

*'Jim was a happy man to live with. My best mate.'*

Irene Greaves (wife)

*'I had the most amazing relationship with him. He was like my rock.  
Dad had a really, really close relationship with the grandchildren.'*

Lynn Greaves (daughter)

*'Dad was very kind, very generous and very supporting.'*

Danny Greaves (son)

*'The true spirit of the man, the great family man, the great footballer,  
who transcended the rivalries of clubs, never changed.'*

Des Benning (cousin)

*'We were best men for each other because we had  
grown up together. We were mates.'*

Dave Emerick (best man)

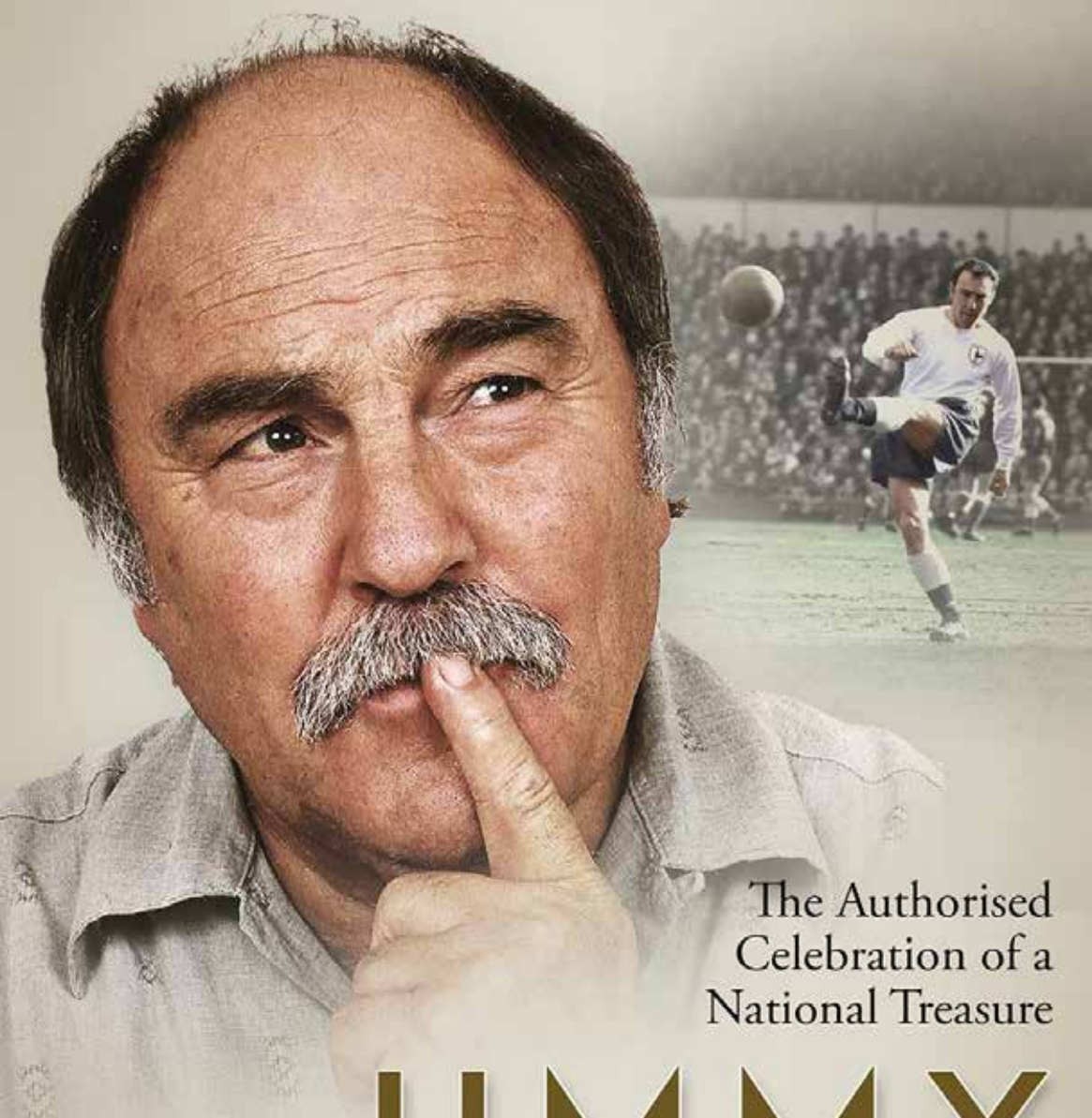
*'Jim proved himself to be the greatest goalscorer there has ever been.'*

