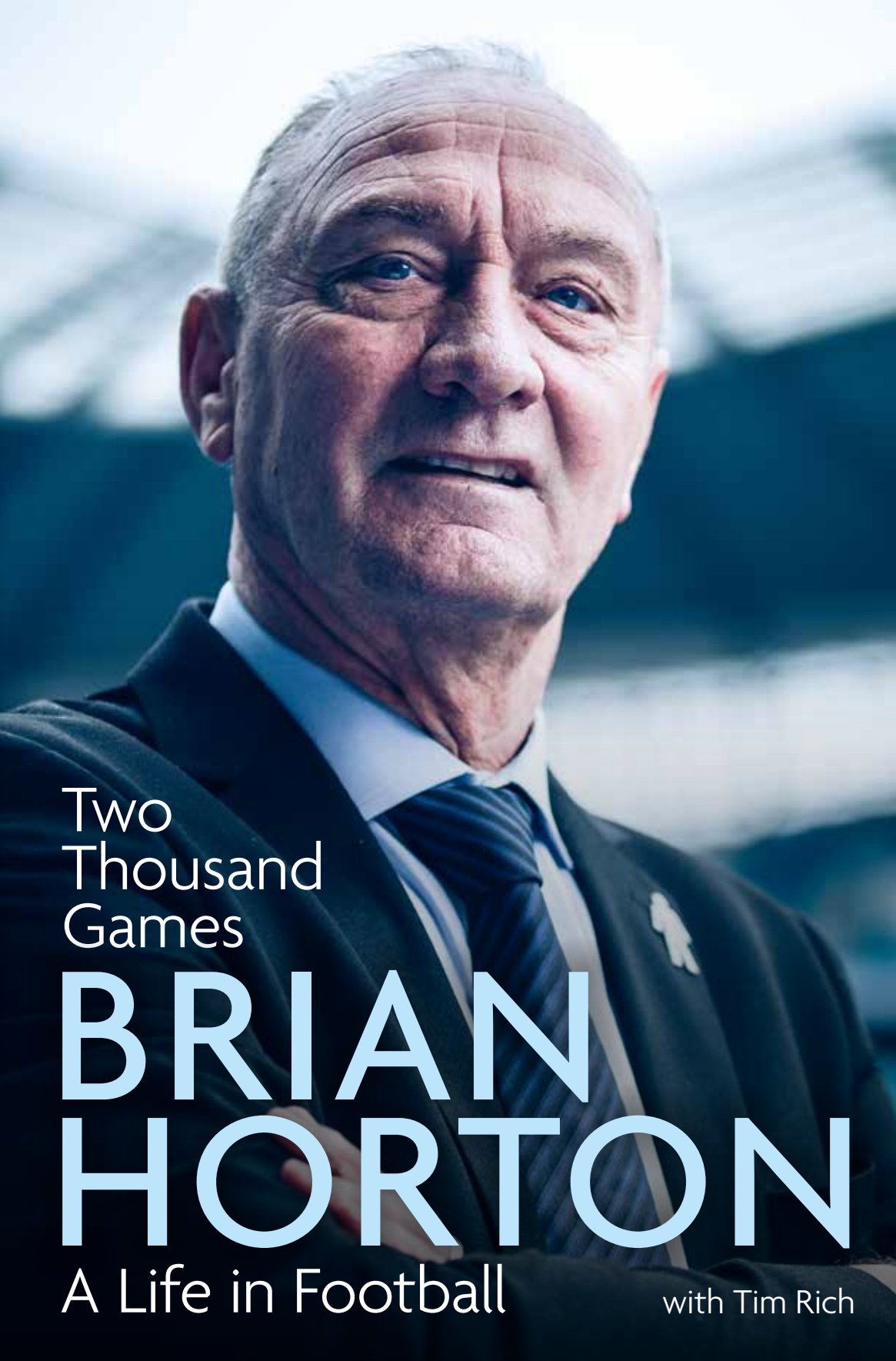

Two Thousand Games

BRIAN HORTON

A Life in Football

with Tim Rich

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Contents

Sold for a Pint of Shandy

I WAS a miner's son born in a coalfield that is now largely forgotten.

The North Staffordshire Coalfield was not vast like South Wales or Yorkshire but tight, compact and full of pits. Before the First World War, Cannock Chase produced five million tons of coal a year. Hednesford, where I grew up, was a mining town. Its football team were known as 'The Pitmen'.

My father, Richard, whom everyone called Dick Horton, was a miner, who had a passion for horses – there was not a day that went by that he did not put a bet on one. His other passion was football and in particular Wolverhampton Wanderers.

When I was growing up, he would take me everywhere across the Midlands to watch a game but Molineux was special. We would sit on the wall behind the goal. Ron Flowers, who was my hero, Peter Broadbent and Norman Deeley were wonderful footballers.

When I first started watching them, Wolves were the best team in England. In 1959, when I was ten, they retained the league title. The next year, they won the FA Cup.

