

The Ghost of '66

The Autobiography

Martin Peters

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

[Click here to buy this book and read more](#)

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

'ENGLAND EXPECTS'

On the evening before the most important game in the history of English football I went to the cinema. You might have thought that on such an occasion, only hours before the World Cup final, the England squad would be closeted away from public view, concentrating solely on the challenge ahead, but you would be wrong. I went to the cinema with Bobby Moore, Bobby Charlton and the rest of Alf Ramsey's squad.

We were staying at the Hendon Hall Hotel in a discreet corner of north London, not too far from Wembley, and had been together as a group for almost two months, preparing for the finals. Alf liked to keep his players safe from distractions whenever we played at Wembley. That's why we stayed in Hendon at the ivy-clad former home of the great eighteenth-century English actor and director David Garrick. This quiet, old-fashioned, cloistered hotel, with its dark panelling and thick carpets, was close enough to Wembley Stadium to be convenient and far enough from the temptations of the West End.

The downside was the distance from the hotel to Alf's favoured training base, which was the Bank of England ground at Roehampton in Surrey. On some days, when the traffic was bad, we'd spend three hours sitting in the coach, travelling to and from the training ground. One day, the players asked Bobby

Charlton to suggest to Alf that we train at a ground nearer the hotel. When the team bus was stuck in traffic, Bobby went to the front of the coach and put the suggestion to Alf.

'I'll give it some consideration,' he said, but before Bobby had returned to his seat, Alf turned round and shouted down the bus, 'Bobby, I've considered it. We'll stay as we are.'

Travelling apart, Hendon Hall was a familiar, comfortable and welcoming base camp for us. We could easily saunter down to the local high street to do some shopping, buy a newspaper or kill an hour or two. Even so, I was slightly surprised that, less than twenty-four hours before the World Cup final, going to the pictures to see *Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines* was considered top of the agenda of things to do. On that July evening in 1966 we attracted few glances from curious passers-by as we strolled down the hill to the local cinema. People didn't make the fuss they make today and there was no police escort. No one bothered us in the cinema, although the presence of the England squad the night before the World Cup final did turn a few heads. Before we went to our seats Alf ushered me to one side in the foyer.

'I don't want you to repeat this to anyone,' he said quietly. 'I haven't told the others the team, but I want you to know that you'll be playing tomorrow.'

A few weeks earlier I would have had no logical reason to suppose that I'd be playing for England against West Germany at Wembley in the World Cup final. I'd had some experience of international football at the lower levels but Alf had ignored my claims for a place in the Under-23 team for nearly two years. I'd played at Schoolboy and Youth level and had five Under-23 caps when my international career suddenly ground to a halt.

Then, in April 1966, Alf selected me to play against Turkey at Blackburn for the Under-23s. We won 2-0 and George Armstrong, the Arsenal winger, scored both goals. I remember sitting down before the match with George and Alan Birchenall, who

was playing for Sheffield United at the time, discussing our prospects, at that late stage, of convincing Alf that we were worth a place in his World Cup squad. As I recall, none of us thought the World Cup was a realistic prospect. All three of us would have settled for a single senior cap. For a professional footballer in those days, there was no greater honour than playing for England. Sadly, neither George nor Alan achieved that ambition, but I was lucky. My chance came a month later when, out of the blue, Alf picked me to make my senior debut against Yugoslavia at Wembley. That match was played on 4 May, just seven weeks before the World Cup kicked off.

Afterwards I still assumed I'd be watching the World Cup on television and reading about it in the newspapers. Even when I was named in his provisional squad of forty for the tournament, I didn't believe I'd be a contender when he named his final twenty-two. Then, when he did pick me, I knew, I just *knew*, that I wouldn't be selected to play. I was only twenty-two, although not quite the baby. That distinction went to Alan Ball, who was eighteen months younger than me.

Alf had so much talent to pick from – Gordon Banks, Bobby Moore, Bobby Charlton, Jimmy Greaves and Ray Wilson were widely acknowledged as being among the best in the world. Ron Flowers, George Cohen, George Eastham, Jimmy Armfield and Nobby Stiles had vast experience. Where would I fit in? My shirt, with No. 16 on the back, hardly suggested that I had a high ranking in the pecking order.