Cliff Jones (teammate)

*'As Jimmy reached me he ruffled my hair  
[after 17-year-old Perryman made a Greaves goal].  
That moment will live with me forever.'*

Steve Perryman (teammate)

MIKE DONOVAN



The Authorised  
Celebration of a  
National Treasure

THE JIMMY  
GREAVES  
WE KNEW

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**PART ONE:**  
**THE PRIVATE LIFE**

Nearest and Dearest



# Irene Greaves

## *Wife*

IRENE GREAVES laughed affectionately and softly as she told a tale which touched her heart and funny bone. It concerned a variety of roses in her Essex garden which reminded her of her late husband.

She said, 'He loved gardening while mucking about with the fish pond every day. All the roses I've got here in the garden, he planted. I do the gardening now. All the shrubs have been lovely this year. I can't lift the pots like I used to which is frustrating but I've got to keep his roses going. They are in all sorts of colours and normally come out June time.'

And, with tongue in cheek and an overload of fondness, she added with a smile, 'What he did, which "annoyed" me, was he took all the labels off! So I don't know the names of the roses!'

The widow of Jimmy was warmly recalling the twinkled-eyed man she knew as a boyfriend, husband, father of five children and best friend for more than 60 years; someone who would have laughed along with her.

She said, when asked to sum up her time with him, 'Jim was a happy man to live with. The most incredible sense of humour. My best mate, without doubt. And he was so generous. Not just with his money, but with his time. We used to confide in each other and I miss that.'

‘He loved his dogs. Walked them every day. Unfortunately, two years ago we lost a beautiful golden retriever. He was only seven. His back legs went. I still miss him. It’s amazing. It’s nearly three years. I still miss that dog. His name was Lester.

‘Jim’s favourite sports person was Lester Piggott [who passed on 29 May 2022]. So he called our dog after him. We used to go racing and actually met Lester the jockey himself, might have been Newmarket. Jim was thrilled to meet him.

‘Jimmy and I did a lot of moving. Everybody said that. We were professionals in the end! But I’ve been in our last home – in Danbury – for a while now, nearly eight years. That’s good for me.’

Staying put, of course, kept her late husband and the time they spent together inside that particular structure of bricks and mortar in her mind’s eye. A source of comfort. One, of course, much needed. Irene said, ‘I’m on my own after 63 years now. It’s a huge void. It really is.’

How else did Irene try and keep her spirits up? She said, ‘Just think of the good times. Some days it’s bad. I don’t really like living on my own, to be honest. Even as a kid I slept in the same bed as my sister. So I’ve never really been on my own. Like most people, you get on with it. There’s loads of widows around.’

It was love at first sight with her life partner. Irene said, ‘It was. We were married 63 years. It’s a long time, isn’t it? I can’t see the kids doing that today. They get married later and then they grow apart. They don’t stick to it, do they?’

‘We met at a youth club. And then we had a mutual friend who was going into the army. So we went into London, can’t remember which station it was, and dropped him off. And I said to Jim, “What are you doing today?” He said, “Well, I’m going training.” So I said, “Well, I’ll come with you.” And I sat up on the stands at Chelsea and watched him train. And that was it.



‘First impressions were pretty good. Was it his dark good looks? Probably. It did help. We dated. Probably went to restaurants and parties.’

The couple married at Romford Register Office in Essex, on 26 March 1958, when both were 18. Irene recalled home life with her husband.

She remembered Jimmy as a home bird despite his football career trajectory swiftly moving him into the superstar bracket via Chelsea, AC Milan, Tottenham Hotspur, West Ham United and England.

