

On 15th May, **BOBBY MURDOCH** died at the mere age of 56. **SHAUN KEOGH** looks back on the life of a Boro legend

“His head was for thinking, and his feet for dancing...”

When a new manager takes over a football club, a 're-building' programme is invariably announced along with buzz phrases like 'It'll take me at least three years to turn this club around', the latter normally issued as an insurance policy for the new manager to fall back on if results do not go well in the first year or so of his tenure.

However, when Jack Charlton took over at Boro in 1973, he took a long hard look at the squad that had limped up the table to finish two places behind the promotion places in the previous season, and made two key decisions, the first of which was made for him.

On the announcement that Jack was taking over, Nobby Stiles, his World Cup winning team-mate upped sticks to Preston. Having been captained by one Charlton brother for many years while playing for Manchester United and Eng-

land, he wasn't prepared to be managed by the other one.

Firstly, to replace Stiles, Charlton converted 20 year old Graeme Souness into a right sided midfielder from the left sided more attack minded role that he had played under departing Boro manager Stan Anderson.

Secondly, and perhaps more crucially, the right sided midfield role needed filling, because, their personality clash aside, Eric McMordie simply did not fit into the type of game that Jack wanted Boro to play.

This created a dilemma for Jack, because it looked like he might have to spend some money; a particularly harrowing thought for miser Jack, even if it was someone else's cash.

His conscience was rescued by his pal Jock Stein, who, having heard Jack's tale at a sportsman's dinner, offered him the legendary Bobby Murdoch. For

40s can imagine what effect that would have on the Boro if Scholes was offered on a free, you can imagine the excitement that Murdoch's arrival created on Teesside during that Autumn.

Murdoch's vision and passing in mid-field made the difference between the under-achievers of the previous season to the runaway champions that Boro became that year.

To once again put this in context for all you ankle biters, this was Boro's first return to the top Division since 1954. A whole generation of Boro fans had never seen their team play anything but Second and (briefly) Third Division football. Teesside went mental.

Bobby played in all but three of Boro's League games in their inaugural season back in the top Division, when they finished in a respectful seventh position. By the end of the following season, Bobby's ankle injury, which he had carried since a collision at Parkhead in 1963, put an end to his playing career.

However, Boro were not going to let go of such a valuable asset, Murdoch was kept on board at Ayresome as youth team trainer, bringing through the ranks the likes of the also recently deceased Stephen Bell, and Tony Mowbray.

However, by the end of 1980-81 season, the Boro were unrecognisable from the promotion squad of 1974. As well as losing key players like Murdoch and Souness in the intervening years, by the end of 80-81 further lynchpins in the form of David Armstrong, Craig Johnston, Mark Proctor and David Hodgson had grown disillusioned at under-achieving Boro, and moved on to better things elsewhere. Little was known at the time just how dire Boro's financial situation was, although the money received from the sale of these players merely postponed the financial calamity to come.

If that wasn't bad enough, manager



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anybody under the age of 40, this is similar to the Boro being offered Paul Scholes. But it gets better.

“How much?” asked Jack. To his amazement, Stein was happy for Bobby to go on a free transfer. A 29 year old, precision passer, midfield genius oh, and European Cup winner on a free transfer. Now if all you under-





John Neal moved on as well, and Bobby Murdoch gamely accepted the offer to take over.

I interviewed Bobby for **mss** in April 1999, (**mss** 128) and he said of this period: "Taking over as Boro manager was probably a mistake; perhaps I should have remained in the coaching role I had. The club didn't have any money, and the team was mostly youngsters. Money was real tight, and the club needed to sell rather than buy."

It was a hopeless task to throw at anybody, let alone somebody who had no previous managerial experience. In the disastrous season that followed, Boro finished bottom of the top Division, winning only 8 games all year and setting an unwanted club record of 19 consecutive games without a win. The only thing that Boro had to shout about that year was that they beat the Mackems at Joker.

During the following season in (the old) Division Two, Murdoch was sacked following the second 1-4 defeat at Ayresome in succession, seven games into the new season. However, it gave Bobby great pleasure in one of the earlier games that year to give a debut to Tony Mowbray, whom he had helped to coach through from the juniors.

Bobby and his family stayed in the Boro for a few years before returning to their native Rutherglen in Glasgow. The experience of being Boro manager during the early days of their financial nightmare sickened Murdoch, and left him with no appetite to return to the game which he once graced.

In recent years, Bobby had been part of the hospitality and corporate entertainment set up at Celtic, allowing starstruck fifty-somethings to meet one of the Lions of Lisbon. It also allowed the man to be on the end of plaudits and dignified respect that neither he, nor, I would venture, any other manager, would have been afforded if they had managed Boro during the traumatic time that Bobby did.

Many years ago I remember my brother-in-law, Vince Thynne, telling me that he and some Boro friends visited Glasgow for a match in the 1980s, and afterwards popped into the bar that Murdoch then owned. They introduced themselves as Boro lads, and Murdoch saw to it that they hardly spent a penny on booze all night, and that they left with an armful of carry-outs for the journey home, all compliments of Bobby.

This gives a measure of how much Bobby thought of Boro fans, who he spoke of with great warmth in our interview.

If that wasn't enough, I started to recount the story of my brother-in-law visiting Bobby's bar during our interview, and he interrupted me, telling me, virtually word for word what Vince had told me 20 years ago, even down to the carry outs. Bobby must have had literally hundreds, if not thousands of fans visit his bar from all over the world.

At the end he said "Aye, his name was Vince wasn't it?" ■

● The full text of Shaun's interview with Bobby can be viewed at www.mss.org.uk. Click on Magazine in the left hand column and scroll down.