

PETER KENNY JONES

SWEeper KEEPER
**TOMMY
LAWRENCE**

The Story of
Liverpool and Scotland's Legendary
Flying Pig

Foreword by Ian Callaghan

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Growing Up

THE PHRASE ‘humble beginnings’ is often overused, but when it comes to the Lawrence family during Tommy’s childhood in South Ayrshire it’s certainly true. One of three children to Francis (known as Frank) and Robina (known as Ruby), William (known as Billy) was the eldest, his sister Mary the youngest child and the family were packed into a small cottage. The home had one bedroom and one living room, with two inset beds in the wall of the living area. This was to house five people at its most cramped and was also the place that both Tommy and his sister were born.

The family home had no running water, so trips to the stream at the bottom of the garden that fed off the Water of Girvan was the only way the Lawrences could collect some for their daily needs. Acres of green land surrounded them, and the main village had little more than a shop, a pub and a small local football team. The cottage actually belonged to Ruby’s parents, Thomas a miner and Mary, names she would use for two of her own children. While Frank was part of the

war effort and after Thomas passed away in 1942, the two mothers could help each other in more ways than one.

The village of Dailly was as humble as the Lawrence family home but that didn't stop Tommy from being a normal, active, sporty and popular child within the local community. Seeing the young Scot without a ball at his feet (not just in his hands!) was as likely as seeing running water in the family home. His popularity may have also been down to the fact that he was the person who could provide the football for their daily kickabouts. It does always seem that these infatuations with the sport start very early when it comes to anyone with a future in the game, and that's again the case here.

It's also impossible to not mention the impact that the Second World War had on Tommy's childhood. Being born during the fighting would have obviously been a traumatic experience, more so for his mother than the second infant child she had to care for. As Frank was also part of the fighting, it made it all the more stressful for Ruby. Being in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, his ability to understand and repair the more sophisticated technology involved in the war effort made Frank a crucial part of the British Army unit and led to a trip to Sierra Leone as part of his duties. Helping to teach the locals how to drive was an insight into his passion for mechanics and the positive impact the Scot had on most people around him.

Frank and his three brothers all saw action and miraculously all made it back home. The first time Tommy actually met his father was as a four-year-old, once the war came to an end and the world had returned to (relative) peace once again. It's a story that's certainly not out of the ordinary for anyone born in the early 1940s, but a sobering reminder of the impact this must have had on so many families.

Tommy and his elder brother Billy were three years apart in age but had a very close childhood in wartime and post-war Dailly. Their younger sister Mary was born over five years after Tommy, so for much of the very early days in the future Scotland international's life his brother was his best friend. Both went to the same school and would spend a lot of time together before, during and after their days in different classrooms.

Tommy was always proud of his big brother and there's perhaps no better story that illustrates this than when the pair visited the local harbour when they were younger. As five-year-old Tommy was playing near one of the ropes that was mooring a ship, he tripped and fell into the water. Thankfully, Billy was on the scene, and despite being just three years older, he made the quick decision to dive in and save Tommy from a certain death by drowning. No matter what shenanigans Billy was to cause in later life, he always had a keen and vocal supporter in Tommy. It would be commonplace to hear him say, 'Don't you say that about my brother, he saved my life!'

Once Frank had settled back into life in Dailly, and before Mary was old enough to join her elder brothers at school, the family made the short move to Ayr in search of their own family home and to allow Ruby's mother some respite from three small children in her overcrowded cottage. Tommy's parents were looking to restart their lives after the war and create opportunities for their three young children.

When Ruby first met her future husband, she was working as a parlour maid in service, and by the time the war commenced she was a housekeeper with much of the same roles being handed to her. She would work all day maintaining someone else's home, to then go back and help manage her own. Frank was a chauffeur before he left for the army and his interest in cars had led to an increased understanding and interest in how they worked. It was then the plan that, once he returned from the war, the job search would commence in the more densely populated Ayr as a motor mechanic, given his experience during the conflict.