She said, ‘Jim was, strangely enough, quite a private man considering he was so famous. And he preferred to be home than anywhere else, to be honest. No, he wasn’t domesticated.’

The couple suffered tragedy when their second child, Jimmy Junior, born in June 1960, died before his first birthday (see Mitzi Robinson and Dave Emerick chapters). Irene said, ‘That was a very sad time. But in those days you got on with it. You didn’t get counselling. It’s a different life completely now; social media and what have you. I’m technophobic by the way. I don’t do anything like that.’

‘I would say the World Cup in 1962 was hard at home because Jim was away for a long time and I had a baby, Mitzi, as well as our first child and daughter Lynn. But on the whole you got used to that sort of thing as he was going away every other week with his club.’

They were a sociable couple. Irene said, ‘We used to meet up with team-mates and the partners. There were always parties. Bobby Moore, who Jim played with for England and West Ham, was a mate. An absolutely lovely man. I can still see him sitting there in our living room.’

‘I don’t think the camaraderie now is the same in the dressing rooms as it once was. There are so many players from different nations. You can’t have that sense of humour that they used to be able to share during the time Jimmy was playing.’

‘Also, we used to leave Tottenham after a game and go up to the Bell and Hare pub [on the High Road]. The fans used to come in. You can’t catch the players now, can’t get near them.’

The couple had two more children, Danny, born in January 1963, and Andy, born in February 1966. Irene said, ‘I remember when Danny was born. It was in the middle of a terrible, cold winter. They didn’t play football for weeks. What did Jimmy do with himself? Not a lot. Planning our next house move? Could have been!’

‘Andy was born in the year England won the World Cup, with Jimmy missing the final, although nowadays they have subs and he might have got 20 minutes!’

‘Jim was a very good dad. He played with the kids. Used to take them to places, including the football. He was very, very generous. The children loved him. That shows what he was like.’

Irene remembered when she first started watching Jimmy play. She said, ‘When I first went to go and see Jim play at Chelsea I’d go into the stands with the fans. I was just a young girl. I wasn’t really a football fan, although I amaze myself by watching it now. I quite like sport, and played netball.’

‘Jimmy’s career just grew and grew. We went off to Italy [when Greaves joined AC Milan in 1961]. He just really couldn’t get on there with [coach Nereo] Rocco. We lived in Milan. We just had the two girls, Lynn and Mitzi, of course. Then we came back and went to Tottenham. Probably the best times because it was a great club. It was super. We had a lovely time. A good time in our lives.’

‘All the wives were lovely. We just got on, unlike today when they are going round suing each other [in reference to the ‘Wagatha Christie’ court case between Coleen Rooney, married to former England and Manchester United striker Wayne, and Rebekah Vardy, wife of England and Leicester City striker Jamie, over social media posts].’

‘We had what they called a tea room we went into at White Hart Lane. I used to enjoy going with my brother Tom regularly to the matches. He was in business with Jimmy. He’s passed away now, bless ’im. I’ve lost all my siblings this year.’

Irene revealed how bemused her husband was at his exit from Spurs to West Ham United in March 1970. It seemed one bad performance – an FA Cup defeat against Crystal Palace – led to manager Bill Nicholson deciding to let him leave White Hart Lane after close to a decade of service as a makeweight in the deal which brought World Cup-winner Martin Peters from London E13 to N17. And it shook Spurs’ players and fans, who didn’t understand the decision. Irene said, ‘Neither did Jim.’

Irene accepted she had had to ‘share’ her husband with the public due to the attention he received with being rated the game’s greatest ever goalscorer. She said, ‘You had to share him, in a way. You got used to it in general, to be honest. Sometimes it was irritating, but on the whole you just got used to it.’

‘Jim was always good with people. He was quite private, as I said, but connected with the public. The general public liked him. He just had this way with him. I think he was a people’s person really. Approachable. He’d let people come up and interrupt him but he never, ever got cross. He was always civil and what have you.’

‘He was a national treasure. Absolutely. The adulation when he died was amazing. It was just incredible. It was an outpouring. And it wasn’t just football fans but whole households.’

