

JOHN LYALL

A Life in Football



By Dr. Phil Stevens
Foreword by Sir Trevor Brooking CBE

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To the memory of John Lyall and Ron Greenwood

Acknowledgements

My aim in writing this book has been to construct John Lyall's life story mainly through interviews with his family, former players, colleagues and friends. It is an indication of Lyall's reputation in the game that so many people were keen to cooperate with the research.

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It is said that most of a writer's time is spent reading. In the preparation for this book I have read countless match programmes, newspaper reports and many of the excellent books on the history of West Ham United and Ipswich Town. The bibliography at the

back of this book lists the standard works on the history of these two famous clubs and others I have found helpful for my research.

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Preface

by Murray Lyall

My dad and his great mentor Ron Greenwood were so much more than managers; they ran the club from top to bottom and stamped their personalities on it to such an extent that they became the very fabric of the club. Both brought unrivalled success to West Ham and without doubt they are the most successful managers in the club's history, but more than that they were responsible for creating many of the traditions that West Ham is renowned for. They were instrumental in West Ham being known as *The Academy of Football* with an enviable conveyor belt of home-grown talent and a free-flowing style of entertaining football.

After taking over his beloved West Ham from Ron, when he left to be England manager, doing things the *West Ham* way was something my dad had inherited and believed in strongly. By this he meant the style of play and the reputation of the club as a whole both on and off the pitch. He was the Boss and with the assistance of his backroom staff he managed every aspect of the football club, including players' contracts.

In the football world he was widely acknowledged as a perceptive, innovative and visionary coach, who simply had another dimension, and was honoured to have had the pleasure of coaching and working with some of the greatest names in the game. Every training session was different and if something didn't work, he would analyse it and improve it. John Lyall wouldn't accept technical faults.

His great teams of 1980 and 1986 played the simple game of pass and move, but he also encouraged his players to express themselves. There could be no better example than Alan Devonshire who, under dad's watchful eye, developed from a promising non-League footballer to a West Ham legend and England international.

As a Hammers' fan I ask myself, when was the last time I was excited by a West Ham side and I find myself thinking back to the

Boys of '86 – biased because it was my dad's team maybe? What is certain is that it was a time when the team was good to watch. Things were done in a simple but thorough way. Players were keen to learn and develop through the sheer enjoyment of going to the training ground each day to learn how to play the West Ham way.

It was a privilege for him to be a football manager in an era of greats such as Sir Matt Busby, Bill Shankly, Jock Stein, Bill Nicholson, Brian Clough, Bob Paisley, Terry Venables, Sir Alex Ferguson and Sir Bobby Robson, who were all very special men in their own right and with whom he shared a great rapport, understanding and love of the game.

The John Lyall we all knew had self-respect and was highly esteemed in football across Europe. Although a disciplinarian in his approach to the game, John Lyall always respected other people and was courteous to everyone. He had a great regard for football and what it could do for people in their lives. The respect he had from players, coaches, directors and most importantly... the fans, was earned through his open and honest approach to things.

Our family is honoured by the fact that his memory and legacy will continue with the publishing of this book and it is important that the traditions and principles he, and many others, stood for in the game are maintained in future generations.

Foreword

by Sir Trevor Brooking

It is a great privilege to be asked to write this foreword about John Lyall. He was certainly a wonderfully gifted coach, but even more importantly he was a hugely respected and trusted friend. I was a player at West Ham United for 19 years and during that period had just two managers, Ron Greenwood and, of course, John. I was very lucky to have such a memorable career at the club I supported as a little boy, but even more fortunate that it coincided with two special talents at the helm as managers.

My first encounter with John was when I was being shown around the club. I was introduced to him when he was working in their offices after suffering a knee injury that curtailed his playing career. He was always a very approachable individual, but this early introduction revealed an immediate and strong link to each other as we both attended Ilford County High School for Boys. As Old Parkonians we enjoyed a quick exchange of familiar teachers and pupils who had crossed our paths, while also reflecting on how beneficial that quality academic experience had been for each other.

By the time I joined West Ham after I finished my O-levels, Ron Greenwood had already encouraged John into his coaching structure at the club and so my own progress as a player almost mirrored his own development as a coach. Throughout those 19 years from 1965 to 1984 I can honestly say my football experience was one of enjoyment, fulfilment and improvement. My assumption for most of that period was that all clubs and players received a similar programme of learning from their respective managers, but over time the feedback from other players highlighted that was often not the case.

John and Ron both believed in encouraging players to maximise their talents by expressing themselves creatively and technically. They gave us the individual confidence and belief to play to our

personal strengths but embrace it into a team ethos which was entertaining for all watching fans. We were encouraged to think about the game too, and many of us did early coaching sessions in schools which made us appreciate how different the game can appear from the touchline.

If there was one clear distinction between the two managers then it was definitely John being firmer and stronger with players than Ron. As time has moved on, players have tended to challenge authority more, especially with the extra money and profile coming into the game. I thought John dealt with that transition superbly and his excellent man-management provided a perfect balance between clear decision-making, alongside fairness in the manner of keeping people informed.

When I stopped playing in 1984 I naturally kept in touch with John's remaining spell at West Ham, plus his impact which followed at Ipswich. The large numbers of players from both clubs who attended his Service in 2006, reflected the massive respect we all had from our football time together.

At that Service I will always remember that Sir Alex Ferguson flew down to speak, even though his club, Manchester United, had been knocked out of the Champions League the previous night. He eloquently conveyed how John had helped his early managerial years at Old Trafford by always being a reassuring voice to speak to for guidance. It was a friendship John himself kept very private.

