

File: BMD Alex Ward.mp3

Duration: 00:28:36

Date: 01/08/2016

Typist: 805

START AUDIO

Interviewer: Could you state your name, age, and your relationship to the club?

Alex Ward: Yes, Alex Ward is my name. 15/11/1948, which makes me coming up to 63. I played for the Stevenage youth team in the mid '60s, '65, '66, and then again for Stevenage Borough when they reformed ____ [00:00:24], mid '80s. And I used to watch Stevenage at the old London Road ground when I came up from London in the late '50s.

Interviewer: So you moved to Stevenage when it was a new town?

Alex Ward: A new town. It was being built at the time, the new town, and the ground was already there. So as a kid, five or six years old, it was good fun, coming here and watching them, and playing ourselves in the grass behind the goal.

Interviewer: Who was it that you used to come with when you first moved here?

Alex Ward: Well it was a lot of kids from junior school, we all palled up, as we come up, and we used to all go down from Bedwell down to the own ground, which is where the police station is now, on the railway line. ___[00:01:10], has built over it. They weren't very good, but it was very enjoyable.

Interviewer: What was it like moving to the new town and having a club like Stevenage being there to watch? Did you hold any ties to any other clubs back in London, or was Stevenage your main.. ?

Alex Ward: Well yes, I did. My father used to take me to Wimbledon, because that's where we come from, used to live, so obviously that retains a link, and as loads of kids do when they get older, you go and watch the professional clubs, which for me it was Tottenham. But there's always that, because you live in Stevenage, and you go and watch them, there's always that link as well. But when you get older, you want to play for your local team, which is what I did.

Interviewer: You said you first played in the '60s, is that correct?

Alex Ward: Yes, I was, I think probably just leaving school then, and played for the youth team at Stevenage town.

Interviewer: How did you get involved with the youth.. ? How did it work back then? How did you get involved with the youth team?

Alex Ward: Well a school team, I was at Heathcote, and we had a very, very good team with a lot of very good player. There were a lot of good kids that came up from London; Heathcote, [Barclay, 00:02:27], _____. And a few of us were involved with Chelsea; we thought we were going to make the grade, and we didn't.

But, a knock on the door, the Stevenage youth team manager came round, and said, "I've heard about you." And, "Would you play [for your team?]" It didn't take much persuasion, and it was really good, I played the whole season for Stevenage Town.

Interviewer: Any great memories from your first season?

Alex Ward: Yes, they'll never be forgotten. We were probably playing teams that were real professionals; Ipswich Town, Colchester, Cambridge United, Gillingham; they were pro teams, and we were sort of, if you like, a bit of a rag tag and bobtail. Didn't have a lot of money, but it was fantastic, and we really were competitive as well.

Interviewer: What position?

Alex Ward: I was a goalkeeper.

Interviewer: Goalkeeper.

Alex Ward: Yes, yes I was coming home with cuts, because the new ground, as it was then, we had just moved into this new ground, it was mud and stones. The pitch hadn't really settled, so you had to be hardy. But it was very enjoyable.

Interviewer: What did you do in your period before you came back to play for Stevenage in the '70s?

Alex Ward: Well, the Stevenage Town team then went into liquidation, otherwise a lot of us, I think, would have carried on playing. We were too old for the youth, so we would have gone into the reserves hopefully, and then eventually the first team. But of course in the meantime we had to go and play locally, which we did; I had a job at British Aerospace as an apprentice, so I just wanted to play locally. There was no money around then, so, thank goodness, because we enjoyed it more.

Interviewer: What was it about Stevenage that you really enjoyed?

Alex Ward: I just think the town itself, there were jobs for my father and my mother, and there were parks and greens and good schools. It was marvellous coming up from London, which was probably just after the war, so to play football as well was the natural thing to do, really. So I just played locally for Knebworth, Letchworth Town, and Langford, and eventually came back to playing... When Stevenage reformed for the third time, in the Wallspan league.

Interviewer: And how long did you play for Stevenage?

Alex Ward: Unfortunately, I played a couple of games, and then I helped out with the reserve team as a sort of player-manager, if you like, for a season. But I wanted to play rather than manage, and carried on back in local football again. I was getting a bit old, to be honest, in the mid-30s, playing at that standard with lots of youngsters racing about, it was difficult. But good memories, I've kept all the cuttings, and always look back on them from time to time, and famous players for Stevenage like Colin Powell – 'Paddy Power' as he's known – I see him a lot at Charlton now, he's head groundsman. Johnny Brooks lives in Bournemouth, but I used to watch all these players, and they're smashing blokes.