I wasn't surprised when he didn't select me for the opening game against Uruguay but I was surprised when he told me I would be playing in the second game against Mexico. Although I kept my place against France, Argentina and Portugal, I wasn't sure whether I'd retain it against West Germany. In terms of status within the squad, some players were automatic selections but I wasn't one of them. So that evening when Alf told me I was in the team, I had to take a couple of deep breaths to suppress

my feelings of relief – and elation – although, to be honest, I don't remember feeling any more pressure than I'd experienced in a club match on a Saturday afternoon.

For a start, the media interest in those days wasn't quite the same as it is now. These days, the media is often responsible for fuelling a quite unrealistic level of public expectation and the burden must be something of a handicap to today's players. I feel a little sorry for some of them. I don't remember ever feeling that kind of pressure when I played for England.

I was quite relaxed that summer evening as we all walked back to the hotel from the cinema. I noticed a lot of whispering among some members of the squad, and a lot of suppressed giggling. Perhaps they knew they were playing – or not playing! Perhaps I was not the only one Alf had taken into his confidence.

Anyway, I wasn't going to tell anyone my news. At least, I wasn't planning to tell anyone. My lips remained sealed until we got back to the hotel. I was sharing a room with my good friend and West Ham club-mate Geoff Hurst. Once in the privacy of our room, Geoff and I looked at each other and started smiling. We had been friends for a long time. Our wives were friends. We spent a lot of time with each other.

'Are you in?' he asked me.

'Yes,' I said. 'Are you?'

He nodded, and our smiles got wider. If anything, Geoff was more concerned about his place than I was about mine. He was a latecomer, like me. He made his debut against West Germany in a friendly in February 1966 and hadn't played in the opening three World Cup games. He got his chance when Jimmy Greaves suffered a badly cut leg against France. Geoff was called into the side, scored against Argentina and kept his place for the semi-final with Portugal. Jim reckoned he was fit to play in the final but Alf boldly decided to keep the side that had beaten the Portuguese 2-1.

I believe Alf had seen something in the 1-0 win over Argentina

that he believed was worth keeping. Bobby Moore, Geoff and I had played together at West Ham many times but the controversial game against Argentina was the first occasion on which the three of us played together for England, and so was the first time we had been able to use the near-post cross. The classic execution of that goal, using the tactic perfected by West Ham manager Ron Greenwood, won wide acclaim at the time.

In the seventy-seventh minute I gathered a pass from Ray Wilson on the left and drove the ball to the near post. I knew that Geoff would be running to meet it. The move came straight out of the Ron Greenwood coaching manual, and was something we'd done many times for West Ham. Geoff's header was enough to put England into the World Cup semi-finals for the first time.

So that night, on the eve of the final, Geoff and I both felt a mixture of relief and delight. Our celebration involved nothing more than a cup of tea and an early night but before going to bed we phoned our wives. That summer, my wife Kathy and I had decided to move back to Barkingside from Hornchurch. I wasn't expecting to be involved in the World Cup and, as it turned out, we had to move during the tournament. The timing was unfortunate because it meant that Kathy had to move without me. I knew I had no hope of getting away during our eight weeks of preparation. Alf would have frowned upon it and the competition for places in the starting line-up was such that no player would have done anything to jeopardise his chances. Kay Stiles, Nobby's pregnant wife, suggested he return home for the birth of their child. Nobby, vastly more experienced than I was, knew that if he went away for a couple of days, he could return to find that his place in the pecking order had gone to another player. He stayed with the squad.

Kathy coped magnificently. Her twenty-first birthday fell on the day after we'd beaten the French and I'd sent her twenty-one red roses. I rang her on her birthday and said, 'Did you get the flowers?'

'They're lovely, Martin,' she said, 'but you wouldn't believe it – someone nicked three of them before they were delivered.'

'What d'you mean?' I asked her.

'There are only twenty-one,' she said. 'There should have been two dozen.'

'No, I sent twenty-one – one for each year!'

The next morning, Geoff and I decided to have breakfast in our room while reading the papers. We called room service. I had my usual cereal, toast and tea. When we eventually went downstairs, you could feel a little anxiety among the players. We weren't the only guests staying at the hotel. Other people, commercial travellers, businessmen, were also there and that helped to keep the morning as normal as possible.

These days the England team is locked away in seclusion. If they are in a hotel preparing for a tournament, they have the place to themselves. The idea is that only in isolation can the players focus properly on the job ahead – at least, that's the theory.

