. One can't underestimate what he achieved as a manager – two league titles and an FA Cup – but, towards the end, he made some unquestionably poor signings and I think his judgment was starting to go. He cut a sorry figure and one who seemed to lack confidence; odd in a man who had achieved so much inside and outside football.

I was given a small insight into poor old Tom Whittaker once. My brother, some friends and I were outside the main entrance on Avenell

Road to collect some autographs when Tom came out of the car park in his big black car and promptly drove straight over the wheels of my brother's bicycle, which was lying on the ground. Tom stopped and got out of his car and seemed very upset about it. He wasn't cross or annoyed; in fact, he went the other way and was very apologetic. Almost immediately, he pulled out his wallet and offered my brother a crisp £5 note and said: 'I hope this will pay for the repairs.' The average weekly wage was £10 in those days! What I noticed about this little scene was just how shaky Whittaker seemed. He really didn't look well. He died fairly soon after, of a heart attack, in 1956. He was only 58 but that day, when I saw him close up, he looked much older. Towards the end of his reign, the club seemed in complete disarray. The board did try to address the football side of things but that was badly handled, too, and only resulted in Whittaker's nose being put out of joint. A dapper young coach called Alec Stock was appointed as first-team coach; he only lasted 53 days but Whittaker must have felt publicly undermined. If you were trying to be fair to the board, then you could say they were motivated to do the right thing with the appointment of Stock but just went about it the wrong way.

In 1954, both Arsenal and Tottenham were keen on signing Danny Blanchflower. Tottenham had tabled a bid and Arsenal let it be known that whatever Spurs bid, Arsenal would beat it. Blanchflower, in any event, had his heart set on joining Arsenal but began to worry when their bid didn't materialise. Time and again, Whittaker assured Blanchflower not to worry, that he would be joining the Gunners. But when nothing happened, Blanchflower started to lose confidence in what he was hearing from Whittaker. Eventually, he would sign at White Hart Lane for £30,000 and Arsenal would miss out on one of the shining lights in the British game.

A few years later, in March 1959, and with the now deceased Tom Whittaker replaced by Jack Crayston and then George Swindin, Arsenal were again chasing the sort of transfer target who might reignite the club's fortunes. Chelsea, Tottenham and Arsenal were all after the strapping Welsh international Mel Charles, brother of the legendary John Charles. Swindin, in the end, managed to convince Charles that Arsenal were the club for him. When Arsenal signed him from Swansea for £42,750, it was for a record fee between two British clubs. The fact that Charles's stint at Highbury fell so flat, plagued as he was by injuries, is only part of the story; the other part is probably

one of the best illustrations of the law of unintended consequences. Once Spurs got wind of Charles's decision to sign for Arsenal, they immediately withdrew their bid and, as an alternative, went out and signed Dave Mackay from Hearts, who, along with Blanchflower, set in train the development of perhaps Tottenham's most successful ever team; two deals which so comprehensively changed the immediate futures of both clubs.

Towards the end of the 1955/56 season, Arsenal started to look a reasonable young team, with Groves, Herd and Bloomfield all beginning to flourish. We progressed to the quarter-finals of the cup after beating Charlton 2-0 at The Valley in front of 71,758 spectators. However, Birmingham City, the eventual losing finalists that year, beat us 3-1 at Highbury. After that, we went on a run of eight wins in the remaining 11 games and finished the season strongly in fifth place. There was a bit of optimism that summer and the following season, too, when we again finished fifth.