Their heart was in Stevenage as well, they all lived in Stevenage, and it's nice to see them doing well now. After all these years, they're really making ground now.

Interviewer: Who would you say was your favourite player to play with at Stevenage?

Alex Ward: Well I've played with Johnny Brooks, as most people have done, because he played late into his 50s here, and he was an absolutely outstanding player. He taught you so much about the game. It was really enjoyable. A pleasure, really. But of course, with the youth team, you didn't really have a lot of contact with the first team players then, because they played Monday nights. People in the '60s, remember, that was their midweek night, Mondays, and we were all piled down there and watched the first team on a Monday night. Some fantastic football played.

Interviewer: Any great matches that you can remember?

Alex Ward: They're all tremendous, watching, as people of my age will remember, the Colin Powell's, Dick England, Tommy Watson, Johnny Brooks, people will know they're fantastic players. It was really exciting watching it. Big crowds as well. And Hitchin Town, at the same time, had a very, very good team as well, so there was lots of very good football. As well as going back to London, it was just football, football, football. That's my excuse for life.

Interviewer: So you mentioned back in the '60s, Monday night was the football night, your midweek night. What was your usual Monday night before, during, and after a game?

Alex Ward: I'd be watching football on Saturdays, sometimes play on Saturdays, Stevenage Town. The Monday nights would be Stevenage Town when they're playing at home. Then Tuesday would be training, I always remember that, it was a training night. And Wednesday we would be out somewhere else. When we were at school we fitted in some homework now and again, I guess. When I was at an apprenticeship, it was just football, football really. And probably Thursday and Friday were the only nights where we'd behave like teenagers, I suppose. A more innocent era.

Interviewer: You mentioned “more innocent era”, how do you reckon football’s changed over the years? Like in consideration of Stevenage?

Alex Ward: Well it’s very professional now. Money is the all-important thing. Even though the level I’m at now, I’m involved with Langford Football Club, you do need money if you’re going to make... Just the cost of running clubs, as well as the playing budgets. Stevenage has done remarkably well to do what they’ve done with some very, very big teams. And also, people have changed now, the electronic era. Kids that are keen at 14, 15, 16, playing football, then lose interest. There are so many other things now. It was just natural for us to carry on playing. There wasn’t the computers, and the games. It was basically the cinema, the Mecca in Stevenage, and that was about it really.

But it’s a different era. People move with the times, and you need money, really, now, to run it as a business.

Interviewer: Do you watch the current day Stevenage Football Club?

Alex Ward: Yes, I’m involved on Saturdays with Langford Football Club, but the midweek games, I do get to go and see when they’re at home. It’s just a bit too far to walk for my age now ___[00:08:41], but it doesn’t take long for me to get there, so I watch the midweek matches when I can.

Interviewer: What do you think of the current team, getting to the highest level Stevenage has ever got in League One?

Alex Ward: Absolutely tremendous, brilliant. Whatever these people say about the ways of playing football, and styles, and the rest of it, to do what they've done is absolutely terrific. I'm amazed, quite frankly, to come out of the Conference to Division Two, which they've deserved to do that for a few years now. But to go into Division One and hold their own is quite tremendous. Yes, nothing but praise for all of them, the people who run the football club.

Interviewer: What do you actually think about the current management? Because the club folded three times - Well, this is the third team now, is it?

Alex Ward: Yes, there was one in the '60s, they became Stevenage Athletic in the '70s, and then Stevenage Borough in the '80s, and of course it's been the same, just a different name now. Stevenage Borough, Stevenage FC. But the way they run the club here has been absolutely tremendous. They don't get big crowds, they probably deserve more. Nothing but admiration for all the people that have run this football club now.

When I'm finished being involved in local football, I probably will come to every game, whatever level they're playing at. It might be in the Championship, you never know with this team.

Interviewer: You say that you'd come and watch them no matter what level they're at, is it just because Stevenage was the place that you'd come to live, or is there more to it now?

Alex Ward: No, it's the place I've lived from London, and I've got fantastic memories I've kept in my scrapbooks of when I've played, and I still see a lot of the people around, at my age now who are still around. So there's a little bit of, I don't know, a bit of homeliness about it; it's where I live, and you tend to follow your football club. And travelling, it's a bit hard now, so it's just convenient. And it's nice, it's a nice ground, a lovely ground now. You can watch under cover, and have a seat if you want to. It'll definitely be fine by me.