I was far too young to have gone but in 1954 they had beaten the fantastic Hungarian side, Honved, led by Ferenc Puskas under the floodlights of Molineux. It was the first time a white ball had been used in England and it made Wolves fans believe that they supported not just the best team in England but maybe the world.

If I wanted a pair of new boots, or the new white ball, my father would do a double shift at the pit. We lived on a Coal Board estate and in front of the houses there was a big field where we played. We made a football pitch on it and after a week all the white would have come off the ball.

My mum, Irene, worked as a cook at Cannock Grammar School. She was the one who ran our household. She was a very strong woman and it was perhaps from her that I got my character and determination.

My older brother, John, I don't think ever kicked a ball in his life. His passion was cars and he went on to own his own garage and became a very successful businessman.

My younger brother, Alan, was more academic than either of us and worked for the Professional Footballers' Association sorting out mortgages for players.

My father was not from a long-standing mining family. His father had a business building sheds and it was taken over by my uncle – Dick's brother. When my dad was injured

in the mines, my uncle asked him to work with them and I watched them demolish an RAF camp in Wiltshire and then take away the biggest pieces of wood to turn into sheds.

However, they say that once you are a miner, you are always a miner. Dad couldn't stand a working life away from the coalface and he went back down the pit. He loved pit life, the miners' talk. Most nights he would put on his collar and tie and go down the pub to continue the conversations.

He died in a tragic accident. John owned the King Ford franchise in Stoke and sponsored many of the Stoke City players as well as Mark Lawrenson when he was at Liverpool.

John lived in a large house in Staffordshire and, after he had retired, Dad would come and work in the garden or help him with odd jobs around the house.

The house had a sweeping staircase that curved upwards. Dad wanted to climb up a ladder to clean a window but John's wife was about to go out and she said: 'Don't go up without me holding the ladder. It's not safe.' When she came back, she found my father dead at the foot of the stairs. He had gone up the ladder and fallen.

Much as my father loved mining and miners, he did not want any of his sons to follow him down the colliery shaft. When I was 15, I was taken down the pit. I was by then desperate to make it as a professional footballer but this was a reminder of where, if it didn't happen, I would be going.

Sport had been part of my life ever since I could remember. I was captain of the football team at my primary

school, St Chads, where we won the league and cup and went to a secondary school, called Central, where sport was at the centre of the curriculum. We had two teachers, called Mr Hubbard and Mr Salter, who organised not just football and cricket but badminton and trampolining.

In January 1963 we were all moved to a new school, The Blake, which had been built on land once owned by the West Cannock Colliery Company and had been used to stockpile coal.

By then, I was playing for Staffordshire and then for Birmingham District and had met a teacher called Ron Bullas who became one of the most influential people in my life.

He was a schoolteacher who scouted for Birmingham City and ran a club called Cannock Athletic in the Walsall League. I played in their under-18 team when I was 11. Ron was way ahead of his time. He would take me and three or four others to the gym simply to practise skills, like keepie-uppies and drag-backs – the sort of thing that nobody else seemed to be doing at our level.

Because of Ron's connections to Birmingham City, we would go to the club's training ground at Elmdon, near the airport. I was driven down by Malcolm Beard, who was from Cannock and a regular part of Birmingham's midfield.

Birmingham were then a very powerful side, perhaps as good as they have ever been. Malcolm played for Birmingham against Roma in the 1961 Fairs Cup Final and was part of

the side that beat Aston Villa to win the League Cup two years later.

The Midlands in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a hotbed of football. Wolves were the dominant team but Aston Villa had won the FA Cup in 1957 and the League Cup in 1961.

Birmingham didn't take me on as an apprentice but Walsall did. They were in the Third Division. I was 15, three years younger than Allan Clarke, who was already the star of Fellows Park. Like me, he had sat behind the goal at Molineux. He had been brought up a West Bromwich Albion fan but, from his home, it was one bus ride to Molineux and three to The Hawthorns.

Arthur Cox was a coach at Walsall and after training he used to keep the first-team goalkeepers back and allow Clarke to practise his finishing against him. He was one of those footballers that you knew would make it. In 1966, when he was 19, he was sold to Fulham for £37,500, which was then a huge sum of money for a teenager.

Ken Hodgkinson was one of the big personalities at Walsall when I was breaking into the reserves. He was just coming to the end of his career, an elder statesman of the dressing room.

Of the apprentices at Walsall, only me and a lad called Geoff Morris, who would become the youngest player in the club's history when he made his first-team debut, had really broken into the reserves.

We spent the summer of 1966, the World Cup summer, doing pre-season training and then the manager, Ray Shaw, offered me a lift to the bus station, which seemed very strange. As we were driving into town he said: 'We've made a decision not to keep you on for the third year of your apprenticeship.'

I could not understand what he was saying. I thought I had done enough. Ken Hodgkinson was gobsmacked I had been given a free transfer. I was broken-hearted. I was 17 and it was the end of my life. I had been rejected by Birmingham and now Walsall. I could not imagine where I would go from here. I wasn't just thinking of football. I had no profession.

There was a guy, Bryan Yates, who was married to my cousin, Jeanette Horton, who had a bricklaying gang. He played in goal for Hednesford Town and he knew where work could be found on the sites.