My final thanks to John is on a more humorous note. When I shook hands with him in May 1984, following my last game for the club, he punched me lightly in the stomach and said, "I can see you putting on a load of weight now you are not going to have me on your case!" I naturally defended myself and said that would not happen. But in all honesty, during the years that followed, John's words often ticked over in my head whenever my trousers started to feel a bit tight. So even now I am still listening to his wise old words because for me he is someone to whom I will always remain indebted.

Introduction

John Lyall was one of the most successful managers in English football in the 1980s. The former West Ham full-back, forced out of the game by a horrific knee injury at the age of 23, showed immense courage and determination to become one of most admired coaches of his era. Lyall led the East London club to their highest-ever top-flight league position, won the FA Cup twice, once against the mighty Arsenal, and took the club to the final of the European Cup-Winners' Cup. But Lyall's career did not progress effortlessly from one triumph to the next. It was full of crushing lows and extraordinary high points which he met with good humour and a healthy dose of Scottish stoicism. As Kipling might have written, *he treated the imposters of success and failure in exactly the same way.*

The Upton Park faithful loved him, not just for his success, but for encouraging his teams to play football the *Hammers'* way. To take this unfashionable club to within a whisker of winning the old 1st Division title in 1986, only to be pipped at the post by Liverpool, was a remarkable achievement and a tribute to Lyall's outstanding leadership and inspirational coaching style. Many of his ex-players and colleagues talk about Lyall's excellent man-management style. Professional football clubs are rife with rumour, intrigue, vendettas and cliques. Lyall would have none of this and inspired a common purpose in his staff, players and crucially, the fans.

Cruelly sacked by West Ham in 1989, Lyall spent 18 productive months working with Terry Venables at Tottenham, before being snapped up by Ipswich Town, who were then languishing in the lower half of the old 2nd Division. Lyall achieved a minor miracle with the *Tractor Boys*, leading the Suffolk club into the newly-formed Premier League in only his second season at Portman Road.

John Lyall's influence as an innovative and perceptive coach extended beyond East London and Suffolk. It is not widely known

in football that England managers, Sir Bobby Robson and Terry Venables, regularly turned to Lyall for advice and guidance, as did the younger Alex Ferguson. The story of how these top football brains shared their considerable expertise makes interesting reading for all football lovers. Lyall's chief battle cry was excellence. He insisted on high standards and expected his players to follow his example of studied professionalism, attention to detail and exemplary personal conduct. At Upton Park he was astute enough to gather around him a dedicated staff team and a core of high quality footballers who understood exactly what their coach demanded of them.

As the appointed successor to Ron Greenwood, Lyall slipped quietly into the manager's job at the Boleyn. But, as the former England manager was quick to acknowledge, Lyall was very much his own man. Greenwood acknowledged his successor was a stronger character, despite his outwardly genial nature. At once amiable and tough, Lyall possessed a fine football imagination and feel for the modern game as his West Ham side very nearly swept all before them.

Former players, colleagues and fans all agree that Greenwood and Lyall were special. Neil Burns suggests the pair had,

'...a rare ability to touch both hearts and minds across big communities. Despite being no longer with us in person, the quality of their example continues to impact on many people's lives, both in the world of football and beyond.'

If Lyall was a highly respected public figure, his family and friends paint a picture of a much-loved and sorely missed husband, father and companion. He was a devout family man and in some ways, despite his success, unsuited to the crass, commercial world of the Premier League. Lyall is part of the DNA of West Ham United, his values and achievements are buried deep into the claret and blue soul of this once celebrated football club. While Lyall was at Upton Park the poetry of the Hammers' football was protected.

Despite his undisputed allegiance to West Ham it never surfaced at Ipswich, where he led the *Tractor Boys* into the Premier League in its inaugural season. Ex-players and coaching staff from Lyall's time at Portman Road continue to have a deep regard, almost reverence for their former manager.

No one who knew Lyall failed to like him or to respond and engage with him. He never compromised his deeply held values and dignity, despite the professional temptations that came his way – the beliefs instilled in him by his parents were too deeply ingrained. Early in his managerial career he promised his wife Yvonne that he would retire from the game he loved in his mid-50s. Needless to say, he kept his word, only too aware there is a life outside football.

As he led his team out at Wembley for his two FA Cup wins, the Hammers' manager had the appearance of a very proud man. Tall, confident and immaculately dressed, Lyall provided an impeccable example to his players. It is now just over 30 years since Lyall took his West Ham side to the summit of the English game and Ipswich Town into the Premier League. This is the first biography of John Lyall and is offered as a warm tribute to his outstanding contribution to the history of two great football clubs.

Chapter 1

A happy childhood

Today's West Ham fans must look back on the club's golden age with tremendous affection and longing. In the years between 1975 and 1986, under the leadership of the saintly John Lyall, the Hammers came close to winning the 1st Division Championship for the first time in their history, while twice winning the FA Cup. Following the first West Ham manager, Syd King, and his successors Charlie Paynter, Ted Fenton and Ron Greenwood, Lyall was only the fifth manager of West Ham in just over 80 years. He represented the very best traditions of the Hammers pioneered by the club's founder, the East London shipbuilder, benefactor and moralist, Arnold Hills. With the peerless Bobby Moore as his captain, Greenwood won the FA Cup in 1964 and the European Cup Winners' Cup in 1965, but it was his prodigy John Lyall who led the Hammers to their highest-ever league position, glorious European campaigns and two unforgettable FA Cup triumphs.