Once Frank could find a job, he could then try to get the family a home, which came in the form of a prefab council house. After a lot of hard work, stress and time apart, the Lawrence family finally had a place that the five of them could call their own.

This terrific work ethic and strong desire to better themselves and the future of their children meant that Frank and Ruby were about to make a decision that would change

the course of the life of their family. Having experience working with cars meant that the former soldier always kept an eye and ear out for any potential opportunities to work on and drive in the type of cars he could simply not afford to own himself. Although fixing them was certainly a passion, it never compared to the thrill of sitting in the driving seat. When the news came round that a reasonably wealthy company owner, Adam Lythgoe, was in need of a chauffeur, it caught Frank's attention. Hearing that they were also interested in finding a new housekeeper and that the roles came with a tied house too made it almost a no-brainer. Both he and his wife could work for the same family together, be provided a new home, and they had experience in the exact roles on offer. There was one stumbling block though – the jobs were over 200 miles away.

Once Frank posed the idea of a move to Culcheth in Warrington, the town based right between Liverpool and Manchester, it took some convincing to uproot the entire family and their lives. Seeing as both of Ruby's parents had now passed away though, the only family she had left in the area was her brother – another Thomas. The move was eventually agreed upon in 1954 and it was to be a decision that certainly made the future possibility of Liverpool finding themselves a new goalkeeper much easier, given Tommy's move to the North West of England as a 14-year-old.

The children arrived in a new village and had a tough task of settling in, with their 'strange' accents making them immediately different. Tommy's love for sport and ability meant that it was perhaps easiest for him to adapt in Culcheth Secondary Modern. Mary attended the local grammar school, and it was always a topic of constant teasing from Tommy, whether out of jealousy or not; it was a running joke within the family. This joking spirit and sporting talent makes it easy to understand why he found his new surroundings so easy to settle into.

This wasn't just in football though; Tommy represented his school in athletics, he was a great sprinter, and a keen and able table tennis player, where his talents were honed on the makeshift table erected by Frank in the family backyard. Tommy would take on his whole family, and his desire to win at all costs meant that the rest had to improve quickly to keep up with him! This grew into an interest in tennis too, but football was always his first love.

This sporting acumen may have also stemmed from the long walk that was needed to get to class. Tommy's daughter Tracey remembered stories from her dad: 'He used to say that he used to walk five miles to school. He didn't, it was probably more like two. But I know there were no shoes and he used to walk across the fields just to get to the school. Him and my Uncle Billy, they would walk off in the morning on their own, all across the fields from Dailly to school. They

used to play out in the fields afterwards too. It was hard but he only had good memories, he always spoke fondly of those times – he loved it.’

It wasn’t just cars that had the interest of Frank either – there was also a strong passion for football from him. Being a promising player in his younger days meant he was always interested in the sport, although the war commencing in his early 20s curtailed any hope of progressing in the game. His love for Ayr United was passed down to his two sons, although this passion was somewhat transferred to Bolton Wanderers when the family moved south.

The two young brothers were now in a new area and their father was keen to help them flex their footballing prowess. Whether this was an attempt to live vicariously through his children due to his lost playing days, or a genuine certainty in their talents, Frank’s belief in the boys would soon pay off. The presence of two other local brothers around the same age as the Lawrences meant that there was also company for them whenever Tommy brought his ball along for a kickabout. These were Peter and Roger Hunt. Anyone who recognises the latter brother’s name will certainly be interested in seeing his first mention in this tale, but for anyone unaware, you’ll soon be hearing a lot more about him!

Frank would often use his contacts and personability to pitch the services of his sons to local teams, which was a tactic that would soon lead to the ultimate reward. Before

Tommy had his growth spurt though, the feedback would often be to bring the youngster back once he had grown a bit more – something that didn't happen until around his 16th birthday. It wasn't just between the sticks that you would see the future keeper playing, however, as most of his youth was spent pursuing a role as an outfield player.