Interviewer: Did you know the old ground, when they played at the King George playing fields?

Alex Ward: Yes, yes. I played a game there. What they did, they put advertising boards around, and a railing to make it private. But ___[00:11:13], tremendous to start... Derek Wilkinson and Frank ___, managers then. And the ground before that of course was where they are now, here, and before that London Road. I think they played for a season there on that King George's. Quite remarkable, really, when you think of it.

Interviewer: Any great memories from... You said you played one game there. How different was it playing on a playing field where it was just separated off with advertisement signs, to playing in a, well, a ground?

Alex Ward: I've been used to playing Sunday football, I've been playing Sunday football since I was a youngster, so basically it was not much different really. And I've played for Knebworth and Langford before I came back to Stevenage Borough in the

Wallspace league, so I was quite used to playing on parks, if you like, or enclosed parks. There was just that little bit of pride. And there was a lot of people coming to watch actually. You could probably get about 100 people watching around the sides. Must be convenient for shopping, I guess.

Interviewer: With the current team, any favourite players that you have?

Alex Ward: They're very much a team, this team. I always have a soft spot for players who do little things out of the ordinary. Scott Laird, I think, is a very, very good player. And Ronnie Henry, what he's done for Stevenage has been absolutely tremendous over the years. But they are a real team, together, and I think that's what strikes me about this team now. They have to play together as a team, and you don't see that a lot, really.

Interviewer: What is it you think that makes Stevenage different from other football clubs, that the fact that they see that they have to pull together?

Alex Ward: I think it's the management, the management and the coaches. I think that's their mantra, and that's where they've been successful. I don't think there's anything else there. They've got the right players, and they all believe in what they do. That's what I see from a distance, anyway. And you see that when I see them play.

Interviewer: How do you feel coming to watch them on a Tuesday night?

Alex Ward: Yes, I want them to do really well, I want them to win, whoever they're playing. And it's quite amazing to see some of these big teams here. Sheffield Wednesday, quite incredible, and what went on as well. And funnily enough, some of the things they try and do here, I try and implement at local level, I've always tried that, take tips away with it, to play as a team and have the spirit, and it's half the battle in lower football, and I try and use that when I go back and see our managers.

Interviewer: Were you around for Stevenage's probably most known memory of the Newcastle game, back in the first time around, the FA Cup?

Alex Ward: Yes. It was quite incredible, they came so close to beating them as well. A big name team, and it's typical of the smaller side, being determined to not... Well, this goes on now with Stevenage; the big names come, and Stevenage are very good at bringing them down to size. Unfortunately, the replay I didn't see. It was live on telly, but we had a game; I was with Langford Football Club. We were at Barton Rovers at that time. If I remember right, a few Stevenage players, Stevenage lads who were playing for us didn't turn up either, they wanted to watch the Stevenage replay, so it'll never be forgotten, that. They really deserved to go up then, and the shenanigans with the ___[00:14:53]. But they're there now, they got there in the end.

Interviewer: The development of the ground, do you reckon it would've happened had it not been for that Newcastle match? Was it then really that people noticed, this is a club that could go far?

Alex Ward: I think there's always been potential for support as Stevenage, and I think if they'd gone up then, the momentum would have kept the crowds big. But I think they lost a hell of a lot of support when they didn't do very well the few seasons after they were turned down. And then the Arsenal's, and the Chelsea's, and the Tottenham's started to become easier to get to, and you see the station now flooded with red/white scarves, and Tottenham, and Chelsea, and it's a bit of a shame, really. And I think that's probably the biggest thing keeping the crowds not as big as they should be.

But I think the potential's always been there. Over the last few years, the ground is really magnificent ____ [00:15:56], for more behind that goal, I think. They've got plans then, I think, to put a new stand up, and just need to get the crowds up somehow. ____.

Interviewer: How do you think they could do it?

Alex Ward: I don't know. It might be money, it might be premier football, which I've said before. Youngsters now get to watch Arsenal, Tottenham. It's a difficult one. It can't be success, because they've had it, and the crowds are still about the same 3,000 mark. And it was 1,500 in the '60s days, and that's when the town was nowhere near the population as it is now, so there's always been support for Stevenage.