The Hammers have a special place at the heart of the English game. The West Ham way of playing a fast-flowing, attacking football, full of bewildering exchanges and great goals, gave a grateful nation Moore, Hurst and Peters, and some of the most exciting football ever seen in this country. John Lyall was one of the creators of the West Ham Academy and a true pioneer of all the good things the club came to represent. His record places him alongside legendary historical claret and blue figures like Hills, King, Greenwood and Bobby Moore himself. As a young man Lyall played with the great West Ham names of the late 1950s, and if it were not for a career-ending injury he might have developed into a decent international defender. But it is as an exceptional coach that Lyall is best remembered both at the Boleyn Ground and at his second club, Ipswich Town. He was part of the 50s' generation of Malcolm Allison, Noel Cantwell, John Bond and Malcolm Musgrove, yet many years later he was a thoroughly

modern manager full of ideas, well-prepared, and in his early days, desperately keen to learn. Lyall had a great teacher in Greenwood and learnt from older players at the club like Allison, Bond and Cantwell, but he was always very much his own man and as a coach had a decisive influence on the club's reputation for playing exciting football. As a manager Lyall would have much preferred to lose a highly entertaining game 4-5 than grind out a 0-0 draw, although he would have had some harsh words to say to his defenders after the game.

The impression I have gained of Lyall from conversations with fellow coaches, managers, ex-players and friends was of a deep thinker about the game of football. Here was a man who combined a true love for the game coupled with a genuine respect and affection for all his players. A born leader, from the outset this inspirational coach had a serious interest in improving individual players and developing successful teams. Lyall's qualities included sound judgement and a keen sense of timing. Throw in a lifelong ethic of hard work, persistence and forensic attention to detail and you have all the personal attributes required for a successful football manager. There is one other quality which marks out Lyall from most other managers. It is difficult to define, but can best be described as a certain presence. Player after player has spoken of his command on the training ground and in the dressing room – he commanded respect by his sheer presence – a rare quality indeed.

John Angus Lyall was born in Ilford, Essex on 24 February 1940. His mother, Catherine was from the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides and his father, James hailed from Kirriemuir, near Dundee in north-east Scotland, a birthplace Lyall shared with Sir James Barrie of Peter Pan fame. Kirriemuir is set in the rural vastness of the Braes of Angus where young John acquired his life-long devotion to fishing. John's dad was the son of a ploughman and the second oldest of eight children. Lyall's mother, Catherine, was born in the crofters' village of Back, near Stornaway, on the Isle of Lewis, bordering the Minch, one of the most testing stretches

of sea around the British Isles. She was one of six children and on leaving school entered domestic service. Life in the Outer Hebrides for its 25,000 or so inhabitants was tough and challenging in the early part of the 20th century. Despite its awesome beauty, the cold, inhospitable weather and remoteness the Hebridean Highlands were no place for young people with ambition.

For John's mother, staying to work on the island meant digging potatoes or helping to cut the family peats, none of which appealed to an ambitious young girl with her entire life in front of her. So, like many others of their generation, young Catherine and her brothers and sister left the island to find a future on the mainland. Remarkably, all became successful in their chosen careers. Older brothers, Angus and Donald left for the United States to become successful businessmen, while Roderick followed and built a career for himself in the car industry of Detroit's motor city. Angus did eventually return to Lewis, but retained his entrepreneurial spirit buying out the local bus company with his younger brother, John, who later became the local village Postmaster.

Catherine's sister Kate also returned to Lewis, and not to be overshadowed by the boys, set up her own successful dressmaking and tailoring business. In many ways Kate reversed the trend of young girls on Lewis as John points out in his autobiography *Just Like My Dreams: My Life with West Ham (1989)*. It was a long-standing tradition on the island for girls to go into domestic service, primarily on the mainland. At the time, service offered a respectable career for young girls throughout the United Kingdom. Working class parents were delighted if their daughters secured a job in a comfortable household where they would be secure, looked after and reasonably clothed and fed. Perhaps lacking the same spirit of adventure as her brothers and her sister's latent entrepreneurial skill, John's mother, who was the youngest in the family, chose the only available route open to her, which was to go into service. She quickly obtained a position with the wealthy Glenmorangie whisky owning family based in Edinburgh, where she steadily worked her way up the household ladder and became

assistant cook to the head chef, a formidable and highly qualified woman from Paris.

While working in Edinburgh, Catherine developed a close relationship with the Glenmorangie family's handicapped son. When the company created a new export division in London, the family relocated to Putney and the highly valued Catherine was asked to join them. But instead of working in the kitchen she was offered the position of personal carer to their handicapped son – an opportunity she happily accepted. It was in London that she met her husband-to-be, James Lyall, who hailed from the Vale of Strathmore area in the rugged Glens off Angus in the north east of Scotland.

With most of the grain mills closing down due to a harsh recession, work was increasingly hard to find and John's father, who trained as a millwright and carpenter, made the inevitable decision to leave the Kirriemuir area. Now widely known for the excellence of its game fishing, walking and shooting, this part of Scotland was a harsh place for young people back in the early 1900s. Just like the Hebrides, most young people left for the potentially richer pastures of Glasgow, Edinburgh, or even as far away as London. John's father was a bright student who did well at school and was expected to take up a place in one of Scotland's excellent universities. His Headmaster was horrified when, as a result of extreme family hardship young James, perhaps sensing the future, gave up Latin for a more practical subject. In such difficult financial times, university was never a realistic prospect for a boy like James. Instead he qualified as a carpenter/joiner and worked in the mills and factories dotted around Kirriemuir, before the work gradually dried up leaving him with little choice but to move away.