My parents weren't into sport and had no real interest in football but tolerated my obsession with all things Arsenal. Although we were Jewish, I suppose we might now be called 'cultural Jews', we certainly didn't practice the faith but we observed Jewish High Holidays and the intention, I am sure, was to be respectful of our roots. Given the experiences of my parents, that feeling of a rootedness in a culture and identifying with it perhaps took on a special significance to them. Inevitably, Arsenal and my Jewish upbringing had eventually to collide. On 15 September 1956, the Jewish Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, coincided with Arsenal versus Newcastle United at Highbury. My father made it clear where he expected my priorities, and my brother Jack's, to fall and, by way of emphasising this, he wouldn't give me my pocket money until after the game, knowing full well, given the chance, I would have headed to Highbury, N5. Jack didn't go to the game but I did. I don't think I ever really considered not going to Highbury that afternoon. I slipped out of home and when I got to the ground, I hung about at the Clock End, where I received the kind of providential benefit that, on reflection, my behaviour didn't really deserve; a gentleman in a flat cap offered to pay for me to get in. Once inside Highbury, I remember standing with him to watch the game and I got on with enjoying the match as best I could, given what I knew awaited me upon my return home. Arsenal lost 1-0, Bloomfield just failing to rescue a point at the death when he hit

a post. With the game concluded, I had no choice but to return home and face the music. My mother was the first to see me and she said simply: 'You have behaved very badly and your dad has punished you.' And the punishment? At the side of my bed, in a group of shoe boxes, I kept a hoard of Arsenal programmes, home and away, and copies of *Gunflash*, the supporters' club publication. These had been lovingly collected over a long period of time and were taken out each evening by me and pored over; they represented the spoils of every last penny of pocket money. I was taken to the dustbin by my father and made to look at them, every single one of them ripped to pieces. I was only a boy and I cried for hours afterwards. It still feels, to this day, a very severe punishment; it remains a moment from my young life that I have carried with me through the years and I can vividly recall the sensation of cold emptiness that spread through me as I stood there looking at the torn pages. My parents' lives were hard ones and perhaps my actions were interpreted as a small desertion or belittlement of a culture and way of life they sought to defend and which brought them some comfort.

It wasn't until I was much older that I began to reflect and to see why it might have been that Arsenal meant so much to me. I am sure it goes back to the almost wholesale loss of my extended family. At a stroke, my history had been wiped out; a yawning chasm remained where all those people should have been and perhaps Arsenal filled that loss. Perhaps, too, as a young boy, my own sense of Jewishness simply hadn't taken hold of me. Needing something to belong to, something that bestowed upon me an identity and the membership of a community, I turned to Arsenal and Highbury and, luckily, found a place for myself there.

During the 1956/57 season, my brother, Jack, joined a youth club, the Victoria Club, and one week it was announced that Arsenal star Jimmy Bloomfield was going to begin a series of coaching sessions. Jimmy probably would only have picked up a couple of quid for his time but players back then were always on the lookout for a few extra quid. I wasn't old enough to join in the coaching sessions but I went to watch and the chance to see Bloomfield was enough for me. After the sessions, I would bend his ear with questions. I literally bombarded him and wouldn't shut up. Jimmy took it all with a wonderfully kind heart. I must have tested his patience – he certainly earnt his couple of quid.

To cap it all, Jack and I were invited by Jimmy to a game at Highbury – against Manchester City on 6 October. We turned up at 2pm sharp to collect the tickets from Jimmy himself. The seats we had been given were in an area of the ground known as The Paddock, located in the lower East Stand on the halfway line and the game turned out to be a ten-goal extravaganza, with Arsenal winning 7-3; Holton playing at centre-forward scored four and Bloomfield got one, too.

That season, I completed another Arsenal rite of passage – I joined the supporters' club, with a membership number of 22351. Another bond with my destiny secured.

The progress of the two previous seasons felt like it stalled in 1957/58 and there was another humiliating third-round cup exit, too, this time at the hands of Northampton Town of the old Third Division (South), 3-1.

Only a few weeks after that cup defeat, Arsenal entertained Manchester United. A huge crowd that day of nearly 64,000 caused the gates to be closed by 2pm and they witnessed a fantastic and memorable game of football. United, the reigning champions, swept into a commanding three-goal lead but early in the second half, Arsenal struck back with a magnificent passage of play when they drew level with United at 3-3 in the space of four frenetic minutes. Although United would go on to win the game 5-4, Arsenal took much encouragement from their performance. It was a fantastic game and for years after it was referred to as 'the greatest-ever game'.