Interviewer: Just need to work out a way that we ca-

Alex Ward: Of bringing them back, yes. I mean, there's probably people like myself as well who are involved with local football on the Saturdays, still getting involved at grassroots level. I think if they'd known the reason, they ___[00:16:54], by now. It's a difficult one.

Interviewer: Back to your playing career, what was your favourite game that you can remember?

Alex Ward: We played West Ham in the FA Youth Cup, and we had, looking at the paper report, it was 441, which was quite big then for the ground, and really and truthfully, the last 15 minutes it was 0-0, and I was desperately hoping to hold out being in goal, and a replay at Upton Park would have been lovely to play down there, at West Ham, would have been fantastic. But they got two late goals, one by the well-known Trevor Brooking, who was in the youth team then, so I shall never forget that.

Interviewer: How did you feel? You said you were trying to hold out, and then to get two late goals.

Alex Ward: Yes, we were desperately disappointed. Pleased with ourselves. We were quite proud that we played a top, top side's youth team, and kept it to two late goals, in the mud; it was thick mud. But very disappointed to have seen that slip away. But I remember that, and I remember the previous

round we were at Cambridge United, another sort of biggish club then, and we won that, so I remember those two games to this day. Great memories. And I think the fighting spirit of the youngsters then was very similar to the first team now. We were all together. Good memories.

Interviewer: So what were your favourite opposition grounds?

Alex Ward: It was fantastic to play on these grounds. I'd been with Chelsea the year before, with the youth team, well, the juniors actually, and I played at Stamford Bridge, and that was quite something, and The Valley at Charlton. But for Stevenage to play at grounds like Gillingham, Colchester, Ipswich; we played there twice, it was really quite something. It inspired me, really. I played better, particularly in goal where the crowd seemed to be behind you, behind your goal, so it made you really nervous beforehand, but it was great when those games started. It was fabulous, those sort of memories, they really stand out, all those grounds, the changing rooms.

There wasn't very many there, to be fair, but they were still marvellous places to play at, in the football league.

Interviewer: What was your relationship like between the players and the fans?

Alex Ward: Well there was probably only 100 or so that watched the Stevenage youth team, and you tend to know everybody that came. They were all parents, and friends, and diehard supporters who watched the first team, and then watched the

youth, and then watched the reserves. But they were all friendly. We had good support as well when we were up against it, as we often were, so it was good.

And I think there were people of the town who followed their club through thick and thin. This is the same ones when they reformed, and the same people running the club in the '80s, still there, the same faces; older, but marvellous really.

Interviewer: What was your relationship like with your other players? Was it just Stevenage based, or did you become friends outside of the club?

Alex Ward: Yes, I mean, most of them were all the schools around Stevenage, and then we would all play together, and then we kept in touch with one another when the club folded. Invariably, a lot of us played in local football, and we kept in touch all the time. But of course there was a big gap between Stevenage reforming, and by that time we were all doing other things, and a bit older. But the people who are still around have got Stevenage in their blood, I think. It's a good place to be young, very good place.

Interviewer: What about it was a great place to be young?

Alex Ward: Well I think, we're going right back to the beginning, really, it was new housing, the schools were good, there were parks everywhere with football pitches and cricket pitches as they are now; none of them have gone. And when people come up from London, and they all swear it was a marvellous place to

be, and everyone seemed to know everyone then. I lived in Bedwell, and others lived in Rockingham Way, and that sort of area, and everyone sort of knew one another, so there were no strangers where we played for Stevenage; we all sort of fitted in straight away, it was blended straight away.

It was just a different era. It's probably different now, probably. It is, I think, because even at senior level now, players come from all over the place. You have to, pay them wages, you get the best players from wherever you can. People travel. And then there was very little in the way of phones, or cars, and things like that.

Interviewer: When you heard that Stevenage were reforming, how did you feel about that?

Alex Ward: Pleased. It was a shame, and it lost a little bit, from 1,500 crowds in the '60s, it was down to 3 or 400, and it wasn't the same. But it was good that they reformed. But then of course it went again. But you're always pleased when it reforms, always pleased, and this time it's been very stable now for a long, long time; long may it continue. And there are other clubs as well: I've seen Letchworth and Baldock go, and it's always a shame. And Hitchin Town have stayed, and it's quite marvellous, another team with traditions and history.

Interviewer: What do you think it is about the current management board that have allowed this team to carry on and not fold, like the past teams?