At the same time, I was asked if I wanted to play for Hednesford. I was working on building sites in Walsall and playing non-league football. Looking back, it was probably the best four years of my life.

The building work brought in decent money and my mum sorted out the tax. There would be match fees and win bonuses from Hednesford – and we won a lot. I was driving a Ford Anglia which had belonged to my brother.

I was then more of a forward than the midfielder I became. Their player-manager was Dick Neal, who had played for Lincoln and for Birmingham in the 1960 Fairs Cup Final against Barcelona.

He was sacked not long after I joined. His replacement was Granville Palin, whose great claim to fame was that he had been part of the Wolves side that had won the 1958 FA Youth Cup Final after losing the first leg 5-1 at Chelsea. They had scored six at Molineux.

I treated playing for Hednesford as if it were a full-time job. My mates would be taking the usual Friday night release down the pub and I would be with them with a Coca-Cola or an orange juice.

I grew up in a tight community and I still keep in touch with my school mates – 'Wink' Bakewell, John Blackham, Alan Dangerfield, Gary Willis and Micky Elcock – more than 50 years on. Gary and Micky were very good footballers and played alongside me at junior and senior school.

We would train twice a week, on a Tuesday and a Thursday and because the lights at our ground, Cross Keys, were sometimes not good enough for much ball work, we would go on road runs. I forged great friendships at Hednesford, particularly with Billy Millard, to whom I was best man at his wedding.

Hednesford had former pros like Jimmy Campbell and Ray Wiggin, who had played for West Bromwich Albion and Walsall, and they were not playing for the sheer love of the game. They wanted the win bonuses.

I had known from an early age how much these mattered. When I was a teenaged apprentice for Walsall, I was playing for the reserves at Dudley Town and I cost them a goal. I was

the last man in the wall but they were clever, played the free-kick past me, and a lad ran across and scored.

My team-mates went absolutely berserk. They slaughtered me because I had cost them the game and cost them their win bonus. Ken Hodgkinson, who was Walsall's senior pro, went over to me and said: 'You'll never do that again, will you?' I never did.

My gaffer on the building sites around Walsall was a workaholic called Harry Bann. We would build the inside walls once a house had its roof on and Harry's schedule was to do a house a day. Once I had done a wall, usually with breeze blocks, Harry would come over, check it and then it was on to the next one.

I loved building sites and their conversations. There would be Irish plasterers who always had a story. There would be others who were football daft. We would stop for a sandwich and some football talk. Combined with training two nights a week with Hednesford, it made me astonishingly fit, strong and tough.

We worked the same site in Walsall for several years and then went over to a new job at Sutton Coldfield. When I arrived, Harry was not there which was very unusual. I carried on with the work and went in the next day.

That morning there were police on the site. They said: 'We've come about Harry Bann. He's committed suicide.' They had found him in his car, dead. I was devastated. I had worked next to him for four years.

He was one of the happiest men you could wish to meet. However, his wife had had a baby, she suffered from post-natal depression and he had met someone else. Everything fell apart and he ended his life with an overdose in Sutton Park.

I was on my own but I had learned enough to carry on doing walls by myself. However, at Hednesford things were changing.

In 1970 we beat Kidderminster Harriers to win the Staffordshire Senior Cup, which turned out to be my last game for Hednesford. Gordon Lee, who was the manager of Port Vale, had been watching me and was now ready to make an offer.

Before joining Aston Villa, Gordon had played for Hednesford and continued to follow the club. Port Vale had just won promotion to the Third Division but they had no money, there was no question of a transfer fee but he told the club secretary that he would buy him a pint of shandy from the club bar, 'to make it worth your while'. The story Gordon told was that I had been sold for a pint of shandy.

I was, in fact, sold for more than a mixture of lager and lemonade because Port Vale agreed to play a pre-season friendly in which Hednesford would keep all the gate receipts.

At Hednesford one of the supporters had told me I played like Nobby Stiles. When I returned with Port Vale to play the friendly at Hednesford, the players heard me being called 'Nobby' and the name has stuck with me forever. It was not a bad player to be named after.

Although it was what I had wanted since I was a boy it was not an easy decision to become a professional footballer. I was 21 when Gordon Lee approached me and I had more or less abandoned the idea of being a pro. I thought those dreams had passed.

At Walsall I had earned £6 a week as an apprentice. I was now a self-employed builder who could reckon on about £20 a week. Hednesford paid £7 a week but with bonuses that would come to another £20. All in all, I was earning about £40 a week. In today's money, that was £600. I was still living at home so I had plenty of cash. The Anglia had been upgraded to a new Ford Cortina GT.

Port Vale offered me £23 a week. To become a professional footballer would mean taking a pay cut of nearly 50 per cent. I was only ever going to make one decision but, fortunately, I had met Denise, who was to become my wife. She was a very clever girl who earned more than I did, working as a computer programmer, which in 1970 was highly specialised work.

We were saving to buy our first house and with Denise's salary I could, ridiculous as it might sound today, afford to become a professional footballer. I signed the forms on her 21st birthday.