James left Kerriemuir and worked his way down to London, arriving with few possessions and fewer prospects. But, ever resilient, a characteristic his sons were to inherit, James ultimately joined the police force and enjoyed a successful career, reaching the rank of sergeant in the Essex Constabulary. James would

probably have rather used his joinery skills to earn a living, but in the gloomy depressed late 1920s, the Police Force provided a solid and secure start to his new life. This was important for the young Scot who knew that work in the construction industry was generally poorly paid and terribly insecure. Initially, the life of a serving police officer was something of a culture shock for James. Living in a Section House in central London, although largely occupied by fellow Scots, was a long way from the peace and tranquillity of the Glens of Angus, but James did find time to represent the Metropolitan Police at football, as he slowly settled into his new London life.

New home in Essex

Catherine and James eventually met at a Scottish social function in London. A romance subsequently blossomed and the couple married in December, 1935 at St Columbas Church of Scotland, Pont Street in London's West End. Catherine and James began their married life together in Leyton in East London, before moving a few miles to the relatively prosperous suburb of Clayhall in Ilford.

Ilford was a good choice for a young couple setting out on a new life in London. The flat, above a shop in Claybury Broadway, was just a few miles away from the Ilford Palais where Bobby Moore famously met his young wife, Tina. John's future wife Yvonne, had a very strict father who flatly refused to allow his daughter to go anywhere near the Palais. But at that time the glitzy dancehall provided a great night out for the young and not so young in Ilford and the surrounding area.

In the 1950s Ilford was in general a quiet suburb, but only a few miles from the tougher environment of the East End. To the north lay the wellheeled, leafy boroughs of Havering, Barkingside and, to the west, Wanstead, where John's father was finally stationed. In the 1950s, factory work was plentiful, if poorly paid. The defence and electronics contractors, Plessey, who produced prototype TVs for John Logie Baird, employed over 15,000 people in nearby

Vicarage Road in the '50s. In addition to the Plessey plant there was work at the Marconi television firm and the nationally known, Ilford Films.

The more attractive option for generations of local young people was to make the short commuter trip to Liverpool Street to work in the City or the West End. The Stock Exchange, banks and finance houses provided attractive employment for generations of bright young people from the area. These jobs were well paid compared to those in the local factories and a position in the City was seen as some kind of status symbol. In the early years of their married life Bobby Moore's grammar school-educated wife, Tina actually earned more from her City job than her famous husband did at West Ham. Or she did until the 1966 World Cup changed things forever for the Barking boy. If the young John Lyall had not shown so much promise as a footballer, he might well have left school for a job in the City or an apprenticeship in Plessey or Marconi. Fortunately, John's parents were happy to indulge the youngster's insatiable love of sport and football in particular.

A good start in life

James and Catherine Lyall were both from solid Church of Scotland stock and carried with them cherished memories of a happy childhood. Their own parents had taught them the meaning of hard work, integrity and responsibility. James and Catherine were determined to pass on the values of Lewis and Angus to their own children. They had left the comfortable and warm environment of their close-knit Scottish families to seek a better life hundreds of miles away in London. This took courage, determination and resilience, qualities John and his two brothers subsequently inherited in abundance.

Partly because of their early, challenging experiences, John's parents were understandably cautious people and were never tempted to purchase their own home for their growing family. Flat 12a, Claybury Broadway was rented from the outset, not an

unusual occurrence in the 1950s. James and Catherine understood the value of money and would have been wary of getting into debt, a family trait they passed onto their children. While James was carrying out his constabulary duties, Catherine stayed at home to look after the boys, as was the tradition in the 1950s. Though careful and very private, it would be a mistake to see the Lyalls as a stereotypically highminded, austere Highland couple. James and Catherine were warm, loving and highly supportive parents but, with their own tough Highlands upbringing, could be strict disciplinarians if the occasion demanded.

John's brother, Jim, now a fit 76-year-old, lives in comfortable retirement in Norwich, where he still enjoys cycling, walking, trout fishing and weekly games of squash. Jim recalls his childhood with great affection and fondness, but remembers testing his father's patience from time to time. One evening Jim cycled over to Hainault Lakes to do some fishing. For hours the fish refused to bite. Just as darkness approached he sensed a change in the atmosphere. He waited an hour for dusk to settle around the lake. His patience was rewarded when he eventually landed a huge tench. Jim remembered a neighbour in Clayhall, once said to him, "If you ever catch a big tench let me have it. It will clean out all the rubbish in my pond." Jim tucked the prized catch into his shirt and cycled home at breakneck speed, stopping on the way to deliver the prized tench to his delighted neighbour.

Although extremely late, Jim was relieved to be home, but began to worry when he found the front door locked. He tried his key, but was mortified to discover the door was bolted on the inside. Accepting his punishment, Jim resigned himself to a night in the coal shed. But within a short time his father appeared. After the appropriate scolding, James was finally allowed back into the house and the safety of his bedroom. That night young Jim learned a valuable lesson – if you have done something wrong, own up immediately and take your punishment, and with no excuses.

'Wait till your father gets home,' is a familiar warning from fractious mothers to badly behaved children at the end of a difficult

day. On one particular evening the boys waited silently in their room for their father to come home from work. After what seemed an eternity dad appeared at their bedroom door in full police uniform, truncheon in hand.

