



LIFE OF BRYAN

SHAUN KEOGH meets **BRYAN ORRITT**: a sixties Boro player who set records during his time at Ayresome Park that can never be taken away...

As the beginning of the 1961-62 season approached, Boro fans struggled to muster enthusiasm for the winter ahead. The previous two seasons in the old Second Division had seen them finish just off the promotion pace, in fifth position. However, this was largely due to the goals of a certain lad called Brian Clough. Of the 173 League goals bagged in those two seasons, more than a third – 73 – were put away by old big 'ead himself.

However, Teesside was stunned by the news in July 1961 that not only had Boro-born Clough left the club, but that he had joined Sunderland. It is well documented that Clough's frustration was borne from the fact that his phenomenal goals-to-games ratio only served to counter the equally phenomenal inability of Boro's defence to stop the opposition from scoring.

So it was with a feeling of trepidation that Boro fans approached the 1961-62 season. Understandably, they figured that if Boro could not win promotion with Cloughie's 30+ goals per season, then they sure as hell were not going to do it without them.

Predictably, Boro hit the second from bottom place in the League the week before Christmas, and were still there at the end of February when Bryan Orritt was signed from Birmingham City. The ultimate utility player, he made 115 League appearances, played in every position on the pitch, and scored 22 goals. Orritt is forever in the history books as Boro's first named substitute when the law was introduced in 1965.

Orritt slopes into the bar of the Blue Bell Hotel, where we had arranged to meet on what turns out to be the day before his return to

South Africa. He is in a good mood because, as he explains he has just sold his car. Having emigrated to South Africa in 1966, Orritt returned to the UK a few years ago, but has now decided that his heart lies on the other side of the world.

The atmosphere is rather sombre at first, as a funeral wake party has just arrived. I feel very conspicuous in the corner of the bar talking happily whilst surrounded by long faces, some a little tearful. Now I know what Sunderland fans looked like when they heard Howard Wilkinson was their new manager.

I had already met Bryan at a former Boro player's event a month previously; so ice breaking conversation was not necessary. After a few exchanges regarding last minute jobs he had to do before leaving the UK, I ask Bryan why he joined the Boro. Now, this may seem a dull question, but the week before he joined, Boro had

been hammered 5-1 by Liverpool, which saw them slump to second bottom of the old Second Division. At the time, Bryan was a first team regular at Birmingham City who were in the top division, and playing in Europe. Bryan, I said, what were you thinking? He acknowledges the point with a laugh and says:

"I had been at Birmingham City for about six years at that time, and was ready for a change. Dick Neil, a team-mate and friend of mine there had joined Boro a few months before and he encouraged me to come. Gil Merrick was my manager at Birmingham and he told me that Boro were coming to speak to me, but that he did not want me to go.

"Anyway, I spoke to Boro, and they offered me the same wage I was on at City of £25 a week, but they also offered me an extra £5 appearance money plus £5 for being in the top half of the table." At the time, Boro might as well have offered £500 for getting in the top half of the table. It was two months into the following season before the club had to cough up their first fiver. Orritt continued:

"I asked City to match the money, but they wouldn't, so I came to Boro. But you know, I didn't even think of the fact that Boro were a Second Division side and at the bottom of the table, I just thought that for me it would be a good move."

Hmmm. Well, call me old-fashioned, but it looks to me from where I am sitting to be anything but, so perhaps a different approach might get us away from the 'good move' chestnut. I wondered, having sampled life at the top with Birmingham, did he ever regret leaving them for a club that was clearly going nowhere at the time?



Orritt's first club was his local team in north Wales – Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwyllyllantysiliogogoch FC

Bryan Orritt

► “Well”, he concedes, “I did have second thoughts a year later because Birmingham won the League Cup while we were struggling at the Boro. Younger people don’t realise that Birmingham City were a big club back then – In my last two years there we had got to the final of the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup” (now the UEFA Cup).

This is something that genuinely surprised me during my research for this interview. Birmingham were beaten in the 1960 two-legged final by Barcelona, and in 1961 by Roma. Orritt played in the home leg where more than 40,000 packed into St Andrews, but missed out on the replay at the Nou Camp. In 1961 he played in both legs of the 4-1 aggregate defeat by AS Roma. I always thought that the closest Birmingham had come to serious European competitions was the same as the Boro – an away match at Brighton. It’s also nice to be able to claim to be one of those ‘younger people’ that Bryan so graciously referred to. Thanks mate.