The events which followed a few days after the match have immortalised that afternoon: the Munich air disaster. The game at Highbury remains a very fitting epitaph for the 'Busby Babes'. One newspaper report stated that there had been a whiff of the good old days about it; it had been such a tremendous occasion and I remember the sides leaving the pitch arm in arm – it had just been one of those matches. While the disaster was very much Manchester United's private grief, it was also the wider game's loss – to a degree, we all felt it. The 'Babes' were a brilliant team. At least that afternoon at Highbury can stand as a very fitting memorial to the lives lost in Munich.

I generally had the happy knack of making my parents proud. After the Grocer's scholarship, and a sudden and unexpected move to Ilford,

I put in a very sound performance in 1958 during my bar mitzvah, the traditional Jewish coming of age for a boy on their 13th birthday. It requires an aptitude for Hebrew and I found this aspect of the process quite difficult but, after much perseverance, I got there and gave a good account of myself at the Beehive Lane Synagogue, much to my parents' obvious pride. Perhaps this was one small payback to my father for disobeying him when I chose Highbury over joining him in our family observance of Yom Kippur! These sorts of rites of passage in Jewish culture are usually accompanied by a big and happy family gathering but, because of our family circumstances, there was no large family to help me celebrate. I was the only boy in my Hebrew classes who didn't have a party. If I am honest, this didn't overly bother me but I confess to being a bit sore at missing out on the presents!

I settled at my new school and I really began to enjoy my developing social life in Ilford. Through my older brother, Jack, I began to meet a lot of boys and girls of a similar age. Around this time, Jack became friendly with a lad called Michael Tabor, who, after a classic rags to riches story, went on to be become the famous and successful racehorse owner, whose successes included The Derby, the 2,000 Guineas and the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe amongst many other victories as a part owner. Michael was a West Ham United fanatic; in fact, he tried to buy the Hammers in 1996. Michael invited Jack and me to accompany him to the Boleyn Ground over the Christmas period of 1957. West Ham were fighting for promotion from the old Second Division and were, in fact, promoted as champions that season. The Boleyn Ground had a very different feel to Highbury; more compact, more enclosed, with a more immediately partisan atmosphere to it, which, if I am honest, made a real impression on me – I was quite in awe of it. The whole crowd joined in with 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles' and the supporters on the terraces would sway in unison. It was the first time I had witnessed the famous Chicken Run terrace, from which visiting wingers were prone to copping some good old East End abuse. I used to love how different grounds had their own little traditions, something which was lost over the years as grounds were redeveloped and, later, some were replaced altogether by new, largely out-of-town, edifices of metal and concrete – the rush to modernity seemed to wipe the slate clean of some aspects of the game's history and culture. West Ham won that day 6-1 against Bristol Rovers and it felt like the crowd just never stood still all afternoon!

There was a massive upswing the following season, 1958/59, and it's not going too far to say we could have won the league; in fact, if it hadn't been for a run of injuries to key players, we probably would have done. One of those injuries was to Scottish international Jackie Henderson, who we signed from Wolves. Tommy Docherty joined us, too. We were starting to look a decent team at last; everyone had settled in and things were looking good as we went top in mid-September after winning a north London derby at Highbury. We remained top or thereabouts up until the end of February but, when the injuries hit, things began to fall away. Some of the football we played that season was the best for years. Bloomfield was really hitting his stride by then but I think a lot of it can be put down to a young coach we had: Ron Greenwood.

We had style and a bit of panache to our football that I am sure Ron was responsible for. The players obviously bought into it and there were some great results and performances that season. Greenwood, who combined his Arsenal duties with coaching the England under-23s, was one of a small group of young coaches who were revolutionising the approach to tactics in English football. He had studied continental coaching methods and managed to introduce many of the ideas he discovered into the English game. He was well liked by the Football Association from these early days and, after a successful spell at West Ham as manager and then general manager, he succeeded Don Revie as England's permanent boss.