“I understand that you three have been messing around and playing up mum all day,” said the angry police sergeant to the boys cowering in their bunk beds. He reminded the boys of his position in the community and how they needed to show responsibility and set an example to other children. The three troublemakers learnt their lesson that day and it stayed with them for life.

Born in 1936, Jim was the only brother to do National Service. After a spell in Portsmouth he was posted to Egypt. To his parents’ surprise, he returned home unannounced late one night from the Middle East, following a long and tiring flight across several countries. Jim remembers still having the sand of the desert in his pockets. When the young serviceman knocked on the door of the family flat his dad welcomed him as if he popped out to the shops 10 minutes ago, calling out, “Mother there is someone here to see you.” This was not a lack of affection, more a sign of James Lyall’s complete unflappability.

Jim spent the last few months of his National Service in Liverpool where he worked as an RAOC army ammunitions clerk in the famous Liver Building. During his short spell on Merseyside, Jim, a decent footballer, turned out a few times for Everton’s A team. After one particular match, the coach turned to Jim and said rather rudely, “You’re the wrong Lyall – we thought we were getting the other one.” Fortunately, Jim was not offended by the remark and loved his time in Liverpool, before returning to the normality of civilian life.

Occasional boyish misdemeanours apart, the young family settled easily into life in Ilford. James spent time on his allotment and did a few odd carpentry jobs to earn extra money. John remembered traditional Sunday lunches at home, with dad insisting on one of the boys saying Grace and doing the washing up – you can almost smell the roast lamb and mint sauce. The boys took their turn at the

wringer when mum was busy with the ironing, or dad was sleeping after a night shift. The household was modest but happy. John, Jim and Rod were always encouraged to follow their sporting interests, and grabbed every opportunity to play football and cricket or cycle out to fish in the lakes of Hainault, Highams Park and, especially Abridge, where John subsequently bought his first home.

Despite never owning a car, the family took the occasional summer holiday to Hove in Sussex or breezy Dovercourt on the Essex coast. When the children were older there were regular summer trips to the Hebrides, which the boys loved. During the war they were evacuated with their mother to Lewis, staying very close to Catherine's birthplace. More than anything, it was the wartime years in Scotland that gave the elder Lyall boys such a close and firm connection to their parents' Scottish roots. John has fond memories of this part of his childhood, and in 1990 wrote:

'My family used to go to Scotland each summer. My mother took the three boys for a month and my father followed us for the last two weeks. The journey to the Isle of Lewis could take almost two days by train and boat, but I loved going back to the island and still do.'

The boys were steeped in Highland life and today brother Jim retains a good grasp of Gaelic, while John's lifelong passion for fishing dates back to the many happy hours he spent with his brothers in the delightful rivers and lochs surrounding Stornoway.

Growing up in post-war East London

As a London policeman, James was required to remain in Ilford while his family were far away in the Scottish Highlands. After the war he continued to work long and unsocial hours, but occasionally found the time and energy to take the boys to watch local sport, including speedway at West Ham. It could not have been easy bringing up three boisterous young boys in a crowded flat in East London at a time of austerity and hardship. It is a great tribute to John's parents that all three boys became successful in

their different ways. Four years older than John, Jim qualified as a banker. He then worked for the Ford Motor Company for several years, before becoming the Managing Director of a local Car Retail Distribution Group. In the mid-50s, despite his business commitments, Jim found time to play several matches alongside his more famous brother in West Ham's A team. The youngest Lyall brother, Rod, worked in construction and established a flourishing building business.

The Lyall boys totally embraced the family values handed down by their parents and forged in those war-time Stornoway summers. They were to serve John throughout his life, and especially in his career in football, as he readily admitted:

'I've always been positive, determined, perhaps a touch stubborn at times. As a manager you have to develop a degree of resilience, but obviously many of my characteristics were inherited from my parents.' (1989)

John was so drawn to his Scottish roots that, late in his West Ham career, he found time to visit Kirriemuir during the busy schedule of the annual pre-season tour of Scotland. Lyall remembers his father's home town with great affection. He wrote in his autobiography,

'...we would travel across Scotland to my father's home town of Kirriemuir, where we would fish in the trout streams.'

But even in those days, football was never far away:

'Even there we would watch football... my dad used to take us to watch Dundee or Dundee United. I can remember seeing some great Scottish players like Bill Brown, Billy Steel and Doug Cowie.'

In the early 2000s, Jim and John spent an enjoyable week together in the Perth area, where they caught up with many distant relatives and a few ex-West Ham players, including Scottish international, Ray Stewart, a formidable full-back in his West Ham days.

Buy an ice-cream or take the bus?

If a first floor flat, with little or no garden, was not the ideal place to bring up three lively young lads, in some ways, it was the perfect place. Encouraged by their parents, John and his brothers loved nothing more than playing football and cricket for hours on end in the local public parks which abound in this part of East London. Their parents had no need to worry about their whereabouts or safety. For a child growing up in the 1950s, life was fairly straightforward as John remembered:

'You went to school, you played football or cricket, and maybe you went to the cinema on Saturday mornings. There were few other options.'

The biggest decision for a boy like John at that time was:

'If I walk to the cinema I'll be able to buy an ice-cream, but if I take a bus I won't.'

Or, as Jim Lyall remembers:

'The same applied to our visits to Upton Park – if we went by bus both ways, we had no money for a programme. If we walked one way, then OK.'