So, onto Boro matters. Let’s see how his memory is in this department

“Scoring two goals against Newcastle was just great – it really bonded me with the fans”

I wondered. Did Orritt remember his first appearance in a Tyne-Tees derby? He is straight in: “Yes I do, because it was just after I joined the club.” Without a pause he adds: “My first game for the Boro was against Charlton at Ayresome, which we won 3-2. Then a few days later we had Newcastle at home. We won 3-0, and I scored two goals. I didn’t realise until then how important it was to the fans for the Boro to beat Newcastle, it really bonded me with the fans.”

There are some records set by players that can, at some stage, be taken away from them. Leading goalscorer, or the most appearances for instance. However, Orritt’s place in Boro history will be set for evermore, even though it is not an achievement as such, more a case of, er, being left out of the team at the right time.

Until the beginning of the 1965-66 season, substitutes were not part of British football. The only time that a player could be replaced was if the goalkeeper was injured and unable to carry on. In this case, a substitute was allowed to replace him, but it had to be an outfield player currently on the pitch, effectively reducing the team to 10 men. At the beginning of 1965, a new rule was introduced which allowed the naming of a 12th man, who could replace any player on the pitch.

Orritt’s first mention in Boro history then, is in being the first player named as substitute. This was for the opening game of the 1965-66 season against Manchester City. On this occa-

sion, he did not play, nor did any of the other substitutes named in the following five games. However, Orritt’s second leap into the record books came in the next game, when he became the first named Boro substitute to actually get onto the pitch. I know what you’re thinking – ‘wow, how much more exciting does this get? I’m on the edge of my seat’. I can hardly contain myself either, and I know what’s coming next. A couple of weeks later, Orritt was on the bench again, and came on as substitute for the injured Boro goalkeeper, thereby becoming the only player to have appeared in every position on the field in a Boro shirt. Bryan takes up the story:

“It is a nice feeling to know that I will always be in the record books at the Boro, come what may. “I remember that first sub appearance, as I came on for full-back Neville Chapman against Preston. A week later I came on just before half time for the goalkeeper Bob Appleby against Charlton. We drew that game 2-2, but both of Charlton’s goals had been scored before I went on, so I kept a clean sheet.

“A couple of months later I came on for another injured goalkeeper, Eddie Connachan, against Coventry. I let one goal in there, and I can laugh about it now, but I remember being annoyed with Bill Gates, who should have been covering for me.”

So how come Orritt seemed so comfortable with this role? Was there a secret yearning to loiter between a pair of sticks with a silly hat on whilst puffing on a Woodbine rather than do all that tiresome running around?

“I had always liked going in goal at training over the years, so I was a kind of obvious choice back then. Having me on the bench or on the pitch was almost as good as having a substitute goalkeeper available all the time. I had also substituted for an injured goalkeeper from an



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out field position in my days at Birmingham. I stood in for Johnny Schofield, who was carried off in a game against Manchester United. We won that game 3-1. I was always a fit player, always worked hard and trained hard. I may not have been the classiest, but I gave 100 per cent."

By now though, Orritt was struggling with his fitness, and only made one more appearance for the Boro, as centre forward in a defeat at Carlisle three months later. This was the first of five consecutive defeats, which saw Boro slump into the relegation mire. Boro had been under the tutelage of caretaker manager Harold Shepherdson since the sacking of Raich Carter the previous month, and a few weeks later the Boro captain Stan Anderson was given the daunting task of saving Boro from Division Three.

Orritt knew his days as a pro in England were numbered, but I wondered if the appointment of Anderson was a factor in the decision to leave the Boro for South Africa?

"No, there was no problem with Stan, I had played against him a few times before I even came to the Boro – he was fine.

"I was 29 years old by then, and in those days being that age meant that you were coming to the very end of your career in this country. I'd had three cartilages removed in the last six months I was at Boro, so I saw the writing on the wall. Bury came in for me, but I didn't fancy the process of slipping down into the lower leagues. I was then contacted by Roy Bailey (who made over 430 League appearances in goal for Crystal Palace and Ipswich in the 1950s and '60s) – who at that time was managing a team in Jo-

"I will always be in the record books at Boro, come what may"

hannesburg and had heard that I was available. He made me a good offer, but part of the deal was that I went immediately, so we flew out on the afternoon of the Cardiff game, the day that Boro were relegated.

"I was a bit disillusioned at Boro by then, but at the same time I knew I wasn't fit enough to play in the first team. I remember playing in a reserve game towards the end of my time there when I tried to hit a long ball on a muddy pitch, but I just couldn't do it. I knew that even if I moved to another club in the UK that my days here were numbered. So I thought why not go to South Africa and start a new life? The game was not so demanding over there, and I played for about five or six years before packing in."

Bryan left England two months before what is still the greatest achievement by an England football team – I wondered was he able to follow the 1966 World Cup in South Africa? He laughs out loud at this one: "There were no TV sets in Africa then. We had to listen to it on the radio. It was terrible really, looking back."