Greenwood, though, was a central player in another bad mess-up by the club in the 1959/60 season, although in no way could the blame be laid at his feet. That season saw us fall back into mid-table obscurity, while another massive misjudgment by the club resulted in us missing out on the most keenly sought-after young footballer in Britain. After all the messing around which eventually undermined the attempted signing of Blanchflower, you would have thought the club would have been careful not to make the same mistake again but perhaps that old, 'it's a privilege to play for Arsenal' sentiment still lingered.

Everyone agreed that Huddersfield Town, managed by Bill Shankly, had a prodigy on their hands. Denis Law had had four successful years with the Terriers and I remember seeing a headline in

the papers: 'Denis Law: I want to join Arsenal.' Arsenal boss George Swindin had effectively sealed the deal, helped by skipper Tommy Docherty, who had privately brought the young Law to Highbury and shown him round, allowing him to experience the atmosphere and the aura of the place. Law was smitten and all it needed was for him to sign on the dotted line. I went to bed that night very excited at the arrival of one of the game's genuine rising stars, someone who, at a stroke, was going to put 10,000 on each gate and raise the club's spirits again. I came down the following morning to find that Law had signed for Manchester City for a new record transfer fee between British clubs of around £55,000. What I later learned had transpired was this: Swindin, believing the hard work had been done and that Law had, in effect, been secured, sent his coach, Greenwood, to conclude the formalities. Law was perhaps put out – annoyed even – by what he might have interpreted as him being taken for granted. He promptly turned down Arsenal and signed for Manchester City instead – perhaps with some additional incentives? I do think Swindin should have gone to complete the deal in person. It would have been a really significant signing; it would have certainly helped lift the gloom over the next couple of seasons, especially as Tottenham were soon to do the Double.

One day, out of the blue, my parents told me that, because they hadn't really settled in Ilford, we were moving again, this time to Whetstone in north London. 'Great,' I thought; I'd not even heard of Whetstone. This was in 1960, we had only been in Ilford for three years and, at the formative age of 14, I found it all pretty unsettling. However, Whetstone offered a leafier lifestyle than I had been used to and one even bigger bonus: my new school, Tollington Grammar, in Muswell Hill was co-educational! This was definitely an improvement. My first day there turned out to be a good one. Walking into the classroom as a new boy, there right in front of me was a group of lads exchanging Arsenal programmes – it was an absolute blessing, as the lads, every one of them, welcomed me as a fellow Arsenal supporter. I immediately felt at home.

My first P.E. lesson was an eye-opener – the goals had nets! I really enjoyed my football at Tollington. We had a pretty strong side and while I was there, I represented Middlesex Schools a couple of times – perhaps the pinnacle of my own football career.

In late 1961, Arsenal hit some great form, beating title challengers Burnley away 2-0 and they followed that up with a thrilling 2-1 victory over the Spurs side that had recently won the Double and which now had Jimmy Greaves in its ranks. So, when we drew Manchester United away in the fourth round of the FA Cup at Old Trafford, we travelled up full of confidence. I arranged to go to the game with my very good friend at Tollington Grammar, David Stubbles, and we were to travel up with the Arsenal supporters' club. I was 15 years old and this was my first visit to Manchester; I was incredibly excited.

We gathered at Highbury Corner at around seven on the Friday evening and the coach travelled overnight up the A1 (this was before the M1 was opened). When we arrived early on the Saturday morning, it was like arriving on a different planet. Rows of little terraced houses and narrow streets; the locals with their strong Mancunian accents with that strange nasal resonance. *Coronation Street* was just becoming the most popular programme on TV and, for us, it felt like we were in the Rovers Return.

The Arsenal fans gathered in their thousands behind the away goal and were raucously awaiting the kick-off. Then, half an hour before the start, and out of nowhere, we watched in horror as a fog descended from the Old Trafford Station and completely enveloped the ground. The kick-off was delayed for an hour but the fog only grew thicker before the match was called off. Talk about disappointment! I was absolutely convinced that we were going to win this tie and my disappointment was compounded when we lost the rearranged midweek fixture which, of course, I couldn't attend, by one goal to nil.