What could be simpler? Decisions like that provided a clarity that remained with John throughout his life. Young people today face a bewildering and not necessarily wholesome, range of choices. What cool young teenager today would be content with a handmade kart fashioned out of a set of old pram wheels as a Christmas present? Or, as in my case, a lovingly crafted toy fort which must have taken my father months to secretly assemble.

For young John, at that time, whether to take a bus or buy an ice-cream was the biggest decision of the week. Today's children demand X-Boxes, PS3s, iPhones and all the other must-have techno toys. A senior Apple executive recently claimed that 'children today are either asleep or online.' An exaggerated boast perhaps, but one

many of today's parents will recognise. In his autobiography Lyall wrote,

'...on balance our upbringing was a far easier, less fraught, process. We didn't face the temptations that children face today. We created our own entertainment. We created our own Wembley in the little alleyway at the back of the shop...'

But it would be a mistake to view the 1950s through rose-tinted glasses. John and his brothers, like many others at the time, could have chosen a different path. They could easily have joined up with a group of tough teddy boys who terrorised Ilford High Road on Saturday nights, or drifted into crime. The activities of the notorious Kray twins stretched from the Mile End Road out to Ilford and there were plenty of wannabe Krays who were keen to stamp their authority on the local snooker halls and drinking clubs. Fortunately the youthful Lyalls dutifully accepted their parents' kindly, but firm, authority and their passion for sport kept them well away from trouble.

John Lyall was of the same generation as Brian Clough, Bobby Robson and Alex Ferguson. These great football figures inherited their parents' values of self-sacrifice, hard-work and loyalty. Lyall's generation learned their trade in the late 1950s, but needed to adapt to the new world of the '60s, ushered in by the Beatles in 1962. They had to negotiate a difficult path between the old ideals and the ever-present vanity of the modern celebrity obsessed society. Only the remarkable Ferguson has succeeded in bridging the old standards and the new, less-predictable world of modern sport.

Of course, it is always a mistake to generalise about people or try to fit them into convenient boxes. Thousands of young people today continue to enjoy impromptu games of football and cricket in the parks, or play for their school, District or County just as the Lyall boys did for Ilford. Modern school sport is far healthier than its critics suggest. Most of these people haven't the slightest idea what goes on in the PE Department of Ilford High, John and Trevor Brooking's old school, or on the playing fields of

Barkingside, Clayhall, Wanstead Flats or West Ham Park. Having said that it remains true that today's young people don't enjoy the same freedom to play outdoors as those growing up in the 1950s.

As a boy, John Lyall would regularly come home from the park, after hours of playing football with his mates, covered head to foot in mud. On such occasions his mother would plunge him into the bath, where he would sit until he was clean enough to have his tea. Mrs Lyall was a wonderful cook, famous for her delicious apple pies. She was old school, but extremely proud of her sons and even went to the extremes of washing and ironing their football boot laces for District and County matches. One memorable day in the early '50s young John received a brand new pair of Arthur Rowe boots for his birthday. The brand was fitting as Rowe was responsible for Spurs' famous push and run style, the basis of the adult Lyall's own football philosophy. John would have known the boots were expensive and could hardly contain his excitement. Every other football-loving boy in the street would have been envious.

Jim Lyall recalls a similar story. He played regularly for his school team and represented Ilford District on many occasions. Jim knew the family had little spare money, so when his first pair of boots wore out he was forced to borrow a pair from a school friend, Frankie Bell, in return for repeatedly running irritating errands. One day Jim's mum asked him, "Why are you so fed up, that's not like you Jim?" He told his mum about the condition of his ancient boots and that he was fed up with fetching and carrying like a skivvy for his wealthy friend.

Mum said, "OK, I'll ask dad to nail some studs into an old pair of shoes for you." When this didn't work, Jim became increasingly frustrated. Catherine saw Jim was clearly upset, so one afternoon after school she told her eldest son:

"Come on we are getting the bus up to Cranbrook Road."

"What for mum?" replied the surprised youngster.

"To buy you a new pair of football boots, that's what," said Catherine

When they arrived at the prestigious Cranbrook Sports Shop, Catherine asked Jim what kind of boots he wanted. "The Hotspur ones please," Jim replied immediately. On the way home the delighted youngster asked his mum where the money for the boots came from.

"I used the coal money Jim, but you really needed your new boots." It would have been a little chilly in the Lyall household for the next few weeks and Jim will never forget his mother's generous gesture.

Both parents made extreme sacrifices to support the boys, as most parents did at the time. Oddly, John's dad was a heavy smoker, which seems strange when you think how careful the couple were about money.

One day in later life, Jim asked his dad, "You are an intelligent, smart man. How come you smoke so much, dad?"

His father was ready with his answer. "When I was your age we lived in a tied cottage on a farm and were restricted primarily to a diet of rabbit and turnips and, as a result, were often hungry. A packet of ten Weights were cheap and if you had a cigarette in your mouth you were never hungry."

Of course, this was at a time long before smoking was recognised as the dangerous and anti-social activity we now know it to be today. It also explains why John refused to eat rabbit.

Like most parents, James and Catherine wanted the best for their children. Although they were always keen to encourage the boys, they showed little enthusiasm for attending matches. John and Jim would run home to tell their parents they had been selected for the district side or the Essex Boys' team, only for mum to say, in her understated way, "Well done dear, just make sure you always do your best." This understated support should not be seen as indifference, as Jim remembers,

'...it merely reflected their view that making a determined and successful effort at everything in life was a reward in itself.'

The Lyalls knew that John was a real prospect in a neighbourhood which was and remains a hotbed of football activity and they were keen to do all they could to encourage and support him.