Back to family life, Frank's parents were both still alive and thus provided the Lawrence family an excuse to travel back annually to Scotland and also visit whenever they had the opportunity. William Lawrence can probably be attributed some credit for the sporting life his grandson Tommy was going to have but certainly not for his soon-to-come rather uncomplimentary nickname of 'The Flying Pig'. William was a horse groomer and a jockey, and his passion for the sport meant that well into his 70s he worked in the racing stable in Ayr, showing the equestrian's love for horses. For a profession where being short and light is the desired profile, it's almost comical to learn that Tommy is often best remembered for being a footballer whose physique was closer to the man stood in the crowd behind him than it was to the 21 athletes in front!

There's also a distant family link to Joe Corrigan, a man who went on to play in goal for Manchester City for 13 years and work as a goalkeeping coach for Liverpool for ten years. It seemed that this athletic prowess was always going to come to the fore at some point and Tommy certainly seems

to have made the most out of the sporting gene present in the Lawrence family tree.

This inherited ability was shining brightest in Tommy and these trips back to Ayr meant that he maintained an appreciation and love for Scotland, despite leaving at such a young age and never moving back to the country of his birth. Not just through his teenage life but throughout the later years too, he returned to the cottage where he spent the first nine years of his life, which was something that reminded the soon-to-be star of how far he had come. The sacrifices of his parents not only moved the young Scot closer to the footballing institution he was soon to join but also allowed him an opportunity to begin his own working life too.

When he left school at 15, Tommy was looking to earn himself a wage to help the family, and to spread his own wings in adult life. This once again came through the same family that his parents worked for, in an office working as a clerk on Hob Hey Lane for Joseph Lythgoe, son of the man who had provided Tommy's parents with their employment in Culcheth. This was enough to hand the teenager his first step on the working ladder, while he continued to play football at a local level for Stockton Heath (today known as Warrington Town) in the mid-1950s.

Speaking about growing up with her elder brother, Mary Bailey said: 'I don't think Tommy ever really changed at all. He was one of these people that didn't think *if*, it was always

when. He didn't doubt that he could do anything, like when he went for his driving test and he never thought, *If I pass ...*, it was always, *When I pass ...* He didn't doubt himself. He was always pretty confident when he was young, confident in his own ability. He obviously didn't mind being the centre of attention. You've got to be like that or you couldn't do what he went on to do.'

This rather interesting childhood of moving homes certainly moulded Tommy into the character he later became. His father Frank had a passion for cars and his grandfather William for horse racing, and although neither rose to the level of stardom that Tommy was to experience, these strong male examples of following dreams and earning a living from them would have certainly provided a young aspiring footballer with confidence that there was a chance to excel in his own passions. This tied in with his dad being so positive about the youngster's ability on the pitch and created a perfect platform from which to go on and achieve great things. Being constantly reminded of his humble start in a tiny cottage provided an appreciation of what hard work can lead to. By being one of the lucky families that didn't experience huge loss during the Second World War also meant that positive role models were a constant presence in Tommy's childhood.

When the Lawrences returned to the original family home in Dailly in 2023, the sight of a St Helens-born Evertonian living there was a great shock. The way in which

the building has been renovated, but still keeping much of its original charm, is something that would be sure to have brought a huge smile to Tommy's face – someone who was very proud of where he came from. Cherry-picking the best parts of each aspect of his childhood meant that he made the most of every opportunity his family worked so hard to provide.

From the generosity of his grandmother, Mary, to allow them into her cottage, to the sporting prowess of his grandfather, William; the tireless work ethic of Ruby, to the ingenuity and positivity of Frank. The community spirit of Dailly and Culcheth and his own morals and natural abilities all created the perfect storm, which sprouted a 15-year-old on to the cusp of greatness.