That morning Geoff, Bobby and I loitered around the hotel with the rest of the lads. Some of them wandered down to the high street. Nobby Stiles went off to church. Geoff had a walk. I stayed in the hotel chatting with anyone who wanted to talk. Jimmy Greaves, who knew by now that he would miss what would have been the greatest game of his career, was packing his bags. He was twenty-six and the finest England goalscorer of all time, but he would play only three more games for England.

Alf wandered in and out of the lounge as the morning unfolded. At a brief meeting he told us what was expected of us. We treated him with great respect. No one would question his decisions. I was a newcomer to the squad but it was immediately apparent how close Alf was to his players. I'd had a little experience of his style of management with the Under-23 set-up but, viewing it at close hand with the senior squad, it was possible to assess the strength of the bond between the manager and his players.

'ENGLAND EXPECTS'

Initially, I felt I was on the fringe of things. I was probably still a bit naive and I had a lot of respect for Alf and the people around me. There was an obvious pecking order, with the two Bobbys at the top, but when we were playing, everyone had equal responsibility.

I'd learned about squad etiquette during three weeks of intensive training at the end of the 1965–66 season. Lilleshall was the venue, an imposing country estate in Shropshire that had once belonged to the Duke of Sutherland. The period we spent training in those marvellous grounds was vital to our preparation. The work was unrelenting but it created a sense of unity and harmony that was the platform for our later success.

I'd roomed with Gordon Banks, who was a senior player. He had a very positive attitude and made me feel at home. He was always joking about the peacocks you could hear screeching during the night.

Bobby and Geoff were as important as 'Banksie' in helping me settle into the squad. The fact that we played together in the same club side was a great help. Bobby was almost in a class of his own, status-wise, and there was some reflected glory for me in being his club-mate – but even the big stars had to take their plates back to the serving counter at the end of each meal when we were at Lilleshall. Can you imagine them doing that today?

After an early lunch, just four hours before kick-off, we climbed into our motor coach for the trip to Wembley. The police escorted us via a back route. As we got closer to the stadium, the crowds deepened and cheered us on our way. I remember sitting in the bus, wondering what was in store for me. Kathy was going to be in the stadium. Friends would be there, too, and the world would be watching on TV.

My main hope was that I wouldn't let anyone down, especially Alf. He'd shown great faith in me and I thought I had a debt to repay. The pressure I felt was largely self-induced. I wanted to do well and represent my country with pride.

Perhaps without realising it, Alf had placed a great burden on his players, although no one seemed troubled by it. In 1963, shortly after his appointment as manager, he predicted that England 'would win the World Cup'. There may have been occasions when he regretted those words but that afternoon, as we climbed down from the bus and walked into the cool of the Wembley dressing rooms, we all wondered whether his prophecy would be proved correct.

I was waiting for nerves to seize me but it didn't happen. I was quite relaxed. I always took my time getting ready and this match was no different. It usually took me about an hour. That was the way I got my mind right for the challenge ahead. I always put my kit on in the same order. The shorts went on last. Bobby Moore always put his kit on in the same order, too, with his shorts last. He also wanted to be the last of the eleven to put his shorts on.

In the dressing room that day I waited until 'Mooro' put his shorts on and then I slid into mine. Triumph – or so I thought. Mooro took his off again and waited until we were walking up the tunnel before putting them back on.

I also always preferred being last to leave the dressing room. I liked to be at the end of the line as we walked on to the pitch. Unfortunately, so did Jack Charlton. As the newcomer – and Jack's a bit bigger than me – I had to concede that privilege to him on that day.

Mooro finally led us out of the dressing room into the great cavernous tunnel that led up to the pitch. We filed up to the top of the tunnel and stood in line, Mooro at the head, Jack at the back. I was third from the back. We stood there for two or three minutes waiting for the Germans to emerge from their dressing room.

We could hear the crowd growing impatient as they waited for the players to leave the tunnel. All sorts of thoughts raced through my head. I remember thinking how lucky I was to be

playing in the World Cup final at the age of twenty-two. I was desperate not to let the side down. Was it going to be our day? Or was it going to be their day?

We'd waited for what seemed several minutes when suddenly we could hear them coming, their boots resounding on the concrete surface of the tunnel. It was a chilling moment as the Germans filed up to the mouth of the tunnel. I glanced across – Seeler, Weber, Beckenbauer, Haller, Schnellinger, Overath. Yes, they had some great players.

Before that thought had time to take root, we were ushered forward. Both teams walked together into the sunshine to be greeted by a wall of noise. My life was about to change.