A few years ago, out of the blue, Jim Lyall received a letter from his brother, John. In the letter John reflected on the tremendous influence their parent's had on their lives and how fortunate they had been. The brothers are very conscious that James and Catherine rose from very humble origins. They taught their children the traditional values of honesty, courtesy, respect and the importance of good manners. They lived their own lives by way of example. The brothers have never forgotten their parents' advice; their values have provided the watchwords for their entire lives.

One of the Lyall family's neighbours in once fashionable Ilford was the respected football journalist and TV presenter, Peter Lorenzo. In those days Lorenzo, who wrote the notes for the programme of the 1965 West Ham v Munich European Cup Winners' Cup Final, was learning his trade at the *Ilford Recorder*. John remembered kicking a ball against the wall of Lorenzo's flat for hours on end, first his left foot, then his right, in his determination to be as two-footed as possible. The budding reporter was patient with the noisy youngster and even encouraged him, won over by John's sheer enthusiasm. The pair later became great friends and John was later devastated to hear of Lorenzo's untimely death at the age of 58.

Practice makes perfect

Legend has it that the great East London rock band from the '60s, the Small Faces, based their song Itchycoo Park on the old Essex county ground at Valentine's Park. Others argue that particular honour belongs to Manor Park a few miles away. What is beyond dispute is that back in the 1950s the great West Indian batsmen, Worrell, Walcott and Weekes flayed the Essex bowling attack to all parts of Valentine's Park. To the delight of the locals the celebrated Hollywood actress, Jayne Mansfield opened the annual fete at the

Park around the same time as the boys from the Caribbean were lofting sixes into Cranbrook Road.

Nigel Benn, Nasser Hussain, and the Essex and England cricketer, John Lever were all born and brought up close to the park, with its smart rows of terraced houses and even smarter villa-style mansions. Valentine's Park and Clayhall Park were the beating heart of the area. Like the Lyall boys and their friends, these great sporting figures would have spent their summer evenings and school holidays playing football and cricket in the park, where Trevor Bailey, Keith Fletcher, Graham Gooch and Hussain entertained the locals during the Ilford cricket festival. The park has been the home of Ilford CC for over 100 years. Lever, Hussain, Gooch and Stuart Turner were all junior club members and attended the Trevor Bailey-owned, Ilford Cricket School under the tutelage of the legendary coach, Bill Morris.

Close to Clayhall Park was Parkhill Primary School where John passed the 11-plus and like Trevor Brooking after him, won a coveted place at the local grammar school, Ilford County High. John was never in the same class as Brooking, either academically or in football terms, as he later admitted, but he was happy to play football morning, noon and night. As young as sevenyears-old, John tagged along with his brother Jim to the regular Sunday morning matches in the local park. Initially nothing more than a ball-boy, young John had to wait until he was nearly 12-years-old before being allowed to play regularly for his brother's Sunday morning side. He simply couldn't wait for a game. He was a strong, tough-tackling, sturdy lad and refused to be intimidated by the older boys. As Jim observed recently:

'John was a quick leaner at everything and even as a youngster he tackled fearlessly, like a Sherman tank.'

Playing all sports well above his age group toughened up the youngster and was an ideal preparation for the physical demands of professional football. He remembered,

‘...one Sunday they let me play in goal and, then finally the moment came when I was a fully-fledged team member.’

Anybody who played in these types of games at the time will know how serious they were taken, not just by the players, but sometimes the whole neighbourhood as Lyall testified:

‘It was like a cup final every week, and by Friday all the local lads were speculating about the outcome of the big Sunday match.’

Playing in these games on rock-hard pitches in the summer or mud-baths in the winter toughened up young players – although strong, often brutal tackling brought serious injuries and may have been the root cause of Lyall’s later career-ending knee problems. In his autobiography *My Manchester United Years*, Bobby Charlton talks about the full-bodied games of football played in his local park in Ashington when he was a boy.

“We all played football – that’s all there was,” Charlton remembered. These pick-up games were played out in every city park the length and breadth of the country. You rarely see these kinds of informal encounters in the sanitised, safety-conscious municipal parks of today.

In his early life John was totally immersed in his favourite sport of football, but still found time to play cricket in the summer months. John and Jim regularly travelled up to Gidea Park for practice sessions with the Essex coach, Ken Preston. But football was John’s first love. Back in the 1950s many East London football fans liked to watch West Ham, Leyton Orient or Tottenham on alternate Saturdays. John and his dad would take the 144 bus along the North Circular Road, passing the London Rubber Company, the LEB headquarters and the infamous Cooks’ Ferry Inn, on its way to the Angel, Edmonton. From there it’s a short walk down the High Road to the Tottenham ground. Back in the ‘50s, Tottenham High Road was a quiet place, even on match days. Spurs’ supporters would sleep overnight on the pavement while queuing for tickets

to see their heroes play European ties against Eusebio's Benfica or the great Italian sides of the early 1960s. Spurs' manager, Bill Nicholson, who later became a great personal friend of John Lyall, lived in White Hart Lane most of his life. In his spare time he loved nothing more than tending his allotment just down the road from his neat, but modest, semi-detached house. Gun crime, gang warfare and full-scale riots now blight this deprived, but once undisturbed part of London.