‘The carers that used to come in. To them he was just “Jim”. After he died, they suddenly realised just how famous he was. They knew he was famous but they didn’t know how famous.’

That relationship with the public was reflected when Jimmy went into television after his full-time professional football career came to a close with West Ham, followed by spells at non-league Brentwood Town (see Dave Emerick chapter), Chelmsford City, Barnet (see Barry Fry chapter) and Woodford Town.

Irene giggled when reminded how Jimmy got into TV following a 'prompt' from her after he had turned down an initial offer; an action which might get her described these days as an 'influencer'. And she remained proud of what her husband achieved on the small screen.

Irene said, 'How good was Jim there?! So good. Especially when he did *Saint and Greavsie*. If I had £1 for everyone who said to me how good he was! Even the players who were going out to play on the day it went out would watch it. It was so funny. It might be considered non-PC in places now. They wouldn't cope with those bits! He was off-the-cuff, just like he was in life. He went straight into it. He'd just have a quip. Just so funny. It was just him.'

There were bumps in the road over the years that Irene shared with the love of her life. She said, 'It was interesting being with Jim! Well, it's ups and downs in life, isn't it? That happens to all people. When people say, "We've never had an argument," I don't believe it. It's impossible to live with someone all that time and not fall out. It's life. In the end you can always apologise, and say, "I don't know what I'm apologising for, but I'm apologising."'

The biggest bump, perhaps, was when Greaves revealed he was an alcoholic in the wake of retiring from the professional game at the age of 31 in 1971. It led to a brief separation and divorce proceedings for the couple before reconciliation.

And Irene was full of praise for her husband getting his condition under control and abstaining for the rest of his life. Irene said, 'As a character, he was a nice bloke. As I've told you he was funny and generous, but Jim also had strength of character which he especially showed when he gave up the booze. It was a tough time. Not an easy thing. It was like talking to someone who was under anaesthetic all the time. It's just they are not listening.'

'He did give it up a couple of times previously, but on one particular night he said "no more" and that was it! Amazing. It's

like people giving up smoking. It was difficult, because it is such a social thing.'

Did Jimmy become sober because of his love for Irene and the family? She said, 'No. I don't think that happens with alcoholics. Think they have to make up their minds themselves. Jim woke up that one day and said, "I'm not going to drink." And that was in 1978. And he never did. Even though wherever he went after that, people were drinking. He did well. Really well.'

The couple were able to enjoy more good times together once more. Jimmy enjoyed his television career and developed as an after-dinner speaker and theatre entertainer in public. The couple also revelled in a settled home life, but it all changed when he suffered a major stroke on Sunday, 3 May 2015.

Irene said, 'It was absolutely awful. Life completely changed overnight. Bless him, it was the start of six years he didn't want to be here. It was hard work. Carers were coming in four times a day. A terrible situation, just awful. Absolutely awful. It would have been better when he had his stroke that he'd have gone then because the six years that he lived were just not nice. It was hard. The kids were supportive. Lynn helped quite a lot at home. And Danny helped on the football side of it. And I have to say Tottenham were very good.'

She recalled how Jimmy was cheered by former team-mates. Irene said, 'Jonesy [former Spurs winger Cliff Jones] used to ring up Jim a lot. Jim would try and answer him and what have you. I have to say, he was very good, Jonesy.'

'Alan Gilzean and Pat Jennings came to see Jim. It was lovely. Lovely men. That was the only times he used to cry when the players went. Alan has gone now. We're all getting to that age, that's the trouble.'

'Quite a few players came to the funeral, including Jonesy and Pat. Also, I saw Jonesy's wife Joanie there. Hadn't seen her for years. It was lovely to see her. I like her.'

Irene revealed she kept her husband's ashes in her bedroom. She said, 'I always say "goodnight" to him every night.' Irene planned to scatter Jimmy's ashes in the near future. She said, 'We were lucky because we lived almost in the middle of National Trust woods. No one is going to build on them. As you turn left and go out of the house you go into loads of woods to where our dogs' ashes are. That is where Jim's going. I'm going to take him over there and spread his ashes.'