I noticed in my research that Orritt played in Durban in the late 1960s which is where his former Boro team mate, goalkeeper Arthur Lightening hailed from. Born in Durban, South Africa, Lightening played 18 games in goal for the Boro in 1962-


63 before disappearing back to Africa. Does he know what became of him?

"Last time I saw him was about 1999. I went to Durban to play bowls against the Transvaal players, and it was only then I found out that he had half of one of his legs amputated. I understand that he lost it in a speed-boat accident. Anyway, since then I heard that he had died, sometime last year."

So, the nitty gritty – a move to the other side of the world at very short notice must have carried an incentive – what was the carrot dangled in front of him? What sort of fool would want to leave a doomed Middlesbrough team in which an increasingly smaller role was on offer, for a new start in sunny South Africa? This gets another chuckle, as Bryan remembers what happened:

"Oh yes – there was an incentive all right! After speaking with Roy Bailey, he took me to London to meet the owner of the club that wanted me in South Africa. I wasn't too sure how serious they were, so I told him that I wanted £500 in my hand now, £500 when I arrive in Africa, and £500 after 12 months. £1500 was a lot of money in 1966 – I was only on £30 a week here remember.

"Anyway, he sent someone out with a cheque, and they came back 10 minutes later with £500 in cash for me. It was a massive amount of money at the time. But, like I said, they wanted me out there immediately, so a few days later we were off." He laughs



20th October 1963 at Stamford Bridge, Bryan scores Boro's first goal in a 2-3 League defeat in front of a crowd of 32,551. Boro's second that day was a penalty scored by Arthur Kaye and the Boro team that

Bryan Orritt

▶ again and continues: "I think looking back, that part of the rush to get me out there was that they wanted to make sure I did not renege on the deal, having given me £500 in cash."

So, a nice financial cushion to start a new life in the sun. How did he earn a living after he stopped playing?

"I worked in a sports shop at first and then I bought the owner out. Unfortunately, it got broken into soon after and the shop was cleaned out completely. It was terrible, so that was the end of that. I then started up another business in tree felling, and did that until we came back over here in October 1999, as my father-in-law had become ill. We thought maybe we should get back to the Boro, as much as anything be-

Boro's defence opened the 1961-62 season determined to continue the poor form of the previous season. Derby won the opening game at Ayresome 4-3 after Boro led 3-0 at half time. This was followed by a 0-2 defeat at mighty Leyton Orient. The two young full backs, paired for the first time in the opening

months of that season must have really caught it in the ear from the Ayresome chicken run. One of them was MICK McNEIL, who was about to make his ninth and final appearance for England - no mean feat for a Second Division player, then as now. He went on to become a legend at Ipswich. The other one was

an upcoming whippersnapper starting his first full season for the Boro - GORDON JONES, he of the sweet left foot. Jones was a virtual ever present from that day through to 1973, and with 527 matches, has made more outfield appearances for the Boro than anybody else in the history of the club.

cause my wife is from the town originally."

Unfortunately, Bryan and his wife have been unable to settle since their return. Work offers are pretty thin in the run up to retirement age - Orritt turned 65 in March this year. All said and done then, does he now consider Africa to be his home? "I do, yes. Most of the friends I had here in the UK have gone now," he says sadly, meaning I guess that they have not so much

moved on as passed on. I felt a bit sad for Bryan at this point. It must be strange to return to your original homeland - which in itself must have been a big move for a couple in their 60s - only to find that you would rather be in a foreign country because it feels more like home. So does he have any reservations about returning to such a volatile part of the world? At this, he perks up with a big smile:

"Oh, none at all. It is a wonderful country to live in, and I really am looking forward to getting back there. I have just heard that my daughter is expecting a baby, so we have even more reason to go back." The look on my face clearly gave me away - I was thinking: 'yer jokin' aren't yer? You're moving to a frigin' war zone.' So he continues:

"Of course, it is a dangerous place to be - but we have lived there a long time and we know how to stay out of trouble. There's a lot of crime, there's a lot of violence; you have to be careful. You can have the best security system in the world and still be broken into. It's the car hi-jacking out there that is particularly dangerous, because they don't just take your car; they kill you as well. So you have to be very, very careful."

So what about the future - will he follow the Boro from Africa? "Oh yeah, we had a sort of

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Boro supporters club before I came back here - all Boro people who have emigrated. About 10 or 15 of us used to get together to watch the televised games. The bar we watched the games in is like shrine to the Boro. It's a strange thing - even though I am moving away from living in Middlesbrough, one of the things I am looking forward to is watching them play from the other side of the world." ■

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