Fortunately, his dad's Tottenham allegiance was never going to sway young John away from Upton Park. Next-door neighbour, Frank Whale, was an avid West Ham fan and regularly took John and Jim with him to

Upton Park, where they stood on the sacred North Bank. The boys had strong local loyalties and West Ham was their local club. A lifetime commitment to the claret and blue of West Ham United had begun. However, the youngster's heart was not in standing on the terraces watching football, but out on the pitch playing. He later wrote,

'...there was no substitute for playing the game. Every spare minute of each day was devoted to playing football.'

This level of enthusiasm combined with his undoubted ability soon got the Ilford youngster noticed. John's teachers quickly recognised his sporting potential. One of the most important influences on John's development at Parkhill Primary was his form teacher, Mr Tom Carter, who was largely responsible for John passing his 11-plus. Lyall remembered his old teacher with great affection:

'Mr Carter was a big influence on me in those days, and years later we were friends. He wrote to me regularly as manager of West Ham, until he died a few years ago.'

With supportive parents and teachers like Mr Carter, John was given every encouragement and opportunity to succeed. He was not going to let anyone down. The great lesson Mr Carter taught John, he later recalled, was the power of positive thinking.

Young John was not allowed to play football as long as he told Mr Carter during Maths lessons, "I'm sorry sir, I just can't do it." With sympathetic teaching John quickly learned how to solve mathematical problems and duly passed his 11-plus. At the same time the reluctant mathematician became the best footballer his school had seen for a generation, with apologies to older brother, Jim. The promising young striker's impressive displays for his school soon caught the eyes of the Ilford District selectors. John Lyall's life in football was under away.

Boyhood dreams

James and Catherine were delighted when John won a place at Ilford County High School. To see their son leave the modest flat in his smart new uniform would have made them very proud indeed. With a name straight out of a Carry On film, Mr Roy Percy Pyman was John's PE teacher at the High School. He was a qualified referee and coached the boys in football and cricket. John remembers Pyman as a conscientious teacher who noticed his new pupil was extremely left-footed. He told John he needed to work on his weaker right foot if he was to have any chance of fulfilling his dream of becoming a professional footballer. John was quick to take advice. He worked hard over the next few years to improve his right foot, testing the patience of his neighbours to the limit. His single-mindedness was quickly rewarded and before very long John could take penalties and corners confidently with either foot. At 12-years-old, he was determined to fulfil his dream of becoming a professional, preferably with West Ham United. For a very brief moment, John did consider a career as a PE teacher, but he really had no Plan B such was his obsession with football.

Former class-mate Dave Kingston, who remained life-long friends with Lyall, offers us an interesting insight into John's emerging character:

John was a hard worker who moved from C stream in our first Year to B stream in our second and A stream in the third. His progress was unprecedented.'

Kingston played football and cricket alongside Lyall at Ilford High and has some vivid memories of their schooldays together. John played inside-left for his school and Dave recalls one particular match in their second year:

John picked up the ball in his own half, ploughed through the mud leaving the opposition in his wake, before unleashing a screamer into the top corner.'

At school John played two years above his age-group and as a strapping 13-year-old scored a memorable hat-trick against a team of 15-year-olds. Dave Kingston remembers, "At school John stood out as an outstanding young prospect." Young Lyall's sporting talent was not restricted to football. He excelled at cricket and represented Ilford District as a batsman. But, as Kingston explains, it was a school boxing match which brought out the true side of John's character:

John was never captain of the school cricket or football teams. That honour belonged to a lad called Johnny Mitchell. In their second year the two fought against each other in a school boxing final. They went hell for leather for three rounds before John was given the decision on points.'

The boxing incident reveals a great deal about John's 'never say die' attitude to life. As Kingston remembers, he was very much a leader at school, extremely popular and a real good bloke. The thought of re-introducing boxing into schools today would have friends of the nanny-state chained to the school railings, although that view might change following Team GB's success at London 2012.

Like Lyall, Dave Kingston was also a good student. The Barking boy was sent to Ilford because his local grammar, Barking Abbey, was full. He said later, "It was the best thing that ever happened

to me.” Dave became a PE teacher rather than a professional footballer, although as a youngster he did have a trial with West Ham. To this day he retains in his possession a letter from Ron Greenwood stating, in the most polite terms, that he wasn't going to be good enough for the professional game. Kingston enjoyed a distinguished career in education, gaining an MA before moving to teacher training. The two old friends kept in touch for most of their lives. A few weeks before John's death, the Lyalls were due to stay with Kingston and his wife at their home in Kent. Sadly, the reunion never took place.

John continued to represent Ilford Schoolboys on a regular basis while at High School and particularly enjoyed the training sessions of District coach, Stan Frankland. Men like Mr Frankland, who was involved in Essex school football all his life, were the heart and soul of school football. Teachers gave up their free time to provide outstanding young footballers from schools across the area the opportunity to play at a higher level. The young Lyall loved Frankland's training sessions and felt honoured to play for Ilford against other districts across London and Essex. John always appreciated the support he received from Mr Frankland, as did his brother Jim. When Stan Frankland passed away, just before John's own untimely death, both brothers attended his funeral at Cranham, Essex along with other remaining members of the Ilford District Old Boys team.

Sadly, District school football has largely disappeared. The best youngsters are now recruited by the professional academies that refuse permission for contracted players to represent their school or district. Deprived of the best players, school football has seen a rapid decline in standards that has nothing to do with the quality and commitment of PE teachers, but is a consequence of the hard-nosed approach of the professional academies. What is good for the top clubs can be disastrous for school sport. In fairness to West Ham, the Hammers' highly respected Youth Academy Director, Tony Carr, does allow his youngsters to play for their school, providing there is no clash with academy games. The West