Alex Ward: I think it's the way the club is run as a business... It must be, I don't know, but the chairman and the board, they run it, or I should think, as a very good business, and it's stable. It seems to be stable. We never hear anything in the press about financial troubles or anything like that, which is marvellous in this day and age, for quite a few years now, so long may that continue. I think before there were some very poor business practices in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, and that's what caused the problems, I think; owners that didn't have the club at heart.

Now you've got the council, and the board of directors here are determined to make it a success.

Interviewer: Could you ever believed that Stevenage would have got to this level?

Alex Ward: No. No, I always thought they were Conference, and Division Two, they would be maybe at that level really. But to see them in Division One, I'm absolutely amazed, astonishing really. And who can bet against them now, what they're capable of doing. It wouldn't surprise me if they were in the playoffs, but if they finish halfway they would have done tremendous, really, this year.

Interviewer: Any great matches you've seen this year? Against the new great opponents that they have in League One?

Alex Ward: To beat teams like Sheffield Wednesday and Charlton, the two games I've seen, I would have never put any money on that one, it's quite tremendous. They were marvellous against

Sheffield Wednesday, they played some tremendous football and blitzed them in the first half an hour, I couldn't believe what I was watching.

And the Charlton game, they did very well, because they were a good side. I've seen Charlton, I've been to see Paddy Powell, played for Stevenage many times down at Charlton, and they're a good side, and for Stevenage to beat them was very good. Quite amazing.

Interviewer: What was the crowd like?

Alex Ward: Good crowd against Charlton: 4,700. And Sheffield Wednesday was good as well. It's the lesser games where the crowds drop; Yeovil, there was 3,000 of us. Probably, they were probably hoping for more, I think. But we'll see, see how it all pans out. It's early in the season yet.

Interviewer: What's your greatest memory as a fan?

Alex Ward: The older I get, the bigger the memories, but I think there's too numerous to mention, to be honest. Watching Stevenage in the '60s times, watching Johnny Brooks, all them, every game was terrific really. And then the Newcastle game, never to be forgotten really. And to the current time, that Sheffield Wednesday game, well, it was quite amazing to see a very good team beaten 4-0 at half time. The football they played as well, it could have been double figures. So these are all memories that stay with you.

Interviewer: Could you tell me about the famous Newcastle match, what you remember?

Alex Ward: Yes, because it was a smaller ground then, and it was heaving, the temporary stands up, and of course nowadays you see big teams here, and it's sort of more commonplace. But then, to see a team like Newcastle here, and the crowds, and the whole of Stevenage seemed to know about it. I'm also forgetting - this is what memory does to you - watching Stevenage at the new Wembley in the FA Trophy final. That's another, who would have thought that? I mean, the first game at the new Wembley, it was a marvellous occasion. And typical Stevenage, 2-0 down and they won 3-2, marvellous occasion. That really got the town going as well.

There were coaches from firms and all sorts going there. So it just shows you the potential support for the town.

Interviewer: The match that you said at Wembley, that was against.. ?

Alex Ward: Kidderminster.

Interviewer: Kidderminster. Stevenage, if I remember correctly, are the only team to have won at both... Was the first team to win at the new Wembley, who also won at the old Wembley? Something like that.

Alex Ward: No, you probably know more than me about that one. They were the first team to win at the new Wembley, that's for sure,

because I went the next day to the FA Vase final, so I went twice in two days. But that first game, I can't remember about the old Wembley.

Interviewer: What was it like winning at the new Wembley?

Alex Ward: It was terrific really, because Kidderminster were 2-0 up, and they were far the better side really, and they just turned it around as they do. They brought on a couple of substitutions and changed the game totally, and they finished well in control. Amazing turnaround. And there you are. I worked at a big company, not far from here, from the ground, and there were coaches from there being organised, from people who don't normally go. I'm sure they captured one or two people who go back. I think they have actually, but it just shows you the potential support that's there.

Marvellous occasion that was, the Wembley one, I've just remembered that. And the Newcastle game obviously was a similar thing where it captured the town's imagination, particularly with the television, showing it live, and big name people in the press, and there was a bit of riff between the two teams. It was marvellous, really. A bit of passion. And they did very well in the replay, too. They gave Newcastle a scare. 2-1, if I remember right, on a frosty night. As I say, I was involved that night in football, so I had to be content with the highlights. But, marvellous.

END AUDIO

www.uktranscription.com